

CLAIMING THE COWGIRL'S BABY

Silver James



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Аннотация

The surprise heir gets a surprise heir! As the newly revealed secret son of Oklahoma's most notorious billionaire, ranch foreman Kaden Waite could lose everything if he doesn't kowtow to his late father's terms. In a desperate moment, he turns to heiress and friend Pippa Duncan for some very private comfort. But soon Pippa has a secret of her own—she's having his baby. Kaden is determined that history not repeat itself: the child will bear his name and Pippa will be his bride. But Pippa refuses to settle for marriage without love. Is it a stalemate or the start of something truly special?

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Claiming the Cowgirl's Baby is part of the Red Dirt Royalty series.

“Who knows when I might be in your bed again?”

Kaden stopped to consider Pippa's words. Oh yeah, there were all sorts of buts and second thoughts. She didn't seem like a one-night-stand kind of girl but maybe he'd read her wrong. It was just sex after all. A way to forget.

He studied her expression, thought about what he knew of her. Pippa Duncan was a sweet woman who wanted to make the world a better place. She wanted to help people. And this was her way of helping him. Somehow, in spilling his guts about the day's revelations, he'd become one of her charity cases.

The more he thought about it, the more Kade understood what Pippa was trying to do. What would it hurt to accept what she was offering?

He gave in to the need.

His lips skimmed her jaw, seeking her mouth. Then he took their kiss deeper, yet kept it quiet and dreamy, hovering just on the edge of desire.

He eased back to look at her and asked, “Are you sure?”

* * *

Best Friend Bride is part of the Red Dirt Royalty series: These Oklahoma millionaires work hard and play harder.

Claiming The Cowgirl's Baby

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

SILVER JAMES likes walks on the wild side and coffee. Okay. She LOVES coffee. A cowgirl at heart, she's been an army officer's wife and mum and worked in the legal field, fire service and law enforcement. Now retired from the real world, she lives in Oklahoma, spending her days writing with the assistance of two Newfoundlands, the cat who rules them all and the characters living in her imagination.

To every person who has ever created a family of the heart.

And with special thanks to my great Harlequin team: Charles Greimsman, Stacy Boyd, Tahra Seplowin, Keyren Gerlach, Erin Crum and the magicians in the art department. Y'all keep me on the straight and narrow.

looks shifty-eyed Mostly.

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[One](#)

Kaden Waite was a simple man. Standing on the street staring up at the massive glass-and-steel tower that housed the offices of Barron Enterprises, he wondered why he'd been summoned here. Kade managed the Crown B Ranch for the Barron family. He belonged in the country, not here in downtown Oklahoma City.

Two women, chattering like blue jays, brushed past him, then slowed to glance back over their shoulders. Their appraisal embarrassed him.

Other people, men and women in suits moving at a hectic pace, pushed in and out of the building's entrance intent on their business. The city was full of rush and commotion. Kade liked to take his time. Especially today when he was out of his element. Bells from a church near the Oklahoma City National Memorial chimed, reminding him the hour for his appointment was rapidly approaching.

Removing his cowboy hat, he reached for the bandanna in his hip pocket, only to discover he didn't have one. Instead, his

fingers encountered the crumpled envelope containing a certified letter requesting his presence today. And he had no freaking idea why. Cyrus Barron had hired him straight out of Oklahoma State University to run the Crown B Ranch, putting him in charge rather than one of Mr. Barron's five sons. Now that Mr. Barron was dead, was that about to change? Was that why Kade had been summoned?

He was dressed up—at least by his standards. Starched jeans with a knife-edged crease, buttoned-up shirt, polished boots. No bandanna to wipe the sweat from his forehead, no spurs jangling as he walked. Kade used an index finger to ease the pressure of his collar against his throat. Hat in hand, he entered the building.

Kade stayed pressed into a back corner of the elevator as it stopped on lower floors. People got on and off. A few women smiled. Several men did double takes before their expressions turned speculative. This wasn't the first time his presence caused that reaction. He wondered what people saw in him that created this response. Was it his Chickasaw heritage? His mother was a full-blood. He knew nothing about his father.

By the time the elevator doors opened on the thirty-sixth floor, Kade was the sole occupant. He stepped into an impressive reception area defined by dark wood and leather. Both receptionists—one male, one female—glanced up. The young man frowned, the slightly older woman smiled.

Hat still in his hands, Kade approached the desk. “Ah...good morning? I think I have an appoint—”

Smile still in place, the woman interrupted him. “Good morning, Mr. Waite. Heidi, Mr. Barron’s assistant, will be here momentarily.”

He eyed the plush leather couches and the tall-backed chairs in the waiting area wondering if he should sit down. The tall mahogany doors leading to the inner sanctum of Barron & Associates, the law firm headed up by Cyrus Barron’s middle son, Chance, opened, making a decision unnecessary. A petite dark-haired woman bustled toward him.

“Good morning, Kaden.” She extended her hand and he automatically shook it.

He remembered her. Chance’s longtime legal assistant looked refined in her stylish business suit and low heels. Kade was careful not to squeeze her hand too tightly despite his nervous inclination to do so. Ever since Cyrus Barron’s funeral, he’d fought down a sense of unease. Then a week ago, he’d gotten the certified letter.

Heidi ushered him down a long hallway. Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor only to be silenced when she stepped onto one of the expensive rugs lining the corridor. Stopping at a wide door, she knocked sharply and waited a count of five before opening it. Kade got the impression this was all stage dressing but he couldn’t figure out why it would be necessary.

He made three strides into the room before the door closed at his back with a quiet snick. Kade gazed at the people seated around the massive conference table, then glanced to the

windows lining one wall. He could see for miles across the rolling countryside beyond the metropolitan environs of Oklahoma City. He refocused on the people in the room and didn't miss the looks they exchanged.

"Thanks for coming, Kaden. We'll get started as soon as Mr. Shepherd gets here." Chance's voice cut through the heavy silence.

Kade noticed the plates and coffee mugs on the table in front of the Barron brothers, and then located the long cherrywood credenza loaded with food and coffee decanters. Full of nervous energy, he took his time pouring a cup of dark roast coffee and choosing something to eat from the array of muffins, doughnuts and pastries.

Black coffee, a buttermilk spice muffin and the chair at the far end of the polished wood table. This worked. He had his back to the windows but faced the Barrons and the door. Except for the occasional sidelong look, the brothers ignored him—not that they paid much attention to each other either. He didn't want to think about his predicament. With the old man's death, he figured he was here to be fired, and if that was the case, he wished they'd just get on with it.

When Cyrus first hired him, Kade had been young and full of ideas. It wasn't until later, after years of watching the interactions of the Barron family from the outside, that he started wondering why the brothers didn't resent him. The ranch was their birthright. They'd grown up there and even though each had

made his own mark in the world, the Crown B was still their home, still the heart of their family. To have its management turned over so completely to a stranger must have chapped their butts. It would have chapped his.

He'd poured his heart into the ranch for eight years. It was more than just a job; the Crown B had become his home too. And his passion. Their prime beef herds were the envy of cattlemen's associations in ten states and the horses he bred? They were coveted by horsemen the world over. His personal project had been to breed a "super stallion"—a stud to rival the American Quarter Horse Association's foundation studs. He now had a yearling colt that was the culmination of all his work.

If he had to leave the ranch, it would break his heart.

A sharp rap on the door jerked him out of his thoughts. When the door opened, an older man in a three-piece pin-striped suit marched in, set a briefcase on the conference table, looked around then fixed his unwavering gaze on Kade.

"Kaden Waite, I presume?"

