



THE COUGAR CLUB

THE COWBOY  
AND  
*The Cougar*

HELEN HARDT

Aspen Mountain Press

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## **Dedication**

To all my friends at Colorado Romance Writers, and special thanks to Lizzie T. Leaf who suggested I write a story for this series.

## Chapter One

"Sugar, you look like you just lost your best friend."

The voice was deep and husky. Very sexy. Holly Taylor didn't look up from her empty martini glass. She speared the remaining gin-soaked olive with her sword-shaped toothpick, twirled it in the last drop of alcohol, and popped it in her mouth. The piquant saltiness exploded across her tongue. She closed her eyes and inhaled.

She'd get through this. She had no choice.

"What can I get you?"

Holly opened her eyes at the female bartender's squeaky voice. Damned annoying, especially for a swanky hotel bar, but the woman poured a mean martini.

"Scotch, neat," the familiar male voice said, "and another for the lady."

Nope. Not another. Holly was driving. No matter what lay ahead, she couldn't get drunk and drive home. She turned her head to thank the gentleman and met the darkest, smokiest, most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen.

The rest of him wasn't bad, either.

"You okay?" he asked.

Uh, yeah. Her mouth hung open and she quickly shut it. "Thank you, sir—" *Sir? He had to be at least ten years her junior!* "—but I don't want another drink."

His eyes twinkled behind their ebony curtain of lashes. "I'm not sure anyone's ever called me sir, sugar. And you look like you could use another."

Holly stared. She couldn't help it. His eyes weren't his only magnificent feature. His face was perfectly sculpted, with high cheekbones and an aquiline nose. A few days' growth of black beard dusted his strong jaw. Onyx hair fell to his shoulders in thick

waves. And what shoulders they were—broad, meaty and clad in a white western shirt complete with silver snaps. His jeans, hat and boots completed the picture. Here was a real, honest-to-goodness cowboy in the middle of The Livingston Palace bar in Denver.

Gorgeous. Simply gorgeous.

The bartender set down another martini. Holly opened her mouth to speak, but the stud next to her touched her forearm. Sparks crept to her cheeks and warmed them.

"It's okay. I'll take care of you."

Take care of her? She let out a sigh. If only her life were that simple. She fingered the stem of the martini glass with her free hand and looked into his amazing eyes. He smiled. What the heck? Maybe a few minutes in this handsome young man's company would take her mind off her problems.

"Thank you," she said. "I may need to take you up on that."

"Any time, sugar." His lazy half-smile dipped as he picked up his drink with his other hand. When the tip of his tongue touched the rim of his glass, Holly's pulse lurched. She imagined that pink flesh snaking around a hard nipple. One of *her* hard nipples, both of which currently strained against her bra, aching.

Her companion let out a soft laugh. "You gonna drink that? Or just squeeze it till it shatters in your hand?"

Holly looked down at her white-knuckled fingers wringing the glass stem. She exhaled and forced her hand to relax. Lifting the drink to her lips, she said, "Cheers," and gulped the martini.

The gin stung her throat as she set the glass back down on the bar.

She'd had a shit day.

But it was about to get a whole lot better, she hoped.

Her neck chilled, and she inhaled and gathered her courage. "You live around here, Cowboy?"

"Not too far. You?"

*Not too far.* He hadn't asked her name. He was wise to keep the conversation impersonal. No names. That would be best. No ages, either. If this young stud knew she'd just hit forty he'd no doubt run for cover.

"I don't think I'm going home tonight," she said. "I think I feel like a room. A suite maybe. A jacuzzi suite."

The cowboy's full lips curved into a grin and his fingers tensed on her forearm. "Are you asking for company?"

Holly's heart fluttered, but she steadied herself despite the two martinis. She wasn't drunk. It took more than two drinks to get her tipsy. All signals from the man said go. She hadn't had sex in a while. Damn, had it been two years now?

She was forty. Forty and alone, with no one to hold her and comfort her as she cried about what was to come.

She didn't have to be alone tonight.

Tonight, she could escape, albeit temporarily, and make love to a hot younger man. If he were willing, which he seemed to be.

She pushed her empty martini glass toward the bartender and then covered his hand which still warmed her arm. His hands were as beautifully formed as the rest of him, with long thick fingers that would feel really good in lots of places. The soft hair on his knuckles tickled her.

Why not get straight to the point? She met his dark gaze. "If I were asking for company, would you be up for it?"

He downed the rest of his Scotch and smiled. "Can't think of a better way to spend the evening, sugar."

Holly gulped. She was really going to do this. "Do you have protection?"

"I was a boy scout—" He leaned toward her, and his warm breath caressed her cheek. "—I'm always prepared."

\* \* \* \*

She wouldn't tell him her name and didn't want to know his.

She'd touched two slender fingers to his lips when he'd tried to introduce himself. "You're Cowboy to me tonight," she'd said. "And I'm Sugar."

Okay, he'd play along, though he'd insisted on paying for the room. She'd stayed



far from the front counter as he reserved the best suite The Livingston had available. She probably didn't want to get curious and peek at the name on his credit card.

Fine. For now. He had every intention of knowing this beauty's name and everything else about her before the night was over. Specifically, he wanted to know what or who put that forlorn look in her beautiful eyes.

His hand to her back, he escorted her into the empty elevator. The doors closed.

And she attacked.

His body slammed against the wall of the elevator and her smooth hands cupped either side of his face. She pulled him toward her luscious red lips.

"Kiss me, Cowboy."

She crushed her mouth to his. Though his intent was to play with her a little, hold her off, make her beg, he couldn't resist the temptation of her honeyed mouth. When her tongue touched his, he sucked it between his lips. It was soft. So soft and wet, and she tasted like the martinis she'd drunk. Gin, a touch of vermouth and some spicy lime. Jack wasn't sure where the lime had come from, but it was the perfect compliment.

Her lush body molded to his, and her bountiful breasts mashed against his chest. She was tall, his sugar. Tall enough that he, at six-three, didn't need to strain his neck to kiss her. The silky fabric that covered her plump tits rubbed against him and ignited his loins.

Hell, his loins had been on fire since he'd first seen her. So beautiful and so sad. He'd wanted to help her, hold her, and take away whatever was hurting her.

If he could do that by fucking her, so be it. Yep, that was him. Jack Sherwood. Altruist.

Fuck.

She grabbed his ass and any further thoughts of altruism fled his mind.

This was not altruism. This was lust, pure and simple. He wanted her, and clearly the feeling was mutual.

The elevator dinged and opened, and he broke the kiss with a loud smack. Her lips, scarlet and swollen, curved slightly into a shy smile. She met his gaze then looked away quickly.

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

"Don't get bashful with me now, sugar," Jack said. "You're one hell of a great kisser."

"Who's bashful?" She met his eyes and her own green orbs smoldered.

He smiled. "My mistake." He pulled her from the elevator and down the hallway to room 1145, and then trapped her against the door as he fumbled for the keycard in his pocket. Again, her body felt perfect against his and his arousal ached in his jeans. He pushed it into her soft belly and arched his eyebrow at her gasp.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, sure Cowboy." She grabbed his ass and pulled him harder against her. "I'm fine."

"Damn, sugar." Fine indeed. His jeans had tightened so much he had a hard time finding the keycard, but he had to find it, and fast. Otherwise he was about to fuck the daylights out of her right there in the hall.

He eased away from her to withdraw the card from his pocket. In a flash her warm hand was at his crotch, cupping him.

"Ah," he groaned and shut his eyes.

Thank God he'd decided to step into the Livingston bar after his appointment earlier.

This was going to be one hell of a good night.

## Chapter Two

The cowboy had her in his arms before they were five feet into the room. He took her hand, drew her close and pressed his body into hers. Holly slid her fingers up the soft cotton of his shirt, grabbed the collar, and released the snaps one by one. She wanted to hurry, to rip the damn thing off him. But she'd tease a little. Take her time. He smiled—damn, he was gorgeous—as she pulled the shirt from his waistband and pushed it off his broad and beefy shoulders. It landed on the floor with a soft swoosh.

Cowboy trailed one finger over her breasts snug in her green polo shirt. Her nipples tightened when he grazed them.

"Fair is fair, sugar. You need to take this off." He pulled her shirt over her head and his calloused fingertips skimmed the sensitive bare skin of her belly. She shivered as white heat spread to her limbs. Soon her shirt joined his on the floor.

His chocolate gaze dropped to her breasts. Swollen and ripe, they fought against the lace of her bra. Instead of touching them—to her disappointment—he merely looked and then pulled her into his embrace. He squeezed the cheeks of her ass.

She slid her hands over the hard planes of his chest, through the soft smattering of dark hair, up his sleek golden shoulders and into his soft, dark waves. She sifted the silky strands through her fingers and thought she'd never felt anything quite so soft, so heavenly.

His lips lowered to hers. So close, they were, but he didn't kiss her. Not even a centimeter separated them, but he didn't bridge the gap.

The fact that he didn't was incredibly erotic. She'd already kissed him in the

elevator, but at this moment, she wanted to kiss him more than she wanted her next breath. His long, thick fingers caressed her neck, sending shudders through her which landed between her legs. She tried to press closer, to spear him with her painfully hard nipples. Still he tantalized her, warming her lips with his soft breath.

His fingers trailed from her neck down her shoulder and eased down one strap of her bra. She closed her eyes as the air hit her turgid nipple. Cowboy moaned and cupped her naked breast, then squeezed, and her nipple hardened even further. Her sex wept. Damn, if he didn't kiss her soon, or touch her nipple...really, it didn't have to be much. A little pinch to the hard bud and she'd explode on the spot. She withdrew from his hypnotic stare and kissed his sculpted shoulder. His skin was warm and slightly salty. Very, very masculine.

She turned in his arms, her back to his chest, and he squeezed her breast again. His other hand slithered down her smooth belly and under the waistband of her stretch capris. Into her panties he went and his long warm fingers sifted through her pubic curls.

She shuddered when he reached her clit. Slowly, methodically, he stroked her moist folds.

"Mmm, wet sugar," he whispered in her ear.

She nodded, unable to speak. His caresses made her blood boil. She squeezed his sinewy arms, his massive shoulders, then turned her head and bit his hard flesh.

His groan was her reward.

Enough of him being in control. As much as Holly was enjoying his ministrations, she needed to take charge. If he wouldn't kiss her, wouldn't suck her nipple, she'd show him what a tease she could be.

She turned in his arms and dropped to her knees. Her hands trembling, she unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans. His hands fisted in her long dark hair, but she proceeded slowly, methodically. She'd tease him like he'd teased her.

She grasped the rough denim and pushed it down over his lean, sculpted hips.

Before her stood the most amazing cock she'd ever seen. Long, thick, and golden, it sprang from a thick nest of black curls. So much for teasing. That delicious-looking cock

was going in her mouth.

She looked up at him. His eyes pierced her with scalding flames. She smiled and met his gaze. God, he was beautiful. She traced lacy patterns on his thighs and continued to stare at his massive erection. His muscle, his skin, felt glorious to her touch.

"Damn," she said under her breath.

"Hmm? What is it, sugar?"

Had he heard her? Warmth crept to her cheeks, but she steadied herself. Why be embarrassed now? She was staring at his naked cock. Time for embarrassment had definitely gone out the window.

"I'm thinking, Cowboy—" She reached upward and pressed her hands to his gorgeous chest, then scraped her fingernails downward. He sucked in his breath. "—that I'd really like to suck this beautiful cock."

His groan vibrated against the palms of her hands. Good, good. Right where she wanted him.

"Please," he said. "God, please suck it."

Holly leaned forward and took just the head between her lips. Mmm. Delicious, just as she'd expected. A drop of salty pre-cum tantalized her tongue, reminding her of the olives in her martini. She loved olives.

And she loved this cowboy's cock.

He pushed forward and tried to nudge his way farther into her mouth, but she held fast, enjoying the feel of his sensitive head against her lips and tongue. She slurped a little, then drew back and rained tiny kisses to the tip. Mmm.

"Damn, sugar." He bent forward and smashed his mouth to hers in a kiss so raw and untamed, she nearly forgot who she was. His tongue tangled with hers, exploring, possessing.

When he ripped his mouth away, she inhaled a needed breath, and he grabbed her hair and forced her back onto his cock.

"Suck me. Please."

He didn't have to say please. She took him deeply this time, let his knob graze the

back of her throat. Then she inched back, let it drop from her mouth and licked the underside, relishing his moans. He still held her by the hair which—she wasn't sure why—turned her on even more. When she took him in her mouth again, his face twisted into a grimace. She hummed softly, knowing the vibration from her voice would tease him.

"God! If you don't stop that I'm going to come."

Holly backed off. No way. No coming until she'd gotten what she came for—a night of hot, heart-stopping sex. "So good I can't remember my own name" sex. That's what she needed right now.

To forget her own name.

To forget everything.

Cowboy gathered Holly into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her gently on the bed and quickly disposed of her bra. His eyes widened.

"Damn, sugar, you've got beautiful breasts." He pinched a nipple. She sucked in a breath. "Gorgeous nipples, too. Perfect."

Holly had always been self-conscious of her nipples. Resembling pencil erasers and surrounded by silver-dollar areolas, they were too big. At least, that's what she'd always thought. The lecherous look in Cowboy's smoking eyes eased her and drove that thought from her lust-filled mind.

When he finally tore his gaze from her chest, he removed her shoes and tugged off her pants. He inhaled sharply.

Was it the thong? Holly didn't normally wear thongs, but this red lace number had been lounging in the back of her underwear drawer for far too long. She'd wanted to feel sexy and desirable this evening.

Able to conquer the world...by wearing crimson butt-floss?

Yeah, it was a sham, but what the heck? She'd worn the thong to accent the freshly trimmed black curls which peeked through the lace.

Clearly Cowboy appreciated the gesture. His dark eyes burned.

"Sugar, you are one sexy lady." He didn't remove the thong. Instead, he spread her legs, positioned himself between them, and grasped the triangle of red satin. When he

yanked it toward her navel, she shuddered. The red string rubbed against her clit and moisture dribbled from her, wetting the insides of her thighs. She groaned.

"Yeah, sugar, that's it," he said, continuing to slide the string through her wet lips. "Saturate this thong and I'll suck the string. Then I'm gonna suck you."

Moisture gushed out of her. She knew she was pink and swollen. Her sex cried out for his tongue, his lips, his fingers, his cock. She wanted it all buried deep inside her.

He buried his face between her legs. "God, you smell good." He tugged on the string again and her clit pulsed. When he moved the string over to the side and his fingers grazed her engorged lips, tingles erupted on her skin and her belly fluttered. "I'm gonna suck you now, sugar." His voice had deepened. "I'm gonna eat all that sweet cream out of you and you're gonna come all over my face."

Sounded good to Holly. She smiled and closed her eyes, but his firm fingers encircled hers.

"No. Watch me." His eyes had darkened to a soft onyx. He was beautiful. Holly didn't often think of men as beautiful, but this cowboy was.

Hot, sexy and beautiful.

She pinned her gaze to his as his pink tongue snaked over his full bottom lip—a lip that widened into a sexy smile. He flicked that gorgeous tongue over her clit and she nearly imploded. Oh, this was going to be one hot night.

His dark hair fell around his golden shoulders and tickled her sensitive inner thighs. She reached forward and sank her fingers into the thick locks. Had she ever felt anything finer? Fine as Persian silk. His lips curled around her clit and he sucked.

Then she did implode. The climax hit her like a lightning bolt, careening into her, humming through her veins and settling between her legs. He licked her relentlessly as the spasms rocked her body. She fisted her hands in his gorgeous hair and pushed his face farther into her wetness.

When the pulsating began to subside, she let her head sink into the soft mattress. He'd climb up to her soon. Hopefully he'd kiss her, sink his tongue into her mouth so she could taste her own sex mingled with his spicy maleness, and then stuff that beautiful cock inside her.

Instead, he grinned, his chin and lips shiny with her wetness. He ripped the thong off her – who needed it anyway? – and clamped his mouth to her folds again.

"Ah..." The soft gasp left her lips in a whisper. She was near climax again.

"Mmm. You're so wet, sugar."

Holly released his hair and slid her hands up her soft tummy to her breasts. She cupped them, squeezed them, and plucked at her tight nipples.

When he pushed her thighs forward, exposing even more of her, she twisted her nipples and icy sparks speared through her. One more lick to her clit – pow! She came again, this time with the force of a stampede. Her skin tingled, her heart raced. She moaned. She sighed. She squeezed the soft flesh of her breasts as she came down from the climactic high.

"Mmm," he said, two fingers gently gliding in and out of her heat. "Good, sugar?"

"God. So good."

His fingers slipped from her – oh, the loss! – and he slid forward. He licked her wet curls and circled her navel. He licked her belly, the valley between her breasts. The feel of it was sweet as blueberry syrup.

She sank her hands into his soft hair again. He kissed first one nipple, then the other. He circled the areola and sucked the tight bud between his lips.

"God, I love your nipples."

She shivered, tingled, gasped for air. When he released the nipple, she sighed, but then his lips were on her neck, licking, nipping.

He pulled her legs up over his shoulders and thrust into her.

She widened her eyes. "Condom?"

"Already on," he rasped.

"When?"

"When you...were coming. Ah, God." He pulled out and thrust in again.

Holly dug her heels into his broad shoulders as he fucked her. He fucked her slow. He fucked her fast. He leaned down and kissed her hard nipples. His lips trailed over her cheeks, her neck. Still he fucked her, and damn, it felt so good, so right.

She grabbed his chiseled cheeks and pulled him to her for a deep kiss. Their



tongues tangled, dueled, and his soft groans chorused through her like a concerto.

