

Romance in Scarlet



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***D*edication:**

I gratefully acknowledge my writers' group for
patiently reading and critiquing with open minds and
sharp wits.

Prologue

Andi stepped up on her front porch and turned. As expected, Raymond took her in his arms and gently kissed her. He's not supposed to come in tonight, she reminded herself. The doubts are behind us. This time we agree. The plans are set.

When he stepped back, he looked grim. "It's not that bad," she teased. "This is Wednesday, the wedding is Sunday afternoon. You agreed that not sleeping together for the month before was a good idea."

He shrugged. "It's not that."

"Then what?" She took a step back, against the front door. "You've been distracted all evening. I doubt you could tell me what happened in the play we just saw. Or how dinner tasted."

"There's a problem." He shrugged. "It just came up day before yesterday. I have to go to Vermont this weekend. I won't be back before late Monday. No way around it."

She stared at him. "You have *got* to be kidding. We've been going together for over a year. We've been engaged six months. The wedding we've been

planning for three of them is Sunday afternoon. I know it's a small family affair, but everything is arranged. *Everything.*"

She looked into his pale blue eyes. He didn't say anything; instead, he slid his fingers through his styled hair. She snarled, "Just what the *hell* is in Vermont?"

"An estate auction," he said. "Very important. Pre-Revolution. Over a thousand items. I had to volunt..." He bit it off too late.

Andi's voice went dead quiet. "You *volunteered* to go?"

"I had to." He reached for her hand, eager to explain. "You won't believe what is included. The firm has authorized me to—"

She snatched her hand away. "Go away," she said.

"Please, Andi. Let me—"

She stepped forward until she crowded him against the step, staring directly into his eyes. Her voice was flat with anger. "Go. Away. Now!"

He stepped back. She was ramrod straight, her fists clenched at her side. He retreated down the steps and backed toward his car. "Okay. We'll talk later, after I get back."

She turned her back on him and managed to get her door open without breaking the lock. She slammed it behind her, stumbling toward her bedroom whispering, "Shit, shit, shit," over and over again. She sat down at her vanity and started freeing her waist-length hair. Her hands were shaking so badly, she dropped half the bobby pins.

She eyed the telephone. "If I call my mother and tell her what I'm thinking," she whispered, "she'll make me wash my mouth out with soap." Andi strangled on the chuckle that followed, then the tears came.

Chapter One:

Saturday Afternoon

Saturday, Andi finally finished up her workweek. She parked the county Bookmobile in its carport and straightened everything for the Tuesday run. Then she headed for her beauty shop appointment.

She walked through the glass door of the shop five minutes early, trying to relax. It was impossible. Ruth looked up. Concern filled her eyes. "I heard," she said gently.

Andi shrugged. "Small town gossip. I cancelled most of the arrangements, but *this* is one appointment I'm keeping." She climbed into the vinyl chair. The wide arms felt like they were closing around her. *Confining? Supporting? I don't know.* She took a deep breath. "I really don't want to talk about it."

Ruth nodded, their years of friendship making more of an answer unnecessary. She freed Andi's hair from its long braid, asking, "What's the plan?"

Andi handed her the folded piece of paper

clutched in her hand. "Radical."

Ruth took one look and came around to the front of the chair. She held up the picture, scissored neatly from a San Antonio newspaper, so Andi had to look directly at it. The woman pictured was a patrician radiating the power she wielded as one of San Antonio's elite. Her gray hair was full around her face, very short, not even falling to the line of her chin. The left side swept around her eye. The right side tucked behind her ear.

Andi nodded. "That's what I want. The picture was in Thursday's paper. I clipped it and stuck it up on my refrigerator. I've been thinking about it ever since."

Ruth flipped the paper over and looked closer. "I see you cut it neatly from the page and dutifully recorded the bibliographical reference. At least your librarian's instincts are still intact." She held it up by Andi's face. "You have the same aristocratic bone structure, just not quite as severe. This style will look good on you, if..."

Andi smiled. "Absolutely sure. Whack away."

Ruth spun the chair around. "I never 'whack.' That's an insult to my years of professional experience." But she was smiling. She took hold of Andi's hair and picked up a large pair of scissors. "Last chance."

Andi nodded, and felt the tug of the scissors as they sheared away more than a yard of honey-colored hair. It made a crunching sound. "Done this before?" Ruth asked.

"No."

Ruth's voice softened. "What else are you leaving behind?"

While Ruth sorted through her newly cut hair, dividing it into sections to be clipped, Andi sorted through her mental list. Tomorrow was the wedding day, she thought. Do I have everything cancelled? She ticked off the minister, caterer, florist and all the people she'd called in the past three days. The only cancellation she had left was the room at the Palacio del Rio in San Antonio, where reservations were made for a week-long honeymoon.

Their desk wasn't limited to business hours, so she could make the call tonight. At least phoning a clerk sixty miles south would be easier than calling off plans with another one of the friends she had asked to help with the small ceremony. Each one had offered sympathy, and wanted to know the whole story.

I'm still not sure I know the whole story myself, Andi thought. Everyone said I was justified, but...

"Yoo-hoo."

Andi blinked, her dark blue eyes meeting green as she caught Ruth's gaze in the mirror. The redheaded beauty operator paused, waiting for her friend's full attention. "It's hard enough to cut hair when you're tense," she accused, "but it's impossible when you shake. You have *got* to relax."

Ruth dropped scissors and comb into her pocket and dug strong fingers into the muscles of Andi's long neck, probing for knots of tension. Her victim straightened in the chair with a gasp that was close to

pain, then filled her lungs with a deep breath as the tightness started to fade.

Ruth's skilled hands eased their pressure. "Changing hairstyles is supposed to be exciting, not traumatic."

"It's not that, and you know it."

"It's none of my business," Ruth caught her eye again, "but I'll butt in anyway. Any man who postpones his wedding to go to an antique auction ought to be gelded."

"Well, it is an important estate." Andi tried to remember all his good reasons. "Besides, I'm not sure that's the real problem." As Ruth sprayed her hair with water and went back to work, she wondered again, Why did I end the engagement rather than accept the postponement? The third finger of her left hand felt particularly vulnerable without the engagement ring.

"What are you going to do with your new hairstyle?" The green eyes were watching her, and Andi realized that her shoulders had started to tighten again. Ruth continued, "You have a week of vacation. Don't tell me you're going to waste it just sitting by the swimming pool."

"I told Elizabeth to cancel it. Maybe the work will keep me occupied."

"I bet your boss was really thrilled. She'll *love* having you moping around for the week you were supposed to be on your honeymoon. I bet you'll be *real* good with the customers. Just how much do you think you'll get done, anyway?" Ruth combed

through the wet hair, clipping stray ends. "Go ahead and go. Just take a week to do whatever you want. Shop. Have a fling. Catch up on your reading. I'll even supply an appropriate book I just finished." She dropped her comb into the sink and reached for a brightly-covered romance novel. "This is the kind of hero you should be looking for."

"All right. All right." Andi quailed in mock terror of the flashing scissors in Ruth's hand. She took the book, and when they moved to the dryer, dropped it into her purse. "I've been looking for some time to spend in the San Antonio library. I want to do more research for my book on pioneer Texas women."

Ruth rolled her eyes and shook her red curls. "I'd think you get enough of libraries driving the Kerr County bookmobile."

"This is different." Andi chuckled. "At least I'll know what I'm looking for." She saw Ruth's eyebrows gathering in puzzlement, so she related the story of the man who had come in two days earlier bearing a faded magazine clipping. He'd asked her to find the original, even though he didn't have the title, author, or date, and wasn't really sure which magazine it had run in. By the time Andi finished telling of her long but successful search, Ruth was putting the finishing touches on her new hairstyle.

Andi looked at the stranger in the mirror. A smooth sweep in front softened her high forehead and fell over one ear. The asymmetrical cut was a complete departure from her usual look. The absence of a heavy cascade of hair made it one of simplicity.

She stood and pirouetted before the mirror, her slender figure swirling in embroidery and latticework. She had bought the sea-blue cotton dress because the shallow scoop of its jewel neck provided a natural contrast to an intricate hairstyle. Now it formed an even stronger compliment. The overall effect was one of modern self-confidence. *I wonder what would it be like to live up to that image?*

While she paid her bill and listened to Ruth's instructions on how to manage the shorter hair, she tried to describe exactly what was different. *For one thing, my head definitely feels lighter, and the feeling is familiar.*

Andi probed back into her memories and, just as she stepped from the air conditioning into the August heat, found it. *I feel the same way I did as a teenager when I finished a session at the roller-skating rink and swapped heavy skates for sandals. I feel free.*

Andi slipped into the hot interior of her tan Dodge and let the last of the tension bake out of her body. The rearview mirror reflected a glimpse of her short hair, and she decided. *I'll take Ruth's advice. The room at the Palacio del Rio is reserved, and I'll use it.* Her cell phone call caught her boss on the way out of the library. "I've changed my mind," Andi said. "I'm going to spend next week in San Antonio."

"Good! Have a ball. See you a week from Tuesday." Elizabeth *had* sounded relieved. Andi chuckled.

She started the car and headed toward her apartment. As the air conditioner blew the heat away,

she let the past six months flow with it. *If only for the next week. I'll step into the easy-care lifestyle my sassy new hairstyle represents.*

When she got home, Andi used the last fresh vegetables from her crisper to toss a dinner salad and sat down to eat. She frowned as she took her first sip of coffee and found a hint of bitterness in the rich brew.

Coffee was one of the few luxuries she permitted herself, and with it she demanded perfection. She bought fresh roasted beans, grinding and carefully brewing each pot herself. Perhaps the tools were the problem. She'd clean her pot and grinder and let them sit while she was gone. She laid aside the question of whether her need for perfection was part of her larger problem.

She reached over to her leather shoulder bag and pulled the paperback free. Andi didn't see many category romances at the library, but they seemed to be everywhere else. This one was typical, with an embracing couple on a cover as slickly scarlet as the polish on her trimmed nails. The man was arrogantly masculine. The hero type. *His passion wouldn't even wait for a wedding, much less for a postponed ceremony.*

Andi snatched the thought back, opening the book. She started to skim, but by the fourth paragraph she was deep in the plot. The heroine, Lily Stephenson, was *not* the type of woman she expected to find in a romance.

Like the woman from the newspaper clipping, Lily, radiating authority, belonged in a full-length portrait

hanging at the head of the manor stairs. Her modern independence and self-reliance reminded Andi of the pioneer women she so admired. The story started with Lily moving from New York to Texas, and plunged immediately into her first tumultuous meeting with Mack Braeburn.

Mack was a Levis-and-Stetson cowboy with thick, dark hair curling over the collar of his sweat-stained western shirt. His stride was meant to cover miles of open range. Lily, however, was looking for someone who was gentle and considerate—a candlelight-and-roses sort of man. But the awakening passion in her heart wouldn't cooperate, and neither would the sensuality exploding in her body. *Jewels in the Stone* was definitely not one of the sweet romances.

An hour later Andi found herself halfway through the novel, still deeply immersed in the inevitable and boldly passionate conflict raging between the two. She finally heard her doorbell's insistent chiming. The living area was gloomy in the fading twilight, so she turned on a few lights on her way to open the door.

"Mom, Dad."

"Sitting in the dark, huh?" John Thomas filled the foyer with his gruff voice as Andi gave each of them a quick hug and pulled them inside.

"We were just passing." Helen's voice flowed smooth and rich, but she had Andi's open eyes, and they betrayed the lie.

Andi smiled and drew them back into a family embrace, but it couldn't ease the concern she knew her parents were feeling. "Actually I was reading."

"In the dark?" Helen's eyes probed.

"Mother," Andi warned in her I'm-a-grownup voice. "But I'm really glad you came." She led them into the kitchen and poured them each a mug of coffee, refilling hers at the same time. "Everything is under control," she assured them, "both tomorrow and next week. I've decided to go ahead and spend the week in S.A. and do some research for that book you don't think I'll ever finish."

Her father wasn't listening. "What did you do to your hair?"

"I decided to get it cut. What do you think?" Andi held her breath.

"I like it. Makes you look older." He caught a daggered look from his wife. "Well, it does. More grown-up somehow."

The tension splintered in warm family laughter. "It's good to know I'm growing up now that I'm twenty-six. When are you going to join me, Daddy?"

Her parents grinned, and she really looked at them. *I take it for granted, having two parents that bicker good-naturedly, but deeply love each other. Is the romance from one of those scarlet novels what they share? There are so many split families among my friends. I wonder if such a love is even still possible? Is the lack of it the true reason I cancelled the engagement?*

Her mother, as if she had read the thought, brought the conversation back to that subject. "You really are all right? What was that about next week?"

Andi tried to sound confident while she repeated her plans.

She didn't fool her father at all. He crossed his arms. "Sounds to me like you're just putting things off. Not that there's anything wrong with that. You've got time to take a week." John ignored his wife's signal and continued. "We've got all kinds of opinions, of course, but after we talked it over we decided we'd better stay out of it and let you decide for yourself."

With that he stood, and they walked toward the door. The three of them united in another love-filled embrace, and Helen reminded, "If you need help, you know where we are." Her parents strolled toward the street, and Andi heard them chatting about her new hairstyle.

A half-hour later she'd cleaned up the kitchen and was ready to pack. Digging her suitcase from the back of her closet, Andi opened it on the bed and folded her clothes inside. She was ready to close it when she noticed the quilted bag that held her combs, barrettes and hair-clips in its usual place on top of her clothes.

Those aren't going to do me much good. What's happening to me? I kept my hair waist-long since junior high school, yet decided to have it cut as soon as I spotted the picture. I never act on impulse. Was canceling the engagement impulsive? Or have I just grown out of it?

"When you grow," her father always said, "you need a new skin." She smoothed her fingers across the strangely textured patch of flesh at the base of her neck where Ruth had razored away short, delicately fine hair.

So I'm growing? I wonder what it would be like, lying

in the strong arms of someone like Mack Braeburn, burning with the shared passion described so vividly in this novel. I don't know. That, she decided, was why I cancelled the engagement.

She turned back to the suitcase and took a good look at what was packed. It was exactly what she would wear to work. She dumped everything on the bed and started over.

For the hours of research at the library she chose two comfortable pairs of jeans, and then dug deep into a bottom drawer to come up with three long-unused T-shirts. The faded Texas Women's University logo on one called up a memory. *The Night of a Thousand Crickets. Post-football-game passion in the middle of an open field. Losing my virginity in the front seat of a pickup truck.*

Ruth's voice echoed. *"Have a fling."*

It's silly. A romantic fantasy.

But her soul whispered, *What if?* She leaned against her dresser and thought again of the sudden passion portrayed in *Jewels*, and the coming week in the romantic Old Texas setting of the Palacio del Rio, the 'Palace of the River'. Turning, she looked into the mirror at her slender, sassy-haired image. "I could do that!" she murmured. "But what would I need to wear?"

She thought back to the novel. Lily had gotten a lot out of a 'wicked white' swimsuit. Andi smiled, then realized that her old self hadn't even packed her black maillot. She pulled it out and held it up before her reflection. Without the bathing cap she usually wore

to control her long hair, its sleek lines complemented her slender figure. Loosening the laces in front, Andi added plunge to the neckline and didn't even try it on. She dropped it into her suitcase with a frilly coverup and turned her reveries to romantic evenings.

With Mack Braeburn in her fancy, Andi swayed across the room, dancing in an intimate embrace. She pulled from the closet a dramatic wrap dress.

Swirling back to the mirror, she smoothed the matte jersey across her body. The puff-shouldered sleeves, tulip hemline, and graceful neckline were perfect for the sophistication reflected in her new hairstyle.

Midnight-blue, it caught the color of her eyes and emphasized their clear, steady gaze. She tried to look at herself the way *he* would, and drew a sharp little breath when she realized that the row of tiny buttons that held the sarong front closed lay just where his hand would rest as they spun in each other's arms.

Shivering, she tried to regain some hold on her bolting imagination and do some realistic packing, but she found the *What if?* coloring all her decisions. She pushed herself through the completion of the week's wardrobe, trying not to imagine *his* reaction to everything she selected yet still finding herself with the boldest of her clothes.

Then it was time to pack something to sleep in. "Enough is enough," she told her reflection. "No fantasy could go that far. Besides, I didn't have any sexy nightwear. In fact, the only decent gown I own is

long, white and brand new. I do *not* want to take *that* one."

She dropped in two of the T-shirts she usually wore at night and securely latched the suitcase—as well as the romantic fantasy—shut.

Andi readied herself for bed, then found herself lying wide awake. Her unruly mind kept straying back to the romance that lay deserted in the kitchen, and she finally gave in. Fetching it, she plunged back into the bigger-than-life world, following Lily and Mack as they fought each other and their blossoming romance. By the time the characters solved all their problems and ended up in a satiated embrace, Andi was thoroughly swaddled in the same misty haze.

She dropped the book on her nightstand and turned out the light. Then she lay there, warm under the covers. Not warm, she thought. Hot. And there's no way I'm going to get to sleep. Damn Mack Braeburn.

She summoned his image, sliding her hands up under the T-shirt. She caressed her breasts, imagining range-roughened palms rasping across her nipples. They stiffened. How would his lips feel on mine? she wondered. How would they feel on my breasts? She slid one hand down across her belly, and under the elastic of her pants. *How would it feel when he...* She probed firmly, the way a cowboy would. She imagined him, looming over her, weighing down on her, penetrating her. She found her button and came hard, back arching as she panted in release. "To hell with Raymond Reinholdt," she muttered. "What I

need is a *cowboy*."

Her logic tried to tell her how silly that was, but she shushed it. One last thought whispered through her mind. *Lily, in all her sensual encounters with Mack, never had time to put on a sexy nightgown.*

Chapter Two:

Sunday Morning

The next morning, Andi pulled out of her parking spot and headed for San Antonio. Interstate 10 cut straight through the tree-covered Texas Hill Country. Sunday traffic was light, and she covered in about an hour what would have taken pioneer wagons at least a week. As the live oak and cedar trees gave way to office buildings and shopping centers she was still wondering just what kind of exploring she was looking forward to. She obviously wasn't going to find much 'raw frontier' in the country's tenth largest city.

She left the Interstate and followed Alamo Boulevard to the entrance of the Palacio del Rio. Parking behind a bus, she tossed her keys to the parking attendant and joined a stream of tourists carrying purchases just made in Old Mexico. Besides the wrapped packages, there were a couple of huge sombreros and a brand new pair of Mexican cowboy boots on a little boy speaking what she thought was

German. At least five languages rattled through the lobby as the group flowed through the doors, swirling toward the banks of elevators. It was an urbane, cosmopolitan, worldly crowd. Andi, with her sassy hairstyle and confident stride, fit right in.

She passed a sign mounted on a portable easel, and backtracked as it caught her eye. Welcoming a convention of computer storeowners, it also invited the public to an exhibition of computer equipment across the street in the Hemisfair Convention Center. She decided to go. After using the computer equipment at the library, Andi knew how much upgrading her own PC would help with her book.

But first she stepped over to the wide reception desk and asked the clerk about her reservation. The woman handed her a registration card and said, "*Buenos dias*. Please fill this out, Mrs. Reinholdt."

Andi stopped. "I'm not Mrs. Reinholdt," she said, and watched the classic Latina face carefully control its expression. "The wedding was called off, but I decided to use the room anyway."

The attendant drew the card back. "I don't think we can release a reservation to someone who didn't make it. And all our other rooms are booked."

Andi dropped her credit card on the smooth desktop and stared deep into the eyes across from her. "Raymond Reinholdt isn't coming. I'm here, and I want a room. Do I have to go elsewhere?" Her voice was not loud, but it echoed in a suddenly-still lobby. *I didn't feel like explaining, and I'm just not going to.*

Her target froze for a long moment, then reached

for the plastic rectangle. "With your own credit card, Ms..." —she glanced down at the card—"Thomas, it will be okay. I'm sure you can understand our reluctance to charge your stay to Mr. Reinholdt."

By the time Andi finished the registration paperwork, everything was back to normal and the clerk was genuinely cheerful when she said, "I hope you have a pleasant stay. *Vaya con Dios.*"

Andi was in the elevator when the strangeness caught up with her. She found herself smoothing long, slender fingers through her hair. *Who did I become? Before, I would have carefully explained the situation, asked for a room, then spent all the time necessary to straighten things out. Instead, I was ready to walk out of the hotel. I'm going to have to be careful not to carry this new-image thing too far.*

A half-hour later she strode back through the lobby and out into the bright August sun. She dodged around a mess of street construction and crossed the intersection toward the Convention Center. Entering the exhibit hall, she looked around the huge room filled with tables covered with every brand of personal computer and the peripherals and software they ran. The people filling the aisles were just as varied, ranging from gray-haired women dressed for success to tousled teenagers in computer-freak T-shirts.

Andi wandered around, looking at the people more than the machines. She hesitated by a table where a young woman was demonstrating a word processing program, but it wasn't what she needed.

When she turned to go, she stepped full into a man just starting forward to ask a question. His strong arms caught her before she could fall and she found herself in an uncomfortably close embrace, her face buried in his shoulder. After making sure of her balance, she pulled free and stepped back. Andi looked up into gray eyes. His hair was dark and smooth, and just a little thin in front. A conservative gray suit covered a frame that was well proportioned without being burly. "You all right?" he asked.

He's so big. Way over six feet. My head barely comes up to his shoulder. She gathered her wits. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"Mostly my fault."

She glanced at his nametag, then turned away. The chance encounter was over.

She wandered on up the aisle looking at more of the displays. Mackenzie Stone, she thought. Another Mack. Handsome enough, but not like Mack Braeburn. If I had bumped into him, according to the scarlet novel, I would have Known. Mack Stone was just a chance encounter. I'll never see him again. I'll have to wait for another collision.

Mackenzie Stone. Why does his name hang echoing in my memory?

Eventually Andi returned to her room and dropped the stack of propaganda she'd collected on the dresser. *Most of me thinks it's nice not to have a schedule to meet. Unfortunately, my appetite is not inclined to be lazy.* It was almost half-past six, and the grumbling in her stomach prodded her sharply in the direction of food. She took the elevator all the way

down to the River Level and walked out the rear of the modern hotel into another world.

The San Antonio River wandered through the heart of the city below the hustle and bustle of the modern streets. Shaded by ancient oaks and crossed by the high arches of stone footbridges, it belonged to the time of Texas independence, more than a century before. The air was still warm, but out of the direct sun it made Andi feel lazy instead of hot. Everyone else seemed to agree, strolling leisurely instead of hurrying.

The warm smell of food richly prepared caught Andi's attention, pulling her back through the Palacio's entrance to the informal atmosphere of the hotel's river level café, El Comedor. The hostess seated her at a table close to wide picture windows looking out on the Riverwalk. Andi turned her attention to the menu, selecting a Mexican platter loaded with a variety of South-of-the-Border specialties. Only after her order was safely on its way could she enjoy the view.

A pair of teenagers pedaled a paddleboat up the center of the river, too interested in each other to notice the much larger boat, full of tourists, cruising the other direction. The sharp bleat of a horn and the laughter of the driver and his passengers sent the amorous couple blushing toward the side. The shops lining the opposite bank were busy, but even there the aura of easy relaxation was apparent.

Just outside the window were outdoor tables that formed a part of El Comedor, filled with hungry

people enjoying the restaurant's varied fare. A family was just finishing up right in front of her, and four men were being served at the table further down. One was Mack Stone.

She was sure it was he. He'd shed his coat and tie, and looked completely relaxed, sharing laughter with his cronies at some just-completed joke. He looked up at his waitress as she placed his steak on the table then, with his three friends, followed her with his eyes as she carried the empty tray back inside. Andi felt like an eavesdropper watching him when he had no idea he was being observed, but curiosity overpowered her conscience. She smiled at herself. *What would my romantic heroine think?*

Then her own waitress appeared with a steaming plate, and she plunged into the tangy Mexican delights that covered it. But as she crunched her way through her taco, she kept her eye on the men outside. More honestly, she admitted, on one of them.

He talked confidently, making points with his strong hands in gestures that were definite without seeming abrupt. This was obviously a gathering of equals, yet there was a certain authority in the way Mack acted. This was a man who would be a leader wherever he went. He ate with gusto. His steak must be as tasty as the pungent tamales on Andi's plate. He was obviously not on a diet. The trim waist accenting the width of his shoulders must be the result of exercise.

What does he do for a living? His presence at the exhibition and now here at the hotel makes something to do

with computers a likely possibility, but he certainly doesn't look like computer nerds are supposed to.

But then, I don't look much like the stereotype of a librarian.

The men finished eating, and Andi was relieved to see that Mack was not one of those who lit cigarettes. *Whoa! That scarlet book up in my suitcase has my thoughts running in strange directions. I'm enjoying the view, nothing more. I might brush past this Mack Stone in the next week, if he was here for the conference, but it's a thousand to one against anything else happening.*

One, her mind echoed, and she found herself blushing as the four men stood and ambled away up the Riverwalk.

Andi finished the last of her frosty glass of tea, which of course failed completely to quench the bite of jalapeño lingering from her burrito. When she strolled outside she deliberately turned left, down river, just to be safe. She strolled only as far as the bend in the sidewalk, and looked up at the grass-covered benches of the Arneson River Theater. It was packed with people, natives and tourists side by side, enjoying the staccato Spanish music and dance that occupied the stage across the river. Beyond, Andi knew, was *La Villita*, the little village of century-old crafts. But that was for *mañana*, tomorrow.

It was still hot when she walked back through the river entrance of the Palacio, so Andi stopped in her room just long enough to change into her swimsuit. Then she headed for the fifth floor deck that held the hotel's swimming pool. Once there, she dropped her

swim top and towel on one of the plastic chairs and slipped into the cool water. It felt wonderful after the heat of the day. She slid into a lazy crawl and did a couple of easy laps, luxuriating in the smooth friction of the water against her skin, particularly on her head.

Again her new hairstyle did its job, slicking into place as the water flowed away. She drifted to a stop in the middle of the pool and floated effortlessly in the cool water, soaking up the warm sun. When she had enough, she rolled over and kicked her way to the bottom of the clear pool, then pushed to the surface and pulled herself out onto the Spanish tile border. Walking over to her lounge, she sat down. Then she noticed all the men.

There were only a few women on the roof. Over half the unattached males seemed more than a little interested in her. Andi pulled her sunglasses from her purse and put them on. This is interesting, she thought. I'm tempted to play the sassy and mysterious beauty to the hilt.

Then she discovered that she was already well on her way. Andi had completely forgotten about loosening the lace that closed the front of her suit, and was showing a lot more of her cleavage than she usually did. She thought about closing it up, but couldn't think of any way to do so without being obvious. *How could I have overlooked that when I glanced in the mirror? Did I just check my hair, or was there something about the short style that made the greater exposure more appropriate? I'll have to think about that.*

But for now, she just laid back and basked in the

warmth of the setting sun, watching the men. There wasn't a romance hero in the lot, although the two swimming laps came close. But they swam doggedly, obviously out for the exercise, and she wasn't interested in anyone who could ignore the lazy beauty of the San Antonio skyline silhouetted against the last blush of the evening sky.

Andi thought about going over to sit in the hot tub, and pushed her sunglasses up onto her head to see better into the shade. It was crowded with men, and one of them was Mack Stone. He caught her eye, and she was sure he recognized her.

For a minute Andi thought he was going to come over, but the big man next to him said something, and he relaxed. With my luck, she thought, he'd been reminded about his wife. Although he wasn't wearing a ring when I bumped into him.

Then Andi had to wonder why she'd even noticed that, much less remembered it.

With the sun down it began to get cool, so she gathered her things and went back down to her room. After combing her hair into shape, she pulled on a T-shirt and checked the TV schedule.

The cable movie channel was showing one of her favorite black-and-white versions of the battle of the Alamo, but it didn't start for a quarter hour. She settled back and started rereading *Jewels*. Again she was swept up in the tumultuous first meeting, and only reluctantly set aside the book to turn on the movie.

But once the film began to run, she watched

closely. This was an unusually accurate representation of life during the dawn of Texas independence, and she found few faults as it told the story of the struggle against the overwhelming forces under the command of General Santa Anna. Then, just as the Mexican artillery started firing their first shots into the mission, Andi blinked. *Wait. There's Mack Stone on the wall.*

She leaned closer, getting a good look before the scene changed. It wasn't him, of course, but the actor looked enough like him to be a brother. She forgot about the plot and the historical accuracy, and scanned the background, catching glimpses of the bit actor three more times before he disappeared, thirteen screen days later, in the confusion of the last, successful, attack. As the credits rolled, she stretched, then turned to eye the scarlet-covered book lying in the center of the wide bed.

