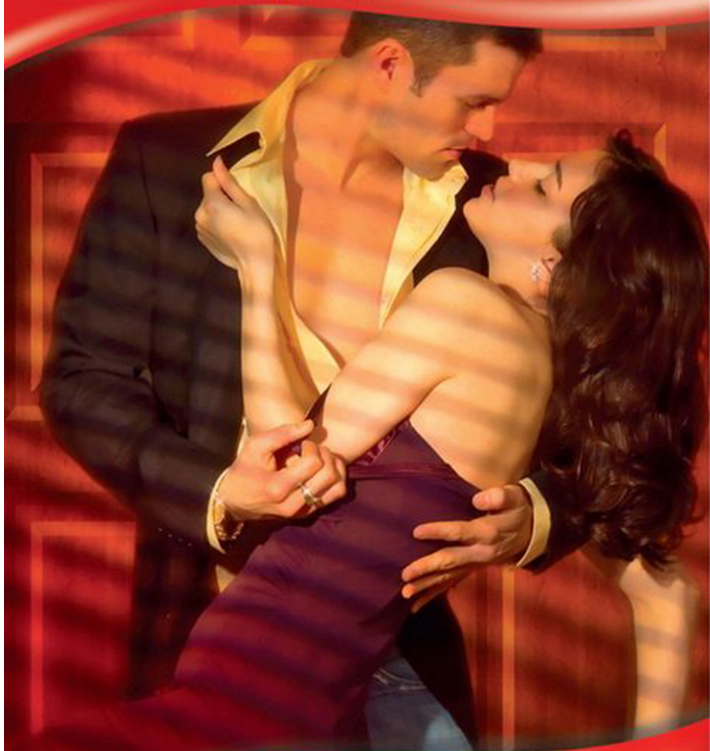


Taming the Texas Tycoon

Katherine Garbera

One Night with the Wealthy Rancher

Brenda Jackson



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Brenda Jackson
Katherine Garbera
Taming the Texas Tycoon / One
Night with the Wealthy Rancher:
Taming the Texas Tycoon

Аннотация

Taming the Texas Tycoon Katherine Garbera For years Kate Thornton had dreamed of becoming Mrs Lance Brody. Then her boss became engaged strictly for business and Kate had had enough. Giving her two weeks' notice should have released her, but Lance wasn't about to let her leave. Not even if it meant taking her to bed to keep her! One Night with the Wealthy Rancher Brenda Jackson Darius Foster was still trying to forget the incredible night he'd spent with Summer Martindale...a night that never should have happened. Certain she had relocated just to get close to him – and his millions – the ex-lawman vowed to keep his distance...until danger came calling; then Darius knew he was the only one who could protect her.

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Taming the Texas Tycoon

by Katherine Garbera

THE TEXAS TATTLER

All The News You Need To Know...And More!

Who could have imagined that confirmed Texas bachelor Lance Brody would return from a trip to Washington, DC, engaged! And to a woman he'd never met before. The successful businessman claims it's a love match, but we certainly have our doubts. Miss Bea Cavanaugh is well connected to all the people the Brody brothers need. We smell merger rather than marriage!

But we also don't see this "engagement" being a long one. Not that Lance is heading down the aisle soon. No, we've seen the looks he's been giving his personal assistant. Especially now that the formerly nondescript Miss Thornton has suddenly blossomed into a yellow rose of Texas. With the fiancée so far away, how soon before the groom-to-be starts to play?

One Night with the Wealthy Rancher by Brenda Jackson

THE TEXAS TATTLER

All The News You Need To Know...And More!

Maybe it's just us, but a certain Millionaire's Club member has been spending an awful lot of time at the new Helping Hands Women's Shelter. At first, it seemed as if this mega-rich rancher was just being neighbourly and philanthropic. But we've caught a glimpse of the shelter's newest advocate. There's no way that rancher has not noticed as well. He is, after all, a red-blooded Texan!

But what about this new girl in town? She certainly couldn't have missed that tall, dark and handsome rancher hanging around. And we all know how many women have been throwing themselves at this certain bachelor for his lovely loot. (Money and looks? Sign us up!) Has she been helping out at Helping Hands purely for compassionate reasons...or to get *her* hands on a millionaire?

Taming the Texas Tycoon

By

Katherine Garbera
One Night with the Wealthy Rancher

By

Brenda Jackson



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Claiming King's Baby by Maureen Child & *Wyoming Wedding*

by Sara Orwig

Taming the Texas Tycoon by Katherine Garbera & *One Night with the Wealthy Rancher* by Brenda Jackson

One Night, Two Babies by Kathie DeNosky & *Valente's Baby* by Maxine Sullivan

Taming the Texas Tycoon

By

Katherine Garbera

Dear Reader,

Kate is a heroine who is very close to me. She's a bit of an ugly duckling in the beginning, someone who's very comfortable hiding who she is. She likes blending into the background and hoping that the man she loves will notice her. But when Lance Brody announces his engagement to another woman, Kate realises it's time to take action. Kate is a woman in flux. I think most of us are. We are constantly changing and reinventing ourselves, trying to find an outer shell that matches the inner woman. For Kate this new sexier face and body she sees in the mirror is a stranger. And she has to find her confidence again.

Happy reading!

Katherine

KATHERINE GARBERA is a strong believer in happily-ever-after. She's written more than thirty-five books and has been nominated for career achievement awards in series fantasy and series adventure from *Romantic Times BOOKreviews*. Her books have appeared on bestseller lists for series romance and on the *USA TODAY* extended bestseller list. She loves to travel and

lives in Dallas, Texas, with her two children and the man of her dreams. You can visit her on the web at www.katherinegarbera.com.

This book is dedicated to my mom and dad. I don't think I say thank you enough or let you know just how lucky I am to have you as parents. So...thank you, Mom and Dad. I love you very much.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to give a shout-out to the other authors in the MILLIONAIRE'S CLUB series – Michelle, Brenda, Charlene, Day and Jennifer. It was a lot of fun to write with you.

Chapter One

“Brody Oil and Gas, Kate speaking,” Kate Thornton said into the phone as she did about fifty times a day.

“Hey, Katie-girl, any fires I need to put out?” Lance Brody asked.

“Hi, Lance, how was DC?” she said while she sorted through the messages on her desk. Her boss was everything she’d ever wanted in a man and, embarrassingly for her, he never saw her as anything other than his ultra-efficient administrative assistant. Which was great—really it was. That’s what she was paid for.

She’d joined Brody Oil and Gas shortly after Lance and his brother, Mitch, had inherited the failing refineries. And over the last five years, Lance and Mitch had turned their fortunes around and were now members of the famed Texas Cattleman’s Club.

“DC was hot and the meetings were long. Messages?” Lance asked.

“You have two that aren’t urgent but that you might want to handle before you get back to the office. One is from Sebastian Huntington regarding TCC business. Do you need his number?”

“Nah, I got it. What’s the other one?”

“The other one is from Lexi Cavanaugh. I didn’t recognize her name but she asked for you to call her as soon as you landed.”

“She’s my fiancée,” Lance said.

Kate felt all the blood leave her body. She knew Lance was

still talking because she could hear his voice beyond the buzzing in her ears. But all she could think was after years of secretly loving this man, he'd gone away and gotten engaged to someone she'd never even heard of.

"Katie-girl? You still there?"

"Yes," she said. "Of course I am. That's it on the messages. When do you think you'll be in the office?"

"En route now. The traffic on highway 45 is heavy, though. I need one more thing from you," he said.

Please don't ask me to plan your engagement party, she thought.

"Double-check with the caterers for Thursday's Fourth of July barbecue. I want to make sure this year's party blows the top off of last year's."

"No problem," she said, hearing her own voice break. She didn't know how she was going to be able to work with Lance every day now that he was clearly another woman's man.

"The other line is ringing," she said, though it wasn't. She just needed to get off the phone.

"I'll see you soon," he said, hanging up.

Kate hung up the phone and sat there staring at her computer screen. The wallpaper on her monitor was a photo of Lance, Mitch and her taken in February when Lance and Mitch had received word they were going to be accepted into the millionaire's club. She'd bought a bottle of champagne and the three of them had toasted the brothers' success.

Back then it had seemed fine that both Lance and Mitch thought of her as nothing more than an assistant. She had believed that one day Lance would see past her horn-rimmed glasses and cardigan sweaters to the woman beneath.

Clearly, that wasn't the case.

She leaned forward, looking at the photo and realizing that part of the problem lay with her. Her thick dark hair was pulled back in a sloppy braid and her glasses were a little big for her face. She'd lost weight last year—almost eighty pounds—and hadn't bothered to get new frames for her smaller face. In fact, all of her clothes were just the old ones. They were all faded and too big for her.

She looked like someone's maiden aunt, she thought.

Having grown up in the Houston, Texas, suburb of Somerset, she was aware that taking care with her appearance was an important thing if she was going to catch a man's attention. But being overweight had made everything she wore look, well, not very nice. So she'd stopped trying.

She reached out and brushed her finger over Lance's face, trying to convince herself that she would be fine as he planned his wedding. That she could stay here in this office, working for the man she loved while he lived his life.

But she knew she couldn't. The only way she was ever going to be happy with her life would be if she took control of it, the same way she'd taken control of her body by stopping her binge eating and focusing on making herself healthier.

There was really only one way for that to happen. She was going to have to quit her job at Brody Oil and Gas.

Lance wasn't in the best of moods considering he'd just gotten engaged, a day he knew that most men considered one of the happiest of their lives. But then he wasn't marrying for love; he was marrying to ensure the future of Brody Oil and Gas. He and Mitch had grown up in the fading dreams of their father, a man who'd let the Brody name get washed up and their wells dry out.

But with Mitch's financial genius and his skills—hell make that *luck* at finding mineral deposits and oil reserves—they'd turned around Brody Oil and Gas.

He was back in Houston now, which was a relief. He hated being away from home for any length of time. He liked his life the way it was. Liked the roughness of his roughneck oil workers, liked the comfy feeling his secretary Kate gave him and liked that he had a home at the oil refinery that he'd never found anywhere else.