* * *

Pippa Duncan pressed the pillow over her head. Jagged lightning danced behind her closed eyelids. The last thing she needed this morning was a massive migraine. She had too much to do plus a lunch date with Kade. No, not a date, she reminded herself. A lunch meeting. She needed to finish writing a grant and she had some notes she wanted to share with the Barrons' ranch manager to get his opinion.

She'd gone to high school with Chase and Cash Barron, had gone to parties and hayrides at the Crown B Ranch. Her father and Cyrus Barron had shared the same country club, poker games and social set. Her mother had done everything possible to pair her off with one of the Barron brothers, and had never been particular about which one. She'd endured her mother's disappointed sighs at four weddings. Her parents hadn't been invited to the fifth so Pippa pretty much invited herself to Cash's wedding because she'd needed to get reacquainted with Kade. She needed his expertise and horse sense to build a string of horses for Camp Courage, her riding therapy program. That was her only reason. Okay, she'd crushed on the Barrons' ranch manager when they'd both been students at Oklahoma State, but she'd outgrown those feelings. Really she had.

It was all about business now because getting Camp Courage financed and running was her priority. Since Cash's wedding, she'd spent time with Kade at the ranch and he'd come to town for lunch or dinner a few times, all so she could pick his brain. Kade had volunteered with the Oklahoma State Outreach Riders, a group of students working with disabled kids and horses. When he called last night to ask her to meet him in Bricktown for lunch, she'd ignored the zing of excitement that coursed through her. Because...business. And she was too old for crushes. Even if there was a whole lot about Kade Waite for a woman to crush on. Beyond the obvious—tall, handsome, employed—he ticked off several items on her Perfect Man list. He was a cowboy—and

that was the biggest priority. Yes, she was shallow like that.

If her head hadn't been pounding, Pippa would have laughed. She was such a cliché—the rich debutante falling for a common cowboy. Except there was nothing common about Kade Waite. She'd known that from the first time she saw him at OSU when she was hanging out on the corral fence watching the rodeo team work. She wasn't too proud to admit fantasizing about the tall cowboy in the faded jeans with work-roughened hands, and some of those fantasies had gone straight to all things sexy. Because Kade starred in every erotic dream she'd ever had.

The prescription medication she'd taken for the migraine was finally having an effect and she could unsquint her eyes. She wasn't ready to remove the pillow yet, afraid her room would be too bright to bear. The migraines had begun to manifest more frequently, a worry that nagged at the back of her mind. She didn't have time to be incapacitated. She had grant proposals to write, stable and arena space to rent, horses to buy. Camp Courage was so close to becoming a reality.

Eyes scrunched closed, she lifted the edge of the pillow and peeked. When no blinding pain lanced through her head, she opened both eyes. The medications had fully kicked in. She still had tunnel vision but managed to focus on the clock next to the bed. She had time to make her lunch with Kade—if she hurried.

After showering and getting dressed, she was ready to head out when her mother met her at the front door. Pippa had been so close to escaping, but she knew she was stuck. She plastered

a smile on her face. “What brings you out here, Mother?”

“I thought we might have lunch together, discuss your current activities.”

“Sorry. I have a lunch date.”

Her mother perked up. “Someone I know?” Then her eyes narrowed. “Why are you wearing those awful jeans and boots?”

“They’re comfortable, and no, you probably don’t know him. I’m meeting Kaden Waite, the Barrons’ ranch manager. He’s consulting on my foundation.”

Millicent Duncan shook her index finger in Pippa’s face. “I don’t understand you at all. There are days I can’t believe you are my daughter.” Her mother closed her eyes in an obvious effort to control her temper. The bitter edge had smoothed from her voice when she continued. “I wanted to send you to ballet school. You wanted riding lessons. You have always had this obsession with horses. And helping unfortunate people.”

Fighting her own temper, Pippa made her face blank. This was not a new argument. “It’s my money, Mother.”

“No. Technically, it was your grandmother Ruth’s. Your father and I both tried to dissuade her from setting up that trust fund. We knew you would just fritter it away on—”

“Enough.” She cut her mother off as lights started flickering in her peripheral vision again. Pippa needed to get away before the migraine precursors bloomed into crashing pain and roiling nausea. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temple in an unconscious motion.

“That man is not someone you should be seeing, Pippa.” Millicent’s voice grated on her nerves as the headache gained strength. “You need to stop all this nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense, Mother. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m going to be late.” Pippa slipped past her mother, shutting the door to the guesthouse behind her.

* * *

Pippa still managed to arrive a few minutes early. The patio of Cadie B’s Southern Kitchen was one of her favorite spots—especially in late spring. Overlooking the Bricktown Canal, the restaurant catered to locals and tourists alike with a menu of southern cooking favorites. Her usual table hugged the outer railing but today, she opted for one closer to the brick warehouse building that housed the restaurant. The secluded table she chose was squarely in the shade and would remain so during lunch. She kept on her sunglasses just to be on the safe side. The perky waitress set a sweating glass of sweet tea in front of Pippa and she settled in to wait.

Thirty minutes later, she checked her watch, then her smartphone. Kade was officially late and he hadn’t called or texted. Which was unusual. The guy really was a gentleman. She called him and when her call rolled to voice mail, she left a rushed message.

“Hey, Kaden. I’m at Cadie B’s. Did I mess up and get the day or time wrong? Give me a call, please. Talk to you soon.”

She wouldn’t panic. But she reflected on her mother’s pursed

lips and condescension when Pippa mentioned she was meeting Kade. Even though she'd assured her mother this was a working lunch, Millicent Duncan seemed to have the idea that Pippa was dating him. Ha. She wished.

After no return call and repeated texts to Kade, three refills of tea and a waitress morphing from perky to pitying, Pippa lost her own easygoing demeanor. Her thumbs flew over the virtual keyboard on her phone as she typed an angry message.

CALLED YOU AND TEXTED. NO REPLY. IF
STANDING ME UP IS YOUR WAY OF BLOWING ME OFF,
YOU SUCK!

* * *

Kade's phone blew up with calls and texts starting about ten minutes after he walked out of Barron Tower. Numb, he'd climbed into his truck and started driving. Now he was northbound on I-35 headed home. Only it wasn't his home. Not any longer. A highway exit loomed and he jerked the steering wheel, taking the ramp at twice the posted speed. He didn't care.

Turning into the parking lot of a truck stop, he parked in the farthest corner. Stiff-armed, fingers bloodless as he gripped the steering wheel, he pressed back against the seat.

"Shut up!" he yelled at the cell phone. He wanted to turn it off. He wanted to slam it against the concrete and drive over it with his pickup. He wanted his life back. The damn phone pinged again. Another text. Wait...from Pippa?

Breathing like he'd just run a forty-yard dash, he opened her

text. Standing her up? Blowing her off? He clicked over to voice mail. He had multiple missed calls from...what did he call them now? The Barrons. He'd refer to them as he always had. He couldn't wrap his head around what else they were at this point in time. Kade listened to Pippa's voice mail and winced. He'd blanked out about meeting her for lunch. Completely.

He hated texting. His thumbs were broad, unwieldy when it came to hitting the virtual letters but he didn't trust his voice. Thank goodness for autocorrect.

I totally messed up. Bad morning. I'm sorry. Really really sorry.

The big diesel engine of his truck rumbled as he stared out the windshield trying to marshal his emotions. Kade ignored the phone when it rang. It stopped after three rings. His text program dinged almost immediately, and he glanced at the message.

Will you please answer the phone so we can talk? What happened? I'd like to help if I can.

Pippa couldn't. How could anyone? He slammed his fists against the steering wheel. His mother had known. The whole damn time. She'd known who his father was. Had known the people he worked for were his half brothers. The sense of betrayal clawed at him, gnawed on his bones with teeth-jarring viciousness.

