



*Hard*  
**DRIVIN' MAN**  
CERISE DELAND

A Total-E-Bound Publication



[www.total-e-bound.com](http://www.total-e-bound.com)

Hard Drivin' Man

ISBN # 978-0-85715-282-4

©Copyright Cerise DeLand 2010

Cover Art by Lyn Taylor ©Copyright September 2010

Edited by Stacey Birkel

Total-E-Bound Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Total-E-Bound Publishing.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Total-E-Bound Publishing. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2010 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

# **HARD DRIVIN' MAN**

**Cerise DeLand**

## *Dedication*

For M J Frederick, Layla Chase and Desiree Holt, my critique partners and my inspirations!

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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

Jell-O: Kraft Foods

## Chapter One

Jessica shoved the gear shift of her ten-year-old pick-up into 'park' and sat staring at the bright red door of Trey Hardwick's sprawling Texas ranch house. Though her young brother-in-law had arrived home on leave from the Army two weeks ago, she hadn't come over to visit. Couldn't. Even though Trey had asked her to come to dinner last Friday, she had refused, not risking the chance she'd reveal to him how foolishly she craved his kiss-me-quick six-foot-six wall of masculinity in her bed. Inside her body.

*Stop it, Jess. Your appetite for him is a widow's hunger. Born in minutes of shared laughter with him over the decades. Born in moments when you thought he understood you better than Clint ever did. Killed by common sense, your age difference – and your decision to never seek another man to love.*

She inhaled, summoning the courage she'd corralled back home this morning. This appeal would have been easier if she could have approached the ranch foreman hired by Trey and his dad years ago to run the place. But it wasn't friendly Frank Harmon she had to face this morning. Damn it.

She flicked off the ignition and threw her keys on the dash. She hadn't been to the Rocking H in nearly a year. Not since her father-in-law, Taylor Hardwick's, wake. Still, she marvelled that the rambling Hardwick homestead looked as fresh as it had when she'd first seen it as a teenager. Then she'd been young, so very young, and so much more naïve about how life would treat her. How she'd treat life. She'd had hope then. In love with the high school quarterback, she'd been honoured and amazed that Clint Hardwick loved her back. That the second son of the legendary Hardwick dynasty wanted her as his bride. Claimed her for himself before any other boy could. And Jess had welcomed Clint's proposal. Needed him. Wanted him.

She snorted. *And look how well that turned out.*

She reached across the seat for her summer straw Stetson and jammed it on over her pony tail. But vanity and pride had her straining up to check out her face in the rear-view mirror. What she saw made her frown and question her simple approach. No make-up, no cleavage showing for the hunky specimen most females in town would drop their panties for. *Is this the way to win Trey over? Or a sure way to fail?*

She squinted at her reflection. The lines around her eyes came from years of sun-drying her skin as she rustled cattle on the range. Her lips, still full and pink, didn't widen in laughter often. True, her cheeks were high and elegant, but her green eyes showed the weary strength of running her ranch alone since Clint's death three years ago. She'd come far since then, freed from worry when she no longer had to worry each day about Clint's preference for bourbon over her.

*Forget that!* She snapped away from her image. *Ask for Trey's help now – or never!* On a small cry, she thrust open the cab door, slid down out of the truck and slammed the door.

Palms running down her denim-clad thighs, she strode up the circular drive towards Trey's house. And what she needed.

What she had to have to survive.

And Trey, Clint's younger brother, had to give it to her. Didn't he?

She knocked. Folded her arms. Tapped her toe. Dug the heel of her boot into the floorboard.

No answer.

She tried again, banging the big brass knocker against the sturdy red wood with loud purpose.

"Hey, hey!" She heard Trey yelling from inside. "I'm here, Jess!" He swung the door wide.

She stood there, glued to the porch like a stunned kitten, looking up at the black-haired giant whose umber come-to-daddy eyes could melt a girl at twenty yards and make her mush at this distance. Jess had to swallow back all the desire that pooled in her mouth at the sight of the way his shoulders filled the doorway and the way his full lips curved to smile down at her.

"Come on in, honey." He reached for her with one big hand and pulled her through the doorway right into his massive arms. "God, it is good to see you."

She caught her hat as he lifted her and squeezed the stuffing out of her. Then he planted his warm lips on her forehead, and she loved the heat of his body and the brotherly affection of his words. *Just as I did after his oldest brother Sam died. Then Clint passed away – and Taylor, too.* All of those deaths had been awful, unexpected sorrows, soothed by Trey's friendship. Truth be told, while the memory of Trey's mighty embrace had pierced her lonely

nights far too often since Clint's death three years ago, none of them matched this one for delicious decadence.

*Dream on, Jess. The man has no designs on his widowed sister-in-law.*

He peered down at her, but his hands held her fast, splayed over her back. Their lower bodies were pressed together by his tight hold on her and the desire that had filled her throat, now travelled south to her moist folds and north to her cool brain. "Jess, babe, you look hot."

"You can't imagine!" she jested and put a hand to his chest to strain backward. "The weatherman said it's going to be one-hundred-and-two out there today!"

He hugged her close again, chuckling so deeply she felt the reverberations in her breasts and her belly – and her pussy.

She pushed away and thought she caught a flicker of regret in his gaze. "Thanks for seeing me alone." *Though God knows, looking at you close up, I should get my business done and get out of here. Fast.* "Your welcome home party had half the county!"

"Aunt Marie!" He shook his head. "You know how she is, wanting everyone to have an excuse to eat and dance. Although I have to tell you, I was disappointed you left before you and I could dance."

"I had to go." *Before I scratched out Betsy Lou Morgan's eyes for drooling all over you.* "I needed to be up early for the well-drillers," she lied with a bit of bravado. "Besides, you didn't lack for dance partners."

The ghost of mischief flickered in his dark eyes. "None as good as you, babe."

"More your age, though, buddy!" Grinning up at him, Jess could now do what she'd yearned to do since Trey had come home two weeks ago on leave. She could admire how his features had matured these past few years. If the Army made men out of boys, then this man's Army had taken a reedy youth of twenty-one and made him into a thirty-one-year-old mountain of male perfection. His jaw was more square, his cheekbones more harshly hollow. His eyes, so fathomlessly black, seemed sharper and yet more lambent contrasted with the rich bronze tan he had acquired from repeated deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. If he also had lines around his eyes, at least his added gravitas to his thirty-one years. And as if he needed more appeal, more machismo, his huge body had bulked up to a pervasive power that she could still feel beneath her fingertips.

Before she lost her cool and felt him up right there in the hall, she declared, "I want to talk."

"So you said on the phone. Come on in." He closed the door and indicated they should go into the family room.

She walked in and realised he hadn't changed a thing. The ten-point white tail deer still stared at anyone entering with bulging crossed eyes. The bison head still pointed towards the fully stuffed carcass of a smiling bobcat. And the two wild turkeys on the sideboard still stuck their necks out, appearing to be arguing with each other.

"You aren't going to get rid of these, are you?" she asked, shaking her head at the menagerie that never had ceased to make her smile.

"Nope. My dad loved their expressions. Thought they said all there was to say about how ridiculous it is to mount your prey—and I agree. If I kill something, I'm doing it to destroy it—or eat it. Period. If I'm mounting something, I'm doing it for quite a different reason."

She raised her brows, playfully chastising him for the sexual innuendo that could lead this conversation nowhere she should follow. She strolled over to the ochre leather couch and took a seat. "Years in the war have made you very frank."

"Life is precious—and short. You need to say what you want, grab what you want, fast." He came to stand in front of her, and the angle gave her a full frontal view of the impressive bulge in his jeans.

She raised her face to admire his earnestness and avoid looking at his striking bodily assets. "We both know that's true, don't we?"

Mulling that for a second, he must've decided not to go down that path. Instead, he sighed and rubbed his palms together. "Want a drink? Coffee? I know you love the stuff. Made a pot for you."

"Really?" She considered his features, the way his lips pursed as he examined her own. Shifting in her seat, she felt how her panties were getting soaked at the thought he might find her attractive. Without make-up or perfume, that was a poor bet. She faked a smile. "Sure. Coffee."

He walked towards the kitchen, his steps quick and hard on the Saltillo tile.

"Is Lupe not here this morning?" she called to him. His housekeeper lived on the ranch and her presence was almost a cornerstone of the Rocking H for the past forty years. Without



her around, Jess felt suddenly vulnerable. Being alone with Trey was a concept she had only dreamt of but never imagined could come true.

"She had to go into Midland," Trey called from the kitchen. "I told her to take the day off."

"Ah, good." But it wasn't. Her tension blossomed like some ugly flower that reached out and stung her resolve. She crossed her legs and drummed her fingers on the cool leather couch. The sounds of him pouring coffee made her twitch. Before she could lasso her thoughts, he was back, standing in front of her again and holding out a cup and a napkin.

"I know how you like napkins," he said matter-of-factly.

But he also knew—or remembered—how she liked cream. "Thank you." She took it from him and sipped. The brew was hot and strong. Something to devote herself to for a few seconds as she worked up her nerve.

He had settled himself in the big matching leather chair opposite her. With his long legs stretched out, his sable brown snakeskin boots peeking out from under his form-fitting jeans, and his starched white shirt and fist-sized silver belt buckle, he was the picture of a successful Texas rancher. A successful rich Texas rancher home from the wars. Decorated for bravery. Eligible. Wanted by every girl this side of the Pecos—and maybe the other side as well. And Jess had a favour to ask of him.

"What's on your mind, Jess?" he asked in a baritone that soothed every cell in her body and softened her to flimsy tissue paper.

"I need your help."

He lifted his shoulders, a languid action that spoke of his charm and their years of being family. "Anything I can do for you, I'm ready."

His words caressed her sore heart like no man had in decades. His tone, soft as sand, filed down any remaining fears so that she could meet his gaze.

"I've culled my cattle. All my calves."

"Aunt Marie told me you put them up for auction. Tom Wagner told me, too, because he's worried about your ranch surviving." Trey put his coffee cup down on the table beside him. "This drought is awful. Not this bad since the fifties. You did the right thing."

"But I've still got my bulls. I can't sell them. You know I can't."