She decided against tempting herself with more of its fantasy. Instead, she turned out the light and crawled under the covers. *What would it be like? To have a wild romantic fling. To meet and fall suddenly in love with someone like Mack Braeburn. To live the romantic fantasy.*

"Romantasy," she murmured into the smooth coolness of her pillow. "Mack Braeburn is just a character in a book. And Mack Stone is probably nothing like him. The whole thing is too absurd to consider. There's quite enough adventure and romance awaiting me in the library tomorrow, locked in the historical references I need for my book."

Romance in Scarlet

And for some reason, I'm certain Mack Stone is not here to use the library.

Chapter Three:

Monday Morning

Monday morning was Andi's first research day. She decided to start it with a breakfast at El Comedor. She got there just in time to beat a mob of sightseers scheduled to leave on another tour bus. Not sure what she wanted to eat, she started with a cup of coffee.

The selections were as varied on the breakfast menu as they had been the evening before, everything from the standard platters of bacon and eggs to Southern favorites like grits, to Tex-Mex *huevos rancheros*. She decided to save the adventure for later; scrambled eggs sounded good.

When she looked up, she caught sight of Mack Stone just entering. The hostess spoke to him and shrugged, and when Andi looked around she saw that all the tables were full. By the time she looked back he was halfway across the room, heading straight for her.

"I lied," he said, and there was a twinkle in his

gray eyes. "I told her you were waiting for me. Are you going to come to the rescue or let them throw me out?"

She stalled, looking around at the crowded tables. *Sassy Lily Stephenson. My romantic heroine would take this completely in stride.* And so Andi returned his smile.

"I guess it's safe, as long as you behave, Mr. Mackenzie Stone from—" and she squinted at the small print on his nametag, "Fredericksburg. That's only twenty-five miles east of my hometown."

"You live in Kerrville? I've been meaning to get over there."

"My name's Andi Thomas."

"Folks call me Mack."

The waitress interrupted them. Andi ordered her eggs, and Mack decided on the same. "Got to have my morning coffee," he said. "One of my habits. At home I grind my own."

"You too? I'm so picky I usually drink something else when I'm eating out." Andi took a sip from her cup. "But the brew here is pretty good." They talked about coffee beans until the steaming plates arrived, then suspended conversation while they ate. But the silence is comfortable, Andi realized. He's no longer a stranger. I'm more comfortable eating breakfast with Mack than with some people I've known for years. But at the same time there's a tension between us, one I don't recognize.

Mack swallowed the last of his eggs, and reached for his mug of coffee. "New hairstyle?" he said. "I like

it."

She started. "How did you know?"

Looking as wise as possible, Mack reached up to his nape and pulled at his short hair. "It takes a week or so to get used to," he said, and the twinkle was back in his eye.

As soon as he touched the back of his head, Andi recognized the gesture as something she had been unconsciously doing. And he'll tease me about it unmercifully, she thought.

"Perhaps I should pull your hair instead," she offered. *How far can I let this go? He's back in a suit, this one dark blue, and the light summer cloth hugs his body in a way that leaves little to my imagination. Not that my imagination is idle.*

She pictured him dressed in fringed buckskin and broadcloth, like the man on the wall. Finally Andi realized he was waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about last night," and she told him about the movie, and seeing him.

"Couldn't have been me," he chuckled. "I've never been to the Alamo."

Andi recoiled in mock horror, "Never been to the Mission San Antonio de Valero? Never been to the Shrine of Texas Liberty? Are you a *damn Yankee*?"

He almost choked on a bite of bacon. "I was born in Midland, Texas, thank you, and believe it or not there are a lot of folks from West Texas who haven't visited the Alamo. It is three hundred and fifty miles away."

"Well, it's only three and a half blocks from here,"

she lectured, "see to it that you don't miss the opportunity."

He leaned forward and his gray eyes locked on hers. Andi had the feeling she had just stepped into a bottomless pit. "Will you take me?"

"Me?" Her voice squeaked. "Why?"

"It would be so much more interesting with a guide along. 'Mission San Antonio de whatever,' you said. You are an expert, aren't you?"

Andi caught her breath. "De Valero. I guess so. Librarians are supposed to know everything."

"Librarians are also supposed to have long hair and matronly figures. I guess I'll just have to take what I can get." His laughing eyes did not look dismayed at the prospect.

"The Alamo closes in the evening," Andi said. "We'd have to go during the day, and you'll be busy with your conference. Too bad."

Mack pulled out a folded schedule. "As a matter of fact, I have free time tomorrow. Would four be early enough?"

Just how serious a game is he playing? Andi wondered. I guess I can go a little further. Carefully.

Mack continued, "I'll pick you up." The pen he held paused, and Andi saw the mischievous twinkle return to his eyes. "Room number?"

She wasn't ready to go that far. "We'll meet in the lobby, thank you, and walk. Not that I don't trust you," she said, but she let her expression show him the lie. "Anyway, this is about as close as we can park. And the main reason I'm going is to do some

research.”

“I was wondering why you were here, since I hadn’t seen any signs about a librarian’s convention. Are you writing a book?”

The innocent question prodded into her broken wedding plans, but Andi managed not to show it. “Yes, on pioneer Texas women. I’ll be spending most of this week in the San Antonio Public Library, just down the river.” She reached for another sip of coffee, but the cup was empty. She realized her breakfast was finished, and she had no idea what the food tasted like.

“Tomorrow at four,” he reminded. “And I’ll be here for breakfast. Would you like to join me? Voluntarily, that is.”

Andi chuckled. “Before the tour group this time?” She shouldered the bag holding her laptop and notepad and walked out into the bright August sunshine. She swung off down the Riverwalk in a loose stride that she knew did wonderful things to her pert behind. Glancing back, she caught him checking his watch. *Is he wondering if there’s enough time before his first meeting for a cold shower?*

Andi continued west along the Riverwalk, already thronged with people heading out into the day. Even this early the bright August sun had pushed the temperature into the nineties. It was a good thing she’d revised her wardrobe. She walked through the now-deserted Arneson River Theater, crossed over a little stone bridge to the other side, and found herself behind San Antonio’s Main Library and Information

Center. *Not a bad commute.*

She climbed the wide stone steps back into the modern city and went through the glass and steel entrance. It was just past nine o'clock, and the library was still opening up. She walked past the checkout counter and headed for the information desk. The tall man seated behind it was on the telephone, but a map of the library posted on a nearby partition gave Andi the answer she was seeking. Quickly she found her way to the third floor, and the administrative office.

But as she left the elevator, she stopped. In the midst of an exhibit of early Texas flags was one bearing the likeness of a woman. She stood proudly, a saber in her left hand, as if she was about to advance into battle. Her right breast was bare. Andi detoured closer to read the card tucked into the bottom left corner of the frame. It told her that this banner was the only one carried by the Texas army at the Battle of San Jacinto. She got out her notebook.

The banner had been presented to a volunteer company from Newport, Kentucky. At the ball held in their honor the night before they left, one of the belles had given James Sylvester her long evening glove. The young ensign had carried it, fastened above the flag, into the battle.

"As usual," Andi grumbled, "the name of the woman isn't noted. Still, it's an interesting story, and maybe a little digging can turn up more." She walked across the lobby and into the office. There she introduced herself to the secretary and asked for Helena Alvarez.

"Bueno," Helena said as Andi was announced into her office. "It is a great pleasure to finally meet you, *amiga*. We have talked so often on the telephone." Her chocolate eyes were as soft as the midnight curls that brushed her shoulders. She firmly shook Andi's hand. "Are you just visiting, or is there some way we can help you?"

"I'm here to do some personal research," Andi replied, "and you've already helped. I took some notes from your flag display on the way in. What I want to do with my book is trace Texas history from the 1800s by telling the stories of ordinary women, with each life covering a different period of time."

"Then you will want a Dialog." Helena jotted a quick note as she continued. "You will need assistance setting up the computer inquiry to make sure you get complete results. David Lawless is one of our best researchers, and I believe he is free this morning. He can also help with the paperwork that goes along with underwriting by the Texas State Library. But be careful." Her dark eyes held a twinkle as she handed Andi the small square of yellow paper. "David is *un hombrón*, a hunk, and he knows it. If you encourage him, he will most likely suggest some 'alternate avenues' for research."

Andi took the note gingerly and held it at arm's length. Helena chuckled. "He is not actually dangerous. In fact, rumor has it he is not a bad date. I would consider it myself, did he not work for me."

Maybe he's just what I need, Andi thought, and the scarlet novel popped into her imagination.

Helena glanced at her watch. "I hate to rush," she said, "but I have a meeting in a few minutes. I invite you to use the staff break room while you visit. I can show you where it is on my way, and perhaps we will run across David."

She led Andi through the Technical Services area, past long shelves cluttered with books, to the very back of the library. As they turned left and started past several vending machines and a long table, Helena stopped. "*Buenos días*, David. This is Andi."

He certainly qualifies as a hunk, Andi thought. Except for his light hair, he could be Mack Braeburn. Tall, broad shouldered, and ruggedly handsome, he fits perfectly the part of Texas cowboy-type hero. He's even wearing a pair of sand-colored western boots. Helena explained what Andi needed and asked David to help her.

"Be my pleasure," he drawled as Helena left for her meeting. "You ever done a Dialog before?" He looked Andi over.

She found herself a little surprised at her lack of reaction. "No," she caught up, "but I've emailed for them for some of my patrons in Kerrville."

"Then as you know—" he started as they headed back through Technical Services towards his desk. But Andi found her mind wandering as he expounded about two hundred databases and ninety million records. *Here I am, walking alongside a man who could step onto one of those scarlet covers without even changing clothes. His slim western-style shirt and boot-cut slacks are molded to his rugged frame. Short sleeves reveal*

arms braided with muscle that could only be the product of carefully planned exercise. Yet my heart is just laying there in my chest, thumping along in its dependable rhythm. By the time she told him about her project, however, and they carefully defined the search topics she wanted covered, they were on better terms.

In addition to his handsome exterior, David quickly proved to be intelligent. He was truly enthusiastic about his job, and interested in Andi's project. "Your idea's a good one," he said as they finished. "That part of frontier history was neglected for a long time. I've seen a lot of interest in it lately, though, 'cause of women's lib. But there are a lot of holes left. They just take more work. Hey, I have a break coming up. How 'bout a Coke?"

"Some other time," Andi responded. "I'm anxious to get to work." She stood and held out her hand, and he shook it with an easy, firm grip, not the macho bonecrusher she half expected. *There might be more to this man than I expected, if I can gather the interest to find out.*

David showed her where the other reference tools she needed were. "Your Dialog should be ready in about three days," he finished.

Andi took the elevator back down to the first floor and found the Information and Ready Reference area. But as she went through the files and volumes, taking notes on references she wanted to look up, she found herself wondering about her reaction, or rather her lack of reaction, to the handsome David. She stared at the blinking cursor on the screen. *Has good sense finally*

caught up with my imagination? Is my mind trying to tell me how foolish it is to believe in scarlet-clad romance novels?

When she caught herself leaning against one of the tan filing cabinets, staring off into space and blocking the drawer a high-school age girl wanted, Andi decided to find the Texana section and start in on a couple of the books she had discovered. Maybe that way she would be more resistant to distraction.

The reading area closest to the library's Texas books was in a corner, bordered on two sides by tall windows that let the bright August sun flood the space with indirect light. Andi set her laptop on one of the round tables, claiming a space that looked out over the busy street outside. Turning to the dark brown metal shelves she found three of the books that would be helpful for preliminary fact-finding and returned to the table.

It didn't work. She was soon daydreaming again. Andi slammed the heavy book shut and sighed. *I might as well get it over with.* Cupping her chin in one of her palms, she let her gaze wander through the arched window.

*Just what do I want from this vacation, from the time I'll spend outside of the library? It was simple enough to fantasize about romantic rendezvous as the big Texas sun set over the Riverwalk. But is it really possible? And is it what I want, to live for a week in a romantic fantasy? A 'romantasy'? Mack stepped into her imagination, but she wasn't sure whether it was Mack Braeburn, from *Jewels*, or Mack Stone, from a small-town computer*

store. *Is that the attraction? Did the names just link the two, the fiction and the reality, in my mind?*

The questions stumbled around in a mad dance, leaving no room in her head for answers. Andi's free hand was at the back of her head, her slender fingers dragging painfully through what was left of her hair.

Blinking, she eased her head around. The pain was coming not from her head, but from a nagging crick in her neck. She rubbed it out, then stood and stretched. It was time for lunch. A rumble of hunger told her that deep thought would have to wait. Andi packed up her computer and headed for Helena's office. She would know of a good place to eat.

They met by the elevator. "Share what I brought," was her friend's answer. "I have plenty. You may buy the drinks."

They headed down the steps toward the river. "There is a bench on a little peninsula under a huge tree," Helena continued. "I like to sit and watch the traffic on the river while I eat."

"Are there many boats?" Andi asked.

Her friend's smile was hot with the blood of her Castilian ancestors. "*Si*," she murmured. "We can watch boats if you prefer. But you are on vacation. We can find more interesting sights, and maybe dream a little."

Helena's sandwiches were built with spicy fajitas—thin, tender strips of marinated beef doggy-bagged home from a Mexican cafe. Their conversation was just as tangy. The two women shed their professional decorum and for an hour giggled like schoolgirls as

they swapped naughty speculations about the men who passed along the sidewalk.

It was just what Andi needed. When she returned to work her imagination, tired from running loose, took a nap. The afternoon passed quickly, and by the time Helena came back down Andi had pages of notes and references.

"How are you doing, *amiga*?" Helena's dark eyes glanced at the screen. "*Bueno!* But you are not intending to work all night, are you?"

"Just finished. I thought I'd go back to the Palacio and lie around the pool." Andi used her most innocent voice. "You don't know of anything *else* to do in San Antonio, do you? For a country cousin?"

Helena chuckled. "I think we may be able to discover something."

Chapter Four:

Monday Evening

Andi gathered her books and they walked up the river to the Palacio del Rio. When they entered Andi's room, Helena murmured, "*Fantasia*."

"It is a little fancy for a librarian," Andi agreed. "But with summer rates, it was a good place for—" she almost said honeymoon. "For a special trip." Before Helena could catch the slip, Andi asked, "What am I dressing for?"

"There is a dance troupe from Madrid appearing in the Arneson Theater tonight, so wear slacks. We can eat at the Village Inn, then I need to shop for a birthday gift before the show."

An hour later they left the inn, full of chicken roasted to perfection over a slow Mesquite fire. "Whose birthday?" Andi asked.

"Mama's," Helena replied. "But first I need to visit John Little's Boot Shop. My father has a pair of boots ready, and he asked me to pick them up."

They walked out into the bright sunlight and

turned right into La Villita, a century-old Mexican plaza full of shops.

Mack was in front of them. Wearing tan slacks and a lighter blue pullover shirt, he strolled across the plaza with another man. Andi watched as they looked into a door, then entered a shop called Texas Potpourri.

"Which one?" Helena asked.

Andi looked back. Her friend had stopped walking. "What?"

"You did not look at the river traffic in that way. Which of those *hombres* caught your eye? The blond was most handsome." Her teasing eyes glanced over toward the shop. "I might find something for Mama in there."

"I thought you had to get to the bootmaker."

"And spoil your vacation? Now, which one?"

"I had breakfast this morning with the one in the blue shirt," Andi confessed, then watched dark brows climb over chocolate eyes. "It was perfectly innocent, I assure you. There were no empty tables, so we shared one. We just happened to bump into each other yesterday at an exhibit." Andi finally realized Helena was trying not to laugh, and gave up trying to explain. "Are we going to pick up those boots, or not?" she demanded.

"*Bueno*, 'country cousin', but I do not think I need to show you what there is to do in San Antonio." They walked on towards the leather shop.

"Having breakfast at the same table hardly qualifies as life in the fast lane," Andi said. "I have to

admit the Riverwalk is a romantic setting. But the chances of anything happening between me and a computer store manager are a million to one."

As they climbed the narrow steps into John Little's, Helena looked over her shoulder and asked, "Are you again having breakfast together?"

Andi didn't need to say anything; her friend read the answer in her expression. As Helena presented her ticket to the bootmaker, Andi looked around the cluttered shop.

Convincing Helena is impossible, she thought, so why am I still thinking about all the reasons why nothing was going to happen? Am I trying to convince myself? Andi decided to forget the subject, and concentrate on having a good time with Helena.

This leather shop could have seen the birth of the Texas Republic. Just down the street at the Cos House a Mexican general surrendered San Antonio to the Texians, three months before the battle of the Alamo. Some of the volunteers that defended the mission could have stopped in a shop just like this one, needing boots repaired after the long journey from the United States. Maybe the man on the wall. The one who looked like Mack. He might have come in here. Mack could have – It took an elbow in the ribs to drag her back.

"You have that same look," Helena said. "Should we head toward Texas Potpourri now?"

"No!" Andi snapped. *Careful. It's not Helena's fault you can't keep your mind from straying.* More evenly she continued, "Tonight I'm trying to have a good time with my friend, who teases a little too much."

"Then I will quit, and we will have a good time," Helena said. "But I think my teasing was not all that sharp, *mi amiga*, unless there is more than you have told. However, that is between you and the tall *hombre* with the blue shirt, and none of my business."

Andi smiled and took Helena's smaller hand in hers as they headed back across the street. "You're right. I'm sorry I snapped at you. Let's forget the whole thing, and concentrate on us."

"Only because I have a boyfriend," Helena responded. She was trying to sound innocent.

"You're in love, so you think you know what's going on with me?" Andi asked, not sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"Oh, no." Helena's eyes were twinkling. "Because of the blond he was walking with. *Muy hombre*, that one. But now you will not introduce me."

"Not on a bet," Andi agreed. "Are you always this way?"

She laughed, but Andi felt a twinge of pain through Helena's hand. She pulled her friend to a stop and searched her eyes.

"No," Helena confessed. "I am not. And I lied. I no longer have a boyfriend. He thought I was not enough of a lady. So perhaps I have been overreacting."

She squeezed Helena's hand. "I don't think so. As far as I'm concerned you're *muy* ladylike. Or however you say it. At least you're willing to try again."

Helena laughed. "It is '*muy como señora*'. I wish you would tell Mama, she still thinks I am a young girl."

Now, speaking of trying again—" She pulled Andi around.

Mack and his friend were ten steps away.

"Hello, Andi," he said.

"Mack," she said.

It took him a moment to realize more was needed.

"This is Steve," Mack continued.

"This is Helena."

Mack finally pulled his thoughts together. "Are you looking for a place for dinner?"

"We already ate." Andi replied. *Drat, Steve is wearing a wedding ring. A new one.*

"We had to go to a reception over in the Plaza Nacional, or I'd have eaten earlier."

"I'll be inside."

I didn't say that, Andi thought, then realized that Helena had. She held on to her friend's hand and said, "No. Wait, I'll go with you." She looked back at Mack, and he seemed to have the same trouble gathering his thoughts.

"I'll see you at breakfast, then," he finally said. The two men turned and walked away, but he looked back. Andi waved, and then followed Helena into the shop.

The little stone room was hot with the passionate scent of steaming oil, and the deep breath Andi took only reinforced the heat that filled her body. She looked at Helena. Her friend was grinning, but she wisely turned to the clerk without saying anything. Andi looked around the room. They were in Artes Metalicas, so it was filled with metal sculptures; most

of them intertwined lovers.

Whoa! She reined her imagination and looked around with clearer eyes. *Actually there are only a few pieces featuring man and woman, and most of them are dancing, not embracing.*

Helena finished placing her order and turned toward Andi. "I envy you, *mi amiga*," she said.

"Was it that obvious?"

"That you came in here by the hot forge to cool off? Si." Helena was chuckling as they left the shop.

"What about you?" Andi asked, trying to change the subject. "I thought you wanted an introduction to your blond *hombre*."

She shook her head. "He was wearing a wedding ring."

"I didn't notice," Andi lied, and watched the grin spread back across her friend's petite features. Before Helena could say anything she continued. "Isn't it almost time for the show?"

"The box office is open," Helena replied. "But the performance will not start for over an hour. You should have time to calm yourself before listening to the passionate music of Spain." She let her words sound cool. "It is too bad your Mack did not decide to stay with us."

"Helena." Andi gave her a look of warning. "I think I'm finding out how your Mama sounds when she talks about your love life."

Helena's dark eyes did their best to look innocent.

They bought tickets, then spent an hour examining exquisite jewelry in Chamade's, wandering through

the Southwest Craft Center Galleria, and admiring the sculpture in the La Villita Clay and Leather Company. Andi had to keep reminding herself that Mack and his friend were eating, not shopping, so it was no use looking around for them. She didn't succeed very well.

"We are not so plump," Helena said.

Andi glanced down at the sculpture they were supposed to be looking at. It was a black stallion, lean and arrogantly masculine. "Plump?" she questioned.

Helena rolled her eyes and murmured, "We could have eaten dinner again."

Andi groaned. "Enough! You said you were going to quit teasing, but I see it's impossible. It's eight-fifteen, let's go find our places." She pulled her laughing friend from the shop and across the plaza. The center section was full when they arrived, so they chose a grass-covered seat halfway down on the left side. The wrong side, Andi discovered. Just as the lights on the stage across the river brightened, she spotted Mack and his friend heading for a spot halfway down the right aisle.

Helena caught her gasp, and looked across all the people in the wide center section. She also caught Andi's warning glance, and didn't suggest moving.

Andi watched Mack glance around as he was sitting down, and their looks met across the wide amphitheater. He checked quickly around his seat, then looked back towards Andi, and she could tell what he was thinking. There were no free places by either of them. In fact, the whole hillside was full.

They shared anyway. From the staccato rhythm of the first black-clad dancers to the whirling kaleidoscope of colorful costumes that led into the intermission, Andi could feel him by her side. Even though he sat clear across the hillside, when the high tenor voice of the lead singer filled the theater with a lilting Spanish love song, she could feel Mack's hand around hers. By intermission, she was misty-eyed.

Helena pulled her to her feet before the audience quit applauding and hauled her toward the top of the hill. Andi glanced across and saw Mack's blond friend pushing him up the other aisle, a gleeful look on his handsome face. She looked at the dark-haired woman she was following, and found the same expression. "Where are you taking me?" Andi asked.

"I need to use the restroom," Helena replied. She dropped her in front of the theater building's high porch just before Mack's friend did the same. All Andi could do is lean against the rough adobe finish and look up into his eyes.

Mack looked down into hers. He fumbled for something to say. "Are you enjoying the show?"

"Yes, very much." They talked about the music because it was something to do while they stood, not quite touching. Helena and Steve returned just as Mack reached for the soft hand spread across the rough wall.

"My car is still at the library," Helena said to Andi. "Are you going to walk me back?"

Looking distracted Andi answered, "I guess so."

"I have to go back to my room and call home,"

Steve said to Mack.

It took Mack a moment to get the message. "I'll walk with you to the library," he finally said. The house lights blinked for the end of the intermission. "I guess we'd better go back to our seats."

"I guess so," Andi agreed, reluctantly. She pushed away from the wall and the two women started back down the left aisle.

Andi sat back down and glanced across at Mack as the lights dimmed and the stage again filled with dancers. It looked like his friend was already teasing him.

"It is not fair," Helena muttered. "I have the next two days off." She turned to Andi. "I suppose you would object if I ask you to leave messages with my secretary, so I could call and find out how you are doing?"

Andi's answer was a withering look and a feline "Meow" that ended in a strangling noise.

"The fate of the cat." Helena chuckled. "No more curiosity, then, until I return. It is still not fair."

They shared a warm smile, then settled back to enjoy the music. The second half of the program was different. Instead of romance, it featured the wild songs of Spanish patriots. By the time the cast assembled on the stage for the encore, Andi had gathered her wits and was ready to calmly walk along the river with her two friends. She felt a moment of panic when everyone stood for the final ovation. "How are they going to find us," she asked.

"Steve and I arranged for us to meet by the bridge,

just below the theater," Helena replied. Andi wasn't sure that made her feel any better. But by the time the men fought their way through the disintegrating crowd to where Helena and Andi stood at the foot of the stone arch, she was ready to calmly shake Steve's hand and watch as he turned back towards the Palacio del Rio.

The three crossed the river and started down towards the library, chatting about the Spanish music and dance they had just watched. Helena ended up doing most of the talking. Because she spoke Spanish, she explained a couple of the jokes she had caught and told Andi and Mack about the background of several of the songs. Andi discovered that she was finally calm enough to talk intelligently, so she and Mack managed to hold up their end of the conversation.

Then Helena said, "*Adíos*," and Mack and Andi stood behind the library, watching her car disappear down the street. They were both thinking of the long blocks between them and the hotel, blocks they'd just realized they had to walk alone, together.

He looked at her. "You don't think we were intentionally set up, do you?"

"I don't know about Steve," she responded, letting disbelief soak every word, "but Helena would never even *dream* of it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He was silent, as they descended the stairs and started back along the river, and Andi wondered what he was thinking.

I know what's wrong, and it has scarlet covers. It's one

thing to fantasize about romantasy with a tall stranger. It's another thing entirely to deal with it when he appears. I need to take a long step back and think about what I want to get into.

"How are you doing?" Mack's voice sounded normal. Yet it echoed in her soul.

"Doing?" she asked. *Can he read my mind?*

"With your research." He glanced back at the steps. "That's where you go all day, isn't it?"

"The library. Yes." Her thoughts finally caught up. "I'm doing pretty well. But there are other places I want to visit."

"Like the Alamo."

"Yes." Andi searched her blank mind for something else to say. *Why can't I carry on a simple conversation with this man? Why can't I get my mind out of the scarlet novel?*

"Like that?" he asked.

She had to catch up again. He was pointing to a picture in brightly glazed square tiles, set in one stone wall of the Riverwalk. 'Old Mill Crossing', it said, 'Last known place where horses drank and crossed the river.' Andi laughed and Mack joined her, the sound echoing across the dark water snapped the tension between them.

"Yeah, I guess you could call that history." She walked closer and smoothed her fingers across the cool tile. The picture held a big tree like the ones they stood under as well as the old mill, now long gone. A buggy holding a couple was just entering the crossing, the horse reaching for the blue water, and a

tall man on horseback had just left it.

"Big Stetson, high boots. Typical Texas hero, isn't he," Mack said.

"But he has a mustache," Andi responded, before she could think.

Mack looked down at her. "Lots of men did back then," he said.

But you don't, she thought. Then she had to drag her imagination back again. "You're right," she agreed. Quickly.

History gave them a safe subject to talk about, as long as she stuck to the facts. They chatted easily while they walked back along the river, over the bridge, and past the now-deserted theater.

Andi was cool enough by the time they entered the Palacio that it seemed natural to stop by the elevator. "I'll be all right from here," she said. The door opened as soon as she pushed the button.

"Okay." Mack agreed. "I'll see you in the morning." Then the steel door slid shut between them.

Andi stepped out of the elevator and headed for the Coke machine. It wasn't until she dropped the coins into its shiny slot that her mind caught up. "Dummy," she muttered. "Why didn't you ask him to join you?" She wondered how he felt. *He would have joined me, I don't doubt that. But would we have finished our drinks?*

She felt sweaty, so she drew a lukewarm bath. After she undressed, she stood in front of the full-length mirror and tried to be critical of her

appearance. But all she could think of was the way Mack had looked at her. "This isn't helping," she muttered, and slipped into the tub.

Mack's image followed her. By the time she was ready to soap her breasts, her nipples were stiff and sensitive. She gave in, rubbing them until she was panting, then sliding both hands down under the water and into her pussy. She teased herself open and let the water spread her caresses. When she was trembling on the edge, she conjured up Mack's manhood in her mind and imagined what it would feel like. She slid two fingers inside and when she came, it was so hard she slopped tepid water all over the floor.

Chapter Five:

Tuesday Morning

The next morning, Mack beat Andi to the restaurant. Evidently Tuesday was an off morning for tour buses, and they had the place almost to themselves.

Mack waved across the room, then stood as she approached. He'd ordered coffee already, two steaming cups sat on the square table. Andi stirred in a single package of sugar and a little cream. When she looked up, she found Mack's eyes concentrating on her cup, as if he was more than interested in how she liked her coffee.

He glanced up and chuckled. "I really can't tell anything about you by the way you fix it," he said, "but I like to try."

"After yesterday you know enough about me. It's your turn to answer questions."

"The first one is usually 'Am I married'." Something dark flickered in his gray eyes, but he quickly pushed it away. "The answer is no."

Andi hesitated, then decided that it was not the

time to probe any deeper. Instead she looked down at his nametag. "I suppose you're here for the computer conference."

