

Cowboy All Night
by
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Chapter One

"And the last lucky male who will grace the floor tonight in the All-Night Scoot-Til-Your-Boots-Stick Charity Dance is none other than...Kyle Masters of the Double Masters Ranch!"

His heart sinking, Kyle forced a smile for the sparse crowd clapping its approval. Across the room, his brother, Pete, grinned devilishly. Since Pete was in charge of drawing the men's names, and had insisted that both of them should attend the annual fund-raiser, Kyle should have known this would happen. While he was always ready to contribute to a good cause, it had never occurred to him that he'd be chosen to dance. But Pete was an ornery brother, always ready to incur his older brother's wrath. Pete would say "It's for charity, Kyle," and Kyle wouldn't be able to argue with him. He could, however, give Pete extra chores to do back at the ranch — and he'd be within his rights to do so since his own presence was now required at the charity dance. All night.

"The oh-so-lucky lady who will be Kyle's partner is none other than..." The gray-haired older woman in charge of calling ladies' names looked at the paper as if she couldn't read it. She handed it to Pete, who glanced at Kyle, his grin even wider.

Kyle's heart sank to unfathomable depths. Pete wouldn't. Pete knew how Kyle felt about —

"Molly Dewberry, Ike, Idaho's favorite daughter!"

The small crowd in the ballroom applauded and hands pushed at Kyle's

back,
urging him to go claim his partner for the evening. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Pete smirking. Of all the single women in Ike, he had to be
partnered with the one woman he was least likely to share a comfortable evening
with. Dancing for charity was sufferance enough — why Molly?
Molly Dewberry wasn't smiling, either. She stared at him as he approached her, a
vision in a microscopic red velvet dress, a hot firecracker of a girl with a notoriously aloof manner with men. Her history he knew by heart — it was the one
thing they had in common: Molly's grandmother had fallen in love with his grandfather, who was too in love with rodeo to settle down and marry her, even
after they'd been caught in a compromising position. Her reputation ruined, Molly's brokenhearted grandmother married another man to save face in the town,
never speaking another word to her rodeo-loving beau.
As a result, Molly and Kyle had never spoken five words to each other in their
lives. Equatorial poles could not be further apart, as the wounded pride of one
woman spilled into descending generations. But the greatest curse of his life
was thinking the notoriously cold Molly Dewberry, the sister of his childhood
foe, Dob, was the sexiest woman alive.
The next 12 hours promised to be the longest of his life. Holding her would be
sheer red-hot hell. If he could simply keep from getting an erection, maybe he
wouldn't die a fool's embarrassment in front of the assembly of charitable-minded people he'd known all his life.
"I believe we are partnered for the evening," Kyle said, holding out his hand to
Molly. The ballroom grew quiet, waiting with held breath to see if Idaho's version of the Hatfields and the McCoys could share dance space.
Without a word — had he expected her to kick his shin with her red high heel? —
she took his hand. She was too short for him, too petite and fine-boned, and
after dancing 12 hours with her he'd probably be hump-shouldered and

stooped,
but if she was going to be a good sport about this evening, he could be,
too.
After all, it was a charity event — and he didn't have to wear those
outrageous
red shoes she had on.
"Hello, Kyle," she said, gazing up at him with clear, blue eyes, tranquil as
the
sky on a perfect spring day.
"Molly." Swallowing hard, he closed one hand around her tiny waist and
took her
other hand — also tiny — in his. He felt like a bear holding a bee in his
paw.
Of course, she was small all over — too short to be a model, which he'd
heard
had caused her disappointment. And she wasn't what any man would call
stacked,
unless it was a short stack. But then, he figured in her case less was
more,
because if she were any bigger on top, she'd tip over.
"I thought this was supposed to be a boot-scooting dance-a-thon," she
said
wryly.
He wondered about that himself, glancing over at Pete, who was now
assisting the
disc jockey with music selections, the first of which didn't make for much
boot
scooting.
Five slow dances and no conversation later, he was ready to rethink his
policy
on not using his physical superiority against his younger brother. Then
Molly
shifted, almost leaning against him as if she needed his support, and the
feel
of warm, supple velvet beneath his fingertips took all the heat out of his
temper.
For a short, slight, and stubborn girl with a notoriously reserved manner
with
men, she was managing to put that dreaded itch in his lower region.
Her brother, Dob, glowered at them, waiting for a chance to take offense.
She laid her head against Kyle's shoulder, and he stiffened, realizing his
unwanted attraction was obvious to her.
"Take it easy, cowboy," she said. "I just need a leaning post for a sec."

Chapter Two

Molly looked into his eyes — strangely blue eyes on an auburn-haired woman — and said, "Surviving?"

He nodded.

"I thought so." Smiling at him with a mischievous wink, she moved against him, dangerously close to that itch, which had somehow worked into a long, hard prickly that wanted foolishly to be scratched. He tried to shift away, furtive with awkward, hot male pride.

"It's okay," he heard her say as she lowered her head to rest against his chest again. "I'd be disappointed if you weren't attracted to me."

"I didn't say I was."

"You didn't have to." She looked up and smiled, 30 years of confidence in her gaze. "I can feel it."

He wasn't about to reply.

"It's the one disadvantage of being a man. You give away your thoughts. Whereas you can't tell if I'm attracted to you or not."

They were talking softly enough that no one in the growing crowd could hear them, so Kyle decided to see where this conversation would lead them. It was certainly more interesting than worrying about her brother staring at them all night.

"Are you attracted to me?" he asked, more out of masculine pride than need to know.

She shook her head. "No."

He narrowed his gaze on her. "Are you telling the truth?"

"Do you think I am?"

"I don't know."

She laughed, her smile teasing. "I will tell you one thing: We've made it through the first 15 minutes, and with any luck, I might be able to stand 12 hours with the one man I've never expected to dance with."

Oh. That didn't sound like a woman who wanted him. Damn. For a moment, he'd had

fairy-tale aspirations of finding out what was under that flirty red skirt. "I never wanted to dance with you, either."
"Well, you're stuck with me now," she said. "I came here tonight to help out a good cause, and to have a good time while I'm at it. I've always wanted to dance all night, and this is the first chance I've had. I'm not going to let anything or anyone spoil it for me." It was almost as if she was daring him to back out.
Then she gazed up at him. "Would you like to kiss me?"
Chapter Three

