

Shadow Mountain  
Leona Karr



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**Leona Karr**

**Shadow Mountain**

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# Содержание

Shadow Mountain

6

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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*Nobody gave Wes Wainwright orders.*

He'd grown up with the conviction that people should and would do his bidding.

Caroline held out the reins of the mare. "You ride and I'll walk." Her steady unwavering look said she wasn't up for negotiation. Wes decided to let her think he was amiable to her dictates – for now.

Caroline led the way, walking beside Danny's horse. Wes followed, riding close enough to handle the unexpected if Danny suddenly lost control of the animal.

The Rocky Mountains were a treacherous playground. Unexpected threats could send the most placid horse into a frenzy without warning.

Wes felt a swell of protectiveness and suddenly realised this woman and her son had engaged his emotions on a level that was both foolhardy and dangerous.

People he deeply cared about always seemed to end up dead.

To my husband, Michael, whose love and laughter inspire and enrich my life.

### *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

A native of Colorado, Leona (Lee) Karr is the author of nearly forty books. Her favourite genres are romantic suspense and inspirational romance. Graduating from the University of Colorado with a BA and the University of Northern Colorado with an MA degree, she taught as a reading specialist until her first book was published in 1980. She has been on the bestseller

list and nominated by *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* for Best Romantic Saga and Best Gothic Author. She has been honoured as a Rocky Mountain Fiction Writer of the Year, and received a Colorado Romance Writer of the Year award. Her books have been reprinted in more than a dozen foreign countries. She is a presenter at numerous writing conferences and has taught university courses in creative writing.

# Shadow Mountain

LEONA KARR



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## Chapter One

The clock in the hall had already struck midnight when Caroline Fairchild pushed back from her home computer. Muttering an unladylike expletive, she rubbed the tense muscles in her neck. The discouraging financial printout told her what she already knew. Her newly launched decorating business in Denver was in the red. If she didn't get at least one lucrative contract this fall, she'd lose the investment of her late husband's life insurance and probably the house, too.

It wasn't just her future that was at stake. There was Danny, her six-year-old son. Growing up without his father was hard enough. She wanted him to have a full and happy life. Being a single parent presented more challenges than she had ever imagined.

Wearily, she turned out the lights on the lower floor and went upstairs to Danny's bedroom.

"I'll figure something out," she whispered as she bent over

the child's bed and brushed back his light-brown hair from his forehead. He was a beautiful child and her heart swelled with the miracle that he was hers. Since she had no other family, she'd wanted to be a mother more than anything in the world. Now that she had lost her husband, having this darling little boy to raise made every day a special blessing.

Quietly, she crossed the hall to her bedroom and left the door open in case Danny called to her. Even though her husband, Thomas, had been dead two years, being alone at night was still the hardest part of being a widow. She'd given up wearing the sexy nightgowns and settled for old-fashioned flannel pajamas. Sometimes when she looked in the mirror, she wondered where her youth had gone. Even though she'd kept herself physically fit and her hair was still a rich dark brown and her blue eyes were 20/20, she thought she looked older than her thirty-two years.

She lay awake for a long time, her thoughts heavy with unanswered questions and decisions to be made. The tiny bedside clock had passed two o'clock before her tense body began to relax. She was finally on the edge of sleep when suddenly her nostrils quivered with the stench of burning wood. She sat up and clasped a hand over her nose and mouth.

Smoke!

She leaped from the bed and bounded into the hall. Clouds of black smoke rolled up the stairway. Somewhere on the floor below was a terrifying brightness and the sound of crackling flames.

“Danny!” Shouting, she ran into his room and grabbed him up from the bed. Half-asleep, he started to fight her. “No, honey no, the house is on fire! We have to get out.”

He was a load to carry as she fled back into the hall, holding him tightly against her chest. They had to get out of the house. Frightened, Danny began to cough and struggle in her arms.

The only exits from the house were on the ground floor. As she froze at the top of the stairs, she could see tongues of red flames already licking at the stairs and banister. In moments the entire staircase would be in flames. Black smoke swirled around them.

“I can’t see,” Danny wailed.

As she wavered at the top of the stairs, the heat rose up to meet her, instantly parching her mouth and throat with a burning dryness. Her eyes were watering and the biting smell of scorched wood and cloth seared her nostrils.

A dancing brightness at the bottom of the stairway warned her that the entire first floor might already be a flaming furnace. Danny was coughing and crying as she plunged down the stairs through the swirling, thick haze.

Panic drove her through an encroaching ribbon of fire spreading along the bottom step. She leaped over it, almost losing her balance as she fled down the smoke-filled hall.

Fiery flames were devouring the dining-room curtains and spreading along the carpet runner leading to the front room. Danny bolted out of her arms with the panicked strength of a

terrified six-year-old. He disappeared in the direction of the front foyer just as a thunderous crash vibrated through the depths of the house.

“Danny!” she screeched with parched lips and a burning throat as she ran after him. He was already at the locked front door, pounding on it and whimpering when she reached him. Her eyes were watering so badly, she couldn’t see the dead bolt. As her hands played blindly on the door seeking it, her fingers touched a hinge. She was on the wrong side of the door!

Danny had his face buried against her nightgown when she finally found the lock. Frantically, she turned it with one hand and jerked open the door with the other.

They bounded outside.

Coughing and gasping, they stumbled across the porch and down the front steps. The sound of falling timbers and radiating heat from leaping flames followed them across the yard.

Grabbing Danny’s hand, she croaked, “Run.”

At two o’clock in the morning all was quiet in the modest neighborhood in North Denver. The street was empty of people and cars. Only a few porch lights were on as they bolted across the cul-de-sac to the house of Betty and Jim McClure, her closest neighbors and longtime friends.

They stumbled up the steps and Caroline’s frantic ringing of the doorbell and pounding brought Jim, disheveled and sleepy-eyed, to the door.

His eyes widened when he saw them. “Caroline! What on

earth? What's happened?"

"Call 9-1-1! Fire. My house!"

When Jim looked across the street and saw the flames leaping out of the windows and roof, he spun on his bare feet and ran for the phone.

"What is it?" Betty called from the top of the stairs and hurried down.

Caroline tried to answer but a spasm of coughing choked her words.

"Our house is on fire," Danny whimpered.

ALL NIGHT crews from two fire trucks fought to control the flames. Caroline knew she never would forget the sound of the wailing sirens and the sight of firemen mobilizing to fight a dangerous enemy.

By sunup, their victory was small.

A stench of smoke, ashes and foul water floated through the whole neighborhood. The entire house had been gutted. The back was leveled. Most of the roof on the remainder had collapsed and water damage was everywhere.

As Caroline stared at the devastation, her lips quivered with disbelief. She and Thomas had bought the house when they were first married.

It had been the only real home she'd ever had. Her parents had been dryland farmers in eastern Colorado, moving from one acreage to another when times were bad—and they always were. Caroline was an only child and had been weighed down

with responsibility and never-ending poverty as she grew up. Her parents had died within a year of each other when she was a senior in high school. She'd always been a hard worker and good student and her perfect 4.0 high-school record earned her a full scholarship to Colorado University.

She'd been working in the cafeteria when she met Thomas Fairchild, an older medical student doing his internship. Thomas always told her she was the prettiest girl with summer-blue eyes and soft brown hair that he'd ever seen. Their marriage had been a happy one, especially after Danny had become a part of their lives.

Now, she bit her lip to fight the ache in her heart as she walked across the street and stared at the shambles of their home. Most of the firemen had left, but the fire chief had remained. His expression was sympathetic as he walked over to her.

"I'm afraid there's not much left."

"But surely, I haven't lost everything?" she asked, biting her lip to control her emotions.

He avoided a direct answer. "Do you have any idea what started the blaze?"

She shook her head. "I can't imagine how it happened."

"Did you have any combustible material stored at the back of the house or in the kitchen?" he prodded.

"No. And nothing left on the stove. I always clean up after dinner and work a few hours in my office."

