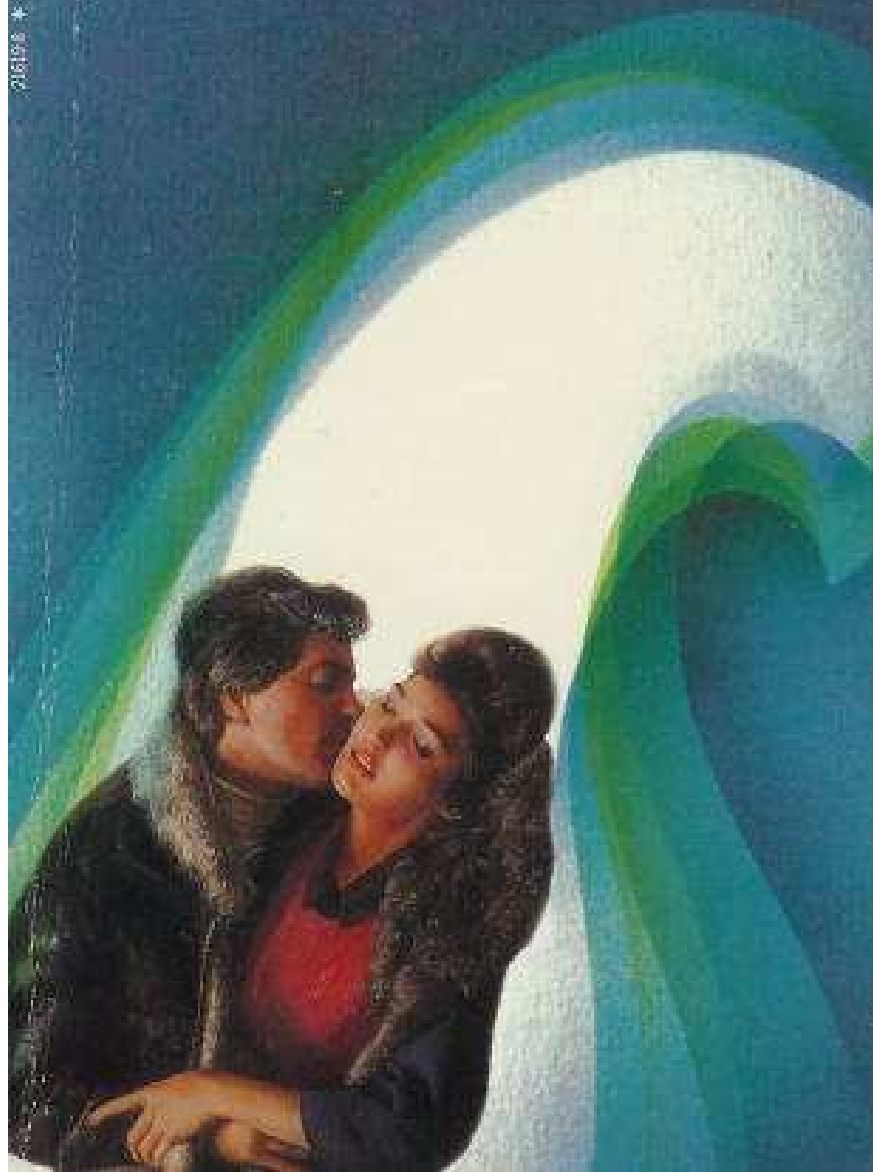


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AUTUMN FLAMES

Sara Orwig

She meant to fire a warning shot, but instead Lily Dunbar's aim faltered and she grazed the hunter himself. She had ventured too far into the wilderness of Reece Wakefield's vast Chilean ranch, now an oncoming storm thrust her into his arms and he refused to let her go. They shared a love for the wild mountain country and under the forceful insistence of his sensual embraces, Lily struggled against passion and need. Reece wanted a lifetime, she agreed to one week. Could he lure her, step by seductive step, away from the life she had forged for herself, to find her real home in his arms?

Chapter One

A raw, bitter gust of wind swept across the snow-covered, rugged peaks of the Chilean Andes. Whistling down a rocky slope, the wind buffeted dark green beech trees and rattled the bright blue nylon of a small tent perched on the mountainside.

Inside the tent Lily Dunbar smoothed her black curls as she looked down at the one-eyed cat curled on her bedroll. "I'll be back soon, General." She patted his gray- and black-striped head.

She stepped outside and glanced to the south. Above the mountains, gray clouds boiled into sight, their gathering menace a threat to her plans for the day. She was packed, ready to leave by noon if a storm didn't interfere. It was October thirty-first, Halloween, but early spring on the other side of the equator in Chile. Before she left, she wanted to spend one last hour on the mountain.

As she walked, dried grass rustled and scraped against her brown leather boots. Even though the wind was cold, she felt invigorated. She loved the mountains, the jagged, majestic peaks, their awesome remoteness and challenge. She pulled the collar of her blue parka closer beneath her chin and gazed at the panorama spread before her. Gray boulders poked through patches of snow on the slopes that ran to a narrow, forest-covered valley below. To the east and far down the mountainside, a movement caught her attention, and she paused.

A silvery stream cascaded down to the valley; near its edge on a slab of rock stood a man dressed in black boots, jeans, and a black jacket trimmed in wolf fur. Wind tangled the locks of his dark brown hair. While he gazed through binoculars, he held a rifle in the crook of his arm. From information gained in town when she bought supplies, Lily knew she was camped near the boundaries of a large sheep ranch owned by a Welshman, and she wondered if the man was from that ranch.

A gust of frigid air swept against her, stinging her cheeks. Her gaze shifted to seek the object of the man's intent observation.

Within seconds she saw what he watched, and her heart dropped.

Across the valley on the opposite mountainside, protected and half-hidden by beech trees, was a herd of guanacos, the large animals with limpid brown eyes that Lily had come to Chile to study.

She had no doubt about the menacing purpose of the man's watchfulness; the rifle held in the crook of his arm all too clearly indicated he was a hunter. Her heart began to pound as she gauged the distance to the man. The wind and the murmur of the stream behind him would lessen chances of a call being heard. Even while she watched, he lowered the binoculars and raised his rifle to take aim...

"No!" Her cry was carried away by the wind.

Still unaware of danger, the animals moved higher, into the trees again, and the man lowered the gun, waiting with tigerlike patience for his prey.

Lily knew she couldn't get to him in time to save the animals. Relatives of the llama, the guanacos moved slowly, grazing as they went. Within seconds they would step into the open again. Already the first three animals were unprotected by the cover of trees, sunlight glistening on their red-gold coats.

In desperation Lily whirled and dashed the short distance back to her tent and snatched her Smith & Wesson revolver.

With the heavy, cumbersome weapon in her hand, she ran outside, slipping and scrambling to find a vantage point to see the man. Helplessness and fear for the animals filled her when she spotted the hunter, rifle raised, ready to fire.

Without hesitation, aiming high above the man's head, she fired.

The blast was deafening, and the heavy pistol recoiled in her hand. Nearby, birds flapped away noisily. Instantly the man whirled, dropped to his knee, and fired in return; the bullet chunked into a tree beside her.

Startled and frightened, in an automatic reaction Lily squeezed the trigger again.

She hadn't meant to fire the second time. To her horror the man tumbled forward on his face.

"Oh, no!" she gasped as she dropped the gun. She ran, sliding down the slope, terrified she'd killed him.

She fell, scraping her palms as she hit the ground. Pebbles and sticks bit into her skin, but she didn't give any thought to the pain. She jumped to her feet, oblivious of the rough, uneven ground and the mournful whistle of the wind. All she heard was the pounding of her heart; she wasn't conscious of the clatter of rocks as she dislodged them in her headlong run down the mountain.

Breathlessly she dashed toward the inert figure stretched on the rocky terrain below. An icy chill of fear swept over her. "Oh, please be all right," she whispered, unaware of making a sound. She reached him and knelt to touch his warm cheek.

With breath-stopping swiftness, like a demon unleashed, he exploded into ruthless action. In a furious burst of shoulders, fists, and hard legs, he lunged at her.

Breath was knocked out of Lily and he flung her on her back. Instantly he straddled her and raised a fist to strike.

Lily gazed up into angry, deep blue eyes. Time stopped. The man's fist hung in the air while he looked at her. A thin trickle of blood ran down his temple. Their gaze locked, held.

The world turned topsy-turvy. Moments before, she had been oblivious to everything around her; now, Lily was intensely aware of the smallest detail.

Her hands were caught under legs covered in smooth, worn denim. She felt the rock-hard muscles through the cloth. Even with the thick, quilted parka,

stones hurt her back. It was difficult for her to breathe because the man's weight rested heavily on her midriff.

Clouds high overhead matched his dark, angry face while the wind tumbled his brown curls. A streak of gray ran through the curls above his forehead. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, the color of a clear, azure sky. With a smoldering menace, his eyes narrowed, and he lowered his fist.

Upset, she lapsed into her native tongue and said, "I'm sorry." She realized what she had done and asked in Spanish how badly he was hurt. "*Le duele mucho?*"

When he answered, his voice was deep and husky, with a rough quality. He shook his head and reached into his hip pocket to get a white handkerchief. While he held it against his scalp, he replied in English, speaking with a slight accent, a trace of Spanish in the rolling r's. "It's surface, a scratch, I'm sure. Why the hell did you fire at me?"

"I thought you were about to shoot a guanaco. I fired above you, but I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted to stop you from shooting the lovely guanacos."

He looked at her in silence, and she wondered what he was thinking. And then, as she gazed into his blue eyes, the moment changed.

She felt it to the core of her being, and she knew he did too. His eyes flickered, deepened, and she became aware of him as a man, aware of herself as a woman and vulnerable.

One dark eyebrow curved in question. He asked, "What difference would it make to you if I shot a guanaco? This is my property."

She drew a sharp breath. "No, it's not! I have a map that clearly marks government land."

Laughter transformed his features, softening the harshness of a strong jaw and prominent cheekbones. A web of lines gathered at the corners of his eyes, and the creases that bracketed his mouth deepened. "I know my own

boundaries." He waved his right hand. "You probably came in through the south. I don't have fences there." As he held the handkerchief against his head, he studied her intently. "You didn't answer my question."

Disbelief about the ownership of the land shook her. She felt certain she wasn't camped on his property, but he was right—he ought to know his own boundaries.

More worrisome at the moment was her consciousness of his masculinity and her submissive position. He still straddled her, with his knees on both sides of her; his inner thighs pressed against her rib cage, and she wished he would move.

She realized he waited for an answer and said, "I'm here to study guanacos, to do what I can to save and protect them. I don't want to see one killed."

"That's charitable, considering a sixteenth of an inch lower in your aim and I would've been killed," he said.

She burned with embarrassment and anguish. "I'm sorry. I tried to fire over your head. When you turned and fired back quickly, I squeezed the trigger accidentally. I'm not very good with a revolver."

"What the hell are you doing with a gun if you don't know how to use it?"

"I thought I might need it." The angry glare in his blue eyes made her want to wither and vanish. Why didn't he move? Where else could she put her hands?

He glanced around. "You're the American. I remember now; one of my men told me there was an American woman in this area. What state are you from?"

"Iowa."

"Isn't someone with you?"

Again, she was acutely conscious of her vulnerability, of his maleness as he remained astride her. She answered in a level voice, "No, I'm alone."

The words seemed to reverberate in her mind. Alone. Defenseless. She watched him as he looked down at her.

And, once more, she felt that electrifying current pass between them, a spark that was as ancient as the beginning of time.

He held her chin gently, then moved his finger back and forth on her jaw while he looked at her. His gaze shifted to her mouth, and her lips tingled from the onslaught of hunger in his eyes.

He looked into her eyes again, and she knew he intended to kiss her.

It was ridiculous. How could she know anything about this stranger?

He was silent while he studied her with piercing scrutiny. This tall, broad-shouldered man reminded her of a ravenous wolf. His fingers tightened the barest fraction to hold her chin as his gaze shifted back to her lips.

She licked her lips and immediately wished she hadn't because she realized it looked like an invitation. She felt a tremor course through her. She'd been out in the mountains too long. She tried to think, to speak calmly, to know what she said.

"Will you move, please? I can't breathe."

"Of course." The answer was casual. He moved, but it wasn't away as she wanted or expected.

He leaned down to kiss her, to take her lips with insolent mastery.

She tried to twist to escape, to hold back. She didn't want to be kissed by anyone, and certainly not by this rough stranger. For an instant she jerked her mouth away from his. His fingers held her chin firmly, not hurting her, while his lips teased hers.

"Don't, please," she whispered.

"Shh." His kiss was slow, deliberate, tantalizing, and it sent a burst of warmth through her. His mouth coaxed a response. She didn't want his kiss. She tried to resist, to say no, but the sound was merely a groan. Shock and anger filled her, and she moved her hands to push against granite shoulders as unyielding and hard as his thighs. But in spite of her reluctance and her fury, exquisite sensations blossomed. Sweet agony filled her, intoxicating her. His firm lips were warm, his breath hot with faint traces of smoke. Relentlessly, with consummate skill, he explored her mouth.

She felt the need to move, to shift her hips. In desperation she pushed violently against his chest. He straightened. His breath was as ragged as her own. For a moment she felt a stab of shock at the look of wonder in his eyes.

And she thought she understood why—that had been a spectacular kiss! Too spectacular. Putting the thought out of mind, she tried to collect her wits and regain some control of the situation. "Are you finished? You can move away now."

Several seconds ticked by before the corner of his mouth tugged upward in a lopsided grin. "I don't want to. I want to kiss you again."

Why did the words send a ripple of excitement through her? She ignored it. "I'm quite uncomfortable, and while I can't stop you, I'd prefer you didn't kiss me."

Amused, he rose with ease. To avoid the hand that stretched to help her, Lily gained her feet quickly. She faced him as he studied her.

He touched her wide gold wedding band. "You're married."

In, a tone that sounded far more calm than she felt, she said, "I was." Why did he have such a direct way of looking at her? She couldn't avoid those blue eyes.

"Divorced?"

"No, I'm widowed. I'm a principal at a grade school in Des Moines." There wasn't any reason to add the last, she told herself.

"I'm Reece Wakefield," he said.

She accepted his proffered hand, felt the warm fingers close around hers in a firm clasp while she said, "I'm Lily Dunbar. They told me in town about you. You own a sheep ranch, don't you?"

"Yes." He glanced around. "I don't see any gear."

"I have a tent, and everything's there. I leave today."

He shook his head. "Sorry to change your plans, but those storm clouds mean business. We have a wild storm brewing."

She followed the wave of his hand and looked up at the menacing gray clouds that had boiled over the southern ridge of the mountains only a short time ago. Now, they blotted out the sun as they rolled in a dark, churning mass. She sighed. "I think you're right."

"Will you miss a plane reservation or miss meeting someone?"

She studied the clouds. "Neither. I just earned a master's degree in school administration, and I've accepted a job replacing the principal of a grade school who's leaving because of pregnancy. But I don't start for over two weeks, not until November fifteenth."

"I received a radio message early today. This storm will cause floods in the valleys." As if adding emphasis to his words, a howling gust of wind buffeted them. Lily realized the weather was growing worse rapidly. "I'll just wait and leave later," she said.

"You don't have to stay out. You can come to my house."

The last few minutes in his presence had been tumultuous, a shock to her system in several ways she didn't care to explore. She laughed. "Thanks, but I feel safer here in the storm."

A dark eyebrow arched in question. "My kiss was that threatening?"

"No, your aggressive methods are. I don't want you to take charge of my life."

He grinned. "I wouldn't dream of it. You don't have to outwait the storm in a tent. It's not safe. Where are you camped?"

She waved her hand to the north. "Up that slope."

To her consternation he headed in that direction. When she didn't follow, he turned to look at her. "Come on. We'll get your things."

A twinge of anger shook her. "Just like that? I don't want to stay at your house. I'm leaving Chile."

"You won't today," he said laconically. "Rain south of here has already cut off the road." He tilted his head to one side. "Are you on foot?"

"No, I have a jeep."

"Well, you won't go anywhere in it for the next three days at least."

"I don't believe you!"

He grinned again, which added fuel to her warming anger. He was an arrogant man, and to make matters worse, she couldn't forget his kiss. She felt in danger, but the threat was emotioned rather than physical. She said flatly, "I'm not going to your house."

"Let's have a look at your campsite." He moved ahead a few yards before turning to ask, "are you coming?"

As she hesitated, she faced the lopsided, mocking grin that so aggravated her.

Thunder rumbled, and a gust of wind whipped up dried leaves, swirling them through the air. Reece Wakefield motioned. "Come on, Lily. Earth and heaven are working against you."

There wasn't anything else to do except join him. "I've been here in storms before," she snapped. "Usually I come in the summer, but this time I came early."

"Usually? You've done this before?"

"This is my third trip. I love the guanacos, and I love Chile. It's beautiful here." For a moment she forgot the man and gazed around at the mountains. To the south a sheet of rain already obscured the high peaks. Patches of fog drifted across nearer slopes while the storm clouds threatened to unleash all the fury Reece had predicted.

Her gaze swung around to meet his, and she discovered she was the object of intense scrutiny before they moved ahead.

At an outcropping of rocks, he extended his hand. When she smiled and jumped up without his aid, he grinned. "As independent as hell, aren't you?"

"How do you think I'd have fared out here if I weren't?" she countered.

"Well get soaked before we get to my house."

Another ripple of annoyance shook her, and he realized it because he said, "I can't stop the rain."

"It's a wonder you don't try. You appear to have control of everything else. Once and for all, I'm not going to your house. I don't know you."

With an abruptness that startled her, he halted to confront her. "Scared?" he asked.

She studied him and, again, had the feeling of facing a hungry, stalking tiger. A cave would be a suitable place for Reece Wakefield. It wasn't

difficult to envision him slinging her over his shoulder to carry her off to his house. She saw the amusement in his blue eyes.

"No," she answered flatly.

He turned away. "How much farther is your tent?"

She looked at his broad back, the long legs and big, strong hands. For the first time, she noticed the wide gold band on his ring finger. "You're married," she stated, annoyed he'd kissed her.

He shook his head. "No, I'm widowed too."

She lengthened her stride to keep up with him. Shortly she spotted her revolver. Reece picked it up, turned the cylinder, and emptied the shells into his hand. Without a word he handed the gun to her, and she felt a flush of embarrassment that she'd hurt him.

They reached the tent and without hesitation, Reece stepped inside. Lily followed and looked up at his injury. "How's your head?"

"It hurts."

"Can I put something on it?"

"I'm all right. I'll wait until I get home. The sooner we start, the better."

"I'll get a few things," she said.

Chuckling softly, he looked around. "Few is right! You travel lightly, don't you?"

She glanced at the spartan furnishings, her bedroll, camera, knapsack, and neatly folded change of clothes.

Reece chuckled. "Don't tell me you brought that cat from Iowa!"

She looked down at the striped cat as he opened one baleful yellow eye to gaze back at her. "General Jackson? No, he simply appeared one day about three weeks ago." She raised her head. "I've wondered what I'll do with him when I leave."

"You're looking at me like a dog begging for a juicy bone. Forget it. I'm not taking in a cat." He watched General Jackson uncoil and stretch, arching his back. "If I did, it wouldn't be that sorry excuse for one. I'm not even sure that *is* a cat."

She looked at the one-eyed creature with his scarred, jagged ears. When he stood, the crook in his tail was noticeable. In spite of her efforts to smooth his fur, it stood out from his body as if blown by a strong wind.

"That's why I call him General Jackson. He looks like a scrappy fighter."

As if aware that their remarks were about him, General Jackson looked up at Lily and meowed, a deep sound like a dog's growl.

"He doesn't even know how to meow," Reece muttered.

Glancing at Reece, she suddenly realized how narrow the confines of the tent were. With his rifle in hand, his broad shoulders and his height, Reece Wakefield dominated the small space.

"Is this all you brought?" he asked.

"Yes. I rented the jeep in Santiago."

"Well, it won't take long to gather this up. When ; you leave, where will you go?"

"I'll drive to Santiago, get a plane to Miami, where I change flights to Des Moines," she answered while she folded her things and put them inside the bedroll.

"We'll take your jeep now. I rode out this morning on my horse, then went on foot. I'll stop and get him before we drive home."

She gazed at him with a mixture of consternation and curiosity. His blue eyes met hers, and he grinned. "You look ready to take another shot at me."

She shrugged. "I'm just not accustomed to this. I do as I please and don't have to follow anyone's ! dictates."

A peal of thunder rumbled, and wind whipped against the tent, causing it to flap wildly. Reece Wakefield said, "We better move and leave the conversation until we're settled in front of my fire."

They turned at the sound of a soft snort.

"What the hell?" Reece said as a guanaco thrust its head into the tent.

"Dolly!" Lily rose to her feet. "She's so gentle."

She reached out to pet the long-necked animal, smoothing its soft, red-gold fur. Reece asked, "You've tamed a two-hundred-pound guanaco?"

Smiling, Lily answered, "I hate to leave her. You see, you can't shoot them. Why did you want to? What did you have to gain?"

"I want to make a spread out of guanaco hides, and I like to eat guanaco meat. I've hunted all my life. If you want to save your pet, you'd better tie a red ribbon around her neck."

She felt another twinge of anger at his ruthlessness. She pushed away the guanaco, which turned to graze while Lily continued packing.

Reece glanced around. "If you're through, I'll take down the tent, and we'll go."

Within minutes they had her meager possessions packed in the jeep. Reece took her arm and glanced at the dark sky. "Get in. We'll get drenched before long."

"I can't imagine how the weather can dare defy you," she said, and he chuckled, his flash of white teeth softening the harshness of his features.

"I have a feeling you're not accustomed to much defiance from anyone either, or you wouldn't be so disturbed by my orders." He paused and smiled at her.

Lily was caught between Reece and the jeep; she gazed into his blue eyes and saw amusement.

"You're as bristly as a porcupine," he said.

She laughed. "And you're as cavalier as Henry the Eighth!"

The creases around his mouth deepened. "Far be it from me to be cavalier. Mrs. Dunbar, would you please get into the jeep now?"

She smiled. "I'd be delighted." She started to climb in, but his hand closed around her arm. Surprised, she hesitated.

"If courtesy is what it takes to sweeten you up, I have one more request." The blue eyes held a challenge as he asked, "How about another kiss?"

Ignoring a traitorous tingle that rippled deep inside, she knew she had better discourage him quickly. She still felt threatened by him, by his aura of masculinity, and hoped some nonchalant banter would cool his interest. "Forget it," she said. "We'll be caught in the rain if we wait here any longer."

"It's worth the risk."

"Not to me!"

He laughed. "Score one for you that time! I didn't know I was *that* bad. ..."

She smiled and patted his arm. "Your kiss was fairly nice."

He shifted, moving closer to her. He reached out to turn a stray curl away from her face. "Next time, I'll try to see to it that I score higher than fairly nice." He slipped his arm around her waist.

Immediately she said, "I don't see any need or point in another demonstration. Let's go before we get soaked."

He looked at her a second and then grinned and swung her into the jeep. He rested his hand on the windshield and said, "My ego just took a wallop."

She answered with heartfelt sincerity, "I doubt it. I suspect it withstood my opinions remarkably well."

A peal of thunder sounded, and Reece glanced overhead. Reluctantly he dropped his arm and walked around to climb in on the driver's side.

At that moment Lily noticed General Jackson sitting underneath a beech tree. "Wait a minute," she said and jumped out to get the cat.

"My dog will kill him."

"I doubt it," she replied, dumping the cat onto the backseat. She turned to look at the guanaco grazing yards away.

"Forget the guanaco and get in," Reece said, and she climbed in to sit beside him. "I meant what I said. I have a sheepdog that's dangerous."

"General Jackson and I will take our chances with your dog and you," Lily stated and met Reece's sardonic gaze.

As they started up the mountain road, she looked back at the spot where the tent had stood, and for an instant she had a strange feeling that she was leaving something behind.

The wind howled down the slope, buffeting the canvas top of the jeep and whipping in through the open sides to hit Lily and Reece with icy blasts. Looking determined, Reece gripped the steering wheel with strong hands. His wedding band glinted dully, and Lily wondered how long he'd been widowed. Her gaze drifted to his full underlip, and she remembered the velvet softness of the first brush of his mouth on hers. Instantly she banished the thought, reminding herself to keep up her guard with him in the hours ahead.

After a short time, Reece left the road, explaining, "My horse is nearby. I'll unsaddle him and let him go. He'll get home before we will." The jeep bounced across the rough terrain toward a black stallion. With quick efficiency, Reece unsaddled the horse, slapped his flank to send the animal racing out of sight, and placed the saddle in the back of the jeep.

Minutes after they returned to the road, rain swept over them. Splashing against the earth, torrents of cold water poured from the skies and totally obliterated sight of the mountains.

As the jeep forded a swollen stream, rushing, turbulent water swirled high around the wheels. When the engine coughed and sputtered, Lily wondered if they would be stranded. It was a fierce storm, and she welcomed the thought of Reece's warm house, hoping they could get to it soon. She pulled the collar of her parka tighter around her throat. Raising her voice above the storm, she said, "I don't think we can get through another creek like this."

As they pulled out, skidding in the mud, he replied, "We won't have to. That's the last one."

Each time the jeep skidded, Reece straightened it quickly. Finally, they passed through an open gate with pole fences stretching away to the right and left. Ahead, through a blur of water on the windshield, Lily saw a long ranch house and outbuildings. Houses, stables, a barn, sheds, and various structures of wood or corrugated iron nestled at the foot of tall mountains. Beyond the buildings Lily glimpsed an expanse of gray water, a large lake that extended to the south. Between the mountains, spilling into the lake, was a glacier, its icy slopes glistening in the rain.

The jeep bounced as they hit a puddle, splashing water high. The motor sputtered and died.

Chapter Two

After two futile attempts to start the motor, Reece said, "The distributor cap or the spark plugs are wet. As soon as they dry, the motor will start." He added, "That's Hawick, my home, ahead of us. This is the last chance for that cat. You should put him out now before Tiger catches sight of him."

She glanced over her shoulder. General Jackson crouched on the worn seat of the jeep. He looked so bedraggled, she thought. "I told you, I think General Jackson can hold his own."

One corner of Reece's mouth lifted a fraction. "Just like his owner?"

She faced his twinkling blue eyes coolly and thought absurdly of an iron fist in a velvet glove. Only a short time ago she'd had no such intention of going with him, yet here she was sitting beside him, headed for his house. A small voice inside whispered a warning to take care.

He sobered and looked intently at her. "How long have you been widowed?"

"Five years."

"What happened to your husband?"

She paused for a moment and thought of her sandy-haired husband, Bill, whom she'd known all her life. One year older, he'd grown up across the street from her; his little sister, Nancy, had been her best friend. Gentle, tall and quiet, Bill had been a part of Lily's life as long as she could remember until the accident. "My husband was a professor of zoology. His office was in the basement of a building that caught fire. They said he tried to save some of his records. He died of smoke inhalation."

"Any children?"

She twisted her gold wedding band. "We had the papers finished and everything ready to adopt a child. After the fire the agency wouldn't agree to let me go ahead with the adoption." She felt a twinge of pain and dimly was

surprised that in all this time, the agency's decision still caused an ache. "They didn't think I could take care of the baby properly," she added softly. She became aware of the silence and looked up to see him studying her.

"I'm sorry."

"How long has your wife been gone?"

"Two years." His blue eyes shifted, and he gazed across the field. In a deeper voice he added, "A tractor turned over and injured her back. She had four spinal operations during the next three years, and she died during the last operation."

"How terrible. Do you have children?"

His gaze returned to meet Lily's, and the strained note left his tone. "Three boys. Clint, who's twenty, is at Harvard. Renner, eighteen, attends Texas A and M, and Dylan, who's sixteen, is in Santiago with his grandparents now."

He gazed silently at Lily, and she knew he felt as terrible about his loss as she did about hers.

As if confirming her guess, he said, "It's tough, isn't it?"

"Yes." A gust of wind blew a cold spray of rain into Lily's side of the jeep. She shifted, turning her back to the opening. "If your wife was ill for three years and she's been gone two, you've had to take care of your sons alone for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes. It was probably easier to do here than it would have been in a city. While Meredith was in the hospital, I owned a house in Santiago."

"I guess it would be difficult to go back and forth continually from here to the city."

He shook his head. "It's not. I have a plane, and it's only a little over three hours to Santiago." He paused and looked through the windshield. "It looks like the rain has slackened for a minute; we ought to be able to go now." He

turned the key, and the motor started. With a glance over his shoulder he said, "General Jackson, you're misnamed. It should've been Napoleon because you're headed for Waterloo." Reece faced the road again, shifted, and started home.

As they approached the house, the storm whipped into greater fury, blowing through the jeep and soaking Lily's jean-clad legs. Through the rain-streaked windshield, she studied the sprawling wooden home with its wide porch. At the front door Reece stopped the jeep, jumped down, and came around to gather Lily's belongings. When General Jackson sprinted to the ground and dashed under the porch. Reece shook his head. "So long, General."

