

One

It was the last night In the month of September, just after midnight, and Trinity Ann Warrenton couldn't sleep. She had tried, going to bed about an hour earlier, but it had been no use. Tossing restlessly, she had only succeeded in rumpling the once-smooth sheets and twisting her long nightgown around her restive body.

The full moon beckoned her with its mysterious brilliance to come and play. The night seemed alive, and Trinity wanted to join it.

Stephanie had been asleep for hours and wouldn't wake; and even if this night proved to be one of the unusual times when she did cry out, Trinity would be able to hear her.

After a futile attempt to lie still a few minutes longer, she gave up. She simply felt too awake, too full of life, to spend one more minute in bed.

She checked on her sleeping daughter and then silently let herself out the back door of the old farmhouse. Her bare feet ran nimbly over the well-traveled path, out of the yard that surrounded the house and across the field that sloped down toward the pool.

It was one of those enchanting nights when the moon shone as brightly as dim sunlight and there were no clouds to obscure the radiance that was bathing the northeast Texas countryside in bright silver light.

Trinity's fine cotton nightgown flattened against her body as she ran, the wide ruffle around the hem skimming her ankles, the white of the sleeveless Victorian-styled gown shining iridescent in the moonlight and countering her golden-brown skin.

Reaching the short pier built out over the small natural pool that covered about an acre of her land, she flung off her gown and walked to the edge. Feeling the warm night air caress her bare skin, she paused for a moment with her arms outstretched, absorbing the sights and sounds that ribboned seductively through the night.

Lightning bugs flashed, crickets chirped, somewhere out on the main road, a lone car passed, and in the distance, the call of a whippoorwill bounced off a hill, reaching out to a potential mate, who answered. Trinity was absolutely captivated with the luminous magic of the night.

Right before she arced gracefully into the pool, her clear green eyes caught a flash of silver in the woods opposite her, but she thought no more

about it, as her firm body sliced into the water. The water was cool from the underground spring that fed the pool, and it swirled around her naked body in exquisite delight.

Trinity laughed out loud with sheer happiness. Her life, by her own choice, was one of hard work and responsibility, and she hardly ever took any time out for herself. This was a treat, and she was enjoying it thoroughly.

Swimming, floating, diving, she reveled in the feel of the water with an uninhibited joy. Splashing loudly to scare off any water moccasins that might be in the area, she laughed again, hearing the happy sound soar across the night and mingle with the whispering pines that encircled one half of the pool.

Half an hour later, reluctantly deciding she had stayed long enough, she dipped her head in the water, causing her long hair to fall like liquid brown silk away from her face and down her back. She climbed up on the pier and stood still for a minute, letting the water sluice off her body, down around her high, full breasts, toward her long shapely legs and onto the rough boards that fashioned the pier. Picking up her gown, it went over her head, sticking to her wet body everywhere it touched as it settled down around her ankles.

It was then that she saw him. He was walking around the pool toward her, and Trinity watched him come, not one bit afraid. The man was a

stranger, it was true, but there was nothing furtive about the way he was approaching.

Like a lean, hungry cat, he moved out of the moonlight toward her with an uncanny blending of power and grace. It was the oddest thing, but watching him, she could almost feel inside of her the way he moved, and her breath quickened. Walking off the pier and up onto the bank, she waited.

As he got closer, she could see that he was probably in his mid-thirties. Tall, over six feet, with extraordinary silver-white hair, he had a rifle slung across one arm.

There was a harsh intensity about him that suggested a certain violence, and it wasn't just the fact that he was carrying a gun. Having been born and raised in East Texas, Trinity knew what a common occurrence it was to see a man with a rifle. No, it was more than that. It was something about *this* man in particular.

He was wearing a blue knit shirt and skin-tight jeans that explicitly outlined every masculine muscle and bulge. She knew now that his hair had been the flash of silver she had seen just before she entered the water, and the thought that he had seen her naked body as clearly as she was seeing him now sent a thrill of awareness along her spine.

He stopped a few feet away, saying nothing, just watching her with light-colored eyes that looked strangely cold and dead in the warm moonlight. It had been a long time since a man had touched

her senses, but this stranger was doing it effortlessly without speaking a word.

It was Trinity who broke the silence stretching between them, by calmly requesting, "If you're going to shoot me, would you mind telling me the reason first?"

He laughed, a roughly unpleasant sound that grated across the soft midnight. "Of all the things you could have said, that was the last thing I expected."

"I think it's a perfectly rationed response to a stranger who walks out of my woods in the dead of the night carrying a high-powered rifle."

"You're not afraid, are you? I wonder why not."

He smiled a smile that was not really a smile, and Trinity wondered why she seemed to be attracted to him—but there was no hesitancy in her answer.

"I don't frighten easily, Mr. . . ?"

"Chase," he supplied with soft derision.

"Well, Mr. Chase, if you were planning to shoot me without talking it over first, you could have done so before now. That rifle has a long-range accuracy—besides, you would have to take the safety off before you shoot, and that would give me a few seconds to try to distract you or to talk you out of it."

His eyes made a slow exploration of her figure clearly imprinted against the dampness of the gown, but Trinity didn't even attempt to pull the gown away from her wet body. It would have been no use, and she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing how aware she was of the fact

that a few minutes earlier he had seen much more of her than he was seeing now.

"As well as being beautiful, you are very observant," he commented caustically. "But you don't have to worry, I would never kill you. That would be a crime, now, wouldn't it?" He reached out a hand and ran a long finger down her cheek with a touch that was sensual rather than tender.

Trinity's pulses raced with the astonishing electric contact, causing her reply to come out somewhat uneven. "Murder usually is."

"Oh, murder wouldn't bother me," he assured her coldly. "But killing you would. Surely something as rare as you is on the endangered species list."

"I'm *no* animal!"

"There's some animal in all of us," he explained with a sort of bored patience. "It's just that we all have different thresholds in terms of situations and people that bring it out in us—but there is a threshold nonetheless." To this phenomenal statement, he added the question, "Mrs. . . ?"

"Warrenton. Trinity Ann Warrenton. And it's Miss."

His wide, firm mouth, with its full lower lip, broke into a semblance of a smile, and she found herself thinking what a beautiful mouth he had. "Your name," he drawled, "is as improbable as the fact that I have found someone like you swimming alone in a pool at midnight."

"It's not so improbable when you consider it is *my* pool and you're on my land."

Ignoring her pointed statement, he set the rifle

on the ground beside him and stepped closer to her. "Well, Miss Trinity Ann Warrenton, where did you become so knowledgeable about guns?"

"It's hard to grow up on an east Texas farm without knowing something about them." He wasn't touching her now, but the heat from his body was. Nevertheless, her answer was given with a poise that was innate to her, and her eyes never wavered from his. "My father made sure my sister and I knew how to handle them, but I've never been impressed with guns enough that I would walk around carrying one."

"I'm new to the area," he revealed by way of an explanation. "I didn't know what I would encounter, so I came prepared." Again, he reached out—this time to a damp strand of her hair lying by her throat.

"Prepared for what?" she asked, trying to ignore his hand brushing the side of her neck as he twisted the curl around his finger. "Texas hasn't had to defend her borders for a long time now. You must be an extremely wary man."

"Just cautious." He smiled thinly. "I have found that if you have enough power, in whatever form, you can choose whose company you want to be in. I'm particular and I believe in stacking the odds in my favor."

The moonlight was casting shadows on the sharp angles of his face, and Trinity thought that she had never seen a harder, colder man. Still, there was something about him that caused her to want to step closer to him, instead of away from him, which she knew she probably should.

Instead of doing either, she said, "You certainly do! Carrying that big a rifle is definite overkill in these woods. That gun would kill a bear, and there are no bears around here. We do have a mixed breed of coyote and wolf, but I don't have enough cattle on my land to attract them, and they pretty much stay away. Mostly you won't find anything more dangerous than the occasional armadillo or possum."

"I found you, didn't I?" His voice was low and deep and reminded her of a knife that had been temporarily encased in velvet.

"I'm not dangerous unless I'm threatened, Mr. Chase."

"Chase is my first name," he corrected her softly. "Colfax is my last. Chase Colfax."

He looked at her expectantly for a moment, evidently waiting for a reaction, but when he got none, he continued with a sardonic twist to his mouth, "And let me see what I can do about your not feeling threatened."

Before she could guess his intentions, he stepped even closer to her, reaching out to her hair and twisting it into a long, wet rope, using it for leverage to pull her head back with a firm tug, as though he expected resistance. His other hand went around her back, pulling her tightly to him so that her soft breasts were crushed against his hard chest.

The kiss, when it came, was such a surprise, Trinity forgot that her first impulse had been to fight. It was feather-light, totally at odds with his violent expression.

At first, his lips just grazed and teased, experimenting and tasting, causing pleasant sparks of warmth to radiate out to the farthest parts of her body. But when his tongue snaked out, wending its way into her mouth to seek and find her own tongue, it ignited the sparks into a full-fledged blaze, shocking Trinity into a passionate response that she could not comprehend or stop to analyze. She only knew she was melting inside, loving the feeling and not wanting it to stop.

He was the one who eventually broke off the kiss, stepping back, breathing deeply and viewing her with a peculiar expression on his hard face.

"Mr. Chase," Trinity gasped, "or—or Mr. Colfax . . . or whatever the hell your name is, *what* are you doing in my woods?"

For the first time, his laughter was full and genuine. "Oh, Trinity. Don't you know that was the second thing you should have asked, right after you found out that I wasn't going to shoot you? I *am* trespassing, you know."

Trinity could not be assuaged by his sudden good humor, when her body was still vibrating from his kiss. "I'm still waiting for your answer."

"We're neighbors," he told her with what she felt was a deceptive indulgence. "I just bought the place adjoining yours." He pointed in the direction of her woods.

Diverted, she exclaimed, "The Karnes place? I didn't even know it was for sale."

"It wasn't until I made them an offer."

She tilted her head to one side and observed

him with curiosity. "You said that with a certain amount of cynicism."

"I find that most things I want have a price." His face registered a hard contempt. "I usually buy up land wherever I am involved in a project. It's more convenient and private than staying at a local hotel, and the Karnes place, as you call it, is making excellent temporary headquarters."

Trinity shook her head slowly. "That place must have over a thousand acres. You don't do things halfway, do you?"

"Whatever"—he shrugged indifferently—"but in this instance, I think I made a wise choice. Having you for a neighbor may make the cost of the land cheap at twice the price. This bucolic life just might appeal to me after all."

He reached out and ran the back of his hand down her cheek with a killingly sure touch, and she shivered with the warmth it caused. He seemed to enjoy touching her.

"You feel it, too, don't you," he questioned softly, "this chemistry that has been between us since we first set eyes on each other?"

"Yes," she admitted unsteadily. Chase Colfax interested her, and she couldn't help but concede the point.

He laughed, a low, rich sound that she immediately became absorbed in. "You *are* a rarity. Most women would deny it, say no, while all the time they would mean yes."

"I don't play games, Chase, and if we are going to be neighbors, you might as well learn it now."

"Good! That will save a lot of time."

Something in his forceful answer made her continue. "But just because I'm attracted to you doesn't mean I'll be yours for the taking. The entry to your land is miles away from mine, and it's approached from different directions. Even though part of your land runs beside mine and fronts on the same road, there is no entrance there. Who knows? It might be some time before we see each other again." It was the truth, but she couldn't make up her mind whether she was disappointed about the fact or not.

"Don't bet your farm on it, Trinity Ann. We *will* see each other again. You are a very unusual young woman. So far, you haven't done or said one expected thing. You just don't conform, do you?"

"To what?" Trinity wondered aloud.

But he ignored her question and asked one of his own. "You said this is your farm?"

"Yes. It's only thirty-two acres—not big, when you compare it with yours—but it's all I need. My father left it to my sister and me when he died, but my sister has signed her half over to me, since she and her husband have a place down the road."

"What generosity," he mocked. "East Texas land is very valuable, if for nothing else than the mineral rights."

"It's something that goes beyond generosity," she insisted, watching the way the moonlight glinted off his hair. "It's called love."

"I really wouldn't know about that," he responded brusquely. "Do you live here alone?"

"No, I don't."

"So . . . you do conform after all," he drawled his contempt, with maybe just a hint of disappointment, at her flat statement. "You live with some guy, huh?"

"No," she answered evenly. "I live with my three-year-old daughter." She knew what was coming and she also knew exactly what she would tell him.

"You have a child? Well, Trinity Ann Warrenton, you've just managed to surprise me once again, and I can't remember the last time someone did that."

"You must live a very dull life, then," she commented dryly.

"Never mind that. I thought you said you weren't married."

This was what she had been prepared for. Sooner or later most people got around to asking the same question. Trinity looked straight into his eyes and replied, "I'm not married and I have never been married, but I do have a daughter."

Chase shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and regarded her speculatively with his cold blue eyes. Maybe she shouldn't have told him, but she had never been anything but honest about Stephanie and she wasn't going to start lying now. If the facts bothered him, it was his problem, not hers.

Trinity watched Chase Colfax while he assessed this latest information about her. What a strange man he was! It was a curious fact that, when she had first seen him, the possibility that he might rape her never even occurred to her. Her first

impression had been that here was a man who would possibly kill but who would never resort to rape. And now, in the aftermath of his kiss, she knew he would never have to rape any woman.

Despite his jeans and rifle, he didn't seem to belong on a farm in east Texas. Which brought up the question: Where did he come from? Maybe she should ask him. Maybe she should find out if he was married, but somehow she didn't think he was.

One thing she *was* certain of: No woman had ever touched him deeply enough to bring out his softer side—if indeed he had one. He seemed hard, all the way through, like a block of Texas granite, with no veins of softness to mar his tough strength.

Chase finally spoke, breaking into her reverie, and it was his turn to surprise her. "When I first saw you flying down the hill, with your hair streaming out behind you and your feet barely touching the ground, you reminded me of some wild thing—an untamed creature, free of any earthly constraints."

Listening to him speak, it seemed that, just for a moment, his voice had held a different inflection; however, it had come and gone so briefly. Trinity wasn't sure what it had meant. When he continued, his voice was low and cool again, but his eyes burned his desire through the silver night, reaching out to her with a disturbing intensity, weakening her knees and heating her lower limbs.

"And then, when you reached the pier, flinging off your gown and standing still as if you were

. . . *inhaling* the night, do you know what I was thinking?"

"No," she whispered shakily.

"I was thinking what a beautiful body you had and wondering what it would feel like under me, with those long, lovely legs of yours wrapped around my back."

"Don't say those things," Trinity gasped in faint protest.

But it was really too late for any form of protest, because his words had reached out and covered her with a spell of fascination and, when he took her in his arms this time, there was no thought of a fight.

The kiss did not ignite sparks, because it didn't have to. She was already aflame with her own perception of his verbal pictures, and there was no thought as the kiss deepened and went on and on, thrusting through all restraints occasioned by the situation.

The moon could have fallen from the sky and Trinity would never have noticed. She was totally absorbed in the raspiness of his tongue in her mouth and the heat of his hands through the thin damp cotton of her gown.

There was no reason why this man's kisses should have excited her, but they did—ridiculously so, unbearably so. His musky male scent swirled through the air around them, mingling with her perfume and wrapping them both in the sweetness of the night.

And when he finally broke the kiss off, as he had the time before, she was totally disoriented.

His hands on her shoulders kept her steady until her equilibrium returned.

Trinity looked up at the man in front of her and saw a complete stranger, to whom, at their first meeting, she had responded with an inexplicable passion. It didn't make a lot of sense, and she needed time to think, away from his magnetic pull.

"I've got to get back to the house," she choked out, and turned, running back up the slope, not stopping until she got to her room.

Lying in her bed a few minutes later, she thought about her perplexing encounter down by the pool. Could she blame it on the enticing allure of the moonlight? She didn't really know. But she could recall every detail about Chase Colfax: How he had tasted, how he had smelled and how he had made her feel.

She wasn't a silly teenager experiencing the first stir of passion. She had known desire before, but not on this scale. It was an obvious chemical reaction, and whether they would feel the same explosive attraction to each other the next time they met remained to be seen.

Their encounter had been scandalous and it had been intriguing, and Trinity fell asleep, dreaming of a strange, hard man with silver-white hair and ice-blue eyes.

Two

By midmorning the next day, Trinity had already been up and working for hours, doing her best to forget about the man who had so successfully dominated her dreams throughout the night.

Washing dishes, she watched while her golden-haired daughter painstakingly cut out cookies with a star-shaped cookie cutter. "That's really good, sweetheart," she encouraged absently.

Having enjoyed every minute of Stephanie's young life, it was hard for her to realize that her little girl was nearly four years old now. Trinity had a teaching degree, but she had made up her mind not to work away from their home until Stephanie was older and in school. Even though Stephanie didn't have a father, Trinity was still determined to give her as secure a start in life as possible.

"When can we ice these cookies, Mommy?"

"I'll put a batch in the oven right now," she answered, matching her actions to her words, "and then, when the boys get here, Tray can help you."

Her three nephews were going to stay with them for the night while her sister and her husband went into Dallas on business.

"I don't think I can wait," Stephanie told her importantly. She had been working on the cookies for quite some time. "When will they be here?"

"Any minute now."

And sure enough, about that time, Larry, with his thinning brown hair askew and his wire-rimmed glasses smudged, walked in the back door, carrying nine-month-old Joshua under one arm and two-year-old Anthony under the other.

"Mornin', babe. Are you ready for the little monsters?"

"Hey, you be careful who you call little monsters! Those are my nephews, and in *my* family, we don't have anything but little angels. Isn't that right, Joshua?"

Trinity smiled at the little boy as she took him from his daddy's arm. "How's my handsome fella?" she asked him, walking over to the kitchen table and sitting down. Joshua cooed a silly little smile up at her. He was such a happy baby, and she just loved to cuddle him.

Her sister's three children were all very comfortable in Trinity's home, having spent so much time there, and the reverse was also true. There

were times when Trinity thought Stephanie would be quite happy to live permanently with Sissy and her brood.

Larry set Anthony on the floor and walked over to the stove to help himself to a cup of coffee. "I see icing cookies is on the agenda for the day." He grinned, spying the muffin pan—with each muffin hole full of a different color icing, which Trinity had made out of powdered sugar and food coloring—and the little paint brushes by the side of the pan.

"Of course. I keep telling you, the trick is to keep them busy." Her kitchen was old-fashioned but big, and she had set up a card table in one corner of it for the cookie making. "Where's Sissy? Is she getting ready for the trip into the big city?"

Her sister's name was Sabine. Their parents had loved the slow, moody rivers of east Texas and had graced their daughters with two of their names, but Trinity had been born five years after her sister, and, as a baby, she had not been able to pronounce the name Sabine. As a result, "Sissy" had evolved and stuck.

Larry rolled his eyes. "She's home, making fudge."

"The trip's bothering her, right?" Trinity laughed indulgently.

Larry and Trinity both knew that whenever Sissy was upset about something, she invariably made fudge.

"Yep, you know your sister. Even though she knows you take as good care of the boys as she does, she hates leaving them, even for one night."

"Don't worry. The trip will be great for her, and once y'all get on the road, she'll be okay."

Larry was a successful mystery writer, and even though he loved the seclusion of the country for writing, he had to make periodic trips into Dallas to see his agent. Larry refused to fly. Consequently, his agent made the concession to his star client's idiosyncrasies and flew in from New York upon request. Larry was that successful.

Their conversation was interrupted by a five-year-old bundle of energy named Tray bursting in the back door. Again, Tray was a nickname, since the boy had been named after his father, Lawrence Breedlove II, making Tray the third.

"Hi, sweetheart. How were the hens? Did you get all the eggs?" Trinity asked, noticing that Tray was carrying a small basket. He took a proprietary interest in the hens and always inspected the hen house the moment he arrived. He loved to help Trinity feed the hens and collect the eggs.

"No. There were more, but I couldn't carry all of them," he informed her, carefully putting the basket on the counter.

"Well, come here and give your Aunt Trinity a big hug, and then you can help Stephanie paint the cookies with icing."

Running promptly over to her, Tray planted a great big juicy kiss on her cheek and then went tearing off to the corner of the room where Stephanie sat, diligently cutting out more cookies, this time with a cookie cutter in the shape of a clown.

Trinity got up, plopped Joshua in his father's

lap and took a tray of newly baked cookies and the pan of icing over to the table, giving the two small cousins instructions. "Go to it, kids. The secret is to ice them while they're hot, and be sure to change brushes every time you change colors."

On her way back to Larry, Trinity scooped up Anthony, who had been sitting on the floor playing with a truck. "How's my baby today?" she asked him, and in his own fashion he tried to tell her.

"Co'd," he said, pointing to his runny red nose.

"Oh, nooo! Anthony has a cold?"

Anthony nodded emphatically, happy to have his aunt's undivided attention.

"I bet a few cookies would help that cold feel better. What do you think?"

"Co'kie," Anthony repeated happily.

"Okay," Trinity said, carrying him over to the card table, "you sit here and watch Tray and Stephanie ice these cookies, and when they're finished, you can have one." She handed him a cookie cutter of a Santa Claus and a ball of dough to keep his hands busy and then walked over to the stove to pour herself a cup of coffee.

"So"—she viewed her brother-in-law teasingly—"what fiendishly convoluted plot have you come up with for your next book?" Larry's mysteries were famous for their diabolically weird twists, and Trinity loved kidding him about them.

"*The perfect crime!*" Larry wiggled his eyebrows at her. "The killer stabs his victim with an icicle, and when the icicle melts, presto—no murder weapon."

Trinity pretended fascination. "What brilliance! Don't tell me, let me guess—they find the suspect's freezer full of icicles."

"Hey, that's no fair," he protested, his brown eyes laughing at her from behind his glasses. "You're getting too good!"

"I don't think that's too original, hon. You're slipping. I'm sure I read that plot years ago in a how-to-kill-your-brother-in-law book."

"Damn! I hope my agent doesn't read that book. Then hell know all of my secrets."

"You're not going to tell me about your next plot, are you?"

"That's right. You can buy the book when it comes out. I need the royalties."

"Yeah, sure you do." She laughed. "Like *another* hole in your head. Come on, Larry, tell the truth. You haven't thought up your next plot yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't," he agreed cheerfully. "Actually, I haven't done a good ax murder in a while, and I thought the subject might have unexplored possibilities."

"Ugh, Larry! Sometimes I worry about Sissy and the boys living with you. You are just too weird!"

"Weird but loveable," he amended, then changed the subject. "What have you been up to in the last day or so?"

Larry constantly worried about her living alone and kept close tabs on her, but he tried not to be too obvious about it.

"Oh, the usual. I finally got the fall garden in."

She wanted to tell him about her meeting with Chase Colfax, but she knew Larry well enough to know that she should ease into the subject. He would have a "hizzy fit" if he knew there had been a stranger anywhere near her property.

"You had to do it by yourself, didn't you? You couldn't have waited for Bob to come down and help." His tone was one of resignation as he named the man who worked for him.

"I don't *need* any help. Besides, you know I like to do things by myself."

"What I *know* is that you're stubborn as hell. So . . . what else has been happening?" Larry was watching her closely. "Something must have. You've been fidgeting like a cat walking over a stack of hot bricks for the last five minutes."

"Did you notice the full moon last night?" Trinity sidestepped the question casually.

"No, I was sleeping, and you should have been, too. Were you sick?"

"No, Larry, I wasn't sick. Honestly! You are worse than a mother hen! It was just too beautiful a night to sleep, and if you had any soul at all, you would have noticed."

"Sissy loves me," he observed with fake injured pride.

"For some obscure reason, I do, too, but that's beside the point."

"So what *is* the point?"

Larry wasn't a famous author for nothing. He had a rare insight into people that never ceased to amaze her.

"I met someone down by the pool last night."

"What?" Larry nearly came up out of his chair. "Why didn't you tell me this right away?"

"Here . . . give me that baby before he comes to bodily harm," Trinity demanded, taking Joshua out of Larry's clutches and sitting back down at the table.

"It wasn't any big deal," she stated, feigning a nonchalance that she didn't feel. "He said his name is Chase Colfax." She had no intention of telling him the true nature of their encounter.

"No big deal!" Larjy exploded. "Good grief! Half of east Texas has been trying to meet Chase Colfax, and you calmly tell me you met him down by the pool!"

"Well, yes." She was a little bewildered by Larry's words. "He said he bought the Karnes place for some sort of temporary headquarters."

"And it never occurred to you to wonder what kind of headquarters? Wasn't his name at all familiar to you? Where have you been these last few months?" Larry banged his fist on the kitchen table, causing Joshua to jump in her arms.

"Which question do you want me to answer first?" she asked dryly, appeasing Joshua with some plastic measuring spoons.

