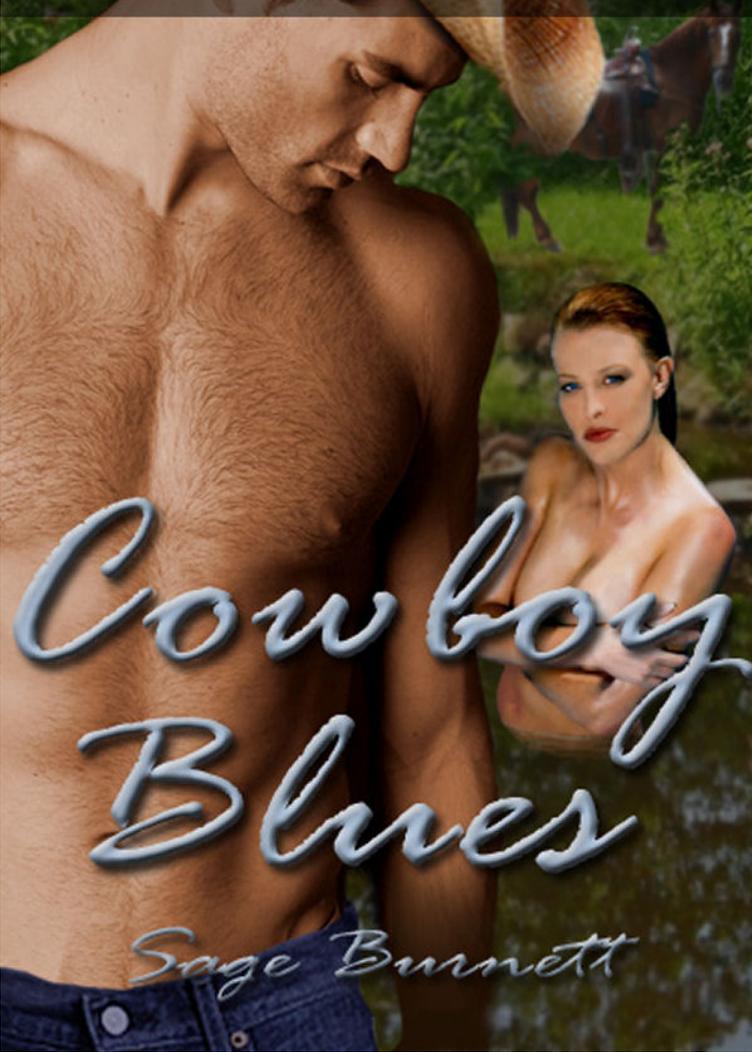


Mardi Gras Publishing Presents...



*Cowboy
Blues*

Sage Burnett

Cowboy Blues

By

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CHAPTER ONE

“Your options are limited at this point.” Jerry Storm, president of First Savings in Missoula, leaned back in his expensive desk chair.

“A dude ranch?” Matt Brennan spit out the words like a rattler spits out its venom. The stiff, high-backed chair, across from Jerry’s desk, felt as hard as the boards of his barn. Must be to keep his customers on the edge. “That idea doesn’t sit well with me.”

“The Walkers did it with their ranch, and they’ve been operating in the black the last two years.”

It was all about the black and red. Right now, he sat square in the middle of the red concerning his finances. He glanced out the large window behind Jerry, and scowled at a young couple strolling by.

Jerry sat up straighter, gathered a stack of papers to straighten them. “There’s also the working ranch. People pay you to come to stay on your ranch and work. It’s a big hit with the city dwellers. You get your cattle herded and rounded up, hay stacked in the barn, plus you’re getting income for it.”

He was a third generation rancher. His father and grandfather, if still alive, would be chewing his butt royally if they knew the only way he could keep the ranch was to modernize, and bring city slickers onto his ranch to do the work. He didn’t have the heart or guts to tell his mother, who now lived in Arizona.

Jerry lifted his arm and glanced at his watch. “Think about it, Matt. Right now it looks like the only way.”

With his back teeth gritted together so tight, he figured he might crack the filling he had replaced a month ago, he stood up. “I’ll get back to you.”

Jerry flashed him his banker’s smile, all teeth, and eyes resembling a shark. “Thanks.” He spun around, and marched out of the office, cursing under his breath.

As he strode out to his Ford four-wheel drive truck parked in front of the bank, desperation raked at his guts. If he didn’t do something and fast, the bank would

foreclose. The three cups of black coffee he had downed before heading into town, burned like battery acid inside of his stomach.

He needed a clear head to think this through, and he knew just the place to do that.

The backpack felt like it weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, instead of twenty-five as Laura Kent trudged up the last steep part of the trail. Thanks to John Blackstone, her friend and co-worker, she had just hiked a steep trail to a remote mountain cabin in the Bitterroot Mountains for a few days of rest and relaxation. She considered herself lucky because she hadn't been eaten by a bear, charged by a bull elk, or attacked by a rabid squirrel. At the end of the narrow trail, she spotted a boxy, rustic log cabin with a dull gray tin roof, nestled under a covey of fir and pine trees. She rested her shoulder against the nearest pine tree, pausing to catch her breath. A wood corral sat about a hundred feet from the cabin. Between the cabin and corral, a good old-fashioned outhouse leaned dangerously to the left. John had assured her there was a creek that meandered behind the cabin for bathing and drinking water. Laura trudged the short distance to the cabin, lifted the tired and beaten looking welcome mat, and found the solitary key wedged between two of the porch boards. "Original."

After she stepped inside, her gaze roamed around the one room cabin. "Not bad." She left the door open behind her and walked over to the one full-sized bed in the back corner of the room. She shrugged off her backpack, dumped it on the bed, and plopped down next to it.

"Downsizing." Two and a half hours alone in the wilderness, and she was already talking to herself like some old hermit. She would like nothing better than to downsize a certain part of Paul Drake, her ex-employer's, anatomy.

"Damn." In the past month, she had been dumped by the jerk she dated for the past six months, and downsized right out of her job. No great loss, concerning her ex, Kevin. He had turned out to be self-centered and totally, me oriented. To top it off, he hadn't been that great in bed, although he believed he was the world's greatest lover.

Raking her hands through her wavy, shoulder length hair, she surveyed the cabin again, which basically contained the barest necessities. A black cast iron wood burning stove sat against the far wall with a lumpy looking floral couch facing it. The kitchen area consisted of a round wooden table with three chairs shoved under it, a propane cook stove, a small, narrow counter, and four cupboards.

“Roughing it for a few days, damn well better work out my hostilities.”

His horse, Whiskey, whinnied when her front hoof stumbled on a rock jutting out of the trail. “Easy girl. We’re almost most there.” A full moon had guided Matt and his horse up the trail to the cabin his grandfather had built over eighty years ago.

A few days alone, to think through his botched up life as a rancher, and he would be good to go. At least, he hoped like hell he would be in a better frame of mind to tackle his financial problems. Tugging down the brim of his black cowboy hat, he nudged his horse in the ribs to get her moving again.

Ten minutes later, with Whiskey locked in the corral and his backpack slung over one shoulder, Matt dug the key out of his pocket, and unlocked the door. The glow of the moon slanting through the windows afforded him enough light so he didn't have to mess with the kerosene lantern. He set his pack against the wall and hung his hat on a peg near the door. After he stripped off his clothes, he tossed them onto the sofa.

Yawning, he scratched his bare chest, carefully making his way over to the bed. Tonight, he would sleep like a baby, and in the morning he planned do a little fishing for a nice, fat trout for breakfast. Yup, that’s what a man needed to clear his head. A couple of days alone in the wilderness to work out the mental kinks, and he'd be good as new.

When he slipped back the blankets, and crawled under them, a scream so piercing that it damn near split his ear drums, rang out in the small cabin, echoing off the four walls.

CHAPTER TWO

Damned if there wasn't another body in his bed, which felt suspiciously female to him. He knew the curves, valleys, and shape of a woman's soft body. Sharp fingernails clawed down his cheek. "Shit." His cheek stung as he felt a long, silky leg moving toward his groin. Suddenly engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a woman he blocked her knee by pressing his thighs tight around her leg.

Wrestling with her, he managed to grab onto a wrist.

"Let go of me, you goddamn bastard."

Her fingernails barely grazed his jaw again, but he grabbed her other wrist.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you." Rolling her over onto her back wasn't as easy as he figured it would be. She kept shoving her knee higher toward his balls. "Oh, no you don't."

With a loud grunt, and a swift turn of his body, he got his unknown bed partner pinned on her back. The shapely woman had strength, but that could be because he had surprised her. Fear had a way of bringing out the fighter in people. She wriggled underneath him, her bare legs rubbing against his thighs. Under some skimpy little top, Matt felt her plump breasts pushing against his chest.

"Damn you. Get the hell off of me."

"Hold on a minute, lady. For your information, you're in my bed."

The room suddenly went quiet. The only sound, the hoot of an owl perched on a nearby tree outside the cabin. Her breathing seemed to still, too.

"Come again?" she said. "You're not supposed to be here."

"And who told you that?"

"John, John Blackstone."

"Damn, good old John, always assuming things."

"How do I know you're really Matt Brown?"

"Brennan, not Brown." Couldn't his old buddy at least get his name straight? "It

looks like you're just going to have to trust me on that one."

"I don't think so. Get off of me right this minute."

Her nipples were hard pebbles underneath the slinky thing she was wearing. Barely able to see her face, he got a definite feel for her curvy, soft body under him. "If I get off of you, you have to promise not to attack me. My face stings like hell from your fingernails."

"If you think I'm going to apologize for that, you're way off base."

"Nice and easy. I'm rolling off you." Damn, if she didn't smell good, like cherry blossoms in the spring. Although, he was dead on his feet, his cock appeared to be wide-awake.

"You said you were getting off of me."

Matt heard the anger in her throaty voice. "Promise, you won't claw me again."

"I'll do more than claw you, if you don't get off of me. And soon."

After he released her wrists, he rolled off her and the bed in one quick sweep. Matt headed for the kitchen area where he fumbled around for the lantern and box of wooden matches on the kitchen table. He set the match to the wick, bringing more light into the room. He picked up the lantern, and spun around. The woman stood less than two feet from him, holding an aerosol can of bear spray pointed straight at his face. "Hey, take it easy. If I was going to hurt you, I would have already."

"You'd better prove to me real fast, you're Matt Brennan."

He didn't relish the idea of being sprayed in the face with that damn bear spray. Intended for use on a threatening Grizzly bear, he could imagine what it would do to his eyes, not to mention the scratches on his face. "My wallet is in my jeans." He pointed toward the couch.

"Get it."

Her cool green eyes blazed with fear and anger, while her wavy chocolate colored hair tangled around her cheeks and face. She wore lacy panties and a matching white lacy top, which did nothing, but barely cover the essential parts of her body. And the essential parts of her body were definitely noteworthy.

She might be a sultry sight for his tired cowboy eyes, but fear glimmered in her

eyes. Her hand clutching the bear spray trembled. He angled around her and over to the couch. After he tugged his wallet out of his jeans' pocket, he pulled out his driver's license, holding it up for her to see. She didn't seem to notice him holding his license in front of him like a cop holds his badge because her eyes were focused on his naked body when he walked towards her. Her gaze finally lifted and locked with his for a moment.