Few people knew that their old man had drunk away his fortune. Mitch and he had borne the brunt of the old man's anger at the loss of that fortune.

He rubbed the back of his neck as he pulled his truck into the reserved parking spot at the offices of Brody Oil and Gas.

His cell phone rang as he was getting out of the truck. He checked the ID. "Hey, Mitch. What's up?"

"I'm going to have to stay in DC a bit longer to work out the rest of the deal we put in place with your engagement."

“No problem. Do you think you’ll be back for the Fourth?”

“Of course.”

“I invited Lexi to join me. I want her to start getting to know everyone here,” Lance said.

“That sounds good.”

“You know her better than I do,” Lance added, thinking of the woman he was going to marry. “I was thinking I should get her a little gift to say thanks for agreeing to marry me. Should I ask Kate, or do you think you could suggest something?”

There was silence on the line and Lance pulled the phone away from his ear to make sure he hadn’t lost the connection. “If you have any thoughts, just shoot me an e-mail.”

“I’ll do that. When are you going to tell Kate that you’re engaged?”

“Already did. Why?” Lance walked up toward the building.

“No reason,” Mitch said.

“Do you think I should have waited until I announced it to the rest of the company?”

“No,” Mitch said. “She’s not like the rest of the staff.”

“I know that. Do you think I should call Senator Cavanaugh to follow up on anything?”

“I’m handling that. Just keep doing what you usually do,” Mitch said.

“And that is?” Lance asked.

“Heavy lifting,” Mitch said.

Lance smiled. From the time they were very little, Mitch had

relied on him to do the heavy physical stuff. It only made sense since he was the older brother, and Lance had learned early on that their parents weren't going to watch out for either of them.

"Will do. See you on Thursday?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Mitch said.

He disconnected the call and stood there for another moment in the hot, Houston sun. It might sound like he was daft to others but he liked the burn of the summer sun on his skin.

The air-conditioning chilled him as he walked through the building. There was always a moment when he almost paused as he entered the office, unable to believe how he and Mitch had brought the empty, run-down company back to this. The lobby was filled with guests waiting to go up to different meetings. There was a full staff of security guards who protected the company.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brody."

"Good afternoon, Stan. How's things?"

"Good, sir. Good to have you back in Houston," Stan said.

Lance nodded at the man and walked toward the executive elevators. He got on and pushed the button for the executive floor. The ride was quick and he realized he was eager to be back to work. DC was like another world, a place he didn't fit in. Here at Brody Oil and Gas, he not only fit in, he was in his kingdom.

He walked into his office and Kate glanced up at him. Her normal smile of welcome wasn't as bright as it usually was.

"Welcome back, Lance. Steve from finance needs five

minutes sometime today. I told him I had to check with you first.”

“No problem. I’m free this afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll take care of it.”

“Anything else I need to know about?”

She shook her head, a strand of her thick dark hair brushing her cheek. She looked up at him and her eyes seemed wider, those dark-chocolate orbs that he’d lost himself in a time or two. He shook his head. That was folly. Kate wasn’t the type of woman who’d be interested in an affair.

And despite his engagement, affairs were all he’d ever been interested in. He wasn’t the kind of man who could marry a woman he felt anything for. He’d learned from his father that Brody men didn’t handle lust or love well. They required devotion and dedication from their lovers or else they turned to jealousy. He had experienced it himself during his ill-fated love affair with his high school sweetheart April, when he was eighteen.

“Lance?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

He shook his head. “No, I was thinking about the trip to DC.”

Kate bit her lip and looked down.

“What is it, Katie-girl? Is something on your mind?”

Kate nodded. “I need a few minutes to talk to you in your office.”

“Okay,” he said. “Now?”

“Yes, I think the sooner we get to this the better.”

“Come on in,” he said.

She stood and picked something up from her printer before leading the way into his office. Lance watched her walking in front of him, seeing the sway of her hips and the way the fabric of her long skirt brushed her calves.

Why was he just now realizing that Kate was one fine-looking woman beneath those ugly clothes of hers?

Kate had been in Lance’s office many times before and today she felt a pang at the paper she held in her hand. She had made up her mind that she was going to resign. There was nothing that could change that.

Well, that wasn’t true. She vacillated between being firm that she had to leave, and wanting to stay so she could see Lance on a daily basis.

But then she had to remember that part of the reason she’d lost the weight was because she was tired of sitting on the sidelines of life, and watching other people live while she just went about doing her job and going home to her empty town house in Houston.

That emptiness had started getting to her and she’d contemplated buying a cat. But she’d stopped, horrified at becoming her great-aunt Jean, the spinster and butt of most jokes by the younger generation when Kate was growing up.

“What did you want to talk about?” Lance said. He leaned one hip on the front of his desk and stretched his long legs out.

She stared at him for a minute. How was she going to get over

him?

“I have been thinking about my job lately. And I...I’ve decided to pursue opportunities away from Brody Oil and Gas.”

“What?” Lance asked, standing up. “Why now? We need you, Katie-girl.”

Katie-girl. He called her that stupid nickname that made her feel like she was five years old. And like a sister to him. She realized that she’d let the relationship develop that way, happy to have at least some sort of affection from him.

“That’s the problem for me, Lance, you don’t really need me. You might have back in the beginning when you hired me, but now any efficient office manager will be able to handle this. I think we both know that.”

“That’s been true for the last two years. Why are you leaving now?”

She shrugged. She hadn’t thought that Lance would care, to be honest. “It just seems like a good time to make a move. Everything is going well here, you’re engaged and Mitch is spending more time in DC. A new person will be able to transition smoothly.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Is anything the matter, Kate? Did I do something I shouldn’t have?”

“Not at all. It’s me, Lance. I keep staying here year after year because it’s comfortable, and I think we both know that isn’t the way to really have a successful career.”

“Is that what this is about? We can promote you into a

different role,” he said.

She shook her head. “No. Thank you for the offer but I’m ready to try something new.”

Kate was tempted to say yes to anything that Lance suggested, but she refused to let go of the fact that he was getting married, and to stay here...well, it would be the dumbest thing she could ever do.

“Will you stay until I can hire a replacement?”

She nodded. That sounded fair to her. “Of course I will.”

“Thanks for that.”

“I guess...here is my resignation. I’ll be at my desk if you need anything else from me.”

She turned to leave and felt as if she was running away. A part of her wondered if she shouldn’t try to stay here and make things different between her and Lance. But how?

She’d Googled Lexi Cavanaugh as soon as Lance had told her about the engagement, and there was no way that she could compete with a woman like that.

“Kate?”

“Yes, Lance.”

“I would like to have a cake at the barbecue to celebrate my engagement to Lexi. Can you order one from the bakery for me?”

“Of course,” she said.

It was definitely time for her to leave Brody Oil and Gas.

She realized that she and Lance hadn’t hammered out the details of her leaving the company. “I’ll stay for two weeks.”

"It might take longer than that to hire your replacement."

"I'd like to try to fit it into that time schedule," she said.

"Have I done something to upset you, Kate? You know I'm more of a roughneck than an executive," he said.

She steeled herself against responding to that rough aw-shucks-ma'am charm that he was able to pull off so easily. She liked that he wasn't as sophisticated and polished as Mitch was. That was why she'd fallen for him. At heart, Lance was a good old boy, a Texas man like her daddy and her brothers. The kind of guy that knew how to charm the pants off any lady.

And he hadn't had to work hard to win her affections. But she realized now that the charm was just part of his practiced act. It was as much a part of the savvy millionaire as his thousand-dollar cowboy boots and million-dollar mansion. He pulled out the charm when he needed it.

"No, Lance. You didn't do anything other than treat me like your secretary."

"Is that a problem?" he asked, his shrewd gaze on her.

"Not at all. But that's all I am to you and I decided I want more."

She walked out of his office and closed the door behind her. She knew she should stay and work the rest of the day but she needed to get away. And she didn't care if it made her seem cowardly. She went downstairs and put the top down on her Miata convertible and drove out of Houston, leaving Brody Oil and Gas behind. She only wished it were as easy to convince her heart to

leave Lance Brody in the dust.

Chapter Two

Lance was speechless as Kate not only walked out of his office, but left early. He knew he'd missed something important as far as she was concerned. She said she wanted to be more than his secretary—did she mean professionally, or personally?

He started to go after her but realized he had no idea where she went when she left the offices. To be honest, she was always here when he arrived and she stayed until after he left. How was he going to operate without her? Kate *was* more than just his secretary. She was the most important piece of the office, the person who kept everything running smoothly and kept him in line.

“Damn it,” he said to no one in particular. He hadn’t gotten to where he was by letting things like this go. He speed-dialed her cell phone.

“I can’t talk now, Lance,” she said.

“Then pull over or use the headset I gave you, because you can’t just walk away like that and expect me to let this go.”

“Hold on,” she said. He heard her fumbling around and then cursing, and a minute later she was back. “What do you want to talk about?”

“The fact that you left like you did.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was so unprofessional, but I just didn’t think I could be productive anymore today.”

"I can understand that. Want to tell me why?"

"No. It'll just make you uncomfortable and make me feel like a big dummy."

Lance didn't like the sound of that. "Kate, if I've done something, just flat out tell me. I'll apologize and we can move on."

"I don't think we can," she said. Her words were sad and he wished she were still in the office so he could see her expressions. Kate had the most expressive eyes of any woman he'd ever met.

"You won't know until we talk," Lance said. He would fix this problem with Kate—he couldn't afford to lose her. "Where are you?"

"On the interstate headed toward Somerset."

"Going to your parents house?" he asked, knowing that Kate had grown up in Somerset, a wealthy suburb of Houston. He had a house there now.

"I guess so. I just got in the car and kind of drove on autopilot. I didn't realize where I was headed."

"Katie-girl—"

"Don't call me that, Lance. It makes me feel like we have a relationship beyond boss-secretary and I know that's not true."

He cursed under his breath. "We do have one. We're friends, Kate. And we have been all these long years."

"Are we really friends?"

