

Her Secret Millionaire

by Cat Schield

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CHAPTER ONE

The scent of hay, horses and hot-blooded male filled the sparsely furnished studio apartment above the barn. Jaime dug her toes into rough wood planks as Cody came up behind her. "I really can't stay."

His fingers grazed her shoulder as he slipped her hair aside and nuzzled the sensitive skin below her ear. He dislodged her bra strap with an expert flick of one finger and fanned his hand over her stomach. Gentle pressure coaxed her backward until her shoulders met his bare chest. Her hormones buzzed at the contact.

"Baby, it's just a party."

"But I've promised I'll be there."

At the rate things were going, it wouldn't require a whole lot to convince her to skip the event. Already her muscles were yielding to the notion of spending the evening wrapped in Cody's arms.

"You'll be bored to tears."

He had that right.

A long gown of olive silk hung from the closet door. The last thing she wanted to do was zip herself into the designer original her mother had found on her last trip to New York City.

"This afternoon was great," she murmured.

A low hum vibrated against her neck, almost a purr. "And the evening will be even better."

"I can't imagine how."

Her fingers skimmed along steely forearms and tugged at the hands gliding over her torso. The wispy caresses tantalized and teased, increasing her body's sensual thrumming. The man sure knew how to wreak havoc on her willpower. The longer she let this go on, the less likely she was going to leave.

"Give me a chance and I'll show you."

Desire simmered beneath her skin. Cody's words stoked it into a rapid boil.

"What if I come back later?"

"I need you now."

His urgent tone thrilled her. Knowing she disturbed him was the biggest turn on. It gave her a sense of power lacking in her personal life. Cody made her feel beautiful and adored. Heady stuff for a girl who'd barely known her father, been ignored by her stepfather, and bullied by her mother.

"What are you doing to me?" she mused out loud.

"Let's get you out of these," he suggested, tracing the edge of her panties. "And see if we can figure it out."

"The party..."

"No one will notice you're not there."

"My mother will. She's already complaining that I've missed two family dinners and skipped our bi-weekly lunch." But even as she spoke, Jaime's determination wavered. From the

instant she'd locked eyes with the tall cowboy in the bar two weeks ago, she'd been hot, wet, and ready for anything he wanted to do with her. "I can't not show up tonight, too."

"She'll get over it."

"My cousin won't. It's her engagement party." Although with three hundred guests invited, it was hard to imagine Gwen would have time for more than a wave across the room.

"You're so beautiful she'll be happy not to have the competition."

Usually she wouldn't believe a compliment like that, but she'd come to trust Cody and knew if he didn't mean it, he wouldn't say it.

He cupped her breasts, his caresses reverent and arousing. Even with the barrier of her bra between his warm hands and her hot skin, sensation rocked her, agitating her judgment.

"Everyone will wonder why I didn't show."

"You'll have a great story to tell."

She reached up and back and dragged her fingers through his thick wavy hair, letting him play her body with the finesse of a virtuoso. "This isn't the sort of thing I talk about."

"I thought women loved to share the details." He sucked on her earlobe, his breath hot and unsteady.

"I'd rather not share you."

"Honey, I'm all yours." He said it like he meant it. Like he wasn't leaving for God knew where in three days. Like this two weeks meant something more to him than great sex.

She turned in his arms and nudged him backward toward the bed. "Well if that's the case, maybe just a couple minutes more."

CHAPTER TWO

Cody lay with his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. He couldn't move. Didn't want to move. Jaime was amazing. The sex more intense than anything he'd ever experienced. Who would have guessed an erotic fantasy lurked beneath her shy awkwardness.

She'd about blown his head off the first time they'd kissed. He'd been ready to take things slow, seduce her inch by inch. Instead, she'd dumped him onto that couch in her office and ripped open his shirt. While buttons pinged off walls and furniture, she'd locked her lips on his and made him see stars.

His cell phone buzzed on the nightstand. Grinning, he hit the go button. "What's the matter, baby, miss me already?"

A long pause followed his question.

"As much I love you, man. You're not my type." The voice on the phone belonged to his best friend from college, Nathan Case.

Cody sat up. "Sorry Nathan, I forgot I gave you this number."

Nathan chuckled. "I take it things are going well with your horse lady."

"You could say that."

Two weeks ago, he'd been returning from a long weekend at his uncle's ranch where he'd hoped some hard manual labor would help him clear his head. Too restless to head straight home, he'd stopped off for a drink. He was kicking back his first beer when he'd overheard Jaime tell her friend how she was sick of all the rich, entitled jerks her mother had been throwing at her lately.

If she was going to date anyone it was going to be a normal guy. Someone who didn't drive a fancy car and dress in thousand dollar suits. Someone who worked with his hands. Not in an office. In short, not him.

Cody hadn't believed her.

In his experience women would choose wealth over poverty every time. To prove his theory, he'd pulled out his thick Texas drawl and introduced himself as an injured bull-rider from the rodeo circuit, without funds or steady employment.

Within fifteen minutes, his hard luck story had transformed the cautious curiosity in her green eyes into sympathy. An hour later and she'd offered him a job helping out around the facility where she trained horses and a place to stay for a couple weeks while he healed. Common sense warned him to refuse, but her enthusiasm for her job captivated him and the way her cheeks turned rosy when he touched her arm or tapped her bare knee enticed him to sample the chemistry between them.

"When are you going to stop pretending you're a busted up rodeo hack and admit you're the son of an oil tycoon?"

"That's not in the cards."

He rolled off the bed and approached the only other piece of furniture in the room: a chest of drawers that held two pair of jeans, half a dozen shirts and assorted socks and

underwear. His walk-in closet at home was bigger than the room he was standing in and filled with expensive clothes. Funny how he hadn't missed any of it.

"Seems like your two weeks was up a couple days ago."

"I decided to stick around a little longer." The attraction between him and Jaime was burning hotter, not burning out, and he was having one hell of a time saying adios. "Once the new barn manager starts, she won't need me anymore."

"How'd your dad take the news that you're extending your vacation?"

"About the way you'd expect." Silas Montgomery, CEO of Montgomery Oil, was a workaholic. It's what made him one of the most successful businessmen Cody knew. Unfortunately, he expected the same dedication from his sons. "I'll be back in the office by the middle of next week."

"What about your equestrian?"

"She knew from the start that I wasn't going to stick around."

Cody fingered the striped blue blouse Jaime had left behind tonight and remembered how much fun he'd had taking it off her one button at a time while anticipation turned her eyes to all pupil and flushed her pale cheeks bright pink. Lifting the shirt to his nose, he inhaled her unique perfume. Plain soap and unscented body lotion. Nothing fancy about Jaime. Simple, basic, charming. Being around her grounded him. Compelled him to slow down and appreciate the details instead of scanning the big picture.

"She thinks I'm heading back on the rodeo circuit," Cody continued. "And when I go she'll be none the wiser."

"I don't get it," Nathan began, his tone doubtful. "You're a pretty straight-forward guy. Why this elaborate ruse for a couple weeks with a girl you're not planning ever to see again?"

It had started out simple enough. The horse training facility where she worked was short staffed, and she was struggling to keep it running smoothly. He had some vacation time coming. It was supposed to have been an easy in, easy out. Take a break from working eighty hours a week. Tumble Jaime into bed. Help her out around the barn. And then return to his regular life.

"Because it had no place to go," Cody explained. He wasn't a long-term guy. Right from the start, he'd made that clear. "She wasn't kidding about wanting nothing to do with any wealthy executive types. And her mother is relentless about setting her up with exactly that." Cody shook his head. "The real me is the antithesis of what she's looking for."

A point that bugged him more and more the longer he stuck around. Many times he'd been on the verge of telling her the truth. But he liked the way her eyes took on a special glow whenever her gaze rested on him. As if he was her hero.

"Right," Nathan said. "Most girls prefer a drifter with no money to a guy with an MBA who's worth millions."

"That's what I thought too, but this girl is different."

"No girl is different. When it comes right down to it, they might say they're looking for a soul mate, but they'll choose a guy with cash in the bank every time."

"You're such a cynic," Cody said, conveniently ignoring the fact that up until two weeks ago, he'd shared Nathan's attitude towards women and love.

However, since meeting Jaime, he'd begun to question his way of thinking. She spent her money on what she needed to get by. The rest she tucked away, saving toward the day when she had enough capital to open her own training facility.