He glanced down and straightened the plastic-covered rectangle. His fingers were long, Andi thought, yet strong enough not to be slender. They would look equally at home darting to-and-fro on a keyboard or wrapped around the polished wooden stock of a flintlock rifle.

"...computer store in Fredericksburg." Andi had missed his first words. "This conference is supposed to tell me how well I'm running it. So far the sessions have been pretty good." He quit trying to look serious. "Besides, the company paid for it, and at least it got me away from the store for a while."

"It sounds like your whole life isn't wrapped up in hardware and software."

Mack shrugged. "I like my job. I'm interested in computer applications, and I'm pretty good at managing the store. But like you, I really want to be a writer."

Andi shook her head. "I enjoy being a librarian. My writing is strictly a sideline. I got interested in frontier women through the genealogies research group that meets in our building, and just decided to write down some of the things I found out about them. They were a pretty special bunch."

Mack leaned closer, listening and Andi wondered why she was telling him so much about herself. She leaned closer, mimicking him. "I said we were going to talk about you this morning. I'm not going to be

distracted. What do you write?"

He chuckled, "A true librarian. I've published two western short stories and I'm working on a novel."

"You write westerns, and you haven't taken the trouble to visit the Alamo? Where do you do your research?"

"I said I wrote westerns, not history books. I grew up watching 'Bonanza' and 'Gunsmoke' on TV. I was born in West Texas. What else do I need to know?"

It took Andi a couple of seconds to put together a coherent answer. "What about historical accuracy? Surely you don't want to make mistakes?"

"About who really went where and did what a hundred and fifty years ago? Who cares?" Mack dismissed all of recorded history with a wave of his hand, and the gesture struck Andi like a slap across her face. Ignoring her shock, he continued, "If you worry about all the details, you might as well write computer programs. Readers want an exciting story with lots of action and romance. And I'm careful about mistakes. None of my six-guns shoot more than half-a-dozen shots without reloading."

"That's an excellent example." Andi's voice rasped with the tone she used on misbehaving children. "No real cowboy would load all six chambers of a single action revolver. It's too dangerous. Any blow on the hammer could fire the cartridge under it. Your fusillades should be limited to five shots."

"Picky, picky, picky. One lousy bang. Typical librarian, worrying about dumb little things like that."

"You better believe it. As a librarian I've seen too

many readers dump an author's book down the return slot and swear never to read another because of 'dumb little things like that'."

Mack leaned back. "Well, you'll get your chance this afternoon."

Andi was lost. "To dump your book down a return slot?"

"I was referring to our trip. We are still going to see the Alamo, aren't we?"

"Oh, that. I guess so, if you're sure you can stand spending time in a dusty historical site with a musty old librarian."

Mack looked her over. The gleam in his slate eyes told her that what he was seeing was neither old nor musty. His voice softened, "I think I can put up with it." Then he stood.

Andi looked down at the cleaned plate in front of her and blinked. She couldn't remember ordering, much less eating what her full stomach said must have been a hearty breakfast. She finished the last sip of her coffee. *Just how interested am I getting in this infuriating man?*

After they paid, she waved to Mack and started toward the library. She could feel his eyes on her, and resisted the urge to roll her hips for him.

Andi checked back into the predictable world of research and started looking up the books on her list. She ran into the usual problem. There was simply too much material on the shelves. She had to constantly fight the temptation to pick up the book that happened to be next to the one she really wanted, to

read just a couple of chapters more than the one that had the information she required. It was true, 'No one who reads can clean out an attic'. And the shelves of a library were worse than any attic.

Why can't Mack see it? It's all those 'dry facts' that bring history to life and make it live in the minds of readers. Exaggeration's not necessary. There's enough romance in two people standing side-by-side facing nature and their fellow man to have to exaggerate the passions of love.

She flipped back and reread the first notes she had made, about the San Jacinto flag. *I wonder what Mack would think of that little tidbit of history? He probably thinks the Texians under Sam Houston won the battle that guaranteed their independence under a modern-day Lone Star banner.* Shaking her head, Andi banished the exasperating man from her thoughts, absorbing herself with taking notes and checking into other sources revealed during her reading. She did so well that it was noon before she slowed down long enough to stand in the narrow aisle and stretch.

She caught herself pulling at the short hair that lay close to her nape again, and wondered what Mack would think of her now. *My knees are dusty and my hands dry from handling books. I look more like the old Andi. Did the haircut really change me that much? Can I really be the sleek, sensual tigress of the swimming pool that Mack would probably prefer?*

She sighed. *Not likely.* Andi thought about breaking to eat, but since Helena wasn't there, decided against it. She went back to work.

It was almost two-thirty before Andi closed the last book and returned it to the shelf. She picked up her laptop and found her way back to the breakroom, where she sat down to sort through her notes and munch on a snack from the machine. David strolled in just as she was finishing.

"Thought I'd never get my break," he said as he flopped down beside her.

He shoved her trash toward the center of the table and replaced it with a cup of hot water. When he had stirred in a package of instant coffee, he smiled and turned to her. "How's the book coming?"

For some reason his question, even though it was so like Mack's, didn't prod into her recent history. Maybe it's because he's a fellow researcher, Andi thought. She waved a hand over the computer. "I'm doing pretty well."

"Surely you're not planning to spend all your time hitting the books? Everyone needs a break." He was smiling. *He's leading into something.* It startled her, and she wondered at that reaction. *Am I really so out of practice?*

He was still waiting for an answer, and she had to reach back in her memory for the question. "No, I also want to do some relaxing." And some thinking, she promised silently.

"Then maybe you'll let me show you some of San Antonio. How about having dinner with me. I'm free on Thursday."

"I'd love to," she said, and surprised herself again. Andi pulled her long fingers away from the soft hair

that lay against her neck. *I must have slipped back into the sassy Andi.*

"I'll pick you up about seven-thirty," he said, as he jotted down her room number.

As he walked back toward the main part of the library Andi wondered, Now, why did I give the number to him, and not to Mack? Maybe it's because he looked more like the romantic heroes pictured on scarlet covers. At least the two of us will have lots to talk about, both being in research. The only thing Mack and I agreed on so far was the importance of well-made coffee.

Andi jumped. Mack's name reminded her of their plans. She glanced at her watch. It was three-fifteen. If she was going to change clothes before meeting him she was going to have to hurry.

She walked quickly back along the Riverwalk, reviewing the history of the two weeks in 1836 when Santa Anna's massive army had besieged the little band of Texians holed up in the small adobe mission. Many of the Mexican soldiers had probably camped along the river she followed; certainly most of them had gathered water from it. The trees that shaded her had shaded them.

Andi found herself wondering about the women. *Some would have fled the battleground. And perhaps some had found companionship among the men surrounding the Alamo. I wonder if any of them loved someone inside.*

She thought about how it would feel to watch wave after wave of infantry and cavalry smash at a fortress that held your lover, while you stood helpless

outside. She stopped for a moment, her palm cooling against the glass in the modern entrance to the Palacio, feeling like she had taken a wrong turn.

Then she gathered her scattered thoughts back to the present and headed toward the elevator. She was almost up to her floor when she realized why the imaginary situation felt so personal. *It was Mack in my imagination. He was the man on the wall, looking with dismay past the cannon arrayed upon the open plain, trying to catch sight of me.* The doors slid aside and she headed down the hall toward her room, shaking her head. *It must have been the movie. My imagination is totally working overtime.*

Chapter Six:

Tuesday Afternoon

She barely made their rendezvous. Her watch said precisely four o'clock when she stepped off the elevator and walked around the corner to find him waiting by a rack of tourist propaganda. He'd changed clothes too. He wore a wine-colored knit shirt tucked neatly into gray slacks that were two shades darker than his eyes. Then he caught sight of her and his eyes darkened until they did match. Andi smiled.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he said.

"Not a chance," she replied, and turned toward the door, forcing him to pursue. She was not about to tell him what she was thinking. *It's the first time we've been together when he wasn't wearing a nametag. It doesn't matter. There's no way I can forget his name. Not after my vigil by the river.*

He caught up to her in time to hold the door as they stepped out into the August heat. Even under the awning the sun was fierce, reflecting from the

concrete that surrounded them. Andi turned left, dodged traffic across the drive, and headed into the heart of downtown San Antonio.

Then she noticed Mack was only half-listening to her guidebook description. He was hanging back a half-pace so he could watch her instead of the locations she was pointing out.

She stopped. He almost ran over her. "Penny for *your* thoughts," she said. It was no use trying to lie, so he stepped closer.

Andi looked up into eyes gray as ash on burning coals. There was half-an-inch of August air between them, and it was Texas hot. His left hand found her waist and smoothed across it in a touch that was feather light, yet drove the breath from her lungs. His other fingertips traced a path across the bare top of her shoulder and up her neck. When they rasped through prickles of new hair and brushed into the soft fringe at her nape Andi knew that only his left hand was holding her on her feet.

A pedestrian from outside their world jostled them, and they dropped back into the downtown crush of skyscrapers, people and cars. Andi filled her lungs with new air while she searched for something to say. Taking a step back, she finally stammered, "I think I'll save my penny." Mack smiled and reached for her arm, and it took all Andi's willpower to dredge up the past and turn the subject back a century and a half as they continued toward the Alamo.

Then they spotted the little boy. Wide-eyed,

obviously enthralled with the big city, he was bombarding his weary parents with a steady stream of 'Wows' and 'Look theres' as they trudged down the street.

"I bet it was like that back then," Andi said. She looked up and watched his black eyebrows gather over puzzled eyes. "Think about it. A kid that old would have spent all of his eight or so years in a sleepy little mission town. Then one day it was the heart of a revolution. The Mexican army had ten or maybe even a hundred times as many people as he'd seen in his whole life. What with cannon, lancers, wagon trains, cattle herds, sappers cutting every straight tree for miles around to make ladders. I bet every child around was as excited as that one is about visiting the city."

The family turned left at the corner, and Mack and Andi walked the last half block in silence. His hand slid down her soft forearm, and just as they entered Alamo Plaza, his fingers tightened around hers. They stopped for a moment on the corner and looked across the wide plaza at the low stone shrine nestled among the tall stores, offices and hotels in the heart of the city. Like the Riverwalk, it belonged to another age.

Instead of turning toward it, they continued along the west side of Alamo Boulevard, past the Army-Navy Store selling the surplus of a different war. They crossed the street into the park in the middle of the plaza and stood looking up at the towering monument to the men who had died here. Mack eyed

the long roll of names inscribed on the white stone. "I suppose you know how many," he said.

"One hundred eighty eight."

He looked across the asphalt street at the white stone and mortar buildings-the low wall to the left, the famous shape of the façade of the chapel set back in the courtyard, the arched colonnade extending from it to the right. "It doesn't seem real."

When Andi looked up, startled, he swept his arm around the bustling plaza and continued. "Here's a monument to men who died over there in a mission. But it's sitting in the middle of a city. It's as out of place as that horse-drawn carriage over there behind that modern city bus. If you're a historian, and only concerned with cold facts, maybe it means something to you. But I can't see it."

Andi pulled her hand from his and faced him. "You would have believed it on the morning of March 6th, 1836, if you'd have been standing here watching half the Mexican army coming at you."

Mack started toward the entrance. "It would mean more to me if I could see Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Travis looking over the chapel wall."

"That's what I mean," Andi snapped. "They weren't there. The actors or the real people they were portraying. Yet that's where you see them in story after story. And what about the other hundred and eighty-five men? Surely at least one or two of them were interesting enough to research."

"One or two, maybe. But you'd probably spend hours looking up one of them, and then find out he

was a storekeeper or something. When people read a book they want to be excited."

Just before they reached the chapel entrance Andi pulled him to a halt.

"Isn't that what you are, a storekeeper?"

Mack looked down into her sapphire eyes, and he knew she was angry. "Are you saying I'm exciting?" he asked.

"I can't decide," she said, and smiled. "Either exciting or infuriating."

"Then how about a truce?" He started toward the door again. "Let's just enjoy the sights." When her eyebrows gathered in disbelief he continued, "Honest, I'm looking forward to seeing it." Mack watched her nod, then pause by the door to run her fingers reverently over the brass plaque that bore an inscription and the Alamo's hours of operation.

"I'm not sure what you see here," he said. "I was more impressed with the replica of the Alamo, built out in the middle of a dusty Texas plain near Brackettville, where the movie was made. Out there, hearing the clean wind sighing through the dried grass, I can get a better feel for the story of the thirteen-day siege. Here the sounds of car horns and tires are too distracting."

Andi just sighed. She smoothed her fingers across the dark brass of the plaque. She recited the quote she knew by heart. "Be silent, friend. Here heroes died to blaze a trail for other men." *Why can't Mack see it? This is real.* They walked past the massive wooden doors into the cool chapel. Like many of the couples

wandering from portrait to portrait, from display case to display case, they walked silently, absorbed in their own thoughts.

Andi found herself paying attention to the man beside her rather than looking again at the familiar treasures she usually came to see. She watched him grow quiet under the influence of the two and a half centuries of history held within the massive walls. They were almost to the rear of the big room when one of the guides quietly announced the lecture. Andi pulled Mack over to the glass-covered case that held the Alamo model.

The story the gentle-voiced man reverently recited was familiar to Andi, but she knew Mack was hearing it for the first time. She felt him lean forward slightly as the final stations of the three commanders were pointed out. Travis had died first, in the northwest corner, when Santa Anna's reserve forced its way over the north wall. Crockett was caught in the courtyard, where he and his Tennessee volunteers were defending a hastily-built wooden barricade that closed the weakest part of the south wall. Bowie died in the chapel with the last defenders, too sick with typhoid-pneumonia to stand, but fighting savagely from his cot. She looked at Mack. *Is he making mental notes? Does he remember what he said about wanting to see all three over the chapel?* After the tale was completed they looked through the rest of the shrine, then walked out the side door toward the museum.

Mack took a deep breath as they stepped out into the bright sun. "I think I see what you mean," he said.

"It's like becoming part of the story. I wonder how anyone who reveres history as much as you do could work in there. But I don't see how anyone who doesn't like history could stand it either." Then he shook himself, and looked at her. "I was thinking of roots," he said, gesturing toward the ivies clinging tenaciously to the stones. "There are a lot of roots here. Is that what you find in your books?"

Mack stood, and they walked back into Alamo Plaza while Andi searched for words. She looked back over her shoulder at the familiar shape of the chapel, and finally said, "I'm not sure. Research is important, but it isn't everything. Even when I have all the facts, it takes visiting a place like this to tie them all together. I can stand inside those walls and really feel—" Andi broke off, not sure of what she was saying, even less sure of what she was admitting. *Of course research and writing about history excite me. Yet—*

Mack broke in. "History, to me, seems so fragmentary. Just bits and pieces from the past. Like back there." He waved a hand back at the Alamo as they turned and started back down Alamo Boulevard. "I lost count of how many famous men's razors we saw, as if what a man shaved with was important in remembering who he was. What I felt was the story behind what happened there. The minor details weren't that important."

"But isn't it the details that make sure the story is correct?" Andi asked.

"I guess so."

She thought, Mack looks as if he's having as hard a time explaining how he feels as I am.

They walked in silence for half a block. Then they were surrounded by the most delicious smell. Andi looked up as Mack grinned. "Let's worry about the past later," he said. "I think we just found something we can agree on."

"I think you're right," Andi said, and they turned into the Fuddrucker's Restaurant, sharing thoughts of fat, juicy hamburgers.

An hour and a half later they stepped back out onto the sidewalk, still chuckling over jokes from the newsletter Fuddrucker's distributed with their big sandwiches. That and a story about political shenanigans in the State government kept their conversation lively until they entered the Palacio's main lobby. But as they rode up on the elevator, Mack fell silent. Andi could feel a barrier lower between them. When they stopped in front of her door he said, "We're neighbors," but his voice was awkward. "My room is just down the hall."

Andi looked up. "I had a lovely time," she said, and the trite phrase, true as it was, sounded as strained as his.

The silence stretched unbearably, and finally Mack mumbled, "Well, I guess I'll see you for breakfast." Andi could think of nothing to do but enter her room and shut the door.

She stood, leaning against it. *What went wrong? Nothing makes sense. We haven't really resolved our difference of opinion about history, but that isn't anything*

he's shy about discussing. He doesn't seem like the kind of man who waits for a woman to take the lead in a relationship. And it isn't disinterest. If I'm sure of anything, it's that Mack is attracted to me. And I've made it obvious that I'm attracted to him.

With her eyes closed, she let her mind trace back across the hours they'd spent, silent, hand-in-hand, in the ancient mission that had become the cradle of Texas independence. Whatever he thinks of history, I can see him there. He may not have been one of the commanders, but I knew he would have been close behind Tapley Holland, the first man to cross the line Colonel Travis' sword scratched so indelibly in the dry earth. She pushed away from the door, shaking her head. Maybe morning will bring the answer.

Chapter Seven:

Wednesday

Wednesday morning, Andi's alarm didn't go off. When she sat down at the table, she was still hurrying too much to notice that Mack was worried. She'd finished ordering pancakes and bacon before she saw the frown on his face. "Is something wrong?" she asked, and watched the dull line of a blush rise from his collar.

"No, everything's okay." Mack mumbled, but he didn't seem too sure. Their conversation dragged from there, tripping across the weather and stumbling around the first rush of traffic outside, going nowhere. Silence stretched tighter and tighter between them as Andi wondered what had happened. His glances fled around the room until he had nowhere else to look, and he finally let her catch his gaze over her cup of coffee. She could feel wrinkles of worry gathered between her eyes.

"Dumb!" he said.

"What?"

"I feel like a teenager. I'm sitting here waiting for

the perfect opening to ask you for a date, and it isn't happening. I guess I'm out of practice."

"You? You did all right last time, when you talked me into going to the Alamo." Andi leaned forward and leaned her chin on one hand. "And you don't strike me as the shy type."

His gray eyes darkened. "Last time I surprised myself," he confessed. "It was last night that I choked. And yesterday wasn't as important as today." Then his eyes clouded and Andi felt him drift away.

"There's something else," she said softly. "Or someone else?"

"There used to be." Mack cleared his throat and looked down to where his fork probed aimlessly among the tumbled heaps of scrambled eggs on his plate. "I was married. A little over a year ago a drunk driver killed her." He took a deep breath, and when Andi's hand found his, returned her gentle squeeze.

Then he shook his head, scattering the gloom and banishing it from the table. "Maybe that's why I write about the past. Anyway, since then friends have fixed me up more times than I can count, and I've been out on dates with women I knew, but you're the first one I've met that really qualifies as 'asking for a date'."

Keep it light, she thought. "I won't ask what my qualifications are." Andi let a smile spread across her face and was glad to see the teasing twinkle she knew sparkled in her eyes spread to his.

He said, "I'll tell you anyway. I'm looking for a slender, demure young girl with waist-length dark hair who hates the thought of being anything but a

homemaker. Making my home."

Andi felt the chill of a ghostly hand on her shoulder. From the look that flashed behind Mack's eyes, she knew he'd told more than he'd expected to. It was all she could do to keep her smile in place. "Well," she said, by some miracle keeping her voice steady, "at least I'm slender."

"You forget," he murmured, and his eyes caught her reflection again, "I saw you by the swimming pool." His gaze traveled down across her body, and the caress warmed her smooth skin, bringing a flush to its surface. "Behind the plunging neckline of that black swimsuit, you have curves where slender girls don't even have places."

"That's what I like about writers," Andi said. "They always know the right words to shovel. Is that from one of your stories?"

He leaned back in his chair, and the boom of his laugh filled the dining room. "Did I mention that this girl I'm looking for should hang on my every word?"

"That's definitely not me." Andi heaved a theatrical sigh. "I'll let you hang on your own words."

"I wouldn't dare call you a girl, either. Or demure. But from the way you're pulling at what's left of it, I'd guess the waist-length hair was a possibility."

Andi brought her wandering hand back down to the table with a thump that rattled her silverware. "I suppose it would grow back out," she said, "but I don't think I'm going to let it."

"I suppose I'll just have to do without it."

"It would take more time than you have anyway."

Mack's thick eyebrows gathered in puzzlement. Andi continued, "Before the date you have yet to ask me for."

"I'm beginning to wonder what I've gotten myself into. But the offer stays open. Would you care for dinner, dancing and so forth? Or do you have another suggestion? I don't know much about San Antonio."

Andi caught her hand before it reached behind her neck, and considered how the new Andi should handle the situation. "Dinner and dancing sound fine," she purred. "We'll think about 'so forth' later. When?"

"Unfortunately I have a meeting tonight, and as chairman I can hardly duck out. How about tomorrow evening?"

"I have a date tomorrow," Andi said. She couldn't tell him how unusual that was. "It'll have to be Friday. About seven?"

"Sounds fine."

Andi could tell that he was surprised and uncomfortable about her other date, but he didn't say anything. She decided to leave him dangling, something the old Andi would never have done.

Not that it makes any difference. She tucked away the last bite of the fluffy pancake. *I'm about as far as I can be from the 'girl' he's looking for.* Andi glanced across the top of her napkin at him as she dabbed at her mouth. *He's not exactly the image of what I'm looking for either, even for this week.*

Then his slate eyes looked into hers, and all the calm, logical reasons why they could never suit each

other were swept fluttering from her mind. She found herself agreeing with something he had said. *Yesterday wasn't as important as today.*

Andi's Dialog wasn't ready yet, so she spent the day with her notes, looking up some of the less obvious references. On impulse she checked through a book on flags, and discovered more about the San Jacinto banner hanging upstairs. That led her to another work about Ensign Sylvester and a reference to a collection of letters that could be a valuable primary resource.

As she saved another completed note on her hard drive, Andi smiled. *The story is just the kind a romantic western writer would be proud to make up. I'll have to tell Mack about it.*

Andi stared out the big picture window, watching modern-day Texans, daydreaming about the flintlock rifle era. She could almost see past the concrete and asphalt to the adobe and dirt of that bygone day. *So many of the things I take for granted would have been different. The short distance between my home and Mack's would have been most of a day's journey. Back then the law presumed that even leaving the county was a major task. Running across state lines from the police wasn't a major problem until the cheap automobiles of the early 1900s spawned a rash of fast-moving holdup gangs.*

Then Andi noticed that the traffic in the real world outside was slacking off. A grumble from somewhere beneath her belt provided the reason. It was almost seven-thirty. Quickly she gathered her things and neatly stacked the books she'd been using.

But before she left the library she detoured across to the Western fiction. Scanning quickly across the long shelves, Andi pulled out the first book that caught her eye. The bold hero on the dust jacket could have been another Mack Braeburn. After all my careful research, she thought, it might be good to give in to impulse.

Instead, it was a disaster.

Chapter Eight:

Thursday Morning

Andi was still seething at breakfast Thursday morning. “The author pulled every dumb stunt in the book,” she told Mack, “including the ‘smell of cordite’ blunder.”

“Poetic license,” he dismissed. Mack finished stirring his second cup of coffee and looked up at her. “And what’s wrong with the smell of cordite? Everybody uses it.”

“No scholar would,” Andi snapped. “And no one who knows anything about shooting. Cordite was used in English military rifles in a completely different time period, on the other side of the world. This is just exactly what I’ve been telling you about. You have to know the time you’re writing about to do convincing historical novels. Details are important.”

Mack shook his head. “Not when they get in the way of the story. Readers don’t want to know all about the history of firearms. They want a strong, romantic tale that’s fast-paced and action-packed.

Who cares whether you call gunpowder cordite or whatever. Nobody really knows what either one of them smells like."

"So you just make something up, even if it's wrong. You don't have to do that. Just in the past week I've found lots of true stories that would make wonderful books. Yesterday I looked up one about a Kentucky lady. She was in love with the man who carried the flag into the battle of San Jacinto, and gave him her evening glove. He tied it to the top of the flag. With a little research you could probably get quite a novel out of that."

Mack dismissed her story with a wave of his hand. "And all your research will tell you is where and when she was born and how many sisters and brothers she had and how tall she was and a whole lot of other stuff that nobody cares about. The story is about the way they felt, what she saw in his eyes, how she cried when he left. And the passionate way they made love when he returned triumphant. The rest is frills."

"Frills!" Andi choked. The blueberry muffins on her plate were delicious, but she couldn't seem to choke them down. *This infuriating man cares nothing about my whole life.*

Mack seemed to be having trouble swallowing his toast. The silence stretched tighter between them until he just had to break it. "Do you still want to go tomorrow?"

Andi flinched. *He wants out of the date.* Well, she thought, letting logic subdue her surging emotions,

it's probably for the best. "I guess there really isn't any point."

She forced the last of the muffin down her throat and picked up her shoulder bag. They left the table at the same time, but they weren't together. As they paid even the cashier felt the chill that settled between them, and looked sad. Andi turned away, and ran into a man.

To keep from falling, she had to grab one of his arms, which wasn't difficult. He'd thrown them around her to avoid falling himself. His hearty laugh boomed through the lobby. "Anything hurt but your pride?"

Andi finally caught her breath. "I don't think so." She looked up. He was a big man. Then she recognized him from the swimming pool.

As rotten as the timing was, Mack had no alternative but to introduce them. "This is Stan Norris. He owns a computer store in Uvalde." He reached out, and Andi shook his hand.

Stan dropped Andi's hand reluctantly, and she glanced at Mack. *He seems uncomfortable. Is he worried about the new competition? His big friend's laugh is hearty evidence of a man who knows how to have a good time. Perhaps Stan is closer to what I need if I'm going to have a romantic fling. He isn't too handsome, and his fleshy face says he isn't one to worry about staying in shape. But that might be an advantage. He won't be one to let minor problems get in the way of having a good time.*

What should the new short-haired Andi do? For one thing, she'd quit pulling at her hair. "It's time for me to

go," she said.

"Mack told me you've been walking to the library every day." Stan's voice was as hearty as his laugh. "I have an hour free, so I was just going for a walk myself. Would you mind some company?"

Andi hesitated, giving Mack a chance to break in. He didn't. "Okay," she finally said.

Stan opened the outside door and asked, "What is your book about?" The question smoothed the awkward moment when she turned away and left Mack standing in front of the empty elevator.

They walked down the Riverwalk, and Andi found herself chatting easily about her project. Stan seemed interested or perhaps a little short of breath, so she ended up doing most of the talking. By the time they reached the stairs from the river back up to the modern world, he knew almost as much about her book as she did.

He paused just before they started up. "Would you have dinner with me tonight?"

No hesitancy here, Andi thought. "I have a dinner date tonight."

"Then how about Friday evening?"

And persistent. Or, she wondered, was it practice? Either way, the date with Mack was off. The new, sassy Andi would take the chance. "I'll meet you in the lobby about seven. Where are we going?"

"The Tower of the Americas. There's an excellent restaurant on top."

"And it's just down the street, so we can walk." Andi was surprised to see a frown flicker across his

face. It was no further than they had walked this morning. But his smile fell quickly back into place. *It must have been my imagination.*

"I'll see you at seven, then." His voice was as firm as the handshake he offered. Then he turned and started back up the winding river toward the Palacio.

What have I gotten myself into? Andi wondered as she skipped up the steps. But as she walked through the tinted glass doors, she thought of Mack. Suddenly it was much more important to wonder what she had gotten herself out of.

When Andi approached David's desk he smiled and flashed a triumphant thumbs-up. "Hot off the printer," he said, and rapped a knuckle on a thick computer printout. "Checking out all the references in this Dialog ought to take about a decade."

Andi chuckled. "I hadn't planned to work quite that long. How much do I owe?"

"After the Texas State Library kicked in, your share came to fifteen fifty." David exchanged Andi's three bills and two quarters for a receipt, which she tucked into her folder with the usual silent prayer that she wouldn't be required to produce it for an IRS audit. As he dropped her cash into a box, David joked, "If I sell a couple more we can really go someplace fancy." He looked up. "We are still on for tonight, aren't we?"

"Not if it's a choice between embezzlement and washing dishes. The Palacio is quite far enough 'up the river' for me."

He spread a big hand across his wide chest and heaved a sigh. "In that case I guess we'll stick to what

I earn legally. I was going to suggest one of the best German restaurants on the Riverwalk, the Little Rhein. It's next door to your hotel. Great steaks and good dark beer."

"That sounds wonderful. I'll be ready about seven."

David's thick eyebrows gathered in a frown. "I think I said seven-thirty. Seven's a little tight through afternoon traffic."

Oh, great, thought Andi. Next I'm going to have to buy a little black book to keep track of my dates. "I guess I was thinking of Friday." As soon as the statement slipped out, Andi realized how it sounded. She watched sandy eyebrows soar into startled arches.