"Kiss you?" Kyle asked, tempted. "No," he replied. He was into saving pride at this moment.
"Are you telling the truth?" she said, teasing.
Molly smiled as if answering her own question. "So, Dob tells me you're going back on the circuit."
"As a guest judge to fill in for a friend of mine who's having surgery. I'm looking forward to it."
"How long will you be gone?" she asked.
He shifted his weight so that he could maneuver her closer to him. "A couple of weeks. I leave after the charity dance."
"Pete can look after the famous Double Masters Ranch?"
"About as well as anybody. How's your ranch?"
She shrugged. "I don't know. I stay away as much as possible now that Mom and Dad are gone. This past summer I took my sisters to visit our cousin, Mimi, in Union Junction, Texas. They've got a small ranch, too, but at least it's a manageable drive into Dallas."
"Get into any trouble?"
Her nose wrinkled. "Only when we went picnicking with Mimi and some of the brothers next door. There are 12 men on the ranch and they're all pretty rowdy."
He stiffened, not liking the idea that she might have been offended by a man.
"Did they bother you?"
Molly laughed at the idea. "It's never a bother when men get into a brawl

for
your attention." Molly laughed up at him. "Although my youngest sister
does tend
to get weak at the sight of blood."
"A fistfight over women?"
She laughed. "Mimi says the Jefferson boys are generally well behaved
but that
the occasional argument does break out."
"So, did you go out with any of the brothers?"
"Oh, no. I don't date..."
"Cowboys," he said, finishing her sentence.
Her gaze caught on his. "Is that what you've heard?"
"Yeah. I've heard you can be...picky."
Her eyes moved from his, which caused her nose to tilt into the air. "My
mother
used to say it was just as easy to love a dentist."
"Do you have bad teeth?" he asked, joshing around in a brotherly manner
he
thought she might be comfortable with, but she shook her head, in all
seriousness.
"No, but neither do I eat meat. Nor do I care to live in the country all my
life. As soon as my sisters are more settled, I'm moving to New York."
"To do what?" he asked, honestly curious as to why she'd want to leave
Ike.
"I want to go to law school," she said.
He nearly laughed, but stopped himself. Her eyes told him she was
serious.
"Why?"
"I finished college but tried modeling instead of going for a higher degree. I
never really had a future as a model, but even if I was a foot taller, I
wouldn't have wanted to do it for very long. I've always wanted to do
something
important, and now I'm ready.
"I like to debate, I like to argue, and I'd like to help people who have no
other voice out there," she said firmly. "And because there's only room for
one
lawyer in all of Ike, I'm going somewhere I can really make a difference."
Tough as it was, he felt an inkling of admiration for Dob's little sister.
Maybe
the family tree wasn't totally blighted. The only person Dob ever helped
was
himself.
Then again, this was a woman who didn't mind men fighting over her. Was

that a
character flaw? He wasn't certain. He'd probably consider women fighting
over
him a plus.
"What will Dob do without you?" he asked.
"Continue annoying you and everyone else in Ike." She shrugged. "It's
your own
fault, you know."
Chapter Four

"My fault? How so?" Kyle frowned at Molly, not wanting any blame where
Dob was
concerned. From the playground to the barroom, it had always been Dob
picking
fights with him.
"You let him get to you," Molly said. "If there's a mosquito on your arm,
you
slap it off, don't you?"
"Yeah."
"Think of him as a mosquito. You're too big to be bothered by him. You're
not
boys anymore."
"Could be you're right." He didn't want to talk about Dob. It was true that
the
family feud had made them enemies while they were kids, and the bad
blood
between them had only gotten personal when they became grown men.
Kyle's fingertips walked the curve of Molly's waist and his mind was on
how
fragile she was. Unfortunately, Dob crossed his line of vision, in the midst
of
eager men. "What is he doing?"
She looked up for a moment. "Taking bets, I think."
"On what?"
"Whether we make it from moonshadow till daylight," she said
matter-of-factly.
Kyle had never heard anything so outrageous. It was a charity ball, for
heaven's
sake! Everyone besides the dancers was busy eating, talking, or putting
money
into a large jar by the doorway.
"You're letting him get to you now," she said, noticing the change in his

expression.

"How do you know?"

"I can tell."

She shifted close to where he'd been itching before, but the sensation no longer

alarmed him — mainly because she was right. Dob's machinations had a peculiar

effect on his ardor.

"Let's play a game to pass the time, Kyle."

"All right," he said hesitantly. He wasn't usually a man for playing games.

"Close your eyes. We both will." She did, but he didn't, instead using the moment to drink in the sight of her beauty. With her eyes closed, she looked

peaceful, as if she were asleep. It was a very tempting picture.

Her eyes snapped back open. "Did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Imagine anything?" she demanded.

Not wanting to appear unobliging, he nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Good." She smiled. "Ladies first. I imagined that we were having a wonderful evening together."

Oh. He'd imagined seeing her lying in bed. "Uh —"

She frowned teasingly. "You didn't play, did you?"

He decided to forego the whole game. "Maybe I'm not too good at imagination."

A light, fine brow cocked at him. "Then you have to think up the next conversation. Time will pass more quickly if we're having fun."

Clearing his throat, he said, "I imagined that Dob disappeared. For tonight only," he amended hastily. After all, he wouldn't like it if someone insulted his brother, not matter how ornery Pete was.

Now her frown wasn't teasing.

"Okay," he said, not wanting to appear too mean-spirited. "I imagined what you

looked like asleep."

"Why?"

She would have to delve deeper into this matter, he realized with an inward sigh. "Because when you closed your eyes, I couldn't help myself. I just saw it.

And that's the truth," he stressed, going back to their original cross-purpose.

She smiled. "Do you want to play 'fact or fantasy' now?"

Chapter Five

"No." Kyle looked down at Molly with something akin to extreme discomfort. "Why would I?"

"So that we can spend the next 11 hours getting to know each other. Can you think of something better to do?"

Besides bribing the DJ to play faster music, no. But then he'd be stuck jumping around in a formal suit, and though it was February, it was warm inside from the heating. Hers was a harmless, social, conversational game, he supposed. He could get through it.

"All right," he said, surrendering his sanity.

She smiled at him approvingly and moved closer against him. The sensation was like liquid drowning all his senses, and he wanted nothing more than to pick her up and slide her down the length of his body.

Dob would kill him, she'd justifiably slap him, all of Ike in attendance would laugh, and he'd have to miss judging on the circuit if Dob hit him because he didn't dare retaliate. Dob was, after all, Molly's brother, and for some reason, Kyle didn't want to look bad in her eyes for beating her brother senseless. Best to put the sliding-down-the-body fantasy away quick.

"Truth or dare?" she asked.

"I thought you called it something else. Something with facts in it. I know lots of trivia about sports," he said hopefully.

"Okay. If I was a ball, what kind would you want me to be?"

His jaw sagged. His mind repeated her question. Yes, it was sports-related, but with a definite catch. Answer: A handball, because then I could hold you all I wanted.

Bzzz! Buzzer disallows answer. Handball was a fast, rough sport. A basketball. No good. He'd be throwing her away all the time. Bzzz! Football. No, best to avoid that on every level. He'd never thought so hard about such a silly question, he was certain. There was just no way he could answer this with dignity.

"A ball of cookie dough — preferably chocolate chip," he said finally. She shook her head. "I think you censored your imagination." She perplexed him. "How did you know?" "Because you took forever to answer, and your face was kind of stressed while you thought through your choices." She gave him a mock shame-on-you gaze. "So why a cookie-dough ball?" "Because chocolate chip is my favorite cookie." He was thinking a ball of cookie dough was soft and sweet, just like Molly. But he didn't dare tell her that. Her look was questioning, then somewhat sad as she put her face against his chest, hiding her eyes and her thoughts from him. "You didn't like my answer?" he asked.

