



Jan Scarbrough
Kentucky
Bride

BLUEGRASS REUNION SERIES

Kentucky Bride

By Jan Scarbrough

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Kentucky Bride

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For Paula and the staff and volunteers of The Luci Center

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Chapter One

Downtown Chicago

“Hell, Brennan, this is a nice deal.” Construction company owner Ray Elliott riffled through the pages of the thick business proposal with the diligence of a general readying for a campaign.

Relaxing his shoulders, Camden Brennan sank back into the plush leather chair across from Elliott’s polished cherry office desk. He crossed one crisply-pressed trouser leg over the other and brought his fingertips up to touch his lips in a thoughtful steeple as he studied the man who held the future of Brennan Equipment Company in his hands.

With practiced indifference, he hid his true feelings. Half-closed eyes shrouded the gleam of excitement he knew to be in them. Slow and even breathing belied the adrenaline pumping through his veins. Not yet time to celebrate. He was willing to wait for Elliott’s decision, willing to bide his time like a cat stalking its prey. The rewards were huge. A multi-million dollar deal was in the works; a deal which, if he landed it, would restore a longtime customer to the Brennan fold and prove to his adoptive father that the fifty-year-old company tradition was safe in Cam’s hands.

Winning the Elliott contract had been too important to leave to a mere salesman. With the weak economy and over two hundred employees depending upon him for work, Cam brought the bid to Chicago himself. Brought it straight into the lion’s den with the confidence of a biblical Daniel.

Ray Elliott was a cagey and worthy foe. Cam knew him well. Elliott hadn’t built the

biggest road construction company in the Midwest by being timid. That's why playing it cool was important. It was part of the game and prelude to the incredible rush he always felt when he landed a big contract.

Yet there was more at stake this time. His mother's cancer and subsequent long recovery had taxed even her second husband's ability to pay. Cam owed it to the man who adopted him to make the company succeed.

Elliott looked up from the paperwork, his gaze steady and thoughtful, gauging Cam's reaction. "Vince Clayton submitted a bid yesterday that was equally as attractive as yours."

Never flinching to show his surprise, Cam let the words sink in. He wouldn't put it past Elliott to play bidder against bidder with both heavy equipment companies vying for the business. Cam dropped his hands and sat forward, striving to keep his face blank. Only the trace of movement in his jaw hinted at his anger.

"My offer is solid."

"Why should I do business with Brennan Equipment when I've bought from Clayton for five years?" Elliott asked in a clipped voice.

Why? Because you can't turn me down. I've waited for this big deal all my life.

The question was a direct challenge to him. To his management of his father's company. Okay. If Elliott wanted a recital of what he already knew, Cam would give it to him.

"As you know, my equipment comes from Sweden. Clayton's doesn't," Cam said. "The European parts are assembled in the United States. You can't beat the manufacturer's quality or Brennan's A-1 service department. We have a twenty-four hour a day hotline. Your broken equipment will be up and running within twenty-four hours after you place a service call."

Before Elliott had the chance to respond, his secretary tapped twice and opened the office door. "Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Elliott," she said, "but you told me to let you know if Aimee called."

"Thank you, Cynthia." Elliott reached for his phone. "Hate to do this, Brennan, but I've been trying to talk to my daughter for three days. Her mother is driving me crazy because we can't get in touch with the girl. She doesn't even own a cell phone." He shook his head. "You married?"

"No, sir."

"You'll be married some day, and then you'll understand how women can make your life

miserable. Can't live with 'em. Can't live without 'em. Excuse me a moment."

"Certainly."

Cam shifted his gaze away from the man he'd come to do business with. This was awkward. *Damn awkward*. He didn't want to eavesdrop, but Elliott was shouting into the phone. A vein pulsed in Cam's neck.

He stood abruptly and walked to the window of the corner office, putting distance between him and the conversation carried in upper decibels. On the twenty-ninth floor of a high-rise, he had a panoramic view of the Chicago. Beneath him, the El snaked through downtown, and as he looked to the south, the city tapered off into industrial nothingness about a mile away. To the east he spotted landmarks—Grant Park and the Art Institute. He watched as glints of sunlight sparkled off Lake Michigan.

"Damn it, Aimee, your mother wants you home for the Renfro's party in three weeks!" Elliott paused as if to steady himself. "Your mother wants you to meet their nephew from California," he continued in a controlled whisper.

Cam took a deep breath and glanced back at Elliott. The businessman didn't know Cam had a history with his treasured daughter, Aimee. Granted, not a long one, but he didn't want Elliott to find out he had once slept with her. They had met at a frat party at the University of Kentucky. He was in graduate school at the time, and she'd just finished her freshman year.

He shrugged mentally. The fling hadn't lasted long, but it had been hot and intense. It had been fun, if he remembered correctly. Aimee had been full of spunk and a real tigress in bed. No, Elliott didn't need to know *that* particular detail about his daughter.

Cam glanced at the cherry credenza in the corner where pictures of Aimee were displayed—a blond child playing with a dog, dressed as a witch for Halloween, and wearing a prom dress. Aimee riding a horse. Always riding a horse.

In all of them, Aimee was smiling at the camera, her blue eyes sharp with determination. A determination he recalled well. His mouth tensed. When she told him it was over, he had gone willingly, but not happily. She wasn't the only fish in the sea, or the only coed at UK.

Still, he had his pride. The gut-wrenching pain of her rejection was something he had tried to forget. He had loved her, but she'd taught him a lesson. He didn't need that kind of emotional involvement. She had been his last serious relationship.

"Your mother won't be happy about this," Cam heard Elliot predict. Then his host

slammed down the phone.

Interesting. Steely Ray Elliott bested by his only daughter. Cam's instincts honed in on the tiny detail in hopes of finding a use for it later.

"The girl is too damn independent for her own good," Elliott grumbled under his breath. "What she needs is a husband."

Cam returned to his chair and sat down. He leaned back. "Problems?"

Elliott glanced up, as if just remembering his existence. "No," he snapped after a brief hesitation. Then he sat up, visibly pulling himself together. He shuffled through the proposal again, his eyes narrowing on the documents.

A clock chimed somewhere. Minutes ticked away. Looking up again, Elliott leveled a pointed gaze at Cam. "You're from Kentucky. What do you know about horses?"

"Thoroughbreds?"

"Hell, no. You can bet on them. They're worth something," Elliott replied with gruff disgust. "I'm talking about show horses. Prissy things with set tails and shaved manes. All they do is go around in circles."

Caught off guard, Cam shifted in the chair. "I know there are big horse shows in Kentucky during the summer."

"You're right." Elliott nodded. "Been there when Aimee was showing. Cost me a pretty penny, too. I even let the girl go to school in Kentucky. At the state university. She would have done better at Northwestern or Purdue, but no, nothing would do for her but to be in the heart of 'horse country' as she called it."

Cam didn't know where this was going. He cocked his head and waited. It didn't seem as if his opinion was required, for Elliott carried on the conversation without any input from him.

"She's got this wild idea about becoming a horse trainer. Hell, that's a man's job, but no..." He drew out the word *no* to emphasize it. "The girl thinks she can make a career out of it. Now she's going to disappoint her mother by not coming home for the gala at Renfro's. I'm going to catch hell for this."

Elliott flipped through the proposal, focused, and once more returned to business. "I need to have time to digest the figures."

"That's fine."

"I've got Clayton's to review, too."

Warning bells rang. “How long do you expect to take?”

“Hell, I don’t need the new equipment for another six months. I was just putting out feelers.”

“Six months?”

“That’s right. You got a problem with that?”

“No.” Cam shook his head. “But can you tell me how my proposal stacks up? Perhaps I can adjust the figures.”

Elliott stood. “No need for that. You and Clayton are dead even. I’ll let you know.” He extended his hand.

Muscles in Cam’s stomach tightened. He felt as if he’d been sucker-punched. Elliott had been trolling the waters. He had no intention of buying new equipment now. Six months, he’d said. It would be September before Elliott made up his mind. Five more months to sweat it out. This deal was big. Bigger than any other deal in his thirty-year-old life.

Cam jumped to his feet and accepted the offered handshake. “Good, I’ll keep in touch.”

“Yes, do.” Elliott ushered him to the door. “And Brennan, if you see my daughter in Kentucky, keep an eye on her, will you?”

Cam walked through the outer office, offering a thank-you smile to the secretary and exiting into the hall. He pushed the button for the elevator.

He didn’t mind waiting when he was in control of the situation. He could play the game as well as any of his competitors. But he didn’t like not winning the contract outright.

The door opened. Cam stepped into the empty elevator and pushed the first floor button. How could he influence the decision?

Once again he heard Ray Elliott’s soft words—words the businessman spoke only to himself. *What she needs is a husband.*

A spike of inspiration jarred Cam, and he straightened his shoulders. Aimee had flustered her old man. Got to him bad. Somehow Elliott’s daughter was the key to this whole deal.

And Elliott had asked Cam to “keep an eye on her.”

The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor and the door opened. A tall blonde entered, her cloying fragrance filling the confined space. The businesswoman gave him a blatant “come on” glance, the side of her mouth turning up in a smile. Cam returned her glance with a dismissive nod. She got the message and turned her back on him as the door shut, and the

elevator began to move again.

Wait a minute. What if he found the wayward Miss Aimee Elliott? He knew where she had worked as a groom six summers ago. Maybe she was still employed by the same trainer.

What if he somehow convinced her to fall for him? They'd clicked back then. Why not now? Elliott wanted her married. Cam didn't have to marry her, just date her long enough to convince Elliott to give him the deal.

His palms started to sweat. He liked taking a risk, even an unwarranted one. And he liked being in control almost as much as he wanted to win. His chances of winning the contract were fifty-fifty now. To better them, he needed to do something drastic. Hadn't he persuaded his share of women over the years?

The elevator stopped at the lobby and the door opened. The blonde tossed her head and left in a huff, letting him know in no uncertain terms what she thought of his indifference. Cam grinned, suddenly pleased with himself.

If he captured the heart of Ray Elliott's only daughter, he would also capture the biggest business deal of his life, and maybe exact revenge on the only woman who had the nerve to dump *him*.

Chapter Two

Holt Stables

Near Simpsonville, Kentucky

Jimmy Burke needed her. Aimee knew that for sure. Watching the gnarled hands of her employer and mentor as they tightened the saddle girth and adjusted the curb chain was proof enough. Jimmy's mind was still sharp, but his body was letting him down. Debilitated by severe arthritis, unable to ride, he could train the American Saddlebred horses under his care only with her help—with her following his instructions and being his hands and legs in the saddle.

"Ready?" Jimmy asked, standing on the other side of the horse with his hand on the right stirrup iron.

Aimee pulled on her leather gloves and nodded. She positioned herself with one hand on the reins and the other on the back of the saddle. Sticking her boot into the stirrup, she swung into the saddle, adjusting her seat and gathering her double reins. She glanced down at Jimmy for instruction.

He ran a practiced hand over the gelding's well-muscled shoulder, trying to keep the big chestnut calm. "This is a good 'un," he said, his voice revealing his admiration for good horseflesh. "Champions on both sides of his pedigree. Excellent show record, but still young. Let's take it slow this morning and see what this big boy can do."

Anticipation pulsed through Aimee's veins. The huge horse with the improbable name of "Wedded Bliss" had arrived at the barn yesterday morning, and this was her first time on his

back. She loved her job. Loved working with Jimmy and learning his techniques. Loved discovering what made a good horse tick and how to get the best performance from every equine athlete she rode.

Pressing her legs against the Saddlebred's side, she signaled the horse to move forward. Rodney, the groom who stood at the horse's head, jumped out of the way as Wedded Bliss shot forward, already dancing with eagerness for his morning workout. Making a mental note not to ask Bliss so severely with her calves, Aimee tried to relax. But with one thousand pounds of high-strung horse between her legs, it was hard to do.

Continuing at a flat walk, they entered the spacious indoor arena that smelled of cedar shavings. Jimmy didn't have a facility of his own, but leased eight or nine stalls at Bob Holt's training barn near Simpsonville. Jimmy had worked for many big stables in his seventy-odd years, and trained for many wealthy clients, including her dad. Now he only accepted a handful of horses from select owners.

Times had been hard for the hall-of-fame trainer, but Jimmy had persevered as always. What did he always say? When you fall from the saddle, pick yourself up and climb back on.

Jimmy took his position in the center of the arena, resting one lean hip on a wooden stool. Aimee glanced his way, gratitude rising in her chest. If Jimmy hadn't believed in her, trusted her talent, and had faith in her willingness to give it her all, she would be stuck in Chicago right now. Stuck on the "Elliott dole."

Being the only child of a millionaire had its advantages. She had learned to ride at the age of five and spent the next twenty years in the saddle thanks to her mother's indulgence and her father's money. She loved riding and she loved horses. A champion equestrienne in her teens, she now hoped to turn her riding expertise into a career as a professional horse trainer.

But being Ray and Martha Elliott's daughter had its drawbacks too. She had not been allowed a life of her own. Expected to be the dutiful daughter and make a "good" marriage, she had finally rebelled. It was time to stand up for what she wanted in life and she'd made the break. She was a big girl now, with a real job, a job someone needed her to do.

Besides, how could she be assured that the men she met—the men who proclaimed undying love—actually loved her for herself? She was Ray Elliott's daughter, wasn't she? An heiress to a fortune. And she'd been burned one too many times.

"Ease on into a trot," Jimmy called from his position in the middle of the arena.

Aimee nodded. She shortened her reins and clucked softly, prepared to use her whip if the horse needed urging. Instead, the gelding exploded into a trot. Adjusting to the surprise of his raring-to-go gait, Aimee went with him a few paces before beginning to post.

“Whoopee!” Jimmy stepped away from the stool and turned to watch her as she circled the arena. “Just let him go!”

Aimee did as she was told. She spent the next twenty minutes on the ride of her life, following Jimmy’s instructions and getting to know her new charge. Riding Wedded Bliss was like riding liquid adrenaline. He put out two hundred percent during the work out. By the time they were through, Aimee found herself panting hard. Bliss had barely broken a sweat.

“I don’t think you need that whip,” Jimmy said with a laugh as she rode into the center of the arena and parked out. He removed the riding crop from her left hand.

“I don’t think so either,” Aimee agreed, knowing her boss was pleased with what he’d seen, and so was she.

“What’s the verdict on my horse?” A deep voice cut in.

Aimee’s head jerked up and she gazed between the horse’s ears to see an elegantly dressed stranger in a gray Armani business suit walking toward them. Didn’t he care about ruining those shiny Gucci shoes?

When the man reached them, he shook hands with Jimmy. Aimee sat deeper in the saddle, shifting her weight and stretching her legs. Her chest tightened as a sixth sense alerted her to trouble.

Cam?

Then the man glanced up at her. They made eye contact and his bone-melting smile almost unseated her.

She straightened herself in the saddle, aware of her labored breathing. Her one-time lover was as dangerously sexy as she remembered, with hair the color of steaming café mocha and a face classically chiseled like a male model’s. His eyes were dark, brown, and as before, they seemed to see right into her core. She stirred in the saddle again as that familiar current of attraction sizzled between them.

