

The background of the cover features a desert scene with pyramids under a dark, stormy sky with lightning. A man in a cowboy hat and a yellow shirt stands in the foreground, holding a gun. A black and white horse is behind him.

# Memory's Desire

Gale  
Storm

*“How long have you known him, Sheena?”*

She didn't hesitate with her answer. “We met yesterday on the train. Rob claimed he noticed me. One thing led to another and when we arrived here...” She stopped as he swung her around and faced her.

“I can see the results of last night, myself. I don't need details.” His voice cut her like a knife. “You do trust very easily, don't you, Sheena?”

His condemnation was unbearable. She had to make him understand. “I told you nothing happened between us, Travis. Rob helped me after I lost my—”

“For Christ's sake, Sheena.” He had moved close now, and the warmth of his thigh was branding her knee. She lifted a hand toward him in silent appeal. He caught it, pulling her to her feet in a rough movement, placing his lips hard against hers. The abruptness of his action tipped her head back, and for a moment she was thrown off-balance. She clung to his shoulders in an attempt to remain on her feet.

The kiss was born of anger. His lips seemed to scorch hers as he sought entry into the warm cavern of her mouth. She twisted her head away, hitting and kicking him in an attempt to break his iron hold.

His mouth completely covered hers now as he held her with hands wrapped in her hair. Despite the pain it caused, she yanked her face away. Her breath was ragged as she fought him. She landed a brutal kick to his shin as she pushed him and he lost his balance. In the second this gave her, she dashed for the door, flying out into the parking lot.

Frantically, she sought a hiding place. She could feel pure panic as she ran; her fear destroyed any rational thought or sense of danger. She dashed between cars, looking neither right nor left. A blast of a horn and the squeal of brakes registered dimly in her panic-stricken mind. Someone shouted her name. She sensed the truck a fraction of a second before it lifted her up and backwards.

**Also by Gale Storm**

*Christmas Paradise*

# **MEMORY'S DESIRE**

**BY**

**GALE STORM**

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Burnaby, B.C.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any reference to actual locales events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

MEMORY'S DESIRE

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## **DEDICATION**

*For Nita Ford, librarian and great  
proofreader and friend. I couldn't write as  
well without your constant encouragement.  
Thanks for believing in me.*

## CHAPTER ONE

**S**HEENA ANNETTE LASSITER WAS EXCITED AS SHE BOARDED THE AMTRAK train headed west out of Albuquerque for Flagstaff. She glanced around, surveying the other passengers with the cool Eastern manner of an experienced commuter. She noticed very little, though. Her mind was on other places, other times, other faces.

She wouldn't have been here except for Travis O'Keefe. He had not only awakened her passions but also her interest in things completely foreign to her experience. As a sheltered child, she had never been the type to seek out the company of men, had never even missed their company until Travis. Had it taken only one night, and one man, to awaken her to her true nature? she marveled. How could she, Sheena Lassiter, preoccupied veterinary surgeon and professor, have been so unaware of her own passionate nature? She supposed her preoccupation with animals had blinded her before.

Sheena smiled to herself as she found an empty seat by a window. Settling comfortably, she placed her black medical bag at her feet. Her purse and overnight case she tucked into the curve of her body. The train started to move, and for a moment she listened to the message from the loudspeaker; but her thoughts would not stay in the present.

Instead, her mind's eye reviewed her unpredictable meeting with the man who had changed her life and made her admit to hidden desires and a strong sensuality.

Actually, their first meeting had all of the slapstick comedy of a Charlie Chaplin movie. Travis had arrived in her life like a whirlwind from the desert, awakening her body to passion with a glance, a slight touch and a knowing smile. Sheena felt a warm pressure along her spine as she thought about his broad shoulders, his arresting jade

gaze, his black hair. She saw herself dashing down the steps of the Cornell Medical Library, late for class as usual, preoccupied with the recent death of her parents. He had been sprinting up the same steps. Also preoccupied. Their collision had been inevitable.

Sheena remembered the way they both had tipped over. The weight of his body knocked the breath from her lungs as they rolled to the foot of the stairs, their books scattering everywhere. They had been tangled together intimately, lacking any dignity or decency.

Her jade eyes had blazed into equally green ones. Mischievous humor shown at her as she lashed at him with a tongue of pure fire. Moving lithely, he had pushed his body from hers, coming gracefully to his feet, lifting her without effort in the same movement. Sheena glared at him, hardly an inch from his large masculine chest. His voice, when he spoke, was tinged with mockery at her outburst, which had made no sense.

\* \* \*

"I take it you're not hurt?"

Sheena noted his thick black hair, his tanned face and athletic jaw, the strength behind the steadying grip he kept on her upper arms and the unusual jet-black arrowhead pendant around his brown neck.

"No," she sputtered, shaking her shoulders in an effort to dislodge his warm hands. "I'm not hurt—no thanks to you, though. Don't you ever look where you're going?"

"I do most times, but from now on, I may look the other way if I can be guaranteed of running into a pure spitfire from Satan's paradise." He winked at her, a grin widening his face.

She flushed in fury at his chauvinistic attitude. Her eyes narrowed like an angry cat's, her delicate features pinched in anger.

"You arrogant—"

"Now watch the language, Angel, you wouldn't want to tarnish your heavenly armor would you?"

Sheena yanked away then, even though it hurt to do so, realizing that several students were watching their exchange with interest.

"You...you..." She spun around and marched off toward her



building, a red flame blinding her vision. It was several moments before she realized he had caught up with her, his arms now filled with her books as well as his.

"You forgot these, miss. You might need them."

Sheena jumped at the sound of the calm voice; she hadn't noticed him beside her until he spoke. She stopped dead, tasting the salty tang of her tears for the first time as she opened her mouth to tell him to get lost.

He saw her tears, and concern darkened his green gaze as she whirled away, ready to run in the opposite direction.

"Good grief, girl, you *are* hurt! Why didn't you say something?" He reached out with a swift move, catching her shoulder, holding her still.

Sheena was so upset all she could do was whimper. He bent, placing the books on the sidewalk; then he lifted her and strode toward the student medical center.

"Put me down...this minute!" She choked at him, squirming violently against his chest. "I'm not hurt...I'm..." She swallowed. "Please...put me down...please," she begged. Her sobs made her almost totally incoherent; but he stopped, looking into her face.

"The tears are part of the temper tantrum, I take it?" he stated, not releasing her. His eyes drilled into hers, seeking an answer.

Sheena felt like the biggest fool. Sniffing, she tried to make herself stop sobbing; but she hadn't cried since her parents' death, and now that the tears had started to flow she could not control them. Deep, soundless sobs raked her slim body, and he must have grown alarmed. He smoothed her thick hair from her face and met her eyes.

Shaking her head in a futile attempt to communicate her grief, she choked on the words that seemed to stick in her throat.

"I'm sorry...I haven't cried. They died. You see...please...you can't understand." Trembling shook her as he slowly dropped her to her feet. Sheena slumped against his broad chest. Her legs would no longer support her; and he lowered her to the grass, his strong hands resting against her back as she continued to sob.

Her fury was long over, but it took much longer to rinse away the numbing grief that had clutched her heart since the accident. Minutes

later, but what seemed an eternity to Sheena, she finally managed to control the wretched tears. Her head was now pressed against his corduroy slacks.

"Feeling better?" he asked as he smoothed her hair.

The warmth in his voice didn't surprise her, yet suddenly she was extremely self-conscious. She nodded slightly, sniffing as she sat up.

He pressed a handkerchief into her hand, gently massaging her neck. "Would you like to go wash your face, and possibly have some coffee with me?"

There was immeasurable understanding in his tone, and Sheena felt the tears start again.

"Good girl," he answered his own question. "Can you stand, or should I bring it here?"

Sheena giggled with embarrassment at the thought of this man waiting on her. She wiped her eyes then blew her nose, trying to smile her appreciation in the gathering shadows of evening. For the first time she realized he was stunningly handsome, with rugged chiseled features softened by his expression in the failing light. Her heart fluttered as he helped her to her feet, keeping a warm arm around her shoulders as he retrieved their books and led her to his car.

"Really, you don't need to do anything else. You've been very kind. I'm sorry about breaking down like that. I don't know what to say."

He smiled slowly, his dark eyes resting on her pale features, touching her long brunette hair. He brushed a stray strand from her eyes.

"Just tell me your name. Don't explain."

Sheena was glad of the shadows that partially hid her flush from him. "Sheena, Sheena Annette Lassiter, Mr....?"

"Travis O'Keefe." He reached across the small car, capturing her offered hand for a brief moment.

She felt the heat of his hand as it covered hers with an awareness she had never felt before. "Thank you, Mr. O'Keefe."

Her tongue suddenly failed her as her gaze locked with his.

"From your books, Sheena, I would say you're in medicine. Tell

me, should I be concerned about the fall?" He was already negotiating his way through rush-hour traffic. His glance touched her face, burning her skin.

"I suppose you could say I'm in medicine. I'm completing my internship as a veterinarian. And, no, I wasn't hurt by the fall. You did knock the breath from me, and I suppose my dignity was injured more than anything. I don't usually strike out like that, but you appeared out of clear air."

Sheena spoke shyly, hating herself for breaking down in public, and with this stranger in particular. She sent him a sidelong glance, seeing the deep lines near the corners of his eyes in the faint glow of the dashboard lights. She wondered if they were caused by smiling, or if he spent most of his time outdoors.

"You have a sense of humor. I'm glad to see it." He shifted gears and smiled across at her before moving through a traffic light. His hand was near her knee, and she looked at it. It was large, carefully manicured, with what she considered incredibly long fingers.

He continued. "I didn't think you were hurt, but I'm glad to hear you confirm it."

He stopped at another light. This time when she met his teasing glance she understood for the first time the old expression "drawn out of yourself." His eyes reached out and touched her, pulling her to him as carefully as a doctor delivers a newborn.

"Will there be trouble because you missed your class?" he asked next.

Sheena gasped. She had totally forgotten about the class. Flushing with sudden guilt, she said, "Goodness, I'm the instructor, of course I should be there. You'll need to take me back!"

"How long was the class, Sheena?"

She blinked but answered the odd question. "An hour. It's in the medical arts building. You shouldn't have any problem finding it. Please hurry."

He shifted gears, moving with the traffic flow. His voice was even as he replied, "Look at your watch, Sheena. You've missed the class already."

She did so, releasing a small exclamation. Surely, she had not

cried for over an hour. Surely...but the evidence was against her.

Glancing at the stranger beside her, she frowned. He calmly made a right turn as she wondered what in the world had happened to her. She had never gone out for coffee with a stranger before. She had never cried like that with one, either. Why had she lost all control this evening—and with him?

Sheena thought again of how tall he was, the strength behind his gentle hands, and realized with a shudder that he was different from any man she had ever met. For one thing, he was dressed in tight black corduroy western jeans and a white shirt open at the throat, exposing the silver chain with the black arrowhead pendant. He had on a brown leather jacket, and the effect was completely informal and masculine. She didn't like the way her pulse was suddenly racing, nor the awareness, like an electrical current, that shot through her every time he turned those dark green eyes in her direction.

