

Undeniably Yours

a novel

BECKY WADE



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For Jim and Terry

*You are two of the most compassionate,
hard working, and generous people I know.
I'm blessed to have married into your family.*

*Thank you for everything,
especially for being Granny and Grandad
to three kids who love you dearly.*



Chapter One

She was too softhearted to be an oil tycoon. Meg had always known it, but she'd never worried about it much because while her father was lousy at being a father, he'd always been very, very good at being rich.

William Cole had shouldered the responsibilities of the family company for twenty years, and if the pressures and stresses of his position had ever been difficult for him to handle, he hadn't shown it. He was an old-school oilman who sometimes wore Stetsons with his suits and could be ruthless, arrogant, or demanding if the situation called for it.

William Cole was also, unfortunately, dead.

Which was why Meg herself was about to have to fire this Mr.—she consulted the file sitting on the surface of the desk—Mr. Porter. He'd be arriving here at her father's home office at Whispering Creek any second for their scheduled meeting. At which time she'd have to look him in the face, turn his world upside down, and crush his dreams.

A deep sense of panic rose within her. It swirled and clawed, causing her chest to tighten.

In an effort to counter it, Meg jerked her worn sudoku book from the desk drawer. Almost desperately, she ran her gaze over

the columns of numbers, trying to concentrate, praying the puzzle would help her settle her mind.

She'd spent the last two weeks holed up at the Ritz with Cole Oil advisors, undergoing a crash course on the family holdings. Among many other things, they'd counseled her on Whispering Creek Ranch—a huge plot of land situated thirty miles northeast of Dallas, near J. R. Ewing's beloved Southfork. Whispering Creek included their family home and her father's horse farm.

The advisors had unanimously urged her to release the Whispering Creek employees who'd fit into her father's life-style but couldn't possibly fit into her own. Thus, she'd already terminated three people on this Monday morning, her first official day in her new capacity as her father's successor.

She'd fired her father's driver (she didn't want a chauffer), the man who had kept his kennel of hunting dogs (she'd didn't hunt), and the man who had managed his weapons and shooting range (she definitely didn't do guns).

Next on the guillotine list? Mr. Porter, who ran her father's Thoroughbred horse farm. While all of her father's hobbies had been costly, none were nearly as expensive as the Thoroughbreds and none further from her own interests.

Even so, she didn't want to deliver this sad news to Mr. Porter or take away the jobs of the people who worked for him. More than that, she didn't want to face *any* of this. She didn't want to be in this predicament at all, smothering under the weight of overwhelming responsibilities.

She'd faced some hard knocks in life—one really hard one five years ago—and had managed to cultivate a protective shell for herself. But like a Godiva truffle, she was only hard in a thin outer layer. Her insides were still as tender as ever.

Her disobedient heartbeat started thumping like a bass drum as her stomach burned and knotted. Meg popped open her container of antacids, chewed two, and tried to think harder about sudoku.

Drafted anxiousness. Years ago she'd gone twelve rounds with it and bested it. But three months ago, when she'd heard the dreadful news about her father, it had come rushing back for a grudge match. She'd been trying to white-knuckle it through the grief, the shock, the difficulty sleeping, and the stress. She'd been hoping like crazy to escape any full-fledged panic attacks.

But at the moment, it felt like a *very* full-fledged panic attack was chasing her, gaining, right on her heels. If it caught her, it would mean a trip to the ER on this, her first day back at Whispering Creek. The thought sent her anxiety rising, fast and jagged. *No no no no no.*

Meg gave up on sudoku, gripped the armrests of the leather chair, and screwed her eyes shut. She should breathe. Wasn't her doctor always touting the calming benefits of deep breathing? Something about breathe in for a count of six, hold for six, breathe out for a count of seven?

She worked to follow his instructions but soon simply stuck her head between her knees to keep herself from hyperventilating. *God, come,* she pleaded. *Help me.* Where could she find a paper bag?

A knock sounded on the office door.

Meg reared upright, her gaze jerking to the platinum-edged clock on the edge of her father's desk. Mr. Porter had arrived right on time. "J-just a moment, please."

She stashed her antacids and sudoku, then pushed to her feet and paced once around the perimeter of the office, shaking out her wrists and trying to determine whether she could hold herself

together well enough to meet with Mr. Porter or whether she'd be needing a straitjacket.

With trembling fingers, she smoothed her black Fendi suit. "Come in."

The man who let himself into the office was young. Maybe thirty? Thirty-three? Much younger than she'd expected. Tall and powerfully built, with dark hair shaved close to his skull. Such short hair would have made an average-looking man look worse. But he was handsome, she realized, as their eyes met. The close-cropped hair suited his rugged features.

