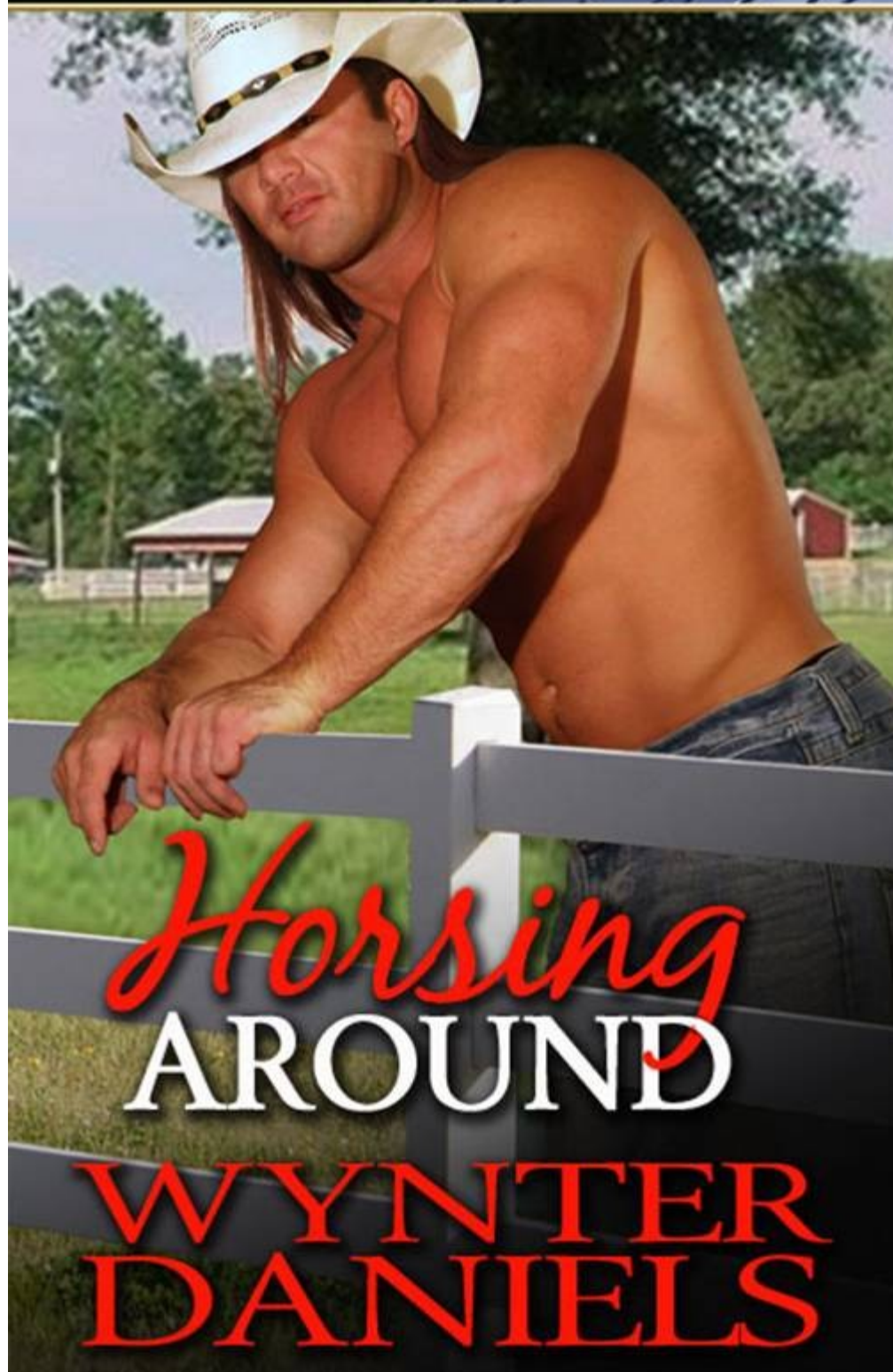


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Horsing*  
AROUND

WYNTER  
DANIELS

## **Horsing Around**

*Wynter Daniels*

City girl Paige Eastman arrives at her recently deceased father's Ocala, Florida, horse ranch to settle his estate, but she finds more than material assets with his business partner, resident cowboy Jake Skinner. The two engage in a hot fling until Paige learns she must sell the struggling enterprise out from under Jake.

All Jake wants is a chance to turn the business around since Paige's father nearly ran it into the ground. But his attention quickly shifts to wrangling the hot prima donna who is now his partner. Can they overcome their differences without dousing the fire burning between them?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Horsing Around

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# ***HORSING AROUND***

**Wynter Daniels**

## **Chapter One**

Paige Eastman lifted her gaze from her laptop when the taxi came to a stop in front of a white two-story colonial-style home. Could this be her father's place? She surveyed the lush green landscape and rolling hills. Fishing in her purse, her fingers closed around the money she'd stashed for the fare. Maybe being here would answer some of the gnawing questions she had about the father she'd hardly known.

"This is the Circle O Ranch, right?" She handed the driver a fifty.

"Yes, ma'am." He stepped out of the car. Seconds later the trunk clicked open.

She climbed out of the cab and drew in a deep breath infused with the scent of fresh cut grass and something else, something vaguely unpleasant. Another sniff. Manure? Nausea threatened, but she forced it back. Lord, it had to be a hundred degrees out. Why would anyone choose to live in such a hellishly hot place?

No one had even contacted her until more than a month after his death. Now she had the unwanted task of disposing of the assets of a man she hadn't spoken to in more than ten years.

The ranch seemed inviting enough, though. The house looked well cared for and freshly painted. A porch wrapped all the way around it, the kind she'd always dreamt of. With the sprawling green meadows and a white split-rail fence, the property appeared exactly how she'd envisioned it.

The driver ascended the three wide steps to the wraparound porch and set her suitcases near the front door of the house. "Would you like me to take them inside for you?"

Giving the man a smile, she shook her head. "I've got it from here, thanks." She waved as the cab pulled away.

Glancing around, she heard the whinny of a horse. Curiosity niggled at her. The only horses she'd ever laid eyes upon in real life had been with the mounted patrols she occasionally saw near Times Square.

Abandoning her luggage, she followed the sound around the side of the house. A huge black and gray horse approached. White markings dotted its face and its thick legs. The steady clomp of the animal's hoofs mirrored the pounding of her heart.

It wasn't the horse, but the rider who stole her breath away. Still a good twenty yards from her, she could already see the broad, muscled shoulders beneath his T-shirt, the long, powerful legs covered in faded denim.

Lord, the man was hot. With scenery like him, she could deal with the hellish temperatures, at least for the week or so this ought to take. With the ink still wet on her divorce decree, she deserved to make this forced trip part vacation.

Tugging at her collar, she realized she should have changed her clothes before she left the office. Sweltering heat engulfed her as the man drew near. His icy blue stare raked over her body. Despite the stifling temperature and humidity, a chill skittered across her skin. He must have noticed, because he gave her a crooked grin that charged the air with a crackle of sensual energy.

He patted the horse's neck then dismounted. After he'd tied the reins to a post, he strode across the thick grass toward her. Great walk, amazing legs, strong jawline and prominent cheekbones. His dark hair brushed his shoulders and he had just enough stubble on his face to be sexy, but not messy looking.

"You must be Owen's daughter." His smile revealed deep dimples. "Welcome to Ocala."

Offering her hand, she prayed her voice wouldn't fail her. "Paige Eastman." When they shook, electricity arced between them, nearly knocked her off balance. She let go, cleared her throat.

His eyes shone even bluer up close. And his lips, oh, Lord. He licked the bottom one and she imagined that tongue licking her. Her legs turned to jelly. Maybe this trip

didn't have to be all business. No reason she couldn't put the property on the market and have a hot fling during her time here. She couldn't remember the last time her body had responded to a man this way.

"Sorry about Owen. He was a good man."

*Not really.* Her father had abandoned her and her mother fifteen years ago. Just picked up and left. That didn't exactly qualify him as a *good man* in her book. He'd been distant even before he'd gone away. Yet she remembered some fun times with him, an occasional hug. For some reason she cherished those memories, even though animosity still remained. "Thank you."

"I'm Jake Skinner. Your dad's lawyer told me you planned to come." He set his hands on his waist. "Did he explain about the damage to the bunkhouse?"

How could she think rationally with this incredibly sexy man standing in front of her? Who was he, anyway? Caretaker? Friend? Employee? Whoever he was, he was beyond fine. She hoped he planned to stick around for the length of her stay. Her nipples hardened and strained against the lace fabric of her bra, reminding her of her unfulfilled needs. "Um, no. He only said I needed to come down to decide what to do with the ranch."

Jake's face only grew more handsome with the slight furrow of his brow. He shifted and pointed past his horse. "Last big storm through here took out the roof of that building over the hill. Guess y'all heard about Tropical Storm Emily even up in New York City, huh?"

She tried to concentrate on what he'd said. "No, we didn't. At least, *I* didn't." Guilt stabbed at her for not paying more attention to potentially catastrophic events in her father's adopted state. Not like he'd paid her and her mother much attention, though.

She reluctantly dragged her gaze from Jake's eyes and scanned the green pastures. A small brown building sat near a traditional looking barn. Blue tarps covered one side of the roof. "I assume the bunkhouse is where you live?" Her heart pounded so loudly she prayed he couldn't hear it.

“Right. At least I did until the storm opened a skylight. Roofers are coming in a few days. I’ll pay them from the operating account.”

The bookkeeper in her honed in on his words. “Operating account? You’re a signer on one of my father’s bank accounts?” All her father’s assets should have been frozen after his death.

He visibly stiffened. “Owen didn’t share much information with you about his business, did he? The tour operations are incorporated. We each had a stake in the company. His half goes to you now from what I understand.”

“Tour operations?” She had no idea what the man was referring to. Far as she knew, she’d been summoned here to dispose of his house, nothing more. Could he really be her father’s business partner? She wished someone had told her he’d had a partner. So much for a fling with him. Damn. Not a good idea to sleep with someone she might have to do business with. “What sort of tours are you talking about?”

A broad grin lit up his face and made his eyes sparkle. “Sounds like I need to show you around the ranch. You ride?” Her eyes widened and Jake had to laugh. “I’ll take that as a no. Might want to change out of those clothes.” He slid his gaze over her white blouse, buttoned clear up to her chin. She reminded him of all those stuffy bankers he and Owen had to placate a few years ago to get their original business loan. Stuffed shirts made his head ache and his skin itch. He didn’t trust them for a minute.

He could just picture her behind a desk under glaring fluorescent lights surrounded by mountains of adding machine tape. She could use some lessons on loosening up. Her pants looked way more suited to a sterile office than to riding a horse. Despite the conservative digs, he glimpsed a hot body underneath. If she’d release her chestnut hair from that severe ponytail she’d be downright sizzling. Way hotter than anything he’d seen in a long time.

Most of the women he knew had been born and raised in the area. Dating someone he’d known since kindergarten would be akin to incest in his book. But dating a banker

type might be even worse. Anyway, she'd be leaving after she took care of the estate. Last thing he needed was a broken heart.

"I've never ridden a horse. Never even touched one." She gasped when he grabbed her hand, easing it toward Daisy.

Even her skin felt different than that of the local women. Soft and velvety, her hands had probably never been calloused from gripping a pitchfork or holding reins for hours on end.

When they stopped right next to Daisy, Paige's eyes grew huge and her complexion paled. No problem. He had loads of experience setting city folks at ease around horses. Giving her a reassuring nod, he set her palm on the mare's side. "This is what you call a shire. She's real gentle. Pulls the kiddie wagon."

"The kiddie wagon?" She snatched her hand away and tucked it behind her back. "I'm afraid you've lost me."

Owen had hardly ever mentioned Paige and she'd never visited in the three years he'd known his former business partner. Hard to believe the old man hadn't shared anything about their business with his only daughter. "We do horse and buggy tours, carriage rides, hayrides, that sort of thing. Take tourists around the local horse ranches."

Understanding registered in her dark eyes. "I see. Then I suppose I ought to take a look around the place. I didn't realize my father's estate included a business, or his half of it."

"It's a working ranch. Fifteen acres of prime North Florida real estate." Which Owen had leveraged to the max. He hoped she hadn't inherited her father's controlling nature. Never again would he blindly trust a partner, a decision that had cost him dearly.