His phone rang again. He stared at the caller ID. Pippa. Accepting the call, he didn't say anything. Had nothing to say.

"Kade? Are you there?" When he didn't respond, she

continued. "What happened? I know you were supposed to meet with Chance this morning." Her voice trailed off but he remained silent. With a quick intake of breath, she gasped out, "Oh, no! Did he fire you? That's... They... That's despicable. After everything you've done at the ranch, after all the improvements, after...after..." She stopped and inhaled. "I'm so sorry, Kade. I can try to talk to them."

And she could talk to them. She was part of their social class. He knew she'd gone to school with the twins, Chase and Cash. Grew up knowing all of the brothers. His brothers. Half brothers, he amended. And wasn't that a kick in the ass. He closed his eyes, leaning back against the headrest.

Feeling exhausted, he huffed out a breath. He didn't need Pippa to fight his battles. He didn't need or want anyone involved in this very personal decision. He hadn't been fired, not outright. In fact, the Crown B could be his, lock, stock and barrel. "You don't understand, Pippa. It's not really like that. This is something —"

He stopped speaking. This really wasn't something he wanted to talk about. Not to her. Not to anyone. Not yet. It was too personal and he couldn't talk about it until he figured out what he was going to do. "Never mind, Pippa. Look, I'm sorry about lunch. You can't help, but thanks. Just leave it be. Please." So far, so good. He could finish this conversation without losing it. "I need to go. I'll...just...ah, later, Pippa. Bye."

Clicking off his phone, he leaned back against the headrest.

He could get everything he'd ever wanted. All he had to do was accept the callous edict of a dead man.

Two

Pippa stared at her phone. Kade had very politely hung up on her without her getting another word in. What was going on? Before she could contemplate the situation, the waitress appeared again. If she didn't eat something, Pippa would pay for it later. She ordered then headed to the ladies' room. There was a line, and when she returned, her salad was waiting for her.

Still trying to decide what to do about Kade, Pippa ate and people-watched. That's when she recognized the five men occupying a nearby table. The last time she'd seen all five Barron brothers together had been at Cash's wedding. They were all incredibly successful. Clay was a US senator. Cord ran the family's oil company. Chance headed up a huge law firm. Chase normally lived in Las Vegas, Hollywood or Nashville as head of the family's entertainment empire. She seldom saw Cash, though he lived in Oklahoma City. He was president of the security company in charge of safeguarding all the rest of the family's enterprises.

"So what are we going to do?" Chance sounded glum and Pippa stilled. It was rude to eavesdrop but instinct had her skulking behind the arrangement of plants between her table and theirs to remain unnoticed.

"We can't make him accept." Clay shrugged and Pippa wished she could see his face. Who were they talking about?

“It’s not like we hadn’t figured it out,” Chase added. “We’ve all hinted to Kade that we knew.”

Wait...what? She was beyond confused now and waved away the waitress who was approaching with the iced water pitcher in her hand.

Cord glanced around the restaurant and Pippa ducked down as he spoke. “Leave it to the old man to screw up things all the way from the grave.”

A waitress arrived to take their orders and no one spoke for a few minutes after her departure. It was Cash who reopened the conversation. “How did you expect him to react? Jump up and down for joy? The guy works for us. For the old man. Never once did Dad treat him as anything but an employee. Put yourselves in Kade’s boots. He’s told he’s a bastard son and that the only way he can keep his job—keep everything he’s worked for the last eight years—is to change his name. If he doesn’t become a Barron, he’s out on his butt.” He met the gaze of each of his brothers and added in a sarcastic voice, “Yeah, I’d be thrilled to death with that ultimatum.”

Pippa didn’t want to hear anything else. Her first thought was to get to Kade. No wonder he’d stood her up. Maybe she was too softhearted, as her mother so often complained, but she wanted to find him, try to make things better. If she jumped up and dashed from the restaurant, the Barrons would see her. She had to wait. That meant dessert. And coffee. And more stalling.

She finally paid out and was just waiting for her chance to

sneak away when a waitress and busboy began to clear the table between her and the Barrons. With a surreptitious glance toward their table, she slipped out of the chair and scuttled toward the door leading to the restaurant's interior. She now had one goal in mind—find Kade.

Walking to the parking garage, she considered what she'd overheard. Was Kade really a Barron? He'd never really talked about his family. Granted, she hadn't exactly been forthcoming about her own. She and Kade were friends but not particularly close. Not that she didn't want to know him better. She did because part of her remembered how she'd been that starry-eyed coed mooning over the handsome cowboy.

Cash said that Kade had to change his name or he was out. What exactly did that mean? Obviously, they wanted him to be a Barron, but did they mean to kick him off the ranch if he didn't? Her sense of justice surged again. Kade had told her she couldn't help, but she was determined to do something. Besides, what was the worst that could happen? He'd get mad, tell her to go away and that would be that. He'd still help out with the therapy program. Probably.

Before she could second-guess her motives, she headed toward the ranch, figuring that's where Kade would go. He'd lived there since graduating from OSU. She knew he was from somewhere down south—Sulphur or Davis or somewhere. Surely he wouldn't head that direction.

There was only one way to find out. She kept driving north.

Her foot might have been a little heavy on the accelerator because she made the drive in record time. She followed the long, sweeping trip to the big house. No vehicles were parked there.

Pippa took a secondary road and headed toward the building that housed the ranch office. Kade's truck wasn't parked there either. She kept driving until she found the pickup in front of his house. She parked her Highlander next to his truck, worked up her courage and got out. After knocking on the door for several minutes and listening intently, she decided he must not be home. She stood on the porch and looked around. What would she do if she lived out here and was upset?

The open door of the main horse barn caught her attention. Had he gone riding? After picking Kade's brain about horse breeding and ranching, she understood enough about the Crown B operation to know that when the ranch hands rode horseback, they used the stock horses kept in the smaller barn. Kade worked and rode the blood stock stabled in the main building.

She headed to the barn and found Kade there. He stood in front of a stall, arms folded across the top of the stall door, chin resting on his fisted hands.

He looked...forlorn. Deflated. Utterly defeated. Pippa wanted to run to him, throw her arms around his waist and hug him until the stuffing came out, as her grandmother used to say. But her feet remained encased in emotional concrete.

"Go away, Pippa."

He hadn't looked up, but of course he'd know she was here.

He always seemed attuned to his surroundings. There was no heat in his voice so she didn't move.

"Do you want to talk about..." She couldn't tell him she knew. He'd have to share that on his own. "About whatever has you upset?"

"No." He swiped his ball cap off his head and tunneled fingers through his thick, black hair but refused to look in her direction. "Just...leave me the hell alone."

"Don't curse at me. And I'm not leaving. You owe me lunch." She made a show of looking at her watch before glancing up at him, a smug expression firmly in place before she winked. "Though at this point, it is closer to suppertime."

Kade turned his head and her heart broke a little at the utter devastation etched on his face. His brown eyes were shadowed by a soul-deep pain. She moved then, walking toward him like she would a skittish horse. She stopped short of touching him, choosing instead to lean on the stall door in a mirror image of his posture when she'd arrived.

The yearling colt inside the stall whickered. Barron's Imperial Pride, Imp for short. "He's growing fast." Imp was Kade's crowning accomplishment and a safe topic.

"Yeah. Too bad I won't watch him grow up."

Or not. Pippa had to get Kade to tell her everything because this dancing around what she knew without tripping up was hard. She leaned a little closer to him, accidentally brushing her arm against his. "You can talk to me, Kade. Always. You know that,

right?" He didn't say anything so she tried again. "We're friends, Kade. Friends help friends. I can see you're upset. Won't you tell me what happened today?"

