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SECRET NIGHTS AT NINE OAKS

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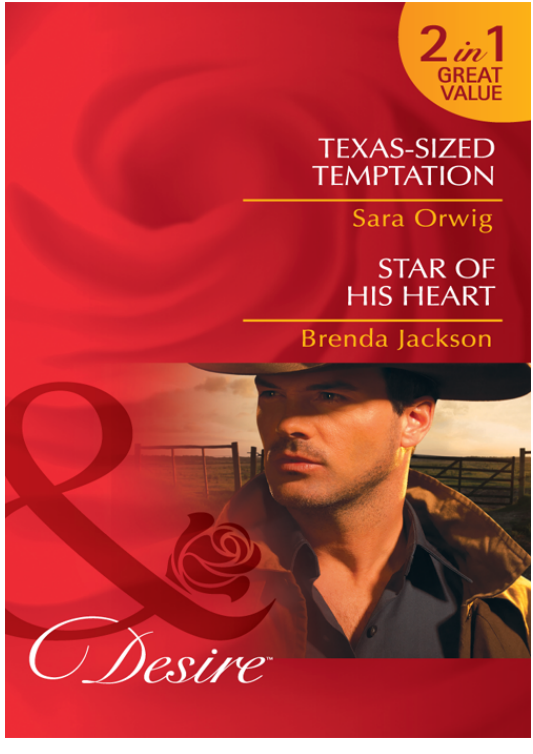
Texas-Sized Temptation / Star of His Heart: Texas-Sized Temptation / Star of His Heart

Аннотация

Texas-Sized Temptation Bitter enemies to bedmates… A Santerre – a sexy one – dared trespass on oil magnate Jake Benton's ranch? Their families were feuding, yet here was Caitlin Santerre, asking nicely for the land that Jake had bought out from under her. Just how far would she go to get what she wanted?Star of His Heart Drop-dead gorgeous actor Ethan Chambers loves his life as Hollywood's most eligible and elusive bachelor. He's just landed a starring role on TV's hit medical drama. But the show's sultry make-up and wardrobe director has really got his pulse racing – and heating up the sheets. Would she live life in the spotlight with him?

Содержание

Jake built a fire in the fireplace and then sat beside Caitlin. Close. 6
About the Author 8
One 9
Two 27
Three 44
Four 66
Five 93
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 103



Texas-Sized Temptation
Sara Orwig
Star of His Heart
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Texas-Sized Temptation

Sara Orwig

Jake built a fire in the fireplace and then sat beside Caitlin. Close.

Handing her drink to her, he brushed her hand lightly. The physical contact, while so slight, burned. Soft, warm skin. A startling awareness that increased his desire.

She smiled at him. “Thank you. We’re having quite a storm. There won’t be any going home the way I came. This kind of downpour gets the river spilling out of its banks.”

She slanted him a look that was hot. He wondered if it was deliberate. Maybe he shouldn’t be so hasty in getting rid of her.

While he had no intention of selling any part of the Santerre ranch back to her, how far would she go to try to convince him to do so?

“We have plenty of room,” he said in a husky voice. “You can stay all night.”

Dear Reader,

Our lives are interwoven with our families and as the years pass, no one can predict outcomes. Falling in love involves two people, but their relationship is also affected by the influence of family, which I like to include in my stories.

Family has always been important in my life, and it is consequential in my books. This time it is the world of Jake Benton, a cowboy CEO, a multi-millionaire mogul who loves his

West Texas cattle ranch and a cowboy's life. He never expects to cross paths with his beautiful neighbor. Their sizzling attraction plays havoc with bitter feelings from generations of feuding between their families.

Against the backgrounds of Dallas, a West Texas ranch and the French Quarter in New Orleans, the family conflicts give the characters tough choices to make. Each has to cope with events from the past. Caitlin's tenderhearted care for others propels her into a tempestuous relationship with Jake. Ultimately, Jake makes a life-changing discovery that he hopes will win Caitlin's heart. Their story begins …

Sara Orwig

About the Author

SARA ORWIG lives in Oklahoma. She has a patient husband who will take her on research trips anywhere from big cities to old forts. She is an avid collector of Western history books. With a master's degree in English, Sara has written historical romance, mainstream fiction and contemporary romance. Books are beloved treasures that take Sara to magical worlds, and she loves both reading and writing them.

To David, Susan, Jim, Hannah, Ellen,
Rachel, Dixie, Joe, Kristine, Cameron, Anne, Brian,
Colin, Elisabeth, Myles. With many thanks to Maureen.

One

Unless the event had been an act of God, when was the last time a life-changing decision had been taken out of his control? Not for years. And he intended to keep it that way.

Beneath darkening skies in the early October afternoon, Jake Benton drove from the private airstrip toward his ranch. From the moment he had left Dallas for the weekend, he had been happy to put distance between himself and his father, who still meddled in his life. They had once fought over which university Jake would attend; later whether he would work in the family business or not. That had brought the first threat to disinherit him. Now when his dad threatened to disinherit Jake, it was over bigger and more important things. Like the most recent demand to get married within the year.

Jake shoved thoughts about his quarrel with his father out of mind. He was on his way to his sprawling West Texas ranch, a retreat where he could get away to relax. The only people for miles were ones who worked for him and his brother. As always when he returned to the ranch, he wondered why he didn't come more often.

He couldn't escape the phone or demands of business, but he could cut back on them.

Jake felt himself relax as the family ranch home that was now his, with its guesthouses, bunkhouse, staff homes, outbuildings,

barns, shop, gym and various other structures, appeared in the distance. Irrigated, landscaped yards with beds of brightly colored fall blooms surrounded each house. Jake took in the view, his pleasure over being at the ranch increasing. While clouds hid the sun and thunder rumbled closer at hand, the road divided. Jake took the curve leading to his house. As he turned the corner and drove to the side of the house, he saw someone on his porch. Startled, he stared in surprise. He had a fence and security at the gate leading from the highway. In all the years he had never had any uninvited visitors—until now.

His first reaction was annoyance that someone had breached his privacy and trespassed. Curiosity replaced aggravation. His trespasser, from a distance, looked like a woman. The closer he approached, the more he could see that she was good-looking.

As he pulled to a stop only yards from his house, his gaze raked over her. She stood, walked to the steps and halted to watch him.

Auburn hair piled on her head framed an oval face with prominent cheekbones. Her long legs, encased in pale, slim jeans above Western boots caught his attention. A short leather jacket was cut high, revealing her tiny waist. He was close enough now to experience a skip in his heartbeat.

His last shred of animosity vanished. Searching his memory for a clue to her identity or reason for her on his porch, he remained at a loss. He couldn't imagine why she was waiting for him or how she had known he was coming. Intrigued, determined

to get answers, he stepped out of the car.

As his gaze locked with hers, he was startled by a sizzling current of attraction. The chemistry was instant, hot and inviting.

Whatever she was up to, she was audacious. As he approached her, he felt a defiance coming from her that puzzled him.

"Welcome home, Jake," she said in a mellow, quiet voice. In spite of the polite greeting, his sense of a silent challenge increased.

With his gaze still fastened on hers, he climbed the porch steps until he reached the top. Standing only inches from her, he had intended to intimidate her. Instead, he felt ensnared in huge, crystal-green eyes fringed with sweeping auburn lashes. She was gorgeous and he couldn't pull his gaze away.

"I don't often get surprised, but I am now," he admitted. "How'd you get past my security at the gate?"

When a faint smile lifted the corner of her mouth, his attention shifted lower to her full lips. Her mouth made him wonder how it would be to kiss her. Taking a deep breath, he tried to get his thoughts back to his question.

"You don't know me, do you?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. Even more disturbing, she thought he should know her. He never could have gone out with her without remembering. A woman with fabulous looks was not to be forgotten. "You have the advantage. I suspect I should know you. One thing, we've never gone out together," he said, voicing aloud his thoughts.

Another faint smile tugged at her mouth. “No, we haven’t,” she said patiently. “And to answer your question, I didn’t pass your security checkpoint. I came across your ranch from the west.”

“There’s no gate or road from the west,” he said, glancing beyond her at the land that vanished in a long grove of thick oaks he’d had planted as a windbreak. He could picture beyond the oaks, the flat, mesquite-covered land extending miles to his western boundary. “If you forded the river, it must be mostly dried up now, but rain is threatening,” he said, taking a deep breath and smelling the rain that approached. “If you have a vehicle parked in the woods, I better let my foreman know before he calls the sheriff. You’re trespassing, which could cause you trouble. I can call the sheriff to have you arrested. I have signs posted.”

“This is a desperate effort to talk to you. I haven’t been able to get past the secretaries and your attorneys.”

His curiosity returned. With an effort he stopped staring at her, focusing instead on who she was. For all he knew, she could be a threat, although at the moment, he would relish a physical struggle with her because he would like to touch her.

An intriguing scent tempted him.

“All right, you want to talk. We can sit here on the porch and have a discussion,” he said, motioning toward chairs. He was reluctant to invite her into his house. It crossed his mind that she might be armed. “First though, I’ll admit, I don’t know who you are.”

He received another flicker of amusement. “Caitlin Santerre.”

The name was a knife stab. As if ice water had poured over him, he cooled toward her while he stared at her, reconciling his memory of Caitlin Santerre with the beautiful woman standing before him.

“Son-of-a-gun,” he said beneath his breath, for once not hiding his reaction to a shock. “You grew up. What the hell do you want with me?”

“You actually don’t even know, do you?” she asked, anger creeping into her tone. “You own our land. I want to buy part of it back.”

“You get to the point. Yes, I own it. It’s my land since your brother sold it. I was surprised he was willing to sell it to me.”

“Will loves money more than maintaining an old family feud, remaining loyal to the family and keeping the home place. All Will wants is to take care of Will,” she said.

“I have to agree, but I’m biased. You should have told him to not sell,” Jake said, trying to remember the age difference. He had never paid attention to her as a child when he saw her in town. She had seemed years younger and he hadn’t given her a thought then or since.

“My brother and I aren’t close. We never have been.”

“That I can understand,” Jake said, a cynical note creeping into his voice when he thought about Will Santerre whom he despised. The litany ran through his thoughts—the first Benton to settle in Texas in the mid-1800s, killing the first Santerre

who was trying to divert water. The retaliations followed, which included killing cattle, poisoning water. In the next generation a Santerre son burned the Benton house and barn. The feud continued until his father put Caitlin's father in the hospital after a fistfight. Finally, his generation with the ultimate and most personal clash, made Jake feel the old hurts like a scar. He would always be certain Will Santerre had killed his older sister, Brittany. Will was tried and found not guilty. Will had sworn it was Brittany who caused the car crash, but Jake would never be convinced. His family was guilty of doing things to the Santerres, but his family had always felt justified. While Jake had hated it, Brittany had been in love with Will. Brittany had been Football Queen, Class President, beautiful, popular—Will loved the girls and went after her. Maybe out of both revenge and really wanting her. Maybe just because he had thought she would be a conquest that would make him look good. Jake could never believe anyone as selfish as Will could love another person. As far as he was concerned, Will loved himself more than anybody else. Jake looked at Caitlin. Her beauty now was tempered by the knowledge of her lineage.

The first huge drops of rain fell, slanting to hit along the edge of the porch. "This rain was a twenty-percent chance—most unlikely from the morning weather report. I'll make this short," she said.

"Let me call my foreman about your vehicle—what did you drive? "

She flashed a smile that made Jake forget his hostility again. Her white teeth were even and her smile was a warm invitation as if she were on the verge of sharing a delightful secret. “There’s no vehicle. And there’s no road,” she answered, jerking her head toward the trees. “I came from the west on horseback. He jumped your fence. You might want to tell your foreman I have a tethered horse. I would appreciate getting my horse out of the weather.”

“Ah, now I know why no one spotted you. I have men who drive the boundaries, but they can’t cover this big ranch all the time. The likelihood of anyone coming across the ranch from any direction other than the highway is minimal to nonexistent. I’m not here most of the time, keep a low profile when I am home, and it’s peaceful out here. I don’t have enemies—or at least not many,” he said, thinking of his former neighbors. Jake glanced at the trees again. “I’ll tell someone to bring your horse in so it’s sheltered.”

“Thanks.”

As Jake made his call, more drops fell. He put away his phone. “My foreman will put your horse in the stable closest to the house.”

“Thanks.”

“This may only be a fall shower. Let’s go inside where we can talk in more comfortable surroundings,” Jake suggested, intrigued by her in spite of his burning hatred of her half brother. “Since our grandfathers’ days, we haven’t had to worry much about trespassers.”

“I guess our fathers were less into tearing down fences and stealing livestock from each other than the generations before them. The feud between our families began with the first two men who settled here.”

“It may be less violent, but it hasn’t ever ended,” Jake said, thinking again of Will.

“Where is Will now?”

“He won’t ever be back. He’s bought a home in San Francisco and also owns a home in Paris. He’s into investments. Beyond that, I know little about him. We have virtually no contact.”

Knowing they were getting on a bad topic, Jake held the door for her. “This is a turn in the feud—you’re the first Santerre to be invited in.”

She barely looked at her surroundings as they walked down the wide hall. “So this is where you grew up.”

“Yes. The original part of this house is as old as the house where you grew up. I know your dad’s house was built later.”

“My dad’s house no longer exists,” she said sharply. “Your crew began demolition last week. It doesn’t take long to destroy a structure. Fortunately, Grandmother’s house is the one that dates back to the beginning.”

Holding back a retort, Jake directed her into a room. “Let’s sit in the study,” he said.

They entered one of Jake’s favorite places, spacious with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on two walls while the remaining walls were glass. French doors opened onto the wraparound

porch and patio, which had been remodeled with an extended roof and comfortable living areas. Beyond the patio, steps led down to a pool with a waterfall, a cabana, chairs and chaise longues. Tropical plants added an appealing touch.

