

It was the sound of silence in the wake of all that thunder and lightning that made Catherine stir in her slumber. She awakened gradually, her thoughts in motion and her senses coming alert before her eyes even opened.

There came to her the smell of damp earth and the sound of water dripping through a hole in the roof. Familiar odors and friendly sounds lulled her into a state of semi-awareness, and for the time being, the events that brought her back to this place were forgotten.

Uncurling her fingers, she splayed them against the ground on which she lay. The earth was cool and dry to the touch. From it she determined that the sun was on its way down. Ten years was a long time to be away, but Angus had taught her well. She didn't have to open her eyes to know that the sky outside was fired up with the brilliant pinks and oranges of twilight in the aftermath of the storm, nor did she have to see the creeks to know that they were overflowing from the heavy rains. The memory of it was as familiar to her as the fierce black sky and ominous thunder that had sent her scurrying for shelter.

Shelter. Wasn't that what she had come back to Alberta for? Shelter from the storm of emotions following a bitter divorce?

The summers she had spent on her grandfather's sheep ranch in western Canada had led her to regard this place as home. This was where she'd been happiest as a child. This was where that happiness had come crashing to an end ten years ago. Ironically, this was where she ran to now, when there was no place else to go.

The past decade had led Catherine on a circuitous route as the wife of a powerful American businessman. Then, from a courtroom of the United States Southern District Court in one of the most publicized divorce cases America had seen in years, to the crumbling sheep ranch of her youth and to a shack in the middle of nowhere that only she, and possibly one other person, knew existed.

She recalled the vow she made ten years earlier never to return, and except for the brief time she came back for Angus's funeral, she'd almost kept that vow. But circumstances made that solemn vow seem now like mere words. Here she was, practically broke, having used up the inheritance her father left her to buy her freedom from an unhappy marriage, with a neglected, almost-bankrupt sheep ranch on her hands.

The joke was on her it seemed, but that was all right as far as Catherine was concerned. Up here, she could be just plain Catherine Coleman—Angus wouldn't mind if she borrowed his last name—instead of Catherine Randolph, daughter of Boston tycoon Ellis Randolph, or Catherine Chandler, wife of a man whose philandering was as famous as the hotels and office towers he built. Up here, in the vast Canadian wilderness, it was easy to get lost in obscurity. The newsmen and photographers who'd hounded her during the divorce proceedings would not find her here. But perhaps, she reasoned, she could find herself, for she seemed to have lost track of herself somewhere along the way.

She wished her grandfather were still alive. He would have chided her on coming back, but he would have understood. She was just grateful that there was a place to come back to.

With that small but comforting thought in mind, she sighed and stirred, drifting in and out of the memories, unaware of the eyes that were watching her from the shadows.

Cal could tell by the sound of her breathing that she was awake even though her eyelids were still lowered. He watched in silence, tracing with his eyes the soft, curving line of her profile. Even etched against the growing darkness she was as beautiful as he remembered, and to his own self-disgust he found himself hating her for it.

He knew now who had shot at him earlier. If old Angus Coleman had taught his granddaughter anything, it was how to shoot. Cal could recall trying to best her at fifty paces, but she'd beaten him every time. Little had he known back then, when they'd been two kids shooting at tin cans, that she would one day shoot at him in earnest.

"Do you always shoot at people like that?"

Catherine's eyes snapped open at the masculine voice that spoke from somewhere close by. In those few words she heard the anger and hostility of the speaker. In that initial instant before her body even reacted, it registered upon her brain that the voice sounded familiar. Every muscle in her body tensed.

It was dark in the small line shack. Dusk threw long shadows across the walls of rotting timber. Her eyes adjusted rapidly to the absence of light, and she gasped to see the figure of a man sitting on the ground.

He sat with his back pressed against a splintered wall. One leg was stretched out across the ground, the other knee was drawn up, with one arm slung across it. His face was in profile, the half that was visible cloaked in shadow. But even if Catherine had possessed no sight at all, she would have known him.

Her heart slammed against the wall of her chest with instant recognition. She had no idea who that was she'd spotted earlier kneeling over one of her sheep. She had fired a close shot to warn the intruder that his presence in her pasture wasn't welcome, little knowing that the echo of her gunshot would reverberate clear to the past and back to this moment.