"Of course we are. We are more than friends...you're like part of the family to Mitch and me, and to be honest, Kate, I don't

think either of us will know what to do without you.”

She was quiet for a few seconds.

“Kate?”

“I just can’t talk about this anymore, Lance. I know to you it probably seems...how does it seem?”

“Like I’ve done something to upset you. Listen, whatever it is, I can fix it. You know that, right?”

“You can’t.”

“Kate, when have we ever encountered a problem or obstacle that I couldn’t figure a way out of?”

“Lance...”

She was weakening as he’d known she would. His other line was ringing and he ignored it.

“Tell me, Kate.”

“I’m not sure I can. I feel silly that you are making such a big deal out of it now,” she said.

One of the first things he’d liked about Kate was her voice. It was soft and sweet and even when she got mad, which wasn’t often, she kept it pleasant.

“Why don’t you come back to the office and we can talk,” Lance said.

“We can talk tomorrow when I come in. I think I need the night to get my mind together.”

Lance knew it was important to get Kate back and convince her to stay on before too much time had passed. He knew that she could find other jobs that would pay her as much as he did.

But he needed her.

The other line started ringing again and his cell phone beeped with a text message from Frank Japlin, the head of operations at their main refinery.

“Kate, can you hold on a minute?”

“What?”

“I’ve got to take a call from the refinery,” he said.

“Sure,” she said.

He put her on hold and answered the call. “It’s Brody.”

“Frank here. We have a fire at the refinery. I think you need to get down here right away.”

“Have you called the fire department?”

“First thing. But this blaze is burning to beat the band.”

“I’m in the middle of another emergency.”

“There is a lot of damage. And I heard one of the investigators say they thought the cause of the fire wasn’t accidental.”

Great. Just what he needed today. “See what else you can find out. I’ll give you a call in fifteen minutes or so.”

“Okay, boss,” Frank said, hanging up.

Lance rubbed the back of his neck, thinking that damage was the last thing they needed at the refineries. The hurricane they’d had last fall had already done enough damage to them.

He needed Kate back in her chair, taking care of this mess. He’d have to call the press, the families and the insurance company. He glanced down at his phone and noticed that the line where she’d been holding was now off. She’d hung up.

Just what he needed, he thought.

Kate realized, as she was hanging on the phone waiting for Lance, that she'd spent too much of her time in that static role. Lance had gotten engaged. There was nothing he could say or do that was going to make staying on at Brody Oil and Gas okay.

She hung up the call and kept on driving. Going home to her folks' place wasn't the smartest idea. Her mom would just tell her that if she wore makeup and dressed nicer, she wouldn't still be single. And honestly, who could deal with that?

But she didn't want to go to her town house and spend the night alone. She needed some good advice. She needed to be with her best friend, Becca Huntington. Becca would commiserate with her and tell her not to go back, not to listen to Lance...wouldn't she?

She called Becca at Sweet Nothings, the lingerie shop she owned in Somerset.

"Sweet Nothings."

"Becca, it's Kate."

"Hey, there. How's things in the big city?" Becca asked.

"Horrible."

"What? Why?"

"Lance is engaged."

Becca didn't say anything for a moment and Kate realized she probably seemed like a loser to her friend. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't realize he was dating anyone."

"He wasn't."

“Are you sure he’s engaged? Lance doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who’d do something that spontaneous.”

He wasn’t spontaneous and he was careful not to be tied down by any of the women he got involved with. “Yes, he told me the news himself.”

“Who is she?”

“Lexi Cavanaugh.”

“Senator Cavanaugh’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Is it politically motivated?” Becca asked.

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. I quit my job.”

“You did what?”

“Was that crazy? I’m so confused, I don’t know what to do,” Kate admitted. She’d hoped that Lance would realize she was waiting there and fall for her.

“It may have been a little crazy. I know you’ve had a bit of a crush on him,” Becca said.

Kate took a deep breath. “It’s more than a crush. I’m in love with him.”

It was the first time she’d said the words out loud, and she had to admit they felt good. Or they would have if Lance wasn’t engaged to another woman.”

“Oh, Kate.”

“He doesn’t even know I’m a woman.

“Let’s fix that,” Becca said.

“How?”

“Come to the shop and we’ll give you a makeover.”

“A makeover? I don’t think so. Remember the last time we tried.”

Kate had felt so uncomfortable in the makeup and clothing that Becca had suggested, she’d ended up going straight home and taking it all off. She needed the comfort of her old clothing... or did she?

“I just don’t know what to do,” she repeated.

“Only you can figure that out. But if it were me, I’d change my hair and my clothes. Just start over and find a new love.”

“I have to work for Lance for two more weeks.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t just quit and walk out on him.”

“All the better,” Becca said. “You can go back to work looking like a million bucks and then leave. It will be a chance to get back a little of your pride.”

Would her pride feel any better if she came back to Brody Oil and Gas and Lance looked at her like a woman instead of his assistant?

“I’m coming to your shop,” Kate said.

“Good, we can talk once you get here. I’ll have the white wine chilled.”

“Thanks, Becca.”

“For what?”

“Being here. Listening to me and not thinking I’m being silly.”

“Why would I think you’re silly? I’ve been in love before and

I know what it can do to you.”

Kate swallowed, glad she had a friend like Becca to turn to. “I’ve never loved anyone before Lance.”

“Not even in high school?”

“I had a crush or two,” Kate admitted.

They’d been friends for what seemed like forever and Becca had always been the sister she’d never had—the one person who accepted her the way she was. At home, her brothers teased her if she did anything girly and her mother was never satisfied with any of the choices that Kate made.

“That was different. And don’t ask me why. I can’t explain it, but Lance Brody has always been different.”

“I know he has. I’ve never heard you talk about one person as much as you do him.”

“Am I annoying?”

Becca laughed, and the familiar sound of it made Kate smile.

“No, you aren’t annoying. Just in love. I’m sorry that he didn’t turn out to be the guy you hoped he would be.”

Kate was, too. “Maybe he is that guy, but just not the one for me.”

“Probably,” Becca said. “When will you be here?”

“In about twenty minutes. I just left work without asking or anything.”

“I think you’re ready for a change,” Becca said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re already acting like a rebel.”

Kate thought about that. “I guess I am. Maybe Lance’s engagement will turn out to be good for me.”

“I bet it will. If not you’ll be stronger for having loved and lost him.”

Kate hung up the phone and continued driving toward Somerset. She didn’t think about Lance or Brody Oil and Gas. She just concentrated on herself and the new woman she was becoming. It was way past time for her to change.

It was hot and smoky at the refinery. The fire burned for almost three hours before the firefighters got it under control. Frank was busy talking to local media and Lance was calling his brother. Mitch was in a meeting and Lance had to leave a voice mail.

“Catch me up on what’s going on,” Lance said to Frank.

“We have four injured.”

“Have you talked to their families?”

“As soon as we identified the men who’d been injured. They’re in the emergency room now. I sent JP down there to talk to the families and make certain that there were no questions as to insurance coverage, et cetera. And I asked him to keep me posted on any pressing health issues,” Frank said.

“Good. Do you think we’re going to have to shut down?”

Frank rubbed the top of his balding head. “I won’t know more until we have a chance to talk to the fire chief.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“Have you stopped the flow of oil into the refinery?”

“First thing we did. We enacted our emergency protocols. And everything went exactly as it should have. I’m going to send you some suggestions for commendation for some of our guys who went beyond the call of duty.”

“I’ll look for that,” Lance said. His cell phone rang and he glanced at it. “It’s Mitch.”

“I’ll go see if I can talk to the fire chief,” Frank said.

“We’ve had a fire at the main refinery,” Lance told Mitch.

“Is everyone okay? How bad is the damage?” Mitch asked.

Lance caught him up. “Do you think this will impact the senator’s plan to allow us more drilling?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it. I’m going to go to his office right now.”

“I’ll get this under control. I’m going to have a press conference later on to let everyone know we’re okay and still in business.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get back with you after I’ve spoken to the senator.”

Lance hung up with his brother and surveyed the mess at the refinery. Employees were clustered to one side, all of them waiting to see what the verdict would be. They were a 67,000-barrel-a-day refinery, and if they had to shut down, all of those people would be without work. And they wouldn’t make their quarterly revenues.

He dialed Kate’s number. She usually served as a hub during

these kinds of emergencies, when he couldn't be in the office.

Her phone went to voice mail and he realized that she was serious about leaving the company. "It's Lance. I need your help. We've had a fire at our main refinery. Call me when you get this message."

The receptionist at the Brody Oil and Gas office wasn't experienced enough to handle all the calls that were coming in. But the secretaries who worked for his duty managers could. Lance usually relied on Kate to take care of liaising with them. Guess it was time to figure out how to work without Kate. He called the finance manager and asked him to send every secretary they had down to help out. He then composed a short memo on his BlackBerry and sent it to the entire company apprising them of the situation and telling them that no one was authorized to speak to the media.

Frank waved Lance over to where he was with the fire chief. "Lance Brody, this is Chief Ingle," Frank said.

"Thanks for getting the fire under control so quickly," Lance said, shaking the fire chief's hand.

"You're welcome. It is our job."

"I know that. But I'm grateful all the same. What are we looking at here?" Lance asked him.

"We thought it was started by an explosion, but we've been talking to the men closest to the location where the fire started and none of them reported hearing one," Chief Ingle said.

"That's odd. How do you think the fire started?" Lance asked.

“I’ve called for our fire-scene investigators to do a thorough examination of the area. But one of my men thought he saw cans of fire accelerant.”

“What kind?”

“We don’t have any details but I wanted you to know what we suspected. I’ve called the arson investigator and he’s sending his team out, as well.”

“Crap. I have to notify our insurance company. They will want to work with your arson team.”

Chief Ingle nodded. “They always do.”

Insurance companies were very well versed in arson investigations—they didn’t mess around with fires. Lance wanted someone who had Brody Oil and Gas’s interests in mind. “Is it okay if I hire my own security team to be part of the investigation?”

“We’d rather not have extra people on the site,” Chief Ingle said.

“Darius won’t get in the way. He’s the best at what he does.”

“Darius who?”