"I do." He nodded slowly. "You've done a helluva job, babe. You have built up that strain of cattle until you've got the corner on artificial insemination."

"If I have to sell my bulls, I lose everything. That's why I've come to you."

His features took on a serious mien. "And?"

"I want you to let me drive my herd over here and water on your land. At your creeks."

His eyes went from wide with shock to narrow with thought. He lifted one hand and ran his index finger over his bottom lip.

The way he stroked it had her focusing on her fantasies of how he would kiss her. On the mouth. On her pussy. She bit her lower lip and sat forward. "I'll pay you. Name the price per head. I have the money from the auction at Tom's three weeks ago."

"If you don't have my help, you'll lose your family ranch," he supplied like he was the one who had inherited her father's and grandfather's thirty-thousand acres.

She put her cup down and kneaded her fingers together. "We've had it since nineteen-hundred-and-two and I can't let this drought destroy it. Or me." That last, she was shocked she had added, but now that the words were out, she just kept going. "I need this, Trey. This ranch is all I have left of my life. With my folks gone and Clint, too, and no children to work for or love..." *Oh, God, had she said that?* "I need this for myself, Trey. My wells are gone dry. My creeks, too. My land looks like the Sahara."

"How many head do you have?"

"Two hundred."

He lifted a brow, impressed. "That many. You are doing well."

"Not that well. I've never been in such a fix. I know we've had dry spells before, but this one is wicked. I ran out of grazing land last fall. Rains finally came in October and November which meant I could survive through the winter. But now, not a drop of rain since March and I need help. I need you."

His long lashes fluttered. His lips firmed. And just as he opened his mouth and she thought he was going to give her what she wanted, he got to his feet and walked towards the huge picture window to look out over his pastures.

*I need you.* His eyes fell closed. *I need you.* Precisely the words he'd vowed to pay heaven and hell to get from Jessica Spencer Hardwick's lush lips. Not precisely the reason for them today, but he could live with that. Work with that. He'd been wracking his brain trying to find a way to get her alone and talk to her while he was home here on leave. He had only one more week left to have his say. One more week before he had to let his commanding

officer know of his decision to reenlist. One more week to tell her how he cared before he got too old and regretted his failure to pursue her. Here was his chance to take her away and declare to her what he wanted for half his lifetime.

All those nights freezing in the mountains north of Kandahar. All those days frying in the sun south of Bagdad. All the years he'd envied his brother Clint for being old enough, wise enough, to marry sassy, sexy, funny Jess.

Trey had tried to find a woman who matched her. The startling lime green eyes. The strawberry blonde curls. The lithe little body that moved like water.

*Damn.* He ran a hand through his hair and muttered about being between a rock and a painfully hard cock. Since he discovered he wanted her at the old age of fourteen, how many women had he tried to care for? Since he was old enough to vote, for pity sakes, how many women had he slept with and wished they were her? Too many to count. Senior year in high school. Up at Texas Tech. At so many of his duty posts State-side over the ten years he'd been enlisted. Try as he did, no one compared to the lovely, laughing memory of her down by the creek with him every Saturday morning. Or the vision of her standing in his kitchen with his brother Clint as they told his mother and father they were getting married. Soon. No, she hadn't been pregnant, but they wanted each other. Badly. So they were bent on getting married right after they graduated high school. Her folks and his father had not approved, but Clint was determined to get her before any other guy did. The plan to marry had sounded good to both of them. But the best made plans can get a hitch in them, can't they?

"Trey?"

He inhaled. Hooked his hands in his belt loops and shook his head. What he wanted he meant to have. He'd suffered too much, fought too long for his country, seen too many of his buddies die without getting what they yearned for not to take the bull by the horns now. So he swung around and faced her.

Damn, what a sweet piece she was. No teased hair. No lipstick or eyeliner. No push-up bra. He harrumphed. Like she needed anything to look like the tastiest dish he'd ever wanted to eat up. Devour. Slowly.

"Trey?" She took a step forward, fear dimming her big beautiful eyes. "Please tell me if you'll do this."

"Oh, you bet I will, Jess."

The smile she began with spread into a joyous grin. She clasped her hands. "Oh, Trey! Thank you! I—"

"But I need something in return."

"Fair enough. I told you I'd pay. So name your price! I earned so much from my auction that I'm—"

"I don't want your money."

She tilted her head. "No? But Trey, I *can* pay for this. I've not only dug my ranch out of debt these past three years but I have savings. If I can get through this drought, I can build up this insemination business into a huge success."

"I know you've done well." He forced himself to stand there, look stern and not move a muscle. All the better to appear impervious. And win here.

"So then—!" She spread her arms wide. "Why not let me pay you?"

"No."

"But—"

"I want something else from you."

Her hands fell to slap against her shapely thighs. "Name it."

*Oh, Christ, what if she refuses?* "Two days and nights with you."

Her lush lashes fluttered and her mouth worked at words. "Say that again."

*Steady, boy, let her come to you.* "You heard me."

Her brows knit. "To do what?"

He let his eyes narrow with a hot hint of what he intended. "To show you some fun. Make sure you laugh again, the way you used to, throwing your head back and shaking out your hair to flow down your back."

"You remember that?" She was stunned. And when he nodded, she said, "Trey. Even I don't remember that!"

He let his gaze travel slowly down her body and take its time sashaying back up. "I see that."

His sexual intention hit her so hard she jerked backward. "You're kidding." She tried for a smile. But couldn't make it go beyond nervous.

Was she interested or appalled? He couldn't tell. Couldn't back down now. "Never more serious in my life."

She looked him over. From his lips to his chest and arms, to his hips and his crotch, her eyes grew wider the farther they went. But when her tongue came out to glide over her lower lip, damn, he almost grabbed her then to kiss her silly. He wanted that mouth. Those eyes. Those hands. Those pointed little breasts. And those long legs draped around his shoulders. With him deep inside her. And he could see now that she was tempted to have him. Big time.

"Why?" she asked on a whisper.

He took one step closer. "Because I've wanted you for years."

She flinched. "You have?"

Hearing wonder in her voice, he fisted his hands to keep from hauling her against him and stripping her down right there in his living room. But he soothed his soul, knowing he'd soon enjoy her, naked and panting for him. He took a step forward. "I have imagined how I'd have you. In a tent. In the desert. In the mountains. In a cabin. In a hotel, any five-star affair, in the biggest, softest bed I can find."

She made tiny noises of shock and delight. Speechless, she stared at him.

He grinned, his gaze travelling her body a second time and noting he made her nipples harden under her plaid shirt. "I want a big hot piece of you, Jess. Always have." His gaze seized hers. "I promised myself three years ago after Clint was gone that one day I'd have you—if I could catch you before some other man married you."

She inhaled fast, anger spewing out of her. "I don't want another husband."

"I think I know why. And I want—"

"Right." Her mouth went rigid. "You want to scratch an itch." She stalked him and he didn't move as she thrust two fingers into his sternum and glared up at him. "Well, I'm not available."

He caught her wrist. "From what I saw the other night at my party, honey, you are very available." He inched closer, one arm circling her waist, pressing her to him, thighs and belly to his growing erection. "Jedd Dayton wanted to dance. You refused him. Kyle Masters wanted to talk. You looked bored."

She rubbed against him, as much a sign of displeasure with his words as a real attempt to get away from him. "I'm not interested in either one."

"But you took your time being interested in how Betsy Morgan talked to me."

Her mouth dropped open.

He wrapped his other arm around her and splayed his hands on her back. The toned muscles in her body made him want to find and trace each one. "I saw you. That's why you left early." He nestled his shaft against the planes of her belly. "Don't deny it."

Defiant, she raised her chin. "Momentary snit."

He snorted. "Really? How's that?"

"I'm lonely. I admit it, okay? I saw her...flirting with you and it took me back a few years. I envied her. I may be thirty-eight. But I am not dead yet."

He cuddled her closer. Damn, he didn't think it was possible to get any nearer without fucking her. "Oh, believe me, I know you aren't dead, honey. And I want to make you more alive."

"You can't."

He ground against her and the force of his loins on hers had her lifting her shoulders and squeezing her thighs together. Good sign that her pussy was getting wet for him. "Want to bet I'm making you feel good right now?"

She winced, looking tormented, poor baby. "I've always thought of you as the youngest brother."

"Not when you and I were kids and we used to meet for picnics down by the creek on Saturday mornings."

She smiled sadly. "Still like peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwiches?"

"I haven't eaten one since the last time you and I ate together when I was eighteen and you were twenty-five."

She got tears in her eyes then and he wanted to kiss them away. Make her happy all the time. "I know you haven't thought of me as the younger brother since Clint died. Not when I saw you at Dad's funeral last year, either, and you let me hold you." He grabbed her chin and lifted her face higher, closer to his lips. "Tell me," he rasped, "that's a lie."

She swallowed, hard. "No," she breathed. "That's the truth." She shook her head, looked straight up at the ceiling. "But it's not possible. We shouldn't do this. We're in-laws."

Sensing triumph, he crooned, "Clint's gone. Your parents and mine, too. Aunt Marie is into Zen and the power of the universal one." He grinned and so did Jess. "There's no one here to object. No one here to criticise. No law we can't be together."

"There is the town!"

"What the hell do they matter?" he sputtered. "What've they ever done for you?"

"I live here! Work here! And even though you're in the Army, you're the owner. Frank is only your manager but he runs the Rocking H with the power of your name! You *are* a part of us!"

*I just want to be a part of you.* He cursed, unable to reveal all his cards because she'd run like the devil was after her. "The people in this county don't make me happy," he pointed out. "Do they make you happy?"

"No! No one makes me happy."

"Ain't that the truth." He hugged her and she moaned a little, then shifted ever so slightly into his embrace. He smiled. "I want to make you happy, Jess. Again. Happy like you ought to be. Deserve to be."

"Don't be silly."

"That's exactly what I plan to be. Want to be. With you, Jess."

Her big green eyes travelled all over his face as if she were seeing him for the very first time. "I haven't laughed in so long," she said, her one hand creeping up his chest, feeling his muscles as she went. "You are a tempting man." Her fingers touched his throat. "And this is a sweet offer." Her fingertips outlined his lower lip. "But I can't."

