

Chapter 1

Driving the candy-apple red Porsche onto McCain property was tantamount to waving a red flag before a bull, but Tara had come too far to turn back now. She stopped in front of the imposing iron gates and commanded herself to remain calm. Her palms were already damp and her pulse was accelerating with alarming speed. Just the thought of being near Rand again made her heart pound and her breathing labored. She couldn't allow him to affect her this way. If she didn't remain immune to him, she'd have no hope of winning a battle of wills.

Mustering her self-control, she tooted the horn and then breathed a small sigh of relief when a stranger came from the gate house. Luckily, he was a new employee and wouldn't recognize her. Chalk one up in her favor.

As she rolled down her window the warm Oklahoma breeze wafted in, assaulting her senses and bringing back poignant memories. She really loved this ranch and leaving it had been the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life. Coming back was the second hardest.

There was no time for reminiscing, she admonished herself sternly, then forced a smile that was bright and cheerful.

"Hello," she greeted the thin young man who approached the car. Her soft southern accent held a captivating sweetness and brought a slight blush to his rather gaunt features.

"I'm Tara McCain, and I've come to visit my family. I wanted to surprise them, but I'll need your help."

The man tipped his hat respectfully and gave her a guarded smile. She knew her only hope of gaining entrance to the ranch was dependent on deceiving this boy, yet she hated lying to anyone. Still, if he insisted on checking with Rand, there would be no gates opened to her.

"I have my electronic control for the gate, but I don't know if the code's been changed. I've been out of state for the past year, and I haven't had any need to check it," she explained as she showed him the device.

When he remained hesitant, she flashed him another smile and punched in the old code she'd originally installed.

The huge iron gates began to slowly slide apart, and Tara heaved a mental sigh of relief. Now the watchman easily returned her smile. The remote and code had assured her clearance.

"You must be good with numbers if you remember the code after all that time," he declared, his expression admiring.

Tara gave him the full benefit of her wide-eyed gaze and tried to conceal her impatience. She desperately wanted to pass through the gates, but she didn't want to arouse his suspicion.

"I'm one of those odd creatures who loves numbers, computers, and programming," she told him truthfully, knowing that few people were willing to accept the fact that she had brains as well as beauty. At times the beauty could be a detriment, but she'd never regretted her mental abilities. "I helped Rand implement the security system here at the ranch."

When the impressionable young man's eyes widened in awe, Tara feared that she'd given herself away. She prayed that this new staff member didn't know Rand's estranged wife was responsible for the computerized security.

"Wow!" he exclaimed in genuine enthusiasm. "I've studied the system and worked with it for a while. It's one of the best I've ever seen."

Her soft laughter was sweetened by genuine delight. "Thank you. I take it you're in charge of the system now."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded, suddenly remembering his manners. "My name's Donnie Lee Pruitt. I'm working for Mr. McCain until I go to college in the fall. I've already been accepted at Computon in Oklahoma City. It's one of the finest computer schools in the country."

"I know," she replied warmly. "You must be very pleased. Computon's become so popular that they had to limit enrollment. I studied there myself, and I loved every minute of it."

"You did! No kidding? Have you just graduated?"

Tara couldn't help but enjoy his enthusiasm. Her smile widened and she teased. "I'm a little older than most of their students. I studied there several years ago and do some teaching for them, but mostly I just freelance."

"Freelance?" he questioned and then his eyes grew still wider. Suddenly he was studying her with great intensity. She would have been uncomfortable if she hadn't known what was going through his mind.

"You're the T.L. McCain who writes for *Computer News*? You're considered one of the best trouble-shooters to ever touch a keyboard!"

This boy was definitely good for her ego, she thought. "The name's Tara Leigh McCain. My mother is a hopeless romantic. I write and work under the initials T.L. because a lot of men still resist taking business advice from a woman."

Donnie Pruitt seemed struck speechless, and her amusement increased. She was used to being respected and appreciated in her own environment, but she certainly hadn't expected to find anyone on Rand's ranch who cared one iota about her reputation.

"Wow!" was all the young man could manage to say.