"Bo Porter," he said.

She introduced herself, shook his hand, and took her seat. He lowered into one of the two chocolate-colored leather chairs that faced her father's desk. In his jeans, beige henley-style shirt, and weathered boots, he looked every inch like a man who made his living working with horses.

"My father . . ." She cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Her stomach clenched horribly. "My father loved the Thoroughbred horse farm that the two of you built here together. If he'd lived, I'm sure that he'd have continued working with you toward your goals for the farm for years to come."

He regarded her with an even expression, just a hint of tension around the mouth. Slowly, he nodded.

"But as it is, it falls to me now to decide what to do with Whispering Creek Horses. I regret to inform you that I've decided to close down the farm."

He frowned, concern clouding his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

Silence stretched between them, heavy with the weight of the disappointment she knew he must be feeling.

“May I ask why you’ve decided to close it down?”

Meg shifted a little. “My father loved horses and horse racing, but I do not. There’s no logical reason for me to continue supporting the farm financially now that my father’s gone.”

“We’re very close to breaking even,” he said calmly, his words accented with the mellow north Texas accent she’d grown up hearing. “Once we do, you’ll begin to earn a profit.”

She flipped open the file before her and consulted the column that listed the horse farm’s net earnings and losses since it had begun, four years prior. “Yes, I’d noticed that.”

“It cost us a lot to get the farm started. Your father and I decided to pay down all those expenses in these early years. That’s why we’re not in the black already.”

“Be that as it may, my decision stands.” Suffocating in remorse and trying hard not to show it, Meg extracted a professional-looking report from a desk drawer and handed it over. “This is the severance package we’re offering you. I hope you’ll find it adequate.”

She knew the package reached far beyond adequate. She’d insisted on triple the amount of money recommended by her father’s advisors so this gentleman, and all of the other terminated employees, would have plenty of time to find new jobs. She’d even guaranteed anyone unable to find work a position at the downtown headquarters of Cole Oil.

The three men she’d met with prior to Mr. Porter had all accepted the bad news with disappointment mixed through with good manners. In every case, the severance package had softened the blow. But Mr. Porter didn’t even open the report. “Ma’am, more than twenty people work for me at the farm.”

“I’m offering severance packages to each of them, depending on their position and how long they’ve been working at the

farm. You'll find all of that information in the report. I can . . . go over it with you if you'd like."

He let her offer slide, watching her, his expression troubled. "We have ninety horses."

"I'd like to sell the horses as quickly as possible. I'm not interested in making a profit on them, so much as I'm interested in speed. Perhaps an auction?"

He stared at her with light gray eyes, rimmed with darker gray.

"I give you," she said, "my . . . ah, permission . . . to go ahead and take whatever steps necessary to sell the horses. You can keep as many staff members as you'll need to complete the task. And I'll send over someone from Cole Oil to oversee the process and help you with accounting or any other financial service you may need."

"We've already made plans for the next several months. We have commitments."

"I have attorneys who can help with the contractual side of your obligations." She'd rehearsed most of these lines last night and practiced them today on the three previous victims. Still, that she sounded like a somewhat intelligent business person astounded her. Five minutes ago, she'd had her head between her knees.

Meg laid her palms on the glossy desktop. "Well. I believe that's all then."

"It's a good farm," he said. "We've all worked hard for its success, and I'd hate to see it shut down."

His honest, plainspoken words twisted her heart, but Meg knew if she let herself fold in any way, she'd cave. "I'm sure that's true, Mr. Porter. I'm sorry that my father's passing has led to this, I truly am." After a beat, she pushed to her feet. "Thank you."

She offered her hand. He shook it, hesitated, then turned and left.

Once the door shut behind him, she sank back into her father's chair, her muscles quivering.

The cool air of the office and the almost inaudible whir of the electronic equipment in the space slid around her. Bookshelves lined three sides of the room. A wildly expensive Remington statue of a bronze cowboy riding a bucking bronco stood on a stand in front of one of the windows. Her father's desk sat before her in the center of it all, a birchwood monument that practically shouted, "SIZE MATTERS!" with a megaphone.

This room, just like every other room in the house, had been done up by someone who'd graduated with honors from the "Opulent Texas Lodge" school of design. Everything in the place was either costly, a shade of brown, or lifted off a dead animal. She didn't like the big house. She'd grown up here. But she'd *never* liked it. This was her father's house, and her father should be the one sitting in this chair.

Meg had always expected him to face death across a negotiating table and haggle out a favorable bargain for himself. Instead, he'd died on the floor of his penthouse office in downtown Dallas in early January, three months ago. Catastrophic heart attack at just sixty years of age.

