

Pauline Baird Jones



*Dance
With Me*

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by Pauline Baird Jones

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DANCE WITH ME

Richard Hamilton prided himself on keeping his business life strictly separated from his personal—and business *always* came first. It had helped him achieve success separate from his father. It made him work hard to get the best people for the job and strive to keep from losing those people to messy personal complications, well, at least messy personal stuff involving *him*.

He couldn't stop anyone from messy personal complications with other people, but for the most part, his staff kept messy anything far away from him. It was part of their job descriptions. The best of the best at avoiding the messy was, hands down, his PA, Sam Sutherland.

He didn't need anyone else telling him she was the perfect PA, though his business associates told him that frequently, and then tried to steal her behind his back. From the moment he'd hired her, their personalities, their working styles, meshed flawlessly.

She was attractive, but in a restrained way that made him look good. Her appearance was just a quiet part of the overall, highly efficient package.

Even better, she never let *her* personal life impinge on *his* business.

Until now.

Ric wasn't even sure when he'd realized Sam *had* a personal life. There was just a gradual awareness that she was leaving exactly on time more than usual, that she was involved in *something*.

And it was something she didn't want *him* to know about.

She'd never been a clock watcher and she wasn't sneaking peeks at her watch. Sam would never be that obvious. She just managed to, he hesitated to use the word manipulate, but it was the only one that fit, she was manipulating things so that she could leave exactly on time.

It was like a cold draft of air intruding into the warm comfort of his working environment—a feeling of unease building in his gut. Was Sam getting ready to bolt to another company, or worse, into marriage?

He didn't know what went on behind Sam's calm, cool, highly efficient exterior. But once he'd started wondering, once he'd started asking *questions*, his mind couldn't rest until it got *answers*.

It was how his mind functioned. The drive to *know* had helped fuel his success and his instinct was telling him something was going on with Sam, something not good for *him*.

She was an attractive woman. When he started really looking at her, he realized she was very attractive. She was tall, slim and graceful. Her brown hair had enough red to hint at fire tamped down, and her eyes were a deep, cool blue. She had creamy skin and a bone structure that would age well. A very kissable mouth, now that he was looking more closely at her.

She was a bit too buttoned down for his personal taste, but perfect for a PA.

She had a lovely walk and perfect posture. He had a thing about posture. Hated it when women slumped. Sam walked like a queen or a movie star, now that he thought about it. It was smooth and regal, no matter her speed or the amazing height of her shoes. And her head sometimes tipped to the side, like she heard something no one else did. What did she hear? He added that question to the growing list, right under: how come he hadn't noticed her shoes before? He was noticing the shoes almost as much as he was noticing her mouth.

And now he was having trouble *not* watching her all the time. Worse, watching her triggered more questions that his mind wanted answered, questions that made it harder to keep things strictly business.

In the end, all the questions, all the conjecture boiled down to two, essential. Was Sam seeing someone? And if she was, was it serious?

The amount of time she was giving to this guy, if there was one, seemed to indicate it was very serious.

Okay, so she might be seeing someone. Why did the idea bother him so much? He'd lost other PA's to headhunters and marriage and his life had gone on. He didn't like the disruption of his routine, hated it actually, but it happened. Nothing was forever.

Okay, so none of his previous PA's had been quite as perfect as Sam. He thought about it some more and decided it was business, good business to anticipate problems and be ready for them. Nothing personal.

It still felt personal.

It was a shock to realize his relationship with Sam was different. She had a quick mind and she challenged his assumptions, made him consider different options and strategies. She could jolt him out of a bad mood with a subtly delivered quip that never crossed the line. She...anchored him in a way that was different from his previous PAs. Just seeing her at her desk in the morning made his world seem right. He hated it when she was out sick or on vacation. Studied her schedule for ways to keep her at work. Really hated it when she locked it, because he wasn't supposed to hassle her, even though it was fun to fire flare in her eyes when he did.

Right now, winking at him on his lap top screen was her schedule with a Saturday, a *whole day* that she'd locked. Even worse, she'd done it without explanation.

He flipped through her schedule, looking backwards and forwards. It was the only large block of time locked up without any explanation of any kind. Her brother's upcoming wedding was noted. Same with doctor visits, though thankfully nothing about which type. He didn't need *that* much information.

He leaned back in his chair, one hand tapping the top of his desk. He knew so little about her personal life. He didn't even know if the brother getting married was an older or an only.

But it surprised him how much he *did* know. He knew she was stubborn, had a sense of humor, had integrity, was bright and quick, kind—without getting personal, he'd somehow managed to get very personal with his PA.

Even worse, he *wanted* to get personal.

And he didn't know how.

He'd made it crystal clear when Sam was hired, that if she crossed the personal line, she'd be out.

The hard line had seemed wise at the time. Now it had become a hurdle to get over.

* * * *

There was something going on with her boss.

Usually Sam—Sophie Adele Marie—Sutherland could read Richard Hamilton easier than a first grade primer, but he'd suddenly become a difficult, college level textbook.

It wasn't just that he kept calling her into his office way more than usual, though it was annoying. It wasn't just the feeling of him watching her all the time, though it was part of it.

It was a *sense* that something had changed, which was unsettling but hardly definitive, because nothing *outwardly* had changed.

Well, except for the fact that he'd ended his latest relationship and had yet to replace her.

That was new.

In the two years since Sam had come to work as Ric's PA there'd been a steady stream of women in and out of his life. She'd dealt with all of them in one way or another, since everyone had to go through her to get to Ric. She set up the dates, the rides and the gifts, and then had to head them off when it was over.

Sam had been told when she interviewed for the job that falling for Ric was a firing offence. She'd been confident that wouldn't be a problem until she met him. The sight of him had rocked her senses back on their heels and made time stand still. Sometimes he still affected her that way.

He had the most amazing green eyes set in a face that had been honed into perfection by nature and topped with hair as dark as the deepest part of night.

When she'd finally managed to drag her gaze free of his eyes and his beautiful face, she found nature had also given him a tall, strong body that was utterly male. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, long legs, beautiful hands.

Sam's job as PA gave her far too many opportunities to contemplate his hands and to watch him as he moved through his life with the lithe grace of a tiger on the prowl—leaving behind a trail of broken hearts that probably reached back into the cradle.

It was inevitable that her heart would fall with the rest of them, but she was determined that he'd never, ever know it. To that end, she'd fashioned Sam as a front woman, a business persona, a shield to hide Sophie from Ric's potent masculinity.

For work Sam always dressed in black slacks or skirts that hit just below the knee. Her crisp, white blouse was always buttoned all the way to the top. Make-up and hair were always demure. Sam never lost her cool, never lost her temper, never tried to attract Ric's attention in any way that wasn't strictly business.

The only departure from the prim line was her shoes, a weakness for both Sam and Sophie. Oh, they were black, but always sassy, always a bit flirty and always do-me high. A tiny hint that beneath Sam someone called Sophie lurked, if he ever cared to look past the prim, efficient exterior of his perfect PA.