For a man who was accustomed to seeing dollar signs in the eyes of the women he dated, he found Jaime both refreshing and disconcerting. But was she really what she seemed?

“Maybe,” Nathan retorted. “But I’m a happy cynic with a dozen women on speed dial.”
Cody had little he could say to that. “Is there a reason besides criticizing my love life that you called?”

“I want to introduce you to a couple investors I’m trying to lock up for this venture capital deal I’m doing. The Montgomery name opens doors in these parts.”

“I’m not in the mood.” There was only one place he wanted to be tonight and that was in this bed, awaiting Jaime’s return.

“Come on. It’s just a drink. I could really use your help.”

Cody sighed as he scooped up his jeans. “I’ll give you one hour.”

CHAPTER THREE

The crowded, noisy ballroom battered Jaime's senses. The ten-piece band was too loud. The laughter too shrill. Expensive gowns passed before her, a dizzying kaleidoscope of color and pattern. A hundred different perfumes clashed and Jaime's nose twitched in discomfort.

She'd given up a night with Cody for this?

Seated at the back of the room with her back against the wall, Jaime rubbed her thighs together as delicious heat shot straight to her core. She sipped a glass of champagne, hoping the chilly liquid would help her cool off, but the alcohol only fired her imagination and stimulated a dozen wild impulses.

The confidence to let go and celebrate every second with Cody liberated her like nothing she'd experienced before. What had gotten into her? Lust? Love? Insanity?

Whatever it was, she had it bad.

She glanced around the room and wondered if anyone would notice if she disappeared. Beneath her floor length dress, she was as bare as the day she was born. Cody had stolen her underwear while she was in the shower, saying he wanted her to feel the sensual caress of silk against her bare skin and think about him all night.

As if she would think of anything else.

"Jaime!" Her mother advanced past tables covered in white linen and fine china. "Where have you been? You said you'd be here an hour ago."

Elizabeth wore a hot pink dress designed to suit a woman ten years younger, but thanks to her incredible figure and a fortune in plastic surgery, she managed to pull it off with great style.

"I was delayed getting away from the barn tonight."

A smile blossomed as she pictured what had delayed her. Yep, she had it bad.

Lust.

Love.

A little or a lot of both.

Jaime shook her head. She wasn't in love with a guy she'd only met two weeks ago. No one fell that fast. It was lust. Had to be. And after he was gone, it would fade. Eventually. Hopefully sooner than later. Otherwise, she would go crazy thinking about all the women who would be throwing themselves at him the way she had.

"Well, at least you're wearing the dress I bought you." Elizabeth assessed Jaime's appearance and gave a tight nod of satisfaction. "Let's go."

"Go where?"

Elizabeth's impatient inhale caused her enhanced C-cups to push the V of her neckline even wider. Prodded by envy, Jaime resisted the urge to cross her arms over her own unimpressive chest. While Cody was wildly appreciative of every aspect of her body, Jaime couldn't help but wonder if a little surgical enhancement would keep him around longer.

Her heart twisted in distress. No. Jaime shook off the pain. She had to stop thinking like that. She'd known from the start he wasn't hers to keep. He'd already stayed past the two weeks he'd planned. She'd celebrate every minute with him that remained and then set him free.

"Weren't you listening? I found someone for you." Her mother's eyes had a feverish glow that made Jaime wish she'd let Cody talk her out of coming. "He has way more money than your cousin's fiancé and better connections."

Jaime was sick of being pawn in the Burnett sisters' rivalry. "I'm not interested."

Daughters of a Cleveland, Ohio beauty salon owner and an accountant, Elizabeth and Emmaline Burnett decided if they were going to marry, they were going to marry extremely well. And shortly after college, they headed for Dallas, Texas and did exactly that.

The fact that her sister had married better drove Elizabeth to improve on her social standing by pushing her daughter at rich, eligible men in the hopes that Jaime would marry one of them.

Too bad her mother was blind to Jaime's shortcomings. She was neither as beautiful and charming as Elizabeth nor as elegance and graceful as Emmaline.

And everyone knew Jaime's millionaire father wanted nothing to do with her. She grew tired of feeling unacceptable in the circles her mother liked to move in.

"It's Silas Montgomery's second son. You won't find a better catch here tonight."

"I'm really not interested." The last thing she wanted was to waste even a minute bored to death by some entitled playboy with an over-inflated opinion of himself.

"Can't you just make me happy and meet him?"

Can't you just make me happy and accept that my life as a horse trainer makes me happy and don't want to give it up so I can live the lifestyle you want?

"I'm not going to like him, which means I'm not going to marry him." Jaime was sick of having this conversation with her mother. "It's nothing but a waste of everyone's time."

"How do you know you won't like him?" Elizabeth demanded, her exasperation growing. "He's rich, handsome and connected. Perfect."

And how would he find her? Lacking? He wouldn't be the first one. Daniel Swan had that honor. He'd been charming and attentive the night he'd hung out with her at his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Trusting Daniel went against her every instinct, but she'd let herself get swept away. It wasn't until after she'd let him kiss her and put his hand on her breast that she found out what he was really like.

But having the whole school laughing about the padded bra her mother insisted she wear wasn't anything compared to how furious she'd gotten at herself for daring to believe that a handsome and popular boy like him found her attractive.

She'd deceived herself. That's why the hard lesson had stuck.

"I don't care about perfect," she told her mother. "I want real." Someone who wouldn't judge her because of superficial things.

"Oh, please." Elizabeth's cultured tones slipped, revealing the flat Midwestern accent she'd been born with. "No one is as real as you want them to be."

Cody was. Every inch of him was as real and honest as they came and she knew exactly what she had. He rode bulls. Had a knack with horses. Worked hard and had nothing much to show for it. He might be too poor to take her out for a steak dinner, but she'd take a hamburger and a night with him every time.

“Stop all this nonsense,” her mother insisted, grabbing Jaime’s arm in a tight grip and towing her toward the opposite end of the room where the band played on a raised platform behind the dance floor.

Jaime ground her teeth. Attending fancy parties like this intensified her insecurities. It wasn’t that she’d been humiliated by a guy she believed had liked her. Or that she knew she wasn’t as pretty or as well dressed as the other women in attendance.

Deep down she worried that she’d inherited her mother’s pathological craving to be accepted by people with the power to hurt her. And that scared her to death.

Elizabeth pulled her toward a small group that included her aunt, the newly engaged couple and two tall men with their backs to her. “Look who I found.”

Mortified to be offered up with such fervor, Jaime focused on Gwen and her fiancé and avoided looking at either of the well-dressed men as her mother all but shoved her at the nearest one.

“This is my daughter--”

“Jamie.”

As a familiar voice spoke her name, shock surged along her nerves.

Cody?

“What are you doing here?” The words tumbled out of her in an ungainly rush.

Before he could answer, Elizabeth jumped in, beaming her delight. “You two know each other?”

Jaime’s heart crimped. She shook her head.

“Yes.” Cody’s deep voice was rock solid, his gaze steady on her face.

“No.” The urge to cry barreled into Jaime like a spooked horse, throwing her off balance. How could she have been duped again? “No, I don’t think we do.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Damn.

If on the drive to the party, his thoughts hadn't been consumed by his upcoming night with Jaime, he might have connected that Nathan's potential business associates were related to the man her cousin was about to marry.

The noisy, crowded ballroom vanished from Cody's awareness. There was only the stricken expression on Jaime's face and the hurt pooling in her eyes.

He hadn't intended to cause her pain. It's why he'd established the time limit in the first place. Two weeks had seemed like a perfect amount of time. He'd be in and out of her life before she had a chance to get used to having him around. Before his vague answers about his background roused her curiosity.

He'd intended to leave her with plenty of fond memories and no reason to hate him. Instead, he'd been caught and would have a lot of explaining to do.

A tempest was building in Jaime. Hands clenching, lips compressed, brows colliding, she vibrated with anger. That she hadn't yet reacted beyond her initial denial of him told Cody that she hadn't quite made up her mind how to handle the situation. If he acted fast, he might be able to explain himself before she got away.

"Dance with me." Sensing she was still grappling with her shock, he grabbed her by the wrist. The chill of her skin seeped into him as he pulled her away from her startled relatives.

She resisted, but it was a feeble effort. Every time they touched, however fleeting, it seemed as if they were transported to a world all their own. Time ceased to matter.