"Have a seat," Jake said. He turned as she sat in a leather wingback chair. In a sweeping glance he took in her blue Western shirt that clung to lush curves and tucked into her snug jeans. Her belt circled a waist that was as small as he had guessed at his first glimpse. The little Santerre kid he had always ignored had turned into a stunning woman. He sat in another leather chair that faced her across a low mahogany table.

She crossed her long legs and he wondered how she would look in a dress. The image made his blood heat. She looked poised, comfortable, unlike someone desperate to get him to agree to something. She also looked desirable. Even though she was a Santerre, there was a red-hot chemistry about her that tempted him to forget who she was.

When he looked up from her legs, his eyes met hers and he was again ensnared. Attraction was tangible. She had to feel it because she held his gaze as invisible sparks heated him. He wanted to know her better. At the same time, the lifelong hatred of all Santerres coated the magnetism with bitterness. Caitlin was as forbidden as poison, yet he wanted to place his lips on her to taste and kiss.

Taking a deep breath he tore his gaze away to return his attention with more composure.

“Have you been waiting long?” he asked. “I took my time flying in here this morning.”

“I was willing to wait,” she said.

“How’d you know I was coming today?”

Amusement flashed in her expressive eyes. “I’ve hired a private detective to learn your whereabouts so I could find an opportunity to talk to you. You rarely have a bodyguard with you.”

“You’re taking a chance because you know I can have you arrested.”

“It would be a little more difficult to consider me a trespasser now that you’ve invited me into your house.”

“So you want to buy back part of your ranch. Why didn’t you discuss this with your brother?”

“My half brother never gave me the opportunity. It’s general knowledge in these parts that traditionally in the Santerre family, the oldest son inherits the ranch. They are raised to protect the ranch, maintain it, keep it in the family. Well, all of that instruction didn’t take with Will. He does as he pleases and he has no interest in cowboys, the country or ranch life.”

“He told me he didn’t,” Jake said, thinking about the closing that he hadn’t planned to attend and then did just to face Will when he bought out the Santerres. In spite of Will being happy over the sale, the buyout had been sweet revenge—a goal through generations of Bentons to see the last of the Santerres in the area. Jake’s attorneys had already informed him that Caitlin wasn’t

included in the ranch inheritance. Also, she hadn't lived at the ranch since she had graduated from college. He still had thought of her as a child, so he had dismissed her from mind.

"Why didn't Will sell part of the ranch to you since you want it badly?"

"He didn't bother to contact me, either about selling or to ask if I wanted to buy any part of it. Will and I aren't close. He cares only about himself."

"I'd agree with that," Jake stated, remembering the antagonism he had felt toward Will at the closing. Each time he had looked into Will's hazel eyes, he could see loathing mirrored there.

"If it were left up to Will," Caitlin continued, "I would be excluded from the family. Our father felt the same."

"If I remember correctly, your grandmother raised you. She was a Santerre, actually, your father's mother."

"Yes, but unlike him in so many ways. I loved her deeply and she was good to me. Because of her, I'm recognized as a Santerre by everyone except Will."

Jake recalled lots of gossip regarding the Santerre family history—how Caitlin's mother had been a maid for the Santerres, the brief affair … and the resulting baby. And how the baby had been unacknowledged and cut off by Titus Santerre, yet adopted and raised by her paternal grandmother. How Titus Santerre had remained married to Will's mother until her death and did not remarry.

"Why do you want to buy any of the ranch back?" he asked. "You don't live here any longer and you're not a rancher." His gaze drifted over her thick auburn hair that was pinned loosely on her head with a few escaping strands. Looking silky, her hair was another temptation, making him think of running his fingers through the soft strands.

"I adored my grandmother and I loved growing up in her house. The people who worked for her closely were included in her will. Our foreman, Kirby Lenox, Altheda Perkins, who was our cook and now also cleans, and Cecilia Mayes, Grandmother's companion—they all stayed on. Kirby and two who work for him, still run the ranch. They care for the horses and the few cattle we have. Altheda maintains the house, cooking and overseeing the cleaning. Cecilia is elderly now. She devoted her life to Grandmother, first as her personal secretary and later as companion.

"I knew people were still staying there."

"As owner, you could have evicted them."

"I'm not in a rush. I figured they would leave before long. If they didn't, then I planned to tell them they had to go. It is my property."

"I love all of them because they were there when I grew up. I wanted to keep the house, barn and animals for them as long as they live. I wanted to be able to return occasionally to the ranch house—just as you must do here."

Jake nodded. "Why didn't you tell Will?"

She looked away but he had seen the coldness in her expression that came with his question. “I did tell Will. He just laughed at me and reminded me that my father barely acknowledged my existence so I had no say in what he did with the ranch. He said he would tell me if it looked as if I could come up with more money to buy it and make a better offer than anyone else who bid on it. When the time came, he didn’t. I knew nothing about the sale. He didn’t legally have to notify me because I had no more part of ownership of the ranch than a stranger.”

Jake felt no stir of sympathy for her. Even though she and Will were alienated, Jake couldn’t forget that they were both Santerres. The same blood ran in her veins as in Will’s.

“You know I can’t work up much sympathy for a Santerre,” Jake admitted, voicing his thoughts aloud. “Not even a beautiful one.”

One dark eyebrow arched as she gave him a level look. “You’re honest. I’m not asking you to like me or even see me again in your lifetime. I just want to buy the house and part of the land. Grandmother never owned it. There was a stipulation in my father’s will assuring her she could live there the rest of her life and then it would belong to Will. All I want is a small part.”

“What advantage for me would there be in doing any such thing?” he asked. “It would mean keeping a Santerre for a neighbor. You surely heard the family histories and know what kind of past we’ve had.”

“Oh, I’ve heard,” she replied lightly as if discussing the

weather. “The first Benton killed the first Santerre over water. The river meanders and thus the argument continues about each family’s rights and boundary. Our great-great-grandfathers were political opponents. Your family supposedly burned down our barn in the early days, rustled cattle, stole our horses. The list is long.”

“You’ve left out the most recent episode that touched our lives, at least it affected mine. You may have been young enough to miss it. I’m thirty-four. You must be about twenty-two.”

Her eyes danced with amusement. “You’re a little off. If that were the case, when you were seventeen in high school, I would have been toddling off to kindergarten. No, I’m twenty-eight now.”

Smiling, he shrugged. “You were a little kid. You might as well have been five when I was seventeen. I paid no attention to you at that age.”

“Mmm, I’ll have to remedy that. I have no intention of letting you continue to ignore me,” she drawled, making his heart skip because she was flirting with him.

“Maybe I’ll have to reassess my attitude toward Santerres,” he said.

“You might be surprised by what you’d find,” she rejoined, slanting him a coy smile that made his pulse jump.

“You should make me forget you’re related to Will. As far as our family is concerned, Will caused my sister Brittany’s death.”

“When the District Attorney pressed charges and Will was

brought to trial, he was found innocent. The car wreck was ruled an accident. Will has been cleared of that charge," Caitlin stated matter-of-factly.

"I'll never feel he was innocent," Jake replied. "Will testified that Brittany tried to run him off the road. But she was in love with him. Will is the one who ran her off the road."

"The jury found Will innocent. Will and I barely speak. He'll probably cease to do so now that our father is gone. Although, my success in my profession has given Will a grudging mellowing toward me. Not enough to inform me of his decision to sell the ranch, much less of the agreement to sell it to you."

"Will is rotten," Jake said, thinking more about Caitlin's silky auburn hair and huge eyes, still amazed to learn her identity.

"Please think about this. I want to save the house and people's livelihoods that you'll take away. I love them and they're older now. I feel responsible for their well-being because they've devoted their lives to my grandmother and to me."

"Noble, but they also got paid to do so and probably a damned good salary."

"Sure, but it went beyond that. That house holds happy memories. Please rethink my request to buy before you answer hastily."

He smiled at her as he sat in silence and studied her. "All right, I'll think about it, but I doubt if I'll change my mind."

"If so, your decision has to be spite." Her expression didn't change. Green eyes observed him coolly. "You have one of the

largest ranches in the state as it is and now you've bought up neighboring ranches as well as ours. I urge you to have an open mind when you give this thought."

"It isn't spite. At least not toward you. It's vengeful where Will is concerned. I was delighted to buy him out. Even happier to tear down Will's home place, turning it into rubble that will be cleared. Eventually, in its place will be mesquite, cactus and bare ground."

Lightning crackled and popped while thunder made the windows rattle. Rain began to drum against the house.

Jake's mind raced as his gaze roamed over her again. Her beauty pulled on his senses and there was an unmistakable physical attraction, but he didn't care to pursue it. She was a Santerre and he wasn't selling land back to her. She should have talked to Will immediately after their father's death about her wishes to keep their grandmother's property. He glanced beyond her through the French doors at the downpour, listening to the loud hiss of rain.

He glanced at his watch; it was almost six o'clock. He wanted her to stay for dinner when common sense said to get rid of her. Tell her no, get her out of his life and keep the property. She would give up and go on with her life if she learned there was no hope of regaining her childhood home.

But, traitorous or not, he was enjoying the sight of her too much. "You might as well stay for dinner. You can't ride home in this and I don't care to get out in it right now. It's a gully washer

and you know as well as I do how fast creeks and streams here will flood, so just stay. I can take you home later and you can get your horse when it's convenient."

She gave him another of her long, assessing looks and he couldn't guess what ran through her thoughts. "Very well, thank you."

He nodded. "This place is stocked. All the staff is gone, Their work is minimal since I'm here so little. I give them notice when I want them. My cook lives here on the ranch, and the other house staff live in town. Since you're here, I'll ask Fred to come in the morning. He lives on the ranch, so it's easy for him to do so. Dinner will be what I can rustle up."

"That's fine. You can keep it simple."

"Want a drink? Wine, soft drink, mixed drink, beer?"

"A glass of water would be great," she said.

"Let's go to the family room. It's more comfortable."

"Fine, lead the way," she said, standing in a fluid motion.

She was tall, although a good six inches shorter than he was. They walked into an adjoining room twice the size of the study with windows and French doors with another, more panoramic view of the storm. French doors also opened onto the porch and the covered patio. She crossed to the windows to look out while he built a fire in a stone fireplace. He went to the bar to get her water and get himself a cold beer.

"We can sit outside and watch the storm if you prefer, although it may be chilly. I can build a fire and I'll cook out there."

“I have a jacket.”

“And I don’t get cold,” he said. They walked out to the patio with its comfortable furniture, stainless-steel equipment and a state-of-the-art cooker.

“Even though there are no walls, you have what amounts to another few rooms out here,” she remarked, glancing around at a living area, a kitchen area and the cabana and pool.

“It’s livable. A fire will make it more so.” He built a fire in a fireplace and then sat facing her near the blazing orange flames.

Handing her drink to her, he brushed her hand lightly. The physical contact, while so slight, burned. Soft warm skin. A startling awareness increased his desire.

She smiled at him. “Thank you. We’re having quite a storm. There won’t be any going home the way I came. As you said, this kind of downpour gets the river spilling out of its banks.”

She slanted him a look that was hot. He wondered if it was deliberate. Maybe he shouldn’t be so hasty in getting rid of her after dinner.

While he had no intention of selling any part of the Santerre ranch back to her, how far would she go to try to convince him to do so?

“It’s already dark out because of the storm,” he said. “We have plenty of room,” he added in a husky voice. “You can stay all night.”

Two

"A Santerre staying overnight with a Benton. It's a shocking invitation that would turn our relatives topsy-turvy if they had known."

"Scared to stay with a Benton?"

"Not remotely. I look forward to it," she said, smiling at him. "It's just that never in my wildest imaginings would I have guessed I would be here overnight. One Santerre is definitely shocked."

"This is a stormy night, so better to stay inside."

"Good. Staying longer will give me more time to try to talk you into selling. You don't live here year round, why would you want so much more land? I know you've bought the ranch to the east of this one in addition to buying ours."

"The first and foremost reason is oil," he answered. "My brother thinks there may be oil in this general area. You have to know that he's already drilling to the west of your grandmother's house."

"I see the activity with the trucks coming and going all hours. A rig is up now. From the upstairs floors we can see the work. They have fenced off the area so the cattle won't roam there. I don't think you'll find any oil. My dad went through this at one time."

"Gabe thinks there may be oil on your ranch, or on the old

Patterson place. That's why I wanted the land to the east, partially why I wanted your home place. Mostly I wanted to buy out Will and see the last of the Santerres in Nealey County. The people who worked for your grandmother are not Santerres. They would eventually have to go, but I haven't been in a rush to run them off."

"I have never done anything to hurt you or your family," she stated quietly, but he saw the flare of fire in her eyes indicating animosity was not his alone.

"No, you haven't. Admit it, though, you don't like me or any other Benton."

She glanced away. "I was raised to feel that way. I'm sure both families are at fault." Her attention returned to him. "Your dislike hinges primarily on your sister and Will, even though Will was found innocent."

Jake hoped he hid the sudden clenching of his insides as the old anger stirred again. She had touched a nerve. "I'll always feel my sister's death was due to Will."

"Even though a jury found him innocent?" Caitlin asked. "From what Will said, your sister was the one at fault."

"My sister had the poor judgment to fall in love with your half brother," Jake said, thinking Caitlin should have left the topic alone because she stirred memories of the most abhorrent event in his life. It was the ultimate culmination of his hatred of Will. "Brittany didn't live to tell her side of the story."

"At the trial Will testified that they had a fight and she drove

off in a rage. He said he was afraid she would have a wreck and he followed her. He tried to get in front of her car so he could slow her down. He testified that when he tried to pass her, she sideswiped his car. She lost control and crashed."

"I'll always think Will sideswiped her car. Will was the one who wanted her out of his life. She wanted him to marry her."