Growling, he crushed her closer. "How tempting is this?" He lowered his lips to hers and took them with the fierce longing of years of pent-up desire. Her lips were warm as summer honey, wet inside with mint and when his tongue surveyed the inner recesses and ravished her senses, he knew what she wouldn't admit. So he said it for her. "You know this is a damn good offer."

She looked up at him, her eyes glazed, her pink lips open in wonder.

"Say it."

"A great offer." She tasted her lips with the tip of her tongue. "The best offer."

He leant down and spoke on her mouth. "Say you're coming with me."

"I want to," she said without sound to the words. "But I haven't made love to a man in so long."

He felt like a stag in rut to think she hadn't belonged to any man in a long time. Mad to claim her, he grinned. "Does that mean you've forgotten how?"

She fought laughter. "I might have. So *then* what'll you do?"

"Teach you new things you'll never forget."

She did grin then. "You are outrageous."

"Got that right." He kissed the hollow of her throat and spoke on her satin skin. "And wild to have you. You won't regret it, honey. I won't, either." He could have fused them together right then, and he wouldn't need a blow torch either. With another kiss to her lips, victory would be his. So he whispered and begged, "Come with me, Jess. I need you."

"Where?" she asked, dazed.

He grinned like a kid with a prize – and thought fast. "Big Bend."

"The wilderness," she asked, though she sounded like she was in a trance. "All alone."

"Not a soul to disturb us. Except for maybe room service."

Her eyes danced over him, and it was like the sun shining on him. "They have room service in west Texas?"

"At a big resort."

"Oh," she leant back in his arms and rolled her head on her shoulders, "I *love* room service."

Chuckling, he kissed her cheek and blessed her eyes with two tender kisses. "Honey, the world is your oyster."

"I *adore* oysters," she sighed and wrapped her arms more tightly around him. "When?" she asked, becoming more lucid.

"Tonight."

"No, my bulls –"

"I'll get my boys, we'll saddle up and we'll meet you at the creek. We'll all drive them over here." He clamped her close and he felt the air leave her lungs. "I'm not giving you time to back out."

Her eyes cleared and her spine stiffened. She pulled away. "This isn't wise, Trey."

"Who said it ought to be?" He hauled her up into his arms. "This is what it's supposed to be, Jess." He ran his fingers up into the hair at her nape, braced her like a captive as he splayed his legs wide and pressed her torso to his aching shaft. "*This*." He anchored her head and kissed her like he'd never kissed another, never wanted to, never needed to. He took her lips in one, two, three forays. He seized her breath and claimed the inside of her mouth with a spearing, demanding tongue. He made her moan and gasp, made her clasp her hands around his neck and kiss him back like she'd die if she didn't. He wanted her here, now, standing up against the wall or in a chair. But if he seduced her quickly here, he knew he'd



soon need a bed. Yet his home was not the place to lay her down for the first time. Not the place to savour her.

Still he had to have something to tide him over until tonight. As if he were starving, he just kept kissing her, not able to get enough of her mouth or her eyelids, her cheekbone or her jaw. Christ, she smelled like strawberries and coconut. Her skin tasted like them, too. Her throat, the hollow of her shoulder and the valley of cleavage. The plump rise of her breasts. God, he'd been a hang-dog pup loving her all these years—and now that he could have her, he couldn't stop. But had to.

Tormented, he retraced the path of his kisses from between her breasts to her throat and her chin. But when he pulled away to look down at her, he paused, enthralled.

Her eyes closed. Her lips open, her breath quick and hot, she hung in his embrace as if she were suspended in air. Drifting in euphoria. Lost.

Lost in him. Just how he wanted her. He cradled her closer. She was his. She loved what he did for her. And God knew, that's what he had wanted, what he had dreamed of all these years.

And if he could enchant her with his kisses, imagine what he could do for her loving her with his entire body.

*Look out, Hardwick. You may never get out of bed again.*

## Chapter Two

By the clock on Trey's dashboard, it was ten past midnight and soon time for her to make good on this bargain she'd made with him. While he'd been making small talk for more than three hours, she'd been torn between outrageous hunger for his fit, firm body—and a howling desire to escape a deal that could be her undoing.

Oh, yes, she wanted him badly. So badly, she'd decided to treat herself and him to a different woman. She ran a hand through her loose waves, hanging over her shoulders. She looked down at her frilly black blouse and a white match-stick skirt, black boots and the shiny silver belt she used to loop around her quivering body and tie her silly heart inside. She'd even showered and shampooed with perfumed items she'd forgotten she owned. She'd put on blush—like she needed any, her fever for him was so high. She put on mascara, wondering if it would run when she perspired making love to him. Then she'd found her see-through black lace bra, worn once, put it on and preened at how it pushed up her size 36Bs.

And left the matching panties home.

At her risqué behaviour, she grinned, squirming once more now in his truck's plush leather seats like she did every time he looked at her with those dark, fathomless eyes. But the sex she wanted today, she knew, might not be the yearning for him she needed to experience tomorrow. And the day after that. He was home only for one more week on leave. She knew that. Was it good he was going away again? Part of her said no. No, he was the only friend she had left. Now when he went, he'd be the only lover she'd had in more than six years. *Oh, God, what will I do after he leaves again for the wars?*

She'd go back to being the lonely widow of the county. The one who'd told herself she'd live her life alone. Never love. Never laugh again.

She wrung her hands. *Stop going round and round on this, Jess! You are here. You want him.* Should she just strip naked here, make him pull over so she could jump his bones—or should she order him to stop at the nearest town and let her jump out? *Escape.*

But from the looks of things, by the light of the moon and a million twinkling stars, he was down to twenty miles per hour and headed up Main Street of a tiny town towards the only five-star hotel in west Texas. So to her, the idea that a man—the knowledge that *this*

man—wanted her enough to treat her so very right, tingled her toes. And made her body swell and her pussy cream with a luscious ache she hadn't felt in at least a decade. She relished it, too, nestling her needy labia against the cool seat and feeling her nipples pucker.

He drifted to a stop in front of the Victorian-brick façade hotel and shut off the ignition.

"I called earlier and told them we'd be late. I'll roust them and be right back," he said in a gruff whisper and squeezed her hand. "I'll check in, get the key and we'll go around to the casita I've rented for us."

She tried to look nonchalant while her cunt pulsed to have him inside her. "I'll be here."

He lifted her chin so that the moonlight drifted into her face. "I'm gonna make this good for you, Jess."

She gave him a wry smile. "I don't want either of us to ever be sorry."

In the velvet darkness of the night, his features formed a devilish portrait in greys and blacks. He moved closer and thumbed her lower lip. "You'll be so happy, darlin', you won't know what hit you."

She shivered with his promise. "Get going then and hurry back!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

He hopped out, took the sidewalk with long strides of his two long legs and disappeared into the lobby. Maybe two minutes flat went by and he was out, inside his truck and driving around to the largest adobe casita that just happened to be the farthest from the main lobby.

After he parked, she jumped out and opened the back door to get her overnight bag. But he grabbed it first, his eyes telling her he was being the gentleman here. Then he took his bag in one hand and her arm with his other. Only tiny lights illuminated the sidewalk in the silent black night as they headed for the door of their little house. With a twist in the lock, he opened the door—and she stood there, astonished by the sight.

The lights were already on inside. Mellow rays bathed the peach-coloured walls, the rich ochre leather sofa and matching chairs and the hues of sienna, turquoise and ivory in the Navaho carpets on the floor. While on every surface in large vases and small stemmed ones stood masses of white blooms of roses, chrysanthemums, jasmine and lily of the valley. The fragrances floated through the doorway and drew her inside to marvel at the array.

"Trey," she whispered as she turned to take them all in. "Trey." She couldn't imagine what this cost him. "Oh, thank you." She found his face, so handsome, so dear, so firm with tension. "They're lovely. How did you know I love all these?"

He dropped the bags, kicked the door closed and twirled the lock. "You told me."

"Did I?" she asked, a hand through her curls, star-struck by his proposition since this morning. And loving every moment of his devotion.

He took a step towards her and threw his keys on a table. "There is a lot I know about you, honey."

"You remember from our Saturday mornings at the creek?" she purposely asked in an innocent tone because she didn't want to know if Clint had told tales about her. "How could you? We were kids."

"You were my friend who loved macaroni and cheese. Hated airplanes. Wanted to raise dogs—Labradors."

She admired his strong features in the soft glow of the lamplight. "You have a remarkable memory." *I remember you, too, sweetie.* "You were my best friend. I told you things I never told anyone else." *Not even Clint.*

He nodded. "I thought so."

He wasn't coming to her, and if that was him being even more of a gentleman and giving her room to breathe, she didn't want either now. She'd come this far with him, not because she needed to save her ranch, but because she needed to save herself. She needed to take what she wanted. What she needed. And this afternoon, riding home from the Rocking H, she admitted to herself what she wanted was Trey. Naked. Rolling around in a bed with her. Making love to her for as long as she could claim him.

Smiling now, she took the two steps to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Thank you." She inhaled the rich aromas of her own surrender and melted against his warm hard body. "The flowers are lovely, you are very thoughtful and I am absolutely dying here to have you kiss me like you did this morning."

He made a small sound of relief and pulled her close. Now, torso to torso, thighs to thighs, she could feel his erection grow against her.

The fires of her own need had her standing up on tiptoes to search his eyes, speak his name and put her mouth to his.

"God, Jess!" He tore away before she could get a good hot taste of him. "I worried."

"You're sweet."

"Sweet, huh?" He caught her up in his arms and pushed her to the wall. "Tell me this is sweet," he ground out and took her lips with a fierce claim. Though his force was mighty, his tongue was soft and searching, his lips plush as they plucked at her mouth, pressed against her and seared her with demands.

"No, not sweet." Her fingers thrust between them to get his shirt off, his skin on hers. "Torture." She bent to kiss the hollow of his throat, inhaling the scent of his soap and his musk. "I love the way you smell." And before she knew what she said, she had added, "I always did."

He growled then, his hands pushing her to the wall, one set of fingers splaying into her long loose curls, holding her while he plundered her mouth and his other hand ran down her back to scoop her up to him. She rubbed against him like a cat, her breasts confined in the tight lace bra, her hips tilting up to his, begging.

