



Bad Medicine
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Hard Shell Word Factory

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Yellowstone National Park

Chapter 1

"What the hell kind of name is Sloan Stafford?" Reno Blackwolf scowled at his superior, Howard Jacobs, over the edge of a resume that read more like a PR piece than an application for employment.

Howard leaned back in his worn leather chair and smiled. "I don't know. California, I think. Malibu. That's what it says there."

A groan rumbled through Reno's chest and he clenched the paper in his hand tighter. "Why me? Why now?"

Jacobs' smile widened one hundred eighty degrees. "You're the ranger; you get the intern. You've weaseled out of it too often in the past and rumor has it that I'm showing favoritism. For the next three months, pal, that little miss is all yours."

"But--"

"Hey," Howard said with a quick dip of his brows. "You could do worse. I could've stuck you with that dour old maid Milton's working with, but I didn't. At least this Stafford gal is easy

on the eyes and smart as a whip." He tried to hide his amusement behind steepled fingers, but failed. "Don't say I never gave you anything, Blackwolf. She's dynamite."

"So's nitroglycerine but I don't shake it."

"I doubt it's shaking you'll want to do around this one."

Reno flashed his superior a dark look. "Those comments border on sexist. Last I knew that kind of stuff didn't go unless you were courting a sexual harassment suit--and harassment is one word, boss."

"Old attitudes die hard, my friend. Since when've you been politically correct?"

Reno gritted his teeth. Jacobs had managed to spread sunshine everywhere he could during his first year as superintendent. Summer was upon the park and Jacobs obviously enjoyed giving Reno the last assignment he'd ever wanted. "I know too well how hard old attitudes die, Howard," he said. "I just don't think the Park Service needs interns. We didn't have them in Bozeman. We had jobs, a park to care for, not babysitting some snot-nosed, Boulder party-girl, rich bit--"

Jacobs rose from his seat and held up his palm. "Prejudice? From you? Now there's an interesting premise. Anyway, the point is moot. She's waiting outside."

An image of the fair-haired beauty he'd stormed past only minutes before flashed through Reno's mind. Easy on the eyes was a major understatement, but that wasn't big on Reno's list of requirements for a partner. Strength and stamina and the ability to follow orders were. "You mean that piece of fluff in the lobby?"

He almost barked the words, the question coming out unaccountably harsh. A woman--any woman in general, this one in particular--was wrong for the job. Completely and totally. Females weren't cut out for rangering, a fact brought home loud and clear to everyone close to a command position a decade or so ago. That was pure fact, not sexism like Jacobs', just the plain truth and something Reno had learned the hard way. "She won't last the week."

The graying man smiled and unwrapped a tootsie-pop from the candy jar he kept fully stocked on his desk. "She graduated cum laude from Boulder and was at the top of her class in the master's program at the School of Mines--number one to be exact. That's hardly fluff."

"Boulder's a party school for rich little girls and boys." Reno barely restrained the resentment that bubbled up. He'd pulled enough half and fully-crooked college kids off the mountains to make anybody think twice about higher education. "Studying comes right after skiing and drinking and fraternizing with the opposite sex."

"At the university maybe, but not at the School of Mines," Jacobs said.

That wasn't so easily dismissed. Reno wanted to group it in the same category, but couldn't. He had a degree from the same school. "Well, hell..." He twisted his lips in a parody of a smile and rubbed his temple. "You've got me there."

"For a man who knows first hand about prejudice, you sound more than a little redneck," Jacobs said, scrutinizing the candied stick. "No pun intended."

"It never is." Reno didn't know if it was veiled racism or not. He could never really tell with Jacobs who invariably walked a razor-thin political line. Reno knew all about that area. Back in '88, he'd taken a demotion to get away from it. After the boys in Washington got done investigating the 'natural burn' policy and the national media got done scandalizing it, he'd had enough. Now, saddled with a California blonde, he was right back in the middle of the people-pleasing game. "Look, if I have to have an intern, make it a man, somebody who can do me some good."

Jacobs stood and turned to the window, watching the comings and goings of tourists and employees, then turned to face Reno. "Believe it or not women do the job and do it well. Rookies may be next to worthless in your book, but in mine they make a valuable contribution to

this park--"

"Valuable my ass," Reno growled.

Jacobs glared but let the comment pass. "God knows we can use the help with all the congressional budget cutting. It's more than cutting." he said to no one in particular. "More like butchering." His brows merged together in one ferocious line, and he glanced at Reno. "Besides, you don't have a choice. Every ranger gets their turn and now your number's up." He paused and eyed Reno like a bug under the microscope. "Especially when you're a grunt, a plain old Smokey-the-bear type."

The words rankled, but there was nothing in the other man's tone or demeanor that gave offense. He was as smooth as Reno had ever seen, and his observation was also right. After the political fallout of the fires of '88, Reno didn't need to be reminded of his place in the world. The only thing that had kept him in Yellowstone was his minority status and his love for the park. Even Jacobs couldn't change that, intern or no intern.

Mentally shutting out the raised voices inside, Sloan Stafford gazed around the National

Park Forestry Office. At first she didn't want to think they were arguing about her, but the mention of her name left no doubt. She couldn't make out the exact words, but the tones weren't pleasant. Sloan wiped her damp palms on her khaki shorts and swallowed through a desert-dry throat.

Why on earth was she so nervous? This was hardly her first job. Over the past five years, she'd waitressed, sold everything from bread makers to designer undergarments, telemarketed, and even put time in as a nanny. She shuddered at the memories of wrinkled hands, diapers by the carload, and a perpetually aching back. Scholarships and fellowships had paid the tuition but didn't quite extend to living expenses. And so she'd worked, always keeping her one dream in mind, staying focused on the goal she'd had for longer than she could remember: being a ranger in majestic Yellowstone.

Today was the first step in making that goal a reality. If she did a good job for the next three months, her field training officer, the FTO, might recommend her for the permanent position that was said to be opening up this year. More than anything in the world she wanted that job. She'd even let herself be staked naked over Old Faithful to get it.

She wiped her clammy palms again. If she shook hands with anyone, they'd know she wasn't

nearly as calm and collected as she appeared. Her hands would betray the enormity of the weight she put on this internship, her wavering confidence, and the knots in her stomach.

Her mother hadn't liked the idea of ranging, especially in Yellowstone with bears and wolves and especially Indians. Her father was dead set against it as well. His little princess wasn't destined to work with her hands. Her family was well off--very well off and the oppressive parental pampering and coddling had driven Sloan nuts. Until they'd visited Yellowstone.

There she could breathe deep and clean and unfettered. The wide-open spaces spelled freedom with a capital "F" and Sloan had fallen in love immediately.

Somewhere during her freshman year at Boulder, maybe because the Rockies surrounded her, she changed her major. Still, they had cut the purse strings in an effort to get her to change her major back to education. Sloan wrinkled her nose at the thought. No way. She was meant for higher things, and that higher was meant literally. High in the mountains, preferably in Yellowstone. In the end, her parents had finally accepted the inevitable. At least now the battles were over Yosemite, which was closer to home, and Yellowstone.

The door swung open and Sloan snapped out of the past and into the present. Standing, she

extended a hand to Mr. Jacobs, whom she'd spoken with yesterday.

He pumped her hand and a friendly, enthusiastic smile wreathed his face. "Sloan, we're thrilled to have someone of your accomplishment on board. Like I said yesterday, we recently lost a ranger to the Grand Canyon and we sorely need you."

She smiled back. Finally, finally, finally! she was in. This was it. The old saying about the first day of the rest of her life was really true and it was beginning now, this instant.

"Before we go any further, I'd like to introduce your FTO." Jacobs stood aside and another man, tall, forbidding, and silent with a piercing black scowl, folded his arms across a wide chest and glared down his angular nose at her. "Reno Blackwolf."

The man's hair, pulled into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, had to be at least shoulder length. His gaze skimmed over her dismissively. Anger snapped and crackled in the depths of his dark eyes. She caught herself before she could take a cautionary step back. One look from him and the whole room could explode. The height and breadth of him would intimidate most women and a majority of men, but for Sloan, his attitude merely chafed.

"Reno, this is Sloan Stafford, your charge for the next three months. If she's half as good as her school tells me, she'll probably be running this place in no time." He laughed and dipped his

head in a conspiratorial manner to Sloan. "Reno looks mean, but I assure you he's quite tame."

A muscle in the tall man's jaw ticked and he flashed Jacobs a black look. "Yeah," he drawled. "I've had all my shots and I haven't bit any little girls lately." He swung his inscrutable obsidian gaze her way. "Unless they asked real nice."

His chiseled jaw quirked into what might have been a smile. Sloan couldn't tell, but his gaze remained hard and wintry. Despite his warning about biting, the sensation of being in the presence of something wild and untamed swirled around her. Her first instinct was to step back and reassess her situation, but of course that would seem foolish and she wanted them both to think her strong and sharp and capable. She stepped forward and held her hand out to him. "Mr. Blackwolf."

Like his independent namesake, he ignored her gesture, keeping his hands tucked under the biceps that strained against his uniform shirt. "It's Reno."

His voice was rich and deep and cold. She dropped her hand and returned his glare, hitching her chin a notch to make eye contact. He probably put lots of people off with that thundercloud personality, but he hadn't dealt with Sloan Stafford yet. Especially not in her most determined state. If he thought he could get to her with that B-western attitude, he was nuts.

She'd French kiss the devil himself if that's what it took to get on here. Obviously, Jacobs wanted to test her mettle and see if it equaled her education. Well, fine. She was more than up to anything Blackwolf could dish out.

"And you can call me Sloan," she said. "Everyone does. I--" Her mind might have been prepared for whatever Blackwolf dished out, but her fingers had other plans. Fidgeting with the edge of her purse, it slipped out of her grasp, the contents scattering on the wooden floor, her lipstick rolled almost beneath his boot. Blackwolf's gaze darkened and his jaw tightened. He leaned down, but Sloan tried to beat him to it. A decided thunk of two hard heads colliding echoed through the lobby.

"Damn it--" Blackwolf rubbed his head and backed off, letting Sloan scoop everything back into her bag.

She blinked and mumbled an apology, mentally kicking her backside for the faux pas. What was with her? She hadn't acted like a nervous schoolgirl since...since she was one. So what? If the big guy didn't like it, the heck with him. She could get along without his acceptance. After all, she only needed his professional recommendation, not his personal stamp of approval.

His grinding teeth only accentuated his sculpted cheekbones, long dark lashes, and slashing

eyebrows. The khaki uniform hugged his wide shoulders, flat belly and lean hips like a second skin. She continued studying the physical perfection of her immediate supervisor until she met the glossy depths of his eyes. He was sizing her up, too. Her breath caught in her chest and she immediately stood, trying to regain the composure his simple glance had ruined.

He grabbed her shoulder. "Let's go." All but shoving her out the door, he stopped and turned back to the superintendent. "I'll take her to Mammoth so she can get settled. See you."

"Take her the long way, the scenic route. And don't be so hard on her, Reno. She has to walk before she can run."

"The only direction she'll run is back home."

"Just take it easy. I don't want any EEOC complaints about a hostile work environment."

"Hostile?" Reno pressed a broad hand against his chest. "Who? Me?" He settled his hat on his head, neatly tucking the queue under with more force than was necessary. "Never."

Sloan hitched her duffel over her shoulder. Blackwolf's grumbled words registered somewhere in the back of her mind, and the first day of the rest of her life loomed before her like an eternity in living hell.

Blast Fate anyway. She hadn't come this far to get torpedoed by a sexist supervisor! Reno

Blackwolf was a man who definitely needed a few revisions in his thinking and she was just the one to provide the editing.

Perfect, Reno thought, just freaking perfect! The last thing he needed or wanted was a woman tagging along beside--or behind--him in his park. He didn't want some little bit of female fluff sticking her nose into things that didn't concern her.

Already this spring was the driest, hottest on record since the debacle of eighty-eight. If things continued this way, he'd have enough to keep two men busy, and that was without the greenhorn schoolgirl tagging along.

Someone should've hung a big, orange warning sign around Stafford's neck, Dangerous Curves Ahead. And that was before they ever got to the winding mountain roads. Hell, she could make his pulse race and his palms sweat just by looking at her.

Great, just great. Actually it was bad, real bad. A lousy idea from start to finish, but there wasn't much he could do about it except get through it. Summer had never seemed so long.

Dragging her huge but classy suitcase, Sloan followed him to the four-by-four. Reno made no effort to help her. If she planned to make it as a ranger, she'd need every source of strength

she could muster and then some. Few women actually made it in the field and when they did, they usually screwed something up. Reno could only ask the gods not to let Stafford mess up as bad as Liza. He couldn't take that again.

Liza's delicate features filled his mind. Her betrayal filled his heart. All because she didn't have the guts to do what she'd hired on for, what she'd promised Reno she could handle. And he'd actually believed her. Now Jacobs wanted him to make nice with another woman. What a laugh. Females were bad medicine, for him and his park.

He didn't relish the time with Sloan Stafford, but he'd survive. His people, the Shoshoni, always had. These days most of the tribe was confined to reservations, but they'd been one with the land, the park, for more than seven hundred years. The white man's boundaries and laws would never change that.

He'd tried. After the fires he'd wanted to leave, go some where else, but he couldn't. This was the only home he knew, the only place that filled him with peace and contentment and made him feel alive. Yellowstone was his heritage, one he accepted gladly. It was also his guilt and his punishment to know the devastation and misery his decision had caused. In penance, he'd vowed to spend the rest of his life atoning for that decision, for placing trust where it didn't

belong.

But repentance should never be so enjoyable. Protecting mother earth to the best of his ability, caring for every inch of his heritage was a gift, not a punishment. He could never leave. He knew that now, was at peace with it. He belonged here. His people belonged here. Perky little Malibu blondes didn't.

Chapter 2

The drive to Mammoth proved long and tiring, the monotony relieved by Sloan staring at the muscle ticking in her reluctant chauffeur's clenched jaw. His attitude would keep a northern grizzly at bay, and Sloan had enough to adjust to in the next few days without bearding the Native American in his den. Besides, she thought with a smug smile they had to work together, so he'd have to speak to her sometime.

What was it about him that intrigued her? Oh, he was good looking, that was for sure. He seemed to carry intensity around like a cloak. His bottomless eyes flashed with intelligent scrutiny. In a blink of an eye, he'd given her such a thorough once over she sensed it in the depths of her soul.

And he didn't seem to even like her much. How much would his intensity increase for someone he was interested in? The answer came quickly, easily. It would be fierce, volcanic, and mind-blowing. She shot him a sidelong glance and her breath caught in her throat. It would also be as scary as hell.

As if sensing her perusal, he angled his head and darted a quick glance her way. Heat, power, and virility hit her like a punch. He wielded them as if they were his private domains. That one look made her shiver in the warm confines of the vehicle. She chafed her arms and turned her gaze to the beauty and wonder of Yellowstone. She'd achieved her heart's desire. Everything was exactly as it should be, but nothing like she'd planned.

The U.S. Park Service, helped a thousand-fold by the misers in Washington D.C., provided the biggest distraction in the midst of natural grandeur. Lousy roads.

Only a few main arteries traversed Yellowstone from Grant Village near the south entrance to Gardiner and Mammoth Hot Springs on the north, from Fishing Bridge on the east and Madison Junction on the west. Other, lesser, thoroughfares, like the one they drove on, were pitted and worn. With each jostle and jolt, Sloan's teeth crashed together. "Why," she asked. "With all the money that pours into this place each year, does the government allow such disrepair? Better yet, why do the tourists put up with them?"

Reno didn't even glance her way. He kept his hooded eyes straightforward, staring out the

windshield, and directly on the road.

"Hello," she said. "Anybody home?"

His black brows slashed together. He seemed startled, almost like she'd awakened him from a deep sleep. "What?"

Distinctly disquieted by the idea of a potential narcoleptic driving her and Blackwolf's bad attitude, Sloan returned his frown with one of her own. "I asked you," she said slowly and patiently, as though explaining to a kindergartner, "a question. Obviously I wanted an answer to something I didn't know."

His frown deepened to the scowl she'd seen at Jacobs' office. He wouldn't get many wrinkles in old age since he only appeared to have two facial gestures, blank and scowling. No laugh lines or crows feet would mar the perfection of his face. He never used those particular muscles.

"Don't use that patronizing tone with me, blondie--" He spoke through a clenched jaw.

"And don't use my hair color as my name," she shot back. "Unless you expect me to return the favor, 'blackie'--" she tried to duplicate his perpetual, intimidating scowl-- "you'd best wake up before you run us into a ditch."

Sloan couldn't have said what brought it on or what had changed, but in a heartbeat the dark, brooding Reno Blackwolf, broke into the hearty laugh she'd thought him incapable of performing. His full lips drew up to reveal straight white teeth in stark contrast to his copper-toned skin. Twin slashes--dimples almost, but not quite--flared in his cheeks and his eyes crinkled at the corners with the tiniest beginnings of crow's feet. She stared in fascination at the rock hard man of only moments ago. He was amazing. There might be hope for him yet.

His laugh died down to a broad, breath taking grin, and he shook his head. "That's quite a mouth you've got, Stafford, but don't worry. I haven't lost an intern yet."

A strong wrist draped atop the steering wheel, he turned to her and she forced herself to relax. A light tickle started at the back of her throat and drizzled down to pool in her belly. "And how many interns have you had?"

He pulled back as though catching himself, the light-hearted moment shuttered off as quickly as it had come. "Just you. So what was your question?"

"Huh?" It was her turn to make like a no-mind.

"Your question," he repeated in the same tone she'd used. "The one you needed answered?"

"Why are there so many potholes? Doesn't anyone fix them?"

A sharp sigh stabbed through Blackwolf's lips and he shook his head. The scowl was back in full intensity. He'd be tough to keep up with but at least his emotions only swung from dark to black. "What is it?"

"You," he muttered. "It sounds like this is the end of my peace and quiet."

"No wonder you haven't had any other interns," she said. "You probably scared them all off."

Again, that sideways, slashing move than almost passed as a grin. "That's right."

"Well, not me."

"Really?" he all but drawled. In the confines of the four-by-four, he made the word sound silky, intimate, challenging.

"Yes." She squared her shoulders but didn't look at him. "Really."

He straightened too. The challenge had been issued and accepted. May the best ranger win.

"Now," she began again. "About the roads?"

His long-suffering sigh said he wasn't happy about her persistence, but would tolerate it.

"The road conditions slow people down, helps in controlling the traffic. We have way too many folks who give in to too many temptations. Besides haven't you heard. . .speed kills."

His litany was as interesting as a section from Standard Operating Procedure Manual. Not only didn't Blackwolf like her, he was a letter-of-the-law man, precise and exact as a drill sergeant.

And yet, it didn't matter. He didn't matter. Deep in her heart she knew this would be the most fabulous summer of her life. She'd just have to find a way to keep from strangling her FTO.

Reno glanced at Sloan from the corner of his eye. Her blonde hair floated in the breeze. She'd never make it. She'd never care about his park, not in the same, soul-deep way he did. She was after a job. He'd made a life commitment.

Reno studied Sloan with darting sidelong glances. How could someone with skin that pale survive the sun and heat of a Yellowstone summer? After a couple of days in the field, Miss Politically Correct would get the sunburn of her life, blisters and all. Maybe the chance for skin cancer would be too much and she'd have to beat a hasty retreat back to California with sad tales of how cruelly she was mistreated by the big, nasty FTO, how he'd been too rough, the weather too hot.

The briefest hint of a smile touched his mouth. It would almost be too easy. He could have her gone, like a puff of lake fog in the morning sun within the month. But he couldn't let up, not

for one minute, until she did leave. Yeah--this time a full smile crossed his face--which would about do it.

He wound his way toward Mammoth, maneuvering around the potholes and bad paving like the veteran he was. Through the open window, the unmistakable scent of pine mixed with the light sulfur from some distant geyser or paint pot drifted through the woods.

Around a wide curve, they entered into a high open basin. The air cleared and a new scent, one mingled with wind, sun, and nature introduced her to an immense green valley farther below. An ocean of brown, beige, and sienna dotted the banks of a lazy, flowing river.

As they traveled down to the lower elevation, she rooted through her backpack and retrieved the binoculars. Adjusting the lenses, she sucked in an appreciative breath at the sight of milling bison roaming free, much as they had since before the dawn of time. Time seemed suspended in the panorama before her. She turned to ask Reno to pull the truck over so she could get a better view.

"This road is unreal at four o'clock," he grumbled before she even got the first word out. "Tourists clog up whole the valley."

Obviously Mr. Sunshine was on another roll. It was late morning, and already she felt like

she'd put in a twelve-hour day.

"Unless responding to a call, avoid this place in the afternoon like it had the plague."

"Reno?"

"Understand?"

"Yes. Reno--"

"If you absolutely have to come here," he said, "go overland."

"Reno!"

"What?" He snapped out the word a shade above a growl.

She'd had her fill of his lousy attitude and they hadn't even been together a day. She turned to face him. "Exactly what is your problem?"

"Problem?" His voice lowered past a growl to a dangerous register that vibrated along her spine, and his eyes flashed.

Goaded beyond good sense, she rushed ahead. "Yes," she hissed. "Is it women in general or is it just me? Or maybe you're just having a bad hair day? Something obviously flew up your nose and died--decades ago, I'd imagine."

He mashed his already tight lips closer together until they formed a thin, straight line. Again

something flickered in the depths of his eyes but it was gone so quickly she couldn't name it, doubted she'd want to if she could. His gaze snapped and hardened. "My problem," he grated out, "is ignorant tourists and over-eager rookies who come up here and expect it to be a Girl Scout Camp. Most anything can--and usually does--happen. Usually from sheer human stupidity or being so insulated in a city they lose what little common sense they were given. See those signs?"

Sloan followed his index finger toward the side of the road. Animals are wild. Do not approach or attempt to feed them. "Any idiot can see them," she snapped.

"Any idiot. Right. Any idiot should know that wild animals don't know where a cookie stops and the hand begins. To most of the wildlife around here, the hand is just dessert without all the fat and calories." He slammed his fist against the steering wheel. "And we get to clean it up. Not you--" He shoved that infernal finger her direction-- "Me and my kind."

"I am your kind."

"The hell you are!" His words hung in the air between them. He glared at her as best he could between the curves in the road and his sideways looks. "You're nothing like me. You're a rookie, one step above a damned tourist." He turned to glare at her full on. "Everybody wants to

commune with nature." He snorted his derision. "But they're thieves. They steal," he said. "Rape the essence of Yellowstone. Then, when the going gets tough you leave--"

Sloan straightened in her seat and set her jaw. "You know," she began. "I don't think I'm really part of your problem after all. It's obviously much bigger than being stuck with a mere intern, but I'd appreciate--no demand--a little respect. One human being to another. And," she rushed toward to add, "I'm here to stay."

Reno's jaded gaze said he doubted it. "We'll see. During the height of the season when you have to be ten different places at once, we'll see who's still around."

That said, he stared ahead again, like he had during the first of the trip. He drifted into the silence he seemed so comfortable with. With as haughty a sniff as she could manage, Sloan refocused on the textures, colors, and terrain that cascaded into view.

After six years of struggle, she could put up with anything or anybody, especially a mere man.

Reno muttered three explicit words and shoved the brakes to the floor. The truck screeched and lurched, interrupting her. A string of cars lined the road as far ahead as Sloan could see. Everything was at a complete standstill. Horns honked. Children cried. People milled aimlessly

across and along the highway.

"Probably a tourist stopped in the middle of the road to take a once in a lifetime picture of a ground squirrel. Stupid human trick number one thousand eight hundred and twelve." Hands braced on his open door, Reno turned back, a sly smirk twisting the corners of his mouth. "Okay, California, here's lesson number one."

He reached behind her, his shoulder grazing hers. Intensely and acutely aware of the steel beneath the uniform, the heat of his body, his woodsy, masculine scent, she froze. He, too, stilled--infinitesimally--so that she might not have even noticed if she hadn't been so attuned to him.

In a quick motion, he was out of the vehicle jerking a bullhorn to his mouth. "Get back in your vehicles and proceed to the left."

Sloan jumped out and hurried to catch up. About a half-mile up the road, they discovered the problem.

A young man barely into his twenties worked diligently under a dilapidated truck to repair what looked like a broken radiator hose. Blackwolf thrust the bullhorn at Sloan. "Direct traffic around this mess."

With a curt greeting, he slid under the truck beside the younger man. Sloan continued blaring the instructions. Walking on the opposite side, she glanced through the truck's open passenger window. A very pregnant, very uncomfortable-looking young woman fanned her face with a map and rubbed her stomach with her other hand. Tossing her a worried glance, Sloan motioned traffic past and ordered drivers to move along. A low moan snagged her attention and she glanced back at the woman. Her teeth-baring grimace almost had Sloan mirroring her. She was obviously in labor. "Mr. Blackwolf?"

No response. Sloan's heart thudded dully in her chest. "Um...Reno?"

No response. He was obviously preoccupied under the chassis. Perspiration beaded on the woman's upper lip and dampened her brow.

Another low, deep, almost animalistic groan drew Sloan. "Are you all right?"

Between deep panting gasps, the woman shook her head. Blood trickled from her lower lip where she still bit the tender flesh. Sloan reached in and laid her palm on the woman's rigid stomach. A strong contraction tightened her abdomen.

Sloan tossed the bullhorn down. "I'll be right back."

Reno popped out from under the truck. "I said to--"

He was speaking to thin air. What the hell?

Within seconds Sloan brought up the four-by-four, lights flashing, hopped out, ran over to the disabled truck, and wrenched open the door. Her gaze paused on Reno a bare instant. "Come on, ma'am. Can you walk?"

The woman stifled a moan. "I don't think I can."

Sloan slid her arm around her. "Sure you can. Here we go."

She helped her charge into his vehicle leaving Reno stark still and wide-eyed in the middle of the road. Slamming into gear, she stuck her head out the window. "Sir, we're taking your wife to the first aid station in . . .?"

The husband slid in beside his wife. "You're not leaving me behind."

"Mammoth," Reno said. "It's forty miles away. I know the roads better."

"And you know more about mechanics than I do, too, so take care of the truck." Her tone brooked no disobedience, even from him. "I'll get her to a doctor."

"Now just a damned--" Not wanting to knuckle under to Stafford at this early date and needing to establish himself as the head of their duo, Reno hesitated. A low moan split the air.

"Okay." Sloan slid the truck into park. "You can deliver the baby, too, Mr. Wizard."

He clenched his jaw and glared at her. "Go on."

"I will." She laid a short strip of rubber and raced down the road in a manner that would do a New York ambulance driver proud. Reno shook his head and went back to the truck. So much for the inept, insipid California Valley Girl.

The woman's name was Maryanne. Her husband, well trained in Lamaze techniques, was Jonathan. Sloan radioed ahead and the aid station blazed with excitement. By the time they arrived, contractions were only a minute apart. Sloan let Jonathan coach and focused on not getting bumped off the road. Finally, they skidded into the parking lot. A tall woman with shining black hair in a waist-length ponytail helped Maryanne out, Jonathan scrambling behind her.

Together they lifted Maryanne into a wheel chair and hurried her inside. "I'm Angela Whitestone," the dark-haired woman said breathlessly.

"Sloan Stafford," Sloan said.

Helping the mother-to-be onto a gurney, Angela hooked up a fetal monitor and draped a

sheet over Maryanne's knees. "Come on, Dad. Let's go," she called. "We've got us winner here."

Within fifteen minutes a wizened baby boy nestled comfortably in the crook of his mother's arms. Angela wrapped the baby, checked his mother's blood pressure and turned to Sloan. "Well, Sloan Stafford," Angie said, "Glad to meet you. You're my new roommate." Pulling off a wet, latex glove, she extended her hand and a genuine smile. "Welcome to Yellowstone."

Chapter 3

Angie handed Sloan a beer and plopped down on the couch across from her. "So you've helped deliver a baby and survived your first day with Reno." She took a drink and nodded her head. "Pretty good, I'd say."

Sloan held the bottle to her lips and took a long pull letting the cool liquid tickle her tongue. "You delivered the baby and as for Blackwolf..." she gazed up toward the ceiling. "...let's just say his disposition fits his name."

"Poor baby." Angie scrubbed her hand across her forehead. "It must've been a real bitch of a day. Blackwolf," she said lowering her voice, "is his Indian name, brother to the wolf. And don't worry, he's not always a mean, nasty grouch. He just has a few problems with change." Angie pushed her shoes off and crossed her ankles atop the coffee table. "But he's really a great guy."

Sloan stared at Angie trying to picture Reno as a 'great guy.' "That I'd have to see to believe."

She grabbed a few pretzels from the bag Angie had tossed on the table and took another swallow of beer. Nothing had ever tasted better and she'd never been so tired, frustrated, or depressed. "What did I do to deserve him?"

"You didn't do anything really," Angie said cheerfully. "You probably remind him of someone he'd rather forget."

Sloan sat up. "Oh great. All that attitude because I remind him of someone? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"Reno's own particular brand of logic and a combination of events that happened a decade ago. He's never gotten over it, or her."

"Her?" Sloan set her bottle on the table and leaned forward. "Tell me about it."

"Sure, but this requires more than just beer. We'll need sustenance, real food and lots of it. I hope you like pizza. It's got all the important nutrients besides being my basic staple."

Sloan laughed. "I hope you don't teach nutrition."

"Not!" Smiling Angie sat forward. "I've got one in the freezer. Nothing fancy. I'll pop one in. You must be starved." Angie downed the last of her beer, stood, and reached toward the ceiling to unkink her joints before sauntering into the kitchen.

"I passed hungry a long time ago." Sloan moved to the couch, leaned her head back and relaxed for the first time in twenty-four hours. Mammoth was town, resort, and headquarters all rolled into one pleasant setting. Nestled at the base of the hot springs, elk and mule deer roamed about the streets as if they still owned the land.

"Do all park employees live here?"

"Most of the time. The daily commute from outside is just too long so everyone stays during his or her rotations. Reno, too. He lives on the edge of town. You can see it from there."

Despite herself, Sloan stood and strode toward the window, but couldn't bring herself to peel back the curtain and glance up toward the terraces.

"Give him some time," Angie called back amid the rattle of pans. "He'll come around. He's not so bad. He and my Jimmie have been friends for years."

"Jimmie?"

Angie popped her head around the doorway. "Jimmie Sunbear. We're getting married in the fall. He's the local sheriff at Wind River. He's in Mammoth on assignment. He's stayed with Reno for the last few weeks. We usually spend weekends together, but we'll try not to bother you."

"Nonsense," Sloan said softly. "This is your place. It's me who's bothering you."

Angie wandered over to Sloan, parted the curtains above her head, and pointed toward the north end of town. A dark figure, definitely large and definitely male, stood on the porch smoking. She watched the glow of his cigarette in the twilight. "That's Reno on the porch. Jimmie and Reno went to school on the Wind River Reservation, but Jimmie's the only one who's stayed full time. I'm going to practice medicine there after we're married."

"Are you a doctor?"

Angie's eyes and mouth widened in a huge smile. "I wish. All the tribe could afford was nurses training."

Sloan lifted her eyebrows. "The tribe?"

Angie smiled. "Yeah. I'm Bannock-Shoshoni. Jimmie says Shoshoni's my best part. All through childhood, I was his and Reno's tag along playmate. Until I went away to college, then grad school..." She gazed out at the panorama. "...Things changed, the world changed, we changed. When I came back for a visit last winter, Jimmie proposed. I still have some graduate courses to complete--officially I'm a physician's assistant--but I do just about everything a physician does, except brain surgery."

She turned, her lips tipped in a half smile at Sloan who'd almost believed her until the rich sound of her laughter filled the room. She put her hand on Sloan's shoulder and softened her voice. "Just kidding. I do birthing, suturing, dispensing, and bottle washing."

Sloan glanced back at Reno's cabin. "So tell me, doc. How will I survive the next three months?"

Angie's laughter filled the cabin. She strode to Sloan, cupped her shoulders, and ushered her toward the couch. "Come and sit down. Reno's probably a little angry--"

"A little angry?" Sloan fisted her hands on her hips. "He nearly tore my head off, and that was when we were introduced."

Angie patted Sloan's shoulder. "I know. He's got a temper and he'll pout for a while, but once you gain his trust, he'll be okay--even pleasant."

Sloan shook her head. "I don't know. . ."

"Come on. Let Sister Angie tell you all the gory details about Reno's Last Stand."

By the time the first rays of dawn drenched the lodge poles with color, Sloan and Reno had

already inspected most of the Fishing Bridge campgrounds for any sign of bears.

"Do you really think there are grizzlies this close to the camp?"

Reno fastened the lid of a loose container and glared down at her. "That's what a typical tourist thinks. They think they're safe because the '88 fires drove them to high country."

"High country?"

"You've heard of the fires?"

"Of course." Sloan leveled her gaze squarely at him.

"Last night the Cody newspaper reported a housewife in Wapiti complaining about grizzlies rummaging through her trash."

The thought of coming face to face with a great beast sent icy shivers through her. "I've seen a grizzly only once." She smiled. "I was a child and it was from a safe distance. I watched it climb along the foothills of Glacier Park near the Highway-to-the-Sun."

His jaw softened. "Yeah, been there, too."

Reno had seemed subdued, almost pleasant so far this morning, and she hoped everything Angie had told her the night before was true. That he didn't hate all women--only California blondes who left their posts during fires.

Great! She'd spent the last six years confronting and overcoming every roadblock in her way. Now, with only three months left, she had to make nice with a sullen, who-knows-what-else, supervisor. And for what? A chance to work with him even longer. Smart, Sloan! Just sentence yourself to prison for life.

"There's a smoldering campfire up there. Reno's deep voice sliced through her thoughts. "Check it out."

"What?"

His lean, dark arm pointed out the window. "Up there."

She craned her head and gazed up the steep incline. "You're joking. It's almost straight up...." Craggy rocks supported small clumps of bushes and trees. Sloan's head reeled. How had he picked her main phobia right off the bat?

Lucky, lucky, lucky. The chant echoed in her head. "I don't see any smoke."

He slanted her a dark scowl. "Do as you're told."

Sloan knew the inevitable and if she complained it'd go on her record. "Where's the climbing gear?"