"Honestly." Larry shook his head in disbelief. "It's no wonder I worry about you. You wake up in a new world every morning!"

"You know that's not true," she corrected defensively. "I've been busy. Mrs. Janis wanted her quilt order finished the day before she gave it to

me, and I have been working nonstop on it—besides everything else I do around here. Anyway, just exactly who is Chase Colfax and why has everyone been trying to meet him? And," she tacked on as an afterthought, "why can't they meet him?" It had seemed incredibly simple to her.

"He comes from somewhere up north," Larry began heavily, "and he has taken Texas by storm. He started in Houston, getting involved in offshore drilling and establishing a huge new oil refinery on the Gulf Coast. Now he has moved his way up to Dallas. He's been there for a while, and, by all accounts, he has Dallas eating out of the palm of his hand. I think he has out-Texaned the Texans, being three moves ahead of them in their own field—energy—and they are fascinated."

"Okay . . . but what's he doing here, and what is all the uproar about?"

"He's in the area to set up a monstrous coal-gasification plant."

"Oh, no! Not strip mining?" Trinity exclaimed, thinking of how the surface method of mining could destroy the land, turning once-fertile fields into a stark, barren landscape.

"Yeah, but don't worry. The main area of activity will be at least thirty miles away, and it won't be coming in this direction."

"Well, I suppose it will be a boon to the area . . . jobs, housing, and all of that," she said uncertainly, trying to be fair but hating the thought. "What else do you know about him?"

"You listen to me, babe"—Larry pointed a bony finger at her—"*stay away* from him!"

"For someone who expresses himself so brilliantly on paper, you can sure be vague at times," she said wryly. "Why don't you just spit it out! Don't be shy. What are you trying to say?"

"Let me put it another way, my dear. He eats little girls like you for breakfast."

"Larry, I am twenty-five years old," she stated with loving exasperation. "Just because I was sixteen when you married Sissy doesn't mean I stayed that young girl you first knew. I have a little girl of my own now, you know."

Without a doubt, he knew very well. Larry and Sissy had given up their home in Europe when they had heard that Trinity was pregnant and alone and her dad sick, coming home to lend their considerable moral support and help.

"You can save your protests. I know good and damned well that you're a full-grown woman—too independent for your own good and with a courage that scares the hell out of me. Even though I don't like to admit it, you can take care of yourself—in *most* cases. But this man is different."

"Why? How could you possibly object to someone you've never met?"

"They say he has gray hair?" Larry returned abruptly.

It was a statement and a question and a condemnation all rolled up into one, and Trinity was even more puzzled. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but remember. "It's really more silver-white—like the color of last night." She seemed to have no control over the softness that crept into her voice

at the memory, but she could have bitten her tongue off when she saw Larry's eyes narrow.

"Whatever the hell color it is," he growled, "it's prematurely gray. Do you understand? *Premature!* Chase Colfax has seen everything there is to see, has had everything he ever wanted to have and has done everything there is to do—and he's only thirty-six."

Trinity couldn't help but ask, "Is he married?"

"No!" Larry glared at her. "And he has a deadly reputation where women are concerned. His affairs are short and sweet—he gets bored very easily and walks away without a backward glance."

"Is he going to settle here?"

"I have the terrible feeling I'm not getting through to you." Larry groaned, rubbing his hand across his pleated forehead.

"Just tell me what you know," Trinity wheedled.

"No! He won't settle here. He *never* settles in any one spot. He usually stays in one place just long enough to get moving whatever project he is currently involved with, makes a few million and then moves on. And I don't think he's too anxious to make friends here. The old Karnes place is heavily guarded."

"Guarded?" Trinity was astonished. "Against what?"

"Against anyone who might intrude upon his privacy. He only ventures out in public when it is advantageous to him. He's not exactly reclusive, just selective. He commutes back and forth to his Dallas headquarters by helicopter."

"Helicopter?"

"Yeah, he's had a heliport built south of his house. Haven't you heard him go over?"

"I guess not."

"Well, maybe he approaches from the other direction, I don't know. But that helicopter and the strip mining aren't the only things that have people buzzing. He has a red Lamborghini that can almost fly, it's so fast." Larry shook his head admiringly, then concluded, "He really hasn't been in these parts that long, but believe me, he has made his mark. Everyone is dying of curiosity about him."

A loud knock on the front door interrupted their conversation, and, rising, Trinity walked lissomely through the living room, carrying Joshua on her hip.

Trinity tended to surround herself with the things she loved, and her living room was no exception. Wild flowers of all sorts were scattered across the pattern of the durable material covering the bulky old couch and chairs, which were placed around the room for ease of conversation rather than chic order.

Flourishing green plants filled every corner of the room, and on the floor, the earth-brown rug Trinity had braided was splashed through with the deep orange hue of a sunset. Leaf-green sheer curtains draped the windows, revealing the view beyond them, so that the room seemed filled with the outdoors. It was an easy, comfortable room, and it showed the effort she had put into it.

Opening the door, she found Chase Colfax stand-

ing on her front porch, leaning against the door-jamb, displaying a sophisticated elegance that hadn't been apparent the night before.

It was something of a shock to see him so soon after she and Larry had been talking about him—and in broad daylight, too. But here he was, and, if possible, more severely masculine than he had seemed by moonlight.

His features were really too harsh to be called handsome. However, no one would dare argue with the term "devastating" to describe the man now standing in front of her.

His expensive attire of a dark-blue pin-striped custom-made suit toned with a lighter blue shirt and a deep-burgundy print silk tie was in sharp contrast to her own casual outfit of faded jeans and front-buttoned camisole.

He had one hand inserted casually in his pants pocket, drawing back his jacket and exposing a close-fitting vest. The narrow pinstripes of the beautiful material emphasized the long, muscled strength of him and sent the blood pounding through her veins.

It was happening again! His sensual magnetism was reaching out to her without his saying a word.

She hadn't even noticed that Joshua had a handful of her hair bunched in his tiny fist. Chase noticed, though, because he reached out and carefully freed the silky strands, leisurely brushing the back of his hand against her bare skin as he did so.

Her stomach clenched at the simultaneous soft touch of his hand and the sharp-edged sound of his voice asking, "Who is this?"

Before she could answer, a strident noise impinged upon her consciousness, interrupting her train of thought.

"What **is** that noise?" she asked. Not exactly what you would call a clever greeting to a man who had kissed her so completely just hours before, she reflected humorously.

"It's some heavy machinery working out by the road," he explained with an unreadable expression on his face. "I'm having an access road built to my land from this side. They'll be working out there most of the day."

"I see." She didn't really. Why would he do a thing like that? "Come on in."

He stepped through the door, looking around him with interest. The farmhouse, old and solidly built, contained good-sized rooms with nice, high ceilings. The front room needed to be large, because it was the only place Trinity could set up her seven-foot-by-eight-foot quilting frame, which she had built herself. It caught his interest, and Chase walked over to view the quilt on which she was currently working.

"This is quite nice," he observed, touching the exacting needlework that took Trinity such long hours. "You can hardly see the stitches!"

The sight of Chase's long fingers stroking the beautiful quilt so delicately brought strangely erotic images to her mind of the evening before, when

his hands had caressed her body with the same care. Trinity found, to her consternation, that she was having trouble keeping her mind on the subject of quilts.

"That's the whole idea. You are only supposed to see the effect, which is lights and shadows. It's like art, only you use fabric instead of canvas and oils."

"Are you making it for yourself?" Chase returned his full attention to her.

"N-no. I sew them for other people. It's a skill that not a lot of people have in this day and age . . . or want to take the time to learn. It's a shame, too, because when you make a quilt, you are really stitching history."

"What is this pattern called?"

How peculiar, Trinity thought, that such a hard man would be interested in quilting. But his interest seemed quite genuine.

"Flowers in a basket," she replied, jiggling Joshua on her hip as she spoke. "It's a marvelous design based on diamonds, triangles, squares and rectangles. The way you put the different shapes together forms a floral pattern."

"But doesn't it take a long time to make?"

"Definitely. Most of them take months, but I enjoy it and I can make extra money doing it."

"And is making money so important to you?" His eyes were steady on her face.

"Only inasmuch as it helps to feed my daughter and myself." She grinned, totally unperturbed by her plight.

At that moment, Larry walked into the room. "Hey, babe, I've got to go, but I took that last batch of cookies out of the oven and gave them to the kids."

Trinity sensed Chase stiffening beside her as Larry stopped, suddenly realizing she wasn't alone.

"Larry, I'd like you to meet Chase Colfax. Chase, this is Larry Breedlove."

"Are you Lawrence Breedlove the writer?" Chase asked, politely extending his hand.

Larry briefly acknowledged the fact with a nod of his head, withdrawing his hand as soon as he could. It was obvious he had already prejudged Chase—especially now that he knew Trinity might be involved.

"I had heard that you lived around here. I enjoy your books," Chase told him, coolly but sincerely.

"It's always nice to meet a fan," Larry replied with a blatant curtness, drawing Trinity to him and kissing her on the cheek. "I'll give you a call tonight. Will you be okay?"

The meaning of his question was not lost on Trinity. "I'll be fine," she reassured him. Larry turned and walked back out to the kitchen after having dropped a kiss on Joshua's head. "You be careful driving," Trinity called after him.

When she turned back to Chase, his blue eyes were absolutely frigid, exactly matching his voice. "I thought you told me you didn't live with a man."

"I don't," she said huffily. Trinity rarely got angry - although being accused unjustly of some-

thing would do it every time. However, before it came to that, she decided to explain. "Larry is my brother-in-law. He and Sissy are going to Dallas to meet with his agent, and I'm keeping their boys for them."

"Why does he have to call you tonight?"

Now she was mad. Trinity's green eyes blazed her obvious anger into Chase's cool countenance. "Figure it out for yourself, Mr. Colfax. What the hell business is it of yours, anyway?" Her hold on Joshua tightened, but the baby continued gumming away happily on the measuring spoons.

"I'm going into Dallas for the day"—a muscle worked in his chiseled jaw—"but I'll be back this evening. I want you to have dinner with me."

So that explained his business suit, Trinity thought irrelevantly—and he was inviting her to dinner! Her anger disappeared as fast as it had appeared. The fact that she had known this man less than twelve hours didn't seem to matter to her overinflamed senses.

Joshua had hold of another fistful of his aunt's hair, and once more, Chase reached out and disentangled her from Joshua's grasp. This time, he deliberately brushed the strap of her camisole off her shoulder as he did so. One thousand tiny tingles of pleasure ran up her spine, somehow moving into her chest, making it impossible for her to draw a deep breath.

"I—I can't," she started to explain, just as a howling din started up in the kitchen and Stephanie ran out screaming, "Mommy, Mommy! Tray is painting Ant'ony with red icing!"

"Calm down, sweetheart, calm down. I don't think I've ever heard of anyone's dying from being painted with red icing. IH take care of it in a minute. Right now I want you to meet a new neighbor of ours, Mr. Colfax. Chase, this is my daughter, Stephanie."

Chase's face softened imperceptibly as he nodded to the adorable little girl with yellow icing smudged on her cheek. Stephanie, for her part, immediately scooted behind her mother, peering out from around Trinity's long legs, grinning shyly at the tall, elegant man.

Trinity laughed ruefully—not only at her daughter's sudden shyness, but at the fact that she could think of more opportune times for World War III to break out among the kids than when Chase Colfax was standing in her living room looking so heart-stoppingly virile.

"Okay"—she sighed—"go back and tell Tray to stop painting Anthony this *minute*, and I'll be right there." Trinity shoved Joshua at a startled Chase. "Here, hold him while I go take care of this little fracas . . . no, not like that! He's a baby, not a rifle. . . . Here." She readjusted Joshua in the strong unfamiliar arms and started toward the kitchen, ignoring Chase's sharp, "Wait a minute!" but not Joshua's suddenly unhappy little whimpers.

She turned back and smiled reassuringly. "Now, now, I'm not leaving you, Joshua. I love you and I'll be right back. In the meantime, you be nice to Mr. Colfax, you hear?" Magically, Joshua's tiny

face cleared, and he started cooing, happily drooling all over his measuring spoons.

Trinity swiveled and walked into the kitchen, finding Tray holding a dripping red paint brush, critically viewing Anthony, who just "happened" to be wearing the same shade of "sugar red" and who was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Tray, shame on you!" she rebuked him as she picked up his younger brother. "Anthony! You are so pretty and red!" She kissed his face five or six times and confided, "*And* you taste so good!"

Anthony stopped crying and observed his aunt with interest. Seizing the period of momentary calm, Trinity walked over to the sink and washed his face, arms and neck and blew his nose.

"You didn't miss a single place, did you, Tray?" she asked in a scoldingly stern voice. Tray's mouth was turned down, but she could tell he wasn't sorry about painting his brother—only about the fact that his usually loving aunt was upset with him.

Discovering that she couldn't really concentrate on discipline when her mind was so completely absorbed with Chase—whose masculine presence seemed to be dominating the next room—she relented. "You and Stephanie go outside and play. I'm going to put the two babies down for a nap, so y'all be quiet."

Tray brightened visibly and grabbed Stephanie to race outside before his aunt could change her mind.

Trinity took a now-clean Anthony into Step-

nie's room, changed his diaper and settled him down on the bed amongst a wide assortment of stuffed animals. He immediately latched onto a tattered pink rabbit, gave a big sigh, rolled over on his tummy and went to sleep.

Smiling to herself as she remembered Anthony's exhausted little face, Trinity walked back to the living room, coming to a stop in the doorway.

Chase, sitting in her favorite rocking chair, awkwardly but securely holding a fascinated Joshua in his lap, looked immensely relieved to see her. The baby was totally involved in turning what looked to be a genuine sapphire, mounted on a solid gold tie tack, around and around.

"I'll take him now," Trinity told him. "He needs a change and then a nap. Do me a favor and bring me the diaper bag that's sitting on the floor by the kitchen table." Taking Joshua into her bedroom, she lay him back on the bed, unsnapping the legs of his overalls.

Chase had gone obediently enough into the kitchen, Trinity observed to herself, but there had been something in his face to suggest that he was not used to taking orders—from anyone. After all, if what Larry had told her was true, Chase Colfax was an extremely wealthy man, answerable to no one.

The man occupying her thoughts walked into the bedroom, carrying the requested diaper bag, and sat stiffly down on the bed, watching her talk softly to Joshua as she changed him.

"You're very good with children," Chase com-

merited with what seemed like reluctance. "I don't know too much about kids, but then, I've never been around them very much."

"The main thing to know about children is that they are sponges when it comes to receiving love. You can't give them too much." She smiled down at the little boy, who responded in kind. "Isn't that right, Joshua?"

It had been gradually dawning on Trinity that Chase wasn't ill at ease with either her or the femininity of her sunshine-yellow bedroom. Rather, he seemed to be holding himself aloof from the environment of her home—as if he had no intention of letting himself get too used to a warm home containing love and children.

Evidently, though, he couldn't help his curiosity. "Why did you come back, after you had handed the baby to me and were halfway out of the room?"

Trinity glanced at him. What a complex man Chase was—and one who, for better or worse, interested her greatly. "Because Joshua trusts me and I wanted to make certain he knew I wasn't deserting him. He might not have understood my words, but he could understand my tone."

Chase looked at Trinity as though he had never encountered anyone quite like her before, then stated softly, "He smells like you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The baby. You must have held him for so long that he picked up the scent of the perfume you wear. While you were out of the room, the smell of you stayed with me."

"Oh," was the only response she could manage for the moment. Nestling Joshua and his bottle on a pallet of quilts beside the bed, she arranged pillows completely around him so that he wouldn't roll around too much. "Come on, we'll go out to the front porch," she directed, unconsciously giving Chase another order.

Once out on the porch. Trinity breathed deeply of the fresh, pine-scented air, trying to dispel her awareness of the man who had followed her out of the house. The leaves were already starting to change, and soon it would be Indian summer, one of her favorite times of the year.

"Why can't you?"

At the sound of his voice, she turned to find Chase's eyes trained on her. All of the impressions she had formed about him the night before had been right. Everything that Larry had told her about him only reconfirmed it.

Chase was a wary man, surprisingly closed off from people around him. *Except her*. He responded to her on some fundamental level—just as she did to him.

And his eyes. They were an ice blue. She had seen them flame with desire. Was it possible that they could ever melt with tenderness?

"Why can't I what?"

"Come to dinner with me."

"I told you. I'm baby-sitting the boys tonight."

"That's simple enough. I'll hire someone to stay with them while we're gone."

What had he said last night? Oh, yes. He had said, "I find that most things I want have a price."

"No!"

Chase looked at her broodingly, his gaze going down to her full lips . . . then traveling to the shadowed cleavage revealed by the low-cut cami-sole . . . and then on to the hard nipples of her unconfined breasts jutting against the thin knit of the top.

"Then tomorrow night."

Despite her best intentions, Trinity found herself thinking of the way he had kissed her. His kisses had been like a slow fire, burning their way through her, and they had left her wondering what more of his lovemaking would be like.

"All right," she yielded.

Chase ran a finger caressingly across her collarbone. "Why is someone like you buried down here?"

His voice. Oh, that voice! As sharp as it could be at times, it could also turn to velvet—a hypnotic velvet.

"I'm not buried," she returned huskily. "I'm alive and I love living here. There are no restrictions. I can't imagine raising children in a city. Here they have complete freedom, plus the learning experience of being raised on a farm."

Chase looked down toward the pool for a long moment—and when he looked back, his eyes pierced straight through Trinity with the force of a blue-hot laser.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow night at seven-thirty," he grated roughly, "but this will have to hold me until then."

All at once, Trinity realized that she had been waiting unknowingly for Chase to take her in his arms, and he certainly didn't disappoint her. The kiss was a very thorough and effective assault on her already heated senses. Capturing her lips, Chase moved his mouth hungrily across hers in a devouring possession.

Running his hands over her body and down to her softly rounded bottom, he pulled her tightly against his own hardened need, making his masculine excitement very apparent. "See what you do to me, wild child that you are?" he whispered hoarsely into her mouth.

Trinity couldn't speak—she could barely think, because Chase's tongue had engaged hers in a gentle skirmish of pleasure, with him the eventual winner by mutual, unspoken consent. Drawing her tongue into his mouth, he sucked it with a slow, gentle motion, savoring almost every inch of it with the muscles in his mouth and causing her to moan with an undisguised longing.

There had been no man since Stephen. She had dated occasionally, but not seriously. Being alone, she had not been lonely.

But now there was Chase, and their impact on each other was undeniable. Their relationship had the detonation potential of pure nitroglycerin. Trinity had always heard it could happen like this, even though, now that it had happened to her, she wasn't sure how to handle it.

However, it didn't seem to matter right at this moment, and her hands went up into the silver

thickness of his hair, pulling his mouth even harder against her own. Trinity felt his fingers inside her camisole, unbuttoning the garment and gathering her firm breast into his hand. Kneading it gently, Chase flicked the already distended nipple with his thumb, pausing . . . then squeezing it tightly, causing thrilling shocks to surge through her, all of them converging in the very core of her womanhood.

Nudging apart her legs, his leg applied a hard pressure up against the juncture where her jean-clad thighs joined her body. "That's where I want to be," he said huskily into her ear, outlining it with his tongue.

Trinity leaned into him instinctively in a kind of basic seeking and wanting. If they had been alone, there was no telling where the kiss would have ended. As it was, the sound of Tray and Stephanie's racing around the side of the house was the only thing that could have parted them.

Chase drew a ragged breath, took one last look at her and vaulted down the porch steps to his car.

Watching him *whoosh* away in an exotic red machine, Trinity buttoned her camisole with shaking fingers. Larry was probably right, she decided. She *should* stay away from Chase Colfax.

But he had walked out of the silver moonlight and into the quiet of her life with an explosive power she couldn't ignore. And now, tomorrow evening stretched before her with a tantalizing potency.

Larry had been right about something else, too. She had courage, and it appeared that she would need every ounce of it if she were going to pursue this relationship.

Perhaps she was a fool, but she was curious. There seemed to be an undefined substance to the man—a hint of a hidden sensitivity that she wanted to explore. Where it would lead to, she didn't know.

But Trinity found that Chase Colfax was a powerful force pulling her to him, and she simply had to go.

Three

Racing through the growing darkness the next evening, with the wind rushing over the rear-mounted wing of the Lamborghini, Trinity had to wonder again at the foolishness of accepting Chase's invitation. He had been curiously withdrawn since he had picked her up this evening, hardly touching her as he carefully helped her into his car. And now, his firm grip on the gear shift incredibly attuned to every nuance of the car's engine, he seemed totally preoccupied with driving.

Yet she knew she hadn't imagined the forceful current of awareness that seemed to flow so effortlessly between them. Evidence to the contrary, it was with them right now, more potent than ever, causing Trinity, to be terribly alert to the way the muscles in Chase's legs flexed every time he shifted gears and accelerated, pushing in the clutch

with his left foot and pressing against the throttle with his right. Even the slightest pressure on the throttle made the muscles in his legs bunch against the close-fitting slacks he was wearing.

To get her mind off Chase's disturbing physical attributes and to see if she could bring him out of this almost-too-quiet mood, Trinity commented laughingly, "I feel as if I'm in a guided missile rather than a car."

The car was wide and low to the ground, eating up the road that meandered carelessly through the countryside. Chase had decided to take the long way around, since the road he was having built across his property wasn't finished.

To her relief, the sound of her words brought his head around, his blue eyes amused, the ice in them slightly thawed. "From the tone of your voice, am I right to assume that you don't like my Lamborghini?"

"Well . . ." Trinity looked around her. Even though the car gave the impression of width, with wide sills and a large expanse of dash, the individual black leather-covered seats were quite narrow. "It's just that I feel so . . ." she groped for the right word, "so confined. And you can't say you're all that comfortable either, when your head is rubbing the roof and you have to go through a series of contortions"—Damn it! She was thinking about his legs again—"to even get in this . . . uh . . . car."

Chase turned to view Trinity once more, his mouth twisting sardonically. "You don't like *any* sort of restrictions, do you?"

His words brought to mind the comments she had made yesterday about raising kids in the city; however, his glance touched on the pale green cloth of the wraparound dress that crisscrossed so prettily over her braless breasts. Without realizing what she was doing, Trinity drew a deeper breath, and her nipples hardened noticeably through the material.

Chase wrenched his gaze back to the road in front of him, gripping the steering wheel in such a way that his knuckles turned chalk-white. He continued, somewhat tight-lipped, "I guess I never thought about it too much. I didn't really buy it for comfort."

"Why did you buy it?" Trinity inquired curiously, as they took another curve at a high rate of speed with well-balanced precision. Everything about Chase Colfax interested her.

"To get from Point A to Point B as fast as I can," he admitted laconically.

Trinity shook her head, causing the shiny brown strands of her hair to brush against the golden luster of her bare shoulder and bringing another sidelong glance from Chase. "What's the reason behind all the speed? Where are you racing to? Or is it, what are you racing *from*?"

The ice that appeared back in Chase's blue eyes should have frozen Trinity on the spot. Blithely ignoring the obvious warning signs, however, she reasoned, "You can't even see where you're going. All you can really see is a short distance in front of you . . . and that rear wing has got to interfere with your vision."

"I can see all I need to see to drive safely," Chase said with assurance, but he automatically slowed the car down and then looked over at her again. "You know, Trinity," he drawled humorously, "this car cost as much or more than your farm is even worth."

"I'm sure it did." She smiled engagingly at him. "But look what you have for your money—just a bunch of nuts and bolts."

A great burst of laughter erupted from Chase. "Don't let the Italians hear you blaspheme their Lamborghini as just a bunch of nuts and bolts," he advised, stopping before a wrought-iron fence and sounding the horn.

A large, beefy man appeared in the doorway of a gatehouse that sat just inside the fence and looked as if it were in the process of being renovated. Walking quickly to unlock the gate, the man swung it open and casually saluted them as they drove past.

Chase accelerated the car up the gravel drive, and Trinity drew in a sharp breath. Before her stood a massive two-story southern colonial house. Solidly built out of glass and stone on a lush green hill, it had a wide veranda sweeping around three sides.

Trinity had never been here before, for although she had known the Karneses, they were an older couple without children, and, consequently, there had been no reason to socialize.

After stopping the car, Chase got out and walked around to her side to open the car door, which hinged upward. He offered her his hand in cour-

teous assistance, but immediately released her as soon as she was standing beside him.

A puzzled frown pleated Trinity's forehead. Just as she thought she had broken through to him, he had closed back up. It was almost as if he were making a *deliberate* effort not to touch her. How strange!