But he never had.

Now she watched him through the filter of her lashes as she waited for him to sign the sheaf of letters she'd brought him. When he angled his head like that, a wayward bit of hair fell across his forehead, igniting an almost irresistible urge to smooth it back.

This wouldn't be the first time she'd wondered what it would feel like to touch him, not in the impersonal way of a PA, but as a his lover, to have those beautiful hands touch *her*.

One of them held the paper in place, while the other slashed his signature onto the bottom. It was a shock to realize she *envied* the stupid letters. And the stupid pen.

If only he'd been a different kind of man. Yes, he dated a lot, but he was never blatantly unkind. He was a great boss, kind and generous. Sam was in perfect position to know just how much he contributed to good causes. The women he left behind never hated him. Animals and children liked him.

He wasn't perfect, but that only made him more appealing, not less.

It was so unfair.

She had already decided to quit. That she was going to have to move away. It was the only way to get over him.

It was so unfair. Her family was close. Denver was where she wanted to live. But if she didn't leave, didn't break free of him, she'd turn into one of those women who gave their lives for a man who never noticed them and eventually retired to a life of lonely eccentricity.

Sam didn't want to be lonely or eccentric. She wanted to marry, have children, love and be loved by a man. Okay, so she wanted that man to be Ric, but he had other plans, plans that didn't involve settling down with one woman and if he did eventually settle down it wouldn't be with her. His family was seriously upper drawer. Sam's hovered around the bottom, or maybe next to the bottom. Not poor, white trash, but only "rich" when Congress was figuring how they wouldn't get a tax cut. So she needed to get over him, clear the way for someone else in her life.

No, the problem wasn't her need to quit. The problem was how to do it without Ric figuring out why. Ric hated disruptions in the smooth running of his business. Whining about staff changes was one of his flaws, though even his whining was kind of cute.

He'd told her on numerous occasions that she was the perfect PA and compensated her accordingly to keep the head hunters at bay. He wasn't sparing in his praise of the job she did.

Well, except for last week when she refused to give up her Saturday for him. They had a deal, one worked out not long after Sam started, when she realized he'd gobble up all her life if she wasn't careful. The deal was she *only* locked her schedule when she had something she *couldn't* change. If the schedule was locked, Ric was supposed to respect that.

He didn't of course, though it helped when she made a notation of why she'd locked it, like she did for her brother's upcoming wedding, but she couldn't, she wouldn't tell him why she'd blocked off that Saturday.

It still shocked her when his whine had turned into freaked. During freaked he'd let slip that he'd noticed her managing things so she could leave work on time for the last few weeks. How come she hadn't known he'd noticed?

But he *had*. He'd actually accused her of putting a date, then dates, above the good of the company. *The punk*.

It had taken all of Sam's self-control to keep from answering back. Sophie had pounded at the walls of her prison, hurling some truly clever and devastating responses at him. Sam had coldly waited until Ric was finished, then she'd handed him the gift for his slut of the week, and the box of *condoms* he'd had the pharmacy deliver to the office, instead of his home. *Not just a punk, but a jerk, too*.

Sam had made it out of the office, out of the building, without hitting him with either of those items, her purse, or a volley of words, all of which he totally deserved. She'd spent the drive home penning various vituperative versions of a resignation letter.

It was only after she'd cooled off that she realized that if she gave vent to her feelings he'd *know* that she was like every other woman on the planet. Her heart might have fallen at his feet like a soggy sponge, but she'd die before she let him know it. She was *glad* he thought she was seeing someone. It would make things easier when she submitted her resignation.

She realized that his hand had stopped moving across the bottom of the letter. Before she could ask him if he'd found a mistake, he moved it to the side, and quickly finished the stack.

He leaned back in his chair, his green gaze hitting her with its usual force. She didn't flinch, just absorbed it, like she always did. Only her center went soft.

The silence, while he studied her, grew overlong.

"Your brother's wedding is coming up, I see."

The words were so unexpected, so *personal* it took Sam a minute to change mental gears. They *never* talked about their lives outside the office. Oh, sometimes he'd ask how things went at the dentist, but Sam never fooled herself he wanted more than a, "Fine."

"Yes." Sam scrambled mentally for something to add and produced, "I see your cousin's is coming up, too." Nothing like stating the obvious.

Sam knew Ric's dad was after him to take a local blue blood to the wedding. Sam had heard Ric arguing with him over the phone about it the other day. Ric had left his father's business, carving out his own against the odds. Instead of making his dad proud, it annoyed him for some reason.

For Sam, it was another reason to admire and love him, darn it. If only he'd been happy to be a parasite...

Ric's mouth turned up in a wry grin, as if he knew she was thinking about his dad. Which he couldn't, could he?

He pushed back his chair and stood up, pacing to the window, his back to Sam. It was a great back. Almost as great as his front. And those two sides...

"I suppose you've got an escort to the wedding?" His tone was so casual, so disinterested, it took her a moment to realize he'd done personal again.

Before she could stop her, Sophie answered for them both. "Weddings make men too weird."

Okay, she was supposed to be encouraging him to think she had a man in her life, not making it clear she didn't.

Ric spun to look at her, his brows arching. "Weird?"

Sam permitted herself a cool smile and a half shrug, hoping he'd let it go.

He didn't.

He leaned against the sill, his arms crossed. "Weird how?"

"Well, don't you all go hoping the alcohol will loosen...inhibitions, but terrified it will also give us ideas?" She was pretty sure she'd gotten the tone of amused scorn right.

He grinned, making her heart stutter in her chest.

"It does make your heart stop when your date catches the bouquet," he admitted, pushing his beautiful hands through his wonderful hair and looking charmingly rueful.

His gaze swept over her in a way that was...unsettling. Sam felt an odd, prickling heat dance across the surface of her skin, almost like his fingers were touching her...

"Maybe we could...help each other out."

His voice was a husky murmur that sent a surge of warmth into her face, despite frantic signals to her brain to ignore words and tone.

They also sent a chill down her back, but not a dash of cold water chill. No, this was more like a charged chill, with a core of scorching heat. It scalded her insides and ignited a longing for him to mean it, wrapped in a cold fear he *knew*.

Somehow she managed to stiffen knees gone seriously soggy. She gave him a look of polite inquiry.

Well, she hoped it was a look of polite inquiry. It was possible that what she felt like she was projecting and what she was actually projecting were as disparate as the cold and hot swirling through her body, dueling for supremacy.

"If we escorted each other to our respective weddings, we wouldn't have to worry about the weird factor."

No, they'd have to worry about the "I want to jump you" factor, which had the potential to be weirder than the normal weird factor. Sam felt her jaw drop slightly. Her brain, instead of producing a reasoned and negative response, was doing high fives and cartwheels.

A hole opening in the floor beneath her feet would have been helpful, but the floor remained stubbornly firm.