He shook his head and the next words out of his mouth stabbed her heart.

"What makes you think we're friends?" Kade jammed the cap back on his head and glowered at her.

She flashed him what she hoped was a sweet smile before nudging his biceps with her shoulder. "I did drive all the way up here after you blew me off for lunch. Only a friend would do that." She considered her next words carefully. "Even if you don't want to tell me what's got you upset, I still think you need a friend right now, and I just happen to be here all handy and stuff."

She tilted her head to look up at him. "Besides, you're a growing boy," she said. "You need to eat. I'll even cook, provided you have something in the fridge."

* * *

Pippa wasn't going to leave him be, and part of him didn't want to be alone. "I'm not fit for company, Pippa."

"Yeah, and?" She grinned at him, totally unrepentant for intruding on his solitude.

Kade settled at her words and that surprised him. He didn't want company of any sort, but if he had to have some, Pippa would do. Seeing her at Cash's wedding, he'd remembered her from college, from when he'd catch her sitting on the fence mooning over him. He hadn't wanted a girlfriend then. He didn't

want one now, especially not someone like Pippa. She should be with someone rich, like a Barron—He cut off that thought. Technically, he was a Barron, or could be.

He started to decline her offer but she was smiling all cute and sunny at him. Her long blond hair was caught up in a ponytail and the sprinkling of freckles across her nose went perfectly with her blue eyes. The quintessential girl next door.

It was just an early dinner. Between friends. And she was right. He needed to eat.

“C’mon, then.” His voice was gruff as he ushered her out.

They exited the barn and Dusty, the ranch mutt, galloped toward them. He leaped up on Pippa and would have taken her to the ground had Kade not braced her with his body, one arm automatically going around her waist. He stiffened, fending off the dog with a terse command, then tensed more as Pippa pressed back against him. She shouldn’t feel this good in his arms.

After releasing her, he kept his hands jammed in his pockets as they walked up the road to the house he’d called home since the day he’d arrived as the newly hired ranch manager. The place reminded him of the houses found on cattle and sheep stations in Australia. A wide porch wrapped around all four sides and the metal roof gleamed dully beneath the bright afternoon sun.

Pippa stumbled and he automatically caught her arm to steady her. “Pip? You okay?”

Her face had paled and she was squinting against the sun. Lips pressed together, she shook her head. “Migraine coming. Been

fighting it all day.”

He scooped her up into his arms without thinking. His mother suffered debilitating migraines and he knew what to do. “Keep your eyes closed until I can get you inside.”

Lengthening his stride, Kade quickly got her into his dim living room. He set her on the couch and hunkered down on his heels. “What can I do to help?”

She reached blindly for him so he snagged her hand with his own. “I have meds in my purse. In the Highlander.”

He pulled his hand away from hers reluctantly. “Keys?”

“Not locked.”

“Be right back.” Kade resisted the sudden urge to brush his knuckles over her cheek as he rose and headed outside. He returned moments later, her purse in hand. He didn’t like the wince on her face as light spilled in from the open door.

“Sorry about not fixing dinner for you.”

He brushed her apology away. “Not a problem. It’s more important for you to lie down. I’m going to carry you into my bedroom, okay? It’s darker in there.”

She nodded so he lifted and cradled her. After she was settled, had taken her medication along with a long drink of water, she held his hand as he sat on the edge of the bed with her.

“I’ll go away so you can rest.”

“Don’t. Please. I like the sound of your voice.” A little smile teased the corners of her mouth and she patted the bed beside her. “And a girl likes to be fussed over. I’ll be okay in a little

while. I caught this migraine early.” She offered him a tentative smile and a scrunched-up nose. “Besides, it feels a little weird being in your bedroom all by myself.”

Concerned about her, Kade acquiesced. He stretched out beside her and moments later, she'd curled into him, her head on his chest. Was it wrong that lying here with her felt so right? Even so, he didn't want to talk about his situation, especially not to Pippa. He liked her more than he should, and liked her idea for a horse therapy program. He'd considered asking her out but figured she wouldn't be interested. Still, she was easy to be around. Too easy.

“Are you going to talk to me?” She asked the question without opening her eyes.

The feelings of bewilderment and resentment hadn't gone away. He didn't want to talk about his day and the choice that had been forced on him.

As a kid, he'd lain in bed next to his mom when her headaches put her down for the count. He'd read stories to her, and it always seemed to help. Since there was no reading material nearby, he began to talk.

Kade started out talking about the ranch, about Imp. He spoke of his grandparents and growing up on their small ranch outside of Davis, Oklahoma. He talked about OSU. About getting hired by Cyrus Barron. About making the Crown B his home. Without a conscious decision, he opened up to Pippa. He voiced his bewilderment at going from the only child of a single mother to

having five brothers who'd grown up with their shared father, and expressed his concern over how they viewed him. Eventually, he got around to the feelings of betrayal engendered by his mother's deceit—a deceit he wasn't ready to confront her with yet.

He spoke until he was hoarse, hoping that Pippa had fallen asleep so she didn't hear the catch in his voice when he said, "Then the lawyer dropped Cyrus's ultimatum on the table. If I want to stay here, keep my home here, keep the Crown B..." He had to breathe before he could continue. "And it would mean keeping the ranch as CEO of the Barron Land and Cattle Company, it would mean owning Imp." And having more money than he could wrap his brain around.

Her hand pressed against his chest. "What do you have to do, Kade?"

"Turn my back on the only family I've ever known."

"I don't understand." Pippa's voice was soft as she craned her head to see his expression.

"To keep my place here on the ranch—to have absolute control over it, I have to change my name. I can't be a Waite. I have to be a Barron."

"Is that so bad?"

Kade almost shoved her away, remembered the pain she'd been in and forced his muscles to relax. Still, he needed distance so he eased out from under her and stood. What did she know about anything like this? Pippa was the beloved daughter of the Duncan family. They were rich, like the Barrons, while he'd

worked for everything he had—all of which could be ripped away at the whim of the man who'd donated his sperm to create Kade.

He paced away from the bed then whirled to face her. "What would you say to someone who came to you and told you that you weren't a Duncan, could no longer be a Duncan? That you were someone totally different."

"But you wouldn't be somebody totally different. You'd still be Kaden. The name doesn't make a person. It's just a label."

He stalked to the edge of the bed and glowered at her. "Being a Waite shaped who I am, Pippa. My grandparents. My..." Anger surged again. He'd always been close to his mother. He'd adored her as a boy, respected her as a teen and admired her as a man. He'd never questioned their love for each other. Until that damn attorney read Cyrus Barron's will.

Pippa sat up on the edge of the bed, watching. After a moment, she spoke. "I'm going to repeat myself. The man you are is the man you've always been. Your family—the one that raised you—had a profound effect on who you are. You could change your name to John Doe, and you would still be the same man who is standing in this room. Understand?"

Her stomach picked that moment to grumble. "You need to eat," he said, relieved at the interruption. "Me, too. Do you feel up to food?" At her nod, he added, "I'll go see what's in the fridge."

"Okay," she replied. As he started to turn, Pippa slanted twinkling eyes at him. "But I need something else first."

He wrinkled his brow, not quite trusting her expression. “What?”

She crooked her finger, beckoning him, and when he stood before her, she crooked it again. As he leaned over, she laid her hands on his cheeks. Urging him to come closer still, she stretched up and pressed her lips to his. “You’re good medicine. Thank you.”

He enjoyed the kiss, brief though it was. Pippa was an attractive woman. Lying there in the darkened room with her, just talking, was intimate in unexpected—and not entirely undesirable—ways. “Okay. But I’m going to feed you now. Food is better medicine.”

