

LONE STAR BABY SCANDAL

Lauren Canan



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One night changes everything...It's bad enough that straight-laced Sophie Prescott fell for her boss Clay Everett's charms the night of Royal's masked ball—now she's pregnant with his baby! Too bad the former rodeo star turned billionaire entrepreneur's emotional defences are impenetrable and Sophie doesn't stand a chance of breaking through. So where does that leave her? And with a blackmailer hounding the town's A-list, is their secret the next to be revealed? Or is an even bigger surprise in store—that maybe, just maybe, Sophie has discovered the chink in Clay's armour...?

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“Kiss me.”

It was only a whispered request but Sophie was so attuned to him she couldn't have missed his words if he was a mile away.

“I don't think that's a very good idea.”

“I think it's a terrific idea.” One hand moved from around her lower back up to her head as he gently encouraged her lips to come closer to his.

“Clay, I—” She opened her mouth but before words could form, he lifted his head and his lips found hers. They were hungry and he didn't hesitate filling her mouth with his tongue. It was everything she remembered and more.

Part of her wanted nothing more than to give him whatever he wanted; the other part, the smart side of her, wanted to run away as fast as she could.

Only one thing was certain: this attraction to her boss was going to eventually cause a rift between them.

* * *

Lone Star Baby Scandal is part of the series *Texas Cattleman's Club: Blackmail—No secret—or heart—is safe in Royal, Texas...*

Lone Star Baby Scandal

Lauren Canan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

LAUREN CANAN has always been in love with love. When she began writing, stories of romance and unbridled passion flowed through her fingers onto the page. Today she is a multi-award-winning author, including the prestigious Romance Writers of America Golden Heart® Award. She lives in Texas with her own real-life hero, four dogs and a mouthy parrot named Bird.

She loves to hear from readers. Find her on Facebook or visit her website, www.laurencanan.com.

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[One](#)

When Clay Everett approached, extending his arm in a silent invitation to dance, Sophie Prescott immediately shook her head in embarrassed refusal. Clay was her boss. Her employer. It was a job she valued highly. There should be no mixing business with pleasure even if Clay was the best-looking man at the charity ball. His deep emerald eyes gleamed, framed by dark lashes that matched his ebony hair. His dark tan, five-o'clock shadow and the scar on one side of his face from the rodeo accident that had almost taken his life made his very presence dark and menacing. He didn't need the air of mystery the masquerade ball offered. Since the accident, he presented the persona of a man who was hard and unforgiving, who ate any competition for lunch.

Actually, he had a beautiful smile, perfect white teeth. But he rarely smiled. In his five-thousand-dollar hand-tailored suits and white silk shirts, he gave the impression of the consummate businessman. A man of great wealth who was used to the world of glamour in which he lived.

But when he wore the glove-soft faded jeans, scuffed boots and thin T-shirt that highlighted his six-pack abs and the muscles in his shoulders and arms, it was equally unsettling. That was the Clay she knew. He'd come into their office a couple of times in his Western getup and it was a look she much preferred. Like the raging stallions he trained, like the wild bulls he'd ridden to superstardom in his youth, he was a man unlike anyone else.

Refusing to take no for an answer, he grabbed her hand, pulled her up from her seat and led her toward the center of the Grand Ballroom of the new Bellamy Hotel. Her heart rate tripled. Content to watch the antics of the idle rich from the back of the ballroom, Sophie never expected her boss to find her and propel her into the center of the action. She was a secretary, for crying out loud, a woman who had grown up on a farm in the rust belt of America. She had no business being here, rubbing elbows with the elite of Royal, Texas.

"Breathe," Clay said in his deep, rusty voice, while a glint of amusement sparkled in his green eyes behind the dark mask. "You look as though you're about to pass out. I thought I remembered hearing you say you loved to dance."

"I do. Just not here." And not with him, the president and founder of a billion-dollar corporation and Royal's most eligible bachelor. With those broad shoulders and incredibly handsome tanned features, his presence alone was enough to make everyone sit up and take notice. And not in the midst of people dressed in tuxedos and the latest designer originals, adorned to the hilt with jewels no doubt worth a king's ransom. A few of the other guests smiled at her sincerely, while others smirked in that condescending manner that only someone in her position could recognize and understand. Wasn't Clay being kind to his poor little secretary? How thoughtful of him. Sophie could read their minds without much effort at all.

"And what's wrong with here?"

"If you don't know, I won't waste my breath trying to explain it to you."

He chuckled, a deep, sexy sound that drew more looks from the women within hearing distance. Instead of allowing them to negatively affect her mood, she stopped arguing, closed her eyes and let herself be swept into the music. The band was playing a ballad, one of her favorites. With Clay's

arms around her, they danced to the slow rhythm. He smelled so good. A mix of spicy cologne and essence of pure male. The combination was intoxicating. His silken tux jacket felt smooth against her cheek. At some point the song ended and Sophie moved to return to the small table in the back of the great hall.

“No,” he said, his warm breath on her ear. And before she could argue, the band struck up another song. He dropped her hand, held her with both arms around her waist, pulled her closer until she could feel every movement, every pulse inside a hard body laden with muscles. More muscles than she’d ever felt on a guy. She didn’t know what he did in his spare time, or if such a thing existed for him, but she doubted he sat around knitting sweaters.

One thing was clear: she had his attention and his body hinted at his response. With every slow step, side to side, she felt him move against her belly, driving her crazy. A fog of heat enveloped her as her own body reacted to his. Her hands clutched his broad shoulders and she drifted into a dream world of his making.

Clay was a cowboy through and through. It was in his stride, his way of talking. It was in those deep emerald eyes, so piercing, as though they could see into her very soul. In those full lips just waiting to cover hers and savor the heat that would surely flare between them. Even the years away from the rodeo arena couldn’t weaken that persona. Since the two-ton bull had turned an evening at the rodeo into the nightmare from hell almost ending his life.

The doctors had said he would never walk again, but they didn’t know Clay. He had surprised everyone. Everyone except Sophie, who knew Clay was a man who just didn’t quit. Ever. After the injuries he’d sustained and the months of grueling physical therapy Clay had been through, it was a pure miracle he was here tonight at all. He’d astounded everyone when he put aside his cane and took to the dance floor, ignoring the limp and the pain that accompanied it.

He’d been America’s number-one cowboy, his talent propelling him to superstardom. After he healed enough to be released from the hospital, faced with the fact that he’d never ride rodeo again, he’d found a new outlet for his talents. Today he was a successful cloud-computing entrepreneur, changing his star status from millionaire to billionaire in only five short years. That was just the kind of man he was. If he could imagine it—he could make it materialize. If he wanted it—he got it. And right now, tonight, he wanted her.