She studied him through narrowed eyes as he pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant favored by the locals. He unfolded his tall form from the car, coming around to her door. She guessed from his confident manner he was in his mid-thirties and knew with certainty he was not from her part of the country. Massachusetts hadn't bred a man like him in the last two generations.

He ushered her into the dimly lit restaurant, requested a private booth then ordered dinner for both of them without referring to the menu. She excused herself before the waiter even left the table, going to the restroom to bathe her face.

When she saw her swollen eyes in the mirror, she laughed. It was absurd to think he had seen anything attractive about her. His consideration was because he had been partially responsible for the fall, nothing more. Yet, for the first time in her twenty-eight years, she desperately wanted to be attractive. There was something about this man that made her heart sing and her pulse race.

As she repaired her makeup and combed her hair she studied her small pixie face critically. She wished she had some eye shadow with her, and some lipgloss. But Sheena had never taken a lot of time with her appearance. With a fatalistic shrug she realized she couldn't do much more to help at this late date.

Rejoining him at the table, she smiled brightly, hoping to improve his first impression of her by being cheerful. Her voice was low, and she could see that he liked the silken sound of it. He inclined his head, his gaze sliding over her figure, clad in sweater and jeans. He made her aware of herself as no man had before. She felt the firm roundness of her breasts against the thick knit of the sweater, the nipped sliminess of her waist and gentle curve of her hips. An instant of instinctive reserve flashed through her, but she couldn't lie to herself—she liked the interest in his eyes. She never wanted it to dim.

“You were good enough to tell me about your studies. Now, I would like to return the favor.” He watched her over the rim of his coffee cup, a speculative gleam behind the beautiful green eyes. “I’m a lawyer. I graduated from these hallowed halls more than seven years ago. I just completed a week-long seminar in Constitutional law, and I will be leaving tomorrow.”

Sheena heard this information with a wave of disappointment. He was leaving. They had just met, and there would be no time for anything to develop between them. Trying to hide her disappointment, she asked where he was from. He relaxed, smiling across at her as he told her Arizona.

Fascinated, Sheena quizzed him about the desert country she had only read about. Three hours later, after they had finished dinner, drinks and coffee, Sheena felt totally at ease with him. They went to her apartment, talking at first of general things then, finally, about family.

It never intruded in her mind that she had just met him, that she had only known him hours as she opened up and told him in detail about her parents, her horses, cats, dogs, birds and, lastly, about the devastating fire that had claimed them all. When she finished, she felt as if the world had been lifted from her shoulders. The misery she had felt for so long remained only as a slight ache, and that caused her to smile.

Sheena fixed them herb tea as she answered his specific questions about her other relatives. How she had managed to keep herself in school. He never once gushed with sympathy or advice. She found

she appreciated his interest and calm manner. Drawn to his maturity and straightforward attitude, she let him take her stray tabby from her arms as he told her about himself in turn. She listened avidly as he told her about his childhood, about the death of his own parents years before.

His father had died while he was still a child, his mother after her third wedding while still on honeymoon with her new husband. He drew a vivid picture of his childhood home on a ranch in western New Mexico on the border with Arizona. He confided that he still ran it, even though he maintained a law office in Phoenix and a branch office in New Mexico.

They relaxed in the dim light of her living room, talking as easily as if they were long-lost friends. She asked about his lifestyle, the differences between her home in the East and his in the Southwest. She was totally enchanted by his vivid descriptions of the land, the sunsets, the thin warm air, as well as the people of his home state. For the first time since the fire she found herself totally caught up in something other than herself; and it felt good, healing.

As midnight came and went she shared her plans for the future, while he told her about his own hopes and dreams. Yawning in the early morning as she said goodbye to him, she felt as if her life had lost its meaning again.

He had seemed as reluctant to leave her. He rested a shoulder against her doorjamb, his expression impossible to read in the dim light of her porch lamp.

"I must leave today, Sheena. My plane takes off in just a few hours." He glanced at his watch. His voice was husky as he looked deeply into her eyes. Travis took her hand, holding it against his chest for a long, silent moment. "I left my card on your table—please, call me anytime."

There was a frankness in his gaze that clearly expressed his regret at having to leave her so soon.

They exchanged a few more pleasantries; then he was gone. Alone, Sheena could not completely understand the frustration that made her feel so deserted and alone. Since she had only known him for a few short hours, it didn't make sense. Yet she knew it would be

a long time before another male affected her so deeply on every level. She picked up her cat, burying her face in its fur as it purred.

"Oh, Carey, I don't think I'll ever meet a man as gentle and understanding again. A man who is so overwhelmingly sexy and controlled. What's wrong with me? I've just met him, yet I feel as if I've lost something I may never find again."

She walked into her bedroom in a daze of exhaustion and sexual frustration. Changing into her sleep shirt, she slipped under the covers just as the doorbell chimed. She drew on her robe before opening the door. Travis stood before her, smiling, his expression slightly mischievous, his eyes apologetic.

"Locked myself out of the car. May I use your phone to call the airport rental desk?"

"Of course." It took all of her reserve to keep from babbling how happy she was that he was back, however briefly.

He dialed a number and listened for a moment. She stared at his broad shoulders, feeling jittery in her midsection. She tried to convince herself that her nerves were caused by lack of sleep, but she knew better.

When Travis turned, he was frowning slightly. "They can't come before noon. I forgot today is Sunday."

Sheena smiled in spite of her intention not to. "That means we have more time to get to know one another, doesn't it?"

His eyes narrowed, traveling over her bare legs and feet as ill-concealed happiness lit her face.

"Would you like some more tea, or maybe breakfast? Surely, we can think of some way to get you to your hotel and the airport on time. I've never needed a car, but I do have friends who would let me borrow theirs."

Sheena walked into her efficiency kitchen and was fumbling with fresh cups when she felt his body close to hers.

"Sheena, look at me."

She obeyed, smiling into his face.

"If I drink another cup of tea, I think I'll burst." His eyes twinkled at her then grew serious. His hands suddenly rested on her shoulders. "Please believe me when I say I wanted to part friends

with you. I never meant to jeopardize our meeting with something like this."

His voice was earnest, and she read the sincerity in the deep darkness of his eyes.

"I understand." She touched the labels of her robe self-consciously, realizing he had misunderstood her enthusiastic reaction to his problem. He thought she expected him to...

Dropping her eyes, she felt embarrassment flood through her as she realized the implications. Heavens, that was exactly what she *did* want. She did not understand her reaction at all. It was so deliciously wicked, and carnal—so unlike her. She had never sought out relationships without knowing the guy for years. The risk was too great.

But as she met his dark eyes the only thing she was thinking was how to get him to remain for the rest of the weekend.

Placing a finger under her chin, Travis lifted her face. He moved closer. The lightness of his touch sent chills of desire through her in fluid, pulsing showers. A thrill ran to the very core of her being as he slowly smiled. Her lips trembled as she searched for something—anything—to say.

"Oh, Sheena, angel of fire and darkness," He whispered against her forehead. "I called you an angel from Satan's paradise when I first saw you, and I wasn't wrong. What you do to me is definitely a sinful offense."

He slowly lowered his mouth toward hers, and she did not resist when he claimed it. His lips were gentle at first, waiting for her reaction. When she released a small sigh, her body instinctively moving into the curve of his arms, his kiss took the breath from her body with a sweetness that left her legs weak and a warm liquid heaviness in her womb. His tongue easily gained entrance into the warm cavern of her mouth, making her open her eyes to stare at him wide-eyed, wanting him to increase the pressure of his body against hers. Their tongues danced softly, meeting in the mating ritual known only to lovers.

He paused for a second, reading the longing in her eyes; then he caught her hard against his chest, holding her as if he never wanted



to release her. His lips rested in her hair.

"Do you know, Sheena, I've wanted to kiss you like this ever since you were lying beneath me at the foot of the stairs this afternoon?" He moved his hands down her spine and across her hips lightly. Slowly, they traced upwards, touching the outer softness of her breasts as he brought them back to her face. His mouth claimed hers once more, drinking the nectar of her lips.

"Don't be afraid, Angel," he whispered as he felt her tremble. "You've done something to me that no other woman has ever managed to do." He stared deeply into her emerald eyes, his voice soft as he continued. "I want to protect you and ravage you in the same moment. I would never hurt you, though. Will you trust me?"

His eyes bored into hers, his voice thick with restrained desire. Sheena felt her pulse race in response to his husky words. Her hands seemed to have a will of their own as she slid them under his jacket, pressing them firmly into the muscles of his chest.

Her lips sought his with uncontrolled need then. Travis's muscled thighs pressed against hers intimately, declaring his desire. He lifted his head once more, and she could sense the longing he controlled as he ran a finger down the side of her cheek, playing with her earlobe.

"We may both regret this tomorrow, Sheena, angel of mine, but tonight...today...there won't be any regret for either of us."

With a brisk movement he picked her up, carrying her to bed. His mouth sought hers in a sensual storm. Sheena made a momentary effort to resist the flame his touch inspired, but she felt her impulsive side take over. Once in a lifetime was not too much to ask of her morals, she decided as the fiery flame spread through her body, obliterating all reason.

He paused for an earth-stopping moment as he joined her on her bed. Drawing a small packet from his pants pocket, he threw his clothes aside and fumbled with it for a few seconds. Then he came to her in a steaming rush, his lips enveloping hers in the hot passion they both so craved. Tenderness and lust intertwined in their consummation. Sounds were muted as they both died a small death in each other's arms.

When they awoke hours later, they made love again, this time with less elementary discovery. Sheena had never felt as alive as when his fingers caressed her skin, his teeth tugged at her breast, his breath warmed her navel. Their bodies fit together perfectly. The tenderness they felt was mutual.

When they awoke the third time, Sheena lifted heavy eyes to the sound of her door chime. Pulling on her robe, she was aware of his hot gaze following her out of the room.

\* \* \*

It was the car rental agency, and within the hour he really had disappeared from her life.

Now, Sheena blinked the erotic image of their night together away, looking out at the desert the train was now passing through. Travis had emailed or called daily since that night more than four months ago. Then, two weeks ago, he had sent her a letter she now had tucked away in her purse. He told her about a clinic in Tempe, Arizona, in need of a veterinarian. Would she be interested?

Sheena smiled. Interested? She had been all too happy to desert everything she knew to come west, although she had not told him so. She wanted to surprise him. To see his brilliant eyes darken with the desire she felt was so alive between them.

This train would take her to Flagstaff, where she planned to spend several days touring the area, seeing the Grand Canyon. Then she would travel on to Tempe and secure the clinic Travis had found for her.

She felt this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; and she had grabbed it with all of her impulsive energy, knowing she could make a success of it and, possibly, be able to see Travis on occasion. There was little chance of their getting together on the East Coast, and she wasn't about to give up the paradise she had found in his arms.