Kade slipped away from her. When she started to get up, he shook his head. “No. Stay put. I’ll serve you dinner in bed.” Which sounded far sexier than he’d intended.

In the kitchen, he made soup and sandwiches on autopilot while thinking about Pippa and what he knew about her. She was a sweet woman who wanted to make the world a better place. She needed to help people, and this was her way of helping him, he decided. Somehow, in spilling his guts, he’d become one of her charity cases. Just like he’d been for Cyrus Barron. His father. The word twisted in his gut. Bitterness welled up, but Kade reined it in. That wasn’t fair to Pippa. She wasn’t part of this mess. And while Cyrus might have been despicable, his sons had never really jerked Kade around. He needed to get a grip on his emotions.

The microwave dinged and he reached in to retrieve two bowls of homemade chicken noodle soup.

“Can I help?” He almost dropped the bowls at the sound of Pippa’s voice.

Concentrating, Kade set the dishes on the counter without burning his hands or spilling the contents. He turned to gaze at her. She leaned against the door jamb, her eyes still looking a little bruised from the pain but her lips—and he knew what they tasted like now—curved up.

“No, I’ve got it.” He glanced around. “I guess since you’re vertical now, we can eat at the table.”

Pippa laughed, a deep, throaty purr that caused Kade’s brain, and other parts of his body, to go places far beyond the gentle kiss they’d shared. “And forfeit the opportunity to eat in bed? Not on your life!” She whirled and was gone.

Gathering up bottled water, utensils and napkins, Kade set up the tray and followed her. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, her back against the headboard. He handed her the tray to steady, then settled opposite her, doing his best to hide his body’s reaction.

“This is nice,” she said after finishing her soup. “Sitting here with you like this.”

“Yeah.”

“Want to know something?”

“Sure.”

“I had a big crush on you in college.”

“Uh-huh.” Was she blushing? Kade swallowed hard, feeling a little more Neanderthal than he was comfortable with. “I kinda figured that out.” She didn’t reply and he fumbled for something else to say. “You were cute, sitting on that fence mooning over me.”

Tilting her head, she studied him, a half smile on her lips and mischief twinkling in her eyes. “I had lots of dirty thoughts about you while sitting there.”

Kade opened his mouth but no words came out. Dirty thoughts? His libido overrode his brain. “How dirty?”

Laughing now, Pippa shoved the tray away. “Really dirty. Sexy dirty. Cowgirl-style dirty.” She pressed her hand against her mouth. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this. I blame the chicken soup.”

“What’s going on, Pippa?”

She glanced down at her hands clasped in her lap and her cheeks pinkened. “Probably nothing. I just...” She raised her chin and met his gaze directly. “I like you, Kade. A lot.”

“The feeling’s mutual.”

“Is it?” She licked her lips and his eyes tracked her tongue.

Kade rolled off the bed, putting distance between them and easing the building pressure behind the buttons of his fly. What was Pippa saying? What did she want? For that matter, what did he want? “Are you done?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Was that disappointment in her voice? Kade reached for the

tray, hesitated, staring. “What’s happening here, Pippa?”

Her eyes bored into his, as though she was searching for something. “I don’t know.” She breathed deeply. “A connection maybe.”

Connection? Kade liked that idea probably more than he should.

“It felt good—my head on your shoulder. And the kiss. Maybe we could just lie here. Talk. Or kiss. If you want to.”

If he wanted to? She was a beautiful woman. Sweet. And too good for him. But he definitely wanted to. Kade grabbed the tray, shifted it to the top of his dresser. When he returned to stand beside the bed, he felt awkward. Pippa slid down until she was prone and patted the bed. He stretched out next to her and she rolled into him as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Maybe it was. Maybe he was overthinking things.

Yet, the more he thought about it, the more Kade understood what Pippa was trying to do, what she sought from him and sought to give back. She was kind and caring, and it dawned on him. She wanted to grant him tenderness, and if he gave in to the need for her, he would give her the same in return. This moment of...belonging was a gift. Aftershocks from the day’s revelations continued to rock him, but Pippa could vanquish them. For a while at least.

His lips skimmed her jaw, seeking her mouth. Then he took their kiss deeper, yet kept it quiet and dreamy. And Pippa, this generous, concerned woman, opened for him. He held her as the

kiss continued and they hovered just beyond the edge of desire. He discovered a sense of peace with her in his arms, mouth-to-mouth, body-to-body.

He eased back to look at her and asked, "Are you sure?"

She smiled, nodded and sat up. Neither broke eye contact as they unbuttoned each other's shirts. He felt her fingertips skim across his abs, his chest, and his breathing turned ragged. Working for control, finally steady again, he slid her shirt off her shoulders so he could touch her. His fingers glided over her surprisingly delicate skin. She was a cowgirl, with a cowgirl's strength. He was astounded when he discovered that fact, especially now as she sat on his bed, all but naked. A low hum thrummed in her, a sound of pleasure as she spread her hands over his chest while he skimmed his hands down her arms.

He gathered her close, eased her to the mattress and followed her down. They faced one another, touching, exploring, learning each other for the first time. He stripped the rest of her clothes off, kissing, licking, touching every part of her. He wasn't in a hurry when he kicked off his own boots and jeans, and he was male enough to enjoy the way Pippa's eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect O at the sight of his naked body.

He wanted to spoil her so he offered lazy caresses that teased then soothed. His mouth found her breast, his hand cupping it for easy access. He wanted to tantalize, stoking her passion in a slow burn. Pippa arched and sighed beneath him, her fingers tangling in his hair. He swirled his tongue around her other breast, making

her gasp.

Using his mouth and his hands, Kade ensured she had a long, slow climb to her peak. Her sighs tripped over into moans, and she quivered in anticipation, waiting, wanting, needing the pleasure. When he brought her to climax, she drew his head up, begged him with her eyes.

“Inside me.” Her command rushed out on a hiss of breath. “Now.”

Kade recognized her desire and slipped into her. She surrounded him, welcomed him with drenched heat, her inner muscles holding him in a fierce grip. They moved together, an intimate dance of retreat and advance so unconditional his heart pounded. She clenched around him.

“Kade.”

When she spoke his name, the tenderness shattered him.

Three

Pippa considered the empty space beside her on the bed. The spot was cold so Kade had likely been gone for some time. She couldn't decide which was more awkward—waking up to the man she'd made love to for the first time, or waking up to his absence. Their relationship had changed—obviously—but for better or worse?

She listened but caught no sounds. Pushing off the covers, she rolled out of bed and stood, waiting to see if her head was going to cooperate this morning. For the first time in over a week, she had no vestiges of a headache lurking. Excellent. She grabbed her

clothes and scuttled into the bathroom. She freshened up, using her finger for a toothbrush, dressed and headed toward the main part of the house. Which was empty. There was no sign of Kade but for a pot of hot coffee and a tented piece of paper propped up in front of it.

Opening cabinet doors until she found a mug, she poured a cup, rummaged for milk and sugar, fixed her coffee just the way she liked it and settled at the breakfast bar with Kade's note in front of her. Pippa swallowed a few sips while working up her nerve to read it.

"You're a big chicken," she chided herself out loud. And she was. The fact that he hadn't stuck around to face her the morning after—and they were in his house—didn't bode well for their relationship to continue. If he was blowing her off, she'd have to figure out a way to salvage things. She still needed his expertise to get Camp Courage up and running.

Pippa stalled another couple of minutes while she fixed a second cup. Finally unable to put off the inevitable any longer, she opened the note.