"That's close enough." She snatched his license out of his hand and read it.

He watched her nibble on her luscious bottom lip before she looked at him. "Satisfied?"

"A...yeah," she said as she handed him it back to him.

Matt walked back to the couch, and tossed his license on top of his clothes.

"Excuse me," she said with a hint of irritation in her voice.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Yeah."

"Do you think you could put some clothes on?"

Her cheeks had turned a delightful shade of pink. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll put some clothes on, if you will." He'd much prefer she didn't cover up that shapely body of hers.

"Oh." Her cheeks stained a deeper shade of pink before she hurried over to her backpack at the foot of the bed. Instead of getting dressed, Matt watched as she dug out a pair of black sweat pants and stepped into them, covering her long legs and sweet ass.

She spun around and caught him staring at her. An annoyed look glinted in her eye. "Clothes. Our deal was that we both get dressed.

"Shit," he mumbled before he snagged his jeans off the couch. By the time he had his pants on; she had put on a pink, long sleeved tee shirt. Her hard nipples were still visible beneath the thin shirt. Clearing his throat in, a feeble attempt to get a handle on his libido, he zipped up his jeans. "Now you tell me who you are and why you're in my cabin."

She perched on the edge of the bed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Laura Kent. I'm taking a few days off."

Matt sat down on the arm of the couch, reached up, and lightly touched his

cheek. The scratches didn't burn as badly as a few minutes ago. "So my old buddy, John, told you about my place."

She nodded. "Don't worry. I'll be gone in the morning."

Instead of answering her, he wondered if he could think clearly and figure out his future with an attractive woman like her around. He was already distracted by her. He'd only had the pleasure of feeling her nearly bare body pinned under him. "It must have taken you a good three hours to hike up here with that big pack of yours."

"John failed to mention how steep the trail actually was," she paused. "He also said you'd be busy branding your spring calves, and I would have the place to myself."

"We finished two days ago." The green of her eyes, reminded him of a high mountain lake.

"So you came up to unwind."

He lifted a bare shoulder. "You could say that."

Funny, how he dragged his tired butt when he walked into the cabin, yet now he appeared to have gotten his second wind. She definitely had to go. The lady was too damn distracting. He wasn't looking for a woman at this time of his life because he had too many other problems to deal with.

"Like I said, I'll pack up and leave in the morning."

Matt nodded. "How do you know John? Are you an ex-girlfriend or something? Last I heard, he wasn't seeing anybody."

An exasperated look spread across her face. "He is, I mean, he was my co-worker. Oh, never mind. I'm not in the mood to talk about it." She glanced away from him, stood up, and smoothed her hands over her sweats. "Where are you going to sleep?"

Two raven-colored brows rose. "Me?"

Fisting a hand, she planted it on her hip. "Is there someone else in the room?"

"You've probably figured out by now, there's only one bed in here. And if you think I'm getting my six foot frame on that puny couch..."

"Then I'll sleep on the couch."

Matt shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Would you mind telling me why not? I think I can sleep wherever I want."

"There's a slight blanket problem, unless you brought a sleeping bag with you."

Laura frowned, reached up and rubbed her temples. "John said there was plenty of bedding and not to worry about it."

"He's right. There's plenty of blankets for one bed. It's probably going to get into the upper twenties tonight." He looked over his shoulder. "Looks like you didn't build a fire."

"I was too tired."

"If you're satisfied I'm a safe guy, and you promise not to attack me, I don't have a problem sharing the same bed for one night."

"You know why I scratched you. And you should put something on that scratch so it doesn't get infected."

"Good point." He stood up, and wandered over to the cupboards where he kept a metal box filled with first aid supplies. He tore open an alcohol wipe and dabbed at his face. "Ouch, dammit."

When he finished doctoring up his face, he circled around and saw Laura standing in the same spot, giving him a suspicious look. "What?"

"You are planning on sleeping in your clothes, aren't you?"

"Clothes? Sorry, no can do. They're too restraining."

Her eyes widened.

"Okay, okay, I'll sleep in my underwear, but no more than that."

Laura Kent made some kind of unladylike sound before she turned her back to him, and climbed into his bed. The shape of her butt made his cock twitch. "Dammit, anyway."

He shrugged when she eyed him over her shoulder.

After he dressed in his briefs and white tee shirt, which only added to his agitated mood, he put out the kerosene lamp and walked over to the bed. He felt her scooting as close to the wall as she could get when he climbed in beside her. The cold mountain air filtered through the log walls of the cabin, creating a deep chill in the room.

"I don't bite," he said. "You don't have to sleep against the wall. Besides, there might be a spider or two crawling around."

"I'm not afraid of spiders."

Maybe six inches separated the two of them. Being aware of her body so close to his, gave him a full-fledged hard-on. Frowning, he stared up at the ceiling. How in the hell was he supposed to get any sleep with an attractive woman in his bed? Since, his ex-wife, Carolyn, ran out on him eighteen months ago, he'd been wary of women. For the first time in his thirty-six years, he'd done a damned fine job of keeping his distance from the opposite sex, but his body felt the neglect of not having a woman.

Struggling to ignore the big, muscled man next to her, Laura closed her eyes, as she tried to sleep. When he moved, the small bed shifted under his weight. He smelled of horses, and coffee. His raven-colored hair was a bit on the long side for a cowboy, while those blue eyes of his were a startling contrast to his black hair. And, lordy, but the man was built. She buried the urge to squirm around on the bed, because that body of his steamed up her senses to the boiling point. Clenching her teeth, she didn't move. John would pay for his faux pas when she returned to Missoula. Thanks to the unexpected arrival of the cowboy, she' would be toting that heavy pack back down the mountain first thing in the morning. So much for her planned regrouping time. Damn both of them.

"You like trout?"

She nearly jumped out of her skin, when his deep voice broke the silence in the cabin. "Excuse me?"

"I'm planning on catching a couple for breakfast."

"Thanks, but no, I brought some granola."

"Granola and trout? Yuck. Afraid that doesn't sound too appetizing."

In spite of her agitated state of mind, she smiled at his humor. "You can eat your trout and I can eat my granola."

He rolled onto his side. She knew that because she felt his breath on the back of her neck. Way too, close for comfort. John had failed to mention Matt Brennan

was a hunk of a man, but so was John in his city slicker way. The number one difference between them was Matt had acquired his prime shape because of his work as a rancher. And his male equipment was spectacular. *Don't even go there.*

Frustrated, she flopped onto her back, forgetting he was so close.

"Ah...so you're not the ice princess."

"What the hell do you expect from me? You added twenty years to my life when you crawled into bed. And just because I don't find the wall comfortable to cozy up to, doesn't mean you need to get any ideas."

His husky chuckle sent a tantalizing thrill through her. The cowboy appeared to be a delicious package that was for sure.

"I promise hands off as long as I'm awake, but all bets are off once I fall asleep."

Not at all sure, she liked his answer. Laura said. "Meaning?"

"Meaning. I'm a rowdy sleeper. I'm a blanket hog; I crush pillows, and take over most of the bed. I just thought I should warn you in advance."

"Gee thanks." Heat pooled between her legs imagining him sprawled all over her again. Her little getaway had just been turned upside down. There went her peace and quiet, and alone time, so she could plan her job hunting strategy.

"I bet you're a cuddler. Women usually are."

"You're generalizing."

"That's the way of the world. Men are macho and women are all soft and cuddly."

"Do the women in your world have brains?"

This time a husky laugh rumbled from him, which in turn, made her smile again.

"Good come back. Yeah, I like brains. And I can see you have one," he paused. "Nice combo. Brains and sexy."

Was he referring to her as smart and sexy? Or to smart and sexy women in general? No doubt, women melted like spring snow at his feet. "Nice try, but, you're not sweet talking me into anything."

"You think I'm coming onto you?"

Laura considered his question. Maybe she had jumped ahead of herself because subconsciously she wanted him to put the moves on her. That wasn't her

style. Bedrooms were off limits on first dates, but then again, she didn't end up in bed with a hot and sexy cowboy every night of her life either. "Maybe."

"Hmmm..."

After that, their conversation came to an abrupt halt. She wasn't sure how much time passed before Matt drifted off to sleep beside her. Still wide awake, staring up the ceiling, she felt his muscular thigh slide over her legs, followed by his arm flopping across her middle just below her breasts.

"Just great," she muttered. Knowing she wouldn't get a wink of sleep tonight, she let him stay where he lay. Partly because she didn't want him waking up, and partly because she liked the feel of his strong body sprawled over hers. She had just met him and already she liked the feel of him. Laura cautioned herself to be careful. This cowboy might prove to be a handful.

CHAPTER THREE

Bright morning sunlight streamed through the windows when Laura blinked her eyes, bringing herself awake. Slightly disoriented, she turned her head, and discovered the bed was empty. The sprawling cowboy was already up and foraging for food. Heat radiated from the wood stove in the corner. While he'd built a fire, she somehow managed to sleep through it. Throwing back the blankets, she scrambled out of bed, craving a hot shower, and a strong cup of black coffee. Unfortunately, the creek and instant coffee would have to suffice this morning.

After she gathered up her clothes, towel, and toiletries, she walked outside and felt the chilly morning air assaulting her. Hunching her shoulders against the cold air, she angled around the cabin, and paused when she spotted the beautiful roan colored Quarter horse penned in the corral. The cowboy was authentic, right down to his sleek ride. A quick stop at the outhouse and she headed in the direction of the creek.

The gurgle of water could be heard up ahead. She followed the narrow path that snaked through the thick stand of pine trees until the wide creek came into view. The creek, by Montana standards, constituted a small river. She walked beside the flowing bed of water, until she spotted a deep pool and slowly circled around, searching for the cowboy. When she didn't spot him angling for fish, she figured it was safe to strip. Not that it mattered, he' had seen her nearly naked last night. Teeth chattering, she quickly peeled off her clothes and placed one foot in the icy water.

"Oh!" This wouldn't be the first time she'd bathed in cold mountain water while camping. By midsummer, the creeks and rivers warmed just enough to make bathing tolerable. In May, the water still flowed cold because of the snow run-off from the mountains.

"Time to bite the bullet." Laura picked up a bar of soap and a small bottle of shampoo from her things. In one swift move, she plunged into the water, submersed

her head, and shot straight out of it like a shuttle at take-off, followed by a scream that sounded like a Grizzly had attacked her.

Teeth chattering, and body shivering, she shampooed her hair, before scrubbing her body. Laura tossed the soap and shampoo onto the bank before she dunked down into the water again to rinse her hair and body. While under the icy water, she realized she grew colder with each passing second.

After she shot out of the water at warp speed again, she brushed her hair back from her face. Her eyes landed on Matt, standing at the water's edge, a deep scowl drawn across his rugged face, under his black cowboy hat.

"What the hell is going on? I thought you got attacked by a bear or mountain lion."

The pool of water wasn't deep enough to cover her breasts, so she wrapped her arms over her chest to cover herself. Too late for modesty because his killer blues zeroed in on her bare breasts. "The water's freezing."

