



***A Tender Lie***

***by***

***Barri Bryant***

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Chapter One

After two long, barren decades, Rachel Cassidy MacCall was coming home. After all the heartache, the rejection, the pain and the tears, she was coming home again. Back to where it all began, back to memories as sweet as honey, and recollections as bitter as sour wine.

A hot morning sun glinted against the windshield of the battered pickup. The young driver squinted as he pulled off Interstate 35 and turned onto an access road. "Which way now, Mother?"

Rachel MacCall's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure. There was no interstate here twenty years ago." She pointed. "The sign says five miles to Summerville. Make a right at the next intersection."

Clint MacCall eased into the flow of traffic. "After twenty years in exile how does it feel to be coming home again?"

"In exile?" Rachel looked out the window at the passing billboards, plowed fields, and farm houses. "You make it sound like I was banished. Grandmother Cassidy is dead. I'm her only living relative. I feel obligated to see that her affairs are set in order."

As they neared the outskirts of a small town, Clint let up on the accelerator. "Couldn't you have settled your grandmother's affairs on the telephone, or by mail instead of coming back to this little jerkwater town?"

"I don't think so. Mr. Patton insisted that I come here to meet with him." Rachel pointed to an approaching road sign. "This jerkwater town has a name. It's called Summerville."

Clint slowed for a caution light. "Does it bother you, coming back after all this time?" "It makes me feel very nostalgic." Rachel's voice held a note of sadness. "I grew up here. In a way it still seems like home."

"It does?" Clint looked surprised. "Why, after all this time, should you feel sentimental about Summerville?"

Rachel didn't want to begin unraveling those broken threads from the past. "I can't explain why, but the feeling is there."

Clint glanced briefly in his mother's direction. "Don't let it get you down."

Rachel smiled. "I'll think of it as doing my duty."

"*Why* do you feel that strong sense of duty?"

Rachel was slow to answer. "I owe my grandmother this much. I can't let what happened twenty years ago get in the way of what I should do now."

"What did happen, Mom?" Clint frowned. "I'm beginning to realize how little I know about your life before you married Dad."

"There's very little to know." Rachel's cool tone was a warning. "I was only eighteenyears-old when I married your father."

Clint complained, "That's not an answer. I want to know why you left here, and never came back."

"The story's hardly worth telling."

"I'd like to hear it anyway."

Rachel shrugged. "You're probably going to be bored."

"Try me."

He's like a little boy, Rachel thought, bent on having his way, pushing a little farther than he knows he should. Pure adoration shone in her eyes as she glanced at her son's handsome profile. "I was in the throes of my first infatuation. There was a misunderstanding, and a quarrel. In short, he dumped me."

Clint's jaw line tightened. "I thought this was about your grandmother. Who is this mysterious 'he'?"

Even now Rachel found it difficult to say the words. "His name was Jake Reardon." "So your boy friend dumped you." Clint's voice rose in frustration. "Was that any reason to leave home and never come back?"

"My grandmother and I quarreled too." Grief that had been softened by the passing of time, renewed itself with sudden force.

With unabashed candor, Clint asked, "Was Jake Reardon the reason you and your grandmother quarreled?"

"Not exactly. It all seems so foolish now. Jake and I quarreled. Gran took his side, one thing led to another, and ... " Rachel's voice trailed away on the end of a sigh.

"Does Jake Reardon live in Summerville?" Clint was looking puzzled and more than a little curious.

"His family owned the largest cattle ranch in this area. I suppose he still lives on that ranch. It's several miles south of town."

"A ranch?" Clint raised an eyebrow. "Jake Reardon must have been a wealthy man."

Rachel fought to control the hurt she thought had vanished with the passing years.

"Comfortably well off was the way Gran always put it."

"Gran being your grandmother, I take it?" Clint's knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel. "I feel like a stranger in this little world we're going to. I didn't know you had a grandmother until she was dead. Did she know about me?"

"Not for a long time." Rachel took a deep breath. "We were out of touch for years. Gran contacted me while Don was in the hospital."

Clint didn't intend to let go. "Did she like Dad?"

"Gran didn't know Don." Rachel answered tartly.

Her sharp tone didn't phase Clint. "Was that your choice or your grandmother's?" He aimed another puzzled glance in his mother's direction.

"It wasn't a matter of choice. Gran and I quarreled over some of the things she said to Jake. And ... " Rachel's explanation died in her throat.

"And what?" Clint demanded.

"You know how family disagreements are." Rachel spread her hands in a helpless little gesture. "They can start over nothing at all, and before you know it, they explode into full-fledged feuds. What happened then has nothing to do with now."

"It was so trivial you've forgotten what it was about, and yet you never came back?" Impatience gave Clint's voice a hard edge. "Why don't you want to talk about this? I'm beginning to believe you're keeping something from me."

Rachel scowled. "You're making a mountain out of a mole hill. When Gran contacted me, she asked me to come back for a visit, but Don was too ill for me to leave him. She died just before

Don ... " Rachel swallowed. "Passed away."

Clint's features softened. "You still miss Dad, don't you?"

Rachel closed her eyes against the pain of remembering. "Donovan MacCall was the kindest, sweetest man I ever knew. Yes, I still miss him very much."

"Did Dad know about your quarrel with your grandmother?"

Rachel nodded. "He knew. I never had any secrets from your father."

"Dad's last words to me were: 'Son, take care of your mother.'" Moisture glistened in Clint's eyes. "He cared about you too, Mom."

"And he was a very old-fashioned man."

"How do you think Dad would feel about your coming back here?" Clint glanced around him. "Summerville is just a wide place in the road."

Laughter caused the tense lines in Rachel's forehead to relax. "It doesn't compare to Dallas, but it's a very nice little town." Her mind was pulled back to another time. "It's big enough to hold a lot of memories."

"Most of them painful," Clint observed dryly. "I don't like leaving you here overnight." He stopped his pickup for the flashing red light at an intersection. "I could cancel my date in Houston tonight."

Under ordinary circumstances, nothing would have pleased Rachel more than sparing herself the agony of knowing her son was somewhere in a dusty arena, trying to hang onto the back of a wild bull for eight terrifying seconds. She was petrified by the dangers he faced as a rodeo performer. But these were not ordinary circumstances. "Memories may be painful, but they're never fatal." Her eyes softened with love, as she studied her son's determined expression. "You have a commitment in Houston."

"I worry about you, Mom. You work too hard, and worry too much. What you need is a long vacation."

Her son's words touched Rachel, deeply. Clint shouldn't have to worry about her, and he shouldn't be working either. He should be in college, enjoying his young years, and preparing for his future. Instead, he was riding bulls on the rodeo circuit to help pay the staggering medical bills that Don's death had left them owing. "Maybe we can take a day off on our way back to Dallas. We can stop in San Antonio and you can show me the sights."

Clint shifted gears, and drove through the intersection. "I can't afford to take time off, not even a one-day stopover." He smiled, as apparently, a happy notion surfaced. "Unless your grandmother left you some money."

Rachel thought, he's was too young to be shouldering so many heavy responsibilities. "Then we can forget the stopover. Gran never had two copper cents to rub together. She eked out an existence on a dirt farm after Grandpa deserted us."

"So things were rough for you when you were growing up?" Clint's interest was definitely aroused, so was his sympathy.

It had been so many years since Rachel had even thought about her childhood. "Financially, yes, but otherwise, mostly happy, thanks to Gran. She always managed, but we lived a very hand-to-mouth existence." Rachel stopped, as increasing curiosity sparked her son's eyes. "Turn right at the next intersection. I have a reservation at a motel on Highway Sixteen."

Clint drove down the main street of Summerville, and onto the highway. "Tell me more about your childhood days with your grandmother."

"My sister and I lived with Gran after our parents were killed in an automobile accident." Old memories stirred a dull ache to a stinging pain. "Gran was strong and proud. She was also kind and caring. At least that's how I saw her when I was a child."

"Apparently you had a great deal of admiration for your grandmother." Clint cut two lanes of traffic. "What happened to change all that?"

Rachel sighed. "Nothing happened." She didn't want to discuss her grandmother's betrayal with her son. "We quarreled, that's all."

With insight that belied his years, Clint argued, "I can't understand how one quarrel could turn you against a grandmother you loved and respected."

"Don't blow a foolish argument all out of proportion. Most children tend to see things in terms of black or white, right or wrong. There never seems to be any middle ground. Maturity and hindsight change perspectives."

"So now I'm getting a lecture? What does any of that have to do with what happened between you and your grandmother?" Clint pushed his foot down on the accelerator, and sped around a slow-moving car.

"Be careful," Rachel cautioned, "and don't speed."

"I know how to drive, Mom." Clint eased up on the accelerator. "I want to hear more about your grandmother."

"I'll tell you all about it later. Help me look for the motel. It's called The Shady Rest. There should be a sign along here somewhere."

"I thought this was your old hometown," Clint scoffed. "Don't tell me you're lost." "There was no motel in Summerville twenty years ago." Rachel pointed. "There's the sign. Take the next right."

"No motel?" Clint's impatience with his mother was making him testy. "Where did travelers stay? Where did lovers meet?" He turned onto the access road.

"There was a place." Rachel's stomach clenched. "It was called The Longhorn Inn." Those words had the power to stir distant, difficult memories.

A smile broke through Clint's scowl. "Maybe we should stay there." "It burned years ago." In the warm air, Rachel shivered.

"Mom, are you all right?" Clint pulled his pickup along side the curb near the motel's entrance, and stopped. "You couldn't be cold, it's ninety degrees in the shade."

"I'm a little worried about why Gran's lawyer insisted that I come here." Rachel folded her arms across her chest. "I'll be all right. Let's go inside."

"You haven't been well since Dad died. You shouldn't have come here."

"I keep wondering if ..." Rachel stopped. Her son had enough on his mind without taking on the burden of some dead great-grandmother. Quickly, she improvised. "If I should have found a motel that was nearer town and a little less expensive. But Mr. Patton recommended The Shady Rest."

Clint reached for the door handle. "You can catch a bus back to Summerville. Let's go inside. After lunch you can rest."

"I thought that we might drive around the city after lunch."

"City?" Clint smiled. "How can you call this burg a city?"

"All right, town. My appointment with Mr. Patton isn't until ten o'clock tomorrow, so we have some time to kill before you go to Houston." Rachel slammed the pickup door twice before it closed. "I thought you were going to have that door repaired."

"I never got around to it." Clint caught up to his mother. "Stop trying to change the subject. Tell me about this Mr. Patton." He opened the lobby door, then stepped back, and waited for Rachel to enter. "Is he someone else from your mysterious past?"

"I never heard of him before he got in touch with me a few weeks back. He's an attorney. You were in Denver when he called. He said he had things to discuss with me. He was very insistent." "Attorneys are always insistent." As they entered the dimly lit lobby, Clint caught his mother's arm. "What do you mean by, 'got in touch'?"

Eventually, Clint would have to know. She may as well tell him now. "Mr. Patton wrote to me. I suspect Gran left debts that should be paid, so I didn't answer. Then he called, and insisted he must see me."

Clint's fingers tightened on Rachel's arm. "Why do I keep getting the feeling that you haven't told me *everything* about why you came back here?"

Clint's emphasis on the word everything, told Rachel that he intended to pursue the subject until she answered all his questions. "Let me check into my room, then we can talk."

Clinton MacCall was a tall, ruggedly handsome young man. His hair, black as a raven's wing, contrasted strangely with the cobalt blue of his eyes. Those eyes were troubled now. "No. We talk first. Why didn't you tell me about Mr. Patton being so pushy before now? Did he pressure you into coming back to Summerville?"

Rachel's eyes, just as blue, just as troubled, challenged his gaze. "Of course not." Her voice fell. "Maybe, a little."

The blue of those stunning eyes was the only clue that these two might be related. Rachel was small and slim, with a wealth of curly blonde hair. Her fine patrician features could have been those of a much younger woman. "He was very insistent."

From behind the counter, the desk clerk cleared his throat. "May I help you?"

Rachel turned. "Yes, I have a reservation. My name is Rachel MacCall." She pulled her arm from Clint's grasp, and walked toward the questioning clerk.

The man's brow knitted into a frown. "Oh, yes, of course." He opened the ledger before him, and flipped pages. "Mrs. MacCall, Mrs. MacCall." His head lifted. "Oh, dear. Mrs. MacCall, you have two reservations."

"There must be some mistake. My son won't be staying."

"But you don't understand." The man's mouth twitched. "I don't mean two rooms. I mean two reservations." Without another word, he turned and disappeared through a door marked, 'office', leaving Rachel to stare after him.

Clint lowered himself into a well-padded arm chair. "What got into him?"

Rachel shrugged. "I don't know."

Seconds later the man emerged from the office, smiling sheepishly. "It seems Mr. Patton reserved a suite of rooms for you. He must have talked to our night clerk."

"Mr. Patton? The attorney?" Rachel questioned.



"I don't think there is another Mr. Patton in Summerville." The man leaned across the desk. "I just talked with Mr. Patton on the telephone. He insists you cancel your reservation, and stay in the suite he reserved for you."

"I can't afford a suite." Not in a place this expensive, Rachel thought, as her eyes swept around the large, well-kept lobby.

"Mr. Patton will pick up the tab." The man's nervous twitch had returned to worry the lines around his mouth. "He says to put your meals on the bill too."

"Meals?" Rachel wondered why an attorney she had never met had gone to such lengths.

The man pointed toward the neon sign above the door at the end of the lobby. "We have a fine restaurant."

"But you don't understand," Rachel argued.

"I suppose in your case ... " The clerk's fingers tapped the top of the desk. " ... we could provide room service."

"I don't need room service and I can pay for my own room." Rachel's uneasiness was giving way to anxious indignation.

Clint interrupted. "My mother is tired. May I have her key?"

"Clint!" Rachel was set to say so much more when her eyes collided with Clint's stern stare.

"Let's find your suite, Mom." Clint picked up the key, then began to propel Rachel toward the door.

"Let me go," Rachel hissed. "I am not some wild bull you're trying to hang onto." "You're as stubborn and almost as hard to manage." Clint guided her out onto a small patio.

"I don't like Mr. Patton paying for my room." Rachel pulled her arm from his grasp. They walked through the sunlit patio and down a flagstone path. "It's a suite, Mom, and Mr. Patton is not paying for it. That's not the way lawyers operate. That money, along with a hefty fee, will be deducted from your grandmother's estate." Clint found Rachel's suite and unlocked the door.

Rachel followed him inside. "How many times do I have to tell you? Gran had no estate. She was as poor as a church mouse."

"You said she owned a farm. Isn't that worth something?" Clint surveyed the cozy sitting room. "Not bad, considering."

"Considering what?" Rachel asked.

"Considering that someone else is picking up the tab." Clint put his hat on the table by the door.

"Maybe Mr. Patton will find himself stuck with this bill, after all," Rachel mused, as she thought of the mountain of medical expenses Don's long illness had left in its wake. "I doubt that Gran's farm would pay for a decent funeral, let alone any other expenses she might have incurred."

"Maybe after you left, your grandmother married a rich man." Clint sat on a chair near the door.

"How could she get married again? She had a husband, such as he was." Rachel sighed. "Dennis Cassidy was a poor excuse for a man, but he was Gran's husband."

"Was he your grandfather?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but, yes he was." Rachel sat down and kicked off her shoes. "He was my father's father."

"What was wrong with your grandfather?"

"He was an alcoholic, and when he was drunk, he turned mean and violent."

"What happened to him?"

Rachel shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Did he just vanish?" Clint laid the room key on the table beside his hat.

"Not all at once." Disjointed memories moved across Rachel's mind. "It started when I was very young. He would disappear from time to time, go off on a binge and return days, sometimes weeks later."

Clint dropped into a chair. "What did your Gran do then?"

"There was nothing she could do, but wait. Then one day he left and never came back."

"Didn't anyone look for him?" Clint was leaning forward in his chair.

"I don't suppose anyone cared that much." Rachel shook her head. "Gran always said he'd turn up again someday, but he never did."

"How old were you when your parents were killed?"

"I was five. That's when Lola and I went to live with Gran and Grandpa."

"At last, a name I recognize." Clint fitted his shoulders to the back of his chair. "I remember you talking about Lola. She was your older sister." Rachel nodded. "I was two years younger than Lola."

"What happened to her?" By now Clint was hanging onto Rachel's every word. Rachel brushed her hand across her face. "She died five years after I left Summerville."

Almost too casually, Clint asked, "How did she die?"

"There was an accident. I don't know any of the details. I didn't know she was gone until after she ... " A cloud of memories rose from the mist of Rachel's regret. She lowered her head. "I didn't know, at first."

"Your grandmother didn't let you know?" Clint's eyes rounded in sympathy. "That was cruel. I'm beginning to understand why you grew to hate that woman."

Rachel's head came up. "I didn't hate my grandmother. What happened wasn't all Gran's fault. She didn't know where I was."

"She didn't know where you were?" Disbelief tilted Clint's voice upward. "Your own grandmother didn't know where you were?"

Rachel pressed her fingers to her forehead. "I ran away when I ... When Jake and I quarreled. I ... They didn't know how to get in touch with me."

"They?" Clint questioned. "Who else was there except your grandmother? You said your grandfather left and didn't come back."

An old misery, long forgotten, suddenly swamped Rachel. "Lola was married when she died." Her voice faltered. "I read about Lola's death in the newspaper."

"Where is Lola's husband now?" Clint was completely absorbed in Rachel's narrative. "Is he still alive?"

The answer came out in a rush. "Her husband was Jake Reardon. Jake married Lola six months after I left Summerville." Rachel had never spoken those words aloud before. Clint's jaw sagged. "What?"

She couldn't bring herself to repeat them again. "You heard me."

Clint was looking stunned. "That means this Reardon bastard is your brother-in-law." "Lola died fifteen years ago." Rachel's teeth worried her bottom lip. "Jake has forgotten all about the Cassidy family by now."

"I hope so." Clint stood to his feet. "I'm going for your suit cases, Mom. I'll bring you a salad and coffee for lunch. When I come back I want to hear more."

Sunlight slanted through the blinds to make patterns on the carpet. Rachel stared at them before saying, "There's nothing more to tell."

"That's it?" Clint put his hat on his head and gave the crown a little tap.

"Don't you think that's enough?"

Clint grasped the door knob. "I don't understand why you never told me this before."

"There never seemed to be any reason to tell you. Why should I dredge up all those old memories?" Rachel's shoulders rose and fell in a little shrug. "What good would it have done?"

"I never knew you were so hurt, so wounded by these people." With the vehemence of youth, Clint declared, "Maybe you should hate your grandmother, and this Reardon character must have been a total bastard."

"No, Clint. They were no more at fault than I was. You mustn't blame them. You mustn't blame anyone."

"In a way you were fortunate." Clint opened the door. "If you had married Reardon, you might never have met Dad." He smiled. "Maybe I'm the fortunate one. If you had married someone else, I would never have been born."

"I'm the fortunate one. ... to have a son like you." A cascade of emotions flowed through Rachel.

Clint studied his mother's pale face. "I think I'm beginning to understand why Dad was always so protective of you. If he were alive, he would have handled Mr. Patton. And he would have made sure that none of the people in Summerville ever hurt you again." He hurried out the door. "I'm going for your bags and lunch."

Rachel followed him outside. "Be sure there's cream in my coffee."

"I'll leave an order for your dinner to be delivered to your room too," Clint called over his shoulder. "I don't think you should be out alone after dark."

Rachel leaned against the wall. "That sounds like a good idea." She was relieved that Clint's thoughts had moved to other things. Hopefully, his curiosity about her past had been appeased.

She watched as he strode across the patio toward the restaurant. How handsome he was, how young, how vulnerable. Her heart renewed an old vow. She must protect him at all costs. Going inside, she closed the door, then sat in a chair and stared at the patterns of sunlight on the carpet, as the sharp knife of her mind cut across the years and laid open festering old memories....

Chapter Two

Rachel sat on the edge of her chair and stared across the cluttered desk at the distinguished man on the other side. "I'm sorry I wasn't on time. There was no bus from the motel to Summerville. I called a cab and it was late."

"You're here now, Mrs. MacCall. That's all that matters." David Patton shuffled the papers on his desk to one side.

"I'm here. "Rachel grimaced. "But I don't know why."

"Then perhaps we should get down to business." Mr. Patton tugged at his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "Mrs. MacCall, your grandmother is interred in the cemetery south of Summerville. It was her wish to be laid to rest there. I thought you should know that before we begin."

Having recently dealt with the trauma of burying a loved one, Rachel knew that even a small funeral could be costly. "And her creditors are pressing for their money?"

David Patton's head snapped back in surprise. "Mrs. Cassidy's funeral expenses were paid by her family."

Rachel digested those words slowly. "There must to be some mistake. My grandmother has no family, except me and her husband. He disappeared twenty-five years ago." Could it be possible that her grandfather had returned after all this time? "Have you located Dennis Cassidy?"

"Who is Dennis Cassidy?" Mr. Patton seemed genuinely puzzled.

"My grandfather, Estelle Cassidy's husband. When you said family, I assumed you were speaking of him."

David shook his head. "No. I was speaking of Mrs. Cassidy's grandson."

"Gran had no grandson." This man was making less sense by the minute. "She had two granddaughters, me and Lola, my sister. Lola has been dead for fifteen years."

"Mr. Reardon referred to Mrs. Cassidy as his grandmother." Mr. Patton cleared his throat. "Naturally I assumed ... "

Rachel's astonishment was replaced by a nagging fear that transmuted slowly to subdued anger. "Mr. Reardon?" Her voice faltered. "Are you ... speaking of Mr. Jake Reardon?"

"Yes. Mrs. Cassidy referred to Mr. Reardon in her will as her grandson ... " Mr. Patton paused, waiting, apparently, for some sign that Rachel comprehended what he was saying.

Rachel paled. "Jake, Mr. Reardon is not related to my grandmother." She reconsidered, then amended her statement. "Except my marriage. He was my sister's husband."

Mr. Patton leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers. "So the mystery is solved. Mr. Reardon is Mrs. Cassidy's grandson-in-law."

It struck Rachel as strange that in a town as small as Summerville, Mr. Patton was ignorant of Jake's relationship to Gran. She could have pursued the subject. She decided not to. She didn't want to become involved in any way with Jake Reardon. "You said my grandmother left a will?"

"She left all her worldly possessions to you."

A whisper of caution nudged in around Rachel's confusion. "Did my grandmother leave many debts?"

David's fingers drummed nervously on the desk. "There are no debts Mrs. MacCall." "Then why did you insist that I come here?" Rachel's patience was wearing thin. "You are Mrs. Cassidy's sole heir." David smiled as if that should explain everything. Rachel was quick to tell him that it didn't. Then she asked, "Heir to what, Mr. Patton?" Very much on his dignity, David replied, "Your grandmother left you her farm and her fortune."

Rachel leaned across the desk, feeling the miserable sensation of being annoyed and not knowing exactly why. "Is this some kind of joke?"

David Patton pushed his chair back and vaulted to his feet. "I am a reputable attorney, Mrs. MacCall. I don't like what you're implying."

"I am not implying anything." For an attorney, this man seemed unduly sensitive. "I asked a simple question. I would like an honest answer."

"If you will give me the opportunity," David retorted, "perhaps I can answer all your questions."

Rachel was anxious to have this meeting over and done. "I'm not questioning your honesty, Mr. Patton. Please, sit down and explain."

Somewhat appeased, David sat back down in his chair. "Your grandmother left an estate of well over a million dollars. Oil was discovered on her farm some years ago. Since she continued to maintain a very frugal life style, I suspect most of the money gained from that find is still in the Summerville bank."

Rachel gasped, "There must be some mistake." Her confusion was giving way to disbelief.

David gave his mustache another tug. "I don't make mistakes about such matters."

A picture of Gran, tall and unyielding, rose up in Rachel's mind. "Did you say over a million dollars?"

"The sum is roughly one million two-hundred thousand." David's thumb and forefinger continued to worry his mustache. "Monthly royalties from the oil wells on the farm fluctuate, making it difficult to give you an accurate figure." He dropped his hand from his mustache to the desk. "Mr. Reardon can explain the situation much better than I

"

can.

Uneasiness tightened in Rachel's stomach. "I had rather not involve Mr. Reardon any further in my grandmother's affairs."

"That's impossible under the circumstances."

Rachel frowned. "What circumstances?" Her mind clouded with a dozen hazy thoughts.

"Mrs. Cassidy named Mr. Reardon executor of her estate." "Executor?" Rachel echoed. "Just what is an executor?"

Mr. Patton's expression moved from anxious to distraught. "Your grandmother left her estate in a trust fund that is administered by Mr. Reardon."

Rachel grappled with that revelation for several seconds. "Are you telling me that Mr. Reardon exercises some control over the money my grandmother left me?"

"That depends on what you call control. He's bound by many rules and regulations."

Rachel stared directly into the dignified face of the man across from her. "What rules? Which regulations?"

David flinched. "It means Mr. Reardon must abide by the guidelines laid down in your grandmother's will when he approves any expenditure of money."

A jolt of panic overlaid by another fierce flash of anger surged through Rachel. "Are you telling me that Jake controls the money my grandmother left me?"

David met her narrowed gaze. "In essence, yes."

"I need some time to think about this." Rachel sucked in a deep breath of air, then let it out slowly. "I want to discuss it with my son."

"There is nothing to discuss, Mrs. MacCall," David said. "Perhaps you don't understand. The money is yours. Your grandmother left it to you."

Rachel couldn't shake a dull ache of foreboding. "I don't like someone else controlling my money. Is there some way I can change that part of the will?"

"You mean change the executor?"

The tension in Rachel's stomach tightened. "Yes."

"You could try, I suppose..." David paused. After some thought, he added, "...but it would be costly and probably useless."

Experience had taught Rachel that it was never wise to act hastily when she felt this unsure. "Then I'll have to give this more thought."

David pushed what he obviously thought was an advantage. "Mrs. MacCall, surely you don't intend to turn down a small fortune because of one little stipulation in your grandmother's will. That would hardly be acting in your own best interest."

Rachel pondered that question. It would probably be in her best interest to take to her heels and run again, as she had done twenty years ago. But of course, David Patton had no way of knowing that. "This all comes as quite a surprise. I need some time to think." She pushed her chair back and stood to her feet. "My son will be back in Summerville tonight. I'll talk to him and let you know what I decide. Thank you, Mr. Patton, for your time."

David scooted from behind his desk and dogged Rachel's steps as she turned to walk away. "Mrs. MacCall, Don't you think you're being a little unreasonable? I'm sure Mrs. Cassidy would be grieved if she thought you were unhappy with this arrangement." He had followed Rachel into the outer office.

Rachel swung around to face her pursuer. "My grandmother never gave a damn about my happiness." Embarrassed by her angry outburst, she hurried into the hall. The door swung shut behind her.

Once outside, Rachel leaned against the wall and drew a jagged breath. She was behaving like a frightened child. Maybe she should go back and apologize. She opened the door.

"Who was that beautiful woman?" The curious voice of David's young receptionist drifted out into the hall.

The attorney's agitation sounded in his reply. "She is beautiful, isn't she? She's also foolish. That was Estelle Cassidy's granddaughter."

"Foolish?" Interest infused the young voice. "Why foolish?"

Careless of passersby who turned to stare, Rachel pushed the door open a fraction more and listened.

David ridiculed, "She says she can't accept the terms of Mrs. Cassidy's will, so she may refuse to accept the money her grandmother left her."

"What happens if Mrs. MacCall refuses to accept her inheritance?" the receptionist asked.

"The estate then becomes the property of Mr. Reardon to do with as he chooses." The soprano voice pitched a little higher. "Why would the poor woman turn down a fortune?"

"I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on Rachel MacCall. She is a woman with a rather unsavory past."

On a breathy gasp, the receptionist asked, "What do you mean?"

"Before she left Summerville some twenty years ago, she was involved with a married man. The man's wife found them together. There was a shooting and a fire. The incident created quite a scandal."

"Good Lord!" Shock deepened the young woman's response. "Is that Rachel Cassidy?" "It is!"

"The woman who was with John Holcomb the night his wife shot him?" Shock gave way to protest. "But she looks so young."

David chuckled. "Age is relative, Sandra." On a more serious note, he added, "An aura of mystery still surrounds that entire affair."

Rachel willed her feet to move down the hall toward the elevator. How could she have let her self be persuaded to come back here? The sooner she left, the better. She pushed her finger into the elevator button. In a matter of hours, Clint would return from Houston. Then she could go back to Dallas and forget she had ever been foolish enough to risk coming back to Summerville....

Three hours later Rachel stretched out in the reclining chair in the sitting room of her suite and stared at the ceiling as she debated if she should tell Clint about Gran's will. Her better judgment told her that would not be wise. She should have heeded her old friend Tom Carter's counsel. He had advised her to ignore David Patton's request to come to Summerville.

When Rachel had received Mr. Patton's first letter telling her of Gran's death and asking her to call him, she had been in a quandary. After wrestling with indecision for several days, she opted to ignore the letter.

A week later, Rachel received a second letter from David Patton. She tossed it, unopened, into the waste basket.

Three weeks after that, Mr. Patton called Rachel on the telephone, insisting that he must see her.

Rachel steadfastly refused to return to Summerville. "Can't we discuss this matter over the telephone?"

"This is not a topic that can be discussed over the telephone," David replied.

"I can't come to Summerville, Mr. Patton." Rachel hung up the phone and tried to forget the call.

Three days later David Patton called again, asking Rachel to reconsider. Something in his voice told her that he didn't intend to take no for an answer. Rachel promised to give his request some thought and get back to him in a day or so.

Later that evening over dinner with Tom, Rachel's eyes scanned the quiet restaurant as her mind wandered back to Mr. Patton's call.

"Are you all right, Rachel?" Tom's words intruded into Rachel's rambling thoughts.

"Wool gathering." Tom had been Don's business partner and lifelong friend. After Don's death, he had been the epitome of kindness, helping Rachel through the maze of details that surrounded the settling of Don's business and personal affairs. She smiled at him now with genuine affection. "Don't look so worried, I'm fine."

Tom reached across the table and touched Rachel's hand. "Is it something you want to talk about? I know what it's like to lose someone you care about. Maggie has been gone for six years, but I still remember."

"I know how much you loved your wife." Rachel took a sip of her cold coffee. "I could use some advice and this is something I don't want to discuss with Clint." Rachel told Tom of David Patton's insistent letters and calls.

Tom leaned back in his chair. "I'm a mechanic, Rachel, not an attorney. I'm not sure how much my advice is worth, but I know Don didn't want you to go back to Summerville, ever."

"I'm well aware of that." Don had always been adamant about Rachel trying to contact her Grandmother. "How many times have I heard him say: 'There's nothing there for you now, Rachel.' But the attorney keeps insisting that he has important business to discuss with me."

"Did he say what he wants?"

"He won't talk about it on the telephone."

"After all these years, would it be so difficult to go back?" Tom's hand caressed Rachel's fingers.

"No. Not really." The lie slid off her tongue with appalling ease. "But there's no point in it either."

"Do you want me to call this attorney and tell him to stop annoying you?" Rachel didn't want Tom talking to anyone in Summerville. "I don't think that's necessary."

"Why can't you talk this over with Clint?" Tom signaled the waitress for a check.

Neither could she tell Tom why she didn't want to discuss the calls with her son. "Clint's in Denver. He has enough on his mind without having to worry about something this trivial."

"Don't you think you should tell him?"

"This is not Clint's problem." Rachel looked at Tom's blunt fingers, as they closed around her wrist. How different they were from Don's long slender hands. "I'd rather he didn't know."

"Tell Mr. Patton to get lost, Rachel. He can't make you do anything you don't want to do." Tom pushed his chair back. "Are you ready to go?"

Rachel nodded. She hoped Tom was right. A nagging little voice in the back of her head kept saying David Patton couldn't be silenced that easily. "Thanks for the dinner and the advice."

"I enjoyed it. Now promise me you'll stop worrying." Tom took Rachel's elbow as they walked toward the front entrance.

Rachel smiled up at him. "I promise."



But she found it impossible to keep that promise. Why did David Patton keep calling? What if? "Stop it," she told herself, "It's been twenty years."

Three days later, David Patton called again, suggesting that if Rachel couldn't come to Summerville, perhaps his representative could call on her in Dallas.

"Let me think about it. Maybe I can find time to come there." And in the end, that's what she had decided to do.

Now, as she stretched out in the recliner, Rachel began to doubt the wisdom of her decision. Raising herself to a sitting position, she acknowledged, "The decision's been made and it can't be changed now."

Rachel closed her eyes. Clint would be here in a matter of hours. Then they could go home. She held onto that comforting thought until a restless sleep claimed her.

Chapter Three

An insistent banging on the door roused Rachel from a troubled half-sleep. Her slumber-drugged brain struggled to slow consciousness. After a few moments she remembered where she was. "Who's there?"

Another resounding bang brought her to her feet. "Is that you, Clint?" She stumbled to the door.

Her question was answered by another loud bang and an insistent masculine voice calling, "Open the door."

"Thank goodness you're here." Rachel slid the chain back. "I'm almost ... " One glimpse at the face peering back at her from the other side and the words died in her throat. She tried to close the door.

The toe of a big boot inserted in the opening stopped her. "Rachel? Open the door. I have to talk to you."

Rachel found her voice. "Go away, or I'll call the police."

"Do you think that would be wise?" A broad shoulder had pushed itself between the door and the casing. "Please let me in. I have to talk to you."

Rachel leaned against the door and dug her heels into the plush carpet. "I don't open my door for strangers."

"I'm not a stranger."

He was a stranger. He had always been a stranger. She had never really known him at all.

"Go away, Jake. Please go away."

"No. Let me in."

Rachel refused to budge. "What do you want?"

"I want, among other things, an explanation. Open the door."

How ironic that, after all these years, Jake wanted to hear her explanation. Rachel was suddenly doing battle with heart-rending emotions. "I don't want to talk to you." "Rachel, please." Jake's tone moved from demanding to pleading. "We *have* to talk." Rachel's spinning mind was a maze of confused thoughts. Why was Jake here? What did he want? "I have nothing to say to you."

Jake's voice was firm. "I'm not going anywhere until we talk."

She knew how stubborn he could be. "Talk - I'm listening."

"I can't talk standing outside your door. Let me in." His fist struck the wall. "Open the door."

"Go back to the lobby. I'll meet you there." Rachel stood back and ran a shaky hand across her face.

"We can't talk there. You know that."

He wasn't going away. Rachel slid the chain from the hook. Jake pushed sideways through the door and closed it behind him.

His presence reduced her to stunned silence. He was as darkly handsome as she had remembered him, but now his raven hair was laced with threads of silver. Lines etched themselves around his full mouth and furrowed his forehead. The ebony eyes were shrouded. "Hello, Rachel."

Rachel fought to keep her voice steady. "How did you know I was here?" That old quicksilver joy that she always felt at the sight of him, coursed through her veins. It was a joy tethered to despair. "Never mind, I think I know."

"David Patton called me." He stood, daring her, by his bold presence, to deny him. "May I come in?"

His sudden appearance had left Rachel shaken to the core of her being. "You are in." Her fingers gripped the top rung of the chair back. "I thought you were my son."

Jake surveyed the half-packed on the foot of the bed. "I see I didn't get here a moment too soon." His glance softened as his eyes swept over Rachel. "It's been a long time."

Rachel returned his stare, refusing to be lured into polite conversation by his beguiling words.

Easing down on the plush upholstery of a wing backed chair Jake let his eyes scan the room before coming to rest on Rachel's pale face. "How have you been?" He asked the question as if it had been two weeks instead of two decades since their last stormy encounter.

Twenty years ago he had abandoned her, with a chilling indifference that had left permanent scars. Now he sat looking at her, calmly asking how she had been, as if that terrible trauma had never existed. Rachel sat on the edge of the recliner. Dispensing with any pretense at formality, she demanded, "What do you want?"

Bluntly, Jake replied, "David Patton is very upset." One long slender hand rested on the arm of the plush chair, as the other slid through his unruly salt and pepper curls. "He thinks you might try to alter the terms of Gran's will. He suggested that I try to persuade you to reconsider."

Time had not erased the anguish. Rachel struggled for words that refused to push past the knot in her throat. She tried to pull her eyes from Jake's face and found it an impossible endeavor.

After a throbbing, awkward interval, Jake went on. "I don't want to upset you even more." He paused again, swallowed, then said, "Maybe my coming here wasn't such a good idea. I'm not sure how you feel about me, after all this time."

How *did* she feel about this man? Once she had loved him, then she had hated him. He still had the power to excite and unsettle her. Rachel feigned indifference. "I'm surprised, not upset."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "David says you may refuse to accept Gran's money. Is that right?"

"I need some time to think about it." She wanted him out of here, and the sooner, the better. "None of this is your concern. I'd like you to go now."

"I can't do that." Jake settled back in his chair. "Not until I've said what I came here to say."

Once it had been Rachel who had pleaded for a hearing. Those words, buried for so long in the pit of her memory, surfaced now, like little demons to torment her. "*I won't go until I explain to you. Please Jake, let me tell you what happened.*" Now she echoed his reply of twenty years before. "We have nothing to say to each other, not now."

He met her gaze. "Don't do this, Rachel. I was young and foolish then. I'm much wiser now. Do you want an apology? I suppose I owe you that." A glint of dark fire sparked

through the anguish that clouded his eyes, then his heavy lids fell. "As inadequate as it must seem, I am sorry."

It was inadequate. It was also more than she had ever expected. "None of that matters now." Shrugging, Rachel added, "I'm listening, say what you have to say." "I was sorry to hear you lost your husband."

Apologies, then compassion? This didn't sound like the Jake she had once known. "Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me...."

Jake interrupted. "I also came to talk about Gran's farm and her personal belongings. They're yours now. I thought you might like to go through your grandmother's personal possessions."

"I don't think ... " Rachel's voice faltered. "Nothing of Gran's concerns me."

Jake bared his teeth in a dark, humorless smile. "Gran left you a letter. She wrote it the day before she died. Surely, you want to read that."

Rachel's despair was giving way to unreasonable panic. "Do you know what the letter says?"

She watched with a familiar old feeling of helplessness as Jake's face froze in that humorless smile. "It's sealed. No one has read it."

Rachel expelled a long breath. "You can mail it to me. Mr. Patton has my address."

"Would you read it if I sent it?"

"Probably not. Nothing Gran could say would make any difference now. And I don't want to put myself through the pain of dragging up old memories."

Jake's rugged features softened. "Can't you at least listen to what your grandmother had to say?"

Rachel's lips pulled into a thin line. "I listened to her will and I didn't like what I heard."

"Your grandmother died with your name on her lips."

Once that knowledge would have been a balm to Rachel's wounded spirit, now it seemed no more than a token gesture. "Guilty conscience, no doubt."

"Maybe so," Jake replied softly.

"Gran is dead and buried." Even if she could forgive Gran's betrayal, she couldn't forget. "I don't want her money, and it's too late for apologies or explanations."

A frown slashed across Jake's handsome face. "Don't talk foolishness. You need that money."

"You don't know what I need," Rachel protested. "You don't know anything at all about me."

"I know a great deal about you. Gran had detectives looking for you for a long time. They did a fair job of piecing together what happened to you after you ran away."

Anxiety began to weave its way up Rachel's spine. "Why would Gran care what happened to me? When did she do this?"

"Shortly after Lola died. She hoped she could persuade you to come home." Jake's frown splintered into a grimace. Was remembering Lola that painful for him? "Your refusal to answer any of her calls or letters broke her heart."

Rachel had never had one shred of correspondence from her grandmother until six months ago. Should she tell Jake that? He had taken Gran's word over hers twenty years

ago. Why should anything have changed just because time had passed? "Maybe my belated condolences are in order. I'm sorry you and Gran lost Lola."

"Lola couldn't come back. You could have. Why didn't you?"

There had been so many reasons, none of which she wished to discuss with Jake Reardon. "This is getting us nowhere. You'd better go. I'm expecting Clint soon. You shouldn't be with me when he arrives. Good-bye, Jake."

"I'm not going, Rachel, not yet." Jake's voice was edged with determination. "You and I are going back to David's office, then out to the ranch. We'll wait for your son. He can come with us."

She couldn't trouble Clint with yet another petty problem. He was already burdened with too many responsibilities. "Clint knows nothing about the circumstances surrounding Gran and her will."

"We can explain the situation. Your son is old enough to understand."

It was Jake who didn't understand. "What I choose to tell my son is none of your business. Please go, Jake."

"Maybe we can compromise," he suggested with a touch of insolence. "You can talk to your son after you and I meet again with Mr. Patton."

Anger brought Rachel to her feet. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll wait for your son and ask him to meet with me and the attorney."

That wasn't a compromise, it was blackmail. "Clint shouldn't be involved in this. I'll meet with you and Mr. Patton." Rachel agreed, hating herself for her easy surrender. Jake seemed to relax. "I'll wait in the lobby."

"Not now. We can meet with Mr. Patton tomorrow."

"And have you run away again?" Jake stood and walked toward the door. No. We do it today."

The insistent ringing of the telephone cracked like a whip across the tense air. Rachel picked up the receiver and barked into it. "Hello."

"Mrs. MacCall?" The voice on the other end of the wire was high pitched, agitated.

"Mrs. Donovan MacCall?"

Jake stood by the door, his hat in his hand. He showed no inclination to leave. Rachel's first thought was that Clint's old pick up had broken down again. "I'm Mrs. MacCall." She turned away from Jake.

The voice on the other end of the wire raised a few decibels. "This is the Harris County Trauma Center."

Clint! Something had happened to Clint. Fingers of fear tightened around Rachel's throat. "What happened?"

"Your son was brought into emergency late last evening. There was an accident at the rodeo arena."

On a wave of pure panic, Rachel asked, "How bad is it?" Her free hand clutched her parched throat as the room swayed dangerously.

"Mr. MacCall is in guarded condition after his surgery. He's in recovery."

"Tell me what happened." Rachel could taste fear on her tongue, feel it in the silken shiver that ran down her backbone.

That impersonal voice droned relentlessly on. "He was thrown from a bull. The bull gored him, then trampled him. He has a broken leg, a broken collarbone, possible internal injuries, and a brain concussion."

Her fear mixed with a desultory dread, leaving Rachel feeling spent and weary. "Is he conscious now? Will he be all right? Is that all you can tell me?"

"Your son is conscious now." The voice seemed to beat at her. "He's asking for you."

"I'll be there as soon as possible." Rachel hung up the phone and turned to face Jake. "I have to go to Houston. There's been an accident. Clint's been injured." The room swayed again as hideous spots collected before her eyes.

Tossing his hat on the chair, Jake came across the room and grasped Rachel's shoulders. "Tell me what happened."

The color drained from Rachel's face. "Clint's been gored by a bull." She pressed her fingers to her temples. "He's in the Harris County Trauma Center."

Jake led Rachel back to the recliner. "Sit down. You're in a state of shock."

Rachel sat, protesting as she did so, "I can't sit down. Clint's been hurt. I have to go to him."

Jake was reaching again, for his hat. "I'll take you there. You're in no condition to travel alone."

Forcing herself to speak with a calm that belied her mounting fear, Rachel declared, "That's not necessary." She was up again, tossing belongings into her suitcase. "I'll get a bus to San Antonio, then catch a plane."

"Look at me, Rachel." The deep voice was threaded with dark emotion. "And listen. You are talking about a trip that will take hours. I have a plane at the air strip outside Summerville. I can fly you to Houston. We could be there in less than an hour."

Tears burned behind Rachel's aching eyes. She was so tempted. "No, thank you. I can manage."

Pushing her aside, Jake crammed the last of Rachel's possessions into her bag and snapped it shut. "Let's go." Taking her arm, he lifted the bag with his free hand and led her toward the door.

Rachel pulled back. "No, Jake. I don't want your help."

"Why, Rachel?" A frown pulled his winged brows into a V across his nose. "Do you still hate me so much that you'd refuse my earnest offer to be of some small assistance?" "I don't hate you, Jake. It's just that ... " Rachel couldn't go on. "Just what?" Jake questioned.

She was over reacting. "You have other, more important things to do."

Dropping the suitcase, Jake pulled her into an impersonal embrace. "Nothing that important. I want to fly you to Houston. Please let me."

For a moment Rachel yielded to the solace of Jake's arms. Quick realization of where she was, made her start and stiffen. "If you're sure."

"I'm very sure."

Rachel nodded her head in agreement.

Jake's hands fell to his sides. "I'll call the air field from the lobby while you check out. The plane will be ready to go by the time we get there."

As they stepped through the door, a sudden gust of wind wailed like an ill omen across the patio, rattling windows and scattering debris. A sullen sky had swallowed up the sun.

Rachel lifted her hand to brush a wayward wisp of hair from her forehead. Had she taken leave of her senses, agreeing to let Jake Reardon fly her to Houston? She pushed her misgivings from her mind. Tomorrow seemed soon enough to confront the dilemma of her strange inheritance and to rid her life, once more of Jake Reardon. The pressing present demanded that whatever the price, whatever the consequences, she get to her son's side as soon as possible.

## Chapter Four

Despite a driving rainstorm, Jake set his plane down on the runway of Hobby Airport fifty minutes after he and Rachel had taken off from Summerville. "I called ahead for a car. It should be waiting for us."

One pressing thought was uppermost in Rachel's mind, get to Clint as soon as possible. "Can we hurry?"

The ride to the hospital had all the aspects of a surrealistic nightmare. A heavy summer rain slowed freeway traffic to a snail's pace. Rachel leaned forward, trying to see the exit signs through the driving torrent. "How much farther?" The world around them was bathed in an eerie light, as weak rays of sunshine filtered through a heavy blanket of clouds. Later, she would remember these anxious hours as some of the most difficult of her life.

"Try to relax, Rachel." Jake swung the rented Buick onto the exit ramp. "The hospital is just around the corner and up the street."

How could she relax? Her son was lying somewhere in a hospital bed, injured, suffering, alone, maybe ... A shudder ran through Rachel's body. "Can you go a little faster?"

Jake pulled the car into a parking space near the emergency entrance. "He's going to be all right. Try not to worry."

For some obscure reason, Jake's attempt to comfort her angered Rachel. "My son may be dying, and you tell me not to worry?"

Jake was holding Rachel's arm, helping her up the ramp that led to the desk outside the emergency room. "I said try not to worry. It doesn't help, you know."

"Clint is my son." Clint was also the center of her universe. "Can't you understand how I feel?"

"I guess I can't." Jake dropped his hand from Rachel's arm. "I never had a son." "Forgive me." How treacherous unconscious fate could be. "You've been very kind, and I'm behaving badly"

As they neared the desk, The nurse raised her head and laid her pencil aside. "May I help you?"

"I'm Mrs. Donovan MacCall," Rachel said, trying to keep the nervous tremor from her voice. "Someone called me earlier today about my son, Clinton MacCall."

"Mrs. MacCall, oh yes. Your son is still in recovery. If you'll wait over there." The nurse pointed toward the waiting room. "I'll page his doctor."

"How is he?" Rachel's fingers gripped the sides of the desk. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Please sit down, Mrs. MacCall."

Rachel refused to move. "I want to know how my son is." The nurse came around the desk and took Rachel's arm. "I'll page his doctor."

Shaking her arm free, Rachel demanded, "Tell me where my son is. I want to go to him now."



The nurse extended a pleading hand in Jake's direction. "Mr. MacCall if you will have your wife sit down, I'll page Doctor Bishop."

Jake took Rachel's arm and guided her toward the waiting area. "Sit down and try to relax. The doctor will be here soon."

Rachel sat, inwardly fuming that the nurse would presume Jake was her husband. "The stupidity of some people."

"I think I missed something." Jake lowered himself into the chair next to Rachel. "That nurse assumed, without even bothering to ask, that you are my husband." Jake shrugged one broad shoulder. "It's an understandable mistake."

Rachel clamped her mouth shut. She was behaving badly again, taking her fear and frustration out on others. "I'm too upset to think logically." She clasped her hands in her lap and stared down the dark hall.

A slight built man materialized from the darkness at the end of the passageway and walked toward Rachel with one hand extended. "Mrs. MacCall?" Rachel jumped to her feet. "Yes."

"I'm Doctor Bishop." He grasped Rachel's hand in a dead fish handshake. "You made a speedy trip."

Letting her hand slide from his cold grip, Rachel dismissed the doctor's polite overture. "How is my son?"