His eyes traveled over what was left of the house. "I'm afraid

the damage is extensive.”

“I’ll need to go through and see what I can salvage,” she said in a strained voice.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he hedged. “You’ll have to have one of the firemen go with you.” He cleared his throat. “The cause of the fire is under investigation. We don’t want any potential evidence destroyed. Arson is always a possibility.”

The way his eyes narrowed suggested he was considering the idea that she’d set it herself.

She stiffened. “How long will the investigation take?”

“Hard to tell.”

Caroline knew that meant the insurance company was absolved of any responsibility to write out a check for who knew how long.

THREE DAYS passed before she was finally allowed inside the house. In the company of a young fireman, she went through the painful process of salvaging what she could.

She was relieved that her important personal papers and a few old photos of her late parents were in a metal box that had survived the heat. Her office was destroyed.

Nothing in the upstairs rooms was salvageable. What hadn’t burned was ruined by smoke and water. When all was said and done, she accepted the stark reality that all was gone.

She was grateful for the generosity of friends and strangers and, luckily, she had just taken some fall and winter clothes to the cleaners to get ready for the October weather. She had no choice

but to use funds from her less-than-impressive bank account to buy necessities for her and Danny.

“What are you going to do, Caroline?” Betty asked as Caroline sat dejectedly in the kitchen, staring at a cup of tea. “I mean about your business? I know you’ve always worked out of your home but you’re welcome to put in a desk at our furniture store.”

Jim and Betty owned the McClure Furniture Outlet and it was through their referral of some of their customers that Caroline had secured several redecorating contracts.

“Maybe that way you’ll pick up some decorating jobs from more of our customers,” Betty encouraged. “And you and Danny can stay with us until things get settled.”

“That’s kind of you. I just don’t know.”

After the shock had worn off and reality set in, Caroline gratefully accepted both offers.

Danny had turned six the first week in October—after school had started, so he was in kindergarten.

Betty loaned Caroline a laptop and she set up her “office” in a corner of their store. Using the telephone, she prospected for viable clients and created a simple advertising brochure to hand out.

She had just hung up the telephone, batting zero for the morning, when Betty and an attractive woman approached her desk.

“Caroline, I want you to meet Stella Wainwright. She’s from Texas and her brother-in-law has a mountain lodge in Colorado

that he's decided to redecorate.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Caroline rose to her feet and held out her hand. “Caroline Fairchild.”

The woman was fashionably dressed in gabardine slacks, a pink knit shell and a leather jacket. Her blondish hair was cut short around a tanned face and alert hazel eyes matched her steady expression. Caroline guessed her to be close to forty despite her youthful appearance.

“She tells me she's having trouble hiring a decorator willing to go and work in such an isolated place,” Betty explained quickly. “I told her I didn't know whether you'd be interested—with your other commitments and all,” she added with a straight face.

“The project sounds interesting,” Caroline responded, smiling and playing the role of a successful, busy decorator.

With obvious satisfaction, Betty made her retreat, leaving the two women to talk.

“Please sit down.” Caroline motioned to a nearby chair and turned her desk chair in that direction. “Where is the lodge located?”

“At the foot of the San Juan Mountains on the western slope of Colorado,” she answered, crossing her legs in a relaxed fashion.

“Near Durango?”

“North of there. Closer to Telluride.”

“I see.” Caroline had never been in that part of the state but she had a general idea of the area.

“His property is extensive and includes its own lake and

encompasses hundreds of acres of mountain forest,” Stella Wainwright continued. “The lodge is quite isolated and private.”

Caroline mentally groaned. The nearby Rocky Mountains were great for an occasional recreational pastime, but working in a rugged, isolated area of the state with a six-year-old boy wasn't high on Caroline's preference list.

“I'm not sure,” Caroline began.

“I know what you're thinking.” The other woman gave a light laugh. “It's not that bad, trust me. The Wainwright family built Shadow Mountain Lodge as a welcome retreat for family and friends from hot, muggy Texas summer heat. My late husband, Delvin, loved it. He was Wes's younger brother and was killed in a private plane crash en route to the lodge.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Caroline said sincerely; she knew what it was like to lose a husband.

“My teenage son, Shane, and I still spend a good deal of time at the lodge. It's isolated and set on the slopes of Shadow Mountain. The surroundings are quite beautiful.”

“I'm sure they are,” Caroline replied evenly. Without even seeing the place, she was intimidated by the challenges such a job would present. The demands of acquiring materials and dependable labor to carry out a job there could be a living nightmare.

Before Caroline could put her refusal in polite terms, Stella Wainwright surprised her by reaching out and touching her hand. “I can assure you that Wesley Wainwright, heir to the family's oil

empire, would financially make it worth your time and effort.” In the next breath, she mentioned a figure that was ten times what Caroline had expected.

“For that amount of money, you could hire the very best—”

“I’ve tried,” Stella replied shortly. “All the interior decorators I have on my list have refused for one reason or another. Maybe it’s because I have very definite ideas about what I want done. Of course, sometimes those ideas change when I don’t quite like the way they work out.”

*Uh-oh, enough said!* Now Caroline understood! Stella Wainwright was looking for someone who would put up with her constantly changing her mind about what she wanted. A decorator’s nightmare!

As if to verify Caroline’s thoughts, Stella gave Caroline a measuring look and asked, “Do you think we could work together?”

The innocent question was loaded. Caroline knew it. If she accepted this job it would probably turn out to be pure hell. She’d bet there would be plenty of headaches with little satisfaction. Maybe even the loss of her own integrity included.

She wanted to say, “No thanks. I’ll pass.” But she didn’t. There were too many things at stake, like securing an immediate income and having a place for her and Danny to stay without imposing on anyone. Her options were painfully limited. When it came down to it, she really didn’t have a choice.

She straightened her shoulders and replied in a calm and

rational tone, “Yes, I think we could work together nicely, Mrs. Wainwright.”

“Call me Stella,” the woman invited with a smile that sealed the matter. “How soon do you think you could begin?”

WESLEY WAINWRIGHT had just come back to the lodge from a hike on Shadow Mountain when the phone rang. He was breathing a little heavily when he answered it. The climb was always a strenuous one, but his six-foot body had handled the muscular demands with ease and he felt as strong now in his thirties as he had in college. He loved being out in the mountain air, away from closed-in offices, board meetings and the ever-present demands of his financial responsibilities.

He sighed as he picked up the receiver. If it was his secretary in Houston, he was going to hang up.

“Hi, it’s Stella.”

His sister-in-law had been gone nearly a week and he’d rather enjoyed not having her around. Sometimes Stella’s presence got a little tedious. He wasn’t all that happy when she’d showed up at the lodge during his planned vacation away from work and family. Frankly, he’d been relieved when she’d left to spend time in Denver. She was one of those women who liked to manage everything and everybody—including him.

“What’s happening?” he asked in a guarded tone. Stella’s voice was laced with excitement.

“It wasn’t easy but I did it. I found one.”

“One what?”

“An interior decorator,” she answered impatiently. “I found one who will come to the lodge. Last spring we talked about doing some redecorating at the lodge. Don’t you remember?”

Wes’s hand tightened on the receiver. “I thought that was in the future.” *Way in the future*, he added silently. “I didn’t know you were intending to carry out the idea so soon.”

“I just haven’t been able to find a decorator who would spend several months isolated in the mountains—until today.”

“When is all of this going to start happening?” His sister-in-law was constantly testing his patience. If she hadn’t been his late brother’s widow, he wouldn’t have put up with her being such a controlling force in his life.

“Since it’s early October, everything will be just perfect for the Christmas holidays. I’ve arranged for the decorator to start next week. Her name is Caroline Fairchild and she’ll be bringing her little boy with her.” She paused. “I’m thinking of putting them in rooms on the second floor. She’ll need another room close by to work in. Since your suite is at the far end of the corridor you won’t be bothered. What do you think?”

He controlled an impulse to tell her exactly what he thought. “Yes, fine.”

“Good. They’ll arrive next week.”