When she broke the kiss to take a breath, he flipped her onto her hands and knees and plunged into her from behind. *Ah, the steely hardness of him filling her, the warmth of his strong hands on her hips.* He thrust deep inside her and she slid one hand backward and grasped his sinewy forearm. The flesh was so taut she could feel the lines of his muscles. His fingers found her clit and she shattered again, thrusting backward onto him.

"Yeah, sugar, yeah." He rubbed her to completion. "Come for me. Ah, so good."

When her spasms subsided, she leaned forward. He pounded into her once more, holding himself deep inside her. Each pulse of his cock spiraled against her sensitive tissues.

When he released her, she fell forward and collapsed on the fluffy comforter.

Within a few minutes he lay next to her, pushing moist strands of dark hair out of her eyes. His gaze burned into hers.

"Wow," was all he said.

"Double wow," she agreed.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Up for an encore?"

She giggled.

When was the last time she had giggled?

"Are you?"

His laugh was husky. "In a few minutes. There is that jacuzzi to consider." He turned onto his back and covered his forehead with his arm.

She'd never made love to a hot stud in a jacuzzi, had never made love in a jacuzzi, period. In fact, she'd never made love to a hot stud, come to think of it, at least not as hot as the cowboy next to her.

Boy, had it been a day. She didn't want to think unpleasant thoughts. She wanted her escape to last a little longer.

She touched his firm lower lip with the pad of her thumb. "I'm up for the jacuzzi, cowboy."

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

\* \* \* \*

Darkness enveloped the room when Holly awoke. Her cowboy was behind her, holding her spoon-style. His large, warm hand cupped her breast. Her sore nipple hardened beneath his palm. A hard thigh was wedged between hers. The soft hair covering his flesh tickled her smooth skin. His breath, slow and steady, blew against her neck and disturbed a few stray hairs.

The night had been amazing—wonderful!—a hedonistic frolic and a total escape. She wouldn't soon forget the encounter in the jacuzzi. How they'd kissed each other until their lips were red and swollen. How he'd sucked on her nipples until they were nearly raw, all the while fussing over how beautiful they were. How she'd ridden him, and the jetting had swished over them as they coupled again, and then again.

A night of wonderful memories to savor was exactly what she had needed.

But now? She sighed as she disentangled herself from Cowboy as gently as she could. She didn't want to wake him.

She walked to the window and opened the drapes. The sun peeked over the horizon. Soon dawn would brighten a new day.

She sighed again.

Time to face the music.

## Chapter Three

*Six months later*

Late again.

Holly ran into the classroom, dragging her portfolio behind her. She'd stopped at the art store for more charcoal after work and she'd hit major traffic.

She laughed it off. This was art class at the community college, not a pressing appointment. It was okay to be late. Problem was, she didn't want to be. She wanted to breathe in every bit of knowledge this class and this professor had to offer. She was done taking life for granted. She'd wanted to learn to draw for forty years and now she was.

She'd always had a flare for sketching—or so others always said. In college she'd taken the well-traveled road and majored in economics and political science, then she'd gone on to law school, which, frankly, had been the three most boring years of her life. She did the time, got the grades, landed the partnership-track job.

Five months ago, she'd thrown it all out with the garbage.

She hated practicing law. She liked to draw. She loved to draw. She was good at it. It made her happy. She smiled. What was better than doing what made her happy?

Of course, she had to pay the bills, so she'd hung out a shingle and opened up her own law practice. Writing wills and trusts wasn't exactly a rocket science challenge, but it kept her in food and shelter until she could learn how to make her art pay.

Damn it all if she wasn't happier than she'd ever been.

She hastily took an empty seat and spread out her paper and charcoal. Tonight was model night. Male, if she recalled correctly. Last week they'd sketched a gorgeous

blonde woman with a body so perfectly proportioned she resembled Barbie.

Well, her legs weren't quite that long.

Drawing the human body fascinated Holly. She'd learned as much about anatomy as she had about technique in this class. She used her knowledge not only in her artwork, but also at the gym, where she was hard at work on another artistic endeavor – reshaping her own physique.

"Good evening."

Holly looked up to see Professor Fleming in front of the class. Professor Fleming was an amazing artist and his praise meant the world to Holly. He liked her work and thought she had potential. Had she started down this path twenty years ago, who knows where she could have gone?

Determined not to berate herself, she looked back up at Professor Fleming.

"Tonight, as you know, we'll be working with a male model. He's waiting outside." He cleared his throat. "I have a special surprise for you all. For the first time, we'll be working with nudes."

Childish chuckles echoed from the back of the room. At forty, Holly was easily the oldest person in this class. Most of the students were straight out of high school.

"Get your jollies out now," Professor Fleming said, "so you don't embarrass our model when he comes in."

Even Holly had to stifle a giggle. Jollies?

When the room quieted, Professor Fleming walked to the door of the classroom. Holly leaned down to grab her bottle of water out of her backpack, then cursed under her breath when she brushed against her charcoal pencils and they tumbled to the floor. She gathered them quickly and decided to leave her water where it was. She could live with a parched throat for an hour. Better that than accidentally spilling water on her art work.

She sighed and looked up just as an emerald silk robe fell from a glorious male body. She glanced at the long, perfectly sculpted legs, a back carved of hard muscle, a firm, tight ass. Staring at this for an hour wouldn't be a hardship.

He turned toward the class.

Holly's blood ran cold. Before her was a chest she'd caressed, sinewy arms she'd gripped.

A cock she'd sucked.

Her gaze traveled down the beautiful legs, then back up, over the torso dusted with dark hair, the golden shoulders that had tantalized her fingertips to his face of raw male beauty. Cheeks she had cupped, lips she had kissed, sucked on. She wanted to look at his eyes—those eyes that had burned into her soul that night.

That wonderful, terrible, fateful night.

But she couldn't. He might recognize her.

What the hell was a cowboy doing working as a nude model?

Of course, she hadn't asked what he did for a living, because she hadn't wanted to know.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. He wouldn't remember a one-night stand with a needy older woman anyway. He'd no doubt been glad she was gone when he awoke.

She took a deep breath and raised her gaze to his dark eyes.

He was staring straight at her. Daggers shot from his eyes and speared into her.

He wasn't happy.

Holly's skin prickled. Did he remember her? She couldn't think about that now. She had to draw him.

God, she could draw that body from memory—every line, curve, mass of muscle. She closed her eyes and inhaled, then opened them and began to sketch. This was class, after all, and she wanted to learn to create art more than anything in the world. She wouldn't let an awkward situation keep her from her goal.

That gorgeous chiseled face... Her pencil stopped moving. He was staring at her again. Damn, those lips were lethal weapons. Her nipples tightened against her bra as she remembered him kissing them, sucking them.

*Time to get a grip, Holly.* This was art class, and when would she have the chance to draw such a perfect specimen of masculine beauty again?

She sat back and attempted to steady her breathing. *In and out, in and out. Slow*

*down, pulse. He's just a model.*

\* \* \* \*

Holly stared at her sketch. It was Cowboy, all right. Problem was, he was entwined around a curvy female who bore a distinct resemblance to Holly herself. How had this happened? She'd been in the zone, hadn't thought about what she was doing, and before she knew what was happening, her hands had gone off on their own and drawn Cowboy, naked, making love to her.

She couldn't turn this in to Professor Fleming.

Quickly she gathered her papers together and shoved them in her portfolio. If she left now, a few minutes before class was actually over, she could escape before Cowboy left the room. She'd draw another sketch—one that wasn't x-rated—at home and bring it to class next week.

Yeah, that would work.

She stood up quickly and quietly and walked out of the room. A sweltering heat swept over her. Cowboy was watching her. She could feel it.

She stopped in the ladies' room and splashed some cold water on her face. It didn't work. She was still hot and bothered, but at least she looked a little better—not pale and wan as when she'd first looked in the mirror. The frigid water had added rosiness to her cheeks. She stood at the counter, grasping the Formica, breathing in and out.

*Calm down, Holly. It's over.*

After one final deep breath, she hurried to her car and drove the short distance to her downtown loft. Her arms full with her portfolio, briefcase and the small bag of groceries she'd picked up before class, she keyed in the code with her nose and slipped through the door. The elevator was closing so she ran and slid through just in time. She hit the number three with her elbow and collapsed against the elevator wall for the short ride up.

When the door opened, she tightened her grip on all her belongings and headed toward the door to her loft. Dropping the groceries to the floor, she fumbled one-handed in her purse for her key.

Sheesh, it was hot in the hallway. Beads of sweat trickled from her hairline, down her forehead and into her eyes. She blinked at the sting. Why was it so damn hot?

With an exasperated sigh, she threw down her portfolio and began emptying her purse.

"Need some help, sugar?"

## Chapter Four

That deep, whiskey-smooth voice...

She turned, and there they were—those piercing dark eyes. He looked incredible, almost as delicious as he looked naked. His western shirt was forest green, silky and unbuttoned at the top. A few black strands of chest hair peeked out. His jeans fit as snugly as she remembered and he wore scuffed brown leather boots. She could see him on horseback, riding the range, the wind tearing through that gorgeous sable hair.

She looked away and huffed. "What are you, some kind of stalker?"

He shook his head, chuckling. "Can't say I've done anything like this before."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Some doormen can be bribed."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't have a doorman."

He gave a lazy half-smile. "Okay, you got me. Some horny women can be bribed."

*Horny women?*

"Sheila."

Her man-hungry neighbor had been known to be free with the passcode. Now Holly'd have to call management and get it changed again.

"That her name?"

"Did she have bleached blonde hair and a voice hoarse from smoking?"

"That'd be the one." He fingered his stubbled jaw line. Holly tried not to gape.

"Damn her anyway." Holly continued her relentless search for her keys.

Cowboy gently pried the purse from her grasp and pulled out her keys. "This what



you're lookin' for?"

She grabbed her purse. "Yes. Thank you, Cowboy."

He miraculously picked the right key and fit it into her lock.

"It's Jack," he said. "Jack Sherwood. No more cowboy." He opened the door, picked up her portfolio and bag of groceries and waited for her to walk in. Her nerves rattled as she entered. He followed her in and set the portfolio and groceries on her kitchen counter.

"Well, thank you for your help," she said. "I can manage now."

"Oh no," he said. "Not so fast. You haven't told me your name yet, sugar."

"Sugar's fine."

"The hell it is." He walked to the door, shut it and leaned back against it. "You left me that morning without even waking me to say good-bye. I thought we had a good time. I wanted to see you again. Why'd you pull a stunt like that?"

Holly's heart raced. He'd wanted to see her again? This had to be some kind of sick joke. "It was a one-night stand, Cowboy."

"Jack."

She sighed. "Do you understand what a one-night stand is? One night of mind blowing sex? I'm sure you're familiar with the concept."

"That's not what I'm about."

"Well, that's what I was about that particular night," Holly said. "I'm sorry if I upset you. Really I am. I was in a bad place that night and all I wanted was..." She let her words trail off as she closed her eyes and sighed again.

"You ever gonna tell me your name?"

"I think it's better to leave it—" She opened her eyes. "Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

Jack had grabbed her purse from the counter and fished out her wallet. He opened it and pulled out a credit card. "Holly. Holly S. Taylor. What's the S stand for?"

"None of your goddamn business."

"Susan?"

"No."

"Sheila?" He gave a short laugh.

"Hell no."

He smiled a heart-stopping smile. "Sugar?"

Holly couldn't help but return his grin. "It's Simone, if you must know. It's my mother's name. She's French."

"Very pretty." He replaced the credit card and handed the wallet to her. Her skin tingled when his fingers grazed hers.

"Listen," he said. "You're never gonna convince me the sex wasn't amazing that night. I know you felt it."

She shuddered. His voice was like hot silk. "I n-never said it wasn't amazing."

"Truth is, Holly—" He emphasized her name. "—nobody's gotten under my skin like that in...well, ever." He advanced toward her like a wolf stalking its prey. She backed away, not paying attention to her whereabouts, until she found herself trapped against her own refrigerator. A fairy magnet dug into her back.

"When I saw you sitting in that class today, all fresh and beautiful, I was both ecstatic and angry at the same time. You know what I mean?"

"N-no."

He placed his palms on the refrigerator, on either side of shoulders, trapping her. His scent drifted around her—cedar wood, spice and male musk. She could inhale it forever and never tire of it.

"I think you do." He looked above her head for a moment, as if composing himself, then gazed back into her eyes. "When I woke up that morning and you were gone, I turned that suite inside out searching for something—anything—that would lead me to you."

"I'm sorry—"

"I haven't been able to get you out of my mind." He pressed his lips to her forehead and she ignited. Blazes trailed over her skin from one little kiss.

"I dream about your nipples, you know that?"

She gulped. Moisture trickled between her legs.

"I dream about suckin' them raw like I did that night. I dream of you suckin' my

cock with those sweet lips of yours. Then I dream about fuckin' you hard and fast, then makin' slow sweet love to you."

Holly writhed under his steady and scalding gaze. Her nipples puckered against her bra. Want—pure, raw want—screamed through her.

His mouth closed over hers. The kiss was gentle at first, tiny licks around the corners of her lips, his tongue like smooth cream. Then he probed with slightly more force and her lips parted. Again, he was gentle, even as he sank into her mouth and kissed her with a slow hunger. It was sweet and sexy at the same time. Nothing like the frenzied passion of their first kiss, but incredible all the same. A soft groan left his throat and vibrated into her mouth, giving her chills.

Holly was vaguely aware of Jack fumbling with the buttons of her blouse and pushing her bra upward. Her ample breasts fell gently against her chest.

His lips left her mouth and she sucked in a much needed breath. He trailed moist kisses over her cheek, her neck, down her chest, across the swollen flesh of her breast, until he caught a nipple between his teeth.

She couldn't stop her shriek.

He looked up. "Too much?" His word hummed against the wrinkled flesh of her areola.

"God, no, but—"

He took the nipple again and tugged. Lightning flashed to her core and she jerked backward, the magnet digging farther into her flesh.

He let her nipple go with a soft pop. He stood, touching his forehead to hers, his hands cupping her breasts and his fingers gently kneading the tight buds. "Let me back in your bed, Holly." His voice was husky, primal. "*Please*."

Oh, she wanted to. The thought of another night of unbridled passion with Cowboy—no, Jack, what a perfect name for him—sent ripples through her.

But another one-nighter wasn't possible. That wasn't who she was. Jack didn't want her for the long haul, and who could blame him?

She pushed him away and ducked under his arms.

"Sugar?"

"I'm sorry," she said, standing next to the door. "I really need you to go now."

"Holly – "

"Please, Jack."

He walked toward her and smiled. "That's the first time you've called me by my name. I like that."

Why was he so damn sweet? How was she supposed to get rid of him when he made her skin tingle and her heart race?

There was one way.

"I'm forty, you know."

His eyebrows arched. "No, I didn't know. You don't look a day over thirty."

"So you can see the problem."

"What the hell problem are you talking about?"

"Well, clearly I'm a lot older than you are."

He shook his head, his eyes wide. "You really think I give a rat's ass about your age?"

A prickle of defensiveness speared into Holly. "How old are you anyway? Thirty-two? Thirty-three?"

There went the lazy half-smile again. The one that made her heart go pitter-pat. "Twenty-nine, actually."

"Dear God." Holly's body thudded against the wooden door.

"What?"

"What do you mean 'what?'" That's a difference of over ten years!"

He let out a chuckle, then said in an exaggerated drawl, "I done figured that out. Even a cowpoke like me knows how to cipher, ma'am."

"Stop making fun of me."

"Why not, Holly? You're bein' silly."

"Silly? You're young. You're...well, I'll just say it. You're freaking hot. You can have anyone you want."

"Right now, I want you."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, I'm pretty sure I'll still want you. And the next day."

"And after that?"

"Christ, Holly. You want a fuckin' commitment here? It's not going to happen, at least not yet. I'm attracted to you. I'm hot for you. I'm so damn hard right now I think I could cut through diamonds. I'd like to get to know you—inside and outside the bedroom. If that isn't enough for you, well, maybe I *should* go."

Now he was talking sense. As much as she desired him, wanted him, nothing could ever come of it, for reasons she wasn't ready to tell him or anyone else.

"That's right. Go."

"Look—" He gripped her shoulders, and his touch sparked a shiver between her legs. "I spoke quickly. I don't want to go. If you don't want to go to bed, I can accept that. But can we talk? Have a drink? Or a cup of coffee? We don't have to stay here if you're not comfortable. We can go to a bar or a coffee shop."

Her body was on fire, and she was tempted to spend the evening with this handsome stranger—for that's what he still was, a stranger. However, it couldn't lead to anything good, and she'd just be heartbroken when it ended.

Holly had already experienced enough heartbreak for this lifetime.

"I'm sorry, Jack. Just go. Please."

"Aw, damn, sugar. Why won't you let us get to know each other?"

"Because..." Her voice trailed off and she cleared her throat. His dark beauty left her breathless. He was a sweetheart and he deserved the best—better than she could give, anyway. She gulped in some courage. "Because I have nothing to offer you, that's why."

"I disagree."

"You don't know me."

"I'd like to change that."

She opened the door and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry."

Tears stung the inside of her eyelids as he walked away toward the elevator.

He didn't look back.

## Chapter Five

He was waiting at her law office the next day.

He looked luscious, of course. He was still wearing jeans and a western shirt. This time the shirt was a creamy beige that accented his golden skin tone. Could he be any more tempting?

"Mr. Sherwood's been waiting for a while, Holly," Cindy, the receptionist, said. "Said he had an appointment."

