

LUKE



Chapter 1

Luke Craig was a rancher, and he'd battled all sorts of problems over the years. He'd had to deal with falling beef prices, closed markets, crazy winters and bad fall harvests that required him to buy feed for his livestock over the winter. But the problem that had just cropped up was one he'd never seriously considered. A summer camp for underprivileged city kids had just opened right next door to his ranch, and he was having to come to terms with invaders who made the Mexican Army in 1836 look tame by comparison.

To top it all off, the owner of the camp was a feisty young woman who seemed to have cornered the market on bad temper and stubbornness. Her name was Belinda Jessup. He knew her brother, Ward, slightly, having met him at cattlemen's association meetings in the past. Ward was more interested in oil wells than cattle, as a rule, but he still kept his membership in various groups that dealt with livestock. Belinda didn't resemble her brother all that much, but they shared the same hot temper. She wasn't bad looking, with her dark blond hair and green eyes and outgoing personality. Strange how she rubbed Luke the wrong way.

His sister Elysia liked Belinda. Of course, Elysia had just married Tom Walker, the father of her young daughter Crissy, and right now, in the glow of nuptial bliss, she liked everyone. Luke, living alone for the first time in years, was heartily sick of his own cooking and his own company. Belinda's project made him even more irritable than he normally was.

It had come as a shock to discover that old man Peterson had sold the river property that adjoined Luke's to an outsider. It had been sudden, too. The land hadn't been advertised, not even with a sign on the roadside. One day, old man Peterson owned it. The next, it was being developed as a youth camp, complete with roofed pavilion, small cabins, and a pier on the river. Luke's pasture adjoined the property. It was delineated by a sturdy electrified fence and a steel farm gate with a padlock. The very first morning Ms. Jessup's city kids came to stay, the padlock was skillfully removed and the gate opened. Neighbors had called the sheriff's office to complain that Luke's Hereford steers were roaming the neighborhood— and the highway.

Luke and his men had rounded up the cattle, put them back into the fenced pasture, and the padlock had been replaced by a chain half the size of one that held a ship's anchor, affixed with eight combination locks.

The next morning, the sheriff's deputy was back with the same complaint about loose

cattle. Luke checked and all eight combination locks were lying on the grass, rusting.

It was inevitable that the rancher would go straight to the source of the problem.

Belinda was working out the next day's recreation schedule when she heard the sound of a horse's hooves outside the large cabin that served as her main office. She'd heard about the liberated cattle and she had a cold feeling that retribution was at hand.

She went out to meet trouble head-on. It was trouble, too; a lean, lithe man in denims and wearing an expensive wide-brimmed hat and hand-tooled boots with silver spurs that even her brother would have coveted.

As he came closer, she saw that he was incredibly handsome, with thick blond hair and eyes as blue as a china plate. He had a firm mouth and a square jaw, and an expression on his lean face that could have curdled milk. She didn't need telling that this was Luke Craig. She'd already heard about him in town, although most people said he was easygoing and friendly. He didn't seem that way to Belinda.

She held up both hands. "We're quite willing to pay damages," she said at once. "I know who the culprit is, and I've had words with him. Strong words."

He put both hands on his narrow hips and glared down at her. It was a long way down, too. She was a little woman. "If those had

been my breeding bulls instead of steers, we wouldn't be having words, Miss Jessup," he said in a deep, cutting tone. "You'd be locked up in the county jail, alongside your larcenous cohort."

"My larcenous...!" Her mouth closed with a snap. "You hold it right there, cowboy," she said shortly, losing patience and diplomacy in one breath. "These kids have never had much. They live in abject poverty with parents who don't want them. Some of them have been beaten, some have been addicted to alcohol and drugs, some have been in jail. The oldest is barely seventeen, and I'll leave you to imagine the sort of upbringing they've had. I opened this camp to give them a glimpse of life as it could be, as it should be! I brought them here to learn that there's more to the world than dirty houses and drunk parents and the sound of gunshots every night they live."

He studied her with open curiosity, his expression giving away nothing of his thoughts. "You're a one-woman salvation society, I gather."

"Actually, I'm a poorly paid public defender in Houston," she replied. "In the summer, I take a few kids camping. This year I decided to buy some land and make it a permanent camp."

He nodded. "Right next to my largest pasture."

"This is Texas," she reminded him. "You've got lots of room. I only want this little tiny bit of land, right here, that I bought and paid for."

"You didn't pay for the right to let my cattle loose."

She sighed heavily. "You're right, I didn't," she admitted. "And if I hadn't insisted on bringing Kells along with me, you wouldn't have been inconvenienced twice in one week. I'm sorry."

She'd piqued his curiosity. He'd known several do-gooders, but most of them were all talk and no action. "Kells?"

"The seventeen-year-old," she continued. "I defended him when he was arrested for shoplifting. Last month I convinced the judge to give him a second chance and asked for him to be remanded into my custody from juvenile hall." She grimaced. "He's not your

ordinary slum kid. There hasn't been a lock built that he can't pick. If they put him in prison, he'll be a master safecracker by the time he gets out, complete with diploma."

"Having learned the trade from pros, in the slammer," he agreed.

"Exactly." She searched his blue eyes curiously. "Socially conscious, are you?"

"I watch the six o'clock news," he returned. "And I'm all for prison reform. I just don't want it next door to me."

"That's how everyone feels," she told him. "It's the same with any unpleasant thing. Yes, let's have a new sanitary landfill, but not on land adjoining mine. Yes, let's have an incinerator, a water treatment plant, a new factory— but not on land adjoining mine."

"You can't blame people for guarding their investments," he pointed out. "And I work as hard for my income as you work for yours, Miss Jessup."

She smiled. "I know a little about cattle. My brother's into oil exploration these days, but he still runs a thousand head of Santa Gertrudis on his ranch up in Ravine."

"He's from Oklahoma originally, isn't he?"

"No, but our mother was," she corrected.

"We still have relatives there," she murmured, without adding that they never had any contact with those relatives, or their scandalous mother, who'd deserted them to run off with a married man.

"I know your brother," he added unexpectedly. "I go to a few cattlemen's conventions, when I can manage time. He got married a few years ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, to one of the few women in the world he actually likes," she murmured dryly. She looked past him at the big black-spotted white horse he was riding. "Nice mare."

"She's four," he said with a smile. "An Appaloosa. I breed a few of them."

"My boys would love to ride a horse," she murmured.

His face hardened. "Would they? There's a riding stable a mile down the road—Stan's Bar-K Ranch."

"I know. I've already approached him about riding lessons," she said with a smug grin at his chagrin. "Spiked your guns, huh, Mr. Craig?"

He looked around at the cabins. Curtains moved in one. He'd have bet money it was the boy she'd mentioned—Kells. He glared toward the spot and the curtain fell together and remained still.

"Nice glare," she murmured. "How long did it take you to perfect that?"

"All my life." He pulled the hat farther over his eyes and glared down at her. "No more opened gates. I'm putting a man out here on night duty. A city policeman. He'll be armed."

She drew her breath in sharply. "You'd have him shoot a child for trespassing?"

"I would not," he said coldly. "But I'm trying to make you see the seriousness of the situation. It wasn't so many years ago that leaving a gate open could get you hung in Texas."

"So could insulting a lady," she drawled.

He lifted a blond eyebrow and a corner of his mouth tugged up in a very sarcastic smile.

She actually blushed. Her hands clenched at her sides. "I'll be sure and tell Kells that your storm trooper is lying in wait for him."

"Some storm trooper," he murmured. "A family man with six kids and ten grandkids

who can't make it on what they pay him to risk his life every shift he works."

She had the grace to feel ashamed. "Sorry."

"You've been standing on the wrong side of the law for a while, haven't you?" he asked coolly. "Perhaps you should spend a little time with the victims of the people you defend and broaden your view of the world around you."

Her indrawn breath was audible, even above the brisk wind in the trees around them. "That was uncalled for! You have no idea what I do—"

He cut her right off. "I have every idea! I sat in court and watched an ambitious public defender accuse my mother of asking to be beaten every night of her life by a drunken lunatic who caused her to miscarry two children." His blue eyes blazed in a face gone taut with horrible memories. His fists clenched at his sides. "To hear him tell it, my father was a victim of his family, not the reverse. Well, sadly for him, there were color photographs of my mother and my sister, very graphic ones, that the jury got to see." The hatred he felt for the whole legal system was written all over him as he spoke in curt, deep tones laced with

bitterness. "They put him away for five years, despite all the legal chicanery and smooth talk, but not in time to save my mother. She'd suffered so much abuse that years were taken off her life. She died right after he was convicted."

She was shocked that a total stranger would tell her such a thing about his family. She was more shocked that he made her feel dirty with his confession, and vaguely guilty as well.

"I'm sorry," she said with genuine sympathy.

"Sorry." He looked her up and down coldly. His eyes went past her to the cabins. "Yes, you're sorry for the way the legal system works, Miss Jessup. So sorry in fact that you've brought a few future lawbreakers down here to the brush, to coddle and baby them so that they're even more convinced that society owes them a living for the horrible bad lives they've lived." He glared at her. "I could write you a book on dysfunctional families and physical abuse, but I've never picked a lock or stolen a car or shot another person in my life, except during Desert Storm when my army reserve unit was called up."

She moved back a step. "I'm not trying to defend criminals, Mr. Craig. I'm trying to turn some potential criminals around before they become the real thing."

"Pamper them, then," he mused. "And see how long it takes one of them to slit your throat while you sleep." He leaned forward. "But don't take my word for it," he added sardonically. "It's been my experience that stubborn people have to learn the hard way."

"You have a very narrow view of life," she replied.

He looked down his nose at her. He knew he was being harsh, but something about her egged him on. "I'll bet you were loved and wanted and spoiled, weren't you?" he asked.

She was unnerved by that blue glitter. "My childhood is none of your business."

He laughed hollowly. "To hear you tell it, every criminal's childhood is my business. Poor little murderers and thieves and rapists. They just needed a little more love to be good citizens. And the people they victimized probably deserved it, didn't they?"

She was shocked. "I never said that!"

"You do-gooders think it. They said my mother asked to be beaten."

She winced. "Of course she didn't!"

"Really? The public defender was eloquent about that. He had dozens of reasons why she

enjoyed having her face broken time and time again."

"He was doing his job," she said. "Even the worst criminal has the right to an attorney."

"Of course," he drawled. "And every public defender has the right to build a reputation for setting the guilty free."

"Was your father set free?" she asked pointedly.

"The public defender convinced the parole board to let him loose early," he told her. "He'd have come back with blood in his eye and taken his rage out on my sister and me. But he dropped dead in his cell of a heart attack. I suppose God still believes in justice, even if the legal system has forgotten the meaning of the word." He turned around. "I won't have the boy shot if he picks that lock again. I will have him arrested and prosecuted." He paused, glancing back at her. "I'm

not a poor country kid at the mercy of the system now. I can afford the legal help of my choosing, and pay for it. If I lose any more cattle, you won't be taking one of your charges back to the city after summer camp. And that's the only warning you'll get."

He swung back into the saddle, turned the horse, and rode back the way he'd come, his back as straight as a board.

Belinda watched him go with more conflicting emotions than she'd felt in her life. He was a bitter man, and they'd made an enemy of him because Kells couldn't keep his fingers to himself. If she wasn't careful, if she didn't keep a close watch on the boy, she'd land him in jail herself, when her whole purpose in coming here was to keep him and his mates out of trouble.

She worried the thought all through the evening meal of hot dogs and French fries, her green eyes on the lanky dark youth with the curly black hair who sat idly at the table taking a pocket watch apart and putting it back together for amusement.