"Get the hell out of there now, before you get hypothermia."

"Turn around, dammit, so I can get out."

"No time to be coy, Laura. If you're not out of there in a flat second, I'm coming in for you and carrying you out."

Her shivering increased the longer she spent in the frigid water. She cursed him for being right, as she trudged through the water to the bank. At the water's edge, two big hands grabbed her hips and lifted her out. Matt snagged her towel off the ground and started drying her.

"Hey," she protested through chattering teeth. While the chill settled deep into her bones she couldn't remember ever being this cold in her entire life. Weakened from the icy water, she let him dry her, not far enough gone to feel his hands roughly rubbing her body dry with the towel. "I'm okay."

Silently, he dried her fast and thorough. His hands and the towel traveled everywhere. The hell with modesty she decided as she bent to grab her clothes. Matt took her clothes out of her hands, first holding up her black bikini panties. Worried, because her shivering kept getting worse, she snatched her panties away from him and stepped into them. Next, he held her lacy black bra out to her. Before

she even had it snapped, he pulled her sweats over her ankles. She grabbed onto his shoulder for support so she didn't take a tumble backwards.

After the two of them had her dressed, he scooped up her things, grabbed her hand, dragging her toward the cabin.

"If you can't keep up, I can carry you," he said over his shoulder, a concerned look on his face.

In spite of the fact, her teeth chattering because she bordered on hypothermia, his concern for warmed her heart. Not only had he touched nearly every secret part of her body, he also touched her emotions.

Matt stopped, dropped her things to the ground, and scooped her up in his arms.

"I can walk."

"Like hell you can. You need to get warm and fast."

Laura dropped her head to his shoulder, closed her eyes, and let the cowboy take charge. As soon as she was warm and fed, she would be on her way.

She must have dozed on the short hike back to the cabin, because the next thing she knew, Matt wrapped a wool blanket around her before he gently sat her down on the couch. Through a haze, her body wrenched with the shakes, she watched him add wood to the fire, and then he disappeared. Lying down on her side, she stacked her hands under her head wishing like hell that she would get warm.

A short while later, Matt took her arm, to sit her up before he placed a mug of steamy coffee into her trembling hands.

"Drink it."

"Mmmm..."

He sat down next to her. "Drink it."

Laura took a few small sips of the hot brew.

"All of it."

"You're pushy." She followed his orders by taking a bigger sip this time.

"And you, lady, are bordering on hypothermia."

"I'm starting to get warm."

“You’re still shivering.”

By taking small sips, she managed to get most of the coffee down. The coffee warmed her body, but the chill still lingered. Leaning back against the couch, she watched him over the rim of the mug. “Thank you.”

He turned, his knee resting against her thigh. “You could have waited till the sun got warmer, before going skinny dipping.”

“Okay, okay, I blew it. I needed a bath.” She remembered him drying her. Had she not been so out of it, his big hands roaming her body, she would have surely come under his rough touch. When her strength returned, she was out of here, she reminded herself again.

“I usually wait till mid-afternoon when the sun is overhead,” he paused. “Are you okay enough to be left alone for awhile?”

A tiny wave of panic rolled through her. Where was the cowboy going? “Yeah.” And why did it matter to her if he left for awhile? She felt her body slowly returning to its normal temperature.

“I need to get back to the creek and fetch the fish I caught for breakfast. That is, if a bear hasn’t already eaten them for his breakfast.”

One corner of his lip curled up, but his eyes were serious as he stared at her. The cowboy not only had a killer body, his also possessed a code of ethics. “Go ahead.”

One dark brow lifted. “You’re sure?”

“Uh...huh.”

Matt laid his hand on her knee and squeezed it gently before he stood up. When he glanced back down at her, she noticed a strange look in his eye.

“Be back in a flash,” he said as he headed for the door.

She cradled the warm mug in her hands and stared at the closed door after Matt left. Something was going on between them. Even in her weakened state, she felt the heat every time he came close. In less than eight hours, he had seen her naked, touched her bare body, and now helped save her life. She wondered if she was his type? Did it matter if she was his type? She would be leaving in a short while. Once she got some food in her, she would be good to go.

She set the mug on the floor and laid back down, tugging the blanket close around her, and drifted off.

Matt shouldered the door open and saw that Laura had fallen asleep again. He dumped the three trout into a bucket and strode over to the couch. He laid a hand on her cheek and marveled at the silky softness of it. Her skin had warmed to a decent temperature, so he knew she was out of the woods now. Breathing a sigh of relief, he walked back to the kitchen to fix breakfast. Under his breath, he cursed himself for not dragging her out of the water sooner. After he grabbed a cast iron skillet out of the cupboard, he set it on the stove.

When he'd heard her terrifying scream, he had dropped his fishing pole, and taken off running in her direction with fear knotting inside his gut. Finding her in his cabin had thrown a definite wrench in his plans for clearing his head. Now his thoughts were all muddled concerning her. He'd been looking for a few days of solitude. While he dressed out the fish, he glanced over his shoulder. Her dark wavy hair was a tangled mess, kissing her cheeks, and splaying out around her face.

At the creek, his first concern had been to get her dry and warm, but images of her bare womanly body rising out of the water taunted him. Her plump breasts bouncing as she moved, and her nipples puckered hard from the icy water. It had been damned hard to ignore her breasts, and the dark, wet curls between her legs. While the frying pan heated on the propane stove, he mixed powdered eggs with water in a bowl.

"Smells good."

He wheeled around at the sound of Laura's voice. The blanket wrapped around her, she walked toward him. Her right cheek reddened from sleeping on her side, while the other cheek still looked slightly pale.

"Maybe you'll share your breakfast with me, so I can be on my way," she said.

"Sorry. I'm afraid you're not going anywhere today. You need to take it easy."

Her brows knitted together before she peeked around him to see what was cooking. "Once I eat breakfast, I'll be fine. Trout and scrambled eggs. Good energy for hiking."

He dished up two plates with scrambled eggs and the fried trout. "After your polar plunge, you need to rest."

She plucked the plates off the counter and carried them to the table. He followed with two cups of black coffee.

"You came up here to rest after branding season. I'm in your way." She shrugged. "I'll get out of here, like I promised last night."

"You can go tomorrow." Tomorrow seemed too soon. What the hell was going on with him? "I didn't exactly come up here to rest. I'm not that old, that branding time kicks my butt." He grinned at her. "Those little devil calves manage to get in some whopper kicks, though." He watched her lips curve into a smile, causing a slight hitch inside his chest. "Besides, you're up here for some R and R, too."

A shadow passed across her face. "I guess you could say that."

"You might as well enjoy the time off from work."

Her fork stilled on her metal plate. "I've been downsized."

"Come again?"

"You know. Fired, laid off. Whatever the hell you want to call it."

"That's a tough break. Last time I talked to John, he said Simtech was going great guns."

She ate a bite of eggs before she answered. "Oh, it is, but, my boss had it in for me. Or I should say he had it in my assistant, Melissa." When he didn't respond, she said. "You know, he was doing her."

Matt nodded, wondering why her boss didn't want to do Laura.

"Paul is forty- six, married with a couple of kids, so he's having some kind of mid-life crisis. Melissa is twenty-four, with a Playboy bunny body. He insisted I hire her as my assistant. He's VP of human resources and I was right below him." She pointed her fork at him. "Personally, I didn't think she was qualified enough for the position. Obviously, Paul had her other qualifications in mind."

"Tough break. You ought to sue the bastard and get your job back."

"I considered that. But why would I want to work for him again? No, I'll just find another job."

He picked up his mug and took a long swallow. "I need to either turn my ranch

into a dude or working ranch.” He had no idea why he was confiding his financial crisis to her, but she appeared to be in the same boat.

Laura caught his eye. “You mean, you’ll go under if you can’t bring in additional income?”

“Yeah, that’s it in a nutshell.”

Laura sipped her coffee. “From what I understand, working ranches are becoming quite popular in Montana and Wyoming. City people pay big bucks to play cowboy for a week or two in the summer.”

“That’s what my banker told me.” That option still didn’t sit well with him.

“You want to keep your ranch. It’s probably been passed onto you.”

“My granddad bought the land. I’m third generation.”

After Laura finished off her breakfast, she picked up her mug, and dropped her elbows on the table. “These days you have to think outside the box. Maybe you don’t want to, but sometimes you have to reinvent yourself.”

Scowling, Matt stared down at his empty plate for several moments before he pushed it out of his way.

“It might not be as bad you think,” Laura said. “It would only be for a few months in late spring and summer. The rest of the time you’d have your ranch to yourself.”

When he looked at her, he saw the genuine concern in her eyes. His ex had never warmed up to ranching as a life style. “My options are pretty damn limited at this point.”

“Join the club. I worked at Simtech for nine years. I started at the bottom and moved up. And ended up getting axed out of my job all because of some big breasted twenty four year old.” She held up her mug in a faux toast. “C’est la vie.”

A sudden urge to grab her and carry her to the bed swept through him. The lady was a deadly combo; sexy and smart. He warned himself he needed to get his shit together, not get involved with a woman that stirred the blood in his veins and gave him a perpetual hard-on. Getting involved would only complicate his botched up life. On the other hand, they were alone together in the wilderness, and wild, hot sex would definitely take their minds off their problems.

“Why are you staring at me? Do I have a chunk of fish stuck to my cheek or

something?”

“Ah...” He cleared his throat, not realizing he ogled her. “Your cheek is nice and clean.”

From under lowered lashes, she studied him. “This is your place and I kind of horned in on your time up here.”

Interest gleamed in her eyes. Did she want to stay? “We can blame this all on John. If he would have called me, I would have told him I was coming up here. You know how John is. He assumes a lot.”

“Yeah, that’s how he operates, but I still like him.”

Their eyes locked for one burning moment. Laura glanced away first, but a few moments later, she looked back at him with a sexy look in her eyes. “We might as well enjoy our time up here.” His voice came out sounding like scratchy sand paper. Damn, the woman had burrowed under his skin and he didn't know if he liked that or not. It was hard to focus on anything, let alone his financial affairs with Laura around.

She stood up, avoiding his gaze, and snatched the plates off the table. “I’ll clean up,” she said.

Matt stood up, too, and caught her arm. “I don’t think you’re up to it.”

“Okay, cowboy. I’m warm and now have food in me, so I can handle washing the dishes.”

He didn't miss the challenge in her eyes, which for some crazy reason, made him want her more. Should he kiss her or not? Tossing caution aside, he leaned toward her when her fist thumped him in the chest.

“Maybe you could go fetch some water?” she suggested.

Her eyes were alive with emotions, but he backed off and dropped her arm. “Yes, ma’am.”

CHAPTER FOUR

After Matt left with a couple of buckets, Laura dressed in faded jeans, and a long sleeved white tee, which she soon realized, didn't fill the bill. A slight chill still lay dormant in her body, so she grabbed a blue long sleeved pull over sweater out of her pack. As she laced up her hiking boots, the cowboy returned with the water. His gaze caught hers for a sizzling moment when he walked through the door. She turned away and dug a brush out of her pack, before glancing around for a mirror.

