

#1 *New York Times* and *USA TODAY*
Bestselling Author

DEBBIE MACOMBER

HEART *of* TEXAS ★ VOL. 2



CAROLINE'S CHILD
& DR. TEXAS

LET DEBBIE MACOMBER TAKE YOU INTO THE HEART OF TEXAS

Welcome back to Promise, Texas, a ranching community deep in the Hill Country. It's a good place to live and raise a family—and a good place to visit. Yes, there's a secret or two hidden beneath Promise's everyday exterior, but what town doesn't have its secrets?

CAROLINE'S CHILD

Who's the father of Caroline Daniels's child? Everyone in town wants to know, but no one's ever asked—or ever will. The people of Promise are protective of Caroline and five-year-old Maggie. They care. Especially rancher Grady Weston, who's beginning to realize he cares...

DR. TEXAS

They call her Dr. Texas. She's Jane Dickinson, a newly graduated physician from California who's working at the Promise clinic—but just for a couple of years. They call him Mr. Grouch. Cal Patterson was left at the altar by his out-of-state fiancée, and he's not over it yet. Too bad Jane reminds him so much of the woman he's trying to forget!

“Debbie Macomber brings the people of Promise, Texas,
to life as she blends drama, romance and adventure
in *Caroline's Child*.”
—RT Book Reviews

“I've never met a Macomber book I didn't love!”
—Linda Lael Miller

“Romance readers everywhere
cherish the books of Debbie Macomber.”
—Susan Elizabeth Philips

“Debbie Macomber writes stories as grand as Texas itself.”
—Pamela Morsi

“Debbie Macomber's name on a book is a guarantee of delightful, warmhearted romance.”
—Jayne Ann Krentz

“Popular romance writer Macomber has a gift for evoking the emotions that are at the heart of the
genre's popularity.”
—Publishers Weekly

“With first-class author Debbie Macomber it's quite simple—she
gives readers an exceptional, unforgettable story every time
and her books are always, always keepers!”
—ReaderToReader.com

Dear Friends,

I hope you're enjoying the Heart of Texas series. Although I wrote these books years ago, I continue to receive reader mail regarding this series. A lot of people were looking for one title or another and wrote to ask if I knew where they might find a copy. It was for this reason that my publisher decided to reissue these books.

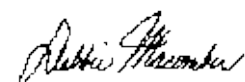
The Heart of Texas series helped inspire my current Cedar Cove series set in the Pacific Northwest. As with almost everything in life, writing is a learning and growing process. Heart of Texas was a giant step forward for me. It was this series that led to my first *New York Times* bestseller, *Promise, Texas*. But that's only one reason these books are special to me. I came to love this little town I'd created deep in the Texas Hill Country and the characters who live there. And I associate these stories with some wonderful visits to Texas.

Caroline's Child and *Dr. Texas* are the middle books in the series, which also includes *Lonesome Cowboy* and *Texas Two-Step (Volume One)* as well as *Nell's Cowboy* and *Lone Star Baby (Volume 3)*. *Promise, Texas* and *Return to Promise* are the final two titles. (*Return to Promise* is available in the collection entitled *Small Town Christmas*.)

As you might have gathered, I enjoy hearing from my readers; I read every word you write and value your comments. You can reach me through my website at www.DebbieMacomber.com or at P.O. Box 1458, Port Orchard, WA 98366.

Now, find a comfortable chair and spend a few hours with the people of *Promise, Texas*. I'm sure you'll hear a few whispers about the ghost town of Bitter End while you're there....

Have a good visit!



DEBBIE MACOMBER

HEART / TEXAS ★ VOL. 2



CAROLINE'S CHILD

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE PEOPLE OF PROMISE

Nell Bishop: thirtysomething widow with a son, Jeremy, and a daughter, Emma; her husband died in a tractor accident

Ruth Bishop: Nell's mother-in-law; lives with Nell and her two children

Dovie Boyd: runs an antiques shop and has dated Sheriff Frank Hennessey for ten years

Caroline Daniels: postmistress of Promise

Maggie Daniels: Caroline's five-year-old daughter

Dr. Jane Dickinson: new doctor in Promise

Ellie Frasier: owner of Frasier's Feed Store

Frank Hennessey: local sheriff

Max Jordan: owner of Jordan's Town and Country

Wade McMillen: preacher at Promise Christian Church

Edwina and Lily Moorhouse: sisters; retired schoolteachers

Cal and Glen Patterson: local ranchers; brothers who ranch together

Phil and Mary Patterson: parents of Cal and Glen; operate a local B and B

Louise Powell: town gossip

Wiley Rogers: sixty-year-old ranch foreman at the Weston Ranch

Laredo Smith: wrangler hired by Savannah Weston

Barbara and Melvin Weston: mother and father to Savannah, Grady and Richard; the Westons died six years ago

Richard Weston: youngest of the Weston siblings

Savannah Weston: Grady and Richard's sister; cultivates old roses

Grady Weston: rancher and oldest of the Weston siblings

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CLUTCHING THE MAIL IN ONE HAND, Grady Weston paced the narrow corridor inside the post office. He glanced distractedly at the row of mailboxes, gathering his courage before he approached Caroline Daniels, the postmistress.

His tongue felt as if it'd wrapped itself around his front teeth, and he was beginning to doubt he'd be able to utter a single sensible word. It shouldn't be so damned difficult to let a woman know he found her attractive!

"Grady?" Caroline's voice reached out to him.

He spun around, not seeing her. Great. Not only was he dreaming about her, now he was hearing her voice.

"Open your box," she instructed.

He fumbled for the key and twisted open the small rectangular door, then peered in. Sure enough, Caroline was there. Not all of her, just her brown eyes, her pert little nose and lovely mouth.

If he'd possessed his brother's gift for flattery, Grady would have said something clever. Made some flowery remark. Unfortunately all he managed was a gruff unfriendly sounding "Hello."

"Hi."