"In the back."

The small muscle in his jaw clenched and unclenched. Just great. Three months of monosyllabic conversation would be like three years.

She found the rope, couplings, and gloves all neatly done up in a pack. She sucked in a deep breath and hesitated.

"I'm right behind you."

Oh sure, make her do the climb, but he'd be there if she made any mistakes. Climbing was her least favorite of all the duties performed by a ranger. She'd hoped to avoid it as much as possible, but no such luck. On her first official day she was gearing up for a climb. Lucky, lucky, lucky.

Grabbing onto small bushes and branches, she slowly pulled, scrabbled, and fought her way up the steep grade.

"Who the hell taught you to climb?" Reno asked.

She glanced back. "I--"

"Good Lord. Look at that." He pointed to the debris, a trail of uprooted twigs and broken bushes left in her wake.

She ground her teeth. "Maybe I should fly up instead?"

"No," he said almost cheerfully. "But you could check out the natural footholds and handholds. They're there. Just keep your balance and find them. Here--"

He pushed on ahead of her. "I'll show you."

Carefully placing his feet and hands in minute crevasses and small indentations, he worked his way easily up the incline. The corners of his mouth turned up in a smug grin. He was enjoying this. Anger warmed her cheeks. Sloan wasn't about to allow him to make a fool out of her. Grinding her teeth, she squared her shoulders and matched his movements. Slowly, she inched toward the summit.

There, on a small plateau overlooking the low-lying valley below, a circle of glowing twigs and leaves smoldered. Her heart flip-flopped in her chest. He'd been right. It wouldn't take long for a breeze to come along and liberate the live coals and spread them across the buffalo grass below. Voila! A repeat of '88.

Reno stamped out the troublesome embers and emptied his canteen over the pile.

"How did you know?"

His dark eyes flashed mischievously. "Famous Indian tracking skills."

For a moment, she could only stare. The corners of his mouth turned up, and a sigh of relief

exited her lungs. A smile crinkled the tiny creases around his eyes and softened the hard planes of his face so that he was more than good-looking--almost approachable. Her heart thudded against her chest. Why did he have to be so angry all the time? Why couldn't he just be a nice friendly guy without the wise cracks? Why was he so intent on making her feel as if she hadn't one working brain cell? Dumb question and she already knew the answer.

"Okay, so I forgot Forestry one-oh-one. It's a little different putting textbook theory to work in the field. Your experience told you that campers frequent this ledge, right?"

Reno studied her. One part of him wanted to laugh at her, embarrass her into defeat. The other was sorry he'd been so insistent she climb hoping to make a fool out of her. He'd tossed off his remarks without thought. Now, in his half-hearted attempt to lighten up, he'd succeeded in proving she was stronger than he'd guessed.

He'd treated her unfairly. He wouldn't expect a male rookie to climb without instructions. He steeled himself against that thought. A male rookie hadn't left his post and disgraced his FTO, either.

Neither had she, a tiny voice nagged. So what? She'd be outta here in a few weeks--he'd make sure of that.

So what if the look of her stole his breath when he'd picked her up in the morning? So what if she seemed intelligent and strong? So what if she'd climbed the bank with ease after he'd showed her the way? None of it mattered. He wouldn't let it.

"Come on," he grumbled. "We're burning daylight."

The sunlight's weakened rays dipped behind a mountain peak and left the valley blanketed in the shadowy softness of evening. The rest of Sloan's day had almost been heavenly. Reno may have pushed her to the point of exhaustion but, she had to hand it to him, he'd been right with her, not hanging on the sidelines and giving orders.

Until today, she'd thought herself in good physical and mental condition, but from the throbbing in her calves and her head, she needed a long hot soak in the tub. Reno hadn't said much on the drive back except to criticize each and every turn she made.

By the time they drove into the parking lot across from Lake Yellowstone, her stamina had worn thin and her self-confidence had taken some powerful blows. Yet, still the day had been filled with excitement. Even the climb--or maybe especially because of conquering it--she'd

loved every minute of her job. Everywhere she turned, she saw beauty, majesty, and grandeur. The thick guardian pines, colorful bubbling paint pots, the still icy rivers, and the lush flower-filled valleys were all served up in a never-ending bounty. Exactly as she'd always dreamed it, of living and working here. This was the reason she'd somehow stick it out and get past Reno's criticisms and sarcastic remarks. At least she'd be able to put him out of her thoughts for the rest of the night and relax a little.

"We're going out tonight," Angie said in greeting.

It was all Sloan could do to drag herself over to the couch. The thought of an evening in West Yellowstone sounded appealing in theory, but not in practice. The day had been long and the night would be too short.

"I've had a rough day, Angie."

"Everyday is rough, especially with Reno, but you stuck it out. Besides it's Friday. We all have the weekend off and Jimmie's taking us out to dinner."

Reno had dogged every step she'd taken, not letting her rest for a minute or allowing her to enjoy the experience. Assignments came one after the other. At least his disposition had

changed--from sullen to quiet. In the last few days something about Reno had changed. Somehow she'd become comfortable with him and actually enjoyed herself.

Reluctantly, she forced herself up and staggered into the bedroom, unconsciously sliding on a pair of jeans and a lavender sweater in deference to the cold night. She welcomed the chance to let her hair flow out of its customary braid and brushed it until it curled softly around her shoulders. Although she'd rather curl up and sleep for a month, she felt she owed it to her new friend and excellent roommate to have a good time. Now if she could just keep from falling asleep at the table.

Sloan leaned back in her chair and rubbed her stomach. "Not another bite."

"But you've got to try the huckleberry pie. It's absolutely fabulous." Angie pushed her dessert plate over to Sloan.

"I can't even look at another bite. I haven't had this much to eat since I was on the track team in high school."

"Yeah, but with Reno pushing you, you need the calories," Jimmie added.

"I didn't say he pushed me."

Jimmie winked. "You didn't have to. He's Reno. By the way, I invited him to come along, but he had paperwork to catch up on. Might be by later."

Jimmie's matter of fact statement startled Sloan almost as much as the rapid beating of her heart at the mention of Reno's name. A strange reaction to someone who treated her so harshly. Although toward the end of the day, he'd seemed almost friendly, as if they'd formed an unspoken truce. Sloan wasn't sure she liked his affect on her. "He seemed pretty owly today. Had to stop some fraternity boys from climbing up the face of Mammoth's hot springs--a dare--and they didn't take kindly to his intrusion."

"He's lucky," Jimmie said. "I'm so backed up with paperwork it'll take me a month to do it all. But it's my own fault for procrastinating. Took me forever to get around to asking Angie to marry me. Isn't that right, forest flower?" Jimmie filled their beer glasses and ordered another pitcher.

"But when you did...." Angie replied wistfully, cupping his chin in her hand.

"We should be glad he's not here yet," Jimmie said cheerfully. "If he's in such a bad mood, he might put a damper on the party."

Angie flashed him a look that Sloan wondered about. Jimmie had kept the draws coming steadily to their table ever since they'd first sat down, but he acted normal and she'd thought nothing of it until Angie's furtive glance.

"Come on, Jimmie." Angie stood and pulled him to his feet. "Let's do some dancing--work off that supper."

She linked her arms around the tall man's neck and kissed his cheek. He smiled and playfully batted her away. His thick braid fell down his back to his waist. Sloan liked the easy way smiles crossed his face. He was the opposite of Reno. Darn it! Why did her thoughts always turn to Reno?

"Okay, Pocahontas." He gulped his glass dry, stood, and slid a muscled brown arm around Angie's waist. "Just promise I can lead."

A look of contented happiness replaced Angie's worried expression. Excitedly, she led her man toward the small parquet dance floor.

Sloan smiled and sipped away at her beer, watching the crowd. Reno didn't seem the type to socialize with the riff-raff grunts. He was too stubborn to have a good time like this.

Jimmie two-stepped Angie back to her seat and bowed down in front of Sloan. "Next? Do

you lead, too?"

She smiled, put her hand in Jimmie's outstretched one, and allowed herself to be caught up into Jimmie's easy step. The music was bouncy, the company pleasant. Everything a girl could ask for.... Their dance over, Jimmie excused himself to the little boy's room and Angie sauntered over to the jukebox. Despite herself, Sloan's gaze kept straying to the entrance.

Muffled angry voices drifted just above the strains of another Garth Brooks song. Angie turned, a look of anguish on her face. Jimmie and a burly blond man swathed in plaid red flannel were engaged in a shoving match on the dance floor. Jimmie was tall and muscular but no match for the giant towering over him. Angie darted over to stand between them, trying to coax Jimmie back toward their table. Puffing in disapproval, he followed her to their table.

"What's that all about?" Sloan glanced at Angie whose wide eyes still shimmered with fear.

"Nothing much," Jimmie offered. "Seems the dance floor wasn't big enough for me and Paul Bunyan there."

"Excuse me?" Angie said. "Sounds to me like you started it this time." She turned toward Sloan and whispered. "His temper sometimes gets the best of him. Especially when he's been..."

"And you're mad at me," he added contritely. "Come on, Angie, give me a break. Hey

Ralph," Jimmie called out to the bartender. "Another pitcher."

"Sure thing, Jim."

Sloan put her hand over her still full glass. "No more for me."

Jimmie's dark eyes flashed at Angie. "Don't worry, I won't drink Reno's share...unless he doesn't come."

The bartender brought the beer and Jimmie downed several glasses in quick succession. From Angie's flushed cheeks, she was doing a slow burn.

"Where's Reno? This party's getting dead." Jimmie snorted and slammed back his drink. Angie glared and turned her head toward Sloan. "Reno will be here soon, and he'll be mad. He won't want to nurse your hangover tomorrow."

The attempt at humor drifted lifelessly around them. Sloan wished she was anywhere but here. Her first night out in a long time and she was caught in the middle of a lover's spat. Even the thought of seeing Reno didn't change that fact.

"He doesn't tell me what to do and neither do you."

Sloan stood, realized she had nowhere to go and sat down. "I--ah--"

"So the little lady wants to dance?" The blond powerhouse staggered over to Sloan and put

his massive hand on her arm. Instinctively she pulled away and Jimmie stood. "She doesn't want to dance--especially with you. Get lost."

The man turned toward Jimmie, but Sloan moved between them. "Yes, I do. Come on."

She practically pulled the man onto the dance floor. The touch of his hand on her waist made her flesh crawl, but she had no choice but to try and keep peace at least until Reno arrived. Although she didn't know what he could do, either. Maybe she could appease the ape that tugged her closer with each beat. Luckily it was a two-step and she didn't have to be smashed up against him. "What's your name little doll? I'm Jake."

Why did she know that? "Sloan, and the only reason I'm dancing with you is to keep things quiet so don't get any ideas that I'm interested."

A smile crossed Jake's weather-beaten face. "You'll be interested by the time I'm done. What's a pretty little thing like you doing with that oily bunch from the reservation?"

"That's it. This dance is over." Sloan tried to turn on her heel, but he held her arm in a vice-like grip.

"Take your hands off the lady." Jimmie's voice interrupted. It wasn't a command; it was stated as a fact.

"Go back to the Res, boy--" In a heartbeat, Jimmie was flying through the air and crashing into their table. Sloan looked back at Angie bending over him. Sloan struggled against Jake's grip, but his grip held her fast.

"You were told to get your hands off the lady." Reno's deep voice filled the room with menace. The burly man's grip tightened yet again. The sound of her heart thudding in her ears almost drowned out Reno's voice. Dressed in a pale blue chambray shirt tucked into second-skin jeans he took her breath away. His dark hair hung loose against his cheeks and he pushed his way to the dance floor.

"Come on, fella. Don't want to start anything you can't finish. The guy you just nailed is a lawman and I doubt if you and your friends want to spend the night in jail, do you?"

"He ain't nothin' 'cept in his own territory. We ain't stupid."

Reno squared his shoulders and widened his stance. He filled the room and, Sloan noticed, sucked out most of the oxygen. "You boys aren't real smart. Cops stick together and the West Yellowstone sheriff will take Jimmie's word over yours. You'd best clear out."

A string of racial epithets swarmed like the buzzing of angry hornets, but the only sign of anger was in Reno's ticking jaw. Jake released his grip on Sloan and the blood flowed back into

her legs. Reno slid his arm around her and drew her away.

The angry group pushed passed him and sidled over to their table. Sloan disengaged herself and hurried over to the table and gathered up her purse. "I think we'd better leave. Okay, Angie?"

Jimmie downed another glass and stood up. "What's wrong? That son-of-a-bitch hurt you?"

"No...Jimmie...I," She reached out and grabbed his sleeve, but it was too late. He stormed past Reno to where Jake sat.

"Lumberjacks?" Sloan whispered half-heartedly.

"No." Angie didn't take her gaze off Jimmie. Sloan's followed Reno. "More like strip miners," Angie said. "Probably from Montana. That's all Jimmie needs. His temper gets short when he's drinking and he's already had too much."

"Why's he mad at Reno?"

"Jimmie loves Reno like a brother but he doesn't want to embarrass himself by showing any weakness." She turned and put her hand on Sloan's. "I'm sorry. We've ruined your evening. Jimmie rarely drinks or gets drunk. He knows his example as a lawman means more than words. But he's been under a lot of strain lately and..." She scrubbed her hand over her eyes. "...he

won't talk about it, but I think the stress has gotten to him. Someone is polluting the rivers. He suspects strip mining—probably from Montana. He's probably thinking that jerk was one of them."

Heat flushed Sloan's cheeks. "And I could've handled it."

Reno strode back to the table and sat down.

"You didn't have to do that," Jimmie said embarrassed. "There's no need for you to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

Reno gazed at his friend. "Come on, Jimmie. It's been a long night for everyone. You've had too much to drink and I don't think Sloan or Angie had a good time watching you swill beer and make trouble."

Jimmie stiffened and rose out of his seat. "Make trouble? I didn't...the only trouble around here is you in my face." He shoved Reno. "You've been nothing but trouble since we were kids. Hell, you're nothing but trouble for the park, too. Good thing they had to keep a quota of apples—"

"Stow it, Jimmie," Reno growled between clenched teeth.

They squared off. First Jimmie stood and then Reno followed suit. Angie pulled on Jimmie who shook her off. Sloan glanced at Angie who stood and backed away.

"I ain't stowing nothing. You're a damned token and you know it. That's why you take all the white man's--"

"I said shut up."

Jimmie kept his tirade. "You treat me like a kid, like dirt. Hell, you treat everyone like dirt...even sweet, little Sloan there...what's she ever done?"

Reno put his hand on Jimmie's back and eased him forward. "Come on. Let's go--"

Jimmie's fist flew glancing a weak blow off Reno's jaw. Sloan watched horrified. In a split second friendship was forgotten and instinct took over, Reno countered with a hard right to Jimmie's jaw and he dropped like a lead weight. Reno, tossed him over his shoulder and mumbled a gruff, "C'mon."

In the back of Reno's car, the dazed man mumbled a few words and then slumped back.

"I'm sorry, Sloan. You didn't need to see this." Angie sniffed. "Jimmie's never done this. I've only seen him drunk once. I'm sorry--"

"Don't worry about it. These things happen."

Reno gripped the wheel in a white-knuckled grip. Sloan cast a worried glance at Jimmie and leaned toward Reno. "Will he be all right?" she whispered.

His initial look was angry, but his gaze softened as it searched her face. "He'll be fine. He's just had a bad time. The big ape inside made him feel like a fool. Then his big brother comes along and he felt helpless."

"Big brother?"

"As in blood. Haven't you ever played Indians? Didn't you have a blood brother or sister?" One side of his mouth tipped up in a sly smile.

"Well...yes, but--"

"What? You didn't think we actually did that sort of barbaric thing?"

Sloan turned sideways in her seat. Reno glanced at her. Anger flashed in her eyes.

"Since you seem to know everything I'm thinking, you tell me."

Reno tunneled his fingers through his hair. Every time he tried to say something friendly, she took it wrong and it was wearing thin. "Look, I didn't mean to--"

She swiveled back to face the front. "You never do, but it always sounds the same, like you're mad at me for...whatever."

He knew the feeling. Sloan seemed to always spark the same reaction in him. Heat from a deeply hidden place and then anger. It was always the same when he was around her. Frustrated,

Reno slapped his palm against the steering wheel. "It's just that--"

"Hey!" A startled cry from the back interrupted them. "What happened to my face?"

"It collided with my fist, little brother." Reno hollered back.

Jimmie tried to sit up, but Angie pulled him back. "Oh, no, you, don't. You're spending the night in the infirmary, James Sunbear."

A sheepish look crossed his face. He rubbed his swollen jaw and settled his head in Angie's lap so she could caress his forehead. "Okay, Angie, but only if you take care of me."

"You've got a deal." She bent down and feathered a kiss across his lips.

"Jimmie's hand flew to his jaw. "Ouch! Dammit, Reno!"

"Serves you right," Angie said matter-of-factly. She leaned forward and put her hand on Reno's shoulder. "Drop us at the infirmary. Then take Sloan home, okay?"

Reno nodded and in a few minutes pulled into the infirmary parking lot. He glanced back at Angie. "I'll help get him out."

"Like hell. You've done enough already." Jimmie scrubbed his hand across his face and climbed out of the jeep. "My body can't take any more of your help. Hey, where's my car?"

"Back in West Yellowstone," Reno said.

Jimmie sighed, his shoulders slumping in resignation. "I'll take you there, tomorrow," Reno said.

"Okay, bro," came Jimmie's reply.

Reno hopped out and clapped a hand on Jimmie's shoulder. Angie pulled Jimmie toward her and slid his arm around her waist and headed toward the doors. "See you in the morning, Reno. Thanks for everything."

"Sure." From his downcast eyes, Sloan could have sworn the man who'd dogged her these past couple days, had made her life miserable seemed shy, embarrassed, and vulnerable. There was a lot about this side of Reno she liked. He seemed more human, more caring. Dangerous qualities in someone who looked like Reno.

Just before entering the infirmary, Jimmie turned back and hollered one last comment. "You be good, now."

"Always." The rich timbre of Reno's voice hit her in the pit of her stomach...and snaked lower, filling her with an unbidden flash of what Jimmie intimated. Warmth flushed Sloan's cheeks, and she silently cursed the telltale blush.

Reno climbed into the jeep and glanced at her. In the streetlight he could see the blush

across her cheeks, one that made him want to cup her cheek in his palm. Blushing. How could this supposedly hip, with it, Malibu chick blush at Jimmie's hackneyed inference that he might do more than just take her home? He'd pegged her for a free spirit do-gooder. Easy to leave and easy to forget. Now he knew better.

He drove the half-mile across Mammoth and pulled into Angie's parking stall. In a fluid motion he stopped the engine and rounded to the passenger side to unlatch her door. "Curbside service."

His attempt to be humorous died right there. Her face was tipped toward the full moon that glistened down on her. Her eyes glistened like a summer storm. The moonlight coated each strand of hair with a glowing halo, framing her face with a natural aura.

Before his mind even formed a rational thought his hand strayed to that silken hair. A slight shiver moved through her and he moved his hand to her arms. "Are you cold?"

She shook her head, a soft smile crossing her lips. He hadn't meant to, but the forces of night and the moon's gravity pulled him closer. He cupped the nape of her neck and brought her lips to his. He leaned her against the jeep and molded his form into her softness.

He was much different than Sloan would ever have believed. As authoritative as he was on

the job, his kiss was hesitant, exploring her response. She gave it, and all hesitancy vanished. His tongue retraced the path of his lips and her stomach whirled. Tiny shards of anticipation filled her and her tongue met his with equal abandon, dancing, dueling, thrusting. Her back against the vehicle, his body pressed against her sent a promise of pleasures yet to be explored.

She returned his kiss with a hunger that shocked her, caught her up in a consuming need that defied rational thought. She wanted him.

Each new sensation heightened her appetite. The scent of man, heat, and night filled her senses. She ran her hands up his arms, reveling in the hard biceps that flexed and rippled with his movements. He pulled her closer, held her tighter, and slid his fingers through her hair to anchor her more securely to him.

And then it was over--as abruptly as it had begun. One moment Reno's hungry mouth was devouring hers and the next, night air cooled them. She sucked in a ragged breath and fought to maintain some semblance of normalcy, as if he hadn't just turned her world upside down.

A quick glance at Reno said he wasn't in much better shape. His broad chest heaved under the cotton shirt and he stared at her like he was shell-shocked.

She reached a hand toward him. "Reno--"

"Don't," he said on a reedy breath. "Don't touch me."

Stung, she dropped her hand and stepped back.

"Sloan," he said, his deep voice rasping through the air between them. "I'm sorry. You're my intern; I never should have--" He raked his hand through his unbound hair. "I stepped out of line here."

He was right of course, but it galled Sloan to admit it. She'd never felt so vibrant, so alive before. She'd never met a man who'd made her feel like Reno had. He met her gaze straight on and renewed the fire inside all over again. Before she could speak or move, he stepped back. Once. Twice. He kept backing away, like she was flame...and he was dry tinder.

"Forget this ever happened, Sloan," he said. "Or we'll never be able to work together."

Somehow, she made her head nod in agreement. "Sure, Reno."

As though coming to some internal understanding, he nodded, too. "Okay." He continued nodding. "Good."

"See you tomorrow," Sloan said.

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

Sloan watched his tail lights until they were pinpoints in the night. Reno might have convinced himself that things could go back to the way they were before, but she knew better. There was such tenderness in his kiss, such poignancy, that she finally believed what Angie had been saying about him. He wasn't the dark, nasty ranger he tried so hard to portray. There was a lot more to Reno Blackwolf than what lay on the surface, and Sloan couldn't wait to discover what it was.

Sloan had to hand it to him, the man put on a great front. If she hadn't known better, she'd think him the same nasty, bear-with-a-thorn-in-his-paw FTO of the previous week. Anything she tried to do or say to smooth matters out between them was met with dark scowls and a surly attitude. But she couldn't get the kiss out of her mind. She couldn't erase the look on Reno's face, couldn't take away the taste of him, the smell of him. So, she gritted her teeth together and refused to respond. He was bruising for a fight, but he wouldn't get one from her.

She hoped.

"Sloan!"

She'd grown more than tired of hearing her name barked out in his clipped, hard voice. All day, it had taken her a moment to gather her stamina not to give in and have it out with him. Still, he'd have stomped all over most people's last nerve a long time ago. "Yes, sir, Mr. Reno, sir," she said and snapped out a smart salute.

"Stow it smart ass and get in the jeep."

Sloan did as ordered. At least they'd be riding. She shook her head and settled back in the seat. He was one stubborn hombre. He drove slowly along the pot-holed blacktop selecting historical points of interest on which to lecture her.

"Oh, please," she said. "I'd think two adults could talk about something else."

The look he shot her said he wasn't in the mood for 'something else.' This was safe territory, and he was obviously avoiding what had happened between them last night. Like the proverbial pink elephant, it sat in the vehicle between them.

"Sometimes we have to give guided tours or do other PR crap," he said dryly. "You'll need to know everything there is about Yellowstone. Here." He tossed a small brown leather-bound book in her lap. Yellowstone Official Guide Book. "Memorize it."

She turned the small volume over in her hand and opened to the title page. Yellowstone, A

Ranger's Companion. She gazed at him wide-eyed and speechless. "Memorize it?"

"Did I stutter?"

Heat flushed her cheeks. She'd had just about enough of his high-handedness, especially after what had passed between them the night before. "There's no need to--," she ground out between clenched teeth. "Look out!"

Straight ahead, a large tour bus leaned precariously on its side and blocked any further passage along the road. A group of older ladies, with hair in varying shades of white, blue, and lavender, milled around the disabled vehicles and waved lacey handkerchiefs that fluttered in the breeze. Reno braked and joined Sloan in staring at the surreal scene. The women looked like they were either bidding adieu to a long-lost swain or swatting at a pesky mosquito.

A soft but explicit curse slid through Reno's lips. One of the women approached his side of the vehicle and Sloan rubbed a finger across her upper lip to keep from laughing. Reno glared momentarily at her, but the approaching tourist took his full attention.

"Oh, my!" she said in a voice that bore the heavy cadence of a southern accent. "Thank you so much for stopping, officers." The dainty white-haired lady was dressed in the palest blue sundress Sloan had ever seen. The woman stuck out her white-gloved hand as if leading a

reception line at a debutante ball. "Sir, we are in dire need of a rescue."

Although Sloan couldn't see his face, she watched Reno cover the woman's tiny palm with his massive hand. That tender act so out of character for the angry man of today, once again reminded Sloan of the man he was last night. The tender man, the gentle lover. "Looks like a flat tire," he said and exited the vehicle. "Where's your driver?"

"Under here." A middle-aged, heavysset woman wearing jeans and an oversized man's shirt, scuttled out from beneath the bus. "I can't quite figure how I'm supposed to release the tire."

"Have you called for roadside assistance?"

The woman wiped her dirty hands on her jeans and finger-combed her stringy brown hair. "No phone in the bus. CB's been broken for months. I was gonna have it repaired after this tour."

"What you 'was gonna' do doesn't help much." Reno rubbed the back of his neck and stalked back to Sloan. "Great, just great," he muttered through clenched teeth. "Radio the base to send a repair truck out. I'll try to--"

"Oh, Officer? Officer?" A tiny voice called out. "Allow me to introduce our group here. I'm Chelsea Davis and we are the Daughters of the South, here visiting your lovely park on our

annual walkathon. I daresay our trip will be plum ruined if we miss the geysers."

"Geysers?" Reno returned politely. "Just over there." He pointed toward the north. "Around the bend and across the road."

"But, Sir, we can't go alone," Chelsea said wringing her dainty white fingers into her dainty white hanky. "We are all senior citizens and require a guide to conduct us on our tour. This is what we've been waiting for," she continued in a cultured voice that brooked no opposition.

"Then you'll have to wait until the bus is fixed. Your driver can take you."

The greasy woman waived her hands. "I'm no tour guide. I just drive this tugboat. Park rangers conduct the tour."

"We can't take that much time, Sir," Chelsea interrupted. "And we are on a very tight schedule. Those ladies..." She gestured toward the bus filled with pale frightened faces pressed against the window. "...they can't possibly miss the geysers. We've been reading about them for so many years and finally this year we decided to visit. One last time..." The old woman fanned herself with her kerchief and batted her eyes in a plaintive manner. "Before we die." She paused and the effect wasn't lost on Sloan. This gal was good. Real good. "Please, sir...I can tell by your uniform that you're a ranger. We simply can't miss it; you'll have to take us."

"I'm not an--" he said in a voice that was somewhere between a groan and a sigh. If the growl was gone, Blackwolf was sinking fast.

Everything Sloan had read about southern belles was right. Even with his height and physical strength, Reno was no match for this seventy or eighty year-old practiced belle.

He waged an internal battle that he was sure to lose. Sloan looked forward to see a humbled, mellow Reno eat crow.

--It's really out of the question, ma'am," Reno said as if he was genuinely sorry he couldn't grant her request. He folded his arms across his chest and nodded at Sloan. "My intern can assist you."

"Me?" Sloan gave him her best wide-eyed, ditzy blonde shtick at Reno who squinted back at her and flattened his lips into a hard line. He'd not only underestimated the little old ladies, he'd vastly underestimated her. No way was she bailing his backside out of this. She waved the Yellowstone Manual at him. "I haven't even begun to...what was it?" She smiled at his scowling face. "Oh, yes. Memorize it. I just don't have the necessary knowledge to lead any tour." She shrugged and shook her head, biting her lower lip to keep from laughing.

"Wing it," he growled next to her ear.

Chelsea Davis walked to Reno and turned her head up to look at him. "Thank you, my good man, but what shall we do about Mandy?"

Reno gazed around bewildered. "Mandy? Who's Mandy?"

"I am." The stringy-haired, grease-spotted driver called back.

A giant sigh filled Reno's chest and Sloan had to hand it to him. He was at least going to give in gracefully. "You--" he pointed at Mandy-- "stay with the bus until the mechanic gets here. And you--" he pointed at Sloan with a look that could frost the desert-- "take these nice young ladies on a tour of the geysers."

Sloan opened her mouth, but before she could form a word, Chelsea placed her hand on Reno's outstretched arm. "Forgive me, Sir. But are you a Native American?"

"Yes, I--"

She clapped her gloved hands together. "This is all so perfect. We insist, Sir; we simply insist, Mr...what is your name?"

"Blackwolf," he said, "but I hardly--"

She gingerly tipped her head up and Reno couldn't have missed her sweetly honest look. Sloan had to hand it to the septuagenarian. She had plenty of moves up her lace covered sleeve.

"It would be such an honor for an authentic Ind--Native American--to take us. I had planned to ask the Superintendent for such a person when we arrived, but now that you're already here, you will save us both the time and trouble. We have a particular pleasure to see Morning Glory Pool."

She smiled sweetly and dabbed the lacy handkerchief against her lips. Reno glanced down at the old woman and back at Sloan. He could tell from the smirk that tickled the tip of Sloan's lip that she was enjoying herself at his expense. He knew what she was thinking. That he couldn't refuse these little old ladies, a whole busload of them. At least not without his own mother taking him to task. He'd crossed her only once, back in '88.

She'd wanted him to go through a ritual cleansing before making any major decision regarding the park, but he hadn't. Since then his life and his career had gone to hell. He wouldn't abandon her teachings again.

At least that's what he told himself as he gave Chelsea Davis a weak smile. Sloan couldn't have handled the tour. She'd barely been shown the entire park, so there was no way she could conduct a tour. He'd known that, but hadn't been able to keep from goading her anyway. Why the devil did he keep letting her get to him? He couldn't help the perpetual glare he gave her. It

was either that or a repeat of last night, and that wouldn't do. Especially not in front of The Daughters of the South. "Come on," he growled at Sloan. "You're going with."

"Me?" Sloan asked. "What for?"

He bent close to her ear. "In case one of these delicate flowers faints--"

"Steel magnolias don't faint--"

"--or drops dead." He turned on his heel and stalked off. "And don't forget the packs," he threw over his shoulder.

The tiny woman clung to his arm and hung on his every word. Chelsea Davis kept up with his gait, walking ahead of the group much like an elderly scout, but none of it registered with Reno. Nothing could completely divert his attention from Sloan...or the way she'd felt in his arms, or the way she'd tasted, or the way she'd responded. Fiery yet sweet.

He'd called himself a fool a million times over, called himself some unspeakable names, but try as he might, he couldn't make himself regret last night. If he lived to be a hundred, or died right then, he would never regret...or forget. And that irritated him. Thoroughly. Totally. Completely.

He'd never met a woman he couldn't forget if he tried hard enough. Not until Sloan. She

was the exception to his rules.

"Come on, Stafford," he called out. "Get a move on." He patted the gloved hand resting on his forearm and smiled down at the serene face that watched his every move. "She's a greenie," he explained. "Doesn't quite know all the ropes yet."

"And you're teaching her?" the older woman asked.

Reno straightened, towering at least a head and a half over the gaggle of females surrounding him. "Looks like it."

The woman smiled and patted him. The scent of powder and gardenia wafted up to him. "That's so gallant, Officer."

She caught Reno by surprise. The word that described the way he'd treated Sloan today, was rotten. He couldn't tell this little fluff of magnolia and spice that, so he kept moving up the boardwalk with a nod. "I'm glad you think so, ma'am."

Sloan hurried to grab the emergency equipment from the truck and catch up. Gallant? Around her? Ha! She hadn't caused the flat tire. It wasn't her fault if all these women had dreamed about a Native American leading them on a tour of the geysers. Knowing him, he'd make her pay for it all, though--one way or the other.

"Let's get a move on, ladies," Reno said slowly.

One by one, the white, blue, and lavender haired Daughters of the South followed behind him.

"Faults are cracks or weaknesses in the earth's crust, and nearly all topographic features are tied to their presence. Faults are created by the movement of plates as well as by local disturbances such as rising magma." Reno swatted a mosquito against his neck and continued in the a tone that Sloan found completely boring, bordering on a drone. The ladies had fared the walk to Morning Glory pool pretty well and aside from the weight of the backpacks bearing down on her, meeting Chelsea and her friends had turned out to be a delightful event.

Chelsea's husband, Sloan learned, was the grandson of Jefferson Davis, and came from a fine old southern family. In fact most of the occupants of the bus were from old, landed southern aristocracy.

Sloan watched him leading the women along the trail. They asked all sorts of inane questions and rather than further heightening his sullen nature, he'd softened and gently answered every query Sloan would have been too embarrassed to ask, thinking he'd light into her for the lack of knowledge. She was glad someone had.

"In Yellowstone, a geyser begins with rain or snow. Water works its way underground eventually hitting heated rocks a mile or more below the surface at temperatures over 450 degrees Fahrenheit. The water," Reno paused, seemingly stifling a yawn. "...dissolves the quartz or silica around it."

"Very interesting, Mr. Wolf," a blue-haired, heavyset woman raised her hand as if in school. "But why are the bears called American Black Bears? They seem to be a reddish color. Why not call them American Cinnamon Bears?" A twitter of tiny giggles skittered through the crowd.

"I--ah--" Eyes wide, Reno glanced back at Sloan, his shoulders rising in an 'I don't know.'

Sloan almost laughed out loud! The big tough ranger had been downed by a group of little, old ladies. She flashed him a wide-toothed smile and gave him a go-for-it thumbs up.

"There was a bear in camp last night--" A purple haired matron added.

"That's impossible," another interrupted. "The bears are up in the high country. The brochure said so. After the fires of '88 they left."

"Oh, those fires were terrible. Were you around when those fires occurred, Mr. Wolf?"

Sloan glanced at Reno. In a flash his look had changed from playfully exasperated to dark and brooding.

"I heard that the rangers," another woman said. "...did nothing, absolutely nothing, and that's why everything burned--"

"Everything didn't burn," Sloan interrupted from the rear. "Only a small portion of the park was actually lost. As usual, the media catastrophized the situation. Actually, in the time that's passed since the fire, scientists and ecologists have realized that letting the fire burn was, in fact, good for the park." She rushed on, hoping she wasn't trespassing on his private territory. From the look on his face, she wasn't. In fact, he looked relieved. "Look around you, ladies. There's new growth, new life, new beginnings as far as you can see. That newness is what will keep the park safe for the next hundred years."