In that one moment Meg had inherited his controlling share in Cole Oil, his diverse and far-flung investments, hundreds of employees, three properties, six luxury cars, and a plane. She, his only child. She, who'd insisted on living on her own meager salary for the last five years and had found contentment in the simplicity and independence and accomplishment of it. She, whose knowledge of high finance consisted of her checking account at Bank of America. She, who was nothing like her father.

The office door swung open, and Bo Porter strode back in. She jerked upright.

He stopped about three feet in front of the desk, facing her squarely. “Ma’am.”

She stared at him with round eyes. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but no.”

“No?”

“No, I’m not going to close down the farm. I’m not going to sell the horses.” She didn’t hear any anger or threat in his tone, only an abundance—oceans—of implacable resolve.

Meg’s thoughts all dashed in different directions and then vanished. She feared her jaw had locked into place. Um . . .

“I know I don’t have the right to make that decision, but I want to try to persuade you to give me that right. I want a say in what happens to the farm.” He held his body still and under perfect control, but his gray eyes blazed with intensity. “I’ve earned it.”

Her courage began to unfurl in a long strip, like an ace bandage held out a car window. “Would you care to have a seat?”

“No, thank you. I’ll stand.”

She released a long breath, measuring the determined cowboy in front of her, longing for her old job as assistant-to-the-assistant-of-the-curator at the museum in Tulsa. “I’m sure you’ve worked very hard,” she said carefully, “and I’m sure that you *have* earned better than this situation. But the attorneys have assured me that the only one with a say about the future of Whispering Creek Horses . . . is me.”

“Then change your mind.”

Her brows lifted.

“It’s a matter of pride. I can’t let you inherit a debt from the farm.”

“If that’s what you’re worried about, I can assure you that the horse farm’s debts don’t concern me.”

“I know you don’t need the money. But that farm is *my* business. And my business is going to pay for itself.”

“The auction . . .”

“No, ma’am. Even that won’t be enough to make back what we’ve spent. I need time.”

Meg caught herself spinning the back of her earring with her fingers, something she did when nervous. She dropped her hand and walked to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the second-story view of the front yard and the drive, lined with mesquite trees, that led away from the house. Beyond, acres of rolling Texas land stretched toward the horizon, the tips of the trees feathery against the blue of the sky.

Horses? Not her thing. She didn’t want a horse farm on her property; all those animals, all those strangers coming and going. She had no interest in this particular passion of her father’s and no need of the money it might one day generate. The advisors had all counseled her to dump it. Meg couldn’t reverse her decision now just because an honest, good-looking cowboy had asked it of her.

Except that her hard outer shell, already thin, was melting fast. Her gentle heart wanted to help him. “How much time?”

“Six months.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. Six months was a long time, but not unbearably long in the scheme of things.

“That’ll give me enough time to break even,” he said.

“What if you break even before then?”

“I still get six months to wrap things up.”

“What if you still haven’t broken even in six months?”

“Then the farm stays open until I do.”

“No. That’ll just give you an incentive to lose money.”

“Ma’am.” He waited until she looked at him. “I’ve never done anything in my life with the goal of failing.”

Quiet crackled through the room. Bo Porter stood at his full height, impressive, radiating purpose.

The decision hung in the balance in her mind, both sides evenly weighted. Meg measured him, trying to think, to be tough and impartial, to decide—

“Please,” he said.

And with that single word, the scales tipped with a ringing clatter in his direction. She nodded. “I’ll give you six months, but that’s it. Regardless of whether you have or haven’t made back the cost of the farm by then.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She’d honored his request, but they both knew she’d presented him with a stay of execution, not a pardon.

He made his way to the door, pausing on the threshold. “There’s one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like for you to come out and visit the farm.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“To check on your investment?”

Meg regarded him with skepticism. He must know she had employees far better qualified for that.

“Then come so that you can see what your father built,” he amended. “I’d like the chance to show it to you.”

Still, she hesitated.

“Sometime this week?” he asked.

“If you’d like.”

“You’ll let me know when you’re coming?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you again.” He dipped his chin and left.

Meg called herself every synonym she knew of for *cream puff*. She no longer had a driver, a kennel of hunting dogs, or an employee who specialized in guns. But she *did* still have a Thoroughbred racehorse farm, of all things. She released a gasp of a laugh. She hated horses!

A moment later one of the women who cleaned the house stuck her head into the office. “Ms. Cole?” She held aloft the severance package Meg had given Mr. Porter. “Did you want me to dispose of this? I found it in the hallway trash can.”