Kells was hard to reach. He was ultrasensitive about his lack of grace and looks as well as his background. He had five brothers and sisters scattered around the country with various relatives. He'd moved here with his mother and her boyfriend, but the boyfriend didn't want him and his mother wouldn't fight for him. He'd stolen a CD player on purpose to get back at her when her boyfriend had beaten him. In his neighborhood, many people had criminal records. But Kells had magic in his fingers and something in his manner that set him apart from his peers. Belinda had recognized the potential in him. She believed in him. She was the only person who did. She'd had to fight his mother and the whole juvenile court system to get him here to summer camp. Now he was seventeen and he could go to jail if he was arrested. She might have taken him out of the frying pan only to land him in a fire.

He noticed her scrutiny and his black eyes came up, hostile and faintly defensive. "I can put it back together," he muttered when he saw her eyes on the watch.

"I know you can," she said, and smiled, "You're very clever with your hands, Kells. I don't think I've ever known anyone your age who had the facility you have with mechanical things."

He averted his eyes and shrugged, but she sensed that the compliment had pleased him. "That cowboy going to arrest me?"

"He's a rancher. It was his cattle you turned loose, twice."

"I never turned no cattle loose," he said with his head down.

"You picked his locks and opened the gate. The cattle turned themselves loose."

He made a jerky motion with his head. "Never seen cows before," he mumbled.

"Steers," she corrected.

His eyes came up and he seemed suddenly alert. "Steers? What's the difference?"

"Cows are mothers of calves. Heifers are unbred cows. Bulls are stud cattle. Steers are neutered cattle raised for beef. Those were steers. They're beef cattle."

His whole face seemed entranced. "Like at the supermarket, ground beef and all."

She smiled. "Yes, that's right."

He lost interest in the watch. "Why does he keep them apart from the others?"

"Bulls won't tolerate a steer, and mother cows will fight them to protect their calves," she explained. "Besides that, it's logistics. It's easier to have different categories of cattle in a bunch, easier to work them when it comes time to separate them."

He leaned forward. "Work them?"

She chuckled. "During roundup. You have roundup twice a year on the ranch, once in the spring when the calves come and once in the fall, when you're rounding them up for sale or culling nonproducers. Calves have to be de-homed, branded, given their vaccinations, castrated if they're to be beef cattle, and tagged."

He was really interested. His eyes were more alert than she'd ever seen them. "Do they have names or something?"

"They have numbers, usually on their ear tags, but sometimes they're tattooed or a computer chip with the individual animal's history is implanted under the hide to be read with a scanner."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not. We still have rustlers in the cattle industry, even today."

"Did those steers have computer chips?"

"I don't know." She pursed her lips. "We could ask Mr. Craig."

He grimaced. "Oh, he won't talk to me," he said. "I know how people are around here."

She studied him quietly. "How are they?"

"Prejudiced," he muttered.

She smiled. "Did you know that a quarter of all the cowboys in the west during the last century were black?"

"They were?"

"African Americans and Hispanic Americans still make up a good portion of the numbers out here on ranches—they certainly do on my brother's. And I'm sure you've heard about the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry—the Buffalo Soldiers—and the Fifty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Infantry units. All African American."

"You mean, the Buffalo Soldiers were *all* black?"

She nodded. "They had the highest reenlistment rate and the lowest desertion rate of any group in the army."

He seemed to grow taller as she spoke. "They didn't say nothing about that in history class."

"It's changing," she said. "Slowly but surely American history is starting to include contributions by all races, not just the whites."

His lips tugged into a reluctant smile as his long-fingered hands toyed with the watch.

"You're okay, Miss Jessup."

"So are you, Kells. Don't worry about Mr. Craig. Everything's going to be fine."

"I don't know," he said quietly. "It's not hard to see that he don't want us here."

"Sure he does," she countered. "He just doesn't know it yet!"

Chapter 2

Luke was fuming when he got home. He hated the whole idea of his new neighbors. It wasn't bad enough that the largest part of his hay crop had been ruined by too much rain, or that cattle prices were falling after a bacteria scare. Some days it didn't pay to be a rancher. He wondered why he hadn't gone into some better paying profession, like plumbing. It was sheer lunacy to hang on to a ranch, even if it had been in the family for three generations.

He tossed his hat onto the sofa and sat down in his big recliner to watch the news. There was a feature on about the rise of juvenile crime and the lack of proper punishment in the juvenile justice system. He laughed without mirth. The same old tired theme again, and now he had a better knowledge of juvenile crime than most people. He'd put the eight combination locks back on the farm gate between his pasture and the summer camp, and he'd talked to his friend in the police department about working two nights a week out mere.

He allowed himself a moment to ponder the trespasser's future if he'd left a gate open on the other side of that summer camp, on land that belonged to Cy Parks. Luke was fairly easygoing, even in a temper. Cy Parks was so bad-tempered that delivery boys had to have double pay just to take things out to his place. Luke had considered talking to him about the summer camp, because there was safety in numbers. But he decided against it. Cy was a newcomer to Jacobsville and he'd never made any attempt to get to know local people. Rumor had it that he'd been burned out on his Wyoming ranch and had barely escaped with his life. He'd bought old man Sanders's place

on Verde Creek and was building a herd of purebred Santa Gertrudis cattle. If Kells had so much as sneezed on one of those expensive young bulls, mere was no telling what Cy would do. Luke, of course, was a kindhearted man. That being the case, he had to resort to desperate measures to protect his cattle. So he planned to hire a watchman.

His property contained a little line cabin near the fence, which Luke had furnished with a stove and refrigerator, chairs, a table and a cot for the men when they were working out there during roundup. It was a good few miles from the ranch proper, and he didn't run a chuck wagon to roundup, so the cabin was largely self-sufficient. There was a kitchen, so the men could cook for themselves, and the small building even had a telephone. Luke would provide his security man with a pair of binoculars, special ones with infrared, so

that they allowed night vision. He wasn't going to lose any more cattle through open fences. No matter what it took.

The next morning, on a day when he was going to install the security man in the line

cabin, he rode out to the steer pasture to find the gate closed. But the steers weren't alone in the pasture. A tall, lanky dark youth was stalking one of the steers.

Luke spurred his mount, something he rarely ever did, and put on a burst of speed, insinuating the horse in front of the boy, who backed away with huge wide eyes and upraised hands.

"Get that thing away from me!" the boy yelled. "Don't let it kick me!"

The fear in the youth's face was a surprise. Luke reined in the horse and sat quietly, leaning slightly forward in the saddle to study the nervous youth on the ground.

"What the hell are you doing in my pasture?" Luke demanded in a cold tone.

"Looking...looking for them computer chips," Kells stammered.

It was the very last thing Luke had expected to hear. He sat hesitating, his mind working furiously.

He wasn't aware of Belinda's cry or her headlong rush over the locked gate, so frenzied that she almost ripped a hole in her elegant designer jeans and scarred her boots.

"It's all right!" Belinda cried, panting as

she ran up to join Kells, moving just in front of him. "He wasn't doing anything to the cattle!"

"Steers," Kells corrected, feeling a little smug.

Luke looked at him with new interest. "You know something about cattle?" he asked unexpectedly.

"She was teaching me," he replied, jerking his head toward the small woman in front of him. "About the difference. You know, steers and heifers and such. And about the computer chips under the hides."

Luke's hostile expression had faded to curiosity. "She told you about that?"

He nodded. "I wanted to see the chips. I wasn't going to hurt nothing," he added with faint belligerence.

Luke actually chuckled. He abruptly rode off toward where the steers were congregating near the fence, lifting his lariat from the saddle horn. He spun a loop and lassoed one of the steers with easy grace, the result of years of long practice, and got down out of the saddle to catch the rope tight. He motioned to Kells.

"That was great!" Kells exclaimed. "That was just great! How you learn to do that, spin that loop and lasso that cow...that steer...so easy?"

Luke grinned. "A lot of practice and a few bruises," he murmured. He was petting the steer behind its ears, and the animal stood very still and looked content. "Come on, he's not dangerous. I only run polled cattle here."

"Polled?" Kells asked, curious.

"Dehorned," the older man qualified. He searched behind the steer's neck and felt for a small lump. He found it "Here." He caught Kells's dark hand and smoothed it over the spot. "It's a computer chip. I resisted this technology for years, but it makes roundup so much easier that I finally gave in. We can keep an animal's entire herd history on one chip and get the information in seconds with a scanner when we sort the animals for sale."

"I didn't think ranchers used it on steers," Belinda interjected.

"Oh, we don't usually," he agreed. "But this lot is an experiment." He shifted a little self-consciously. "I've been reading about some new methods that our local cattlemen's association is using. Vasectomy, for one."

"What's that?" Kells asked.

"Ordinarily, you create a steer by removing what makes him able to reproduce. But by giving the steer a vasectomy," he explained, "the animal still produces testosterone, which we think is responsible for fast growth. But since the steer is effectively neutered, it tends to be easier to handle. You get a higher weight-gain ratio the same as with bulls, but you get the lean carcass of a steer."

"Isn't it expensive to do it that way?" Belinda asked.

He smiled. "Not really. It takes about the same amount of time, and we do it ourselves instead of calling out the veterinarian. But even if it did take more time, we think the benefits outweigh the cost. That's why we're experimenting with it. Since the animal gains weight without the use of growth hormones, we save some money there, too."

"My brother says a lot of consumers are getting scared of those additives, like growth hormones and antibiotics," Belinda agreed.

"There's definitely a market for organically grown beef, and at least one cattleman I know of is offering custom-grown lean beef to supermarket chains," he added. He noted Kells's light, fascinated touch on the animal's shoulder.

"Isn't it hard to kill them?" Kells asked unexpectedly.

"Yes," Luke replied unexpectedly. "I'm in the cattle business because I like animals, so I get attached to the damned things. They all have personalities. They're all different. I try not to get too close to the beef cattle, but I've got a ton and a half bull who follows me around like a pet dog, and two Holstein milk cows who think they're cats."

Kells chuckled. "No fooling? What's a Holstein?"

"They're dairy cattle...look here, are you really that interested in cattle?"

Kells shrugged and lowered his gaze to the steer. "Never saw cattle before," he murmured. He glanced shyly at Luke and then away again. "I like them. I didn't mean to let them get loose. I wanted to see them up close, you know. And after she told me about the computer chips..." He grimaced. "I just wanted to see what it looked like."

Luke pursed his lips, aware of Belinda's stillness. "Want to come see the Holsteins?" he asked.

Kells caught his breath. "You fooling?"

Luke shook his head. "Nothing a cattleman likes better than to show off his operation." He almost laughed aloud at the expression on Belinda's face.

Kells was fascinated. "Reckon I could see that bull?"

Luke chuckled. "Sure. Why not."

"Aren't you scared of that thing?" Kells persisted, moving back from the big black-spotted white horse.

"She's gentle—a mare," Luke explained. He frowned. "Why are you afraid of horses?"

"I lived in New York City until this year," he muttered. "A cop on a horse tried to run me down. It reared up and if I hadn't moved, it would have pawed me."

Luke wisely didn't ask what Kells had done to provoke the man. Still, trying to ride a boy down, for any reason, was reprehensible. "You should have told someone in authority," he said curtly.

Kells shrugged. ' 'Nobody ever wanted to do anything for me until my mom moved us to

Houston a few months ago and I got in trouble for taking a CD player out of a shop. She —" he indicated Belinda "—went to bat for me and got the owner not to press charges. But I got sent to juvy anyway, 'cause I was sixteen then."

"Juvy?"

"Juvenile hall," Belinda told him. "Courts are harder on juveniles these days, because there's so much violence in the inner city."

"I see." He didn't. He studied Kells, who was watching the cattle with such fascination that he was drawn to the boy. All his prejudices about "coddling juvenile delinquents" were going up in smoke. It was easy to be intolerant when you didn't know the people you were intolerant toward. Kells was giving him an education in gray areas, where before he'd seen only black-and-white.

"When do you want me to bring the guys over?" Belinda asked him.

"No time like the present," he said. "Load 'em up and come on. Know how to find it?"

"Yes, I've seen it from the road," she replied. She smiled with genuine gratitude. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "Just being neighborly." He took the loop from the steer's neck and coiled the rope, with Kells watching every move. The young man had a quick mind and nimble fingers. Suddenly he had an idea that might bear consideration.