Chapter Six

Molly knew Kyle hadn't meant to be funny, but she had to laugh at his answer just the same. She hid her face so she wouldn't hurt his feelings. She was attracted to him and that was a bad sign. He was tall, chiseled, good-looking, and humorless. He was trying to go along with the moment, but it was like asking a mountain to suddenly leap sideways. Kyle simply wasn't going to be able to partner her in a lighthearted manner and just say what was on his mind. They'd never last through the night if he didn't unbend. And she really wanted to win the charity dance so the children's wing at the hospital would receive the night's proceeds. For those children alone, she was willing to dance into next week with her brother's arch-rival. Besides, the family feud had never made much sense to her. "I can make you laugh, cowboy," she said. "Take a little starch out of that spine of yours." He grimaced, which probably served as his smile since he was holding her. Definitely she'd felt his attraction to her, but he wasn't about to go further

than a mechanical masculine sexual response. Still, she had to get him to climb

out of his formal demeanor or he might back out on her after a couple of hours.

"I don't have a very good sense of humor."

"All right, tough case. What's the difference between snowmen and snowwomen?"

"I don't know."

She smiled at him. "Snowballs!"

He didn't laugh, but he did perk up at her corny joke. He had to admire the way

she was trying to lighten up an awkward situation. Her warmth was unexpected,

given what he'd heard about her, and considering their family history.

"Can I change my answer from chocolate-chip-cookie-dough ball to snowball?"

"Why a snowball?" she asked, pleased he was still trying to play along.

"Because...I think it sounds better, that's all. It's the kind of answer I wish I

would think of off-the-cuff."

"I have trouble with spontaneous humor, too. I always think of something better

to say later."

He nodded.

"But if I'm a snowball, I might hit you in the face," she said.

"I'll catch you first and melt you in my hands." This type of conversation was

new to him; most people in Ike stuck to cattle and the weather.

Her eyes widened in spite of herself. Creative progress points for him! And she'd love to be his snowball for a night — she was already feeling pretty melted in places she hadn't expected to.

"So I'm a snowball. Hey, cowboy, do you know why you can't hear bunnies making

love?"

"No. Why?"

"Because they have cotton balls!" She only knew two really corny jokes, and she

wondered briefly what she would do if this one didn't make him laugh, if only

out of embarrassment.

But he laughed, a real chuckle, his smile almost...almost getting comfortable.

Dob appeared at their elbow suddenly, and Kyle went stiff under her hand.

"They called break time but I don't think you heard," Dob said, his words directed to Kyle. "Fifteen minutes."

Kyle dropped his hand from her waist as if he'd been burned.

"I'll see you in 15," he said courteously. Then he nodded to her brother.

"Dob."

Her brother barely nodded back.

The two men stared each other down before Kyle looked at Molly once more, then walked away.

"I don't like this," Dob complained. "He holds you too close. People are staring."

"I like the way he holds me. He's been a perfect gentleman. Far more perfect

than I'd like him to be, in fact." She enjoyed pushing Dob's buttons.

"Just so long as it stays that way. I'm watching every move he makes."

"I can take care of myself."

"Not where the Masters men are concerned. If a woman could catch them, don't you think they'd be caught by now?"

"You're not," she shot back. "And you're Kyle's age."

"Yeah, but I appreciate solitude. Kyle Masters chases all women, just like the rest of them. And don't think I'll stand here and watch you be ogled in front of all of Ike, Idaho."

"It's none of your business, Dob."

"Would you care for a drink?" Kyle asked, coming back to stand beside them. He

held out a drink to her, and Molly realized he'd known she wasn't going to get

her break if her brother had anything to do with it. Dob didn't mean to be selfish, but he was totally overprotective, and this made him oblivious to a lot of things.

"Thank you. I need to freshen up. Excuse me." She left the floor but Kyle caught

up with her and took her elbow.

"Hang on," he said. "I have something to say to you in private."

Chapter Seven

Private sounded promising. Maybe Kyle didn't mind her overprotective brother.

Perhaps he found her fun, intriguing company.
Or was he going to back out on her? Claim tired feet? Early rise tomorrow
to hit
the rodeo circuit?
Obviously he hadn't expected to hear his name called for dancing tonight
since
he'd planned to hit the road early. His chivalry in not begging off for that
reason spurred some begrudging admiration. Dob, of course, wouldn't see
it that
way.
Pooh on Dob, anyway. Molly allowed Kyle to lead her into a courtyard.
"Is it too cold out here for you?" Kyle asked.
Shaking her head, she said, "I'm too heated up at Dob to get cold."
"Is he always that way?"
"Short answer? Yes."
Kyle took her drink and placed it on a stone fence on the clubhouse patio.
"I
have a confession to make."
"Confessions will make the evening go faster," she teased.
"I do think you're beautiful."
She was touched. "Thank you, Kyle."
"I thought you were beautiful even before we danced."
"Is there a reason you're telling me all this now?" She was terribly afraid
he
was making this confession because he was going to leave her. Find her a
substitute. Abandon her to her games and her silly conversation. Make
her
disappoint the children at the hospital. And, just as bad, get the town's
people
gossiping about history repeating itself.
"Because I figure I'm no better than Dob. All I've done tonight is dance
around
what I should be saying." He sighed. "Conversation is not my strong suit,
and it
caught me off-guard to find myself wondering what you had on under your
dress.
And I'd want you to be a chocolate-chip-cookie-dough ball because I'd eat
you
all up from toe to top. And if you were a snowball that melted in my hands,
I'd
drink every drop."
She felt herself blink with surprise.
"Surprised?"

"Did you really think all that?" she asked, skeptical.
"Well, I don't really need to know what you're wearing under your dress, but I did wonder, yes. I mean, I'm not asking. But I did think about it. And some other less-gentlemanly things, obviously."
He was really cute when the tips of his ears went pink. "That's kind of sweet," she murmured.
He didn't reply.
"Kyle, tonight we're just dancing. Nothing more than that. The dance will end at eight in the morning, and you'll hit the road. I'll make plans to move to New York after my sisters are back in school. Tonight's my night to be Cinderella. And you can be my prince," she finished softly.
Standing over her in the cold moonlit night, she could barely see his face in the romantic light from the swaying Japanese lanterns and white mini-lights. But he was obviously watching her, listening to every word she'd said, digesting it.
Inside the ballroom she could hear people having a good time. The truth was, she wanted to keep him with her for the rest of the dance. And it wasn't just about winning anymore. Or kicking up her heels all night. If she was honest with herself, she wanted this night with him.
"I've got a confession, too," she said. "I want you to kiss me. And if you kiss me for real, not like Dob's little sister, I'll tell you what I've got on under my dress."
Chapter Eight

"I thought you didn't like cowboys," Kyle said.
"Maybe I like you," she replied.
"I'm mighty tempted, but to be honest, I think you're just trying to make Dob mad."
"Why would I do that?"
He shrugged. "I don't know. He's got a hair-trigger temper, though, and I don't aim to stoke it. Not tonight."

He had many admirable qualities, but the ability to forget who Molly was for the night wasn't one of them. She was nothing like he had expected, but it seemed the past still stood between them. Or at least Dob did.

"I'm sorry," she said, disappointed. So much for Cinderella.

"For what?"

"For asking you to kiss me. And that you have to partner me. I know you're only being a gentleman."

Inside the ballroom, the announcer called the couples back to the floor. Her pride hurt. She didn't look at Kyle. She couldn't change the past, and she couldn't be anyone except who she was. And she wasn't going to keep trying to pretend that this night could be fun for either of them. She had hoped he saw the "feud" as she did, but apparently it had meaning as far as he was concerned.