She shielded her eyes from the sun and looked toward the stables, then the meadow. "It looks pretty, but I have no idea how anyone lives in this heat."

He shrugged. "You get used to it pretty quick. Your father said his first summer here took a lot out of him, but after that it never bothered him." Why did he even care if she liked the place? Only he did. "There are a few orange trees 'round the other side of the house. Should even be a few ripe enough to eat."

She ignored his statement. "How big did you say it is?"

He couldn't resist the opportunity to tease her. She needed to lighten up some. "Real big. Probably bigger than you could handle."

Lifting an eyebrow, she met his stare. For a fleeting moment, he caught her full lips lifting in a grin, but quick as a wink, she frowned. "Excuse me?"

Straightening, he cleared his throat. "Fifteen acres."

"What's land going for around here?"

No way would he sell. Not unless she forced him. He swallowed back the fear. "I haven't checked recently. But the Circle O is more than just acreage. It's a tourist destination. We've been written up in all kinds of travel magazines."

"Oh?"

He was about to tell her about some of the plans he had to expand the business when Daisy whinnied and stomped a hoof on the ground.

Paige gasped and jumped back.

He couldn't hold back a grin as he grasped her upper arm to calm her. "It's all right. She gets a little restless sometimes."

Her pretty face took on a pink flush. "Thanks." She shrugged off his hand, but her smile sent a zing of heat coursing through him. She might be a cool, all-business city girl on the outside, but he definitely sensed a fire burning somewhere inside her, one she kept well hidden. Everything inside him warned him against starting something with her. But his cock had other ideas as it strained against his fly.

"You ought to change if we're going to see the grounds." He started toward the main house and she followed.

When they rounded the front of the building she stopped and huffed. "My bags are on the porch, but—"

He cut her off with a raised hand. "I'll bring 'em inside. Guest room or your father's old room?"

Her face clouded and he winced.

*Did I just say something that insensitive?*

Of course she didn't want to stay in Owen's old room. "Jeez, I'm sorry. The guest room's nice. I'm sure you'll be more comfortable in there." Recalling how painful it had been for him to stay at his grandmother's house right after she'd passed away, he mentally kicked himself. He hoped he hadn't upset her.

She gave her head a sharp nod. "That's fine. I'll carry my own things."

He started to protest, but she practically ran to the porch ahead of him as if she couldn't wait to get away.

He followed, circled past her and reached for her suitcase the same instant she did. Their fingers twined together on the leather handle. The warm softness of her skin struck him again. Their eyes met for a moment, locked. Her lips parted and her chest heaved. A sexy pink flush colored her cheeks.

Heat swirled in his belly and his pulse quickened. Her skin felt warm, inviting.

Suddenly she snatched the bag from his grip. "I'm not some silly little Southern belle you have to treat like a flower. I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own suitcases."

"Whoa." He backed away and raised his hands in surrender. She acted as stubborn and independent as her old man had. Would she be as mule-headed in business? His gut tightened. The fate of the business he loved lay squarely in her hands. He prayed she wouldn't make any rash decisions about the ranch.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a key. Why tell her the door was unlocked? Pushing it open, she labored through with her suitcase, a smaller bag and a

laptop case. She dropped her things in the foyer then turned to him. "Thank you, Mr. Skinner. I'll come out after I've changed and had a look around the house."

He held back a chuckle. Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned against the doorjamb. "Guest room is at the top of the stairs. First on the right. Mine's at the other end of the hall. Last door on the left. In case you get lonely." He threw her a wink.

Her jaw dropped, but she quickly snapped it shut. "You live here? In my father's house?"

"Maybe I should have explained what the damage to the bunkhouse means. The place isn't livable with part of the roof missing. I'm camping out here until the repairs are completed. Probably another week, maybe two."

Her face turned fifteen shades of purple. "Here? In my father's house? With me?"

He took off his hat, tried to make out her body under the loose-fitting suit. Couldn't wait to see her in something besides those prudish clothes. Come to think of it, he'd love to see her wearing nothing at all. "It'll be okay, long as you don't snore too loud. I'm a light sleeper."

She let out an indignant huff then started hauling her things up the stairs. He'd have offered her a hand if he wasn't a hundred percent sure she'd insist on doing it herself. She wrestled the bags to the landing and set them down a moment. After a quick rest, she continued on, finally dropped them at the top, panting and muttering curses. Regardless, he sure enjoyed her rear view.

This ought to be real interesting.

## **Chapter Two**

Paige changed into a pair of shorts, a tank top and sandals. Way too hot here to wear any more clothes than absolutely necessary. She left the guest room and started toward the staircase, but stopped. Curiosity drew her toward the open door halfway down the hall. Poking her head inside, she pulled in a breath infused with a leathery scent. The bed was covered in a simple brown spread and the walls painted a pale sage.

My father's room.

He'd always loved green. Taking a step inside, she noticed a small framed photo of her, taken in high school. Her eyes watered, but she clenched her teeth and forced the emotion away.

Where had that come from? She hadn't shed a single tear when she received the news of his death. Not like he'd been a part of her life. Even when he'd lived with her and her mother, he'd hardly ever been around. Never seemed to have anything to say to her. Still, it would have been nice if she'd had the chance to ask him why he ran away to Florida, why he left her mother and her. Had he found whatever he'd been searching for?

She crossed the floor to the small closet. A few T-shirts, one dress shirt, two pairs of well-worn cowboy boots and half a dozen pairs of jeans. A cardboard shoebox sat on the high shelf. She pulled it down and carried it to the bed. Inside she found a stack of letters and a bunch of old photographs. She sat on the mattress and bit back the lump in her throat, then shuffled through images of herself, taken at various points in her life. One by one, she opened the letters. All from her.

Maybe he had cared. A little. Didn't change the fact that he'd mostly ignored her. She stacked everything neatly inside then carried it back to her room. Maybe she'd take them home with her. Maybe not.

She descended the stairs, but didn't see Jake anywhere. Poking her head into the living room, she caught sight of a display of baseball memorabilia on one of the walls. Her chest tightened. She had a few happy memories of her father, and most involved outings to Yankee Stadium. Just the two of them. She'd never paid much attention to the game, but her dad always bought her a hot dog and cotton candy, so she'd loved going.

He'd explained each and every play in minute detail, spouted the players' statistics and even allowed her to shout at the opposing team. She sank into a big wingback chair and breathed in the scent of the room. Pipe tobacco and leather. Yeah. She could feel her father's presence lingering here more than she had in his bedroom. He must have spent most of his time here.

"You a fan too?" Jake's voice ripped her out of her momentary haze. He stood in the doorway gesturing toward the Yankees pennant tacked to the wall.

That empty place inside her chest ached. "Not for many years."

"My uncle used to take me to spring training games down near Orlando when I was a kid. All the big teams had training camps in the area. Lots of 'em still do."

She'd sworn off baseball after her father left. Forcing the memories from her mind, she pushed out of the chair and stood. "Do you still go see the games?"

"Haven't in years. No one to go with." He pinned her with a stare and her breath caught.

"I find that hard to believe." Women had to be falling at his feet. He was gorgeous, for heaven's sake.

"Why's that?"

She rounded her father's desk to put something solid between them. She didn't trust herself to be so close to him. "I'm sure you have lots of friends."

He let out a chuckle. "I've got a few friends. But it's Daisy and Goliath and the rest of the horses that I spend most of my time with." He stepped behind the desk and

stopped a couple feet from her. "Shorts aren't the best choice for horseback riding." His gaze traveled slowly down her legs. "Although you do them justice." An appreciative grin lifted one corner of his mouth.

Her temperature spiked. She'd have sworn she heard the air conditioner running. Regardless, she fanned her face. "I'm not used to this heat."

He glanced toward the window. "Sun's sinking low now. Jeans would be better. Trust me."

*Trust me?* She'd only met him minutes ago. It had taken her years to trust her husband, for heaven's sake. And that hadn't served her well. Men didn't merit trust. Not about anything. "I'll be fine."

"Your choice. But don't say I didn't warn you." His smile widened and a surge of heat bloomed inside her. Okay, so maybe Jake had inspired the hormonal heat wave spiraling through her. But hopping into bed with someone she'd probably do business with wasn't smart. Clamping down on her rising libido, she took a step away. "Shall we go?" She practically ran past him. A whiff of his scent made its way to her nose. Fresh cut grass and pure man.

Tense as a spring, she hurried out the front door. She'd wait on the porch. No sense in tempting herself.

Jake took his time coming outside. He parked that cowboy hat on his head and grinned at her. "I don't understand you city girls."

She folded her arms over her chest. "What does that mean?"

His sultry stare swept slowly over her body sending a rush of desire to her core. "I guess it's more important to look hot than to dress practically for a ride, huh?"

"I'll be fine." She'd had enough of a man telling her what to wear. Her ex had played that card to death. But Jake thought she looked hot. That shouldn't matter to her, only it did.

"Let's go reintroduce you to Daisy." He offered his hand, but she refused it.

With a shrug, he started around the side of the house. She followed.

They stopped right next to the horse. How would she get up that high? The stirrups had to be at least four feet off the ground. "Big horse."

He nodded and she caught another waft of his enticing scent. "Got to be. She's built to haul around heavy loads."

She gulped. "Don't you have one that's a little smaller I can start on?"

A quiet chuckle broke from his lips. "There's Mr. Giggles. He's a pony we hire out for kids' parties."

Kids' parties? What the hell was he implying? "Never mind. Daisy is fine."

Jake adjusted the stirrups. He stepped around her and set his hands on her waist. Renewed desire rushed through her.

"Put your left foot in." He gestured toward the stirrup. "I'll help you into the saddle. Just say when."

She looked up at the horse. Swallowing hard, she slipped her foot into the stirrup. She gave her head a firm nod. "Ready." Her pulse raced.

He hoisted her up. She swung her right leg over the horse and landed smack in the center of the saddle. The animal twitched. She grabbed onto a protrusion resembling a shoehorn in front of her, but the instant she looked down, her stomach lurched.

Don't be a baby.

Daisy took a step forward, then back as she whinnied. Paige's heart pounded like it might explode any second.

*Screw appearances.* She hovered low, wrapped her arms around the horse's neck and squeezed her eyes tight. Why did she agree to do this?

*If I fall, no one will catch me. No one ever has.*

"Look at me, Paige." Jake's voice.

She peeled open her eyelids and tried to stop her body from trembling.

"Afraid of heights?" he asked.

"I guess so." Or afraid of traveling on anything with its own heartbeat or that didn't have brakes. She clung to the animal's mane.

"You have to sit up tall." He smiled and gave her a reassuring wink. "How about we take this real slow."

"By slow do you mean we'll begin on foot or in a car, maybe?"

He shook his head and untied the reins. Tugging gently on the horse, he guided it away from the post. "Nice and easy."

Paige marveled at the sheer power of the animal's muscles as Daisy's back moved the saddle up and down. "Can we stop, please?"

"Whoa, Daisy," Jake said.

Heart still hammering, Paige pulled her right foot out of the stirrup. "I don't want to ride. Maybe later I will."

"Sure?"

She nodded, anxious to get the hell off the beast. Jake lifted his arms to her. She threw herself off the horse and into his embrace. Jake stumbled backward and she fell on top of him on the grass. His hat went tumbling away. A great whoosh escaped his throat.

Straddling his hips, she stared down at him, hoping she hadn't just killed the poor guy. "Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes looking a bit dazed. That handsome face lit up with a sexy grin. "You kidding? I've got a beautiful lady sitting on top of me. Doesn't get any better than that."

Despite herself, Paige laughed. Jake's hands caught her shoulders, pulled her down until their faces were inches apart. She started to protest, but he stilled her with a gentle brush of his lips over hers. She shut her eyes, distilling the implications. But for once in her life, she didn't care. All she knew was it had been a long time, way too long, since a man had made her feel this way, all woozy and full of butterflies.

She parted her lips, allowed his tongue entrance. His fingers moved to her head, and forced her closer. They shared a slow, tasting kiss. The world fell away. Nothing existed but Jake and his sensuous mouth, his fingers combing along her scalp, the swell of his cock pressing against her belly.

He drove his tongue deeper, inviting hers to dance and play. His taste was part mint, part coffee. She couldn't get enough. Sweet desire spiraled inside her. She licked and tasted and explored, slid her tongue over his teeth. Long dormant need crashed over her and flooded her veins.