"That never came out in the trial, although it was common talk. Will admitted to Grandmother that Brittany wanted him to marry her."

"You know a lot about it."

"I was there, even if I was younger than you."

"She was pregnant with Will's baby," Jake said, feeling the dull hurt that came when he thought about Brittany's crash. "Brittany told me. She was in love with him, too. I'm convinced Will ran her off the road and she crashed," Jake said, hurt growing with each word. He hated having painful memories dredged up again.

Caitlin gasped. "I always figured talk of pregnancy was just a rumor. It was never brought up at the trial."

"My mother didn't know about it. My dad didn't want it brought out at the trial and your family sure as hell didn't," Jake said. "I will always blame Will. I don't believe he told the truth about that night, but no one will ever know because only two people were present. At the time of the trial, one of them was dead," Jake stated, bitterness filling him as he sank into dark memories of a painful time. "We better get off this subject if you

want to have a civil conversation with me."

Jake gazed into fiery green eyes. Caitlin made no effort to hide her anger. He could feel the waves of antagonism that revealed her flirting was simply a means to try to get what she wanted from him.

"So that's why you hate Will so much," she said.

"Will and I have competed in school in sports and in the classroom. I was captain of the football team when he wanted to be. We both were on the baseball team. I had more home runs than Will. He had more stolen bases. I was my class president and the next year he was his class president. We were both on the debate team. Will and I have had plenty of our own battles. I never put Will in the hospital or vice versa."

"You broke his nose. Actually, I wasn't too sorry when I heard that. I thought a good punch was well deserved."

"It definitely was," he said lightly. "It was the loss of Brittany that tops my list of complaints against Will. I loved my sister and I hated to see her go out with Will. Brittany and I fought constantly over that. When she could, she hid her relationship with Will from our dad. I should have told him, but I don't think it would have helped. She was eighteen, a senior. Will was eighteen by then. I was still seventeen. She would have done what she wanted. I don't think anyone could have stopped her. Not even that fatal night."

"As a Benton, you'll always think Will was guilty."

"Yes. While you'll always think he's innocent. We're at an

impasse on the issue and it makes even a business deal between us an emotional event that can't be looked at in a purely impartial way."

"Will's no angel and we've never gotten along. Grandmother sat him down and made him tell her what happened. He swore that was the truth and I don't think even Will could have lied to her. She could be a formidable woman. More intimidating than my father."

Jake sipped his beer and listened to the rain, remembering all the emotional upheaval of that time in their lives. He could imagine easily Will Santerre lying to his grandmother. He looked at Caitlin and saw a Santerre, Will's half sister. The ultimate irony would be to seduce her.

He had no intention of selling one inch of the Santerre place back to her.

How valuable was the land to her? Was trying to obtain it worth the price of seduction?

"That's Will," Caitlin continued. "What he did has little to do with me other than the fact that the same blood runs in our veins. There is no love lost between the two of us, so do not lump me with him." The air was thick with hostility again. There was a fine line between them that kept them civil and caused her to flirt with him. He owned her family home and it was headed for destruction. In turn, he was beginning to want her in his bed. The more he was with her, the more he desired her.

She placed her palm on his cheek, startling him. "I told you.

I'm going to make you see me as a woman and not as a Santerre."

"I do already," he answered in a husky voice, letting go thoughts about past history. Her hand was warm, soft against his cheek and he wanted her to keep it there. He longed to slip his arm around her waist and pull her into his embrace, to lean close to taste her lips.

Instead, when she sat back in her chair, he took her empty glass from her. "Want something stronger than water this time?"

"I'll have another glass of water," she said, smiling at him and getting up to follow him to the bar. She slid onto a high bar stool and watched as he filled another glass of water and sat on a bar stool facing her.

With their knees lightly touching, the temperature on the patio rose a notch in spite of the rain-chilled air.

"Now what can I do to get you to pay attention to me?" she asked.

He smiled. "You have my full attention right now," he said. "Should it wander, you'll figure out some way to capture my notice again. Some way as clever as getting into my house and spending the evening with me. You managed that easily."

"Right now we're captives of the storm. We both have to be here." She leaned forward, her face closer to his. "I don't know whether I can ever get you to see me apart from my family."

"I promise you," he replied in a huskier voice, "that I see you as Caitlin, a beautiful woman."

Something flickered in the depths of her eyes and she got

a sensual, solemn expression that made his heartbeat race. As his gaze dropped to her mouth, his desire to kiss her grew. He wondered about her kiss, resolving to satisfy his curiosity before the night was out.

"Now we have the whole evening to get to know each other. Do you work, Caitlin?"

She nodded. "I'm a professional photographer."

"You must be good if you're earning a living at it."

Swirling her glass of water, she replied, "I freelance and I do earn a living at it."

One dark eyebrow arched. "Why do you want to stay out here when you have a busy life elsewhere in the world?"

"Same reason you're here, probably," she replied. "I can relax, get away from everything else and have solitude."

He sipped his drink and nodded. "You're right," he admitted. "This is an escape for me."

"What do you need to escape from? Business decisions? Women?"

He laughed. "Never women."

"You think about it—I'll make a nice neighbor and the old feud will die with us. I won't fight with you over the boundary, over water, never over the mineral rights, which I'm certain you won't sell back to me, but that's not my purpose here. I want to keep the home for all those people I told you about. Selfishly, also for my own memories and pleasure."

She sipped her water and turned to watch the rain that still

came in torrents. “We’re having a record breaker.”

“Maybe it’ll be a night to remember,” he said softly. She gave him a sultry look. He wondered if she hadn’t wanted the ranch from him if she would have been far less friendly. She had a convincing act to get what she wanted.

“It already has been,” she replied. He took her chin in hand to hold her face so he could look into her eyes.

“Are you playing with me to get what you want, Caitlin?” he asked.

“Perhaps, but you’re doing the same thing.”

“I didn’t come to the ranch wanting something from you.”

“You do now,” she replied, and his heart drummed. He wanted to close the last few inches between them to kiss her. As if she guessed his intent, with a deft move, she twisted away from his light grasp and sat back, smiling coyly at him.

“What would it hurt to sell a piece of the ranch back to me? You could still search for oil and reap the rewards if you find it. The little parcel you’d sell to me, you’d really never miss.”

“You could turn right around and give it to Will. As a matter of fact, how do I know that he hasn’t had a change of heart and sent you to buy a piece of the ranch back for him? If I sell to you, it’s yours to do with as you see fit.”

“You can write it in the contract. I’ll swear in front of a judge if you want—I absolutely am not doing this for Will,” she said and her expression frosted. “Will and I speak only when necessary. Our father barely recognized me. Will has snubbed me on the

street in town before. There's no love lost between us."

"I'd think you'd be glad to be rid of the house and the land that belonged to your father and that Will inherited. That would be a constant reminder of your status in the family when you're here. And a reminder your grandmother couldn't own the house she lived in. The Santerres were not considerate of the women in the family."

"No. When I'm in the house where I grew up, my blood father and Will are an insignificant part of it. My father and Will were at her house for family get-togethers, rarely any other times. Grandmother couldn't own the land or the house, but she had other assets. She left Will a token $25,000, otherwise all her money, savings, stocks, bonds, went to me. One thing, Will had to mind Grandmother and he hated that. Will never took orders well from anyone except Grandmother and sometimes his father. Grandmother made him mind and it irritated him no end, but she was the one person on this earth Will truly feared. He feared and cooperated with his father just to the point to keep in his good graces. Will's mother spoiled him terribly. She may have contributed greatly to Will being the selfish, self-centered person he is."

"Did you ever go to your father's house?"

She shook her head and stood, watching the rain. "No, except for Christmases when I was young. Later my father and Will would travel to exotic places to celebrate. I think they were both frightened of Grandmother. They didn't mess with her. I haven't

seen Will since my father's funeral. We talked on the phone after I learned about the sale of the ranch. That's how I know Will is living in California and Paris. I'm my father's daughter by blood only. Since I didn't grow up with him, he had little influence on my life. Grandmother raised me to think for myself and form my own opinions. I keep telling you, please don't categorize me with Will." Caitlin tilted her head, studying Jake.

"I haven't. I can keep you and Will separate in my mind." Jake reached out to touch a stray lock of her hair. "I have a suggestion. Let's set aside business so we can enjoy the next few hours. For a while, let's forget that I'm a Benton and you're a Santerre. We can get to know each other on another level that doesn't involve the past, but is the present. If we'd just met, we wouldn't be into all this family history. I think we'll have a better evening that we're compelled by rain to share."

She smiled. "You feel compelled to share this evening with me?"

"You've already said we're captive for tonight and I never said the time together was a bad thing. I'm just trying to make it better by removing some of the remnants of the family feud for a few hours. We can always return to swords' points."

She laughed softly. "Deal. At least we can try. We'll see how long it lasts."

"Excellent," he said, smiling at her. Again, there was a flicker in the depths of her eyes and his insides tightened. She was responsive to him, willing to flirt. She wanted to kiss, he was sure

of it, but he was determined to wait until the right moment.

"So, Caitlin, tell me about professional photography. Do you have a studio somewhere?"

"Yes, I do in Houston as well as galleries in Houston and in Santa Fe. I have homes both places."

"Impressive."

She smiled as she peered over the edge of her drink at him. "You're not really impressed. I like my work. Actually, I love my work."

"And what kind of photography do you do?"

"Don't sound as if I'm playing marbles for a living," she said, her smile taking the bite out of her words. "I take pictures of people, families, children, celebs, pets. I specialize in black-and-white photography of people and children. I already know about you—the CEO of Benton Energy, Inc. Your father is retired now and you run the company. Your brother Gabe is CEO of Benton Drilling."

"Right. Before hunger sets in, I'll fire up the grill for steaks. I'll put potatoes in to cook." He went to the refrigerator to remove the steaks and put them on the grill.

While he cooked, she helped him get salads and water on the table. When she was finished, she perched on the bar stool nearest him to talk to him. "This is a wonderful patio. You can sit outside, yet you're protected from the elements here."

"I enjoy it when I'm here," he said, glancing beyond the patio at the pool that was splashing as raindrops hit the blue surface.

“No swimming in this weather.” Lightning streaked the sky in a brilliant flash. “If the lightning worries you, we can go inside.”

“I’m fine.”

“So what does worry you, Caitlin?”

“Losing the property, not being able to help the people who worked for Grandmother through the years.”

“I walked into that one.”

“So what worries you, Jake?”

“Business failure. My dad’s interference in my life.”

“You’re a little old for your daddy to interfere, especially since you’re running a large company,” she said and he detected the amusement in her voice.

“Oh, no. I have a manipulative father. At least he tries and I resist. It’s not quite the same for my brother. Sometimes I think Brittany dated Will out of rebellion against Dad’s constant attempt to dominate her life.”

She laughed. “That’s mind-boggling. You are definitely not the type to have someone try to control you.”

He grinned, turning from the steaks to sit near her for a few minutes. “I like your smile, your laughter. When you laugh, it’s a sunny spring day.”

“Thank you. That’s a nice compliment,” she replied. “Too bad you’re not Jake Smith and I’m not Caitlin Jones. The night might be incredibly different.”

“For tonight, we can try to be Jake Smith and Caitlin Jones. We’ve already agreed to forget business. Just stretch it a little

more and pretend we don't have family histories."

"That's a giant stretch with pitfalls all along the pathway, but it would have been nice," she added and sipped her water.

He leaned down so his face was closer to hers and her eyes widened. "Try. You have an imagination. See me as someone you just met," he urged, thinking she had the greenest eyes he had ever seen. Her perfume tormented him and her mouth was a constant temptation.

"While it's an exciting prospect, it's the way to disaster. Impossible," she answered breathlessly and he was certain she felt the attraction, too.

"Coward," he teased with a faint smile, wanting to lean the last few inches and kiss her. She tilted her face up another degree.

"Wicked man," she replied, smiling to make light of her words.

It would be so easy to close the mere inches of distance and kiss her and she wanted the kiss as much as he, but he resisted. He wanted her to be eager to kiss with no hesitation. The tantalizing moments were building his desire. Hopefully, hers, too.

"Your steaks may be crispy now," she remarked.

He hurried to flip the steaks. He turned, catching her studying him. "Now, wine with dinner?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," she replied and he moved behind the bar to get a bottle of Shiraz.

In a short time they were seated near the fireplace with dinner in front of them. She was a dainty eater, telling him about her

gallery in Santa Fe while he mentally peeled away the blue Western shirt. His appetite for steak diminished. To his surprise, he wanted to see her again beyond tonight and he wanted to take her dancing so he could hold her in his arms.

Common sense told him to forget both things. As a Santerre, when they got down to business, she was going to be unhappy with him because he didn't want to leave a Santerre house standing. The people who had worked for her grandmother could retire or find other jobs, he was sure. He would look into hiring them himself.

Out of sentiment Caitlin wanted the house she grew up in, but she spent little time here. She could move everything out of the house into another home elsewhere. He saw no valid reason to sell the place back to her and several reasons to turn her down. He didn't want Santerres left in the county. He didn't want to have to worry about Caitlin and that old house sitting in the center of his property, leaving part of the property out of his control. If Gabe struck oil, it would be even more important to own the land. While he had mineral rights, he didn't want to have to drive around Caitlin's holdings.

Was he being uncooperative because she was a Santerre? So what? It was his property, legally purchased and he couldn't help if her half brother had not informed her about the sale or her father hadn't included her in ownership. From all he'd heard, her father never had involved her in anything in his life. It was solely the grandmother who had adopted Caitlin to give her a Santerre

life.

"Your grandmother has been gone now—what—five years?" Jake asked, trying to recall when he heard that Madeline Santerre had passed away.