"Thank you," Tara replied with heartfelt gratitude. Her self-esteem needed a strong boost before she faced Rand. "Perhaps we'll get the chance to work together sometime."

"That would be super! I mean, anytime you wanted . . . well, just anytime you have a free minute. I'd love to learn more about the system here. I've been trying to help Mr. McCain retrieve his business files for the ranch, but that last secretary sure fouled things up."

"So I've heard," she murmured, shifting her gaze toward the gates. That bit of information had finally given her the courage to come home. "I'm hoping I can help." She was praying Rand would let her.

"Of course," Donnie exclaimed. "I should have guessed. If anybody can crack that crazy code, you can."

Tara's smile was growing more stiff and forced. Her impatience to approach the house increased with each passing second. Tension gnawed at her insides even though she'd become an expert at hiding her feelings. "I really should go in now," she said, praying he wouldn't insist on calling ahead to alert the family.

"Gee, I'm sorry for keeping you so long," Donnie apologized while stepping back

from the car. "But it sure has been a pleasure to meet you."

"You, too, Donnie."

Tara gave him a parting smile and rolled up her window, shifted gears, then turned the air-conditioning on full blast.

She was on McCain property and fought to remain cool, calm, and in control. The only way she could accomplish her objective was to appear self-contained and in command of her emotions. Rand didn't suffer fools, and she didn't want to give him even the slightest advantage. Mentally prepared to do battle with him, she dared not let him realize how terribly insecure his world made her feel. He must never learn that she still became hot and flustered at the very thought of him.

Her heart seemed to lodge in her throat as she drove the last half mile to the sprawling, hacienda-style ranch house. She'd shared Rand's beautiful home for two of the most emotionally stressful years of her life and it wasn't easy to return.

Her sophisticated façade threatened to crumble, as memories overwhelmed her. She'd failed Rand miserably as a wife. They'd been veritable strangers when they'd married and they'd become lovers, but they'd never had time to become friends. They'd never shared their hopes, dreams, and fears.

They'd never been close enough to share their insecurities. She'd been hopelessly in love with him, but knew he'd never suspected the depth of her feelings. He hadn't loved her and hadn't believed she loved him. After more than a year of separation his image was still vivid in her mind. She forced herself to banish thoughts of him and concentrate on her main objective, Mindi.

Tara couldn't believe her eyes or her incredible luck as she pulled to a stop in front of the house. Her nerves were already strung taut, but the sight of the diminutive three-year-old made her tremble with excitement. Mindi was alone on the shaded front porch. Taking a deep breath, Tara swung her silk-clad body from her car and quickly moved toward the porch steps.

She headed straight for her daughter, but she was intercepted by a huge, low-growling German Shepherd. The guard dog rose from his seemingly relaxed position and watched her with unblinking intensity, continuing to growl in warning.

She tensed, and then smiled derisively. Why had she imagined Mindi would be completely alone and unprotected? The house had always been well-guarded. Rand's only child and heir to the McCain fortune would never be without watchful eyes.

"Is that you, Rex?" she offered softly, putting out a hand for the big dog to smell. "You were just a baby the last time I saw you. You certainly have grown big and tough looking," she continued to murmur softly, awaiting the dog's acceptance.

Rex's tail began to wag, and he cautiously sniffed her hand with a wet nose. Tara doubted he remembered her, but he'd obviously decided to trust her anyway. She imagined he'd tolerate her as long as she didn't make any move to touch Mindi. Rand's dogs were well trained. They were gentle and friendly, but prepared to respond to the slightest threat.

"Do you know Wex?" asked a childish voice. Despite the rolling of her "r," Mindi sounded formally polite and very adult. To a mother who had lived on photos for more than a year, the voice was music to the ears.

"I knew Rex when he was just a long-legged puppy," she replied lightly while her gaze devoured her daughter. The mop of dark sable curls was long and thick and a bit

wild, but healthy and shining. The wide hazel eyes were a mirror image of her own. Tara's throat tightened, her heart aching with emotion.

Her daughter had no memory of her. A year was a long time in a young child's life. How could she have been such a coward for so long? How could she ever hope for forgiveness?