Wesley hung up the phone, muttering, “Well, so much for peace and quiet.”

Having Stella show up had been bad enough but now she was arranging for some decorator and her kid to move in for

God knew how long. Stella had been twenty-four years old when she'd married his nineteen-year-old brother, Delvin. Noticeably pregnant at the time, Stella eventually gave birth to a baby boy they named Shane. To her credit, since Delvin's death almost six years ago, Stella had been a conscientious single mother to her son.

Wes had tried to fill in the empty spot that his brother's death had left in the boy's life. Now seventeen, Shane loved spending time in Colorado. The young man had made it clear he'd rather forget about college and just enjoy life on the ski slopes and hiking trails. His mother disagreed, but Wes thought it might be a good idea for Shane to take a year off, to discover a few things about himself.

Wes always tried his best to accommodate Stella's ideas and plans when they were at the lodge but this latest decorating craze of hers was the limit.

He could imagine the frenzy the lodge would be in when the redecorating got into full swing. Well, he wasn't going to stick around to see it. He'd be long gone. There were plenty of spots in Colorado where a man could find peace and quiet.

He reached for some brochures and settled back to make plans for his escape.

## Chapter Two

The Wainwright property on the southern edge of the Colorado San Juan Mountains was a seven-hour drive from Denver. A narrow road twisted through rugged shadowy slopes

that reminded Caroline of pictures she'd seen of Germany's brooding Black Forest.

"Are we there yet?" Danny asked in a bored voice.

"Almost." She sent him a reassuring smile that faked the confidence she didn't feel.

"I'm tired."

"Me, too." She'd turned off the main highway hours ago and had no idea how close she was to the Wainwright lodge. Only vaulting wooded cliffs rose on each side, making a tunnel-like passage for the twisting mountain road. Signs of habitation were scarce and the pencil map Stella had drawn was of little help. She'd made an X to show where the lodge stood at one end of a small, private lake—but where was the lake?

Caroline's hands were tense on the steering wheel as she maneuvered a series of hairpin curves. Then, suddenly, without warning, there was a break in the view ahead and a startling vista opened up before her eyes. Nestled in the circle of the encroaching mountains was a meadow, a small lake and an access road posted with a wooden sign, Shadow Mountain Lodge.

"We're here," she said with a sigh of relief.

Danny peered over the front seat as best he could, straining against his seatbelt. "Where? I don't see nothing."

"Anything," she automatically corrected him. "See that building across the lake? That's where we're going."

He stuck out his lower lip the way he did when things weren't going his way. When they got closer, he said, "I hate it. It's ugly."

Caroline wasn't about to argue. Built of austere, dark wood, the mountain lodge was set in the depths of towering trees that hugged its square, unrelieved lines. A late-afternoon sun failed to lighten the blankness of recessed dormer windows crouched under a sharply slanted roof.

She remembered Stella had told her that her brother-in-law was a widower and had a six-year-old daughter named Cassie. Caroline hoped that Danny and the little girl got along. Her son was easygoing most of the time but when Danny set his mind against some thing or someone, a team of horses couldn't budge him.

She followed the road that bordered the lake and then rose sharply to the lodge set against the steep back-drop of a mountain. She continued past the lodge and parked in an open area which looked as if it might lead to some other smaller buildings like stables and bunk-houses set back in the trees.

Once released from his seat, Danny bounded out of the car like a young animal freed from a cage.

"Stay close," she ordered as she took out an overnight bag and decided to leave the rest of the luggage until later. The place looked deserted, but she could hear the neighing of a horse and spied a corral set back in the trees.

With Danny at her side, they walked around to the front of the lodge and climbed a flight of wooden stairs to a heavy, planked front door. A brass lion's head with its mouth open made a loud clanging sound as she dropped the knocker several times.

As they waited, she rested her hand reassuringly on Danny's shoulder but already the enveloping isolation was getting to her. Her mouth went dry.

*What on earth am I doing here?*

The massive door suddenly opened and Stella stood there, smiling at them. "Oh, good, I was hoping you'd get here before dark. Sometimes these mountain roads can be a little tricky at night."

Caroline silently added, *And in daylight*. It was some kind of miracle she'd found the place at all.

"Please come in. I'll send Shane to bring in the rest of your luggage."

They followed her inside and the interior of the lodge seemed just as dark and intimidating as the exterior. Beyond a shadowy vestibule, they entered a large room with a high ceiling and a monstrous chandelier made of elk horns suspended from a high rafter. Several tall windows allowed muted sunlight to slightly relieve the shadows of high ceilings and dark-panelled walls. A massive stone fireplace dominated the far wall and a variety of furniture, mostly leather and dark walnut, was scattered about. An area rug of faded green covered a small section of a wide-planked floor. Some framed black-and-white photographs hung on the wall. They were group pictures as far as Caroline could tell. She wondered if this was one of the rooms Stella wanted redecorated. If so, simply introducing some color would be a step in the right direction.

“I’ll show you to your rooms first,” Stella said motioning toward a massive staircase mounting a far wall. “You’ll probably want to freshen up before meeting Wes. He was set to leave yesterday when one of his good friends, Dexter Tate, showed up unexpectedly. They’re out target-shooting but should be back anytime. Wes’s daughter, Cassie, is upstairs with her nanny, Felicia.” She glanced at her watch. “I’d better see that some refreshment is ready.”

As they mounted the steps to the second floor and walked a short distance down the hall, Stella said in a practiced hostess manner, “I hope you’ll be comfortable here. There’s a small sitting room, a bedroom with twin beds and a connecting bath. I’ve set up a workroom just down the hall. If there’s anything I’ve missed, just let me know.”

She opened the door and motioned them inside. They had just walked into the sitting room when Danny suddenly cowered beside her, hugging her leg.

“What is it?” She followed his frightened gaze to the walls of the room. Her breath caught. “Good heavens!”

Mounted on the walls were heads of wild animals—a fierce black bear, a threatening mountain lion and a snarling wildcat. She could tell from the raw fear in Danny’s expression that he thought they were alive and about to jump down on him.

“It’s all right, honey,” Caroline said quickly. “They won’t hurt you.”

“They’re dead?”

“Yes. Somebody killed them.”

“Why?” he demanded with childish bluntness.

“They’re like trophies,” Stella answered quickly before Caroline could. “Big men shoot them and then hang them on the walls to show how brave they are. I’m afraid you’ll find them all over the lodge.” Then she brightened. “But your mother and I are going to make some nice changes.”

Caroline didn’t say anything, but she wondered how easy that was going to be. Changing anything that had become a male tradition might be an uphill battle. If she were a gambler, she’d bet the mounted animals stayed despite Stella’s best efforts.

Fortunately the small bedroom was spared any hunting decor. Several scenic pictures hung on the walls. One window had simple green draperies hanging from a brass rod. Caroline was delighted with the hand-crafted aspen bedroom furniture. She immediately visualized how a little color and fresh wallpaper would add a pleasant warmth to the room.

“If there’s anything you need, just let me know,” Stella said, preparing to leave them. “Please come downstairs when you’re ready. There’s a small social room just past the main stairs and down the hall. I know Wes will be pleased to meet you both. He has a little girl about your age, Danny. Her name is Cassie. I know you’ll have fun playing with her while your mother and I are busy.”

Danny’s scowl plainly showed his reaction to the idea. Girls weren’t his thing.

Caroline silently sighed. A belligerent little six-year-old was all she needed to make this whole experience a living nightmare. Her son's mood certainly didn't improve when she insisted on a hands-and-face washing, a quick change of clothes and a brushing of his tousled brown hair. He flopped down on one of the beds while she freshened up.

Stella had warned her they'd need warm clothes as well as walking shoes and boots. Caroline had followed her suggestions and found some bargains for her and Danny that she could afford.

She wanted to make a good first impression. After exchanging her jeans for a pair of tan slacks and her plain pullover for a variegated knit sweater in the red and orange colors of fall leaves, a quick glance in the mirror warned her she didn't look very professional. Somehow her two tailored outfits didn't seem right either. Besides, they were packed in the luggage she'd left in the car. She brushed her lips lightly with pink gloss, gave her short, wavy hair a quick combing and straightened her shoulders.