The clinic would give her the opportunity to practice on ranches in the remote areas of Arizona as well as build a client list of local pets. She would be able to prove herself capable within her profession without the aid of professors or friends. She could do it, she knew, and her reward would be in having finally made a move

completely on her own. Her only true regret came from leaving behind her tabby—she would miss Carey. But there would be other animals for her to adopt. Carey had gotten a good home with Mr. and Mrs. Cortenay, her longtime landlords.

Nevertheless, she once again saw the small devil of doubt at the back of her mind shake his head at her impulsive decision. She could almost hear her father telling her she should never allow herself to be ruled by her brash nature. She should be cool and rational, think everything through. She sighed, taking a deep breath of the warm desert air, as she mentally defended her choice. She had not deserted her dead parents or her schooling to take this opportunity. She had worked hard to gain her doctorate, and it was up to her to prove to herself that all of the sweat and years had been worthwhile.

Sheena had never wanted to be anything other than a doctor for animals. Her love of Earth's four-legged creatures had been her only true passion since she was a child. Determined to succeed, she had done so, with honors. And Travis had known she needed this opportunity and challenge. She told herself again that, even if he hadn't found the clinic, she would have found another way to come west.

Smiling, her upturned nose wrinkling with humor, she recalled the varied reactions of her friends and professors when she had announced her decision. They had thought she was insane, risking everything on an adventure that could prove disheartening as well as demoralizing and bankrupting. But she had accepted the challenge with a gleam in her eyes and a determination that had quickly silenced the objections. If they had really known the incentive behind her actions they might have been able to stop her, but she had never told anyone about her odd meeting and one-night love affair with the tall, broad-shouldered man from Arizona.

Her cheeks flushed again as she thought of his sensational body, his electric touch. The way he made her feel was unholy, wicked and yet so very right. Sheena could hardly wait to see him. It would be wonderful to feel his arms around her again, his mouth, soft and tender, opening hers with passion. She could taste him. She wanted him that badly.

"A dime for your thoughts, pretty lady?"

Sheena blinked, dissolving the erotic image in her mind. She stared at a young man her own age sitting at ease beside her. When had he seated himself there?

She forced a smile, meeting his bold gaze with a shy one, not sure whether to pull her cloak of haughty Eastern dignity around her and ignore him or respond to his cliché. He was grabbing the moment without hesitation, so she accepted the challenge. After all, she had broken with the past, and now was as good a time as any to prove she meant it.

"I'm afraid my thoughts aren't even worth a penny." She spoke softly, discovering an air of worldly experience behind the man's eyes that were neither blue nor green nor grey but, strangely, all three. His complexion was enhanced by a dark, golden tan; and she sensed the same strength she had so admired in Travis. As a matter of fact, there was something strangely familiar in his bone structure that triggered a nerve inside her.

But that was ridiculous, wasn't it? Just because he had raven hair, light eyes and an athletic build didn't mean anything. Many of the men she had noticed since arriving in New Mexico had the same healthy look and build. It didn't mean a thing.

He reached over and took the book she had laid in her lap. Flipping it over, he studied the title.

"So, you like science fiction. I'm a fan myself, although I haven't read anything by Niven. I usually go in for the old names—Heinlein, Clark, Asimov. Have you read them?"

"I have, but it was some time ago."

He grinned as he skimmed the jacket of the book.

"This looks good, I suppose I should read it." He handed it back to her. His eyes lingered on her face with interest.

"By the way, my name is Rob Ivory. Miss...?" He stretched out his hand.

"Sheena Lassiter." Sheena paused, not sure what else to add as Rob gripped her small hand and studied her.

"Sheena...now, that is an unusual name. I like it. Tell me where you're headed, Miss Sheena Lassiter?" He continued to hold her

hand, even though she tried to politely extract it.

"I..." She fumbled for words, taken off-guard by the warmth of his interest. She glanced around at the other occupants of the compartment. It was crowded; a baby cried somewhere behind them, but no one was paying any attention to them.

"I'm on my way to Flagstaff. Then, after touring the Grand Canyon, I'm expected in Phoenix." She stopped as he turned her hand over, studying the callused palm.

"Hmm..." He rubbed the callus with interest. "What do you plan on doing once you get there?" He lifted those light eyes to hers.

"I'm a veterinarian. I plan to open a clinic there."

His eyes lit up. "I knew it!" He grinned broadly. "You've the look of someone who can handle animals. That's a special quality, believe me. I, too, have always loved animals. Actually, I trust them more than most of the people I meet."

Sheena smiled quizzically at him, a sable eyebrow lifted. "You must be an excellent judge of character if you guessed I was a vet."

His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Not really, Sheena, but when I noticed you this morning on the plane, I saw your black medical bag. Now, seeing the callus on your palm—well, it all adds up." He shrugged, leaning back in his seat. "Your calm self-assurance, your preoccupied intentness, all told me you were one young woman who had gotten her act together early on."

Sheena frowned, though she found she was responding to his easy, outgoing personality. It did bother her that he took such a blatant interest in her personal matters. "Thank you, Mr. Ivory. I believe that was your name?"

He laughed a full hearty sound. "Not 'mister' anything, Sheena. My name is Rob. I save the 'mister' for those few men who gain my respect."

His pointed comment made her eyes narrow.

"Tell me, Rob, where are you going?"

He lifted a dark eyebrow. "You won't believe this, Sheena, but I'm also headed for Phoenix via Flagstaff. I'll be meeting my half-brother there before we take off for our ranch."

Sheena opened her mouth to speak, but he continued. "You

haven't been out West before, have you? I detect a slight accent. New England, isn't it?"

Sheena smiled at his quickness. "Yes, and yes. I haven't been out West before, and I'm from New Hampshire."

Normally, she would have been reluctant to talk so freely with a stranger, but Rob was so casual about everything she felt herself relaxing.

"Then you're one lucky lady." He was smiling still. "You've a new world to explore here. Quite an adventure, I'd say."

His gaze moved to her shiny brunette hair.

Sheena wondered silently what he was doing on a train when it would be faster to fly. He had said he saw her that morning on the plane.

She stiffened suddenly as an unbidden fear shot through her. Was he following her? There were so many insane stalkers anymore—could he be one of those?

Rob read her mind.

"Relax, Sheena. I bought my ticket for the train more than three weeks ago. I didn't follow you to the train depot. You see, I just finished a six-year stint with the Navy, and I wanted to arrive back in my old stomping grounds slowly." He waved a hand at the interior of the train and the window. "I needed time alone to readjust before meeting any of my old comrades, especially my brother." He glanced out the window at the desert landscape, a shadow moving through his eyes. "Tell you what, Sheena. If you'll allow me to buy your dinner, I'll tell you all about Arizona so you won't feel such a foreigner when you arrive. How about it?"

"I..." She hesitated, but then she decided it couldn't hurt anyone. She liked Rob Ivory, in spite of the alarm bells that reminded her she rarely trusted this easily. She was being too conservative. It was time to embrace her future with both hands. Yes, it was time she broke the mold and faced life's adventures with a smile.

"Okay, but it wouldn't be right your spending money on me. After all, we've just met. I can afford to pay for my dinner. Why not let me buy *your* dinner for all of the information you'll share."

Rob laughed then caught her against his lean body when the train

rocked on the tracks.

"Strange words coming from a beautiful female, but I was never one to turn down a free meal. Although I will insist on buying us cocktails." He smiled at the conflicting emotions reflected on her face. "Okay..." He grinned again. "...I can see you would feel much more comfortable if I don't force the issue. So much for male chivalry and old-fashioned standards."

He took her elbow, guiding her safely through the three coach and observation cars to the dining car. They sat across from one another, a small vase with a flower between them.

"I'm starved," she confided, feeling lighthearted. Outside she observed the beauty of the Southwestern landscape with pure awe. They were passing dull red cliffs that challenged her Eastern eyes with their strange beauty. Only a few short hours ago she had been in Boston. "It must be hours since the meal on the plane."

"Actually, six." Rob was watching her admiration with interest. "I've been wondering when you would get hungry again, but you were so lost in your own thoughts you didn't even notice me, not even when I made a point of sitting beside you."

Sheena pulled her gaze from the bluffs, feeling a flush heat her face. She suppressed a shiver.

"How long were you sitting there?"

"About thirty minutes. That's why I finally broke into your thoughts with that old cliché. I wanted to see if you were real, or just a figment of my romantic sailor's imagination."

His mouth curved whimsically. The waiter arrived, and Rob ordered them each a cocktail, giving her a wink.

"The least I can do, Sheena. Don't scold me, please." He grinned. "Now, tell me why a woman like you decided to become an animal doctor rather than finding herself a husband and having kids?"

Sheena glanced at her hands. Rob Ivory believed in breaking the ice as quickly as possible—no small talk for him. She looked back into his light eyes, and he lifted his brows at her hesitation. She couldn't help liking him. His charm was natural and unrehearsed.

"Forgive my old-fashioned values and bluntness, Sheena." He leaned forward and studied her impish face. "But I'm curious. The

writer's instinct within me, I suppose. I've a great curiosity about all of my fellow *Homo sapiens*, and I've found that if you don't ask specific questions, you won't get direct answers." He touched her hand, lying on top of the table. "I'm really harmless, you know. Don't go shy on me."

His voice was warm, reassuring, and because there wasn't anyone else to talk with, she relaxed. She knew that traveling companions rarely saw each other after the trip; even so, she made her reply evasive.

"Everyone has to eat."

"But why vet school? That requires years of study, apprenticeship, hard labor—and the failure rate is high, I've heard."

Sheena lifted a shoulder. "I never wanted to be anything else. I love animals, all kinds, and they seem to respond to me."

"With that soothing voice of yours I can understand why. It's so soft and calm. God, how I've missed soft, feminine voices like yours. Barked orders from male and female lips for over six years was about to drive me mad. I would have been AWOL if the Navy hadn't allowed me to travel and fly Tomcats." He took a sip of the drink the waiter had brought. "Even so, I find it hard to understand how you managed to come through—how many years of school?—without getting hitched. Surely, you've had offers? Or were all the men blind in New Hampshire?"

Sheena smiled into her drink. Yes, if she were honest, she could say she'd had offers, but she had laughed them off. All of the young men she had dated over the years had just been friends, no matter how seriously they wanted her to take them. She had only been affected by one man, and even her reaction to him had been more sensual, more a fantasy-like dream, than emotional. At least, so she told herself.

"I never wanted anything other than to be the best vet I could be. Nothing was going to turn me from my goal, not my parents' pessimism or the attention of a hundred admirers—if there had been a hundred admirers." She chuckled at his doubtful expression; then he laughed, too.

"There were—trust my male instincts on this one, Sheena. Any



time a girl is disinterested in the romantic chase the male ego is challenged." He gave her his warm grin. "But I can understand your reasons. I never wanted to be anything but a great writer, and little has distracted me from *my* objective, either." His expression became introspective.

"Tell me about that, Rob. What do you write? Have I seen anything in print?" She was curious about him now. There was an odd maturity behind his twenty-five or so years, and she wanted to know what lay behind it. He had a combination of small boy charm and manly integrity behind his laughing face and easy manner. These two characteristics seemed at odds, and the mixture intrigued her.