There were six kids from the ghettos of Houston in Belinda's group, ranging in age from nine to fourteen. Kells was the oldest. The youngest was Julio, a Mexican boy. Two were white and one of the others was black, like Kells. The middle boy, Juanito, was Native American, although he wouldn't say which tribe. He didn't talk about himself at all. In fact, he didn't talk much, period. He was living with an uncle and aunt who didn't seem to notice what he did, or care. It was the same story with most of the others. That's why they'd landed themselves in juvenile court and detention centers. They cared as little for themselves as the adults around them did. It was important to Belinda that someone cared about them, built their self-esteem, made them proud of their races and history. She didn't delude herself that she could change the whole world. But maybe she could change one person.

She drove the boys to Luke's ranch in the rickety old van she'd bought for the occasion. It was in good mechanical shape, even if it did look like the dark side of the moon. She thought of having it painted, but it seemed a waste of time and money.

As she reached the end of a long, winding graveled road that led off from a paved highway, she noticed Luke was waiting for them. The house was nice, big, white and friendly with a long porch. There was a stable and corral back away from the flower garden that Luke's sister had kept until her marriage, and there were fenced and cross-fenced pastures reaching all the way to the main road.

Belinda got out of the battered old van and opened the side door so the boys could get out with her. "Remember not to go through any fences, okay?" she cautioned them. "Bulls are dangerous and unpredictable. If you've ever watched rodeo, in person or on television, you'll know that already."

"Mr. Craig said his bull follows him around," Kells reminded her.

"So he does. But the bull knows Mr. Craig, doesn't he?" she replied.

Kells grinned. "I guess so."

Luke came down the steps to meet them, greeted the boys, and led them toward the barn. "This ranch has been in my family for three generations," he began. "My grandfather started out with longhorn cattle and I ended up with Herefords. Most ranchers have a breed they prefer above others. Cy Parks, who lives across there—" he gestured back toward the space the summer camp occupied "—runs purebred Santa Gertrudis. One of his bulls cost a million dollars."

Kells eyes widened and then his face fell. "Gosh, I guess you got to be rich to have cattle, huh?"

Luke smiled at him. "Not really. You could start out with a young bull and a few heifers and build a ranch from mere. It's not as expensive as you think."

The light came back into the youth's eyes. He looked past Luke to the big Hereford bull in the pasture adjoining the barn and his breath caught. "Oh, Lord, what an animal!"

Luke burst out laughing. "He sounds just like me at his age," he explained when everybody looked at him. "I thought there was nothing on earth as pretty as a bull."

"There isn't," Kells agreed. He got up on the bottom rung of the high wooden fence and wrapped his arms around the top rung. "Isn't he great?"

"His name's Shiloh," Luke told him. "I raised him from a baby and now he's mentioned in just about every major cattle journal as a top stud bull. I can't keep up with the demand for his progeny. There's even a waiting list."

"Got any buffalo?" one of the boys asked.

Luke shook his head. "I know of a ranch or two that runs some, but they're dangerous to keep. They'll charge at the least provocation and they can go right through a fence."

"They have buffalo up on the Yellowstone," Juanito said. "I saw a whole herd when my uncle drove us through the park."

"I never saw a buffalo," another boy murmured.

Belinda smiled at her charges. "The whole of the western states used to have herds of them, before white people came along and killed them off."

"Why'd they do that?" one of the others wanted to know.

"Greed," Luke said flatly. "Pure and simple, greed. They wanted the money that people back east and even overseas were willing to pay for buffalo hides. And, too, there was a lot of money to be had for guiding shooting parties out on the plains so that they could kill hundreds of buffalo for sport and leave them lying in the sun."

Belinda stared at him curiously and then she smiled. They were kindred spirits. She hated the loss of the buffalo, too.

He glanced down at her while the boys murmured to each other about the size of that big bull in the fenced pasture. She had a pretty face, he thought, and a big heart to go with it. He liked her already. He smiled slowly and was surprised and delighted to see her face flush.

She had to drag her eyes away from his. That look had gone right through her. Over the years she'd had plenty of boyfriends, but they were all just casual acquaintances. Or they had been until Russell, who gave her an engagement ring and swore he loved her, and then eloped with her best friend. That had been four long years ago. She hadn't looked at another man since.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked perceptibly.

She caught her breath. "Wrong? Why... nothing."

"You were thinking about something and it hurt. What was it?"

She shifted. ' 'I was engaged. He eloped with my best friend."

"Well, well." He studied her carefully. "So that's why you aren't married. No inclination to try again, I gather."

"None at all."

"Join the club."

She shot a quick glance at his averted profile. "You, too?" she asked softly.

He nodded, a jerk of his head. ' 'Me, too. She promised to be true, but the minute I went off on business, she was entertaining an old boyfriend at the local motel." He laughed coldly. "You can't do that sort of thing in a town this small and not be gossiped about. Two people told me about it when I got off the plane."

"It's the world we live in," she said quietly. "Fidelity doesn't seem to mean much, anymore."

He turned to face her. "It means the world to me," he said flatly. "I'm an old-fashioned man. When I give my word, I keep it."

She grimaced. "So do I." She smoothed her fingers carefully over the hard wood of the fence. "He said I was a dinosaur."

One eyebrow levered slowly up.

"I wouldn't go to bed with him because we weren't married," she said simply. "So he found somebody who would." She shrugged. "I can't blame him, really. I mean, every woman does it."

"Not every woman," he said coldly. "Virtue is so rare as to be priceless these days."

"Show me one virtuous man," she dared.

"That would be difficult," he agreed, "although it's not impossible. I've known a man or two who felt the way you do about it. Still, men can't get pregnant, can they? Women are the childbearers, the civilizers. I believe that when children are going to be involved, there should be one man, and no others."

She stared up at him quietly. "You're a dinosaur, too."

"You got a dinosaur?" one of the boys, overhearing, asked.

"Don't be stupid," another boy answered him, "there's no such thing!"

"I read that dinosaurs turned into birds," another ventured.

Juanito grinned for the first time. "My grandad used to say he could turn into a bird when he liked. And my mom said no wonder he ate like one."

Everybody laughed, but kindly.

It broke the ice. Luke showed the boys around, and they warmed to his easy, friendly manner. He led them through the barn, where he had two calves being treated for scours and a heifer with snakebite.

"They're all improving," he said, watching the boys stare at the animals. "They'll go out into the pasture in a day or two. There were three calves in here, but we lost one of them yesterday."

"What's scours?" Kells asked.

"It's a disease calves get that prevents them from keeping anything in their stomachs," he replied. "They die if they aren't treated. The vet has been giving them medicine for it. Usually it works. Sometimes, it doesn't, no matter how hard you try."

"I guess you have to use a horse to work cattle," Kells continued.

"I'm afraid so. Although," he added with a chuckle, "I used to know a man who used an all-

terrain vehicle to do it."

"One of those four-wheeled things like a big lawnmower?"

"The very thing. He hit a stump unexpectedly and went headfirst, right into the lagoon. I hear he gave the vehicle to his nephew the next day and went back to using horses." He saw the question in Kells's eyes and before he could ask it he added, "A lagoon is where animal waste is collected."

Kells doubled over laughing. "No wonder he gave the thing away!" He sighed. "I guess I could learn to like horses."

"Sure you could," Luke assured him. "A horse that's trained right will do what you tell it to, although I've seen some bad horses. In fact, a neighbor of mine has a twenty-year-old horse that killed a man in an arena and was about to be destroyed. He saved it."

"Must be a nice man."

He shook his head. "Not a chance. He's like a rattlesnake, coiled up and waiting for somebody to come within striking distance." He grinned. "Most people walk wide around him."

"Can we go back out there and look at the bull?" Kells asked.

"Sure, go ahead."

They ran out almost in a unit, leaving Luke and Belinda together at the steel gate that contained the calves in their stall.

He glanced at Belinda. "That neighbor lives on the other side of your camp, by the way. You'd better make sure nobody trespasses in his direction. I'm a reasonable man. He's not."

"I'll remember," she promised.

He watched her openly, his blue eyes narrow and thorough on her soft oval face. "Do you like your job?"

"I like kids," she said. "Especially kids who need something society isn't giving them." She jerked her head toward the boys. "There's not one thing wrong with them that a little love and attention wouldn't have taken care of. They just want someone to care about them, and they find unorthodox ways to attract attention."

"Kells said he stole a CD player."

She nodded. "But not because he wanted it," she murmured. "His mother's boyfriend had beaten him up that morning. He was getting back at her, for exposing him to that sort of treatment." She shrugged. "The boyfriend is the reason they're out here. He sent for her, but he doesn't want Kells. Neither did his father."

"What a shame."

She nodded. "The boyfriend's idea of discipline is a fist to the jaw. I've had the D.A.'s office looking into it, but Kells's mother won't say a word in Kells's defense. In fact, she told the investigator that he asked for it, by being sassy."

"Nobody asks to be beaten up." He said it with such ferocity that she turned and looked up at him. His face was hard, set with lines of pain. She had the most terrible urge to reach up and touch it, to make the lines relax. She remembered very well what he'd told her about his father, about the beatings. It would have been worse, to watch his mother taking that sort of abuse and not being able to stop it. It was a sadly familiar story in her circles. She reflected on women she'd worked with who had been victimized by abusive husbands.

There seemed to be so many women who tolerated the abuse out of fear, a kind of fear that well-meaning outsiders could never understand. Belinda tried to explain that everything would change once the woman was out of the house. It rarely worked until a beating landed her in the hospital, or until the man injured, sometimes killed, one of her children.

"What are you brooding about?" Luke asked abruptly.

She smiled sadly. "About women who won't accept help, feeling they're better off where they are. I was thinking about why they won't leave men who hurt them."

"Because they're afraid," Luke replied curtly. "Everybody says, just get out, you'll be okay." He laughed bitterly. "Once, after the police left, my father held a butcher knife to my mother's throat for ten minutes and described to her, graphically, what he'd do to my sister, Elysia, with it if she ever called the police again."

"Dear Lord," she breathed.

"He meant it, too," he added. "He said he'd have nothing to lose if they were going to put him in jail anyway."

She put out a hand and touched the back of his, just lightly. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

He turned his hand and caught her fingers in his, tightly. "Why did you become a public defender?"

She smiled ruefully. "My best friend was raped by her stepfather, and the public defender on her case had such a heavy workload that he plea-bargained the case to get it off his schedule. She was devastated when her stepfather didn't even have to serve time for what he'd done. She couldn't go back home, because by then her mother believed she'd invited it." She shook her head sadly. "I decided then and there that I wanted to make a difference in the world. I studied law and here I am, despite my brother's assurances that I was wasting my time."

He chuckled. "I remember your brother very well," he mused. "He was the most ruthless businessman I ever met."

"Yes, he was. His wife has changed him," she added. "He's given up being stone-hearted. Now, he's my biggest fan."

His blue eyes met hers and he smiled slowly. "Maybe, but he's not your only one." He leaned closer deliberately, pausing with his lips a breath away from hers. "I like you, too, Miss Public Defender." And then he kissed her.

Chapter 3

He'd meant it to be a brief, teasing kiss. It didn't work out that way. The touch of that soft mouth under his was explosive. He caught his breath, lifting his head just enough to see the mutual shock and pleasure in Belinda's eyes before he bent again.

This time, it wasn't brief, or particularly gentle. He lifted her completely against the length of his tall, muscular body and kissed her until he had to come up for air. He looked into her

stunned eyes with quiet curiosity, breathing raggedly.

"You should...put me down," she whispered.

"Are you sure?" he murmured while he searched her face.

"Yes. The boys..."

He eased her back onto her feet, shooting a glance toward the barn door. The youngsters weren't in view at all. "Nobody saw," he said. He traced her swollen lips with his forefinger. "I could get used to this," he added quietly. "How about you?"