Slowly his hands slid down her back, coming to rest above the surge of her hips, pulling her even closer to him. The feel of his muscled body propelled her to an immediate and impulsive response.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said in a voice that sounded more like a growl as the third song ended. Without waiting for a reply, he took her hand and led her through the dancing couples toward the exit.

When he summoned the elevator, the doors opened almost immediately with a muffled ding. Stepping inside, Clay pushed a button that sent the elevator skyrocketing to the penthouse where he was staying during the masquerade ball. Then he lost no time gathering her in his arms.

Sophie had been kissed before but never like this. It was raw, passionate—hungry. His tongue traced the line of her lips, moistening them for penetration. He filled her then, his hand clenching her hair in the back, holding her head exactly where he needed her to be. He was so male. His scars that remained from his accident only served to increase his air of desirability.

He had spent his life dueling with the devil and in spite of impossible odds, he had come out on top. Every time except the last. Even then, Clay had pulled his raw courage from someplace deep inside and survived when any other man would have rolled over and admitted defeat. It was part of that rock-hard determination that she felt now, in his arms, his emerald eyes giving off signals as to just what he intended to do to her when they reached the bedroom. He was going to forever change their relationship, and in spite of any thoughts to the contrary, she knew in that moment, she was going to allow it. Blame it on the cocktails, the music or a weakness within her own heart. She had fantasized about this man for far too long. She would probably hate herself in the morning, but tonight she would sample what heaven was like.

At some point the doors opened with an almost silent swish and they stepped out of the elevator into a vestibule with marble floors and occasional tables laden with huge bouquets of freshly cut flowers. Beyond a black door trimmed with gold paint was the penthouse. He guided her inside with a single-minded purpose. It was in his face, in his eyes. He was going to make love to her.

And she was going to let him.

This is wrong, said the small voice in her head. So very wrong. He was her boss. Their relationship should be kept strictly platonic. But she followed as they walked toward the bedroom and the word no disappeared from her vocabulary.

“Would you care for something to drink?”

She shook her head. If she was really going to do this, she wanted nothing to mar the memory of this night in his arms—a once-in-a-lifetime moment that could never be discussed or thought of again except in her dreams.

He turned a switch and the lights dimmed. He pressed her backward against a wall and his hungry lips again found hers. His shirt and jacket hit the floor before he turned all his attention to her. Leaning over, he kissed her ear, alternately nipping and kissing down her throat until he returned to her mouth, his tongue filling the deep recesses until she couldn't suppress the moan that emerged from deep in her throat. She knew a moment of freedom from the constraints of her strapless gown as it slid down her body to the floor.

Then she was in his arms as he carried her to the master bedroom, his long strides eating up the carpet. When he put her down, the silken sheets of the bed felt cool against her back as Clay disposed of her panties. Then he was hovering above her, directing her lips to his in the darkness. He kissed her jaw, taking little nips as he went toward her ear. It was seduction of the purest form by the master of the game.

“You are so damned sexy,” he whispered in her ear, causing chills to run over her skin. “I've wanted you since the first moment you walked through my door.”

He continued to kiss his way down her body, nipping at her throat, sucking first one breast then the other, playing with the stiff peaks, teasing until she wanted to scream. Then he suckled her rosy tips, stopping just short of painful, and the feeling burned hot all the way to her core. Then he moved farther down, as though intent on tasting all of her. As he found the spot at the center of her being, he pushed her legs apart and claimed her forever. She opened to him without any rational thought, her mind sent in a whirlwind by what he was doing. She wanted more. But even in her delirium she knew who it was that was about to push her over the edge. Her boss. She couldn't follow the thought far enough to care. Before any further doubts could work their way into her mind, she was exploding, gasping for air, clutching him as the climax went on and on.

One heavy hand remained on her stomach while he opened a drawer next to the bed with the other. She heard the almost silent tear of a packet. Repositioning himself over her he entered her then. Time and all conscious thought disappeared. All she knew was Clay, his scent and the slight rasping of his five-o'clock shadow as he kissed her with full abandon. What was he doing to her body? Incredible things. Touches that singed her until she was drowning in the abyss of his arms. His deep, raspy voice broke the silence as he encouraged her, praised her, whispering raw demands that sent her over the top yet again. Eventually he came with her, his big body straining as they both soared to the heavens. By then she was so inundated with his touches she couldn't rationalize how many times or how long he'd made love to her. Finally, he separated their bodies, placing her head on his broad shoulder, holding her close. She could hear his rapid heartbeat and feel his lungs gasp for air. With a smile, she closed her eyes and nothing existed but the two of them and the gentle, loving space around them.

* * *

“Sophie?” Clay's deep voice brought her out of the daydream. “Sophie! Hello? Are you okay?”

A heated blush ran up her neck and over her face as reality came slamming back. She was seated at her desk, staring blindly at her monitor while the phones rang and Clay called her name. She had to get a grip on herself. She kept reliving their one night of passion, first in her dreams then during the day while she was at work. It had to stop. They were attracted to each other but their encounter had taken place more than two months ago and it would not be repeated. It was past time to let it go and move on. Each time he had offered to talk about it, she would find a way to stop him. She didn't want to talk about it. The night had settled inside her heart as a treasured memory. It had happened. It wouldn't happen again. End of subject.

"Yes. Ah...yes. Yep. I'm fine."

"I've been calling your name for five minutes. Are you sure you feel up to working today?"

"Yes. Really, I'm good." She struggled for composure and cleared her throat. If he had any idea of her wayward thoughts, he would never let her live it down. "Just a slight headache. I'll be fine," she lied and reached for the phone.

Clay laid a file folder on her desk with a sticky note attached bearing instructions. Then pursing his lips as though hiding a smile, he walked out the door.

Sophie hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath and released it now in a sigh. It was almost as if he knew what she'd been thinking. Impossible. He couldn't read minds. Could he?

* * *

Clay Everett stood in the massive glass-walled lobby of the main barn at the Flying E Ranch. He was surrounded by countless photographs and awards. In the corner were silver-embedded saddles on their holding racks with matching bridles hanging over the horn. Oversize belt buckles with gold and silver inlays were displayed in black velvet-lined shadow boxes. Trophies and large silver cups, the competition date and event imprinted on the front of each, rested on the enormous mantel of the natural-stone fireplace. Still more lined the bookcases around the large room. In between were dozens of action shots of various bulls and horses as they tried with all their might to tear their equally determined rider off their back. If you looked at some close enough, you could hear the angry cries of the animal, recognize the fury in its eyes. But you could also see the grit and determination in the rider's eyes. For the bull, eight seconds to kill. For the cowboy, eight seconds to walk away a champion.