Inside the great house, the polished-oak entryway was bare, inhabited with only a grand staircase, spiraling majestically up to the second floor. As they walked into the living room, Trinity observed an attractively proportioned room, large, but ascetically furnished with expensive pieces of furniture arranged uncaringly around an empty fireplace.

Trinity shuddered with a sudden sensation of leaden chill and cast about in her mind for something appropriate to say. "This is very—"

"Don't bother with the platitudes," Chase cut in abruptly. "I know it's terrible, but it serves my purpose. It's only temporary, at any rate."

"But it's such a beautiful house," Trinity protested, twirling around with her arms outstretched, the full skirt of her narrow-strapped dress swinging out around her legs, "and it could be made into a lovely home."

"I don't need a home. I only need a place to sleep and change clothes while I'm here."

The pain that his cold statement caused Trinity was astonishing, and it effectively silenced her.

At that moment, another man appeared, identical in build and bland appearance to the one at

the gate, only this one was slightly older and with a sparkle of humor in his brown eyes.

"This is Mangus," Chase informed Trinity, who gave a naturally captivating smile to the man. "He's been with me a long time and is my general factotum. Mangus"—Chase did not take his eyes off Trinity—"this is Miss Warrenton. You are to give her anything she asks for, at any time. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." Mangus received the startling order with far greater equanimity than Trinity. She turned to look at Chase's closed face in surprise.

"That will be all for this evening." Chase ended the conversation with Mangus with an abrupt dismissal. "Just put the dinner on the buffet, and I'll serve it. You may go."

Walking to a cabinet set in the far wall, Chase opened the carved doors that hid a mirrored bar. Without asking, he poured Trinity a dry sherry and brought it back to her, careful not to touch her as he handed the small crystal glass to her.

Trinity was at a loss to understand Chase's mood. Moving to a nearby window, she looked out on the rich green land that stretched away to the horizon and that was now darkly shadowed by nightfall. Criminally barren of any crops or livestock, it was land that was utterly wasted, in her opinion.

Sighing, she turned around and found Chase leaning back in the corner of the couch, watching her closely. A fine tension stretched disturbingly between them, connecting them in some indefinable way.

Searching for a subject with which to break the strained silence, Trinity said, "Larry tells me you are going to build a coal-gasification plant."

"You really didn't know, did you?" Chase asked softly, his cool gaze gliding down her body, lingering on her feminine curves.

"N-no." Trinity licked her lips and walked over to sit down beside him. Maybe her closeness would lessen his rigid behavior.

"Should I even ask how you feel about it?" he questioned wryly, his glance locked on the moist peach glaze of her lips.

"I realize that northeast Texas is a virtual black gold-mine, sitting as it is on one of the richest lignite veins in the country." Trinity chewed on her lower lip in unconscious defense. "But, besides boosting the local economy, I have to wonder if the strip mining will be worth it. Where do you draw the line between using the land and using it up?"

Turning toward her, Chase shifted his arm along the back of the couch, to where he was almost but not quite touching her. One leg was pulled up, making her notice again how the gray material of his slacks stretched snugly over his thigh. She took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

"Texas has been called the window to the world for the energy industry,' and it's no secret that energy is one of the main problems in the world today. Although Texas is still home for much of the nation's oil and gas, the challenge for the future will be to develop a replacement for the

dwindling oil and gas supplies. I'm predicting that the low-grade coal available here will become the main source of fuel for utility companies in this state within the next ten years, besides providing thousands of jobs."

"You're not saying that our oil is running out, are you?"

"No, I'm not. It will be decades before that starts to happen, and I doubt if it will ever be totally drained, but in the meantime, we must develop this state's other sources of energy."

"Intellectually I understand all of that, Chase." Trinity shook her head and spread her hands out in an unconscious appeal. "But emotionally, I can't stand the thought of the black ugly holes that will be made in this beautiful area by the giant machines that literally dwarf the men who've created them. And I feel sorry for the people who will be put out of their homes."

"Don't waste your sympathy for the landowners," Chase observed cynically. "Their payoff is going to be huge. They'll be able to retire on what they get for their land, and I won't take from anyone who doesn't want to sell. . . ."

Trinity watched quietly as Chase talked. She understood that they were seeing the strip mining on two different levels. That Chase was an intelligent, farseeing industrialist, Trinity had no doubt. But her reaction was from the heart, springing from an abiding love of the land, and there was no way Chase could ever understand.

Her attention was drawn to his face, where the skin was closely shaven. The silver growth of his

hair just brushed the open collar of a black silk shirt that vanished under the waistband of form-hugging slacks. His hands, so strong and lean, were cutting through the air to make his point—so near to her, yet so far.

She refocused on what he was saying, fastening on the concern she heard in his voice. ". . . I'm going to make sure this is done right. The coal can be made to burn cleanly, free of sulfur, and the land will be totally restored. Parks, lakes and woodlands will be spread out, and the revegetation will be done so that minimum erosion will take place. With good management, time and nature, the area can be completely reclaimed."

Quirking his eyebrows, Chase suddenly stopped speaking and looked at her with a slight smile that drew her capricious attention to his full, sensual mouth. "That's enough of that for now. Let's go eat."

Trinity stood up, conscious of the fact that Chase hadn't offered her his hand, and followed him into the dining room. It held a large bay window that would provide a magnificent view in the daytime. However, because the window was now heavily draped, the candles on the pecan dining table and matching buffet provided the only illumination. The table was leafless, at its smallest proportions, and the settings were placed at right angles to each other. It was an intimate scene.

Chase seated Trinity politely and served her plate with a little of everything from the steaming containers on the buffet. Repeating the process for

his plate without comment, he sat down and indicated that they should begin eating.

The grenadine of chicken served with orange rice, hot fruit salad and green beans, mixed with a chicken-broth sauce and chopped pecans, was mouthwateringly delicious, but Trinity's stomach was tied in knots by the heavy silence of the man sitting next to her.

On impulse, she asked, "If this isn't your home, where is?"

"I have *houses* all over this country and a few in several foreign countries."

Unenthusiastically taking a few bites and pushing the rest of the food around on her plate, Trinity considered Chase. He gave absolutely *nothing* away about himself. Trying to get to know him was like trying to fit random pieces of several different jigsaw puzzles together.

"Do you have any family?" Trinity prompted, watching curiously as he withdrew visibly from her even more.

"I suppose you could say so. Biologically I have a mother, but she never had any time for me as a child, and, now that I'm an adult, I rarely ever see her—by my own choice. She lives in New York. My father's dead."

"I'm so sorry! That's terrible," Trinity exclaimed, remembering how desolate she had felt when her own father had died.

"Not really. He was an alcoholic, whose only redeeming virtue was that he had inherited a lot of money." Chase spoke quite impersonally, his voice devoid of emotion. "I owe my parents noth-

ing, and that's the way I like it. Everything I have, I've made on my own, by myself, with just a small amount of money that was willed to me from my maternal grandmother."

Trinity had thought that by coming here tonight, she might be able to learn more about Chase, and in several ways, she had. She had learned a few personal facts that could go a long way toward explaining the world-weary man who was Chase Colfax. She had also learned that, even though he was the type of man who could rip into the earth, he would not do it irresponsibly and that he had a comprehensive concern for the country and its problems.

But what did he feel about her? What about the ache that had been inside of her since he had first kissed her? Was it all on her part? She could have sworn that his attraction for her was every bit as great as hers was for him. And yet, he had hardly put a hand on her tonight, exhibiting a sort of mystifying, cold indifference toward her.

Trinity wasn't entirely sure what it was that she wanted, but she knew it wasn't the food that she was trying to choke down. If she was hungry for anything, it was for Chase. What that said about her, she didn't even want to think. But she had never in her life felt so needful of being touched—touched, that is, by Chase Colfax.

At last, giving up all pretense of eating and putting her fork down, Trinity gave a slight shake of her head. "Chase, what's wrong?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he asked tersely, "Are you through eating?"

"Yes." She had just noticed that he hadn't eaten much either.

"Come on, then," he jerked out gruffly. "I need a drink."

He led her toward the back of the house, to a room different from the one they had previously been in. This room seemed slightly cozier, warmer. Maybe because it was obviously the place where Chase spent a lot of his time.

Books and newspapers were stacked here and there on the floor. A large-screened TV was in one corner of the room, and in the middle sat an oversized modular sofa covered in a lush rust velvet. The many pieces were fitted together to form a giant bed—an ideal place from which to read or to watch TV, Trinity guessed.

Chase didn't even stop to notice the sudden hesitancy on her part to sit down. Actually, she couldn't decide *where* to sit, and finally settled on the edge of one of the pieces that seemed to form a sort of chaise lounge.

Chase quickly poured them two brandies, handing Trinity's to her and gulping his down with one swallow, then pouring himself another. Stalking over to the sofa, Chase threw himself down opposite Trinity and studied her with a piercing scrutiny that was disconcerting in its intensity.

Trinity returned his gaze steadily, thinking that this strange mood of his was getting a little ridiculous, but determined to find out what was wrong.

Taking one more swallow of his brandy. Chase commanded roughly, "Tell me about Stephanie."

"What about Stephanie?" At the moment, Trin-

lty's brain couldn't sort through its surprise to decide what he could possibly want to know about her daughter.

"About her father, the man who was your lover." The words were bit out between clenched teeth, and, when Trinity didn't immediately respond, because she was trying to decide why he would want to know such a thing, Chase continued sneeringly, "Or is it too painful for you? Does his love hurt too much to think about?"

"No," Trinity answered slowly, her green eyes perplexed. "It doesn't hurt, because I have only good memories."

"Well then, where the hell is he?" Chase snapped out. He rose abruptly and paced over to the bar, pouring himself another brandy. His obvious anger was revealed by his very controlled movements. "What kind of man would leave you to raise his child alone?"

"A dead man, Chase," Trinity declared bluntly. "He died of leukemia five months before Stephanie was born."

Chase turned and stared at her broodingly, his light-blue eyes missing nothing about her. He took another drink of his brandy, slower this time. "Then tell me about him."

"Okay," she agreed calmly, shrugging her shoulders. "I don't mind talking about it if you really want to know."

"I really want to know," he assured her caustically.

"His name was Stephen, and I met him in college. We fell in love and were going to be married as soon as we graduated, but Stephen was hospi-

talized suddenly and then . . . there was no time left."

"Did he know you were pregnant?"

"No. I didn't want to add to his burden by telling him. He was just too sick, and there was nothing he could have done about it anyway."

Chase pondered the swirling brandy. "He could have married you," he shot out, "given the child his name."

"I gave the baby his name—Stephanie."

"It can't have been easy for you"—Chase continued to pursue the subject with a bewildering relentlessness—"even in this day and age. Did you think about having an abortion?"

"Not . . . for . . . one . . . minute." Her loud, clear and firm reply echoed around the still room.

Chase raked his hands through the silver length of his hair and slanted her a considering glance. "Do you still love him?"

Trinity paused for a moment, thinking out her answer carefully. She wanted to give as honest an answer as she could. Somehow she sensed that it was terribly important. "Part of me will always love him. He gave me Stephanie and I'll never apologize to anyone for that. But it was so long ago, and life goes on. I'm not still *in love* with him. Does that answer your question?"

Chase paced back to the bar and set his glass down. Hunching his shoulders, he appeared to be deliberating some weighty matter.

Trinity regarded him quietly, waiting for his next move, watching the way the muscles in his

upper arms tightened tensely as he leaned against the bar.

Why this strange man should have the power to affect her so greatly was beyond her. But every time he breathed, there was an answering movement inside of her, and she didn't know what to do about it.

Maybe tomorrow she would think about the ramifications, but right now all she could concentrate on was the way the breadth of his shoulders stretched out the black silk of his shirt and the manner in which the gray slacks molded his lean hips, following gently the curve of his firm male buttocks and on down the long, muscled length of his legs.

Trinity couldn't stand the strained silence one minute more. She had to get up, go to him, find out what was wrong. Tentatively placing a hand on his shoulder, she jumped when he quickly turned.

The heat emanating from his blue eyes was a tangible thing. Boring straight into her, his eyes effortlessly transferred their raging passion to her. His two hands cupped her face, looking at her, absorbing every detail, from the slight trembling of her lips to the matching heat in her eyes.

"Oh, Trinity," Chase muttered thickly, "I honestly think there's only one thing that I can do with you."

His lips were hard and sure, and Trinity opened her mouth to his without hesitancy. All night long, she had yearned just for this, and she gave

herself up to the shivers of sweetness their joined lips were creating within her.

Her arms slid around his neck, and her fingers threaded into the rich vitality of the silver-whiteness of his hair. Lifting her in his arms, Chase carried her the short distance to the sofa and lowered her onto the sensuous velvet material.

Following her down, he murmured into her throat, "How I kept my hands off you all evening is beyond me."

"Why did you try?" Trinity gasped, as his hand found the one tie that secured the dress around her waist and undid it. Slowly he unwrapped the dress from about her, leaving only a pair of narrow panties to keep her from being completely naked.

"God!" Chase groaned huskily at the sight of her. Compulsively, he ran a trembling hand over the silky texture of her skin, closing on one swollen breast and lowering his mouth to its tip. "You'll never know the effort it took, but if I had touched you before now, I couldn't have stopped, and I had to ask you about Stephanie."

His lips and teeth played with one hard nipple, while his hand caressed the other. His words were warm around the pink tip, fondling it, heating it, in an entirely new and exciting way.

Trinity squirmed against him and murmured, "Why?"

"I had to make sure there was no one else. I want you too badly to share you."

"Oh, Chase," Trinity whispered weakly, pulling

his mouth up to hers again and capturing his tongue.

His hand had lowered to go between her legs, skillfully pulling the last scrap of material off and then gently prying them apart. Trinity moaned as her body received two of his fingers, and she arched shamelessly up to him, giving away just how ready she was for him.

"God, Trinity! You are the most beautiful, the most desirable, woman I have ever known. Tell me Stephen never touched you like this, before I go out of my mind."

Trinity was too crazed by the desire his kneading hand and caressing fingers were causing to do anything but tell the truth. "It was just once," she moaned. "Nothing like this."

"Did he make you feel as wild as you do with me?" he persisted. "I have to know."

"No," she gasped. "I've never felt like . . . this before. Never."

"Say you want me as much as I want you," Chase commanded huskily.

There was a split second in time when Trinity's mind cleared and she thought about what was happening. What would the result be of giving herself to Chase? Would it mean the same thing to him as it did to her? And what *did* it mean to her?

But then she felt Chase's fingers push into her, and she had to answer, "Yes, Chase, yes!"

What was the use of denying it? Their lovemaking was something that *had* to happen. She was lying naked under him, her body moist with its

desire—a desire that had been steadily building for two days and three nights, and there was nothing she could do about it. Glorifying in the undulating rhythm of his tongue and of his fingers inside her, there was only one thing she wanted more, and she had to have it.

Fumbling for the catch on the waistband of his trousers, her words were almost a plea. "Chase . . . please . . . please make love to me."

Removing his fingers from her fervent body, he assisted her. In less than a minute, he was undressed, and with slitted eyes glazed with desire, Trinity reached for him.

This passion the two of them shared had to be taken care of, and it would have been akin to attempting to turn back the tide for either of them to try to stop it.

His tongue was circling her ear, and she felt the soft waves of his breath against the small opening, whispering, "There's no way I'll let you go now."

He entered her at once, with a hard, driving motion, causing their need to scorch through them both, sending them into the frenzied, beautiful movements of passion. The urgent fire that raced through their blood reached a quick boiling point and, as Trinity pushed against Chase's thrust, their desire bubbled over, drenching them both in the wonder of their absolute satisfaction.

A long time later. Trinity heard a phone ringing from somewhere close by. She stirred and felt

Chase's arms tighten around her as he reached over the side of the couch and picked up the phone, answering with a husky, impatient, "Yes?"

At the sound of whoever was on the other end, Trinity could feel all the relaxation—the gratifying result of their lovemaking—leave Chase's body. Lying in the crook of his arms. Trinity moved her head curiously so that she could see his face. By now, she could hear that the caller was feminine, although she couldn't understand the words the person was speaking. But Chase's compressed face told her all she needed to know, and Trinity decided she didn't really want to hear this conversation.

As she attempted to get up, Chase's arms bound her even closer, so that she was forced to lie where she was and hear him snarl cuttingly, "Forget it. It's over, Melissa. Accept it."

A shiver ran up Trinity's spine at the coldness she heard in Chase's voice, and she knew, if she could see his eyes, the ice that she had fought so hard to remove would be firmly back in place.

He had paused, apparently listening, but then continued brutally. "What we once had, *if anything*, is gone. There's no need to drag it out. Good-bye, Melissa."

Chase hung up the phone, and Trinity could feel some of his tension subside. He apologized in a clipped, husky voice. "I'm sorry."

"Chase . . ." Trinity murmured, "couldn't you have been kinder?"

"With some people, cruelty is the best form of

kindness. We won't be bothered by her again," Chase declared with complete confidence.

If that remark was supposed to reassure her, it failed miserably. Trinity escaped his hold. Getting up, she began to dress, stepping into her panties and then picking up her dress from the floor, wrapping it around her and tying it firmly in place.

Chase watched her with hooded eyes from his vantage point on the couch that had made such a successful bed. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Home," she answered succinctly, pushing a heavy swath of hair behind one ear.

"You can stay the night. You told me that Stephanie is sleeping over at your sister's."

"The fact that I *can* doesn't alter the fact that I'm not *going* to," Trinity muttered, scanning the floor for her shoes.

"Why?"

"Look." Trinity expelled her breath with a sigh of exasperation. "Just consider this the end of another one-night stand and leave it at that. Okay?"

"No! It's not okay, Trinity." Chase got up off the bed with a movement of swift grace and walked over to her.

Trinity located one shoe and then turned to seize the other. She was trying very hard not to look at Chase. His presence was an enticing temptation, and it was too soon after their lovemaking for her to forget just how powerfully his body had pleased her—if she ever could forget.

Straightening, she heard Chase behind her, his

voice grating with annoyance. "What's the matter, Trinity? You're acting like an outraged virgin who has just been taken advantage of. And," he drawled disparagingly, "you were sure no virgin."

"No," Trinity agreed bitterly, swinging around to face him, a shoe in each hand. "No, I wasn't a virgin. But I lost my virginity in an act of love, and it has suddenly occurred to me that there was no love involved in what just happened between us."

Trinity didn't add that hearing his response to the unknown Melissa had made her realize that she wanted no part of an affair with him. She refused to put herself in the position where one day it might be her on the other end of the phone. She would rather be the one to say good-bye—now—before she became any more involved than she already was with this strange, hard man.

"So?" Chase crossed his arms over his chest, not attempting to hide his nakedness. "Is love so important to you that you're going to try to deny what's between us?"

"Yes, love is important to me," Trinity affirmed, her eyes blazing a bright, vivid green and her brown hair disheveled from having Chase's hands run through it over and over. "And I'm not going to deny that there's something between us. Only a fool would try. But there has to be something more for me. Desire without love is nothing more than a profanity."

"Then, baby," Chase drawled sarcastically, "if what just happened between us is profane desire, I'll take all I can get." The tone of his voice was

hard and cold, and Trinity turned away from him, trembling with an uncommon hurt.

"You were wrong to assume that just because I—"

"That's the truth!" He bit out each word savagely. "I should have known better than to assume *anything* about you."

"It's no use, Chase," she whispered tremulously. "I won't have an affair with you. What happened tonight was more than inevitable, but it won't happen again."

Rough arms swung her around, and consuming lips ground into hers. Grasping his shoulders to keep from falling, Trinity could not stop the traitorous need in her body from leaping to a life of its own, and she clung to him as if the survival of her world depended on it.

Nonetheless, when he pulled away, holding her at arm's length and breathing deeply, Trinity, white-faced and shaking, gathered her strength and reiterated carefully, "Chase, I've got a daughter to raise, a farm to run and a living to make. I don't have time to become just another dalliance for you. Now, are you going to take me home, or am I going to have to walk?"

Chase raked impatient fingers through his hair and pounced over to the phone. Jerking it up, he viciously punched out two numbers. "Bring the Lincoln around," he barked to some unfortunate person on the other end of the line before he slammed the receiver down and pulled on his pants.

• * *

The big white Lincoln glided through the night, smoothing the bumps out of the still-incomplete shortcut that connected their two farms.

Trinity sat huddled in the corner of the front seat, tense and silent, trying not to speculate on why he wasn't taking her home in the Lamborghini. Had her objections about the other car reached him after all? Did he really care what she thought? And what did it matter to her if he did?

Pulling to a halt in front of the farmhouse and killing the engine, Chase reached over to hold her door closed, preventing the hasty exit she had planned.

He was very close, and his breath fluttered warmly over her face, as he whispered softly, "I want you, Trinity Ann Warrenton. Again and again. Now . . . I've laid my cards on the table. It's your turn. You tell me: What's it going to take to get you?"

Trinity shook her head sadly. "Oh, Chase. We obviously don't even speak the same language."

"Our bodies do," Chase avowed softly, provocatively, bringing his hand up to trace her slightly swollen lips with the tips of his fingers.

Trinity's gaze wandered over Chase's hard-boned face, stopping to dip into the smoldering blue depths of his eyes, trying to fathom the man. Even now, she could feel her body's need for him, and she knew if she said the word, he would turn the car around and take her back to his house as fast as the Lincoln would go.

But she couldn't do that. Her feelings were too confused—she just wasn't sure how she felt about Chase. Was it possible that she could be in love with him? The thought was staggering!

The only thing that she could really be sure of was that he didn't love her. That knowledge alone should have been enough to completely turn her off. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Still wanting him, she opened the car door and got out.

And later, in the loneliness of the night and in the chasteness of her bed, Trinity tried very hard to believe that she had made the right decision.

Four

Much to Trinity's surprise, the next few days turned out to be alternately interesting and infuriating, amusing and annoying—starting with the following afternoon, when a delivery van pulled up in front of the house.

The sign on its side proclaimed the van to be from a florist shop in a nearby town, and Trinity, who had wandered to the door, watched curiously as a man in his early fifties approached carrying a vase of red roses, with a younger assistant following behind, carrying two more vases of roses.

Reaching the porch, the man peered suspiciously over his black-rimmed glasses. "I have a delivery for a Miss Trinity Ann WarrentOn. Is that you?"

"Yes," Trinity admitted dubiously. "Can I help you?"

The man's face cleared immediately. "I'm Jas-

per Briggs, from Briggs Florist," he informed her genially. "These are for you. Where do you want them?"

"All of them?"

"Yes, ma'am. All three dozen."

"Well. . . any place will do, I guess." She opened the screen door, taking a pile of Stephanie's books off a nearby table and pointing. "Right here will be fine."

The young assistant started to put down the two vases he carried, but jumped as his boss bellowed, "Be careful! Those vases are gen-u-ine crystal." Turning to Trinity, he confided, "That's why we were a little late delivering them. We had to scour the countryside for those vases. This was a very unusual order, and I don't mind telling you, I've been a little nervous about it."

"Really?" Trinity viewed the roses with a new cynicism.

"Yep. Here you go, little lady. This card and package go with the roses."

Trinity didn't like the uneasy feeling she was getting. "Would you mind waiting outside, please?" she requested coolly. "I'd like to get you something for your trouble."

Once alone, she tore into the glossy silver paper and viewed the green velvet box with a sinking heart. Sitting down abruptly, she couldn't seem to stop the tremors that shook her hands as she opened the lid.

A gasp escaped Trinity's lips. There before her, nestled on a bed of green velvet, was a pair of stunning emerald earrings. And gleaming bril-

llantly below them, a matching emerald pendant lay swinging from a delicate gold chain.

Ripping open the card, she read the bold black scrawl. "A dozen red roses for each day I have known you and an emerald for each night. Chase."

Trinity sat quietly, stunned. What was Chase doing? She had been very clear when she had told him she wouldn't go to bed with him again. The man obviously didn't believe in taking no for an answer—no doubt fostered by years of having everything his own way, especially where women were concerned.

A not-so-discreet cough from Mr. Briggs out on the front porch roused Trinity from her reverie. She plucked a couple of dollars from her purse and called the men back in.

"I'll keep a dozen roses, but everything else is to be returned to the sender—including all three vases."

"But . . . but . . ." Mr. Briggs was obviously shocked.

"Everything else!" Trinity's green eyes were glacial.

"Okay, okay," the man muttered. "But that boyfriend of yours is going to be one unhappy gent."

Trinity got an indication of just how unhappy that was, the next evening, when the roar of the Lamborghini split the quiet of the night and interrupted the quilting she was doing.

It was after ten, and Stephanie was already in bed, fast asleep. Trinity herself had taken a bath

earlier, and now—wearing only a thin terry-cloth robe, her skin soft and glowing, her hair piled on top of her head—had decided to quilt for an hour or so before going to bed.