"Shall we sit down?" The Doctor waited for Rachel to sit back down, then pulled a chair up beside her.

Rachel asked again, "How is my son? May I see him?"

The doctor nodded in Jake's direction. "Your son has a compound fracture of the left leg and a fractured clavicle. He is also suffering from a slight brain concussion. There was some internal bleeding, but that's stopped now. He was fortunate. The bull's horns did minimal damage."

His words sent a bolt of terror ripping through Rachel. "Brain concussion?" Her hand shot out to grasp the doctor's arm. "Is he unconscious? Is he in a coma?"

"Calm down, Mrs. MacCall" The doctor gently unfastened Rachel's fingers from his arm and held her hand in his. "Your son regained consciousness soon after he was admitted to the hospital. He was able to sign release papers for us to treat his injuries. His concussion was slight. It's his leg that concerns us now. The bone below the knee was shattered. He will need corrective surgery to regain normal use of that leg."

Rachel paled, dreading to know, even as she asked. "Normal use?"

Doctor Bishop cleared his throat. "Without corrective surgery, your son's left leg will be a fraction of an inch shorter than his right one."

Relief turned to dread. "Does Clint know the extent of his injuries?"

"Your son is in no condition to discuss such things right now. Although his injuries are of a serious nature, he should eventually make a normal recovery. However, that recovery will be a slow process."

"Is he in pain?" As she spoke, Rachel felt Jake's arm tighten around her shoulder. "He's heavily sedated. There will be pain, a great deal of it, for a while, but we'll keep him as comfortable as possible."

With diplomatic ease, Jake inserted himself into the conversation. "I'm sure you are doing everything you can for Clint. We appreciate that."

Even though she resented Jake's intrusion, Rachel nodded her agreement. "When can I see him?"

"In about a half hour." Doctor Bishop leaned around Rachel to stare at Jake. "You, sir, must be Mr. MacCall's father."

Jake reached in front of Rachel to shake the doctor's hand. "I'm Clint's uncle."

Slowly those words penetrated Rachel's confused senses. She opened her mouth to protest, then realized, that as Lola's husband, Jake was, indeed, Clint's uncle. She closed her mouth.

Jake stood and waited for Doctor Bishop to do the same. "Can you direct me to a coffee vending machine?"

"I'd be glad to." As the doctor stood, he gave Rachel a reassuring smile. "When your son is out of recovery, you can see him. Meanwhile, why don't you sit here and try to relax?"

Jake fell in step with the doctor. The two men walked down the hall together. Their voices droning into a hum, their footsteps fading away as they rounded a far corner.

Rachel sat on the edge of her chair and squeezed her eyes shut. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't even bother wiping them away. Somewhere in this hospital Clint lay helpless, injured, and in pain, and all she could do was wait. For twenty years Clint had given purpose to her life, meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. She opened her eyes and gazed upward. "Please, God, don't take him from me." Past events had taught her that it was not always wise to bargain away the substance of today for the shadow of tomorrow, but this was Clint she was pleading for; her little boy, her only child. "I'll do anything, *anything*, only don't take him from me."

"Rachel?"

Rachel lowered her head to see Jake standing in front of her, a cup of coffee in each hand. "Drink this." He extended one hand in her direction. "I remembered, you take only cream."

How incongruous that in the midst of all her suffering, Jake should remember so trivial a thing as cream in coffee. "I prefer my coffee black."

Jake extended his other hand. "Then have mine." Now he was humoring her. That was even more unbearable.

"I'll have the one with cream, thank you."

With his face wearing a long suffering grin, Jake extended both hands. "Take one of them, please."

Rachel's eyes flashed as she reached for the cup with cream. "Thank you." Sipping from the cup, she sighed. "I'm behaving badly again."

"Under the circumstances, that's understandable."

Why was Jake being so understanding? Whatever his reasons, he was being a tower of strength, and she needed that now. "The coffee's good." She took another sip. "And it was kind of you to bring me here and stay with me."

"It was the least I could do." After a moment's hesitation, Jake asked, "Is there someone I should call?"

Rachel wrapped her cold hands around the warm cup. "About what?"

"About Clint. Is there someone you'd like to notify?"

"I suppose I should call Tom."

Jake took a quick sip of coffee. "Would you like me to call him for you?"

The answer to that was a definite no. "I'll do it myself." Rachel glanced at her watch. "He should be home soon."

"Is Tom a relative?" Jake asked, with a casual candor that elicited an automatic answer.

"He was Don's best friend and his business partner." It didn't occur to Rachel until she had already explained, that Tom's identity was none of Jake's business. "I assume that Don was your husband?"

Rachel had supposed that Jake knew who Don was. "My husband's name was Donovan MacCall. His friends called him Don."

"I see." Jake's broad chest heaved as he drew an irregular breath.

He didn't see, and she hoped he never would. "And you still miss him?" Jake crumpled his empty coffee cup in his hand. "Especially at a time like this."

He was prying into things that were none of his business. Rachel struggled to keep the anger from her voice. "Don was my husband for nineteen years, I miss him all the time."

The man beside her became silent, pensive, distant. "Would you like to go to dinner now?"

"Not until I see Clint," Rachel answered, matching his stiff, cold tone.

Turning his face from her, Jake stared down the long corridor.

Old memories, old fears, moved in to haunt, then taunt Rachel. "Why don't you go alone? I'm not hungry."

"I'll wait." Jake leaned back in his chair.

Rachel consoled herself with the thought that nothing lasted forever, but in the cold light of a hospital waiting room, half an hour seemed an eternity. She stirred restlessly to her feet, then walked across the room and stood staring out the window. From nowhere, old memories moved in to swamp her.

In an instant her mind jumped back through the years to her first encounter with Jake. In her mind's eye, she could see him leaning against the corral fence as she rode her little mare into the horse lot. Even now she could feel the tingle of his hand touching hers for the first time. *"I'm Rachel Cassidy."*

Unfortunately, Rachel Cassidy no longer existed. That young, trusting, eighteen-year-old girl was gone forever, lost in the harsh passing of unrelenting years. Tears brimmed under Rachel's eyelids. All that remained now were memories and regrets.

"Rachel?" Jake was standing directly behind her. "Are you all right?" He rested his hands on her shoulders.

Rachel willed away those treacherous recollections. "I'm a little tired."

How well Jake read her introspective mood. "What were you remembering?" "Things I thought I had forgotten. How it was before ..." Her voice trailed away. Softly, he completed her sentence. "Before you ran away?" "Yes," she whispered.

"Why did you run away? I came back the next day after I had time to think things through. I wanted to apologize, but you were gone." His fingers tightened on her shoulders. "That was as near as I ever came to hating myself."

Rachel stared out the window at the sprawling city with its tall skyscrapers and millions of lights. "I didn't plan to run away. It just happened."

Jake's fingers turned to steel. "You just happened to vanish into thin air? For over three years we thought you were dead. Can you imagine the agony we lived through?"

How could they so casually assume she was dead? They hadn't looked for her, they hadn't tried to contact her. And Jake had married Lola barely six months after she had run away. That was ancient history now. "I was very young and very confused." She stopped and swallowed, hard. "It's a long story."

Jake turned her around to face him. "When your horse came home alone, I was afraid that Tina Holcomb had gone gunning for you again."

Should she try to explain? She had, once, and Jake had chosen not to believe her. Wishing to change the past was like was like beating the wind. Pushing back, Rachel studied the concerned face of the man who stood before her. Jake Reardon was still the handsomest man she had ever seen, even though his once ebony hair was laced with threads of silver, his eyes were still the color of midnight. He was tall, with a massive, muscular build. He moved with a quick, agile grace that was in direct contrast with his size and stature. It was that quick grace coupled with his amazing strength that had first attracted her to him. She dropped her head.

"I searched for you for hours." Jake's speech slowed, his tone became introspective. "When I finally had to admit I wasn't going to find you, I had Gran call Sheriff Adkins and report you missing." Jake dropped his hands. "Why did you let us think you were dead?"

Rachel's spine stiffened. "I didn't *let* you think anything." She strode quickly across the room and sat back down on the edge of her chair. "I couldn't stay, not after what happened." Her lips pulled into a taut line. "I don't want to talk about it."

Jake followed her across the room and sat down beside her. "Well, I do. I want to know how you managed to disappear from the middle of nowhere and not leave a trace. You vanished like a puff of smoke, into thin air."

Irony crept into her reply. "Would you believe me, Jake? It's even more far-fetched than my reason for being at the Longhorn Inn." Her voice faltered, "You came back the next day to apologize?"

"Yes. Lola said you'd gone for a ride. I decided to wait. I waited and waited, but you never came back."

What difference could it make now if Jake knew the details of her bizarre flight into oblivion? If he chose not to believe her, that was his problem. "After I see Clint, I'll tell you what happened."

A nurse suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Mrs. MacCall?"

Rachel jumped to her feet. "Yes?"

"You may see your son now. He's in the last room on the right at the end of the hall." The nurse nodded toward an exit light at the end of the corridor. "Follow me, please." Rachel rushed to follow the nurse.

Jake was beside her, matching her every step. She stopped. "It would be better if I made this visit alone."

To her great surprise, Jake turned, and without a word, retraced his steps back toward the waiting room.

Clint lay in the far corner of a four-bed ward. A curtain had been pulled along one side of his bed. The sounds of snores, groans, and idle chatter could be heard over the drone of

a television that was suspended from the ceiling in another far corner of the room. An acid smell of disinfectant permeated the entire area. How long would Clint have to stay in this depressing place?

The nurse pushed back the curtain. "Your mother is here, Mr. MacCall." She motioned for Rachel to move around her.

"Mom?" Clint asked as Rachel came to stand beside his bed.

Steeling herself against what she must face, Rachel stepped into the inner circle of the curtain and gasped.

Clint lay flat on his back on a narrow, slightly elevated bed. A spot above his temple had been shaved and bandaged. A vicious steel pin jutted from one side of his collar bone. His mid-section was swathed in bandages. His left leg was suspended in a complicated contraption of wires and pulleys. He tried to smile. "Hi, Mom."

This was her son, the one person in the world that she loved above all others. She couldn't let him see how shaken she was. Sitting down beside him, Rachel brushed a wayward curl from his forehead. "How do you feel, darling?"

A hideous bruise covered one side of his face. Smiling was impossible, but he tried. "A little the worse for wear right now."

"But you're going to be all right." Rachel assured him with more confidence that she felt. "The doctor says you will recover completely, but it will take time." She caressed his bruised face with her finger tips. "All you have to do now is concentrate on getting well."

"We both know that's not true, Mom. My medical expenses here will be tremendous, and after that, I'll need weeks, maybe months of physical therapy." Clint turned his head and stared at the wall. "We still owe debts from Dad's illness."

Rachel spoke without considering the consequences. "That's not true, darling."

"Mom, we both know ... "

"You don't know, not yet." Rachel held up her hand to stop Clint's intended interruption. "You were right about Gran's will. She left me over a million dollars, a farm and several producing oil wells."

He didn't believe her. Skepticism overrode the pain in his eyes. "Come on, Mom."

"It's true." She was begging trouble, even considering accepting Gran's money. But Rachel would have made a blind bargain with the Devil if that was what it took to assure her son's complete recovery. "I swear."

"A million dollars?" One dark eyebrow climbed up Clint's bruised forehead.

"A little more than that, and a farm, and a source of income." Rachel touched Clint's brow with loving fingers. "When you're on your feet again, you can think about starting college, just like we planned before Dad got sick." She ran her fingers through his damp curls. "All you have to do now is get well."

The nurse stuck her head around the curtain. "Mrs. MacCall, I must ask you to leave now. "

Meanwhile, don't worry about a thing. Just concentrate on getting well."

~^~ Already Clint's heavy lids were drooping. "See you tomorrow, Mom, and *you* don't worry."

"I won't, darling." Rachel lied. She *was* worried. She had to get Clint out of this ward and into a private room. To do that she would have to accept Gran's money. That meant

she would have to get Jake's okay to spend some of her inheritance. Surely, he wouldn't refuse her that request. She closed the door and moved down the corridor toward the waiting room, and Jake.

Chapter Five

"This food is terrible." Rachel stabbed at the meatball on her plate.

Jake pushed his coffee cup to one side. "I agree. Do you want dessert?"

"Good heavens, no!" Rachel laid her napkin beside her plate and glanced around the almost empty cafeteria before blurting out, "Jake, I have to talk to you about Gran's will." Jake took a sip of water, then set his glass on the table. "Have you made up your mind to accept Gran's generous bequest?"

"I don't have a choice. In truth the money is a godsend." She waited, hoping Jake would respond. He didn't.

Rachel took a deep breath. "Mr. Patton says you have to approve any expenditures from the estate."

"That's true." Jake stared toward the cafeteria entrance.

"I need money, a great deal of money for Clint's medical expenses, and for me while I'm here with him." Rachel girded herself for the questions she was sure Jake would ask. "That can be arranged." His eyes swept over her face.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. "Just like that?"

"Of course, just like that." He sounded almost angry. His quick acquiescence made Rachel apprehensive. She had expected objections, maybe an argument. "Thank you."

"You'll need a place to stay. There should be a motel near the hospital." Jake pushed his chair back. "I'll take care of everything."

"That can wait." Rachel held up one hand. "First, I want Clint in a private room." "We can do that now." Jake came around the table and helped Rachel to her feet. "Then we can find that motel and arrange for rooms."

An alarm went off inside Rachel's head. "I only need one room."

"I can't get a clearance to fly home tonight because of the storm." Jake was guiding Rachel toward the entrance. "I need a room too."

"But the storm has blown over."

"True, and it's moving in the direction of Summerville."

Rachel could think of no answer to that blunt statement. Their footsteps echoed down the long corridor. As they neared the nurse's station, Rachel slowed her pace. "Wait for me. I want to see that Clint's moved to a private room tonight." Jake caught her arm. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you." Rachel stood by and waited patiently as Jake arranged for Clint's room. As she watched him converse with the nurse at the station, then follow her into the office behind the desk, Rachel shuddered at what the last few hours would have been like without him. She didn't notice Jake had returned until he touched her arm. "Ready to go?"

Rachel sighed. Dear God, she was tired. "Yes."

They walked through the emergency exit. The rain had stopped. A sinking sun shafted beams of light through the smoky bank of clouds that ringed the western horizon.

Jake opened Rachel's car door. "The nurse says there's a motel a short distance down the street."

Rachel fastened her seat belt. That was good news. Hopefully, she could walk from the motel to the hospital.

Resting her head against the back of the car seat, she thought that the exhausting events of this long day had worn her to a thread. Through a web of weariness, Jake's words sounded. "You look like you're ready to drop. Try to relax."

Rachel turned to study his rugged profile. Even now, after all these years and in her present state of weariness, being near him was enough to make her heart pound and send a flicker of desire racing through her veins. He had been an intense and passionate lover. She didn't recall him being compassionate or understanding. He was being both now, and that disturbed her even more than the flicker of yearning that she quickly extinguished. "I am, but relieved too. Clint's going to be all right. That's all that matters."

With detached calm, Jake observed, "Aren't you carrying this doting mother act a little too far?" He made a sharp right turn and stopped the car before the motel office.

His censure brought Rachel's head up. "It's not a crime for a mother to love her child."

"Your son is not a child. He's a man." Jake reached for his door handle. "How old is he anyway?"

"You don't understand about mothers." Rachel was a little miffed by what she perceived as a criticism. "Clint will always be my little boy, no matter how old he gets to be."

Jake's answer was to slam his door. He returned a few minutes later carrying two keys. Handing one of them to Rachel, he got into the car and maneuvered it around the office plaza and into a slot before a long line of closed doors. "My room is next to yours. If you need me, you can call." Setting the emergency brake, he instructed, "Be sure to lock your door."

Rachel clamped down on the urge to give some tart reply. "Thank you."

Coming around the car, Jake helped her from the car, then put his hand under her elbow and guided her toward her room. His touch was automatic, impersonal, but it sent a tingle through her arm and down into her body. Memory stirred long forgotten images from the past. Jake had been her first love. He had taught her the splendor of first passion, the sweetness of shared sexual joy. He had also introduced her to the shattering pain of heartbreak and the bitter travail of rejection. She closed her heart. Better to forget, than remember and regret.

"Give me your key."

Rachel was in another age, another world. "Huh?"

"Your key. I want to open your door."

Rachel gave him the key.

Jake opened the door, then stood aside for her to enter.

She pushed past him, then looked back in surprise as he followed her inside and closed the door. "I thought we might have that little talk you promised."

Rachel sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm very tired. We can talk tomorrow." Putting the back of her hand over her mouth, she yawned, hoping he would take that as a signal to leave.

Instead, he eased down into a chair. "I've waited twenty years for an explanation. I won't be put off any longer."

"Jake, please."



"Don't try to beg off. I have to know how you managed to disappear so quickly and so completely. You did say you would explain after dinner." Rachel pleaded, "I'm very tired."

Jake ignored her weary words. "I didn't ask before because I thought you might be reluctant to talk about such a personal experience in a public place." Annoyed, Rachel snapped. "Not tonight, I said."

"I don't think I can sleep until I know." Jake crossed his long legs. He didn't intend to move an inch until she told him the entire story.

Angered by his polite persistence, Rachel retorted, "Oh, all right. If you insist."

There was a touch of triumph in Jake's smile. "I insist."

Rachel put her feet on the bed and pushed a pillow behind her shoulders. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything, beginning with what happened after you saddled your horse and rode off toward Comanche Ridge the day you disappeared."

His request struck a dormant chord that vibrated through her memory like some sad, half-forgotten refrain. Her words came out on a little rush of breath. "When I went for a ride that afternoon, I had no idea of doing anything more than escaping for a few hours." She drew a deep breath and began to speak more slowly. "I rode to the far corner of the north pasture, tethered my horse, and walked the last half-mile to Comanche Ridge." In her mind's eye, Rachel could see the bluebonnets that bloomed along the ridge and smell the scent of grass and Sweet Williams. "My world had just come crashing down around me. I was feeling alone and more than a little desperate. I thought more than once about hurling myself over the ridge and down into the ravine below."

Sudden emotion pushed Jake to his feet. Rachel had forgotten how swiftly and gracefully he could move. He was a large man, well over six feet tall, but completely lacking the clumsiness that plague so many men his size. In two quick strides, he was standing before the window of the small room, staring out into the darkness. "There were times over the next few years that I was sure you had taken your own life. I was hardly the person to cast the first stone, Rachel. I should have listened when you tried to explain."

She was thankful for the distance between them. "Don't blame yourself for what happened, Jake. It wasn't your fault."

For some obscure reason, her answer angered him. "We both know better than that!" His shoulders hunched. "That's all water under the bridge now. Tell me what happened." Retracing his footsteps, he sat back down.

Rachel picked up the threads of her story. "I don't know how long I sat there, torn by anxiety, feeling betrayed and forsaken; wishing I could avenge myself on those who were responsible for my suffering."

"Is that why you ran away, because of some childish desire for revenge?" Jake's hard eyes bored into her face.

"I ran away because ..." Rachel stopped. "That's not important now. Do you want to hear the rest of the story?"

Jake nodded. "Of course, I do. Go on."

"I lost track of time." Rachel was amazed at how clearly each detail of that fateful night had etched itself into her memory. "When I got back to the tree where I'd tied my horse, she was gone. I panicked. It was miles back to the farm and almost dark. I couldn't

walk that distance at night. I would have to stay on the ridge until morning. That was a frightening prospect. As I turned, I caught sight of a dilapidated old van parked on the far side of the ridge. I had no idea who the van belonged to, or how it had gotten there. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd have run in the other direction as fast as my feet would carry

"

me.

"But these weren't ordinary circumstances?" By now Jake was completely absorbed in her narrative.

"No. So on an impulse I have never been able to explain, I decided to cross the ravine and see who was there."

"And who *was* there?" Jake asked, in a voice that couldn't hide his skepticism.

Her fingernails dug into her hands. "There was no one in or around the van when I got there."

Jake eyed her suspiciously. "A van on the far end of Diamond X and no one in it? There's no road up to Comanche Ridge. That means someone drove for miles uphill and over that rough terrain. Why would they do that, then desert their vehicle? Did it occur to you that the van may have been stolen, that the driver could have been anything from a lunatic to an escaped convict?"

"I wasn't thinking very clearly at the time."

"A vehicle, parked on the far side of Comanche Ridge?" Jake shook his head. "I find that hard to believe."

"I can understand your doubt, but it's true."

One side of his mouth turned up in a self deprecating smile. "I do believe you, go on." Did he? She wondered. "I looked all around and found nothing or no one. Then I tried the door of the van. It wasn't locked. I thought it might be a safe place to stay until morning. I got in and locked the doors, then crawled into the back."

"Didn't you think the owner must have a key?"

Rachel sighed. "I was in no condition to think rationally about anything. All I knew was it was too dark to find my way back across the ravine. There were two bunks in the back of the van. I laid down on the top one and fell asleep."

"In the back of some stranger's van?" Jake's expressive eyebrows met in a disapproving frown. "Dear God, Rachel! That was madness."

"I know that now." Even now, recalling the bizarre events of that night, sent a shiver down Rachel's spine. "When I woke, the van was speeding down a dark highway." She swallowed over the lump in her throat. "I sat up and screamed to the top of my lungs."

Jake turned his face from her, as of looking her was more than he could endure. "Then what happened?"

"The driver was as surprised as I was." Recalling that vanished moment weighted Rachel's heart with sorrow. "He stopped the van and demanded to know what I was doing there."

"Had you ever seen the driver before?" Jake's profile cast a long shadow across one wall of the dimly lit room.

"No, he was a stranger. He told me later that he had driven to the ridge to gather samples of wild flowers and to escape for awhile from the crush of civilization." Rachel dropped her eyes to study her hands. "The driver was Donovan MacCall."

"Your husband?" Astonishment made Jake's head swivel to stare at her. She read in his eyes the intent to further question the truth of her story. His mouth opened, then closed....

Why should she think he would believe anything she told him? "I warned you the truth would sound like a lie."

After a few seconds, he seemed to subdue his urge to question. "I do believe you. You have no reason to lie to me now."

She wanted to say she had never had reason to lie to him. That would be the biggest lie she could tell. With a nod of her head, Rachel went on with her story. "By the time Don could stop the van and get back to me, I was hysterical, screaming like a banshee and threatening to run from the van and into the dark fields along the side of the road if he dared touch me."

How vividly she recalled Don's astonished expression when he realized he was carrying a very frightened, very distraught young passenger. "I soon realized he was almost as scared as I was."

"What did he do?" Jake's voice had lost every trace of disbelief.

"It was all so strange. He was very understanding and not the least bit angry. He assured me that he wouldn't harm me. Then he asked me how I had found my way into his van."

"You weren't afraid of this strange man?"

"I should have been. I know that now. I can't explain why, but I wasn't."

"I ... " After a few moments of silence, Jake directed. "Go on."

"You have to understand about Don." As if anyone could understand Don, Rachel thought as a smile softened her features. "He was different. He'd spent several years in a prison camp in Vietnam. He was injured when the enemy captured him. He almost died there. Everything that had happened to Don seemed to condition him to understand my plight." A far away look lighted her eyes. "I desperately needed someone who would listen and sympathize. Before the night was over, I had told him most of what had happened to me over the past six months."

"Did it ever occur to you that Don might not be what he seemed?" Jake whispered hoarsely. "Good lord. Rachel. You could have been in real danger."

"I was too emotionally exhausted to think or feel. "Don told me to get some rest, and he'd take me back to the farm in the morning. He had traveled several miles north while I was sleeping."

Jake's brows shot up in surprise. "He offered to bring you back home?"

"Oh, yes." By now remembering had become a release, a way of expunging grief hidden away until now when she had been forced to relive those dark hours. "I laid awake for a long time after Don was asleep on the lower bunk." How angry she had been, how hurt, how desirous to strike back at those who had wounded her. "I decided it would be better for everyone concerned if I disappeared. The next morning I asked Don to let me ride to Dallas with him."

"And Don agreed to such a hair-brained scheme?" The sound of Jake's snapping fingers cracked the tense air. "Just like that?"

"Rather reluctantly, but yes, after awhile, he agreed. Don understood."

"It sounds more like Don took advantage of your youth and stupidity." Jake growled. "How old was he?"

"Thirty-two years old," Rachel said with slow deliberation. "He told me later that he knew that first night, he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me." Jake asked suspiciously, "And you believed him?"

"Rachel was immediately defensive. "I know it sounds foolish and naive, but yes, I did. And he never gave me any reason to doubt those words."

Jake's features contorted. "How long after you met Don did you marry him?"

"Seven months."

"Seven months? Isn't that rather short notice?" Jake's eyes sliced into Rachel's face. "It didn't take you long to forget me, did it?"

Should she tell Jake why she had never been able to forget him? No, that must remain forever her own secret sorrow. "I married Don a month after you married Lola."

The cords in Jake's neck stood out. "I thought you were dead. Why didn't you get in touch with us, Rachel?"

Tears crowded into her eyes as she was forced to admit for the first time, a galling truth. She had run away because she was a child bent on revenge, and she had stayed away because she was a coward. "I didn't want to testify against Tina Holcomb." "There was no trial. John recovered and refused to press charges against his wife." "By then it was too late."

"Too late? For what?"

Rachel ran a hand across her forehead, then brushed it through her hair. "What happened, happened, Jake. We can't change it and thinking about how it could have been different now, seems an exercise in futility."

Jake sighed his dejection. "You're right."

She had to ask. "Were you happy with Lola?"

His surprise was slowly replaced by heavy thought. "Happiness comes and goes. There were happy moments, then Lola died. I grieved, but I got over it."

"You could have married again." She wondered why he hadn't.

"By that time I realized I wasn't meant to travel in double harness."

Did Jake know of the deception Lola and Gran had perpetrated? No, of course not, and even if she could convince him now of their guilt, it would only hurt him more. There had already been too much hurt and pain and duplicity. "It's late, and you have to fly back to Summerville tomorrow." Rachel stifled a yawn.

"I'm not going to Summerville tomorrow." Jake stood to his feet. "I'm staying here with you until we can take Clint back to the farm to convalesce."

"What did you say?" Rachel bent her head forward, as slowly, her mind absorbed his words.

"You heard me, and there's no point in arguing."

A feather of apprehension stirred across the back of Rachel's neck and tickled down her spine. "When Clint is well enough, I'm taking him home, to Dallas."

Jake moved toward the door. "I can't let you do that. I made some promises to Gran before she died. I intend to keep them."

Cold reality moved in around Rachel's apprehension. "Is this your way of telling me that if I don't do what you say, you won't release my money?"

With cold implacability he told her, "I will do what is necessary to bring you back to the farm to live."

"*Why?*" Rachel was too startled to offer any logical argument.

"Why not? You have nothing in Dallas." Jake's eyes narrowed. "Do you?" She didn't, but she was unwilling to admit as much. "Dallas is my home."

"Not anymore. I promised Gran I'd look after you. I'd probably be just as adamant if I hadn't."

Rachel could comprehend, to some degree, Jake's feelings of guilt and responsibility, but this was absurd. "You're being unreasonable." She wanted to say so much more. Discretion dictated caution. Jake controlled her money. "I hope you'll reconsider."

"My mind is made up." A note of finality underscored his terse words. "You're all the family I have. My parents are dead. I'm an only child, Lola and Gran are both gone, I want you back on the farm."

She knew him too well to believe he was being mean-spirited, or vindictive. Confusion clouded her brain. "I don't want to go back to that place."

"The old house has been renovated. It's really quite livable." Jake opened the door. "Go to bed, Rachel." He was gone before she could answer.

Wisdom gained through hindsight told Rachel that she shouldn't even consider going back to the farm to live. On the other hand, she dared not risk openly defying Jake. A trace of exaggerated mockery slipped into her whisper. "Trapped." She was damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

How did she resolve this dilemma? With the firmness of a fixed star, she knew that she couldn't let her son's injury condemn him to life as a cripple. She would be treading on quicksand, but she would have to bow to Jake's unreasonable demands. But only until Clint was well enough to go back to Dallas and safety.

## Chapter Six

Rachel rested her weary head on the lumpy motel pillow and pulled the covers up under her chin. Her mind was a welter of conflicting emotions and unanswered questions. Why was Jake so determined to intrude into her life again? After all these years of ignoring her, it made no sense at all. Was he motivated by affection for Gran? Maybe he thought he owed it to Lola. It seemed much more likely that he was influenced by his own guilt. None of these reasons explained, with any degree of satisfaction, his determination to have Rachel return to Gran's farm.

Gran's farm! What recollections those words evoked. Gran's farm! The residence of a thousand childhood memories. The dwelling place for betrayal and heartbreak. Rachel closed her eyes as her mind made that perilous journey back through time and uncertainty, to slip into the past. With brutal resolve, she forced herself to relive the enchanted months she had shared with Jake. She had believed then that the magic would last forever. Fate had challenged that assumption, and time had proved it was a lie. Recalling Jake's bitter rejection was enough to make Rachel pull the covers over her head and sob as she had not sobbed for twenty years. At last sleep, on silent wings, slipped in to soothe away the pain of remembering.

Rachel woke with a start, recalling with a pang of remorse, where she was. Outside her window a dismal dawn tarnished the dark sky with shafts of brassy brilliance.

The rigors of a restless night had left her feeling tired and depressed. Sitting up in bed, she reached for the light switch. One thought was uppermost in her mind now: Make sure Clint had everything he needed to assure his complete recovery.

A knock on the door brought her to her feet. "Yes?"

"It's me, Jake. Let me in. I brought breakfast."

Rachel slipped into her robe and padded across the floor to open the door. Jake stood on the other side holding two large cups and two containers of food. "I was waiting for your light to come on."

Rachel held the door open. "Where did you get food at this hour?"

Jake was dressed in the same tight jeans and wrinkled shirt he had worn the day before. The soft light snarled in his salt-and-pepper curls and cast oblique shadows across his clean-shaven face. "There's a McDonald's down the street."

She was struck anew, by his raw masculinity. The tight shirt accentuated the powerful muscles in his chest and forearms. The form fitting jeans hugged his thighs and trim waist. Rachel leaned against the door frame. "You must have got up in the middle of the night."

"Not quite, but I've been up for sometime. I went shopping for a toothbrush and a razor. Then I went out again for food and coffee." Jake put the cartons on the table beside the bed and offered Rachel one of the Styrofoam cups. "This one has cream."

Rachel pulled the flap from the lid of the cup and took a sip of the hot liquid. "It's just right."

Jake's eyes followed her every move as she sighed and sat on the bed. "You look a little tired. Maybe you should lie back down and try to catch another forty winks."

Rachel shook her head. "I can't sleep again, once I'm awake."

"*Did* you sleep?" Jake pulled a chair near the bed and sat down before opening the second cup of coffee.

Rachel ignored his question. "Can we leave for the hospital soon?"

"It will be hours before we can see your son." Jake stared down at the cup in his hand. "I thought we could make a few plans while we waited."

"That's not necessary." She might as well have been whistling in a whirlwind. "Yes, it is." The light from the table lamp cast Jake's face in an outlaw's sinister silhouette. "It may be weeks before Clint can travel."

Rachel armed herself with another sip of coffee. "Clint is not your concern. You have a life of your own. You can go home now."

With quiet determination, he replied, "I've decided to stay here, with you, until we can all go to back the farm together."

"You've decided?" Anger made Rachel dig her fingers into the soft Styrofoam of her cup. "That's not your decision to make."

"I happen to think it is." Jake opened one of the cartons of food. "Do you want breakfast?"

"Yes." Rachel unwrapped a plastic fork and took a bite of scrambled eggs. They had the consistency of rubber. "Jake, I don't ... " She stopped, swallowed, then began again. "I don't need you here. I can manage now." He held the purse strings. She couldn't afford to offend him.

"I'm staying, Rachel." Jake buttered a biscuit and laid it beside his eggs. "I told you last night, I consider you and Clint my family."

Her fork halted in mid air. "We're not your family!" Why was he so determined to bulldoze his way back into her life?

His whisper-soft voice cut through the tense air. "I say you are. Legally, you're my sister-in-law. That's family as far as I'm concerned."

"I'm a sister-in-law you haven't seen in twenty years. Clint doesn't know you at all. If you think for one moment ... " Something between alarm and caution caused Rachel to stop her complaint and take another quick sip of coffee.

Between bites, Jake asked, "Does Clint know I'm your sister's husband?"

"You *were* my sister's husband." Rachel took a deep breath and steadied her voice. "Clint knows very little about my life before I married Don. What little he does know, I'm afraid he doesn't like."

"He can't know more than what you've told him. What *did* you tell him?"

A voice of caution warned, be careful, be very careful. "I told him ... " Rachel was poised to say, the truth. The words hung in her throat. "A part of the story. He drew his own conclusions."

"I'm not going to let you run away from me again. I want to get to know Clint too." Those words made the hair on the back of Rachel's neck rise.

"Clint is not an easy person to know." Rachel stirred her coffee with a plastic spoon. "He's shy and somewhat reserved."

"I'm a patient man and given half a chance a likable one. During Clint's recuperation, I intend to get acquainted with him." Jake smiled, without any humor at all. "Like it or not, Rachel, that's the way it is."

He was threatening her. Those cool words, delivered in that deep monotone, were a threat. A cold finger of fear positioned itself along Rachel's spine and began a slow climb upward.

"What if I refuse to go along with your plans?"

"Then you can kiss your money goodbye. I won't release a solitary cent."

His words were like a gun to her head. She had to have that money, and he knew it. "That would be cruel"

"That's the way it is." Jake set his cup on the table. "Don't make me do it, Rachel." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "You're going to do as I ask, one way or the other."

Color flooded her face. "You're not asking, you're threatening."

"It's not a threat." Jake's voice rumbled like a restless volcano. "It's a promise. From now on, you and Clint are my family. You may as well get used to the idea."

"Why?" Rachel's mind reeled with confusion. "Give me one good reason why."

"The best reason in the world, That's what I want." Standing, Jake moved toward the door "Get dressed. I'll be back in thirty minutes to take you to the hospital."

Rachel sat staring at the door that had slammed behind Jake's departing figure. He seemed determined to elbow his way back into her life. Why? Twenty years ago he had ended their love affair, with a callous indifference that even now, scraped like an abrasive barb across her wounded psyche. Six months later, he had married her sister. Why now, after all these years, was he willing, almost anxious, to declare that she was his family and accept Clint as his nephew? She pushed the dilemma of Jake's strange behavior from her mind and dragged her thoughts back to Clint. She would deal with Jake later. Right now, Clint needed her.

When Jake returned thirty minutes later, Rachel was waiting for him.

Without bothering to knock, he came quietly into the room and eased down on the edge of the bed. "I hope you aren't angry with my decision, Rachel." He managed to look almost contrite. "Are you ready to go?"

"I'm not angry." Almost reluctantly, she admitted to herself that those words were partially true. This ordeal had been made bearable by Jake's presence. "I'm sure you think what you're doing is for the best."

"So I get the benefit of a doubt this time?"

"This time?" Rachel's head came up slowly. "I never doubted you."

"You're still doubtful." One hand pushed through his hair. "I can't blame you. I let you down once. It won't happen again."

"Are you talking about what happened twenty years ago? Don't you think it's a little late to ... ?" The look in Jake's eyes caused her to pause. In the silence of an awkward moment, she reassessed what she stood to lose. "If you're going to stay here, we have to lay down some ground rules. What happened twenty years ago is in the past, why don't we leave it there?"

"Maybe you can forget what happened, but I can't. My treatment of you was inexcusable."

She couldn't forget. It was foolish to suggest that she could. But neither could she let the past interfere with what was uppermost in her mind now, Clint's recovery. "You don't have to try to make up for some imagined wrong that happened twenty years ago."



"Imagined?" Jake vaulted to his feet. "My God, Rachel. I deserted you when you needed me most."

He would never know how much she had needed him. "It's ... I ... "

He waited, it seemed with bated breath, for her to say more. Compassion overrode her uncertainty. "I forgave you, Jake. Just as I hope you forgave me."

"What was there to forgive?" He sat back down.

"I ran away. I let you and Gran and Lola think I was dead. I'm not blameless." She had to stop this conversation. "Suppose we stop rehashing what happened and concentrate on helping Clint recover?"

Jake shrugged. "Maybe that's best, for now. Let's go. Clint should be awake by now. I want to meet him."

The words were out before she could stop them. "No. You can't." She met his gaze, and saw, in those ebony depths, uncertainty overlaid with pain. Guilt made her turn away. "Not until I can explain the situation to him."

Jake's eyes shrouded over, became unfathomable. "I'll give you a few minutes alone with him first."

"It may take more than a few minutes." Rachel knew her son. The little he knew about Jake, he didn't like. He would resent Jake's intrusion into their lives. "Clint can be as stubborn as a mule."

"Like his mother, huh?"

"No, Clint's exactly like his father." What had prompted her to say that? She turned to escape Jake's hard gaze. But she could feel his stare.

"Did you love his father?"

"With all my heart." It didn't matter, she told herself, that she had clothed a naked truth in the fabric of deceit.

"Let's go." A few quick strides took Jake across the room. He opened the door.

The hospital teemed with activity. "Sit here." Jake guided Rachel to a chair near the waiting room wall. "I'll find out where your son's room is."

Jake made inquiries at the desk, then motioned for Rachel to join him.

They were inside the elevator before Jake spoke. "Your son is on the third floor, room 319."

Dread knotted in Rachel's stomach. Clint would not be happy about Jake's coming here. As they walked down the hall, she pleaded, "Let me talk to Clint alone first, Jake."

"I'll wait outside." Jake leaned against the wall and inclined his head toward the closed door. "Clint's waiting for you."

"You can't stand out here." If he did, he would hear every word she said to Clint.

"There are chairs in the waiting room. I'll meet you there later." "This is better." Jake had no intention of moving.

Rachel did the only thing she could do, she pasted a smile on her face and stepped into Clint's room.

The suite was large and boasted a reclining chair, a small table and two other chairs. A television was suspended above the bed. A telephone sat on the table. Rachel gave a silent prayer of thanks that she could have Clint out of that noisy ward and in this comfortable room.

"Clint?"

He didn't turn, he couldn't. "Hi, Mom."

Rachel sat on the chair beside the bed, and leaning over, kissed Clint's cheek. "How are you feeling, darling?" That terrible bruise on his face tore at Rachel's heart. His leg swinging in traction above his bed caused her even more pain. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept all night." Clint made a wry face. "And if you think I look bad, you should see the bull."

"Don't joke about your accident. You could have been killed."

"You worry too much, Mom."

"Has your doctor been in?" Tears gathered in Rachel's eyes as she studied the complicated contraption that held Clint's leg suspended above his prone body. "Not today."

"Do you like the room?" She pulled her eyes from Clint and gazed around the spacious area.

"The room is very comfortable," Clint agreed on a sigh.

Rachel settled back in her chair and searched for a way to tell Clint about Jake. "If Gran hadn't left me a small fortune, you'd still be in that terrible place downstairs." Clint objected, "I shouldn't be the one to spend your inheritance. You should spend that money on yourself."

"That might be easier said than done. Gran has some stipulations about the money."

"Stipulations?" Clint tried to move his head and couldn't. "Did the old broad shaft you again?"

In a way that was exactly what her grandmother had done. "Gran designated an administrator of the estate she left me."

Clint cut his eyes in Rachel's direction, "What, exactly, does that mean?" "It means someone else controls the money."

After an echoing silence, Clint asked, "Yeah? Who?"

There was no easy way to break the news. "Jake Reardon."

"The sorry bastard who threw you out twenty years ago, then married your sister?" The muscle along Clint's bruised jaw tightened.

Rachel put a finger across her lips. "Shh. Clint, please, Jake's just outside the door. He can hear every word you say."

"He's here?" Clint's anger was instant and intense. "Why?" "He brought me here in his airplane yesterday."

She could see Clint's hackles rising. "If you needed help, you should have called Tom, not that bastard Reardon."

Rachel felt her own control slipping. "I didn't need help. I could have managed on my own." She bridled her tongue. What was wrong with her? She never quarreled with Clint. Rubbing her hand along his arm, she soothed, "Don't get upset. Jake showed up at the motel about the time the hospital called. All I could think of was getting to you. He offered to fly me here in his plane, and I let him."

"Get rid of him, Mom," Clint ordered. "I don't want him near you."

"Lower your voice. He'll hear you."

Clint's hair-trigger temper snapped. "Who gives a damn?"

Jake chose that precise moment to open the door and stride into the room. For the space of a short eternity, complete silence reigned as Jake sat in the chair beside Rachel

and pushed his hat back. "I give a damn. I'm your Uncle Jake, and you shouldn't swear at your mother."

It was as if a fiendish nightmare had become a brutal reality. Rachel could never remember feeling so helpless. "Jake wanted to meet you. Her hand tightened around Clint's arm. "Clint, please." She wanted to give her young son a good shake for not acknowledging Jake's introduction.

Clint was not about to be civil. "Get him out of here, Mom."

Rachel's finger dug into Clint's arm. "Don't be upset, darling. Jake and I have had a long talk. We have settled all our old differences." She thought that she might be struck dumb for telling such a flagrant lie, then dared repeat it. "Everything is settled."

Rachel was furious with Clint and even angrier with Jake. Who did he think he was, walking in and throwing his weight around like he had a right to be here? She tried to tamp down her rising anger. "Why don't you leave, Jake? I need to talk to my son alone."

Jake showed no signs of going anywhere. "I don't think that would be wise."

Clint pushed his fist into his pillow. "If I could get out of this bed, I'd throw you out, Reardon. I won't have you threatening my mother." Clint's possessiveness of Rachel was even more apparent than his instant antagonism toward Jake.

Rachel had expected some hostility to exist between Jake and Clint. But this animosity, this mutual loathing on sight, caused fear to knot around the anxiety that had settled, like a coiled rope, in the pit of her stomach. "Jake was just leaving." She impaled Jake on a slashing stare. "Weren't you Jake?"

Jake didn't move a muscle. "No, Rachel. We have to settle this here and now." "But Clint is ill, and he wants you to go."

Jake ignored Rachel's plea and spoke directly to Clint. "Your mother and I have come to an understanding. This is strictly business. I need to discuss some things with you. Are you up to talking now, or should I come back later?"

Clint's prone body stiffened. "Say what you have to say, then get out."

"Look, Son, I know this is difficult for you but ... "

Clint's hands tightened into fists. "Don't call me your son. I'm not. My father's name was Donovan MacCall."

Rachel bit her lip to keep from shouting at Clint and Jake to stop this dispute before it mushroomed into an all-out brawl. "Jake, please."

Jake answered Clint with an apology of sorts. "Rachel says you're very much like your father. I'm sure he was a fine man."

Somewhat appeased, Clint relented a little. "What do you want?"

"I want to help your mother get through this difficult time. As administrator of her estate, I am in an excellent position to do that. It will be a while before you will be on your feet again. She needs someone to lean on until then."

"That sounds very noble." Clint's words were weighted with sarcasm. "What's in it for you?"

A telltale tinge of color licked across Jake's cheekbones. "I was married to your mother's sister once. I consider Rachel a part of my family." "I don't like it ... " Clint began.

Rachel interrupted, "Please, Clint, for now, let it go." Clint nodded with grim reluctance. "For you, Mom. I'll let it go, for now." He tried to shift his position. "Call a nurse, Mom."

As Rachel reached for the buzzer, Clint said, "I believe you were leaving Reardon." "I'll wait outside."

"It will be a while," Clint said. "Mom and I have several things to discuss."

Rachel knew that tone of voice so well. Clint had a possessive streak a yard wide. He wanted Rachel's undivided attention. She could understand his need. He was in pain and more than a little angered by Jake's sudden appearance. "The nurse will be here soon, and I'm here for you now."

Clint smiled. "I'm glad you're here, Mom. What would I do without you?"

"Where else would I be?" Rachel dropped a kiss on Clint's bruised cheek. "I'll always be here for you."

## Chapter Seven

She could cope, Rachel told herself. The feeling lasted until she caught a glimpse of Jake sitting in a waiting room chair, scowling. "Clint's asleep. I slipped away." "Your son is one demanding young man."

"He's in pain and upset." Rachel defended her son, even though his behavior had been reprehensible. "Give him a little time to adjust. He'll come around." Jake raised one dark eyebrow. "Will he?"

Over the next three weeks, Rachel waited in vain for her prediction to come true. By the time Clint was ready to be discharged from the hospital, it was obvious that his dislike for Jake was as strong as it had been the day they met. "Why do you want to go back to your grandmother's farm to live?" He asked Rachel, when she told him of her plans that were really Jake's plans.

"Be reasonable, Clint," Rachel begged. "You know what Doctor Bishop said. You can never be a rodeo performer again and not just because of your accident. Face it, darling, you also have a genetic disorder."

When Doctor Bishop first told Rachel that her son had a genetic disorder, she panicked. "Will he die? Will he be maimed or crippled for life?"

"It's a disorder, Mrs. MacCall, not a fatal malady." Doctor Bishop patted Rachel's arm and smiled his frosty smile. "It's a genetic anomaly that's more aggravating than fatal. The condition is characterized by tenderness at the base of the second metatarsal bone ... "

Confounded, Rachel interrupted, "I don't have a clue as to what you're talking about. What's a metatarsal bone?"

Doctor Bishop frowned at what he must consider Rachel's ignorance. "I am speaking of your son's toes."

Rachel breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Then this affliction is not fatal?"

"Definitely not, although it is, at times, painful. Callosities form between the second and third metatarsal, and there is hypertrophy of the second metatarsal due to a short first metatarsal. The condition, coupled with Clint's injury, makes it inadvisable for him to consider ever being a rodeo performer again."

In some strange way, Rachel welcomed the news of her son's condition. It meant she would never again have to live through the torture of knowing Clint was somewhere in a rodeo arena, climbing onto the back of a wild bull and trying to hang on for eight terrifying seconds. "Can this disorder be treated?"

Doctor Bishop pursed his lips. "It seldom requires treatment. If it does, it can be, and quite successfully. In extreme cases orthotic devices are recommended. I don't think that will be necessary in Clint's case."

"I don't want Clint to suffer, ever."

"Your son was suffering for some time before his accident. There is every possibility that his disorder contributed to his accident."

"He never mentioned any of this to me." How long, Rachel wondered, had her son been in physical pain and chosen to suffer in silence?

"Mom!" Clint's soft reprimand, intruded into Rachel's dismal thoughts. "Yes, what?"

"I asked a question. Why are you so set on moving to your grandmother's farm?" "It's not Gran's farm," Rachel reminded him, gently. "It's our farm." "I'm not a farmer, Mom, and neither are you."

"I know that. But you can't hope to perform on the rodeo circuit again." She added a silent, thank God. "You've always wanted go to college and study veterinary medicine, then start your own animal hospital. What better place to start a practice than on a farm? When you're out of school, you'll have a place to start your own business."

Clint was still looking skeptical. "It will be weeks, maybe months before I'm on my feet again, and even if I did decide to go to college, it would be years before I'd be ready to start my own practice."

Rachel didn't intend to listen to any objections. "The first thing you have to do is get well, then we can see about getting you enrolled in A and M."

"Meanwhile what happens to your farm?" Clint asked. "It takes hard work and knowledge to turn a farm into a horse ranch."

"The farm has a hired hand." Rachel turned her full attention to Clint and was rewarded with a dazzling smile.

"You were a million miles away," he chided.

"I was thinking about you and the farm."

Clint was temporarily placated. "Tell me about this hired hand."

"His name is Mike Goodman. He's worked for Gran for several years. He lives on the farm with his sister, Maddie. Mike manages the farm, and Maddie was Gran's housekeeper. Jake says they will be more than willing to stay on and help us out until you're fully recovered."

"So all you really know about this deal is what Reardon's told you?" "Well yes, but Jake says Mike Goodman ... "

"Mike Goodman?" Clint interrupted. "That name sounds familiar." His brow creased in thought. "Is your hired hand the Mike Goodman who was once a famous bronco rider?"

It was the first positive response Clint had shown since Rachel had told him of her plans to move to the farm. "Jake did mention that Mike was once a rodeo performer."

"A performer?" Clint was jubilant. "Mom, Mike Goodman was more than a performer." Clint's leg was no longer in traction, but a heavy cast made it impossible for him to move with any degree of speed. Using both hands, he heaved the cast from the bed to the floor. "Mike Goodman is the best all round cowboy who ever sat a horse."