On the dance floor, the band's smooth jazz sound was perfect for sliding his arm around Jaime's slim waist and holding her close. If this had been another place, another time, he might have lost himself in the heady delight of her body grazing his in unconscious temptation, but he got maybe ten seconds of rapport before her temper kicked up.

"Damn you, Cody." She put her palm against his chest and shoved. Fortunately, he'd been prepared for her flash of temper and held on. "You lied to me."

"Yes, but I'm not going to apologize for it. If I'd told you who I was, you'd never given me a shot."

"So you pretend to be too hurt to ride and down to your last ten bucks?" She battered him with accusations. "Why? So you could make a fool of me?"

"I wanted get to know you better."

"Get to know me better?" A rough laugh escaped her. "In other words you wanted to seduce me and then disappear."

He didn't like the unflattering picture she was painting of him. "I wanted to help you until the new barn manager showed up. And I didn't seduce you."

"You never got the chance. I threw myself at you. Like some desperate, pathetic creature..." Her voice cracked beneath the pressure of self-loathing.

"Don't be ridiculous." He pushed aside his guilt and concentrated on reasoning with her. "You're neither of those things."

Cody wasn't sure whether it was his words or his firm tone that sliced through her distress, but between one heartbeat and the next her chin rose and her shoulders straightened. When she met his gaze, her eyes were flat jade.

"No, I'm not. And I won't deny that I wanted you."

Her use of past tense worried Cody. "You still do." And he would take her back to his place and spend the night proving it to her.

"Not you," she said, shaking her head. "I wanted someone ordinary. Someone who doesn't get off playing games and being cruel because they think they're better than everyone else." She lifted her chin and met his gaze squarely. "I'm done with not being good enough for people like you."

Her passionate declaration caught him off guard. Not good enough? What was she talking about? Cody never got a chance to ask. The song ended and Jaime broke free. The despair that turned the corners of her lips downward kept him frozen in place.

What on earth had possessed him to think that he could spend two weeks in her bed and walk away without a backward glance? He was obsessed with her lithe body, her clever mind, her tender spirit. She'd taken him in because he'd let her believe he needed help. She'd offered him a job without knowing anything more than what he'd told her. Trusting him when most people would have demanded references.

And he'd deceived her.

The crowd swallowed her before he shook off his immobility. He followed, intent on catching her and saying...what?

Nathan stepped into his path. "Let her go."

Had his best friend lost his mind?

"I can't."

Nathan cocked his head. His gray eyes narrowed. "Why not? You told me two weeks and you were out. It's been two weeks and you are definitely out."

"I know what I said." Cody's right hand became a fist. If Nathan didn't stop talking and get the hell out of his way, he was going to hit him. "But not like this."

"What are you planning to do? Chase her down and beg her to forgive you? Then what? Dump her?" Nathan had a knack for cutting through all the crap and seeing straight to the heart of a situation.

Damn him.

Cody's knew his best friend was right. His time was up. He had to get back to his job and his friends, a lifestyle Jaime despised. So why was he edging around Nathan, heading for the door.

"I saw her expression, man." Nathan sidestepped, keeping himself in Cody's path. "You are the last person she wants to see. Let it go. Let her go. In the long run, you'll both be happier."

Happier? Without Jaime?

Cody shook his head. "You don't get it."

"Let's go have a drink," Nathan suggested, sliding his arm around Cody's shoulders and turning toward the bar. "And you can explain it to me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Through the big window in the manager's office off the training barn lobby, Jaime watched Beth Adams preparing her Irish Sport Horse for a three-day event later that month. Horse and rider had come a long way in the six months since Jaime had begun working with them. Satisfaction briefly brightened her mood as she watched a few minutes longer before she turned back to the piles of bills awaiting her attention.

When the barn manager left a month ago, Jaime had offered to take on the responsibilities until the owner could hire a replacement. Since her dream was to open a training facility of her own, she figured having management experience was important. What she hadn't counted on was how much time she'd spend behind a desk.

While Cody had been here, he'd lifted the burden of paperwork from her shoulders. His comfort level with the computer and quick grasp of the bookkeeping software should have raised her suspicions. Why would a cowboy who'd spent his life on the rodeo circuit be so familiar with spreadsheets and expense reports?

He wouldn't. And she'd been too distracted by his cocky smile and solid, muscular body to wonder why a bull rider possessed those sorts of skills.

Humiliation and annoyance tore through her so fast she wasn't sure if she should cry or swear. She wasn't sure if she was angry with Cody for lying to her or with herself for feeling disposable. She'd known from the beginning that he wasn't going to stay more than two weeks, but while it had felt right to let herself enjoy a casual affair with an ordinary guy, the thought that she'd been tricked into bed by rich one destroyed her confidence.

A blur of color in the doorway caught her attention. She turned her head and spied one of the grooms entering the office.

"This came for you," Carrie said, her voice reverent as she clutched the saddle against her chest. "It's a Hermes. And there's a card."

Jaime stared at the four-thousand dollar saddle, her thoughts churning.

"Put it there." Jaime nudged her head toward the couch, a growl locked behind clenched teeth. Ignoring the curiosity shining in the nineteen-year-old's brown eyes, Jaime took the white envelope and dropped it onto the pile of horse show entry forms she needed to fill out. "I got a call from Melissa Hendrickson today. She's coming by at two to ride Bonner. Can you get him ready?"

"Sure."

The groom hovered in Jaime's office another couple seconds before taking the hint to get back to work. Once again alone, Jaime released the growl. She didn't have to open the envelope to know whom the four-thousand dollar saddle had come from. Why couldn't Cody have sent her roses or even jewelry? Something she wouldn't think twice about giving away or returning.

Instead, he'd given her something she'd have a hard time refusing.

With an effort, she refocused on the invoices demanding attention. But it was hard to ignore the new leather smell wafting toward her from the couch. With an impatient huff, she pushed away from her desk.

She'd break her own rules about training her horse during the day and work Ransom over some fences. Usually she rode early in the morning or late at night when clients weren't around. Today, however, she needed to clear her head and nothing did that faster than taking the Danish Warmblood over a series of jumps.

By the time she pulled Ransom from his stall and picked out his feet, she was feeling moderately calmer. The gelding shoved his nose into her chest as she ran the soft brush down his wide blaze. She laughed and slipped him the carrot he was looking for.

"You're not going to try out your new saddle?"

Five feet away, Cody dominated the aisle between the stalls in another gorgeous suit that fit his powerful shoulders with such perfection she knew it had been made for him. Slicked back hair, a gold watch and an arrogant half smile completed the picture of rich, sophisticated male.

Her muscles trembled with the urge to push him up against the stall, muss his hair and press her mouth hard against his.

Damn, she missed him.

But looking at Cody in all his masculine perfection, Jaime didn't see the hunky cowboy she'd come to rely on for companionship and support. She only saw a rich guy who'd never appreciate a woman that loved training horses and who got dirt under her fingernails and manure on her boots.

And just like that, fifteen minutes of tranquility vanished like a soap bubble.

"I'm glad you're here." She drew the brush along Ransom's neck in steady, soothing strokes. "I packed up your stuff, but didn't know where to send it."

"You could have called and had me come get it."

He stepped forward and placed his hand on the horse's shoulder inches from where she was plying her brush. To her dismay he even smelled expensive. And wonderful.

She ached to press her face into his neck and spend the rest of her life just breathing him in. But pretending he was still her down-on-his-luck bull-rider wouldn't work. His lavender silk tie wasn't the rough cotton shirt he'd worn as part of his disguise. The instant she rested her cheek against him, the illusion would shatter.

"I can't. I've already deleted your phone number out of my cell."

"Let me send it to you again."

Cody pulled out his phone and dialed. Her back pocket erupted with the Linda Ronstadt classic *You're No Good*. She dug the phone out of her back pocket and silenced the ring tone with a hard jab of her thumb.

Ignoring his smug grin, she resumed brushing her horse. "You can pick up your things in my office. Take the saddle with you when you go."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I don't like it." *She loved it.* It was the saddle of her dreams, but she was way too practical to spend that much money on a piece of equipment when something less expensive would do.

"I'm surprised. I saw your expression when your client let you borrow her Hermes. The only other time I've seen you that happy is under me in bed."

