

Heartbreaker

Her butt hurt.

Lynn Nelson stifled a groan and rubbed the offending body part with both hands. Not that the impromptu massage did much good. The ache did not abate.

Realizing how peculiar her actions must look, Lynn dropped her hands and cast an embarrassed glance around to see if anyone was watching. Her fellow vacationers--a group of twenty fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls, two teachers, and two other parent chaperons like herself--all seemed to be going merrily about the business of setting up camp for the night. Nary a watcher in sight. Nor a fellow butt-rubber, either.

Did they all have buns of steel?

Apparently. No one else seemed to be walking around as if she had a corn cob shoved up where the sun don't shine. No one else even limped.

"Did you find what was bothering him yet?" The speaker was a wiry, twenty-something pony wrangler whose name, Lynn thought, was Tim. Dressed in jeans and boots, with a cowboy hat shoved down over his short blond curls, Tim looked every inch at home on the range. Which, Lynn had already guessed, was the idea.

"Not yet." Lynn cast a look of loathing at the cause of her misery--a shaggy mountain pony named Hero--and retrieved the metal pick from the ground where she had stuck it moments before while she attended to more pressing needs. Grabbing the beast around the foreleg as Tim had shown her earlier, Lynn tried to pry a muddy hoof off the ground.

What must have been a thousand pounds of sweaty, stinky horse leaned companionably against her. Its rotten-grass breath whooshed past her cheek.

Pee-yew. Lynn remembered why she hated horses.

"Get off, you," she muttered, shoving the animal with her shoulder, and was rewarded by a soft nicker and even more of its weight.

Though she pulled with all her strength, the hoof didn't budge.

"Here." Grinning, Tim moved to help her, picking up the hoof with no trouble at all and handing it to her.

"Thanks." If her tone was sour, Lynn couldn't help it. She felt sour. And sore.

Bent almost double, straddling a hairy, muddy animal leg, Lynn once again stabbed her pick into the mud-packed hoof that was clamped between her knees.

Hero leaned against her. Lynn contemplated horse-icide.

"Dig in there a little deeper and I bet you'll find a rock," Tim said.

You'll learn to take care of your own horse, the brochure advertising the trip had promised.

Remembering, Lynn thought, whoopee.

Another dig, and the mess in the hoof popped free. A rock, just as predicted, packed in with a dark substance too malodorous to be mud. Yuck.

"Good job." Tim gave her an approving pat (or maybe whack was a better word) on the shoulder. Losing her balance, Lynn staggered backward, dropping both hoof and pick. The pony stomped its foot, snorted loudly, and turned its head to look at her. If the animal had been human Lynn would have sworn it snickered.

"Oh, sorry," Tim said, his amusement obvious as he retrieved the pick. "We'll make a horsewoman out of you yet. You'll see."

"I can't wait."

"Here, give him this and he'll love you forever."

"Lucky me." Under Tim's supervision Lynn clumsily fastened a feed bag around Hero's head. The pony twitched its ears at her and began to eat.

"Now pat him," Tim directed. Patting was not Lynn's first choice of things to do to the mangy beast, but she swallowed her less civilized impulses and complied. Hero's hairy hide felt rough as she bestowed a perfunctory pat. Turning her hand palm up, she looked down in distaste at the dirt and reddish-brown hairs left clinging to her fingers.

"Good job." With a nod Tim moved on down the line of the tied string of ponies.

Dismissed at last, Lynn pushed her fist hard against the aching small of her back and tried not to dwell on the fact that this was only the second day of a ten-day-long wilderness "vacation." And she tried not to rub her butt again either.

What had possessed her to come?

Rory, Lynn acknowledged, tottering toward one of the small campfires that was supposed to provide protection--hah!--from the no-see-ums. Her fourteen-year-old

daughter had not asked her to be part of this freshman-class trip. On the contrary Rory had groaned when Lynn told her she had volunteered. But Lynn felt Rory needed her. And she needed time with her daughter, to shore up a relationship that lately felt like it was coming apart at the seams.

Anyway, the promotional literature advertising the trip had made it seem educational, fun, and the experience of a lifetime, all rolled up in one all-inclusive package deal.

So she had taken two weeks off from the daily grind of television broadcasting--her first real vacation in three years, and here she was, on the side of some godforsaken mountain in the High Wilderness area of Utah's Uinta Range, tagging along on a teenage girl's horseback-riding fantasy trip.