"Yes. You have an excellent memory because I know that wasn't a date that meant anything to you," Caitlin replied, looking away. "I loved her with all my heart," she added quietly. Her emotional answer indicated she probably cared so much for the people who had worked for her grandmother because she didn't have anyone else. Her father and half brother had rejected her all her life. So had her birth mother in giving her up for adoption. "The minute Grandmother heard my mother planned to put me up for adoption, she stepped up and took me in."

"So where did you go to college, Caitlin?"

"To Texas University and then to Stanford. My degree is from Stanford. I had intended to go into law, but by my junior year I was earning a lot of money with photography, so I finished college and became a photographer. What about you, Jake?"

"Texas University, too, but years ahead of you. Then a master's in business from Harvard. Then back to work here. Pretty simple and predictable."

"Sure," she said, smiling at him. "You told me what you don't like, so what do you like, Jake?"

"Beautiful women, slow, hot kisses—"

She laughed, interrupting him. "That was not what I had in mind. Besides women, what do you like?"

He grinned. “Making money and doing business deals, watching the business grow, the usual. I swim, I play golf, play basketball with my friends, I ski, I like snow-covered mountains or tropical islands. I’m easy to please. Your turn.”

“I’m even easier to please. I like a riveting book, quiet winter nights, getting just the right picture, little children—”

“That sounds like marriage is looming.”

“Not at all. No man in my life, but I hope someday. Don’t you want to marry someday?”

“Yes, but not this year,” he said a little more forcefully than he had intended.

She laughed. “Okay, so you’re not ready. I think I can make the same promise safely. I will not marry this year,” she said, mimicking him and he had to smile and was relieved she made light of his comment.

The rain turned to a steady, moderate rain. Jake took her hand, aware of her smooth skin, the warmth and softness of her. “Let’s go in where it’s warmer. I’m glad we don’t have to get out in this,” he said.

She looked down at her clothes. “I just have what I’m wearing. If you can stand seeing me in the same thing in the morning, only more wrinkled, I’m happy to stay because water may be over some of the bridges, I’d guess.”

“Great.” He switched on lights in the living area. The fire had burned low and he added logs.

He put on music and took her hand, pulling her to her feet.

“Come here, Caitlin, and let’s dance,” he said, drawing her to him on the polished oak floor in a space between area rugs.

She came into his arms easily, following his lead. He liked holding her, wanting her more with each hour that passed. Common sense still screamed to keep his distance to avoid entanglement of any kind with her, but it was a losing argument. It would be the ultimate irony to seduce Will’s half sister, except Will wouldn’t care because he obviously had no fondness or even polite consideration for Caitlin.

Jake tightened his arms around her and moved slowly with her. “This is good, Caitlin,” he said quietly, more to himself than her.

“Not wise, but it’s good,” she added, indicating that she must hold the same view of getting acquainted that he had.

“So you like to dance.”

“I love to dance and I’m glad you thought of this,” she said softly. They moved quietly, conversation ceasing and he was sorry when the music came to an end.

She looked up at him. He held her lightly in his embrace and he felt as if he were tumbling down into a sea of green, falling headlong without any hope of stopping. He had waited long enough.

Three

Caitlin's heart drummed as she gazed into Jake Benton's eyes. Her afternoon had turned her world topsy-turvy. All her life she had been given reasons to dislike the Bentons. Her grandmother had hated Jake's father for things he had done to her son, Caitlin's father, in the years the men were growing up. They had been thrown together at school as well as in town. Grandmother had disliked Jake because of complaints about him from Will.

During the past month, Caitlin herself had developed hostility toward Jake, which had increased swiftly when she found a stone wall of interference keeping her from contacting him.

He was important, busy, an oil millionaire, but he should have had a streak of common courtesy to at least take a phone call from someone from the neighboring ranch. While the bitterness between the families could have made him unreceptive, she suspected he was never even told that she was trying to contact him.

Growing up, she had disliked the Bentons because she had been taught to. Jake's snubs had added fuel to the fires of contempt. The only way to get the property back from him was to communicate with him. When she had learned he was expected at the West Texas ranch, she had decided to confront him to force him to listen to her request.

He was being as stubborn as she had expected. What she

hadn't anticipated was the scalding chemistry the moment they were face-to-face. It was an intense attraction he felt as much as she did. He also probably hated it as much as she did. Except he had seduction in his eyes. She could imagine how much it would amuse him to seduce a Santerre, even one on the fringe of the family. Titus Santerre's illegitimate child whom he only grudgingly acknowledged because his own mother adopted her.

The thoughts swirled briefly and then vanished. Caitlin's gaze locked with Jake's. His blue eyes held a blatant hunger. Her breathing altered while her temperature rose and her heart skipped. She tilted her face up, knowing she should step away and never kiss him, never open a Pandora's box of problems.

The instant attraction had mushroomed with each hour. A kiss might send it soaring out of control. She had no intention of repeating her mother's big mistake in life that had left Caitlin abandoned and hurt.

"Caitlin," Jake said in a quiet, husky voice that conveyed desire and was an invitation to her.

How could she have this intense sexy reaction to him? A man she had disliked her entire life even though she had never known him or talked to him before? *Get away from him*, an inner feeling urged. He was over six feet of danger to her peace of mind. A kiss would only make things worse. There was no way a kiss would have positive results.

"No," she whispered without moving an inch.

He slipped his hand behind her head, cupping her head

lightly. “This is something we both want,” he whispered, his gaze lowering to her mouth. “I have since we were standing on the porch this afternoon.”

Her lips parted, tingled in anticipation. She was lost to his seductive ways and her own desire, the volatile chemistry between them, her own foolishness.

He leaned down, slowly, tantalizingly. His tongue stroked her lower lip and then he brushed her mouth with his own. Electricity streaked as swiftly as a bolt of lightning flashing outside. Her insides knotted while she slid an arm around his neck. She moved as if she were a puppet with someone else pulling the strings.

His arm tightened around her waist, drawing her more tightly against him.

His kiss scalded, teased. Lust burst in her, sending sparks through her being. She wanted him, needing to touch and kiss and make love. Yet the nagging knowledge that she was kissing a Benton persisted for minutes until his kiss demolished her concern.

Her sigh was consumed by his mouth over hers. When he leaned over her, she tightened her arm around his neck, her body molding to his long, hard strength. Her heart drummed as need built. She wanted him to keep kissing her, longed to run her hands over him.

Fireworks burst in her. His spectacular kisses thawed resistance, escalating her longing and response. She pressed against him to hold him tighter, kissing him with all her being,

intending to make him melt and give in to her requests. Caution no longer existed.

His tongue stroked hers; she kissed him deeply in return, slowly thrusting her tongue over his. The faint moans of pleasure were hers. Her hand went to his shirt to twist free top buttons and slip her fingers across his warm, muscled chest.

Running his hands through her hair, he sent pins tumbling and auburn locks falling.

Hot, low inside her, need heightened. She craved him with a hunger that built with each kiss.

Jake's hand slipped down her back to her waist, sliding lightly over her bottom.

His breathing was as ragged as hers and beneath her hand his heartbeat raced. Caressing her nape, he trailed his fingers to her throat, drifting lower lightly down over her breast to her waist.

As he caressed her, the tingling electricity finally sent a warning that broke through her stormy senses. Moving mechanically, she stepped back a fraction to stop their kisses.

"Jake, wait. This is getting out of hand. I never intended this to happen and neither did you."

He framed her face with his hands. "You never expected it to happen when you came to my place. From the moment we faced each other on the porch, we both wanted to kiss. It was inevitable. I still desire you and you still want me to kiss you because it shows in your expression."

With his words her heart raced faster. He was right and it was

obvious, but that didn't make it acceptable. He had nothing to lose. She definitely did.

"Okay, so it shows. Common sense tells me to stop. You and I aren't friends. That's a prerequisite to me for someone to be a lover. An extremely close friend."

Her heart raced as she talked and her gaze was held by his that conveyed his desire. She wanted to lean the last few inches and return to his steamy kisses. He was on target totally, but she had some resistance. Reminding herself of her mission and that he was a Benton, she moved away. "I think we should stop dancing and go back to conversation," she said, heading toward a sofa. She turned to glance at him.

He stood watching her. Locks of his brown hair had fallen across his forehead. His tight jeans revealed his desire that hadn't diminished. Even with distance between them, his expression held lust. His gaze roamed slowly over her and his perusal might as well have been a caress.

Tingling, her body sent entirely different signals from what her logic conveyed. Without taking his gaze from hers, he crossed the room to her. Each step closer made her heart flutter faster. He walked up to her, wrapping his arms around her, bending to kiss her. It was a demanding, possessive kiss that seared and made her weak in the knees.

His hand locked behind her head, his fingers tangling in her hair while he kissed her and shattered her resistance. She pressed against him, losing the battle willingly, pouring kisses back while

she clung to him with her arm around his neck. Her other hand roamed down his back and then across the strong column of his neck. Her fingers combed through his short, thick hair. She was never going to forget Jake's kisses. The fleeting thought was as unwanted as his kisses *should* have been.

Why did he have such a devastating effect?

She didn't care why or how threatening they were. His kisses made her want more of him, made her respond and moan with pleasure. Kisses that locked in memory as they awakened needs long dormant, exploded longing and imagination.

When his hands began to free the buttons of her shirt, she gathered her wits to take another stand.

"Jake, stop now. I have to." She gasped for air, looking up at him, fighting the temptation to rake her fingers through his unruly locks to comb them off his forehead.

Giving her a searching look, he released her. "Want a glass of water or anything to drink?" he asked suddenly. When she declined, he turned and left the room.

She didn't know if he had to put distance between them

to help them both cool or just wanted a drink. Whatever the reason, she welcomed his absence and was grateful he had left her. While her heart raced, her breathing sounded as if she had just run a race.

Why, oh, why had she found this excitement and magnetism with Jake Benton—literally the worst person she could think of to feel drawn to.

On the other hand, she should seize the moment, take advantage of the heat between them—as he would—and try to win his cooperation about selling to her.

She glanced at the rain that was coming down harder again. She was in for hours more with Jake and she intended to make the most of them without yielding to his seductive lovemaking.

She sat on the sofa, still conscious of the slight brush of their fingers as he joined her to sit near her.

"When do we return to business?" she asked.

"How about next week when I've had time to think about this? You've known you want to buy back the property, but this is all new to me since late afternoon."

"Why do I suspect you're stalling, although I don't know why you would. Maybe the prospect of seduction tonight is keeping you from flinging a refusal at me."

One corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "That's a sufficient enough reason," he said, turning to look into her eyes. Tingling again, she drew a deep breath.

"I don't know why I have this reaction to you," she admitted.

One dark eyebrow arched. "Man, beautiful woman, there it is," he said. "Elemental."

"Not even remotely elemental," she replied. "I hate to admit to you, few men have the effect you've had."

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes and his chest expanded as he drew a deep breath.

"Oh, my, I shouldn't have divulged that to you," she said, her

pulse drumming again.

"No, you shouldn't have if you want me to keep my distance. Remarks like that—there's no way in hell I can sit back and say, 'How nice.'" He moved closer. His arm went around her waist and he lifted her to his lap.

Her instant protest ended as his mouth met hers and they kissed again. Her heart pounded while she clung to him, kissing him hungrily. He cradled her against his shoulder, kissing her while his free hand ran over her hip and along her thigh, sliding up to her breast to stroke in slow circles that taunted even through her lacy bra and cotton shirt.

Fiery tingles radiated from his touch. She should have left well enough alone, but the thought was dim and slid away. Desire surged in a scalding heat running in her veins.

His hand slipped down over her stomach, inching lower between her thighs. Even through her heavy jeans, she could feel his touch as if it were fire.

With an effort she sat up. While she gasped for breath, she gripped his wrist to hold his free hand. "You stop. I shouldn't have told you what I did. We've gone too far too fast."

"Not at all," he argued in a husky, gravelly tone.

She slipped off his lap to the other end of the sofa where she turned to face him. His hooded gaze indicated he still wanted her.

"We should get on some safe topic. Tell me about your hobbies. Your brother and your parents. Your controlling father that meddles in your life."

"My father is the last thing I want to discuss or even think about tonight. I've been enjoying the evening beyond the obvious frustrations. I do not need to drag anger back into my life." He stood. "I'm getting a beer. Want something else? Soft drink? How about homemade lemonade? Juice, milk, wine, martini, any mixed drink—whatever you like?"

"I'll have that lemonade, please, which sounds absolutely wonderful."

"I won't tell you what sounds absolutely wonderful to me," he said, his suggestive drawl conveying a double entendre that was as sizzling as his touch.

"Stop that, Jake. No flirting, no more remarks that are personal."

"Aw, shucks," he drawled, making her chuckle. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Humor me. I caused the last crisis, but we can avoid future ones."

"If my kisses are a 'crisis,' then I have no intentions of avoiding flirting with you."

"Go get the beer and lemonade," she said quietly, wanting to end the volatile conversation that could put them back in each other's arms easily.

She watched him walk away, a masculine stride that was purposeful, hinting of the excellent physical condition he must be in.

Her thoughts were filled with guilt. Why, oh, why had she

flirted with him so openly when she had known what the consequences would be?

She couldn't understand her reaction to him, couldn't explain it. It didn't happen with other men, but that definitely did not make Jake "Mr. Right." He was Mr. Wrong in so many ways.

She thought about her grandmother who would be shaking her head and frowning at the idea of spending an evening in the company of a Benton. She never could have explained a relationship with a Benton to her grandmother. Grandmother had been furious with Will for going out with Brittany Benton.

If Will knew she was with Jake tonight, he would be disgusted because of the lifelong competition between the two in school and sports. Then again, perhaps he would shrug it off that she was spending time with Jake because Will also held a low opinion of her, as well. She thought Will had been dazzled by Brittany at first. She also suspected he liked sneaking around, getting away with something that would annoy both families because it stirred talk and envy among his peers.