Alone in the cabin yesterday, she hadn't cared about a mirror, but since the dynamics had shifted with the arrival of the cowboy, suddenly she needed to get her hands on a mirror. "Um...excuse me. Is there a mirror around here some place?"

He filled a big kettle on the stove with one of the buckets, before he glanced in her direction. "Mirrors aren't allowed up here. This cabin is all about getting back to the basics."

She rolled her eyes, attempting to brush the tangles out of her hair.

"By the way, you look just fine."

The gleam of appreciation in his eyes sent slivers of sensual heat through her. She concentrated on getting the tangles out of her naturally wavy hair, knowing her hair probably resembled a tornado stricken zone. Laura felt his eyes on her, but she ignored him, struggling with the tangles.

"Need some help?"

"No thanks." She kept fussing with her hair, refusing to look at him.

Matt walked over to her, and brushed a lock of her hair off her cheek. The gentle caress of his rough fingers stirred crazy little emotions inside her heart.

"Pretty hair..."

"Um...thanks." His blue eyes locked with hers. No doubt, those big blue eyes of his made women drool all over her him. Now, if she could just refrain from drooling herself.

"How come you're not married?" He paused, his eyes narrowing a fraction.

“You’re not, are you?”

Her defenses flared because she didn't have the best track record with men.

“I’m not married. And is there some law that says I should be?”

“Hey, take it easy. I was just wondering. I thought maybe you were taking a few days off from the hubby, too.”

She held up her left hand. “No ring.”

“Has there ever been a ring?”

“No.”

“I had a ring for three years.” He frowned. “My ex didn’t like ranch life. She lives in Seattle now.”

Suddenly they were sharing secrets about their past and personal lives, which created a sense of uneasiness inside of her. How could she not be attracted him? Wide shoulders, nice firm butt, a rugged face, and killer blue eyes made for one dynamite man. “I’m sorry.”

Matt lifted a shoulder. “That’s life.”

Laura tossed the brush on top of her pack and circled around. As she walked toward the kitchen area, she felt his eyes following her like twin laser beams. She poured the hot water into a metal washbasin to clean the breakfast dishes.

“I need to take care of my horse.”

Startled, she jumped and spun around. “Oh.” Inches away from her, his eyes watched her like a hawk checking out a field mouse. “Okay.”

“Since it’s warming up outside, I’m going to take a quick dip, too.”

A hot thrill rushed through her, remembering the image of his naked body last night. “You do that.”

He backed away from her, his eyes holding hers. “Holler if you need anything. Or scream. You got one hell of a scream, lady.”

His horse waded into the creek to lap at the water, while Matt washed his body. When he walked out of the cabin, his dick had been hard and ready. The icy cold water remedied his condition and fast. Frustration had him scowling as he stepped onto the bank and snagged his towel off a nearby tree branch. He didn’t remember

the last time he was so unexpectedly attracted to a woman. He had already seen and touched just about every inch of her body so far. That might be the problem. He'd experienced too much of the woman, and none of it had been intentional. While he hadn't set out to seduce her, but now seducing her seemed to be the only thing on his mind.

Whiskey plodded out of the water and followed him back to the cabin. He staked out his horse in a small green meadow to graze, and decided he needed to split some firewood. As he strolled by the cabin, he glanced in the window and saw Laura sleeping on the bed. His gaze took in every inch of her body, covered by a blanket. She liked to sleep on her side. Her high cheekbones, big eyes, and thick eyebrows made for an interesting face. Feeling his dick coming to life again, even after the icy bath, he walked to the porch, and dumped his stuff on it. "Shit."

A small shed behind the cabin held axes, mauls, shovels, metal buckets and various other necessities. He picked up a maul and angled over to the stack of wood, already cut into rounds. As he split the pine wood, he elbowed aside fantasies of Laura, and concentrated on his plan for the future of his ranch. His back was against the wall and he knew it. He needed to figure out how to get the ball rolling for setting up a working ranch. His foreman, Rusty, would have a shit fit for sure. Antisocial by nature, Rusty would have to be dragged kicking and cursing into the future concerning the ranch.

Feeling eyes on him, Matt paused, the maul raised above his head. He turned, and saw her leaning against the porch pillar watching him. As he lowered the maul, their eyes caught, holding onto each other's. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure how long I slept, but I do feel much better."

"Good. Time doesn't really matter up here. I never wear my watch up here. I bring it, but I'm not sure why." Time might damn well matter this trip up here, if she left in the morning.

Matt leaned the handle of the maul against the chopping block, then bent down to gather up an armload of wood.

"Need some help?" she asked.

"You still need to take it easy."

“Oh...please, I’m not that fragile.”

She struck him as a strong and independent woman, which added to the attraction for him, since clinging vines had never been his type. “I’ve got the wood handled.”

When he walked past her, he looked into her eyes, and nearly stumbled on a loose porch board. An impish grin lit up her face. Grinning back at her, he went into the cabin, and stacked the wood next to the stove. He went back outside, and saw her turn her face up to the late morning sun.

In two long strides, he moved next to her, cupping the back of her neck with his hand. Tilting her head, the invitation clear in her eyes, he lowered his lips to hers. She tasted sweet, like honey slathered on warm biscuits. He explored her luscious lips with his, feeling the adrenaline bolt through his body.

Ready to slide his tongue into her, she stepped back. Not that easily deterred, Matt said. “You taste good.” He tried to lean in for another kiss, but her hand splayed across his chest, stopping him.

“Trying to take advantage of the situation?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I think it would be hard to take advantage of you, not that I’m that kind of guy.”

“Yeah, right. All guys try. It’s the nature of the beast.”

He wondered how bad she’d been hurt in the past. “Point taken, but you let me kiss you.”

“Maybe I was curious. Now that my curiosity has been satisfied...”

“Has it really been satisfied, Laura?”

She crossed her arms over her chest in a protective manner, and looked away from him, staring toward the corral.

“I think not.” That said, he went to gather up more wood.

His arms loaded with wood, he spun around, and saw her heading toward the creek. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“For a walk.”

“Dammit,” he muttered, as he dumped the wood on the porch, and hurried to catch up with her.

Matt fell in step with her. "You don't know your way around here."

"If you weren't here, I'd be walking around all by my lonesome."

Not seeing a bulge under her blue nylon jacket, he said. "You didn't bring your bear spray."

"I forgot."

"Since you're intent on getting some fresh air, there's a waterfall about a quarter mile north of here." He would rather she rested. Why was he acting like her personal bodyguard? It was clear she could take care of herself, or else she wouldn't have lugged a heavy backpack all the way up here to be alone.

"I like waterfalls," she said.

"It's not Niagara, so don't get too excited."

She looked over her shoulder at him, her lips curving into a playful smile. Whenever she smiled at him, his breathing went all haywire.

Laura took the lead when they reached the creek, which he didn't mind at all. It gave him an opportunity to watch her butt moving in her snug, faded jeans. Not paying attention to the narrow game trail they hiked along, the toe of his boot caught on a rock sticking out from the ground. This time he did stumble, and almost plowed right into her.

She stopped, and spun around to face him. "You okay back there?"

"Ha-ha."

Smiling, she circled back around. "You need to pay attention to the trail."

He couldn't help himself as a big grin split across his face. Her sassy attitude just fed his desire for her.

They walked in silence after that, Matt alternating his gaze between her shapely ass, and the trail, so he wouldn't fall flat on his face. Up ahead he heard the rush and gurgle of water.

She paused in front of the narrow waterfall pouring out of the hillside, before she turned and smiled at him.

Unable to stop himself, he grinned like an idiot back at her, and when he reached her, he grabbed her hand. "There's a comfortable rock over here for waterfall watching." A good feeling swept through him when she didn't pull her hand

away. He led her over to a large irregular shaped rock near the creek with a perfect view of the waterfall.

Sitting down first, he tugged her down beside him.

She glanced at him, a twinkle in her eye. "Not bad for a rock."

"Told you, it was comfortable."

Their hands resting on his thigh, he watched her from the corner of his eye. She seemed to be enthralled with the cascade of water emptying into the creek. "I know you're not married, but is there a man in your life?"

She took her time answering, before she tilted her head in his direction. "Not for awhile now."

He didn't like how good that made him feel to find out she was available. Available for what, he wasn't sure. Now that he was forced into changing the lifestyle of his ranch, he wouldn't have time for a woman, but he did have a couple of free days up here. "In a few days I have to go back home and start making changes on my ranch."

Laura shifted so she could look at him. "Yeah..."

"And you have to go back to Missoula and look for a job. Right?"

"Uh...huh."

He rubbed the pad of his thumb over her knuckles, liking the simple act of holding hands with her. "The way I see it, is we might as well enjoy our time up here."

"I am enjoying my time. This is a beautiful spot."

Matt leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear. "Am I not making myself clear?"

"Oh, you're coming through loud and clear."

His brows furrowed together. "Okay. I thought maybe I was losing my touch."

"You're old enough to have your seduction lines down pat."

"Never use the same line twice," Matt winked at her. "Not good policy."

Laughing, she looked away from him and over at the waterfall. While she gazed at the water, he lifted her hand to his lips, skimming kisses across the palm of her hand.

Laura slowly brought her gaze back to him. "You're good."

"Thanks." He dragged her closer to him, and pressed his lips against hers.

Her little sigh had him coaxing open her lips, and sliding his tongue deep inside to explore. Her free hand clutched his jacket front, while his arm slid around her back. As their kiss grew more frantic, he dropped her hand to slide his between her legs, spreading his palm across her crotch.

The feel of her pussy against his palm, tore a groan from him, and caused a deepening of the kiss. Her hand clutched around his jacket, tugging him closer. The cherry blossom scent of her only added to his aroused state. As he stroked her with his hand, he willingly swallowed her little sighs and moans of pleasure.

Laura tore her lips from his, and stared at him, her face flushed. Suddenly her hand grabbed his away from between her legs.

She shook her head. "No."

Damn, just when things got good, she hit the brakes. "Say it like you mean it."

She scooted away from him and shook her head again. "Trust me, I mean it."

"Okay, I can respect that." It didn't mean he had to like it though. Laura stared at the waterfall, ignoring him, her hands clasped together in her lap. "We're both attracted to each other. You can't deny that."

She didn't answer him right away. "I won't deny it. But that doesn't mean anything is going to happen between us."

"Why not? We're both adults and foot loose and fancy-free. The way I see it is we could have a damn good time up here for a few days."

She shifted her position to look at him. "Are you suggesting we have a fling?" Before he could answer, she hurried on. "I don't do one night stands."

In spite of his throbbing dick, he respected that about Laura and wasn't that surprised at her answer. "I didn't figure you for that type, either, but, we're both looking to unwind. And what better way than hot, mind blowing sex?"

"How do you know we'd have hot, mind blowing sex? The chemistry might not carry to bed."

He brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Ah...Laura. I think you know better than that."

“Hmmp. Remember I’m leaving in the morning.”

“You don’t have to leave in the morning,” Matt said in his most seductive voice. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

She stood up and faced him. “You’ve really got your moves down pat, don’t you?” Her green eyes sparked with anger.