"He can help you start that horse ranch you've always wanted." Rachel was elated by Clint's enthusiasm. "We should be at the farm by evening. You can meet Mike then."

Clint reached for his crutches. "This might not be such a bad idea after all." He managed to stand. "I can't believe we have a celebrity working for us."

Relief made Rachel's knees weak. "We can talk to Jake about buying a few horses."

"Ah, yes, the mighty Jake Reardon would have to approve, wouldn't he?" A belligerent scowl replaced Clint's smile. He began to hobble toward the door. "I'm going to the sun room. I don't want to be around when Jake shows up. I'm sick of having to look at him. Come with me, Mom. We can talk about our horse ranch."

"I think I should wait here for Jake." Rachel watched her son stumble across the room. "He'll be here soon." It was the wrong thing to say.

"Does he have to come here every day?"

"He's coming today to make arrangements for your release." The sight of Clint leaning on those crutches broke Rachel's heart.

Clint leaned his weight on one crutch and struck his forehead with his hand. "I forgot to tell you, Tom telephoned last night. He wants you to give him a call."

Rachel wasn't anxious to talk to Tom. She knew what he wanted to say. Tom thought Rachel's decision to move to Gran's farm was a mistake. She didn't want to tell him that she had no choice. "I'll call before we leave the hospital."

After Clint had hobbled from the room, Rachel packed his belongings in the bag she had brought with her, then sat on the side of the bed to wait for Jake.

"You look ready to go." Jake poked his head around the door. "Where's Clint?" "In the sun room. I'll get him."

Jake sat down beside her and laid his hand on her arm. "The doctor seems to think Clint's physical condition has improved. I wish I could say as much for his attitude."

"You talked to Doctor Bishop about Clint? You had no right to do that." Rachel's eyes traveled from Jake's hand to his face and back again. "And you're not exactly Mr. Sunshine yourself."

"I didn't pry. I saw Doctor Bishop in the corridor. He volunteered the information." Jake dropped his hand. "Sorry, Rachel, but that kid brings out the worst in me."

She wanted to tell him, he had the same effect on Clint. Instead she smoothed the side of the bed and said, "Clint recognized Mike Goodman's name. He's excited about getting to know him."

"That's a welcome change, Clint excited about something." Jake reached for Clint's bag. "Let's get out of here."

"Why don't you check Clint out of the hospital? I have to call Tom before we leave." Jake's face froze. "Why?"

"Why what?" Rachel was being deliberately obtuse, but she didn't care. She resented Jake's prying into her personal life.

Jake set Clint's bag on the bed. "So you want to play games? Why do you have to call Tom?"

"I don't *have* to call Tom; I want to call Tom. I promised I'd give him our mailing address."

Jake blew a blast of air out his mouth. "Call if you must, but don't linger. I want to leave as soon as possible. I'd like to be in Summerville by late afternoon and home before dark."

Rachel was set to argue, then another, more pressing thought moved in around her indignation. As she followed Jake down the hall, an old familiar pang of anxiety lodged in her stomach. Her return to Gran's farm was sure to stir gossip and speculation. Little communities had long memories.

The flight home seemed endless. Clint sat in morose silence. Jake, grim and foreboding, concentrated on piloting the plane. After several attempts at conversation, Rachel gave up, leaned back, closed her eyes, and fell asleep.

They were in Jake's car driving down a farm to market road before Clint broke his self-imposed silence. "When do we get to meet Mike Goodman?" Clint was stretched out on the back seat of the Lincoln sedan. "Will he be at the farm when we get there?"

"We aren't going to the farm." Jake eyed Clint in the rear view mirror. "Jake and Maddie are at Diamond X. That's where we're going now."

Rachel had thought they were going to the farm. She wanted to tell Jake that he had some nerve, but Clint was already upset. "You failed to mention that little fact to me." Some of her annoyance seeped into her voice.

"Did I?" Jake's voice was caustic.

"You know you did." Why had he let them believe they were going to the farm?

"I was remiss." Jake took his eyes from the road long enough to look at Rachel. "But you know now."

Rachel wondered how much longer she could stand the strain of being caught in the middle of this on-going quarrel between Jake and Clint. She looked over her shoulder.

"Darling, are you ready to meet Mike Goodman?"

For once, Clint was amenable. "I've wanted to meet him for a long time. He's one of my heroes."

Jake was pulling the car into the circular drive that stretched across the front of the long rambling ranch house. "Your hero is standing on the front porch."

As Jake stopped the car, a tall, handsome man stepped from the long verandah and hurried toward them. "Welcome home," he boomed in a voice that echoed across the flat countryside. Before the car had come to a complete halt, the man was opening Rachel's door. "You must be Mrs. MacCall. I'm Mike Goodman." As she stepped from the car, he grabbed her hand and shook it warmly.

"I'm happy to meet you."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Goodman." She dropped Mike's hand and reached to unlock Clint's door. "And so has my son."

Mike stooped to stare into the back seat. "I recognized your name, MacCall. I saw you ride in San Antonio a few months back. Let me tell you, I was impressed."

"You were?" Clint was scrambling to get his leg out of the car and onto the ground. "I saw you ride in Dallas almost ten years ago. My dad was a big fan of yours."

"You don't say?" Mike watched Clint struggle to rise on his crutches, but he made no offer to help.

"That's the day I decided I wanted to be a rodeo cowboy." By now Clint had both feet on the ground. "Dad told me you got your name in the record books that day for riding a horse that had never been ridden before."

Mike doffed his hat revealing a mop of startlingly red hair. "That critter's name was Sun Fish. Imagine you remembering that. You must have been just a little kid."

Clint's grin spread from ear to ear. "I was ten years old."

Mike reached around Clint and closed the car door. "Was your beautiful mother present to see that ride?"

What would, from anyone else, have seemed rude behavior, from this tall, craggy man, seemed perfectly acceptable. Rachel found herself laughing. "I wasn't there. I'm afraid I'm not much of a rodeo fan."

"If you had been there, I would remember." Mike grinned. "A face as pretty as yours would be hard to forget."

Jake came around the car. "Grab a bag, Mike, and stop the malarkey."



"Jake!" a voice called from the door. "You're home!" A tall woman with hair the color of a bright flame hurried down the verandah steps.

Recognition lit Jake's eyes. "Maddie, come on over and meet Rachel and Clint." Maddie came to stand on the other side of Jake, Her eyes shone as she smiled up at him. "It is so good to have you home again."

Jake returned her smile. "We got here as soon as we could."

Maddie surveyed Rachel. "So you are Mrs. Cassidy's long-lost granddaughter. She spoke of you often." Instinctively, the woman moved closer to Jake. "Mrs. Cassidy always said her stubborn granddaughter would come back someday."

"My grandmother told you that?" Surprise was causing Rachel to be less than discreet. "Why would she say such things to a stranger?"

Maddie's look moved from smug to indignant. "I took care of Mrs. Cassidy the last several years of her life. She didn't think of me as a stranger."

Quite unintentionally, she had offended Gran's housekeeper. Rachel tried to smile and found it difficult. "Jake said you lived on the farm with Gran."

Maddie shot Jake a questioning look. "My home is here, on Diamond X. My brother, my daughter, and I live in the foreman's quarters." She pointed to a neat house nestled in a clump of trees between the main house and the bunk house. "And Mrs. Cassidy's home was here, in the big house with Jake."

The look that passed between Maddie and Jake made Rachel wince. Jake patted Maddie's hand. "I moved Gran here so I could see after her."

"You said ... " Annoyance, like an itch, nagged at Rachel. "I thought ... "

Jake was looking as uncomfortable as Rachel felt. "Maddie is my housekeeper. Didn't I tell you?" His voice was affable, but his eyes flashed ebony fire.

He had told her no such thing, and he damn well knew it.

An emotion dangerously near fear brought a soft muffled sound to Rachel's throat. "I guess that's another one of those little things you forgot to mention."

Jake moved to Rachel's side and put his hand under her elbow. "Let's go inside." He began to guide her toward the house. Under his breath he whispered. "Relax, Rachel. This is a homecoming, not a wake." His grip on her elbow tightened as he helped her up the steps.

"Homecoming?" Rachel tried to pull away. "This is not my home. It never was." They were on the wide verandah before Rachel could manage to pull free of Jake's grasp.

"Jake?" A beautiful young woman wearing shorts and the skimpiest of halters came bounding through the screen door. "Mamma said that you'd be home today. I ran from the barn when I heard your car."

Jake smiled at the young woman and began to make introductions. "Amanda, this is Mrs. Cassidy's granddaughter, Mrs. MacCall." His smile vanished as he turned toward Rachel. "Amanda is Maddie's daughter."

"Hello, Amanda." Rachel extended her hand toward the smiling girl.

Amanda possessed a rare beauty. Her classic features gave her the look of a Greek goddess. Her honey colored hair was long and caught back with a bright ribbon. Her huge green eyes slanted upward at the corners. Those eyes slitted now as her smile died on her lips. "So you're Rachel. It's a shame you didn't make it back before Mrs. Cassidy died."

Maddie's voice sounded from behind Rachel. "Amanda, Mrs. MacCall is a guest here. Mind your manners."

"I'm sorry." Amanda apologized, reluctantly. "But Mrs. Cassidy did so want to see her granddaughter. She told me so, many times." Obviously, tact was not one of Amanda's strong points.

Rachel found herself in the uncomfortable position of being annoyed without any justifiable reason. "Excuse me. My son needs my help." She retraced her footsteps, off the verandah and toward her limping son, grappling, as she went, to control the resentment that rose like a gust of wind inside her.

She rushed to Clint's side. "Let me help you, darling."

Clint tore his eyes away from Amanda long enough to tell Rachel that he didn't need help.

Falling in step behind her son, Rachel let Mike accompany her up the steps. Holding onto Mike's arm, she walked past Jake, who was introducing Amanda to Clint and hurried into the house.

Once the group was inside the spacious living room, Maddie took over, acting every inch the hostess. "Dinner will be ready soon. Sit down, everyone, while I help Mrs. Jackson in the kitchen." She bustled away as Rachel was helping Clint settle into an over stuffed chair.

"What would you like to drink?" Mike asked. Rachel's puzzled stare caused him to add. "I just appointed myself bartender for the evening. Name your poison."

It would be difficult to tell whose home this was. "Tomato juice will be fine." Rachel sat on the arm of Clint's chair.

"Tomato juice? God, woman, you can't get high on tomato juice." Mike's eyes danced with amusement. His smile was like a child's, genuine and sincere. There was an air of good humor about him that appealed to Rachel's reticent nature. It was a case of opposites attracting, she decided.

Mike swung a towel across his arm. "Clint? Jake? But not you, Amanda. You're too young, unless you'll settle for tomato juice."

His eyes alight with interest, Clint asked, "How old are you, Amanda?"

The expression, the voice, the question itself, bent Rachel's mind toward a still green memory. "*How old are you, Rachel?*"

But Amanda's features revealed none of the startled surprise that had lit Rachel's face twenty years before. "I'm eighteen. Old enough to have a beer if I want one, and I do."

Rachel reached for the glass of tomato juice Mike offered. "Jake says that you worked for my Grandmother."

Mike spoke in an exaggerated southern accent. "Actually ma'am, I work for Jake. I'm his ranch foreman. I ran the farm too after Mrs. Cassidy couldn't manage alone." "But Jake said ... "

Mike sensed immediately that he had spoken too freely. "Diamond X and Mrs. Cassidy's farm have become pretty much one and the same over the past several years." Mike raised the glass in Jake's direction and grinned. "Here's to my boss, if he still is my boss." He leaned toward Rachel. "I think I just put my foot in it."

Rachel had to laugh. Mike's good-natured honesty was refreshing. "Maybe your boss is the one who put his foot in it. I think he deliberately misled me. I was under the impression you would be working for me."

"I sure wouldn't object to that." Behind the bar, Mike deftly mixed drinks. "Jake's a good enough boss, but he's no where near as pretty as you are."

Rachel's spontaneous laughter filled the room, as Clint interjected, "Spoken like a true cowboy."

"We can work something out." Rachel let her hand rest on Clint's arm. "After Clint's recovered, he plans to go away to college. But I think I can manage the farm with very little help."

Amanda lifted one pretty eyebrow. "Are you going to live in that old house?" She reached around Mike and captured a bottle of beer.

"We plan to move there as soon as possible." Rachel set her half empty glass down on the table beside her. "Why wouldn't we?"

Jake intervened with a decisive, "Go help your mother, Amanda."

Amanda was set to argue. One look at Jake's granite expression caused her to close her mouth and scoot for the kitchen.

This charade had gone far enough, Rachel decided. If Jake had not lied to her, he had certainly abused the truth. She stood and straightened her skirt. "You and I need to talk, Jake, in private."

Jake lifted a bored eyebrow. "Are you speaking to me?" A trace of insolence colored his voice.

As if she had been given a cue, Maddie appeared in the door way. "Dinner is ready, Jake."

"Please, Jake." Rachel wanted this matter settled--the sooner the better.

Jake took Rachel's arm. "First things first. Let's eat." Still holding onto Rachel, he guided her toward the dining room.

## Chapter Eight

Through dinner, Mike and Clint talked incessantly about rodeos and horse breeding, seemingly oblivious to the cloud of antagonism that hung like a menacing cloud, between Jake and Rachel.

Conversation moved to gossip about local events and people, then to politics. Time seemed to drag on endlessly.

Rachel was impatient for the meal to be over and angry with herself for being caught in this untenable situation. She looked across the table to see Mike staring at her, humor dancing in his eyes. When Rachel made a wry face, he smiled. He understands, she thought. That insight pleased her.

Pulling her mind back to the talk at hand, Rachel found herself listening to what was swiftly becoming a heated debate. Clint was disagreeing vehemently with Jake's opinion of farm subsidies. "Subsidizing is another way for the farmer to get his hand in the tax payer's hip pocket." Clint declared with youthful intensity.

"Kid, you don't know the first thing about subsidies or farming," Jake drawled.

"And you, old man, are an authority?" Clint shoved his chair back, and began the painful process of standing to his feet.

Across the table, Jake stood to his full height. "Damn right I am."

Rachel scrambled to her feet. "Jake, you promised me a private hearing. Could we talk now, please?"

"A hearing?" Amanda giggled. "What is this, some kind of trial?"

"Amanda," Maddie barked, "Go help Mrs. Jackson in the kitchen."

As Jake took Rachel's arm and led her from the dining room toward his office, he called over his shoulder, "Give Clint a hand if he needs help, Mike. Rachel and I will be busy for a while."

"Can't Mike help Mrs. Jackson and let Amanda take care of me?" Clint slid his crutches under his arms.

Jake stiffened, but Mike laughed. "Get your butt into the other room and your mind off my pretty little niece." He made no effort to help Clint move.

As Jake closed the door of his office, the last echoes of Clint's laughter at some ribald remark Mike had made, died away. "They seem to hit it off well." Jake pulled out a chair and indicated that Rachel should sit down. "You wanted to talk?"

Rachel perched on the edge of her chair. "I think you got me here under false pretenses."

Looking more than a little formidable, Jake sat down behind his desk. "Oh? How so?"

He knew how so, but if he wanted her to tell him, she would. "You led me to believe that Gran's farm was a viable, self supporting entity. I find now, much to my aggravation, that it's only an extension of Diamond X."

"Who told you that?" Jake tented his fingers, then studied them carefully.

"Mike did!" Rachel asserted, then recognizing the ambiguity of Mike's revelation, she realized she may have assumed too much. "Didn't he?"

"Mike is my foreman. When Gran was no longer able to run her farm, I moved her here, and Mike took over running the farm as well as Diamond X."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" Rachel felt the swift bite of sudden anger.

"I didn't see how it could possibly make any difference." Jake shrugged one shoulder and leaned back in his chair.

"It makes a great deal of difference to me." Puffing out her cheeks, Rachel expelled a long breath. "Is the farm house livable?"

After some deliberation, Jake answered, "Yes."

"I'm glad to hear that." Rachel breathed a little sigh of relief. Maybe things weren't as bad as she had first suspected.

"But you won't be moving there for a while." Bringing his feet up, Jake rested them on his desk. "You and Clint will stay here at Diamond X until Clint can take care of himself."

"You said the farm had a manager, and Gran's housekeeper would be glad to help me with Clint." Suppressed anger gave Rachel's words a cutting edge. There was no excuse for Jake's high-handed actions. His insolence was even more unbearable.

"It does and she will. Mike can run the farm and Maddie will be glad to help you with Clint." Jake stared over his tented fingers and into Rachel's angry face. "That's why you need to be here. Maddie has her own home and my house to oversee. We can hire more help, if necessary. But I want Maddie to be in charge of the entire operation."

"I don't want Maddie, or anyone else in charge of caring for my son."

"Be reasonable, Rachel." Jake swung one hand around in an impatient gesture. "You need help. You aren't up to managing on your own."

"That's not your decision to make."

Jake argued with silky ease, "Yes, it is, and I've made it."

For more reasons than she cared to name, Rachel couldn't stay in this house, with this man, under these impossible circumstances. She didn't even intend to try. "I can hire a housekeeper and a farm manager too, if it comes to that."

"Not without money."

Her defenses collapsed like a punctured balloon. She was outdone, and she knew it. But she was reluctant to admit defeat. "Couldn't Maddie go with us to the farm?" "That's not practical. Where would she live?"

"She could stay in the farmhouse with Clint and me."

"Three adults in a tiny two bedroom house?" Jake scoffed. "Come on, Rachel, be reasonable."

She had to admit it would be an uncomfortable arrangement at best. "Maddie could come home at night."

"You need someone at night more than you do in the daytime. The whole idea is absurd. Forget it. You and Clint are staying here until I'm sure you can manage by yourselves." Jake dropped his feet to the floor with a thud. "I think you understand what I'm telling you."

Rachel understood. She understood all too well. "You're threatening me again."

"I'm trying to take care of you. You can't help Clint up and down during the day and to the bathroom and back at night. He has months of the physical therapy ahead of him. You need help."

What he said was true, but Rachel was not about to admit it. "I can take care of myself and my son."

"I doubt that," Jake retorted. "You're not physically able to care for Clint. You're too thin now. I suspect you don't take very good care of yourself."

Rachel jumped to her feet. "Who are you, my doctor?"

"Right now, I feel more like your keeper." Jake's mouth thinned with displeasure. "Sit down and calm down."

Rachel sat back down. What else could she do? "Clint won't like this arrangement." Her chin jutted out in defiance. "He won't stay here."

"Clint does like this arrangement. He admires Mike, he's taken with Amanda, he likes Maddie, and he will learn to tolerate me."

"Why are you doing this?" Rachel detested the pleading note that crept into her voice. "And don't try to tell me I'm family. I'm not."

"Yes you are." Jake pushed his chair back. "Forget about trying to leave. You can't afford to make such a foolish move."

"Can't afford?" Rachel bolted to her feet. "Are you telling me if I don't stay here, you won't release any more of my money?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Rachel." Jake moved around his desk. "And I don't want to see that ornery son of yours suffer, either, although a little suffering might make him a better man."

He had hit on her most vulnerable spot. "Don't you dare demean Clint. He's been forced to grow up too fast, but he is a man! He's a good man!"

He was coming toward her. "He's a spoiled kid, and I suspect that's your fault. You pamper him like he was two years old."

Rachel took a step backward. Jake was backing her into a corner, literally and figuratively. "I love my son! He needs me now. I have to take care of him." She felt the wall against her back.

"And you need help." Jake pulled her into his arms. In a voice as soft as satin, he whispered, "Don't fight me, Rachel." Oh, so gently he brought his lips down to cover her mouth in a sweetly seductive kiss, his tongue forcing her mouth to open, his breath taking hers away.

She had forgotten how quickly he could sweep away all of her reserves and bring her to the brink of surrender. Her response was immediate and instinctive. She yielded to his touch without any semblance of a struggle, melting into his embrace like warm wax held to a flame, whispering his name against his demanding lips. "Jake, oh, Jake."

From across the room, an astonished voice sounded. "Excuse me, I ... " and died away on a gasp of startled surprise, " ... should have knocked."

Jake lifted his head and swallowed hard before turning to confront a very embarrassed Maddie. "What the hell do you want?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that ... " Maddie began to apologize profusely.

Too profusely, Rachel decided. Her intrusion was no accident. "It's all right." Jake released Rachel and stepped back.

How could she have let such a thing happen? Rachel raced for the door. "I have to see about Clint."

"I came in to tell you Clint was asking for you," Maddie explained, "and to show you

to your bedroom before I go home."

Rachel hurried past Maddie and sped to the living room. Behind her she could hear Jake's questioning tones mingle with Maddie's repentant ones.

Rachel's wrath gave way to grudging gratitude as she realized Maddie had done her a favor by bursting into Jake's office. She put her hands to her flushed face and shuddered. She was a far cry from the infatuated teenager Jake had seduced so many years ago, which made her even more a fool.

"Mom?" Clint was leaning against the far wall. "Will you give me a hand?"

Shame mixed with self reproach. Clint had needed her while she was foolishly responding to Jake's sexual assault. "Of course, darling." She hurried to his side. "Are you tired?"

Clint's mouth bent into a satisfied smile. "I asked Maddie to find you. I am, a little." "I'll help you into bed." Rachel slid her arm around Clint's waist and began to help him toward the door.

A frowning Maddie sped past them and hurried down the hall. "I'll show you to your rooms."

Rachel's room was comfortable and airy. The bed had been turned down and looked inviting. The strain of getting Clint settled for the night, and the emotional drain of her encounter with Jake were taking their toll. She was as tense as a bow string. With the thought that she needed to relax before she could fall asleep, she walked to the window and let her tired eyes wander across the darkened countryside.

The rolling landscape was bathed in the luster of a full moon. A sharp pang of remembrance triggered a touch of nostalgia and a nameless, lingering sadness. Rachel recalled, how long ago, as a child, she would steal out of the old farm house, to wander across the moon drenched countryside, thinking her own thoughts, dreaming her own dreams. That little girl had been lost forever in the fall of passing years. A bruise of sequestered sorrow mourned her passing.

"Get a grip on reality." Rachel gave herself a mental shake. But she couldn't resist the serenity of the beckoning night. Silently, swiftly, she stole from her room, down the hall and onto the path that led toward the barn.

The air was rich with the scent of honeysuckle and roses. Rachel closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the fragrant air. The warm night breezes blew across her face and ran teasing fingers through her hair. Finding a bench under a spreading oak, she sat down and lifted her face to stare into the bejeweled sky. "I had forgotten how beautiful a Texas moon can be."

"Looks like an oversized pearl," a deep voice from the darkness agreed.

Rachel's head jerked around to see Mike Goodman leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree. "Where did you come from?"

"From over there." He pointed toward the Foreman's house. "We were watching the moon."

"We?" Rachel questioned.

"Uncle Mike and Me." Amanda stepped from the shadows to stand beside her uncle. "Am I intruding?" Rachel asked. "I had no idea anyone was out here." "No. Not at all. Are you a moon watcher, Mrs. MacCall?" Amanda moved around Mike and came to sit on the other end of the bench. "I am."

Was this pretty young thing trying to make Rachel feel ancient? "Please call me Rachel."

Amanda looked doubtful. "I don't think Mamma would approve. She says I shouldn't call older people by their Christian names."

"Older people?" Rachel echoed.

Mike intervened. "In this case, Amanda, I think your mother would make an exception."

Amanda dimpled beautifully. "All right ... Are you a moon watcher, Rachel?" "Often in the city, the moon is conspicuous by its absence." Rachel lifted her face skyward. "It looks like a jewel hanging up there."

"Uncle Mike says it's made of green cheese." Amanda giggled.

"You're not a moon watcher, Mike?" Rachel asked, suppressing a smile at Amanda's words.

"Nope. That romantic stuff eludes me. I'm a cowboy, not a poet." His wide mouth turned up in a wicked smile. "And right now, I'm the luckiest cowboy in five counties." He dropped to the ground in front of the bench. "To be in the company of two beautiful females."

"You speak words befitting a poet, cowboy." Rachel teased.

She could see the humor shining in his eyes. Mike Goodman had an elusive charm she found both intriguing and disarming.

"Uncle Mike!" Amanda scolded her uncle with affection. "He's joking," she told Rachel with a flutter of her graceful hands. "Don't pay any attention to him."

Rachel wanted to pay attention. She found Mike Goodman fascinating and fun. "I think your uncle is charming."

Amanda slid down on the bench. "Don't encourage him, please. If you do, he'll keep it up as long as you're here."

"How long will you be here?" Mike pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Rachel shrugged. "Until Clint's recovered from his injury, and it's all right to ask."

Amanda was skeptical. "Mamma says it's never polite to ask personal questions." "My sister is a prude," Mike said with easy candor.

"And you are a terrible tease." Amanda scowled with affection at her uncle.

"Come off it, Amanda," Mike chided with good-natured frankness. "Don't get to be one of them." He pointed a finger toward the ranch house, at the same time nodding toward the foreman's bungalow. He was drawing a definite line of demarcation between himself and Rachel and the people inside those houses. Rachel found she rather liked the distinction.

Amanda showed her dimples. "Uncle Mike, you're hopeless."

Completely unabashed, Mike gave Rachel a broad, seditious wink. "Hell, I'm just honest. I prefer being honest and crude to being dishonest and a stuffed shirt."

Rachel surprised herself by returning Mike's wink and his smile. "There is much to be said for honesty, Amanda."

Mike rose to his feet. "You're a lady after my own heart. Shall we dance?" He put one hand on his belt buckle and held the other one out from him. "Let's do a slow two-step and then maybe a polka." He began to waltz around the yard.



Rachel was surprised at the way her inhibitions vanished when she was with Mike Goodman. "Without music?"

"After awhile, I don't think either of us would notice."

It had been years since a man had flirted this outrageously with Rachel, and she found she was pleased and flattered by the attention. "We might wake those stuffed shirts on either side of us."

Amanda giggled again. "Mamma wouldn't like that."

It was becoming apparent to Rachel that Maddie's wrath was a force to be reckoned with. She thought, in passing, that Clint would probably disapprove too. "Not here. Mike."

Mike sat back down, this time between Rachel and Amanda. "We could turn up the stereo, but I doubt if we could dance to Maddie's music." He made a wry face. "Who the hell is Bach? Do you know the man?"

Rachel smiled. "Not personally."

Mike stretched both his arms out across the back of the bench. "Squealing fiddles and steel guitars are my kind of music."

Amanda giggled. "And the louder, the better."

Ignoring Amanda's observation, Mike suggested, "We could play spin the bottle or post office."

Rachel suppressed a giggle of her own. "Spin the bottle and post office are kissing games. Mike, you're impossible!"

Amanda laughed out loud. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Solemnly, Mike declared, "I know the finer points of both games."

This time Rachel laughed, along with Amanda. She couldn't remember a time she had felt so relaxed and carefree.

Sobering suddenly, Mike jumped to his feet. "Hey I got a great idea. Let's go over to Kickers' Kountry Korner and dance all night. I'd be the envy of every cowboy in the joint if I came in with a beautiful woman on each arm."

Amanda's eyes rounded. "Mamma would kill me if I went there." "You don't have to tell her."

"Uncle Mike!" Amanda feigned outrage.

"Sorry," Mike answered. His smile said he wasn't, not one bit.

Rachel wondered if Mike Goodman knew the meaning of that word. "I have to take care of Clint. If he wakes during the night, I should be near."

"There are people all around here," Mike argued, then asked, "How about it, pretty lady? Do you want to go dancing with the best two-stepper in Texas?"

"No, thank you." But Rachel was tempted, so very tempted. "I have to listen for Clint."

Mike's face shaped into an artless smile. "Amanda would be glad to do that for you. Wouldn't you, Amanda?"

Almost too quickly, Amanda agreed. "I wouldn't mind at all."

"Would your mother object?" Rachel asked, uncertainty underscoring her words. "I'll just go inside and sit on the couch in the living room until you get back. I can watch the late night talk shows on TV."

"I'm not dressed ..." Rachel looked down at her worn denim skirt and cotton blouse.

"And you still look elegant." Mike pulled Rachel to her feet. "Let's go! The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be there."

Suddenly, impetuously, Rachel thought, why not? Amanda would listen for Clint. He would probably sleep all night, anyway. Over her shoulder, she called to Amanda, "Maybe you should call your mother and tell her where you are."

Amanda lifted her hand in a goodbye salute. "I'll do that." "We won't be home until morning," Mike called out, as he led Rachel down the path toward his pickup truck.

Chapter Nine

Kicker's Kountry Korner was a typical Texas night club, replete with flashing neon lights, a crowded bar and an overabundance of beer and cigarette smoke. The huge hardwood dance arena was filled to overflowing with couples moving across the floor to the blasting music of a raucous five piece band.

Mike Swaggered through the heavy front doors with Rachel hanging onto his arm. "This is one of my old hangouts." He pulled Rachel a little nearer. "Watch every cowboy in the joint wish he was me."

The candid compliment touched Rachel. She was beginning to realize how much she missed the honest appreciation of a virile male. "Are you trying to flatter me, Mike?"

"I'm telling you the truth." They stood for a moment, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the dim lights, then Mike began to lead Rachel across the room. "I'm the envy of every man in this place."

Mike waved to the group of men gathered at the bar. "All my friends are wondering how I got lucky enough to get a date with a lady like you." He led Rachel to a table near the crowded dance floor and helped her sit down. "I kind of wonder how I managed it myself."

Rachel knew she shouldn't attach too much importance to Mike's flattering words, but she was pleased. Over the loud mixture of sounds, she almost shouted her reply. "I'm sure you date pretty girls all the time."

For once Mike was serious. "You're not a pretty girl, Rachel. You're a beautiful woman."

"Aren't you afraid you'll turn my head?" Rachel sought safety in frivolity.

"Lord, I sure hope so." Mike rolled his eyes and raised his head as he pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'd like to dance," Rachel said. It had been years since she had, but she didn't tell him that.

Mike stood and extended his hand. "Then, shall we?"

Rachel slipped into his arms.

Mike pulled her very near and laid his face against the sheen of her hair. "They're playing our song."

"But we never ..." Rachel pulled back to look at him, then realizing he was joking, she relaxed in his arms. "So they are."

Mike was a superb dancer. Moving with the lithe grace of an athlete, he glided across the floor with effortless ease. Putting his mouth inches from Rachel's ear, he whispered, "You feel like a feather in my arms."

At first Rachel wasn't sure she could follow Mike's intricate steps. His beguiling words lifted her spirits and gave wings to her feet.

All too soon, the music stopped. "Do you come here often?" Rachel asked as Mike guided her through the crowd and back to their table.

Mike helped Rachel to her chair, sat next to her and reached for her hand. "Once or twice a week, unless I get lucky and have something more exciting to do."

Rachel wondered what could be more exciting than coming here. "Like what?"

"I can think of a few things that might be more exciting than dancing with you." Mike smiled. "Not many, but a few."

Rachel felt herself blushing. "Maybe you are a poet."

He laughed, a soft chuckle that made her heart beat a little faster. "You're blushing, that's sweet." The band began to play again, but Mike was content to sit beside Rachel, holding her hand and smiling.

I'm as bemused as a teenager on her first big date, Rachel thought as Mike's fingers curled around her wrist. She suddenly realized how dull and humdrum the past few years of her life had been. She stole a glance in Mike's direction. His frankly admiring stare sent her head down again and brought a renewed rush of color to her cheeks. "Could I have that drink now?"

Mike signaled for a waitress. "Name your poison."

Rachel was set to order a soft drink, when from nowhere, came the urge to be a little daring. "I'll have a beer."

Mike ordered two beers.

Rachel lost count of the dances they shared. She also lost track of exactly how many beers she consumed. After a fast-paced polka, as Mike guided her across the crowded floor, Rachel announced. "I want another beer."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea." Mike smiled ruefully. "I think maybe you've had one too many already."

The world had taken on a rosy glow. "Nonsense. I ... " Rachel's words died on her lips, silenced by the confusion that rose in her throat.

Seated at the small table, his jaw tense, his full mouth pulled into a grim line, was Jake Reardon.

If Jake's presence surprised Mike, he covered it well. "Hi, Boss, what brings you here?"

"Sit down, both of you." The words exploded from Jake's mouth like little bursts of gun fire.

"I would ask you to join us, but it seems you already have." Mike helped Rachel to her chair before signaling for a waitress. "We were about to have a drink. Would you care to join us?"

Rachel's beer-induced euphoria was bathed by a cold douse of fear. She could think of only one reason Jake would come here. Sobering instantly, she sat on the edge of her chair. "Is Clint all right?"

Jake's dark eyes raked over her solemn face. "Clint is fine."

"Did somebody die?" Mike asked, a serious note sounding through his bantering tone. "It has nothing to do with you, Mike." Jake scanned the crowded dance floor with condemning eyes. "This is not the place for it, and I have to talk to Rachel. I'm sure you won't mind if I take her home."

"Wait a minute." Rachel intervened, only to have Mike hold up his hand to silence her. "Let me handle this." Under Mike's facade of good humor, Rachel suspected there lurked a touch of anger. "Do you have some problem with me taking Rachel out?"

The drumming of his fingers on the table told of Jake's agitation. "Obviously, Rachel goes out with whom she pleases."

Mike took a long drink from the bottle of beer the waitress had placed in front of him, then set it down on the table. "Rachel came here at my invitation. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Don't go champing at the bit." Jake ran his finger around his shirt collar. "This is a family matter."

Mike's eyes held a militant gleam. "I don't think I get your drift."

"Rachel is my sister-in-law. Gran was my mother-in-law. I can't be any more specific than that, but believe me when I tell you this has nothing to do with you."

Mike leveled a questioning gaze in Rachel's direction. "Rachel?"

Rachel was completely mystified and more than a little on edge. "Maybe I should go with Jake. This must be important." She thought to herself that it had damn well *better*

be. Mike took another sip of beer. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"No." Rachel refused with a toss of her head. "But thanks, anyway."

Jake bared his teeth in a grimace as he turned toward Rachel. "Then it's settled. Let's

go. " She was not going to let him intimidate her. "I want to talk with Mike first." Rachel laced her fingers around Mike's wrist.

Mike pulled his hand away and began to clench and unclench his fists. "We need a little privacy, Boss, if you don't mind."

Rachel was cold sober now and becoming more puzzled by the minute. "Please go, Jake."

"I'm gone." Jake swung his leg over his chair. "My car is parked at the west end of the parking lot, beside a red pickup. Be there in five minutes."

A new fear had found its way into Rachel's confused mind. What if something had happened to Clint, and Jake wanted her out of here before he told her. "Goodbye, Jake."

Jake extended his arm toward Mike. "I'm sorry you got involved in this." He shook Mike's hand firmly. "I apologize for the intrusion." Kicking his chair back with his foot, he leveled a hard stare in Rachel's direction. "You have five minutes." Then spinning on his boot heel, he walked with quick strides across the crowded room and out the door.

Rachel's eyes followed Jake's retreating figure. "I'm sorry about this." She turned to face Mike. "I don't know what got into Jake to make him come charging in here this way."

Mike stared at the beer bottle he was turning in his hand. "It's called jealousy." He sipped from the bottle, then sat it on the table. "Why didn't you tell me there was something between you and Jake?"

"There's no 'something' between Jake and me," Rachel said through clenched teeth. "At least not the kind of something you're implying."

Smiling sardonically, Mike suggested, "Maybe you'd better tell him that. He's acting like a jealous lover."

Rachel's fear was giving way to exasperation. "Jake is my brother-in-law, or at least he used to be. He thinks of Clint and me as family. But that doesn't excuse the way he behaved here tonight. I don't know what to make of it."

Mike was studying Rachel with a puzzled expression. "You really are confused, aren't you?"

"Yes." She was more than confused; her mind was a tangled skein of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

"Well so am I. I never saw Jake act this way before. You're a little peeved, too, aren't you?"

"That I am." Rachel granted, as she stood to go. "I have a feeling Jake will be back if I don't show up outside soon."

Mike unfolded his body from his chair. "Good luck. I think you're going to need it. Thanks for a great evening."

Rachel hurried toward the door, looking straight ahead as she went. Once outside, she slowed her pace and walked toward Jake's car, struggling to control the anger that was expanding with every step she took. Jake had embarrassed her and made her feel like a slightly demented child.

The car door was ajar. Yanking it open, Rachel sat down. "I'm here," she said over the loud slam of the car door.

Jake turned the key in the ignition. "Fasten your seat belt." He was out of the parking lot and onto the dirt road before she could accomplish that small task.

Over the snap of her seat belt, Rachel sputtered, "How dare you follow me here." She underlined each word with sarcasm. "I've never been so embarrassed."

"You left me little choice. I find after twenty years you still have a tendency to run off with any man who asks you." He shot her a quick, sidelong glance. "Where is your sense of decency?"

"Decency?" Rachel echoed, then clamped her mouth shut.

Over his labored breathing, Jake exclaimed, "I want an explanation."

She owed Jake no explanation for anything she did, and Rachel told him so, in short unadorned phrases. She knew if she tried to justify her actions, she would explode with uncontrollable anger.

"Mike has a way with women," Jake said with a wave of one hand. "He seems to attract them like stale beer attracts flies. I don't think you are a match for him." Rachel gritted her teeth. "Stop it, Jake."

Jake was not about to do that. His words beat at her. "Mike is thirty-five years old, a little young, don't you think for a woman of your advanced years?" "Do you enjoy insulting me?"

Jake's tense fingers gripped the wheel. "If I seem a little upset tonight, I have reason, believe me."

Rachel stared out the window and watched the fence posts along the side of the road race past. "Clint and I will move to the farm tomorrow. We're disrupting your household completely."

"Are you trying to make me angry?" He shot her a hostile glance before pulling his eyes back to the road.

"You're already angry."

"But not without reason." Jake's hands clutched the steering wheel in a death grip. "What did you mean when you told Amanda you wouldn't be back until tomorrow? Did you plan to spend the night with that smooth talking cowboy?"

A jolt of humor nudged at Rachel's anger. "I wouldn't call Mike smooth talking, glib, maybe and persuasive, but definitely not smooth talking." Echoes of Mike's rough drawl still sounded in Rachel's ears, causing her to smile.

Jake slammed his foot into the brake, bringing the car to a sudden stop. Rachel lurched forward and grabbed the dash board.

In one swift movement he had unfastened his seat belt and was pulling Rachel toward him. "You, you ... tramp! How dare you sit there and smile about Mike's persuasive abilities?" His arms were bands of steel. Then his hold relaxed as he buried his face in the sheen of her hair. "Oh God! Rachel!"

How totally he could subdue her with a caress, a glance, a sigh. Any thought of protest was swept away by her own betraying senses. He smelled of leather and a spicy cologne. His touch sent sensations of pure of fire surging through her stomach and darting down into her loins. The taste of him was like manna from heaven, ambrosia from the gods.

Tilting her head back, he caught her mouth in a passionate probing kiss. His tongue found its way into her mouth and explored hollow places, leaving her yielding and breathless.

What a vast memory has love. After all these years, her body responded as if only yesterday they had made love in the sweet smelling hay. She melted into his embrace.

His breath became short and labored as the kiss moved from exploring to demanding. Grasping her hands, he held them against his chest. Slowly the kiss deepened, became possessive and passionate.

What had begun in anger slowly transmuted to sweet, seductive hunger. Rachel's arms stole around Jake's neck. Even as her body merged with his, a small part of her hated the woman who responded so completely to his sensuous embrace.

Suddenly, Jake thrust her from him. "You don't need persuading, you need controlling." Turning the key in the ignition, he pushed his foot into the accelerator. "You have a hell of a lot of explaining to do!"

Rachel rubbed her hands across her stomach. The seat belt had cut unmercifully into her middle. "I owe you no explanation! I owe you nothing at all, and I have nothing more to say to you."

"I have plenty to say to you!" In the dim dash lights of the car, his face was a grim mask.

Rachel's fingers traced across her still moist lips. "Like what?" She could have been a small child defying a stern parent.

"Like walking off and leaving Clint."

"Clint?" Rachel echoed in dismay. "Why this sudden interest in Clint? And I didn't leave him unattended. I asked Amanda to listen if he called."

"You left your son with a child you had only met today?"

"Amanda is not a child." Rachel protested. "She's eighteen years old. She said she'd look in on Clint every few hours. ..." Rachel's voice faded on the end of a disgruntled sigh. "You said yourself I babied him too much."

"That's beside the point." He dismissed her explanation with a wave of his hand. "Amanda is a kid. She shouldn't be expected to look after Clint for the entire night with you out of the house."

"Clint is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. You're talking like he was five years old."

Jake was past listening to anything she had to say. "Did it occur to you that your son might need you while you were out kicking up your heels with Mike Goodman?"

"Clint was not alone." Rachel argued. "Amanda was there and so were you."

"In all these years, you haven't changed, have you Rachel? You couldn't pass up the opportunity to cavort with an available male. Who was supposed to take care of Clint in the morning while you were waking up in Jake Goodman's arms?"

It was like opening a festering old wound. He was accusing her again, just as he had done twenty years ago and with even less proof of guilt. He hadn't believed she was innocent of wrong doing then, he certainly wouldn't believe it now. Weariness flattened Rachel's voice.

"I never should have come here. Clint and I will leave in the morning."

"You will leave if and when I say you can go," Jake informed her with harsh arrogance. "And in the future you will be more discreet. Furthermore, when Clint needs you, you will be there for him."

The severity of his words grated against her self control, causing her to cry out, "Clint is not your concern."

Jake's voice cut like a sharp knife. "You and I have a score to settle, Rachel. Your web of deception is coming undone."

A dread, long dormant and too fearful to give utterance, moved in around Rachel's racing heart. "You can keep Gran's money! I don't want it." She huddled in the far corner of her seat and folded her arms across her chest. "Clint and I are leaving tomorrow. You can have the farm, too. We're going back to Dallas."

"You're not going anywhere." A muscle along Jake's jaw line jerked erratically. "You almost got away with it, didn't you?"

Fear ached through Rachel like a throbbing wound. "I have no idea what you are trying to tell me." With cool, off-handed insolence, she inquired. "What have I done that is so terrible?"

"For starters, you imposed on Amanda. She is not in my employ. You shouldn't ask her to look after Clint."

Caustically, Rachel intoned, "How could I have been so remiss, so utterly thoughtless?"

"That's what I keep asking myself." Jake's voice softened. "Maybe it was because you were so fascinated with Mike."

There was an element of truth to that statement. Rachel had been dazzled by Mike's unaffected charm and rugged masculine charisma. "So I find Mike attractive. He asked me out, I went. That's not exactly a crime."

Disgust sounded in Jake's cool reply. "The message you left said you'd be out all night."

"We left no message." Indignation gave Rachel's words force.

"Amanda says otherwise."

"What, exactly, did Amanda tell you?" What gave him the right to cross-examine her in such a presumptuous fashion?

"Did Mike say you wouldn't be home until tomorrow?" Jake's knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel.



"You know how Mike is. That was a joke." Rachel wondered why she bothered trying to explain. "That was his way of saying we would be out late."

"Amanda seemed to think differently." The lights from a passing car played across Jake's grim face. "If a naive kid like Amanda saw the truth, what makes you think you can fool me?"

"You're already fooled if you think Amanda is a naive kid," Rachel snapped. "Amanda is a young woman and a very perceptive one."

"Do you believe that because you were a woman at eighteen, Amanda is too? She is not as discerning nor as experienced as you were at her age." Jake negotiated the turn that led from the road to the house.

"You should know, Jake. You taught me all I knew."

Pulling the car into the circular driveway, Jake hit the brakes with a fury that brought the car to a sudden stop. "You have a nasty mouth. Get into the house."

Rachel considered defying him. Second thoughts caused her to change her mind. "You'll feel better tomorrow, after you've slept on this and have time to think about how trivial the entire matter is."

Jake slammed the car door shut with his foot. "This is not a trivial matter. You and I are going to settle an old score, and it's about time!"

"You're going to wake everybody on the ranch." Rachel eased her door shut. "I'm not in the mood to discuss anything with you tonight."

Through clenched teeth, Jake advised, "Don't push your luck."

Chapter Ten

Rachel set her recalcitrant feet on the cobblestone walk and hurried toward the front door, with Jake following close on her heels.

Once inside, he eased the door shut, and locked it, then pointed toward the couch. "Sit down, Rachel." His voice was soft, too soft.

Rachel peered through the dimness toward the hall. "We can talk tomorrow after you've had some time to cool off." She began to walk away. Jake's voice cracked like a penny whip. "Sit down!"

Fear made her stop and turn. "I can listen standing."

Moving across the room with the grace and gait of an angry panther, Jake shouted, "Sit down, damn it!"

Rachel eased down onto the edge of the couch. Reason told her that she could brazen this through. Instinct argued for sudden flight. She folded her hands in her lap. "Go ahead, talk."

"You are the one who is going to do the talking." Emotion honed Jake's quiet voice to a sharp edge. What did he want from her, some belated admission of guilt? He should live so long.

"I don't know what you want me to say."

Jake slammed one fist into the palm of his other hand. "You can't think of one thing you should tell me?"

His rising anger was pushing her toward the edge. "I haven't done anything wrong!" He pulled her to her feet and fastened one hand on each shoulder. "Don't lie to me, Rachel. I'm already angry enough to do something I might live to regret!"

An ominous sensation settled in the pit of Rachel's stomach. "Why this sudden interest in my personal life? What I do with Mike is not your concern."

Through clenched teeth Jake hissed, "Anything you do is my concern!"

Anger, tinged with fear, gave Rachel's voice volume. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" She tried to pull away, only to feel his grip tighten. "I don't have to answer to you for anything I do."

"You couldn't be more mistaken!" He released her and strode across the room, swearing under his breath, short, crude imprecations that rent the tense air.

The beer she'd drunk had fogged her brain. Rachel shook her head then narrowed her eyes in Jake's direction. "What did you say?"

He swung to face her, his handsome features etched in bleakness. "I said, you'll be accountable to me from this moment on!"

Rachel took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice. "This is ridiculous. I don't have to take this kind of treatment from you. Just because you control my money doesn't mean you can run my life." Jake was stretching her harmless little escapade all out of shape. "This preposterous conversation is over. I'm going to bed."

"What's between us will never be over!" Jake made rapid strides across the carpet. It flashed through her mind, as she watched him bearing down on her, that his countenance could have altered the wind, or caused the sun to halt its ascent. "Why didn't you tell me

Clint was my son?" He stopped directly in front of her. "Answer me, Rachel. Why didn't you tell me?"

The room swayed, as she reeled under the impact of his words. "Have you lost your mind?" Rachel's knees gave way as she sank down on the couch.

Placing his hands under her armpits, Jake lifted her up and glared into her frightened eyes. "Answer my question!"

Panic robbed her of her breath. "No! No!" Blackness rose up and pulled her down into a sea of unconsciousness.

She surfaced slowly, rising from a murky pool of darkness. She lay on the couch with Jake kneeling beside her, wiping a damp cloth across her face. Her hoarse whisper echoed into the electric silence. "Where am I?"

Jake folded the cloth and laid it across her brow. "Snap out of it, Rachel." Pushing the cloth from her face, she sat up. "What happened?" "You fainted." "That's because you scared me out of my wits!" She ran a shaking hand across her damp face. "With your bullying and your wild accusations."

Jake jumped to a standing position. His cry was low and impassioned. "Why did you pass my son off as another man's child? Tell me Rachel, *why?*"

"Clint is not your son." Rachel tried to stand. She couldn't. "His father is Donovan MacCall."

"I *know* Clint is my son." Jake's quiet words fell like whiplashes across Rachel's startled mind.

"Don't jump to foolish conclusions. I ... " Rachel caught herself. She was treading a tight rope of deception. "Clint belongs to Don." Her safety lay now in stealth and cunning.

"Stop it, Rachel." Jake ran a trembling hand through his hair, as his eyes met hers in a look of abject misery. "After what happened tonight, I did something I should have done a long time ago. I went through the papers Gran left for you. I found a little dossier that had been put together several years ago by the first private detective that Gran hired to look for you." He shook his head in disgust. "Gran was no better than her granddaughter. She knew. All those long years she knew, and she never said a word."

The air hummed with tension. "Gran knew nothing about me, or Clint." Panic chilled the blood in Rachel's veins.

"Yes, she did. She knew that Clint was born a little more than seven months after you ran away. She knew you were carrying my child when you left here." A sudden gust of anger shook him. "And you knew it too."

Rachel was as rigid as a stretched spring. "Donovan MacCall *is* Clint's father."