At his provocative words, heat flared in her midsection and slid downward. She crouched and applied the brush to Ransom's leg to hide her flushed cheeks. "It's too expensive."

The gelding lowered his head and lipped at her sleeve. Large brown eyes watched her struggle with her composure. She was seconds away from a meltdown. Why wouldn't Cody take the hint and go away?

“It’s my way of saying, I’m sorry I wasn’t truthful with you.”

His deception didn’t bother her as much as the fact that she’d been fooled again. She was such an idiot. Straightening, she set her hands on her hips and faced him square. “You don’t know me at all if you think you can buy my forgiveness.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“Sure it is. Isn’t that how rich guys like you make amends?” She gauged her accusation had hit fairly close to the mark the way his features settled into unhappy lines. “And I don’t know why you bothered. It isn’t as if you were planning on sticking around before I found out you lied to me.”

“Jaime.” He murmured her name and coasted his palms down her arms.

She wasn’t sure if it was the regret in his voice or his tender touch that hurt more. “Don’t you Jaime me,” she flared, shaking him off and spooking Ransom in the process. The big gelding tossed his head and shifted his feet uneasily. “There’s nothing more to say.” She stroked the chestnut’s silky neck to quiet him and pitched her voice to a more moderate level. “Just go. Please.”

“I don’t want it to end like this.”

His words brought her to tears. She’d been so busy being mad at him for lying to her she hadn’t faced the fact that she’d never see him again. She stiffened her spine and forced sadness away. His leaving had been inevitable from the start. He’d offered her two weeks and she’d accepted. Too bad she hadn’t foreseen that she’d tumble head over heels in love with the man.

“I didn’t want it to end at all,” she admitted. Her gaze collided with his. She’d changed a lot since Cody had come into her life. Two weeks ago, she’d never imagined letting anyone glimpse her in such a vulnerable state. With Cody, she’d bared her soul. It was hard to hide from him. “I liked you. Trusted you. I believed what you told me because I wanted someone real in my life.”

“I’m real,” he growled.

“No, you’re not. You made up some ridiculous story about cracking ribs after a bad spill from a bull to get me to hire you. Pretended to be down to your last dollar.” And the same way she let him witness her weakness, she now gave him a healthy dose of her regret. “You must have had a good laugh over how gullible I was. I’ll bet you live in a huge house. Have an important job at your father’s company. Your rich friends probably thought you’d lost your mind when you decided to go slumming for a few weeks.”

“Slumming? That’s not what I was doing and you know it.”

“I don’t know it.” Since finding out the truth, she’d imagined all sorts of terrible things about why he’d lied to her. “But in the end it doesn’t matter. You and I are over.”

His muscles went rigid. Tension vibrated the air between them. “A minute ago you said you wanted me to stick around.”

“That’s before I found out the man who interested me doesn’t exist.”

“He exists. Nothing about me has changed except now you know I come from money and I’m an executive at Montgomery Oil. But those things don’t define who I am.”

“Don’t they?” She shook her head. “My mother is constantly throwing men like you at me. Wealthy. Privileged. Entitled. The sort that take what they want and don’t care who gets hurt in the process.”

“Is that who you think I am?” His eyes blazed beneath drawn together brows.

It was a relief to see him this angry. Maybe now he’d understand a little of how she felt.

“I don’t know who you are.”

“Then stop comparing me to all the jerks that have come through your life and get to know me.”

Even if he hadn't lied to her, getting involved with someone like Cody went against every promise she'd made to herself since her mother had started arranging for her to meet suitable men. She wanted to find someone ordinary. To never question whether she deserved his love.

“I can't.”

“You won't,” Cody countered, his fury cooling to disdain. “You're as much a snob as the people you criticize.”

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. “I am not.”

“You want me out of your life because you don't think I'm good enough for you.”

“That's crazy.” He was so wrong that she almost laughed.

He was handsome, sexy, rich, funny and an amazing lover. He was too good for her. And if he hadn't already, at some point he'd figure that out.

“Then accept my apology and let's start over.”

“Apology accepted.” She ducked beneath Ransom's neck, needing the leggy Warmblood between them before he convinced her to do something she'd hate herself for later. “But we're not starting over.”

“Give me one reason why not.”

Dust flew as she whisked her brush along Ransom's back. “You aren't what I want in my life.”

“Because I have money?”

Her hand fell to her side as she met his gaze. “Because of the way you use your money to insulate yourself from anyone or anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yes, I do. I met my real father for the first time when I was fourteen.” She rested her cheek against the horse's warm flank. The contact soothed her battered heart. “That's when I learned he never wanted me.” She steeled herself against the hurt that always accompanied the memory of that encounter. “He paid my mother a lot of money to ensure that he'd never hear from either of us.”

“I didn't give you the saddle to get you out of my life.”

“No.” She gave him a sad, watery smile. “You gave me the saddle to make yourself feel better about lying to me.”

She snuck a glance toward Cody's silent presence. Angry color stained his strong cheekbones. He looked grim. As if she'd slapped him.

“What the hell do you want from me?”

Regret twisted her emotions into knots, but she plowed on, wanting Cody to understand how his actions affected those around him. “I don't want your gift. You'll just have to find some other way to ease your conscience.”

CHAPTER SIX

Cody paced his large, corner office at Montgomery Oil and scanned the file his executive assistant had pulled together for him, but his mind was far from the printed pages. In the ten days since he'd last spoken with Jaime, he'd tried to put her out of his mind and concentrate on work.

It isn't as if you were planning on sticking around...

Her words haunted him. Had he behaved any better than her biological father, a man who'd treated Jaime's mother in a cavalier fashion, offering her money to vanish from his life when circumstances got complicated? Sure, Jaime wasn't pregnant, but that didn't mean she felt any less rejected by the fact that Cody only wanted a couple weeks of mind blowing sex with her and nothing more.

And how had he tried to make amends for his behavior? He'd given her an expensive gift and demonstrated that he belonged in the same camp as her father.

Now, out in the cold, Cody couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. From the start Jaime had made her position clear. She wanted a man who offered her his heart, not his wallet. And while he'd been playing the part of a simple cowboy, he'd been able to do that. For the first time in his life, Cody had found it easy to share bits and pieces of himself.

He'd talked about how hard it had been to lose his mom at six. How he never seemed to be able to keep up with his father's expectations. That sometimes he wasn't sure if he was living the life he wanted or the one he was supposed to.

Beyond his desk, the lights of downtown Dallas blazed outside the window. He'd been burning the candle at both ends since returning to the office in an effort to get caught up. It wasn't as if he had something more important to do. Nathan had returned to New York City a week ago after wrapping up his new venture and the last thing Cody wanted was to go out with friends and pretend to have a good time.

In fact, he wasn't in the mood to do much of anything these days except think about Jaime and kick himself for believing he could play false with her for a couple weeks and get away Scot-free. Every action held consequences. Experience had drummed that truth into his head. But was Jaime right when she claimed he used his fortune to keep those around him happy instead of giving of himself?

Probably. But given the way he grew up, was that such a huge surprise?

As he sat down, he noticed the display on his cell phone and realized he'd missed a call. Probably his father working from home.

And as if his thoughts had conjured her...

"I probably shouldn't be calling you, but there's a couple things I need to get off my chest."

Every second of the last two weeks without her had been like acid eating through his system. Hearing her on his voice mail, his suffering vanished as if it had never been.

"I was doing great until you came along," she continued. Behind her he could hear country music and the indistinct clamor of voices. "Didn't need a man to make me happy."

She was way past tipsy on her way to intoxicated.

“I didn’t care that I hadn’t had sex in almost a year.”

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hand across the beginnings of a smile, hearing the rasp of stubble against his fingertips.

“Now it’s all I can think about. Sex. With you. It’s driving me crazy.”

He knew the feeling. Her scent lingered in his mind. The softness of her skin tormented his dreams. The way she moaned his name had become the anthem for his stupidity.

“I want you all the time,” she continued, her voice lowering until he could barely make out her words. “And I wonder if I ever cross your mind.”

“You’re never out of it,” he told the phone, sinking fingers into his hair and resting his closed eyes on his palms.

“No one ever made me feel the way you did.” Her monologue continued, but her voice slowed and shifted from high and defensive to low and tormented. “With you I did things. Wild things. I’m blushing just thinking about all the things we did together. I wish you were here right now because I’d tell you that I—” Before Jaime had a chance to bare her soul, the call ended.