He lifted her, both hands under her ass cheeks and walked with her to a chair. He plunked himself down, her thighs straddling his legs as he undid the buttons of her blouse and she did the same for him. "Jess, baby," he crooned, "you are a beauty." He tugged her shirt out from her waistband and plucked at her belt and the button of her skirt. "Get these off!" He flung her shirt to the floor and set her at arm's length from him. Open-mouthed, he palmed her breasts in the black lacy affair she'd worn for him.

He trailed the backs of his fingers over her nipples and her hands stilled on his chest. He unhooked the front clasp and as her breasts sprang free, he put his warm hands over the fullness of her. She let her head fall back and moaned. Muttered something wild, his lips came down hard on her and sucked her inside. She wiggled and inched to get closer, her inner walls raging and soaked now with juices to bathe him, take him inside her. But he nipped her nipple and licked her to salve the power of his claim. He shifted to the other nipple, sucked it to a hard point and rolled it with the tip of his tongue.

"Arggh, God, Trey!" She swayed in delight and pleaded with him, "More of that. Please, more."

Fast as a whip, he stood with her in his embrace. Her legs around his hips, he took three steps to the huge four-poster and laid her down on her back. She toed off her boots and wiggled backwards eager to get her skirt off and show him how she'd not dressed for him.

But he pushed away, leaving her alone to go rip open his suitcase. She stared at him, pulsing to have him put his hands all over her starving pussy, while he rummaged around and finally, strode back to the bed with two large boxes of condoms.

Bubbling with laughter at the sight, she didn't have time to do more than screech as he loomed over her, dropping the boxes on the bed beside her head. He was now focused, feral, staring into her eyes, a man on a mission. His hands were everywhere, yanking at her waistband, sweeping her skirt down her body until he looked back, stopped short and stared at her bare pussy. One black brow arched as he wrapped his fingers around one of her thighs and asked, "No panties, baby?"

Her gaze glued to his, she shook her head. "I didn't need them. Didn't want them. Didn't know if I could inspire you in the truck."

His eyes widened in glee. "You should have told me. I would have obliged you."

"I didn't want to be too demanding right away."

He drove his fingers, fully splayed into her bush, and she whimpered. "You're going to be a witch? Is that what you're telling me, hmm?"

"Oh, yes," she moaned. "I thought about this all afternoon and I knew that once I had you naked, I might never let you go."

He traced her slit with a delicate stroke of his finger and she curled up into his hand. "Good to be forewarned."

"Absolutely," she insisted. "You also need to know that I didn't bring a lot of clothes with me. And no panties."

He pulled his finger away and she drove her fists into the bedding. "None at all?"

"Mmm-hmm. I hoped you wouldn't mind."

He caught her chin. His eyes were lambent orbs of need. "Mind? Jess, honey, this pussy—," he sank his fingers into her curls again and tugged, "is gonna be so full of my cock that it won't have time or need to be all covered up."

"But if we go out, if you get bored with me in bed—"

He sent two hard fingers up into her soaked core this time and she bucked up off the mattress. "Neither one of us is going to be bored, I promise. Because I'm going to do such things to you, do so many things for you and me, that you won't remember your name."

She stilled. Her name she didn't want to remember! Not her married name. Not her married life! She rose up on her elbows and kissed him quickly. "Oh, Trey, how can this feel so right?"

He searched her eyes then, deeply, briefly. "Because it is, darlin'. See, feel how right this is." He rose over her then, his cock resting on her mound, his balls dangling between her hungry folds, and spread her out. Hands above her head, he trailed his fingers down her wrist and arms. Palming up her breasts, he formed them into cones and licked and sipped at her aching, sensitive nipples. Tracing her waist, he ran his hands under her hips, nuzzled her navel and caught her ass cheeks to force her pussy higher for his examination. There, he paused, looking at her curls. "Damn, I always loved the colour of your hair, and I always wondered if you looked like a strawberry sundae down here, too." He sank to his elbows and leant down to plunge the tip of his tongue into her hot and needy little slit. "Sure enough," he groaned as she did, too, "you even taste like one."

She was laughing, choking on the delight of his tongue teasing her. "Strawberry sundae?" She gulped as his fingers spread her wet lips open with a succulent sound, his forearms pushing her thighs wide towards the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, yummy, baby." He sent one finger inside her channel and she arched up at the thick invasion. "You are so wet for me. Let's see if you want more." He put another finger inside her and slid out again. Then he plumped her lips up so that she felt the brush of his breath touch her where no man's ever had. "I want to see your clit. Oh, yeah. Big and swollen for me, isn't it?" He kissed it and she bucked. "I want—" he tickled her clit with the tip of his tongue, "—to make it bigger." He licked her. "Harder. Think I can?"

"Ohhh, yes!" She dug up handfuls of the coverlet. "Can you do it now? Please?"

He was so good about obeying her. Sinking down, he put his whole mouth over her open pussy, madly and loudly sucking on her until his tongue came out to drag over her clit in a determined homage that made her keen and yell at him to, "Come inside me. Oh, now."

Lifting his face, he grinned at her. "No." He rubbed her clit with two deft fingers, making her moan as he bent to her again. "You'll scream for me first." This time, he spread her labia wide and kissed his way all the way around one and the other. Then he sat on his haunches and toyed with her clit, rolling it, rubbing it, licking it, sucking it over and over to make her thrash like a mad woman.

She was floating, flowing, soaked with cream, swelling inside with a mindless ardour like she'd never felt, never imagined. "Trey, Trey, you are killing me here, honey!"

He rested his cheek against her thigh. "Am I, darlin'?" He bit her lightly on one of her folds and the sharp thrill of his teeth set her to grinding her own. "Let me see what I can do to make it all better."

He put his mouth to her with a delicate determination, his tongue laving her clit, two fingers seated deep inside her sensitive, tender channel. With a rhythm that astounded her, he stroked her inside and out so that she seemed to rise above them both to pound and quake in an orgasm that had her screaming and him pushing her to the mattress and hugging her so close she thought she'd dissolve into his body.

As she simmered in the aftershocks, he caressed her pussy with the flat of his hand and sat back on his heels. "Do yourself, baby. I want to watch."

"But I've never done that..."

"Ever?"

"Just for me. Alone," she whispered, knowing she gave him some hint of the sad sexual deprivation she'd endured in her marriage to his brother. She also saw in Trey's shining dark gaze the thrill that this knowledge gave him. Suddenly, she swelled with desire to please him, tease him, make him satisfied and hungering for her.

She lifted her hands and sent her fingers through her long hair, over her scalp, and down her throat, over her shoulders to her full and pointed little breasts. Her nipples were diamonds and she rubbed them with the centre of her palms. Her cunt hair was drenched with her own juices and his lavish kisses. She combed the thick curls of her pussy and shivered at the feel of herself, soaked with her thick syrup. Her clit—she tapped it and yelped—was achingly sensitive, and her labia felt as smooth as liquid glass, so rich with the heat of her desire and his care. She spread her legs wide and plumped up her full pussy lips to circle her clit, round and round, in glorious moaning splendour, nearing completion.

His fingers clasped her wrists. His voice was harsh with want when he said, "You make me yearn to be the skin of your fingertips."

Limp with her own explorations, lost in her lush yearnings, she became bold. "I want your skin to mine—your fingers to pet me."



His dark eyes set aflame with her words, he lifted her then so that she sat on the bed. With deliberate moves, he discarded his own starched shirt, his belt, his jeans and stepped out of his black briefs.

She felt faint with the sight. *My God, my God. Where have you been all these years with all that beauty and power and fully standing red cock?*

She ate him up with her eyes, awestruck by the muscular play of sinew and bone, the patina of pale light and shadow on his scrumptious hard body. "Trey, you are every thing I imagined you'd be."

Stalking her on his knees, he leant down on one elbow and caught her nape with his free hand. "You thought about me. Good. Just like I dreamed of you." He lavished a rich kiss on her lips. "Makes a man damn happy to know he's admired."

A wicked idea flashed through her brain. "Want to show me just how happy you are?"

He straightened up then and she looked up along the long, blue-veined wealth of his shaft, already dripping for her in need.

"How's that for happy, honey?"

She licked her lips, put a hand up to circle his rod and noted her fingers barely touched. She stroked him up and down. "Trey, I'm going to die and go to heaven."

He snorted and bent down to brand her with a kiss. "Well, then, baby, I'm coming with you. Starting—" he pressed her thighs wide and rubbed his mouth over her cunt, "—as soon as I can get a damn sheath on!"

He reached over to one box and tore it open. Packets sprayed all around them. But he held up a handful of pink packets and wore a rueful grin. "They had only watermelon flavoured."

She sputtered in delight. "Never heard of that."

"Yeah, well, imagine my distress." He pushed up, ripped one packet with his teeth and flipped out the little red disk. The room filled with the aroma of the summer fruit.

She shook with laughter.

But he was about to roll the latex up his shaft.

"Please," she crooned to him, a hand atop his, "let me."

He put the condom in her palm and planted his hands on his hips. "Do it. I'm yours."

There she was, looking at this to-die-for hunk of man, admiring his muscles, his humour, his many charms. She tilted her head, wrapped her hand around the base of his

very impressive blue-veined erection and leaned up to lick off the silver beads of pre-cum that glistened there. Just one taste—one swirling sample of his thick shaft—sparked an addiction that had her stroking him with her lips and tongue and him moaning, objecting, “No more, Jess. I’m not good at control where you’re concerned. Honey? Jess?”

She floated down to the mattress, her delight that she could please him, melted her into a puddle of longing. She positioned the condom over his beautiful blunt head. “That’s awfully pretty to hide.”

He growled. “Hurry up, baby, so you can tell me how pretty it feels.”

She slipped it on, her tongue coming out between her teeth, not certain she still had the skill to put one on. She had done it so very rarely in her married life. Not since the fourth year she and Clint had been husband and wife and they’d learned Clint could never father a child. But she rolled it on in three strokes, the aroma of watermelon tickling her nose and her funny bone. “I’ve never been in bed with a watermelon.”

He hooted. “Hell. How about a zucchini?” He sank his fingers into her ass cheeks.

