

Cassie's Cowboy

The book cover depicts a man and a woman in a rural setting. The man, on the left, is shirtless, muscular, and wears a dark cowboy hat. He is looking towards the woman. The woman, on the right, is seen from the back, has short blonde hair, and is wearing a bikini. They are standing in tall grass. In the background, there are two horses: a white one with dark spots and a dark one with white spots. A wooden fence and a large wheel are visible on the right side. The title 'Cassie's Cowboy' is at the top in green, and the author's name 'Fawn Lowery' is at the bottom right in green.

Fawn
Lowery

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cassie's Cowboy
Copyright © 2004 Fawn Lowery
ISBN: 1-55410-209-X
Cover art and design by Lyrra Madril

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya
Publications, 2004
Look for us online at:
www.zumayapublications.com
www.Extasybooks.com

DEDICATION:

To Stefani Sekellick, without whom this book would not have been possible. My heartfelt thanks.

And to Dave, whom I modeled my cowboy after.

Thanks, honey, for the inspiration.

Special thanks to Lyrra Madril for her wonderful cover art.

CHAPTER ONE

Cassie Michaels stood at the car rental counter inside the Tucson airport, anxiously waiting for the woman clacking the keys on the computer to find her a car. It didn't seem to matter that Cassie had reserved the automobile a week in advance—there was no record of her having done such a thing.

Cassie drummed her acrylic nails on the Formica countertop and turned to watch the passengers streaming in through the wide double doors of the airport. She had spotted a Lear jet as it taxied along the runway, but then her eyes had been turned to the incompetent woman behind the rental counter when the passengers disembarked the sleek expensive plane. The breath caught in her throat just thinking about the speed the Lear jet could travel, not to mention the caliber of man who must own it.

Two blond women and an impressively dressed man crossed the polished tile floor to the airport lounge. Cassie guessed they had gotten off the plane - they certainly looked like they could afford the price of the jet. The women wore designer suits and carried leather traveling cases, and the man was simply

CASSIE'S COWBOY

striking in a navy blue Armani suit. She watched them disappear through the door of the lounge, her eyes then drawn to the man just entering the airport. He was apparently the final passenger to leave the jet since he was coming from that direction.

"I can't find any record of you having reserved a car, Miss Michaels. I'm sorry."

Cassie jerked her head round to stare at the young woman behind the counter. There was a sheepish grin on her thin, excessively made-up face, but that didn't help much where Cassie was concerned. She needed a car to drive for the next two weeks and the woman had just informed her, for the third time, that her reservation didn't exist.

"Listen," she said, leaning across the counter. "I have a reservation confirmation number." She stabbed a red-painted fingernail at the paper lying on the counter. "Now you just find me a car to drive." She frowned at the woman, her eyes narrowing.

The woman returned quickly to the computer keyboard and began jabbing away at the keys. Cassie returned her eyes to the tall, attractive man who had gotten off the Lear jet. He was about midway into the lobby of the airport, a black leather briefcase in one hand.

He was nerve-jarring, she quickly decided, her mouth pursing as she watched his smooth, loose limbed gait cross the tile floor. He was well over six feet tall, with a set of shoulders that could make you weak in the knees. Blond hair bleached out almost white hung loosely across his forehead, and he had a Texas tan that served quite well to emphasize his high

cheekbones and roughed mouth. Dressed casually in a denim shirt and jeans, he had an appealing look about him despite his simple attire. Cassie's eyes at once took in the taut denim across his trim hips and the long fabric-encased length of his muscular thighs.

She stifled a knowing mew. He was gorgeous, a real hunk. She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and bit on it, her senses assaulted by his maleness.

Momentarily, he disappeared inside the lounge area, and she surmised he went to join the others from the jet. Sighing, she turned back to glare her disapproval at the rental clerk. If she didn't come up with a car pretty soon—

"You're in luck, Miss Michaels. I found your reservation."

She produced a card for Cassie to sign and then a set of keys. Cassie took the keys without thanking her and turned to leave, then remembered she hadn't said what kind of car she was getting.

"It's a truck," the woman mumbled. "Sorry."

"To hell with it," Cassie muttered. She glanced down at the keys in her hand and glimpsed the tag. Chevy pickup. Lot 2. Space 27. She could find it. She only hoped the rest of the day would be better than the first part.

She had flown out of La Guardia only hours earlier, had been scared half to death by a storm about mid-flight, only to land and find she wouldn't have transportation for the coming two weeks. And to top it all off, she had a headache.

She picked up her suitcase, over-stuffed and seeming to weigh a ton, and decided to go to the

CASSIE'S COWBOY

lounge for something for her throbbing head. With her luck, she had probably forgotten to pack the aspirin.

The lounge was dimly lit, but Cassie had little trouble spying the tall, good-looking man she had watched in the lobby. He was seated with the three people from the jet. She pulled her eyes from the sight of him. He was probably married to one of the women at the table, though he was seated somewhat apart from the group with his chair tipped back on two legs. He had a drink in one hand.

Cassie bought a bottle of aspirin from the man behind the lacquered bar and turned to leave. Her head was pounding louder than before and she still had an hour drive ahead of her. In a damned truck, of all things. She only hoped it wasn't a stick shift.

She finally managed to find the rental truck—a red Chevy with an automatic transmission and a bad radio. It didn't matter, she told herself. Just as soon as she tidied the small ranch her Uncle Barney had left her, she'd list it with a local realtor and fly back to New York. Then, when the little ranch sold, she'd pay off her condo with the money.

It was a good plan. Then at least, she'd own something outright. And perhaps she'd decide to stay in New York. Her job was all right. She had good colleagues to work with and legal matters had always fascinated her, particularly corporate law. At one time she had thought about becoming an attorney, but then she'd discovered how much work was involved in earning a law degree. It wasn't that her attention span was short, something she'd been accused of by

her close friends—in jest, she suspected—but she didn't want to devote six years of her life to law school. At twenty-four, she figured she should be running into Mr. Right anytime, and pursuing a high-stress career like that would only be a hindrance to becoming a wife and mother. She guessed she'd always wanted to be like her own mom—smart about certain things, ignoring others.

She shrugged her shoulders. She didn't have a lot of interests, aside from liking to watch old movies and reading the occasional historical romance novel; she was pretty much a free spirit. She went with the flow, and at times embraced the unexpected.

She thought about Uncle Barney while she turned the pickup out of the rental lot and headed down highway 127 following the directions the attorney had given her. She hadn't seen Uncle Barney since she was fifteen—almost ten years ago—but he was stuck in her mind forever.

He was her father's youngest brother, and the spitting image of her dad—small boned, with a fair complexion and dishwater blond hair. He was a fiction writer by profession and a loner who kept to himself, moving to Texas when he was barely twenty. It had been almost twenty years later when the family paid him a visit. It was the one and only family vacation Cassie ever enjoyed. Uncle Barney had horses and lots of open space to ride. She had loved every minute of it.

But two weeks ago, Uncle Barney died and she was notified he had left her his ranch; lock, stock, and barrel. She was surprised and intrigued, but had no

CASSIE'S COWBOY

intention of moving out of her cushy condo to live in a ranch house without air conditioning or running water. How can such a place exist in this day and age? The fact that the ranch house was so primitive had been the other thing about that vacation that stuck in her mind.

The sun was hot, shining in through the windshield of the pickup. She had removed her linen blazer and unbuttoned the neck of her blouse. It was hot in Texas, she decided, much hotter than in New York. Good thing she had packed plenty of shorts and halter-tops.

The city quickly gave way to a winding black strip of highway meandering through green hills and cattle infested pastures. The feeling of being in the country soon overcame her. It was pleasant in a mundane sort of way. The highway forked at the junction. She glanced at the paper lying in the truck seat, then took the road on the left. According to the directions the attorney had given her, Uncle Barney's ranch was fifteen miles down the road. She let out a long breath. She hoped it wouldn't be as bad as she feared. Her parents had tried to talk her out of coming, but she felt she at least owed Uncle Barney's memory the courtesy of coming to see her inheritance.

There was virtually no traffic on the road until she looked into the rearview mirror and spotted the biggest pickup truck she had ever seen rapidly catching up to her. In the next moments, it zipped past her, mufflers roaring like a hot rod—and Cassie glimpsed the tall good-looking guy from the airport in the driver's seat.

The pit of her stomach tipped, sending a funny little shiver racing through her. Up until this moment she had been feeling a little dejected, dreading what she would find once she arrived at Uncle Barney's ranch. Now she suddenly felt rejuvenated by the thought that the man from the airport—the hunk whom she had briefly fantasized sexually about—had just blown past her with such unassuming finesse. Well, it made her sit up straight in the seat and release another button on her blouse. Perhaps...just perhaps, she might see him again.

She smiled knowingly. He had been alone in the truck—no woman at his side. Perhaps his bed was empty, too.

She stepped harder on the gas, her eyes pinned on the back end of his truck up ahead, deciding to catch up to him. She had never been the bashful sort—maybe that was what Uncle Barney had seen and admired in her—her uncanny ability to enjoy the moment.

She could have sworn he slowed down, letting her catch up to him. And the funny little feeling she got in the pit of her stomach told her he had his eye on her in the rearview mirror. She felt emboldened by the thought.

The road curved, winding amid green pastures with large sprawling farms, or rather, ranches, she noted, briefly glancing about. She had to slow her speed when the road suddenly became very crooked. Then he chose to leave her behind, stepping on the gas and making his mufflers roar.

Cassie let out a big sigh and placed her toe on the

CASSIE'S COWBOY

brake. The road was too crooked to speed on unless you were familiar with it – which he apparently was. Momentarily, she was back to meandering along and braking at every curve until finally, she spied the weathered little house that Uncle Barney had called home.

She turned into the drive, a rutted dusty lane that cut off from the highway with a deep plunge into a washed-out ditch. The jolt shook her insides, but then she couldn't help but laugh out loud. What had she gotten herself into? she thought, grimacing at the sight through the windshield.

A little gray weathered cabin sat at the end of the dirt lane, a little worse for wear, she noted. Uncle Barney hadn't been much on upkeep. The front porch sagged and the tin roof was rusty. Tin roof, she thought, hoping she was far from there when a rainstorm came up. But then she added in afterthought, by the looks of things it had been some time since the last rain. The grass was brown and patchy. A section of fence spanning the pasture beside the cabin was laying on the ground. But there were no horses about – and hadn't been for several years.

Cassie slid from the truck seat, her eyes taking in the mess she had inherited, and walked toward the cabin. She had decided to spend the night, but maybe she had been silly to plan on it. She bit her bottom lip. Surely the inside wouldn't be worse – or could it? The one and only time she had visited Uncle Barney, her family had stayed in a hotel in Tucson.

She started toward the cabin at a fast clip. Get it over with fast, she decided, but the sound of a horn

cut into her thoughts, causing her to pull up short. The big black pickup she had seen on the road was turning into the dirt lane, and the good-looking hunk was looking out the cab window in her direction.

She stood stock still and waited, hoping—for what exactly, she wasn't sure. But with a man that good looking—something good had to give.

"Is your name Cassie?" he said, shutting off the engine of the truck.

His voice was low toned, almost rumbling, and at first Cassie wondered how she had managed to hear him, since he was clear down at the end of the lane. But that didn't last long. He began walking toward her, his tall body fluid in his tight jeans. Her eyes drank him in—the length of him, his broad shoulders, and the impressive bulge in the front of his tight jeans.

In the next instant he was standing across from Cassie, and she was looking at her reflection in his Raybans. She raked her fingers through her short blond hair, combing the silky strands off her forehead. He was compelling as all get out, she decided, feeling her pulse quicken.

"You *are* Cassie," he said, smiling down at her.

His mouth quirked to one side, and Cassie suddenly had the urge to kiss him. Shaken by her own sense of how silly the thought was, she took a step back, breaking the spell that had suddenly slipped over her.

"Yes, I'm Cassie," she finally managed to say. She poked out her hand then, trying to regain a measure of sanity. "Cassie Michaels."

CASSIE'S COWBOY

He wasted no time in clasping her hand in his. He squeezed it gently, pressing his palm against hers.

Oh, God, she thought, feeling his flesh meld with hers. His fingers were strong, warm, and wrapped around her small hand like a warm glove. And she didn't make any effort to retract her arm, or break the clasp.

"You look just like your picture," he said, sliding his sunglasses off.

His eyes were piercing blue, like a cloudless summer day and they quickly locked onto Cassie, making her suck in a quick breath.

* * * *

She looks like a hot stick of dynamite encased in ivory-colored linen, Hawk thought, his eyes drinking her in. Funny, linen fabric had a way of creasing in just the right places, especially on a woman. His eyes followed the telltale creases left behind after several hours of sitting straight to Cassie's crotch. Lingered a moment, his mind was momentarily filled with ideas of how she would look with the linen stripped away, before he returned his eyes to her face.

"I'm Hawk Downs," he said, nodding his head. "I live on the next ranch west of here, The Double D. I'm sorry about your uncle's death, Barney and I were good friends."

Cassie tipped her head back to look up into his face.

"Get your suitcase. You're coming home with me," he said, releasing her hand and placing his sunglasses

across the bridge of his nose.

"I...I beg your pardon?" Cassie sputtered, a laugh leaping from her throat. Going home with him would be a girl's dream come true—but *after* the date.

He gestured one hand toward the cabin. "You can't stay here."

"Well," Cassie replied, twisting round to gaze at the cabin. "True. It does look a little rough."

"Hell, honey. Barney roughed it living here every day of his life." He chuckled and cocked his head at Cassie. "You don't look cut out to batch in this place." He smiled at her, displaying a row of white, even teeth. "You look like you enjoy bubble baths and soft mattresses."

He supposed all women liked bubble baths and soft mattresses. He hoped his words didn't sound too corny to the pretty city lady. But women—all women, it seemed—were mysteries to him. Aside from sex, he really never got to know any of them very well. Maybe that was why at thirty he was still single. In some circles—business, mostly—he was known as a loner, a rancher who minded his own business and made money easily. But his wealth didn't warm his bed at night or share his passion for airplanes or prize horses. And his wealth couldn't provide an heir to carry on the Downs name or continue running the Double D.

* * * *

A flush quickly worked its way up Cassie's neck. He was not only gorgeous as all get out, but he was

CASSIE'S COWBOY

presumptuous, too. She couldn't help but smile up at him. His lips were drawn tight against his teeth, reinforcing her earlier thought that his mouth looked roughed, like he could plunder a girl's lips and make her want more.

"Are you offering me a bubble bath and a soft mattress?" She knew the moment the words left her mouth that she was opening herself up—just how sensual of a reply he would offer, she couldn't guess.

He chuckled, then reached out one long arm and touched a fingertip to Cassie's chin. Gently, he tipped her head to one side. "See that little shack with the half moon in the door?" He asked, peering down at her.

Cassie blinked her eyes. Damn, she was staring at the outhouse!

"Now get in that rental truck and follow me to the Double D," he instructed, chuckling at her reaction.

He had been studying her, and she wondered why, but at the same time her stomach somersaulted in a giddy way. Sexual arousal skittered through her veins. What difference did it make why he was looking? He was definitely interested. If she was any judge of men, and there had been more than a few in her life, she knew the look of sensual longing in a man's eyes.

She drew in a long breath, reaching a decision, but careful not to be too obvious. She glanced again at the pitiful little weathered cabin behind her, then bit her bottom lip.

"I guess you're right. The place doesn't exactly look like a resort...and I suppose I could get an early

start on cleaning it up in the morning..." She broke off her words, giving him the opportunity to repeat his offer. Much to her delight, he didn't disappoint her.

"Taking care of you is the last thing I can do for Barney," he said, a serious note to his tone. "And he talked so much about you that I already feel I know you."

A shiver of longing raced across her bare arms. How would it be to *really* get to know him? Her thoughts began to spin out of control.

"Come on," he said, reaching out and taking her hand. "The Double D is just over that hill." He pulled her gently toward the red pickup. "Come home with me." He turned and locked gazes with her, smiling. "I promise I'll take *really* good care of you."

CHAPTER TWO

The Double D looked exactly like it belonged on a post card that said COME VISIT THE OLD WEST. It was a sprawling ranch house complete with hitching post out front, a wide array of out buildings, barns and sheds, and the proverbial green pasture with grazing steers.

Cassie pulled the rental truck up beside Hawk's big black truck and shut off the motor. All during the short drive over from the little ranch that she now owned, she had been wondering just how hospitable this friend of Uncle Barney's might be. Then it dawned on her that perhaps he was just being kind in remembrance of her uncle.

And there might be a Mrs. Downs inside the sprawling ranch house.

The thought didn't sit too well with her. Ever since first seeing him in the airport, she had allowed her senses to reel when she thought about him. And now, should she meet a woman, a wife inside...Well, she'd just have to curtail her sensual musings and get on with the job at hand; ridding herself of Uncle Barney's

gift to her, then getting back to her real life – such as it was – in New York.

He opened the driver's door on the rental truck and stared at her while she slid from the leather seat. She saw where his eyes fastened onto her hips...and crotch.

A titillating little shiver of desire spiked through her insides. Surely there was no wife inside! He had all but undressed her with that look!

He closed the driver's door on the truck, ushered Cassie toward the front door of the house, then stepping round to the passenger side of the truck to get her suitcase.

Cassie watched his every move. He looked about thirty, or younger, certainly not older. She glanced around the ranch. It was gigantic. Had he inherited it? She wondered, having heard stories of large spreads being passed down from generation to generation.

"How was the flight?"

The gravelly voice came from behind Cassie, and she quickly turned to look at the front porch of the ranch house. A small man, about sixty, with gray hair and a wrinkled face, stood in the doorway, a white apron wrapped round his lower body.

"Good flight," Hawk replied, rounding the truck and taking hold of Cassie's right hand. "Max, this is Cassie, Barney's niece."

A wide smile broke across Max's face and he came toward them, hand outstretched. "It's a real pleasure," he said, clasping Cassie's hand and pumping her arm. "We'll miss Barney, he was a really good friend and neighbor. He talked a lot about you."

He used to show us all your cards and letters."

She had almost forgotten about keeping in touch with Uncle Barney by means of cards at holidays and short letters through the years. She had just never seemed to forget the good time she had enjoyed on that family vacation and like a silly kid, wanted to keep thanking Uncle Barney for having them. And, she had always promised to come see him again—not that she had kept that promise. Life seemed to get in the way. Living and working. There never seemed to be time for a vacation after that one.

"I'll put your things in the spare bedroom," Max said taking Cassie's suitcase. "And you just make yourself at home, honey."

Cassie smiled her thank you, and allowed Hawk to usher her inside the house. There was Max, she noted—no wife! She felt buoyed by the realization.

It was cool inside the ranch house, Cassie noted with a big sigh. She was spoiled by modern convenience, she admitted, feeling the urge to slip out of her cream-colored mules when she saw the marble tile on the entry way.

And then she did—giving into her urge to feel the cool tiles beneath her bare feet. Heck, Max had invited her to make herself at home.

* * * *

Hawk saw Cassie pause and step out of her shoes. He grinned at her, catching the playful glint in her green eyes. Surges of carnal need wafted through his loins as his eyes lowered to take in the pink polish on her

toenails. He hadn't sucked on a woman's toes in some time—but Cassie's little pinkies somehow gave him the urge.

There had been a lot of women in his life. Beth Alden, the businesswoman he thought he'd possibly fallen in love with three years ago. But then he realized he wanted more from a woman than bullish ambition. Beth was headstrong in her desire to be the top salesperson at Collins Real Estate and Investments, and she had devoted more time to work than to her relationship with Hawk. Then there was Heidi Crump. She was beautiful, with long red hair that not only enhanced her lean body and facial features, but drew the eye of every male she came into contact with, pleasing her to no end. She liked to flirt, and proved it at every opportunity.

He tried to push the memories aside. He knew in his heart the type of woman he wanted to call his own. He wanted someone who shared his love of the outdoors and family values. He wanted a woman who would love him for who he was and not try to change him. He was country, plain and simple, and he wanted a woman who reflected those traits.

He accessed Cassie again with his gaze. She made his lust rise. He hid a chuckle, faking a slight cough and covering his mouth with one hand. And perhaps just as important, he wanted a woman who liked sex— wild, unabashed sex.

* * * *

The foyer was spacious, leading into the core of the

house. A wide room spanned one side, with the kitchen visible at the end. A series of doors lined the outside wall, bedrooms, she surmised, since she had seen Max carry her suitcase through one.

Hawk ushered her into the living room, a wide expanse decorated in southwest hues, dusty browns and ochers, with dark paneled walls and massive seal brown leather furniture. A tall, ivory stone fireplace graced one end of the room with an enormous set of steer horns hanging over it. She looked around, accessing the space. It was definitely a man's house, lacking even the smallest feminine touch.

She turned her eyes back to Hawk—and was unabashedly assaulted by his stare. She smiled broadly, hoping her voice didn't quiver when she spoke.

"It's really very kind of you to take me in," she said.

He came toward her, two drinks in his hands, and Cassie realized she hadn't been aware of when he'd made them—she had been too caught up in looking at his house.

"It's the least I can do," he said, handing her a mixed drink. "Tell me your plans." He touched one hand to her waist, directing her to the leather sofa positioned near the fireplace.

The touch of his hand, ever so light, sent a jolt of sensual awareness traveling through her and his words—'tell me your plans'—opened her mind to all sorts of creative ideas. Did he want to hear the plan she had for him? She smiled shrewdly. It was simple—or to start with, anyway. She wanted to strip

off his clothes and have her way with him—to quote an old saying. The rest would come after the heated bout of sex play.

She was a bit surprised by her thought. Yes, Hawk Downs was absolutely gorgeous, but she didn't make it a habit of wanting to have sex with a man right after meeting him. She wasn't promiscuous by any means, but, she freely admitted, she felt a strong sense of sexual attraction to the handsome cowboy.

"I thought I'd list the ranch with a realtor, then go back to New York," she said, settling on the leather couch.

* * * *

He sat down beside her, turning his body slightly so he could look at her. She was smaller than he had initially thought, or maybe it was her blond countenance dwarfed by the brown leather of the couch. At any rate, he figured—she appeared delicate and fragile—much the opposite perception of his first reaction to seeing her—that of a stick of dynamite encased in linen. He smiled slightly at the memory. But the look he had glimpsed in her eyes when they had accidentally latched onto his earlier hinted of a sizzling sexual undercurrent she harbored. He pulled in a deep breath and raised his drink to his lips. How to unlock that passion—

He had been accused of wooing women with his boyish charms—of smiling at women and turning their bodies to putty. Well, he didn't think of himself along those lines. In fact, he had never thought of

himself as a lady-killer. A womanizer, perhaps, because he liked women. Fact was, he loved women. He loved to look at them. Loved to feel them beneath him in bed. Loved to take a pretty one out and show her off—so long as she remained loyal to him.

He demanded loyalty. He supposed it was a trait he had gotten from his father. Or one that was bred into him from his Ute heritage. And like his ancestors, he loved the land, respected it, revered it. And he loved the Double D. It was his home and his legacy—if he ever found the right woman to marry and have a family with. Sometimes the waiting became almost unbearable. At those times he saddled a horse, packed a bed roll, and went out alone, to camp and reflect on his life.