"Wait and see." Ducking her head, Lily dashed through the pouring rain. Cold drops splashed against her cheeks and hands as she ran for the shelter of the porch.

Reece held the door, and she stepped into a hallway. A tempting aroma filled the house, and she glanced at Reece as he took her coat and shed his parka, then hung them on a coatrack by the door. "Something smells good."

"My specialty, mutton stew. I've learned to cook during these last few years. The wife of one of my men cleans for me and cooks part of the time." He took her arm. "Come on, I'll show you around." They entered a large room with a massive stone fireplace at one end. Covered only by a polar bear skin in front of the fire, a bare floor gleamed with polish. Across the room, a wall was filled with guns. Displayed with the rifles and pistols were a few knives and swords. Covering another wall were shelves of books. A large plate-glass window dominated the fourth wall and offered a panoramic view of the mountains and the lake. Lily felt a mixture of emotions. Along with appreciation for the magnificent view, she felt a deep distaste because mounted around the window on the wall were heads of trophies: a polar bear, a mountain lion, a tiger, an antelope, a gazelle, and a water buffalo. Weapons, trophies, brown leather and dark wood furniture, as well as the hard, polished floor and low-beamed ceiling combined to give a strongly masculine appearance to the room.

Lily glanced again at the mounted heads. "That's a strange combination."

He followed her gaze. "We made one African safari. I went to the Arctic and bagged the bear. Meredith was good with a gun." His gaze shifted, and he looked at Lily. "I can see disapproval steaming out of your lovely gray eyes."

"I happen to like animals."

"I do too. Most hunters like animals. But you can't make a pet out of a polar bear."

"But you don't have to kill them either." She felt a surge of anger as she faced him. One hand hooked into his brown leather belt, he looked relaxed, self-confident, and tough. His blue eyes assessed her coolly, and she returned his gaze. "This looks like a man's house," she said.

"Meredith and I had a decorator several years ago. She wasn't too interested in the house. She liked to garden and hunt and fish. She was an outdoor person." He glanced around the room. "I guess I had more influence on the decor than she did."

"Shall we finish the tour of your house?" Lily asked.

"Let's get into dry clothes first. Come on, I'll show you the bedrooms so you can shower and change."

For a moment he continued to study her before he shifted and motioned toward a door to enter a long hall. "Bedrooms are here. Mine's at the end of the hall. You can have your choice of the boys' rooms."

She glanced ahead. Two doors opened on the left, one opened on the right. She waved her hand toward the door on the right. "This should be fine."

He grinned farthest from my room."

"I hope so."

"You'd better look at them and take your pick."

She halted at the first door and glanced inside. This is fine."

Reece's grin widened. "Suit yourself." He strolled down the hall toward his room as Lily entered the bedroom and closed the door. She looked around at the single bed covered in dark brown, a braided rug on the floor, a rocking chair, a small fireplace, shelves of books, and airplane models suspended from the ceiling.

Wondering what lay ahead during the evening, she wandered into the adjoining bathroom, stripped off her clothes, and luxuriated in a hot bath. After the weeks camping with only icy streams available, the bath was marvelous. Reluctantly she climbed out, dried her hair, and put on her second pair of jeans and a white sweater. While she rinsed out the clothes she'd worn earlier, she listened to the wind howl around the house and rain beat against the windows. The storm was as fierce as Reece had predicted, and she was thankful she wasn't isolated in her frail tent, although she suspected Reece Wakefield might be as much challenge as the wild storm.

When she entered the living room, a fire was roaring in the fireplace, and Reece was lounging on the sofa. He had changed to a blue wool shirt and jeans. She guessed he'd showered, for his dark hair curled damply against his neck.

He rose and picked up a glass of chilled white wine to hand to her. When he faced her, all her senses became alert, fully conscious of her own movements, of the odor of wood smoke in the room, the silence broken by the popping of cinders.

As he approached his gaze swept over her, and she saw the quick approval in his eyes. Inches away, he stopped and held out the drink. "You're pretty, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you." Accepting the proffered drink, she appraised him with directness, aware of the charged atmosphere between them. The pale blue wool shirt heightened the blue in his eyes. Long-lashed, seductive and lively, those blue eyes noticed too much.

Even though she didn't see any evidence of the injury, she asked, "How's your head?"

"It aches, but I'll survive. Want to finish a tour of my house?"

When she nodded, he moved ahead through an open door. "Here's the dining room. My Welsh ancestors settled here at the turn of the century. The original house is gone. My grandfather started this one; my father and I have both added to it."

"Your parents aren't living?" she asked.

"No."

"Mine aren't either," she stated as they entered the dining room, which looked as masculine as the living room. It was Spanish style, with massive dark wood furniture and a large stone fireplace at one end of the room. Reece motioned toward another door. "Here's where I eat."

They entered a spacious kitchen, which held a round oak table set for two. A cloud of steam rose from an iron kettle on the stove. As she looked at gleaming copper pots and pans on the wall above rust-colored modern appliances, he asked, "When did you lose your parents?"

"My father died with pneumonia six years ago, and my mother died a year later from illness."

He frowned. "You lost them as well as your husband about the same time. That's rough."

"Have yours been gone long?"

"I lost Mother eight years ago and my father sixteen. I took charge of the ranch long before that because he wasn't well."

"You don't have any brothers or sisters either?"

He shook his head. Suddenly, above the drumming rain loud barks erupted, followed by the squall of a cat. Reece glanced at Lily. "Sorry. There goes the General."

She listened to rain striking the house. All sounds of the animals ceased. She shrugged. "We'll see," she said and followed him across the room through another door.

With a shock, Lily paused at the doorway of a glassed porch. While the rain beat a deafening tattoo on the glass, she gazed in surprise at a room filled with plants. Pink, yellow, purple, and white orchids bloomed among palms and green banana trees. Amazed at the exotic, tropical plants, she looked at Reece. He smiled. "This was Meredith's hobby, and I became interested. Now, this is my hobby. More pleasant than yours, I think." Amusement lighted his eyes. "You look surprised."

"I am. You're not the type." She couldn't imagine anyone as tough and ruthless as Reece appeared to be, working diligently over a delicate orchid, yet the room was filled with thriving blossoms.

"Maybe there's more to me than you thought. I might have some redeeming qualities."

She heard the challenge in his voice and hoped her level tone dampened it.

"I won't be here long enough to find out."

His eyes widened as if in surprise, and she wondered what had just occurred to him. She'd said something that startled him, but she couldn't imagine what. Shrugging aside the notion, she headed for the kitchen again. He followed, closed the door to the porch, and motioned her toward the long hallway to the bedrooms.

"I've seen this part of the house."

"Only Dylan's room."

She glanced at him and caught a speculative look on his face. It was gone as he stepped through the first door on the left. "Here's Renner's room."

She followed him into a room done in deep tones of blue. Another polar skin was on the floor beside the bed, and trophies were mounted on the wall, an albatross with wings spread, an eagle, and the hide of an ocelot. She glanced at Reece. "I see it runs in the family."

He smiled. "Even Meredith liked the animal skins and hunting. Clint's different. He's majoring in accounting. He'll come home and help me keep books on this place."

"Is it that complicated?"

"We have a little more than a quarter of a million acres with eighty thousand head of sheep. We have our own general store on the ranch, an infirmary, and a cantina. We're fairly self-sufficient."

"I'm sure you are," she answered, shocked at the size of his ranch.

"Come see Clint's room. You may want to move into it."

As she strolled along the hall beside him, their boots were loud against the boards. She noticed his height; her head came only to his jaw. She shrugged, wishing she weren't so acutely aware of him.

Reece stopped at an open door and said, "This is Clint's room." She glanced at a bedroom filled with books and decorated in shades of brown. Reece took her arm and strolled to the end of the hall. "Here's my room."

She entered a large bedroom. Like all the others, it had a fireplace, only this one was fully as large as the hearth in the living room. A fire blazed, warming a room that contained guns and books, large chairs, and an oversized brass bed covered in tiger skins. Two polar bear skins lay on the floor in front of the fire.

"It's certainly you," she said and turned to catch him studying her with the same speculative gleam she'd noticed before. Common sense urged her to

get out of his masculine intimate bedroom, away from the warm fire and brass bed. In a light tone, she said, "Thanks for the tour." She started to turn, but she noticed a picture of a smiling woman on a large dresser. "Is this Meredith?"

He nodded.

She headed toward the door, where he was standing, aware that he would have to move if she was to pass without touching him. To her chagrin, he remained still.

She reached the door, and he stretched one long arm across to rest his hand against the jamb, effectively blocking her exit . . . and causing her heart to beat erratically. She faced him squarely, and he said softly, "That description of my 'fairly nice kiss' still rankles."

"I don't care to try again."

Smiling, he dropped his arm and joined her to head toward the living room. As they strolled down the hall, he asked, "Is there any man at home, waiting for you?"

She glanced at him. "No. I loved my husband very much and since his death, I've led a busy life. Besides accepting the job of principal, I'm continuing Bill's guanaco studies, I belong to the zoological society at home, and I do volunteer work at the zoo. My own research on guanacos and llamas involves me, and I plan to complete the book Bill started. I lecture, I teach an exercise class, and I make most of my own clothes. I do my own housekeeping, care for the lawn, have three cats and two dogs."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled wickedly. "That's a hell of a lot of activity. If you have to work that hard to suppress your natural urges, you must be quite a woman!"

For the first time in too long to remember, she felt her cheeks grow faintly warm. She didn't know whether it was from embarrassment or anger.

Determined to retain her composure, she answered flatly, "It combats the loneliness."

"Lily, I was teasing. You don't have to tell me anything about feeling lonely."

It was her turn to regret her choice of words, but before she could say so, he asked, "Where's the menagerie while you're here?"

"My sister-in-law keeps them."

They reached the living room, and he took her arm. "Dinner's ready, but let's sit down by the fire and finish our drinks."

She crossed the room with him and sat on a sofa. He sat on the edge of the stone hearth a few feet from her and studied her quietly while he sipped his wine. His blue eyes were direct and intense as he gazed steadily at her. How could he have such long, thick eyelashes? she wondered.

He stretched his long legs in front of him, and she noticed the dried, gray mud on the heels of his black boots. "Does your sister-in-law have any children?"

Lily laughed. "Indeed, she does! Five, and another one expected in two months."

"They keep her busy too, don't they?"

Suddenly Lily sensed more to the question than a polite remark. She looked sharply at him and caught him watching her intently. She wondered what was on his mind, and then his gaze slowly lowered, appraising her in unmistakable speculation that made her feel he'd just stripped away her clothes.

"Don't get any ideas," she said in a level voice and received another long, inscrutable look. He placed his glass of wine on the hearth, rose, and opened a cabinet to search through records. "Renner sent me some new records last

month." As soon as a slow, easy melody filled the room, he turned and said, "Let's dance before dinner."

"I don't mind just sitting by the fire."

He smiled. "I do. I want you in my arms." He reached down to take her glass from her hands, and she was far too conscious of the mere brush of his warm fingers. When she stood, he kicked the bear rug out of the way, reached out, and slipped his arm around her waist to pull her close. Again, she noticed the faint smell of smoke about him.

Smiling, he asked, "What are you wondering about?"

How did he know she was wondering about anything? "I noticed a trace of tobacco, but I haven't seen you smoke."

"I'm trying to quit."

"I can't imagine any lack of success to something you've made up your mind to do."

"Perseverance and determination usually pay."

"Especially when they're accompanied by charm." She said it and wondered if she should have refrained.

He looked down and laughed. "Thank you!"

"Don't let it go to your head."

He was easy to follow, and in a moment Lily relaxed, enjoying the music and the cozy firelight in the room. Her hand rested against his back and through the soft wool of his blue shirt, she could feel his hard shoulder blade. With his jaw only inches away, she detected the faint odor of tangy aftershave.

He pulled back slightly to look at her. "This is nice."

She smiled. "I just thought that too. Let's keep it that way."

Instead, the moment changed. His blue eyes held hers with a silent message impossible to miss. She felt the same charged current pass between them she'd experienced on the mountain. His gaze shifted to her lips, and his hand tilted her chin while his arm tightened around her waist.

"Reece, there's no room in my life for any involvements, much less a one-night stand while I'm in Chile."

She didn't think he heard a word she said. He leaned down and placed his mouth on hers.

A wave of pent-up longing swept through her. All her logic was denied by her body's instant response, and she was certain he knew it as he wrapped both arms around her and held her closely.

For a moment she felt as if she'd stumbled into a bottomless pit and was falling through a void in a dizzying rush she couldn't stop. Warmth coursed through her; his kiss unleashed sensations she'd held in tight check for a long time.

His kiss was as demanding and arrogant as everything else about him. Even so, it struck a responsive chord in her, something she could feel but couldn't control. His probing tongue forced an eager return, and she felt devoured by his insatiable hunger. Flames licked through her veins to blaze into a fervor that took her breath and made her heart pound wildly.

His strong fingers drifted along her spine to the nape of her slender neck. He caressed her bare flesh, sending exquisite tingles through her as he bent her backward, forcing her hips to mold against his.

With a struggle, she collected her wits and pushed against his chest. Without hesitation, he loosened his hold, keeping his hands on her waist as he looked down at her.

She wished the hammer blows of her heart would gentle. "I don't want your kisses," she murmured.

His sardonic lift of an eyebrow told her how much he believed her.

Aware of her hands resting lightly on his bare forearms, she shrugged one shoulder. "All right, part of me responds, but logically I realize this . . . this dalliance is pointless for both of us. I told you a minute ago, all these years I've avoided entanglements."

"Haven't you dated at all?"

She heard the disbelief in his voice. "Only casually. I've avoided serious entanglements because I preferred to pursue my career. There are opportunities available to women now that weren't years ago. Fortunately, I had teaching credentials; I taught sixth grade five years." She looked up at the determined thrust of his jaw. "I told you, too, there isn't any place in my life for a one-night stand in Chile, nor am I the type to take sex lightly. Sorry."

He kept an arm loosely around her waist as he twisted a curl against her cheek. When he touched her hair, she felt his warm fingers brush her skin. Shaken by her reaction to his kiss, she stepped out of his arms, picked up her wineglass, and turned to face him.

Leaning one hip casually against the bookshelves, he sipped his wine. The sleeves of his blue shirt were rolled to his elbows, revealing his muscular forearms.

Orange flames heightened his tan and threw dancing shadows across his face. Without doubt, he was handsome. Ruggedly appealing would be more accurate, she thought. Dangerous. It was a good thing she planned to leave, putting thousands of miles between her and this man. That six feet, four inches of male could wreck all her hard-won serenity.

Catching her hesitation and uncertainty, his bold look assessed her with a strange mixture of hunger and satisfaction. In a leisurely movement, he straightened and came toward her. Lily's heart began to pound again, but she looked straight at him and spoke calmly. "Reece, no more."

Ignoring her, he placed his arms around her once again. Irritated that he had paid no attention to anything she'd said, she asked, "You won't resort to force, will you?"

His blue eyes were as seductive as his husky voice. "What do you think?"

Before she could answer, he asked, "It's academic, but was that kiss 'nice'?"

She laughed. "You know better without asking."

"How would you describe it?" he asked, in a deep-throated whisper that sent a tantalizing shiver through her.

Aggravation flashed through her. "You're not going to give up until I satisfy that ego, are you? It was spectacular, Reece. It weakened my knees and curled my toes."

"I had the same reaction."

She drew a sharp breath and realized she was in more danger than ever. Her peaceful existence could easily be shattered even by the briefest affair. It was the first time she had felt really alive since Bill's death. It was a dangerous path to follow, upsetting her calm, purposeful existence, her plans for the future. Up until now she had managed to push the physical side of her nature to the background.

"Reece there's no place in my life for an affair," she stated emphatically.

"That's not what I want either." His blue eyes denied his words as he gazed at her with an insistent urgency.

She frowned "If it isn't an affair, what do you want?"

His arms tightened a fraction, and he replied solemnly. "Lily, will you marry me?"

Chapter Three

Shocked, she stared at him in stunned silence. Finally, she pushed free and moved away. "Of course not! That's absurd!"

"It's not at all." He reached out to take her arm. "Come on, we'll discuss it over mutton stew."

"You ask me to marry you and have a bowl of stew! How can you think of mutton when you just dropped a bomb like that proposal?"

He laughed. "I know it's sudden."

She remained immobile, still in shock. What was the matter with the man? "We don't know each other. This is the craziest thing I ever heard in my life! Why would you ask to marry me?"

"I'm damned lonesome here. I need a wife," he answered as if he were explaining how the car motor worked.

"There ought to be women—"

"It isn't a woman I need or miss. It's a wife, an intelligent, committed, attractive female. It's not the same as having a woman around."

Consternation filled her. "You don't know if I'm intelligent, and I'm certainly not committed." She recovered somewhat and smiled wryly. "I hope I'm reasonably attractive, though."

He chuckled and touched her cheek lightly while he looked at her. "You're that, all right! You're intelligent too, or you wouldn't hold the job you do, and you wouldn't be here on your own, studying guanacos. If you accept my proposal, you'll be committed. You look like a very earnest type."

"You've been alone too long."

"You're damn right!"

He took her arm. "Come on. We'll discuss it over dinner." He led her into the kitchen, held her chair before pouring red wine into both glasses. She studied him while he worked. He looked normal, not at all a crazy type who would come out with such an outlandish proposal. The man was too appealing and charming to have difficulty finding a woman. She sipped the wine while her thoughts reeled.

With quiet efficiency he filled white china serving dishes with steaming stew, corn, and hot bread. The table was covered with a cheerful red cloth: the kitchen was warm and cozy, filled with tempting odors of coffee and mutton. Outside rain drummed on the windows, and gusts of cold wind howled around the corner of the house. Lily took little notice of any of it. When they ate, she was barely conscious of how delicious the stew tasted. All her thoughts were on the broad-shouldered, self-confident male facing her as she listened to him discuss his proposal as calmly as if he were charting a new route home for her.

"What do you have to go home to? You told me you don't have any parents, any children. Now, Lily, give me a week. You said you don't go to work until November fifteenth. Stay this week and see how you feel about my proposal."

She couldn't believe her ears. She stared at him. The man was unhinged. His lonely life had warped ' his judgment. Mingling with the shock, she felt a stirring of sympathy. She said, "You don't ask the first person who comes along to marry."

"You're not the first person. You're the first *suitable* person."

Upon seeing his mocking grin, her sympathy evaporated. "Have you ever heard of love?"

"I think that could easily come with a little time and effort."

"And if it didn't?"

"There's no reason it wouldn't."

"There's no lack of arrogance or self-assurance in you!" she snapped. She forgot her dinner and stared at him. "Why did you marry the first time? Was it because she was a good gardener?"

He laughed. "I loved Meredith very much."

"Well, I don't know you, and I certainly don't love you! We might not be compatible. Besides, I have my own life. Marriage is not part of my plan."

"You could study guanacos to your heart's content."

"Thanks, but I don't plan to go to such lengths just to get more time with my guanacos."

"Would you care for a slice of bread? I baked it myself."

"All your other talents and you bake, too? See, you don't need a wife."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes, and she felt she'd lifted the lid off a blast furnace. His blue eyes held such voracious hunger that she drew a sharp breath. It was easy to guess his thoughts because his passionate longing was so plain. She said, "There should be several local belles who could take care of these physical needs you obviously have."

"I just told you, there's more to it than that. I want a woman who's attractive, fun, intelligent, healthy, and sexy. You fit."

She felt both flattered and dismayed. "Thank you for the compliment, but there are others in the world who'll do as well if not a lot better—"

"I don't have time to find one."

Just when her anger was abating, it flared again with his statement. "You proposed to me to save yourself the trouble of wife-hunting! How many hours of your busy life have you allocated to this activity?"

"I want that week. If you'll stay—"

"You'll take a week off from the sheep! How far down in your list of priorities is getting a wife? It must come after sheep, the ranch, hunting guanacos . . ."

"Not really," he answered, grinning.

"Why don't you run an ad in the Santiago paper? It would be just as sensible. You could put all the qualifications you want. This isn't any different."

His eyes twinkled with amusement as he said, "Think of the interviews I'd have to sit through!"

She couldn't resist smiling. He leaned across the table to touch her cheek lightly with his fingertips and his voice dropped to a sensual huskiness "If I ran ads from here to Anchorage, I couldn't find a woman as tempting to kiss."

In spite of her anger and her common sense, a thrill raced through her. "Thank you, but that's not true, and you know it. Santiago is filled with women who'd be delightful to kiss, I'm sure. Stay in the city for a while. A man with your appeal shouldn't have too much difficulty."

"Thank you."

She ignored his remark and continued, "You said your son is visiting grandparents in Santiago. Why don't you join him for a few weeks? They could introduce you to some likely señoritas."

"I tried that, and the youngest woman I met .was sixty-four. I'm forty-three, and I prefer a younger wife." His eyes narrowed, and he studied her. "You look about twenty-nine."

For an instant she forgot her aggravation and laughed. "That's refreshing. I'm thirty-six!"

When she saw a flare of surprise, she said, "See, you might be in for all kinds of disappointments when you got to know me."

"That wasn't a disappointment. The more I learn, the more I think I've made a good decision."

"I'll take that as a compliment, but I'm sorry, the answer is no." She gazed at him and smiled. "You said you wanted someone who's fun. You don't know if I am."

"Anyone who carries a sorry-looking animal around and gives it a dignified name like General Jackson definitely has a sense of humor." The twinkle reappeared in his eyes as he folded his hands across his broad chest. "I'm having a good time right now."

"At my expense! You don't know me at all."

With maddening calm, he persisted, "Yes, I do. I saw the interior of that tent. You're neat, methodical, practical. You're orderly and want everything to conform. Right?"

"That's correct, and your crazy proposal doesn't have a place in my orderly life."

"Also, you're intelligent, passionate—"

"You've proved your point," she interrupted. She finished her dinner, aware of his silent scrutiny. Finally, she looked at him. "You're a good cook. That was delicious."

"Thank you. I like to cook. If we many, I can cook for you." "Thanks, but so will the cafeteria at home. I can eat there when I don't want to cook." She rose and began to clear the table.

Reece stood and took the dishes from her hands. "I'll clean up later. Let's go into the other room."

In the living room, while he crossed to put more records on the stereo, she sat down in a leather chair. She glanced at the dark windows. Raindrops spattered against the glass as a gust of wind swept the house. The onslaught of rain and wind might have been easier to combat than Reece's

determination and sensuous charm. She thought about leaving and immediately dismissed the idea. He wouldn't allow her to go out in a storm, and she didn't want to anyway. It shouldn't be necessary, if she remained firm. Memory of his kisses stirred her, and for a moment she worried about her ability to withstand his attraction. There wouldn't be any more dancing, she decided. But as he refilled both glasses with wine, she felt sympathy for him. He did lead an isolated existence. She could understand his loneliness and frustration. Shut off from the world, he would have difficulty meeting women if he didn't leave his ranch. A man as vigorous and full of life as Reece wouldn't enjoy celibacy.

He straightened and stood in front of the fire. "You look pensive. What are you thinking?"

"About you I understand how you feel."

"That's one more bond between us," he said softly.

"One more? There isn't any other tie."

"There is when we kiss."

Warnings sounded in her mind to take care and keep up her guard with him. For an instant, a current of longing rippled through her. His kisses were fiery, and it felt good to be held in a man's arms once more. His lean hard body felt so right against hers. But knowing those things led only to tempting complications, so she put them out of mind.

Reece set his drink on the coffee table, spread the rug again, and placed more logs on the fire. While he worked, she sipped her wine, gazing at his back, his broad shoulders, and the leather belt that circled his narrow waist. His jeans were pulled tautly over his thighs, as he knelt in front of the hearth. She thought about his outlandish proposal. Any minute she expected him to ask her to dance again, but to her surprise he settled on the sofa.

Why could those blue eyes be so electrifying? she wondered.

"Are you financially independent?" he asked.

She didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. "Not that it's any of your business, but with my job, I manage just fine."

"I'm wealthy. You'll get along better here."

"With the sheep and guanacos?" she asked and then smiled. "I'm accustomed to living in a city with a stimulating life of college activities."

"The University of Chile is in Santiago. It's a short flight to Vina del Mar, Valparaiso, or Santiago. We can go anytime, and I can afford to do what you want."

She tilted her head and looked up at him. "Does your wealth begin to match your arrogance?"

He shrugged and grinned. "I thought it might relieve you of financial worries."

"My answer is no. Now, why don't we pursue some safe topic, like the preservation of guanacos? Do you know how many there were in South America at the turn of the century?"

"There were millions of them. Now there are between fifty to one hundred and fifty thousand."

His accurate answer caught her off guard. "Maybe I'm smarter than you think." He chuckled.

"You're incorrigible!"

"You're ready for more wine."

Even though she declined, he rose and crossed to refill her glass. When he finished, he stood in front of the fire. "Give me this week, Lily. Don't throw away a future for both of us without giving my proposal just a week's consideration."

"I'm sorry you're lonely, but I won't marry you. I'll go home tomorrow."

With his feet planted slightly apart, hands hooked in his belt, he faced her. That determined jaw was thrust forward, and his cool blue eyes looked hard as flint. He said, "No, you won't."

She frowned. "When the storm is over, I'll go home." He shook his head, and a stab of suspicion hit her. "You don't intend to seduce me against my will."

He smiled and walked to place his hands on her shoulders. His voice was velvet. "No, I won't seduce you against your will." His hands slipped over her shoulders to her neck. His fingertips touched her nape, sending a delicious current racing through her while his other hand traced a line across her cheek.

"Reece, please. ..."

He whispered, "It'll never be against your will, I promise you that, Lily. You're a warm, loving woman, and you've kept it bottled up too long. You weren't meant for a solitary life. You were meant to love a man."

His fingers touching the corner of her mouth provoked erotic tingles, and she parted her lips.

"I'm going to kiss you." His blue eyes darkened. "You want me to kiss you, don't you?"

His question raced through her like wildfire.

"Do you like my hand on your throat? Answer me, Lily," he insisted in honeyed coaxing. "This isn't against your will, is it?"

She ignored his seductive questions. His teasing caresses drove her beyond a protest, made her want his lips, and, despite doubts about the wisdom of her action, she welcomed his kiss with a soft moan.

He locked one strong hand in her hair and tilted her head up. "Look at me, Lily," he demanded, and she opened her eyes. "Say it! You want this, don't you? You want my kisses."

"Oh, Reece, I don't know. I do, and I don't."

His arm slipped around her waist, and he lifted her to her feet, pulling her close against him as his lips possessed hers, arousing a need in her. Once again, she knew what danger lay in her actions. She'd let down those carefully constructed defenses that had carried her through the empty years. Yet, how strong his arms felt around her, as if he could protect her against every hurt, every lonely moment. Sweeping hunger exploded in her, and she knew if she didn't stop him quickly, she couldn't.

Reece paused and raised his head to look down at her. "Don't go home, Lily. Give me a week. Stay here one week and let me have a chance."

She gazed up at him. "No! Can't you understand the word no?"

"What do you have to go home for this week? You said your job doesn't start until the fifteenth of November. I'll bet you're ready for work now. I'd guess you could walk into that school and start as principal tomorrow morning. Do you have to do anything in particular before you go to work?"

For a moment she regretted being so orderly and organized. "No, I'm ready."

"Why can't you wait one week longer?"

She moved away from him. "It just doesn't make any sense!"

"You don't have any good argument to present. I know I've surprised you. ..."

"Surprised!" She paced, halted beside a chair, then turned to face him. "Reece, it's too ridiculous to consider. What about your sons? Wouldn't they be shocked to find they have a new mother, someone you knew less than six hours when you proposed?"

With maddening calmness he answered, "They're growing up and will have their own lives."

"They might not like me!"

"I'll take that chance. There's no reason they won't."

"I don't know if I want three grown sons."

He tilted his head to one side and let out his breath. "Ah, Lily. You sounded so wistful when you told me about the adoption. I'd guess you'd be delighted with a dozen children—no matter what their ages."

For the first time she realized the full implication of his proposal. She had wanted a family badly. In the early years of her marriage, she and Bill had decided to wait while he got established in his job. Finally, when they wanted children and she hadn't become pregnant, she had gone to a physician. She was fine; it was Bill who couldn't have children. Eventually they decided to adopt. Reece's guess was correct. She looked at him to ask how he felt about more children. Instantly she stopped because she felt as if she were about to fall into the trap he'd set.

Instead she said, "It's out of the question for me to stay, and when the rain stops, I'll leave. Go along to Santiago. Reece. and spend more time there. You're attractive. You'll meet someone."

"Come here. Lily, he whispered, and her pulse quickened. She moved as if in a trance, and he reached out and pulled her into his arms to kiss her throat, trailing his warm mouth to a sensitive place behind her ear. "Just give me a week."

Giddy with a chaotic need, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back as his gentle onslaught continued. After a moment she shifted and looked up at his strong jaw, dark with tiny bristles, his aquiline nose. "Do you plan to seduce me tonight?"

"Should I?" His blue eyes were direct.