Jake stepped back, as if he were offended by her nearness. "There was a copy of Clint's birth certificate in the dossier."

She had grown smug through the years, smug and careless. It was such an accessible document, a birth certificate. Why hadn't she done something to prevent it from being public property? "And that birth certificate says that Donovan MacCall is Clint's father. So, you see, There was really nothing to tell."

"Do you honestly think I believe that?" Jake prowled across the floor like some restless, caged animal.

It struck Rachel, like a hard fist to her mid-section, that this man could shatter her safe world and destroy her son. "Clint was a premature baby."

"And your premature baby weighed eight pounds and three ounces?" Jake's ebony eyes raked over her taut face "I had a right to know, Rachel, and so did Clint."

That thought sent a glacial shiver down Rachel's spine. "You aren't thinking of telling this drivel to Clint?" She was fighting for her very existence now and against an unrelenting opponent. "You wouldn't be that cruel."

"Cruel?" Jake's tortured breath rasped in his throat as his massive chest rose and fell in mighty heaves. "You talk to me about cruel? I've had a son for almost twenty years, and you never saw fit to tell me of his existence."

Rachel was grasping at straws, trying to say something, anything that would stop Jake's suspicions from blossoming into sure knowledge.

"How do you know Clint doesn't belong to John Holcomb?" She was tearing her own moral character apart, ripping her reputation, and her heart, to shreds, but if it would save Clint, that was of small consequence. "I was with John at the Longhorn Inn the night of the shooting and the fire."

"There was a time I might have believed that, but not anymore." With swift economy of movement, Jake crossed the floor and sat on the couch beside her. "God, what a fool I have been." He put his head in his hands. "Gran lied when she said you had gone to meet John for some lover's tryst."

Aching ambivalence tore the words from Rachel. "How can you be sure of that?" Jake's jaw clenched as his eyes narrowed. "Gran admitted the truth, shortly after Lola died."

Fear, like an uncoiling serpent, slithered up Rachel's spine. "What did Gran tell you?" "She admitted that Lola and John were lovers, and that you had gone to the Longhorn that night to deliver a message to John from Lola."

Remembering was a knife twisting in Rachel's heart. "How could you believe anything Gran said?" Reviving that memory was like walking barefoot over hot coals. "Maybe Gran told the truth the first time."

"Gran's lies were to protect Lola. She had no reason to tell anything but the truth after Lola was gone. Lola was sick, Rachel. Your sister had a perverse kink in her brain. Only someone with a twisted mentality could have concocted such a lie. Why?" he demanded on a tortured note, "did Gran go along with Lola's monstrous web of deceit?"

Rachel brushed away a tear with the back of her hand. "Don't you think I've asked myself that question at least a million times?" Only after her admission had escaped her trembling lips, did she realize that by acknowledging Gran's betrayal she had, in effect, admitted her own duplicity. She raised her tear stained face to look into Jake's cold eyes. "Can you understand now, why I felt so betrayed, so alone?"

"You dare me for sympathy?" Jake sucked in a deep breath of air, then let it out slowly. "Forget it, Rachel. What you've done to me is even more unforgivable than what Gran and Lola did to you."

"Jake, please ... " Rachel begged hoarsely, "Let the past go."

Jake held up one hand. "My son is not my past, he's my future. I'm beginning to understand why you refused to come back to Summerville. You were afraid someone would guess the truth."

"The truth is," Rachel carefully emphasized each word, "Donovan MacCall is legally Clint's father."

"I'm not talking legalities. I'm Clint's biological father. He is seed from my loins." Jake struck the arm of the couch with his fist. "I fathered him. There's no point in denying it, Rachel. I know it's true."

"You talk as if you had some irrefutable proof." Rachel's taunting tone belied the nervous tremor that ran through her body like an electric shock. Softly, Jake said, "I do."

"There is no way you can prove Clint belongs to you." She could hear the thunder of approaching doom

He smiled then, the saddest smile she had ever seen. "Why did you do it, Rachel? *Why?*"

Everything that Rachel had reckoned to be settled and sure, began to shake and tremble. "How did you find out?"

"By opening my eyes and seeing the obvious. Clint slipped and fell. Amanda was watching TV in the living room. She heard the noise and went to help him, but she couldn't get him to his feet, so she called me." Frowning, Jake added, "That's when I learned you had gone out with Mike."

Rachel nodded. "Go on."

"Clint seemed shaken by the fall, and more than a little embarrassed."

"I should have been here. I never should have left him. What happened then?"

"Clint didn't like appearing helpless in Amanda's eyes. He began to explain about his condition. If he was hoping to arouse Amanda's sympathy, he succeeded. He told her his genetic difficulty had been made worse by his accident. That was enough to get my attention."

"My poor baby," Rachel moaned. "He's so sensitive."

The look Jake sent her way said he doubted that. "The more he explained, the more I realized that Clint was describing the disorder that afflicted the Reardons for generations. I told Amanda to go to bed, and I helped Clint to his room." Jake ran his fingers through his hair again. Those fingers were shaking now. "Did you think you could hide this from me? That I would be too stupid to put two and two together and come up with four?"

She hadn't thought at all. She had never had the slightest inkling that Jake suffered a genetic anomaly of any kind. "So Clint has the same disease you have. That doesn't mean a thing."

"We're not talking about a disease. We're talking about a rare genetically transmitted syndrome." Jake charged fiercely, "There is a difference, a vast difference, in the two."

Rachel was caught in the tangled web of her own deceitful weaving. Silently, she warned herself, don't panic, not now. "Stranger things have happened than two people suffering from the same syndrome." She lifted her shoulders in a careless shrug. "That doesn't prove a thing."

"So you want to talk about proof?" Jake's face was white with fury. "Try this on for size. As I helped Clint into his bed, I noticed that his fourth and fifth toes were not only double jointed and webbed at the base, just like mine, but his feet were shaped exactly like mine too, right down to the high arch and broad heel."

Rachel tried to speak and found her voice had deserted her.

With a quick nod in her direction, Jake went on, "There hasn't been a Reardon male descendant in the last two hundred years who hasn't borne that genetic anomaly. I was looking at Clint's feet and seeing *my* feet. It was like being hit in the head with a sledge hammer! Then I began to look at his hands, his facial features, his hair! Except for the eyes, it was like looking at a younger replica of myself. I must have been blind not to have seen it before!" His voice dropped and quivered. "Why in the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I? It was over between us." Her tormented eyes locked into his. "You didn't want me. I had no reason to think you'd want the child I carried."

Jake swallowed, painfully. "All these years, I've had a child, a son, and I didn't even know he existed."

Rachel spread her hands in a helpless little gesture. "I did what I thought was best for Clint." Slowly her defiance was replaced by introspection. "And there was Don to consider." It was a poor defense for such an intolerable deception. Even in her own ears, her words rang like sounding brass.

"Donovan MacCall had no part in this."

"Yes, he did," Rachel argued. "Any man who is willing to accept another man's child as his own deserves some consideration."

"How could you?" Jake looked at her in utter disbelief. "I had a right to know."

"No." Rachel contended, "You didn't have that right. You were married to Lola. What was I supposed to do, show up on your door step with your bastard and say, 'This is your son, Jake'?"

"Lola would have hated that." Jake agreed after silent deliberation.

"You were married to my sister. I knew what you thought of me." Rachel dropped her eyes. "I did what I did to protect Clint."

Jake's anger seemed to float away as he took Rachel's trembling hand in his and rubbed his thumb across the slim fingers. "So you lived a lie for twenty years and forced others to do the same."

Loose thoughts rolled around in Rachel's head like beads from a broken string. "It wasn't like that. Don was Clint's father in all the ways that matter." She had to make Jake see what to her, was so apparent. "Don always thought of Clint as his own child and after awhile, so did I. Leave it alone, Jake. If Clint learns the truth now, it will destroy him."

"Do you think I can forget I have a son, that I missed all his growing up years?" How dangerous his voice sounded when it took on that silky, sonorous tone. "You gave what was mine to another man."

"Until you knew who he was, you didn't even like Clint."

She was facing a man bent on vengeance. He would be a formidable adversary, but Rachel would cross swords with the devil to protect her son. "And Clint isn't overly fond of you."

"That's an understatement. Clint hates my guts." Jake pulled her hand to his chest, as a reluctant smile curved his lips. "I understand now what makes him so stubborn and unyielding."

An involuntary shudder ran through Rachel's body. She tried to pull her hand away and found her wrist manacled by Jake's strong fingers. "Finding out the truth would destroy Clint. Promise me you won't tell him."

"No promises, Rachel, but maybe we can reach a compromise." Jake squeezed her hand ever so gently. "What assurance do I have that you won't turn tail and run again now that I know the truth?"

"I'll give you my word that I won't." She would pledge anything, do anything to protect her son.

Jake shook his head. "Not good enough."

"You control my money," Rachel reminded him.

"Earlier this evening, you gave all that money to me." Unconsciously, Jake's fingers stroked the pulse that beat at Rachel's wrist. "If it comes to a question of protecting Clint or having money, I have no doubt which you will choose."

"We seem to have reached an impasse." Rachel spoke with a confidence she didn't feel. Jake was in complete control of the situation, and they both knew it. Did he realize how vulnerable she was? "We'll just have to trust each other."

"Do you trust me, Rachel?" Jake leaned across the small space between them and brought his face very near hers. "Would you agree to stay here if I agreed not to tell Clint the truth?"

"Yes, I would." It was a lie, spoken the best of intentions, a mother's determination to protect her son.

"I wish I could believe that." Jake wagged his head from side to side. "But I can't." She couldn't let Jake see how frightened she was. Rachel stifled a yawn. "There seems to be no answer. I'm going to bed."

"There is one answer. I need some legal hold to keep you here. I want to get to know my son. You want to buy my silence. We can strike a bargain."

Rachel looked up with a gasp. "What kind of bargain?"

"Marry me." Jake's fingers caressed her hand. "And I'll keep my mouth shut about Clint being my son."

She gave him a frightened sidelong glance. "Clint would never agree to me marrying you."

"You don't need Clint's permission to marry me."

"I know that, but I never do anything to upset Clint."

"Which would upset him more, our marriage, or the truth?"

"You know the answer to that." Her words faded on the end of a sigh.

"You were attracted to me once, Rachel." Jake's index finger traced the outline of her trembling lips. "We could light that fire again."

What she had felt was more than attraction. She had loved him, totally, completely, irrevocably. Maybe she still did. "You mean a real marriage?" Memory quickened the ache inside her. "It's been twenty years since ... "

Jake's hands brushed through her hair. "I know you loved your husband, but that doesn't mean we can't have a reasonably compatible marriage."

"You want me to ... " Rachel choked on her own words. "Sleep with you?" She was bewildered by this strange turn of events.

Jake lifted a dark eyebrow. "I want us to be married in every sense of the word. I want more than a sleeping partner, I want you to be my wife, that includes a sexual relationship."

Rachel was too stunned to speak. Taking a deep breath, she prayed she wouldn't faint again.

"I know I can please you, physically. You're a passionate woman." Jake moved a little closer. "You shouldn't be without a man."

Rachel sat very still, her eyes wide with surprise. "I wouldn't have to marry to have a man."

"Are you offering me sex for silence?" One side of Jake's mouth turned up in an amused grin. "If you are, the answer is no."

"I'm not offering you anything!" The audacity of this man! "I can't think of marriage, or sex. My husband is ... "

"Dead." Jake completed the sentence for her. "I need some assurance that you won't run away again."

Rachel closed her eyes against the horror of Clint learning that Jake Reardon was his father. He must never know of the elaborate deception she and Don had perpetrated. If he ever learned that his mother had lied to him for all these years, there was every possibility that he would hate her. She couldn't let that happen! "You wouldn't tell him, would you?"

"I would if I had to." Jake brushed his lips across her mouth. "Don't fight me Rachel. This is the way it must be." She turned her face away. "I won't let you do this to me, or to Clint. I'll deny everything."

Jake sighed. "You'll lose in the end." He pulled her into his arms. "Do you want to lose everything, Rachel? Your son's love and respect, your peace of mind, what's left of your reputation?"

Fear coagulated in her throat. "You know I don't."

By sliding against her, Jake pinned Rachel between his body and the end of the couch. One of his arms reached around her shoulders, the other caught her chin and pulled her around to face him. "I'm not asking you to do something that would be distasteful to you. I can bring you intense physical pleasure. Remember how it was with us?"

She remembered. Loving Jake Reardon had been a brief and beautiful rhapsody. And she *had* loved him, as only a young innocent can, reckless of sorrow, sin, or scorn. Remembrance caused color to rise in her cheeks and sent a tingle of desire through her body. "I need some time to think about this."

"Of course, Darling." Jake yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "You have until tomorrow morning."



## Chapter Eleven

As she rested her weary head on her pillow, Rachel thought there would be no sleep for her this night. Her mind was a quagmire of turmoil, and her heart was heavy with sorrow. She had built her life on the shifting sands of deceit and now she was being swept away on the tidal wave of a truth that could be more devastating than the lie she had lived with for twenty years. That sweeping current from her past could inundate her future.

Even before she began the long, useless argument with herself, Rachel knew what her final decision would have to be. She couldn't bear the thought of Clint being enmeshed in the web of lies she had spun. If preventing that catastrophe meant marrying Jake Reardon, then marry him she must.

Why was that prospect so frightening? Once her fondest hope was to be Jake's wife. Reluctantly, she forced herself to face the cruel truth. In her youthful ignorance, she had believed, that with time Jake would return the intense love she felt for him. She was no longer eighteen-years-old and April innocent. She had reached the ripe September of her life and had neither the time nor the inclination to indulge in hopeless dreams. Her one, her only consideration must be her son. In that sparse and cautious moment she knew that she would do anything to spare him heartbreak, even enter into a loveless marriage.

If she was not the foolish girl she had been twenty years ago, it stood to reason that Jake had changed, too. With a rueful smile, Rachel admitted that in some very basic ways he hadn't changed at all. He was still totally ruthless and overly suspicious.

He was also, from all appearances, a staid, settled widower, unless ... A new and disturbing thought impinged. Was Maddie more to Jake than just his housekeeper? She had no reason to think so, other than Maddie's apparent resentment of both Rachel and Clint, but Rachel couldn't shake a feeling of nagging doubt. "Don't borrow trouble," She told herself.

Even as weariness overtook her, depression lingered like a hovering shadow in a far corner of her mind. Somewhere between trying to assure herself everything would be all right and the impulse to pull Clint out of bed and run, sleep caught up to her.

Rachel awoke with a start and a fright, knowing, even before realization of where she was dawned, that something was terribly amiss. Then the events of the night before began to play through her head like clips from a bad movie. She sat up on the edge of the bed and stared into space. Maybe, for once in her life, she should face the truth and deal with it. Some primitive instinct told her that would be a monumental mistake. Finding her clothes, Rachel began to dress.

She was greeted just outside her door by a smiling Jake. "I've been waiting for you." One look at the smug smile on his handsome face made her wonder what he was up to now. "I overslept. I was very tired."

Jake fell in step with her. "Soon, very soon, you will be falling asleep in my arms." He reached for her hand.

Her pulses raced as she pulled her arm to her side. "Stop it, Jake. Someone will see you."

"What would it matter?" Taking her arm, in open defiance of her request, Jake urged, "Come have breakfast. Afterward we can discuss the details of our ... coming merger." He was steering her toward the dining room.

Rachel's heart sank as she came through the door. Clint was seated at the table, his injured leg propped in a chair, a broad smile on his face. "Hi, Mom, I was wondering if you were going to sleep all morning."

From around the kitchen door, Amanda's head appeared. "I told you Uncle Mike said they were going to stay out all night." Her dimples creased her face, as she gave Clint a dazzling smile.

The smile had its desired effect. Bemused adoration lit Clint's eyes. "I can't imagine what he said to get my mom to go out with him."

Amanda set a platter of bacon and eggs in the middle of the table. "Uncle Mike can be very persuasive." She sat beside Clint. "Mrs. Jackson made breakfast."

"You look hung-over, Mom," Clint teased as Rachel sat down across from him. From the coffee bar, Jake asked, "Coffee, Rachel?"

Nodding a yes, Rachel asked Clint, "Did you sleep well? Jake said you had a fall."

"I also had a wonderful nurse. Amanda was looking after me." Clint helped himself to a generous serving of eggs and bacon. "But enough about me. Tell me about your wild night on the town."

"Don't tease me, Clint," Rachel scolded, "I'm in no mood for foolishness."

"What will Tom say when he finds out you're two timing him with some handsome cowboy?" Clint chuckled, as Jake put a cup of coffee in front of Rachel.

Rachel's cool tone was a warning. "I said stop teasing me." Jake was pulling a chair back from the table. His hand halted in mid air. "Tom?" His eyes narrowed.

Clint swallowed before saying, "You remember Tom Carter. He was Dad's business partner."

The word 'dad' brought a grimace to Jake's face. "I didn't know he and your mother were such good friends."

Rachel shot Clint a lethal look. "Tom has been very kind to me."

"That's because he's crazy about you," Clint said between bites. "He has been for years. Dad used to be jealous of him." His eyes cut in Amanda's direction. "I'm beginning to understand a lot more about jealousy."

Jake sat down beside Rachel. "Tell me about your father, Clint."

Absently, Clint answered, "Dad was a fine man." He was too absorbed with Amanda and her dimpled smile, to pay attention to Jake.

Jake wasn't going to shut up. "But you didn't understand him?"

"I guess Mom has been talking to you." Clint's brow creased in thought. "No kid understands his dad. The older I get, the more I know what a wonderful person he was."

In a desperate bid to change the subject, Rachel interrupted, "We have an appointment in San Antonio with the physical therapist, Clint. Maybe you should call and confirm the appointment." She gave Jake a narrow, angry look.

Not in the least intimidated, Jake continued. "You must look like your father, you don't resemble your mother, except for your eyes."

"I'm a throw back," Clint answered, apparently unable to understand Jake's sudden interest.

"What's a throw back?" Amanda asked.

Clint smiled in Amanda's direction. "I must look like some distant ancestor. I don't resemble my dad or my mom."

How long, at this rate, would it be before either Amanda or Clint recognized the startling resemblance between Clint and Jake? She had to put a stop to this absurd conversation.

Rachel stood and pushed her chair back. "Jake, is there some place we can talk?"

"Now?" Jake was watching Clint and Amanda with amused interest. "It's important." Rachel's toe tapped the floor.

Jake waved his hand in annoyance. "Can't it wait?"

Rachel reminded him, "We have business to discuss."

"Later." Jake promised.

"No, now," Rachel replied.

Jake set his cup down with a bang. "In my study."

"Excuse us," Rachel muttered. She scooted past Jake, complaining to herself as she went, "This nonsense has to stop."

Jake followed Rachel into his office and shut the door. He ambled across the room toward his desk, then slowly lowered himself into his chair. "This must be important." Leaning back, he narrowed his eyes in her direction. "Clint's right, you do look hungover."

She wasn't hung-over. She was scared and more than a little annoyed. Rachel took a deep breath and dropped into a chair. "What are you trying to do, Jake?"

He seemed genuinely surprised. "Me? Nothing, except be a good host." Lacing his fingers behind his head, he reminded her, "You said we had business to discuss?"

Once, long ago, Don had told Rachel of walking through a mine field in Vietnam, with the enemy in close pursuit. She was caught now in an emotionally explosive mine field. Trapped and defenseless, she didn't dare turn back, and she was afraid to move ahead. "You have no right to call attention to the close physical resemblance between you and Clint."

His smile was sardonic. "You want to talk about rights? What about my rights as a father?"

"You have no rights where Clint is concerned."

"Thanks to you, and the man who conspired with you to take my place. And what about Clint? Doesn't he have a right to know who his real father is?"

"You're a stranger to Clint, a stranger he doesn't like very well." Rachel swallowed a moment of panic. "What would it do to him if you decided to tell him now, after all these years, that you're his father?"

"He might see me in a different light." Jake answered with a calm assurance that made Rachel's blood boil.

"As if he could dislike you any more."

"He might begin to view you differently, too. Maybe he'd wonder why his mother had lied to him all this time."

"Surely, you aren't thinking of telling him. Rachel's eyes widened in distress. You promised ..."

Jake's frustration was almost visible. "It might be the best way, believe me."

Something inside Rachel snapped. Jake, of all people, was asking her to believe him. "Believe you?" Her voice rose in angry outrage, "Like you believed me when I tried to tell you what really happened at the Longhorn Inn?" Old, long dormant anguish was suddenly overwhelming her. "You would never have believed me if I had told you Clint belonged to you, that you were the only man he *could* belong to. I couldn't let my son grow up thinking he was a bastard. I had to protect him. If that causes you some pain now, think of what it must have cost me to live with that deception all these years."

The torment in Jake's eyes was very real. "Are you asking me for sympathy again? Sorry, Rachel, I can't feel anything but contempt along with a deep-seated sense of injustice for what you did, and I want my son near me."

"Under these circumstance, how long do you think it will be before Clint guesses the truth?" Realization cut, like an incision across her mind. "That's what you want, isn't it? You want enough time to win Clint over before you tell him who you are. I can't let you do that to my son."

Jake spoke as if he were correcting a wayward child. "He's *our* son, Rachel. I would never do anything to hurt him. But I have decided, after due consideration, that you will marry me and live here with the two of us until I can be reconciled with Clint, or I will go back into the dining room and tell him now, who I am, and what you did to him, and to

"

me.

Panic cracked Rachel's veneer of self control. "What I did to you? What about what you did to me?"

"That too, if you want to drag out all the sordid details of our little affair." Jake's mouth twisted. "Do you want your son to know how it was with us?" Shame caused her head to drop. "No."

"Then marry me, and let me have some time with Clint."

"It wouldn't work, Jake. What kind of marriage could we possibly have? We have nothing in common." She had to make him listen to reason. "I need a little more time." "More time?" Jake spoke the words slowly, scornfully. "You've had twenty years. Time has run out."

Self preservation warred with impotent anger. Some sixth sense, an instinct born of being a parent, told Rachel it would be futile to openly defy Jake where his son was concerned. "We need to talk about this. It's not like you to make hasty decisions."

"You're stalling Rachel." Jake's mouth shaped into a sneer. "I have other commitments." Rachel improvised a speedy excuse. "Tom Carter?" Jake asked.

That was best left unanswered. "Clint needs me now. He's going to be in therapy for a long time."

"And after that, you'll find another way to hold onto him. Rachel, let go. Clint's a man, it's time you started treating him like one."

Jake's arrogance coupled with his on-target criticism stripped Rachel of all the logical arguments she had been gathering to defend herself. Standing to her feet, she clenched her fists and holding her arms close to her sides, began to advance toward him. "Is that your plan? Do you think you can divide and conquer? I won't let you drive a wedge between me and my son. I won't!"

"You're paranoid where that boy is concerned." Jake rose to his feet. "Sit down, Rachel, and face reality. If you want to talk, we can talk about our approaching marriage."

Color flooded her face. She stopped her advance and stood perfectly still. "What if I refuse?"

Jake's voice was soft, almost pleading. "Are you ready to accept the consequences?" He raised one dark eyebrow and smiled at her. "Think of the fringe benefits. I know enough about you to know what a hungry, passionate little woman you are. I have an excellent memory."

Rachel gasped for breath and waited for her heart to stop racing out of control. After a few moments, she drew herself up to her full height. "So do I. I remember how you refused to trust me, how you rejected me, when I needed your trust and your understanding the most."

He reminded her, "You were the one who ran. You ran and took my child with you." Jake's fingers drummed restlessly on the desk. "I'm waiting for your answer."

"I am not going to marry you." Rachel's words rang with a note of finality. The tapping stopped. "I hope you don't live to regret that decision."

His taunt added fuel to her anger. "Clint will hate you, too, Jake. I'll see to that." Jake shrugged. "He already does. What do I have to lose?"

With a sense of sinking finality, Rachel knew he had won, again. She dropped her head into her hands. "All right, damn it, I'll marry you." Tears blinded her eyes as she walked toward the door.

From behind, Jake's arm snaked out to catch and hold her. "Don't you want to seal our bargain?" His other hand gripped the door knob. "With a kiss?" His warm breath on her neck sent a shiver down her spine.

"Let me go, Jake." Tints and tones from the past splashed across her mind. "You had your way, what more do you want?"

"So much more than your verbal surrender." His husky whisper sounded in her ear. "So much more. I won't hurt you again, I promise."

She closed her eyes. "You will if you hurt Clint."

His searching mouth nuzzled along her neck. "I want you, Rachel. I always have. I always will."

Tingles of desire fanned out inside her, feelings she was sure she had slain and buried, along with a passion she had willed to die. Feeling weak and betrayed by those resurrected emotions, Rachel whispered, "Don't, please don't."

Oh so gently, Jake turned her to face him. "It's still there, isn't it? That old magic is still there." His hands caressed her arms, then moved to trace each side of her face and wipe the tears from her cheeks. Cupping her face with those same strong hands, he let his lips slide over her moist, slightly opened mouth in a slow, sweet kiss that was elegant torture.

She surrendered to the sensuous pleasure of his hands, his mouth. How easy it would be to succumb to his seductive love making. How sweet it was to be held in his warm embrace. And it had been so long, so very, very long.

He released her, as he pushed the door open. "Shall we make our announcement to Clint and Amanda now?"

Rachel backed through the door. Open defiance would be a mistake. Maybe Jake would listen to her pleading. "Wouldn't it be better to tell everyone at once?"

"You won't tell Clint until I can get everyone together?"

"No." She was so confused that she didn't know if she had given the correct answer or not.

Obviously, she had. Jake smiled. "Promise?"

"I promise." Rachel hurried for the safety of the dining room. She had to be alone with Clint for a while. She had to prepare him for the bombshell Jake seemed determined to drop. What would Clint say, she wondered, and what would he do when he learned she had agreed to marry Jake Reardon?

## Chapter Twelve

Rachel returned to the dining room to find Maddie sitting at the table, sipping coffee and talking with a tall gaunt middle-aged woman. She frowned when Rachel entered the room. "Mrs. MacCall, I don't believe you've met Mrs. Jackson, our cook."

Rachel acknowledged the introduction, not missing the possessive 'our' that defined whose cook Mrs. Jackson was. "How are you, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Fair to middling," was the brisk reply, "And I can see you don't remember me."

Rachel studied the woman's face. "No. I don't. Do I know you?" "We were in high school together. I was Reba Gentry then."

Rachel poured coffee into a cup, then sat down at the table. "Reba? Reba Gentry?"

Recognition lit her eyes, curved her mouth. "I do remember you. It's been a long time." "It sure has. You sure threw everybody in Summerville a curve, coming back here after all these years."

Rachel shrugged, feigning indifference. "I suppose so." She didn't want to discuss her return to Summerville with Reba Jackson, or Maddie for that matter. "Do you know where my son is?"

Maddie pointed toward the back door. "He and Amanda went to the barn."

Reba smoothed her graying hair, as she asked Maddie, "How many people will be here?"

"Quite a few. I'll have a list for you later today." Then addressing Rachel, Maddie asked, "Did you have breakfast?"

"Yes," Rachel lied.

"Mrs. Jackson and I were putting the final touches to the plans for Diamond X's annual barbecue." Maddie tore a sheet from the pad in front of her and handed it to Reba.

Reba put the paper in her apron pocket. "Why the big rush to have this wing-ding next week instead of next month?"

"Mr. Reardon decided late last night that he wanted to hold it early this year," Maddie explained.

Late last night? Those words struck like little arrows into Rachel's heart. Jake had been with her until almost midnight. Obviously, he had been with Maddie after he left Rachel. "Did Mr. Reardon say why?" Reba pushed her chair back. "It's not something I wish to discuss."

Maddie answered, icily. "But Mr. Reardon has his reasons."

Without another word, Reba began to walk away. Over the top of Maddie's head, she raised her eyebrows and winked, then went into the kitchen, shaking her head as she closed the door.

Maddie let her hands fall into her lap. "Jake says you and Clint won't be moving to your grandmother's farm after all." Glancing down at her hands, she turned them over and studied them carefully. "How much longer will you be here?"

This woman was stepping way out of line, asking Rachel such a question. "I'm not sure. Jake thinks we should stay until Clint has completed his physical therapy." Goaded by some malicious demon, she added, "That should take three, maybe four months."

Maddie's eyes clouded with animosity. "That's much longer than I had anticipated. This may require some changes in sleeping arrangements."

It took every ounce of Rachel's will power to keep from asking *whose* sleeping arrangements. "Different arrangements?" She tried to keep her voice light. "I don't understand."

"You and your son are occupying guest bedrooms. If Diamond X is to be your temporary residence, I can find suitable rooms on the second floor for you."

"Clint can't climb stairs with a cast on his leg." Rachel suppressed an ugly urge to remind this arrogant woman that she was the housekeeper here, nothing more. "And I want to be near my son in case he needs me at night."

"Clint seems so much better now." Maddie mused, "Do you think that's really necessary?" She dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. "I'll discuss it with Jake later."

Rachel could have handled an argument from Maddie, but a curt dismissal made her temper flare. "This isn't your decision to make. Call Jake. We can settle this now." She was making an enemy, but she was too angry to care. Nobody, but nobody, mistreated Clint, not while she had breath in her body.

"There's no need for that."

"Yes, there is. I want this settled here and now." Rachel had enough on her mind trying to make sure Jake didn't do something foolish, like tell Clint who his father was. She didn't intend to add to that awesome burden something as trivial as where she would sleep in this house. She demanded, "Call Jake."

"Mrs. MacCall - Rachel." Maddie met her insistent stare. "There is no need to involve Jake in a simple household decision. If you insist on sleeping downstairs, it can be arranged." Rachel could have said so many things, she decided that discretion was wiser than forcing a show down. Pushing her cup back, she asked, "Which way to the barn?"

Maddie inclined her head toward the kitchen. "Through there. Will you ask Mrs. Jackson to come in as you go out? Jake's decided to invite half the county to this barbecue."

Rachel pushed through the door and into the huge kitchen. She walked slowly, with her head down, trying to sort and organize the events of the morning into some coherent order. From a far corner in the room, an insistent voice called out, "Hello. Rachel, over here." Reba was leaning against the kitchen cabinet, holding a cup in one hand and a donut in the other. "Does Mrs. Duncan want me in the dining room?"

Rachel's head came up as her nose wrinkled in distaste. "I'm sorry. Who is Mrs. Duncan?"

"Mrs. Duncan, Maddie, does she want me now?" Reba rolled her eyes heavenward. "Don't let Maddie get to you."

"She is a little high-handed." Reba had been listening to every word Rachel and Maddie had spoken. "You would think Diamond X, and Jake, belonged to Maddie." Rachel pushed down the burst of resentment that flared inside her. "How long has Maddie been Jake's housekeeper?"

"About five years." Reba popped the half-eaten donut into her mouth and wiped her hand on her apron. "She came at first to help with Mrs. Cassidy."



Rachel thought that Reba would tell her much more with very little encouragement. She wasn't sure she was up to hearing what Reba might have to say. "It's nice to see to you again after all these years."

Reba set her cup on the cabinet. It's a nice surprise seeing you, too. "What made you decide to come back to Summerville after all this time?"

"I came to settle Gran's affairs." Rachel had no intention of publicly laundering her soiled family linen. "Clint's accident has detained me."

"Maybe we can talk sometime." Reba wasn't the least put off by Rachel's elusive tone. Suddenly, conversing with Reba seemed an excellent idea. "How long have you worked for Jake, Reba?"

"Ten years. Jake gave me a job when my first husband died." Reba's face creased into an artless smile. "I've married again, since then. I have five kids. Three girls by my first, and the two boys belong to Pete. You don't know Pete. He comes from over around Pleasanton way. I'd like you to meet him sometime."

"Soon," Rachel promised. "But now, I have to find my son. Which way to the barn?"

"Lord, Rachel, the barn hasn't moved. It's where it always was." Rachel nodded. "Thanks."

She wasn't sure what she was thanking Reba for. Reba called after her, "Anytime, Rachel.

See you around." Rachel walked the short distance to the barn, shading her eyes against the sun as she

struggled to make some order from her conversations with Maddie and Reba. As she rounded a bend in the well-worn path, she spied Clint and Amanda leaning against the top rail of the horse lot. Clint was holding Amanda's hand and speaking in low, intimate tones.

Rachel didn't like what she saw. She had to get Clint away from this place before he did something foolish. Already, he was too involved with Amanda.

"Mom?" Clint's call stopped Rachel's morbid thoughts.

"Hi, Mrs. ... Rachel." Amanda pulled her hand from Clint's grasp. "I was showing Clint my mare."

A slim legged quarter horse stood at the far edge of the lot. Amanda pointed. "Her name is Baby. Isn't she a beauty? Uncle Mike gave her to me for my birthday."

Baby was, indeed, a beautiful horse, also an expensive one. A chill settled into Rachel's bones. "She's a fine horse." She turned her attention to Clint. "You shouldn't walk around on that cast."

Clint looked down at the heavy mass of plaster that encased his leg. "I'm hoping this thing comes off today."

"Did you call about your appointment with the doctor?" Impatience gave Rachel's voice a definite snap.

"I didn't have to. Doctor Mangum's office called earlier." Clint reached for Amanda's hand again. "I told you, we had a lot in common."

Amanda's dimples flashed. "I can see that. Both of our fathers served in Vietnam, and both of our mothers are chronic worriers."

Clint held onto Amanda's hand. "Let's get out of this hot sun." He began to limp toward the house.

"What time is your appointment?" Rachel fell in step with Clint and Amanda.

"Eleven-thirty this morning," Clint answered, never taking his eyes off Amanda.

"I'll be ready," Rachel promised.

"You don't have to bother, Mom. Amanda's taking me. She has to go to San Antonio anyway. She has some errands to run for Jake."

Rachel stopped in her tracks. "Whose idea was this?"

"Jake suggested it." Clint stopped and leaned on his crutch. "He said since the errands had to be done, we could kill two birds with one stone."

"Jake is going to let us drive his pickup," Amanda volunteered.

"So you see, Mom," Clint went on, smoothly picking up the conversation where Amanda left off. "There won't be room for you and me and Amanda and my cast in the cab of a pickup."

Rachel recognized Jake's fine hand in this little scheme. He was deliberately throwing Clint and Amanda together, and at the same time, excluding Rachel. "I want to go along. I'll ask Jake if we can use his car."

"Jake is using his car today," Amanda told Rachel. "He's going to San Antonio, too."

For the hundredth time, Rachel repented of having come to Diamond X. "Then Jake can take the pick up and run his own errands. I want to be there when Clint sees the doctor and the therapist."

"Mom, let it be the way it is." Clint was reaching for the back door screen. "Amanda and I can manage without you." The words were spoken without malice, but they cut like a knife.

Pride mingled with hurt, causing Rachel to shrug. "If that's what you want."

Rachel spent the remainder of the morning in Jake's office writing a long letter to Tom. The letter omitted almost as much as it told. How could she properly detail to Tom the alarming events of the past few days? She decided she couldn't. She ended by promising to call him soon.

As she was addressing the envelope, the clock on the book case struck noon. A sudden weariness of spirit overtook Rachel. She rose to her feet with the thought that there was time for a brief rest before lunch.

Five minutes later she was standing in the kitchen door, hands on her hips, confronting Reba Jackson. "Where is Maddie?"

Reba looked up from peeling potatoes. "Maddie went with Jake to San Antonio." "My things are not in my bedroom." Rachel came into the kitchen and sat down at the long table in the center of the room. "Can you tell me why?"

"Would you like some lunch?" Reba wiped her hands down the sides of her apron. "I was going to have a sandwich."

"I would like to know why Maddie took my things from my bedroom." Rachel answered on a flare of righteous indignation.

"She didn't. I did. Your things are in the bedroom that adjoins Jake's bedroom." Rachel drew a quick breath of astonishment. "Then you can put them back. I prefer the bedroom I was in."

"No, Rachel, I can't." Reba didn't look up from her sandwich making. "I follow Jake's instructions. If Jake says for me to put your things in the bedroom next to his, that's what I

do. "

Reba came across the room, carrying a plate of sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea. "Eat some lunch, Jake and Maddie should be home in two or three hours. You can talk to him then."

What could Rachel say to that? Nothing, obviously. As Reba slid into a chair, she asked, "Will you show me the room?"

Reba's head snapped up. "You don't know where the room is?" Her voice rose in disbelief.

Rachel sank her teeth into a sandwich and chewed thoughtfully before she replied, "No. I don't."

"I guess you'd run away before Jake added the west wing. That's his private domain. Eat your lunch, then I'll show you the way."

Rachel found she was hungrier than she realized. She was finishing her sandwich and drinking the last of her iced tea before she asked Reba where in San Antonio Jake and Maddie had gone.

"They went to buy supplies and talk to the caterer." Reba wiped her mouth with her apron. "At least that's what Amanda told me. I try to stay out of Maddie's way, and Jake isn't long on answering questions."

"I think I'll go to my room now." Pushing her chair back, Rachel stood.

Reba rose slowly. "This way." She led Rachel through the big living room, then turned right and entered a long hall that led to a closed door.

Pushing the door open, Reba motioned for Rachel to follow her. Once inside the well-furnished sitting room, Reba swung her hand around in a grandiose gesture. "This is Jake's hideaway. How do you like it?"

"It's nice, but Jake should have consulted me before he moved me here. I'm not sure I like this arrangement."

"You don't like it?" Reba snorted. "I'd like to see Maddie's reaction when Jake tells her that he moved you in with him."

Rachel snapped, indignantly, "I have not moved in with Jake." "I'm not sure Maddie's going to believe that."

"Maddie doesn't know?" Rachel questioned on a quick intake of breath.

"Jake told me to move you here just before he and Maddie left for San Antonio." Reba laughed vengefully. "I'd like to see her face when she finds out you're in Jake's suite."

Rachel wondered if Jake had asked Reba to move her so Maddie wouldn't find out. That didn't make much sense unless Jake felt Maddie had some reason to object to such an arrangement. "Which room is mine?"

Reba nodded toward one of the doors that opened off the sitting room. "There."

Rachel opened the door with a gentle push. The room was large and tastefully furnished. The poster bed, the tall chest, the dresser, were simple in design and elegant in appearance.

Reba was beating a hasty retreat. "I have tons of work to do, getting ready for the barbecue. I put your things away for you."

Rachel's gaze followed the closing door. "Thank you." She didn't intend to stay here. She would inform Jake of that fact when he returned from San Antonio.

Sitting down on the wide bed, she looked around the luxuriously furnished room. A small desk stood in one corner and a chintz-covered chair in another. An ambiance of serene elegance permeated the atmosphere.

Rachel had kicked off her shoes and let her toes curl into the plush carpet, when a door at the far end of the room caught her attention. Wriggling her toes as she walked, she came across the room and nudged the door open. On the other side was a lavish bathroom, complete with a sunken marble bathtub and a separate dressing room. Here was elegance and luxury such as Rachel had never known. What, she wondered, lay beyond the door on the other side?

Her bare feet skipped over the cool tile floor as she hurried to find out. She edged the door open and stepped into another bedroom. It was a gracious chamber, subdued and somber, decorated in shades of browns and muted greens. A shirt lay on a chair near the door. Books were strewn on the bed. A desk stood in the corner. This was Jake's room.

Rachel came quietly inside, feeling like a voyeur, but too curious now to turn back. "So this is the master's inner sanctum."

She lifted the shirt to her face and rubbed it along her cheek. Jake's musky, masculine scent clung to the garment. Time fell away, as the odor inveigled her senses and seduced her back into a long-forgotten yesterday. For a few nostalgic moments Rachel allowed herself the luxury of remembering, then she draped the shirt over the chair and retraced her footsteps back to her room. Without even bothering to undress, she stretched out on the wide bed and closed her eyes.

A host of whispered suspicions began to chase themselves around in her head. She made a concentrated effort to collect her scattered thoughts. They slipped from her mind's grasp, like water through a sieve. Finally frustration and fatigue gave way to a troubled sleep.

## Chapter Thirteen

Shadows were lurking in the corners of the room when Rachel opened her eyes. She lay for several minutes, staring at the ceiling, trying to adjust to waking in a strange place. Then she stretched like a sensuous cat and pulled herself to a sitting position. From one dark corner, a voice sounded. "How do you feel?"

Rachel jumped as her head swiveled to stare into the semi-darkness. "Clint?" A tall figure was sprawled in the chintz chair in the corner. "No, it's Jake." Rachel's spine stiffened. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to open your eyes."

"Don't you have any concern for my privacy?" Rachel narrowed her eyes against the darkness. "You have no right to come barging in here."

Jake stood to his feet. "I was concerned about you. Reba said you'd been in your room since lunch time." He pointed to the table beside the bed. "I brought you a tray." "Clint?" Rachel questioned, "Where is Clint?"

"It's always Clint, isn't it? You can stop worrying. He's in the living room." Jake crossed the floor and flicked the switch on the wall, flooding the room with light. "He had his dinner, and he is watching television with Amanda."

"I want to see if he's all right." Rachel felt around on the floor for her shoes. "Did he see the doctor? What about that cast he's been dragging around?"

"The cast is gone. Clint is limping and still using one crutch." Jake relaxed once again, in the chintz chair. "Eat your dinner."

"Someone should have called me when Clint got home."

Jake's voice was gentle. "You were asleep. Clint wanted to wake you. I talked him out of it. You needed to rest, Rachel."

His kindness infuriated her. He was calling all the shots. He could afford to be magnanimous. "You should have let him wake me."

"Eat your dinner." Jake insisted.

Rachel put the tray over her lap. There was no point in evading the issue that was uppermost in her mind. "Why did you have Reba move me into this room? Was it to get me away from Clint?"

"You're smothering him." Jake stretched his long legs out in front of him.

"I resent your high-handed manipulating." Rachel took a tentative bite of the sandwich.

"I would have preferred a salad." She swallowed, then asked, "What if Clint needs me?"

"I need you, Rachel. You're going to be my wife. This is where you belong." There was a smugness in Jake's voice that made Rachel more than a little apprehensive.

Carefully, she laid her sandwich back on the plate. "You don't need me, You never did. You want to marry me because of Clint."

A shadow fell across Jake's clean shaven jaw. "That's a part of it. I won't deny that. I want my son near me."

"Is that why you keep throwing him and Amanda together? Is that just one more way to make him want to stay here?"

"I want Clint to know who I am, eventually. I realize that will take time, but I haven't tried to push Amanda on him. The truth is, he seems bent on pursuing Amanda."

Rachel didn't want to admit the truth of that statement, so she changed the subject. "Did Clint see the therapist?"

"Forget about Clint. We have other things to discuss."

"Yes, we do." With a sigh, Rachel set the tray on the table. "I would like to move back to the bedroom near Clint."

Jake's set face told Rachel that he was not going to give an inch. "This is where you belong."

The silky timber of his voice caused her to shudder. "Clint won't approve of me moving into your sleeping quarters. What will Maddie think? And there's Amanda to consider and Mike. What about Reba?"

"Clint will have to adjust. What I do within the confines of my own home is of no concern to Maddie or Amanda, or Mike for that matter; and Reba could care less. Eat your dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"Then drink your milk."

Frowning her disapproval, Rachel picked up the glass and sipped from its contents.

With the tread of a prowling panther, Jake came across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. He waited until Rachel had emptied her glass to ask, "Why do you keep fighting me?"

To escape his probing gaze, Rachel stared into her empty glass. "Why do you keep pushing me?"

Jake took the glass from her, set it on the tray, then held one of her hands in his. "It's the only way I can get close to you."

He was close, too close. His nearness frightened her, but not nearly so much as her own ambivalence. How could she wish him near, and at the same time want to push him away? An icy chill snaked down her backbone as she tried to pull her hand from his. "Jake, please."

"I won't hurt you again, Rachel. Will you let me hold you?"

She could feel strength emanating from his powerful body. He radiated a raw, dangerous, masculine allure that made her breath come in short, quick gasps. Her lashes swept across her flushed cheeks. "I can't." She tried, a second time to free her hand.

"Relax, Rachel. I won't do anything you don't want me to do." Pulling her hand to his chest, he tightened his grip. "I just want to be near you."

She fastened her eyes on the pulse that beat in steady rhythm at the base of his throat. How could she tell him how frightened she was? She doubted that he would believe her, even if she could bring herself to explain. "I can't."

"I can't accept that." There was disbelief in his voice and a residue of aggravation. Her fear was replaced with a barren pride. "It's Don. I can't help remembering." "Was he a good lover?" Jake asked, then looked away from her, apparently surprised at his own audacity.

"You don't understand." She couldn't answer that question, for reasons he must never know.

"I think I do." His eyes clashed with hers, two dark mirrors that reflected the pain in her heart.

She eased her conscience by telling herself she had not lied; she had only let Jake assume what he wished to assume. "It was different with Don. I can't talk about it."

Jake released her hand and bowed his head. "I don't think I'd want to hear it, even if you could."

Quite unintentionally, She had injured his male pride. "I was with Don a long time."  
"Were you happy with him?"

Rachel lifted her chin. "You once told me happiness comes and goes." The words stuck in her throat. "It's too soon."

Jake's lips twisted into a cynical smile. "Too soon? The man's been dead almost a year."

"I know that."

"I could help you forget."

She retreated behind a wall of silence. Some things were best left unsaid.

Softly, Jake asked, "Did he make you forget how it was with us?"

The truth was out before she had time to consider its consequences. "He could never do that."

"Then we can work it out." Reaching into his pocket, Jake took out a small velvet box. "I bought you an engagement ring." He opened the box to reveal a large, square cut diamond, resting in a setting of shimmering yellow gold.

"It's too late, too late ..." Those sad words that had chanted through Rachel's life like a broken refrain, hummed now across her penitent senses. "Engagement rings are for young brides."

Jake reached for her left hand. "Engagement rings are for all brides. Let's see if it fits."

Rachel blinked in astonished silence as Jake slid the ring on her finger. "I can't wear this!" She held her hand out and watched the many-faceted gem catch and reflect the light.

"Why not?"

"It's too expensive. It's inappropriate." Rachel stammered. "I don't mean the ring's inappropriate, I mean ... no one knows we're going to be ... married."

Jake laughed, seemingly delighted by her confusion. "They will, soon. The ring is for my protection and for yours. The world is full of Mike Goodmans. I don't want anyone else assuming you are available." He kissed her fingertips. "This ring says you're off limits to Mike Goodman, or any other man."

Rachel moved her finger around and studied the diamond, watching as it glistened and shimmered. It was beautiful. Sadly, she thought that she had never before owned an engagement ring. Then she slipped it from her hand and held it toward Jake. "For now, maybe you should hold on to this."

With a resigned sigh, Jake took the ring and returned it to its resting place inside the velvet box. "Maybe you're right." He dropped the box into his pocket. "The sooner we announce our coming marriage, the better, and until then, no more dates with Mike."

"Mike means nothing to me."

Jake grasped her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. "What about Tom Carter?"

"I don't want to discuss Tom."

Jake's voice was whisper-soft. "I think we should."

"He's just a friend."

Jake's tone was persistent. "Nothing more?"

"Nothing more," Rachel answered defiantly. "What is Maddie Duncan to you, Jake?" It pleased her to see she had surprised him. "Maddie is my housekeeper, that's all. And for the record, Maddie is a married woman."

"Oh?" Rachel looked about her. "I see no signs of a husband."

"He's away." Jake catapulted to his feet. "It's nothing for you to be concerned about." He began to back away.

"But I am concerned. I want an answer, Jake. Where is Maddie's husband?" "Suppose we drop the subject of Tom and Maddie?" Jake turned and began to walk toward the door.

"Is Maddie your mistress, Jake?"

Her words stopped him in his tracks. Stiff as a statue, he turned to study her face for several seconds. "What ever gave you such an absurd idea?" "She seems to run your household."

"That's a housekeeper's duty."

"Then why didn't you ask her to move my things into this bedroom instead of having Reba do it?"

"So that's it." Jake sighed. "You've been listening to Reba's prattle. Maddie said the two of you were once friends. What did she tell you?"

"Reba and I were acquaintances in high school, but she didn't tell me anything." Rachel was suddenly angry that Maddie and Jake had been discussing her. "Not that it's any of Maddie's business, or yours for that matter."

"Maddie wasn't prying. She made the comment in passing."

The gulf between them was more than just the space across a room. In so many ways Jake was a stranger, a man she hardly knew.

"I'll talk to Clint in the morning. Good night, Jake."