“Got one?” She wiggled, feeling his balls against her soaking wet kitty.

He lifted her legs up around his shoulders, kissed her ankle and nestled the hood of his cock at her entrance. “A huge one for you, honey,” he ground out and sank down into her cunt in one luxurious drive.

Her mouth fell open.

His eyes squeezed shut.

“Oh, oh, ohhhh.” She lolled her head on the mattress. “I think I’m throwing over ranching for farming.”

“Yeah?” He began to thrust inside her, rocking her on the bed in a soft rhythmic sway. “How about I come plough your fields?”

She hummed, ran a hand up through her hair, luxuriant as a cat, and curved up a shoulder. “Lovely offer. But I’d need you more than in spring and fall.”

He pushed into her on that note. “I’d be at your command.”

“Really?” She stroked his hipbone, running her fingers down through the dark short curls above his cock. “How often could you come?”

He blew out a gust of air. Then he rammed her once, twice, three times. “As often as you need me.”

"I do need you!" she whispered in a rasp that couldn't be her own. She strained up to get him closer, nearer, dearer to her. "I need you, Trey," she told him again, now with tears in her eyes and in her words, his nearness so vital to her. He dropped into her over and over again. Her hands grabbed for some part of him to hold onto as he focused on her face and fucked her hard and long until she pierced the air with her cries and he shouted out a hoarse declaration that she belonged to him.

Some time later, he rose up and left her. In a fuzzy part of her consciousness, she heard him run water, flush the toilet and come back to her. He rolled her over to one side so that he could embrace her from behind and sank his fingers into her juicy cunt. With strokes that awakened her to renewed needs, she wiggled her ass back into his groin and moaned her approval of his pursuits.

"You make me so hungry for you, Trey." She turned her face to invite his kiss.

He gave her a tender one and pulled back to whisper, "If I can make you want me every minute of every day, don't doubt I'll try, Jess." He rubbed his nose along her shoulder and bit her flesh. "I'll work so hard to make you come for me with a touch or a look, you'll do it across a crowded room."

She undulated beneath his hand, purring like a cat. "Yum. I want that."

He burrowed further into her folds to find her clitoris and massage it with two fingers. "You'll know that in my mind I'm stroking your pretty pussy and nipping your clit."

She bucked, the very idea a stimulation that had her whimpering for completion. "Make love to me again, Trey."

He rolled her to her tummy and before she could think what was happening, he had her up on her knees, her ass in the air, and his fingers spreading her folds wide from behind. "Oh, Jess," he groaned, "you are beautiful this way, too, honey." He sent two fingers up inside her from behind and he bent to put his lips to one buttock. His fingers going in and out of her sounded luscious, the succulent fragrance of their musk and watermelon filling the room. He bit her ass cheek. "I love how you sound." He kissed where he'd bitten. "I love how you give in to me." He withdrew his fingers and tore at a condom, to roll it on and plunge his sweet hard shaft up inside her.

She sucked in air, filled and thrilled by his length, his girth, his heat. She shifted back into him.

He slid impossibly farther inside her and with his hands braced on her hips, he took her once more to a gasping, groaning orgasm that pulsed through her with electric jolts. He spent his cum seconds after, grinding into her with abandon. But she was floating, fulfilled but feverish for more. So that even after he came to a halt, she milked him with massages of her pussy walls and made him hang his head on her back and groan with her strokes.

She sank to the bed and he collapsed atop her, his weight, massive and warm. She wiggled and he rolled to lie flat on his back. Filled with an energy she'd never experienced, she turned to one side. Surveying this ravishing man who had just taken her three times to orgasms so powerful she still felt the hollows of the vibrations, she knew she was a woman fresh to an intoxicating kind of loving. This mating with him had been nothing like that with Clint. While she needed to examine why that was, now was definitely not the time.

Now was a time to savour and enjoy this man. Again.

"You are beautiful." She leaned over to kiss his lips and run the fingers of her hand through the satin hair on his head and the prickly black hair on his chest. She nuzzled him there, inhaling the scent of him, the scent of her on him—and she grinned against his ribs. "How can it be that a man who knows how to make love so well hasn't been snared by some smart girl before the age of thirty-one?"

Eyes still closed, he dropped one hand over hers and tilted up the corners of his mouth. "I was always practicing."

"Never marrying."

"You got that right."

"Afraid of it?"

He opened one eye, stared at her, and shut it. "No."

She snickered. "Afraid of women?"

This time he opened the other eye. "No."

"Ah, I know." She grinned, catching his chest hair in her fingers and rolling it into tight little curls. "Afraid they'd get your money."

He closed his eyes, his mouth grim. "Ha! Never had any until my dad died. Never would have inherited the ranch either if Clint had lived or Sam had." Sam, Trey's and Clint's oldest brother, had died ten years ago of a head injury from playing college football. "That's why I joined the Army. Had to make something of myself, all by myself."

She'd learned that lesson herself the hard way. When she realised Clint was an alcoholic about six years in to their marriage, she also soon learned he had no interest in getting sober. Or staying sober. She cleared her throat now, forcing herself back to the moment and the question she longed to ask, but should have stayed away from. "So why didn't you ever get married?"

Both black eyes opened now and fixed straight on her. "Truth?"

She nodded. "After what we've just shared. Yes, truth. Always."

He lifted her fingers now, each in turn as he frowned. "When I went to college, at first I was like any other guy, just looking for a weekend lay. No technique required." He smiled ruefully. "One day, guess I was a freshman, a buddy of mine says hey, ask so-and-so to homecoming. I said, no, she doesn't strike me. 'Why?' asks my friend. 'Because she's got brown hair and brown eyes – not strawberry blonde hair.'"

Jess went very still.

Trey pinned her hand to his heart. "'And green eyes.'"

Reason, anger and joy infused her with fire. "You can't tell me that you were so taken with me that you didn't date anybody who didn't have those characteristics?"

"Why not?" His gaze grew hard as onyx. His cheeks flush with fury. "Why not, Jess, if it's the truth? Why not, if that's the way it happened, and I never knew consciously until that minute when he asked me?"

"Because you and I met when you were a kid!"

"And you were not much more than a kid yourself!"

"Still, that story makes me seem like a fantasy."

"So what if you were? To me, you were important. So important that I measured you against every girl I looked at, every woman I wanted. I'm not saying it's logical. And I'm not saying I planned it that way. So go ahead and argue with me, if you want. But you can't change what was in my mind."

"Oh trust me, I'm thrilled by the compliment, but the fact remains that we were just kids. And even if we shared Saturday mornings at the creek, how could you really know me? The adult me? You don't."

"Trust me, Jess. I am not in bed with you, the child."

She stared at him. Could he know her better than she thought possible?

He started to speak then but snapped his mouth shut. With a roll, he jounced to the edge of the bed and stood up. "Get up."

She stood, knowing he was going to order her to go to sleep or to get dressed. And if that happened, they would go home and never speak of this again. Sorrow swamped her so quickly, she swayed in the storm.

"Pull down the bedspread."

"Trey. I am not going to sleep in the midst of an argument with you."

"Pull. Down. The. Bedspread."

She blew out a gust of air and swiped her hair from her eyes. "Obstinate man." She tossed mountains of pillows to the floor then yanked the duvet and the sheets down. For the second time this evening, she stood staring at a sight so totally unexpected. She bent and picked up one of the little round candies that lay strewn over the sheet. She examined it—put the orange-flavoured bit in her mouth. Then another. Laughter bubbled up from the bottom of her heart, filled it and had her throwing back her head to chuckle.

A hand to her stomach, she felt the vibrations of her joy rumble deep inside her. She spun to him, her eyes misting up with mirth. As she strolled towards him, she off-handedly said, "You must have paid the hotel management a small fortune to comb west Texas in August for every jelly bean around."

His body was rigid as she wound her arms around his neck and rose on tip toes to brush her mouth on his. "Not a small fortune, by any means," he replied gruffly. But his arms pressed her nearer. "Not when you are in need only of two flavours. Orange and pina colada."

"I imagine," she whispered as she brushed her mouth over his, "that's hard."

"Damn, right, honey."

"And deserves a big thank you."

"I'd say so." His mouth was splitting in grin. "Want to tell me what my thank you is gonna be?"

"Oh," she breathed and nestled her breasts against his chest, "I'd say it'll be special, really special, for a man who knows me so well."

## Chapter Three

She sank down, her skin brushing his like satin, her nipples blazing a trail over his abs and his hips, until one of her hands cupped his balls and the other covered his cock. She kissed the head of his penis and he bucked, sinking his fingers into her long silken hair. He threw his head back and shut his eyes. *Man, how many years had he dreamed of her taking him in her lush mouth?* He'd usually come at the first thought, never able to get beyond the initial feel of how she'd possess him.

But this was so much better than his poor imagination.

She was careful. Rolling his heavy balls in her soft fingers. She was devoted. Licking his cock all along one side and down the other.

And damn, she was slow. But oh, so creative. Nuzzling her nose against his belly, stroking his cock back and forth and humming against his groin. "Gonna kill me here, honey, if you don't put me in your mouth again."

"You liked that?" she asked, sounding stunned.

Part of him was so far gone with lust, at first he didn't get the innocence in her tone. But his brain kicked in enough for him to fist his hand in her hair and rejoice that this was not a regular act she performed. "Loved it. Let me have more, will you?"

She exhaled like a filly too long held back on the reins. "You bet," she crooned and caressed his testicles again, then kissed his navel and pulled away to sink her plump lips once more over the blunt head of his penis. He ground his teeth, having to tense his thighs to keep from blowing the whole scene then and there. His reward was her rhythmic, almost dream-like service to his cock. With warm and luscious pulls, she stroked his painfully turgid flesh and sank her mouth over him, moaning in her delight. He shot a hand out to the wall to keep from falling over.

She withdrew, making him bite his lip at the denial of her heat. She looked up at him with those doe's eyes of hers, alarmed. "Can I keep going?"

"You'd better, Jess, or I'm gonna tear the house down with my bare hands."

"Ohhhh, wonderful!" She exulted, a child with a huge prize. Rearranging her knees on the floor to scoot closer to him, she smiled against the length of his cock, running her mouth along him sideways, holding him firmly at the root.