"Hello, Cathy."

The familiar ring of that voice forced her throat to constrict so tightly that at first no sound emerged. Swallowing hard, her voice scratched at the back of her throat. "Hello, Cal."

For several tense moments neither of them spoke. When the silence became unbearably, Catherine rose to her feet, brushed herself off and stood there self-consciously, not knowing what to say. What could she say to a man she had neither seen nor heard from in ten years?

"Do you always trespass on other people's land?" she asked.

"When there's a storm about to break and I need to take a shortcut, I do."

"How long—?" Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and began again. "How long have you been sitting there?"

Long enough for the sight of her to tighten a knot in his belly, Cal thought with dismay. He gestured toward the window with a flick of the head and said, "Storm's over."

She glanced anxiously at the window. "The storm," she said weakly. "Yes. It came from out of nowhere."

He snorted derisively. "They usually do this time of year. I'm surprised you don't remember that." Apparently, there were a lot of things she didn't remember, or else chose to forget. Either way, he told himself it made no difference to him. Affecting a disinterested tone, he asked, "So, what brings you back to these parts, Cathy?"

His question carried the annoying ring of I-told-you-so. Wearily, she replied, "It's a long story." And one she had no intention of going into with him, of all people.

He went on in a deceptively casual tone that should have warned her they were headed for dangerous waters. "I seem to recall that when you left here—what was it, oh, ten years ago?—you said you were never coming back."

She stiffened at the reminder. "How would you know what I said when you weren't around to hear it?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his spot. Back then, word had reached him that she'd left for good. He wondered why word had not reached him now that she'd come back. Why did he have to find out like this, as if he'd stuck his finger into a light socket and ten thousand volts of electricity had shot through him?

He knew why she'd come back. He read about her divorce in the Edmonton papers and had felt a small twist of triumph to learn of the demise of her marriage. The accompanying photograph had also not been without its impact. It had been a shot of Cathy coming out of the courthouse the day the divorce had been granted. Those dark, serious eyes, the full lips compressed into a tense smile for the clicking shutters of the photographers. Her somber beauty had appealed to him against his will as much then as it always had...as much as it did right now. He galvanized himself against it.

"What happened?" he asked. "Got tired of all that fancy living and decided to come back to the family sheep ranch?"

She responded to his pointed sarcasm by observing, "You sound as if you resent my having a place to come back to, Cal."

It wasn't the coming back he resented, he wanted to say. It was the leaving in the first place. "Why the sudden interest in sheep?"

"Because now they're my sheep."

It was true, they were her sheep, but when Angus died and left the ranch to her, she didn't plan on coming back to run it. What she didn't say was that not a day had gone by these past ten years that she had not thought of this place, or of him, in one way or another.

"This place is in my blood," she said. "I guess I'm Angus Coleman's granddaughter, after all."

"Yeah," Cal muttered. "And Ellis Randolph's daughter, too." The bitterness behind those words made Catherine shudder.

Her father, having hated sheep ranching with a vengeance, had kept to his own domain of trading in international markets. From the pinnacle of his Boston office tower, he'd been unaware of his daughter's summer romance with the son of the neighboring cattle rancher until Catherine had announced her intention to marry Cal Walker. Ellis had flown into a rage. Catherine had been summoned home from Alberta for a severe upbraiding, only to race back to Cal in defiance of her father's wishes. When she got there, however, Cal was gone. Neither Angus nor anyone else could tell her where he'd gone, or more important, why.

One year later she married someone else, never suspecting that her father may have played a role in orchestrating the outcome. All she knew then, or now, was that she'd been betrayed by Cal.

Himself unaware of the external forces that may have had a hand in shaping his life, Cal knew only that having been in love with Ellis Randolph's daughter had nearly destroyed him. He wasn't about to make that mistake again.

"It's going to take a lot of hard work to save that place," he said. "I hear it's gotten pretty rundown since Angus died."

Catherine shrugged against the growing darkness. "I learned a few things about sheep ranching from my grandfather. And what I don't know, I'm sure my foreman does."

From out of the shadows came a deep laugh. "It's too bad your foreman doesn't know anything about boundary lines."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He took his time answering, rising to his feet first and stretching the lean muscles in his back and legs while keeping to the velvet darkness. "Ask your foreman about it."