“No, I’d better keep it.” She sighed. “I’m going to need it again in six months.”



Chapter Two

After his meeting with Megan Cole, Bo drove away from the mansion and along Whispering Creek's paved back roads. When the horse farm came into view, he pulled his truck to the shoulder and sat motionless, his hands gripping the steering wheel, his attention traveling over the buildings and land.

A redbrick barn, one of the farm's five. A few cars. White fences that followed the land. A groom hand-walking a yearling. Texas prairie covered in places with pink wildflowers and bluebonnets. Trees.

The scene as a whole was simple. Plain. There was nothing about it that should have made him love it as much as he did. But he *did* love the farm.

Kids he'd grown up with had been into cars or rodeos or sports. It had always been Thoroughbreds for him. He'd started studying them at the age of ten. Back then he'd watched every race he'd been able to find on TV, subscribed to magazines, pored over library books, and just about memorized the studbook and auction catalogues.

In the years between then and now, many things had changed.

He'd grown up. Served overseas. Lived in various places. But Bo's passion for horses had never wavered.

As farm manager at Whispering Creek, he got paid well. But the reward—the reason why he put in twelve-hour days, woke at the crack of dawn, and thought about horses 24/7—was the work itself.

This job was his dream job. This ranch his dream ranch. As good as it would ever get for him.

His memory ran back over all the hours, effort, and sweat that had gone into building this place. He thought of the horses, each one carefully handpicked. He thought of the people who worked here. He knew them all well, and he understood just how much they relied on the farm for their income and how much pride they took in their work here.

Megan Cole had given him the worst possible news just now when she'd told him she planned to shut it all down. Ever since William Cole had died, he'd worried this would happen, but he'd hoped . . . he'd been hoping with everything in him that William Cole's daughter would decide to keep the horse farm running.

Scowling, he drove to the hay barn located at the back of the ranch's property, near the place where they stored equipment. He turned up the truck's radio so that he'd be able to hear the music within the barn. George Strait's "Troubadour" filled the air.

Bo pulled on his work gloves as he walked into the barn. He cut a glance across the space, then got busy stacking hay bales. Did the bales need to be reorganized? No. Was the boss expected to stack hay? No. But he needed to get his thoughts in order before telling his employees the bad news. When upset, he'd never been able to sit still—he'd always been driven to do something physical. He blew out his breath and heaved a bale up to shoulder height, then set it on top of a pile on his right.

He'd expected to dislike Megan Cole. He'd even kind of worked himself up for it, in the event that she told him she wanted to close down his farm. Dislike would have been the rational response, so it surprised him that his own reaction had been so different.

In the past, when he'd heard people gossiping about her, he'd pictured her as a Paris Hilton type of person. She did look rich. That, she did. She must have spent two hours getting ready this morning. Her makeup could have come straight out of a magazine ad. She'd put up her long blond hair in a twisted style that reminded him of bridesmaids. Her black suit probably cost more than a normal person's monthly salary. She'd worn earrings made out of yellow gems surrounded by diamonds. And she'd had on a pair of little black glasses.

The whole effect had reminded him of a hot teacher out of an '80s rock video. Blond hair, curvy build, ultra feminine—exactly his type. When he'd walked into the office to meet her, the whole room had smelled like her, like roses.

Bo paused, his breath coming hard with exertion. As much as Megan Cole had looked the part, though, there had been something about her that had struck him as strange for a rich girl, something he'd sensed more than seen. Over a lifetime of working with horses, he'd come to trust his senses.

Beneath her appearance he'd recognized a . . . What should he even call it? An uncertainty in her. A vulnerability.

Which was bad news for him, because he'd always been a sucker for vulnerability. Megan Cole had pretty features. Not gorgeous. Pretty. But that hidden vulnerability of hers—combined with the kindness in her eyes—had fascinated him more than beauty would have. Worse, it had made him want to protect her.

Which was laughable. *She* was the one with all the money and power. *She* was the one firing him from his job. And yet he'd stood there in the mansion's office, fighting the urge to help and comfort *her*.

He wondered what her life had been like, growing up in the mansion with no mother and a father like William Cole. Had her childhood made her fragile? Or had something else happened to her?

He wiped sweat from his forehead with his wrist.

She'd given him six months and the opportunity to pay back her father's investment in the farm. It was a start, but it was also the minimum he could live with. What he wanted? To keep the farm running for good. He was going to have to do his all-out, absolute best to change her mind.

He'd asked her to visit the ranch because he had a small hope that she might soften if she could see the place for herself, meet the staff, and spend time with the horses. Over the next few months he could take her out on rides, escort her to the owner's box at the track for races, tell her stories about the history of racing, explain to her why her father had liked it so much, show her the farm's earning projections over the next decade.