Caroline had beautiful eyes, dark and rich like freshly brewed coffee, which was about as poetic as Grady got. Large and limpid, they reminded him of a calf's, but he figured that might not be something a woman wanted to hear, even if *he* considered it a compliment. This was the problem, Grady decided. He didn't know how to talk to a woman. In fact, it'd been more than six years since he'd gone out on an actual date.

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked.

He wanted to invite her to lunch, and although that seemed a simple enough request, he couldn't make himself ask her. Probably because their relationship so far hadn't been too promising. Calling it a "relationship" wasn't really accurate, since they'd barely exchanged a civil word and had never so much as held hands. Mostly they snapped at each other, disagreed and argued—if they were speaking at all. True, they'd danced once; it'd been nice, but only when he could stop worrying about stepping on her toes.

Who was he kidding? Holding Caroline in his arms had been more than nice, it had been *wonderful*. In the month since, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about that one dance. Every night when he climbed into bed and closed his eyes, Caroline was there to greet him. He could still feel her softness against him, could almost smell the faint scent of her cologne. The dance had been ladies' choice, and that was enough to let him believe—hope—she might actually hold some regard for him, too. Despite their disagreements, *he'd* been the one she'd chosen to ask.

"You had lunch yet?" Grady asked, his voice brusque. He didn't mean to sound angry or unfriendly. The timbre of his voice and his abrupt way of speaking had caused him plenty of problems with Maggie, Caroline's five-year-old daughter. He'd been trying to get in the kid's good graces for months now, with only limited success. But he'd tried. He hoped Caroline and Maggie gave him credit for that.

Caroline's mouth broke into a wide grin. "Lunch? Not yet, and I'm starved."

Grady's spirits lifted considerably. "Well, then, I was thinking, seeing as I haven't eaten myself... The words stumbled all over themselves in his eagerness to get them out. "You want to join me?"

"Sure, but let me get this straight. Is this an invitation, as in a date?"

"No." His response was instinctive, given without thought. He'd been denying his feelings for her so long that his answer had come automatically. He feared, too, that she might misread his intentions. He was attracted to Caroline and he wanted to know her better, but beyond that—he wasn't sure. Hell, what he knew about love and marriage wouldn't fill a one-inch column of the *Promise Gazette*.

Some of the happiness faded from her smile. "Understood. Give me a few minutes and I'll meet you out front." She moved out of his range of vision.

Grady closed the box, but left his hand on the key. How could anyone with the skills to run a thriving cattle ranch in the Texas hill country be such a fool when it came to women?

He rapped on the post-office box hard enough to hurt his knuckles. "Caroline!" Then he realized he had to open the box. He did that, then stared through it and shouted for her a second time. "Caroline!"

Her face appeared, eyes snapping with impatience. "What's the rush?" she demanded. "I said it'd take me a few minutes."

The edges of the postbox cut into his forehead and chin and knocked his Stetson askew. "This *is* a date, all right?"

She stared back at him from the other side, and either she was overwhelmed by his offer to buy her lunch or surprised into speechlessness.

"All right?" he repeated. "This is a date."

She continued to look at him. "I shouldn't have asked," she finally said.

"I'm glad you did." And he was. He could think of no better way to set things straight. He hadn't invited her to lunch because he needed someone to pass the time with; if that was what he'd wanted, he could have asked his sister, Savannah, or her husband or Cal Patterson—or any number of people. No, he'd asked Caroline because he wanted to be with *her*. For once he longed to talk to her without interference or advice from his matchmaking sister. It didn't help to have Maggie there hiding her face in her mother's lap every time he walked into the room, either. This afternoon it'd be just the two of them. Caroline and him.

Grady respectfully removed his hat when she joined him in the lobby.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Caroline said.

"I was in town, anyway." He didn't mention that he'd rearranged his entire day for this opportunity. It was hard enough admitting that to himself, let alone Caroline.

"Where would you like to eat?" he asked. The town had three good restaurants: the café in the bowling alley; the Chili Pepper, a Texas barbecue place; and a Mexican restaurant run by the Chavez family.

"How about Mexican Lindo?" Caroline suggested.

It was the one he would have chosen himself. "Great."

Since the restaurant was on Fourth Avenue, only two blocks from the post office, they walked there chatting as they went. Or rather, Caroline chatted and he responded with grunts and murmurs.

Grady had long ago realized he lacked the ability to make small talk. Unlike his younger brother, Richard, who could charm his way into—or out of—anything. Grady tried not to feel inadequate, but he was distinctly relieved when they got to the restaurant.

In a few minutes they were seated at a table, served water and a bowl of tortilla chips along with a dish of extra-hot salsa. He reached for a chip, scooped up as much salsa as it would hold and popped it in his mouth. He ate another and then another before he noticed that Caroline hadn't touched a single

chip.

He raised his eyes to hers and stopped chewing, his mouth full.

Caroline apparently read the question in his eyes. "I don't eat corn chips," she explained. "I fill up on them and then I don't have room for anything else."

He swallowed and nodded. "Oh."

A moment of silence passed, and Grady wondered if her comment was a subtle hint that she was watching her weight. From what he understood, weight was a major preoccupation with women. Maybe she was waiting for him to tell her she shouldn't worry about it; maybe he was supposed to say she looked great. She did. She was slender and well proportioned, and she wore her dark brown hair straight and loose, falling to her shoulders. In his opinion she looked about as perfect as a woman could get. Someday he'd tell her that, but not just yet. Besides, he didn't want her to think he was only interested in her body, although it intrigued him plenty. He admired a great deal about her, especially the way she was raising Maggie on her own. She understood the meaning of the words *responsibility* and *sacrifice*, just like he did.

She was staring at him as if she expected a comment, and Grady realized he needed to say something. "You could be fat and I'd still have asked you to lunch."

Her smooth brow crumpled in a puzzled frown.

"I meant that as a compliment," he sputtered and decided then and there it was better to keep his trap shut. Thankfully the waitress came to take their order. Grady decided on chicken enchiladas; Caroline echoed his choice.