He took her hand and silently they returned to the floor. Molly didn't offer any conversation. Neither did Kyle. They slow-danced, holding each other awkwardly. When a fast dance played, they didn't change positions. This way, their eyes never met. But as much as they ignored each other, staying lost in their own thoughts, Molly felt the heat growing between them. A mutual attraction simmered; it teased and tormented with their every move. They'd shift to a different, less ill-at-ease position, only to find a different kind of tension building. Everywhere he rested his hand, her skin burned. She knew Kyle felt it, too, because he kept clearing his throat. Once or twice she thought he might say something, but he never did.

And then, to her very great surprise, exactly 44 minutes into the hour — one minute before the break would be announced — Kyle moved his hands to cup her face. Her gaze jumped to his. He stroked her cheeks for a moment as he stared

down into her eyes, and then he bent down to touch his lips to hers.
The entire ballroom went silent. No one could miss a six-foot-four man
bending
down to kiss a woman who barely reached his chest. Besides, everyone
had already
been watching them out of the corners of their eyes, expecting an
argument to
break out at any moment.
She didn't care who was watching. Winding her arms around his neck,
she kissed
Kyle back for all she was worth. He smelled sexy, he felt heavenly, and he
knew
what to do with his mouth.
"Break!" the DJ called.
Neither she nor Kyle took a break from the smooching. If anything, she felt
him
put more body into it. She moved closer between his legs, tilting her head
back
for him to more easily and deeply plunder her mouth.
"Break!" the DJ repeated loudly, sounding desperate.
"Damn it! Break!" Dob hollered into the microphone. "Can't you hear?"
Kyle broke away to glance at Dob, who was posed like a bantam rooster
at the DJ
stand. Kyle also noted that the floor was empty. They had a small
audience of
astonished and amused people.
"I hear, but I'm not listening," Kyle said.
Chapter Nine

"They have to take a break from the floor, don't they?" Dob asked the DJ.
"The rules do state that everyone has to be off the floor for a 15 minute
break
each hour," the DJ confirmed, almost apologetically.
Kyle turned back to her. "Hate to break when it was getting good, but we
must
play by the rules."
For once, she was glad for the rules. Her face on fire from the whispering
of
spectators and her brother's stormy expression, Molly stepped from his
arms. "I
think it's just as well."
Dob gained her side the instant she walked from the floor. Taking her by

the
arm, he pulled her outside. "Molly, what were you thinking?"
"That it was the best kiss I'd ever had. Dob, cool off. It didn't hurt
anything."
He took a deep breath. "Molly, for years you've been the mother figure to
our
two younger sisters. I know you're ripe for striking out on your own, maybe
even
for falling in love. But what you don't know is what I haven't told you. And
I'm
telling you now, Kyle Masters is not the man for you."
"I wasn't looking for the man for me." Truthfully, she'd wanted one night —
this
night — with him. She did a lot for other people; she'd come to the dance
this
night for herself alone.
"If you want to throw away your good name, do it," Dob continued. "But
remember
that his grandfather played fast and loose with our grandmother, and she
was
never the same after he shamed her. Never."
"I don't know that I've heard the story that way," Kyle said, coming to
stand
beside Molly. Though Dob was tall and rangy, Kyle had him beat by four
inches he
used to his advantage. "It seems to me that our grandfather wanted to get
married, and your grandmother did not."
"Same thing! What's the difference?" Dob looked at Molly triumphantly.
"The
Masters are not known to settle easily."
"I don't want to settle him! I want one night for myself. I didn't know Kyle
would be my partner; it was all about participating for the charity and
having a
good time. But I can make my own decisions, Dob. And if I want this one
night
for myself, I'll pick up my own pieces if I get broken." Molly was angry now.
"So be it." Storming off, Dob left the ballroom altogether.
"Thank you for sticking up for me," Kyle said.
"I didn't. I stuck up for myself." She looked up at Kyle, Dob's warning
ringing
in her ears. But I don't want to tie him down.
Yet, I sure as heck don't want to fall for him, either. And whether I want to
admit it or not, he's a mighty tantalizing hunk.

"What are you thinking about?"

She shook her head. "I'm thinking that I'm tired. Would you believe it?

Only two

hours into it and I'm pretty sure I'm exhausted."

"Didn't you say to just 'slap him off like a mosquito'?" Kyle asked softly.

True. But Dob's bite stayed with her. At the beginning of this evening, she'd

been comfortable with Kyle, almost innocently so, believing their story was a

book with one chapter, a chapter that read "The End" once the dance was over.

She hadn't expected attraction. Or a kiss that made her pulse race. And she

certainly hadn't expected the book "to be continued."

"Let me make you a totally unchivalrous, selfish proposition," Kyle said.

Chapter Ten

"Unchivalrous and selfish? That might actually be refreshing," Molly replied.

Kyle quirked a brow at her. "My suggestion is that we forfeit the dance-a-thon."

She stared at him, disappointed. "That pretty much hits unchivalrous and selfish

in the same bold stroke."

"Yeah, but here's the sweetener. I'm willing to match the money won tonight for

your particular charity."

"That's quite a sweetener. It could be a few thousand dollars, Kyle."

He nodded. "Worth it, though, since it's a charity event. I'm not all dressed up

in this tux because I thought I was getting out of here for free. I just never expected to be a full-fledged participant."

"So we forfeit, you match the winning dollar amount, and both of us go home

happy?" Surely it couldn't be that easy. That meant there would be two big winners tonight: whoever won the dance-a-thon, and her charity. Also, it was a

guaranteed donation, when she might not have been the winner tonight, anyway.

Not to mention her fantasy of dancing all night had turned out to be less fun

than she'd imagined.

"Both of us go home right now to pack," he said, "Because the catch to

my offer

is: since I've spent a few hours dancing with you, in front of too many interested busybodies, I'd like you to spend a few hours alone with you."

"What?"

He grinned at her, sexy confidence all over his face. "I guess I'm asking you on

a date. Fair is fair, right? That kiss...that kiss blew me away. I'm even going to

let you off the hook about telling me what's under your dress, but I want to spend more time with you, preferably away from your brother and this crowd."

"So you can find out first-hand?"

Shaking his head, he touched the side of her cheek with one finger, a stroke

that sent her pulse fluttering. "So, what do you say to running away with me for

one night?"

"It hardly seems like a fair exchange. I get my charity donation, which means

more to me than you can know...what's the catch? Exactly how alone are we

talking?"

He smiled at her, but his dark eyes simmered with heat. "The fair is in town. We

could go get stuck at the top of the Ferris wheel together. It takes 45 minutes

just to load the ride. Forty-five minutes is a bunch of guaranteed privacy."

From the top of the Ferris wheel, one could see practically all of Ike, and the

lights in the nearby city. But that wasn't close to the reason that she was tempted to accept his offer. She liked him. He knew it. Dob knew it. Her

kiss

had given her away.

She was the one who'd said she didn't want to settle him. That was true.

They

were worlds apart...but what could going with him for one night hurt?

"I don't know if being stuck at the top of a Ferris wheel with you is a good thing," she said sternly.

He raised his hands in surrender. "You're safe. Honest."

Then he laughed. Maybe at her.