The horse neighed suddenly. Jake broke away. "Sorry, darlin', but I don't think either of us want to get stepped on by Daisy. She weighs nearly a ton." He rolled over her, gave her mouth a quick swipe of his tongue. He stood and offered her a hand. She let him help her up. The instant he let her go, she missed his touch.

Jake brought the horse back to the post and tied her there while Paige dusted the grass and dirt from her knees. Heat rushed to her cheeks. What had she been thinking? She'd never been prone to such rash behavior. How had her libido overridden her brain in seconds flat?

No, Jake was the wrong person for a meaningless fling. It would never work to allow her carnal needs to interfere with settling her father's estate. She brushed her hands together and sucked in a steadying breath. That's that. She'd just pretend it had never happened. And hoped he'd do the same.

Jake cleared his throat and returned to Paige's side.

Damn, the woman looked hot in those impractical shorts and that skimpy tank top.

At least her outfit finally allowed him a glimpse of that body. And he enjoyed the view. The feel of her straddling his lap a minute ago had made the fall well worth the backache he'd probably suffer later. And her scent, God. She smelled like the flower shop in town, so sweet you never wanted to leave. Like roses and carnations and honeysuckle all mixed together.

Only he didn't much care for the way she stood now, with her arms wrapped tightly around her body and her eyes looking everywhere but at him. Like she didn't want to continue what they'd started.

Her cheeks and neck flushed pink. Could be from the heat – or the hot kiss that held the promise of so much more. Or maybe she was embarrassed. "Horses take some getting used to. Nothing to be ashamed –"

"I'm not ashamed!" The color spread over her entire face. She shut her eyes a moment and huffed a breath. "That kiss was a mistake. One that won't happen again."

If he were a betting man, he'd lay odds she was dead wrong about that. He tried to stifle his grin.

"Can we please do the tour of the ranch on foot?"

He stared down at her sandals. "Not in those shoes. This is a big place."

She rolled her eyes. "It's fine. They're quite comfortable."

He contemplated telling her it had as much to do with the abundance of piles of horse dung scattered about, but why not let her find that out on her own? "Fine. Let's start with the stable."

They hadn't gone fifty feet when she yelped and yanked off her shoe. "Do you let these damned horses go to the bathroom everywhere?"

He tamped down a chuckle. "Uh, they don't have a whole lot of control."

"Why didn't you warn me?" Her chest heaved. Showed off perfect, rounded tits. Pebbled points strained the thin fabric of her shirt. His mouth watered to taste those erect nipples.

His cock hardened. Fighting the desire to kiss her again, he forced his eyes to meet hers. "You didn't seem to want my wardrobe advice."

Her face contorted in an angry scowl. She opened her mouth to say something. Instantly, she snapped it shut. Gripping her dung-covered shoe, she hobbled toward the house. "Give me a few minutes to clean up and change." She picked up her pace.

A boom of thunder sounded nearby. Jake scrutinized the storm on the horizon. Time to get Daisy home. He adjusted the stirrups then climbed into the saddle. Giving Paige a backward glance, he rode toward the stables. As the sun sank low, he removed the saddle. May as well muck out the stables now. He ushered the horse into the corral.

After getting Daisy settled into her stall, he gathered the feed tubs. He cleaned them out, filled them, then hung one for each horse.

He'd just finished spreading straw in the fourth stall when Paige marched in and glared at him. She now wore jeans with a T-shirt that hugged those luscious curves perfectly. "I expected you to be at the house. For your information, I'm not one of those women who says I'll be ready in a few minutes when I really mean a lot longer."

What had her so ticked off? "I'm right here, honey. No reason to shout."

Her face reddened again. "Honey?" She balled her hands into tight fists at her sides. "No one calls me *honey*."

"Can't say *that* anymore, huh?" He'd heard about city girls like her with their hot tempers and bossy attitudes. Must be a real firecracker in bed.

"I am ready for that tour now." She spoke real slow, as if he were a moron.

He ignored her tone. "Look outside, darlin'. You won't be able to see anything in the dark." He hung the pitchfork on a hook on the wall. Then he grabbed a water bucket from a nearby stall and handed it to Paige. No time like now to start breaking her in. "Take this to the hose, rinse it out and refill it."

She stared at him as if he were an alien. "You expect me to take care of the horses?"

He pushed his hat farther back on his head. "*I'm* taking care of them. You're only helping me out. That's all right, isn't it?"

"I'm a bookkeeper, not a horse keeper." With that, she dropped the bucket on the floor, splashing water on the rubber mat. She lifted an eyebrow in challenge and crossed her arms over her chest, a hundred-percent spoiled city girl.

She'd succeeded in pissing him off but he managed a chuckle. Keeping his voice barely above a whisper, he said, "That wasn't very nice. Now you get to do them all."

Paige's temper flared white-hot. She stood her ground. No way would she do Jake's work. She tapped her foot and stared him down, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"One way or another, you're going to fill those buckets." He took a step closer, leveling a stern look at her.

She pulled in a breath infused with his scent, powerful and manly. Horses whinnied from the corrals. She shuddered with raw need. The tension between them electrified the air. She clamped down on her rising desire.

*I am not turned on by this arrogant country boy.*

Yet her nipples ached and her pussy grew moist.

"You're not allowed to be a prima donna on a working ranch." He was so close now she could practically hear his heart thundering in tandem with hers.

"I'm not—"

His hands caught her shoulders and he stilled her with a kiss, hungry and deep. Even better than before. He sucked on her tongue, swirled his around hers. Those pesky butterflies started flapping their wings inside her. All reason flew out the door. She threaded her fingers through his thick hair, knocked that damn sexy hat right off his head. Liquid desire washed over her, flooded her veins.

Jake slid his hands under her shirt, ran them up and down her back. His touch on her bare skin sent delicious shockwaves through her entire body. A moan caught in her throat. His rough skin rasped over her flesh, igniting her nerve endings with a craving for more. He drew her against him, close enough that his erection pressed into her belly. She lowered her right hand and traced his hard cock through his jeans.

A rough growl rumbled from deep inside him. He broke the kiss and met her stare with a smoky blue gaze. Lifting her shirt over her head, he let out an appreciate whistle at the sight of her lacy bra. "You have some damn fine breasts, ma'am."

His compliment ratcheted her passion higher. Jake bit her left nipple lightly through the material. The air was still, yet a quiver danced over her skin. He pushed aside the lace covering her other breast and cupped it with a calloused hand. Pleasure swirled around her, shot in every direction. She rolled her head back and swam in bliss.

"Don't stop."

*Did I say that?*

God help her. She meant it. His tongue laved her sensitive skin, bathing her in delicious sensations.

Lightning flashed through the open-air stable windows. Seconds later, the mighty roar of thunder shook the ground beneath them. She felt Jake stiffen seconds before he pulled away. But she still needed so much more from him. She craved the feel of his hands, his lips, his cock.

The tight set of his jaw confirmed that they'd have to put this party on hold. "Sorry, darlin'. I have to move the horses inside. We have wicked lightning storms here."

She swallowed back the disappointment and nodded. He handed over her T-shirt.

*A fling with Jake isn't wise.*

Perhaps the interruption was all for the best. Nature's way of telling her to stop before she did something she'd regret. Only she didn't regret a moment of it. In fact, she couldn't wait until she had him alone again.

For once in my life, I'm going to do what I want and not what my mother, my boss or my ex-husband wants.

And she wanted Jake. Badly.

He retrieved his hat from the floor and stuck it atop his head.

"Can I help?" she asked.

*What? Did I really say that?*

He lifted an eyebrow and leveled a wary stare at her. "Sure. Open that first stall." He pointed to the half door behind her.

She did as he instructed, then watched him lead each animal inside from the corrals. His clothes grew wetter and wetter with each trip, but he didn't seem to mind. By the time he walked the fourth horse into its stall, he was drenched, but no less enticing. His soaked shirt exposed the rippling muscles of his shoulders, back and chest.

She drew an appreciative breath and squirmed against the liquid heat building between her thighs. Imagining Jake's hands slipping between her legs, her breath caught. Centering a hand on her chest, she glanced outside. The storm wasn't letting up at all. Lightning sizzled all around them. The house was way too far to make a run for it across a flat open field.

She heard something shuffle behind her. Spinning around, she found Jake spreading a thick layer of straw on the floor in the empty stall. He'd taken off his shirt and she had to tamp down her sheer awe at his bare torso. Uncovered, his form looked even more enticing.

The man exuded so much sensual heat it was a miracle he hadn't singed her a few minutes ago. His chest was hairless except for a light sprinkling between his pecs. And he had a better six-pack than any man she'd seen at her gym in New York. His smooth skin bore a golden tan. The thought of those powerful arms around her made her heart jump.

"What now?" She couldn't tear her gaze from his incredible body. Even his walk turned her on. More a swagger, really.

He picked up a pile of blankets from the area where he stored the saddles and carried them across the stable to the last stall. "Come on."

She hesitated at his tone, but the command touched something primal inside her, something dark and incredibly irresistible.

"Come here, woman." Lower, his voice more forceful this time.

The man had the power to turn her into a puddle of estrogen. She followed him into the stall. He'd set up a sort of bed on the floor. "Looks lumpy." She slanted him a grin.

"Once we're done with it, it'll be a whole lot lumpier." He unfastened his belt.

Desire rumbled through her. She closed the distance between them. "Let me." Heart racing, she reached for the buckle, yanked the leather back and forced it through the metal.

He pulled off his boots, threw them aside.

Paige sank to her knees, unbuttoned his jeans. She slid down the zipper slowly, tantalizing him. The wet denim stuck to his muscular legs as she peeled the pants away. A commando man. She liked that. His erection sprang toward her, granite-hard and flushed with blood. Veins stood out along the shaft. She swallowed at his impressive size and closed her fist around the base.

Jake hissed out a breath.

His cock, still damp from the rain, felt so hot she wouldn't have been surprised to see steam rise off it. The head was perfectly symmetrical and a silvery drop of semen glistened at the tip. She squeezed her fist tighter and licked the seed from his slit, salty and hot. His hips pushed toward her and she allowed more of his length inside her mouth. Swirling her tongue around the shaft, she tasted his male scent and her own desire heightened. She cupped his balls and took his cock, so heavy with need, into her mouth, only a little at first.

He let out a pleased moan and pushed closer. She pulled him deeper, taking his length all the way inside until it touched the very back of her throat. Hot, wet desire flowed to her sex with every stroke. She rasped her teeth over his shaft, eliciting a pleased gasp from his lips.

"Paige. Where have you been all my life, honey?"

She smiled at that, looked up at him as she ran her tongue along the underside. She sucked his ball sac into her mouth and lapped at the tight skin. The bliss evident on his face sent a shiver of excitement dancing up her spine. His cock throbbed and pulsed. She closed her lips over it as she circled the base with her fingers. He thrust into her mouth slowly at first, but with more and more need. His moans grew louder, more

insistent. She used her fingernails to lightly scrape his balls and he rewarded her with a gasp.

Water and sweat slid down his chiseled chest in rivulets. He grasped her head and moaned. A drop of semen escaped. Paige savored its heady flavor. He pistoned his hips in an ancient rhythm. She tightened her grip. His release drew closer. She felt it in the quiver of his skin, heard it in the rumble inside his chest.

He quickened the pace of his strokes, his lusty sighs filling the air. When his orgasm came, it was powerful, spurting a strong gush of his salty seed into the back of her throat.

“Paige.” Her name broke from his lips like a prayer, soft and sensual.

She released him, but his taste remained on her lips.

He leaned against the wooden wall, braced himself as he teetered. “That was... amazing.”

Grinning, she sat back on her knees, listened for the rain, which had slowed to a rhythmic trickle. “Glad you liked it.” She looked away, let him clean himself up. “Should we head back to the house?”

Jake pulled on his jeans and his boots. “Definitely. Never know when the clouds will break loose again.” He reached to her and gave her rear end a slap. “Besides, I have plans for you that would be way more comfortable in a real bed.”

She knew they needed to talk business, but it would have to wait. She only planned to spend a few short days here and she hoped to make the most of them, even if that meant saving the negotiating for the last possible moment.

## **Chapter Three**

Jake shut off the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Stepping into the hall, he listened. The creak of the porch swing out back cut through the silence. He descended the stairs. Stopping at the French doors, he caught a glimpse of Paige on the wooden seat. She sat curled up like a kitten.