Morning, Pip. You were sleeping sound so I didn't wake you. I have some work this morning and need the early start. I left coffee. Hope it's not too strong by the time you get up. Talk to you soon. KW

Well, alrighty then. Pippa had no idea what to think. It wasn't a Dear Jane letter. Not exactly. But it wasn't a declaration of undying love, either. Not that she really expected such a

thing. She just wanted a chance to explore their relationship—especially after last night. Her whole body heated just thinking about it. He was... Her brain short-circuited and she puffed out a deeply feminine sigh of appreciation. He had real muscles and his hands were work-roughened. And his...oh yeah, his was something to behold. And enjoy. She thought about splashing cold water in her face then glanced at the paper on the breakfast bar.

She reread the note. He'd called her Pip. Which is what her best friend called her. Plus, it sounded like what a guy might call his best friend's little sister. While Pippa might be an only child, her best friend, Carrie Longford, had two older brothers. Carrie had bemoaned the guy code loudly and often. Guys didn't date their friend's sisters. Nor did they date their sister's friend. Good thing Pippa had never been attracted to Carrie's brothers. But where did that leave her with Kade? She wasn't in the sister zone. Was his reticence due to her friendship with Chase and Cash? He'd also written that he'd talk to her soon. What did that mean? She obviously needed her BFF's advice.

She finished her coffee, rinsed out the mug and put it in the dishwasher. Her stomach rumbled from hunger. She also hadn't mentioned she was on birth control in the heat of the moment, nor had he brought up the subject. Wondering if she should wait until he came back so they could talk, she stared out the window. Movement at the ranch office building drew her attention. Uh-oh. A black SUV was disgorging tall, handsome men. Four of

them. The only Barron missing was Clay.

Yikes! She had to get out of here. She could avoid driving by the office, though it involved a circuitous route. Kade's truck was still parked in front of the house and she figured the brothers would be headed here next. She located her purse and keys, glanced around to make sure no other evidence of her presence remained and boogied outside. She twisted the lock on the door handle, hoping it would secure the door, and pulled it shut behind her.

Skulking to her car, she scrunched down behind the wheel, started the engine and eased away from Kade's house. Taking the back road toward the houses where other ranch hands lived, she eventually circled around toward the big house, gained the driveway and rocketed down it. Pippa didn't take a deep breath until she'd hit the section line road headed toward I-35. Then she started laughing. She was so ridiculous sometimes.

* * *

Kade sat on his horse. The small hill gave him a good view of the ranch buildings on the left and the grass range where a herd of Black Angus cattle grazed. He'd ridden out before dawn looking for some peace. He hadn't found it. He took off his Stetson and turned his face toward the sun. Wind teased his hair, loosening a few strands from the cord he used to tie it back.

He loved this land. Every scrap of it—the river to the south, the scrubby trees and rocky hills, the sweeping grasslands. He could admit to himself that he'd once wanted his own spread but

after all the years here at the Crown B, this was home and he was satisfied. Until now.

Cyrus Barron. The man had been a master manipulator and he'd led Kade like a lamb to slaughter. Land management? You're the expert, Kade. Cattle breeding program for high-yield, Grade A beef on the hoof? I trust you, Kade. Want a "super horse" stud? Do whatever you need, Kade. And he'd fallen right into the old man's nasty web. Everything Kade worked for had been done to further the Barrons' brand. And he'd been proud of what he'd achieved.

Then the truth came out.

Shoving the hat back on his head, he judged the time by the height of the sun on the eastern horizon. Was Pippa awake yet? And man, wasn't that another can of worms he needed to sort out. He shoved that problem to the back of his mind. At the moment, he didn't have the time or energy to sort out his feelings for Pippa. But he worried last night had been a mistake. A big mistake.

Kade shifted in the saddle to ease the pressure in his jeans. Physically, last night had been amazing. Emotionally? He wasn't ready to go there. He liked Pippa. She was funny and cute and smart and sexy and sweet. Very sweet. She came from money—lots of it—and was the type of woman a Barron would date. Which brought him right back into that mental box he'd been trying to escape. He was a Barron. According to Cyrus's will. But he wasn't. He was Kaden Waite, half Chickasaw son of Rose Waite, grandson of William and Ramona Waite. He was

a cattleman. He worked with his hands. He did not wear an expensive suit and tie.

But he'd put down roots in this place and it could all be his. His horse nickered and pawed the ground with a front foot. Kade loosened his grip on the reins. He'd freaked and stormed out of Barron Tower—and wasn't that one of his finest moments. Not. He shook his head, feeling rueful. His half brothers had risen to their feet, all of them talking to him at once as he'd lost his cool. Chance had blocked the door, tried to manage the situation. Kade scrubbed at his face as he remembered the scene. He'd threatened to coldcock Chance if he didn't get out of the way.

Chance held him in that conference room just long enough to say a few things—things he didn't want to hear. Take some time, Chance had said. Think things over. Kade heard the murmurs of agreement coming from the rest of the Barron brothers. Yeah, easy for them to say. They'd grown up as Barrons, knew who and what they were.

Since coming to work at the ranch, he'd walked a fine line between employee and friend with the five brothers. Looking back, he recalled the sideways glances and the hints. They'd suspected all along and he'd been... What? An idiot? Stupid? Clueless? Pretty much. He'd definitely been blind. He was still too angry to call his mother and too unsure to call his grandparents.

How could she not tell him? And why hadn't she gone after the sonavagun for child support? She'd worked hard all his life,

sometimes two and three jobs until her paintings started to sell. His grandparents had all but raised him. All that time his father—Kade spit on the ground. Cyrus Barron had money. Lots of it. And he'd known of the bastard son living in Davis, Oklahoma.

The cell phone in his shirt pocket pinged. Jerking it out, he read the text from Selena Diaz, the ranch secretary. The Barron brothers had descended like locusts on the office. When was he coming back? He hated texting and she knew it. Stewing over whether to text back or call, and what to say, he chose to just ignore it.

He urged his horse off the hill and pointed him toward the far northwest side of the ranch. Selena's husband Pedro and several other hands were moving cattle today. They needed supervision, he decided. There was something soothing about pushing cattle, even with the dirt and grit. Kade was good at this job. It settled him. He was desperate for that right now.

Six hours later, Selena caught him in the barn as he unsaddled his horse. She was full of sass as she stomped toward him, face twisted into her version of a snarl—mostly crinkled nose, pursed lips and narrowed eyes. She stopped several feet from him, planted her fists on her hips.

“Did you lose your phone?”

Kade didn't look up. “No.” He carried the saddle and pad he'd just stripped off into the tack room and returned with a curry brush.

She opened her mouth to start again, but Kade beat her to the

punch. “Don’t want to hear it, Leenie.”

“Seriously? Then don’t listen. Just stand there and don’t pay any attention to me while I talk.” When he continued brushing the horse, she launched into a speech. “Dude, you do not want to be jacking the brothers around. I know things have been really weird since Mr. Barron died. I mean the Crown B has always been sort of a...a sideline. Oh, sure, Cord was nominally in charge as president of Barron Land and Cattle but that was just a thing on a line of a corporate tax return because we all know he’s into all that oil and gas stuff. You have no idea how excited Pop was when old Mr. B hired you.”

Her father, Manuel Sanchez, was his ranch foreman now. Leenie and her sister, Rosalie, grew up on the Crown B. He tuned out her voice while he curried the horse. Then he turned his mount out in a big stall and set about watering and feeding the animal. Selena dogged him every step. He finally paid attention again when she grabbed his arm and jerked him around to face her.

“You could have at least replied to my text so I could tell them what was what so they’d get the heck out of my office. There was so dang much testosterone in the air even Dusty was hiding under my desk. What the heck is going on between you and them?”