She hadn't yet locked the front door for the night, and Chase stepped into the room before Trinity had a chance to get halfway to the door. He was wearing a dignified, heather-blue three-piece suit, although the darker blue shirt had been relieved of its tie and the first three buttons had been undone.

Chase presented a virile elegance in the cozy front room of Trinity's home, and her movements across the floor became suspended as she watched him walk toward her.

At the first sight of him, her heart had surprised her, leaping into her throat as it had. As long as she hadn't been able to see him, her resolution to call their relationship off had been fairly easy. Now, however, their awareness of each other seemed to arc across the room, touching each of them with an electrifying jolt, and Trinity's pulse raced out of control as Chase stopped in front of her.

"How are you?" The velvet softness of his voice reached out to stroke her, even as his long fingers came out and gently touched her face. The contact burned, and Trinity stepped away.

"I—I'm fine. How are you?"

Such banality, when she knew very well that that was not what they wanted to say to each other.

"I'm tired," Chase flatly pronounced. "It's been

a long two days, and I've just gotten back from Dallas."

"And you came straight here?" Trinity turned and walked to the front door, stopping to stare out into the blackness of the night. It was better than looking at Chase.

"Yes," he admitted simply. "I missed you."

She could tell by the sound of his voice that he was walking toward her, and his next words came from directly in back of her.

"I've missed the look"—his hands grasped the soft flesh of her upper arms through the peach-colored terry cloth—" . . . and the feel . . . and the smell . . ."—his mouth came down on the sensitive cord that ran along the side of her neck—" . . . and the taste of you."

His mouth nibbled hungrily up her throat to behind her ear, and Trinity couldn't stand still a minute longer. "Stop it," she groaned, and wrenched herself out of his grasp. Retreating to the relative security of the rocking chair, she sat down, holding her forehead in her hand, not meeting Chase's eyes.

However, seconds later, Trinity looked up in surprise as a black velvet case was thrown summarily in her lap.

"Diamonds," Chase informed her succinctly. His hands were rammed into the pockets of his slacks, and his blue eyes roved intently over her face.

Trinity's stunned silence filled the room. Finally, she managed to ask faintly, "Why?"

Chase's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "I thought

you might like diamonds better than you did the emeralds. There are five of them, by the way."

For the first time, Trinity was able to see some humor in the situation, and she began to laugh, a liltingly lovely sound. "No wonder your affairs are so short-lived, Chase! You can't *afford* to know a girl too long."

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped, throwing himself into a nearby easy chair, but the harshness of his words was relieved by the unexpected indulgence she could see in his eyes as he looked at her.

"What is it you want, Chase?" Trinity asked quietly. "I told you I wouldn't see you again. Can't you just leave it at that?"

The silver weight of his head lay against the back of the chair, and his eyes were heavily lidded. "No," he told her softly, "I can't leave it at that."

"I told you my reasons—" Trinity began.

"Which didn't make a hell of a lot of sense," Chase finished for her, his eyes wandering down to her legs, which were crossed at the knee and revealed by the parting of her robe.

"They made perfect sense to me." Trinity pulled her robe closed.

"For a lady with such puritan ethics," he mocked, "you sure are fantastic in bed."

Damn him! Why did he have to bring that up, when she was trying so hard to forget it.

"Chase, *go away!* We lead different types of lives. There would be no hope for any kind of a

relationship between us other than some tawdry little affair."

"There would be nothing *tawdry* about an affair between you and me." Suddenly, he loomed before her, gripping her arms and pulling her up against him. The case containing the diamonds slid from her lap onto the floor, but neither of them noticed. "There was a sweet, hot beauty to the way our bodies reacted to each other, and you can't say there wasn't!"

His lips were mere inches away from hers, and Trinity could feel the hard maleness of him through the layers of their clothes. It took a terrible effort on her part to keep on resisting him.

"It's no use, Chase. I won't sleep with you again."

"You didn't *sleep* with me"—he laughed harshly at her euphemism—"however much I wanted you to."

His grasp lightened, turning into a tender caress, and his eyes roved hungrily over her face. "Oh, Trinity," Chase murmured huskily, "you really are a wild thing, aren't you?" The velvet was back in his voice, sheathing the sharpness, turning her limbs to water and breaking down her resistance almost completely. "I've never met anyone quite like you before. You live life in your own special way."

"Chase . . . I—"

"Okay," he ground out abruptly, just as if she had asked something of him, and pushed her gently away. Running his hand around the back of his neck, Chase absentmindedly massaged the

tense cords he found there. "I won't try to pressure you into my bed, at least for a while."

"What do you mean?" Her tongue circled her suddenly dry lips.

"I mean," he stated grimly, "that we'll try it your way. We'll *date*."

"You'd be willing to do that?" Trinity was astonished. Chase Colfax, she knew instinctively, was not the sort of man who made concessions easily.

"I'd be willing to do that," he repeated wearily.

"And no more gifts?"

He bent over and picked up the black velvet case, tapping it against one hand and regarding her thoughtfully. "You don't even want the ones I've already given you?" he asked, as if he couldn't understand her reasoning.

Trinity shook her head emphatically, causing Chase to smile slowly and ever-so-charmingly at her. "All right. I'll keep them for you."

Dear God! When he smiled like that, he was nearly impossible to resist. What was she letting herself in for?

Trinity swallowed hard. She had one more question. "No sex?"

"No sex," he agreed, maybe a little too easily. "But don't expect me to resist kissing you."

And so it started—their dating. To say it was an interesting experience would have been grossly to understate the case. Chase exhibited a restless energy, leading Trinity through some of Dallas's most expensive restaurants, finest homes and el-

egant clubs with a flattering attentiveness. He had been born into the exclusive world of the highly privileged, and he took it for granted.

And yet, knowing Chase as she now did, Trinity sometimes sensed that this was not the type of life Chase really wanted. She couldn't help but feel that if one dug far enough beneath the hardness of the man, one would find a core of sadness, perhaps even emptiness.

One night after dinner, he took her to his penthouse apartment and watched her reaction to the hopelessly modern decor of the place with quiet amusement.

The apartment sprawled across the top of one of Dallas's newest luxury condominium complexes. Thick white carpet swept toward walls of tinted glass. Ultra-contemporary pieces of smoked glass and shining chrome accentuated the clean lines of the white custom-designed couches. The room had a stark beauty that was set off by a profusion of white candles and a melange of bronze sculptures, and the neutral-colored walls provided a backdrop for the artful splashes of color in the many paintings hanging around the room.

To Trinity's surprise, she liked it. A child couldn't be raised with any sort of freedom in an environment like this. For that matter, she wouldn't want to live here, either. But the room was tastefully done, and it suited what she knew about Chase, reflecting a controlled sophistication, an elegant austerity.

But his bedroom was surely the highlight—and the revelation—of the tour. The room was domi-

nated by a massive bed set high up on a platform, with steps leading up to it. The bed was covered with a rich, soft gray suede, and the headboard was nothing but pillows—pillows piled upon more pillows, dozens of pillows in assorted sizes, shapes and hard, bold colors of vivid blues, bright reds and hot corals.

The crowning touch of the room was the large mirror on the ceiling, perfectly centered over the bed. Trinity walked around the bed, viewing the mirror from different angles. Finally, she turned to Chase, with a smile tugging at her full lips. "How do you clean it?"

His laughter, a low, throaty sound, roared around the room, making Trinity's heart beat faster. Chase laughed so rarely that, when he did, it was a treasure to be stored up and cherished.

Pulling her into his arms, he looked down at her. "No one but you, Trinity Ann Warrenton, would think to ask a question like that."

"But it's a very practical consideration."

"My cleaning service," he assured her, "must have no trouble cleaning it, because I've never heard a word about it."

"Cleaning service? You call the people that clean your apartment a 'cleaning service'? Chase, how impersonal! You don't even know the names of the people who clean your apartment. At least if you had a maid, you *might* just know her name. You know, perhaps you might have come upon her one day and asked—"

"Shut up, Trinity!" Chase advised pleasantly. Picking her up and holding her close, he fell back

on the bed, and Trinity landed with a soft bounce beside him.

"What are you doing?" she shouted, taken off guard.

"I'm about to show you, my wild, beautiful creature, the advantages of having a mirror on the ceiling," he enlightened her, lowering his lips to hers and softly rubbing them back and forth, until she had to reach up and hold his head still, pressing her lips to his in a long, deep kiss that made slow heat seep through her body, right down to her toes.

Chase unbuttoned her blouse and took it off, and Trinity didn't protest. He ran the palm of his hand across the tips of her nipples until they stood upright and tight, actually throbbing for the moist encasement of his mouth.

But it never happened. Instead, without ever taking his eyes from hers, he unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it. Then, ever so gently, he covered her with his half-naked body. The fine curling hair of his chest was a sensual abrasion against the swollen sensitivity of her breasts, and, supporting himself on his forearms, he began rocking against her.

Trinity moaned in helpless pleasure as the hard lower portion of his body ground against her at the same time that the upper half of his body barely grazed the tenderness of her skin, teasing her to a new plateau of passionate desire.

Hearing low murmuring sounds coming from deep in her throat, Trinity realized that she was

arching under Chase in a provocative invitation that she had to stop.

"Chase . . . no . . ."

He moved off of her but kept his hand on her breast, gently caressing it. "Look up at the ceiling," he commanded softly. "Can you see the way my hand strokes you, the way your body strains toward mine?"

In spite of herself, Trinity's eyes were drawn to the mirror above them, and she was captured by the erotic image the two of them made. She could see that Chase's eyes were on her, watching her reactions. He was propped up on one elbow, one leg thrown across hers, his body nestled into the side of her.

"Do you see the way my fingers trail over your skin and up onto your breast?" His voice reached out, velvet-soft and seductively low, flowing fluidly over her. "Can you feel my touch in the pit of your stomach at the same time that you see my hand on you?"

"Chase . . ." Trinity gasped, meaning to sound a protest, but instead hearing his name come out as an aching whisper.

"I can actually feel your body quivering under my hand. Trinity. Your body responds to mine as it does to no other. Admit it."

"No," Trinity moaned.

He continued, working insidiously on her mind. "Think how we would look completely naked, the beauty of your soft body against the hardness of mine. . . . Imagine how my back would look, tensed and ready, right before I plunged into

you. . . . Think how my hips would look as I moved in and out of—"

"Chase . . . don't."

He was rolling her nipple between his thumb and two of his fingers, making her nearly crazy with a need that was becoming almost impossible to deny.

"It would be a slow motion at first, until you begged—"

"Stop it!" she cried.

"And then the movements would be very fast . . . up and down, around, in and out."

Trinity's breath was coming in great hurtful gasps, yet she couldn't seem to take her eyes from the mirror that so perfectly reflected back their images.

He persisted. "Can you see It, can you feel it?"

Of course she could feel it, *of course* she could see it, and she knew with a great certainty that she couldn't take much more!

The shrill ring of the telephone in another part of the apartment proved to be the distraction and the opportunity Trinity needed. She rolled out from under him and grabbed for her blouse. Holding it against herself, she gasped, "*What* are you trying to do to me?"

Chase sat up and reached calmly for his shirt. "The same thing you're doing to me," he responded coolly. "Turn you inside out with wanting."

"You promised—"

"I didn't promise *anything*," he retorted very definitely. The ice was back in his eyes, and the sharpness of his voice cut her like a newly sharp-

ened knife. "What I said was that I wouldn't try to pressure you into my bed, at least for a while." He stood up, shrugging into his shirt. "And I haven't."

"What do you call what just happened then?"

"I didn't ask you to let me make love to you, did I?" His tone was neutral, almost indifferent.

"You didn't have to, Chase. The way the velvet strokes of your words paint erotic pictures in my mind is more than adequate to set my imagination on fire. It will be a long time before you get me alone again."

He gave her a lazy half-smile, a glint of humor sparkling in his eyes. "Fine. If you insist, I'll take you to dinner in a crowd."

Which is exactly what he did the next weekend.

The trip into Dallas was made in the surprising luxury of the sleek jet helicopter that Chase used for transportation as casually as Trinity used her car.

Since Chase was piloting, Trinity sat up front in the cockpit with him, watching while he flew the helicopter with the same sureness and expertise as he had driven the Lamborghini. It was so quiet in the cabin that they could talk to each other in a normal voice, without shouting or using headphones. That shattered a misconception Trinity had had concerning helicopters. But then again, she knew this was no ordinary helicopter.

From the minute she had climbed the steps and set foot onto the plush carpeting, Trinity knew she was entering a world of power and wealth,

where minimized travel time, combined with the utmost luxury and comfort, were all-important and money was no object.

Behind the cockpit, five seats covered in a soft burgundy leather faced one another in a club seating arrangement. The cabin featured an airborne radio telephone, individual environmental control vents, custom cabinetry, fluorescent cabin lighting and large tinted glass windows—everything that money could buy for passenger comfort and convenience.

Cruising at 150 mph, they reached Love Field in forty-five minutes. 'This sure beats fighting the traffic,' Chase said as they landed, and Trinity had to agree with him.

Getting into a blue Cadillac that had been parked at the airport waiting for them, they drove to Texas Stadium to a specially roped-off parking area. There Chase presented a card to a uniformed attendant that allowed them to park only a short distance from the entrance. An escalator carried them high into the stadium, to the first level of the Circle Suites.

A long carpeted hallway fed the suites, and, even though the game had started, there were still people milling in and out of the different rooms. A few called hellos to Chase, but he more or less ignored them, briskly nodding his head and leading Trinity to a numbered door.

The Circle Suite he ushered her into was long and narrow and on two levels. The step-down level by the window had chairs lined along its length for viewing the game. The upper level was wider,

with a fully stocked bar and several couches and chairs. In the middle sat an impeccably laid linen-covered table, awaiting their dining pleasure.

The lights in the suite were dim, but Trinity's eyes were drawn to the immense sheet of glass covering the wide opening that looked down upon the playing field. Trinity knew that there were no glass windows in the other suites, and she had to laugh. "I believe Larry was right. You *have* out-Texaned the Texans. How did you ever purchase one of these suites, and on the forty-yard line, too?"

"Why, Trinity," Chase mocked. "Didn't you know that with enough money and enough know-how, a person could own the world? Obtaining a Circle Suite was no problem, I assure you."

"No problem! I understand that these go for millions—that is, if you're lucky enough even to get the chance to buy one. They're a very big status symbol."

His mouth quirked with humor. "And yet, somehow, I doubt very seriously if you're impressed."

"Is that why you brought me here? To impress me?"

"Perhaps," Chase answered her, noncommittally.

He was wearing loden-green wool slacks under a handsome herringbone sports jacket with a light turtleneck sweater. It just wasn't fair! The man was, quite simply, devastatingly sexy. During the day, she could laugh at Chase's blatant tactics, but at night, after he had dropped her off at her house, she frequently cried at the way her body

ached for him. Trinity mentally shook off the disturbing thought.

Below them, a kaleidoscope of moving colors and a cacophony of roaring sounds swirled their way around the oval-shaped stadium and pulsated into the suite through speakers that had been set into the wall.

"Why did you put up a window of glass? No one else has."

Chase walked over to a control panel and flipped two switches. The sound was abruptly cut off. "I like my privacy."

So that night, with candles flickering intimately and soft music playing suggestively, they ate dinner amid sixty-five thousand screaming people—in total isolation.

The day glowed crisp and golden, and Trinity was making a halfhearted attempt to rake the front lawn clear of the newly fallen leaves. She much preferred to leave the beautiful autumn hues that nature had so wisely furnished, exactly where they had fallen. However, Tray was spending the afternoon with her and Stephanie, and she was raking the leaves into piles for them.

"Okay, who's next?" Trinity looked around and found Tray barreling across the yard, making a real effort to land precisely, smack, in the middle of the pile of leaves. Stephanie followed, and soon both kids were rolling through the leaves, screaming with delight.

"You're a good mother."

The quietly spoken comment came from directly in back of her, and Trinity let out a yelp, turning instinctively toward whoever had spoken.

"Chase! Good heavens, you startled me."

"I didn't mean to be furtive." His smile was warm. "I was just enjoying watching you with the kids."

"I didn't hear the car. Where did you come from?"

"I ran over from my place."

"Ran!" she exclaimed, teasingly. "You mean you used your own two feet! What happened? Did the Lamborghini break down? Or did the Lincoln run out of gas? Darn! I guess the Cadillac is still in Dallas, isn't it, but you could have flown over in the helicopter, you know."

"Trinity," Chase warned. "Don't start."

"Well, really, Chase," she reasoned, "you could have gotten here in about a minute. Think of the time it would have saved."

"Okay, okay. Point taken." He laughed. "You think I overdo it when it comes to transportation, obviously. But my way is fast and safe, and it sure does beat that wreck you drive."

Trinity couldn't dispute that point, because it was absolutely true. But her car was paid for, and she couldn't afford a new one. Besides, it was too glorious a day to argue—about anything.

Wearing a charcoal-gray warm-up suit that was slightly damp with sweat, Chase looked arousingly healthy and vitally alive. His silver hair was tousled, and his eyes were a warm blue, absorbing her into their depths.

"Mommy, Mommy!" She turned to find that

Stephanie and Tray had run up to her. "We need to go get Ant'ony. We *neeeed* him!"

Trinity laughed at her daughter's exaggeration. "Why, honey?"

Tray answered the question. " 'Cause we need someone to bury in the leaves."

"Why don't you take turns getting covered, then?"

"That's no fun," Tray protested, his chubby little arms planted firmly on his hips, obviously convinced that his Aunt Trinity didn't fully understand the situation. "We want to do it *together*."

"Oh." She thought this predicament out, then turned to look at Chase, barely able to keep a straight face. "I bet Mr. Colfax would just love to play with y'all and let you cover him with leaves."

The kids let out squeals of excitement. "Really, really?" They started running around the two adults in circles. "C'mon, c'mon!"

Chase's face twisted into an expression of irritated amusement as he looked at Trinity. "One of these days, Trinity Ann Warrenton ..." he growled, shaking his fist.

"Yes, Mr. Colfax?" she questioned innocently, at the same time grabbing his arm and pulling him over to the nearest pile of leaves.

An hour later, Trinity fell exhausted onto a mound of leaves beside a sprawled-out Chase. He had been amazingly natural with the two children, playing with them on their level, and she felt wonderfully contented.

"Where did the kids go?" she questioned breathlessly.

"They probably wandered off to find someone new to torment," he said in a tone of long suffering.

"Idiot!" She turned over into his arms, nestling her head on his shoulder. Why couldn't they always be this peaceful? Why did there have to be so much tension between them? "Why did you come over, by the way? Did you run out of playmates over at your house?"

"That's the problem!" Chase pouted teasingly. "You refuse even to go over there anymore, and Mangus is no fun. He keeps encouraging me, in the politest ways possible, of course, to either go run my frustrations off or to fly back to Dallas. He has actually hinted that I've gotten rather hard to live with lately."

"Gee, I can't understand that!"

"Hush, Trinity. I really came over to tell you that there's a party I want us to go to tomorrow night."

"So what else is new?" Trinity -complained wearily, looking up at the canopy of leaves over their heads. "As much socializing as those people do in Dallas, it's a wonder they ever find any time to make money."

"I don't like it any more than you do," Chase assured her, "but some party-going is necessary. I've closed several of my biggest deals at parties." His breath tickled her ear as he turned to watch her. "Just say the word, though, and we'll stay home tomorrow night . . . alone . . . in front of a roaring fire." His tongue had begun to trace circles inside her ear.

"Well go!" Trinity declared decisively, jumping

to her feet and running off to find Tray and Stephanie.

This sort of passionless truce that had existed between the two of them for the last few weeks couldn't possibly last much longer, of course. It was bound to come to a head sooner or later, and then some decisions would have to be reached. Chase knew it, and so did she.

The next evening, Trinity donned a length of sheer jade silk chiffon that she had cut on the bias and fashioned into an intriguing pareu. The material had been a gift from Larry and Sissy, and it was exquisite. Because of the thinness and cut of the cloth, it was hard to wear much, if anything, under the pareu without its showing through. Trinity settled for wearing bikini panties and a pair of gold-strapped high heels with it.

She never attempted to outdress the women at these parties to which Chase escorted her. She didn't have the means or the inclination. But her simple, sometimes homemade, clothes never failed to draw admiring stares and compliments from one and all, and this evening was no exception.

As Trinity strolled around the large room, the dress moved seductively against her, revealing the clearly outlined curve of her full, firm breasts and the golden-brown length of her legs, exposed by the thigh-high slit in the front of the skirt.

She had come to know a lot of Chase's business acquaintances and friends during these last few weeks. Most of them were sincere, well-meaning

people who just happened to have a lot of money, and Trinity had no trouble finding something to talk to them about, holding her own in any conversation, usually with Chase at her side.

This night, however, Chase had apparently staked out the bar as his own personal territory, nursing a drink, holding desultory conversations with various people who sought him out and, annoyingly, showing no desire to join her.

The only real indication that Chase hadn't forgotten that he had brought her with him was his eyes. Intense, brooding and very blue, they followed her every gesture, noted her every breath and observed each whispering movement of the jade-colored silk.

Trinity stopped in one corner of the room to talk to an older couple of whom she had grown particularly fond. They had a passel of grandchildren and they both seemed extremely interested in hearing about the quilt that Trinity was currently working on. Her hands were enthusiastically sketching the pattern in the air when Chase captured her arm in an iron-firm grip. "Excuse us, Clovis, Hector. Trinity and I have to be going now."

The speed at which he managed to get them across the floor, out the door and into the private elevator that whisked them to the garage level was nothing short of astounding.

"Chase! Why on earth did you do that? I think Clovis and Hector were just about to give me an order for a quilt."

"Damn it, Trinity! That man is chairman of the

board of one of the largest banks in Texas. Besides which, you don't have to sew quilts to make a living."

"I haven't the vaguest idea of what you're talking about, Chase. I've told you how handy that extra money is."

"We'll talk about it when we get home." His flat, angry edict kept Trinity quiet for the short car ride "home," which turned out to be his penthouse apartment.

Once there, Trinity wandered to the couch and sat down, shaking her head in silent refusal to Chase's terse question, "Drink?"

Chase took one, long drink of Scotch, then put the glass down. Turning, he walked slowly over to her, until he was standing just a short distance away. Shoving his hands in the pockets of his black evening suit, he regarded Trinity thoughtfully for a minute.

At last, in a voice that was low and restrained, he commenced. "Nothing I have done these past weeks has made the slightest impression on you, has it?"

Trinity didn't answer. Somehow, she knew that it was a rhetorical question. Instead, she waited, the clear green of her gaze never wavering from him.

"You refuse my gifts. Hell! You refuse half the flowers I send you." Chase began to pace back and forth in front of her, his accusatory words slicing through the air, nearly puncturing her heart with their sharpness. "You're living on a

farm, with no help, barely eking out a living, yet you turn down everything I try to give you.

"I take you to the most expensive restaurants, the most exclusive parties, the newest "in" places, and you not only manage to fit right in, you have some of the richest people in the country eating out of your hand." Chase paused in his pacing and looked straight at her, skewering her with his hard-bitten eyes. "And you're no closer to my bed than you were weeks ago."

Chase drew a deep breath, looking at her and appearing to choose his next words very carefully. "I want you more than ever, Trinity, and I'm willing to settle a great deal of money on you, enough to make you independent for the rest of your life, if you'll come back to my bed. The money can be in any account you choose by noon tomorrow."

Trinity bolted from the sofa, moving quickly over to the huge window. The magnificent view of the night lights of Dallas blurred before her eyes. She knew the room was maintained at a comfortable temperature, yet suddenly she felt cold—so very, very cold. She hugged herself, rubbing her arms with her hands, trying to instill some warmth in them, until she heard Chase come up behind her. Then her hands ceased their nervous movement, and Trinity waited quietly for his next blow to fall.

"Trinity?" His voice was coaxingly soft as he turned her around to face him. "I have great power and even greater wealth. Come to me and I promise I'll use it all to make you happy."

At first, Trinity wasn't sure she would even be

able to speak. Her throat seemed to be completely clogged by tears—tears that formed a vast ocean of unexpressed pain. And when she finally did, her voice was not recognizable. It was strained, and the words were croaked out. "For how long?"

"I don't know," he gritted. "All I know is that, having had you once, I must have you again."

"I see. And love doesn't enter into it?"

"Love is a schoolgirl's fantasy. I'm not sure I believe in it."

"What do you believe in, Chase?"

"You . . . me . . . and what we can make each other feel." He reached out and ran the back of his hand down the side of her face.

Trinity shrugged away from the caress and moved to the middle of the room. "And marriage, Chase? Do you believe in marriage?"