He took a tentative step toward her. "Kiss me good night, Rachel."

She sat very still, remembering how Maddie had said Jake had been with her after he had left Rachel the night before, wondering if he would go to Maddie again tonight. "We can't solve our differences by mere physical nearness. You should know that."

"It seems a good place to start." Jake began to retrace his steps, back across the room.

Rachel watched the changing expressions that flitted across his face and tried to fathom what his thoughts might be. "Grow up, Jake. Marriage is more than sex."

He was coming too near again, invading her space, playing havoc with her senses. "Maybe it's the glue that holds a marriage together." He eased down on the bed and gently drew her into his arms. "Why are you so frightened?" His lips brushed hers in a feather of a kiss. "I could almost believe you're a blushing virgin instead of a mature woman."

She was more than frightened; she was petrified. "We both know that isn't so." She willed her treacherous body not to respond. Despite her valiant effort, as her breasts touched his chest, they tightened and hardened. She tried to push him away.

Jake's seeking lips and roving fingers wouldn't be denied.

Slipping his hand beneath her blouse, he gently massaged her nipples through her bra.



Memories stalked through her mind like old ghosts. She recalled the tender strength of his hands, the searing fire of his mouth, the driving force of his raw passion. A fiery languor swept through her loins and thighs as flames erupted inside her brain. Lifting her face, she closed her eyes as his lips scorched a path from her ear to her collarbone.

Soft as satin, smooth as silk, his hands moved across her back, her shoulders, through the heavy fall of her hair. When his mouth touched her lips, they trembled under the impact, then parted, allowing his moist tongue to enter, probe and plunder. A quiver of raw emotion shivered through her.

It was back, and with more force than ever before, that shaking inside that she had always felt each time he touched her. Surrendering to the sweet pleasure of his assault, Rachel returned his caresses and kisses with reckless abandon.

Suddenly, abruptly, Jake broke the embrace, lifting his head and stiffening his arms into steel bands. His midnight eyes, now deep pools of ebony anguish, scanned her flushed face. "I didn't bring you here to seduce you. It's going to be right this time." He moved back and brushed her flushed cheek with his mouth. "Good night, Rachel."

Bewildered, Rachel sat for a long time after he had gone from the room, her hand rubbing the cheek he had kissed, as she tried to unravel her snarled senses. Jake had used his masculine charm and sexual magnetism to bring her to a fever pitch of desire, then he had calmly walked away. This was so unlike the passionate, impetuous Jake that she remembered from twenty years ago. Sighing, she decided she could add that to her long list of unanswered questions.

But she was very sure of one thing. Jake intended to keep Clint near him until he could find a way to reveal his true identity to his son. With a sinking sense of despair, Rachel admitted to herself, that for her, there was no easy way out. She was trapped. She had to protect Clint, if that meant marrying Jake Reardon, so be it.

Sleep was impossible now. A dozen new and perplexing questions found their way into her mind. So many loose ends plagued her, like why would Gran make Jake executor of her will? Why was Jake so insistent that Clint and Rachel return with him to Diamond X, even before he knew Clint was his son?

And where did Maddie fit into the scheme of things? Did Jake and Maddie share more than an employee-employer relationship? Reba had said that Maddie would be furious when she learned Jake had moved Rachel to the west wing. Was that because Maddie thought she had some prior claim on Jake?

Where could she turn for answers? Suddenly, she knew where. As painful as it would be, she had to read Gran's letter. A glance at the clock on her night stand told Rachel that Jake might still be awake. She would find him and ask him for the letter. Closing her door, she hurried down the hall toward the main part of the house.

She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but voices were coming from Jake's office. Rachel stopped and listened.

"Nonsense." Deep and sure, Jake sonorous tones drifted out into the hall. "Replace you? No one could replace you. Whatever gave you such a foolish idea?"

The answering voice was Maddie's. "You've brought another woman into your home. Maybe you don't want me here now."

Jake interrupted with a decisive, "I'll always want you here, if you want to stay under these changed conditions."

"Doesn't Rachel object?"

"Our arrangement has nothing to do with Rachel."

Jealousy, like a sluggish serpent, slowly uncurled inside Rachel. Before caution could dictate discretion, she raised her fist and rapped on the door, calling as she did so, "Jake? May I come in?"

After a dead silence, Jake called out, "Rachel?"

Her answer was to open the door. "Are you busy?" With counterfeit casualness, she stood waiting, in the doorway. "I can come back."

Jake's, "No, come in," and Maddie's, "Are you looking for Clint?" were simultaneous. "I want to talk to Jake first," Rachel explained, feeling foolish and small. "Then I'll go."

Maddie made no effort to move.

The couple had been standing near the window. Had they broken an embrace as Rachel had entered? She could read the surprise in Jake's eyes as she stepped into room. "I'll be with you soon."

"If you're busy, I can come back." Rachel was pleased that she sounded distant and cool.

"Don't go," Jake commanded. He waved toward a chair. "Maddie was just leaving." "I'll wait then." Rachel eased down into the chair.

Jake turned to Maddie. "Then everything is settled?"

"We can discuss it later." Maddie shot Rachel a lethal glance as she turned to go. "I'll take care of the details of the barbecue."

As Maddie swept past Rachel and out the door, Jake seemed to pull his mind from another place. "Rachel? You wanted to see me?" He closed the door and leaned against it.

Watching him, standing there, so confident, so appealing, Rachel thought there was no connection at all between common sense and passion. For all his deceit, she wanted him still. "I didn't intend to interrupt." A gust of latent anger shook her. "What was Maddie doing here at this hour of the night?"

"It wasn't anything important." A puzzled look bent Jake's high brow. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to bed."

Foolish tears filled Rachel's eyes. "I couldn't sleep."

"Are you worried about Clint?" He was coming toward her with his arms outstretched. "I'll look in on him later." Rachel stepped aside to avoid his coming embrace. "Why was she here at this hour of the night?"

"Do you mean Maddie?" Jake's arms dropped to his sides. "She called and wanted to talk. I invited her over."

Perhaps to lose was to learn. Rachel stepped around Jake and headed for the door.

"Maybe if you call her, she'll come back."

She slammed the door behind her and walked swiftly down the hall, half expecting Jake to follow her. He didn't.

It was not until she had taken a leisurely bath, slipped into a gown and stretched out on her bed that Rachel realized she had forgotten about Gran's letter and about looking in on Clint. Her preoccupation with Jake was taking over her life. He was an obsession that could become an addiction.

Her mind drifted back to the conversation she had overheard earlier. Jake and Maddie had been having a painfully personal discussion. Jake seemed genuinely upset. Apparently, Maddie was disturbed, and Jake was trying to reassure her.

Rachel's mind was a maze of confusion. She laid her head on her pillow and stared toward the now familiar ceiling. Tomorrow seemed soon enough to try to unravel the tangled threads of her life at Diamond X. Tomorrow she would read Gran's letter, have a talk with Clint, then find Reba and ask her a few pertinent questions.

Chapter Fourteen

Rachel awakened slowly and with the uneasy feeling that all was not well. Gradual awareness brought full knowledge of where she was, and with that, remembrance of yesterday's unsettling events. As her mind cleared, one thought took precedence over all others. She had to find Clint and talk to him.

A knock on her door caused Rachel to sit up and reach for her robe. "Come in."

The door swung open, and Reba entered carrying a breakfast tray. "Jake said I should bring you breakfast." Balancing the tray with experienced ease, she made her way across the room.

"I'm not an invalid." Rachel sat up in bed. "I can come to the dining room."

"Like I told you, I take orders from Jake. If he says, 'Take Rachel her breakfast,' I do just that." Reba sat the tray the table. "You know what I think, Rachel?"

"No." Rachel frowned. "You brought enough food for three people."

"Jake told me what to bring." Reba placed her hand on the small of her back. "I toted the thing all the way from the kitchen."

Rachel sipped from a cup of hot coffee. This was the opportunity she had been waiting for. "What do you think, Reba?"

"I think Jake wants to keep you and Maddie separated. Not that I blame him." Reba sank, uninvited, into the chair in the corner.

"Why would he want to do that?" Rachel spread marmalade on a slice of buttered toast and nibbled thoughtfully.

"Maddie's in a terrible temper this morning, and it's not all because of this rushed up barbecue."

"I can't imagine why Maddie would be upset." Rachel put her toast on her plate and stared at Reba.

"It's as plain as the nose on your face."

"Then why don't you explain it to me?"

Rachel suspected that Reba was more than willing to render a lengthy explanation if it would extend her stay in Rachel's room and let her enjoy a respite from her kitchen chores.

Reba crossed her legs and smoothed her apron. "Maddie wants you and your son gone from here and the sooner, the better. She thinks you're a threat to her place here." "And just what is Maddie's place here?"

"Well, that ain't easy to say ... "

Maddie's sudden appearance in the doorway caused Reba to shut her mouth and jump to her feet. "I have to get back to the kitchen."

A carefully controlled anger shot through Maddie's condescending words. "That would be an excellent idea. What are you doing here, anyway?"

Reba edged toward the door. "Jake sent me with Rachel's breakfast."

Maddie's face hardened. "That doesn't excuse your dilly-dallying around. Get back to the kitchen."

"And take the tray," Rachel said. "I'll come to the dining room for breakfast." Reba argued, "But Jake said ... "

Before Rachel could respond, Maddie snapped, "Don't argue with our guest, Reba. Take the tray and go."

Reba's smile was malicious. "Don't forget what I told you, Rachel, and if you want to talk some more, I'm in the kitchen."

As Reba disappeared down the hall, Maddie kicked the door shut with her foot. "I hope you will excuse Reba's juvenile behavior. Extra people in the house make extra work for her. Add to that the burden of the upcoming barbecue, and you can understand her bad temper."

Rachel chose to ignore Maddie's explanation. "I'm sure you will excuse me. I want to dress."

Heedless of Rachel's words, Maddie went on, "Jake should have fired her years ago, when she married again, but his sympathy for her overrode his better judgment." She leaned against the door, making no move to go.

Rachel didn't intend to discuss Reba with Maddie. "Have you seen Clint this morning?"

"He's having breakfast," Maddie said, then added, "Amanda says Clint will be under the care of the therapist for at least three months. Will you be at Diamond X all that time? I asked Clint and he says he isn't sure."

How dare Maddie Duncan question Clint about anything? Rachel clamped down on her temper. "I haven't talked to Clint since he saw the doctor."

"If you could let me know as soon as possible, I'd appreciate it." Maddie reached behind her for the door knob. "I'll go now. I must see to the plans for the barbecue."

As she dressed, Rachel began to grasp the magnitude of Maddie's seemingly simple request. Maddie would go to any lengths to get Rachel and Clint out of Jake's house. What would she do when she realized Rachel and Clint would be permanent residents at Diamond X? What would be her reaction if she ever learned Clint was Jake's son?

Rachel found Clint seated at the dining room table sipping coffee and talking to Amanda. He smiled when Rachel came into the room. "Hi, Mom."

Rachel wondered how she could ask Amanda to go away without seeming rude. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel great. I think these daily trips to the therapist will do me world of good." "Amanda's driving me to San Antonio this afternoon, for my first session. We should be back in time for the big barbecue Jake's throwing tonight."

"I'd like to go with you. And don't offer me some lame excuse, like you're going in Jake's pickup."

"But we are going in Jake's pickup." Amanda interjected. "Jake said we should go early and do some shopping. Clint needs new jeans. He cut a leg off all his old ones so he could wear them over his cast."

What could Rachel say? Nothing, obviously. Jake had out maneuvered her again. "You don't mind, do you, Mom?" Clint asked.

"No. I don't mind. I have work to do here. I want to look over the papers Gran left me." Excusing herself, Rachel turned to go.

"You didn't eat, Mom." Clint reminded her.

"I'm not hungry. Where's Jake? I want to talk with him." "He went to Summerville." Amanda volunteered.

"Do you know when he will be back?" Rachel's impatience sounded in her voice. She wanted those papers, and Jake was the only person who could give them to her.

"Jake got a call from David Patton." Amanda explained. "I took the message. Mr. Patton wanted to see Jake. He said it was urgent."

From behind Rachel, Maddie's voice sounded. "Amanda, honestly, you shouldn't discuss Jake's affairs with strangers."

"Jake said I should tell Rachel where he was, if she asked," Amanda answered defensively.

Rachel couldn't miss what Maddie was saying with her every word, her every gesture. She was telling Rachel that she and Clint didn't belong at Diamond X. They were strangers, outsiders.

That veiled message seemed to go unnoticed by Clint and Amanda. They were too engrossed in each other to pay attention to anything Maddie said.

With what had to be feigned concern, Maddie told Rachel. "Maybe I can help you. It's possible that Jake will be gone most of the day."

"No, thank you," Rachel said, pronouncing each word slowly and distinctly, "My business with Jake is personal."

With great dignity, Maddie replied, "Then you will excuse me. I have so many last minute details to take care of."

Rachel spent the rest of the day reading, wandering about the house, and visiting with Reba. She had the distinct feeling that Maddie was deliberately avoiding her.

Shadows were stretching across the long verandah when Jake came through the front door and greeted Rachel with a smile. "Where is Clint?"

Rachel looked up from the magazine she had been scanning. "Amanda drove him to San Antonio."

Jake shifted the package he carried under his arm to his hands. "I have something for you."

"For me?" Rachel laid the magazine aside.

"Is there an echo in here?" Jake pulled Rachel to her feet and began to guide her toward the west wing.

His happy mood was contagious. Rachel's spirits lifted. "What did you bring me?"

"Something almost as beautiful as you are." Jake answered with a smile. "Come on, let's see if it fits."

"Amanda told me you had gone to see David Patton." As they made their way down the long hall, Rachel felt her pulses quicken. "Your meeting must have gone well."

"That was over hours ago." Jake dismissed the meeting as if it was of no importance. "What I want to do now is concentrate on you and tonight."

Once inside Rachel's bedroom, Jake pushed her down on the bed, then laid the box beside her with a flourish. "Open it Rachel."

It was a moment such as she had not known in years, carefree and happy, yet crackling with excitement. With fingers that shook, she slipped the ties from the box and lifted the lid.

Her breath caught on a surprised gurgle, as she stared down at the contents. "It's lovely."

A dress of brushed blue denim lay nestled between sheets of white tissue paper. Lifting the elegant creation from its resting place, Rachel held it to her shoulders. The feel of the material, the simple but graceful cut told her it was a very expensive garment. "And it's my size. How did you know?"

"I told you, I have an excellent memory." Jake's face was wreathed in a tender smile. "Will you wear it tonight?"

Rachel laid the dress across her lap. "Why is tonight so important to you?"

Jake moved the box to one side and sat beside her. "I want tonight to be perfect." His voice faltered. "I want ... " On a quiver of emotion, he changed the subject. "Did you rest today?" Rachel began to fold the dress. "I'm not an invalid, Jake, and I'm not ill. There is no need to be so concerned about the state of my health."

"I want to take care of you, Rachel. Is that such a terrible thing?"

She was touched. "No." Lowering her head, she smiled up at him through her lashes. "But I could help Maddie and Reba with some of the household chores. Clint and I do create more work. Maddie said ... "

Jake's hand shot out. His fingers caught around her arm, biting into the soft flesh above her elbow. "You talked to Maddie? When?"

"She came to my room this morning."

Jake's fingers were steel bands. "She came here, to this room? What did she say to you?"

Rachel pulled away and rubbed where his fingers had grasped her arm. "Nothing important. She was looking for Reba."

Jake's scowl demanded further explanation. "What happened?"

"Reba brought me a breakfast tray. She sat down to talk, and before she could get three words out of her mouth, Maddie appeared and told Reba to go back to the kitchen." Jake was on his feet, looking down at Rachel with eyes as bright as polished ebony.

"And?"

"Reba argued, but she went. Then Maddie explained what she referred to as Reba's 'bad temper' by saying extra people in the house caused extra work, and she asked me how long Clint and I would be here."

Jake paced slowly across the room, then turned, "What did you tell her?"

"I told her I didn't know." Rachel shrugged one shoulder, trying to imply indifference and failing to do so.

Jake rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and stared at her without saying a word.

Rachel took advantage of that dead silence to ask, "What is Maddie to you, Jake?" He was wary as a cornered animal. "You know the answer to that. She's my housekeeper."

Every instinct she possessed told Rachel that she should let well enough alone, but she couldn't let go. "She seems to think differently."

"You have no reason to be jealous of Maddie." He took an uncertain step in her direction.

Rachel didn't want to admit it, even to herself, but that's what she was, jealous of Maddie. "I'm not." Even in her own ears, the words were empty and insincere.

"It's getting late." Jake sat back down beside Rachel and kissed her cheek, a soft feather of a kiss. "Get dressed. After tonight, everything will fall into place." He let his fingers trace the outline of her face. "We can work this out, we have to." He was staring at her with tenderness, or was it misgivings? "Will you trust me, Rachel? Can you bring yourself to do that? This time I won't fail you, or my son."

"How can I trust a man who threatens to do harm to my dearest possession?"

"That dearest possession being your son?" Jake shot to his feet. "There's no room for anyone else in your life, is there, Rachel? Your love for Clint is an obsession."

Only last night she had thought that her love for Jake was her obsession. "I'm his mother. I want to protect him." She was talking to Jake's back. He had turned and was walking slowly away. "Please don't destroy my son with the truth."

Without turning, Jake reminded her, "He's my son too. Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. Do you think I would deliberately cause him pain? I asked you to trust me, but it seems you're unable to do that."

Jake didn't wait for an answer. Opening the door, he slipped through and disappeared down the dark hallway.

As the door slammed behind him, Rachel sighed and dropped her head, Jake's words played through her mind like a broken record. *Will you trust me, Rachel? Will you trust me, Rachel?* How she longed to rest her faith in the haven of his beguiling words. She had trusted him once, and she had lived to rue the day. Her heart fluttered with misgivings. She could not tread that thin line again. There was too much at risk. She couldn't chance Clint being hurt by her folly. Her eyes filled with useless tears. Rachel dressed with great care. The dress fit snugly around her waist and flared becomingly around her slim hips.

The woman who looked back at Rachel from the bathroom mirror, appeared to be serene and quite lovely. That was not the way she felt. Inside she was a bundle of conflicting emotions with nerves stretched to the breaking point.

As she came down the hall, Rachel caught a glimpse of the crowd that was gathering on the lawn outside the house. Under her breath, she whispered, "I'm not ready for this." Side-stepping a passing delivery boy, Rachel detoured through the kitchen, dodging caterers who hurried back and forth with trays and boxes.

"Rachel?" Reba was leaning against the serving bar in the kitchen. "Hi."

"This is quite an undertaking." Rachel looked around at the busy preparations.

"It is," Reba agreed, "but I'm used to it by now. Jake throws this bash ever summer." She scanned Rachel's small figure. "Well aren't you a pretty thing? Where did you get that dress?"

"Do you like it?" Rachel turned around. Her long blonde hair, caught with a large clasp, swung when she whirled. "I feel like Cinderella going to the ball."

"Well, look out for the wicked stepsister. She don't intend to let you walk off with Prince Charming."

Rachel couldn't suppress a giggle. "I'm off to the ball."

She eased down the hall and slipped, she thought, unnoticed onto the flagstone patio. The evening air felt cool on her face. She sat in a lawn chair that was almost obscured by



tall shrubbery, but she could see the milling crowd from her hidden vantage point. Sighing, she leaned back in her chair.

## Chapter Fifteen

Through the crowd of moving people, Rachel spotted Jake with a drink in his hand, and Maddie standing beside him. They were chatting with a group of guests.

Then Maddie looked up at Jake with her heart in her eyes. It was only a glance, but it spoke volumes. No woman looked at a man like that unless she was in love with him.

On the heels of that revelation, came a shattering question. Were Jake and Maddie lovers? If that were the case, did Jake expect Rachel to shut her eyes to his other woman? Surely, he didn't entertain some idea of keeping a wife and a mistress on one ranch.

Maybe that was just what he planned to do. Jake's chief reason for marrying Rachel was to keep Clint near him. He seemed to think the sexual attraction that still flared between them was some kind of fringe benefit. But apparently it was not strong enough to make him want to give up his housekeeper-mistress. How quickly one insightful supposition could crush a budding hope.

Rachel thought back over the bleak, barren years of her life. Remembering brought a raw and primitive grief. Long ago a vicious lie had torn her world asunder. A new knowledge twisted and turned inside her. Now, a truth, long hidden, could do the same thing all over again.

"Drink?"

Rachel looked up to see Mike Goodman standing beside her, holding a glass in each hand. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," Mike apologized reflexively, then asked again, "Drink? It's whiskey and cola."

Rachel took one of the glasses and sipped from its contents. "I haven't seen you since the night we went dancing."

Mike sat on the edge of the chair next to Rachel. "I know when to dodge. I've been sleeping in the bunk house. That way I steer clear of my boss and my sister." He grinned that devilish little-boy grin. "I got on Jake's bad side and in Maddie's dog house, by asking you out."

Over the rim of her glass, Rachel studied his bemused face. "Jake was upset that night, but it had nothing to do with you. Maddie's anger should be directed toward me, also. I shouldn't have imposed on Amanda by asking her to look after Clint."

Mike let his eyes wander across the patio. "My sister is very straight-laced. She thought it was improper for a young woman to be in the house with two men and no chaperon." He took a deep swallow from his glass. "I hate to interrupt her good time now, but Wayne called and left a message."

"She does seem to be enjoying herself." Rachel sipped her drink to ease the pain in her throat.

"I'll catch her in a moment." Mike seemed reluctant to go. "Maybe I shouldn't tell her about Wayne's call until after the party. She seems to be having such a good time."

Curiosity overrode good manners. Rachel took a painful swallow of her drink. "Who is Wayne?"

"Maddie's husband." Mike studied Rachel's surprised face. "You don't know, do you?"

"What is there to know?" Rachel asked the question carefully, trying not to appear too interested.

"Wayne is Maddie's husband. He's in the state prison at Huntsville - has been for the past five years." Mike's voice deepened. "No one told you about Wayne?"

The whiskey warmed Rachel's stomach. "I'm afraid not." She watched as Jake followed by Maddie, walked toward the refreshment table. "Maybe someone should."

"There's not much to tell. Wayne's a bad one. Maddie married him when she was little more than a child. After Amanda was born, he joined the army. It was that, or go to jail. After he came back from Vietnam, he was in and out of jails and prisons for years. About five years ago, he killed a man with his bare hands. He's in prison for life now, but he's up for parole."

"You mean, he's ... " Rachel couldn't bring herself to say the word.

"A murderer?" Mike registered her surprised look with a quirk of his mouth. "Several times over. My sister hasn't had an easy time of it."

Pain pushed Rachel to her feet. "I feel the need to circulate. Would you like to come with me?"

"Thanks, but no thanks." Mike refused, politely.

Rachel hurried past Mike and began to wander through the crowd. She had circled the patio and turned toward the pool, when she heard Jake's voice calling her. "Rachel, there you are."

Rachel turned to see Jake standing behind her, motioning for her to come to him. "I was about to come looking for you."

Rachel didn't move. Caustically, she asked, "Were you?"

"Yes." Jake nodded to Maddie, who was behind the refreshment table, then began to walk toward Rachel. "Where have you been?"

Rachel's voice lost some of its bite. "Talking to Mike."

That struck a nerve. Jake put his arm around Rachel's waist. "I didn't know he was here." He began to lead her toward the refreshment table. "Maddie wants a word with you."

"Why?" Rachel's surprise was sincere.

They stopped beside the table. "Let her explain." Jake nodded in Maddie's direction.

Maddie's eyes sought Jake's face. A faint flush tinged her cheeks. "I feel you might have taken my remarks about you and Clint being guests at Diamond X the wrong way. You're welcome here, for as long as you care to stay."

Jake was responsible for this apology. Rachel realized what those words must have cost this proud woman. Sympathy suddenly prevailed over jealousy. "I know that. You have been most gracious."

Jake pulled Rachel a little nearer. "Maddie was worried that you might have misunderstood."

"I'm very conscientious." Maddie couldn't take her eyes off Jake's arm around Rachel's waist. "I'm afraid I let my zeal to do my job well make me seem rude and unfeeling. I hope you will forgive me."

Rachel was not fooled. All this contrition was for Jake's benefit. Pulling herself from Jake's embrace, Rachel fought to gain some control. "I owe you an apology too. I should

never have asked Amanda to stay at the ranch house and look after Clint without first having your consent."

Maddie's benign smile didn't quite disguise the reproach in her voice. "I'm sure you realize now that it was most inappropriate, but Jake was in the house so Amanda was safe."

Rachel felt like a child being reprimanded for misbehaving. She had tried to be charitable and been slapped down for her effort. "Excuse me, I have to find Clint." She hurried away before Jake could stop her.

Jake caught up to her as she stepped onto the patio. He grabbed her arm. "Why are you still upset? I thought Maddie's apology would put your mind at rest."

Rachel's eyes flashed blue fire, but her reply was calm. "I'm not upset. There was no need for an apology. I understand what Maddie is saying to me. Her message comes through loud and clear."

Jake caught her shoulders. "Please Rachel, don't make this anymore difficult than it already is."

"Difficult for whom?" Rachel asked, then added before Jake could reply, "Why don't Clint and I move over to the farm? That would solve this problem."

"Don't talk nonsense. There is no problem, not one that would be solved by your leaving. This is your home now." She felt his determination in his touch, saw it in the obstinate look on his face. "I plan to announce our approaching marriage tonight. After that, there will be no question that you belong on Diamond X and to me."

Dismay sent Rachel's senses reeling. "Are you out of your mind?" Her resolve to remain cool and detached melted in the heat of her confusion. "You promised me time. It's too soon to make that kind of announcement."

Jake began to walk across the patio, pulling Rachel along beside him. "People are staring, Rachel. So don't make a spectacle of yourself by arguing. We make the announcement tonight, and we will be married sometime early next week."

Rachel was shaking with anger. "This is definitely not the place to announce an engagement. What will your friends think?"

"They will be happy for me."

Rachel couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "And what about your other woman?"

Jake's arms tightened around her. "Are you referring to Maddie?"

She asked through clenched teeth, "Do you have more than one other woman?"

"Certainly not!"

Rachel glared at him. "I happen to think one other woman is one too many."

"Maddie is my housekeeper, Rachel, nothing more. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Rachel pulled herself free and strode rapidly away, making her escape as Jake was stopped by two elderly guests. Gradually, her anger subsided, leaving a sick feeling of despair and defeat. She spent the next hour circulating, dodging Jake and being careful to give Clint a wide berth too. She was in no mood to answer questions or offer explanations.

After awhile, Rachel slipped away from the crowd and wandered toward the back of the house. She needed some time alone. Stopping, she leaned against the side of a gazebo

and stared across the terraced lawn. Jake seemed determined to push her into a hasty marriage. Was he telling the truth? Was Maddie no more than Jake's housekeeper? They showed every appearance of being friends and maybe more. She had laid her dreams at Jake's feet once, and he had walked all over them. Did she dare trust him again?

Rachel climbed the three steps into the gazebo and sat on the floor. She laid her head on the bench and looked up into the star filled sky. Nothing was more beautiful than a Texas sky on a warm summer night. Stretching her legs out, she studied the Big Dipper, admiring the magnificent way it diagrammed itself along side a full, watery moon.

The faint voice of Maddie Duncan floated from the far side of the gazebo and into Rachel's listening ear. "I can't believe it. It's almost too much for me to grasp."

The masculine voice that answered was one that haunted Rachel's dreams at night. "Sometimes a moment's indiscretion can lead to a lifetime of regret."

Rachel's eyes dilated in fear as she realized that they were passing only inches from the gazebo. Pulling her head from the bench, she lay flat on the floor, fearful that even the slightest move would reveal her presence.

Maddie's voice dropped, became almost a whisper. "I should have guessed. God knows all the signs were there. In a way, maybe I did."

Jake's soft sigh was barely discernible. "Can you accept it, and deal with it." "I'm trying, but it's so difficult ... "

"The past does have a way of intruding into the present." The voices faded as the speakers walked farther and farther from the gazebo.

Rachel was comatose with pain. She lay there on the gazebo floor, as still as death, staring up at the heavens, as she forced herself to rehearse every word of the conversations she had heard. What was it that Maddie was having so much difficulty accepting? She decided it could only be one thing, Jake had told Maddie that he and Rachel were going to be married and why.

And Jake had called her an intrusion. But wasn't that what she was? An intrusion, a complication from his past that had come back to trouble his present and burden his future. She should never have come back to this place.

After what seemed hours, Rachel shook herself from her paralyzed state and slowly rose to her feet. After a few pathetic moments, she began to walk aimlessly toward the crowded lawn.

"You look like you just lost your last friend." Mike fell in step with Rachel. "Give this old cowboy a smile."

Rachel forced a smile. "You're still here?"

"I'm not sure I should be. I don't think my boss is over being mad at me yet, and my sister is unhappy with the message I brought her."

"Don't worry about Jake. He's too busy to notice you, or me."

Mike chuckled. "I saw him take off toward the gazebo with Maddie a while ago. Don't worry, They'll be back in time for Jake's annual welcoming speech."

Anger sharpened Rachel's reply. "I'm not worried. Jake and Maddie are not my concern."

"I guess Maddie needed someone to talk to." Mike extended his arm. "Forget about Jake and Maddie. Let's dance." He led Rachel toward the area of the patio that had been roped off for dancing.

The music changed suddenly, from a fast paced polka to a sad love song that moaned the ache of a broken heart and cursed the calamity of a cheating lover....

Mike pulled Rachel very near and laid his face against her hair. "Every time I think I have this situation all figured out, somebody throws me another curve. Can you tell me what's going on here?"

Rachel wondered what Mike would say if he knew the truth. "It doesn't concern you, Mike."

Mike molded Rachel's body to his as they swayed in perfect rhythm with the music. "So everybody keeps telling me. If that's the case, why do I keep getting the cold shoulder? First from Jake, then from Maddie and now you?"

Rachel's smile was tender. "You're imagining things." Impulsively, she brushed his cheek with her lips.

A cynical smile curved Mike's face. "If you say so." He pulled her even closer. Rachel laughed. "You're holding me too close." But she made no move to break his intimate embrace.

Her tacit surrender was all the encouragement Mike needed. He pulled her so near she could have been glued to his body. "Follow me."

Rachel concentrated on following Mike's complicated steps and discovered she was enjoying the challenge.

Then all too soon, the music stopped, and the dance was over.

Hand in hand Mike and Rachel walked to the edge of the dance arena.

From the little knot of people near the patio, Jake appeared, his handsome face set in a vicious expression. Nodding toward Mike, he took Rachel's arm. "Excuse us, Mike. Rachel and I have an announcement to make."

Rachel hung back. "Thank you, Mike, for a lovely dance." With a wave of his hand, Mike disappeared into the crowd.

Rachel quickened her pace to stay up with Jake. "We can't make an announcement. I haven't told Clint yet."

Jake smiled down into her face, but there was a steely glint in his dark of his eyes. "Stay away from Mike Goodman."

Rachel was appalled at Jake's possessive outburst. "I will not. I enjoy dancing with Mike."

Jake came to a sudden halt. "Don't argue, just do as I say."

"Maybe I should ask why."

"You are a mature woman and the mother of a grown son. A little discretion seems to be in order."

What was this? Jake talking to her about discretion? "Who are you to talk me about being discreet? You don't know the meaning of the word." She had lashed out at him in hurt and anger, He should have been angry with her in turn. Instead he was looking as if she had struck him a mortal blow. "Forgive me, Jake. I didn't mean that."

His hand tightened on her arm. "We are both acting like children. I'm sorry too, Rachel."

As they made their way to the bandstand, Rachel pleaded, "Don't do this Jake. Wait awhile, please."

Her plea was ignored. "Smile, Rachel, we're about to announce our approaching marriage."

Turning to the band leader, Jake instructed, "Give me a fanfare, gentlemen."

The drummer beat out a mighty roll. A hush fell over the milling crowd as over two hundred faces turned, with one accord, to look with expectation toward the tall man who raised one slender hand for silence.

Rachel searched that little mass of humanity, seeking her son's face. She finally spotted him standing beside Amanda near the far end of the gathering. Her heart did a little flip-flop before it sank to the pit of her stomach. Clint was her only child, her one delight, her single joy. What if, now, after all these years, she failed him? The thought sent her spirit plunging into the depths of despair.

Jake had taken the microphone from the band stand and was welcoming his guests in warm, friendly terms. He went on to extol the virtues of friendship and neighborliness. "This annual celebration began over twenty years ago. It was a way for my father to express his gratitude for the warm welcome he received into this community. Through the years it has become a tradition."

Rachel watched as the crowd hung onto Jake's every word. He was quite an orator, she thought, as she scanned the little sea of attentive faces.

Jake reached for Rachel's hand and pulled her nearer. "This particular celebration is more important to me than any of the others have ever been."

A ripple of surprise moved through the gathering. Murmurs of disquiet replaced sighs of satisfaction. Rachel watched as a kind of restlessness filtered into all those faces, as if what Jake was saying didn't agree with the speech they expected to hear.

Jake too, sensed the subtle change. He cleared his throat. "Some of you may remember Rachel MacCall. She was Rachel Cassidy when she left Summerville many years ago." His grip on Rachel's hand tightened, as rumbles of latent recognition rippled through the restless group before him.

Like a tiny bombshell, Jake's purpose for this little scenario burst through Rachel's shaken senses. He was daring these people, with his winning words and charming demeanor, to reject Rachel openly, because of her past. It was an act that was as foolish as it was noble. For the briefest moment, she wondered why Jake would put his reputation on the line for her. All too soon the answer became crystal clear. Jake intended that the community some day accept Clint as his son. He was paving the way for that eventuality by attempting to secure a cloak of respectability for his son's mother. As noble as the act was, it left her cold. He had made this magnanimous gesture because of love, but that love was for his son, not for his son's mother.

Jake went on to make the announcement of his coming marriage to Rachel to a stunned, disbelieving crowd. The proclamation was met with whispers and the sad shaking of many heads.

Later Rachel stood beside Jake and listened to stilted congratulations and awkward wishes for happiness from Jake's amazed neighbors and friends. The atmosphere was heavy with the strained conversation of people who were not sure how they should react.

The remainder of the evening passed in a haze of frustrated pain. It seemed hours before Rachel could excuse herself and leave.

Once inside the house, she leaned against the door to catch her breath, then raced down the hall toward Clint's room.

Clint had been nowhere in sight since shortly after Jake had dropped his little bombshell. Rachel wiped sweaty hands down the sides of her dress before she rapped softly on the closed door.

There was no answer. Rachel knocked again, this time a little louder. All she heard was silence. Pushing the door open, she looked inside. The room was empty, the bed neatly made. Wherever Clint was, he wasn't in his room.

Rachel decided it would be futile to try to find him tonight. She made her way to the west wing on weary feet that seemed reluctant to follow her command to move.



## Chapter Sixteen

Rachel undressed in the dark and slipped into bed. As weary as her body was, her mind refused to relax. Like badly written scenarios, the events of the evening kept chasing themselves around and around inside her head: Mike telling her about Maddie's husband, Jake's vehement denial that Maddie was his mistress, then his angry warning that she should 'Stay away from Mike', the cold reception she had received from Jake's friends, the bitter remembrance of Jake's intimate conversation with Maddie ...

Sleep was impossible. She sat up in bed. Why had she allowed this impossible situation to go so far? Suddenly, she felt an overwhelming urge to read Gran's letter. Pulling a robe over her gown, she padded on bare feet down the long hall toward Jake's office.

The old house groaned and creaked with eerie night sounds. Somewhere in the distance a coyote's call was answered by a barn owl's mournful hoot. The striking grandfather clock in the hall told her it was two a.m.

The thought impinged, as she reached Jake's office door, that it might be locked. Maybe she should rouse Jake. The fear that he might not be in his bed, or worse, that Maddie was there with him, chased that idea from her mind almost before it was conceived.

The office door yielded to her gentle touch. Rachel reached for the switch on the wall, flooding the small room with light. Her eyes traveled to a file cabinet that stood in the corner. "A good starting point," she told herself.

In the short space of ten minutes, Rachel discovered that everything inside the office was locked. All the file cabinet drawers, as well as every opening in the desk had been firmly secured. She sat in a straight backed chair and stared at the bookcase.

"What is this?" Rachel's line of vision took in the bottom shelf of books. Tucked away between a tome of Plato's dialogues and an unabridged dictionary was a - could it be? Yes, a slim volume of poetry.

Intrigued, Rachel sat cross-legged on the carpet and pulled the book from the shelf. The pages were worn and dog-eared. She used the marker to open the book. Someone had underlined in yellow highlighter, the words at the bottom of the page. Rachel read aloud:

"For just one kiss that your lips have given In  
that lost and beautiful past to me, I would  
gladly barter my hopes of Heaven And all the  
bliss of Eternity. For never a joy are the angels  
keeping, To lay at my feet in Paradise, Like  
that into your strong arms creeping, And  
looking into your love-lit eyes."

The beauty of the words brought a tightness to her chest and a sting of pain to her heart. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and read the last lines of the poem through a distorted rainbow of tears.

"To know for one hour you were mine completely-  
Mine in body and soul, my own I would bear unending  
tortures sweetly, With not a murmur and not a moan A  
lighter sin, or a lesser error Might change through hope  
or fear divine; But there is no fear, and hell has no  
terror, To change or alter a love like mine."

Rachel closed the book, and let the tears fall. In the quiet, lonely hours of early morning, the truth, at once exhilarating and oppressive, challenged her in all its complex intensity. She loved Jake Reardon, and a part of her longed desperately, to be his wife.

Wisdom told her that such a marriage would be bought with heartbreak and paid for in the coin of misery. Could she pay that price? Jake was a tough, cynical man. He held none of the romantic beliefs that Rachel now hugged to her breaking heart. Could she bear sharing him with another woman? Could she endure wanting him and loving him, all the while knowing that he had married her to secure his son? "I can't, I can't!"

"Rachel?" The deep voice was heavy with relief. "Here you are. I was beginning to think you'd run again." Jake stood in the doorway, dressed in pajamas and a robe. "I went to your bedroom when I discovered Clint was gone. What are you doing in here?"

Rachel brushed her hands across her eyes. "I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd read Gran's letter." After an awkward pause, she added. "I couldn't find it."

Jake reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet. "You're crying. Why?"

Rachel perched on the edge of the leather couch and closed her eyes. "I was thinking about Gran and Lola."

"You should be in bed." He sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Tonight was trying, I know. But you can trust me this time, Rachel."

Such sweet, seductive words. Oh, how she ached to believe them. "Don't make rash promises." Almost instinctively, she relaxed against the strong wall of his chest.

Jake's lips moved from her hair to her cheek as his arms slipped around her waist. "I know you've had a difficult time of it. But things will be different from now on." His arms tightened.

"I want to read Gran's letter. There are still so many unanswered questions." In the warmth of his embrace, Rachel felt her defenses slipping away. "I have never understood why Gran betrayed me. I thought she loved me."

"She did love you. She grieved for you. Your refusal to come home broke her heart. She blamed herself for everything that happened."

"Then why did she go along with Lola's lies?" Tears of remorse choked in Rachel's throat.

"How could she sew such seeds of destruction, then leave me to reap the whirlwind?"

Jake cradled Rachel in his arms. "Gran carried that secret to her grave."

Rachel knew she could not long bear the comfort of Jake's arms and not want more than just consolation. Slowly, carefully, she broke the embrace. "Then we'll never know." Resignation flattened her voice. "Some things are better left alone."

Jake dropped his hands in a helpless little gesture. "Since we can't change the past, why don't we concentrate on the future?"

Did he really believe they could have a future? Or was he trying to make the best of an impossible situation? "Maybe we should begin by discussing our engagement. You don't have to marry me to claim Clint as your son. It may take a while, but eventually he will accept you."

Jake leaned back against the leather cushions of the couch, his expression guarded. "Do you want Clint to accept me as his father?"

"I want what's best for Clint," she answered with convincing honesty.

"Do you think it's best if Clint knows I'm his father?" Jake's voice was easy, but an impassioned inquiry lurked in the darkness of his eyes. "He has that right and so do I." She hesitantly agreed. "Yes, I suppose you do."

"Do you want Clint to think, once he learns the truth, that he is the product of a brief, meaningless affair?"

Rachel's eyes clouded with pain, "It wasn't like that. I ... " She almost said, I loved you. That would be a foolish admission, even now. "I cared for you, deeply." "How are you going to prove that to our son?"

This was an eventuality Rachel had never considered. "I don't know."

"What better way than to marry me?"

"Do you think that's the best answer?"

"I think it's the only answer. Does being married to me seem repulsive to you?"

"No!" Rachel swallowed, then drew a deep breath. "That's not it ... "

"You want me Rachel," Jake argued, "and God knows I want you. Why are you so afraid?"

Dared she tell him the truth about her marriage to Donovan MacCall? No. She owed Don the silence she had promised him so long ago. Maybe Gran wasn't the only one who chose to carry some guilty secrets to her grave. "What makes you think I'm afraid?"

"You tense up every time I take you in my arms." One side of Jake's mouth turned up in a self-deprecating little half-smile. "If it's not fear, maybe it's revulsion."

A look of disbelief spread across Rachel's face. "You think I'm not attracted to you?"

She saw the skepticism in his eyes, heard the doubt in his voice. "Are you telling me you *are* attracted to me?"

"I've always been attracted to you." Rachel's fingers caressed the side of his face.

Jake moved slowly, as if any sudden movement might break the spell that was weaving between them. Pulling her closer, he whispered, "Do you know how desperately I want you? From the very first moment I saw you, I knew I had to have you." His lips were a sweet torment, teasing the hollow of her throat. "Don't be afraid of me, Rachel. Let go, love me."

His gentle touch, his seducing words, lit fires deep within her. Desire sprang, full blown into her loins and her throat. She wanted him, with a hunger born of years of

suppressed yearning and held in check too long. Sliding her arms around his neck, she surrendered to the sensuous warmth that invaded her body. "It's been so long, so long."

He covered her trembling mouth with a kiss that was as sweet as it was seducing. Closing her eyes, Rachel lost herself in his slow caresses, his whispered words of passion.

Pushing her down on the couch, he reached for the belt of her robe. "Rachel, My darling, my own little love." His mouth found hers again, in a long seductive kiss.

She ran her hands around his shoulders and down his back. "It's been so long, too long ... " Her hands felt for the belt of his robe. She pulled, hard.

He slipped her robe from her shoulders, revealing the throbbing whiteness of her throat, then pulled it away with one swift movement, exposing the soft fullness of her breasts.

She felt his hardness against her, promising fulfillment, rapture. Her hands ran with abandon, over the rippling muscles of his back and over his tight buttocks as she arched her body toward him.

He dropped his mouth to the tips of her breasts, tasting, sucking, first one, then the other. "You're as lovely as I remembered."

A voice, slurred and irregular, sounded from the door. "What the hell is going on here ... " Clint's question ended in a gasp as he staggered into the room. "What are you trying to do to my mother?" He swayed and reeled into a chair.

His harsh words pulled Rachel back from the erotic haze that had spun itself around her self control. She hastily pushed Jake from her. "Clint! Where have you been?" With shaking fingers she pulled her gown over her head and shoved her arms into her robe. "You're drunk."

"I'm celebrating my mother's big announcement." Clint's eyes narrowed as he tried to bring the scene before him into focus. "I asked a question, damn it. What's going on here?"

Jake sat up and tied his belt. "Your mother and I were discussing our coming marriage."

Clint wagged an unsteady finger in Jake's direction. "You were trying to rape my mother." He made a shaky attempt to stand to his feet, and when that wasn't possible, he shaped his hand into a fist. "I'm gonna beat the hell out of you ... " His words slurred into nothingness as he pitched forward on his face in a drunken stupor.

With a furtive glance in Rachel's direction, Jake rose from the couch. "It seems our son has tied one on. Let's get him to bed."

It was not an easy task, but together they managed to get Clint to his room. As Jake laid the dead weight of his son on the bed, he ordered, "Go no to bed, Rachel. I can handle this by myself now."

"But Jake--"

"Go, there's nothing you can do here now. He has to sleep this off. We can talk in the morning."

Slowly Rachel shut the door and walked down the hall, thinking as she went, that if Clint had not staggered into Jake's office when he did, she would have surrendered to Jake, completely, willingly, shamelessly. A belated sense of panic moved in. Her son had caught her naked and panting, making shameless love to a man he considered a

scoundrel. How could she bring herself to tell him that the man he held in such low esteem, was his father?

## Chapter Seventeen

Rachel threw her robe across the foot of the bed, stretched out and rested her head on her arms. She stared into the darkness and shivering, as she realized how near she had come to surrendering to Jake's passionate love making.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to recall, in intimate detail, the terrible heartbreak that had followed her ill-fated affair with him twenty years before. Hindsight and wisdom gained over the years told her that she should refuse to marry Jake. If her happiness and peace of mind were the only considerations, she would. Better a brief bitter wrench, followed by loneliness, than living with a man who showed no signs of being faithful to the marriage vows he insisted on taking with her.

But there was Clint, her son, the joy of her existence. The longer she stayed at Diamond X, the further she and Clint drifted apart. She had to talk to Clint. "Tomorrow," she promised herself. "Tomorrow I'll talk to Clint." Remembering why she had gone to Jake's office earlier, she tagged, "And then read Gran's letter." Her uneasiness hung on and followed her into a troubled sleep.

Rachel woke feeling as tired and frustrated as she was when she fell asleep four hours earlier. She dressed quickly, then hurried out the door and down the hall, hoping to find Jake before Clint put in an appearance.

Jake was sitting alone in the dining room, nursing a cup of coffee.

Without so much as a greeting, Rachel announced: "We should talk to Clint. We have to explain about ... " Her eyes darted around the room. "Is Clint still in bed?"

"Clint's in the living room, talking on the telephone." Cautiously, Jake questioned, "Talk to Clint about what?"

Rachel poured coffee into a cup. "About last night. What must he think of us?" She sat in the chair beside Jake.

"Good Lord, Rachel. The boy burst into my private office, dead drunk and threatening to beat me to a pulp. He is the one who owes us an explanation and an apology."

"But we were - in a compromising position. Clint might get the wrong idea."

Jake's expressive brows knitted together. "Clint knows what's going on, and we don't owe him an explanation."

"Please, Jake," Rachel begged. "Just talk to Clint."

"I'm not even married to you yet and already you're wrapping me around your little finger." Jake's smile was tender. "All right, I'll talk to him, but I refuse to offer apologies for something that's none of his business."

Rachel decided that a compromise was the best she could hope for. She pushed her chair back from the table. "I'll get Clint." "Clint is here." Clint limped into the room and sat across from Rachel. "Mom, would you get me a cup of coffee?"

As Rachel stood, Jake caught her arm. "The coffee's over there." His grip tightened as he inclined his head in the direction of the coffee bar. "Get it yourself."

"Don't start with me, Reardon." Clint propped his elbows on the table and let his head fall into his hands. "I'm not in the mood for any of your bull."

Jake's voice was calm, but his dark eyes flashed. "Your mother is not your servant. I won't have you ordering her around like she was the hired help."

Slowly, Clint raised his head. "You won't have?" He lifted an unbelieving eyebrow. "Butt out, Reardon."

Jake was on his feet. "I'll get your coffee."

Rachel sat down and searched for some way to defuse what was fast becoming an explosive situation. This was not the way she had envisioned her meeting with Clint and Jake, not at all. Jake's voice cut across her wandering thoughts.

"Maybe coffee will help sober you up, but I doubt anything can help your bad attitude and your terrible manners." He set the cup in front of a scowling Clint.

Clint took a long sip of the hot liquid. "I am sober, and my manners aren't going to get any better. I want to talk to Mom." He drank deeply from his cup before adding emphatically, "Alone."

"Anything you have to say to your mother, you can say to me too." Jake held Clint's eyes in a steady gaze. "And you'd better keep a civil tongue in your head."

Clint grimaced as he swallowed another gulp of coffee. "What I have to say to Mom is none of your damn business."

The two faces that confronted each other across the table could have been stamped from the same mold. The resemblance was so pronounced that it made Rachel's skin crawl. How long before somebody else noticed what was, to her, so blatantly obvious? The two men shared the same rugged profile. The same angles and planes cut across and defined each face. Even the shape of the two heads was identical. Only the eyes were different. And now Clint's glint of obstinate blue met and clashed with the ebony stoniness in Jake's angry gaze. Neither of them intended to give an inch.