Head lowered, he studied the tips of his boots. “Long story, Leenie.”

She ducked and twisted so she could look into his face. “They didn’t threaten to fire you or something, did they?”

How was he supposed to answer that? “Not your business.”

Leenie straightened and glowered. “Seriously? I work for you, dude. If you get fired, it is most definitely my business. And FYI, they’d be stupid if they did. I grew up on this ranch. I know what it was before. And what you’ve done with it? Absolutely no comparison, boss man.”

Kade removed his hat and scrubbed his fingers across the top of his head, loosening long strands of his hair. “It’s not my work ethic being questioned.”

“Then what the heck is going on?”

“Again, not your—”

“Business. Yeah, yeah. I call BS. I grew up with those five. Granted, I’m closer to the twins, but Cord and Chance spent a lot of time here too. You can talk to me, Kade. And if I can help, I will.”

Shaking his head, he stepped around her, though he wasn’t surprised when she pivoted and matched him stride for stride. He halted at the barn door, staring at the demarcation line in the dirt. Where he stood remained in shadow. One step and he’d be in sunlight. Was that a metaphor for something? He didn’t have the energy to be philosophical and he was tired of the emotions bottled up so tightly inside that his whole body hurt.

“I’m Cyrus Barron’s illegitimate son.”

Four

Selena stared at him, her eyes almost as wide as her gaping mouth. “Holy cow. Talk about dropping a bombshell! Do the

boys know?" She grimaced and rolled her eyes. "Of course they know. Hence the rugby scrum in the office today. Dang, boss. Talk about a tangled web. When did you find out?"

"Yesterday."

"Wow. Just...wow." She pushed his arm aside and moved close, her arms snaking around him. "Welcome to the family."

That startled him—both her action and her declaration. Leenie laughed and hugged him tighter as he tried to disengage. "I meant that in the figurative sense, not literally. Rosalie and I are sort of..." She smirked before finishing. "Kissing cousins." Laughing, she added, "Big John caught us in the barn with the twins when we were kids."

She turned him loose and stepped into the late afternoon sunshine. "When you're ready to talk, I've got big ears and a closed mouth." She offered a jaunty wave as she headed back to the office. He started to follow her. He probably had work piled up on his desk but he didn't want to think about the ranch, the will, the Barrons or anything having to do with his predicament. He turned toward home. And stopped. That was the heart of the matter.

"It's just a house," he muttered, walking forward again. "Just a place where I sleep at night."

Not surprisingly, Pippa's Highlander was gone when he got there. That was a good thing, right? He didn't want to deal with her, with the inevitable questions she would ask for which he had no answers. He stomped up the stone steps and across the

wide porch to his front door. Kade pushed through and stopped. The place was empty—as it was every time he returned. Why it bothered him now, he couldn't say. He hung his Stetson on the rack next to the door and headed to the kitchen. He'd missed lunch—his own fault. His stomach growled and he felt a little stupid for avoiding the Barrons. He still hadn't listened to their voice mails on his phone.

He grabbed a TV dinner and tossed it in the microwave, then popped the top on a long-neck beer. Retrieving his phone, he stared at the number of missed messages. He'd finished the beer by the time the oven dinged. He snagged another beer, peeled the plastic off his dinner and prepared to listen to what the Barrons had to say. He clicked on the speaker icon and opened voice mail.

“This is Chance. I wish you'd stayed to talk with us, Kade. I know this is a shock. Let's discuss things.”

“Clay here. Welcome to the family, Kade. Talk to Chance.”

“Dude, don't be stupid, says your big brother Cord. We're here when you're ready.”

“Don't make me hunt you down.” There was laughter and somebody said Cash's name. “Seriously, let's go get a beer, talk about this.”

“Kade, this is Chase. Bad news, bud. You realize the wives are gonna be all over this. Fair warning. You know where to find me when you're ready.”

Huh. Nothing at all like what he'd expected. He knew what the Crown B was worth. Millions. Why wouldn't they be upset

at losing control of that kind of money? Wouldn't he, if he was in their shoes?

The messages from the Barrons continued in a round robin, before clicking over to the angry then conciliatory messages from Pippa. A stab of guilt burned in his chest and he glanced at the coffee maker. The note he'd left for her was gone. Yeah. He'd definitely taken the chicken way out of that deal. He didn't know why he'd kissed her...and more. He swallowed a gulp of beer. He was a guy and Pippa was gorgeous. He'd thought about getting her into bed—and the experience had been everything he could have hoped for. Well, almost everything. He still had a fantasy about her mouth that hadn't been fulfilled.

He didn't bother listening to the rest of the messages. He switched to the number pad and tapped in Pippa's phone number.

* * *

Pippa leaned her head back against the pool lounge and sipped her wine cooler through a straw. "Was I stupid?"

Her best friend occupied the next lounge, a frozen margarita in her hand. Carrie slurped from her glass. "Are you attracted to him?"

Tipping her sunglasses to the end of her nose, Pippa glowered over the top of them. "Is this where I say d'uh?"

"Then no. You weren't stupid. You saw what you wanted and you went for it. Rock on!" Carrie held up her empty hand, index and pinky fingers stabbing into the air while her thumb held down her two middle fingers.

“Seriously? You’re flashing the Hook’em Horns sign at me?”

“That wasn’t the University of Texas Longhorn salute—state college football rivalries aside.” Carrie carefully set down her drink, sat up, extended her arms and waved both hands in the same gesture. “Rock and roll, babe! It’s all about the rock and roll.”

“Uh-huh.” Pippa wasn’t convinced but then again, Carrie had always been the wild child.

Carrie settled back on the lounge. “Look, Pip, you’ve always been uptight.” She waggled her brows in mock apology. “You know I’m right. And Kade is hot. I mean really hot. Frankly, I’m confused about why he hasn’t put the moves on you before now. I mean, seriously. Most guys get grabby on the first date. Not that you two have been on a real date. But, dudette, all those working lunches and dinners? Less work, more play.” She rolled her eyes. “Leave it to you to find the last true gentleman in the state.”

“There is nothing wrong with being with a gentleman.” Pippa was slightly affronted.

“True that. I’m just saying they’re few and far between. And I admit, I’m a little jealous. Look, did he have a good time?”

Pippa blushed to the roots of her hair. “I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Well, he didn’t kick you out after the big climax, right?”

“Carrie!”

“You two had some spectacular sex—at least I’m assuming it was because, girlfriend, I’ve seen that man in tight jeans.”

Her face flaming, Pippa sucked down the rest of her cooler and pushed up out of the lounge. "I am not going to sit here while you embarrass the socks off me."

"You aren't wearing any. Just nod yes or no, okay? Was he good?"

Pippa chewed on her lips but jerked her chin to her chest in a brief nod. Carrie pumped her fist and uttered a breathless, "Yes!" before continuing. "And the man is a rancher. They're up before the chickens. I think it's sweet he let you sleep in. Frankly, I don't know many guys who would leave a girl in their bed the morning after their first time. Most dudes are too insecure or private or weird or something. Just doesn't happen."

"So...you think he'll call me? Ask me out on a real date? Or is this just one of those friends with benefits things?"

"Hmm..." Carrie pursed her lips and stroked her chin in an exaggerated gesture. "Yes."

Huffing out a breath, Pippa resisted the urge to throw up her hands in frustration. "Yes what? Yes, he'll—" Her phone rang.

Carrie let out a whoop at the ringtone. "Pip! Jason Aldean's 'Burnin' It Down'? That's gotta be Kade." She flicked imaginary tears from her eyes. "You make me so proud."

Scrambling, Pippa found her phone and winced at her breathless "Hello?" She made a face at Carrie while shushing her.