“Darius Franklin. He owns his own security firm.”

“Okay, but only him.”

Lance understood that. The chief didn’t want a bunch of men trampling over the fire scene.

“When can we go back into production?” Lance asked.

“I think we’ll need at least 24 hours before I’d feel comfortable saying you can go back on line. More, if the investigation proves

to be complicated.”

Lance made a note of that. And when the chief moved on, he turned to Frank. “Tell all of our employees to gather in the parking lot in fifteen minutes. Then set up a number so they can call in and get a message about when to report back to work and give them that number.”

“I’m on it,” Frank said, walking away.

Lance dialed his best friend, Darius, and got his voice mail. Being as succinct as possible, he told Darius what had happened, that the fire chief suspected arson, and he asked Darius to come and help with the investigation. Now if he could just get Kate back, he’d have the best team any man could ask for in this situation. He reached for his phone.

Chapter Three

Kate put her phone on silence after the second call from Lance. She was tired of hurting and questioning herself and everything she'd done. She arrived at Sweet Nothings to find that Becca had made her an appointment with her hairstylist.

"I don't know that a haircut is going to change anything," Kate said.

"Don't think of it as just a haircut. You need to change," Becca said. "I've been thinking about this since you called and the only way you are going to be able to make these next few weeks bearable is to make Lance Brody realize what he's missing."

Kate took one look at herself in the mirror behind the counter and shrugged. "Not much."

"Soon, he'll see a whole new woman."

"But I'll still be me," Kate said.

"Of course you will, silly. And Lance already likes you. This will just make him lust after you."

"He's engaged to be married, Becca."

"So what? You're not going to make him do anything. Just tease him a bit and maybe get your heart back."

Kate liked the sound of that. She'd given Lance five years. And wasn't it past time to get over him?

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Good."

Becca gave her directions to the salon. As Kate drove over there, her cell phone rang again. It was Lance. She answered the call as she parked her car. "It's Kate."

"Where have you been?"

"Driving," she said.

"There's been a fire at our main refinery. I need you in the office to be my information hub."

Kate was shocked. Brody Oil and Gas was one of the safest refineries in the business. "Was there an explosion?"

"They aren't sure. I'm done looking over the fire scene at the refinery. When can you get to the office?"

She almost said tonight, but what was the point of that? This was an emergency situation but they didn't really need her. Paula and Joan, two of the other secretaries at Brody Oil and Gas, could handle the phones in this situation.

"Tomorrow morning," she said.

"Kate, I need you."

Her heart almost skipped a beat.

"The company needs you. This is one of those times when we really want to have our best players on the field."

Lance had played football and she had noticed early on that he fell back on sports analogies when he was stressed.

"You've got your best players," she said. "I'm being traded, remember?"

"Damn it. We haven't decided that yet."

"Yes, we have. Or maybe I should say I have. I will call

Paula and make sure she's prepared to collect information and disseminate it. I made a procedure file for this type of emergency after the hurricane last year."

Lance didn't say anything. "I guess that'll have to do. Leave your phone on so I can get in touch with you."

"Why? I'm not—"

"Stop arguing with me, Kate. I don't like it. What's gotten into you?"

She looked at herself in the rearview mirror and realized this was the first time she'd ever said no to Lance. And he didn't like it. Maybe the way to get his attention was actually easier than changing her hair and clothes. She realized that she'd been too accommodating, and that was part of the reason he'd taken her for granted.

"I don't know, Lance. I just decided it was time for a change. Don't make this into anything other than that."

"It feels like..."

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'll be there."

"Good," Lance said.

"I'm sorry about the refinery," she said, feeling bad because of the way he sounded. "Were there injuries?"

"Four men are at the hospital now."

"I'll have Paula send flowers to them and food baskets to their families."

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re welcome.” She felt a little guilty about not going in and taking care of the details herself, but Lance and she both needed to get used to other people working for him because Kate couldn’t continue to be his Girl Friday *and* be in love with him. That was the path to pain and destruction for her. And she was tired of living for the few brief moments when she and Lance were in the office together.

“Goodbye, Lance,” she said, hanging up the phone. She sat in the car for another minute but the heat was getting to her. Or at least that was what she told herself. She didn’t want to think that the idea of being without Lance was causing her to feel light-headed.

Lance spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening at the main refinery. Darius had arrived late and had agreed to stay and work with the fire investigators. Since he wasn’t an arson investigator per se, all Darius could really do was narrow down the list of suspects and conduct investigations into the backgrounds of those who might have had probable cause to start the fire.

Lance left the refinery and drove back toward Houston deciding that he was ready for a new day. This one had been too...crazy, he thought.

When he’d been a boy, he’d longed for a busy day so he wouldn’t have time to go home or to think about the home he had waiting for him. But that was long ago, he thought. Now he

lived alone and liked it that way.

Well, he lived alone for now. Soon he'd be bringing a bride to his mansion in Somerset and he wasn't sure he was ready to try suburban living with a wife yet. But he and Mitch had agreed he was the one who should marry Lexi.

Damn, he thought, rubbing the back of his neck. Tension seemed to take up residence there when things weren't going well.

His cell phone rang and he checked the caller ID before answering it.

"Hello, Mitch."

"Hey, big bro. How are things at the refinery?"

"A mess, but I have Darius working with the fire investigators to try to make sense of it. How's DC?"

Mitch let out a long breath. "It could be worse. I handled most of it with Senator Cavanaugh's office. Let them know the proactive things that Brody Oil and Gas are doing to minimize damage to the community and the environment. I think that helped to soothe his fears over backing expanding oil production."

"Did you tell him that with additional refineries we could rotate operations so the loss of this one for a day wouldn't impact oil prices?" Lance asked.

"Yes, I did. I'm watching the markets as they open in Japan. I think we will see US crude prices jump."

"I know we will. With the economy being what it is, that's the

last thing we need right now.”

“We can’t control the actions of investors,” Mitch said.

“I am stopping by the hospital on my way home. I think it’d be a good idea for you to call the injured workers—I’ll send you a text with their names when I’m done.”

“All right, that sounds good. Lexi and I are going to fly back to Houston together tomorrow.”

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to her. She called me earlier. Will you let her know that until the mess at the refinery settles down, I can’t talk?”

“Sure thing,” Mitch said.

“Did you come up with any ideas for a gift yet?” Lance asked.

“Not yet. I haven’t been thinking about your love life.”

Lance hadn’t been, either. “This is business, Mitch. Remember, you told me that. We need the Cavanaugh connection. Today proves that.”

Mitch didn’t add anything to that. And Lance had to guess that being a brilliant strategist meant his brother wasn’t surprised that his planning had worked to their advantage.

“I forgot to mention that Kate gave her notice today.”

“She did? Why?”

“She thinks this will be a good time for her transition out of her job with us. She’s not being challenged enough or something like that.”

“Maybe it is time she moved on.”

“I’m trying to convince her to stay,” Lance said.

“Why?”

Lance didn't know, but there was no way in hell he'd admit it. “She's part of the Brody Oil and Gas family and we need her.”

“Maybe she wants to be more.”

“Like how?” Lance asked remembering Kate's comment earlier.

“Think about it,” Mitch said. “I've got to run. Don't forget to send me the names of the injured men.”

“I won't. Ally got them interviews on the morning shows for tomorrow. She's going to talk to the families and prep them on what to say.”

“Good. I'll advise the senator of this so maybe he can get a sound bite in, as well.”

“This could have been a lot worse,” Lance said.

“Why wasn't it?” Mitch asked.

“I think because of all the preparedness we worked on after the hurricane last fall. The guys really knew what to do and how to handle things.”

Lance pulled into the hospital parking lot and chatted a few more minutes with his brother before hanging up. He didn't like hospitals. Never had, to be honest. Maybe because he'd visited more than his share of emergency rooms as a child.

His father had always been blunt in the parking lot. Telling him what to say when the doctors asked about how he'd broken his arm or his leg—bicycle accident; how he'd hurt his ribs or broken his fingers—skateboard accident. Never did he tell

anyone the truth. And after a while, Lance realized even he kind of believed his dad's stories.

He rubbed his hand over the scars on the back of his left knuckles. Some days he felt damned old, older than his years. He knew he had to be careful with Lexi. Had to remember to keep the engagement and their eventual marriage manageable.

Lance was always conscious that he'd inherited his father's legendary temper. And as he sat in his truck looking at the modern hospital, he couldn't help but remember the promise he'd made to himself when he was thirteen. The promise that he'd never bring a child of his to the emergency room, because he'd never have children.

He wondered if that was going to be an issue for Lexi Cavanaugh. A part of him hoped it would be so he could end the engagement and get his life back to the way it had been.

Kate was nervous as she got out of her car the next morning. Last night the new clothes she'd purchased with Becca in Houston had seemed fun and daring but this morning when she'd put on the slim-fitting sundress and styled her new hair, she'd felt like an imposter.

It had taken her three tries to get her contacts in but at last she had her look as close as possible to the way the stylist had done it last night.

But she was nervous...and babbling, she thought. She always talked to herself but this morning her internal talk bordered on inane.

It all boiled down to one thing. What if everyone saw her and laughed?

Wasn't that silly? She was a grown woman and shouldn't care what anyone else thought but she was trying a new look—one that she was not certain of, despite Becca's reassurances that she looked *hot*. Kate still felt like fat, frumpy Kate, trying to be someone she wasn't.

She walked into the lobby, and Stan the security guard looked up. "Good morning..."

"Morning, Stan," she said, feeling awkward as the older gentleman just kept staring at her.

"You look nice today, Miss Thornton," Stan said. "Real pretty."

"Thank you, Stan," she said, the warmth of a blush on her cheeks.

She scanned her ID card and went to the executive elevator. While she waited, she stared at her reflection in the polished, mirrored wall that surrounded the elevator bank.

The hardest part about this makeover was that she simply didn't recognize herself.

"Excuse me, miss, but this elevator is for executive personnel only," Lance said, coming up behind her.

She turned around.

"Kate?"