It wasn't that Catherine had forgotten how tall and broad-shouldered Cal was. It was just that she had underestimated the impact it would have on her. When he'd been seated on the ground, she had somehow felt more in control than she now suddenly did. She watched him warily and, in spite of herself, admiringly.

The years had added flatteringly to Cal's appeal. As a boy, he'd been lean and wiry, like a spring in motion. As a young man he had exuded athletic prowess. But this was no boy standing before her, no young man on the threshold of uncovering his ultimate strength. This was a man full grown, handsome and hostile, a dangerous combination under any circumstance.

"That was one of your sheep I found today, dead."

She pushed aside her disturbing thoughts of him and responded with an even tone. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for it. Sheep don't die for no reason. Maybe its teeth—"

"Its teeth were fine," he cut in.

"Wolves, then."

"Wolves didn't kill it. Wolves would have devoured it on the spot."

"You seem pretty certain as to what didn't kill it," she said. "Care to venture a guess as to what did?"

Cal shrugged with indifference. "Who knows?"

"Something could be contaminating the water further upstream," she ventured, adding purposefully, "Or someone."

He looked at her skeptically. "Who would want to kill your sheep?"

Parodying his indifference, she quipped, "Who knows? Maybe some cattle rancher with a gripe."

His features remained unreadable, indeed scarcely visible from where he stood. If he was surprised by her remark, she saw no outward sign of it.

Inside of Cal, however, much was going on. He was shocked that she thought him capable of killing her sheep. He figured it only went to show how little he knew her. It was ironic, for there was a time when he thought he knew her so well. That, of course, had been before their bubble had burst and they'd been hurled into separate orbits, only to come crashing to earth ten years later, each landing in a small wooden shack deep in the Alberta foothills. No, he wasn't surprised by her remark, only deeply disappointed by it.

"I have no reason to kill your sheep, Cathy."

She regretted saying it the instant the words had left her lips, but the sound of his voice now, filled with anger and pain, only made her feel worse. She went to the window and looked out. It was nightfall. Overhead, a crescent moon appeared through the feathery branches of the pines. The stars were out, and all that remained of the storm was the smell of damp grass. She breathed in the sweet night aroma. She ought to be getting back. Even though she had assured Gertie, her housekeeper, that she knew her way around these hills and valleys, she was bound to be looked upon as a newcomer to these parts and presumed easily capable of getting lost in a storm. The last thing she wanted to do was worry Gertie needlessly, or to give Ben, her foreman, reason to think she wasn't cut out to run the ranch. He wasn't, after all, the friendliest person in the first place.

Yet while Catherine's better judgment told her she should be going, she dared not budge, not with Cal watching her from the shadows with predatory eyes. He was keeping his distance, but that was fine as far as she was concerned. The air around him sizzled with hostility, and she had

no wish to get any closer. What was he so angry at? If anyone had a right to be angry, it was she. She was the one who'd been jilted. Perhaps the guilt had become too much for him. Well, what did he expect? No one got off scot-free. In one way or another, it always came back to haunt you.

Something had, indeed, come back to haunt Cal Walker. He had closed his mind to her and shut her out of his heart. But to his shock and utter dismay, the years had not taught his body how to stop wanting her. Now, as then, it reacted with a predictable longing. Feeling betrayed by his own body, he told himself it was just the way any red-blooded man would react to a beautiful woman. And she was certainly that.

A ribbon of pale moonlight fell softly upon her face as she stood at the window. A sheen of perspiration had evaporated from her skin, giving her complexion a matte look. It was smooth and flawless, and as Cal remembered only too well, remarkably soft to the touch. Her dark hair hung free. She had never cared for styling it, and while it was shorter than it used to be, reaching now to her shoulders instead of to her waist, he was pleased to see that she still preferred to wear it loose and casual. His fingers flexed involuntarily at his sides. They knew the feeling of being buried in the deep, dark fullness of her hair.

Those eyes that had always reminded him of semi-sweet chocolate were focused out the window. She looked to be a thousand miles away, yet he knew that she was very much aware of him. The carefree, unrestrained girl who could ride with the best of them and shoot better than any of them was now a carefully guarded woman whose mistrust was evident in her dark eyes.