Desire quickened his blood. He stood motionless, watching. She'd finally let her hair down and it cascaded in soft waves over her shoulders. God, she was pretty, especially with moonlight stroking her delicate features.

Everything in him yearned to make love to her, yet reality kept tapping his shoulder. Sooner or later they'd have to talk business. Would she insist on dismantling the whole operation when she learned the Circle O was losing money? She'd said she worked as a bookkeeper, probably someone who looked at the world in stark black and white. He hoped she found room for the shades in between.

They'd deal with that problem tomorrow. Tonight he aimed to give back to the lady. He'd make sure he pampered her with at least as much pleasure as she'd given him earlier. And considering she'd treated him to the best head he'd ever gotten, he planned to spend the entire night devoted to her satisfaction.

Padding into the kitchen, he made a mental list of the things he needed. He found a bottle of Chablis, a corkscrew and a couple glasses. Gathering his supplies, he stepped out to the screened porch. Paige stirred, adjusting herself on the swing. She looked too angelic to disturb. He could hardly believe this was the same buttoned-up businesswoman who'd arrived only a few hours earlier.

He kissed the top of her head, pulled in a breath laced with her sweetness.

Her eyelids fluttered open. She gave him a smile that warmed him from the inside out. "Hey."

He set his burden on the wicker coffee table. "Feel like a drink?"

She sat up and yawned. "Sure. What is it?" Leaning toward the table, she squinted at the bottle.

He reached for the corkscrew, positioned it atop the bottle and started working the cork. "Chablis. From a local winery near Orlando. For a low end wine, it's not half bad."

She quirked an eyebrow. "You don't strike me as a wine connoisseur or am I missing something?"

"What, you think I'm just a dumb cowboy?" Grinning, he poured her a glass, handed it to her before fixing his. "Or is it that I'm a Southerner? I'm sure I can hardly match wits with a sophisticated city girl like yourself." He gave her a wink.

"That's not what I meant." But he saw the doubt in her eyes, even in the dim light. He sipped his wine. Setting the glass down, he offered her his hand. "Come outside for a second."

She climbed off the swing and let him lead her through the screen door to the pool deck. "What are we doing out here?"

"Look up." He lifted his gaze to the sky and felt that same humility he did every time he viewed nature's light show. "The afternoon storms pull all the dust out of the atmosphere and the stars shine brighter and sharper. See?"

Paige tipped her head back and gaped at the incredible array of stars. "Beautiful."

"Definitely."

She tried to recall the last time she'd looked toward the night sky merely to enjoy its beauty, but she couldn't. "I've never seen it so lit up. We don't see many stars in the city. Too much light pollution."

"Mmm hmm." He pointed to a cluster of three stars. "See the faintest of that group?"

She nodded. The two brighter stars were very close to each other. The third sat a little apart.

"That's Proxima Centauri, the nearest to our sun."

She whipped her head toward him. "How do you know?"

"I had a telescope when I was a kid. Did some reading on astronomy."

How could he tell the difference between the millions of twinkling specks? Pointing to another star in the constellation, she asked, "Know the name of that bright one?"

"That's Alpha Centauri, also part of the Centaurus constellation. Which is named after a centaur. Ever hear of it?"

So the man was more than just a handsome face and an incredibly amazing body. "Half man, half horse, right?" She slid her gaze over his broad shoulders and powerful arms. A zing of desire stirred inside her. She longed to touch that muscular chest and washboard stomach.

"Correct. But do you know *which* centaur?"

She didn't know of more than one, but her concentration lay elsewhere. Shrugging, she tried to focus on what he was saying.

"According to the Roman poet Ovid, the constellation honors Chiron, a centaur who tutored the likes of Hercules and Jason of the Argonauts."

She sipped her wine as she eyed him. Astronomy, ancient literature, mythology. He had a closet full of surprises. Certainly not what she'd expected when she'd first laid eyes upon him.

"Not bad for a dumb cowboy."

She huffed out a heavy breath. "Your words, not mine."

He led her back inside the screened porch, took her glass and set it on the table. "Now I'd like to demonstrate some of the *other* things I know." He lowered his mouth to hers. She tasted the wine on his tongue. He kissed her with slow, luxurious strokes, grazed the edge of her teeth. She longed to be naked with this man, to feel his skin on hers. The thought sent a rush of molten heat to her core.

She softened against him, molded her body to his. His cock tented the towel still cinched around his waist. Her nipples tightened, ached for his touch.

Reading her thoughts, he slid his hands under her shirt, pinched a pebbled nipple, tearing a soft moan from her throat. Trailing his tongue down her neck, he cupped her breast. Her pussy vibrated with need.

He traced a finger around her nipple, kneaded her flesh. The vibration spread through her entire body, made her knees weak. His cock pressed into her belly.

She shuddered with yearning. "Up...stairs?" she managed.

He nipped a straining point through her shirt, released it and met her stare with eyes smoky as sin. Heaving a breath, she pushed open the French doors. She pulled him by a finger, led him across the house.

When they reached the stairs, he pinned her against the banister and lifted off her shirt. He stared at her bare chest and sucked in a loud breath. "Damn, woman." Grasping both her breasts, he gave one a broad swipe with his tongue. He sucked the nipple into his mouth, raked his teeth over it. She writhed and sighed. Moving to the other one, he captured the nipple in his teeth, gave it a tug. He circled the areola with long, tantalizing licks. He lightly bit and suckled until she thought she'd incinerate on the spot. Before she could recover, he moved to the other breast for a similar treatment.

Tendrils of hot desire ribboned through her. Every cell cried out for release. She craved him with every ounce of energy. "Oh God, Jake. I want you to fuck me."

Giving her breast a final kiss, he slid his hands around her waist. His rough, calloused skin made his touch more intense, way more pleasurable. She met his stare. His smoky gaze reflected untamed lust.

"First I'm going to tease you." He caught her earlobe in his mouth, scraped it between his teeth. "Then I'm going to tease you some more. I can't wait to taste you."

She crushed her hips into him, whimpered softly. His cock pressed against her. She took his hand in hers and ushered him up the stairs.

Halfway to the top, he grabbed her wrists and clasped them to the wall, high over her head. He licked the valley between her breasts, rounded each nipple with slow, teasing kisses as she squirmed and bucked. The sensation undid her. Her pussy pulsed and twitched, ready for that big cock. The instant he loosened his grip, she broke away. She slipped past him and charged up the remaining steps, giggling and panting.

He raced after, chased her into the guest room. His towel fell to the floor. She watched him silently, in awe of his powerful male beauty.

Kicking the towel away, he crossed the dark room. He switched on a lamp on the table next to the bed.

Perfect. It shed just enough light to keep the mood sultry. Not that they needed any help with that, though. She had a feeling even glaring fluorescent light wouldn't douse any of the heat permeating the atmosphere.

Her gaze fell to his engorged cock, hard as stone.

"Take off your pants," he ordered.

That gruff, masculine tone ratcheted her desire higher than she thought possible. But she hesitated, held back an excited laugh. "Make me." She lifted an eyebrow in challenge.

A challenge he accepted. He started toward her, a wicked grin on his face. Grabbing her hands, he yanked her toward the bed, but she resisted, eager to ratchet up the game.

Before she knew what was happening, Jake swept her off her feet and lifted her into his arms as if she weighed nothing. He carried her to the bed and dropped her in the middle. Climbing over her, he trapped her beneath him.

Her pulse quickened and her pussy ached for his touch. Slow as honey he unbuttoned her jeans and lowered the fly. Anticipation drummed through her. He planted wet kisses on her belly. Inch by inch, he peeled away her jeans. He smoothed his hands along her legs, her feet.

Lifting her foot, he kissed the sole. A quiver of excitement rolled over her. He drew her big toe into his mouth and slid it in and out. The suggestive motion felt surprisingly sensual. His tongue dragged over her skin in slow, sweeping movements. He massaged her heel and instep, treated the other toes to the same pampering he'd given the first one. After he'd finished with the other foot, he held her legs open and fixed a dark stare on her pussy.

Her panties were moist and more cream collected at her entrance under his intense scrutiny. Jake moved closer and settled his hands on either thigh. "What will I do with you, Miss Paige?"

"Fuck me. Please."

He gave his head a heavy shake. "Not time yet. I want you sufficiently desperate."

She whimpered helplessly. He rubbed the heel of his hand along the scrap of fabric between her thighs.

"Please." Her pussy throbbed for his attention.

He sneaked a finger under the elastic only for a brief moment.

She sighed her disappointment.

"I told you. I'm going to tease you for a long, long time." He moved his head to her neck, kissed the hollow of her throat, her chin, her eyelids. She breathed in the clean scent of his hair. His smooth, freshly shaved skin slid over hers. He kneaded her breasts and trailed soft kisses in a line down her body. She bucked and squirmed as his tantalizing touch moved below her bellybutton. He skated past her pussy, licked her inner thighs. Heat burned her skin. Her head swirled with pleasure and her sex ached to be filled. She raised her hips to urge him closer to her core, but he wouldn't be rushed.

Her panties were now drenched with her juices. Jake ran his thumb along her fabric-covered intimate lips, tantalizing her, destroying her defenses. With every stroke of his tongue, each flick of his fingers, she skittered closer and closer to the edge.

She couldn't take any more. She needed him inside her. "Please, Jake."

He lifted his head, met her stare, grinning. "Please what?"

"Please fuck me."

A taunting laugh. "Patience." He plucked her nipples between his fingers, rubbed his erection along her thigh.

She spread her legs wider, hoping for relief. Planting a kiss between her breasts, he rubbed a hand over her sex. She arched toward him, increasing the pressure. He hooked his fingers through the elastic band along the top of her panties and eased the underwear over her hips. She tried to shimmy the tiny garment off, but Jake grasped her waist and held her still. "Not until I'm good and ready." She clamped down on the overwhelming need to come. He rolled her over so she lay on her stomach. Settling his hands on her rear end, he said, "You have a gorgeous ass, Paige."

She lifted her buttocks, giving him access to her sex. His fingertip slipped between her thighs and found the upper edge of her cleft. She rocked against his touch, yearned for him to go deeper into her pussy. But he stopped and withdrew his hand.

Finally he slid her panties down her legs, took them off. She glimpsed them flying across the room. He pushed his cock along the crease between her ass cheeks and returned his hand to her lips. "You want to come, Paige?"

"Yes, please." Her voice sounded deliciously desperate, even to her ears. She lifted her ass higher.

He licked a line down her back, sending an erotic quiver over her skin. "Must be time, then." He flipped her onto her back. She shivered with anticipation. Spreading her lips, he sneaked his fingers inside her furls and found her clit. She focused all her energy, all her thoughts on the moment, the feel of his long fingers dipping into her drenched pussy, sliding inside her, higher and deeper. Drowning in pleasure, she gasped, rocked against his hand. He moved with her, picked up on her rhythm and stroked her toward the edge, faster and harder.

Holding her breath, she allowed herself to let go, to dive into pleasure as an orgasm shook her body. She twisted and moaned as the blissful release spread through her.

"That's it, baby, let it go."

She clenched her intimate muscles, pulling him deeper.

He lowered his head between her legs and licked her folds, stroked inside her. An aftershock of ecstasy had her bracing herself, curling her fists into the bedclothes.

Jake's control shredded when he saw Paige writhe with pleasure. He needed to fuck her, long and hard and deep.

"Condom," she gasped. "Suitcase."

He raced across the room to it. "Where?"

"Inside pocket. Hurry."

He found one immediately, tore open the packet and rolled it over his cock.

"Hurry!" She held out her arms, lifted her hips to him.

He climbed on top of her, drove his shaft into her juicy depths. God, she was tight. Paige's long, slow moan filled the air. Her sweet scent wrapped around him. Her delicious taste lingered on his lips as he pistoned his hips, speared his cock deeper inside her.

Yearning to make the pleasure go on and on, he took his time, savored every stroke. Catching her nipple in his mouth, he suckled, drew a pleased gasp from her lips. Her channel conformed to his shaft as if it had been made for him alone.

She grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked. "Yes, Jake. Yeeeeesss."

He felt her pussy clench around his cock as she dug her fingernails into his shoulders. Watching her face contort with pleasure sent a jolt of power and passion through him. She shuddered and shook, writhing beneath him. Her trembling ebbed and a satisfied smile settled on her lips.