"You answer my question first."

"No."

"Why not?"

He chuckled and answered softly, "I'll be glad to, if that's what you want, but I get the impression you don't want me to make love to you."

"Your impression is correct, although you apparently take what you want when you want it," she answered, trying to hold to sanity.

"I'd like to seduce you," he whispered, his words sending a traitorous reaction through her. Reece murmured, "More important than making love, give me a week." His strong hand pressed the curve of her back, and he placed his mouth over hers, parting her lips eagerly. With languorous deliberation he kissed her, his warm, probing tongue provoking a ravenous torment.

She felt his hand slip beneath her sweater as he sought her bare flesh, pushing aside the flimsy lace barrier. On fire, she quivered from his touch.

His voice was a rasp as he demanded, "Only a week. You'll have to admit these kisses are special." His hand slipped back to her waist.

She struggled to think, pushing away from him. "Maybe that's all the more reason to say no, because in spite of the physical attraction between us, we're not compatible. You're a hunter. You live a rugged life involved with guns and slaughter. I'm committed to peace and saving animals from people like you."

To her surprise he laughed. "If that's all we have to work out, it won't be a problem."

She glanced at the wall of weapons. "Are you willing to give up all those guns, never hunt again?"

He looked over his shoulder at the weapons before returning his compelling gaze to her. "I doubt it, but that doesn't mean we can't work things out."

"Your way, I'm sure!"

"I don't know." His blue eyes hardened. "I can't forget how quick you were to use that Smith and Wesson. You almost finished me off today."

"I didn't mean to! I loathe guns."

"Yet you carry one, and you'll use it," he drawled. "Remind me to show you how to use the damned thing." He gave her an intense look. "Are you going to give me that week?"

"I'm sor—"

He sighed, reached out, and tightened his arms to crush her against his chest. "I'll kiss you until you consent, Lily Dunbar. That's probably what you need anyway!"

Her protest died in her throat as his mouth possessed hers again, exacting the fiery response she couldn't hold back.

Passion shook her as his relentless kiss plundered her mouth, replacing logic with pleasure. He lifted her into his arms and sat down, holding her on his lap while he continued to kiss her. She clung to his powerful shoulders as her restraint shattered.

His mouth trailed to her ear: his breath was hot as he whispered, "Give me one damn week!"

She felt dazed intoxicated; she couldn't think clearly enough to decide if she was on the brink of disaster or rapture. Momentarily, she wondered if he realized he was as vulnerable as she, that he might be hurt.

"Lily," he demanded.

"Yes," she answered, then sighed. The promise 'was given. She had succumbed to his charm, to his demand.

To her surprise he looked down at her and smiled. "Good. I don't think you'll regret that decision."

"I wonder if you will, Reece," she murmured and slipped her hand behind his neck to tug his mouth down to hers.

She saw the flare of surprise in his blue eyes before he lowered his head to take her lips.

It was her turn for surprise. His kiss was tender, affectionate more than passionate. And it helped restore her senses. She sat up and looked at him. "What have I done?"

"You promised me a week. It just started." He looked down at the gold watch on his wrist, studying the date as well as the time. Looking at the sweep of the tiny black second hand, she noticed the curly dark hairs on his forearm. He said, "This is Sunday night, October thirty-first. You'll stay until Sunday, November seventh."

She straightened on his lap, aware of his rugged handsomeness, his thick dark lashes, the gray streak in his brown hair.

"You are absolutely crazy!"

"No, I know a good thing when I see it."

"You really don't know me!"

"I'll bet you even can cook," he remarked dryly and grinned. "If you can't. I'll teach you."

"I've always lived in a city, and I don't know anything about sheep ranches or sheep, for that matter."

"I don't expect you to run the ranch." She laughed and started to get off his lap. His arm tightened, and he held her. "There's one area where we're compatible."

"I hope I'm not headed for a big heartache."

"That isn't what I've planned for you at all." He pushed a curl away from her temple.

"You sound so sure."

"I feel more certain every minute. I like you, Lily. I'm wildly attracted to you. I think I'll grow to love you deeply, and I hope you'll love me in return. I need a woman like you, honey. You ought to understand."

"All I can think about at the moment is how much I want you too. You've changed my decision to go home as soon as the storm is over. Does that satisfy you, Reece? You've destroyed my reserve."

While she talked, in spite of the storm, she heard a scratching at the door.

Chapter Four

"There's Tiger," Reece said. "He wants out of the storm."

"Has he eaten?"

"Probably ate the General."

Lily frowned, and he laughed. "I'm teasing. I fed him this morning. Although I wasn't joking when I said he'll kill that cat."

Keeping her opinion to herself, she watched Reece open the door.

Wet and bedraggled. General Jackson meowed, his deep, guttural meow, strolled in a leisurely fashion into the room, sat down, and began to smooth his fur.

"I'll be damned! I didn't know a cat could scratch on a door. Where's my dog?" Reece's eyes narrowed, and he peered into the rain-filled night. "Tiger," he called softly and waited a moment.

"I don't know where your dog is," Lily answered, "but I know General Jackson looks as hungry as usual."

Reece stared at the cat a moment, then looked out the door again. "Tiger!" He whistled, but no dog appeared. Rain pattered against the roof of the porch. Behind Reece, General Jackson meowed forlornly.

"He's hungry. Can I give him some scraps?"

Reece closed the door. "That dog is always around here unless I'm gone. He's a seventy-three- pound sheepdog. I guess he's at the barn."

Watching Reece study the cat, Lily smiled. "You might be just as wrong about me as you were about General Jackson."

Reece grinned. "I'm sure a woman is as difficult to figure as a cat, but I think I'm right about you."

The single yellow eye winked, and General Jackson meowed as his crooked tail switched back and forth. Reece said, "General, you go out in the rain again. No cats in this house."

Lily laughed and said in a soft voice, "I love cats."

Reece smiled and threw up his hands. "Come on. then. General. Chow time."

Lily followed Reece into the kitchen and began to clear the table, watching him feed scraps of mutton to the cat.

When they finished, Reece said, "Get your plane ticket I'll call and change your reservation." She went to her room and retrieved the envelope with her plane ticket. For a moment she stared at the paper in her hand and thought about home, her pets, her in-laws. What had she done? How had she let him charm her into staying? She knew the answer to that question! Hurrying down the hall, she realized she would have to phone Nancy and tell her it would be another week before she returned. Accustomed to Lily's independence, Nancy wouldn't question her decision.

She went to the kitchen and glanced at Reece, who stood at the sink, cleaning the countertop oven in a domestic setting, there was an aura of primitive maleness about him. He glanced over his shoulder as she entered.

"I'll take care of this. I need to phone my relatives. After all, there are several dogs and cats waiting in Iowa for me to come home."

"There's the phone." He pointed to his right. While she talked to the airline, he finished, dried his hands, and strolled to her. He slipped an arm lightly around her waist and bent his head forward to kiss her neck. She struggled to carry on a coherent conversation until she had changed her reservation.

The moment she replaced the receiver, she said, "I have some more calls to make. I can't phone anyone until you leave me alone. I'm not certain I have my reservation correct."

He kissed her ear and whispered, "It's not going to matter."

Startled, she exclaimed, "I have to go home!"

"I know," he murmured and kissed her shoulder.

She struggled to think, to resist his kisses. "I can get a flight out of Santiago at noon on Sunday, November seventh. Now, I need to call my in-laws, and I can't when you do that."

"Go ahead with your calls. Where do you suppose that cat went?" Reece strolled out of the room, and she watched him as she lifted the receiver. When he walked away, she looked at his broad shoulders. In just a few hours, he'd changed her life; she knew she'd never forget him. At the sound of the operator's voice, Lily turned her attention to the phone.

When she finished, she went to the front room. General Jackson lay curled in the chair in front of the fire. Lily laughed, then paused in the doorway to survey the dark, masculine room. What a contrast it was to her white and pale blue living room and her light yellow kitchen. As she looked around, Reece rose and crossed the room to drape his arm around Lily's shoulder.

"What are you thinking?"

"How different this is from my home. My rooms are light with bright colors."

He chuckled and steered her toward the sofa. "I don't give a damn what you do. You can decorate this house any way you want."

Her remarks had only added to his confidence, and she wished she hadn't brought up the subject. Wanting to dent his satisfaction, she asked, "How about pale pink walls and nice pink velvet chairs?" While his dark brows drew together in a frown, she continued. "We can paint the woodwork white; everything will be pink and white."

He laughed. "Pink and white! If that's what it takes to get your consent, I'll give up my brown leather for pink velvet. We won't mention it to my boys for a while."

His cheerful agreement brought a sigh from her. He squeezed her shoulder. "Disappointed?"

She laughed in response.

Keeping his arm around her, he sat in the corner of the sofa. When she scooted away a few inches and shifted to face him, he looked amused. In spite of what he'd said and done earlier, she still felt certain he intended to seduce her.

"We might as well make our plans for the week."

"I get to offer an opinion? With your cavalier manner. I figured all decisions for this week rested with you."

"All of them?" he drawled.

"Maybe not all."

He laughed softly. "When the storm is over, I'll take you to Santiago. By the middle of the week, if things still look promising, I'll call the boys. They'll fly home to meet you."

Startled, she frowned. "Aren't they too far away?"

"No, and we can afford it."

"You know, I feel as though any minute now, I'll wake up in Iowa and find I've been dreaming. When this week's up, I'll pack my bags and go home." She tilted her head and said solemnly, "I won't marry someone I've known only a week. I'm not impulsive."

He smiled and tightened his arm to pull her closer. "By the time this week is over, your answer to my proposal won't be impulsive."

"You're a sheep rancher; you live in your parents' house and the home of your grandparents before them. You married young, and you've raised three sons. You don't sound like the impulsive type either."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're right."

She studied him. He looked so commanding and self-sufficient, yet the vulnerable note in his voice was easy to detect. "If you're so wealthy, why don't you leave, hire someone to run the ranch, or turn it over to those sons? Take a cruise, visit where there are lots of people. The world is full of women who'd find you attractive."

"You don't?"

"Fishing for compliments again?" she teased. "You know I do, but that doesn't mean I'll marry you. Have you tried a cruise?"

"This is a big ranch, and it needs someone to run it. Clint could, but his inclinations lie toward bookkeeping and math. In time Renner will help me. He's majoring in agriculture, and I think Dylan will major in agriculture and work with me someday, but right now, none of them can run thisplace. I've never been away long at one time. I love it here."

For a moment she forgot the conflict between them. "I like Chile too. That's why I've come back each year. It's harsh and rugged, but at the same time it's beautiful and quiet. Out on the mountains, the air is so clear, you can see for miles."

"Have you been to Torres de Paine?"

"Towers of Paine National Park? No, in all my visits, I haven't seen it."

"As soon as we return from Santiago, we'll take tents and packs and visit the park. How's that?"

She laughed. "Do I actually get a choice?"

He smiled. "This time you do."

"It sounds fine." She stared at him. "This won't ever work."

"Never know until you try."

"You know your boys won't like me. They won't understand anything like this. I don't either."

"Anyone who can charm a two-hundred-pound guanaco, can please my sons."

"It's too sudden."

"Clint's the only one who might be difficult." While he talked, Reece stretched his arm across the back of the sofa and reached up to wind his fingers through her hair. "He's strong-willed."

"It runs in the family!"

"Don't worry about the boys. They'll come around eventually."

Aware of the light touch of his fingers as they drifted lower to the back of her neck, she asked, "Where did you meet your wife?"

Meredith - Her grandparents were Welsh immigrants to; There are large settlements of English and Welsh sheep ranchers in both southern Chile and Argentina Her father is an attorney in Santiago, and she grew up in the city, but her grand-

parents had the adjoining ranch, and I met her when we were young."

"Your loneliness might keep you from thinking clearly about your proposal." She felt a tingle from . -the gentle caress of his fingers against her nape.

"I know what I want," he replied firmly.

She studied him, deciding he looked like a man who *always* knew what he wanted and set out to get it just as directly as he had tonight. "You're a very positive person. So am I. I'm accustomed to making all my decisions and doing as I please."

"I think you'll hold your own, Lily. You got your way this morning. You kept me from shooting a guanaco."

"I hope I don't have to resort to using a pistol to get my way again!"

"You have some other weapons that are far more likely to destroy any arguments I might have." He grinned wickedly.

She shook her head solemnly. "I've been married, but Bill was the only man in my life. I mean that literally. He lived across the street, and I knew him since I was a toddler. He was one year older than I. He's the only man I've ever loved, and I don't take sex lightly. I can't use it as a weapon—"

"I was teasing you!"

"You're doing more than verbally teasing," she said firmly and reached up to shift his hand away from her neck. "You run this ranch and everything about it, I imagine. We're both so strong-minded, Reece, it's inevitable we'll clash."

The fire crackled as a log split and fell. A gust of wind whistled outside, but her attention was on Reece.

"Maybe that's one reason I was attracted in the first place. I'd never be happy with a woman who couldn't make her own decisions, who didn't have spunk." His fingers drew circles lightly on her knee, starting again the subtle attack. "This morning, out there on the slope when you shot that pistol, I was sure it was a man. I didn't know why anyone would shoot at me, so I lay on the ground until you reached me. When I tackled you and started to hit you, you didn't flinch or scream. Facing me the way you did took nerve. I need a woman like you." He looked down at her, his gaze slowly taking in each feature, resting a moment on her thin nose, her wide gray eyes and high cheekbones.

Her emotions turbulent, Lily glanced at the windows and saw the flickering drops of rain run down the glass. "You were right about the storm. I'm glad I'm not out there in my tent."

"Have you always come alone to Chile?"

"No, the first two years I didn't. There's a program called earth study in which you can sign up to accompany a scientist. I came with a biologist who was a friend of Bill's. They had exchanged notes on guanacos. Another professor from Bill's college came with us, and the three of us spent two months observing guanacos. This year I couldn't fit my schedule to the earth study program, so I decided to come alone."

"You weren't afraid?"

"No. it's peaceful here."

"Oh. yes, you have your trusty pistol."

"You won't let me forget that, will you?"

"Not until my head quits aching or you get a more reasonable attitude about guns."

She laughed. "With your proposed, you're a fine one to talk about reasonable attitudes!"

"We'll see what this week brings." He grinned.

Lily looked at the length of him, the black boots, the tight jeans over his narrow hips. He had the fit body of a person accustomed to hard, outdoor work. She knew what power lay in his muscled arms and broad shoulders. His mouth quirked in a smile, and she remarked, "You look as satisfied as General Jackson."

"I am. I think I made a good decision today."

"Nothing daunts that confidence of yours, does it?" She reached down and grasped his fingers to move his hand away from her knee. "You're at it again. I get up early, so I'll tell you good night now."

In a fluid movement he was on his feet as quickly as she was. His arm slipped around her waist. "That's good news."

She tried to remove his hand as she asked, "What's good news?"

"That you get up early in the morning. I do too. We'll go to bed early."

"We'll do no such thing!"

He laughed. "I meant after we're married. I wasn't talking about tonight unless you've changed your mind."

"I haven't, and I won't. Under duress I gave my consent to stay."

"Duress! Your description of my lovemaking has gone from 'fairly nice' to 'duress.' I've been alone too long." His dancing blue eyes denied his statement, and his arm tightened around her waist. "I'm losing my touch."

"Far from it!" she exclaimed. "I can't imagine how I let you talk me into this!"

"I'll remind you how."

She opened her mouth to protest, but his lips silenced anything she was about to say. His arms tightened around her, and he crushed her to him.

The scorching reaction she felt was deeper than before, and she knew what a perilous situation she faced. Not only did she have to combat his insistent demands, but also she had to struggle against her own tempestuous desire. All her care-ful planning was threatened. She saw the folly in throwing over everything just because a man had aroused passion. But how difficult it was to fight his caresses! While one strong arm held her, his other hand slipped over her hip, following the curves of her trim waist, moving beneath her sweater to touch her breast with a feathery caress that brought a gasp of pleasure.

Reason told her that it was only a matter of minutes before he'd carry her off to bed if she didn't make him stop. She whispered, "Reece, don't go so fast. I have to know what I'm doing."

He straightened and looked at her. His chest heaved as he silently gazed at her. Trying to control her conflicting emotions, she said, "It's been a long day. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, honey."

His velvet tone was as enticing as a caress. She started out of the room, then remembered General Jackson and turned around. "I'll put the cat out."

"He's here in the chair."

They both looked at the empty chair. Reece frowned. "What the hell do I do now, start calling, 'Here, General Jackson?' How'd you call him?"

She laughed. "I didn't. I couldn't get rid of him."

Reece swore under his breath as he waved his hand toward the hall. "Go to bed while I look for him."

"I'll help. I don't know if he'll answer to 'kitty.' " She walked into the kitchen while Reece stepped into his greenhouse. A string of oaths indicated Reece had found him. He appeared carrying the at "That damn cat smashed a dozen tiny orchids!"

"I'm sorry. He'll have to stay outside. My cats have better manners than to sleep on someone's orchids."

She followed him to the door as he dropped General Jackson outside. With injured dignity, the cat meowed loudly, sat down, and looked up at Reece. Ignoring the cat, Reece called, "Tiger!"

The rain had stopped, and everything was hushed. Somewhere nearby water dripped off the roof with a steady plop. After a moment Reece closed the door, and Lily smiled.

She said softly, "You see, there's another impossibility. I love cats and keep three in the house." Before he could argue, she added, "Good night." She left, returning to the small bedroom where she hastily got ready for bed and climbed under the covers. While she lay in bed, she gazed into the darkness and thought about Reece. She sympathized because he was lonely. If nothing else, he could come to Des Moines to visit, and she would introduce him to some likely prospects for marriage. The more she thought about it, the better she liked the idea. She decided to suggest it to him in the morning. Even though she was satisfied with her possible solution, it remained difficult to forget his stormy kisses, the wild feelings he evoked so easily. Finally, she fell into a restless sleep.

When Lily opened her eyes, it was dark outside. For an instant she lay disoriented, staring at the unfamiliar room. With a rush she remembered the night before. She glanced at her digital watch, which lay on the bedside table, and saw it was five minutes before four o'clock.

Lily threw aside the covers, pulled on jeans and a sweater, and started her morning exercises. Following her usual routine, counting with each jump, she was halfway through the hour she always allowed when she heard a rap on the door. Reece called her name softly. "Lily, are you all right?"

Panting for breath, she opened the door and faced him.

Bare-chested and barefoot, dressed only in jeans, his curls tousled from sleep, he asked, "What's the noise in your room?"

She smiled. "I'm exercising. I'm sorry if I woke you, but I thought you were an early riser."

"You didn't wake me, I was going to the kitchen. It's only a little after four o'clock!"

"I'll wait if it disturbs you."

"How often do you get up at four?"

"Nearly every morning of the year."

"You ought to channel all that energy to a better use," he said sardonically. "Go on exercising. I have some things to do. I'll take care of them, cook breakfast about seven, then we'll eat and leave for Santiago. How's that?"

"Fine," she replied and returned to her exercises as he strolled down the hall.

By six-thirty she had ham, eggs, biscuits, and hot coffee ready. She leaned over the sink to look out the window. Only a few minutes earlier, she'd - seen Reece ride past the house toward the barn. Sitting straight and tall in the saddle, he rode with ease. Now, there wasn't any sign of him, but she remained on tiptoe, gazing at the magnificent view. When she looked outside, she understood even better why he loved his home so much. The rain was gone, leaving a clear blue sky. On the mountain peaks to the south, white patches of snow sparkled. At the foot of the mountains, the large lake reflected the sky, its surface smooth and blue, while spilling into it was the glacier, dazzling in the morning sunshine. She heard a footfall behind her and strong arms closed around her waist.

Chapter Five

She whirled to look up at Reece's smiling face. He leaned down to kiss her cheek lightly. "Good morning."

"I didn't hear you come in!"

"I came in the other end of the house. Looks as if you saved me the trouble of cooking breakfast." Grinning wickedly, he added, "Or were you anxious to prove your culinary abilities?"

He silenced her protest with a brief kiss before he straightened and released her. Pushing up the sleeves of his dark brown sweater, he said, "I smell something delicious, and I'm not about to let it get cold."

She couldn't resist teasing and asked in a sultry voice, "So, my kisses come second to scrambled eggs!" He turned so quickly it startled her as he slipped his arm around her waist again. "To hell with the eggs if you'll let me kiss you until I want to stop!"

His voice was light, but she sensed a current of seriousness in it.

"Let's eat!" She slipped away from him and poured coffee into white china cups. "Remind me not to tease you any more."

"Lily!"

She paused in surprise at the grave tone in his voice.

"That damn General Jackson has made a jellyfish out of my dangerous, tough sheepdog."

Expecting something entirely different from his announcement, she was so startled for an instant that she didn't say a word. Suddenly laughter bubbled up and made him scowl.

"That dog isn't afraid of predators, foxes, our bull, men, not one damned thing except that one-eyed animal you call a cat!"

"I'm sorry, Reece. He didn't hurt your dog, did he?" She tried to suppress her laughter.

Reece started to speak and clamped his mouth closed. In a few seconds he drew a deep breath and said, "Tiger won't come around the house if that cat is here. He's staying down at the barn."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"I just don't understand it. How could that big sheepdog be scared of that rascally old cat?"

"Does that mean you won't keep the cat?"

Thoughtful blue eyes rested on her, and a slow smile appeared. "If I have to keep him to get you, he can chase away every dog on the place."

"Maybe they'll get to be friends. I'll see what I can do."

"You do that. I usually introduce Tiger to strangers so he won't bite them, but I suspect it won't be necessary this time," he said dryly. "Now, Lily, quit laughing about your cat."

She turned her back quickly. "I'll try."

Halfway through breakfast she broached the subject of introducing him to some of her single friends. His blue eyes rested on her, and he listened quietly while she said, "You could take a few days, come to Des Moines and visit me. I can think of at least six acquaintances or friends who want to get married and are delightful, attractive women."

He lowered his cup of coffee. "That's nice, but it won't be necessary."

"Give it some thought."

"I'll do that."

She wondered if he meant it. Mentally she went through a list of likely friends. "One of my friends who's divorced owns an employment agency. She's lovely, intelligent, and lonely. She wants to marry again badly."

While he buttered a biscuit, he asked, "Why hasn't she? Surely in a city like Des Moines she can meet eligible men."

"She can't find a man who is her match intellectually."

His blue eyes met hers, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a mocking grin. "Thank you. I'm glad you think I might be equal to such a challenge."

"The men she dates all want to go to bed with her. They're not interested in her mental ability."

"I'll try and keep that in mind if I ever meet her."

She paused as she started to take a sip of hot black coffee. "Seriously, give it thought. You could take a few days and come to Iowa."

He smiled. "If you're finished, well leave for Santiago."

She knew he wasn't interested in her suggestion, but she'd go over it again. She rose and picked up her dishes.

Immediately he said, "Just leave those. We need to go, and Maria will be here any minute now. She does the cleaning."

Lily set her dishes on the counter and asked, "What will we do in Santiago? I only brought my jeans and one skirt, so I don't have any fancy clothes. I don't have a dress."

"Wear your skirt. It'll be fine. We'll go to my in-laws' home so you can meet Dylan and his grandparents. I think you'll like them. I'll take them to dinner with us tonight."

She returned to her room to bathe and dress. When she was ready, she paused to study her reflection. Her blue woolen skirt, white long-sleeved

blouse beneath the white sweater, and low-heeled navy pumps were plain. She leaned forward to look closely at her gray eyes and the faint touch of blush on her cheeks. Gathering her purse and a small bag, she headed for the living room.

When she entered, Reece's warm gaze assessed her. She drew a sharp breath because he looked so handsome! The coat of his western-cut charcoal gray suit fit smoothly across his broad shoulders, nipped in at his waist, and rested lightly on his narrow hips. His white shirt and gold cuff-links added to his urbane appearance. One look at his attire and she said, "This is all I have to wear except jeans."

He strolled toward her and drawled, "You'd look nicer without that sweater."

Startled at his suggestion, she glanced down. "You think so?"

He reached her and placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Yes, and without your blouse, without your skirt—"

"Reece!" she laughed and stopped him.

He smiled. "If you have to wear clothes, those look fine."

For a moment she thought he would kiss her.

Instead, he took the bag from her hands, held her elbow lightly, and moved toward the door. "I won't lock up. Maria should be here any minute. She has seven children, and probably one of them has made her late." He helped her into the jeep and 'Climbed in to drive to the small airstrip behind the barns.

Shortly they were airborne, flying above the craggy snow-covered peaks of the *cordillera*.

Lily gazed at the land below, fascinated at the aerial view of volcanic craters, deep blue and brilliant emerald lakes surrounded by dark green forests, snowy peaks, and an occasional waterfall with bright rainbows in

the fine spume. When she spotted a spectacular one, Lily exclaimed, "Look at the rainbow!"

Reece glanced at her and asked casually, "Why aren't you lying on the beach at Valparaiso or Acapulco?"

She turned in the seat to meet intense blue eyes. She hadn't given it a thought before. "That wouldn't be fun; it would be too easy."

"So you like a challenge. I'll file that away to remember."

She added quickly, "Not people. I don't need a challenge to interest me, Reece."

"What does interest you? I don't mean guanacos. Surely you go out with some man at home."

"No, I told you that last night. I wouldn't be here with you now, if you hadn't had an advantage and been so determined."

She met another assessment of unfathomable blue eyes. "Determined. That's a nice way of saying it. I am determined' where you're concerned," he said, and his voice dropped. "Right down to my boots."

Why did such remarks always cause reactions in her? That statement brought a tingle racing up her neck behind her ears as thoroughly as his warm fingers would have. She drew a quick breath and looked out the window again. "The scenery is safer than this conversation."

She expected him to persist, but he was quiet, and her attention shifted to the land below. Gradually the terrain changed, and they reached the fertile valley nearing Santiago. Lily looked down on greening wheat fields, groves of eucalyptus trees, grazing cattle, and winding rivers that snaked across the countryside.

When they landed in the busy airport at Pudahuel, Reece took a taxi, and they rode eighteen miles to the city. Poplars lined the road, casting cool

shadows across the paving. To the east of the city rose the majestic snow-capped Andes.

She thought of her first glimpse of the city when the LAN Chile jet had banked and circled to land. Inhabited by more than three million people, Santiago sprawled in all directions, with San Cristobal hill, a dark mound, rising dramatically in the midst of houses and buildings. She had visited enough South American cities to know that Santiago with its large middle-class population and universities was more cosmopolitan than most.

Lily settled in the car seat as they wound through heavy traffic to the sprawling, beautiful Sheraton San Cristobal hotel, where Reece registered for separate rooms and rented a Peugeot. They returned to the car, and as they drove through the city, Lily gazed at the heavy stone buildings and Gothic architecture. "This always makes me think of Germany. I haven't been there, but this resembles pictures I've seen of German cities."

"Santiago is different from other South American cities. It has a highly European flavor because so many Europeans settled here. There's far less Spanish influence."

Lily watched an ancient Mercedes whip past, followed by another Peugeot. "Even the cars you see here, add to that European feeling."

They drove along Avenida Bernardo O'Higgins, which Lily knew was referred to by *santiaguenos* as the Alameda. As she gazed at the divided street with islands of green trees and grass in the center, she said, "This is the most beautiful city I've ever seen."

He laughed. "Too bad I don't live here. I might not have such a battle getting you to marry me."

"I'm not marrying so I can live in a pretty city," she remarked dryly.

"Why *would* you marry?"

Startled, she answered quickly, "For love. Why else?"

"What is love?"

"Reece!"

"No, I mean it. I want to know what you think love means."

"For one thing, it means ..." She felt as if she were about to step into a trap. "You know as well as I do what it means." His conversation had taken a disturbing turn, and she was determined to end it. She looked out the window and remarked, "It always surprises me to see names like O'Higgins and Mackenna on major streets."

"Bernardo O'Higgins was a patriot who helped liberate Chile."

"I know. He led a revolt against Spain in the early eighteenth century."

"In spite of O'Higgins's efforts, Chile didn't gain independence from Spain until Jose de San Martin, a general from Argentina, defeated the Spanish in 1818. This country is settled largely by immigrants from the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain."

They passed the Plaza de Armas and the monument, Liberty of America. Reece explained it was a statue of Pedro de Valdivia, the Spanish soldier who founded Santiago in 1541.

Reece turned a corner and asked, "Have you ever been in an earthquake?"

"No, thank goodness!"

"This is earthquake country. Santiago has a long history of them."

They headed east into a suburban area in the foothills of the Andes. The first inkling Lily had that her visions of a sweet couple in a lovely little home might be incorrect came as Reece turned into a residential area of elegant mansions and well-tended gardens. As he slowed, he said, "This section is called *barrio alto*. We're almost there."

He turned the car through open wrought-iron gates, passing between rock walls to follow a curving drive to the entrance of a two-story gray stone house with a high, peaked roof. Reece held the door while she stepped out and walked with him up broad steps of smooth stone.