Drat him! He knows he's irresistible. What exactly could I do to keep myself

from making the monumental mistake of wanting him? If the way he

kisses is any
indication of what would follow, I'd be one happy lady....
"I have just one qualifier to this scenario," Molly said.
He grinned. "Why are you so worried about being alone with me?"
"Because...because strange things have been known to happen between
Masters and
Dewberrys."
"You might decide you like us."
She stared at him, trying to decide what his words meant. Did he want her
to
like him, or was he just like his footloose, rodeo-loving grandfather? Would
she
be walking in her grandmother's shoes, right down the path to a broken
heart?
Kyle gently touched her cheek. "C'mon," he said. "I'm known for being a
gentleman."
She cocked a brow at him doubtfully. Gentleman? Actually, she had to
admit she'd
never heard anything bad about Kyle, except from Dob. Over the years,
she had
even admired many things about him.
But right now it was annoying the way he was smiling at her as if he knew
a
secret she didn't! As if he knows me better than I know myself.
Well, she hadn't grown up with Dob trying that same smirking attitude on
her and
learned nothing. She knew how to wipe that I-know-you grin off a man's
face.
"Kyle Masters, I'm more than willing to go with you and be as much of a
good
sport as you've been about this charity dance, but should you and I end up
sharing anything more than a kiss, you have to marry me. Pronto. I'm not
going
to be the second Dewberry to be shamed by a Masters in front of all of
Ike,
Idaho."
Chapter Eleven

Kyle raised a brow at Molly. "Folks are already talking, Molly. Just us
being on
the dance floor together was enough to keep folks hanging around to
watch. The

donations tonight should be phenomenal." He paused for a moment, studying the apprehension in her face. "As I mentioned, it was an unchivalrous proposition. You have more to lose than me."

Her eyelashes lowered for an instant. With Dob looking ready to start a fight any instant, and with everyone who'd ever known them looking on, Molly had no reason to leave with him. But he figured they'd be better off going where there were a lot fewer prying eyes — and selfishly, now that he'd been able to get close to Molly, he wasn't anxious to give up the magic. He had liked her for so long. He'd never approached her, thinking that she despised him. For good reason, sure. But that didn't mean he had to give up the one night he had to change her mind.

"You're a lovely lady, Molly. I'd never do anything to hurt you," he said softly. "Stay or go, the choice is yours."

Her eyes widened. She glanced toward her brother. "I'll go," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Come on." He took her hand, pulling her toward the DJ stand. "We're forfeiting," he told Pete.

Since the microphone was on, the whole room heard. A gasp went up from the audience, and murmuring began. He could almost feel the relief from the other dancers. He could feel Molly's tension, too, as her hand clutched his.

"We wish all the remaining couples the best of luck," he said into the microphone. Then he put his hand over the mike. "Can I see you?" he said to his smirking younger brother.

"Sure." Pete got down from the DJ stand and followed them outside. Dob barreled out, angrily standing between Molly and Kyle as best he could despite their clasped hands. "Just a minute, Kyle. Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"We're going to the fair. We might get there before it closes. Molly and I are going to ride the Ferris wheel."

Dob's brows nearly jumped into his hair. "Oh, no. I see plainly what you're up to, and I won't allow it. You're not getting my sister alone on a ride where no one can see what's happening. And if you think I don't know that that's exactly how your grandfather wooed our grandmother, you've got another think coming."

It was true. The Ferris wheel — largest in the country — was known for its size and the supposed promise one man made to his woman while at the top. The enclosed cage-like seats were perfect for romance, and when Molly's grandmother got off the ride, her face had been glowing, her skirt just enough awry for people to talk. Her reputation was ruined when her Masters man didn't return from the rodeo circuit to make it legal. The Wheel of Romance, it was called now. No one had ever really known if Kyle's grandfather made love to Molly's grandmother while on it, but the myth really alarmed Dob.

"Hold on, Dob," Pete said. "They're just going for an innocent carnival ride. Forty-five minutes. No different from a taking a ride into town. Settle down."

"No! Molly, you are not going," Dob insisted.

"I am," she replied. "Dob, I love you, even though you're bull-headed. But I am going with Kyle, because I don't believe in family feuds. And I'm not about to let any romantic fantasy spoil my evening. It's one night at the fair — and nothing more."

"He's already kissed you!" Dob shouted, his tone desperate. "Don't you think more could happen...up there?" he demanded.

"Tell you what." Pete shouldered his way between Dob and Kyle, pushing them apart so that Kyle and Molly were standing close again. "I'll go with them and chaperon them. All right?"

Kyle didn't like that idea at all. They were both adults, not a couple of teenagers. "We don't —"

"Yes, you do," Pete insisted. "I'll be the third wheel tonight, just to keep Dob from having a seizure. Molly's got a right to a chaperon, and it's either me or Dob, Kyle. Choose."

Kyle sighed. Truth was, he'd walk through a brick wall to have the chance to spend time with Molly. "Come on, Pete," he said reluctantly. "If you don't mind, Molly."

She looked at her brother, who still didn't appear happy. "Good night, Dob," she said. "I'll see you later."

The three of them walked off, heading toward Kyle's truck. "Now I want you to get lost as soon as we're out of Dob's eyesight," Kyle said.

"Uh-uh," Pete said, with a wink at Molly. "No way. You need a bodyguard, Kyle, more than Molly needs a chaperone. Consider me hired. 'Course, you have to pay for my ride ticket."

How was he going to change Molly's mind about him with Pete hanging around?

Chapter Twelve

Even though Kyle skipped right over her threat of having to marry her if anything more than a kiss was shared between them on the Ferris wheel, she'd still decided to go with him. Why?

In one word: Dob.

Somehow, it felt very good to let go of the past. After all, it had felt awkward over the years not talking to Kyle and Pete, not acknowledging them beyond a nod because of something that had nothing to do with any of them. And the kiss had done a lot to change her mind. She had never been kissed like that in her whole life.

Maybe she shared more in common with her grandmother than a small stature.

The three of them got in the truck silently, Molly sitting between the two

men.

Kyle switched on the engine.

"You know, Molly, we don't have to do this," he said. "Maybe the Ferris wheel is

a bad idea. All that fresh air, all that wonderful atmosphere — maybe we should

go fishing instead. You ever midnight-fished? Or maybe we could drive into town

and see a movie."

She stared at him. "Having second thoughts? Or did you develop a latent fear of

heights, brought on by my brother?"

He rubbed at his jaw, not looking at her. "Maybe both."

Pete sighed in disgust. "It's going to be horrible listening to you fail at romance, Kyle. There are some things that shouldn't be handed down from brother

to brother, and bad technique is one."

"You just stare out the window and pretend you're interested in the countryside," Kyle instructed.

Molly leaned her head on Kyle's shoulder and didn't say a word. What was she

going to say? There was nothing easy about either of their situations.

"Or I could just take you home," he said quietly. "We don't have to go out, Molly."

She looked up at him. "I know you're not afraid of what people say about you,

and I know you're not really afraid of my brother. You only acted like you cared

about his opinion so he wouldn't feel like a peon. So what are you really worried about?"

He cleared his throat. "You, I guess."

"Why?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

Instantly, a spear seemed to fly right into her heart. Did he mean that he knew

he would — eventually?

"I said I wouldn't, and I won't."

She thought she understood. "When you said that at the dance, you meant

physically. Now you're having second thoughts because you mean emotionally. Am I

right?"