Then there were older pictures of a young boy: riding his first bull, roping his first calf, his legs barely reaching the shortened stirrups of the saddle. The largest picture in the room was of a man holding up a two-by-six-foot check, made payable to Clayton Everett in the sum of one million dollars, proclaiming him the new American Rodeo Champion. Standing next to him were his barn manager, George Cullen, and Sophie Prescott, his secretary and maybe his best friend in the world.

He wandered out of the foyer, down the main hall to the east wing. Climbing up a few bleacher steps that overlooked one of the outside arenas and the sloping fertile pastureland beyond, he sat down, marveling at the view all around him. He would never tire of it. Rolling hills, the few that existed in this area, and white pipe fencing as far as his eyes could see. In the distance a herd of longhorns grazed on the irrigated spring grasses. In the first part of October, hundreds of breeders of Texas longhorn cattle would gather at the Lazy E Arena in Guthrie, Oklahoma, to find out who owned bragging rights to the bull with the longest horns in the world. Word had reached him that his ten-year-old bull, Crackers, had horns three-tenths of an inch longer than his chief competitor's. That should have made Clay happy. But there was more to life than watching horns grow on a damn cow. No one knew it better than he did.

It had been Sophie's idea to move his office from his Dallas headquarters to the ranch. At least temporarily. But the arrangement had turned permanent after almost two years. The maze of awards from his cowboy days had been cleared out and moved to the main barn lobby and the workings of his current office had been moved in. Sophie had overseen the move and, as usual, he couldn't help but be impressed. He'd slid into the burgundy leather chair behind the massive mahogany desk

like it was still at the high-rise in Dallas. Everything, from files to computers to office equipment to Sophie's office, had been arranged almost exactly the way it had been at the other location, thereby eliminating the need to learn a new setup. He could find his way around the new office blindfolded.

He'd given Sophie free license to do what she wanted with the trophies and awards that had hung for years in the current office space. She'd done it all while he was still in the hospital, his gut torn open by an angry bull named Iron Heart, his left leg shattered by pounding hooves. In the blink of an eye, Clay had been thrown from the animal and gorged before landing squarely on his head, the compression causing him to break his neck, barely missing his spinal cord. It had taken less than six seconds, from the moment the chute door opened to the crack he heard from within and sweet oblivion, which brought his days as a superstar in the Professional Bull Riding League to an end. He'd known a bull like that would someday come his way. It was inevitable. Nothing went on forever.

She'd had a glass room built in the foyer of the main barn and moved everything there. She'd set about filling it with memories of his life. From boy to man. From child to champion. It was both shocking and humbling. Lord, he'd come a long way over some of the worst roads in the country. He'd also traveled some of the best. The road to Cumberlin County and the Brahma bull who'd awaited him was a culmination of the worst and the best that could happen to a man. The accident had come as close as possible to ending his life but at the same time, it had brought out the true colors of Clay's money-grubbing fiancée, who had suddenly lost interest, finally admitting she simply could not marry a man who had to limp to the dance floor. She'd refused to be saddled with a "cripple" for the rest of her life. She had packed her bags and disappeared faster than a cube of sugar in a cup of boiling coffee. And she hadn't even had the guts to tell him herself. No, the news had been relayed as gently as possible by Sophie.

It had been just one more setback to add to the list. Clay had had to accept that his rodeo days were over and his life was going to change. Hell, it already had. Once he'd been released to come home, it had taken a month of prodding by the stubborn, unshakable, relentless Ms. Sophie to get up off his ass—as she'd put it—and do something. Clay had started tinkering around with some ideas, found one he liked and threw himself into developing it. It was partly to keep his mind off the injuries that were still healing and partly because that was the way he was built; he was a self-made man and risk taker by nature. And Sophie never let him forget it for a second. He loved nothing more than a challenge, regardless of whether it was a two-thousand-pound Brahma bull or a billion-dollar company. A challenge was still a challenge.

He'd set about building a cloud-computing company he named Everest, specializing in providing ironclad infrastructure to corporations. With the usual Everett finesse, it took off like a rocket, making him a multimillionaire almost overnight with no indication it was anywhere near slowing down. And neither was he. No one who really knew him was surprised. He knew only that he wasn't ready for his life to be over. At thirty-four, it was too soon. But while he was forced to set aside the thrill of bull riding, there were other trials to be fought and won.

Like what to do about his attraction to Sophie Prescott.

As if on cue, she popped her head around the corner.

Two

"I thought I would find you here. What do you want for lunch?"

When he merely shook his head, she said, "Then I'll have Rose grill a steak and throw some sides together. It should be ready in about thirty minutes."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's too bad. You've got to eat. Nothing good is going to come out of you sitting around with your head in the clouds."

"I was thinking, not daydreaming."

"Thinking, huh? I'll bet. More than likely thinking about that old bull and how you would do it better if you had a second chance."

He glared. "I'll be in for lunch in a few."

She tapped her watch as a silent way of saying she would expect him sooner rather than later.

Damn, she was beautiful. For reasons he couldn't understand, she chose to tone down her natural beauty, pulling the amber hair into a ponytail and using very little, if any, makeup. Not that she needed any. Her sky-blue eyes couldn't hide behind the glasses always perched on her nose. And those full, slightly pink lips... A man could lose himself in them. And he had done exactly that almost two months ago, the night of the Texas Cattleman's Club masked ball held at the Bellamy Hotel.

It probably shouldn't have happened but that was one thing he would never regret. As his eyes had surveyed the large ballroom and the people seated at the linen-covered tables, Sophie stood out like a diamond set against dark granite. He hadn't been able to resist taking her hand and pulling her out onto the dance floor. Sophie had protested and he understood her side. She felt herself to be only a secretary who had no place dancing with her boss. He didn't give a damn.

She'd driven him crazy for most of the time she'd worked for the company, deflecting his teasing in complete innocence. If she had given him so much as a wink or a beguiling smile, he would have jumped her bones in a heartbeat. But the ever-proper Sophie never did even though he sensed a few times she wanted to. The attraction between them was there. The sparks went off like static around them every time they got close. He'd just never been able to get her to admit it. At the ball, with her in that dress, he hadn't cared. He had to have her. Period.

As much as she was beautiful, she was also about as ornery as a mule. His father had called her persnickety. Let Miss Sophie get her hooks into something and she would not let go no matter what. For the years she'd worked for him, those talons had grabbed hold of his hide and she was damn near vicious in her efforts to guide him in the direction she wanted him to go. She'd been there ever since that day in the hospital, his lowest day, when she'd stood in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest, and calmly stated with absolute resolve if for one second he thought he was just going to lie in that bed and rot away, he could think again. Giving up was not an option. If he didn't agree with her, he was a jackass. And he was going to have to fight her tooth and nail, day in, day out, before he would be allowed to just give up. It was time for the pity party to end. They had work to do.