"Anything that concerns Rachel, concerns me," Jake announced with a calm that frightened Rachel more than any loud protest he might have made. "Say what you have to say, then your mother wants to talk to you."

Rachel had to do something, and fast, before this became an open brawl. "It's all right, Clint. I don't mind Jake hearing anything you have to say."

Disbelief crowded the anger from Clint's eyes. "Well, I do mind. Are you taking his side in this?"

"I'm not taking anybody's side." Rachel was not in the habit of arguing with her son. She wasn't sure how to cope with his criticism. "What do you want to tell me?"

Clint's mouth pulled into a thin line. "Okay, I'll speak my piece, but I don't think this broken down, middle-aged Romeo is going to like what I have to say."

The atmosphere hummed with tension as Clint pulled air into his lungs and pushed his cup back. "How did this man get you to say you'd marry him? Did he threaten to tie up your grandmother's money? Or did he intimidate you in some other way?"

She had to disabuse her son of this outrageous notion. "Jake didn't threaten me. We agreed that marriage was the best answer." God, that sounded like a foolish reason to contemplate spending the rest of your life with someone. "There are extenuating circumstances, things you don't know about."

"Then tell me what those circumstances are. I saw the look on your face when Jake made his big announcement last night. You're not happy about this, Mom. So why are you doing it?"

Unspoken animosity crackled through the atmosphere as Jake intervened. "Your mother owes you no explanation, Clint."

Clint had opened his mouth to retort when Maddie materialized in the doorway. "Jake, David Patton is on the telephone. I know you've been expecting his call." "Thanks, Maddie." Jake nodded in her direction.

Maddie sent Rachel a withering look. "I hope I'm not interrupting something important."

"It's all right." Jake was on his feet. "I'll take the call in my office. We can finish this discussion later. For now I think Rachel should go to her room and get some rest. She was awake most of last night."

Rachel watched the look of agony that flitted across Maddie's face before she swallowed and gained a degree of control. Did Jake realize the implications his words carried? No, Rachel decided, he didn't. Jake was not a cruel man. She had thought he was, once. She knew better now.

Jake hurried from the room with Maddie in close pursuit.

Over the slam of the closing door, Clint sneered, "Are you too blind to see what's going on between those two? Are you going to let him keep his other woman after he marries you?"

Clint's words bolstered Rachel's worst suspicions and fed her greatest fear. "Maddie is Jake's housekeeper."

Clint snorted. "Do you think that's all there is to their relationship?"

If only she could offer some explanation. For the first time, ever, Rachel was faced with a situation she could not share with her son. "I can't discuss this with you, Clint. Not now. In time you will come to see ... "

Clint shot to his feet. "No, Mom, I will never understand why you have agreed to marry a man like Jake Reardon." He sat back down and stared into his cup. "I knew you wouldn't listen to me. That's why I called Tom."

Surprise lifted Rachel's head, stiffened her spine. "You did *what?*" "I called Tom when I got up this morning."

"Clint, you had no right to ... "

Anger tightened Clint's voice. "Damn it, Mom, I had every right. I can't let this go on. If I can't stop it, I have to find someone who can."

"You had no right to involve Tom in this. This is not his concern." She couldn't believe Clint's high-handed intervention.

"Tom was Dad's best friend, and he cares about you." Clint moved his head from side to side. "He wants to marry you. He told me so, just before we came to Summerville. He asked for my consent and blessing."

"Your blessing?" Rachel's temper flared. "And your consent? That consent was not yours to give. I am not a child, Clint. I don't need you and Tom to decide my future."

Clint shrugged his broad shoulders. "When you talk to Tom, you'll feel differently. He'll be here soon."

Rachel jumped to her feet. "Tom is coming here?"

"He's flying in this afternoon. I'm picking him up at three o'clock."

Rachel shouted, "Tom can't come here!"

With chilling calm, Clint said, "He's already on his way."



"Did you talk to Jake about this?" Surprise had caught Rachel completely unawares. "This is his home."

"I asked Maddie," Clint answered in a smug voice calculated to infuriate Rachel. It did.

"This is not Maddie's home."

"She lives here," Clint declared with a superior nod of his head.

"Not in this house!" Why did Clint's words set her teeth on edge?

Clint's smile was ironic. "She lives on the ranch. She runs both houses." With a shrug, he added, "Maddie likes the idea of Tom coming here. She says he can stay as long as he likes."

Rachel couldn't control the tears that burned in her throat and collected behind her eyes. "That was not Maddie's decision to make. This is Jake's home! Clint, how could you do such a thing without asking me first?"

The pain in Clint's reply was yet another agony for Rachel. "How could you agree to marry Jake Reardon without telling me of your plans? I'm your son. I deserve some consideration."

The door burst open, and Jake walked boldly into the room. The ashen line around his mouth contrasted strangely with the darkness of his skin. His voice cracked like a whip. "That's enough, Clint."

Rachel couldn't stop her tears. "It's all right, Jake. Clint didn't mean ... "

A few long strides brought Jake to Rachel's side. He folded her into his arms. "Don't cry, Rachel. We can work this out." Looking over Rachel's head, Jake glared at Clint. "Can't you see what you're doing to your mother, or don't you care?"

"I'm not trying to hurt Mom," Clint answered in a subdued voice. "I'm trying to protect her."

Through her tears, Rachel began to tell Jake about Clint's invitation to Tom Carter.

"It's all right," Jake soothed. "Maddie told me. If you want Tom to leave when he gets here, that can be arranged. If you want him to stay, that's all right, too."

Rachel's tears had slowed to a trickle. She didn't know what she wanted anymore. "I don't mind him being here, but Clint had no right to ... " Rachel stopped herself. The last thing she needed to do now was to sow more seeds of discord between Jake and Clint. "Clint was a little over zealous in his effort to protect me."

"Clint was meddling where he had no business." Jake brushed a tear from Rachel's cheek. "I doubt the purity of his motives, but that's beside the point now. Tom Carter is on his way to Diamond X. We will make the best of the situation."

Rachel wiped the last residue of tears from her eyes. "I want to read Gran's letter, Jake. Now seems as good a time as any." Jake's arms tightened. "You're tired, I think you should rest."

"I'm not that tired. I want to see my letter."

From behind her, Clint spoke. "I think Jake and I agree, for once. A little rest would do you good."

Rachel turned to confront her son. She was set to tell him to mind his own business when she saw the look of deep concern on his face. She couldn't be the one to cause Clint more pain. "I think I'll go to my room."

Jake sent Clint a wrathful look. "I'll have Reba bring you some breakfast."

Rachel would have protested if Maddie hadn't chosen that moment to come into the room. She let her defiance slip away. "Just toast and juice, please."

"I can get Rachel's breakfast." Maddie bustled toward the kitchen.

"No." Jake's command sliced the air, then his voice softened. "You and I have things to talk about. It seems we are to have a guest here on rather short notice."

Maddie stopped her headlong rush to the kitchen. "Of course, Jake. I'll wait in your office."

Rachel made a quick exit. She was far down the hall when Jake hurried from behind to fall in step with her. "Your son should be horse whipped."

"So now he's my son? I thought you had a meeting with Maddie." "In due time."

Rachel pleaded, "Please, Jake, try to see this from Clint's point of view. He didn't mean some of the things he said. He's very upset."

Jake opened the door to Rachel's room. "I may lack many things, but empathy with my son's feelings is not one of them. Clint's jealous. He's afraid he's losing his place as number one in his mother's life."

Rachel sat on the side of the bed, a little annoyed that Jake could do so well, what she failed to do so often, read Clint like a book. Pushing down a scorching singe of jealousy, she said, "Maddie's waiting for you."

An emotion she could not fathom crossed Jake's handsome face and lodged in the ebony of his eyes. "Rachel, about Maddie ... I know how this arrangement must look to you ... " He sat beside her and took her hands in his. "You have no reason to be jealous of Maddie, or any other woman alive."

She pulled her hands away. "Is that what you have with Maddie, an arrangement?" He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. "Maybe I made a mistake persuading you to come back here."

He hadn't persuaded her, he had forced her. Like so many other things it had fallen into the abyss of things gone by now. "What can't be changed is best forgotten."

"That's not true." Jake's fingertips danced feather light down her arm. "Ignoring the past could destroy the future." He sighed and hugged her to him. "David is waiting for me. Reba will be here soon with your breakfast."

Weariness born of emotional turmoil took away any thought of argument. Rachel lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, Jake's backside was disappearing through her half-closed bedroom door. She rolled over and feigned sleep until pretense became reality.

Chapter Eighteen

Consciousness returned suddenly. Rachel opened her eyes to see Reba standing beside her bed with a breakfast tray. "Jake said I should bring you breakfast." Reba put the tray on the table beside the bed. "You slept right through the fireworks."

Rachel sat up. "What happened?"

Uninvited, Reba folded her gaunt frame into a chair. "Jake got a call from David Patton. It must have been bad news. He stormed out of his office breathing fire and cussing a blue streak. Poor old Mike picked that time to show up. Jake jumped all over him. Mike jumped right back. Then Maddie butted in and got told off by Mike for her trouble. They went back into Jake's office and closed the door. That's when the big shouting match started."

"Where is Clint?" Rachel asked.

"He's gone to San Antonio with Amanda. They went after some man who's flying in from Dallas."

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness Clint was out of the house before the clash between Mike and Jake had taken place. "Do Mike and Jake argue often?"

Reba's knowing look didn't escape Rachel. "I can't ever remember them squabbling before you and your boy came back here."

"Oh." If she wanted to know more, Rachel knew she would have to ask. "What were they arguing about?"

"You and that boy of yours sure threw a monkey wrench into Maddie's plans," Reba replied.

"What does that have to do with Jake's argument with Mike?" Rachel swung her feet to the side of the bed.

"Maybe nothing, maybe everything," Reba answered cryptically.

"I'm not in the mood for riddles, Reba."

Out of the blue, Reba made another unconnected announcement. "Your grandma didn't like Maddie."

That was, indeed, a revelation. Before she could stop herself, Rachel asked, "Why?"

"Lord, she had a million reasons." Reba was enjoying her opportunity to enlighten Rachel. "The main one was, Maddie didn't want Jake to find you and bring you home, and your grandma was set on you coming back here."

Cautiously, Rachel asked, "How long after Lola died did Gran come to Diamond X to live?"

Reba thought for a long time before she ventured a response. "I guess you didn't know."

Rachel decided if she wanted answers from Reba, she would have to play Reba's little game. "I guess I didn't. Why don't you enlighten me?"

Smiling like a Cheshire cat, Reba nodded her bushy head. "Well, for starters, Gran and Lola moved in here when Lola married Jake."

Softly, Rachel whispered, "And Gran stayed, even after Lola died?"

"Lola didn't just die." Reba's words knifed across the room. "She was killed, Some say ... " And struck with keen intent, before they lagged into nothingness.

"Some say what?" Rachel leaned forward, and waited, dreading what she might hear, but determined to know.

"Your sister was killed when her car went over the bridge at Canyon Gap. Some say she drove over the edge on purpose." Reba's downcast eyes watched her bony fingers pleat the hem of her apron. "Some say she had good reason to want to end her life."

Rachel's patience was wearing thin. "What had Lola done that was so terrible?"

"It wasn't what she'd done, it was Jake." Reba lifted her hands and her eyes at the same time. "Don't get me wrong, Rachel. I like Jake, and I never believed everything I heard."

Impatience finally overrode Rachel's resolve to be cunning. "Will you tell me what Jake did that drove Lola to suicide?"

Reba's defenses went up. "I didn't say Lola's death was Jake's fault. Don't go putting words in my mouth."

"Tell me what some say Jake did." Rachel's change in strategy had the desired effect. "Some say Jake's fooling around with other women finally drove Lola right out of her mind."

"Other women? Jake?" Rachel's aching heart would not let her head accept what Reba was saying. "Are you sure it wasn't Lola who was having affairs?"

"Well, that's a nice thing to say about your dead sister." Reba sat up and glared at Rachel before she slid far down into her chair. "Some say she had her share of men, but she wasn't so open about it. It was like Jake didn't care about anything."

Maybe Jake was the womanizer Gran had thought him to be in the beginning. But that made no sense either. If Gran thought Jake was responsible for Lola's death, why would she continue to live at Diamond X after Lola was gone? "And Gran stayed here after Lola ... Lola's accident? Did she know about Jake's other women?"

"I reckon so." Reba responded, slowly. "She had been living on the ranch for several years before I came to work here. She never said much to me about Lola. Mostly, she talked about you, and how she wanted you to come home."

Rachel had to ask. "How did Jake feel about Gran wanting me to come home?"

"He never said, but Jake was fond of your grandma. He hired Maddie when Mrs. Cassidy couldn't manage this big old house anymore. Mike had been Jake's ranch foreman for a couple of years before that. Maddie and Amanda were living with Mike. Maddie's husband had just been sent off to jail again and I guess Jake knew she needed the job."

Rachel closed her eyes against the pain that shafted through her. "What did Gran think about Jake hiring Maddie?"

"She didn't care much for the idea. Your grandma wasn't stupid. She saw right off what that woman was up to."

Swallowing painfully, Rachel whispered, "What was she up to?"

"Maddie had designs on Jake, right from the start." Reba's brow wrinkled in remembrance. "Maybe that's one of the reasons your grandma didn't like her."

An incredulous note crept into Rachel's voice. "If Gran didn't like Maddie, why did she stay here?"

"Jake wanted her here. And you know Jake, and how he can get what he wants from women. Besides, she didn't have any other place to go."

"She had her farm," Rachel argued.

A quizzical look of surprise lifted Reba's eyebrows. "I thought Jake owned the farm." "What gave you that idea?" Aggravation put a snap in Rachel's voice. "Who told you Jake owned Gran's farm?"

"Nobody told me anything." They had moved into an area that was making Reba uncomfortable. "I'd best go before Maddie comes looking for me."

With Reba's growing discomfort came a dawning knowledge. "Who told you not to discuss the farm with me?"

Reba was immediately defensive. "What makes you think anybody did?"

Rachel felt almost guilty for taking advantage of Reba's lack of intelligence and perception. "Why doesn't Jake want you to discuss the farm with me?"

"Well, I ain't the only one. He told everyone the day after you and your boy got here that if either of you asked anything about the farm, or Gran's business, we were to tell you to ask him, then shut up."

"What else did Jake tell you?"

Relaxing a little, Reba smiled. "He said we were to be nice to you and treat you with respect. He said you and Clint were all the family he had now. Well, that went over like a lead balloon with Maddie. She began to ask how long you and Clint would be here."

"And then?" Rachel questioned.

"And then Jake told me to go back to the kitchen. So I left."

Rachel let out a defeated little grunt. "I see."

"No. You don't. I listened outside the door."

Before Rachel could find an answer to that, Reba went on. "Then Jake told Amanda to go see about Clint. I had to leave to keep Amanda from seeing me."

Rachel took a sip of her coffee. It was cold. "Thank you, Reba, for the breakfast and the conversation."

Ignoring Rachel's attempt to dismiss her, Reba plowed ahead. "I went back after Amanda got out of sight. I stood by the door and heard Jake rip into Mike like you wouldn't believe. He was mad as hell at Mike for taking you out the night before."

"That was none of Jake's business." Rachel spoke before prudence could dictate discretion.

"Mike said the same thing. But Jake would have none of that. He said he was your guardian, and he didn't want you going out with Mike, or any other man. Lord, you could have heard a pin drop. Then Jake began to sound like he was sorry he'd lost his temper."

Rachel could believe that. She asked, even though she knew she should tell Reba to shut up and go. "What happened then?"

"I don't know. Mike stormed out of the room, so I had to run for cover again. Then Amanda found me and wanted me to help her with Clint. So I never got back to hear what happened."

A knock at the door caused Reba to bolt to her feet. "That's probably Maddie. I'd best go."

Rachel set her cup on the tray. "You can take the tray back as you go."

As Reba picked up the tray, the door opened to admit Jake. The scowl on his face was enough to send Reba scooting by him and hurrying out the door, slamming it behind her as she went.

For a long time after Reba had made her swift exit, Jake stood in the middle of the room, staring at Rachel. To cover her growing apprehension, she teased, "You frightened Reba away." When Jake continued to scowl at her, she added, "Maybe I should run too." "That's what you do best, isn't it Rachel?"

The bitterness in his voice caused Rachel to sit up straight and give him a quizzical look.

With the lifting of one dark eyebrow, he explained, "Run, I mean. When the going gets rough, you take off. Run out and leave somebody else to pick up the pieces."

"You're upset, Jake. Do you want to tell me why?" Rachel nodded toward the chair Reba had so recently vacated. "Would you like to sit down?"

Jake stood with his feet far apart and his hands clenched at his sides. "How many lies does your silence cover? You've been perpetrating another devious deception for the past twenty years. I'm beginning to wonder if that's a family trait."

He was attacking not only Rachel, but Lola and Gran as well. "You can say what you want about me, Jake, but don't malign two women who can no longer defend themselves. Leave my sister and my grandmother out of this."

"You're kinder to them than they ever were to you." Jake's mouth tightened and pulled into a cynical line. "Omitting the truth is as much a lie as telling a deliberate falsehood, and that's what you've done. You've lied to me and to Clint by omitting a truth we should have been told."

Rachel didn't know what he was talking about. Very calmly, she told him so, ending with a little plea. "Tell me, please, what you think I've done that's so deceitful."

Cryptically, Jake replied, "I just had a most enlightening telephone conversation with David Patton."

Rachel made a pathetic attempt at levity. "That's an explanation?"

Jake took long strides across the floor. Stopping near the window, he stared outside. "For some time now David has been working with a private detective. That detective has just turned up some very interesting facts about your husband." He hooked his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans. "Damn it, Rachel, this is no joke! You lived twenty years with a man who wasn't a man at all!"

The blood drained from Rachel's face. He knew! Jake knew! But how? "Donovan MacCall was not only a man; he was a fine, gentle, loving man."

"Well, that fine, gentle, loving man's medical records reveal a startling fact." Turning suddenly, he confronted her. "All those years, all those agonizing nights I lay awake, tormented by the thought of you in another man's arms. And now I learn he was incapable of making love to you. You put me through twenty years of hell and for no reason."

For a moment Rachel was too stunned to speak. Finally, she gasped, "How did you gain access to Don's medical records?"

Jake's face was tight, his expression suddenly puzzled. "Do you think I sanction some illegal activity to gain this knowledge? I didn't. The detective did nothing more than access and examine public records."

"Maybe it wasn't illegal, but it was immoral and under-handed!" Rachel's ugly accusation resounded across the spacious room. "Why, Jake? Why?"

He sank into a chair as the anger seemed to drain from him. "I didn't deliberately set out to uncover some dark secret from your husband's past."

"Then why did you go snooping around?"

"I wanted to know more about the man who had taken you from me and then claimed my son as his own. Now I find that he wasn't a man at all."

There followed a deep and expressive silence that seemed more condemning than speech. Then over the catch in her throat, Rachel asked, "Are you angry with me because my husband was impotent?"

"I'm not angry. I'm hurt and confused. Why couldn't you have been honest with me?"

The sting of his reproach cut deep. "Like you've been honest with me?" "You, who even now, as you contemplate marriage to me, have a mistress living within a stone's throw of your home?"

"How could you accuse me of such a thing?" Jake gripped the arms of the chair with both hands. "I haven't lived a life of celibacy since Lola died. But Maddie is not and never has been my mistress."

"And you're wrong, too, Jake. I had many good reasons for staying with Don. He was a loving husband. Just because he was impotent didn't mean he couldn't satisfy my needs. And he was a good father to Clint."

Jake snorted his disbelief. "Those are excuses, not reasons. You must have had some other motive for living with an impotent man for almost twenty years."

"And if I admit to some terrible secret past will you still want to marry me?"

Jake met Rachel's accusing gaze with unflinching calm. "That question is academic since Clint is my son, and you are his mother."

"I'm not Lola, Jake. I won't marry you and share you with another woman."

"Is that what you think I'm asking you to do?" Jake's face was ashen, his features stark. She wasn't sure how to answer that question. "Maybe you can show me." She challenged, "Why don't you fire Maddie?"

"What would that prove, other than I'm the scoundrel you think me to be? Maddie depends on this job. She has a daughter who will be entering college soon. I can't just turn her out without notice or reason."

The hurt inside Rachel had grown to gigantic proportions. "Isn't one woman enough for you?" Her flippant words couldn't mask the unbearable pain that had invaded every cell of her being.

"Was a man who wasn't a man enough for you?" A cruel sneer pulled at Jake's lips. "I don't think so." He rammed his forefinger into his chest. "This is Jake, remember? The man who had you first. I still dream about how it was with us. I still wake in the middle of the night and reach for you. In all these years, I've never made love to another woman without seeing your face." He paused and ran his hand through his hair. "And as for firing Maddie, that's something I won't do. I have some sense of decency."

"And you're saying I don't?" Rachel's voice rose, then fell. "You think I was unfaithful to Don?" Wiping a trembling hand across her face, she whispered, "I wasn't."

Jake came across the room and sat on the edge of a chair. Utter defeat sound in his soft words. "You can't be unfaithful to a man who isn't a man. You weren't unfaithful to Donovan MacCall, you were unfaithful to me. I had come to terms with you having a husband, but this? You lived with Donovan MacCall and pretended to be a devoted wife. Did he know?"

Astounded, Rachel asked, "Know what?"

"How many, Rachel?" Jake demanded.

"How many what?"

"How many men have you slept with?"

"You dare ask me that?" Fury burst like an incendiary explosion, inside her head. "You, who admit to having numerous affairs? You who seduced me when I was a stupid, innocent little virgin?"

Jake was on his feet, his anger blazing forth in unbridled fury. "Stop it, Rachel! Stop it now!"

The warning, for all its intensity, came too late. His cold assumption had transformed Rachel's icy anger into white hot fury. Jake was once again accusing her and on the strength of someone else's indictment. "Don't judge me by your standards!"

"Don't talk to me about standards!" His knife-like eyes slashed at her. "It's Tom Carter, isn't it? Clint was telling the truth. How long has this been going on? Did your husband know?"

A hope kept green through the drought of long years, suddenly withered and died. His opinion of her hadn't changed with time. Her anger died away in the light of that revelation.

"Clint and I will leave with Tom. We never should have come here."

Jake drew a ragged breath. "Do you want to be with me when I tell Clint?"

Rachel didn't have to ask what Jake planned to tell, she knew. "Do you want to destroy your own son?"

"My son will adjust soon enough to knowing that I'm his father when he learns that the man he thought sired him was castrated by a land mine in Vietnam years before he was conceived. Clint will come to accept me, but he may end up hating you."

That thought was too unbearable to imagine. Rachel wrapped her arms around her waist and doubled over in pain. "Do you hate me that much?"

Sitting down beside her, Jake took Rachel in his arms. "How can I hate you? You're my son's mother. I'm a little unbalanced where Clint is concerned. I don't want to lose him."

She lifted her tear stained face. "Neither do I. He's been the center of my existence for twenty years."

"Truce, Rachel?"

She decided to surrender with grace. "With you calling the shots, of course?" His lips brushed her cheek. "Of course."

"What are the terms of the treaty?"

"That you marry me, then help me establish a viable relationship with my son." "Despite what you think I am?" Rachel moved back and stared into the darkness of his troubled eyes, "You still want to marry me,

His answer was a taunt, almost inaudible, "Yes."

She couldn't risk losing Clint. "I will have to be the only woman in your life." "You will be. And you will get rid of your lover, too?" Rachel frowned. "My lover?"

"Yes. You will end your relationship with Tom Carter."

That shouldn't be difficult, since he had never been more than a friend. "Of course."



Chapter Nineteen

Rachel stood by the window and watched Jake's pickup rumble across the cattle guard and speed down the gravel road toward the house leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. From behind her, Jake spoke, "I thought Tom Carter was your friend." The word friend rode on a sneer. "Why are you so nervous?"

She turned to face him, feeling more uncertain with each passing moment. "I don't know what to say to him."

The grimness of Jake's fixed stare added to Rachel's uneasiness. "That should be easy. Tell him you're going to marry me."

"He's not going to understand." Rachel turned from Jake's unforgiving gaze. The pickup was turning into the driveway.

"Does he know your husband was a eunuch?"

God, what a ghastly word! Anger thinned Rachel's lips as she spun around to face him. "You make me sick!"

His smile was hideously smug. "That's the correct terminology. A eunuch is a castrated man."

"Do you enjoy degrading a dead man?" Furious with herself that she had let his remark get to her, Rachel turned once again.

Clint was helping Amanda from the pickup.

"Does it bother you that your husband was less than a man?"

Rachel tried to slow the beating of her racing heart. "For some women, sexual prowess is not the measure of a man."

"To quote *my* son, bull." Jake asked again, this time much more assertively, "Does Tom know?"

When it became apparent that Rachel wasn't going to answer, he demanded, "Tell me, damn it!"

"I never discussed Don's ... problem with Tom. There was never any reason."

Jake smirked, "He knew by your actions that your husband couldn't satisfy you?"

The intimate relationship she had shared with Don was not something she intended to discuss with anyone, not even Jake. "Don't be insulting." Rubbing her hands across her folded arms, Rachel felt goose bumps. "I'll need some time to talk to Tom."

Jake came to stand directly behind her. "You can have all the time you need. Talk all evening."

Relief that Jake was making some effort to be agreeable eased much of Rachel's tension. "Could we use your office? I need to talk to Tom in private."

Jake's long slim fingers locked around Rachel's arm and pressed into her flesh. "You're welcome to use my office, but what you say to Tom Carter, you will say in my presence."

Was this the man she had so recently decided to be kind and considerate? "Don't be difficult. I have to talk to Tom alone."

"Difficult?" Jake's fingers caressed her arm. "Difficult is too a mild word for how I feel. Try determined, or suspicious, even hell-bent." He pulled her around to face him. "What could you possibly have to say to Tom that I couldn't hear? More secrets, Rachel?"

"You are alone with Maddie any time you chose." Rachel was amazed at the intensity of the jealousy that scorched through her.

Over the sound of the footsteps coming up the walk, Jake said, "You're welcome to sit in on any conversation I have with Maddie. There's no lock on my office door, or the door to my bedroom. You can check on me anytime you feel the need." His eyes were mocking. "Unless you'd like to move into my bed now."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Rachel was adamant. "You have no right to broadcast Don's ... affliction."

"Don't talk to me about rights, Rachel. I've learned that any rights I have, I must take by force, then protect and defend with equal vigor. I refuse to let you be alone with your lover."

Her hand shook as she reached to push his fingers from her arm. "What I have to say to Tom, I have to say to him alone."

"You will do no such thing."

"I'll see Tom alone here, or I'll leave with him."

Jake paled under the tan of his dark skin. "You try that, and see what happens."

"I'll take Clint with me." Rachel sat down. Her insides had turned to jelly.

"What makes you think Clint will want to go with you once he knows the truth?" Jake sat beside her and brought his face very near hers. "Get rid of Tom Carter, or I will and in the most brutal, ruthless way possible."

"You said he could stay as long as I wanted him here." Rachel's voice was a prim as a child's, but a touch of very adult fury lingered there.

The mingling of Voices sounded outside the front door.

"That was before I knew he was your lover." Jake ground out between clenched teeth. "You won't be alone with him ever again."

The door opened suddenly, ushering in, with a gust of hot wind, Clint, Amanda, and Tom Carter. The very air seemed to ignite and sizzle.

After looking around the room, Clint announced, "Hey everybody, we're here." "So you are." Jake extended his hand to Tom. "You must be Tom Carter. I'm Jake Reardon."

As he returned Jake's handshake and his greeting. Tom's eyes darted around the room, taking in his surroundings with one assessing sweep. "I hope my coming here is not an imposition. Clint seemed to think Rachel needed me."

Tom's obvious discomfort was enough to send Rachel scurrying across the room. "Tom, I'm so glad to see you." She gave him a quick, impetuous hug.

Tom held Rachel from him and studied her grave face. "When I got Clint's call, I was concerned. He hinted there might be some problem."

Rachel spoke with quiet determination. "There's no problem. She smiled. "How was your flight?"

Amanda, sensing the unspoken animosity that permeated the room, backed toward the kitchen with the announcement that she would bring drinks for everyone. "Go with her, Clint," Jake instructed.

Belligerent as always, Clint demanded, "Why?"

"Because your mother and I want to visit with Mr. Carter."

Clint leaned against the door jamb. "Bull."

Tom Carter was watching the heated exchange between Jake and Clint, his eyes moving from Clint to Jake, then back to Clint again. He swore softly under his breath. "Please, Clint ... " Rachel begged. This constant conflict with her son was tearing her apart.

Strangely enough, it was Tom who came to her rescue. "Mr. Reardon is right, Clint. We need to talk in private."

"I don't like it, but if you say so, Tom." Clint began to move toward the kitchen. "I'll tell Amanda to hold the drinks."

Jake gestured toward the hall door. "We can talk in my office."

They were scarcely through the door when Tom spoke. "Don never wanted you to come back here, Rachel. Now I know why. My God! What an unholy dilemma. This never would have happened if Don had been alive. He would have protected you and Clint."

Puzzled, Rachel asked, "Protected us? Against what?"

Tom answered her impassioned inquiry with yet another assertion. "Don never intended that you or Clint ever have contact with any member of your family. That's why he always stopped all those attempts to lure you back here."

Rachel shuddered at the implications those words carried. An insidious suspicion began to unravel inside her brain. "Attempts? What attempts?" Could it be that Don, the one person she had always trusted implicitly, had betrayed that trust?

"Over the years, he intercepted the numerous efforts your grandmother made to contact you. He stopped the letters, blocked telephone calls, even got rid of the private detectives."

For a ghastly moment Rachel was too shocked to speak. After a brief struggle, she gasped, "I *didn't* know." Laying her hand over her heart, she whispered, "I never once suspected."

"Of course, you didn't. Don was careful to see to that, too."

Even Don had deceived her, with the most damning of all lies, silence. "I thought my family had abandoned me." Rachel closed her eyes against a sudden shaft of debilitating pain. "Why would Don do such a thing?"

"Don loved you. He didn't want you to be hurt again." Abruptly, Tom asked, "Do you ever intend to tell Clint the truth?"

Jake intervened, as he placed a possessive arm around Rachel's shoulders. "What truth, Mr. Carter?"

"Under the circumstances, don't you think you could call me Tom?" A disarming smile accompanied Tom's request. "I see no reason to pretend I didn't know the moment I saw you. You're Clint's father."

Rachel was still trying to deal with the resounding blow of Don's years of deceit. "I never dreamed my family was trying to contact me. Don let me think they'd rejected me completely."

Tom cast an accusing look in Jake's direction. "Don acted out of compassion and love. He told me many times how your lover had sent you away before Clint was born."

A spasm of pain crossed Jake's face. "I didn't send Rachel away. She was spirited away by your friend, Don. For years, I thought she was dead. I didn't know my son existed until a few weeks ago."

"None of that matters now." Rachel was not about to mull over her pitiful past with these two men. "Jake and I have decided to be married, and Clint has some idea that it is up to him to stop us."

"Try to see this from Clint's point of view," Tom reasoned. "Why should you suddenly decide to marry a man who rejected you before? Your decision makes no sense to him." He shook his head. "It makes no sense to me either."

Jake's voice rose. "I never intended that another man claim my son. I am the injured party here. I want Clint to know I'm his father."

"I think everyone will suffer if you tell Clint the truth," Tom argued. "Clint has believed himself to be Donovan MacCall's son for twenty years. How would he react if he learned that he had been deceived all this time?"

Quietly, Jake explained, "That's why Rachel and I have decided to be married. Clint must first accept me as his step-parent. That will smooth the way to an eventual acceptance of me as his father."

Tom's skeptical look mirrored his doubt. "*Rachel and you?* I think Rachel would walk through fire to keep Clint from finding out Don's not his father. Clint said he couldn't imagine why Rachel had agreed to marry you. Neither could I then, I think now I can. You're blackmailing her."

"Blackmail is an ugly word, Carter." Jake's hand slipped from Rachel's shoulder to her waist. "Rachel thinks Clint should know the truth, eventually."

A slow kindling of anger smoldered in Tom's eyes. "I don't believe that."

Jake's mouth turned up in a derisive smile. "I don't give a damn what you don't believe. But let's get one thing straight. Nothing can alter the fact that Clint is my son. The cost of that revelation seems paltry compared to him never knowing who I am. I want my son to know the truth."

Tom's face set in grim lines. "The truth for Clint is that Donovan MacCall is his father."

Jake released Rachel and dropped his arm and shaped his hands into fists. "The truth for us all is that Donovan MacCall couldn't father a child. He was castrated by a land mine in Vietnam."

With sudden fury, Tom rounded on Rachel. "You dared tell that to this man?"

It occurred to Rachel that since entering the office, none of them had bothered to sit down. She sank wearily into a chair. "I would never have breathed that secret to a living soul. I didn't even know you knew."

"Don and I were friends even before we went to Vietnam. We had no secrets. I knew Don, and until today, I thought I knew you. Now I'm not so sure."

Jake intervened. "None of this is relevant to the present situation. Rachel and I have announced our approaching marriage. If you care about Clint you will urge him to accept that fact."

Tom retorted, "If you care about your son, you will consider his feelings and the feelings of his mother. She doesn't want to marry you."

Jake's dark brows pulled together in a furious frown. "How do you know that?"

"Look at her." Tom waved an agitated hand toward Rachel's small form huddled in the vastness of an overstuffed chair. "She's more than a little intimidated by you. She didn't want to come here, but you forced her. Now, after less than three months under your roof,

she says she wants to marry you. I know a little about the tactics you used to get her here. And you're still threatening her."

Jake's jaw tightened. "It's time you were leaving, *Mister* Carter. I'll get someone to drive you back to the airport."

Tension electrified though the room, as Tom replied, "I will leave if and when I'm convinced you're not trying to coerce Rachel into doing something she doesn't want to do."

Jake took a menacing step in Tom's direction. "Just what the hell are you implying? I would *never* do anything to hurt Rachel."

Not the least intimidated, Tom stood his ground. "You've already hurt her. Twenty years ago you sent her away, pregnant and alone, and now you are killing her by degrees by threatening to tell Clint you're his father."

Rachel moved swiftly to stand between Jake and Tom. "Stop, please, both of you." Much more of this and Tom and Jake would be exchanging blows. That would bring Clint into the argument. Rachel couldn't let that happen. With her back to Jake, she faced Tom. "Jake hasn't forced me to do anything I don't want to do." She hoped she wouldn't be struck dumb for daring to tell such a blatant lie. "I know you find it difficult to believe, considering what's happened in the past, but I do want to marry Jake." To some degree those words were true. She had always wanted to be Jake's wife.

Tom relented a little. "Are you sure? You don't have to be afraid of this man, Rachel, I can protect you, just as Don always did. I won't let him hurt you."

Rachel wanted to laugh at the sheer irony of that statement. So long as she loved Jake Reardon, he possessed the power to hurt her, and she knew now that she would love him as long as there was breath in her body. "Your friendship with Don doesn't extend to taking on my problems."

"I'm not doing this out of any sense of duty to Don." Tom was emphatic. "I care about you, Rachel. I can protect you, just as Don always did. You can go back to Dallas with me, if that's what you want."

"I know what I'm doing." Rachel tried to sound convincing.

Tom heaved a mighty sigh. "I do hope so." His head moved slowly from side to side. "What do I tell Clint?"

"About what?" Rachel could feel Jake's eyes stabbing into her back.

"About your marrying Jake Reardon. He's going to ask me what I think. I can't tell him that I approve when I don't."

"Can't you tell him you respect my decision?" Rachel glanced quickly in Jake's direction. He looked as if he were ready to explode. "Why don't we go back into the living room and have those drinks?"

Jake's voice bristled with hostility. "Not until I get a few things off my chest." He pointed an accusing finger toward Tom and Rachel. "The two of you may have deluded yourselves into believing all this was for Clint's good. The truth is, you did it to protect Donovan MacCall. You passed Clint off as his son to keep the world from knowing the man was a steer."

"That's not ... " Rachel was set to deny Jake's bitter accusation. She couldn't. What he said was partially true. In her frantic effort to protect her unborn child, she had struck a

bargain with Don that had, in effect, protected him too. "altogether true. I was protecting Clint too."

Tom drew a deep, harrowing breath. "This is getting us no where. Do you want me to go, Rachel?"

"No. yes. I don't ... " Rachel stammered.

Jake answered for her. "Under the circumstances, that would be best."

Tom made one last futile attempt to dissuade Rachel. "Is there any way I can make you to change your mind?"

"Don't look so distressed." Rachel tried to smile. "Everything will work out, in time." "I wish I could believe that." There was a quiver in Tom's voice. "But I can't seem to convince myself that it's true."

"It's not your problem." Jake assured Tom.

Ignoring Jake's caustic rebuff, Tom asked, "Are you going to marry this man, Rachel?"

Before Rachel could frame a reply, Jake roared, "That's enough, Carter!" "Yes." Rachel opened the door. "Everything is settled. Let's have that drink now." Tom refused to respond to Rachel's overtures toward hospitality. "The sooner I go, the better. I'll ask Clint to drive me back to the airport."

As Jake opened the office door, and Rachel and Tom emerged, Clint came down the hall to meet them. "Amanda has made iced tea."

"Thanks, son." Tom put an affectionate arm around Clint's shoulder. "But I need to get back to Dallas. Will you drive me to the airport?"

"So soon? I thought you'd stay over-night." A look of ugly suspicion clouded the blue of Clint's eyes. "Did Jake ask you to leave?"

"We can talk on the way to San Antonio," Tom assured Clint. "Mom?" Clint's questioning gaze shifted to Rachel. "Do you want to come along?"

Clint was doing this to anger Jake. The truth was, Clint had asked Tom here in the first place to irritate Jake and make him as uncomfortable as possible, and he had succeeded admirably. Rachel wanted to tell her son to behave himself. Instead, she said, "No, thanks."

As the front door closed behind Clint and Tom, Rachel turned to confront a scowling Jake.

"Why didn't you come to me long ago and tell me Gran wanted me to come home?"

Jake shrugged as his features softened. "I thought you knew. I assumed you didn't want to come back to us."

"I would have come back to Gran, if I'd known that was what she wanted."

Jake swallowed, painfully. "But not to me? You preferred being with your impotent husband. Or was it his business partner that made you want to stay with Donovan MacCall?"

"What I want, what I've always wanted, is for Clint to be happy."

"And I want you, Rachel, here on Diamond X with me, as my wife."

Jake did want her, now. There still flared between them a potent sexual attraction. How long, she wondered, would that last? Not long, since it wasn't even strong enough to convince him to give up his mistress. Rachel had never felt so weary, so defeated. "I don't want any dinner, so don't send a tray to my room. I'm going to bed."

"We're going out tonight. Be ready to leave by eight o'clock." Jake's voice rang with the self-assurance she knew so well.

"I'm not going anywhere." Rachel tossed her head in haughty defiance. "If you go out, it will be alone."

"Don't argue; this is important. There's a benefit dance at the Community Center in Summerville tonight. It was planned months ago. Since I'm one of the sponsors, It's important that I be there." Jake leaned against the mantle and put his hands in his pockets. "All we need do is put in a token appearance."

"Why didn't you mention this before now?"

"I forgot it myself, until Maddie reminded me this morning. Then David called to tell what he had discovered about your husband." Jake's tone moved from caustic to troubled. "The matter of Tom coming here arose, one thing led to another, and I forgot about it again, until now."

"You deliberately didn't tell me until now." Rachel accused. The thought of facing the elite of Atascosa County society was more than she could handle right now. "I'm not going."

"Don't be obstinate. A night out will do us both good." He tagged his plea with an unexpected, "Please."

Oh, he could be persuasive when he set his mind to it. "I am not up to facing a crowd of prying gossips tonight."

"Sooner or later you have to face the people in Summerville. Why postpone the inevitable? You're going to be my wife, it's time you began to take your place in the community."

Rachel's chin tilted upward, as a revelation born of remembered occurrences blossomed inside her brain. The fear that Jake had no intention of being faithful to her was not the only reason she had for being so afraid to marry this man. She didn't belong in Jake's world, and she never would. To the people in Jake's tight little universe, she was a woman with a scarlet past. With sudden certainty, she knew that, regardless of the consequences, she could not enter into a marriage that was doomed to heartbreaking failure. She would have to tell him, but this was neither the time nor the place for such an announcement. That declaration needed to be made on neutral ground, where she had a little more leverage that she could ever attain within the walls of Jake's home. "I'll be ready by eight."

"Just like that?" Jake's snapping fingers cracked the tense air.

Over her shoulder, Rachel shot back, "Just like that." She sped from the room.

## Chapter Twenty

The dress, an elegant creation of blue satin, with a knee-length skirt and a brief top, accentuated Rachel's slim figure and exposed an enticing expanse of her full breasts. A slit up one side of the skirt, revealed one well-shaped leg with each step she took. Rachel pulled the zipper up the back and smiled at her reflection, wondering if she dared appear in public in such a provocative garment.

Earlier, when Rachel had complained that she had nothing to wear to the dance, Amanda had offered to lend her a dress. "I'll be right back." Amanda hurried away.

Half an hour later, Amanda reappeared with a swath of blue satin hanging over her arm and carrying a pair of silver sandals. "This dress should fit you like a glove."

"And the style's for someone half my age," Rachel was forced to admit.

"With a figure like yours, you can wear anything you want to wear." Amanda held the dress out to Rachel. "It's the exact color of your eyes." She turned to leave. "I have to go home and get ready myself. I have a heavy date tonight."

Rachel was too engrossed in her own problems to ask Amanda who that date was with, or where she was going. Later she would remember and wish she had been much more observant, and a little more inquisitive.

As Amanda closed the door, she called over her shoulder, "You will look beautiful."

A last glance at her reflection in the mirror told Rachel that Amanda's flattering prediction held an element of truth. The dress, the makeup, the glint in her eyes, blended to give her a dangerously seductive appearance. She blew a kiss toward the image in the mirror.

Several minutes later, Rachel came into the living room to see Jake leaning against the bar. He whistled through his teeth as she came through the door. "You look stunning."

Rachel wondered what thoughts lurked behind that too pleasant exterior. She returned his smile. "Do you like the dress? Amanda loaned it to me."

He extended his arm, and she laid her hand on his sleeve. "I like what's in it. You're beautiful, Rachel."

They were in the car before either of them spoke again. Jake glanced briefly toward Rachel, then fastened his eyes on the road ahead. "Thank you for being so understanding about going out on such short notice. After the way I behaved with Tom this after- noon, it was more than I had any right to expect."

Rachel swallowed over the lump in her throat. "I don't understand at all. You're being unfair. You asked me, no, you forced me to send Tom away, but you refuse to fire Maddie." Jake's insistence that Maddie stay on at Diamond X was a knife in Rachel's heart. She couldn't spend the rest of her life letting someone twist that knife deeper and deeper. "I don't want to discuss Tom, or Maddie."

Heedless of her words, or perhaps because of them, Jake hastened on. "We have to talk about Maddie. I have to make you understand that Maddie is nothing more to me than my house- keeper."

"All that smoke and no fire at all?" Rachel scoffed. "Maddie is still in your employee. She considers Diamond X her home."



Jake's expression hardened. "Has Maddie been talking to you?"

Rachel sat up and leaned forward. "Not in so many words, but I get the message. She runs your house and much of your business. She and Amanda seem to be a very important part of your life. What do you expect me to think?"

"Maddie has been my housekeeper for five years. She's completely dependent on that job for a livelihood. She has a daughter to support. I can't just toss her out without any reason and no notice at all."

Words Rachel's grandmother had said to her long ago, came unannounced into her head. "*Jake's a maverick, Rachel. You can catch mavericks, but you can't hold them.*" She leaned against the leather upholstery. "And If I said you had to make a choice, who would it be, Maddie or me?"

"Is that an ultimatum?" Jake's sharp tone cut through the haze of misery that surrounded Rachel.

"It's no more than you forced me to do with Tom."

"All right," he relented. "Tomorrow I'll move Maddie and her family to Gran's farm house. Then I'll give Maddie her two weeks' notice."

A red ball of fury exploded inside Rachel's head. "That house belongs to me, and nobody moves there without my permission."

That old tone of implacability slipped into Jake's response. "Don't be difficult. You don't want Maddie at Diamond X. What better place for her and her family than Gran's old house?"

"Maddie would be off Diamond X, but still accessible. How convenient for you. But you're wrong on both counts. I'm not going to marry you, and Maddie is not moving into Gran's house."

She watched as his profile turned to granite. "You're still angry about the way I treated Tom."

"This has nothing to do with Tom. I just don't want to marry you."

Jake's reply sent a shock wave quaking through Rachel. "Do you want me to release you from our engagement?"

The shock turned to a tidal wave of agony. "Would you?"

On the end of a long sigh, Jake said, "If the thought of being my wife is that repugnant to you, then I think I must. Is that what you want, Rachel?"

Why did she feel so desolate, so devastated? This was what she had hoped he would say, wasn't it? Pride wouldn't let her back down. "That's what I want." Even as she spoke the words, she knew they were a torturous lie.

Jake shrugged. "Consider it done. You're off the hook."

"What about Clint?" The agony inside Rachel splintered into a thousand particles of misery.

Jake never took his eyes off the road. "We can work that out. You can stay at Diamond X until I can find a way to tell Clint who I am. Under the circumstances, that's a reasonable request." As an after thought, he added. "Maybe you and Clint should move to Gran's farm. You would probably be more comfortable there."

It was reasonable, and kind, and not at all what she had expected. But it *was* what she had said she wanted. Why, then did she feel so devastated, so utterly shattered? "You're releasing me?"

They were pulling into the parking lot of the Community Center. "Isn't that what you want?" Jake braked the car.

"I don't want Clint to be hurt." The click of her opening seat belt sounded in Rachel's ears and snapped across her frayed nerves.

"That's all you really care about, isn't it?" Jake set his emergency brake. "Clint is the only person who matters to you."

"He's all I have." Rachel fought the tears that choked in her throat. Opening the car door, she put her unsteady legs on the cement parking lot. "Shall we go in?" All she could think of now was finding some way to get through the long evening ahead.

Jake came around the car and took her arm. "I asked too much, didn't I? I asked too much and hoped for the impossible."

His cryptic words only deepened her anguish. "What did you hope for, Jake?"

Jake caught the handle of the door and pulled it open. "Why rehash it now? This is a party. We came here to have fun."

The moment they stepped through the door, every eye in the crowded room turned in their direction. The sudden attention caused Rachel to blink and stare at the man beside her. He looked like some nineteenth century outlaw, strong and rugged, and emanating a raw, magnetic masculinity, coupled with an innate poise.

Rachel's pensive stare heightened the look of moody elegance that accentuated her patrician beauty. Jake didn't give a damn about her. If he cared, he wouldn't have let her go without so much as an argument. He had released her without the slightest protest. It was almost as if he were glad to let her go.

The tension that flared between them was like a match struck in the dark. It glowed and throbbed, with the potential to explode into a million fragments of splintering passion.

Jake bent his mouth to Rachel's ear. "You're on your own. If you need a ride home, let me know. Otherwise, I'll see you in the morning."

He was dismissing her, telling her to get out of his way and out of his life. Garish overhead lights fell across the planes of her fragile facial features as she tossed her head and smiled. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

Turning away from him, Rachel lifted her hand and waved to the tall man standing at the end of the bar.

Mike Goodman returned Rachel's greeting with a broad grin and a wave of his hand. Then leaning backward, he rested his elbows on the bar and let his appreciative eyes slide the length of Rachel's slight figure. "Hello, pretty lady."

Rachel sat on the stool beside him. "Hello cowboy." From the corner of her eye she watched as Jake hurried across the room where he greeted Maddie with a hug and a kiss. Mike asked, "Are you all right?"

Rachel was finally able to tear her gaze from the embracing couple, but not before she caught the intimate look that passed between them. She couldn't stay here and watch the two of them together. "I've never been better." Sliding off the bar stool, she headed for the flashing exit sign over the back door. "I think I'll catch a breath of fresh air."

Without knowing quite how, Rachel found herself outside, on a wide terrace. Leaning against the banister, she stared through the open door. Jake was standing very near

Maddie, smiling down at her. Rachel was seared with a flame of jealousy so intense that it took her breath away.

"Rachel?" a deep voice broke her train of thought.