He glanced at her, their eyes meeting in the dimness of streetlights.

"Yeah."

"It's okay," she said. "Believe it or not, I can fend for myself."

Kyle stopped the truck. "Pete, get out."

"What?"

"Go ride in the truck bed," Kyle told him. "I want to talk to Molly without your

big ears hearing everything. What I've got to say is between one man and one

woman."

Chapter Thirteen

Kyle's gaze seemed to glow at her in the dark. Molly repressed a small shiver of

excitement as Pete got out, closed the truck door — almost too eagerly, it

seemed — and hopped in the back. He banged on the roof, and Kyle turned his

attention back to the road.

Molly held her breath, her posture stiffer, her head no longer resting on his shoulder. "So...you had something to say?"

"I do." He seemed to choose his words carefully before staring down at her. Then

he cupped her chin with one hand, guiding her head back down to his shoulder. "I

sure do like the way you feel, Molly Dewberry. You just seem to fit me right."

Her eyes went wide. She wanted to hear him say it again, just so she'd know she

hadn't dreamed the words — or the emotion she'd heard behind them. But she

didn't say anything, her feelings too carefully guarded as she tried to keep herself from falling head over heels.

Ten minutes later, Kyle pulled up to the county fair. "There's the Ferris wheel.

Lots of light, lot of people for safety. I think there's safety in numbers, don't you?"

"I like to get lost in a crowd. Especially a crowd of strangers." She got out of

the truck when Kyle came around to open her door. Pete jumped to the ground as

well.

"I hope he told you something really important," Pete said. "'Cause my

ears are
frozen from the wind."
She smiled at him. "He didn't."
Pete punched his older brother in the arm. "It was cruel to kick me out if
you
weren't going to go through with it."
"Shut up, Pete," Kyle growled.
Once inside the gate, Kyle threaded through the crowd until they got to
the
Ferris wheel. The neon lights on the huge wheel lit up the darkness, and
Molly
thought she'd never seen anything so romantic in her life.
"Hey, Penny," Pete said to the operator of the Ferris wheel.
The petite brunette squealed and threw her arms around his neck. "Now
this is
the way it's done," he said to his brother, giving Penny a big hug that
mashed
her whole body up against his. "Since when did you learn to handle such
a big
ride, honey?"
"Never you mind, Pete Masters. The ride is now officially closed. That's
the
last time I'm loading it tonight. And I'm free if you are," she hinted.
"I might be," he said smoothly, "if you'll allow these two to have their own
private ride after everyone leaves."
Molly started to say that they didn't need a ride on the Ferris wheel when
she
felt Kyle's hand take hers in his. He really wanted to go on the ride with
her,
she realized. And she really wanted to go for a romantic nighttime ride
with
him....
"There'll be nobody at the whole fair except you and me. No one will even
know
we were here," he said. "Can't get any safer for your reputation than that,
huh?"
He was referring to the time her grandmother and his grandfather had
gotten off
the ride together, her skirt slightly askew. "I guess not," she said, knowing
full well that her reputation might be safe, but not necessarily her heart.
But
without the whole ride needing to be loaded — a 45 minute process —
they'd only

be up there for five minutes, max. "It'll be fun."
After the ride had emptied and the riders departed, the carney workers
began
clearing debris away. Penny motioned them toward the now empty ride.
"Help
yourself," she said.
Feeling like she was embarking on a daring adventure, Molly entered the
steel
cage and sat down on the red vinyl seat. Kyle followed her. Penny and
Pete
stared in at them, smiling, as Penny locked the cage. "Have fun!" she told
them.

* * *

Up on the ride, Molly relaxed against Kyle, his arm along her shoulders,
as
their car rose higher and higher. Just as she could see the whole city from
the
top of the wheel, the ride came to a complete stop.
"Uh-oh," said Molly.
They sat up and looked down, but in the darkness, they couldn't see
much except
some carney workers scurrying to clean up and get home. Lights were
being shut
off at various tents. The other rides were dark.
"It's all right," Kyle said. "I'm sure that this is my brother's way of getting
back at me for making him ride in the back of the truck."
Oh. A prank. She should have known.
"Or maybe," Kyle said, turning her toward him, "maybe this is my
brother's idea
of giving us some time alone together. In which case, I don't want to let his
efforts go unrewarded."
And then he kissed her, softly and sweetly, and Molly heard herself moan,
and
suddenly she knew why her grandmother's face had been glowing and her
skirt had
been awry.
Chapter Fourteen

"And then, maybe some things are better left undone," Kyle said, his

voice

sounding a little shaky to Molly's ears after they finally pulled apart from the

kiss. She could feel her heart hammering so hard she was certain he must either

hear, or feel it.

"I shouldn't take advantage of this situation, now that I think about it," he continued. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted a woman, but he also

respected her condition for coming with him tonight.

She felt like she'd been hit with icy water. Had he not felt the earth move the

way she had?

Or maybe it was only the Ferris wheel, swaying slightly, or the cage itself moving from their bodies coming together, then pulling apart. Still, she had wanted him to feel the way she had. This kiss felt just as earth-rocking as the

one at the dance had — or was she imagining his heated response to her?

But all she said was, "Pete's a good brother. And Penny seemed to like him."

"Penny likes anyone who pays attention to her. Pete's always had a soft spot for

her, but she's not the type to commit to a relationship," he said.

Molly straightened. "I thought it was the Masters men who were unable to commit."

Kyle shook his head. "Myth. Or what did you call it? Fact or fantasy? That one's

truly fantasy. Come here. I don't want you to get cold."

And he bundled her up next to him. She put her feet up on the seat and leaned

into his chest, loving the feel of his arms around her.

"I wonder how long Pete intends to hold us hostage?" he grumbled.

"I'm sorry you are having such a terrible time. There are two seats in here, you

know," she said, struggling to sit up. "And I'm not that cold."

"Hey, wait a minute. All I meant was that my brother isn't showing a lady a very

nice time, and I fully intend to remind him of that later. I didn't mean I don't enjoy being up here with you."

She looked at him. "Yell down at him to get us out of here."

"No way." Kyle looked alarmed at her request. "Look around at the city lights,

Molly." He held her closer, not allowing her to get into the other seat. "I've

always liked you, Miss Dewberry," he said huskily, pressing kisses to her neck.

"I just want to be sure you like me as much as I like you."

"I'm up here with you, aren't I?" She loved what he was doing to her senses, as

much as her frightened heart tried to deny it.

"Yes, but I promised you a good time. It doesn't seem fair to romance you when

you're not getting the ride I promised you," he said.

She pulled away and gave him an arch look. "Are you saying if the ride were

moving you'd have a better shot?"

"That would be overconfident, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

He laughed, and tugged her to him again so he could wrap her in his arms. "I'll

tell you a secret if you don't tell Dob."

"I'd love to hear a secret that my brother will never know."

"Your grandmother dumped my grandfather, not the other way around."

She jerked away from him, her mouth dropping open. "What?"

Chapter Fifteen

There was no better time to tell her, Kyle figured. His heart was in such a terrified place right now. Dob had filled her head with all these horror stories

about him over the years — the Unsettled Masters Men theory — but that was the

biggest fantasy of all. "My grandfather loved your grandmother," he told her.

"Why do I not know this?"