She'd never strayed from his side. Even on his worst days when his self-pity and self-loathing overcame his common sense, she was there, taking the verbal punches and flinging back a few of her own. Clay didn't know of another human being who could talk to him the way she did that day. Not and get away with it.

And it continued through the months of therapy. She accepted no excuses, daring him to shut her out, and with each day his respect for her grew. What she ever saw in this broken-down, scarred ex-cowboy he would never know. It wasn't about money. She had never asked for a raise in salary and had, in fact, purchased some office supplies out of her own pocket and never said a word about it. He'd happened to find a receipt. When questioned she'd said only that it wasn't very much so why bother anyone for the money? He had insisted she set up an account at the local office supply store, then had to make her promise to use it.

Most people tended to cower at his anger and between his injuries and the stab in the back of his ex-bitch from hell, he'd had plenty to feel angry about. Rage often filled him but even when he lashed out, Sophie never batted an eye. He owed her his life. That was a fact no one could dispute. And that made her even more tempting than she'd even been before.

He had given considerable thought to the possibility that his attraction to her was because for him, she'd become a nurse, a psychiatrist, a trainer, a cook and sometimes a shoulder to cry on. All wrapped in one beautiful package. But it wasn't because of anything she'd said or done. It wasn't just because she was hands down one of the most beautiful and intelligent women he'd ever met—and yet it was all of those things and more. Clay wanted her. In his house. In his bed. Twenty-four-seven. And he'd tried. But for reasons he didn't understand, Sophie refused. Nor would she let him touch

her again. Damned frustrating. If this was some kind of misguided ploy to get him to notice her—to want her—it was working. But when was it going to end?

Instead of returning to the house, she joined him on the bleachers without a word, resting her arms on her knees and fiddling with a wild flower she'd found somewhere.

“So what’s on the schedule for today, boss?”

She knew the answer: nothing. But she asked anyway. She always did.

When he didn’t answer, she proceeded to give him a few choices. “You’ve left your cloud-computing business in the hands of others far too long. It’s past time you picked up the reins.” He sniffed at the pun and watched her grin before she continued. “The cows are calving. You have six new foals on the ground. Jonesy said they all looked top-notch. After lunch, why don’t we head to the foaling barn and check them out? I love seeing the new foals.” And you used to, she didn’t say. After two years, he’d learned what Sophie didn’t say held as much weight as what she did say.

“Okay.” He shrugged, knowing full well she would badger him all day if he didn’t agree. He hadn’t been down to the foaling barn since the accident. It had been a place where he’d grown up. A place to plan his future, to dream about all the things he wanted to do in his life. But no more. That life, as he knew it, was over.

“I’ll go and check on lunch and give you a ring when it’s ready. Can you make it down the stairs by yourself?”

The glare he gave her produced the full grin he loved to see on her face.

“Oh, you poor old soul,” she teased, hopping down from the bleachers. “I’ll have Nathan come and carry you to the house.”

“Not unless you want Nathan hurt.”

She giggled and turned toward the house. Nathan was the ranch hand she had called when, just after returning home from the extended stay at the hospital, Clay fell and couldn’t drag himself back onto his feet. At six-foot-four and two hundred and eighty-five pounds, Nathan was a close match to Clay in physical size and stamina. He had Clay up and on his way in a fast minute. Since then it had become an inside joke between them. If Clay got stubborn and refused to get out of his chair or dismissed a call to dinner, she threatened him with Nathan. She was playing on his ego. He knew exactly what she was doing, but he let her get away with it most of the time. He was not a damned invalid. He might not be able to swing his leg over a saddle—yet—but he could damn well make it up the stairs by himself.

He recognized that Sophie was well-intentioned. He was almost back to 100 percent except for the limp that would take years to overcome, but she knew that implying he was an invalid pushed his buttons. Few things stuck in his craw like that one did. He had come to accept her methods and her teasing without flinging some nasty remark back in her direction, but many times he’d had to bite his tongue to achieve that end. Her nature was that of a mother hen and one of her chicks had fallen out of the nest. Well, peep, peep. He swung his legs over the edge of the stairs and followed her to the main house, cane in hand.

* * *

“You received an email from someone named Conrad Drexler,” she told Clay as Rose set a beautifully seared steak in front of him. “It sounded important. He wants you to call him at your first opportunity.”

“Yeah, I’ll call him after lunch.”

“Clay, what’s going on? You’ve been closed up in your office for over a week. Is there something I should be doing? Has something happened?”

“Nope. Not a thing. All’s good.”

He wasn’t telling the truth. She’d learned to look for a slight pulsating under his left eye if he was upset, angry or concerned about something. It never failed. And right now the tiny vein was pulsing for all it was worth.

“Well, everything appears to be going as it should. Everest stock is soaring and the people I’ve spoken with seem genuinely happy with the quality of service they are getting.” She smiled at him. “Word has spread and it’s growing unbelievably fast. But I guess you know that?” The business’s success had propelled him to the rank of billionaire. After putting his days as the world’s top cowboy behind him, he’d also started several other companies and all were doing well, although not as well as Everest.

“Yeah,” he answered as he began to cut into the perfectly grilled steak. “So far Everest is doing all right.”

When a company stopped gaining and growing at a rate Clay thought was acceptable, he did as he had always done in the rodeo arena: he studied. And studied some more. He’d compiled statistics on every working bull in the circuit and its method of removing a rider from its back. Was the bull a spinner, a kicker, did it rotate its shoulders and if yes, in what direction and to what degree? What were its weaknesses and its merits? He took into account age and lineage and any other factor he could find on any one cow and by the time he pulled up to the rodeo arena, he knew every bull in the lineup inside and out. It didn’t matter which one he drew, he knew more about it than the owner did. The same went for the industries where he did business.

But knowledge was only a part of the puzzle. Where it ended, Clay’s tenacity took over. When he set his mind on something, accomplishment was usually just around the corner. He had a knack for business, was a genius with numbers and statistics, and developing and running a company came as naturally to him as breathing was for everyone else.

But something was going on. If she couldn’t figure it out, she would have to wait on Clay to tell her. Oftentimes that wasn’t until he had managed to solve the problem. She wasn’t usually called in unless things were nearly out of control and he needed her help. She supposed all she could do at this time was watch his body language and be prepared for anything.

“Aren’t you going to finish your lunch?” Cole asked as she stood and walked toward the door.

