

## Chapter 1

### El Camino Ranch

On an edge of the wild and wind-swept desert Southwest rose a hilly oasis, clumps of Spanish oak and cedar, juniper and pecan trees. The trees were dwarfed by too little rain under a mulish, hot sun. A narrow road ribboned its way among those hills, entwining modern bunkhouses - cabins that peeked here and there from the greenery of El Camino Ranch. At the top of the hill stood a large conference hall that also doubled as a recreation room and cafeteria.

In one of the cabins Becka Bailey floundered, caught in a nightmare. She dreamed she was tumbling over and over in a cactus bed, its needles glowing like tiny branding irons, piercing her arms, face, neck ...

“Aayeee!” she screamed, waking abruptly to burning skin. She squinted in the twilight at her nightshirt that looked peppered with busy red blurs. “Ants!” she gasped and leapt from her bunk, shaking the creatures from her hair. Frantically, she brushed them off, then raced to the sink for her contact lenses.

“If I could just see,” she gurgled into the water that splashed soothingly against her fiery face. With her nose nearly touching the reflection in the mirror, Becka groaned at the puffy image staring back at her.

“I must be allergic to those stupid creatures,” she thought in disgust. “First my scalp gets sunburned, then I break out in heat rash, and now I’m swelling up with ant stings. What next?”

She half-grinned at her sorry reflection. “Don’t ask!” it warned.

She could hear her roommate showering in the other bathroom as she tried in vain to put the contact lenses in her swollen eyes. Finally, with a deep sigh, Becka gave up the effort.

## WHEN NOVEMBER COMES

“Great! In a few minutes I’m supposed to run the obstacle course, and I can’t even see.”

She hastily combed her long, blondish hair, then fumbled for the jeans and T-shirt hanging next to her bunk bed. Quickly dressing, she headed for the screen door.

“Good morning!” She heard Tricia’s melodic voice as her robed friend emerged from the small, steamy room.

“The morning is not good,” Becka retorted. “I’ve just been attacked by an army of fire ants. Would you believe our room’s full of them.”

“Oh, no!” Tricia rolled her blue eyes dramatically. “Funny! They didn’t bother me.” She giggled. “I must not be as sweet as you.”

“Well, I don’t feel very sweet at the moment,” Becka said. “My skin’s burning, my eyes are too swollen to wear my contacts, and I’m so near-sighted I can’t see beyond a foot.”

“Oooo!” Tricia moved closer. “They are swollen, and your face is all red - and your arms!” Her voice filled with concern. “If you’ll wait a few minutes, I’ll help you hike up to the lodge.”

“Thanks, but no! I’ll manage OK,” Becka replied, stepping outside onto the cement porch. She blinked in the dazzling sunlight and gazed around at a blurry world.

“Cauliflower!” she thought. “Everything looks like cauliflower - green, gray, and brown fuzzy cauliflower!”

Cautiously, she rounded the side of the cabin toward the path that led up the hill through what she called bushes. Her boyfriend, Bradley Colton, had corrected her their first day at the youth ranch. “These are trees, Becka.”

“But trees tower way up into the sky,” she protested. “These things barely reach above my head.”

Her heart had fluttered a little when he regarded her with obvious amusement. “This is arid land, not the rainy North west you’re used to. Little rain makes little trees,” he had joked, “but trees just the same.”

Becka wasn’t convinced. They still looked like bushes to her. And right now those bushes seemed to reach out with

thorny claws as she struggled awkwardly along, trying to stay on the path.

Just two days before, she had spent hours with other staff members, watching films and relearning how to guide sightless campers around such hilly terrain. Now, in her struggle, she keenly sensed the helplessness blind campers must feel. At least she could see images, however blurred and foreign they looked. What a strange and frightening world darkness would create, surrounded by those prickly branches along the steep, dirt path!

"I'll take extra good care of my blind campers," she vowed, "that is, if I can see by then myself - and right now I truly wonder if I ever will."

She sighed again. Whatever was she doing, training as a counselor in this sweltering, forsaken country, when she could have applied instead for a job again at Camp Wautum Woods in the cool Northwest? Two toilsome years of college had passed since that sunny-snowy summer as a camp counselor in the mountains.

Then she spotted the reason for her choosing El Camino Ranch. At least she thought the faceless blob - rising like a pillar beside the stone bridge - was Brad.

"Becka!" he called anxiously. "What in the world happened to you?"

"Fire ants!" She shot the words at him like bullets.

"Don't tell me you didn't have ants at Camp Wautum Woods either," he pleaded.

"We had ants," she answered primly, "but they were well-mannered ants. They stayed on the ground where they belonged, and never would one stray thought of stinging a person enter their cute little heads."

Brad chuckled. "I'm sorry, Becka." He took her hand and helped her over the bridge. "Looks like you don't have your contacts in this morning, huh?"

"How'd you ever guess?" Sarcasm coated the statement.

Becka couldn't believe how quickly Neil began to pant and puff. As she breezed past him, she felt like twittering, "Oh,

Neil! Is this pace fast enough for you?" But her conscience wouldn't allow it.

Stopping to maneuver under the wire, Becka's amusement turned to genuine concern when she spotted Neil dragging his bloated self across the field. His face, already soaked in sweat, blazed scarlet under the warming sun.

"He'll never make it," she breathed, then wondered if a guy that young could suffer a heart attack. Away she flew to the next obstacle and ran so fast she never discovered if Neil had actually completed the entire course or not.

Becka was glad to see that Neil was still alive at breakfast an hour later. She also noted that he was a much meeker and quieter man. He scarcely spoke a word during the entire meal.

After her shower Becka straightened up the cabin, steering clear of the clusters of ants that seemed to multiply by the minute. She hesitated at the window and gazed out at the cloudless sky and fuzzy horizon. How different the Southwest was compared to her mountainous home! She recalled two summers before when Geoffrey Blake had followed her the 2,000 miles to her college, then promptly dumped her for another girl.

"Oh, the unpredictability of infatuation!" she mused, then wondered about Brad. Was this infatuation also? After Geoff she had dated several guys, but none like Brad.

"More than just intelligence dwelt behind his frank, dark eyes," she thought. A sensitive spirit, rare honesty, and a gentleness that must have grown out of his careful Southern upbringing. Brad was a theology and psychology major at Becka's school. He was studying to become a hospital chaplain. His trim, athletic form stood about six inches taller than she. Add to those attributes a handsome, tanned face with a devastating smile, and Becka felt blessed indeed to have Bradley Colton as her boyfriend.

By ten o'clock Becka was able to wear her contact lenses and see clearly all the way to the swimming pool where the rest of her crew was cleaning. She decided to join them.

## WHEN NOVEMBER COMES

Tricia called from the smaller wading pool beyond as Becka walked up. “Hi! Glad to see you’re all right!” Tricia stood so short that the trash bag she clung to looked like a tent flapping at her side. “Why don’t you help me over here? You can’t imagine all the rocks and junk that are cluttering up this place.”

Bending over to scoop up more debris, Tricia gasped, then emitted a loud, piercing scream that made Becka stop dead in her tracks.