If he couldn't change her mind, he couldn't.

But for the sake of the people who worked at the farm, and for his own sake, he had to try.



Whispering Creek's housekeeper might wear Birkenstocks, but she had the brain of a CEO and the work ethic of an Olympic triathlete. Meg found Lynn in the cavernous kitchen of the big house preparing a lunch of egg salad sandwiches, baby carrots, chips, and fruit salad.

“Mind if I join you?” Meg asked.

“Course not.” Lynn had on her standard uniform of leggings and an oversized T-shirt. Today’s tee had a picture of a fading desert sunset, a howling coyote, and the words *Santa Fe* scrawled across the front.

Meg washed her hands, toed off her black high heels, and went to work slicing watermelon. Early April sunshine fell through the windows and illuminated her hands, the tan granite countertop, top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances, and the mahogany cabinetry. The beauty of it all should have calmed her. Instead, her surroundings only reminded her of how peaceful she *ought* to feel, how peaceful everyone else around her seemed to feel. They: normal. She: not.

After meeting with Bo Porter, she’d spent the remainder of the morning trying to reply to the numerous calls and emails she’d received from people at Cole Oil asking her for direction. Challenging work, since she didn’t know how to answer a single one of their questions. She sighed and moved on to cantaloupe.

“Rough morning?” Lynn asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“No, hon.” She gave a mellow smile. “It’s just been the usual.” Lynn dropped a handful of chopped pickle into the mixing bowl that held the egg salad, then went to work seasoning it. “So what’s going on? I only got to talk to you for a second this morning.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Meg had arrived at Whispering Creek late last night and greeted Lynn in a rush this morning before her first appointment. She set down her knife and propped her hip against the edge of the countertop. “What’s happening is that Uncle Michael came to Tulsa two weeks ago.”

“Huh.”

“And he demanded that I come home. He feels strongly that Cole Oil needs me.”

Lynn sampled the egg salad with a fresh spoon. “Well, after your father’s funeral you were able to return to Tulsa and go on with your regular life longer than I expected.”

“I was hoping I could go on with my regular life forever.”

“Bad case of denial?”

“I guess so.”

Lynn regarded her with sympathy. “You must have known you’d have to come back.”

“I did, I just . . . I honestly hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. I quit taking Uncle Michael’s calls, thinking that might buy me more time.”

“Voice mail has never stopped Michael Cole.”

“No. He was pretty hard to ignore once he showed up on my doorstep in the flesh.”

“I’ll bet he was.”

“Since he brought me back to Dallas, he’s had me at the Ritz with a team of men who’ve been trying their best to teach me the family business.” She released a wobbly laugh. “I was an art history major, for goodness’ sake!”

Lynn tilted her head. Her short Julie-Andrews-in-the-*Sound-of-Music* hairstyle framed a rectangular, fifty-ish face without a wisp of makeup. “My advice?”

“Yes, please.”

“Fake it until you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve been trying, but I’m a bad faker.”

“A bad faker is better than a sissy. You’re the majority shareholder of the company now, so you’ll have to do.” Lynn scooped egg salad onto slices of brown bread. “I heard you’ve been busy firing people this morning.”

“Yes, and I don’t recommend it. You do know, of course, that you and your staff and Mr. Son will always have jobs here.”

“I never worried about it for a minute.”

She told Lynn about the first three gentlemen she’d met with. “Then I tried to fire Mr. Porter, but he sort of refused to be fired. We agreed that he could keep the farm running for another six months.”

“I’m glad. I like Bo, and I like his brother Jake. I like a lot of the people who work out at the horse farm, actually.”

Together, they set the kitchen table, which stood in a nook ringed with windows. For as long as Meg could remember, lunch had been served seven days a week at noon sharp for the employees of the big house.

Just as they were finishing, Mr. Son entered, wearing his usual mechanic’s jumpsuit and slip-on canvas shoes. He and Lynn were around the same age and had both been working at Whispering Creek for more than twenty years. As their landscaper, every tree, shrub, blade of grass, and flower came under Mr. Son’s meticulous care. “Meg.”

She’d known him most of her life, and so she knew better than to try to hug him. She smiled and shook his hand. “Mr. Son.”

His Korean features firmed into stern lines. “You been firing people today?”

“I was just telling Lynn that her job—and yours—will be here for you as long as you want them.”

“You going to sell the house?”

“No.”

“Then why *would* you fire me?” His words turned heated. “You need someone to care for the grounds.”

“Exactly.”

He grunted angrily and moved toward the table.