At a massive, carved door Reece lifted a heavy brass knocker, and a butler opened the door to greet him. Reece introduced Lily to the servant. As she nodded, a cheerful voice sounded.

A woman dressed in gray wool entered the wide hall and crossed to them. "Reece! How good it is to see you. I started to call this morning." Tall, with gray hair, which she wore pulled back in an elegant bun, she leaned forward while Reece kissed her cheek. Lily caught a whiff of a sweet fragrance. Dark brown eyes rested with open curiosity on Lily.

"Lily, this is Meredith's mother, Elise Hale."

"I hear someone familiar," a voice boomed from the end of the long, marbled hall. Wearing a white shirt and black slacks, a man fully as tall as Reece appeared and joined them to shake hands and clasp Reece on the shoulder as his dark eyes rested on Lily with as much curiosity as his wife had shown.

"Lily, this is Charles Hale." Reece held Lily's elbow lightly. "I'd like you two to meet Mrs. Lily Dunbar."

"Welcome to our house, Mrs. Dunbar," Charles said pleasantly.

"Oh, please call me Lily."

"Let's go in the salon and sit down," Elise said. "I'll have Carlotta bring hot tea and coffee." She placed her long fingers on Reece's arm. "I started to call you. Dylan's ill."

"What's wrong?" Reece frowned.

"The doctor sent him to bed because he's running a fever. It's a virus, and Dr. Bueno said he should be better tomorrow."

"I wanted to take the three of you to dinner with us tonight."

Elise smiled and patted his arm. "Thank you, Reece. We couldn't anyway. I'm having a dinner party, and both of you can just stay for it."

Reece laughed. "I know your dinner parties. They're planned down to the last ice cube. Thanks, Elise, but we'll go out to dinner. We won't crash your party."

Both Charles and Elise protested, but Reece shook his head. "No, not this time, but thank you." He glanced past her at the broad, curving staircase. "I'll speak to Dylan. I'd like him to meet Lily. If you don't mind, we'll see him first and then be down for coffee."

"Of course, that's fine," Elise said promptly.

Reece took Lily's arm and headed for the sweeping staircase. She said, "Your son may not feel like meeting someone right now."

"I'll find out."

They reached the upstairs hall with its potted palms, marble statuary, and oil paintings. After passing several open doors, Reece motioned to a small blue velvet chair. "If you'll wait, I'll see Dylan alone for a moment."

She nodded and sat down, watching Reese turn the knob and quietly enter a room.

While she sat in the deserted hall, she gazed at the elegant furnishings and wondered what kind of woman Meredith Hale had been. Her ranch home with Reece, with its simple, masculine decor, was so different from the opulence of her parents' home. Lily looked at a beautiful oil painting at the end of the hall, and it occurred to her that Meredith must have loved Reece deeply to give up such a home and life in Santiago to stay on the remote ranch in that fierce area of southern Chile.

At that moment Reece thrust his head into the hall and motioned to her. She rose, and as she stepped to the door, he took her arm. The drapes were

pulled, and she entered a dusky bedroom decorated in tones of green. Propped on pillows in bed was a boy who, at first glance, bore no resemblance to his father. Lily looked at Dylan's shock of sandy hair, brown eyes, and rather broad face' and wondered if Dylan strongly resembled Meredith.

Dylan's large dark eyes followed her progress toward his bedside. "Lily," Reece said, "this is my son Dylan. Dylan, I want you to meet Mrs. Dunbar."

"I'm glad to meet you, Dylan," Lily said. "I'm sorry you're sick."

He studied her solemnly and spoke in a raspy voice, "It's not bad."

"Only a high temperature and sore throat and aching muscles," Reece said. "Other than that, you're fine. I wanted you to go out to dinner with us tonight."

Dylan gazed so intently at Lily that suddenly she wondered what Reece had told him before she had come into the room. Dylan said, "I'd like to, Dad." His gaze shifted to Lily. "Dad said you're from the United States."

"That's right. I'm from Des Moines, Iowa."

"I haven't been to Iowa." Dylan's eyelids drooped, and Lily guessed he was struggling to keep from falling asleep while talking to them. Reece squeezed his son's shoulder. "Go to sleep. I'll come back next week and take everyone to dinner."

Dylan gazed up sleepily. "It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you, Dylan. I'm glad to meet you, and I hope you feel better soon."

When she finished, Dylan closed his eyes, and she was certain he was asleep. He looked so vulnerable, she thought, with smooth tan skin and a faint flush in his cheeks.

"He's sound asleep," Reece whispered. "We'll go downstairs for coffee."

As they descended the steps, the doorbell chimed, and the butler opened it. A stunning blond in a red linen dress swept into the hall, her glance going straight to Reece.

"Reece, darling! Elise didn't tell me—" Her gaze shifted to Lily, and she paused.

"Elise didn't know we were coming. Althea, this is Lily Dunbar. Lily, meet Althea Bocaja."

"How do you do," Lily said. She was aware of a narrowing of Althea Bocaja's brows and an intense scrutiny. In turn, she felt a shock. Althea Bocaja was extremely attractive, and her greeting of "darling" rang in Lily's ears.

She knew that some people used the word indiscriminately, and Althea Bocaja could have a husband and mean nothing by the endearment. She tried to pay attention to what Althea was saying.

"... so I came to ask Elise about it before the party tonight."

"Come join us for coffee. Elise and Charles are waiting." Reece fell into step between Lily and Althea, and they entered a spacious room filled with antiques and beautiful mahogany furniture. Charles Hale rose to his feet as they entered, and Elise greeted Althea, who sat down near her.

A silver tray with a pot of hot tea, another pot of coffee, and white china cups and saucers rested on a table in front of Elise, who poured. Looking over the coffee cups, Elise asked, "Are you from Santiago, Lily?"

"No, Des Moines, Iowa, is my home." Lily was aware of everyone's close attention.

"What part of the United States?" Elise asked.

"The Midwest," Lily answered.

"Such a long flight," Elise murmured.

Charles laughed, explaining, "I can't get Elise to fly anywhere."

She glanced at Reece and shivered. "How you can fly everywhere is more than I can comprehend! Between here and your ranch all those terrible mountains are right below."

"I could fly over the Pacific instead," he remarked dryly, and everyone laughed at Elise's horrified look. She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know which would be worse!"

The conversation changed, and Lily sat, listening quietly. When Althea reached for a cup of steaming coffee, Lily noticed the large diamond rings on her fingers, but within a few minutes Althea mentioned someone named Raoul and added "Welsh and Spanish, a deadly combination. No wonder I'm divorced!" She looked at Reece. "You were so wise to marry someone with your same heritage. I will never understand these hot- blooded Chileans!" She laughed. "I should have listened to Mum and gone to school in England, but I didn't want to leave Santiago. Seems ridiculous now."

Elise shrugged. "I don't know. I feel that way about Santiago too." She glanced at Lily and asked, "Have you seen much of our city?"

"Not really, but what I've seen is beautiful."

"I quite agree," Althea said. "I don't know how Reece can stay away from it so long." As the conversation shifted, covering the merits of the city, politics, and Charles's questions about Reece's flocks, it became plain that Althea Bocaja was single and interested in Reece. Each statement was directed to him. She sat facing him and sent continual glances in his direction.

The low jingle of a phone momentarily interrupted conversation. Reaching to the table beside her, Elise lifted the receiver. While Althea resumed talking, Elise spoke softly, not interfering with Althea's mild argument to Reece over the tastiest fish, trout or mackerel.

Even though her voice was low, Elise's words carried clearly as she said, "Caroline, Reece just arrived ..."

Althea glanced at her hostess and became quiet, and it was impossible to avoid hearing the next statement. Elise added quickly, "We're visiting with Althea. Reece brought a guest with him ..."

Charles's voice drowned out the rest of her sentence when he asked, "Reece, are you bringing any of your horses to Santiago for the races?"

"We'll have two, Sinbad and El Sol."

The conversation picked up again, overriding Elise's voice until she hung up, turned, and faced Reece. "That was Caroline. She said she'd drop by and say hello shortly."

He replied easily, "Fine." Turning to Charles, he continued, "I thought El Sol's leg might prevent him from racing, but he's in good condition."

While Reece talked, Lily noticed Althea's narrowing of brows when hearing about Caroline's visit. She thought of his remark, ". . . no one under sixty-four years, and I prefer someone younger . . ." Althea looked in her late twenties and was obviously interested in Reece. Too puzzled to keep her thoughts on the conversation, for a moment Lily dwelt on Reece's proposal. He couldn't be as desperate as he sounded, yet why would he say so? Why would he propose to her when they were almost total strangers? She looked into his blue eyes and felt her breath catch.

He still chatted about his horses, but his eyes sent another message that was as clear to Lily as spoken words. The smoldering hunger in their blue depths was unmistakable. She wanted to glance around, to see if anyone else noticed, but she was held, her gaze magnetized by his. Making an effort, she forced her attention elsewhere, anywhere away from him.

She looked at Elise and received another mild shock. Elise shifted her attention immediately to the coffee pot, but Lily knew she had caught the exchange.

Lily felt embarrassed and angry. She knew how Reece felt as well as if he had told her, his blue eyes did the talking blatantly. His gaze drifted to her lips, lowered farther, and it was like a caress. A wave of heat fanned through

her, and without thinking, she crossed her long, slender legs, sliding one smooth stockinged knee over the other.

He smiled as he watched her and raised his eyes to meet hers again.

In spite of wanting to ignore him, wanting him to stop, Lily felt alive with awareness of him. Her skin had nerve ends that responded to his glance, a whisper of a tingle that he could arouse effortlessly.

She looked at him intently, hoping her eyes could convey her wishes.

His mouth crooked in a lazy, sensuous smile that teased her. Determined to ignore him, she turned to Elise Hale. "This is such a lovely home."

"Thank you. We've enjoyed it. Before you go, get Reece to show you around." She looked at Reece. "Did Dylan still feel feverish?"

"Yes. His face is flushed, and he was hot. He met Lily and then promptly fell asleep."

Althea looked intently at Lily and asked, "Is Mr. Dunbar traveling with you?"

"No, I'm widowed." Irresistibly, her gaze shifted and met Reece's wicked blue eyes. He winked, and she couldn't resist smiling. To her relief Althea rose, and his attention shifted. After telling Althea goodbye, Lily held back as the other three saw Althea to the door.

When Reece returned ahead of the Hales, Lily had a moment of privacy with him. "You really are incorrigible!" she whispered. "Will you stop? You're embarrassing me."

His eyes were mocking. "You didn't look embarrassed. You looked as if you would have enjoyed doing what I was thinking about!"

She couldn't answer as Charles and Elise reappeared. They sat down and chatted another fifteen or twenty minutes before the butler appeared to announce Caroline Wicksham. Both men rose to their feet as a beautiful

young woman dressed in clinging green silk entered the room. Her dark brown eyes went straight to Reece. She crossed the room and kissed his cheek.

"The prodigal returns. Just in time for a party!"

He laughed and took her arm to turn her around. "Caroline, meet Lily Dunbar. Lily, this is Caroline Wicksham. She loves a party almost as much as Elise does."

Caroline was even less subtle than Althea. Her dark eyes widened in surprise, and her cheeks flushed. Lily's curiosity and anger increased. Why had Reece played on her sympathy and said he was lonesome for female companionship? It looked as if he could find all he wanted in Santiago.

As Caroline nodded in greeting, she glanced at Reece. "Elise told me that you'd brought a guest, but that's all she said." She turned to Lily again. "Did we meet at the Tagles' party?"

Lily smiled. "No, I've been here only a short time. I'm from the States."

"The United States!" Caroline exclaimed. "How did you meet Reece?"

Lily glanced at him and saw the dancing laughter in his eyes. "I'm in Chile to study guanacos, and I encountered Reece on his ranch."

"Encountered!" He laughed aloud. "She made a nice part in my hair with her Smith and Wesson!"

Lily met the surprised stares of the others. "As you can see, his hard head survived the blow," she answered coolly and received a chuckle from Reece and Charles. Caroline looked at Reece. "Perhaps I chose a poor time to drop by. I'm interrupting your visit."

"Not at all, Caroline," Reece said. "We're going, and you and Elise can talk about what you'll wear tonight,"

Immediately Charles and Elise protested, but Reece took Lily's arm and steered her toward the door while he politely but firmly refused their entreaties to stay for the evening.

Elise raised her cheek for Reece's kiss, then took Lily's hand. "Do come again and stay longer."

The invitation sounded sincere. Lily realized Elise was scrutinizing her intently. Feminine intuition told her that Elise realized the extent of Reece's interest in her. As she thanked her politely, she suspected, too, that Elise would prefer someone from her own class for him.

As Reece drove away from the house, Lily shifted in the car seat, struggling to retain her composure as indignation shook her.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking grin. "I can see the fire flashing in those big gray eyes now. I'm glad your revolver is safely tucked away at the ranch."

"You poor man—you don't know any females. They appeared like flies around sugar! To think I lay awake worrying about your dilemma and asked you to Iowa to introduce you to some eligible women!"

His laughter died abruptly, and he shot her a thoughtful look. "You lay awake worrying about me?"

"Yes! And for no reason ..."

With a sudden twist he whipped the car to the curb and cut the motor.

Chapter Six

Shade dappled the hood and windshield from leafy branches, which extended over the street. With the motor silent, the only sound remaining was the chirp of birds and a faint ping from the cooling car engine. "I can't discuss this while I drive," Reece said in a husky voice. "I told you, I haven't met anyone suitable."

She felt puzzled and angry. "How could I be more suitable than either of those two! They're both beautiful, far more attractive than I am. They're younger, I'm sure. They have the same background as you—"

He reached out to trail his fingertip along her jaw. "I don't care about anyone younger. I'm six years older than you, that's enough!" His fingers drifted across her cheek, lightly brushing the corner of her mouth to stir exquisite tingles. "You're no judge of your attractiveness—or its effect on me. Good lord, Lily, you're beautiful."

A rush of pleasure went through her, mingling with an amused certainty that under no circumstances would she be considered as beautiful as Caroline Wicksham or Althea. Along with those feelings, there still remained aggravation that Reece had misled her about the true situation concerning his female acquaintances.

"This doesn't make sense. If you were in love with me, I can see how you might feel that way, but you proposed so quickly. Why not Caroline Wicksham?"

A patient note entered his voice. "In the first place, neither Caroline nor Althea, nor any other female I know, would last two months on the ranch."

"Either one of them looked as if they'd do anything you asked!"

His blue eyes flashed. "Maybe that's why they don't appeal to me."

Her consternation increased. "If I fell in love with you, I might be willing to do anything you want."

Giving her a mocking grin, he said, "I'd be willing to stake my whole ranch that won't happen!"

She couldn't keep from smiling. "So you want a stubborn wife."

"No. I just want someone who has a mind of her own and will use it. Those two wouldn't live on the ranch; if they happened to surprise me and stick it out longer than two months, I'd be ready to head for the hills. Can you imagine either of them on their own, studying guanacos? They're not my type," he said flatly.

"Well, you don't know that I am!" she snapped.

"I know enough," he said with maddening calm.

"You surely didn't propose because I can camp out alone, did you?"

He leaned forward to trail his fingers across her shoulder. "No, but I find that a definite plus."

She threw up her hands. "I can pitch a tent—so you want to marry me!"

His laughter faded as he continued, "I'm sorry if I made you angry, but I was telling you the truth."

"Oh, sure! You haven't met anyone suitable under sixty-four ..."

"That's right. Adele Ciamar is a friend of Elise's. She's sixty-four, amusing, attractive, intelligent, but I want a younger wife. After two hours with Althea or Caroline, I'm bored."

"Are you always this single-minded?"

"Only when it's necessary."

Lily couldn't stay angry after his remarks. She waved her hand at him. "All right, I'll take your word for it."

"Good." He shifted behind the wheel again, but before he started the motor he asked, "Shall I change our hotel reservations from two rooms to one?"

"No!"

He chuckled. "It didn't hurt to ask."

"You're so direct!"

"When I know what I want, I am."

"Which must be all the time."

He put the car in gear, and she settled back to look at tall linden trees, which flanked the wide boulevard.

They ate lunch at the restaurant in the hotel, then went to their rooms. To Lily's chagrin, as she gazed about an elegantly furnished room with floor-to-ceiling white drapes, a thick blue carpet and white French Provincial furniture, she noticed an adjoining door to Reece's room. Then her eyes were drawn to a large glass coffee table which sat in front of an oversized pale blue sofa. A vase of two dozen red and white carnations dominated the table. A white card was tucked into the flowers. Opening the small envelope, she pulled out a card to read a bold scrawl. "Thanks for the week. Love, Reece." She felt half flattered, half angered. She was happy to receive the flowers, but the elegant hotel room disturbed her.

When a light rap sounded, she turned to call, "Come in."

With his tie in hand and his coat flung carelessly over his shoulder, Reece entered to stroll across the room toward her, dropping his coat and tie on the first chair he passed. The top button of his shirt was unfastened, and his collar was starkly white against his dark skin. The gray slacks fit his trim hips perfectly, and she felt a sudden catch inside that made her realize just how dramatic was the impact of the mere sight of him.

Trying to ignore her racing pulse, she said, "With that connecting door, we might as well have one room."

"Want me to change the reservation?"

"No! What I'm trying to tell you is that I'm not too happy about this arrangement."

He reached her and slipped his arms around her waist. His voice dropped to a husky note. "It shouldn't matter any more than staying down the hall at my home. All you have to do is say the word, and I'll leave you alone. I don't intend to win you over with force."

"I know what your intentions are."

He kissed her temple, his lips drifting lower to her ear, setting off a shower of sparks inside.

"Thank you for the lovely flowers. Are you trying to soften me up?"

His hands tarried over her hips, while his lips nuzzled her ear. "I don't know. You feel soft enough to me."

"Oh, stop that!"

"Would you like to know something?" he whispered.

"What's that?"

"I've been waiting for hours to do this. When we sat in Elise and Charles's living room, I wanted you in my arms. I wanted to kiss you."

"You made it obvious." She felt his fingers flutter up her spine to her nape.

"I didn't do anything," he murmured.

"Those blue eyes of yours did!"

"You see how fast you're getting to know me? All you have to do is glance at me, and you know what's on my mind."

"Don't do that to me again when we're in public."

"I can't help myself. You inspire it. All your fault. Just ignore me if you don't like it." He grasped her chin and raised her face to look up at him. Her lips and her mouth tingled without a touch.

"You're at it again," she whispered. "Don't go too fast, Reece. Leave me some rational thought."

"You have too damn many rational thoughts. I'd like to drive them all out of that bright and busy brain of yours."

Slanting her eyes up at him, aware of his fingers tracing circles on her bare neck, she said, "I thought that's what you like about me, that I have a mind of my own."

"On occasions. The rest of the time I like some other things about you." Slipping both hands beneath her hair, he tilted her head upward as he leaned forward to tease her mouth. His voice was seductive. "I like your lips"—he trailed kisses along her throat— "I like your instant response, that faster heartbeat I always feel."

Her quickening pulse became a hammering in her ears. She tried to cling to sanity and reason.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she felt hard muscles beneath the smooth cotton shirt. "I think that's what scares me about you. You're so implacable. I'm afraid you'll dominate me completely."

The intensity of his studied gaze made her draw a sharp breath. He brushed curls away from her forehead, and his voice held a note of tenderness.

"Sweetheart, I know what a rough time it is going it alone. You've made a good life for yourself, filled your time with meaning and purpose. You're too much your own person for me to overshadow you. You've carried a big load on your shoulders." His voice dropped to a honeyed coaxing that sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine. "Let me carry some of that now. I want to love you, Lily, to cherish and protect you. I need you."

His words sent a thrill through her; they offered a tempting peek at a fuller life. She knew how dangerous such speculation could be, how quickly it might make her forsake caution.

His strong fingers fanned apart, sliding over her shoulders and down across her back to her narrow waist. Struggling to resist his demanding caresses, she caught his arms and said, "That's easy to say now, but when we disagree later, you'll feel differently. Either that or you'll ignore my wishes. Reece, from the first encounter, the moment I knelt to touch you, you've dominated everything. I wanted to stay in my tent, not go to your house—look at me now! I'm in a hotel room, standing in your arms!"

"Only because your good sense ruled and you promised to spend a week to see if we're compatible. "

"Good sense?"

A lazy smile drifted across his features as his gaze moved to her mouth. "Sometimes, honey, you talk too much." He leaned down to take her lips. Lily started to protest, but his mouth silenced her words.

When his lips moved from hers to her ear, she whispered, "You're at it again, using that persuasion of yours and ignoring me."

His throaty chuckle came softly to her ear as his tongue sent an enticing sizzle down her backbone. "The last thing on earth I'm doing is ignoring you." His lips shifted to her bare throat. Lily closed her eyes, losing the will to challenge him as his tongue and lips fanned warmth into a singeing blaze.

She felt his hand slip beneath the soft sweater and tug gently at the top button of her blouse. His warm fingers brushed her skin, pushing away a wisp of lace. His hand circled her breast, eliciting a gasp from her.

Rough, yet strangely gentle, his masculine, calloused hand moved slowly, teasing the tip of her breast to a ripe fullness. Summoning a supreme effort of will, Lily opened her eyes. "If you make love to me, how can I trust my judgment? You're attacking my reason."

"I'm not attacking you in the least," he whispered sensuously. "Our feelings are something special between us. "

Really? Or does it just seem that way because we're both so vulnerable?"

With an arm tightly around her waist, he straightened. "I haven't led a monk's existence since I've been alone. Trust me. You're very special," he said in such a flat tone, she couldn't doubt his sincerity. "The others—a necessity for the moment."

Tugging—the sweater out of his way, he kissed the curve between her shoulder and her throat. Effortlessly he scooped her into his arms and crossed to a soft chair where he sat down and held her. She sat on his legs, crushed against him while he tilted her back against his shoulder and leaned over her to kiss her fiercely.

Lily yielded to a searing indulgence, and for a moment she returned his kiss. When she did, his arm tightened. One hand moved, brushing her knee lightly as his fingers traveled over silken stockings, slipping higher along her slender leg to brush her thigh and stir a paroxysm of pure, hungry desire. She sat up to face him and rested her hand lightly on his shoulder. Her lips felt swollen from his kisses.

"Don't rush me, please," she whispered.

A shudder rippled through him. She felt his muscles tense. "Ahh, Lily, Lily, you want this too. You feel what I feel," he said in a low, intense voice, reaching out to caress her.

The quick intake of her breath brought a slow smile to his face. "You see," he murmured. "You *are* ready for me. We need each other to put contentment back into our lives."

"No, this is too important to get carried away by passion," she argued, while everything inside her cried out yes! "Give me a chance to consider everything with a degree of reason." Beneath the smooth cotton shirt, his shoulder felt warm.

"Lily ..." His hand tightened at her waist.

To ease the tense moment, she pushed herself up and walked away. "I can't think while I sit close to you. Shall we go to dinner? We'd better get out of here." Facing the mirror, she picked up her brush to smooth her soft, dark curls.

Black curls framed her face; her wide gray eyes shifted to his reflection, and her heart skipped a beat. He had pulled on his coat and was knotting his tie while he watched her with a devouring intentness.

"You said you'll wait. Stop looking at me that way," she muttered.

He didn't answer. Instead, his blue eyes traveled with slow thoroughness, dropping over her waist and hips, down the length of her legs. She felt as if it were his hands instead of his eyes. Every inch of skin tingled. Her mouth went dry, and her hand shook violently. She placed the hairbrush on the dresser and fumbled as she buttoned her blouse and straightened the sweater over it. When she finished she walked to the door. "I'm ready now."

"So am I," he said, but the three words held a distinctly different meaning. Smiling, he reached out to open the door and said softly, "Well do this your way for now."

His statement seemed so far from the truth that she laughed and felt some of the electric tension ease between them.

"I didn't say that to be amusing." He closed the door.

"If we'd done everything my way, I'd be sitting out in the *Cordillera* in a wet tent, waiting for the streams to go down."

He grinned. "Well do everything your way—at least during the next hour!"

"I get one out of twenty-four?"

His blue eyes twinkled. "I'd say that's a generous ratio. I'll make that sacrifice."

She laughed, but deep inside she wondered how much he was teasing, exaggerating. He was a purposeful man, accustomed to running a giant ranch and getting his way.

As they entered the elevator, she glanced at him. He was ruggedly handsome with a lithe, trim body that she suspected had changed little over the years. The elevator doors opened, and another couple entered, ending Lily's speculation about Reece.

She expected him to drive her to an elegant restaurant. Instead, when they emerged from the elevator, he took her arm. "How about walking?"

"Fine. When I'm home, I usually walk about four miles a day. When I start work, I'll walk to school."

He shook his head. "You can walk as many miles as you want at the ranch. How long will it take that school to replace you?"

She laughed. "If they'd put you in charge of getting a replacement, I'd say about an hour!"

Chuckling, he draped his arm possessively around her shoulders. As they strolled along, she gazed about her, watching the people.

The paving radiated heat from the day's sun, but the first cool shadows of evening were beginning to fall. Although cars filled the street, crowds thronging the walks had thinned since Reece and Lily's arrival at the hotel. A bus wheezed past, leaving a cloud of noxious fumes, which quickly dissipated.

Within minutes they reached a restaurant. Behind a wall of cracked, fading stucco and decorative wrought iron was a courtyard with fountains and pots of blooming flowers. Reece held open the door to allow her to enter a dimly lit hall. A waiter came forward to greet them. "*Buenos noches*, Senor Wakefield. Senorita."

"*Buenas noches*, Enrique," Reece answered, the melodic language purring from his sensual lips.

Enrique's dark eyes flashed as he smiled at Lily. "*Mesa para dos*," he said in rapid Spanish and led the way through an arched door.

When they crossed a room filled with tables, Lily realized how wrong she'd been in her guess where Reece would dine. The restaurant was sparsely and simply decorated: bare wooden floors, straight wooden chairs, dark brown tables, and baskets of bright red and yellow tulips. Yet it was so full of quaint charm that Lily felt a flash of eager anticipation for the evening ahead. For the first time in so very long, she was out with a handsome, appealing male whom she enjoyed.

The thought surprised her, making her realize that she did enjoy his company, his quick humor.

She followed Enrique through another arched door, down two steps, and outside into a small courtyard filled with pots of flowers. As they crossed smooth, worn cobblestones and skirted a splashing fountain, Lily knew why Reece liked the restaurant. Tables were widely separated, scattered around the courtyard, tucked into niches close to the surrounding rough stone walls. Most of the tables were occupied, but not all. Enrique led them to a secluded corner beside a fountain.

Reece ordered a bottle of Undurraga, a fine Chilean white wine. As soon as they were alone, he asked, "What's your favorite food, Lily?"

She smiled. "A hamburger."

He shook his head. "That's not the specialty of the house."

"I wouldn't want one in any case. I like to try Chilean dishes when I'm here."

"Good. That's what I intended."

"You order, Reece. I'll leave everything up to you." She received another penetrating glance.

"I wish you would," he answered.

Her chuckle censured him, and he shrugged one broad shoulder. "Sorry, but I can't help myself, Lily. I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve with you."

She leaned forward. "You have to stop saying things like that. Suppose I did marry you and it didn't work? Have you thought of that possibility?"

"I gave it a fleeting thought. I'm not worried."

He reached over to take her hand, spreading her fingers against his.

She looked down at their hands. Deeply tanned, his was large, dwarfing her slender one. "How can you be so sure about this? How do you know you . want me for a wife? It could be disastrous for you, Reece."

Still holding her hand, he ran his finger lightly over hers, brushing sensitive skin as he followed the contours of her fingers. The touch was light, innocuous, yet it sent tingles racing in her. His husky voice deepened her awareness of him as he replied, "You couldn't be disaster for anyone."

"I think that's one thing that scares me. You're so positive about something that you can't possibly know anything about. You proposed without knowing me at all!"

"How about giving me credit for discerning judgment or good taste?"

"I think you just need to go to bed and make love and get over your frustration!"

His white teeth flashed. "Want to cancel dinner?"

"No! That wasn't what I meant. I didn't intend to suggest we go to bed together."

The waiter returned to pour the wine and take their order. Lily wondered if he'd overheard her remark. She heard the amusement in Reece's voice as he ordered. When Enrique left, Reece asked, "Have you been to the top of San Cristobal hill?"

She shook her head. "No. I haven't spent much time sightseeing in Santiago ... or the rest of Chile for that matter."

He sipped his wine. "Valparaiso is beautiful, Vina del Mar has the casinos, and the lake district is like Switzerland. There's Portillo, the summer home for national ski teams. The ski season just ended. Do you ski?"

"No, I haven't ever tried."

"I think you'll like it."

"And you intend to teach me!"

He grinned. "I'd be delighted to teach you anything."

The waiter appeared with a soup made of *erizos*, or sea urchins, with celery, lemon, and onions. It tasted delicious. The entree, *paella*, a rice dish filled with bits of shrimp, chicken, and sausages, followed.

Finishing with a cup of black coffee, Lily declined dessert. She gazed around at the tulips and fountains, the worn cobblestones, wondering if she would eat here again or if it would be just a memory when she returned to Iowa. "What a wonderful dinner," she exclaimed.