"I guess I'm ready," she said as she came out of the bathroom. When she saw that Danny had fallen asleep, she groaned. Now what? She couldn't leave him here asleep. If he woke up and was alone with all those animal heads, he'd freak out! But he'd be grumpy if he didn't have a nap.

Stella would probably be waiting impatiently, but she didn't have a choice. Caroline knew she'd have to wait at least a half hour before waking him.

As she looked at his sweet face, so angelic in sleep, her

chest was suddenly tight with emotion. He was so precious. Her whole life now. He'd been only two years old when she was left to raise him alone. Even though Thomas's medical career had dominated his time and energies, his unexpected heart attack and death had left her without any emotional support. There were no grandparents or close relatives to provide an extended family for either of them.

She turned away from the bed and walked over to the window to look out. Her view was of the wooded slopes behind the lodge. Already the sun had slipped behind craggy mountain peaks and she would have missed seeing the two horsemen moving through the trees if their movement had not caught her eye. Before she could get a good look at them, they disappeared beyond her view.

Wes Wainwright, no doubt, and the guest Stella mentioned who had gone target-shooting with him. She wondered what targets they'd chosen for their sport and doubted that she could even be polite to her Texas host after seeing the mounted heads.

She'd always had trouble controlling her temper when she encountered selfish, self-centered men. Bragging rich Texans who seemed to throw their weight around had never been very high on her list.

When she finally woke Danny, he was less than cooperative. "When can we go home?" he said with a scowl as she brushed his hair once again.

"Not today," she said with false cheerfulness. She couldn't tell him when it would be because she really didn't know the answer.

Everything depended upon Stella and her redecorating plans. If they were superficial and limited, the job would only require a few weeks. If the entire lodge was to undergo a coordinated redecoration, several months might be involved.

“I bet you’re hungry.” Caroline said brightly. “Let’s go downstairs and have a nice dinner.”

She was glad a bedroom door led into the hall so they didn’t have to go through the sitting room with the overpowering animal heads. Danny needed time to adjust to this strange environment.

*And so do I!*

Their feet made a muffled sound on the bare steps as they descended the staircase to the main room. Someone had turned on a few scattered lights that played over the furniture, gloomy walls and stone fireplace. The bulbs on the ugly antler chandelier remained dark as it hung like a menacing threat overhead.

Following Stella’s instructions, Caroline turned down a dimly lit hall and, with Danny hugging her side, passed a series of doors opening into various sized rooms. She couldn’t tell what they were used for because they were all dark.

Caroline was beginning to wonder if she’d missed the right way when she heard the sound of voices and saw light spilling through double doors opening into the hall.

She tried for a composed smile when they entered the social room, as Stella had called it. Even though the decor was much the same as the main room’s—paneled walls and brown leather furniture—the warmth and lighting in the room was a sharp

contrast to the rest of the lodge. The room gave off a surprising cheerfulness.

She held Danny's tense little hand firmly as he started to pull back. She saw then he was staring at a black bear skin with an snarling, open mouth stretched out above the fireplace.

Stella immediately stood up from a chair next to a coffee table. "There you are. I was about to send someone after you. I want you to meet Wes."

Caroline could tell she was nervous. *Maybe as nervous as I am.* "I'm sorry, Danny took a little nap and delayed us."

Two men stood in front of a blazing fireplace with drinks in their hands. *Which one is the Texas tycoon?* Was it the overweight, round-faced fellow wearing leather trousers and a fringed jacket? The one doing all the talking and gesturing with his free hand?

The other man was taller, well-proportioned, wearing jeans and a denim shirt open at the collar and rolled up at the cuffs. A shock of brown hair with a glint of red hung low on his forehead and framed a strong, masculine face.

A slight frown creased his forehead as Stella brought Caroline across the room and introduced her. "Wes, this is Caroline Fairchild and her son, Danny. She's the decorator," she added as a reminder.

"Oh, yes. Pleased to meet you," he replied politely and Caroline sensed a decided lack of enthusiasm in his manner.

"Did you kill that?" Danny demanded, thrusting a pointing

finger up at the mounted bear skin.

“Nope. My grandpa killed that one.”

“Why?”

“Well, that old bear was looking around for something to eat. You can see his sharp teeth. Grandpa didn’t want him to have his dog, Shep, for dinner. My little girl says he looks mean. What do you think?”

“I don’t like him,” Danny answered flatly.

“Smart boy.” He nodded approvingly. “How old are you, Danny?”

“Six.”

“Really? What do you know? I have a little girl the same age.” He turned to Caroline. “They’re a handful, aren’t they?” She could tell he was forcing himself to be congenial so she smiled and nodded.

Obviously, he wasn’t all that pleased about having an interior decorator under foot. Something warned her that she’d better tread softly and keep her distance. If he was going to pay her the exorbitant amount Stella had promised, she couldn’t afford to antagonize him. She remembered Stella had said he had intended to be gone before she arrived. Caroline suspected that under those good looks there was probably plenty of barbed wire.

Despite Wes’s lack of enthusiasm, Stella seemed to be determined to proceed full speed ahead with the project. “We’ll be looking over the lodge and deciding where to begin—”

“Just leave my suite and the gun room alone.” His tone

brook no argument. The lines and planes in his face suggested a firm control of his thoughts and feelings. Even when he smiled his eyes held a certain glint, as if his mind were functioning on many levels. He was worth millions and his casual attire didn't fool Caroline a bit. She suspected only a fool would judge him by outward appearances.

The robust man still standing by the fireplace chuckled as he took another drink from his glass. He must be the old friend Stella said had arrived unexpectedly. As the man's assessing eyes traveled over her, Caroline mentally stiffened against his open appraisal. They hadn't even met yet and she didn't like him.

At that moment, a little girl bounded into the room, blond pigtails flapping. She was wearing jeans and a plaid shirt. A red cowboy hat hung by a string down her back. When she saw Danny, she stopped short.

"Who's that?" she demanded, scowling.

Danny's little mouth tightened as he scowled back.

"This is Danny Fairchild, Cassie," Stella answered quickly in a warning tone. "He's going to be a guest at the lodge and you'll want to make him feel welcome."

"What if I don't like him?"

*Oh, no,* thought Caroline. *This could turn out to be a real nightmare.*

"What's not to like, honey?" her father asked as he motioned Cassie over to his side. "You've been complaining about not having anyone to go horseback-riding with you. How about it,

son? Would you like to take a ride on one of Cassie's Shetland ponies?"

As Danny's scowl instantly faded, Caroline stiffened with sudden irritation. How dare this man make such an offer without knowing whether her son would be safe riding a horse—pony or otherwise.

Danny's eyes were already sparkling with anticipation as he looked up at her. "Mom...?"

"We'll see."

"Spoken like a true mother," quipped the man in leather trousers before Wes had a chance to say anything. As he stepped forward, he held out a pudgy hand. "Dexter Tate. Wes didn't warn me that we were going to have feminine company or I would have shaved for the occasion." He rubbed a growth of dark whiskers on his full cheeks and chin.

"Dexter thinks of himself as a ladies' man and we try to humor him," Wes said with a chuckle. Dexter took a playful swipe at him and they both laughed like good friends who enjoyed ribbing each other.

Cassie had moved closer to Danny. "You want to go see my ponies?"

"Not now, Cassie," her father said before Danny could respond. "It's almost time for dinner." He turned to Caroline. "I imagine it's been a long day. Traveling is never easy."

"Not unless you have a jet plane, helicopter and a slick foreign car," Dexter quipped and added with pointed emphasis, "Not that

Wes ever travels alone.”

“Cut it out, you two,” Stella said quickly, obviously wanting to change the conversation.

A tall, lanky youth with a tanned narrow face and longish unkempt dark hair appeared in the doorway. He was wearing cowboy boots, a Western shirt and low-slung jeans held in place by a leather belt with a huge silver and turquoise buckle.