Holly let out a harsh breath. Reprimanding Cindy would do no good. The young woman took phone calls and manned the lobby, and each tenant contributed to her salary. But each tenant who rented an office here kept his own calendar. Executive suites, the offices were called, and many sole proprietors found them an economical way to do business while keeping the professional air of a downtown building. The situation usually worked just fine.

"Is everything okay, Holly?" Cindy asked. "It's not like you to miss an appointment."

*I don't miss an appointment...when I have one.* Holly smiled at the receptionist. "Just running late is all." Now, what to do with Jack? He'd already been waiting and to keep him any longer would look bad to Cindy. "Come with me, Mr. Sherwood."

She opened the door to her office, gestured him in, and closed the door.

"Don't you have a home to go to?"

"Yup." He took a seat in one of the chairs in front of her desk. He looked completely comfortable and at ease. And absolutely edible.

*Damn him.*

"Then why aren't you there?"

"I have a legal problem."

"How'd you find me?"

"A little bird." He chuckled. "With a raspy voice and smoke on her breath."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Sheila. One day I'm going to revert to my teenage years and kick that woman's ass. I could take her, you know."

Jack's smile lit up the room. "Aw, leave her alone. Poor thing's gonna be on oxygen in ten years anyway."

"That's her own doing."

"True enough, but don't blame her. I was persistent."

"Of course I blame her. She should keep my private information private."

"Sugar, your business name and address are hardly private. I would have found you eventually. Sheila just sped up the process a little by telling me you were an attorney. It was easy enough to find you after that." He leaned toward her and whispered. "I coulda googled you and found you myself."

Holly moved away. Being too close to him kept her from thinking straight. She sat down behind her desk, inhaled, and looked right at him, determined not to be mesmerized by his dark gaze.

"What is it that you want, Jack?"

"Besides you in my bed?"

A rush of heat crept over Holly's skin. She cleared her throat.

"Yes, besides that."

"I told you. I have a legal problem."

"Which is?"

"I need a document drawn up, giving me sole custody of my son."

An anvil landed in Holly's stomach. He had a son?

"You have a son?"

"Sugar, you look like someone just told you pigs could fly. Surely this can't be that surprising."

"Well, I just —"

"If you'd have had that drink with me last night, so we could get to know each other, I would've told you all about Sam."

"And his mother?"

"Was a mistake I made seven years ago. No, I take that back. She wasn't a mistake, or I wouldn't have Sam. She came to me a year later. He was only a few months old. Said she couldn't take care of him, that he was mine. So I took him."

Holly stomach was churning. Jack was not who she thought he was. He wasn't a player, wasn't just after sex. "Did it occur to you to have a paternity test?"

"Yep. I had it. He's mine."

"Whatever happened to your...uh... his mother?"

"Never heard another word from her."

"Is your name on the birth certificate?"

"Yes."

"Then there shouldn't be any problem. The mother clearly abandoned him. If you haven't heard from her in six years, why are you worried about it now?"

"It's something I've put off long enough. I need to tie up some loose ends."

"Good enough. I have to tell you though, this really isn't my area. If you had googled me, you'd have found that I'm an estate planning lawyer. I write wills and trusts. I don't dabble in family law."

"I want you to handle it."

"I'm not qualified. I have a rolodex full of great family attorneys who will be more than happy to help you."

"I want you."

She let out a sigh. "You're not hearing me, Jack."

"Correction, sugar. You're not hearing me." He stood, walked around the desk and turned her chair to face him. One long finger gently nudged her chin upward and she met his gaze. "I'll take the referral to a qualified attorney. I want this done right. But I'm still going to be here every morning until you agree to have coffee with me. Just coffee. No alcohol. No dinner. No kisses, no sex. Just one hour, Holly. That's all I'm asking."



One hour to get to know a little about me, and I'll get to know a little about you. If you still want to say good-bye after that, I'll walk away."

"But I'm too old for you."

"Bullshit." His fingers glided over her jaw line to cup her cheek. The calloused pad of his thumb stroked her bottom lip lightly.

She closed her eyes. His touch felt so wonderful, so perfect.

Would it really hurt to have coffee with the guy? They had no future, but heck, some caffeine and a heavy dose of cowboy drawl sounded pretty good right about now.

Oh, she'd regret it. Spending time with him would make it all that much harder to say good-bye. God knew, though, she'd been through worse.

"All right." She placed her hand over his, still holding her cheek. It was firm, warm and masculine and made her heart flutter.

*Okay, that was a mistake.* She brushed his hand away from her face and dropped her own to her side and stood. "Let's go."

They ended up at the coffee shop across the street, a little Mom and Pop Shop called Mocha Dreams that had, so far, stood up to Starbucks. Jack bought Holly a Vanilla Latte and he had black coffee.

"I'm a purist," he said and she couldn't help but smile.

"So," he said, handing her the Latte and pulling out a chair for her at one of the little round tables. "Tell me about Holly Taylor."

"There's a loaded question." Holly tried to sound nonchalant. There was both nothing and everything to tell. Her life hadn't been that exciting.

"I'm from here originally. Where are you from?"

His grin split his face. "Texas."

Of course. The drawl, the persistence, the raw male beauty, his size. Everything about Jack Sherwood was *big*.

"Okay, I'm dying to ask. Why were you modeling nude last night?"

His laugh filled the room. "I was doing a favor for a friend."

"For who?"

"Mark Fleming, the teacher."

"You know Professor Fleming?"

"He's my godfather."

This just kept getting better and better. Holly shook her head and took a sip of latte.

"So you were out late last night and up with the birds this morning. Where's your boy?"

"Sam's with my mom for the week, having some grandma time. Mom knew I was helping Mark out, knew I'd be out late. I'm modeling for all his classes this week, not just yours. Some are during the day."

"What do you do otherwise?"

"I run a small ranch about an hour from here, so I'm used to getting up early."

Holly shook her head again. "You're not anything like I expected."

"What'd you expect?"

"I don't know. Kind of a cad, you know? A guy who'd bed a woman without knowing her."

"Seems I recall the whole thing was your idea, sugar. Who was I to say no?"

"You're right." Holly couldn't deny it. That night *had* been her idea. She'd used him, really. It hadn't been a nice thing to do. "I'm sorry."

He grinned. "You hear me complainin'?"

"Well, no, but —"

"Sugar, the only complaint I have is that you left without saying good-bye. I wanted to see you again."

"Like I said, Jack, I was in a bad place then. I needed something. Someone. You were there and you gave me a nice memory. It meant more than you know."

"I don't want to be a memory, Holly. I want to see you."

"I'm too old for you."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"It's not dumb. You're just starting out in life, and I'm —"

"For Christ's sake, Holly, you're forty. You're not dead!" He looked around and lowered his voice. "I got a bigger bang out of being with you than I've ever had with a woman. I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Yeah, the sex was great. It was

earth moving. I won't lie to you. I want more of it. But I want to get to know you, too."

"Now you know me. I'm Holly. I'm forty. Single, never been married. I'm a lawyer who wants to draw. Enough said."

"Why don't you want me?"

Holly's mouth dropped open and she stared at his chiseled face. "Are you serious?"

"Well, something's keepin' you from seein' me again."

"It's...it's the age thing, Cowboy." She swallowed. "That's all."

"Not good enough, sugar." He stood and tossed his empty coffee cup in the nearby wastebasket. "We're going out tonight."

"Jack, I have class."

"Mark doesn't have a class tonight."

"It's not Mark's...er, Professor Fleming's class. It's a different class. Conceptual drawing."

"Skip it."

"No. Drawing is my passion. I don't want to skip it."

"I'll make it worth your while."

"Damn it, Jack. Why are you so determined?"

"I do whatever I can to get what I want, sugar. Right now, you're it."

Holly sighed. "Tomorrow night?"

"Don't want to wait. But tomorrow it'll be, if that's what it takes. The day after, I pick up Sam from my mom's and my time'll be more limited." He grinned. "In fact, tomorrow's perfect."

"Perfect?" What did he have in mind? And why did tomorrow sound like it wouldn't work? "Oh!" She clapped her hand to her mouth. "Tomorrow's no good. I have to go to Professor Fleming's—"

"Exhibit," Jack finished for her, still smiling. "I figured you'd like that idea so I'll be takin' you. We'll have dinner first. Deal?"

Warm tingles spiraled through Holly. He understood how much the exhibit meant to her. Maybe, just maybe...

She sighed.

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

*No.*

This was only temporary. Once Jack found out the truth about her, he wouldn't want her anymore.

## Chapter Six

"How am I supposed to walk through Professor Fleming's exhibit after that meal you just fed me?" Holly patted her full tummy. "You're going to have to roll me out of here."

Jack's husky chuckle was too low to resonate over the din of the restaurant, but Holly felt its vibration. Very sexy. Then again, everything he did was sexy.

"You do like a good steak, don't you, sugar?"

"Yes, I do."

His smile was pure sin. "So many women these days won't eat red meat. Heck, they won't eat anything but rabbit food."

"Well, I enjoy eating," Holly said, "and life is too short not to do the things we enjoy."

"True enough," Jack agreed.

He had no idea how true. The man hadn't even hit thirty yet. The whisper of a chill skittered up Holly's neck. She hated thinking about his age. Thinking about his age led to the myriad reasons they could never be together long term. That saddened her, truly. She liked this man more with every minute she spent in his company. He was so much more than a hot cowboy. He was a father, a son, a rancher. Her lips curved. A nude model.

She had to end it tonight. The more time she devoted to him, the harder the heartbreak would be when it ended.

And it would end. That was inevitable.

"So you ready?" Jack said.

Holly nodded and rose. "Yeah, let's go. Thanks so much for the dinner."

"My pleasure." He stood and helped her with her light sweater. "The gallery's only a block away. Nice night for a walk."

She nodded again. "I'd like that."

"You okay, sugar? You sound a little down all of a sudden."

*Just thinking about turning you loose tonight.*

She sighed. "I'm fine, Jack. Just a little tired. But I don't want to miss this exhibit. I'm a huge fan of Professor Fleming's work. I hope this exhibit will be his big break."

"He's hoping so, too." He took her hand and guided her around the tables and out the door of the restaurant.

He continued to hold her hand as they walked. The spring night was balmy and downtown Denver was hopping. Every woman who passed them seemed to be checking Jack out and Holly couldn't help but wonder what they thought of her, the older woman, on the arm of the hot young cowboy. Her skin prickled with conspicuousness. They didn't talk during the short walk and Holly breathed a sigh of relief when they entered the small gallery.

A hostess greeted them with glasses of wine and a tray of hors d'oeuvres, which Holly declined. She was so full from dinner she might never eat again.

"There's Mark," Jack said, gesturing. "Want to go say hi?"

Holly shook her head. "I'm sure he's busy."

"Not too busy for his favorite godson." Jack pulled Holly along behind him as he made a beeline for Professor Fleming.

"Jack, good of you to come," Professor Fleming said as they approached. "Meet my agent, Mary Rivers."

A small blonde woman held out her hand. Jack shook it, and then said, "This is Holly Taylor."

"A pleasure, Ms. Taylor," Professor Fleming said. "You look familiar. Have we met?"

Holly cleared her throat. "I'm in your perceptual drawing class at the community

college."

"Ah, yes, that's it." He reddened just a bit, but Holly noticed. "Then you were there when Jack —"

"Yeah, she was, but that's not how we met, so get your mind out of the gutter." Jack exchanged a smile with the older man.

Holly's cheeks warmed. Get his mind out of the gutter? If he knew how they'd actually met, he wouldn't think the whole nude model thing was that bad.

She stifled a giggle. "I'm really excited about this exhibit, Professor."

"Please, call me Mark and I hope you enjoy it," he said. "I know Jack'll take good care of you."

"Count on it, Mark," Jack said, then excused himself and Holly and led her to the first wall of oil paintings.

Holly didn't enjoy abstracts much, so she was glad Mark had only a few in his exhibit. She much preferred landscapes and portraits. She drank in the colors, the textures, examining each painting closely, then from farther away.

"Wow," Jack said beside her, his warm breath caressing her neck.

"What?"

"You're looking at each one like it's unique."

"Each one is unique, silly."

"That's not what I meant. Heck, I don't know what I meant. It's just...beautiful, the way you sink into the art, like you're becoming one with it."

"I kind of am, I guess. I love art. I always have. I should have learned to create way before now, but —" She sighed. "—life gets in the way sometimes. Decisions get made for the wrong reasons."

Jack said no more and Holly went on to the next painting. It was a little boy on a chestnut horse. Clad in jeans and cowboy boots, he looked to be about five or six years old. Mark had captured his youthful beauty with tiny strokes of the brush. The child's dark hair and eyes gazed outward, as if he were looking through Holly.

"Gorgeous," she said under her breath.

"You like that one?" Jack said.

"Yes, it's wonderful. The horse and the child almost seem like one being and the child's innocence is depicted so beautifully. I can't believe Mark is only now showing this stuff."

"Oh, I think it's kind of like you said. Decisions get made. He didn't decide to get serious about his own work until later in his life."

"That's sad. I hope this exhibit is successful. In fact, I think I'd like to buy this painting."

"I don't think that particular one's for sale, sugar." Jack handed her the program. "It's not listed."

Holly leafed through the pamphlet. He was right. "Shoot. Well, I'd like to support my professor. I'll have to find another, I guess."

Holly chose a painting of an older woman gardening. It didn't move her quite as much as the little boy on the horse, but it was beautiful nonetheless and the color scheme would look great in her loft. She and Jack said goodnight to Mark and took the downtown shuttle back to Holly's loft.

Jack smiled as he entered the passcode. They took the elevator up and she fished her keys out of her purse and handed them to Jack.

Why had she handed the keys to Jack?

It had been an unconscious move on her part. Weird.

He unlocked the door and followed her in. He set the painting on the floor and smiled at her.

That gorgeous, sexy, heart-stopping smile.

Oh, she was a goner now. She knew exactly what he was after and she wanted it, too.

Was one more night with him too much to ask? Another night of mind-numbing sex that she could remember when it was all over?

"Jack—"

He pulled her to his body, gripped her cheeks with his warm hands, and lowered his mouth to hers.

His full lips were smooth and firm, laced with the lusty spiciness of the Petite Sirah



they had drunk at the gallery. Slowly they slid over hers, kissing, caressing, urging, until Holly had no choice but to open to him. The kiss was slow at first, thoughtful, unlike their previous encounters, but its depth evoked powerful emotion from her head to her toes. His lips were numbing, drugging, and they carried her to a place where she felt, for a moment, a happy ending might exist for them. She allowed the illusion to saturate her mind and gave herself freely to his leisurely passion, meeting his gentle tongue with her own, exploring his sweet mouth with a soft fervor.

It was a beautiful kiss, unlike anything she'd experienced. One hand remained firmly on her cheek and his thumb caressed her as though she were made of fine porcelain. His other hand trailed down her neck and made her shiver as he gently massaged her nape. Such wonderful, talented hands.

The kiss continued. He didn't touch her breasts, didn't pull her closer into his arousal. She fought her own desire to grind into him, to unbutton his shirt and trail her fingers over his sculpted chest, his copper nipples. Instead she reached upward and tangled her fingers in his silky hair.

Holly lost track of time. Had it been only minutes? Or maybe half an hour? Still his lips held her in thrall and the kiss chorused like a symphony through her veins. Perfect.

The perfect kiss.

Her nipples puckered against her bra and moisture trickled between her legs. Still he kissed her lips and nothing more.

When he finally pulled his mouth from hers, he looked down at her, his eyes burning, and smiled.

"Holly," was all he said.

She wanted to tell him what that kiss had meant to her, that she would cherish it always. She parted her lips, but no words emerged.

"Sugar, that was the best kiss of my life."

"Oh, Jack, me too."

His fingers still caressing her cheek, he said, "I'm glad to hear that. Glad this isn't just one-sided."

Holly widened her eyes. "How could you think that?"

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

"You don't seem to want me like I want you."

Holly touched his lips, swollen and wet from the kiss. This man was so beautiful  
"Wanting you isn't the issue, Jack. It never was. How could any woman not want you?"

He kissed the tips of her fingers and then gripped her shoulders and pulled her against his body. His arousal poked into her belly.

"Feel that? That's me wanting you, Holly. That's me dyin' to make love to you."

"I—"

"Please. Please let me take you to bed tonight."

Holly closed her eyes and buried her head in his hard shoulder. He didn't know, but she had already made her decision. She would take him to bed.

Tomorrow she'd tell him good-bye.

## Chapter Seven

She had the world's sexiest nipples. Jack couldn't get enough of Holly's breasts—their full, round shape, their soft flesh and especially those amazing rosy nipples that fit so well between his lips. They were smooth as satin beneath his fingers and tongue, and they tasted like sweet cream. He'd never known a woman's nipples to have a flavor, but Holly's did.

He couldn't wait to get inside her hot body that gripped his cock like no other. He hadn't had sex since the night they were together. Sure, he'd had the chance, but he hadn't wanted to. Strange, but Holly had gotten under his skin that night and when he'd stood before her art class, naked as the day he was born, both joy and anger had seized him—joy that he'd found her and anger that she hadn't wanted him past that one night.

She was hiding something. That much was clear. At this particular moment, though, he didn't much care what it was. He burned for her and he was going to have her.

She writhed under him as he licked her nipples, sucked them, bit them. She liked her nipples bitten hard, his Holly, and he was happy to oblige. He trailed his fingers over her soft belly and entwined them through her dark thatch of curls. Nearly black, they were a few shades darker than her long mahogany hair. Why that turned him on, he couldn't say, but he itched to inhale their muskiness, to sink his tongue into the moist folds they hid. He sifted through the curls to find her swollen clit and he rubbed it as he continued to tug on her nipple.