As Reece smiled, his blue eyes radiated pleasure. "Santiago has some excellent, fancy restaurants, but this is my favorite. I discovered it about a year ago, and I eat here whenever I get the chance." He added solemnly, "One more thing we have in common."

She looked into the blue depths of his eyes, his dark lashes a shadowy fringe. The one thing they had most in common was that passionate, vibrating attraction between them. She felt it jump to life and knew he did too as his eyelids lowered a fraction.

"Are you ready to leave?"

She wondered if he intended to take her straight back to the hotel, but when they stepped outside, he took her arm to stroll until he hailed a taxi.

Chapter Seven

Darkness had descended while they were eating. Lily rode in the backseat of the taxi, sitting next to Reece. He held her hand while he pointed out sights they passed. She found it increasingly difficult to keep her attention on Santiago's buildings rather than the man at her side.

They drove to San Cristobal hill and took the cable car to the top. As they began the ascent, Reece explained that San Cristobal held Parque Metropolitano, Santiago's zoo. On a higher level was a residential area and a terraced park at the top.

When they stepped out of the funicular, over a thousand feet above Santiago, Lily gazed with awe at a large, beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary, arms outspread as though blessing the people in the city below.

Hand in hand, they strolled around Bellavista Terrace, the park at the top of the crest, and stopped to gaze below at Santiago. Lights sprinkled the darkness, twinkling, giving a touch of magic to the evening.

A breeze blew and Lily shivered. Reece glanced down at her, putting his arm around her shoulders to draw her closer, and they stood quietly in perfect communion, enjoying the view.

Finally they took the funicular down, and Reece hired a taxi to return to the hotel.

As they emerged from an elevator and strolled down the hall, Lily was certain Reece would stop in her room. Instead, he motioned toward his door with a wave of his hand. "Come have a drink. You can leave whenever you'd like."

"Fine," she answered and waited while he unlocked his door. Expecting to find a room similar to hers, she was surprised to discover that Reece had a suite of rooms. She entered an elegant sitting room, which had thick pale blue carpeting and white decor.

On the coffee table in front of the sofa sat a crystal vase with two dozen roses, their sweet scent filling the air. One soft light burned, and the drapes were open, revealing another spectacular view of the myriad lights of the city.

While Reece crossed the room to a small bar, she strolled to the window to look out. Multicolored, glittering lights twinkled in the darkness; headlights moved along the arteries of the city; neon signs flashed their brilliance—all of it dazzling in the black night.

In a few seconds the light clicked off, and she glanced over her shoulder to watch Reece approach. And the ease she had felt throughout the evening vanished as her senses became alert. Her quickened pulse leaped. She was acutely conscious of the seductive atmosphere and the ruggedly appealing man. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, he placed a chilled drink in her hand.

"Have some *aguardiente*, Chilean brandy."

She accepted the drink and said, "You forgot the soft music."

Bemused, standing only inches away, his fingers brushed her soft hair. His voice was deep, almost harsh, as he said, "I want to hear your words of love."

Her heartbeat took another violent leap. "Maybe I should go."

In mocking tones he asked, "You don't like the view?"

"It's marvelous." With an effort she turned from his compelling blue eyes to look out the window. "This is as beautiful as the view on top of San Cristobal."

"It's even better here." His voice lowered to a husky note. "We can be alone."

Lily raised the brandy to her lips and drank. The liquid changed to flame as it went down her throat. She coughed slightly and glanced at him. "I've heard about *aguardiente*, but this is the first I've tasted."

"It's a little fiery." Placing his glass on a table, Reece reached into his pocket and produced a bit of white tissue paper. "Hold out your hand."

She did as he asked and watched while he unwrapped a gold chain bracelet and fastened it around her small wrist.

The tiny golden links gleamed dully in the semidarkness. She touched it lightly with her other hand. "Reece, it's lovely!"

He frowned, his big fingers fumbling with the catch momentarily. When it was secured, he raised his head, and she was riveted by blue eyes again. "It represents my love." Each deep word was like a silky stroke. "I'll make you mine irrevocably."

A warmth, deep within, started rising, swelling and spreading through her, making her tremble. As if pulled by an unseen force, she felt like drawing closer to him. She almost threw caution aside. Dredging up her iron control, she said simply, "Thank you. It's beautiful. When did you have time to get it?"

"This afternoon after we returned from my in-laws.' "

She watched while he shrugged out of his coat and draped it on a chair. He unloosened his tie and slipped it off, and her mouth went dry. She knew she was skirting a borderline of calamity if she stayed. "I'll go now," she said. "It's been fun, Reece. More fun than I've had in a long time."

"You haven't finished your *aguardiente*."

"I'll take it with me." Before she could turn, he reached out to grasp her arms lightly.

He took the brandy from her hands, and his voice lowered. "Do you think, after an enjoyable evening like we've had, I'll let you say good night and walked out without a kiss?"

She answered breathlessly, "I didn't think you would."

He ran his hands up her arms to her shoulders, and his voice was warm. "I've had a wonderful time, Lily. You're marvelous to be with."

His words were so satisfying. "It was nice." Nice! A small inner voice mocked her. She spoke with a calm she didn't feel. "Let's get to know each other and keep passion out of the relationship for now. We've known each other for only a few hours."

"Remarkable," he said, slipping his arms around her waist to draw her to him. "It seems so much, much longer," he murmured.

Her pulse throbbed. "You're not avoiding sex!"

His voice was velvet, deep and soft. "Of course I am. We've spent the last five hours without so much as a kiss. If that isn't avoiding it, I don't know what is. Besides, it isn't just sex, it's intimacy and need."

He leaned forward to possess her mouth. At the first brush of his warm lips, she felt her reluctance begin to dissolve like ice beneath a desert sun. Desire surged along her veins and made her sway toward him. She returned his kiss with a golden fire of her own.

After a moment she shifted away slightly. When she did, he asked, "Doesn't this feel right?"

It did. It felt right, inevitable, perfect. In the dark shadows of the room, she gazed up at him. The flat planes of his face showed clearly. He stepped closer, menacing yet tantalizing at the same time. This dark, tall man was invading every corner of her heart and soul and body.

With all the steely determination that had carried her through critical moments during the past few years, she ignored her pounding heart, her

feminine yearning for him, and started toward the door. "It's been a marvelous evening, and I know you so much better—let's leave it at that."

He was beside her instantly, his long arm slipping around her waist to pull her back.

He held her tightly, and she felt hard arms that threatened her peace. "You said you wouldn't use force."

"I won't," he replied as he bent down to kiss behind her ear. His breath was warm, his lips moist on her sensitive skin. One hand pressed the small of her back, propelling her gently to his muscular frame, while his other hand slid beneath her sweater, following the curve of her full breast. Lily gasped, a scorching current flamed through her. Reece's voice dropped to a deep huskiness. He whispered in her ear, "Go on. I'm not holding you with force."

Her traitorous body took charge, overriding cool wisdom or will or restraint, and Reece knew it as well as she did.

"You have to stop!" she insisted, but the protest was a token, faint and useless against his masterful determination. Relentlessly he trailed kisses along her throat. His hands found the small white buttons of her blouse, unfastened them deftly, and caressed her warm flesh.

"This damned sweater," he mumbled. She felt his hands tug her sweater over her head and fling it aside.

Cool air rushed across her skin. She lowered her arm, saw the bracelet on her wrist, and remembered his fingers fastening the clasp.

She was allowing him to undress her, to make love to her, and each act bound her like a link in the bracelet. Every light caress, every fiery kiss forged another link in an invisible chain that could imprison her heart. Before with Bill, love had grown between them over the years. She hadn't experienced anything like this burst of reckless yearning under the compelling charm of such a physical man. She was dismayed at how effortlessly Reece could arouse wild, sweeping abandon in her. She couldn't face any more heartache in her life, and Reece was rushing her too swiftly

into a commitment she wasn't certain she was ready to make. She hoped it wasn't too late to overcome passion with caution.

"I'm going now."

"Before you do, let me kiss you once more." His husky voice was as binding as his caresses. He rested one hand behind her neck, his thumb brushing her skin to ensnare her with feathery touches.

She knew she should walk away, but it was too late. "Reece, how can I fight you?"

If he heard, he gave no indication. All his attention was elsewhere, concentrating on her with an intensity that made her tremble. This man dangled paradise before her eyes, but she had to be sure before she reached for it.

His free hand slipped beneath her ear, down to her unbuttoned blouse to push it off her shoulders. Acute longing enveloped and held her.

His breath went out in a rush. "You're so damned beautiful." His gaze drank in her smooth skin, her full curves, while his voice held a note of awe that stirred her as much as his touch. She felt incredibly young; it seemed so good to have Reece look at her as if she were the most precious thing on earth.

"Touch me, Lily," he commanded, his sensual tones arousing her further.

"No." How difficult to refuse! "I'll never be able to think straight if I let you make love to me." An inner voice urged flight; every heartbeat throbbed with a different wish.

A lazy, confident smile played across his face as he shook his head. "That cool, logical part of you is outnumbered. There's a warm, passionate part that wants exactly what I do. I hear it in your voice in spite of your words. Let yourself go, honey." The silken coaxing was torment.

His arm circled her waist, drawing her closer. "You're trembling!" he said.

"If you continue this seduction, I'll be lost. ..."

"No, you won't. Does this make you feel hopeless?" He leaned down to place his lips on hers and peel away her lacy bra. Arms like steel pinned her to him, silencing all protests.

Her thoughts whirled in a jumble; every inch of her quivered in response to him.

"Doesn't this feel right?" he whispered.

"Yes," she replied and heard a sigh of satisfaction from him. His fingers drifted along the tender flesh of her bare back until he reached her skirt. Lily felt him lean over her, bending her backward; her hips thrust against his. She wrapped her arms around his neck to cling to him tightly, fearing without his support she would lose her balance.

"Ahh, Lily, you're still holding back," he murmured. "You mustn't. I'm going to take my time loving you until you admit what your body and your heart already know. I'll kiss you and touch you and taste you until every shred of reason or reluctance is gone."

His husky voice set a torch to her blood. "I want to undress you. I want to remove your clothes and with them your hesitation, your doubts. I don't want any barrier between us, not lace, not uncertainty. "

The deep note of sincerity in his voice shook her as much as his hands cupping her breasts. Would it be as easy as he thought to lose uncertainty? Would it be wise? His strong hands gently kneaded her full breasts, and she lifted her mouth to his, returning his kiss ardently. One hand brushed from nipple to nipple, the other dropped so his fingers could unfasten her skirt; within moments he shifted slightly, and her skirt dropped to the floor. He lowered his head to kiss the hollows of her throat, while the thumb and forefingers of both hands made magic of a light flicking of her nipples. Lost to his seductive touch, she pressed her lower body closer to him, feeling his hard, male readiness. She moaned. It had been so long: how vulnerable she felt!

She tried to tell him. "Reece, I can't bear to get hurt."

"Oh, honey." The two words were filled with anguish. "The last thing on earth I intend to do is hurt you. I want you to need me so badly, you'll never be able to go." He kissed her again, a tantalizing, languorous kiss. Then his lips moved hotly to her throat, and his tongue traced her collarbone until she trembled. Rational thoughts fragmented into irrational ones. Disaster, disaster, flitted through her mind, banished as his tongue branded a line along the tops of the swelling mounds of her breasts, then circled each with lazy, loving attention. He caught a nipple between his teeth and nibbled ever so gently until she thrashed her head in a frenzy of delight. With equal ardency he ministered to the other nipple, and Lily's silent, inner voice that had just cried "disaster," now whispered "ecstasy!" Sweet rapture replaced caution as tantalizing sensations raked through her.

Carefully, thoroughly, he cupped each breast, while his head bent to kiss the tender flesh at her waist. Her quivering pitch of readiness matched his own.

Dimly she felt his hands pull away the last silken barriers of her underclothes and stockings. "Do you know what you're doing to me?" she whispered. "I told you, I can't take sex lightly."

"I never intended you to take this lightly." He didn't whisper. His voice was firm and deep, mildly startling in the quiet room. "I'll bind you to me with each touch, each caress until you need me as much as I do you."

His hands rested on her hips as he shifted away a few inches. A shudder rippled through him. She guessed the effort for control he exerted.

"You're gorgeous. I can't look at you enough."

He made her feel fragile and young and beautiful. He lifted her into his arms, striding toward the bedroom.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, feeling his cotton shirt between them while his cold, hard belt buckle bit into her flesh. A shaft of light spilled into the room from the bathroom, and Lily glimpsed a large bed covered in a dark blue spread. "Reece ..."

His mouth silenced her words, taking her lips to counter her momentary resistance.

When he lowered her gently to the bed, after pulling down the spread, she felt the cold sheet beneath her back and legs. She shivered. The degree of returning reality deepened. Doubts assailed her as she lay still.

Reece gazed down at her, his blue eyes raking over every inch in one quick glance, then again slowly, as if memorizing her full, thrusting breasts, her smooth, flat stomach and long, slender legs.

"Reece ..." she whispered in a last concession to reason. Her heart thudded against her ribs. She watched as he tugged his shirt free, unbuttoning it and dropping it to the floor. Within seconds he'd unfastened the belt buckle and shed the rest of his clothes. Keys, change, the buckle, dropped with a jingle, and in the breathless silence that followed, Lily gazed avidly at his trim, hard male body that was honed to tough fitness by years of rough ranchwork. Curly, dark hairs covered his bronzed chest and forearms. He stripped off his gold watch and placed it on a table beside the bed.

He gazed down at her as unselfconsciously and naturally as if he were fully clothed. All his attention focused on her. He stretched out on the bed on his side, drawing her to him. She discovered the joy of being loved by a mature man. It was so different from the impetuous youth she had married so long ago.

His control gave her a special gift, made his lovemaking leisurely, full of consideration for her.

Wrapping his arms around her, he held her alongside him, flesh against flesh. Her bracelet slipped higher on her arm as she shifted to put her arms around his neck. He lay without moving, only the hammer blows of his heart revealing the tumult inside him.

"This is only part of what I need. I'm going to make you want me, Lily, until you beg for me, until you lose every bit of reason," he whispered, and she felt his breath softly stir her curls.

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck to pull his mouth down on hers.

Pacing himself, he unhurriedly aroused her to a higher level of passion, a deeper need than she ever dreamed possible. Without haste, he kissed and stroked and caressed her until she felt both cherished and wild with longing for him.

He kissed her breasts hotly, dallying with masculine delight. His lingering caresses were fire. Each silky stroke of his tongue heightened her response, arousing her and compelling her to acquiesce.

"Honey, do you want me? You can't tell me you don't."

Like unraveling a ball of string, little by little, he persisted, undoing each bit of her restraint.

He kissed her legs, his meandering fingers teased the delicate skin behind her knees, along the insides of her thighs, until the last shred of pent-up restraint melted. Lily reached for him, feeling Reece's weight as his mouth covered hers.

Her fingers roamed across the rippling muscles in his back, touching his thick, wavy hair while she writhed beneath him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she wound her fingers in his hair.

She lost all hesitancy, any lingering shyness. He made her want him with every fiber and every pore. His dizzying caresses flooded her with torment. Long past the point of reason or hesitation, she hungered for more. Enveloped in a cauldron of steaming sensations, she needed all of him, yearned for him desperately. Years fell away, her defenses dissolved in the heat of passion. Restraint went down like rain.

Finally, he crushed her to his broad chest while his muscular legs tangled with hers. His mouth descended on hers fiercely, taking her kiss eagerly. Groaning softly, she twisted against him, feeling his hardness, his strength and unyielding maleness.

His lips shifted to her ear, and he whispered, "I need you, Lily. This is the way love should be."

His hands touched her; his lips followed, exploring intimately, fanning the torrid blaze to a conflagration. All the intimate caresses that aroused, magically became a new discovery, a wondrous feeling to her.

"Reece, please ..."

"Ahhh," He exhaled a long sigh of pure satisfaction, and she realized he had been waiting until she said she wanted him, holding back while his consummate lovemaking drove her to feel an overpowering need.

He paused, straddling her; dark curls streaked with gray tumbled over his forehead. His knees squeezed lightly against her bare flesh in the same position as that first meeting on the mountain, only now they were in bed, and she lay naked and totally vulnerable beneath him.

While he towered over her, she met his intense blue eyes. "Now, you'll dominate me completely."

Suddenly he bent down to scoop her gently into his arms kissing her with tenderness before he whispered fiercely, "How can I dominate you when you've bound me to you, Lily? I can't let you go back to Iowa. You're all I want, now or forever."

He placed her hand over his heart. "Feel that. Do you know what it's cost me to hold back, to wait until you said you wanted me?"

She felt the crisp hairs beneath her palm, his warm flesh and the thudding hammer blows of his heart. Each pounding beat was for her, because of her.

In scorching agony she twisted to raise her lips to his again. She wanted him, and it seemed as natural as breathing, as much a necessity.

When he released her, he lowered his head to kiss her breasts as she sank down on the bed. He stretched out; she felt his weight on her and yielded to him.

She gave to him her heart and body, but she was mindless. Intellect had long fled, banished by his fiery love. A fervor of craving intensified as he loved her with deliberation.

Lily's slender legs wrapped around his strong back. Her arms lay across his powerful shoulders while he drove her to an unbearable tension. Hot, shifting, she became molten gold beneath him.

Their hearts were thunderous in her ears, drowning out all other sounds. For one second her eyes flew open to meet his.

A sheen of perspiration made his copper skin glisten as a vein throbbed in his temple. His blue eyes seared her soul with their message. Her lashes dropped, hiding the last small fraction of her inner self that she wasn't ready to give.

"Lily, ahh, love ..."

The words were tantalizing. All her senses converged to one ravenous height. Deep within her, desire seethed, heightening to a roaring, white-hot blaze that fused their need. Sheer ecstasy raced along her veins, rippling through her like summer lightning flashing across a stormy sky, its violent currents streaking in all directions.

Release burst inside, rapturous, drugging her in heady fulfillment. He took her with love. She gave to him with abandon.

"Lily, darling." Reece groaned and crushed her to him as his strong body shuddered with satisfaction.

Finally he rolled to his side, pulling her over with him. Deep, uneven breathing made his chest heave.

She came back to earth a bit at a time. Gradually her heartbeat returned to normal. She became aware of the heat radiating from his body. His arms held her tightly; one hard leg was flung over hers.

As they lay in the darkened room, he said quietly, "I love you, Lily."

The words shook her as much as his ardor. She felt elated and saddened at the same time. It was happiness to hear him declare his love, yet with reason returning, she couldn't help feeling he was carried away by the great passion of these last minutes.

"You can't know what you feel is love, Reece," she murmured.

He shifted slightly so that he could look down at her. His blue eyes were dark as he said, "I know what I feel. You're part of me now, Lily."

And she knew it was true. If she stayed in Iowa and didn't marry him, part of her would forever be his. She closed her eyes a moment. "You may regret this someday."

"Not in an eternity," he answered with such finality it shook her.

His hand slipped over her shoulder, down her arm, along her hip, and he sighed. "You're the loveliest, sexiest, most giving woman in the world!"

Smiling, she said, "I might consent to marry you just to hear words like that . . . and to sleep with you."

"I'll settle for that." He brushed curls away from her forehead. "Lily, you won't regret it, I know. I can't be whole without you."

She placed her fingertips on his lips. "Don't! When you say things like that, it frightens me more than anything. You hardly know me, what I like, what I think, what motivates me."

Suddenly he seemed to relax. He smiled. "You're not exactly a stranger."

"You know what I mean." She shifted and gazed at the ceiling. "I feel that Althea or Caroline or anybody—"

"Dammit." He said it flatly, placing his hands on either side of her face. "You're beautiful, I'll never tire of looking at you, talking with you, making love like this. I was lost, overwhelmed by you that morning on the

mountain. Since then, I've discovered you're good company, you're fun, you—"

"All right!" she interrupted. She felt thrilled and desperate at the same time. "I just want love, true love, not mere sex or fleeting fascination. Since Bill, if I ever thought about another man, it was to find love, true love."

Tension between them became almost tangible, that charged current that sprang alive with the merest glance. In a deep, quiet voice he asked, "You don't think this is love?"

"I don't know!" A tremor ran through her.

She slipped her arms around his neck and raised her lips for a kiss. "What have you done to me? This has happened so quickly, I've changed so fast."

"Thank heavens! I think I've shown admirable restraint."

"Restraint! It's been two days and one night since we met!"

"That's what I mean. I've wanted to do this since the first hour on the mountain."

She frowned, as if in pain. "That's what worries me so! You don't need marriage and a wife. ..."

"Like hell I don't. Look, physically I'm satisfied, to put it mildly. I want you, Lily, and not just in bed. All the time. You're so nice to have around."

Anguish flashed through her. "If this was the first time you said that to me, I might be convinced, but you've told me the same thing over and over since our first meeting."

He swore softly. "It's just my direct manner."

His skin was hot and damp from their love-making. She trailed her hand over his hard shoulder. His arm circled her waist, and his breath blew against her curls.

"Ahh, isn't this good? Wouldn't you rather do this every night than run a school and live with three dogs and two cats?"

"It's two dogs and three cats. And that's what I keep asking myself."

"I'll get you all the animals you want."

"There's more to it than that, and you know it. You're talking about spending the rest of our lives together."

"I can't think of anything more satisfying than the past hour."

"We can't live in bed."

"We can try."

She laughed. "Will you be serious!"

He raised slightly and propped his head on his hand, resting on his elbow. He smoothed damp black ringlets away from her face. "So you want me to be serious. I'll be happy to oblige." His blue eyes shifted, moving down the length of her, and he spoke in a husky voice. "You're delightful. Your skin is soft and smooth, and I'll never get enough of you."

His words sent a tingle slithering through her, and she shifted with an unconsciously provocative movement that made him draw a sharp breath. He whispered, "I could spend the rest of the week right here."

"I couldn't! Can't you see how you've complicated any decision I'll make?"

"I'd think it would be simpler now. Don't you ever follow your feelings and stop thinking things through?"

"The last time I did that I grazed your scalp with a bullet!"

"Go with your feelings again. I'll risk it. I'll bet it won't be calamitous this time." He leaned down to kiss her.

She wound her arms around his neck, murmuring a feeble protest. "Reece, I'm exhausted."

"Just ignore me."

"Will you stop!"

He sighed, pulling her into the crook of his arm. Satisfied and spent, they lay in the darkness in each other's arms.

After a time his deep voice broke the silence. "Where would you like to go for a honeymoon?"

She closed her eyes, feeling as if she were battling an overwhelming adversary. She replied firmly, "I'm not discussing a honeymoon."

"Talk never hurt anything."

"Oh, no? That's what caused me to be here now!"

He twisted, laying on his side to face her with one dark brown arm across the pale flesh of her midriff. "Honey, talk isn't what put you in my bed." His gaze roamed over her full breasts as he leaned down to kiss her. He whispered, "It was this . . . and this."

Overriding her protests, he commenced an indolent provocation that stirred another wave of longing. Reece set a slow pace, concentrating on pleasing her until she strained with tempestuous bliss and agony.

She abandoned herself to him once more, encouraging him to do whatever he wanted, making love to him in any way she could discover to give him pleasure. And she knew in her heart that what they had found in each other was very, very special.

Gradually, his checked, unhurried loving dissolved into heated eagerness. When she yielded, his possession drove her to greater fervor than before. Satisfaction burst through her, and she lay in his arms while the world settled to normalcy again.

Reece brushed her hair back tenderly and smiled at her as he lay beside her. Feeling drugged, weightless, she stretched and sighed contentedly. At the moment it was impossible to worry about anything. "I'm hopelessly lost."

"That's good to hear. It means I'm making progress."

"That's the understatement of the year!"

He chuckled softly. After a moment he whispered, "I need you so badly. I'll never stop telling you."

Lily didn't answer, but lay gazing into the darkness long after she heard his deep, rhythmic breathing.

Finally she turned, placing her cheek on his chest. Short, coarse hairs tickled her skin. With an arm flung over his flat stomach and her leg across his, she thought how right it felt to be in his arms. In that moment she was tempted to throw aside all her doubt, but the habit of analyzing and thinking things through before she acted couldn't be shaken. She closed her eyes and in a few minutes finally slept.

Later, when she opened her eyes, she gazed into darkness, blinked, and remembered the past hours. She shifted to study Reece.

His thick, dark lashes lay against his prominent cheekbones. A faint stubble of whiskers covered his jaw. She gazed at his mouth, his slightly full underlip that hinted at the sensual side to his nature. A stir of longing raked through her. Frowning, she gazed at the ceiling. The damage was done, and there was no going back. Reece had destroyed all the control she had carefully built and preserved over the years.

He had taken her passionately, but it went deeper than the physical; it was also emotional. Whatever her decision about marriage, part of her belonged to him forever.

She looked at him again and felt a dismaying mixture of consternation and yearning. Carefully she extricated herself from his arms, rose, and slipped

on her bra and white lace panties. Without a sound she walked into the sitting room and looked at her clothes strewn on the floor.

Since when had her neat, orderly life gone so awry? For how many years—beyond remembrance—had she neatly folded or hung up her clothes? How could Reece Wakefield have this effect on her—devastation was all she could think of. Devastation and the most spectacular, magical bliss. She felt angered and infatuated at the same time as she picked up her clothes and folded them into a neat pile. While she worked, a mixture of emotions tormented her. She started to go to her room, but she glanced through the open door at Reece stretched out under the sheet. Seconds passed, and then instead of going to her room, she returned to his bedroom.

Determinedly, she put her clothing on a chair, glanced at his gold watch, and commenced her morning exercises.

It took six minutes before he stretched and groaned. "Oh, Lord, what are you doing?"

Arms spread wide, she twisted and touched her right toes with her left fingers. Breathing deeply, she answered, "I'm exercising."

"Caramba! How can you move at this hour? We must have slept ten minutes."

Twist and touch right hand to left toes. Stem the burning anger inside, the outrage at the change he had caused in her life. Try to forget his caresses that rendered her defenseless and at the same time made her wanton. Now, how would she live without him, yet how could she marry a stranger? "Nope," she answered and silently congratulated herself on the normal sound of her voice. "We slept almost two hours."

"Lily, that's grim."

She felt a flash of white-hot anger and straightened, standing tautly, her hands on her hips. The worry that had been churning inside her boiled over. "How many other things between us will we discover are 'grim'? What if they're worse than merely 'grim'? Unbearable?"

He sat up, the sheet tumbling around his waist, leaving his broad chest bare. "Whooee. How can you wake up angry? Go ahead and exercise. It's marvelous. There's nothing I like better than an energetic woman."

Still outraged, she scooped up her clothes and said, "I'll finish in my room."

"Oh, ho! You're just leaving because you really don't want to finish those exercises."

She hesitated and shot him a quick glance. Clamping her lips together, she placed her clothes on the chair and started touching her toes again, counting silently to herself.

She reached fifty and straightened to find him propped up in bed his arms behind his head, watching her intently, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

He swung his bare feet to the floor, standing quickly. The sheet fell away, and she saw his readiness.

"Let me show you a new exercise, Lily," he said in a sensual drawl that sent a shiver of anticipation through her.

When he reached for her, she stiffened and snatched up her clothes. "Damn you, Reece! Now I don't know if I'm falling in love with you or just falling in love with love."

"Oh, honey, you don't need to be angry with me." He leaned down to kiss her throat while one hand glided down her spine and his other drew her to him.

She pulled away. "We're not spending the rest of this week or even this morning in bed!"

"Of course not." His voice was gentle. He kissed behind her ear, trailing enticing kisses around to the back of her neck while his hand drifted to her breast to caress her. Lily drew a sharp breath. "I'm getting out of here."

"In a minute."

"Reece ..."

His voice was rough and husky. "Sweetheart, you're a delight. Don't be angry over last night. It was wonderful."

She couldn't fight his kisses, his warm fingers, his hard strength, or the words of truth about their lovemaking. It had been wonderful, perfect. Dropping her clothing, she wrapped her arms around his neck and let him make love to her.

An hour later when she lay stretched beside him, held closely in his arms, she suddenly swung her feet to the floor, rose, and gathered up her clothing.

Walking toward the door, she paused. "I'm going to bolt my door, shower, dress, and I'll see you next in the coffee shop downstairs."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking grin. "Yes ma'am. Sure you don't want your back scrubbed when you shower?"

"No!" She rushed across the sitting room into her room and locked the door.

An hour later as she sat over her third cup of coffee, she was in as much turmoil as ever. She didn't know what she felt for Reece, how deep her feelings went, or how good her judgment was at this point. She glanced up as he stepped through the open door to the coffee shop.

That quick charge sparked inside her and polarized as his blue eyes swung to meet her. She felt something inside like a tiny explosion of joy. Dressed again in his suit and white shirt, he looked urbane and commanding. It was almost impossible to think that only a couple of hours earlier she had lain naked in his arms.

He started threading his way toward her. A smattering of people filled the room, which held tables covered in white cloths. People sat at a counter, and the jingle of a cash register sounded every few minutes.