* * * *

"You knew Uncle Barney the whole time he lived here?" she asked, studying him. She could smell his scent; a hint of leather and spicy fragrance, perhaps the interior of the expensive Lear jet he had flown on earlier and his after-shave. She wasn't close enough to feel any heat emanating from his body, but she'd take care of that soon enough.

He nodded. "I was a kid when Barney moved to the ranch." He took a drink, then lowered his glass. "Barney was very supportive when my dad was killed and I took over the running of the Double D."

Cassie didn't know what to say, but now she knew he had inherited the large ranch. She concentrated on finishing her drink. On the back of her tongue she

tasted gin, the only form of liquor she could readily identify – and she had begun to feel very relaxed from head to toe.

He stretched out one arm along the back of the couch, his palm brushing Cassie's shoulder.

She felt the urge to scoot across the couch and nestle in his arms, snuggle against his chest. It had to be muscular, she thought, staring at how it filled out his denim shirt. She stifled a shiver and pulled her gaze away just as Max entered the room.

"Supper will be on the table in fifteen minutes," he said, wiping his hands on his apron.

"You probably want to freshen up," Hawk told Cassie.

"Yes, thank you," she agreed, making to get off the couch. Her head felt dizzy as all get out—maybe because she had skipped lunch. She levered herself up, only to find Hawk's arm around her waist, pulling her body against his side.

"You're not a drinker," he whispered down at her. He chuckled softly, helped her across the room, then headed down the hallway.

His hand was very near the rise of her breast, circling her upper body like a firm warm band. She leaned into his body, keenly aware of the muscles pressing into her side and hip.

When they reached the bedroom where Max had placed her suitcase, Hawk steered her inside and pushed the door closed. Then he turned her into his arms, wrapping his arms around her waist and tugging her against his chest.

"I didn't give you that drink to get you drunk so I

could seduce you," he murmured, his head dipping very near her face.

Cassie's breath caught in her throat. She wasn't feeling the liquor as much as he thought she was. Or else his sudden boldness had sobered her up. She almost giggled out loud. Should she reveal her secret?

No.

She raised her arms and wrapped her hands around his neck, twining her fingers together at his nape. She raised her eyes upward to lock gazes with him.

And that was all it took.

His mouth came down hard against hers, and she matched his ardor, opening her lips and welcoming his tongue inside. A carnal mew leapt from her throat.

He tasted of gin and heat, of lust and sensuality all rolled into one wet, hot, plundering tongue that swept along her gums and teased her tongue back into his mouth. His hands spanned her back, then slid lower to clasp her hips. He pressed her abdomen into his crotch.

The unmistakable feel of an erection pressed into Cassie's belly and she let loose a swooning sigh. *God!*

His mouth was greedy against hers, sucking and nipping, demanding she give as she was receiving. His hands made their way around to her front, opening her blouse and pulling it from her body.

It was crazy...but so necessary.

He released the clasp on her bra and freed her breasts—then he covered them with his hands. Pulling his lips from hers, he trailed hot, wet kisses down the arched column of her throat until he found

her breasts.

Her nipples were taut little clusters of needing flesh and he suckled each painfully, making Cassie delve her fingers into his hair and hold his mouth tightly against her flesh.

His hand found her waistband and the zipper closing her slacks. In a moment she was helping him rid her of the confining garment, then her fingers began to rid him of his clothes, feeling the hot muscular male form beneath the denim covering.

He picked her up and crossed the room to the bed. Quickly, for he couldn't wait much longer—he laid her down and hooking his thumbs in the elastic of her bikini panties, pulled them from her hips and down the length of her legs.

Cassie could hardly wait for him to strip out of his jeans, to come to her. She opened her legs and held out her arms. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. Her gaze quickly wafted across the sight of his engorged cock; it was beautiful, long, and thick. She allowed the lusty shiver rising inside her to take full flight. She watched him as he came round the bed, opened the small drawer on the nightstand and removed a condom.

She hadn't even thought about a condom.

Holy cow. She was so hot she had totally overlooked her rule of having safe sex.

Hawk Downs was gorgeous—so he'd probably had a lot of women. Maybe in that very room, since he kept condoms in the nightstand drawer.

Don't think about it, she warned herself, watching him roll on the rubber.

"Damn, shit!" he said under his breath.

Cassie smiled and bit on her bottom lip. She'd heard guys say that condoms took most of the pleasure out of fucking—but she had yet to believe it. True, sometimes the entry was a bit rough, but that was only when she wasn't sufficiently sexually aroused. It wouldn't be so this time, no sir! Hawk Downs had turned her on from the moment she first laid eyes on him.

He came to her, all moist from arousal and properly gloved, and Cassie spread her legs really wide, inviting him to enter her. And he did, with one powerful lunge.

Cassie wrapped her legs around his thrusting hips and waited for the ecstasy to come.

His body was big; his back ropy with elongated muscles and his buttocks firm as rock. His long cock worked away at her inside cavern; sliding inside, thrusting hard, and pulling back, only to lunge in deep, making Cassie yelp and cling to his shoulders tighter.

He held her buttocks in each of his big palms, keeping her steady while he thrust inside. His mouth bore down on her lips, roughly taking what he wanted from her.

Cassie reveled in the manly way he controlled her—he was taking, yet she was offering herself up. She wanted him and she wasn't holding back. She raised her hips to meet his powerful thrusts, sucking on his tongue to pull him deeper into her mouth. She felt her response to his control make him shiver, and the truth spurred her on.

She felt it then—the onset of orgasm—the tingle beginning in her belly and spiraling through her nerve endings. She tore her mouth away from his, needing to gasp great gulps of air while she savored the storm of sensations taking over her body.

“Oh, babe!” Hawk's voice rasped. His hands tightened on her rear as his body seemed to gain new faster momentum. He thrust wildly, ramming into her core with such force that the head of the bed slammed against the wall.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

Cassie bit her bottom lip with the sheer ecstasy of the act. She couldn't contain her joy any longer and let loose with a shrill of delight.

“I'm coming!” Hawk rasped. “I'm coming!”

They rode the wild wave of ecstasy together, pushing their bodies tightly together, clinging to each other.

CHAPTER THREE

Cassie awoke with a start. She had dreamed she had sex with a handsome stranger. Blinking her eyes, she realized that the warm body nestled against her back was real, and not a figment of her imagination.

Hawk Downs slept peacefully at Cassie's back, his right leg sprawled across her buttocks and his right arm secured around her waist. All in all it was the perfect way to wake up; naked and encased in a handsome man's arms.

They hadn't made it to supper last night— they'd used three different condoms instead. Who would be hungry after all that sex? She smiled at the thought. She had wanted him since first laying eyes on him— and so she had him— and enjoyed every nuance of the experience.

Hawk roused beside her, pulling his arm and leg away, and stretching leisurely.

"Morning, babe," he said in a husky voice, kissing her temple. "Shower time." He levered himself from the bed, tugging her after him.

"Hawk, it's barely daylight," she protested in a sleepy voice.

"We ranchers get up at the crack of dawn." He tugged her into the bathroom across the room.

Cassie stood on the fuzzy rug before the shower stall and yawned while Hawk turned on the water and adjusted the spray, then she allowed him to push her inside.

"Mmmmm," she murmured when the hot spray of water splashed against her naked body.

In the next instant Hawk was joining her, his big body taking most of the brunt of the water force. His hands were on her, lathering her body with a fragrant soap, his big hands gliding over her breasts in slippery caresses. Then he delved between her legs, his fingers lingering a while to manipulate her pussy.

He pulled her against his chest and kissed her mouth while the water sprayed against their heads. Steam rose to cloud the glass shower door and surround their naked wet bodies.

His cock was hard and he poked it between Cassie's legs, teasing her as his tongue tangled with hers. He flicked his tongue across her lips, then sucked her lower lip between his lips, toying with it.

Suddenly he turned her around. Holding her wet body, he slid his cock between the creases of her buttocks, then he placed his hands on her pussy, spreading the fleshy, hair-covered lips. He began to stroke her clitoris, making Cassie wiggle and press her buttocks against his hard cock.

"You tease me," she whispered, her hands pushing between their bodies so she could grasp his cock.

"I want to possess every inch of you," he whispered against her wet hair. "I want to make you come, and come, and come!"

"You're making...me come...right now!" Cassie squealed, grasping his hand with hers. "And it...feels ...wonderful!"

She forgot all about trying to grasp his cock and just allowed her body to experience his expert manipulation, unabashedly grinding her hips into his massaging fingers. The last man she had let fondle her didn't seem to know much about the art—not the case with Hawk. He knew exactly where to place his fingers and how hard to rub.

"You make me...weak in the...knees, Hawk Downs."

He turned her in his arms and entered her passage, raising her slightly and pressing her back against the shower wall. He moved quickly at first, lunging in deeply, and making her yelp out loud, then he slowed his pace, pressing his lips to hers as he set a methodical rhythm.

"Mmmm," Cassie murmured, enjoying the ease with which he slid inside her. "Mmmm."

"Will you shave for me, Cassie?" he asked, his lips briefly leaving hers. "Will you shave your pussy for me? I know it sounds crazy—but the rest of you feels so silky and smooth."

A ripple of lust streamed through her; her eyes flickered open. A man had never requested such a thing of her—yet she had thought about shaving herself on numerous occasions.

"All right," she murmured, imaging herself soft

and bare. "All right. I'll shave my pussy for you, Hawk." The mere utterance of the words made her feel sexy — though she wasn't really sure why.

"Thanks, babe. I'll even lend you my razor." He pulled his mouth from her lips and smiled at her, his eyes boring into her.

They were brimming with heat, Cassie realized, locking gazes with him, her nerves assaulted by the blue depths.

She giggled, suddenly feeling very lusty. "Do you want to watch? Or do you want to shave me?"

His mouth quirked to one side. His hips continued to move, his cock continued to thrust inside her.

No condom, she suddenly thought, but apparently he noticed the same thing. He suddenly lunged inside her, only to cuss under his breath and drop his head against her bare, wet shoulder. In the next instant, he was pulling his cock from her hot passage and leaving her to stand on the floor of the shower stall.

"Sorry about that," he mumbled. He reached behind them and shut off the water, then slid the glass door open and grabbed two towels.

Cassie let loose a pent-up breath. "I hate condoms," she said, dabbing at her wet body.

"About that shave—" he reminded, winking one blue eye at her. He draped the towel around his hips and began helping her dry off, making it a point to carefully wipe her breasts and between her legs. He dipped his head and brushed his lips across hers. "I look forward to seeing you bare," he whispered. He stepped out of the shower. Cassie heard the bedroom door close and knew he had left her.

She finished drying her body, taking note of how relaxed she felt from the sex, and went to find her suitcase so she could get her razor. It was the first time she had the opportunity to look at the guest bedroom at the Double D, and she saw that it had the same characteristics as the other portions of the house she had seen. The room was practical—a bed, a dresser, a nightstand, one window with curtains that matched the bedspread in the choice of male colors—brown and ocher.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in red short shorts and a matching halter-top, Cassie appeared in the kitchen of the ranch, having followed her nose and the inviting aroma of coffee and bacon, to find Max standing at the stove.

“Morning,” Max said, glancing over one shoulder. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Oh, no eggs, Max, just coffee. I’m not much on breakfast,” she hedged, taking a seat at the breakfast counter. The kitchen was very modern with black granite counter tops and stainless steel appliances. A large dining room sat off to one side and a sliding glass door opened onto a red brick patio. She spied the swimming pool lying beyond and the green expanse of lawn.

“You better have some food if you plan on keeping up with Hawk today.” He turned and grinned at her. “He’s got a lot of energy.”

“You’re telling me,” she mumbled beneath her breath. They had fucked the night away—“On second thought,” she voiced. “I’ll have two eggs and three strips of bacon, a slice of toast, and coffee.”

"That's more like it," Max agreed laughing out loud.

She downed the big breakfast, then got her purse and keys and went to her rental truck. Max had told her Hawk was out tending to ranch duties and would catch up to her later. He had, however, left her a small sack, its top folded over neatly. She thanked Max and carried the sack to the truck before opening it. There were condoms inside and a note telling her to take them with her. She laughed and slid the packs inside her purse.

The drive over to the little ranch house was short, only about ten minutes. The day was hot already, despite the early hour. She refrained from using the air conditioning in the truck, reminding herself that there was no convenience in the little cabin. Instead, she rolled down the windows and let the hot Texas breeze caress her bare arms and legs on the ride over.

The cabin was just as she remembered it from her teen years. She had days of work ahead of her, getting it ready for a realtor to list. She supposed all of Uncle Barney's possessions were still inside, and a part of her wasn't looking forward to sorting through his life's accumulation.

She pulled up out front of the cabin and shut off the truck engine. A wave of sadness washed over her. Uncle Barney had been very kind to make her his beneficiary. She should have kept in closer touch with him. She should have come to his funeral—except none of the family was notified until after he was buried. In fact, she didn't even know what had happened to him—how he died.

She slid from the truck seat and slammed the door. For the hundredth time there was no sense dwelling on it. For all her pondering, she couldn't bring back Uncle Barney.

She took the door key from her purse and stepped up on the porch. The weathered boards squeaked underfoot as she crossed to the front door. And when she tried to use the key—it got stuck in the lock.

"Crap," she muttered, yanking on the doorknob. How was she going to clean the cabin if she couldn't get inside?

She pulled the key out of the lock—was it the right one?

"It's the key the attorney sent," she asserted, poking it back in the lock. A bit more wiggling of the key in the lock, a few more choice words—and the door was open.

It was dark inside, and Cassie's first thought was that of candles or a battery powered light. But she'd have to drive into Tucson to buy either, unless Uncle Barney kept some on hand. She hurried to cross the small room and raise the window blind.

A musty smell engulfed her nose. Once she raised the blind and then the window, a shaft of light illuminated what she suspected was the living room and the main living space of the cabin. She tried to recall how it had looked all those years ago when she had come with her family to visit, but she couldn't remember even going inside. Her priority had been riding Uncle Barney's horses.

The first thing she spied was an old manual Royal typewriter sitting on a small wooden desk that was

pushed against the wall in the living room. That was where Uncle Barney wrote his western books. There were reams of typing paper stacked on the floor beside the desk and an oil lamp on one corner. The old desk chair had a worn cushion in its wooden seat and ball castors for rollers. He sure hadn't been into updating his writing equipment, she thought, taking in the sight. There was a brown plaid couch and chair, both in a sorry state, with a couple of small end tables near by.

She raised every window in the cabin; throwing up the blinds and letting in the air, warm as it was, to refresh the interior of the cabin. There was lots of cleaning to be done. Every room, despite its small size, was piled up with debris; boxes of clothing and piles of books and newspapers were stacked, in some places ceiling high. The kitchen was a disaster. The small washbowl and stove harbored an array of dirty dishes and pots and pans. She didn't dare open the single cupboard beneath the washbowl.

She stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. Uncle Barney had lived in a pig sty, she was loathe to admit. The bedroom was perhaps the cleanest of the cabin. The bed was made—a total reverse from the rest of the house.

Where to start? she thought. She doubted finding any cleaning supplies, which meant she'd have to go into the city. She poked around and managed to find a straw broom. She was soon engrossed in sweeping the living room floor—a linoleum-covered space that yielded a large pile of papers and junk heaped in the middle of the floor.

CASSIE'S COWBOY

It was as bad as she had feared.

She worked up a sweat with little trouble and was walking out on the porch to cool off when she saw a silver Chevy pickup turning into the lane. A visitor. She didn't have a clue who it was.

The pickup came toward the cabin, pulling onto the lawn as though the driver were familiar with the parking arrangement at Uncle Barney's. Cassie leaned on the broom and watched as the driver shut off the motor and exited the truck.

A tall, thin man with steel gray hair came walking up the path to the front steps, his eyes pinned on Cassie. He walked as though he had a purpose in mind and Cassie felt suddenly on guard. It wasn't a good feeling, and she mentally recalled where she had put down her purse—just in case she needed to call 911.

"I'm John Meyers, your neighbor," he said, pausing at the foot of the three steps that led to the porch. He poked his hand out to Cassie as he removed his sunglasses. "And you must be Barney's niece."

A bit of the unease waned and Cassie shook hands with him. "I'm Cassie," she said, forcing a smile.

He nodded his head and glanced past Cassie to peer inside the cabin. "I'd say you have your work cut out for you," he remarked, chuckling slightly. "Barney wasn't exactly a good housekeeper."

Cassie nodded in agreement. "It looks like a bomb went off inside." She combed her fingers through her hair, tucking the blond tresses behind her ears. She saw that her visitor's attention had returned to inch

along her bare legs, trailing across her bare midriff before rising to peer at her breasts.

"I have to get back to work," she suddenly blurted out.

John Meyers suddenly cleared his throat as if realizing Cassie had caught him accessing her body, then he took a step back, as though preparing to leave.

"Are you planning to sell?" he asked. "Cause if you are, I'll make you an offer right now."

Cassie's eyebrows shot upward in surprise. She had no idea what the ranch was worth. True, there were fifty acres, some of it in grazing pasture; but the majority was barren, rough, rocky, sagebrush covered and good for little aside from riding a horse across it.

"This property adjoins mine," Meyers said, as though reading Cassie's mind.

And Hawk Downs' Double D.

"I'm not ready to sell."

"Well, when you get ready, let me know."

He was quite presumptuous, Cassie thought, watching him as he walked to his truck. But she couldn't deny the relief she felt when he finally drove away. She took her broom and went inside. The sooner she got rid of the ranch, the better. She stifled a shiver. John Meyers' eyes hadn't been menacing, but she didn't like the feeling on her body.

She shifted her thoughts to Hawk...and their night of sex play. Such a night it had been! Just thinking about his hands on her body made her forget all about John Meyers' roaming gaze and his offer to buy the ranch.

CASSIE'S COWBOY

She had gathered up the strewn contents of the living room by the time she heard the roar of Hawk's pickup truck. She threw down the broom, wiping the sweat off her face. Then she noticed the smears of dirt streaking her legs and midriff. And there was no water inside the cabin—only a rusty old pump outside the back door.

It was too late to worry about primping. Hawk was already getting out of the truck.

She watched him walk up the dirt lane, her pulse racing at the sight of him. Low-slung jeans clung to his narrow hips, and a sweat-stained Stetson on his head shaded his tanned face. He wore black cowboy boots and a denim-style western shirt with white pearl buttons down the front, its cuffs turned up to expose hair roughened forearms.

He was everything she sought in a man; good looking, wealthy, and excellent in bed. But she had just met him—never mind the mind-blowing sex they had shared last night. Silently she cautioned herself, at the same time rejoicing in her carefree decision to succumb to his devilishly yummy sex appeal.

* * * *

He stepped up on the first step leading to the porch and saw Cassie watching him from the living room of the cabin. A wave of heat swept through him at the sight of her in those red short shorts and skimpy halter-top. Man! The heat in Texas couldn't hold a candle to the heat Cassie stirred in him.

He'd never met a woman quite like her—a woman

who continued to arouse him just by being near him. He liked that. But, he admitted, there was something more going on inside him and it had to do with emotional feelings more than the sexual lust he was experiencing.

A tingle of excitement coursed along his limbs. Cassie Michaels could very well prove to be an interesting lady as far as he was concerned. In the back of his mind he compared her to a young foal, a filly, vibrant and wanting. And in need of a master.

* * * *

"Hi," she said, walking toward him. She suspected he had come to lend a hand...but working at cleaning up the cabin had suddenly taken leave of her mind. She wanted to feel his hands on her body again...have him press his flesh into hers...

His eyes scanned the length of her slowly and seductively, then rose upward to hers. A smile toyed with his roughed mouth, letting Cassie know he approved of what he took in.

He didn't stop when he drew near Cassie, but rather extended one arm and wrapped it around her bare waist, hauling her body against his.

"I didn't come to work," he whispered in a ragged breath. His fingers delved into the short-cropped blond hair at her nape, gently clasping the back of her head. "I came to play...with you."

His mouth descended to hers and his lips fitted possessively against them, forcing the pink flesh to part so he could poke his tongue inside.

CASSIE'S COWBOY

A flood of heat coursed through Cassie, intensifying her already fiery state. She felt her knees grow weak and raised her arms to snake about Hawk's neck. She vaguely heard the broomhandle clatter to the floor as she became lost in the wonder of his kiss.

* * * *

Her body felt like an extension of his own; soft, pliable, and yielding. He could fall in love with her, he thought, briefly aware that the notion made his heart skip a beat. Forget the fact that he had just met her. Thanks to Barney Michaels, he felt as though he had known her for years.

Cassie moaned deep in her throat, breaking into his thoughts. His mouth feasted on her lips, gently and roughly at the same time, giving and taking, and Cassie responded in kind—as though they were one mind.

In the next moment he swept her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

* * * *

Cassie's eyes flickered open when Hawk lifted her into his arms. Yes, she wanted sex with him—but not inside Uncle Barney's little cabin.

"Go to the truck," she whispered, her lips close to his ear.

Hawk laughed out loud and turned on his heel. "And I suppose you'll want air conditioning, too."

Cassie giggled and kissed him on the cheek, then began opening her halter-top. By the time Hawk opened the door of the pickup, she was bare-chested and eager to feel his hands on her breasts.

She wiggled out of her shorts and thong panties, while Hawk started the pickup and turned on the air conditioner. She leaned close to the nearest vent, letting the cool air waft across her throat and breasts.

"It feels good," she exclaimed, turning to find him watching her.

* * * *

She was gorgeous in her naked state. Her clothes lay on the floor of the truck, along with her strap sandals and she appeared quite comfortable perched on the black leather truck seat, her velvet skin shimmering from the rays of sun streaming in through the windows.

He was still fully dressed, leaning his back against the door of the truck, watching Cassie in front of the air vent. Her breasts were round and perfectly shaped with dusty brown areolas and taut petal-pink nipples. They were already in tight little clusters, and he hadn't laid a hand on her yet. She had her hands clasped behind her head holding up her hair from her neck, and her upper body arched toward the cooling breeze from the vent. She was perched on the edge of the leather seat, her rounded buttocks begging to be clutched in his hands. He wondered then, the breath catching in his throat: Had she shaved for him?

As though reading his thoughts, Cassie swiveled

round on the leather seat and pulled up one knee, exposing her shaved pussy to his inquiring eyes. She smiled demurely.

"Do you like it?" she cooed, wagging one knee and arching her hips toward him.

He growled deep in his throat and lunged across the truck seat to grab hold of her, making her squeal in delight.

He pulled her naked body atop his, parting her legs so her newly shaved pussy fit hotly atop the bulging cock still secured behind his zipper, though the denim fabric was stretched about as tight as it could possibly be.

* * * *

Cassie found herself on top—a good position if you liked to be dominating, she thought, getting an idea. She levered herself upright, pushing Hawk's hands around to her breasts, then while he fondled to his heart's content—and her delight, she found the tab on his zipper and eased it down.