“You purchased a live ’un, Mr. Brennan,” Jimmy said, catching the horse’s bridle.

“That was my intent, Mr. Burke.” Cam’s tone was all business. “Buy the best horse and put him with the best Saddlebred horse trainer in Kentucky.”

Aimee knew Jimmy wouldn't be swayed by Cam's blatant compliment. The old trainer had worked with wealthy horse owners for years, and he was the same with every client—low-keyed, practical, always doing what was best for each horse in his care. He'd been that way with her dad when her horses had been in training with him. Ray Elliott's volatile temper made him hard to work with, but Jimmy had always managed her father with calm, good grace.

That's why Jimmy's next comment startled her.

"I don't know about that," the old trainer said, his tone unassuming. "That's why I asked you here today, Mr. Brennan. I'm not capable of doing the job now crippled up like I am. But my assistant here is a good 'un. Expert rider, she's ready and quick. If you're satisfied with her working your horse, I'll be happy to do what I can for you."

Cam's gaze moved from Jimmy up to Aimee. She raised her chin a bit, transmitting her nervousness through the reins and her legs to the big horse. Bliss snorted and moved out of his parked stance. Only Jimmy's firm grip prevented the horse from prancing forward.

"On your feet!" Using the riding crop, Jimmy gently but firmly touched the back of the horse's front hooves, commanding Bliss to behave and stretch out again.

"And who is your lovely assistant?"

Cam knew who she was. Aimee caught herself pressing her lips into a thin line and trying to fight the irritation rising within.

Jimmy became the polished gentleman. "Camden Brennan, let me introduce you to my assistant trainer, Aimee Elliott."

Why did handsome men always know they were handsome? Cam's opinion of himself hadn't changed either. It was evident by the self-assured smile on his lips, a smile that said he expected to charm the socks off her again. No way! Not if she could help it.

"Miss Elliott?" He offered up his hand.

"Mr. Brennan?"

She could play along too. But she didn't like the way he stressed her name, as if asking her marital status. What business was it of his? Maybe she was just touchy about the subject. Her best friend Sarah had gotten married last year and was already a mother of a cute little baby boy.

She had willingly taken herself out of the marriage market, hadn't she? Too many men with ulterior motives had soured her on the subject of matrimony. Camden Brennan was technically her boss now. What had happened between them was finished long ago and best

forgotten. She could remain professional.

Aimee leaned her right arm across the horse's neck and took Cam's outstretched hand. She caught her breath as scorching heat from his fingers seemed to spread to hers through the leather of her gloves.

"If you have confidence in Miss Elliott, Mr. Burke, so do I." He looked straight at Aimee with what could only be described as "bedroom eyes." Then he had the nerve to wink.

"Thank you, *Mr. Brennan*." She let the tone of her voice drip with sarcasm.

"Call me Cam. Most of my friends do."

He still held her hand—securely—as if not wanting to let it go. His thumb caressed the back of her glove for a split second, long enough to send more warning shocks straight up her arm.

"*Cam*," she said, stressing his name. "If you don't mind, we need to unsaddle your horse and cool him off."

"Surely." He released her hand. "You'll find I'm pretty green at this game. I hope you'll teach me what I need to know." He stepped back.

Jimmy nodded to her. Aimee nudged Bliss out of his parked stance and circled the two men, falling in behind them as they walked out of the arena into the stabling area.

She had Mr. Sexy Ex-Boyfriend at an advantage now. High up on the horse's back, she had a great view of his lean-hipped stride and the cedar shavings that now clung to the cuffs of his expensive trousers. For all his arrogance and put-on charm, he was as out of place in a barn as she would be in a boardroom.

They reached the stall, and Rodney was there to take the bridle so she could dismount. With practiced efficiency, she slipped her boots free of the stirrups and swung her right leg over the horse, turning in the process to face the saddle. Gripping the front and back of the saddle, she balanced her weight on her arms.

"Here, let me help you."

Before she could drop to the ground, Camden Brennan's hands grasped her waist. Her body tensed at his touch. Slowly, he lowered her to the ground, his warm breath touching the nape of her neck.

She spun around. "I'm perfectly capable of dismounting myself, thank you."

"Of course," he said, but he didn't give her space. Instead, he held her waist and gazed at

her, his eyes burning with a strange light.

Now at a disadvantage because she was on the ground, Aimee's mouth tightened. She didn't tower over him as she did most men, yet he was uncomfortably near. She tried to ignore the heat that rushed to her face and blasted through her whole body.

"Perhaps the next time you come to the barn, Mr. Brennan..."

"Cam," he countered.

"You'll come dressed for the occasion." With a meaningful glance at his ruined shoes and dirty trouser legs, she slipped out of his grasp, wheeled and walked away.

Aimee heard him laugh, a deep rolling laugh that sounded genuine. "I promise to take your advice, Miss Elliott."

She should be angry at his presumption. At the way he had touched her so intimately. At the way he pretended not to know her. Instead, her heart hammered with a strange anticipation.

Oddly, Camden Brennan's pledge was one she hoped he would keep.

Chapter Three

Girls' Night Out

The Racetrack Restaurant, Louisville

Aimee shook her head as if that would remove the memory of Camden Brennan. What was wrong with her? She had no business getting weak in the knees about Jimmy's new client—a guy she'd slept with many years ago and then ditched.

Aimee picked up her half-empty glass of chardonnay and took a small sip. Why did she find the man intriguing? She recalled the way her hand tingled from where he had touched it, and the memory of his warm breath upon the back of her neck tickled her senses. She had been down this road before, but once more, her body was not cooperating.

She had promised herself not to do it again—reacting to a guy like a filly in season. Especially not after Norm.

Norman Sanders had been the last one in a long string of disappointments. Like all the others, except maybe for Cam, he had been an ugly reminder that guys cared more for Daddy's money than for her. She had finally learned that lesson.

Aimee sat down the wine glass and absently ran her finger up and down the stem. The chatter of her three best friends seated with her at the table added to the hum of conversation in the restaurant. She listened only half-heartedly to Sarah, Kate and Tracy.

Imagine! She'd been about to marry Norm, but the big-time jerk couldn't keep his mouth shut, and his bragging had gotten back to her. She could thank one of Norm's fraternity brothers

for revealing her fiancé's secret. Turned out that good old Norm had been betraying intimate details of their relationship, to put it nicely, and also claiming he would be C.E.O. of Daddy's company within five years.

Fat chance! She had ditched the lying ne'er-do-well so fast that it made his head spin. Throwing the diamond ring back in his surprised face had satisfied her anger very nicely.

Six years earlier, when she told Camden Brennan to take a hike, there had been no engagement ring involved, which at that time had been part of the problem. The man may have made mind-blowing sex, but he had also made it perfectly clear that settling down was the farthest thing from his mind. At least Cam hadn't been impressed by Daddy's money. His stepfather had enough of his own.

With her bad track record, she didn't have time for stray thoughts about men, especially not with the opportunity of a lifetime on the line. Her dream was literally riding on the next few months. She had to develop the expertise to train American Saddlebred show horses and then win a few important shows during the upcoming season. That was how she could establish herself as a trainer, ready to start her own operation.

Camden Brennan, with his disconcerting grin, was an unexpected complication. She didn't want the untimely distraction. She had too much to prove. To herself. To her family. Besides, she had to quiet that niggling dread that lay like a bad meal in the pit of her stomach.

What if she really *was* nothing without Daddy's money?

Aimee's fingers closed tightly around the wine glass. She lifted it to her lips, tasting the suddenly bitterly tart wine. She frowned at the thought of having to work with Cam even if it was in a professional relationship.

"Why so glum?" Kate asked, drawing Aimee back into the moment.

"Oh!" Aimee replied a little too quickly, glancing around the table at her three friends. "Just thinking."

"He must be pretty hot."

Aimee threw Tracy a sharp look. "Why does everything with you come down to a man?"

Tracy shrugged. "I'm twenty-five and single. What else should I be thinking about?"

"Try your career," Aimee shot back.

"Don't start bickering again," Sarah warned, her face flushed with the blissful glow of new motherhood. "We're here for a nice, relaxing dinner."

Aimee wondered when she had lost the role of peacemaker in the group—probably after Sarah met and married Lane, her Prince Charming and owner of the Racetrack Restaurant where they now dined. Their girls' night out had lost much of its punch, taking place in the elegant surroundings of softly lit brass lamps, plush carpets, rose-colored table linens and attentive waiters. Soothing piano music had replaced the snazzy jazz and loud noise of their former watering holes.

Times had changed no doubt about that. Granted, the former college suitemates had little time for the bar scene. They were all busy with their own lives—Sarah with a newborn at home, Kate working on her master's degree, and Tracy putting in long hours at her job.

"What happened to our theory about kissing toads and turning one into Prince Charming?" Tracy wouldn't let up. "It worked for Sarah."

Aimee waved a dismissive hand. "Been there, done that. All the toads I've kissed have never morphed into a prince."

"You'll find your man," Sarah said, giving them an affectionate look. "All of you."

"Sure," Kate replied with a dismissive snort and picked up her pina colada.

Although she still liked having a good time, Aimee knew Kate was definitely out of the marriage market. One rotten divorce had settled that for her.

In a flash of honesty, Aimee realized that for all the grumbling she'd done, she didn't want to be like Kate. She didn't want to give up *all* hope. She was too much of a romantic for that. She believed in happy endings. But she had to tread warily with Cam back in the picture. She couldn't fall for the guy simply because he sent her body into meltdown mode. She couldn't let herself fall for Camden Brennan.

"So what's going on with you, Aimee?" Sarah asked. She took a sip of her club soda with lime—minus the vodka. She was breastfeeding. "I'm so swamped with diapers and colic that I rarely see the real world. Fill me in."

Aimee grinned. Sarah complained, but she was head over heels in love and wouldn't change her life or the dirty diapers. "Well, Jimmy got a new horse in yesterday. I rode him this morning. Great potential. And get this—his name is 'Wedded Bliss.'"

"I like him already," Sarah said with a nod.

Tracy looked interested. "Where did he come from?"

"Shipped from Missouri. The horse is young. Jimmy thinks he has world grand champion

potential.”

“Is the owner out of state?” Sarah asked.

“No, he’s a businessman from Louisville.” Aimee looked up as she spoke, and her stomach did a giant flip-flop.

Fate must have it in for her, that or bad karma or very bad luck. Camden Brennan, following the maitre d', weaved through the crowded tables and headed straight toward the empty one beside theirs. *Please don't let him see me.*

Her nerves stretched tightly like a horse anticipating the signal to canter.

And of course he spotted her.

“Miss Elliott, what a surprise to see you here.”

So much for her swift prayer for invisibility.

Aimee felt her face flush. “You can cut the charade, Cam,” she spoke, not hiding her irritation. “You know my first name very well. We have a history, if you remember, and my friends know it too.”

Tracy’s eyebrows lifted and Aimee knew her friend’s matchmaking antenna had zoomed in at her obvious animosity. “Camden Brennan,” Tracy gushed. “I haven’t seen you around for...let me see...has it really been six years?”

Tracy had been in on all the gory details of Aimee’s decision to call it quits with the handsome grad student. She knew darn well how long it had been.

Cam turned to Tracy. “I’ve been busy running my father’s business,” he said with a gracious nod. “Refresh my memory. You are?” He let his question hang in the air.

“Tracy Harris. We met at the University of Kentucky.”

“That’s right.” His smile seemed genuine, but Aimee reserved her judgment. After all, men were all alike in her book. They were only after Daddy’s money.

“I’m Kate Long, Mr. Brennan.” Kate stuck out her hand and he shook it.

“Cam,” he corrected. “Kate, it’s good to see you.”

“Are you dining by yourself, Mr. Brennan?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, I am. And you are?”

“Sarah Williams, friend of Aimee’s from college. My husband owns this restaurant.”

“Ah, the Racetrack is my favorite Louisville restaurant.” The two exchanged smiles.

Warning lights flickered in Aimee’s brain. *No, Sarah, don't do it.* But she did.

“Why don’t you join us?” Sarah waved a hand at the fifth empty chair at the round table. “We haven’t ordered yet.”

He didn’t hesitate. “My pleasure,” Cam said, accepting the seat pulled out expertly by the maitre d’. “I can’t refuse the invitation to dine with four charming ladies.”

Give me a break! Aimee frowned at him, at all of them. She knew her friends well enough to know they were up to no good. What Cam was up to was another matter.

The headwaiter switched the place setting from the original table. Cam accepted the menu from him and made his drink order. Then he glanced at Aimee. She curved her lips up into a smile, one dripping with disdain.

He had the audacity to lift a challenging eyebrow, a predatory light sparkling in his eyes. The flash of his you-know-what-I’m-thinking smile incited an even larger warning signal. Yes, this guy was up to something.

Aimee lifted her glass of chardonnay. “Cam is the new owner of the horse I was telling you about,” she said and then took a sip of wine, her gaze never leaving his.

“He is?” Kate drawled. She looked from one to the other, and Aimee could almost read the speculation in her friend’s eyes.

“I hear you have a wonderful horse,” Sarah joined the conversation.

“Yes, ma’am, so I’m told.” He replied with a dose of Southern charm. Then he turned his gaze back to Aimee. “I’m very new at this game.”

I bet you are. Aimee tilted her head and smiled again. Her mouth was growing tired from forcing so many smiles.

“Aimee has ridden my horse.” Cam’s eyes locked with hers. “Perhaps she can tell us what she thinks.”

“You paid big money for an unproven, five-year-old horse.” Her tone was mild, but censure was implied by her words. “The gelding has potential, but if you want to make money when you sell him, he will have to do well in the show ring this season. Maybe Jimmy can figure out how to make him level out.”

“Why American Saddlebreds, Mr. Brennan?” Sarah asked. “Why not buy a Thoroughbred? That seems more the kind of purchase a man with your money would make, especially here in Kentucky.”

“Yeah,” Tracy piped up. “I’d think a man like you would want the thrill of winning.”

People who owned and showed American Saddlebreds might do it for the love of it, but often the tax write-off was another motivation.

Cam lightly fingered his menu and didn't answer right away. "That's a good question," he admitted leaning back in his chair. "My mother rode before I was born. She took me to horse shows at the state fair when I was a child. I was looking for a hobby that I can become *intimately* involved with."

He tossed a glance at Aimee, as if conveying his real meaning only to her. She still felt the burn of his hands on her waist. Could it be he remembered that moment too?

"But it's so subjective," Kate complained to the group. "No offence, Aimee, but I've never liked horse shows. The outcome is determined by a judge, a fallible human being. Give me a fast race horse, a finish line, and a camera to determine the winner in a dead heat."

"I suppose everyone has his own motive when choosing a sport," Cam said in a conciliatory way, his gaze traveling around the table.

Aimee smiled sweetly again when Cam's gaze captured hers. *I bet. And what might your motive be?*

She didn't trust him. Or maybe she didn't trust herself. She knew she was too gullible where men were concerned. Besides, she had a job to do. She couldn't screw this up. More than anything, she longed to give Mr. Camden Brennan one more set of marching orders.