He wrapped his arms around her and rolled her over him so she straddled him.

"Now *I* get to ride *you*." She pulled her knees in close to his sides and lifted her hips, ground against him.

Christ, he was buried so deep inside her. He took hold of her hips, fought to maintain his control as she rocked and undulated above him. She adjusted to the pace and rhythm he set.

He squeezed her tits, tweaked her tight nipples. Paige leaned her head back and sighed, quickening her pace. He was so close, but he held back, clamping down on his overpowering need.

She adjusted her stance so her feet sat flat against the mattress, giving her more control over her hips. She curled her fingers into his sides, bouncing above him. He let go and a white-hot blast of pleasure shot through him, surging in every direction. A primal growl rumbled in his chest as blinding ecstasy flooded his veins.

Paige kept riding him, milking every last drop of seed from him. He caught her waist, held her still. She crumpled against him, their hearts pounding in unison. He ran his hands over the smooth skin on her back, damp with sweat. Shutting his eyes, he drew a breath laced with the musky scent of their lovemaking.

He'd let her sleep—for a while. But he hadn't finished with her tonight. Not by a long shot.

## **Chapter Four**

Paige opened her eyes and tried to orient herself. Images of Jake making love to her flooded her mind. She could barely make out his features in the dark, but she caught his familiar scent, heard the steady cadence of his breathing. The sex had been better than with her ex, better than with any of her past lovers.

Don't get too used to him.

She'd leave in less than a week never to return. Developing feelings for the man would be foolish and totally illogical. And she was nothing if not completely practical. But why not enjoy the ride as long as she could?

She eased the covers back and climbed out of bed. Nature called. On her way back from the bathroom she heard something—a squeak? And another. A meow, a tiny one. Following the sound to the last room on the left, she pressed her ear to the door. Definitely a cat.

She entered the room and immediately recognized Jake's earthy scent and the cowboy boots in the corner. A tiny ball of orange fluff wound around her foot and stared up at her with bright green eyes.

Her heart squeezed at the sight of the kitten. Bending to pick it up, she spied a bowl of food and another filled with water nearby. And a plush pink pet bed. Someone had a soft spot for kittens.

She lifted the animal to eye level. It had to be the most adorable thing she'd ever seen. She snuggled it to her shoulder a moment, before setting it down on the cat bed. Jake definitely harbored his share of surprises.

He still lay sprawled across the bed in all his naked glory when she returned to her room. A ray of moonlight peeked through the curtains and painted him in shades of purple and blue. Desire swept through her. She neared the bed.

His eyes fluttered when she slid under the covers beside him. He smiled, threw an arm over her and sighed contentedly. "Where'd you go?"

"Bathroom. I found the most adorable kitten on my way back."

His eyes opened wide. "Where?" He sat up and threw the covers aside.

"Your room."

His shoulders slumped as if she'd caught him stealing a cookie or something. "Oh."

She waited for him to elaborate, but he just leaned back on his elbows, eying her.

"She's precious. Does she have a name?" She couldn't resist climbing over him and nipping his chiseled chest, licking his erect nipples.

"Mmm. That feels good."

"So?" She stopped playing and leveled a questioning stare at him.

"What?"

"What's the kitten's name?"

He coughed dryly. "Creamsicle. Okay?"

Why did he seem embarrassed that he had a cat? "Where'd you get her?"

He gave his shoulders a slight shrug. "One of the mousers that lives around the stable had a big litter. She was the runt and the mom wouldn't take care of her. Satisfied?"

"That's so sweet."

He rolled his eyes then grasped her waist, eased her off him. Moving off the bed, he shook his head. "I didn't want her to starve. No big deal."

"So that's why she has a cushy pink bed and a bunch of toy mice on the floor in your room?" Why wouldn't he admit to his softer side? Maybe he didn't think it very masculine, but she found it downright hot.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he sighed. "I don't want to talk about *that* pussy." He stalked back to the bed and sat on the edge. "I'm not through with yours." Grabbing her arm, he pulled her onto his lap, facing him. "Last night was..."

“Amazing.”

He planted a gentle kiss behind her ear. “I want an encore.”

A shudder of anticipation rolled over her skin. She hooked her fingers together behind his neck. “Mind if I take a shower first?”

“I do. Actually, I have a better idea.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Have you ever gone skinny-dipping under the stars?” He trailed a finger between her breasts, followed with his tongue.

The notion heated her from the inside out. “Can’t say I have, but it sounds...sexy.” In truth, she’d *never* been skinny-dipping, nighttime or daytime.

He helped her hop off his lap. Hand in hand, he led her downstairs. Before they arrived at the pool, he disappeared inside the downstairs bathroom and came out with two towels.

The house was cool as midnight, quiet as a secret. What if Jake hadn’t been staying there? She’d have freaked out here all alone, in the middle of nowhere. Of course, he was way more than her security guard. He’d played her body like a musical instrument and she knew the concert had just begun.

Outside, she drank in the peaceful atmosphere—the rhythmic beat of the crickets and the blanket of stars in the sky. No car horns blasted, no engines hummed, no people spoke. The dark enveloped everything and she had to hang onto Jake for fear of falling.

“Isn’t there a light inside the pool?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Only for show. Unless you want to be carried off by the mosquitoes.” He set her hand on the railing. “Stay here. I have an idea.”

She heard him moving things around nearby. Moments later a flame lit the area. She sucked in an excited gasp at the sight of the torches. At least six feet tall, half a dozen circled the pool. Jake lit them one by one, creating a Hawaiian atmosphere.

After he'd finished, he joined her at the steps, pulled her into a strong embrace. "How's that for light?"

She softened against him, marveled at how their curves fit together like two long separated puzzle pieces. "It's perfect." She brushed her lips along his, slid her tongue inside his mouth, over his teeth, tasting and exploring. He cupped her cheek and she leaned into his touch.

A chill breeze whispered past. Desire engulfed her like a favorite soft blanket. Jake took her hand and they stepped into the pool. Once the water reached her waist, she wrapped her legs around him and curled her fingers into his shoulders. Jake held her hips, forced her closer and she felt his growing erection between them. The cool water did nothing to quench her burning hunger, a hunger only he could satisfy.

Jake stared into Paige's dark eyes. He'd never met another woman who'd turned him on so much. If he wasn't careful, he'd develop feelings for her.

What am I thinking? I just met her.

But his body responded to her as if they'd been lovers for a long time. She touched him as if she lived inside his head, knew exactly how, where and when. He closed his mouth over hers, tasted her sweet tongue.

She tightened her arms around his neck, ground her sex against him. His cock grew heavier with need. Molten lust collected in his loins like a simmering volcano. The full swell of her breasts pressed into him. He cupped one, kneaded and tweaked. She squirmed and purred. Dropping his head, he flicked his tongue over an erect point. He backed away and stared at her nipple, stoked by how red and glossy he'd made it. She lifted the other breast, fed it to him. So sexy. He suckled and licked, incredibly turned on.

Shifting a hand under her, he eased her folds apart, drove a finger inside her creamy entrance, then another. Rubbing along her cleft, he grinned when she started moving in time with his strokes. The surface of the water rippled with her gyrations. A

low moan started deep in her chest and slowly moved higher. She bucked and bobbed. Her needful whimpers filled the humid air and her slick depth gripped his fingers tight.

He couldn't resist her erect nipples another second. The moment he suckled one into his mouth, Paige released a strangled cry and leaned her head back. She writhed with a pounding intensity. Her pussy clenched and twitched around his fingers.

He held her to him, luxuriating in her pleased moans. When she dropped her head onto his shoulder, he carried her across the pool and up the steps. She purred softly as he deposited her on a lounge chair. He grabbed the towels he'd left on the table and covered her with one, then wrapped another around his waist.

"Moonlight skinny-dipping is fun, huh?" The satisfaction on her face glowed in the firelight.

"Yes, ma'am. What did you think?"

A laugh, like the tinkle of wind chimes.

"I think I like it. Love it, actually."

He kneeled on the chair, crawled toward her. "I'm not through with you yet."

Her eyes widened. "No?"

With a shake of his head, he lifted the towel off her and dropped it onto the deck. He spread her legs apart, smoothed back the dark tuft of curls shielding her sex.

Paige clamped her legs together and backed away. The man aimed to kill her with pleasure. "No more. Not yet."

He lifted a brow in challenge. "I'm not through with you, Paige."

The honey in his voice tempted her. "I won't be able to walk if we..." Her cheeks heated. "You're awfully well endowed, you know."

A slow smile split his handsome face. "I'll settle for another taste of your sweet pussy."

Renewed desire washed over her. Her resolve shattered. She let Jake push her legs open. His teasing nips on her inner thighs chased away the last vestiges of her

resistance. Lust burned inside her pussy as he moved his attention to her hard nub. He flicked and gently sucked, swirled his tongue around it.

She shuddered as the lush sensations flooded her veins. The heat of his clever tongue rocketed straight to her core. He laved her clit, stroked rough fingers through her furls. The intensity of the pleasure snatched her breath away, led her up the precipice of bliss. She grasped handfuls of his thick hair, soaked from the pool.

Just when she thought she'd approached the point of no return, Jake stopped and settled a stiff hand over her pussy.

She stared down at him, questioning him.

He smiled wickedly. "I'm not ready for you to come yet." He crawled along the cushion until he straddled her. Holding her breast, he laved her flesh, slid his teeth over her nipple painfully.

She shoved him away. "That hurts." But it also felt good. Too good. Something he seemed to know instinctively.

His gaze met hers for an instant. The power of their attraction stole her breath. All she'd envisioned was a casual fling, yet the way he touched her, the intensity of her desire rocked her to her core. And made her want to run screaming for her life.

Yet she couldn't turn him away. She needed this, needed him.

*No!*

This couldn't be anything but a vacation fling. Needing Jake, needing any man was out of the question. Particularly one she'd have to do business with. What had she been thinking?

She gripped the sides of the cushion and inched back in the chair. "Jake, I think—"

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. "Stop thinking."

He had a point. Her brain's built-in brakes had derailed every spontaneous thing she'd ever set out to do.

He kissed her bellybutton, nipped and tickled her skin. Desire surged anew and all thoughts of stopping him disappeared into the starry night. She lay back and unclenched her fists.

"That's better." He gave her one of those sexy winks. Scooting lower, he settled between her legs again and glided his finger along her pussy. Her pulse quickened and her muscles tensed as she braced for the onslaught of more pleasure.

Jake parted her lips and slid the tip of his tongue over her clit. She lifted to him, sighed when a blissful shudder swept through her. He drove his tongue into her, lapped at her juices, followed with his fingers. Stroking them in and out, he hit that spot where her delight bloomed. She squirmed against the approaching orgasm, coaxing it closer.

She slipped over the edge and let the ecstasy pull her under. Powerful waves of pure satisfaction shook her body, rolling with a pounding intensity. She curled her fingers into his hair as a loud moan broke from her lips, filled the quiet night air. As her satisfaction ebbed, Jake moved higher, smiled at her.

"Your eyes are glittering brighter than the stars." He planted a sweet kiss on her lips and she tasted her sensual essence there. Through the afterglow of her pleasure, a troubling thought emerged.

*I have to say goodbye to him soon.*

But she didn't want to. No man had ever touched her the way he did. Somehow she knew, deep in her soul, every other man would pale next to Jake.

## **Chapter Five**

"Breakfast is ready." Jake's silky voice tore Paige out of her blissful sleep. She opened her eyes and squinted against the bright sunlight filtering through the blinds.

Jake leaned over the dresser with his back to her. "Owen's lawyer called to confirm your meeting with him at eleven."

She stiffened. But she could hardly put off the business she'd come all the way down here to handle. "Thanks." She sat up.

"I have to take a group of tourists out after you come back. I'd appreciate it if you'd join me." He carried a tray to her and set it over her lap.

She gasped when she saw the sumptuous meal. Speechless, she could only direct a questioning stare at him.

He pointed to the plate as if it were nothing special. "Cheddar cheese omelet, hash browns, biscuit and bacon."

"Wow." Had he actually cooked all this? No one had ever done anything so sweet for her before. "Are you real?" She poked a finger at him, touched his muscled forearm.

"No big deal." Turning his wrist, he glanced at his watch. "I'll be back to collect you in an hour." His gaze slid over the length of her body.