A low moan came from his throat as Cassie's warm fingers released his fly and uncovered his hard erection. In a few seconds she had it free of his jeans and was running her nimble little fingers up and down its long hot length, driving him wild.

"Oh, babe! Suck on it," he instructed. He reached for her as Cassie dipped her head and planted a moist kiss on its smooth, round head. "Suck on it!"

Cassie's playful feeling intensified with Hawk's suggestion. She opened her mouth and eased her lips

around the hard flesh, listening to him draw in a quick breath as the moist heat from her mouth engulfed him. She played along its length with the tip of her tongue while she gently clasped its base.

Hawk grabbed Cassie's head in his hands in an attempt to guide her mouth on his cock, but Cassie had ideas of her own. While she wanted to please him—and give him pleasure—she liked the rush of power the act brought.

She played her tongue along its hot length, moving quickly, then slowly, until Hawk could take no more. He levered himself up in the truck seat and grabbed Cassie. Wrestling her beneath his body, he drove his hard cock between her shapely legs, spearing her insides with a heated thrust.

Cassie's bare butt squeaked on the leather beneath her hips. Her legs were drawn up, one levered atop the seat back, while the other was pinned beneath Hawk's right leg. It was uncomfortable as hell, but the sensations beginning to flow through her were worth every cramped second.

She reached orgasm almost at once, panting and clutching at Hawk's thrusting hips. She wished he was naked, instead of only his cock exposed through his fly. She wished they were in a bed, where they could be comfortable...

"Hawk," she breathed, her hips lunging upward to meet his thrusts. Sweat blanketed her naked skin, despite the force of cold air from the air conditioner vents pelting her body. "Hawk—you forgot the condom!"

CHAPTER FOUR

“**F**uck.”

“Yes, baby,” Cassie murmured.

Hawk paused, but only long enough to pull his cock out of Cassie’s cleft and roll on the condom he took from his jeans pocket.

Cassie laid still and watched the procedure. One orgasm was slowly waning from her insides and she savored the sensations as her eyes latched onto Hawk’s big cock. Usually the men she bedded applied their condoms before they entered her. She smiled. Hawk seemed to have a problem remembering them.

Her smile widened. Usually the men were quite secretive about applying their condoms—not so with Hawk. His long cock was standing up proudly in his lap while he gingerly placed the rolled condom on its bulbous head and eased the soft rubber along its length.

The condom in place, Hawk returned to slide inside Cassie’s wet passage. Cassie had savored the initial climax and thought she’d need longer stimulus to reach another, but Hawk’s fingers on her clitoris,

along with a little tracing along her smooth lips and she was instantly panting and lunging her hips against his cock, bringing about a second orgasm.

Hawk reached his climax at almost the same instant and they bucked and pushed against each other until the sensations began to fade away.

Cassie lay in her cramped state, one hand trailing languidly across Hawk's left cheek as his head nestled between her breasts.

* * * *

He could hear her heart beat; a steady thud, thud, thud. Her skin was soft against his cheek and the rise of her left breast cut into his vision like a plump little hill. He reached his fingers to her nipple. It was only slightly relaxed from his earlier stimulating. Gently, he tweaked the rosy bud between his fingers and thumb.

"Unless you've got another condom in your pocket, Cowboy, you better stop," Cassie warned in a lazy voice. She felt very relaxed, almost sleepy in her post orgasmic state.

Hawk chuckled and planted a soft kiss on the arc of her breast, then he withdrew his hand from her nipple and sat up, pulling Cassie onto his lap. Her naked body was lush and very beautiful. He had already admitted to himself that he loved to touch her, and loved fucking her even more. He smiled at his own thoughts. The woman was rapidly working her way into his heart.

Cassie settled her back against Hawk's chest. He'd

CASSIE'S COWBOY

pulled off the rubber and tossed it out the truck window. He'd grumbled as he poked his rapidly deflating cock back inside his fly, but then he turned his full focus to the naked woman on his lap.

* * * *

Cassie sighed and settled languidly against Hawk's muscled chest, her head lolling on his right shoulder. She couldn't think of a better place to be. His hands slimmed along her bare body, hot in contrast to the cool air blasting her from the air vents. His palms brushed across her erect nipples, encompassing her global breasts in each hand. He massaged them, running his fingers around the circumference of each mound, then turning his attention to each nipple.

When Cassie was breathing erratically from his fondling of her breasts, he dipped his head and nuzzled her neck and bare shoulders, then he lowered his hands, finding her shaved crotch.

"Mmmm," Cassie breathed. "Mmmm."

His fingers parted her smooth lips and began an erotic exploration, an investigative search—as though looking for gold in a known gold mine.

"Hawk!" she exclaimed, clutching at his moving fingers.

"What, babe?" he teased, his fingers continuing to stroke her slick, wet flesh.

"You're driving me crazy!" she confessed, wiggling her bare butt on his denim-covered lap.

"You feel really good, babe," he whispered, his fingers sliding inside her passage. "And you like what

I'm doing to you – don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Cassie breathed. "I...like it...a lot!"

"You're a woman who likes to play," he whispered, easing his finger in and out of her. She was very aroused, almost unable to hold still on his lap as he stroked her. "And I've got lots more ideas to show you."

Cassie's breath caught in her throat. Hawk was right. She did like to play – and be played with.

"Enjoy it, babe. Enjoy it!" He turned her on his lap, laying her legs across the seat and her back against the inside of the door. Then he pushed her legs apart and used both hands on her crotch, stroking her clitoris with one hand while ramming his fingers inside her with the other.

"Your fingers feel...just like...a big...long cock!" she said, withering and squirming against his lap. "It's delightful!" She closed her eyes and gave herself over to Hawk's mastery as the sensations of multiple orgasms streamed through her body.

* * * *

He held her, listened to her sighs and soft mews – and his cock was so hard it was almost painful, confined inside his tight jeans. But he had had only one condom in his pocket – and he'd already used it.

He let loose a ragged sigh. He could play with Cassie's nubile little body the rest of his life. The realization jarred him. Was he falling in love with Cassie?

She stilled momentarily, and he pulled his hands

CASSIE'S COWBOY

from her crotch. Splaying his fingers across her belly, he gazed down at her. Her eyes were closed, as though she were on the verge of sleeping. Gently, he raised her head, bringing her mouth up to his. He kissed her softly, making her open her eyes.

"Thank you," she said, her full lips pulling into a slight smile. "Most of my breaks aren't this enjoyable."

Hawk leaned his head back against the seat and laughed out loud.

"In fact..." she continued, amused. "should you wish to stop by again and interrupt my work—"

He silenced her with a kiss; a deep, penetrating kiss that seemed to go on forever—and ended only when Hawk realized he would have to either go to the cabin for more condoms—or postpone further sex play until later.

Cassie tied her halter top in a knot between her plump breasts and yanked up her shorts. She picked up her sandals from the floor of the truck and slid her feet into them. It was time to get back to work.

"I have to drive into town to buy cleaning supplies," she announced. "There's nothing in the cabin except a broom."

Hawk nodded and helped her out of the truck. He had already revealed that he had to get back to the ranch and he'd be busy until suppertime, but he'd look forward to spending more time with Cassie then.

* * * *

They parted after a lengthy kiss that threatened to

destroy both their minds, and Cassie waved to him as he pulled out of the lane. Then she turned her attentions to making a list of cleaning supplies to buy.

She found a convenience store a few miles outside of Tucson and made her purchases. Returning to the cabin, she began cleaning, tackling the kitchen first. Uncle Barney had lacked housekeeping skills—that was certain. Every pot and pan in the place was dirty, with dried food cemented to their metal sides. Every glass and plate was stacked up in the washbasin. And the irony of it all, Cassie found, was the fact that there wasn't any food in the house. Was he in the habit of eating up every scrap before he went shopping?

She shook her head and grimaced. She was finding Uncle Barney to be quite eccentric—or just downright nuts.

She laughed at her assumption. She often heard her mother say that insanity reigned on the Michaels side of the family. Of course, she was just kidding—or was she?

Three hours later the kitchen—the smallest room in the cabin—was clean. Dishes, pots and pans, floor, window, and the one cabinet all gleamed in scrubbed elegance. And Cassie was tired. Her back ached and her hands were raw from all the scrubbing with the harsh cleaning solutions.

"I could use another break—if only Hawk would stop by," she mumbled.

Shortly before suppertime, Cassie gathered her purse and hopped into the rental truck. She had made some progress on the cabin today. A few more days of strenuous work and she'd be ready to find a

CASSIE'S COWBOY

realtor.

She thought then of the visit she had that morning from John Meyers, Uncle Barney's neighbor to the East. She'd have to tell Hawk about his offer to buy the ranch and get his opinion on the matter.

* * * *

"You better hold on to the ranch for a while, babe," Hawk advised over supper. He cut a large piece of steak and poked it into his mouth.

Cassie paused, her fork inches from her mouth, when she heard Hawk's words. "Hold on to it? You mean, don't sell? But why?"

Hawk stared at her while he chewed.

"I just don't think you should rush into it."

Cassie concentrated on the butter melting on her baked potato, her brows drawn together in contemplation. Maybe Hawk was telling her not to sell the ranch in hopes of having her around longer. But she only had two weeks off from her job as secretary at the law firm. And she had all intentions of returning to New York once those two weeks were over. True, the sex with him was great—the best she'd ever had. But her life was in New York, not in the sweltering heat of Texas.

She raised her gaze and locked eyes with Hawk. But then he dropped his, and she was left wondering about the look she saw in them.

They finished their meal in virtual silence. Then when Max entered the dining room and asked if they wanted coffee on the patio, she rose to accompany

Hawk through the sliding glass doors onto the brick patio surrounding the swimming pool. Only an hour earlier a rain shower had rolled through, briefly cooling the hot evening.

The air was fragrant with new rain, a refreshing aroma that drew Cassie's eyes to the darkening sky. A cloudbank lay nestled along the horizon and reminded her of Max's words—'there's a storm brewing.' She inched her palms along her bare arms.

"Cold?" Hawk asked, holding a chair for her at a glass-topped patio table.

"No," she replied, smiling up at him. "I was just reminded of a storm when I was a kid. It rained so hard that you couldn't see across the street and when it finally stopped, the entire subdivision was flooded."

"We don't have floods here on the ranch. There's too much open range to soak up the water," Hawk explained. "So you don't need to worry."

She wouldn't worry with him around, she thought looking at him as he took a seat across the table. He seemed capable of handling anything.

She smiled.

Especially if it pertained to sex.

She raised her coffee cup and took a sip. Max made a robust cup of coffee, she had to admit, enjoying the hearty flavor on her tongue. The caffeine was bound to wake her up—not that it was needed with the likes of Hawk Downs so near.

He seemed preoccupied, she thought, watching him drink his coffee. Earlier, when he had stopped by the cabin and they had sex in his truck, she thought

he'd rush her into bed once supper was over, but he seemed to have cooled down from his earlier heated state. She wondered if she should question his mood—or simply invite him to her bedroom and resume the sex play.

"You don't want to sell the ranch to John Meyers,"

Cassie's eyes grew large in surprise. "Why not?"

"Because he and Barney didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things."

"You mean Uncle Barney didn't like him?" she asked remembering how Meyer's eyes had skimmed over her body, setting her teeth on edge.

"Yeah. That's what I mean." Hawk levered himself out of the metal lawn chair and walked to the edge of the covered patio. Poking his hands into his pockets, he stared at dark clouds now beginning to roll in.

Cassie stared at his back. Even from that angle, he was a magnificent man. Tall, straight, and built to pleasure a woman. Her pulse jumped in her wrist.

"Okay. I'll take your word for it, Hawk. I won't sell the ranch to John Meyers." She pushed out of her chair and went to stand beside him. Raindrops suddenly began to pelt the red bricks of the exposed patio. Hawk twined one long arm around Cassie's waist, bringing her against his side.

"You feel good," he murmured, giving her a squeeze.

Cassie snaked one arm around his waist, then brought her other hand to his fly. She pressed her palm against the rapidly hardening bulge beneath the covering of denim.

"You're hard," she whispered, glancing up at him.

"I've spent the afternoon thinking about you," he divulged, pulling her against his chest. He lowered his hands to clasp her butt, then pressed her belly into his erection.

Cassie's tiredness seemed to disappear with Hawk divulging his thoughts to her. She had been thinking about him too—not to mention the intensity of their budding relationship. Where was it headed—once her two-week vacation had ended?

"You have?" she prompted. She raked her nails across his denim-clad hips, molding his firmness against her length.

He bent his head and kissed her mouth, a demanding little kiss that sent a ripple of longing coursing through her insides. She let out a long breath when he pulled his mouth away, regretting him doing so.

"I've been thinking of all the things I want to do to you," he whispered. He raised one hand and clasped her breast. She had showered and changed clothes since returning from cleaning the cabin, so she no longer wore the short shorts and revealing halter-top, instead, white slacks and a pale blue T-shirt. He rubbed her breasts through the cotton fabric, paying close attention to her nipples with the end of his thumb.

"Mmmm, that intrigues me," she returned. She separated her body enough from his so she could unzip his fly and poke her hand inside to twine her fingers around his hard erection. She rubbed him gently, as much as the tight confines of his jeans would allow. "And what do you have in mind?" she

inquired, her fingers enjoying the hot, firm length of him.

"I want to fuck you every way imaginable," he whispered, his mouth pulling into a sensual grin, "and I want to taste every inch of you."

"Ooooo. You turn me on." She raised up on her tiptoes and kissed him. "When do we get started?"

He reached the hem of her T-shirt and yanked it over her head. "Right now," he said, chuckling.

"Hawk!" Cassie clutched at the hand holding her shirt. "What about Max?"

"We don't need Max."

"I mean—won't he see us?" she sputtered, trying to take her shirt back.

Hawk laughed out loud. "Relax. Max has a date. He's already left the ranch."

With that news, Cassie breathed a sigh of relief. Then she allowed Hawk to take off her bra. He unzipped her slacks and pushed down her thong panties. When she was naked, he took her by one hand and led her to the glass-topped picnic table where they had drunk coffee earlier.

"You're the next item on the menu," he informed her. "Get on the table and lie down. I intend to sample that delectable little shaved pussy of yours."

She hurried to climb up on the table and lay down, opening her legs for Hawk.

Hawk was hammer-hard, and he gingerly released the snap on his jeans and pushed them from his hips. In the next moment, he kicked off his boots and stripped his shirt off, then he approached Cassie, who was spread-eagled on the picnic table.

"I think a man and a woman should enjoy each other, Cassie," he said, gazing down at her naked body.

"I think so, too," she agreed, laughing. She was burning up inside and she could hardly wait until he laid hands on her.

She sucked in a quick breath when she saw Hawk draw up a chair and sit down, then he took hold of her bare hips and pulled her butt over to the edge of the table. Next, he draped her bare legs across each of his shoulders.

"Cassie is served!" he whispered, grinning broadly.

He brought his head down between her legs and began lathing her smooth, clean-shaven pussy lips.

Cassie moaned out loud in utter pleasure at the feel of his hot, wet tongue flitting amid her sensitive folds. When he placed his fingers on either bare lip and gently pushed them apart, she thought surely she would come just from the sheer pleasure of it all. His tongue found her clitoris and flicked it gently, then he placed the very tip of his tongue against the sensitive little nub.

Cassie moaned. "It feels like heaven, Hawk! It's wonderful! Simply wonderful!"

* * * *

She tasted of womanly musk, of fragrant soap and water; even the hint of laundry soap lingered from when she had dried with the towel. Her tissues were firm and slick from his mouth. Her little shaved lips

were ripe to be nipped by his teeth, gently, arousingly.

And he tasted her to his heart's content, reaping a number of orgasms from her with his fondling, then, when he could stand it no longer, he stood and plunged his needing cock into her hot, wet core, causing her to gasp at his size. He began to move, holding her hips in his big hands, carefully, gently, needing to last as long as he could so he could see the pleasure he brought her on her face.

Her eyes flickered closed, her lips parted to reveal her white even teeth, her breasts jiggled on her chest, her belly tightened and her head fell back as she gave into the throes of orgasm.

He stiffened his legs, knotting his buttocks. He was on the verge of exploding inside her body, of claiming her as his woman —

Damn the luck!

He was fucking without a condom — again!

He hesitated only a moment — deciding — weighing the odds —

Then he went with his gut feeling — and allowed the orgasm to blast through his body.

"Cassie!" he yelled, leaning his head back. "Cassie! Oh, Cassie!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The rain had stopped and the moon and stars hung brightly overhead. Cassie lay on the patio table with Hawk's upper body draped over her, his cock still snuggled inside her womanly crevice. His mouth was kissing her greedily, though tenderly, nipping at her full lower lip and sucking it into his hot mouth.

"I've never been served up like that before," Cassie said, her breathing ragged. She stared up at Hawk in the amber light from a thousand Chinese lanterns illuminating the patio. Her eyes surveyed his face. There were tiny little laugh lines at the corners of his eyes—and those lovely dark lashes. She had just noticed them for the first time. She looked closer at him, finding his face an exquisite thing. There was a tiny scar on the crest of his left cheek—she wondered what had caused it. She touched it lightly with one nail tip. His roughed mouth was much more gentle than her first assumption—especially now since he had been so adapt at pleasing her with it.

A relaxing sigh wafted from her as she pulled his face down to meet her lips. With the touch of his mouth to hers, she was almost overcome with the

desire to proclaim her love for him—but then she halted the thought in mid-sentence. Love? Wasn't her association with Hawk Downs all about sex—lusty sex?

* * * *

Her mouth tasted good; the faint tinge of after-dinner coffee and cinnamon from the apple pie they had for dessert. But there was more in her kiss, the way her lips conformed beneath his, the playful return from the tip of her tongue. Or was he imagining things—because he wanted them to be there?

He sighed deeply, raising his upper body off Cassie. His chest felt immediately chilled by the loss of her body heat pressing against him. He tugged her forward, his hands gentle beneath her shoulders until she was sitting upright, devoid of any part of his body, and staring at him as though awaiting his next idea.

"Let's go for a swim," she coaxed, reaching out and touching his chest. She teased him with her smile, promising sex in the pool—if he wanted. Or if she wanted—

He grinned down at her, then touched the crest of her left cheek with one finger. Her skin was like silk, smooth, creamy, wonderful to touch. Her eyes reflected her teasing nature, and her lusty sensuality that he was just beginning to know. She was getting to him—making him keenly aware that she was all woman and his for the taking. He felt a surge of lust that nearly rocked him.

Cassie slid off the glass tabletop and strode to the edge of the Olympic-sized pool. Glancing over her shoulder at Hawk, she beckoned him to join her.

And he couldn't resist.

The sight of her naked body as she slipped easily into the cool, blue water urged him to follow, to be near her at all costs.

* * * *

Cassie swam to the far end of the pool. Pausing, she pushed the wet hair out of her eyes. She treaded water and watched as Hawk dove off the diving board and came to the surface, then began swimming toward her. His shoulders and arms were powerful for swimming. His big, naked body sliced through the water with very little splash. He was an excellent swimmer, she agreed, catching her breath as she waited near the concrete side. She hadn't swum in months and was winded from the short distance.

Hawk swam over to her and circled her waist with one arm. Cassie glanced down into the water and saw he was fully aroused—ready to take her right there in the pool. She felt emboldened by the sight of his elongated cock.

She turned to face him, liking the idea of having sex in the water. But then it dawned on her that he didn't have a condom. She deliberately locked gazes with him. Momentarily she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, nibbling nervously on it. He hadn't worn a condom when he took her on the patio table, either.

"Hawk!" she breathed, her body being drawn into the warm circle of his arms.

He could read her mind—or her eyes. Whichever, he knew why she had stiffened in his grasp. He pulled her against his chest and kissed her, trying to reassure her with his lips.

"I won't let that happen again, Cassie. I promise," he whispered, his lips only centimeters from hers.

"Then we better get out of the water—"

His lips hushed her, his tongue plunging inside her mouth to slick across her teeth and tangle with her tongue.

"Don't go anywhere!" he instructed.

And he was gone—breaking his hold on her so quickly that she slipped beneath the surface of the water without thinking. Splashing noisily, she surfaced and swam to the shallow end of the concrete pool. She wasn't a strong swimmer and she was at once reminded of the fact. True, she wanted to have sex with Hawk in the pool—but she didn't want to drown while doing it.

He was back almost before she could make sense of what they were planning to do, with a condom encasing his erection. She had to laugh. It was so unnatural to him—wearing a condom—that he had difficulty remembering to put them on.

The realization of her thought suddenly sank in. Hawk may not be the confident stud she initially thought him to be. She watched him swim over to where she stood in the shallow end of the pool. Or was she wrong about him? Was she getting to him?

She wondered, because he might be getting to *her*.

"Come here," he said, pulling her into his arms.

His gloved cock went right between her legs, sliding in so easily it surprised her, making her catch her breath. She clung to Hawk while he kicked his feet and propelled them out into deeper water.

Cassie felt weightless, suspended by the long cock inside her body and Hawk's powerful arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck when his hands clasped her buttocks. They both kicked their feet, keeping their bodies afloat.

And they began to move.

It was a water ballet—a slow rhythmic moving in the swirling water that spoke of sensuality and heated desires. His hips thrust forward, meeting hers in a crescendo of wild need and lusty cravings.

Cassie's breathing quickened, signaling her onset of orgasm. The water cooled her fevered skin, closing on her flesh and making tiny ripples around her jiggling breasts and moving hips. It was all very erotic—clinging to Hawk's wide shoulders and becoming one with his body. Her thoughts soared in a tangle of want and need, then the climax began, spinning out of control along her limbs. She gasped in a deep gulp of air and quickened her movements, feeling Hawk's hard erection thrusting harder and harder inside her.

There was no feeling to compare to that of a climax in the water. The cold pressed in on her, caressing and battling with her movements at the same time. But that exquisite feeling racing rampant through her made her forget all else.

Hawk sensed her giving in to the sensation,

savoring it to the maximum, and propelled their bodies out of the deep water to where Cassie could touch her feet to the bottom of the pool.

She gained new momentum once she felt the solid floor of the pool beneath her feet. She leaned her upper body into Hawk's chest, feeling the hair-roughened flesh tickle her nipples, and gave herself over completely to the orgasm.

"Mmmm," Hawk said, his face close to hers. "You feel so damn good, babe!"

He climaxed then, crushing Cassie so tight in his arms that she thought she would suffocate before his orgasm began to wane.

Momentarily he picked Cassie up round the waist and hoisted her to the side of the pool, then he levered himself out and went toward the house. He came back with a towel and wrapped Cassie in it, raising her to her feet and pressing her against his chest. He kissed her full on the mouth; a loud, noisy smack that rocked her senses and made her laugh out loud. He produced another towel and began to dry her hair.

Cassie raised her hands, accepting the towel, and took over the drying of her hair, wiping her face and eyes. Her body still felt on fire from their lovemaking, and she still wanted to be in Hawk's arms, snuggling against him and feeling his big hot body melding with hers.

"Let's go to bed," Hawk whispered, taking her hand and heading for the house.