"I doubt it. I worked for a small paper here in Arizona while in high school, did some hardcore journalism in Albuquerque at college for a short while before joining the Navy. I've had a few short pieces in underground trash magazines, and one good short story in *Analog* this past winter. Not much to show for twenty-six years of living and writing, actually, but no matter, I'm in no hurry to make a mint of money and dry up my creative juices. Besides, it takes years to write the Great Universal Novel, you know."

His eyes twinkled, although his expression was candid. She knew he was poking fun at himself so she wouldn't think he was an egotist.

"You really do want to write that novel, though, don't you, Rob?"

"How did you guess?"

"Call it sixth sense. People often make fun of the talent they are most proud of, and anyone who writes is risking their whole self when they turn it over to a jaded public. I've never been able to write creatively myself, although I always made excellent grades in the basics in school." She lifted a shoulder.

"An excellent and very astute observation, Sheena Lassiter. It's too bad others don't share your understanding."

They smiled at each other.

"It would save considerable time. I think I'm going to model my next heroine after you. Let's see—intelligent, beautiful, compassionate and a mind reader."

They both laughed.

"Make sure you mention that my professors often thought I was

the densest kid in class, but they couldn't deny my talent with animals."

He patted her hand, and she asked, "Could I read something you're working on? I would love to."

"Would you really be interested?"

She nodded and could tell he was flattered, even though he tried to hide it.

"Of course, you can, but you must realize it isn't fit to be judged yet. I consider everything a draft until it's published and even then it can be changed."

"What themes do you write about? How do you get your ideas? How do you go about getting published?"

Rob had wicked humor behind his eyes at her spontaneous questions. "Got your curiosity aroused, have I? That's a good sign. I like it. But didn't we come here to talk about where you're going?"

Sheena waved her hand in dismissal. "I've a million questions about that, also. Where should I start?"

"First, tell me a little about college. About your home, your friends, your parents..."

Sheena swallowed; she really didn't want to talk about her parents. "I was lucky and won a scholarship to Cornell right out of high school. College, of course, was different from school at home—more challenging, more to learn, new ways of thinking about things, with few worries during the first years."

She closed her eyes as she remembered the last year, the fire. The hurt was still very much alive, and it was hard for her to talk about personal things, even with him.

"You make it sound as if there are a lot of worries now."

"Oh, no, not really, except..." She paused again. "Well, as we mature there are always new and different responsibilities we must accept." Her reply was odd enough to make him raise an eyebrow. "I've just never been so far from home before, Rob. I suppose everything is catching up with me. I'm feeling a bit unsure of my decision at this point."

She turned her head, studying the landscape rushing by.

Why had she told him so much? Should she have called Travis

before she left? What would his reaction be when she appeared on his doorstep? After all, they were strangers, no matter how much he affected her. He would have his own life, his own family, possibly his own wife. She had never stopped to think about that, and she frowned deeply at the unbidden thought. Dear God, she prayed silently, don't let him be married. The implications of that made her frown, and a cold shiver of premonition touched her spine.

"Let me tell you about decisions and the world, Sheena," Rob broke through her thoughts. "It's a nasty place, the world, for the most part—lots of troubles on every scale, filled with challenges and hateful events forcing decisions on each of us. All we can hope for is a bit of luck, good friends and family who'll forgive us and the personal courage to go on if they don't. You've got the courage, I think, but if I were a woman I think I'd settle for a loving husband, a white frame house in a meadow and two spoiled kids."

Sheena giggled, her first since she'd left Cornell two weeks before to go home and finally take care of the business of selling her parents' home and farm. "I suppose it might be safer that way, Rob, but what gives you the idea it's easy finding a loving husband, a safe meadow or having two kids. I prefer knowing I can take care of myself, have an occupation I love and can make helpless creatures feel better."

Rob's mouth slanted at her description, not making a full smile yet hinting at it. "What did I say—smart, beautiful, and spunky. You've defended your decision before, I take it, probably against others with the same old-fashioned ideas I have. Tell me, Sheena, what did your parents think about this move out West?"

Sheena dropped her green gaze from his too-astute one. Rob was too sharp, too curious, and she really had no desire to talk about her parents. The loss was still too close for her to discuss it and remain detached.

"The truth is, they don't know about it." She glanced back at him, adding quickly in defense, "Oh, it isn't a case of running away or anything like that." She saw a flicker of concern pass through his eyes. "You see..." She hesitated again. She had never confided in anyone so quickly—even with Travis it had taken half the night and a

bucket of tears for her to explain her loss, the reason why she had broken down on the lawn.

But somehow, as she met Rob's warm look, she felt she had met in him the brother she had always wanted, and it was obvious he was genuinely interested. "You see, my parents were killed last Thanksgiving in a house fire. It was horrible. I barely escaped. I have no other relations or siblings. So, you can see my break with the East is a big step for me."

Sheena was relieved Rob didn't gush with condolences or sympathy. Either would be useless—they would only make her uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "So, you're on your own in your mid-twenties, with a vet degree and your independence." He shook his dark head slowly. "Unfortunate that such a beautiful woman is so alone in the world. No wonder you're hesitant about talking about yourself. I must look like a brash young stud, pumping you for information as I have. I suppose I should apologize for my curiosity, but when a girl looks like you, is so caught up in herself she doesn't even notice a handsome sailor sitting beside her...well..." He winked as he spread his hands on the table beside his plate, just delivered by the waiter. "It stirs the male instincts. I'm glad you confided in me, Sheena. And I'm sincerely sorry for making you share something so personal."

He studied her face with affection. "Would you think it too brazen of me to offer myself as your adopted brother? I think you could use someone out West, just in case you find you need a friend."

His offer was made quietly, and she saw the sincerity in his gaze. Sheena felt like kissing him, her relief was so great. She had been right about Rob Ivory. He was definitely different, and he, too, must feel the connection between them.

"I've always wanted a brother," she told him, a smile making her eyes glisten.

"And I've always wanted a kid sister instead of an older brother." He grinned. "Strange how nature takes care of the little things for us, isn't it? I've always known we have no choice over whom our family is, but our friends—now, that is a different matter. Tell me about this

clinic you're going to open. Is it a partnership arrangement, or did you purchase it outright unseen with the last of your funds?"

"No to both questions. A friend of mine called me about the clinic. It was being closed down because the old vet is retiring. I'm taking it over on a trial basis with all of his old clients. If things work out, I have the option to purchase it."

"Not one to take the easy road, are you, Sheena? You're impetuous by nature, taking the lead no matter the obstacle. Did you think of the distance involved in coming out here, the changes you would have to adjust to? Don't get me wrong, sis, I like impetuous behavior in a woman. It's just unusual."

Sheena pushed her empty plate aside before answering. He sounded very much like her father, and she bristled in self-defense.

"Aren't you the same, Rob?" she countered. "I get the impression you joined the Navy without the approval of your family because you wanted to see the world. You're not looking forward to the reunion now, are you? Have you even been in touch with them since you left home?"

This time surprise and fondness reflected from his silver eyes. "You aren't such a bad judge of character yourself, Sheena Lassiter. I hadn't realized I gave so much away." He chewed the last of his steak with gusto, his eyes never leaving hers. "But you're right," he continued after he swallowed. "I'm not looking forward to facing my brother again. He will never understand my reasons for leaving the ranch just before our mother was killed in a freak accident, especially since I was only eighteen. I'm not even sure he will give me a chance to explain anything before nailing me to the wall."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really. Some scenes never change, no matter how often you rehearse them." Rob stared out the window for a moment. "Instead, let me tell you about your new home."

## CHAPTER TWO

ROB BEGAN TO DESCRIBE THE COUNTRYSIDE, SO FOREIGN TO HER YET SO vividly alive within her imagination. His descriptions brought to life the history of the states as well as the various cultures that populated them. He described the vegetation with the eye of an artist, and Sheena was mesmerized by his impressions. In fact, he sounded so much like another man, one who had woven a web of enchantment around her heart, that she closed her eyes and dreamed of the time she would find Travis again.

She also came to understand, as Rob talked about the nature of the land, the harshness that lay behind the superb beauty, the toll it must take on each person who dared to challenge it. She opened her eyes and stared at the passing landscape. The sun was low in the west now, and the desert sands were alive with vivid color. She could hardly believe she was fast becoming part of this reality. She felt her pulse quicken, spreading color through her like the desert flowers, pushing out her last-minute fears and uncertainties.

Her questions were a reflection of her fascination.

"I believe," Rob said as he swallowed the last of his beer, "you're ready to see a real Southwestern sunset. Let's go to the observation deck."

Sheena nodded and followed, quickly finding a seat in the middle of the car. There they watched a brilliant sunset in silence. Her breath was literally taken away by the variety of colors and cloud shapes. She had always thought sunsets like this one were only in the wild imagination of artists who wanted to impress their patrons. She had never expected to experience one.

Her hand resting over her heart, she watched as nature made fine

brushstrokes of red, gold, ivory and dark lapis blue that were awe-inspiring. The clouds seemed pinned in place for her enjoyment as they turned a magnificent rose color, fading at last into willowy, unreal images.

Rob didn't miss her quick intake of breath, the rapture on her face. He told her then about his family's ranch, and how the darkness could swallow entire cliffs when, like tonight, there was no moon. He told her the only way to find your direction was by the stars.

They spent the rest of the trip into Flagstaff lost in deep conversation. It was midnight before they reached the depot.

"So, where are you staying?" Rob asked as he helped her down the steps of the train. She named a motel, The Travel Lodge, several blocks from the station.

"I know exactly where that is," Rob told her as he hefted their bags then nodded toward the street. "When are you going on to Phoenix?"

"I made reservations for two nights," Sheena said as they traveled down the sidewalk. "I was told not to miss the Grand Canyon, so I plan to tour it tomorrow—there's a train that goes out to it. Then I'll take a plane that tours Lake Powell and the canyon before landing in Phoenix later that day."

"Whoever gave you that advice, Sheena, was a man after my own heart. I still get a thrill out of the canyon every time I see it. As a matter of fact, if you'll cancel your plans and trust me, I wouldn't mind taking you out myself tomorrow. I'm positive I can borrow a friend's car."

Sheena found his offer exciting—she really hadn't wanted to lose contact with him. His suggestion thrilled her. "You would do that for me? It's always so much more fun to share an experience with someone. I would love to have you as my personal guide, Rob. Thank you."

He grinned. "It's been years since I've seen the canyon myself. I always feel more grounded when I can balance myself with nature. We'll make it fun!" He tweaked her nose playfully.

"I'll write my phone number for you so you can get in touch with me in the morning." She reached for her purse and froze. He

continued down the walk for a few strides before realizing she was no longer beside him. He turned toward her in the darkness.

"Sheena, what's wrong? Did you stumble?" His voice was tense as he came back.

"No," she moaned in anguish. "I've left my purse on the train. It was on the seat in the dining car. We have to get it." She felt as though the air were being sucked out of her lungs as she realized the train was already pulling away.

"It has everything in it, Rob. My money, my addresses, phone numbers, everything." She ran toward the tracks, heard a whistle and the sudden sounds of wheels against iron. Rob sprinted ahead of her.