Two of the women who worked for Lynn cleaning the house drifted in, welcomed Meg home, and made their way to the table.

“Sadie Jo’s coming, right, Lynn?” Meg asked.

“I’m here!” Sadie Jo called from the hallway.

Meg rushed to her and fell into her embrace. They hugged for a minute straight. Relief and comfort caught in Meg’s chest, causing tears to brim in her eyes.

Meg’s mother had hired Sadie Jo Greene as her nanny shortly after Meg’s birth. It turned out that Sadie Jo would become the best gift Patricia Cole would ever have the chance to give her daughter, because a blood disease had taken her life just two years later. If Sadie Jo hadn’t been there every day of every year to raise and love her, Meg would have been consigned to a life of utter loneliness. There’s no telling what would have become of her. She didn’t even like to think about it.

Twenty-eight years had passed since Sadie Jo had started working for their family, and in that time Sadie Jo had turned into a plump eighty-year-old who resembled nothing so much as one of Sleeping Beauty’s good fairies.

“It’s so nice to have you home,” Sadie Jo whispered. “I’ve been waiting and waiting for you to move back. Oh, Meg.” She cupped her cheek. “I love you so.”

“I love you, too. It’s wonderful to see you. You doing okay?”

“Very well. My, you look beautiful in that suit.” She scanned her from head to toe. “Where are your shoes?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Aren’t your feet cold?”

“Nope, perfectly fine.”

“Come.” Sadie Jo took hold of Meg’s hand with her knobby one and led her to the kitchen table, where the others were already passing the food. Once everyone had been served, Sadie Jo

spoke a blessing over them, then talk and easy companionship circled the table.

Meg stilled, struck by her love for Sadie Jo, Lynn, and Mr. Son. She didn't know the other two women well at all, but in this moment—why not?—she loved them, too. She might not have a mother, a father, a sibling, a husband, or a boyfriend, but she did have these people. At this precipice-like point in her life, they were blessedly familiar. They were hers.

“Eat something, dear,” Sadie Jo coaxed. “You must be hungry.” Since toddlerhood, there'd been nothing Sadie Jo liked better than to see Meg stuff herself.

“Have you decided which bedroom you'll be moving into?” Lynn asked her. “There's the master suite.”

“No thanks.” Meg couldn't even contemplate moving into her father's room.

“Your old room, then?”

She'd stayed there last night, but she had no desire to move into it again permanently. It was full of kid memories. “I don't think so.”

“There are a total of ten bedrooms to choose from,” Mr. Son pointed out.

“Actually, I've decided that I'm going to use the guesthouse while I'm here.”

Every face at the table regarded her with arrested surprise.

All self-respecting tycoons had free-standing guesthouses adjacent to their mansions. A person could reach the guesthouse at Whispering Creek via a short walk from the big house across the garden and along the length of the pool. “I'm going to have the furniture that's in there now moved out and my own furniture moved in.”

They all continued to stare at her.

Welcome to the Reign of Meg, she thought. *All of you know good and well that I'm an oddball of an heiress.* "Would that be all right, Lynn?"

"You can do anything you'd like, hon," Lynn answered. "You own the place."



Two days later Bo was walking along the central first floor hallway of the mansion when Megan Cole rounded a corner ahead of him, bringing them face to face.

After thinking of little but her and his farm, his farm and her since their first meeting, the reality of seeing her again came as a shock. All his senses sharpened in a rush.

"Hello." She looked slightly confused.

"Hi."

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked. "Something you need?"

He realized that she didn't know what he was doing in her house. "No, I . . . my office is just over there. I stopped in to do some paper work, and now I'm on my way to the farm."

"Oh, I didn't realize you had an office in the house."

"Right next to Lynn's and Mr. Son's."

"I see."

The little black glasses had disappeared, but she'd dressed in another expensive-looking suit and still smelled like roses. Even in high heels, she stood a good five inches shorter than him. *Man*, she was pretty. He hadn't forgotten, but as he looked into her light brown eyes, the power of it hit him afresh. "Do you have time to come out and visit the horse farm today, ma'am?"

"You can call me Meg."

"Thanks. You can call me Bo."

“All right.”

He watched her closely.

“I’m afraid I can’t make it out to the farm today.” He could tell by her face that she regretted that she’d agreed to visit at all. “I’m headed to the office downtown. Maybe—sorry, I’m just trying to remember my schedule—maybe Friday?”

“Sure. What time?”

“Late afternoon? 4:30?”

“That’d be good.”

“I’ll have someone call you if I have to reschedule.”

“Okay.”

They said their good-byes, and she moved past him. He forbid himself to glance back.