“Come in, Shane,” Stella said with a wave of her hand.

“Cook says grub’s on. Come and get it,” he said as he ambled in with his hands in his pockets.

“Shane, that’s no way to announce dinner. I want you to meet Mrs. Fairchild. This is my seventeen-year-old son, Shane.”

“Nice to meet you,” Caroline quickly responded. “This is my son, Danny.”

Shane gave a quick bob of his head at the introductions and as if to ward off a lecture from his mother, he told Caroline, “I took your suitcases up to your rooms.”

She quickly thanked him and was rewarded with a fleeting smile that didn’t quite meet his light-brown eyes.

“Shane’s a big help around here,” Wesley said as he put his arm around the adolescent’s shoulders.

Caroline could tell that Shane was pleased with the attention. He ducked his head and shuffled his feet as if a little embarrassed by his uncle’s attention.

“Shane’s only going to spend a year here in Colorado before going to college,” his mother said quickly as if there might have

been some heated discussion about it. “His late father would have wanted him to fill his shoes, being responsible and taking care of family business. That means some brain work and study.”

Caroline could tell from Shane’s expression that he’d heard this lecture before. His eyes darkened. The young man’s suddenly stiff posture hinted at an explosive emotion close to the surface.

Wes murmured, “Easy does it.”

There was something threatening and unsettling about Shane Wainwright. Caroline decided then and there to keep Danny as far away from him as she could.

### Chapter Three

Caroline was relieved that dinner was a casual affair served in a square room that resembled a café more than a formal dining area. The walls were knotty pine and undressed windows with open shutters overlooked a rocky slope and the lake below. Small maple tables and chairs were scattered around the room with no sign of the traditional long table. She suspected the lodge’s main dining room was closed off when so few people were in residence.

Stella had told Caroline that usually only relatives and close friends made use of the lodge, but Wes invited business associates and acquaintances to be guests a few times during the year.

Wes and Dexter had stayed behind to finish their drinks and the only occupant in the room when Caroline, Stella and the children entered was a woman with graying dark hair and strong

Spanish features sitting at one of the tables. Her dress was a bright, exotic print with a matching fringed shawl and a stream of different colored beads hung around her neck. Large silver hoops dangled from her ears.

“Nanny, here’s another kid,” Cassie exclaimed as she bounded over to her. Pointing a finger at Danny, she added with a frown, “I don’t like him much. Does he get to play with all my things?”

The woman slowly set down her cup and rose to her feet. She was tall with a rather regal posture. Caroline guessed her to be in her fifties.

“No, sit down, Felicia,” Stella ordered, but the woman remained standing as Stella drew Caroline forward. “I spoke to you about Mrs. Fairchild and her son being with us for a few weeks. Well, this is Danny. He’s the same age as Cassie.”

Felicia’s dark eyes narrowed and she seemed to stiffen as she looked at Danny. Caroline wondered if she had already decided that the boy’s presence spelled trouble.

“I’m sure having someone for Cassie to play with will be a help,” Stella told her.

Caroline spoke up rather defensively. “Danny’s preschool teachers have found him easy to manage. He plays well with other children. If there’s any problem, I’ll want to know about it.”

“Such beautiful brown eyes, round and clear,” Felicia said, her expression softening as she looked at him.

Cassie shook her finger at Danny in a warning manner. “You have to do as she says.”

Danny stuck his tongue out at the bossy little girl.

To Caroline's surprise Felicia laughed deeply, her earrings jingling as she nodded. Apparently, Danny's rejection of Cassie's bossiness amused her. "He's a nice boy. You bring him to my rooms. We'll all play and learn together."

"Good. That's settled then," Stella said, just as Wes and Dexter came into the room.

"Mmm. Smells good," Dexter said. "I'm hungry as a bear. Grrrr," he said patting his stomach as he made a play move for Danny. He laughed when Danny backed up and gave him a wide-eyed stare.

"That's enough, Dex," Wes said and motioned Caroline and Danny toward a built-in buffet along one wall. "We don't stand on formality here. We serve ourselves except for drinks."

"Wait for me at a table, Danny," Caroline told him. "I'll bring you a plate."

The choices were unbelievable and Caroline decided there were enough steaming dishes set out to feed a harvest crew. She had a choice of chicken, roast beef or barbecue pork ribs. There were several vegetable casseroles and potatoes oozing with butter. A platter of fruit was about the only thing that didn't shriek calories.

Caroline selected a piece of chicken, modest servings of two kinds of vegetables and sliced oranges for both her and Danny. Wes, Dexter and Shane were in line behind her, filling their plates to the fullest.

Stella and Cassie took their plates to the table where Danny was sitting and as Caroline followed, she noticed that Felicia had left. She wondered if it was the nanny's habit not to eat with the family.

As the two men and Shane sat together at another table, a murmur of conversation and laughter filled the small room. Almost immediately, as if there'd been some kind of signal to the kitchen, a rather plump, redheaded woman in slacks and T-shirt came into the room to serve the drinks.

"Trudie Benson, our housekeeper," Stella told Caroline. "Her husband, Hank, is our wonderful cook and the two of them keep the place going. They're recruits from the Texas ranch. Been with the Wainwright family for years. Wes brought them to Colorado when he was first married."

"How long ago was that?"

"Before I was born," Cassie piped up. "Daddy told me. Him and Mommy were lonesome until I came along. When she went to heaven, he was glad he still had me."

"My daddy went to heaven, too," Danny said as if he wasn't going to be outdone. "And my mom's glad she has me."

Both Caroline and Stella choked back smiles. Competitive natures, both of them.

Caroline begged off staying downstairs after dinner. It had been a long day and both she and Danny were tired. To her surprise, Wes invited her to have an after-dinner drink before retiring, but she politely refused. She knew better than to

fraternize with the boss.

After they were settled in their beds and Danny had said his prayers, she wearily closed her eyes and courted sleep. None came. After an hour of turning and tossing, she was still awake. The dynamics of her new situation and the people she'd met kept her mind whirling.

Wes Wainwright certainly had perfected an image of devoted father and unpretentious millionaire. But was it just a facade? What was he like, really? She doubted that he'd stay around long enough for her to find out. Even if he did, she was pretty sure he'd make his presence scarce while the redecorating was going on.

And what about Stella and her son, Shane? Stella must have been much older than the younger brother, Delvin, to marry and have a son of seventeen. She wondered what Wes's wife had been like and what had happened to her. Caroline tossed all of this around in her mind until she finally fell into a restless sleep.

The room was filled with morning light when she came awake with a jerk. Danny was bending over her, his breath warm on her face. "Are you awake?"

"Almost," she said and smiled as she cupped his face with her hands and kissed his forehead. "Are you?"

"Can we go home, now?"

"Not today."

"When can we?"

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. Taking one day at a time was the only way she could cope at the moment. She wasn't

at all sure how this decorating job was going to play out. Stella's temperament was certainly a question mark. Conceivably, the woman could throw her hands up at any time and fire Caroline without much cause.

Obviously, her brother-in-law, Wes, had no emotional investment in the project. Caroline suspected he'd be glad enough to have the whole idea scrapped.

And then there was Cassie. If Danny got crosswise with her in any serious way, her father would promptly show them the door to keep her happy. And Felicia wasn't exactly the kind of nanny Caroline would have chosen. She didn't seem the type who easily related to children.

WES WAS the only one in the room when they came down to breakfast. He watched as Caroline and Danny moved along the buffet. When she gave him a hesitant smile, he was glad he'd made the effort to come down early. He stood up and motioned for them to join him at his table.

He thought she looked trim and neat in light-blue slacks, matching jacket and simple white blouse. The first thing he'd noticed about her was her eyes. They were as blue and clear as a summer's sky. Her brunette, wavy hair was short, casual and carefree. He liked that. He couldn't stand women who were always fussing with their hair. His late wife, Pamela, had been the worst. She'd been a Texas beauty queen when he'd met and married her. Her appearance had always been uppermost in her mind. It got a little wearying at times.