The woman who'd asked the question took Sloan's hand and patted it. "Why my dear that was beautiful. Perhaps we were too hasty in believing what we read. Right, girls?"

A murmur of agreement drifted through the group. Reno didn't say anything directly to her, but the tone in his voice was thanks enough. He prodded the band of blue and gray heads along the wooden paths between the geysers.

"The water in these geysers is so colorful," another woman said. "How does that happen?"

Reno cleared his throat. "Algae."

"What?"

"There are several types of algae and they thrive in many different temperatures. Different water temperatures cause a whole spectrum of colors from blues and greens to bright yellow and orange. Morning Glory Pool, up ahead, is an example of that concept algae. But unfortunately, the colors in the pool are not as vibrant as they used to be."

"Why is that, officer?" A dainty voice called out.

Reno glanced at Sloan, lifting the corners of his mouth in a half-smile.

"Indiscriminate pollution by tourists throwing coins and trash into the pool has dulled the color and clouded the waters. So you see--"

"And what would a corpse do to that delicate ecosystem, Ranger?" Chelsea Davis had wandered ahead of the group and stood higher on the wooden walkway than everyone else. She was directly in view of Morning Glory Pool, her soft, cultured accent asking the stark question cut through the late afternoon heat.

"Corpse?" Reno's dark brows snapped together and he hurried toward Chelsea. Sloan followed up the stairs behind Reno and the ladies crowded in behind.

Chelsea turned calmly away from them and extended a gloved finger toward a human form

floating face down in the geyser. She cocked her head as if analyzing the situation. "From the steam rising from the body, I'd say he's been poached."

Reno stopped and let out an explicit curse that, upon viewing the body, Sloan almost seconded.

From behind her came heavy sighs as two women slowly sank to the ground in a dead faint.

"Go radio the office and tell them to get Jimmie and a first aid kit," Reno growled. "Looks like we've got an epidemic."

Chapter 4

Sloan's day had started out on a low point. Her FTO's growling and snarling sounded a lot like the grizzlies inhabiting the high country. The southern ladies had been cute and funny. On the tour things were definitely looking up, but in the time it took to flutter a lace hanky, everything was topsy-turvy. If possible, the day had ended on an even lousier note.

Finding a body--any body, let alone a bloated human being poached in Mother Nature's crock-pot--just wasn't part of her job description. Rescuing children lost in the wooded pines, warning blue-haired matrons who got too close to the bubbling geysers, and drinking in the glory around her--the unmatched natural beauty, majesty, and grandeur was what she'd signed on for.

After their grisly discovery this afternoon, even the thick stands of lodgepole pines guarding the park, the colorful geysers, the icy rivers, and the lush flower-filled valleys below granite peaks didn't move her. In fact, she kept her eyes trained on the winding road and hardly noticed the sights she loved so well.

The magnificent surroundings were the reason she'd wanted to live and work here, the reason

she put up with Reno's attitude. And now, the sanctity of the park had been desecrated in a most brutal manner. Who could have done such a thing? A better question might be, who was the poor hapless person they'd found. It would take the FBI forensic people time to figure things out. Was it, as they suspected, a tragic accident? Or was it something more sinister? Like murder?

The sun's weakened rays dipped behind the mountain peaks drenching the valley in an evening blanket of shadowy softness. For some reason, Reno turned the driving duties over to her. He seemed lost in a world of his own thoughts, a world to which she'd never be privy.

The discovery of the body had been a definite shock, especially for their elderly visitors, but only a few needed to be revived. The others had a sort of macabre interest, much like reincarnations of Jessica Fletcher.

Sloan had certainly never heard of setting up a crime scene in a national park. It took an hour to find yellow and black tape to section off the area. Add to that dozens of tourists, irate that their favorite sightseeing spot had been cut off, and it was no wonder she had a gigantic headache.

After undergoing a battery of questions from investigators from the state Criminal Investigation Bureau officers and the FBI, it was obvious the group of women were exhausted.

Sloan wasn't far behind them. By the time they'd returned the ladies to their rooms at the Old Faithful lodge, Reno's dark mood had returned with a vengeance. His dark eyes flashed with barely suppressed anger. A muscle flexed in his clenched jaw, and Sloan tried to rally herself to prepare for the worst.

She couldn't. After the adrenaline rush of the afternoon, she was running on empty. She couldn't muster up the energy to even give a damn anymore. Not even the exhilaration of surviving a strenuous climb, a long hike, a gaggle of little old ladies, and discovery of a gruesome accident--at least she'd hoped it was an accident--could push her one step farther. No wonder the thought of facing an angry Reno didn't faze her. She'd long passed the letdown stage and the only thing keeping her upright was the fact that she was driving.

She darted a glance at him. His head leaned against the window and only his profile was visible. Her gaze traveled from the fatigue lines bracketing his mouth and his eyes to the tiny muscle in his jaw that jumped with each clench.

"You're tired," she said.

"I'm fine."

It was a lie. She knew it and so did he. It was weird but every time she was physically close

to him, he seemed to suck away all the air. She never really breathed normally around him. Sensations of hopelessness mixed with a deep need to be reassured that all was right with the world washed over her. Right now, the only thing she wished was for Reno to be like he was last night, to pull her into his arms, press her cheek against his chest and hold her.

But that was impossible. Whatever his mood had dissolved into, his performance after they discovered the body had impressed her. If he'd pushed her to the point of exhaustion, it was nothing compared to how he pushed himself. She had to hand it to him, he didn't issue orders in a catastrophe, and he got right in the middle of it and led by example. In everything he'd lectured her about, there wasn't anything he couldn't or wouldn't do himself.

From the beginning, he'd taken control. He'd even helped perform first aid, something plenty of FTO's refused to do these days. She figured she owed him the luxury of enjoying his black mood without any antagonism or cajoling from her. She'd stay out of his way until he decided when--or if--he wanted to speak.

Sloan straightened in her seat, squirmed to a more comfortable position. A sigh she tried to stifle, but couldn't slid through her lips. Already tight muscles along her spine and shoulders stiffened further. Until today, she'd thought herself in top shape physically and mentally. The

tightness in spots from the soles of her feet up through the throbbing at the base of her skull disputed that evaluation. Tonight would be spent in a very long, very hot bath.

Lost in thoughts of his own, Reno hadn't said much during their drive back to Mammoth. By the time she approached a sign announcing Fishing Bridge Resort, her physical stamina been shredded and her facade of strength had melted into a small puddle of insecurity.

"Sloan?" Reno's deep voice wrapped around her and she realized the bond of trust that had been forged that day.

She slanted him a look from the corner of her eyes. His face was stark and drawn. Despite wanting to do otherwise, his obvious stress touched her. "What?"

"I--" His gaze grew dark. "You hungry?"

"No, I--" her stomach growled at the words and she realized she hadn't eaten since breakfast - "I guess I am." She pressed her hand over her stomach. "Got any ideas?"

A slight smile cracked his stony countenance. "Fishing Bridge has a pretty good snack bar." He pointed toward a log building looming at the side of the road. "It's a good hour to Mammoth. Let's grab a bite here."

She pulled in and cut the engine, but stayed seated and stared straight ahead. She couldn't

get the scene of the dead man out of her mind. Wherever she turned, in the calm, down times, the vision popped into her mind's eyes. She shivered. "I don't know if I can eat."

Reno leaned over and unhooked her safety belt. The scent of man and mountain and musk filled her senses. She fought the urge to lean against him and close her eyes.

"Jimmie wants to go back to Morning Glory and check things out." His voice grew soft. "I'll reassign you."

She chafed her arms. "No, you won't. I'll be there."

"It's not that big of a deal," he said and shouldered his door open. "Stay with Angie if you want."

Exhaustion set in from her feet to her brain. Her muscles screamed in rebellion. Sloan didn't know if she could even raise her hand to bring the food to her mouth, let alone keep it down if that mental picture came back. The last thing she wanted was to argue.

Reno and Jimmie could go wherever they wanted, do whatever they wanted, investigate whatever they wanted. She didn't care. All she wanted to do was sleep--preferably for a hundred years or so--right after that hot bath. And that was still a couple hours away. "Whatever," she mumbled. "Sure. Reassign me. What the heck."

Reno glared at her. She'd given up way too easily and for a brief moment disappointment replaced his anger. She hadn't objected even once. Now what? Hell, he didn't have time to deal with her moods and if she was going to pout, to hell with her.

But Sloan wasn't pouting. In the last week or so, he'd learned that her lower lip, so full and ripe it would drive any man to distraction, jutted out slightly when she was tired. Today he'd ridden her as hard as he'd ever ridden any male ranger and he knew she had to be tired. Add to that the stress of finding a dead body in a particularly grisly manner, and most men of his acquaintance would be getting drunk enough to forget what they'd seen. Not his Sloan. She just kept plugging right along. Whatever he threw at her, she accomplished; whatever he said to her, she remained balanced. She was as cool and as calm as they came...and he admired her.

Hell, he more than admired her. He'd fought the urge to cover her mouth with his the whole ride back. It's why he had her drive--that way, he couldn't touch her or they'd end up in a ditch or down a mountain ravine if he did. It was enough to keep him on the straight and narrow. But she was more than enough to tempt a statue, and Reno was no statue--or saint--by any stretch of the imagination.

Sloan was an intriguing mixture of contradictions. When he expected a fight, she

acquiesced. And when he figured she'd go along with something, she balked. Every time he thought he knew her game, she changed the rules. He looked forward to what each new day with her would bring.

His slip-up on the porch a few evenings before had only given him a taste of her sweetness, a glimpse of what could be. Now, he wanted more. A situation that simply couldn't exist. What had passed between them had to stay buried. It couldn't happen again. It simply couldn't. So he'd work himself and her into massive exhaustion so they'd both be so tired, they couldn't move.

But it couldn't stop the wanting. Since that night, desiring Sloan had become an obsession, a craving stronger than any drug known to man. He had to handle it. There wasn't any choice. He wouldn't compromise her, himself, the park, or his heritage.

Unfortunately it was easier said than done. Just a glimpse of her aroused him, and losing control wasn't something Reno was used to. He didn't know how, but he'd find a way to contain his growing feelings for Sloan. It would be difficult, but if anyone could do it, it was him.

Reno held the restaurant door for Sloan who looked as if she was ready to drop. A voice from deep inside called to him: she needed someone to hold her, to comfort her, to take her home. She'd never looked more vulnerable, more feminine, or more delicious. She never had

been more dangerous to him either. Steeling himself against the need clamoring inside him, he gripped the door with white knuckles and followed her in.

He had to put the thoughts, the fantasies so far away they wouldn't interfere or intrude on his workday. Giving them any credence at all would only get him in trouble. He was her supervisor. He had to keep that in mind at all times and stay focused.

Food would help. A man never really thought well on an empty stomach. Hunger released all kinds of weird thoughts and dreams. A good meal would clear his head. An All-American meal of burgers and fries and he'd be as good as new.

"Do you think it was a homicide?" Sloan asked softly. She stared at the tabletop and shredded her paper napkin.

Reno fought the urge to cover her restless fingers with his hands and calm her. The day had been harrowing for him. God knew what it had done to her. "Naw," he said, striving for a tone lighter than he felt. "Accidents like this happen all the time. Some tourist gets too much to drink, refuses to read the signs and tumbles into a geyser."

"But Morning Glory pool?" She turned those dynamite baby blues his direction and it was

almost like an upper cut to the jaw.

"Yeah," Reno said, sounding gruff even to his ears, "even Morning Glory."

She kept ripping at her napkin. Slowly, methodically tearing it into long strips and then ripping them into smaller strips. Her entire attention seemed focused on it. Reno told himself she was driving him crazy, that he couldn't stand the sound of the steady rip...rip...rip.... He captured her hands between his, all but engulfing her smaller, lighter ones. "Sloan," he said on a reedy breath. "Don't--"

Again that fabulous gaze meshed with his and he felt her relax under his touch. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry for feeling pain at a tragedy," he said. "But don't turn it inward either."

A waitress tossed two menus down and sauntered off. Sloan glanced down then up at Reno again. "Guess I won't be having the chicken soup," she said with a weak smile.

He chuckled her under the chin, not willing to deny himself the luxury of one last touch. "I think you'll make it."

Her answering smile shook him to his core. Staying away from her would take every ounce of strength and willpower he possessed. Or else he'd become possessed--obsessed--by her.

Reno picked Jimmie up just as the morning rays of the sun crested Hayden Valley. Fingers of gold, fuschia, and lavender drizzled above the peaceful, wide, grassy meadow. Buffalo and antelope, out for a morning feed followed a well-worn trail across the road to the misty lake below pausing only a moment to look at the intruders on their road before sauntering in front of the Bronco.

Reno smiled. "Ever notice how animals instinctively know their safe harbor?" he asked his friend.

"Mm," came the noncommittal answer.

"Why can't man?"

"You're too much the philosopher, Reno. Always have been. That's why the nuns always liked you better."

"Well, I didn't like them."

Jimmie laughed. "Nobody did, but you were always the heathen, always hanging onto the old ways."

Reno smiled. "Really ruffled their habits, didn't it?"

"Yeah." Jimmie settled back in the passenger seat. "It sure did."

"So," Reno began, seeing Jimmie's good spirits. "What about your investigation?"

Jimmie's smile stayed, but his eyes were distant. "I keep telling you, Big Brother. Hang on to your Stetson, wait a bit, and see what I bring to the table."

"Pretty big talk," Reno said, "even for a Shoshoni brave who had a vision quest at fifteen." Ever since they'd been kids, there had always been a friendly competition, particularly on Jimmie's side. Reno still spotted it on occasion. At one point, Jimmie even thought Reno had wanted Angie. For some reason, he had always needed to best Reno in everything. Reno had played the game so often repeated, his patience wore thin. If Jimmie wanted to crack his little investigation alone, so be it.

Reno turned onto an access road for park vehicles only. "This will take us straight to the pool."

Jimmie nodded. "The guy was well done when you found him, huh?"

"You could say that. It was hard to even tell he was human."

"How's Sloan taking it?"

Reno sighed. The image of her stricken face was seared into his memory. "About the way you'd expect that little bit of California fluff to take it."

"Why do you do that?" Jimmie asked.

"Do what?" Reno knew exactly what his friend meant.

"Don't play that game with me, Bro. I know you too damn well. Why do you put her down all the time? Does she get to you that badly?"

Reno pulled up to Morning Glory, staunchly ignoring the question. His mind screamed an answer: yes, dammit, yes! She got to him on so many levels all at once, he wanted to run screaming from the mountains. But of course that wasn't masculine. It wasn't acceptable. It would be his defeat. Besides, she was only here for a summer. He could handle it that long.

In the crispness of the early morning, steam from geyser pools reached skyward the way it had for thousands of years. "Hard to believe you just found a body here less than twenty-four hours ago," Jimmie said.

"Yeah." It still confounded Reno.

"An accident?" Jimmie asked.

"That's what they're calling it right now."

"But?" Jimmie prompted.

"I don't like the feeling I get," Reno said.

"About the case?"

"The case, this place, the whole scene," Reno said. "It doesn't feel right."

"How so?"

Reno shrugged. "Well," he began, "tourists aren't the smartest creatures ever given life--"

"No kidding," Jimmie said with a smile.

"I mean," Reno said, "it could just as easily be a random killing."

Jimmie stood stock-still and stared at his friend. "Why do you say that?"

"Why not? It almost looks too fishy and it feels worse. Something is definitely not right here, but if there are killers, why would they dump the body in such a public place knowing it'd be found right away?"

"What's the matter?" Jimmie asked with a smirk, "are the spirits whispering through the pines more restless than usual?"

"Knock it off, Jimmie. You know I don't believe that stuff any more."

"Any more?" Jimmie all but choked on his laugh. "You think you can root that stuff out of

your psyche just because of the fire? Get real, dude. That stuff is bred in your bones; it travels in your blood, in the breath you draw. Your mama ain't a shaman for nothing."

"How long before we get any kind of an autopsy report?" Reno asked, blatantly changing the subject.

"Can't say for sure. I few days," Jimmie said. "Maybe longer. There weren't any obvious wounds. Very little blood. Course the microbes could've taken care of most of that."

Reno faced his friend full on. "Do you really think a tourist would get drunk, stumble off the boardwalk and fall into this pool?"

Jimmie met his gaze solemnly. "No."

"Then it's murder."

"Not without evidence, it's not," Jimmie said.

Reno muttered an oath and shook his head.

"Let's just hope the geyser didn't boil all the evidence away," Jimmie said.

"Identifying the victim won't be easy," Reno said.

"No. We'll have to wait for missing person reports and compare dental records."

"That could take months," Reno said.

"Doesn't matter. It's the only way."

"Then we have to establish a motive--"

"And opportunity," Jimmie said.

"I can't have an unsolved homicide in this park," Reno said.

"Well," Jimmie said with a bright smile, "it ought to help cut down on all those pain in the butt tourists." He laughed and slapped Reno on the back. "Come on."

They circled the perimeter of the pool twice. Then slowly, Jimmie proceeded to climb to the deck overlooking the pool, keeping his eyes on his boots the entire time.

"What the devil are you doing?" Reno asked.

Jimmie, obviously lost in his own thoughts, jerked his head up and gave him a rueful grin. "I wish I knew, Brother. All I've got now is a hunch. Not much to go on in law enforcement. I'm hoping maybe the perp left a calling card."

"Calling card?" Reno was ready to scream with impatience, but this was what made Jimmie an excellent investigator. It drove Reno up the wall.

"Shoe impressions, markings, scrapings, that sort of thing..." He pulled off his Stetson and swiped his arm across his brow. "Even I can feel the vibes in this place. Not good, but as a

crime scene the whole area's clean. Nothing unusual."

Reno squatted down on his haunches and surveyed the gravel. His friend was right. There wasn't even an unusual car or truck track. "Let's take another look around," he suggested.

"Okay." Jimmie started back toward the Bronco. "Come on. We'll back-track the old way." Jimmie held up a hand to stop Reno's argument. "Stow it, Blackwolf. If you want my help, we do it my way. Besides," he said with a wicked grin. "If we get moving we'll have every inch from here to the access road covered by afternoon."

Jimmie swore under his breath. Reno mentally seconded the comment. It had taken most of the day to scour the six-mile circumference. It had also been fruitless. Hot, tired, and once again in definite need of food, Reno turned into an off the road diner. A nice cold beer, one with little slivers of ice sliding down the side of a frosted mug, sounded like a slice of heaven, but only if Jimmie didn't give a repeat performance of the other night.

"We'll have two pitchers," his friend began.

"Make that coffee and two of your biggest T-bones." Reno said.

"Sure thing, Reno." The waitress walked back to the kitchen with their order.

"Bring that pitcher anyway," Jimmie called out. "And two glasses. He turned to Reno. "You don't want me to drink alone, do you?"

"No, but--" Ryder placed his hand on his friend's shoulder-- "I don't want a repeat of the other night, either."

Jimmie's eyes flashed with anger that was extinguished as quickly as it had flared. "I said I was sorry about that. And I don't plan on anything like it happening again. I just want to relax. I'm parched."

The waitress brought the pitcher. Jimmie thanked her, filled his glass and Reno's. The brew went down smooth and Reno joined his friend.

"I guess I've been under more pressure than I thought. I just can't seem to get anywhere with this other case."

Reno leaned forward. "Tell me about it. Maybe I can help."

Jimmie polished off his glass and filled it again. "No big secret really. Just a hunch." He lifted his glass toward Reno. "That and fifty-cents will get you another draw here."

"More like a couple bucks." Reno sipped at his beer waiting for an answer. Jimmie had

been distant ever since he'd started on this 'hunch.' Most likely it was the cause of his trouble...and his drinking. "What hunch?"

"Hell, Reno..." He heaved a heavy sigh. "I think someone's strip mining--" The arrival of the waitress with their order interrupted him. He waited until she left again before he resumed speaking. "I've found some clay--the orange stuff--in weird spots where it didn't belong."

Reno dug into his dinner. The steak covered the plate and soon filled Reno's stomach. Jimmie, however, had only eaten a couple of bites and to Reno's chagrin, had managed to down two pitchers. What was eating at him? Why wouldn't he share the burden?

Reno leaned back in his chair and eyed his friend. "You said something about clay earlier. What sort?"

Jimmie filled his glass yet again. "The crap that's left over after the white man rapes the land."

"Jeez, Jimmie." Reno took the pitcher away. "That's enough."

Jimmie's hand shot out and grabbed Reno's arm. "Don't boss me around anymore, Bro."

"I'm not--"

Jimmie's eyes flashed and his voice rose. "The hell you're not, but I don't have to take it. I'm

not some intern you can use and abuse."

Reno glanced around at the staring patrons. "Can it, Jimmie. Now."

"I don't work for you, so I don't have to take your friggin' orders." Jimmie twisted in his chair and tried to shove Reno, but his foot slipped. As he struggled to stand, the chair fell over in a loud clatter.

"I guess you want the other side of your face swollen and red," Reno growled.

Jimmie slammed his glass on the table spilling its contents. "You and what army?"

Reno fought to keep his temper in check, but he hated this side of his friend.

"You found a body," Jimmie continued, "but you're not in charge of the investigation. Hell you're not even the law."

"Dammit Jimmie, what are you talking about?"

"Take it outside," the waitress said with a pointed look at both of them. She picked up their plates and nodded at the door. "You're spoilin' folk's dinners."

Reno glanced around at the disgusted faces. "Sorry," he said and stormed out with Jimmie right behind.

"Dammit, Reno." Jimmie grabbed his arm and swung him around. "Stop running away

from me and act like a man."

He stopped and Jimmie crashed into him, then stepped back and took a swing. Reno easily stepped out of the way of the blow, folded his arms, and smiled.

"That all you've got?"

Jimmie stepped back to swing again.

"Stop it." Reno's hand caught Jimmie's fist mid-swing and he held it fast. "It ends--right here, right now. This isn't about Sloan or the body or your investigation or anything else. It's about your drinking."

Jimmie stopped struggling and glared at him. "What about it?"

"You've got a problem."

"The hell I do," Jimmie said.

"Yeah, buddy. You do."

Jimmie's shoulders drooped and he shrugged. "I'm under a lot of stress."

Reno let go of Jimmie's hands and circled his friend's shoulders. "Spill it. That's what Blood-brothers are for."

"About a month ago, I was checking out some leads on cattle thefts from the

reservation...only it turned out that the cattle weren't rustled, they were poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Reno leaned back against the Bronco and thumbed back his hat. "How?"

"That's where the hunch part comes in." He shook his head. "I followed the cattle trail high up into the mountains and found carcasses all over. They'd been eaten by bears and coyote and wolves."

"You could tell that from the markings?" Reno wondered how Jimmie could have come up with such a crazy theory. The booze more than likely.

"No!" Jimmie said. "I found 'em surrounding the cattle remains. The wolves, bears and coyotes, I mean. Unmarked and dead. I took their remains into Mammoth and had 'em analyzed. Poisoned all right, but the toxins were way bizarre."

"How so?"

"It wasn't any known poison. Just chemicals. Like byproducts found after strip mining."

"Where'd you find the cattle?"

"Up by Dunraven Pass. That's what's so weird. There's nothing to mine there." Jimmie rubbed his temples. "I've been going back as much as I could to see if there's a trail, but it's a dead end. Always a dead end."

"And you couldn't tell me?" Reno asked slowly, quietly. His disappointment in his friend's inability to share was incredible. "When have I never supported you?"

"You have. I know. But you left the reservation."

"But that was because my--"

Jimmie grabbed Reno's shoulders. "You wanna know, and I'm gonna tell you. So shut-up and listen."

Reno fell silent. As though finally satisfied that Reno wasn't going to interrupt, a slight smiled crossed Jimmie's lips. "Like I was saying...I got this threat...scribbled on paper and stuffed under the door."

"How do you know it wasn't me they're threatening?" Reno cracked a smile. "Most people around here, Sloan included, hate my guts."

"Very funny, kemosabe, but this one had my name on it. And it basically said if I didn't drop the investigation, I'd be geyser food."

"Jeez, Jimmie, you should've told me."

"Nah. You're always the big important ranger and I'm just a tribal deputy. Even the Council said I could only be interim sheriff 'til they got a permanent replacement."

"Jimmie, that was five years ago."

"I know, but on the books I'm still interim, 'an I ain't marrying Angie 'til I'm full-fledged."

Reno walked to the driver's side of the Bronco and shot his friend a no-nonsense glance.

"Hell, she doesn't care what your job is. She loves you."

"It's a matter of honor," Jimmie said. "Something you know better'n I do."

Reno stared at Jimmie...and saw himself, his own stubborn pride, and personal code of honor reflected in his friend.

"Geyser food?" Reno asked with a frown.

"Yeah...just the like the guy in Morning Glory."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Reno asked.

"Yep. A homicide, but we need more evidence," Jimmie said. "A lot more."

Chapter 5

Jimmie's words haunted Reno all night and all the next morning. Heading down the road to Angie's to pick up Sloan, Reno's thoughts crept back to his life-long friend. Dammit, Reno thought, when had he gotten so hung up on honor, on his high and mighty perceived duty, on his overblown ego that he shoved away someone who cared for him? He and Jimmie were closer than natural brothers. They were brothers by choice as well as by the ancient childhood ritual of sharing blood. They'd shared everything, parents, broken bones, fights, and football championships. What they hadn't shared, they'd competed for, namely women.

Until Jimmie had finally woken up and saw the light. Angie had waited for him all her life, had been silently in love with him up to the point of enduring a role of friend and sister until two years ago when Jimmie had finally recognized it.

Reno had to hand it to his friend. When he finally declared his love for Angie, his carousing came to a screeching halt. Devoted strictly to her, Jimmie had settled down and they'd been inseparable ever since. Stubborn to a fault, though, there would be no wedding, Jimmie vowed,

until he was named Sheriff. That had only happened last month when the Council of Chiefs, after a series of rigorous tests, finally declared him worth the position. Now, a Christmas wedding was all Angie and Jimmie could talk about. True love had won out all the way around thanks to Angie's longsuffering and patience in the face of Jimmie's procrastination.

A lot like someone else we know... Ridiculous, Reno argued to himself. There was no comparison between Angie and Jimmie's situation and his and Sloan's. He wasn't pushing Sloan as far away from him as possible. He and Sloan hadn't grown up together. He didn't love her and she certainly didn't love him. Lust, a heavy dose of it, or maybe elemental chemistry was about all they had between them. That might be a basis for raging hormones or a basic attraction, but that was it.

Yeah, right, came the inner voice of reason, the one he could never scam or lie to. His feigned indifference to Sloan hadn't done squat in changing how he felt about her. In fact just the opposite was true. The more he tried to stay away, remain uninvolved, the more he wanted her.

He was purposely hard on her. Maybe if he could keep her thinking he didn't like her, and thought she wasn't cut out for this line of work, she might keep her distance.

It was a great idea. Too bad he'd ruined it by kissing her. Damn, if only he could take it

back. But of course, he couldn't. He wondered how far he'd overplayed his hand? Then again, he wondered how she felt about him.

Sloan hadn't liked the idea going with another ranger while he and Jimmie investigated things further, and he hadn't really meant to put her down so publicly. That remark about not needing a little blonde, blue-eyed piece of fluff tagging along was uncalled for, but he hadn't wanted her listening to what he said and he hadn't wanted to cause Jimmie more embarrassment when he talked to him about his drinking. Surely Sloan would understand.

Then again if she'd gone with them, maybe he and Jimmie wouldn't have gotten into such a public fight. Reno speared a hand through his hair. Hell, who knew? What was done was done. Last night was done and over with. He couldn't change the past. Hopefully today was a new start for them all.

Reno pulled up in front of Angie's house and honked. A hand in the window waved at him, obviously Sloan, and obviously not ready.

If this was a new start, Reno figured he'd better begin with himself--right now. It never failed to yank his chain that women never managed to keep track of time. Why couldn't they fix their hair and change their lipstick without something always holding up the operation? Damn it,

they were frustrating.

But the other side of the coin, the purely soft and sweet side set his blood boiling for a different reason. He'd seen that side of Sloan once too often. The way she treated tourists, young and old with a special kindness they all responded to, the way her lip quivered when she held a small wounded animal or the way her eyes widened when she discovered some hidden beauty that was Yellowstone. All those softer qualities ate away at him and made him want to repeat what had happened on the porch only a few nights before.

In a heartbeat, she appeared. The door opened and Sloan bounced down the steps wearing the plain brown shirt and shorts uniform of the National Park Service. On her, though, regulation duds looked like designer clothing. Reno fought against the instant turn-on. He didn't need to awaken his libido this early in the morning.

"Get in," he said, his thoughts making his voice sound gruffer than he'd meant.

"Well, good morning to you, too," Sloan said, not sounding much better than Reno.

Well, hell, weren't they the gruesome twosome? He didn't want to be stuck with her and he doubted she wanted to spend another day with him. Sloan buckled her seatbelt and Reno pulled away, heading south toward Old Faithful.

"Who was that in the living room? Who waved?" Reno leaned forward to look in his rear view mirror. "Jimmie must have slept in this morning."

"That was Angie. She was waving to Jimmie. He was with you, wasn't he?" She tossed a glance to the back seat. "Obviously not."

Reno narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, 'he was with me?' I dropped him right back there last night. He said he wanted to talk to Angie."

"What?" Sloan shook her head in obvious confusion. "Jimmie didn't come here. We went to bed early and I would've heard him if he came in. I always do, even when it's late, but last night I didn't hear a thing. Maybe he changed his mind."

"Maybe." Reno slanted his gaze in her direction. The uneasiness he'd first felt at the pool where they'd found the body was back tenfold. He didn't like the way this was unfolding. Not at all. "Mind if we look for him while we take a few calls?"

Sloan shook her head. "No. Why?"

"Nothing really," Reno said as much to himself as to her. "It just doesn't sound like Jimmie."

They patrolled the highway and the back roads for several hours with no sign of Jimmie. As

the midday sun rose in the Wyoming sky, Reno's mood grew darker. Sloan cursed whatever luck had matched her up with Reno Blackwolf. He was masculinity personified, as intriguing as a Chinook wind on a winter day, as ungiving as the mountains that stretched toward the sun.

She had everything she'd ever wanted, but Fate had served it up on a platter with Reno, the one man who made her want to crawl into his arms and forget everything else, a man who could barely seem to stand the sight of her.

Conversation with Reno generally dissolved to monosyllables like it had today. Sloan's suspicion that he was brooding over something that he didn't want to talk about had grown into a full-blown conviction. They headed into the Upper Geyser Basin, home of Old Faithful and the world's largest concentration of geysers, the pungent scent of sulfur filling her senses. Although offensive to some, Sloan found the scent strangely appealing and barely noticed it after a few minutes.

Reno pulled the Bronco to a stop and shouldered his door open. "Come on," he said in a low voice." He gave her a shove when she didn't exit the vehicle as quickly as he wanted.

So far today, their only calls had been to supervise a sky-med lift of an elderly man with a suspected MI at the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone along the northeast and to locate a

honeymoon couple stranded below Moose Falls in the south. Not that they'd been too excited about being found and having to leave. They'd been all over each other without a second thought as to what their rescuers might have seen and heard.

"Should've left them there for another day or two," Reno had grumbled. "Maybe then they'd be interested in a rescue."

And the day had gone downhill since then. Somewhere between then and now, Sloan decided she'd rather having him snapping at her than suffer through these sullen, silent, nasty moods.

The shove decided her on when to confront him. She swiveled on her heel and marched in front of him until they stood toe to toe. "What the hell is your problem, Blackwolf?"

He smiled as though he thought she was cute. That goaded her even more. "Nothing," he said and walked toward the lodge.

Sloan ran up behind him and grabbed his arm. "Oh, there's something all right," she began, her tone growing with each word. "And we're going to settle that 'something' right here, right now. You and me; mano a mano."

"Man to man?" Reno chuckled. "But you're not a man."

"Oh," she said with an exaggerated smile. "You noticed?"

He glanced around at the people staring at them. "Not here. We're drawing a crowd."

"Then where, your highness? Where and when will you be standing still long enough to talk to me?" Sloan dug her heels in and waited for his answer. Her gaze meshed and melded with his for a long moment. At first, his eyes flashed with anger only to be replaced with an incredible sadness. Before she could inspect it further, it was gone.

"Okay, let's go check out Riverside Geyser. We got a complaint about it being plugged and I've got to check it out." He thumbed back his Stetson and donned his sunglasses. "If you're so hot to talk, let's block off the walk, chase out the tourists and walk up." A corner of his mouth drifted up in a rueful smile. "That way you can swear and holler all you like." He grabbed her elbow, all but dragging her along. "Come on."

He led Sloan through back roads of a multitude of small geysers and colorful heated pools that dotted the way. He strode past Beehive Geyser that spewed water high into the air in a buzzing sputter of steam, past Doublet pool with its strikingly deep blue water, and past Castle Geyser that erupted every eleven hours.

Tired of being treated like a tag-along and realizing he wouldn't talk until they got there, Sloan tried to gather her thoughts.

Even these few silent minutes would help her to collect her thoughts, a definite plus around Reno. She checked her watch. Up ahead Riverside Geyser was due to spew. This one should've been called Old Faithful since it erupted every seven hours on the nose and Old Faithful wasn't quite so faithful any more. Riverside was scheduled to go off in the next twenty minutes. After doing exactly as he'd directed and cleared the last tourist away, then, she would've have it out Reno Blackwolf once and for all.

Sloan watched him crest the hill. She wondered how long it would take her to get tired of that incredibly sexy hip rolling gait, the one that made her knees go weak every time she saw it? Why him, she wondered for the thousandth time? Why was it this man, this antagonistic, sullen specimen, who made her want to rush into his arms and cover him with kisses? Better yet, how could she make peace and salvage a working relationship with him?

All she'd wanted was a three-month internship in God's country, finish it up with no muss, no fuss and get on with her future. Instead, what she'd gotten was trouble with a capital T in the form of a six foot-six, black-haired, dark-eyed man who made her blood race, her heart pound,

and her stomach flutter. Watching him come toward her, Sloan realized the chemistry simmering between them was so hot she feared the air around them might ignite. Especially since that night on the porch, since that kiss had rocked her both physically and mentally. Even knowing how much Reno had gotten under her skin, she had to pull it together. She had to iron things out between them if she was to salvage her internship...and her future.