He encased her in warmth, his warmth once they were in bed and Cassie pressed as close to him as

humanly possible, savoring the feel of him, the smell of him. She sighed deeply, as though having found her niche.

It was daybreak before she knew it—and Hawk was leaving the bed. She felt the mattress dip, and then heard him moving around in the room. But her eyes were sleepy and her body so relaxed...

The sun cut a yellow slice across the bed, shining in Cassie's eyes and awaking her. She squinted at the intrusion and rolled to her side. The events of last night suddenly came to mind. She had sex with Hawk in the swimming pool—and before that—before that—he had fucked her without a condom!

"Oh, God!"

She sat bolt upright in the bed. How had she let it happen? When had she let her guard down? When had she lost her sense of judgment?

She threw back the covers and scrambled out of the bed. What if—what if she had gotten pregnant last night?

She combed her fingers through her hair, feeling almost frantic. What if in a moment of weakness, they had made a baby?

She began pacing the room. Why hadn't she taken precautions?

"Because he's in charge of the condoms!" she almost yelled.

She had always prided herself on being cautious where her sexual escapades were concerned. But Hawk Downs had caught her unaware. Completely off-guard. Clueless. He came out of the blue—with his broad shoulders and cowboy boots. Hell! He had

ambushed her!

She laughed out loud suddenly.

She was being ridiculous. One fuck without a condom couldn't possibly...

Oh, yes, it could!

She dashed across the bedroom and got her purse. Digging through the contents, she found her date book and calendar. Her last period had been... And she was most fertile...

She felt so relieved she almost cried. There was no way their stupidity had made a baby. The calendar didn't lie.

She showered and dressed, then went to find breakfast. She had a lot of cleaning to do at the cabin and she had to throw herself into it, had to get it done—so she could leave the Double D as soon as possible.

A pang of regret stabbed her insides. She sounded as if she couldn't wait to get away from Hawk - when in truth, the opposite was the very thing she was feeling.

She gulped down a couple of eggs and toast while listening to Max whistle a happy little tune as he cleaned up the kitchen.

"You're awfully happy today," she said, then chided herself for the comment. She didn't know Max well enough to say anything about his mood. For all she knew, he may be happy all the time.

"I had a date last night," he divulged, grinning at Cassie over his shoulder. "Got lucky, too."

Cassie almost choked on a swallow of orange juice.

Max laughed, a real belly laugh, then he came over

to where she sat at the small kitchen table. "It's not every day a man gets lucky," he said, his wrinkled face animated. "Especially where love is concerned."

Love? Or sex? Cassie thought, but didn't voice.

He stared at Cassie for a few seconds, waiting for her to respond, then when she just continued to eat, he shifted in his chair and changed the subject.

"How's the cleaning coming along?"

"I'm just getting started," she replied, thinking in the back of her mind about the two-hour sex romp she had with Hawk the day before. In retrospect, those two hours would have gone a long way toward scrubbing the cabin. But then —

"Old Barney wasn't too fastidious," Max remarked, shaking his head and chuckling. "He was too busy enjoying life."

Cassie's head came up with Max's words. "Enjoying life? I thought he was a virtual hermit."

Max raised both eyebrows at her comment. "Hell, no! Barney was a ladies' man — out on the town every night. The only reason he wrote those books was so he'd have money to treat all the ladies."

Cassie's jaw dropped open. So far she hadn't found anything to substantiate Max's claim — but then she hadn't really been looking, either. Or did Uncle Barney's neatly-made bed have something to do with his being a ladies' man? Did he bring his lady friends home? Or did he climb into their beds?

She smiled in spite of her thoughts. "Well, that sounds a whole lot better than sitting in that little cabin writing stories until he died."

Max sent a queer little grin her way, then got up

from the table and returned to tidying the kitchen.

"Hawk went into Tucson. He won't be back until suppertime."

Cassie breathed a sigh of relief, then frowned. Well, maybe she needed a day without him to sort through her thoughts. And while he was away, maybe he'd work on remembering the damn condoms!

"'Course, he's got enough hired hands to run the ranch without him being around," Max continued.

"How big is the Double D?" Cassie inquired. She had been wondering about its size since she arrived, but hadn't asked. Truth was, talking about the Double D wasn't exactly sex talk—and having sex was all she and Hawk had been doing since she arrived.

"Fifteen hundred acres," Max spouted in a proud voice. "Hawk's grandfather homesteaded the property, and it's been in the Downs family ever since. When Hawk's father was killed, Hawk took to running the ranch. He was just a kid then. That's when I moved from the bunkhouse to the ranch house and started helping out. Hawk's mother, Rachael, died in childbirth. Hawk looks just like her, but he's got his great grandfather's name. He was a Ute Indian chief."

"How did Hawk's father die?" Cassie asked, her curiosity aroused.

"Oil rig," Max answered matter-of-factly. "Me and him were wildcatters. We drilled wells and brought in oil. We tapped many gushers in our time."

"Wow. That's dangerous work," Cassie offered, a new respect gaining momentum for Max.

Max nodded his head and came to where Cassie sat at the table to pick up her dirty dishes. There was a wistful look on his craggy features, as though he wished his days of wildcatting could be recaptured.

Cassie realized she either had to continue the conversation, knowing full well where it was leading—straight to Hawk—or make a quick exit. She chose to leave. And rather quickly, just as the telephone hanging on the kitchen wall began to ring.

It was just as hot outside as yesterday, despite last night's rain and the brief cooling spell. She drove over to the cabin and unlocked the front door. It looked much better inside, she admitted, walking round the small space. She opened the windows and pulled the back door open. Uncle Barney's old rusty Ford pickup was parked near the falling-down barn in the back yard. What was she going to do with that?

She heaved a sigh and pulled on the pair of rubber gloves she'd bought to scrub in. She had plans to tackle the bedroom—the tidiest room in the cabin. She mixed up a bucket of cleaner, after finally getting the pump outside the back door belching out water yesterday afternoon—and grabbed the sponge mop and headed in its direction. Cleaning had never proven any fun for her. And after listening to Max expound on how Uncle Barney was a ladies' man—well, she wasn't quite certain of what she might find when she started poking around.

After a few minutes of mopping the floor, even the skimpy halter-top and short shorts she wore seemed too hot. She put aside her mop and strode to the front porch to take a break. She had brought along a bottle

of water she had purchased at the convenience store yesterday and went to the pickup to get it. As it turned out, it wasn't too cold after a couple of hours of lying in the truck seat, but at least it was wet.

She drank the water, strolling round the outside of the cabin. It was peaceful and quiet in the country, a sharp contrast to New York and all the noises of traffic and throngs of people. A part of her thought she might like the serenity — given the opportunity.

She shaded her eyes with one hand and gazed off into the distance. She didn't quite know where Uncle Barney's land ended and Hawk's Double D began — or where John Meyers' ranch began on the other side, for that matter. She wondered if Uncle Barney had a survey or property deed that showed the boundary lines. If not, she'd have to have the property surveyed and staked before she could try to sell it.

As she thought about all the red tape that might be involved with ridding herself of the property, she was reminded of what Hawk had said about her hanging onto the ground for a while. At the time she thought he may be suggesting that only to have contact with her for a little longer — it made her feel good inside — but on second thought, maybe he was all aware of what it would take in order to get ready to sell the ranch. But, she reminded herself, Hawk hadn't offered to buy the property from her as John Meyers had.

The realization gave her cause to pause. Why hadn't Hawk made her an offer on the ranch? Surely another fifty acres joining his Double D would be beneficial in some way — if nothing other than to

expand his grazing pastures a little further.

She giggled suddenly, glancing around the ground. Well, maybe the ranch wasn't very good for cattle—it was brown and dried and mainly sagebrush.

Shrugging her shoulders, she replaced the cap on her water bottle and returned to the chore of cleaning the bedroom. It was time to check under the bed—something she'd been putting off since arriving days earlier.

CHAPTER SIX

Cassie heard the truck when it came up the driveway and passed the ranch house, en route to the three car garage at the back of the yard. A feeling of relief that Hawk had returned surged through her, making her question her feelings. He had only been gone for one day, for Pete's sake. And, if she remembered correctly, she had been pretty glad about his absence.

She tightened the belt on her white terrycloth robe and, barefoot, padded out of the bedroom and down the hallway, expecting to find Hawk coming in the back door. As it turned out, he was already in the house. As she passed one of the rooms off the hallway, she spied him setting his briefcase atop a large desk.

She pushed the door the rest of the way open and stepped inside. It was an impressive looking office—complete with book-lined walls and an array of office machinery. Dark hardwood floors shone in polished elegance, giving homage to the massive mahogany desk and twin black leather chairs sitting before it. As in the other rooms of the house, it reflected Hawk's

masculinity.

"I was just thinking about you," Hawk said, looking up and smiling. He stepped from behind the desk and met her in the middle of the floor. Placing his hands on either side of the lapels on the front of her robe, he pulled her against his chest. "Fact is, I've been thinking about you every moment of the whole damn day, babe."

He kissed her then and her knees shook. He could assault her nerves so quickly—such as no other man ever had. A sharp shiver of lust skittered across her flesh.

Her hands rose to press her palms against his chest. He was dressed in a black western-cut suit with crisp white shirt. And he smelled of cologne—an expensive scent she had tried at a cosmetics counter in a department store once, but she couldn't remember the name. There was liquor on his breath, she realized as he slid his tongue into her mouth, but she didn't know what that was either.

Her nipples were growing hard from his kisses. Even though his hands hadn't moved from her robe front, she was trying her best to will them to lower, to grasp any part of her body, just to prove to her senses that he intended to make love to her at some point that night. It seemed almost silly on her part—needing proof that he was sexually attracted to her. Good grief. All they had done since meeting was to have sex—wild, fuck-your-brains-out sex.

"I've got some business to tend to," His tone was filled with regret, his lips only slightly withdrawn from hers, his voice husky. He couldn't be with her

just then — sex would have to wait.

A bit of disappointment filtered through Cassie's insides, but she tried not to show it. He had been gone all day dealing with God only knew what and she could sense his weariness. And his tanned face revealed his fatigue as well. There were deep furrows across his brow as though he had spent a long time pondering something.

"I'll leave you to work, then," Cassie said, her palms skimming along his coat front. She could feel the hard outline of muscles lying just beneath and stifled a longing rising inside her.

"I won't be long," he promised, giving her a final peck on the lips before releasing her robe.

She turned to leave the office, but remembered she had planned to pick his brain concerning Uncle Barney.

"I want you to tell me everything you know about my Uncle," she said, giving him fair warning. "Cause I've got a lot of questions that need answers."

She caught the guarded look he tried to keep her from seeing, but the raised eyebrow didn't go unnoticed. Indeed, it merely served to enhance the fact that there was a lot about Uncle Barney she didn't know.

Cassie returned to the bedroom and removed her robe. Naked, she slid between the sheets, awaiting Hawk's coming to her. But after an hour, she grew sleepy and dozed, figuring he would surely wake her when he climbed in beside her.

It didn't happen.

The next Cassie knew, it was morning and the

bright sunshine streaming in through the bedroom window woke her up. Immediately she rolled her head to glimpse Hawk lying beside her—but he was conspicuously absent from the bed. In fact, his pillow hadn't been used.

She sat upright, rubbing her sleepy eyes in disbelief. There was no sign of Hawk in her bed—nor had there been all through the night. She threw back the sheet and got up, then raced about the room to get dressed. In all likelihood he had probably already left the house since she knew he was prone to rising early and getting busy running the ranch.

"He's been gone for hours," Max announced when Cassie arrived in the kitchen. "But he'll show up later." He grinned, giving her the impression there was more to tell.

"You mean at suppertime?" Cassie questioned, her eyes accessing Max.

Max shrugged one shoulder, not committing himself.

Despite her burning curiosity, Cassie let the matter drop. From the look on Max's face nothing further was going to be pried out of him. Not even with a crowbar, Cassie thought.

She ate and drove over to the cabin to begin work. There was still so much to do and she had almost used up one week of vacation. Chances were, she would have to take more time off work to finish the business with the ranch—unless a miracle occurred.

"Yeah. Sure," she muttered, still puzzled by Hawk's failing to show up in her bed last night. "But I don't know what it takes to run the Double D," she

added in afterthought.

Yesterday's search beneath Uncle Barney's bed had turned up a locked metal box—his safe, she reasoned, since everything else seemed so primitive. But she hadn't found any key to unlock it or been able to open it in any other manner. She had searched high and low for a hammer but hadn't turned one up. She had hoped Hawk would be able to open it—but he seemed to be absent, too.

Frustrated, she threw herself into her work: scrubbing the windows of the cabin and stripping the bed. She put the quilts and sheets in a box she found in the closet and planned to look for a charity group to donate the items to, as well as Uncle Barney's clothing and cookware. There wasn't anything great about any of the personal possessions, but maybe there were those who could get some use out of them. At any rate, when she first got the idea to toss out everything, she was reminded of her mother's words to her when she found out she was the lucky inheritor of Uncle Barney's ranch.

Don't throw anything away. Donate it all. Then you can take it off your taxes.

Cassie shook her head at the advice. Her mother was always concerned with income and taxes—but then, she supposed, that was why she was well-to-do financially, with a prosperous catering business, and Cassie was busting her butt in a nine-to-five office job.

Cassie had been so consumed with her own thoughts and been too busy scrubbing and cleaning, that Hawk was standing in the living room of the cabin before she realized he was even around.

"Hi!" she chirped when she dashed from the bedroom with an armload of clothes. She was really glad to see him. Now, maybe, he could help her get the locked box open. Her curiosity was absolutely burning a hole in her brain.

"Drop everything," he suddenly ordered, grabbing her around the waist and scooping her into his arms.

At first Cassie squealed in surprise, but then she released the wad of clothes she held and wrapped her arms around Hawk's neck. In the next instant she was opening her mouth so he could push his tongue inside.

His kisses made her dizzy. Long, deep, sense-jarring kisses that made her burn inside. She had never experienced such a reaction to a man's kisses before.

Momentarily Hawk dropped down in the single over-stuffed chair in the living room and cradled Cassie on his lap. He continued to kiss her while his hands worked on her clothes.

He untied the knot of the halter-top nestled between her breasts, then eased it from her upper body. Then he began working on her shorts, sliding the zipper down and helping push them off her rounded hips.

Cassie kicked off her sandals and tossed her shorts off the end of her toes. Smiling, she turned to press her body against Hawk's, resuming the heated bout of kissing.

They had both begun to perspire and Cassie had begun to unbutton Hawk's shirt in lieu of ridding him of it. Already she felt the firmness of his cock nestled

beneath her right buttock and knew for certain their joining was inevitable.

His hands slid over her body, across her aroused nipples and between her legs. One hand lingered there—in her crotch—right between her shaved pussy lips. His fingers began to stroke her, making her shiver with delight at the multitude of tingles beginning to course through her body.

She was warm and wet, and he wanted her.

Without warning, Hawk stood up and released Cassie to stand on wobbly legs while he stripped out of his clothes.

His erection was enormous—bobbing in his crotch like a tempting stick of candy. Cassie drew in a quick breath—the overwhelming desire to suck on it coming over her. At once she reached out and clasped the long stick of flesh, then bent her head and lathed its rounded head with her tongue.

“Damn, Cassie!” Hawk said, in a bout of lusty shivers. “You’ll make me come!”

Cassie giggled. “I like our games,” she admitted, gazing up at him. His cock was still in her hand, her grasp tight and unyielding. She still had the urge to suck it.

Hawk grinned down at her. Cassie saw pure lust in his piercing eyes as he reached out his long arms and took hold of her waist.

“Have you ever been spanked?” he asked in a husky voice.

Her fingers flexed on his cock.

She smiled broader at him. Her eyes dancing with carnal lust. “No. But,” she licked her bottom lip with

the tip of her tongue. "I'm willing to give it a try."

She barely had time to get the words out of her mouth, before Hawk grabbed her and spun her round, then in a moment's time, she landed belly first across his bare knees.

"Hawk!" she squealed, her legs and arms flailing about.

He had plopped down in the old chair and was holding her spread-eagled across his bare thighs, her butt poking up in the air, her head and shoulders hanging across the arm of the chair.

"I've never spanked a woman before—" he began, raising his hand and letting it fly against Cassie's naked ass. "But guys I know who have say it's one of the sexiest things you can do to a woman!"

"The hell they do!" Cassie shouted, the first blow stinging to high heaven! "Hawk!"

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

The pain was undeniable, she decided, and the bent position of her body was uncomfortable in a whole different way. But then—

She couldn't describe the feeling that was suddenly beginning to rise inside her—she only knew it was different from anything she had ever experienced.

Smack!

Smack!

Cassie drew in a long breath. Her breasts were beginning to ache from being squashed against the arm of the old chair, but...but...

"Oh, Hawk!" she breathed.

Smack!

Smack!

"Oh, honey! Throw me down in the floor and fuck me!" she begged, her body a turmoil of stinging want. "Hawk! Hurry!"

She tried to lever herself upward, but she felt too languid – too in need – to muster the strength.

In the next instant, Cassie was sprawled out on the floor and Hawk was busy rolling on a condom.

She held out her arms, urging him to come to her and he threw himself atop her body. Lunging in to the hilt, he began to thrust wildly. Cassie wound her legs around his gyrating hips and clung to his body. A fire was raging inside her body – a fire that spiraled out of control like nothing ever before. The cheeks of her butt pained in uncomfortable anguish—but at the same time, felt excruciating pleasure.

It wasn't to be explained, she decided, but rather to be totally enjoyed.

The orgasm began almost the instant Hawk pushed his cock inside her body. She arched her back and gave herself over to the barrage of sensations streaming ramrod quick along her limbs. The sheer depth of the orgasm knotted her belly and made her cry out in sheer joy!

Hawk drove his cock inside deeper, deeper, deeper until Cassie yelped with the force. Then he began a rapid thrusting, hammering her insides with his hot cock until she reached the apex and collapsed beneath him, writhing on the wooden floor.

* * * *

Caught up in the emotional volition of it all, Hawk came long before he wanted to. There will be other times, he told himself. There was much to explore sexually with Cassie—and much pleasure to be derived from their experimenting.

He was puzzled by the way spanking had excited Cassie—and himself. And the intensity the bout brought to his orgasm. God! He thought his head would explode when he ejaculated.

Collapsing on top of Cassie, they both breathed loudly into the quiet, hot cabin. Sweat was running down Hawk's back and into the crack of his butt.

Cassie was panting like she'd been jogging—sweat-drenched and burning up. "Holy cow!" she whispered.

Hawk raised his head from her bare shoulder and kissed her mouth, tasting the sweat on her upper lip.

"Oh, babe! That was incredible." He cradled her face between his palms and kissed her lips.

"I can't...imagine how that...would have felt...if I'd done...something to deserve...the spanking," Cassie said in a ragged tone.

Hawk chuckled and rolled off her body. Lying on his back beside her, he reached down and pulled the used condom off his cock. Then, taking aim, he tossed it in a debris pile Cassie had heaped near the front door.

"I was really glad you had the condoms handy, babe." He stretched his well-sated body.

"I'll never...be without them...again," Cassie assured him, then laughed slightly.

* * * *

Several minutes passed before they got up from the floor and dressed. After Cassie finally managed to think straight again, she remembered that she wanted Hawk to open the locked box for her.

"Don't get your hopes up, babe," he warned as he broke the lock with one swift blow from a hammer he took from his truck.

"I'm not expecting money," Cassie confided. "But I do hope there's a deed inside with a survey of this property."

She found a deed, as she had hoped, and a bound pack of personal letters from her dad to Barney, his brother, and every card and note she had ever written him. Tears came immediately to her eyes when she saw just how much her keeping in touch had meant to Uncle Barney.

Hawk consoled her by rubbing her back, then her neck, then he worked his way around to her breasts. He toyed with her nipples, making them tight beneath the cover of her halter-top.

"Hawk," she objected when he began opening her top.

"I'm trying to cheer you up," he said with a sly grin.

"I know what you're trying to do," she returned, her eyes latching onto his handsome face. He had a devilish look about him, especially with that lock of blond hair hanging onto his forehead. He had a bad boy appeal intensified by the effect of his tousled hair.

And the sight of him set her pulse racing. But she had other things on her mind, like how to sell the ranch and needing questions answered about Uncle Barney.

"How did my uncle die?" She captured the hand on her nipple.

Hawk briefly glanced at her face, then returned to watching his fingers manipulate her. The little bud was fairly straining at the thin fabric of her top. And he wanted to get at it—if only Cassie was willing.

"Answer me, Hawk. What happened to my uncle?" she pressed, pushing his hand away. But she didn't want him to go far. She purposely held on to his hand, ready for him to resume fondling her nipple once he answered all her questions concerning Uncle Barney.

"Well?" she prompted. Why wasn't he answering her?

"He died fucking Marge Crawford."

A startled snort leapt from Cassie's mouth. She dropped her hold on Hawk's hand and walked out onto the porch of the cabin.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"You asked."

Hawk followed her outside. She turned and glanced at him, seeing he was fully amused by what had happened to Uncle Barney—or by her reaction. It was hard to tell. At any rate, he was definitely getting a chuckle out of something.

"Tell me what happened."

"Keep in mind, I wasn't there," Hawk began, his mouth stretching into a very broad grin. He took hold of her hand and pulled her down beside him on the

top step of the porch.

Cassie shook her head. It wasn't going to be possible for him to relate what had happened to Uncle Barney without jokes and puns.

"The story is," he began again.

"For Pete's sake, Hawk. My uncle is dead. Where's the humor in that?" she wanted to know. She had to frown at him to keep from being led into laughing with him.

"Honey. He died a happy man—"

"Hawk!" She made to rise from the step.

"I'm sorry, honey. Really, I am." He tried to keep a straight face, but it was obviously a strain. "Barney had this girlfriend, Marge, and he paid her regular visits—really regular—almost every night."

* * * *

Cassie shook her head at Hawk. How much of his bull could she believe? But then, who else could she ask? Max? Oh, but they were like two peas in a pod -

"One night, about two weeks ago, he was humping her—and he dropped dead. A heart attack, I guess." He stared at her, then he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know if he got an orgasm off or not—"

"Hawk!" Cassie warned, then she smiled in spite of things. "I think I get the idea."

"Yeah. Okay. Your uncle died in bed. Plain and simple," he clarified, chuckling.

"Yes, well, I probably won't relate that news if anybody asks. So, where can I find Marge Crawford?" she asked, staring up at him.

Hawk frowned and shook his head at her. "I don't think I'd go to visit her, if I was you."

"Why not?" Cassie asked, frowning in return.

"I'd leave well enough alone, hon," Hawk cautioned.

"Explain why I should."

"Well, the newspapers made quite a big to-do about Barney dying in Marge's bed," he explained, his eyes cautious.

Cassie shrugged one shoulder nonchalantly. "I'm sure that's not the first time something like that happened."

"Well, you see, Marge has a certain reputation to uphold."

Cassie chuckled for the first time since she began interrogating Hawk. "What is she? The Mayor?"