Once inside the terminal they learned the train was too far gone to stop; but she was assured by the ticket agent that, when it got to its next stop, a search would be made. If her purse was found it would be returned as soon as possible.

Sheena felt desperate and lost. How could she forget something so important? She did have her medical bag with her, but she had no ID or money inside. Her brain whirled with the need to make a decision. She had never been in a place where she was without funds or friends. She supposed she could call the police and ask for the nearest shelter for the night, but she didn't even have a quarter to make the call.

She chewed her lip as she puzzled over her options. She wasn't even aware when Rob took her elbow and led her out again into the darkness. His voice was gentle when he spoke.

"I tell you what, I've a solution to your problem, Sheena, if you'll trust me." He swung their luggage easily to the opposite side, his voice conspiratorial as they continued side-by-side. "I'll get us a motel room for the night and breakfast in the morning, and then you can call the depot and see if your purse has been recovered. By then you'll know if you should call home and have money wired to you. At least this way we'll have a real chance to get to know one another. What do you think?"

Sheena stopped and stared at him. A surge of relief flashed through her—she heard no seductive overtones in his offer.

"You would do this for a complete stranger?" she asked.



"Not a complete stranger, probably, but for you, sister, I would jump over the moon," he teased.

Sheena was speechless. She really didn't know how to thank him. Suddenly, she felt exhausted, as if everything had hit her at once and all of her reserves were gone. She watched as Rob paid for a room, signing the register in a neat script. He took the key and walked with her to the door.

"I'm sure the place'll be okay, Sheena. You'll be comfortable till the morning."

He pushed the door open and set her luggage inside. She smiled her gratitude as he pushed the key into her hand.

"If you don't mind, I won't come in and check it out with you. I'm not sure I would have the strength of character to leave," he teased.

She'd been certain he wouldn't claim some payment from her, and in her penniless condition it would have been very awkward to deny him; but it was a good to have her belief proven correct. She stood on tiptoe and placed a quick kiss on his cheek in gratitude. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

"This is wonderful, Rob, thank you."

"It's nothing, little sister. Now, if you don't shut the door, I won't be held responsible for my actions. Sleep well." He tweaked her nose again.

"Goodnight, Rob. I'll see you tomorrow"

\* \* \*

Sheena stretched in her sleep, blending the sound of a knock at the door into her dreams, but she did not awaken. Instead, she rolled over onto her side.

She was dreaming a pleasant dream. The train rocked along its tracks, the click-clack sound lulling her deeper into the misty curtain of her childhood. She was playing with the puppy her parents had given her for her tenth birthday. She tugged on a rag, laughing as he released it to tumble her to the floor.

The covers were cruelly yanked away, and Sheena awoke with a start. A sharp intake of breath burned her lungs as she stared into furious jade eyes. Clad only in her nightshirt, she felt the chill of the

early morning air hit her bare skin.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Travis O’Keefe stated in surprise, his eyes running over her legs and back to her face. “Little brother works fast.”

Sheena tried to clear the sleep from her brain as she deciphered the condemnation in his eyes. For a long moment she could not remember where she was, why he might be here at all. Glancing around wildly she sat up straight, hugging her pillow to her breasts in a protective gesture. Her eyes were wide in fright as they locked with his.

The impersonal room brought back no memories. But Travis did. She felt a rush of heat surge through her. What in the world was he doing here? How? What had he said? Why was he glaring at her as if he would like to wring her neck?

He was still holding her covers. His body was rigid as he met her frightened look.

“So...” His voice when he spoke was harsh. “...you’re still playing the innocent. I’ll admit it becomes you, Sheena, in an attractive way, but hardly what I expected of you. And sharing his bed—that alone tells me how easily I was deceived by your innocent act.”

His expression hardened as he looked at her. His anger was totally inappropriate as far as she was concerned. He surveyed her rudely, making her aware of the skimpy T-shirt she wore.

“I can say this for Rob, though, he has finally developed a superior taste in women.”

She could feel the white-hot fury he barely controlled.

“Aren’t you going to greet your *old* lover, Sheena?”

The sarcasm in his voice hit her harder than the cold air had moments before.

“How? Why? What are you doing here?” she stammered. She wasn’t sure even yet he wasn’t part of a weird nightmare.

Travis dropped the bedding onto the foot of the mattress and took a step back. She heard the barely suppressed oath he swallowed as he stared at her.

“Get dressed,” he ordered.

A tight knot clamped her stomach, and she bent with the sudden pain. His glare had not left her face, and she knew she had never looked into anything as cold or alien before.

"You *are* Travis O'Keefe, aren't you?" she asked, not moving.

His eyes flashed as he snatched her clothes from the chair and pitched them in her face.

"When will he be back?" he demanded.

Sheena could only stare, not comprehending what he was asking. Then, suddenly, she recalled Rob Ivory, and the events of the night before.

"I don't know. I..." Her tongue felt too thick for her mouth. She wet her dry lips. Travis's hand shot out, catching her forearm in a vice-like grip.

"Stop it, Sheena. I haven't time to waste on girlish games. Where is he?"

She glanced at his hand—he was hurting her. "*I don't know.*" She tested his hold, almost afraid to move. "He left after bringing me to the room last night. We got in late. He didn't mention where he was going or when he would be back." She dropped the pillow, shoved at his hand. "You're bruising me, Travis. Let me go!"

She realized how vulnerable she was with a sinking feeling. She was totally exposed to him. His grip changed suddenly, and he slid his hand up her arm to her throat. She grabbed it, her fear almost making her irrational. His touch was exquisitely gentle in comparison to his grip on her arm, but she stared at him, afraid to speak or move.

"You're telling me he didn't sleep with you last night? What do you take me for, a complete fool?" His voice was cool—too cool. The look in his eyes sent fire through her veins.

Without warning, she flipped to the opposite side of the bed, standing in one lithe move. She made an attempt to grab the covers, but he caught them and threw them to the floor. She darted her eyes to the door.

His voice was tense as he growled, "Don't even think it, Sheena. You're not that fast."

"He didn't stay. He left, Travis. What right do you have to be in

here? How did you get in?"

He seemed to gain control of himself and the situation. "I read the register. I was expecting to pick him up today. The maid let me in. You really expect me to believe you didn't sleep with him last night? I'm used to dealing with liars and sluts. Remember my job? I recall how easy it was for me to..."

His eyes narrowed with memory.

"I really don't care what you believe or why you're angry." She managed a brave tone, even though her heart was pounding hard enough to hurt. "I really never knew you at all, did I?"

Her last words came out with a strangled quality as she stared at him, as if all of her dreams had melted in front of her.

"One night in the arms of a man doesn't usually give a woman an insight into his darker side, sweetheart." With a swift move he kicked the covers to the side and strode to the window, his back to her as he pulled the curtains aside and gazed out at the parking lot.

Sheena swallowed hard, realizing with an embarrassed flush that even now, though she thought she understood some of the reason for his anger, she wanted the man she had known before back.

"Get dressed, and be quick about it." His voice was hard and cold.

Sheena was totally demoralized as she grabbed her clothes from the floor and dashed into the bathroom. Why was he acting so hateful, so cruel? There was little about him that was familiar, nothing of the loving, kind man she had met before and thought she had grown to know from their calls and email.

She thought about Rob then, watching in the mirror as her pupils dilated. Of course—that was why Travis was angry with her. Rob had said his brother would likely not let him explain. Explain what? She didn't know. What in the world had an eighteen-year-old boy done to get this reaction out of Travis?

Then she remembered Rob signing the register. The room would be in his name. That usually meant a tryst.

Sheena pulled on her slacks and shirt in a rush, washing her face and running a comb through her hair. She needed answers. Travis frightened her, but she knew him and realized the anger he had

displayed would vanish once he understood the situation. She stared at her pale-faced reflection. There was no time to fix that reflection now.

Travis was normally a man in full control of himself and any situation. This morning, she knew she had seen the worst of him. She looked at herself then saw all the remaining color disappear from her face as a new thought stabbed her in the solar plexus. *Dear Lord*—her eyes widened even more as she considered the thought. No, surely, she really wasn't in love with him. That wasn't possible, was it?

Sheena considered herself a mature woman, not a schoolgirl with her first crush. Yet, she knew, as she confronted her reflection, that she was truly, madly in love with that angry man in the other room; and if she weren't careful he would know it as well.

She tied her hair back and was reaching for her lipstick when an impatient knock rattled the door.

"I haven't all day—get out here."

Sheena dropped the lipstick into her case, forcing her features into a calm appearance as she opened the door. She couldn't afford to let him see how she felt, or how shaken she was. Her pulse was racing again as she faced him, her eyes colliding with his green gaze. He had gone back to the window and stood with his hands buried deep in his pockets.

"Please leave, Travis. I won't say a word to anyone if you will go now." She looked down as she picked up her shoes.

"No way. I plan to be your best friend until Rob shows up. He isn't likely to desert a treat like you, and he and I have unfinished business. If you're really anxious to get rid of me, it's simple—just tell me where he is."

"Are you dense? I wouldn't lie to you, Travis. I don't know where he went."

He shrugged, his voice even when he replied, "No, I'm not dense, so listen to me. Rob played me for a fool six years ago, so I know how slippery he can be. You're in his motel room. That alone means I can't trust you. I'm not acting the dunce again, Sheena, nor am I going to believe anything you try to feed me until I get my hands on him, get some straight answers. So, it won't do you any good to try

and defend him or yourself.”

Travis once again faced the window. His broad shoulders were rigid. He was convinced she had betrayed him with his kid brother. Her heart lurched, and she swallowed the gall in her throat. She must make him understand that nothing had happened.

She sat in the chair and watched his straight back. He was using his best courtroom tactics on her—and they were working, even though she was innocent.

She could see a nerve jumping in his cheek near the dimple she remembered. She tried to remain calm, but she clasped and unclasped her hands again and again. Desperate, she tried to think of a way to convince him she had not slept with his brother, but he was right. He didn't really know her, and she *had* slept with him, ironically after having known him for less time than she had Rob.

No rebuttal came to her as she stared at his back. Because he believed Rob had tricked him all those years before, finding her in what he thought was his brother's bed would be the final humiliation for any man—and especially a man of his integrity.

Travis had not changed since that day more than four months ago—Sheena hadn't realized how firmly his image had imprinted itself in her mind. She wanted to reach out and smooth the deep, furrow from his brow, make him smile. When he spoke, she jumped, more from being lost in her thoughts than anything else.

“How long have you known him, Sheena?”

She didn't hesitate with her answer. “We met yesterday on the train. Rob claimed he noticed me. One thing led to another and when we arrived here...” She stopped as he swung her around and faced her.

“I can see the results of last night, myself. I don't need details.” His voice cut her like a knife. “You do trust very easily, don't you, Sheena?”