He drew close enough for her to see the scorching look in his eyes. She took a deep breath and stepped toward him. His gaze traveled the length of her, but this time there was no anger...just a curious twinkle. Maybe the walk relaxed him enough that she could talk to him calmly and sensibly, like an adult. Yeah, right. This was Reno she was talking about after all.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he put his finger to his lips to quiet her. Frowning, he pointed toward Riverside Geyser. "What's that?"

Sloan turned toward the geyser with a performance said to be one of the best in Yellowstone. Riverside's eruption always arched seventy-five feet over the river.

She followed where Reno pointed. Something was clogging up the geyser all right, something all too familiar--a body. "Oh, no," she said with an unbidden shudder. "Not another one."

In a flash, Reno hopped off the wooden path and strode toward the geyser. "Damn!"

Each of Reno's steps carried a new urgency until he was running toward the open geyser. Sloan's mind registered the only thing that could push Reno that hard, but her heart refused to entertain the notion. The report had said the geyser was clogged and from the boardwalk they could see the body, but dear God it couldn't be... It was too horrible to even contemplate. It had to be a--

Reno dropped to his knees with a cry so painful, Sloan knew all of nature had felt it. Staked, spread-eagle across the mouth of the geyser was the body of Jimmie Sunbear.

Sloan turned to Reno with a gasp of horror, but Reno had already puled out his knife. He glanced back at her, her face filled with such anguish it broke her heart anew. "How long before it erupts?"

Sloan checked her watch. "About thirteen minutes."

Reno cursed explicitly and succinctly. He edged toward his friend and started to cut the rope. "Grab his binding," Reno said and Sloan reached to do as he asked. "I don't want him floating in this thing."

It was his attempt to spare Jimmie any further indignity. It wouldn't matter to the corpse

whether his hands or feet would dangle in the hot water. The damage had already been done. It was simply a gesture of respect, of love for a connected spirit. She steeled herself to do whatever was necessary. She could do it she told herself. She could do it--for Jimmie, for Angie, but most of all for Reno.

Reno scrambled to cut one foot free. "Can you hold this one?"

She nodded and did as he asked. A sound, almost like a wrenched sob came from the dark head bowed over his friend's body, but his voice was calm when he spoke. "What's our time?"

"Less than ten minutes," she said.

"How much less?"

"We have four minutes."

Reno grabbed the rope he'd just cut, reached down and slit the last one. "Okay," he said, "on the count of three lift straight up. One...two...three!"

Sloan stood, using a reserve of strength and adrenaline she didn't know she'd had. They lifted Jimmie's body out of the steaming pool and gently laid it on the ground. "Reno," she said.

He stood, as if in a trance, staring down into the face of his childhood friend.

"Reno...the geyser--"

He didn't move. He was still standing perilously close to a geyser set to go off at any moment. The possibility of scalding was nothing to take lightly. "Reno, watch out!"

By the time he lifted his head to look at her, the rumbling beneath the ground, a warning of the geyser's timely eruption could be heard. Sloan launched herself toward him, hitting him directly in the chest and knocking him to the ground. She landed on top of him and stared into his pain-filled eyes.

"Are you nuts?" he asked.

Hands pressed against his shirt-covered chest, she shoved away from him and sucked in a deep breath. "You're my partner," she said in simple explanation. "I couldn't let anything happen to you, too. You weren't paying any attention."

Reno raised up on one elbow and stared back at where he'd been standing by Jimmie's body. A scalding water filled the footprints where his boots had been. His head lolled back on his neck and he swore again.

"You're welcome," Sloan said and pushed to her feet. "Now what?"

Reno's face wrenched into a mask of renewed suffering. "Do you know what that geyser eruption would've done to Jimmie?"

She nodded. "Yes, but it didn't. You got him away in time."

He speared her with a direct look. "You helped."

"But he's still dead."

"I know."

Reno's two words scored Sloan's heart. Dear God, what would they say to Angie? Who would do such a thing to another person?

"We can't leave him here," Reno said.

"Of course not," she said quietly.

"And he's--I mean, we can't move the body." His voice grew thick and quiet. "We need to radio headquarters," he said as if by rote. "They'll pick up the--Jimmie--and take him to--oh God. Angie..."

Sloan pushed to one knee and pulled the radio from her utility belt. "I'll call headquarters."

Reno grabbed her by the arm before she could stand. "No!" He motioned her down. "Not yet...just wait with me," he said, more as a request than an order. "Just a little while...please. I don't want strangers taking him away. I'll do it...and you can help me. He...liked you," Reno said. "He liked you a lot."

He handed Sloan his jacket and nodded toward where Jimmie lay. She nodded and covered his face with the regulation garment.

That done, she sank to the ground beside the most infuriatingly stubborn man she'd ever met. A heavy sigh shuddered through him and not knowing what else to do, she reached out and pulled him to her. To her surprise, he went willingly. His dark, shaggy head lowered to her shoulder and she held him close, as though trying to absorb the mountain of anguish inside him.

Together they waited for Reno's anguish to subside long enough to radio for help taking the body of Jimmie Sunbear to the morgue.

Chapter 6

Sloan held him for two hours. Reno never said a word, never uttered another shudder, never showed any pain. However he'd managed it, he was back to the self-contained ranger. For some odd reason, Sloan was glad she'd been around, not only to see him in those few unguarded moments, but to know he was human like the rest of them, that he was familiar with vulnerability and hurt as well as anger.

Of everything she'd seen that day, the image of Reno scooping his friend's lifeless body off the ground and cradling it against his own chest was forever seared into her memory. Like a living warrior of by gone days carrying his fallen comrade, Reno could've strode straight into legend. Only Sloan had glimpsed the roiling emotion that lay just below his dark, brooding surface. And she'd die before she mentioned it to anyone.

She'd started the day wanting to hammer out a working relationship with him and ended it with being more in awe, more enamored, more captivated with him than ever before.

The ride to the infirmary came at dusk. The road stretched on in the gloom of the evening.

Reno drove, as silent and rigid as the forest surrounding them. Sloan said nothing, not wanting to break the cocoon around them. She only hoped that her presence was in some way a comfort to him.

They found Angie in the lab stocking medical supplies. "Hi, you two." She put away the last of a bandage shipment. She glanced at her watch and flashed a bright smile. "Hey, what's the occasion that I get both of you? Is it just my lucky day, or are you cooking something up with Sunbear?"

How he ever managed to keep from flinching at the mention of Jimmie's name, Reno would never know.

"Well," Angie said, chattering on in her usual gregarious fashion, "then you guys can just take me to supper. I haven't had a break all afternoon. Just one emergency after another, luckily nothing was too catastrophic."

"Angie--" Reno, his eyes burning in his head, glanced at Sloan. She'd been such a rock all day, silent and helpful whenever he'd needed her. It looked like he might have to lean on her

again. This job was too big, even for him. How could he tell Angie that Jimmie was dead? Worse, how could he tell her they way he'd died? How could he break the heart of a woman who was as dear to him as his own sister? And in a manner she was his blood--his friends became his family.

For the second time that day, if not in his life, he needed help, and he needed it from Sloan. His strength was fading fast. All his reserves were tapped out. Suddenly, he didn't feel strong at all. Jimmie's death had cut him off at the knees and he was all but paralyzed and would remain so until he could sort out the myriad of emotions swirling inside. How did he comfort Angie when he needed it himself?

"Reno?" Angie asked with a puzzled frown. "What is it?"

As she had all day, Sloan seemed to sense what he needed, slid her arm around Angie and led her into her vacant office. Reno followed. A feeling of mute helpless engulfed him. The strong ranger was an illusion at best. Yet he couldn't give voice to the fact that the strong man he'd pretended to be was really a coward, unable to express anything: his grief over Jimmie, his love for Angie, or his gratitude to Sloan for her nearness, her strength, and her compassion.

Sloan sat Angie down on the large sofa that ran the length of the wall. "There's been an

accident," she began

Angie glanced anxiously from Reno to Sloan, then paused a moment. In a flash, recognition crossed her face. "Okay, why didn't you just say so. Fill me in on the details and I'll get my--"

"No." Sloan tightened her grip and kept Angie on the couch. Angie looked up into Reno's eyes.

"It's okay, Sloan," he said, returning Angie's placid look. "I think she knows it's Jimmie."

Angie's shoulders slumped and she seemed to stop breathing. Finally, she spoke. "Is--is he...alive?"

Reno searched for the words to tell her, but Sloan answered. "No," she said. "He was dead when we found him."

A gasp escaped Angie's lips and she covered her face with her hands. "Where?"

Sloan exchanged a frantic glance with Reno. He nodded solemnly. "At Riverside."

Angie dropped her hands and stared at Sloan. "The geyser?"

Reno and Sloan nodded. Angie's gaze flew from one to another. "Not like the other one," she whispered. "Tell me it wasn't like that guy they brought in two days ago."

Sloan moved to speak, but Reno cut her off. "No," he said. "It wasn't like that."

Technically it was the truth, but she'd know exactly what happened soon enough. Hospital gossip, especially a small hospital would be quick and deadly.

"Not really," Sloan said.

"How really?" Angie asked woodenly. "What happened?" Her voice was dull and lifeless.

"We don't exactly know," Reno said. "We won't know anything for a few days...until the autopsy report comes back."

"Autopsy?" she asked on a choked sob. "My Jimmie? An autopsy? Reno, no. Don't let them...do you know what they do?" Her eyes were like that of a cornered, wounded animal. Frenzied and frantic, she wasn't handling this well at all.

Reno knelt down in front of Angie and framed her cheeks with his palms. "Angie," he said slowly and softly, "listen to me. This was no accident. It was a homicide. Someone killed Jimmie. There's no choice about the autopsy. It's demanded by law."

"Not our law," she said, fury blazing in her words and her eyes. "We don't have to follow the white's law," she said. "Tribal law supersedes it. We're an independent nation. US law comes second."

She all but spat the words out. Sloan couldn't believe what she was seeing or hearing. This

wasn't Angie, her roommate, her friend. This was someone else, someone touched by outside ugliness, someone unable to deal with the hand fate had just dealt them.

Angie lifted her head and glared at Reno. "I want the details. Jimmie--"

"Hush," he whispered and pulled her close. He kissed the top of her head and met Sloan's gaze.

In the depths of his eyes she saw the overriding pain, the will of iron, the incredible integrity of the man called Reno Blackwolf. He hated every moment of what he had to do, but he'd push that aside for Angie and for Jimmie.

"From the beginning, Reno," she whispered. "Please." Sandwiching Angie's hands between his, he began to speak and relate the whole ugly story of their afternoon discovery.

After the hospital, there were more CID officials to talk to. They related their story so often, Sloan had lost count. Finally, hours later, Sloan's head pounded as she climbed the steps at Superintendent Howard Jacob's. Inside, she rubbed the back of her neck, trying a little accupressure to relieve the throbbing between her temples.

Jacobs paced his office, shook his head, and wrung his hands. For a minute he looked almost comical, but the situation that had brought them together was anything but funny. The realization of the scope of tragedy had finally sunk in and all Sloan wanted to do was dig a hole in which to hide and pull the hole in after her.

Neither she nor Reno had wanted to leave Angie. The other woman hadn't shed so much as one tear. It was obvious she was in deep shock and leaving her alone was dangerous. Sloan had sought out the hospital superintendent and entrusted Angie to her care.

When it came to the shock department, however, Reno couldn't have been much farther behind Angie. Through all the telling and retelling of their story, his expression remained blank. No tears, no anger, no nothing. Reno wasn't dealing with Jimmie's death either. He was functioning on the outside, but Sloan worried when the realities of it all would hit home, and how would he deal with it?

Reno needed comfort as much as Angie, but Sloan felt completely inadequate--hell, she was an outsider, totally useless, incapable of helping either of them.

The call to the superintendent's office couldn't have come at a worse time. Sloan didn't know how Reno was holding himself together. She would have given up and splintered into a

thousand pieces long ago. But of course, she wasn't Reno; she didn't have his strength. Despite her vow to hammer out a working relationship between them, she was inexorably drawn to him on a more emotional, much personal level.

At least the drive over had given her a chance to collect her thoughts before returning to the cabin and confronting Angie's grief.

At Jacob's office, a special agent from the FBI waited for yet another retelling of the gruesome story.

"I don't know what we can do about this." Jacobs' voice all but cracked. He spotted Reno first but didn't give so much as an acknowledging smile until he saw Sloan. "Ah, here they are. Sloan, Reno, this is Mr. McCall.

Reno drew up beside Sloan, hooked his fingers in his belt, and cocked one knee. "What were you saying when we got here, Howard?"

"Just--well...two murders in the same week, doesn't look good for the park." Jacobs stopped pacing long enough to grab a sucker from the jar and unwrapped it with shaky fingers. "Yellowstone has never had anything like this before. Never!"

"Sure we have," Reno said. "Remember when the people eaters kidnapped and murdered

tourists back in--

"That was in the 1800s," Jacobs snapped.

"Well, yeah," Reno said. "But then they weren't terrorists or killers. Just Native Americans trying to protect their home and land from invaders."

Sloan glanced at Reno and then McCall, hoping her surprise wasn't too obvious. In light of what had recently happened to his best friend, Reno's comment seemed flip, sarcastic. She'd never heard him utter a disparaging remark about any ethnic group except tourists. And his scorn for them transcended any racial or ethnic criteria. She wondered what the agent's take on Reno's attitude and erratic behavior would be.

One glance at Reno revealed the mounting pain he'd kept hidden all day. The stony expression was starting to slip. What was with men anyway? Why were they so afraid to show emotion, especially when it was eating them alive inside? Hadn't they passed the outdated thinking that an expression of grief was a sign of weakness?

Grief was a universal feeling. Even the special agent or Jacobs would understand it, but the surly attitude didn't bode well. She struggled to come up with a way to signal Reno that he needed to reign it in, act differently--at least in front of these two.

The only thing Reno was accomplishing here was to look antagonistic, as if he didn't care. Even worse, it made him seem almost guilty, but of what she had no idea. She shook away the thought and focused on where she was and what was happening around her.

"You're letting your heritage take over your reasoning, Reno." Howard's eyebrows merged into a deep V in his forehead. "We've never experienced anything like this." He gave Reno an appraising glance that Sloan didn't like. "In fact, I'd have expected to see you acting with a little more gravity about the whole thing once the feds arrived."

"Why are the feds here, Howard?" Reno stopped pacing and leaned forward. "What are you intimating?"

"A homicide has occurred on federal land, Mr. Blackfoot. A tribal law enforcement officer, no less. That makes it my business," McCall said.

"Only if the tribe lets you make it your business," Reno shot back.

"True enough." McCall sat down and nodded at Reno. "So I guess it's your show."

"You were the last person to see Jimmie Sunbear alive," Jacobs said. "In my book that makes you a pretty likely suspect."

Sloan gasped at their superior's intimation. Reno sprang forward and stood head to toe with

the superintendent. "Is that an accusation, Howard?"

"No," McCall drawled from the sidelines. "An accusation requires evidence, doesn't it, Mr. Jacobs? You remember the old game of Clue? No evidence, no accusation? So far I haven't seen or heard a shred of anything that would remotely be considered evidence."

McCall stood and walked over to the other two men. He was as tall as Reno and they stood eye to eye a long moment. "I'm sure Mr. Jacobs is just trying to get to the bottom of things, isn't that right, sir?"

Sloan had to hand it to the man. He'd smoothly managed to diffuse both Reno's anger and their superior's accusation. Still things didn't look good for Reno.

Jacobs lowered his gaze, but jutted his chin in an attempt at defiance. "I'm not accusing you, Blackwolf, but there are some incriminating rumors floating around."

"What," Reno asked, nostrils flaring, dark eyes smoldering with barely suppressed rage, "are you raving about?"

Fear shivered down her spine and she realized exactly what Howard Jacobs was hinting at: that Reno might be accused of his best friend's death. Impossible! And Jacobs had to know exactly how impossible it was.

Sloan walked up to the group and put her hand on Reno's arm. Beneath her touch, his clenched forearm relaxed. "I'm sure Mr. Jacobs is just looking for information to help in the investigation. We all want the same thing here--Jimmie's killer brought to justice."

Jacobs backed away, reclined against his desk and shot Reno a withering look. "Someday that temper of yours is gonna backfire, Reno. Unless it already has." Howard seated himself and motioned Reno into a chair.

"I think we need to all talk about this quietly and rationally," McCall said.

Sloan couldn't have agreed more. Reno inched to an empty chair and tossed Sloan a glance that said I'm all right. Taking a deep breath, he removed his Stetson and placed it on his bent knee. "I'm all ears."

"We've heard that..." McCall cleared his throat. "That you were the last person to see Jimmie alive last night. Is that correct?"

Sloan perched on the edge of her chair, waiting for another explosion that didn't come. Reno cocked his head at the agent. "We went to supper; I took him home--period. End of story."

Jacobs let out an shaky sigh. "Good Lord."

McCall tossed him a glance and continued. "And at supper," he said, "you fought."

A long pause shimmied through the room. "Depends on your definition of a fight. I didn't hit him; he didn't hit me. Was there a difference of opinion? Yes. Was that a fight?" Reno's lips drew up in a self-deprecating grin. "Not for Jimmie and I."

"We have several witnesses in Yellowstone City who saw you and Jimmie. According to them there was some sort of altercation."

"Yeah, maybe so according to their standards, but not ours." Reno leaned his arms on his thighs and twirled his Stetson between his hands.

"Reno," Howard said, "this isn't seemly to have a ranger flying off the handle, fighting in public--"

"I didn't fight with Jimmie...at least not last night," Reno said.

Sloan cursed his innate honesty.

"I don't care, it doesn't look--what do you mean, 'not last night?'" Howard asked.

"I mean we fought, yes. He was drinking a little too much two nights ago. We had words and I decked him to prevent him from getting in one of those altercations you were talking about. Miners and Indians--a real bad mix, y'know," Reno said.

Howard ignored him. "Agent, will there be an inquest?"

"I would imagine."

Jacobs cleared his throat. "And Mr. Blackwolf looks like a prime suspect?"

Reno snapped straight in his chair, his spine rigid. "That's crazy. Jimmie and I fight--fought--all the time. It doesn't mean anything."

"Nevertheless," Jacobs said. "I have no choice other than to relieve you of duty." He glanced toward Sloan. "You'll be reassigned, of course."

"I don't want to be reassigned!" Sloan shot out of the chair and strode toward the desk. "And you can't possibly believe Reno had anything to do with this."

"It's not what I think," Jacobs said and pressed his large hand on his chest. "It's regulations. Until Mr. McCall or an associate completes the investigation, Reno is most assuredly suspended."

Reno stood and replaced his Stetson. "How long?"

"Two, maybe three days," the agent said. McCall stood and extended his hand. "I'll be in touch."

"And we're behind you one-hundred percent," Jacobs added. "I'm sure Agent McCall will get this all cleared up within a day or so."

"I--" Reno stared at the hand extended toward him, then clasped it with a wary look. "Two

or three days I can handle. Anything longer and I might go berserk, start scalping tourists and stuff."

Sloan knew that it was meant as a joke, but his eyes were humorless and no one laughed.

McCall flipped through his notepad. "One last question, Mr. Blackwolf. You stated you dropped Mr. Sunbear at his fiancé's house around midnight?"

Storm clouds gathered in Reno's eyes again and his gaze darkened with apprehension. "That's correct."

"Can you provide any proof of your whereabouts from that time until the next morning when you arrived to pick up Miss Stafford?"

"No." The storm clouds had moved on and Reno's face was expressionless. Sloan wondered what was going to happen when McCall put all this information together and assumed he was guilty.

"Well, I guess that's all I have, Mr. Blackwolf," McCall said dismissively. "Ms. Stafford, anything you'd like to add?"

"I don't know what--that is...I mean you're barking up the wrong tree. Way wrong," she said.

Reno watched Sloan's golden hair glisten under the harsh lighting, her uniform fitting her all

the right ways in all the right places. She'd been a rock of support for both him and Angie today, but there wasn't anything she could add that would make any difference.

McCall leaned forward. "How so, Ms. Stafford? Is there anything more concrete you can give us?"

Sloan glanced around the room, her gaze jettisoning from man to man before lingering on Reno. In that moment, his stomach clenched involuntarily and it was as if their very souls meshed. She'd never seemed so beautiful...or so vulnerable. And there was no additional information could she shed.

"Yes, sir," she said hesitantly. "I think--" She cleared her throat and spoke more authoritatively. "Yes, I do have some information I think will help in this investigation."

"In deference to my reputation," she began, her gaze never leaving Reno, "Mr. Blackwolf neglected to mention one thing."

McCall nodded. "Go on."

Her voice, no matter how soft and slowly she'd begun, now sounded as firm and clear as if she was testifying in court. "We spent the entire night together last night. He couldn't have had anything to do with Mr. Sunbear's death."

Jacobs sounded like he was choking. McCall eyeballed her squarely. "You're sure."

She squared her shoulders and returned his no-nonsense gaze. "Oh, yes, sir. I'm a very light sleeper. He didn't leave all night."

Chapter 7

For a moment it was as if the world had spun off its axis. Reno's first reaction was shock, his jaw slackened and his breath caught. Surely he hadn't heard what he thought Sloan had said. She couldn't be serious. Lying to a federal agent? For what? To save his miserable--albeit innocent--hide? The instant the reality of her statement hit--of what she'd said and who she'd said it to--Reno shot to his feet. "Stop it!"

Her cheeks flamed, but she lifted that stubborn chin of hers in a way he knew meant she was digging in her heels. She met his narrowed glare with a defiant one of her own.

The woman was certifiable--loony as a...a loon. What in the hell could she hope to accomplish? Other than get her pretty little butt fired.

"Reno," she said in a soft, soothing voice that would've had him melting at her feet if he wasn't so angry at her. "You don't have to protect me. It's okay. I don't mind...really."

Nobody fought Reno Blackwolf's battles for him--nobody. Not even Jimmie. Reno refused to allow this kind of horse manure to be shoveled around the superintendent's office. He turned

to McCall and jerked a thumb back at Sloan. "She's lying."

"Mr. Blackwolf," McCall said, "I certainly can understand your reluctance to--"

"You don't understand a damn thing." Great. The fed believed Malibu Barbie. Reno didn't know who he wanted to strangle more--Sloan or McCall. Probably Sloan since he could hardly blame McCall. Any male with an ounce of testosterone would take one look at her and immediately think of heading to the nearest bedroom--if they made it that far. Hell, he'd had the same thoughts himself on more than one occasion. Nope, he couldn't fault the agent for believing her, and yet it galled him that she was laying her career and reputation on the line for him. He didn't want to owe anyone for anything. Life was safer that way. "She's trying to--" he raked a hand through his hair in mounting frustration-- "to protect--" He broke off and glared at Sloan trying to will her into submission. It wasn't working. "Hell, she doesn't know what she's-- Dammit!"

"And what's she trying to do?" McCall asked.

The calm, placid tones of the agent rankled Reno even more. Easy for the fibbie to be Mr. Nice Guy. He didn't have anything on the line. "I'd think, Agent McCall, it would be obvious what she's doing. She thinks she's protecting me."

McCall gave him a quizzical look, his brows tugging together as though trying to understand a very complicated puzzle. "Why would she do that?"

Reno paced in front of Jacobs' desk pondering the agent's twenty-four hundred thousand-dollar question. Hell, who knew what ran through that head of hers? Up until a few minutes ago, he'd thought her one of the brightest women he knew--tough, beautiful, competent. Where the devil had his head been? Or better yet, which head had conjured up that particular thought? His astonishment was genuine. She'd totally confounded him. Absolutely and completely. And she hadn't given him a clue. "I don't know." He slanted her an amazed glance. "Hell, she all but hates me."

McCall quirked a brow at him. "I doubt that."

"I know her. We work together." Where he chose to make her life a living hell. "Don't doubt it," Reno said.

"Ranger," McCall said, "I've spent a lot of years studying people. This lady is exhibiting some pretty strange behavior for someone who dislikes you, let alone hates you."

Reno glanced at Sloan again. She didn't meet his gaze. She blushed from her neck up to her

hair. Impossible. The agent was way off. Sloan was trying to help him of all people? After all he'd put her through? It didn't make sense. He shook his head. The agent was right on one count: people didn't do things without a reason. Maybe by the enforced closeness of their work environment, or some other twisted way, she felt a misplaced loyalty to him. Women! The rest of the world was worried about the year two thousand computer problem. That was nothing compared to figuring out what made a female--especially this one--tick!

Frustration mounting, he clenched and unclenched his fists in complete helplessness. It wasn't a state he liked or ever associated with himself. In fact, he despised it, especially when it involved Sloan. "I am telling you once more," he grated out through a tight jaw. "She's lying--period."

"He's just upset," Sloan said.

"No duh," Reno said.

"He knows I don't hate him. We have a...a relationship."

"Sloan." His voice reaching a near roar, Reno whirled on her. "Shut the hell up."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jacobs' sputter came in unison with Reno's outrage. "You're both--that is...your conduct is totally inappropriate, strictly against policy and--"

"Of course it is," Sloan said so calmly that Reno wanted to wring her neck then and there. "Don't you see? That's why Reno didn't say where he'd been." Sloan smiled weakly. "I--we--didn't exactly know it was against the rules. And anyway, it was just too hard to fight our...you know, our feelings."

McCall shook his head and looked like he was trying to hide a definite smirk. He turned to address Jacobs. "This is out of the realm of my jurisdiction. I have everything I need other than the autopsy report and that will be sent when it's available. I have another matter at the west entrance that I have to take care of, but the Regional office will send someone out to wrap things up."

Jacobs thanked McCall profusely and escorted him out of his office. Reno stared at Sloan who in turn stared at her hands clasped in her lap. He couldn't think of anything sane to say to her at the moment. Not one word.

Jacobs returned a few seconds later, slumped on the corner of his desk and scowled. "I can't believe it, Reno," he said in obvious amazement. "This behavior from you, a seasoned ranger." He glanced at Sloan who hadn't moved. "You're her field training officer. Good Lord, are you insane."

"No, I'm not," Reno ground out. "But someone here definitely is. She's lying, Howard."

"No, I'm not." Sloan lifted her chin and an arctic blue gaze. She crossed her arms, squared her shoulders as though silently daring either of them to say more.

"Then you're crazy," Reno bit out.

"I don't think so," Howard said.

"Any idiot could see straight through her. She's like a freaking pane of glass and she's not that great of an actress."

"So now I'm an idiot?" The vee in Jacobs' forehead deepened until his eyes were slits. "I'd say you're the idiot, Reno, acting like some rutting moose in springtime."

"I didn't act like a moose and you know what I meant about the idiots," Reno shot back.

Jacobs cleared his throat. "I should suspend you--" he pointed toward Reno-- "and dismiss you--" his angry gaze settled on Sloan.

She jutted that chin farther out as if daring the superintendent, Reno, or both to take her on.

Jacobs's hands trembled with barely suppressed rage. "Dammit, I should." He picked up the assignment roster. "And I would--"

"Except?" Reno asked.

"You know exactly why," Howard said. "We're so shorthanded, we can hardly keep things under control now." He tossed the roster on his desktop. "There's nothing I can do right now," he said with a firm glower at both of them. "I'll have to leave you where you are."

An audible sigh of relief came from Sloan indicating she wasn't quite as brazen as she'd let on. Good, Reno thought. He hoped she was stewing in her own soup. Served her right for telling such a whopper.

Her shoulders relaxed. "Thank--"

"Don't thank me," Jacobs said. "Because I'm not done with you two, not yet. It's against my better judgement to let things go on like normal, but I need you--and you're both good. And," he said and swiped his hand across his damp forehead, "you make one helluva team. But--" he fixed Sloan and then Reno with a hard gaze and another pointed finger-- "if I get the slightest undercurrent of any more of this...malfeasance--"

"Malfeasance," Reno said. "Get real, Howard."

"If any, and I mean no matter how minuscule the misconduct might be--if I even hear a little bird peeping about it, you'll both be gone so fast it'll make your heads spin like a bad rerun of The Exorcist. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes," Reno said through his aching tight jaw.

Sloan nodded.

"I mean it. I'll yank your butts out of here even if you're the last rangers in the park."

"Yes, sir." Sloan angled a glance at Reno who refused to even acknowledge her presence.

"If you'll excuse me, Howard," Reno said. "I have to get back to Angie."

Jacobs gave him a blank look that slowly changed as he realized who they were talking about. "Ah...yes, yes. Give her my condolences."

Sloan turned to leave, but Reno didn't trust himself with her at the moment.

"Hey," she said and reached for his arm. "Come on."

He stepped away from her and jerked his arm back.

"Reno, please...."

He followed her to the steps leading down from Howard's office. "I ought to leave you here and let you walk home."

"I can explain--"

"The hell you can," he shot back. "There's no explanation for--" He caught himself and glanced around. A few employees milled around and he didn't want anyone spreading any other

stories about him. "Wait for me in the Bronco." He managed to keep his voice steady, even though he felt that the wind had been knocked out of him. "I need a few minutes alone," he said. "And you know why."

She nodded and did as he'd asked.

He didn't speak to her on the ride back. He didn't trust what he'd say let alone what he'd do. He just kept turning her words over and over in his mind. Obstructing justice in a federal investigation! She was nuts. That's all there was to it. A bonafide mental case.

He pulled up in front of Angie's place and cut the engine. "I don't know what's worse," he said, "being a prime suspect in the murder of a friend, or as a sexual predator of a subordinate."

Sloan sat silently looking at her clasped hands again.

"Damn you, Sloan. What were you thinking? Or were you thinking at all? The act you put on back there was pathetic. You're not Meryl Streep, not even close."

Still she said nothing. He opened his door and turned back to deliver one last parting shot. "In fact, if it hadn't been me you were talking about, I would have doubled over laughing at your performance."

"It was no laughing matter," she said at last. "Not to me."

He frowned. "Or me. Did you bother to think about what's going to happen once Jacobs figures things out?"

"He won't."

"Yes, Sloan, he will. Give him a little time and a little bit of digging and he'll put it all together." He eyed her straight on, hoping to convince her of the stupidity of her actions, praying it wasn't too late to turn back the tide of what she'd started. "And then guess what?"

"W-what?"

"You'll be kicked out of the park permanently. In fact--" he lowered his voice to make sure she got the point-- "you won't work in the entire federal park system again. Not ever."

With that, he slid out, slammed the door, and strode toward Angie's porch not knowing whether he was more furious with Sloan and her stupid blonde trick or himself. Every time he looked at her, his temper inched a notch higher.

One side of him realized he should be tap dancing in the street at the possibility of finally getting her out of his hair. It was what he'd wanted from the beginning and with very little effort, he could have it.

But now that the goal was within sight, he had a few doubts. He wasn't ambivalent. He

simply didn't want her gone. Why, he couldn't have said and didn't want to know. The feeling was strong and he didn't want to examine it. For now, Reno knew he didn't want Sloan out of the park, or his life. Not just yet.

He ground his teeth and shook his head. He should make an appointment with a shrink, because he definitely needed his head examined. Maybe he was as insane as Jacobs had accused him of being. This particular type of thought was totally out of character for him. He might be able to handle the fact that he was attracted to her--hell, who wouldn't be--but that's all his beleaguered brain could handle.

Only one thing gave him a big enough shield to hide behind, his anger. It was all that seemed to hold her at arm's length and give him breathing room. And after that stint in Jacobs' office, he'd have more than enough reason to breathe fire around Sloan.

Sloan had burrowed into his life right under his nose. How, he didn't know, didn't want to know, didn't need to know, but he'd gotten used to her, to the sound of her voice, the clean fresh scent of her in the morning when he came to pick her up, the way she dug her heels in and refused to give up. With Jimmie's death, she became an anchor of reality for him, something he could depend on. He didn't want to lose that, especially now.

But he couldn't afford to let her get closer, either. Damn! Life used to be so much simpler.

He raised his hand to knock. Sloan's voice stopped him.

She scooted up the stairs and stepped in front of him. "I know what you're thinking, but--"

"You don't know anything." He ground the words out, knowing that if he didn't maintain a wall between them, he'd end up kissing her again, wanting more from her, and end up in royal mess.

"Fine, then I don't know, but just listen."

He pulled back and stared at her. God, the woman had guts.

"Okay I lied to the agent and to Jacobs. So sue me. It was a spur of the moment decision and maybe it wasn't too bright, but it was the only way I knew to keep you--"

"To keep me what? Safe?" The words came out before he could think better of it. Her eyes showed how deeply he'd hit the mark, but she didn't waver or back off. "You're laboring under one helluva huge illusion if you think I need protection, lady."

She planted her hands on her hips and angled her head up to glare back at him. "Oh, right. I forgot that the big, tough ranger rides through the forest on a grizzly bear, picks his teeth with a pine branch, and catches silver bullets in his bare hands. Silly me."

"Yeah," he said, "very silly you."

"Well try this on for size, Blackwolf," she said. "I know you didn't kill Jimmie. There's no way," she said, her voice filled with conviction and courage.

"Sure I could. Haven't you heard? Everyone has a little murder in their soul."

"Not for Jimmie you don't."

Damn, she was like a dog with a bone. She never let up and she never let loose. He would've liked to have gotten this kind of support from Howard. Even now, her simple faith in him touched him more deeply than he wanted to admit--even to himself.

"Like I said, you don't know shinola about me--" he turned to open the door-- "and you don't want to find out."

"Dammit, Reno, wait a minute."

She grabbed his arm, the outline of her fingers almost searing his skin. "No," he said, shaking her away and trying yet again to mentally distance himself, protect himself from the comfort and safety she offered. "You wait a minute, because that's all I've got left for you--one minute, so spit out whatever's so all fired important. I want to check on Angie."

"I'm sorry I made you mad."

She looked up at him in the gloom of the evening. A bright, full moon rode low in the sky. Her hair did that funky sparkly thing that all but beckoned him to touch it again, to pull her close... He shook his head and stepped away from her. No wonder people called it lunacy--it had shoved his head up his backside more than once.

"You wouldn't be any good to Angie if you were locked up somewhere." She dropped her gaze and sighed. "I thought you'd want to catch whoever did this."