As they sat down, Wes poured her coffee from a table carafe and offered Danny a carton of chocolate milk.

“I like chocolate best,” Danny said with a happy grin.

“I thought you might,” he said smiling as he poured it into a glass for him. He was a damn cute kid. Not as outgoing as Cassie, but he’d bet Danny was just as sure of himself in his own way. “Did you sleep well?” he asked Caroline as if the dark circles under her eyes weren’t answer enough.

“So-so. I guess I had a few things on my mind.”

As she sipped her coffee and looked at him over the rim of her cup, a feeling he hadn’t experienced for a long time stirred within him. Her features were totally feminine and her full breasts and rounded hips invited the caressing touch of a man’s hands. Her lips were moist and pink from the warmth of the hot coffee and he couldn’t help but imagine what they would feel like pressed against his. As he felt desire begin to stir, he looked away quickly and gave his attention to his cinnamon toast.

“Lovely view,” she said, looking out the window.

“This early in the morning the sun just brushes the tops of the trees,” he told her. “The mountains look as if they’ve been painted against the sky. As far as I’m concerned, the Colorado Rockies have the kind of beauty that makes life worthwhile. I hope you can relax, Caroline, and enjoy yourself a little while you’re here.”

“Stella said you wouldn’t be staying.”

Wes couldn’t tell from her tone whether it made the slightest

difference to her one way or the other. He was used to women who welcomed his company and for some strange reason he wanted her to be one of them.

“I’ve changed my plans a bit—because of Dexter. I guess I’ll have to keep him company for a few days at least.”

The excuse was a lie. Dexter often spent time at the lodge or Wes’s Texas ranch when Wes wasn’t around. His old friend had been trying to make time with Stella for quite a while—without much luck. If Stella favored anyone it was Tim Henderson, the manager-caretaker of the property. Tim was a little older than Stella, quiet-spoken and didn’t jump when she threw her weight around. Their relationship hadn’t changed much through the years and Wes really didn’t know if they had a private, intimate relationship going or not.

“I hope Dex and I won’t be in your way,” Wes added, blatantly fishing for an assurance his presence would be welcome.

“I’m not sure how extensive Stella’s plans are,” she replied evenly.

“You may have trouble putting a leash on Stella’s wild ideas,” he warned.

“That isn’t my job. I’ve been hired to follow her wishes as best I can. My commitment is to please Stella and offer suggestions, but not implement my own ideas.”

“Then heaven help us both,” he said lightly. He was impressed with the firm way she set him straight. He liked that.

“More coffee?” he asked as he filled her cup.

Danny piped up. "Where's that girl?"

"You mean Cassie?"

Danny bobbed his head. "Yeah, her."

"She usually has breakfast and sometimes lunch with her nanny upstairs. They have a nice little kitchen apartment all their own. Maybe you'd like to join them sometime?"

Danny's expression clearly expressed his lack of enthusiasm for such a happening. "I don't like girls."

Wes chuckled at the child's display of disgust. Danny was all boy. Watching a son like that grow up would be a joy. Wes's heart tightened just a bit. He loved his daughter, but he couldn't help wishing he also had his own son to raise.

"Girls are a pest sometimes," he agreed solemnly. "It's too bad you're not interested though. Cassie has a playroom filled with all kinds of fun things. And then there're the ponies."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," his mother said quickly. "Danny's never been around horses."

"Maybe this is a good time to give him that opportunity. One of my staff, Tim Henderson, is very good with youngsters. He rides with Cassie almost every day." Wes could tell she wasn't sold on the idea. "What about you? Have you done any horseback riding?"

Her laughter surprised him. "I've ridden bareback, saddled up my own mount and even mucked out a stable or two." She told him that her parents had been farm people.

"Well, I guess I'd better brush up on my own performance

before asking you to go riding with me.”

“We could all go,” Danny popped up in a firm little voice.

Wes was beginning to like this kid more and more. “Good idea. How about this afternoon?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Stella—” Caroline started to protest.

“Let’s say four o’clock. She should be through with you by then.”

“Please, Mama, please,” Danny begged.

Wes could tell Danny’s mother was hard put to deny his eager expression. “We ought to take advantage of the nice weather. October can be unpredictable, especially in the high country.”

“All right, if Stella doesn’t object.”

“Good,” Wes stood up and ruffled Danny’s hair. “See you then, cowboy.”

CAROLINE AND Danny were just finishing their breakfast when Trudie Benson came in from the kitchen. She wiped her hands on an apron large enough to cover her rounded middle and asked, “Everything all right?”

“Great,” Caroline assured her. “Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. Hank and I are happy just to see people enjoying the food.”

“Where is everybody?”

“The hired help eat early and the rest eat late. You’re kinda in the middle. Felicia and Cassie are having breakfast upstairs.”

“Could you tell me where their rooms are? I need to check with the nanny about looking after Danny while I work.”

Caroline ignored Danny's audible groan.

"Top of the stairs, turn to the right. Knock on the double doors at the end of the hall."

Caroline thanked her and they left Trudie busily checking the buffet and coffeepots.

Danny hung back and grumbled all the way up the stairs.

"It's going to be fun," Caroline assured him. "Like daycare and preschool...only better. Just the two of you to play with all the toys."

"Girls' stuff," he muttered.

"Did you notice her cowboy boots and hat? And she has her own ponies." She smiled to herself as his frown disappeared.

"I guess she's okay."

"You'll have your own special teacher, too. Felicia seems very nice. And this afternoon we'll go horseback riding—if you behave yourself." She wasn't above a little bit of bribery when the situation invited it.

She found Felicia's apartment on the second floor at the opposite end from their rooms. She knocked on the double doors. It opened slowly and Cassie peeked out. Her round eyes instantly fixed on Danny. "What do you want?"

"May we come in?" Caroline asked politely, ignoring the two children glaring at each other.

"We've already had breakfast," Cassie declared with obvious satisfaction as she opened the door wider. "You can't be sleepyheads and eat with us."

“We already ate,” Danny declared triumphantly.

The apartment’s sitting room was quite spacious and light with the morning sun pouring through windows along one wall. Draperies, furniture throws and fringed gaudy lamps were various shades of red and purple. Artificial flowers were displayed on small tables covered with silk cloths and Caroline could smell an invading scent of potpourri coming from a cut-glass bowl.

Cassie pranced ahead of them into an adjoining room which was obviously the playroom of a very rich little girl. Even Danny’s eyes widened as he looked around at the games, toys, paints, clay and inviting electronic gadgets he’d only seen in toy stores.

Cassie knocked on one of the doors at the far side of the room and called out loudly, “That boy’s here.”

The bedroom door opened almost immediately and Felicia glided into the room wearing a long multicolored robe that swept the floor. Her salt-and-pepper hair was held back by a braided band and fell freely halfway down her back. If Felicia was embarrassed by her less-than-formal appearance, there was no evidence of it.

“I hope we’re not too early,” Caroline quickly apologized.

“Not at all,” she said smiling and in a formal tone, she said, “Good morning, Danny.”

To Caroline’s surprise, Danny responded with a preschool ritual. “Good morning, Miss...Miss...” He fumbled for the right name.

“Felicia. Fe...lis...e...a,” she pronounced phonetically. When he repeated it, she nodded. “Very good.”

Danny beamed. Caroline began to relax.

“Cassie, why don’t you set up the race track for you and Danny? And let him have his choice of cars?” she prompted.

The car-racing game must have been a rare treat because Cassie’s frown instantly changed in to a wide smile. Caroline blessed Felicia for recognizing a pivotal moment and handling it so beautifully. The two children happily busied themselves setting up the track and positioning their choice of cars.

“Would you join me in a second cup of coffee while the children get acquainted a bit?” Felicia asked Caroline.

“Yes, thank you.” She doubted that Stella would be looking for her this early.

Felicia motioned toward the kitchenette. A small round table and chairs were in an alcove off the main room. Caroline didn’t see any dishes in the sink or on the table.

