

CHAPTER ONE

TIFFANY SAW HIM in the distance, riding the big black stallion that had already killed one man. She hated the horse, even as she admitted silently how regal it looked with the tall, taciturn man on its back. A killer horse it might be, but it respected Kingman Marshall. Most people around Jacobsville, Texas, did. His family had lived on the Guadalupe River there since the Civil War, on a ranch called Lariat.

It was spring, and that meant roundup. It was nothing unusual to see the owner of Lariat in the saddle at dawn lending a hand to rope a stray calf or help work the branding. King kept fit with ranch work, and despite the fact that he shared an office and a business partnership with her father in land and cattle, his staff didn't see a lot of him.

This year, they were using helicopters to mass the far-flung cattle, and they had a corral set up on a wide flat stretch of land where they could dip the cattle, check them, cut out the calves for branding and separate them from their mothers. It was physically demanding work, and no job for a tenderfoot. King wouldn't let Tiffany near it, but it wasn't a front-row seat at the corral that she wanted. If she could just get his attention away

from the milling cattle on the wide, rolling plain that led to the Guadalupe River, if he'd just look her way...

She stood up on a rickety lower rung of the gray wood fence, avoiding the sticky barbed wire, and waved her creamy Stetson at him. She was a picture of young elegance in her tan jodhpurs and sexy pink silk blouse and high black boots. She was a debutante. Her father, Harrison Blair, was King's business partner and friend, and if she chased King, her father encouraged her. It would be a marriage made in heaven. That is, if she could find some way to convince King of it. He was elusive and quite abrasively masculine. It might take more than a young lady of almost twenty-one with a sheltered, monied background to land him. But, then, Tiffany had confidence in herself; she was beautiful and intelligent.

Her long black hair hung to her waist in back, and she refused to have it cut. It suited her tall, slender figure and made an elegant frame for her soft oval face and wide green eyes and creamy complexion. She had a sunny smile, and it never faded. Tiffany was always full of fire, burning with a love of life that her father often said had been reflected in her long-dead mother.

"King!" she called, her voice clear, and it carried in the early-morning air.

He looked toward her. Even at the distance, she could see that cold expression in his pale blue eyes, on his lean, hard face with its finely chiseled features. He was a rich man. He worked hard, and he played hard. He had women, Tiffany knew he did, but he was nothing if not discreet. He was a man's man, and he lived like one. There was no playful boy in that tall, fit body. He'd

grown up years ago, the boyishness burned out of him by a rich, alcoholic father who demanded blind obedience from the only child of his shallow, runaway wife.

She watched him ride toward her, easy elegance in the saddle. He reined in at the fence, smiling down at her with faint arrogance. He was powerfully built, with long legs and slim hips and broad shoulders. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him, and with his checked red shirt open at the throat, she got fascinating glimpses of bronzed muscle and thick black hair on the expanse of his sexy chest. Jeans emphasized the powerful muscles of his legs, and he had big, elegant hands that hers longed to feel in passion. Not that she was likely to. He treated her like a child most of the time, or at best, a minor irritation.

"You're out early, tidbit," he remarked in a deep, velvety voice with just a hint of Texas drawl. His eyes, under the shade of his wide-brimmed hat, were a pale, grayish blue and piercing as only blue eyes could be.

"I'm going to be twenty-one tomorrow," she said pertly. "I'm having a big bash to celebrate, and you have to come. Black tie, and don't you dare bring anyone. You're mine, for the whole evening. It's my birthday and on my birthday I want presents—and you're it. My big present."

His dark brows lifted with amused indulgence. "You might have told me sooner that I was going to be a birthday present," he said. "I have to be in Omaha early Saturday."

"You have your own plane," she reminded him. "You can fly."

"I have to sleep sometimes," he murmured.

“I wouldn’t touch that line with a ten-foot pole,” she drawled, peeking at him behind her long lashes. “Will you come? If you don’t, I’ll stuff a pillow up my dress and accuse you of being the culprit. And your reputation will be ruined, you’ll be driven out of town on a rail, they’ll tar and feather you...”

He chuckled softly at the vivid sparkle in her eyes, the radiant smile. “You witch,” he accused. “They’d probably give me a medal for getting through your defenses.”

She wondered how he knew that, and reasoned that her proud parent had probably told him all about her reputation for coolness with men.

He lit a cigarette, took a long draw from and blew it out with faint impatience. “Little girls and their little whims,” he mused. “All right, I’ll whirl you around the floor and toast your coming-of-age, but I won’t stay. I can’t spare the time.”