“Call it whatever you want. I’m being honest here. I want you. And if you weren’t fighting it so hard, you’d admit you want me, too.”

“Oh *please*, give me a break.”

Matt stood up and placed his hands on her hips, and when she tried to back away, he tightened his hold. “How about this? I won’t put the moves on you anymore today. But, when we go to bed tonight, you can give me a signal.”

“A signal?”

By tonight, he wouldn’t need a signal because he would be hard pressed to keep his hands off her. “You could slither up on top of me and kiss me until I can’t breathe.” He paused, considering that. “Yeah, the more I think about it, the more I like that signal.”

She shoved at his chest, pushing him away, but her eyes blazed with heat. “Or you can get creative,” Matt suggested.

The corners of her lips curved up. “You’re full of it.”

Chuckling, he reached for her again, but she spun around and sashayed down to the creek.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her lashes lowered. “You promised hands off, while I think about it.”

A wide, foolish grin spread across his face as he walked toward her. “I like that. You’re going to think about it.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, cowboy. I said I was only going to think about it.”

His cock strained against his jeans. Sparring with her made him want her more. “I have all day to persuade you.”

“I’m sure you’ll give it your best shot.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Laura, sat on the porch, her feet propped up on the railing, pretending to the read the paperback book she brought with her. The cowboy proved to be too distracting, making it difficult to concentrate on the mystery novel. She watched him groom his horse, his broad shoulders stretching the fabric of his tee shirt, and his faded jeans curving around his butt, which made for a sexy, distracting sight.

He wanted a quick fling, with no strings attached. She reasoned he deserved a gold star for being honest. When he glanced in her direction, she quickly looked down at the book, hoping he hadn't caught her drooling over him. If she agreed to his proposition, she didn't doubt for a second it would be memorable. The operative words being *if she agreed*. Why not? It might be good for her since she definitely needed an attitude adjustment after being axed from her job.

"Is your book interesting?"

Startled, Laura looked over at him. He had one hand on his horse's rump, the other on his hip. "Very."

A grin kicked up the corners of his lips. "I thought maybe you found me more interesting. You were watching me more than reading."

That grin of his shot tingles clear down to her toes. "Huh. That's what you want to believe."

Matt's grin widened before he went back to tending his horse.

Her senses heated up from their little exchange, she struggled to concentrate on the book again. The words were a blur. All she had to do was give him a sign. If she stood up and peeled off her top, that would definitely do it.

Matt finished brushing his horse, and looked back at her, his eyes searching her face. "I'm taking Whiskey to the creek for a drink and to wash up."

She lifted a shoulder with a nonchalance she didn't come close to feeling. "Okay."

As soon as he disappeared from view, she closed the book, and laid it on the

porch railing. Running her hands through her hair, every single nerve ending in her body hummed. She had never been given an opportunity quite like this one before. A rugged, attractive cowboy who also appeared to be a decent guy.

She could analyze or she could act. Deciding to act instead of analyzing what she was about to do, she jumped up and hurried into the cabin. Her hands clammy, and her heart pounding, she walked over to the bed, and started removing her clothes. When she was as bare as the day she was born, she laid down on the bed. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows warming the spot where she lay.

Totally out of her element and feeling it too, she scooted around on the bed, trying to strike the right pose. Just as she turned on her side, the cabin door opened. Feeling her face reaching the same temperature as the sun, she watched Matt as he paused and stared over at her.

His eyes widened in surprise and appreciation before he cleared his throat. "Planning on taking a nap? Or, is this the signal? 'Cause if this is the signal, let me commend you on your choice." The door banged closed behind him.

Damn, what the hell was she doing? Definitely not her style to be laying nude on a bed for a man she hardly knew. "I wasn't planning on napping." Her voice sounded slightly breathless to her own ears.

His gaze fixated on her, he walked toward her, peeling off his tee shirt. Her pulse hammered at the sight of that wide, muscled chest of his covered with sooty black hair. By the time he reached the side of the bed, his eyes were hooded. She watched as he tugged off his boots, followed by his jeans and briefs.

His hard-on was spectacular.

Then he was on the bed and on top of her.

As Matt nibbled the corner of her luscious lips, he remembered opening the door and seeing Laura's bare body lying seductively on her side. His cock had responded immediately. Laura sighed as he forced his tongue inside of her mouth, adding to the heavy sexual tension inside his body. Sliding his leg over her thighs, he pushed her onto to her back. Their tongues, tasted, explored and tempted.

Her back arched when he cupped her plump breast. Matt ended the kiss so he

could taste her nipple. He caught her hard nipple between his teeth and tugged. Circling his tongue round and round, his hand massaged her breast. Feeling her nails dig into his shoulder blades, he drew her nipple into his mouth and suckled.

She tasted sweet and salty, smelled like cherry blossoms and womanly musk. His hand roamed down to her pussy where he spread his large hand across her, and gently massaged her mound, feeling the movement of her hips beneath his hand.

His gaze sought out hers and she stared back at him with a deep flush on her cheeks, her eyes filled heat. He kissed her again, long and deep, while he continued his exploring with his hand. After he ended the kiss, he trailed kisses across her cheek, to the soft, side of her neck.

"I want to taste every inch of you," he whispered in her ear, before he nipped her lobe.

"Oh...yes," she murmured as her hands skimmed up and down his back.

Laura, offering herself to him, was a gift that he fully intended to savor every second of before they went their separate ways. His lips slowly traveled down her shoulder, to the underside of her soft breast. He licked his way to her nipple before drawing it into his mouth. Hoping like hell, he could control himself for the duration, he gave one last tug before he continued his descent down her silky, shapely body. He swirled his tongue around her belly button before he slithered down her body until he was eye level with her dark brown curls. After he took her hips in his hands, he lifted her up as she wrapped her legs around his shoulders.

When his tongue flicked across her clit, he had to grit his teeth. He wanted everything from her. Slowly he tongued her clit, feeling her hips start a slow gyration under his face. He struggled to keep himself gentle, but the lust burning inside his body quickly ended his honorable intentions. Matt licked her hard and fast, while her hips moved in rhythm with his strokes. He buried his head against her hot, moist pussy, snuggling her legs tight against his face as her fingers drove through his hair. He didn't feel it coming when her body convulsed against him, while her loud cry of pleasure echoed inside his ears, as he raised his head, and looked at her.

Her eyes were closed and her hands fell away from his arms. He raised up over

her, dropping his elbows next to her shoulders for support.

Laura's eyes slowly fluttered open and her hands tightened on his butt, trying to push him down to her.

"I want to take you from behind, lovely Laura." His voice came out on a husky, rough note.

She reached up and traced his lips with her tongue before she turned on her side. The sight of her shapely ass had his cock throbbing so damned hard he wondered wonder he didn't explode. She barely had herself positioned when he grabbed her hips, and rammed his himself hard and swift into her damp pussy. His loud grunt filled the cabin with it's intensity as he pumped and drove himself deep inside of her.

Her shapely rump pushed tight against him as he drove himself in and out of her womanly heat. His hands dug into the soft flesh of her hips as her moans increased with each thrust of his cock. Leaning over her back, he caught one of her breasts in his hand, kneading it with rough strokes.

He nipped her shoulder and he heard her harsh intake of breath as he thrust harder and faster into her. Seconds later, he came with one final plunge, feeling Laura tumbling over the edge with him, as she tightened around him.

Laura turned and flopped onto her side and waited for her breathing to settle down. Matt fell beside her, gazing into her eyes. They were almost nose-to-nose. His hand rested on her hip. She did believe that was the best sex she had ever experienced in her entire life. Offering herself to him had been worth every hot, thrilling moment. The hell with the consequences, she decided. She would figure those out later. Now, she just wanted to bask in the afterglow with Matt looking deep into her eyes.

He leaned in and kissed her. "What changed your mind?" He paused, his eyes filling with mischief. "My irresistible charm?"

His irresistible charm, his killer body, his sexy grin, and his concern and care of her this morning, all had her caving within hours of his proposition. "Maybe I was just horny."

He moved his hand from her hip to her breast, where he circled his forefinger around her nipple. Feeling heat burst inside of her, she rolled onto her back. Those big, rough hands of his held the power to make her melt at his slightest touch. Not good. They were having a fling. She needed to remember that.

His leg slid over her thighs as he started fondling her breast again. "You have beautiful breasts," he said, before he bent and paid homage to one nipple.

She gripped the back of his neck, wishing he wouldn't stop, but knowing in her heart too much of the cowboy might not be good for her emotional health. "I'm hungry."

"Me, too." He moved his head to her other nipple and did wondrous things with his tongue.

She fought against the avalanche of desire tumbling through her. "I mean food...oh...we...missed lunch."

Matt lifted his head, and shot her a rakish look. "I promise to feed you as soon as I'm done here." That said; his hand wedged between her legs.

Sitting across the table from Laura, he watched her devour the peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich. It was damned clear she made a complete recovery from this morning. "I think you need to stay another day."

She finished chewing the last bite of her sandwich. "I feel fine. I'm back to normal."

If she left in the morning, would anything be normal again? Something had shifted inside of him when they had made love. "Another day. Doctor's orders."

Over the rim of her glass, she eyed him before she took a drink of iced tea. "We'll see. You still have things to work out about your ranch."

Some how, his ranch seemed a million miles away instead of three. With Laura, it was too damn easy to forget his financial problems. He frowned because sooner, rather than later, he had to make a solid plan. "Maybe you could help me."

She rolled her eyes before she set her glass down. "You're an intelligent man. I don't see why you'd need my help. Besides, this isn't my area of expertise."

He knew damn well he was grasping at straws. Matt realized he liked sitting and

talking with her as much as making love to her. "Throw some ideas at me."

She tapped her fingers on the side of her glass and seemed to be lost in thought. Her hair still tangled from making love, while her face sported a healthy glow.

"Do you have somewhere for the guests to stay?" she asked.

"There's a bunkhouse. Needs a little work and cleaning. It could probably sleep eight."

"Okay, then. Who's going to do the cooking for the guests?"

Matt rubbed his chin. "Hmmm. Good point. I never thought of that. I'd have to hire somebody."

"Transportation to and from your ranch. Some might drive and others from across the country would probably fly."

The plot thickened, which he didn't like at all. "You mean I'd have to buy a damn minivan?"

She smiled at him, causing a rosy glow to settle inside his heart.

"Think of this way." Laura picked up her glass. "You're not getting married and moving to the suburbs. You're starting a new business venture." She shrugged. "Transportation could be on the guests. Unless you're planning on making them indentured servants, it might be better if they rented a car. There are lots of things to see around these parts."

He considered that idea. If they had their own cars, they could come and go as they pleased since he still didn't relish the idea of strangers infiltrating his ranch. "I vote for they have to provide their own transportation."

"Advertising is something else you need to consider. But it's cheap these days with the Internet."

"I'm a two finger typist myself."

When she smiled at him again, an over all good feeling spread through him. *Better be careful.*

"Just hire someone to design a web page for you," Laura said.