“You must have breakfast early,” she commented as Felicia brought cups and a coffeepot from an apartment-sized stove over to the table.

“Dawn is the best time to greet the world. Vibrations are at their highest then. All shadows of the night flee before the healing rays of the sun, you know,” she said as she sat down opposite Caroline. “Of course, Cassie wakes up several hours later.”

Caroline took a sip of coffee before responding to her unusual

remarks. “I can imagine how a person could lose oneself in the grandeur of the surroundings. You must love being here.”

“I’m always ready to go back to sunbaked earth, clear skies and warm nights. Texas is home.”

“Have you lived there all your life?”

She nodded. “My parents worked on Wes’s grandfather’s ranch when they first came over the border. I grew up there. Sadly, Wes lost both of his parents while he was still in college but when he got married, he asked me to come and work for him.”

Caroline wanted to know how she had liked Wes’s wife, but she refrained from asking. Gossiping with the nanny wasn’t exactly the wisest thing to do.

“I really appreciate your looking after Danny.”

Felicia’s forehead was suddenly creased with thoughtful lines. She didn’t answer as she stirred her coffee.

*She doesn’t want to do it. Now what?*

“Danny really isn’t as difficult to handle as he might appear,” Caroline quickly assured Felicia. “He has a lot of interests and he wouldn’t demand a lot of time if he has something to do.”

Felicia set down her spoon and sighed deeply. “It isn’t that. He’s a fine little boy, I can tell that.”

“Then what?”

“Nothing,” she said but her eyes betrayed her words. There was a haunted look about them.

Caroline was suddenly uneasy. She’d leave the lodge in a

minute if she felt it wasn't safe leaving Danny in this woman's care.

"If there's something that might affect my son, I need to know it now. Tell me."

Felicia took another sip of her coffee, carefully holding the cup steady with both hands. Then, slowly, she set it down and took a deep breath.

"I'll let no harm come to your boy, I promise."

Whatever reservation Felicia had had in her own mind seemed to be resolved. In the weighted silence, they could hear the children squealing in the other room. Danny was cheering and Cassie was laughing deeply.

"It will be good for them to be playmates," Felicia said as she reached across and patted Caroline's hand. "You do your work and I will take good care of your son, I promise. I have taken care of Cassie since she was born. They trust me and so should you." Her dark eyes hardened. "You pay no attention to what anyone says. Today is not yesterday."

Caroline wasn't sure what Felicia meant by that cryptic remark, but she knew that she wouldn't rest easy until she found out.

## Chapter Four

Caroline left Danny sitting on the floor, watching as a red racer careened around a track. He barely gave his mother a quick glance as she said, "I'm leaving now, Danny. You stay here with Cassie and Felicia."

“Okay.” His face was flushed and his eyes bright. “I’m ahead of Cassie two laps.”

“You’re going to miss a curve going that fast,” Cassie retorted as if she’d learned that lesson the hard way. “Wait and see! Then I’ll catch up.”

“No, you won’t.”

Felicia gave Caroline a reassuring smile as she eased down in a nearby chair and picked up her sewing basket.

“I’ll be back before lunch,” Caroline said. Everything seemed to be under control. She couldn’t find any rational reason for a lingering apprehension. *Quit being an overprotective mother*, she told herself, but the lecture didn’t do much good. She wished they’d never left home.

Her chest tightened. *What home?*

After leaving Felicia’s apartment, she walked the length of the hall to her rooms and spent a few minutes making up the beds and putting things away. Because of her limited finances, she’d shopped for only enough clothes for about a week. One of her first challenges would be to find the laundry room.

After glancing at her watch, she decided she’d go downstairs and see if Stella was ready to give her the tour of the lodge that she’d promised and tell her what rooms she wanted redone.

The eating room was empty except for Trudie Benson who was clearing off the buffet. When Caroline asked about Stella, she nodded. “She had breakfast and I think she left to talk to Tim Henderson. He’s the year-round manager-caretaker, you know.”

Caroline remembered that Wes has mentioned Tim before.

“Well, you’ll probably find them in his office. It’s just down the hall at the back of the house. It has an outside entrance so Tim can come and go without having to traipse through the whole house. He spends half his time outside checking the property and overseeing the two stablemen.

“Maybe I shouldn’t bother them.”

Trudie waved away the objection with her chubby hand. “Tim doesn’t stand on ceremony. Besides, if Stella isn’t there, he’ll probably know where she is.”

Trudie’s instructions seemed simple enough, but Caroline soon discovered that the hall didn’t continue in a straight line but made several abrupt turns. She passed a couple of narrow stairways rising to the floor above. She hugged herself against a penetrating chill in the dank, shadowy hall. The only sound was her own steps vibrating on the planked floor.

When the silence was broken by a floating echo of Stella’s laughter, Caroline let out a breath of relief. Quickening her steps, she reached a door that opened into a low-ceilinged room with one window and an outside door. The furnishings were meager: a desk, a couple of straight-back chairs and some gray metal file cabinets.

A muscular man of about forty, with a weathered face and sandy hair was half sitting on the corner of the old desk and smiling at Stella who stood close by.

Both turned quickly in Caroline’s direction when she appeared

in the doorway. From their startled expressions she couldn't tell whether she'd interrupted something personal or they were just surprised to see her.

Stella waved her in. "Come and meet Tim Henderson. He's the boss around here."

"Hardly," he objected with an easy smile.

"I told you about her, Caroline Fairchild. She's the decorator who's going to help me put a little class in this place. And about time, too," Stella added as if she'd fought more than one battle on this subject.

"Welcome to Shadow Mountain," he said, shaking her hand. From his slight Western drawl, Caroline assumed he was another Texan. "Reckon you gals are going to be pretty busy, all right."

"You better believe it. Maybe we'll start here." Stella gave him a teasing smile as she glanced around the packed office.

"Not on your life, honey."

"Oh, you men. Wes has already warned us to leave his suite and the gun room alone. You'll be sorry when you see how beautiful the rest of the lodge turns out." She turned to Caroline. "I'll show you the lodge and we can decide where we'll start first."

Tim walked with them to the hall door. "I hope you can keep a rein on this gal. She can be a handful sometimes."

Caroline wondered if he was speaking from experience.

As they walked down the hall, Stella explained, "We have our own generator, water supply and telephone service via Telluride. Cell phones are useless here. And no house mail delivery. We

order groceries from Telluride or go after them ourselves.”

As they toured the main floor, Caroline was thoroughly frustrated with Stella’s ambivalence about making any decisions about basic changes she wanted. They could end up with a hodgepodge of fabrics, colors and furnishings that completely lacked harmony and balance.

Caroline was ready to call a halt to the unorganized approach and suggested they spend the afternoon going over some basic plans.

“Oh, I can’t,” Stella said. “You’re on your own for the rest of the day. We’ll get together again tomorrow morning and go over some ideas.”

Caroline swallowed back a protest. A myriad of initial decisions had to be made before they could proceed. Spending only half days working out the details could extend the project almost indefinitely.

Caroline would have made an issue of the matter if she hadn’t already agreed to spend the late afternoon with Wes and the children.

“I’ll show you the workroom and you can get set up there,” Stella said as if she sensed Caroline’s impatience. “I’ve made a collection of magazines, books and articles that offer some good suggestions. You could look them over and see what you think.”

“That might be a place to start,” Caroline agreed.

When Stella showed her the workroom and Caroline saw the pile of material stacked on a long work table, she silently

groaned. It would take more than one day to go through that collection.

“I set up my laptop and printer.” Stella motioned to a small table. “I thought that would be an easy way for you to make some notes. Anything else?” she asked.

“No, that’s fine,” Caroline lied. The woman hadn’t given her any clues about what she had in mind nor any specific changes she wished to make in any of the rooms. Caroline was thoroughly frustrated. If Stella had already decided on some definite ideas, this would be the time to share them, but she left Caroline alone in the workroom without another word.