"Hi, beautiful, can I sit down here?"

She laughed. "Reece, don't cause a scene."

He pulled out a chair and sat down facing her. His amusement faded. "I received a call from the ranch. I need to get home. I have trouble, some sick sheep."

"I'm sorry. Is it serious?"

He shrugged. "I don't know until I get there." He glanced at the approaching waitress.

Reece ordered, they ate, and as soon as they finished, they checked out of the hotel and drove to the airport to return to the ranch.

Chapter Eight

Reece had ridden away on horseback, saying he wouldn't be back until the next day. As Lily sat curled on the sofa in front of the fire, studying her guanaco notes, she heard the sound of a car motor approaching. The rumble grew until it reached the drive beside the house.

Setting aside her notes, she rose and looked out the window to see headlights. Regretting her decision to get ready for bed early, she glanced down at her heavy nightgown and a blue terry robe borrowed from Dylan's closet.

The car halted beside the house. It was too late to change into any other clothes. As Lily reached the kitchen, a key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Cold air struck her as she stood in the center of the kitchen and watched a young man step inside. He closed the door, turned, and she knew immediately how Reece had looked twenty years ago.

This son had the same dark, curly hair and slightly stubborn jaw, the same blue eyes, only these were stormy with anger. He was broad-shouldered and lean to the point of looking underfed.

"You're Clint, aren't you?" she asked.

His blue eyes narrowed, and her suspicion about the anger in his eyes was confirmed by the tone of his voice. "Yes, Mrs. Dunbar." He studied her insolently, taking in the robe and nightgown, her stockinged feet.

Pulling the collar of the robe closed beneath her chin, she felt defensive and wished again she had remained dressed. She sighed. "How do you know who I am?"

His eyes were glacial as they met hers. "Dylan called me. Where's Dad?"

"He's not here, and he said he probably won't be back tonight. Some sheep are sick, and he left to see about them. Have you eaten?"

"No, but I'll take care of myself."

She smiled. "There's a little of your father's mutton stew in the refrigerator. I'll heat it."

"Don't bother, Mrs. Dunbar."

Every word was clipped; there was no mistaking the tight anger in his voice. He said, "I'll put my things in my room."

After he left the kitchen, Lily removed the cold stew from the refrigerator and ladled it into a pan. As soon as she set it on the stove to simmer, she hurried to her room. Closing the door quietly, she flung off the robe and gown to pull on her white sweater, jeans, and boots. She was certain Clint had come home because of her; she was equally certain Reece hadn't expected him. Running a brush through her curls, she emerged, glanced toward the open door down the hall, and hurried in the opposite direction to the kitchen.

When she entered the room, Clint was standing at the stove, stirring the stew. Fully as tall as his father, he was wearing a brown sweater and faded jeans, which fit his bony frame tightly. While an enticing aroma filled the room, a wisp of steam "curled from the kettle and dissipated into the air above the stove. The windows sparkled with tiny collected drops of moisture. Another cold glance raked over her, and he said, "You didn't need to dress on my account."

"I thought I'd be here alone." She poured a glass of milk for him and a cup of coffee for herself.

She sat down at the table and watched him fill a large bowl with steaming stew. As he carried his dish to the table, she asked, "Did Dylan call and tell you he met me?"

Placing the stew on the table, he removed a bottle of Escudo, Chilean beer, from the refrigerator and sat down across the table from her. Dark lashes, which were as long and thick as his father's, raised, and furious blue eyes challenged her.

"Dad told Dylan he's going to marry you."

The words sent anger and shock through Lily. How typical of Reece and his directness, his self-confidence. Why hadn't he waited to spring that news on his family until he was certain! And why hadn't he warned her that he'd told Dylan? No wonder Dylan's dark eyes had studied her so intently! She frowned, her anger increasing as she realized the problems Reece had caused by his arrogant assumption that she would accept his proposal. Now she had to deal with Clint's fury.

"You arrived here quickly after learning that bit of news."

"It wasn't easy. Fortunately, I could get a flight out of New York, and a friend flew me to Valparaiso. I drove the rest of the way." His blue eyes narrowed. "I would've walked if I'd had to!"

She tried to keep her temper under control. "Clint, your father proposed to me. I haven't accepted."

The stabbing glance showed how little he believed her statement. Silence lengthened between them.

"You want to know where I met your father, don't you?" Lily asked quietly.

He sat back in the chair and regarded her with open hostility. "Yes, ma'am. And I'd like to know when. It wasn't too long ago I left to go to school, and I don't recall ever hearing your name mentioned."

Here it comes, she thought, bracing for the reaction from him. Why had she promised Reece a week? Why had she stayed? For a fleeting moment, she remembered their tumultuously passionate night together. She felt a deepening flare of anger at Reece—and at herself for succumbing to him.

Clint's arrival brought the harsh, clear light of reason from the outside world. She realized how befuddled she had become with Reece's persuasion, his adroit lovemaking, his overwhelming assertiveness.

"I'm in Chile to study guanacos. I met your father when I was camping. A storm was brewing, and he invited me to stay here."

"How long ago was that, Mrs. Dunbar?"

Her voice was calm, not betraying any of the turmoil she felt. "Not long."

The -evasive words might as well have been a physical blow. Abruptly Clint pushed back his chair and rose to stride away from the table. Jamming his hands into his pockets, he stopped at the sink and gazed through the window above at the darkness outside.

"Are you divorced?"

"No, I'm widowed. I haven't accepted your father's offer."

He whipped around, and she saw a muscle work in his jaw. He took his hands from his pockets and clenched his fists. "You said you're here to study guanacos. Is that your job?"

"No, I'm an elementary school principal."

"So you earn your living." Bitterness filled his voice. "My father is a very wealthy man, Mrs. Dunbar."

She felt another flash of anger, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. She could understand Clint's attitude. She answered quietly, "I don't intend to settle at the end of the world, isolated on this ranch, just to acquire the security of your father's wealth. My job is good, and if I return home, I intend to pursue my career."

His eyes revealed his disbelief in her statements, and his voice was cynical when he asked, "How long had Dad known you when he proposed?"

This angry young man wouldn't understand. "I think you'd better ask your dad about that."

He swore roughly. "Dad's been lonely as hell since my mother's death. He's a sitting duck for this! You just happened to come to our ranch to study guanacos, thousands of miles from your home, staying on our land where one of the wealthiest men in Chile lives, an eligible widower. ..."

"You've made your point."

"Did you know about my father before you met him?"

She frowned. The son could twist things around to his view just as easily as his father. "Well, yes, I did."

"At least you're honest."

"He knew I was in the area."

"So he hunted you up and proposed." The rage and condemnation were almost tangible. How could she stay shut up with Clint until Reece returned?

His sardonic gaze matched the mockery in his voice. "And now I can pack and go back to Boston."

She tried to hold her temper. "I didn't say that to you."

"It's what you want, though, isn't it?"

He certainly was his father's son! Forcing a smile, she answered coolly, "I'll have to admit, you haven't been a ray of sunshine, but I don't blame you. I'm sorry your father sprang that news on your brother. I didn't know he had, and it was premature."

Clint shifted his weight, hooking his thumb in the belt of his jeans. His voice was low. "I can imagine how sorry you are. I'm sure you'd rather Dad told all of us after the fact, once the wedding was well behind you." In bold contempt his glance raked over her again. "You're a little young for him, aren't you?"

His question momentarily eased the strain and anger she experienced. She had to bite back a smile. "Thank you, but, no, I'm not."

For an instant he looked startled and sounded much younger. "You can't be as old as Dad!"

It was difficult to keep from laughing, but she kept her features solemn, certain the last thing Clint would want was for her to find him amusing. She answered, "Your father's not that old. I'm thirty-six, Clint."

She saw the flare of surprise. It was followed quickly by another intent, assessing study. She knew he was thinking about ways to prevent her from marrying his father. The angry scowl and clenched fists revealed clearly his feelings toward her.

He crossed the room, narrowing the space between them. It took all her control to sit quietly without rising to her feet. She wondered if he would strike her, but he merely leaned his fists on the table, bending down to gaze at her closely. "You're marrying him for his money, aren't you?"

It took a strong effort to hold her temper. "Will it matter to you how I answer?"

Ignoring her question, his voice grated as he said, "I can't stop my father if he's decided to marry you, but I want to warn you, don't mess up his life. Don't marry him and expect to take him for what you can get. I promise you, one way or another, I'll make you sorry if you do!"

"I'll remember that."

Her quiet words added to his anger. He sucked in his breath and grasped her arm roughly. "I mean it, Mrs. Dunbar."

She turned her head and looked pointedly at his fingers squeezing her arm.

He dropped his hand. In a firm voice she said coldly, "Don't do that again, Clint."

"My father is lonely, and it's warped his judgment. Or you have. If you marry him, just remember he has three sons who still live under the same roof with him."

There was nothing to be gained in arguing with him, and she could understand his attitude. She gazed into his fiery blue eyes and remained

silent. It was easier to understand Clint's indignation than it was Reece's sudden proposal.

"Did he tell you we all still live at home when we're not in school?"

"Yes, I gathered that from what he said."

He continued to stare at her, and she met his gaze without wavering. "Are you in love with Dad?"

On the surface the question was simple, but his tone held all his derision, his challenging fury. She suspected he'd like her to lose her temper, that her quiet answers were beginning to rattle him slightly. She realized she hadn't answered him. She didn't want to answer him either. He saved her the trouble by saying, "You're very cool, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you, Clint."

"It doesn't change a thing about how I feel toward you."

"I didn't think it would."

"Did Dad tell you that we'll probably come right back here to live after we finish our education, after we earn our degrees?"

"Yes." She knew she couldn't marry Reece. His son had broken the spell woven by Reece's seductive charm. It had been ridiculous to give the proposal serious consideration.

In spite of her decision, she didn't intend to give Clint the satisfaction of knowing it yet. While he had succeeded in driving her away, he'd never understand it wasn't his threats or anger, but merely his presence that had restored her common sense. Away from the pervading insistence of Reece, his passionate lovemaking, she saw things in their proper perspective.

When she looked at it logically, it seemed absolute folly to think of marrying a man who had proposed after knowing her only a few hours. With three hostile sons, a way of life entirely different from hers, an arrogant

disposition, a home thousands of miles from her relatives and friends, he could not possibly offer her a satisfying future.

Then, remembrance sprang to mind of his quick laughter, his deep blue eyes, his blazing kisses. Experiencing a pang, she thought fleetingly of the fun they'd had in Santiago, the enjoyment shared during the early hours of the evening, the wild, devastating love later.

She said, "You've made your point, Clint. If you'll move out of my way. I'll clean the kitchen."

He stepped back, but he frowned. "You're not in love with him," he said cynically, and his voice sounded so much like Reece.

She picked up the dishes. As she faced Clint, she asked, "How can I know what I feel in such a short time?"

Something flickered in his blue eyes, and his frown disappeared. "You're direct too. At least I'll be able to talk to you."

No, you won't, she thought; I'll be in Iowa. She kept her thoughts to herself and moved to the sink to rinse the dishes.

She was aware she hadn't heard him leave the room. She glanced over her shoulder to find him leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest, watching her.

She said, "You made your point."

"Am I bothering you?"

"No, not really."

"Do you have children?"

"No."

"That makes it convenient for you. When is the wedding to be?"

She dried her hands to keep from dripping water on the floor. "I told you, I haven't accepted."

He made a derisive sound and stomped out of the room. She gazed after him and felt desolation sweep through her. Realization came that she should leave now. It was a long drive to Santiago. Why wait to combat Reece's arguments, his implacable personality, his charm? The more she gave the idea thought, the more appeal it held. She moved quickly, going to her room and collecting her things. Finally she sat down to write a note to Reece.

She gazed into space, composing her thoughts before she wrote carefully:

Dear Reece, I've had time to think quietly and review my needs.
I've decided it's best I return home.
Clint arrived tonight, and I feel doubly certain now.

I won't ever forget.

She paused, surprised at the pain that enveloped her. Shrugging her shoulders and determined to stick by her decision in spite of the way she felt, she finished the note.

Thank you for everything. I hope you find happiness.

My love, Lily

She gazed at the words. It shouldn't hurt so badly to go, but it did. She slipped the note into an envelope, sealed it, and wrote Reece's name in large letters across the front.

Lily looked at her watch. In five minutes she could board her flight to Miami. She turned the gold bracelet, the chain that Reece had fastened on her wrist. As she remembered the moment, something inside wrenched painfully.

Over the address system came a loud voice. "*Senores y senoras, atencion porfavor. El vuelo doscientos sesenta y siete de LAN Chile estara listo de partir en quince minutos.*" Along with others around her, Lily rose. It was time to go, and she felt a pang of regret while at the same time she was certain she was doing the right thing. Gathering her belongings, she joined the throng that had begun to cluster to board the plane.

Another announcement in Spanish came over the loudspeaker. "Will the owner of a gray and black cat please come to the LAN Chile desk?" There was a pause, then: "Will the owner of the cat that answers to the name General Jackson, please come to the LAN Chile desk?"

Lily stiffened in shock. Several people around her laughed. She couldn't believe what she'd heard. How on earth could that cat be at the airport? How would they know the cat's name? As quickly as she wondered, she knew. Reece. Her heart began to pound as the announcement came again.

"Will the owner of a large one-eyed cat please come to the LAN Chile desk? We have General Jackson at the LAN Chile desk."

She stepped out of the line, aware of several people watching her with curiosity. At that moment came a repeated announcement that they were now boarding the flight.

Quickening her pace, her heels clicking with each step, she hurried toward the front of the airport, passing people walking toward the waiting plane.

In the center of the busy lobby, she spotted Reece leaning casually against the counter, one hand on General Jackson. The cat looked as angry as Reece looked relaxed. Crouching on the counter, General Jackson's striped gray and black tail switched violently from side to side. Behind the desk, two male clerks in identical dark blue coats and white shirts were working. One cast continual worried glances at the cat.

Lily took in Reece's tight tan whipcord slacks, brown wool shirt, and light brown poplin jacket. His blue eyes searched the crowd, shifted, and met hers.

Chapter Nine

Something seemed to burst inside as she met his stormy gaze. Her blood pounded in her ears, and she lost all awareness of the people milling about.

Reminding herself to remain firm in her purpose, she steeled herself for a confrontation. When she reached him, she saw the ice in his blue eyes. "How did you get here so quickly?" she asked.

"I flew."

"Of course. I forgot about your plane. Reece, I'm sorry, but Clint made me see things in a clearer light. I tried to explain in my note." Aware of curious glances from the nearby clerk, she kept her voice low. As people strolled past, they turned to look at the cat, then at Lily and Reece.

He continued to lounge against the counter. Only the glacial blue in his eyes betrayed any emotion. "You gave me your word."

The despair she had experienced all the previous night and this day deepened. "I know." In a shaky voice, she added, "See, I told you that you might be disappointed in me."

Clearly, the announcement came, *"El vuelo dos- cientos sesente y siete de LAN Chile esta ahora listo de partir."*

She drew a deep breath. "Reece, I'm sorry it didn't work out. That's my flight. I have to go." She stepped forward and reached up to kiss him lightly and quickly on the lips. As she moved back, she felt pain. She wondered how much of her heart would stay behind with him.

He gazed at her with an impassive expression as he remained nonchalantly leaning against the counter. He asked softly, "What are you going to do with General Jackson?"

She blinked in surprise. "You'll keep him, won't you?" Suddenly it dawned on her what his answer would be, why the cat was with him.

"This is your cat," he replied coolly. "Are you taking him on board with you?"

Remorse changed to dismay and anger. "You know it would take a week to get through the red tape to get that cat on a plane! I have to go. Please take him to the ranch."

In the softest voice he answered, "If you take three steps away from here, I'll remove my hand from General Jackson, and he's on his own."

"That's blackmail!"

Reece shrugged his shoulder casually. "Not much worse than breaking a promise, I'd say."

Out of the corner of her eye she was aware that more than one clerk had gathered to listen to the exchange. A few people paused nearby, some casting surreptitious glances at them, others staring openly. When General Jackson meowed woefully, someone snickered.

Lily detected a wicked gleam in Reece's eyes, and her anger grew. "Clint made me think clearly."

"Oh, hell, Lily. The kid's just in shock. I told Dylan I might marry you—"

"That was a little premature, don't you think!"

"I'm sorry. I should have called Clint and Renner too. Somehow, I forgot after we reached the hotel."

She faced resolute blue eyes. "Reece, I have my ticket to get on board a plane leaving in a few minutes! You can't be so cruel as to turn that cat loose in this airport. You know he'd be lost and homeless."

"That would be a damn shame, Lily," he drawled. "I'd hate to see General Jackson shivering in the street at night, dodging cars, going hungry, sleeping in the rain."

"Reece Wakefield! You can take that cat home with you!" She realized they were drawing a crowd, but if Reece noticed, he gave no indication. Never taking his eyes from her face, he said, "General Jackson's tough. He'll keep out from under the wheels of buses and cars. There are lots of trash bins. Hell fend for himself, I imagine. Surely he's been in a city before."

"Reece, I have to go home now."

"Go on," he urged with extreme nonchalance. "What's one battered old cat?" General Jackson meowed, and several people laughed.

Lily felt a flush of heat in her cheeks. "You are the most stubborn . . . this is ridiculous!"

"Anunciofinal para el vuelo doscientos sesenta y siete de LAN Chili."

"Reece, I'll miss my plane! That's the last call!"

"Hey, lady, don't go," someone said. A male voice said, "Senorita, I have a very nice cat that needs care; he's better looking than that one."

Another male voice called, "I'll get a cat, senorita!"

Ignoring the comments, Lily gazed into Reece's implacable blue eyes and knew that he would do exactly what he threatened. She felt another flash of anger at his strong-arm tactics. He knew she wouldn't abandon the silly cat. "This isn't going to win you any points!" she snapped.

"Breaking your promise to me didn't win you any either."

"I have about two minutes."

"I want my week."

"Clint doesn't like me."

"I do and I count more."

In a low voice she said, "There are moments when you can be so aggravating!"

"What did you say, Lily?"

She knew he heard every word. The chill in his blue eyes changed to dancing amusement, and she guessed he was certain he'd won and was enjoying himself. No doubt her plane was headed down the runway by now.

In a loud, clear voice she said, "You're arrogant! *Eres muy testaduro y agravante!*"

Several people laughed. She heard words in Spanish she couldn't translate. In sympathy with her someone said, "*Muy bien dicho, senora!*"

Reece smiled. "I also want to marry you."

Lily's anger began to fade. She laughed. "You're hopeless!"

The crowd broke up with laughter and suggestions to Reece. He loosened his grip on the cat to take Lily's arm.

Suddenly General Jackson leaped from the desk and sprinted between people's legs.

"Reece, if that cat gets away, I go!" Lily cried.

Reece swore and chased the cat, dodging people as he tried to keep the cat in sight.

For an instant Lily forgot General Jackson's plight while she watched Reece rushing through the lobby. In spite of her worry about the cat, daughter shook her. She glimpsed a flash of gray fur. To her horror General Jackson bolted through the front doors of the terminal.

Reece ran after him, Lily hurrying behind. Emerging into the sunlight, she spotted Reece sprinting between taxis. With Reece in pursuit General Jackson ran across an open field.

Pausing for breath, Lily watched Reece's long legs stretch out to run, his coat flapping behind him. General Jackson reached a tall willow. Without hesitation he scampered up the tree to a high branch.

At the foot of the tree, Reece stopped, arms akimbo, feet planted wide apart as he gazed up at the branch on which General Jackson crouched, his striped tail switching.

Stepping through weeds, Lily caught up with Reece. "You have to get him."

He glanced at her and scowled. "That damned mangy cat deserves to get hit by a taxi!"

"Without him, you don't have any leverage. If he goes, I go," Lily said sweetly and received another dark scowl.

"Oh, hell!" Reece flung aside his coat, jumped up, and caught a limb. His wool shirt was taut across the bulging muscles in his shoulders as he hauled himself onto a branch.

Lily tried to smother her laughter. Moving carefully from one limb to another, Reece finally paused and reached up to get the cat.

Hissing, General Jackson shot out a paw. Reece swore and glanced down at Lily. "So help me, Lily, you'd better quit laughing!"

She couldn't restrain herself. Suddenly fumbling open her purse, she whipped out her camera and snapped his picture.

"Dammit! I'd like to kill this cat." Ignoring the flailing paw, he snatched the cat by its nape and lifted it off the branch.

Reece climbed down and dropped to the ground. He straightened, extending the dour-looking General Jackson to Lily. "Here, he's all yours."

She laughed and shook her head. "You may carry him. You seem to know how to handle him just fine."

Suddenly Reece grinned. He tucked General Jackson firmly under one arm and draped the other around Lily's shoulders. "Come on, honey, let's go home."

The words had a warmth to them that filled her with contentment and a curious sense of relief. Vaguely, she wondered if she was relieved that he'd caught the cat, or if it went deeper and she was thankful to miss the flight out of Chile, away from Reece.

Enjoying his arm around her shoulder, she walked beside him and reflected on the quick turn of events. Suddenly she remembered her backpack and halted.

"Reece, all my clothes are in my pack on the plane. They're going to Iowa!"

"Well notify the airline," he replied calmly.

"I don't have anything except what I'm wearing."

"I could make a suggestion about that." He gave her an exaggerated leer.

"Never mind!"

Heading toward the terminal again, he said, "We'll get what you need before we leave Santiago. IH rent a car."

"And take General Jackson shopping with us?"

Reece glanced down at the cat and remarked blandly, "I just can't tell you what I'd like to do with him."

She laughed, and Reece stroked General Jackson's head. The cat closed his eye and began a deep, rumbling purr. Lily noticed two long scratches across the back of Reece's hand.

She touched his wrist lightly. "He did hurt you!"

"I'll forgive and forget; I owe him a debt of gratitude. I'll try and control my evil thoughts about him." He glanced around. "I'll find someone to watch him."

"How can you do that? No one in the airport will take care of a cat."

"Want to lay a small wager on it?"

She saw the determined thrust to his jaw. "No. You'll bully someone into cat-sitting, I'm sure."

Reece halted. "Why, Lily, I haven't ever bullied you, have I?"

"Not during the last five minutes."

He laughed. "I'll make it up to you when we get home."

She didn't want to pursue what he meant. "Let's go"

He sighed. "I hate to take this feline monster into the airport again."

"It serves you right!"

He grinned and squeezed her shoulders. "I had to do something to make you stay."

"How did you get them to announce that General Jackson was lost?"

"I'll never tell how much that bribe cost."

"Well, it caught my attention, all right."

He turned her to face him. "Lily, Clint's young. I know my proposal doesn't make any more sense to him than it did to you, but you should understand my reasons better than he does." Wind ruffled his curls, and General Jackson meowed loudly. Reece placed his hand against Lily's cheek, and she felt the warmth of his palm, an electrifying current that was transmitted from Reece. He said, "I don't regret it in the least. Every moment I'm with

you only makes me feel more strongly about it. I'm in love with you, honey."

Even though his words thrilled her as much as any caress ever had, wrapping her in a shelter of reassurance, she couldn't forget another pair of deep blue eyes. It was impossible to wipe out the thought of Clint's accusation that she would marry Reece because of his wealth. While she gazed up at Reece, his blue eyes darkened, and she knew if he didn't have to hold the cat, he'd kiss her.

"He thinks I'm marrying you because you're wealthy."

She saw a quick flash of anger, but he answered quietly, "He'll come around." His eyes searched her face. "Clint can be as stubborn as I am. Just don't take his accusations to heart."

"I can understand his reaction. I don't blame him." She added firmly, "And I don't want to cause a rift between you and your son."

"You won't."

Exasperation shook her. "Reece, how can you always be so positive!"

The corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile. "I'm not. I'm just that way about things that have meaning for me. Come on. Let's get through so we can go home." As they continued toward the airport's glass doors, she asked, "If I had boarded the plane, would you really have turned him loose?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you would have."

"You're damned right! That cat doesn't like to fly. We had a hell of a ride up here, and I'd be happy to go back without him."

"You can't now! Don't you let anybody lose him while we shop."

When they entered the lobby, Reece paused a moment and surveyed everyone on the floor. "Let's walk around," he suggested. On the second floor outside the restaurant, he paused and squeezed her arm. "Wait here and I'll take care of this."

She watched Reece's long stride carry him through the doorway of the restaurant. He sauntered past tables to a waitress. Her back was to Reece as she leaned over a table, removing dishes. Lily saw the beautiful young woman, her dark eyes accentuated with mascara, glance up to talk to Reece. Her full body straining against her uniform, she reached out to pet General Jackson's head. Reece smiled and shrugged his shoulders. As he talked to her, Lily knew he was turning on his irresistible charm.

They laughed, and the waitress looked down at the cat a moment. Saying something else to Reece, she left to speak to another waitress. While they talked, Reece petted General Jackson in a display of affection that made Lily smile. The woman returned, wrote something on a piece of paper, and gave it to Reece. He glanced at it and said something to her. She reached out to take the cat. Smiling broadly, Reece squeezed the waitress's shoulder, winked, and strolled into the hall.

Lily walked down the hall a few feet, paused, and waited until he caught up.

"That's all taken care of," he announced.

"I thought she might melt when you flashed your charming smile."

He looked down and grinned. "Oh? Do I have a charming smile?"

"I won't answer on the grounds it'll make you even more arrogant—if such a thing is possible!"

He laughed. "She's going to take the General home with her. She gave me her address and phone number."

"Will she be disappointed to see me at your side?"

With mocking solemnity, he said, "Why, of course she won't. She gets to spend the next couple of hours with the General."

Lily said dryly, "I don't think it was the cat that caught her interest."

"It was a hefty sum of money! That cat has cost me a bundle, but he's worth every cent if it's kept you here. Let's hurry. I don't like to fly back after dark, but I want to get back tonight because Clint leaves early in the morning."

Clint. Lily dreaded the confrontation. "I'm not certain we did the right thing today."

"Don't worry about Clint. You'll win him over. He's young and strong-willed, but he's also intelligent. It shouldn't take you long."

She wondered about Reece's confidence. He might not understand how deep Clint's resentment and dislike went.

She thought about the previous night and asked, "How are the sick sheep?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't anything we couldn't control."

"Does anything ever get out of your control?"

He looked down solemnly. "Quite a bit or I wouldn't have been so lonesome these past few years."

Immediately she was sorry for her question. "I'm sorry."

He winked at her. "That, and a certain dazzling, black-haired beauty whom I can't control at all, a cowardly sheepdog, a ratty old cat, my angry son ..."

"I think you'll manage with all of those," she said.

They went downstairs, Reece hailed a taxi, and they rode to the Sheraton San Cristobal, where he rented a Jaguar. They drove along the Alameda until it changed names to Avenida Providencia in a suburban area about two miles east of downtown Santiago.

Reece parked, took her arm and waved his hand toward the intriguing shops lining curving walkways. "Let's go on foot along the *caracoles*, those winding walks in front of the stores."

A closer glance at the elegant boutiques made Lily protest, "Reece, I need a simple department store."

With firm pressure on her elbow, he opened the door of a small shop and ushered Lily inside.

A gray-haired woman in a striking blue silk dress came forward and greeted Reece with a smile. "Senor Wakefield—*Buenos dias!*"

He returned the greeting in rapid Spanish, introducing Lily to Senora Madryn.

The woman's dark eyes took in Lily's figure at a glance as she greeted her warmly.

Reece asked to see a dress for Lily, something for a dinner party.

"Of course. If you'll come with me, please."

Lily looked at him. "Reece, I really don't—"

"We'll discuss it in a minute," he said and took her arm to follow Senora Madryn into a small room. As soon as the senora disappeared through an arched doorway, Lily turned to Reece.

Laughing, he held up his hands to ward her off. "Hold the barrage. It's my fault your things are flying to Iowa now without you. I want to buy these clothes."

"No, thank you, and I know this shop is too expensive, and I don't need a dinner dress. And don't turn that charm on me, Reece Wakefield."

His- blue eyes danced, but he gazed at her solemnly. "I have a right to see how the woman I want to marry looks in a dress."

She considered that and said, "I'll try on one and take it right off, even though I hate to waste Senora Madryn's time that way."

"I don't. I've spent a small fortune in this shop."

"I thought Meredith liked to hunt and fish," Lily said quickly.

He shrugged. "We did a few other things."

She thought of his own impeccable suit, his ease in an urban atmosphere. Too, she remembered Meredith's magnificent home. In a quiet voice she said, "Reece, you might be better suited to someone who is more like Meredith, who likes to hunt and shoot and still has a cosmopolitan background."

He stepped closer and touched her chin briefly. "Lily, I've told you my criteria for a wife. It didn't include any of that." The solemnity left him, and he added, "Of course, now, if you continue to fire that Smith and Wesson, I'm going to teach you how to use it."

"Oh, Reece! One minute I feel one way, and the next I feel just the opposite."