“Not really hungry. See you later.”

“You pulled me all the way back to the house with a lecture on eating right—then you don’t eat?”

She shrugged. “I’ll get something later.”

With a sigh of frustration Clay picked up his full plate, a napkin, cutlery and his drink and disappeared inside of his office, closing the connecting door between their offices. Drexler was one of the men who’d helped Clay develop Everest. What the exact purpose of his call was, Clay hadn’t said. He played his cards pretty close to his chest until his idea took root or problem was solved.

If anyone called him an entrepreneur to his face, he would laugh it off and respond by saying he was just an old cowhand who had run into some luck. In truth he was a shrewd and intelligent businessman who seemed to have a natural ability to turn dust into gold.

The bull that changed his life years ago didn’t merely crush his leg and open his belly. It figuratively ripped open his heart, challenging his mind and his spirit. As his injuries healed, inside he’d carried frustration, rage, sadness, a touch of hopelessness and always a hint of the bitterness he tried to hold back. Emotions he managed to conceal from most people he couldn’t hide from her. Sophie knew that handsome face better than she knew her own. She could tell when he thought someone was lying, when he was holding back his anger, when he thought something was inappropriately funny. She knew when the sparkle that lit his emerald-green eyes meant to come forward or turn tail and run. Most women made the mistake of running the wrong way—straight into his arms. A few weeks later, whatever they’d had—or thought they’d had—was over and no doubt they were still wondering what had happened.

She hoped she would never again see the pain Clay tried to hold inside. Or the fury. But some of it was still there. The hurt, the bitter embarrassment and pure rage that his ex-fiancée had caused. Sophie had to surmise that was the reason he still hadn’t dated very much since the accident.

He was the most intelligent man she knew. He had a remarkable sense of humor that was slowly coming back. But it was his deep emerald-green eyes and the rare smiles on a face that still took her breath away even after the five years she'd been an employee. His hands, callused and powerful, could be gentle when he touched a woman, as if he were stroking a newborn foal. The spicy cologne mixed with his natural scent drew females like bees to a flower. Except Clay Everett was certainly no flower. He was hard, raw and pure male.

The accident and subsequent changes he'd had to make in his life shortened his temper and did nothing to improve his attitude. If anything it gave him a dangerous edge, which ironically, to most women, was even more appealing. The same power that held a one-ton bull beneath him was still harnessed inside him; in the bedroom a woman knew it was there. And Sophie knew firsthand just how sexy the man could be after that night of too many cocktails and too many steamy looks at the masked charity event in May.

The next morning, as the sun appeared over the distant hills, she had slipped from the room, dressed and headed for her car. It had taken all weekend to shake herself loose from the spell he'd cast, and even then her life would never be the same. She could feel it. But Monday morning when it was time to report to the Flying E for work, she'd done so with her head held high. She'd brushed past him straight into her office space with a brisk good-morning and refused to look straight into his eyes. That night had been a mistake and it would not be repeated. If he had any ideas to the contrary, the quicker he forgot them the better for all concerned.

It was just too bad no one had given Clay the memo.

Three

Friday morning Sophie opened her eyes and focused on the clock on the nightstand next to her bed. Seven o'clock. She had the day off. The local weatherman had predicted beautiful weather and she knew exactly how she was going to spend the day. After tossing back the covers, she stood from the bed and quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Clay was in Dallas attending a meeting with some of his stockholders, so the day was her own. She had a chance to take a beautiful horse and roam over fifty thousand acres of Texas hill country just waiting to be explored. Since moving his office to the ranch and her own relocation to Royal, Texas, she had taken advantage of Clay's generosity in allowing her to borrow one of his many horses and ride to her heart's content.

Foregoing her usual morning coffee and dry toast, she drove the six miles to the Lazy E Ranch. After pulling her car up next to the barn, she entered the main building and headed down the right-hand hallway. The smell of freshly cut alfalfa and sweet-corn molasses swirled around her on a gentle breeze. She heard Hopper nicker before she reached his stall.

Clay had been surprised that first day he'd found her in the main barn. After she explained that she'd been raised with horses and really missed them, he had quickly assured her she was welcome to ride any horse at the ranch during her time off. It became addictive. She'd chosen a black-and-white paint named Hopper. He seemed as eager to leave his stall for an adventure as she was to leave the office. In no time she had checked his hooves, given him a quick brush and thrown a saddle on his back. After that first glorious day, Sophie never missed the chance to go riding.

About the time she led him out of the barn toward the north gate, Clay's voice hailed her. Surprised, she turned toward him.

"Well, good morning," she said, coming to a stop. "Did you cancel your meeting?"

"Yeah. I have to go into Dallas next week anyway so I decided to meet with the stockholders then," he explained. "It's a beautiful day. Mind if I tag along?"

Yes. "Of course not." She tossed the reins over Hopper's neck near the saddle and gave him a friendly pat. "So has the doctor given the okay for you to swing up into a saddle?"

"I haven't really asked for permission."

"And you're doing it anyway." It wasn't so much a question as a statement.

"I think I can still mount pretty good. I don't expect to have any problems."

Ornery man. She refused to take the bait. She'd glanced once at his face. His eyes glistened and a shadow of a smile touched those succulent lips. It was the look of a shared secret he was daring her to tell. Their night together had been incredible but it absolutely would not happen again.

Sophie watched as his long strides carried him toward the bank of stalls that housed some of the top quarter horses in the state. Clay's limp was evident. The horses welcomed him with soft knickers; they watched Clay pass by with large brown eyes, their ears alert. The road to recovery had been long and she had to admire his tenacity, his determination to regain 100 percent dexterity. He had amazed the doctors whose predictions for his future were not so bright. She had firsthand knowledge of just how physically fit the man was, which was why his coming with her made her nervous. In the weeks after their night together, Sophie had used the increasingly busy days in the office as an excuse to prevent any mention of that night they'd shared. If Clay had picked up on what she was doing, he'd said nothing. He had never brought it up and neither had she. But this wasn't the office. She owed it to him not to mention any business concerns and thereby allow him to escape the rat race for a few hours. But it also left her without the barrier to more personal conversation. She had no idea what she would say if he introduced mutual attraction into the conversation.

Today with the cooler temperatures, Hopper was full of spunk and ready for an adventure. Clay returned with his choice of mount, a large chestnut gelding. When both horses were saddled and ready to go, they rode toward the main gate that opened onto the eastern pasture.

It was an area much like where she'd grown up. The first time she'd saddled a horse and ridden out and away from the main homestead, she'd felt the stirring of homesickness for the first time in over a year. During her time off, she sat in the small house she was renting on the edge of town and wondered if she could ever dare to go home again.