He arched a brow. "A simple, yes, thank you, works for me."

"I don't think that would be a good idea." That's because it was an amazing, awe-inspiring idea. It was a dream come true—or her worst nightmare.

His other brow rose to join the first. "Why not?"

She gathered in the cheerleaders and sent them to the back of her brain. Reminded herself that *Sam* couldn't go to Steven's wedding. Her family had never met Sam. To them she was Sophie. Ric didn't know about Sophie.

"We have a business relationship." Going together would be uber-weird. Or uber-wonderful. Followed by uber-painful when Ric fired her when he found out she wanted to get very personal with him.

"Which is why it's perfect," he pointed out, the epitome of unreasoning reason. "I'll even let you catch the bouquet without having a panic attack."

And then he smiled at her. He'd smiled at her before, but this smile wasn't abstracted. It was personal. It curved the edges of his mouth, exposing that almost dimple on one side and warmed his eyes with soft, golden highlights, and put endearing creases at the edges.

He stepped closer. "Say yes."

It almost took out her knees. It did take her brain off line.

By the time she'd rebooted it, she was at her desk, not sure how she'd gotten there.

Even worse, she had this vague memory of saying yes.

* * * *

He shouldn't have done that.

Sam was right. It would change their relationship. He'd started out trying to answer questions that would keep his PA right where she was: sitting at a desk guarding his inner sanctum, keeping his business running smoothly.

So why was he picturing doing things with Sam that weren't remotely related to business?

He'd crossed a line when he went looking for answers to his questions about Sam and that blocked off Saturday. He hadn't meant to do anything about it, no matter how much he wanted to. But then Carstairs had thrown a bomb at a business lunch.

"That's really something about your PA, isn't it?"

"There's a lot of *some things* about Sam," he'd managed to say coolly. "Which something are you referring to?"

"The ballroom dancing."

Ric had managed to play it off, but he'd been shell shocked. *Ballroom dancing?* As soon as he could, he called a private investigator he used when he needed information in a hurry.

If she ever found out, she wouldn't just quit. She'd probably sue him for invasion of privacy.

Even knowing all of it, he was still glad he did it. Could remember his panic when he thought she had a dance partner *and* a lover. Was still relieved that her partner was her brother, not some suave hunk with great moves.

And he still felt a sense of awe when he thought about her and her brother dancing together for so long. He'd learned they started when they were just kids. They'd never gone professional, though there were some in the dance community who thought they should have. Now that Steven was getting married, they were retiring. Obviously her evenings had been spent practicing for their final performance on the blocked out Saturday.

Knowledge should have resolved Ric's issues. There was no threat to the orderly function of his office. End of story.

Except for the raging curiosity that had eaten up his insides, and that had propelled him to see Sam dancing for himself.

As soon as he got there, he almost turned around and left. It was so alien, it was hard to picture his prim and proper Sam involved in it or with these people. The exotic clothes, the heavy make-up and stylized hairdos. The dances, so sexy, so sultry, so graceful, so compelling.

Nothing he knew about Sam fit in that place.

Then the spotlight had swirled around the floor while the announcer went into his spiel, finishing with a flourish.

"...I give you Steven and Sophie Sutherland for the last time!"

Sophie. He didn't even remember that her real name was Sophie, didn't recognize her as the spotlight settled on the carefully poised couple at the edge of the dance floor.

Her brother was dressed in what looked like formal attire. Sam, no *Sophie*, was dressed in a body-hugging, shimmering gold dress that stopped well above her knees and made her legs look endless. Sleeves skimmed down her arms, stopping in points on each hand. And when Steven led her into the center of the arena, giving her a graceful spin, he saw that her dress dipped provocatively low in the front and the back.

That dress in motion was...there weren't words for it. It came alive, moving with her perfectly formed body as millions of pieces of glittering fringe came into play. Her heels were ridiculously high, but no impediment to sexy, flowing movement. Slits on both sides of her dress gave him far too frequent glimpses of her sleek thighs.

Instead of prim, her hair was wickedly sexy as her clothes. It framed a face where each feature had been enhanced by makeup that would have been too heavy in normal light, but had been perfect for the time and the place. Her smoky gaze, her red, pouting mouth and all that creamy skin...

She looked so exotic, so mysterious he couldn't breathe as he tumbled helplessly in lust with his PA—no, with *Sophie*.

And that was before they started to dance.

As a sexy Latin beat pumped into the room, they began to dip and sway together, the movements so inherently sexy he couldn't breathe.

Through a haze, Ric had watched them go through a montage of dances, reprising choreography from their years together, their feet moving so fast at times he couldn't follow them, at others his gaze caught and held by the slow, sultry sway of Sophie's hips and almost boneless body.

It was a crash course in Samba rolls and quick steps—and his PA's incredible flexibility when her leg flashed up over her brother's head, barely missing her own perfect nose, and when she dropped into splits and was dragged across the floor, her head arched back to expose her endless white neck and the rounded curve of her breasts.

For the final dance, a waltz, Sophie spun out of Steven's hold, and he grabbed a woman from the side lines. The crowd went wild when they realized it was his bride-to-be. Sophie stood aside as he twirled her around the floor.

Ric longed to jump down there, hold out his hand to her and say, "Dance with *me*."

He managed to restrain himself, mostly because he couldn't explain how he knew she was dancing that day. He'd waited impatiently for Monday morning, feeling...relief and disappointment...when Sam, *his* Sam, came into view.

As he'd watched her prim approach, he also saw Sophie, the sultry dancer in flashes, like a shorting circuit. Now he knew why her back was so straight, now he realized why she walked the way she did, could almost hear the music flowing through her. Knew why sometimes she walked fast and sometimes she...didn't.

It took several days of close study and comparison to realize something else. It wasn't a business relationship he was protecting. He and Sam fitted together, meshed together so well, because they were *supposed* to be a couple.

He'd never been this close to a woman. Their minds had met first, here in the office, but he wanted all of her. He'd spent the last two years drifting through casual relationships, not even caring enough for the women he'd dated to try to get them in bed.

He'd told himself it was too much trouble. That they started expecting what he couldn't give them. Now he realized it was because he wanted to give all of himself to Sophie. Celibacy had been ridiculously easy, because he'd already been falling for Sophie.

She was his match, his mate in every way.

Love had grown in his heart, had filled him up while he'd been distracted by his need to keep his distance because of work.

He'd seen the way Sam looked at him when he'd proposed they be each other's escorts for the weddings. He knew why she'd looked at him that way. He'd told her he'd fire her if she got personal.

It was also possible she believed he'd been hopping from bed to bed the last two years. He'd had the pharmacy send the box of condoms to the office to tweak her, to get a reaction.

In retrospect, that might have been a mistake.

And what if she wasn't interested in *him*? Just because there wasn't a man in her life, didn't mean she wanted him.

He'd never had trouble getting a woman to want him, but courting her in the office could complicate things. If he wasn't careful, he could find himself facing sexual harassment charges. Or worse, drive her away.