Before he could answer, Senora Madryn returned, asked them if they'd like to be seated. A model appeared, a beautiful brunette dressed in a simple black dress made of raw linen. Its simplicity didn't hide the flawless cut. It was short-sleeved, had a round collar and narrow belt, and the only adornment was a full black and red silk bow that tied beneath the collar.

Lily commented on the dress while Reece sat quietly. The model disappeared through the door and returned in another black dress, this one silk with spaghetti straps, a softly draped bodice, and a full skirt that swirled away from her long legs when she turned.

Lily smiled. "That's a beautiful dress." She thought of her meager wardrobe at home. They looked at several more dresses. Reece eliminating first one, then another until there were five for Lily to try: both black dresses; a stunning red silk with a full skirt and one shoulder bared; a deep green silk

with a straight skirt; and a beautiful three-piece ensemble, a gray linen jacket lot ' and skirt and long-sleeved raw silk blouse to match.

Feeling ridiculous, Lily slipped into the three- piece outfit and emerged to model it for Reece.

His blue eyes lit up with pleasure when she turned around in front of him, and Senora Madryn murmured compliments. Next, Lily slipped into the black linen sheath. She ran a comb quickly through her curls. The dress fit perfectly and gave her a sophisticated look she was far from feeling.

She suspected Reece would purchase one of the dresses, and she didn't want him to and didn't know how to stop him.

When she met his gaze this time, she saw the quick flare of satisfaction. As she turned around in front of him, his eyes darkened, and he said flatly, "Wear that one home, Lily."

She started to protest, but one look at the steel in his blue eyes and she bit back her words. "Thank you. There isn't any need to try on the others, is there?"

"Oh, yes. Let's see them all. I told Senora Madryn that you'll need a coat and a jacket."

"Reece! I can't let you spend so much. Besides, this shop is too expensive for me! You 11 have to take me to a department store."

"Just try on what she brings in, and we'll discuss it in a minute."

She returned to the dressing room. While Senora Madryn hung up the black dress, Lily pulled on the green. Laughing, she gazed at the wrinkles around her waist. "I'm too short-waisted and long- legged for this one."

"That's not you," Senora Madryn remarked and removed the red silk from a hanger. Lily glanced at the older woman and wondered what she thought about Lily's relationship with Reece.

She took the red silk and dropped it over her head.

"Ahh, how lovely you look!"

"Thank you," Lily replied and received a warm glance from Reece when she modeled the dress for him.

Grinning, he said, "Maybe you should wear that home instead!"

She smiled and left to change into the black silk. It was perfection; the soft material clung to her curves, her slender arms were bare, and her summer tan contrasted with the black.

She knew Reece would like it. Pausing to run the comb through her curls again, she wished she had a pair of high-heeled pumps instead of the practical low-heeled navy shoes she wore for traveling.

Feeling alive in every pore, she stepped into the small sitting room. She received the reaction she had expected. She saw the flash of admiration, a flicker of masculine approval before his lids lowered to gaze at her with an indolent, hooded look that made a flame begin to grow inside her.

She couldn't take her gaze away from him, yet she knew she had better do so quickly. Reece was too unpredictable, and the smoldering message in his eyes said clearly that he wanted her in his arms. They were alone; Senora Madryn hadn't followed Lily into the room. She started to leave to change clothes, but Reece's words stopped her.

He said quietly, "Lily, I'd like to get you a mink coat."

She turned, and the black skirt swirled softly against her knees. His expression was as solemn as his voice. "I mean it, Lily."

She tried to keep her voice calm, to hold her temper. "If you even hint at that, I'm going to the airport and get the next plane away from here, General Jackson or not!"

Reece shrugged. "All right, not another word!"

When she entered the dressing room, two coats and two jackets were hanging on brass hooks. Senora Madryn lifted one down and started to help Lily into it. Lily shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I won't be getting a coat."

Senora Madryn smiled. "Please, Senor Wakefield was very persistent, and I promised I would see to it that you try these on."

Unwilling to argue, Lily slipped her arms into a dress-length charcoal wool and buttoned it beneath her chin. With straight lines and a narrow skirt, it was striking, but she knew she couldn't afford it, and she didn't want Reece to purchase it. Reluctantly she emerged to show it to him. "You can't buy me a coat."

"We're just looking," he said easily. "Try the jackets on and forget the coats."

She was happy to comply, relieved to return the coat to Senora Madryn. Next, she pulled on a hooded, fleecy sheepskin jacket that was soft and warm. It felt marvelous, and for an instant Lily was tempted to inquire about the price and splurge, but she reminded herself of her careful budgeting. She tried to keep a hefty sum in savings in case of an emergency and for her next trip to Chile. Without a doubt, she could find a practical, warm jacket for far less money in Iowa. She modeled it for Reece, however, and then quickly modeled a striped wool parka.

Finally Senora Madryn whisked away the other dresses, leaving Lily wearing the black silk, and picked up Lily's blouse, sweater, and skirt. "I'll box these for you," she said and left.

When Lily reappeared, Reece was holding a small box under his arm and the charcoal coat lay over the back of a chair. Senora Madryn chatted with him, thanked them both, and he picked up the coat to hold it for Lily.

"You didn't!"

"Oh, but I did."

While she wrestled with anger and the temptation to return the coat even if it caused a scene, he said, "Come on, Lily, well be flying over the *cordillera* after dark."

Senora Madryn said, "It is lovely on you. So pretty with your dark hair."

"Thank you." Lily capitulated and slipped her arms into the coat. The moment they stepped outside, Reece said, "Thank you for wearing the dress and coat."

He sounded so humble that she lost some of her misgivings. "Thank you for the gifts, but you know I didn't want you to do it."

"We have to do something about those shoes." He looked past her at the row of shops.

"Reece, I can't let you spend money on me this way. It isn't right."

Smiling, he reached out to button her coat beneath her chin. He said, "Now, look here, I'm doing what I want and what I can afford." His blue eyes darkened as he looked at her. "You look luscious. I'd like to peel away every stitch."

"Can't we shop for shoes in a less expensive place?"

Ignoring her remark, he took her arm to stroll toward another shop, which looked as exclusive as the one they had just left. "Look at it this way. If you marry me, I'll buy all your clothes from now on. If you don't, you'll have little mementos to remember me by when you're back in Iowa."

He lengthened his stride. "I'm glad you don't dilly-dally. We need to hurry."

"If you'd take me to a big department store, I could take care of everything in less than an hour."

They headed toward another shop, and suddenly she realized he was laughing. He caught her questioning glance and cocked an eyebrow. "*Eres muy testaurda*, Lily."

"You're as obstinate as a balky horse, Reece Wakefield."

He laughed aloud. "Takes an opposing force, honey. You have a little streak of that yourself!"

"I'm still in Santiago, I'm wearing the clothes you bought, and I'll go home with you tonight."

He grinned. "And I have a cat now, you haven't consented to marry me, and I didn't get the mink."

"What a concession!"

He held open a carved wooden door, and a chime rang as they entered. "I'd like to see that wardrobe of yours. I'll bet I can guess what you own." He paused to greet a salesman. They were seated in brown leather chairs. Reece remained quiet while the man took Lily's shoe size and left. As soon as they were alone, Reece continued, "I'll bet everything is practical, plain, no-frills—"

She laughed. "You're right! That's all I need."

At his insistence she selected a pair of high- heeled black sandals. Reece purchased the shoes, and they headed for the car.

When they reached it, Lily froze. One glance at the small green Jaguar, and anger tore through her. The narrow backseat was filled with boxes that matched the one under Reece's arm. He said, "We don't have time for a fuss. I want you to have them."

"Did you buy everything I tried on? I don't need those clothes; I can't use them." She felt dismay that he would spend so much on her.

"They're for your honeymoon if you agree to marry me," he answered quietly.

"You may be a little premature."

"I'm willing to take the chance because I might not get another opportunity to buy something for you. Don't be angry." He held the car door open.

When they were both inside, she said, "If we don't marry, I'm returning those things."

"Fine. I wish we had time for dinner, but we don't. Can you wait to eat until we're back at the ranch?" When she nodded, he cautioned, "It'll be a long time."

Her thoughts were still on the packages and his solemn statement, "... get another opportunity to buy something for you." She said, "I can go all day without eating."

"I guess opposites attract."

"That's a lot of expensive clothes, Reece."

He sobered and took her hand in his. "I'm doing what I want."

Quickly he whipped downtown and helped her out of the car. They walked over the cobblestones that had been closed to traffic. "Here's Falabella. You wanted a big department store." He accompanied her to purchase two pair of jeans. When Lily firmly insisted on paying for them, Reece told her he had some purchases of his own to make and he would meet her in twenty-five minutes. Lily bought a pale blue sweater, two cotton shirts, and two pairs of socks. She purchased a pair of boots and rabbit fur gloves.

When she met him, he held an armful of boxes. Taking hers, he carried everything to the car.

They picked up General Jackson, then stopped at Lily's request and bought a fish, which she fed to the cat while Reece drove to the airport. Finally, they boarded the plane.

As they taxied along the runway, Reece glanced down at General Jackson in Lily's arms. "If that cat knows what's good for him, hell be a better passenger on the return trip than he was when we came."

"That's why I fed him all that fish. You watch. Hell lie down and go to sleep."

She stroked his head, and the cat settled in her lap, his rumbling purr audible in spite of the noise of the plane.

"If you let me sit in your lap and rubbed me that way, I'd settle down too."

"I bet you would!"

An hour after they left Santiago, the flight to Hawick became rough. Gray clouds, like trails of smoke, floated past the plane, and Lily glanced inquiringly at Reece. He looked relaxed, no more intent than he had earlier.

"It's a good thing your mother-in-law isn't along now, since she doesn't like to fly."

He smiled. "Would you rather not be?"

"I'd be glad to get on the ground again. You don't ruffle easily, do you?"

"Only when I'm shot at by a beautiful woman."

"Thank you," she replied serenely.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile. "You don't ruffle so easily yourself."

"Only when I'm kissed by a handsome rancher."

"You certainly pick your times. You would say something like that when I have to keep all my attention elsewhere."

Suddenly the plane hit an air pocket and dropped.

As night came on, the flight became rougher, the air more turbulent. She wasn't anxious to face Clint. She didn't want Reece to see she was perturbed. "How can you see to land?"

"I called Clint from the airport and told him to light the runway. You'll see."

Shortly, she did see it; first, she noticed a patch of light. As they neared she saw the floodlights on the runway, cutting a swath of light in the inky darkness below.

Reece was silent, all his attention at the controls and the ground rising swiftly to meet them. They hit, bounced, landed, and slowed to halt.

Reece climbed out, and General Jackson leaped down, bounding into the darkness.

When Reece helped Lily down, he said, "If you'll wait, it'll only take a minute or two to tie down the plane." He began to work quickly.

She realized that he wanted to protect her from encountering Clint alone. She shook her head. "I'll go inside."

He straightened. "Wait a second. I'll come back and finish this."

"No, do it now. I don't mind, really."

His blue eyes peered intently at her a moment, and she saw the concern in them. "I'll be all right."

Picking her way through the darkness, she strolled toward the house. She turned the collar of her coat up and suddenly knew why Reece had asked that she wear the new dress. She was certain he wanted her to look and feel her best when she confronted Clint again.

Cold wind buffeted her, and holding her purse under her arm against her side, she thrust her hands into her pockets. While she dreaded the encounter with Clint, she wasn't going to hide behind Reece.

When she entered the warm kitchen, Clint was standing at the sink, washing his hands. The odor of burned meat filled the air, and a blackened skillet sat on the stove. Dressed in faded jeans and a blue sweater, Clint turned, and she looked into another pair of deep blue eyes. With a calm she didn't feel,

she said, "I'm back, Clint. Your father persuaded me to stay the rest of the week."

Chapter Ten

He gave her another quick, assessing glance. Leaning against the counter, he crossed his arms over his chest, but to her surprise the angry resentment didn't show in his features. Nor in his voice as he said, "I thought he would."

He shifted his feet and looked vaguely uncomfortable, but his gaze was unwavering. "Mrs. Dunbar, my father talked to me this morning and told me how you met and when he proposed." Clint looked down a second and shifted his weight again.

"I know how tough and stubborn my father can be." He raised his head. "I guess I owe you an apology."

Lily's breath went out in a long sigh, and she realized how braced she'd been to face another of Clint's angry attacks. Amazed at the change, she smiled. "That's all right. I think your feelings are normal and quite understandable."

"I wasn't very nice."

"Let's forget it." Suddenly she realized he was studying her intently, and she was certain there was something else on his mind.

She waited, but he remained silent. At that moment the door opened, and Reece entered, his arms full of boxes. He frowned and glanced quickly at Lily before he greeted Clint. "Did the kitchen catch on fire?"

"No, just my dinner," Clint answered.

"Let me have the rest of my things," Lily said. "I'll take them up to my room."

"I'll do it. We haven't eaten, Clint. Will you please get steaks out of the refrigerator?"

"Did you bring that cat home, Dad?"

"Yep. He shot out of the plane. He doesn't care about air travel," Reece said dryly.

Lily paused and caught Clint watching her with curiosity. Suddenly she wondered what Reece had said to his son earlier. She looked sharply at Reece, but he was occupied hanging up his coat. He crossed the room to the sink, washed his hands, and asked Clint, "Want me to fix you a potato too?"

"I had one, but I can eat another. I ruined my dinner."

"You wash these while I take Mrs. Dunbar's things to her room."

"I can manage," Lily said, but Reece picked up the stack of boxes and joined her. When they reached the end of the hallway, she said softly, "Clint apologized to me."

"That's good. I told you he'd come around. He will even more when he gets to know you."

She heard the relief in his voice. "What did you say to him?"

Reece answered offhandedly. "I just told him how we met and when I proposed."

"He keeps looking at me as if there's something he wants to ask or as if he can't figure me out. It isn't because of what you said to him, is it?"

Reece's blue eyes were wide and unconcerned. "I doubt it, Lily." He opened the door to her room, and she entered while he stepped back and waited. On the dresser was a vase of red roses from his greenhouse. Every table in the room held vases or bowls with orchids: small purple ones, large white ones, yellow and pink. While the flowers were beautiful and she loved them, the blossoms stirred a ripple of consternation. She gazed accusingly at Reece.

"Rather sure of yourself, weren't you?"

"What's that?" He set the boxes on the bed.

"You know what I'm talking about. All these flowers for me. You knew I'd do what you wanted."

He smiled. "I didn't think you'd abandon General Jackson in Santiago."

"How could you be certain of finding me?"

He laughed. "The flowers were meant to make you happy, not angry. Shall I gather them up and pitch them in the trash?"

"No. You haven't answered my question. You didn't rush straight to Santiago because you took time to do all this. How'd you know I'd still be there?"

He crossed the room to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You drove and I flew. That gave me quite an edge. I called and found out which flight you'd made a reservation for."

She looked around again and felt another wave of irritation.

There was laughter in his voice as he said, "I haven't ever seen flowers make a woman mad."

"You're just so damned sure of yourself!"

He laughed aloud and pulled her to him. "Lily, I had to be. I couldn't let you go, and I wouldn't accept the possibility that you might."

His words and the earnest tone of his voice made it difficult to stay angry. He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes before his gaze shifted to her lips.

She ignored her increased pulse rate and said, "And now, in typically male fashion, you'll kiss me until I lose all my wits and forget my aggravation."

"That doesn't sound bad." He raised an eyebrow. "Lose all your wits?" He leaned forward to brush her lips with his, and a wild churning started deep within her.

"All," she repeated. "Not one shred of sense will remain."

"I have to see it to believe it." His arms tightened around her. "I've waited too long for this." His mouth pressed against hers, opening hers, intensifying in her a flash of yearning. Vaguely she noticed a whiff of aftershave, the faint odor of wool from his shirt. Her arms slid around his neck, resting on his hard, broad shoulders. He did exactly what she had predicted. She felt as if she were drowning in his kiss. If, at that moment, she had been asked two plus two, it would have taken her minutes to calculate an answer. Thought diminished, dissolving into a growing response and need. Finally he released her. His voice was husky as he said, "If we were alone, I'd say to hell with dinner right now."

"We're not alone."

He stepped away reluctantly. "I'll fling the steaks on to cook."

"I'll change and be down in a minute."

The devilish twinkle appeared in his blue eyes. "Want some help?" he asked softly.

"No!"

Chuckling, he reached out to place his hand against her cheek. Laughter faded from his eyes, and he regarded her soberly. "I'm glad you're here, Lily."

The breathlessness she had experienced during his kiss returned full force. Silently she watched as he left and closed the door behind him.

She shook her head. It was hopeless to fight him. She wondered if he would let her go easily when the week was over. Would she want to go by that time? She realized it would be far more difficult next time.

It made her think of Clint. His attitude had changed, but there was something about her that puzzled him, she felt certain.

She showered, dried her hair, and dressed in new jeans and the pale blue sweater. After unpacking the boxes and putting her things away, she went downstairs and found Reece and Clint working over dinner.

The tantalizing aroma of sizzling steaks and hot coffee filled the kitchen. "Can I help?" she asked.

"Clint and I have everything under control. There's your glass of wine."

She sat down at the table and picked up a glass of chilled red wine to sip while both men finished getting dinner on the table.

All through a delicious meal of tender juicy steaks and fluffy potatoes, buttered carrots and bread, she caught speculative glances from Clint. When the meal was over and they rose from the table, Reece said, "Clint and I'll clean."

Lily took his arm. "Oh, no. I insist. Go sit down in front of the fire and forget the kitchen."

Reece picked up his cup of coffee and left. Lily glanced at Clint and said, "Go on. I'll do these."

"No, I'll help."

Lily carried dishes to the sink and began to rinse while Clint cleared the table. As he set plates on the counter, he paused. She glanced up to find him studying her again.

He tilted his head to one side, and she discovered the reason for his curiosity as he asked, "Did you really shoot my father?"

Chapter Eleven

What had Reece told him? she wondered. "Well, yes . . ."

Clint's eyes widened. "He said you did!"

"I said you did what?" Reece asked from the doorway as he entered the room to return his empty cup.

Lily blushed, wondering if she would ever hear the last about that shooting. "Did you tell Clint I shot you accidentally?"

"Or missed accidentally." Reece's blue eyes twinkled.

"I didn't intend to hit you, and you know it!" She explained to Clint, "Your father was going to shoot a guanaco, and I couldn't bear to see one killed. I didn't know any other way to get his attention quickly—"

"You made me notice you, all right!"

Emphatically she finished, "I didn't mean to wound him."

Clint's eyes were wide; he listened with such close attention that Lily wondered about it.

Suddenly Clint laughed and looked more like his father than ever. "There've been some people who'd have liked to take a shot at him, I'm sure, but no one has before you."

"Thanks, Clint," Reece said dryly.

"He showed me his scalp. Dad said you've been down here alone. He said it's your third trip to Chile. It's rugged in the *cordillera*."

She thought she detected a note of acceptance in his voice. She replied, "It is, but I like it."

"How did you get started studying guanacos?"

While she talked with Clint, Reece quietly helped with the dishes, and soon they were finished. Lily declined anything to drink, and both men opened bottles of cold Escudo. Reece put his arm around Lily's shoulder to stroll to the living room. When Clint started down the hall toward his room, Reece said, "Come join us."

After a slight hesitation, Clint returned and sank into a large leather chair, draping one leg over the arm.

During the next hour, they chatted, and Lily realized Clint had some of his father's charm. When he excused himself and left to study, she turned to Reece, who was sitting on the sofa, his long legs stretched in front of the fire. A log fell, sending a shower of bright orange sparks up the chimney as flames curled and licked around the thick, brown wood.

Lily said, "He's like you."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Both."

Reece laughed softly and patted the sofa. "Come over here."

"Not on your life. We have a chaperon, remember?"

"I hate to say 'I told you so,' but you've won him over."

"I'm glad, but I don't think I did it. What did you tell him about the shooting?"

Reece shrugged. "When I found you were gone, we talked. I knew he made you leave."

She frowned. "It's just that he brought part of the outside world with him, a degree of reality."

"I told him a little about you and set a few rules about his treatment of my guest."

She could guess the extent of Reece's anger and the lecture he'd probably delivered to his son. "It's a wonder hell speak to me at all!"

"Or vice versa. Clint is bullheaded and can be rough."

"You can't blame him." She asked again, "What did you say to him about the shooting?"

He grinned. "He was in the kitchen when I left. Clint lives in the kitchen. The last thing as I went out the door, I leaned over, told him to look where you shot me, and then I left."

Shock coursed through her. "Just like that? You didn't explain anything?"

"Not a word. Gave him something to think about while we were gone."

"Oh, Reece, for heaven's sake! You didn't tell him any of the circumstances?"

"Nope."

"No wonder he kept studying me! No telling what he imagined. That's terrible."

"Oh, no. It put a little respect in the boy."

"You have an ornery streak!"

"You'll turn my head with all those flattering remarks. Ornery, arrogant, autocratic." He raised an eyebrow. "What is it you like about me?"

"Your devilish good looks!" she answered, amused.

"Oh, really. Sure you don't want to come sit here?" he asked, indicating his lap.

"I'm positive."

He laughed, and after a moment he said, "Let's go to Torres de Paine Park tomorrow."

"I don't have my tent or sleeping bag now. They're on their way to Iowa without me, thanks to you." , He grinned. "We've called the airlines, and they'll hold them in Iowa for you. You won't need them because I have a tent and a sleeping bag."

"There you go again. You're an incurable autocrat."

"No, I'm just pragmatic. Why take two when we'll only use one?"

"You know, you're not doing yourself any good when you make statements like that. Just because I succumbed to your charm once doesn't mean I ever will again."

"There's nothing wrong with admitting you want to be loved, Lily."

"You're talking about sex, not love, that's what you can't seem to see."

"I can see I want you over here in my arms right now," he said softly. His blue eyes darkened as his voice became husky. "I want to kiss you and touch you." His gaze lowered. "Wouldn't you like me to?"

She felt her body respond to his steamy glance, and nerve ends sparked to life. "Reece, don't look at me that way."

"Why not? I'm not doing anything except thinking about what I'd *like* to do."

"You might as well be making love to me!"

"Oh?"

He uncoiled, and she said quickly, "Well, not quite! Stay on the sofa."

"I will if you'll come here."

"No I will not. You stay where you are."

He sank down again. "Whatever you say, Lily."

She couldn't help laughing. "I win about one out of every twenty contests between us."

He smiled and shrugged. "It's not that bad. If I let you win them all, you'd be bored stiff."

"How about two out of twenty? That would double my rate."

"No, that's where you'd reach the level of boredom." With his booted feet planted widely apart, he leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. "Well, if you won't let me kiss you, shall we start packing and getting things together for tomorrow? You can take care of the food while I get out the equipment."

"That's fine, but I want two tents and two sleeping bags. Reece, I had a nice down sleeping bag that was light to carry."

"Don't blame me. You're the one who put them on the plane."

"You're the one who kept me off that plane! By now, I should be on my way to Iowa with my down sleeping bag."

"It's not half as much fun to sleep with as I am."

She laughed. "Such modesty!"

"You won't need your tent or sleeping bag. I have a trailer."

"With one bed?"

He smiled. "No. We used to take the boys camping. You can sleep twelve feet away from me if you want."

"That's so reassuring!"

He laughed, rose to his feet, and picked up the empty beer bottle. "Want to help?"

"Sure, if I can. I don't know where you keep everything."

"Just rummage around. You'll find enough food. Make some sandwiches and put them in the freezer; we'll eat on the way. The pantry holds plenty."

For an hour they worked. Lily discovered the kitchen was orderly and it was easy to find the food and utensils they needed. Reece pulled on his black parka and left for the garage to return shortly and park by the kitchen door.

He entered with a cold gust of wind. "Get your coat and come look at the trailer."

She dried her hands and went to get the sheepskin coat. Outside, a porch light shed a yellow glow over a red pickup truck and a white eighteen-foot trailer.

She stepped inside and looked at dark brown mahogany veneer walls and russet carpeting. There were two convertible gaucho couches, a propane-butane range and sink on her left, and opposite the range, a refrigerator. At the back were a bathroom and closet. She said, "After a tent this looks like total luxury."

"It's comfortable. Do you have any food ready?"

"Yes." Together they returned to the kitchen and in a few trips loaded the trailer.

When they finished, they hung their coats in the kitchen. Reece switched off a light and draped his arm around her. Together they walked through the silent house to Lily's room. He stepped inside with her and closed the door quietly behind them.

Before she could protest he said, "I'm going to leave in a second. I just wanted to tell you good night." He tilted her chin up a fraction, and the touch

of his warm fingers sent a wild current through her. "I'll see you at five in the morning. Night, honey."

He left quietly, and she gazed at the door as Reece pulled it shut behind him. She was surprised he hadn't kissed her; she had expected him to, and, she realized, she had wanted him to.

A hungry longing swept over her, and she knew she wanted his kisses, his hard, strong arms around her, his lean, muscular body against hers. He'd awakened hunger she'd kept suppressed so carefully and for so long.

She undressed and climbed into bed, shivering between cold sheets until her body's warmth banished the chill. While she lay in the darkness, she thought about the day and how close she had come to going home.

What did she feel for Reece? Desire was overwhelming; he'd destroyed her guarded reserve, but she didn't want to mistake passion for love.

She remembered his kiss earlier in the evening and drew a sharp breath. How difficult it had been to sublimate the passionate part of her nature; she had succeeded so well until she had encountered Reece.

In spite of the teasing banter, he was, as she had told him, autocratic and arrogant. They were sure to clash head-on. Was there enough love growing between them to withstand such confrontations? Her life with Bill had been so different. But she had been a different person, far less self-reliant and independent. She lay on her back and continued to gaze into the darkness. It was Wednesday night. How much her life had changed since Sunday! Would it change as drastically before the next Sunday came? she wondered. Finally she drifted into a troubled, dream-filled sleep.

In the early hours of Thursday morning, Lily rose, dressed, and joined Reece to tell Clint goodbye. Clint had chartered a plane to get home from Santiago. Now, one of Reece's men was flying Clint back to Santiago.

When Clint was ready to leave, standing in the kitchen with them, Reece left the room for a moment to get his coat.

Clint's blue eyes were as direct as his father's. He asked, "Have you given Dad an answer yet?"

Startled, she replied quickly, "No, of course not, or we would have told you. I don't know what I'll do, Clint, but we'll call you immediately. Your dad meant to call you before."

She felt that the hostility was gone, but she wasn't sure she had his acceptance. There was a hesitation, a holding back. Along with it, there was still a gleam of curiosity in his eyes, as if he were a little uncertain about her. She was sure the fact that she had shot Reece was the source. Evidently she didn't fit any of Clint's preconceived notions.

The silence was uneasy, broken by Reece's return. He wore his black parka over a heavy brown sweater, jeans, and his black boots. He clasped his son on the shoulder. "I'll go out to the plane with you."

Once more Lily felt the stab of cold blue eyes. "I'm glad I met you, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you, Clint. I'm happy to have met you," she answered just as solemnly. She couldn't visualize this tall young man as her stepson.

The two men left, a rush of cold air sweeping into the warm kitchen as they departed. Leaving the kitchen, Lily drifted to the greenhouse to look at the lovely, exotic flowers. Idly she touched the soft, iridescent pink petals of an orchid. The back door closed, and she turned.

Reece appeared and leaned casually against the door jamb. "We're alone."

With an effort she kept her voice firm, ignoring temptation. "And we're going to Torres de Paine Park, remember? You told me you would take me to see it."

"You wouldn't rather spend today at home?"

She heard the undercurrent of longing, felt the quick charge between them. "No. Reece, you have to give me a chance to think. Too much is involved.

Your life will go right on, but marriage will mean a complete upheaval in mine."

He smiled and answered gently, "Okay, honey. Torres de Paine it is. Come, my love, the trailer awaits us."

Within the hour they were enroute south. As darkness faded to light, Lily gazed at the now familiar rugged terrain. The road was a bed of rock cut into the mountain.

Eventually they reached paving and spent the morning winding over the *Cordillera* in breathtaking ascents and sharp inclines.

Once again they left the paving and followed a rough, rocky road. The land grew more rugged, broken by fords with sheer blue glaciers rising steeply between snow-capped mountains. Along the shore flocks of birds hovered. Terns, with their black-tipped wings, circled over the water, gray against a blue sky.

Lily glanced at Reece, who was concentrating on driving. "I'm glad I didn't try this alone."

"You would have made it, I'm sure."

"If you want me to drive for a while, pick a less hazardous stretch, and I'll take over."

"Thanks. I will if I get tired."

"I've never been this far south."

"Chile has everything. It has deserts and fertile valleys. The lake district is perfect for skiing, and down here are fjords, glaciers, and mountains."

It also had Reece Wakefield. Already Iowa seemed terribly far away. Glancing at him, she considered his profile, the long, thick lashes, the blue eyes, the dark hair with a sprinkling of gray. Turning to watch the scenery,

she tried to ignore the sweeping current of longing that came with his proximity.

It was a long, rugged drive through Chilean Patagonia. Reece drove with the competence she had expected, and she knew they covered the distance in as little time as possible.