Normally, Sophie rode toward the west, following an old cattle trail through the mesquite trees, passing by the mirror-still waters of the natural lakes found in that area. In the direction they were headed this time, the terrain was more rocky, the path steadily uphill.

"I thought I would check a fence as we go," Clay told her. "The ranch hands keep repairing it only to have the wires go down again within a few days. Something's going on that isn't normal. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I've never ventured into that section of your ranch."

"The terrain is considerably more difficult to cross but once you reach the top, the view is amazing. It's one of the reasons I bought this ranch."

They rode for a while in silence. Then he said, "Tell me how you came to be such a proficient rider. Where did you learn your basic horsemanship?"

"At home," she replied hesitantly. "My dad has a small dairy. We always had a horse or two around. My brother and I grew up riding every chance we got. Mom and Dad both love to ride. I guess I inherited it from them. There are not many things I'd rather be doing."

She saw his lips purse as though he was hiding a grin. "I agree. There's nothing like a good ride."

"I wasn't talking about bull riding."

"Neither was I." Clay leaned down from his mount and opened another gate. He waited while she rode through then closed it behind them. Sophie rolled her eyes and shook her head at his try at an off-color remark.

"How about you?" she asked. "Were you raised with horses, cattle and such?"

It seemed silly to ask the question of a man with his history but while she knew and certainly appreciated his abilities as a cowboy in the arena, she knew little about his childhood. Before moving his office from a downtown high-rise to the ranch, they hadn't really had the opportunity to talk as they did now.

"Yep." A slow grin lit his eyes. "I was put in a saddle when I was still wearing diapers. Being a cowboy was all I ever wanted to do until I hit my teens and discovered the opposite sex."

"You were sure good at it."

“I had my moments.” He glanced over at her, the lights in his eyes dancing wickedly. “I was a pretty fair cowboy, too.”

Sophie groaned and shook her head. She’d walked right into that one. But the quiet laugh from Clay made it worth it. Since the accident he never laughed, rarely smiled.

“In the years we’ve worked together, I don’t think you’ve told me anything about your life. Now I know you grew up on a farm. Tell me more.”

The question about her past was not expected and Sophie felt tension run rampant.

She hoped he would let the subject drop. Unknowingly he was causing her to remember the horror that had propelled her to run from her home and travel as far away as she could go. Not that those memories ever left, but packed down in the back of her mind they were easier to contend with. No one knew her here. No one had any reason to know her past. And she preferred to keep it that way.

“There’s nothing much to tell. Typical small town. Friday-night football games. Blue-plate special every Wednesday at the only café in town. It rotated between stew and chicken-fried steak. Totally boring.”

“What brought you to Texas?”

And that was the question.

She shrugged. “No special reason. Just wanted to live someplace new.”

Clay opened his mouth to say something else then thought better of it. Sophie let out a silent sigh of relief. She hadn’t been prepared for his question. Next time she would be.

The small sandy trail looped through the trees as they made their way to gradually higher terrain. As they rode along, the trees grew taller and the thick stands of oak were overshadowed by tall, majestic pines. At one point Clay stopped and pointed back in the direction they had just come. The view was phenomenal. Amid the distant pine trees, she spotted the core of the ranch; a large clearing marked the house and separate barn areas. In the distance, horses and cattle grazed on the thick oat grasses.

“The stretch of fence is just over here,” Clay offered, nodding his head in that direction.

Sophie followed him over another small rise and dismounted when Clay did. Sure enough a couple of the cables in the fence had come loose. One was lying on the ground. Without another word, Clay set out to mend the fence. It struck Sophie as odd watching Clayton Everett do menial labor. But then what else would she have expected from him? First and foremost he was a cowboy. He would always be a cowboy at heart. And a cowboy mended fences. She could only hope he didn’t do any further damage to the ligaments and sinews in his body. She bit her lip to keep from saying something to him about it. She had to stop being his mother and let go of the constant worry. Yes, he’d been through hell and back. But he was better.

Looking around her, she spotted the blue of a small body of water in the distance, just below them to the left. “I’m going over to the lake,” Sophie told Clay.

“Good. I’ll meet you there when I finish here. Stay on this side of it. The shoreline on the far side is very unstable.”

“Will do.” Sophie mounted her Tobiano gelding and headed back down the trail. Within minutes she reached the clearing that opened up to the water. It was something out of a postcard: shimmering blue waters circled by red rocks with green sage grass filling in the distance between the rocks and the forest. She dismounted, leaving Hopper to graze while she scrambled to sit on a huge boulder overlooking the lake.

Something in the water caught her eye. She looked harder and realized she was watching a small school of fish. They were feeding on something just below in the shade of the boulder. She wished she had a scrap of bread or corn to toss down and see if they would eat it. Maybe if she and Clay ever came back to this spot, she would remember to bring something.

She realized what she'd just been thinking. She'd imagined them coming back together. This was a rare opportunity to go riding with Clay and share the beauty of the ranch. She might return here someday but she very much doubted if Clay would come with her.

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky and a slight breeze blew the hair from her face and teased the leaves on the trees. Suddenly she felt heavy hands on her shoulders. Cole sat down on the large rock, his legs bowing out around her while he moved to hold her close, his hands just beneath her breasts.

"You pick good places to rest," he said.

"I was watching the fish. Can you see them?" She leaned forward, pointing.

"They're feeding off water-dwelling insects and minnows. I should have thought to bring a collapsible fishing rod. We could take home some trout for supper."

"Are they good to eat?"

"Trout?" He sounded surprised. "You've never eaten trout?"

"No."

"Oh, darlin', we must expand your palate. I'm no damn connoisseur, but you gotta try trout cooked in butter and some spices. Maybe with a potato on the side. I like it best when it's cooked over an open campfire."

"Maybe I'll get to try it sometime."

"Maybe you will. Maybe I can cook it for you."

"You can cook?"

"Damn straight I can cook. Nothing fancy but I can fill you up and provide good, hot nourishment."

"I would like that."

His body grew taught. "So would I." He moved down to nuzzle the sensitive flesh of her neck. "Will you let me, Sophie?" He spoke softly against her ear, causing the goose bumps to race over her skin. "Will you let me fill you again?"

Somehow their topic of discussion had changed from simply fishing to something much deeper and more raw. Sophie felt the heat in her lower region as it began to build and intensify.

"I want you, Sophie. You know that."

The night they'd shared was completely wrong and should never have happened. While every cell in her body screamed for him, she would not make the same mistake twice. Suddenly Cole lay back on the huge rock and with an easy twist maneuvered her on top of him, face-to-face. Her forearms rested against his broad shoulders and she looked down into those emerald-green eyes. His body was at once hard and pliant, allowing her body to sink into the power of his.