Knowing a lost cause when she saw it, Andi choked back the explanation and instead picked up her Dialog. "Thank you," got her away from the desk.

She dropped the stack of paper in her usual spot and spent five minutes chasing down her fleeing thoughts and locking them securely into little boxes so she could concentrate. *Painstaking research and passionate romantasy might both be rewarding, she thought. But I'm beginning to regret trying to indulge in both on the same vacation.*

The first time through the Dialog she scanned quickly, crossing off references she'd already checked and 'X'ing those that didn't seem worthwhile. Then she started over, drawing neat stars by the ones that sounded most interesting.

She found herself particularly looking for

references to James Sylvester and the San Jacinto banner, and had to pause and nail that box back shut. Andi was just ready to start cross checking the library's card catalog to see which references were in the building when Helena found her.

"Well?" she demanded.

"The research is going well," Andi said.

It wasn't the answer Helena was looking for. She crossed her arms and added, "And?"

"Mack and I had breakfast. Twice. Period." Andi bit the words off.

Helena tried to look optimistic. "There are many apples in the barrel, Mama would say."

"My mom would say the same."

Helena looked into her eyes. "But a girlfriend would not? So neither will I. Instead I say lunchtime." She shook the midnight curls that tumbled around her shoulders. "And after this morning it is most welcome. Particularly because of what I have in here." She tapped the lunchbox with her elegant fingernails. "I was over at my parents' last night, and even though it's summertime, Mama gave me some of her tamales. I just heated them in the microwave, so prepare yourself for a treat."

"Summertime?" Andi asked.

"It is traditional to have them at Christmas," Helena said. "I think Mama made them special, because she is still mourning my 'lost opportunity' with my ex-boyfriend."

Andi stretched and followed Helena out the door and down the steps toward their bench, keeping up

with her tale of parental meddling. Then her friend popped the lid on her big Tupperware container and the beefy fragrance burst from the cornshuck-wrapped delicacies and awakened her hunger.

They spent the lunch hour gorging themselves with too many tamales and swapping tales about their respective mothers. Andi didn't have time to worry about her love life the rest of the afternoon. She was too busy fighting drowsiness.

Still, by the time she was ready to quit at six o'clock she'd succeeded in tracking down several new avenues of information. As Andi left the library and headed back up the river toward the Palacio, she looked back over her week of research.

She'd done a lot of work, even between distractions, but she'd just scratched the surface. Basically she had found all the sources she needed to begin the serious research she needed to do before she could start writing. And tomorrow was Friday, her last day in the library.

What would Mack say? she wondered. He'd think I wasted all that time. I can almost hear him say, "I can make up three stories in the time it takes you to research one."

But as Andi reached the bend in the river and climbed to the top of the high stone bridge to the other side, she paused. There was something else. She leaned against the wide stone parapet and gazed across the slow-moving water, through the big windows, and into El Comedor. Andi let her mind replay the fight they had had there, and the more she

thought about it, the more she became convinced that Mack had left something important unsaid.

Andi sighed. *That discovery doesn't get me very far. I can hardly walk up to the man and demand his innermost secrets in hopes one of them might explain why he hates history. Or can I?*

Not right now, she thought, and headed down the other side of the arch. It was almost six-thirty, and she had to get ready for a date with David-the-Hunk. Andi squared her shoulders and marched into the cool lobby. *Maybe a bird in the hand...*

Chapter Nine:

Thursday Evening

Ready by seven-twenty, Andi spent the ten minutes before David arrived leaning on the wrought-iron rail of her balcony, looking down four stories at the people crowding the Riverwalk. Just looking.

David would park and come through the front door, and of course she wasn't watching for anyone else. But she had to keep reminding herself not to twist the buttons that closed the heavy gold trim at the mandarin collar of her dark blue peasant dress.

When the knock finally came, she straightened and brushed her slender hands across the smooth cotton, flouncing the full skirt, and headed for the door. David's eyes widened appreciatively, and Andi forced herself to smile in return. They were in the elevator and halfway down to the river level before she realized she hadn't really looked at him.

He was worth looking at. The tan suit he was wearing fit snug across broad shoulders without

straining. Andi looked up into his eyes as they walked across the lobby, and found them as clear and blue as the summer sky outside. He moved with the grace of an athlete, opening the heavy steel and glass doors as easily as Andi would have opened a book.

She took his arm and made a determined effort to be the new, sexy Andi, who read scarlet-covered romance novels.

The Little Rhein Steak House nestled in the outside of a bend in the river next to the Palacio. David and Andi walked the short distance around the corner to the iron gate closed across the lowest of the several terrace levels holding tables. The maître d' showed them to one halfway up. Andi settled into her chair and caught a whiff of David's musky cologne as it struggled against the heavier scent of the late-blooming flowers covering the vines climbing close by.

"How did your Dialog work out?"

The question caught her off guard. Andi had to take a breath before she could come up with an answer. "Just fine. I got a couple of good leads. I just wish I had more time to follow them out."

He leaned forward, and his big hand rested on the smooth table an inch from hers. "Next time call ahead, and I can have everything ready when you arrive."

"This research was a last minute thing. Next time I'll have more time to plan." The statement came out easily. She must be getting used to it.

"I hope so," David responded, and his eyes held

anticipation of more than Dialogs. But their waiter interrupted and after they ordered, the conversation turned to shop talk as they compared notes about the differences between big city and small town libraries.

The steaks arrived, and proved to be everything David had promised. Andi discovered that she was enjoying the evening. She and David had a lot in common, and conversation flowed easily between them. He had a dry wit that brought to life the humor in the stories he told and kept Andi chuckling.

The nightly show at the Arneson River Theater began, and the passionate music of Old Mexico mingled with the sounds of happy people enjoying the Riverwalk. Overhead the sky darkened, then filled with a yellow moon, more than three quarters full.

Andi sighed. *The setting is romantic. My companion is ideal, and certainly willing. Yet nothing is happening. I'm enjoying myself, but there's none of the rising sweep of passion that surges within the scarlet-bound books. Is what they hold more fantasy than romance?*

Andi and David finished eating, then strolled in companionable silence the short distance back to the Palacio, and then up to her door. David leaned against the frame. "Here comes the heavy question. There's someone else, isn't there?"

Andi shrugged, unable to answer.

"It's all right," he continued. "I enjoyed the evening. You just seemed to be preoccupied." He grinned. "And maybe it was me as much as you. You're pretty, and fun to be with and talk to, but the rest just wasn't there. Friends?" He held out his hand.

Andi shook it, and with all her self-control, smiled up into his blue eyes. "Thank you, friend, for a lovely evening."

As she stepped across the threshold, David said, "I sure do envy Friday."

She got the door shut and turned to face the full length mirror, staring at the stranger it reflected. *Look at me. Wheaten hair sweeps smoothly over my ears, and across my high forehead. Dark blue cotton trimmed with bright gold flows easily around my slender figure. Long legs fill smoke-gray nylon. A modern, self-confident woman. Except for the tears. They stream from my eyes. They betray the lie. Reality is the long-haired, small-town librarian born and raised in Mountain Home, Texas. Passionately romantic holidays are for sophisticated, big city girls.*

Friday, she thought, picking up *Jewels in the Stone*. Friday would have been a night of passion in the novel. But the romance lied. Andi closed her eyes. It's an easy toss, a flash of scarlet arching from the balcony into the cold water below. No one will see.

Yet she couldn't. Perhaps it was the librarian in her, rebelling at the thought of destroying any book. Perhaps it was a tiny, stubborn spark that still flickered secretly deep in her soul. But *Jewels* was safe, at least for the night.

Chapter Ten:

Friday Morning

Andi took a deep breath before she entered El Comedor Friday morning, a little earlier than usual. She hadn't yet decided what she was going to do. The hostess was waiting expectantly, but a quick glance told Andi that his usual chair was still empty. She looked around the room, but Mack wasn't at any of the other tables, either.

In a quiet voice she said, "I'd like to sit at a different place this morning."

A frown crossed the older woman's expression, but Andi could read in her face the decision not to ask any questions. She cradled her stack of menus closer to her ample bosom and led Andi to a small corner table. There she laid one of the folders between Andi's slender hands and hesitated, not sure whether she should place another across the table. She decided not to.

Oh, great. Everyone in the hotel was probably following

the adventures of Andi and Mack. Everyone but Andi and Mack.

He walked in. She watched him glance across at their table, then scan the room. Just as she had. Their looks met, but she couldn't read in Mack's expression anything of how he felt.

Andi felt numb, her face as expressionless as his.

The hostess, reluctantly it seemed, seated him two tables past the one she had already set for two. It squatted, lonely, between them.

Andi's waitress arrived, and she pulled her imagination back, concentrating on her order. By the time she finished telling the pony-tailed woman what she wanted the restaurant was filling up, and the father of a family of four was settling into what should have been her chair. His two children were chattering about their imminent trip to the border, but they seemed more excited about riding the bus than visiting a different country.

Andi caught the amused smile the man shared with his wife. The intimate gesture, exchanged so easily between the two, tied an aching knot deep in her heart. She glanced past them at Mack, but his face was buried behind his menu.

Deliberately she shut down that part of her mind where her imagination lived. Her breakfast arrived, and she neatly poured syrup across her waffles the way she had as a kid, in the straight-edged geometric spiral that most efficiently covered every individual square. Then she stirred a single package of sugar and a little cream into her coffee without becoming

distracted. He wasn't closely watching her this time.

The waffles were delicious, crisp and golden under the warm, sweet syrup, and the silver-dollar patties of sausage were tangy, seasoned with a potent blend of spices. Her coffee was dark and rich, as good as any she'd tasted in a restaurant.

Andi kept her gaze on the other side of the window, looking at the strangers sitting at the outside tables and strolling along the bank of the river. She glanced down only often enough to cut neat rectangles from her waffles and find her cup. And she was careful not to stare too deeply into the dark, trembling surface of the coffee. Finally she swept up the last drops of syrup with her last neat square of waffle, leaving her plate clean.

Andi dropped her tab by the register with enough cash to cover it and marched from El Comedor, head held high. *I finally succeeded in enjoying one of their fine breakfasts without any distractions. Now I'm ready to face the world. I didn't pay any attention to him, after the initial glance, and Mack didn't pay any attention to me. It was only by coincidence we ordered the same meal. It was too bad he had to choke his down.*

She strode down the sidewalk and across the stone bridge, enjoying the new sunshine filtering through the stately trees. *This is where I belong, in a world of reality. A place where I can find romance, of a different sort, in the multilingual patter of conversation that surrounds me. San Antonio's a city where six flags had in turn held sway, seven if you included the Native American tribes that originally settled along this river. The result is a*

city of contrasts, where restaurants serving food from a dozen different corners of the world nestle side by side. Romance surrounds me. I don't need to chase any romantasies.

Andi's brisk stride brought her up the stairs to the modern world before the library was ready to open, so she sat down on one of the benches.

A church bus pulled to a halt in front of the building, and she found herself in the midst of a tornado of kids heading for the last of the library's summer children's program. Then there were two tornadoes, as the boys and girls split to play separate games.

That's where I need to be, she thought. Back in that simpler age when boys were yucky.

The doors opened, but Andi sat still until three adult leaders managed to tame the whirlwinds and led their charges inside. Then she entered and headed for her corner. After checking her notes, she picked through the shelves until she had an even dozen of the best references stacked on her table. She worked quickly through them, taking detailed notes and rechecking quotations to make sure they were exact.

She was interrupted only once, when one of the library staff delivered a message from Helena, calling off lunch. So when noon came, Andi just kept on working, and by four she had finished the list of references not in the library system and made a list of Internet sites and books she could get through Interlibrary Loan after she returned to Kerrville. Guess what, she thought. I'm finished.

Andi stood and stretched, working tight kinks out of the small of her back. As she gathered up the results of her week in the library, she tried not to think what Mack would say about the megabytes on her laptop, the spiral notebook, the multi-page computer printout, and the stack of photocopies she had assembled. She hurried upstairs, catching Helena just as she was returning from a meeting.

It took most of an hour to say goodbye to the friends she had made during the short week. David gave her another handshake, and then added a broad wink that had something to do with her date that night. She managed to politely ignore it.

Helena was harder. Her dark eyes were alive with curiosity. Andi jumped in with, "Come up and see me when you get the time. It's always cooler up in the Hill Country." In more ways than one, she added silently, but the distraction worked. She ended up giving directions instead of answering awkward questions.

Chapter Eleven:

Friday Evening

Two hours later it was time for her date. Stan was waiting in the lobby when she stepped off the elevator, but for some reason the look of appreciation that widened his eyes made her uncomfortable.

She knew she looked cool and sophisticated. The dressy black jumpsuit she was wearing had shirred shoulders and full sleeves that draped from its jewel neckline. A skirt-like flounce dropped from a wide belt and emphasized the straight-leg pants. Big imitation pearls hung in a necklace halfway to her waist in hard contrast to the soft knit material. What he's interested in, she realized, is the long zipper that closes the back.

But he turned the conversation toward her book as they left the hotel and started across Hemisfair Plaza toward the tall, slender needle, the Tower of the Americas. They walked slowly through the heat of the summer evening talking of Texas heroes and heroines and the legends that surrounded them. But

Andi found herself avoiding the story of the San Jacinto flag. Telling Stan about the bare-breasted goddess it featured would give him the wrong idea, she thought. Not that he's being anything but a perfect gentleman right now.

Andi found herself relaxing, warming to the man. Stan was not a historian, but he was interested, and interesting. He had a keen mind. His smile, and his deep laugh, were as warm as the August air that surrounded them.

But again Andi felt something missing. Or perhaps this was reality, the truth that the romance novels exaggerated into their tales of overwhelming passion.

"There it is," Stan said. They walked out from beneath big trees lining the walk and Andi had to crane her neck to see the flying-saucer restaurant that topped the fluted concrete column.

The elevator to the top was full, and Stan stood close behind her on the way up, but he didn't take the obvious opportunity to crowd close. *Maybe my first impression was the result of an over-active imagination.*

As they rose above the trees, she spotted the long, low concrete building that held the Institute of Texan Cultures. *Mañana. That's where I'm going tomorrow.* And over-active imagination or not, she couldn't bring herself to mention that to Stan.

They emerged from the elevator into the warmly fragrant atmosphere of the restaurant level and were seated next to one of the windows that circled the tower.

"We must be looking almost directly north. There's

the Palacio." Andi pointed back over her shoulder as they took their first look at the city spread seven hundred and fifty feet below.

"And there's the Alamo," Stan pointed closer to the front. "I remember visiting as a little kid. And of course I saw the movie."

"Sunday night?" *Is he a closet history buff?*

"What?"

"They showed one of the better black-and-white movies about the Alamo on cable in our rooms last Sunday night."

Stan chuckled. "No, I was talking about the John Wayne version. I didn't get back to my room until late Sunday. We are having a convention, you know. Time to rest and recreate. Speaking of which—" he broke off as their wine arrived, and went through the ritual, accepting it. Then he offered a toast, "To San Antonio, a friendly and most romantic city."

Andi took a sip of the dry rosé as Stan emptied his glass. "That long walk through summer heat made me thirsty," he explained, and he refilled the crystal bowl. Their salads arrived soon after, and they began to eat slowly, taking time out to share new sights as the restaurant's rotation brought them into view.

The food was delicious, the salad crisp under its ranch dressing, the steaks thick and juicy. Andi barely had room for her wedge of pecan pie. Throughout the meal, Stan kept both of their wineglasses filled, ignoring the fact that Andi was only sipping at the excellent vintage.

By the time they finished with dinner the

restaurant had made a complete rotation, and they had watched the heavenly beauty of the setting sun die into a night filled with stars and a nearly full moon. Andi stood when Stan pulled back her chair, and they walked to the elevator for the trip back to Earth.

This time it was crowded, and as he stood close beside her Stan circled Andi's waist with one big arm. Her first impulse was to pull away, but she didn't. *Logically there's no reason to. He's being a perfect gentleman, and I'm having a good time. This is just another date, like last night.* Andi convinced herself to relax and have fun.

"What now?" she asked, after they separated from the crowd.

Stan turned toward downtown. "I thought we'd take a ride on a streetcar." They chatted easily as they walked across the site of the Hemisfair to Market Street and found a stop, just in time to catch one of the imitation streetcars that clanged between San Antonio's historic areas. Stan dropped a couple of dimes into the box and they swung aboard the polished wood coach trimmed in dark green.

It was as full as the elevator, mostly with couples wearing identical bright-orange vests, members of a motor-home camping club. Andi and Stan found one of the authentic leather straps to share and stood for the jostling ride. They quickly found themselves caught up in rattling conversation with the convivial group, and time passed swiftly until the club disembarked at Market Square.

They waved goodbye, and Andi sat down. Stan dropped heavily into the empty seat beside her as they crossed Santa Rosa. "We have about three blocks to go," he said. "We'll get off on St. Mary's. From there it's a block to the Esquire Tavern. It boasts the longest bar in Texas, and I'm dry again."

"They did talk a lot, didn't they," Andi chuckled. "There are a couple of their clubs in Kerrville. You can't find a friendlier bunch."

"I guess not, if you like the covered-dish crowd. Here's our stop." They stepped off the car in front of the library and dodged roaring traffic across the boulevard. Cars ran in a steel river down St. Mary's Street.

"Something must have just let out," Stan yelled, then gave up. They hurried along the short block and around the corner to the Esquire.

"This is more like it," Stan shouted as they entered the tavern. The noise level was, if anything, higher. Spanish Mariachi music throbbed its hot rhythm over a roar of conversation that swirled around a gleaming bar stacked with Longnecks.

Stan quickly found two bottles, and several friends from the convention. He pulled Andi into a storm of conversation that twisted around convention war-stories and rough jokes. The workshops had closed hours earlier. These were the diehards, determined to have one more night of fun before heading back to the smaller towns they called home.

By the time she had finished two beers and Stan had gone through five, Andi found herself enjoying

the riot just as grimly as the men. She didn't let herself wonder why. Surely, she thought before she could stop herself, it wasn't because Fredericksburg is close enough that Mack had probably driven home already.

It was almost eleven by the time Stan was ready to leave, and Andi's smile was glued to her face. The streetcars were long gone, so she steered him towards the river. As they strolled under its bright lights, dodging other couples, it took most of his concentration to walk.

But by the time they got back to the Palacio, he was sober enough to make a pass. "Let's stop," he said, turning toward the bar.

Andi dropped his arm. "No, thanks," she replied, and ducked into an open elevator.

He managed to catch the door and join her. "I'll order a six-pack from your room," he said. His long arm snaked too low on her waist as the elevator doors opened to her floor, and this time she pulled away.

He grinned. "Oh, come on. Loosen up." He didn't quite stagger as he followed her down the hall to her door. He leaned one massive shoulder against the frame, ready to push inside. "All I want is a nightcap."

"Not in my room." She kept her voice low and quiet.

"Okay." he agreed, too quickly. Then he stood, waiting for her to open the door.

Andi crossed her arms. "My key's staying in the bottom of my purse until you leave."

"You mean you don't *trust* me?" He managed to look hurt.

Frost covered Andi's voice. "Let's say I'm not going to let politeness lead me into anything I'll regret."

Stan's grin turned wolfish. His words oozed intimacy. "I can't believe you really mean to say no. Surely you don't want to risk the embarrassment of making a scene out here in the hall? Let's go inside and talk it over."

Andi's smile was cold as her sapphire eyes, and her voice was gemstone hard. "Willing? I'm willing to make more than a scene. I'm willing to rouse this whole floor, this whole hotel if you don't leave." She stepped away from him and pulled a pepper spray from her handbag.

Stan froze, the canine smile dropping from his face as he flushed deep red. Andi's expression left no doubt she was serious, yet still he stood, leaning against the entrance to her room.

"Right now!" Her voice was just enough louder so he couldn't possibly miss the difference. He turned, smothering a curse as he headed toward the elevator. It obligingly opened to swallow him.

Andi-of-the-short-hair, she thought as she slipped her door card smoothly through its slot, you handled that pretty well.

Then she caught a flicker of motion in the corner of her eye, and heard a muted click from down the hall. A door shut, and she was sure it was Mack's. He must have been watching her.

Andi slipped inside and latched her own portal against the outside world. *Why was he watching? Was he checking up on me, or had he been ready to ride to my rescue? Inquisitor or Knight?* She leaned against the door, sorting through what she knew about him, and more importantly, what she felt. *He isn't the snooping kind. Certainly he wouldn't have stayed over after the conference for that purpose. But if he was protecting me, why didn't he step in?* Andi took the two steps to the full-length mirror and examined her reflection, trying to see herself as he had.

The sleek woman who stared back at her was softly feminine, yet beneath her curves was a steel core of self-assurance that made her more than a match for the Stans of this world. *So, Mack watched without interfering, trusting me to handle the situation. But he was there, just in case. Now, how to thank him. I can't go to his room and knock on his door, particularly since I need some time to get over Stan.*

Andi glanced at the telephone, but it looked cold squatting on the desk. And she couldn't trust her thoughts to impersonal hotel stationery. Then she caught sight of the scarlet romance, and knew what to do.

Logically there was no way she could expect him to meet her at their breakfast table, yet she did.

Andi hummed a passionate Spanish melody all the time she was getting ready for bed, and just before she switched off the light she smoothed her fingers gently across the entwined couple on the novel. *Romantasy cannot betray my trust.*

Her nipples tightened. She conjured up an image of Mack and Andi, twined in a lover's embrace. She pulled her T-shirt up, imagining his eyes upon her. She substituted her hands for his. She took her time, teasing, tantalizing, imagining, until her body was tight with lust. Then she conjured his image looming over her, let her fingers thrust deep and threw herself over the edge of release.

Afterward she drew the T-shirt back over her head, remembering that she no longer needed to pull long hair from beneath it. *I'm getting used to being sassy Andi. I was right. Romantasy cannot betray my trust.*

But then, when she lay alone in the wide bed, surrounded by night, a dark thought pried its way into her mind. *If Mack has already left, it may have been someone else listening from his room. Someone who was only mildly curious.*

Grimy little notions ran in long grim circles around her imagination, and it was hours before they tired enough to go away and let her sleep.

Chapter Twelve:

Saturday Morning

Even though she'd forgotten to set the alarm, Andi struggled free of the twisting dream in plenty of time to prepare for breakfast. Pulling open the drapes, she looked out into the new day, and found it glorious.

The August sun was just peeking over the horizon, but already the sky was a turquoise arch high over exciting San Antonio. Romance filled the air, and she drew it deep into her lungs. Andi tingled in anticipation. The day was made for fantasy. She turned to get ready.

After hurrying through a shower she dried her hair, working in a little mousse to add extra fluff. Makeup she kept subtle, a little blush, and her palest gloss gave her a fresh, innocent glow. He will be there, she thought.

Andi hesitated in front of the closet, then decided. Today was a day for simplicity. She pulled a white, silken blouse from its hanger and slid into it, standing

in front of the mirror to fasten the five white buttons up its front. Crisp and short, with flap pockets, open collar and epaulettes. It was perfect. She matched it with a short white skirt.

Before she left the room she slid the scarlet novel into her purse, just for luck. *He will be there.*

Mack wasn't there when she arrived, but Andi gathered hope from the extra warmth that lit the hostess's smile when Andi asked for their table. She crossed her fingers and ordered two coffees. It worked. Mack stopped by his chair just as the waitress set the steaming mugs between them.

Mack glanced down. Two cups. He's wondering if I'm waiting for someone else, she realized. She looked up at him, letting her eyes carry the silent invitation. He sat down.

"I admire the way you handled Stan," he finally said.

She smiled. "So it was you down the hall."

Mack shrugged, watched Andi stir a spoon of sugar and just a little cream into her cup and then shared the first sip of coffee with her in a silent toast. He apologized, "It was a pretty silly argument, wasn't it?"

"On both sides," she replied, and her smile banished most of the remaining tension stretched between them. Her voice was a whisper. "Your trip is over, isn't it?"

Mack set his cup back in its saucer. "I called my assistant and told her I'd be in late Monday. She asked if I had something special on my mind, and I

said 'Yes.'"

Two days, Andi thought, and loosed the air trapped beneath her breast. Only to catch it in her throat when her heart added, *Two nights*.

The pony-tailed chaperone interrupted to take their order. Andi gathered her thoughts and was ready to ask for more time when Mack glanced a question her way. Then she only had to smile her response. He had noticed, yesterday.

"Waffles and sausage," he said. "Two."

As the waitress headed toward the kitchen, Andi chuckled. "It probably won't make much difference." Mack's thick eyebrows gathered with question. She continued, "The other times we've eaten together I've hardly noticed what the food tasted like. You're distracting."

His chuckle sounded almost like a groan, "And distracted." His eyes broke contact with hers and he looked at the rest of her, what he could see above the table.

She saw herself reflected in their dark centers as they caressed her long bare arms and the lightly tanned V of smooth skin bordered by the white collar of her outfit. The image was warm with passion, but she wasn't sure whether the emotion was his, or hers. She had to clear her throat before she could ask, "Will this 'something special' keep you occupied today?"

"I'm not sure I want to sit in a library all day, if that's what you mean. But I can spend it planning for this evening."

"That's silly." Andi smiled, so there wouldn't be

any sting in the words. "You can't plan a fantasy. Besides, I'm finished at the library. I was planning to spend today at the Institute of Texan Cultures."

Mack looked doubtful. "It's been a long time since I visited a museum."

"The Institute isn't one. You'll enjoy it. And I promise I won't lecture about history."

"Okay. But I'll step on your foot if you start."

"Ooo, nasty."

"It's better than having another dumb fight."

"Agreed!" The mock argument had them both laughing by the time their waffles arrived, and they shared a few minutes of easy silence while they covered them with butter and syrup and recovered their decorum.

"Now," Mack said, "what did you mean, 'You can't plan a fantasy'? I've got all sorts of plans." His gaze roamed down past her wide collar and tried to probe under the white silk that covered her breasts.

"Optimistic, aren't we?" she murmured to him, and her heart echoed silently, *Yes!* Andi let the thumping steady a bit, then continued, "But according to my research romantasies have to happen by themselves."

Mack sighed loudly. "You mean they even have romance neatly catalogued in the library?"

She drew the paperback from her purse and laid it on the table. "I was really referring to this."

His gray eyes widened with surprise. "You're not the type to read romances. Particularly one as sensual as that."

"Oh?" Andi let her voice cool. "Just what 'type' does read romances?"

"You know, long hair, dreamy eyes, delicate...And I'm getting back into trouble, aren't I?"

Andi let the smile she was hiding show. "In more ways than one. Next you have to explain how you know so much about *Jewels in the Stone*. You've read it, haven't you? I'll pass on the eyes, but your hair isn't any longer than mine." She looked over the wide shoulders that filled his rugby shirt. Short sleeves concealed few of the smooth muscles that corded his arms, and his hands cupped all the way around his coffee mug. Andi almost forgot what she was saying. "Uh... Not much that's delicate there, either."

"Are you enjoying your research?"

"Not bad," she teased. "But I still want the answer."

"Yes, big ol' macho Mack reads romances. I started because they were supposed to be easy to write and get published, but by the time I found out I was too old-fashioned to write liberated romance I was hooked. I plunge through half-a-dozen a month." He looked around the crowded room and heaved a large sigh. "Man, it feels good to come out of the closet!"

Andi choked trying to laugh through a sip of coffee.

"My turn," Mack said. "How many do you read?"

She stalled. "That sounds suspiciously like research. Which you don't do."

"May be," he echoed her teasing. "But I still want the answer."

The words caught in her throat. "This is my first. A gift from a friend who didn't think there was enough romance in my life." Her fingers brushed the scarlet cover, the third finger suddenly naked again without the engagement ring.

Gray eyes darkened with concern. "I'm sorry, Andi. That was a bad question, wasn't it?"

She tried to clear her thoughts with a deep breath. "Just a memory that's still a little raw."

Mack reached over and covered her hand with his. "Then we can talk about it later. We'll have time."

Andi looked up, startled, and let hope chase Raymond from her thoughts. *Is there a promise in Mack's words?*

"But not over breakfast," he continued.

Andi glanced down to find her plate empty. Then she caught Mack's look and they both laughed.

On the way to the register, he circled her waist with his bronzed arm and drew her close to murmur into the soft shell of her ear, "Maybe that's what they call 'Living on Love'." They were still chuckling when they left, and the hostess was smiling triumphantly.

Mack and Andi caught a streetcar at the corner and snuggled into one of its polished wood benches for the ride up Market Street. She gave his shoulder a bump when they passed the Convention Center, and they shared a secret smile.