"This is really very nice," she said and reached for the tall glass of iced tea.

"I wanted us to have some time alone," he told her.

"Any particular reason?"

Grady rested his spine against the back of his chair and boldly met her look. "I like you, Caroline." He didn't know any way to be other than direct. This had gotten him into difficulties over the years. Earlier that spring he'd taken a dislike to Laredo Smith and hadn't been shy about letting his sister and everyone else know his feelings. But he'd been wrong in his assessment of the man's character. Smith's truck had broken down and Savannah had brought him home to the ranch. Over Grady's objections she'd hired him herself, and before long they'd fallen in love. It came as a shock to watch his sane sensible sister give her heart to a perfect stranger. Still, Grady wasn't proud of the way he'd behaved. By the time Laredo decided it'd be better for everyone concerned if he moved on, Grady had wanted him to stay. He'd gone so far as to offer the man a partnership in the ranch in an effort to change his mind. Not that it'd done any good. To Grady's eternal gratitude, Laredo had experienced a change of heart and returned a couple of months later. Love had driven him away, but it had also brought him back.

Savannah and Laredo had married in short order and were now involved in designing plans for their own home, plus raising quarter horses. Savannah, with her husband's active support, continued to grow the antique roses that were making her a name across the state.

In the weeks since becoming his brother-in-law, Laredo Smith had proved himself a damn good friend and Grady's right-hand man.

"I like you, too," Caroline said, but she lowered her gaze as she spoke, breaking eye contact. This seemed to be something of an admission for them both.

"You do?" Grady felt light-headed with joy. It was all he could do not to leap in the air and click his heels.

"We've known each other a lot of years."

“I’ve known you most of my life,” he agreed, but as he said the words, he realized he didn’t *really* know Caroline. Not the way he wanted, not the way he hoped he would one day. It wasn’t just that he had no idea who’d fathered Maggie; apparently no one else in town did, either. He wondered what had attracted her to this man, why she hadn’t married him. Or why he’d left her to deal with the pregnancy and birth alone. It all remained a mystery. Another thing Grady didn’t understand about Caroline was the changes in her since her daughter’s birth. In time Grady believed she’d trust him enough to answer his questions, and he prayed he’d say and do the right thing when she did.

Their lunches arrived and they ate, stopping to chat now and then. The conversation didn’t pall, but again he had to credit Caroline with the skill to keep it going. Half an hour later, as he escorted her back to the post office, Grady was walking on air.

“I’ll give you a call tomorrow,” he said, watching her for some sign of encouragement. “If you want,” he added, needing her reassurance.

“Sure.”

Her response was neither encouraging nor discouraging.

“I’d like to talk to Maggie again, if she’ll let me.”

“You might try this afternoon, since she’s spending the day with Savannah.”

This was news to Grady, but he’d been busy that morning and had left the house early. He hadn’t spoken to Savannah other than a few words over breakfast, and even if he’d known Maggie was staying with his sister, he wouldn’t have had time to chat with the girl that morning.

“I’ll make a point of saying hello,” he said. His heart lifted when it suddenly struck him that he’d be seeing Caroline again later in the day, when she came to pick up Maggie.

They parted. Whistling, Grady sauntered across the asphalt parking lot toward his truck. He felt damn good. The afternoon had gone better than he’d hoped.

He was about to open the cab door when Max Jordan stopped him.

“Grady, have you got a moment?” The older man, owner of the local Western-wear store, quickened his pace.

“Howdy, Max.” Grady grinned from ear to ear and didn’t let the somber expression on Max’s face get him down. “What can I do for you?”

Max shuffled his feet a couple of times, looking uncomfortable. “You know I hate to mention this second time, but Richard still hasn’t paid me for the clothes he bought three months ago.”

The happy excitement Grady had experienced only moments earlier died a quick death. “It was my understanding Richard mailed you a check.”

“He told me the same thing, but it’s been more than two weeks now and nothing’s come. I don’t feel I should have to wait any longer.”

“I don’t think you should, either. I’ll speak to him myself,” Grady promised.

“I hate to drag you into this,” Max muttered, and it was clear from his shaky voice how much the subject distressed him.

“Don’t worry about it, Max. I understand.”

The older man nodded and turned away. Grady climbed into his truck and clenched the steering wheel with both hands as the anger flooded through him. Leave it to his brother to lie and cheat and steal!

What infuriated Grady was that he had no one to blame but himself. He’d allowed Richard to continue living on the Yellow Rose. Allowed him to tarnish the family name. Allowed himself to believe, to hope, that the years away had changed his brother.

All his illusions had been shattered. They were destroyed like so much else Richard had touched.

He'd done his damndest to ruin Grady, and he'd come close. But Richard had succeeded in ruining his own life—his potential to be a different person, a worthwhile human being.

Charming and personable, a born leader, Richard could have accomplished great things. Instead, he'd used his charisma and personality to swindle others, never understanding that the person he'd cheated most had been himself.

Six years earlier Richard had forged Grady's signature and absconded with the cash their parents had left—cash that would have paid the inheritance taxes on the ranch and covered the burial expenses. Grady and Savannah had found themselves penniless following the tragedy that had claimed their parents' lives. It'd taken six long, backbreaking, frustration-filled years to crawl out of debt. Grady had sacrificed those years to hold on to the ranch while Richard had squandered the money. When it had run out, he'd returned home with his tail between his legs, looking for a place to stay until he received a severance check from his last job—or so he'd said.

Deep down Grady had wanted to believe in Richard. His sister had begged him to let their younger brother stay. But she didn't need to beg very hard or very long for him to relent. Unfortunately it had become apparent that a liar and a cheat didn't change overnight—or in six years. Grady's brother was the same now as the day he'd stolen from his family.

Despite the air conditioner, the heat inside the truck cab sucked away Grady's energy. It should have come as no surprise to discover that Richard had lied to him again. This time would be the last, Grady vowed.

Oh, yes, this episode was the proverbial last straw.