"Kiss me." It was only a whispered request but she was so attuned to him she wouldn't have missed his words if he was a mile away.

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"I think it's a terrific idea." One hand moved from around her lower back up to her head as he gently encouraged her lips to come closer to his.

"Clay, I—" She opened her mouth but before words could form, he lifted his head and his lips found hers. They were hungry and he didn't hesitate filling the cavern of her mouth with his tongue. It was everything she remembered and more. Without any doubt Clay was the sexiest man she had ever come into contact with. He was temptation run amok with an element of danger on the side.

Her feelings for him had slowly come about in the months after the accident. But rather than pay heed and stay well away from him, she was drawn to him more than ever. The carefree, fun-loving bachelor, the love-'em-and-leave-'em guy, had been gone, replaced by a man of serious intent.

Part of her wanted nothing more than to give him whatever he wanted; the other part, the smart side of her, wanted to run away as fast as she could. He had a ruthlessness she'd always known was there but felt secure knowing he kept it bottled inside. Since the abandonment by his fiancée, he was

no longer in control of the anger and merciless drive. It both drew her to him and pushed her away out of self-preservation.

Only one thing was certain: this attraction to her boss was going to eventually cause a rift between them.

She turned her face away, breaking off the kiss she wanted more than air in her lungs. She realized she was now lying on the huge boulder with Clay above her, her head held in his large hand, his erection pressing hard against the apex of her thighs. Of its own accord, before she could summon the strength to stop it, her body pressed against him. Hard. She heard him moan, deep and hungry, and the heat of desire exploded inside her, igniting every vein. He cupped her breasts, first one then the other. Unbuttoning her shirt, he pushed her bra aside and his lips and tongue teased the stiff peaks.

Voices. Through the sex-filled haze, her brain picked up on the distant sound of voices.

“Clay,” she whispered. “Clay, someone’s coming this way.”

“Let ’em.”

“No! Clay, stop. Please.” Her own voice was breathy. The last thing she wanted to do at that moment was to push him away. She was in rapture such as she’d known only one other time in her life: with Clay.

Finally he heeded her words and sat up. He drew in several deep breaths of air then turned toward her, his voice deep and full of determination. “I want you, Sophie. I want you so bad it hurts. One time was nowhere near enough. Mark it down as a friendly warning. I will have you again.”

Offering his hand, he pulled her to her feet. She quickly repositioned her bra and began to fasten the buttons of her blouse. Clay watched her with a gleam in his darkened eyes.

Before either could say anything more, three of the ranch hands rode their horses around the grove of pine trees and into clear view.

“We came to fix that downed fence,” one of the riders said to Clay. “But looks like somebody already beat us to it.”

They continued to talk while Sophie edged her way toward her horse. Mounting her ride, she eased into the saddle, content to wait for Clay from there. Eventually, the three cowboys turned their horses around and headed back to the barn, and Clay faced her with a lopsided grin.

“Well, it was nice while it lasted,” he said as he mounted his horse.

“What?” she asked, her brows furled in a frown. “Oh,” she corrected as she realized exactly what he was referring to: their brief time in each other’s arms.

“Ms. Prescott? You certainly know how to make a man feel desirable.” With a shake of his head he reined his horse toward the trail leading back to the ranch. Sophie followed, biting her tongue.

Impertinent man.

Four

The days of summer rolled into Texas, raising the temperatures and bringing thunder that rumbled across the sky, hinting at rain that rarely fell. But despite the heat, both the ranch and the small town of Royal were abuzz with activity. Tonight the Texas Cattleman’s Club Fourth of July celebration would be held. A large terrace had been built at the back of the clubhouse building. Complete with retractable awnings in case of rain and a soundstage for the twelve-piece orchestra selected to play in time with the fireworks, this year’s festivities were expected to be the celebration of all celebrations. Just seeing the huge deck raised Sophie’s excitement level.

She had volunteered to oversee selecting and ordering the wines and ingredients for the various cocktails along with stemware, plates and bowls for the pies and ice-cream dessert. She’d done similar tasks before when Clay held a formal dinner consisting of six courses for fifty couples at his ranch house. Even though more people would be in attendance tonight, this was a piece of cake by comparison.

Earlier she’d opened the door to the clubhouse and stepped into a whirlwind of activity. A dozen or so volunteers each had their assigned task lists. Sophie recognized a few of Clay’s ranch

hands right off the bat. In fact, she'd caught a ride over with George and Alan. They were the strong arms. Aided by a couple more cowboys from the nearby ranches, they would unload the truck moving all the cases of wine, champagne and various setups for cocktails into the storage room.

Checking off each case, she unpacked the sample of plates and glassware. In light of the occasion, she'd selected an assortment of William Avington china in red, white and blue with gold rims and matching inner gold circles on the plates and matching gold rims on the coffee cups, saucers and bowls. But, as Simone Parker had told her, at only a couple of hundred dollars per setting, it wouldn't be a great loss if some were broken. At that thought, Sophie rolled her eyes and smiled. Not exactly like the Independence Day celebrations back home where her dad would cook hot dogs on a homemade grill in the backyard while her mom made her family-famous potato salad and baked beans, usually served on paper plates. The beverages consisted of beer for the adults and lemonade for the kids. How in the world had she managed to land in such a totally different world?

"Are you almost finished?" a deep voice asked. She didn't have to turn around and look at Clay's tanned face to know it was him.

"Just about. Did you need me for something?"

Sophie glanced at Gayle Brown, one of the volunteers, who stood tongue-tied in front of her, staring over Sophie's shoulder at Clay. He leaned down to Sophie and whispered, "Ask me that when we're alone." Aloud he said, "Can I offer you a ride home?"

She turned and smiled at him. "That would be great. Thank you."

"Okay, Gayle, where were we?"

"The wine is... We...we were at the wine," she stammered, her eyes glued to Clay, who was casually dressed in his T-shirt, a pair of holey jeans and well-worn boots. He could easily wow the pants off any woman in the room. And he didn't have to be a billionaire to do it.

Sophie hoped the woman wouldn't literally start to drool.

"And...what about the wine?"

"The... Oh. It's here. And the new champagne flutes came in last week. They are expecting about five hundred members and guests, give or take, based on past years. If there are more, the kitchen crew will keep the dishwashers going full-time."

"Sophie, I have a total count of the stemware," said another volunteer, smiling intently at Clay. "Where do you want them set up?"