"Because Dob doesn't know it. Or maybe he does and he choses to tell the story

in a light that gives him a reason to gripe about us. Maybe he just sees himself

in an underdog role. I've always thought he just likes to fight about everything, but that's just my opinion."

Molly pulled away from him. "My brother only gets upset about your ranch. And it

does have to do with your grandfather." She stared at him. "Is there a reason

you're telling me this now? Other than the fact that...you'd probably like to...you know."

"Make love to you? I won't even try to deny it. But I won't." He stared back at her stubbornly.
"And why not?" she demanded, sounding suddenly like a woman scorned.
"Because you think I'm telling you whatever I have to just to get you into bed.
It tells me that we might never be able to put the past behind us. We have to trust each other. Or should I say, you have to trust me, Molly."

* * *

Molly stared out at the brilliant lights of the city. The fair was now totally dark. If Pete and Penny were down there, they sure weren't giving any hint of it. "I think your brother forgot about us," she said miserably, from her place on the other seat.
"I think he did, too. His life is now forfeit," Kyle said, sounding as if his teeth were grinding together.
"Maybe you could explain to me one more time what I'm not understanding," Molly said. "I've heard the same story for a lifetime. It's going to take more than a few minutes for me to understand that it might have happened another way."
Kyle sighed. "Your grandmother decided she didn't want to be married to a man who lived his life on the rodeo circuit. She chose to break the engagement. Everyone just assumed he'd left her after he got what he wanted at the top of this wheel. If the town gossips knew he wanted to make an honest woman of her, but she turned him down...well, my grandfather knew it was better that people thought he was a cad."
"How do you know all this?" Molly desperately wanted to believe him.
"Because I've got a stack of letters and postcards at home that my grandpa wrote to her, begging her to reconsider. Telling her that the only woman he'd ever love was her."
Molly's heart began a frantic tattoo inside her. All the years that had gone

by,
and yet — Her grandmother hadn't been used by her rodeo beau. She
could have
married him to save her reputation, but she had chosen not to. "Why can't
I tell
Dob this?" she demanded.
"Because he's having way too much fun believing in this feud," Kyle said.
"If we
took that away from him, what would he have? Now come here, sexy lady.
I know
you're cold in that dress, and this tux may not be the warmest, but friends
should share their body heat."
Molly crossed to his seat and slowly went into his lap. "Friends?"
"And maybe more," he qualified, running his hand down her hair. "If you
want,
Molly Dewberry."
Chapter Sixteen

"I think...I think I do want," she murmured, in a surrender that sounded
heavenly to Kyle's ears. But maybe he should double-check. The clock
was about
to turn forward, and he needed to make certain Molly wanted to time travel
on
this old Ferris wheel. Because if she let him, he was going to give her a
ride
she'd never forget.
Holding her in his lap, stroking her cheek with one hand and cradling her
back
with the other, he said, "Want what, sweetheart?"
"More," she said softly, snuggling against him. "More, more, more."
So he kissed her, long enough, deep enough to make her moan. Her
hands clutched
his shoulders and he told himself to remember that feeling. He liked her
holding
him with that much need and womanly want. One day I'm going to feel her
do that
when we're both naked. Hands on my shoulders, begging me to get inside
her.
Tonight, he wasn't about to make her cold. "Let me turn you around,
Molly." He
slid her forward into his lap. Kissing her neck, he stroked the outside of
the

bodice of her red dress, with the skirt flaring ever so femininely over her knees. She put her hands on his so they could explore her body together.

Right

then and there, Kyle knew he was a goner. "You're so sexy, Molly," he said on a

groan. "I don't care if Pete ever gets us out of this damn cage."

"I don't, either."

With a sigh of complete contentment he adored, she leaned back against him, her

head on his shoulder. Together, they traced her breasts, down her curves, and

down to the flared red skirt. Moving underneath it, he stroked the inside of her

legs, enjoying the silky sensation of her skin against his callused palms, and

the softness of her touch on top of his hands.

"I've dreamed of this night," he said huskily.

"You have not," she said with a giggle that sounded decidedly nervous and deliciously, wickedly convince-me-otherwise.

"I did. I always admired you from afar," he said, tapering his finger right down

the center of her panties with just enough pressure to let her know the magic

that was to come. She was wearing a thong, he suddenly realized as he continued

his quest downward, and it was all he could do not to growl like a bull and take

her in hungry, crazed lust. "I know what you've got on under your dress now," he

told her, nipping at her shoulder.

"You discovered my secret," Molly said breathless.

"No. I'm about to know your secret," Kyle said, lifting Molly up just the slightest so that he could stroke her bare bottom. Thank heavens for wallets,

and flat condoms that fit inside them, and easy-tear foil, and —

"Let me do it," she said, turning to help him put it on, and he did, loving the

fact that she stroked him way more than necessary for a typical fast slip-it-on.

So he kissed her lips, holding her captive, before turning her fully around and

moving the thong out of the way. She still had him in her firm little grip, guiding him.

He ran a finger along her wetness, groaning inside himself, before she placed him at the edge of pleasure.
"It's now or never," he said. "No going back once —"
"Kyle," she said, "I'm not about to change my mind." And then she slid down him, taking him completely inside her, and Kyle saw stars that had nothing to do with the beautiful night sky.
Chapter Seventeen

Molly never dreamed she could feel so heavenly. She never knew that making love could feel so wonderful. Maybe it was the fact that they'd always thought they were enemies; perhaps it was the edge of danger of making love to someone a little bit forbidden. If she was caught in the grip of a fantasy, she didn't want to get over it, Molly thought wildly, feeling Kyle thrust inside her. His hands held her hips tightly against him, his fingers spreading her and teasing her. She had colors in her mind not unlike neon fair lights, and a sound building in her throat that felt like it would equal a roller-coaster scream, and all she could do was hang on, hang on, hang on —
When she screamed her pleasure, all Molly knew was how glad she was that the fairgrounds were empty and they were far away from residential addresses.
"Oh, Kyle," she started to moan, when his tempo changed, and she realized that she was about to climax again. Desperate and lost in the feelings sweeping over her, she begged, "Don't stop, don't stop!"
"I won't," he promised. "Let me take you there."
And he did. Her knees went limp. He helped her relax against him and then held her tightly, his face pressed against her neck, as he found his own pleasure.
She knew when he did, because he groaned, "Oh, Mol...ly," so sweetly that she told herself she was going to hear him say her name that way many more times in her life.

They stayed that way, her safe in his lap, for what seemed like a long, pleased time. But it wouldn't last, Molly knew. Sooner or later they had to face life on earth. "I know the perfect way to finish this."

"I don't want to finish anything," he said stubbornly, holding her in his arms more tightly.

"That's not what I meant, exactly. I've been thinking about what you told me about my grandmother."

"Every word of it is true."

"I know." He wouldn't lie to her. She'd always known the man he was didn't square with the man Dob said he was. And the lost, empty feeling she'd always had in her life seemed filled now. Somehow she felt whole, and not so aimless, with Kyle holding her. It was as if a circle had been completed, arc matching arc seamlessly. "You said my grandmother turned your grandfather down."

"She did. She broke his heart. He was never the same after that."

"I'll never tell anyone that," Molly said. "Because clearly my grandmother still loved your grandfather, and didn't want him to give up his dreams and settle down to an ordinary life, just because people knew about their passion. I do want to read their letters, but...I think we've avoided the past all our lives. Now I think we should learn from it."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

Very softly, yet with all her heart, Molly told him.