* * *

HIS DAYS IN PROMISE were numbered, Richard Weston thought as he sat on his bed in the bunkhouse. It wouldn't be long before Grady learned the truth. The whole uncomfortable truth. Actually he was surprised he'd managed to hold out this long; he credited that to his ability to lie effectively. But then, small-town folks were embarrassingly easy to dupe. They readily accepted his lies because they wanted to believe him. The years had finely honed his powers of persuasion, but he hadn't needed to work very hard convincing the business owners in Promise to trust him. Being born and raised in this very town had certainly helped. He nearly laughed out loud at how smoothly everything had gone.

Actually Richard did feel kind of bad about leaving a huge debt behind. Max Jordan was decent enough, even if he was an old fool. Billy from Billy D's was okay, too. One day—maybe—when he had money to spare, he'd consider paying everyone back. Grady and Savannah, too. That would shock his uptight brother.

It might all have worked if Richard could've persuaded Ellie Frasier to marry him. He experienced a twinge of regret. He must be losing his knack with women. Nothing could have shocked him more than Ellie's informing him she'd chosen Glen Patterson, instead.

Damn shame. Glen was a real hick, not all that different from Grady. Why Ellie would marry Glen when she could have had *him* was something he'd never understand. Women were fickle creatures, but until recently he'd been able to sway them to his way of thinking.

Not Ellie. How he would've loved to get his hands on her inheritance. That money would have gone a long way toward solving his problems. Well, it didn't do any good to cry over might-have-beens. He was a survivor and he'd prove it—not for the first time. Nothing kept Richard Weston down for long.

Calculating quickly, Richard figured he had only a few days before everything went all to hell. He

was ready. Grady seemed to think he idled away his days, but Richard had been working hard, preparing what he'd need. He'd been planning for this day almost from the moment he'd gotten back to Promise. Grady needn't worry; before long Richard would be out of his brother's hair.

Sure he had regrets. He'd thought about returning to Promise lots of times over the years, but he'd never suspected it would be for the reasons that had driven him here now.

When he'd first arrived on the ranch, he'd felt a faint stirring of emotion. It'd been a little less than six years since he'd set foot on the old homestead. Those feelings, however, hadn't lasted long and were completely dead now, especially since Grady had tossed him out of the house and forced him to sleep in the bunkhouse.

Richard couldn't grasp what it was that had kept his father and now his brother tied to a herd of four-footed headaches. He hated cattle, hated the way they smelled and bawled, the way they constantly needed care. Hated everything about them. This kind of life was never meant for him. Sad no one appreciated that he was different. Better, if he did say so himself. Not even his mother had fully recognized it. Unfortunately neither did Savannah. Now that she'd married Laredo, she was even less inclined to side with him.

Sad to say, his time on the Yellow Rose was drawing to a close.

"Richard?"

Maggie Daniels peeked into the bunkhouse. The kid had become something of a pest lately, but he always been popular with children. They weren't all that different from women, most of them, eager for his attention.

"Howdy, cupcake," he said, forcing enthusiasm into his voice. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Nothing. You want to play cards?"

"I can't now. How about later?" He leaned against the wall, clasping his hands behind his head.

"You said that last time." Her lower lip shot out.

Yup, kids were just like women; they pouted when they didn't get their way.

"Where's Savannah?" Richard asked, hoping to divert the kid's attention.

"In her garden."

"Didn't I hear her say something about baking cookies this afternoon?" He hadn't heard any such thing, but it'd get rid of the kid.

"She did?" Excitement tinged Maggie's voice.

"She told me so herself. Chocolate chip, my favorite. Why don't you ask her, and when you're finished you can bring me a sample. How does that sound?"

Maggie's eyes lit up and Richard laughed. He loved the fact that she preferred him over Grady. His big lug of a brother didn't know a damn thing about kids. It was comical watching him try to make friends with Maggie. She wouldn't have anything to do with him, and for once in his life Richard outshone his big brother.

"Come on, I'll go with you," he said, changing his mind. "We'll go talk to Savannah about those cookies."

"She's busy in her rose garden."

"But not too busy for us." Richard felt certain that was true. Savannah had a soft spot in her heart for the child and could refuse Maggie nothing. If he'd asked her on his own, chances were he wouldn't get to first base, but with Maggie holding his hand, Savannah was sure to capitulate.

For some reason Richard wanted one of those cookies. And he wanted it now.

He wasn't sure why—maybe just to pull Savannah's strings a bit. But Richard prided himself on getting what he wanted. Whenever he wanted it.

“YOU’RE FULL of surprises, Grady Weston,” Caroline muttered to herself as she drove down the highway toward the Yellow Rose. The afternoon had dragged even though she’d been busy. Despite the heavy flow of traffic in and out of the post office, Caroline had frequently glanced at her watch, counting down the hours and then the minutes until closing time. And until she saw Grady again...

His invitation to lunch had caught her by surprise. She’d all but given up hope that he’d ever figure it out. In the past six months she’d done everything short of sending him a fax to let him know she was interested. When it came to romance, Grady Weston was as blind as they come. Not that she was any better; it’d taken her years to work up enough courage to give love a second chance.

She’d dated occasionally but never found that combination of mutual attraction and respect with anyone except Grady. Unfortunately she wasn’t sure he recognized his own feelings, let alone hers. Twice now she’d decided to forget about him, and both times he’d given her reasons to believe it might work for them. Like showing up this afternoon and taking her to lunch.

She sped up, hoping their lunch date really *was* a beginning. She wanted a relationship with Grady, a romance—maybe even marriage eventually. Oh, my, but she did like him. He was honest, loyal, hardworking. She admired the way he’d struggled to hold on to the ranch despite grief and crippling sacrifices. Year after year she’d watched him do whatever it took to keep the Yellow Rose, to keep what was important to him and Savannah.