"Do you know my daddy Wand?" Mindi's inquiry was made with a slight lift of her right eyebrow. The gesture was so like her father's that Tara felt an unwelcome fluttering in her stomach.

"Yes," Tara breathed lightly while trying to come to terms with a wealth of conflicting emotions.

"Does my daddy Wand know you?" was Mindi's next question. Tara smiled at the way she combined both of her father's names.

"Yes, your daddy knows me," she conceded, quelling the urge to reach out and grab her. Her arms ached to hold her baby and ease some of the incredible loneliness she'd experienced during their interminable separation.

Mindi had been a toddler when she'd first left Rand and taken her to Georgia. They'd lived with Tara's parents for nearly a year with sporadic visits to Oklahoma. It hadn't been a good way to raise a child. Finally, Rand had decided that Mindi's emotional well-being was at stake. He'd demanded that she move back home with his family.

At the time, Tara had known it was in Mindi's best interest to live with her dad, but she'd never learned to cope with the guilt and the hopeless longing.

After a thorough perusal, Mindi silently accepted Tara's presence and invited her to play. "We're having a tea party," she explained, moving to a small table surrounded by chairs and a variety of dolls. One particular baby was easily recognizable. Tara had sent it to Mindi last Christmas. She felt a thrill of pleasure that the doll had become a playmate.

"Would you like some tea?" Mindi offered as her short, pudgy fingers carefully handled the teapot and miniature cups.

"That would be lovely," she said, smoothing the skirt of her dress and easing herself down on the step next to the dog. She watched as Mindi served her guests, including Rex, like a perfect little hostess.

A smile tugged at her lips as Mindi cautiously carried Rex's teacup across the porch. Her tongue poked between her lips as she seriously concentrated on reaching the dog without spilling the contents. Tara wondered at the countless times she'd caught herself holding her tongue just so, and the ache in her heart intensified.

Mindi sighed with self-satisfaction as she accomplished her task. She'd placed the tiny cup between Rex's massive paws, and he obligingly lapped up all his "tea."

"What's your name?" Mindi asked, her attention redirected to her newest guest. A lump lodged in her throat. "You can call me Tara, if you like," she suggested huskily.

"Miss Tara?" queried Mindi.

"Ms. Tara would be fine."

The dark curls bobbed in agreement. "Gewaldine says all ladies should be called Miss or Mrs."

Tara smiled at the mention of Geraldine Jackson. The elderly house-keeper was a dear. Rand's beloved nanny was nearing seventy, but wouldn't accept retirement without several years worth of arguments. "Is Geraldine home this evening?" she asked.

"She's fixin' supper," retorted Mindi while pouring more water from her pot. "Cream

and sugar?" she asked politely.

Remembering the addition of sand and chalky-white liquid to Rex's cup, Tara decided against any extras. "I think I'll drink mine straight."

Mindi nodded in approval. "My daddy likes his stwaight," she explained. "Gwan just takes cweam."

The breath got trapped in her lungs. Her pulse accelerated as Mindi came close enough to offer a teacup. She realized, fleetingly, that everything she held precious in life was within arm's reach. Her own hands were a bit unsteady as she accepted the cup and saucer. Mindi waited expectantly, her big, heavily lashed eyes intent.

Tara lifted the cup to her lips and pretended to sip the brew. Then she smiled at her watchful hostess. "Just right."

A smile is worth a thousand words. The age old phrase came to her mind as Mindi's smile beamed with pride. She was so sweet that Tara wanted to steal her away and spend the rest of her life making up for the many months they'd been parted.

Mindi moved back toward the table full of dolls and made sure each of them was cared for. Tara watched the small replica of herself and remembered the hours she'd spent in her own little world of make-believe. Being an only child made one dependent on the imagination. She desperately wanted to share Mindi's world, but she knew she had a long, hard battle ahead of her.

"More tea?"

"No thank you, Miss Mindi," she replied softly, her smile widening when her daughter giggled in delight.

Then the peaceful game was disrupted by the roaring of a truck engine as it raced around the house from the direction of the barns. Tara went rigid with tension as it screeched to a halt beside her Porsche. She didn't need Mindi's squeal of excitement to identify the driver. Rand McCain wasn't a man one ever forgot.