"God, Jack," she moaned. "Please."

He released the tight bud and smiled. "What, sugar?"

"It feels so good. Put your fingers in me, Jack. Please."

Never one to deny a lady, he inserted two fingers into her hot, wet channel. She clamped around him like a vise and he nearly lost his load right there. She was so tight. He couldn't wait to sink his cock into her.

He glided in and out of her, enjoying the tight suction of her walls around his fingers. Twisting his hands, he massaged her G-spot and she arched upward. His forearm tensed as he added a third finger, stretching her willing flesh for his hard cock.

He couldn't take much more, but first he needed to taste her. He unclamped his lips from her gorgeous nipple and let his tongue travel over the round flesh of her breast, down her silky belly and through the pretty dark curls.

He lapped at her folds, the honey and spice a pleasure to savor, as he continued to finger fuck her. She writhed and moaned, sweet symphony to his ears, and he closed his lips around her clit and sucked.

"Yes, Jack, yes!" she rasped, her voice low with desire.

Her walls spasmed, milking his fingers with their sweet contractions. When the convulsions slowed, he sucked her clit and made her come again, just for the sheer pleasure of hearing her moan his name.

"Jack."

Not cowboy. Jack. How sweet the sound from her pink lips.

"Fuck me now, Jack," she said, "please."

Removing his fingers from her took effort, but knowing he'd replace them with his cock made it worthwhile. With haste, he found his jeans crumpled on the floor and withdrew a condom from the pocket. In seconds he sheathed himself and returned to Holly's bed.

He lay next to her and touched his lips to hers, slowly tracing them with his tongue. He loved to kiss a woman after he'd gone down on her. He had no idea why, but shoving his tongue coated with female musk into her mouth never failed to get him going. Of course, he was horny already but when Holly opened for his kiss and he fed

her a taste of her own juices, a spike of intense heat hit him low in the gut.

He caressed her smooth skin, trailing his fingers along her back to the soft curve of her bottom. She had a great ass, just plump enough. He squeezed a firm globe of flesh and a rumble escaped low in his throat. He had to have her. Now.

Still cupping her backside, he glided on top of her and slid himself snugly between her welcoming thighs. He thrust inside and the breathy sigh from Holly warmed his neck and made his skin prickle. He buried himself to the hilt and stayed immobile for a moment, letting himself sink into her tightness. His body was ablaze—hard, hot and filled with lust—yet he needed this closeness, this chance to consume her completely, before he began pumping into her.

Holly had other ideas. She rocked her hips against his and tiny tremors shook his cock. He withdrew slowly then plunged back into her depths. Ah, how her tight suction gripped him, moved him. He thrust into her again and once more. He wanted to give her more, but he was so close. His body ached for release. The slender length of her legs cushioned his pistoning hips and he groaned when her walls clenched around his rock-hard shaft. She was coming, thank God. He let himself go and the vibrations began in his balls as they tightened against his flesh, then traveled through his cock in tiny jerks.

"Holly, sugar," he gasped and spilled into her warmth.

She clutched his ass, pushing him farther into her as he came with violent jolt after jolt of heavenly pleasure so intense it almost hurt.

When his body finally relaxed, she caressed his back, murmuring unintelligible words against his neck. He kissed her sweat-dampened forehead and rolled to his side. His cock, still hard, slid out of her.

"Jack," she said.

"Hmm?" He flung his arm over his forehead. His breathing was unsteady.

"That was amazing."

He couldn't help but smile. Hell, yeah, it had been amazing. He pulled the soiled condom from his penis and disposed of it in the wastebasket next to her nightstand. He turned to her, her beautiful face glowing with the sheen of perspiration.

"It was goddamn fucking amazing, sugar. The best I've had in years. Maybe ever."

Her smile illuminated her beauty. Had he reached her? Would she give him a chance now?

"Come here," he said and she scooted into his arms. He kissed the top of her head and pulled her close. "Sleep now. You're gonna need it."

\* \* \* \*

Holly couldn't sleep. Jack's hard body snuggled up to her felt so good. Why couldn't her life have turned out differently?

Why couldn't he have been born ten years earlier and already had all the kids he wanted?

*Face it, Holly. No matter how you slice it, this wasn't meant to be.*

She disentangled herself from his muscular limbs and padded out to the kitchen for a glass of water. If only he weren't so sexy, so handsome. But his looks and charisma weren't what had her so shaken. It was him. Jack. Sure, he had a gorgeous face, an amazing body – but that was superficial. What she loved about him was his kindness, his persistence, his nurturing personality.

Holly's glass clattered to the bottom of the stainless steel sink. Luckily it didn't break, and she hoped the noise didn't wake Jack.

Shit. Had she just thought the word "loved" about Jack?

*God, Holly, you so can't go there.*

*Heart-stopping sex does not equal love.*

Hands shaking, she retrieved her glass, filled it with cold water, and gulped it down, then splashed the still-running water on her face. She reached for her dishtowel and rubbed the wetness from her skin.

She'd spent two nights with the man. Had two dates with him, if you counted the coffee date yesterday morning. She couldn't possibly be in love.

Her pulse raced. She was more than a little freaked out. He was too young for her, that was for sure, and there were definitely other reasons he wouldn't want her. Damn – how could she love him? What a perfect setup for heartbreak and that she did not

need.

With a huff, she strode to the extra bedroom that housed her computer. She sat down and typed "older woman/younger man" into the search engine bar.

Over a million hits!

Apparently she wasn't the only woman who had the hots for a younger man.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she began clicking. Lots of information surfaced and she skimmed it, but when she stumbled into a chatroom called "The Cougar Club" she had to take a closer look. Maybe these ladies would understand her dilemma. Surely one of them might have a similar issue.

She created an account under the name HollyGolightly—not original but she couldn't think of anything else at midnight—and logged in. Music jingled, indicating a post.

**Cublover:** Hi Holly!

**GoodtimeCharlene:** Evening, Holly.

**MrsRobinson:** Hey there, Holly! Welcome!

Should she lurk? Only these three were in the chatroom besides her. She'd be very conspicuous if she lurked.

She'd log out. This had been a mistake. She was no cougar. Jack wasn't a cub. It wasn't going to work out anyway, due to circumstances way more important than their respective ages. Her mouse was poised over the logout link when the jingle sounded again.

**Cublover:** Welcome to the Cougar Club. Is there anything we can help you with tonight, Holly?

*Just click, Holly, just click.*

As seconds passed, she knew she wouldn't leave the chatroom, but she didn't chat, either.

**MrsRobinson:** Or just feel free to lurk if you're more comfortable with that. Charlene was just telling us about breaking up with her latest.

**GoodtimeCharlene:** Yeah, it didn't work out this time. My first foray into cougardom. But I enjoyed his stamina.

Should she? Why not?

**HollyGolightly:** If you don't mind my asking, why didn't it work out?

**GoodtimeCharlene:** Not at all. He's only thirty-five, and he wasn't ready to give up the dream of a white picket fence and a houseful of rugrats.

Holly's heart sank. Jack was six years younger than Charlene's "cub."

**Cublover:** And you're not willing to talk about this?

**GoodtimeCharlene:** Hell, no. Been there, done that. I'm done being the soccer mom. My children are in college.

**MrsRobinson:** If he loves you, he'll be willing to compromise.

**GoodtimeCharlene:** What compromise is there? He wants a child of his own. I already have children of my own, and my child-bearing years are rapidly coming to an end. I just don't want to do it all again.

**Cublover:** Understandable.

**MrsRobinson:** Never say never. There's always a compromise available.

**Cublover:** I'm not sure there is, Megan. Children can be an issue that ends a cougar/cub relationship. I've seen it happen too many times.

**MrsRobinson:** Katherine, I don't want to sound all Pollyanna, but if they love each other, they can work it out.

Holly made a mental note—Cublover was Katherine and MrsRobinson was Megan. She wondered how old they were.

**GoodtimeCharlene:** I have to side with Katherine on this one, Megan. I just don't think there's a future with Bob. Yeah, I love him, but he's not willing to give up his dream of being a parent and I have to respect that. If I were twenty years younger, it would be my dream too.

A lead ball dropped to Holly's stomach. It all came down to children for Charlene and Bob. That part of Charlene's life was over, but it hadn't yet begun for Bob. Children were the issue. And of course they were. They'd been Holly's dream, too.

**HollyGolightly:** If you don't mind my asking, how old are you, Charlene?

**GoodtimeCharlene:** Don't mind at all. I'm forty-seven. How old are you?

**HollyGolightly:** Forty.



**MrsRobinson:** I'm fifty.

**Cublover:** Me too. How old is your cub, Holly?

Her cub? Jack was her cub? The beginning of a smile curved her lips.

**HollyGolightly:** He's twenty-nine.

**MrsRobinson:** Nice!

**Cublover:** Have you been together long?

**HollyGolightly:** No. And it's not going to work out anyway. There are issues.

**MrsRobinson:** There are always issues, hon. But we can help, right, ladies?

**GoodtimeCharlene:** We can try. That's what we're here for.

**HollyGolightly:** Are you ready to say goodbye to Bob, Charlene?

**GoodtimeCharlene:** No, to be honest. But I love him enough to let him go. If he lets go of his own dream to be with me, he may resent me for it, and I don't want that.

Holly nodded at the computer screen. Charlene, whoever she was, spoke the truth. Resentment had no place in a relationship. Did she love Jack enough to let him go?

She nodded again. What a mess! She was in love with Jack.

**Cublover:** Do you have anything you want to tell us, Holly? You're safe here.

Safe? Safe in a computer chatroom talking to faceless women? Heck, she didn't even know if they were women. They could be perverted old men who got off on talking about young studs.

Somehow she knew this chatroom was legitimate. She felt it, and she felt safe. And she did need to talk to someone.

She started to type, but the soft thump of footsteps behind her interrupted her thoughts. Quickly she clicked on the logout link.

"Sugar?"

She turned to face Jack, who looked tousled and sexy and way too good for the middle of the night.

Her heart sped up at the sight.

"What're you doin' up? You okay?"

She stood to face him. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. I just rolled over and you weren't there. Brought back memories of that

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

morning after till I remembered I was at your place. Pretty hard for you to run out on me."

Holly smiled and pushed back a lock of dark hair that had fallen over his eye.

It hit her again, like an arrow between her eyes. She was in love with this young cowboy and it was time to let him go.

She'd do that in the morning. For the rest of the night, she could lie in his arms and make love to him. For just a few more hours, she could play Pollyanna like Megan and pretend everything would work out.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to end it.

## Chapter Eight

"What?"

The forkful of scrambled eggs on its way to Holly's mouth dropped back onto her plate.

Jack smiled at her from across the kitchen table. "I said I want you to spend the weekend with me."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. I want to see more of you and I want you to meet Sam."

"I don't think I'm ready to —"

"No excuses, Holly. Don't tell me you didn't feel something special last night. We made love four times. Four, sugar. I'm twenty-nine, not seventeen. I haven't been able to make love four times in a row for nearly a decade."

"Maybe you just haven't had any in a while?" Holly's voice hedged.

"You're right about that. Not since that night with you."

Her fork crashed onto her plate next to the discarded serving of eggs. He hadn't had sex since her? Well, she hadn't either, but he was a guy—an incredibly sexy and desirable guy. Surely women fell all over him, especially with all that nude modeling.

How was she supposed to end this? To love him enough to let him go, like Charlene said, seemed impossible.

"Look, Jack —"

"Sorry —" He stood and placed his empty plate in her sink. "—not taking no for an answer this time. We have something special here, Holly. I want to get to know you and

I want you to get to know me and my son." He hesitated for a moment and a troubled line creased his forehead. "You do like kids, don't you?" he said, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

"Yes, of course I like kids, but —"

He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. "Good. I'll pick you up at your office tomorrow at five. Have your bag packed."

"Jack, really —"

"Gotta run, sugar." He thumbed her cheek and kissed her again. "I'm pickin' up Sam this morning at my mom's, then I have some stuff to do around the ranch today. I'll see you tomorrow evening."

In a flash, he was gone, leaving Holly with her mouth hanging open.

\* \* \* \*

Her bag was packed. She'd told herself she wasn't going, that she couldn't put Jack through this, but in the end, her hands had gathered her sundries and clothing and packed them in her burgundy overnight bag. It now sat by the door to her office.

He was late. It was nearing five-thirty and all her office mates and Cindy had left early for the long Labor Day weekend. Jack hadn't said anything about the long weekend, but Holly had packed for three nights just in case.

She frowned. If he stood her up....

A soft sigh left her throat. If he stood her up, it would be for the best. Though her heart cried at the thought, at least it would spare her having to end it after the weekend.

After she'd fallen that much deeper in love with him.

Five-thirty went by, then five-forty-five. Holly stood from her desk, ready to take her packed bag home, when Jack rushed in.

"Thank God you're still here," he said, panting.

"What happened?"

"Just ran up here from where I parked a block away. I was afraid you'd have left already."

"I was just about to."

He grinned. "I'm glad I got here in time. Sorry to be runnin' so late."

"Is everything okay?"

"Fine. Just had to run a quick errand and Friday night traffic was bad."

"Oh."

"Sam's anxious to meet you."

"He is?"

"Sure is. Believe it or not, I don't bring lots of ladies home and he loves company."

He says he wants to show you his horse. Sound good?"

Holly absently rubbed her bottom. "I've never been on a horse in my life."

Jack let out a laugh. "We'll remedy that this weekend." He walked behind her desk and embraced her. "Damn, I've missed you."

She let out a nervous giggle. "You just saw me yesterday."

His lopsided grin stole her breath. "I still missed you, sugar. How about a kiss?"

Before she could reply, his lips crushed to hers. This wasn't the gentle kiss of two nights ago. This was a desperate kiss, a possessive kiss, as though he'd been hungry for the taste of her for days, weeks. He thrust his tongue into her mouth with fierce determination and he devoured her.

She loved every second of it.

She kissed him back with equal fervor. God, she'd missed him, too. She hadn't realized how much.

Moisture trickled between her legs. One kiss, and she was ready to be thoroughly fucked.

He broke from her mouth, panting. "I need you, sugar. Are we alone?"

"Yeah." Her voice was low and raspy. "Everyone else left for the day."

"Good." He lifted her skirt, moved her panties aside and thrust his fingers into her.

"Already so wet for me. Do you have any idea what you do to me, sugar?"

"Maybe a little." Her breath came in a puff.

"God, you've gotta know." He turned her and bent her over her desk. Her stapler bit into her midsection, but she didn't care. She heard the zing of his zipper, then the rip

of a condom packet.

"You ready for me?" His low voice was music to her ears.

"Yes. Please."

He thrust into her in one smooth stroke. He'd barely plunged in the second time when her walls clenched, sending icy spasms from her womb to every cell in her body.

"Jack, yes!" Ripples pulsed through her.

"Yeah, sugar, come for me. Just like that." He thrust into her again, then once more, burying his cock in her as he cried out his own release.

The weight of his body pushed her farther onto the stapler and the hardness of her wooden desk. He pressed wet kisses to her neck, making her shudder as her orgasm continued to roll through her. She panted against her day planner and beads of sweat trickled across her cheeks and dropped onto the open book.

"Holly, I wish..." His voice trailed off, and he rose, leaving her feeling an acute loss when his body heat and weight left her. With a tender touch, he replaced her skirt and panties.

She unbent her body, turned, and faced him. "You wish what?"

"Nothing." He smiled and disposed of the condom in her wastebasket, then pulled his pants around his luscious narrow hips, zipped them and buckled his belt. "Come on. It's a forty-five minute drive to my place from here. Luisa's keeping dinner for us."

"Luisa?" Holly pictured a sultry Hispanic woman as she smoothed her underwear and skirt.

"She keeps house for me and watches Sam while I work," Jack said. Her husband is my hired hand around the ranch."

*Husband. Whew.* Holly relaxed a little.

"Do they live on your ranch?"

"Yeah. There's a small house adjacent to the main house. They live there."

"That's handy."

"Works for all of us. At least it will till they decide to have their own family. Then I'll need to find different help."

"Oh." Everywhere around her, it seemed children and family were the focus.

Always a reminder of why this relationship with Jack wouldn't work long term.

But why think of that now? She could enjoy the weekend with him and meet his son. She just wouldn't get attached – to his son or to his home. She was already attached to him, and heartbreak was just around the corner.

She forced a smile. "Ready?"

His grin lit his raw male beauty. "You bet.

\* \* \* \*

Holly laughed as they rode through the gate to Jack's ranch. The sign above it said *Rancho Notso Grande*.

"Nice name."

He chuckled. "Sam came up with it."

"Did he really?"

"Yeah. Luisa teaches him a little Spanish now and then. Her husband, Carlos, doesn't speak much English and Jack wanted to talk to him. Last year he decided our little operation needed a name and that's what he came up with."

"He sounds smart."

"I'm sure I'm a bit biased –" Jack winked at her, and her heart leaped. " – but I think he's the most brilliant six-year-old on the planet."

Holly couldn't help but smile. Jack loved his son. He was a doting daddy, as he should be. If only....

He pulled his red pick-up to a stop in front of a sprawling ranch house.

"Wow," Holly said under her breath.

"It looks bigger from the outside," Jack said. "It's actually pretty cozy."

Warmth crept to her cheeks. "I didn't think you heard that. It looks gorgeous to me."

"I hope you like it." He exited the truck and in seconds opened the passenger door for her. All that and a gentleman, too.

Oh, this would be difficult.

He grabbed her overnight bag out of the back and led her up the driveway and into the house.

"Daddy!" A small boy ran into Jack's arms.