"I travel very fast through life. You know that, Trinity. I don't want or need a lot of excess baggage. If we do it my way, I can give you and Stephanie the security that you deserve, without a bunch of legal obligations to hold us together."

Trinity turned to face him, hoping that the deep hurt she felt didn't show. Very softly and very clearly, she uttered one word. "No."

Chase didn't say a thing. And he didn't really have to. His eyes said it all. They were as frozen as an Arctic winter, with the ice in them as thick as a glacier. He looked at her for one, long, endless minute and then walked out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

It couldn't have been too long after that, for Trinity was still standing in the middle of the

room, that a man she had never seen before walked in the front door of the apartment.

Tall and intelligent-looking, he addressed her solemnly. "Miss Warrenton? I'm John Phillips, Mr. Colfax's executive assistant. He just reached me at our office down the hall. If you'll follow me, I'll take you home."

And he did. Silently and competently, he flew her back to east Texas, and Trinity didn't need to be told that she would never see Chase again. It was obvious.

Five

The next weeks were not the easiest Trinity had ever lived through—but she did it. She had Stephanie, the farm and her quilting to keep her busy, and if, for the first time in her life, she found her days empty, she tried not to notice.

One morning over coffee, Trinity broke down and told Larry everything that had happened between her and Chase, from the first night down by the pool to their final confrontation, where he had offered her a great deal of money. To her surprise and chagrin, Larry took the news with a great deal more equanimity than she had expected.

"And you refused?" Larry's brows were raised interrogatively and there was an unexplained amusement in his voice.

"Of course I refused!" Trinity glared at her brother-in-law, failing to see any humor in the

situation. "Who does Chase Colfax think he is, anyway? If I took his money and had an affair with him, I would be no better than a prostitute. And if I refused his money but had an affair with him anyway, I . . ." Her words came to a halt.

"You'd what?" Now Larry was actually smiling!

"I don't know," she cried, suddenly feeling veiy defeated and extremely confused. Consequently, Trinity did the only logical thing she could do—she took it out on Larry. "Why don't you go home and murder someone off in your latest book, instead of hanging around here and bothering me!"

Larry laughed uproariously and kissed her goodbye. His final sally—"Maybe Chase Colfax has finally met his match"—was too cryptic for her to even bother thinking up a retort.

The first week in December, Stephanie came down with a severe case of the flu, which promptly became complicated by bronchitis. Stephanie felt so bad that she couldn't bear to have her mommy out of her sight for a minute, only seeming to rest when Trinity was holding her, and of course. Trinity gladly obliged—her daughter's pain had immediately become hers.

The trouble was that she hadn't been able to get much sleep while Stephanie's breathing was so labored, so she'd been making do with catnaps whenever she could.

As a result, when the phone rang late one dark

afternoon, Trinity had to drag herself to the phone.
"Yes?"

"What's wrong?" The deep, velvet-sharp voice of Chase temporarily paralyzed Trinity. She would have bet her last penny that Chase wouldn't call her again.

"What do you want?"

There was a distinct pause on the other end of the line and then, "You sound terrible! What's wrong, are you sick?"

"No"—Trinity sighed wearily—"it's Stephanie. She's been sick for about a week, now, and so far hasn't responded to the medicine the doctor has given her."

"Have you talked to the doctor about it?"

"Yes. He switched antibiotics yesterday morning and feels I should see some change in her condition pretty soon." Why was she telling him all of this? She must be even more tired than she thought.

"I'll be right there."

"Chase!" The line went dead with a very definite click.

He hadn't even said whether he was in Dallas or at his farm. What was she going to do? The house was a mess, and she couldn't even remember if she had combed her hair yet today. Heavens! She hadn't even gotten dressed. She was still wearing the old winter robe that she had put on this morning. Just as she was thinking that perhaps she would have time to get dressed, a plaintive, "Mommy!" put an end to the notion, and Trinity went back to her daughter.

Five minutes later the roar of the Lamborghini told her that Chase had been at his farm and had now arrived at hers.

He walked in, cool and hard, fresh and confident, wearing dark jeans and a blue sweater. Chase took one look at her and ordered, "Go to bed before you get sick, too."

Trinity shook her head weakly. "Chase..." her voice trailed off. She honestly didn't know what to say next.

Chase's face softened in a way she had never seen before, and his voice revealed a disarming kindness, soothing her tired nerves, as he took Stephanie from her arms. "Go get some rest. I'll take care of her."

"But you don't know anything about children," she protested, "and besides, Stephanie will never let you take care of her."

Trinity stopped talking, because she was speaking to Chase's back. Carrying Stephanie over to the rocking chair, he sat down and pulled the vaporizer Trinity had set up, closer to the chair.

"Well be fine, won't we, Stephanie?" he questioned gently, looking down into the little girl's flushed face and half-closed eyes. Miraculously, Stephanie nodded in agreement and nestled closer into Chase's broad chest. He looked up at Trinity. "Just explain to me about Stephanie's medication and then go on to bed."

Hours later, Trinity awakened to a cold and bleak dawn. Snug and warm, she realized someone must have put extra quilts on her bed during the night. Her green eyes opened completely. Chase! It had to have been Chase.

Lying very still, she listened for the barking sound of Stephanie's cough. However, the steady hum of the steaming vaporizer was the only sound that reached her ears, and something else she couldn't put a name to. Curiosity, mixed with a mother's natural anxiety about her sick child, made her leave her bed.

Trinity crept silently down the hallway, her long nightgown swishing around her bare legs as she moved, and came to a stop in the doorway of the living room. The scene before her made the breath catch in her throat.

Chase, cuddling a drowsy and contented Stephanie in his arms, was singing a soft, out-of-key lullaby. It was a lullaby that Trinity had never heard before—one about a beautiful, golden-haired little girl who was very precious to everyone who knew her. The song went on to say that, when the little girl was sick, all of her friends became so very sad. Stephanie was enchanted and fighting extremely hard against falling asleep.

Tears sprang to Trinity's eyes, and she very quietly walked back to her bedroom, leaving alone the two people whom she now knew meant more to her than anything else in the world. Climbing on top of her bed, she turned her face into the pillow, trying to absorb this new knowledge.

She had always known that Chase Colfax was a hard, cold man who could make her feel soft and hot with only a touch, a look or a smile. That had been obvious right from the start. But now she knew something else, also. She loved him. Totally, completely and absolutely—she loved Chase Colfax. It was an indisputable fact. There was only one question in her mind: What was she going to do about it?

Trinity sensed a movement beside the bed and rolled over to find Chase standing there, watching her. His silver hair mussed and a night's growth of beard on his face, the sight of him made her heart turn over with longing.

"Do you feel better?" Chase sat down on the bed and took her hand in his.

"Yes, thank you. You were right. I was nearly out on my feet."

A smile curved his mouth, while his other hand combed silky brown strands of hair away from her face. "Stephanie's asleep now. Her fever broke in the night, and she was able to eat some of the soup that you had left warming on the stove. Her breathing has improved quite a bit, and I think she'll be all right now."

"I know. I was just in there and saw the two of you." Trinity licked her dry lips and confessed, "I never expected you to call again."

Carefully putting her hand down, he got up and walked to the end of the bed. Shadows from the dark corners of the room fell onto his face. "I've been out of town."

That statement was not the most informative she had ever heard. She wanted to ask: Where have you been? Who have you been with? Instead, she heard herself saying, "Oh . . . well, I appreciate your coming over to help out. It was awfully nice of you."

The blue of his eyes touched her with a vibrant sensuality that passed through the thinness of the nightgown and onto her bare skin, making her feel the beginnings of an uncomfortable warmth.

Chase smiled knowingly and drawled, "I'm rarely nice, Trinity." He pulled out his billfold from a back pocket and took out a business card. Writing something on it, he handed it to her. "I'll be in Dallas at one of these two numbers. Call me if you need me."

During the next few days, Stephanie's physical condition improved, and Trinity at last had time to contemplate Chase's last words. "Call me if you need me." That was an enigmatic statement if she'd ever heard one. What did he mean? Call me if Stephanie gets worse? Call me if you want me to make love to you? What?

The unqualified truth was that she did need him—in every conceivable way. Her love for Chase had burned its way into her soul, destroying her contented life, making her feel half-complete without him. But she didn't know if she could risk going to him.

Yet she felt that Chase needed her, too. Per-

haps, for the moment, he would only admit to a physical need, but it was a powerful one, nonetheless, and that powerful a desire must *surely* be a kind of love in itself. No one could want someone as badly as Chase wanted her and not feel something else, too.

Maybe his wasn't an all-consuming love in the way that hers was—not yet, anyway. But if she could teach him how to let his guard down and leave it down, how to open up and how to show his love more than just on a physical or a monetary level, they just might have a chance.

Chase had shown her that he was capable of great tenderness. He had taken care of a sick, fractious child, a little girl who wasn't his own, holding Stephanie throughout the night so that Trinity could get some rest. He had shown concern, and whether or not he realized it, he had shown a kind of love. Maybe the rest would come in time.

Whether Trinity would be successful really didn't enter into her decision. There was only one thing that mattered when she came right down to it: She loved him. Chase Colfax was a compelling need, an unfed hunger, and Trinity had decided. She was going to go to him.

Christmas was over, Stephanie was well and, through a superhuman effort, Trinity had finished and delivered Mrs. Janis's quilt and caught up on most of the chores on the farm.

It was now or never. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the phone and dialed her sister's number. Sissy answered in her usual breathless manner. "Hello?"

"Hi, how are you?"

"Same as usual," her sister answered cheerfully. "Tray is torturing Anthony, Joshua is lying in his playpen screaming and Larry is skulking around my kitchen looking for new and interesting murder weapons."

Trinity laughed. "That man is a certified, card-carrying candidate for a prefrontal lobotomy!"

Sissy returned the laughter. "Yeah, I know. I don't like the way he keeps looking at my food processor. Listen, do you want to come over for dinner? I've made a huge pot of beef stew."

"Actually, I was wondering if Stephanie could spend a few days with you."

"Sure, you know she's always welcome. What's up?"

"I've decided I'm going into Dallas to see Chase." There was dead silence on the other end of the phone. "Sissy? Sissy?"

"Are you sure, Trinity? Have you really thought things out?"

"I've thought of little else, believe me," Trinity admitted dryly.

"Why don't you come over and talk about this? Another day isn't going to make any difference."

"It's been almost a month since I last saw him. It's nearly New Year's!"

Larry's voice came on the line. "I gather from

Sissy's distressed look that you've decided to see Chase."

"You gather right. Is she assembling the ingredients for fudge yet?"

"No. At the moment, she's looking a little stunned, but she should be starting any minute, probably by the time you get over here. Trinity . . ."

"Don't worry, Larry, everything will work out."

"I hope so, babe, I hope so."

An hour later, Trinity found herself sitting by the phone once again, this time trying to gather the courage to call Chase. She had already delivered a thoroughly happy Stephanie to a very excited Tray. She shook her head ruefully. There was no telling what those two would get into in the next few days.

Forcing her mind back to Chase, Trinity grasped the phone and dialed the first number that he had written down weeks ago. There was always the chance that he wouldn't be interested. Four weeks was a long time for a man like Chase Colfax to wait for a woman—any woman.

Going through a switchboard operator and a receptionist, Trinity was finally connected with Chase's secretary. "Mr. Colfax's office."

Trinity cleared her throat nervously. "Is Mr. Colfax in, please?"

"Yes, he is, but I'm afraid he's busy right now. May I give him a message?"

Trinity grimaced to herself. The easy way out of

this would be to say no and hang up. But she had never yet taken the easy way out of anything, and she wasn't going to start now. "Yes. Could you please tell him that Miss Warrenton called and—"

"Excuse me," the cultured voice of the secretary interrupted, "but is this Miss *Trinity Ann* Warrenton?"

"Yes, it is."

"Miss Warrenton, if you will hold for just a moment, I'll connect you with Mr. Colfax."

The unseen woman did exactly that. It was only a matter of moments before she heard the deeply affecting voice of Chase. "Trinity?"

"Yes, Chase, it's me."

"Are you okay? Is Stephanie?"

"Everyone's okay."

There was an unnerving silence.

"Uh . . . Chase?"

"You have my undivided attention, Trinity," he assured her dryly.

"I've been thinking about us."

"Yes?"

"I'll come to you if . . . if you still want me."

"I do."

"But only on my terms."

"I've already told you that you can have anything you want." His voice cut its way sharply through the telephone lines.

"It's what I *don't* want. No money, no gifts, and I will set the time limit. Do you agree?"

There was no sound for the space of about ten seconds; then he grated his response into the

telephone. "I'll take you any damn way I can get you, Trinity. The helicopter is already there and will be ready to take off whenever you are ready."

"No! I'll drive."

"Don't be any more hardheaded than you already are, Trinity. It will take you over two and a half hours to drive to my apartment, and the roads are as slick as glass from the rain we're having this morning."

"It's one of my conditions, Chase. I won't be picked up and delivered to your front doorstep like some . . . some call girl."

"Trinity," Chase began forcefully, but then suddenly stopped. "Okay, okay, you win. But for God's sake, drive carefully! I'll be at the apartment, waiting."

As Trinity drove toward Dallas, she marveled at the newly rinsed loveliness of the gently rolling countryside. The rain had stopped, leaving the land soft and green—just as if she were looking at it through a piece of green cellophane.

Why was she leaving it? She was going from a world that was mistily gentle into a world made up of concrete and steel, right angles and seams. Dallas and Chase Colfax suited each other. Trying to soften either of them would be a Herculean task.

And it was a definite gamble. It was a well-known fact that Chase had a low threshold of boredom where women were concerned. To pull this off

would require nothing less than a full-fledged miracle.

But Trinity didn't stop and she didn't turn around. She continued driving, down Interstate 30, into Dallas.

Six

The doors of the private elevator opened directly into Chase's apartment. As Trinity walked a few feet into the room, they closed behind her with a discreet swish.

Chase stood in the middle of the room. Dressed casually, with his usual virile elegance, his hair was damp. She realized he must have showered and changed when he had come home from the office.

Trinity's feet stopped their forward motion. All at once she couldn't take a step further. She had just driven well over one hundred miles to be with Chase, and at the sight of him, she had frozen. How ridiculous!

Chase evidently didn't have the same problem. He moved toward her, slowly, lazily. "Do you know the hell you've put me through this last month,"

he remarked conversationally, "while I waited for you to call?"

As Trinity watched him drawing nearer to her, the same feeling that had come over her when she had first seen Chase on that long-ago silvery night washed over her—the sense that she could feel the grace and the power of him inside of her. And just as it had that night, her breath quickened.

He came to a halt in front of her, and his hand curled around her neck in soft possession, the thumb moving casually up and down against her sensitive skin. "You see, I knew there was nothing I could do but wait. I couldn't pressure you. I had tried that. I couldn't bribe you. I had tried that, too. I couldn't even blackmail you, because I had nothing that you wanted. So I had to wait."

His thumb had found the pulse that was beating so frantically at the base of her throat, and paused there for a breathless moment. The blue of his eyes fired to a dark urgency, and Trinity felt the strength leave her legs. His thumb resumed its slow, insidious up-and-down motion. "I think I would have given you about twenty-four hours more, and if you hadn't called me by then, I would have tried something else."

He stepped forward and lowered his face until his mouth was a breath away from hers. "I don't know what I would have tried next, but I would have *had* to try something." His lips softly grazed hers, and Trinity barely heard the moan that escaped from her mouth and went into his. The blood thundered through her veins, prohibiting any coherent thought.

Chase's hand slid under her sweater and up to one breast, like a homing pigeon coming to roost. "Have I ever told you how glad I am that you never wear a bra?" he questioned huskily. "The fact that you don't means that I can reach out and touch the bareness of your breasts . . . at any time I choose . . ." His thumb was now rubbing, oh, so lightly, back and forth across the tensed nipple. ". . . in any place we happen to be . . . under any circumstances . . . and no one would, know what I was doing to you but us."

Trinity clung to him—she was capable of no other action. With one hand still on her breast, he used the other to quickly skin her sweater over her head.

"It seems like we've been apart forever," Chase whispered thickly, as he unbuttoned his shirt—his eyes never leaving hers, his other hand staying firmly in place—and then *pulled* her breast to his chest, rubbing her nipple against the tingling mat of curling silver-white hair.

Trinity slowly sank to her knees, her hands finding the waistband of Chase's pants and pulling him down with her. Chase shrugged out of his shirt at the same time that she unfastened his pants, and he finished undressing while Trinity lay down on the carpet and stripped off her jeans.

Soon Chase was lying beside her, and Trinity reached for him. There was something elemental in the way they came together. The powerful force of their combined passion's raged out of control. Chase and Trinity's erotic motions, their explicit

cries, their hungry demands, all came to an eager, heart-stopping climax, like a ton of skyrockets going off all at once, and, finally, all the blazing colors of their fire showered through their bodies in an ultimate, shimmering release.

They lay there, on the thick white carpet, still joined together, for quite some time, until their breathing became steadier and their pulses returned to normal. After a while, Chase picked up Trinity and carried her to his bed, which already had the covers turned down, and got in beside her, immediately taking her in his arms again.

Trinity snuggled contently into his shoulder, one arm and one leg thrown across him. "I think we're even."

Chase gave a little laugh. "What on earth are you talking about?"

She ran a finger teasingly around one of his nipples, enjoying the feel of it and the way Chase drew in his breath at her touch. "After the night that you had John Phillips fly me home, I thought I would never see you again. I went through a hell of my own in the weeks that followed, wondering what you were doing and who you were with." Her finger moved to the other nipple, tracing random patterns around and over it. "Then you called, coming over and taking charge of Stephanie just as if nothing had happened."

"Trinity!" Chase took hold of her finger, holding it motionless against his chest. She could feel his heart thudding against her hand. "The reason I had Phillips fly you back was because I was afraid I would lose you for good if I took you home. I was

so upset when you turned down what I considered to be a damn good proposition, that I was afraid of what I would say to you. I had to walk out of the room before I did or said something to you that I didn't really mean and would definitely regret later."

Chase turned her over on her back, his hand going unerringly to her breast, and began to softly stroke the erogenous area. "And then I had to go to England for several weeks and I felt it was better not to call you. I didn't want to discuss things over the telephone. When I finally got home, Stephanie was sick and you had your hands full."

His mouth swooped down, covering one nipple. Trinity's stomach turned over with desire, and she locked her hands behind his head, pulling him even closer, fusing his mouth to her breast. "Chase!"

He hadn't really said what she wanted him to say. He hadn't mentioned the word love. But for the moment, it didn't seem to matter.

Hours later, Trinity stretched languorously awake. Turning slightly, her eyes encountered the warmth and the blue of Chase's eyes, watching her. Leaning on one elbow, he gave her a relaxed, caressing smile.

Trinity grinned at him. "Do you enjoy watching people sleep, Mr. Colfax?"

"Well, let's put it this way," Chase said wryly. "I never have before, but there's something about

the way you do things that fascinates me. There's an uninhibited joy about you."

Trinity laughed and glanced up at the ceiling. "Chase! Where's the mirror?"

"I had it taken down after your last visit here."

"But why?"

His hand began stroking the length of her thigh. "Because you and I don't need anything to stimulate us but each other."

Feeling his hand move to the inside of her thigh, she pointed a warning finger at his face. "Don't you start anything else, Chase Colfax. I'm starving. You've got to feed me!"

Chase grinned complacently. "I've already taken care of that. I've put one of Mangus's special casseroles in the oven, and it is heating even as we kiss."

Giving her an especially tender kiss, he continued, smiling at the bemused expression on her face. "Mangus condescends to come into town periodically and cook me up a number of properly exotic concoctions that I can just take out of the freezer and heat up whenever I get hungry. He never stays long, though, because he has fallen in love with east Texas and, once he's done what he considers to be his duty by me, he can't wait to get back."

"Great! When will it be ready?"

Chase kissed her again. "In a little while. It was frozen solid, and I didn't want to use the microwave, because I didn't know how long you would be asleep." He ran a finger across the soft lips he

had just kissed. "How long can you stay? Is your sister taking care of Stephanie?"

Trinity searched Chase's face, wondering how he was going to take her answer. "Yes, she's staying at Sissy and Larry's. I can stay for a couple of days; then I need to get back."

"Okay," Chase agreed easily. "I'll arrange my work load so that I can go back with you."

Trinity took a deep breath and looked away. "No."

"Why? What's wrong?"

She looked back at him, noting the new softness in his eyes. Dear Lord, she prayed silently, please don't let the ice come back. "Nothing's wrong, Chase. But we'll only be together when I come to Dallas, and then it can only be for two nights a week."

Pausing, she waited for the explosion. It never came. Instead, Chase's hand came out and combed its way through her hair, tenderly stroking the silky strands that had spread out across the pillow.

"Why, Trinity?" he questioned gently.

She prayed for strength. "I can't forget my obligation to Stephanie, Chase. She's got to be my first consideration. It would only confuse her if you slept at our house. She'd wake up one morning and you'd be there. Then, just as she would start to get used to the idea of your being at the farm, you would have to take one of your trips or go into Dallas and you wouldn't be around for a while. When you returned, she'd have to start getting used to your being there all over again. And, of course, inevitably, the time would come

when . . . when you wouldn't come back." Trinity didn't want to talk about it, much less think about it.

Chase's hand turned her face toward him. "I don't want to interfere with your raising of Stephanie. I've told you before: You're a good mother. And since I'm in the position of knowing that kids aren't always lucky enough to get good, loving mothers, I'd never try to change that. It just seems to me that there must be some sort of a compromise that we could reach. I want to be with you more than two nights a week."

"Those are part of my conditions, Chase," Trinity maintained bravely. "Besides not wanting to leave Stephanie for more than two days at a time, there's the farm to think about."

"Regardless of whether you agree to come to Dallas more than two days a week, I want to hire someone to do the farm work for you. I've wanted to for a long time now. I'd also like to buy you a new car, one that I wouldn't be afraid will break down."

"No. Absolutely not. I've managed this long by myself and I'll continue to."

"But there's no reason to do that. You've got me now."

"No, Chase," she contradicted very softly. "I don't have you. Not really."

"Yes, you do," Chase whispered huskily, resuming his stroking of her thigh.

Trinity's eyes roamed lovingly over Chase's face. Could she, given enough time, make him understand what she meant? And would she even have

the time she needed? How soon would it be before he tired of her, the way he had grown tired of the girl on the phone?

Chase's hands grew more insistent, and it was a long time before they remembered that Mangus's casserole was still in the oven.

There were times in the following weeks when Trinity thought she was succeeding with Chase. Going on the assumption that you learn to love by the way you are loved, Trinity committed herself totally to him. She dared to risk the emotional lows as well as the highs of loving a man like Chase, who had never learned to give of himself.

She devoted both her mind and her body to Chase, fully and intensely, and she allowed no shadows to fall over their time together.

The shadows usually started to encroach around the perimeters of her mind as she drove home after having been with Chase for two days and two nights. It was then that she faced, with as much objectivity as she could summon, the enormity of the task that she had set for herself, and she tried not to think about what he did during the five nights when he wasn't with her.

It was true that Chase had become softer, warmer and even slightly more open with her. And in his own way, he devoted just as much of his mind and body to her as she did to him.

Chase did everything fast—decision making, buying and selling, travel—but when it came to making love with Trinity, he did it slowly, with

Infinite care and patience, and it was like nothing she had ever imagined that she might experience.

But Trinity knew that the concept of being able to enjoy sexual relations with someone for a period of time with the idea that you could simply break it off whenever you wished, left out the emotional element. And the knowledge that their relationship could very well be an impermanent one cast many a dark shadow over her heart when she was alone.

She stuck by her conditions, and Chase didn't press her to change them. He seemed to have accepted them. He called her every night and often dropped by to see her and Stephanie during the five days they were apart. A couple of times she even had Sissy, Larry and Chase over to dinner together. She so desperately wanted them to like one another, and they seemed to be slowly forming a friendship based on mutual respect and admiration.

At last, however, Trinity began to notice a change in Chase. It was so subtle, at first, that she wondered if she was imagining things. She wasn't, though. She finally had to admit to herself that it was definitely there—a certain coldness that she would pick up in his voice, or a sort of hardness that would appear in his eyes. And as the days passed, Chase became edgy and argumentative—to the degree that Trinity couldn't help but wonder if he had already begun to tire of her.

One evening, late in March, Trinity lay on the bed in Chase's apartment, watching him dress for their evening out. They had both had a shower earlier, but Trinity didn't feel up to getting dressed yet. She much preferred to lie there, watching the way the muscles rippled under the smooth skin of Chase's back as he moved about the room.

Taking a white dress-shirt from a drawer, Chase turned and looked at Trinity. "I have to leave in the morning for Europe. I'd feel a lot better if you'd let Phillips fly you home and have someone else drive your car back."