Hawk laughed out loud. "Not quite. She's an ex-madam from Nevada who just can't quite get out of the business." He leveled his gaze on her, a serious look on his face. "You see, babe, men come to her bed to have a good time — not to kick the bucket."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“You’re taking the day off from cleaning,” Hawk announced the moment Cassie’s eyes flickered open the following morning.

Cassie yawned and stretched, enjoying the feel of Hawk’s naked body pressed against her backside. His right arm was curled possessively around her waist, holding her back against his body. It was a good feeling to wake up with him there.

“There’s so much to do, Hawk,” she objected in a sleepy voice. In the back of her mind she wondered if he meant for them to stay in bed all day, since he had made no show of getting up.

“It can wait,” he said matter-of-factly. “I have a surprise for you today.”

His words woke her right up. She rolled over to face him, her hand coming up to caress his cheek.

“I love surprises,” she said, smiling at him.

“Did you bring a pair of jeans?” he asked, smiling at her.

“Yeah,” she answered. The thought that he might have something sexual in store suddenly left her mind.

"Get dressed," he ordered, tossing back the sheet and getting up.

She was left staring at his gorgeous backside as he headed for the door of the bedroom. Then he was gone, leaving her to wonder about the surprise he mentioned. She stretched again, feeling the muscles in her lower back pain from overexertion. Maybe Hawk was right. Maybe she did need a day off from cleaning.

She forced herself to move, swinging her feet over the side of the bed and slowly rising. Last night had been another sexual interlude—a hot sexual frenzy that went on and on.

She smiled at the memory. She had never had so much sex—until she met Hawk Downs. And, she admitted, she had never felt so free in giving herself to a man. Not just any man—but a sexy Texas cowboy!

She pulled on her stretch jeans, knotted the ties of a red halter-top between her breasts, and slid her feet into white tennis shoes. If she stayed around much longer, she'd have to invest in a pair of cowboy boots.

She chuckled at the notion. She was more an inside person—air conditioning, soft mattresses—Her mind reeled. She was exactly the way Hawk first described her. How had he known? Had Uncle Barney been so free with his information about her? But yet, he hardly knew her either.

She pushed the errant thoughts away. There would be ample time to ponder, once she left Texas and returned home to her real life.

It felt surreal, she admitted. The good-looking

guy—the sex—the *hot* sex! And the orgasms. Oh, God, the orgasms! They were exquisite. Beyond anything she had ever experienced with any man.

Hawk was just coming into the kitchen from the back of the house when Cassie came for breakfast. She halted her feet at the doorway and watched him as he wafted his inspection over her body. Slowly, his gaze slid along her jeans-clad hips, lowering, pausing at her crotch, then lifting to her red halter top. She felt her nipples begin to tighten from the heat of his gaze.

“You two sit down and eat before the eggs get cold,” Max suddenly ordered, turning from the stove.

His voice broke the spell Hawk’s gaze had manifested around her. She jumped slightly, jarring her thoughts back to the present. It was becoming more and more apparent—the incredible effect Hawk Downs was having on her.

They ate quickly and silently. Cassie figured Hawk was in a hurry to leave and if he didn’t talk, she would have no reason to, either. Max, of course, was another story. He wanted to know where they were off to and if Cassie was done cleaning the cabin.

“There’s still lots to do, Max,” she answered, finishing off her orange juice. “But Hawk seems to think I need a day off from all the work I’ve been doing.” She stared across the table at Hawk, smiling slightly. She really wondered what he had in mind for them—but she felt safe in betting there would be sex somewhere along the way. The thought made the pulse flutter in her wrist.

Their eyes met across the table and Hawk winked one blue orb at her. She smiled in return, then he got

up from the table and she followed.

"Hawk, tell me what the surprise is," she coaxed, catching up to him as they went out the back door.

Then she saw them, two horses, saddled and standing inside the fence by the barn. And she could hardly wait to get in the saddle.

"Oh! We're going horseback riding!" she yelped, throwing her arms around Hawk's neck.

He squeezed her in his powerful arms and kissed her cheek. Somehow, he knew she would like to go horseback riding. The horses stood calmly on the other side of the fence while Hawk opened the gate and they walked inside the barn lot. One was a palomino with a golden coat and white mane and tail. The other was coal black with a white star on his forehead.

"They're beautiful," Cassie said, reaching out one hand to stroke the palomino's soft nose.

"That's Princess. She's very gentle." He walked over to the black horse. "And this is Major. He has a mind of his own."

Cassie laughed. Major reminded her of Hawk—a gorgeous male who could do his own thinking.

"Which do you want to ride?" He smiled at her. "I think you're capable of handling either one."

"I haven't ridden in years, Hawk." She stroked Princess's nose. "I better take the one who handles the easiest."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Hawk said rushing back to the barn. In a moment he returned and placed a white Stetson on Cassie's head. "Every cowgirl needs a hat to keep the sun out of her eyes."

CASSIE'S COWBOY

It was all very esoteric. She had the horse. She had the hat. And...she had the cowboy.

Hawk held the stirrup while Cassie fitted her toe in it and then gave her a boost into the saddle. She landed rather hard, she thought, remembering how easily she used to mount up—but then that was a number of years ago.

The leather saddle creaked as she took hold of the reins and fitted her other foot in the remaining stirrup. Looking down at Hawk, she felt as though she was perched very high off the ground. A little shiver of nervous anticipation flitted through her insides.

Hawk swung in the saddle like a pro. He guided Major through the open gate, his long legs spanning the animal's sides.

Cassie clicked her tongue—just as Uncle Barney had shown her when she rode his old horse as a kid, and Princess immediately followed Major out of the lot.

Momentarily Cassie caught up to Hawk and they rode along side by side, both horses walking leisurely. The pasture they were in reached as far as the eye could see and beyond, Cassie figured, since the Double D was a spread of fifteen hundred acres. Rolling green hills gave way to equally green valleys.

The sky was a clear azure blue, cloudless, with a giant yellow sun on the Eastern slope. So far it wasn't too hot, Cassie noted, adjusting the hat on her head to best shade her eyes, but just wait until the sun moved directly overhead. She had learned from the past several days, that noon hour in Texas was a scorcher.

The fragrance of warm horseflesh, worn leather, and fresh Texas air filled her nose. She pulled in a deep breath. She was glad Hawk had insisted she take a day off from cleaning the cabin. Being outdoors with nothing to do except sit on the back of a horse and enjoy the scenery was a lot more pleasant than being elbow deep in a bucket of scrub water, or pushing a wet mop across a dirty floor.

They had let the horses walk, giving Cassie a chance to become familiar with Princess and being in the saddle again, but now it was time to pick up a little speed— and Cassie knew it by the look Hawk aimed at her.

“I’ll race you to that tree on the hill over there,” he said, pointing one hand.

“You’re on,” she replied.

Hawk nudged Major in the flanks and the horse was off like a shot, leaving Cassie to yell her objection.

“That’s not fair!” she bellowed, her legs flapping on Princess’s sides. Finally the horse got the message and loped into a gallop, racing across the flat pasture in an effort to catch up to Major.

But the race to the tree was lost. Hawk beat her easily and reigned in Major and sat waiting for her, his Stetson pushed to the back of his head and a teasing grin slanted across his mouth.

Cassie galloped Princess up beside Major and pulled on the reins. The horse snorted through its nose and shook its head, ruffling its white mane. Cassie leaned forward and patted the animal’s neck.

Hawk leaned his forearms on the saddle horn and looked at Cassie. At first she seemed a little anxious

CASSIE'S COWBOY

on Princess's back, but now she appeared at ease.

"Let's go," he suddenly announced, turning Major's head and touching his flanks with the toes of his boots.

Cassie was right beside him, sitting tall in the saddle, the reins lying easily in her palm. She hadn't thought it possible, in such a short time, but she was suddenly very comfortable on Princess's broad back.

The horses loped along at a fast clip, until Cassie spotted something off in the distance. She at once slowed Princess, alerting Hawk to wait.

"What is that over there?" she asked, pointing one hand.

Hawk followed the direction of her hand with his gaze. "That's an oil derrick," he explained.

A number of thoughts flitted through Cassie's mind but she didn't voice any of them.

"Can we ride over to it?" she asked, already turning Princess in that direction.

"Sure," Hawk agreed, reining in Major.

The oil derrick must have been half a mile away and as they drew nearer, Cassie could see its giant black head moving up and down. The derrick was pumping. She glanced at Hawk, a question forming in her mind.

She held her thoughts at bay until they rode up to the oil derrick. They reined in the horses and Hawk dismounted, swinging his right leg easily over the back of the horse and stepping to the ground.

"I might as well make my check while we're here," he said approaching the moving machine.

"Are there other oil wells on the Double D?" Cassie

voiced, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"A few," Hawk replied.

He sounded as though he didn't want to discuss it. Cassie studied him as he scrutinized the machine. The smell of oil was all too prevalent on the warm, still air encasing them.

She began looking around them then, turning first one way and then the other in the saddle. There was nothing but green pasture sprawling out in every direction the eye could see.

"Your ranch is in that direction," Hawk said, noting her obvious reason for looking around.

The thought that she too may have oil beneath the land Uncle Barney had left her rose in her mind. But then, maybe not, she thought just as quickly. Surely Uncle Barney would have known—and taken advantage of the good fortune.

She felt puzzled by her thoughts. And for some reason—she wasn't sure why—she was reluctant to talk to Hawk about it.

Hawk spent a few minutes inspecting the oil rig, walking round it and checking a row of gauges on its base, all the while the giant black head bowed and rose, only to bow and rise again.

They rode North after leaving the oil pump and Cassie kept Princess in pace with Major. Several hours had passed since they had set out, enough time for Cassie's bare arms to get sunburned. They had left the green pastures and the enormous herds of grazing cattle for the sloping hills at one edge of the Double D. Here the ground was rough, pebble strewn and dusty. They slowed the horses allowing them to walk

for better footing.

Cassie was getting thirsty and her butt was on the verge of becoming numb from the constant jostling in the saddle.

"We'll stop for a while," Hawk announced, turning Major toward a stand of trees.

At first Cassie thought they would merely dismount and rest under the shade of the trees, but then she spied a small shack situated in the clearing.

"Don't tell me someone lives out here," she said, her voice teasing.

"That's one of the lineman's cabins on the Double D," Hawk explained. "Before technology debuted on the ranch, there were regular riders who worked on keeping the fences repaired. When they were working, they stayed in these shacks."

The shack was weathered, as one would expect, and leaning slightly. The front door was broken on one hinge and Cassie could see where blowing dirt and dust had formed a pile just inside the entryway.

Hawk dismounted and went to help Cassie down from Princess's back. Then he went to the side of the little shack and returned with bottled water for Cassie and him and two metal pans for the horses to drink out of. He poured a third bottle of water into the pans and each animal dipped their velvet nose to quench their thirst.

Cassie stretched and rubbed her butt.

"Saddle sore?" Hawk asked, a lilt in his tone.

"I guess you could say my butt aches," she returned with a giggle.

* * * *

Hawk took a sip of his water and looked at her. The white Stetson suited her. The blond hair framing her face was sweat dampened and pressed close to her flushed cheeks. He trailed his eyes down the arched length of her neck, taking note of the moisture clinging to her collarbone and following the fleshy cleft created by her plump breasts.

She looked good sweaty, he thought, smiling and genuine. It made him feel calm inside, as though he had finally discovered something about her that had been bothering him. He wasn't a curious man, but perhaps, a guarded man. Not everyone understood. Yet Cassie seemed to.

Or maybe she merely accepted him for who he was. He was glad of that. He could be himself around her. He didn't have to pretend. He hated the idea of pretense—merely because he found it so hard to do. Sure, he was rich, but he didn't flaunt the fact. Sure he adored women—but only one at a time.

And Cassie could be the last woman he ever loved. Or the first one he truly ever loved. For a second he contemplated his words. But then he understood the reason for his slight doubt. He'd never actually been in love before. Lust. He had been in lust numerous times—like a bull needing to sate himself with a cow.

He gave a brief chuckle and shook his head. Why had he compared himself to a bull—of all things? And Cassie...well, Cassie was the one prize he'd been waiting to claim since he was big enough to discover women.

CASSIE'S COWBOY

He loved to look at her, to imagine himself with her. They were good together. Very good. And he only wanted the goodness to continue.

* * * *

Cassie pulled off her hat and using its brim, fanned herself. Hawk's eyes were heating her up more than the Texas sun. If he kept staring, she just might have to take off her top. She stifled a giggle. It was all too apparent that Hawk's staring was making her horny, and playful.

Hawk threw aside his water bottle and pushed his Stetson to the back of his head, his hot gaze pinned on Cassie. In the next instant, he was striding over to her, a slanted grin wreathing his handsome face.

His hands went immediately to the knot in Cassie's halter-top. He began untying it, his knuckles brushing her moist cleavage.

"Funny thing," she said in a low toned voice, her eyes watching his fingers. "I was just thinking about taking my top off."

"I've been watching your breasts jiggle for hours now," Hawk said. "And I'm burning with the desire to put my mouth on them."

Cassie drew in a quick breath, his words exciting her.

Her top peeled away from her moist body, Hawk dropped it on the ground at her feet. Then he opened his palms and weighed each breast against his hand while his thumbs came up to circle her nipples.

"Mmmm," Cassie cooed, her eyes half-closing in

ecstasy. "Cowboy, you sure know what a girl likes."

"Your breasts are beautiful, Cassie. I love to play with them."

They were standing under a tree, in the shade, and Hawk was caressing her breasts. She was watching his hands, enthralled by the tenderness he exhibited toward her.

Cassie reached for his fly. She could see the bulge of his erection. Just to tease, she raked her painted nails across the heavy denim covering his cock.

"You better watch out," he warned in a low voice. "I'm loaded."

"I know you are, honey," Cassie whispered. She inched her fingers up, traveling teasingly along his fly, to the zipper tab. She slowly lowered the tab and felt his hard cock pressing against her fingers, with only the fabric of his undershorts preventing it from jumping out.

She giggled, then glancing up at him, saw his grin broaden. Then she pushed aside his underwear and let his cock free. It sprang into her hand, and she pulled in a quick breath. Each time she saw it, handled it, she seemed to think it was bigger.

His hands on her breasts were driving her crazy. The balls of his thumbs had made her nipples into tight clusters that jutted upward as though reaching for his mouth to suck them in.

"There isn't any place to lie down—except in the dirt," he said, looking round beneath the trees. Then he pulled his hands from her breasts and began loosening his shirt.

It dawned on Cassie then that he intended she lay

CASSIE'S COWBOY

on his shirt and she began helping him with the buttons. Soon they were stripping it from his muscular upper body and he was spreading it out under one tree.

Cassie giggled and popped the snap on her jeans. Kicking off her tennis shoes, she pushed the tight pants off her hips and along her legs until she could finally step out of them. All that remained were her thong underwear, but when she hooked her thumbs in the elastic at either side, Hawk caught both her hands in his.

"I'll take your panties off...when I'm ready."

"Ooooo. That sounds promising."

She stood before him, clad only in red thong underwear, looking at him while he kicked off his boots and stripped out of his jeans and underwear.

They were naked under the low hanging boughs of an oak tree, somewhere on a fifteen-hundred acre ranch. It seemed silly. What if someone saw them? But then, the mere thought lent an aura of sensuality to the moment.

His hands were on her, feeling her breasts, skimming over her bare buttocks, outlining the silk thong softly covering her crotch. The breath caught in her throat. The heat from the sun scorching the bare ground and only slightly deflected by the oak tree could hardly compare to the blazing inferno raging inside Cassie.

His hands were gentle, touching her flesh as though she was fine crystal in danger of breaking should the pressure be too hard. His lips settled on her left shoulder, softly caressing her sweat

moistened skin. Cassie raised her hands and delved her fingers into the thick hair at the back of his head, liking the feel of the silky blond strands mingling with her fingers.

His lips left a trail of wet kisses, punctuated by the tip of his tongue the length of her chest to her right breast, then onto her nipple. He clasped her bare buttocks, pressing her belly against his hard cock, kneading her butt with his fingers, sending her senses reeling.

Cassie wound her fingers around his hard cock, then began moving her hand slowly, up and down over him. He was hard as a rock, a tiny moist drop of seminal fluid shown on the round, smooth head.

Condom! She *would* remember the condom this time!

He pushed aside the silky patch of her thong, uncovering the smooth lips lying beneath. His fingers felt their smoothness, parted them, and slid easily among her wet slippery folds.

"Oh, my God, Hawk!" Cassie breathed. She spread her legs, wanting him to touch her more. Hawk dropped to his knees and holding the silk fabric aside, replaced his fingers with his mouth. Cassie released a ragged breath and almost stumbled back when she felt his hot mouth touch her pussy.

In the next moment, Hawk laid her down on the denim shirt beneath the tree, his mouth returning to her sensitive flesh. He raised her legs to position them across his broad shoulders, then resumed his play on her folds.

Cassie could hardly stand the barrage of sensations

he was causing her to have. She bit on her bottom lip and tangled her fingers in Hawk's blond hair, pressing his mouth tight against her crotch.

She didn't really know when he pulled off her thong, only that when he came to her, condom in place, she was so glad. She opened her legs and lunged up to meet him as he pushed inside.

They moved in a frenzy. Raw emotion and the lusty reach for orgasm streamed through their bodies. Sweat drenched and stirring up the dust swirling round their naked bodies - they reached their climax simultaneously.

She was a wash of trembling emotion when the orgasm streamed through her. Hawk pressed his chest against her breasts, enjoying the feel of her tight nipples pressing into his muscles. He clutched her buttocks in one hand, the better to control his thrusting cock and hold himself inside, while her rapture brought about her intense bucking. She smelled of womanly musk and hot sweat, a tangle of rapid breathing and panting gasps. He had brought her to this state—he had given her this keen sense of feeling with his very body. She felt like an extension of himself.

Cassie clung to Hawk. The orgasm lasted so very long—so intense, so strong. Her pulse throbbed in her wrist. Her breath came in short gasps. She was aware of Hawk holding her so tightly, of him nestling her body so close to his. It was a sensual feeling, on top of the exquisite orgasm he had just given her.

A bit of a breeze moved the leaves on the oak tree and briefly blew across her fevered skin. Her palms

felt the film of sweat covering Hawk's back and shoulders. He raised his head and looked down into her eyes. Softly, he brushed his mouth across hers.

She cradled his face in her hands, looking up at him, studying him. He had a sexual appetite equal to her own. Or maybe it was stronger—he had been the one to initiate the sex under the tree. She remembered then, that she had thought about taking off her top.

She laughed suddenly, reading the questioning look in his eyes. But she didn't get a chance to tell him her thoughts, silly as they were, because his lips came down to claim her mouth in a sensuous, possessing kiss.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They rode back to the ranch house just before supper time, and the entire time Cassie was aware of Hawk watching her. She could feel his gaze skittering over her body, as though he was trying to communicate something to her.

Cassie glanced at him once or twice while the horses galloped along, but she was still too uncertain of her seat to become too distracted by Hawk, which she knew could happen quite easily—given his sexy appearance on the black horse.

They hadn't been in any hurry to put their clothes on once they'd fucked under the oak tree. In fact, they had leisurely sprawled out on their backs once they had gotten their fill of each other—temporary as it would be—and looked at the sky through the filtering leaves of the tree. It was only when Hawk noticed Major becoming restless that he got to his feet and tugged Cassie up and they began gathering their clothes.

Cassie hadn't really wanted to return to the ranch house when they did—but her stomach was empty,

and they hadn't taken any food with them. Truth was, she could have spent a week under the limbs of the oak with Hawk. It was quiet and peaceful—not that she craved peace and quiet—but she had Hawk all to herself.

That sounded possessive, she warned herself. And it was a waste of time thinking about him in that way. Their relationship was purely sexual—he proved as much every chance he got.

She was guilty as well, she admitted. Hawk was a marvelous sex partner—and she took full advantage of every opportunity she got to bed the big hunk.

Max had supper waiting when they walked the horses into the barn lot. He waved a hand at them from the back patio, then returned to the inside of the house. When Hawk and Cassie finished tending the horses, the hot food was on the table waiting for them.

Max had cooked up a beef stew—hardly warm weather fare, Cassie thought, but delicious nonetheless. She stuffed her belly, complimenting Max on his skills as cook at the Double D.

When they had eaten, Cassie went to the shower, and Hawk disappeared into the study after remembering he had paperwork to catch up on.

Cassie didn't see him any more that evening, or the following morning. Max said he had some business to tend to and would be back the following day. Cassie thought it odd that Hawk would go away without even a good by kiss—but then she reminded herself of their relationship. Sex partners didn't have to tell each other when they could come and go. Sex

partners just lusted after each other and fucked every opportunity they could.

Cassie went to the cabin to resume her cleaning with plans to finish up if it took until midnight. She quickly amended that plan, when she remembered there wasn't any electricity at the ranch. If she worked beyond sunset, she'd be forced to use one of the oil burning lamps she had found in the cabin. How in the world had Uncle Barney stood it all those years? Wasn't electricity a prerequisite for living?

She parked the rental truck and taking the door key from her purse, let herself into the cabin. Just inside the front door, setting on the small table beside the over stuffed arm chair, sat the metal box she had removed from beneath Uncle Barney's bed. The packet of cards and letters lay in the box, but she had taken the deed with her to be on the safe side, she told herself. Now that she had found the paper, she didn't intend to let it out of her sight.

She sighed and went to sit in the chair, her eyes pinned on the metal box. She should keep the cards and letters just for old time's sake, she thought, plucking them from the box.

As she lifted the packet, her nails scraped the bottom of the box, disturbing what she first thought was the metal insides coming apart. She found, however, that there was a false bottom in the box.

Curiosity urged her on as she tipped the box over and the sheet of tin fell out, along with a white lace-edged hankie folded around a little gold cross on a chain.

The sight of the necklace first made her wonder if it

was some relic from her childhood—had she been wearing it when she visited Uncle Barney and lost it only to have him find it and keep it all these years? But it didn't look familiar at all.

Further inspection led her to believe the necklace had never belonged to anyone. It looked brand new, despite having been trapped in the metal box with its uncanny ability to draw moisture from its surroundings.

She unfolded the handkerchief, creased sharply and yellowed in its folds, to find embroidered initials in one corner.

MC.

"Marge Crawford," she muttered.

Her jaw dropped open and for a moment she imagined another side to Uncle Barney, a sentimental man. Yes, but this secret find made her think he was love stricken.

She grasped the tiny necklace, a gold filigree cross on a delicate gold chain, in one palm. She had been hoping for an excuse to look up Marge Crawford. Now she had it. She'd find her and see if she wanted the necklace back. She would explain that she found it in Uncle Barney's things. It would be the perfect excuse to see the woman Uncle Barney had spent his final hours with.

She locked up the cabin and drove into Tucson. The best way to find someone was to look up the name in the phone book, but finding a phone book was a difficult task, she soon found out. With the invention of cell phones, pay phones with intact phone books were almost obsolete. Then, finally, it

dawned on her and she took her phone from her purse and dialed the information operator. Since she had been with Hawk for the past week and a half, she had almost forgotten she had a phone—except when the damned thing began beeping in warning of needing to be charged.