She'd agreed to the escort thing, but her brother's wedding was days away. He needed, no, he wanted more. He wanted to be with Sophie, wanted to tie her to him so tightly she'd never want to get away.

He wanted to discover just how flexible she really was.

He wanted to dance with her.

* * * *

Sam looked at her computer screen, trying to summon up her usual enthusiasm when she felt so disconnected from all the parts of her life. Saturday had been a thrill—and the hardest thing she'd ever done, except for trying to fall out of love with Ric.

She'd drawn a line under dancing with Steven. It was a line that needed to be drawn. She loved her brother's fiancé. Lou was perfect for Steven and she'd make him happy. She was happy for them.

And she was also...jealous. She felt mean even thinking it. Steven was her twin and for the first time, he was leaving her behind, going somewhere she couldn't follow. Not to mention leaving her as the only unmarried child—something everyone was sure to comment on at the wedding. In front of Ric. She shuddered.

It didn't help that she was going to have to change jobs, too, move away from everything and everyone she loved.

Through the open door of his office, Sam could hear Ric talking on the phone with someone, his tone quick, decisive, unbearably sexy. She'd tried not to think about his suggestion they be escorts to the weddings. She was afraid to think about it. Afraid it would make her too happy. Afraid she'd imagined it. Afraid she hadn't imagined it.

Afraid he'd change his mind.

Lou was bugging her to name her escort, or let them set her up with someone. A blind date for the wedding. That was worse than weird. It was pathetic. Like her life right now.

There were some men at the studio who'd have liked to take Steven's place as her partner, but Sam knew that if she kept dancing, Lou would worry that Steven had given up dancing for her. That's why Sam had told everyone it was her idea to retire. Steven had been relieved, though he'd been smart enough not to look relieved in front of Lou.

Just changing partners wouldn't fill the hole in her life or her heart. Besides, the guys who approached her wanted to go pro. Sam had never wanted that. She loved dancing, but only as a hobby, not as her life. She loved the *fun*, the contrast with her day job.

And she wasn't sure she could dance with anyone else. It had always been Steven. He'd made it seem easy, because they knew how to anticipate each other's moves, knew instinctively what the other would do.

She could already feel him pulling away. Oh, there'd always been a special bond between them, but it was right that he...cleave to his wife. She wanted that for them. She wanted it for herself.

"Can you come in here, S—Sam?"

Of course she could. It was her job. She jumped up, bracing herself for the scrutiny that she knew she wasn't imagining. Good thing, because it seemed...worse than usual.

He sat in his desk chair, leaning back, his hands resting lightly on his chest, his gaze not wavering from her as she approached. She stopped on the other side of the desk—when her libido urged her to throw herself across the expanse and into his lap. She didn't trust her voice, so she arched her brows instead, waiting for him to get down to business.

He looked...intensely focused and a million miles away. Sam tipped her head to the side, almost said something, but then wasn't sure she could trust her voice. The silence in the room seemed weighted and warm. It seemed...important.

She licked her lips and felt his gaze home in on the movement, something flaring in his eyes that she was afraid to hope was desire.

The phone rang sharply and Sam jumped at least a foot straight up, her heart going from passion to fast adrenaline rushed. She stepped forward to answer it, having to clear the huskiness from her voice before she could speak.

"Let me talk to my son." The voice was cold, harsh. Hard to imagine the man it came from ever getting warm enough to make a son, let alone a vibrant and warm man like Ric.

Sam covered the mouth piece. "It's your father."

She could see he didn't want to take it, but then he sighed and reached out for the receiver.

"Yes." His tone was clipped and cold.

Sam hoped she never heard that tone directed at her.

Ric didn't say much, but Sam could tell his father was calling about the wedding again. And that daddy dearest wasn't happy that Ric had found his own date. Ric slung the phone back in the cradle and rubbed his face, a rueful look replacing the cold one.

"Did I remember to thank you for agreeing to go to my cousin's wedding?"

Sam actually didn't remember him *asking* her, but she produced a prim smile. "I'm happy to help."

Happy. Scared. Totally confused.

"Are you?" His gaze was unexpectedly piercing, the question and what was behind it impossible to ignore.

Her smile was careful. Her words weren't. "Yes. Yes, I am."

* * * *

Ric watched Sophie from the door of his office, using the time before she realized he was there. She was on the phone and he noticed she was doodling on a message pad while she listened, writing over and over, *I hate blind dates*.

He grinned. It was a small thing, but something in common.

"Why can't you be happy with 'and partner,' Lou? Be satisfied I'm probably bringing someone to the wedding and leave it at that? What's this pressing need to know?" A pause. "Don't you have enough to worry about with the wedding preps, without throwing my love life into the mix?"

Ric frowned. Why didn't she want to tell this Lou he was taking her to the wedding? Did she think he'd bail on her? Or was she planning to bail on him?

He leaned past her, plucked the phone from her hand and put it to his ear.

"Honestly, Sophie, I don't know why it's a big secret," he heard this Lou say.

"Hello, Lou, this is Ric Hamilton. Sophie didn't want to tell you I was bringing her until she was sure my schedule was clear, but that's no longer a problem. I *will* be escorting her to your wedding." He looked right at Sam as he spoke, saw her twitch when he called her Sophie.

"Sophie will call you when we get back from lunch." He listened to Lou's voice, without really hearing what she was saying until she got to good-bye. All his attention was on Sam—no, *Sophie*.

"Ready?" Ric asked. "Do you need to powder your nose before we go?"

He hoped she'd say no. He didn't want her to have time to recover, to start thinking. He'd noticed before this that a woman could go to the bathroom one person and return an entirely different one. It was one of life's unsolvable mysteries—at least for men.

She wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue and it was all Ric could do to not lean over and claim her mouth. "Go?"

He bent past her, making sure his shoulder brushed against hers and pulled up her schedule on the computer screen. He pointed to the entry.

Lunch with Ric.

She stared at it for what seemed like a long time.

"We need to fill each other in on our families. Before the weddings." He gave her a look that was innocent and watched her cool fragment some more.

Her head tipped up, putting her face within striking distance. He wanted to kiss her more than he wanted to breathe. But he didn't. The time wasn't right. He wanted to lure Sophie out, not drive her deeper into hiding.

A tiny frown formed between her arched brows. "We do?"

"Absolutely. Do what you have to do and let's go." He straightened away from temptation. This time.

Looking a bit dazed, she locked down her computer and switched the phones over to the answering service. She let him take her arm and steer her toward his private elevator and then they were enclosed in the small, but plush steel box. *Alone at last.*

He felt almost as diabolical as the villain of a melodrama and had to fight back a grin. The urge to smile faded quickly, though, when he inhaled her distinctive scent, a mix of clean spring and something utterly female, completely feminine. Desire spiked through him. He wanted to grab her, flatten her against the hard, cold wall, and kiss her senseless...

