



Chapter 1 Esmerelda

**EIGHT MONTHS LATER
NOVEMBER 25, 1959**

At little past six o'clock in the evening, a cold, bitter West Texas wind cut across the open campus grounds of San Angelo Junior College as thin, dirty clouds scattered across a gray sky, showing no signs of mercy for the future. Esmerelda Castillo trudged across the parking lot after her last class, pulling her coat lapels snug against the white turtleneck pullover she wore, and bent her head forward to ward off the bone-chilling western. That morning, before she'd left for classes, Esmerelda told Sherie, her roommate, that she'd be back to the apartment later in the evening to pack and then she'd be heading home for the Thanksgiving holidays. She didn't tell her about the meeting with Professor Wallace that she arranged earlier. Sheri wouldn't have liked that.

No doubt, Esmerelda carried strong pangs of guilt about the way her life had turned for the worse during her first semester of college. It wasn't what she expected. She wasn't prepared to fall in love ... at least not with *him*. But none of that was important for the moment. She blotted it from her mind. Killed the thought. She had to focus on the *now*. She'd deal with the guilt of ill-fated choices later.

The campus parking lot was deserted, except for a few scattered cars leftover from students or faculty members that were late getting off for the holidays just like her. Esmerelda approached her black '55 Chevy, the one possession she prized over all she owned. Her father and brothers had pitched in together and bought the car as a present for her high school graduation. *Was it really just six months ago? It seemed like a lifetime.* Her father's words rang in her ears, crushing whatever courage she had left for the night. *This is only the beginning for you, Esme. You're the one that's going to leave behind these West Texas cotton fields and make something of yourself. We love you ... make us proud.*

"I'm so sorry, Papa," she whispered aloud. Reflexively, she pulled back her shoulders and took a deep breath. "Get it together, Esme. You can do this."

The wind whipped long strands of hair around her face as she dug through her purse for her car keys. She was supposed to meet John in thirty minutes at El Amigos Restaurant, and she wanted to get there ahead of him. Get her thoughts together. Rehearse for the last time what she planned to say. She needed to be calm. And strong. She found her keys, unlocked the driver's side door, and tossed her purse onto the front seat before getting in. Twisting her head back to clear the constant wind-blown hair away from her face again, she spotted the professor from the corner of her eye. She turned for a better look and then a stark, devastating realization stabbed her heart like a thunderbolt. Disbelief wrinkled across her smooth, delicate brow, and her eyes immediately welled with tears. Not tears from hurt, but pure, unadulterated anger. "Damn you, John Wallace," she growled. It wasn't the site of Professor John Wallace

that riled her, it was the blonde hooked on his arm. *Affectionately* hooked on his arm. Huddled next to him, using him as a shield against the wind.

A deep throaty voice, totally void of emotion gravitated from her gut, “John-n-n!” The westward gusts at her back carried the cry across the parking lot, ambushing the unsuspecting pair. She saw the professor’s head turn towards her in slow motion.

He held up his hand haltingly and acknowledged her. “Esmerelda!” he shouted half-heartedly.

She heard the catch in his voice, saw his face reddened, the deer in the headlights look. *Caught in the act.* There was no reason to meet with him now. It was over. She was on her own. She realized how foolish she’d been. All she wanted to do now was run. Her chest started to heave with heavy sobs. *What have I done? My whole life is ...* She cupped her hands over her mouth to catch her breath, falling back and bracing herself against the front fender of the Chevy, she tried to control her wobbly legs.

She sucked in deep gulps of cold air, steadying herself against the car. The wind burned her throat and lungs. She had to get a grip of herself. Her emotions. She saw the two of them talking. Kissing. Saying good-bye to each other. She watched him turn and casually stroll in her direction. That irresistible, rascally, crooked smile planted conveniently across his face. As though nothing was wrong!

Esmerelda didn’t sense the car keys slipping from her cold, stiff fingers. She didn’t hear the metallic ring when they plunked to the ground beside the front tire. *Just get away from him!* Unsure, she hesitated ... then without reason or cause, she twisted around, away from Wallace, unintentionally leaving the car door open. She took off, stumbling at first like a drunkard, but finally getting her feet into a rhythm. She ran to the

other end of the parking lot, to the administration building. Crusty, brown grass crunched beneath every footfall. *Must get away from him!* At the edge of the building, she stopped and put her hand against the corner bricks for support, momentarily bracing her forehead on the corner of it. She turned, stared over her shoulder, and saw Wallace stop at her car. *What's he doing?* She watched him bend over and pick something up off the ground. She couldn't wait any longer. Esmerelda grimaced, then took off at a dead run, and disappeared from sight.

After a brief wave to Esmerelda, the professor's eyes shifted back to his new student aide. "That's one of my freshman students, and I'm afraid she's got a bit of a crush on me," he said, shrugging his shoulders as though embarrassed by the situation and then dug both hands deep into his coat pockets, her arms still intertwined around his elbow. "These freshmen girls nowadays are so impressionable and take everything so serious. You know what I mean? So much *drama*." Wallace untangled the young coed's arm from his, looked into her eyes, and gave a deep sigh of exasperation. "Jennifer, do you mind us putting off the drink and just meeting at my place ... at say...", he checked his watch, "seven-ish? This shouldn't take long," he said, nodding in Esmerelda's direction. "I just need to clear this up with her. Whatever her problem is ...you understand ... don't you mind, Sweetie?"

"Of course," the second-year student said, arching upwards on her tiptoes and whispered into the Wallace's ear, "Not at all, *Pro-fessor*, but you'll have to make it up to me tonight." Then she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Wallace smiled and lightly brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. “Tonight then.” After returning a quick kiss of his own and a wave goodbye, Wallace turned to confront Esmerelda. *I was afraid of this happening with this girl. I knew she was trouble on our first date. Should have stopped it then. She really looks shookup.* He gave her a disarming grin of assurance as he approached, but then he saw her stumble away from the car and head towards the Admin Building. “Dammit,” he mumbled, trotting after her. When he got to her car the door was open, and he spotted her keys on the ground. “What the hell? Wait Esmerelda! Wait!” Wallace yelled after grabbing the keys off the ground. “Your keys!” He called after her, his arm extended straight in the air. “Dammit all,” he cursed under his breath again, “you can’t do this to me!”

He took off at a dead run to catch up to Esmerelda. He had to stop her before she talked to anyone else.