"I do." He fought to keep the shield up, to keep his anger stoked high and hot. In the face of her certainty of his innocence, it was the toughest thing he'd had to do in a very long time.

"Then do it." Her head snapped up and in the dappled mixture of moon and night her eyes blazed with heated affirmation. "I'll help you. Whatever you need."

Oh, brother, exactly the offer he didn't need right now. "No thanks," he managed to grate out. "You've done plenty already."

She nodded, her gaze falling to the porch again. Nice job, Blackwolf, he told himself. Way to stomp all over her when she's already down. Why did she have to be so damn sweet, so understanding? From day one, she'd conjured up a flurry of mixed emotions in him. The need to hold her, touch her, kiss her was continually doing battle with his common sense. And yet when

she was close like this it was hell.

All he had to do was open his arms and gather her in. He had no doubt she'd allow whatever he wanted. What he wanted was to bury himself in her softness and let her comfort him. What he'd allow--what she needed was a good night's sleep. What he'd said was true, she had done enough, but not in the way he'd meant it. Her downcast face almost broke his heart. Ah, Sloan, he thought, you turn me inside out. "Come on," he said and gruffly ushered her inside the cabin.

Sloan sank onto the couch. Reno walked quietly down the hall to check on Angie. "She's sleeping," he said, stating the obvious.

"I'm not surprised," Sloan said. "They gave her some pretty heavy medication at the infirmary."

That, Sloan realized, would give her and Reno more dead time and space together--something she didn't need right now. She suspected he didn't either. She thought he was the type that would need to stay busy, keep up his head down, and blank everything out as long as he could. From the moment they'd discovered Jimmie, she'd fought an almost constant urge to comfort Reno. He was too stubborn and too strong to ever give into something like that, though, so she'd done the only thing she could, protected him the only way she knew how.

If she was obstructing justice, so be it. She'd accept whatever punishment the law required. In fact, she'd do the same thing all over again if necessary. By spinning the lie, she'd placed her fate in Reno's hands. She knew he wouldn't be happy about it, no macho ranger she knew would, but she hadn't known he'd react quite so harshly. Then again, maybe it was for the best. She was tired of fighting the constant attraction that seemed to grow each time they were together. Her performance today seemed to have ended it pretty abruptly.

"I can't stand all this quiet." Reno strode to a lamp and snapped it on.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He grabbed his notebook and pen from his pocket. "Making a list."

"And checking it twice?" Sloan asked.

He sent her a dark look that didn't begin to faze her. He had much blacker ones in his repertoire. "For what?"

Trying to keep herself busy, she went into the kitchen and filled a large coffeepot with water.

"I want to go over everything Jimmie and I did yesterday, including what I really did last night--" he sent her a side-long glare-- "up until when we found the body. I want to make sure I didn't miss something that might point me in the right direction."

"Then you can use some coffee," she called from the kitchen. "Sounds like it could be a long night."

"For me," he said, "not you."

She came to the doorway between the living room and kitchen. After everything they'd been through together, after finding the body, bringing it back, after she covered for him with the agent, he wanted to play it silent and alone? She thought it should irk her more, maybe even make her as angry as he always seemed to, but it didn't. Maybe she was so numb, nothing could touch her anymore. Or maybe she was just numb, a good place to be right now. "Whatever," she said with a shrug, and went back to her java-making duties.

He consumed two pots while sketching and jotting down notes. She silently dozed in the rocker. Finally he threw his pen down with a soft, but disgusted expletive.

"Something the matter?" she asked groggily.

"No." A heartbeat passed. Then two. "Yes," he said at last. "I can't seem to come up with a motive, not for me or anyone else. There's nothing in any of Jimmie's relationships or business dealings that give any indication of why somebody would to kill him."

"And in such an awful way," Sloan said. "Do you suppose he was dead before--"

"Yes!"

The force and vehemence of the one lone word also carried impotent anger and unfathomable pain. Although the autopsy report wouldn't be released until later, Sloan realized that Reno couldn't deal with a death as horrific as Jimmie's. For Reno and Angie's sake, she prayed he was right.

"He said it was someone close," a sleep-laden voice said.

Sloan and Reno turned around. Angie, disheveled and a little wobbly, padded into the living room and rubbed her eyes.

"Hey, there." Sloan walked up to the other woman and hugged her, trying to will some of her own strength into her new friend. "Can I get you anything?"

Angie's choked laugh was tinged with sarcasm. Her lips lifted in a weak smile that was lost in the sadness of her eyes. "Not unless there's a cup of human kindness around."

"Angie." Reno stood and held his arms out to her. She left Sloan and fled to the refuge of Blackwolf's strong arms and solid chest.

Sloan couldn't blame her. It's exactly the place she'd like to be for a millennium or two. The thought wrenched her heart. It was something she'd like, but it would never happen. He fought

too hard to keep her at arm's length. She didn't have a prayer.

Too bad. Reno Blackwolf was the only man to ever hold her heart. Something inside Sloan wanted to laugh out loud at the irony of her predicament. The woman who'd studiously avoided relationships in favor of pursuing a career had gone and fallen in love with the most remote man on the face of the earth.

Chapter 8

Reno's arms slid around Angie and he pulled her close to his thudding heart. He wanted to do more, but he couldn't take her pain away no matter how badly he tried. It was something she'd have to work through on her own, probably for many years. There was no way around it, love was pure hell.

He sheltered her, trying to telegraph some measure of empathy and comfort to her. His chest filled with a mixture of the same regret, pain, and loss that he thought Angie was experiencing, but he knew that whatever he felt, hers was a hundred fold greater. Angie was special, not only to Jimmie, but to Reno. She was a part of him, of his heritage, of his life and he loved her. Not the way a Jimmie loved her, the way a man loves a woman, but rather the way a man loves his mother or sister. Not the way he felt about Sloan.

Reno stiffened. Where the hell had that come from? Sloan had been in his life for just a few weeks and stirred incredibly volatile feelings. Lust, he told himself. Hormones, passion, glands-nothing else. And yet in the calm, vulnerable time of holding Angie, a softness curled around

the heart he'd sworn he'd turned into granite. The love he was experiencing was due to Angie, and yet felt a lot like what he fought against daily with Sloan.

Angie relaxed and pulled out of his embrace. "Where's the coffee? I need a cup...or two."

Sloan came up to Angie and ushered her into the kitchen. The light, distinct fragrance he associated with her lingered a few moments. A consuming urge to reach out and pull Sloan back to the place Angie had just vacated enveloped Reno. He fought it successfully and was grateful to win the battle, but each time took more energy, more effort, and it worried him. How long could he keep this up? How long before his stamina and control gave out? How long before he and Sloan ended up doing exactly what she'd been lying about today?

He pulled his thoughts to a safer area. "Angie," he said, walking into the kitchen and straddling a ladder-back chair. "I know this is a really rough time, but what did you mean a minute ago? If Jimmie said something about it being 'someone close', he must have indicated what he was investigating. Or better yet, who?"

Angie stared into her black coffee and tried to blink back tears. "Not exactly," she said as a drop of moisture trickled from the outer corner of each eye. "He just said he had some kind of evidence and it involved someone close."

"Close to whom?" Sloan asked gently. "To Jimmie? To you? To Reno?"

Angie sank into a chair next to Reno, set her mug on the table and wiped her cheeks. "The only thing he said much about was illegal mining."

"Where?" Reno took her hand in his, kissed it, and tucked it against his chest. "Think, honey. It's important."

A tear trickled down each of Angie's cheek again. "I'm trying, Reno, really, it's just--"

"We shouldn't push her," Sloan said and moved to stand protectively behind her roommate.

"It's somewhere inside." Angie massaged her temples as though to keep pain at bay and help her think.

"Inside?" Reno exchanged a puzzled glance with Sloan who shrugged.

"Yeah," Angie said and brushed the tears away. "Inside Yellowstone. But I don't know exactly where. He was pretty tight mouthed about his job."

"Yeah," Reno said. "I know."

"He did say we'd be surprised, though," Angie said. "But he also said he was safe in saying that because no one would ever guess who it was."

"Sounds like he was ready to close in to make an arrest," Reno said. "That would make

sense."

"How so?" Sloan poured herself some coffee and refilled Reno and Angie's cups.

"If he was that far into his investigation that he had the goods to make the arrest, it means someone had a solid motive for killing him."

"But who?" Angie asked.

"Whoever killed him," Reno said. "Which bring us back to square one."

Angie pressed a fist over her mouth to stop her sob.

"If he said 'it's somebody close', then it could be someone we know, someone in the park." Sloan paced the linoleum floor then stopped suddenly. "If there was enough for Jimmie to arrest someone, wouldn't he have sworn out a warrant on them?"

"Maybe," Reno said slowly. "If he'd gotten that far."

"He said he'd seen something, something illegal," Angie offered, her voice thick with sorrow and tears.

"Something that someone would kill him for to keep it undercover," Sloan said. "But what? There's got to be a thread that we can follow."

Reno glanced at Sloan, watching her as she spoke. Each time his gaze touched her it was as

if the look had form and substance. The sensations that followed did weird things to her throat, her stomach, and her equilibrium. She always felt off-balance in his presence, but his somber, dark gaze was something else, something deeper, sexier, and more dangerous. She met his gaze and from the look on his face, he'd had a similar jolt. God, why couldn't this be easy with no attraction, no dancing around at arm's length? Why couldn't they simply react to one another like normal individuals?

"Like what?" he asked, his voice lower and huskier than before.

All Sloan wanted to do was wrap herself up in Reno Blackwolf, but there was something much bigger than petty desires going on. "Think about it. There aren't many people who kill for the fun of it. And those that do don't take the time to--" she caught herself before she could comment on the ignoble way Jimmie had been left at the geyser. Reno's gratitude shone in his eyes. Angie struggled to maintain her composure, lost the battle and fled to the living room.

"Let her go," Reno said so softly, Sloan had to bend to hear him. "She needs to deal with her grief in her own way. Now finish what you were going to say."

"Well," Sloan said, "it's just that most people have a reason behind their killing. If we find the reason--"

"Right. Motive plus opportunity equal a suspect." Reno raked his fingers through his hair, a sure sign his frustration was mounting. "But I can't fathom what that reason might be. There's no lucrative mushroom hunting," he said, alluding to the theft and even murder of mushroom hunters in other parks. The 'shroom business was hot in the oriental market, but Yellowstone didn't allow visitors much access into the inner areas of the park.

"Whatever Jimmie was killed for has to be very lucrative. People usually kill for power or money, which is just another form of power," she said, musing out loud.

"How do you know that?" Reno asked. "You haven't had time to watch television lately."

She shot him a withering glance. "Criminology was my undergraduate minor. There was a time I wanted to be in a profiler for the FBI"

"Why didn't you?"

She shrugged. "A desk job would bore me silly. I need to be out and about."

Reno nodded sagely and she knew he felt the same way she did. "So what could be in this park that's worth a whole lot of money?"

"Not our jobs, that's for sure," she said and sank down in the chair Angie had vacated. "The most lucrative thing I know of is drugs."

Reno just stared at her, not as if she was nuts or an idiot or any of those names he'd called her earlier, but as if he was listening and thinking. Like they were really communicating. "True," he said finally. "But why Yellowstone? Why not run it across I-90? Why meander on these god-forsaken roads?"

Sloan slumped back in her chair and gazed at the ceiling. It could use a new coat of paint. "I don't know."

"What else?" Reno asked.

"What do you mean 'what else?'"

"You seem to be on to something. If Jimmie had stumbled on illegal activity, he'd most certainly want to weed it out, but if not drugs, then what?"

Sloan rolled her head to an angle where she could stare at him. He'd actually given her credit for something? Thought she was on to something? Maybe the world would stop turning next.

"Maybe dumping waste or toxic substances?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up as if she'd done something right again. "Possible."

A soft sound came from the living room. Sloan and Reno turned to see Angie, struggling

valiantly to hold herself together. Reno got up and went to her, slinging a strong arm around her shoulders to guide her back to the table. "I want to help," Angie said. "I'm sorry--"

"Don't apologize," Reno said. "It's like you're apologizing for loving him."

"You have a right to your tears and your grief," Sloan said. Angie nodded. "Jimmie was also ranting about strip mining," she said. "I mean in the days before his death, he was really wound up about it."

Reno frowned. "Had he been--"

"No!" Angie cut him off before he could mention anything that might sully Jimmie's memory. "He was stone cold sober. Other than that night with you and Sloan."

Reno's frown deepened.

"Strip mining?" Sloan asked. "It doesn't make sense. It's perfectly legal."

Angie glanced at her with swollen, sad eyes. "That's all I know. Sorry."

"Unless..." Reno leaned forward and Sloan caught a whiff of the masculine scent that clung to him, an essence of the man himself. If only she could crawl inside his arms and feel safe.

"Unless what?" she asked.

"Unless the strip mining isn't legal. Those miners can slowly and deliberately destroy their

own land, but what if it's not enough any more? What if they're poaching on park land?" Strip mining inside Yellowstone? Sloan shuddered at the thought. "No way."

"Oh yes," Reno said. "It's as possible as a drug operation or toxic dumping. And if Jimmie had gotten too close, a miner could kill him as easily as a druggie, right? I mean the same thing is on the line, money."

"Do you suppose?" Sloan asked, unwilling to think anyone could so desecrate such a gorgeous park. "Aren't there enough minerals and stuff around outside the park? They have to try and ruin Yellowstone, too?"

Reno patted Angie's shoulder as a new round of heartache seemed to engulf her. "Omigosh," Sloan said. "If Jimmie was killed to cover up illegal activities and the perpetrator knew the investigation was getting too close, then he also has to know Angie and Jimmie's relationship. That they were planning to get married."

"What are you getting at?" Reno's thunderous gaze met Sloan's over the top of Angie's head.

Sloan shook her head and sighed. She didn't want to be the one to voice the concern, but there didn't seem to be any way around it. "If the perpetrator knows they were engaged, they might also think that Jimmie confided in Angie--"

"Then she could be next," Reno said. He raised his head slowly, almost dazed, to mesh his gaze with Sloan's.

"Oh for heaven's sake, that's impossible." Angie's gaze wasn't nearly as strong as her words. "Isn't it?"

Reno pulled Angie close again and rested his cheek on the top of her hair. "I don't know, honey, but I'm not willing to take that chance. Until we find out who it is, you could be in definite danger. You'll need to be with someone at all times."

"No! I refuse to be a hostage in my own life." Angie covered her face with her hands. "I can't."

Reno gently pulled her hands away. "It can and I won't let anything happen to you. I might have screwed up with Jimmie, but I won't let anything happen to you."

His declaration stirred Sloan's heart. Did Angie know how lucky she was? If Reno Blackwolf swore anything, Sloan knew he'd keep his word...or die trying.

"Are you in this?" he asked Sloan.

"Absolutely."

"Can you fire a weapon?" he asked.

"As well as clean and repair them," Sloan said.

Angie stiffened in Reno's embrace then broke free. "No!"

Reno looked puzzled. "You don't have a say in this."

"The hell I don't," Angie said. "It's my life, isn't it?"

"Yes," Reno said. "And I want to make sure you get to live it and not end up staked on some--"

"Reno!" Sloan interrupted. "We can't keep her prisoner."

"I can't sit around this apartment thinking...remembering. I have to go out," she said. "Especially to work."

"But--" Reno began.

"No buts," Angie said. "You two can stay with me or accompany me, but I will go to work. And I'll be surrounded by people at the infirmary, so you won't have to worry about me there. And I'll stay there with all these people until one of you picks me up. How's that?"

Reno stared at her, as though analyzing the chances of a successful argument. He glanced at Sloan. "It should be okay until we narrow the list of suspects."

"It can't get much narrower," Reno said. "We don't have anyone."

"But we will," Sloan said. "We will."

"You can bet on it," Reno said. "That much I swear by my Grandmother's grave."

Angie met his gaze. "I'll help as much as I can starting in an hour."

"What's in an hour?" Reno asked.

"I go to work. And don't even think of stopping me."

"I'll take you," he said.

"And I'll go along," Sloan said. Before he could say anything, much less 'no' she added, "We should go back to the crime scene and check around again. Maybe we missed something last time."

Reno quirked a brow at her.

"Not that I'm trying to tell you what you should do or anything," she said.

"Then let's get moving. We can make it by daybreak, before any brass sticks their nose in it or pulls us off the case."

"It's not really our case," Sloan said.

"Oh, yes it is. He was my brother in spirit. It's very much my case. Now let's get on it."

Reno and Sloan dropped Angie off and headed back to where they'd found Jimmie's body. No one spoke. The memories were too horrible to recall and too monstrous not to think about. Jimmie hadn't deserved such a death. No one did. Reno had meant what he'd said. He'd find the killer...and God help the man when he did!

"I want to believe that Jimmie was killed somewhere else," Sloan said at last. "And whoever did it, transported the body to the geyser."

"Me, too," Reno said. Anything else was too gruesome to think about. Dear God, how did families of people who'd met a particularly gruesome death deal with it through the months and years? Every time the vision of Jimmie's body staked over the geyser popped to mind, Reno forced it back to whatever crevice nightmares like that came from.

"That means we've only seen the secondary crime scene," she said.

"You sound like a cop."

"Thank you. I'd hate to see my education a total waste."

Reno brought the Bronco to a stop and jumped out. "Don't forget your flashlight," he called, then headed toward the geyser at a slow jog. Sloan followed at a slower pace. Everything

seemed the same. Sunny skies, white-capped mountains, and crystal streams, and yet the spell had been broken. There was something sinister in the air, as though nature herself had taken offence to what had occurred here. The crime committed almost blotted out the wondrous beauty of the mountains. Sloan wondered if it would always be marred by the tragedy or if, in time, nature could reclaim the pristine innocence once again?

Nearing the crime scene, Reno pointed toward the backside of the geyser. "Let's split up. You go around there and look for anything that's out of different or out of place."

"Right."

Sloan strode toward the front of the geyser and shined her light around the edges. Might as well start from the top and work her way farther out. Fingers of daylight were stretching across the wide sky. Her light glinted off the cone where millennia of microorganisms had helped to form a gray mound that towered over the heated water. She scraped around edge, but the substances were hard and unyielding. Nothing out of place there. Behind the cone, opposite where they'd found Jimmie, something bright in color caught Sloan's attention. An orange lump of clay stuck out against the muted colors of the cone. She squatted down to examine it closer and shined her light on it. Bright orange, it didn't match the geyser's mineral-rich drizzle.

Whatever it was, it definitely had come from somewhere else. But where? She had no idea.

"Reno? Is this anything?" She lifted a corner of the clump with her pocketknife and held it up to further examine it.

Reno strode around the cone to where she stood. He bent down beside her, his shoulder scraping hers. She lifted the knife and he took it, turning it over.

"Any idea where it's from?"

He sighed, a deep whoosh of air escaping his lungs. "Yeah. A place higher up inside. This just may be the lead we've been wanting."

"And I found it," she said smugly.

"Don't get too excited. You didn't know where it came from or what it meant, Ranger Stafford."

"Where's it from?" she asked.

He turned to meet her gaze. "Up north. Way up north, like by the border."

"What's there?" she asked.

"Strip mining outside the park. Who knows what inside. Let's just cross our fingers and hope that this takes us where we need to go," he said pensively.

Reno's defenses were down. He was tired and he was grateful. Sloan had found a bit of something that might prove essential in Jimmie's murder. Her eyes shimmered in the early morning light. She shivered, whether with excitement or from the cold, he didn't know, but it couldn't have happened at a worse time. "Sloan..."

Her blue eyes turned sapphire. "Yes?"

"I--thanks," he said, standing and dusting his palms against his khakis.

"For what?" she asked.

"For coming along, for helping with Angie."

"I didn't do it for your thanks." She stood also. "But you're welcome."

He couldn't help himself. He reached out and folded her in his arms. A congratulatory hug, he told himself. A human touch in an inhumane crime scene. He deserved as much; so did she.

In an instant, the warmth of her body seeped into his, and she fit so perfectly against him. The moment he pressed her closer, molded her to him, the friendly embrace became something more. Her breath rushed through her lips, grazing his ear and stoking his passion. He should push her away. Hell, he never should've started this in the first place, but the moment Reno pulled back, she looked up at him and he couldn't deny himself any longer. He brushed his lips

across hers once, twice, then came back to deepen the kiss and lose himself in the welcome that was Sloan.

A sensation of falling engulfed her and she leaned into him for stability. That only made the vertigo worse. Her head was dangerously close to spinning out of control and with it, her good sense.

Since finding Jimmie the day before, she'd wanted Reno's arms around her. She parted her lips and he took her mouth as his own. He tasted like the elements: of man, of desire, and dark passion. Tiny splinters of desire licked along her spine. She was hot. She was cold. The world was whatever Reno willed it to be, and she couldn't get enough.

Reno's senses whirled, and he fought to regain control of the situation. Control? Yeah, right. He'd lost that a long time ago--like the first moment they'd met. Or maybe that night on the porch. She'd had the upper hand at every turn and now, he was lost in a vortex of sensation. He felt the heat of her lips, the wet, delicacy of her stroking tongue, and the timeless sensuality of her softness fitted against his hardness. Their bodies were made for each other; they were made for this moment and much more.

He was headed toward dangerous territory, and there was still so much to do. Jimmie.

Angie. Damn, he'd known better than to ever touch her. And yet, everything inside him called out for comfort, a cease to the pain of the past day. The problem now was that he couldn't release her, couldn't let her go. He'd never felt more powerless in his life. He needed her.

"Oh, my!" a voice said.

It sounded funny. High pitched and old. It couldn't be Sloan, her lips were fastened with his. Was it in his head?

"Excuse me? Uh, Officer?"

This time the voice knifed through Reno's passion-filled haze.

"Ranger?" a deep male voice asked.

Sloan might have driven him to the brink of self-control, but not insanity. Not yet. He pulled his mouth from hers and glanced up. His vision cleared, and he realized four people stood on the trail watching them.

An elderly man stood with his hands on his hips. "Sir, are we disturbing you?"

"What are you doing here?" Reno snapped back. "This area has been closed to visitors."

"We got lost and there weren't any signs saying it's closed." The man glanced around. "What's the problem here?"

"Nothing," Reno said, "we've had some...uh..."

"Geyser problems," Sloan said, slipping away.

He slanted her a glance. "Yes, geyser problems."

"How do we get back?"

With a splayed hand on Sloan's back, Reno pushed her forward. "Ranger Stafford here will escort you back."

Sloan glanced at him over her shoulder. "But, I--"

He scowled, more at himself and lack of discipline than at her. "I'll catch up to you later."

With that, he turned on his heel and stalked away. "Oh, my," the elderly woman whispered. "He seems quite angry. I'm so sorry."

"He's had a lousy couple of days," Sloan offered, her gaze following the broad retreating back of her FTO. "Let's follow this trail to the parking lot and I'll direct you wherever you need to go."

"Oh, thank you," the woman said. "We've been wandering around for hours."

"All part of the job, ma'am," Sloan said and gave the group a phony smile. She'd much rather have followed Reno into whatever remote country he was going, but duty called. No

matter how dull and boring, it was still her duty.

Reno kicked every rock he came upon. What in the hell had he been thinking? First he kissed his intern--again. He didn't want to think of how many personal principles, let alone professional codes, and his own better judgments he'd gone against. It was especially galling in light of Jimmie's death. Dammit, how could he have kissed her again? Then he had to go and snap at the tourists. It was part of his job to help tourists not bite their heads off. All of this because he couldn't conquer his feelings around Sloan. Losing it by the geyser had been the last straw. He had to find a way to stop the feelings. But short of killing himself, what? He couldn't stop the way he felt about Sloan any more than he could keep his heart from beating or his lungs from breathing.

Fists clenched, he recommitted himself to learn to live with his feelings around Sloan--without wanting to bury himself in the depths of her body every time he was within a few feet of her.

Sloan headed back to headquarters, but Reno wasn't there. She filled out paperwork, stared out the window, and literally willed him to show up. Finally, she gave up and paced the narrow space between their two desks, at one point slamming her fist against the wall. "Ouch, dammit," she said.

"If you're trying for workman's comp, you're going to have to do better than that." As though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, Reno walked toward his desk, his deep voice filling the room. Sloan gasped for the air that seemed to be rushing from her lungs. Not this time! He wouldn't get away with acting like he hadn't turned her world upside-down. He sat in his chair and she rested one hand on the back, shaking a fist in front of his face.

"What," she snapped out, "in the hell is your problem, Blackwolf?"

"Problem?"

He made it sound like he was surprised by her question, but he didn't fool Sloan at all. She could see deep into his face at the close distance, and his eyes betrayed him. Her question was something he didn't want to deal with.

"Yes, your problem. I've had it with this off-again, on-again stuff. One minute you're

growling at me like I'm a child who can't do anything right, the next you're pulling me so close I don't know where my body stops and yours starts. If I'm the only person around here who thinks you're innocent of Jimmie's death, then that means I'm the only one you can trust. Or are you using the sexual thing to keep me at arms length and no closer."

"The sexual thing?" he asked as if saying 'good day.' "There's no 'sexual thing' going on here."

"Wrong," Sloan said. "You might convince someone else of that, but it was my body plastered against yours this morning and you can't deny there wasn't anything sexual going on--not to me. Viagra is something you definitely don't need."

Reno's brows snapped into their usual frown. "Keep it down."

"No body's here. Heck, no body will work with you or me, so we're sort of stuck with each other. Or to each other, depending on your mood."

"Look, Sloan," Reno said. "Don't go misreading a little physical pleasure as a life-long commitment. Okay, so you turn me on. Big deal. Deal with it."

She stepped forward and purposely leaned closer--into his personal space. He froze. "That wasn't a little physical pleasure back there this morning."

"Sure it was; that's all it was."

"If those tourists hadn't interrupted us, where do you suppose we'd be right now, Reno?" She checked her watch. It was almost three o'clock. "Maybe just brushing the grass stains off our backsides? Maybe getting ready for Round Ten in Mother Nature's Passion Pit? I've never done it outside, Reno. Have you? The wind on our skin, the sun on our faces--well, on mine anyway and on your shoulders. The scent of pine wafting around our slick, sweaty bodies. Because that's what it would be, wouldn't it? Nothing delicate and nice, not the way our kisses have been."

The words came through a rapidly drying mouth. Images of entangled limbs, of dark hair and darker eyes above her claimed her mind. Her womb clenched in anticipation, but she was in too far to back down now.

Reno cleared his throat and paused before looking away. "I didn't realize that a little kiss would upset you so much. I'm sorry. I'll have to do a better job."

"I don't think so." She slid one arm along the back of his chair and leaned close to his ear. "I think you do a great job. In fact if you did a better job of kissing and caressing me, I would've exploded in an orgasm right there in your arms. And wouldn't those tourists have had something

to write home about then?"

Reno didn't move.

Sloan grabbed her hat and stalked out the front door and down the front steps.

Reno couldn't have gone after her if his life depended on it, not with the erection he had. Worse than his physical predicament was the mental one. If he lived to be a hundred, he knew he'd never be able to erase the images she'd conjured up. Images of him and her, naked, together in the soft, green grass of the forest. And she'd been right. It would be hot, panting, and passionate--

Damn! Reno glared out the window. Just damn!

Chapter 9

Sloan burst through the front door and strode out to the parking lot. A list of colorful nouns and adjectives describing Reno Blackwolf tripped from her lips with each furious step. By the time she reached their vehicle, she'd expended her litany. "Of all the mule-headed, hard-hearted, distant son-of-a--" She stemmed the rest of the words by tapping a fist against her mouth.

She turned to glare at his office window. No one was there, not that she thought he would be. Reno wasn't one to follow after, to apologize, to empathize. Not him. Not the tall, stoic ranger she worked with. There had to be over a thousand million men on the planet. Surely a couple million were as sexy as Blackwolf. A hundred million had to be nicer than he was. So why him? Why did she have the lousy luck to fall in love with the most remote man in existence?

Sloan blew out a heavy breath. At least she'd gotten the last word this time. She hoped she'd left him incapable of coherent thought. She'd almost done it to herself. The images she'd evoked were burned into her brain. She only hoped they were in Reno's as well. Why should she be the

only one to suffer?

She was in no mood to get behind the wheel and meander Yellowstone's roads for the next hour or so, so Sloan headed over to the infirmary to check on Angie. She found her in the cafeteria.

"Whoa," Angie said after taking one look at her. "What's the other guy look like?"

Sloan pulled out a chair and sat down. "Why? Do I look that bad?"

"You look upset. Real upset."

"Yeah, well, I am," Sloan said.

"Let me guess," Angie said with a sad smile. "Reno again?"

Setting her hat on the table, Sloan nodded. "Reno. Again."

"Want to talk about it?" Angie asked softly.

Sloan shook her head. "I should be asking you that. How are you doing?"

"Nice change of subject," Angie said.

"You haven't answered my question."

Angie's eyes teared up. She swiped at her eyes. "It only hurts when I think about him."

"Which is every moment."

"Every down moment," Angie said, struggling to regain composure. "I should be grateful it's been busy today."

"Have you seen anyone or anything out of the ordinary?" Sloan asked.

Angie shook her head sadly. "You've read too many murder mysteries."

"Better to be safe than sorry."

"Now you sound like my grandmother," Angie said, her lips tilting up for a moment. "I'm fine--as fine as I can be. Have you gotten the autopsy report?"

"No. Tomorrow probably."

Sloan sank into silence with her friend and took solace in the fact that she was safe. Maybe they were being paranoid when there wasn't any reason. Then again, better safe than sorry.

"If I haven't said it before," Angie said, interrupting Sloan's thoughts, "thanks for caring."

Sloan reached across the table and clasped Angie's hand. "You make it easy."

Angie glanced up, seeming to spot someone she knew. Her face lit up, then fell. "Uh-oh."

Sloan turned. "What do you mean uh--"

Tall, dark, and furious, Reno crossed the room toward them. Workers and other patrons paused at the sight of him, his stride eating up the distance.

"What did you do to him?" Angie's voice sounded almost awestruck. "I haven't seen him this angry since...since I don't know when."

"I tend to have that effect on him," Sloan said.

Within five feet of their table, Reno pointed at Angie. "You I'll meet in the car in fifteen minutes." He turned his black scowl on Sloan. "And you can come with me to wait for her."

Sloan met his gaze and didn't flinch. Evidently she was getting used to it. She glanced at Angie and shrugged.

"Now, Sloan," Reno said.

She checked her watch, then looked at him. "I'm off duty, Ranger Blackwolf. You no longer have any say-so about what I do or with whom."

"Sloan--" Angie began.

Reno cut her off with an outstretched hand. "Fifteen minutes," he said to Angie. Before Sloan could take a breath, he grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. "I want to talk with you. Now."

"Let go of me," Sloan said through gritted teeth. "This instant."

His eyes flashed with barely suppressed emotion, but it was quickly extinguished. He

released her, but kept his palm at her elbow as if he thought she might bolt.

"If you want to talk with me," Sloan said, managing to keep her voice much calmer than she felt, "all you need to do is ask nicely."

A tense moment passed. He stared into her eyes; she stared back. She wasn't backing down, not after what had happened today. In fact, she wasn't backing down to Reno Blackwolf ever again.

"Could I speak with you a moment, Sloan?"

Sloan blinked. He could do it. He could actually be decent--to her. Chalk one up for modern women. "Of course."

His broad hand at her back, he ushered her to a secluded area adjacent to the emergency entrance. She stood with her back to him, thinking that was the best way to deal with whatever he had to say, but he was silent. The sun's warmth washed around Sloan; the breeze rustled through the pine branches like a breathy sigh. Still he didn't speak. Tension threaded through her, giving the advantage to Reno. Sloan refused to allow it. She was done taking his garbage, and that included these verbal cat and mouse games. She whirled to face him. "Look, Reno--"

She caught herself up short. The look on his face was completely unguarded. He wasn't

angry; he was tormented, in agony. "Reno?"

Whatever she'd seen on his face was quickly erased with an ease she envied. "What did you want?" she asked.

"Want?" he echoed.

"Yeah. What did you want with me?"

Again, the time seemed strained, stretched out and taut. "What I want with you..." he repeated softly, then looked out over the endless horizon of blue and green. "There can't be anything...with you," he said finally.

She frowned, not following his meaning. "I never asked for anything."

"I know."

He fell into silence again and her frown increased. "Then, what--"

"It's never been like this," he said in a tone so quiet she had to step toward him to hear.

"Like what?" she asked.

He pursed his lips. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?"

"First of all, I don't know what you're talking about. Secondly, I wouldn't make anything easier for you than you've made things for me."

He nodded. "I guess I deserve that."

"You damn bet you do," she said, grateful to finally be holding her own with him--even if it did seem like he was letting her. He fell silent yet again, prodding Sloan's patience. "Reno, just spit it out. What did you want to say? Or would you rather wait until you have Angie as an audience?"

"No," he said quickly. "It's just that--"

"What?" she snapped.

"That I've never felt this way with anyone."

Sloan laughed. "You've never been turned on around a woman before? Give me a break."

"Turned on, yes," he said, meeting her gaze straight on. "But not like this, not like what I feel around you."

"And what do you feel like around me?" she asked. "How am I so different?"

"You're like lightning at the end of a summer drought. The spark that ignites everything I am. It's been like that from the beginning." He shrugged almost helplessly. "I don't know how to fight it anymore, and I'm tired of trying."

Sloan was finding it hard to find a downside to his confession. "Then stop."

"I can't," he said. His gaze pleaded for her understanding, her help, and she didn't want to give it. She wanted him--almost more than anything else. "I'm your superior. Everything Jacobs said the other day is true. If we were to get involved it would be sexual harassment."

"Not if it's consensual," she said.

"Listen to me, Sloan. I'm your superior. There's power differentials here that consent doesn't touch. If we were equals, it would be one thing, but we're not. I'm your Field Training Officer; you're my...my student. Hell, you're not even a rookie!"

He was right of course, much as she hated to admit it. She'd felt like a ranger, acted like one, but she wasn't. And that was the one thing she wouldn't give up for anyone or anything--including Reno.

"Look, Sloan," he said, "I'm sorry."

He actually sounded sorry, too. That was a new one.