No. The denial roared in his mind.

He found her number and redialed. When she answered, he wasted no words. “Where are you?”

“Cody?” She sounded foggy and distant.

Somewhere close by a male voice spoke up. “Bartender, get the little lady another drink.”

He had little trouble picturing her precariously balanced on a bar stool surrounded by sharks eager to take advantage of her vulnerable state.

“Damn it, Jaime.” Anxiety hammered at him. He tugged open his desk drawer in search of his car keys. He had to get to her. Save her. “Where are you?”

“At the bar where we met. I’m looking for your replacement. A nice ordinary guy with no money who I can take home.”

Her declaration had him sprinting down the hall toward the elevators. “You stay right there and don’t talk to anyone.”

“Too late.”

Once again the call disconnected too soon. Growling, Cody redialed, but after four rings, he was directed to her voice mail. He raced across the dim parking garage toward his car. Ten minutes later, the BMW was streaking through the quiet downtown streets toward the freeway.

The bar was a twenty-five minute drive from the heart of the city. Cody made it in a little over seventeen. On a Tuesday night, the place was not as packed as it had been the weekend Cody and Jaime met. He sent a thank you heavenward as he burst through the front door and spied Jaime surrounded by ardent admirers.

He’d been right to imagine her perched on a barstool. She wore a silky, low cut tank that offered glimpses of the beginning swell of her breasts and a short denim skirt that bared far too much of her long slender legs. As she laughed at something the guy beside her whispered in her ear, she batted at wisps of wavy brown hair that had escaped the loose knot atop her head.

Cody charged into the crowd separating them and didn’t stop until he stood before her.

Her eyes popped open in surprise at his appearance. “Cody. What are you doing here?” She waved away his answer. “Never mind. Meet my new boyfriends. This is Paul. Jim.

Randy. And Chuck. They're all cowboys. And they all need a job so they're coming home with me. Just like you did."

He set his hand above her elbow and tugged her off the stool. "It's time to leave."

"Hey buddy, what the hell?" The one she'd named Chuck moved to block their path. "Didn't you hear the lady? She's taking us home."

"That's not happening." Not in a million years. Jaime was his. He'd demonstrated that in a hundred different ways. If anyone was going home with her it would be him.

"Says who?"

"Me."

Cody was so focused on staring down Chuck he didn't see the punch coming from one of the guys standing beside him. The next thing he knew pain exploded high on his left cheek. The blow knocked him off balance, but he recovered faster than his opponent expected and twisted to deliver his fist into the guy's stomach and an elbow into another's ribs as they closed in on him.

By the time a couple of the bar's bouncers stepped in and began clearing the decks, Cody had lost sight of Jaime. He had needed less than three seconds of searching before he spotted her tearing free from two women who were trying to keep her from the fray. Relief blasted through him.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to get you into a fight." She threw herself into his arms, her slim form a soft, fragrant balm for his bruises. "I don't want to go home with anyone but you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The dull throb in Jaime's head grew worse the closer she got to consciousness. Her stomach shifted in protest as she rolled onto her side to escape the brightness waiting on the other side of her eyelids.

Why the hell did she feel like death warmed over?

Like a camera lens coming into focus, her memories of the previous night sharpened. She covered her mouth in dismay, muffling a groan. What had possessed her to call Cody and tell him she couldn't stop thinking about having sex with him? And then she remembered what else she'd said.

That she loved him.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

She shoved her face into the pillow, wondering if it was possible to smother herself this way, and ran through every swearword she knew. It didn't take long. Her private school education had been long on book learning and short on real life experience.

As her cursing wound down, she sifted through the rest of her memories. After talking to Cody on the phone, the night got pretty fuzzy. She recalled flirting with some cute guys. Something about offering them a job and how they should come home...

Heart pounding, Jaime sat up with and looked around. The unfamiliar bedroom was empty and large. Had she gone home with one those guys? It was then that she realized she had on a man's T-shirt and not another stitch. Casting frantically around for her clothes, she slipped out of bed. Panic began to take hold as she realized she had no idea where she was or what she'd done with the owner of this large bedroom, decorated with expensive furniture and luxurious linens.

"You're awake."

With a muffled squeak, she whirled around and spied Cody in the doorway, stern and mesmerizing in a white T-shirt and worn jeans. Relief flowed through her at the sight of him, so familiar and so dear. Her heartbeat steadied.

"How did I get here?"

"I brought you."

Thank goodness. At least she hadn't driven in her condition. She sank to the bed and gathered handfuls of the sheet, lifting the cotton to her chin as a child would a favorite blanket. His steady gaze awakened her to how vulnerable she'd let herself become since he'd entered her life. Trusting him had allowed her to drop her guards and show him all her weakness and flaws. With all he knew, he could destroy her if he wanted.

"Why didn't you take me home?"

"Because then you could kick me out and I need us to talk."

She froze beneath the intense glint in his eyes, recognizing that she was about to be run down by the serious conversation bus. Her heart began breaking in anticipation of his gentle let down. What would he say?

Sorry sweetie, you're not my type.

I'm flattered that you fell madly in love with me, but I'm not interested in anything serious.

How about we keep things casual until I get tired of sleeping with you.

She had to redirect him into safer channels. "Did we do something last night?"

"By do something, you mean make love?" His eyebrow arched in that sexy come hither way she couldn't resist.

She nodded, acutely aware of the soft sheets against her bare butt. "I'm not wearing any clothes."

"Have no fear. I'm not in the habit of taking advantage of drunk women." His lips softened. His gaze slid over her with intoxicating results. "Or letting them take advantage of me."

Embarrassed, she clutched the sheet even tighter. "Sorry."

"Don't be. As far as intoxicated women go, you're adorable." He paused for effect. "And very affectionate."

A groan found its way past her clenched teeth. She sure wasn't feeling adorable or affectionate at the moment. She was feeling raw and rough around the edges.

"And my clothes?"

"Covered in beer. I threw them in the washer."

"I should get them and get going."

She started to slide her legs off the mattress. Cody moved with the quickness of a man used to dodging flying hooves. Before her feet hit the floor, he'd sat on the bed beside her.

"Jaime, listen to me." He caught her chin in his strong fingers. Tender, but firm, his grip compelled her to face what she most feared: his rejection. "I need you to understand that I never meant to hurt you."

Glimpsing the earnest expression in his eyes, she believed him. With that realization, her defenses came tumbling down. She loved Cody, faults, wealth and all. The man she'd gotten to know hadn't deliberately set out to hurt her. And now that her indignity had faded, she was a little more open to seeing his point of view.

"I know you didn't." Her attention snagged on the darkening color high on his cheek. She released the sheet and skimmed the purpling skin with the lightest of touches. "What happened?"

"You don't remember how I had fight off four cowboys to keep them from taking you home?"

"Four cowboys?" she echoed faintly.

"Four."

Her stomach flipped at his crooked smile. His possessive tone sent delight spiraling through her. "I guess it's my turn to say I never meant you to get hurt." An ironic smile ghosted across her lips.

"It was worth a few bruises to make sure you came home with me."

"A few bruises?"

He lifted his T-shirt and exposed more patches of dark red on his ribs.

"Oh, Cody, I'm so sorry." Her fingers hovered over his skin, afraid she'd hurt him if she touched the bruises.

"There's a way to make me feel better, you know."

The atmosphere went from grave to sexy in less time than it took for her to blink. "Is there?"

“Oh yes.”

“Such as?”

Suddenly she was having trouble drawing air into her lungs. The sensual glow in Cody’s eyes awakened a thousand butterflies in her midsection. Her body felt weightless. As if she was filled with air.

His lashes lowered. “Your lips have always had magical properties when applied to any part of my body.”

“You don’t say,” she murmured, liking where his mind was going. “So, if I do this?” She leaned forward and dusted her lips over the discoloration below his eye. “You’ll feel better?”

His exhalation tickled her neck. “Much better.”

“Does anything else hurt?”

He pointed to his chin.

She obliged with a quick peck before working her way along his freshly shaved jaw and down his muscular neck. “Anywhere else?” She hooked her fingers beneath the hem of his T-shirt.

In one fluid motion she peeled it over his head, revealing the broad, powerful chest she adored. Shoving aside her doubts, she kissed her way down his body, paying special attention to the bruises adorning his ribs.