Chapter Four

Holt Stables

Near Simpsonville, Kentucky

Hands stuck in the hip pockets of his straight leg jeans, Cam stood at the picture window in the barn lounge. He had a clear view of the training arena where Aimee circled on the back of his horse, Wedded Bliss. The irony of the name was one reason he had forked over the low six-figure sum to purchase the five-gaited American Saddlebred.

In the center of the arena, Jimmy barked out orders, and from what Cam could tell, Aimee translated them flawlessly, making subtle adjustments in her riding to encourage better performance from the horse.

He felt a pang of longing. Aimee was beautiful. She fit his picture of a perfect equestrienne. Aimee was tall, almost as tall as he, with a shapely body and long jodhpur-clad legs that made her look slim and elegant in the saddle. Her blond hair was straight, touching her waist, and today she let it flow freely, catching the air as she cantered. Until last week, it had been years since he'd seen her, and he'd forgotten about her loveliness and stylish grace.

He could enjoy this moment if it wasn't for the niggling jab of his conscience.

Cam scowled. From his sources, he had learned Jimmy Burke was in trouble. The old trainer's body was giving out, betraying him in the worst way. He couldn't ride any more. Therefore, he couldn't train the horses under his care. As a result, customers had taken their business to other trainers, ones with whole legs and straight backs. The man needed him and his

money. He didn't feel guilty there.

As for Aimee, well, she was fair game, wasn't she? Because she had rejected him, he knew where he stood with her. Winning her friendship, let alone her heart, was a fifty-fifty proposition—the same odds he had with her father and the important contract. Cam liked the odds. He would give it his best shot.

He shifted his stance as his conscience tweaked him again. His motives, while not pure, were honest. His adoptive father had entrusted the wellbeing of Brennan Equipment Company to him instead of his own son Harry.

Cam's stepbrother Henry Brennan, Jr., fondly called Hank by his dad, had no interest in the family business, much preferring his oil paint and canvas to disgruntled clients, late payments, and issues with human resources.

Being only a year younger, Hank had looked up to Cam at first when their parents married and they became a stepfamily. It didn't last long after Cam began to outshine his stepbrother at school. Hank felt entitled, being the biological son, and ultimate heir to the family wealth. That's one thing Cam liked about Aimee. She didn't act snooty and put on. She didn't live off her father's money, and in fact, wanted nothing to do with it. Her independent streak spoke to his sense of self-reliance.

Cam's thoughts were interrupted when the door to the lounge suddenly opened and a gray-haired woman walked in carrying a UPS box, an environmentally friendly green grocery sack, and a thermos bottle of what might be coffee.

"Oh, I didn't know anyone was in here," the woman said, quickly recovering her surprise and giving him a quick grin. "You must be the new customer."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Camden Brennan." He offered his hand.

The woman dropped her bundles on a worn, black leather sofa, turned and took his hand. "Camden? Is your mother Ginny?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't believe it! I knew your mother years ago." The older woman pumped his hand. Her grip was strong and sure. "You were just a kid. So, your mother married Hal Brennan? Good for her!"

"Yes, ma'am, he adopted me and they changed my last name."

"A good man. I told your mother that at the time." She nodded her head. "We were in a

divorce support group. The last time I saw her, I was leaving the next day for St. Louis to marry Jimmy. The way the two of us have traveled over the years, I never saw your mother again.”

“Jimmy?”

“I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Lydia Burke, but friends call me ‘Toady.’”

Toady? The look on his face must have reflected his bewilderment. He’d never met a woman named Toady.

She laughed. “It’s because I’m obsessed, you see.” She stripped off her jacket and slung it on the sofa, revealing a gray tee shirt with an embroidered green frog on the front. “I collect frogs and toads. Not real ones, mind you. I have dozens of stuffed ones and all kinds of statues and knick-knacks.” She shrugged and threw up her hands. “I know I’m crazy.”

What could he say to that?

“Want some coffee?” she asked, opening the top of the thermos. “Jimmy takes it black, so I don’t have any cream or sugar.”

“Black is fine.” He watched her dig into her bag for a Styrofoam cup. She poured coffee into it and then handed him a cup filled to the brim. Steam rose from the dark liquid. Cam took a sip. He had to admit it hit the spot.

“So how’s your mom doing?” Toady asked as she stood at the window and waved at Jimmy. He acknowledged her wave, but continued shouting instructions.

“Actually, she has recently survived breast cancer.”

“Oh, my!”

The shock on Toady’s face mirrored his own feelings. Learning his mother was sick with a potentially fatal disease had shaken him to the core. Thank goodness Hal had been there—as he’d been there for twenty of Cam’s thirty years. His father had gotten the best doctors who had given her the best care. Still chemo and radiation treatments had taken their toil. That’s why his adoptive father had turned over the reins to Brennan Equipment to him. Cam owed Hal for the confidence he’d shown in him and for the way he had taken care of his mother, something Cam could never financially have done alone.

“She’s better now,” Cam said. “Last month, Hal flew Mom to a resort in Sedona, Arizona. They have made no plans to return home. My father has decided it’s time to stop and smell the roses.”

“Smart man.” A determined look appeared in the Toady’s eyes. “Now, if I could only get

my stubborn husband to slow down.”

“Don’t you go talking about me, woman.” Jimmy’s tone was brusque as he opened the door and walked into the lounge. His eyes twinkled.

Toady didn’t seem to mind her husband’s gruffness. She hugged his neck. “Brought your morning coffee, you old coot.”

“Humph.” He frowned. “Morning, Brennan. I see you’ve met the missus.”

“Yes, sir, she knows my family.”

“The old gal knows everyone.” Jimmy couldn’t keep the fondness from his voice.

A wave of something akin to sadness swamped Cam. Jimmy and his wife reminded him so much of his mom and Hal—the easy banter, the glances filled with love. Seeing them together triggered a sense of longing for something he would never have, given the calculating course he was pursuing.

Cam straightened his shoulders, renewing his resolve. He had something to prove—to himself and to the man who had adopted him. He cleared his throat. “How’s the horse doing?”

Jimmy and Aimee had been training Wedded Bliss for a week now, a week that Cam had forced himself to stay away from the barn. He didn’t care as much about the horse as about the rider. He wanted to give Aimee plenty of time to wonder about him. No point in coming on strong. Too much was at stake.

They still had that spark of chemistry. He felt it when he touched her. Aimee knew it too. He had seen it in her eyes. She’d never been good about hiding her feelings. They were written all over her face like words in a book.

“The horse is coming along,” Jimmy said, wrapping his big hands around his cup of coffee. “We’re showing him next week at Rock Creek, if you agree.”

Cam nodded. “Fine with me. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a show at Rock Creek.”

“We’ll see how Bliss does in that setting. Should tell us a lot about him.”

Cam shifted his weight and kept his voice all business. “Showing in places where he will be seen by influential horse people is important.”

“*If* he makes a good show,” Jimmy added the words of caution.

“Ah, but I’m counting on it.” Cam let his eyebrows lift along with an encouraging smile.’

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll do our best, son. Now I’d best get back at it.” He turned and spoke to his wife. “Thanks for the coffee, old gal.”

“You’re welcome, you old coot.”

Jimmy left the lounge and Toady turned to stare up at Cam. “So the new horse is just a business investment?”

Cam cocked his head. “You can say it’s a business proposition.”

Toady gazed at him as if wondering what his motives might be and Cam moved back to the window. He didn’t want the cagy, former friend of his mother to catch on.

“Well, I need to get going,” she said picking up her bag and jacket. “Will you tell Aimee this package came for her at the house?”

“Sure.”

After Toady left the lounge, Cam finished the coffee, stuffed his hands into the hip pockets of his jeans again and stood at the window. In the arena, Aimee worked a big, flashy Saddlebred. He followed the pair with his gaze, mesmerized by the teamwork of horse and rider. How his scheme would turn out, he couldn’t guess. Cam only knew that the next few weeks would prove interesting.

* * * *

Aimee licked her lower lip as she entered the lounge and saw the tall, lean body of Camden Brennan standing at the window. He turned when she came in, his brown eyes appraising her. He had taken her earlier advice. He wore a white, long-sleeve shirt and dark indigo straight-cut, cleanly styled jeans. Armani, if she had to guess. He had lost that businessman look, but remained appealing in a physical, male sort of way.

Her eyes honed in on the button fly front beneath his waist, and quickly she snapped her gaze upward to see his amused grin. *Damn him!*

His dark brown hair was too long, curling around his ears, and all too sexy—almost begging fingers to run through it. Cam knew he was a gorgeous chick magnet, and he knew she knew it too.

“What’s the idea of acting like you don’t know me?” A good offence was always better than a bad defense. She had not received an answer from him the other night.

He raised an eyebrow and then narrowed his eyes, considering her with an air of amusement. “I thought you might prefer your employer not knowing about our...ah...past. And I half-hoped you would want to make a fresh start.”

“Our affair was over and done with a long time ago,” she said with a testy tone.

“But we *are* making a fresh start as employer and employee. Strange how things work out.”

He tilted his head giving her a very bland look, not smiling, but assessing her, almost stripping her bare with his gaze. Aimee felt her face grow hot. Their being together in the small lounge brought back suddenly fresh memories of other times together. Was Cam remembering too? Was he thinking about those times as he watched her with such delicious bedroom eyes that she thought she would faint right away with longing?

Instead, she straightened her spine. “Why Jimmy Burke? There are plenty other Saddlebred trainers in this area. Why not go with a bigger stable?”

“I didn’t know you were working for him, Aimee, if that’s what you’re driving at.” He rubbed his nose, looking down and breaking eye contact.

“I don’t know what I’m driving at,” she admitted as she watched him sit down on the leather sofa.

Gazing up at her from the sofa, he didn’t look so intimidating, but when he draped both arms over the back of the sofa leaving his whole body open and exposed, Aimee was struck by a strong desire to jump into bed with him for old time’s sake.

She turned her back on him and looked out the window into the empty arena. “I need this job, Cam,” she said softly. “I don’t want what we once had to get in the way of what I do for Jimmy.”

“I don’t intend for our past to get in the way,” he said in a deep, sincere voice.

Aimee turned to look at him. She had to trust him until he proved her wrong. The past was dead, but the way her body was reacting, she certainly had not forgotten those old feelings he had once stirred. She was determined that something as uncontrollable as lust would not manage her life.

“I’ll do a good job for you, Cam,” she told him.

“I know you will. I’m not worried about that.” He smiled then, a charming, mind-blowing smile that tore at her heart.

She swallowed hard and stepped back. They sized each other up a moment, quietly staring into each other’s eyes until she looked away.

“Mrs. Burke—Toady—wanted me to give you this package,” he said.

Aimee glanced back. He held out a UPS package, his lips twisted in a wry grin. “I can’t

get used to calling a woman Toady.”

She smiled then. “Well, it is an odd nickname, but you’ll find Toady is unique in more ways than just her name.”

Aimee took the package from him and sat down in the only chair in the room, as far away from Cam as she could get. It was from her father. A sick feeling slid through her stomach. She opened the box, dug through the packing material and pulled out a cell phone and battery charger. Suppressing a groan, she unfolded the accompanying letter.

“You may not want money from me, Aimee,” the letter read. “But call your mother. Don’t be stubborn. Don’t hurt your mother. She’s worried about you. Remember the Renfro’s party this weekend. Dad.”

Direct, dictatorial, good old Dad. Aimee turned the cell phone over in her hand, staring at it as if it were a noose to be hung around her neck.

“Is there something wrong?”

Aimee’s gaze lifted. “Oh, no, nothing.” For a moment, she’d forgotten about Cam.

“Your face doesn’t look as if nothing is wrong.”

Anger got the best of her. “It’s my father. He’s trying to pull strings again,” she shot back. “I’m twenty-five-years old. I make my own living and I resent his interference.”

“What does he want?”

She shook her head, furious. “He wants me to go to a stupid party in Chicago this weekend to satisfy my mother who has it in her head that she’s going to fix me up with Mark Renfro. I can’t stand the guy. Besides, I’ve got to get the horses ready for Rock Creek. I don’t have time for such foolishness.”

Cam rubbed his chin. “Would you get her off your back if you went to the party?”

Aimee stood up and glared down at him. “Don’t you understand? There would be other parties. Other men for me to meet. My mother won’t stop until she marries me off.”

Cam gazed at her mildly and shrugged. “She’d stop if she thought you had a boyfriend.”

“But I don’t. What’s more, I don’t want one.”

“I understand.” Cam sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “But you can tell her you have a boyfriend. A little white lie wouldn’t hurt if it gets you out of a jam.”

“She won’t believe me.”

“She’d believe you if she saw you with a man.”

Aimee's stomach lurched. "What do you mean?"

"Go to the party, and take a man with you—your *boyfriend*. Your mother will see proof and she'll leave you alone."

"You're forgetting one small detail."

"A boyfriend?"

"Yes."

Cam stood up, now looking her in the eyes. "I offer my services."

Her mouth dropped open. For the life of her, Aimee couldn't respond.

"I'll fly you to Chicago on Saturday. We'll fly back after the party. You'd only miss one day of work."

Aimee put her hand on her hip and found her voice. "Why would you do this for me? After the way I treated you?"

"I've met your father at business conferences. I know how persuasive he can be." Cam shrugged. "And let's just say I'm protecting my investment. That horse cost me a nice chunk of money. If you're happy, maybe my horse will be happy." He took a step nearer. "Besides, I find myself attracted to you. You might say you owe me another chance to get to know you again, to show you I'm not the jerk you accused me of being."

Something in the tone of his voice made her knees weak. She swallowed, trying to decide.

"I almost lost my mother to cancer this year, Aimee," Cam said in a quiet voice. "Don't take yours for granted." He unclipped a cell phone from his belt and handed it to her. "Use my iPhone. It's charged. Call your mother and tell her you'll be there."

Aimee's gaze traveled from his face to his hand and back up to his face. "I don't know how to use an iPhone." It seemed a pathetic admission.

He grinned. "And I don't know how to ride a horse. What's the number?"

Aimee told him, and as she watched Cam tap in the numbers on the flat pad, she had the strangest feeling she had been manipulated big time, but part of her didn't care.

Chapter Five

Highland Park, Illinois

Saturday night

The Renfro family owned an impressive multi-million dollar lakefront estate on Chicago's exclusive North Shore. Aimee's mother and Helen Renfro were friends. Aimee had visited the 1920's era mansion many times while growing up. She wasn't awed when the limo her father had sent to pick them up at Midway, where the Brennan corporate jet had landed, turned from Sheridan Road into the gated property.

What awed Aimee was the fact she was going to the party at all—something she had resisted for months—and going with a man she'd once thought she loved.

Aimee felt a twinge of double-edged anxiety. She tried to smother her misgivings and draw on all the courage she could muster, but it was proving hard.