Caroline and Savannah had always been close, but never more so than now. Caroline’s mother had died the year before, and it was Savannah who’d stood by her side and cried with her. Having buried her own mother, Savannah understood the grief that suffocated Caroline those first few months. It was also during that time that Maggie had grown so attached to Savannah, who’d become like a second mother to her. It pleased Caroline that her daughter loved Savannah as much as she did herself.

However, the five-year-old felt no such tenderness for Grady. Caroline sighed as her thoughts drifted to their rocky relationship. Grady’s loud voice had made the child skittish from the first, and then one afternoon when Maggie was feeling ill, she’d phoned Savannah. Grady had answered the phone with a brusque demand, and from that moment forward Maggie would have nothing to do with him.

It was a problem, and one that continued to bother Caroline. If a romantic relationship developed between her and Grady the way she wanted, the way she dreamed, then Maggie and Grady would need to make their peace. True, Grady regretted the incident and had tried to undo the damage, but the child was unrelenting in her dislike of him.

As she reached the long gravel driveway leading to the Yellow Rose, Caroline decreased her speed to make the turn. A few moments later the large two-storey ranch house came into view. Rocket, Grady’s old dog, lumbered stiffly down the porch steps to greet her, tail wagging.

Laredo was working in the corral while Savannah stood at the fence watching him put their prize stallion through his paces. Maggie was with Savannah, her feet braced against the bottom rail and her arms resting on top. When she heard the car, she leaped down and dashed toward her mother.

Maggie hurled herself into her arms as soon as Caroline stepped out of the car. “Me and Savannah baked cookies!” Her young voice rang with glee. “And Richard said he never tasted better. He ate five cookies before he could stop himself.” She slapped both hands over her mouth as though she’d blurted out a secret.

“How many did you eat?” Caroline wanted to know. It would be just like Richard to let the child spoil her dinner with cookies.

“Too many,” Savannah answered for her, giving Caroline an apologetic half smile.

“We’ll have a late dinner,” Caroline said, dismissing her friend’s worries. “I had a big lunch.” She was about to tell Savannah about her lunch date when Grady burst out of the barn.

“Have you seen Richard? Has he shown up yet? He’s got to be around here somewhere.” Grady’s face was distorted with rage.

Maggie edged closer to Caroline and wrapped her arm around her mother’s waist.

“Grady,” Savannah said in that low calming way of hers.

If Grady noticed Caroline, he gave no indication.

“Did I hear someone call for me?” Richard said, strolling out of the house as though he hadn’t a care in the world. He was a handsome man, lean and muscular, probably the most attractive man Caroline had ever known. But in Richard’s case the good looks were superficial. She’d watched as he skillfully manipulated and used others to his own advantage. Even Grady and Savannah. She was amazed that Grady had allowed him to continue living on the ranch—yet at the same time, she understood. Like Savannah, Grady wanted to believe that Richard had changed.

Grady whirled around at the sound of Richard’s voice. “We need to talk.” His voice boomed and Maggie hid her face against Caroline’s stomach.

“Max Jordan said he hasn’t been paid,” Grady shouted.

A shocked look stole over Richard. “You’re joking! He didn’t get the check? I put it in the mail two weeks ago.”

“He never got it because you didn’t mail it.”

“What do you mean?” Richard demanded.

The two men faced off, Grady’s anger spilling over in every word and Richard looking stunned and hard done by.

“Grady, please,” Savannah said, hurrying toward her older brother and gently placing a hand on his arm. “Now isn’t the time to be discussing this. Leave it until later.”

“She’s right,” Richard said. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we have company.”

It was obvious that Grady had been so consumed by his anger, he’d barely realized they weren’t alone. “Caroline,” he murmured, and his face revealed both regret and delight. He seemed uncertain about what to say next. “Hello.”

“How’s my cupcake?” Richard asked, smiling at Maggie.

The little girl loosened her grip on Caroline’s waist, turning to Richard as he spoke. He threw his arms open and she raced eagerly toward him.

“That’s my girl,” Richard said, catching Maggie and sweeping her high into the air. He whirled her around, the pair of them laughing as if it’d been days since they’d seen each other.

Savannah sidled closer to Caroline. “Grady’s been looking for Richard all afternoon,” she said in a quiet voice, “and he’s been conveniently missing until now.”

Caroline understood what her friend was saying. Richard had played his cards perfectly, appearing at the precise moment it’d be impossible for Grady to get a straight answer from him. Then he’d used Maggie’s childish adoration to make Grady look even more foolish.

“Maggie,” Caroline called.

Richard set the child back on her feet. Together the two of them joined Caroline and Savannah.

“I do believe Maggie has stolen my heart,” he said, his eyes bright with laughter.

“Does that mean you’ll marry me?” Maggie asked, grinning up at him.

“Sure thing.”

“Really?”

“He won’t marry you,” Caroline said, reaching for her daughter’s hand.

“Don’t be so certain,” Richard countered. He crouched down beside Maggie, but he was looking at Caroline.

“Hi, Maggie,” Grady said, choosing that moment to try again. The anger had faded from his face, but he still held himself rigid.

Caroline gave him credit for making the effort to win Maggie over.

Her daughter wasn’t easily swayed, however. She buried her face in Richard’s shoulder.

“There’s no need to be afraid of Grady,” Richard whispered to Maggie—a stage whisper that carried easily. Then he smiled in a way that suggested Grady was wasting his time. In other words, Grady didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of convincing Maggie he wasn’t an ogre. Richard’s meaning couldn’t have been clearer.

“I don’t like Grady,” Maggie announced, pursing her lips.

“Maggie!” Caroline admonished her.

“She’s right, you know,” Richard said, teeth flashing in a wide grin. “Grady just doesn’t get along with kids, not like I do.”

Caroline clamped her mouth shut rather than reveal her thoughts. She didn’t trust Richard, *couldn’t* trust him, not after the way he’d used his family. Used anyone who’d let him.

“I’m thinking Maggie needs someone like me in her life,” Richard said. “Which means there’s only one solution.”

“What’s that?” Caroline knew she was a fool to ask.