She swallowed and then swallowed again. She had to move back from contact with him before her mind would work again. "I'm only here on my summer vacation," she managed in a voice that didn't sound like her own.

He smiled slowly. "Houston isn't that far away."

She didn't know what to say. She was overcome by feelings she'd suppressed, tucked away and forgotten. Her body felt like a rosebud subjected to rain and sun and wind, blooming and lifting its face to the elements. He was very attractive, and he had qualities that she loved. But it was too quick; too soon.

"I'm rushing you," he mused, seeing the confused uncertainty in her eyes. "Don't get uptight. I won't back you into a corner. But I'm interested. Aren't you?"

She took time to catch her breath. She lowered her eyes to his shirt. "Yes."

He grinned. His heart felt lighter than it had in years. He curled her fingers into his and led her toward the barn entrance. "Come on. I'll show you my horses."

Belinda went along silently. She couldn't believe he'd done that, right out in the open, in plain daylight. It had been a passionate kiss, deliriously arousing and hungry. The warm, hard contact left her confused and quiet.

He had several horses, all Appaloosas. He explained the markings and called their names. "I'm crazy about them," he remarked. "I belong to an Appaloosa club and we talk on the internet about our passion. This is one special breed."

"Everybody says that about whichever breed they like best," she said with a laughing smile. "But I can see why you like Apps. They really are beautiful."

"Cy Parks has Arabians," he told her. "A small herd, with a glorious stallion herd sire. He's pure white, like beach sand on the Gulf of Mexico. I think he used to race them, before he moved here."

"Is he really such a rough customer?"

"Yes, he is," he said bluntly. "Keep your brood well shy of his ranch. He can't tolerate children at all," he added, without mentioning why.

She let out a soft whistle. "Thanks for the warning," she said. "I started this camp because I wanted to make a difference for these boys, if they could see another sort of life from the one they live in the inner city. Yet I never stopped to consider the potential pitfalls... Still, I'm encouraged by Kells's interest in ranching. He didn't seem the kind of teenager who'd fall in love with cattle so quickly, but he's genuine about it. This will give him something to work toward."

"I had an idea about that." Luke confided. "I thought I might ask him to stay at the ranch and learn the ropes while you take the others back to your camp. Then if he decided to come back here and work after graduation, I'd hire him."

She caught her breath. "You'd do that for him?"

"For myself, too," he said. "He's a quick study and he loves the business. A cowboy like

that would be an asset anywhere. If I train him, I can hire him when he gets through school."

"He'd be over the moon."

"Don't tell him until we can get the details worked out," he cautioned. "I don't want to build him up to a big letdown."

"I won't say a word." She searched his face. "You're good with children."

"I learned on Elysia's little girl," he told her with a grin. "I took her to movies and the park and carnivals. Her dad does those things now. I've missed her since Elysia remarried."

She studied the Appaloosas. "You should get married and have kids of your own."

"You know, I've just realized that."

She didn't dare look at him. Her heart was leaping around madly in her chest.

He turned away from the horse pasture and tugged her along with him. "We'd better get back to the boys and make sure they aren't trying to climb aboard that old bull," he murmured dryly. "I still remember how I was as a kid."

"How did your father make a living?"

"My grandfather made the living for him," he replied. "He had this ranch. Dad worked for him, when he was sober enough, and my grandfather protected us as long as he was alive. When he died, everything changed."

"But you managed to hang on to the ranch."

"I had help," he said. "Neighbors, friends, relatives...everybody did what they could for us, despite my father. That's why I'm still here," he added seriously. "Jacobsville is the sort of place where you're not a resident, you're part of a family. Maybe people know your business, but they care about you as well. I couldn't think of living anywhere else."

"I can understand why," she murmured. Her hand in his felt small and vulnerable. *She* felt small. He towered over her, and she liked him very much. Too much. It wasn't possible to feel so strongly for someone she'd only just met, but she seemed to fit into his life as if she'd been conditioned to it.

He glanced down at her with a warm smile. She was pretty and feisty and she really did care about these boys of hers. He could see her with children of her own. She'd be a veritable mama lion if her kids were threatened. He found himself wondering about having a child of his own. He loved Elysia's two, but he had to start thinking about the future, about kids of his own to inherit this place when he was gone. It didn't really surprise him that he was beginning to see Belinda in a new light. She came from a ranching background, and she had a soft heart. He'd had his fill of women who wanted a good time and no ties of any kind. He was old enough to start looking for a settle-down sort of woman.

The boys left the ranch late that afternoon with Belinda, after a long tour of the ranch on saddle horses that left them all sore but happy.

"They'll be uncomfortable tomorrow," Luke chuckled as he saw Belinda to the van. "They used muscles they didn't know they had on that trail ride. Kells took to it like a pro, did you notice? For a boy who was afraid of horses, he's come a long way in a short time."

"You were amazing with him," she said.

"He was the one I couldn't reach, did you know? He was surly and uncommunicative until I started telling him about cattle. I found the door and you found the key. He's different."

"He's focused," he told her, glancing toward the van where the boys were conversing animatedly inside. "They're not bad kids," he said suddenly, as if the thought surprised him.

She smiled. "No, they're not," she replied. "The world is full of them. Young people get married and two years down the road, they realize they've made a mistake, but they've got a

child. They get divorced and marry somebody else and the kids end up in a family where they're the outsiders. Sometimes they're not even wanted. It's worse in poor neighborhoods, of course." She nodded toward the van. "Kells could write a book on that. He said that most of the kids in his neighborhood in New York City were either wanted by the law or selling drugs. He thought he'd end up the same way." She sighed, her eyes seeing far away. "When people live in hopeless poverty, with a poor self-image and no way out, they give up. That's why they resort to alcohol and drugs, because it eases the pain, just for a little while. But pretty soon, they're hooked and they can't quit, and they'll do anything to get high again, so they can forget where they live and what they've become." She shook her head. "It occurs to me sometimes that a small percentage of people aren't constructed to live in a regimented, money-oriented, time-clock-mandated industrial society. These same people, placed on the land where they could work at their own pace, would be happy and useful."

"That's a new theory."

She shook her head. "It's not. I'm only quoting Toffler." He looked puzzled and she smiled. "Alvin Toffler...*Future Shock*? Mr. Toffler is a visionary and he sees right inside people. He said that some people will never fit into our fast-paced culture, and I think he's right."

"I'd like to hear more about that." He pursed his lips. "I don't suppose you could get away for supper one evening?"

"I've got no one to stay with the boys," she said regretfully.

"Then I'll just have to find an excuse to

have them back over again, won't I?" he said, grinning down at her.

She chuckled. "You do that. I'd better get them back to camp. Thanks for letting me bring them over."

"I enjoyed it," he returned.

"So did I."

She went back to the van and climbed in with the boys. She couldn't help a glance into the rearview mirror as they went back the way they'd come, down the winding ranch road. Luke was standing in the yard with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his wide-brimmed hat covering his head. He looked like part of the land itself, and something warm kindled inside her at just the sight of him.

For the next few days, Belinda found plenty of time to regret her lapse of control with Luke in the barn. She got cold feet and flatly refused the boys' request for another visit to the ranch.

She didn't realize that her refusal was about to have grave consequences. Kells, depressed with little to do and too much time on his hands, wanted another shot at roping cattle.

Late one sunny afternoon, he slipped away from the others. He'd found an old, limp rope in one of the old outbuildings near the camp and he'd spent hours every day practicing with it, as he'd seen Luke do. He was somewhat proficient, but he was bored with roping the old sawhorse that sat near the oak tree behind the building. He wondered if he could lasso a steer. Miss Jessup was occupied with the other boys, teaching them how to use her laptop computer. He preferred cattle to computers, so he coiled his rope and sneaked down the road toward a pasture full of red-coated cattle.

He didn't realize that Luke's cattle were only one side of the long, winding graveled road. He knew that most of Luke's steers were Hereford's, which were white and red. These cattle were red, but they might be a variation on the same breed, he decided. They sure weren't steers,

he knew that by looking at them, and they had horns. They'd be easy to rope! He slipped through the barbed-wire fence stealthily, eased into the small line of trees that outlined the green pasture, and started up a small rise where a red-coated young bull was grazing.

It was the perfect time to practice the lariat throw he'd been perfecting, as Luke had showed him how to do it. He missed the first time he tried, but the animal didn't run away. It stood chewing grass and staring at him curiously. He coiled the rope and patiently tried again. This time, he managed the throw perfectly, tossing the loop right over the short horns of the young bull. He chuckled and let out a whoop as he started reeling the bull in.

He was having the time of his life, leading the young bull around the pasture and down the hill toward the gate when he heard a loud yell, followed by a chilling report that sounded very much like a rifle being fired.

He stopped dead in his tracks, the rope in his hand, and turned to find a tall, threatening-looking man on a huge white horse sitting just a few hundred feet away on the ridge holding a rifle to his shoulder. His face wasn't visible under the wide-brimmed hat, but the threat in his posture was immediately recognizable to a teen who'd had several brushes with gangs.

Kells dropped the rope and threw up his hands while he had time. "I was just practicing with the rope, mister," he called. "No need to shoot me!"

The man didn't reply. He had a cell phone in his hand now and he was punching in numbers. A minute later he spoke into it and then closed it up.

"Sit down," a rough, deep voice called.

Kells wasn't thrilled with the idea of sitting down in a cow pasture where rattlesnakes might be crawling, but he didn't want to get shot. He sat down. This, he thought, was very obviously the landowner Luke had warned him about, but he hadn't listened. He knew with a miserable certainty that he was going to wish he had.

Belinda was just beginning to clear the lunch dishes and wondering why Kells hadn't come in to eat when her cell phone rang. She picked it up and listened, and then sat down hard.

"They didn't have your number, so they called me," Luke told her grimly. "If you'll give me a minute to organize things here, I'll pick you up and we'll go to the police station together. I know these people better than you **do.**"

"What are my chances of getting Mr. Parks to drop the charges?" she asked with resignation in her voice.

"Slim to none," he said flatly. "If Cy Parks had his way, they'd probably shoot him. I don't think we'll be able to talk Cy out of this, but we can try."

"How long will it take you to get over here?" she asked, not even protesting his offer to go with her.

"Twenty minutes."

Actually, he made it in fifteen. He was dressed for work, in wide leather bat-wing chaps, old boots with caked spurs, and a long-sleeved chambray shirt. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat farther over his eyes as he put Belinda into the huge double-wheeled pickup truck and drove her into town.

"Don't get the idea that our police department is gung-ho to arrest people for no good reason," he said as he drove. "Cy will have bulldozed them into it. By the letter of the law, Kells was trespassing, but nobody in his right mind would take a rustling charge seriously."

What was he going to do with the damned bull, anyway?"

"He was practicing with the lariat, the way you taught him," she said miserably. "I suppose he got tired of lassoing the sawhorse and wanted something real to practice on."

"He heard me tell him to keep off Parks's place!"

"He wouldn't have known which side of the fence was Parks's," she returned. "He probably wasn't even paying attention to the color of the animals. At any rate, yours have red-and-white coats and Parks's have red coats, he might have thought some of yours were a solid color."

"It's a hell of a mess, I'll tell you that," he said angrily.

"Worse than you know. With his record, he may never get a chance to go home again. They'll want to send him right back to the detention center and keep him there."

"Damn!"

She felt furious at Cy Parks for this. Kells shouldn't have been on his property, but he was a kid, and he didn't mink. Why did Parks have to abide by the very letter of the law?

It seemed forever before Luke pulled up in front of the neat brick building that contained the police and fire departments and the city jail.

"In here," he indicated, holding the door open for Belinda.

The building was air-conditioned and very neat. Luke opened the door that had Police written on it, and ushered her to the counter, behind which a clerk sat.

"We're here to see about bail for the Kells boy," Luke said.

"Ah, yes." The clerk took a slow breath and sorted through papers, shaking her head. "Mr. Parks was furious." She glanced at Luke. "He's still here, you know, giving the chief hell."