Matt nodded, turning serious. "I'm still having a damned hard time getting used to this idea. Running a working ranch."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "I know, but the important thing is you don't lose your ranch."

Her simple, sympathetic gesture knocked him off balance. *Remember boy, a fling. No attachments.* He wrapped his hand around hers. "I know you're right. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"If you accept it, it will be easier on you."

He nodded as he ran his thumb over the soft palm of her hand. "What about you? What kind of job will you get?"

Laura stared down at their hands entangled together for a few moments before she gently tugged her hand out of his. "I don't know. Something along the same lines. Missoula is growing, so once I set my mind to it, I'm sure I won't have a problem finding another job."

Disappointed because she pulled her hand away, he frowned because he didn't like his reaction of not being able to touch her. He reached for her hand again. "How about we forget our problems and go back to bed again?"

She avoided his eyes as she tried to pull her hand from his.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

"Nothing." She met his gaze, a hint of wariness flashing in her eyes. "I feel like some fresh air."

Something was up with her, but he had no idea what. "Sure, we can go for a walk."

Laura nodded, avoiding his eyes again.

The trail they followed this time wound through the dense fir and pine trees. Laura wondered if she had made a major mistake by giving herself to Matt. How blatant could a woman be? She still couldn't believe she'd stripped herself bare for him. Unfortunately, for her, she laid herself bare both physically and emotionally. Drawn into the dilemma of the financial problems of his ranch, she wanted to help, to sympathize, and to soothe his worries. With a short fling, it needed to be focused on the sex, not the emotions. Because if she did let her feelings mix with the hot, passionate sex, where would that leave her?

Matt stopped, and circled around to face her. "We've hiked for quite awhile. Are you doing okay?"

The concern in his eyes made her go all soft inside. "I'm not as fragile as you think I am."

After he took her in his arms, he whispered in her ear. "I don't think you're fragile. I just think you had a bad morning."

Against her better judgment, she rested her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes. His arms tightened around her and then he trailed kisses across her temple, down her cheek, to the corner of her lips. He turned his head to give him better access to her.

His tongue slowly slid inside of her causing her common sense to bolt like a frightened deer. Twining her arms around his neck, she dragged him closer, losing herself in his scent, the feel of his lips pressed against hers, and the length of his solid, strong body.

Their tongues teased each other's making promises of things to come. She felt the rigidness of his erection straining against his jeans, pushing against her belly. Moaning, she arched her back against his chest, heat rising in her as her hard nipples rubbed against him.

As if understanding what she needed, his hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs rubbing and stroking her nipples. She leaned back from him, but Matt sought out her lips again as his hands slipped under her tee shirt and unclasped her bra. When his big, rough hands molded around her breasts, she wiggled her sex against his hard-on, knowing she wanted him now. Deep in the forest where the only sounds were their labored breaths and songbirds chirping on tree branches high above them.

Before she could even blink, her shirt and bra came off. She watched in a frenzied state of heat and desire as he shrugged his tee shirt over his head. Reaching for him, she skimmed her fingernails down his chest through the dark tangle of his hair. Laura knew what she wanted and needed. Fumbling with his belt buckle and jeans zipper, she pushed his jeans over his hips. Her fingers traveled the length of his hard cock, as she heard the abrupt intake of his breath. Kneeling

down, she licked the tip, loving the scent and taste of him.

His hands grabbed her bare shoulders, while his voice came out low and gravelly sounding, almost a warning. "Laura."

She bent her head to slowly suck his cock into her mouth, feeling the heat spread between her legs like an out of control wildfire. She wanted to pleasure him and give back to him everything and more that he had given her earlier in his cabin.

The feel of his blunt fingers digging into her soft flesh heightened her desire to give him release. Listening to his hard breathing, she continued to suck him deep into her mouth, savoring the hot, velvet feel of him.

"I'm going to come. I swear to god I am." He paused. "I want to come inside you."

Although she appreciated his compliment, she ignored his plea, and kept drawing him deeper and deeper until she could hardly breathe, not wanting to stop.

His hands tangled into her hair. "Come here."

Laura leaned back and looked up at him, feeling the fire inside of her ready to explode.

Under lowered lids, he gazed down at her. "Lovely Laura."

Slowly he pulled her to her feet and kissed her, before he stripped off her boots, jeans and panties. The cool mountain breeze did nothing to alleviate the fireball of heat blazing inside of her. Matt quickly rid himself of his jeans and boots. Then he pulled her down to the mossy carpet floor, and positioned her on top of him.

One hard, thrust quick thrust and he drove himself inside of her. Straddling his muscular thighs, she sat up and rode him, drowning in the sensation of his strong body moving with hers.

"Look at me," he ordered.

Laura opened her eyes to look into his, feeling the powerful heat of his gaze searing her. She felt one hand slide to her pussy, where he caressed her clit, while his other hand clutched her hip, driving himself deeper into her. Her head fell to the side, reeling with emotions and hot sensations shooting through her body with the feel of him inside of her.

His middle finger stroked her clit until a ravaged moan tore from her throat as

she climaxed, leaving her in the darkness for a long time. As she started to surface, she felt Matt's final thrusts before he groaned out her name. When reality returned through the haze of her bliss, she flopped down onto him, feeling him cradle her in his arms. Tears slipped from her eyes, the impact of their coming together bringing unknown feelings to the surface. She burrowed her head against his shoulder, not wanting him to know what he did to her. Emotions spinning inside of her heart, she felt him stroking her back in a lazy, comforting fashion.

If only she could backpedal and rethink her impulsive actions from earlier in the day. Feeling reckless and wanting Matt far too much for her own good, she had offered herself to him.

"You okay?" he asked.

Laura noticed the slight hesitation in his voice. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He rolled her over, so they were face to face, forcing her to look at him. He locked his eyes on hers. Swallowing back the sudden dryness at the back of her throat, she met his gaze, refusing to let him see how vulnerable he made her feel.

Matt traced her swollen lips with his thumb. "You're sure?"

Before she could answer, he kissed her. Feeling the breath grab inside her chest, she kissed him, knowing in her heart she was doomed when it came to this particular man. Matt did things to her, unlike any other man she had ever been with.

He ended the kiss abruptly. "You wouldn't be pulling my leg, now, would you?"

She flashed him a quick smile; one, that she didn't feel. "Why would I do that, cowboy?"

The pad of his thumb went back to tracing her lips. "Sometimes," he paused. "Ladies fake it."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You think I faked it?"

"Take it easy. I know for a fact you didn't. That was real. So sexy and real. What I mean to say is, maybe you're faking it now?"

How could he know she seemed to be falling hard and fast for him? Were her feelings that transparent? "I'm regrouping." That wasn't a total lie. After all, she'd just had the ride of her life. She needed a few minutes to get herself back together.

Matt's voice lowered to a rough whisper. "Are you sure you can handle our

fling?”

His sincere expression made lying to him even harder for her. She supposed he felt he needed to be a gentleman about this. His concern didn't necessarily mean he felt the same way about her, too. Laura lifted her chin. “I'm a big girl. I can handle it.”

“I don't want to hurt you, lovely Laura.”

Battling with her emotions, she closed her eyes for a moment. *Attitude*. She needed attitude to get through this. He kissed her cheek. “I don't want to hurt you, either.”

Matt raised his head, his brows knitted together. “Looks like we're on the same page. We'll have our fling and...”

And what? Unfortunately, for her, she knew the answer without him having to say it. Laura nodded, afraid to speak because of the lump forming at the back of her throat.

CHAPTER SIX

Hands stacked under his head, Matt watched Laura washing herself in the kitchen. Impatience raced through him, waiting for her to come to bed. Right now, the bed felt extra empty to him. He wondered who was fooling whom. It had been his idea to have a fling because he'd been crazy to get inside her pants. Once you had sex with a woman, the dynamics changed. He had walked away from plenty of women the morning after, but he hadn't promised them any more than a night of mutual pleasure. With Laura, the dynamics had definitely shifted. Uneasiness combined with his impatience made it hard for him to lay still and act casual. His gut warned him, she felt more, too.

After she dried her face with a towel, she turned and glanced over at him. His cock instantly responded with a hard throb. One look from her and he felt like a stallion ready to mount the nearest mare. She looked away, but not before he noticed the vulnerability pooled deep in her eyes.

Still holding the towel, she walked over to the bed and stopped at the foot of it. "I think I should leave in the morning."

His jaw tightening, he studied her for several seconds. "You look beat, Laura. I think you overdid it today. You need another day of rest." The dark circles under her eyes were hard to miss, but the real reason he wanted her to stay another day was because he wasn't ready to let go of her just yet.

She tilted her head. "Like I'm going to get any rest up here."

"I'll keep my hands to myself."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

So she saw through him that easily. Damn. "Tonight we sleep. That's what's on the agenda." Getting sleep would be about as impossible as getting his cock to shrink down.

She turned away from him as she stripped down to her bra and panties. With her back to him, she unhooked her bra, causing him to curse under his breath. She

knelt down at the foot of the bed disappearing from his sight for a moment. When she straightened up, she had on a skimpy black tank top that barely met the edge of her panties.

Cursing again under his breath, Matt sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, so she could get onto it easier. He definitely didn't need her slithering over him in her sexy underwear. Without a word, Laura climbed into bed and crawled under the blankets.

The inside of the cabin quickly lost light as night settled around it and the surrounding mountains. Matt undressed, but left on his briefs and tee shirt, hating like hell he couldn't be naked with Laura, but he knew she needed her rest. Gritting his teeth, he climbed in beside her. If he touched her, he wouldn't be able let go of her.

"Thanks," she said. "I am feeling drug out. I guess I do need a good night's sleep."

He rolled onto his side, and brushed a lock of hair from her cheek. Her soft skin and the scent of her fresh scrubbed face, made his promise of hands off damned hard to keep. Since he'd always been a man of his word, he kissed her forehead, knowing if he touched her lips, all bets would be off.

"Sweet dreams," he said in a voice tight with disappointment and regret.

"You, too."

Sunlight filtered through the window near the bed when Matt clawed his way from a deep sleep. Shifting to his side, he reached out, but his hand thumped down to an empty bed. His eyes flew open to discover he was alone in the bed.

He turned his head, his eyes scanning the room. "Laura?"

An uneasy feeling crept through him as he sat up, and raked his hands through his hair. Maybe she was visiting the outhouse, but his gut warned him differently. Throwing the blankets back, he stood up and looked at the empty floor at the foot of the bed where her backpack had sat.

"Dammit." He strode over to the door, throwing it open and stepped out onto the porch. Eyes narrowed, he surveyed the area around the cabin. No sign of her.

When the hell had she left? And why had she left without a good-bye or explanation? He walked back inside, slamming the door closed behind him, and dug through his pack until he unearthed his watch.

Ten after eight, which meant if she left at daybreak she already had a couple hours on him. Matt scrambled into his clothes, grabbed a granola bar and a bottle of water. After he watered his horse, he locked the corral gate.

Two trails led to the cabin. The one Laura had used was too steep and narrow for his horse. Whiskey could navigate it, but it would be slow going. Keeping a brisk pace down the trail, he cursed under his breath. He told himself he chased after her to make sure she made it down the trail without any problems.