"How long are you going to be gone?"

Chase shrugged into his shirt and frowned at her. It had not escaped his attention, evidently, that she had ignored his last statement. "Will you let Phillips fly you home or not?" There was a noticeable lack of patience in his voice this evening.

"No, Chase, I won't. I'll drive home, as I usually do. I'll be just fine."

Chase didn't respond, but his anger was apparent. Trinity watched while he rammed his shirt into the waist of the dark pants. There was something wrong. She couldn't put her finger on it, but an ominous chill had begun to creep into her bones.

Trinity repeated her question. "How long will you be gone?"

"It's a little hard to say," Chase grunted at her. "But I know that the trip will be an extended one."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"When I'm around you, Trinity, I don't always

remember business matters." Chase gave her a sardonic smile as he stalked into the dressing room.

Trinity clenched her fist on top of the gray suede that covered the bed. Was this it? Was it the end? Perhaps the writing had been on the wall for a long time now, and she had just refused to read it.

At the outset, she had made the condition that *she* would be the one to put a time limit on their relationship. But now that she knew the end was drawing near, would she be able to do it? Did she have the courage?

Chase reappeared, tie and coat in hand. "I want to leave you some money, Trinity, just in case you need something before I get back."

"No! How many times do I have to tell you: I won't take money from you."

"You're just being stubborn, Trinity, and a little dense." He jerked the tie around his shirt collar and began to knot it. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with my giving you money. Don't read things into the offer that aren't there. It's nothing more than a desire on my part to insure that you and Stephanie have everything you need while I'm gone."

"I won't—"

Chase grimly held up one hand, silencing her. "At least think about it." He shoved his arms into the jacket and looked at her. "I'll be downstairs. I've got some calls to make. You'd better get dressed. We don't have much time."

Lethargically, Trinity began to dress, pulling the

jade pareu around her and knotting it. Inspecting her image in the mirror, she realized that she hadn't worn it since the night that Chase had made his outlandish proposition. She grimaced at the mirror. If only they didn't have to go to this party tonight! If they could stay home and talk things out before Chase had to leave in the morning, perhaps they would be able to resolve whatever it was that seemed to be bothering Chase lately.

Trinity gave a sigh and picked up her hairbrush, staring sightlessly at it. Chase had told her that this was a very important party tonight and that they couldn't possibly miss it. She supposed she would just have to paste on a smile and make the best of it. Maybe they would have a chance to talk after the party.

After brushing her hair, she applied a light makeup, then she stepped into the high-heeled sandals that were held on her feet by two straps of gold.

Walking out the bedroom door, she paused at the top of the stairs and looked down at Chase, devastatingly attractive in his black evening suit. He was on the phone, haranguing a no-doubt terrified employee. "Get it done by tomorrow or you're fired!" Not bothering to say good-bye, Chase slammed the receiver down.

It was then that he noticed her. His eyes lifted to Trinity and he became very still, a muscle jerking in his jaw.

She took a deep breath and started down the stairs. The light was streaming out of the bed-

room behind her, and Trinity suddenly realized that Chase would be able to see straight through the sheer fabric.

He didn't take his eyes off her and he didn't move. Instead, he seemed to become mesmerized by the sway of her body under the dress and the manner in which the material parted in the front as she descended the stairway.

When Trinity reached the bottom, she halted, watching Chase cautiously. At last he moved, walking across the short distance that separated them.

"You know, Trinity," he began quite casually, "when you wear a cobweb for a dress, you should realize that there'll be spiders that will be lured into it." His hand went to the knot that was tied between her breasts, and he tugged her to him. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?" His mouth lowered to a point right above the knot, which he still held in his hand, gently caressing the area with the moistness of his lips.

"You're a woman, Trinity Ann Warrenton." His lips were traveling down over the silk chiffon to where the hardened tip of her breast jutted out. "All the other ladies I know only play at the part. You're the genuine article." His mouth closed onto the nipple through the material and began sucking.

Trinity moaned with a spasm of longing. How could he do this to her so easily? Everything always seemed to come down to the physical between the two of them. "Chase . . . the party . . . we've got to go," she stammered weakly.

He let go of her breast with his mouth and journeyed leisurely back up the smooth column of

her throat. "You never hold back . . . anything I ask of you when we're making love, you give . . . don't you?" His mouth had found the hollow behind her ear. "Yet, you make all these damned conditions, and I have to abide by them or you'll leave." His tongue traced into her ear. "You're a wild and free spirit, as impossible to hold on to as a handful of smoke."

The throbbing heat in her lower limbs had gradually transfused to every part of her body. "Chase," Trinity gasped, "you said that the party . . . was . . . important."

His hand still held the knot, playing gently with it. "I think I've just found something *more* important." His lips glided across her cheek to her open mouth and captured it in a kiss so electrifying that Trinity was lost. Her arms slid around his neck just as the pareu slipped down to the floor around her feet.

Chase lifted her in his arms and carried her up to the bedroom, laying her down on the soft, supple suede. His eyes ran hotly over her, stopping at the pair of bikini panties she still wore. "Get undressed," he ordered hoarsely, as he began to take his own clothes off.

Trinity did as she was told and then waited for Chase to join her. The waiting seemed interminable. He took his time, stripping off each item with an unhurried nonchalance. He appeared to be enjoying the way her eyes fastened hungrily on each new naked inch of his body as it was uncovered. Finally, he came down beside her.

"This will have to last us until I get back," he

ground out huskily. His mouth found hers, and his hand located the entrance at the apex of her thighs, delving into its depths. "You're ready for me, aren't you, Trinity?" he asked into her mouth. His tongue was darting in and out, even as his hands made the same motion between her legs. How could she possibly answer? He had made her almost sick with wanting. She felt she was incapable of uttering a single intelligent word.

"Tell me," he insisted. "Tell me just how ready for me you are."

"Yes, damn you, Chase Colfax," she cried. "I'm ready! I *want* you! What more do you want from me?"

He didn't answer. He showed her. Entering her with a force that made her lose her breath at the intense shock of pleasure that shot through her, Chase took control. He moved in and out of her, deeply and so leisurely she thought she would go out of her mind. But every time she tried to move faster, he would only go slower.

Realizing he was determined to set the pace, she gritted her teeth and tried to match her restless needs to his moderate stride. Beads of perspiration broke out on her face at the effort it took to hold back, but finally she was able to slow her responses down somewhat. Then, all at once, Chase started going faster and harder, and Trinity responded gladly. "Chase!" she moaned. Her body was ablaze from the desire for him that he was so expertly creating inside her.

Suddenly, he stopped all motion. "Don't move," he commanded thickly. "Don't move, and I'll start

again." She stopped in utter surprise, and he began his movements once more—long, mind-blowing, body-destroying strokes, in and out of her. And every time she would involuntarily arch up into him, Chase would stop the stroking and wait until she was still.

She was aching, she was throbbing, and just when she didn't think she could take it anymore, he would start again—long, slow, thrusting motions. Her head tossed feverishly back and forth on the pillow, her hair wet with not only her sweat, but Chase's as well. She could tell how much of an effort it was for him to hold back, but for some damnable reason he continued with his torture. And all Trinity could say was, "Please, please, please," over and over, like some long-forgotten incantation, while Chase grated, "Not yet, not yet."

By making her lie absolutely still while he stroked voluptuously in and out of her, he was punishing her, he was pleasuring her and he was tearing her heart apart.

Trinity's restraint broke, snapping in two, and she started pushing against him, holding him tightly, not caring whether he stopped or not. But he didn't this time, for his control had broken, too.

Chase's fingers bit into her buttocks, pulling her up to him, and he drove into her, time after time, until the world exploded around them and they both lay spent and exhausted, their bodies gradually coming down from the heights to which their passion had carried them.

Trinity silently cried herself to sleep that night, and awoke the next morning to find she was alone in an empty apartment. Dragging herself into the bathroom, she filled the tub and added a capful of fragrant bath oil that Chase had once bought for her, saying it was a gift for both of them. Then, immersing herself up to her neck in the soothing warmth of the water, she tried to wash away the pain that Chase had caused with his lovemaking.

It wasn't so much the bruises on her body that Trinity worried about. She knew they would fade in time. No, rather, it was the injury to her soul that she knew would never heal. It was a permanent hurt that Chase, with his cruel, humiliating game of domination, had inflicted so ruthlessly.

Seven

Trinity looked disgustedly at the quilt she had been trying to work on. For the first time that she could remember, the thought of the amount of time that it would take to finish one of her quilting projects staggered her, and the countless rows of stitches held no allure. She just couldn't seem to get interested in it.

Pushing back the chair and getting up, Trinity walked around the quilting frame to one of the living-room windows. *What in the world was wrong with her?* There didn't seem to be any direction to her life anymore. Even the farm work seemed endless and too much for her to handle.

She had been feeling slightly off color for days now. As a matter of fact, when Trinity stopped to think about it, she hadn't really felt well for quite some time, but she had been so preoccupied with

loving Chase that she had brushed off the fact that she might be getting ill. Mentally shrugging, she focused her gaze toward the meadow. Spring had come, and ordinarily, Trinity would have been excited about the prospect. The traces of new life appearing in every nook and cranny around the countryside should have lifted her spirits.

Bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush and clover would soon carpet the fields with riotous color. Last year, she had taken Stephanie and Tray for a picnic in the middle of a glorious field of wild flowers. She couldn't help but wonder if she would have the energy to do it again this year.

The phone rang, and it was Sissy. She came straight to the point. "How are you today? Are you feeling any better?"

"I don't think so." Trinity laughed ruefully. "In fact, I think I'm feeling worse."

"Trinity, I think you should go to the doctor. This has been going on for a couple of weeks now."

"I'm sure it will pass. I must have just picked up a bug."

There was a hesitant pause. "Trinity . . . have you thought that you might be pregnant?"

"Pregnant!" Trinity exploded. "Have you lost your mind? Of course I'm not pregnant."

"It's not as extraordinary a thought as you're making it out to be," Sissy pointed out with unnerving logic. "Did you and Chase use any sort of birth control?"

Trinity sat down in a nearby chair. "Naturally, I did. Do you think I'm crazy? Irresponsible?"

"No, certainly not, hon. But this is exactly how you felt when you were pregnant with Stephanie."

Trinity pressed her hand to her forehead and moaned. "I suppose it could happen. Wouldn't you just know I'd be in the ten percent for whom that birth-control method fails?" She stopped herself. "No. It can't be! I'm sure I'll feel better by tomorrow."

But she didn't. In fact, by eleven o'clock the next morning, she was seriously considering going back to bed. Sissy had already been over, arguing unsuccessfully that, whether or not Trinity was pregnant, she needed to see a doctor.

How could she disagree? No doubt Sissy was right, but Trinity just wasn't ready to deal with whatever it was that the doctor would tell her. Surely she would begin to feel better soon.

Sitting in her kitchen, she was eyeing the sink full of dirty dishes with an unusual degree of aversion when the phone rang. She padded listlessly to the phone. "Hello."

"Trinity, this is Chase."

Her knees buckled under her, causing her to fall into the chair next to the phone. Damn it, she didn't need a phone call from Chase piled on top of everything else! She was feeling absolutely rotten . . . Sissy was worried about her . . . she didn't even want to think about what Larry's reaction would be . . . she hadn't been able to quilt for days . . . the sink was full of dirty dishes . . .

"Trinity! Can you hear me? Do we have a bad connection?"

"I—I can hear you, Chase. What do you want?"

The hauntingly familiar sound of his voice answered her from thousands of miles away. "I want you to fly here. This trip is going to take much longer than I realized, and I want you here, with me."

Frowning, Trinity rubbed her forehead. Now would be the perfect time to tell him their affair was over. If she could convince Chase that she never wanted to see him again, it would eliminate the grief of trying to break it off while facing him. "I don't really care what you want, Chase. It doesn't matter anymore. We're through."

"Trinity . . . we've got to talk. I'm in London now, but tomorrow I'll be in Geneva. I'll make the arrangements for your flight from this end. Meet me, and we'll get everything straightened out between us."

"No, Chase," she contradicted firmly. "It's over between us. No purpose would be served by my coming there."

"Hear me out! I've got to explain about what happened between us the night before I left, and I can't do it over the phone."

Trinity shook her head—she didn't want to hear about that final night they had been together—and then realized Chase couldn't see her. She had to persuade him that she meant exactly what she was saying. As hard as it was to break up with Chase over the phone, it would be ten times worse trying to do it face to face.

She forced her voice into a sarcastic drawl. "I'm

positive you'll remember, Chase, since you've kept bringing it up from time to time, that when we first started our affair, you agreed to certain conditions. And one of them was that I would set the time limit."

"Trinity, please—"

"I'm setting the time limit. Chase. It's over. To quote you, what we had, if anything, is gone. There's no need to drag it out. Good-bye, Chase."

Trinity didn't move for a long time after she hung up the receiver. She just sat by the phone, thinking. She was sure that, if she sat there long enough, she would find some sort of poetic justice in the fact that she had been able to repeat to Chase what he had, so long ago, snarled to the unhappy Melissa.

However, it wasn't really important. The way Trinity felt now, *nothing* would ever be important again. She felt numb and she hoped she stayed that way for a long, long time. Absolutely sure that she had left no doubt in Chase's mind that their relationship was over, Trinity felt strangely lifeless.

She had called it an affair. It had been a *love* affair only on her part. But no more. Her love for Chase was quite dead. It had died the night before he had left for Europe—the night she had finally faced the fact that Chase would never love her.

She had thought she sensed a sadness in Chase, but it had only been the emptiness of a self-serving life. She had rationalized that she perceived a

need in him, but it had been merely a need to gratify his lust for her. She had believed there was tenderness in Chase, but if there had been, it had been very fleeting.

Deep in thought, the telephone startled her. That couldn't be Chase again! "Yes?"

"What in the world are you thinking about?" Larry bellowed in her ear.

"Actually, I was thinking of having the telephone disconnected," Trinity returned wearily.

"Sissy has just been telling me how *pigheaded* you're being."

"What a charming phrase! Is that from your next book?"

"Trinity, you're not going to give me any trouble," Larry snapped, "because I'm not going to let you! You've been sick long enough, and you're going to the doctor. I've made an appointment for two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and you'll be there, because I'm going to take you! I'll pick you up at one-thirty. Any questions?"

"Just one. Who died and left you boss?"

"Good-bye, Trinity."

The next afternoon, on the way home from town, Trinity had to laugh at her brother-in-law, however weakly the laugh came out. "Honestly! You *can* go above thirty miles an hour, you know. Just because the doctor confirmed what I think, deep down, I had already guessed, doesn't mean we have to crawl back home at a snail's pace."

Larry's mouth twisted into a sheepish grin. "I've been through four pregnancies—three of Sissy's and one of yours—and the news still shakes me up."

"I know how you feel," Trinity acknowledged dryly. "I have to admit the news has sort of knocked me for a loop, too."

"So what are you going to do about it, now that you know?"

"What do you mean?" Trinity's forehead pleated with puzzlement. "There's not much I *can* do about it. It's an accomplished fact. You know what they say: There's no such thing as being a *little* pregnant."

Larry looked over at her and said carefully, "There are a couple of options open to you, and I think you should consider them. The one that leaps immediately to mind is to tell Chase."

"No, Larry." Trinity shook her head firmly. "I guess it's a sad fact, but it hasn't even occurred to me to tell Chase."

"It's sad, all right, but not so strange, when I think about it," he retorted feelingly. "I've always said that you're too damned independent for your own good."

"I don't want to hear what you've always said," Trinity said with a moan. The car ride was beginning to make her sick. "Just step on it, will you?"

"Look, babe. All I'm saying is that you went through your pregnancy with Stephanie by yourself, without her father, because you didn't have a choice. You've got a choice this time. The man has a right to know that you're carrying his child."

"Chase has no rights where I'm concerned," Trinity flared, and immediately regretted it. The energy it had taken to get her angry protest out had brought the nausea right up into her throat. She put her hand over her mouth, and it subsided for a minute.

A minute was all Larry needed. "I know you haven't had time to think everything out yet, but you also have the option of an abortion."

"Larry!" Trinity didn't move her head; she just slanted her eyes and gritted her teeth. "If you don't shut your mouth, I'm going to throw up all over your nice, clean car!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Larry made the final turn into Trinity's driveway. However, after stopping the car, he turned and took her hand, his mood sobering considerably. "I knew your answers before I ever made the statements, Trinity, because I know you. But I felt I had to point them out. What I won't point out to you is how difficult it's going to be for you to have a baby and raise it alone, because you obviously already know that."

He looked at her consideringly. "Maybe what you don't realize, however, is that there may be twice as much pressure put on you as there was when you had Stephanie. A lot of this community is made up of an older generation, which holds more rigid moral values than are generally prevalent today. People around here may have forgiven you for slipping up once, but now you've done it again. They may not be quite as understanding this time."

Trinity shrugged imperturbably. Larry, as usual, was right, but she couldn't be troubled by what people thought. "If they won't accept my situation without question, then they're not worth bothering about. I just won't have anything to do with them."

"I know you feel that Stephanie has added to your life rather than taken away from it, and I agree wholeheartedly with you. Have you thought how all the talk will affect her when she's old enough to go to school?"

Trinity combed her hand back through her hair and leaned her elbow tiredly on the window of the car. "If that happens, then I'll move."

"You love this place, Trinity."

"I also love my daughter and I already love this child growing inside of me. I'll allow nothing to harm either of them."

Larry gave a chuckle and kissed the hand that he still held. "And, as stubborn and pigheaded as you are, I love you. Like I said before, I knew all your answers before I raised the questions, and you know that Sissy and I will do everything in our power to help you and make it easy for you. We're behind you a hundred percent."

Trinity smiled at him. "The luckiest day of my life was when my sister caught you and married you."

Larry playfully tweaked her nose. "I'm not sure I would have been so easy to catch if Sissy had told me about her little sister first. I'd better get home and start eating the new batch of fudge that Sissy has no doubt made while we've been gone."

"Thanks, Larry," Trinity said softly, from the bottom of her heart.

"Sure, babe. Any time—you know that."

A light, cooling breeze wafted across Trinity as she lay listlessly in the hammock that was strung between the two giant pecan trees in her side yard. East Texas had been blessed with a beautiful spring this year, and she was taking advantage of it, lying outside in the hammock instead of inside on the sofa, as she usually did. It had been several weeks since she had found out that she was pregnant, and since that time, all of her days had settled into a bland grayness.

Like many pregnant women, she was afflicted with a morning sickness that lasted twenty-four hours a day. It had been somewhat like this when she had been pregnant with Stephanie, too—but nowhere near this severe. And it was much harder on her now than it had been at that time. Then, she hadn't had a four-year-old child to take care of. If she had felt bad enough, she simply stayed in bed for the day. Now, she had to get up and make sure Stephanie had clean clothes, nourishing food and loving care.

But that was about all that she was doing successfully these days, Trinity thought despairingly. It seemed as if the more work she did, the more there was to do. As hard as she tried to keep caught up with everything, the farm was beginning to look run-down, and she knew that you

couldn't neglect a farm for very long before it became noticeable.

Sissy took Stephanie to her place as often and for as long as Stephanie would consent to. The little girl still loved going over to her aunt and uncle's and visiting her cousins, but now that she knew she was going to have a new baby brother or sister, Stephanie was very protective of her mother, insisting on staying with Trinity and helping her. As it happened, though, her help was, more often than not, a hindrance. Trinity sighed ruefully. What was it about mothers being sick that made children come unglued and get into the most calamitous messes?

Oh, well, Trinity thought to herself. Stephanie had elected to go over to Sissy and Larry's for the day, and Trinity was determined to get some rest. Lately, she seemed to be continually sleepy. It felt so good to lie perfectly still in the hammock with her eyes closed, feeling the soft puffs of air blow tranquilly across her body and hearing nothing but the gentle rustle of the leaves above her and the occasional lowing of the few cows that ambled around the pasture in the distance.

"Trinity?"

Her eyes flew open. Standing beside the hammock, the width of his shoulders and chest covered in a casual plaid western-styled shirt and the length and muscles of his legs encased in black jeans. Chase looked astonishingly virile. She also noticed, inconsequentially, that he looked tired. What was he doing here? She shut her eyes against the sight.

"Trinity? Please look at me." His voice sounded almost hesitant, pleading.

"You're not supposed to be here." Her voice was grim, and she didn't open her eyes. "Go back to London ... or Dallas ... or Geneva ... or wherever it was that you came from." Wasn't that funny? She honestly couldn't remember where he was supposed to have been, and she didn't care.

"I was in New York until a few hours ago," he advised her softly. "I've been working nonstop so that I could get back as soon as I could. And now that I'm here, I plan to stay."

Her eyes flew open again. "Not here! You're trespassing. Get off my land."

"I'm staying. Trinity, until we've talked and straightened out things between us."

Looking at Chase from a prone position. Trinity realized that she was at a decided disadvantage. But she hadn't moved since Chase had appeared, mainly because if she moved suddenly, she would get very sick. If only he'd leave!

Chase's gaze ran over her questioningly. "What's the matter, Trinity? You look pale. Have you been sick?"

Trinity knew a brief moment of panic. Dear God, was it so obvious? Her suddenly muddled brain raced through a series of reasoning processes: No, it couldn't be. She hadn't had much of an appetite lately and had lost rather than gained weight. Consequently, the jeans she had on weren't tight, and there was no way he could find out that she was pregnant.

"I'm just fine, thank you very much. Now, if you don't mind, I would really like you to leave! We've got absolutely nothing to talk about."

His eyes rested broodingly on her face for a minute and then panned comprehensively over the yard. "Is something wrong? How come you've let things go so badly? It's not like you. You've got weeds a foot high in your cucumber patch. What's been going on here?"

"*What cucumbers?*" Trinity forgot herself and raised herself curiously up on her elbows to look at the garden. A wave of intense nausea swept over her, and she lay back down, closing her eyes. "Those are zucchinis, Chase," she gritted disgustedly. "Pay attention to me. You don't belong here, and I don't want you here. Just go!"

Complete silence met her statement, and finally Trinity opened her eyes to see if Chase had really left.

No such luck. He was still there, regarding her with a thoughtful expression. "I'm going, Trinity, but I'll be back. Count on it!"

Trinity gave a sigh of relief as she watched him stride away. *Thank heavens*. Chase had gone. That she couldn't have physically forced him to leave, she knew only too well. At the best of times, she was no match for his lean, hard strength, and this certainly wasn't the best of times. She had never felt weaker in her life.

Chase's parting words had carried more than a hint of a threat, but, curiously, he had uttered them more gently than she had ever heard him

speak. Well, she couldn't worry about It now. Chase was gone, and that was all that mattered. He wasn't a part of her life anymore. Her world consisted of herself, Stephanie and the baby that was growing inside of her. Her nausea had abated somewhat, and, yawning, she fell peacefully asleep.

An hour or so later, Trinity awakened, feeling all at once as if there were something wrong. Cautiously, she swung her legs over the side of the hammock and slowly sat up. A wall of nausea immediately hit her, causing her to keep her eyes trained on the ground until the worst of it had passed.

At last, feeling steadier, she lifted her eyes and started to stand up, but immediately sat back down at the sight of Chase. He was lounging comfortably in one of her lawn chairs, which he had apparently carried over and positioned where he could watch her sleep. One ankle rested casually on the knee of the other leg, and his elbows were balanced on the arms of the chair. His face was unreadable, and his blue eyes glinted with an emotion that Trinity couldn't begin to decipher.

"I've just spent an interesting hour with Sissy and Larry," he told her idly.

Eyeing him warily, Trinity watched while he got up and strolled leisurely toward her, his hands thrust nonchalantly in his pocket.

Chase came to a halt in front of her and continued evenly, "The funniest thing happened. As

soon as Sissy saw me, she started gathering the ingredients to make fudge. Although I had heard of her rather endearing propensity to make fudge whenever she's upset, it's a phenomenon I'd never witnessed until now, and I must say, it was quite an experience. I decided that with a few well-placed questions, I could probably find out just exactly what was wrong. I was pretty sure that whatever it was, had to do with you." Chase paused for a minute and then prompted gently, "And guess what?"

Trinity instinctively crossed her hands over her stomach and shook her head mutely back and forth. It had never occurred to her that he would go over to Sissy and Larry's after he left her. By now, though, it was beginning to dawn on her that there were a lot of things she hadn't considered. Feeling as bad as she had lately, living in her endless gray world, she had not thought of much except getting through the day.