"Hey, buddy." Jack pulled the child into a bear hug and kissed the top of his head. "I want you to meet Miss Holly. She's the friend I told you about."

The boy turned to Holly and she melted. He was Jack in miniature, only his ebony eyelashes were even longer than his father's, if that were possible. He had the same dark eyes and sable hair, and an adorable elfin face that promised handsomeness in the future.

"Welcome to Rancho Notso Grande, Miss Holly." He held out his little hand and again, Holly melted into a puddle. *What a cutie.*

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Sam," she said, taking his small hand in hers, "and you can call me Holly. I hear you named your dad's ranch."

"Yup. Sure did."

"It's a fine name." She smiled and was overjoyed when he smiled back, showcasing a missing front tooth. *Adorable.*

"Did you already eat, Sam?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. I ate with Luisa and Carlos. Sorry Daddy, I was hungry."

"That's okay. But Miss Holly and I are starved, so we're gonna go to the kitchen and eat our supper. Where's Luisa?"

"She's in the kitchen."

"Okay. You run along and play for a little while. It'll be bedtime soon."

"Okay."

"What a good natured little thing," Holly said to Jack, as he led her to the kitchen.

"Yeah, he's a good kid."

As Holly had originally feared, Luisa was indeed a Latin beauty with black hair and eyes, red lips, a sumptuous figure. She stood at the sink rinsing dishes.

*Husband*, Holly reminded herself. *She's no threat.*

Not that it mattered anyway.

Jack made the necessary introductions and a few minutes later Sam ran in. Luisa



caught him in a hug. "Come on, *mijo*, let's get you ready for your bath." She excused herself and left the kitchen with Sam.

She'd left them a Mexican feast—cheese *enchiladas*, *refritos* and *carnitas*, which Holly had never eaten before. It was stewed pork served with guacamole, sour cream and *pico de gallo*. It was delicious and very spicy.

Her nose was running after the first few bites. Jack laughed and handed her a box of tissues from the counter. "Sorry, sugar. Luisa only knows how to cook hot, hotter, and hottest."

"No problem," Holly said and meant it. "I love spicy food, really. This is just a little spicier than I'm used to. But it's wonderful, and it's homemade. I don't get to eat homemade food very often."

"You don't cook?"

"I love to cook. But what's the point of cooking for one? Frozen entrees are cheap and easy."

"When's the last time you cooked?"

"Heavens, I don't know."

"Do you have any specialties?"

"Well, yeah, actually." Her cheeks warmed. "I told you my mom's French. I make a mean *Boeuf Bourguignon*."

"Sounds delicious. What is it?"

"It's beef stewed in red wine and it's divine. In fact—" An idea came to her. "—why don't you give Luisa the night off tomorrow, and I'll make it for you and Sam? You'll love it, I promise. I'll have to start it in the morning. It cooks for several hours and the whole house will smell great."

"What do you need? I'll have Luisa go to the market."

"A nice lean cut of beef, about two pounds. And a dry red wine. Some pearl onions and mushrooms. Thyme and bay leaves. Especially the thyme. That should do it. Oh, and flour, unless you already have that. It's a staple in most kitchens."

"Now, sugar, flour I have. I make a mean flapjack myself."

"Okay then." She shot him a grin. "I'll expect your flapjacks for breakfast and I'll

make you a great dinner."

"Sounds like a deal." Jack sipped his glass of Chardonnay. Holly, who normally only drank red wine, had to admit the oaky white worked well with the spicy Mexican fare.

Luisa whisked into the kitchen. "Sam's ready to say goodnight."

"I'll be right up," Jack said, rising. "Excuse me for a few minutes, Holly."

"No problem. Take all the time you need." She turned to Luisa. "Thank you so much for the delicious dinner. I can't remember when I've enjoyed a meal more."

"You're most welcome, *senorita*."

"Please, call me Holly. I'd love to get your recipes if you don't mind."

Luisa laughed and Holly was again stunned by her fresh beauty. "I never write them down, but I can show you. Tomorrow?"

"I told Jack I'd cook for Sam and him tomorrow. Maybe the next day?"

"*Si*, Carlos likes a good Mexican feast on Sundays. I'll be happy to show you then." She sat down in the chair Jack had vacated. "Tell me, Holly, how long have you known Jack?"

"Not long. Why?"

"Because he hasn't brought a lady home for a while. I don't keep track, but it's been more than a year, close to two at this point."

"Oh?" Holly's heart jumped as a sizzle of happiness raced along her nerve endings.

"He was very excited to have you come. He kept me busy all day making sure the house was clean and neat for you. I've never seen him like that."

"You didn't need to go to any trouble for me."

"I'm glad to do it. Carlos and I, we want Jack to be happy. He's a good man."

"Luisa, Jack and I..." Holly hedged. "We haven't been together very long. It's too soon for any type of real commitment between us."

Luisa smiled. "I understand. It's just good to see him interested in someone."

Holly returned Luisa's smile. She couldn't help but like the younger woman. Beneath her dark beauty shone kindness and what Holly sensed was true caring for Jack and his son.

"Do you have children, Luisa?"

"No. Carlos and I have tried for years, but it hasn't happened for us yet. I have Sam. Carlos and I love him like he's our own. And we have lots of nieces and nephews who we dote on. Most of Carlos's family is still in Mexico, but I have seven brothers, and they all have kids." Luisa's black eyes filmed over – only a bit, but Holly noticed.

And she understood.

She reached across the table and patted Luisa's hand. "It may happen yet, Luisa. You're young."

"Yes, I am only twenty-seven. I pray every night for a baby of my own. Until it happens, I take care of Sam for Jack."

"How long have you been taking care of Sam?"

"Since he came." Luisa's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "Carlos and I have been on the ranch since we got married. I was only nineteen at the time. Carlos didn't speak much English, so I came with him to speak to Jack about working here on the ranch. My mother works for his mother and she sent us over here."

"Does his mother live nearby?"

"*Si*, on a neighboring ranch. His father passed away last year."

"I'm sorry."

"He was very ill with cancer. It was for the best."

The C-word. Chills crept up Holly's spine. Would she ever be able to say it out loud? There was so much she didn't know about Jack, and so much she wanted to learn, but wouldn't be able to.

"Sam's all tucked in." Jack's voice boomed as he entered the kitchen.

"I'll get home, then," Luisa said, rising. "It was great talking to you, Holly."

"You too," Holly said and meant it. "I'm looking forward to our cooking lesson on Sunday."

"I thought you said you could cook," Jack said to Holly, his gorgeous full lips curved into that lazy half smile she adored.

"I can. American, French, a little Japanese even, but not Mexican. I want to learn."

"Luisa's the best, then. I'll stay out of your way on Sunday."

They laughed as Luisa left.

"I took your bag upstairs for you," Jack said, pulling Holly to her feet.

"I suppose you have a guest room?"

"I do. But I was hoping you'd stay with me."

Her tummy fluttered. "You know I'd love to, but Sam...."

"I'm a grown man, sugar. Sam doesn't have any say about who I sleep with."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I could put you up in the guestroom, but I'd be sneakin' in there with you. And if Sam woke up in the middle of the night lookin' for me and I wasn't there, that'd sure be more traumatic for him then finding a hot woman in my bed."

Holly couldn't help but laugh. Why was he so damned wonderful?

"What do you want to do tonight? We can watch a movie. I have a great DVD collection."

"How about a walk? I'd love to see more of your ranch."

"I do like the sound of that, sugar, but I sent Luisa home. I can't leave Sam."

"Oh." The warmth of embarrassment coated Holly's cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to being around kids. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's okay. I hope you'll get used to Sam, though. I want you to get to know him. He's a wonderful kid."

"I know that already." She cupped his cheek tenderly, let her fingers scrape over the rugged stubble of his night beard. "And he has a great dad."

Was that a blush on his neck and cheeks? He was so handsome and his humility made him more adorable. "I promise you a great tour of the place tomorrow, with Sam and me as guides." He covered her hand, still on his cheek, with his own. Its warmth radiated through Holly's skin all the way to her core. "Tonight, though, I can give you a bird's eye view of the big dipper from my deck, if you'd like. You can see stars out here that you just can't see in the city, sugar. It's amazing."

"I'd love that." She leaned upward and brushed her lips gently over his.

He deepened the kiss, but only for a moment. "We can make love under the stars, Holly." His low voice hummed against her lips.

"How is it that you do this, Jack?"

"Do what?"

"Make me want you so much? It's like I'm not myself anymore. I can't see, I can't hear, I can't even breathe."

His lips moved against hers in a smile and he nipped her chin. "I'm so glad this isn't all one-sided. You're so beautiful. I can't get enough of looking at you. And right now, I want to look at you under the Big Dipper."

## Chapter Nine

Jack's redwood deck wrapped around the back and both sides of the ranch house. They sat together on an old-fashioned porch swing holding hands, not saying much, until the sun set and the stars shone in the black night sky. Holly's breath caught at the beauty of it all. Jack had been right. The country sky held secrets she'd never seen. The Big Dipper was vibrant in its luminescence and lesser stars she hadn't known existed twinkled all around it.

Once she'd breathed in her fill of the night sky's radiance, Jack undressed her slowly, kissing each new inch of skin as he exposed it. When they were both naked, he grabbed the blanket hanging over the back of the porch swing, took her hand, and led her to a secluded spot on the soft grass.

The sounds of the evening shrouded them—crickets chirping, a delicate breeze rustling through the aspen grove that surrounded Jack's house, and the soft groans rumbling from Jack into her as he made love to her slowly, sweetly, and gently underneath the stars.

Later he led her to his bedroom and made love to her again.

\* \* \* \*

"It's easy, Holly, you just stand on the near side and get on."

"Near side?" Holly eyed Sam's eager face, and then turned to the creamy white animal that was already saddled. "You mean the one I'm nearest to?"

"He means the left side, sugar," Jack said. "You need to speak in non-cowboy language for Holly, Sam."

"Sorry, Daddy. But I can't believe she never rode a horse before!"

"She lives in the city, pal. Not everyone lives on a ranch like we do."

"Well, everyone should."

Jack laughed. "Can't argue with you there." Then to Holly, "Just put your left foot in the stirrup, and hold onto the withers."

"Jack—" Holly rolled her eyes. "What the hell is a wither?"

"Non-cowboy lingo, Daddy," Sam reminded him.

Jack's lazy smile lit up his face. "It isn't that easy, is it pal? The withers, sugar, with an 's'. It's the highest part of the back at the base of the neck." He patted the horse's withers, or so Holly assumed. "Ladybelle here is gentle, and she'll take good care of you."

"I hope so. I have to say, I'm a bit nervous."

"The horse'll sense your fear, Holly," Sam said, "right, Daddy?"

"Sam's right, sugar. You need to take control."

"Right. Take control of an animal that outweighs me by four times."

Jack eyed her and she warmed under his gaze. "I'd say about eight or nine times, sugar. But that'd probably make you more nervous."

Holly's tummy lurched. Eight or nine times? "Thanks for that, Jack."

"Aw, Holly," Sam said, "Ladybelle's our most gentlest horse here. I've been ridin' her since I was knee high to a grasshopper."

Holly shook her head. Sam wasn't much more than knee high to a grasshopper now. "Okay, here goes." She grasped the "withers" and lifted her left leg into the stirrup. Quite a difference from the only stirrups she'd encountered in the last year—those at the gynecologist's office. Her skin chilled for a split second until she wiped the negative image from her mind. Today was for her and Jack and Sam. She'd worry about the rest tomorrow.

Make that Monday.

Tuesday at the latest.

"Okay, sugar, just push up with your left leg and swing your other leg over the back of Ladybelle there, onto the saddle."

"But be careful you don't kick her flank," Sam warned, "or you'll knock the wind out of her."

"Flank?"

"Right between the ribs and the hip," Jack said. "Just be careful. You won't kick her."

"From your mouth to God's ears," Holly mumbled. Just what she needed, an angry horse who couldn't breathe while she was completely helpless, one leg lodged in a stirrup. She inhaled sharply and swung her leg over Ladybelle's body.

Her bottom hit the hard saddle with a plunk.

"There you go," Jack said. "Now gather the reins and slide your other foot into the stirrup. Are you comfortable? Are the stirrups the right length? I can adjust them for you."

"How the heck should I know? They feel okay."

Jack gazed down at her feet. "Yeah, they look okay. You should be able to slide into them simply by lifting your feet a few inches. Now you wait while Sam and I get on our mounts, and we'll start out."

"Uh, Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"She's not going to...take off or anything, is she?"

He laughed. "No, sugar. Just sit tight. We'll be with you in a minute."

Jack helped Sam onto a spotted gray horse, and then mounted his sleek brown horse with smooth grace. Damn, the man was beautiful.

"Okay, sugar. We're gonna start with a slow walk. Just squeeze your calves together, and Ladybelle'll know what to do."

"Don't I just say 'giddyup' or something?"

Sam burst into giggles.

"No, Holly," Jack said. "Just squeeze your calves. Don't kick, or she'll get numb."

"I'd never kick any animal, Jack Sherwood."

"I know you wouldn't. I'm just sayin' don't squeeze too hard. Sam, come on." Jack's



horse walked.

Holly stared at Jack's finely shaped calves and tried to see exactly what he was doing. Underneath his jeans, those muscular legs were no doubt taut and sinewy with their squeezing movements. Unfortunately, she couldn't see through the fabric, so she had to guess how much tension to put in her own legs.

Sam followed his father and Holly took a deep breath. It's now or never, she said to herself, and squeezed her calves together.

To her astonishment, Ladybelle walked. The horse followed Jack and Sam. Holly's bottom bounced a little in the saddle. Jack and Sam seemed to be sitting comfortably. What was she doing wrong?

"Pull back the reins now," Jack said. "We need to stop and check the girth."

"My girth is just fine, thank you."

"Oh sugar, your girth is lovely. But we're checking Ladybelle's girth."

Holly pulled on the reins and Ladybelle jerked to a stop.

"A little lighter pull next time," Jack said. "Now watch me." Jack slid his fingers beneath the band that went under the horse and held the saddle in place. At least that's what it looked like it was doing. Holly didn't have a clue. "If you can get more than two fingers under the girth, you need to tighten it."

Her hands shaking, Holly replicated Jack's actions. Barely one finger fit between the girth and the horse. "Good to go, I guess," she said.

"Excellent. Let's try a slow walk again. You know what to do."

"Jack, I—" She stopped. How exactly could she say her ass was bumping in the saddle? Not very sexy. "Never mind."

"How're you doing, sugar? You ready to trot?"

"I'm not sure."

"Sure she is, Dad." Little Sam sped forward.

"He's quite the horseman," Holly said.

"Sam would rather ride than just about anything else. Now, for the trot. While we're walking, squeeze her side with your legs again, and she'll move to a faster pace. Just a warning, though. It's gonna get bumpy."

Bumpy? Bumpier than it was already? She was going to need a sitz bath for sure. *Epsom salts, here I come.* She squeezed her calves and Ladybelle started to trot. At least Holly assumed it was a trot. The way her ass was plunking up and down didn't bear any resemblance at all to what Jack and Sam were doing ahead of her.

Jack slowed down and soon rode beside her. "Uncomfortable?"

"Just a touch."

"Try to move with her movement. I know it's hard at first."

"Hard doesn't even begin to describe it."

"I'll massage you later." His dark eyes gleamed.

While a massage with his master hands sounded like heaven on earth, Holly wasn't anxious for him to see her bruised behind. "No thanks."

He laughed. "Don't underestimate the therapeutic value of a good butt massage. Try to post to the movements. Post up and down in the saddle in time to the beats of the trot."

"Right."

"Sometimes it helps to say 'up, down, up, down.'"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. That's how I learned."

"But you weren't forty years old."

"True enough. I was four. Just like Sam was."

"I'm afraid I'm old and set in my ways. I love horses, I really do. They're noble and beautiful animals but I'm not sure I was meant to ride one." *Up, down, up, down.*

It wasn't working.

"Anyone can ride a horse, Holly. We all start out the way you're starting out. It's completely normal."

"Come on, Jack. You look like you were born on a horse."

"Hell, no. I did my share of fallin' the first day. You're doin' way better than I did."

"You were four."

He chuckled. "I suppose it helped that I had no fear. Four-year-olds don't, as a rule. But as an adult learnin', you have sense enough not to spook the horse. So you're ahead

of me."

"I don't particularly feel ahead of anyone at the moment."

Plunk, plunk. The bones in her butt ached. Weren't butts supposed to have lots of cushy insulation?

Jack whistled to Sam. "Turn around, pal. I think Holly's had enough for this mornin'."

"Oh, I hate to cut his ride short."

"No worries. I can take him out again this afternoon if he wants. Or he can ride by himself, as long as he stays close to the house."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. We'll have loads more opportunities to bring you out here."

Holly's insides squeezed together. There wouldn't be loads more opportunities. This was probably the only time she'd visit Jack's ranch and the only time she'd ride a horse.

"Besides," he continued, "you need to get back to check on that great meal you put in the oven before we left, right?" He winked.

"Not really. It bakes for several hours. I don't need to do anything."

"I was tryin' to give you an easy way out, sugar. I know your posterior's hurtin'."

Holly sighed. It was, at that. The massage Jack had mentioned was sounding pretty darn good.

\* \* \* \*

She was sitting on a hemorrhoid donut pillow.

Her humiliation was now complete.

Thank God she hadn't fallen off Ladybelle. That would have been the ultimate embarrassment. Right. As if the donut weren't enough.

Luisa had brought her the pillow after lunch. She'd said it had been her mother's.

Of course, Holly was old enough to be Luisa's mother-her young mother, but mother nonetheless.