"Hey, Pippa. Uh...are you busy?" Kade's voice sounded uncertain.

She glowered at Carrie and made a shut-it motion with her

hand. “No. Not busy. I’m just sitting out by the pool.”

“Oh.”

And didn’t that word just drop into a void of uncertain meaning. Pippa suddenly felt the need to defend herself. Or make excuses. She wasn’t sure which. She lived at home because her parents’ Heritage Hills mansion was huge, and also had a separate guesthouse. While she had a trust fund that would pay her expenses, she was putting all her money, time and effort into setting up her riding therapy foundation.

“It’s a nice evening so I thought I’d sit out here and enjoy the weather.” Okay, that was totally inane.

“Are you wearing a bikini?” His voice had gone husky.

She glanced down her body and considered lying. “Um, no. Capris and a camisole.”

“Oh.”

And this time, there was a whole different tone and meaning to that syllable. A giggle bubbled out before she could stop it. “Okay. Guilty. Only it’s not really a bikini. Just a two-piece.”

“Mmm uh.”

Pippa wasn’t sure how to translate that and without thinking, she blurted, “Would you like to come over? We could swim. Maybe grill some burgers or something?”

Carrie gave her big eyes while covering her mouth with both hands as Pippa waited. Kade’s answer finally came.

“Yeah. That’d be cool. Thanks. I’ll be there in about an hour. Okay?”

Her heart was pounding so hard in her chest she was afraid Kade might be able to hear it. She nodded, realized she needed to speak. “That’s great. Yes. Perfect.”

“Kay. See you then.”

Dead air hummed between them and she panicked. “Oh, crud, Carrie! What am I going to do? I’m not prepared for a cookout.”

“Breathe, babe. I got this. I’ll run to Whole Foods, grab stuff. You go fix your hair and get out of that granny suit and into the hot bikini you bought for our trip to Aruba. The one with the sexy little wrap. And put on makeup.”

“My parents.”

Carrie was already at the door leading into the house. “What about them? They won’t care.” And then she was gone.

Would her parents care? She might live in close proximity but they most often went their own ways, very seldom crossing paths. Her mother always had some event or party and her dad was a workaholic. Pippa glanced at the Cartier watch on her wrist. She didn’t have time to procrastinate.

* * *

Kade smoothed back his hair, feeling a little naked without a hat on his head. Despite being invited to a “pool party,” he wore jeans and boots, and a crisp Western-style shirt over a clean white T-shirt. Pippa’s parents had always seemed staid and traditional whenever he ran into them. While one of the Barrons might have gotten away with showing up in board shorts, he just wasn’t comfortable. Again, he wondered what it would have been like

growing up with the kind of money that guaranteed entrance and acceptance no matter where.

Not that he'd trade. Growing up on his grandfather's homestead outside of Davis had been perfect for a wild kid. He'd had horses to ride, ponds to swim in, trees to climb. He'd learned to hunt and fish and be a good steward of the land. Bill Waite had taught him to take responsibility, to work hard, to be an honorable man. Those lessons were priceless and there wasn't enough money in the world to get him to change. And that was the core of his dilemma.

The door opened, catching him off guard. Mrs. Duncan stared at him for a moment before saying in an icy voice, "May I help you?"

Offering a smile, he introduced himself. Again. "Evening, Mrs. Duncan. I'm Kaden Waite. Pippa invited me over."

"I see."

"Mom! Is that Kade?"

He heard pattering footsteps and then the door opened wider to reveal Pippa wearing... He blinked and tried to work up enough spit in his mouth to swallow. She wore a scrap of a bikini top with some sort of swirly see-through scarf thing tied around her waist. If it was meant to cover her up, it totally failed.

"Mom, you remember Kade." Pippa reached out and snagged his hand. "I invited him over for a swim and burgers on the grill."

"I see." The woman's tone hadn't warmed any.

"You and Daddy have that deal tonight at the art museum.

"You're gonna be late." Pippa was all bouncy and sweet as she maneuvered her mother out of the doorway so she could draw Kade into the house.

He wondered, briefly, if his reception would have been so chilly if he'd been introduced as Kaden Barron. The news hadn't hit the media yet, for which he was grateful and also curious. He wondered how the Barrons were keeping the story quiet.

He watched Mrs. Duncan leave. The woman didn't walk so much as glide and when she climbed the sweeping curve of stairs, he'd take bets that she could balance a book on her head, her posture was so stiff.

"C'mon out back." Pippa tugged his hand and glanced down at his clothing. "You did bring a swimsuit, right?"

He nodded, and indicated the small backpack slung over one shoulder. "I figured you had somewhere to change?"

"Of course! You can change at my place." She continued to hold his hand as she drew him through the house to a set of glass-paned doors leading to a terrace and pool. He caught glimpses of fancy furniture, antiques and artwork that probably cost as much as he made in a year. "What would you like to drink? I have that beer you like in the ice chest."

"That'd be great, thanks."

While the big house on the Crown B was expensively furnished with Pendleton rugs, leather furniture and Western art, it was comfortable—looking and feeling lived-in and homey. This house reminded him of a show home—each room

decorated in a different style and looking pristine. No self-respecting speck of dust would dare land on any of the furniture.

Out on the patio near the pool, Pippa pointed him toward a second building—which had probably been either a carriage house or servants' quarters when the mansion was built at the turn of the last century. Two stories tall, it was made of the same yellow-and-buff bricks and stone with matching red tile roof.

“Technically, it’s the guesthouse, but it’s where I live.” She offered a crooked grin. “Just so you know? You don’t have to go to the front door. You can come straight back here and knock.” She opened the door and he found himself standing in a combined living area and dining room. He glimpsed a full kitchen beyond the stairs. “You can change in here.” She opened a door to a bathroom with a shower.

Quickly changing, he emerged and set his folded clothes on the couch. Pippa had disappeared but the outside door was open. He headed out and found her waving at him from the door to the main house.

“Beer’s in the ice chest over there in the outdoor kitchen. I’ll be back in just a sec. Mom needs something.”

The outdoor kitchen was every bit as impressive as the one at the ranch, but for the life of him, he couldn’t find an ice chest. Kade finally resorted to opening cabinet doors because he really needed a beer. After searching the entire kitchen, he discovered the built-in ice chest, with its own ice maker. This is how rich people lived—people like his half brothers. That’s

when he knew. Half his DNA might be Barron, but he'd never be one of them.

Five

Pippa knew her mother was watching from the windows in the kitchen—not that her mother spent much time in the kitchen. The woman's disapproval was almost palpable. She glanced at her watch, willing her mother to leave for the cocktail reception for some charity or another. Just her mother's cup of tea. There were times her parents' snobbery embarrassed her, and this was definitely one of them.

Yes, she'd insisted, when questioned by her mother a few minutes ago, the only relationship she had with Kade was of a business nature. And it had been—but for a few late-night fantasies with her battery-operated friend and a lot of what-if scenarios. Until last night. Pippa still didn't completely understand why she'd all but seduced him. She sipped her wine cooler and admitted that she wasn't sorry. Still, she needed to bring up the subject so she could let him know they were covered on the no-baby front. They hadn't discussed it. And she was a little bothered by that. True, she wasn't the most experienced, but it was a conversation she always insisted on—and not just because of pregnancy.

“You're thinking too hard.”

She startled at Kade's voice. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for, Pippa.” His gaze shifted from her to the kitchen window. Crud. He knew they were being watched.

“I’m sorry. About my mother. She’s...” How did she explain her mother’s actions? “Well...she is who she is.” His dry chuckle helped her relax. “She and Dad will be leaving soon.” Hopefully. “Would you like to swim before we fire up the grill?”

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