She waited to see if he'd say anything else, but he didn't. That hurt a little bit but it was okay. Last night she'd decided to stop

trying to please Lance, something that she'd done without much thought for a long time.

"I saw the workers on the *Today* show this morning. I thought they sounded good."

"Ally did a good job of prepping them. I'm glad they will all make a full recovery," Lance said.

The elevator car arrived and he waited for her to enter. She felt his eyes on her back as she moved in front of him. Was the skirt too short for the office?

But when she turned and saw him staring at her legs, she realized that the dress was having its desired effect on him. He was finally seeing her as a woman. Kate felt...weird, actually.

Lance's attention was the one thing she'd craved and now she had it. But she wasn't sure what to do with it.

"How was your night?" she asked.

"I spent most of it on the phone...something that would have been easier if my assistant had been here."

She pursed her lips. "Maybe your assistant decided it was time to get herself a life."

"Did you, Kate? Is that what this is all about?"

She shook her head. "I've been ignoring myself for too long. I know my timing stunk last night but I had no idea there would be a fire at the main refinery."

"Who could have known? I don't mind if you take an afternoon off. In fact, if it would convince you to stay then I think we could work out more time off in your schedule," Lance said.

The elevator arrived at their floor and once again he gestured for her to go in front of him. As she walked past him, she heard him inhale sharply.

“Are you wearing perfume?” he asked.

She raised both eyebrows at him. “I am.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. It’s a very nice scent.”

“Thank you,” she said. Her new look seemed to be bothering Lance. Or maybe he just wasn’t himself this morning. “I can handle the office this morning if you want to go back to the refinery.”

“Thanks, Kate, but I think I am needed here. Especially if you are determined to quit.”

She nodded and entered her office. The voice – mail light on her phone was flashing and she imagined she had a lot of messages waiting for her.

Lance closed the door and brushed past her to go into his office, knocking her off balance in the one-inch heels she was wearing. Lance steadied her with a hand on her waist. She turned her head and her hair brushed his shoulder.

Lance smelled good this morning but then she had always liked the scent of his aftershave. He put his other hand on her shoulder and looked down at her.

“I never realized how pretty your brown eyes are,” he said.

She flushed. “I guess you couldn’t really see them behind my glasses.”

“Or maybe I never looked,” Lance said.

"I think that there wasn't anything to look at before," Kate said. Becca had made a good point last night when she'd said that Kate hid behind her clothes and glasses.

"You are always worth a second look, Kate."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't notice before now."

"Why sorry?"

"Because you are so damned pretty."

"It's not me, it's the haircut and makeup," she said, uncomfortable with the compliment. She started pointing out all the things her mom had always told her were wrong with her. "My mouth is too big for my face."

He shook his head, rubbing his thumb over her bottom lip. "Your mouth is perfect for your face. Very lush and tempting..."

"Tempting? It's me, Lance. Kate Thornton. You've never thought I was tempting before."

"I must have been blind, Kate, because you are tempting me now," he said, lowering his mouth to hers. He kissed her.

She rose on her tiptoes and kissed him back. The moment was everything she'd imagined it would be and also completely unexpected. There was no way she could have imagined the way he tasted as his tongue slid over hers. Or the feel of his big hands in her hair. Or the way that one kiss could change her life completely.

Chapter Four

Kate tasted like heaven. She was pure temptation in his arms and he knew he'd never get enough of her. He didn't want to.

He slid his hands down the sides of her body. How had he missed this curvy body and those big, pretty eyes? Glasses and baggy clothes be damned, he'd have to have been blind to not see what a hottie his secretary was.

He turned to lean on the edge of her desk and pulled her more fully against him. Her breasts were full and felt good against his chest. He angled his head for deeper access to her mouth. He wanted more. He couldn't get enough of the taste of her. How had he missed this Kate all these years?

He lifted his head, rubbed his lips over hers and realized her eyes were closed. She looked so innocent in his arms. He remembered that he was a man who'd never learned how to handle the softer things in life. Having a lover was one thing, but this could never go beyond the physical.

As he traced the line of her face with her hair hanging free, he realized how delicate she was. "Should I apologize for that kiss?"

She opened her eyes and looked dazed for a moment but then she recovered. "Do you want to?"

"Not at all. I want to do it again but I don't think the office is the place for it."

"I agree."

His line rang, and Kate smiled at him as she reached over to answer it. "Brody Oil and Gas, Kate speaking."

Her smile faded. "Please hold."

"Who is it?"

"Your fiancée. You probably want to take that in your office."

Lance nodded. He didn't like that Lexi had interrupted his moment with Kate but he couldn't ignore her again.

"We're not done talking," Lance said.

"Of course not. We have the next two weeks to get through," Kate said, pulling out her chair and sitting down.

"When I'm done I want to see you in my office," he said. He wasn't going to pretend there wasn't a fierce attraction between them, but he didn't know how to deal with this new Kate who argued with him and didn't just do everything the way he wanted her to.

"Sure thing. You better go, you don't want to keep your fiancée waiting."

He pivoted on his heel and walked away from her. He went to his desk, sprawling in his leather chair. He reached for the phone and picked up the line where Lexi was holding.

"Hi, there, Lexi."

"Hi, Lance. I know you must be busy this morning but I wanted to thank you for the invitation to come to your Fourth of July party. I wanted to know what you need from me as your hostess."

Lance hadn't thought about Lexi acting as hostess. "My

secretary has taken care of all the details.”

“I’ll give her a call and see if I can help with anything. I think if we are going to make our marriage work, I should be involved with Brody Oil and Gas.”

“Why?” Lance asked.

“Because that’s where you spend all of your time,” she said. “I know what it takes to be a good wife. You need a partner who can understand where you are coming from.”

Lance knew that was the truth. But he didn’t want Lexi here. He realized with a shock that when he thought of a partner—a female partner—at Brody Oil and Gas, he thought of Kate.

Why hadn’t he realized that he wanted her before this? It was too late to change the past but he wanted to make things different between them going forward. But Kate didn’t want any part of the company anymore and he was engaged to Lexi. He needed to sort this mess out. Was he going to try to make the match with Lexi work? And where did that leave Kate?

Mitch and Lance had determined that the connection to Cavanaugh was needed. And Lance had always put Brody Oil and Gas before everything else. He knew exactly what he needed to do, and how he needed to act. This was his chance to prove he wasn’t the bastard his father had been.

He needed to be a better man. A man who wouldn’t kiss Kate unless he could make a commitment to her. A man who would honor his commitment to Lexi. A man who was proud of who he was.

“You don’t need to do anything for the picnic, but we can talk when you get here. Kate—my secretary—has given her two-weeks notice. If you are serious about wanting to be more involved, the picnic would be a great time for you to talk to her about the details of our events.”

“I am serious, Lance. I want to make our marriage work.”

There was a sincerity in Lexi’s words that shamed him. He’d asked her to marry him and it was time to step up and honor that.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lance said.

“I’m looking forward to it. Mitch has raved about the Brody Oil and Gas Fourth of July party.”

“It’s the one time of year when we pull out all the stops for our workers. When we were rebuilding the business we decided that if we were going to be successful, we had to make everyone who worked for us feel like they were a part of the Brody Oil and Gas family.”

“If your success is any indication, I’d say you’ve achieved that.”

But at what cost? Mitch was determined and a workaholic just like Lance was. And this marriage wasn’t real—it was purely business. Lexi was just another step in their plan to be successful. Was that any way to go through life, especially when he had a woman like Kate on his hands? What was he doing?

Kate couldn’t believe she’d lost her head and let Lance kiss her. It was wonderful...incredible, really, but so stupid. She was here to get over him. She was supposed to be using these two

weeks to put him in her past.

She wanted to go out looking her best and she supposed she could count herself successful on that item. Lance hadn't even recognized her.

The sad part about that was she hadn't done anything except wear clothes that fit her. What a difference new clothes made. She would never have believed it. Mainly because her mother had been the one to say clothes made the man, and that woman had been wrong about so many things.

She glanced down at the phone and saw that Lance was still on the line with Lexi Cavanaugh. She knew next to nothing about the woman. But at the end of the day, Kate felt she'd owe Lexi a word of thanks.

If it hadn't been for that woman's engagement to Lance, Kate might have stayed stuck in her frumpy rut until she died an old lady spinster.

A wolf-whistle brought her head up as Marcus Wall walked into the office. He was one of the petroleum geologists who worked for them, one of the men who helped decide where Brody Oil and Gas drilled and he was an expert at picking the right location for their wells. "Dang, Kate, you look good today."

She smiled at him. "Thanks."

"I never noticed how big your eyes were before," he said, coming into her office and leaning on her desk. He must have come into the office at least a hundred times before and he'd never sat close or really even talked to her.

She wanted to be flattered but instead she was uncomfortable. She didn't want a lot of male attention. She had wanted one male's attention, and now that she had it she didn't want to let it go.

That was her problem. Lance had moved forward and she was supposed to be, too, but if her reaction to Marcus's friendly flirting was any indication, her plan was a failure. She only had eyes for Lance.

"Kate?"

"Hmm?"

He shook his head. "Is there a man behind this change?"

"How'd you guess?"

He shrugged. "I know women."

"Do you?"

"Yes, three sisters. I was raised by wolves."

"I don't think women like to be called wolves."

"True enough, but I know that when a girl—I don't mean any offense calling you a girl—gets dolled up like you are, there's a reason for it."

"Maybe I just want a change," she said, surprised that Marcus was actually helping her to understand herself. There was something hollow about the changes she'd made.

When Lance had kissed her and held her in his arms she'd felt like a queen. But now she was back to just feeling like Old Kate, the same way she'd felt for the last few years as Lance treated her like some kind of favored pet.

“Well, this change looks very good on you. Is the big man in?”

Kate glanced down at the phone. Lance was off of his line. And it was probably way past time for Marcus to leave her office. She hoped that she didn’t have guys talking to her all day. “Yes, he is.”

“I’ll announce myself,” Marcus said.

She nodded. Marcus usually did just that. “Thanks, Marcus.”

“For what?”

“For being you,” she said.

“I can be so much more if you let me,” Marcus said.