She was quickly given Marge Crawford's phone number and address and pulled into the first service station she found to ask directions.

* * * *

Marge Crawford lived in the suburbs of Tucson, in a small modest house with a white picket fence surrounding its front yard. A late model red Chevy car sat parked in the narrow driveway. Cassie pulled in behind it and shut off the truck motor. She hoped Marge was home, she thought, looking at the house as she gathered her purse and slid from the truck seat.

She knocked twice on the front door before she saw the curtain covering the glass pull back, then a slim woman opened the door.

"I'm not interested," she said in a kindly voice, then started to close the door.

"I'm Cassie Michaels," Cassie rushed to say, hoping the last name caught her attention.

"Michaels?" She studied Cassie for a moment. "Dressed like that, honey, I know you're related to Barney."

Surprise and a bit of relief shot through Cassie. She hadn't worn short shorts and a halter-top to be identified as a relative of Barney Michaels, but rather

to survive the oppressive Texas heat while she slaved away trying to clean the cabin. But what did that say about Barney? she thought, remembering Hawk's account of his last hours alive. Had Uncle Barney really been a sexy stud?

Cassie stared through the glass in the storm door. And Marge Crawford stared right back.

Cassie held out her hand and showed Marge the hanky with the gold cross tucked inside.

"I found this among my uncle's things," she said.

The door was suddenly pushed open and Cassie stepped inside the house. Marge turned and led the way into the living room, a small neatly kept area with country charm; blue fabric-covered chairs flanked a matching couch with a grouping of traditional tables on either side and in front of the couch.

"I guess you heard the gossip," Marge said, taking a seat on the couch. She invited Cassie to sit with a wave of one hand. "People are so damn cruel."

"I haven't heard any gossip, Miss Crawford. I live in New York and Uncle Barney willed his ranch to me. I've been cleaning the cabin in order to get it ready to list with a realtor. When I found the handkerchief and the cross, I thought you might want it back."

"So that's why you're here?" Marge questioned.

She had large brown eyes and they were looking critically at Cassie. She was a bit younger then she had initially thought, early fifties, she guessed, giving her the benefit of the doubt, with coal black hair piled atop her head. But anything to do with Marge

Crawford was of little consequence now, given the circumstances.

Marge smiled at Cassie. "And you thought those things would be a good excuse to drop by and get a look at the woman your Uncle Barney was screwing when he died — is that it?"

Annoyance tinged her voice, and Cassie was suddenly put on guard. "What my uncle did in his private life was his business. I don't care how many times he screwed you." She stood up and laid the handkerchief and cross on the coffee table, then she started across the room to the front door.

"I loved Barney."

Cassie halted her feet at the sound of Marge's voice. She turned round to look at her, spying a sheen of tears in her eyes.

"I'm glad," Cassie said in all sincerity.

"We didn't know there was anything wrong with his heart." She shook her head. "He seemed healthy. He could get it up two or three times a night."

Cassie raised her eyebrows at the woman's words. She hadn't come there to hear all the intimate details of their sexual escapades. Or had she? Earlier she had all but denied her curiosity about Marge, only to be somewhat intrigued by the woman's honesty.

"I'll miss him," Marge said, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. "I've decided to move back to Nevada," she continued. "Barney's sexual appetite made me realize I can't live without a man in my bed."

Cassie almost felt sorry for her, but she couldn't give her any advice. She had turned her thoughts to Hawk with her talk about sex. She turned to leave,

satisfied in her mind that Uncle Barney had loved and been loved. It made her feel better—knowing there was more in his life than a rundown cabin without electricity or plumbing.

“I’m glad I came to see you,” Cassie confessed. She smiled at Marge and went to the door. Marge was still sitting on the couch dabbing at her eyes when she let herself out.

She felt so much better as she backed the rental pickup out of the driveway. Now she could put Uncle Barney’s memory in its proper place. She didn’t feel sorry for him anymore. Any man who could get it up two or three times a night didn’t need her sympathy.

She drove back to the cabin with all intentions of wrapping up the cleaning and finding a way to dispose of the furnishings, but when she arrived at the ranch, she spied John Meyers sitting on the front porch. She eased the pickup in the lane and shut off the motor.

Meyers stood up when he saw Cassie in the truck, then she saw he was in the midst of writing something. He slipped the pen and scrap of paper into his shirt pocket.

“Mr. Meyers.” Cassie got out of the truck.

He came toward her, his hand outstretched in greeting. “I thought I had missed you and was going to leave you a note, Miss Michaels,” he said, grasping her hand and pumping her arm.

He seemed more cordial than when he had dropped by earlier. Cassie pulled her hand out of his and leaned against the front of the pickup waiting for him to tell her why he had stopped by.

"I'm still interested in taking this piece of property off your hands. Just name your price," he said, smiling sweetly at her.

He looked nervous, Cassie decided, as though he was trying to put something over on her. His eyes were deep set, shaded by dark brows that somehow offset his silver gray hair.

"I really don't know why you would want this land." Cassie spread her arms, indicating the ranch. "It's little more than barren land with rocks and tumbleweeds."

He pursed his lips, thinking. "The property adjoins mine. That's reason enough," he alleged, forcing a smile with his thin lips.

Cassie sucked in a deep breath. "Is there oil on your land, Mr. Meyers?"

"Oil?" Meyers repeated. He poked his hands into his pockets and glanced around, as though contemplating his reply.

Cassie almost laughed in his face. "I don't think I've decided to sell the ranch just yet," she said, pushing away from the pickup. "If I change my mind, I'll drop by and discuss it with you."

"Yes...well," he stammered.

Cassie walked past him, taking the door key from her purse. She didn't look back, but she heard him slam the door of his truck and knew he was leaving.

She let herself inside the cabin and plopped down in the armchair. Oil? She hadn't given any real serious thought that there might be oil on *that* property—until she made the remark to John Meyers and saw his reaction.

"Uncle Barney would have known," she mumbled, trying to justify her reasons for thinking along those lines. "Unless he was too busy fucking Marge Crawford to be aware of it."

She combed her fingers through her hair. Enough already, Meyers was interested in buying the ground because it adjoined his—just as he said. There *wasn't* any oil—just the wish that there was.

She levered herself out of the armchair and walked through the cabin. She had cleaned enough, she decided, taking note of each room as she walked about.

The small living room with its scant assortment of furnishings—a dreary brown couch and matching chair, a small bookcase that listed to one side, and the shallow fire box hearth looked as good as she could make them. She had decided to keep Uncle Barney's old Royal typewriter—a memento of his writing career. And the numerous paperback books bearing his name. She had rearranged the furniture to better serve the fireplace—the only warmth in the cabin—and cleaned the ashes out. Since it was July, Uncle Barney should have already cleaned them out—but then he had probably been too busy with Marge Crawford.

The visit to Marge kept coming back to mind. On the one hand she had seemed defensive—assuming Cassie had looked her up just to jeer, as others were apparently treating the incident with Uncle Barney, given the fact that Marge was an ex-madam. But on the other hand, she had shown a vulnerability that Cassie hadn't expected. She had confessed to loving

CASSIE'S COWBOY

Barney Michaels, even thought the admission now would serve no purpose.

The kitchen was as tidy as it was going to get, Cassie decided, taking in the small wood stove and the one wooden cabinet in the room. She had boxed up the utensils and left them sitting on the counter ready to drop off at the first charity she could find. She had readied Uncle Barney's books and old typewriter to mail back to her condo in New York.

The same was intended in the bedroom. All of Uncle Barney's clothing and bedding were packed and ready to be donated. The bed was naked of its covers, and the mattress atop the metal bed frame, stood forlorn beside the single little nightstand. She walked over and picked up the wind-up alarm clock she had left sitting on the nightstand and placed it on the top of the box of clothing. Now all she had to do was find somewhere to donate everything.

Then she could get on with her own life.

Which was? Well, flying back to New York and returning to work on Monday morning. Where had the past two weeks gone?

"In bed with Hawk Downs," she said out loud. And it hadn't been a waste of time either. It had been one great orgasm after the other. She felt a little shiver just remembering.

She let out a long breath. Time to return to the real world. A wave of sadness washed over her, making her question her feelings for Hawk.

"Its just sex with Hawk," she told herself.

No wonder she felt a little remorseful at leaving Texas. Hawk Downs was absolutely the most

fantastic sex partner she had ever met. Not even Rory Summers could hold a candle to Hawk.

She thought for a moment about Rory. Two years ago they had met at an office Christmas party. He had been in town to visit relatives for the holidays and Tom Sullins, one of the attorneys in the firm, had asked him to drop by when he got in town. They had seen each other across the crowded room—just like in the movies—and been drawn to each other. They had left the party together—and spent the next twelve hours in a hotel room fucking.

Rory had been good—very good—but Hawk was better. Hawk had imagination—but Rory had only twelve hours, where as Hawk had two weeks.

“Shut up,” she said to herself. It was beginning to sound like she was measuring Hawk to her best fuck ever. In the next thought, she’d be judging them by the length of their cocks.

She returned to the living room of the cabin and found her cell phone. In a few minutes she had the number of a local charity and was ringing them up. As luck would have it, the charity was delighted that she wanted to donate the items and, after giving them directions to the ranch, told her they would be right out to pick up everything.

Half an hour later, Cassie waved at the driver of the pickup truck as it turned in the dirt lane. Then she watched the two burly men carry everything out of the cabin and pack it into the truck bed. The sight made her feel a little nostalgic. But her memories were soon pushed aside to make room for the next phase of her plan—the listing of the property for sale.

But that wouldn't happen today, she decided. Already it was nearing sunset and most of the real estate agencies would probably be closed for the day. Besides, she had hoped to talk to Hawk about the land before she listed it.

She took the old typewriter to the post office and mailed it off then she drove over to the Double D and found Max just leaving on a hot date.

"I saved you a plate," he said, pointing toward the refrigerator. "Zap it in the microwave and eat up."

"Thanks, Max," Cassie said. "And have a good time on your date."

"I'm gonna get lucky again tonight. I can feel it!" he boasted, his mouth stretching in a wide grin.

"Remember the condom!" Cassie yelled to him as he rushed out the back door.

Laughing, she shook her head and went to locate the plate of food Max mentioned. The day had gone by so quickly that she hadn't realized she had skipped lunch, but her stomach was growling from neglect.

Since Hawk wouldn't be back until tomorrow, and Max was out for the evening, she planned on a long relaxing bath. Her muscles were achy from all the cleaning she had been doing, plus laying on the hard ground under the oak tree yesterday hadn't exactly soothed those already sore muscles. Never mind the fantastic orgasm she had reaped under the tree—nor to mention the horseback riding—well, a long hot soak in the tub would be a real treat.

She cleaned her plate—Max had fixed country ham and fried potatoes. She washed the plate and found where it went in the cabinet, then headed down the

hall to her room for that planned bath.

The door to Hawk's study was standing open and she glanced inside when she heard one of the office machines suddenly kick on. Pausing, she glanced round, spying the fax machine spitting out a sheet of paper on the corner of the big mahogany desk.

She didn't even think that she might be venturing into uncharted water – she thought perhaps she knew Hawk as well as any woman had or was likely to. She entered the office and crossed the floor to the desk. The fax was almost done by the time she halted her feet.

Her eyes settled on the single page as it slid from the machine into the paper tray, and without trying too hard, she caught a few of the typed words. Oil. Drilling rights. Property location.

Her mind was suddenly reminded of the conversation she had with John Meyers earlier in the afternoon concerning Uncle Barney's ranch, and she stepped round the desk to view the fax right side up.

The fax was confirmation of earlier documents sent to Hawk Downs concerning property lying just East of the Double D. There was a series of numbers denoting the plat location and site.

Cassie's stomach suddenly knotted in surprise. Was the fax about the land Uncle Barney left to her? She read it again, trying to make sense of it. Why was Hawk inquiring about the ground that had once belonged to Uncle Barney?

All sorts of questions raced through her mind. Why hadn't Hawk told her about his inquiry? Had Uncle Barney known about the oil?

She pulled out the big black leather desk chair and sat down, propping her chin on one hand. She couldn't quite make heads or tails out of the fax, except that it was confirming earlier findings concerning the ground she believed once belonged to Uncle Barney – and now belonged to her.

“Earlier findings.”

Her eyes scanned the top of the desk, looking for something more to do with the message in the fax. There were a number of manila folders stacked neatly in the center of the desk as though Hawk had been working on something in each of them. But he had gone out of town on business—why had he left the folders behind?

She raised the front flap on the top folder—only to have her suspicions confirmed. A topography map grabbed her green gaze. At first she didn't really understand what she was looking at, until she deciphered the rows of numbers pertaining to the various parcels of ground. The Double D was drawn out with clear boundaries, noting each oil derrick's precise location.

“There's dozens of oil wells on the ranch,” she said out loud. Then she saw the fifty acres of ground that Uncle Barney had owned and read the topographer's suggestions for drilling.

The fact that Max had told her he and Hawk's father had been oil wildcatters came into her mind like a bolt of lightning. For a few seconds she didn't want to believe what her mind was suggesting. Surely Hawk hadn't been fucking her brains out in order to end up with her inheritance!

"No. I don't want to believe that!" she said under her breath. But her stomach felt sick at the possibility that it was true. Why else would Hawk tell her to hang on to the land for a little while? Other than the fact that he hadn't enough time to sway her mind—and he was using sex to do it!

She felt heat rise inside her—and it wasn't due to any thoughts of sex. It was because she was mad as hell. Hawk had been deceiving her—fucking her in more ways than one.

She jumped up from the desk and hurried out of the room. What should she do? Should she wait until Hawk returned home—and blast him with the truth? Or pack her bags and leave immediately?

She went to her bedroom and paced the floor in front of the bed. She bit on her bottom lip, trying to decide what steps to take.

Suddenly the phone on the bedside table began to ring and she stared at it. Was that Hawk checking in? she wondered. Curiosity pulled her in the direction of the phone. In the next instant, she picked it up.

"Hello," she said, aware that her voice must sound strained.

"Hi, babe," Hawk said in a sultry tone. "I was just calling to check on you. How did things go at the cabin today?" he asked.

"Fine," Cassie replied, tight-lipped. How dare he ask about the cabin? Didn't he already know? Wasn't he one up on her already?

"Fine?" he repeated, his tone questioning.

"Yeah. Just fine!"

"I miss you," Hawk said, his voice low.

Cassie was silent. Hadn't he led her on enough?

"Are you okay, babe?" he inquired, concern in his voice.

Cassie checked her anger. "I'm tired. I was just getting into bed," she lied. She hated to tell lies. They always came back to haunt her. But she could hardly bring up the matter of his deceit over the phone. She'd just end up slamming the receiver down. And, she reminded herself, she *was* in his house.

"I wish I was there to lay beside you – to tuck your little sexy body beneath mine and –"

"Hawk," she cut him off. "When are you coming back?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. I have one meeting in the morning, but I think it'll drag on until lunch. Once I get to the airport, I can fly back to Tucson in an hour. You'll be waiting for me – won't you? Naked, and in bed?"

She felt her stomach tip at his words. Sex with him was incredible – but deceit was a different matter.

"Yes," she decided, her jaw set. "I'll be waiting."

CHAPTER NINE

Cassie slept fitfully, tossing and turning, her mind racing one minute, giving into dozing the next. A part of her didn't want to believe Hawk would deceive her—he had been so gentle with her—so dedicated to pleasuring her.

Or had he merely been pleasuring himself?

When daybreak finally arrived, she got out of bed. Her body ached from the night's tossing and turning. Her head felt groggy from missing sleep. She traipsed into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Leaving the water cold, she stood naked under the icy spray in an effort to awaken her senses.

Shivering, she shut off the water and stepped out. As she dried herself, she recalled the morning she had wielded the razor and shaved off her pubic hair—just because Hawk asked her to.

Also because the notion intrigued her at the moment. Now she just felt silly for having let him take control of her so easily.

"I'm making him sound like a real son-of-a-bitch," she muttered, scrubbing her skin with the towel.

She had considered the matter all night. Should she

leave before he returned to the ranch? Or hang around and face him?

Would he tell her about the fax when he got home and found it? Or would he pick up where he had left off with her—sex at every opportunity?

She felt a hot rush of tears sting her eyes. Why didn't she just pack her bag and leave before he got back? That would be the thing to do.

And that's the coward's way out.

Cassie Michaels wasn't a coward.

She'd stay and fight, she decided. Or better yet, maybe she'd try and outsmart him. She drew her eyebrows together in contemplation. If she was gonna play that game—she'd need a plan.

She dressed and left the Double D without breakfast or speaking to Max. She needed a quiet place to think. She drove over to the cabin. It was still several hours before Hawk would be back. She needed a plan before she faced him.

There wasn't even a chair to sit on inside the cabin. She perched on the top step leading up to the porch, her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. She had never been a conniver. So it was quite difficult to come up with a plan that would either convict or vindicate Hawk.

Did she want to convict him? she asked herself, immediately feeling the renewed sting of tears in her eyes. Not really, but she couldn't erase the fact that she had seen the fax...and the map. And Hawk had undoubtedly gone behind her back.

A lone tear rolled down the crest of her cheek and she swiped at it with the back of one hand. Now was

no time to go soft. She had to stay strong, to decide what to do.

She glanced at the watch on her wrist. Only a few times in her life had time been so important. Given the circumstances of the moment, this was perhaps the most critical.

She had let him into her heart—despite her repeated warnings against doing so. Then she'd give him the benefit of a doubt. She'd give him the chance to be up front with her.

If he did, that would be wonderful. And if he didn't—she'd leave and never look back. It might be hard. But she could do it. She was a Michaels, after all.

Her mind set, she drove back to the Double D to await Hawk's return.

"Where were you at breakfast?" Max asked, his hands propped on his hips like a surrogate parent.

Rather than lie to him, Cassie conveniently sidestepped the question. "Sorry, Max. I had things to do."

"Well don't go running off before supper," he warned, shaking a finger at her. "I think Hawk has some special plan for you." He winked.

Max's news was unexpected to say the least. "Have you talked to Hawk?" Cassie asked.

"Not lately," Max divulged. "But he should be touching down at the airport any time now."

Jittery nerves made Cassie fidget. Suddenly she didn't know if she'd be able to go through with her plan or not.

"You feeling all right?" Max inquired, staring at

her with narrowed eyes.

"I'm just a little tired," she admitted, hoping he didn't ask why.

"Well, take my advice and rest up, cause you're gonna need all the energy you can muster when Hawk gets home." He gave her another conspiratorial wink.

He left her then to tend to something outside, and Cassie went to her room to lie down. She hadn't thought about Hawk coming back with plans for her. Maybe she could play sickly and wouldn't have to participate. Or was Max merely being coy?

She got up and found her cell phone in her purse. Punching in the number of the airport, she checked the departure time of her flight back to New York. The news only made her more aware of the time remaining with Hawk.

It was late afternoon when Hawk returned to the Double D. Cassie heard him talking to Max when he came in the back door but she didn't run to greet him. She waited in her bedroom, her nerves frazzled. Could she go through with her plan—without Hawk suspecting she was on to him?

She sensed his presence moments before he touched her. She was standing at the window overlooking the driveway when he came up behind her. He wrapped both arms around her waist and pulled her back against his tall muscular length.

Cassie couldn't help but close her eyes in reply to the feel of him; the warmth, the firm muscles pressing into her back, the intense pressure of his abdomen pressing against her buttocks. Then there was his

erection; she could feel his cock becoming hard, lengthening, pushing against the confines of his pants.

His mouth nuzzled her nape, traveled up to her earlobe, then onto her cheek. The moisture of his kisses coupled with the fragrance of his cologne went straight to her senses, assaulting her like nothing else.

If you're going to give him the benefit of a doubt—then you're going to have to act as though nothing is wrong, she silently told herself. You have to give him the opportunity to tell you about the fax and the map.

She let out a long, steady breath. His mouth was hot against her skin and he was quickly working his lips around to hers. Any moment he would turn her in his arms, and that would be the telltale second that would reveal whether something was wrong or not. She had to act as though nothing had changed between them. Hawk was a wealthy man, a rancher, and an oil producer, for God's sake! He piloted a Lear jet—anything else about him she didn't know, except that he was pretty smart to have gotten all he had at that point in his life.

His hands slid from her waist, palms flattened, to glide across her belly. His right hand ventured lower, possessively cupping her crotch and pressing firmly, while his left hand continued to explore, roaming onto her bare thigh where her shorts ended and rubbing sensuously before raising back up to her bare midriff.

He was turning her on—making her want him. In the next seconds, she relaxed against him, leaning her back into his body and letting him touch her however

he wanted.

His hands grew instantly bolder when Cassie's head lolled against his shoulder. He brought his right hand from its possessive position on her crotch, up to press against her belly while he took his right foot and moved her feet further apart, parting her legs, then his right hand returned to her crotch.

Cassie drew in a shuddering breath as she felt his hand press against her pussy, then his fingers inch inside the hem of her shorts and pushed at once into her warm bare pussy lips. He began to stroke her while his mouth continued to drive her wild along her neck and earlobe.

His fingers couldn't have been better directed, Cassie thought, feeling him touch just the right spot to bring her to orgasm. His right hand rose over her bare midriff to push up her halter-top and grasp her bare breast. Her nipple was being tweaked by hot fingers that knew just how to arouse her.

She was on fire...and an orgasm was quickly bearing down on her. She clasped her hands atop Hawk's, further aroused by the erotic sensations. Then she let it happen, let the orgasm ripple through her. She pressed her body forward into his strumming fingers, then back, feeling his hard cock calling to her against her buttocks.

She opened her mouth and panted, all too aware of the man at her back who was giving her the exquisite climax. And all too aware of how much she had needed the release—since the tension brought on by her discoveries in the office had made her so uptight.

His fingers continued to manipulate her, even

though she was coming. Her body was wiggling round like she could hardly stand it—then a second, more powerful orgasm took over, almost canceling out the first, and she could barely contain the yelp of utter delight that traveled up her throat.

“Hawk!” she breathed, almost unable to comprehend what he was doing to her.

Her mind lost all ability to think. She rose with a maelstrom of unending pleasures—all from his moving fingers. The room ceased to exist—the barrier of clothing held no significance—his hands were on her sensitive parts, and he was intent on making her wild with the orgasmic storm of sensations.

Cassie was only slightly aware of when Hawk picked her up and took her to the bed in the room. Orgasm still shook her body, made her insides clench with hot, streaming forces. Her clothes were stripped off and Hawk was positioning himself over her, driving his hard cock between her legs, and into her hot passage that needed further sating.

The entry of him into her body only served to intensify the orgasms she was experiencing. She felt heat engulf her entire body as he thrust wildly against her, spearing her insides with his long cock.

She felt as limp as a noodle from all the orgasms brought about by his fingers and when the sensations came on even stronger, brought to the fore by his penetration, she felt fluid as a river of flowing liquid.