His condemnation was unbearable. She had to make him understand. “I told you nothing happened between us, Travis. Rob helped me after I lost my—”

“For Christ's sake, Sheena.” He had moved close now, and the warmth of his thigh was branding her knee. She lifted a hand toward

him in silent appeal. He caught it, pulling her to her feet in a rough movement, placing his lips hard against hers. The abruptness of his action tipped her head back, and for a moment she was thrown off-balance. She clung to his shoulders in an attempt to remain on her feet.

The kiss was born of anger. His lips seemed to scorch hers as he sought entry into the warm cavern of her mouth. She twisted her head away, hitting and kicking him in an attempt to break his iron hold.

His mouth completely covered hers now as he held her with hands wrapped in her hair. Despite the pain it caused, she yanked her face away. Her breath was ragged as she fought him. She landed a brutal kick to his shin as she pushed him and he lost his balance. In the second this gave her, she dashed for the door, flying out into the parking lot.

Frantically, she sought a hiding place. She could feel pure panic as she ran; her fear destroyed any rational thought or sense of danger. She dashed between cars, looking neither right nor left. A blast of a horn and the squeal of brakes registered dimly in her panic-stricken mind. Someone shouted her name. She sensed the truck a fraction of a second before it lifted her up and backwards.

## CHAPTER THREE

**A**N EMT SMILED DOWN INTO HER SWOLLEN EYES. “YOU’RE GOING TO be fine, miss. Don’t worry about anything now. Just relax. You’re safe here.”

The woman’s voice seemed to come through a dark tunnel as Sheena stared at her blurred image. She shut her eyes and shook her head a little. It hurt, and the dizziness was odd. She felt a hand against her forehead as a male voice asked, “You’re certain?”

Sheena opened her eyes again to see the man who had spoken, wondering blankly who he was. She tried to focus on his face, but she was lifted and carried somewhere. The blurred images made her nauseous, and it was too much effort to focus on either the voices or the people. She closed her eyelids tight, fighting back the bile in her throat. There was a fiery pain in her chest that made her gasp, and she could barely breathe.

The same male voice echoed near her ear again. “Be careful with her, for God’s sake. She isn’t made of concrete.”

Sheena made another attempt to look at the speaker, but it was impossible to focus. She felt exhausted. She heard movement, voices; and the man asked impatiently where the doctor was. There came a shuffling sound as the voices moved away, a door closed and an engine roared to life. She recoiled as a large hand moved along her right side. She blinked rapidly, flinching as a bright light was shone into her eyes.

A calm voice questioned her. “Can you remember what happened, miss?”

Sheena tried to turn her head toward the voice, but a shooting pain in her neck prevented her.



"The pain," she gasped as tears rolled down her cheeks. Struggling to sit up, she tried to orient herself. It hurt to breathe, and she fell back against the hard pillow.

"You must remain still, miss. Can you tell me your name, where it hurts the most?" The question was firm, although the voice was gentle.

"Where am I? I...can't remember. Why?" she whispered then sucked in a shallow breath.

"You were hit by a pickup, miss. We'll be at the hospital in a matter of minutes." The speaker stroked her arm in a calming fashion. "Can you recall your name, miss?"

Fear shot through her dimmed consciousness. She really couldn't think about her name when the pain was going to make her throw up. She swallowed then choked, and someone turned her head to the side; but she didn't throw up after all.

The voice was now speaking to someone else. "Get an IV set up stat!" Her arm was connected to a blood pressure machine; then she felt a poke. A dark cover of drugged unconsciousness blocked out anything more.

A doctor was examining her when she opened her eyes again—she was never sure if it was only minutes later, or days, but the pain had subsided and she felt calmer. She surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings with a sense of panic. Where was she? How had she gotten here? When? Why? What was wrong?

She bit her lip as she discovered the IV above her head. Flexing her fingers, she traced the plastic tube to her arm, observing the abraded flesh of her hand as if it belonged to someone else. She covered her right with her left—it was deathly cold—as she slowly became aware of the rest of her body.

Sheena touched the bandage that rested under her bangs. She closed her eyes, trying to remember what had happened, but nothing—absolutely nothing—came. She took count of her injuries as she swallowed fear. What had happened to her? She tried to lift her head and shoulders, but the movement brought a new wave of nausea and startling pain to her head. She groaned and closed her eyes. Maybe she should just go to sleep. If this was a nightmare surely

when she awoke again it would all be over.

She woke several more times, never fully aware of anything. Gradually, though, she became aware of voices speaking above her; and she forced herself to pay attention, though she kept her eyes closed.

"It was a serious injury, Mr. Ivory, as I told you before. It may take weeks before she regains consciousness. With this type of concussion it isn't uncommon for comas to last a while. Patience is the key for family and friends. We cannot rush recovery after an injury like she suffered."

The speakers moved away. Sheena squinted through her lashes, watching the men go through the door. One—the doctor, she assumed—held a metal chartholder in his hand. The other, younger man had dark hair falling erratically over his brow. He looked worried and disturbed. He was tall with a slender build, with strength reflected in his wide shoulders and chest. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing the dark strands away from his eyes. She wondered who he was.

"You're positive she'll be okay otherwise, Doctor? Will she remember when she awakens?"

The doctor lifted a shoulder as he looked back at her. "No one can be certain until she comes to, Mr. Ivory. Her bones are mending well, and her vital signs are stable. She's in good health overall. Give her time." The doctor shook hands with "Mr. Ivory." "Concussions aren't anything to mess with. We're watching her closely for any problems."

"Thank you, Doctor. It's just that it isn't fair. She's already had so much to deal with this past year, and now this...because of me." He shook his head in regret.

"It was no more your fault, Rob, than it was mine. We were both responsible in different ways for this tragedy, even Miss Lassiter, for reacting as she did." A taller, older man walked between the other two and placed his hand on Rob Ivory's shoulder. "She acted impetuously, dashing into traffic like that, not looking left or right and ignoring your horn. Get yourself together, Rob, we won't abandon her to the wolves, and you know it."

Rob's voice was heated as he responded. "You've some nerve, *brother*." He emphasized the word with a sarcastic sting, shaking off the consoling hand on his shoulder. "You're putting the blame squarely on her, aren't you, Counselor? What did you do to scare her into doing it? You've always been a brutal bear, and now look at what you've done to her."

Sheena did her best not to jump as the older man stepped forward to look straight at her. She raked her brain for some remembrance of the two...brothers?

The only reaction he displayed to his brother's furious condemnation was a nerve that made the dimple in the side of his cheek deepen and a hardening of his voice.

"Nothing would have happened if you hadn't been playing games with me, Rob, and you know it."

"Okay," the doctor interrupted, "that's enough. Keep your voices down—this *is* a hospital, after all."

Sheena had unconsciously moved, and the older brother saw it. She watched his green eyes widen as he realized she was listening.

"Doctor," he said. "Look, she's awake."

The doctor moved quickly to her side, lifting her wrist and checking her pulse.

"Well, well." He smiled at her. "So, you've decided to rejoin the living." He brushed a strand of hair from her face. "How are you feeling?"

Sheena glanced at the two other men, dampening dry lips before answering. "I'm not sure. Where am I? Who are you?"

She was surprised to find her voice so weak. Her mouth felt as if it had a role of cotton stuffed into it, and her chapped lips trembled.

"I'm Doctor Barrie, Miss Lassiter. I've been taking care of you these past four days." He patted her hand. "Do you know, I think you are one of the soundest sleepers I've ever met."

Sheena smiled weakly in reply as he bent and flashed a light in her eyes. When he moved back the man named Rob Ivory took his place. She studied him blankly, her gaze reflecting her puzzlement.

"Sheena, you've given us quite a scare." Rob spoke softly, taking her hand in a gentle grip.

"I don't know you, do I?" she whispered, her eyes flashing to Doctor Barrie then to the others.

"I'm Robert, Rob Ivory, Sheena. You look so frightened. There's nothing to be afraid of here. Don't I look at all familiar to you?" His tone was anxious.

"I c—can't remember seeing you before." She glanced at the doctor. "I can't remember anything, Doctor. Who am I?"

"Miss Lassiter, you've suffered a head injury and several broken bones," the doctor explained. "We didn't know how it would affect you. Don't let yourself get too upset—it's common in head injuries for one's memory of recent events to suffer for a while. Normally, it isn't permanent." He glanced pointedly at the other two. "If you gentlemen would excuse us, I need to make a complete examination. If she's strong enough later, you may return."

Rob gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'll be back as soon as the doctor allows it. Don't be frightened, please."

He bent down and planted a sweet kiss on her cheek.

Sheena smiled, wishing she could remember him. It was obvious they were friends, maybe even more than friends. She didn't know. He seemed likeable, and very concerned. She watched as the two brothers left the room, eyes drawn to the taller, older man. Who were they? What were they to her?

Doctor Barrie called a nurse in and conducted a slow, thorough exam. He sat with her after he finished to explain her condition. She was suffering from what he called *retrograde amnesia*, which he told her often follows traumatic injuries. Sheena had suffered several broken and bruised ribs and multiple scrapes and contusions.

When he finished, he asked. "Will you tell me, honestly, how much you really remember? Can you say how much of your reaction now is due to the two men and their earlier conversation in the hall—which you overheard, I'm sure?"

She blinked; he was very astute, and undoubtedly had dealt with situations much like her own before. Did he think she was an abused woman, or possibly something even worse?

"I..." Her voice was a bit stronger now that she was fully awake, although she felt deathly weak. "I did hear them talking. It seemed I

was responsible for the accident, and they were angry.”

Doctor Barrie nodded slowly, his shrewd scrutiny moving over her bruised face. “From what I’ve gathered from both men and the police you were in route to Tempe to take over an animal clinic there. You met Mr. Ivory on the train.

“After arriving here in Flagstaff, you agreed to share a room with him because you had lost your purse, and then tour the Grand Canyon the following day. Mr. Ivory left you at the motel to return to the train depot to wait for your purse. His brother, Mr. Travis O’Keefe, arrived to find you in Rob’s room. For some unknown reason, you ran away from him, dashing into the motel parking lot, where you were hit by Rob’s pickup truck. Does any of this sound familiar to you?”

Sheena frowned, biting her lip. It was definitely an odd story, one that made her feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. Was Rob Ivory her friend, a past lover or a new one, she wondered, feeling sick at the thought. Could she be a cheap pickup, or was there more to their relationship than that? Was it a purely physical attraction that had led her to share a motel room with him the very night they met? Was that what had led to the accident, her guilty conscience? What kind of person was she, really?

There were too many unanswered questions, and they made her head ache from just considering them. Her confusion showed in her face, and Doctor Barrie saw it.

“Rob claims you lost your purse on the train, Sheena, nothing more. He says he was helping you until the purse was returned. Which it was the next morning.” The doctor patted her hand again. “He was planning to take you to the Grand Canyon the day you were injured. He didn’t like seeing an Eastern girl like yourself all alone out here in the West.”

He shrugged, as if dismissing the explanation of why they had become close on what appeared to be such short acquaintance. Sheena got the distinct impression there was nothing new under the sun to him—he wasn’t about to judge her relationship or her motives. She relaxed a bit, even though she continued to worry her bottom lip.