“For a few weeks, right?” she asked, knowing that Marcus would be the right man for a fling but nothing more. Even if she *was* leaving the company, she didn’t want to have an affair with someone who worked with Lance.

This plan—which had been concocted when she’d had two glasses of wine—now seemed...silly. She needed to just keep doing her job, find a replacement for herself and get out of Brody Oil and Gas before she hurt herself any further.

“Definitely. I’m not a forever kind of man.”

“Marcus, are you here to see me?”

“Sure thing, boss man. I’ve got good news on the new mineral rights we purchased.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Lance said. “Go on in my office. I need a word with Kate.”

Marcus winked at her and then left. Lance reached over and closed the door leading to his office.

“What do you need?” she asked. She was trying to come off cool and sophisticated, but it was really hard when she felt like she was twelve. Why had she given this man so much power over her?

“I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier.”

“I think we already covered that,” Kate said. The last thing she wanted to do was rehash that kiss. For her, it had been incredible and the answer to many long fantasies about this man.

She turned away from him, but he put his hand on her chair and turned her back to face him. “I don’t know why this is happening to us, Kate, but I am not going to be able to ignore it. You are—”

“Don’t say anything else. You have a fiancée and I’m leaving this job.”

“Why are you leaving?”

Kate looked up at him and thought about blasting him with the truth. But somehow she didn’t think he’d react well if she said she was leaving because she loved him and watching him get married would be about the same as ripping her heart out of her body.

“I’m leaving because I can’t work for you anymore.”

That was as close to the truth as she could get. Lucky for her he seemed to accept that answer.

She spent the rest of the day doing her job and realizing that all of the men in the office were starting to notice her as a woman. It should have given her hope that she’d find another man and fall in love, but instead it just made her sad because the one man

she'd changed for still seemed to be oblivious—even after he'd finally kissed her.

The Fourth of July barbecue was held at Lance's home in Somerset. He lived on acreage and had set up the party out near the lake on his property. There was an area for beach volleyball, which Lance had started playing when he was in college. Later on they would play the annual management-versus-workers match.

The caterers had been cooking since before dawn and mouthwatering smells filled the air. There was a deejay playing music under a tent near the caterers and everything had been decorated in red, white and blue.

He spotted Kate first thing as he approached the party area. "Happy Fourth of July."

"You, too. Where do you need me?"

"Well, Mitch is running late, so if you want to work here with me handing out name tags and welcoming everyone, that'd be great."

The first year they'd held the barbecue they'd started the tradition of personally welcoming everyone to the event. He, Mitch and Kate. It had been the first function where they'd really needed her.

"I can't believe this is your last year doing this," he said.

He'd given up on trying to convince her not to quit. She'd made it clear that she wasn't going to change her mind, and given that he was trying to make a go at being a decent fiancé to Lexi, he thought he should probably stop trying to convince the woman

who he was having nightly fantasies about to stay on.

“Me, neither. I’m going to miss it a lot. But you’ll have a new hostess for this next year.”

“Yes, we will. I think Lexi is anxious to talk to you about the planning of this event so she will know what’s involved.”

Kate bit her lower lip but nodded. “I’ll invite her to the postmortem meeting with our party-planning team. It will give her a chance to get know everyone, as well.”

“Thanks. Are you staying in Somerset tonight?”

“I don’t know. My folks went up to Frisco to visit my brother and his family.”

“You don’t see your parents much, do you?”

“We’re not close,” she said. “I mean, they are busy with their lives and I am busy working. But if I needed more time with them, they’d be here.”

Lance had learned from his own parents that the family he could count on was the one he’d made for himself. He counted his brother and Darius as his family, and the other men who were being inducted into the Texas Cattleman’s Club with him.

He’d been in touch with Darius the day before to ask him about the fire, but so far there had been little news of what was going on there.

“Have you heard from Mitch? When I talked to him yesterday he said he might be running late. But we are going to need him for the annual prize announcements.”

“Yes, we will,” Lance said. “Feel up to playing volleyball on

my team this year?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Every year you say you will next year. But this is your last year...”

“What good will come from me playing?” she asked. “I’m not very athletic.”

“It’s all for fun. Come on, Kate.” He wanted to spend as much of the day with her as he could. At least until Lexi got here. He realized he had to force himself to think about Lexi. All he could think about was Kate.

“Okay, I’ll play, but only if Mitch gets here so one of us can man the welcome table.”

“He will be here,” Lance said. “What’s in the goody bag this year?”

“The T-shirt and some other company goodies. We have water guns for the kids.”

“Why just the kids?” Lance asked with a grin.

“Because of last year when you and Mitch didn’t know when to stop.”

“Are you still upset about being caught in the cross fire?”

“Of course not,” she said.

He remembered how Kate had looked with her baggy T-shirt soaking wet and clinging to her breasts. To be fair, that was when he’d noticed that there was more to his secretary than met the eye, but she’d looked so distressed by the entire thing that he’d taken his shirt off and offered it to her. She’d taken it and then

left a few minutes later.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“About the way you looked in that wet T-shirt last year.”

She flushed. “Well, don’t. You’re not supposed to think things like that. Remember, you said you didn’t want any more temptation.”

“I’m thinking that wasn’t my wisest decision, Kate.”

“Why not?”

He glanced around the yard quickly. It was still early so there wasn’t anyone here yet except for the party crew who was setting up. He touched her face and looked down into her big brown eyes.

“I can’t ignore the way you make me feel.”

She bit her lower lip. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t want you?”

She pulled back. “Don’t say things like that. Because I will believe them and do something silly like kiss you. Then you will change your mind and I’ll feel stupid again.”

“Don’t feel stupid,” Lance said. He leaned down and kissed her. He’d been wanting to for the last two days since he’d seen Marcus leaning against her desk and talking to her.

He wanted to make sure she knew that he was the only man she needed to kiss.

Her lips felt so right against his and he realized he’d been more than hungry for her. Lexi or no Lexi, was tired of denying himself Kate.

Chapter Five

Mitch arrived at the picnic looking every inch the successful lobbyist. There was a part of Lance that envied his younger brother. But with Kate at his side and now his younger brother, too, Lance felt pretty good.

“You two seem happy,” Mitch said. “Did Lance finally talk you into staying on as his secretary?”

Kate shook her head, and Lance realized there was still a lot of work for him to do before he had his Katie-girl back for good.

“Let’s go to my office at the house and call Darius,” Lance said.

“Right now?”

“Yes. I haven’t had a chance to check back in with him today and the press is calling, looking for an update.”

“Senator Cavanaugh is waiting for answers, as well. And until he gets them, I’m afraid that no matter what your relationship is with Lexi, he won’t back the bill we need him to,” Mitch said.

Lance was impressed with his younger brother. He looked nothing like their father and yet he had the old man’s drive. And Mitch was savvy when it came to dealing with politicians. Lance himself was only good with gas and oil people.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Mitch asked.

“Just wondering where you get this polish you have.”

Mitch shrugged. “Mom, I guess.”

“Probably. I always forget about her,” Lance said. Alicia Brody had done the best she could. And when she’d walked away from their old man, Lance knew it was because she’d had enough of the roughness of her life. He’d learned a long time ago to just bury his feelings of abandonment.

“You know, I get why she left me behind,” Lance said as they entered his house. “I’m the spitting image of him. But I never understood why she left you.”

Mitch rubbed the back of his neck as he headed for the bar in the living room. “I think she didn’t want either of us to be alone. I’ve always imagined she knew that if I didn’t stay she’d lose you, too.”

Lance didn’t like the sound of that. He’d always thought of himself as the protector, the one who’d kept Mitch safe. “Really?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I’m not a woman and to be fair, I don’t understand them,” Mitch said.

Lance laughed. His own situation with women was beyond complicated at the moment. Getting engaged hadn’t made his life any easier like he’d imagined it would. Although he’d resolved to be the man Lexi deserved, he just couldn’t keep his lips off Kate.

“Speaking of women, I got Lexi a necklace. Do you think she’s the type of woman who’d enjoy receiving it in public?” Lance asked.

Mitch poured two fingers of whiskey into a highball glass and downed it in one swallow. “No.”

"I wasn't sure. I guess I'll give it to her when she shows up at the house later. I'm glad she's coming today."

"Her dad asked her to. I believe he wants to know what we are like beyond the glitter of DC."

"Cavanaugh knows what we are like. Texans, like him. And he shouldn't forget that."

Mitch poured some whiskey for Lance and held the glass out to him.

"To Texas boys."

Lance clinked his glass against his brother's and downed his whiskey in a quick swallow. He liked the burn as it went down.

The band started playing out back. "Let's get this business with Darius wrapped up so we can enjoy the party."

"Good idea."

Lance led the way down the hall to his den. It was decorated in dark hues of brown and leather. He'd picked out the furniture for this room himself instead of leaving it to the interior designer. He'd known exactly how he wanted the room to look.

There was a Remington black and white photograph on the wall, and a portrait painting of Mitch and him that had been done when their first well came in. In the background was Old Tilly, as they liked to call her.

"Remember that day?" Mitch asked.

"Hell, yes. I think about it often. It was when I knew you and I were going to make it."

"I always knew we would," Mitch said. "Neither of us knows

how to quit.”

“True that.” Lance dialed the speakerphone and Darius answered on the second ring.

“Darius here.”

“It’s Lance and Mitch,”

“Happy Fourth. I suppose you are calling about your arson investigation,” Darius said.

Lance liked that Darius was straight to the point. He was one of Lance’s best friends and the kind of guy that Lance knew he could count on.

“We are.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much news. They are still saying arson and they found the source that started the fire but now they have to eliminate several possibilities as accelerants. Once they find the one used at your blaze, they will start investigating where the accelerant was sold.”

“How long do you think that will take?” Lance asked.

“Who knows? But I’m in touch with them every day and you can take my word that they are working hard on your case.”

Darius gave them a few more details and he and Lance made plans for drinks later in the week before hanging up.

“Are you going to be in town next week?”

“If I get Senator Cavanaugh back on our side. If not, I think I should stay in DC. This is a critical time in our dealings with him.”