Cam sat quietly on the seat next to her wearing a tailored black tuxedo. Aimee glanced at his classic profile silhouetted against the tinted window—his firm chin, high cheekbones and straight nose, his luscious brown hair curling over his ears. They had not spoken much in the hour-long journey from Louisville, or in the equally long limo ride.

This was, after all, a business trip for Cam. He wanted her to soothe her mother's frayed nerves so she could then focus on training and showing his horse.

"You look lovely," Cam said, turning his head slightly to gaze at her.

"Thanks." She didn't know how to take his praise. She didn't want to be flattered by it or

acknowledge this might be more than a business trip.

Her fluttering insides told her that. So did her vivid imagination that strayed uncontrollably back and forth from memories of their brief, but hot affair, to equally uncontrolled longings for a second chance at getting him in bed.

No! Sitting in enclosed, intimate spaces with a very virile man did strange things to her equilibrium. Was it the spicy but earthy scent of aftershave that heightened her sex drive? Or was it his thigh pressed against hers?

Self-consciously, Aimee tugged at the hem of her skimpy cocktail dress. It hardly made it over that thigh she was thinking about.

"I'm glad you agreed to come," he said, his deep voice soft and gentle.

"We'll see." That's the only concession she was willing to make.

"You'll find out you're doing the right thing."

Anger spiked. She didn't want to talk about her family with him. "Look, you don't know anything about this. Let's just leave it at that."

He took her hand, turning it over and holding it palm up. "You will have to pretend to like me, you know," he stated nonchalantly, off-handedly, as if it was an afterthought. He sketched a circle with his fingertip on her palm.

She pulled her hand away. "I know."

"I won't be pretending."

Aimee's anti-male antennae went up. A sixth sense told her something was not right with this picture. Cam had not come on strong until now. Maybe he meant what he said. Maybe he carried the torch. She remembered he had taken their breakup hard. Still that was six years ago. She'd learned from more than one bad experience after that not to trust men, especially ones needing money. Why was it men were never interested in her for herself?

She gazed into Cam's brown eyes, trying to read them, searching for something that made sense to her about this ridiculous situation she found herself in.

The limo came to a stop in the driveway at the foot of a bank of wide stone steps that led to the entrance of the mansion. An attendant pulled open the side door next to Cam.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing her hand again as he climbed out.

Aimee slid across the seat, aware of her body-hugging dress riding up her thighs. At the edge of the seat, she swung her bare legs out, letting her spiky black pumps touch the pavement

all the while properly keeping her knees together. She snatched her hand away again and tugged at the hem of her dress before standing without Cam's help.

She straightened, eye-to-eye with him. They were so close. Strange electricity traveled between them. Was this sexual chemistry? It had to be just her sex-deprived body responding to his.

"Don't resist me, Aimee," he said, grabbing her hand once more.

She licked her lips, staring at him, all the confidence she possessed in other situations slipping away like a bad ride. Suddenly she longed for the horsey aroma of the barn and the gravely voice of Jimmy snapping orders at her.

Cam tucked her hand under his arm when she didn't respond. "We should go in."

They walked together up the steps toward the door, Aimee vitally aware of the lie she was about to tell her parents and the man at her side who made the telling possible.

Cam had never known the clean scent of lavender to smell as heavenly as it did wafting from Aimee's body. It clung to her sexy, black dress and her long blond hair, making him almost forget his niggling conscience or his true purpose for being here with her tonight.

Something about Aimee made him want to help her. Whether she realized it or not, he was doing her a favor. He had meant it what he said her about her mother. He had learned the hard way never to take his only parent for granted. Whatever Aimee thought about her mother, she shouldn't take hers for granted either.

Answered by a tuxedo-clad butler, the door opened inward onto a marble-floored foyer flanked by twin staircases with ornate wrought-iron and brass railings. The entry ran straight through the house, giving them a view of Lake Michigan at the other end of the corridor.

Aimee's mother suddenly materialized from a side door and rushed toward them. Cam knew it had to be Aimee's mother because Ray Elliott was not far behind.

"Aimee, let me look at you!" Mrs. Elliott squealed and wrapped her daughter into a throat-choking hug. They were the same height, and her mother had the same blond hair probably from a bottle. She was plump and matronly as his mother had gotten over the years, but from his first impression, she seemed to be a loving, if over-protective, mother.

Mrs. Elliott drew back, still holding her only child by the shoulders. "Are you getting enough sleep? Your eyes have circles under them. Are you tired?"

No wonder Aimee avoided coming home. Cam could guess the scrutiny she was under every moment. He doubted he could stand to be smothered either.

“Brennan?”

Elliott had noticed him. “Yes, sir,” Cam acknowledged, extending his hand.

The older man clasped it, drawing him aside while the two women talked. “What are you doing here?”

“You wanted me to keep an eye on your daughter,” Cam replied with a direct gaze. “I found out where she was working and encouraged her to come see her mother.”

Elliott’s bushy eyebrows rose and then drew together over narrowing eyes. “I won’t question your motives, but if you’re the one who brought my daughter to this god-awful event, you have my thanks.”

But you’re suspicious just the same. Cam nodded. “I knew you were concerned.”

Mrs. Elliott turned to evaluate him. “Who’s the nice-looking young man, Aimee?”

Cam stepped forward, in part to extract himself from the awkwardness of being quizzed by Elliott. “I’m Camden Brenna, Mrs. Elliott,” he said, offering his hand. “Aimee and I recently started dating.”

She shook his hand, giving him a once over, her eyes widening with what he hoped was approval. “Aimee never mentioned you, but then again, my daughter would rather talk to a horse than her own mother.”

“Mom!” Aimee’s face flamed red.

Cam felt sorry for her. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her toward him in a conscious show of support. Contact with her bare skin shocked him, causing a flare of desire. He tugged her closer. His next response was even more shocking. For some odd reason, he wanted to protect her from her parents.

“I wanted you to meet Mark Renfro again,” Mrs. Elliott said with an oozing whine of disappointment in her voice.

“I’ve known Mark for years, and you know I can’t stand him,” Aimee protested.

Cam felt Aimee tense. She was frowning.

“Watch what you say,” her mother warned in a loud hiss. “Here comes his aunt. Be gracious.” She pivoted and went toward the approaching hostess. “Helen, my daughter has arrived!”

“I see that, Martha, honey. You must be tickled pink.”

“Aimee has brought Mr. Brennan with her.” Helen Renfro glanced back and smiled.

Introductions were made with Aimee still safely tucked in Cam’s protective embrace. Then the group moved toward the solarium where guests drank cocktails and nibbled on tiny canapés of grilled salmon and lobster.

“You can unhand me now,” Aimee said between clenched teeth and then smiled at a matronly guest.

“I like having you in my arms,” Cam said just to gauge her reaction.

She wiggled free. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do,” she stated. “But don’t get any ideas.”

“You’ve got me all wrong, Aimee.”

He could tell she didn’t buy his innocent look.

“I believed what you said about coming here, but I don’t want any of this physical stuff. Keep your hands to yourself, *Mr. Brennan*.”

He cocked his head, giving her a sheepish look. “I remember when you didn’t want me to keep my hands to myself.”

Her cheeks flamed again for other reasons besides embarrassment. She set her jaw and glared at him. “Don’t fool yourself, buster. Not every girl is swept away by your charms.”

“So much the pity.” He shrugged and reached for two glasses of red wine from a passing waiter. Handing one to her, he then took a sip. He couldn’t keep the smile from his lips as he gazed at her over the rim of the wine glass.

He had nice eyes and a to-die-for smile. Aimee blinked and glanced away, trying to ignore the waves of sensation washing over her. Coming to this party was a total mistake even though it had already made her mother beam with happiness.

Cam had urged her not to take her mother for granted. She didn’t. It was just that she’d spent so many years in the vain attempt of trying to make her mother happy that she rejected the burden today. It was tough being an only child, but it was even tougher being the only child to live in a set of twins. After her brother’s death during childbirth, the responsibility for her mother’s happiness had fallen solely on her tiny shoulders.

She sipped the wine, hoping the biting liquid wouldn’t go to her head. Maybe it would be

better if it did, she thought shamelessly. Maybe she needed the release of mind-numbing alcohol after the stress she'd been under at work lately.

Who was she kidding? Aimee looked back at Cam who was still ogling her. The release of mind-numbing sex would be more fulfilling.

"Penny for your thoughts."

She blushed once more. Her face felt hot. "None of your business!"

He laughed at her again using only his eyes, casting a knowing look as if he knew darn well what she'd been thinking. That was *not* the right reaction.

"Aimee, you must meet my very best friend," her mother said, coming up to them. "Come with us, Mr. Brennan."

"Cam," he corrected.

"You'll enjoy Georgette and her husband. Did I tell you she's my dear friend?"

Sometime Aimee would tell Cam that everyone was her mother's best friend.

Later they sat down with the twenty other guests to a dinner of French style steak *au poivre*, *pommes gallette*, and roasted vegetables. It was elegant dining with rich food that settled uncomfortably in her stomach, but such affairs were nothing new to Aimee, who had been raised on them. She wondered about Cam's background, knowing from their earlier relationship that he was adopted. But she didn't know much more about him except that he ran his stepfather's company. Why was she suddenly itching to know more about her new customer? That wasn't a good sign.

Aimee eyed him over a bite of potatoes only to find him assessing her with his gaze. Something inside her stomach skipped as they connected once more. His eyes promised what she wanted. Bedroom eyes, she thought. But it was too soon to be thinking that, and what's more, she didn't want to think it. Or feel it. *Damn him!* Why had he come back into her life again anyway?

Aimee recalled that question when, three hours later, she and Cam stood on the steps of the Renfro mansion, darkness surrounding them. Her father stood silently behind her mother, looking down his nose at her as if she'd done nothing to please him by coming all the way to Chicago. Her mother was agape with happiness, chattering inanely about the lovely time she'd had because of their visit.

"I am so glad you came, Aimee, dear," her mother bubbled.

“Thank, Cam, mother,” she said, glancing at her escort, “His company plane made it possible for us to come and for me to be back at work tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, Cam, you have my undying gratitude. You can’t guess how important our little girl is to us.”

Cam grinned. “I have a *slight* idea, Mrs. Elliott.”

“Oh, go on, you’re teasing me.” Mother swatted his sleeve playfully.

“I almost lost my mother to breast cancer,” Cam said. “I know how important families are.”

Aimee saw the hard look around the corners of her father’s mouth soften. He approved. Her mother did too, for she gave Cam a farewell hug. “You bring my little girl back to Chicago any time, Cam, darling.”

“Good bye, Mother.” Aimee kissed her mother’s cheek and gave her a huge hug. Cam may be right. Her mother’s shoulders felt less substantial than she recalled. Her mother was getting old. She had to remember not to let her fear of failure overcome her true sense of duty to her parents. After all, they had given her the world when they let her take the first riding lesson years ago.

“Now that wasn’t so bad,” Cam said once they were back in the limo and pulling away from the estate.

Aimee rested her head on the back of the seat and shut her eyes. “No, it wasn’t so bad.”

“I think your parents bought it that we were dating. Maybe that will keep your mother happy for a while.”

Aimee shrugged. “She won’t be satisfied until I have a big, fancy society wedding and marry a wealthy man of the right social standing.”

“I guess a hick from Kentucky wouldn’t do.”

Aimee opened her eyes and glanced at Cam. His heart softened toward him. She reached over and patted his sleeve. “Don’t feel so bad. My career isn’t on her list of proper occupations either.”

He covered her hand with his. “You know, that doesn’t matter too much to me. I don’t go in for all this society stuff.”

Cam kissed her then, lifting his hand from hers and cupping her cheek. His lips were warm and gentle, not the demanding, hungry lips of six years ago. They both had grown up.

There wasn't a frantic quality in their relationship now. They were employer and employee. He was her customer. She had a job to do for him. This wasn't proper, but oh, so very welcome.

Aimee lost herself in his kiss, letting her eyes drift shut and her senses ring with delight. Damn! This was good. She'd forgotten how good. Her girlfriends were right. She needed to date again. If she didn't want to be alone for the rest of her life, she had to take another chance.

"Thank you," she said when their lips finally parted.

"What? For the kiss? I'll gladly do it again." He gave her mischievous grin.

"No, for bringing me tonight."

"My pleasure."

He put his arm around her shoulder and she snuggled against him. They sat like that, not speaking, all the way to the airport.

Chapter Six

The Rock Creek Horse Show

Louisville, Kentucky

Every spring, the Rock Creek Riding Club, a nationally prominent American Saddlebred stable, hosted one of the most prestigious horse shows of the season. With booths selling corn dogs and lemon shakeups, the country fair atmosphere was popular with horse people and general spectators alike.

Aimee had not seen Cam since early Sunday morning when the corporate jet had landed at Standiford Field in Louisville. They had gone their separate ways without the awkwardness of another kiss, and Aimee had been too busy to think about him during the next five days. Jimmy had six horses showing at Rock Creek, which meant she had to help get each one ready to be shipped and then care for each of them at the show.

Of the three to four hundred horses attending the show, most were stabled in temporary stalls covered by huge tents. The structures filled the normal parking area in front of the historic clubhouse, providing adequate security and cover when the show's notorious rain showers hit. Each stable decorated its space with its barn colors. Many added potted plants for color and a seating area for customers.

Toady had decorated Jimmy's area with his colors of forest green and navy blue. The floor of their seating area was covered with cedar shavings, and it was located at the end of the shed row under an awning. She had placed four directors' chairs around a large black tack trunk

along with several pots of red geraniums.

On Friday evening, Aimee was sitting on one of the directors' chairs letting Toady pin up her hair into a bun when she saw Cam again.

He strode toward them wearing white linen trousers, a navy-and white-striped jacket and a blue-and-white-striped shirt with a white collar, and brown shoes. He looked as if he'd stepped from the pages of GQ, but he had the height and good looks to carry it off. Cam certainly turned a lot of heads, and hers wasn't the exception.

"So you're going to watch our girl ride," Toady said by way of greeting.

Cam grinned. "That's my plan. I just had the buffet dinner at the club house and I'm ready to whoop and holler when you make that victory pass."

Aimee found herself warming to the sound of his voice, his enthusiasm, and the way he smiled down at her as if to say they shared a special secret. Were a kiss and an intimate ride in the back of a limo enough to make her feel so lightheaded?

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Aimee's voice caught slightly. "I hope Wedded Bliss and I don't disappoint you."

"I don't think you could ever disappoint me," he said in a deep, suggestive voice.

Toady pulled her hair, probably as startled by those bedroom eyes and sexy voice as she was.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry, honey. I didn't mean to." Toady wrapped an old-fashioned hair net around the bun she had been creating and affixed more bobby pins to it. Then she placed a classic brown derby bowler hat on her head, adjusting it so that the blond bun was visible at her neck above her shirt collar.

Cam viewed the hair pinning process with rapt interest. He'd never seen such a production that transformed Aimee from a beautiful woman with long, flowing hair into a stately equestrienne wearing an old-fashioned bun, her hair pulled back from her face giving definition to her lovely features. A medium charcoal tropical weight worsted wool suit coat hung on a nearby hanger. Aimee wore matching Kentucky jodhpurs.