He told himself to withdraw.

But she took his blunt tip in her mouth again and this time—*Christ!*—*this* time she increased her tempo to a maddening pace. He could feel the jolt from his balls that signalled his climax and he jerked backward. She hung on to him, followed him. So when he groaned and she didn't move, he wondered, as he let himself helplessly pulse between her warm willing lips, if she'd known what she was doing and if he'd pay some kind of price for a service she never intended.

He swallowed hard as he felt the last of his cum spurt into her. Then he heard her swallow too.

His hands caressed her scalp. "Honey, Jess." He didn't know what to say. All the other times he'd had this done for him, he'd known the woman knew what she was doing, where things were going.

Jess lifted her head and searched his eyes. Hers were bright and he feared it was because of tears.

He raised her, two hands under her arms, and cuddled her close. His lips on her nape, he pressed his hands into the muscles of her back and lifted her ass cheeks to press her whole body against him.

She pulled back in his arms and cupped his cheeks. "Thank you. I always wanted to do that."

Again, he was speechless. He wouldn't lead her into a discussion of what her love life was like with his brother. Too much information in this case was a bad thing. And he certainly did not want to know if she had ever tried it before she got married—or after she became a widow. So he just stared at her, stupidly.

But she said, "Oh, Trey," grinned and kissed him, and suddenly she was a sprite who hugged him and rubbed her nose against his.

He let her bite his earlobe and run her tongue down his throat. He found some voice. "You got a kick out of that."

"Mmm. You bet I did, big boy!" She giggled.

Giggled! He put her away from him and examined this creature whom he did not know. "So you don't mind that I—?"

"No. You don't mind, right?"



Noting a new tone of power in her voice, he grinned. "Mind?" He grabbed her, tossed her over his shoulder and took two paces to throw her on the bed. "You just blew my mind. I'd like that to happen again, yes, anytime you are ready. Hear me?"

She wiggled, her arms thrown wide on the bed, her gaze trailing down to settle on his sadly limp cock. "I'm ready now."

"Yeah, insatiable, I get it. You've got to have a little pity for a poor old man here, honey."

"Hmm." She tipped her head to one side and examined him. "So what will we do in the meantime?"

He looked her over. Her hair was a tangled mess of red-gold curls. Her mouth was dark pink with exertion and rapture. Her beautiful big nipples were up in rosy points like pink diamonds. He grinned, an idea ripe with promise blooming in his very happy brain. He grabbed her up again, threw her over his shoulder and bit her thigh. As she squirmed and cooed at him he'd better let her down, he wrapped one hand around her legs and sounded as stern as he did when giving orders to his men. "As we go out the door, you have got to do as I say."

"Out the door!" she screeched. "Are you nuts? Where are we going?"

"Shh, now, honey. Be a good girl. I'm opening the door. Oh, and see the resort robes there on the hanger? Grab those."

"Trey!" She kicked her legs. He bit her firm little leg again, harder. "It must be two in the morning!"

"I know. Got those robes? Good girl."

"Trey!" She was gulping and laughing at the same time, but as he grabbed the key to the room and stepped outside into the cool night air, she scolded him in a hot whisper, "We'll be arrested for indecent exposure."

"Not if you're quiet. Now shut up, baby, I have a new adventure for you."

"You are one stubborn man! *What* are we doing?"

"Looking at the stars." He headed down the path to the resort swimming pool. He'd come here a few times before and loved the silence, the crisp air of the primeval mountains of Big Bend, the clear black of the sky at night out here. She stilled, the quiet inviting her own, he figured. He opened the gate to the pool. Illuminated in lights, the aquamarine waters shown like a gem in the fathomless dark of the western night. He marched over to a large

chaise longue and set her down, then sat down beside her. Pulling her close to his body, he felt her nestle there, her long legs twining in his, her elegant fingers over his chest, her head against his heart.

She sighed. "This is divine."

"I know." He kissed her forehead and draped the robes around them. "I wanted you to come see this with me."

She looked up into his eyes, her irritation gone to admiration. "You've been here before."

He nodded, massaging the back of her neck. "And wanted you here with me every time. After Dad died. After Clint died."

She stiffened. "Let's not go there."

*We'll have to sometime. And soon. If I'm going to come home and stay, it'll be because I have a chance with you and because we can talk about the past with some equanimity.* "I don't want to know about your sex life. No need for that, Jess. But Clint was an alcoholic. I knew that. Dad did. The whole town did. You couldn't miss it what with the week-long drunks and the crashed cars."

"Okay, okay. I hear you. I dealt with it. I endured. I went to Al Anon and I tried to get him to go to rehab or AA. I tried, but he didn't want to stop drinking. He thought he was a failure. The second son. The boy who could only marry into land."

*Oh, Christ. Clint, you crazy man. You resented your wife? For land she had inherited?*

She wrapped her arms around him again.

"Cold?" Trey asked and wrapped her more tightly to him, letting that part of the conversation die.

She shook her head. "Not with you."

He lifted her chin with two fingers. *I love you, Jess Hardwick.* "Good!" He bounded up and stripped her of the robes. "Come swimming."

She snorted. But stood up. "You are a wild man."

He grasped her hand and admired the naked woman with long muscular legs and pointy high breasts. "Yeah, wild for you, lady." He tugged her to the edge of the steps down into the water. "The pool's heated. You won't catch cold."

She walked up to him and in the rapidly cooling air that breezed softly around them, she put a hand to his jaw and reached up to kiss his lips. "I'm always warm near you."

He felt his cock appreciate that statement. "Let's swim, before I have other activities in mind."

He pondered what those other activities might be for most of the night. After a couple of laps in the pool, he had taken her back to bed and kept her tightly spooned to his body. Possessing her had become a minute-by-minute obsession now that he knew she loved to fuck with him. Loved to laugh with him. As she'd dropped off, he slipped the fingers of one hand inside her swollen wet pussy and felt the reverberations of her moan in delight. She was his. He was going to keep her from all harm. He just had to figure out how to make her see it and agree to it before he told his commanding officer what he'd do about re-enlisting. That was a conversation with his CO he had to have next Friday, which meant the time to make Jess his was short. To do it, he was going to rush her like a charging bull.

\* \* \* \*

Jess woke up the next morning, sun peeking through the heavy drapes, her body languorous, heavy, soaked with need and arching—*Oh, my God*—into Trey's skilful sucking of her clit. His artful strokes of her channel. His open-mouthed kisses to her thighs.

"Trey, honey," she rasped, delirious with the thunderous sensation of being consumed by a ravenous man, "what are you doing to me?"

He glanced up, his umber eyes mischievous. "I'm loving you, baby."

She undulated on the bed, careful not to move too much lest she disturb his ministrations. "Oh, you are so very good at it, too. I may never get out of bed."

He growled and drew her clit into this mouth with such a hard pull that she bucked. "I may never let you."

She writhed, delirious with his ardour. "How can you want me so badly?"

He crawled up her body on his elbows and framed her head. "Not want the sassy babe with cat's eyes and bad bod? Oh, lady, I have *always* wanted you." He nudged her legs open wider and the blunt head of his cock found the entrance to her pussy. She could tell he had planned this, too, because she now knew the texture of the watermelon condom delving inside her wet core. He drove quickly to firmly seat himself with a twist of his hips. "Never any other. Anyone I took to bed was sweet but never you."

She hummed in joy at his body's possession. But in the mystery of how he had cared for her for years, she was humbled and her eyes watered. "I am grateful you thought all those others were only...sweet."

He let out a laugh, then lifted his hips and treated her to his shaft's possession. "Never thought of yourself as wicked in bed, is that right?"

"Never," she admitted as she moved with him in delicious rhythm, her body filled to the brim with sumptuous man and delicious cock.

"You are, baby." He lifted a bit and leaned over to bite one nipple and the other.

She groaned and grabbed his hair. "With you, I want to be wicked," she confessed, staring him in the eyes. "Always did. But I was afraid. Afraid that I was nuts to think of being with you this way. Afraid that I was transferring some silly affection onto you because my marriage with Clint hadn't worked. Afraid that our childhood friendship had been more than what it was."

His mouth curled up slowly in a compassionate smile. He brushed her hair from her cheeks with his thumbs while he caressed her sopping wet channel with his iron cock. "I had the same feelings, too. But every time I saw you," he whispered, kissed her nose and stroked her once more with his talented shaft, "I knew I wasn't a kid any more. But you, baby, you were a widow I had to leave alone for awhile—but still the woman I wanted, in my arms, in a bed. Hell, in *my* bed. All the time. For this."

He curled his fingers around her nape and raised her to kiss her with a marauding tongue and teeth. She clasped her arms around him and squeezed hard, meeting his thrusts with her own, moaning in rapture at his power and her surrender.

She gritted her teeth and felt her electric need for him building to a climax. He sent one hand down to her clit and massaged her over the edge as he plunged into her. In grinding madness, he swirled her to a heady pulsing orgasm that shook her as he found his own release then curled her with him to one side.

Glued together by exhaustion and perspiration, she lay in his embrace as they both caught their breaths.

Minutes later, he gathered her up in his big arms as if she were a feather and strode towards the bathroom. She slid down his torso to stand, clinging to his musky body like a nymph as he grabbed a condom from the counter. She pushed away to stare at him in joyous surprise. With arched brows, he asked if she was ready for him again.

She flowed against him like a well-loved cat and bit his shoulder. On a shout of delight, he opened the door to the huge circular shower and turned on the spray. He stepped inside and took her with him, placing her on the huge marble seat against the wall and asking if she'd like breakfast. "I'll order room service soon. Promise. You need food. But, damn, honey, I'm just starving for you again."

Complimented to the quick, she dug her nails into his massive arms. "Who needs food when I have you?" *Soon, you'll be gone and I'll have only memories.*

On a cry, she kissed him like a greedy kid.

He rolled on his condom with two quick flicks of his wrist, then grabbed a bar of soap and caressed its smoothness over her breasts and her stomach, down to her pussy and the folds between. She watched in fascination, memorising the sensations of his care. She spread her legs wide for his access and as he bent to kiss her, she tilted up her hips for him and his maddeningly delicious care. He stepped aside, reached up for the nozzle and took it down to rinse her with the spray on her breasts and her cunt.