“You’ll work yourself to death,” she complained, and she was solemn now. “You’re only thirty-four and you look forty.”

“Times are hard, honey,” he mused, smiling at the intensity in that glowering young face. “We’ve had low prices and drought. It’s all I can do to keep my financial head above water.”

“You could take the occasional break,” she advised. “And I don’t mean a night on the town. You could get away from it all and just rest.”

“They’re full up at the Home,” he murmured, grinning at her exasperated look. “Honey, I can’t afford vacations, not with times so hard. What are you wearing for this coming-of-age party?” he asked to divert her.

“A dream of a dress. White silk, very low in front, with diamanté straps and a white gardenia in my hair.” She laughed.

He pursed his lips. He might as well humor her. “That sounds dangerous,” he said softly.

“It will be,” she promised, teasing him with her eyes. “You might even notice that I’ve grown up.”

He frowned a little. That flirting wasn’t new, but it was disturbing lately. He found himself avoiding little Miss Blair, without really understanding why. His body stirred even as he looked at her, and he moved restlessly in the saddle. She was years too young for him, and a virgin to boot, according to her doting, sheltering father. All those years of obsessive parental protection had led to a very immature and unavailable girl. It wouldn’t do to let her too close. Not that anyone ever got close to Kingman Marshall, not even his infrequent lovers. He had good reason to keep women at a distance. His upbringing had taught him too well that women were untrustworthy and treacherous.

“What time?” he asked on a resigned note.

“About seven?”

He paused thoughtfully for a minute. “Okay.” He tilted his wide-brimmed hat over his eyes. “But only for an hour or so.”

“Great!”

He didn’t say goodbye. Of course, he never had. He wheeled the stallion and rode off, man and horse so damned arrogant that she felt like flinging something at his tall head. He was delicious, she thought, and her body felt hot all over just looking at him. On the ground

he towered over her, lean and hard-muscled and sexy as all hell. She loved watching him.

With a long, unsteady sigh, she finally turned away and remounted her mare. She wondered sometimes why she bothered hero-worshiping such a man. One of these days he'd get married and she'd just die. God forbid that he'd marry anybody but her!

That was when the first shock of reality hit her squarely between the eyes. Why, she had to ask herself, would a man like that, a mature man with all the worldly advantages, want a young and inexperienced woman like her at his side? The question worried her so badly that she almost lost control of her mount. She'd never questioned her chances with King before. She'd never dared. The truth of her situation was unpalatable and a little frightening. She'd never even considered a life without him. What if she had to?

As she rode back toward her own house, on the property that joined King's massive holdings, she noticed the color of the grass. It was like barbed wire in places, very dry and scant. That boded ill for the cattle, and if rain didn't come soon, all that new grass was going to burn up under a hot Texas sun. She knew a lot about the cattle business. After all, her father had owned feedlots since her youth, and she was an only child who worked hard to share his interests. She knew that if there wasn't enough hay by the end of summer, King was going to have to import feed to get his cattle through the winter. The cost of that was prohibitive. It had something to do with black figures going red in the last column, and that could mean disaster for someone with a cow-calf operation the size of King's.

Ah, well, she mused, if King went bust, she supposed that she could get a job and support him. Just the thought of it doubled her over with silvery laughter. King's pride would never permit that sort of help.

Even the Guadalupe was down. She sat on a small rise in the trees, looking at its watery width. The river, like this part of Texas, had a lot of history in it. Archaeologists had found Indian camps on the Guadalupe that dated back seven thousand years, and because of that, part of it had been designated a National Historic Shrine.

In more recent history, freight handlers on their way to San Antonio had crossed the river in DeWitt County on a ferryboat. In Cuero, a nice drive from Lariat, was the beginning of the Chisolm Trail. In nearby Goliad County was the small town of Goliad, where Texas patriots were slaughtered by the Mexican army back in 1836, just days after the bloodbath at the Alamo. Looking at the landscape, it was easy to imagine the first Spanish settlers, the robed priests founding missions, the Mexican Army with proud, arrogant Santa Anna at its fore, the Texas patriots fighting to the last breath, the pioneers and the settlers, the Indians and the immigrants, the cowboys and cattle barons and desperadoes. Tiffany sighed, trying to imagine it all.