When she stood, he ogled the close-fitting, from-waist-to-ankle jods that ended with a flared bell-bottom covering her black, ankle-length boots.

She glared a warning at him and he stepped back.

“You’re in class seven, Aimee,” Toady said. “Best be getting on your coat. Rodney and Jimmy will have your horse ready for the warm-up.”

Standing between Aimee and her coat, Cam intervened and lifted it from the hanger. He held it out, ready for her to put on. A slight flush crept up her neck, which he wanted to attribute to his actions, not the hot June evening.

“Thank you,” she said, and he slipped the suit coat over her white French cuff shirt.

Toady handed her a riding crop and black, leather gloves. Aimee stood silently, watching Rodney lead Wedded Bliss down the shed row, and Cam watched her with ever-growing awe. Dressed in a brown saddle seat riding suit, closely modeled on men's business suits but with an extra long coat, Aimee was down right gorgeous. Traditional and dignified, a picture worth posting in a magazine, she took his breath away.

When Jimmy gave her a leg-up, Cam longed to be the one to touch her and hold her, even for the one-two-three count before she was boosted into the saddle. He stood aside, unable to speak, as she and his expensive horse moved out of the stable area toward the practice ring.

“Best grab a seat,” Toady suggested. “Holt Stables has a box just on the corner. You can sit there.”

He nodded, trying to calm his heartbeat, and went to find the reserved box seats. It struck him as he sat down in the folding chair that this is where Aimee belonged. She was more at home here, wearing her fancy riding clothes and doing what she loved, than wearing a skimpy cocktail dress and socializing with the wealthy elite in Chicago. Oh, there was money here at the show ring, no doubt about that, but there was so much more. Whether rich or poor, these people shared a love of horses and spirited competition, making everyone equal.

The ladies five-gaited stake proved to be one of the most competitive classes of the night. Put a horse under a woman and nothing can stop her. That’s how Cam saw Aimee as she aggressively showed his horse, making all five gaits seem flawless to his untrained eye. The women riders circled the outdoor arena at the trot and then the slow gait and rack. Cam liked the rocking chair canter the best, but the rack was what started the crowd cheering.

The second way of the arena, Aimee urged Wedded Bliss into a rack that covered ground like a Ferrari. She floated on the horse’s back, hardly moving. Only her head turned as she sped around the end of the arena and down the straight away in front of the judge. Her long legs and

upright posture gave her a commanding appearance. Cam found himself actually hooping and hollering, just as he said he would do.

They didn't win the class, but were called out as reserve. A red ribbon at Rock Creek was nothing to complain about. Yet Cam felt disappointment for Aimee. She'd tried so hard.

He didn't go back to the barn because he knew Aimee had another class almost back-to-back. After that class, one that she won with flying colors, he walked back to Jimmy's stabling area just in time to see Aimee dismount. Rodney led the horse away and Toady stripped Aimee's coat from her shoulders. Aimee was dripping with sweat, her face red from the heat, but she had a broad smile on her face.

"Congratulations!" He wanted to grab her and spin her around out of happiness, but he didn't.

She glanced up at him, removing her derby. "Thanks. We had a great show, but the competition made mistakes like I made in the first class."

"I didn't see any mistakes," he said, bathing her with the soft tone to his voice. "You looked perfect to me."

She glanced at him and then averted her eyes. "I bet you say that to all the trainers."

He shrugged and came closer. "No, only the pretty ones."

Aimee lifted her head and glared at him. Then reaching up behind her head, she removed the net and pulled out the hairpins. He watched spellbound as she let her hair fall over her shoulders. She shook it briskly two times and then ran her fingers through her scalp.

Right then and there, he wanted her so badly he thought he'd die from need. It had nothing to do with his earlier, less noble motivation. He had helped himself immensely by flying Aimee to Chicago. Maybe that would be enough to close the deal. What he felt at the moment dragged up his emotions from six years ago, throwing them out in the open, making him ache with desire.

This place was too public. He wanted Aimee alone. On his turf. He wanted to get to know her better. Make love to her. God help him, maybe he had fallen in love again.

"You have one more night of showing," he said to her, stepping behind and whispering in her ear so that no one else could hear. "You deserve a break. Come swimming at my house on Sunday afternoon. It will give you time to relax."

She turned to face him. "I don't know."

“I’m staying at my parents’ house while they’re away. They have a large pool that’s hardly used. Say you’ll come.”

Aimee searched his face. He had to control himself. Give her space.

“I’ll let you know,” she said.

“Good. You have my cell phone number?”

Aimee nodded. He’d given his number to her before last weekend’s trip.

His fingers strayed to her flushed face. He felt the heat radiating from her skin. “I expect to see you Sunday,” he said and spun on his heel, leaving the barn before he made a complete and utter fool of himself.

Aimee watched Cam go. A delicious shiver cooled her face where he had touched it. Waves of longing washed over her. *Damn him!* He had not wanted to marry her six years ago when she’d been young and infatuated. Now she was older, wiser and jaded. She had no time for this kind of game. She had no need to be bothered by Mr. Sexy Ex-Boyfriend.

“What was that all about?” Toady asked.

“I’m not sure.” Aimee shook her head. “He asked me to swimming at his parents’ place. He said I need a break.”

“You do. You work damn hard.”

“But it will feel too much like a date. He’s our customer and, besides, I don’t date.”

Toady fisted a hand on her hip. “I know you’re independent and don’t take advice from your parents, but I’m not a parent. Maybe you’ll listen to me,” she said. “What’s to hurt? He hasn’t asked you for anything else. It’s not as if he wants a relationship.”

That had been the problem, Aimee thought. Aloud she said, “I know. I’ve kissed too many toads and you might say I’m gun shy.”

“Toads? That’s right down my alley. Don’t toads sometimes turn into Prince Charming?”

“That’s what my friend Sarah tells me.”

Toady dropped her fist and turned away. She walked away muttering. “I don’t know, but if I was young, and a handsome, eligible bachelor asked me to go swimming, I sure wouldn’t hesitate.”

Aimee licked her lower lip, realizing she needed a drink of water. More importantly, she needed to get back to work. That’s what mattered. Work kept her grounded. She had a goal and a

future to create that didn't include Camden Brennan.

Chapter Six

Exclusive East End Subdivision

Louisville, Kentucky

This wasn't a date, Aimee told herself. She drove up to the Brennan's sprawling walkout ranch located on a wooded lot. It was four o'clock, not prime time for sunbathing, but with her fair skin, she didn't need the sun exposure. She wondered if she needed the exposure to Mr. Oh-So-Hot, Sexy Ex-Boyfriend.

Toady was right. She should take time to relax. Just how much relaxing she'd do this afternoon remained to be seen.

"I'm glad you came," Cam said when he opened the front door. He was wearing a black t-shirt, swim trunks and Teva sandals.

"I brought my swimsuit." Aimee grinned and held up her beach bag, trying not to be self-conscious.

"Great!" He stepped aside. "Come on in."

The entrance foyer paled in comparison to the Renfro's, but immediately Aimee liked it. This was a real home, not a pretentious showplace, and she grew more comfortable as she followed Cam through the great room with its antique beams across vaulted ceilings, and into the kitchen. A pitcher of lemonade and two clear plastic tumblers sat on the granite countertop.

"Did you get all the horses back home?" Cam asked. He opened the freezer and pulled out a bucket of ice.

“Yes, all safe and sound,” she said, standing awkwardly by the island. She engaged his gaze for a moment, and then shifted hers toward the French doors and out to a wooden deck.

“If you go outside and down the steps, you can get to the pool house on the other side of the pool. It’s safe to change there,” he told her. “Away from prying eyes.”

She turned back to look at him and found a gleaming, mocking light in his eyes. “Do I need to be wary of prying eyes?”

He shook his head as if to express his innocence. “Not from me! You’re here to relax, remember?”

“I remember.”

“Go on then.”

Aimee escaped out the French doors and down the back steps. The clear, blue water of the pool looked inviting. She couldn’t remember when she’d been swimming last. Horses took a lot of work and didn’t leave much free time.

The pool was surrounded by trees, making the whole area quiet and secluded. The charming pool house sat on the edge of a fall-away lot. Aimee walked around the pool and in to the pool house. She changed quickly and was outside in a flash. Cam was placing a tray of drinks on a side table by two lounge chairs.

He hadn’t seen her step out of the pool house. She hesitated, watching him. In a swift motion, he pulled the t-shirt over his head and tossed it on the chair. She shouldn’t be staring, but she couldn’t help it. She had often found herself in trouble because she was a sucker for a handsome male. This man was no exception. His well-defined six-pack and broad shoulders were something to die for.

This was a mistake. She shouldn’t have let Toady influence her.

Aimee dropped her beach towel on the concrete by the pool’s edge. She removed her flip-flops and without testing the water, dove into the deep end.

When Cam heard the splash, his head jerked up. Aimee was already swimming across the pool in long, graceful strokes. Her hair was hidden by an old-fashioned white swim cap, something that looked as if it came from the nineteen fifties. He kicked off his Teva’s and stepped nearer to the edge of the pool. Aimee reached the shallow end and turned around, swimming back to the deep end.

She climbed out of the water then. He watched mesmerized. Water sluiced from her body. Her long legs were muscular and her bottom round and taut. She wore a classic, navy blue one-piece suit. She was even more alluring in it than other women he'd seen wearing bikinis with spaghetti straps and thongs.

A part of his anatomy reacted to what he saw. Cam walked down the steps into the cold water and then swam leisurely across the pool, using the breaststroke so he could keep his eyes focused on her the whole way. He reached the other side and rested his arms on the concrete edge by Aimee's left thigh.

Looking up, he said, "Hi, gorgeous."

She blushed. He loved the way he could tease her.

"This is a beautiful home."

Cam looked away toward his parents' thirty-year-old house. "Yes, it is. I love it here. Someday I want to have a home like this."

"Where do you live now?"

"Here while they're away, but I have a condo downtown. You?"

"I'm staying with the Burkes in their basement. They have a house in Simpsonville, and I can't afford anything on my own."

He hadn't known that about her. "You must want this job badly to leave your family and live with strangers."

His comment offended her. Cam saw the tension in her jaw and the stiffness in her shoulders. "The Burkes aren't strangers. Jimmy worked for my dad when I was a kid and he had his own training barn. I'm lucky he gave me a chance and a place to live or else I'd be working a *real* job, as my father calls it."

"I'd say you work a *real* job. I've seen what you do and it's a lot of hard labor, pitching in to groom, feed and muck stalls, because you know Rodney needs help and Jimmy can't do it."

She shrugged. "Well, it's part of the job. Somebody has to do it. Those eight horses are like family. We're paid to train and show them, but we're also paid to give them the best care possible."

"I think you'd do it even if you weren't paid."

Their gazes connected. "You're probably right."

"It's in your blood, isn't it?"

“Yes.” Her voice was soft, wistful.

For the first time, he understood Aimee, her passion and her loyalty to her employer and her clients. Cam liked that about her. She had a work ethic that mirrored his.

But she didn’t lie to people to get what she wanted. A fit of guilt hit him like a heavy brick, and he looked away.

“When we broke up, you said you didn’t plan to marry—ever. Has anything changed your mind?” Her voice caught. “I mean, do you ever want a family? A house like this cries out for a family to go with it.”

“It does. I haven’t thought about it, but I’m not getting any younger.”

She kicked out with her right leg, sending a splash of water over his back. “Oh, come on. You’re not old.”

“Thirty seems old, as if you’re at a fork in the road or something. Like you’d better get on with your life or else time will run out.”

“Is that what happens when you turn thirty?”

He shrugged. “It’s an eye-opener. You begin to realize you aren’t going to live forever.”

“Is that why you bought Wedded Bliss? Determination to follow your dreams?”

“You can say that,” he hedged.

“Well, I’m following my dreams, and I love it.”

Cam searched her eyes, reveling in her honest and sincerity. Damn his need to lie to her! He hated himself.

“Race me to the other side,” he said, wanting action to cover up his guilt.

Aimee surprised him by slipping into the water beside him. “One, two, three, go!”

She took off swimming free style, catching Cam off guard. He raced after her, hitting the other side of the pool seconds after she touched it.

“You cheated!” he sputtered as he gathered his feet under him and stood up.

“Hey, guys are faster than gals. I needed every advantage I could get.” She laughed.

“Fast, you say?” Cam surveyed her, noticing the flush on her face and the drops of water on her eyelashes. He took a step toward her. Water lapped his waist. “I’ll show you fast.”

He gently grasped her shoulders and pulled her toward him, the water swishing around them. Her lips, when he took them, were warm, moist and inviting. She answered his kiss tentatively at first. Then a moan escaped her lips and her arms encircled his waist.

“You like?” he muttered against her mouth.

“Too much.” Aimee’s voice was breathless.

Cam walked her backward through the water until she was stopped and supported by the side of the pool. Then he kissed her again. She tasted of sun and water. She tasted of passion and desire. He wanted to pleasure her as much as he wanted to make love to her.

This wasn’t part of his plan, but it seemed so right. He unsnapped the clasp on her bathing cap and tugged the white monstrosity from her head, which allowed her hair to tumble to her shoulders.

“Why do you wear this thing?” he asked, pushing her back against the side of the pool.

“Chlorine,” she gasped between his kisses. “It gums up my hair.”

“Ah, a shame.” He trailed down the length of her long neck with his lips, offering his kisses as gifts.

Cam couldn’t concentrate on words. His mind was blank except for searching out his next tidbit of delight. Her sun-warmed shoulder was next. He layered kiss upon kiss, pulling down her swimsuit strap and descending upon her chest, then the fullness of her breast.

She sucked in a breath when he touched his tongue to her left areola and nipple. Aimee let him continue, never asking him to stop, never protesting his pursuit, and it emboldened him. Waves of need surrounded him much as the cool pool water splashed on his naked skin. The sun beat upon his back. He tangled his fingers through her damp hair.

Lifting his head, he gazed into Aimee’s desire darkened eyes. “Oh, God, Aimee,” he muttered.

“It was always good, wasn’t it, Cam?” She whispered his name as if she were his guardian angel.

“I had forgotten.”

“I hadn’t.”

“Oh, God, Aimee, I want you.” It wasn’t a romantic admission. He sounded like a broken record and he didn’t feel like a gentleman. He was what he was—a male seeking a mate. A mate in the sexual sense, not a soul mate or long time lover. Not a wife.

“I want you too.” Her confession was as if a sigh of resignation.

“It is what it is.” His lacked the ability to be profound in moments like this. All of his of suave, he-man verbiage faded in the arms of this beautiful woman.

“I know. That’s okay. It’s just today. Now.”

“Now is okay?”

She nodded and he kissed her again, rubbing up against her so she would feel the evidence of his need. “The pool house has been a rendezvous spot for my brother,” he said. “He keeps condoms there.” Would she be off-put by his comment or consider it thoughtful?

“Protection is good,” she said, and he couldn’t tell if she was being truthful or sarcastic.

“Let’s go.”