"If I was going to be involved with anyone--" He caught himself, then seemed to think better of it. "If I was going to be involved with anyone, it would be you, okay? But I'm not willing to risk my career for a quick lay."

Now that hurt. "A quick lay?"

"Sloan, don't--"

"A quick lay!"

"Okay!" The word burst out so abruptly and so loudly, several people opposite them turned to look their way. "Okay, so it wouldn't be a quick lay, and I don't want to talk about what it would be. It can't happen. It won't happen. No matter what."

"Are you trying to convince me?" she asked. "Or yourself?"

"I'm telling you this because I can't do it alone. I can't fight you--this attraction to you by myself. I need you."

Under other circumstances, she'd have loved to have heard those words. The fact that he was right was like an arrow through her heart.

"I mean, I need your help," he said.

"Me? What can I do?"

"For one thing, you don't have to melt against me--"

"You pulled me into that embrace, buddy. Not the other way around."

"Okay, okay," he said irritably. "Help me remember we have a job to do. We have to find Jimmie's killer and we can't do it if we're mired down in lust."

"Lust?" she all but choked out. If her leg would reach high enough, she would've kicked him in the backside.

"You know what I mean," he growled. "If I reach for you, pull away. If I try to kiss you, don't react. Remind me of this conversation, just don't let it happen."

Oh, right and tell her heart to stop beating and her brain to shut down. Just when she finds out she affects him the same way he affects her...just when he admits he's attracted to her...just when he says she's the spark to his dry tinder, he asks her to shut it off? He was nuts.

She glanced at him, opening her mouth to tell him so, but the same emotion she'd seen on his face earlier was back. He was struggling--really, honestly struggling. He looked vulnerable, tired, and anguished. Sloan didn't want to be the cause of that.

Oh, she wanted him, that was for sure, but not this way. Not at the cost of his character, his integrity, his all-fired honor. And not at the cost of her dreams. "Okay," she found herself saying. "I can do that."

Relief visibly washed over his normally impassive face. "Good."

"Under one condition," she added quickly. "I help you with Jimmie's investigation--all of it."

He kicked at a chunk of gravel. "You already are."

"I know you, Reno. You'll elbow me out the minute you think it's too dangerous or too tough. I'm not the piece of fluff you think I am."

"For the record, I don't think you're a piece of fluff."

"That's what you told Howard Jacobs," she said.

"I know what I said and I know why I said it."

"Why?" she asked.

"None of your business." He extended a hand to her. "Look, let's call a truce. We'll work Jimmie's case and stick to a professional relationship--period. Okay?"

Wanting more than he was offering, but knowing she'd never get it, she did the only thing she could. She shook his hand. "Okay. I guess I'd better tell Howard that I lied about us."

"If he had a shred of evidence about us, I would've been suspended immediately. Just let it go for now. If anything else comes up about it, then you can straighten things out. For now, just leave things as they are."

"So what are you two doing?" Angie approached them, a skeptical look on her face.

"Just sealing the deal," Reno said. He engulfed her in a bear hug and kissed the top of her

head. "How was your day?"

"As good as it could be," she said. "How was yours?" she asked, slanting a glance at Sloan.

"Every day with Sloan is a real experience." He tossed her the keys. "Here you go, junior ranger. Let's get this lady home safe and sound."

Sloan snapped a quick salute. "Aye-aye."

Angie glanced at Reno, then Sloan. "You two? Getting along? What's the deal?"

"We have a truce," he said.

"Let's hope it lasts."

"Yes," he said. "Let's hope."

He didn't sound sincere, and Sloan knew how he felt. It was like having the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Damned by park administration if they did; damned by themselves if they didn't.

Reno sat on Angie's porch steps. Her voice mingled with Sloan's as the two cleared the remnants of supper and chatted like they'd known each other forever. Sloan was a constant

surprise. First, she was a whole lot tougher than he'd ever imagined. Second, she had more grit than any ten men he'd known. Third, she fit into his life and with his friends with hand-made precision. He pulled out a cigarillo and lit it, harshly exhaling the bitter smoke. Damned if he couldn't go on all night about Sloan Stafford.

Talking with her this afternoon was the hardest thing he'd done in years. Hell, he'd all but admitted he wanted her in the sack. He'd tried to keep it light and noncommittal, when all he'd wanted was to haul her back into his arms and finish what they'd started that morning by the geyser.

Now that everything was out in the open and they knew what they were dealing with, it shouldn't be so bad. The monkey was partially off his back now that Sloan was fighting the battle with him. The only problem with that was that it made them a team, a pair--exactly the way he didn't want to think of her. Like he had any choice in the matter.

What he needed was an end to the summer. He'd recommend that Sloan be shipped somewhere far away. Maybe Cape Krusenstern north of Nome, Alaska. He shook his head. Nope, too close to Yellowstone for his comfort. Great Smoky National Park, then. That might be good. Nah. South Carolina was still too close. He was debating the merits of the National

Park of American Samoa versus the Everglades or Biscayne National Park. Anything stateside would be too close. He could jump on any jet and be wherever she was in hours. No, something in the Pacific would do nicely. Maybe the Hawaiian Volcano National Park. Working with him would have prepared for the blowups and the heat.

"That's a nasty habit," Sloan said from behind him. "It's bad for your lungs."

He ground it out under his boot. "Where's Angie?"

"In bed," came the soft reply. Sloan settled on the step below him. "She's exhausted, mostly from depression I think."

He nodded and stood. "I have to grab a few things from my place and then I'll be back."

Sloan's brows hiked up in surprise. "Back?"

"I'm not letting you two stay alone if Angie's in trouble."

"You don't think I can handle it?" she asked.

"I think you'd do your damndest to handle it," he said as gently as he could, "but if Jimmie, a seasoned, trained professional ended up dead, I think you can use a little help. Besides we have a deal. I don't have to fight this...thing between us by myself any more. Right?"

She gazed off into the black night. "Right."

"So I'll be back. I'm sleeping on the couch and that's the end of it. If anyone wants to get Angie, they'll have to go through me...and you."

Sloan nodded. "That's right."

"You've got your weapon?" he asked, starting down the stairs.

"I'll keep it under my pillow," she said.

"Good." He hoped it would be enough to keep him at bay, as well.

Sloan woke with a start. Nightmares of Jimmie and a faceless fiend lingered in her mind. The stench of death was something she'd never forget. With a heart-felt groan, she sat up. Voices came from the living room.

She shoved her arms into a robe and knotted the sash at her waist. Opening her door, the voices got louder and Sloan stepped into the hall.

"I mean it, Angie. I don't want you alone for a moment today. Hang with people at work. Always be with someone. We'll be back to pick you up, but we'll be up north all day."

"But, Reno--"

"Promise me," he said. "I don't want to worry about you while we're gone. I'm sure Sloan doesn't either. We'll need our minds focused on the job at hand if we're going to get anywhere on this case."

"Why can't the FBI handle Jimmie's murder?" Angie asked.

Sloan stepped into the room, instantly aware of a freshly showered and shaven Reno. His large frame was an overwhelming presence in the small kitchen.

"Because he wasn't a federal agent," he said.

"But he was a tribal cop. That's federal," Angie said.

"Sort of. Like everything else that our people are involved in, we're only important when the feds want us to be--like with gambling. The FBI won't get involved until the Bureau of Indian Affairs asks them to," Reno said. "And you know how that goes."

"Yeah," Angie said with a long sigh, "I do." She stood and smiled a 'good morning' at Sloan. "Okay, you win. I'll stick with people at work all day long. How's that?"

"Fine," Reno said.

"But first I need to shower," she said, heading down the hall.

"Are you up for this?" Reno asked Sloan.

Feeling distinctly underdressed and more than a little vulnerable, she pulled the collar of her robe together, bunching it under her chin. "Up for what?"

"A trip up north to take samples of the clay and compare it to what we found at the geyser. I think the stuff we found is from a Montana strip mine just on the other side of the park border. That stuff can raise pH of the river sky high."

"Not to mention how quickly the increase in toxins would destroy the ecosystem," she said.

Reno nodded and pulled the clay, now in a small plastic bag, from his pocket and set it on the table. Sloan picked it up and examined it more closely. "Why would anyone wasn't to do such a thing to Yellowstone?"

"Same reason they deal drugs and do insider trading. Money. Illegal strip mining eliminates the middleman. No tariffs, no rules--the money just rolls in."

"But wouldn't someone find out?"

"Evidently several someone's did. We've got two dead bodies to prove it. And if we test it, the pH of the Yellowstone River will be up, way up." Reno rubbed his temples as though warding off a throbbing headache. "It all fits."

"Not quite everything. We don't have a suspect," Sloan said.

"Not yet, but whoever it is knows exactly what they're doing. Both bodies would have had all trace evidence boiled away the minute they hit the pool. I'll be surprised if they can come up with the real cause of death. Jimmie--" He stopped and swallowed hard-- "I'm convinced he was onto some illegal strip mining. That's what he told Angie and now the clay from up north where the strip mining occurs. If this lead pans out, it'll take us one step closer to the killer."

"Maybe whoever is behind this killed Jimmie as a warning." Sloan sat at the table still turning the sample over and over.

"Maybe," Reno said, "but how would they know who would be investigating it?"

"True. Then why dump the bodies in the geysers? That would take an awfully lot of effort, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, "but they made one mistake in their plotting and killing."

Sloan stopped analyzing the contents of the baggie and looked at him. "What?"

"They killed a Native American, and we avenge our own. We don't give up and we don't heed warnings to stay away no matter how they were delivered. I'll have revenge for Jimmie if it's the last thing I do in this life or the next, and that's a blood promise." He said it matter-of-factly as if he was sitting around a warrior's campfire instead of launching a twentieth-century

manhunt.

Reno was adamant, but beneath his oath was fear. Fear for Angie, for Sloan. Fear that he actually might have to finish the assignment in the next world. Whoever was behind this was someone ruthless and tough. Someone who killed people, transported their bodies and then dumped them in holes full of hot water. And whoever did it was going to pay and pay big.

Sloan reached out and touched his arm. "When do we leave?"

"If we start soon, we can make North Yellowstone by before noon. We'll test the river and if it's what we think it is, we'll have to go on horseback from there."

"Horses?"

"Yeah," he said smugly. "Can you handle it? If not--"

"I can handle it, Blackwolf." She turned toward the hall. "Angie's out of the shower," she said. "All I need is fifteen minutes and I'll be ready to go."

Images of a naked Sloan slathered with soap and slick with water weren't what Reno needed to start the day. He busied himself in the kitchen making breakfast for everyone and with what he needed to overcome, it would be a huge one!

The river's pH was higher than either Sloan or Reno had expected. Someone was definitely polluting it and endangering more wildlife than either of them could imagine, not to mention the delicate ecosystem of the park. Sloan's blood boiled at the knowledge. Someone was willing to desecrate this once-on-the-planet kind of beauty for money--filthy lucre! Damn.

She turned to Reno as he replaced tubes and chemicals back in the testing kit. "It's a lot worse than you thought."

He swore explicitly and specifically. "Yeah." His jaw was set and tight. "I've been thinking," he said. "Jimmie told Angie he thought it was 'somebody close'."

"So?"

"So other than Angie or me, who could be 'close?'" He glanced at her.

"Me?" Sloan asked.

"Not you exactly, but a ranger, somebody on the inside," Reno said. "Somebody that if they knew something could be in a position of covering up for these jerks."

"No ranger worth their salt would--"

"That's exactly right," Reno said. "Not one worth their salt, but there's one who has sold the

park out. And we've got to find them before they ruin it worse than the fires of '88 did. At least the park came back from that."

"Can't it come back from this?" Sloan asked.

Reno's jaw tightened. "I don't know. First we have to find the polluters and the pollutant. Then we have to assess the damage, but this--" he indicated the test results-- "is anything but good news."

North Yellowstone was their only lead to the devastating pollutant and the killer or killers. Reno glanced at Sloan who carefully guided her mare over the jagged rocks of the incline. They'd been at it for hours and Reno was losing hope that they'd find anything before they had to return for Angie. Although she'd promised to wait for them, he wasn't so sure she wouldn't set off on her own. She didn't seem to think anyone really connected her to Jimmie.

At least having to go back for Angie would keep him from having to camp out here with Sloan. The thought of spending a night alone with her--truce or no truce, promise or no promise--made his blood run cold. There was no way he could live through that and not touch her--not

make love with her. Hell, he'd like to know five men who could. Every moment spent in her company made her more desirable. He glanced over at her. Like the way she fit the saddle as if she'd been riding all her life. Lucky saddle! Thoughts of her legs wrapped around him in similar fashion crept unbidden into his mind.

The only cure for what ailed him was to give in, to sleep with her, although sleep was about the last thing he'd be doing with her. Yep, the only way to get her out of his system was to indulge his desire for her. And indulge he would. He would gorge himself in her touch, her scent, her taste. Which was exactly why he had to convince Howard to assign her as far away from him as humanly possible. Like American Samoa. He didn't even know where it was other than in the middle of the Pacific, but it was as far as their jurisdiction went. He only hoped it was far enough.

Sloan glanced at the man sitting ramrod straight in his saddle. Warmth swizzled through her. Since their mutual declaration of a truce, every time he looked at her his gaze caressed her and tiny waves of pleasure shimmied up and down her spine. The entire relationship--and they had one no matter how much he'd deny it--was crazy. Outwardly, he was a total grump and there was no pleasing him. But his semi-confession yesterday shed a new light on things. It explained

his off-again-on-again attitude toward her. Why he kissed her until she couldn't think only to shove her away like she repulsed him.

Reno, head down concentrating on some invisible signs only he could recognize, was lost in the moment. How odd that with all the computers and advanced technology available today, he led this quest by such an ancient method. Still, she didn't doubt his expertise.

She gazed across the valley far below. Its lush green was in direct contrast to the gray of the Rockies. Blackened tree trunks were a last remaining symbol of Yellowstone's devastating fire from 1988. The forests were reborn and beautiful again. In fact, Yellowstone had never seemed more beautiful or bountiful. Wildlife had flourished in the ensuing years. Even the bears and wolves, so scarce right after the fires, had slowly made their way back to the refuge of the sheltering land.

She and Reno may be from different cultures, different states, different backgrounds, but they shared one strong bond that transcended everything, they both loved this wondrous place with every fiber of their being. That coupled with great chemistry would be a great platform on which to build a relationship.

The sun climbed higher in the cloudless sky. "We've been at this for hours," she said. "Are

we ever going to find anything?"

He sent her his usual blank look and went back to what he was doing. Her backside tingled with numbness and her back ached from the unaccustomed workout. The higher they climbed, the colder the mountain breeze. It was beginning to chill her.

Suddenly, Reno pulled up and dismounted in such a swift fluid motion that it didn't register. He grabbed her reins and pulled her down from the saddle. His broad hand covered her mouth and she tasted the salt of his skin. "Shhh!"

She nodded and he removed his hand, but the imprint of his touch lingered.

"See that?" He pointed to the top of the steep incline directly above the valley they'd just ridden through. There, almost hidden from view was the metallic gleam of the sun glinting off a bumper.

"Somebody's up there," she whispered. "And they shouldn't be."

Chapter 10

Reno tethered the horses and started up a slope that would put them directly over any activity on the plateau. Carefully, and as quickly as possible, he inched his way up the steep incline. Sloan followed directly behind, matching him handhold for handhold and foothold for foothold. She did an excellent job of keeping silent. No rustling grass, no snapping twigs. It should have thrilled him to have such a quick study, a companion so adept that she picked everything up the first time she was shown. But dammit, it didn't. He couldn't afford to admire her any more than he did. He set his jaw and grabbed for another handhold.

Perspiration dripped down his spine, through his hair and into his eyes. Pausing to wipe his forehead on his sleeve, he noticed a huge rock formation jutting out of the mountainside. With a little detour, they could be there. It would put him looking down at the ledge and able to survey any goings on. Reno put his hand back and stopped. Sloan inched up beside him. He pressed his fingers to his lips. "We're going over there," he whispered next to her ear and pointed toward the mound of boulders.

She nodded and motioned him closer. "Thanks for not giving me a bird call or something," she whispered back, her breath flitting over his skin. "I wouldn't have known what you meant."

He smiled and shook his head. "That's why I didn't," he whispered back. Adrenaline and excitement thrummed in his blood. He couldn't wait to see what awaited them at the top of the plateau.

After grabbing a quick breather, he looked at Sloan and nodded toward their destination. She returned the silent agreement, indicating she was ready. He groped his way through trees and brush. She followed behind and once again he had to admire her skill. She was one helluva ranger. He was an experienced climber and for all his expertise, she was a definite match for him. He'd been pushing her at a fearsome pace, but she didn't get careless or nervous. Even if she had, he'd feel it would be his fault if anything happened. He needed to stay focused if they weren't going to make any mistakes.

The jutting rocks were directly ahead. Reno reached out for the last handhold and pulled himself up. Sloan's hand opened to grab what Reno had just vacated. He grabbed her wrist, noting how much smaller it was, and pulled her up to a small flat clearing that overlooked several large vehicles.

"Wh--?" Reno put his fingers to her lip and she quickly quieted.

He crawled on his belly toward the edge and pointed. She followed to where he was pointing. "Trucks," she all but breathed.

"And earth moving equipment," Reno said. "And we're still in park boundaries. These folks are worse than any slime sucking parasite I've ever seen."

Sloan crept forward, craning her neck to see around one particularly large, protruding rock for a better look. One hand on a small round rock, the other outstretched for a more secure handhold, she pulled herself forward. From the moment she shifted her weight forward, she sensed that something wasn't right. The ground and several smaller stones crumbled out from her. The side of the clearing disappeared downward carrying her, with Reno close behind, rushing, scrambling, clawing for brush or anything to stop their instantaneous slide toward hell.

The wind rushed by, fanning her cheeks. Dust filled her eyes, nose, and mouth. Through the tumult, she heard a distinct crisp snap ringing through the still afternoon. Shots! Someone was firing at them. The sound was unmistakable even amid the cacophony going on around her. Voices, the sound of rushing steps. Shouts. Men, scrambling for God knew what. Weapons probably. And she was falling, taking Reno with her.

The ping of a bullet whizzed passed her right ear. Arms outstretched, she lunged for and grabbed onto a scrawny bush on a precarious overhang. She ducked her head and, despite her thundering heart and labored breathing, managed to look around for Reno. He was nowhere to be found. She glanced up, hoping to find him safe and close.

Something heavy hung heavy on the end of her foot. A hand, Reno's hand, grasped her ankle tightly. Something dark was smeared across his knuckles. Oh, God, don't let him be shot.

A loud roaring filled her ears. Mustering strength she hoped would be adequate, she reached down and grasped Reno's forearm with her free hand. "I can't do this alone," she said fervently. "You'll have to help me."

He nodded and she tugged until she thought her arm was dislocating from its socket. "Come on, Reno," she managed to choke out. "Pull yourself up."

In a moment he was beside her. Much as she wanted to cradle him in her arms, there wasn't time. The place she'd managed to pull him onto was a recession of rock just big enough to hold them without having to hang on. She turned to him and froze. Bright red creased the side of his temple oozing blood that trickled down to his chin. His eyes were closed. Dear God, no! She shook his shoulder gently, but urgently. Whoever was down there wasn't happy to be discovered.

They'd be up looking for them in minutes. "Reno!" she whispered.

His eyes fluttered open and he seemed to be squinting at her.

"Thank God," she breathed. "You're alive."

He twisted, and in deference to the tight confines of where they were situated, she threw her arms around him. "Stay still or we'll end up in the middle of their camp."

"What camp?"

Sloan pointed toward the valley. "That one. The strip miners or whoever they are. And they'll be out looking for us if they aren't already. We've got to get out of here."

He nodded and flinched. "Ouch. Dammit!" He touched his temple, then examined his blood-streaked fingers. "What the devil?"

Reno tried to straighten his lanky frame in the small recess but gave up as if exhausted and lay back in her arms.

"They winged you, as they used to say in the movies." She glanced over at him and caught his attempt at a smile. "Good thing you have such a hard head."

"Nah," he said lightly, "more like they were lousy shots. Probably were aiming between my eyes and."

"Well, anyway," she said. "They missed."

"Luckily."

Something deep inside her clamored for her to care for him, insisted that this was the moment to brush her lips against his cheek and reassure her that he was fine. But she'd promised him, had given her word. She fought the instinct to nurture and instead glanced over at him with a weak smile. "When I saw the blood on your face, I was they'd killed you."

He snorted in derision. "It'll take more than a rifle crease to do me in." He glanced down at the scurrying bodies below, several of whom were climbing into jeeps. "We need to get out of here. They'll be here before we know it, and they may be better shots at close range."

She nodded. With a low groan, Reno maneuvered his long frame beside her. "The horses will be gone," he said.

She frowned and glanced up. "I thought you tethered them back in the trees."

"I did, but I didn't tie them down, just left the reins loose. The first sound of gunfire would've spooked them off. We'll have to round them up later." He sighed deeply and started to slump to the left.

Sloan grabbed his arm and brought him upright. "Reno, we've got to go. We're not safe

here."

He shook his head as though trying to clear it. "I know. There's a snowshoe cabin deep in Black Canyon about a half-mile to the north. My compass is in the saddle bag."

"The horses are gone," she said slowly. "Remember? They ran away. And you're in no condition to walk," she said more to herself than him.

"Yeah? But I can still crawl." He pulled himself upright and shakily angled himself up over the recession. "Come on."

Sloan wasn't sure of how clearly he was thinking, but they needed to get moving. She tried to stick as close to him as possible, following directly behind as they began the climb back to the plateau. She didn't know how good she'd be trying to break his fall if he passed out, but she stayed close just in case.

At the top of the ridge, he managed to pull himself up in only two tries, refusing both her offers of assistance. He turned around and extended his hand to her. Sloan glanced up, knowing he wasn't in shape to help her, but not wanting to insult him when he wasn't at full strength. She grasped his forearm and anchored her feet. He wrapped a broad hand around her arm almost to

the elbow. She didn't know who hoisted who and who was the anchor, but in moments she was lying beside him atop the plateau.

"Let's go." Reno staggered to his feet. "Keep your eyes peeled for any sign of the horses."

She eyed him pointedly. "You look too woozy to be left alone."

He motioned her forward by waving his hand toward the open ground. "You're wasting time. Go."

About twenty-five feet away her horse munched lazily on a mouthful of sweet new grass. She grabbed the reins and led her back. Reno's wound wasn't life threatening, but from the way he was acting, he more than likely had suffered a slight concussion. She fished out a compass and a small first-aid kit from her saddlebag.

"What do you think you're doing?" he growled at her as she came toward him.

"Your head is still oozing," she said.

Reno backed away, shaking his head. "We don't have time for this. Let's go."

Sloan knew better than to argue with him, especially now. He was right. There was no time to waste. "All right, but the minute we get to the cabin, I'm bandaging that thick skull of yours and that's all there is to it."

"Yes, mother," came his amused reply.

He swung into the saddle and helped her mount behind him. She pressed her compass into his hand and he met her gaze. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it."

They set off due north. Seated behind him, Sloan rocked forward with every movement of their mount. Her breasts rhythmically touched Reno's back and she didn't know what to do with her hands. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea and loop them around his waist, but she didn't want to keep her present method up either

His head drooped, nodding with the forward motion. "Reno?"

"Mmm?"

He was barely conscious. She slid her arms around his lean waist to let him sleep and to keep him upright. Sliding her hand in his, she gently withdrew the compass and maintained their course north. It was all she could do to keep him from sliding off the saddle, but she'd finally wriggled her legs around his and splayed a hand across his chest.

He lolled against her, his breathing deep and heavy, his breath fanning across her skin. His clean, masculine scent wafted around her and her heart almost broke. She wanted him; he

wanted her. Duty demanded otherwise and so did reality. She prayed the miners and the polluters were lousy trackers because she was leaving a trail a blind man could follow.

Reno drew in a shuddering breath that shook her to her core. What if it was more than a mild concussion? What if his head wound had taken a turn for the worst? She shivered and held him tighter. It couldn't be. She wouldn't allow it. She loved Reno with all her heart, and was determined to tell him so once the investigation and her internship were over. If he wanted to send her away after that, so be it, but for now...she couldn't lose him. Not now. Not ever. She needed him like she needed air to breathe and food to eat. He was essential to her survival. He was--

Sloan stiffened at the thought. He wasn't the only one who'd been shot. She had too--straight through the heart. The fact that she loved him was as certain as the sun coming up every morning and setting every night. For all his churlishness and stubborn bull-headed ways, she'd fallen for him and fallen hard. But not because of that side of his personality. She'd fallen for the tender way he looked at her during those rare times when he let his guard down. That's the man she loved. That and the deliciously sexy kisser.

She pressed her cheek against his broad back. Oh, man what a mess. If she couldn't have

him when he was conscious, she'd take what she could get now. She'd enjoy the feel of him in her arms, the knowledge that for once she was helping him, that he was leaning on her for a change. Smiling into the fading afternoon, she held him tight and pressed a kiss against the shaggy head resting in the hollow of her shoulder.

What Reno didn't know, wouldn't hurt him, she thought and nuzzled his head with her cheek. Dear Lord, it felt so wonderful that it broke her heart all over again.

It took an hour of careful, deliberate riding to get into the high country. Somehow Sloan managed to balance a semiconscious Reno and still lead the horse through the rocky terrain. Finally, she spotted the cabin right exactly where Reno had said it would be. Easing him forward over the saddle-horn and keeping a hand on his back, she slid off her mount. She specifically avoided using the stirrup because she didn't want to get tangled up and not be able to get Reno down. Her feet hit the ground and sent hot shafts through both feet.

She turned to her companion. Getting Reno down would be a logistical nightmare, but until she could examine him more closely, she wouldn't know about his injuries. After removing his

feet from the stirrups, he roused. "Reno?" she asked. "Reno, are you with me?"

He murmured something she couldn't understand. "I'm going to pull you down from the horse. Can you help me?"

"Try," came the answer.

She engineered his right leg over the mare's neck and kept the animal still. Reno did very well until his feet touched the ground when his knees buckled and he fell on Sloan full force. She hadn't expected it or braced herself for a man of Reno's stature to fall like a dead weight against her. They toppled to the ground, Reno landing on top of Sloan. Somehow his knee ended up wedged between her thighs. The solid wall of his chest pressed her against the cool earth, his face grazing hers before it hit the ground. "Oh, great," she muttered. "I finally get him in the position I want and he's oblivious."

Cussing their bad luck and her own integrity in promise keeping, she pushed his shoulders up. "Reno?"

No answer.

She shook him gently. "Reno. It's me, Sloan."

His eyes fluttered open and he gave her the softest, most touching smile she'd ever seen.

"Hey, Sloan," he whispered to her before closing his eyes again.

"Don't do this to me," she grated out. "Reno, we have to get into the cabin." She shook him again.

"kay," he said.

Getting him inside would be a lot more difficult than getting him off the horse. Hand pressed against his chest, she locked her elbow and twisted beneath him. When she couldn't hold the awkward position any more, she shoved him back and quickly turned her body toward the ground expecting him to fall against her. Getting him in a fireman's hold was the only chance she had of helping him inside. But he didn't fall on top of her as she'd expected. Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed that he'd caught himself on one hand splayed against the grass. His shaggy head hung down as if it was all he could do to hold that position. "Here," she said sitting up and twisting around so her shoulder bolstered him under his arm. He relaxed into her and almost took them down again. Sloan got her footing and braced her feet in a wider stance. "Okay, big boy," she said snaking an arm around his waist. "We're going up. You with me?"

Reno nodded slowly.

"On three," she said. "One...two...three--" She braced herself, jammed her heels down, and

propelled herself up.

Air hissed out of Reno's lungs and he staggered to his feet, still slouched heavily against her.

"Two down," Sloan said and eyed the cabin. "One more to go." She jostled around under Reno's heavy frame and tightened her arm around him.

He sucked in a breath. "Uh--"

To secure him for the trek to the door, Sloan splayed her hand higher and gripped him under his arm. One particular spot was wet and sticky. She didn't like the feel of it. She drew back her hand. It was smeared with blood. "Damn."

He was hurt worse than she'd imagined, but it certainly explained his sluggish behavior. Not that she worried about a concussion, but loss of blood. No wonder he could hardly stay conscious. Step by slow, plodding step, she steered an increasingly heavy Reno up two steps and inside the tiny structure. Created for use by park personnel in emergencies like sudden storms or other naturally occurring problems, the service kept each one fully stocked. She'd have everything she needed. She only hoped Reno would, too.

There was one cot. She and Reno staggered toward it and she eased Reno down. "Thanks," he said with a heart-felt sigh. "You did good."

She shifted one of his legs up, then the other until he lay fully stretched out on the narrow bed. "Why is it you only compliment me when you're half out of your mind?"

"Why ask why?" was his response.

Reno? Being funny and light? "Now I know he's got a concussion."

"I'm fine," he said.

"No, you're not, and you won't be until we get all the bleeding stopped."

He tried to sit up only to let his head fall back with a muted groan. "Damn, I feel like hell."

"You ought to," she said, crossing the tiny room. The snowshoe had a more fully supplied first aid cabinet than the dinky thing in the saddle. After gathering the items she'd need, including a needle and thread, she knelt beside Reno.

Examining the side of his head, she gently cleaned dried blood off his skin and out of his hair with a heavily peroxidized cotton ball.

His breath hissed through his teeth. "Don't enjoy this too much," he said.

"I could never enjoy someone else's pain," she said, leaning forward to scrutinize the wound.

"In my case you could make an exception," he said. He grunted at her palpation and examination.

"No," she said. "I couldn't."

"Why not?"

Because I love you, you big lug. Great time for him to get all his mental faculties back, Sloan thought. And a great time for his vulnerability to be showing. Times like these were when he generally kissed her, but that wasn't supposed to happen with both of them alert and aware of the situation. Sloan didn't know if she'd ever longed to lose a battle the way she wanted to lose this one. One thing she did know was that if either of them broke the truce, it wouldn't be her. She didn't know if he'd throw it up to her when he got back to full strength or not, but she wasn't providing him any ammunition.

If he wanted firm and unbending, she'd play it that way. But if he made so much as one move toward her, the deal was off and she'd be in his arms in a heartbeat. "You were lucky," she said, pointedly ignoring his question. "Another nanometer and your head would've exploded like a ripe plum."

"Thanks for the analogy," he said, "but you didn't answer my question."

"What question was that?" Maybe if she kept changing the question, he'd get confused and drop the subject.

"The one about why you couldn't enjoy seeing me in pain."

A small bottle of iodine lay at the bottom of her pile. She unscrewed the cap and dosed a new cotton ball. "None--" she said and applied the fiery liquid to his open skin-- "of your business."

He sucked in a sharp breath and tried to come up off the cot. "Dammit, Sloan, that burns like a mother--"

She pushed him down and held him with her hand on his chest. "What's the matter, Blackwolf? I thought you were impervious to pain?"

He stared up at her with wide, dark eyes. "No," he said simply. "I'm not."

His gaze held a wealth of emotions she couldn't fathom. "I'm sorry again." She replaced the lid and the iodine, applied antibiotic ointment and a large Band-Aid. The cotton balls went into the trash. "You're going to have to take off your shirt. I think you were hit under your left arm, too."

He blinked at her, then slowly turned to check the area she'd mentioned. A dark spot had blossomed on his uniform. "Well, hell."

She nodded. "No wonder you were so woozy in the saddle."

He opened the top button. "I wasn't woozy."

Sloan smiled. The arrogant FTO was back in all his blazing glory. "Yeah," she said, her smile increasing. "You were. I'm surprised you weren't bleeding all over the place, too, but I guess keeping your arm down for so long pretty well stopped any additional blood loss."

"Lucky me," he said. He fumbled with the next button, then tried to bring his left arm and hand up to assist in the effort. He frowned and closed his eyes. His color wasn't good. New blood spotted his uniform. He was bleeding again.

She placed her hand over his to stop his movements. "Here," she said. "Let me do that. You just reopened your wound."

He stilled and opened his arms. "Have at it."

There was no reason why she should think twice about what she was doing. None at all. She was a professional. She'd performed first aid countless times...but never on Reno and never having had to undress him first. She willed her fingers steady and they obeyed. She opened the second button and the third. At the button by his waist, however, they shook. She hardened her resolve, opened the button and gently tried to ease the material from the waistband of his pants. "Tell me if I hurt you."

"Physically?" he asked.

"Reno, don't. This is hard enough the way it is."

"Not exactly the way you'd imagined, right?" he asked.

Sloan ignored him, unbuttoned the last button, and parted the fabric with her hands. She held the garment while he eased his good arm out of the short sleeve.

"It's not the way I'd imagined it, either," he said as she bent down to ease the brown cloth away from the injury.

His words affected her deeply. So he'd thought and dreamed and imagined the same things she had. Good. It brought her perverse enjoyment and she hoped those images had unsettled him as much as they had her. She tossed the shirt on the floor and untied the sides of his Kevlar body armor. "I don't know how they managed to hit you right above this," she said and pushed the top back. Blood covered the side and most of the front of his white T-shirt. "Oh dear."

"That bad?" he asked.

"Just a lot of oozing," she said, hoping she was right. She grabbed the white cotton hem and held it open so he could again remove his good arm. Moving slowly so as not to disturb the wound, she guided it over his head and off his other shoulder. At the wound site, the fabric

stuck.

"Ouch."

"Sorry," she said. "Lay still while I get a damp cloth. That should help loosen this."

It took three trips and another fifteen minutes to get the soiled garment off the wound. In that time, she refused to think about the half-naked man in the room. He was physical perfection, his chest wide and strong, his belly flat and lean. He was also her boss, she reminded herself, and he was injured.

She pressed her third compress against the wound, which had started to bleed again. "Here," she said. "Keep your arm tight over this." He complied. "I have a small pot of water heating on the stove," she told him. "Then I'll clean everything with soap."

"Everything?" he asked with the innocence of a child.

"Don't go there, Blackwolf. I'm too tired to match wits with you."

"You're very good, Sloan. Thanks."

She glanced at him to gauge his sincerity. It looked real. She smiled. "Not that you deserve anything."

"I doubt your actions have much to do with 'deserving it'."

She gave him a quizzical look. He'd gotten to know her well in the short time they'd been together. "No, it doesn't."