"My daddy's home!" Mindi cheered as she bounced up and down, clapping her hands. "Daddy's home!"

The truck door slammed violently, and Tara rose to her feet, nervously smoothing the hem of her skirt. She'd worn the blue silk because it made her feel casually elegant. The style complemented her figure, and she knew Rand was partial to blue. She also knew she would need any slight advantage she could get. He was furious, just as she'd known he would be.

Rand's long, angry strides quickly covered the distance to the porch. His hat was carelessly jammed on his head and his shirt flapped open, revealing a broad, bronzed chest that was powerfully muscled. He was as big, handsome, and devastatingly male as she remembered. The fiery green of his gaze lashed her with contempt, giving her control a painful beating.

The instant Rand was within reach of the porch, Mindi launched her small body toward him and dove from the steps, never doubting that strong arms would be there to catch her. He scooped up his daughter, returning her fierce hug, but never shifting his blistering gaze from Tara.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he ground out harshly. "How did you get past the gate?"

The violence of his tone startled the child in his arms. Her eyes widened in shock, her gaze going from one to the other.

"Rand!" Tara's soft exclamation of distress begged him not to upset Mindi or make her wary.

Two identical sets of hazel eyes beseeched him, and Rand's jaw clenched. Tara knew he had no desire to spare her feelings, but he obviously didn't want to upset Mindi.

The screen door opened and all attention turned to Dorothy McCain, Rand's mother, a tall, angular woman with soft green eyes and snow white hair. She was thinner than Tara had ever seen her, but just as attractive and almost as intimidating as her son.

"It's time for Mindi to get cleaned up for dinner," she stated quietly. She was aware of the explosive tension between her son and daughter-in-law and wanted to keep the child out of the conflict. Tara wondered how long Dot had been standing at the door watching over Mindi.

Rand moved closer, and Tara shifted out of his way while he settled Mindi on the porch near his mother. Dot smiled reassuringly and then offered her estranged daughter-in-law a tentative smile.

"Geraldine says dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

"Good-bye, Ms. Tara," Mindi said softly as she followed her grandmother indoors.

Tara didn't respond. Rand was too close, and she wondered if he'd always towered over her to such an extent. His presence seemed to steal away her breath and a multitude of conflicting emotions churned within her.

"Ms. Tara," repeated Rand, his gaze icily condemning,

"Would you prefer that I have her call me Mommy?" Tara dared with more bravado than was wise. She didn't want to further infuriate him, but she couldn't allow him to see how devastated she was by his presence. He had an unnerving power over her that she was determined to vanquish. She'd hoped the months of separation would kill any lingering fascination for him, yet the physical impact he had on her senses was swiftly destroying that thin hope.

Rand visibly battled for control and Tara wondered if he was tempted to strangle her with his bare hands. If she were a man, she'd never have dared to trespass on his property in the first place.

"I asked you why the hell you're here!" he snarled, his hands balled into tight fists while his broad chest heaved from the intensity of his temper.

Tara mustered her courage and stated her purpose. "I want to spend some time with Mindi."

"The hell you do!" he exploded, moving a step closer to her. "I told you if you didn't come home with us a year ago that I never wanted to lay eyes on you again. You knew then that you'd never be welcome in my home."

"I haven't forgotten," she replied steadily, refusing to shift her gaze from the hot intensity of his. Every scathing word he'd ever said to her was indelibly printed in her memory. "I've stayed out of your hair for a long time, but no longer. I want to get to know her again."

"Don't tell me it's latent maternal instincts," he insulted. "I won't buy it. It sure as hell couldn't be your conscience, either, and you're not stupid enough to hope for a divorce. What is it? I want the truth."

Head high, spine stiff, Tara returned his regard with as little expression as possible. She dared not let him see how his contempt threatened her composure. She'd been anticipating this confrontation for months, and knew she couldn't let him realize how his

anger unnerved her. The very last thing she could allow was a flare up of her own temper.