"Sissy told me you were pregnant." The enigmatic expression on Chase's face didn't change, but he reached down and took one of her hands off her stomach and pulled her carefully upright. "And then Larry came in. It was a little harder to get him talking, but once I convinced him of my concern for you, he opened up like one of his books. It seems he has been very anxious about you." Chase's eyes closed briefly—as if he were in pain—right before he questioned, soft-voiced, "Why didn't you tell me, Trinity? / had a right to be anxious about you, too."

Trinity felt light-headed, and her nausea was getting worse. Still, she faced Chase unflinchingly. "I didn't tell you because it's none of your business."

"You're carrying my baby, and that makes it very much my business!"

"No, it's not!" Trinity pulled her hand from Chase's grasp and put it back over her stomach. "This baby is mine, and no one else's. And if you'll just go away and leave us alone, I promise you that we will never make any demands on you or that great fortune you're always so busily amassing, if that's what you're worried about."

"Damn it, Trinity, that's not what I'm worried about, and you know it!"

No, Trinity hadn't known it, and she eyed Chase measuringly, wondering what he was up to.

"What I *am* worried about is you and the fact that you've been having a rough time of it. However, now that I'm here, I'll help in every way that I can . . . and after we're married—"

Trinity's legs gave out from under her, and she had to grab Chase to prevent herself from falling. "Are you okay?" Chase asked with concern as he led her to the lawn chair where he had been sitting.

As soon as her equilibrium returned to what was passing for normal these days, Trinity sputtered, "What arrogance! Whatever led you to believe that I would marry you? Did you think that you would come home and poor little Trinity would be so grateful for your offer of marriage that I would just fall into your arms?"

"Actually, you did," Chase pointed out dryly from his kneeling position in front of her. "And it never entered my mind that you would be so stubborn and so stupid as to turn me down."

"I'm smart enough to know better than to marry you," Trinity returned indignantly. "Get this straight. Chase Colfax. I'm going to raise my baby *alone*, with plenty of love and without you or your money."

Chase straightened up with an impatient gesture, forcing Trinity to have to look up at him. "Larry and I just spent about thirty minutes agreeing on how stubborn you are. Not once did we ever seriously question your intelligence, but I'm beginning to suspect that you haven't got the sense to pour rainwater out of a boot with the directions written all over the heel."

Trinity glared at him. "For a damn Yankee, you sure are quick with those colloquialisms."

Chase smiled easily. "Since I'm going to be living here, I'm learning the language."

Trinity rubbed her forehead. She felt absolutely terrible, and getting into a mud-slinging match with Chase was only making her feel worse. He couldn't be serious about wanting to marry her. This all had to be some sort of ploy on his part.

Deciding to change tactics, she tried to reason with him. "Chase, you can't mean that you're thinking of living here permanently. As a matter of fact, you are one of the most *impermanent* people I have ever known. I distinctly remember your telling me that you traveled very fast through

life and that you didn't want or need a lot of excess baggage as you went along."

Chase gave a short, rueful laugh and squatted back down to her eye level. "You have a way of throwing my words back in my face that is awfully uncomfortable." He picked up her hand and kissed the palm lightly.

"You're not listening to me, Chase!"

"Oh, yes, I am. What you're saying is that you think you're going to raise this baby alone, just like you have Stephanie. But you're wrong."

Trinity opened her mouth, but she never got the chance to say anything, because Chase continued quickly. "I'm not saying that you haven't done a beautiful job with Stephanie, because you have. But from now on, you're going to have help, not only with Stephanie, but with the new baby, too. My child is going to have a father."

His presumptuousness made Trinity want to hit him. The *nerve* of Chase to think that he could just come back into her life and act as if their last night together had never happened.

"What makes this baby so special?" Trinity taunted cruelly, trying to hurt him.

But Chase answered her with a disconcerting unruffled ease. "Because the baby is yours and mine, Trinity Ann Warrenton, and it was conceived in love."

Totally astounded, Trinity couldn't believe what she was hearing. He appeared to be very serious, but Chase was up to something, and she knew it. He was too cold and too hard a man to be saying something like this without an ulterior motive.

"Love!" she scoffed. "Why don't you save your pretty speeches for someone who's a little less gullible than I am. I don't know why, Chase, but you're lying. A man like you will never open himself up enough to allow love to enter his life."

"Maybe that was true before I met you," Chase agreed slowly, "but while I was away, I came to the realization that I'm very much in love with you. I nearly tore London apart after our telephone conversation. I felt so frustrated. I had never heard your voice sound so cold, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it until I could get home. I've been through hell these last few weeks, trying to finish my business up and at the same time wanting to be here with you."

Trinity shook her head cynically. "You don't love me. Your pride has been hurt because no woman has ever told you before that it was over. You'll recover from it."

"I wish you'd quit telling me what I feel or don't feel, Trinity," Chase chided humorously. "I love you."

Trinity didn't believe him, not for one minute. He had some brilliantly devious reason for doing this, and there was only one explanation she could come up with: Chase was telling her he loved her so that she would marry him, thus publicly acknowledging the fact that he was the baby's father. And once that was done, he would gain control over both the baby and her. She had to stop him.

Realizing her brain was not working at full ca-

capacity, the only thing Trinity could think of to prevent it from happening was to strike out at Chase and make him angry. Then, she hoped, he would leave.

"I don't love you, Chase. As a matter of fact, I'm very close to hating you. I know better than anyone else that there's no room for tenderness or love in you, and you'll *never* make me believe that you love me."

"We'll see," Chase responded calmly. "In the meantime, well be married."

"No, we won't," Trinity insisted stonily.

Chase got to his feet and walked a few feet away from her. His back to her, his hands in his pocket, his gaze sweeping the pastures beyond them, he appeared to be deep in thought. Suddenly he turned and smiled at her. "All right. If you don't want to make it legal, that's okay with me. I'll just move in with you."

The nausea that had been threatening all afternoon erupted, and Trinity leaned over the chair, heaving, until there was nothing left in her to come up. Gasping, she realized Chase was right beside her, holding her forehead. A handkerchief appeared in her hand, and she held it gratefully to her mouth.

"Come on, sweetheart, let's get you in the house," Chase whispered huskily. Picking her up, he carried her swiftly into the house and deposited her gently on the bed. Stepping out of the room, he reappeared in a moment with a washcloth, a bowl, her toothbrush and a glass of water.

Trinity gratefully brushed her teeth, washed her face and sipped some of the water. Subsiding back on the bed, she scowled weakly at Chase. "You *can't* move in here. I won't let you."

"I'm sorry, Trinity," he said gently, not sounding the least bit sorry. "I *am* moving in. You've called the shots up until now, but at the moment you're too sick to do anything but let me have my own way in this."

Eight

Chase moved in that evening. He simply picked up the phone and gave a few terse instructions. As a result, Mangus appeared promptly on the doorstep with everything Chase had requested, and when Trinity awoke from yet another brief nap. Chase was firmly established in her home.

Efficiently and quietly hanging some of his clothes in her closet. Chase glanced over his shoulder to see Trinity struggling to get up off the bed. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Please don't give it another thought." Trinity smiled sweetly. "I had to get up, anyway, to throw you out of my house."

Chase chuckled and strolled over to steady her as she stood somewhat waveringly by the bed. "I don't think so, my love. You might as well give in

gracefully, because this is one argument you're not going to win."

Weeks ago, if he had called her his love. Trinity would have been overjoyed. Now, she could only feel an impotent rage at Chase's obvious hypocrisy.

"Let go of me. Chase," she gritted out. "I need to go to the bathroom, if you don't mind."

"Do you need any help?"

"This may surprise you, but I've been taking care of myself for a long time now, without any help from you, and I'm reasonably sure I can manage to go to the bathroom all by myself."

Chase grinned at her sarcasm, but the tone of his words was serious. "I just want to make sure you'll be okay. If you go in there and feel faint, you could fall and hurt yourself. Promise you'll call out if you need me."

Trinity tried unsuccessfully to pull out of Chase's grasp. "I *won't* need you—I promise. Why don't you use this time to gather whatever things of yours that are over here and *leave*?"

Chase released her with an infuriating smile, and Trinity made her way into the bathroom. After attending to her needs, she washed her face, glowering at the reflection that looked back at her from the mirror. Her hair hung in limp strands around her pale face, and her green eyes appeared weak and dull. Admitting to herself that some of the corpses described in Larry's books looked better than she did, Trinity also acknowledged the pressing need of working up some enthusiasm over fixing dinner. She dreaded it. Lately just the

smell of food cooking could make her run for the bathroom.

She found Chase waiting for her as she left the bathroom, and expelled her breath in a loud display of anger. "I . . . am . . . now . . . going . . . in . . . the . . . kitchen," she explained slowly, as if to someone who was slow-witted and couldn't understand her.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Trinity breathed a sigh of relief. Larry must have brought Stephanie home. At last she'd have an ally!

Stephanie ran into the kitchen, with Larry right behind her. "Hi, Mommy. Did you miss me?"

"Of course I missed you!" Trinity enthused, reaching down to pick up Stephanie.

Chase beat her to it, swinging the little girl up in his arms. "Your mommy is going to have to stop picking you up. You're just getting too big!"

"Chase!" Stephanie's small arms went around his neck. "I'm so glad you're back."

"Me, too, little one. Me, too."

"Larry." Trinity turned and appealed to her brother-in-law, lounging casually against the door-jamb. "I have told Chase to leave, but he won't! Just because I refused to marry him, he thinks he's going to move in."

Larry tried very hard to suppress a grin, and, to give him credit, he succeeded to a certain extent, but he wasn't nearly as successful at keeping the amusement out of his voice. "He asked you to marry him and you *refused!*"

Trinity scowled at him. "I not only refused; I told Chase I never wanted to see him again."

Out of the corner of her eye, Trinity could see that Chase hadn't moved. Standing in the middle of the room, still holding Stephanie, he was exhibiting, to her mind, a totally inappropriate lack of concern, even though he was the obvious topic of conversation.

Feeling the room sway slightly, she took a firm hold on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. All the arguing she had been doing in the last few hours had definitely taken its toll on Trinity. She had felt temporarily better after her nap, but now she knew she was going to have to sit down soon or be sick again. Still, she stubbornly refused to show any weakness in front of Chase.

Larry launched himself away from the door and walked over to her. "Why don't you sit down, babe? You don't look so good."

"If one more person tells me that I look awful, I'm going to scream!" Trinity threatened, but she took the opportunity Larry offered her and sat down, not bothering to add that she agreed wholeheartedly with him.

Chase gave Stephanie a hug and put her down. "Why don't you go look in my car and see what I brought you back from London?" As Stephanie skipped happily out, Chase turned to Larry. "I'm moving in because I feel that Trinity needs someone to look after her and Stephanie. She's obviously not well, yet she refuses to admit it."

"Pigheaded." Larry nodded in agreement, and Trinity groaned. He ignored her. "When I took her

to the doctor a few weeks back, he told both of us that Trinity was going to have a hard time carrying this baby unless she slowed down. She's in a dangerously run-down condition." Larry's gaze turned critical. "For a while, there, she was not only doing her usual amount of work on the farm, but running back and forth into Dallas to see you. And since you left town, she's been working twice as hard."

"Larry!" The first chance she got, Trinity promised herself grimly, she would kill Larry for telling Chase all of that. So what if it were the truth? And right after she killed him, she would give him her best "blood is thicker than water" lecture.

Chase looked at Trinity implacably. "Don't worry about it anymore, Larry—I'm staying. Between Mangus and myself, we'll see that she's well taken care of."

Trinity turned cloudy green eyes on her brother-in-law but found no support there.

"I'm sorry, babe, but I have to agree with Chase. I've been saying the same thing for quite some time. You need someone to help you. I figure that if anyone can get through to you, it will be Chase. He won't let you bully him like you do me."

"*I bully you!*" Trinity exclaimed incredulously. *Now* she had heard everything. Trinity slumped dolefully in her chair.

Chase was still looking at Trinity. "It comes down to this, my love. If I don't stay and see that you take care of yourself, there's a very good possibility that you'll get sicker, and then you'll be risking the baby's health as well as your own. I

can't believe you would be so selfish as to endanger the baby."

Trinity hunched her shoulders. He certainly had her there. Suddenly Trinity felt swamped by the enormity of everything. She had been sick for weeks now, with an endless nausea and a dull weariness. And instead of getting better, it only seemed to be getting worse.

Actually, Larry hadn't been told everything by the doctor or he would probably have blurted that out, too. The doctor had called a few days after her visit to tell Trinity that some of the tests he had run on her had indicated severe anemia. He had prescribed an iron supplement, but she had been too nauseated most of the time even to take it.

She freely confessed—but only to herself, needless to say—that she had been burning the candle at both ends these last few months in order to be with Chase and, at the same time, in order not to slight Stephanie or her work on the farm. What a *fool* she'd been to run herself ragged because of some false hope on her part that Chase could come to love her!

"Take your pick." Chase's sharp voice broke into her thoughts. "It's either me or the hospital. I'm sure that, after Larry and I both explain how you've been neglecting yourself, the doctor will insist on hospitalizing you."

Trinity was sure, too. In fact, the doctor had so much as told her that if the nausea persisted to the extent that she couldn't keep anything down,

he would have to put her in the hospital in order to feed her intravenously.

In desperation she tried a new approach. "There won't be enough room here for all of us, you know. It'll be too crowded, and you'll be uncomfortable . . . and you keep bringing Mangus up. There's no room here for him. This house is simply too small."

Chase looked at Trinity quite levelly and suggested, "Well move to my place. There's plenty of room over there."

"No way! I'm not about to live in that mausoleum."

"You could have a free hand in the decorating once you got to feeling better. You said yourself, it could be made into a beautiful home."

Trinity was beginning to feel penned in on all sides. Nothing seemed to be going right, but she tried again, refusing to admit defeat. "I could never live over there. I'd feel stifled by all of those guards."

"They wouldn't bother you. They're there to insure privacy."

"I have all the privacy I need, right here—or rather, I will have when you leave—and I don't care what you say. I'm *not* leaving my home."

"Fine," he returned calmly. "Then Mangus will come over whenever I can't be here and will provide all the meals. If you don't want him cooking in your kitchen, then he can prepare the meals over there and bring them here to reheat."

A new objection occurred to Trinity. "I won't have your guards over here, either. I refuse to raise Stephanie in a prisonlike atmosphere."

"If they bother you so much, they'll be dismissed immediately."

Trinity lowered her head into her hand. Chase had beaten her, and she knew it. She felt too weak, too sick, to do anything other than protest, and it was doing her absolutely no good. She couldn't fight Chase anymore. Anyway . . . as soon as he had mentioned endangering the baby, she had realized that she would have to give in.

These past few weeks, she had been wrapped in a cocoon of numbing listlessness, too sick to do anything other than just what she had been doing—striving to get through each day as best she could, one day at a time.

But from now on, until she started to feel better, she was going to drift with the current, like the river she was named after. It was the course of least resistance, and it would be easier for her and better for both the baby and Stephanie. Maintaining her independence from Chase paled in importance when she compared it with her baby's health.

She doubted if Chase would be around much, anyway. With the work load that he carried, he wouldn't have the time to bother her a lot. For a little while, he'd probably make a great show of concern, making sure that she ate a little better and got more rest. But in the long run, it just wasn't his style. Eventually, he would get tired of playing nursemaid and go away.

"Trinity?" Chase intruded on her thoughts once more. "What's it going to be? Are you going to be reasonable?"

Lifting her head, she declared, as pleasantly as she could manage, "I'm *always* reasonable. Chase. You can stay, if you insist, but only until I'm back on my feet. Then you've got to leave."

"Well see," Chase murmured neutrally.

Larry stood up and smiled at her. "You're doing the right thing, babe, and Sissy is really going to be relieved. You don't know all the pans of fudge I've been forced to eat lately."

Trinity laughed glumly. "Yeah, sure. I've seen how she forces you to eat her fudge."

"O-kay. I'll leave on that note," he said, walking around and giving her a hug and a kiss. "But call tomorrow and let us know how you're doing."

Trinity and Chase sat at the kitchen table for a long time after Larry had left, not speaking. She could feel his eyes on her, but she didn't really care. Trying to decide what to do about dinner, she stared off into the spaces of her mind. Unfortunately, only a vast empty blankness greeted her. Her apathy, which had receded to a certain extent when Chase had appeared earlier in the day, was returning.

The silence was broken by Stephanie. "Mommy! Mommy!" Stephanie came running in carrying a beautiful doll dressed in a wedding dress. It was a Princess Diana doll wearing an exact replica of the dress she had been married in. "Look at what Chase got me."

"It's lovely, darling," Trinity responded automatically, while at the same time shooting Chase a withering look because of the obvious cost of the doll. That it was no cheap tourist souvenir, she

could see at a glance, but she didn't have the energy to make an issue out of it. "Thank Chase for your gift."

Stephanie leaped the short distance into Chase's arms with a giggle and a naturalness that Trinity viewed narrowly. It would never do for Stephanie to become too attached to Chase. He wouldn't be around for long.

Chase smiled charmingly at Stephanie. "I thought a real-life little princess should have a doll of another real-life, grown-up princess." Still holding her daughter, Chase turned to Trinity. "What would you like for dinner?"

Seeing Chase sitting so casually in her kitchen, holding her daughter, being accepted without question by Larry and Sissy, Trinity realized that, even though she didn't want Chase here, she was going to have to accept his presence, at least for the time being. However, she had no intention of allowing him to become too comfortable in her home.

She frowned at Chase. "Isn't that my line?"

"I didn't move in so that you would have just that much more work to do. Admittedly, I can't cook too well, but what I can't handle, Mangus can. He's waiting for me to call him and let him know what we want for dinner."

"I'm surprised that you would even consult me," Trinity snapped sarcastically. "You've planned things out so well—just exactly who will do what, when and where—you don't need to ask me."

Chase studied her for a moment, then said quietly, "You're sick, Trinity, and everything assumes

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greater importance when you don't feel well. You probably feel as if I'm trying to restrict you in some way, that I'm building a cage around you, putting up the bars one by one."

The compressing of her lips was the only sign that Trinity gave of the surprise she felt. Chase had been able to put into words what she herself had been only vaguely aware of.

Chase continued evenly. "You're feeling crowded, and I'm sorry. Believe it or not, I would never attempt to put boundaries around you. I know you too well, and I simply couldn't do that to you. All I'm trying to do is take care of you in the best way I know how. This is your home, and Stephanie is your daughter. If, at any time, you think that either Mangus or I am not doing things as you would like them, just tell us how you want them done." His lips lifted into a wry grin. "Now . . . what would you like to eat?"

Everything Chase had said made perfect sense, and, to her annoyance, Trinity found she didn't want to argue with him.

"I don't think I can eat anything," she mumbled, telling the absolute truth.

"You have to eat something," Chase insisted. "What sounds good to you?"

"Mexican food," she answered at once.

"Mexican food! Would you be able to hold it down?"

"I don't know," Trinity admitted dryly, "but I'd like to try. Everything I *can* keep down tastes so bland, that I'm craving something spicy, something to wake up my taste buds."

Chase chuckled and set Stephanie on her feet. The little girl had been contentedly resting in his arms, playing quietly with her new doll. "Okay, I'll get together with Mangus and see what we can come up with. In the meantime, why don't you go lie down?"

Sometime later, Chase brought in a tray of food and set it before her.

"I don't like to eat in bed," Trinity muttered petulantly, in a manner totally unlike her own. She had been lying there for over an hour listening to the sounds of Chase and Stephanie's laughter coming from the kitchen. And later, she had heard Mangus arriving, bringing what she presumed she was now looking at.

"Do you feel like going into the kitchen?"

"Not really."

"Well, this tray is pretty sturdy, and it will fit right across your lap." Chase's tone was one of good-natured coaxing, as if to an ill-humored child, and it set Trinity's teeth on edge. Sit up, and well try it."

"What is that stuff?" Trinity wrinkled her nose doubtfully, while arranging the pillows behind her.

Chase laughed. "This is Mangus's idea of a high-protein, slightly spicy Mexican dinner."

"But *what* is it?" she repeated, indicating the large, indistinguishable blob on her plate.

"Cheese enchiladas. And believe me, it was prepared under great protest. He didn't want to fix you Mexican food. It seems he has other ideas about what a pregnant lady should eat." Chase grinned. "Heaven only knows where he got his

ideas, because he's never been married. Nevertheless, he felt very strongly that you shouldn't have anything too spicy—and I happen to agree with him."

"Oh, what do you know about it?" Trinity grumbled deprecatingly as she forked the first bite into her mouth.

"Not much, but I'm a fast learner." Chase leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm going to bathe Stephanie and put her down for the night. I'll leave the door open in case you need anything."

Trinity decided not to voice her scathing comments on Chase's abilities to bathe a slippery four-year-old child—mainly because, just as she got her mouth open, Chase walked out of the room. Instead she took another bite of the food. As bad as it looked, it was really pretty good. The cheese tasted very smooth, and there was just enough seasoning to make an impression on her deadened senses.

It could have used some more salt, but since she didn't feel like getting up to retrieve the salt shaker, Trinity let it pass. She would blow up like a blimp soon enough, without retaining extra water.

Pausing, her fork in midair, Trinity considered how Chase would react to her burgeoning body. In a minute, however, the fork continued its journey. After all, what did it really matter? She was convinced he wouldn't be around long enough to see her grow heavy and cumbersome with his child, anyway.

She managed to eat about half of the enchilada

and then pushed it away. She could tell by the sounds coming from the other room that Chase had taken Stephanie out of the bathtub and into her room. So Trinity made her way into the bathroom to get ready for bed. Brushing her teeth and washing her face, she reflected that she had already spent nearly half the day either sleeping or resting and she still felt tired. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

Keeping this thought in mind, she took her nightgown from the back of the bathroom door, where it had been hanging, and stripped out of her jeans. After putting the gown on, she surveyed herself in the mirror, suddenly remembering that it was the same nightgown she had worn on the night she and Chase had first met.

Trinity shrugged away the memory and made her way into the other bedroom, to find Chase propped up on the bed with Stephanie, reading a story. This wouldn't last very long either, Trinity predicted cynically to herself. With Chase's steel-trap mind, she couldn't envision him with the patience that was required to read very many stories slowly enough for a small child to understand.

Leaning down over the other side of Stephanie's bed, Trinity kissed her daughter good night, nodded a curt good night to Chase and then left.

As she snuggled down into bed, Trinity reflected that, all in all, it had been quite a day. At this time last night, she had had no idea that Chase would be living with her in less than twenty-four hours. But then again, Chase had only one mode of operation—fast.

Her eyes were closed but Trinity wasn't yet asleep when she heard the bedside light being clicked on. Opening her eyes, she saw Chase in the process of undressing,

"What in the world do you think you're doing?"

Chase didn't answer her question. Instead he asked one of his own as he shrugged out of his shirt. "Can I get you anything before I get into bed?"

"Just whose bed are you thinking of getting into. Chase?" she inquired caustically. "I've only got two beds, and both of them are occupied."

He sat down on the side of the bed and bent to take his shoes off. "I'm sleeping in *this* one, my love."

Good heavens! Where was her mind? Why hadn't it occurred to her before now that where Chase slept would pose a definite problem?

"Chase. You can't sleep in here with me!"

"Why?" he asked as he got up to walk into the bathroom.

"Because!" Trinity found that she was shouting, so she stopped and drew a deep breath. She had to be careful. That enchilada wasn't settled very comfortably in her stomach and would probably come up with the least excuse. She tried again, talking just loud enough to be heard over the running water. "Because, Chase, I don't *want* you in my bed."

His disembodied voice reached her, carrying with

it a hint of laughter. "I have no intention of sleeping either on the sofa or the floor."

"There's always the bathtub," she pointed out, giving absolutely no thought to his comfort.

Chase came out of the bathroom and sat down beside her. Taking her hand in his, he ran his thumb back and forth across it gently, speaking soothingly. "Listen to me, Trinity. I know you don't want me in your bed, but there really isn't anyplace else for me to sleep. This is a double bed and plenty big enough for both of us, but if we're not comfortable, I can always have the big bed in my apartment brought here." He smiled and released her hand to brush a brown curl off her face. "I seem to remember that, even when we slept in a king-sized bed, we didn't use a lot of space."

Trinity shut her eyes against Chase's smile. She didn't want to remember the nights she had slept wrapped in Chase's arms, anchored against his long, lean body.

His hand softly caressed the side of her face, and his voice droned on. "I want to be in here with you, Trinity, in case you get sick in the night and need me."

Her green eyes flashed open. "Isn't it amazing how I managed to live this long without you?"

Chase lowered his mouth and touched hers briefly, gently, sweetly. "You're a wild, beautiful child, Trinity Ann Warrenton, and I'll never again do anything to hurt you."

He got up and walked around the bed. Stripping down to his undershorts and climbing into bed beside her, he turned off the light.