She shivered in response. "Where are you going?"

His wink sent a zing of desire to every nerve ending in her body. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

She bit back the annoyance at his words until she saw his grin break through.

Without giving her a real answer, he started out the door. "One hour." And he disappeared.

Paige ate every bite of the delicious breakfast. She indulged in a long, hot shower then slipped on a sundress. By time Jake returned, she'd washed the dishes and mentally prepared herself to face the lawyer.

Jake hardly spoke a word during the fifteen-minute trip into town. She wondered if his furrowed brow had to do with whatever errand he'd run earlier. "Everything okay?"

He threw her a quick glance and shrugged. "Sure, fine. Why?"

"You seem preoccupied."

A slow grin lifted one side of his lips, yet the tension etched into his forehead remained. "If I am, it's probably because of that hot filly I roped last night. The one I can't keep off my mind." He pulled into a parking lot and shut off the engine.

She glanced at the row of quaint-looking shops lining the street, but didn't see anything that looked like a law office. "Where are we?"

"We're early. Thought you might like to have a quick look at the town. See the place with a native."

A pleasant sort of ache spread through her abdomen. The more she got to know the man, the more she liked. But she'd be gone soon enough. She ought not encourage the feelings percolating inside her.

He came around to the passenger side and helped her out of his truck. Taking her hand, he led along the sidewalk, past a small hardware store, a flower shop and a bank.

"Morning, Jake," a middle-aged woman said as she passed them going the other way.

He tipped his hat. "Morning."

"Ida has blueberry muffins just out of the oven."

"Thanks, Mrs. Murphy. I'll stop by."

When he didn't explain the conversation, Paige squeezed his hand and glanced back at the woman. "Who's Ida?"

He pointed to a coffee shop across the street. "She owns The Morning Brew over there. Best muffins in the state if you ask me."

A passing pickup honked and its driver smiled.

"Hey, Walter." Jake waved at the man. "That was Walter Bradley. He owns a nursery over on 441."

She could count on one hand the number of friends and acquaintances she ran into on the streets of New York in an entire year. Something about the small town atmosphere of this place appealed to her. And strolling along the sidewalk hand in hand with Jake felt way too good.

It's not my reality.

She dropped his hand and hugged her arms around her body. "Shouldn't I get to my appointment? I don't want to be late."

He stopped and fixed her with a probing stare. She diverted her gaze. Silently, he started back to his truck, moving so fast she could hardly keep up.

When he opened the passenger door for her, she held her breath as she moved past him and climbed inside. Why get too used to his scent when she'd be leaving soon?

He started the engine then steered out of the lot a bit faster than she'd have liked. What had she done to piss him off? Could he have sensed her reluctance to get too comfortable in this cozy little town? But why pretend they were starting a real relationship when they both knew it would end as soon as she left the state. Sadness encased her heart at the mere thought of never seeing him again.

It took less than five minutes to get to her appointment. The truck screeched to an abrupt stop in front of a two-story gray building. Jake scrubbed a hand over his face and drew a loud breath. "You'll find William O'Neil's office to the right. First door. I gave him my cell number so he can call me when you two are through."

With a firm nod, she started to open the door, but Jake grabbed her arm. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Before she could ask what he meant, he pulled her into a strong embrace and kissed her—a long, slow, remember-me kiss. When he released her, she could only stare wide-eyed at his handsome face.

Grasping her arms, he leaned closer until his face was only a few inches from hers. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

She merely nodded and climbed out of the truck. Moments later she walked into the law offices of William J. O’Neil, Jr. A blast of overly air-conditioned air sent a shiver across her skin.

“Welcome, Miss Eastman. Bill O’Neil.” The man barely came up to Paige’s nose, but his massive girth more than made up for what he lacked in height. He pumped her hand then gestured toward a seat opposite an imposing oak desk.

He had no receptionist, no waiting area, only a big room with several paintings of horses on the walls. Paige sat on a hard wooden chair and folded her hands on her lap. Her stomach roiled.

“As I told you over the phone, I’m terribly sorry for your loss. I didn’t know your father well, but he seemed like a nice fellow.” His smile was less than convincing.

“Thank you.” She rubbed the goose bumps from her arms.

O’Neil handed her a folder with her father’s name neatly printed on the tab. “Owen left you everything. His stake in the business and the house.” A frown settled on his round face. “He only had about ten thousand in equity in the house. Refinanced it a few months ago. And as for the Circle O, well...” He gave his head a heavy shake. “I’m afraid it’s a losing proposition. Financials are in there.” He pointed to the file in her hand.

She opened the folder and scanned the printout. Every year since it had opened three years ago, the ranch had taken a substantial loss. A dull ache started behind her eyes. Why hadn’t Jake told her? He had to know. Had he purposely kept it from her? Another man she couldn’t trust.

Did he have ulterior motives for making love to her? No. She knew he'd never stoop that low. She shut the file and drew a steadying breath. "What's your advice?"

"Get rid of it." He swept his arm across the desk. "Put the whole shootin' match on the market and walk away."

But if they shut it down, sold off the property, what would Jake do? "What about his business partner?"

He wiped a hand over his sweaty forehead. "You have to protect your own interests, Miss Eastman. Why throw good money after bad." Drumming his thick fingers on the desk, he shrugged. "Now, if Mr. Skinner wants to buy you out, I'd go for it. Make it *his* problem. Better than sitting on it for a year or two until the market improves."

Her chest tightened at the notion of forcing Jake off the ranch he so dearly loved. But she didn't have any other choice. Staying in business when the place was running in the red seemed out of the question. Why hadn't he told her?

Because he probably doesn't have the assets to buy me out.

That would explain why he'd neglected to broach the subject of an offer. Sadness and regret swirled inside her, but she could hardly throw more money into an unprofitable venture.

For the next half hour, they went over the list of her father's assets—furniture, a small personal checking account, an old pickup truck. But Paige couldn't focus. All she could think about was Jake. She'd have to use common sense rather than her emotions to choose her path.

She prayed her decision wouldn't devastate the man she'd so quickly grown to care about.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake shoved through the glass doors out to the bank parking lot. Marching to his pickup, he gritted his teeth. Maybe another bank would agree to loan him what he needed to buy out Paige's share of the ranch.

Yeah, right.

The stuffed-shirt loan officer had spelled it out in black and white. He didn't have enough collateral to justify such a loan. Period. Same thing the banker he'd met with earlier said.

Paige probably knew by now the Circle O had been losing money. And that he'd kept that information from her. If only he hadn't trusted Owen to handle the financial end of things. How could he have known the man didn't have an inkling about running a business?

*It's my own fault. I should have kept tabs on him.*

But he'd been so eager to take on the day-to-day operations—the fun part—that he'd neglected to keep an eye on the tedious financial side of it. By the time he'd discovered the gravity of the situation it was too late. Owen had a heart attack and died days later.

In the nearly two months since his partner's death, Jake had tried to undo some of the damage, made an attempt to rein in expenses, but it wasn't enough. Not yet. Given a year, maybe two, he knew he could straighten it out, make the Circle O run in the black. But he probably wouldn't get the opportunity.

When the lawyer called his cell, he headed over to collect Paige.

He wasn't terribly surprised when she climbed inside and mumbled a halfhearted hello. Her pale complexion and drawn eyebrows confirmed she'd taken the news hard. He ventured another glance at her, but she stared straight through the windshield, refused to look at him. The knowledge that he'd caused her any grief tightened his gut sure as a lasso.

He drove her back to the ranch, neither of them uttering a single word until they turned into the drive.

"My group should start arriving within the hour," he told her. "Tour leaves at one-fifteen from the area behind the stables."

"Okay. Thanks for the lift." She climbed out of the truck and headed inside the house. His chest ached as he watched her, wondered if she'd even show up for the tour. She probably already had her mind made up to sell the place. The prospect of losing the ranch was too painful to dwell on. He'd sunk every penny he had into the business but the damage Owen had inflicted would take more time to rectify.

For now, he had too much to do to get ready for his group. He shook off his gloom and headed to the stables.

An hour later, he helped an elderly woman onto the wagon as Rosebud and Goliath whinnied impatiently. Paige had yet to arrive. Apparently she'd already made her decision. This might be one of his last tours.

As he stepped up to the driver's seat, she rounded the corner of the stables. He allowed a glimmer of hope to lighten his mood. Anyway, he ought to put on his game face for the benefit of the paying guests.

Paige approached the wagon. "Room for one more?"

"Yes, ma'am." He offered her a hand up.

After she'd settled onto a seat under the canopy, he gave her a wink, then addressed the group. "Welcome to the horse capital of the world, folks. Are any of you from around here?"

No one spoke up.

"So I can make stuff up and y'all won't know the difference, huh?" He waited for the usual chuckles and smiles. When he got them, he continued. He motioned toward the horses hitched to the trolley. "Rosebud and Goliath here are shires. Shire horses are the tallest of the modern draught breeds. These babies weigh close to a ton each. We're going to view some of Marion County's finest horse farms this afternoon. Many breeds are raised here. We'll see Thoroughbreds, Tennessee Walkers, Paso Finos and many others. So keep your cameras ready."

Paige watched the faces light up as Jake spoke. He definitely had a way with people, easily earning smiles and laughter. At each stop along the tour, at least one person would ask a question and Jake always knew the answer, whether the subject was horses, local foliage, architecture or folklore.

She took in the pastoral beauty and reflected on her life in New York. Had she ever enjoyed one day at the office as much as Jake seemed to love his job today?

Be practical.

Right. She had to look at the big picture. The business had operated in the red since it began. Period. Jake and her father had three years to make the ranch a success, but they hadn't. Something told her Jake wouldn't be able to buy her out. If he'd had the means, he'd already have made an offer. No way could she keep the place running, throw more money into a sinking ship. This ought to be a simple financial decision, yet her shoulders sank from the weight of it.

After they returned to the stables, she waited as each passenger personally thanked Jake.

Finally, the last stragglers left and Paige drew a calming breath. "We need to talk." She wrung her hands, watched him free the horses from the harnesses.

He nodded but refused to spare her a glance. "Give me a few minutes to finish here. I'll meet you up at the house in half an hour."

She strode across the pasture, trying to come up with reasons to keep the Circle O going, but logic kept prevailing. Jake would be heartbroken. But he had to know she had few options. She'd learned he was no simple cowboy, but an intelligent man. No doubt he'd find a way to start up a similar operation or move on to something else.

Yet half an hour later as she paced her father's study, waiting for Jake, her mouth felt stuffed with cotton. The deafening silence in the big house hung heavy in the air. Would he even want to touch her after this conversation? The notion of never kissing

him again, never making love with him again, ripped through her. A painful emptiness settled in the pit of her stomach.

Ridiculous.

Wasn't as if they'd planned to continue their relationship past this visit. She'd have to deal with the loss now or in a few days. Either way, the prospect of walking away left a great big hole inside her.

The creak of the front door had her trembling like a kid waiting outside the principal's office. She took a seat behind her father's desk, but immediately realized she didn't want that massive oak barrier between them. She quickly switched to one of the chairs against the side wall and laced her fingers together to keep her hands from trembling.

Jake's heavy steps resonated through the house. He held his chin high and his hat in his hand. Deep lines etched his forehead. "Let's get this over with." Sitting in the chair beside hers, he turned toward her and tossed his hat onto the desk.

She cleared the thick clog in her throat. "Well, as you know, I met with the lawyer." She stood and took several steps toward the desk, retrieved the file folder she'd left in the top drawer. Tense as a spring, she returned to her seat.

"I'm sure you know the Circle O has steadily lost money." She couldn't help hoping he'd dispute the findings, show her the accounts had been wrong. And that he hadn't kept that information from her on purpose. But she knew better. Working in bookkeeping had taught her that numbers didn't lie. And being married to an asshole had convinced her men couldn't be trusted. But she'd thought Jake was different. She wanted to trust him, wanted to think he'd never meant to deceive her.

He nodded and the tiny muscles around his jaw ticked.

She opened the folder, took out the financial report. "Would you like to take a look?"

Deep frown lines formed on either side of his mouth. "I've seen it."

She wished he'd say more, that he'd help her somehow. But how could she expect him to make this easier for her? His whole life would be affected by her decision. She set the papers on the desk and swallowed hard. "Unless you want to buy my share of the company, I don't see any other option than to sell."