Andi didn't notice when they passed the Tower of the Americas. That was when Mack put his arm around her and let his long fingers brush the soft skin just below her short sleeve. She tried to ignore the

goosebumps and laid her head on his wide shoulder. *That's another advantage of short hair. No worries about stabbing him with the hardware I used to need to keep my tresses up.*

Gently, she whispered into his ear, "It's time to get off the streetcar."

Mack was looking down at her slender legs, smooth and bare from the high silken hem of her skirt to the narrow sandal strap circling her trim ankle. When her words finally penetrated he stifled a rough word, then asked, "Are you sure?"

"The Institute's one of my favorite places," she replied. "I promised myself a visit when I planned this week. I promise you, it won't be as bad as you think." She let her eyes carry another promise for later. "Now, off."

Chapter Thirteen:

Saturday

They walked hand-in-hand across the parking lot, dodging around a man trying to corral three toddlers into a photograph, and turned the corner around the grassy berm that surrounded the building.

"You're kidding," Mack said. "It looks like someone lopped the bottom off a pyramid, turned it over, and dropped it into a stock tank."

Andi laughed. "I told you it was different." She pulled Mack across the wide concrete bridge that spanned the moat, and through the glass and aluminum entrance. After dropping a ten into the donation box, she picked up one of the maps and handed it to Mack. "The main gallery has exhibits showing the influence of some of the cultures that settled Texas."

"You've got to be kidding. I thought it was 'Texas under six flags.' This thing must list two dozen."

She started to say something, then caught his look and warily moved her sandaled foot further out of the

way. They walked around the corner into the Spanish exhibit.

She watched his reaction. He saw an exhibit floor that was one big room, partitioned into areas that flowed into each other, as the cultures they represented had. It showed the sweep of history as a living thing, the roots from which today drew life. The exhibits were laid out the way he wrote. They're about people, not the artifacts they left behind.

One wall of the Spanish area was covered with a mosaic of portraits and narratives, each a separate page of history. Taken together they were a picture of three centuries of Spanish rule over Texas. Nearby was a glass case containing the arms and armor of a Conquistador, and some of the flags he had followed.

In the middle of the floor, between Spain and Mexico, was a water fountain like the ones that had slaked the thirst of countless peons.

And each exhibit was tied to the present. One wall held an array of modern words Texans had inherited from the Dons of Spain and the Vaqueros of Old Mexico.

Andi turned and started reading from the Mexican wall. She looked over one shoulder and beckoned him.

"Here's a story for you. Gregorio Esparza was one of the Mexicans who died at the Alamo. He was the only defender buried, because his brother fought on the side of Santa Anna."

He looked at the battle scene next to the narrative and put his arm around Andi's slim waist. "That

must have been tough, standing with the Mexican army, knowing that your brother was on the other side, that you might meet in battle. And knowing there was nothing you could do to save his life." He felt her shiver, as if she had looked across such a wall, separating her from someone she loved. He read a little further.

"Here's another story. Gregorio's family was among the survivors of the battle. His son, Enrique, died in 1917, at eighty-nine." Mack subtracted the dates. "He must have been eight years old at the battle."

Struck by the same thought, they looked around the enormous hall. It was Andi who quietly put it into words. "Think of all the changes he saw between the Texas Revolution and World War I."

"Changes his father and uncle fought and died over," Mack added, his voice hushed.

Andi looked deep into Mack's gray eyes. "I would never have thought of that. It would give him a tremendous stake in whatever happened." She stood close, protected in the circle of his arms, her fingers spread across the bold stripe banding his shirt. "That, the human part, is what you mean when you talk about the real story. It's something I've been missing. My research produces notebooks full of facts, but they have no meaning. You were right."

"No." Mack's fingertips brushed gently beneath Andi's soft cap of curls to smooth away the worry wrinkling her brow. "Only half right. I've been trying to pretend the past wasn't there. It's like trying to find

the story without understanding where it came from. And it doesn't work."

"It's like this," he pointed to a case showing the construction of an adobe wall. "Mud is just mud, until you build something with it."

Andi broke in, "History is just bits of mud, until you put the bits together, and build with it."

"Come on." He pulled her into the next exhibit, looking for more. "Here. This says Castroville is a French name. I always thought it was Spanish."

"Over here," Andi beckoned. "This calls the Anglos who moved into Texas 'Professional Pioneers' because they would settle a piece of wilderness, then sell or abandon it and move on when civilization caught up. It says the Mexican and European settlers couldn't understand that. To them, land was wealth. Once they had it, they kept it for their children."

"It ties in with this," Mack responded. "The English started colonies in Texas just as the other nations, but they were generally failures. The settlers quickly scattered. I bet they went on to settle other land, as professional pioneers."

Andi gestured around the exhibit hall. "You can see it today. All across the state there are well-defined settlements tracing their heritage back to different countries. Castroville was French. Fredericksburg, German." She glanced at the map. "Scottish, Belgian, Greek, Chinese, Polish. But very few English. Yet it was the English language, customs, and laws that became dominant."

Mack completed the thought, "Because they spread

out instead of staying in settlements.”

Andi asked, “Why?”

Mack shrugged, “I don’t know. What was so different about England? Why were the people she sent so different from all the rest?”

A long moment stretched between them without an answer. Then Andi chuckled. “I guess we’ll just have to write a book about it and find out.”

Mack froze beside her, his hand clamped on her bare arm.

What did I say? Andi wondered.

“Why not?” he mused. “We’d make a good team.” He turned toward her. “You for the research, me for the romance. We’d make a fantastic team.” Mack’s arm tightened around Andi’s shoulder, and she could feel excitement tingling wherever they touched. They stood on a threshold, and a new world lay fresh before them, waiting to be explored.

They wandered on through the exhibit, arm in arm. Andi scanned an old-new Great Depression newspaper advertisement that asked everybody to open a charge account and buy automobiles that looked almost back in style.

Over lunch downstairs they planned a book about two Mexican sisters, one married to an Englishman, one to a European, and the different roles they played in settling the state. Andi watched Mack make thread on a spinning wheel, demonstrated by an Institute volunteer. And they learned more about each other than they did about Texas.

In the center of the Native American display they

found a mounted buffalo. "Bison," Andi corrected, looking in awe at the shaggy, deep-chested monster.

"Either way, I'd hate to have to hunt him with one of those." Mack flipped a thumb back across his shoulder toward a stone-bladed spear.

"It was that or go hungry."

Mack patted his flat stomach. "I knew all that meat-on-the-hoof was telling me something. It's time for dinner."

"It's only five-thirty!"

"I've been working hard all day."

Andi looked him over. "You don't seem to be starving quite yet. How about a compromise? We'll research about food. Casa Rio is just up the river from the Palacio, and it features traditional Mexican dishes."

Mack answered by taking her arm and starting toward the door.

Chapter Fourteen:

Saturday Dinner

They rode the streetcar back along Commerce Street until it crossed the bridge, then they almost ran down the steps to the Riverwalk. The restaurant was surrounded by the warm, spicy scents of Mexican cooking. By the time they each visited a restroom, then waited for a quarter hour before being seated at one of the big umbrella-covered tables that lined the river, Andi was as hungry as Mack.

They chatted after they ordered, swapping the easy small talk that passes time, but Andi didn't really listen to the words. Instead she let the sound of his voice float through her soul, as she had in the dream. She looked up. She knew, as she had in the dream, that he was the one.

But now she could see his face. They weren't talking any more. They shared instead a silence as intimate as any embrace. It was broken when their dinner arrived. The waiter set big platters of steaming food in front of them, almost apologizing for

interrupting their moment.

"No more talking," Mack said, as the dark-haired man left. Andi let her eyes ask the question. Mack chuckled, "This is research. I don't want you to get...distracted."

Andi let her fingertips brush his hand. "You're too late. But we can try to concentrate on dinner."

They shared the big platters, feeding each other as much as they did themselves. The tamales, burritos and tacos disappeared. The Spanish rice, dark with spices, spread a tangy mix of savors that contrasted with the dusty flavor of refried beans.

By the time the platters were clean, all Andi could do was ease back in her chair and groan. Mack glanced across the river toward the patio in front of the Palacio del Rio. "I don't think walking that far is going to settle this meal."

"I'm not sure I can walk at all," she replied. Mack got up and pulled her to her feet. Andi let her hands drift up the front of his shirt and circle his neck. She could see heat gathering in his gray eyes as her fingers teased along the edge of his dark hair, and felt his arms tightening as he drew her closer for a kiss.

Then she had to hide her face in the hollow of his shoulder to bury an inelegant belch. He began shaking with laughter, so she pulled away and confessed. "I guess a walk might be a good idea."

He smiled, and brushed her full lips with his. The kiss was chaste, but his eyes promised her the world.

They turned and started up the river, away from the Palacio. "Is there anywhere you want to go?" she

asked.

He thought for a few steps, then turned to look into her eyes. "Why don't we walk back to the Alamo?"

Andi took his hand and they followed the river into the glass and concrete tower that held the shops of the Paseo del Alamo, then up through the courtyard that led to Alamo Plaza.

They stopped for a moment on the corner and looked across the wide plaza at the low stone shrine nestled among the tall stores, offices and hotels in the heart of the city. Like the Riverwalk, it belonged to another age.

Instead of turning toward it, they continued along the west side of Alamo Boulevard. The roar of gasoline engines and the rumble of pedestrians faded, to be replaced in their imagination by the rumble of wagons and the roar of thousands of soldiers. Hand in hand, they stood together on the dusty plain as the storm of a century-dead war raged about them.

Quietly Andi supplied the facts. Infantry had marched over the broken ground here, mounted lancers had slashed along that road. Artillery had formed a line, cannon almost at their maximum range, along the crest of that hill.

Then the details. Many of the Mexican soldiers, recently tenant farmers far to the south, marched barefoot by choice.

The eight-foot lances were more reliable than muskets, but very expensive in terms of training. Not for the men who bore them, but the horses. It took time to break the steeds of shying away from the

pennants fluttering at the tip.

And the dust was ever-present, stirred by ten thousand feet and hooves.

Mack wove in the sweep of passion, how it felt to march a thousand miles from the village where your family had lived since the time of the Conquistadors.

He talked of the way an old soldier, one who has fought in deadly battle, forgets tomorrow and yesterday. He doesn't care about the strangeness or beauty of the land he passes through. Instead he worries about dry ground where he can sleep, and folds of earth that will hide him from the round lead balls of the enemy.

Andi told how the troops would shoot impersonally, loading their muskets by the numbers, *uno, dos, tres* through the dozen or so steps until they spit fire at the other side. Then *uno, dos, tres* again, until it's close enough for the bayonet. Then war becomes obscenely personal.

Andi and Mack stood by the gate, side-by-side with Texians, citizens of a republic that was yet to be. Miraculously none had been hit in the two weeks of siege, but that would change with the dawn.

It was the darkest part of the night, finally cool, but the air was still dry with dust. Even at rest an army the size of the one surrounding the tiny mission kept it in the air. Throats were still parched from the day's battle and the salty cake of gunpowder that formed on the mouths and chins of the soldiers as they bit through their paper cartridges, poured the powder down the musket bores, and spit the ball down the

barrel.

They were all desperately tired, but they couldn't sleep. Tomorrow was too close, and they would have more than enough rest afterward. Further along the wall there was a soft patter of Spanish from one of the many defenders who shared the Castilian blood of those outside. The answer carried the green twang of forested hills, Kentucky or Tennessee, even further away than the farms to the south.

Mexican trumpeters found the first gray hint of dawn and echoed it with the mournful *Deguell*. It was time. On all sides the men below gathered into geometric clouds, thickening the haze of dust into a storm. Slowly they began to move, then faster.

The cry of trumpets wailed across the plain like the wind and joined the thunder and lightning of cannon-shot as the storm broke upon the thick walls. Parade ground formations disintegrated as battleplan met battle line.

Mack and Andi stood watching, numb, as men fought side-by-side and face-to-face. Heroes too scared to be cowards and cowards too scared to be afraid struggled and screamed, and died as the sun rose unimpeded into the center of the sky, then fell uncaring back towards the dust that hid the western horizon.

Chapter Fifteen:

Saturday Evening

The two stood alone, shivering in the heat, surrounded by the sounds of modern San Antonio. Andi turned into Mack's arms and they gasped for air, clean with the scent of petrochemicals instead of dust and sweat and blood.

Mack cleared his throat. "That was some history lesson."

Andi leaned back, still looking down at his wide chest. "Oh, yes."

His fingers traced along her jaw until they met the edge of her hair, and his hand cupped her chin. She looked up into his gray eyes, and they were dark with the reflection of blue from hers. Then they disappeared beneath heavy lids as he bent, and brushed her lips with his. Her arms found his neck, and she pulled him closer.

But he resisted, keeping the kiss soft and gentle. Yet as lightly as they touched, the feathered contact burned. He pulled back, and Andi loosed a little

moan before she lifted her heavy lashes and looked into his eyes. The ash was gone. They burned fiercely. Mack was breathing deeply, straining with the effort it took to control his need.

Andi pulled away until only their hands held them together and let the world flood back between them. They stood again on a busy street in front of the Alamo, three and a half long blocks from the Palacio del Rio. Without a word they turned and started down the sidewalk.

They walked through the heat and noise of San Antonio, but it might as well not have been there. Mack and Andi communicated on a level far more intimate than sound. His hand cupped hers, yet even that little bit of contact transmitted his controlled need and echoed her response.

Sharing a glance, they crossed to the east side of the street, still bathed in the August sun, and let its golden heat reinforce the other heat building inside them.

They entered the lobby and walked to an elevator that opened just for them. As it lifted them closer to their sanctuary they stood apart, only their hands linked, yet as they stood gazing into each other's eyes they were closer than if they had stood in intimate embrace.

At her door it took both her hands and one of his to slide the card through its slot. Inside they smiled at each other, suddenly nervous. Communication vanished into unfamiliarity.

Andi looked up at Mack, and he was a stranger.

What am I doing? What is he thinking? She brushed her fingers into the thin hair behind his eye, as if the antennae of her hands could read his thoughts. She knew he was as unsure as she was, and she could read in his gaze more than the animal passion of a one-night stand.

But is he thinking about forever? Am I? Andi found her fingers teasing the short hair behind her head, and decided. *Mañana. Tomorrow I will worry about forever. Tonight I want this man. Tonight I am Andi-of-the-short-hair, and Mack is mine.*

He reached out, and his fingers slid beneath hers to tease along the edge of her hair. Then they crossed that line and slid deep into the short forest, and Andi felt as if they had invaded her body. As his fingers slid across her skin the short hair seemed to resist him and welcome him at the same time. A last wave of doubt flooded her mind, but even as it swelled she knew it was the last. *It's time to make love.*

He pulled her close, and this time his mouth plundered hers. She molded herself to him, and a moan of release purred deep in her arching throat. Still he held back, even though Andi could feel the strain in his shaking body.

I need him. More than I ever did with...anyone else, I lust for him. "I want you," she whispered.

"You're not ready," his voice grated, harsh, in her ear. "I'm trying to wait."

"You can't. It's too late."

"It's been so long," he moaned.

Andi could feel his urgency burning between

them. She whispered, "Take me!"

He did. The explosion plucked her from the ground and flung her to the middle of the bed. He dropped on top of her, and they shared a scorching kiss. He straddled one of her legs and she could feel him, hard and erect, against her thigh. She pushed him off, then rolled to straddle his legs. Frantically she opened his belt buckle and unfastened his slacks. "I'm not this kind of a girl," she moaned.

He tried to grab her hands, but she looked into his eyes. "I'm not *usually* this kind of a woman," she said. "But right now I need you. I absolutely want what is about to happen." She pulled his slacks and briefs down, and looked down at his erection. "Oh, yes," she whispered, and took it in her hand.

He gasped, and groped down under her thigh. She shifted enough for him to get his wallet and extract a foil package. Her eyebrows climbed. He grinned. "There was a machine in the men's room at the restaurant."

Andi laughed, then watched while, between her thighs, he rolled the condom on. When it was ready he slid his hands up under her skirt, searching for the top of her pants. She rolled to the side, drawing him back on top of her thigh, and into a kiss. He continued to search for elastic until she whispered, "There's no waistband. I'm wearing a teddy. It has snaps."

He kissed a line of fire down her throat and covered her womanhood with his hand. She gasped and arched under him. He popped the snaps open, and his long fingers parted her lips and found dew

flowing inside. "Enough," she said. "Please." She spread her legs wider. "Now."

He filled her in one smooth thrust. She sighed, "Oh. Yes." Her legs wrapped around him, and he surged within her again and again.

Just as her need began to really build, he gasped into her hair. "Oh, yes," he moaned, and with a series of ragged plunges, spent himself.

It's okay, she thought. I can't expect fireworks on our first time. Gathering his breath, he pushed himself up on his elbows to relieve the pressure on her chest. Then just as she began to relax, he started thrusting again. "What are you doing?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Silly woman. I'm screwing you."

She trembled at the frank word, and marveled at the heat it contributed. "I mean, I thought you were finished."

He nibbled her earlobe. "You aren't."

"Oh," was all she could say. He wasn't thrusting so much as he was grinding against her, and the friction was just where she needed it. "Oh!" she gasped. She dropped her feet to the bed and thrust back against his plunges. She held on to him as he pushed her up to the edge.

"Your prick feels so good!" she said. My God, she thought. Where did that come from? Then the ecstasy tossed her thoughts to the storm, and she only heard her voice demand, "In. In. In." as she soared to completion.

"Oh, Pam," he whispered.

Andi froze.

"Crap!" he said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He pulled away, rolling onto his back, but Andi followed. She covered his lips with a slender hand, stopping the useless words. And saw the tear leak from the corner of his eye.

She caught it gently on the tip of a finger, and knew why it was there. "She's here, isn't she? Your wife? Between us."

"Not between us." He groped for more words, but they caught in his throat. Mack forced a deep breath into his lungs and said, "Get dressed."

Andi gasped, but before she could move he circled her with his arms.

"Wait!" His eyes looked deep into hers, pleading for her trust. "You're right about my wife." He paused. "I need to tell you, but not here. I'm ready to let her go. I just need a few minutes outside to do it."

Andi didn't trust her voice, so she nodded. She snapped the crotch of her teddy. He disposed of the condom and pulled his slacks up from around his knees. He took her hand, and led her out of her room to the elevator. He held it as they descended. Long, silent minutes later they walked out of the hotel.

Chapter Sixteen:

Saturday Night

Mack stopped as soon as they were outside on the Riverwalk and drew her to one side. "Are you all right?"

Andi started to lie, then shook her head. "But I will be," she promised. And hoped.

He drew her close, and where between them fire had burned there was warmth, gentle as the late sun filtering through the stately oaks that arched over the cool river.

"You are so different." Mack's voice was filled with remembrance. "Pamela's hair was long and dark, her eyes hazel, so light they were almost transparent. I knew everything she thought. I was looking for someone to replace her, and I bumped into you instead."

Andi looked up into his eyes, and they were clear, true. This ghost from his past carried no threat. With gentle fingertips, Andi smoothed an errant lock of his hair back into place. "I think we would have been friends, Pamela and I. Tell me about her."

They strolled down the river while Mack talked, and by the time he was finished they stood by the footbridge that crossed the river below the Arneson Theater. He looked down into the dark water flowing under the stone arch, then turned toward Andi.

Mack glanced down to where her hand was tracing, then looked closer. "Rosita's Bridge?" he asked. Andi turned, and together they read the inscription dedicating the bridge to a 'singer of songs', Rosita Fernandez. The low-relief carving that showed her with a long black braid and clear eyes didn't remind either of them of anyone. They were alone.

They turned back toward the Palacio, but Mack stopped. "I didn't even think," he said. "That wasn't— You weren't a—" He blushed.

Andi tried not to laugh. "No. It wasn't my first time," she said.

"I feel awkward as a teenager. And I acted like one."

"You were in a hurry," she agreed. "But at least you didn't leave right afterward." Andi's voice snagged on an ancient scar.

Mack reached for her hand. "We have the walk back," he said. "What's your story?"

Andi told him about the night of a million crickets. "I was a freshman at Texas Womens' University with about zero experience. We'd been on three dates. It was after a football game. We parked in his big old pickup truck in the middle of an open field and once things got starte I just forgot to stop. The next day he

was back at his school, two hundred miles south in College Station. We wrote back and forth once, and quit. Then I missed."

Mack looked at her, concerned.

"No," she continued. "The next period was right on schedule. But that was before easy access to home pregnancy tests. The twenty-eight days in between taught me a lot."

Mack didn't have to ask. He knew he was the first one she'd ever trusted with that story. "That was a long time ago," he said. She looked up at him, and he also knew there was something else.

Andi looked away. "This week was supposed to be a honeymoon. I was engaged for six months. I broke it off just before I came down." Her voice was flat. "He wanted to postpone our wedding at the last minute because of an antique auction. He's a dealer."

Mack looked like he was ready to tell Andi what a fool this man must be, but he stopped himself.

She continued, "It probably wasn't his fault, I think there was more to it than that. Still, it hurt. Six months of engagement is a big investment."

"Can you talk about love in terms of investment?" Mack asked.

"I guess not," Andi replied. "Maybe that's what was wrong. Anyway, it's over." She squeezed his arm, pulling it closer around her. "And it has nothing to do with us." She looked up, and her eyes told him it was true.

And it is true, Andi thought. What I feel for Mack has nothing to do with what I left behind. It doesn't

even resemble it.

He pulled open the door to the Palacio and they retraced their earlier path. But this time was different. They strolled from the elevator. The wanting was still there, but the raging need to hurry was gone. Andi's hand guided the card easily home, and they went inside.

She stopped when she saw the wrinkled bed and Mack, behind her, circled her with his arms. "Maybe this time we'll get the covers pulled down," he said.

Andi turned in his embrace. "And our clothes off." She looked into his eyes. They were dark with passion. She slid her arms around his neck and pulled close, feeling him tighten in response.

"Andi," he whispered, and she knew it was the sassy Andi he wanted.

And sassy Andi is ready. She felt sure of herself. Whatever tomorrow brings, or next week, tonight I want romantasy. Tonight, I want Mack.

He teased her, stretching the drama, recapturing the waiting of the past week. Mack opened the buttons of her blouse and traced a line of butterfly-soft kisses across her shoulder until the muscle beneath it threatened to knot in a cramp.

Andi pulled his shirt free and with her scarlet fingernails traced the broad muscles banded across his back until they were hard ridges under his skin.

He pushed her away, just a little, and drew her blouse off. His hands felt rough on her satin skin as they teased passion into her body. They drifted lower, and she felt her skirt fall to a heap around her feet. He

was whispering in her ear, but he had to hold her still for a long minute before she could understand.

"Pull down your bed," he murmured, "slowly." When Andi was sure she could stand, she stepped from her sandals and the snowy heap of skirt, turning her back to him. She bent over further than she had to, and smiled when she heard the breath catch in his throat. She stripped the quilted cover and sheets back, giving him plenty of time to look and drop his clothes to the floor.

When she straightened, he was close behind her. He reached around to slide the straps of the teddy off her shoulders, then cupped her firm breasts gently in his hands. Andi moaned and leaned back against his bare chest. Her own hands roamed, quickly discovering that he wore only his briefs.

"This time will be different," Mack promised. "My pants will stay on as long as necessary."

"That won't be long," she murmured.

"When I first bumped into you, I thought you'd be hard to arouse. You aren't." He helped her onto the wide bed and, like the pioneers they'd studied all day, went exploring.

The soft skin at her nape, prickly with new hair, fascinated him. When he kissed it, Andi gasped and bowed her neck. Mack's fingertips found a soft spot below her shoulder blades. Touching it set her moaning. Teasing the shallow dimples just above the bottom of her teddy arched her tightening body as she lay twisting in the center of the firm mattress.

He stroked lower, and she pushed into his hand as

if she fit nowhere else. She clung to him, and her breathing deepened from gasps into long sighs of pleasure until, in a high small voice, she sang his name, "Mackenzie," over and over. "Mackenzie, Mackenzie, Mackenzie."

And then she lay shuddering in his arms, crying into the warm pocket of his shoulder. Mack held her until she quit trembling, then let her up to look deep into his eyes.

She shook her head, searching for words. "It was so good," she reassured him, "so good." Andi bent to kiss her hero. Now I know how it feels, she thought. Now I want to know how *he* feels.

She traced her lips across the first roughness of his returning beard and moved downward, the way an explorer would move down from a mountain pass after her first glance at a new land. Wide-eyed, wondering, Andi explored her romantic hero, searching out his secrets.

She found a spot on his throat where his quickening pulse ran close to the surface and when she kissed it, she felt it skip a beat. She watched her slender hands roam his skin, discovering that his nipples, under her thumbs, tightened the way hers did under his.

Then she teased the white cotton away from his loins. "My turn," she said, and rolled on a new condom. But when she took his hardness in her hands, it was too much. He pushed her onto her back and rolled on top of her open body, and when she looked up his eyes were the gray of swirling mist,

clouded with need.

But this time he kissed her softly, and his invasion was as gentle as his warm breath. He moved slowly, easily, until he caught her body with his rhythm. Her blue eyes clouded with the same twisting smoke as his while she followed him, then moved with him, then became part of him as they soared together.

When he rolled off he drew her with him so she lay half on top of his chest, listening to the tides sighing within his body. His wide shoulder was the softest pillow she had ever known.

He wasn't asleep. Gentle fingers played in the short hair just behind her ear, as hers did in the hollow behind his jaw. Were his thoughts drifting idly, like hers? She sighed.

"Comfortable?" he asked. She felt the word, a soft vibration under her fingertips beneath her cheek.

"Contented," she replied, but the sound eased her out of the reverie. "But I'm starting to get a little cool. I don't suppose you can reach the sheet?"

His hand traced down her neck and across her back until he found one of the dimples just above her *derrière*. "That's as far as it goes," he said. "Are you getting warm?" She answered him with a purr as her body tingled with remembered passion.

She pulled herself higher and let her tongue search the pulse in the hollow of his neck, then rode his deep breath. Andi looked into his teasing eyes, then softly kissed him before she rolled off to reach for the covers. "It's still light outside," he said as she snuggled back into his arms.

"I'm *not* going for another walk."

Mack chuckled. "I'm all out of secrets anyway. I'm not hungry, but if you want something, I'll call room service."

Andi shook her head. "If I ate any more, then I *would* need another walk." She lay her head back on his shoulder, but now the silence stretched tight between them. What was Mack thinking?

"What are you thinking?" Mack finally asked. Andi raised her head from his shoulder, and he looked into her eyes, feeling sapphire bright with her smile.

"We're going in circles," she replied. "You're supposed to fall asleep afterward. We must have started too early."

He snorted. "I didn't see you waving for a time-out. You're just going to have to suffer through a long night."

Andi licked her lips, still rosy from his kisses, and murmured, "I didn't think that was all the 'suffering' I'd do tonight."

"Women!" he groaned, and pushed her to one side, then rolled on top of her chest, pinning her to the mattress. "I just remembered that I haven't checked to see if you're ticklish. That'll pass the time until I recover enough for more 'suffering.'" He looked down in what he hoped was a most effective glower.

She wasn't impressed. "I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. I'm not ticklish at all."

After a long and interesting search, he finally had to agree. "So much for that," he grumbled, looking down into her still easily smiling face.

She smoothed her long fingers across one of his stubbled cheeks. "What time is it?" she asked.

Mack glanced over at her clock. "Almost eight."

"You may not think it's a very romantic idea, but the cable channel is showing that Alamo movie again. The one I said you were in."

"As the local expert on romance," he said, "I declare that watching a movie is indeed romantic."

There was just enough time to find the remote, select the right channel and take turns in the bathroom. By the time the overture and titles ran and the story started to unfold they were back in bed, half-sitting against the pillows.

Andi's warm body was tucked securely in beside Mack's larger frame. He glanced down at the top of her head.

"There!" she pointed, "By the mesquite tree."

"Just like a researcher," Mack said. "You even noticed what kind of tree it is. But you're right, he does look a little like me. Just younger, and in better shape."

"He is not!" she said.

"Thanks." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, under the rumpled cloud of hair.

Andi snuggled closer under his arm. She murmured, "Everyone knows what a mesquite looks like."

Mack said, "I wrote a poem about one, once. It was the first thing I ever published. In my high school anthology."

"So you're also a poet. Can I read it sometime?"

"Sure. But you have to promise to remember how old I was when I wrote it."

"I will," Andi said.

They watched as the plot gathered the events leading to the battle, and caught sight of the actor who looked like Mack several more times before the final assault. Then he was killed.