Luke's blue eyes turned to steel. "Is he, now? Which way?"

The clerk hesitated. "Now, Luke..."

"Tell me, Sally."

"He's in his office. I have to announce you."

"I'll announce myself," he said shortly, and forged ahead, leaving a startled Belinda to follow him.

This was a side of Luke that she hadn't seen before. He barged right into Chief Blake's office with only a preemptory knock, and found the chief looking uncomfortable while a tall, whipcord lean man with venomous light green eyes and jet-black hair raged at him.

Cy Parks turned as Luke entered the office, his lean face as unwelcoming as a brushfire. "I won't drop the charges," he said at once, narrow-eyed and threatening. "I don't want juvenile delinquents camped on my south pasture, and I'll have every damned boy on the place in jail if that's what it takes to keep them out of my cattle!"

"That sounds familiar," Belinda said under her breath.

Luke wasn't intimidated. He walked right up to Cy, almost on eye-level with the man, and pushed his hat back on his blond hair. "I taught Kells to use a rope," he said angrily. "He's crazy about roping. He's been practicing on my cattle, but they don't have horns."

Cy didn't speak. But he was listening.

"He's an inner-city kid who got arrested for swiping a CD player. He didn't want the appliance, he wanted to get back at his mother for letting his stepfather beat him up."

Cy's stiff stance relaxed just a little.

Encouraged, Luke plowed ahead. "He's not a juvenile now, so if you press charges, they'll lock him up for good. He'll never get out of the justice system. He'll become a career criminal in between terms in prison, and I'll lose the most promising young cowhand who's ever come

my way."

Parks's eyes narrowed. "He likes cattle?"

"He's obsessed with cattle," Luke replied. "He's drained Belinda dry and now he's starting to pick my brain. He has a natural seat on a horse. He eats, sleeps, and breathes cattle since he's learned how to tell one breed from another."

Parks's jaw clenched. "I don't like kids around me."

Luke didn't blink. He noticed that Cy always kept his left hand in his pocket, and he knew why. The man hated sympathy; it was probably why he was so mean. It kept most people at bay. "Hating kids isn't going to bring yours back," Luke said quietly.

The other man's face clenched. He stiffened and for an instant, it looked as if he might throw a punch at Luke.

"Go ahead," Luke invited softly, evenly.

"Punch me if you feel like it. I'll give you a free shot. But let the kid go. The last thing on earth he meant to do was damage any of your stock. He loves cattle."

Cy's fist balled by his side and then relaxed. He moved his shoulders, as if they felt stiff, and glared at the other man. "Don't mention my past again," he said in a tone that chilled. He glanced at the police chief. "If I drop the charges, do you let him go?"

"With a warning," Chief Blake agreed.

Cy hesitated. He turned toward Belinda Jes-sup, who was pale and quiet and obviously upset. "What was the idea behind this summer camp?" he asked curtly.

"I brought six inner-city kids to the country to see what life could be like," she replied calmly. "Most of them have never seen a cow, or a pasture, or a small town. They grew up in poverty, with parents who didn't really want them, and all they saw were people working themselves to death for minimum wage or men in luxury cars dealing drugs for big money. I thought, I hoped, that this might make a difference." She folded her hands behind her. "It was making a major difference in Kells, until now. I'm sorry. I should have been watching him more carefully. He's spent two days practicing with the rope. I suppose he thought he was in Luke's pasture when he roped the **bull**."

"Hell of a difference between a purebred Santa Gert and one of those damned mangy Herefords," Cy said curtly.

"Hey," Luke said testily, "don't insult my Herefords!"

They glared at each other again.

"What about Kells?" Belinda interjected before things escalated too far.

"Let him go," Cy said shortly.

Chief Blake smiled faintly. "I'm glad you decided that," he said, rising. "I never thought roping a bull should be a capital crime."

"You haven't seen my new Santa Gert sire," Cy returned.

Blake just chuckled and went to the back to bring out Kells.

Kells was chastised and miserable, and looked as if the world had ended. He grimaced when he saw Cy Parks standing there.

"I guess I'm going back to Houston, now, huh?" he asked Belinda with overly bright eyes.

"No, you're not," Luke said curtly, glaring at Cy. "You're coming over to the bunkhouse at my place for the rest of your camp leave."

Kells looked as if he'd been knocked sideways. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not," Luke assured him. "If you want to rope cattle, you have to be around them."

Besides, we've got to talk about the future. Your future," he added. "Let's go."

Kells hesitated. He walked up to Cy Parks and bit his lip while he searched for the right words. "Look, I'm sorry about what I did, okay?" he asked hesitantly. "I knew them cattle didn't look exactly like Mr. Craig's, but I thought he might have had some more, and that was them. I never meant no harm. I just wanted something alive to practice on. Ain't no challenge in roping a few boards nailed together."

Cy looked uncomfortable. He made a strange gesture with his right hand. "All right. Don't do it again."

"I won't," Kells promised. "Them bulls sure are pretty, though," he added with a shy smile. "That breed started on the King Ranch in South Texas, didn't it?"

Cy's lower jaw fell a little. "Well, yes."

"Thought so," Kells said proudly. He smiled. "I'll know next time how to tell a Santa Gertrudis from a Hereford."

Cy exchanged a complicated glance with Luke. "I guess you could bring him over to see my new Santa Gertrudis bull," he said gruffly. "Call first"

Luke and the other occupants of the room gaped at him.

Cy glared back. "Are you all deaf?" he asked irritably. "I'm going home. I don't have time to stand around and gossip all day, like some I could name." He tipped his hat at Belinda in an oddly old-world gesture, and stormed out the door.

Kells caught his breath as the rancher lifted his left hand out of the pocket to open the door, but Cy, fortunately, was out the door before it was audible.

"What happened to his hand?" he exclaimed.

"His Wyoming ranch burned up in a fire," Luke said quietly. "His wife and young son were in the house at the time. He couldn't get them out. Not for lack of trying, that's how he got burned."

"Oh, boy," Kells said heavily. "No wonder he hates kids. Reminds him of the one he lost, don't you think, Miss Jessup?"

She put an affectionate arm around Kells. "Yes, I do. Poor man. Well, let's get back. I left the others at lunch."

"Sorry about all the trouble," Kells said.

Luke grinned at him. "It was no trouble." He glanced at the chief of police and smiled. "Thanks, Chet."

Chet Blake shrugged. "All in a day's work. I was trying to get him to drop the charges when you walked in. But I didn't get far, I'm sad to say. I couldn't budge him."

"He's a hard-nosed fellow," Luke agreed. "But he did the right thing in the end."

"So he did. Maybe he's not frozen clean through just yet," Blake replied.

They drove back to Belinda's camp in a companionable silence.

"I'm taking Kells with me," he told her when he pulled up in front of the cabin, and the boys piled out onto the porch to greet Belinda. "I'll get him settled and you can come over in a couple of days and check on him."

"I thought you were kidding!" Kells exclaimed. "You meant it?"

"Of course I meant it," Luke told him. "You're a natural cowboy, Kells. I'm going to make you into a top hand. Then, when you get through school if you're still of the same mind, I'll take you on as a cowboy."

Kells could hardly speak. He stared down at his hands in his lap and averted his head. There were bright lights in those dark eyes until he blinked them away. His voice was still choked

when he said, "Thanks, Mr. Craig."

"Luke," he corrected. "And you're welcome."

"Have fun," Belinda told Kells.

He got into the front seat beside Luke and closed the door, leaning out the open window to wave to his friends. "I'm going off to learn cowboying, you guys! See you!"

They waved back. Belinda joined them on the porch and waved the truck off with a grin.

"Is Kells going to jail?" Juanito asked.

"No, he isn't. Mr. Parks dropped the charges," she said with heartfelt relief. "In a day or so, we'll drop by the Craig ranch and see how Kells is doing. But for now," she added with a groan as she saw the disorder of the small kitchen and dining-room table, "we're going to have a dishwashing and housecleaning lesson."

The groans were audible even outside the cabin.

Chapter 4

.Belinda kept busy with the remaining boys in her small group for the next two days, taking them swimming and fishing. They were like prisoners set free, with plenty of time to enjoy the natural world around them, and no regulations and time schedules penning them in. It was more than a vacation for them; it was a glimpse into another world. With any luck at all, it would sustain them when they had to go home, give them goals to work toward, give them hope. Two days after Kells's run-in with the law, they piled into the van and went over to Luke's ranch to see how the eldest of the group was making out.

They hardly recognized him. He was wearing new boots, jeans and chaps, a long-sleeved shirt and a raunchy-looking hat. He grinned at them from the corral fence, displaying blazing white teeth.

"Hey!" he called. He jumped down and went to meet them. "Miss Jessup, I rode a horse all morning and Mr. Craig even let me cut out a steer and lasso it! That's a quarter horse," he informed the other boys knowl-edgeably, nodding toward the horse in the corral. "His name's Bandy and he's a cutting horse. He's trained to cut cattle, so you don't have to do much work except sit in the saddle and let him do everything. He's one smart horse!"

"Well, he certainly thinks he is," Luke interrupted, joining the group. "What do you mink of my new hand?" he asked Belinda, indicating Kells. "Looks the part, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does," Belinda said, smiling. "We need a photo of him dressed like that," she added.

"I took one this morning," he replied smugly. "He'll have some interesting photos to show the folks back in Houston."

"I'm going to work hard, Miss Jessup," Kells said solemnly. "Harder than I ever did before. Now that I got something to look forward to, school won't be so bad."

"I'll tell you a secret, Kells," Luke told him, "school was hard for me, too. But I got through, and so will you."

"My real name's Ed," Kells said quietly. "Never told nobody else."

Luke smiled. "Is that what you want me to call you?"

Kells hesitated. "How about Eddie? I like Eddie Murphy, you know."

"I like Eddie Murphy myself," Luke replied with a grin. "I've never missed one of his movies yet."

"Son of a gun!" Kells was impressed.

"I actually saw him once," Belinda volunteered, "down in Cancun, Mexico, on holiday. He's just as nice in person as he seems to be on the screen."

"Did you talk to him?" Kells asked.

She shook her head. "I was too shy."

Luke pushed his hat back on his head and studied her with a keen, searching look. "Shy, hmm?"

She gave him a hard look. "Yes, shy! I do get shy from time to time!"

He looked pointedly at her mouth. "Do you, now?"

She flushed. "Do you think we could see those Holstein milk cows you mentioned the other day?"

"Sure we could!" Luke said at once. "Kells, suppose you take the boys along to the pasture and explain why we like to keep Holsteins for milk cows?"

The youth beamed. "I'd be tickled, Mr. Craig! Come on, guys. I know my way around here now!"

The group, impressed, followed Kells.

"Why can't I go, too?" Belinda asked.

"Because I have plans for you. Miss Jes-sup," he drawled. He caught her hand in his and led her toward the white frame house.

"What sort of plans?" she asked suspiciously.

He paused with a secretive grin. "What do you think?" He leaned closer, threatening her mouth with his, so that when he spoke she felt his clean, minty breath on her lips. "Well, I could be thinking about how big and soft the sofa in the living room is," he murmured. "And how well two people would fit on it."

She could barely breathe. Her heart was thumping madly against her rib cage.

"Or," he added, lifting his head, "I might have something purely innocent in mind. Why not come with me and find out?"

He tugged at her hand and she fell into step beside him, just when she'd told herself she wasn't about to do that.

He led her up the steps and into the house. It was cool and airy, with light colored furniture and sedate throw rugs. There were plain white priscilla curtains at the windows, and the kitchen was spacious and furnished in white and yellow.

"It's very nice," she said involuntarily, turning around to look at her surroundings.

"Can you cook?" he asked.

"A few things," she replied. "I'm not really good at sweets, but I can make rolls and biscuits from scratch."

"So can I, when I set my mind to it," he told her. He sat down at the kitchen table and crossed his legs across one of the other chairs. "Can you make coffee?"