Cam grabbed her hand and towed her through the water and up the steps. She came willingly, laughing a little with embarrassment and leaving her swim cap on the edge of the pool. He walked faster and she giggled, jogging after him. Then he picked up his pace, racing down the stone steps and into the pool house. He slammed the door with his bare foot, turned and locked it.

“I thought no one was at home.”

“More protection.” He turned and offered a smile, surveying her tall, lanky body. She had not pulled up her strap and her left breast was displayed for him to see.

Aimee sucked in her gut, standing upright, and slowly pulled down the other strap. Cam caught his breath, holding it, and then expelling it in a whoosh. “Damn!”

Aimee wasn’t quite sure what she was doing here baring her breasts before Camden Brennan, the guy she’d dumped because he didn’t want a relationship. Her mind was clouded with lust and longing and a pent-up need to make love. In a way, Cam was safe. She knew what to expect and what not to expect. That he wanted to protect her was flattering.

Maybe she was just tired of her celibate lifestyle. Maybe she was just horny enough to throw caution to the wind and play for an hour or two.

Cam watched her. His eyes were dark, and his wet hair curled above his ears. She tingled as she gazed back at him, hot with anticipation. Her swimsuit was down around her belly. She left it there to see what he would do.

Without moving his gaze, Cam reached down and loosened the drawstring of his swim trunks. He dropped them to the floor and stepped out of them to stand before her tall and proud. She licked her lips. Oh, my, he was handsome! And ready! And wanting only her!

He crossed the floor and took her into his arms. She felt the zipper open as he ran it down

her back, and then her suit loosened enough for her to wiggle out of it. They stood locked in a kiss in the middle of the pool house, the sun streaking through the windows and throwing shadows into the room.

He was so hard and hairy. His body melded with hers and she remembered their times together when she was new and inexperienced. Not that she was old and jaded now, but times had changed. She wasn't the student, and he was no longer the teacher.

There was a daybed made to look like a sofa. Cam broke away from her and stripped off the long cushion that was propped against the wall. Now it was a bed, bigger than a twin, but not as big as a double. He tossed a red throw pillow down at one end and with his back to her pulled something from an end table. Then he lay on his back, staring up at her. One leg dangled over the side of the sofa bed so that his legs were spread wide and inviting.

He had slipped on a condom.

God, he was sexy. Aimee thrilled at the sight of him—at his long, sleek body ready for her. She was wet and warm, and ready, too. She wanted him hard and fast. She didn't want to wait.

Aimee dropped down on top of him, over his body, letting hers rest on his, pressing on him, rubbing on him. He groaned. She tormented him, promising delight. He caught her face and kissed her fierce and long, his tongue darting into her mouth. She pressed her hands against his nipples and then ran her fingers down his sides to his hipbones. There, she rose up a little and took him into her hands. He was full and throbbing. She was empty. She throbbed for him.

Pressing against him, she guided him into her.

“Oh, God!” he cried out. “No! Oh, Aimee, no!”

She rode him hard like she rode his horse, bearing down on him, driving him crazy, making him insane as he tried to hold back and tried not to come. She let go of herself, riding on a high she couldn't describe, only experience. A high that was so glorious and exquisite, and full of passion and wonder.

She came quickly. Her eyes opened. She gulped her breaths.

“Oh, no! Aimee!”

He shouted her name and thrust up inside her and they were one with another for a brief moment. And then they spiraled downward off their climaxes.

Aimee relaxed against him and Cam turned on his side, still inside her. They fell asleep to

wake again twice as the late afternoon turned into night. They did it again and again, as if they couldn't get enough of each other or of the primal desires that brought them together.

Chapter Seven

Midnight

The Pool House

“I’ve got to go.” Aimee struggled to sit up.

Cam didn’t want her to leave. He wanted to lie with her in his arms and keep her warm and safe and comfortable.

But she wouldn’t stay. “I have a job to do,” she said.

He watched her put on her shorts and shirt and sandals. She gathered her swimsuit and flip-flops into her beach bag. He pushed himself up on his elbow. It was dark outside. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Like that?”

She couldn’t hide her smile as she surveyed his naked body. He lifted his eyebrows in invitation. Another body part lifted, too, as if on command, and she shook her head. “I can’t believe you want more.”

He swung to his feet over the side of the sofa and stood up. “For some insane reason, I can’t seem to get enough of you.”

“Well, you must control yourself.” There was laughter in her voice. “We’ve got to work together, remember?”

“I’ll never look at you on the back of my horse in the same way.”

“You’d better.”

“Don’t worry. I can be trusted.”

Cam pulled up his damp swim trunks. They felt clammy against his body. Had he really told her she could trust him? Guilt rushed through him as cruel and ugly as a spring thunderstorm.

Turning on the outdoor light, he opened the pool house door for her and followed her outside. “You can leave by the gate,” he said. “No sense going through the house when your car is parked near the fence.”

“That’s fine.”

They walked around the pool. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Will you?”

“Playing hard to get?”

She stopped and turned toward him. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Cam ran a fingertip over her lips. “But it did, so we have to deal with it. You can’t deny it wasn’t good.”

She let out a long breath and shut her eyes. “Yes, it was good. It was always good. But Cam, I want a relationship. Marriage. You don’t want those things.”

“How do you know?”

“You never did before.”

Aimee was right. He had not wanted to be tied down with a wedding ring—that is until he came up with the scheme to use her to get to her father. Suddenly that motivation turned sour. It sickened him. But of course, he couldn’t tell her that. She would never trust him.

“Maybe I’ve changed,” he evaded. “I’m thirty, you know.”

“Time will tell, won’t it? And we have a whole show season to find out.” She kissed him then...gently...sweetly. “Thank you for a wonderful time,” she whispered.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Was she leaving? He would miss the feel of her—the smell of her sun-drenched skin and the chlorine in her hair. Damn! He’d just plain and simply miss being with her.

“Five-thirty comes early.” She tried to pull away.

“I know.”

“I’ve got to go.”

After one last kiss, Cam released her. He opened the gate to the wooden privacy fence. “I’ll stop by the barn tomorrow to check on my horse.”

“I’ll be there.”

He heard her giggle as she climbed into her Kia Sportage and drove away.

Cam took a big breath and scraped fingers through his hair. “Damn.”

The events of the past few hours had surprised the heck out of him. Not that he’d planned for them to happen. The lovemaking had sort of unfolded. She’d wanted him as badly as he’d wanted her. That passion showed him a new side of Aimee. He had to admit he liked seeing her in a new light.

Cam shut the wooden privacy gate and walked up the steps to the back deck. A light was on in the kitchen and in the adjoining family room.

His brother was home.

“What are you doing here?” Cam asked from the kitchen.

“Late night. Who’s the pretty blond?”

Cam could hear the smugness in Hank’s voice. He tensed. “You don’t know her.”

Hank turned and glanced at him over the back of the sofa. “It’s not like you to have company at the pool house.”

Cam turned off the kitchen light and came into the family room. “There’s always a first time for everything.”

He and Hank were opposites, and like oil and water, they didn’t mix. Being in the same room with Hal’s biological son was a challenge for Cam. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Hank. He just didn’t understand him. How could the kid be so irresponsible, lazy, and downright disrespectful of his father?

“I’m going to bed,” Cam said. “I’m tired.”

“I bet you are.”

The sneer in Hank’s voice flipped Cam’s switch. He pivoted fighting anger. “What do you want?”

Cam was taller than Hank by two inches. That had always infuriated Hank. Plus Cam’s grades in school had been better. There wasn’t an artistic bone in Cam’s body, which made talking to Hank difficult.

“I need money for art supplies,” Hank said, sitting forward and picking up a copy of *Garden and Gun Magazine* from the coffee table. He leafed through a few pages.

“Dad gives you an allowance.”

“I’ve run short this month.”

“It’s only the first week of June.”

Hank shrugged. “I had some unexpected expenses.”

“You’ll have to ask Dad for the money. I’m not a bank.” This really burned him.

“What if I told Dad about that new horse you bought?” Hank looked up from the magazine. There was a gleam of “gotcha” in his eyes. “And then I told him about the horse trainer, Aimee Elliott, daughter of Brennan Equipment’s old customer.” He paused as if to draw out the drama. “Blond and beautiful Aimee Elliott, like that looker who just spent the evening with you in the pool house.”

How did Hank know? Oh, that’s right, when it came to extorting money, his brother was ruthless. Cam had been on the receiving side of Hank’s little games all the time they were growing up. He couldn’t do anything about it then, being the outsider. Now he had an edge. He had Hal’s trust. If Hank spilled Cam’s secrets, no telling how the tables would turn.

His gut jerked. “How much do you want?”

Hank smiled a self-satisfied smile. “I thought you’d see it my way, brother dear.”

* * * *

The Monday sunshine streamed through Cam’s office window striking his back and throwing a glare upon his computer screen. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t looking at the computer anyway, but stared across the office, his mind miles away.

Last night had been pivotal for him. Taking Aimee to bed, holding her and making love to her had opened his eyes to the emptiness of his life. He’d been so driven the past few years since his mother’s illness and his rise in the ranks at Brennan’s. The company his father trusted to him was doing well. Cam had seen to that. What he hadn’t seen to was his own wellbeing, his own happiness.

That thought struck Cam and he got up from his desk and walked to the window. Outside in the fenced parking lot surrounding the office building proof of the company’s success was on full display. He saw three off-highway trucks of various sizes, five front-end loaders, a couple of cranes and four large backhoes. Various pieces of used equipment sat in the yard. The company had taken them in on trade over the last several months. As he watched, a low boy pulled into the yard carrying another used front-end loader.

Cam exhaled a big breath. He had avoided relationships because of Aimee. She’d taught

him not to get involved. When he'd initiated this scheme, he had not expected things to heat up as quickly as they did. He'd wanted revenge for being dumped. He'd wanted to use her as he felt she'd used him. All that had changed in the space of one night. All that had changed because he suspected he had never quite gotten over Aimee. Never stopped loving her.

Damn, what was he doing thinking about relationships? It was so unlike him.

Cam left the window and sat down again. He rifled through a stack of papers, trying to focus. When the phone rang, he picked it up thankful for the distraction.

"Brennan?" The brusque voice on the other end commanded attention. "I've made up my mind. Your company gets my business. I'm sending the contract via Fed Ex today."

"Mr. Elliott?"

"Damn right. Don't know what you did, Brennan. Getting my daughter up here to that damn party was a brilliant ploy. You think I didn't see through it? Ha! But congratulations for a good job! I like that kind of gutsiness."

"Mr. Elliott, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Just sign the damn contract. I've got another call. I'll talk to you later."

Cam replaced the receiver and stared at his computer screen. He had won the biggest contract in company history, besting Vince Clayton in the bargain. But the news didn't bring him joy. Instead, his conscience jarred him, making him sick to his stomach once more.

He had not been truthful. In fact, he'd misrepresented himself and his motives to Aimee. He was a big, fat liar and it didn't make him proud of himself.

Cam dropped his head into his hands, elbows on the desk, and shut his eyes. What was he going to do? Not only was guilt over the contract weighing him down, but he had his brother to deal with. Hank had somehow guessed the truth and dug deep enough to find out the facts. Hank would betray his own mother, if she were still alive, to get what he wanted. He had no compunction about betraying Cam.

What am I going to do? What in the hell am I going to do?

If he continued as if nothing had happened, he'd close the deal with Elliott, prove himself capable to Hal and provide added relief to the corporate bottom line. When she found out, Aimee would hate him.

If he told Aimee the truth, he risked losing her *and* the contract. Aimee would still hate

him.

What if Hank got to her first and told her? Then he would look even worse in her eyes.
He'd look like the biggest jerk in the universe.

Which was what he was, wasn't he?

Chapter Eight

Holt Stables

The barn was quiet in the late afternoon. Training in the arena had ended for the day and the show horses had returned to their stalls. Cam found Jimmy in the tack room.

“She’s down the shed row,” Jimmy remarked, hardly looking up from where he cleaned a bridle.

Cam didn’t have to ask where to find Aimee. Jimmy knew what he wanted. Wasn’t it odd that he and Aimee were already linked together in Jimmy’s mind? Cam turned from the tack room and walked down the aisle.

The barn was Aimee’s environment. To Cam, it was a foreign place, but he was beginning to like its atmosphere. There was something elemental about the dirt under his jogging shoes and the smells and sounds of horses in their stalls.

He found Aimee with Wedded Bliss. The horse greeted Cam with a questioning snort.

Wedded Bliss was cross-tied by two ropes attached to both sides of his halter and the opposite walls. Aimee looked up from where she was wrapping the horse’s hind leg. She stood from her crouching position and came toward him, placing a hand on Bliss’s copper neck.

Aimee blew him away standing there beside the horse. She wore a trim, white polo shirt, gray Kentucky jodhpurs and paddock boots. Her long blond hair was pulled back from her face, delineating her features—the arc of her eyebrows, the angle of her jaw.

“Will he bite?” he asked.

“I haven’t found him to be nippy.”

“Okay.” Cam rubbed the horse’s nose.”

“But there’s always a first time. You need to be careful and respect him.”

“Respect is important,” he said mostly to himself.

A quizzical look came into her eyes. She didn’t understand is aside. “It’s late. I thought you wouldn’t come today.”

“I told you I’d be here.”

She shrugged and stepped nearer. “I know.”

It was as if she was telling him he was still on parole and had to prove himself. Cam searched her blue eyes, longing to touch her again and rub his hands up and down her body. He reacted physically to the thought, almost hating himself for it.

“Is there a place where we can talk?” he asked. The tension or whatever it was, chemistry maybe, between them was electric. He pulsed with it. Her eyes clouded with what he read as desire.

“How about the lounge?”

“Great.”

Aimee unhooked the crossties from the halter and the walls and turned Wedded Bliss free in the stall. She carried the ropes out with her, picking up the wrap and liniment she’d been using.

“I’ll meet you there after I drop these off in the tack room,” she said, shutting and securing the stall door.

All of his self-confidence had deserted him, and Cam was as antsy as a kid in preschool. This wasn’t going to be pretty, but he had to do it to salvage whatever self-respect he had left.

Entering the lounge, he stared at the photos on the wall of past champions. He didn’t really see them. His eyes blurred, not focusing. The door opened and shut. Cam turned.

Aimee looked at him, curious. She was relaxed and smiling.

“You forgot this.” Cam pulled the white swim cap from his pocket.

She blushed. “Thanks.” Taking the cap from his outstretched hand, she glanced up and grinned shyly. “Last night was good, wasn’t it?”

“It changed my life in a lot of ways.” His voice was husky, not deep and commanding. He was on new ground here and he didn’t know what to expect. “Let’s sit down.”

They sat next to each other on the leather sofa. He reached for her free hand and held it,

longing to kiss her, longing for this terrible truth to go away.

“When you and I split up,” he said, “I told myself it didn’t matter. I thought I would find another girl, but I never did.”

Aimee opened her mouth to speak, but he hushed her with a touch of a fingertip to her lips.

“Hear me out.” Cam stroked her soft cheek and then dropped his hand. “I concentrated instead on my father’s business. My mother got sick and Hal made me president. I haven’t had much time for dating.”