She undulated, loving the stimulation of the tiny jets, pinching her own nipples to heighten her need. Then, she sent her fingers down into her throbbing pussy. She sought her clit and bucked at the sensation of her own ability to bring herself to a hotter craving for him inside her. "Trey, my fingers aren't any good, honey. I want you here."

Her words had him hanging up the nozzle and grasping her arms. He picked her up and turned her to the wall. From behind he sent his hand between her buttocks and stroked her labia with delicate fingers. "Baby, how can you be so juicy for me every time?"

Her hands flat against the tiles, her nipples chilled by them, she pushed back. "I have never wanted anyone, anything so much as I want you. Touch me. Have me, Trey."

He drove three huge fingers up inside her cunt and pressed his body to hers. He bit her earlobe. "I want to be the only man you have touching you, Jess. No one can make love to you like I can, baby."

Then he proceeded to show her how true that was. He reached around to the front of her and found her clit, massaging her to a rampaging need. "Now, Trey. God, fuck me now!"

Without turning her around, he pulled her to him and sat on the marble seat. Widening her thighs, he led her hips down so that she began to take his big hot cock inside her cunt backwards. The angle and the raw sensation had her arching in ecstasy.

He began to give her all of him slowly, sweetly, his hands on her waist directing her. But the madness built to a quick frenzy, he pumping into her with speed and precision, she gasping for air and completion in the electric jet of his fulfillment and, finally, hers.

She drifted backwards to him and he enfolded her, his head against her back.

She squeezed his cock with her swollen cunt. "Honey, that had to be the best shower I've ever had."

He shook with laughter. "Wait till you see breakfast!"

More than an hour later, breakfast was eggs, bacon, toast and, of all things, oysters on the half-shell!

"You said you wanted oysters, Jess." He scooped one silvery morsel out of its shell and bent over her chair to hold it close to her lips.

She allowed him to give it to her and after she savoured the thing, she licked her lips and teased, "Are you going to give me everything I ask for?"

He examined her eyes and leaned over to peak down into the gaping resort robe she'd donned to eat. "I live to serve. Name anything, it's yours."

She lifted her hand to trace his full lips. "You've given me more than I dared hope for."

He froze, seeming suddenly and inexplicably disappointed. But he tried to cover it with bravado. "You don't want anything else of me?"

At a loss as to what she had said or implied that distressed him, she sought to assure him with truth. "I never ask for the impossible." *Like devotion. Happily ever after. Those things don't exist for me.*

Frowning, he grabbed her up in his arms and pushed her robe down her body, as impatient as if he'd never had her. "I want to feed you." He sat down in an open armed chair and pulled her forward, so that she sat on his lap and faced him, her thighs wide and open to his stroking fingers. "Have some eggs, Jess." He spooned them into her mouth. "And a piece of bacon." She bit it from his fingers in a nip, confused by his withdrawal.

She turned to the room service cart and surveyed the food. The butter was melting and so was her body. He had loved her so well and so damned often that she was a mass of sexually satisfied Jell-O. She reached over and took a scoop of the butter from the bowl and pushed his robe from his shoulders. Then, she rubbed the butter round and round his nipple. He jumped and she grinned. "Two can play."

His dark brown eyes swam with despair as he stopped her with his hand clamped over hers. "What if I want more than playing, Jess?"

Her satiated cunt pulsed in expectation. With him, she was now ready to play—anytime. "I'm addicted to you, honey." She fingered his cock with her free hand. His shaft was big and bold, warm and ready. A drop of cum appeared on the tip and she ran her thumb over it.

He bit his lip.

She stood, worked her way out of the chair, then extended her hand to him. "Come make love to me again in a bed, Trey. I've never known anything as wonderful as making love to you."

He followed her to bed and moved with her, flowed with her, covered himself with another condom and finally thrust into her with the lightning of his possession. For hours, they slept until he woke her and told her they were going to dinner in the restaurant.

"No bra," he ordered her with laughing eyes. "I want to look at you and know when your nipples reach out to me and your pussy gets wet for me."

"Ha!" She laughed, delighted he had worked himself out of his bad mood. "I'm hard and wet for you twenty-four hours a day!" She ran a hand down his sculpted abs. "What I want to know is how will I manage to eat if I'm not naked in your lap?"

He swatted her on the ass and told her to get dressed.

But in the dining room, he asked for the banquette at the back and sat next to her. There, in the corner of the room, where few could see behind the potted palms, he ran his hand up her thigh, beneath her flowing skirt and ran his fingers over her slit, then inside her fabulously outraged pussy.

"How am I supposed to eat with you inside me like this?" she scolded him on a chuckle.

He arched his brows and somehow she got through her dinner and he through his, with kisses and laughter for extra relish.

That night, they fell into bed with only a few kisses to warm them and slept like two ship-wrecked sailors.

When she woke the next morning, she heard him calling the front desk and asking for an extension on when they could check out. She rolled over to grin at him, knowing this look at his naked splendour was her last.

"Good morning, babe. Guess what? We've slept through the day. It's four in the afternoon. We need to get up and check out." He cupped her face and looked at her, grinning. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Fine," she told him, lying and smiling all in one breath.

She had just spent almost forty hours in bed making love with a man she'd known most of her life. True, a lot of women made love with men they'd known all their lives. That wasn't unique. But different for her was the fact that she'd done it in so many new ways time after time. And according to their deal, time had been the ticking bomb here. All of this passion was over so soon.

Sorrow swallowed her. She clutched the sheets, watching him pad away to the bathroom. She didn't want to do without him!

*Stop your childishness, Jess!* She punched the pillow. She had enjoyed what they had here—and his declaration that he wanted her in his bed all the time was one she understood. She wanted him. Inside her body. Loving her. All the time.

But was sex enough for her?

After Clint died she had promised herself that she would look very long and hard at any man who ever again touched her mind or her heart. Clint had enchanted her in bed. Just like his brother, Trey. Clint had been intelligent, funny and fun-loving. Just like Trey. Clint had been a man in a hurry to have her. Just like Trey. But Clint had been lazy, undisciplined.

Unlike Trey who was organised, efficient.

Clint had also been a drinker.

Unlike Trey who stopped, always, at one.

Clint had been one to issue ultimatums. *Marry me after graduation. Let me do the finances. Sign the deed to the ranch over to me. I'm your husband and you owe me.*

Not like Trey.

Now whatever she had learned about Trey would go for nothing. Because he was returning to his post, to wherever he was sent. Away from her. And even if she wanted to go with him, she couldn't. She owned a ranch that was now, and always had been, the one constant in her life. She wasn't rich enough to hire a foreman like Trey had. She couldn't go anywhere with Trey, no matter how much she wanted him.



Wanting a man was what had led her to marry Clint. Being so in love with lust that she was blinded to who he really was. She had vowed never to make that mistake again. Yet, here she was trying to decide if she loved this man. And she wondered if she could even make a sound decision about loving any man, let alone *this* man who charmed her and disarmed her — and who by his laughter and grace, alarmed her.

## Chapter Four

Their ride towards home in the dusk was so silent, he could damn near hear his heart beat. He reached for her hand at one point and she squeezed it good-naturedly, then withdrew.

He'd thought showing her how he loved her would have made her break down and declare how she cared for him. But she wouldn't go that far, no matter how often or how well he brought her to climaxes. And as for him, hell, he was a goner, now down with a bad case of the love sick blues. And he hadn't even left her yet.

He saw the latest road sign and knew he had only fifteen more miles until the turn-off for home. That meant time was out for him to make his pitch, but damn, if he wasn't a tongue-tied kid. Trying to find the right words, he knew he'd just have to force himself to blurt out what he wanted – what he intended – and sit tight and see where the sparks flew.

At the next right turn off the Interstate highway, he pulled off the lonely road into the service area and parked the truck.

She glanced at him, a question in her eyes.

"Would you like to use the ladies room? Or get a Coke?"

She shook her head no. "Thanks."

"Me neither."

"Then why –?"

"I haven't been fully honest with you, Jess."

Her lips parted. "About what?"

"What I wanted here."

She sucked in air like a woman dying for breath. "What do you mean?"

"I asked you to come away with me because I had an ulterior motive." *Christ, do not look at me like I'm a vampire.* He grasped her hand, but she snatched it back.

"Tell me," she pleaded in a small voice. "Get it over with."

"I took advantage of you to ask you to come away with me."

She searched the landscape in front of her as if she were looking for a refuge out there.

"Jess, listen to me. I have wanted you all my adult life. Most of my adolescence and maybe in my childhood, too."

She winced at that.

"I wanted you like I have never wanted any woman. I have waited most of my life hankering after you and when I came home this time, I told myself I was going to tell you how I cared. But you wouldn't stay at the party at Aunt Marie's and you wouldn't come to the house to have dinner with me. So when you came to me the other day to ask for a favour, I took advantage of your need and I made you this offer. Made you take this bargain."

"And now you hate that you did," she said on a sound of hushed despair. "I see," she whispered and seemed to cave inward as she reached for her door handle.

"No!" He caught her before she could escape him. "Listen to me!"

Tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"Oh, honey, I am not telling you I don't care for you. I'm telling you I love you. I love you, body and soul."

She blinked, her eyes confused – then horrified.

He tried to bring her close but she pulled back. "I love you, Jess. I always have. I got tired of waiting for you and this time when I came home, I vowed to tell you, show you how much I cared for you. I hope I did." He pushed a stray curl from her brow. "Tell me you know I love you."

She gazed outside again, looking for the truth of what he said. Finally, she looked at him again and nodded once. "I—I do."

"What you don't know is that the other reason I wanted to show you this now is because I have a decision to make about my military career."

She frowned.

"While I'm here on leave this time, I am also deciding if I want to re-up for another enlistment term. I'm tired of war, Jess. I'm tired of seeing my men destroyed by bombs and bullets and the desperation of re-deployments back to the desert. I want a family. I want to come home to some peace and quiet and love. I want to come home to you, Jess. I love you and I need you. These hours away with you have convinced me that I have always only needed you, honey."

Tears rolled down her cheeks then.

"Don't cry, honey. I'm asking you to marry me."

She shrank away from him.