"The best," she returned, smiling.

"Let's see."

He pointed her toward the cabinet where the coffee, filters, and drip coffeemaker were located, and sat back to watch her work.

"There's a chocolate pound cake in the cake keeper, there," he indicated a huge rubbery container. "If you like it. My sister brought it over yesterday. She always bribes me when she wants something," he added on a chuckle.

"What did she want?"

"A baby-sitter," he replied. "I get to keep her son and daughter when she and Tom go to the opera at the Met in New York City. It's an overnight trip."

"You really must like kids," she observed.

"I like them more as I get older," he said. "I find I think more about having some of my own. After all, the ranch has to have somebody to inherit it after I'm gone."

"What if your children don't like ranching?"

He grimaced. "Horrid thought."

"Some people don't like animals. I've actually met a few."

"So have I. Not many."

"It could happen, though. Then what would become of your plans for a dynasty?"

"I suppose they'd go up in smoke." He dropped his hat on the floor beside his chair and stared at her until it became uncomfortable. The sound of the coffee dripping grew louder and louder in the tense silence. "Come here."

She just stood and stared at him, confused.

His blue eyes were glittery. There was a look on his face that made her knees weak. He was hypnotizing her.

"I said, come here," he repeated softly, his voice almost a sensual purr.

She walked to him, feeling every step all the way to her heart. This was stupid. She could get in over her head. She didn't really know him at all. She was letting herself be drawn in...

He reached up and pulled her down onto his lap. Before she could utter the confused thoughts rattling around in her mind, he had her head back against his shoulder and he was kissing her as if his life depended on it.

She gave in to the inevitable. He was strong and warm, and everything female in her responded to him. She hadn't realized how close two people could become in a relatively short period of time.

His arms contracted. Then, all at once, he let her go and stood up. His face was harder than she'd ever seen it. He held her tight by the upper arms, staring down into her green eyes with a curious expression.

"I think we should give the coffee time to finish," he said huskily. "Let's go find the boys."

"Okay."

She followed him back out the door, noticing the economy of his movements as he scooped up his hat and put it back on his head. He went a little ahead of her, keeping some distance between them. She felt uneasy, and she wondered if she'd been too

acquiescent to suit him. Perhaps she should have hit him or protested or something. Obviously she'd done something wrong.

He opened the screen door and she started through it, only to be encased by his long arm as it shot out in front of her, blocking her way.

"I loved it," he said gruffly. "But we have to go slow. I don't do one-night stands any more than you do."

"Oh." She seemed to have developed a one-syllable vocabulary in the time she'd known him. She kept her eyes on his arm, instead of his face.

He tilted her face up to his. "If I wanted to give you the brush-off, I'd come right out and say so," he remarked. He bent and brushed his mouth gently over hers. "You don't gulp down an exotic dessert," he whispered. "You take your time and savor it, draw it out, make it last." He nibbled her lower lip gently before he lifted his head. "Suppose I come up to Houston after you get through with summer camp? We could go to the theater and the ballet, even a rodeo if you like. I'm pretty flexible in my entertainment, I like everything."

"So do I," she said, sounding breathless. "I love opera."

"Another plus," he mused, grinning. "We'll fly up to New York with Tom and Ely-sia one day and go to the Met."

"I've only been there once," she told him. "I loved it."

"It's unforgettable," he agreed. "The settings and special effects are every bit as enjoyable as the opera itself."

She shyly traced a pattern on his shirt. "I'd like to go out with you."

"Then it's a date." He glanced past her at the boys in the distance, standing in a group as if they were being lectured. Probably they were, he thought, because Kells was a quick study and he'd learned a lot in the past few days. "It wouldn't be very easy to go out even to a movie with that bunch in tow," he added with a chuckle. "They'd hog the popcorn."

"I suppose they would." She touched his arm, where the muscle was thickest and enjoyed its strength. She liked the way it felt to be close to him. "You've been good to them, especially to Kells."

"He's had a raw deal. I guess they all have, but it shows more on him. Do you know, the guys in the bunkhouse took to him right away. One of them told me that it was flattering to have a teenager ask for information instead of trying to give it. He made them feel important

by asking them things." He pursed his lips. "I wonder if he realizes what a gift he has for making people like him? Even Parks, who hates just about everybody."

"He's learning that he has traits he can exploit, I think. But I don't know that he would have arrived at this point so soon if you hadn't intervened. Thank you."

He shrugged off her gratitude. "Like I said, I'll benefit from all his enthusiasm. He really loves cattle."

She searched his lean face. "So do you, I think."

He grinned. "There was never anything I wanted to be more than a cowboy when I was a kid. One of our wranglers had been a rodeo star. I used to sit and listen to him by the hour."

"We had one of those, too, on my brother's ranch," she replied. "Ward and I liked him a lot, until he had an affair with our mother."

He frowned. "What?"

She sighed. "You might as well know. Our mother was very promiscuous. Anything in pants would do. She finally ran off with one of her conquests and we had to stay and live

down her reputation. Ravine is about the size of Jacobsville, so you can imagine the gossip. It was harder on Ward than on me."

"There are a lot of miserable kids in the world," he remarked.

"I noticed."

"Is that why you don't spend much time at your brother's ranch?"

She chuckled. "No. It's because of his housekeeper—excuse me, now his aunt-in-law. Lillian is a matchmaker. She brought her niece Marianne out to Texas from Georgia on some gosh-awful pretext and Ward fell in love with her. He didn't want to, so things got bad before he admitted he couldn't live without her. She's changed him. He isn't the same hard-hearted, ruthless man he used to be since he married Marianne. So Lillian had that great success and now she's got her eye on me." She smiled. "I don't like her choice of suitors, so I keep well clear of the ranch."

"What sort does she toss your way?"

"Big, husky mechanics and any delivery boy who comes within half a mile of the house."

His eyebrows arched. "You're not that desperate."

"Thank you," she replied. "How about writing and telling her so?"

He grinned. "Give me time. I'll take care of that problem for you, in the most natural sort of way."

She wondered what he meant, but she wasn't confident enough to ask. She smiled and went past him out the door.

In the days that followed, Luke was almost a constant visitor to the camp. Sometimes he brought Kells, sometimes he came alone. He taught the boys how to make a fire from scratch, how to trap game, how to live off the land.

"They say these are outdated skills," he told the group after he'd started a small fire. "But what if the oil suddenly gives out and everything electronic or electrical goes dead one day? Frozen food would spoil. Computers wouldn't work. Since most telephone exchanges are computerized, communications would be out. Cars wouldn't go far, houses wouldn't have heat, air-conditioning wouldn't

work. If all the old skills of survival are lost, one day the only humans who live may be the ones who can live off the land—assuming there's any land left after the developers get through."

The Native American boy, Juanito, touched a tiny bunch of twigs that Luke had bunched to use on the tiny fire. "My great-uncle says the same thing," he volunteered. "But he can trap game and find water in places where it usually isn't. He knows which cactus plants can give water or be eaten, and he knows how to make smokeless fires. His grandfather rode with Geronimo."

The other boys were impressed. "But even if you can do those things, what good are they in the city?" one of the other boys asked. "What are you going to trap in Houston?"

"Girls," one of the older boys said with a wicked grin.

"He's got a point," Luke said, nodding toward the boy who'd asked about country skills in the city. "People who live in cities are going to be the hardest hit if we ever have a ma-

jor energy crisis. Look what happened during the last big power outage in the west."

"They had a movie about that. It was scary," another boy said.

"Well, we've got lots of dead dinosaurs lying around yet to be discovered, so I don't think it's going to be an immediate problem," Belinda mused.

That led to the obvious question of what did dead dinosaurs have to do with energy, and for several minutes she traced the evolution of petroleum products for the boys while Luke watched and listened attentively.

Later, when the boys were in for the night and he was ready to go back to his ranch, he paused with her in the shadows, beside the pickup truck.

"You make a good lecturer," he commented.

"Thanks," she said, surprised. "Some would say I have a big mouth and can't keep it shut."

He took her hand and drew it to his chest. "I like the way you treat the boys," he said quietly. "You never talk down to them or make them feel stupid when they ask questions."

"I try not to," she agreed. "I've had it done to me in school, and I didn't like it."

"Neither did I." He smoothed his thumb over her short, neat fingernails. "You have nice hands."

"So do you." She liked the strength of them, the way her heart jumped when they touched her own hands. She looked up at him through the darkness, trying to see his face in the dim light from the cabin behind her.

He chuckled. "I was just thinking how strange life is," he told her. "I was hopping mad when I found out some lunatic was going to open a summer camp for delinquent boys right on my boundary line."

"I remember," she chuckled.

"It was a surprising day all around, especially that Kells." He shook his head. "What a treasure he turned out to be. And your guy Juanito, whose grandfather rode with Geronimo. These boys are interesting, and they aren't at all what I pictured them as."

"These are unique," she said. "But for every success, I've had three failures," she added sadly. "When I started working in the public defender's office, I had the idea that all these boys were in trouble because of their home lives. It was a mistake. Any number of them had loving parents and an extended family that really cared about them, but they could never see anything criminal about stealing and lying and hurting people. One of my charges actually wrestled me down in my office and tried to rape me."

She felt him stiffen. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I'm an old hand at self-defense," she said, making light of the terror she'd felt. "I got an opening and almost made a eunuch of him. It taught me a lesson. Some of the juveniles can't be turned around, no matter how dedicated you are to saving them. There's always going to be a percentage who feel comfortable with making a living outside the law."

"I don't like the idea that you might be attacked," he said.

She smiled. "I'm glad. But I'm not as naive as I was. I never have closed-door sessions with any of my clients anymore. I have a good secretary and she's always there when I need her." She sighed. "But there are times when I feel so useless. Like with Kells in the chief of police's office. I really don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been able to get through to Mr. Parks."

"Cy's not so bad," he said. "You just have to stand up to him. He's the sort of man who'll be hell on anybody who's afraid of him."

"You weren't."

He shrugged. "I grew up swinging," he mused. "I learned early that fear is the worst enemy. Once I got past that, I wasn't afraid of much."

"I noticed." She leaned close and laid her cheek against his chest, feeling his arms come around her with a sense of wonder. She closed her eyes and let him hold her, drinking in the sounds of the night and the warm, safe strength of his body. "I only have a week left here."

She felt him stiffen. His hands stilled on her back. "A week?"

"Yes. I have cases waiting and my vacation's almost over."

"I didn't realize it was that close."

Her eyes opened and she saw the faint light of the horizon far away. Crickets were chirping madly in the night. "I've been enjoying this so much that I didn't want to spoil it," she confessed.

His arms tightened around her. "So have I. But I've already told you that Houston isn't that far away."

"Of course it isn't."

They both knew it wasn't quite true. It was a great distance, and Luke couldn't leave his ranch to run itself. A long-distance romance was going to be difficult, even though they both knew it was what they were leading up to.

"I don't suppose you might like to come and work in Jacobsville?" he asked.

She hesitated. "That would be nice," she said. She wondered why the thought made her so uncomfortable. He was asking for more than a move on her part, and it frightened her. He was thinking about a future that included both of them, but all she could think about was the disaster of her parents' marriage. Ward had made it work with his Marianne, but Belinda had been on her own for a long time. She wasn't ready to think about spending her life with anyone.

"We have a juvenile court system here," he continued. "It's on a circuit, and we may not have the caseload you do in Houston, but you'd stay busy. We've got local kids who could use a good attorney."

"There are kids everywhere like that," she said tightly. "But Houston is home to me now. It's where my job is. I wouldn't feel comfortable starting all over again in a new town, especially a small town."

He was still for a moment and then he eased her away and stepped back. "The job is that important to you, is it?"

She felt a coolness in him that hadn't been there before. But she wasn't backing down now. She was fighting for her independence. "Well...yes, it is. I feel that I'm beginning to do some good."

"Is your job more important than marriage would be?"