She sighed and brought another forkful of *Boeuf Bourguignon* to her mouth. At least her dinner had come off without a hitch. Jack hadn't stopped raving about it. Even Sam was gobbling it up and Luisa had told her the little boy could be picky.

Watching him with Jack was a joy. Their easy banter, the closeness between them, made Holly wonder about Jack's birth mother. Who was she? Holly had given Jack the names of a few good family lawyers in Denver. She shuddered to think what might happen if the woman showed up and demanded rights to her son, or worse, sued for custody. That would kill Jack.

Hate for the woman who'd borne Sam bristled at Holly's neck. That dumb woman didn't know how lucky she was. How could she have abandoned such a sweet little boy? What Holly wouldn't give to....

No. Such thoughts had no place.

She'd ask Jack about the situation once Sam was in bed tonight. That's the least she could do since a long term relationship between them wasn't possible. She'd see that he got a good family law attorney and make sure all paperwork regarding Sam was in order.

After dinner, they sat on the deck while Sam ran around the yard with Jack's dogs, Lacy and Max, two happy and panting Golden Retrievers.

They didn't say much, just held hands and watched the horseplay.

After half an hour, Luisa came out to collect Sam for bed.

"Go ahead, partner," Jack said. "I'll be up to read you a story once you've had your bath."

"Can Holly read me my story tonight?"

"Sam, Holly's our guest."

Holly warmed, pleased that Sam felt close enough to her to ask her. "I'd be happy to read to him, Jack. I don't mind."

Jack's smile heated her. God, she'd miss him—his raw male beauty, his amazing sexual prowess. But mostly she'd miss his gentleness, his devotion to his son, and his big heart.

"If you're sure you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Okay." He gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "After you're done with Sam's story, I have a special surprise for you."

"Oh you do?" She arched her eyebrows, hoping she could pull off a seductive look.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, sugar. Though I have plans for that kind of surprise as well. This is something tangible. And you're gonna love it."

## Chapter Ten

"It's me, sugar."

Holly inhaled, her skin tingling, as she gazed upon the beautiful painting of the boy on the horse she'd wanted to buy at Professor Fleming's exhibit. She and Jack stood in his small den which was next to the kitchen. The canvas sat upright on a camel-colored leather sofa.

"That's why it wasn't for sale. It belongs to me. I loaned it to Mark for the showing. He painted it when I was six, just Sam's age. I want you to have it."

She gasped as tiny tingles raced across her flesh. He was giving it to her? Something so precious? As much as she adored the painting, she couldn't take it. It wouldn't be fair, not when she wouldn't be sticking around.

"Jack, I can't accept it. It's something special from your godfather to you."

"But I want you to have it. I saw the way you looked at it. You have an appreciation for it that I can never share. I mean, it means a lot to me because it's from Mark, but you understand the art. What he was tryin' to convey. To me it's just a pretty painting."

"How can you say that? Okay, maybe you're not that into art, but he painted it out of love for you. Can't you see it? It's all right there on the canvas. This is more to you than a work of art, Jack. Much more."

"I understand that. Honestly, I do. And I want to give it to you."

"But that means...."

"It means you mean a lot to me, too."

Holly's heart dropped to her tummy. God, she loved this man. She was so head

over heels in love she couldn't tell up from down. But as much as she loved him and as much as she adored the painting, she couldn't accept it. To do so would be to perpetuate a lie, a lie she'd already been perpetuating far longer than she should have. She knew better. She and Jack had no future and it was time to tell him why.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She'd lose him today.

Forever.

His long finger wiped the tear from her face. "What's wrong?"

"It's a beautiful painting, Jack. And even more beautiful is the sentiment behind it and the fact that you want me to have it."

"You're beautiful, Holly. The most beautiful woman I know, inside and out."

But he didn't know her inside. That was the problem.

She took a deep breath, opened her mouth, and....

"Jack, tell me about Sam's mother."

*Fucking coward.*

He smiled. "Does this mean you accept my gift?"

No. "It means I'll think about it."

"Okay, good enough. For now. What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with her name."

"Isabel Watkins. She was a cocktail waitress in a small ranching town on the eastern plains. She was nineteen and needy, I was twenty-two and horny. That about sums it up."

"Was she pretty?"

"Pretty enough. Not as pretty as you."

"Jack...."

"Yeah, she was pretty. Had dark eyes and hair like me, which explains why Sam looks like he does."

"Sam looks just like you. He's the spitting image of you in the painting."

"Yeah, a little."

"A lot. You're both beautiful."

"Shucks, ma'am," he drawled, "I ain't beautiful."

She swatted him in the arm. "Of course you are, and you know it. You've surprised me at every turn, Jack. I never would have imagined that my hot one-night stand would turn out to be such a fine man."

"I don't go out lookin' for one nighters, Holly. I want you to know that. Sam came from a one nighter, but I was younger then. Not as discriminating."

She grinned. "Just a young and horny cowboy, huh?"

"Something like that."

"You're more than just a horny cowboy. More than just a nude model. Though I can certainly see why the modeling appeals to you. You get to show off that magnificent body of yours."

"Sugar, I don't do it to show off my body."

"I was just teasing, Jack."

"I know. But the nude modeling appeals to me for another reason. The money. It pays \$200 an hour."

Holly widened her eyes. "Mark pays you that much?"

"The college does. Big universities pay even more. It's a drop in the bucket compared to what it would cost to hire a real model to take his clothes off."

"Is it weird going naked in front of your godfather?"

"Nah. He's an artist and I'm just a model. He offered me the job because he knew I'd jump at the chance to make the extra income. My ranch is a small operation. Don't get me wrong. I do fine, but Sam and I aren't rollin' in it by any means. The extra bit helps."

"Ah, I see." She gave him what she hoped was an impish grin. "So your body had nothing to do with it?"

"Well..." His face reddened. God, he was so adorable. "Students do need a...good physique to learn to draw the muscle groups and all. But you're a student. You know that already."

"So you're admitting you have a good physique?" she teased.

He pulled her into his arms and nuzzled her neck. "I'll admit it when you admit you have a luscious physique. In fact, maybe you should model nude."



She pushed him away, laughing. "When pigs fly, Jack Sherwood. No one wants to look at a forty-year-old woman naked."

"I do." He moved forward and pressed his lips to hers in a gentle kiss. At the same time, he began to slowly unbutton her white blouse. "You have no idea what I went through that night I saw you in Mark's class. Mind over matter, sugar. I had to work to keep from sproutin' a giant hard-on in front of twenty-five college kids."

His calloused fingers stroked the flesh above her breasts. She shuddered, and then giggled. "Might have made for some interesting drawings for Mark to grade."

He let out a chuckle. "My godfather and I aren't *that* close. I have no desire for him to see me with a woody."

She giggled again. Who was this strange woman? She felt like she was eighteen again, in love for the first time.

"But when I saw you sittin' in that classroom, all I could think about were those gorgeous nipples of yours, those cherry lips around my cock." He grinned. "I had to close my eyes and think of England."

"Ha, ha," she said, trying to keep it light. But light it wasn't, as he unsnapped the front clasp of her bra and let her breasts fall free. He pinched one nipple, then the other, and heat pooled between her legs.

"I can't get enough of you, sugar. Each time I make love to you, after I come, I'm hard again in almost no time flat. The more I have you, the more I want you." He leaned down and nuzzled her breast. His evening stubble was heaven scraping against her hard nipple. "I've never felt this way before."

"Oh, Jack...." Neither had she, but she couldn't say so. Not when it would be over in two days.

"You don't have to return my sentiment, Holly. I understand it might be too soon for you. But I want you to know how I'm feelin'. I'm not just after a piece of ass."

"I know that, Jack."

"Good." He took her nipple between his lips and tugged gently.

"Jack?"

"Hmm?"

"Should we...go to the bedroom?"

He let go of her nipple with a soft pop and gave her a lascivious grin. "I'd kinda like to try out my leather couch."

He moved the painting to his mahogany desk near the back of the den, and then grabbed Holly and took her lips in a deep kiss. The forceful demand of his mouth against hers, the moist heat of his tongue, left her shaking, yearning for more. Once again her passion overrode her caution, and she found herself wanting—needing—his body inside hers.

*Stop him, her inner voice warned. Stop him and tell him the truth. You're not being fair to him. To Sam. Even to yourself.*

Her longing for him silenced her conscience and she responded, kissing him with a raw, devouring fury that overwhelmed all rational thought.

*Jack, inside me. I need Jack inside me.*

Her lips still glued to his, her tongue deep inside his mouth, she took charge and ripped open the snaps of his sage green western shirt, the pop of each snap resonating in her ears and bringing her closer to her goal.

*Jack, naked. Her lips around his cock. His fingers embedded in her. Their bodies joined in ecstasy.*

She pushed the soft fabric from his shoulders. How glorious his golden muscles felt under her fingertips. When the shirt had pooled in a heap on the carpet, she went to work on his pants. Still their lips remained joined.

He kissed her with a fervor, a frenzy, a mind-numbing surety, and she returned it with equal zeal.

When his jeans were open, she pushed them and his boxers to the floor and urged him toward the couch. She ripped her mouth from his, whimpering at the loss, and pushed him down on the leather sofa. Still clothed, though her breasts hung free, she lowered herself to her knees and took that beautiful cock between her lips.

She wrapped her mouth around him tight and sucked.

"Ah, God," he groaned.

She let him go and teased him with little flicks of her tongue around the swollen

head. His strong hands grabbed her head and tried to force her back onto him. She resisted at first, but then couldn't help herself. She took him deep, deep into her throat. She loved this cock. She loved sucking it. Loved the salty male flavor of him.

Most of all, she loved the man attached to it.

She pulled back and licked the underside and nuzzled his balls. She inhaled his musky rawness. She could never get enough of his scent, his touch, his kisses.

His groans fueled her passion. She took him deep into her throat again and he pulsed against the roof of her mouth.

He pushed her head off him. "Not yet," he said. "God, you drive me crazy, but I don't want to come yet."

"Please, Jack," she said, wanting this more than she thought possible. "Please. I want you to come in my mouth."

"Holly...."

"Please. I want it so bad I can taste it already."

"Damn." He fisted his big hands in her hair and guided her back down on his cock. The tiny spasms began in the back of her throat and spread along his whole length. She sucked in time with him, milking him, and letting his cum trickle over her tongue. It tasted salty, bitter, but she didn't care. To her, it was sweeter than fresh cream.

When his shaft relaxed, she released him and smiled. His eyes were closed and a sheen of sweat coated his handsome face. A drop meandered through his night beard, and she caught it with the tip of her finger. He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow. Why didn't you want me to do that?"

"I wanted to come inside you."

"I hope you weren't disappointed."

"Are you kiddin'? It was amazing. I just didn't want to leave you hangin'."

"Who says I'll be left hanging? I happen to know you've got more to give, Cowboy."

"Well, yeah, ma'am." He tweaked a nipple. "I'm pretty sure I can pony up to the challenge."

"I thought you might be able to." She slid down his body and removed his boots, his

socks, and his jeans which were still around his ankles.

"We've got one problem here, though," he said.

"What's that?"

"You're wearing too many clothes."

"Hmm." She grasped his hands and pulled him into a stand, then sat down on the couch. His cock, at perfect mouth range, was already growing again. She grabbed the cheeks of his taut ass and kneaded them. He was so damn gorgeous. She cleared her throat. "I don't really see the problem, Jack."

He leaned down and gave her another soul-searing kiss. She sighed into his mouth as he slid her blouse and bra over her shoulders.

He stopped the kiss, nibbled on her lower lip, and trailed little pecks to her ear. "The problem, sugar, is that I want you naked. Naked, under me, wailing my name as I pound my hard cock into you." He cupped her mound through her jeans. "Does that work for you?"

"God, yes." Her breath came in rapid puffs as he fingered her swollen clit through the thick fabric. The textures, the wetness between her legs, everything worked to send her over the edge. She was near climax already.

"Jack...."

He continued his ministrations, now pressing little love bites to her sensitive neck. "Hmm?"

"God, Jack, I'm...I'm...."

She burst into flames.

"Coming, Jack. I'm fucking coming...Ah, God!"

The spasms ripped through her, her skin chilling, her pulse racing. When they finally slowed, she was panting against his gorgeous hair.

"See?" She took a shallow breath. "I knew you wouldn't...leave me hanging."

"Not in this lifetime." He grinned. "And we're not even close to finished yet." In record time, he freed her of her shoes, jeans and panties, and sat down on the couch with her in his lap. He grabbed her breasts and squeezed them.

"I've said this before, sugar, but your nipples are like candy." He sucked on one,

then the other.

Icy tingles danced across her flesh. His mouth was so sexy. His lips suckling her was a delicious sight. His cock pulsed under her. He was ready again.

Though it took great effort, she pulled her nipple from his mouth and slid downward. She could gaze at his sculpted chest forever. She lowered her mouth and kissed his chest, swirling her tongue first over one coppery nipple, then the other. She licked him and caressed him with her tongue.

"Nice, sugar."

"You're gorgeous, Jack."

He groaned, then lifted her hips and set her on his cock. She inched downward, taking every sweet centimeter of him.

She sighed. So good. "Thought...you wanted me under you."

"This'll do for now."

"Yes. It. Will."

She sat up and sank down farther, until he was balls deep, and she swore part of his cock was reaching her soul.

She lifted her hips, and then took him even deeper. She started slowly but soon quickened her pace and rode him with an impassioned vengeance, her boobs jiggling, her body throbbing. He grabbed a nipple in his mouth as she rode him. He nipped her, sucked her, and she cried out when her orgasm exploded inside her.

Still she rode, her walls tightening, taking him hard and fast as her convulsions continued.

"You're so tight, sugar." His voice came in breathless pants. "I'm gonna come now. Take all of me." He grabbed her hips and slammed her down upon his cock. Her sensitive walls felt every pulse of his climax. She caressed his chest, placing her palm over his heart as it beat in time with his release.

She lifted her gaze and met his dark eyes. They burned with passion.

He smiled.

She smiled back.

No words were necessary.

## The Cowboy and the Cougar

But as she laid her cheek against his chest, his heartbeat thrumming against her ear, her conscience resurfaced, and her eyes misted.

The end was near.

## Chapter Eleven

"What are we gonna do today, Daddy?"

Jack tossed the skillet with a flick of his wrist, and the pancake he was frying flipped over perfectly.

"Can you do that with an omelet?" Holly asked, smiling.

"Never tried it."

"My daddy can do anything," Sam beamed proudly, his missing front tooth making his smile all the more loveable.

"I'm sure he can," Holly agreed, then turned to wink at Jack.

He winked back. "Haven't had too many complaints about my skills."

"You didn't answer my question," Sam said. "What are we gonna do today?"

"Well, it's Sunday. How about we get our chores done early and spend the day relaxing with Holly. I owe her a walk around the ranch."

"A walk? Boring!"

"You can stay here with Luisa if a walk doesn't appeal to you. Holly and I can take Lacy and Max with us. They'll love it."

"No, I wanna go," Sam said.

"Good," Holly said. "We'd love your company." She meant it. The little boy had wormed his way into her heart in but a day.

"Yep, we sure would, pal." Jack slid the pancake onto Sam's plate. "You want another, sugar?"

"Are you kidding? I'm stuffed. I shudder to think how much you're going to have

to feed Sam when he hits his teens." She laughed. "You'll go broke."

"Just like my mom and dad did." Jack let out a chuckle. "Teenage boys are bottomless pits. Don't I know it." He turned to Sam, who was busily buttering his flapjack. "You stay here with Holly for a few minutes. I need to make a phone call in the office."

"Okay, Daddy."

Holly eyed the boy as he slathered syrup over the pancake, and then dove in. He was a beautiful child. If only....

"What kind of things do you like to do, Sam? Other than ride horses and help your dad."

"Lots of things," he said through a mouthful. "Play games with Luisa and Carlos. Sometimes I get to spend the night at their house. Or at my grandma's. That's fun. She makes really good cookies. Chocolate chip are my favorite."

"They're my favorite, too." Holly smiled.

"Plus, there's some kids my age who live close to my grandma and she invites them over when I'm there. Derek and Kathleen. They're twins."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. They're six, too and it's fun to play with other kids. There aren't any who live around here."

"I'm sorry about that. Do you get lonely, Sam?"

"Sometimes. When Daddy's workin' all day and Luisa's busy. One day, I hope I'll have a little brother. I really want a little brother. I've wanted one forever. Daddy says maybe someday. I've been waitin' a long time."

Holly's throat constricted and her tummy sank to her bowels. Icy fingers crept along her spine. Sam wanted a little brother.

Luisa hurried into the kitchen waving a dust rag. "Off, you two. It's time for me to clean up in here."

Holly stared at Luisa, and then said in a robotic tone, "Please, let me do it."

"Nonsense, it's what I'm paid for. You go have a fun day with Jack and Sam."

A fun day with Jack and Sam. Right. The air in the kitchen seemed thick,



suffocating.

*Little brother? Oh, God.*

"Luisa? I need a favor."

Luisa turned from the sink. "What do you need? I'll help if I can."

"Sam? Can you run along and play for a little while? I need to talk to Luisa."

"Sure thing. See you later." He ambled off, whistling a lively tune.

"What is it?" Luisa asked, concern etched along her brow. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid so. I need to leave. I don't have a car. Jack drove me."

"What's wrong? Is it an emergency?"

"No, no. Nothing like that." *The only emergency is that I need to get out of here.* Her breath caught in her chest. *Breathe, Holly. Breathe.*

"How can I get a ride home? Will a cab come out here?"

"Carlos can drive you home. He gets Sundays off."

"God. Thank you. I'll owe you both big time. Where's Jack?"