Kiss her until she realized they belonged together.

He hesitated. He had a small, service apartment in the building he used when he was at the office late, but being alone with her right now was probably not a good idea.

"Do you like barbeque?" he asked.

Her gaze shifted his direction and he could almost hear her trying to gather her thoughts and get them back in order. When it looked like she might succeed, he reached around her, making sure he rubbed up against her again as he pushed a button. Down. For now...

He could feel and hear her breath hitch as his body pressed against hers. He smiled. Sam was many things, but indifferent wasn't one of them.

* * * *

How had she ended up sitting in a booth in a barbeque place next to Ric? So close their shoulders brushed together when he moved? Sam tried to push past shock—it was shock and not anything else.

Ric moved a lot.

He reached past her for a menu.

Removed only one.

He opened it.

Set it between them.

Leaned close to read it. Asked her questions about various items. She heard herself answer. Heard herself chatting like nothing was wrong. Like her heart wasn't pounding in her chest.

H pointed to other items on her side of the menu, bringing their bodies even closer for brief, heady moments.

Her heart thumped so loud she could hardly hear him. Or the country music blaring from speakers around the room. Or anyone else talking. Her chest felt tight, part pleasure, part pain, and a curling heat that made her feel soft and drifty.

She'd been alone with Ric lots of times, but it had never felt as if every single nerve ending was on red alert.

She'd never felt so stinging, terrifyingly alive.

Or had so much trouble hiding it.

So she stared down at the menu as if it held the answer to life's deepest questions. If she could just get her balance back....

"Sam?"

His voice was deep, his mouth close enough to ruffle the hair by her ear. She shivered as the foundation of her world rocked again. She wanted to grab on to Ric and hang on until the shifting stopped. And then not let go.

Probably shouldn't grab him, though. That was personal. She wasn't supposed to get personal, was she? It was hard to remember why with him so close, with the warmth of his body taking the chill from hers.

"Are you all right?"

She took a deep, steadying breath—well, it was supposed to be steadying, but instead she inhaled Ric, his spicy aftershave and the underlying scent of *him*, that was so masculine and personal and just plain sexy.

"I'm fine." Wow, she sounded almost calm. "Are you ready to order?"

Her voice squeaked slightly as the last few words slipped out. She coughed to cover it up, grabbed her glass of water and sipped. It didn't help.

"I know what I want." His voice was husky and seemed impossibly closer to her ear. Shivers danced down her spine and heat bloomed low in her belly.

She shifted, trying to edge away from him without looking like she was trying to edge away from him. Even an additional quarter inch should help.

It didn't.

"Sam?"

She had to swallow dryly before she managed to squeeze out a husky, "What?"

"Have you decided what *you* want?"

Oh yeah. You on a platter, please.

She looked up. Realized their server was waiting for her to order. Color surged into her face, but she managed to ask for a beef platter.

He shifted, erasing her quarter inch and then some, and she felt his arm slide along the back of the bench. The heat from his body burned into her shoulders and back.

"And a diet drink."

"I'll have the same."

He eased the menu from under her hands and put it back in place behind the napkin holder, imprinting himself on her from shoulder to hip. All her nerve endings did this chorus line thing, a cellular dance of joy.

He'd be embarrassed if he realized how much his closeness was affecting her, she told herself, trying to replace heat with cold. She got lukewarm. Maybe.

"So, tell me about your family."

Maybe he thought he needed to lean close to be heard over the music.

"The brother that's getting married, older or younger?"

For some reason, thinking about Steven helped a bit. "He's older, by about three minutes."

She turned and met his gaze, so close, so warm and friendly. Not like a boss, but more than friendly. Maybe she was hallucinating.

"You're twins." He looked delighted.

She grinned. "Please don't ask if we're identical." She got that question way too often.

His gaze swept down her, then up again. "I won't."

His gaze caught hers and held it captive until someone shoved plates of food in front of them. Sam ripped her gaze free and stared down at the heaped meat, feeling slightly sick.

"This looks great," Ric said, his arm brushed hers again as he jabbed his fork into a piece of beef.

Sam looked at him. "Yeah. It does." But she wasn't talking about meat.

Unfortunately.

* * * *

By the time the day of Steven's wedding rolled around, Sam was a mess. Seesawing wildly between hope and despair did that to her. She was probably sea sick. She couldn't tell if Ric was trying to change the nature of their relationship, or just try to make her more comfortable around him for both weddings.

Oh, he'd behaved himself at work—barely. There was nothing overt, nothing she could call him on. He still called her into his office more than usual and seemed to find opportunities to be close to her, just enough to keep her heart pounding and her throat dry.

There was a subtle difference in the way he looked at her, the way he spoke to her when they were alone, as if they shared a secret that no one else knew.

Would have been nice if he'd let her in on it.

She'd alternated between wanting to hit him or jump on his chest and kiss him.

She should have turned in her resignation as soon as he started this—whatever it was, but hope was insistent, hope was...hope. If there was a chance he was seeing her as a woman, a chance he might fall in love with her, she had to take it. She had to try, even if the risk was, well, potentially catastrophic.

They'd done lunch several more times, each time Ric finding out a little more about her. She didn't need to dig into his life. It was all there, on the internet and in the society pages. But she did. Found out he and his father didn't get along because his father didn't like his independence. It blew her mind that he wasn't proud of his son's success and couldn't stop trying to control him. It was clear Ric adored his mother.

They were so good together, fit so perfectly together on every level. As personal blurred the lines, Sam found it harder and harder to remember just why she didn't want Ric to know how she felt, couldn't remember why it was a bad idea to open more and more of Sophie's life to him.

But somehow, despite everything, she hadn't yet told him about the dancing or come clean about Sophie. But it had to be done, before they arrived at home for the wedding. If she didn't, her family would do the outing. So now she had a knot in her tummy, which went well with the tangle of thoughts in her brain, in a painful sort of way.

Sophie had insisted on driving Ric to the wedding. She needed the illusion of being in control. And it would serve him right to have to ride shotgun in her truck. And be a lead in to introducing him to Sophie.

She hoped.

And so, on the first w-day, she pulled her truck to a stop in front of the building that housed his bachelor penthouse—a place that numerous women have passed through, she reminded herself grimly. She sent him a text that she was waiting and climbed out to wait for him, her back propped against the side of her truck facing the gold-plated double doors.

She'd warned him to dress casually, to bring his wedding clothes to change into later. Since she was unveiling Sophie today, she'd decided to do it the whole way. She was dressed in jeans, tee shirt and cowboy boots. She'd pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail and brushed on a minimum of makeup. She also added sunglasses, because she wasn't crazy. She needed *some* camouflage.

The doorman approached with the clear intention of having her move her less than high class transportation somewhere else.

Sophie lifted her chin. "I'm waiting for Mr. Hamilton."

He looked doubtful, then surprised when Ric appeared, dressed as casually as Sophie, carrying his own overnight bag. She didn't think she'd ever seen him in jeans.