“Neither have I,” she admitted.

“Last night, I realized I probably didn’t want to find another girl,” Cam said. “I don’t think I ever stopped loving you, Aimee.”

She stared at him, her lips slightly parted. The night they had shared was the connection between them now. Having sex—no, *making love*—bound them together as nothing else could have done. Cam understood that. He gazed into Aimee’s eyes and knew she understood it too.

“Whatever happens between us, I want you to remember last night. It was perfect.”

“Yes.” Now her voice was breathless. Her eyes were wide with wonder. Could it be love?

Cam glanced away, unable to look at her. “I never would have thought about you again, Aimee, being so caught up in running the business until...”

“Until you bought Wedded Bliss and put him in training with Jimmy.”

Her eyes were bright with excitement, as if she understood the happenstance that brought them together.

His gut twisted. “Not quite.” Cam fought the fear rising in his throat. “I knew you were working with Jimmy.”

“You did?” Her eyes widened.

“Yes.” He forced himself not to break eye contact. “You can say I bought Wedded Bliss so that I could see you again.”

She looked surprised and then smiled. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Aimee threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. He hugged her back, longing to do more than just hold her. She kissed him then, and the poignancy of the kiss wasn’t lost on Cam.

Sitting back, Aimee continued to touch his cheek. Her fingers were gentle, but work

roughened. Her eyes were filled with a tenderness that made Cam's heart miss a beat.

She didn't understand what he was trying to say.

"Aimee, you don't know how I wish that was all of it." He glanced away, and she dropped her hand.

"What are you trying to tell me, Cam?"

He looked back at her. "Your father has offered Brennan Equipment Company a very lucrative contract for five brand new pieces of heavy equipment."

She cocked her head. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"It's worth over two million dollars." Cam swallowed his pride and said, "I wouldn't have landed the contract without our trip to Chicago."

"Do you mean you used me to get to my father?"

He nodded his head, unable to say "yes."

She stood up. "I can't believe it."

Cam forced out a big breath. "I can't believe it myself." He stood too. "After our time together, I didn't like myself. That's why I had to tell you."

"Noble of you." Her voice was toneless.

"No, there's nothing noble in this." He shook his head. "I discovered I cared about you and you don't deserve to be lied to. I decided tell you the truth hoping we can repair my mistake." Cam reached for her. "Aimee, I never stopped loving you. That's also what I'm trying to tell you."

She stepped back, away from his touch. "You have a fine way of showing it."

"I didn't know I was still in love with you. Not when this first started. It was after we got together again that I realized it." Cam heard the desperate quality in his voice.

"Cam, I don't know you well enough to understand your motives. All I know is that I feel dirty, and I don't like that feeling."

"God, Aimee, don't feel dirty. You're a beautiful, loving woman. I'm so lucky to have found you again."

"How can I believe that? How can I believe anything you tell me?"

"Because it's the truth."

"You wouldn't know the truth if it slapped you in the face."

Aimee swallowed hard, her eyes welling with tears. Her expression turned Cam's heart.

“Aimee!” He took a step toward her.

“Leave me alone!”

She turned and fled, slamming the lounge door and disappearing around the corner and into the stable.

Cam didn’t follow her. He didn’t blame her for being mad.

Picking up the white cap she’d left behind, he readjusted his shattered pride and broken heart, and left the barn hoping to bury himself in the day-to-day busyness of running his company.

* * * *

Aimee tried not to cry, but she couldn’t help it. Fighting back heavy tears, she escaped outside and climbed on top of a fence railing. Sitting there, balancing on the rail, she stared out toward the rolling green pasture. Two retired Saddlebreds grazed quietly in the distance.

Oh, how she loved this place. At least she could depend on Jimmy and Toady. Cam’s betrayal grabbed her gut and squeezed it hard, making her sick with grief and anger.

She had hoped he had changed. That age and circumstances would make a difference in whatever relationship developed between them. *Fat chance now*. Cam was just like the rest of them. Men used her to get to her father.

Was she really nothing without Daddy’s money?

Aimee backhanded the tears. She wouldn’t cry for Camden Brennan. She wouldn’t! She’d been gullible again. Falling for him, sleeping with him—those were things she knew not to do, but she’d done them anyway.

The cell phone her father had bought her was in her pocket. Pulling it out, she stared at it, anger growing every second. On impulse, she punched in her father’s office number. Five o’clock here meant it was four in Chicago.

“He left early today,” Cynthia, the administrative assistant, said.

“Oh, okay. I’ll try home.”

Aimee ended the call and then pressed the number for her house.

“I’m so glad to hear from you, Aimee,” her mother said, gushing with excitement. “No, your father is playing golf today with Vince Clayton. He’s not home.”

“Okay.” Aimee didn’t know what she would say to her father. It was probably better she couldn’t reach him.

“How are you doing, sweetheart?” her mother asked, an anxious note to her voice.

“I’m fine.” Now that was a lie.

“Do you have everything you need? Is there anything I can do for you?”

It was sad, really, as if her mother ached so much for her daughter’s love that she tried too hard. Aimee had come to understand that. She loved her mother, but she didn’t like being pushed. She didn’t like feeling responsible for her mother’s happiness.

“I’m fine, really. Jimmy and Toady are taking good care of me.”

“Hump! They should for all the money your father is paying them.”

The phone turned to stone in Aimee’s hand. “What did you say, Mom?”

“Oh, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.” Her mother sounded confused. “Ray didn’t want you to know. Oh, well, you know me.” There was a self-deprecating tone to her voice and uncomfortable laughter. “I never could keep a secret. I’ve done pretty well for this long, don’t you think?”

Aimee held her breath and restrained her temper. “Are you telling me that Daddy paid Jimmy and Toady money? Why did he do that?”

“So that man would hire you, of course.”

Aimee grabbed the railing with her free hand. This was worse than she ever expected. The whole world she had carefully crafted was a sham. Cam, her father, Jimmy—the three men in her life had deceived her in the worst way.

She felt unclean. She felt sick. Her stomach cramped from the knowledge that she was nothing without Daddy’s money.

“Aimee? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, Mom. It’s just that sometimes the truth hurts.”

“What do you mean, darling? Daddy was only watching out for you because he loves you.”

“His love smothers me,” Aimee said between gritted teeth.

“Oh, that’s silly.”

“It’s not silly. It’s like when you wanted me to take ballet as a child. I wasn’t good at it.”

“But you had to try, dear.”

“Why? Why did I have to try?” Aimee raised her voice, fighting back more tears.

“All the other little girls were taking ballet.”

“Don’t you see? I was only good at horses. But that was never good enough for you.”

“Aimee, we bought you all the horses you wanted. I really don’t understand what your problem is.”

“My problem is that I can’t be who you want me to be,” Aimee said in an even voice.

“I’m no good in the society you expect me to move in. I can’t make you happy because I’m not the person you want me to be.”

“Really, dear, you’re talking gibberish. I’ve always been happy with you. I love you.”

Aimee didn’t react to her mother’s words. She snapped the phone shut and balanced on the railing, her mind whirling with panic.

What kind of person was she? She didn’t know. Her life, as she knew it, had just been stripped away. Aimee Elliott, horse trainer, was an ugly façade, an empty shell.

She hopped down from the fence and strode into the barn. She gathered her saddle from the tack room and her purse from the office. Jimmy stared at her as she passed him in the aisle, but she didn’t speak.

There was nothing to say.

Chapter Nine

Tuesday Morning

Brennan Equipment Company

Cam sat behind his mahogany desk staring at a stack of papers and a computer screen that had gone blank from lack of activity. He was tired. He'd spent a sleepless night going over the events of the past forty-eight hours, trying to figure out what, if anything, he could have done differently. Nothing came to him, other than being more forceful when he told Aimee he loved her.

Because he *did* love her. That realization had hit him like the proverbial ton of bricks once he returned home and gazed out the window at the pool house. To think that he'd never have the chance to amend his mistakes, to make love to her again, to ask her to marry him blew his mind big time.

He'd always been so careful never to screw up. Hurting Aimee, ruining their fledgling relationship had been the worst blunders of his life.

His iPhone played the University of Kentucky fight song, his ringtone. Cam glanced at the display. *Aimee!*

"Hello!" he said too eagerly. "Aimee?"

"No, this is Toady Burke."

"Oh, I thought this was Aimee's cell number."

"It is," Toady answered. "This is her cell phone. I was calling to ask if you know where

she is.”

“What?”

“Aimee is missing.”

“Missing?” Cam half rose out of his seat and then sat down hard. “What do you mean, missing?”

“Just that,” Toady explained. “She walked out of the barn yesterday carrying her saddle. Jimmy didn’t ask her what she was doing and Aimee didn’t say a word. When I got home, I found her things gone from the basement apartment, everything except this phone.”

Damn! He’d driven her away from the job she loved.

“I thought she might be with you,” Toady went on.

“No, I haven’t seen her since yesterday afternoon.”

Toady cleared her throat. “I’ve talked to both her mother and father. She’s not with them. Her mother seems to think she told Aimee something to upset her.”

“Aimee was already upset,” Cam said quietly.

“Mrs. Elliott didn’t know the whole story. What she told Aimee was not true, and we’re afraid that’s why she left.” Toady paused as if drawing a breath.

“Are you going to enlighten me?” Cam couldn’t keep the anxiety from his voice.

“She told Aimee that her father paid Jimmy to hire her as a trainer.”

Cam shut his eyes. *Shit!* After what he’d just told her, no wonder Aimee disappeared.

“But it’s not true,” Toady went on. “Mr. Elliott was helping us pay off Jimmy’s medical bills. His wife got the whole thing screwed up.”

“You’ve called Aimee’s friends? Do they know where she is?”

“I don’t know her friends.”

“I’ve met a few of them,” Cam said, trying to remember the names of the girls he met at The Racetrack several weeks ago.

“Do you think you can ask them if they’ve seen Aimee? Her mother is sick with worry.”

“I bet she is.” Cam didn’t have much sympathy for Mrs. Elliott any more than he had sympathy for himself. It was Aimee he was worried about. “I’ll do what I can do.”

Toady clicked off. Cam shut down his computer, pocketed his iPhone and climbed to his feet.

“I’m taking an early lunch,” he told his secretary as he strode out of the office.

* * * *

Louisville's famed Racetrack Restaurant buzzed with the executive lunch crowd when Cam arrived at eleven-thirty. He was seated at a booth against the wall under a watercolor of the racing Thoroughbreds. Placing his order, he then requested to speak to the owner, Chef Lane Williams.

Fifteen minutes later, before his salad arrived, Williams approached his table. Dressed in a classic two-button gray suit, white dress shirt, and burgundy striped silk tie, the owner presented the exacting image of a successful businessman. Cam could respect that.

He rose and extended his hand. "Camden Brennan," he said, introducing himself.

Williams nodded and shook his hand.

"Will you have a seat?" Cam motioned with his right hand as he sat down.

Williams sat opposite. "What can I do for you, Mr. Brennan?"

"Cam, please." Cam sipped his ice water. "I'm inquiring about a woman, Aimee Elliott. Her parents are worried about her."

"What makes you think I know anything about Miss Elliott?"

Cam read the evasion in the restaurateur's eyes. "I had dinner here with Miss Elliott and her friends several weeks ago," he explained. "I know one of Aimee's friends is your wife. Her parents want to find their daughter."

Williams leaned back in his chair. "You can assure her parents that she's okay, but she doesn't want to be found."

"That's understandable," Cam agreed, relieved that Aimee was okay. "Will you tell her to call home? Her father has something to tell her. She was misinformed, and he wants to set the record straight."

Williams stood. "I can tell her, but I can't guarantee she will call home."

Cam looked up at the serious older man. "There are no guarantees, are there, Chef Williams?"

"No, sir. None at all."

* * * *

The soothing June sunshine warmed Aimee's face. She finished hanging the clean towels and rags out in the air to dry and then walked back into the barn. Henry Carlisle's "gentleman's farm" near Louisville contained over a hundred acres with pasture and woodland, and a stable

big enough for Henry's retired Thoroughbreds and Saddlebreds.

Henry was married to Sarah Williams' aunt, the woman who harbored Aimee quite willingly in her upstairs guest room. Aunt Amelia, once a famous food critic, doted on her new great-nephew and kept Henry out of trouble, or so she claimed.

"Lord, child," Aunt Amelia said, waddling into the tack room. "You don't have to do all this work."

Aimee straightened the saddles and girths. She looked around and smiled. "Nervous energy. I'm not used to inactivity. Besides, I'm repaying your kindness."

"Mercy! We're glad for the company."

Aimee was glad for the company too. The Carlises were a happy couple, full of generous good humor. Her fiend Sarah had been right to suggest their home as a hideaway. She needed time to think and get her act together. She needed space.

Amelia hitched her hefty backside up on a stool. She wore her bottled blonde hair in a style reminiscent of the nineteen sixties. Her Capri pants were mint green and her blouse was splotted with bright yellow and red poppies.

She cleared her throat. "Seems as if your folks are looking for you."

"I expected that. How do you know?"

"A nice young man spoke to my nephew Lane at The Racetrack."

"Cam." Aimee's heart took a nosedive. She didn't know what to think about Cam. Her emotions conflicted, at once feeling betrayed and angry, and the next, feeling sorry for the breakup of their relationship.

Who was she kidding? They didn't have a *relationship*. They'd just had sex. Granted it had been mind-blowing, heart-stopping sex, but that didn't mean he loved her. He claimed he did, but she knew enough about men's declarations to know how easily "I love you" slipped from their lips.

"Lane said Cam had a message from your father. You're to call home because there's been a misunderstanding."

"Yeah and I made it."

"Your folks are worried about you, dear."

Aimee nodded. "I know, but I can't call them. Not yet anyway."

Amelia tapped a dimpled finger on her chin. "What about the nice young man?"

“He’s Jimmy’s client.” She turned back to the saddle racks.

“You can’t dismiss me that easily,” Amelia warned. “That young man is special to you.”

“Except that he’s a liar.” Aimee heard the bitterness in her voice. She turned back to face her hostess.

Amelia rejected her comment with an impatient wave of her bejeweled hand. “He’s a man. Need I say more?”

“I’m tired of men using me because of my father’s money.”

Amelia shook her head. “It’s not your father’s money, dear. It’s your attitude toward it and toward yourself.”

How had Amelia pinpointed her problem so readily? Aimee swallowed her resentment and stared at the older woman. “I’m only good with horses. I don’t know anything else.”

“I very much doubt that’s true,” Amelia said, “but given that it is, there are plenty of jobs in Kentucky for a woman of your capability.”

“Not ones that pay enough money to live on. Not for someone starting out. I will *not* take money from my father. I don’t want his help.”

“I have a friend who is looking for a program manager for her non-profit therapeutic riding facility. Her program manager just left, and they are in the midst of their summer session.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

Amelia shrugged. “What do you care as long as horses are involved? I’ll give my friend a call. I believe there’s an apartment available over the barn where you can stay.”