"He's in his office. Then he said something about checking on a few things in the main barn."

"Will he be gone long, do you think?"

"I don't know. You can run out and tell him what's going on."

"No!" Holly adjusted her voice quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so upset." But upset she was. "I need to get home right away. How quickly can Carlos get here?"

"In a couple minutes. Please, Holly, can you tell me what's wrong? Jack will be worried."

"It's nothing to worry about. Just something came up that I need to take care of."

"What do you want me to tell Jack?"

"Just that. I'll...I'll call him later. Tell him not to worry."

"Okay. If you say so."

Holly raced to the bedroom while Luisa picked up the kitchen phone, presumably to call Carlos.

Within fifteen minutes, she was packed and in Carlos's truck, driving toward downtown Denver.

The only problem was, she'd left her heart at Jack's ranch.

\* \* \* \*

Jack didn't call her. Hell, she didn't blame him, the way she'd run off like a freaking coward. Minutes turned into hours as she lay on her bed, holding her pillow to her face, inhaling Jack's scent. She'd never wash that pillow case. How long would the aroma last? It would slowly dwindle away and she'd be left with nothing.

Why had she fallen in love with him? A man so young, so vibrant, with a beautiful little son who deserved so much more than she could ever give either of them.

Now she had no one to turn to.

It served her right for leading Jack on far too long.

Wait! The Cougar Club chatters!

Night had fallen, and darkness surrounded her. She glanced at her alarm clock. Nine-thirty. Would anyone be in the chatroom on a Sunday night? Of course, the other day she had logged on at midnight and three women were there.

It couldn't hurt to try.

Still hugging her pillow laced with Jack's musky fragrance, she wandered into her office and fired up the computer.

**MrsRobinson:** Holly, good evening! Nice to see you again. Afraid it's just you and me tonight. Sundays are usually pretty low key.

Holly typed frantically, correcting typos as she went.

**HollyGolightly:** I'm so glad someone's in here. I really need to talk.

**MrsRobinson:** Talk away. That's what I'm here for.

Where did she begin? She sat and tapped the spacebar for what seemed like hours.

**MrsRobinson:** You still there?

**HollyGolightly:** Yes.

**MrsRobinson:** You're safe here, Holly.

Safe. That's what Cublover had told her the first time she'd wandered into this chatroom. Safe. She could tell her story. Tell it to someone who might understand.

MrsRobinson's name was Megan, wasn't it?

**HollyGolightly:** May I call you Megan?

**MrsRobinson:** Of course. Is your real name Holly?

**HollyGolightly:** Yes.

**MrsRobinson:** What's going on? I'll help if I can.

Holly inhaled deeply and blew the air out her nostrils in a slow stream. Megan couldn't help. No one could. But at least she could listen. Holly had never said these things out loud. But for the first time, she needed to get it all out.

**HollyGolightly:** I met a man. A wonderful man. He's twenty-nine and I'm forty. I didn't mean to fall in love with him, but I couldn't help it. He's nothing like I imagined he'd be. We actually met on a one-night stand. Something I never do....

**MrsRobinson:** Why did you do it that time, then?

Holly sighed. The million dollar question.

**HollyGolightly:** I was in a bad place. I had just been diagnosed with cervical cancer.

There, she'd said it.

**MrsRobinson:** I'm so sorry, Holly. Are you okay now?

Okay? Physically, sure, she was okay. A picture of health, in fact. But emotionally? A wreck.

**HollyGolightly:** Yes. It was only stage one. I didn't need any radiation or chemo. They got it all.

Yes, they had gotten it all, but at what cost?

**MrsRobinson:** I'm so glad to hear that.

**HollyGolightly:** Problem is, they did a hysterectomy. I got to keep one ovary, to keep my hormones balanced but other than that, I'm empty. I've never been married, never had kids. I had to accept that I never would.

**MrsRobinson:** I'm so sorry, Holly.

**HollyGolightly:** I tried to look at the bright side. I was alive. They'd caught it in time to cure me. I'd gone this long without kids and my biological clock was ticking anyway. I wasn't in a relationship, so what did it matter? I figured any man I'd get

involved with would probably have kids by now anyway. At least those are the things I told myself. Do you have kids, Megan?

It was a while before she answered. Holly knew Megan pitied her, which annoyed her.

**MrsRobinson:** Two girls.

**HollyGolightly:** You must be very proud of them.

**MrsRobinson:** I am. They're both in college now.

**HollyGolightly:** So you're divorced?

**MrsRobinson:** From their father, yes. I'm remarried. To my cub.

**HollyGolightly:** How old is he?

**MrsRobinson:** He's forty and he never wanted kids. He's a wonderful stepfather, though. Joy and Laurie adore him.

So Megan had gotten lucky and found herself a cub who didn't want kids. Holly cleared her throat and began to type.

**HollyGolightly:** When Jack—that's his name—came back into my life out of the blue, I didn't want to get involved. I knew I could never give him what he deserved—a family. He was very persistent and so attractive. I caved. Now I'm in too deep.

**MrsRobinson:** Have you told him the truth?

**HollyGolightly:** No. I can barely think about it myself. This is the first time I've talked to anyone about it.

**MrsRobinson:** You need to tell him.

**HollyGolightly:** It's too late now. I hung on way too long without telling him. He has a son, you know. An adorable kid. Six years old. Was never married to the mom and she's not in the picture. When I found out, I was ecstatic. I figured maybe he'd be okay with not having more kids. That's not the case.

**MrsRobinson:** How did you find out?

**HollyGolightly:** Eating breakfast with his kid. He told me he really wanted a little brother and that his dad had told him maybe someday. That pretty much takes me out of the picture. Which I knew from the beginning. This is my own fault for getting in so deep. But now

She couldn't finish the sentence so she hit enter. Tears had blurred the computer screen.

**MrsRobinson:** Now what, Holly?

Holly sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Where was her damned box of tissues?

**HollyGolightly:** Now I've involved his son. He'll be hurt. His son will be hurt. And I'll be hurt. I should have ended it before now. Then I'd be the only one hurting. God knows I've dealt with that before, and I could have dealt with it again.

**MrsRobinson:** There's still time to salvage this, Holly. If this man loves you, he won't care that you can't give him another child.

**HollyGolightly:** He never said he loved me.

**MrsRobinson:** But you love him.

With all her heart.

**HollyGolightly:** Yes.

**MrsRobinson:** Then how can you give up? You have to try. Tell him the truth.

**HollyGolightly:** Can it work, Megan? This whole cougar thing? I don't know. I mean, twenty years from now he'll be in his prime and I'll be an old lady.

**MrsRobinson:** First of all, sixty is not an old lady. Not anymore. And yes, it can work. I'll grant you that I got lucky, finding a cub who wasn't interested in having children.

**HollyGolightly:** When I was in here the other night, Charlene's relationship was ending because her cub wanted a family and she was done with that.

**MrsRobinson:** Yes, that does happen sometimes. I can't lie to you. But you're a little bit ahead of Charlene. Your Jack already has a child.

**HollyGolightly:** But he wants more.

**MrsRobinson:** Are you sure about that?"

**HollyGolightly:** That's what his son said.

**MrsRobinson:** But you've never had this conversation with him?

**HollyGolightly:** No.

**MrsRobinson:** You need to. Talk to him. If he cares for you, he'll listen. Maybe you

can find a way to compromise.

**HollyGolightly:** How? I can't give him a child.

**MrsRobinson:** It's not all black and white, Holly. You can adopt. And you still have an ovary. If you really want a child of your own body, you can try in vitro fertilization with a surrogate. There are many ways to have children these days.

**HollyGolightly:** But I'm so old! I'd be sixty when the kid graduated high school.

**MrsRobinson:** Sounds like you already wrote the whole thing off.

**HollyGolightly:** I kind of had to, when I got my diagnosis. I had to accept that I'd never be a mother. Then Jack came along again, and I found myself wanting something that I thought I'd closed the door on.

**MrsRobinson:** Why didn't you just tell him the truth from the beginning?

Good question. Why hadn't she?

**HollyGolightly:** I honestly don't know.

**MrsRobinson:** Were you afraid he'd leave you?

**HollyGolightly:** I never thought of it in those terms. I always knew I'd have to leave him eventually.

**MrsRobinson:** So you made the choice for him.

**HollyGolightly:** I guess I did.

**MrsRobinson:** Then you've sold him short. Let him decide. The worst he can do is break it off, and you'll be no worse off than you are now.

True enough. Why hadn't she thought of it in this way? Because she'd been too busy feeling sorry for herself, and too busy being selfish. She'd strung Jack along because she couldn't bear to say good-bye. Then she'd escaped in a haze of cowardice when the going got rough. No more.

**HollyGolightly:** You're absolutely right, Megan. Thank you so much! I'm going to call him right now.

**MrsRobinson:** Yes! Let me know how it works out. I'll cheer for you if you have good news and I'll hold your hand if it's bad. That's what we're here for.

**HollyGolightly:** You're a gem. I'll log back on when I have news.

She hurriedly logged off, a spark of energy radiating throughout her. She grabbed

her cell phone out of her purse, and then stopped abruptly.

She didn't have Jack's number.

All this time and she hadn't thought to get his number.

How had she fallen head over heels for a man and not gotten his phone number?

She'd truly lost her mind. And her heart.

Calling information proved fruitless. He was unlisted. She didn't know Luisa's last name, either, so she couldn't call her. She did, though, have Mark's cell number and email on her course syllabus. He'd said his students could contact him anytime. She checked her watch. Somehow, she knew he hadn't meant she could call him at ten thirty at night.

She'd have to wait until morning. She hoped she wouldn't lose her nerve by then.

## Chapter Twelve

Jack sat in his son's room, watching the methodic rise and fall of the little boy's chest as he breathed. When Sam had first come to him, only a little over three months old, Jack had been terrified of SIDS. He'd kept the baby in a cradle in his own bedroom, close enough to reach over and touch the little chest whenever he woke during the night. The rhythmic up and down motion had soothed him then.

The time had long since passed for Jack to worry about his boy making it through the night. But still, on nights when his mind whirled and wouldn't let him sleep, he'd sneak into Sam's bedroom, place his hand over his son's chest, and let the soft cadence of his breathing — his life force — comfort him.

He'd never known what it was like to love a person more than himself until Sam had come into his life. That tiny little person had crept into his heart and grasped it with those chubby little hands, until Jack wondered if his heart had room for anyone else.

During the last week, he'd discovered how spacious his heart actually was. Holly had sneaked in. Somehow, she'd uncovered the key. Jack hadn't planned to fall in love with her. Yet, when he brought her into his home and introduced her to his son, he'd known she was the one.

The one he'd been searching for his whole life. He just hadn't let it materialize on a conscious level.

He sighed and gently laid his palm on his son's chest. He loved this child more than anything. He'd die for his little boy. If anyone dared to harm him? Such a perpetrator had better look to God for forgiveness, for he'd get none from Jack.



Sam's heartbeat fluttered beneath Jack's fingertips and his chest rose and fell with each shallow breath of sleep.

Holly had hurt Sam.

Sam had wandered into the barn during mid morning, his big brown eyes wide and confused. "Luisa says Holly left."

Jack had turned from his chore. "What?"

"Yeah. She was supposed to go riding with us again but she left."

"Oh God." Jack's heart had plummeted to his stomach. Something was wrong. She wouldn't just...take off.

"How'd she go? She doesn't have her car."

"Carlos took her."

He had scooped Sam into his arms and carried him quickly back to the house. "Luisa!" He slammed the door. "Luisa, where are you?"

She'd come running. "I'm here. Goodness, what's wrong?"

"Where's Holly?"

"She had to go. Carlos drove her home."

"Why? What happened?"

"She just said she was sorry. That something came up."

"Is she okay?"

"Yes. She was fine when she left here. She said she'd call you later."

"Oh. Thank goodness."

"Does that mean she's not goin' ridin' with us today, Daddy?" Sam's big eyes held sadness.

"I'm afraid so, pal," Jack had said, kneeling down to face his son. "But I'm sure she'll come back soon to go ridin'."

"But she promised."

"I know. I'm sure she has a good reason why she can't go today. Tell you what, we'll go ridin' anyway. Just you and me. How does that sound?"

Sam had sniffed. "Yeah, that'd be good I guess."

Jack had spent the rest of the day with his son. His heart drank in the pleasure of

being with his little boy. When Sam had fallen asleep to a story of the Old West, he'd had an innocent smile on his face.

He'd finally stopped wondering why Holly hadn't stayed to spend the rest of the weekend.

Jack had taken care of his son, made sure he was happy and unhurt, because that's what a father did.

No one existed to take away Jack's own hurt.

Nearly midnight, and here he sat, watching his son sleep. How was it possible Sam had been so upset by Holly's departure? He'd known her only two days.

Jack understood. Holly had that effect on people. He'd only known her for a little over a week himself, unless he counted their hot one nighter. That only added ten hours, anyway.

Damn her! Her age had never made a speck of difference to him. That had to be what this was about. How could she disappear without any explanation other than "something suddenly came up?" It sounded like a bad sitcom. Luisa had said it had come out of nowhere. Holly hadn't gotten a phone call or anything. She'd just up and said she needed to go home.

If she'd come to the barn to tell him what had happened, or if she'd even told Luisa, he'd have understood.

But no. She'd just left.

Now she hadn't called.

Jack leaned down and gave his son a quick peck on the cheek. "Sleep tight, pal," he whispered. He tucked the cotton sheet around him a little tighter and left the room.

He fell on his bed, still fully clothed.

It was over.

Hell, it hadn't even begun.

\* \* \* \*

Holly looked at her watch. Eight fourteen a.m. Not even a minute had passed since

she'd last looked. Was it too early to call Mark? It was Monday, but it was a holiday. He'd given the students his cell number, but he might not appreciate such an early call on a holiday.

Frantically, she picked up her own cell and dialed. Her heart beat like a stampede of buffalo. She'd risk Mark's wrath. She needed to talk to Jack, to tell him how she felt, and why she'd left. *God, please let him understand.*

Five minutes later, Jack's number programmed into her cell, she listened to the ringing on the other end. It wasn't ringing, actually. It was Glen Campbell singing Rhinestone Cowboy. She couldn't help but smile. Jack hadn't even been alive when that song was popular.

"This is Jack," came his whiskey-smooth voice.

"Jack? It's me."

A pause. A long pause. A pause so fucking long Holly thought for sure the earth had revolved once around the sun already. Then, finally, "Holly."

She sighed. "Yeah, it's me. Listen, I want to apologize for —"

He cut her off. "Was it an emergency, Holly?"

"Well, not exactly, but —"

"Is someone dead?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No. Of course not. No one's dead."

"Anyone in the hospital?"

"No. Jack, just listen —"

"Then there isn't any reason why you couldn't come tell me before you left. Hell, I'd have driven you home. I'd have done anything for you."

Her heart skipped, and tears blurred her vision. "Oh, Jack. Please. I do have an explanation."

"Not one I care to hear."

"But I —"

"Good-bye, Holly."

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"Jack!" Had he hung up? *Damn these cell phones! They won't even tell you when someone hangs up on you!*

"Jack! Jack!"

No reply.

A sob broke through and she threw her cell phone against the wall. It clattered to the ground. She ran to it, relieved it was still intact for the most part. She slid the battery cover back in place and hit redial.

More Glen Campbell.

He didn't answer and it didn't go to voicemail.

Damn! She tried again. Still no answer.

Now what? She had to talk to him.

She sped into her office and logged in to the Cougar Club. Those ladies would know what to do. No one was chatting. Well, what did she expect? It was before nine a.m. on a holiday morning.

She'd just have to go to Jack's place. She hadn't paid close attention when she'd been driven either way, but if she concentrated...

She took a quick shower, raked her fingers through her wet hair and added a touch of lipstick. That was it. She didn't want to take any more time. She had to get to Jack before it was too late.

*It already is.*

She brushed the thought from her mind. True, he might send her packing when he found she couldn't have children but she had to let him decide. She'd made the decision for him, and that was wrong.

Maybe all he wanted was a casual relationship. Maybe he wasn't in love with her and never would be. Could she live with that?

She sighed and grabbed her purse and car keys from the kitchen counter. No use prognosticating. She'd have all her answers soon enough.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Jack?"

Her voice cut through him like a switchblade. He'd just come in from a midmorning ride with Sam and had sent his son to find Luisa. Taking care of the horses soothed his mind, so he let Sam off the hook this once and decided to curry both horses himself. He'd just finished cleaning the last hoof when her voice sliced into him.

He didn't turn.

"What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Not interested."

Such a lie. He was so interested that his heart was thundering against his sternum just at the damn sound of her voice. Why had this happened? Why had he fallen in love? Why had he brought her here and introduced her to Sam?

Sam deserved better.

"I'm so sorry...."

Her words trailed off and he still didn't turn. If he looked at her, he'd be lost.

Her breathy sigh caressed the back of his neck. She was that close. *Don't turn around, Jack.*

"I didn't think you'd get this hurt."

Damn. Those were fighting words. He turned around and the moistness in her emerald eyes tugged at him. But he hardened his heart.

"Not get hurt? What did you think I invited you here for, Holly? Sex? A prolonged

weekend of hedonism? Hell, I didn't need to bring you to my home, introduce you to my son, for that."

"No, I—"

"Please go away."

"I can't, Jack. Not until you hear me out. I behaved stupidly. I know that. But there are reasons. And I—"

He let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. "Yes, I know. You're forty. You've made it abundantly clear how you feel about our age difference. And I thought I'd made it abundantly clear that I don't give a rat's ass but you can't seem to get past that."

"You don't understand. There's more."

"Nothing I'm interested in." He steeled his heart against her misty green gaze.