“You could always marry me,” he said and leaned over far enough to touch his lips to Caroline’s cheek. “Put me out of my misery, Caroline Daniels, and marry me.”

“Oh, Mommy, let’s do it!” Maggie shouted, clapping her hands. “Let’s marry Richard.”

GRADY WAS PLEASED THAT HIS SISTER HAD convinced Caroline and Maggie to stay for dinner. Now all he had to do was behave. It never seemed to fail—whenever he had a chance to make some headway with Maggie, he'd do something stupid. He wanted to blame Richard, but as usual he'd done it to himself.

His brother brought out the very worst in him. As Grady washed up for dinner, he hoped this evening would give him an opportunity to redeem himself in both Caroline and Maggie's eyes.

The table was already set and the food dished up in heaping portions. A platter of sliced roast beef rested in the middle, along with a huge bowl of mashed potatoes, a pitcher of gravy, fresh corn on the cob and a crisp green salad. There was also a basket filled with Savannah's mouthwatering buttermilk biscuits. His sister was one fine cook. He'd miss her when she moved into her own house with Laredo. But it was time, well past time, that she had a home and a life of her own. He knew from his talks with Laredo that they'd already started to think about adding to the family.

"Dinner looks wonderful," he said. Grady made an effort these days to let Savannah know how much he appreciated her. Over the years he'd taken her contributions for granted, discounting her efforts with her roses and her fledgling mail-order business—a business that now brought a significant income. He'd even made fun of her goats, which he considered pets rather than livestock. Now that she was married and about to establish her own home, Grady recognized just how much he was going to miss her.

Savannah flushed with pleasure at his praise.

The compliment had apparently earned him points with Caroline, too; she cast him an approving smile. Grady held in a sigh. He needed all the points he could get when it came to Caroline and Maggie. If everything went well, this evening might help him recapture lost ground with the child.

Everyone began to arrive for dinner. With the scent of the meal wafting through the house, it wasn't long before all the chairs were occupied—except for one. Richard's. It was just like his spoiled younger brother to keep everyone waiting.

"Where's Richard?" Maggie asked, glancing up at her mother.

Grady was asking himself the same question.

"He's coming, isn't he?" Maggie whined.

Even from where he stood Grady could sense the little girl's disappointment.

"I don't know, sweetheart," Caroline answered.

"There's no need to let our meal get cold," Grady said. If Richard chose to go without dinner, that was fine by him. If anything, he was grateful not to have his brother monopolizing the conversation, distracting both Caroline and Maggie. Grady pulled out his chair and sat down. Laredo, Savannah and Caroline did so, as well. The only one who remained standing was Maggie.

"What about Richard?" she asked in a small stubborn voice.

"I guess he isn't hungry," Caroline said and pulled out the chair next to her own for Maggie.

"He promised he'd sit next to me at dinner."

"It isn't a good idea to believe in the things Richard promises," Grady said as much for Caroline's ears as for her daughter's. He hated to disappoint the five-year-old, but it was God's own truth.

Richard was about as stable as beef prices. His loyalties constantly shifted toward whatever was most advantageous to him, with little concern for anyone else.

His playful marriage proposal to Caroline worried Grady. She'd laughed it off, but Grady found no humor in it. Apparently his brother knew Grady was interested in Caroline and thus considered her fair game. It would be typical of Richard to do what he could to thwart any romance between Caroline and Grady by making a play for her himself. Grady knew that made him sound paranoid, but he thought his fears were justified. Experience had been an excellent teacher.

He reached for the meat and forked a thick slice of roast beef onto his plate, then passed the platter to Caroline.

Maggie folded her arms and stared defiantly at Grady. "I'm not eating until Richard's here."

"Maggie, please," Caroline cajoled. She glanced at Grady, her eyes apologetic.

"Grady yelled at Richard."

Once again Grady was the culprit. "I shouldn't have yelled, should I?" He was careful to speak in a low quiet voice. "I do that sometimes without thinking, but I wasn't angry at you."

"You were mad at Richard."

No use lying about it. "Yes, I was."

"And now he won't come to dinner."

"I think Richard has other reasons for not showing up," Caroline explained as she placed a scoop of mashed potatoes on her daughter's plate. "Do you want one of Savannah's yummy buttermilk biscuits?"

Maggie hesitated for a long moment before she shook her head. "I won't eat without Richard."

"Did I hear someone call my name?" Richard asked cheerfully as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, not sounding the least apologetic. He pulled out his chair, sat down beside Maggie and reached for the meat platter all in a single graceful movement.

Caroline's child shot Grady a triumphant look as if to say she'd known all along that Richard hadn't lied to her.

Grady's appetite vanished. For every step he advanced in his effort to make friends with Maggie, he seemed to retreat two. Once more Richard had made him look like a fool in front of the little girl. And once more he'd allowed it to happen.

"Is it true you want to marry my mom?" Maggie asked Richard with such hopefulness that the question silenced all other conversation.

"Of course it's true." Richard chuckled, then winked at Caroline.

"I think you should," Maggie said, hanging on Richard's every word.

Grady didn't speak again during the entire meal. Not that anyone noticed. Adored by Maggie, Richard was in his element, and he became the center of attention, joking and teasing, complimenting Savannah, even exchanging a brief joke with Laredo.

Caroline was quiet for a time, but soon, Grady noted, Richard had won her over just as he had everyone else. Despite his disappointment, Grady marveled at his brother's talent. Richard had always savored attention, whereas Grady avoided the limelight. It had never bothered him before, but now he felt a growing resentment, certain Caroline was about to be caught by the force of Richard's spell. Other than Ellie Fraiser, Grady had never known any woman to resist his brother's charms. Ellie was the exception, and only because she was already in love with Glen Patterson, although neither of them had recognized the strength of their feelings for each other—until Richard interfered. Indirectly, and definitely without intending it, Richard had brought about something good. Still, if it hadn't been for Glen in Ellie's life, Grady wondered what would have happened. That, at least, was one worry he'd

escaped.