For the first time in two days, Aimee felt a sprig of hope begin to grow. She hugged Amelia in an impulsive show of gratitude. “Oh, thank you! It will mean so much to me to make it on my own.”

A smile accentuated by Amelia’s pudgy cheeks. “When you get on your feet, I expect you to call that young man and give him another chance. Your father and mother, too. Promise me?”

“I promise.”

* * * *

Four weeks later, Aimee was ready to call home. Her whole attitude had changed, blossoming into a new respect for herself and her abilities. She had landed the job with the therapeutic riding program and was now busy organizing volunteers and planning charity events.

She pitched in with the lessons, learning to be a sidewalker first, and sometimes she led a horse if enough volunteers didn't show up.

She was good with people and loved the kids who gained so much from riding. The volunteers, who made the lessons possible, were generous people, and taught her the importance of giving. Her work made a difference. Even when she helped muck stalls or groomed the ponies and horses, she was making an impact on someone's life.

Early one morning, Aimee reached her father at his office.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Her voice was soft, full of emotion.

"Aimee? You're mother has been so worried about you," his harsh voice blurted over the phone.

"And you haven't?" She stood her ground.

"Er, yes. I've not been happy about your disappearance."

"I'm fine, Dad." And then she told him where she was and what she was doing. "I'm going to take the classes and tests to become a certified therapeutic riding instructor."

"That's great, honey." This time Aimee heard the pride in her father's voice. "I knew you could be whatever you wanted to be."

She let out a breath, fighting back old anger and hurt. "Really, Dad?"

"Yes. You must know I didn't pay Jimmy Burke to hire you. He needed help with his medical bills. I was sending him money for that."

"But Mom said..."

"You know your mother gets things confused. She only hears what she wants to hear."

Aimee did know that. Maybe she should have confronted her father instead of running away.

"You've got to call Brennan," her father said using that dictatorial voice again. "We've had several long talks recently. The man loves you."

Her heart thudded. Why was her father talking to Cam? Had the world turned upside down so quickly?

"You need to know he never signed the contract," her father continued. "I'm buying my equipment from Vince Clayton. Brennan wouldn't do business with me."

"What?" Had she heard her father correctly?

"Brennan told me he loved you too much to do business with his future father-in-law."

Her father laughed then. "The man has guts, Aimee. You'd do well to make up with him and get him in the family. I can use a partner like that."

Her father said much more, but that's all Aimee heard, her heart doing wild gyrations. Cam had not signed the two million dollar contract.

"You didn't deserve to be lied to," Cam had said. He told her the truth because he wanted a relationship with her. When he said he loved her, he wasn't lying.

* * * *

Cam sat beside the glimmering water of his family swimming pool. It was a late Saturday afternoon. He held a glass of plain lemonade in one hand and an unread spy novel in the other. His body was tanned from many days in the sun. He was sleepy, lethargic, uninterested in the world around him. The pool had become his refuge this summer as he tried to get over the time he and Aimee had spent there together.

He looked up from his stupor to see a mirage walking down the steps from the upper deck. She wore a red and white flowered sundress that swayed as she walked.

He sat up. "Aimee?"

"Hi, Cam." She came toward him, smiling.

There was something different about her. A new confidence. A glow of something he couldn't understand.

Slowly he placed his glass down beside his chair. He dropped his book and stood up watching her walk around the pool toward him.

"Aimee?"

She laughed. "I'm not a ghost."

"What does this mean?" He could barely speak.

"It means your brother let me in. Hank, I think he said his name was."

Hank let her in? Without saying anything stupid or rude? He couldn't believe it any more than he could believe he saw her standing there.

He reached out and touched her cheek. She shut her eyes, leaning into his hand. A smile played across her lips.

"Aimee?" he whispered.

She opened her eyes. "My father told me about the contract."

He blinked, having trouble focusing, unable to speak.

“My father also gave me his blessing.”

“For what?”

“To marry you, of course. That is, if you’re really serious about what you said in June.”

“Serious? On my life I was serious.”

“Do you want to work on a relationship and see where it goes? Do you want to try again?” she asked him.

“I’ve never wanted anything more in my whole life.”

Cam kissed her then and she kissed him back. The sun beat down upon his head as Aimee circled his neck with her arms. She pressed her body against his. Their kiss deepened.

This couldn’t be true. This couldn’t be happening. Aimee Elliott had come back to him.

And he was damn sure he’d never let her get away again.

Epilogue

The Chicago Tribune Online

Aimee Elliott and Camden Brennan were married on October 24, 2009, at St. Peter Catholic Church in Skokie with a reception following at the Chicago Botanic Garden. The bride is the daughter of Ray and Martha Elliott of Skokie. The groom is the son of Henry and Virginia Brennan of Louisville. The bride, 25, received a BS in animal sciences and is the program director for The Hope Therapeutic Riding Center. The groom, 30, graduated from the University of Kentucky with a MS degree in business. He is president and CEO of Brennan Equipment Company. The couple honeymooned in Ireland, Scotland, London, and Paris and resides in Louisville, Kentucky.

About the Author

Jan Scarbrough lives in Louisville, Kentucky, along with two dogs and four cats. Dreams do come true! On January 2, 2000, she married Bill, her soul mate. When she's not writing, Jan takes riding lessons every week on her favorite horse, the American Saddlebred. She also volunteers at The Luci Center, a therapeutic riding center.

Jan says, "The process of becoming a published author has been fun. My best friends are fellow writers. Who else will check a point plot for me or understand GMC and POV?"

Jan Scarbrough is a member of Novelists, Inc., Romance Writers of America and the Kentucky Romance Writers, where she served as president, secretary, and newsletter editor. Jan is currently the web mistress of the KYRW chapter's award-winning web site.

To learn more about Jan Scarbrough, please visit her at www.janscarbrough.com.

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The RP Team

**Jan Scarbrough's *Bluegrass Reunions* Series
is available at
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They thought the boys they loved were out of their lives. They were wrong.

KENTUCKY COWBOY — She had dumped him in high school because he was a risk-taker.

“Warmhearted and wonderful... Kentucky Cowboy is a keeper.” — Bestselling Author Joanne Rock

*Winner of the 2006 PASIC *Book of Your Heart* Contest, Contemporary Series Romance

A contender for the world title, professional bull rider Judd Romeo defies death for a living. Now he must deal with the death of his mother by settling her estate. Returning home to Kentucky, he runs smack dab into the arms of his high school sweetheart, a woman he has never forgotten.

Veterinarian Mandy Sullivan learned early on that risk-takers are trouble. Having custody of her sister's child, she is working hard to be both mother and father to the abandoned girl, and doesn't count on trouble showing up next door.

Mandy discovers she can't avoid the famous cowboy she's never quite put out of her mind. When Mandy's sister comes back threatening to take away the little girl she loves as her own, will Mandy realize Judd is not the same man he was back then?

KENTUCKY WOMAN — She had loved him when she was a teenager, but they never connected.

*Winner of the 2007 San Diego RWA's *Spring into Romance* Contest

*Second Place in the 2007 PASIC *Book of Your Heart* Contest, Contemporary Series Romance

Years of hard work and schooling have paid off for single mom and ex-jockey Alexis Marsden.

She now has a desk job she loves and she's paying her bills—barely. But she can't give her son everything he needs, especially a father. When the big brother of her child's father asks her to marry him, does Alex give up her hard-won independence and settle for an old-fashioned marriage of convenience?

Workaholic banker Jackson Breckinridge has spent his life meeting the expectations of his parents and protecting his younger brother. When his brother fathers Alex's child, Jack must protect his parents from the truth and fix his brother's screw up. Marriage to the childhood playmate he's loved since his school days is just the right thing to solve his problems. He accepts her terms for a marriage of convenience, but he longs to convert it into a one that's for real.

KENTUCKY FLAME — She had his baby, but he left not knowing the truth.

Horse trainer Jake Hendricks arrives to take charge of Royalty Farm from his one-time mentor. After the main barn goes up in flames, Jake must do everything he can to save the farm that is already under financial pressure from a greedy local real estate developer.

After gathering the courage to leave an abusive marriage, horse trainer Melody O'Shea returns to Royalty Farm when her father needs her help. Coming home to the famed American Saddlebred farm is bittersweet because it is also the home of her daughter, the secret child she gave up for a private adoption.

Mel doesn't count on Jake being there. The man left her nine years earlier not knowing she was carrying his baby. Forced to work with Jake to save her daughter's home and heritage, Mel grapples with the mistakes of her past and her love for a man who once rejected her, but who she never forgot. When danger escalates, Mel's life is in jeopardy and she must work with Jake to solve the mystery that threatens her safety and the safety of the daughter they both love.

***Ladies of Legend: Finding Home* by Janet Eaves, Magdalena Scott, Maddie James and Jan Scarbrough**

What happens when four writers who love romance get together and create a town, the people who live in it, and the stories of those people's lives? You get Legend, Tennessee — where four women from different backgrounds find purpose, love and their future in a town intent on preserving its past.

Ladies of Legend: Finding Home is an anthology including four novellas:

***Claiming the Legend* by Janet Eaves...** Lilly Peach is running from something so frightening it finally takes a whole town to cover her back.

***Midnight in Legend, TN* by Magdalena Scott...** Lovely Midnight Shelby finds Legend on the Internet after becoming tired of being one of her now ex-husband's "beautiful things."

***Bed, Breakfast, and You* by Maddie James...** Suzie Schul finds home only when the "fling" she had many months earlier shows up with a plan on her B&B doorstep.

***The Reunion Game* by Jan Scarbrough...** Plain Jane Smith reunites with her long lost love by playing a game of "bait and switch" with her famous twin sister.

***Also available from Resplendence Publishing
More Tales from Legend, Tennessee***

Beauty and the Beast: A Ladies of Legend Novella by Janet Eaves

Special Agent Polly Chapman has multiple identities... She is known to many as a savior. To others she is a killing machine. But all who know her, or think they know her, believe her untouchable.

Until she's injured.

Now the man sent to piece her back together when "The Agency" considers her broken has only two choices— Catcher Stevens must fix her, or kill her.

Harvest Moon: A Ladies of Legend Novella by Janet Eaves

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

Murder on the Mountain: A Ladies of Legend Novel by Maddie James

In the two long years since her Tennessee state trooper husband's murder, Kate Carpenter thinks she's coped with his death, although everyone in Legend, Tennessee tells her she hasn't. She can't see what the problem is, really. She has her parents, and her best friend Patti Jo, and her students. What else could a twenty-nine year old woman want?

A man, Patti Jo keeps telling her.

Sent to Kate's classroom on an investigation, ATF Special Agent Mike Lehmann uses his drug prevention training as his cover. His mission? To find out what Kate knows about her husband's "death." Recent reports indicate he is alive and that he faked his death because of his involvement in a drug-running operation. Mike's task is to expose Carpenter, and if she's involved, Kate.

And he'll stop at nothing to get the answers he seeks.

The Christmas Gift: A Legendary Christmas Novella by Janet Eaves

Christina Montgomery dreads another Christmas with the questions about her soldier husband, Johnny, hanging over her and her daughter's heads. She believes he died with his small sniper squadron a little over two years earlier, even though his was the only body unaccounted for. The Marine Corp has indicated they are leaning towards calling Johnny a defector. There are even a few Legend locals who believe it, too. This is something Christina refuses to consider. Until one snowy evening, two weeks before Christmas, a man looking very much like Johnny arrives at her Tennessee farm with no idea of who he is.

Stunned, confused, Christina doesn't know what to do with him. Is this man's sudden appearance a Christmas miracle? Or is it Christina's worst nightmare come true?

Christmas Collision: A Legendary Christmas Novella by Magdalena Scott

Rebecca Mayfield, *the* divorce lawyer in New York City, doesn't believe in happily ever after. Why would she? Her beloved husband and law partner died of a heart attack a couple of years ago, and she spends every day of her lucrative work life ending someone's marriage.

Her friend and former client, Midnight Shelby McClain, invites Rebecca to her new "hometown" of Legend, Tennessee for the holiday. Small town Christmas—probably incredibly hokey. But Legend worked some magic in Midnight's life. What might be there for Rebecca?

Her rental car slides off the icy road and is stuck in a ditch. She hikes through the dark in the deep snow toward the only light she can see...from a little cabin on the mountain.

David keeps a vigil each Christmas Eve in a little weekend cabin on the mountain outside Legend. He needs this time alone—away from his high stress life in Knoxville. He does *not* appreciate the interruption of having to take care of yet another lost soul—no matter how cute and spicy the package it's wrapped in.

The power goes off, but the sparks continue to fly between these two strangers... There's something magical about this cabin. Maybe this is the Christmas to find love—and a new beginning—in Legend, Tennessee.

Home for the Holidays: A Legendary Christmas Novella by Maddie James

The last thing Chelly Schul wants is to go home for the holidays. She left her hometown of Legend, Tennessee on a wing and a prayer two years earlier and hasn't returned. Her leaving humiliated her entire family, particularly her sister Suzie, since she ran off with Suzie's (almost-ex) husband.

Legend Police Officer Matt Branson values being alone. Even during the holidays, he enjoys the solitude. Dubbed the town hermit, he tells himself he prefers his “cave” to socializing. His friends say he still pines after that lost love...although he begs to differ.

All that changes the snowy day he pulls over the older model sedan heading into Legend. His gut slams against his backbone as Chelly rolls down the car window and looks up into his eyes.

His high-school sweetheart is back in town—the woman who sent him into his cave in the first place.

Santa's Kiss: A Legendary Christmas Novella by Jan Scarbrough

Actress Dawn Smith's world is crumbling. She's always lived on the edge, seeking thrills, making herself into someone different. That's why her success in Hollywood came so easily for a small town girl from Legend, Tennessee. But things have changed. Dawn needs to get away from the bright lights, but it's Christmastime and that has always meant going home to family. She can't face family this year.

Clint Roberts, former high school football hero and current car dealership owner, is a popular fixture in Legend. Affable and fun-loving, the bachelor is everyone's best buddy. Most people know about his infatuation for one-time Legend girl, now superstar Dawn Smith.

Dawn needs someone to turn to, but she's rejected her family. When Clint shows up on her doorstep in a snowstorm dressed as Santa bearing gifts and food, she welcomes him. Will their night of lovemaking bring Dawn more heartache or can Clint convince the actress that it's time for her to come home for good?

Where Her Heart Is: A Ladies of Legend Novel by Magdalena Scott

Two years ago, Betsy McClain gave up on her husband and her hometown. She packed up her baby daughter and moved to the City. Now she's temporarily back in Legend, Tennessee. But when Betsy agreed to this house-sitting job, she didn't know her favorite room was being renovated, or that her handsome almost-ex-husband was the carpenter.

After his wife and baby left him, Mike McClain was forced to grow up. Now he considers himself Mr. Responsibility. LizBeth Ann soon falls in love with her big handsome daddy, who takes her for picnics and is her “date” for little girl tea parties. But though Betsy, with her big blue eyes and cascades of golden blonde hair, looks like an angel, she seems determined to treat him like the devil. How can they let go of the past so the little family can have a future?

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