“Jaime.” Her name flowed from his lips. “What you said in your voicemail last night.” He cupped her face in his hands, thumbs moving against her cheeks in gentle, reverent sweeps. “You need to know I feel the same way.”

He loved her?

Was that possible?

“Cody.” Heedless of his bruises, she flung herself at him, lips aiming for his in clumsy enthusiasm. She missed his mouth and connected with his jaw instead.

Hard arms wrapped around her as her breasts collided with his chest. Thanks to her momentum, they tumbled onto the mattress. Cody rolled her beneath him.

Gasping for air, Jaime scraped her hair away from her face. Pressed deep into the yielding softness of Cody’s bed, she savored the hard crush of his rock solid muscles. Her spirit rejoiced. The disappointment that dogged every romantic encounter she’d ever had vanished beneath the pure brilliance of her love for Cody.

“Make love to me,” she demanded, her hips shifting in restless anticipation of his possession.

He began to kiss his way down her body. Any headache she might have woken with dissipated.

“It would be my pleasure.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cody ignored the sensible voice that warned him making love to Jaime would complicate, not simplify his decision of what to do about her. What man in his right mind worried about the future when he had a naked, willing woman pleading with him to make love to her?

He trailed his tongue along the slope of her breast. Her chest rose and fell with each unsteady breath. Already her nipples had tightened into hard buds. He circled one. She whimpered in frustration, her fingers busy in his hair, urging him to give her the pleasure she longed for. With a crooked smile, he obeyed.

“Cody.”

Her voice broke on his name, a sexy, passionate moan that excited him as much as her lithe body squirming beneath him. Aroused almost to the point of pain, he forced back his own clawing need and focused on Jaime’s pleasure.

He’d never been with a woman like her. She gave herself completely over to him. Trusted him. Held nothing back.

For a second he hesitated. What had he done to deserve such a woman? Absolutely nothing.

He’d kept secrets. He’d been unwilling to offer her more than a brief affair because keeping relationships short and casual was the maxim he and Nathan lived by. And yet it had hurt when she’d ejected him from her life.

Judged him on his birthright and not who he was as a person.

At some point during their time together, he’d dropped his guards with her. He’d met someone who’d been hot for him and not his money. For the first time in his life he could completely relax around a woman and not worry if she had an agenda. Being with her had made him want to do better. Be better.

And for a short time, he’d been that guy who made her smile and moan and come over and over. He’d made her happy. Deliriously happy.

Until she found out the truth

Ruthlessly he shoved away the thought. It was too late now for regret. Better to concentrate on the moment and the delicious woman beneath him. On giving her pleasure beyond anything she’d experienced before.

Jaime’s muscles tensed and flexed as he kissed his way down her body and settled his shoulders between her thighs. She bunched the sheets in her hands as he tasted her, using the tip of his tongue to flick against her hot center. Her edgy growl filled him with delight.

Her musky scent filled his nostrils. He inhaled, his lungs expanding until he became lightheaded with desire. When he set his mouth against her, she cried out. He cupped her butt and held her fast, fingers biting into her sweet curves the way he knew she liked. Her low, aroused moan made him smile.

This was how they were good together. In bed. Here, where the outside world couldn't intrude. They allowed themselves the freedom to open to each other. Found rapport in the giving and receiving of pleasure.

His heart came close to bursting as her body tensed, the sounds emanating from her throat more frantic. He pushed her hard toward a strong orgasm, desperate to embed this moment in her subconscious so she never forgot it. Never forgot him.

Yes. Come for me, baby.

And she did. Beneath his mouth. His name on her lips. Her fingernails digging into his shoulders. Her body bowed as the climax swept through her.

Need raked through him as she collapsed, limp and spent against the sweat damp sheets. Cody kissed his way back up her trembling form, adoring her with soft sweeps of his lips over her hot, satiny skin.

Instead of satisfying his own keen desire by plunging into her hot, silken depths, he slipped his arms around her body, banding her frame against his to savor the aftershocks of her orgasm.

"Why'd you stop?" She demanded as he untangled caramel-streaked strands of brown hair from her long lashes.

He bypassed the confusion swirling in her eyes and searched for the delight that always appeared whenever they came together like this. Until now, he'd attributed her blissful expression to sexual satisfaction. Or he'd shied away from recognizing her strong emotions because he wanted to pretend what was between them was casual and not serious.

"Cody?"

He loved the way she said his name. The perfect blend of plea and playfulness. It made him want to give her everything his money or influence could provide.

But all she wanted was his heart.

"Yeah, baby?"

Her thigh moved against his erection. "I need you inside me. Now."

Her long fingers found him and slipped along his length. A hiss broke from between his teeth as need blasted through him.

"Jaime." He was incapable of saying more. She'd spread her thighs and wiggled her hips until she had him poised at her moist entrance. Holding himself in check wasn't going to last much longer.

"Please."

Incoherent words rumbled in his throat as he sank into her tight sheath. "Baby."

She arched into his thrust until he was buried completely within her. They both sighed in relief at the joining. He rolled her fully beneath him and withdrew slowly, focusing on the incredible slide of their bodies. And just as slowly, he penetrated her again, watching her pupils dilate and her breathing pause as he drove home.

"Yes, more of that."

"If you insist."

He kissed her long and slow, taking them both on a sensual journey through the dips and rises of desire. Thanks to their last two weeks together, he knew exactly what she liked and hit every erogenous zone to increase her pleasure.

But while he'd been learning what gave her the greatest satisfaction, she hadn't been idle. Her curiosity had been limitless. Her campaign to drive him wild, exhilarating. In the end,

they'd explored some pretty sensational lovemaking. But until this moment, he hadn't appreciated how far she'd burrowed beneath his skin.

Shockwaves rocked him as Jaime pitched over the edge of yet another strong climax. Her internal muscles convulsed around him, dragging him with her into paradise. The harmony of their physical connection strengthened the spiritual bond he'd refused to acknowledge. As their eyes met, gazes locking, he experienced the pull of something so strong it stopped his breath.

Lightheaded, he buried his face in her neck and emptied himself into her. Pleasure rushed through him, savage and awe-inspiring. He called out her name, but there was no triumph in the sound. Her answering cry was so poignant that his throat constricted.

Spent, he collapsed and rolled with Jaime until her boneless form lay draped across him. He gulped air and struggled to comprehend his ragged emotions. Jaime's long hair fell across her face, hiding her expression. He coaxed the curtain behind her ear and envied the serenity he glimpsed in her eyes before her lashes fell.

She dusted delicate kisses across his skin. Beneath her lips, his chest ached. He no longer felt invincible. Had the touch of their hearts damaged him somehow?

His hands trembled as they skimmed her soft, warm curves. Her contented sigh eased some of his discomfort, but at the same time made him realize that his happiness was forever linked to hers. Somehow her wellbeing had become his to safeguard. And the best way he knew to keep a woman happy outside the bedroom was to spend money on her.

Only Jaime wanted nothing to do with his money. She craved intimacy. Access to his emotions. Things he had limited experience with.

He wanted to fling aside the burden.

If this was what love did to him, he wanted nothing to do with it.

CHAPTER NINE

“Are you okay?” Cody’s knuckles maintained a soothing rhythm up and down her spine.

If by “okay” he meant turned inside out by the most intense lovemaking ever, then she was marvelous. She lay with her cheek on his shoulder, heart thumping in time with his, blissful and at peace. This was how she wanted to spend her time with Cody. A delicious sensual exploration, not arguments and regrets.

She traced the contours of his chest, mesmerized by the perfection of the moment. He threw a sheet over them as their bodies began to cool. As the soft material settled against her skin, she couldn’t help but compare the expensively furnished bedroom to the simple surroundings he’d occupied above the barn.

He’d given up all this comfort to get to know her better.

A tiny part of her, the romantic fool she couldn’t trust, played traitor and delighted that he’d been interested enough to go to such lengths, but her sensible side, the one shaped by disappointment, reminded her that if he’d deceived her once, he’d do it again.

But if he loved her...

It shouldn’t make a difference. He wasn’t the ordinary guy with the regular life she wanted. But at the same time, she couldn’t deny that living without Cody meant she could never be truly happy.

But did Cody feel the same way?

“Earlier you said you wanted to talk,” she said. “So let’s talk.”

“Okay.”

His neutral tone wasn’t exactly encouraging, but she powered on.