The question was, was she having fun yet?

The answer was an emphatic no!

Lynn collapsed on a bale of hay placed near the campfire for just that purpose and tried to look on the bright side of things. Indulging Rory's love of the outdoors was at least preferable to dealing with her escalating boy-craziness. This trip--her daughter's reward for sticking out a whole year at Collegiate, an exclusive girls-only academy--had cost the earth, but it was thankfully male-free.

Except for the guides. Six of them, all male. All attractive. Of course. That was the way life worked. She should have expected it.

Just as she should have expected her new riding boots to pinch, her butt to ache, her nose to be sunburned despite lashings of sunscreen and the wide-brimmed hat she had worn all day, and her skin--even where it didn't show--to feel like it needed a once-over with a Dustbuster to remove the grit.

She hated horseback riding.

Lynn shifted position, winced, and rubbed the knuckles of her clenched fists hard against her thighs. She felt like she was getting charley horses in every muscle below the waist.

"This might help." The man hunkering down beside her--yes, hunkering was the right word; men in Utah really did hunker down--held out a flattish gold can.

Doc Grandview's Horse Liniment was scrawled in black letters across the top. Yeah, right, Lynn thought. When even the salve she was offered looked like it could have belonged to Wyatt Earp, Lynn's skepticism was aroused. Everything about this trip, from the outfitters themselves to the flies that buzzed around the horses' ears, would have been right at home in the Old West. Lynn's verdict was, too touristy for words.

"Was I that obvious?" Lynn managed a smile nonetheless, accepting the can and turning it over in her hand. Owen Feldman was part owner, with his younger brother, of Adventure, Inc., the outfit that had arranged and was guiding the trip. Owen was tall, broad-shouldered, and lean-tripped, with close-cropped tobacco brown hair, a craggy, square-jawed face, and baby blues to die for. Maybe a couple of years older than her own age of thirty-five, he was allegedly a born-and-bred Utahn, who knew the Uinta wilderness like few others. According to the brochure he was honest, competent, and utterly reliable--and a real cowboy.

Two days into the trip Lynn had already figured out that she hated cowboys. Especially phony ones. Every time the Feldmans and their crew swung into the saddle, she half expected to hear a hidden orchestra strike up the theme song from Bonanza.

Rory, though, was eating it up. She had already pointed Owen out as a potential playmate for her mom. As for herself, Rory said, she preferred the younger brother, Jess.

The memory made Lynn frown. Where was Rory? And where was Jess?

"Lots of people get saddle sore the first day out," Owen said, apparently attributing her grim expression to chagrin at being such a wimp. "Just rub this on your . . . uh, the affected part, and you'll feel lots better by morning."

"Thanks, I will." Lynn slid the shoe-polish-size can into the pocket of her blazing orange windbreaker--new for the trip, the color chosen to prevent some gung-ho hunter from mistaking her for a moose--and stood up. The insides of her knees screamed in protest. The backs of her thighs throbbed. Her butt still ached. Trying not to whimper at the pain, Lynn glanced around the camp. "Have you seen Rory? Or your brother?"

Owen smiled, the tanned skin around his eyes crinkling just the way the tanned skin around a cowboy's eyes was supposed to crinkle. He stood up too, topping her five foot two by almost a foot. Central casting couldn't have chosen better, Lynn reflected dryly.

"Rory's your daughter, right? The little blonde? She and a couple of the other girls wanted to learn how to cast. Jess volunteered to demonstrate before chow."

"Oh, great." Lynn couldn't help the tartness of her tone. While Owen obviously had no problem with his brother taking a gaggle of impressionable young girls off somewhere alone, Lynn did. Jess Feldman was not cut from the same leather as his older brother. Utterly reliable didn't even begin to apply. "Which way did they go?"

She was trying for a humorous tone, but didn't quite make it. Owen's gaze sharpened.

"Come on. I'll show you," he said.

"I don't want to take you away from anything you need to be doing." Though there was a

grain of truth in her reply, the larger reality was that Lynn was simply not comfortable accepting even small favors from anyone. She had been alone for so long, battling her way through the world so that she and Rory could have something better than the nothing with which they had started, that she had grown to like it that way. Never depend on anyone was her motto.

Especially fake cowboys.

"Bob and Ernst are on chow detail. Tim is seeing to the horses. There's nothing I need to be doing at the moment." Owen smiled at her. "Come on."