For the longest time Cassie kept her eyes closed and reveled in the sensations racing through her insides, then she was consciously aware of Hawk rolling her over, of his arm sliding beneath her waist

and him pulling her up onto her knees. She was aware of him moving behind her hips, of him reaching into the drawer on the nightstand and removing something, but she didn't fully realize what he wanted to do until she felt his hand on her buttocks, pushing apart the round, fleshy halves. He dabbed something between her buttocks.

"This is lubricant, babe," he said. "I'll go slow – so it won't hurt so bad."

She felt the rounded head of his cock as he placed it against her rear orifice – and it briefly intrigued her. She had never had anal sex, but then again, she had never fucked in water either, and the night Hawk took her in the swimming pool was not only fantastic, but it had aroused a new carnal awakening inside her.

His fingers came back to stroke her clitoris, to rub it exquisitely firm and start the onset of another orgasm. For a moment she wished she'd bothered to count them, she foolishly thought, then gave herself over to his mastery.

The orgasm began for her and just as the feeling began to shoot through her pussy, Hawk began pushing his cock inside her hole. She couldn't hold back the surprised yelp as he penetrated her insides with his hardness or deny the incredible feelings the act brought about. The orgasm was more powerful, the anal entry of his cock seemed somehow to flood her whole body with orgasm and not just briefly – her entire body was engulfed with the feelings!

He moved slowly inside her, pushing in and pulling back, almost to the point of withdrawing. He pulled his fingers from Cassie's clitoris and held her

buttocks in each hand, steadying her stance on her knees, while he worked his cock inside.

Cassie had brought her upper body upward to lean on her hands, having now since Hawk quit fondling her discovered a whole new realm of sensations coming about inside her anal canal. She had heard of anal orgasms, but she had never experienced one—now she thought she might—and she was eager to feel it.

Her body was on fire. She was sweating profusely. Her breath was coming in short gasps. She could feel Hawk's thighs, muscular and firm, pressed behind her own thighs, their flesh melding in shared sweat. His big hands were clasp tight on each of her buttocks

-

His long cock slid inside her, filling her, making her aware of the pressure—the sensation was like nothing she had ever felt before—filling and at the same time erotic to think a man would want to possess her in such a manner.

His thrusting increased in speed, and Cassie knew the sign. He was on the verge of climax. She felt pliable in his hands, his thrusting cock sliding inside her with an urgency that sent her brain spiraling.

Then she felt it—the anal orgasm she had been waiting for. And it felt like nothing else—it felt as though her whole body had suddenly awakened, had suddenly come alive with new undiscovered pleasure!

"Oh, Hawk!" she breathed, finding new energy to press herself back against his body.

The explosion inside her traveled so quickly along

her limbs that she all but collapsed flat on her belly as Hawk continued to thrust wildly into her body. To describe the orgasm as merely a storm of sensations would hardly do it justice since she had never ever felt anything like it. It was more than an orgasm where her clitoris was involved—every sex organ got into the act—and reaped untold climatic sensation that thundered through her entire body.

Cassie collapsed on her belly completely, Hawk on top of her. His cock was pushed out from her collapsing, and she felt for an instant as though her body had been rid of a great intrusion—yet the pleasures continued to rifle through her in such a manner that the whole thing was puzzling.

"I've never...had...anal sex...before," she confided as Hawk rolled to his side and pulled her backside against his front.

"And did you like it?" he asked, his hand sliding across her heaving breasts to find her taut nipples.

"It was...incredible!" she related, breathing loudly.

"Did you notice?" he asked, raising his head and nibbling at her earlobe. "I don't have a rubber on." He chuckled deep in his throat.

Cassie's eyes flickered open. What was it about this guy and his inability to remember to wear a condom? She made a mental note right then; to get back on her birth control pills once she got home. Sometimes her philosophy of living for the moment put her in jeopardy.

"So...you planned...that?" Cassie questioned, her breathing slowing. In a way it was ironic—his forgetting about a condom, and she being bombarded

by orgasmic sensations to the point that she couldn't remember them either.

"All I have to do is look at you, babe, and I get hard," he whispered.

She couldn't help but smile at his admission. In fact, it was that way for her too. One tiny peek at him, and she was ready to strip out of her clothes and make mad passionate love with him.

"I guess you know what that means," he said, his hand toying with her nipples.

Cassie raised one hand and caught his moving fingers on her breast. God! Her nipples were still so sensitive they felt like he'd suckled them for a month—another lingering effect of the strong orgasms he had reaped from her.

"Don't you?" he prompted, refusing to still his fingers when she caught his hand. He merely mingled his fingers with hers and continued to tickle her nipples.

Cassie pulled her hand away. She didn't need any further stimulus and since he hadn't stopped his playing fingers, only included hers in the touching, she didn't want anything further to develop between them. Now that the initial assault of the orgasms were waning from her body, she was ready for Hawk to start confessing about the things she had seen in his office.

"Cassie?" he said, skimming his lips across her cheek. "You seem distracted. Is everything okay?"

She let out a long breath and lifted his arm from across her waist, then she scooted to the edge of the bed and got up. Heading across the room toward the

shower, she forced herself to reply.

"Every thing is fine," she called over her shoulder.

Mentally she wanted separation from him. She turned on the shower and stepped inside, almost before the water heated up. She took the bar of deodorant soap and lathered her body, then rinsed quickly and got out. Wrapping a towel around herself, she returned to the bedroom—only to find Hawk missing.

"Well, that didn't go too well," she muttered, retrieving her clothes from the floor and pulling them on. She had accomplished little, aside from having sex—again—with Hawk. But then, hadn't she decided not to act suspicious, but to give him a chance to come clean?

"Everything seems so muddled," she admitted, her feelings mixed over waiting for Hawk to explain things. Why didn't she just come out and ask him?

"And have him think I was snooping?"

"And *have* you been snooping?"

His voice was filled with humor, Cassie noted with a start. She jerked her head round, one leg already in her shorts, and spied Hawk standing only feet away from her, fully dressed.

"How can you move around without me hearing you?" she inquired, her heart racing in fright.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It must be my Indian heritage," he said, smiling at her. "Need some help? He stepped forward and picked up Cassie's halter-top from where he'd dropped it on the floor, then he held it out to her so she could slip her arms inside.

Why was she bothering? She was too aware of his masculinity to ignore him, and he was too much of an alpha male to be outsmarted by her.

"Did you bring a dress, by any chance?" he asked, his fingers mingling with hers as she tried to knot the ties on her top.

"No," she answered. "I came to Texas to work—not socialize," she said, restraint in her voice.

"You know what they say—all work and no play makes Cassie a dull girl," he teased. He placed the tip of his index finger beneath her chin and tipped her head up. "Tell me what's wrong, honey."

Cassie tried to look him in the eyes, but a smoldering anger deep inside her wouldn't let her. She stared at his chin—his exquisitely strong chin—instead.

"What makes you think there's something wrong?" she replied in a tiny voice.

He leaned his head down and brushed her lips with his. "I have reservations at the best restaurant in Tucson. I want to take you out and show you off," he said, then he brushed her lips with his again. "So let's go into town and get you a dress—something sexy as all get out."

Cassie's lips broke into a quick smile. For a split second she really wanted to go shopping with him—just to see what he'd pick out for her—but then her mind returned to the reason she was trying to pull away from him.

"I'll give you ten minutes to get ready," he said, taking his hand from her chin and turning to leave the room.

He was gone almost before Cassie could digest his words. He wanted to take her out and show her off—as what, another of his conquests? And she bet he had many.

She almost screamed, running both hands through her tousled hair. Why wouldn't he tell her about the fax he had gotten? She began pacing the floor of the bedroom, walking quickly from dresser to bed, then from bed to window.

Finally, in frustration, she brushed her hair, dabbed on lipstick, and grabbed up her purse. Hell, she could use a new dress!

CHAPTER TEN

Cassie slid into the seat of the black Cadillac and Hawk closed the door. She hadn't seen the car — only the truck that Hawk drove. She supposed it had been housed in the multi-car garage situated adjacent to the ranch house.

Her eyes took in the rich interior of the automobile, the pale gray leather seats and wood-embossed dashboard with an instrument panel to rival an airplane. The aroma of rich Italian leather filtered to her nose.

Then Hawk slid into the driver's seat and she was bombarded with his manly aroma. It made her forget all about the smell of expensive leather. His cologne was a fragrance that she loved to smell. It was masculine and roughed, just the way she thought he was. She drew the fragrance deep into her lungs, savoring the smell. And instantly her anger seemed to subside. She turned a cheery face toward him as he started the motor of the Cadillac.

"I'm taking you to Florine," he announced, turning the car out of the driveway.

Cassie stared at him with raised eyebrows. Who in

the hell was Florine? And why did he sound as though he knew her intimately? She felt her hackles rise.

"Florine owns The Boutique, an exclusive women's shop," he explained, glancing at Cassie. "She'll know just what you'll need for a night out."

Cassie held her tongue, and once they arrived at the shop and got a look at Florine, she was glad she had.

Florine Camp was at least seventy years old, with blue-gray hair cut in a stylish fashion, a trim, though sagging body encased in a navy blue linen suit. She came to greet Hawk, gliding across the carpeted floor of the shop like she was on rollers, the moment he led Cassie through the door.

"Hawk, darling," she greeted, her arms rising to clasp around his neck. "It's been too long. Tell me, how have you been? How's Max?" she inquired, hugging him.

Hawk leaned down and gave her a hug. "All is well, Aunt Florine."

Aunt? The word struck Cassie right between the eyes.

"This is Cassie," Hawk continued, releasing Florine and pulling Cassie forward by one hand. "I want to take her out on the town, so fix her up, okay?"

Cassie felt as though she was being handed over to Florine, because Hawk made a quick exit out the door of the shop leaving the two staring at each other.

"You have a gorgeous little figure. Come on. We'll fix you up so you'll knock Hawk's socks off!" Florine said, chuckling and taking Cassie by the elbow.

There was nothing to do except go along with Florine. Now that she knew she was Hawk's aunt—her anger at another female in Hawk's life was dissolved totally.

Cassie was ushered into a changing room and told to strip out of her clothes. Then Florine brought in underclothes, nylons, and a push-up bra. And a pair of black four-inch stiletto heels.

Then the evening gowns began arriving. And Cassie found herself overwhelmed with choices.

"No more, please!" she remarked holding up both hands when Florine arrived with yet another armload. "I can't make up my mind now!"

"Stick with black," Florine advised, her eyes studying Cassie. "You look dramatic in black."

Finally, after almost an hour of trying on gowns and weighing how she looked in the mirrored walls of the dressing room, Cassie chose a long slinky black gown with a low back and a plunging neckline. The gown hugged her silhouette in silky elegance and set off the long column of her throat and called attention to her well-endowed chest.

"Hawk will go wild when he sees you," Florine told her, her well made-up, wrinkled face beaming with accomplishment. "I'll just give him a call and let him know we're through."

Within a few minutes, Hawk was at the shop and paying for the stack of things Florine had boxed up, then Cassie was once again sliding into the plush leather seat of the Cadillac for the return ride to the ranch.

"It wasn't necessary for you to take me shopping

and treat me to such an expensive gown, Hawk." Cassie turned to him while he maneuvered the car through the crowded streets of downtown Tucson.

"You're my lady," he said, briefly glancing at her. "I want every man we see tonight to look at you and want you."

Cassie's jaw dropped open.

"And then know he can't ever have you," he finished, a low chuckle coming from his throat. He reached over in Cassie's lap and squeezed her clasped hands, reassuring her of his words.

* * * *

When they arrived at the Double D, Cassie was given time alone to dress and prepare for their evening on the town. She drew bath water and sank down in it. It was hot and steamy, and delicately scented with the lavender bath oil she had taken from her suitcase.

She felt frazzled from all that had occurred since she arrived at the ranch and began such a lusty sexual relationship with Hawk. She laid her head back on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes. For the life of her, she didn't know where it was headed.

Hawk seemed not to notice that she wasn't as friendly as she had been—but then how did she expect him to notice when all he wanted to do was fuck her—and she was all too willing to let him.

Yes, it was confusing. And now she was to go out on the town with him—he was going to show her off. Why? Because he wanted to make every other man jealous?

She pulled the plug and got out of the tub. She was wasting her time complaining about something that would be over in a couple of days, and taking more time to make herself smell good—just to appeal to him further.

She dried herself and returned to the bedroom to dress. She donned the underclothes she had gotten with the dress and slipped into the silky gown, then stepped into the strappy sandals, fastening the tiny gold buckle at her ankle.

There was a small mirror hanging over the dresser, but there wasn't a full length one in the room, so she wasn't able to view her entire reflection. But she remembered how hot she had looked an hour earlier in Florine's shop. She put on her makeup and left the bedroom, traversing down the hallway toward the kitchen at the back of the house. No one ever seemed to use the front door, she noted, since all the parking facilities were out back. She knew the impressive ranch house had one, though—she had entered it the first time she came to the Double D. She remembered the winding sidewalk leading up to the house with its array of green shrubbery and colorful perennials.

She heard Hawk's voice coming from the office in the house as she started past the open door. She hesitated, glancing inside, only to see him standing behind the desk talking on the telephone. He saw her immediately and motioned for her to enter without pausing in his conversation on the phone.

He was magnificent in a black tuxedo with a crisp, ruffled, white shirt with tiny black buttons down its front. His blond hair was neatly combed, that

incorrigible blond lock secured off his forehead. But that part of his manicured appearance lasted only as long as it took him to bend over and search for something in one of the desk drawers. Instantly, the lock was back, hanging midway on his forehead and returning him to that bad boy appearance Cassie had first tagged him with.

She wasn't paying any attention to what he was saying to the person on the phone. Instead she had been busy drinking his appearance in. Her eyes then lowered to encompass the surface of the wide mahogany desk, and a disparaging scream surfaced in her throat. She managed to swallow it down.

The fax was gone from the machine—and the folder containing the topography map was absent from the desktop. In fact, the polished surface was clean except for the phone and an impressive set of gold pens embossed with the Double D logo. Apparently, he had felt it safe to wave her inside the study, since he had hidden all the incriminating evidence.

Hawk abruptly hung up the phone—or so Cassie thought—and she jumped in sudden fright when he stepped from behind the big desk and came round to clasp her upper arms. He gave her the once-over, smiling his approval.

"You look gorgeous!" he said, his voice low and vibrating. "And good enough to eat."

"So do you," Cassie returned. She hoped her voice didn't reveal the anger and disappointment she was feeling.

"Later," he said taking hold of her left elbow and

turning her toward the door of the study. In a few seconds they were in the car and heading toward Tucson.

Cassie sat in the plush leather seat, her eyes turned out the side window. If there had ever been an opportunity for Hawk to tell her about the fax, it had just passed while they were both in the study. She gritted her teeth and stared out the window, though there was little to see, except her own reflection in the window. It was almost eight o'clock and Hawk had mentioned that he had made reservations for eight-thirty at the restaurant. It really didn't matter, Cassie thought. Her stomach was too knotted with anger to handle the presence of food.

"You're all done cleaning the cabin?" Hawk asked, glancing at her.

"All done," she replied, her eyes not leaving the black view out the side window. There weren't even any streetlights along the way, just an outside security light on a barn now and then. But they were passing through ranch land after all, and what did steers need with electric lights? That thought was as silly as the others flooding her mind, she admitted. In fact, the past two weeks had all been a silly venture. Why hadn't she let the attorney who notified her of Uncle Barney's death handle the sale of the property? Why had she even attempted to handle things herself? It had only gotten her in a precarious position with a Texas cowboy who was on the verge of stealing her heart.

Admittance is a treacherous thing sometimes, she decided, glancing at Hawk. And what woman

wouldn't be swayed by his handsome self? He was gorgeous to look at—and even more gorgeous to be near. And oh, the sex!

She was relieved to some extent when they reached the city. A barrage of lights seemed to appear in every direction, intermingled with changing stoplights and a flood of crisscross traffic.

"Friday nights are chaotic," Hawk remarked braking at a red stoplight. He flashed Cassie a white-toothed grin that nearly melted her heart. He wafted his blue gaze over her, sending her pulse racing. "I'm really gonna show you off, babe." He gave her a wink, seconds before the light changed and they were heading into the heart of the city.

Petit Paree was a fancy French restaurant situated in the ritziest part of the city. It was a large ornate building, with red carpet at its main door, valet parking and a doorman to direct them inside. A French motif, of course, dictated the walls and floors. Large framed paintings, murals of French landmarks, the Eiffel Tower, The Louvre Museum, Notre Dame Cathedral, and the Arc de Triomphe were dispersed throughout the main dining area. Low lighting throughout gave the aura of romance, which she was in little mood for, at the present.

The menu was equally French. Cassie couldn't decipher a damn thing. And she was hungry, she decided, when she gave up on thinking Hawk was going to open up to her.

They were seated in the middle of the restaurant, at a small table for two. Their knees almost touched beneath the white linen tablecloth. Waiters in black

jackets and bus boys dressed in white shirts and black trousers swarmed around them, waiting on the surrounding tables and filling their water glasses. Hawk ordered a bottle of wine, and a waiter appeared at his elbow to let him sip the selection before he filled their glasses.

It was all very elegant and busy. Hawk had already been approached by three couples that he knew, and he hurried to introduce Cassie, beaming with an inner pride that puzzled her.

She felt very self-conscious—as though things were happening around her to which she had no control. And she really didn't like being left out of the loop. She needed to know what her next move was. She was busy studying the menu, when she heard a familiar voice and glanced up, only to be sorry she had when she saw John Meyers looking at her. He was speaking to Hawk—but staring at her with his assessing eyes. And she didn't like where his gaze was pinned—on her breasts.

She moved the menu she held, raising it to cut off the path of Meyers' lustful gaze. He gave her the creeps, to put it mildly. And she could almost imagine his relationship with her Uncle Barney to be one of mutual dislike.

"Miss Michaels," Meyers greeted Cassie. "And how are you this evening?" he inquired, bowing his head slightly in her direction.

"Fine, thank you," Cassie answered, not going out of her way to strike up a conversation with him.

He stayed at their table, talking with Hawk, until a black-coated waiter came to take their order. Cassie

had finally made up her mind to ask the waiter to decipher the menu for her, since everything was in French and she hadn't yet managed to find anything she could pronounce—when he came round and directed his gaze at Hawk.

Hawk began to order, speaking the French words from the menu with ease. Cassie was relieved and impressed both at the same time.

"So, what are we eating?" she asked, leaning across the table and whispering in a low voice.

Hawk smiled at her and leaned toward her. "Steaks, medium rare, baked potatoes, and salad with what else, French dressing."

She couldn't help but laugh. Why had she even bothered to worry about ordering? He was in total control—as he had been since they first met.

She picked up her wineglass, filled halfway with a white Chablis of some past year and brought it to her mouth. She took a tiny sip, barely wetting her tongue. She had to be careful with wine; it always went straight to her head. And she didn't need to get drunk, what with planning to leave for home the day after tomorrow.

There was a constant parade of people stopping by their table to speak to Hawk and he eagerly introduced Cassie to each of them, mostly men alone, but some with wives, or girlfriends.

Their food arrived, with a big production, Cassie thought since the waiter hovered near Hawk's elbow while he cut his thick steak and deemed it cooked to his satisfaction. He left then, bowing at the waist, and Cassie figured her steak was appropriately cooked as

well, since the waiter hadn't glanced at her once, and Hawk seemed satisfied.

All through the meal, Hawk played host, shaking hands and introducing Cassie. When he alleged he wanted to show her off, she never dreamed they might encounter so many people. It was almost like a receiving line, except they were in the midst of trying to eat.

Finally, when Cassie thought everybody in the town had made it a point to drop by their table, a tall man with a blond woman on either arm arrived. She glanced up, recognizing the man and the two women she had seen in the airport the day she arrived in Tucson.

"Finally, we meet," the man said, holding out his hand to Cassie. "I'm Roy Mays, and this is my wife Helen, and our daughter, Susan."

Cassie swallowed the mouth full of food she had been chewing and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with the linen napkin. She slid her right hand into Roy's hand and smiled politely.

"Nice to meet you," she said, the name faintly ringing a bell in the back of her mind.

"And how goes it with your uncle's property?" he inquired, still holding her hand.

Then she knew who he was! Roy Mays; he was the attorney from Tucson who had notified her of Uncle Barney's death, and told her of her inheritance. How ironic that he should be with Hawk the very first time she saw either of them. The thought stuck in her mind in a funny sort of way.

"She's been working really hard over at that little

cabin,” Hawk put in, pulling Roy’s attention away from Cassie.

Cassie sat silently and let Hawk do the talking. What could she say to Roy Mays? That she had been all ready to sell the ground, but then she had nosed around Hawk’s office and found out there was oil on the land and had since changed her mind?

She glanced at Helen Mays, exchanged smiles, then glanced at the daughter, Susan. There was a rather unfriendly look on her face—and it suddenly dawned on Cassie that the woman was jealous. She had her own ideas about Hawk, apparently.

Cassie blew off the look and returned her attentions to her meal. The steak was excellent, if she could manage to eat it before it got too cold.

“It was nice to finally meet you in person, Miss Michaels,” Roy Mays said. “And if I can be of any help, don’t hesitate to drop by my office.”

Cassie smiled at him and nodded her head. It was nice of him to offer, but—

They had almost finished eating by the time Hawk had stopped holding court. Cassie wiped her mouth and leaned back in her chair. She was stuffed. She couldn’t eat another bite. But then the waiter appeared with a tray of desserts, and her reserve went right out the window.

“I’m a pushover for cheesecake,” she admitted recognizing the creamy concoction on his tray.

Hawk was watching her from across the table. She picked up the fork the waiter placed in front of her and attacked the cheesecake, sighing her enjoyment with the first bite.

"Are you enjoying the evening?" Hawk asked, looking intently at her.

"I'm meeting a lot of people," she said, her tone slightly teasing. "Do you know everyone in Tucson?"

He chuckled and accepted the after-dinner coffee the waiter offered. When the waiter had left, he redirected his attention to Cassie.

"Believe me, babe, everyone is impressed with you," he boasted, sitting a little straighter in his chair.

"You make me sound like a prize heifer or something, Hawk."

He frowned suddenly, shaking his head. "I'm telling you that you're a beautiful, sexy woman and I'm a lucky guy to be with you."

She didn't quite know what to make of his words, since she had witnessed him gloating every time a man looked at her. He sounded shallow as hell, but that didn't seem right either. What was he talking about that she wasn't grasping?

She put down her fork suddenly. They had been at the restaurant for almost two hours and he had showed her off to more people than she'd known in her lifetime—and still he hadn't divulged a word to her about receiving that damn fax! He could have told her about it in the car on the drive to the restaurant; he could have whispered it to her in an aside during a break from meeting one of his friends – hell! He could have written it on the corner of the linen napkin and passed it across the table to her—why in heaven's name was he keeping such incredible news all to himself? And he had done all the talking when attorney Roy Mays had asked her about her uncle's

property.

