

## CHAPTER 1

Texas 1985

Into the unknown they traveled  
Like a band of Gypsies  
Their life came unraveled  
Not knowing exactly what lay ahead  
Holding onto dreams like a golden thread..

A hot July sun bore down on the maroon Chevy Malibu as it headed west. The lush green East Texas pines had long turned into mesquite and scrub oaks. Darlina Flowers brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face. The air conditioner had gone out back around Waco. With the windows open, the Central Texas air felt much like a furnace. The faces of the two little girls in the back seat were flushed and red.

"Luke Stone broke your heart once. He'll do it again." The words echoed in Darlina's head as the tires hummed on the scorched asphalt.

"No, Mama. This time it's gonna be different. I swear he's a changed man and I love him," she'd argued.

"You sure better think about what you're dragging these precious girls into. A man that's been locked up for as long as he has..." Darlina's mother hadn't attempted to hide her anxiety the last time they'd spoken.

"Are we there yet?" A small voice complained from the back

seat, interrupting her thoughts.

"Not yet, sweetie, but we're getting close."

A road sign told her their destination was only a few more miles ahead. She spotted a deserted roadside rest area and pulled in. The girls clamored from the back seat in a hurry to escape the confines of the car.

"You can get out but I want you to stay close. There are rattlesnakes out here." Weary, Darlina rubbed the back of her neck and shoulders.

Darlina watched as the two children chased each other. After a few minutes of letting them play, she called, "Lily, Nicole, you girls come here. I need to make you presentable before we get to Coleman."

Lily ran to her mother. She was nine years old and took her job as the older sister very seriously. She stood patiently while Darlina brushed her strawberry blonde hair, pulling it back into a pony tail. The mother then cooled her child's flushed face with water from the cooler.

More than anything, she wanted her girls to be accepted and loved by the new family they were joining.

Placing a kiss on her cheek, Darlina hugged her. "Thank you, Lily. I'd like for you to get back in the car while I freshen up your sister."

"Okay, Mama." Lily opened the car door and sat on the edge

of the seat swinging her legs as she waited for her younger sister.

Darlina turned her attention to Nicole, barely six years old. She brushed back her daughter's blondish-brown hair and kissed the row of freckles that marched across her nose like proper little soldiers.

The two girls were as different as night and day. Lily preferred reading books and keeping to herself, whereas Nicole treated every stranger as a friend and would rather color in the books than read them. Darlina loved the sweet spirit in both her girls and hoped against hope that she'd made the right decision.

Leaving behind everything secure and comfortable for the second time in her life, to join Luke Stone, was a gamble she was willing to take.

She quickly ran a brush through her own hair and gave the girls one last inspection before closing the doors and restarting the engine.

Fifteen miles down the road, she got her first glimpse of Coleman and her heart sank. The dusty, dirty, small Texas town didn't provide much of a welcome. Darlina drove slowly, following the directions Luke had provided.

"Mama, where are we going to live?" Lily's voice quivered.

"I'm not sure, honey. We'll find a nice place."

"I miss Granny." The rearview mirror reflected big tears

welling up in Nicole's blue eyes.

"I know, sweetie, but everything's going to be all right."

How could she sound so reassuring when she had the same doubts and fears? As she drove under a railroad bridge, a sudden wind whipped down the unpaved dirt streets, pelting the car with sand.

"Close your eyes and cover your mouths, girls." She tried to ignore the apprehension that knotted her stomach like a tightening noose while she rolled up the windows.

She'd spoken with Luke's mother by phone several times and knew they would be welcome in her home. However, many questions remained unanswered.

Fifteen long years had passed since that fateful day the judge had sentenced Luke to seventy-five years in prison. Would he be the same man she'd fallen in love with so long ago, or would the many years behind bars have turned him bitter and cold?

The fact that he'd been granted parole was a miracle far beyond anything they'd dared to hope for. With family and a promise of work in Coleman, Texas, he'd chosen the small town as his parole destination.

Surveying it up close, Darlina now wished she'd advocated a little harder for a parole to Shreveport, where she'd had a good job and nice home.

She brushed that thought aside. It was too late to go back.

It'd been a lucky break when her neighbors bought her house in Shreveport. Things for this move had come together easily, and to her, that was a good sign. It had to be. Everything was hinging on it.

At Luke's insistence, his oldest son, Joseph, and nephew, Gary, drove to Shreveport, loaded a rented U-Haul truck and moved Darlina's belongings. She would breathe easier when she saw her things again.

"We're here," she announced, pulling onto a caliche driveway.

The girls peered out, eyes wide with curiosity.

"Is this our new house, Mama?" Nicole scooted close to her big sister. She couldn't clearly pronounce her R's so they sounded like W's.

"No, honey. We're just gonna stay here 'til we find a nice place for us to live with Daddy. Let's go in and say hello."

Before they could get out of the car, the screen door flew open and a short, rotund, gray-haired lady stepped out onto the porch. "Well, my lord! I thought you kids were never gonna get here. I've been on pins and needles all day. Come in out of this God-awful heat."