For the entire rest of the day, hour after hour, he could not get her out of his mind. It was a reaction way out of proportion, and one that concerned him. He liked most people and usually felt the same level of lazy interest in everyone who came across his path, even the nice-looking ones.

But her.

Her. Something about her had taken hold of something inside him. And try as he might, he couldn’t shake it loose.



It was only Thursday of Meg’s first week at Cole Oil, and she already wanted to fling herself out a window.

She’d woken this morning to formless, inexplicable fear. It had been percolating inside her all day, constricting her lungs with an imaginary iron belt that kept notching tighter, tighter, tighter. *Go away, stress*, she thought frantically. *Please. Let me breathe, eat something, relax, sleep. Function.*

“You’re doing fine, Meg.” Her uncle regarded her from behind

his desk. He'd just spent thirty minutes explaining an oil and gas exploration deal that Cole Oil was in the middle of negotiating.

"I'm trying."

Uncle Michael, her father's younger brother, strongly resembled her father. He had a head full of impeccably cut gray hair, a lean build, a closet filled with dark gray power suits, and a squirm-inducing stare. Meg had read articles by reporters who'd used words like *powerful*, *brutally smart*, and *distinguished* to describe the Cole brothers. All accurate.

"I know it's difficult for you to take all this on." His eyes missed little. "I'd spare you from it if I could."

"I know."

"But we're all bound by the way Cole Oil is structured. We all have our roles. I've had more practice at mine than you have, that's all."

She nodded.

His cell phone vibrated, and he glanced at it. "Excuse me for a second?"

"Sure."

He went to work typing a text message. Behind him, through a long bank of windows, the skyscrapers of downtown Dallas shimmered in the afternoon light.

When her great-great-grandfather, Jedediah Cole, had been thirty-five years old, he'd struck oil in East Texas. Endless barrels of black gold, untold riches, and ceaseless hard work had flowed from that original lucky hit.

Jedediah had been determined that his legacy, the Cole Oil empire, would withstand the test of time. He'd not wanted the decision-making power that would drive Cole Oil forward to be fractured more and more with every subsequent generation as one man's shares were passed down and split among that man's

children. So he'd decreed that 51 percent of his company would always be passed down intact to the oldest child. The one who held that 51 percent also served as chairman of the board and president. The other 49 percent of the company belonged to the remaining shareholders, who were still to this day Cole family members.

Since every previous generation of Cole men from Jedediah on down had had oil-loving oldest sons, the responsibilities had passed along in happy fashion.

Until now.

Thankfully, they weren't about to appoint her as either chairman of the board or president. But her uncle and her other relatives certainly *did* expect her to spend the next twenty or thirty years working to earn the right to attain those positions.

Meg caught herself nervously twirling her earring back and returned her hand to her lap. She glanced at her uncle's profile. Clicking sounds filled the silence as he continued to tap out letters on his phone.

Michael had followed a parallel path to her father's. Both had gone to the University of Texas, both had been trained up in the ways of the company, both understood the innermost cogs of the oil business. They'd spent their lives working in this towering building side by side. But because Michael had been born second, he and his two sons had always known that while they would be important men, indescribably wealthy, well respected—they would never inherit the controlling share of Cole Oil.

That fact had always blanketed Meg with guilt, more so since Michael had brought her here to Dallas. She could believe that he'd made his peace with her father as the head of Cole Oil. But she knew it must be difficult for him to have to accept her—a woman far his junior in years, knowledge, and experience—as the company's majority shareholder.

What a joke! She didn't even accept herself as the majority shareholder. She'd done nothing to earn that kind of power.

Her uncle set aside his phone and returned his attention to her.

"I want you to know," she said, "that I'd give all this to you if I were able."

"Not going to happen. You're my only brother's only child, Meg." Determination marked his tone and expression. "I'll help you. I'm going to look out for you and your best interests, no matter what."

She didn't have anything to say to that. In the whole of her life, she'd never had anything to say in the face of her uncle's will.

"It's quite a birthright. You'll see that soon enough. I only wish you'd come to work with us years ago, so that this process could have gone more smoothly."

"My father and I had a deal." That she'd had to fight very hard for. "He agreed that for the first ten years after college I could choose my own career—"

"And when those ten years were up, then you'd come to work here."

"Yes." She'd always suffered from a lack of interest in Cole Oil, a sense that she was meant for something more and different, and a longing to live her own life. Meg could see now that she'd been impractical and selfish to bargain with her father for the right to follow her heart. Following her heart had only ever led her down steep and icy pathways that she bitterly regretted later. "The . . . the ten years still aren't up."