Sophie looked around the vast room. There was no place for all of the stemware in the main ballroom. "Let's set up a table for each type at points around the room. There are six serving stations. I think we need to break down what type of beverage we will be serving, what glasses we need and put out a large tray for the used glasses at each one. I'm betting there will only be enough room for thirty to forty glasses. The rest will have to be brought from the back as needed."

"Okay. Sounds like a good plan to me," Gayle replied. "I'll find Martha and we'll get started on it."

"Perfect." Sophie smiled at Gayle, who had again locked her gaze on Clay. "And make sure each station has plenty of cocktail napkins and stir sticks. Can you think of anything else we missed?"

"Ah. No?" Gayle turned to Sophie. "Some of the guys are manhandling—" she cleared her throat "—the...the ice for the drinks, but like with the glasses, most of it's gonna have to be kept in cold...ah, hum, excuse me, storage in the back and brought out as needed." She gulped the air deep into her lungs as though she wouldn't have another opportunity. Ever.

"Good enough. Do you happen to know if the two ice sculptures have arrived?"

"No, ma'am. I haven't seen them and I haven't heard anyone talking about them."

"Sounds like I need to make a couple of phone calls. Thanks so much for your help, Gayle."

"Ah...sure. No problem."

"You're not helping." Sophie glared at Clay after Gayle hurried off.

"What did I do?"

She rolled her eyes. “You showed up.” She received a pursed-lip smile in response. He knew exactly the effect he had on women.

Clay stood by patiently while she grabbed her cell phone. “Let me call and check on the ice sculptures.” She hurriedly placed the call. A few minutes later she was satisfied the sculptures were on their way and all was good. Absently smiling, she turned to Clay.

“All good on the ice sculptures?” he asked.

“Yep. Both sculptures are en route and should arrive in the next hour. Someone else can take over from here.”

The day seemed to have gone fast, but by the time she arrived at her little cottage, it would be past six o’clock. Then she could enjoy a long soak in a hot tub and read herself to sleep.

“Members of the club voted to have a pavilion built adjacent to the flower gardens on the west side of the clubhouse,” said Clay.

“Yes. I saw it this afternoon. It’s nice. I think they will be serving the barbecue there tonight. People can then go inside and be seated at a table or dine at one of the new tables outside.”

Excitement ran high. People not associated with the TCC came from miles around to watch what had gained a reputation as the best firework display in the state. Sophie would be happy to watch the fireworks from her little back porch and enjoy a little R & R at home instead.

“Okay. I’m finished. There are plenty of other volunteers to cover anything that might come up.”

Most of them only wanted to get a look inside the vast TCC clubhouse. Only a chosen few had ever seen the interior since it was established more than a hundred years ago. Only recently had the club begun to allow select women to become members and while Clay said it was a good thing, many members still didn’t like it.

With the warmth of his large hand on her lower back, Clay accompanied Sophie out of the building and to his car.

Once they were both seated in his Porsche Spyder, Clay looked toward her and smiled.

“I’ll pick you up at eight. The orchestra will be playing and the fireworks are slated to start at nine.”

His words brought up memories of the last time they’d attended a social function.

“I’m not going to the fireworks. I’ll just watch them from my house.”

“Then I’ll watch with you. I have to make an appearance at the club but I don’t have to stay long. Would nine o’clock be okay?”

“Clay, I’m tired and all I want is a quiet night starting with a hot soak in the tub. I imagine most of the women that will be here tonight would love your invitation.”

“I doubt you’re right about that, but at any rate I’m not asking them. I want you to come with me and see the fireworks from the club. I want you to be my guest.” His voice lowered. “I want to be with you.”

“We are together five, sometimes six days a week,” she said and laughed. “Surely you’re getting tired of my company by now.”

“Never.”

“Clay...” It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be with him. She dreamed of him every night and had recently begun to daydream about him at work, for heaven’s sake. It wasn’t that she cared about who in the town saw them together or the rumors of a relationship between them that had no doubt spread after the masked ball. After the gossip that had flown hot and heavy in her hometown, a love affair with a billionaire was nothing. But Clay didn’t know about those other rumors. And she wasn’t ready to tell him. She wasn’t ready to discuss that with anybody.

It had been really hard to carry on with her life after the night he made love to her two months ago. Seeing him every day in his office, answering his phone, taking his messages, being polite to the women who called him, making excuses when he wouldn’t call them back. He said there was no

one else he wanted to talk to unless it was business. About half of the callers didn't want to disclose their business to her. She'd tried and all they said was it was personal. When she filled the top of his desk with message slips, he had glanced over them before tossing them into the trash. At seeing her astonishment, he always responded with a quick wink and that smile that made her heart go ten times faster.

Eventually other rumors replaced the talk about her and Clay and since their relationship really had nowhere to go, she preferred to keep things just as they were.

“Sophie, it's a fireworks display. We'll probably eat hot dogs off paper plates—”

Her eyes flashed to his face to see if he was joking. The mischievous smile he fought to hide told her he was. “Not hardly.”

“And watch a beautiful display of lights in the sky while we dance.”

He rested his right hand on the stick shift of the elegant Porsche and caught her eyes with his. “I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I don't want to make you the subject of the town's gossips. But I do want to be with you where no phones or computers get in the way.”

He pulled the transmission into first gear. “At least think about it.”

She nodded and silently called herself every type of idiot.

In a vehicle that was known to go from zero to sixty in under three seconds, it didn't take long to flash through town and pull up in front of her small cottage. Clay killed the engine and looked longingly at Sophie.

“Okay. Fine. If you're going to make this a big deal, I'll go.”

“I'll pick you up at eight.” He flashed that sexy smile in her direction.

Sophie nodded. She didn't know if Clay was smiling because he'd won the argument or because he was happy that she was going out with him that evening. In the long run it really didn't matter. She would go. People would talk. She just hoped that the gossip would never reach anyone in her hometown in northern Indiana. Clay was worried about her reputation. He really should be worried about his own.

“Eight o'clock,” she confirmed. “Thanks for the ride home.”

He waited until she reached the front porch, then was out of sight before she closed the door. Cowboys did like their toys.

* * *

The new black stretch limo slowed as it came to a stop in front of the small blue-and-white cottage. Cole had invited Sophie to be his date for the Independence Day celebration and found himself holding his breath until she accepted. He knew several of the men who had called for her over the course of the week and he was pretty sure she'd not accepted any invitation. While he was not willing to commit to another woman—even Sophie—after his ex-fiancée, neither was he willing to take a chance another man would slip in between Sophie and him. She'd hesitantly accepted. In fact, since he had made love to her two months ago after the charity ball, she'd been as fleeting as a deer during hunting season. And so she should have been. Because he was pursuing her. And he would have her again. It was only a matter of time.

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