Lance nodded. “Thank you for doing this.”

“It’s my company, too, and I want it to succeed as badly as you do,” Mitch said.

Lance believed that. When the old man had died, they’d both taken a vow to put the company first and make it the best damned oil and gas company in the world.

They’d had some ups and downs with hurricanes and workers’ strikes, but together he and Mitch had conquered everything that came their way. This arson issue was just a complication—nothing the two of them couldn’t handle.

Kate tried not to think too much about the kiss that Lance had given her at the sign-in table. She just kept her sunglasses on and her head down as she stood in the sand, playing—of all things—beach volleyball.

Lance was serving and he was very good at it. But then he was good at everything he did. And he was built for sports. Though most of the men who worked for Brody Oil and Gas were in shape, no one looked better to her than Lance Brody. She remembered last year when he’d taken his shirt off to give it to her.

He was built like an Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter and from what she had heard of his past, he’d grown up hard with a father who liked to fight.

“Kate!”

She turned around to face the net just as the ball came toward her. She lifted her hands not to hit the ball but to protect her head. She really hated playing these kind of games.

The ball bounced off her, heading toward the ground, when Marcus dove to the sand to hit it up. Joan took the ball and spiked it over the net.

Kate was shaken by her near miss and decided it was time for her to stop playing. "I'm going to sit out."

No one objected and she felt good about that. She sat on the sidelines where she watched the rest of the game and she talked to some of the families of workers who'd been with Brody Oil and Gas since Mitch and Lance had taken over after their father's death.

A lot of people commented on her new look, telling her how nice it was. She thanked them. She was starting to get used to how she looked and no longer saw a stranger in the mirror.

She grabbed a bottle of water as the game ended with Lance's team victorious. She handed the water to him and he hugged her close. "We won."

"As usual," she said, with a smile. This was one thing she'd really miss about Lance. When they were at his house, she never felt like his secretary.

"Winning is what I do best," Lance said.

"Very true," she said, thinking that was probably one of the things that drew her to him. He just had a positive attitude and kept on going until he achieved what he set out for.

"Walk with me up toward the house."

"Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you. Do you have all the fireworks

set up for us?”

“Yes. Exactly as they were last year. I have the music cued and the deejay is ready to announce everything for you.”

Everyone wanted to talk to Lance and though he had asked her to stay with him, she soon found herself drifting to the outside of his circle. It was then that she spotted Mitch at the welcome table with Lexi Cavanaugh.

The woman was beautiful and sophisticated and everything that Kate wasn't. She'd be the perfect match for Lance—being a senator's daughter, she knew how to socialize and work in the community. Brody Oil and Gas was always looking for ways to give back to the communities where their refineries were. And Lexi would be a conduit to that.

“Join me for a beer?”

Kate glanced over at Marcus. He had two Bud Lights and held one of them out to her. She smiled and took it. “Thanks for saving me from that ball earlier.”

“No problem. You definitely looked like you were out of your league.”

She shrugged. “I figured I should play at least one time before leaving.”

“So the rumors are true,” Marcus said. He tipped his bottle back and took a long swallow of his beer.

He was an attractive man, she realized. He was tall, at least six foot five, and had a neatly trimmed red beard. His hair was longish on the top but cut neat in the back.

“Yes, they are true,” she said, sipping her beer.

“I think it’s safe to say we are all going to miss you,” Marcus said.

“I doubt it. There will be someone else in Lance’s office keeping you guys all organized.”

“But that person won’t be you,” Marcus said.

“I’d take that to heart but you didn’t even notice me until I had my makeover,” she said, looking at him closely. As attractive as Marcus might be, he didn’t hold a candle to Lance.

“True enough. But that doesn’t mean I’m not telling the truth now.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Marcus said.

“Why was I invisible before?” she asked. “It was more than clothes and glasses, right?”

Marcus took another swallow of his beer. “It was more than that. I think it was your attitude. You weren’t invisible exactly, I’d say you were more of the girl next door, you know? Just a comfortable woman who we didn’t see as a sexual being.”

“But now you do?”

“Yes, now I do. I can’t speak for anyone else.”

Kate nodded looked away

“I’m not the man you wanted to notice you, right?”

She shook her head. “You’re a good-looking guy but not the one for me.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Well, there is justice

in the universe. I can't tell you how many times I've used almost that exact line."

That made Kate laugh. She gave Marcus a quick kiss on the cheek before turning to walk away. And she stepped right into Lance who had been standing behind her.

Lance took Kate's arm and led her away from Marcus. He'd never felt so enraged before. He wanted to be the man who made her laugh and smile—not Marcus.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked.

"I...no, I'm not okay. I don't like you flirting with Marcus."

"Why do you care who I flirt with?" Kate said, a flash of anger in her eyes.

Because she was his. But he knew that wasn't true, couldn't be true because he'd given another woman his ring.

A woman that he was quickly realizing he could never marry. Lexi was not what he needed in a woman. She didn't arouse his passion. But passion could lead to jealousy and Lance couldn't afford to be out of control, to be like his father. Maybe that was the right answer, then. Maybe Kate would be better off with a guy like Marcus, and he should marry someone who didn't get him all riled.

"Damn. I know I don't have any right to say something like that, but I want you, Kate. And I think you feel the same," he said.

She flushed but didn't try to pull away. "I do. I think you should know I've been attracted to you for the longest time."

“Good.”

“Good?” she asked. “That makes you sound very arrogant.”

“Yes, it is good,” Lance said. He’d had a lot of time to think about Kate over the last two days. “Because anything this strong that is one-sided would be wrong.”

“I guess I can see your point.”

“I’m glad,” he said. He leaned down and kissed her. “Come up to the house with me while I shower and change.”

“Into the shower with you?” she asked.

He raised both eyebrows at her. “Would you be interested in that?”

She blushed and gave him a very shy smile. “Maybe.”

He was leading her by the hand toward the house when he saw paramedics running across the lawn. He dropped Kate’s hand and they both turned toward the food tent.

“I have to see who that is,” he said.

“I know.”

He was very aware of Kate moving behind him and he knew that she was concerned about the emergency, the same as he was.

Lexi was sitting on a bench between two paramedics. Her face was flushed.

“What happened?”

“Heat exhaustion as near as we can tell,” the paramedic said.

“Are you okay?” Lance asked Lexi.

She nodded, seeming embarrassed by the entire thing. “I should have had more water.”

“It’s okay. Does she need to go to the emergency room?” Lance asked.

“No. She’d be fine sitting in a cool room and just letting her body recuperate from the sun exposure.”

“Let’s get you up to the house,” Lance said.

Kate hovered nearby. The look on her face told Lance that it was past time to end things with Lexi. But not now. Not like this.

He helped Lexi to her feet. She leaned on him and he looked over her head at Kate who shook her head and walked away.

He had no choice but to let her leave and he didn’t like that at all. But right now his hands were tied. He couldn’t go after Kate until he took care of Lexi.

He got Lexi settled on the couch in the living room.

“Thank you, Lance.”

“For what?” he asked. He hardly knew Lexi. She was a stunningly beautiful woman but other than a couple of dinners, he hadn’t really even talked to her.

“For taking care of me just now. I’m sorry if that was embarrassing.”

Lance shrugged. “It was nothing. I’m going to go change. Will you be okay?”

She nodded.

“I have a butler of sorts around here—Paul. He’s not much company but I will ask him to check in on you.”

She shook her head. “Please don’t. I’ll just sit here in the quiet.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Lance left her and walked up the stairs to his own suite. He called Mitch on his way because he hadn't been able to find his brother in the crowded yard.

“Brody here.”

“It's Lance. Can you come up to the house? Lexi had a problem with heat exhaustion. I need a shower but I don't want to leave her alone for too long.”

“Is she okay?” Mitch asked.

“Pale and weak but otherwise okay,” Lance said.

“Does she need to see a doctor?”

“No. The paramedics checked her out. Where were you?”

Mitch didn't answer. “I'm on my way to the house.”

“Good. I'm upstairs. She didn't seem to want company but I don't like leaving her alone when she's not at her best.”

“I agree. I'll take care of it.”

Lance hung up and quickly showered and changed. He thought about the two women that were a part of his life right now. It didn't matter that Lexi wasn't the woman he wanted, he still owed her respect—and the truth.

He realized this mess was of his own making. He finished getting dressed and headed downstairs, determined to talk to Lexi. He couldn't marry her—not while he felt what he did for Kate.

Kate was the woman he couldn't live without. He knew

without a doubt that Kate was the one woman that he wanted. He couldn't get her out of his system.

He hurried downstairs, anxious to talk to his brother and fiancée. He had a text message from Mitch saying that he was going to take Lexi to the hotel.

Having made up his mind about Lexi and Kate, Lance felt much better. He liked the changes in his plain-Jane secretary and today he'd realized that he wasn't going to let her slip away from him—no matter what.

Chapter Six

Lexi Cavanaugh was a stunningly gorgeous woman by anyone's standards. The fact that she was his fiancée should have made him feel lucky. But she was essentially a stranger and he felt awkward around her. Not at all like he felt with Kate.

Kate. He'd already decided to end things with Lexi. But he had to be careful. He needed Lexi and her connections but he couldn't just break things off with her.

Lance came back down the stairs to the sound of raised voices. "Everything okay?"

Mitch and Lexi were standing across the room from each other. Lexi's fists were clenched at her sides and a sheen of tears glittered in her eyes.

"Lexi, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Mitch?"

"We were discussing an event we attended in D.C.," Mitch said.

Lance nodded. "I'm glad to see you feeling better, Lexi. I wanted to take a moment to welcome you to the family. You already know Mitch and I think you will see that we are a close group despite there being only two of us."

"I have noticed that your brother will do anything for you," Lexi said.

Mitch gave her a tense look.

“And I for him.”

Lance walked across the room to the foyer where he'd left the neatly wrapped gift box. It bore the emblem of his favorite jeweler and a discreet white bow. He carried it back over and smiled at Lexi.

She didn't seem to be paying any attention to him. “Do you need to sit down?”

“No. I need to go home,” she said.