“Excuse me. I need to powder my nose,” she said getting up from her chair. She grabbed her purse and walked toward the LOUNGE sign at the rear of the room. Enough was enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cassie considered using her cell phone to call a cab and leave the restaurant, but after a few minutes dashed the idea. She didn't want to embarrass Hawk—there were enough people in the restaurant that he'd never live down the fact that a woman had walked out on him in public.

She powdered her nose, and gathered her courage. Then she returned to the table where Hawk waited. He looked relieved to see her, as if he knew she had thoughts of running out on him. But he recovered soon enough, Cassie noted, resuming her seat.

In a few minutes they were leaving the restaurant and heading to the second phase of the evening—the opera.

"Who knew Tucson had an opera," she remarked when Hawk revealed their destination. "Or a real French restaurant," she added, her surprise revealed at being treated to two elaborate things in one night.

They had a private box very near the stage for the opera. *The Turn Of The Screw* by Benjamin Britten, an English composer. The production was fantastic, though its name was somewhat ironic—given the

circumstances with herself and Hawk, but she had to admit, she enjoyed it.

It was midnight when they started back to the Double D. Cassie was tired, and she couldn't say it was a good tired, it was a relieved tired—relieved that the evening was coming to an end.

But she was pissed off, too.

Hawk had passed up ample opportunities to tell her about the fax he received. Every time she thought about his silence, she got angry. She had, after a series of self-discussions, decided she would do her own investigating about the land Uncle Barney left her, and she'd begin as soon as she got back to New York. She'd contact Roy Mays and tell him her thoughts about oil on the land and ask his advice, since he had been Uncle Barney's attorney.

They were quiet on the ride home and Cassie was mentally trying to brace herself for what was probably inevitable when they reached the ranch. Sex. Hawk kept reaching over and stroking her bare shoulder. A couple of times he had brushed his palm across her left breast. They would have sex when they arrived at the Double D, there wasn't a doubt in her mind to the contrary.

She would have sex with the man who was deceiving her.

The thought stuck in her throat. Worse yet, she enjoyed having sex with Hawk. He was the perfect lover. The most absolute incredible lover she had ever been with.

So why not take the sex—live for the moment? And ride off into the sunset. The thought brought

tears to her eyes. For two weeks she had insisted her relationship with Hawk was purely sexual. A mutual coming together for lusty fulfillment.

And she had enjoyed *every* moment of it.

It would be bittersweet, she decided, glancing at Hawk as he turned the Cadillac into the driveway at the ranch. Tonight would be their swan song – the last fuck before she disappeared forever.

The ranch was dark except for the security lights that came on when they neared the garage, then the house. Hawk held Cassie's hand and led the way through the back door, turning on lights as he went.

When they were inside the house, Cassie pulled her hand free of his and headed toward the bedroom, intent on having a shower, perhaps before Hawk joined her. She just really didn't think she could face having sex with him in the shower. The dark would be better since she knew the emotional feelings of the act would be with her for the rest of her life.

Cassie hurried with her shower but she wasn't quick enough. She saw Hawk coming into the bathroom to join her. He was naked. And he was so damned appealing.

He slid the glass door open and stepped inside. And Cassie nearly melted at the sight of him. She gazed up at him, the shower spray wetting her hair and racing down her face in small rivulets.

She went into his arms, pressing her body into the firm contours of his. She breathed in his scent, ran her palms over his hair-roughened chest, trailing low onto his flat abdomen, then twining her fingers around his erection. She had never met a man like

CASSIE'S COWBOY

him, never known sexual bliss to be so intense. He was all she had ever dreamed of.

* * * *

Hawk delved his hand into the wet hair at the back of her head, bringing her face upward so he could look into her eyes. Water droplets clung to her dark eyelashes, giving her green eyes a luminous appeal. The fine spray sat on the crest of her left cheek and in the tiny furrow beside her nose. He pulled in a deep breath and lowered his head to claim her mouth.

Her lips were receiving, obedient, and they conformed to his with a pliable softness that allowed him to be in total command. It gave him a rush of power, and a sexual control over her that urged his mouth to take things to the next level.

He pulled in a ragged breath. Cassie was the girl of his dreams. She was his to love—to keep and protect.

It was a wild thought—but one that totally spoke of his feelings for her. Lust and want combined, to fill his big body and reinforce the feelings he allowed to surface. He could stop looking—he could feel assured that his long wait for a woman to love was at an end.

His heart brimmed with love. His Cassie. His woman. She fit his body as well as his mind. She was his soul mate. His emotions going full throttle, there was no holding back—taking Cassie only confirmed his need for her.

* * * *

Cassie had no control over Hawk, only her resilience to conform to his will kept her leaning against his body while the warm shower spray pelted her body. She had no thoughts aside from the one that remained a true constant in her mind.

This would be the last time she would be with Hawk.

Suddenly, she was moving under the volition of Hawk's hands but her senses were still consumed by his masterful kissing of her lips. Her eyes flickered open only to be forced closed again by the battery of spraying water.

Then the force of the shower ended, and Hawk was securing a towel around her drenched body and lifting her into his arms. She was carried to the bed, encased in a cocoon of terrycloth, and laid down. She was wet, but held so tightly by the bands of steel that she had no recourse but to like it.

He nestled his body against hers, resumed his sensual attention to her mouth, cradling her head in the valley formed by his arm and shoulder. She didn't know how it could have happened—how she could have possibly drifted into sleep—with the exquisite assault on her mouth, but she did.

A noise broke into Cassie's sound sleep state, a noise that sounded somewhere in the house, but she was unable to identify it. She opened her eyes to find she was laying on her right side completely encased in the bath towel from last night.

She fought to remember the final moments she had spent with Hawk. Had they made love?

Made love? When had she started referring to their

sexual escapades as lovemaking? Weren't they merely lusty bouts of sexual frenzy that gave them both the orgasms they wanted – or needed?

She pushed the towel away from her body and sat up on the side of the bed. Her head felt groggy from the short night with little sleep. And her mouth felt pasty. She raised one hand and combed her fingers through her hair. It was plastered to her skull, limp and straight.

She forced herself to get up, to stand on her own two feet. Thank God, Hawk wasn't there to see how frightful she looked. But then, she was leaving today and it really didn't matter. Despite the evening he had given her, the expensive dinner at the French restaurant—that damn French menu still puzzled her. Surely not every patron they had could speak French and now that she thought about it, the waiters didn't speak a word of French either. The thought that she had been tricked crossed her mind.

She laughed suddenly, a loud snort that came from her nose as much as from her mouth. Hawk had tricked her—or maybe she had been too damned caught up in waiting for him to tell her about the fax he received to realize the menu was written in English as well as French.

She let out a long breath. What else had he been up to that she didn't understand? She suddenly felt a pain in her head, the onset of a headache. Well, if she remembered correctly, she had been dealing with a headache the very first time she laid eyes on Hawk Downs. It was somehow appropriate that she should end the relationship feeling the same way.

She pulled on her stretch jeans and a red T-shirt and slid her feet into her sandals, then she began gathering up her clothes from the room. She took her toiletries from the bathroom and her hairbrush from the top of the bureau. In a few miserable minutes she was packed and ready to slip out of the back door of the Double D Ranch house. She only hoped she didn't encounter Max in the kitchen wearing his usual apron and standing over a pan of bacon and eggs. Hawk, she already knew, was up and out on ranch business so she didn't think she would meet up with him while she was trying to make her escape.

Escape? Yes. She was escaping a man who chose to deceive her—a man she had been on the verge of falling in love with.

Had she really?

Yes.

But now it was too late—too late for her and Hawk to have anything. They had sex, and many pleasures of the body, but trust and honesty hadn't entered into the budding relationship.

She scanned the room, making sure she had gathered every last item she had arrived with. God forbid she should leave anything behind that would ever give Hawk a reason to come looking for her.

Her perusal took in the black evening gown he had paid for and insisted she wear lying on the small chair near the door. She had placed the shoes and undergarments—the entire outfit—in a neat little stack. Hawk could return everything to Florine. She was his aunt after all, and would let him return everything for cash, perhaps. Relatives were known

for doing things like that for kin.

Unless Hawk was too proud to take everything back.

In that case, she surmised, he could look for someone else to wear the outfit.

The thought brought immediate tears to her eyes. She didn't want to think about Hawk with anyone else—yet she was leaving him. She had her bag in one hand, the truck keys in the other, and she was on her way out of his life forever. She choked back the sob rising in her throat and opened the bedroom door.

There was no sign of Max as Cassie hurried through the kitchen to the back door. Once outside, she ran across the brick patio surrounding the swimming pool to the rental pickup parked near the garage. In a matter of seconds, she was in the driver's seat and fitting the key in the ignition. So far, so good, she dared to think as she backed the pickup out into the drive and headed down the lane leading to the highway.

She placed a call to the airport with one hand while she drove with the other. She hoped to God her flight was on time. She'd be flying to St. Louis, then catching a plane on to New York.

She was given good news about the departure time of her flight to St. Louis. She'd have only fifteen minutes to check her luggage and return the rental truck. She bit on her bottom lip. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be able to relax once she got on board the plane and it lifted off the ground.

* * * *

Nothing went as she had hoped it would. Her first stop was the ticket counter. She was leaving before her return flight had been scheduled. She lied and said she had an emergency. For Pete's sake! It was only two days early! When that matter was finally resolved, she checked her bag and headed for the car rental counter. As luck would have it, the same woman she had dealt with previously was perched behind the counter, and Cassie could tell by the look on her face that she remembered her.

Cassie slid the key across the counter to the woman and turned on her heel. Enough said, she thought. The woman could figure it out for herself. She had parked the red pickup near the front of the main parking lot—she could look right out the front window of the lobby and see it.

When she finally boarded the plane, she found her seat by the window, and plopped into it. What a way to start the day! She didn't want to think about it. She leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. Maybe everyone in close proximity would think she was sleeping and leave her alone. She had never felt so weary.

* * * *

By the time the plane touched down in St. Louis, Cassie had calmed down a little. She had even managed to have a short conversation with the woman seated next to her. She got her bag from the baggage check and went to the large display board at

CASSIE'S COWBOY

the main counter to check the status of her next plane to New York. Seeing that everything looked on schedule, she breathed a sigh of relief.

By the time her flight landed in New York, Cassie felt confident that she had successfully eluded Hawk. She bit on her bottom lip. Running from him had been the hardest thing she had ever done. She warned herself about contemplating the past.

"Don't remember him," she muttered beneath her breath.

It was mid-afternoon when Cassie got off the plane in New York. Right away she seemed to be bombarded with all the noise and people rushing about. It was a sharp contrast to what she had encountered in Texas.

She got her bag and waited with the horde for a cab to take her back to her condo. When it was finally her turn for a ride, she settled in the back seat and let relief travel through her insides. She'd go home and have a long hot bath, soothe her frazzled nerves with a hot cup of tea and then crawl into bed and sleep for hours and hours. In fact, she just might stay in bed until time to go back to work Monday morning.

* * * *

Everything was just as she had left it at home. There was a pile of mail that had accumulated near the front door where the mailman had poked it through the mail slot, but aside from that, all appeared undisturbed. She came inside and locked the door behind her. Carrying her suitcase through the modern

style living room with its stark white walls and pale mauve and jade green couch and matching chair, into the ivory colored bedroom with the white lace bedspread and frilly lace curtains at the single window. The condo had an esoteric feel about it, private, yet belonging to Cassie, the woman who took advantage of the moment.

She grimaced at the thought. Sometimes she just didn't understand herself. Or anybody else, she tacked on in afterthought.

She kept true to her word about the hot bath and the cup of tea and hurried to run bath water. But then she remembered seeing the red light blinking on the answering machine and went to check her messages. She pushed the button and returned to the bathroom.

As it happened, there was nothing urgent on the machine, just a couple of messages from some of her coworkers wishing her luck in Texas, and one reminder from her mother to give her a call when she arrived home.

Sorry, Mom, but I need to clear my head before I talk to you, she thought, sinking into the tub of steaming water.

She made a pact with herself not to think about Hawk, and tried to keep the promise by putting her mind elsewhere. But it was hard to do. Every aspect of the past two weeks had somehow been connected to him. Even from the very beginning when she had arrived at the airport- she saw him crossing the lobby and had the lusty urge to bed him.

She'd put her mind on deciding what to do about Uncle Barney's ranch. She still found it difficult to

believe that the land—all fifty acres—now belonged to her. She owned a ranch in Texas. Why couldn't she set her mind to the fact?

She was going to sell it...wasn't she?

Well, no, she had changed her mind. But since finding the fax on Hawk's machine, she didn't know what to do. The fact was, she had been hoping Hawk would guide her in her decision.

"Fat chance," she muttered, pouring the freshly brewed tea into a china cup. She tied the knot on her robe tighter and padded barefoot into the living room. Folding one leg beneath her body, she sank into the softness of the down-filled couch cushion.

Hawk had planned to get the land for himself. He was working hard on getting her to trust him—before he offered to take the land off her hands. It was clear to her. As clear as one of those hot Texas days she had endured at his ranch.

She groaned in remembrance of his hands on her body. He was so damned good with his manipulating and molding of her senses. If fact, she remembered, she really didn't do much thinking on her own when she had been with him. He had always been the one to lead her, to make the decisions—to decide when and where, not to mention how they had sex.

She sipped her tea and tried to put her mind on other things. When she returned to work on Monday, her brain would be busy with legal issues and wouldn't wander back to thoughts of Hawk.

The law firm had been handling two different corporate cases when she'd left on vacation. She wondered if either was resolved. Then it became very

apparent to her that she really didn't care if they were or not.

She felt almost startled by her own admission. For most of her life she had been fascinated by law, the why and how of legal things, of corporations and business giants, but suddenly she didn't even find thinking about two of the most important cases the law firm had ever handled intrigued her anymore.

Well, she'd just have to get back in the thick of things, she told herself. She had several years invested in that job at the law firm. She agreed and disagreed with herself for the remaining two days of her vacation, then bucked up her courage and took the subway into work on Monday morning. If she managed things right, if she worked at it really hard, she'd get back in the swing of things — the rat race — in no time at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cassie wasn't ready for the arrival of Hawk at the Furgeson Law office. She almost swallowed her tongue when she spied him stepping off the elevator into the foyer that Monday morning. She had just returned to her office after taking dictation from Mr. Furgeson when she happened to see him. She froze in her tracks, her knees shaking. How in hell had he found her? And why had he bothered?

Deloris, the receptionist, pointed the direction to Cassie's office, and Hawk turned his eyes down the hallway, locking gazes with Cassie as she stood in her frozen state, notepad in hand, a look of total shock on her face.

He walked toward her, all six-foot length of Texas male, his thin hips loose in his easy, rolling gait. He held a black Stetson in one hand and his blond hair fell across his forehead in disarray. He wore denim; appropriate for a Texas cowboy, but terribly out of place in a New York law office. His choice of dress told her he wasn't there to impress anybody. After all, she had seen him in a tux—he could dress up when

he chose. He was his own man.

There was a look of concern on his face, not one of judgment. He had come to ask why she had run out on him. He had come for answers. And she knew him well enough to know he wasn't leaving without them.

She stood still and waited for him, and when he drew so near that his cologne reached her nose, it was too close for comfort. She knew the spell he somehow had over her would reach out and encompass her senses.

"Cassie," he said in a low voice.

His eyebrows were drawn together across his forehead, questioning, as his gaze continued to hold hers. He reached out with his right hand and grasped her left elbow, pulling her within millimeters of his chest.

"Where can we talk?" he asked, his tone urgent.

"I'm busy, Hawk."

His fingers tightened on her arm. "I just need five minutes," he said.

Five minutes with you and I'll be back in your arms, Cassie thought, the notion surging through her like quicksilver.

"I don't have five—" she began.

"Yes, you do," he informed her. He glanced round, looking for a place to secret them away. He found none, for he was astute enough to know there were attorneys behind the closed office doors, and he pulled her back toward the foyer. In the next few seconds he had pushed Cassie into the elevator and closed the door.

The elevator whirled to life, and Hawk watched

the lights pop on as they neared the rooftop of the building.

Cassie looked at him. His jaw was clamped tight in a defiant manner. It wasn't going to be easy dealing with him, she knew, but she had to make him leave. There was no future for them together. Deceit had no place in a relationship between a man and a woman.

The elevator doors slid open on the rooftop and Hawk pulled Cassie outside into the bright sunshine. The roof was a place where some of the workers in the building came to eat lunch. There was a metal picnic table and several chairs clustered together near the air-conditioning units adjacent to the elevator doors. He led her to the table and pushed her down into a chair, then knelt in front of her.

Cassie still held her notepad and pen in her hands, but Hawk soon rid her of those, holding her hands in his as he looked into her eyes.

"I want to know why you ran out on me, Cassie."

Cassie swallowed to ease the dryness in her throat. This was the time of reckoning—the showdown she had purposely run away from.

"Level with me." He let out an exasperated breath while she stared at him, seemingly at a loss for words. "Do you know how damn hard it was for me to find you?" he added, giving his head a shake.

She had no idea she was so well concealed, she thought, the notion bordering on nonsense.

"Don't you think I deserve an explanation for you leaving and not telling me?"

His clean-shaven cheek beckoned to her and his piercing blue eyes could see right into her very soul.

Her stomach tremored with utter wanting of him.

He grabbed her by the upper arms suddenly and gave her a little shake, as though to bring her out of the reverie she had slipped into.

"Cassie, I love you," he said, staring down at her startled face. "My God! I love you."

"Hawk," she murmured, bracing her palm against his chest. His declaration of love shot straight to her heart.

"Talk to me, babe, tell me what happened—why did you leave?" His blue eyes begged her to level with him, to answer his questions.

"I saw the fax—" she began, then halted her words, looking at him with eyes that were rapidly filling up with tears of anguish.

"Fax? What fax? The fax from the surveying company?"

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. "It came while you were gone on a business trip...and I happened to hear it as I was walking down the hall. It was all about oil on Uncle Barney's ranch."

"Yes, honey," Hawk interrupted, a relieved smile coming to his lips. "Yes, that's what I was going to surprise you with—but you never gave me a chance."

"You had two days, Hawk." Tears spilled from her eyes.

Hawk turned loose of her upper arms and poked his fingers into one shirt pocket. He pulled out a sheet of paper. When he unfolded it, Cassie saw that it was the fax she had seen that night in the office.

"Honey, remember when I told you to hang onto the ground that belonged to Barney for a little while

longer?" He held the paper out for her to see.

"Yes," she choked out, her eyes so bleary she could hardly make out the writing on the paper.

"Well, about two months before Barney had his fatal heart attack, he came to me about the possibility that there might be oil on his property. Since there was oil on John Meyers' ranch and the Double D, he said he was a little suspicious, because Meyers had been trying to buy his ranch. But he didn't know how to go about finding out if there was oil or not."

Cassie listened and dabbed at her eyes with one hand, staring at him.

"We had set the wheels in motion to find out if there was oil on the land just before Barney died," Hawk explained. He pushed the fax into Cassie's hands. "This fax is the confirmation Barney was waiting for. Yes, his suspicions were right. There is definitely oil on the land. Honey, you don't want to sell the land—you want to drill an oil well!"

Cassie's jaw dropped as she stared at the paper in her hand.

"But why didn't you tell me when you got home and read the fax?" she questioned, her eyes beseeching his.

"I had planned to, over dinner, but then everybody kept stopping by the table and I didn't get a chance. Then I was going to tell you after we got back to the Double D but you acted so strange toward me one second, and then horny as hell the next—I didn't know what to do," he admitted, half smiling. "I really couldn't read you, babe. In the shower, one second you acted like you didn't want me in there with you,

and the next, you were all over me.”

Cassie reached out and touched his lips with one fingertip, silencing him.

“I thought you should have told me about the fax long before that time arrived, Hawk. And when you didn’t, I thought you were deliberately deceiving me.” She drew in a steadying breath. “I thought you were...just having sex with me...in order to make me sell you the land.”

“Honey, I love you.” He grasped the fingers touching his lips and kissed them, then pressed his lips to the palm of her hand. “I love you, Cassie,” he repeated soothingly

“I love you, too,” she admitted, a great weight lifting from her heart. “Oh, Hawk. I love you so much!”

She was in his arms then, and his mouth was pressing against hers. His hands slid along her back, lowering to her waist. He pulled her up, into his arms where he could press her warm body into the firm contours of his.

“You’re coming back to Texas with me, Cassie,” he informed her, his mouth breaking from hers long enough for him to say the words.

Joy fluttered through Cassie’s heart. She squeezed her eyes shut, closing out all else except the wonderful feel of Hawk’s lips against hers, and his arms holding her body. She had been so foolish to think she could ever deny her love for him.

“Will you marry me, Cassie?” he asked, pulling slightly away and looking down into her face.

Cassie opened her eyes and looked up. “Yes,

Hawk. I'll marry you." She pulled his body against hers.

"Oh, Cassie!" He squeezed her in his arms, kissing her hair near her ear. "Damn! I'm getting hard, babe."

Cassie could feel his erection pressing against her belly. She broke his hug and peered up at him. She had gone without sex—and Hawk—for three days. She began opening her blouse, pushing aside the gauzy fabric to expose her lacy bra, then slipped up the cups exposing her breasts. Then she pulled up her skirt, all the while smiling at Hawk.

In the next instant, Hawk's hands were on her breasts, bringing her nipples to tight little rosy clusters and her hands were unzipping his fly, to release his erection into her palms.

"Take me now, Hawk," she encouraged, hooking her thumbs in the elastic of her pantyhose and pushing them off her hips. "Take me," she murmured, displaying her bare butt to his lusty gaze.

He lifted Cassie to where she could fit his hard cock between her legs, then he entered her, quick and sharp, with a heated thrust that took the breath from her. He held her bare buttocks in either palm and bucked his hips against hers.

Cassie clung to his broad shoulders, the thought of having sex with the man she loved on the rooftop in the hot July sun sending her senses reeling.

She heard her own breath coming in short gasps and Hawk was breathing loudly in her ear as he held her and thrust into her body. His long cock felt exquisite, sliding in and jabbing at her sensitive tissues. And to think she had honestly thought that

she could live without ever seeing him again. Silly girl! She could no more live without Hawk then she could live without air.

She drew in a quick breath when the sensations bore down on her. She slammed her hips against his, forcing every nuance of feelings from her body, savoring, and wanting more, until the rapture totally engulfed her from head to toe.

When they were finished, Hawk kissed her deeply. Then he tucked his cock back inside his jeans, while Cassie pulled up her pantyhose and adjusted her skirt, replacing her bra and buttoning her blouse.

"Go tell your boss you're quitting," Hawk ordered, taking her hand in his. "We're flying back to Texas today. I won't be without you for another moment."

Cassie rose up on her tiptoes and kissed his tanned cheek. They would be together always, she thought, a broad smile spanning her lips. And they would have delicious sex for the rest of their lives.

She giggled suddenly, remembering that between them, they had forgotten the condom – again!

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When I'm not writing romance, I freelance to an assortment of fiction and nonfiction magazines. I enjoy traveling with my husband Dave, and meeting new people. Some of my favorite things are white roses, satin sheets, and pink champagne.