"I see..." Her voice was low, soft as she absorbed what he'd said. What kind of person was she? Some scatterbrained opportunist out for a joyride? Somehow, that didn't feel right. Was she a flirt who picked up strange men on trains? What had the green-eyed man said—Travis, wasn't it? Was she an impetuous woman whose judgment was questionable? Who were those two men, and what were they to one another, to her?

The questions seemed to shout at her as she pondered her reality. She blinked her eyes against the scarlet image her mind presented.

"Everything is so blank, Doctor..." She squeezed her eyes closed as large teardrops dampened her cheeks. "So wrong...unreal." She frowned as pain shot through her skull. "My family, my friends?"

She opened her eyes to meet the doctor's concerned gaze.

"You lost your immediate family late last year in a holiday fire, Sheena." He gripped her hand as she shuddered. "That is what makes this all so tragic. Your parents died in a Thanksgiving fire at your childhood home—you were fortunate to escape. Apparently because of this, you had decided to break with your past and come west and build a new future. Very brave of you, Sheena, but this adds to the trauma of your injury.

"It could be worse, you know," he attempted to console her. "Just think what might have happened if you and Rob Ivory hadn't become friends on the train."

Sheena felt a cold chill run up her back at the implications.

"Trust them, Sheena. From what I know they're both honorable men, even though they disagree on things at times. But that's the way of brothers. I do know they're people you can trust."

"I really haven't much choice, have I, Doctor?" The tears brimmed again.

"I believe you should rest now. Don't fight the blankness within your mind, dear. Relax. Memories are illusive as unicorns and as permanent as the sunshine. Rest for now—tomorrow will be another day." He motioned the nurse away; his smile was warming. "If you need anything just ring."

He showed her the buzzer that rested on the edge of her pillow. She watched as he left, shutting the door.

It was two whole days before the doctor felt Sheena was up to receiving visitors. She had learned the extent of her injuries by then; and though they weren't as serious as she had first thought, she did have a knot above her left eyebrow and a wrapped ribcage. But more importantly, she could not recall one detail of her past.

She knew she had been lucky. Even as dark as her present seemed, there must be a reason behind what had happened to her. She looked forward to seeing Rob Ivory again, and possibly getting a few answers.

It was almost visiting hours; and by the way the young Latina nurse, Carlotta, had straightened the room and helped her comb her hair, Sheena knew she was being prepared for a visitor. Carlotta put away the last of her toilet items, chatting pleasantly as she came back to the chair where Sheena sat.

"You look pretty today, Sheena, despite the bruises. Now with a touch more makeup we can make those look a little better." She efficiently dabbed the cover-up in place. "You were very lucky, you know," she continued. "It was wonderful that Mr. Ivory and his brother were so well-versed in first aid. Here, take a look if you don't believe me. I'm sure that will convince you." She held out a small mirror.

Sheena stared at her reflection—she did look fairly good, considering a pickup had hit her four days before. Frowning at the image, she tried again to recall something of the morning in question.

Carlotta immediately reacted to the frown. "You must not torment yourself with questions you can't answer. The more you try to make your memories return, the more slippery they become."

Sheena still continued to frown at herself, seeing a brunette stranger with dark green eyes. There were even light freckles sprinkled across her pixy nose. She did not recognize the stranger; and worse yet, she wasn't sure she even liked her.

"It is all so strange," she murmured. "So awful to be cut off from myself. I've no recollection of my family, my home, friends, or even...I didn't know until yesterday that my eyes are green, that my hair is brown."

"Your hair is beautiful chestnut. It has red and gold highlights that

are all natural,” supplied Carlotta. “Do you have any idea how many women have to dye their hair to achieve a semblance of this wonderful color?” She touched Sheena’s shoulder-length hair, a trace of envy in her voice. “You are a very lovely woman, Sheena, don’t be so hard on yourself. And don’t be frightened by what has happened to you. Doctor Barrie is confident that within a few days your mind will clear.”

Her encouraging words only caused Sheena to worry her lip.

“But...” she protested as she again studied her image, “why haven’t any of my friends back East tried to contact me? I realize I have no family, but surely I have friends.”

The young nurse looked concerned. “You must stop this. It won’t do any good to get yourself worked up about something you cannot change. Besides, I’m sure there are those who will be interested and concerned; but it has only been a week since the accident, and it may take time for them to contact you.”

“I feel as if I’ve awoken in some type of nightmare. Everything is familiar...yet it isn’t. Why can I recall impersonal things, like how to tell time, and yet nothing about myself?” she mused aloud.

“Unfortunately, that is the way of amnesia. It favors neither good nor bad memories. In your case, the concussion has temporarily wiped your memory of recent events, but it won’t last. You’ve been under tremendous mental strain for the past year, I understand, what with the end of your veterinarian training and your tragedy. You must not blame yourself.

“Anyway, is loss of memory such a bad thing, compared to a coma or death? I realize knowing your situation today is only temporary is little condolence, but it will resolve itself with time and your cooperation. You must not force your mind to remember. The brain is a delicate organ and should never be browbeaten into submission.”

Sheena recognized the wisdom and logic of what she was saying. She also realized Carlotta was talking to her as a friend would, but she couldn’t help asking, “How will I remember anything? Everything here is...”

Carlotta shook her dark head, replacing the hand mirror in the



nightstand. "Remembering is a twofold operation, Sheena. You must first recall the small things, like the smell of roses and garlic." She touched the beautiful bouquet of flowers that had arrived late yesterday without a card. They were a deep red, the passion color. "Don't let yourself worry about this, Sheena. When the time is right, you will recall everything. Even the painful memories you wish you could forget."

Sheena lifted herself from the chair beside the bed and walked slowly to the window. She stared at the front range of what she had been told were the San Francisco Mountains. She realized they looked unreal to her, as their height and beauty was totally unfamiliar.

Carlotta finished her duties and quietly said for her to call if there was anything else she needed. Sheena viewed the pink ruffles of evening clouds with a feeling of pure envy. To be a cloud, free of the human body and all misery. To float with the wind and be able to look down upon the earth and know you would always remain separate from the human pain and suffering you saw below you would be wonderful.

She took a deep breath, letting it out on a forlorn sigh. Actually, that was her situation now; she was disconnected from everything and everyone. It made no sense; and yet, in a way, it did, now that she knew more about her past. It was likely her reckless move west had been the true reason she'd lost her memory. She must have wanted to escape the ties to her loss, which must have been devastating. Without those memories, she could start afresh and make a new future for herself.

She heard her door open and started to turn sharply around. For a moment the whole room seemed to tilt and spin as darkness covered her vision. A strong arm wrapped around her waist as her legs gave way. She fought the tunnel blackness, her heart in her throat.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SHE CAME TO LYING ON HER BED; AN OVERPOWERING JOLT WENT THROUGH her as she stared into a set of dark, jade-colored eyes. Her own gaze raced up and down the man's lean frame. He was tall, more than six feet, with a lithe, athletic build and firm muscles showing under his western-cut shirt that gave him an aura of formidable strength.

There was vigorous control in his movements as he reached out and brushed hair from her eyes. Sheena stared at his face, seeing the dimple in his cheek, his generous mouth, the strong bones of his jaw. His dark brows arched over those unbelievably green eyes as he met her puzzled scrutiny.

She recognized him from the hallway the other day, but no other memory came to her as he smiled. Did she know his name? Yes, she did. Rob Ivory had called him Travis. That name did sound right. The doctor had assured her she could trust both men, but the way her heart was pounding now she wondered if this was so.

"A bit soon for you to be up walking about on your own, wouldn't you agree, Miss Lassiter?" He spoke in a drawl. Sheena bit her lip, feeling every nerve vibrate with awareness of his virile body so close to hers she could feel the warmth he generated. It came to her suddenly—she had known this man before, but where, when? He had called her impetuous the other day in the hallway. How did he know that? How long had she known him—days? Weeks? Years? She didn't know.

"I—I was startled." She tried to keep her voice remote, but it disobeyed, becoming husky instead.

"I've been told I've the tread of a cat stalking its prey on clouds, but then I've never been sure what that meant." He looked amused as he continued to watch her shrewdly. "How are you feeling today?"

"Much better, thank you." Her voice was strained as she forced her hand toward him. He took it, holding it warmly in both of his. "You must be Travis Ivory."

She said it carefully, testing the name for any memory. There was none.

He grinned. "I do believe you are feeling better, and, no, I'm Jonathan Travis O'Keefe." He saw the puzzlement reflected in her eyes. "I'm happy to meet you properly at last, Miss Sheena Annette Lassiter."

He hadn't dropped her hand as she expected him to, and she was confused by his answer.

"But you are Rob Ivory's brother, aren't you? You were here when I first awoke, and Doctor Barrie told me you're brothers." She wet dry lips, becoming aware her hospital gown had crept up her thighs when he laid her on the bed. She pulled her hand from his, reaching for the sheet, making her sides hurt with the movement. She flinched, and a small gasp escaped her.

"Allow me." He lifted the sheet, sliding it past her waist. Sheena had just been scrutinized from toe to head by a frank, approving masculine gaze. She blushed. Her embarrassment made her want to tug the covers over her head and hide; but she managed to meet his bold gaze with a frown, letting him know she did not appreciate his manner.

"I'm Robert's half-brother," he offered then. "I hope you won't get out of bed again without assistance."

There was a curious note in his voice she interpreted as condemnation. She came to her own defense.

"The doctor told me it was time I was up and about. It's all part of the plan to put me back on my feet and out of here."

"All I'm suggesting, Miss Lassiter, is that you have someone with you until you're sure you won't faint." His lips twitched at the annoyance on her face. "I'm sure the good doctor even suggested that himself."

"He didn't...he told me only if I felt dizzy."

"Which could happen at any time, couldn't it?" he pointed out with insistent logic. "You're impetuous and stubborn, aren't you?"

"I don't think so," she snapped, wishing he would just leave. He put her on edge, and she wasn't sure how to respond to his baiting. Travis O'Keefe was so casual with her—and so startlingly attractive. She had the uncanny feeling he was quite familiar with her reactions. Did he possess experience dealing with her on an emotional level, or was he just so familiar with women he could judge their reactions before they could?

"Miss Lassiter..." He placed a hand on her forearm, making the hair stand up on her neck at his touch. "I didn't come here to throw barbs at you, or to upset you. Only to make sure that everything is fine—the arrangements, the care, that kind of thing." He traced a dark bruise the size of his thumb, a frown forming between his brows.

Sheena felt oddly disconcerted by the action, which was neither tender nor gentle but, strangely, both.

"I'm sorry," she managed to apologize. "I'm too sensitive right now, as you must be able to imagine." She had never liked being rude.

"Do you know how the accident occurred, Sheena?" he asked, surprising her by using her first name.

She felt at a disadvantage lying here in bed with him standing over her. Her heart pounded within her chest, and the telltale pulse in her throat had to be alerting him to that fact. She was nervous, and her voice reflected it.

"I believe so. At least, the doctor told me what he knew. Could you roll me up, please? I feel at a disadvantage with you standing over me like this."

He smiled as he complied then got comfortable in the chair beside the bed.