Lynn returned his smile reluctantly and fell into step beside him. They headed through the campsite toward the thick lodgepole forest that climbed the steep slope on the other side of the clearing. Towering pines had shed enough needles over the decades to make the ground soft underfoot. Lynn felt as if she were walking on an inches-thick carpet.

Most of the girls sat together in a semicircle, singing, on burlap sacks thrown on the ground. Pat Greer and Debbie Stapleton, the other mother-chaperons, glanced up from their self-appointed task of leading the impromptu sing-along to watch as Lynn passed by with Owen.

". . . and if another bottle should fall, there'll be eighty-seven bottles of milk on the wall. . . "

Milk.

It was all Lynn could do not to gag. The determinedly cheerful and even more determinedly G-rated warble made her want to barf. Pat and Debbie were Tipper Gore clones: They would never permit their young charges to sing about something as age-inappropriate as bottles of beer.

Lynn liked beer. If there had been one available she would have chugalugged it on the spot just to annoy her fellow mothers.

Because they were annoying her with their cheerfulness, their nosiness, their perfect-motherness.

Lynn could feel the weight of their combined gazes stabbing her in the back as she walked past. Stylish suburban matrons comfortably married to successful men, Pat and Debbie seemed to harbor an instinctive distrust of her. As a single working mother who lived on coffee and cigarettes and had a high-profile, demanding job, Lynn supposed they considered her a different species.

And, she supposed with some reluctance, maybe they were right.

"You have any other children?" Owen asked as he stopped to hold a branch aside so that she could enter the woods ahead of him.

"Rory's it." Lynn strove to lighten her mood as well as her tone as she stepped past him onto a well-worn trail. It was dark and gloomy under the trees, and ten degrees cooler. Moss covered everything, from the rocks to the tree trunks to the path. The smell was damp, like somebody's basement. "My one chick."

"She looks like you. I would have known her for your daughter anywhere."

Lynn walked smack into a nearly invisible spider web suspended across the path. Shuddering, she wiped the clammy threads from her face and kept going.

"She does, doesn't she?" Lynn concentrated on responding intelligently to Owen and tried not to think about the spider that went with the web. She hated spiders. In fact, she and Rory did look alike. Both of them had blond hair--though Lynn admittedly gave nature a hand in keeping her chin-length shag bright--fair complexions, and large, innocent-looking blue eyes. Both were less than tall (she despised the word short), their lack of stature compensated for by slim builds. The difference was that for the last several years Lynn had had to work hard to keep her weight down, while for Rory such slenderness was still effortless. "Poor kid," she said to Owen.

"I wouldn't say that." He was behind her. Lynn couldn't see his expression, but his tone told her that he admired her looks. Lynn made a face. She hoped he wasn't going to hit on her. Ruggedly handsome or not, he was going to be disappointed if he did. She had no interest in a vacation fling and no fantasies about bedding a faux cowboy.

"Do you have any children?" Lynn asked, for something to say. The path sloped upward, away from the rocky plateau where they would spend the night. Roots and the protruding edges of buried stones made it necessary to watch where she put her feet. Ahead, Lynn could hear the splash of tumbling water. Cracklings and rustlings and chirpings from living things that she preferred not to speculate about were nearer at hand.

"Nope." There was a smile in Owen's voice. "No wife either. My brother says I'm not a keeper. Once they get to know me, women end up throwing me back."

Lynn was surprised into glancing around. "Surely you're not as bad as all that."

Owen's eyes twinkled at her. "That's what I think. But Jess was pretty positive."

Lynn walked on. There was something about that rueful smile that made her wary. It was too charming, almost practiced. Part of the shtick. He might very well be lying to her. For all she knew, the rat could be married with a dozen kids.

Not that she cared whether Owen Feldman was married or not. But it was irritating to

think that he might think she was dumb enough to succumb to a smile, blue eyes, and a cowboy hat. She had her faults, but stupid wasn't one of them.

A sudden bright shimmer of light ahead drew Lynn's attention. Through a frame of swaying branches, sunlight bounced off the surface of silvery water. As she walked toward the light her view broadened to take in a wide stream, a slash of sunny sky, and the brown and green wall of the forest climbing the mountain just beyond the opposite bank. A well-fed muskrat sat up on a smooth-surfaced gray rock rising from the middle of the current, whiskers quivering as it stared at something the humans could not see. As Lynn watched, it dove beneath the surface with scarcely a ripple, its sleek