"You've got to listen to me."

"I don't have to do anything. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to take care of my animals."

He turned, but she grabbed his arm. A sizzling current traveled to his groin at her touch. She flung her arms around him, grabbed his cheeks and drew his lips to hers.

His memories soared to their first kiss in the elevator. She nibbled at his lower lip, then his upper, her tongue probing for entrance.

He granted it. Hell, he was still a man—a man in love with a woman. His body couldn't help but respond to her physical presence.

He parted his lips and when her tongue touched his, he melted and his resolve disintegrated.

She tasted of vanilla cream and still a touch of lime. He devoured her mouth. His mind clouded, and energy—hot, raw, and primal—crackled between them.

He gripped her ass, squeezing, kneading, and forced her against the hardness beneath his jeans. Her tiny moans hummed against the back of his throat and he probed farther, deeper, until he was lost in the passion that had sizzled between them since their first meeting.

Then, from somewhere in a different dimension, a small voice broke through the haze.

"Holly! You came back!"

Jack ripped his mouth from Holly's to stare at Sam. Holly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and turned.

"Why, hi there, Sam."

"You missed our ride yesterday."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sure sorry about that. Maybe we can go this afternoon."

"Holly, stop," Jack said. He would not allow her to get Sam's hopes up again. He took a deep breath and willed his nerves to settle. Sam was the most important consideration. His only consideration.

Holly gazed up at him, her lips swollen and scarlet. Damn, she was beautiful. He wanted to grab her again and kiss her until he elicited a promise from her that she'd never leave them again.

But he'd be strong.

"Run along, Sam. Holly and I need to talk about grown up things."

"What kinds of things are those?"

"When you're older, I'll explain it. Go on now. Luisa should have lunch ready soon."

"But that's why I came out here, Daddy. Lunch is on the table."

"Tell Luisa I'll be a little late. You go on and eat."

"Okay." Sam trotted off. The kid never walked. He always trotted or ran. Jack smiled.

"Jack...."

"What?"

"Maybe you should eat first and then we'll talk."

"Not a chance. You tell me what you came to tell me. And no more kissin' until it's all out in the open."

"So you're ready to listen now?"

He nodded. That kiss had told him what he already knew. He wasn't ready to give her up. Not by a long shot. So he'd listen. But he'd listen from a distance. He picked up the curry comb and got back to his horse.

"You stay there," he said, "and start talkin'."

"This isn't easy for me."

"It isn't for me, either. Last night sucked, Holly. If you think you're the only one hurtin' here, think again."

"I'm sorry."

"Quit apologizin' and explain yourself. I'm agin' here."

She let out a heavy sigh. He focused on horse's shiny coat.

"It is the age thing, but there's more to it than you know." She cleared her throat.

"That first night we met, I told you I was in a bad place."

"I know. We've all been in bad places, Holly."

"This was a particularly bad one, Jack. I'd just been diagnosed with cancer."

*Oh God.* His heart dropped to his stomach. He tossed the currycomb to the ground and hurried toward her. "Sugar, are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." She swiped her hand across her nose and sniffed. "Sort of."

"What do you mean, sort of? Sugar, please, tell me you're okay."

"I am. I mean, my life's not in danger or anything."

"Come sit with me." He led her out of the stable and onto a patch of soft grass. He sat down and drew her into his lap. His heart ached.

"Tell me."

"It was cervical cancer, Jack. I-I always had my pap smears, which was lucky. They caught it real early. But it was an aggressive strain. So they treated it aggressively."

"Oh." His heart sank. He already knew where this was going.

"They took my uterus. Plus one ovary. Just left me one for hormones. I'm pretty much cleaned out."

"God."

"I had to give up my dream of being a mom. I thought I'd come to terms with it. Until you came back into my life."

He swallowed and kissed the top of her head. He'd thought about having a child with her. Sure, she was older, but not too old. Now that wouldn't happen.

Did it matter? Sam wanted a brother. He knew that. He sure loved kids and always



thought he'd have more eventually, once the right woman came along.

That the right woman might not be able to give him children hadn't occurred to him.

She rested her head against his shoulder and he inhaled the apple-fresh scent of her hair.

"Sugar?"

"Hmm?" Her voice was muffled.

"I never saw a scar."

She lifted her head. "They used a laparoscope. The scar's hidden in my belly button. It's a lot less invasive. I was able to recover a lot quicker."

"Oh." So she had recovered quickly. Physically. He had a hunch she wasn't completely recovered emotionally.

She'd had to give up her dream of children. Could he give up his dream of a child with her?

Before he could formulate an answer to his own question, a scream rent through the air.

*Sam!*

He stood quickly, his heart hammering, steadying Holly so she didn't fall.

"That's Sam," he said. "Sam! Sam!"

The scream had been loud. He was close by. Jack ran around the stable. Nothing. Across a small field stood the main barn. On the ground, next to a stack of hay bales, lay his son.

He wasn't moving.

"No! Sam! Sam!"

He raced across the field, tears forming in his eyes. Not Sam. Not Sam.

He knelt over the unmoving body of his son. Had he fallen? Jack looked up. He'd tumbled from the roof of the barn. What the hell had he been doing? He was supposed to go in for lunch.

"Jack." Holly knelt beside him. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He fell, I think." His voice sounded peculiar, like it came from

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somewhere else. Thoughts couldn't form. He reached under his little boy's body and gently cradled him to his chest.

"Jack, you shouldn't move him. He might be...injured inside."

Jack knew. But he couldn't think. He had to hold his son. He pressed his fingers to his neck. His pulse was steady and strong, thank God.

"I'll call 911."

"No. No. That'll take too long. I'll drive him to the hospital."

"Jack, be sensible..."

"Damn it, Holly! This is my child! I need to take care of him!"

"I understand." Holly nodded. "I'll drive you."

## Chapter Fourteen

What was taking so damn long?

Holly sat in the ER waiting room and fidgeted with an old *People* magazine.

Jack was in the back with Sam. He'd regained consciousness for a few seconds in the car, said something about a kitty, then had floated back away. He most likely had some broken bones. At least that's what Holly hoped. Bones could be fixed. If he were bleeding inside....

She couldn't go there. What would Jack do without his son? What would she do? She'd grown to care for the little boy in just two days. She loved him, just as much as she loved his father.

An hour passed, and then another. The nurse at the reception desk told Holly, very nicely, to please stop asking for an update. She'd tell her something when she knew.

Holly resisted the urge to smack her.

Just as Holly picked up her fifth magazine, Jack, looking like he'd aged a decade, walked into the waiting room.

She rose from her chair, her purse and magazine flopping to the floor. "Jack?"

He sighed. "He's okay."

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him close. "Thank God. Come sit with me and tell me what happened."

"I don't know yet. I haven't gotten a straight story out of Sam. But he did wake up for a little while. He has a concussion."

Holly nodded. He looked so sad, so forlorn, and yet so relieved. She shared his

sentiment.

"His femur's cracked. The doc was amazed he didn't have more broken bones. He won't need surgery, but he'll wear a cast for a few months. They did an MRI and a CT scan." Jack sighed. "No internal bleeding, thank God."

Holly let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"He's resting now. They have him pretty doped up. He's gonna be in a lot of pain. The bruises are already forming all over his little body..."

Jack's voice trailed off and he stared at the white wall of the waiting room. Holly gently cupped his cheek and turned his face to her.

"Will he stay the night?"

"Yeah. I'm stayin' with him. I can't leave him alone."

"I understand."

"Could you...?" He sighed. "This is a lot to ask, Holly."

"You can ask me anything."

"Would you mind driving back to the ranch and getting some stuff for me? A change of clothes, my toothbrush, you know."

"Not at all. I'd do anything for you and Sam. I hope you know that."

"I appreciate it."

"Are you hungry? I can get you something."

"No." He rested his elbows on his thighs and cupped his face in his hands. "I can't eat."

"You should eat something. You probably haven't eaten since breakfast." She checked her watch. "It's nearly five."

"Can't. Not hungry."

"All right." She'd bring him something anyway. "It's a long drive to your place. I won't be back for a few hours. Have you called Luisa?"

"No. Would you?"

"Sure."

Holly quickly programmed the number Jack gave her into her cell. "I'll call her on the way home."

Home? When had she started thinking of Jack's place as home? He hadn't said he loved her. She hadn't told him yet. Now wasn't the time.

She grabbed her purse and gave the top of his head a kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I should have been with him," Jack mumbled. "I sent him off to eat lunch so I could talk to you. He should have been my first priority."

"Oh, Jack, sweetheart. How many times have you sent Sam off to have lunch?"

He nodded. "I know. And nothing ever happened. But this time...."

Holly smoothed Jack's rumpled hair. "Don't blame yourself. Please. He's going to be all right. Just thank God for that and move on, okay?"

He nodded into his hands. Holly knelt in front of him and lifted his face to meet her gaze. "This isn't your fault."

It wasn't. It was hers. It was hers for leaving in the first place, and then coming back. She'd kept his attention away from his son.

No, she couldn't think like that. It was no one's fault. Things happen. Her cancer was no one's fault.

She leaned forward and brushed her lips lightly across his. Maybe this was the time, after all. She thumbed his stubbled cheek, and then kissed him again. "I love you," she whispered against his mouth.

Before he could respond, she escaped the waiting room.

\* \* \* \*

He'd murmured a husky "thank you" when she left his bag of clothes and sundries. He'd looked at the container of Italian takeout with glazed eyes, but she'd thrust it into his hands anyway.

"What do you need, Jack?" she'd asked. "I'll do anything for you. For Sam. I'll stay here all night if you want."

He'd shaken his head. "Just go home. I need to be alone with my son."

She'd left, her heart in her throat. He hadn't told her he loved her. Perhaps he

didn't. It served her right, anyway.

Now she sat in front of her computer, staring at the blank Cougar Club chatroom. It was nearing midnight on a holiday. Of course no one would be there. They were probably all with their cubs, having a high old time.

Holly drew in a deep breath, flicked off her computer and padded into her bedroom. She flopped onto her bed and cried into the pillow that smelled like Jack.

\* \* \* \*

The next few days passed in a fog. Holly went to work, came home and cried herself to sleep. She skipped both her art classes, something she never did. Her heart wasn't in it.

No word from Jack. She'd tried calling him several times, only to get the endless wails of Glen Campbell. Why didn't he have voicemail? Didn't everyone have voicemail these days? Still, she called.

Her mind buzzed with unlikely scenarios. What if Sam had taken a turn for the worse? What if the doctors had been wrong, and he'd been bleeding internally? And they'd found it too late?

Nausea churned in her belly.

Damn it! She loved that little boy, too. Why didn't Jack at least call her to tell her how Sam was doing?

If Jack had decided to let her go, she could live with that. She had no choice, but she needed to know Sam was okay.

Enough was enough. Friday afternoon, she left her office early and drove home to pack a bag. She was driving out to Jack's ranch. He might tell her to take a hike, but by God she'd know if he and Sam were all right. Fear gnawed at her during the long drive out of town.

She gathered her courage as she pulled into the long driveway at Jack's ranch house. Was she sticking her nose in where it didn't belong? Was his indifference his polite way of telling her to get lost?

She breathed in. It was possible, but it didn't matter. She had to know Sam was okay.

Leaving her bag in the car—she didn't want to appear too eager—she trudged to the door and knocked.

She pasted a smile on her face when Luisa answered.

"Holly, *buenos dias*."

"Hello, Luisa."

Luisa looked behind her. "Where's Jack?"

"Jack? Why would he be with me?"

Holly craned her neck and peeked behind Luisa into the kitchen. A smiling Sam—his right leg in a full-length blue cast—struggled forward on crutches.

"Holly!" his little voice piped.

"Sit back down, *mijo*," Luisa scolded. "You must take it easy for the first few days. Remember what the doctor said."

Holly rushed past Luisa and knelt in front of Sam. "I've been worried sick about you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It doesn't hurt so much anymore. Daddy gives me pills." He leaned against her and held out one of his crutches. "Aren't these things neat?"

Holly nodded, a tear forming in the corner of her eye. "Yes, Sam. They are very neat." She pulled the little boy into her arms and gave him a gentle hug.

"So where's Daddy?" Sam asked.

*Strange. Luisa had asked the same thing.*

"I don't know, sweetie."

"But he went to get you."

A wave of joy swept through Holly. "To get me? What for?"

"To bring you home, he said. Said he'd be back in time for supper, too. Luisa's makin' enchiladas."

Bring her home? Did that mean...? Could she have passed him on the highway?

Her fingers glued to her lips, she turned to Luisa.

"He's right. Jack went for you."

"I didn't think... I mean, he didn't answer any of my calls."

"He didn't get any calls, Holly," Sam said. "But that's kinda my fault. I threw up on his cell phone. One of the pills made me sick. He had to throw it in the garbage."

Holly burst into a giggle. Poor little Sam, sick to his tummy, puking on his dad's cell phone. She stared at his rosy cheeks and big brown eyes. Thank God he was fine now.

Still, Jack could have called her. On the other hand, he'd been busy with Sam, who had no doubt needed his full attention. But one little phone call....

*Stop it, Holly. He was focused on his son and you could have come clean long before you did. He wouldn't have gone for you if he didn't care.*

"Do you remember what happened that day, Sam? Why you fell from the roof of the barn?"

"Yeah. One of the kitties was on the roof crying. I had to get him."

"Goodness me," Holly said, hugging him again. "Your dad told you to go in for lunch."

"I know but — "

She smiled into his curly dark hair. "It's okay, Sam. All that matters is that you're okay now."

"I hope Daddy gets back soon."

"I do, too." Holly kissed his ruffled curls. He smelled like fruity shampoo and little boy. A ripple of motherly love surged into her. She loved this child. She wanted to protect him and take care of him.

"He's driving up now," Luisa said, looking out the front window.

Holly lurched forward and steadied Sam against her. "You do as Luisa says," she told him. "Take it easy. Rest. There'll be time for walking on your crutches once you're a little stronger. I'll go say hi to your daddy."

"Okay."

She helped him to the couch in the front room, then whisked past Luisa and out the front door.

Jack stepped from his pickup, her painting in his hand.



Suddenly shy, she slowed to a snail's pace. But when he lifted his lips in that gorgeous smile, she ran into his arms.

He placed the painting on the ground, leaning against a front tire, and embraced her with strong and muscular arms. She inhaled the crisp combination of sandalwood, spice, and man that was uniquely Jack, then sobbed against his shoulder.

"Shh," he whispered. "Don't cry, sugar."

"When you didn't answer my calls, I thought...."

He chuckled against her cheek. "Didn't have a phone."

She sniffed. "Yeah, I heard. But you didn't call me, either."

"No, I didn't. I'm sorry."

She shook her head against his cotton shirt. "You don't have to be sorry, Jack. All the 'sorries' belong to me, I'm afraid. And I am sorry. About everything."

"I know." He pushed her away, just a bit, wiped a tear from her cheek, and then tipped her chin upward with his finger. "I missed you."

"Oh Jack, I've missed you, too."

"I had some thinkin' to do, Holly."

She nodded. "I understand."

He brushed his lips against hers. "I've never come so close to losin' someone I love so much."

"I was so worried about Sam, Jack. That's why I came out here. I...I wanted to see you, of course. I figured you might not want to see me. Still, I needed to know Sam was all right."

"He's gonna be just fine."

"I'm so relieved. He's a wonderful little boy."

"Gotta agree with you there."

She smiled and he kissed her again. Just a light brush of lips, but energy sizzled through her veins.

"So," she cleared her throat, "about that thinking you did?"

"I can't lose Sam, Holly."

"I know that."

"And I can't lose you."

Her heart fluttered. "I don't want to lose you, either."

"Your age never made a difference to me. But I have to tell you, I did always think I'd have more kids."

Another tear meandered down her hot cheek.

"I did a lot of thinkin' about that, while Sam was laid up in the hospital. He slept a lot, and I had all this time to play over all the scenarios of how my life might be. All kinds of things went through my mind, but Sam was always there."

"Of course he was."

"I mean, in the scenarios in my mind."

"I know that's what you meant."

He nodded, and his beautiful face shone with emotion. "My boy was always there, and so were you, Holly."

Warmth coursed through her, and she smiled into his dark eyes.

"Like I said," he continued, "I always thought I'd have more kids. But Sam's enough for me, and I'm hopin'...." He inhaled and looked upward for a split second, then settled his gaze back on hers. "That is, I'm hopin' maybe Sam might be enough for you, too. I'd like you to be a permanent part of our lives."

"Oh Jack!" She cupped his cheeks—how wonderful the stubble felt against her fingers—and pulled his lips to hers. The kiss was deep, raw, possessive and she reveled in the pure joy of it.

When Jack pulled away, she whimpered.

"There's something I need to tell you."

"Then will you kiss me some more?"

"Forever, if you'll let me. I love you, Holly." He fell to one knee and pulled a velvet box out of his pocket. "This was my grandmother's ring, and I'd be honored if you'd accept it. I want you to be my wife. Sam's mother. Will you have us?"

Fresh urgency spiked into her, coupled with a love so fierce she could no longer contain it.

She knelt beside him and he placed the ring on her left hand.

Helen Hardt

"I love you, Jack. And I love Sam. I would love nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with the two of you." She leaned into him and kissed the rough stubbled skin below his ear. "You've given me back my dream."

"And you've given me mine."

He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her.

The End

We hope you enjoyed this erotic romance by Helen Hardt. Be sure you read the other stories in our *Cougar Club* series, like *Barely Legal* by Lizzie Leaf or *Namaste, My Love* by Sam Cheever, as well as our full selection of erotica at Aspen Mountain Press!

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