As Caroline sifted through a pile of books and a dozen magazines, all new, she didn’t see any signs that Stella had gone through them. Usually clients marked specific ideas that they liked or turned down pages for easy reference.

Caroline leaned back in her chair, suddenly overwhelmed by the project ahead. How could she hope to please Stella when she didn’t have a clue how to begin to shape her nebulous ideas?

When she left the workroom and returned to Felicia’s apartment, Danny and Cassie were happily playing with clay. If her son had missed her, there was no outward sign of it.

“Time to go downstairs for lunch,” she told him.

“I don’t like that stuffy old dining room,” Cassie said, wrinkling up her pert nose.

“Me, neither,” Danny echoed.

“Why don’t I fix the children something here?” Felicia

offered.

“Yay,” they said, almost in unison.

Caroline laughed. “All right. I’ll be back after lunch to get you for your nap, Danny.”

When he groaned, she reminded him that they were going horseback-riding later in the afternoon.

“Oh, I forgot.”

“I don’t want you to fall asleep on Cassie’s pony.”

“Blackie will keep him awake,” Cassie promised with a grin.

On the way downstairs, Caroline realized she would much rather have stayed and had lunch with the kids. When she reached the dining room, she was even more regretful.

Dexter was the only one there. He was wearing burgundy leather pants and a plaid shirt that only emphasized his beefy build and pot belly.

“Hi there, pretty lady,” he greeted her as she came in, immediately rising to his feet. He stayed at her elbow while she selected soup and salad from the buffet and then ushered her over to the table where he was sitting.

“Where’s Wes?” she asked pointedly as he guided her chair to the table.

“Oh, he’s holed up in his suite, working. The price of being rich, I guess. He has to keep on top of things no matter where he goes. No rest for the weary—or the rich,” he added, grinning. “Wes has probably talked to a dozen big shots this morning, keeping the wheels of commerce moving, you know.” His tone

was tinged with something that might have been jealousy.

“It’s too bad he can’t relax when he’s here,” Caroline said, already impatient with the man’s boorish manner.

“Oh, I think he does. This lodge has really been a godsend. It’s one of the blessings his grandfather left the family. I doubt that Wes or his father would have built it. When his parents died Wes inherited all the family property and fortune held in escrow for the oldest living male Wainwright.” Dexter gave Caroline a knowing wink. “Wes is quite a catch for any gal who plays her cards right.”

Caroline forced herself to say lightly, “I imagine there are plenty of downsides. How many times has he been married?”

“Just once. He married a Texas beauty queen, Pamela Labesky. Wow, that gal could send any man’s desire into orbit just looking at her. She was something else and once Pamela set her silver tiara for Wes, he didn’t have a chance. Ruined him for any other woman, that’s for sure.” Dexter looked thoughtful as he speared a link sausage and popped it in his mouth. “Too bad Pamela only enjoyed her good fortune and Wainwright prestige for a few years. You know about the plane crash?”

“Only that Stella said she lost her husband in one.”

“The same crash. Wes would have been with them if something hadn’t come up at the last minute to keep him in Houston. Stella and Shane were already at the lodge. Wes pilots his own plane, you know. Anyway, Delvin and Pamela decided not to wait for him and they hired a pilot to fly them to Colorado.

Bad decision. There's a dangerous downdraft when landing in these mountains. The pilot miscalculated."

"How awful."

"Wes took it pretty hard. The tragedy was tough on him, that's for sure."

"How long ago was that?"

"Cassie was only a few months old when the plane crashed. And then there was—" He broke off as Shane came into the room.

Apparently Dexter preferred gossiping when no one else was around. He quickly changed the subject and asked Caroline how the redecorating was going.

She made a non-committal answer then purposefully gave her full attention to her lunch.

Shane made no attempt to join them and slumped down at a window table by himself. He had the standoffish air of an adolescent and the common belligerency that went along with it. Caroline finished her lunch as quickly as possible and wasn't pleased when Dexter left the dining room with her.

"Why don't you let me show you around the place?" he offered, trying to take her arm. "You haven't been down to the stables yet, have you?"

"The children and I are going riding with Wes this afternoon," she told him quickly. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I bet you are," he said with a slight smirk. "All the women enjoy Wes's company."

She refrained from making a caustic reply about his own apparent lack of charm in that area. Being trapped under the same roof with him was going to test her endurance for repulsive men. If Wes left the lodge, she hoped to heaven he took Dexter Tate with him.

AFTER A LONG NAP, Caroline and Danny made their way down to the social room to meet Wes. She'd changed into jeans and the bright sweater she'd worn the night before. Danny wore a pair of new overalls and a denim jacket. She was glad she'd invested in boots for both of them.

The social room was empty. No sign of Wes nor of Cassie. Caroline felt an instant pang of disappointment. Maybe something had come up and Wes had changed his mind—or he'd forgotten.

No, Cassie wouldn't let him forget, Caroline decided. Not that willful little girl. Thank heavens she and Danny seemed to have taken to each other—at least for the moment.

As the minutes passed, she was beginning to think he'd completely forgotten their date when she heard Cassie's high-pitched chatter floating down the hall.

Caroline smiled at Danny. "Here they come."

The little girl darted into the room ahead of Wes. She was dressed like a movie-star rodeo queen. White fringed pants matched a fringed studded vest and white boots. Her cowboy hat was the same shade of red as her satin shirt.

She grinned from ear to ear as she put one hand on her hip

and demanded, "Well, what do you think?"

Danny missed the nature of her question. "I think you're late."

"Spoken like a true man," Wes said, chuckling. "Sorry, I got held up by a telephone call. Anyway, I sent word ahead to the stable. The horses should be saddled up and waiting."

Cassie danced ahead of them down a worn path under a canopy of ponderosa pine trees. Danny followed at her heels. Wes fell into step beside Caroline and she realized that she was nervous and rather ill at ease.

Maybe she'd given him the wrong idea about her riding ability? After all, a farm horse wasn't in the same league as a prancing thoroughbred. What if she made a complete fool of herself?

At that moment, she realized how much she wanted to impress this rich, handsome Texan. Why, she didn't know. In a few days he'd be gone and most likely she'd never see him again. Still, her feminine vanity wanted him to remember her as a capable horseback rider.

When they reached the stable her misgivings were doubled. Wes nodded toward a restless sorrel mare all saddled up and tethered beside two small shaggy ponies, one black and one dark brown. Two middle-aged stable-hands nodded at Wes and then went about their business in the barn.

Cassie immediately ran over to the ponies. "You can ride Blackie," she informed Danny. "He's kinda old. I like Cocoa best."

“They’re both gentle,” Wes quickly assured Caroline. “We bought them from a Texas breeder who specializes in Shetland ponies. They’re a good mount for children. Strong and muscular, but rein-easy.”

Caroline began to relax. The saddles, harnesses and stirrups were proportionate to the size of a small rider. This could be a wonderful chance for her son to experience his first horseback ride.

“I’ll walk along beside Danny,” Wes told her. “We’ll follow the path around to the western end of the lake. You can ride ahead if you’d like and we’ll catch up with you.”

“Why don’t I walk with Danny and you ride?”

“Because I want you to enjoy yourself,” he replied flatly and his tone brooked no argument.

He cupped his hands and helped Cassie up into the saddle. As she took the reins in her little hands, she grinned at Danny. “Race you to the lake.”

“Cassie! We’ll have none of that,” Wes said sharply and quickly helped wide-eyed Danny mount the other pony. “I’ll keep the reins for a while, Danny,” he said reassuringly. “We’ll just go for a nice walk.”

As Caroline led the sorrel mare out of the barn, Wes watched. There was an easy, confident stride in her movement that pleased him. Nothing about her was showy or pretentious. Deftly she arranged the reins in her hands and patted the mare’s neck. As Wes watched her swing easily into the saddle, he smiled to himself.

*She hadn't lied. She settled back in the saddle as if she were born to it.*

Maybe they could go for a real ride before he left, he mused. He'd like to take her up one of the rugged trails and show her God's country from the top of a mountain ridge.

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