He couldn't believe it. After how he'd worked to make her laugh, love her, she was crying. "What's the matter, sweetheart? I thought I had shown you how much I care."

"You did. Oh, Trey, you did! But I—I don't know if I can do this, make this decision."

"What? Why not?"

"I need to think about it. I need to be away from you and think about it."

He brushed her tears from her cheeks, his heart pounding with a sorrow he couldn't see the bottom of. "My leave is up Friday. When I report, I have to tell my CO whether I'm in or out for the next three years. I need to know, Jess, if I can come home to you or if I'm going to live without you for the rest of my life."

"Trey, you need to decide so soon?"

"Yes, once and for all. I won't come back and run this ranch unless you'll have me, Jess. I couldn't live close to you and not have you. I won't live my life any longer with you just beyond my reach."

"But how can you ask me to decide whether to change my life so quickly?"

"Call it short, call it unfair. I've known you all my life, Jess. I'm giving you twenty-four hours to tell me whether you love me and whether you'll marry me."

"A day?"

"It's all I have, Jess. All any of us has right now. Meet me at the creek at dusk tomorrow night. Tell me your decision then. I can't wait any longer, Jess. I've spent my life loving you and I either have to do it with wedding rings and kids and laughter and tears or not at all."

\* \* \* \*

The sun glowed a bright red through the live oak trees at dusk the next day as Jess walked the barbed wire fence that divided the Rocking H from her own property. Jumpy as a cat on hot coals, she patted her mare and scanned the horizon for Trey.

A few more minutes and dusk would be over, disappeared behind the far western ridge, bringing night and darkness to the day and her past.

She rested her forehead against the saddle of her horse and tried to push out the horror her day had been. What agony she'd felt to know she could choose love again—and be wrong. Or choose love once more—and take a chance this time she could get it right.

She surveyed the creek below, one of Trey's that ran deeper than any on her land. Was Trey like that? Running deeper, dearer, than Clint ever could have? Could brothers be different?

Logic said yes. She had lived with Clint for sixteen years. He had been a jovial teenager, but as a man he became self-centred, morose, and addicted to a substance that took his will-power and weakened him. As he declined in health, he and she hadn't slept together and hadn't communicated like husband and wife for more than eight years. By the time he had been accidentally trampled by one of their bulls, he'd ruined his liver, his heart and their chances for any normal relationship.

That's what came of her teenage love affair. A flame of passion that turned her head, thrilled her young body and ruined the years of young adulthood. Now here she was fascinated by her old friend, Clint's brother. If she had been a fool to go with Trey to Big Bend, she consoled herself that the two days with him had renewed her spirits, taught her how to laugh again—and made her see that she wasn't some thirty-eight-year-old hag who was dried up and dead.

The sound of hooves pounding the dry earth had her turning to the vision of Trey on a black stallion.

*God. How you make me want and weep to have you, Trey.*

He rode right up to her, his black Stetson greying out his features until he pulled up beside her. Jeans, starched white shirt, huge silver belt buckle, all attire for a devilish hunk of man. But he looked like he'd been up all night. His eyes haggard, his jaw lax. He touched his hat brim like any polite Texas gentleman. "How are you, Jess?"

"As awful as you, I think," she told him the truth.

He flinched and looked away as the last sliver of the red sun sank behind the far ridge, blanketing them in grey light. "What's it gonna be, Jess?"

She put a hand to his thigh. "Please, Trey. Climb down and let me talk to you."

"I don't need talk. A simple yes or no will do."

"Trey, I have an answer for you, but I need to tell you how I came to that conclusion."

He examined her features.

"If we can't talk about this, how will we ever live with ourselves?" she persuaded him.

He slid down, looping his reins around a tree limb to secure his huge beast of a stallion next to her mare.

"Daisy likes your man," Jess smiled at the way the two horses nodded to acknowledge each other.

Trey had his hands on his hips as he swung to face her. "I'm ready. Talk, Jess."

"Despite the fact that you know I like jelly beans and oysters and a few other things, too, you don't know everything about me, Trey."

"I know enough to love you, Jess."

"Yes," she affirmed. "I see that."

"You gave me twenty-four hours and frankly, you freaked me out."

"All I've got, baby!" He raised his arms and let them fall to his sides.

"Thinking about this wasn't easy."

He snorted. "Tell me something I don't know."

Frustrated with her own lack of speed and with his despair, she ran a hand over her brow, dislodging her own hat. Catching it, she dropped it to the ground. "After Clint died, I told myself I would live my life alone. I'd never marry again. Never find anyone I could love. There were no men around here who attracted me. None, especially since you weren't here. I ached for someone to love, to share with, to talk with and help me with decisions about the ranch. My dad had never done too well as a rancher. Clint was not much better. Then, of course, he drank himself blind. And I blamed myself for choosing him."

Trey frowned. "I don't understand."

"He wanted me to sign the deed of the ranch over to him."

"He had no right to ask for that, Jess."

She smiled then, broadly, and Trey was even more confused by her reaction. He scowled. "I know he didn't, Trey. I told him so. That land has been in my family for generations and even though I was the only heir and a woman, the land was mine. Plus, of course, he was drinking and he was terrible with money. Drank it up when he could. I had to go to the bank to take him off the accounts. He would have bankrupted us."

"Dad told me. I am so sorry, honey." He came a few steps nearer.

She looked up and could have reached out a hand to caress him, but she didn't dare. "He accused me of not being a good wife. Not sharing. He resented what I had and said he had married me because I was the best looking girl in the county." She inhaled. "And the one with the most land. Aside from being great in bed."

"Jess—"

She put a hand out to stop him from coming closer. "Hear me out."

He stepped back, palms up. "Go ahead, honey."

"I got married at the ripe old age of eighteen, thinking I had married a man I could love forever. A man I could enjoy day after day. Instead, I had the other kind. A man who was secretive, sad, sequestering himself from others. From me. After Clint died, I told myself I'd never settle for anything less in a second husband than all the qualities that had been so lacking in Clint. And I never found anyone I wanted anyway, never found anyone who attracted me except you, so I never felt challenged." She took a step towards him. "If the irony was that I had found all those qualities I wanted in a husband in my young brother-in-law, then my worse problem became that three days ago, that man seemed to want me for a bed partner."

He winced. "Jesus, Jess. It was not that way at all!"

"I know, Trey. I know. But being an occasional lay is not my style. I am a true blue, dyed in the wool woman of ordinary living. With a ranch I inherited and land I love. With an expertise I've developed to a sustainable business. In a community of people I've grown up with and enjoyed. And a desire that throbs in my bones, even if I deny it, for a loving husband and plenty of children, anniversaries and birthday parties and graduations. Just like any other woman I know."

Trey stepped forward then and would have grabbed her if she hadn't warned him off again with a hand up.

"So if you had it in your mind that I was to be your secretive lover, that wouldn't have happened. I told myself that as I lay in bed with you in Big Bend. Even though, God knows, I enjoyed every little moment with you."

"What the hell are you telling me, Jess?" He took his hat off and raked his hair back.

"I love you."

Dropping his hat, he did grab her now, his long fingers digging into her arms.

She pressed against him. "I love you, Trey Hardwick."

He shook her a little. "And?"

"I saw after your dad died, after you held me and we mourned together, that you were a good man, the better man I could love. You were the man I had loved all along. Since you and I were kids and we came here on Saturday mornings. I knew I loved you for a thousand

different reasons – a thousand better reasons than I had ever loved before. But I couldn't call it love. Didn't dare name it."

He seemed to hold his breath.

She wound her arms around him. "Tell me you'll sign a paper declaring my ranch will never become a part of the Rocking H."

He narrowed his gaze at her. Started to speak, stopped, then said, "Hell, yes. Give me any damn paper. I don't want your land. I want you, sweetheart."

She relaxed into his embrace. "That's what I hoped. I'll have my lawyer bring it over tomorrow."

His eyes filled with tears. "Is that your only request?"

"That you love me until we die."

He squeezed the stuffing out of her. "Done. And?"

"That you'll give me laughter and jelly beans and oysters, and babies."

"Damn, honey. You won't know what it's like to be out of bed for a minute."

She giggled. "Great! And that you'll take me dancing on Friday nights. I want to see Betsy Morgan jealous."

He hugged her close and laughed deep in his belly. "I need to the see the men cry that I've landed you."

"And that you'll marry me a week Saturday."

"I can manage that, ma'am." He lifted her face to his and crooned, "Can I kiss the bride now?"

"You 'd better hurry."

He kissed her then, a hot, luscious claim that had them both gasping for air.

"Why do I need to hurry?" he asked as he rocked her in his arms.

"Because I have a few things in my saddlebag I need to give you before they get old and dried out."

He looked pained when he drew away. "I'm game. What?"

"Peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwiches. Plus," she said and dug down into her jeans pocket and brought forth three bright red packets. "Lots of watermelon."

He sank his head down on her shoulder and shook with laughter. But in a rush, he caught her up and twirled her around. "You better have brought a blanket roll to go with that watermelon, baby."



"I did. But did you bring your zucchini?"

## About the Author

Cerise DeLand believes great romances combine feisty heroines with men who adore them and cannot live without them. With a background in Chinese and European history, Cerise brings her knowledge of Chinese, German and a bit of Spanish, then blends it with her years living in Japan, Italy, Washington, D.C. – and Texas. She uses all her talents and experiences to write romances she loves. Published in e-format by Ellora's Cave, Resplendence Publishing and Wild Rose Press, she is thrilled to bring her stories to Total-E-Bound, too! Cerise has won awards for her 18 print romances and mysteries (under another name), many of which have become selections of The Doubleday Book Club, Rhapsody Book Club and The Mystery Guild. (See more at [www.cerisedeland.com](http://www.cerisedeland.com))

Email: [cerise.deland@ymail.com](mailto:cerise.deland@ymail.com)

Cerise DeLand loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

## Also by Cerise DeLand

Swords of Passion: At Her Service  
Swords of Passion: For Her Honour

# Total-E-Bound Publishing



[www.total-e-bound.com](http://www.total-e-bound.com)

Take a look at our exciting range of literagasmic™  
erotic romance titles and discover pure quality  
at Total-E-Bound.