Darlina and the two girls hurried out of the car and up to the front porch. "You're sure right about the heat, Mrs. Stone.

Our air conditioner went out back down the road and it's been pretty miserable."

Mrs. Stone leaned down, hugged each of the girls and ushered them inside the cool house. "Well, I'm sure glad you made it and please don't call me Mrs. Stone. After all, you're going to be my daughter-in-law in a few short weeks. I'd like it if you'd call me Mom and you girls call me Nanny."

"Okay, Mom." Darlina placed a hand on the shoulder of each child. "This is Lily and Nicole."

"I'm very happy to meet you, Lily and Nicole. What pretty little blue-eyed girls. I baked a pie. Would you girls like a piece?"

Inside, Darlina looked around the modest house. She remembered another time that she'd been in Luke's parents' home many years ago in Brownwood, when the welcome hadn't been quite as warm. In fact, the atmosphere had been downright chilly since Luke was still a married man back then.

"Girls, do you want a piece of pie?" Darlina repeated.

Nicole's eyes sparkled. The child dearly loved desserts. "Is it a strawberry pie?"

"No, sweetie." Mrs. Stone chuckled. "Do you like chocolate?"

"Oh yes!" Nicole replied. "I like chocolate but not as much as strawberry."

Lily stood slightly behind Darlina as though trying to make up her mind about this move and strange new woman welcoming them into her life. Her voice was quiet and matter-of-fact. "I like chocolate the best."

"Here, let me help you, Mom." Darlina opened a kitchen cabinet, only to jump back in horror. Cockroaches fell out of the cabinet onto her arm and scattered in all directions.

"Oh, don't pay them no mind. I've been meanin' to get an exterminator out here. I haven't cared about much of anything since Al died. It's hard to believe he's been gone twelve years already." Her words trailed off into a mumble.

Darlina placed her arm around Mrs. Stone's shoulders. "I know you miss him, Mom, and that you can't wait for Luke to get home. How about I go tomorrow and get some bug spray? We'll see if we can run them out of the house."

Mrs. Stone gave her a bright smile. "Yes, having my son home will make everything better. You can go get bug spray if you want." She set plates with pie slices on the table. "You girls eat up."

The girls sat at the small round table in the kitchen, eating their pie, when suddenly Darlina jumped up. "Oh dear! I forgot that Amanda is still in the car. You remember we have a cat, don't you, Mom?"

"Of course. Go bring her in. I don't mind at all. I love

animals. After the girls finish their pie, I'll take them out back and introduce them to my pet sheep, Baby."

"A sheep?" Nicole's eyes widened.

"Yep, a sheep. I've had her since she was tiny. She was the runt of a litter. I brought her in the house and bottle fed her until she was big enough to make it on her own."

"I've never seen a real sheep." Lily popped a bite of pie into her mouth.

Darlina returned with a crate the cat had been confined in since they'd left Shreveport. Amanda, the cat, shot out the open door and quickly darted behind the refrigerator. She mewed forlornly, refusing all Darlina's coaxing to come out.

"Oh she'll come out and explore once she settles down." Mrs. Stone began clearing dishes from the table.

Finally, Darlina gave up and stood. "Where do you want me to put our things?"

"I'll show you. You three are gonna be right here in this bedroom. It used to be Luke and Bobby's." She pointed down a short hallway.

The room held two beds amidst piles of material bolts, boxes and chests. "I probably need to get rid of all this material. Doubt I'll ever do much sewing again with this broken arm that won't ever heal. Just move stuff over to make room for whatever you need."

"Thanks, Mom. We'll be just fine in here."

"Come with me girls," Nanny Stone called. "We'll go see Baby while your mama brings in your things."

"Oh, Mom, I forgot to ask. Did the boys make it okay with the truck?"

"They sure did. It's parked down at Bobby's."

Both girls eagerly followed her out the back door while Darlina stood in the middle of the room looking around. Well, it could be worse. This place could sure stand a good cleaning though. She'd do what she could without hurting Mrs. Stone's feelings.

In no time, she had what they needed from the car and went to find the girls. They were standing in the middle of the yard with Mrs. Stone, hand-feeding and petting a full grown sheep.

Darlina's breath caught in her throat. In the far back corner of the yard sat the familiar Rebel Rouser's band trailer. The rebel flags on each side were faded and peeling and weeds grew around the flat tires.

A rush of memories came flooding. The many nights she'd sat beside Luke in the Lincoln Towncar as he and his country band drove the roads of Texas to play music. The countless hours she'd lain in his arms warm and secure, making sweet love convinced that nothing on heaven or earth could separate them.

Tears stung the backs of her eyelids. Luke was coming home.

In a few short weeks they'd be married. After what seemed like a lifetime of waiting, she would finally become Mrs. Luke Stone.

Just being with Luke would make everything right again. He'd vowed to love her girls as his own. The hundreds of letters they'd written to each other over the long fifteen years, filled with their hopes and dreams, would have a chance at last.

She could put up with the cockroaches, the dirty desolate little town and the heat as long as they had each other. Their love could overcome any obstacles they faced. That's just the way it would be. She had no doubts about that.