He couldn't blame her, he supposed. It couldn't have been easy for someone as strong-willed as Cathy to be the daughter of a tyrant like Ellis Randolph, or for a woman of such spirit and emotion as the one he remembered to adjust easily to life as the wife of a man like the one she married. Be that as it may, he had the distinct feeling that it was neither her father nor her ex-husband with whom she was angry, but him. His defenses went up. He was the one who should be angry, and he was. Why shouldn't he be? He's the one who'd been left with a broken heart.

The air inside the tiny shack grew thick with tension in the ensuing silence. The distance between them was riddled with mistrust and suspicion. And yet, in spite of themselves, something endured, transcending the miles and the years, causing a tiny spark to ignite.

Catherine heaved a sigh of resignation, thinking dismally how some things never change. She'd always been shamefully attracted to Cal. Sadly, in spite of everything, she still was. She turned from the window and walked to the door.

As he watched her go, Cal snorted with self-disgust and told himself it was hormonal. Stay, he ordered himself. Don't follow her. But even as he thought it, his body was in motion.

Outside, the ground was soft from the rain. The soil smelled rich and sweet. The night was warm and clear.

Catherine walked to her car and fished into the pocket of her jeans for the keys. She heard Cal's footsteps come up behind her, and she tensed. A part of her wished she had never come back. The best thing would be to get in the car and drive away without saying another word. What was there to say, anyway, except to ask why? Too often over the years she had asked herself why. Why he'd been gone when she got back. Even now, as she fumbled with the door, that one word echoed through her mind.

She turned to him suddenly to say something...anything...only to freeze with her mouth open.

It was the way the moonlight struck his face that rendered speechless and caused the muscles in her body to go rigid. For the first time she saw him clearly, distinctly. Those hazel eyes of his that hedged somewhere between light brown and green were fixed anxiously on her.

His dark hair fell over his forehead in a crop of unruly curls and looked to be in need of a trim at the collar. Dark stubble spiked his chin. More than one day's growth, she surmised from the look of it. The years had sharpened the angles of his face and etched tiny lines around the corners of his changeable eyes. His was a careless, haphazard handsomeness that, for some reason, had always appealed to her. Her eyes swept over his face. In the next instant he turned his head and she gasped at the sight of the scar.

Her hand flew out to him and in a shortened breath she whispered his name.

He braced himself for an onrush of pity and jerked away, freezing Catherine in mid-motion just shy of physical contact. He dismissed her shock gruffly, saying, "It's nothing."

"But, Cal, how—?"

"Forget it. It was an accident. It happened a long time ago."

The accompanying flash from his eyes warned her not to press the issue. Whoever or whatever had put that scar on his cheek was clearly not a subject he wanted to speak about.

Catherine's moment of genuine concern left her feeling angry and confused, but most of all foolish. She climbed into the car and for several moments just sat there, regrouping. The unexpected reunion with Cal left her shaken. She'd come to Alberta to get away from her problems, not add to them.

Cal's sharp rap on the window made her jump. She rolled it down and looked up into his unsmiling face. From this angle the scar on his cheek looked frightening, and in a strange and unsettling way, compelling.

"You'd best pick up that carcass first thing in the morning and get it over to a vet for a necropsy. The quicker you know what killed her, the better."

She cringed at the know-it-all tone of his voice. "I'll take care of it." She leaned forward to start up the engine, but Cal's hand clamped down on her shoulder. With fingers flexing against her flesh, he pulled her back against the seat.

"I mean it, Cathy," he warned. "Anything could have killed that ewe. Maybe the water's contaminated. If it is, I've got to know. That water passes through your land on its way to mine. If you don't do something about it, I will."

Catherine's glare stuck bravely to his as she issued a warning of her own. "Cal Walker, don't you dare."

It wasn't the command that made Cal turn to ice inside. It was the vivid memory it conjured up in his mind of a pretty, dark-eyed girl shaking a finger at him and warning in that same tone of voice, "Cal Walker, don't you dare", whenever he'd been about to do something stupid.

The years seemed to shrink before Cal's eyes. For one monstrously long moment it was as if nothing had changed. It hit him harder than he expected, and long after the red glow of her tail lights had disappeared over the horizon, all he could do was stand there and remember.