"I've told you the truth. I want to spend time with Mindi." She could never tell him the whole truth about the last twelve months. It would destroy all hope of ever getting to know her daughter. "I may be horribly delinquent in expressing that desire, but it's no less sincere," she added.

"Delinquent!" Rand raged. "You call desertion and a year of absence delinquent?"

His accusation of desertion was a deliberate attempt to make her furious, but she refused to lose her temper. She kept reminding herself that she hadn't been responsible for the emergency that prompted her move to Georgia. She hadn't willingly deserted anyone.

It was his fault that she hadn't come home sooner. Once he'd reclaimed Mindi, he'd made it clear that he didn't want his wife. Her phone calls and letters had been ignored. His attitude had hurt and humiliated her, but she wasn't going to let him see how much.

"I've changed," she forced herself to admit, knowing it would initiate more of his scathing disbelief. "My priorities have changed considerably in the past year."

Rand's bark of laughter was unpleasant. His eyes bored into hers as he challenged her quiet declaration. "Suppose we dispense with games. I know you're not impressed by my wealth, nor by me personally. You never cared for ranch life and that's not likely to have changed since you've enjoyed the freedom of the city. You were never much of a mother to Mindi, so why do you expect me to believe you care about her now?"

Tara fumed at his arrogance and his total disregard for all the facts. He'd agreed that she should help her father after his debilitating stroke. Now Rand made it sound as though she'd jumped at an excuse to leave him and the ranch.

"Are you in some kind of trouble? Are you running away again and hoping for protection here? Has some erstwhile lover gotten too possessive and started to pressure you? Has your fascination with corporate power finally palled?" he lashed out.

His angry words recalled more pain than Tara was prepared to handle, so she tried to concentrate on her major concern.

"I'm not running away, and my only motive is Mindi. That's the truth whether you choose to believe it or not."

She was so cool, so damnably calm. The control was an aspect of her personality that Rand had never experienced. In the days that she'd lived with him, she'd been more prone to emotional outbursts and immature fits of temper. He found himself wanting to shatter that control and make her just as furious as he was.

"You may have changed some, but I haven't. When I said you'd never be welcome here, I meant it. You forfeited any right to know your daughter when you deserted her. She's never needed any mother except mine, and she doesn't need an irresponsible role model like you. I'm not going to let her get to know you just so she can be shattered the next time you decide to take flight."

His words were partly true and they hurt, but Tara didn't let the pain show. She was becoming increasingly disturbed by his proximity, yet she fought the sensual threat to her composure. Nothing was more important than Mindi.

Her lips were tightly closed to avoid any betraying tremor and the directness of her gaze challenged him. She dared Rand to find a weakness in her armor and it infuriated him, yet Tara had no alternative. If he had an inkling of her true feelings, he'd make mincemeat of her.

"I've met with a lawyer to check about visitation rights, but since we're not divorced or legally separated, that wasn't a very promising option. I came here to discuss the matter. If you refuse to listen, I'm prepared to fight you through the courts."

She was threatening him. They both knew that nobody got away with threatening him, but she wasn't afraid to try. And she wasn't bluffing. The seriousness of her threat was apparent in her tone, her rigid composure, and her cool, steady gaze.

"There's no court in Oklahoma that would grant you custody after you deserted your baby," Rand returned in a voice gone low and dangerous. "No court is going to take my daughter from me."

The dark threat in his gaze sent tiny shivers of apprehension through Tara, yet she maintained her composure. Rand might be almighty in this territory, but he also knew she had the money, power, and influence to fight him long and hard.

"I don't want a court fight any more than you do," she declared in a steady tone, "but I want to know my daughter and I want her to have the chance to know me. Your mother and Geraldine aren't getting any younger. They might not always be here for Mindi. I'm not insisting that she be told the truth right now, but I want to be a friend she can depend on."

Tara knew he would scoff at the idea of her being dependable. She was leaving herself wide open for more insults, but she wanted to make herself perfectly clear from the very beginning. This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision on her part, and she intended to make him believe that eventually.

"Mindi will always have me," he growled in response, his emerald-green eyes searing her with unspoken insults. "She doesn't need a part-time friend who doesn't know the meaning of loyalty and dependability."