She wouldn't think that far ahead. "I haven't thought much about marriage. Or if I have, it's a long way in the future. I don't want to be tied down just yet."

He studied her with pursed lips and a calculating stare. "Then you might be in the market for an affair."

It was like a stone between the eyes. She couldn't even find the words to express what she was feeling.

"No, I...I don't want an affair," she stammered. "I don't have time for that sort of

thing. I have a caseload that's more than enough for three people, but there's only me to do it."

He let go of her completely and stood away, leaning against the hood of the truck to study her. "One thing I learned early is that jobs don't matter as much as people," he said coolly. "I've never put work before my family."

"Ward always did," she replied.

"You're not your brother. And you said he'd changed since his marriage."

"Yes, but I grew up learning that you gave everything in you to whatever job you were doing. My father hammered the work ethic into both of us from childhood."

"You don't think you could change?"

She frowned. The conversation was going far out of bounds. She wasn't sure what she believed anymore. She was drawn to Luke, but he was talking as if he wanted her to give up her job and just stay at home all the time. She

knew she could never do that. Her work was fulfilling, important, almost sacred. She had a mission in life that she couldn't sacrifice for dirty dishes and housework.

"I'm not cut out to be a happy home-maker," she said on a hollow laugh.

"No pots and pans and dirty diapers for you, right?"

She wasn't sure about that, but he was being sarcastic. "Maybe so," she said after a minute. "I'm doing an important job, and it isn't one that everybody can do. I enjoy my work. I have to feel that I'm contributing something to the world."

He turned his head and stared toward the horizon without speaking. He hadn't counted on this. He was falling in love, and he'd thought she was, too. But she obviously wasn't the marrying sort of woman, and she didn't want an affair. That left nothing but friendship, and that wouldn't be enough for him.

"I've never been much on glorious causes," he said finally. "I raise cattle. It's what I enjoy, and it makes a good living for me. But I always thought that it would come naturally to me to be a family man. I want kids. I'd be good to them, and they'd have all the things I didn't have when I was growing up, like loving parents and security." He shrugged. "I suppose it's an old-fashioned ideal in this modern world, but it's still what I want most." He stared off into space, his chin lifted, the air cooling his face. He sighed and turned and looked down at her. "Well, I've enjoyed having you and the boys around, despite our bad beginning," he said, and actually smiled. "And if you come back next summer, you can bring your brood over again and I'll show them what ranching is all about."

He was pleasant and friendly and all at once she felt a door closing. He was going to be her friend, her good neighbor in the summer, and not one thing more. She knew without a word being spoken that there would be no trip to the opera, no weekend visits to Houston. She knew it as certainly as if he'd spoken aloud.

"I'll remember," she replied in a subdued tone. "Thank you."

He shrugged. "What are friends for?" he mused. "Well, I'd better be going. Keep an eye on Kells for me when you get home, will you? He's a fine young man. I'd hate for him to backslide."

"I'll make sure he doesn't," she promised.

He nodded. "So long, then."

"So long."

She watched him climb into the cab of the truck, crank it, and drive off with a careless wave. It was more than a door closing. It was the end of something that would have been sweet and fulfilling, and she'd smashed it with a few cold words.

She folded her arms around her chest and wondered why she'd felt compelled to say things that she didn't really even believe. She was afraid, she decided. Afraid to take a chance so risky, to get married and end up as her poor father and mother had. She wasn't the sort to be unfaithful and she didn't think Luke was, either, but she'd seen a bad marriage firsthand and she was frightened.

Her job was safe, comfortable, secure. She knew where it would take her, she knew the path well. Marriage was a trek through a maze, with false turns and sudden stops and danger all around. She barely knew Luke. What if the man she saw on the surface wasn't the real man at all?

She turned around and went back inside. It was useless to speculate. She felt empty and alone, but she knew it was for the best. She was too uncertain to take that final step with Luke. He deserved someone who knew what they wanted.

Chapter 5

Belinda stuck to her guns about being independent, but if she expected Luke to try to change her mind, she was disappointed. He came by frequently to talk to the boys, and he was making inroads into teaching Kells cow-boying. He brought the youth over to see Belinda, and he was open and friendly as he had been at the beginning. But he wasn't approachable.

"I guess you're packing already," he remarked a few days before her vacation ended as he stood leaning back against one of the support posts on the cabin's front porch. "Eager to get going?"

"Not terribly," she said carefully. "It's been educational and a lot of fun. But I've got work to catch up. Vacations can't last forever."

"They wouldn't be much fun if they did," he remarked. His blue eyes slid over her slender body in jeans and a knit shirt. "How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

She blinked, surprised. "I'm twenty-seven," she said.

His eyes narrowed. "The older you get, the harder it's going to be to give up your independence. You'll draw into a shell and never come back out."

She glared at him. "It's my shell."

"Pity to waste your youth on a job, no matter how important it is," he commented. '

'Plenty of women juggle marriage and a career and even children. It isn't impossible, especially with a partner who's willing to compromise.'

"I don't want to compromise," she said stubbornly. Her green eyes flashed. "I told you, I'm happy as I am."

"Got a cat?"

She frowned. "What do I need with a cat?"

"For companionship," he emphasized. "You can't go on living completely alone. You'll get lonesome."

"I hate cats!"

"Liar."

She sighed angrily. "Okay, I don't hate cats, but I haven't got time to take care of a pet."

"You could get one of those Japanese electronic things that you have to feed and clean up after," he suggested.

"I don't want an electronic pet."

"I've got one on my computer," he drawled playfully. "It barks and growls and romps across the screen. Some of them even evolve."

"Wonderful. Just what I need. A dog to guard my computer."

"They're cute."

She hated the way her eyes kept going to his long legs and slim hips and broad chest. He was sexy and she was going overboard about him. She couldn't backslide now, when she was so close to getting away from him in time!

"Next thing you know, they'll have a life-size electronic pet that you have to feed and

water and clean up after. What's wrong with the real thing?"

"Beats me, darlin'," he murmured softly, and chuckled when she flushed at the endearment. "You're the one who doesn't want to get married."

' 'Why should I need an electronic pet just because I don't want to get married?"

He smiled slowly. "You'd have something to lavish affection on. Something to keep you company. Something to cuddle."

"I'd like to see you cuddle an electronic blob!"

He shifted suddenly away from the post and stopped just a few inches away from her, his hands on his slim hips as he searched her flushed face. "I'd like to cuddle you, Belinda," he said softly. "We could sit on the sofa and watch TV together in the evenings when we were through with work. We could lie in my hammock on lazy summer evenings and kiss each other to a cricket and hound dog serenade. We could share coffee and cake at two in the morning when we couldn't get to sleep. Can you do that with a virtual pet or a legal pad?"

She hated what her heart was doing inside her chest. Her wide, worried eyes met his. "I'm scared!" she burst out.

"I know you are, and I know why." He touched her cheek with his fingertips, tracing a pattern on its flushed softness. "I'm uneasy, too. It's a big step from friendship to intimacy. But we've got a lot in common, and I don't mean just cattle." His fingers fell to her soft mouth. "Don't throw it away on a job."

She drew back as if his fingers scalded her. Her eyes were wide, her face drawn with misgivings and confusion. "I don't want to... belong...to anyone," she bit off. "If I stay by myself,

depend on myself, I won't ever get hurt."

"Maybe not," he agreed. "But you'll never know what it is to really share love, either. You've got a big heart. You've given your time, your hard work, your heart to these boys in your camp. Why is it so hard to do the same thing with a man?"

She grimaced. "Love doesn't last," she groaned.

"It does," he disagreed. "If you can compromise, it does. Nothing comes with a money-back guarantee in this life, but people with kind hearts and things in common don't usually end up in divorce court. Try looking around you at elderly couples, people who've been together for fifty years or more. I believe love can last, if you give it a chance."

She sighed wearily. "I don't believe it," she said. "I'm sorry. For me, that's a fairy tale. There aren't any happy endings."

"You cynic," he chided. "Take a chance. Dare everything. Risk it all."

"I'm not a gambler," she replied. "I'm a conventional, conservative woman with no real sense of adventure. I don't take chances, ever."

He shook his head sadly. "Well, it's a waste," he told her. "You've got so much to give, Belinda. But you're wrapped up in your own fears."

"I'm not afraid of anything!" she flashed.

"Except love."

She started to argue, but she couldn't find the right words.

He tapped her nose with his forefinger and smiled. "You may be a quitter. I'm not. Just keep running, darlin'. When you've worn yourself out, I'll still be here."

"Why?" she asked, almost in anguish.

His face sobered, and his eyes began to glitter in his lean face. "You're worth fighting for, didn't you know? And I'm a stubborn man when I want something that badly."

"It's just physical attraction!" she muttered.

"Nope."

"I'm something different, something out of the ordinary."

"You're that," he agreed. He tilted her chin and dropped a brief, hard kiss on her soft mouth. "Okay, no hard sell. But don't make the mistake of thinking I'll go away. I'm like a rubber ball. I keep bouncing back."

"I won't change my mind," she said through her teeth.

He only laughed, got back into his truck and drove off.

"I won't!" she yelled after him.

It wasn't until she realized the boys were all staring at her that she turned around and went back into the cabin.

The next couple of days passed all too quickly, not only for Belinda but for Kells. He was almost in tears when he climbed into the van for the long drive back to Houston. The boys from the bunkhouse had come out en masse to shake hands and wish him well.

"See you back here next summer, young feller," one of the older men said jauntily. "Mind you keep well shy of trouble, too!"

"Yes, sir, I sure will," Kells promised with a sad smile. "Sure am gonna miss you guys."

"We'll miss you, too, son," another wrangler agreed. "Study hard, now. Cowboying is more complicated than it used to be. You need a good education even to keep tally books!"

"I'll remember," Kells promised.

Luke was standing beside the driver's side, where Belinda was trying to be cheerful and failing miserably. She looked up into eyes that were as blue as a robin's egg and felt her heart contract painfully. He was friendly and cheerful, but suddenly remote, as if he felt nothing passionate for her at all.

His attitude confused and even wounded her, but she tried to behave nonchalantly. She held out her hand. "Thanks for all the help," she said with a forced smile. "I'd never have gotten through this without you."

He glanced at the boys and smiled and waved to them as they climbed aboard. "You had a good group. Like I said, if you come again next summer..."

"I...don't think I will," she said, having made that painful decision the night before. She didn't want to see Luke again, ever. "I'm going to put the land on the market. If you're quick, you can get it before Mr. Parks does."

He was staring at her. "I thought you'd decided that the camp was a good idea."

She shook her head. "Too many unexpected pitfalls," she replied. "If you hadn't been around, Kells would have gone to jail. I had no idea what I was getting into, although it turned out better than I expected." She stared at his top shirt button instead of his face. "I've decided to leave the special camps to people who know what they're doing. I came close to causing a disaster, with the best intentions in the world."

"Funny. I thought you did a grand job," he

She smiled halfheartedly. "We'll have to wait and see about that."

He pursed his lips. "I guess you're glad to be leaving," he said carelessly.

She hesitated. She almost said that she felt empty and alone, more so than ever before in her life, and that she wasn't glad at all. But the moment passed. "Yes," she said with a faint smile. "I'll be glad to get back to work." She held out her hand. "Thanks again."

He took her hand and curled his fingers into hers, watching her breath catch at the contact. She felt something for him, something powerful, he knew she did. But she was frightened and ready to bolt. He could tell by the coolness of her fingers, the uncertain flicker of her eye-lids as she tried and failed to meet his eyes.

"There are no great rewards without great risks," he said under his breath.

She lifted her eyes and had them trapped by soft blue ones. "My parents..."

"You're not your parents," he replied simply. "And I'm not mine. Life is a risk. Everything's a risk. If you never take a chance, if you always try to play it safe, what's life worth? You get nothing except monotony."

"I don't like taking chances," she said curtly.

"You could learn to like it," he mused. "But you'll have to find that out the hard way, I expect."