Rachel whirled around.

Mike Goodman had followed her onto the terrace. "Why did you run away?"

Clammy perspiration broke out in her palms as Rachel pressed her hands together. "Jake and I had a ... " She had intended to say quarrel. It hadn't been a quarrel, it had been a brush-off. "A disagreement."

"Do you want me to call him out here?"

Rachel's breath caught. "Good Lord, no!"

"I think ... " Mike shifted to sit on the banister. "Never mind what I think. I don't intend to be the heavy again."

"You were never the heavy." Rachel met his puzzled stare. "I can't explain, but I can tell you, it's over between Jake and me. I'm not going to marry him. We talked it over and decided to call off our engagement."

The corners of Mike's mouth pulled down as his eyes slitted. "That doesn't sound like the Jake Reardon I know."

From inside came strains of music as a band began to play.

Rachel asked, "Would you dance with me?"

"Considering the tongue lashing I got from my boss the last time I danced with you, I have to refuse."

Well, that was plain enough. Mike didn't want to dance with her. Rachel's chin lifted. "See you around, Mike."

"But Rachel ... " Mike began.

Over her shoulder, she told him, "There must be some male inside who wants to dance with me. I'm going to find him."

There was more than one willing male inside. A regular stag line formed around Rachel after she boldly asked a lanky youth to dance with her. Thirty minutes and several dances later, she sank into a chair and told her latest partner, "I have to catch my breath."

"Would you like a drink?"

The nod of Rachel's head sent him scurrying in the direction of the bar. "Don't go away. I'll be back."

"I'll be here." Rachel leaned back in her chair. From across the room she saw Jake staring at her. He smiled and waved. The smile broke Rachel's heart. She was suddenly furious with him for not loving her and even more enraged with herself for letting him hurt her so deeply. Jake couldn't be satisfied with one woman, he wanted at least two. Rachel was damned if she was going to be the legal member of his harem....

It occurred to Rachel that she had not spoken to Maddie. She moved across the crowded room, deciding, as she went, that her quarrel with Jake was no reason to be rude.

Coming to stand beside Jake, Rachel said, "Hello, Maddie."

It would have been difficult to tell who was the more surprised by her friendly overture, Jake or Maddie. A complicated look of bewilderment passed between them before Maddie replied, with great dignity, "Hello, Rachel."

Suddenly Rachel felt sick inside and totally defeated. Her eyes locked into Jake's sharp stare before she dropped her lashes to stop the tears. "I have to go. Someone's waiting for me." Jake put his arm around Maddie's waist. "And Maddie has promised me this dance."

Rachel tried to look away. She couldn't. The look of adoration that flitted across Maddie's face as Jake led her onto the dance floor, was enough to make Rachel physically ill.

She stared through tear-dimmed eyes at Jake's back, as a knot of pain tightened around her bruised heart. She had to get away before she made a complete fool of herself.

Somewhere between heartbreak and the door, Mike Goodman appeared. Taking Rachel's arm, he led her to a chair. "I'll take you up on that offer to dance, if it's still open.

"

"You want to dance with me?"

"I do. You've turned into the belle of the ball."

Rachel wiped her eyes. "I'd love to dance with you. But I need a drink first."

"I could use a drink myself," Mike said. "Wait here, I'll be back."

A pain had begun to throb in Rachel's temples. She closed her eyes and waited. "I'm back." Rachel opened her eyes to see Mike standing over her, holding two glasses. He held one out to her. "Drink this."

Rachel wrapped her shaking hand around her glass. "What is it?"

"Bourbon, drink it."

"I can't drink this, Mike. I can't handle hard liquor."

"You can't handle getting your heart broken, either." Mike commented, dryly. "Drink!" He sat beside her and watched as she sipped the amber liquid.

After several moments of silence, Mike set his glass on the floor, leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

A soothing warmth had begun to spread through Rachel's stomach. Some of the tension drained from her taut body. "About what?"

"Whatever it is that's tearing you apart." After a short, expectant pause, Mike said, "It's Jake, isn't it?"

"It's always been Jake." Rachel took another sip of bourbon. "All my life, it's been Jake."

Mike stared at the toes of his boots. "So what are you going to do about it?" Rachel raised her head, then closed her eyes. "Nothing, absolutely nothing." "You wouldn't make a very good bronco rider." He gave her a sidelong, knowing glance. "The first thing you have to learn about getting tossed off the back of a bucking horse, is that you get right back up on that ornery critter and try again."

"Don't you ever give up?" Rachel opened her eyes to look at the man beside her. "Cowboys don't know how to give up. It makes for a sore bottom most of the time, but what's a sore butt if you win?"

Despite the aching hurt inside her, Rachel laughed. "Your philosophy stinks." She held out her empty glass. "Could I have another drink?"

Mike studied the glass as he turned it in his fingers. "Let's dance first. A few drinks and a few dances, and you'll be surprised how much better you feel."

Three dances and two drinks later, Rachel was ready to agree. A delicious warmth flowed through her body. Her mind seemed to have disengaged itself. The hurt that had

threatened to throttle her a scant half hour ago, had faded into a hazy euphoria. She held onto Mike's arm and tried to maneuver her wayward feet to a chair. "I need another drink." On the end of a giggle, she added, "Another drink, another dance, another drink. This could go on all night."

"No more drinks." Mike's voice was firm. "You're high as a kite now." He held on to Rachel's elbow. "You'd better sit down."

Rachel perched on the edge of her chair. "I need another drink." "Not on your life."

"Maybe you're right." Rachel put her hand to her spinning head. "I think I'm going to have more than a sore butt tomorrow."

"I'll get you some coffee." Mike ambled in the direction of the bar.

As Rachel dropped her hand, she caught sight of Jake dancing with Maddie, holding her very near, as his mouth brushed her hair. The bourbon dam burst, inundating her, drowning her in pain. Once again, her head began to spin.

Then Mike was at her side, offering her coffee. "Drink this."

The last thing she needed was to be sober. If her pain was any more intense, she might die of it. "I've changed my mind. I want to dance."

"You're in no condition to dance," Mike argued, "You can hardly stand. Why don't I take you home?"

That giggle surfaced again. "Humor me, Mike, I'm drunk." Her words slurred together. "And I want to dance."

"Rachel, please," Mike begged, "Let me take you home."

Rachel wagged her finger near Mike's nose. "I've never been drunk before. I've never raised hell before, but I'm drunk now, and if you don't dance with me, I'm gonna raise hell like you wouldn't believe."

With a rueful grin, Mike led Rachel onto the dance floor. The band began to play a slow, sad song about lost love and cheating hearts. "You win, Rachel. Let's dance."

He pulled her very near and moved gracefully across the floor. "Do you remember the night we went to Kickers' Kountry Korner?"

Rachel nodded. "How could I forget?"

Mike executed a particularly difficult dance step. "Dance with me that way again, lovely lady."

As if it had been previously arranged, the other couples on the floor moved to one side. Then the dance floor darkened, leaving Mike and Rachel surrounded by a softly glowing halo of light. The music began, again, a song that moaned of passion and love in the dark of the night. "Follow me," Mike whispered, "We have an audience. Let's show 'em how it's done."

Rachel was too hurt and too drunk to care about anything but easing the ache that squeezed around her heart like a closing fist. She put her arms around Mike's neck and pressed her breasts into his chest. A small, retreating voice in the back of her head, told her she'd be sorry for her scandalous behavior later. A formidable mixture of jealousy, agony, and bourbon, made her mentally thumb her nose at that small voice of conscience. "Let's show 'em how, cowboy."

Mike pushed his right leg between Rachel's thighs and pasted his body against hers. Lacing his arms around her waist, he began to move sensuously and in perfect time to the throbbing beat of the music.

It was a dance of seduction and surrender. Hips met hips in a free flowing movement that rocked and swayed across the hardwood floor. The meeting was followed by a sensual coming together, eyes, and bodies merging, with lustful enticement, promising the sweetness that union could bring. It moved on to wanton wooing and soft touching that led to shameless exploring and indecent arousal. A series of swinging steps heightened the lustful escalation of desire, pledging ecstatic fruition. Mike twisted his groin into Rachel's pelvic cavity for the lascivious finale, a lustful, dry mouthed, erotic surrender. Swaying hips producing ripples of desire that ebbed and flowed with each sensuous step. The couple rested, gently supporting each other, spent, surfeited. Mike siphoned Rachel's mouth to his lips and kissed her passionately. The music stopped.

The lights came up as Mike released Rachel and bowed to the thunderstruck onlookers before he said from the side of his mouth, "Jake is coming our way. You finally got his attention."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Rachel watched as Jake threaded his way through the press of the crowd. Shoving through the group of startled spectators was not an easy undertaking. Curious individuals who had not already crowded into the small space surrounding the dance floor, were frantically trying to push their way through the knot of humanity that encircled Rachel and Mike. Necks stretched, and heads craned to catch a view of the man and woman who had so recently shocked their audience with a primitive dance of seduction and surrender. Jake used his broad shoulders, and his strong hands to clear the way for his determined feet, pushing forward, he came to stand just outside the circle of the spotlight that haloed Mike and Rachel.

Rachel had more than Jake's attention, she had his dark eyes boring into her, telling her, as no words could, that he was furiously, savagely angry. Yet he spoke softly, gently. "Come along, Rachel. It's time to go home."

A residue of bourbon courage surfaced. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Jake's long fingers closed around her arm. Gently he asserted, "Yes you are. Let's go." Mike was holding Rachel's other arm. "I'll take Rachel home, Jake, if you want to stay."

Jake's mouth compressed into a thin line. "Rachel came with me, she'll leave with me." Then almost apologetically, he added, "This is not your fault, Mike."

"So everybody keeps telling me." Mike's fists clenched at his side. "I've had it Jake, find yourself another foreman." He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked away.

A foggy awareness crept through the haze that surrounded Rachel's brain. Fear mixing with a rising nausea brought a trickle of reality. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Taking her hand, Jake led her toward the front door. "I'm taking you home."

Rachel followed along, all too aware that every eye in the house was on her. She stumbled as she stepped through the door. Jake caught her in time to save her from falling, literally, on her face. Half way across the parking lot, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the car. "Rachel, my darling, you are as drunk as a skunk." He sounded almost happy about Rachel's sad state.

She let her head rest on his shoulder. "I am not your darling."

"I think tonight proves that you are." Jake opened the car door and sat Rachel on the seat, then trotted around to the other side and got in.

As he started the vehicle, she felt herself slipping into blissful oblivion.

She must have lost consciousness. The next thing Rachel knew, strong arms were lifting her from the car. She thought, vaguely, that Don had found her. "I'm glad you're here."

The voice was gentle and assuring, but it wasn't Don's voice. "Relax, Rachel, you're home."

Once inside the front door, Rachel closed her eyes against the bright light. "Don?" Her eyes opened, slowly, cautiously.

Jake laid her gently on the couch. "I'll get you some coffee." August 30, 1999

Sitting up, Rachel rubbed her hands along her shoulders and down her arms. Her head was still spinning. "You're not Don." Her maudlin declaration hung in the humid room. She collapsed on the couch, thinking she might drown in her own remorse. "I want Don." She hiccuped. "Where is my husband?"

Jake sighed and sat beside her. "He's gone."

Dimly, her brain registered that it was Jake who sat beside her. "He'll come back, because he loves me." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "In a way you'll never be able to understand, Don does love me."

A look of infinite sorrow moved across Jake's face and stopped in depths of his ebony eyes. "Rachel, Don't!"

"Don't what?" Her slurring words tumbled from her mouth. "Never mind. I don't care. I can't care." She moaned her misery. "I'm sick." A sudden cramp in the pit of her stomach caused Rachel to double over in pain. "I may throw up."

Jake lifted her into his arms. "I'm putting you to bed. You've had a bad evening."

Rachel stiffened and pushed her hands against his chest. "Put me down. I can put myself to bed, and you can go back to Maddie."

Jake frowned, his dark brows meeting across the bridge of his nose. "You're a charming drunk, Rachel"

"Put me down." Despite her harsh words, she relaxed in his arms.

He carried her to her bedroom and sat her on the bed. "I'll help you undress." His voice was gentle.

Rachel's liquor-numbed brain couldn't take in all that was happening. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. Why did his kindness anger her? "What are you up to? I don't trust you."

"You never have, have you? Maybe you'll learn to, once you admit how much you need me." Jake unzipped her dress, then slid the straps over her shoulders and down her arms. "Let's get out of these clothes."

"You think I need you?" She slapped at his hands. "Will you, for heaven's sake, let me undress myself?" Rachel moved back on the bed. "And stop trying to seduce me."

Jake's hands moved over her body, slowly, sensuously, but his voice was light, almost mocking, "I never try to seduce inebriated ladies."

Her head hurt, and her heart was bruised. Her mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. "It's nice to know you draw the line somewhere."

With a few quick, deft movements, Jake stripped Rachel of her remaining garments.

"Where can I find a gown?" His hands brushed across her breasts.

Arousal was immediate. The nipples stood out, pouting, telling him she wanted him. She folded her arms across her chest as a rigor of desire ripped through her. "Go away, Jake. Go back to Maddie and leave me alone."

He kissed the side of her opened mouth. "Why are you so jealous of Maddie?" He kissed her again. "Admit it, Rachel, you don't want to lose me and you do want to marry me."

"

Suddenly, Rachel was racked by uncontrollable weeping. Over the sobs that shook her frail body, she sobbed, "Yes, damn you, I want to marry you. Because I'm more miserable without you than I am with you."



With a great sigh of what could only be relief, Jake gathered her into his arms. "At last. Tonight was hell for me too, but I had to do something to bring you to your senses." He kissed her once more, a lingering affirmation of his passion cloaked in a gentle declaration of what she decided was affection.

Had Jake really uttered those words of endearment, or was her whiskey soaked brain playing tricks on her again? She would think about it tomorrow when she was sober and rested. "There's a gown in the top drawer, and stop looking so damned pleased. I don't know what you said. I don't know what I said. I'm plastered."

Jake laughed as he opened a drawer of the chest and tossed a night gown over his shoulder. "You've already told me what I needed to know."

Rachel slid the gown over her head and laid down. "The drunk is in bed. Kiss me good night, and you can go."

Jake pivoted on one heel. "Say that again."

Pulling the covers up to her neck, Rachel repeated, "I said you can go."

"No." He was walking toward her now. "Did you ask me to kiss you good night?"

"Would you?"

"I wish I could believe you knew what you're saying."

Rachel yawned. "I do ... " She was sliding into oblivion again.

"Like hell." A flick of the light switch plunged the room into darkness. Jake slammed the door as he left the room.

Consciousness returned slowly as Rachel struggled to wakefulness. Cautiously, she opened her eyes. Sunlight was streaming through the windows. She pressed her fingers to her pounding temples and moaned.

From a corner of the room, a voice sounded. "Good morning."

Rachel sat bolt upright in bed, frightened half out of her wits.

Jake was sprawled in the chintz chair by the window, his feet stretched out in front of him, a smile wreathing his face. "How do you feel?"

Rachel groaned as she massaged her temples with her finger tips. "Like death warmed

"

over.

"It's called a hangover, Darling." Jake chuckled. "You got soused last night."

Rachel laid back down and pulled the sheet up under her arms. "I don't remember much about last night." Jake's enigmatic expression made her fear the worst. "Did I make a fool of myself?" Hazy memories filtered through her mind. "Did I embarrass you?"

"You did what I hoped you'd do." Jake smiled ruefully. "Only to a greater degree and with more force than was necessary."

She had no idea what he was talking about. "I think I behaved shamefully. I've never been drunk before." Rachel grimaced as she carefully sat up on the side of the bed. "I have a nest of hornets in my head."

Jake's mouth twitched with amusement. "Do you remember anything that happened last night?"

"I remember dancing with Mike. I remember you bringing me home and putting me to bed."

"Do you remember telling me you were more miserable without me than you were with me?" Jake's voice was probing.

That she did remember. Rachel bowed her aching head. "Go away, Jake."

"Rachel, I want an answer."

Rachel lifted her face. "How do I know what I said? I was drunk." "But you're sober now, and I need some answers."

"And I'm ill." Rachel's stomach lurched. "Stop nagging. Clint and I will move to Gran's farm tomorrow."

"No." Jake declared decisively. "You won't."

Rachel carefully turned her head so she could stare at him. "Go to hell, Jake."

An aura of grim determination surrounded him, making his affirming nod appear almost menacing. "I'm not going anywhere. Neither are you. Forget any thought of moving away. You will stay right here, at Diamond X, either as my wife, or as my house guest."

His words registered slowly. "For how long?"

"For as long as it takes." Jake made a tent of his strong, slender fingers. "Or do you want to unburden your soul to our son right now?"

His words burst like a skyrocket inside her aching head, causing her to wince with pain.

"That's *some* choice."

"Take it or leave it. "

"I need time to think about this."

"Now is all the time you have. I'm waiting." He sat watching her, like a predator contemplating his prey.

Hurt and bewilderment washed over her, weighted by a growing sense of defeat. She could stay here and die a little each time Jake flaunted Maddie, or some other woman, before her, or she could marry him and accept his infidelities. Remembering how she had felt when she saw him with Maddie last night was enough to send her into a black haze of despondent jealousy. With a resolve born of desperation, Rachel blurted out, "I'll marry you."

"On my terms?" He questioned.

She had known since the moment Jake had freed her from her promise to marry him, that any crumb he could offer was better than living the rest of her life without him. "On your terms."

Jake lifted one dark eyebrow. "Are you proposing marriage?" Her last vestige of pride fell away. "Yes."

"I accept." His smile returned. "I called Judge Martin early this morning. We have an appointment with him in his chambers at eleven thirty."

A resigned sigh fell from Rachel's dry lips. Jake had made her crawl back to him. He was exacting his revenge, demanding

every ounce of his pound of flesh. "Go away, Jake." She lay back on the bed and put her hand over her face.

He came across the room and sat beside her, then put his arms on each side of her, pinning her to the mattress. "You still don't trust me, do you?" Pulling her hand away, he brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face.

Rachel wondered how she could love a man who felt no such emotion for her. "Trust has nothing to do with this. I'm doing what's best for Clint."

"And you'd rather have me around as your husband than have me free to pursue another woman."

She closed her eyes against his searching stare. "You don't have to pretend with me. I know you plan to do both. You arranged that entire misadventure last night. You knew I'd be jealous of Maddie."

Jake moved back. "I set the scenario in motion, but you carried it to its rather spectacular conclusion." A wry grin punctuated his observation. "You should have a little faith in the man you are going to marry."

Once she had entrusted her heart and soul into his keeping, and he had tossed them away like so much rubbish. Now he was offering her half a loaf. "I have no illusions, Jake. I'm prepared to accept what is and make the best of it."

Jake rose. Anger emanated from his tense body. "Get dressed. We have to leave soon." He walked swiftly from the room.

Rachel set one foot on the floor and felt splinters of pain shoot through the top of her head. But the pain in her head was nothing to compare to the pain in her heart. "The bitter pill of reality has no therapeutic value," she told herself. Her heart ache was more severe and more debilitating than her headache. By the time Rachel got into Jake's car an hour later, the pounding in her head had reduced to a dull thud. She looked toward the tall, tacit man beside her. "We should tell Clint we're going out."

Without looking her way, Jake replied, "We can talk to Clint when we get back."

Rachel frowned. "Maybe we should give ourselves some more time."

Jake's dark eyes cut in her direction. "Do you want to back out, Rachel?"

Her ambivalence was pulling her apart. She didn't want to commit, and she couldn't bear to let him go. "What will Clint say when he finds out we slipped away, like two wayward teenagers and got married?"

Jake turned the key in the ignition. The motor coughed to life. "Do you or don't you?" "I do."

The car sped away.

The ceremony was brief, and almost comic. Jake was the only person present who looked pleased with what was taking place. The dignified, gray-haired judge squirmed as he set about to unite an obviously happy, very clear-headed man and a morose, hung over, but very attractive woman. The two witnesses, a tall young secretary and a short, fat file clerk, were in turn, bored and amused. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief when the door of the judge's chamber slammed behind them, leaving the newlyweds standing alone in the wide front corridor of the court house.

Dear God, Rachel thought with a sinking sense of finality, what have I done? She stole a glance at the tall man beside her. She had been in love with him for over twenty years, and now, at long last, she was his wife. Why then, did she feel so empty and defeated? She forced her aching heart to accept a truth her head had always known. She loved Jake, but he didn't love her. She must accept the bitter truth. But he was her husband now, and alas, her fate also.

"Let's go home." Jake took her arm as he spoke.

Rachel quickened her steps to keep pace with Jake's long strides. The pain in her aching head was almost as harsh as the pain that moved in around her bruised heart.

A tense silence followed them down the hall, out of the building and across the crowded parking lot.

Jake held the door open for Rachel, and she got into the car. Still neither of them spoke. It was as if there was no proper phrase to utter, no convenient statement to frame the emotions that they were experiencing. They drove through the main street of town, past the square and on to the interstate without speaking, or even looking at each other.

Rachel curled up in the far corner of her seat and stared out the car window. Jake kept his eyes on the road, holding the steering wheel as if he thought it would escape if he loosened his grip.

Finally, she could stand no more, into the deafening silence, Rachel asked, "Do you know where Clint was last night?"

Jake's fingers relaxed as he glanced in her direction. "We've been married less than an hour, and all you can think of is Clint?"

"Was he with Amanda?" Belatedly, it occurred to Rachel that Amanda hadn't been at the party.

"Clint and Amanda went to a George Strait concert in San Antonio."

Rachel's surprise was replaced by a nagging suspicion. "You deliberately got rid of Clint and Amanda. You didn't want them to come to the party." Her accusation was tagged with a querulous, "Why?"

"Amanda is a big George Strait fan. She told me Clint was too. I didn't plan for the concert and the benefit to coincide. It just happened."

"Who bought the tickets?"

Jake turned off the interstate and on to a farm to market road. "Do you want to spend our first hours as man and wife arguing?"

That was the last thing she wanted. "No."

Jake sped up to pass a giant tractor that lumbered along the narrow road. "Why don't we concentrate on us for a change? I have a surprise for you. We're going away for a few days, just the two of us."

An incredible joy budded inside her, but only for a moment. She nipped it, before it had time to burst and bloom. "You stayed so long in Houston when Clint was in the hospital. Can you afford to go away again, so soon?"

"Do you want to go away with me?" Jake's brow wrinkled in thought. "Should I have talked to you before I planned this?"

Rachel held her emotions in tight rein, afraid to let her happiness show. "You didn't need to ask, and I'd like to go away with you."

Jake maneuvered the car across the cattle guard as he cast a meaningful glance in her direction. "Remember how it was with us, Rachel? We can find that magic again."

Rachel's heart melted, as a singing happiness coursed through her veins. This time she held on to that feeling of hopeful jubilation. Maybe there was some hope for this marriage after all. "Where are we going?"

Jake braked the car and turned his full gaze on Rachel. "That, my darling, is a surprise, but we leave as soon as you can pack a bag."

Rachel unfastened her seat belt. "If I don't know where I'm going, how do I know what to pack?" She felt giddy with pleasure.

"I have a very secluded cabin in the Davis Mountains up in the Big Bend country. That's where we're going."

Rachel succumbed, almost unwillingly, to complete happiness. "I can be ready in an hour."

Jake took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. "That sounds wonderful."

Arm in arm they walked up the steps of the ranch house.

Maddie met them at the door, her face a study in outraged fury. Without so much as a greeting, she charged, "Rachel, your son spent the night with my daughter in San Antonio last night. They got home about an hour ago." Placing her hands on her hips, she screeched, "Amanda is barely eighteen years old, and Clint is a twenty-year-old man. He took advantage of my child."

Rachel's joy ebbed away on a wave of anxiety. "You must be mistaken. Maybe you misunderstood."

Throwing both hand in the air, Maddie screeched, "Clint and Amanda slept together. They admitted it! Your son seduced my daughter."

Jake's sharp command sliced the air. "That's enough, Maddie. We won't solve this by screaming at each other. Where are Clint and Amanda now?"

"I sent Amanda home. Then I had a little talk with Clint. He admitted everything."

Maddie glared at Rachel. "Then he took off toward the barn."

Jake ran an anxious hand through his hair. "What did you say to Clint? Maddie, if you ... "

The ringing of the telephone cut across Jake's harsh words.

Rachel's knees gave way. She dropped into a chair and watched as Maddie spoke a curt, "Hello," into the receiver, then slowly sank onto the couch, her breath coming in short gasps, as she turned pale as a ghost. "No! Oh, God, no!"

In two swift strides Jake covered the space between him and Maddie. Yanking the telephone from her hand, he barked into the receiver, "This is Jake Reardon." The ensuing silence throbbed like an open wound. After what seemed a short eternity, Jake said, "I see. Someone will be there before night fall." He dropped the telephone back into its cradle. "That was the State Prison at Huntsville. Wayne Duncan died in his sleep early this morning."

Maddie pushed her fist into her mouth and began to cry hysterically. "No, no. I can't face this, not now."

Jake was looking more than a little unsettled himself. "Where is Mike?"

"I don't know." Maddie admitted, between wails. "He left last night after the party. He said he'd quit his job ... " Her words faded on the end of a wrenching sob.

"Come on," Jake ordered. "I'll drive you to the airport." He took Maddie by the arm and moved swiftly toward the door. "Then I'll try to find Mike."

"I can't go to that horrible place alone," Maddie moaned.

Still holding onto Maddie's arm, Jake turned to face Rachel. "I'll be back as soon as possible. Call Amanda, get her over here then tell her what happened, and Rachel, be gentle."

"I'm not the person to do that." Jake's concern for Maddie and Amanda told Rachel as nothing else could, how foolish her little fantasy of a happy marriage had been.

Jake seemed oblivious to the pain in Rachel's voice. "Then find Clint and let him break it to her." Gone was any thought of Jake and Rachel's promised honeymoon. Why

should she be so surprised? This was the man who had walked out on her twenty years ago without so much as a backward glance.

"Jake?" Hurt and longing lay naked in Rachel's eyes.

Impatiently, Jake snapped, "Not now, Rachel."

The aching defeat that rose in Rachel's throat closed over any words she might have uttered. She bowed her head and closed her eyes, tasting the dregs of utter desolation.

As the door closed, Jake called out, "Take care of Amanda, Rachel."

Rachel sat for a long time staring at the closed door. Her brief happiness was being washed away by the sweeping tide of reality. Jake and Maddie were lovers, and Jake had no intention of ending that relationship. It was time to stop hoping for the impossible.

Rachel took small comfort in knowing that Jake still needed her to help him smooth the way toward an understanding with Clint. Jake didn't love her, but he did need her. That wasn't even half a loaf, but it was better than nothing at all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Mother?"

The word impinged on Rachel's miserable thoughts. She turned to see her son leaning against the door jamb, A weary expression on his unshaven face. "Clint? Where did you come from?"

His bleary eyes narrowed. "That should be my question."

He looked so tired, so worn and weary. "Come in, darling. I have something to tell you."

Sooner or later he would have to be told about her marriage to Jake. Rachel drew a deep breath, "Jake and I drove over to Jourdanton this morning." She wanted to break the news to Clint as gently as possible. "That's the county seat."

"I know everything. Maddie told me."

She could have been talking to a stranger. "I thought you wanted to know where I'd been."

"I don't give a damn about where you've been."

Rachel pressed one hand to her throat quelling the pulse that throbbed there. "You asked ... "

With a sweep of one hand, Clint interrupted. "*You* asked where I came from." His expression was grim as he watched her. "Why don't *you* tell *me*?"

She shivered a little at his expression. "Maddie told us what happened between you and Amanda. She's very upset. Do you want to talk about it?"

Bitterly, he shot back, "What I do with Amanda is none of your damn business."

Rachel paled under his cold stare. I'm your mother. You can tell me."

Clint limped across the room. "Maddie really lowered the boom on me. She said I wasn't fit to touch her daughter." A weary disillusionment cloaked his words.

"She's upset." Rachel shrank back as Clint came nearer. "She'll get over it. Jake and I both think you can work this out."

"You and Jake, huh?" Clint questioned on a sneer. "Who are you and Jake to give advice to anyone?"

Rachel ignored his harsh words. Her anger was directed at Maddie. "You're good enough for any woman who ever lived."

"Maddie doesn't think so. She called me a bastard." Clint came down beside Rachel and caught her arms with his hands. "Am I a bastard, mother?" His cold blue eyes searched Rachel's pale face.

Rachel felt the world begin dissolve around her. "What did Maddie tell you?" She was overwhelmed by a sensation that was dangerously near panic.

An undercurrent of ruthlessness gave Clint's soft voice the cutting quality of a sharp knife. "She said Jake Reardon is my father."

"Surely, you didn't believe her!" The words found their way over a suffocating lump that rose in Rachel's throat.

Clint's icicle blue eyes glittered with frigid anger. "She showed me proof. It's hard to argue with a birth certificate, and the medical records of the man I thought was my father."

Rachel's heart reeled under the blow of his words. That treacherous truth that had lurked in the shadows for all these years was suddenly, boldly, confronting her. "Maddie took those papers from Jake's office. She stole them!"

"So that makes her a criminal?" Clint pondered for a moment, then asked, "And what are you, Mother? A liar, a cheat? Did Dad marry you out of pity, or did you bribe him? He knew I wasn't his child."

"Darling, listen to me." A frantic note crept into Rachel's voice. "I can explain." Very calmly, Clint answered, "Just tell me. Is it true?" She thought, inanely, that he should be angry, furious, shouting his rage. Instead, he sat beside her, calm and collected, asking in icy tones, that she confirm or deny his accusation.

"I didn't want you to learn this from a stranger." Rachel whispered brokenly.

"Then it is true." Very slowly, Clint got to his feet. "How could you do this to me?" He began to limp toward the door.

"Stop! Clint, please, listen to me!" Rachel's panic escalated with her rising voice. "Come back. I can explain. We can talk. Please, don't turn away from me!"

Without looking back, Clint answered. "I don't want an explanation from you. I don't want anything from you, ever again."

Tears streamed from Rachel's eyes and rolled down her face. "Everything I ever did, I did for you. Don't you see? Can't you understand?"

His back stiff, his demeanor unbending, Clint interrupted with a sharp cry. "Stop it! For God's sake, will you stop it?" A sound not unlike a sob shook in his voice, shivered through his body. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say."

"But you have to hear my side. I'm your mother." The pain inside Rachel was a raw, living thing.

Swiftly, Clint turned. "You're not my mother. I don't have a mother. Why don't you go away and leave me alone?" With that scalding admonition, Clint limped through the door and disappeared down the hall.

Once, long ago a vicious lie had separated Rachel from the only man she could ever love, snatching the flame of happiness from her, leaving only the ashes of rejection. In the aftermath of heartbreak, she had been companion to loneliness, surviving day after dreary day, with only deferred hope and bittersweet memories to sustain her. But she had survived because she had a son to protect and nurture.

Now, Ironically, a long hidden truth had taken that son from her, and in the process had robbed him of the only father he had ever known.

Her pain-numbed mind slowly absorbed another reality. She would only complicate any future effort Jake made to reconcile with Clint. The one thing that could bind Jake to her was gone, snatched away this time by the bitter, galling truth.

And then, of course, there was Maddie, the woman Jake had chosen to be with before he knew Clint was his son, and Maddie was now a free woman.

How cruel fate was. Even as Maddie's husband lay dying, Jake was exchanging wedding vows with Rachel. In the moments Jake and Rachel had been planning their honeymoon, Maddie had been telling Clint Jake was his father. An emotion too desolate to name lodged in Rachel's stomach and clawed its way up her backbone. She had lost her son and her husband. Any love or respect Clint had ever felt for her was gone, buried under the avalanche of a precipitous truth. The promise that Jake had made to love and



cherish was forgotten the instant Maddie needed him. So much for truth held in silence and vows spoken in haste.

Rachel lifted her tear stained face and stared into space. Once Jake had told her that what she did best was run. Maybe that's what she should do now. She wiped at her tears, and smiled - a sad, resigned grimace. There would be no Don this time to aid and abet her escape. And she carried no child under her heart. This was a journey she must make alone.

She was operating now on pure adrenaline. Moving like a robot, Rachel went to her room and packed a bag. Then she walked the five miles from the ranch house to the highway, where she sat on the heavy bag and waited for a cross country bus to appear.

The tears were gone, replaced by a creeping emotional paralysis that anesthetized her pain. When the shock wore away, and it would with time, She would fall apart at the seams. She wanted to be a long way from Diamond X when that happened.

A half hour later Rachel lugged her bag aboard a sleek silver bullet of a bus bound for El Paso. She didn't care where the bus was going. El Paso was as good a destination as any.

Despair coupled with a weariness that seemed to seep into the marrow of her bones, caused Rachel to lay her head back on her seat and close her eyes. "Are you going all the way to El Paso?"

Rachel turned to stare at the gaunt woman seated beside her. "I don't know."

The woman leaned forward and studied Rachel's tired features. "Are you all right, Dearie?"

She would never be all right again. "I'm feeling a little weary."

"Well, I can identify with that." The woman extended one work-worn hand. "My name is Etta Johnson."

"Rachel, Rachel Mac ... " Rachel corrected herself. "Rachel Reardon. I'm happy to know you."

Etta Johnson reached into the bag at her feet and took out a half-knitted sweater. "This is for my granddaughter." She pulled a strand of yarn across the back of her hand. "She'll be three in May. Do you have any grandchildren?"

"No." Rachel smiled, wondering why she didn't feel the least offended by Etta's asking such a personal question.

"Have you been visiting relatives?" Etta deftly slipped stitches from one needle to another.

"Yes." Rachel consoled herself with the thought that she had not told a complete lie.

Etta's fingers moved up and down the long knitting needles. "Me too. I've been with my sister, Dorothy, over in Karnes City." Etta laid her knitting across her bony lap and sighed. "I didn't want to come home, but I had no choice."

Absently, Rachel commented. "That's too bad."

"Ain't it though?" Etta agreed. "But, like I told Dorothy, my first duty is to Otto and the business."

Rachel stared out the window at the moving countryside. "Oh?"

"Otto's my husband." Etta went on to explain. "I told him when he hired Ruby that she wasn't dependable. But would he listen to me? No. I said, hire the older woman. I said,

young pretty girls are all flighty. Now she's gone. Took off with a trucker from Detroit. Well, it serves him right."

Rachel tried to hide a fugitive grin. "The trucker or Otto?"

Etta smiled, revealing a deep dimple. "Both, probably."

"Maybe she'll come back." Rachel watched Etta studiously count stitches.

"I think I dropped a stitch," Etta complained. She folded the knitting and put it back into the bag at her feet. "Now what was I saying? Oh, yes. It's not like just anybody will come out to the Red Dog and work."

Rachel found herself wanting to continue her conversation with Etta. It took her mind off her own misery. "What is the Red Dog?"

"The Red Dog is mine and Otto's business. It's a restaurant and bar. The place is twelve miles off the interstate, miles from any town, so any help we hire has to live out there, or make the long drive to and from Paisano ever day. Ruby had a nice room, and free meals, all her tips and a fair salary. Then along came some sweet talking man, and she took off." Etta popped the air with the snap of her fingers. "Just like that. Maybe next time Otto will listen to me."

"Maybe he will," Rachel agreed.

"Are you going as far as Piasano?"

"I don't know where Piasano is." Rachel answered absently.

"Piasano's over in Presidio County, the other side of

Alpine." Etta made a wry face. "If you wink going through, you miss it." She was silent for a moment, then curiosity seemed to nudge her into asking, "Who were you visiting?"

"My son." Rachel turned to stare out the window, trying to conceal her tears. Etta reached into the bag at her feet, pulled out a tissue and offered it to Rachel. "Where is your home?"

"I don't have a home." Rachel used the tissue to blot her eyes.

Etta's voice rose in indignation. "Did your son throw you out?"

"We had a quarrel." Rachel slipped the soggy tissue into her pocket.

Etta's head jerked around to stare at Rachel. "You should have stood up to him. Do you have a husband?"

Rachel's angry tone revealed the hurt she felt. "He went off with another woman." "The dirty no-good rat." Etta sympathized. "That explains why you caught the bus out in the middle of nowhere, and why you look so down-and-out."

A new spate of tears found their way into Rachel's eyes. "I shouldn't have married him in the first place. I knew he didn't love me."

Etta laid her hand on Rachel's arm. "Things may not be as bad as you think. Maybe you're making a mistake by running away."

"If I am, It won't be the first mistake I ever made." Being able to talk about the trauma of what had so recently transpired was strangely comforting.

"Sometimes things ain't as bad as they seem at first blush," Etta said as she patted Rachel's arm.

Rachel laid her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. "You don't know the whole story. Jake, my husband, has been carrying on with another woman for years. He finally left with her."

"What about your son, Why did he quarrel with you?"

"He's involved with the other woman's daughter." Rachel knew she was manipulating the truth, leaving a false impression. She justified her actions by telling herself she needed Etta's sympathetic ear and compassionate understanding. "They've been having an affair too."

That was enough to cause Etta's mouth to fall open in surprise. "Good Lord! That sounds like a story you hear on one of them talk shows on TV. Don't you have some friends somewhere? Isn't there someone who will take you in?"

Rachel's brow wrinkled. "One, maybe, but he'd tell my son where I was the moment he knew I had run away."

"You poor little thing. Whatever will you do? Wherever will you go?"

Tears slid from beneath Rachel's eyelids and rolled down her pallid face. She reached to retrieve her soggy tissue. "I don't know, but I can't go back there." She inclined her head in the direction of Diamond X.

"Don't you fret none. I think you and me just solved each other's problems." Etta's mouth shaped into a determined grin. "You need a home, and I need a waitress. Ever worked in a restaurant before?"

Rachel surprised herself by saying, "I ran a household for twenty years, that should account for something."

"That ain't exactly the same, but close enough, I think to make a difference." A sly smile lit Etta's face. "Otto would take to you in a New York minute. He does have an eye for pretty women. How would you like to come out to the Red Dog and take Ruby's place?"

Surprise brought Rachel's head down. "You mean that, Don't you?"

"I sure do." Etta shook her head in affirmation. "We need help, you need a job. Are you interested?"

Rachel was interested, and over a deep sigh of relief, she told Etta so. "That would be wonderful."

"You lean back now and get some rest." Etta reached, once again for her knitting. "Your husband sounds like my daughter's first husband, rotten and ornery to the core."

Rachel closed her eyes, but she knew she wouldn't sleep. Jake's rugged face rose up before her, smiling, teasing, telling her that he wanted her to be his wife, assuring her that they could, once again, find the magic they had once known together. Her heart seemed to break and shatter inside her. Without opening her eyes, she asked, "Would it surprise you if I told you that I love my husband very much?"

"Well, I figured that out right off." Irony infused Etta's reply. "That's always the way it is. Somebody loves, another somebody don't. Then there's always trouble and hell to pay afterward. Get some rest now. You look plumb tuckered out."

Rachel squeezed her eyes together. She was tired, weary and worn both physically and emotionally. "I can't sleep." But she did.

She was brought back to jarring wakefulness by Etta shaking her shoulder. "Wake up, Dearie. We're almost to Piasino. Otto will be there, all in a dither because he had to leave Buggar to mind the bar while he came after me."

Rachel turned her head from side to side, trying to reorient herself. "Who is Buggar?"

"Buggar is Otto's nephew. Buggar's not his real name," Etta explained as she put her knitting bag on her lap and hung her purse over her shoulder. "His mamma reads them romantic English novels all the time. Buggar's real name is Cyril. But nobody but his mamma ever calls him that."

Otto Johnson was short, rotund, and as Etta had predicted, in a hurry. He was waiting when the driver opened the bus door. As Etta came down the steps, he grabbed her arm. "Let's get a move on. I left Buggar alone out at the Red Dog."

Etta introduced Rachel with a flourish. "This here is Rachel. I hired her to take Ruby's place."

Otto's fat face screwed up in a frown. "Did Etta tell you where we live?" Rachel's fingers were lost in the grasp of his big slab of a hand. "Are you sure you want to go a way out there?"

"Etta explained everything." Rachel pulled her hand from Otto's grasp. He looked formidable, almost sinister. For the first time Rachel had misgivings. "I need a job."

"Then let's go. The truck is parked over there." Otto pointed toward a battered fiftynine Ford pickup. "Buggar has probably drunk up all the beer in the box by now."

Rachel rode on the outside of Etta and listened as she and Otto discussed a host of relatives and friends. Her weary backside pushed into the worn seat. She began to wonder just what she was letting herself in for.

Otto leaned around Etta and glared at Rachel. "'Souse me, Rachel, but I have to ask, How much experience have you had working in a bar?"

Etta patted Otto's knee. "Rachel has worked as a waitress before, sort of."

"Good." Otto squinted against the glare of the setting sun. "She don't look like the type to me, but then beggars can't be choosers. We're lucky to find anybody who's willing to come way out here to live and work."

"Well at least, she's not going to run off with some Yankee trucker." Etta gave Otto's knee another pat. "Rachel's husband took off with another woman and broke her heart. She won't be looking at another man for a long time."

Otto looked anything but assured. "I sure hope this works out." He pushed the accelerator down with a vengeance. "Right now my big worry is Buggar and my beer." The pickup roared down the road in a cloud of red dust.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Rachel tied her tiny triangular apron around her waist and pulled a net over her hair, then stepped back to survey her image in the mirror. The uniform that had been a snug fit three months before, hung from her shoulders now. Small wonder, for the past three months she had dwelt in the dark shadows of continual sorrow....

Adjusting to being in a new place with complete strangers had been an added burden. Etta and Otto were too pleased to have an employee they could depend on, to be overly demanding. When Rachel made it plain that she preferred to spend her leisure time alone, they had left her to her own devices. Buggar, the only other permanent resident at the Red Dog, lost interest when Rachel told him she was married. The truckers who stopped for meals, or to sleep overnight in their eighteen-wheelers, were congenial, but distant. And so, Rachel learned anew, the awesome pain of rejection and the appalling power of loneliness.

Her twofold loss was an affliction she couldn't shake. Through the first days of learning a new job, she was able to push some of the hurt to the back of her mind. But always lurking behind her serene facade, was the agony of a grief too deep to measure, too profound to gauge. Perhaps her only salvation lay in learning how to forget.

Still she held on to her memories, for by some paradoxical twist of logic, the pain of remembering the past, was all that made the present bearable. Her reminiscence always began by recalling some pleasant time with Clint. But her treacherous mind inevitably strayed to Jake, and the brief, but ecstatic affair they had shared twenty years before. Slowly, painfully, she came to grips with a revealing truth. Clint was no longer the sun of her universe, Jake was. Maybe he had always been. Her love for Clint had its roots in the fact that he was Jake's son.

She always returned to one indisputable reality. She had failed the son she loved and lost the man she adored. They were as irreclaimable now, as were her futile hopes and foolish dreams. How did she learn to live with that damning knowledge? For that question there seemed to be no answer.

But three months of living with continual sorrow had brought Rachel not only pain, but a measure of insight. She had come to realize that what happened with Jake and Clint was inevitable. She even succeeded in making herself believe that it was better that Clint learned Jake was his father before she and Jake could consummate their marriage. If Jake had made love to her, she would never have found the strength to leave him. She found a kind of perverted comfort in knowing that under the existing circumstances, the marriage could be annulled.

With the acceptance of that bitter knowledge, came another pressing and unwelcome truth. If she was to set Jake free, She had to find the strength to go back to Summerville.

And then there was Clint. She had done him a grave injustice. She had to find him and tell him so. If he couldn't accept her apology, She would move quietly out of his life. But she had to try, just once more, to make him understand.

But seeing Jake again, was another matter. That, she didn't intend to do. With no little difficulty, Rachel made herself accept the fact that even if Wayne Duncan had not died,

her marriage to Jake was doomed. Jake had married her to bind Clint to him. That was no basis for a marriage.

In the dark hours of this dawning day, Rachel had awakened, more lost and despondent than she had ever thought possible. With that despondency came a realization. She couldn't face another twenty years of emptiness and desolation. She had to set her past in order. Then and only then would she be free to struggle with the prospect of starting over again.

She pushed from her mind any thought that Clint might not be at Diamond X. A sixth sense told her that any added weight of sorrow would crush her completely. The time had come to make plans, then set them in motion.

She began by giving Otto and Etta a two-week's notice. "I've decided to go home." "But you said you didn't have a home," Etta argued, reluctant to accept Rachel's announcement.

"I want to see my son," Rachel explained.

"Well, I figured it was too good to last." Otto moved his head from side to side, causing his heavy jowls to shake. "But maybe all isn't lost. Ruby is back in Piasano. She wants to come back to work for us."

"You've been very kind to me," Rachel told them. "But I can't stay. I hope you will understand. I'm glad Ruby wants to take my place."

"We won't find anybody to take your place." Etta patted Rachel's arm in a brief display of affection. "But Ruby is better than nobody."

Those two endless weeks dragged by with Etta scolding Rachel almost daily. "You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive, and you insist on working two shifts."

"I feel great." Rachel lied with convincing ease. "Besides, I need the extra money."

"You don't look anywhere near great." Etta pursed her lips. "A puff of wind would blow you away! That husband of yours sure did a fine job of breaking your heart. And in spite of all of he's done, you still love him, don't you?"

An old familiar pain moved in around Rachel's heart. "A love like mine doesn't die." "You can come back here after you settle matters with your son, if you want to," Etta offered with a hopeful wave of her hand.

"You're very kind." Rachel was touched by Etta's gesture of friendship. "But I've decided to go to Dallas to live."

"What about your husband?"

"I don't intend to see him ever again. I'm going to give him his freedom."

Etta reasoned, "You have to see him sooner or later, even to divorce him." "I don't think so. Everything can be done through a lawyer."

"It don't work that way," Etta argued. "When my daughter divorced her first husband, it was like a three-ringed circus. The rascal fought the divorce. Your husband might do the same thing."

Rachel didn't want to explain that all she needed was an annulment. "I'll do what I have to do. I can't go on living in limbo."

"You won't be living at all if you don't start taking better care of yourself," Etta scolded.

"I'll do that," Rachel promised. And she did try. She worked fewer hours and went to bed promptly at ten each night, although too often sleep wouldn't come until the wee

hours of the morning. Time crept by. The days seemed to meld together in one hazy stretch of endless waiting, until, at last, she was counting the hours until she could leave the Red Dog.

But when that time finally arrived, Rachel found herself apprehensive about going. Here, at least she had found a measure of security and some stability and order. Almost reluctantly, she packed her bag, bade Etta and Buggar a hesitant goodbye and got into the old pickup beside Otto.

Once in Piasano, Rachel caught a bus to Del Rio. There she rented a car and began the long tedious drive to Summerville. The country side was ablaze with the many colors of autumn. The automobile she had rented purred under her touch, but the journey was not a happy one. Over and over Rachel rehearsed in her mind, what she would say to Clint, refusing, as words of apology slid through her head, to think that Clint might not be at Diamond X.

Another, more disturbing, thought surfaced. How would she know if she didn't go to Diamond X herself and find out? Panic threatened. She couldn't do that. A small amount of calm came as she reasoned that she had to see David Patton anyway, to sign the annulment papers. She would ask the attorney to set up a meeting with Clint. A pseudo serenity took over. "I'll get a room at the Shady Rest Motel, then call David." Having decided on some course of action, Rachel relaxed and began to enjoy the drive.

Darkness hung around the edges of the horizon by the time she reached the Shady Rest. The room she was given, even though it was much smaller and less elegant than the suite she had stayed in all those long months before, was a welcome sight. Too tired to think or move, Rachel climbed into bed and fell promptly into a deep slumber.

She slept far into the morning and awakened feeling an instant uneasiness. This would be a difficult day, and the sooner she started, the sooner she would be done. She reached for the telephone.

The female voice on the other end of the line gasped when Rachel identified herself and asked if she could speak to David Patton.

"Did you say Rachel MacCall? A long pause, then, "Do you mean Rachel Reardon?"

Technically, Rachel supposed, the voice was correct. "Yes. May I speak to Mr. Patton?"

In a matter of seconds David Patton's smooth voice sounded in Rachel's ear. "Mrs. Reardon. This is a pleasant surprise. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to see you as soon as possible. I know this is short notice, but ... " David interrupted. "That's quite all right. Where are you now?"

"I'm at the Shady Rest Motel. Can I come in this morning?" Rachel was anxious to get on with this painful business.

"I'm very busy today. I don't know ... " David's voice faded.