Chapter Eighteen

"Now hold on a damn minute," Dob's rough voice growled into Pete's drowsy ear.

"What the hell do you mean you don't know where my sister is?"

Pete's eyes snapped open. He'd drifted to sleep with words of praise in his ears, only to be rudely awakened by the phone, and an angry voice on the line.

"Dob?"

"Who the hell else do you think would be calling you at 4:30 in the morning? I'm

outside, and I see your truck, and I know my sister's in there with your brother, and if you don't get her out here fast, I'm coming in with my shotgun!

Fair warning!"

Beside him, Penny stirred. Jeez! How had they fallen asleep?

Covering the mouthpiece with his fingers, he said, "Sweetheart, wake up."

She moaned, and Dob erupted. "Damnation, I heard that loud and clear!

You'd best

not be in there with my sister! I'm taking the safety off my gun right now and

coming in."

"Get dressed, sweetheart. Things are about to get rough." Jumping out of the

bed, Pete began pulling on his own clothes. He had to get back to the fairgrounds and let Kyle and Molly off the ride. But first of all, he had to lose Dob.

"She's not here, Dob. Calm down. And I've got a lady friend in here, so if you

don't mind scurrying off, she and I would like to go back to sleep. It is 4:30,

you know."

Dob hesitated. "That's not Molly in there with you? I distinctly heard a woman's

voice, and I haven't seen my sister since you drove off with her."

"Nope. Molly's not my type. Dewberries in general are not my type," he said,

just for good measure, knowing Dob was about as much on the edge as a man could

be.

The phone snapped off in his ear. "Good night to you, too," Pete said.

"We better go get your brother down. He's going kill us both," Penny said.

"And

if he doesn't, he'll have me fired for sure."

"Let's go," he said. "My brother might kill me, but it will have been worth it,"

he said, grinning at her.

They hurried to the truck and returned to the fairgrounds. Racing to the Ferris

wheel, Pete glanced up at the topmost cage. "It's very still up there. God, Kyle's going to jump on me like a wild bull —"

"I can't get this lever to move," Penny said, between gritted teeth. A noisy bump and a grinding noise, and slowly the wheel began to turn, inch by torturous

inch.

"I oughta have known," Dob said behind them. Pete turned and just barely ducked

the punch Dob threw. "I oughta have known you damn Masters would just really

enjoy having history repeat itself, especially in front of an audience."

"No, that was a bonus," Pete said, ducking the headlock Dob tried to surround

him with. But Pete wasn't telling the truth, because the last thing he wanted to

do was embarrass Molly. But the other fair workers gathered around, which

guaranteed the night ride wouldn't remain a secret.

Penny stopped the ride and went to unlock the cage. Dob stopped swinging, and

Pete held his breath, praying for a miracle.

Chapter Nineteen

"I'm warning you," Penny said to Molly and Kyle. "Your brother's spitting mad,

Molly."

Molly stood, straightening her hair. She and Kyle had shared a night of intense

passion, and nothing Dob could say would ever change her feelings about that.

Only Kyle could change her feelings...and he hadn't had a chance to answer her —

her totally selfish proposition, as he'd called the one he'd given her at the dance. They'd known what they would face when the Wheel of Romance ride was over

and the cage was opened. Molly glanced back at Kyle but he was staring through

the bars toward the admission area, so taking a deep breath, she stepped out

onto the walk area.

Before she could go down the steps, Kyle tugged her skirt firmly into place. "No

sense in that part of history repeating itself," he said. "But you can have a smile on your face if you want."

With Dob glowering over there? With not knowing what Kyle's answer was? And yet,

in spite of all that, Molly did smile. "That was the most fun I've ever had,

Kyle."

He winked at her, and took her hand. Together, they walked down the steps. Pete

held Dob back. "Sorry about that, bro," Pete said.

"I'm not — though I should let Dob whup your hide, just for generic reasons,"

Kyle said. And then, right in front of everyone, Kyle kissed Molly full on the mouth.

Fully insulted and at full tilt now, Dob got free of Pete. He barreled over to Kyle and Molly, but she put up a hand. "Stop," she said. "Take a deep breath,

and hear what I have to say."

For some reason, Dob stopped, though he stared at her. "Give me one good reason

why I shouldn't defend my sister's honor."

"Because I love him," she said. "And that's my business."

Instantly, Dob's face turned from angry to heartbroken. "Molly, honey, I warned

you about him."

"I know you did. I made my own decision, Dob. You don't have to protect me. No

matter what happens, I had more fun all night with this cowboy than I've ever

had."

She felt Kyle standing at her back. "I can speak for myself," he said.

"Dob, you

don't know half as much as you think you do. But I would never hurt your sister."

"You've ruined her," Dob complained. "And I'm thinking you enjoyed walking in

your granddaddy's footsteps."

Molly was about to protest angrily to being described as "ruined" — what year

did Dob think it was? But Kyle stopped her.

"If I can walk in my granddaddy's footsteps, I'll die happy, knowing I was all

the man I should have been. No matter what happens between Molly and me, I think

you and I should move forward. Bury the hatchet. What do you say to that?"

Surprised, Molly watched as Kyle extended his hand to her brother.

Chapter Twenty

Dob scratched his head and shuffled his feet. "Please, Dob," Molly said.

"It would mean a lot to me if you could put your bad feelings aside."

A child getting an inoculation couldn't look more reluctant. He loved his sister, and had always tried to protect her from pain. To force her to choose between the two men she loved would be too much for her to bear. And he was afraid he would be the one to lose out. Silently, he stuck his hand in Kyle's for the world's fastest handshake. "There," he said sulkily. He wouldn't have done it for anyone but Molly.

Kyle nodded, and put his arm around Molly's shoulders. "Molly and I have an announcement to make, and there's no better time than the present to do it," he said. "She's asked me to marry her, and I'm accepting here and now as fast as I can in order to get her to the altar before she changes her mind."

Squealing, Molly threw her arms around Kyle's neck. "You made me wait! You could have told me up there!"

"Just remember," he said in her ear, "it's the only thing I made you wait for."

She giggled, her heart full inside her.

"I had to make sure you weren't just using me to try to break away from Dob," he told her. "You know, you might have lured me into that cage on purpose."

"And seduced you against your will."

"Exactly," he said, playing along. "You know, your grandmother was something of a wild woman, too."

Laughing, she wrapped her foot around the back of his leg, lightly pushing him against her. "It's rumored you Masters can't be settled."

"Except by a wild Dewberry."

Dob was telling anyone who would listen how he'd brought about the end of Ike, Idaho's most famous family feud. He declared that he'd never had any hard feelings against Kyle or Pete, that he'd always said he'd be happy to see

a
sister of his married to one of the Masters boys. Dob predicted that the
Masters-Dewberry alliance would mean the biggest and the best ranch in
the
state; in fact, he was willing to take bets on it.
Pete was trying to convince Penny to hit the rodeo circuit with him so he
could
get out of Kyle's way — after all, even a ranch house is only big enough
for one
honeymooning couple.
And the fabled Wheel of Romance somehow blinked on, neon and
multicolored and
beautiful, almost as if by magic.

The End



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