Trinity lay very still, trying to figure out what had just happened. She had flung a remark at Chase that had been dripping with sarcasm, and he had answered her with a comment that seemed to have come out of left field. It had made no sense at all.

Groaning, she turned her back to Chase. She really shouldn't have eaten that enchilada, but it had seemed like such a good idea at the time. Maybe next time she should try a pizza. . . .

Trinity stiffened as she felt Chase's arms go around her and pull her to him. "Easy," he breathed softly into her ear, "easy. What's wrong? Does your tummy hurt?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"Here." Chase's hand found her stomach and began to rub lightly.

To her surprise, Trinity gradually relaxed. There was nothing sexual about Chase's touch. With his body curved around her . . . his breath warm on the back of her neck . . . his hand gently relieving the tension in her stomach . . . Trinity found comfort and, with it, a deep sleep.

Nine

The next morning and every morning thereafter in the weeks that followed, Trinity awoke in Chase's arms. She never knew which one of them it was who turned to the other in the night, and neither one of them ever mentioned it. All she knew was that her first waking sensation was always of Chase's arms around her, usually with his hand lying protectively over her stomach.

The days passed slowly, each one bringing the same gray monotony that seemed to be a steady partner to her listless ill health. The only break in the tedium came with watching Chase. That perhaps she might have miscalculated about him, Trinity pushed firmly to the back of her mind. Instead, she watched suspiciously as he took over nearly every phase of her life.

The first surprise came the next morning. Chase,

carrying a cup of coffee, strolled into the bedroom, to find Trinity standing irresolutely in the middle of the room.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to decide if I can make it to the bathroom before I throw up."

"For heaven's sake, Trinity! Get back into bed."

"I can't." She ran shaking fingers through the tangles of her hair. "When are you leaving for work?"

"In a few minutes. I've got an important appointment in Dallas, but Mangus will be here. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

Trinity turned green and ran for the bathroom, reaching it just in time. Her stomach wrenched painfully time after time as she heaved up her dinner from the night before. Chase stood beside her as he had the day before, holding her forehead and, in some indefinable way, giving her support.

Helping her back to bed, he asked, "Can I bring you anything?"

"No. Why don't you go on to work?" Trinity needed to get Chase out of the house so that she could get on with the things she had to do, but she felt so weak that she spoke without thinking. "When Mangus gets here, he can bring me some tea and crackers. Maybe my stomach will settle down and I can get up and take a shower."

"Why? You don't have to get up at all today if you don't feel like it."

"Yes, I do," Trinity argued frustratedly. "I've got to go see Dr. Curtis!"

Honestly! It just didn't seem fair that she should have to put up with Chase *and* a twenty-four-hour-a-day nausea. One or the other of them would have been more than enough for her. If Chase thought he could meddle in every corner of her life, he had better think again! Coming to a halt in her mental ranting, she suddenly realized that Chase had gone very still.

"You have a doctor's appointment today, and you weren't going to tell me, were you?" Chase's intonation was curiously flat.

Trinity looked up in puzzlement. "Why should I? It's got nothing to do with you. It's *my* doctor's appointment, not yours."

Chase turned on his heel and strode out, returning in ten minutes with a cup of steaming tea and a plate of crackers. "I've canceled my appointment, so whenever you're ready, I'll drive you into town."

Trinity opened her mouth but shut it again at the sight of Chase's uncompromising face.

"Not another word," he ordered shortly.

Two hours later Trinity sat in the doctor's office and eyed with a newfound dislike the elderly gentleman who had taken care of her for years. Dr. Curtis was merrily telling Chase her whole medical history. Worse than that, Chase appeared to be lapping up the information.

Dr. Curtis broke off his monologue to beam over his glasses at Trinity. "I'm so glad you brought Chase in with you this morning, my dear."

Trinity ground her teeth together and smiled at the doctor, groaning inwardly when he continued, "It's very important to get the father involved in the entire birthing process, you know." He switched his gaze back to Chase. "I assume you know of Trinity's anemia problem."

Chase smiled suavely at the man in front of him while he reached over and took Trinity's hand in a painful grasp. "Of course, but I'd like to hear what you've got to say about it, Dr. Curtis."

"Certainly. Unfortunately, Trinity is having a more difficult time of it than she did when she was carrying Stephanie. She was in a run-down condition before she ever came to me. In addition, I believe there is the added complication of a great deal of mental stress involved. But as soon as I found out about the pregnancy, I immediately prescribed an iron supplement, along with a diet regimen that I consider important for all my mothers-to-be." He glanced shrewdly at Trinity. "To what degree have you been able to follow it?"

"I . . . actually . . . uh . . . I—"

"Not at all, doctor," Chase's succinct voice cut right to the heart of the matter as it broke into her stammerings. "Trinity's been too ill to hold very much down."

Dr. Curtis looked at her thoughtfully. "As I told you, my dear, there is something I can give you for that nausea. We could start out with a fairly low dosage and go from there:"

"No." Trinity shook her head. "Definitely not. I thought I had made it clear. I won't take any

medicines while I'm pregnant. I will not risk harming my baby."

"You have to realize, Trinity, that something has got to be done soon. You can't go for weeks on end without getting nourishment of any kind. You'll not only be hurting the baby, but you'll be hurting yourself, as well."

Trinity squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. She couldn't argue with logic like that, but she didn't know what to do about it.

She refused to be put on any medication. She had heard too many horror stories about women who had babies that were born either sick or malformed, and years later it would be traced back to the medicine their mothers had taken during their pregnancy, the same medicine their doctors and the government had deemed safe. But at the same time, Trinity didn't want to be cooped up in a hospital for any length of time. She didn't think she could stand it.

As it turned out. Trinity could have saved herself the mental anguish over her predicament, because, as was his way lately, Chase made the decision. "Why don't we give it a little while longer, Dr. Curtis? I've taken steps to insure that Trinity will be able to get all the rest she needs. She won't have the farm, the house or Stephanie to worry about, and she'll have someone to cook and serve any type of food you think best."

The older man leaned back in his chair and viewed them both with interest. "And you're going to cooperate, Trinity?"

She slanted Chase a reluctantly grateful glance

for his astute assessment of her feelings. "I promise, Dr. Curtis. I know enough to realize I should have been trying frequently to nibble small portions of things like cheese and crackers, but I just felt too tired to prepare it, much less eat it."

"But you'll start now? You'll leave others to worry about the farm and Stephanie?" he persisted, evidently attempting to convince himself of her cooperation.

Trinity grinned wryly, reflecting that the good doctor knew her very well. "I promise," she repeated.

After that, Chase rarely left the farm, more or less moving his office to her kitchen, using the table as his desk. When mealtime came, he simply moved everything, including papers involving millions of dollars, to the floor until the meal was over. During the rare times when he couldn't avoid the trip to Dallas, Chase always made sure that Mangus stayed with her while he was away.

In between bouts of nausea, when she could manage to put two thoughts together coherently, Trinity watched Chase with amazement. As the weeks passed, instead of getting bored and going away, as she had predicted, he became even more firmly entrenched in her home and life.

Hiring a man to take over the farm work, Chase took charge of the housework. He looked tirelessly after Stephanie and showed no distress about either cleaning up after Trinity or thrusting his

hands into a sink full of dirty dishes and soapy water.

And he left no stone unturned when it came to her comfort and health. Chase bought Trinity a portable TV with remote control and installed it at the foot of her bed, as well as a very good stereo. She had only to mention a certain book or food and it appeared miraculously in front of her, in addition to the latest issues of any magazines and periodicals that he thought she might be interested in.

Trinity could only shake her head in wonder. It was nearly impossible for her to believe that this was the same hard, cold man she had met months ago. Yet she refused to believe that he could have changed that much in so short a time. Chase's tough cynicism seemed somehow to have been transferred to her.

Returning from a trip to Dallas one evening, Chase walked into the bedroom carrying an armload of boxes. Tossing them on the bed where she lay, he began to pull off the tops.

"What on earth have you got there?"

"Maternity clothes," he enlightened her laconically.

"I don't need maternity clothes," she protested indignantly.

"You can't get your clothes buttoned now, Trinity"—he laughed at her—"and if those jeans you wear constantly are washed too many more times, they'll fall apart."

She had been hoping that Chase wouldn't notice how tight everything was becoming on her.

She really couldn't fasten her jeans anymore and had been making do by wearing big overblouses. Fortunately, Trinity had been eating much better and was beginning to fill out.

"I have some maternity clothes that are still perfectly good from when I was pregnant with Stephanie," she insisted stubbornly. Trinity didn't add that she had worn the few items of clothing so many times that she had become heartily sick of them. That was why she hadn't bothered to get them out yet. "And I'm sure Sissy has some left over that I can use."

"Sissy told me that you had given her the things you used when you were pregnant with Stephanie."

"Oh. That's right, I had forgotten."

"And she's dumped them."

"She couldn't have!"

"They were rags, Trinity. Besides, when will you understand that you don't have to 'make do' with old or borrowed stuff?"

Settling sullenly back among the pile of pillows on the bed, Trinity scowled.

Chase smiled serenely at her and spilled out the contents of the boxes. A rainbow of colors and textures fell around her, and, involuntarily, she reached out to touch some of the clothes.

Beautifully cut and styled maternity clothes for every conceivable occasion were spread around her. Flowing silks and drifts of chiffon were fashioned into innovative and daring styles.

"They're lovely," she admitted grudgingly. "Usually maternity clothes are horrifyingly practical-looking. Where did you ever find such a selection?"

"A connection through Sakowitz. I just couldn't see you in the usual frumpy maternity wear."

Chase's blue eyes were warm and twinkling, and, for some reason that she couldn't fathom, Trinity couldn't bring herself to ask whether his connection was male or female.

He sat down on the bed beside her and held up one of the dresses against her chest, tilting his head to one side to get the effect. "This is my favorite. I was hoping you would try it on for me."

It was a silver-green swirl of a dress, long and flowing and very beautiful. But it was Chase that made Trinity catch her breath. Close enough that she could see the flecks of amber in his eyes and smell the musky fragrance of his skin. Chase's touch was intimately compelling as he let the dress slide down her body but kept his hands on her.

"Your breasts are getting fuller," he rasped huskily, feeling them through the thin fabric of her gown. "Pretty soon you'll have to start wearing a bra, won't you?"

Trinity could only nod, such was the trance he had put her into. It was the first time in a long while that he had touched her with anything approaching sensuality. And maybe that wasn't his intention now, but that was the way Trinity perceived it. Lately, much to her chagrin, she had been noticing, now that the periods between spells of nausea were lengthening, that the natural needs Chase could always evoke so easily were reawakening in her.

His voice continued, deep and throaty, and reverberating through her brain. "I'll hate it when

you have to wear a bra." Chase began to slowly undo the buttons that ran down the front of her gown, finally parting it and running his hands over the naked skin he found there. "You have such beautiful breasts," he groaned right before his mouth found one hard tip.

Trinity moaned with the longing that shot straight through her at his touch. What was happening? She had been so sure that she didn't love him anymore. Was it remotely possible that she could still be in love with him? She felt so confused. All Trinity knew was that, suddenly, she wanted him very badly.

She reached around the back of his head and held him closer to her, arching into his mouth. Chase Colfax was a silver-haired demon who had walked out of the moonlight on that long-ago magical night to possess her, and there didn't seem to be any help for her.

Chase's mouth released her nipple to trail up to the base of her throat. One hand still gently stroked her breast, while he murmured into her skin, "Are you going to breast-feed our son?"

"Son?" Trinity managed to question raggedly.

"We'll have a daughter next time," he whispered promisingly, arrogantly, his lips wandering up to take control of her mouth.

No! her brain screamed. She couldn't let this happen! How could she have forgotten how he had tried to buy her . . . and, once she had agreed to their affair, how quickly he had gotten tired of her . . . and, most of all, how he had humiliated

her with his sexual games of domination the night before he had gone to Europe.

"Stop it!" she cried, as she pushed him away with all her strength.

Chase's words were a harsh gasp as he pulled back. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

"Yes! . . . No! . . . Oh, just go away!"

"Trinity, what's wrong? Tell me."

"You're what's wrong," she lashed out bitterly. "You, Chase Colfax. You take and you never give . . . but you're out of luck this time, because I'm through giving to you. Now, just go away and leave me alone!"

Trinity turned and began to cry. Bitter, unhappy, dejected tears coursed down her face, and she couldn't really have said why. She was only dimly aware of Chase's shoving all the boxes and clothes off the bed and of the mattress dipping with his weight. Great convulsive sobs wracked her body until she felt herself being pulled into Chase's arms.

"Sssh, Trinity. Hush, now. You're going to make yourself sick." His voice flowed with the soft velvet of someone trying to tame a wild animal, but it made no impression on her.

She hit out at him with all of her strength, beating against his chest with her fists. "I *hate* you," she yelled, "I *hate* you! I don't want you to touch me ever again. Get out of my house and get out of my life!"

He pulled her tightly against him so that her arms were trapped between them, holding her so that she couldn't struggle. "I know, baby," Chase

murmured softly, "I know. Just be still now. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I hate you, Chase Colfax," she repeated, sobbing with frustration. "I hate you. I'll *always* hate you. Just leave me alone!"

Trinity could never remember afterwards how long she cried or how often she told Chase that she hated him. The only thing that she could recall was how Chase held her in his arms all night long, rubbing her back comfortingly with his hands, soothing her with the warmth and strength of his body, quieting her with the gentleness of his words.

The next morning, Chase had already left for Dallas when she awoke—but he came back that night.

In the days that followed, Trinity's health returned, and with it, her objectivity. On the surface, nothing had changed between her and Chase. He continued to take care of her, the house, the farm and Stephanie with the same ready, unembarrassed solicitude that he had shown in the past.

And, of course, this didn't include his own work. Trinity assumed that he had been able to keep abreast of his business concerns without too much trouble. It was funny that it had never occurred to her before that, by moving in to take care of her, he was putting his work in second place.

But then again,, a lot of things hadn't occurred to her. Completely well by now, Trinity began to

take note of just what was going on around her, and what she saw shook her up badly.

If ever a man had had the opportunity to turn his back on a situation and leave, it was Chase Colfax. Trinity certainly hadn't shown a great deal of gratitude for his help and concern. As a matter of fact, she had told him innumerable times to leave.

So why had he stayed? And why did she suddenly care that he had stayed?

Months before, Trinity had set out to teach Chase how to let his guard down and leave it down, how to open up and show his love more—all with the hope that he would fall as deeply in love with her as she had been with him. Was it possible that she had succeeded?

Putting her fixed ideas about Chase aside, she endeavored to look at their situation from a different perspective. If the thousand and one things Chase had done for her over the past weeks didn't prove that he loved her, *what would?*

Another relevant and very disturbing question that had to be asked was: Could it be remotely possible that she still loved him?

The answer had to be yes. Always truthful, even to a fault, Trinity had to admit that she had never stopped loving him. Chase had hurt her badly, but he hadn't destroyed her love for him, as she had once tried to convince herself.

Only one question remained to be asked: What was she going to do about it?

That stumped Trinity. She had been very explicit when she had yelled at Chase that she hated

him and had ordered him out of her life. She had also told him that she didn't want him to touch her again, and as far as she knew, he hadn't. She went to sleep alone and she woke up alone. The indentation on his pillow was the only tangible evidence that he had shared her bed in the night.

But he hadn't gone away, and therein lay her hope.

She started making her plans. Since Trinity had started feeling better, Chase had been flying into Dallas once a week, usually on a Friday.

Trinity knew that Chase, if he followed his schedule, would be going into Dallas on Friday. She surreptitiously arranged beforehand for Stephanie to spend the night at Sissy's and managed to badger Mangus into preparing dinner and leaving early. By Friday afternoon, everything was ready but Trinity.

Though she didn't have a shy bone in her body, Trinity felt quite timid about what she had planned for this night. The dinner was simmering in the oven, Stephanie had been picked up an hour ago and now Trinity was lying in the bathtub, uncharacteristically indecisive about what to wear.

The trouble, as she saw it, was that nothing looked good on her anymore. Her stomach was getting larger every day. She looked down at herself. I look like a beached whale, she thought, disgruntled.

All at once Trinity smiled at herself. She shrugged her shoulders philosophically, and got out of the tub. After all, she reasoned, it was a small price to pay for having Chase's baby.

Applying lotion to every part of her body, she suddenly laughed out loud. Despite everything, she felt better than she had in a long time. The good food and the long rest had really paid off, and she knew she would have a normal, healthy baby. Stopping to put her hand on her stomach, she ventured aloud to the empty room, "Maybe it will be a boy, after all."

Opening the closet door, the first thing that she spied was the silver-green dress that Chase had asked her to try on the night he had brought all of the clothes home.

Trinity put it on. Her breasts had grown larger, and she had begun to wear a bra. However, this dress had an empire waist and gave enough support so that Trinity decided not to wear one for this evening.

The dress fell to her ankles and had a low, scooped-out neck and long, floating sleeves. Her hair hung clean and shining past her shoulders. Feeling pretty for the first time in weeks, she waltzed out to the living room to wait for Chase.

He arrived shortly thereafter, calling out her name as soon as he came through the back door.

"Trinity?"

"I'm in the front room, Chase."

Bursting into the room, his jacket thrown over his shoulder and his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, he looked tired and worried. "Where is everyone? Why are you here by yourself? Is everything okay?"

Trinity held up her hand, ticking off the answers to his questions on her fingers. "Everything is fine, Stephanie is spending the night with her

cousins and I told Mangus he could leave as soon as he finished preparing our dinner."

After he tossed his jacket on a chair. Chase rested his hands on his hips with a disapproving look on his face. "Mangus should never have left you alone. His orders were to stay here until I got back."

Trinity shrugged casually. "I countermanded your order."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What's up?"

Suddenly Trinity was uneasy. The last thing she wanted was for Chase to be tied to her solely for the baby's sake and vice versa. After tonight, the only reason she would accept for the two of them staying together was love. Could she have been wrong about Chase's loving her? There was a distinct possibility that she had. However, either way, it was time to find out.

"Dinner," she responded lightly. "Are you hungry?"

"Not very." Chase sank down onto the couch, leaning his head against its back. He eyed her intently and commented very softly, "I knew that dress would look beautiful on you."

Her cheeks colored slightly as she fingered the material nervously. "It's a lovely dress."

A glimmer of amusement flashed into his eyes at her obvious embarrassment, then they lowered to where her rounded breasts thrust above the low neckline. They lingered . . . and darkened.

Trinity chewed nervously on her lower lip. Oh, God, she felt so *dumb*! What was she doing? This was even harder than she had imagined. She knew

she should say or do something to break the silence.

When she had envisioned this quiet dinner for the two of them, Trinity had thought it would give her the opportunity to sort things out with Chase, to find out just where she stood. But she had forgotten to figure out how to go about it, and evidently, he wasn't going to make it easy for her.

Chase's eyes came back to her face, but he didn't say anything. He just continued to watch her with his intriguing blue eyes.

Fidgeting under his gaze, she asked brightly, "How was Dallas?"

His lips twitched. "Dallas was fine, Trinity. And the weather is hot. And the grass needs mowing. Now . . . what else would you like to talk about?"

Trinity jumped up and walked over to him, eyeing him hesitantly.

"Chase?"

"Yes, my love?"

Trinity's heart jumped into her throat. He had called her his love, and that had to mean something. But even if it didn't, he had unknowingly given her the courage she needed.

Sitting down beside him, she took his hand and placed it on her stomach. "Do you feel that, Chase?" His hand stiffened in surprise for a moment, but she pressed it more firmly into the soft, rounded flesh of her belly. "That movement is the baby you and I made together."

"Trinity . . ." Her name came out as a thick, strangled gasp, and he straightened.

She kept his hand pressed against her body.

"The first night that I saw you, Chase, I thought you were the hardest, coldest man I had ever met." Trinity felt his hand flex involuntarily against her. She continued. "Nevertheless, it didn't seem to matter. There was something about you that kept pulling me toward you. We've come a long way since that first night, and we've been through a lot . . . but there's still something about you that I can't ignore.

"I told you then that I don't play games, and that was the truth . . . so I'm going to lay all my cards on the table. I don't know any other way to do it." Trinity paused and looked at him. "I love you, Chase Colfax. I've loved you for an awfully long time without knowing if you could ever come to love me. But now I need to know what you're feeling. I'm asking if you feel the same way about me."

She stopped speaking because she could feel the trembling that had started in Chase's hand. Trinity took her hand off his and waited.

He took a deep, shaky breath and laughingly shook his head. "Oh, Trinity. You sure do know how to knock a guy's feet out from under him. You've never minced words with me . . . but you never told me before that you loved me."

"Would it have made any difference?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not." He grinned at her ruefully. "I guess there were some things I had to learn for myself. When I first saw you bathed in that haunting silvery light down by your pool, I couldn't believe that you could be real.

and I had to find out." His hand pressed softly into her. "When I kissed you, I found out that you were not only remarkably real, but that you were someone I had to have very badly. The night that you came to my house for dinner and we made love, I discovered that having you once just wasn't going to be enough. My craving for you seemed to be bottomless.

He gave a short, self-derisive laugh. "Yet, you didn't play by the rules. Hell, I found out there *weren't* any rules where you were concerned. You never did one thing that I expected you to do.

"When you finally came to me with your conditions for our affair, I agreed gladly because I thought that at last I'd get enough of you. Only, once again, you surprised me. I discovered that if we made love *one thousand times*, I still wouldn't have my fill of you.

"You never left without my wanting you to come back . . . and that scared me. One of your conditions was that you would set the time limit. Not being able to guess what you'd do next, I realized that I could lose you very easily. My trip to Europe was just around the corner, and I hated the very thought of being apart from you for any length of time.

"You see . . . I wasn't sure you'd be there when I got back. I had finally discovered what you meant when you said you didn't really have me. I certainly didn't have you—not really—in the way that mattered most."

His hand rubbed gently over her stomach. "I became irritable and impossible to be around,

and in my agony of wanting you, I decided to stamp my possession on you in the only way I knew how. At least in bed, I could make you do what I wanted—or at least, I thought so.

"But that backfired on me, too. I couldn't even face you the next morning, I was so disgusted with what I had done. I hated myself for days afterwards. Finally, in Europe, I couldn't take being away from you anymore, and I had to face the fact that I was hopelessly and irrevocably in love with you and had been since the first minute I saw you.

"So I called you and asked you to fly to me. You refused, and I had to wait until I could get back, to explain why I had done what I had.

"But when I got home, you threw me a curve again." At the worried look that came into Trinity's eyes, he said gently, "Not the fact that you were pregnant. That was the best news I had ever heard. I was *thrilled* when I found out.

"No, the curve you threw me was when you said that you wouldn't marry me. To say I was astounded would be putting it mildly. Not at any time—once I found out you were having my baby—did it ever occur to me that you wouldn't marry me. And I wasn't capable of leaving you again. I did the only thing I could under the circumstances. I moved in, hoping that with time, and a lot of love on my part, the memory of our last night together would fade and you would eventually listen to my explanation."

Chase moved his hands up to her neck, his thumbs caressing her jawline. "A miracle happened

on the night I first met you, only I was too much of a fool to realize it at the time. You're a miracle to me, Trinity. Your beauty, your grace, your passion—but most of all, your love. You filled the emptiness of my life, the loneliness of my soul."

He smiled gently at her. "Before I kiss you completely senseless, I have a very important question to ask you."

Tears of happiness filled her eyes, but Trinity blinked them back, laughing softly. "The answer is yes!"

Chase's eyebrows rose in mock surprise. "You could get into a lot of trouble by saying yes to a question you haven't heard yet."

"No, I couldn't. I'll never say no to you again, Chase."

Chuckling, Chase traced with his finger a tear that had fallen from her eye. "Oh, yes, you will, my love. You'll drive me to distraction . . . and I'll love it. The question I'm about to ask you, however, is one that I won't let you say no to. Will you marry me, Trinity Ann Warrenton, wild child that you are? Will you live the rest of your life with me, loving me forever?"

Trinity threw her arms around Chase. "I thought you'd never ask! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The rest of her yeses were smothered beneath his lips. He lifted her carefully into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. There he undressed her, running his hands over the new shape of her body with a discernible wonderment. Taking the soft roundness of her breasts into his hands, he stroked her to a heretofore unreached level of de-

sire. And when he finally joined his body to hers, bringing them both to a rapturous summit, it was with a sweetness and a gentleness that wrote a whole new chapter in their love story.

It was the last night in the month of September, just after midnight, when Trinity Ann Colfax gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, with her husband at her side. The child had warm blue eyes and soft brown hair, and when Trinity saw the baby in Chase's arms for the first time, she knew without a doubt that miracles can happen—especially silver ones.