As soon as he could, Grady excused himself from the table and headed toward the barn. He would have liked to linger over dinner, perhaps enjoy a cup of coffee with Caroline on the porch, but he could see that was a lost cause.

Not until he'd stalked across the yard did he recognize the symptoms. Damn it all, he was *jealous*. The only woman he'd ever cared about, and Richard was going to steal her away. The problem was, Grady had no idea how to keep him from Caroline.

To his surprise Laredo followed him outside. Like Grady, his brother-in-law was a man of few words.

"Don't let him get to you," Laredo said, leading the way into the barn.

"I'm not," Grady told him, which wasn't entirely a lie. He knew the kind of man Richard was; he knew the insecurity of Richard's charm. He didn't like the fact that his brother was working on Caroline, but he wasn't willing to make a fool of himself, either. Other men had made that mistake before him. Glen Patterson, for one. The poor guy had come off looking like an idiot at the Cattlemen's Association Dance. Richard and Glen had nearly come to blows over Ellie, with half the town looking on. They might have, too, if Sheriff Hennessey hadn't stepped in when he did.

"Good." Laredo slapped him on the back and the two went their separate ways.

Grady didn't stay in the barn long. He gave himself ample time to control his resentment, then decided that, while he wasn't going to accept the role of fool, he didn't intend to just give up, either. He'd tried to make sure Caroline understood that their lunch today was more than a meal between friends. Hell—despite what she'd said—he didn't know if she ever considered him a friend.

Grady found her sitting on the porch with Savannah sipping hot tea. Maggie sat on the steps cradling her doll. He strolled toward the women, without a clue what to say once he joined them. He supposed he'd better learn a few conversational rules, he thought grimly, if that meant he'd have a chance with Caroline.

The two women stopped talking as he approached, which led him to surmise that he'd been the top of conversation. He felt as awkward as a schoolboy and, not sure what else to do, touched the rim of his hat.

Savannah, bless her heart, winked conspiratorially at him and stood. "Maggie," she said, holding out her hand to the little girl, "I found one of my old dolls this afternoon. Would you like to play with her?"

Maggie leaped to her feet. "Could I?"

"You bet."

As Savannah and Maggie disappeared into the house, Grady lowered himself onto the rocker his sister had vacated. He felt as tongue-tied and unsure as he had that afternoon. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to remember that he'd been talking to Caroline all her life. It shouldn't be any different now.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" he commented, thinking the weather was a safe subject with which to start.

"Those look like storm clouds to the east."

Grady hadn't noticed. He gazed up at the sky, feeling abashed, until Caroline leaned back in her rocker and laughed. He grinned, loving the sound of her amusement. It was difficult not to stare. All these years, and he hadn't seen how damn beautiful she was. While he could speculate why it'd taken him this long, he didn't want to waste another minute. It was all he could do to keep his tongue from lolling out the side of his mouth whenever he caught sight of her. He longed to find the words to tell

her how attractive she was, how much he liked and respected her. It wasn't the first time he'd wished he could issue compliments with Richard's finesse.

"Come on, Grady, loosen up."

"I'm loose," he growled and noted how relaxed she was, rocking back and forth as if they often sat side by side in the evening. His parents had done that. Every night. They'd shared the events of their day, talked over plans for the future, exchanged feelings and opinions.

The memory of his mother and father filled his mind. Six years, and the pain of their absence was strong now as it had been in the beginning. Some nights Grady would sit on the porch, the old dog beside him, and silently discuss business matters with his father, seeking his advice. Not that he actually expected his father to provide answers, of course; Grady was no believer in ghosts or paranormal influences. But those one-sided discussions had helped see Grady through the rough year. It was during those times, burdened with worries, that he'd been forced to search deep inside himself for the answers. And on rare occasions, he'd experienced moments when he'd felt his father's presence more intensely than his absence.

"You've gotten quiet all of a sudden," Caroline said.

"I want to talk to you about Richard." His words were as much a surprise to him as to Caroline.

"Oh?" Her eyebrows rose.

"I realize you must find his attention flattering, but like I said earlier it isn't wise to believe anything Richard says." The lazy sway of her rocking stopped. "I know you probably don't want to hear this," he added. It wasn't pleasant for him, either. Regardless of anything between them, though, Grady's one concern was that Richard not hurt Caroline.

"I appreciate what you're doing, but I'm a big girl."

"I didn't mean to suggest you weren't. It's just that, well, Richard has a way with women."

"And you assume he's going to sweep me off my feet, is that it?" The teasing warmth in her voice was gone, replaced by something less friendly.

"You think I want to say these things?" he asked, inhaling sharply. "It isn't really you he's interested in, anyway."

"I beg your pardon?"

Grady wished he'd never introduced the subject. Clearly Caroline wasn't going to appreciate his insight, but once he'd started he couldn't stop. "Richard knows how I feel about you and—" He snapped his mouth closed before he embarrassed himself further. "I'm only telling you this because I don't want you to get hurt again." He didn't know what madness possessed him to add the *again*. He realized the moment he did that Caroline had taken his advice the wrong way.

Grady had never asked her about Maggie's father, didn't intend to do so now. Heaven knew she was touchy enough about the subject. The only other time he'd said something, months earlier, she'd been ready to bite his head off.

"This discussion is over," she said, jumping to her feet.

"Caroline, I didn't mean— Oh, hell, be angry if you want." With an abrupt movement, he got out of the chair, leaving it to rock wildly. Once again he'd botched their conversation. "It appears you don't need any advice from me."

"No, Grady, I don't."

It damaged his pride that she'd so casually disregard his warning. "Fine, then, for all I care, you can marry Richard." Not giving her a chance to respond, he stalked away, absolutely certain that any hope of a relationship was forever ruined.

His fears were confirmed less than an hour later when he left the barn and saw her again. She was i

her car with the driver's window rolled down. Richard was leaning against the side of the vehicle, and the sound of their laughter rang in the twilight.