Mack caught sight of him, and pointed him out. Andi looked just as the barbed head of a lance pierced him and he twisted out of sight over a low wall. She cried out and looked up. Mack squeezed her shoulder, reassuring her.

She sat quietly through the rest of the show. When Mack rolled over to turn off the set, she got up and switched off the floor lamp. Mack watched her, but he knew, when she snuggled back under his arm, that she wasn't quite ready.

She sat quietly for a while. "It made it personal," she finally said. "This movie's always been more real to me, because it's more accurate. Only a couple of errors. But this time I really identified with that man on the wall. I wanted to change the ending, to save him, but I couldn't."

"Like what?" Mack asked.

The question distracted Andi. She looked up at Mack's face and asked, "What?"

"You said, 'Only a couple of errors.' What were they?" She felt the tremor in his chest. He was trying not to laugh.

She settled back into his arms and glanced at the darkened screen.

"Santa Anna marched his army too fast getting to the Alamo. He ran off and left most of his heavy cannon. And he almost pushed his horses to death, but the ones in the movie were in good shape." Andi wondered if Mack was really interested in these picky details. Then his big hands cupped her breasts, and she had her answer. "Ah," she moaned. "The Fate Worse Than Death."

"It's your fault, lover. Ever since the movie, your hand's been teasing the inside of my thigh. If you don't lay back and let me ravish you, my leg's going to tie in a knot."

Andi let her head fall back on his wide shoulder. "What else can I do?" she murmured. "I wouldn't want you to get a cramp."

Chapter Seventeen:

Sunday Morning

Andi woke softly in the light of barely breaking dawn. Mack had kicked the sheet off. Naked, he sprawled beside her on the wide hotel bed. The morning after, she thought. Any regrets?

His face was rough with new beard. He was still as big as she remembered. How did he get me so turned on? she wondered.

It's time to be honest. She took a deep breath. Having sex with Raymond was... Okay, it was satisfying. He's considerate. I slept in a sleeping shirt. He wore pajamas. The nights we had sex, we would take them off. We each got one orgasm. Then we put our nightclothes back on and went to sleep. We never talked, during. Certainly we never used words like 'screw' and 'prick.' Which, by the way, is getting hard.

She looked up at Mack's face, to see him grinning. "You're not playing fair," he said.

"Really?"

He stripped away the sheet. "I get to look, too." Reflexively Andi covered herself. Mack laughed.

"Little late for that." He leaned over and gently kissed her lips, then rolled on top of her. He looked down into her eyes, and said, "Ready for a good-morning tumble?"

His erection prodded into her thigh. "I hope I can catch up," she said.

Mack smiled, and kissed her again. Then he traced a line of kisses down her jaw and across her neck. From there he kept going, and by the time he was nuzzling between her breasts, Andi was burning with lust. "Easy," she whispered. "You need a shave."

He sucked a nipple into his mouth, then pulled his lips off it. "My kit is in my room. I'll be back in a half-hour or so."

Andi ran her fingers into his hair and pulled him back down. "Stop and you're a dead man," she sighed.

By the time he finished with her breasts, Andi was writhing under him. He continued down, kissing across her stomach, tonguing her navel. She kept expecting him to stop, to come back up and enter her. He didn't.

As his day-old beard combed through her pussy, Andi finally realized what he intended. *Good grief, he's going to go down on me. He's there!*

His tongue lashed, teased, stroked, thrust. She bloomed, and lust surged over her like a wave. She arched, clinging to the sheet to keep from flying to the ceiling. Just as the wave passed, another followed, then another. She lay, writhing, skimming along from orgasm to orgasm as Mack feasted on her.

Finally she had to push his head away. "Enough!" she gasped, desperate for air.

He raised his head, and she looked down between her trembling thighs to see his grin. "That works pretty well," he said.

"I've never..." she moaned. "Nobody. Ever."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You've never been eaten before?"

She shook her head. "Not like that." Then she noticed he was squirming. "What are you trying to do?" she asked.

He sat up, and she saw he was in the midst of rolling on another condom. "Okay if I take my turn?"

Andi nodded. Mack settled between her thighs, but she gasped when his erection prodded her. He pulled up on his elbows. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm just a little sensitive right now."

"Your clit?" he said. "We can take care of that. Roll over."

"What?"

"If I enter you from behind, your clit will be out of the way. Don't tell me you've never done *that*."

"Of course I have, just not for that particular reason." She rolled over onto her stomach. Mack settled behind her, and gently slid in.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Feels good," she sighed.

He raised his upper body on his hands. "You're amazing," he whispered, and began giving her long, slow strokes. He leaned down to nibble her ear. "Your ass is incredible," he whispered.

Before she could think Andi responded, "So you *like* screwing me from behind?"

"Oh, yeah," he groaned, and his thrusts became hard and frantic. Then he stiffened, hard against her bottom, and came.

Finally he relaxed to his elbows, then rolled to the side pulling Andi into a spoon. His breath was hot in her hair. "Incredible," he murmured.

Andi was drifting back to sleep when he kissed her shoulder. "Hey," he said.

"What?"

He paused. "A couple of times I got the feeling I made you uncomfortable."

"Sort of," she admitted. "Usually when I'm making love I'm not used to being quite as...frank about what's going on." She sighed. "But then this whole week has been a change for me. I feel like I'm still catching up to my new hairstyle, if that makes any sense."

"It does," Mack said. "If I push you too hard, you'll say so?"

"Yes." She snuggled back into his lanky body and drifted off.

Chapter Eighteen:

Sunday

When they woke again, bright sunlight was leaking around the heavy drapes. Before Mack could start anything, Andi said, "It's ten o'clock, and the last day of my vacation. I want some breakfast, then I want to go outside and do something, just for fun." She pushed him out of the bed.

"It's only nine-fifty-five."

"Close enough." She watched him stand and stretch. "Now quit showing off and get out of here so I can get dressed."

"Go ahead," he replied. "I'll just watch. You can trust me."

"I'll bet." Andi pulled the sheet up under her chin. Mack grinned and picked up his clothes.

"My family visited San Antonio when I was a child," he said, and sat down on the edge of the bed to pull his slacks on. "I remember riding a miniature train in one of the parks. After our very adult night, how would you like to be a little kid for the day?"

Andi thought back to the separate whirlwinds in front of the library. "Little girls and boys don't like each other," she replied. "I don't think I can pretend that well. But I've seen lots of young lovers in Breckenridge Park."

Mack finished pulling on a sock and leaned over to kiss her. "Young lovers it is," he whispered, and looked down at the soft mound her slender figure made under the percale.

She could feel the heat from his hand on her stomach even through the layer of cloth she held between them. "Out!" she shouted. "Out!" He picked up his loafers and tiptoed across the room, and the last thing Andi saw before he closed the door behind him was a wide grin.

Slipping from the bed, she padded toward the shower. "I was talking about young lovers," she muttered, "not randy teenagers." But as she lathered her hair, short as it was, she found a tangle. And when she thought back over the long night it had come from, she knew romantasy was ageless.

Wrapped in a towel, combing her wet locks into place, she wandered over to the window. Andi pulled the curtain open and found a day even brighter than the one before.

A cardinal swooped across the wide blue sky, and his crimson wings reminded her of the scarlet covers of her book. *I'm living that kind of magic romance. The day is perfect for it, and I'm ready.* She turned to gather her most potent spells.

She searched through her makeup kit, selecting

from its vials and flasks. From one she poured a dab of gel and combed it through her damp hair, twisting her short hairdo into a tousled imitation of the way Mack had left it. She used a dusky blush to accent her cheeks.

Mascara, liner and shadow lent her midnight blue eyes the mystery of womanhood. Her darkest gloss made her lips full with a sensual promise Mack couldn't fail to understand.

She closed the cap on the last of her potions and looked into the mirror. *Yesterday's fresh look is now mysterious, worldly. I'll balance it with a dress that's bright and sweet. Mack needs a little confusion in his romantic life.*

Particularly tonight. Yesterday I surrendered. For this evening I have different plans. The scarlet bird is my sign, red the color for my magic.

She pulled on her crimson teddy. Smoothing the lace-trimmed fabric drum-tight over her soft skin, she fastened the snaps between her velvety thighs. She smiled wickedly, anticipating Mack's reaction. If he walked in right now, she thought, we'd never make it to the park.

Andi hesitated for a moment. *Here I am, serenely planning a seduction. Not even in the crimson novel had the heroine calmly planned to start a private riot. But Lily isn't sassy-haired Andi. "All's fair," she said to the empty room. "This is my romantasy."*

So much for tonight. Right now I need something to wear to the park. Something sweet. The shirtdress is perfect. It was a bold plaid, red and black, and

buttoned down the front with nine crimson hearts. She buckled her wide patent-red belt around it. Just in time.

Mack was knocking at her door. When she opened it, his wide-eyed reaction was all she had hoped for. She had to shove him aside to get out of her room. Not that pushing past him was as simple as it sounded. When she spread her long fingers across the pale blue shirt that covered his wide chest, they remembered too well last night's explorations. If the tiny birds embroidered over his pocket had been cardinals instead of geese, she wouldn't have been able to push him away.

"Breakfast or lunch?" he asked as the elevator started down.

Andi shrugged. "Just so we eat. I'm starved."

Mack drew her closer, smoothing his hand through the new texture of her gelled hair. "So am I." He kissed her, the caress cut short only when the door slid open. He reached for the button to send them back up, but Andi stopped him.

"Miniature train or not, I need something to eat," she demanded. "Now."

He grinned down at her. "All right, how about hot dogs at the park?"

They drove north, and as they passed the Alamo Mack's air conditioner seemed to have extra trouble cooling the car. "You don't have another history lesson waiting for me at Breckenridge Park, do you? I'm not sure I want to do that again for a while."

"Well, we do go right by Witte Museum," Andi

said, and watched his thick eyebrows gather, "but I wasn't thinking of stopping."

"I hope not."

"I promise," she said in her most innocent tone. "Today is yours. I won't try to teach you anything," she paused, and let her voice deepen. "Not before we return to the Palacio del Rio."

Mack looked over his shoulder. "I wonder what the chances of getting caught in a U-turn are?"

"Pretty high," Andi responded. "There's a police car right over there."

He glanced around, then caught sight of Andi's grin. "Lying to me now, are you?"

"Just keeping you honest. There's the gate to the park."

Mack turned and followed the road through the woods.

"And there's one of the trains," Andi pointed out the four-foot-tall replica steam engine towing a string of canopied cars. "We must be getting close."

They found the station, and while Mack paid for two tickets Andi bought four hot dogs and slathered them with pickle relish and pungent mustard. "I told you I was hungry," she said when he caught up.

"Must have been the exercise," he joked as he picked up the giant Cokes she'd ordered, but Andi noticed that he ate as ravenously as she did. Mack licked the last of his meal from his fingers as the train puffed noisily into the station, and they hurried to throw away their trash and climb aboard.

"The second car, I think." Mack's voice was full of

young enthusiasm, "The front seat?"

"Of course," Andi agreed, caught up in his excitement. I don't have a care in the world, she thought. I'm in the middle of a romantasy with the man I love. That thought startled her as she settled into the narrow bench. *When did I fall in love?* Then Mack snuggled down beside her, his lean thigh burning against hers, and she forgot to wonder.

The conductor sang the traditional, "All aboard!" and the train chugged out of the station. It turned to the right and headed toward the steel bridge that crossed the river flowing through the park.

"Is it?" Mack asked.

"Yes," Andi said. "It's the same San Antonio River that flows through the Riverwalk. The springs that feed it are over there in the zoo."

"How romantic," he murmured into her ear, while he let his long fingers brush the side of her breast.

Andi caught his wandering hand as the breath caught in her throat. "You'd say that about the Dismal Swamp after last night."

She glanced back towards the last half of the car, filled with lively children barely under the control of two harried mothers. "You'll shock the kids," she chided. "Now at least control yourself out here in broad daylight."

"Okay," he agreed, too quickly.

Andi groaned. *I left myself open with that one.* As every toy train must, this one had a tunnel. Right around the next corner.

As soon as their car clattered through the artificial

rock entrance Mack's lips found hers. She burned, and melted into his embrace, knowing she should pull back. Unable to do anything of the sort. His big hand, the one that wasn't buried deep in her short curls, searched its way around her slender waist, beneath her tightening breast.

If he touches it, she thought, I'll explode. Higher, her mind pleaded. Take it into your hand. She wanted to pull her mouth from his, to demand what she wanted, but she didn't want to end the kiss.

It was too late, the darkness faded as they came to the end of the tunnel. Mack brushed his lips across her flaming cheek, and she buried her face in his shoulder, panting her frustration.

Then she caught part of a shrill whisper from one of the kids and laughed. Mack drew back, shocked, and looked down at her.

"Didn't you hear it?" she murmured, glancing over her shoulder. "Something Spanish about 'tunnel of love.' His mother thinks we're too old for that sort of thing."

Mack smiled, and brushed his fingertips through the honey-blond hair behind her ear. "I'm ready to agree. How much longer is this ride?"

"About two more miles." Andi caught his hand, which was teasing the lower edge of her breast. "A mature man could at least wait for the sun to go down," she said.

"Suddenly I feel like a teenager again." He turned her face towards his, but she dodged his kiss.

"A teenager has to wait for dark," she chuckled.

"Otherwise, there's no place to park."

"Then I'm doomed to frustration," he groaned.
"But there's something we can do."

Andi followed his look over her shoulder. "Oh, no! Anything but that. I am not going horseback riding dressed like this."

"Anything?" he whispered.

Andi jabbed a long finger into his chest. "You," she said, "have a one-track mind."

He slapped the front of the car. "That's what a train runs on," he agreed.

"Look!" Andi said.

"At what?"

"Anything! There's a golf range. There's a polo field. There's the skyride." They were both laughing. "There's the zoo, where you belong. There's the train station, thank goodness."

The train pulled to a stop under the canopy, and they stretched out of the car. Mack led her around the side of the building, out of sight of the mob of children, and circled her with his arms. But this time his kiss was restrained. "Do you have any idea how bewitching you are?"

Andi looked up into his slate eyes, and shuddered at the need buried behind them. She led him into another kiss, longer and deeper, and with her eyes still closed, she whispered, "If you need to, we can go back now." *But I don't want to. I want to enjoy more than my body with you.*

Mack shook his head. "I want you. But I want to share more than your bed." His arms relaxed, and he

pulled out of the heat of their embrace. "We have a beautiful day, and a beautiful place to share it." Then he let his eyes look over her again. "Besides," he said, "I have a feeling the wait's going to be worth it."

Andi cradled her plans in her breast, and just smiled.

Mack had to clear his tightening throat before he could speak. "The zoo, now? That's where you said I belonged."

She laughed, and reached for his arm. "As randy as I felt in the tunnel, maybe that's where we both belong."

They strolled hand in hand along the crowded paths between cages and the larger, more natural, fenced enclosures. While they walked they chatted easily about the variety of wildlife, from common to exotic. Then Andi pulled him to a stop. "I'll be right back," she said, gesturing toward the restroom.

Mack blinked. "We've been walking for hours, haven't we?" He headed around to the men's side of the building, grumbling at the accident of anatomy that made the trip so difficult for a male in the grip of lust. Andi entered her side laughing.

When Andi walked out of the restroom, Mack was looking the other way. She paused for a moment, watching him as he leaned casually against a stately red oak. *They're alike. Instead of being dwarfed by the massive tree, he seems a part of it. He shares the rough exterior, and inside is a strength I can depend on.*

He turned, and caught sight of her, and she saw his eyes widen in an echo of the way he had looked at her

that morning. She stepped into his embrace, and they shared a soft kiss that only their combined restraint kept from catching fire. She looked up into Mack's gray eyes, and saw the effort it took for him to remember the question he wanted to ask.

"Does the skyride go anywhere?"

"Only to one of the most beautiful places in San Antonio," she replied. Andi closed her eyes as he brushed a kiss across her brow. He pulled her closer, until her firm breasts crushed against his chest, and the moment stretched into forever.

Then he was chuckling. Andi tried to pull away, but his big hands, spread across her back, kept her close. "I'm trying to turn what you said about 'one of the most beautiful places in San Antonio' into a compliment," he explained. "But you've got me—distracted. Again."

He sighed, louder than necessary, and turned her loose. "Let's go on the skyride. From the looks of the cars, at least I can hold your hand all the way."

"Not quite," Andi replied. "The exit from the zoo is a giant revolving door with steel bars. I doubt we can get through without letting go."

Mack proved her wrong.

They crossed the street to the lower end of the skyride, and this time it was Andi who refused to let Mack's hand go. "My turn," she said, reaching into her purse. Not until they boarded the dangling car did Mack drop her hand, and then only to lay his arm around her shoulders.

When the cable snatched the car into motion, his

grip tightened and he drew her into a gentle kiss that lasted until the car scraped past the trees and swayed into the sky. Andi snuggled into his shoulder, and when her long fingers smoothed across the inside of his leg, just above the knee, she could feel hard muscle knotting beneath them.

Mack trapped her wandering hand in his. "The last time you did that, you got what you deserved," he growled.

"You must have very tender skin."

He looked down at her slender fingers, tipped with trim scarlet nails. "It is when you touch it. You seem to have found all my sensitive spots."

"I'm good at exploring," she whispered.

Mack brushed his lips through her tousled hair, not trusting himself with more. "Speaking of exploring," he said, trying to make his voice sound normal, "what are we hanging in the hot sky looking for?"

"Down there." Andi pointed over the rail.

"A garden?" He leaned past her to get a better look. "It's an oriental garden!"

"Are you disappointed?" she asked, knowing he wasn't.

"No! Of course not!" He finally realized she was laughing, and joined her. Then he looked back as the car rumbled past the last tower and swooped down into the upper station. "You're right," he said, as they got off the car and started around towards the garden, "It is beautiful."

"It used to be a limestone quarry," Andi explained while they bought cold drinks from the snack bar in

the old stone building overlooking the lush greenery. "Back in the thirties, a Japanese gardener and his family turned it into this."

They walked down the steep, narrow stairs into the wonderland below. Low walls of native stone bordered paths that wandered artfully through a sea of flowers and exotic trees. A shallow pond filled half the floor of the old pit. The still water was dotted with islands ablaze with more flowers.

"It's beautiful all year," Andi said quietly. "But August is my favorite. Everything is blooming here, even when the world outside is brown with heat."

They crossed over one of the arched bridges. "These are different," Mack said. Andi let her crinkled brow ask the question. "The ones on the Riverwalk are smooth, made with big stones. These are made of smaller stones, set whichever way they go." He looked into her eyes. "Yet it's just as romantic."

They stepped off the path in front of the high waterfall that fed the garden and stood for a moment watching the giant goldfish that lazed along the bottom of the pond. Mack circled Andi's trim waist and pulled her slim length back against his hard body. "I'm starting to get hungry," he whispered into her ear.

More than the heat of August simmered between their bodies. Her words were husky as she moaned, "One-track mind."

"Hungry for food," he said.

"Two-track mind," she amended. "Where do you

want to eat?" She turned to face him. "Or are you thinking of trying to get both on the same track? I'm not sure I'm willing to put up with room service."

"We'll save that for breakfast," he said, and looked back down into the still water. "Right now I have a craving for seafood."

"Hush," Andi scolded, then leaned over the iron chain and waved to the fish swimming unconcerned below. "He's just kidding. This man has no romance in his soul."

But when she looked at Mack, her eyes carried a different message. He took her arm, and they started up the path that led around the edge of the pond. Andi led the way up the narrow steps, between prickly beds of cactus and thick stands of bamboo, to vantage points strung along the rock hillside. High over the still water, each offered a subtly different view of the fantasyland below.

Mack finally turned from the last overlook and started back towards the pavilion, but Andi stopped him. "There's one more," she said, and led him the other way, down the path and across the wooden bridge to the tower.

Instead of the garden, it looked out over the rest of the park. They watched the miniature train chug past the bottom of the hill, and heard a wild cry echoing from somewhere in the zoo. Wide fields of manicured grass stretched toward the forest that covered Breckenridge Park.

Beyond it the horizon burned with the last rays of the sun and silhouetted the tall buildings of San

Antonio. "There it is," Andi said, and didn't even bother to point. She knew he had already picked out the outline of the Palacio del Rio, their Palace of the River. He drew Andi back against his wide chest and wrapped her in his arms.

"It's almost dark." His whisper was low, husky, and his breath, soft in the sleekly gelled tumble of Andi's hair, warmed her to her curling toes. Then they just stood for a while, enjoying the last moments of the dying day.

Then Andi felt a rumble deep in Mack's flat stomach. "Oops," he muttered. "I guess I'm still hungry for the other."

Chapter Nineteen:

Sunday Evening

"If you were serious about seafood," Andi said, "I know of several places in town. I might need directions to find most of them, though."

"The place I heard about is right over there." Mack pointed just to the right of the hotel. "I checked with the concierge this morning while you were working your magic. The Bayous Restaurant is on the Riverwalk, about four blocks up the river. Does four blocks sound far enough to settle fine Creole cuisine?"

Andi snuggled into his shoulder. "It sounds just about right." They shared a kiss full of the same promised magic that beckoned from the shadowed horizon, then started back along the path towards the skyride. The return trip they spent in silence, content to be close together.

Even while they walked across the parking lot, then drove back downtown, they were content just to touch. Words were unnecessary. They walked through the Palacio, then up the river and left the city

behind, moving in their own private world.

At The Bayous, Andi let Mack order for both of them and, in a daze, shared what he ate. She didn't even notice the surge of life along the water's edge, clearly visible from their upper level table. The waiter left with Mack's credit card before she could step back into reality and protest. "Next time," Mack said.

"Next time," she agreed. Then she finally managed to gather her scattered thoughts together. It was almost her time. Softly she said, "I got the impression you hadn't been with anyone since your wife?"

He looked puzzled. "True."

"I'm on the pill," Andi said. "And I just had a checkup. If you think you're okay, I'll trust you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Thank you. I guess I don't need to hit the restroom, then."

"But I do," Andi said. She used the trip to the powder room to darken her makeup, to take full advantage of the more intimate evening light. She checked her dress, running a scarlet-tipped finger over the first heart that held the plaid shirtdress closed. Then she unbuttoned it long enough to add a touch of perfume just above the lace that edged the top of her crimson teddy.

Andi took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Her plan started just the other side of the restroom door. When she was as ready as she was going to get, she pushed the cool wood out of the way. *It's time for the riot.*

From the look on Mack's face, her modifications had the desired effect.

They stepped through the doors into the August night, and the river-bottom air was a blanket of heat and humidity. But Mack didn't seem to care. Andi moved easily on his arm as they strolled down the crowded lane, and her heat was stronger than the Texas summer.

She was strutting, bold as the full moon that hung over the Riverwalk. She reached out and plucked one of the late-blooming flowers from a bush. The air was foggy with their intoxicating scent. By the time they reached the Palacio, they were dizzy with it.

Instead of opening the door, Mack pulled her into his arms. Her lips opened under his just as the blossoms had opened under the yellow moon, and her scent was as earthy and intoxicating as theirs.

He pushed her back and she moaned, the vibrations throughout her soft body. His lips followed a roaring pulse down the ivory column of her throat, and her long fingers moved deep into his hair as they pulled his head down into the hollow where her blood pounded so close to the surface.

Then she was pushing him back. "There's something long and hard poking into me," she whispered, and her voice was as musky as her perfume.

He eased away from her and looked down, but there was mischief in her voice. "It's the handle on the door."

Andi looked up into his moon-shadowed eyes and

almost took pity on him, but then she pulled her hands down from behind his head and chuckled. In one lay the crushed remains of the blossom. She tried to brush the rest of it from his hair, and succeeded only in dropping most of the crumbs down his shirt. He kissed her gently on the forehead and let her into the foyer.

As soon as he pushed the elevator call button, Mack drew her back into his arms. But Andi turned away, lacing her fingers in his, and his big hands spread across her taut stomach. She let them draw her back, until she was molded against his lean body, and this time it wasn't the door handle she felt.

He bent forward, just as the door slid open, and blew a puff into her left ear. It roared through her body in an explosion that echoed the pounding of her already panting heart. Andi heard the embarrassed laughter from the passengers leaving the elevator, but she was too immersed in Mack's presence to feel any shame.

Then the machine closed around them, and they were alone as it carried them toward heaven. Andi felt his mouth trace a chain of kisses across the back of her neck just below her short hair. Her mind reeled with the sensation and the memories of the night they had already shared.

But I'm Andi-of-the-short-hair. And I want more. And now! Yet, do I dare?

Then she knew she could. She forced herself free of his embrace and turned toward him, watching doubt fill his gaze. Andi reached out and took his hand,

letting the fire in her eyes quench his dismay. "I want to get something straight between us," she said.

"What?" responded Mack, still puzzled.

Her eyes danced. "You'll figure it out."

Chapter Twenty:

Sunday Night

When Andi left the elevator, she turned right instead of left. Mack's eyebrows gathered in a question, but he followed her to his room and let them in.

When Andi pinned him to the door he was too startled to react, but she felt him harden as she pressed herself against him in a boldly passionate kiss. Mack's arms circled her, but not tightly, and she wondered how he was going to react. She leaned back far enough to pull open his shirt, popping each of the pearl buttons.

His eyes were clouded, doubtful of her sudden boldness. Andi's composure trembled, but without hesitating she leaned into his wide chest and traced a fluttering line of kisses down his throat. When Mack still didn't respond, she thought of letting him take control, but it was too late to retreat. She threw caution to the winds and sank her sharp teeth into the hard muscle of his upper arm, almost deep enough to draw blood.

He yelped and thrust her away. But now he was grinning, and fire that matched hers danced in his gray eyes. He started toward her, but Andi's hand flashed between them in a magical gesture that stopped him in his tracks. She let her tongue flick catlike across her teeth and watched his fingers gently explore his wound. "This is a new game for me," Mack confessed, "but I'm ready to play."

Andi pranced toward him and reached for his shirt. Instead of pulling it all the way off, she drew it down only far enough to trap his arms behind him. She kissed him again, her fingers deep in his raven hair, destroying its order. Then her lips traced a chain of explosive kisses down his neck and across his shoulder, and his skin danced beneath each caress. Her nail-tipped fingers traced an intricate pattern down across his chest and flat stomach, and the tanned skin beneath the crimson tips paled as Mack's blood fled her touch.

His black belt rode low on his hips. Andi teased her way around his waist, just above its top edge. Then she drew her fingertips back across the smooth leather until she found his shining western buckle and unfastened it.

Slowly, enticingly, she stripped away his slacks, his shoes, his socks, and his shorts, until Mack stood nude before her, bound by the twisted shirt. She had wanted to arouse him, and there was hard evidence before her that she was succeeding.

Still fully clothed, Andi drew him back into her arms for another long kiss, probing deep into his

mouth in a battle of tongues. The muscles in his shoulders twisted with the strain and she pulled his shirt away, freeing his arms even as they threatened to rip the garment asunder.

Mack's strong hands spread across her back, and he crushed her to his chest. Then his fingers began to roam, aching for the feel of her bare skin, having to be satisfied with the soft cotton cloth that covered it. When they turned into claws from his need to strip the interfering layers away Andi eased back. He reached for the hearts strung down the front of her dress, but she trapped his fingers in hers.

Andi stepped further into his room, drawing him after her. She unbuckled the red vinyl belt and dropped it to the floor, then changed her mind about undressing for him. Instead she pulled him to the center of his wide bed.

Mack reached again for the red buttons, and once again she stopped him, diverting his touch to the side, bending his fingers around her aching breasts. His hands closed around her soft flesh, and their burning need to caress her sent shock waves dancing through her body. But she ignored the pleasure to concentrate on his reactions.

She rolled on top of his hard chest and let her own hands roam, but this time she didn't follow them with her eyes. Instead she looked deep into his. While Andi's fingers traced the secret pathways of his body, she watched his need build until their gray depths were cloudy, fogged with the tension of his lust.

Just as he reached the edge of exploding, she

lightly kissed the fading imprint one of the heart-shaped buttons had left on his hot skin and rolled away from him, leaving Mack gasping for air and sanity.

His mind stumbled back from the abyss and recovered enough to command his muscles, and he rolled toward her. Andi found his hand and guided it to the topmost of the nine red hearts.

His once-strong fingers were trembling with need, and it was all he could do to control them enough to slip each button from its hole and move to the next, but finally he freed the last one. He pushed aside the bold red plaid and revealed her body, clad only in the scarlet teddy.

Andi shivered, feeling his gaze as Mack's eyes caressed her from head to foot, drinking in her beauty as a desert-maddened man drinks water.