"The deal no longer stands, Meg. He died, and because he died, we need you here now."

"I know."

He flicked his fingers. "I never liked that deal." She could see a twinge of condemnation in his eyes.

The iron around her chest drew tighter, and her pulse picked up speed. She needed to escape. Quickly, she made her excuses and let herself out, her uncle's attention pursuing her.

As she approached her father's office, her two executive assistants rose to their feet. They watched her with the intensity of well-trained dogs waiting for a treat, clearly hungry for her to give them something to do. They were extremely qualified, organized, and fabulous in every way.

Meg was having difficulty liking them.

"I need some time alone," she murmured, then slipped inside before they could begin firing questions.

Within her father's office, Panic—capital *P*—swooped down and seized her from head to toe. She released the buttons on the front of her suit jacket and kicked off her shoes. She went to the desk, rummaging through it with shaking hands in search of her sudoku.

She couldn't do this. How did they, any of them, think that in her inexperience and ignorance she could do her father's job? She didn't deserve the money she'd inherited or the position here. She'd been born, as simple as that. And her birth had sealed her fate. Her heartbeat thundered. *I don't know what I'm doing. I can't pretend—*

Quit it, Meg! Think about something else before you lose it.

She shuffled to her current puzzle and forced herself to sit quietly and concentrate. "God, come. Help me. Please, come."

For long minutes, she tried very hard to do nothing but take deep breaths and think about numbers and squares. It helped a little, but not enough. Her breathing grew shallow, and she started to feel like she couldn't get enough air. Pins and needles pricked the ends of her fingers, and her whole body began to quake as if she had chills.

Stubbornly, she wrestled against the anxiety. She kept working the puzzle and making her muscles soften until eventually, her symptoms began to relax their grip on her.

As soon as she'd reached a rudimentary level of calm, she pulled her little book of Bible verses out of her purse. The verses were grouped together based on theme. She'd not had a lot of cause for the chapters on marriage or parenting, but she'd just about memorized the section on worry.

She read through several of the familiar verses, some of them over and over, letting them sink into her mind. Then she went into the adjoining private bathroom and dangled her wrists and hands under a stream of cold water. Feet planted on hard tile, she stared at herself in the mirror.

Her face looked white and bleak.

With sudden, aching intensity, she missed her father.

Gripping the edge of the sink, she started to cry. Sobs wracked her body and tears streamed down her face, falling off her chin into the basin. Her relationship with her father had always been distant and difficult. He'd been an infrequent visitor to her childhood, and when they had been together they'd mixed like oil and water—the bullheaded man obsessed with his career and his quiet, sensitive daughter. She'd last seen him over Christmas, and even then they'd stuck to their roles: him, unable to stop himself from bossing her around; her, simmering in resentment and feeling like she'd disappointed him because she wasn't (and never wanted to be) the person he'd hoped for.

Regardless of all that, he'd still been her father, the only parent she'd had, and she'd loved him. Meg wasn't certain if he'd loved her back, but at the very least he'd protected her. According to their deal, he'd even sheltered her from Cole Oil.

My father's gone.

In response, she could almost sense the presence of the Holy Spirit drawing near, comforting, reminding her that even though she'd lost William Cole, God remained.

I don't know what to do, Lord. I can't see my way forward. Please show me.

She'd been a lukewarm Christian for most of her life. But after the devastation she'd gone through five years ago, she'd thrown herself on God's mercy and discovered that He had a lot of grace to offer. Enough even for her. Meg understood with absolute certainty that whatever strength she possessed came from Him. On the days when she hadn't wanted to get out of bed in the morning, He'd rescued her.

She'd been doing so much better, feeling so much stronger and more sure of herself in recent years. Then her father had died, and now she was falling again.

A worried Christian. That defined her current state. Worried. Christian. Two words that shouldn't have gone together. An oxymoron.

She knew very well that God was holding out His hands to her through this situation, asking her to trust Him completely. She was trying! But she must not be doing it right. He hadn't given her a spirit of fear. This wasn't how He intended her to be. And yet here she was anyway: a worried Christian overcome with anxiety.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed, then mopped at her face with a paper towel.

Her cell phone rang. When she saw Sadie Jo's name on the screen, she answered immediately. Sadie Jo's sweet and reassuring voice flowed through the line. She'd called to check on Meg and offer support.

Meg squeezed the phone, thankful. God had led her through

rough patches exactly this way countless times in the past. Just when she was about to have a meltdown, a neighbor would knock on her door, a friend would invite her out for dinner, a loved one would call.

Then and now she recognized these small interventions for exactly what they were: God throwing her a lifeline through the words and hands of His people.