Jake returned with a cold bottle of beer for himself and a tall, frosty glass of lemonade for her, placing the drinks on a table in front of the sofa.

Only a few feet away, he sat, facing her, and taking a drink of beer.

"The lemonade is delicious."

"I can't take credit. I have a cook."

"Does your cook live in town?"

“Nope. His wife cooks for the men on the ranch and they live in a house here on the ranch. Our foreman also has a house of his own. We’ve got a big complex with several homes.”

“I noticed when I came in.”

“I meant it when I said you could have been arrested for trespassing if you had been caught.”

“I figured since I obviously wasn’t coming to steal livestock and I’m a woman, they would give me time to explain what I was doing and at worst, run me off your property. I really didn’t expect to get arrested. Besides, the sheriff is a cousin of my foreman.”

Jake smiled. “You’re probably right then. It’s a long ride by horseback.”

“Whatever it takes to talk to the untouchable Benton.”

“Definitely never untouchable to you. I’ll be happy to convince you just how ‘touchable’ I am,” he teased.

“Don’t you dare,” she answered, smiling at him. He caught a lock of her hair, twisting it in his fingers and causing slight tugs on her scalp that were as noticeable as every other physical contact.

“So, Caitlin, what do you want in your future?” Jake asked.

“To continue my photography. To marry and have a family.”

“What happens to the photography when you marry and have a family?”

“I’ll juggle them the way others do. I have leeway to set my own hours for a lot of my work. What’s your future, Jake? No

marriage, no family, continue to make money."

"Right. No change, really."

"You've grown up in basically the same surroundings I have, yet our families have been totally different. You have a controlling father and siblings. My father didn't want to acknowledge my existence and my grandmother raised me. I have a half brother, but I might as well be an only child, because Will cared nothing for me."

"That must have hurt."

She gazed into blue eyes that hid his feelings. He looked as impassive as if talking about the weather. "I was adopted when I was only weeks old, so I have had my grandmother all my life and she showered love on me. I was happy with her and loved her totally. It hurt to be snubbed and rejected, but not deeply. I don't feel scarred from it. I just don't want it to happen again to a child of mine," she said, facing Jake and getting a strange feeling inside. Seduction could lead to an unexpected pregnancy, a baby born out of wedlock, just as she had been. She didn't want that to happen to a child of hers and the one way to ensure it didn't, was to stay out of any man's bed.

"So seduction is out of the question tonight," Jake remarked lightly as if teasing her, but she was certain the remark was made in earnest.

"Most definitely," she answered quickly. How easily she answered, yet how difficult it was to stick by her resolution.

They sat and talked with Jake touching locks of her hair or

her shoulder or lightly caressing her nape. Casual touches that she didn't care to draw attention to, yet they were fanning flames. Finally, she stood. "Jake, it's late. I should turn in."

"Sure, I'll show you a guest bedroom."

When she walked with him down a long hall, he pointed out different rooms. She stopped to look at an enormous dining room with a table that would seat thirty, a cathedral ceiling and a stone fireplace. "Do you ever have this many guests to fill this table?"

"Yes. Parties. There are times I have a lot of company out here. Gabe and I will have things together. There are family parties, too."

"Do your parents spend much time here?"

"Nope. Dad has a ranch in the Hill Country where the area is green and scenic. This place was our family ranch, but Dad deeded it to me and gave Gabe another one he owned."

She nodded. "How nice. A father who passes things on to more than the oldest child. Of course, mine wouldn't have passed anything on to me if I had been the oldest child. I told you, I never dreamed Will would sell the place. Neither did our father who would have put binding stipulations on Will had he known. I'm sure he assumed Will would always live there. He left money to me, but nothing else. No part of the ranch."

"I'll have to admit, I'm glad Will sold out. Our family has wanted that ranch for generations. The sale has brought you into my life, which is a bonus."

They strolled down the wide hall again until he turned into

a suite. “These are my rooms. You’ll be nearby, but I wanted you to see where I am.” She looked at the living area that held a desk, an entertainment center, comfortable sofas and chairs, a wall of bookshelves. On a nearby table she noticed a picture of a beautiful brown-haired woman standing beside a horse.

“That’s my sister,” he said quietly. “We were close.”

Caitlin moved closer to study the picture. “She’s beautiful.” She understood why Will had gotten involved with her. “She’s really gorgeous,” she said, thinking she was the feminine version of Jake with blue eyes and brown hair. Caitlin had known about Brittany Benton and Will because sometimes Will had made her cover for him when he had slipped away from family gatherings, and she could remember Brittany as one of the most beautiful girls she had known. Caitlin was aware that Will had been happy and seemingly in love with

Brittany at first. She never thought Will concerned himself

with the old feud or did anything with Brittany out of revenge. Caitlin was certain that Will did exactly what he wanted to do and family history never mattered to him. Since she had to occasionally be ready to cover for him with the family, she knew when he had been out with Brittany.

Brittany had always been nice to her, and Caitlin had wondered how Will could hold the interest of someone so beautiful and so friendly. Except Will could be charming when he wanted to be. He was with his friends. At first, Will had been wildly happy about dating Brittany. The little Caitlin had seen

him, it still was obvious how happy he was. Probably, he had been happy until Brittany had made demands on him. Caitlin could imagine Will carelessly getting Brittany pregnant and then wanting no part of taking any responsibility. Being with Jake had brought back memories of that time as well as the questions about what had really happened.

Had Will really been driving the car that killed Brittany Benton? If Brittany had been pregnant, Caitlin could see Will becoming desperate to avoid an obligation and the wrath of their father. Deep down, perhaps Grandmother had suspected Will had been responsible, but she always tried to hold the family together. They would never have an answer because the only living person who knew was Will, but Caitlin could imagine him going to any length to live life the way he wanted.

Caitlin's grandmother had always wondered even though she only said it aloud once. They had been talking about the trial late at night and Grandmother had gazed out the window into the dark night. "Will is focused on himself," she had said. "He might be capable of wrecking Brittany Benton's car to get her out of his life." Caitlin had listened in shocked silence. After a few minutes, Grandmother had turned back to look at Caitlin. "This family will stand by Will. He has to be proven innocent."

"I remember at Will's trial, Grandmother had gathered the family. We all had to go to support Will."

"Yeah, our family did the same to show support for Brittany even though she wasn't present," Jake said and his tone was cold.

“My dad always insisted that Will was innocent. We celebrated Will’s being found innocent of all charges. That was the one time I recall when Will was nice to me the entire evening. It was one of the few times I can remember seeing him at his best.”

“Sorry. I can’t agree.”

Was Jake trying to get revenge by buying the place and tearing down all the structures, destroying everything owned by the Santerres that he could?

Her grandmother would be shocked, certainly annoyed that Caitlin was here, planning to spend the night with a Benton. Not as annoyed as the men in the family. Will hated Jake and Jake indicated the dislike was mutual. She had heard all about Brittany Benton and Will, whispers from Ginny McCorkin, her best friend, as well as her grandmother’s side of the story. Rumors were that Will had gotten Brittany pregnant and refused to marry her. Grandmother had been furious with Will, but she seldom saw Will once he was a teen. Caitlin always figured Brittany was pregnant because of carelessness on Will’s part. Will was too selfish to worry about someone else, even when he thought he was in love. Will wanted to stop seeing Brittany, difficult when she lived on the neighboring ranch and didn’t want to stop seeing him. Then the fatal night when Will and Brittany had fought when she had died in the car wreck.

Both sides had a battery of lawyers, the Santerres’ from Chicago, the Bentons’ attorneys from Los Angeles. Will was

found innocent and released, all charges dropped, but the hatred between the two families had grown stronger and the animosity between Will and Jake had become worse than ever.

She recalled the trial. Grandmother Santerre had insisted the entire family attend to show support for eighteen-year-old Will. The Bentons had turned out, too, all of them looking solemn and angry. Seventeen-year-old Jake and his brother, his mother and father. Will's mother had still been alive then. She had attended with Titus. Caitlin had been there with Grandmother. They had cousins from Dallas and an aunt and uncle who had come to show support for Will. It had been a solemn time. Caitlin could recall feeling sorry for Brittany and for the mess Will had created. Deep down, Caitlin suspected the Bentons had the true story. Will had a cruel streak and he was a wild driver. Before the fatal accident, when Will had wrecked cars, she had heard her grandmother arguing with her father about covering for Will and buying him new cars without involving the insurance company. It was always difficult for Caitlin to think that Will was any blood relation to Grandmother Santerre who was kind, loving and caring.

That weekend after the trial Will had gone out to celebrate. She'd heard he had had a big fight with Jake Benton. She never heard who won, but assumed Will because she suspected he was meaner and he was a year older and bigger, but she'd heard stories about Jake Benton, too, and wondered if he had held his own with Will.

Caitlin closed her eyes for a moment to clear her thoughts,

then glanced around the room again. “You have everything you want here,” she said, hoping to change the subject.

“Yes, I do. It’s comfortable and I come here to relax and get away from the regular work and office. This is my first love.”

“Then why don’t you ranch? You don’t have to work like crazy.”

He shrugged. “Yes, I do. I want to make money. I want total independence from my dad and there are accomplishments in the business world that will help me get what I want to stay totally independent.”

“Like making more money, owning more property, building a bigger company and a few other things along the same lines,” she said.

“Right. Let me show you where my bedroom is,” he said, taking her arm. She stood, resisting him slightly.

“I think I can find your bedroom, should I need to. If the house catches on fire, I’d guess you have an alarm system.”

He grinned. “You can’t blame me for trying to get you into my bedroom. I’d like to remember you in there in my arms.”

“It’s not going to happen. Not tonight at any rate,” she added.

“Very well, I’ll show you to your room next. Wait a minute.”

He left and disappeared into an adjoining room to return with folded clothes and a robe on a hanger. “You can have these tonight.”

“Thanks. Some of that is still in a package,” she said.

“I keep extras. I told you, I have a lot of company here off

and on. By the way, I have motion sensors and alarms that I turn on in the evening. Don't go beyond the end of the hall without letting me know."

"I won't."

He led her to another suite near his. "How's this?"

"Lovely," she said, looking at a cheerful suite with white furniture and brightly covered floral patterns in the chairs, splashes of yellow and green in the decor. "Thanks for the shelter from the storm," she said.

He stepped closer and slipped his arm around her waist. "One good-night kiss isn't the end of the world."

"It'll never stop with one," she whispered, standing on tiptoe as she wound her arm around his neck again. His mouth covered hers and she placed her other arm around his waist, holding him while she kissed him in return. The impact was stronger. Temptation grew, but she stopped him. "Jake, I'll see you in the morning."

He gave a hungry look before brushing a kiss on her cheek as he strolled out. She followed him, keeping a wide distance between them.

In the hall he turned. "I'm glad you came and we didn't just have this appointment at the office. It turned out better that I didn't know you wanted to talk to me."

"You didn't have the long ride from my ranch or try for over twenty calls to get through to you."

"Sorry," he said.

“You’re not really. You’ll continue keeping out unwanted visitors. See you in the morning, Jake. You can call me at seven o’clock. How’s that time?”

“Perfect. Good night,” he said and was gone, closing the door behind him.

She stood staring at the door. His presence was overwhelming and the day had been a surprise. She had never expected to find Jake Benton a man she would be attracted to. Would he talk reasonably next week or had he already made up his mind and was simply toying with her?

Would she see him again after his decision? She should complete their business and get out of his life. He would get out of hers soon enough.

As she remembered his kiss, her lips tingled. He had stirred a storm in her, something totally unexpected.

She ran her hand over the pile of clothing. The robe was dark blue velvet, soft and warm. She picked up a package wrapped in tissue with a seal and opened it to find new dark blue silk pajamas and slippers. There was a package with a small hairbrush and comb, new toothbrush in plastic, more toiletries in the plastic from a store.

Caitlin showered and dressed in the silk pajamas, relishing the smooth, soft material against her skin. She slipped into the robe, turned the television on low and curled up in bed to watch, but her thoughts drifted to Jake and she neither saw nor heard the program she had turned on.

She still marveled over the chemistry between them. How could it happen with Jake? It wasn't anything either of them wanted or did one thing to cause. Yet it existed, all right, as apparent as a Roman candle shot into the night sky.

She could only think he would entertain an offer from her to buy back part of the Santerre ranch. Caitlin expected him to make a profit, perhaps a huge one, but she didn't care what the purchase cost. She was well fixed financially, having inherited Grandmother Santerre's fortune, plus the money she made from her photography that was growing each year.

Unless he simply priced it out of the market to keep her from buying, she would pay an exorbitant fee if she had to in order to get the land back. It had been a final cruel snub by Will, selling the place without informing her. She didn't expect to have contact with him ever again.

Her thoughts shifted to Jake and the moment he had stepped out of his car and strolled to his porch, climbing the steps until he was on her level, to gaze into her eyes.

He was far more handsome than she had remembered, but she hadn't seen him for years and as a child, he had just been an older boy. Now he was an incredibly sexy, handsome, appealing man. She didn't want this dynamite reaction to a Benton. Even if none of the arguments and fights had anything to do personally with her.

When Jake had faced her on the porch, she had barely been able to get her breath. His blue-eyed gaze had been riveting. His

smile was a flash of warm sunshine. But it was his kisses that took her breath and set her spinning. Kisses that burned and melted and made her want him desperately.

She wanted to be in his arms in his bed right now with Jake making love to her. It was insanity, a slippery slide to disaster. Never in her life did she want to take a chance on leading the life her mother had—rejection by the man she loved, an unplanned pregnancy, giving up her baby, humiliation and hurt. If Grandmother Santerre hadn't been there, Caitlin's life could have been frightful. She was thankful every day for the blessings she had.

Later, she tossed and turned and fell asleep still thinking about Jake and his hot kisses, knowing next week he had agreed to talk to her about buying back part of the ranch. Would he sell to her?