She pulled him on top of her and cradled him in her embrace. They twined as lovers, but with the thinnest of barriers between his need and its fulfillment. His hands roamed her body, remembering all their earlier discoveries, burning through the silken covering, touching hidden traps of pleasure until it was all Andi could do to retain control of her own senses.

Mack dropped his head to her breast and devoured it through the cup of silken cloth until the nipple was a hard knot in a scarlet tent. He was ravenous. She drew his head up and met his lips with hers, drawing him closer.

"Now!" he moaned, and that was the only word

his mind could fashion. "Now!" He tried to draw one narrow strap off her shoulder, but her arm was still trapped in the sleeve of her dress. Mack pulled away, and Andi was astounded at the intensity of the raw need flaming in his burning eyes.

She guided his hand downward, and watched him gasp when he found the tiny snaps. He released them, and stared bewitched into the dark forest they revealed.

With a wave of one hand Andi had enchanted him. She had bound him, and teased him, and tortured him. Now with that same magical hand she freed him. She took his naked masculinity into her hand and guided Mack into the open center of her body.

He entered roughly, out of control, and it was all she could do to pace his wild rhythm. Andi could feel every muscle in his body twisting and knotting with savage power until he froze, rock hard, at the peak of his lust.

With the suddenness of a steel trap snapping shut, the passion Andi had suspended captured her body, arching it high into his embrace. Her breath, driven through her tightened throat, echoed around the room in a startled cry, signaling a completion she had no idea was that close or that intense. Just as quickly her release was over, leaving her shuddering under the weight of his body.

They lay that way for long minutes, gasping for breath. Then Mack raised himself on trembling elbows and looked deep into Andi's eyes with a steady, clear gaze that told her more than any words

possibly could how wonderful the encounter had been. He bent, kissed her as gently as he had been rough, then rolled, drawing her with him until they lay side by side. Before he slid from her body, he was asleep.

Andi lay still, but it was the aching stillness that waited for the bursting of a storm. She lay on a hard-muscled arm, and another circled her waist. His breath warmed the sleek waves on top of her head with the easy rhythm of his slumber. Her slender leg still draped high over his, leaving her open for his next invasion. This time the evidence of his lust seeped from inside her.

And I don't care. The lover that lies naked in my arms is more a part of me than the layers of scarlet cloth still tangled around my cooling body. But is he mine?

Andi's thoughts whirled. She tried to gather them, but she was too close to Mack. She was surrounded by his warmth, and his arrantly male scent.

The long black hair on top of his head tangled her fingers, and the stiffer hair on the outside of his leg teased the delicate inner surface of her thigh.

She freed her hand first, then pushed him gently. Her magic still controlled him, and Mack rolled away and settled back into slumber. *How did I do that?* Gently Andi kissed the bite mark, still dark on his tanned shoulder.

She rolled off the bed and winced as her foot trod the hard buckle of her red patent belt. She picked it up and winced again. Every muscle in her slender body was protesting. The strength she had used had

congealed into hard, gritty aches. Andi shed the red plaid dress, dropped it and the belt on a handy chair and hobbled into the bath, closing the door on the room outside.

While hot water filled the tub, she stood in front of the mirror, staring in wonder at the stranger it reflected. Her teddy still covered her breasts with silken sleekness, but it ended in a scarlet tangle high on her waist. The dark hair it revealed was matted, caked with the residue of lust.

It was obvious she had just made love, and not gently. There was a bruise on one shoulder, and a chafe roughened the velvety inner skin of one thigh. Yet in this wanton portrait, there was no hint of lewdness. Andi's body glowed with a heat she couldn't understand, as if it held a secret her mind had not yet discovered.

She turned the water all the way to hot and switched on the shower, letting the heavy spray plunge a boiling torrent into the water in the tub, filling the room with warm steam. When she stood and pulled off the teddy the mirror clouded, refusing to reveal any more secrets.

Andi turned off the shower and eased into the tub to let the hot water work its healing into her sore muscles. While they relaxed, she closed her eyes and tried to tease some answers from the confusion.

She smiled and chuckled as one of them thrust itself into her grasp. *I looked into the mirror, but I didn't think about my hair. Nor did I make a false start at pinning my remembered tresses up out of the way for my bath. At*

least I'm getting used to that. She let her mind wander back over the day.

Everything would have been different if my hair had still been long. The old Andi had less self-confidence. The long-haired woman certainly could never have taken control. Andi moved uneasily in the water. Do I really want all that control? I'll never dominate Mack for long. And I don't want a David Lawless.

Did I ever really control Mack? His words echoed silently across the hot water baking into her smooth skin. "This is a new game for me," he had said, "but I'm ready to play." A game? The water swirled restlessly as the thought struck her. *Was he really just playing with me?*

But as she reviewed what she knew of him, the conviction grew that to Mack, the time they spent together was more than play. *When my hand enthralled him, the magic had come not from my power, but from his. He let me take control.*

And that's my treasure, the reason the time had been filled with magic. It isn't the control that counted, but the trust. He trusted my feelings enough to make himself my vulnerable pawn.

Andi found herself slipping deeper into the soothing water, on the edge of slumber, and roused. She dried herself, turned out the lights, and stumbled into bed. The room was absolutely dark, the heavy curtains blocking any outside illumination.

She snuggled under the covers next to Mack, in a soft cloud of their mingled scent, and tried to recall her scattered thoughts. It was impossible. She had left

them in a heap on the bathroom floor beside the crumpled hotel towel and the scarlet puddle of her teddy.

* * * *

When Mack awoke, it was too dark for him to see. There was something heavy lying on his arm, and his hand lay woodenly asleep. Gently he turned toward her, easing his arm around, then tried to hold it still as the needles of returning life tortured it. He clenched his hand, and Andi sighed a deep breath as his muscles rolled beneath the weight of her neck. Mack drew his legs up behind hers and a puff of the heated air from beneath the covers thrust the heavy scent of their lovemaking deep into his nostrils. His body instantly tightened as she aroused him.

He eased closer, spooning his hard body into the warmth of Andi's softness until they were touching from head to toe. It wouldn't be fair to wake her in the middle of the night just to satisfy his need, and Mack intended to just snuggle close, then go back to sleep with her cradled in his arms. But the liquid scent that had awakened his body lingered in her short, fluffy hair.

His hand rested on the smooth thigh, and he found it clenching, longing to caress her. Mack slid it across her soft skin until he encircled her, and his arm, with a need of its own, tightened, drawing her pliant body deeper into his embrace. Andi sighed and cuddled back against him.

Gently he let his long fingers draw circles around her navel until he captured the rhythm of her breathing. Then he let his hand drift easily upward, tracing arcane figures across her tightening skin. Andi's breathing deepened as she drifted in his teasing embrace, her mind still asleep, yet with her body coming to life under his exploring touch. The tips of his fingers found the first curve of her breast and teased along its sensitive border. She breathed deeply, about to awaken.

He crossed the border and surrounded the firm mound, taking its weight in the palm of his hand, squeezing it gently.

* * * *

She went rigid, startled as he had been waking beside her in the total darkness. Then she knew Mack, and the pleasure filling her body reassured her. It's all right, she thought.

She took a deep breath, and her breast seemed to grow as she thrust it deeper into Mack's grasp. Her hand traced a nail-tipped pattern along the outside of his thigh that set off echoes of pleasure throughout his body.

She took a deep breath, filling his hand with her soft mound. Her long fingers traced a tight muscle along his rough-haired thigh, and she felt the impact of her touch throughout his body. Mack hardened against her, and his breath fell harsh and hot into her short hair. Andi couldn't see, but her other senses

seemed to compensate, responding with extra sensitivity.

Everywhere their bodies were in contact her skin seemed to tingle with his touch. It was easy to hear the breath rasping in his throat, but her ears, extra sensitive, also detected the pounding of his heart, and the rush of blood it pushed through his veins. Mack's hand burned against her breast, filling it to bursting with sensation, but she also felt the sharp prod of his toes as they curled upward against the soles of her feet. The rousing smell of the love they had already made hung in a cloud around them, tantalizing her. It was underscored by the faint, lingering scent of the blossom Andi had crushed in his hair.

Her one neglected sense—taste—cried out, and she turned in his arms, burying her face in his shoulder as she opened to him. Her tongue teased across Mack's skin, drinking in his naturally salty taste as she strained to push herself deeper into his embrace. Andi huddled there, taste, touch, hearing and smell drinking in his presence until her mind reeled with the overload of sensation.

Then her lips found the throbbing point where his hot blood coursed just beneath the surface. She could feel within him some need, as yet unfilled. Andi drew back, staring through the darkness at his face. Her unseeing eyes looked deep inside his soul with a sixth sense she had never before possessed, and she knew. Mack wanted her to want. He needed her to need, to take and to be satisfied.

She searched through the darkness, molding her

lips to his, mingling her breath with his. She rolled on top of him and slid her strong fingers into his hair, holding his head prisoner as her kiss became hard and demanding. Andi drank his lust, and it inflamed her body as the *jalapeño* had burned her palate. She had taken control before, but it had been with the thought of pleasing Mack. Now it was time to think only of her own need. Andi released her passion.

Her breasts brushed across his hard chest as she moved on top of him, and her nipples ached with a fire that had to be quenched. She moved higher, forcing his head down until she could thrust a nipple into his hungry mouth. It closed upon her, but instead of draining her passion, it squeezed it back into her body, fanning the flames that already raged at blast-furnace intensity.

The pleasure tore a raw cry from Andi's throat, and she buried her face in his hair, chanting her need as if the red-hot words would burn straight through his skull to tell Mack's brain how much pleasure he was giving her.

He had to know. In all their time together she had never felt this wild. She reached for his hand, and guided it to her other breast. "Harder," she demanded, and if Andi whispered, it was only because her voice was hoarse with unfulfilled need. He cupped her flesh, alternating between feather touches and rude pressure. His fingers, like those of a blind man, were ultra-sensitive. He could feel the pleasure vibrating through Andi's body even as he added to it.

He searched the soft valley between her breasts with a kiss. With each hand Mack held one of her firm globes, his roughened face rasping against her smooth skin. Then Andi was shuddering with pleasure on top of him, a void within her that demanded to be filled.

"I need you," she whispered. "I want your prick inside me. Now." She was on the edge of control. She shifted down until she just touched his manhood, then waited, stretching her willpower for another endless moment.

He froze under her, knowing how the tension was building inside her flame-ravaged body. When she could stand it no longer, Andi enveloped him, collapsing on his wide chest with momentary relief. "So good," she whispered. "So hard. So big. You fill me." She shifted into the ancient rhythm.

Mack lay beneath her, unseen, solid as the Earth, and his hands roamed in the darkness, guided by some sixth sense, finding and thrilling all the secret places on her body that needed to be touched. He was whispering now, "Go for it. Take what you need. Come for me. I want to feel you come around me."

Her muscles rolled and strained beneath her smooth skin. She held Mack tight between her thighs and her hands gripped his shoulders, and she tried to pull him up off the bed. The long bands of muscle that twisted across Andi's back and chest strained like the powerful sinews of a hawk as it spread wide wings to catch the wind. She pulled, and again, and was flying. Her lover was heavy beneath her, and she

had to exert all her strength to carry him, but Mack was the source of all her strength.

She flew higher and higher in the darkness, knowing that somewhere it had to end. Just when she knew that to go on was death, Andi burst into the unseen heat of the sky.

She arched backwards as the passion filled every part of her. She felt each of the short hairs that brushed against the back of her neck. She felt the crevices in the palm of his hand through her thrusting nipples.

She counted each of the tiny whorls on the tips of his fingers as they brushed through the mingled hair at their joining. When Andi burst into the sky she felt the heat of it upon her skin, and the dew of sweat that followed it.

Then he caught her as she tumbled back into his arms. Sheltering her from reality, he brushed his strong fingers through her soft hair, turning her face so he could kiss the tears from her eyes.

Her breathing steadied as she relaxed, and her soft lashes brushed his face as her eyes closed.

Andi eased her abused muscles into a long stretch on top of him and smiled. "I haven't forgotten you," she whispered and moved around him, drawing a husky moan from Mack's throat.

She shifted down the bed, off the end, until she lay between his thighs. *It's been a long time since I wanted this*, she thought. She flicked the head of his prick with her tongue, and felt as well as heard his gasp. She engulfed him, and stroked his dew-slick hardness

with her lips and fingers.

Andi freed her imagination, as she had earlier freed her passion. In the darkness he could be anyone she wanted. He could be Mack Braeburn, the big, work-roughened, Texas hero that rasped range-hard words above her, or the Texian on the wall.

Then Andi realized that that fantasy was not one she needed. Mackenzie Stone might not be the commander whose saber drew the line, but he would be one of the first to cross that line. That was hero enough for her. He was a special man, and he made her a special woman. Mackenzie Stone was the one for her. "Now," he said, warning her. "Right now."

I'm going all the way, she thought, and stroked harder. With a love-softened curse he spewed into her mouth, and she swallowed his hot seed.

As he softened in her hand, his fingers slid into her hair, and he drew her back up on top of his chest, and into a deep kiss. "Incredible," he murmured.

The sixth sense that had guided Andi earlier evaporated, and she wondered what he was thinking. *Does Mack feel as I do?* By the time she gathered the will to ask, he was already asleep, his regular breathing gently warming the soft hair swept behind her ear.

Mañana. I'll ask him tomorrow. Then Andi rolled to the side, close under his arm, and drifted easily off into her own dreamless slumber.

Chapter Twenty-One:

Monday Morning

Andi woke gently, warm and soft in the wide bed. She reached for Mack, and found only cool sheets. Drowsily, wondering where he was, she opened her eyes.

The room was empty. As empty as the stand that had held his suitcase.

She shivered. There was only the silent telephone on the nightstand, and nothing of his on the dresser. *Think*, she told herself, but the obvious answer roared in the silence.

She sat up against the headboard, hugging the sheet around her so no one could see her naked in his room, that was no longer his. *It isn't his fault. We never made a commitment.*

It is his fault, her heart shouted. *I'm in love.*

The argument roared through her head, driving all hope of rational thought aside. And her body had to go to the bathroom. But not his bathroom, she thought. The scarlet teddy lay sprawled across the

chair. Andi jumped from the bed and hastily pulled it on, then fought her way into the plaid dress. The garments defied her, as if they didn't want to protect her, protested covering her nakedness from the world.

She glanced around the frigid room one last time, making sure she had everything that was hers, and darted into the hall. It was blessedly empty. She ran the short section of corridor and was fumbling with her key by the time his door clicked shut.

She looked back. The 'Do Not Disturb' sign swung from the handle. Andi left something to die in that room, and now she couldn't go back for it.

The first thing she saw in her room was the red cover of the romance novel. "Liar!" she snarled. Then she went into the bathroom and sat and cried.

"It's not supposed to be this way," she wailed. "He was supposed to fall in love, too. The story was supposed to end happily ever after."

But it didn't, she thought, and ended up giggling hysterically, shaking her head at the idea of a silly girl perched on the toilet weeping over a man she had met only a week before.

Andi took a deep breath. She pulled a fluffy washcloth from the rack and wet it, then washed the sleep and tears from her face. When she found herself staring down at the plastic case that held her pills. She hadn't taken one last night.

"Andi-of-the-short-hair," she snarled to the reflection in the mirror, "you are not as sassy and sexy as you think you are. If you don't slow down,

you are going to find yourself in a *lot* of trouble. You need to quit believing everything you read and everything a man tells you.”

She took a deep breath and opened the case, but it was empty. She’d taken the last pill night before last. Out of the corner of her eye the reflection seemed to smile.

It was a slow, smoldering smile. The look of a sensuous woman who knew exactly what she was doing. The kind of woman who believed in herself, and romantasy, and in one certain man. Andi took a deep breath, refusing to meet that reflection with her own eyes.

She couldn’t stop thinking about *Jewels*. There had been bad times in that story too, before Lily and Mack finally learned to trust each other. Maybe she had overreacted. There hadn’t been a note in the room, but Mack might have left a message somewhere else.

After a deep breath, a quick phone call to the front desk turned up only the information that Mackenzie Stone had checked out, leaving instructions his room was not to be cleaned until late.

And of course it was impossible to give her his address or phone number. Andi blushed at the suspicion she heard dripping from the clerk’s voice.

She checked her purse, but it held no note. She thought, I’m not really checking to see if all my money and credit cards are there.

Of course, something could have come up. Some sort of emergency. Something he would call her later and explain about. Something they could laugh about.

But she hadn't given him her address. She hadn't even thought about not having his, and only now was realizing he didn't have hers. *If this was any other game, I'd need practice. But I don't want to practice, not without Mack Stone.* A deep breath steadied her nerves.

After taking a quick shower, Andi climbed into a comfortable khaki jumpsuit. She threw the rest of her things into her bag and rolled it to the door. Her last check of the room found the novel still sitting on the desk.

For a long minute Andi debated leaving it behind. Then the passionate ending flashed again through her mind. He could always look up 'Thomas, A.' in the Kerrville phone directory. She was the only one.

I'll keep hoping, she thought. Her hand picked up the paperback, and she smoothed her scarlet-tipped fingers across its smooth, scarlet cover, then dropped it into her shoulder bag.

Andi fought against taking another deep breath. *No wonder lovers are always dizzy.*

Chapter Twenty-Two:

Tuesday

Tuesday dawned gray and drizzly. Andi breezed into the library, determined to look like someone back from a restful vacation. All she had to do was appear cheerful for the half-hour it would take her to get away in the bookmobile. She fooled Elizabeth for almost two minutes. Her boss followed her into the cab of the truck with the excuse that she needed to catch Andi up on what had happened in the library the past week.

But when Elizabeth Croft leaned her statuesque figure against the dashboard and arched a sculptured eyebrow toward her smooth chestnut hair, Andi knew she had lost. "I met someone," she said.

Elizabeth smiled. "Sounds more like you met *someone*. Y'all have fun?" Her East Texas drawl held no hint of teasing.

Andi shrugged. "I read one of those romance novels before I left, and I guess I went down there a little starry-eyed. Anyway, I met the Tall Dark

Stranger and had a classic romantic fling.”

“Nothin’ wrong with romance.” Elizabeth’s chocolate eyes were warm with concern. Every inch the professional when it came to library business, she was also one of the rare bosses who could build friendships with her staff.

“Everything was going fine until he just left, without even saying goodbye.” Andi sighed. “It was probably my fault. I’m not used to things happening as fast as they did. I probably convinced him I was just out for a quick weekend. He didn’t even ask for my phone number. A fling is probably all he wanted anyway.”

A tiny crinkle appeared below her widow’s peak as Elizabeth’s gaze narrowed. She probed deep into Andi’s dark blue eyes. “Don’t really believe that, do you? You’re still hoping.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, if all he wanted was a weekend, he ain’t worth worryin’ about. If not, he’s kickin’ himself right now. If he’s got as much sense as an armadillo, he’ll come lookin’ for you. If I were you, I wouldn’t do anythin’ definite ‘til I was sure. Accordin’ to ever’ thing I read, romance ends happ’ly ever after.” She was looking at Andi’s left hand.

Andi looked down at the third finger. She hadn’t given that a thought. “Raymond called?”

Elizabeth crossed her arms, and elegant wine-colored nails smoothed over her silky off-white blouse. She smiled, and this time mischief twinkled in her dark eyes. “Said he’d call back. Forgot to tell him

you were goin', didn't you? Bet you didn't tell him you cut your hair, either."

Elizabeth stood up to leave, then stopped at the door. "You have more smarts than a number one cuttin' horse, Andi. Don't let all that good sense talk you inta cuttin' outa the herd someone you don't want to keep." The smile spread back across her classic face. "Now git to work."

Andi stared at the empty door for a long minute. *Taking my hair down was as intimate a gesture as Raymond and I shared. And Elizabeth is right. I have no idea how he's going to react.*

She shook the thought from her mind and occupied herself with a routine check of the bookmobile. When everything was in its place, she carefully backed the lumbering truck into the cramped courtyard and pulled it up the hill on her way to her first stop.

The weather stayed grim, matching Andi's mood. Business slowed to a trickle, and the adults that trooped through were content to pick out their books in silence. The kids, cooped up by the rain, more than made up for them. It took all of Andi's ragged self-control to keep from throwing a couple of the rowdiest off the bookmobile.

Then the truck decided to act up. The transmission developed a grinding noise that died out whenever she got close to a service station. Even her body rebelled, making itself crampier and messier than usual.

Her phone lay silent on the nightstand Tuesday

Romance in Scarlet

and Wednesday.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Thursday

By Thursday, Andi was ready to risk another vacation, anywhere the sun was shining. Finally the weather began to break. As she left work, the sun was just beginning to tease its way through a ragged hole on the overcast sky.

She parked in her slot and started up the stairs, which were actually beginning to dry. Her phone was ringing. Andi had to hold her key in both hands to get it into the lock, and then it wouldn't turn. She was dancing with frustration by the time she jiggled the latch open and got to the handset. "Welcome back," her mother said.

"Hi, Mom," Andi said, but the words were so gruff they gave her away.

"What's wrong?"

Andi forced her voice into a more normal tone. "Oh, the weather's messy, and that means messy days on the bookmobile. And I'm messy. And my key didn't want to work. It's just a bad day."

"Are you all right?"

"Mother."

"I know. You're a grown woman. I called to see if you wanted to meet us at Frodo's for supper." Helen's voice still sounded only half convinced.

"That sounds wonderful," Andi said. And it did. By the time she hung up she was beginning to feel less disheartened. If her own parents waited until now to call her, could she really expect more from Mack? Four days wasn't that long. She was all the way back out the door when the phone rang again.

This time it was Raymond. Andi agreed to have dinner with him Friday evening, and stumbled through a round of comments about her vacation. When she got back to the door she found she had bent the key in the lock. It snapped off when she tried to remove it. The hole in the clouds had closed up. It started to rain again. She stood on her front stoop and let out a heartfelt, "Shit!"

But by the time she pulled in beside her parent's car in the Oak Hills parking lot, it was just drizzling. She didn't have her umbrella, so she had to dash from her car to Frodo's awning.

His foyer was as warm and friendly as it always was, and she began to feel better as soon as she entered. The air was heavy with good kitchen smells and for the first time all week, she found herself really hungry.

Her parents had claimed the booth under the sign that said 'John Wilkes', and Andi groaned again at the outrageous pun. She waved at the jolly Frodo and

joined them.

"I don't think I'll need those," she said, pointing to the Styrofoam cup of crayons the proprietor held.

He chuckled and gave her an adult menu. "I brought them for your father." He took a step back and looked at her again.

"Your hair is different, isn't it? I like it. I'll bet it's practical." He sighed theatrically. "All my long-haired girls keep griping about the wet weather ruining their styles."

Andi ran her long fingers over her damp locks, shaking the glisten of rain from it. "Practical, it is," she agreed. Perhaps it was time to shake the past week from her hair just as she had the rain. She had good friends and family, and Mack Stone wasn't the only man in the world. *I can convince myself of that.*

Both her parents were looking at her, bursting with curiosity. As usual, it was her father that came crashing to the point. "You went on vacation. If anything disastrous would have happened, you would have called Monday night. Routine good time, Tuesday or Wednesday. So what was so wonderful we have to pry you out in the rain to hear." Andi stifled the impulse to take a deep breath.

"The Palacio del Rio is beautiful, I got a lot of research done, I went out with three different men, and I got used to having short hair. Two of the dates were ho-hum, the third was nice, but he hasn't called since. Will that satisfy your curiosity until I can order? I'm starving." She opened the menu and tried to bury her truth-telling eyes in it.

"Hasn't called?" Her mother refused to be distracted. "These days I thought it was acceptable for the lady to call."

"It's only been four days, Mom. Besides, he didn't give me his number. And he's not in the book." It wasn't until her mother's eyes widened that Andi realized how much she had let slip between those lines. Her blush must have convinced Helen to wait for more answers, because her mother abruptly switched her attention to ordering.

Andi didn't know what she wanted, and that startled her. She always had one of Frodo's tender chicken-fried steaks, with green beans and mashed potatoes.

This time she found herself looking at the menu with adventure welling in her soul. When the waitress appeared, she ordered a pepper steak and picked sautéed mushrooms and fried okra from the list of forty-seven vegetables, fruits, and salads the restaurant offered.

Her parents looked at each other. John picked up his glass of water, while Helen framed a leading question. Distraction, Andi thought and said, "Maybe I should get a tattoo."

It didn't work. By the time her father quit choking, Andi's mother had on her 'won't be denied' look. Andi gave in and told them an R-rated version of the whole story.

"So you see," she finished, "there's Mack, somewhere in Fredericksburg. I really like him, but I don't know how he feels about me. Then there's

Raymond. I'm not sure I know him well enough to predict how he'll take my short hairstyle, and it seems like after being engaged to him, I should."

Andi leaned back, twisting one of Frodo's white napkins into a rope. "I don't even know myself. I'm not sure whether it was cutting my hair, spending a week in the Palacio or meeting Mack, but I feel like I've stepped out of a rut. The only trouble is that I'm not sure exactly where I'm going, or how to get there."

The waitress appeared and interrupted Andi's story while she distributed plates. The pepper steak sent its aroma steaming upwards to mix with that of the mushrooms and the okra in an exciting combination that set Andi's mouth to watering in anticipation.

She wasn't disappointed. The hot peppers in the filling pressed inside the sliced steak contrasted with the earthy taste of the mushrooms and the crunchy tang of the round green slices of okra in a wild harmony of flavors. Andi was half finished before she slowed down enough to continue.

John had been just as busy with his T-bone. He took a sip of iced tea and glanced over at Andi's plate. "Allowing for the strange combination, all this doesn't seem to have affected your appetite. I still think you're just doing a little growing."

"Maybe so," Andi replied, "but I thought I was all finished with that."

Helen chuckled. "It always comes when you least expect it. We went through much the same thing just

last spring." Her hand found John's, and they looked fondly at each other. "We'd been hanging around all the friends we made while you and John Junior were growing up. All we could talk about was how well all of you kids were doing."

"Not that we didn't have a lot to brag about," John interrupted.

"But we were stuck in a rut, too." Helen's smile widened into a grin. "And you'll never guess what we did about it."

Andi thought back. Putting together and then taking apart a wedding had kept her too occupied to notice anything. "You've been busier lately, but I thought it was Dad's job or the Riverhill Club. What have you gotten yourself into?"

John put his arm around his wife. "Helen auditioned for the Point Theater's last musical of the season and made it. She'll sing in the chorus, and even has a couple of lines. And I've volunteered to help backstage."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. She used to be quite a performer back in college, and we just decided that it was time to try something new together. So, you see, you aren't the only Thomas that's branching out."

Andi slit open the yellow square of cornbread that was all that remained of her meal and lavishly buttered it. Her palate may have been adventurous enough for dessert but as usual, Frodo's generous helpings had filled her up.

"By the way," Helen said, "I get two free tickets for

being in the show, so plan on bringing someone to see my moment of glory. We'll be running Thursday through Saturday evenings the rest of the month."

"The last week will probably be the best," her father added. Andi caught a twinkle in his eye. "Besides, that'll give you time to figure out who you're going to bring. If you need help, I'll clean the shotgun."

"Daddy!" Andi glanced heavenward in mock supplication. "I'll thank you to keep your birdshot out of my love life."

"Don't worry, dear," Helen was chuckling. "Between running errands for a certain red-headed stage manager and trying to keep track of my stage door Johnnies, your father is going to be very busy for at least the rest of the month." She glanced at her watch. "Speaking of stage managers, there's a rehearsal coming up. We have to go."

Then she looked up, and her dark blue eyes were deep with concern. Andi reached out and took one of her parents' hands in each of hers. "I'm all right," she answered. "And if I need help, I know where you are. The Point Theater is just the other side of Ingram. I can find my way that far. Now, go have fun."

Minutes later she waved them out of the parking lot. The mist may have disappeared from the sky, but it filled her eyes. I'm so lucky to have parents like that, she thought. How can I hope to find what they obviously share?

She blinked away the moisture and strolled down the broad sidewalk of the strip mall toward the

grocery store at the opposite end. A quick glance through her vegetable crisper just before she left her apartment had resulted in a short shopping list. Pushing her basket through the produce section she picked out carrots and celery, and decided to pass up lettuce.

Then she found herself staring at a bin of jalapeño peppers. *What am I going to do? There is, of course, still the chance Mack will call.*

And Mom's right. If I had his phone number, I'd call him. But will my pride let me hunt through all the computer stores in Fredericksburg until I find him? With the chance he doesn't want me to find him?

And what about Raymond? That relationship never burned with the raw passion of San Antonio. But was that passion just the exotic setting? Or my first burst of freedom? Is what I had with Raymond steadier, more reasonable? Can I settle for reasonable?