“My mother hates what I do. It embarrasses her that I train some of her friends’ horses. She equates it with being someone’s hired help.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much about what your mother thinks.”

“I try not to, but it’s hard facing her disappointment all the time.”

“That’s her issue, not yours.”

“After what happened between us at Gwen’s engagement party, she’s been asking a lot of questions about you. I don’t know what to tell her.”

“Don’t tell her anything.”

“You don’t know my mother. You’re exactly what she wants for me. She’s probably already planning the wed...”

Cody’s body tensed.

Alert to anything that had the potential to hurt her, Jaime pushed away from him and sat up.

“Is this is going anywhere?”

“Does it have to?” His expression closed down like a shop out of business. “I like what we’ve got right here and now.”

“You mean sex.” The muscles in Jaime’s throat tightened. She swallowed a couple times before they loosened enough to allow her to speak. “Is that all you want?”

His bare chest lifted and fell in a weary sigh. “No. Of course not. But we don’t need to decide where things are going right this second. Let’s enjoy the moment.”

Did he want her to become an active part of his life? To meet his family and friends? Old insecurities rushed forward to gabble at her. Or was he leading her on with promises of someday the way her father had done with her mother?

“Did you mean it when you said you loved me? Or was that a lie to get me back into bed?”

He pushed up and away from her. “I never said I loved you.”

“Sure you did. What I told you on the phone last night. You said you felt the same way.”

“You told me you wanted me. That you couldn’t stop thinking about how great the sex was between us.”

Horror dominated her emotions as she searched Cody’s expression for something to reassure her. “I told you I loved you.”

He paused a beat. “I never heard that. The call cut off.”

Humiliation seared her like hot coals. She flinched away from the pain and eased backward on the mattress. When Cody’s fingers circled her wrist, her gaze flew to his. Her throat tightened at the regret shimmering in his eyes.

“Jaime, you have to know I care about you.”

Oh no. Not *the I care about you* speech. People cared about their cars and about their pets. She wanted him to love her.

“Spare me.” Moving with more haste than grace, she ripped her wrist free and almost fell off the bed. Half blinded by tears, she grabbed the first T-shirt she came to. Unfortunately for her, it was the one she’d taken off Cody. As it settled over her body, the scent of his cologne drifted up her nostrils. Longing blasted through her.

Why the hell had she called him last night? Why couldn’t she have stayed sober and behaved like the sane, logical woman she’d been before he’d entered her life?

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the foot of the bed, far from Cody’s ruffled glory. “Where are my clothes?” She had to get dressed and get out.

“I’ll get them.” His tight tone told her he was annoyed that she’d gotten upset.

Too bad. She kept her gaze averted as he got out of bed and pulled on his boxers. She’d offered her heart to him on a silver platter and instead of accepting it, he’d sent it back to the kitchen.

In a minute he was back with her neatly folded clothes.

“Jaime.”

When nothing followed, she lifted her gaze to his face. A muscle ticked in his jaw. He was glaring at the wall to her left. Something sat uneasily on him.

Was it possible that by admitting he cared about her, he meant something more? Was she brave enough to stick around and find out?

“Yes, Cody?”

“When you’re dressed, I’ll take you back to your car.”

It wasn’t what she’d hoped he’d say and she couldn’t summon the courage to ask him if that’s really what he wanted to tell her. “Thank you.”

Protecting herself from hurt had become as vital as breathing. But during the long, silent drive back to her car, she wondered if it was already too late.

CHAPTER TEN

“Cody, hey, are you still with me?” Nathan’s voice flowed from the cell phone, sounding more amused than annoyed. It was Sunday night, three days since Jaime had called him from that bar and told him she loved him. And he’d let her walk out of his life. Hell, he’d shown her the door.

Cody shook himself out of his thoughts. “I’m still here.”

If he’d had a hard time concentrating before Jaime had bared her soul, he was completely incapable of focusing in the days that followed. Her confession echoed through his head over and over. It was ridiculous. Who fell in love with someone they’d known two short weeks?

Except she wasn’t in love with him.

No. She wasn’t in love with Cody Montgomery, millionaire.

She was in love with the bull-rider with no money. His companionship and his support made her happy. Not his ability to buy her four-thousand dollar saddles.

The whole time he’d been pretending to be broke, he’d been debating if he should tell her the truth and keep seeing her. He assumed he was the one with the power. When all along she’d been taking over his heart.

“Apologize.”

“What?” Again he’d missed whatever Nathan had been saying.

“Apologize to your equestrian and get her to take you back. You’re going to be worthless until you do.”

“I’ve already apologized. Several times.” And then he’d made more mistakes. “She doesn’t want me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Nathan snorted. “Most of the single women in Dallas want you.”

They wanted his money and his position, not him.

“Did you try jewelry?”

“I tried a saddle.”

Silence.

Despite his dark mood, Cody found grim amusement in his best friend’s speechlessness. “She turned it down.”

“Try diamonds.”

“It was a very expensive saddle.”

“I’m sure.”

Cody resented his friend’s dry tone. “Jaime’s not like the women you date in New York. She isn’t going to be swayed by jewelry.” Or expensive presents.

That day at barn, she’d been right about him. He had tried to buy her forgiveness. It was the sort of thing she’d expect from a jerk with more cash than sense. And true to form, he’d done the exact thing that would guarantee she’d kick him to the curb.

“Then make some grand romantic gesture.”

Cody wondered what his cynical-about-love friend had in mind. “Such as?”

“Use your imagination.”

Suddenly Cody was back in time, remembering how often Jaime had spoken of her dream to own a training facility. He could make that happen for her.

“Women love it when they think they’ve tamed you.”

Nathan’s remark made Cody’s hackles rise.

“No one has tamed me.”

A rude noise erupted from the phone’s speaker. “I’m going to remind you that you said that when you ask me to be your best man.”

The floor dropped from beneath Cody. “I’ve known her for a little over a month. And for half of that time we’ve barely spoken.”

“How’ve you been doing without her?”

“Terrible.” The word burst from him emphatic and uncensored.

“And what would stop you from being so miserable?”

Damn Nathan for sounding so smug.

“I suppose you want me to say marrying Jaime is going to make me happy.”

“What I want you to say is that you need a long weekend in Las Vegas to enjoy all the gambling, booze and women sin city has to offer. How about it?” Nathan paused and gave Cody a chance to consider his proposal. “I’ve got a couple buddies who’d be up for it.”

To his dismay, Cody didn’t want a guys’ weekend in Las Vegas. He only wanted Jaime. She’d ruined him.

“I’ll pass.”

“That’s what I mean.” Nathan managed to sound both dour and amused. “You’re already a goner. It’s only a matter of time before you’re shopping for engagement rings.”

Marry Jaime?

Was it so crazy?

He’d never met a woman more wonderful, beautiful or perfect for him than Jaime. He wanted to wake up beside her every morning. She was the only woman who’d ever made him truly happy.

He loved her.

Of course he did. That’s why he couldn’t sleep. Didn’t eat. Obsessively replayed their last conversation over and over in his mind.

Recognition broke through the dark cloud of his thoughts like the sun after a thunderstorm.

He loved her.

And couldn’t bear to live without her. That’s why he’d felt so out of sorts their last time together. He hadn’t yet accepted that he couldn’t survive on his own. They were stronger together than as individuals.

He would marry her.

And build a life with her.

Only what if she wouldn’t have him? He’d been acting like a complete idiot.

How did he go about convincing the woman of his dreams that he was the guy for her? It was going to take more than an expensive dressage saddle or the biggest diamond in Texas to persuade her to take a chance on him after the way he’d messed up.

This time, his offering would have to come from somewhere other than his wallet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was Sunday night. The new barn manager had had started a couple weeks ago, but refused to take over the computer work until everything was in perfect working order.

And because she'd hit a wrong key or forgotten to save when she should have, five hours of work had vanished.

"No. No. No." Jaime stared at the computer screen in horror. If she had to start all over, she was going to cry.

Her inadequacy frustrated her. How was she going to realize her dream of owning a successful training facility if she couldn't handle both the training and the management of the business? She needed help.

When Cody had been around he'd helped by shouldering the paperwork and management burden. She'd visualized them working together long into the future. They'd have made a great team. Him charming the clients. Her training their horses. Or snuggled beside him in bed while he worked on the computer and she went over her training schedules. Enjoying each other's company until that familiar chemistry began to bubble and they tossed aside paperwork and made slow and sweet, or hot and passionate love.