"I need to talk to you, Mr. Patton," Rachel said with gentle insistence.

"Perhaps I could work you in. This is short notice."

Maybe she had made a mistake asking David Patton to see her without calling ahead. "If you can't see me today, I'll go to an attorney in San Antonio." After brief consideration, Rachel concluded. "Maybe that's what I should do anyway."

"If you could come to my office within the hour, I could work you in."

David sounded as uneasy as Rachel felt. "I'll be there in thirty minutes." She hung up the phone.

Rachel showered and dressed in record time, then checked out of the motel and raced to her appointment with David without so much as a cup of coffee to soothe her jangled nerves.

David's young secretary welcomed Rachel with polite formality. "Mr. Patton is expecting you."

Rachel had been prepared to wait. She glanced at her watch, then scanned the empty office. "I thought Mr. Patton was busy."

"He's working on a brief." The secretary looked up from her computer. "He doesn't like to be interrupted, but he has made an exception in your case. This way, please." She pushed her chair back and motioned with her hand.

David was seated behind his desk. He didn't bother rising. "Sit down, Mrs. Reardon. I'll be with you as in a few minutes." How cold and distant he was. This was very different from the welcome she had received when she had come here to talk about Gran's will. Rachel sat on the edge of a chair and waited.

After several minutes of studious paper shuffling, David glanced in Rachel's direction. "How may I help you, Mrs. Reardon?"

Rachel swallowed. "I hope I am not overstepping some legal or ethical boundary. I want to engage your services."

David's face was stern. "Perhaps you should explain further. What can I do for you, Mrs. Reardon?"

Rachel flinched. "I prefer to be called Mrs. MacCall."

"But your legal name is Mrs. Reardon."

Rachel wandered how he could be so sure of that fact, when she didn't know for sure herself if her marriage was valid. "How do you know that?"

"Your husband has spent the last three months looking for you. His patience is stretched to the breaking point."

"I know he wants his freedom." Saying those words caused Rachel an unexpected jab of pain. "But we can talk about that later."

"There's something else more pressing?"

There was nothing to be gained by equivocating. "Yes. I don't think I am legally Mrs. Reardon. The marriage was never consummated. I am willing to give Jake an annulment, but I have to see my son first."

Rachel had never seen a human being look so unsure, so uncomfortable. David tugged at his mustache. "Have you talked to Jake about this annulment you think he wants?"

"There's no point in dragging this thing out. I'm willing to sign the necessary papers. Can you take care of it for me?"

In a strained voice, David answered, "I can't represent you Mrs. Reardon. It would be a conflict of interests."

Rachel protested. "But there's not another attorney in Summerville. I'm going to Dallas tomorrow. I want to talk to my son before I leave." Impulsively, she got to her feet. "How could representing me be a conflict of interest?" There could be only one answer to that. David was already representing Jake. Raising her chin, Rachel charged, "Don't call me Mrs. Reardon."



On the end of a long sigh, David pleaded, "Please sit down, Mrs. - Rachel, and let me give you some advise, not as your legal counsel, but as a friend."

Rachel sat, folded her nervous hands in her lap and waited for David to speak. "This is a--" David cleared his throat, "...delicate and very complicated situation." "Then help me un-complicate it. All I'm asking you to do is contact Clint, and tell him that I want to meet with him here, in your office."

"Don't you think you should ask Jake to come too?" David's nervous fingers worried his mustache. "He wants to see you."

"Jake wants his freedom. I don't have to see him to give him that. I'll sign any necessary papers. But only after I see Clint." For some reason she couldn't explain, Rachel felt a sudden urge to put her head on David's desk and cry her heart out. She swallowed the tears that collected in the back of her throat. "Will you call my son and ask him to come here?"

"Rachel." David clamped his mouth shut, then opened it again, decisively, "I can't discuss an annulment with you unless Jake is present. It's not that simple."

With a wave of her hand, Rachel dismissed David's argument. "First things first. Can you contact Clint and ask him to meet me here?"

"I thought you understood. I can't represent you. Friendly advice is the best I can offer."

Piqued, Rachel demanded, "And what is that advice?"

"Find another attorney." David dismissed Rachel by standing and turning his face from her. "I can't become further involved in this, this fiasco."

Rachel pulled the door open. "I'm sorry I troubled you." David had found the right definition. Her marriage to Jake was most assuredly a fiasco. "Good-bye, Mr. Patton." David nodded in her direction. "I wish you luck, Rachel. You're going to need it." Rachel stopped, her hand still on the knob. "Do you know if Clint is still at Diamond X?"

"I don't know."

"Would you ... ?"

With his back to her, David said, "Good-bye, Rachel."

Rachel slammed the door and hurried through the outer office. An emotion that felt suspiciously like fear laced tentacles up her spine. There was only one thing left to do. She would drive to Diamond X and try to find Clint.

Rachel drove around Summerville for what seemed like hours, trying to muster up the courage to make the dreaded journey to Diamond X. The sun was an orange ball, climbing high into the heavens by the time she gritted her teeth and pointed the car toward Interstate thirty five. It had begun its westward descent before she pulled off the interstate and turned down the gravel road that led to Diamond X. She drove the short distance trying to steel herself for a face-to-face meeting with Maddie. She could never remember feeling quite so lost and alone.

Rachel stopped the car in the driveway and looked for some signs of life. There weren't any. Maybe no one was home. She almost started the car again, then changed her mind.

With resolute steps, she walked the short distance to the house. Her feet lagged as she crossed the verandah. Pushing her finger into the bell, she waited. A wave of nausea hit

her, followed by a gathering of dancing black spots before her eyes. She remembered, as she leaned against the wall, that she hadn't eaten since yesterday morning before she left the Red Dog.

The door swung open. Reba stood on the other side, looking not one bit surprised to see Rachel looking back at her. "Hello, Rachel. How have you been?"

Rachel reached for her last reserve of physical strength. "Is Clint here?"

"Come in." Reba invited. "You look like you're dead on your feet." She opened the door a little wider.

Reba was right. Rachel was near the breaking point. Physical and emotional exhaustion were taking their toll. She stepped inside and asked again, "Is Clint here?" A deep voice sounded from the other side of the room. "Rachel? Is it really you?"

Rachel whirled and too late realized her folly. She was in no condition to move so swiftly. Blackness rose up to claim her. She would have fallen if strong arms had not reached to rescue her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

As consciousness returned, Rachel realized that she was lying in the bed that had been hers during her stay at Diamond X. The shades had been drawn and the room was dark. Awareness came slowly. She tried to sit up.

Jake was hovering over her, watching her anxiously. "Don't try to get up. Rachel, you're ill."

She let her head fall back on the pillow. "I'm not ill, I'm hungry."

"When did you eat last?"

Tears seeped from her eyes. "Yesterday morning, I think."

"Lie still. I'll have Reba fix you something." Jake went to the door and barked Reba's name out twice.

A nervous Reba appeared at the opening. "You called?"

Jake's dark brows met in a menacing frown. "You know damn well I did. Where were you hiding this time? Make Rachel some food, something light like toast or oatmeal and do it fast."

"What time is it?" Rachel tried to sit up. The effort was too much for her. She collapsed on the bed.

Jake glanced at his watch. "It's six o'clock." He looked at Reba and said, "Move, woman."

Reba opened her mouth to protest, then changed her mind. With a nod of her head, she hurried away.

"Damn it, Rachel." Jake turned to face her. The light from a lone lamp haloed his dark head and played across the muscles of his taut face. She had never seen him look so savage, or so desirable. Her heart lurched, then constricted in pain as Jake said, "Where did you go after you left David's office? It shouldn't have taken you four hours to drive from Summerville to Diamond X."

Swallowing her pain, Rachel fought the hot tears that burned behind her eyes. "I had some thinking to do, and I ... How did you know I was on my way here?" Then she answered her own question. "David Patton, of course."

Jake sat on the side of the bed. "First I have to get some food in you. Then you and I are going to have a long talk."

Reluctantly, almost fearfully, she met his gaze. "You and I have nothing to talk about. I came here to see Clint." With feigned indifference, she added. "You made your choice when you walked away with Maddie."

Jake exploded. "Walked away with Maddie?" He gave a regretful shake of his head. "You read all the wrong meanings into my taking Maddie to the airport."

There seemed to be no way now to avoid this painful confrontation, and Rachel knew she wasn't up to it. "It doesn't matter anymore. I came here to see Clint. Is he here?"

"He's here." Jake answered, then demanded fiercely, "What the hell do you mean by running off and not telling anyone where you were going? Clint and I have been frantic with worry."

"Worried?" Rachel taunted, "You were worried? You, who once again walked away without a backward glance, and Clint who told me to get out of his life?" Rachel's voice cracked with emotion. "I find that hard to believe." She couldn't imagine either of them being worried enough to be frantic. "You made your choice, Jake. Once again you walked out on me."

"You think I wanted to leave you and go with Maddie? I didn't. I didn't. I felt responsible for Mike not being here for her." Jake whispered on a note of despair. "I acted on impulse and foolishly. I was sorry for Maddie and feeling guilty as hell for fighting with Mike the night before. We found Mike in Summerville. He took Maddie on to Huntsville. I was out of the house for a little over two hours and when I came back, you had disappeared, again."

"I'm back now." Rachel brushed at a wayward tear. "And I want to see my son. Did David tell you that I was in Summerville?"

"You know he did."

Reba appeared in the doorway carrying a tray and looking like she was preparing to enter a battlefield. "Here's your food, Rachel."

Jake snarled, "Put it on the table and get out."

Reba came across the room. "You don't have to snap my head off."

Jake mumbled an apology of sorts as Reba scurried for the door and safety.

Rachel tackled the food with a vengeance. She had not realized how hungry she was.

Then she savored the mug of coffee, as Jake watched her with a look of bemused wonder on his face. "You must have been starved."

Some of Rachel's resolve was returning along with her strength. She sat up and pushed a pillow under her shoulders. "Where is Clint?"

"He went for his last appointment with the physical therapist. He'll be back in a few hours."

Tearfully, Rachel asked, "Do you think he'll talk to me?"

"He wants to apologize to you. After you left, I had a long talk with that obstinate son of mine." Pride sounded in Jake's derogatory declaration. That pride was slowly replaced with a burst of anger. "Then we decided to look through the things Gran had left for you and discovered that someone else had been there before us."

Rachel wrapped her fingers around the warm coffee mug and stared into its contents. "Maddie?"

"Of course, Maddie. She must have taken the key to my file cabinet from my key ring."

Where, Rachel wondered, did Maddie find that key ring? "I see." A vise of jealousy threatened to squeeze the breath from her.

"No. You don't," Jake defended, "You don't see a damn thing, so don't start jumping to conclusions, again." Jake raked his hand through his hair. "Maddie went into my bedroom and stole my file cabinet key. I wasn't in the room when she took it. Then she found, opened, and read the sealed letter Gran had left for you. After that, she set about to cause as much trouble she could."

"Did you read the letter?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, I did. So did Clint. It explained so many things. Things I should have guessed years ago." He swallowed, causing his Adam's apple to bob up and down. "It reinforced

what I already suspected, that I had acted the complete fool. It caused your son no small amount of guilt and grief. He cried when he read what Gran had written."

Rachel placed her hand over her mouth to muffle the sobs. "Clint doesn't hate me?"

"He loves you, very much." Jake's gentle voice cracked. She believed him. Patting the space beside her on the bed, Rachel asked, "Would you like to sit down?"

Jake nodded. "Yes. Thank, you." He sat very near, but didn't touch her. His anger had abated. "Where the hell have you been?"

"At a place called the Red Dog. It's a bar and restaurant between Alpine and El Paso. I worked there for three months."

"I was worried sick about you. I knew I had hurt you, again." He sighed. "We have to talk, about so many things."

Rachel set her coffee mug on the night stand. "Where do we start?" Once she had let pride and a monstrous lie separate her from the only man she could ever love. Nothing short of the truth and honest humility would suffice now. "Have you made your peace with Clint? Has he accepted the fact that you're his father?"

"We've come to an understanding." Pain clouded the ebony of Jake's eyes. "Everything pretty much fell into place after we'd read Gran's letter."

"I hope he can forgive me. I did everything I did for him, but I don't want him to forgive me out of gratitude. I want him to accept what is and understand." Rachel studied her trembling hands. "He was my reason for living, for so long." She added with stark simplicity.

"Was?" Jake raised a dark, expressive eyebrow.

Had she said that? Unshed tears froze behind her eyes. Her throat closed as she tried to speak. When no words came, she as slowly nodded her head. Jake's gaze narrowed. "And now?"

"I have to let him go. He's a man. I've finally come to accept that."

Jake's arms went around her and crushed her to him. "And what about us, Rachel?" She honestly didn't know how to answer that question. Easing from his embrace, she looked full into his face. "That depends on several things."

Jake let his hands slide down her arms. "Beginning, I suppose with Maddie?"

"You can't have both of us, Jake."

"Good Lord, Rachel, is that what you think I want?" Sudden anger propelled Jake to his feet. "I was never intimate with Maddie. Why can't you believe that?"

"I heard you tell her once that you couldn't replace her. She ran your house and a good part of your business." Saying those words made Rachel feel petty, and small, but she knew they had to be spoken. "You refuse to fire her, and you left with her less than an hour after you had married me."

Jake actually smiled. "You're jealous." He sobered suddenly. "I made a mistake. I thought you would understand." He sat back down again. "Maddie had done nothing to give me reason to fire her. Not until she deliberately tried to hurt my wife and my son. She's gone now, and she won't be back, ever!" He spoke with frightening vehemence.

"How could she have been so vindictive?"

Jake pulled Rachel into his arms and held her close to him. She could hear the muffled beating of his heart as she rested her head on his chest. "Revenge is a powerful motive, and she was furious when she learned that Clint had been with Amanda."

"Maybe that explains it." In the warm circle of Jake's embrace, Rachel could almost forgive Maddie....

Jake's embrace tightened. "There are so many other things that must be brought out into the open and explained. Why don't we begin at the beginning?"

Another wayward tear found its way down Rachel's cheek. "I don't care about the past. The future is all that matters now." A guarded elation was growing inside her. She didn't want the bitter past to intrude into her happy present, or rob her of a promising future. "Why should we dredge up all those painful memories?"

"We have to talk about the past. As painful as it is, it must be dealt with." Jake broke his embrace and reached into his pocket, extracting two folded sheets of paper. "This is Gran's letter." He held the paper out to her. "Read it, my darling."

Rachel took the letter, and tried, through a distortion of tears to decipher the words. As she blinked to clear her eyes, Jake gently took the letter from her shaking hands. "Do you want me to read it to you?"

She closed her eyes against a sudden onrush of pain. "Yes, please."

Jake unfolded the pages and began to read: "My Darling Rachel, when you read this, I will be gone. I wanted to say these words to you in person. I know now you aren't coming home. I understand. Why would you, after all I've done to you? I did what I did for your own good. I wanted to protect you."

"Who does she think she's fooling?" Rachel was set to say so much more when she realized, this was the same argument she had used when she had pleaded with Clint to understand, and he had refused to hear her. Lowering her eyes, she whispered, "Go on."

Jake cleared his throat and began again. "There are so many things you don't know. I couldn't tell you then. Now I can. I knew you had gone to the Longhorn Inn because Lola had sent you there to deliver a message to John. I went along with Lola's lie because I had no choice, Lola forced me."

Rachel gasped, as the full impact of Jake's words hit her with the force of a bullet fired at close range. "I should have known. But *how*?"

"Brace yourself," Jake warned. "It's not a pretty story."

She turned her face from him, afraid he would read the fear written there. "I think I always suspected something like this."

Jake picked up where he had left off. "Lola was not always the wicked person who destroyed your life and mine. Something terrible happened to her, and that terrible event warped her. I knew she was devious and dishonest, but I wouldn't let myself see how completely evil she was. By denying what I should have accepted and acted on, I became as guilty as she was of terrible crimes."

Jake dropped his hands and studied Rachel's pale face. "Do you want me to go on?"

It was difficult for Rachel to answer. "Yes. I want to know."

Jake dropped his eyes and continued. "It happened so long ago, and it's as clear in my mind as if it had taken place yesterday. It was springtime. The night was warm. I guess Lola couldn't sleep. She went outside. I heard her slam the screen door. Not five minutes later, I heard her screaming, and over those blood curdling cries, a grunt, and scuffling noises. I spent too much time looking for a robe and shoes. I should have gone out sooner, but I didn't. And when I did find her, it was too late."

"My poor Gran." Rachel sighed.

"Yes," Jake agreed, glancing briefly at Rachel before going on with his reading. "Your grandpa was sprawled on top of Lola. He was still, too still. At first I didn't know what had happened. He reeked of cheap whiskey. 'He's drunk,' I told myself. He stumbled in the dark and fell on Lola as she tried to help him to the house."

And Lola, my poor baby, was in a state of shock. She lay there, staring up at the sky. I stooped down and rolled him off of her, and then I saw. Your drunk, perverted grandpa had raped his own granddaughter! I could see his semen and her blood smeared across the front of both of them.

I went mad. I screamed at him. Do you know what he did then? He looked up and smiled at me, an ugly skull-and-crossbones smile that drove me out of my mind. We were beside the old well behind the barn. I picked up a shovel and hit him across his laughing face. I could hear the crunch as the sharp end of the shovel cut into his forehead. Blood began to gush from his temple. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his mouth went slack. I stood there and watched the life blood run out of him. I had killed him, and I was glad!"

"Then I took Lola in my arms and begged her to speak to me. After a long time, she did. I intended to help her to the house, and then call the sheriff and the doctor, but Lola begged me not to. And in a moment of weakness, I let her persuade me to dump the body down the well and to keep what had happened there, our guilty, grisly secret."

Rachel shuddered. "Gran and I spent weeks throwing dirt and rocks down that old well."

"Do you want me to go on?" Jake asked.

"I think I can guess what happened, but yes, go on."

"When John's wife found you with him at the Longhorn Inn, I knew that you were as innocent as a newborn lamb. I told Lola, she had to tell the truth, or I would. That's was when she told if I did, she'd tell the sheriff about the body in the well. She said she'd tell him you killed your grandpa. She taunted me, telling me how you'd be branded a murderer as well as an adulteress. I knew that Lola was clever enough and devious enough, and God knows she was wicked enough, to make such a tale believable."

"And God forgive me, I agreed to do what she said. I thought the worst that could happen was your reputation would be smeared. If I didn't go along with Lola, there was a possibility you would arrested for murder."

"I didn't once think you'd run away and disappear. When I realized you were gone, really gone, I should have told the truth, but I didn't. I kept my guilty secret. How sad it is, that secret is all I have left. I made so many mistakes. Through it all I loved you. I still love you. Forgive me, Gran."

Jake laid the letter on the table beside the bed and took Rachel in his arms. "So now you know. Gran didn't want to betray you, and she did love you."

Rachel sobbed, "I should have come home. I let her die alone. I'll never forgive myself for that."

Jake's arms tightened around her waist. "Rachel, my love, you have nothing to forgive yourself for. You didn't know Gran was sending you messages all those years. Don kept that from you."

Jake had called her his love. That little term of endearment set her heart lurching. Her voice caught in her throat. "How did Clint feel about what Don did?"

"That's something you should ask Clint." Jake released her and rose to his feet. "He'll be home soon."

Rachel scrambled from the bed. "I don't know what to say to him. I feel so guilty."

Jake held out his hands. "Of what? Loving your son, our son, to excess. I don't think that's a crime." He caught her hands in his, "Let's go to the living room and wait for Clint."



Chapter Twenty-Five

When Clint came through the door, Rachel was sitting on the couch, beside Jake. He stopped and gasped. "Mom?"

She could read nothing from his stoic expression. "Hello, Clint." Her heart threatened to jump from her chest. Would he forgive her? Could he forgive her? Clint's eyes slitted.

"Where have you been?"

Rachel bit her lip. "Away."

Coming across the room with quick sure strides, he asked anxiously, "Are you all right?" Holding out his arms, he smiled. "Do you have a hug for your little boy?"

Eagerly, she went into his embrace. "I'm so sorry, so sorry! I never meant to hurt you." Her words tumbled from her mouth. If she stopped, she might never find the courage to begin again. "I can't change what I did, but if I can make you understand ... "

He held her from him and shook her gently. "Stop it, Mom. I'm the one who should ask for forgiveness. I acted like a spoiled kid. I was angry and hurt, but that was before I knew all the facts." Over Rachel's head, Clint smiled at Jake. "I told you she'd come back to us."

"And you were right. And she's read Gran's letter." Jake stood and put a protective arm around Rachel before pulling her back on the couch. "Sit down, Clint, your mother wants to talk to you."

"And I have some things I want to say to her." Clint eased his large frame down into a chair across from Rachel and Jake. "Beginning with saying how sorry I am for being such a jerk."

Rachel's relief sounded in her voice. "You're not a jerk. I deceived you, letting you believe Don was your father. I should have told you the truth, but I made a bargain with Don before you were born, and I thought I owed him my loyalty."

"I know, Mom. And I know now that Dad kept you from your family for years by intercepting the messages they sent you." There was bitterness in his reply and distressing confusion.

Rachel had wanted Clint to accept Jake as his father, but not at the expense of losing respect for Don. She chose her words carefully. "There is so much you don't know. Will you let me try to explain?"

Clint's smile said he had expected as much. "Jake has already made me understand some things I had never thought of before."

"What things?" Surprise tilted Rachel's voice.

"Like what it must have been like to be eighteen and expecting a baby and alone in the world. I can see how Dad's offer of marriage must have seemed a God-send. What I can't understand is why he was willing to take on such a long term responsibility."

At last she could reveal the strange, almost bizarre bargain she had struck with Donovan MacCall. "Don was a lonely man and a frustrated one. He'd always been a loner and a misfit. He was the only child of parents who were both middle-aged before he was born. His father died when he was a teenager. His mother passed away just after he returned from Vietnam, leaving Don completely alone in the world."

"His terrible experiences in Vietnam only added to his isolation." Remembering caused Rachel to sigh. "Don was a diesel mechanic. He worked in a world of rough-and-tumble men. They couldn't understand his lack of interest in women. He took a lot of teasing about being 'queer,' and he didn't dare deny or retaliate, for fear someone would find out the truth, he was impotent. When he married me, all the questions and teasing stopped. Don was a man with a family. The truth is, I was the one who didn't want to marry him."

"Then why did you do it, Mom?"

Jake took Rachel's hand in his as she sighed her regret. "A combination of reasons. I was living with Don. I had no other place to go. The pregnancy was a difficult one. Don was very kind to me. I desperately needed that kindness, but I needed medical attention even more, and Don's insurance wouldn't pay for my care if I wasn't his wife. He promised if I'd marry him, he'd take care of me. And looking back, I can see that he played on my love for the child I carried, as well as my youth and ignorance. He pointed out that my baby would be branded a bastard for the rest of its life if I didn't marry him. The desire to protect my child was the clincher. I reluctantly agreed to be his wife." Rachel carefully refrained from saying that Jake's marriage to Lola had been the true deciding factor in her agreeing to marry Don. "Dad should never have pressured you into marrying him. I still can't understand why he wanted to keep you separated from your family when they made so many attempts to contact you."

"You must not think badly of the man who was a father to you." Rachel was quick to come to Don's defense. "I'm sure he thought he was doing what was best."

"Best for whom, Mom?" Clint demanded.

"Best for everyone concerned. Don was not a cruel man, nor was he a selfish one."

Rachel could feel Jake's arm tighten around her shoulders. "Clint, Son, it is not wise to judge another human being too harshly. Don was motivated by love for you and for your mother. We all make mistakes. Try to put yourself in his place. He didn't want to lose either of you. Can you imagine what his life must have been like, living with a woman as lovely and charming as your mother and not being able to be a complete husband to her?"

Rachel had expected an argument from Clint. Instead he hung his head. "Yeah, I think I can."

"Why don't we let Donovan MacCall rest in peace?" Rachel suggested. "We could hash over the past forever and never come to a clear understanding of why Don did what he did."

"Do you hate him, Mom, for keeping the truth from you for so long?"

"I could never hate Don!" Rachel cried. "In a very special way, I loved him very much. And I couldn't bear it if you felt anything less than love and respect for him also." Rachel's teeth worried her bottom lip. "How do you feel about Don, Clint?"

A sad little half-grin pulled at one side of Clint's mouth. "I have no reason to hate him. He was always very good to me." Clint's eyes cut in Jake's direction. "Jake is the one who should hate him, if anyone does. Don cheated him out of his family."

Jake lifted his hand in a gesture of acceptance. "I don't hate him, Clint. The way I feel now, it would be difficult for me to hate anyone."

"Except Maddie?" Clint asked.

"I don't hate her, but I can't forgive her either."

"Even if she did what she did in the name of self preservation?" Clint protested. "She was fighting to hold onto to her job and her daughter. She was afraid she was losing both of them."

"Who told you that?" Jake asked.

"Amanda did," was Clint's quick response.

Hoping to turn the conversation to a more pleasant subject, Rachel asked, "How is Amanda?"

Clint hedged. "I don't know. Amanda's not here either."

"Did she leave with Maddie?" Why did Rachel feel a sudden uneasiness?

"Not exactly." Clint seemed unwilling to talk about Amanda. "She's with Mike."

Before Rachel could respond, Jake asked. "Did you and Amanda quarrel?" Clint was evasive. "Not exactly. We just decided to cool it for a while." "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" Jake asked. "Was this your idea or

Amanda's?"

As the two men sat conversing, Rachel was struck anew by the strong physical resemblance. Obviously, there was also a definite similarity in temperament and disposition. With swift insight she realized that already a bond of understanding existed between these two.

Slowly Clint shook his head. "I'm not sure. I think it was a mutual decision. Amanda is going away to college in a few months and ... "

Jake asked, "What's on your mind, Clint?"

Rachel was set to intervene when she reconsidered. This matter was between Jake and his son. She would let them settle it.

Clint's voice dropped. "And that's what I'd like to do too, go away to college. I've always wanted to study veterinary medicine."

Bluntly, Jake questioned. "Is there a possibility that Amanda could be pregnant?" Clint shook his head. "She's not." He swallowed, then went on with difficulty. "We only slept together that one time. And we took precautions."

Very gently, Jake asked, "Do you love her, Son?"

Moisture collected in the corners of Clint's eyes. "I don't know. Maybe. I need time, and so does Amanda."

Jake put his arm around Clint's shoulders. "Then we will talk about college. You and I can drive over to A and M next weekend."

Clint looked at Rachel. "What do you think, Mom?"

Rachel was jubilant. Nothing could make her happier than to see Clint enrolled in college. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

Jake swallowed. He was having trouble keeping his voice even. "Maybe we can persuade your mother to come with us."

Clint was already moving toward the door. "I'd like that. Now I have some loose ends to tie up. I want to talk to Amanda and tell her Mom's home." He raced down the hall without the slightest hint of a limp.

As his footsteps died away, Jake turned to face Rachel. "Thank you, Rachel." "For what?"

"For your silence."

"Clint listened to you, Jake." Rachel marveled.

"I understand him. He's so like me in so many ways." Again, Jake sat down beside her. "You said so much by not saying anything." His hands reached for hers. "I'm grateful." Lifting her fingers to his lips, he kissed the tips.

She pulled her hands away. "Do you think Clint can manage college? He's been out of high school for over two years."

"My son can manage," Jake boasted. "I wonder if his father can do as well. There are some things that can't be said with silence. We still have to talk, Rachel. And we begin with you explaining to me why you told David Patton you wanted an annulment."

She had promised herself, no more half-truths, and no more letting pride get in the way. Rachel lifted her chin. "I didn't say I wanted an annulment. I said I'd agree to an annulment, if that was what you wanted."

"You don't want out of this marriage?" Jake held Rachel's gaze by the sheer force of his stabbing stare.

"I don't want to hold on to you if you want your freedom."

"Hold on to me?" Jake questioned with a twisted smile. "Why would you want to hold on to me? You didn't want to marry me in the first place. I forced you."

"Not really. I wanted to marry you. Even when I was telling you, and myself, I didn't, I did." Rachel drew a deep, sobbing breath. "I've wanted to be your wife since I was eighteen years old." The joy of saying those words almost equaled the pain of making such an admission. Rachel burst into a fit of uncontrollable weeping.

With a heavy sigh, and less than his usual grace, Jake took her into his arms and held her close while she wept as if her heart would break. When the sobs subsided, he asked, almost gently, "Did you ever wonder why I was so insistent you come back to Diamond X?" His hands moved to caress her arms. "Did you question why I went to such lengths to keep you here?"

"I supposed it was because of Gran's will."

"Gran didn't leave a will."

She had misunderstood him. "Yes, she did. I got letters and phone calls from Mr. Patton. He said ..." Rachel's voice stilled, as Jake stated, in a flat monotone, "He lied." That explained David's nervous behavior each time Rachel had met with him. "Why?" "Because he's a good friend, and he knew I was a desperate man. I persuaded him to go along with my little scheme."

Rachel asked, her voice quivering. "What scheme?"

Jake laid his face against the softness of her hair. "When I learned your husband was dead, I knew I had to think of some way to get you back here. I also knew you needed money. I thought the mention of an inheritance would send you scurrying to Summerville. I was wrong. We had to browbeat you to get you back to listen to what you thought was Gran's will."

Completely confused, Rachel said, "You didn't know about Clint then. Why would you want me back?"

Jake's shoulders sagged, as if he were weary of carrying a tremendous burden. "I felt responsible for you running away in the first place. After Lola died, Gran admitted to me that Lola had lied about why you were at the Longhorn Inn that night, and that she had gone along with that lie, although she refused to tell me why she had done such a thing. I

thought I should try to do something to right that terrible wrong. I had nothing to entice you back, except Gran's letter. I didn't think that was enough."

"Why didn't you just come to me, show me the letter, and tell me the truth?"

"Would you have listened to me, Rachel?"

After some moments of soul searching, Rachel had to say, "No." On the heels of that revelation, she asked, "Did Gran leave anything except the letter?" "Her personal belongings."

When Jake seemed reluctant to go on, Rachel urged. "Tell me the truth, Jake, please."

"That was all. Gran had no income for the last several years of her life. I kept her here and took care of her because she had no other place to go and because I loved her like she was my own grandmother."

"And the money I've been spending so freely? That's your money, isn't it?" So now she knew. Jake had been motivated by guilt and pity to bestow a small fortune on her.

"I prefer to think of it as our money. You are my wife."

She was more pained with each word he spoke. "I don't want your pity, Jake." "I'm glad to hear that." His smile was wry. "Because you don't have it."

She had no right, and she knew it, but she needed his strength. Unable to resist his nearness, she buried her face in his chest. "Then Gran couldn't have financed the long search for me. You did that, too, didn't you? I still don't understand."

He smoothed her hair with his hand. "When you disappeared, I blamed myself. If I had been a little more understanding, a little more forgiving, you might never have run away."

"Don't blame yourself, Jake." Rachel was shaken not so much by his words as by the intensity with which he spoke them. "You had every reason to doubt me."

His breath expelled from his mouth in a long, hissing sigh. "It took a while, but I

finally came to grips with the truth. It didn't matter what you'd done, I wanted you back."

Warily, because she wanted so desperately to believe him, Rachel asked, "Then why did you marry Lola?"

"By the time I married Lola, I was convinced you were dead. I thought she was as near as I would ever come to having you. I was too young and too heartbroken to look past the close physical resemblance and see what a sick, sad woman Lola was. She wanted to marry me. To my eternal regret, in a moment of weakness, I agreed."

"Regret, Jake, why?"

"I didn't love Lola, and I knew she didn't love me. What I didn't know was Lola was incapable of loving anyone."

"Poor Lola," Rachel sympathized.

"I tried, but it was never right. I couldn't feel about Lola the way I had felt about you." Jake closed his eyes and grimaced. "Lola was no fool, she knew." "Oh, Jake, I never dreamed, I never guessed."

"How could you?" Jake's smile was narrow and hard. "After awhile Lola and I were two strangers, living together and apart, in the same house, and the saddest part was, neither of us cared."

Slowly, because it must be said, Rachel asked, "What about Maddie? I heard you and Maddie talking beside the gazebo the night you announced our engagement. You said she would have to accept what had to be. I thought you were talking about your reason for marrying me."

"And what might that reason be?"

"That you wanted to claim your son, and marrying me was a start."

"I was telling Maddie that she must accept the fact that her husband was dying with AIDS. She'd just received the news, and she was devastated."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Rachel asked.

"Would you have believed me?" With solemn severity, Jake answered himself, "Of course, you wouldn't have. I had no right to expect you to believe anything I told you." He was right. "I wouldn't have."

"No more than I could believe you were not having an affair with Tom Carter."

"And now?" Almost, she dared to hope.

"When Clint and I were searching for you, I went to Dallas. I had a long talk with Tom." A self deprecating grin slashed Jake's handsome face. "Tom told me what a fool I was. He said you were in love with me." Jake's tone moved from melancholy to almost smug. "He said he suspected you always had been. Is that true?"

Rachel met his gaze with an unflinching stare. "It's true."

"I've waited twenty years to hear you say those words. A secondhand supposition won't do. I want to hear them now, from you."

"I love you."

A pall of silence fell over the room. There was nothing more she could say. Anything more had to come from Jake.

"Rachel?"

She turned slowly, as Jake's emotion filled voice bled out into the room. "I love you, with all my heart."

Tears flooded her eyes as a joy beyond telling sang in her blood and drummed in her ears. If she had doubted his words, the pain in his eyes would have convinced her. She threw herself into his arms.

He folded her into an intimate embrace, as she clung to him. His lips sought hers in a tender kiss of discovery. Lifting his head, Jake begged, "Promise you'll never leave me again. Stay with me for always, not for Clint, not for any other reason except I love you and I need you."

It was so easy to promise. "I won't, not ever." She melted in the warmth of his embrace. "I belong to you, Jake, I have since the first moment I saw you leaning against Gran's corral fence."

He pulled her even nearer, as if he could absorb her into his body. "We can't bring all those years back, but we have all of our tomorrows. Tell me we can begin again."

The naked need she saw in his eyes, caused her to turn from him. Did she dare believe, dare hope? "Can we?" She had lived for twenty years dreaming of this moment, and now she could reach out and grasp the instant, and she was afraid. "It's been so long since ... "

Clasping her to his heart, Jake soothed. "I know I should be sorry that your life has been so barren, but God forgive me, I'm not. After all these years of living in my own private hell, imagining you in Don's bed, in his arms; I find only joy in the knowledge that you have loved only me." Once more, he kissed her, slowly, sweetly, and with infinite tenderness. "Can you forgive me for being so selfish?"

She forced her eyes to meet his. She could forgive him anything, and she told him so.

He released her. "I want to explore anew the wonder of loving you. I want the pleasure of showing you all the ways I can please you." He sighed. "Once, long ago, I thought I knew how to love you. Now I know I was a stumbling novice. Time and yearning have showed me that love that has stood the test of time and separation can be sweeter far than any thing we could have known then. The only similarity between that boy and this man, is that now, as then, I am totally, irrevocably, in love with you."

His words were like a spring rain in a desert, awaking her and alerting her to her need for something she might not be able to give back. "I'm afraid, Jake. It's been so long since I felt anything." Inside she trembled with fear and expectation. "What if I disappoint you?"

"Can you trust me, darling?" Jake's hands moved lovingly down her back.

"I want to, Jake." Her arms stole around his neck. "Help me find my way back to you." He lifted her into his arms and walked with slow, measured steps down the hall toward his bedroom. "Trust me."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Jake's footsteps echoed through the silence of the quiet house; each step carrying them nearer to his bedroom, and the promised consummation of their love. The tension between fear and desire tightened the current of longing that throbbed inside Rachel. Burying her face in the warmth of Jake's throat, she touched her lips to the pulse that beat erratically at the base of his neck as a quivering sigh escaped her dry mouth.

A shiver ran through Jake's body. It gave Rachel a sense of singing joy to know her slightest touch affected him so profoundly. Her misgivings began to melt in the light of that knowledge. It was a privilege and an honor to be the recipient of so intense a love. Once that thought would have been cause for fear and uncertainty. Not anymore. She was a woman now, not a child. The honor she would cherish, the privilege she intended to enjoy to the utmost.

Jake set Rachel on her feet, then opened the door, before turning to capture her mouth in a sweetly seductive kiss. Lifting his head, he said, in a voice that shimmered with passion "I love you, Rachel."

She murmured against his lips, "And I love you, Jake." Her words were more than a declaration, they was a sweet vow, a precious promise.

His fingers moved like mist through the softness of her hair, then came to rest, feather light, on her shoulders. "How beautiful you are."

Color climbed into Rachel's cheeks, warmed the hollow of her throat as a passionate hunger ran through her body, captured her senses. "I need you, Jake. I need you to love me with more than words."

He kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, then held her in a close embrace with his chin resting on her head. "Tell me this isn't a dream. Tell me you're real."

She could feel his hardness pressing into the cavity between her legs. Made bold by his desire, she guided his hand to her breast. "Feel how real I am."

Jake closed his eyes. An expression of sheer rapture illuminated his face. He caressed her lovingly. His breath was coming now in little gasps. "Oh, my god!" Then taking her hand, he led her across the room and pulled her down onto the bed beside him. "I want to look at you." Reaching for the buttons of her blouse, he whispered, "I want to see all of you." He slipped the top button from its mooring. "You're wearing too many clothes." With movements as gentle as a summer breeze, he began to undress her, stripping away first her blouse, then reaching behind her to unclasp her bra. As he pulled the bra away, her breasts, tight with aching need, rose proud and free. "You're even more beautiful than I remembered." His finger tips caressed her nipples as his eyes devoured her.

Desire opened like a budding flower inside Rachel's stomach.

Closing her eyes, she let the rapture of his touch tease through her senses, as erotic memories flooded her mind. Once long ago, their hearts had melted in a fiery rapture as their bodies had fused in sweet ecstasy. Now those sparks, long dormant, were stirring again to a white-hot glow. Then lifting her lids, she reached for his belt buckle. It opened with a snap. "You're wearing too many clothes," She echoed his observation.



Jake's breath unraveled in a broken sigh. "We can remedy that." His own need was a throbbing exhibition for her to see.

A tremor of raw passion surged through Rachel, causing her to shiver. "Help me." She fumbled for his zipper.

It was all the encouragement Jake needed. Deftly, hastily, he divested himself of every stitch he wore, then began to undress Rachel. His touch sent electrical shock waves sparking through her chest and stomach and flashing out into her arms and legs.

They were naked now, and both aroused beyond measure. Jake's fingers shook as he sought the hidden crevices of Rachel's body. Then he let his mouth follow his hands in an erotic exploration. His touch sent shivers down her spine. Then his lips found her mouth in another soul-searing kiss.

Her own hands seemed to have acquired a mind of their own. They ran like hot lava over Jake's taut body, caressing, feeling, examining.

Lifting his head, Jake caught her hands in his. "Love me slowly, Rachel, very slowly. I've waited so long for this moment. I want to savor every second, cherish each sweet instant."

Her arms formed a circle around his neck as her body quickened with yearning. Her seeking lips clung to his mouth. "I'm yours, completely, for now and always."

He held her to him, whispering his love, kissing her hair, her eyes, her begging lips, bringing comfort with his passion, assurance with his tender ardor. "Mine to have and to hold, now and forever."

His words and his caresses opened a flood gate of desire. Shivering in his arms, she whispered the sweet poetry of surrender. "I can't wait. Love me. Please, love me."

His body tensed and expanded with desire, as he pushed her to a prone posture and positioned himself over her. His eyes glittered, his face wore the tight mask of passion. "I do, I will."

A strange, almost magical feeling possessed Rachel. Every fiber of her being responded to his heated touch. Caressing the muscles that rippled across his back, she whispered, "Please, Jake." Passion clouded her brain, thickened her speech.

Jake's lips covered hers, his tongue pushed into the soft confines of her mouth, examining, seeking, dominating. "Patience, my darling. I promise, it will be worth the wait."

A tremor of hot desire ran through Rachel as she moved seductively beneath him, responding to his touch with a fervor that, even as it burst forth, startled her. "Jake, please, I need you now!"

On a thrust of sheer male energy, he entered her body, and began to move to a slow, almost maddening rhythm. "You feel so good."

Rachel's senses were spinning, her body crying out for him to appease her rising, fierce hunger. "And you feel so good inside me." Fingers of fire ran down her legs and through her stomach. "Jake? Oh, Jake."

Her cries were lost in the sweet consummation of their coming together. Their bodies rocked, then fused in that age-old, ever-new rhythm that pushed them to the limits of release.

Rachel's climax came slowly at first, then unfettered itself with rapturous speed as a chain of rippling joy unfastened in her loins and ran unchecked through her entire body. As she convulsed, her cries echoed across the room.

When, at last, sanity began to return, she smiled up at the man who lay, spent and sated above her. "You're wonderful," she breathed on the end of a contented sigh.

As his heart slowed, Jake moved to one side and put his arm under Rachel's shoulder. "It was perfect, just as I knew it would be."

Rachel's body felt liquid, her bones like water. "Better than before?" she questioned boldly.

She felt his amused smile. "Are you asking for compliments?"

Hiding her face in the hollow of his arm, she whispered, "No." Then on a breath of pure happiness, murmured, "Yes. Oh, Jake."

"Can I find words to tell you my heart? I'll try." On the end of a long contented breath, Jake went on, "No other woman ever gave me anything more than relief. Only with you is there this exquisite completeness, this uniting of spirit and flesh, this glittering enchantment that makes the act of love so different from the gratification of mindless

"

sex.

Surprised by his loving confession, and her own joy at his admission, Rachel raised on her elbow and stared at him. "It's a shame I can't make some comparisons of my own."

He pushed her from him. "What about Tom?" His fingers bit into her bare shoulders. "You said ... "

She loved him so much! How wonderful it was to sweep away all the barriers. "I said so many things, but there was never anyone but you." She hesitated, then asked, "Would it matter if there had been?"

His mouth covered hers, hungrily, possessively. He released her reluctantly. "No, I love you unconditionally. But I'm glad there was no one else. I know that selfish and chauvinistic, but It's true."

"You're not selfish. You are the most generous man I know." Rachel's fingers caressed his smiling face.

A searching hand began to explore the soft curves of her body. "Love must be truly blind. I am utterly selfish. I love you so much, I'd do anything to have you here with me. Can you forgive me for lying to you to bring you back to me?"

She reveled in his declaration of love, the possessive strength of his embrace. Her hand pushed a strand of hair from his forehead. "I'm glad you tricked me into coming back to Diamond X."

Rolling over, Jake covered Rachel's body with his. "I'd do it all again."

"You're a ruthless man." Rachel smiled up at him.

"You don't know the half of it." His mouth made forays down her neck and toward the swell of her breasts. "And I'm not going to let you escape again, ever. You belong to me. You're my soul mate and my wife."

"I am your wife." She was awed by the sudden joy the revelation brought her. "I'm yours, and you belong to me!"

"Oh, yes, completely, but just in case there's any doubt, maybe we should consummate our union one more time, to make sure."

Rachel's shoulders gleamed pale in the muted light as her arms wound around his neck. "If it would ease your mind."

"It would ease more than my mind." Jake's lips followed his hands, tracing the contours of her throat, her arms, lighting fires where they touched. Rachel closed her eyes and gave herself over, once again, to the sensuous pleasures of his love making.

She had thought it would never be so good again. She was wrong; it was better. Deep inside her stomach an exquisite desire rose and spread its tentacles of molten flame through her body. She surrendered to the demands of Jake's hands, his mouth, his whispered words of love.

The tenderness of their first encounter was swept away as Jake claimed her with the thrusts of his strong body, the hard demands of his unleashed passion, taking pleasure in the measure he gave it.

A loving that had begun in gentle persuasion escalated to demanding, driving need, soared to a shattering climax and fused into a melting, aching joy.

They lay, spent, clinging to each other, bathed in the afterglow of love. Rachel ran her limp fingers along Jake's chest. They came to rest in the wiry hairs that curled and tangled there. "I love you."

"And I love you. "This is the beginning, Rachel, not the end. We're going to have long, happy years together."

They lay for several minutes, savoring the warmth of shared love, lost in the wonder of discovery. Then Jake wrapped Rachel in a tender embrace and kissed the side of her warm mouth. "Can you be happy here, Rachel? You've lived in the city for so many years, and this place is miles from civilization. We could sell the ranch and move, to Dallas, or any other place you'd like to go."

If she had ever doubted Jake's love, that doubt vanished now. She knew how much he loved Diamond X, and what leaving his home would cost him. A web of joy spun itself around her heart. She touched his face with gentle, trembling fingers. "I can be happy anywhere if you're there too."

In a subdued, almost reluctant, voice he questioned. "You're sure?"

She rested her head in the hollow of his throat. "I'm sure."

He sighed, a sound of drugged satisfaction and complete contentment. "Good night, Mrs. Reardon." He pulled her into the safe cage of his arms.

Mrs. Reardon. Rachel let the words slide through her mind, savoring them as she would a fine wine. On a contented sigh, she closed her eyes and fell asleep in the arms of the man she loved and adored....

Epilogue

Rachel settled back on the blanket that Jake had spread on the hard ground and watched a bevy of white butterflies flutter in and out of the wild flowers that bloomed along Comanche Ridge. "Look at those flowers, look at that sky. The world is a lovely place."

Jake tethered the horses before dropping down beside her. "Yes it is. Look at that sunset."

The sun, round, orange and magnificent, spread shafting rays across the western sky, coloring the clouds and overlaying the horizon with gold. Rachel studied the sinking orb. "It's always different, and always the same."

"And always beautiful." Jake reached to catch her hand. "Like you, my darling."

Rachel laid her head on Jake's shoulder. His words brought a tinge of color to her cheeks and a flutter to her heart. Her happiness, so long delayed and so dearly purchased, seemed, now to be complete.

Jake stood and pulled Rachel to her feet. "It's time we were going home." He kissed her and pressed his face to her hair, then lifted her chin with his hand, and leaned back to look at her flushed face. "How beautiful you are."

Rachel couldn't stop the rush of color that flooded her cheeks. "You're making me blush, and at my age." She couldn't resist asking, "Do I pass inspection?"

Jake laughed. "Are you asking for complements again?" Sudden passion darkening his eyes. "Most definitely."

Rachel and Jake had been married eight months. Over that period of time, Clint had recovered completely from his accident and completed a semester at A and M. He had also begun to accept Jake as a part of his life.

Rachel lay her head against Jake's chest. "Clint will be here in time for dinner. I'm anxious to see him."

Jake smiled down at her. "And he's bringing a friend." "A friend?" Rachel's voice rose in surprise.

"A female friend. Her name is Sharon." Jake seemed to find Rachel's surprise amusing.

So Clint had confided in his father, but not his mother. There was a time that would have angered Rachel. Not anymore.

"When did he tell you this?"

In an off-handed manner, Jake said, "Last night when he called."

"And he wanted you to break the news to me, right?"

"Am I in trouble?" Humor danced in Jake's dark eyes.

"You are if you haven't told Reba to prepare for another dinner guest." Rachel smiled up at her husband.

"I told her this morning." Jake chuckled.

Once more Rachel reached for the security of Jake's embrace. "It's getting late, and we are expecting guests."

A little quirk touched one side of Jake's mouth. "You don't seem surprised that Clint's bringing home a friend."

"I am, a little." Rachel lifted the blanket from the ground and gave it a vigorous shake. "I thought he might still be seeing Amanda." She folded the blanket and secured it behind her saddle. "That's over." Jake untethered the horses. "Clint and Amanda broke up months ago."

"He didn't tell me." Rachel surprised herself by admitting, "I'm glad he can confide in you."

"Clint and I understand each other."

Rachel took the reins of her horse from Jake's hand. "Can you ever forgive me for keeping your son from you for all those years? I ... "

A gentle kiss stopped her words. "There's nothing to forgive." "Do you know how happy you make me?"

Jake lifted himself into his saddle. "No. Tell me."

A long sigh hissed through her lips. "Happier than I ever thought possible." Rachel put her foot in her stirrup.

Jake waited for her to swing onto her horse's back. "I love you, Rachel. You are my happiness."

The waning rays of the sun were fading into twilight. The old day was fading, a new day would soon be dawning. Finally, the last lingering ghost had been exorcised, the final pursuing demon, put to rest. Rachel nudged her horse in the flanks and smiled at her husband. "And I love you. Let's go home."

**The End**