Jake abruptly stood, his hands fisted at his sides. "Do what you have to do."

She diverted her gaze, held back her tears. Guilt and regret stabbed at her head.

Heavy footsteps receded. The air cooled as Jake stormed from the room.

*It's business. I can't cloud my decision with emotion.*

She reached into her pocket and removed a business card. The real estate broker her lawyer had recommended had an Ocala address. Maybe the woman would agree to come over immediately. No sense putting off the inevitable. She lifted the phone to her ear and blocked out the pain clawing at her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake hammered a nail into a broken section of fence and tried to ignore his clenched gut. He recognized the woman standing beside Paige, snapping pictures of the house. According to her TV ads, she sold more real estate in the area than anyone else. Paige certainly didn't waste any time. Thought he knew her better, but just like all those bankers he'd spoken to, nothing mattered to her except cold, hard numbers. He never imagined she'd cut him off at the knees like this, so fast and final. But could he blame her? That lawyer had probably spelled out the bottom line—in red.

Paige crunched numbers on her job. Only natural she'd not been able to see past the hard facts. But there had to be a way. He wished he could make her understand the potential the ranch held.

He brought the hammer down hard, but instead of the nail, he smashed it into his finger. Pain instantly flared. He dropped the tool and shook his aching hand. "Son of a bitch."

Both women turned toward him, gaping.

Great. Last thing he needed was an audience. Cursing under his breath, he returned to his task. Couldn't meet Paige's gaze. Should he tell her how her old man had swindled him? How the bastard kept him out of the loop just long enough to run the place into the ground?

What's the point? She's already made up her mind.

That stodgy lawyer's opinion mattered more than his. Paige would fly back to New York and never think about this place or him again. Why would she want anything to do with a country boy, anyway? She'd probably find some rich stockbroker who'd be more her type than he was. They'd both be better off to stick to their own kind.

He pictured her in some fancy restaurant, drinking expensive champagne and playing footsy with a rich guy in a designer suit. The image ripped through him.

No, damn it!

He wouldn't give up on them so easily. And he refused to walk away from all he'd worked for at the ranch. He'd make Paige see the possibilities. Tossing the hammer to the ground, he marched toward the women, grabbed Paige's arm and led her up the steps and inside the house.

Behind them he heard the real estate agent get into her car and start the motor.

Good riddance.

He pushed through the door to the study and yanked Paige into the room.

"What are you doing?" She jerked her arm away and set her hands on her hips, exactly as he'd seen her father do a hundred times.

"I haven't said my piece yet." He pointed to a chair. "Sit."

She lifted a challenging eyebrow.

"Sit!"

That time, she listened. Her lips flattened into a thin line.

"I want to tell you about your father, how he screwed this place all to hell. And I was dumb enough to trust him. My first mistake." His chest tightened at the thought of

how his former partner had bilked the ranch for all its assets, how angry he'd been — still was — at Owen's reckless business practices.

Her eyebrows drew together. "I know this isn't all your fault. My father certainly had a hand in it, but businesses fail all the time."

"All my fault?" He rocketed toward her chair, poked a finger at her. "Let me tell you something, Paige. I trusted your father when he told me he'd run businesses all his life. He insisted on handling the financial end of things." He scrubbed a hand over his face and drew a deep sigh, trying to calm himself. "I'm sorry for shouting. None of this is your doing. But your father purposely kept me out of the loop on some key decisions. He doctored the books he showed me and made me believe he had everything under control. By time I found out what he'd done it was too late."

The revelation hit her like a slap of icy winter air. "I-I didn't know. I'm sorry." Her father sounded like just as big a jerk as she'd remembered.

Jake rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Bank won't give me a loan to buy you out. I sank everything I had into this place. I've been trying to get it back on its feet, but I've had a couple of months and I'm afraid it's going to take a lot longer than that."

She flashed on the tour, how he'd seemed so in his element as he recounted local history to the clients, when he'd shared his knowledge of the local architecture and the practices at the various horse farms. How could she take that from him, knowing her own father had caused the business to collapse?

*No. Think with your head, not your heart.*

"I'm so sorry my father deceived you. But it doesn't change the facts. This place is losing money."

His Adam's apple jumped and a frown marred his handsome face. "I'm so sorry I didn't come clean with you about the ranch losing money. That's not my style. I was just trying to get you to see how great this place could be before you saw the numbers." Muscles around his jaw ticked.

Sure, he'd kept the information from her, but she believed him, believed that his deceit had been borne of hope, not malice. He'd never meant to hurt her.

"I have ideas, Paige. Ideas that could make the Circle O turn a profit. I've already saved a bunch of money by undoing some things your father put into place. Would you hear me out before you make a decision?"

The emotional thumbscrews tightened. What could it hurt to listen to him? "Of course."

Paige settled into her chair and watched Jake's eyes come alive as he talked about all his ideas for the ranch. Not that she knew anything about running such a business, but his plans made sense. And best of all, most would require little or no additional cash. But more than his ideas, his passion convinced her.

## Chapter Six

When Jake finished speaking, he studied Paige for a reaction. She'd appeared interested a few minutes ago, but now she seemed lost in her thoughts. He schooled his expression, hoping not to come off as overconfident. Praying he'd made some headway with her, sucked in a deep breath. "Well?" he finally said after several long beats of silence.

She crossed her legs, furrowed her brows. She started to say something, but stopped herself. After a heavy sigh, she met his stare. A smile slowly formed on her face and he desperately wanted to kiss her, but he refrained. Maybe he'd read too much into her reaction.

Her brow knitted and she rubbed the bridge of her nose. She drummed her fingers on the file folder on the desk. "I like your ideas. I think you might have something here. Something that can turn a profit."

*I like your ideas.*

He replayed her words again and again. But did that mean she'd agree to hold off on selling? Clamping down on his excitement, he waited, held his breath.

"What would you say to us holding off on selling—for the time being?" She scooted to the edge of her chair. "After hearing your plans, I'm definitely on board with your vision for this place. You know the ranch better than anyone. And I love that contest idea."

Relief flooded his veins. "I say you're a smart woman." Not only would he have the chance to make the ranch profitable, but he'd keep Paige in his life at least a while longer. She might be a city girl, but she was anything but cold and hard.

He closed the distance between them and scooped her into his arms. "I say it makes my dick hard to be within a hundred feet of you." Latching onto the elastic around her

ponytail, he unfastened it. Her silky strands spilled onto her shoulders. His cock strained against his jeans. "I want you, Paige. Right here, right now."

Her eyes turned darker than sin. A devilish grin curled her lips. Fast as a whip, she shucked off her shoes, jeans and T-shirt. Swiping her arm over Owen's desk, she sent the few items on top careening across the room. She climbed onto the surface and crooked her finger at him.

City girl or not, she'd already changed his mind about that seemingly buttoned-up type. Under the cool exterior she was hottest woman he'd ever met. His initial impression had been dead wrong. He leaned toward the desk and kissed those sweet lips. She hooked her hands around his neck and grabbed handfuls of his hair. He deepened that kiss, savored her unique taste. She sighed her approval. He swirled his tongue over hers, skimmed the edges of her teeth. Her grasp on his hair tightened, but the momentary pain only heightened his desire for her.

He broke away and shook his head. "You make me lose control, woman."

That musical laugh. "Good."

He bit at a lace-covered nipple and she arched her back in response. Cupping her other breast, he tamped down the desire to fuck her immediately, hard. But he needed to wash the sweat and the horse smell from his skin. Soon.

Slipping the fabric of her bra away, he stared down at her ripe nipple, red from his bite. Christ, he was rigid as steel. "Paige?"

"Hmm?" She looked at him through half-hooded eyes and damned if he didn't get even harder.

"I ought to take a shower. I smell like the stables."

She sat up, moved to the edge of the desk. "Okay. Mind if I join you?"

"Is that a loaded question?" He offered his hand and she accepted it. "I hoped you would."

Unable to keep his eyes off her luscious body, he climbed the stairs behind her and barely made it to the top without taking her along the way. When they entered the bathroom, Paige immediately started undressing him.

He helped her lift off his shirt. She unfastened his belt buckle and slid his zipper down, slow enough to make him suffer. His cock sprang free, ready to play. "You're killing me here."

Her wicked smile widened. "I'm trying." She crouched to help him off with his boots and get his pants down the rest of the way.

She ripped off her top and her bra.

He grabbed her wrist before she removed anything else. "Let me." Licking his lips, he lowered the zipper on her pants, eased the material over her luscious hips.

She wriggled to push the slacks lower. Heat galloped through him. Circling her thigh with both his hands, he slid each leg down, skimming her satiny skin. He shoved the garment aside so he could focus on getting off the tiny scrap of fabric parading as panties. Struggling to take his time, he rolled the underwear down, inch by inch. When the lacy thing pooled at her ankles, she kicked it away.

He'd never make it to the shower at this rate. Not with her driving him completely crazy with her floral scent and her hot little body. Was it his imagination, or did he really smell her cream? He sucked in a deep breath and caught it again. The instant he reached for her, she slipped out of his grasp and started the shower. She pushed back the curtain and stepped inside. "Coming?"

"Not yet, but real soon, I reckon." He followed her in. She had a bar of soap in her hand and started lathering those perky mounds, slow and sexy. The sight of her—soaking wet, water running over her pebbled points and sliding down her stomach into the tuft of curls between her legs—heated him to the bone.

The shower ought to be cold or he'd risk burning up. He moved closer. Taking the soap from her, he felt her soften into his body. Her nipples pressed against his chest. He

wrapped his arms around her, kneaded the globes of her sexy ass. She purred like a kitten. Running the soap up and down her back, he marveled at her soft, slick skin.

He breathed in the steam and her scent and let out a low growl. Just being near her did things to him no other woman ever had. And she believed in him. He had no idea what a powerful aphrodisiac her confidence in him would be.

She took the bar back and lathered his chest and his back. Her hands lingered on his shoulders and upper arms. He shut his eyes and tried to keep his building lust under control.

"I like your muscles." She moved her attention lower, over his stomach, down to his erection. Her slick fingers wrapped around his cock. She slid her hand back and forth, using the water and the lather as a lubricant.

Steadying himself with a hand to the wall, he watched her work his shaft and his heat rose tenfold. He hissed out a pleased breath.

She gestured toward the ledge of the tub. "Sit."

When he did, she moved closer and closed his cock in the valley between her firm breasts. He pushed up and down, fucking her cleavage as she held those beautiful tits together. "Oh God." His control slipped with each stroke.

"Give me a pearl necklace, Jake."

Enjoying her sexy body's movements, slippery with water and bubbles...Christ, he couldn't take much more. Pleasure spiraled through him, electrified every cell in his body. His balls tightened, ready to explode. He detonated with a loud gasp, shooting her chest and neck with the pearls she'd asked for.

Paige's satisfied expression made his orgasm that much sweeter. He'd never been with a woman so giving in the sexual department. She seemed to relish his delight as much as she did her own. He leaned his head against the cool tiles, recovering.

His seed slid down her skin. She rubbed it over her nipples, tweaking them as she did. Raising an eyebrow, she fixed him with a sultry stare. "You like what you see, cowboy?"

He took her hand, pulled her closer to him and circled his arms around her waist. "What do you think?"

"I think I'd better wash while there's still some hot water left."

Paige twisted away and sluiced lather over her arms and shoulders. Jake reached around her to help her. Well, not exactly help. How much lathering and massaging did her breasts really need?

She turned to face him and looked into those clear blue eyes. The desire she found there stole her breath away. He stood and stroked his thumb along her jaw, followed with hot kisses.

Taking her head in his hands, he met her stare. "You're the hottest woman I've ever known."

Although his comment deeply touched her, she had to laugh. "Come on, Jake. I'm sure you've had your pick of beauties."

He shrugged. "Maybe so. But you're the whole package, baby." He tapped a finger to her temple. "Brains, personality, looks and..." He slid his gaze over her. "The most incredibly sexy body I've ever seen."

"Whoa." The man could set her on fire merely with a word.

He kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, scraped her earlobe between his teeth. "I want to kiss you from head to toe." The whispered words sent a shudder of desire through her. Her pussy quivered with yearning.

He cupped her breast, shaped and kneaded it. "I want to spread those beautiful legs wide and lick you until you scream."

Her nipples hardened and ached for more attention. Anticipation heightened her senses.