Four

The next morning Caitlin dressed in the same blue shirt and jeans she had worn the day before. She braided her hair into one long rope that hung down her back.

She found Jake in the state-of-the-art kitchen with its cherrywood walls, granite countertops and large glassed-in dining area. He was dressed in jeans and a black knit shirt and was talking on his phone. When her gaze slid over him, her heart skipped faster. He was handsome, far too appealing.

Glancing at her, he motioned her to come in, but she left to give him privacy, walking to the nearest room, which was a sunroom. A yellow bougainvillea grew in a massive pot and climbed up one wall to curl across part of the skylight ceiling. Its yellow blooms were bright, matching the yellow upholstered rattan furniture.

"There you are," Jake said, striding into the room, his presence dominating it. "I motioned to you to come on in. That was no private conversation. It was my friend, Nick Rafford. We have fathers with similar traits of being control freaks. I got some sympathy and words of wisdom from Nick over my dad's latest demands."

"Sorry. I've never had that problem in my life."

"Be thankful. Come have some breakfast. You look as fresh as if you had just driven here from your home."

“Thank you. I don’t quite think so. You may need glasses.”

He smiled and walked beside her to the kitchen. In a short time they were seated in the dining area with fluffy eggs and hot buttered toast, tall chilled glasses of orange juice and steaming coffee.

“In fact,” he said, “I’m here to get away from my dad. This ranch is a haven.”

“Then you can understand how I feel about ours,” she said. “It’s a retreat even though I’m not trying to escape from any particular person. Just people in general. Do you have this often with your father? “

“Too often to suit me.”

“Can’t you ignore him?”

Jake shot her a look. “He always sees to it there’s a threat that makes it impossible to ignore him.”

“A threat?” she asked, beginning to wonder if Jake’s father had a streak of meanness like her half brother Will. “Is he like Will? Will can be mean to get his way.”

“Depends on what you call mean. Cruel and unusual punishment rather than anything physical. In this case, I will be disinherited.”

“Good heavens! What does he want you to do?” she said, staring at Jake and momentarily forgetting her breakfast.

“Get married within the year,” Jake answered quietly and she laughed. Jake gave her another grim look. “I’m not joking.”

“Sorry. You have to get married or be disinherited? Well,

that's simple enough. Marry someone. You'll inherit a fortune and then you can divorce."

"Oh, no. I have to marry this year and I have to remain married for five years or the deal's off and I'm disinherited. My friend, Nick, has the same sort of father and he made the same kind of demand and Nick just happened to fall in love and marry. My dad knows Nick's father and thought that was an excellent plan —so now he's foisted it on me."

She stared at Jake. "I can't imagine a parent interfering that much, particularly with someone who is as together as you are. You're successful, have friends, have a full life. You're an adult. That decision is highly personal and yours to make. You can't just run out and grab up a wife."

"I have no intention of 'running out and grabbing up a wife' or even marrying if I fall in love. I have my own fortune and this time he's gone too far," Jake stated in a quiet voice that held a cold note of steel. His blue eyes had become glacial. "I'll be damned if I'll marry just to suit my dad. If I fell wildly in love tomorrow, I wouldn't marry this year, not for any reason. I'm calling his hand on this one. He can go ahead and disinherit me. At this point, I don't give a damn." He looked at her for a moment. "How did we get on this subject?"

She was still staring at Jake, horrified that his father would make such a demand and astounded by Jake's attitude. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. You'll give up your father's fortune just to do your own thing in your own way? That's incredible. Will

would marry in an instant to avoid being disinherited."

"Do not compare me to your half brother," Jake said, making no effort to hide his annoyance.

"Of course not, sorry," she said, barely thinking about what she was saying as she mulled over a man who would turn down a fortune in order to be his own person and not yield to a demanding father's wishes. "I have to say, I'm impressed."

Jake paused as he was pouring more orange juice. He set down the pitcher to look at her. The coldness in his expression melted away. "That doesn't help, but it makes me feel better to have someone appreciate my stand."

"I hope you don't fall in love this year. On the other hand, if you do, you might change your mind about the inheritance."

He gave her a cocky grin. "Not much danger of either, but I promise you, I will not marry this year or next for that matter."

She continued to stare at him, unable to fathom his giving up a huge fortune so easily. His father was on lists as one of the wealthiest men in Texas.

"You're staring," he said with amusement. "I'll admit, if it's this startling, you are making me feel better about my decision."

"It is absolutely incredible. I'm trying to think what I would do in the same circumstances. I'm not sure I'd have the willpower to turn down a fortune. It's also depressing because you will not be swayed by money to sell back part of the ranch."

"No. At this point in my life, I'm not easily swayed by money. There are other things in life that entice me," he said and his

tone changed and the words took another meaning. Now when she looked into his blue eyes, she saw desire.

"So maybe it's not money I should fling at you for the ranch, but something else, something more personal," she replied in a breathless voice. She was flirting when she knew better. *Leave Jake Benton alone*, she'd ordered herself, yet she couldn't resist the retort and it had an effect as his chest expanded.

"Try me and see what it gets you," he said.

"Maybe I'll do that, Jake." She sipped her juice and lowered the glass. "I think we should get back on a less personal, less flirty basis. I wish I could view life that way. Even though I had a very comfortable life growing up and have Grandmother's fortune now, I can't be as relaxed about money as you are."

"You have a normal attitude. Besides, when the dust settles, I expect my father to change his mind. But if he doesn't, I'll stick by what I've said."

"I think, Jake Benton, you are an unusual man."

He reached out to tilt her face up to his. "And you, Caitlin, are a beautiful woman. Go to dinner with me tonight. We can fly to Dallas."

"Won't that take a lot of time?" she asked while her heart raced. Dinner with Jake. Foolish, yet it might help win her the ranch.

"I have a plane here. We'll be there in no time. I'll pick you up at a quarter to six."

"A Benton asking out a Santerre. You wouldn't have done that

twenty-four hours ago."

"Life changes. I can adapt. So can you."

"Who's the woman in your life right now and what is she doing while you're at the ranch? Will your taking me to dinner interfere in your relationship with her?"

"There is no woman in my life right now. Not one here or in Dallas. I'd think that detective you hired would have told you that item."

"Actually, he did. I just wanted you to confirm it because he could have missed something. That makes me feel better about going out with you."

"I'll look forward to it." His hand slipped behind her head and he moved closer to brush her lips with a light kiss. "Good morning, by the way."

"Good morn—" His mouth covered hers and ended her sentence. Her heart slammed against her ribs. His kiss was slow, hot, igniting desire instantly. While her heart drummed, she relished kissing him. Negatives with Jake ceased to exist. The only awareness was Jake and sensations he caused. With an effort to grasp safety, she finally ended the kiss.

"How did we get on this footing so swiftly?" she asked, catching her breath. "This time yesterday, I didn't even know you except on sight. And you didn't know me when you saw me. Now we're kissing."

"It happens. Sometimes even faster. The chemistry is there. You feel it, too." He moved away to get the coffeepot and

returned to refill their cups. When he sat down, he sipped his juice. “I’ll take you home this morning. I’ve already called the stable to get your horse ready and we’ll put him in a trailer.”

“Great. I’ll be happy to avoid the long ride home. While you’re at the house, I want you to meet Cecilia, Kirby and Altheda. I’ll call and let them know you’re coming.”

“That isn’t necessary,” he said.

“I know. I really want you to meet them.”

She ate her breakfast, but her appetite had diminished. The more she was with him, the less likely she thought he would part with his newly acquired property, yet the thought of Jake coming in and tearing down the beloved house turned her to ice. She wasn’t going to dwell on that until he gave her an answer about a sale.

“Stop worrying, Caitlin,” he said lightly.

“Does it show that much?” she asked, thinking it was sinful for a man to have such thick lashes and such blue eyes.

“Yes, and at this point, it’s unnecessary. I haven’t made a decision and I want to talk to my brother, Gabe, and our geologist.”

“After breakfast, I’ll call Altheda to let her know we’re coming. I told you about Altheda last night. She’s the resident housekeeper and cook. And you’ll meet Cecilia, too. She was Grandmother’s companion and secretary and long before that, a nanny for me. She’s almost part of the family and feels like an great-aunt. I really might as well have been an only child. I can

hardly count Will as a sibling even though, legally, he is."

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't count Will as a sibling either, but then I have strong feelings about Will, just as he does about me. I'm still astonished he sold to me."

"I'm sure all Will was thinking about was the money he would get. He wouldn't have cared whose money it was."

"Actually, I think he thought he was getting the best of me by getting my money while I got the ranch. Besides, I was the highest bidder—by far."

"I'm sure he'd view the sale that way. The money was the best of the deal to him."

Jake reached for his coffee. "So does the photography go on hold when you're at the ranch?"

"At the moment, I'm between jobs and I had cleared my schedule, so this is fine. I have to get back to the city soon. I only intended to be here a few days, mainly to see you and discuss the sale."

"I had to get away from Dallas, as well as make myself unavailable to my dad. Now I'm especially glad I did. I just made this decision at the last minute. Your private detective must be a good one. He also must have access to my office or someone very close to me."

"It's not difficult to learn your whereabouts. You don't hide what you do. You flew in your plane and your pilot had a flight plan filed."

Jake nodded. "Interesting. No, I've never had to hide from

anyone, so I'm not overly cautious. I keep a relatively low profile anyway."

She laughed. "Right. How many times have I seen your picture on society pages with beautiful women on your arm?"

"Those hardly count."

"The pictures or the women?" Before he could answer, she said, "I'm teasing you. I know you meant the pictures." She went on. "I know a few things about you from the detective. You have close friends you play golf and basketball with. Let's see if I can remember, Tony Ryder is one close friend. You mentioned your friend Nick Rafford. Those are the ones I recall."

"They're my best friends. Plus my brother. I have a bet with those guys, not my brother, but the others. When we were all bachelors we agreed to each bet a million that we would not marry. The last to marry wins the pot."

She laughed. "So if you marry, you lose a million dollars in a bet and if you don't marry you lose millions in your inheritance. You'll lose either way, Jake. How did you get yourself into that?"

He grinned. "I think the million is the smallest loss. Also, the least likely."

"And your friend Nick is married?"

"Married a woman who was guardian of his baby nephew and she and Nick had a baby. Now he's married and the father of two."

"May you have such great fortune," she teased and Jake rolled his eyes.

“Actually, Nick’s really happy. It’s been good for him. His dad is ecstatic, which is why my dad is so eager. Tony’s dad is just as bad. I’m a buffer for Gabe. Dad always focuses on me while Gabe squeaks by without as much interference. Heaven help him if I marry and get out of Dad’s sights. Enough about that.”

“I can’t imagine such a thing. Grandmother let me make so many of my choices with little direction from her.”

“Be thankful.” He finished his coffee. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, great,” she said, having no intention of telling him she couldn’t get him out of her thoughts; or how she had wanted his kisses. She wouldn’t admit when she had fallen asleep, she had dreamed about him. “And you?”

“Great, but I wasn’t in a strange bed in a strange house. This is home to me. Only one thing would have been an improvement,” he added with a huskier note entering his voice.

“I’m not asking about that improvement. You had an undisturbed night’s sleep. End of subject.”

“We’re through breakfast. Fred will clean this, so let’s get ready to go.”

“I can’t shake the feeling you’re putting me off about discussing a purchase,” she said, knowing she should drop it until he wanted to talk. She couldn’t get it out of mind more than a few minutes at a time.

“I’ve told you that we’ll talk, but I want to think about it first.”

“It seems incredibly simple to me. Sell me a small chunk of the ranch. Deal done. You’ll never miss it.”

"Maybe."

"Surely you don't want me out of this area. I have never done anything to hurt you," she said, carrying her dishes to the sink in spite of what he'd said.

He caught her wrist as she set down the dishes and reached for the faucet. "I told you, no cleaning. And no, you've never done one thing to hurt me, nor has your grandmother. It's your father and Will that I have strong feelings about."

"Oh, surely, you can't mean that you would hold that land just because I have the same name as Will." She looked into unfathomable blue eyes and wondered how strong his hatred was.

"No, I don't, Caitlin," he said quietly and something inside her unclenched.

"I'm glad," she said, realizing in first one way and then another, he was gaining her liking and her respect. He already stirred desire. It was becoming a potent and frightening combination because she didn't want to care about Jake Benton or have her heart race when he looked at her. Scariest of all was admiring and liking him.

"With oil hanging in the balance, I just want to give some thought to my decision."

"We both have old demons to get past," she said.

"I agree. We've spent a lifetime hating each other's families. It's difficult to switch that off instantly. You rode over here angry with me all the way, didn't you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. I've told you why—all those

messages I left for you ignored by your employees."

"I'll have to talk to someone about that. Maybe they need to find out a little more about the person before they turn them away. On the other hand, I don't think anyone would have reported to me that a very gorgeous woman was being told she couldn't even have a phone conversation with me."

"Don't be ridiculous." Caitlin smiled.

He turned her to face him. "I'm not being ridiculous. You wouldn't have stood a chance at getting me to sell any land back to you if we hadn't met in person, I can truthfully tell you that. I've always lumped you in with your father and half brother."

"Big mistake," she said. "But then Grandmother didn't like your family, so there you are. I didn't, either."

"Hopefully, that has changed forever for you."

"Time will tell," she said.

"That's a reserved answer, Caitlin," he said, studying her.

"My guess is, you feel the same way. You can't expect me to be overjoyed with you if you turn me down and I'm definitely not saying that as an ultimatum."

"Let's not get into conflict when it isn't necessary," he said. His cell phone buzzed and he answered to talk briefly before placing it in his pocket again.

"The car, trailer and horse are waiting. Shall we go?" he asked. As they left the house, they emerged into a clear day with water still dripping from trees and the rooftops.