She pulled her mind back into the produce aisle. *I'll see what tomorrow's date with Raymond brings.* But before she left the counter, she picked the biggest and brightest of the red jalapeño pods and put it in her basket. On the way to the checkout counter, another flash of red caught her eye.

It was a rack of romance novels, and one section was scarlet with the same line *Jewels in the Stone* had come from.

She quickly scanned the teasers on the back covers, and *Barnaby's Dance* caught her interest. The hero was a banker, cold, calculating, thinking only of cash. The man on the cover even bore a faint resemblance to

Raymond. Andi grinned. *Can it be as simple as having read the wrong book?*

Back in her apartment she put away the vegetables, making sure the pungent jalapeño was securely wrapped. Then, even though it was early, she slipped into a soft cotton T-shirt and took her book to bed.

Again the heroine was a strong and independent woman. Angela Wheaton was pulling a children's shelter through the growing pains associated with becoming established.

John Sterling the Fourth had joined the agency's board of directors for the same purpose, but his ideas centered on balance sheets and bookkeeping. Angela was more concerned about the terrified kids she and her volunteers had to work with. Barnaby turned out to be a hand puppet with the ability to bridge the gap between adult and child.

By chapter five, it was obvious that John could never trust the agency's funding to the fiscally haphazard Angela. It was also obvious that their personal relationship had exploded with all the passion that had throbbed through the weekend with Mack.

Andi made it through the wild rapture of the first love scene, then marked her place and turned out the light. Wrapped in the soft darkness, she let her imagination stage a restaurant scene.

Instead of a banker, it was an antique dealer whose passions were blooming in riotous growth. But she had to keep reminding herself that he had a head full of sandy waves, not straight black hair with a soft

spot on top. When they stopped in front of her door, Andi felt her long hair come falling down around her shoulders.

“Damn,” she said, then gave up and went to sleep.

Her dreams tumbled on in a confusion of grumpy bears, bratty children, and costumed actors whirling across an elaborate stage. Raymond led her into dance after dance. Then Mack would cut in. But instead of taking her in his arms and catching the beat of the huge orchestra that crowded the pit, he would turn and disappear through a different door. There were enough doors to last all night.

Chapter Twenty-four:

Friday

Friday's pale dawn was a gray reflection of the rest of the week, but by the time it arrived, Andi was ready to fight. She pulled a regal red blouse over a frilly scarlet bra and buttoned it up to its high, standup collar. Her hands fastened the snug cuffs and smoothed across the silky full sleeves and the soft bodice shirring. She stepped into a gathered A-line skirt that caught the bold red of the blouse and spread it in a mitered plaid. Then she ran her wide-toothed comb through her dark-honey hair, adding extra fluff to the sweep across her forehead. It was a look to chase the grimmest clouds away.

To hell with Mackenzie Stone. If the evening with Raymond doesn't work out any better than my romantasy, I'll just start over. Maybe I'll give Mother some competition out at the Point Theater. She whirled out the door, head high and ready to take on the world.

She caught Elizabeth in the head librarian's office and told her about the grinding noise. They decided

to move the truck's semi-annual checkup ahead and schedule it Monday. As Andi left the office, her boss called out, "Welcome back." And she was. The truck's strange noise continued right past the service station. The silent adults and riotous children couldn't faze her.

And despite a head of straight black hair with the right soft spot that stopped her heart for a long moment before it turned and disclosed the wrong face, she spent the day feeling good. Lunchtime found her shopping instead of eating, and she splurged on the perfect dress for the date with Raymond.

By the time she got home from work, she was ready for a wonderful evening. She indulged herself with a bubble bath, then dabbed on an extra spray of the special cologne she kept in her crystal atomizer. She chose black to start with, pulling on high-cut thong pants and a lacy slip. Deftly she clipped the tags away and stepped into her new dress.

Andi looked into the mirror and shook her head. Reaching inside the bodice, she unhooked the ivory inset and pulled it free. Now the soft pleats that swooped from her wide shoulders crossed low enough to reveal the valley between her firm breasts. The soft georgette flowed around her body, emphasizing its softness. The dress was French Blue, shades lighter than her eyes, and caught the highlights that sparkled deep inside them, just as the narrow ivory cuffs and the round ivory button that closed the covered belt pulled highlights from her darker hair. *Almost perfect.*

Andi pirouetted, watching her reflection in her full-length mirror. Then she opened her jewelry box. She needed something small. One of her oldest necklaces caught her eye, and she turned back to the mirror to fasten the thin gold chain around her slender throat. The tiny cloisonné carousel horse hung perfectly centered in the V of smooth skin.

Precisely at five to seven she stepped into her navy pumps, and the doorbell rang. Raymond was wearing a light tan summer suit, and its western-cut jacket emphasized his wide shoulders and trim waist. The tie was one she had given him, and featured a pattern of tiny biplanes flying in neat formation. There was a careful smile on his face, and Andi thought she could detect a hint of wariness in his pale blue eyes.

Then his expression crumpled in disbelief. "What have you done to your beautiful hair?" Raymond's voice sounded as if the cutting of each strand had left a wound on his soul. Andi stood frozen, with no idea what to say.

"Excuse me." Raymond recovered quickly and forced his smile back into place. "But it is a rather startling change. I shouldn't have jumped at you like that. Shall we go?"

He was silent on the short trip to the Kerrville Inn. As they entered the Old World setting, which reflected the strong German heritage of the Hill Country he seemed to be taking a new look at her, as if she had suddenly become a stranger.

They both ordered wienerschnitzel, the special of the day, and while the tender veal cutlets were being

breaded and fried, chatted about Andi's vacation. She found it difficult, trying to describe what she had done without including Mackenzie Stone. She hadn't spent a lot of time with him, but his presence seemed to color every part of that fantasy week.

Then it became impossible. Halfway through the meal, Raymond suddenly leaned forward, cupping his chin in his hand. "Andi," he said, "what really happened? You seem so different." His eyes were clouded, as if he already knew the answer.

"I'm not sure!" she said, "After you called and told me you had to go to that auction, and I had to cancel the wedding, everything just seemed to stack up until I couldn't breathe. So I spotted a picture in the newspaper and decided to get my hair cut. Then I guess I just went a little crazy."

Raymond was shaking his head. "I don't think so," He interrupted. "I really detest short hairstyles on a woman. But I find myself forced to admit that yours fits you." He hesitated, fumbling for words. "I don't love you like this. But I think I like you more."

His gaze dropped to the table, and he took a sip of coffee. "I think I've been wondering about our relationship for the last couple of months. Now that I look back, that may be why the auction was so important."

"It isn't really my hair, then," Andi smiled into his open gaze. "I mean, even if I let it grow back, we still wouldn't be 'us' any more."

"I don't think so."

Maybe I have a book you should read," she mused,

and was surprised at his chuckle.

"I've been doing just that. I looked up and finally read those two articles you published last year. Do you know that you have a completely different concept of pioneer women than I have? Or rather, than I used to have?" Raymond leaned back against the straight back of his old-fashioned wooden chair.

"I always thought of them as meekly following their husbands out to the new land and keeping the cabin warm while he pioneered. What you wrote made me realize that, in order to leave the security of their homes and families and walk off into the wilderness they must have had a great deal of courage, and even more determination." He leaned toward Andi and looked into her eyes.

"In fact, I think that's what came between us. There's a lot more in you than I was looking for, Andi Thomas. Probably more than I can handle."

Now a twinkle sparked to life in Raymond's eyes. "In fact, if I had to guess, I'd say that something happened recently you haven't told me about. But I'll play the gentleman, and not ask."

He sighed theatrically. "I'll just go on questing for the Fair Maid who no longer exists in this world, if she ever did. I'm not sure what else is even worth searching for."

Andi smiled wickedly and asked, "Have you ever read a romance novel?"

Chapter Twenty-Five:

Saturday

Andi looked out across the hood of the bookmobile at the gray parking lot. The gray old man hobbling through the gray mist toward his car glanced through the windshield at her. I probably look as gray as everything else around here, she thought.

Once again she glanced at the clock. "I really need a cup of coffee," she muttered around a stifled yawn. "Fifteen minutes to go, and the longest week *ever* will be over."

At least I'm on the road to recovery. I haven't seen anyone who reminded me of him all day, and I only thought about him a dozen times or so. It's good to have romantasies every now and then, but day-to-day living requires levelheaded, rational thinking.

For the first time in the two interminable hours the mobile library had been parked the back door opened, but it shut before Andi felt the familiar shift of someone's weight on the narrow steps.

"That's great," she grumbled, "I finally lure a

patron, and then he changes his mind. I give up."

She reached over to the front door and locked it. Coffee! she thought, aching for the cheerful lights of the library. I can almost smell it.

Then, as she started back between the book-laden shelves, she realized that it wasn't her imagination. The warm, dry scent of the fragrant beverage was really drifting down the aisle to meet her.

She reached the end of the truck and found herself staring down at a gleaming mug full of rich, dark coffee. Andi stretched over the step it sat on and opened the door, but the only thing moving was a gray delivery van, far across the other side of the empty lot.

She closed the door and eased back to sit on the rough indoor-outdoor carpet, debating the wisdom of trusting such an anonymous, yet much-needed gift.

She picked it up, and her long fingers cupped around the mug, drawing warmth from the heavy ceramic. Then she inhaled, and the fragrance filled her with warmth that seemed to permeate her chilled body, loosening the twisted muscles between her shoulders.

An envelope fell into the space vacated by the cup. Precise script traced a message across the heavy, cream-colored paper, and she read, "Andi, I left this note and cup in the bathroom, because I thought coffee would be the first thing you'd want. The Palacio said they found it there. I hope it was because you didn't see it, not because you ignored it."

There's no signature, she thought. Could it be?

Suddenly she was trembling, threatening to slosh hot liquid all over the carpet. She solved that problem by swallowing almost half the coffee, leaning back as the steaming warmth fell through her body to fill an aching void centered somewhere below her stomach. She took another deep breath and a second sip of coffee, this time savoring the rich taste. *It's fixed exactly the way I like it*, she thought. *The way Mack would fix it. Do I dare open the envelope and find out?*

Hesitantly she reached toward it. Her long fingers smoothed across the textured paper for a moment, trying to sense what it contained, then picked it up. The flap was anchored only at the point, and she pulled it free.

Sliding her trembling fingers inside, Andi drew a single, neatly folded sheet of elegant hotel stationery out and unfolded it. The same precise script in different ink formed a longer message, centered on the page.

"Dearest, I just received a call from the store. There's been a break-in, probably a burglary. I have to, as you would put it, 'return to the wall'. I'm selfish. You look so beautiful in slumber I can't bear to disturb you. Please call when you can. I want to finish our book, and see Fredericksburg the same way we saw San Antonio."

She could breathe again. This time Mack's signature left no question, and his address and telephone number were lifelines to Andi's heart.

They pulled her into an explosion of activity. She gulped the last of the cooling coffee on the way to the

driver's seat. Twisting the key in the ignition, she almost threw the truck into gear. Driving much faster than normal she pulled out of the parking lot and north toward Kerrville.

If I was on the other side of town, Andi thought, I'd just head out to Fredericksburg. She smiled at the thought of Mack's expression if he saw her maneuvering the lumbering bookmobile into an undersized apartment parking lot for an unauthorized overnight stay.

Then she sobered, lifting her voice over the ratcheting of the windshield wipers. "I've known him, really known him, for all of two days, yet here I am, wanting him so much I'm breaking the rules to get back into his bed. I'm not even sure he wants me the same way. All he's seen is the sassy, sexy vacation Andi trying out her new hairdo and living out of romance novels. What if a little passion is all he wants? He called me beautiful in the note, but Mack's a writer. He may have written that any number of times."

She eased up on the gas, allowing the trembling needle to fall back to a legal part of the speedometer. Andi needed time to think. *Can I accept only a month, or a week of him? Can I end up collaborating with him, doing research, aching for more? Or am I fooling myself about how I feel?* The questions were still whirling in her head as she lumbered across the Guadalupe River Bridge and turned left toward the haven of the library.

As Andi eased the big truck down through the

cramped courtyard and into its garage, only the last query was answered. *I love Mackenzie Stone, and I want all of him, forever. I can't truly be satisfied with less.*

Andi squared her shoulders and carried the day's paraphernalia up to her desk. A quick scan through her inbox revealed nothing that couldn't wait until next week, and she hadn't collected any fines that needed to be posted. She made the last entries in her daily reports standing up.

Halfway through, scorning the rule against long-distance calls, she snatched the handset from her phone and jabbed Mack's number on the buttons. I've already memorized it, she realized as the busy signal saved her from the violation.

"You look like you'r'n a hurry." It was Elizabeth, who sat down on the side of her desk and idly picked up the mug. Her dark eyebrows arched in surprise as she examined it.

"A friend gave it to me." Andi stammered.

"The man from San Antone, I hope." She held the cup out to Andi, who noticed for the first time the drawing on it.

It was a crude sketch of a brass bed and the inscription, "Librarians want everything between two covers."

She felt her face flame with embarrassment as she tried to stammer an explanation. Her boss just broke into a wide smile and drew her into a big hug. "If he's waitin' for you, then git the heck outa here!"

Andi ran from the building, fumbling with her keys as she tried to get the Dodge on its way to

Fredericksburg. She managed to start the motor and maneuver around the corner to the exit, but then she had to wait almost forever to get across Water Street.

Finally she made it back to the highway and once more turned north, this time with nothing but twenty-two miles of state highway between her and Mack. She pushed the speedometer just past seventy and pushed the questions and the future out of her mind.

Instead she wondered at the change in the weather. Thick clouds still obscured the sky and the mist was, if anything, getting heavier. Soon fog would start creeping down to fill the river valleys. But it was no longer gray and gloomy. Now she could feel softness in the gray clouds and warmth in the gentle rain as it soaked into the ground, wakening the seeds lying dormant just beneath the surface.

She entered Fredericksburg, and two requests for information brought her to the foot of the stairs that led to his door. It was like a mountain.

No, it is a mountain. The same one my pioneer ancestors climbed. At the top I'll be able to see the valley, but I won't know everything about it. Like my forefather's new land, it will hold bad surprises as well as good. But I'll go ahead, opening myself, vulnerable, gambling with failure for the chance to set roots and make a home the only place I want to live.

Mack opened the door before she could knock, and they stood frozen, neither of them really believing the other was there. Suddenly nervous, Andi brushed by, out of his reach, and walked to the center of the apartment. Reconnoiter, she thought. Scout around.

Stall, until I get my feet on the ground again.

She felt almost at home in the midst of shelf after shelf burdened with an orderly confusion of books, hardbound and paperback. Her hand reached down to touch the rough surface of a cardboard mailing box that spilled half a dozen scarlet-covered romances across a table buried under a colorful jumble of magazines. On the far wall she noticed a Remington print of cowboys and a chuck wagon fleeing a sandstorm.

"That's as close as I have to the traditional etchings I'm supposed to invite you to see," Mack said. His strained voice echoed in the stillness and banished something warm from the air.

Suddenly the apartment was his, and Andi wondered if she would ever truly fit in it. Andi turned toward Mack. The twisted tree in the picture had caught her eye. She lied, "Actually, I came for the poem."

He was wearing a dark green shirt of brushed knit that framed his wide shoulders without straining before it tapered into the waist of his charcoal slacks. The black leather belt rode naturally, low on his hips, just as she remembered.

Then—and she could almost see the spinning gears finally mesh—he caught up to her reference. "The poem. 'Mesquite.' The one I told you about, that I did in high school."

"You did say you would show it to me."

"Good grief. I haven't looked for that in years. I may never find it."

"I'll wait."

"No way." Mack broke into a wide grin. "If I'm going to have to dig into my mustiest files, at least you can finish up supper. There's some beef soup on the stove, and I'd almost finished the salad when I heard you coming up the stairs."

"It's a deal!" Andi said, and retreated around the corner to the sanctuary of the kitchen. The soup was just beginning to simmer, and its heavy fragrance greeted her as she lifted the lid. "Is it homemade?" she called.

"Said so on the label." Mack's voice drifted from the hall, already deep in some long-forsaken file drawer.

On the counter Andi found a bowl of torn lettuce leaves, bits of raw cauliflower, and halves of cherry tomatoes. Beside it, four crisp shallots lay on a cutting board, ready for the knife.

As she chopped the sharply aromatic white bulbs and dark green shoots, she relaxed a little bit, at home with the familiar habits of the kitchen. After scraping the last bit of onion into the bowl, she efficiently tossed the salad, then switched off the coffee machine, which had just finished its cycle.

Mack rounded the corner, triumphantly waving a battered high school anthology as Andi finished lifting the salad into individual bowls and checked the pot. "The soup's not quite ready," she said.

"Here, then. Get it over with. Remember, it's from high school." He held the book toward her, thumbed open to the proper place.

Andi shook her head. "Poetry should be heard. Read it to me." She set the bowls on the table and leaned against the refrigerator, giving him all of her attention. I'm not playing, she realized. I really want to hear this creation, to see into his writer's soul.

"You're making this tough," he muttered, then cleared his throat and started.

"With tarnished golden medals on his dark green coat,

And brown boots planted firmly in the sod,

This ancient, still defiant soldier standing lonely watch

Proudly scans the seared and dusty Texas plain.

Gnarled, twisted, windblown, old, yet strong,

He thrives where nothing else could even grow.

And stands alone, the constant watchman

Of this cracked and sunbaked land of God."

Andi could feel the dry heat of the West Texas plains and smell dust in the still air. "That's pretty good," she whispered. She watched Mack relax, and knew that her approval meant a great deal to him.

Then the lid of the soup pot rattled, breaking the mood. Mack carried it, bubbling, to the small square table while Andi fetched the glass pot of steaming coffee. They sat next to each other, around the corner instead of across the table, almost touching.

They talked as they ate of the mesquite tree, now often considered a pest. And they talked of the pioneers who, having little and wasting less, had

treasured it, burning its fragrant wood, harvesting its beans for animal fodder and using its long thorns for needles and pins.

But neither really listened. Another tide of communication flowed between them, on a level far too deep for words. They finished eating at the same time, and, in unison, stood. Andi's hand lay still on the table, and she watched as Mack reached for it.

He touched her for the first time that day, and it felt as if they were starting over, as if it was the first time ever. His free hand sought her waist and he drew her closer until she raised her arms, spreading her hands to brush against the soft fabric of his shirt, forming a barrier between them.

Then she looked up, into his gray eyes, and her body filled with the remembered passion they had shared. "I have to know," he whispered. "Will you share my bed tonight?"

Andi's breath caught at his boldness. *Tonight?* her heart cried. *Just tonight?* Did his eyes hold deeper promise, or was it only the reflection of her longing? It was time to leave the mountaintop, to advance, or retreat. She had to take the chance.

She still could not speak, so she answered him in the way that is older than words. Her hands smoothed across his shoulders, across the tension-knotted muscles, until her arms were around his neck. Then she drew herself into his embrace, sealing her lips to his, and molded herself around his erection.

His big hands splayed across her back, and he

pulled her even closer, driving the breath from her lungs, lifting her from her feet. His chest heaved against her breasts, and she realized that he had been holding his breath.

She curled her hand into the thick hair at the nape of his neck and pulled back a little, to look again into his eyes. In them lay the aftermath of doubt, and she knew his question must have been sincere. "Surely you knew?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "In the old days, women weren't supposed to have a choice. But they pretended they did, so the man was left dangling. Today, they aren't supposed to pretend, but they really have the choice. Either way, the man ends up hanging, twisting, waiting for the answer."

Slowly Andi pulled out of his arms, willing all that she felt for him to show in her eyes, to tell him that he need have no fear. She saw her passion reflected in his eyes, and they remained untroubled.

It's my turn to be bold, she thought, as she loosed the knot at her throat and opened the lace collar. Then she let her hands slide across the silken charmeuse as she opened the covered buttons, one by one.

Mack's gaze locked on her soft skin as more and more of its creamy surface was exposed between the dusky sides of the blouse, and she caught the tightening of his hands in the edge of her gaze. She pulled the tail free from her waistband and shrugged the soft garment from her shoulders, letting it slide down her arms and drop unheeded to the floor.

Without hesitating, yet without hurrying, she

reached behind herself and unfastened the twin hooks that held the lacy cups of her bra snug. She drew the narrow straps forward, freeing her firm breasts to stand proudly before Mack's gaze. She let her arms fall gently to her side, with her palms open and forward, offering him a silent invitation.

Thus summoned, he stepped forward, reaching out tentatively to place his fingertips softly on the upper slopes of her breasts. The touch barely feathered against the soft skin, but it seared through her body, and she filled her lungs, catching her trembling breath in a throat suddenly dry.

Bolder now, the strong hands rotated, sliding the rough fingers beneath the tightening globes as the palms cupped to take their weight. Andi's head fell back, and the breath was forced from her body in a husky moan of pleasure.

Mack drew her closer, and bent to trace the fading mark left across her smooth shoulder with soft, fluttering kisses. Then his thumbs found the miniature rosettes, and they exploded into hard buds as Andi's breathing became ragged.

The caressing hands left her breasts, leaving her a single moment to start recovering before they flattened against her smooth back and drew her into a close embrace. She gasped as the firm hemispheres were flattened against the clinging surface of brushed fabric.

Mack's hand found the back of her long, slender neck and pulled her head up, meeting her mouth with his. He held her tight as his merciless tongue probed,

then penetrated deep into the honeyed cavern behind her softened lips.

Her hands alternately flattened and clenched against the unyielding band of muscles running across the small of his back, then found purchase and began to drag the long tail of his shirt out from beneath his belt. Her heart ached for him, and she didn't want even the thin layer of cloth between them.

She felt his tension increase, as if he was forcing himself to regain a measure of control. Widening the circle of his arms, he allowed her to move back far enough so her hands could reach between them and slip the hard buttons of his shirt while his lips traced a soft line of kisses across her smooth brow. Then he released his arms and let her strip the garment off his back and drop it to the floor.

She spread her long fingers wide across the hard muscles that banded his smooth chest, retracing the contours, reminding her hands of the explorations they had made the week before. Again she watched his skin pale under the pressure of her scarlet nails as his blood, remembering, fled. Gently she feathered the shallow valley between his nipples with a caress that was half kiss, half nibble, and felt the vibration of his heart on her swelling lips.

Andi expected him to sweep her back into his arms, but instead he stepped back, dropping his gaze expectantly to her narrow waist. Boldly, because she wanted to please this man, because she wanted the pleasure he gave her, even with the caresses of his eyes, and most of all because she had nothing to hide

from him, and wanted nothing between them, she unfastened her soft gray slacks at the waist, stripped their zipper down its track, and dropped them to her ankles. She stepped free of them, abandoning her shoes at the same time.

"Now it's your turn," she murmured, and let her fingers play across his flat stomach, just above the shining buckle. His muscles writhed under the touch, as if her fingers burned him the way his did her.

She pulled the buckle free, then unhooked the waist and zipper and pulled the slacks from his trim hips. He stepped out of the tangle, freeing himself from his dark loafers as she had done, and reached down to strip away his socks. Then he stepped away from her and looked down at the arrogant evidence of his need, barely contained by his briefs.

"If we're going to share my bed," he rasped, "we better go now. One more step and we'll end up on the floor." He reached for her hand, and she could see tension knotting the muscles of his arm.

As she reached out her hand, watching his strong fingers close about hers, she realized what they were doing. Sure of each other, they were holding back, letting their tension build. There was no need to hurry tonight.

Only tonight? cried her heart. *What is it that I see in his eyes? Is it a week, or an eternity? When will I know?*

Still, she followed willingly when he led her across the living room and down the hall to his wide bed. She had only time to form a confused impression of dark wooden furnishings and a quilted western

bedspread before Mack swept her into an embrace. Their passions flamed at the feeling of smooth skin in close contact, and she knew it was no longer possible to retreat.

His lips blazed a path of fire down her throat, pausing at the point where her pulse throbbed wildly so close beneath her skin. Then he continued, out to the point of her soft shoulder and back to the hollow, just above her collarbone, where he found another raging pulse.

His head drifted lower as he kissed his fiery way from rib to rib until he was poised on the smooth skin above the soft swell that began her breast. Andi's voice sang in her throat as she linked her hands in his dark hair and pulled him lower, until he found her aching nipple.

Then he straightened, still suckling the expanding bud, and lifted her off her feet. She fell forward, burying her face in his tangled hair moaning, "Mackenzie, Mackenzie." He sat on the edge of the bed and fell backward, pulling her down on top of him.

Andi wanted to cover him, smother him with her bounty. She needed to give him everything, and she wanted to do it *now*.

Even as his lips crossed the soft valley in search of her other breast, Mack's hands were teasing their way beneath the lacy elastic at her waist, and exploring the rounded hills and dark crevasses beyond.

He twisted under her, rolling her onto her back, and sat up, stripping away the scrap of silken cloth

that was Andi's last defense. He left her in writhing isolation as he pulled his own shorts from his muscled legs, then he was back, claiming her mouth in a deep kiss as his hand plunged down, deep between her trembling thighs.

Andi pulled his lips away and cried out, clenching her legs together and thrusting herself into Mack's cupping palm as she felt her dark flower blooming under his knowing touch. Finally his hand pulled away, leaving her on the gasping edge of insanity.

As he covered her with his lean body, Andi opened her eyes to look deep into his. They were raging, with no sign of tomorrow or yesterday. Mack's eyes held only the now of the full flood of his passion.

His hand, still heavy with the scent of her dew, slid past her throat to bury itself in the dark honey of her short hair. He held more than her head. His long fingers seemed to gather all of Andi into the cup of his palm, as if Mack held her very soul.

Cutting my hair was the best thing I ever did. With this man, the only one I care about, I am Andi-of-the-short-hair: sassy, sexy and no-nonsense. And there's no one else I can be.

Mack pulled her head into the hollow of his shoulder, and she felt as if he had taken her into himself, opening himself as she had done. In response Andi pulled him closer, so that his was not an invasion, but a homecoming.

It was all she needed, and she exploded under him, crying out in a wordless, toneless hymn, cresting high above coherence before she tumbled back into his

embrace. Mack pulled together the last of his ragged will and cradled her carefully inside the sanctuary of his arms as she regained her reason.

Then he released his need. Mack went wild, raging beneath Andi's sheltering arms, pounding between her trembling thighs, casting his animal voice into her ears, forcing her very breath to pace his tumultuous rhythm.

Her body flowed with him, responding to his lust, glorying in his passion. Suddenly, finally Mack stiffened, his muscular body locked in tension as it concentrated on the swirling storm deep inside the enveloping cradle of Andi's thighs.

Slowly he began to relax, lowering his head into the hollow of her shoulder, his harsh panting hot on her soft skin as she held his trembling body, waiting for his breathing to ease and his raging pulse to return to normal. Andi was content. Whatever the future held, for this long moment, Mackenzie Stone was all hers.

But too quickly he drew away, taking his weight on his elbows so he could look into her eyes. *Not now!* her heart cried. *Not so soon!* She couldn't read the emotion that flowed so deep within his gray eyes. *I'm afraid! Be careful!*

"Andi Thomas, I want you." Mack's voice was flat, a dry whisper drained of the raging passion.

Careful, echoed her racing heart, and Andi forced a smile and a light tone into her voice.

"You just had me," she whispered. "And very well, I might add."

Mack shook his head. "I want more. I want your body." and he surged within her, sending a pulse of pleasure dancing up her spine, into the strong hand that still cupped her head. His long fingers seemed to probe deep within her brain. "I also want your mind. But most of all, I want what's in here," and he shifted, drawing his free hand down to trace a heart over hers. "I want you to be my lover, and my friend, and my wife."

For a long moment Andi's heart refused to beat, then it took up a new rhythm, matched with his.

Elizabeth was wrong. The thought spun into a swirling eddy of the current of love that flowed between them. *Romantasies don't end happily ever after. They don't end at all. Romantasies only begin.*

Andi looked up and saw doubt creeping into his eyes, and realized that she hadn't answered him. With one hand she traced the column of his spine to the cleft between his strong thighs, then shifted and pulled his tension-hard body deeper into hers. The slender fingers of her other hand she tangled in the dark curls at the base of his skull, drawing Mack back down into her embrace.

Andi left herself just enough time before their lips sealed together to whisper, "Yes!"

About the Author

After raising fiercely independent daughters, Sean MacReady and his long-suffering wife live in an empty nest in Texas. He is a professional writer with awards for website content, journalism, technical writing, and fiction. His hobby is teaching people to shoot. Since a lot of the people he teaches about guns are women, his stories always show respect for the fair sex.