"I want to drive my tongue into your sweet pussy and lap up your juices."

Molten lust flooded her veins. Reaching to the faucet, she shut off the water with a trembling hand.

Jake grabbed a big towel from the rack and wrapped them both in it, rubbed the cloth quickly over them, then tossed it aside. "Bedroom." He gave her backside a playful swat.

She didn't hesitate. Taking his hand, she led him to her room and immediately climbed onto the bed. Her pussy had already grown wet and pulsed with yearning.

Jake straddled her, set a hand on either side of her and lowered his mouth to her ear. He traced the shell of her ear with his tongue, pulled the lobe into his mouth and raked his teeth over it. "Do you trust me?"

She turned her head to his at the question. "What?"

"You heard me. Do you trust me?" Sliding lower, he drew a taut nipple into his mouth and sucked. Hard.

She bucked and whimpered.

"Hmm?" he pressed.

She had to think about that for a second. Since she'd agreed to be his business partner and she'd had the best sex of her life with him, she must trust him. "I guess I do."

He moved above her, brushed his lips over hers. His eyes bored into hers. "Don't guess. Tell me yes or no." He moved to the other nipple and swirled his tongue around it.

Pleasure radiated from where he touched. She lifted her hips, hoping he'd pay her pussy the attention he'd promised. And soon. "Yes." She'd known him such a short time, but for some reason, she did trust him.

He gave each breast a generous swipe with his tongue, trailed wet kisses along her belly, lower, lower to her inner thighs. Every nerve ending came to life. She shook with pent-up desire.

Suddenly Jake rolled off her and climbed off the bed.

*No! I need him now.*

"Where are you going?"

He held a finger in the air. Then he circled around the bed and strode to the window. She squirmed with cravings that begged to be satisfied. He monkeyed with the drapery, muttered under his breath. God, couldn't he wait to close the curtains. "Jake?"

Her patience wore thin. "What are you doing?"

Returning to the bed with a shit-eating grin on his face, he climbed on top of her and grabbed her wrists in one of his strong hands.

"What the —"

"Shush." He silenced her with a finger to her lips. Then he rolled her over onto her stomach.

"What are you doing?" Excitement swirled inside her. Whatever his plans, she knew she'd enjoy herself.

*I trust him,* she silently chanted.

Reaching over her, he tied her hands together and fastened them to the headboard with fabric.

She craned her neck and caught sight of her tethered wrists secured with the curtain tiebacks. "Did you seriously tie me up?" But a shot of excitement ricocheted through her body. She'd never worked up the confidence to ask her previous lovers to play this game, although she'd always fantasized about it.

He stared down at her. "I seriously did. And I can tell you like it already."

"What?" Her shock came out cheap as tin even to her ears. Vulnerability washed over her and she liked it. Liked the idea that he had total power over her. She yanked her arms, swallowed back the apprehension. Learning to trust Jake was imperative if they planned to share a business.

He nipped her hard points in succession. Knowing he could do whatever he wanted to her raised the stakes tenfold. She squirmed against the rush of liquid heat that flooded her sex.

Jake pushed his hand between her thighs and rubbed near her entrance. He slid a finger inside her and she let out a pleased gasp.

"You're soaking wet. And you're going to get even wetter." He removed his finger way too quickly and sucked it into his mouth. "Mmm."

She licked her lips, rasped out a breath.

"Do you like spankings?"

The question caught her off guard. "Do I...what?" She'd heard him perfectly, and she'd always had a glimmer of interest or at least curiosity about such kink, although again, she'd never had the nerve to ask for it. Thought her partner might find her some sort of deviant.

"You heard me." He smoothed a calloused hand over her ass, then lightly traced his finger along the crease between her butt cheeks.

She fisted her hands, braced for the spanking she knew was imminent.

"Since I didn't hear you utter a no, I'll assume you're game." He gave her a quick slap. The sharp sound electrified the air in the otherwise quiet room.

Her nipples tingled and a zing of excitement flared in her core.

"You liked it, didn't you?" He swatted her ass again, this time harder and louder.

"Ouch." Only she *did* enjoy it. Heat rushed to her face. She lifted her backside closer, silently asked him for more.

"Tell me."

"No."

Another stinging slap and her rear end burned. "No!" Only she couldn't hold back a giggle. Her pussy throbbed with lust. She rocked her hips, desperate for relief.

He rubbed his hard cock along her sex. She lifted toward him again, tried to slide her pussy against his shaft. "Please, Jake."

Rolling her to her back, he eased her thighs apart. "Tell me what you want." Lightly, he skittered a finger along her pussy. Just a tease.

"Please?"

When she thought she'd explode from frustration, he crawled between her legs, licked his finger and dragged it along her folds. Desire shot to her core. When his tongue flicked at her clit, she cried out, so close to the edge.

She strained against her ties, lifted her hips off the bed, bucking and twisting as Jake teased and tantalized her. He suckled her clit, drove a finger deep inside her, then another. Using his thumb, he rubbed her special spot. Her breath hitched. She tried to lower her arms, remembered that she couldn't. Clutching at her tethers, she whimpered with helpless abandon. Delicious, lush sensations vibrated, pushed her closer and closer to her release. She squeezed her eyes shut, held her breath and braced for the onslaught of carnal delight. She came in a blinding flash of ecstasy. Writhing with bliss, she rode wave after wave of heavenly pleasure.

She opened her eyes to find Jake staring at her. Breathless, she grinned at him. "Are you going to untie me now?"

He stretched out beside her, his hand still between her legs. "Don't know. I sure like watching you come." He bowed his head to her chest, pulled a nipple into his mouth and flicked his tongue over the peak. "Maybe this is how we'll make business decisions."

"Ha!" She made a show of fighting against her restraints. "Over my dead body."

He quirked an eyebrow and chuckled. "Over your tied-up body."

She stilled. "You can make this work, Jake."

He kissed her lips with more passion, more sweetness than before. "Thank you for your confidence. It means everything." Reaching over her head, he loosened the knots and released her wrists. She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a passionate kiss. The taste of her lust on his lips made her hungry for more.

He broke away. "Condom." Moments later he climbed on top of her and parted her thighs with his knee. Fixing her with a smoky stare, he angled his erection against her and rubbed the crown along her swollen sex.

She sighed, greedy to feel him—all of him—inside her. Her pussy clenched in anticipation. When he did, she wrapped her legs around him, coaxing him deeper. He stroked into her, slow at first. A sweet flood of pleasure washed over her as her channel stretched to accommodate his thick cock.

He filled her so completely, so perfectly. As if they were two pieces of the same puzzle.

Muscles on his neck and shoulders corded and his jaw clenched. The more he held back, the more flushed and sweaty his face grew. His thrusts grew faster, harder as he churned into her again and again.

She breathed in his scent, heady as the earth and pure man. Watching his face as he succumbed to his climax filled her with joy. Knowing he took his pleasure from her body made her feel powerful and beautiful and feminine.

He settled on top of her, panting and moaning. She ran her hands along his muscled back, felt his heart pounding. For her, for them.

He lifted his head, smiled at her, then pressed a kiss to her lips. Rolling off her, he pulled her to him so her back rested against his torso. Perfect.

Her eyelids lazily slipped shut. Satisfied and exhausted, she fell into a blissful sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun still blazed bright when she woke in Jake's arms a while later. Although she faced away from him, she instinctively knew he lay awake beside her. "What time is it?"

He slid his hand softly along her bare hip. "A little after five."

"What are you thinking?" She stiffened at his sharp intake of breath.

"I don't want you to leave, Paige."

She couldn't look at him. "I have a life in New York. A job, an apartment." That sounded pretty lame even to her ears.

"How do you feel about extending your stay? Maybe another week?" He kissed the side of her neck, below her ear. The tenderness of the gesture sent a shiver shimmying up her spine. Jake was a man she could fall for, hard.

The longer she stayed the more difficult it would be to leave, but she didn't want to say goodbye to him. Not now. "I think I can swing a few more days."

"A week," he insisted.

She could finagle a few more vacation days from her boss. She had tons of them on the book since she hardly ever took any personal time. "Okay. A week." A shiver of excitement danced over her skin.

"You know, with us in business together, you really ought to come down here on a regular basis, keep your hand in it, learn the ropes. That's probably some sort of tax deduction, right?"

She had to smile at his not-so-veiled attempt at coaxing her to commit to visiting. "You're absolutely right. I should."

His serene sigh as he settled against her back assured her that he truly wanted her here.

Yeah. She'd be back. Real soon.

## **Epilogue**

*Four Months Later...*

Paige hurried across the Gainesville Airport toward baggage claim, but her luggage was the farthest thing from her mind. She'd missed Jake terribly since last month's visit. When she spotted his tan cowboy hat and the bouquet of carnations, she took off running toward him. Her heart pounded with anticipation.

Jake caught her in his arms and spun her around. "Whoa. Your flowers are probably all crushed now." He kissed her, long and slow.

How she'd missed his taste and his strong embrace. She'd craved his smell, like pine trees and fresh cut grass. She drank him in. Desire immediately washed over her. "I can't wait to get back to Ocala, to the ranch." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

His face lit up with laughter—and lust. "Me too, baby. Let's find your suitcase and hit the road. I'll do my best to keep the truck under a hundred on the highway."

They left the terminal hand in hand. He carried her bag to his pickup and told her about all the changes he'd made to the ranch since her last trip. Paige listened intently, saved her news for later. Once they started on the road, she decided the time had come.

She set her hand over her heart to calm herself. "I had an offer on my condo."

He glanced at her and the big smile on his face assured her he'd meant what he'd said about wanting her to stay on permanently. "And?"

"I accepted it. We close in three weeks. I should be able to wrap everything up there by the end of the month." She still couldn't believe it was actually happening. She was about to make the biggest move of her life. Her mother and her friends had called her crazy for wanting to give up her life in New York, but then, they'd never met Jake. They'd never seen the ranch or smelled the sweetness of fresh orange blossoms. For the

first time in her life, she didn't care what anyone said. She planned to make a decision based purely on her emotions.

His eyes widened. Without a word, he took the next exit off the Interstate. They passed a stone sign that read, Payne's Prairie State Preserve.

What did he have up his sleeve? And why the silence since she'd told him her news? Had he changed his mind about her moving here? Her throat suddenly constricted. She wanted to be with him full time more than anything and he'd expressed the same hope. Everything she knew about the man told her he meant what he said, always. She licked her lips and glanced across the cab at Jake. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He turned off the main road onto an unpaved path, drove a quarter mile or so into the thick brush then stopped. Shutting off the motor, he faced her. "Does this mean you'll finally come to stay?"

Emotion stole her voice. She could only manage a nod.

Jake unsnapped her seat belt, pulled her onto his lap. "I've been waiting for this for so long." He covered her mouth with his, swirled his tongue around hers. His calloused hands skimmed under the back of her blouse creating the most delicious friction. Desire unfurled inside her. And something else, that feeling of being home, more comfortable than she'd ever been.

She hooked her fingers behind his neck and crushed her breasts against his chest. Her hips rocked of their own accord. Her pussy ached with need only Jake could fill. Sliding over the impressive bulge in his pants, she grinned. She reached between them and opened his belt buckle, lowered his fly. His erection sprang out at full throttle.

He lifted his butt off the seat and lowered his jeans to his thighs. Paige grabbed at her purse, fished inside for a condom. But Jake snatched it out of her hand and tore it open. As he rolled it over his cock, she hiked up her skirt, thankful for her wardrobe choice this morning.

Her intimate juices had already started flowing when he sneaked a finger inside her, testing her readiness. Yeah, she was plenty wet. She lifted herself onto his erect shaft and took him part way inside. The weeks they'd been apart this time had been pure torture, which made the reunion all the more sweet.

"You feel so good. So perfect." He squeezed her butt cheeks as he drove farther inside her pussy. "Every day, Paige. Promise me you'll let me fuck you every day."

She rolled her head back, laughing. "And every night, too." Soon enough, she'd be horsing around with her cowboy whenever she pleased.

## About the Author

Wynter Daniels is the multi-published naughty alter ego of contemporary romance author Dara Edmondson. She lives in Florida with her husband of more than twenty years and their two nearly grown children. They are all the slaves of two very demanding cats.

Wynter enjoyed careers in marketing and the salon industry before her wicked prose begged to be set free. She hopes you enjoy her steamy stories.

Wynter welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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