They reached the truck and Jake held her door while she

climbed inside. In a short time they were on the highway and she thought of the long ride to his ranch on horseback and how angry and determined she had been to see him.

As they sped toward her ranch, she studied his profile. His stand toward his father's unreasonable demand, his care for his sister and brother—she envied that slightly because she had never had any love or even much kindness or attention from Will. Those things softened her harsh feelings toward the Bentons. Plus the wild unwanted allurement that had captured both of them.

Jake was turning out to be so different from the man she had imagined him to be. Much more appealing. Yet beneath all the good things lay their past history. He was a Benton who had done unacceptable things to Santerres. Will's dislike of Jake and competition with him in sports and school was legendary. Maybe both had excelled simply because they were each trying to outdo the other.

Soon they were on what had once been Santerre land, and she grew more tense with each mile. She wanted to keep her house, keep the people who had worked for her grandmother. Damn Will and his selfish ways and the ultimate cruelty in selling all this to Jake without giving her any chance to buy part of it.

"In a way, I'm surprised Will would sell you the mineral rights."

"I wouldn't have bought the ranch otherwise, but Will told me there's no oil. His father had geologists study the land, even

leased it at one point, but they gave up and said there was no oil."

"What about natural gas?"

Jake smiled at her. "As far as Will's concerned, if there's no oil, there's no gas. Will is into buildings and cities and finance, not oil, gas and wind. Or even water rights. There's a lot of water on your ranch."

"I can't believe Will's lawyers let him do this without giving him a lot of advice that was solid."

"Your brother doesn't strike me as the type to take advice well. Not even from men he hires to give it to him."

She nodded. "You're right. Will is supremely confident. It helps him in many ways, but sometimes it blinds him."

"You're so much younger. I'm surprised you were around him often."

"I wasn't, but we had family gatherings because my father was the darling of my grandmother."

"What about you?"

"Oh, yes. She was wonderful to me. I'm a granddaughter, the daughter she never had. But she loved my father with all her being. He loved her, too, so we were together on holidays where Will made his presence felt. I hated being with him because when I was little, he was mean. He'd pinch me or thump me. When I'd cry, he'd deny he had done anything. He'd say I was pretending until Grandmother lectured him. With someone checking on him, he left me alone, but he was never nice, never a brother. Since she passed, he's barely spoken to me."

“Will is something else,” Jake said with disgust in his voice.

When they topped a hill, a tall three-story Victorian house came into view. Trees surrounded it and shaded the steeply sloped rooftops, gables, balconies and wide bay windows.

“See, Jake, it’s a beautiful old house built by the first Santerre.”

“That wasn’t the first house,” he said.

“There’s a tiny log house that was the first, but in time, this house was built. The family considers it the first real ranch house.”

She wanted Jake to see the house, meet the people who worked for her and had devoted years to her grandmother. It should be much more difficult for Jake to displace them if he knew them, rather than faceless, nameless entities.

They drove to the corral where a wiry, sandy-haired man with streaks and sideburns of gray came forward to greet her. His weathered face was tan from years in the sun.

“Jake, meet our foreman, Kirby Lenox,” she said when she stepped out of the truck and greeted Kirby. “Kirby, this is Jake Benton.”

She watched the two shake hands and Kirby size up Jake. She saw no reaction from Jake except a friendly greeting, but she suspected he was taking in everything he saw to help him make his decision about her place.

“I’ll get the horse now. It won’t take long and then you two can go on to the house,” Kirby told them.

As he backed the horse out of the trailer, Jake watched. “That’s a fine horse,” he said, looking over her bay.

“This one’s a dandy. Caitlin has a keen eye for a horse.”

“That’s because I learned from you,” she said, smiling at Kirby.

He grinned as he patted the horse. “He’s a fine one. He’s Caitlin’s favorite. Nice to meet you, Mr. Benton.”

“It’s Jake, Kirby. We’ll see each other again,” he said easily as he held the pickup door for Caitlin.

She felt as if she were walking on broken glass, treading carefully, hoping Jake would appreciate the old house and the people or at least like them even half as much as she did.

“Thanks,” she said. In minutes Jake stopped in front of the house and walked around to open her door. He took her arm in a light touch that was a blistering contact.

“Come look around,” she said, gazing with satisfaction at the porch with wooden rockers, swings, pots of blooming flowers. Lacy gingerbread spindles formed the posts and lacy curtains were pulled back inside the bay windows. Caitlin sighed, wondering how anyone could resist the house’s charm.

“This is too beautiful to bulldoze,” she said as they crossed the porch. “I don’t think a Benton has ever been in this house,” she added, knowing this was another twist in the history of the family feud.

When he didn’t answer, she became silent. The door swung open and Caitlin faced Cecilia whose big brown eyes went from

her to Jake and back to Caitlin. “I’m back. Cecilia, I want you to meet Jake Benton.”

“Mr. Benton, welcome to Caitlin’s home,” Cecilia said warmly, extending her hand to Jake who smiled as he took her hand.

“Jake, this is Cecilia Mayes. I’ve told you about her,” Caitlin said, studying the two of them. Jake sounded incredibly polite, not the least a hard-hearted owner who would evict them. He towered over Cecilia who was only five feet tall, small-boned and thin. She wore a flowered cotton housedress and sandals. Her gray hair was fastened behind her head in a bun. She looked as sweet as she actually was to everyone and Caitlin loved her deeply and wanted to protect her from harm.

“I’m glad to meet you, ma’am,” Jake said politely. “Please just call me Jake.”

“Certainly,” she said. “Come in, please. We can sit in the front parlor and I hope you’ll stay for lunch with us. I told Altheda to plan for that.”

“Thank you, but I should get home before then. I can sit a minute and visit.”

“Fine,” she said.

“Cecilia, I want to take Jake to meet Altheda and show him a little of the house. Then we’ll join you in the front parlor.”

“Of course,” Cecilia said.

“I want you to see some of the inside of this house,” she told Jake when she was alone with him. “The original house is over a

hundred years old. Grandmother made changes, had closets built in, added a wing, a deck and pool, an entertainment center. I've added an office. Even so, a lot is still the same."

Fresh flowers from the garden were on the dining room table, visible from the wide hall when they walked through the open door. Jake's Western boots scraped the polished plank floor. Tempting smells of baking bread wafted in the air and Caitlin was pleased by the appearance of the house.

Deep red velvet chairs circled the mahogany dining table. Cut glass and silver filled a breakfront.

"This room was off limits to me as a very small child unless I was invited to eat in here with the family. We had holiday gatherings fairly often when I was small. There won't be any now or anytime in the future."

"I remember our family get-togethers, tedious to mind my manners, yet fun in teasing Brittany and Gabe when they couldn't get back at me."

"Will did that anytime he was here. The first few times I told on him, he denied everything and I got in trouble, so I just learned to endure his mischief. Only he was mean, pinching me during the family prayer when he knew I wouldn't yell, mean tricks he could get away with."

"The bastard," Jake said.

"That's what Will called me far too often when no one else could hear him. If he got a chance, he reminded me that I was born out of wedlock and neither of my parents wanted me enough

to keep me."

She hoped she kept emotion out of her voice, but it was difficult even after all these years to be unemotional about Will's accusations that actually were on target.

"Thank heavens for my grandmother," Caitlin added.

"She gave you almost as much as your father could have given you. If he had taken you in, you would have had to live under the same roof as Will and you would never have known your grandmother as well as you did."

"I've thought of that many times. Were I given a choice to live my life over with Dad or again with Grandmother, I would pick my life with Grandmother. It was a happy time growing up and she was loving and wonderful to me."

"She didn't have the same charitable attitude toward my father."

"Definitely not. She disliked him enormously because of the beating he gave my dad."

"Our families have a long and violent history," Jake remarked.

"I don't know if either of us can ever view the other without thinking about our bloodlines," she said.

"I definitely can look at you and forget," Jake said softly. "When I am near you, that old feud is the last thing I'm thinking about."

"I'm not pursuing what you are thinking about," she stated with a laugh. "Let me show you more of the house.

"Here's the kitchen," she said, entering a room she loved with

a high ceiling and glass-fronted cabinets. Floor-to-ceiling glass gave a panoramic view of the pool and a decorator-designed deck.

Two ceiling fans slowly revolved. A woman in a black uniform with a white apron turned to smile at them. In her hand she held a tray from the oven with tempting-looking brownies.

"Jake, this is Altheda Perkins who has worked here since she was seventeen. Altheda, meet Jake Benton, the man who now owns the ranch."

"Glad to meet you Mr. Benton," she said politely, her smile fading slightly for a brief moment and then returning. Her white hair was a mass of curls framing her face. "Would either of you care for a brownie and milk? I can bring them to the front parlor."

Jake declined at the same time Caitlin did. "We both just finished breakfast. Perhaps later this morning, we might enjoy a bite."

To Jake she said, "The cabinets in here are the originals. The glass fronts are more trouble to take care of, but Altheda is willing and I love them."

"Nice kitchen," he said, looking around. The appliances were as up-to-date as his own, yet the kitchen retained the charm and appearance of another century and Caitlin loved every inch of it.

Caitlin showed him the new part of the house only briefly, dwelling more on the original and older rooms and areas. She tried to make him see that he would be destroying a treasure if he tore it down.

Beyond a polite interest, she couldn't detect any other feelings about what he was seeing. She loved her grandmother's house more than any other place and couldn't see it as anything except a precious home that should be maintained and enjoyed.

How steeped was Jake in the hatred that always lay smoldering between the two families?

She led him through downstairs rooms and then they returned to join Cecilia in the parlor.

Jake sat, talking politely to Cecilia, laughing at a story she told that had involved him in town. Occasionally as they talked, Caitlin glanced at her watch or the clock on the mantel and was gratified to see that an hour had passed and Jake not only showed no signs of leaving, but seemed to be enjoying himself talking to Cecilia.

Altheda appeared with brownies, a pot of steaming coffee, mugs and saucers.

Jake made a phone call and let Caitlin talk him into staying for lunch.

It was after two in the afternoon when he said he had to get back to the ranch and Caitlin went out to his truck with him.

He held her arm to walk around to his side. "I'd like to walk off into the woods with you or the nearest shed or anywhere we could be alone."

"I don't need to ask why in the world you'd want to do that," she replied, amused, wanting the same thing herself, which she would never admit to him. "I don't think that's possible. You'll

be alone with me tonight."

"I'll be at a restaurant with people everywhere."

"I think you'll manage. I'm glad you stayed today and visited with Cecilia."

"She's sweet and reminds me of my grandmother on my mother's side. She knows a lot about people in these parts."

"Cecilia used to get out a lot, go to town and she had many friends. She's become more reclusive in the last years."

He ran his hand across Caitlin's shoulder. "I'll see you in a few hours. Thanks again for lunch."

"Thanks for taking me in during the storm and hearing my plea finally."

He nodded and climbed into his truck and drove away. She walked to the porch and stood watching the truck on the road to the highway.

Cecilia came out to stand beside her. "Caitlin, watch out. He'll break your heart if you're not careful."

Startled, Caitlin turned. "I won't let that happen. I barely know him."

"He's a charming man. He's also accustomed to getting what he wants. Not one word was mentioned about selling land back to you, so I assume he's put you off with an answer."

"Yes, he has until this week when he can talk to his brother and some people at his office."

"He's dangling you along. He wants you and this ranch. I don't think he's going to sell to you."

"Whatever happens," Caitlin said, growing somber over hearing her own sentiments spoken aloud by Cecilia, "I promise, I'll take care of you and Altheda. Kirby, too."

"We can all manage. Your grandmother left us each a trust that will take care of us financially. We'll get along." Cecilia's gaze ran over the porch and tears filled her eyes. "I love this old house and I know you do, too," she said gently. "It may just be time for all of us to let go and move on. Change is life, Caitlin. You know that. You've done your best to win him over, but those Bentons are a hard-hearted bunch toward the Santerres. He hates your brother. It shows in his cold blue eyes."

"Cecilia, Jake isn't so awfully cold," Caitlin said, having a strange feeling of not being truthful. She had a knot in her throat and hated to hear what she feared voiced aloud.

"Just don't fall in love with him, honey. You're going out with him tonight. You be careful. That man doesn't have your interests at heart. At least not now."

"It's just dinner and I'll be careful," Caitlin promised, looking into Cecilia's worried brown eyes. They both stepped closer to hug each other and Caitlin could feel Cecilia's thin shoulders and hurt for her. "Cecilia, I'd do anything to keep him from uprooting you and the others," she said, fighting tears.

"Don't," Cecilia said firmly, pulling away and holding Caitlin's shoulders. "Do not do anything foolish to get your way. He'll take advantage of you and hurt you. We'll all be fine and stop worrying about us. You've talked to him about selling and you've

done your part."

Caitlin nodded. "I better check my calls and emails. I haven't since this morning."

"You'll have to put it off for a few more minutes because here comes Kirby," Cecilia said. "I'm going in. He'll want to talk to you, not me. I'm guessing he's in his fatherly mode. We all want to keep you from getting hurt while you're trying to protect us."

Caitlin saw the foreman striding toward her, a lanky, relaxed walk that still covered ground rapidly. She had a sinking feeling he might want to air his feelings and warn her to be careful around Jake, too.

Cecilia left and in minutes Kirby climbed the porch steps to lean against a post facing her as she sat and gently rocked.

"I saw Benton drive away. I hear he's taking you out tonight."

Caitlin couldn't keep from smiling. "You three have a grapevine that carries news faster than text messaging."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Altheda told me. She had lunch for the boys and me and I was up here to get it and talked to her."

"And she must have just found out from Jake's remarks. Yes, I'm going out with him and I'll be fine."