“Then I will take you,” Lance said.

She shook her head and noticed the box in his hands. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” he said, handing it to her.

She took it. He noticed that her nails were long and manicured. And for the first time he tried to imagine what it would be like to take Lexi to his bed. He couldn't. The only woman he pictured there was Kate.

Kate's long brown hair on his pillow. Kate's pretty brown eyes staring up at him...Kate was the woman he wanted.

Lexi sat down and opened the gift box carefully. Lance stood across the room with the first niggling of doubt since he'd asked her to marry him. Had he made a colossal mistake?

She held the box in her hands, not opening it. “Why did you get me a gift?”

“To thank you for agreeing to be my wife.”

She put her head down and opened the box. He heard her

breath catch and took that as a good sign.

He glanced over at his brother and Mitch stared at Lexi...the way Lance realized he stared at Kate sometimes. Damn, was his brother into Lexi?

“Will you help me put it on?” Lexi asked.

Lance started toward her and saw Mitch do the same.

His brother shrugged. “I’m just used to filling in for you.”

“Thank you for that, Mitch. Without your help, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Lexi stood up and lifted her hair. Lance fastened the diamond necklace around her neck.

“Yes, thanks, Mitch, for filling in for your brother so well,” Lexi said.

“It was no big deal. I’m used to dealing with problematic heiresses.”

“Are you?” Lexi asked.

“Indeed. Our mother was one.”

“She sure was. But Lexi isn’t anything like Mom,” Lance said, not sure what was going on between his brother and Lexi.

“No, she’s not,” Mitch said. Mitch’s cell phone rang and he excused himself to take the call.

Lance found himself alone with his fiancée for the first time since she’d agreed to marry him. And he needed to know if there was any chance this relationship was going to work between them. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her in his arms.

She looked up at him. Her eyes wide but not with passion, more with...he couldn't identify the emotion.

He brushed a kiss against her lips and found that her mouth was dry and the kiss was rather blah.

Lance worried that he'd be trapped in a passionless marriage. It was clear that Lexi wasn't attracted to him and he knew he wasn't to her.

"Thank you for the gift. It's very pretty."

"You're welcome," he said.

A horn honked outside and Lexi glanced at her watch. "That should be my cab."

"I would've taken you," Lance said.

"I didn't want to be a bother. Thank you for inviting me to the party today. I really enjoyed the chance to see what kind of a company Brody Oil & Gas is."

"You're welcome. Kate said she was going to invite you to attend a meeting with the party-planning staff."

"Sounds great. I'll look forward to her call," Lexi said as she left the house and walked to her cab. She kept talking brightly the entire time and Lance held the door for her as she got into the cab.

She smiled up at him as she said goodbye and he closed the door, standing there watching her be driven away.

He rubbed the back of his neck, having a bad feeling that his marriage to Lexi was going to be a mistake. And he prided himself on not making any mistakes. He wondered if he should

have ended things with her today, but he couldn't have. There was something vulnerable about Lexi. He needed to talk to Mitch about his feelings for her, as well.

There was more between the two of them than he could guess at. But that was a worry for another day. Right now he had a party to host and several staff members to take care of and that was exactly what he was going to do.

After he found Kate.

He needed to talk to her and see her. She had always been his touchstone at Brody Oil & Gas and he realized he needed her by his side now.

Kate was glad when the sun set. Soon it would be time for the Fourth of July fireworks to go off. They had always been her favourite. She'd spent most of the afternoon and evening trying to avoid Lance.

She felt...well, stupid. She was supposed to be getting over him, not falling deeper in love with him each day.

It was silly, really, but seeing the way he'd reacted to Lexi's being sick had affected her. For all his rough ways, she knew that Lance was the kind of guy who'd stand by his friends, no matter what.

And there had been a part of her that had realized that he treated Lexi like a friend and nothing more. Much the same way he'd been treating her for all these years until she'd quit.

What Kate needed was another job in another town, but she really couldn't imagine living anywhere other than south Texas.

Unlike some of her friends from high school, she'd never wanted to live anywhere except here.

She liked the warmth and humidity that came with Houston. She liked the cosmopolitan city aspects of the area and the wide-open spaces that were only a few hours' drive away.

A few kids were running around with sparklers and Kate felt a lump at the back of her throat as she thought about the families.

She'd always wanted one of her own but it had never really seemed like she'd have one and now...well, now she seemed no closer to having kids and a husband than she'd been for a while.

"Hey, girl!" Becca called.

"Becca! I'm so glad you could swing by here. Thanks for coming." Kate gave her friend a hug and they walked up the tiki-light path toward the viewing area for the fireworks.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Sorry it took so long to get here."

"Not a problem," Kate said. "I think Lance is going to the Texas Cattleman's Club later for an after-party and I just wanted..."

"A friend," Becca said. "I get it. So how was everything today?"

"Well, good, I think. I kissed Lance and it was..."

"What?"

"Everything I imagined it would be. But then Lexi had heat exhaustion and he had to go to her."

Becca slipped her arm through Kate's. "Was she okay?"

“Yes. But it made me realize I don’t want to have an affair with Lance. I want to be able to have a relationship with him where we can be seen as a couple. Not one where I have to hide.”

“Good for you. Being a mistress isn’t something that would suit you,” Becca said.

“Would it suit you?”

“Hell, no.”

Both women laughed.

“Is there any other man you are interested in?” Becca asked.

“Not really. I think that Marcus likes me.”

Becca laughed again, and Kate relaxed for the first time all day, feeling safe in the presence of her friend. Becca was the one person who she knew loved her no matter what. She didn’t care if Kate was fat or wore ugly clothes—Becca liked her anyway.

“That’s not surprising, you’re a very attractive woman.”

“Yeah, right. You’re my friend, you have to say that,” Kate said. “One thing that was shocking was Lance. He didn’t like me flirting with Marcus.”

“Too bad,” Becca said. “Lance Brody had his chance with you and he let it slip by.”

“Maybe I regret that, Becca.”

“Good,” Becca said. “It’s about time you realized that, Lance.”

Kate flushed with embarrassment as Lance stepped up behind them.

“Yes, it is,” Lance said.

Lance joined the women and they went to the main BBQ area.

They chatted while the band played, and Becca got up to dance. Kate glanced at Lance. She felt like she wanted to dance, too, but knew they couldn't—not while he was engaged to Lexi.

"I have something I want to show you," Lance said, and led her away from the crowd.

"The perfect spot to watch the fireworks."

"Where would that be?"

"In my arms."

She stopped. "Don't say anything you don't mean, Lance."

"I'm not."

"What about Lexi? How is she, by the way?" Kate asked. What she'd seen of the Senator's daughter had been brief, but she bore the woman no ill will.

"Fine. She went back to her hotel to get some rest."

"That's good," Kate said. "I can't do this—have an affair with a man who belongs to another woman."

Lance cupped her face in his hands. "Today cemented for me the fact that I need you, Kate. I'm sorry I didn't wake up earlier to the fact that you are an incredible woman."

Kate steeled her heart against just believing his words. "What changed your mind?"

"Seeing your hot body," he said.

"That's not flattering," she said.

"Yes, it is. And it's the truth. I'm not going to lie to you and try to make you believe that I had some kind of emotional realization when you said you were going to quit. It was really when I got a

look at you...I realized that you had everything I wanted.”

“Lance—”

“What? Would you prefer I made up lies and told you stories? You know I’m not that kind of guy. I’m also not the kind of man who lets something he wants slip through his fingers. And I want you, Kate.”

His raw language got to her as little else could. She’d long wanted Lance and hearing him tell her that he felt the same...it was a powerful aphrodisiac.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. There was a lot of passion in his kiss and she stopped trying to think this through, stopped trying to make her attraction to Lance go away. The thought that maybe this was the only way to free herself entered her mind.

But she knew she was only placating herself. She wanted Lance Brody and now that he had his arms around her, she wasn’t going to walk away. Not until she had the chance to experience what it was really like to be his woman.

That was the one thing she’d wanted since her very first day at Brody Oil and Gas. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and went up on tiptoe to bring her body more fully into contact with his.

He slid his tongue over hers and she tangled her fingers in the silky hair at the back of his neck. As she ran her fingers through it, she felt everything inside of her clench.

She was in Lance’s arms!

Lance had no real plan of seduction. He just wanted to kiss Kate because it seemed a sacrilege not to. This was the Fourth of July and he was a red-blooded male, a Texan who'd learned the hard way that you had to fight for what you wanted.

And he wanted Kate Thornton. He lifted her into his arms and stepped off the lighted path. He walked up to his house with patriotic music blaring in the background and fireworks going off all around them.

Kate rested her head on his shoulder and held on to him with a strong grip. He knew that the attraction between them was mutual but until this moment hadn't realized just how much that would mean to him.

He just wanted to know what she'd be like in his bed. To know if the woman he couldn't live without in his work life would also be as important to his personal life. His gut said yes.

"You look fierce," she said.

"Do I?"

She nodded. "Are you sure about this?"

"Hell yes," he said, reaching down to open the door to the living room. He walked up the stairs to his bedroom without pausing to turn on a light.

"I'm not," she said.

The shyness in her voice stopped him. He couldn't force himself on her. He never wanted passion between them to be all about him. He knew Kate well enough, had observed the changes in her and knew she had doubts about herself.

And he wanted to show her that he loved her as she was... well, loved her body, he corrected.

"I'm not rushing you, Kate," Lance said. He set her on her feet and led her out onto his private balcony, gesturing to one of the lounge chairs that faced the east and the fireworks.

"How about a red-hot and boom?"

She shook her head. "I had one last year and think I still might be a little drunk from it."

He laughed. It was then that he realized he was nervous. He knew his way around an oil field and a boardroom but a woman—one who mattered to him—that was an entirely different subject. And Kate had somehow become this woman who mattered to him.

"Champagne?" he asked.

"I'm good," she said.

"Still nervous?"

"A little. You know, I've been wanting to be here with you... like this...for longer than I can remember," she said.

"Is it what you imagined?"

She shook her head, those long silky curls of hers brushing against her collar.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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