Before she knew what she'd done, Jaime found her cell phone in her hand, Cody's number showing on the display. "I know I said I wouldn't call you again," she began when he answered. "But I need your help." Her stomach plummeted as she waited for his response.

"I'm glad you called." He sure sounded glad.

As well as solid and steady, someone she could rely on.

And relaxed.

Something she'd not been since seeing him at her cousin's engagement party.

"It's the barn computer," she explained, glad to have an excuse to call him. "I just finished inputting all this month's board checks and the invoices that came in since you left." She paused, needing a moment to conquer a pang of melancholy before she could continue. "Now I've done something and all of it seems to be missing."

"I'll stop by and take a look."

Her pulse spiked. Tears threatened. Three days had gone by since she'd last seen him and every second of their time apart left her feeling like some vital part of her had gone missing. She'd been a fool to expect him to love her after just a couple weeks. If he wanted to continue their relationship and keep on caring about her, she'd take him on any terms. If she'd learned anything in the last couple weeks it was that she was only half alive without him.

"You don't have to do that." But she needed him to. So much.

"Oh, but I do." Cody's deep voice was no longer coming only from her phone's speaker.

Jaime looked up and spied him in the doorway. It took two tries for her to replace the handset, and she had to blink to clear tears from her eyes before she could see him clearly. He wore jeans and a blue plaid button down shirt, long sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms. So familiar. So perfect. His fond smile made her stomach flip flop.

“You’re here.” Paralyzed by nerves, she watched him slide his cell phone into his pocket.

“That you reached out for my help gives me hope that what I’m about to tell you will change your mind about keeping me out of your life.”

“But I’ve already changed my mind,” she explained, rushing to meet him as he strode into the office. With her arms around his middle and her face pressed against his chest, she said, “My stupid fear of being hurt is nothing compared to how miserable I’ve been without you in my life.”

And then he was kissing her, hard and deep and long. Taking away her sadness, replacing it with joy unlike anything she’d ever known. She opened to his possession, surrendered to his demanding kisses. Gave him everything she was.

Without lifting his lips from hers, he swept her off her feet and carried her to the couch. As he eased her down on the worn cushions, she tugged his shirt free and sent her fingers searching for his warm, silky skin.

Groaning, Cody stretched his long frame beside her, his hard muscles imprinting on her softer form. He buried his face in her neck and shuddered. For a long moment neither moved. At last, he lifted his head, grazed her cheek with his fingertips and began to speak.

“When you told me you loved me I wasn’t prepared for how that made me feel.” His gaze traced her features. “Growing up I didn’t learn much about love. My mom died when I was six. I remember her being funny and happy all the time. She used to plan fun outings for my older brother, Ryan, and me. Because my dad worked all the time, I thought my family was just the three of us.”

Compelled by Cody’s melancholy to provide what comfort she could, Jaime wrapped her leg around his thigh and let her hands soothed his spine.

“When she died, Both Ryan and I were completely lost. I don’t think my dad knew what to do. So he bought us stuff. A new horse. Remote control airplanes. Whatever toy caught our fancy. But he was never around. We’d see him on Sundays for a while, otherwise, he was always working.”

Jaime’s heart ached for six-year-old Cody. No child should have to cope with the loss of a parent on his own. “So you grew up believing things were what made you feel better.”

“Yes. And that you work harder when your life seems to be falling apart around you. I believe that’s why my father works so damned much. I used to think his marriages failed because he was a workaholic. Now I think he’s at the office all the time because it’s the one place he feels in complete control.”

Jaime knew she was guilty of doing the same thing. Hadn’t she buried herself in work, taking on extra responsibilities at the barn, accepting new clients when the current ones filled her schedule, all so she didn’t have time to notice the hollow place in her heart where love should be?

“I don’t want to turn into my father,” Cody told her, his lips drifting over hers. “I don’t want to be afraid to love someone. To fear letting someone in.”

Her throat tightened painfully, but she forced herself to speak. “That’s how I been living my life. I thought if I stayed locked up inside myself I would be safe. Then you came along and I flung open the gates and all the emotion and desire I’d bottled up came pouring out.” And now she didn’t know how to get the cork back in. “It scares me to be so exposed,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“And it hurts so much when you’re not around.”

He touched his forehead to hers. "What if I stay?"

"What do you mean stay?" She'd faced disappointment so many times she couldn't help but be wary of the hope sparking inside her.

"I'll quit Montgomery Oil and come work with you. We can open our own place and you can train while I manage."

Jaime couldn't believe her ears. Before she'd known who he was and where he came from, that's exactly what she'd dreamed of. She gave a shaky laugh and shook her head.

"There's not a lot of money in this business. We'd be lucky to break even most years."

"You underestimate my skills," he teased. "Besides. Do you think money is more important to me than you are?"

As hope unfurled within her, she peered at him from beneath her lashes. "I'm important to you?"

"I love you." He laughed softly. Tenderness shimmered in his eyes like sunshine on water. "I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life making you happy. Nothing else is more important than that."

"You'd give up your position at Montgomery Oil and everything that goes with it to live with me on a farm?" Jaime couldn't believe he meant what he said. Yet, the earnest expression on his face told her he spoke from his heart. He would give up everything for her.

"I love you," he repeated. "If you can't live in my world, I intend to live in yours."

His willingness to sacrifice his happiness for hers made her love for him expand until she was ready to burst from keeping it contained.

"I love you, too. And far too much to ask you to do that."

He frowned. "I'm not letting you go."

"I should hope not." She slipped her fingers along his shoulders and into his thick, wavy hair. "But perhaps we can find some middle ground between living the ordinary lifestyle I want and one filled with pretentious parties and pointless social gatherings."

Cody's lips hovered over hers. "My father's going to love you."

She rather liked the sound of that. "Why exactly?"

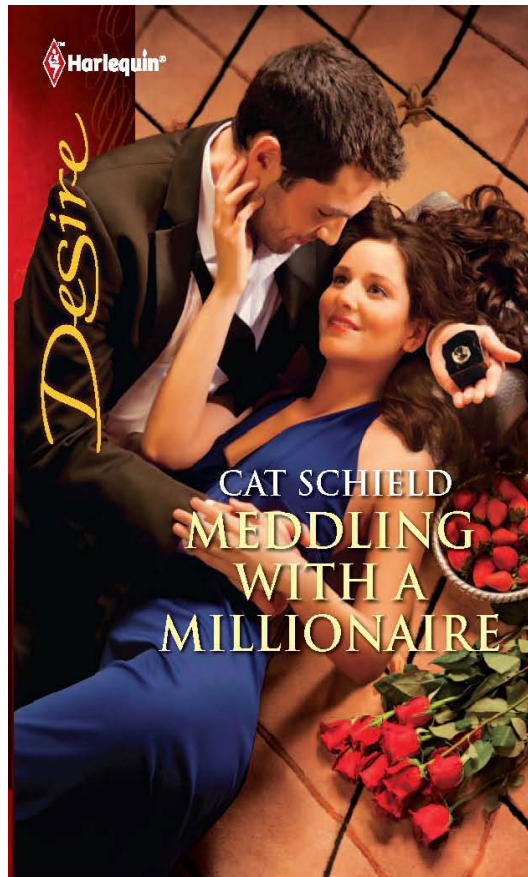
"Because you share his distaste for what he terms social claptrap. He attends one party each year. A New Year's Eve party that he throws. The rest of the time he's too busy working to be bothered."

"I think I could handle one party a year." She cupped his cheek. Joyous warmth suffused her. "As long as I've got you by my side, I think I can handle anything."

"Then that's where I'll be." He bent down to dust her lips with a kiss. "Now and forever."

"That sounds perfect," she said, love expanding inside her as she basked in Cody's adoration. "Absolutely perfect."

Read Nathan's story in
MEDDLING WITH A MILLIONAIRE
coming to Harlequin Desire, June 2011



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Cat Schield lives in Minnesota with her daughter and their Burmese cat. Winner of the Romance Writers of America 2010 Golden Heart® for series contemporary romance, when she's not writing sexy, romantic stories for Harlequin Desire, she can be found sailing with friends on the St. Croix River or more exotic locales like the Caribbean and Europe.

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