The unexpected twist of disappointment and pain caught Grady off guard. Well, that certainly answered that.

Caroline must have noticed him because Richard suddenly looked over his shoulder. Grady didn't stick around. It was too hard to pretend he didn't care when he damn well did. His stride was full of purpose as he crossed the yard and stormed into the house, sequestering himself in the office.

His emotions had covered the full range in a single day. He'd taken Caroline to lunch and afterward felt...ecstatic; there was no other word for it. Before dinner he'd been like a kid, thrilled to see her again so soon. Now, just a few hours later, he'd been thrown into despair, convinced beyond doubt that he'd lost whatever chance he might have had with her.

It was enough to drive a man to drink. He sat in the worn leather desk chair and pulled open the bottom file drawer. His father had kept a bottle of bourbon there for times when nothing else would do, and Grady had followed the same practice. The bottle was gone—which had happened before. Grady suspected Richard, with good reason, but at the moment he didn't really care. He wasn't much of a drinking man. A cold beer now and then suited him just fine, but he'd never enjoyed the hard stuff.

The knock on the office door surprised him. "Who is it?" he barked, not in the mood for company.

"Richard." His brother didn't wait for an invitation but opened the door and sauntered in. He immediately made himself at home, claiming the only other chair in the room. He leaned back, locked his fingers behind his head and grinned like a silly schoolboy.

"So what's up with you and Caroline?" he asked.

Grady scowled. The last person he wanted to discuss with his brother was Caroline. "Nothing."

His denial only served to fuel Richard's amusement. "Come on, Grady, I've got eyes in my head. It's obvious you've got the hots for her. Not that I blame you, man. She's one nice-looking woman."

Grady didn't like Richard's tone of voice, but prolonging this conversation by arguing with him would serve no useful purpose. "Listen, Richard, I've got better things to do than sit around discussing Caroline Daniels with you."

"I don't imagine it would take much to talk her into the sack, either. She's already been to bed with at least one man—what's a few more? Right?"

Grady ground his teeth in an effort to control his irritation. "I don't think it's a good idea for us to discuss Caroline." He stood and walked over to the door and pointedly opened it.

"I wouldn't mind getting into her bed myself one of these days," Richard went on.

Despite everything he'd promised himself, Grady saw red. He flew across the room and dragged his brother out of the chair, grabbing him by the front of his shirt.

Richard held up both hands. "Hey, hey, don't get so riled! I was only teasing."

Grady's fingers ached with the strength of his grip. It took a moment to clear his head enough to release his brother.

"You don't want to talk about Caroline, fine," Richard said, backing toward the door. "But you can't blame a guy for asking, can you?"

* * *

DRIVING HOME, Caroline realized she not only distrusted Richard Weston, but thoroughly disliked him. Before she'd left the Yellow Rose, he'd gone out of his way to let her know that Grady had asked

Nell Bishop, a local widow, to the Cattlemen's Dance earlier in the summer. What was particularly meaningful about the information was that Caroline knew how hard Savannah had tried to convince Grady to invite *her*. He almost had. She remembered he'd come into the post office a few days before the dance, but within minutes they'd ended up trading insults. That was unfortunate. He *had* mentioned the dance, though, leaving her to wonder.

Their verbal exchanges were legendary. Only in the past couple of weeks had they grown comfortable enough with each other to manage a civil conversation.

Now this.

Caroline didn't believe Richard. She strongly suspected that almost everything out of his mouth was a lie. If the story about Nell *was* true, she would've heard about it. To the best of her knowledge Nell hadn't even attended the dance. Not that it was unusual for her to avoid social functions—it was widely known that Nell continued to grieve for Jake, the only man she'd ever loved. He'd been her high-school sweetheart, and their affection for each other had been evident throughout the years. Caroline had often wondered if Nell would remarry.

"Ask her." Caroline spoke the words aloud without realizing it.

"Ask who, Mommy?" Maggie looked at her mother.

"A friend." She left it at that.

"About what?"

"Nothing." She smiled at her daughter and changed the subject.

As it turned out she had the opportunity to chat with Nell sooner than she'd expected. The following afternoon on her way home from work Caroline stopped at the local Winn-Dixie for a few groceries.

She collected what she needed and pushed her cart up to the checkout stand—behind Nell.

"Howdy, friend," Nell said cheerfully. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Nell!" Caroline didn't disguise her pleasure. "How are you?"

"Great. I've been working hard on getting the word out that I'm turning Twin Canyons into a dude ranch. The brochures were mailed to travel agents last week."

Caroline admired her ingenuity. "That's terrific."

The grocery clerk slid Nell's purchases over the scanner, coming up with the total. She paid in cash then glanced around. "Jeremy!" she called. "Emma." She reached for the plastic bags, giving a good-natured shrug. "I warned those two not to wander off. I know exactly where to find them, too—the book section. They're both crazy about books, especially The Baby-sitters Club books and that new series of kids' Westerns by T. R. Grant. I can't buy them fast enough."

Caroline recognized both series. T. R. Grant was the current rage; even Maggie had wanted Caroline to read her his books. Maggie was still a bit young for them, but it wouldn't be long before she devoured Grant's books and The Baby-sitters Club by herself.

"Have you got a moment?" Caroline asked, opening her purse to pay for her own groceries.

"Sure." Nell waited while Caroline finished her transaction. "What can I do for you?"

As they walked toward the book display at the far end of the Winn-Dixie, Caroline mulled over the best way to approach the subject of Nell and Grady. She wasn't sure why she'd allowed Richard to upset her, especially when she believed it'd all been a lie. Not that she'd blame Grady for being attracted to Nell. In fact, at one time she'd believed they might eventually marry. They seemed right together somehow; both were ranchers and both had struggled against what seemed impossible odds.

In the back of her mind Caroline had always suspected that when the time was right, they'd discover each other. Grady and Jake had been good friends, and Grady had been a pall bearer at Jake's funeral. Grady and Nell were close in age and would make a handsome couple. Grady was an inch or two over

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