Yeah right. Ignoring his less than honest feelings to himself, he concentrated on the trail so he wouldn't fall flat on his face.

Taking quick drinks and eating his granola bar on the run, he made it down the trail in an hour to the small parking area. Three trails led into Forest Service Land, while his trail had a private property sign nailed to a nearby tree.

Not a car in sight. "Shit!"

He had no idea how much time he had missed her by. Fighting back the urge to punch his fist through the Forest Service sign that he stood next to, Matt kicked at the gravel in the parking lot instead. He muttered four letters words, that would have his grandmother turning in her grave, before he wheeled around and started back up the trail. With each step he took, a heavy feeling of regret settled deep inside of him.

Laura rested her head on the rim of the tub, letting the warm water soothe her sore leg muscles. She'd hightailed it down the trail too fast without stretching before hand. Now her knees and shins were paying the price, but not as big a price as her heart.

If she and Matt had made love again, it definitely would have tipped the scales against her. As it stood now, she felt only a little bit in love with him. Another coming together...she refused to finish that thought. What was the point? It had been a fling, not the beginning of a serious relationship.

Ignoring the lump inching up her throat, she settled lower into the tub and closed her eyes, fighting back the bittersweet memories of their brief time at his cabin. She grimaced when she shifted her legs, feeling the burn of overworked muscles. The cowboy had proved to be too damn irresistible for her weak-kneed will power.

To make matters worse, he had been understanding about her fatigue last night. If he would have carried on like a self-centered jerk, it would have made it easier for her to sneak away in the early morning hours. Besides, being a fine specimen of a muscle and brawn, he also had manners. "Damn him, anyway."

Laura slowly stood up, wincing at the pain shooting through her legs, and grabbed a towel off the rack near the tub. Wrapping it around her sarong style, she stepped out of the tub. He didn't know her number or where she lived, not that he would try to get a hold of her anyway. She highly doubted that. Matt had want a fling and he' had gotten one. C'est la vie.

End of story. If only her heart could buy into that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Four bales of alfalfa hay lay next to the ranch truck on the barn floor. Matt stood at the edge of the hayloft and scowled down at Rusty who made no effort to lift the bales of hay into the back of the ranch truck. "You got a sore back or something?" His foreman in his mid-forties, and skinny as a rail had the strength of a professional wrestler.

With two fingers, Rusty, pushed his battered straw cowboy hat up over his forehead. "Nah, my back is fine. I'm wondering what the hell is wrong with you."

Two weeks had passed since waking up at his cabin alone that morning. No matter how hard he worked or how hard he tried, the empty hole in his heart would not fill up. Laura had wanted nothing more than to bed him, but he could have sworn he'd seen something different in her eyes and felt something different when they had made love. "There's not a damn thing wrong with me." Matt turned back to grab another bale.

"You're about as blue as the sky, pardner. Hell, I'm taking to the idea of the working ranch better than you are. And you know I'm as sociable as a hungry mountain lion."

Matt dropped another bale to the barn floor, sending up a cloud of dust mixed with straw. He had accepted his fate, and planned to meet later today with Jerry at the bank. Jerry had drawn up a financial plan for him. What he hadn't accepted was never seeing Laura again.

Rusty leaned against the truck and stared up at him. "Ever since you came back from the cabin, you've been a gnarly s.o.b. What the hell happened up there?"

"Not a damn thing happened," he lied. He'd fallen for a woman that he believed he only wanted to have a hot fling with. His crazy plan had backfired on him. "The horses need some food."

“Yeah, yeah. I’m on it.” Rusty sidled over to a bale of hay upended on the barn floor and lifted it. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say a woman was the cause of your ill tempered mood lately.” After he slid the hay into the bed of the truck, he turned to look up at Matt again. “The thing is, I don’t see how you could have run into a woman up there.”

Fate. Fate, which he cursed daily for the past two weeks. And he cursed John, his old friend, for sending Laura up there to his cabin in the first place.

His foreman leaned against the fender of the truck, a piece of straw dangling from the corner of his mouth. “Maybe that’s the problem. You need a woman.”

Without answering, he dropped another bale. He’d had a damned fine woman for a short amount of time. He beat himself up daily for not telling Laura he wanted to see her again. Laura had hotfooted it out of there so fast; he figured she didn’t want anything to do with him. Feeling his jaw tighten, he said. “Let’s get the horses fed so I can get into town.”

Eyes narrowed, a skeptical look on his face, Rusty nodded.

Sifting through the paperwork on her desk, Laura, as usual, had a hard time concentrating. Two days on her new job as personnel manager and she didn’t need to blow it. Since she landed a decent job, she fought to push aside thoughts of Matt. The last two weeks had inched by, each day longer than the next. She reminded herself that she had done the right thing by running out on him in the predawn hours. Brows puckered together, she glanced over the two job applications in front of her.

Both looked good to her, so she would definitely call each applicant to come in for an interview next week. After she highlighted their telephone numbers, she grabbed her mug off the desk in dire need of coffee. When she circled her chair around, she nearly dropped the mug to the carpeted floor. Matt stood outside the glass window of her office talking with Jerry Storm, the President of First Savings of Missoula. She spun her chair back around so fast, it nearly made her dizzy. Her hand trembled when she set the mug down so she took a deep breath and picked up a stack of papers. Since her back was to the window, she doubted Matt would notice

her. A quick peek over her shoulder, showed her he still faced Jerry, completely unaware that she sat only a few feet from him.

“Dammit,” she mumbled. She remembered Matt telling her about discussing his financial situation with his bank. Talk about quirky fate. How many banks were there in town? She'd been hired at the same bank Matt did business with.

Hands still trembling, she straightened the stack of papers on her desk, not daring to glance over her shoulder again. When a knock sounded on her door, she almost jumped straight out of her chair. Had Matt noticed her?

Heart pounding hard against her chest, she turned and said. “Come in.” A mixture of relief and disappointment rumbled through her.

“How’s everything going, Laura?” Jerry asked. “I thought I’d stop by and check on you.”

“Um...thanks. Everything is going great.” With the exception of her heart rate which pounded hard and fast.

“Is there anything you need?”

“Ah...no.” She snatched her coffee cup off the desk. “Just some caffeine.”

Jerry grinned. “I hear you. I was on my way to the break room myself.”

She forced a smile, stood up, and walked over to him.

“Find any good job applications for the teller position?” He asked as they started down hall.

“Two very good possibilities so far.”

Laura glanced over her shoulder, knowing Matt was gone. Her heart cinched tight at just the briefest glimpse of him.

“Excuse me, Jerry. What were you saying?” As she struggled to concentrate on the conversation, she realized at that moment she had made one of the biggest mistakes of her life. *Giving herself to Matt, not just her body, but her heart as well.*

“Come on, buddy, have another drink.” Matt poured two fingers of the expensive Scotch into John’s glass before he slid it across the table to him.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me.”

Matt leaned back in his chair, barely touching the Scotch he'd picked up at the liquor store on his way over to John's house. "Nah, you're not my type."

John stared down at the golden brown liquid before he downed it in one swallow. He scrubbed the back of his hand over his mouth and sighed in pleasure. "Why the expensive booze and unexpected visit?"

"Maybe I missed you."

John laughed. "Nope, that's not it. I'm not that drunk yet."

Rolling the stubby glass between his palms, he decided to get straight to the point. "I want Laura's phone number and address."

John's blond brows raised. "Laura? How the hell do you know Laura?"

He knew her well. Every curve, every secret feminine spot of her body. "I met her at my cabin."

Confusion filling his eyes, John scratched his chin. "You mean to say you were up there a couple of weeks ago when Laura was?"

"Uh...huh."

"I thought you'd still be branding the calves. That's why I sent her up there for some R and R. She's a real outdoorsy type."

He liked that about her. "What's her number?"

John shook his head. "I don't know. Seems like if she wanted you to have her number, she would have given it to you."

"She planned on giving it to me and must have forgotten." He hated lying, especially to his old friend. "And she has an unlisted number."

"How long were you two up there together?"

Matt shrugged. "A day or two."

"Ah...shit. Something went on between the two of you, didn't it?" John picked up the bottle and poured himself another drink before he pointed the bottle at Matt.

He shook his head. "Just give me her number. The bottle's on me."

"And here I thought you missed me." Instead of downing the entire glass, he took a small sip. "Laura just got out of a bad relationship awhile back. She doesn't need a horny guy like you after her."

She'd never said a word about a recent relationship. Damn, he hoped like hell

he wasn't rebound guy because he might as well kiss good-bye any hope of a relationship with her, but just remembering her warm shapely body made him hard. "All I want is her phone number. She can tell me to take a hike if she wants."

"I don't know." John held up his glass of Scotch and studied it. "Laura is a good lady."

He already knew that. "Agreed."

"I'd hate to see her get hurt again. Plus, she got axed from her job for no good reason. Her boss is a prick."

"All the more reason you should give me her number."

John smirked. "So you can love her and leave her?"

"Hey, I've matured. Remember I was married."

"You gonna make a decent woman out of her?"

Matt's eyebrows shot skyward. "Excuse me?" John held his liquor well. He couldn't be drunk after only two drinks.

"What's your agenda?" John asked.

"Dammit. I feel like I'm being interrogated."

John pointed a finger at him. "You are. Laura and I are good friends. I feel it's my duty to protect her."

Frustration eating at him, Matt grabbed the bottle and refilled his glass. He took a long swallow, feeling the smooth taste of the liquor as it slid down his throat. "I just want to talk her."

"Phone numbers are too personal. I might consider telling you where she works. She just got a new job."

A ray of hope sprang to life inside of him. At this point, he would take whatever information on Laura he could get. "I'm waiting." Impatience raked at his tight nerves.

"It's going to cost you."

Muttering curses under his breath, he looked over at John. "Name your price." Whatever his friend's price, it would be worth it to be able to make contact with Laura.

John fidgeted on his chair, and then stared off into space for a time.

Matt's patience hovered near the breaking point. "Spit it out."

John dragged in a big breath. "Okay here goes. I want you to teach me how to ride a horse."

Not able to stop his jaw from dropping, he said. "You've got to be kidding me? You're scared too death of horses."

"I am not scared. I'm unfamiliar with them."

"How long you been in Montana now? Fifteen years? You're still a city boy."

Taking a swig of scotch, John scowled over the rim of the glass. "I met a lady. She raises Arabians."

"Hot damn. It must be love for you to be willing to get on the back of a horse. Why don't you have her teach you?"

John shook his head. "No way. She doesn't know I'm unfamiliar with them."

If teaching his old pal to ride a horse meant a chance to get in touch with Laura, he would do it. "You got yourself a deal."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“My husband has a friend that would be perfect for you.” Kim said.

Glancing over her shoulder as she grabbed her purse out of her desk drawer, Laura frowned. “Thanks, Kim, but no blind dates. I’m not interested in getting involved.” Look what happened to her for getting involved with Matt, an ache lodged deep in her heart, which stayed and wouldn't budge no matter what she did.

“I know Tim would like you. You’re just his type.”