"Look, you're doing this for the three of us, primarily. Dusty and Red, too, because the outcome will impact them. Jake Benton's a tough man. I've ridden against him in rodeos. I've seen Will come up against him and end up the worse for it. I'd say you forget trying to save this place. I don't want to see you hurt."

"Kirby, you're like an older brother to me—or a dad."

“I believe at my age, dad is a better comparison,” he said and she smiled fleetingly, her mind on his warning.

“I’ll take care of myself and I don’t want any of you to worry. Jake won’t hurt me. I’m not getting that involved with him.”

“He’s broken more than a few hearts in this county,” Kirby said.

She gazed to the east, thinking about Jake driving home to his ranch.

“I’ll be careful. You stop worrying. I’ve already been warned by Cecilia.”

“You might as well give up on him selling the place. That man isn’t going to let you have it back. Trucks are pouring in here at that rig where they are drilling. I’ve watched them with binoculars from the barn loft. They’re busy as can be. I wouldn’t be surprised if they do find oil. Your dad never thought there was any here, but that time they drilled it was far over in the eastern corner, not up here near the house. They find oil, you can forget any hope of getting part of this ranch back.”

“I know. He retains all mineral rights, so he could go right ahead.”

“It’s not conducive to raising cattle.”

“I couldn’t just give up without asking. Just please, don’t you worry.”

Kirby straightened up. “All right. I’ve said my say and I’ll head back to work.” He turned and went down the porch steps.

“Kirby—” She waited until he turned around to meet her gaze.

“Thank you. I love you for watching out for me.”

“You take care, Caitlin. I can’t watch out enough to protect you.”

She nodded and he walked away, heading back to the barn. Shortly he was in the truck and drove off on one of the ranch’s paths.

With a sigh, she went inside, mulling over the warnings against Jake that reaffirmed her own reactions. Neither Kirby nor Cecilia expected Jake to sell back to her. She headed to the kitchen, knowing she might as well listen now to Altheda, hear her cautions and then she could go back to her work to check on her galleries and orders.

When she finally stepped inside her office, she closed the door. Feeling drained, she was more worried than ever about the future of the ranch.

Caitlin soon gave up trying to work because she couldn’t keep her mind on anything except Jake. Memories of his kisses tormented her. Questions about his decision concerning the ranch were as constant a concern. All the time she bathed and dressed, she moved as if only half conscious of her actions. Kirby’s and Cecilia’s warnings made her view the evening with more caution, big reminders to be careful.

In spite of the warnings, her pulse speeded at the prospect. Her feelings toward Jake were mixed; fear he would destroy the place she loved, attraction, family hatreds, excitement. The dinner date would give her another chance to try to talk him

into selling. What was really holding him back? Was he trying to get something from her besides a payment? Seduction? Perhaps tonight would bring answers.

Five

With his thoughts on Caitlin, Jake turned into his ranch road and answered a call on his cell. He talked briefly to his brother Gabe who had flown in and was waiting to see him.

When Jake parked, Gabe came out on the porch. His dark brown hair was windblown. He was dressed casually in jeans, boots and a cotton shirt. His blue eyes held curiosity when Jake climbed the porch steps.

"I brought the geological papers, the maps, the description of the barns and outbuildings used by Madeline Santerre. What gives that you're having second thoughts about it?"

"I met Caitlin Santerre and she's asked me to sell part of the property back to her. I'm dragging my feet to see if you find oil."

"Why would you want to consider selling, oil or no oil? We've talked about the possibilities of oil on that land and we've already started drilling."

"We'd retain all mineral, wind and water rights."

"And she would agree to that and still want to buy back part of it?"

"Yep. She wants it for sentimental reasons and to take care of the elderly crew who have worked there."

"Sentimental reasons? You believe that? A sentimental Santerre?"

"This isn't Will. I've found a Santerre who is not like Will

at all. I always heard the Grandmother wasn't like her son or grandson. Let's go to the study where we can be comfortable."

"Sure," Gabe said, holding the door and following Jake inside.

"Actually, Will sold it without telling her. They've never gotten along."

"Caitlin Santerre is Titus Santerre's daughter. I've always heard her mother was a Santerre maid."

"That's right. When the maid had the baby Titus didn't want any part of either mother or baby and paid the maid to go away. When she planned to put the baby up for adoption, the grandmother, Madeline Santerre, Titus's mother, adopted her. Thus Caitlin became a Santerre and was raised by Grandmother Santerre. She's told me that Will was never kind to her."

"That can't surprise you."

"Nope. Will is mean through and through. Caitlin is not one bit like Will. She's worrying about the people who worked for Madeline. As far as I can tell, she doesn't have any meanness or selfishness in her."

"Caitlin Santerre. All I remember is a little kid," Gabe said as they entered the study and Jake sat in a leather chair.

"Not so little. I'm taking her to dinner tonight."

"Caitlin? How old is she? I think of her as twelve at the most."

"When you were having birthdays, Caitlin was having birthdays. She's twenty-eight."

"Damn. Twenty-eight? I don't remember seeing her around these parts since she was little." Gabe hooked one knee over the

arm of the chair and let his booted foot dangle while he studied Jake. “Why are you taking her to dinner? Why didn’t you just tell her no and be on your way?”

“She’s beautiful. I want the evening with her.”

Gabe’s eyebrows arched. “You’ve hated the Santerres, particularly since Brittany’s death. What’s the deal here—a little revenge by seducing a Santerre?”

“No. Will doesn’t care a thing about her. No revenge there. I just want the evening with her.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed as he stared at his brother. “That one I can’t figure. You know plenty of beautiful women. You hate the Santerres with a passion. Is there anything you’re not telling me?”

“Not a thing. If you could see her, you’d know why I want to go out with her.”

Gabe shook his head. “You’re not convincing me. I’ve seen you fight with Will. I’ve seen you try to beat him in sports. I’ve heard you call him names and complain about him. You don’t like any of them. There’s something else.”

“Nope.”

Gabe became silent and Jake waited patiently for his answers to soak in with his brother.

“Tell her no you won’t sell and get on with your life,” Gabe said finally. “You’re not going to go out often with the woman or have a relationship with her.”

“I’ll tell her no soon. Probably this week at the office, but tonight, I’m taking her out. If it goes well tonight, I might put her

off for a week and go out with her next weekend."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Gabe said. "You're sure she isn't going to talk you into selling back to her?"

"Fairly positive."

"Then why the maps and descriptions and pictures?"

"If you must know, she's gaining some of my sympathy. I started out avoiding a definite rejection because I wanted to go out with her. She's gorgeous."

"So you said," Gabe remarked dryly.

"Now, I'm listening to her. If you don't find oil, it doesn't seem such a big deal to sell a patch of land and the old house to her if we retain rights. If you find oil, that house and everyone living in it will be in the way."

"The more you get to know her, the more likely you are to do what she wants."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I don't intend to sell if you find oil."

"That's good because that house of hers may be in the middle of a very lucrative field. I think it is. Before too many more days, we'll know if I'm right."

"I hope you are," Jake said.

"If I am, you won't want her owning any part of the ranch. We'll want to drill where we can get oil. We have to have trucks able to get in and out. I'm puzzled, but okay. I know you're not going all soft over a Santerre. No way is that happening."

"I'm just thinking about it and waiting to hear something decisive from you," Jake said and Gabe smiled.

"I hope I have news for you soon," Gabe remarked. He stood. "I've got to run. I'm flying back to Fort Worth to meet some guys for dinner."

Jake walked to the porch with Gabe. "See you in Dallas."

When his brother was gone, Jake returned to the study to look at the papers Gabe had delivered to him. He hated Will with a passion, disliked Will's father. Why bother selling to Caitlin? He wasn't ready to get her out of his life yet. Erotic images of Caitlin in his bed set his heart drumming.

He had asked to see the house and property because he was stalling to hear from Gabe about oil before he was forced to give her an answer, yet she had wanted to show him the house and everything else, playing on his sympathy.

She had tried to familiarize him with the house and property so it would not seem impersonal and easy to dispose of. He had allowed her to because the more he was with her, the more he wanted to be with her and to seduce her.

As she had led the way from room to room, he had watched the gentle sway of her hips. He wanted her in his arms in his bed. His blood heated at the thought of tonight. Seduce her, spend time with her and then tell her no.

Would she trade sleeping with him for an agreement from him to sell the house back to her? Or become his mistress for a limited time? The possibility was erotic, tempting. She wanted the house and part of the property in the worst way. It was leverage to get something in return from her and money meant nothing. If it

had been Will who wanted the property back, he would have delighted in saying no, but it wasn't Will. This was an entirely different matter. It hinged on Gabe finding oil.

Caitlin had not won him over beyond it being exciting to be with her.

It was a small matter to sell a little piece of the ranch back to her, but he wasn't ready to do so yet. He was certain when he did, he would see no more of Caitlin.

What kind of evening would he have with her? He glanced at his watch. Only a few hours and he would find out.

Caitlin studied herself in the mirror while her thoughts remained only half on her appearance. The prospect of an evening with Jake both excited and disturbed her. Reactions poles apart like all of her responses since she had first faced him. She wanted to get her property back and be done with him because he was an unwanted temptation in her life.

Focusing on her reflection, she smoothed the deep blue long-sleeved dress over her hips. The dress had a draped neckline with a low-cut back. She stepped into silver high-heeled sandals. Her hair was piled on her head, held with a silver clip with a few strands escaping to frame her face. Blue-and-silver earrings dangled from her ears.

A flight to Dallas to eat and then back, but it would be no surprise if he wanted her to stay the night in Dallas. At the thought, her already bubbling insides gave another jump.

The front door knocker made a clang that she could hear

upstairs in her bedroom. Grabbing up her clutch purse, she hurried downstairs. Cecilia had already greeted Jake and was in the front room talking to him.

Caitlin heard their voices before she entered the room. Jake stood the minute she walked through the door. Her breathing altered as she looked at Jake in a charcoal suit with a red tie. Even when she was in high heels, he was still the taller. Wickedly handsome, he presented an enormous challenge: win him over about selling—resist seduction.

Then she saw the perusal he was giving her with approval definitely in his warm gaze. "You're beautiful, Caitlin. I can't believe you're the same little kid I remember."

"Thank you. The same little kid you ignored, is what you mean."

"Cecilia, it was nice to see you again, if only briefly."

"Take care tonight," Cecilia said, following them to the door and telling them goodbye. The minute the door closed behind them, Jake took her arm.

"Cecilia looks sweet, but I wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley. I think she would gladly do me in."

Caitlin laughed. "I have never heard such a description of her in my life. Next to my grandmother, she's the sweetest person on earth."

"You can't tell me I got approval after my visit this afternoon. That was a frosty few minutes before you arrived."

"Cecilia? I can't believe it. She is always sweet to people. Even

Will—she never trusted Will, but she was always kind about him because she knew Grandmother loved him."

"I'm not going to pin you down on Cecilia's opinion of me, but I'd bet the ranch I'm on target."

"You might be," she said, amused by his reaction to Cecilia. "Now if you sell the land back to us, she'll change her opinion completely."

"Ah, that's what her coldness is about. I was afraid it was about taking you out."

"Why would she worry about that?" Caitlin asked.

Jake shot her a look before returning his attention to the ranch road. "Don't make me sound like someone so run-of-the-mill."

She laughed. "You will never be 'run-of-the-mill.' Stop fishing for reassurance or compliments. If our relatives could see us now, they wouldn't believe their eyes. A Benton and a Santerre together for an evening."

"All I can see is a man and a gorgeous woman. That feud melted away when you appeared on my porch."

She smiled as she watched him drive. She had caught a whiff of his woodsy aftershave. All she could remember when she was a kid was an unfriendly older boy who was a Benton and someone to avoid. Not the breathtaking dream sitting only feet away from her and spending the evening with her.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said.

"No amount of money would wring my thoughts out of me right now," she replied, smiling and received another swift

glance.

"Now I have to know. Your thoughts must be personal, must involve me and must include tonight."

"You're enough on target that I think we will change the subject. Do you work all the time in Dallas?"

"A large part, but I travel, too. And you're not getting off the hook that easily. Thoughts that concern us and you won't tell me. That's intriguing. Something you don't want to admit."

"Stop it, Jake," she said with a laugh.

"Not when a beautiful woman admits to thoughts about us that she can't confess. That conjures up all sorts of images—"

"You can stop now. You win—I was merely thinking how handsome you are and that we're headed for an exciting evening. There—very ordinary thoughts that could be expected."

"You're not fooling me. You don't want to admit what you're really thinking—more along the lines of speculation about what it would be like to make passionate love," he said, his voice lowering a notch.

She tingled all over. "You won't believe me if I deny that and of course, now you have me thinking about it."

His hand tightened on the steering wheel. Otherwise, she saw no visible sign of reaction to what she'd just said. "Now I wish I had started this conversation when I wasn't driving."

"You brought this on yourself. Perhaps you should take my suggestion and we change the subject."

"Flirting is infinitely more fun with you than an ordinary

conversation," he said.

"More dangerous, Jake. You and I were never destined for any kind of future together. We can ignore the feud for a time, but never completely, and it means some things will never take place between us."

"Not necessarily. A kiss can diminish family histories like lightning striking a tree. I'll show you when we return to this conversation when I'm no longer driving."

His words wrapped around her, making her warm. He wouldn't forget what he just said. Kisses awaited, heightening her bubbling excitement.

"I hope you've thought about Grandmother's house. It is so wonderful, Jake. It's filled with memories. I just can't bear to lose it."

"It is a fine old home, Caitlin. There's no argument about that."

They reached his ranch and drove to park in front of an open hangar. Nearby a dazzling white jet waited, a larger craft than she had expected. The moment she stepped inside, she saw it was a luxury jet that held plush seats, tables, a bar, a screen for films, electronic equipment and phones. "This is an elegant plane, Jake."

"It's comfortable and equipped for me to work while I fly. Or be entertained, whichever I want."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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