He looked really *good*.

She got a chance to examine the fit of them across his butt as he stowed his stuff behind the seat. If she'd surprised him by her choice of transportation, it didn't show, but then he'd built his success on not giving away what he was feeling.

He settled in beside her, without asking if he could drive. Okay, that was a point in his favor. Not that he needed any.

He slid on sunglasses going from disturbingly handsome boss to mysterious and totally sexy. Like he needed any more help with that, too.

Sophie pulled her thoughts away from him and out into traffic, muttering, "That's right, take your half out of the middle," at an oncoming car.

"Excuse me?"

Sophie paused at a stoplight and looked at him. "I talk to traffic, okay? I can't help it."

He grinned, almost short circuiting her brain. Maybe she'd better not look at him until they arrived at their destination.

Sophie knew she was a good driver, even if she did carry on a one-sided conversation with anyone who annoyed her. Ric seemed to realize it, because he didn't grip the arm rest or anything. He even added a few comments of his own about other people's driving. The small connection pleased her way more than it should.

Sophie felt him looking at her, but refused to look at him. Would not be a good time to swerve or worse. When they were clear of the city, she cleared her throat. "Um, about my family."

"Yes?"

Again she had to fight the compulsion to look at him.

"They call me Sophie, not Sam. If you call me Sam there, they won't know who you're talking about."

A pause. "Okay." Another pause. "And while we're there, can you forget I'm your boss? Can we just be two friends going to a wedding?"

Sophie licked her lips. "Sure." When pigs fly and hell freezes over. "No problem." Except for all her family and half her home town. Who all knew she worked for Ric and had been hassling her since Ric talked to Lou.

"Is that all I should know?"

Sophie shifted uneasily. "Actually, there is one more thing."

Silence. A waiting silence.

"They might be surprised if you don't know," She took a deep breath, then rushed out, "that I ballroom dance. Well, I used to. With Steven. We retired but we danced a few Saturdays ago. I brought you a program. So you can, you know, pretend you saw us. And some pictures a friend took. The folder behind the arm rest."

There was a rustle as Ric retrieved the folder. The sound of pages being turned. What she didn't feel coming from him was...shock. She risked a quick peek at him. He'd propped his glasses on top of his head, so she could see and studied each item with the intentness he usually gave to a takeover bid. He looked interested, intent, but definitely not surprised.

"You knew."

"Yes." A pause. "Carstairs mentioned it at lunch a few weeks ago."

"You didn't say anything."

“No.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “I didn’t know how to bring it up without sounding like I was prying.”

“I see.” Actually she didn’t.

“I saw you dance.”

Sophie managed to keep driving forward, even though her hands clenched around the wheel. “What? Why?”

“Curiosity.”

“Oh.” What did you think, she wanted to ask, but couldn’t.

“You were...amazing. I sort of knew what it was all about, but not really. But it was, you were amazing.”

He sounded like he meant it. Her lips curved up in a smile before she could stop them.

“I wanted to tell you, but you’re very private.”

Because you made me that way, she wanted to say. Actually, I’m only private with *you*. She didn’t have to though. He’d know that by the end of the day. After a day with her family, he’d know more than that.

Okay, she could live with that, but he *couldn’t* know she loved him. That she couldn’t live with.

* * * *

Ric could almost feel his PA hovering between Sam and Sophie as they got closer and closer to her home. It was like trying to coax a turtle out of its shell, he decided, trying not to grin when he caught her peeking at him again.

He angled so he could see her, see the play of the sun on her hair, the way her head moved as she drove, the soft contours of her mouth as she muttered at a lousy driver. He liked this new, relaxed version of Sam, who wasn’t quite Sophie yet, but was heading that way.

He liked watching the ripple of her thigh as she shifted gears, liked her hands as they lightly circled the steering wheel.

He wanted her, not just in his bed, but in his life, but it wasn’t just desire he felt as the miles slipped by. It was...delight. And a sense of peace. Being with her calmed the restlessness in his heart. She was...home.

The truck slowed and she smoothly activated the turn signal. Shifted down and took the turn with easy familiarity and a definite jolt as they left the pavement. Ric knew Sophie’s father was a farmer, so he wasn’t surprised. He was glad he hadn’t offered to drive. His Jag wouldn’t have liked the road.

Even wearing jeans, it was hard to see this as Sophie’s background, her natural habitat, hard to reconcile this with how she was in the city. She made her way along the back roads easily, which was good since signs were mostly non-existent. Was that why she’d wanted him to find his own way? Because she knew he probably couldn’t?

He knew she wasn’t indifferent to him, so why was she trying so hard to brush him off? It was an intriguing question. And he thought he might have the answer.

The truck slowed abruptly, then made a lurching turn into a drive that was even more rutted than the country road they’d been on. He caught a glimpse of a mail box with a faded *Sutherland* inscribed on the side.

After about half a mile, a curve brought a white frame house into view. Ric liked the homey look of it, from the peaked roof to the wrap-around porch littered with comfortable looking chairs and even a swing seat. He studied that seat wishing he could sit in it with Sophie tucked against him...

She pulled her truck into a spot next to a mix of mud-splashed trucks, a couple of mini-vans and one battered car. There was the obligatory barn and clutter of farm equipment off to the side, a windmill and fields on all sides.

As soon as she shut the engine off, she was out, spinning to reach for her bag, as if she couldn’t take being shut up alone with him one minute longer. Ric chose to take that as a good sign, as he mirrored her moves.

In the distance, he could hear a sort of murmur of voices, while a plane droned by overhead. The air was crisp and fresh, filled with the tart scent of green stuff and the softer smell of the mix of flowers softening the hard edges of the porch.

The place was cared for, but still slightly shabby, except for the equipment, which was pristine. It was clear where the focus was, where the bulk of the time was spent.

He looked at Sophie and found her staring at him across the cooling hood of her truck, a hint of Sam still there. Then the front door burst open, people flowed out like an out-of-control river, and Sam vanished as a smile of pure joy lit her face just before she was engulfed in the people flood.

A babble of questions and answers, demands of attention from the little ones, as the grownups tried to be heard killed the silence, but not the sense of peace. Ric was able to pick her mother out of the mix, since she was an older version of Sophie, only with kind, dark eyes. Ric saw a man who was clearly her father looking at him. His expression was much less than kind, though not openly hostile. Yet.

When Sophie finally remembered to introduce him, he felt like he’d wandered onto the set of *My Big, Fat Greek Wedding*—only without the accents and with fewer Nicks.

From their conversations, Ric knew Sophie's mom had given birth to three sets of fraternal twins, so he was able to eventually sort out the brothers and sisters and put them into their proper pairs. It was a relief to find out the kids weren't all related, but had been drawn from neighboring farms. He made a vow to ignore them as much as possible, then found out if he wanted to be around Sophie, avoiding the kids wasn't possible.

It was obvious that they loved her.