Laura walked over to her co-worker, who stood in the opened doorway of her office, and shook her head. “I don't think so, but thanks for thinking of me.”

Kim rolled her eyes before she headed down the hall. “My husband says I’m a meddling matchmaker.”

Laura laughed and fell into step with her new friend. “A sweet, meddling matchmaker.” Kim worked in new accounts and they had hit it off on Laura’s first day on the job.

“Just tell me you’ll think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about.” She smiled as she pushed open the door that led to the employee parking lot behind the bank. Her smile vanished as she came to a sudden stop when she spotted Matt leaning against the one and only tree in the center of the parking lot.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Kim asked. “Are you okay?”

Clutching her purse tight in her hands, she fought to tear her eyes from him. His gaze locked tight on hers. How did he know where she worked? He could be here to see someone else, like maybe Jerry. But why would he hang out in the parking lot waiting for the president of the bank?

Kim laid her hand on her arm. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

She barely glanced at her friend, unable to take her eyes off Matt for even a

second. "Sorry, I'm...I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Um...yeah."

"I'll see you Monday. My car is over there." Kim pointed to the row of cars parked directly behind the bank.

"Bye." Unfortunately, for her, she'd been running late this morning and had to park in the rear of the lot.

After Kim walked away, Matt strode toward her. Heart thundering, she forced her feet to move. When they met up, she couldn't think of one damn thing to say. She just wanted to savor the mere sight of him. His brown tee shirt strained against his muscular chest, while his faded jeans were nothing less than sinful, and his eyes were shaded by his nut-brown cowboy hat.

"Hello, Laura."

"Hi." Unable to take her eyes off him, her fingernails dug into the strap of her purse.

Matt set his jaw. "Why did you run out on me?"

Because I was a fool and falling for you. "Run out? I merely left. I wanted to get an early start."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Uh...huh."

The bank employees walked past them, talking and laughing, but Laura really didn't hear the people passing by them.

Avoiding his eyes, she rummaged in her purse for her keys, all the while struggling to pull herself together.

A silence, heavy and thick with sexual and emotional tension hung between them. When she found her keys, she clutched them tight in her right hand and forced herself to look at him. "How did you know I worked here?" She knew for a fact he hadn't spotted her a week ago, when she'd seen at the bank.

"Let's just say I have my sources."

The two of them had one person in common. "John. That no good rat." She frowned, vowing she' would give her friend a good tongue-lashing.

Matt shrugged. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

Still struggling to find her cool, she looked away for a moment. “I don’t know that we have anything to talk about.” The last of the cars in the lot disappeared around the side of the building. “And by the way, I saw you here last week.”

Leaning forward from the waist, the brim of Matt's hat nearly bumped her forehead. “Yes, we do have something to talk about. “ He frowned, a scrutinizing expression on his face. “You saw me here at the bank last week? Why didn’t you say something?”

The late afternoon breeze carried his scent to her. Masculine and spicy, mixed with raw sex appeal. Laura squared her shoulders in a feeble attempt to appear strong. “We agreed to a fling. No strings attached, so I figured what was the point in saying anything. If you’re here for more flinging.” She waved her hand in front of her. “Sorry.” All he would have to do is touch her and they would no doubt be going at it on the concrete parking lot.

“You never gave us a chance to discuss our fling because you hightailed it out of my cabin that morning.”

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

Narrowing his eyes, he studied her for several moments again. “Come on, Laura, you can do better than that.”

“It was a spur of the moment fling.” She tried to brush past him, but he caught her arm, spinning her around to face him.

“Yeah, I suggested the fling.” His gaze lowered to her lips and lingered for a time before he brought his eyes back to her. “But something happened between us up at my cabin. I know you felt it, too.”

“We had sex. That’s what happened.”

The next thing she knew, she was pressed up tight against him as his lips crashed hard against hers. Her mouth opened of its own accord, letting his tongue push inside of her. A fire ignited low in her tummy and spread swift and fast. He tasted like bitter coffee and chocolate candy.

Matt ended the kiss as abruptly as he had started it. He stepped back, but kept his hands on her hips. “Now tell me there’s nothing going on between us.”

It appeared her brain waves had short-circuited sometime during their kiss

because she couldn't seem to form any words. She shook her head, trying to step away from him, but he only tugged her closer to him.

"I know you just ended a bad relationship a month or so ago," he said.

"Damn, that John." Ambivalent feelings crashed together inside of her. On the one hand, John ticked her off for giving Matt her job location. On the other hand, just seeing Matt again made her reel with giddiness. As far as Kevin went, he'd been left behind somewhere in Matt's dust. "Did he tell you my whole life story? By the way, my ex is history and I do mean history."

A relieved expression spread across Matt's face. "That's damn good to know about your ex. Don't be so hard on John. I got him drunk and made a deal with him so he would tell me where you worked."

A tiny ball of hope formed in her heart. Matt had gone to a lot of trouble to get in touch with her. Did it mean he wanted more? She didn't dare believe that because she didn't need her heart broken and aching even more for this man.

"Let me buy you dinner," he said.

Laura shook her head, not wanting to believe they might have something together. She felt like a first class loser where men were concerned, even though she was proficient at other things. She'd aced the job at the bank on her first interview. "No."

"I'll follow you home, and order a pizza on my cell, so it will be there by the time we get to your place."

If Matt set one foot in her door, they would not be eating pizza." "You have to concentrate on your ranch."

"I've got it all worked out, but concentrating has been damned near impossible since you walked out of my life."

Her heart pounded a steady, swift beat. Over the past few weeks, she'd paid a hefty price for her impulsive behavior at Matt's cabin. She needed time to think and to get herself together, if that was even possible. "I like pepperoni." He dropped his hands when she stepped back. Spinning around, she walked toward her car, wondering if she would ever learn and cursing herself for that flaw in her character.

"Pepperoni. Good. My favorite, too." He called from behind her.

Laura fought back the strong urge to glance over her shoulder at him.

How the hell was he supposed to order pizza, when he didn't know her address? Not that he wanted to eat anyway, he just wanted Laura. Matt wove in and out of rush hour traffic on the main streets of Missoula trying not to lose sight of Laura's blue Chevy Blazer.

Tossing his cell on the seat of his truck, he gassed it to pass a slow moving car that didn't seem to be in a rush, in spite of the time of day. Laura protested so damn much, shock had bowled through him when she'd said pepperoni.

A few minutes later, Laura turned her truck into a narrow driveway on the outskirts of town. A quaint little white house sat on a large lot surrounded by pine trees.

Matt rolled to a stop behind her and jumped out of his truck. The hell with pizza. He would order it later. He caught up to her at her front door. She barely had the door open, before he grabbed her. His mouth came down hard and fast on hers.

After he kicked the door closed behind him, he tugged her against him and leaned back against it. Slanting his head for a second kiss, he barely touched her lips when she murmured. "Did you order pizza?"

"Didn't know your address." His lips locked onto hers.

Filling his senses with her, he tasted her tongue, and inhaled her subtle cherry blossom scent. As he snuggled her tighter against him, he pressed his cock against the curve of her belly.

Nearly out of breath, he ended the kiss. Laura's eyes fluttered open what he saw in her eyes made his breathing speed up. When she moved back from him, a sharp sense of disappointment shot through him but was quickly replaced by a strong hunger as she shrugged her blue blouse over her head, showing him a blue, lacy bra. She undid her bra, skimming the straps over her shoulders and bared herself to him.

When he reached for her, she scooted away from him again.

"Your turn," she said in a husky voice.

Matt tossed his hat and peeled off his tee shirt, while Laura stripped off her gray

slacks. For the life of him, he couldn't remember ever getting out of his clothes so fast. She kept her eyes focused on his as she skimmed off her blue panties.

"Come to me, Laura."

She started backing up, with a sultry look in her eye. Matt quickly glanced around the room, spotting a large burgundy couch. He caught up to her, taking her hand and led her to the couch.

After he plopped down, he pulled Laura down to his lap. When her wet pussy rubbed against his cock, he groaned, and reached for her breasts. Her nipples were puckered hard. Before he could take one into his mouth, she straddled him. He drove himself deep inside of her wet heat, feeling a sense of completion in his heart. With his hands on her hips, he controlled her rhythm to match his. Her moans and sighs of pleasure increased with each quick thrust of his cock. He covered her breasts with his hands as he watched her face, now colored with a sexy flush. Her eyes were filled with a dreamy faraway look as she rode him.

"Laura," he said through gritted teeth.

She leaned toward him so he could nibble on the soft flesh of her neck. Knowing he couldn't hold back much longer, he lowered one hand to her clit and caressed with deep strokes as he pounded himself hard into her.

"Come for me, baby," he whispered.

"Oh...Matt..."

When she shivered and her body convulsed with her orgasm, Matt drove himself high and deep inside of her, feeling the sweet pungent release of his seed into Laura.

She fell against Matt's broad chest, and buried her head against his sweat glistened neck. Feeling every bit the foolish woman that she was, Laura shut her eyes tight, battling back powerful emotions. How much easier could a woman be?

"Hey," he said, as his hand cupped the back of her neck.

She tamped down her emotions before she raised her head and looked at him.

He studied her for a moment, causing a flutter of nerves to erupt inside of her.

First, he kissed her, and then he brushed the hair back from her face. "I think

we need to go on a real date.”

Emotions still clogged her throat, so she merely nodded.

“And then, I need to call you every day, and send you flowers.” His deep voice lowered. “Maybe introduce you to my mom, which will be damned hard because she lives in Arizona now.”

Her eyes widened in shock, not sure she had heard him right. “Your mom?”

Matt nodded and framed her face with his hands. “That’s what you do when you have strong feelings for a woman. Court them properly, then introduce the special woman to your mom.”

“Matt. I...uh...”

His thumb rubbed her bottom lip for a second before he kissed her again. “No protesting. I know why you took off from the cabin. You wanted more from me than a fling.”

Color heated her cheeks, but she shook her head trying to deny the truth of his words.

“I know it was my idea to have a fling. Alone in the wilderness with a sexy, intelligent woman. Hell, what guy wouldn’t make a move? When I woke up that morning and discovered you were gone,” he paused, seeming to search for the right words. “Something snapped inside of me. I ran down the trail, but by the time I got to the parking area, there was no sign of you.”

“You ran down the trail?” She had no idea he’d gone after her, but how could she have known? She bolted down the trail like a rabbit fleeing from a hungry coyote.

“Yeah,” he said.

A feeling, reminding her of warm molasses, spread through her as she looked at him. “Wow, I’m impressed.”

A grin tilted up the corners of his lips. “Problem was by the time I got back to the cabin, I was royally pissed, thirsty, and hungry.”

Laura giggled. “Sorry.”

Looking directly into her eyes, he said. “Are you going to let me court you properly?”

She smiled a big foolish kind of giddy in love smile. "I think I might."

Matt lowered his hands and molded them gently around her breasts. "You have to do better than that. Like a yes in capital letters."

As his thumb and forefinger toyed with her nipples, she murmured. "Oh...yes."

He captured her lips, kissing her quick and hard. After ending the kiss, he whispered to her. "Ready for pizza?"

"Not quite yet."