Before sundown she had her first glimpse of the Paine Cordillera. Reece braked, and they looked ahead. Purple in the distance, the rocky extrusions had an awesome grandeur. The rugged outline was unique, sharp peaks etched against the sky, and she knew it would be unforgettable.

Overwhelmed, she gazed in silence for a moment before she said, "I'm so glad you brought me to see this."

"It's impressive, isn't it?"

She turned to look at him and found him studying her intently. He said quietly, "You see, Lily, I don't know any other woman who would've liked this."

"I think you're wrong." She looked at the mountains again. "They're magnificent!" He put the truck in gear, and it bounced over the rough road. In the last light of day, he found a campsite at the base of the mountains.

She stepped outside to breathe cold, fresh air. To the north of the trailer spread a forest of beech trees, and their sweet, woody scent filled the air. Ahead of the trailer, dark and majestic, the mountains towered over them. She strolled around the trailer, damp, brown leaves and twigs rustling softly with her steps. Coming down from the mountains, a stream gurgled nearby.

Suddenly she heard the click of a rifle bolt. She turned and saw Reece raise a Browning to his shoulder to aim across the stream as Lily glimpsed the red-gold fur of a fox darting between the trees.

Chapter Twelve

"Reece!" she shouted, dashing toward him.

Lowering his rifle, his head jerked around.

"You can't shoot that animal!"

"Lily, it's not a guanaco; it's a fox. He's a predator, dammit!" He raised the rifle and turned to aim.

"Reece!"

His blue eyes met hers and locked in an unrelenting gaze.

She lowered her voice. "I'm sorry, but I just can't stand killing. It's murderous, even if it's only an . . . an animal."

Suddenly she was filled with anguish. In that second she saw the hopelessness of the opposition between them. This hard, implacable man was born to hunt. He lived a primitive life on the rugged, isolated ranch. He was a philistine; his ancestors hunted to survive. Killing was as ingrained in his nature as eating, drinking, and sleeping. He was king in his small corner of the world. She knew how unyielding he could be. Arrogant and tough, remorseless when he hunted, he wouldn't give up hunting because it distressed her. There were other issues that went deeper.

In the few seconds while she gazed at his unreadable blue eyes and felt the charged air between them, she knew the hopelessness of the situation between them.

"I'm sorry, Reece," she said quietly. "It's too important to me."

Reluctantly he lowered the rifle, running his hand across the back of his neck without taking his eyes from her.

She wondered if he finally realized the futility of a union between them.

Wind ruffled the wolf-fur trim of his jacket; a gust tugged dark curls away from his face. His jaw was set, and his shoulders looked stiff. The seconds ticked by. She wondered what was going through his mind. Waiting, almost dreading the words she could imagine forming in his thoughts, she stood quietly.

"Lily, I've hunted since I was nine years old."

She realized then, instead of giving up the relationship between them, it would be far more typical for him to try to override her wishes, to ignore them and expect her to conform to his. She couldn't do it. It went against everything in her nature.

She felt rage and hurt and frustration. She loved him. How much or how deeply didn't matter. All she was certain about was, it would hurt to leave him.

Wordlessly she turned and entered the trailer. After a moment she glanced outside and saw him walking away through the trees, rifle in hand. She wondered if he would kill an animal anyway.

A shudder went through her, and a great sense of loss enveloped her.

Numbly she worked over dinner. She heated slices of cold beef, cooked mashed potatoes, and frozen peas, which she had learned Reece liked. Her shoulders tense, she kept waiting to hear a gunshot, but there was only unbroken silence.

The door to the trailer clicked, and Reece entered. Her heart hurt to notice the deep creases that bracketed his mouth. He looked so tired. She remembered that they had been up since before dawn and he had driven hard over rough roads for long hours. Added to that was the turmoil of the past hour.

"How can we work this out?"

At a loss for words, she blinked in surprise, staring at him.

In a quiet voice he continued, "There must be some way, some compromise."

She gazed up at him warily, unable to imagine that he would give up, barely daring to hope that he would.

"I don't know how we can compromise. Killing is killing."

"I can't give it up."

"I know that, but I can't change either. That's just the way I'm made."

"There goes dinner, you know. I expected to shoot a rabbit and cook it."

"I couldn't eat one bite."

"You're not a vegetarian."

"No, but whether it's reasonable or not, I feel very strongly about hunting."

Again, she was the object of intense scrutiny. She knew that their future course hung on the next few minutes, yet the issue was more complicated than just hunting.

She remembered all the things he'd persuaded her to do against her principles of a lifetime: to stay a week, to remain after Clint's arrival, to keep the clothes bought for her in Santiago. She knew she might be throwing away a wonderful, exciting future with him by remaining firm, but she was compelled to do so. Her school, Iowa, friends were all part of a rather dreary routine, full of tedium, but she was used to it; it was comfortable. Was the situation between them enough to overcome years of habit?

He tilted his head to one side slightly and continued to regard her silently. She began to wonder how long they would face each other without talking and what was going through his mind. Finally he asked, "Lily, would it be acceptable if I agreed to put away the guns when you're present?"

She drew a long breath, realizing this arrogant, proud man was willing to make a concession. She mulled over what he said. Cautiously she asked, "Explain what you mean when you say if I'm present."

"I mean I won't carry a gun or hunt if we're out together like this."

"You don't mean just out of my sight?"

"No. I have my boys to consider. They have always hunted with me. Do you expect all four of us to bend to your wish?"

"No," she answered quietly.

"I'd still like to hunt with the boys, but I'll give it up on any trip with you or anytime at the ranch when you're with me. Which means I'll virtually give it up anyway. I hunt with my boys about six times a year."

"Clint will dislike me even more if he discovers I've changed your life-style that much."

Reece shook his head. "Not when he sees how much happier I am with you."

Hope flowered inside her with his last words. She realized that if he was willing to yield that much, she should give thought to yielding somewhat herself. She carefully considered his suggestion. She didn't like the idea of killing whether she was present or not, but she could live with his compromise.

"I guess I can go along with that."

She saw the relief sweep through him and wondered if what he was feeling could in any way match what she was experiencing.

Setting the rifle down carefully, he crossed the short distance to pull her to him. He placed his cheek against her head and stood quietly holding her.

"Thank goodness," he said with such sincerity that it shook her to the core. She closed her eyes and listened to his heart.

She had the feeling she'd just averted disaster. She began to perceive the depth of her feeling for him. It was bliss to hold him, to have him close to her, to touch him.

How long she stood quietly in his arms, she didn't know. After a time he released her.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, if you'll keep your word."

"I will."

He pulled her close again, and she closed her eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart. She felt relief, but along with it was a certainty that she should go home, back to Iowa before she gave him a final decision.

After a few minutes, she moved away. "Dinner will get cold. Are you ready to eat?"

He nodded and went to wash up. All through dinner, their conversation was pleasant, inconsequential, but she felt tense because she knew she had to tell him that she was going home.

He appeared relaxed, but she noticed a steady watchfulness. He didn't try to make love to her, but merely kissed her good night and moved to a bunk in the front of the trailer.

Long after she had undressed in the narrow bathroom and slipped between covers, she lay awake. She could see Reece's profile outlined against the window and knew he was sitting up on the couch below the bunk, gazing out. Occasionally he smoked a cigarette.

She started to speak to him but bit her lip and remained quiet. She dreaded telling him that she had to go, but she knew she couldn't accept his proposal until she viewed it calmly at home in her own element. Essentially she was a country girl from Iowa. She knew if she told him, he would say he was a country boy too—but were they the same?

He seemed in better spirits the next day. They rose early, ate, and spent the day climbing the Paine massif.

There never seemed to be a good moment to tell him her decision. At the end of the day, they returned to the trailer. In the last fading light of day, Reece built a roaring fire, piling up brush and logs until orange flames leaped in the air. She watched him work, his lithe movements indicating his fitness and vitality.

He straightened and brushed his hands against his jeans. "We can roast marshmallows after dinner."

The next day would be Saturday, and they would return to the ranch; Reece would expect an answer from her.

He tilted his head to one side to study her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he said, "You've been unusually quiet."

Resolutely she steeled herself for a confrontation.

She had to go home to think things through. Meeting the warmth in his blue eyes, she felt a tightening inside. "I have to go home," she said.

Chapter Thirteen

Her heart began to thud at the visible shock in his eyes. A shuttered look came over her face, and her heart wrenched because she knew she was the cause of his anguish. His pain was so intense, she was tempted to relent, to forget her resolution.

"Does that mean your answer is no?" His voice was flat, hiding any emotion.

She shook her head. "No. I just need to look at this in the proper perspective. I have to go home and think about your proposal."

"You're damn careful."

"That's just the way I am, and I can't change now."

The tension between them grew. "There isn't a man at home?"

"No, I've told you that several times.

"I want to go home and see if I feel the same about you when I'm in Iowa." She waved her hand. "This is magical; it's awesome and not quite real to me. Reece, I can't go through another heartbreak. I have to be very sure."

"All right, Lily." His eyes darkened, and his voice was deep. "I'll give you something to be sure about. Come here." He caught her off guard, and she stumbled slightly. His hand snaked out and seized her arm to haul her roughly against him. Like a steel trap, his arms closed around her. With an intensity that ripped through her, his blue eyes stabbed her.

She didn't know if it was hurt or anger or passion that made his voice gravelly and tense. "Remember this when you get back to Iowa."

Her heart hammered in her ears as he kissed her in a demanding, merciless kiss that brought a burst of response. Age-old, primordial, his plundering kiss made her forget the cold wind, the mountains, Chile, everything except him. It seared her, burning deeply, inciting the fire he could arouse so fast.

"Reece . . ."

"You're not going to walk out of my life now, Lily, without remembering me or what I've offered you. Not by a damn sight!"

Shaken by his words and his actions, she pleaded, "I want to think things over calmly. Reece, if it were the other way around, if I asked you to sell the ranch and buy one in Iowa and live there— would you give me an answer in a week?"

"That's different," he said harshly. "And the difference isn't you moving versus me moving. You know I have roots here that go back through generations."

"I have roots too, and even if you didn't, you'd give it more thought than a week. It's just that—"

"Try and think rationally about this!" he said in a threatening tone, his blue eyes blazing. He swept her against his lean strength, and his mouth possessed hers in an explosive kiss that carried through on the threat that had been in his voice.

Her heart thudded against her ribs as she was overwhelmed by him. How could she hold to her resolve to go home when he kissed her so ardently? She tried to wriggle out of his embrace, but his arms tightened until she thought she couldn't breathe.

Her eyes flew open and met his unwavering gaze.

The hood of his parka dropped to his shoulders, and his curls were blown in disarray. She remembered her first impression of him, wolfish and menacing to her peace. Still, she couldn't resist him, and he knew it. He asked, "Where is your logic now?"

She raised her chin in defiance. "The logic that makes me go home to think things through is part of what attracted you in the first place. I'm sorry if you're angry."

"I'm not angry, Lily. I'm determined as hell that you won't go to Iowa and forget me."

"How could I do that? You know I won't!"

Looking into his stormy face, her heart thundered in her ears. Between them flared an ancient primeval male-female tension. He grasped her shoulders to turn her around to look at the magnificent view of the Paine Cordillera.

The last rays of receding sunshine struck rough stone, changing granite to brilliant gold, leaving shadows blue. Across the jagged peaks snow sparkled in glittering contrast to the dark blue sky. It was breathtaking, but not as much so as the man behind her.

Whipping down the rough granite of the mountain, wind lashed them, but it's cold chill wasn't as unnerving to Lily as Reece's unpredictable actions. He stood behind her, his body touching hers lightly, with both hands on her shoulders.

When he spoke in her ear, his voice was deep and gruff. "Look at that."

"It's beautiful," she whispered and drew a deep breath. If only her heart would stop pounding.

He spoke in her ear, his breath warm on her skin as he asked, "Will you remember it?"

"You know I will."

His strong hands propelled her around to face him. "You'll remember the mountains and the man who loves you and the love we had here."

He pulled her to him again. His kiss ravished her mouth, and she could no more have stopped her response than she could have flown to the mountaintop.

He scaled the walls of her caution, battering them down with roaring passion.

Insulating her against the chill was the conflagration he kindled. Holding her in the circle of his arms, she felt his hands yank down the zipper of her parka and peel it away, flinging it on the brown leaves at their feet. Cold wind whipped against her, and she shivered.

She knew what was happening, what he intended.

"Reece, there's a warm trailer only a few feet away. You can't make love like this! Not out here!"

"Oh, yes, I can, and you won't ever forget, Lily, not if you live to one hundred."

Her heart slammed against her ribs, and she shivered. "I'll freeze!"

His blue eyes glinted with passion and determination. "No, you won't. That warm body of yours that's fire beneath my hands will cry out for more."

Anger flared. She didn't want to be seduced in the cold, buffeted by wind off the rocky mountains. "I don't want this. It's not—"

"Not logical," he drawled. "No, there's nothing logical about sex, about love, but you want it. Tell me you don't."

His mouth possessed hers in a kiss that was arrogance and honeyed seduction at the same time. She felt her anger slipping, transformed into something else, a hurricane of passion. Its violent tumult swept over her, crushing resistance, carrying her along with its tide.

Her need for him sang into life as he held her against his taut, muscular, ready body.

How could he have such power over her! It dismayed her because his driving passion unleashed a corresponding hunger in her that she could neither understand nor fight.

He flung off his parka and dropped down to pull her into his arms. She realized he had been right— she didn't feel cold. Vaguely, she heard the fire

crackle close at hand, felt its heat on her legs, the cold mountain air against her back.

He stripped off her clothes as quickly as his own, shifting her between his length and the roaring fire. She relished his furred chest against her soft, warm skin as he enfolded her in arms of steel.

His hands explored intimately. She groaned in surrender, her lips seeking his as his marauding tongue invaded the moist, honeyed warmth of her mouth. He stretched out, pulling her against his rock-hard length, his heated flesh against hers.

She turned to him with abandon, straining against him, unable to get close enough. Beneath his hands, she came alive in every inch of flesh, squirming against him, gasping as each caress, each kiss drove her to deeper excitement.

Her mind was dazzled, bereft of logic as her hips undulated against his hard body in a response that was as fundamental as breathing.

His hands fondled her unresisting body, sending thrill after thrill coursing in every vein. Vibrant sensations spread through her, making her movements uncontrollable as she strained against him. Her eyes closed tightly, she wound her fingers in the silky softness of his hair. Her body relished his hard muscles, the sharp hipbones, his flat, narrow waist.

She felt caught in a raging inferno. He invaded with hands and tongue, exploring her soft, feminine warmth, and her pliant body writhed with each blazing stroke.

How much she needed and wanted this strong, forceful male! She felt she could never get enough of him, that she would do anything to keep him.

His weight shifted and moved over her.

His voice was rough. "I'll make you mine forever. Ill bind you to me with fetters that you can't break."

His words fueled the conflagration inside her, the stormy longing that made her thrust her hips upward to meet him.

He took her in a wild, all-consuming haste; she met it with surging abandon. All sound was drowned by a roaring in her ears. "Reece, please!" she cried and buried her head in his shoulder as her hips moved with rhythmic force. He drove her to a peak she hadn't thought possible. Ecstasy flowed through her, rippling to the core of her being.

Finally he shuddered with release and crushed her to him, his weight a welcome heaviness on her.

After a bit he rose, scooped her into his arms, and carried her into the warmth of the trailer.

He slipped between the covers on his bunk and held her tightly in his embrace. "We'll start home at dawn."

How final that sounded. Regret and desolation swept her, but she fought against it. She struggled with an unreasonable panic at the thought of leaving him, but she had to go home before she gave an answer to something that would change her life drastically and irrevocably.

The ease they had always experienced with each other was gone through the night. A tenseness between them remained, and their drive home was strained.

Once Lily dozed to wake with her head against his shoulder, his arm around her. Evening shadows covered the smooth paving. She realized they had made good time on the trip back.

"We're almost home."

Home. How good that sounded, yet she felt another wave of desolation. She wondered what his thoughts were while they covered the last miles to the ranch.

They bathed and changed clothing. After dressing in her blue sweater and jeans, she cooked steaks Reece had set out while he unloaded the trailer.

It was after midnight by the time they finished. Pushing back his chair, Reece rose from the table. He was wearing a light blue sweater, the color of his eyes. His faded jeans fit snugly, and Lily couldn't stop remembering the lean, hard body beneath the soft material. He said, "Maria will clean in the morning."

"IH help. We can do the dishes quickly now."

He moved around the table and took the plate from her hand. "No. I'll rinse them after a while. You have a long trip ahead of you."

"I have to pack."

He smiled. "With your efficiency, it should take all of ten minutes."

She smiled, but she felt the knot of tension grow tighter inside. He seemed to feel it too, as he grew quieter. They walked down the hall toward the bedroom, and she wondered if he would make love to her this last night together. At the door of her bedroom, he paused to look down at her.

His blue eyes were clouded, dark and smoky. He rested one hand on her shoulder while he touched her curls lightly with the other.

The caress was like a feather, but it started a tingling in her heart. In his deep voice he said, "Thank you for this week."

She wanted to declare her love and throw her arms around his neck, but she held back. There still were some nagging doubts about a life with a man as forceful as Reece, doubts about moving to the ranch, so far from all she knew.

He tilted her chin and kissed her, one flaming, soul-searing kiss that threatened to make her toss all caution to the winds.

When he released her, he stepped back slightly, and she knew he wouldn't make love to her that night. The words came out of their own volition. "You made love to me in Santiago and in Torres de Paine, but you haven't here at the ranch."

His voice was harsh. "When I take you to my bed, Lily, you'll be Mrs. Wakefield."

She felt something explode inside. "Reece, can't you see I have to do this?"

His blue eyes were solemn. "Just remember I love you. I've fallen in love with you completely and irrevocably."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him, whispering in his ear. "Reece, I can't help the way I'm made. I have to go home."

"All right. Good night, honey." She stepped into her room, closed the door, and stared into space for a long time until her burning need for him subsided.

She kissed him goodbye early the next morning at Santiago's airport. The jet climbed above the clouds, and Chile was lost from view. - All the long flight to Miami and on to Des Moines, she was filled with weariness, longing, and a sense of desolation. On a chilly November night, she entered a stuffy house. As she went through the rooms, turning on lights, she ached for Reece, for his strong arms, his quick laugh, but she knew she had to wait and see if she still felt that way when she was back in her orderly routine. She phoned Nancy and made arrangements to pick up her pets the next day.

On her second day home, she had visited her sister-in-law and returned to her house with two beagles, one yellow tabby and two silver-tipped Persian cats. Just after she had fed them, the doorbell rang. Lily answered it to face a delivery man with a huge box in his arms.

One glance at the Chilean customs labels and she knew that Reece had sent the clothes home to her. She signed for them and took them inside, relishing

opening each one. On top of the first box, which contained the black dinner dress, she picked up a folded piece of paper.

Opening it, she read in bold scrawl, "Lily, darling—We miss you terribly. Love, Reece." Beneath his name was a smudged cat print, and she laughed at the vision of Reece acquiring General Jackson's muddy print. The next day she answered the door to find two dozen red roses.

When she opened the card, she read, "We miss you more. All our love, G.J. and R."

Still she waited. She felt she would never know for certain until she was in the routine of work. After she began her new job, it took two more days, and she knew she had waited all that would ever be necessary.

She wanted to marry Reece. Her heart was his, totally, absolutely.

When she returned home Tuesday, she made her decision. As soon as she reached home, she rushed to the telephone to call Reece. With the receiver at her ear, she paused. A sudden cold thought hit her that maybe after she had left, he might have changed his mind.

Slowly she lowered the receiver and studied it, debating about calling. Finally she rose and pulled out her box of stationery to write instead. If anything had happened to make him change his mind, it would be easier for him to handle.

She went to the kitchen table and sat down with her cream-colored stationery in front of her. She felt her fingers tremble with eagerness. Now that she had made the decision, there was no doubt, no lingering question in her mind about anything.

She wrote, "Dear Reece: Yes! Yes! Yes! I can't wait! I love you, Lily."

She sealed it and yanked on her coat to rush to the post office. It had closed for the day, but she dropped it in the box outside. She felt like singing for joy. She returned home, too excited to eat, and forced her thoughts to making arrangements to quit her job.

She decided to wait until she heard from Reece. The moment he received the letter, she expected him to call, and then she would notify the board of her decision. She knew the competition when she won the job; there wouldn't be any difficulty replacing her, she was certain.

She looked down at the two beagles at her feet. Laughing, she knelt to pet them. "South America for you, chums!" she said and watched their tails wag happily as she scratched their ears.

In a daze of joy, she tried to concentrate on her job during Wednesday. The pressures of school kept her mind occupied, but she found it increasingly difficult to work efficiently. She forgot papers and left them in teachers' classrooms, she was late for an appointment, and she missed lunch. Appalled when she finally realized how uncharacteristic those actions were, she knew she had better hear from Reece soon.

She faced Thursday, determined to keep her wits about her because it was an all-important day. Thursday evening was the annual school open house and parent-teacher meeting. Lily would be introduced to parents. She knew she couldn't announce her resignation until she had notified the board, so she would just have to go through with the open house. She thought of the brief speech she had planned and began to reword it carefully.

How long would it take her letter to get to Chile? Again and again, she thought of calling Reece, but she wanted to wait and let him get the news by mail.

The next day was chaotic at school with everything going wrong at once. A set of books was delivered by mistake and had to be sent back to the depository, a water pipe burst and flooded the hall and a classroom, and she had an unexpected conference with an irate parent, which delayed her getting home from school. When she picked up her mail, she discovered the postman had tried to deliver a parcel and it was waiting at the post office. She rushed to get there before closing and fought five o'clock traffic on her return.

As soon as she entered the house, she ripped open the battered box from Chile. Beneath rustling tissue paper, she removed a whisper of black lace. It

was a sheer, delicate nightgown, and it gave her more joy than any other gift she had received because it meant he still wanted her. She rushed to the phone and placed a call to the ranch. Her heart thudded with eagerness that changed to disappointment when he didn't answer.

Without allowing for the time change, she knew he could be anywhere on the ranch or even in Santiago with Dylan.

She glanced at the clock and realized she would have to hurry to get to the PTA meeting.

Eating a hasty dinner, she fed her pets and rushed to select something to wear for the open house.

Without hesitation, she chose the black dress Reece had purchased for her.

When she stepped outside, the first cold white flakes of winter were drifting silently to earth. She scraped the windshield of her car, climbed inside, and as she drove to school, rehearsed what she would say. Once she stepped inside the overheated building, she shed her coat and began to meet parents. Folding chairs filled the stage in the cafetorium, the combination auditorium and cafeteria. Bright fluorescent lights illuminated the crowded room.

To one side of the rows of folding chairs, against the east wall, was a long table with a punch bowl filled with lemonade, as well as paper cups, napkins, and platters of cookies.

When the meeting finally started, Lily took her seat with teachers on the front row. Colors were presented, and everyone rose to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. As soon as the audience was seated, three fourth-grade girls came forward to sing. The music teacher, Mrs. Wilens, sat down at the piano, and the girls sang "America" and "Yankee Doodle." Lily listened to the children, who were followed by the chairman of the PTA. While Mrs. Soames called the meeting to order and welcomed those attending, Lily found it increasingly difficult to keep her mind on the program. Thoughts of Reece interfered. It was impossible to keep from smiling. She felt a continual racing excitement, an eager anticipation. For the hundredth time she counted the days until she thought he would be likely to get her letter.

With an effort she pulled her attention back to Mrs. Soames and within minutes listened to a glowing introduction that made her wish she could have turned in her resignation *before* this meeting.

She rose to her feet and moved to the podium as Mrs. Soames sat down. Lily smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Soames." She turned and scanned the pleasant, smiling faces. "I'm happy to have the opportunity tonight to meet parents." While she spoke, her gaze continued across the room and halted. In shock she looked into a pair of very blue eyes with thick, long-fringed lashes.

Chapter Fourteen

Reece! For the first time in years, she lost her poise. She felt a burning warmth that seemed to start in her stomach and rise to her cheeks. She forgot what she was saying or why. In a split second she recalled that first encounter on the mountain when he had raised his fist to strike her and she had looked into those deep blue eyes and time ceased to exist.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a slow smile, and he winked at her. He sat near the back of the room, looking relaxed as he leaned back in his chair, arms folded across his broad chest. Dressed in a dark brown, western-cut suit, his white shirt open at the throat, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen, and her pulse roared in her ears, drowning out all other sounds.

She realized there was a roomful of expectant people gazing at her, waiting for her to continue speaking.

As if coming from a distance, she heard her own voice. "I'm sure Longfellow School has a fine year ahead."

She tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but it was impossible. She watched him uncoil his long frame and rise to his feet, and she knew she had to get off the stage quickly.

"I hope you enjoy talking with teachers tonight. You'll have an opportunity to see your children's work."

Where was he going? she wondered, making a major effort to concentrate on her words. "Now, I'll turn things over to Mrs. Soames. ..."

Reece strolled leisurely toward the stage. Her erratic heartbeat raced faster as she stopped speaking. He climbed the steps and moved to her side. She felt lost in his blue eyes and watched helplessly as he turned to the audience.

"I hate to interrupt this meeting, but I have an announcement to make. Mrs. Dunbar has consented to be my wife, and she'll have to leave her job as principal."

She was dreaming. She'd wake up at home, and Reece would be thousands of miles away in Chile. He really didn't say she would have to terminate her job. She felt rooted to the stage, unable to move.

Even though that was exactly what she had planned to do, this wasn't the way she had intended to go about it.

He continued as blandly as if he were announcing the serving of lemonade and cookies. "There's a plane to Chile to catch, so if you nice people will please excuse us, I'll take my fiancée and go."

Those blue eyes focused on her with full impact. "Are you coming?" Wordlessly she joined him, and they moved off the stage, leaving behind a stunned audience that began to buzz with conversation. Lily heard Mrs. Soames rise to the occasion and call loudly for order.

Lily walked around the corner and down the empty, brightly-lit hall toward her office. Beside her, Reece's brown boots clicked against the polished red tile floor. They turned another corner and both stopped to face each other.

"Of all the arrogance!" she said and couldn't wait another second to throw her arms around his neck.

His arms wrapped around her and crushed her against him. "Lily, please marry me?"

"I'll have to after that announcement. I'll never get another job in Des Moines!"

She felt the breath go out of his lungs. He shifted and kissed her until she thought she would faint. Finally she moved away a fraction.

"You've embarrassed me enough tonight. Just like that, Reece Wakefield, you walk up in front of all those people and announce we're getting married.

.

Instead of his familiar grin, he gazed at her somberly, his voice filled with urgency. "Lily, I can't live without you."

Her heart flipped, sending erratic currents racing through her veins. Suddenly she wanted out of the school, away from any interruptions. "Let me get my coat, and well go to my house."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes. I sent you a letter to tell you so."

He frowned. "Dammit! Why didn't you phone?"

Now it seemed absurd, but she said, "If you had changed your mind after I left, I thought a letter would give you a better chance to let me know."

He groaned. "Woman, do you know what I've gone through? Next time I propose and you decide to accept, pick up a phone and call."

"I'll do that."

"Get your coat and let's go."

She stepped into her office, pulled on her coat, glanced around, and turned out the light.

They emerged into a world of swirling snow- flakes. She turned to him, "Reece, I love you."

"I was beginning to think you'd never say it," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

He crushed her to him to kiss her.

Finally he released her and put his arm around her to protect her from the snow, the cold, everything in life. It was as though he wrapped her in a promise for the future, a final commitment. Together they headed toward his rented Ford; he held the door and walked around the car to climb behind the wheel.

Everything was ordinary—the car, the school, the snow, but Reece made it extraordinary, magical, and rapturous. She felt as if she were floating in a wonder world. This handsome man, whom she loved so dearly, pulled her close beside him, and his hand rested lightly on her knee while he closed his fingers around her hand.

When they entered her house, the beagles rushed forward to greet them. Reece knelt to pet them and glanced up at Lily as she introduced him to Fred and Petunia. "There are three cats, too, you know."

"General Jackson had better move over. I'd take home a zoo, if necessary."

She couldn't think about what he was saying. All she knew was that she wanted in his arms, wanted to kiss him.

"Did you get a present? ..."

"The nightgown?"

His voice dropped to a breathtaking sensuousness. "Put it on, Lily, so I can take it off."

Her heart pounded in her ears. "I will." She turned to go, but he reached out to take her arm and pulled her back as he thrust his hand into the pocket of his brown coat.

"Wear this with it." He opened her hand and slipped a ring on her finger.

The diamond flashed with a dazzling brilliance, and for just an instant she remembered that same fiery glitter on the mountains in Paine Park.

She threw her arms around his neck. "I love you, and I'll never quit telling you. It's beautiful, and I can't wait to get home to the ranch."

"Ahh, Lily." He groaned and swept her into his arms. "To hell with the nightgown. I'll see it on you some other time."

She clung to him and knew she had come home, that together they had found the love they had both longed for.