"It's my choice," she said doggedly. "You can't tell me how to live my life."

"I can't, hmm?"

"That's right, you can't," she said firmly. "I'm leaving now. I'm going back to my own life, to my job."

"And that's all you need to be happy, right?"

"Right!" She straightened. "I'm glad you finally understand that"

He smiled in a strange, calculating way. "I understand more than you think. Well, since you're determined to leave, here's something to take back to Houston and your perfect job with you."

He moved forward and swept her up against him, bent her back over his arm in the best

Hollywood tradition, and with a wicked laugh, kissed the breath and the fight right out of her. She felt as if she was melting right down the front of him, her lips hungry and aching as he kissed them, her body throbbing at the long, hard contact with his strength. By the time he was through with her, she was clinging and moaning helplessly. He had to lift her arms away and steady her before she could stand alone.

Several hectic seconds later, she wobbled to the van and climbed in, fumbling the key into the ignition to the amused catcalls of her passengers.

"I bet he watches them old movies on TV," Kells said gleefully.

"Could you be quiet?" Belinda asked. "We've got to get on the road. Goodbye, Mr. Craig!" she said gruffly.

He swept off his hat and bowed mockingly. "Au revoir, Miss Jessup!" he called after her.

She stomped too hard on the accelerator and almost flooded the engine. As the van jerked its way out of the yard toward the gates, Luke was laughing wickedly. He was a keen fisherman, and this was the championship tournament of his life. He was going to land that feisty little fish. It would take patience and fortitude, but he'd never been lacking in those qualities.

He put his hat back on and went toward the barn, whistling all the way.

The first two weeks Belinda was back at work in Houston, she felt a new emptiness in her life. She hadn't considered how lonely it was going to be without the boys. Over the weeks, she'd gotten used to them. Now, she felt as if she'd left her family behind. And she missed Luke ridiculously.

She was just leaving the courthouse after a particularly rough morning when she almost ran into Kells at the bottom of the steps.

He grinned. "I got something to show you," he said, producing a handful of papers.

She took them, looked at them, and gasped. "Why, Kells, this is extraordinary!"

It was, too. He had straight A's on English, math, and science papers.

He was still grinning. "They think I'm going crazy at home, cause all I do is study. I just ignore them when they start drinking. I stay in my room and crack those books. It's not so hard, after all, Miss Jessup. You just got to get motivated."

"That's exactly right. Oh, I'm so proud of you!" she exclaimed.

He looked sheepish. "Thanks. Reckon you might tell Mr. Craig?"

She closed up. "I haven't heard from him."

"You could write him, though, couldn't you?" he persisted.

She had to agree that she could, although she didn't really want to. She sighed. "I suppose I could, considering what a happy surprise those grades are going to be for him. I'll do it."

"Thanks, Miss Jessup. And not only for that, but for believing in me," he added solemnly. "Nobody else ever thought I was worth their time."

"You're worth my time," she said with a smile. "Mr. Craig believes in you, too."

"That's what keeps me going," he told her. "That job next summer. I'm going to work so hard, Miss Jessup. I'm going to learn all I can before I go back. I'll make Mr. Craig proud of me."

"Indeed you will," she said.

"Gotta go. I'm taking a night course in Spanish," he added, surprising her. "They speak it on the ranch, you know, and there's a couple of Mexican hands. See you, Miss Jessup!"

She waved and then caught her breath at his ambition. To think that only a few short

months ago, he might have ended up in juvenile hall for good, and then in jail. How many children like Kells never made it because they had no one to encourage and believe in them? She felt good inside. If she only pulled one child out of the hopelessness of poverty, her job was worthwhile. Why couldn't that hard-nosed cowboy in Jacobsville understand that, she thought furiously.

Then she remembered that he'd asked how she'd feel about working in Jacobsville, and what she'd told him. She'd said that she couldn't do such a job anywhere except Houston, and that was baloney. Of course she could. But she was frightened. She didn't want to fall in love and get married. She wanted to depend on one person, herself. She couldn't imagine risking her heart.

She went on down the street to her car, feeling despondent and miserable. If only she'd never met Luke Craig!

It wasn't easy to ignore Kells's request about that letter to Luke. In the end, Belinda was all but forced by her conscience to send him a note. It was friendly, not too intimate, and factual. It took her twenty tries before she had the right words. She mailed it and waited.

But the reply didn't come in the way she expected. After a particularly long session in court with a client, she dragged herself up the steps to her apartment and found a familiar face leaning against the wall near her door. He was wearing a navy suit with a tie, and he looked more sophisticated than any rancher she'd ever known.

"Luke!" she exclaimed.

He chuckled and scooped her up in his arms, kissing her hungrily right there in the hall. Her raincoat, her valise, her pocketbook were scattered like grains of corn while she kissed him back. It was only then that she realized how much she'd missed him.

"No need to ask if you missed me," he murmured before he kissed her again. "How about supper?"

"I'm famished," she said breathlessly. "But I don't have anything to cook..."

"There's a nice restaurant down the street. I've made reservations," he said. "Put your gear inside and freshen up."

She was reluctant to take her arms from around his neck, and she laughed at her own feelings. "It's good to see you," she said, trying to act normally as she paused to scoop her stuff from the floor.

"It's good to see you, too," he replied with a smile. "You look worn."

"It's been a long week." She searched his eyes before she put her key in the lock and opened the door. "It's been a long several weeks," she added honestly.

"I know."

She put her things in a chair and turned to him. He looked tired, too. He was devastating to a heart that had gone hungry for the sight of him. For several seconds, she just stood there and looked at him.

He did the same. In her beige dress and high heels, with her dark blond hair in soft waves down to her collar, she looked lovely.

"If you want supper at all," he said huskily, "you've got ten seconds to stop looking at me like that before I do something about it"

She wanted him to. She really did. But there were things to settle first, so she dropped her gaze with a shy smile. "Okay," she said. "I'll freshen up."

While she fixed her makeup and added a touch of perfume, he stared down at the computer on her desk. A piece of new software was lying near it, with a scruffy-looking dog on the cover

of the box. He grinned.

"Bought a dog, I see," he drawled as she came back into the living room.

She saw where he was looking and laughed self-consciously. "It sounded cute. And it is."

"Told you so. Ready to go?"

She nodded, grabbing her purse.

He stopped her just at the door before he opened it. "Does that lipstick come off easily?" he asked in a deep, lazy tone.

She was barely breathing. "It isn't supposed to."

"Let's see."

He drew her to him, stared into her eyes until she felt her whole body vibrate with delicious sensations, and only then bent to take her mouth completely under his.

Absence had certainly made the heart grow

fonder, she thought while she could. The purse dropped to the floor for the second time that afternoon, and her arms stretched up to hold him while the warm, hard kiss went on and on.

She was standing on her tiptoes when he stopped. His blue eyes, more vivid than she remembered them, stared straight into her green ones with all the evasions and teasing gone.

He was so somber that the expression on his face made her nervous.

"Tell me the job means more to you than I do," he said roughly. "And I'll leave right now before this goes any further."

Her eyelids flinched at the very thought. She drew in an unsteady breath. "It's been weeks," she managed to say in a tight tone.

"Hell, it's been years," he muttered, and his mouth came down on hers again. But this time it was rough, hard, insistent. This time it burrowed into hers with passion and purpose, and she was shaking when he lifted his head.

She held on for dear life. "If you go, I'm going with you," she said involuntarily, her face flushed, her eyes sparkling with feeling.

"That's what I came all this way to hear,"

he said in a harsh undertone. "It took you long enough!"

She burrowed against him and his arms came around to enfold her. "I'm still afraid, Luke," she whispered.

"Everyone's afraid. Not only of falling in love, but of getting married, having children. These are big steps, important steps. People who aren't afraid to take them are the ones who end up divorced and miserable. You have to be sure, but even then, it's a risk."

"I'm willing to take it, if you are," she said after a minute.

His arms contracted again as he bent over her head and rocked her against him. "**I've** been willing to take it since the first time I saw you," he breathed. "I've spent my life waiting for a woman I could live with. And you didn't even like me!"

She laughed with delight. "Only at first," she protested.

"Ha!" he murmured. "You fought me every step of the way." He lifted his head to look down at her. "Jacobsville can always use a good public defender," he said firmly. "There are kids in trouble everywhere."

She smiled ruefully. "I was hedging," she confessed. "I couldn't bear the thought of being near you all the time if...well, if I was the only one who felt this way."

"Which way?" he asked in a soft, sensuous tone.

She stared at his tie. It was blue and had a paisley pattern—very nice. His thumbs jabbed her gently in the ribs.

"Which way?" he persisted.

She leaned her forehead against him. "I love you."

There was a long, ominous silence. She lifted her head apprehensively and saw his eyes. They were such a vivid blue that they almost glowed. She got barely a glimpse of them before they closed as he lifted her against him and kissed her again. Under his breath, she heard him repeat the words back to her. And then, she stopped trying to hear anything except the beat of her own heart.

Long, tempestuous minutes later, he looked down at her, where she lay in the crook of his arm on the sofa, her body soft and fluid against his, her dress unfastened, her hair disheveled.

His shirt was open, too, the tie long gone, and her fingers played lazily through the wedge of blond hair on his chest.

"We were going out to eat," she reminded him.

"To hell with food. I'm not hungry."

"Well, I am," she said, laughing. "Especially now."

He traced a slow pattern on the lace of her bra. "Spoilsport," he murmured. "Just when I'm getting to know all about you."

She laughed again, moving his hand aside so that she could button up her dress again. "You stop that," she teased.

"Stop? I haven't even gotten started!" he protested.

"There's plenty of time for all that," she reminded him. She searched his blue eyes. "I want a white wedding. Do you mind?"

"I want a white wedding, too," he agreed, smiling at her. "We'll have the works, a best man, a best woman, a flower girl—my niece, of course," he added with a chuckle.

"I'll have my sister-in-law for matron of honor. Best woman," she scoffed, and broke up laughing at the thought of pretty Marianne in a suit and bow tie.

"It will be an occasion," he said. "And then we'll raise cattle and look after kids and grow old together."

She snuggled close to him, so happy that she could barely contain it all. "I love the way that sounds."

"So do I. But we'll grow old slowly, if you don't mind. I've got a lot of ginger left in me, yet."

"I noticed," she said demurely.

He loomed over her with intent. "Did you, now?" he murmured, his eyes drawing over her sensually.

"I love you," she whispered.

He smiled slowly. "I love you, too."

It was the last thing they said for a long time.

The wedding was truly a Jacobsville occasion. Everybody came, even glowering Cy Parks, who wore a suit and brought a wedding present. Ward Jessup and a very pregnant Marianne were present, along with Marianne's Aunt Lillian. Elysia Craig Walker and her husband, Tom, welcomed Belinda into the family, and their daughter Crissy acted as flower girl. Belinda was exquisite in a white lace gown with a train and a delicate lace veil. She carried a bouquet of white rosebuds and she wept when her devastatingly handsome new husband lifted the veil and saw her for the first time as his wife.

Outside the church, the Craig ranch's cowboys made a double line and threw confetti as the happy couple erupted from the front entrance. One of the cowboys had just graduated from high school and was the newest employee on the place. He wore a ten-gallon hat, a red bandanna, boots, jeans, a chambray shirt and a huge toothy smile—and his name was Edward Kells.

The happy couple waved at him as they rushed past to the limousine that would take them to the ranch to change clothes before they went on to the reception Matt Caldwell was hosting for them at his elegant mansion on the outskirts of Jacobsville.

They piled into the car and the driver pulled away from the curb.

Luke looked at Belinda with his whole heart in his eyes. "The best day of my life," he murmured, "Mrs. Craig."

"And the best day of mine, Mr. Craig," she echoed.

The words exemplified their vow of love. He drew her close and kissed her. Behind them, the crowd drew in on itself to rehash the details of the elegant society wedding. But inside the limousine, two pairs of sparkling eyes were already looking ahead to a bright and beautiful future.