He knew exactly how they felt.

* * * *

The day, Sophie decided, studying her image in the full length mirror, had been full of surprises, with all threads somehow leading back to Ric.

When her nieces and nephews, and their friends, had clamored for their usual one-on-twenty basketball game, Sophie was sure that would give her a little space from him. The game involved her playing by herself against all of the kids. It was wild and crazy and even playing against the horde, she still sometimes won. She never counted on Ric joining the kids or playing so...dirty.

She didn't score a single point, mostly because every time she tried to get the ball or make her move on the basket, he was there blocking her, going for full body contact. Each time her body slammed into his, she saw stars and it wasn't because she was about to pass out, because there were suns and moons in there, too. By the time her brain stopped playing "Ode to Joy," her opposition had managed to score multiple points. She lost by about one thousand to zip. Her worse defeat ever and she didn't even care.

While the kids did cartwheels of glee, Sophie found herself cut out of the herd by Ric.

"I should help," she started to protest.

"Your mother asked me to head you off."

Sophie grinned. "I have been known to be dangerous to flower arrangements, but I'm not bad in the kitchen."

"According to your mom, you're not that good there either."

Sophie tried to look offended. "Well, if they want perfect..."

While they'd been talking, Ric had guided her out onto the porch and pulled her down onto the porch swing. With his arm around her, and the way the cushions pushed and gave, her only option was to rest her head on his shoulder if she wanted to be comfortable. Who didn't want to be comfortable?

"I've wanted to do this since I saw it," Ric murmured, setting the swing in gentle motion.

It was cool and almost quiet. In the distance Sophie could hear a tractor and the muted murmur of voices. With her nose in his chest, all Sophie could smell was Ric, his aftershave, *him*, and just a light overlay of her mother's flowers.

"I like your family." His voice soft and she could feel him relax.

"I'm glad. I like them, too." It made her sad she couldn't say the same thing about his family, well, his father. She'd never met his mother.

"Looking at this place, I can see why you're like you are."

How is that, she wanted to ask. How do you see me? She was quiet a moment.

"I was lucky, I know that, but my dad told us all the time, it isn't enough to be lucky." She hesitated. "We also had to *choose* to do the right thing with what we've been given." She angled her head so she could see his eyes. "I know your father is difficult, but you haven't let that define who you are. Or how you live your life. You're a good man, Ric."

His hand came up to stroke her cheek and she wanted to close her eyes and purr like a cat. His head bent toward hers. She angled hers to give him access...

"Sophie."

Her sister's voice sprang them apart and sent the swing swaying wildly.

"Carrie."

Her sister's gaze rested on Ric for a long moment. "So."

Sophie had sighed and Ric didn't look too thrilled at the interruption either. Carrie had always had lousy timing.

It was the only time that day he'd looked less than thrilled, she had to admit. And he'd hid it very quickly, enduring Carrie's less than subtle grilling with charm and grace, too.

Her family had been more than happy to share Sophie stories with him, more than happy to show off the dance trophies, and then there were the photo albums. Starting with her naked on a blanket. The blush was probably with her for the rest of her life.

Ric had been charming and wickedly delighted through it all. Her family had fallen for him almost as fast as she had, well, except for her dad. He was only halfway there. She knew this because he hadn't cleaned his gun while he grilled him—though that might be because her mom had threatened to beat him with it if he did.

And now all that was left to get through was the wedding.

She tipped her head to one side, then the other, liking the way the soft, green sheath looked. She so rarely wore dresses that weren't in some way related to dancing, that it made a nice change of pace. There was no sign of Sam in the mirror and Sophie wasn't sorry.

She rubbed her finger along the mouth that Ric almost kissed. Was it wrong to hope for a second chance at that kiss?

Satisfied she'd done all she could, she turned to leave, but stopped with her hand on the door, her thoughts turning to her twin with a suddenness that left her struggling to sort out her feelings.

How could she be so happy and so sad at the same time? She wouldn't change anything, but oh, she was going to miss how it had been with them. It was stupid to feel like that. He wasn't going anywhere, but Sophie could feel the distance, feel the ache of loss, even though she knew it was right, that it was meant to be.

Of course they hadn't done everything together, but the important stuff...

A light tap at the door broke into her thoughts. Sophie turned the knob and found Ric waiting. Before she could step out, he slid in, closing the door and leaning against it, an odd look in his eyes.

"You all right?"

Sophie's chin rose, though it wanted to quiver. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I'm not a twin, but I'd think you'd have kind of mixed feelings tonight."

His eyes were so warm, so worried, so understanding. She wanted to tell him, don't be nice to me because that will make me cry, but all she managed was a quiver of the lips. Then his arms were around her, his cheek against her hair, the feel of his body against hers flooding her with warmth and comfort.

"I'm going to miss...I don't know what I'm going to miss," she muttered against his shoulder, wanting to burrow in and never leave. It was the closest she'd come to feeling at home since she'd left home. "He's not leaving. They'll be right here, well, in their house, but close."

But his home wouldn't be her home anymore. And they'd never dance together again. She couldn't say it out loud. It hurt to think it.

His hand stroked up her back, then down. She was glad he didn't say anything, just held her. It was as if he knew that was what she needed. At first she just took the comfort he offered, but then a longing for more welled up inside her. Sad was replaced with something else. She wanted to lift her head. She wanted to slide her arms around his neck and tug until his mouth was on hers and she got the kiss she'd missed. The ache for that replaced the other ache and she wasn't sure which was harder to deal with, since she couldn't do anything about either one.

She tried to find Sam inside, tried to ease back, get some distance, some control back, but she was still too close to Ric when her chin lifted, when her eyes met his. He was so close she could see the texture of his skin, the fine lines around his eyes and mouth, the different shades of green in his eyes and the spark of desire flaring to life...

She didn't know who moved first or if both of them did. It didn't matter. All that mattered was contact. His mouth on hers. Sensation, warmth, delight flowing out and spreading through her body until her toes curled in her high heels and one foot popped slowly up...

* * * *

Ric had kissed other women, but when his lips came into contact with Sophie's it was as if there'd never been anyone else. Heat surged through his body, erasing every woman from his memory, burning away everything he thought he knew about women. There was only Sophie.

His mouth left hers, but only so he could kiss her eyes, her nose, her cheeks, the sweetly scented area behind her ears...

A sharp knock stopped his exploration. He slowly lifted his head until he could see her eyes, see them soft and warm with desire. Her heart pounded against his chest. He traced her parted lips with his thumb.

"Sophie! You in there?"

"I guess it's time to go to the wedding," he said, his voice still husky with desire.

Her mouth widened into a smile, as yearning faded from her eyes, replaced by uncertainty. He knew why it was there and he wanted to tell her how he felt, but now wasn't the time.

He took her hand and let her lead him down to where the wedding party had gathered.

"There you are," her mother said, giving them both a quick, but discerning look before nodding to Sophie's father.