King, she thought, would have fitted in very well with the past. Except that he had a blasé attitude toward life and women, probably a result of having too much money and time on his hands. Despite his hard work at roundup, he spent a lot of time in his office, and on the phone, and also on the road. He was so geared to making money that he seemed to have forgotten how

to enjoy it. She rode home slowly, a little depressed because she'd had to work so hard just to get King to agree to come to her party. And still haunting her was that unpleasant speculation about a future without King.

Her father was just on his way out the door when she walked up from the stables. The house was stucco, a big sprawling yellow ranch house. It had a small formal garden off the patio, a swimming pool behind, a garage where Tiffany's red Jaguar convertible and her father's gray Mercedes-Benz dwelled, and towering live oak and pecan trees all around. The Guadalupe River was close, but not too close, and Texas stretched like a yellow-green bolt of cloth in all directions to an open, spacious horizon.

"There you are," Harrison Blair muttered. He was tall and gray-headed and green-eyed. Very elegant, despite his slight paunch and his habit of stooping because of a bad back. "I'm late for a board meeting. The caterer called about your party...something about the cheese straws not doing."

"I'll give Lettie a ring. She'll do them for her if I ask her nicely," she promised, grinning as she thought of the elderly lady who was her godmother. "King's coming to my party. I ran him to ground at the river."

He looked over his glasses at her, his heavily lined face vaguely reminiscent of an anorexic basset hound; not that she'd ever have said anything hurtful to her parent. She adored him. "You make him sound like a fox," he remarked. "Careful, girl, or you'll chase him into a hollow stump and lose him."

"Not me," she laughed, her whole face bright with young certainty. "You just wait. I'll be dangling a di-

among one of these days. He can't resist me. He just doesn't know it yet."

He only shook his head. She was so young. She hadn't learned yet that life had a way of giving with one hand, only to take back with the other. Oh, well, she had plenty of years to learn those hard lessons. Let her enjoy it while she could. He knew that King would never settle for a child-woman like his beautiful daughter, but it was something she was going to have to accept one of these days.

"I hope to be back by four," he said, reaching down to peck her affectionately on one cheek. "Are we having champagne? If we are, I hope you told the caterer. I'm not breaking out my private stock until you get married."

"Yes, we are, and yes, I told them," she assured him. "After all, I don't become twenty-one every day."

He studied her with quiet pride. "You look like your mother," he said. "She'd be as proud of you as I am."

She smiled faintly. "Yes." Her mother had been dead a long time, but the memories were bittersweet. The late Mrs. Blair had been vivacious and sparkling, a sapphire in a diamond setting. Her father had never remarried, and seemed not to be inclined toward the company of other women. He'd told Tiffany once that true love was a pretty rare commodity. He and her mother had been so blessed. He was content enough with his memories.

"How many people are we expecting, by the way?" he asked as he put on his Stetson.

"About forty," she said. "Not an overwhelming number. Just some of my friends and some of King's." She

grinned. "I'm making sure they're compatible before I railroad him to the altar."

He burst out laughing. She was incorrigible and definitely his child, with her keen business sense, he told himself.

"Do you reckon they'll have a lot in common?"

She pursed her pretty lips. "Money and cattle," she reminded him, "are always a good mix. Besides, King's friends are almost all politicians. They pride themselves on finding things in common with potential voters."

He winked. "Good thought."

She waved and went to call Lettie about doing the cheese straws and the caterers to finalize the arrangements. She was a good hostess, and she enjoyed parties. It was a challenge to find compatible people and put them together in a hospitable atmosphere. So far, she'd done well. Now it was time to show King how organized she was.

The flowers and the caterer had just arrived when she went down the long hall to her room to dress. She was nibbling at a chicken wing on the way up, hoping that she wouldn't starve. There was going to be an hors d'oeuvres table and a drinks bar, but no sit-down dinner. She'd decided that she'd rather dance than eat, and she'd hired a competent local band to play. They were in the ballroom now, tuning up, while Cass, the housekeeper, was watching some of the ranch's lean, faintly disgusted cowboys set up chairs and clear back the furniture. They hated being used as inside labor and their accusing glances let her know it. But she grinned and they melted. Most of them were older hands who'd

been with her father since she was a little girl. Like her father, they'd spoiled her, too.

She darted up the staircase, wild with excitement about the evening ahead. King didn't come to the house often, only when her father wanted to talk business away from work, or occasionally for drinks with some of her father's acquaintances. To have him come to a party was new and stimulating. Especially if it ended the way she planned. She had her sights well and truly set on the big rancher. Now she had to take aim.