She took the heated water, clean cloth, and bar of soap to his bedside and set it on the floor. "I'll help you roll to your side."

He was warm and vibrant beneath her fingers. His hair, thick and luxurious, gleamed in the dwindling afternoon light. She shoved the notions away and focused on the bleeding. Between the two of them, they got him situated on his side. She moved his arm and lifted the compress. The bullet had once again grazed the flesh, but this one was much deeper and had tiny bits of material in it. "Looks like you lucked out once more," she said.

"That's good news."

"It's not all good. This is deeper than the one on your head."

"How much deeper?"

She pulled up the needle and thread to soak them in alcohol.

"You're kidding?" he asked.

The big, brave ranger actually paled. "Unfortunately I'm not. You can't afford to break it open and lose more blood. It looks like we'll be spending the night here as it is," she said.

Reno froze. "What about Angie?"

"As soon as I'm done with you, I'll get her on the walkie-talkie and tell her what's happened."

"Damn."

"I know." Sloan was worried about her friend, too, but she had to get Reno ship-shape before she could tackle whatever else came along. "Angie's still at work," Sloan said.

"I know." Reno stared at the empty fireplace. "Let's get this taken care of."

Sloan nodded and threaded the needle. Pushing that sharp slice of metal through Reno's skin was the hardest thing she'd ever done. Two stitches closed the wound nicely, but perspiration from the toll it had taken on Sloan beaded her upper lip and forehead. She cut the last knot and covered her face with her hands.

"Sloan," Reno said a little shakily.

"What?" she asked from behind the shelter of her palms.

"You did great."

Tears prickled in her eyes. She dropped her hands and pulled in a shuddering breath. "I don't ever want to do that again."

He was definitely pale this time, but calm and almost smiling. "Slap a bandage on it and call

Angie."

"Right," she said, not caring that her quavering voice betrayed her inner turmoil.

"Hey." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. "You did great. Honest. I can't think of one man who could've done what you did today."

Still reeling from the minor surgery she'd performed, Sloan could only nod. She stayed like that and he seemed content to let her. Sloan couldn't imagine a more perfect place to spend a lifetime than surrounded by the strong arms and bare flesh of Reno Blackwolf.

"Angie," he said and released her.

"Right." Sloan squeezed more ointment on her handiwork and covered it with a Band-Aid. "I just hope the horse is still here."

Reno's soft chuckle followed her out the door. She had meandered away, but not far. Sloan brought her close to the cabin, tethered her by a new patch of grass, and retrieved the walkie-talkie.

It took a few minutes to get the infirmary's frequency, but by the time Sloan was back inside, Angie was on the other end. "Oh, good," Sloan said. "You're still there."

Reno motioned for the transmitter and she handed it to him. "Angie, hi," he said. "We ran

into a little problem, or rather I did. I got clipped by a couple bullets."

Her reaction must have been fierce. He held the device away from his ear and frowned.

"I'm fine," he said. "Sloan took real good care of me. Look, these people are serious about this. We found a strip mine in a secluded valley up in the north country. If they're following us, they'll be looking for you, so stay put. I don't want you going anywhere without somebody along. You got that? These folks will kill anybody they think is in their way. I don't think they know who Sloan and I are, but they know who you are. If we stumbled on them today, they'll trace it back to Jimmie and something he said to you." He frowned. "Just be cautious and don't trust anyone. Remember that this involves someone on the inside, so other than Sloan and me, it could be anybody around there. Is there someplace you could sleep at work like where the docs sleep sometimes when they have a long shift or get snowed in?" He waited, listening to the answer. "Good. Stay there and we'll be by tomorrow to check with you. I'm fine as long as I don't stand up. Really. Okay, love you, too."

Sloan smiled at the endearment. He was quite a sight bare-chested with his hair falling on his forehead. Her heart swelled. Was there nothing she could do to stop loving him? It would make things so much easier. But, of course, there wasn't.

She'd just have to muddle through each day, loving him more, wanting him more, and getting nothing in return until they finally sent her away. And they would. Her lie to the federal agent and Howard had sealed that fate.

He handed the receiver to her. "Hello?"

"I know Reno," Angie said, "and if you give him half a chance, he'll try to ride to my rescue. I've already promised him I'll stay here tonight. I work late tomorrow, so there's no need to rush back here, okay?"

Sloan smiled. "Okay."

"And, Sloan?" Angie asked quietly. "Take good care of him, will you?"

"Sure," she said.

"Even if you have to club him over the head for his own good."

"I will," Sloan promised. She clicked off the walkie-talkie.

"Well," Reno said. "I guess it's just you and me."

"Yeah."

"So..." he began. "What do you want to do on this first night together?"

"I know exactly what we need to do," she said and crossed the room.

"What?" he asked softly, almost as though he was holding his breath.

"Just watch." She dropped a light kiss on his forehead. "And be very impressed."

Chapter 11

"This isn't quite what I had in mind," Reno said glancing down at the woman seated on the floor beside his bed. The afternoon had brought a new respect for Sloan as a woman, as a professional and as one helluva ranger.

"There wasn't a lot of choice," she said. "It was canned beef stew, canned beef stew, or canned beef stew."

Reno chuckled and settled back against the bedrolls she'd bunched into huge pillows for him. "After the day we've had, it was wonderful."

"Thanks. If I was my mother, I could've opened a bunch of other cans and whipped up something spectacular, but..."

"You don't need to be anyone else. This was fine." He thought he detected a wistful quality to her words, a longing, but for what he didn't know. In fact, other than the obvious, he didn't know her well at all. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "Go into the park service? You must've known you had three strikes against you."

She gazed into the fire she'd managed to coax from tinder into its current roar. "If I didn't, my mother was there to remind me. Generally about five seconds after my father did."

"Ah," Reno said and reached for the steaming cup of coffee she'd left for him.

"Yeah...ah," she said so quietly that he thought she was speaking to the air rather than him. "My parents tolerated my undergraduate work in zoology and natural resources, but they thought I should work at a big aquarium up north or Sea World down south or even a zoo. Anything that would keep me close to home."

If he thought her hair was irresistible in the moonlight, he hadn't seen anything yet. The gold turned almost platinum in the firelight, giving each strand an almost celestial glow. He'd better keep talking, or he'd be in big trouble. There were plenty of positions to make love that wouldn't bother his injuries. He shouldn't be listing them off in his head. "So you came here," he said, hoping she didn't notice the tightness in his voice.

"Via the Colorado School of Mines, yes."

"Top in your class," he said.

She paused, then her shoulders relaxed. "Yes."

"Had to be twice as good as the best man?"

She nodded. "Three times, plus foot the bill myself. My parents refused to even help me out in graduate school, so I had to work as well." She fell silent again. He was just about to say more when she added, "but I did it."

"Why?" he asked. "Why not just take what mommy and daddy offered. What's the difference where you work, whether it's San Diego or Mammoth?"

"Yellowstone is the only place I've ever known what my place in this world was, the only place I've ever felt totally free and at peace. I was ten years old when my family took a vacation here and I knew I had to come back. Whatever it cost, I had to live here." She laid her head against the bed-frame and looked back at him. "There's no where else in this world I love better."

He knew the feeling. It was the same reason why he'd stayed after the fires of '88, why he'd taken a demotion instead of taking a lateral move to a different park. He loved this country. It wasn't only his heritage, it was in his blood and no where else would ever do.

"What about you?" Sloan asked. "Are your parents still alive?"

"My mother is," he said and then blew on the steaming liquid. "She lives around here."

"Around here?" Sloan asked. "I thought we're on park land."

Reno laughed softly. "Don't tell my mother that. She's a shaman for the people and she goes

wherever and whenever she wants. Sometimes during the summer she'll camp out in a lean-to or tipi of sorts."

Cradling her own cup of coffee, she half turned to face him. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, ma'am. She lives her life as she sees fit and asks no one's opinion, although she'll sure as hell give it to anyone who asks and most people who don't," he said.

"I take it you fall into the latter group."

He smiled and shook his head. "Generally. She's the reason I went to college, the reason I've stayed on here after the fiasco in 1988." He sighed. "Hell, she's been my best cheerleader for most of my life. I can always depend on her for support...or a good kick in the butt, whichever she feels more necessary."

Sloan smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. In those blue depths, he read sorrow so deep he wondered if it could ever be healed. "You're very lucky."

The wistfulness was back in her voice.

"Sloan--"

"You'd better get some sleep. You'll need it tomorrow. We've got a big day ahead. We've got to tell Howard what we found as well as check on Angie."

He frowned at the sudden drop of their conversation. "I'm fine and I'll be damned if I'm going to sleep in this bed and leave you on the floor."

"You don't have a lot to say about it, Blackwolf."

He pulled one of the bedrolls out and tossed it to her. "Here. At least use this."

She caught it and spread it out on the floor. She unbuttoned her shirt and removed her vest. In the silhouette of the glowing embers, her white T-shirt was easily seen as was the outline of her breasts. Reno shut his eyes and slipped into his own bed. She was beautiful and he'd bet his future on the fact that those breasts were soft and full and fit his hands perfectly. With her blonde good looks, the nipples would be pink, and perfect, and-- And he was losing his mind, that's what. He'd made her promise to help him keep his hands off of her, and he couldn't even keep his mind off of her.

With a disgusted grunt, he turned over and tried to will himself to sleep.

Sloan knew she could never sleep in the same room as Reno. His presence disturbed her, made her acutely aware of how much she wanted him. Now that she'd seen him half-naked, she knew exactly what she was missing.

The floor was hard and she shifted to one hip until it got numb, then turned to the other side

until it did the same. She repeated this process until the fire died out completely. Then the chills set in. The cabin wasn't exactly weatherproofed. It was for emergencies, so rangers could stay here and not die from the elements. That meant no luxuries--like heat and decent food.

She shifted yet again, trying to be as quiet as she could so as not to wake Reno.

"Have you slept at all?" he asked.

She sighed. "A little."

He scooted back against the edge of the bed and opened his bedroll to her. "Come on."

The breadth of his chest gleamed in the moonlight. Oh, man. Under different circumstances, she wouldn't have hesitated.

"Sloan," he said sleepily and more than a little sexily, "We're both adults. We can sleep together without...without-- We can sleep together, okay? I'm not the only one who needs a good night's rest."

She took a tentative step, drawn by the cozy picture he made and by the fact that he was offering exactly what she wanted. Even if it was platonic and even if it was only for one night. She crawled in next to him and reveled in the strong arms wrapping around her.

"Don't get any ideas," he said. "I have to do this because this thing's so damned small, it's

the only way to sleep."

"It's okay," she said, resting her head on his plump bicep. "I think I can put up with it." She was certain it would be the first night she'd ever slept with a smile on her face.

Sometime later--Sloan didn't know when, but it was still inky black outside--Reno's hand slid to her waist. She loved his touch, the calluses of those broad hands brought a shiver of pleasure up her back and down her arms and she burrowed her backside against the strong wall of his chest. He responded with a few incoherent words. His arms tightened around her. One hand splayed across her upper abdomen, his thumb settling just under her breast. She blew out a sigh of undisguised enjoyment, bringing his thumb even closer to her aching chest.

"Ah, Sloan," he murmured over the top of her head. "What you do to me."

If he was dreaming, she didn't want to wake him. In fact, she hoped it was a distinctly erotic dream. He bent his head and nuzzled below her earlobe. She stretched like a cat against him, her breath coming out with a low purr. His free hand slid from just under her breast to the waistband of her shorts...and then lower. When he found skin, he groaned low in his throat. Afraid to say

anything, to even move lest she break whatever moonstruck madness that consumed him, she sucked in her stomach allowing free and total movement over her body.

And he took it. His hand slid lower. Sloan bit her lip to keep quiet, but moved her hips, silently inviting him to do more. He seemed to rouse and nipped her earlobe. Her hips had a will of their own and undulated against his marauding hand. Every time he touched her, he stole her breath. She wanted to speak, but dared not. His other hand slid under her regulation undershirt to cup her breast, and she was lost in a vortex of carnal sensation she hoped never to escape from. He circled her nipple with his thumb and it instantly peaked.

Suddenly she wanted more. She wanted his mouth, his body, his very soul, but she knew she'd only have this night. That meant trying to record every touch, every taste, every sensation.

"Sloan?" he whispered against her temple.

She froze. "Yes?"

"I was wrong."

If he stopped now, she'd kill him for sure. His hand fell from her breast...

"I was wrong..."

He withdrew his other hand from her shorts...

"But--" Sloan tried to make sense of what he was saying, but in the sensual haze that enveloped her, she was having trouble.

"We can't just sleep in the same bed." Both of his hands fell to the buckle of her belt and unfastened it. The snap and zipper instantly opened.

"But--"

"Lift your hips," he said.

She did and he shimmied her uniform shorts and panties down her legs onto the floor.

"Now where were we?"

She twisted around to face him and with a shy smile, accomplished the same feat with him. "You made me promise--"

He touched his forehead to hers with an exquisite sweetness. "I know," he said with a sigh that swizzled through her as well. "But I'm damned tired of fighting this. I damned tired of trying to ignore the fact that when it all comes down to the bottom line, I'm just a man...and you're just a woman. Can't we just be that for a moment out of time?"

She cupped his cheek in one hand. "And after that moment?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "The only thing I'm certain of right now is that I want you

more than I've ever wanted anyone or anything in my life. You turn me on quicker than anyone I've known and it drives me stark raving nuts to look at your tight little butt in that ugly brown uniform--" He squeezed that particular part of her anatomy and pressed her intimately close. His breathing was as ragged as hers. "Can we do this and still maintain a working relationship?"

"I don't know," she breathed against his mouth, "but I might die if we stop now."

"The hell with it," he murmured. "The hell with everything."

"Yeah," she said on a shaky breath.

"Weren't we about--" he began, his lips hovering above hers.

She lifted her chin at a good kissing angle, but he didn't take the bait.

--"about here?"

"Oh, yeah," she managed to say before he was robbing her of rational thought.

Each word he spoke grazed his flesh against hers, but he didn't kiss her. Instead, he lifted her T-shirt and pressed his mouth against her nipple.

"Ah..." Sloan whispered. "Exactly right...there."

He kissed and laved and suckled until Sloan was almost out of her mind. He raked his teeth across the sensitive tip until she grabbed the covers under her. "Reno..."

He lifted his head and took her mouth in a carnal kiss so evocative of his intent, she felt it down to her very core. Then he dipped his head to her other breast and feasted there as well. He wasn't just making love, he was turning it into a satyr's delight: reveling in her body, enjoying everything about her. It was a total experience; she was the center of his universe.

He came back to her mouth for another long, slow, deep, wet kiss. She speared her fingers through his thick hair and anchored him to her, returning taste for taste, thrust for thrust, movement for movement. In dire need of air, they broke the kiss.

"I knew it would be like this," he growled against her neck.

"You talk too much," she said and brought his mouth back to hers. He held her to him with a broad hand at the back of her head and sent the other on a foray down her body. He whisked across her sensitized skin...dabbled at her breast again...and went lower. She gave him access and he again repeated the promise of what was to come.

"Sloan...." His chest heaved with the effort he was expending.

"Like I said, ranger. You talk too much." She scooted beneath him, wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him close. "Let's see a little action."

"If action is what my lady wants," he said, resting on his good side and smiling down at her.

"Then action is what she gets."

He was true to his word. He drove her to the brink of orgasm, then backed off and grounded her in his reality. He stoked her passion with mouth, hands, tongue, fingers, and the essence of himself. Every touch, taste, sound, and scent was Reno, and he consumed her. The words she'd spoken to him only the day before were coming true. She didn't know where she ended and he began. How could something that felt so completely and totally right, be wrong? It wasn't possible. In fact this felt more than right. It felt perfect.

"Sloan," he said. He slid his hand down her body, reveling in the recesses, the curves, the valleys. Her head arched back in languorous delight. A growl sounded deep in her throat, and she moved against him in an ageless rhythm that begged for conclusion and release. He slid his knee between her legs and entered the damp recesses of her body. "God...Sloan..."

Every place he was hard, she was soft and inviting. She completed him in a way he'd never realized she could. Her hands moved up and down his back. She kneaded his shoulders, slicked down his spine and cupped his backside to pull him even closer. He knew exactly how she felt. He couldn't get enough of her, either.

Her lips parted and his tongue sought hers. Their duel went on until he had to gasp for air.

Electrical shards surged up from the base of his spine. Heat, raging and out of control, consumed him. Passion demanded release. Reaching his hand between their sweat-soaked bodies, he brought Sloan with him over the precipice and into a shuddering climax.

Reno dozed, then woke to Sloan's wandering hands.

"You awake?" she asked with a yawn.

"I am now."

"Me, too."

"Are you okay?" he asked, suddenly wondering what was keeping her awake, if maybe he'd hurt her in his overeager lovemaking.

"Mmm. I'm better than okay."

He smiled against the top of her hair. She didn't sound like he'd hurt her. "How much better...?"

She snuggled into him and he felt the passion he thought he'd expended flare to new life.

"I think," she began, her breath fanning over his chest. "That I'd much rather show you than

tell you."

"Oh, you think so?"

She moved over him, her hands, mouth, lips and tongue playing his body like a fine-tuned instrument. She kissed him, softly at first, then harder. Her breasts grazed his chest and he reached for her, but she shook her head. "Not yet."

She explored the hard planes of his body, the hollows, his masculinity and his breath caught in his throat. His muscles tightened and she playfully nipped his ear. He couldn't form a coherent thought and yet was consumed by this one moment, this one woman. There had been others in his life, many in fact, but Sloan was different. She'd captured him long before she took control of his body. She'd mesmerized him with her spunk, her intelligence, and her honesty. He wanted--needed--to know everything about her, to brand himself onto her the way she was part of him. He wanted to make the moment last forever.

Sloan straddled his hips and slowly lowered herself onto his straining sex. He groaned and pulled her down for a long, soulful kiss. He'd never be able to make her leave, not the park, not him. He was in too deep. Hell, he'd been in too deep from day one, but now...with their bodies fused together...he knew he could never bear seeing her hurt.

It was his last rational thought before he wrapped his arms around Sloan in a long, shuddering moment.

Life would never be the same again.

Never.

They lay together, limbs entwined. Minutes ticked by, like an accusing warden. He might be able to shut out reality tonight, but with the morning light came the mess that their lives had become.

"Sloan?"

"Yes?"

He wanted to tell her he loved her. He shook his head instead. The sex had been great--better than great actually. Then realization dawned on him. What an idiot he'd been. He'd fallen in love with Sloan Stafford, a beach bunny, Barbie-doll who was about as opposite from him as he could get.

"What is it?" she asked.

He tightened his arms around her and pressed a kiss against her temple. "I can't promise you--That is, I--"

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not looking for promises."

"That's not what I meant." Then what had he meant? He couldn't say anything, give her any hint of a future until he'd taken care of Jimmie's case and made sure Angie was safe. He was already beginning to feel guilty for taking tonight for himself--damned selfish bastard that he was. "It's just that--"

She turned in his arms and stopped his stammering with a kiss...that turned into more.

"I can't get enough of you," he said.

"Then take whatever you need," she murmured, sliding against him. "If only for tonight."

"But I wish it could be more...." So damned much more.

"Me, too," she said and stoked his passion again. "Me, too."

Finally, they slept. Sunlight beat through the window and she scowled at it. It meant the end of what she'd shared with Reno...and the renewal of a very ugly reality.

From outside came a snap, almost like twigs being crushed in the bushes. The thought stopped her cold. Had the men from the camp followed them through the night? She lay still, her breath caught in her chest, and listened again.

Someone was definitely outside the cabin.

But why bother sneaking around? If it was the illegal strip miners, they had her and Reno outnumbered.

Sloan, however, wasn't going down without a fight. She pulled on his shirt, reached down, and pulled Reno's revolver from its holster, checking to make sure it was loaded.

Both hands cupping the weapon, she aimed dead center in front of her, directly at the door. Her own heartbeat roared in her ears.

From outside came a small voice, an unintelligible voice. "Egi,egi dabaiyi, nemmen newe dease bozho'na gai yengade. Suni yunde Andebichi-woho saitū hagatunde." The words were a language Sloan didn't understand. They were repeated again almost as if the speaker wanted the occupants to hear.

Reno roused awake, looked at Sloan and the weapon, then cocked his head to listen to the strange chant. He tossed Sloan her clothes and slipped into his shorts. "It's my mother, she's

asking who we are? If we're strangers."

"Wha-a-at?" Sloan asked. He must be joking.

"My mother." He sent her a beautiful smile. "I told you she wanders around at will."

"What's she doing here?" Sloan hurried and pulled on her shorts while Reno finger-combed his hair and winked at her.

"I guess we're about to find out."

She opened the door and an older woman stepped into view. She glanced at the weapon still in Sloan's shaking hands.

"You can put the weapon down," Reno said.

"Oh. Sorry." Sloan put the safety on and replaced it in Reno's utility belt.

She said something else in her strange language, pointed toward Sloan and smiled, "I search for the brother-of-the-wolf that calls himself my son. But what I find is Andebichi-woho guarding this hut."

"Sloan, this is my mother, Daughter-of-the-Spirits-who-roam-the-heavens." Reno extended his hand toward the old woman and she smiled.

"You may call me Sky, child." His mother shook her head at him. "Reno, your horse. I

have loved these creatures far to long to find one wandering the hillsides. And then I see it belongs to my son the stranger, the Andebichi-whoho. Could you not have taken the saddle and reins off? Must you add even more to his burden?"

She stretched out her arm and Reno's stallion plodded up to the steps.

"I...er...that is--"

"Sorry, mother," Reno said. "We had a major emergency and in all the craziness, we forgot."

He held the door open, turning to Sloan. "She also breeds and sells horses to the park service," he said.

"And ours were--"

"Bred and raised by her," he finished. "She's a touch possessive."

His mother eyed him pointedly, then stepped inside. "My son tells you the truth."

"I'm terribly sorry about the horses, Mrs. Blackwolf--"

"You may call me Skye, my daughter. You are no longer Andebichi-whoho now that I know your name. Now, come, sit, and tell me of this emergency that made my horse wander so far. Why do you fear Andebichi-whoho nunukimi'ii'yu?"

Sloan had no idea what Skye was talking about, but for the next hour, she and Reno related their narrow escape. Tears fell unashamedly from Skye's eyes when she learned of Jimmy's death and she echoed their fear for Angie's safety.

Skye stood and raised her arms toward the heavens. "This is but a continuation of the bad medicine that has filled this forest since the great fire."

Reno's gaze darkened, "That's ridiculous, Mother." He stood somewhat unsteadily, towering over the older woman. He rubbed the back of his neck. "The only thing that failed in eighty-eight was me."

She placed her hand on his arm and gently guided him to a corner; their gazes locked.

"You must realize this, my son. The ways of this forest have been carved out of time. Daa Ape'a is angered that his children do not respect the natural ways of these lands."

"But I tried that; we all did." A muscle ticked in his clenched jaw. "And you know what happened when we did."

"My son, the fires were needed to replenish the life that was ebbing from Daa Sogobia, our mother earth. You have only to look around today, to know the magic of this place has returned. The whites do not understand the ways that have ruled this land since the time of the great hairy

bozho'na that roamed here before the whites destroyed them all." She touched his forehead. "You must not abandon these ways." She touched his heart. "You will find the killer. But first you must cleanse your heart and make ready for the courage Daa Ape'a will send you."

"Our Father," Reno insisted, "is what let me down."

"No," his mother said, placing her hand firmly on his chest. "A woman let you down. And now another woman who is not andebichi-woho, believes in you and stands besides you." She gestured toward Sloan who smiled without really understanding what was actually going on. "Your life has come full circle. If the whites' poison is not stopped now, it will ruin Yellowstone."

"You know about the strip mining?" he said, glancing from his mother to Sloan and back again. Sloan could see the great debate going on in the depths of his gaze and longed to help carry some of his burden. But she also knew that whatever his mother was suggesting was something that affected him deeply. It was a decision he'd have to make for himself, something he would do for himself. All she could do was love him and hope for the best.

The throbbing in Reno's head intensified. How had his mother known where to find him? It had been so many years since he'd sought her counsel. They hadn't even spoken much since he'd

abandoned her ways more than a decade ago. Now, when he needed her most, she appeared as if only moments had gone by since they'd last been together instead of years.

If only what she'd told him was true, that if he cleansed his soul everything would be back in balance with him and with Yellowstone. But how? Nothing could bring Jimmy back; nothing could ease Angie's pain. And what about Sloan? Not only had he endangered her, he'd made love to her. Last night, she'd become a part of him. How could he keep screwing things up for those he loved? Was his mother right? Did he need to get himself in tune again before things would fall into place?

"First the sacrifice, my son," Skye said. "Then the reward."

How else could he ever repair the damage? Then again, how could he leave Sloan and Angie in possible danger and go to the sweat lodge? How could he cleanse his soul like some carefree brave searching for his manhood? "It's ridiculous. I can't."

"Reno?" The softness of Sloan's voice cut through his thoughts and startled him. He turned to gaze into her eyes, as blue and clear and deep as Lake Yellowstone. He saw one other thing, an overflow of love he never thought would be his. "Your mother is right."

"No--"

"There's something going on here that goes against nature herself. Skye wants you to discover what that something is; one of us needs to be in tune with what's happening, and it seems that you're the only one with the right connections."

His mother smiled and nodded. "Nemmen Newenee', udei getaambe. Dammen Newenahape, audenbichi-wohonee' udei nangasumbaaduka--This woman is very wise for her young years."

Reno's thoughts raced. His mother was a great and respected shaman, but...Angie and Sloan...unprotected. This couldn't possibly be the time to get back to religious basics. Anger bubbled out. "She's just saying that because she--"

"No, Reno. Your mother's right. We'll be fine. I'll stay with Angie until you get back. We'll be fine."

"No. I need to be there, too." Reno paced the floor his hands forming fists. He was insane to even consider it.

Sloan stood in front of him and blocked his way. "No. You need to do what your mother said."

When had he lost control of his life? The two women facing him crossed their arms as

though they were a force to be reckoned with. And they were. If it had been any other time, he'd have laughed and gathered them up in his arms. But this was different. This was life and death. "But--"

"No." Sloan stood straight and tall and had never looked so beautiful. His heart swelled with the need to protect her. "This time I'm giving the orders." She pushed against his chest. "You're not totally out of the woods yet anyway. You had a close call. You could use the down time."

"Listen, my son. Sloan is right."

"But I can't protect--"

"I'll go to Angie. You go...wherever your mother takes you." She laid he back of her hand against Reno's cheek. "We'll be fine. Honest."

"You need--"

"All I need is Mr. Remington there." She smiled and retrieved the handgun. "With this, I'm as macho as you and twice as deadly."

Although the thought of Sloan riding back to Mammoth alone made his blood run cold, but way deep inside where his inner thoughts lay hidden, he knew she was telling the truth. He knew

his mother was right, too. Things hadn't been straight in the park since the fires, since he'd blamed the devastation on doing things the old way, the shaman's way, his mother's way. Since then, he'd been ashamed of his Native American heritage and had tried to shun everything and anything about the culture--except Jimmie and Angie. He'd blamed everyone from Fate to tourists to the whites in general, and most specifically and recently, Sloan. He'd taken his anger out her and she'd deserved it least of all. He'd heaped his failures and fears on her and she'd borne them well. She was as deep and mysterious as Yellowstone itself. It was all so fundamentally simple now. He loved her and as her world was also his, his had become hers. Maybe, it was time to try once more.

"All right, Mother. You win. Sloan, can you remember how to get back?"

She nodded.

"Get Angie and bring her back here. But, if you so much as suspect trouble, call Howard." He pointed a finger at her. "Understand?"

Even though his mother and Sloan smiled at him, even though the decision was made, there was something at the base of his spine that said it didn't set well. Sloan's smile lit up her face. That and her sparkling eyes almost made him forget that warning. He'd made her happy and for

some strange reason that face gave him great pleasure.

"Aye, Aye, Sir." She saluted in mock attention.

"Wrong branch of service." Without care who was watching, he pulled her to him and kissed her deeply.

"Be careful," she said.

"You, too." He glanced at his mother who squinted into the cloudless horizon.

"Okay, mother. Let's get on with it."

Chapter 12

Reno helped Sloan get the horse packed up. "Stay with Angie," he said. "Tell her what's going on and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I don't like taking your Kevlar vest."

"Trust me," he said with a wan smile. "Where I'm going I won't be needing it."

Sloan's eyes said she was only doing this to support him. She didn't completely understand, but the bond forged in the past twenty-four hours led her to trust his judgment. "Then I'll see you later."

"Count on it," he said a heartbeat before hooking a hand around her neck and pulling her down for a quick, hard kiss.

With a somber nod, she turned the horse and headed back to Mammoth. Torn between trying things his mother's way--the old way--Reno watched until he couldn't see her anymore. His heart had never been heavier and for the first time since making his decision, he questioned it. Cold feet, he told himself. He'd been away from the old ways for so long, it was natural. His

mother held out a blanket for him that he threw over his shoulders.

"My son," she said. "You know what you must do, but it is your choice."

"I know."

"Then come." She led him through the countryside, in the opposite direction as Sloan had gone. Every step took him farther from what he felt was his duty, as well as where his heart lay.

They walked in silence. "I sense your tension," his mother said at last, "and I know it is difficult, but before you can go on, you must cleanse the bad medicine from your soul."

"I know."

Inside his mother's home was a wooden chest that held his ceremonial clothing. "I kept everything," she said.

Reno smiled at her. "I remember. You said I'd be back someday."

"And you," she said, "told me never--never would you live by the old ways again."

"Desperation drives men to do strange things," he said.

"You cannot run from who you are," she told him. "You must learn to blend with the future. It is only then you will be at peace."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'd forgotten a lot of the things you've blessed me with, the spiritual

gifts...the emotional support."

"You've been away a long time," she said. "Too long."

Reno nodded. Not only was Skye his mother, she'd been his spiritual guide since before he could walk. Descended from a long line of strong women, she kept the tradition of strength, but she'd taken a major detour herself. His father died in the high country at the hands of poachers. Skye moved here to be closer to his spirit, but using the second sight of a shaman, she'd predicted that the ground where his father's blood had spilled was sacred and that Reno would save Yellowstone in much the same way that his father had.

Now, many years later, it looked like it was coming to pass.

He prepared himself, but his mind whirled. Had his mother also seen a vision of his own death? The thought of never seeing Sloan was one he thrust away. This was the time of cleansing, not regrets. He'd found her; he'd loved her. That's all that mattered. Somewhere in the great vast universe that Daa Ape'a inhabited, they would be together. Of that he was sure.

Like countless ancestors of old, he gazed at the wide, clear sky and drew a deep breath. There was a battle that lay ahead, one that held the future of his beloved park. Before he could fight that one, he needed to win a more personal one.

It was to be a sacred day. Brother-to-the-wolf edged his horse up the steep incline that led to the sweat lodge. Abandoned long ago, the lodge was the one place where his mother still partook of special cleansing rituals meant only for a shaman. Everything in his culture had been about spirituality and the relationship with all living things. Inside this relationship, he had learned the value of life, especially reverence for Sogobia, his Mother Earth and all living creatures that walked upon her breast. It was this particular belief that made the Shoshoni different from the andebichi-woho, the stranger.

Since the fires however, Reno had viewed an andebichi-woho every time he looked in the mirror. As his horse picked his way through thinner air, Reno prayed that he could leave the trappings of andebichi-woho behind and go back to being one of the people, Nemme Newenée.

He was on a journey in a sacred day, a journey to renew his strength and faith, a journey that meant abstaining from food and drink and walking upon the red road.

Ever since they had discovered Jimmie's body, the only thing Reno could see or think or dream about was Sloan. Her face, her eyes, her hair floated like a vision before his mind's eye.

He could almost smell the clean scent that preceded her entrance into a room. In a short time, she had become his universe. She was now his past, his present, and his future. He'd had a chance last night to tell her that he loved her, but he hadn't. Now, if something happened to either of them, he might never be able to do so.

A heavy sense of foreboding crept in on his thoughts and Reno slowed down and looked around. He reigned in his horse and stopped to catch his breath, but his heart raced. He breathed deeply but the clean freshness of the forest did nothing to calm his fear.

A thought slipped into his head unbidden. They were in trouble. The women he loved were in danger. It came again, stronger until he knew it as surely as he knew the sounds of Yellowstone at night that echoed in his head.

It was as if each blade of grass, every sigh of the wind was calling out a warning. The trees spoke of evil. The tiny, chirring insects told him to go--now, immediately--to Sloan. It was imperative and time was fast becoming his enemy.

He remembered his mother's words, and how he was called to the sweat lodge, to his heritage, his promise. The horse shied under him, as if he, too, sensed what the elements were telling him. In the time it took to turn his mount around, his decision was made.

If Sloan and Angie were in danger, he would go. Everything else could wait.

Sloan headed back to Mammoth with the intention of turning the information she and Reno had discovered over to the superintendent, Howard Jacobs. While her heart would have had her stay with Reno forever, her head demanded other things. She'd promised to stay with Angie, to watch over her until they were sure she'd be safe. Since starting back, there had been an odd sense of urgency in her chest. It spurred her on to get back to Angie as soon as possible. Sloan wondered that if by finding the trail of the illegal strip miners, she and Reno had uncovered the link to Jimmie's death. Howard would be grateful for the information, and Sloan couldn't wait to tell him, but she decided to check on Angie first. Once she knew her friend was okay, they could talk to him together.

The urgency to get to Angie grew until it consumed Sloan's conscious thoughts. She glanced up at the brilliant sun. She had plenty of time before Angie was off work. Maybe they'd go out for pizza, beer, and some soul-baring girl-talk.

It was early afternoon by the time Sloan dropped her mare at the stables. Remembering Skye's gentle admonition that morning, Sloan unsaddled her and led her to a hay-filled stall before heading over to the infirmary.

The admissions clerk looked up when she came through the doors. "Where's Angie?" Sloan asked.

"Angie? No, I think she went home for lunch. Hasn't come back yet." He checked his watch. "Hey, she's way late."

"Late?" Sloan asked. "When was she due back?"

The clerk checked the In-and-Out board then glanced back at Sloan. "Jeez about an hour ago."