There was no quick, easy way to convince him that she was loyal and trustworthy. There was no easy way to prove her sincerity, and she couldn't erase the past. What she had to do was convince him that she was serious and that she wouldn't be brushed aside by his anger and resentment.

"I *am* going to spend some time with my daughter, Rand, even though you're going to hate the idea and resent every minute I have with her. I've stayed away more than a year, but I'm not going to stay out of her life forever. You can either accept that fact or you can hire a lawyer to fight me. I'd rather we came to an amiable agreement, but I won't be intimidated or discouraged. I'm not going to run away and hide this time."

The tension that pulsed between them was heightened by the sudden, deadly silence. Only the sound of their labored breathing could be heard as he moved disturbingly close to her. Their gazes locked in a war of wills. Rand radiated a primitive power that was awesome, and Tara's legs trembled. The trembling traversed her body, but she didn't back down or reveal her chaotic reactions to him.

"You deserted her," he ground out harshly.

"I left her in your care," Tara countered, annoyed when her voice sounded slightly breathless. "Dot was always a more adequate mother than I was."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Mine," she admitted with a return of spirit. "I'm not denying the fact or pretending it doesn't matter. I'm merely insisting that I be allowed to spend some quality time with her now. We'll both lose if we take our fight to court."

"Damn you," he uttered with a vehemence that reverberated over and between them.

One of his big hands came up to grasp Tara's chin in a firm, but painless grip.

"Damn your arrogance, your incredible nerve and this sudden lapse into maternal caring. I won't let you hurt Mindi. I'll fight you in court and any other way you decide to challenge my guardianship. Mindi will be graduating from college before she's allowed to spend any time with you."

"And how will you explain your actions to that college graduate?" Tara wondered aloud, fighting both the man and the intense aching his touch created within her. "How will Mindi feel in a few years when she learns that you've denied her the knowledge of her mother?"

Rand's eyes blazed. The monumental control he was exhibiting was costing him dearly. He hated Tara for challenging him, yet he couldn't deny the fact that Mindi was as much her child as his. He didn't want to share the rights of parenthood with a woman he'd ordered out of his life, yet he was intelligent enough to realize the law would uphold her rights.

He was further infuriated by her insinuation that he was depriving Mindi. "I'll deal with the psychological effects your desertion might cause if and when Mindi expresses an interest."

"And the affects of deliberately keeping us apart?" Tara dared. She badly wanted to pull her face from his grasp, yet she was afraid the action might betray weakness.

"My responsibility," snapped Rand. "I can take care of all her needs. You can get in your little car and get off my property."

"You're going to have to throw me off," Tara whispered. Her words and unflinching gaze challenged him. His face was close enough to feel the heat of his breath. She could feel the fine tremor of anger coursing through him and knew he badly wanted to throw her off his land. Still, she taunted him with unprecedented boldness.

Rand was a man of action. He was used to having his orders obeyed and accustomed to being in full control of most situations. They both knew he could have her escorted off the property without lifting a hand to help. She waited with bated breath to see how he chose to handle her intrusion in his life.

They were so thoroughly engrossed in each other that neither heard the screen door reopen. The sound of Mindi's voice startled them. Rand dropped his hand from Tara's chin and they turned to their daughter.

"Gewaldine says supper's weady. She set a plate for Ms. Tara and said not to keep her waiting."

Tara paled. She wanted time with Mindi, but she didn't know if she was prepared to dine with the family. A little of Rand's fury went a long way. She needed a respite.

"Ms. Tara is leaving," Rand told Mindi as he swept her possessively into his arms.

Dot was the next to speak, having followed Mindi to the door. "Tara's come a long way. She should have something to eat before heading back to town."

Rand glared at his mother while Tara offered a stiff smile in appreciation.

"That's right, Daddy," Mindi added while framing Rand's face with her small hands. "We have to be hospitable," she reminded, quite proud of her manners.

Tara smiled more easily and relaxed a little.

"You'll stay, won't you, Tara?" Dot asked, ignoring her son's anger.

Tara gave Rand a quick glance. Then her eyes focused on Mindi and her smile deepened. "I'd like that very much."