He opened the patio doors and they filed out into a garden turned into a fantasy of lights and soft music. Under an arch, Ric saw Steven and his bride, seated side by side on what looked like a bower of flowers.

It was an odd arrangement, but lovely. It wasn't until the end of the simple, but moving ceremony that Ric realized Steven's bride was disabled.

That was the only departure from the norm. There were toasts, food and dancing. Ric kept close to Sophie and pulled her onto the dance floor as soon as he could manage it, sending mental thanks to his mother for making him take lessons when he was at boarding school.

"You're not bad," Sophie said, looking almost impressed as he gave her a modest spin.

She was a dream to dance with, following his lead as if she was reading his mind.

"We make a good team," Ric murmured into her ear as he tucked her close against his body. Had he ever been at any party that didn't have another purpose? Had he ever felt this simple peace, such utter pleasure before in his life? He tried to picture his father with these people and had to hold back a shudder at the thought.

"Ric?" Sophie lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him. "Are you all right?"

He hugged her close. "I've never been better."

* * * *

Sophie hadn't expected to see Ric the Monday morning after the wedding, so she wasn't disappointed. That didn't stop her from feeling the emptiness of his office or from wondering how he'd act when he came back after lunch.

All she'd done since she dropped him off in front of his apartment was think about every moment of their day together, wondering what it meant—if anything. It hadn't felt like a pretense.

Thankfully her family had been too busy with post wedding stuff to call and quiz her about Ric, but Sophie knew that wouldn't last. It was a relief to switch the phones over to the service and head out for lunch. As the elevator took her down to street level, she mulled her lunch options, trying to match what was close with what sounded good.

Outside, the sun was high and bright, the air lightly cool and dry. Maybe she'd get something to go and find a spot to eat outside—

"Miss Sutherland?"

Sophie stared at the uniformed chauffeur blocking her path. Even though he'd said her name, she still looked over her shoulder.

"Mr. Hamilton was hoping you'd join him for lunch."

Sophie stared at the long limo crouched by the curb, while her brain worked its way to the realization that Ric's *father* wanted to lunch with her.

Way to ruin a perfect day.

* * * *

Despite her surroundings and the fact Sophie knew Ric's dad was loaded, she didn't fool herself she had carte blanche to go nuts ordering. The look in Mr. Hamilton's eyes had killed her appetite anyway.

"I'll have the soup," she said, handing the huge menu to the waiter with a weak smile, wishing she didn't have to give it up. Now there was nothing between her and his icy gaze.

She knew she looked outwardly calm. She'd had lots of practice hiding her feelings from Ric, but her stomach churned. Hopefully he'd get down to it. Otherwise she was liable to disgrace herself by barfing her country club lunch back into the bowl.

She kept her hands out of sight in her lap, not trusting herself to take even a sip of water, despite a desperately dry throat.

He placed his order—one considerably more detailed than hers—then handed over his menu. Sophie watched his head turn her way, feeling like a duck in an arcade waiting for the laser sight to find her.

She lifted her chin. The man had no power over her but what she gave him. It just felt like he could do nasty things to her.

He knew just how long to drag out the silence, before he reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out a check book.

"Just how much will it cost for you to...fade from my son's life?"

His voice was cold enough to give her frost bite, as she tried to process what he'd just said. Even when she got her brain wrapped around them, it didn't help.

He wanted to *pay her to stop fake dating Ric*. It was almost funny. In a really sick kind of way. Hard to imagine this man could be Ric's father.

"I understand you're competent at your job. I'm sure you'd have no trouble finding work elsewhere."

She was angry, she realized, surprised to feel it bubbling up into her throat, not for herself, but for Ric. Anger cleared her head, sharpened her thoughts to razor points.

"I'm actually more than competent, Mr. Hamilton. I've had top companies try to head hunt me. So, no, I'd have no problem getting work anywhere I wanted to go."

"Good. Then all we need to do is agree on a price."

"No." She could have said more, but didn't.

His thin brows arched. "I don't understand."

"That's clear. You have an amazing son. A *man* well able to take care of himself and his own business. That you feel the need to interfere is just...sad. I wouldn't insult him, or myself, by taking *money* from you."

Sophie pushed her chair back, tossing the white linen napkin on her place setting with a flare that distantly made her proud.

"Sit down."

"Last time I checked, this was still a free country."

"If you think you can get more by marrying him, I should warn you, he'll insist on a prenuptial agreement."

"Which I would happily sign. I have no interest in his money...or yours."

He leaned forward, almost hissing at her. "My son is not going to marry some country nobody if I have anything to say about it."

"But you don't have anything to say about it."

Ric's voice cut between them, every bit as icy as his father's.

Sophie jumped as if shot, her heart going all the way into her throat, then dropping down to the bottom of her stomach.

His arm slid around her waist and she was pulled against the hard length of his body.

"Stay away from Sophie."

Neither of them spoke until Ric had settled her into his Jag and climbed in beside her.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was so husky it came out as a rasp.

"Why should you be sorry?" He glanced over his shoulder, then steered the car into traffic. "It's I who should apologize. I should have realized he'd do something like this."

"It's kind of ironic, in a way," Sophie said, wanting only to ease the grim look on his face. "What is the going rate for buying off a fake girlfriend?"

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Has it all been a pretense, Sophie?"

If he'd looked at her, she'd have had to lie. Or maybe not. Maybe she was past that point. And he had called her Sophie. That had to mean something...

"No." She looked out the window, not seeing the street sliding by. "I've never been that good at pretending. Hiding, yes, but not pretending."

His hand slid over hers, his fingers meshing with hers.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to realize how much I love you," he said, his tone almost conversational. "I want you to know, I've dated women, but nothing else since you came to work for me."

Sophie didn't know how much that mattered until he said it. She looked at him then, grateful for the red light that freed him to look at her, let her see his love finally in his eyes.

"Do you love me, Sophie?"

She smiled. "Did you really think I was *that* different from all your other PA's?"

He grinned. "You had me worried." The grin faded. "Will you marry me, Sophie? Will you love me and dance with me? Will you have children with me and grow old with me?"

Before she could answer, there was a pointed honk to remind him the light had changed.

Sophie snuggled down in the seat, her hand gripping his, her head nestled against his shoulder.

"Yes, please."

ABOUT AUTHOR PAULINE BAIRD JONES

Pauline Baird Jones is the award-winning author of nine novels of science fiction romance, action-adventure, suspense, romantic suspense, steampunk/science fiction romance, and comedy-mystery. She's also written two non-fiction books, *Adapting Your Novel for Film* and *Made-up Mayhem*, and she co-wrote *Managing Your Book Writing Business* with Jamie Engle. In addition to a Dream Realm award, Pauline has received a Bronze IPPY (Independent Publisher award), an EPPIE, the Dorothy Parker Award and is a two-time Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award winner. She also has short stories in several anthologies. Originally from Wyoming, she and her family moved from New Orleans to Texas before Katrina.

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