"Who'd she leave with?" Sloan struggled to tamp down a niggling fear.

"Nobody. She was alone when I saw her," he said. "Said something about getting antsy just sitting around and waiting. For what I don't know."

"Did she seem okay?" Sloan prodded with her questions, wanting to reassure herself everything was all right and prove her anxiety wrong. "I mean she wasn't upset or anything, was

she?"

"Nah, she was fine." He smiled at Sloan and shrugged. "Just bored."

"Okay. Thanks." Nothing seemed wrong there. So why was her apprehension escalating? Paranoia maybe. Sloan headed back to their cabin. The place was dark and too silent. Angie usually always left a reading lamp on, day or night. She always had. Sloan couldn't remember a time when she hadn't. Fighting a rising panic, Sloan scampered up the steps.

This is nuts; everything is fine. Angie was probably asleep in her room, and she deserved it with the past few days she'd had. Reno was readying himself for what was to come, and Sloan would be reporting the results of their investigation. Angie would certainly get a chuckle out of Sloan's fear when she told her how scared she'd been. She tried to still her racing heart, but wasn't having much success. There was no need for panic, she told herself, none at all.

Sloan threw open the front door, but before she could reach the nearest lamp she tripped over something, something distinctly out of place. She reached out and touched the overstuffed chair lying on its side on the floor. What in the world?

And the door hadn't been locked. In fact...her breath caught in her throat and her heart threatened to burst through her chest. In fact, everything was wrong, very wrong.

"Oh, no," she murmured, fearing the worst. She tripped over what seemed like a minefield of other overturned furniture. Finally, she reached the wall and flipped on the light switch.

It looked like the entire cabin had been upended and ransacked. Furniture, appliances, even clothing were strewn in total disarray. "Angie!" she hollered, fearing there would be no answer, but hoping to find her roommate somewhere. "Angie, where are you?"

She staggered down the hall to Angie's bedroom door and pushed it open. There, too, everything from bed linens to the contents of dresser-drawers had been thrown around. But Angie wasn't anywhere around. "Angie!"

The silence seemed to mock Sloan's growing anxiety.

From the looks of it, either Angie had put up quite a struggle or someone had torn the room apart looking for something. Or maybe Angie had interrupted the intruders and they'd taken her away. The chance of Angie becoming a victim of random violence was remote. This was deliberate and those who were behind it were serious, deadly serious in their game.

Sloan's heart hammered against her chest. Back in the living room, she pulled the phone out of the debris and dialed Howard's number.

The other end of the line rang...and rang...and rang. Finally, after the tenth ring, the

answering machine kicked in and she was told to dial an extension number or leave a message. She hung up the receiver. There would be no help from anyone, not Reno, not Howard.

A wave of guilt washed over her. Angie had been alone and unprotected. Granted, they'd told her to stay put, to be with someone at all times, but Sloan couldn't blame her friend. No one ever thought they were in danger until it stared them straight in the face. Like now.

If something bad had happened to Sloan, she'd never forgive herself. She called the infirmary to alert them as well as the stables in case Angie might be out looking for her. She called several other places Angie haunted, but no one had seen her.

Please God, let her be safe.

Sloan tried Howard's office and his residence one last, desperate time, but he was nowhere around. Neither was his secretary. Where was he? He should be at least one of the places. She rustled the walkie-talkie from her things and tried to contact someone there. She alerted everyone she spoke with to keep their eyes open for Angie. Unfortunately, she didn't know who might be behind the illegal mining or Angie's disappearance, which meant Sloan, couldn't give a description.

Frustrated in her own impotence, she threw the wireless contraption onto an overstuffed

pillow. "Damn!"

There had to be something she could do. She couldn't just straighten the place up and sit around to wait. The least she could do was go back up to where she and Reno had seen the trucks. If she could work her way far enough into the mining operation, she might be able to identify--at least for authorities--what they should be watching for. If she stumbled on something that would point to where Angie might be, or who might have done this, so much the better.

One part of her hoped Reno might find her. The other part knew anything he could do would come too late.

Reno arrived at Angie's cabin and discovered what Sloan had found hours before. Any hope that he'd harbored about the feeling being his imagination evaporated, leaving him with a heavy load of guilt.

Too late? Impossible! He tamped down his growing apprehension and forced himself to look at the remains of what had been left behind. Other than the obvious chaos of the furniture, there was no sign of blood, no foul play. At least not here. It was a small consolation, but he'd

take it. It at least left him with a fragile strand of tenuous hope. And who did this include? Angie? Sloan? Both? If anyone had meant to kill one or both, they would've done it right there. A mental image of two bodies floating in simmering geysers popped into his head, but he refused to think about that possibility. He needed to be calm; he needed to be organized and he couldn't accomplish either if he dwelled on 'what ifs.' It was a long shot--a very long shot--but he had to find something that would point him in the right direction.

His hand went to his weapon. He unholstered it and checked the magazine. "And one in the chamber."

If anyone so much as ruffled a hair on either Sloan or Angie's head, there would be hell to pay, and Reno would be the devil himself.

He started outside. He had to clear his mind, to think things out in a rational plan. Reno sank down on the top step and massaged his throbbing temples. Yellowstone was a big place and there were too many places to hide, especially two slender women. Where to start? What to do? He raised his eyes to the god of his people and the god of the whites. Help me find them. Reclining back against the higher wooden step, he stretched out his arms, only to draw back. The boards were rough with several splinters, one of which had pierced his skin. He glanced at the

small wound, a smudge of orange garnering his attention.

Bending down, he scrutinized the same clay they'd found at the geyser, the same clay that had led them into the mountain and the mining site.

But was it from Sloan's boots or was someone who'd done this to Angie's home, someone who'd kidnapped her and maybe Sloan, someone who meant them harm?

The apprehension he felt since late that morning welled up so strongly that he trembled. He couldn't just stand by and let something happen. If he lost Sloan, especially after being alone for so long, after finally coming to terms with his past--he couldn't even think it.

Resolve, quickly followed by adrenaline coursed through his veins. His senses went on full alert. He'd found the miners; he'd find the women.

Reno bent down to study the steps, the gravel, the land. The signs were there; he just needed to find them. With renewed purpose, he willed his heart to a slower pace and focused on reading what was left behind. What was different? What had disturbed the congruity of this place?

Suddenly, it was there, right in front of him--a small piece of khaki-colored cloth mixed in with the dust of the road. It had been waiting for him to slow down long enough to see it. That cloth belonged to the woman he loved.

For once he accepted his feelings without recrimination or denial. He loved Sloan. From her exasperating stubbornness to a soft tear escaping down her cheek, he loved her. And he wasn't about to stand by and let some human garbage destroy anything else. Not his park, not his friend, not his love.

He only prayed he could make it so.

Chapter 13

A tiny piece of cloth so small it could've been there for days or hours, he couldn't tell. But he had to...two lives may depend on him to know. One he loved as a sister and the other. . .it was impossible to put his feelings into rational thoughts. But Sloan had become the air he breathed, the blood that flowed through his veins, the very beat of his heart. He was connected to her in some mystical cosmic way that transcended anything and everything he'd experienced until now.

Reno pushed aside all the book learning he'd been taught in college, all the modern methods he'd turned to in the past decade and reached deep into his inner spirit. There lay his memories of the native way, the way of his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. His was a heritage rich and deep in legacy and lore from his shaman mother and his Shoshoni upbringing. A heritage he had rejected because of failure, now resurrected by love.

He held the almost microscopic shred of fabric, closed his eyes and willed his mother earth to whisper the words of his beloved's whereabouts. Gone was the anger that had been anchored in his heart for so long and with it came a new understanding and sight, a renewed sense of his

place in the universe, a renewed purpose of life. He had to find Sloan, and he would. Angie, too. He opened his eyes and studied the path that stretched ahead of him. He'd found the cloth; there must be something else.

He widened his vision glancing back and forth, surveying the landscape that stretched ahead. Finding nothing, he reversed the process, starting from the panorama that was Yellowstone and ending with the blades of grass that poked up between a single piece of orange splashed gravel. He crouched down again, reexamining the gift from mother earth.

And then he knew...and set off on his quest of the heart.

Reno eased his mother's gelding into the deep underbrush of aspen and swung down from the saddle. The rest of the climb would be on foot. The orange clay had been the clue he'd been searching for. It couldn't have been from Sloan because they hadn't reached the mining site. There was no way she could have the soil on her boot.

That meant whoever had taken Angie, or Sloan, or both had probably taken them to the place he'd been shot. From there, he could better organize his search. One thing was certain, they were

somewhere in the area. His sense of purpose grew with each mile that drew him closer. His bond with Sloan was unbroken and he almost sensed her presence. Knowing he'd gone to wrestle with his roots, she'd been determined to protect Angie alone. How he knew it, he didn't question. She was an integral part of his soul and their lives were intertwined forever. Nothing could ever change that. Not even death.

Was it only a few short weeks ago that Sloan's actions had driven him so crazy he'd wanted her gone. Now here he was searching for her, his determination overruling everything else.

She was normally level headed, but if she found Angie, especially if Angie was in trouble or worse, he couldn't predict what she'd do. One thing he was sure of, Sloan had been here in this place--whether of her own volition or as a hostage he wasn't sure, but the sensation of her presence was all around him. It was amazing that thinking about her could now tip up the corners of his mouth in a smile. But this wasn't the time for sentimental thoughts. This was a time to win the battle...and the day.

Sloan had definitely been where Reno was. She'd managed to keep herself hidden in the

deep underbrush and slowly, methodically, and meticulously made her way into the valley and past several behemoth earthmovers. Hidden beneath the tires taller than she was, she breathed a quick sigh of relief. She was relatively safe for now--unless and until the workers came back. The men had been at it through the morning and around noon had stopped abruptly. A lunch break, Sloan thought with a grimace. Even in the midst of committing a crime, they took time for lunch. It was so normal it was almost ridiculous. In reality, however, there was nothing normal or ridiculous about it. One of these men had killed to cover up their illegal operation. Two people were dead and Reno had been wounded. These people wouldn't hesitate to do more damage or injure more people.

Trying to clear her mind to form some sort of plan, Sloan leaned her head against the tire and unconsciously ran her hand over the rough ridges. It was a particularly craggy surface, hard rubber with deep grooves. Her fingers hit a sharp piece of gravel and she pulled in her hand to examine it. A splash of orange mixed with the blood oozing from the small cut at the end of her finger.

None of this made sense yet. Why would anyone run an illegal strip mine inside the park? Rangers were everywhere. In the last two months, neither she nor Reno had an inkling anything

untoward was going on. They'd never seen anything out of the ordinary. Jimmie had been right. Only an insider could keep an operation like this from the rangers. But who?

Someone capable of murder. Someone ruthless. Someone pretty high up.

Sloan was sure of one thing. This was the right place. If Angie was alive, she was around here. The question was where?

A high-pitched scream split the afternoon's silence. Trying to zero in on where it had come from, Sloan glanced around. Angie!

High above, on a ridge overlooking the heavy equipment and trucks, was a large tent. Another cry rent the silence. Angie. She had to be up there. Quietly and carefully, Sloan made her way through the brush and up the hill as fast as she could without drawing attention to herself. From her pocket, she retrieved a small Swiss knife, opened it, and inched closer to the tent. It wasn't much as weapons went, but it was better than nothing.

As she drew nearer, she heard the unmistakable sounds of a struggle. It grew louder until she recognized Angie's voice. Relief filled her. She was here and she was alive. Another voice, a low guttural growl, was unfamiliar. Nearing the flap, she took a deep breath, gripped the knife tightly, and leaned forward.

A solid pressure in the middle of her back stopped her where she stood. Whatever it was wasn't good. It was cold, hard, and made of steel. She stiffened. Someone held a gun against her ribs.

"Well, well, little miss ranger. You couldn't keep Blackwolf busy with anatomy lessons. You had to go sticking your pert little nose into other people's business." The unmistakable voice of Howard Jacobs echoed through her, and her mind reeled. The shock was instantaneous and overwhelming. It couldn't be...and yet it was.

"Get inside," he said.

He shoved her into the dark tent. The contrast between the brightness of the day and the dimness of the tent momentarily blinded her. She hesitated and blinked. Howard shoved her forward and she tripped, falling into the body of another person.

There was a soft cry from the other body.

"Angie?" Sloan whispered. "Is it you?"

"Oh my God...Sloan?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

Angie leaned into her and whispered in her ear. "I'm fine. Don't provoke them."

"I'll take over from here," Howard said to a second man who was dressed in jeans and a dirty T-shirt. "Get the men rounded up off their fat butts and busy back at work."

With a nod to Howard and a glare at the two women, he left. Howard followed him out, barking more directives at him.

Sloan, eyes adjusted to the dim tent interior, looked at her friend. Ugly purple splotches mottled Angie's face. Her hands flew up to frame her face; tears prickled at her eyes. "Oh, Angie...what have they done?"

Angie shrugged. "Interrogated me. He wanted to know how much we knew and who we've talked to."

Sloan hugged her friend. "I can't believe it's Howard," she said through a thick throat. "I would never believe it of him in a million years." She pulled back and cupped Angie's battered cheek in her hand. "How could he?"

"It seems that he's been making quite a bit of change off the park. Reno will take him apart piece by piece."

"Not for a while he won't," Sloan said. "He's at his mother's sweat lodge as we speak."

"Skye?" Angie whispered. "How does she always know when to show up for him?"

"Must be that shaman stuff," Sloan replied.

"She's amazing."

"Yeah, well if she's such a great shaman and is so amazing, why did she drag him off just when we need him the most?"

"She shows up when it's best for Reno," Angie said, "not for the rest of the world."

"So how long has this operation been in action?" Sloan asked, specifically redirecting their thoughts away from a rescue that wasn't going to come.

"I don't know. I can't figure out how he kept it a secret so long. I mean there are rangers all over the place."

The flap of the tent opened. Sloan and Angie both closed their eyes at the bright sunlight flooding in. Howard stepped inside. "Oh come now, ladies. This operation was very easy to cover. Until that Indian cop decided to stick his nose in where it didn't belong. A little bit like our Sloan here."

Angie sucked in her breath. "Jimmie?" she asked. "You--?"

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly. "Me. Well I didn't kill him per se--"

"You just gave the order," Sloan finished for him. "Why? Why did you--"

"I don't tolerate anyone questioning my decisions," he interrupted, "but since you two won't be around much longer, I suppose I can tell you. Mining is strictly regulated by the feds. But I wrangled an especially lucrative deal with an old acquaintance, a Montana mining contact."

"Do you know how much you've polluted the Yellowstone River?" Sloan swung her hand around to slap him, but he turned and her blow glanced off his shoulder. Howard shoved her backwards through the tent opening where she landed in the dirt.

"I needed the money."

"We all need money, Howard."

"I need more than most."

"Gambling?" she asked.

"None of your business," Howard said. "It's not like these mountains are good for anything else. If you've seen one, you've pretty much seen them all."

Sloan saw pure red. The nerve of this weasel to insult her favorite natural resource!

"When Sunbear stumbled onto the operation and threatened to go to the Department of Justice, I had no choice. Knowledge is power, and he couldn't be bought."

"And the first man? What did he do?"

"Him?" Howard asked in a bored tone. "He was just a tourist who got too close. Said he'd gotten lost. That body was dumped in Morning Glory as a lark, but Sunbear...he was just too dangerous to let live--sort of like you and his girlfriend. But don't worry," he continued. "We're not dumping you in the geysers."

Sloan knew it wasn't the time to be relieved. Anyway she cut it, Howard wanted them dead...and disposed of.

"I've got something much more creative for you two. You and your little friend will go out with the rest of the waste around here. Get out," he snarled at Sloan. She helped Angie up and out of the tent. In the light of day Angie's battered countenance looked even worse. Sloan's heart wrenched at the sight of someone so innocent yet so abused and knew a rage so white-hot and all consuming, she could hardly contain it.

Glancing around, she searched for something--anything--that could buy them some time. All she needed was the element of surprise--no one would think a woman would fight back--and a momentary diversion. Then maybe...just maybe...they could manage to escape.

At the bottom of the incline was an empty truck. Sloan squeezed Angie's arm and nodded toward the truck. She prayed she'd pick up on her intention.

"All right, ladies." Howard urged them forward with the barrel of his gun. Two huge, open refuse barrels were straight in front of them. "Jump right in. Wait a minute, maybe I should tie you up first."

She exchanged a horrified look with Angie. This lunatic was planning to seal them inside and leave them to die of exposure, starvation, lack of water, or asphyxiation--whichever came first. Instinct took over and Sloan switched to function on pure adrenaline. Reno was off somewhere doing God knew what and she and Angie were being sealed into a gruesome death. She would not stand by and go down without a fight.

Angie took a step forward and let loose with an ear-splitting scream that could probably have been heard in Canada. She dropped in a theatrical faint and Sloan made a dash for the truck.

Howard was faster. Snaking a beefy arm around Sloan's neck, Howard yanked her back. "Not so fast, valley girl." He tightened his grip and Sloan struggled for air. "So where's that pain-in-the-ass boyfriend of yours?" He glanced around. "Reno!" he called out. "If you want to see your little piece of fluffs while they're still breathing, you'd better hightail it up here."

Sloan squirmed, but Howard only tightened his arm again. Black spots appeared in front of her eyes. "He's...not...here," she managed to get out.

"You think that's gonna get me to release you?" He laughed. "You're going into that barrel conscious or unconscious, alive or dead. I don't care. You'll all end up the same way, anyhow."

Reno eased forward in the bushes. He'd caught up with them almost too late. With Howard's arm around Sloan's neck, he didn't dare risk rushing him. Their only hope was if Howard made a mistake. Reno forced himself to stay calm and keep a clear head. He'd have to wait until the last possible moment before he could make any move. Otherwise, he'd give himself away. Hang on, he silently pleaded. I'm here.

Sloan was more courageous than he'd even imagined. He already knew he cared deeply for her, but with every passing minute, she demonstrated new qualities that simply increased that admiration.

He was prepared mentally, physically, and emotionally to do whatever it took. He had much to hold Howard accountable for. Two murders, one of whom was his best friend, plus the physical injuries he'd given Angie, plus what he had in mind for Sloan.

Oh, God! Sloan. So near and yet so far. He loved her and would continue to love her pure

and simple until his dying breath. Right now, he'd do whatever necessary to save her, even at the expense of his own life.

Sloan was his future. Before he could think of that, he had to deal with the here and now. He had to come up with a plan. Right now.

Chapter 14

Everything surrounding Sloan blurred into darkness. Bright dots flashed before her eyes. Howard had her in a chokehold, and she had to stay conscious. She fought back the dizziness. If she could just catch her breath...

A memory from some dumb late-night infomercial or documentary, she didn't know which, popped into her head. It had been geared toward women and in a situation like this...what was she supposed to do?

Howard's breath seared her temple and she hated him, hated what he was doing to the park, what he'd done to Jimmie and Angie.

Fight it, Sloan. You can do it!

It was as if she could hear what Reno would have said to her. Think. Remember.

She turned her head until her nose fit into the crook of Howard's elbow. She grabbed a quick lungful of sweet, clean air. The spots disappeared and the darkness faded.

An involuntary shudder moved through her. She detested the man holding her, the man who

harbored malice against those she held dear. Howard moved toward the barrel, dragging Sloan with him. She dug her heels into the dirt to slow their progress. He was ruthless, would do anything to keep this lucrative operation a secret. He was growing fat with illicit money while the land and the wildlife would start dying very soon. In Howard's new line of work, stuffing her and Angie into a barrel and dumping them God knew where would be all in a day's work.

She tried to wrench free. Howard savagely kicked her legs out from under her. "Uh."

Another step drew them closer to the yellow vat. Maintaining her face at his elbow gave her the air she desperately needed to fight back, as ineffective as it had been. Sloan wasn't going down without a fight.

Reno's image flashed through her cascading thoughts. She couldn't she leave this world without telling him that she loved him. She knew him well enough to know that he'd accept the whole blame for their deaths. He'd wander the hills and valleys of his beloved park alone and anguished, never able to forgive himself. She'd seen his dark moments. No way could she watch him spend his life in such dark despair, not from either side of life. She had to survive this somehow, had to stop Howard, keep him from getting away with murder yet again.

Reno. His name filled her thoughts. Reno!

Would he ever know the truth of what happened here? Would he be able to figure out that it was Howard who was the mastermind? Dear God, she couldn't let this happen. There had to be a way out...something, somehow, but what?

Howard twisted around, his arm like a vise around her neck. Once again stars and spots pirouetted merrily before her eyes. She fought until she could turn her face back to where she could breathe. She needed to do something sudden, maybe use something sharp, but she had to make him let her go.

But what?

Maybe if he thought he'd succeeded in knocking her out, he'd loosen his grip. Anything. She'd try anything at all. Sloan grabbed a breath and went limp. Howard appeared to be caught off guard. He stumbled under the sudden shift in her center of gravity and she knew the moment had come.

He was bent forward, trying to right himself and her. His forearm was directly in front of her, and she seized the moment and his flesh. Sloan bit down as hard as she could, trying to see if she could get her teeth to meet the bone underneath.

"Agh!" His scream rent the air and echoed through the valley, but strangely there was no

answer. Evidently his men were still on their break. In the next breath, he released Sloan and she scrambled away, filling her lungs to capacity. She stumbled toward Angie, grabbed her arm and dove down the incline. The unmistakable c-r-a-c-k of a gunshot rang out above them. One single ear piercing shot that stopped Sloan's heart. She felt no pain. Was the bullet meant for Angie? Had it hit its mark?

Dirt, shrubs, and sky whizzed by as they tumbled toward the foot of the hill. In a moment it was over. Sloan landed with a thump and the breath she'd fought so hard for rushed out.

Angie landed beside her. "O-o-o-f!"

Sloan brushed dirt and leaves off her clothes, all the while checking for bullet holes. "Are you okay?"

Angie nodded and went through the same ritual as Sloan had. "What about you?"

Sloan gave her a tiny smile. "I think I'm fine."

They stared at each other a long, stunned moment, then broke into a heart-felt sigh of relief. "Oh, my gosh," Angie said.

"That was close," Sloan said. "Way too close."

"Did I hear a shot?" Angie asked.

Sloan glanced up. "Yeah. I'm sure that's what it was."

A cloud of dust was trekking downward, straight toward them. "Oh, Lord," Sloan said. "Come on. He's coming after us."

She stood and Angie followed suit. "Where?"

"Follow me." Sloan headed toward the brush. She hadn't gotten ten feet when someone very tall came rushing forward.

"Hey," Angie said.

Reno rushed forward and scooped Sloan, and then Angie off their feet then collapsed in a soft stand of prairie grass. Sloan's heart almost stopped for a second time that afternoon. A thousand questions popped to mind, but they were all overruled in the joy of seeing him once again, of being alive, of being with him.

"Where's Howard?" she asked.

He pointed up. There, sprawled halfway over the side, was the crumpled body of Howard Jacob.

Everything had happened so fast. From the moment Howard had laid his slimy paws on Sloan, Reno knew how it had to end. Her quick thinking gave him the opening he'd needed, and in the end the park supervisor lay dead in the very place he and his men had desecrated the land. His blood fed the ground he'd bled dry. A fitting tribute in Reno's eyes.

Once they'd found Reno's horse, the FBI was alerted and had no trouble rounding up the rest of the men by sundown. Sloan and Angie once again shared a room, in the hospital at West Yellowstone.

"I mean it," the fresh-faced intern said sternly. "You're to stay at home and rest, Angie. You, too, Sloan."

Sloan opened her mouth to protest that she was fine, but the look Angie sent her stopped the words.

"Yes, Doctor Pedersen," Angie said so docily that Sloan thought maybe her roommate had sustained major head trauma.

Once they were in the back seat of the Park RUV and headed home, Angie slumped against the seat and sighed. "I don't know why the doctors wouldn't let us go. We were okay. I would've promised the devil himself anything he wanted just to get out of there."

"Me, too. It was almost worse than prison."

"They meant well," Angie said. "I think."

"Then why didn't Reno have to stay, too?" Sloan asked.

"Because he's the hero and he's the man and he didn't want to."

"Neither did I," Sloan said, "but I didn't have any choice."

"Like I said, he's the boss," Angie said.

"The acting superintendent," Sloan corrected.

Since Howard's death, the duty of running the park had fallen on the senior officer--Reno Blackwolf.

They hadn't seen him in twenty-four hours, but he'd promised to catch up with them later.

Sloan and Angie walked up the steps to the cabin, but it was empty. No sign of Reno anywhere. Sloan's mood worsened and she couldn't disguise her heavy heart. "I thought--"

Angie sent her a knowing look. "Me, too."

The furniture had been put back in place. Those pieces that were broken, had been replaced with new. "Looks like he was busy," Sloan said.

"Yes," Angie murmured. "It does." Silence settled between them and Angie was the first to

break it. "I'll make some coffee."

Sloan doubted even Irish coffee would improve the situation or her mood, but there wasn't anything else to do. She sank into a kitchen chair with a long sigh. This didn't bode well at all.

In the days that followed, the expanse of the strip-mining operation was slowly revealed. It was a multi-layered process designed to bury Howard's collusion in an ocean of bureaucracy. He'd provided special permits to a fringe operation Montana mining company authorizing them to conduct their activities within park limits. It was brilliant in that it was a similar contract to those farming and ranching concessions that had been allowed along the park's borders for decades.

It was difficult to comprehend that it had been running for years undetected until Jimmie Sunbear had gotten too close for comfort. But everyone involved agreed that they hadn't been looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Rumors ran rampant. One said there would be a big shake up; a second had Reno named permanent Park Superintendent. But Sloan couldn't confirm or deny either of them. She hadn't

seen Reno since they'd come down from the mountain.

She was thrilled that he'd finally wiped away any past mistakes, even those in his own mind. She'd hoped he was happy, but she couldn't be sure. All she had to get through the long days and longer nights were those few stolen moments when they'd been alone at the snowshoe cabin.

Now he was reportedly in Washington. Congress subpoenaed him to report on the scandal and specify how the damage to the delicate ecosystem was to be accomplished. Yesterday's paper had a page one picture of Reno with the Vice-president no less.

The press was a pain. At first, they'd been everywhere, demanding all the details of the grisly ordeal. They credited Sloan with helping to avert the greatest disaster to Yellowstone since the fires, but it all rang hollow. Something was missing.

Reno Blackwolf.

An ache gnawed at her heart each time she thought of him, and that was often. She didn't understand what was going on, why he hadn't called. If he loved her, wouldn't he want to be with her? Wouldn't he try to move heaven and earth to at least talk to her?

She'd gotten nothing but silence from him. The whole time he'd been gone, he hadn't made the slightest attempt to reach her. It was time to admit a cold, hard fact. He didn't love her.

She'd made the cardinal female error. She'd mistaken hot sex for eternal love. A stupid assumption. He didn't love her. But, oh, how she loved him.

It would take a long time to get over him. Maybe even a lifetime.

What a dummy she'd been. He'd never said he loved her. His actions were hormonal, so she couldn't go by that. But he'd followed her instead of going to the sweat lodge. Surely that meant--

Nothing.

His actions with Howard were those of a professional protecting a subordinate. Anyone who didn't would get their butt sued, especially from her parents.

But what about the night in the cabin?

What about it, her more cynical side asked.

He's a man; you're a woman. It was hormonal, nothing more. It was tough to face, but it must be true. She could have been anyone and the night on the mountain would have turned out the same.

But still, when he'd scooped them up in the end, he'd hugged them. He'd held her like she was his, like she'd belonged to him.

Oh, yeah? He hugged Angie the same way and he didn't sleep with her.

Reno's trip to Washington was supposed to have been for no more than two weeks. Two had turned into three and three into four. Sloan had hoped she'd lose count, but each day when the sun rose in the east, her thoughts turned to him. Each night when the sun died in the West, she cried herself to sleep.

One particularly beautiful sunny day, Angie scampered up the steps.

"Sloan," she said breathlessly closing the cabin door behind her. "They're out!"

"What's out?" Sloan asked unable to muster even passing interest in much of anything anymore.

"Permanent assignments, that's what. Go see if you've gotten an envelope."

"An envelope?"

"Yeah! To see where you go."

"What else did you hear?" Sloan asked.

Angie cast her gaze downward. "Shawn Clark whooped and hollered because he said he got

Yellowstone. But he could be lying...or there might still be one for you."

"You know there was only one position available here." The implications of Angie's word chewed off what was left of her heart. She didn't try to fight the new heartache. Her eyes filled with tears, blurring her vision. One broke through the dam of her lashes and trickled down her cheek.

"They could have decided to go with two positions." Angie sat down beside Sloan and put her arm around her. "He could have been kidding. Or maybe it's a mistake."

"It's no mistake," Sloan said. But it was the final nail in her professional coffin. If anything showed her what Reno had thought about her, it was the assignments. He'd wanted her out of the park since the day he saw her. Now he'd get his wish.

It had been six weeks since Howard's death and still no word from Reno. Sloan had known what she had to do. Forget the past and move on. Even if she had gotten the Yellowstone assignment, she couldn't live with loving him and knowing he didn't return that love. She couldn't have borne seeing him and not picking up where they'd left off. The Yosemite

assignment would have to do. She glanced around the place that had been home for what seemed like a lifetime. It was time to go.

"Hurry up if you really want to catch that plane." Angie stood in the doorway and gave her a mock scowl. "You're really going to do it? You're actually gonna leave me?"

Sloan looked up and tried to smile, but failed miserably. "There's nothing for me here."

"I'm here and I'm your friend."

"I know, sweetie, and I'll stay in touch." She grabbed her duffel bag, slung it over her shoulder, and gave Angie a big hug. "I won't forget you. I promise."

Angie sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Yosemite won't know what hit them."

"And I was serious, Angie. Go to medical school; be a doctor. You already out perform most of them at the infirmary."

"Maybe I will." Angie stepped back and studied her. "I wish things had worked out differently."

"Me, too," Sloan said.

"I called headquarters and told them to send a driver. He should be here--" .A series of rapid honks interrupted.

"All right, all ready," Sloan said with a shake of her head. "I'm coming."

Angie checked her watch. "You've only got two hours before the plane takes off and it's ninety miles to the Jackson Hole airport. This guy's cutting it pretty close, so go. Get out of here." Angie hugged her briefly and pushed her out the door.

The honking kept up. Sloan couldn't see inside the dark-tinted windows. A new jeep, and a very nice one. Maybe Reno had gotten more funding. God knew they could use it. She pulled herself up short. Would there ever be a day when she wouldn't think of him?

She doubted it. It didn't improve her mood. She yanked open the passenger door. "I'm here," she snapped. "You can quit honking."

Behind the wheel, Reno glared at her. "And just where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Wh--what?" Seeing him so unexpectedly caught Sloan completely off guard. She furiously blinked to keep the tears at bay. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Get in."

She did but said nothing. He pulled the jeep out on the road and headed south toward Jackson Hole. "What the hell am I doing here?" he growled. "I work here. And so do you."

She turned to gaze out the side window. "Not anymore I don't."

He shook his head and looked at her like she was crazy. "What are you talking about?"

"Shawn got the assignment. I was offered the position in Yosemite and I took it."

"That was a rookie assignment," he said, his voice growing deeper and louder.

"Duh," she said. "That's what I am. A rookie. Fits don't you think?"

He gripped the steering wheel tightly. "You took the Yosemite position? You couldn't have waited to hear from me?"

The frustration of the past weeks and the crushing blow he'd dealt her heart bubbled out in anger. "Yeah, Reno, I did wait for you. I haven't seen or heard from you in six freaking weeks. How long did you expect me to wait? A year, maybe two? And how was I supposed to support myself? Eating grass along the roadside?"

"You didn't think I'd make a position for you?" he countered almost as though he hadn't heard her. "After all we've been through you didn't trust me?"

She turned and glared at him. "Trust you? I didn't even know where you were? The paper said you were in Washington. What, they don't have those new-fangled contraptions called a telephone there?"

"Not one that wasn't bugged." He smiled and took a sharp curve way too fast. It threw

Sloan against him.

His presence, his delicious scent, and his overpowering nearness did funny things to her stomach. "Well, if you'd bothered to contact me, you'd know that I need more than just a job."

He seemed to relax. His smile grew wider. "You're right. I should've called, but I wanted to surprise you."

"Surprise me?"

"Why are you repeating everything I say?"

Sloan's eyes narrowed. He might think the whole thing was funny, but she didn't. Not for a minute. "I can't believe I waited for you, hoping against hope to hear from you and you just waltz in today like nothing's happened?"

Reno stopped the jeep in the middle of the road. Several cars behind him screeched to a stop. Ignoring the angry honks, he turned to her. "A lot has happened. What I mean is I was obtaining an official clearance so I could offer you a permanent position--as my second in command. But," he rushed to add, "that's only part of the position." He reached for her, pulled her to him and Sloan was lost for a moment in her favorite spot on earth. "Most especially," he said, "I want you first in my life. How do the words marriage, commitment, and wife sound?"

Sloan stared at him in disbelief.

"I need more out of a relationship than stony silence." He gave her a wry smile.

"I--I--"

His lips hovered above hers. "You need me as much as I need you. And I won't take no for an answer. I'll just kidnap you and take you to that mountain hideaway. I have many dark and mysterious ways to bend your will to mine. Along with a few other delicious things I've been fantasizing about for the last month and a half."

A stream of cars was lined up behind them. The horns sounded repeatedly in helpless frustration. The tourists wouldn't have minded if the obstacle in their path had been wildlife, but they had no patience with humans.

Oblivious to the commotion, Reno cupped Sloan's head in his hand and bent to kiss her thoroughly and completely. "The bad medicine is gone," he whispered. "You've healed my heart and soul."

Sloan glanced up to see the love revealed in his eyes, that gave the truth of his words. "And you've healed mine."

His voice grew husky. "You haven't answered me yet."

She gazed deeply into dark eyes that were no longer angry, but filled with desire. "Like I have a choice. I can't bring on any bad medicine now, can I?"

"There's no bad medicine anywhere," he said between a trail of kisses along her jaw and neck.

Sloan sank into the loving warmth of his arms reveling in the new assignment she'd just agreed to. An assignment that was full of love, of beauty, of a lifetime.

~ The End ~