"Why don't you tell me what the doctor said? Then I'll clear up any misconceptions you may have." He waited.

Sheena felt as if a thousand little pins were pricking her flesh where his fingers had touched. She covered the bruise with her hand.

"Doctor Barrie told me that Rob and I met on the train ride west, that we became friends and that, once arriving here in Flagstaff, we rented a motel room together." She stopped, clearing her throat and

looking away from his searchlight eyes. "We rented a room..." She fumbled, a frown drawing her eyes together before she forced herself to continue. "The next morning Rob left me and you came in. I became frightened and ran away from you into the path of Rob's pickup."

She looked away, fingering her hair self-consciously.

He laid his hand lightly on her bruised arm again, bringing her attention back to him.

"Sheena..." He cleared his throat. "That isn't quite correct. Do you mind if I sit awhile and explain it all to you?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. What was wrong with her, she wondered, as she watched him shift in the chair so his face was level with hers. Travis O'Keefe overflowed with sexual magnetism, and her reaction to it was nothing short of schoolgirlish, she decided.

She couldn't understand why he made her feel this way—surely, she didn't react this way to every charming male she met. But since she had no memory of her normal reactions to men, the dampness of her palms was enough to alert her that, at least with this man, she needed to remain on the alert.

"I realize you think it should be Rob explaining things to you, but..." He shrugged, shirt tightening across his broad chest, his tanned face looking totally out of place in the stark whiteness of the hospital room. "I'm the one responsible for the accident, and as such I insist on being the one to explain it all to you."

She realized suddenly that he looked tired. He stared at her for a moment, seeming to look into her very soul.

"You and Robert—Rob Ivory, my wayward half-brother—met on the train from Albuquerque, New Mexico, this past weekend. You soon found you had a lot in common. You ate a meal together on the train, discussing the differences you saw between the Southwest scenery and your home in New Hampshire. He told you all about Arizona and New Mexico, the place you had chosen as your new home.

"You are a licensed veterinarian, Sheena, and a darn good one at that—you graduated top in your class. You had just latched onto a clinic in Tempe, near Phoenix, through a friend. That was the real

reason for your move.

"When you and Rob arrived here in Flagstaff, you left the train together around midnight, when you discovered you had left your purse on the train with all of your money and ID. Rob gallantly offered to pay for your motel room for the night, since the railroad could not return the purse until the next day. You accepted the offer, and he left you at the motel while he went to stay with friends, as he had planned."

Travis shifted, uncomfortable, but he didn't drop his gaze. "The next morning I found out where Rob was staying and arrived, planning to pick him up and take him to our ranch near Payson. I didn't doubt in the least that the room he had rented for you was his. I got a maid to let me in, and I burst in on you."

This time when he paused he looked a bit shamefaced, but the lapse was not long enough for her to interrupt. "Suffice it to say that I woke you, questioning your right to be where you were, and demanded to know where Rob was. I treated you shamefully, which rightly infuriated as well as frightened you. You broke away from me and made a headlong dash into the parking lot—and Rob's borrowed pickup."

Travis offered no excuses or additional explanation for his behavior, but Sheena knew instinctively there must be more to the story even as she felt a wave of relief wash over her. At least she wasn't the scatterbrained opportunist she had envisioned. She was a veterinarian, and she felt sudden pride in knowing this.

"I guess I understand." Her voice was hesitant as she narrowed her eyes in thought, still considering all he had said. "And now, where do I go from here?"

"Now, you have every right to sue me, my family and the motel. As soon as you're back on your feet I could even recommend an excellent lawyer in Phoenix where you can pursue it." He stated it casually, with a patriarchal attitude.

"I don't think...I hadn't thought of doing anything like that. What kind of person do you think I am?"

"I really don't know, Miss Lassiter. What kind of person do you think you are?"

The question grated on her sensitive nerves and her newfound self-confidence in learning she was a doctor of veterinarian medicine. She felt her whole body tense, and a dull pain started behind her eyes as she frowned at him anew. She was confused and annoyed by his superior attitude, and from his expression he knew it.

"You must know I've forgotten everything about myself. I can't recall my own name, much less what type of person I am." Her words sounded plaintive rather than bitter, even though she somehow knew better than to ask for his sympathy.

\* \* \*

Travis knew he was pushing her too fast, but he also knew more about her than anyone here. After he discussed the situation with Doctor Barrie, they had both felt she would need a solid push to recall anything from her past, considering the psychological traumas she had been through in the last year.

He smiled slowly—if any women ever needed a hug it was her, and it was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and kiss her fear away. But he knew he couldn't do that until she trusted him again.

"It's my turn to say I'm sorry, Miss Lassiter. I'm afraid as a lawyer I've become jaded. I see the courts filled with individuals who have less reason to be there than you do. I never meant to infer you were the caliber of person who would take advantage of a bad situation. I know you aren't, by a long shot.

"It would seem we've gotten off to another rocky start. Would you prefer I leave now, or possibly...we could start over again?"

When she didn't reply, he stood, heading for the closed door.

"Please, wait."

\* \* \*

Travis turned without haste, lifting an eyebrow. Sheena realized how very appealing he was and, suddenly, how attracted to him she was. His rugged outdoorsman's features made her heart skip against her breastbone. Was it really wise to call him back? she wondered. But

there was so much she still needed to know, and he seemed to have all the answers.

Travis was extending his hand, this time more formally than before as he introduced himself again.

"I'm Travis O'Keefe. Miss Sheena Lassiter, I believe?"

In spite of her trepidation, she smiled at the ridiculous formality of his tone. His grip was warm, and she ended the contact as quickly as possible.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mr. O'Keefe," she replied with the same formality, still amused by the absurdity. "Would you mind sitting with me for a bit? I understand you know something of my past."

Travis grinned, a twinkle entering his dark eyes when she gave him a shy smile. He looked more at ease this time as he sat. She noted the good leather of his cowboy boots as he rested one foot on his knee, hands clasping his ankle. She noted the way his jeans tightened along his well-developed inner thigh.

Suddenly, she was certain she had noticed that about him before, but when, where? She wondered what it might feel like to have him kiss her. This enticing thought and her strange awareness of him brought a bright flush of color to her cheeks; and embarrassed by her thoughts and her strange awareness of him, she looked away. She suspected his touch would be earth-shattering, and definitely more than she could handle at this moment. When she finally was able to face him again, she knew he had seen her blush.

"If you're not feeling well enough right now, we can postpone this for another day," he offered.

"I really need to know all you can share, Mr. O'Keefe. I must know everything. It is very important to me...to my understanding of my present condition and this situation."

"Of course." He reached down beside the chair and lifted a black briefcase he must have had with him all along, even though she hadn't seen it until now. She realized next he had left it there when he walked toward the door. Had he known she would call him back?

She was intrigued by the thought. He was too self-confident, too self-assured. She would like to see him lose that control...

But maybe that was how she had ended here in the first place, she



thought with a shiver.

He pulled out several official-looking folders and objects. Clicking the case shut, he set it back on the floor. Sheena felt an emotional jolt when he returned his attention to her.

"I realize now I should have filled you in on this immediately—on your personal background, as well as Rob's and mine." His voice was now businesslike, with a professional authority that brooked no argument. "You are twenty-seven, born on October twenty-third. Here are your driver's license and your wallet."

He handed these to her and waited as she opened the wallet and studied first her license photo and then several others behind it. There were five credit cards in pockets, one Cornell University ID card and thirty-five dollars in cash with miscellaneous change. There was a checkbook, and she glanced at the last check she had written and the balance she had posted. It appeared she had around \$1,590,000 in a credit union savings account in New Hampshire, a thousand dollars in a checking account in Massachusetts and property in Delaware. The amount surprised her. She closed the checkbook.

"You graduated from the Cornell School of Veterinary Medicine two years ago, and have been working as an instructor at their clinic since you were an undergraduate. You've worked in pet hospitals in Boston, Cleveland and in New Hampshire, your home state.

"This past year, your parents were killed in a house fire that destroyed their farm and their livestock. You escaped the blaze then had to assume the responsibility of straightening out their affairs and selling the property to pay their debts. Understandably, this was a hardship on you and was part of the reason you were willing to risk starting a new life in the West. Your decision startled your friends and professors, but you were determined to move and here you are."

He smiled as he handed her a file folder. Inside the folder was a bill of sale for her parents' farm in Sea Brook, New Hampshire, for two million dollars, dated two months before her arrival here. Behind this were copies of her diplomas and behind those a five-page resume of her experience. Then there was a six-month lease contract between herself and one Doctor Bryan Craven of Tempe, Arizona, for

an established veterinary clinic.

Sheena assimilated all of this before glancing back at Travis, who had remained silent, watching her absorb the material.

"I have no other relatives, I take it?" she asked at last.

"None that I could find."

She looked at the receipt for her family's home again. Something of the desolation she was feeling seemed to communicate to him. She felt his light touch near the bruised spot on her arm.

"Sheena, you may not have a family anymore, but don't feel you're alone. You have many friends in the East, and a few people here in the West who care deeply for you." His voice was warm and intimate.

She tried to smile, to hide the self-pity that was consuming her. "It would seem you have been very thorough, Mr. O'Keefe."

"Very," he agreed complacently as he withdrew his hand.

Sheena worried her bottom lip. She hated his detachment in that instant, although she thought she understood it. Why did he have to be so blunt and unemotional about it all, though? Couldn't he see how distraught this information made her? That she didn't even know how to respond to the facts of her life he had discovered for her.

She felt like she should cry, but why? She couldn't recall anything about the woman she had been, nothing about her parents or her home. She really did not want to break apart in front of him, as he would never understand. He would only become acutely embarrassed by her show of feminine weakness, she was certain. After all, he wasn't really involved in her life. How else could he act?

"I see," she said at last, because there was nothing else she could say. A queer sensation in her middle made her swallow as she considered just what the word *alone* meant. "It's all so strange and unfamiliar to me, and yet it isn't." It slipped from her lips before she realized she was speaking aloud. "I can't recall my parents. The fire... I don't even feel loss. It... I... feel nothing. As if this is all part of a bad melodrama on TV. It didn't happen to me."

He was cradling her arm again, the pressure of his fingers a physical reminder of his presence.

"Are you okay, Sheena?" The formality was gone, and she could see he was genuinely concerned. "Should I get a doctor or a nurse?"

His intense scrutiny made her flush. It was if he were touching her all over, reassuring her with the rich darkness of his eyes. She glanced at his brown hand, suddenly blinking as something flashed in her mind. She had felt, seen a hand like this one before somewhere, at some time—but when, where? The impression was fleeting, but very real.

“I’m really okay. It’s just that I don’t feel anything concerning what are supposed to be the most important people in my life. I’m untouched by their tragedy, and yet I know I did love them. It makes me feel hollow inside, as if everything you’ve said is true, but that it happened to someone else.” She wet her lips and glanced at the folder. “Even when I try to recall their faces it’s as if I’m staring at a blank wall.

“I’m sorry, Mr. O’Keefe, you’re very patient. I don’t think I’m making much sense. But thank you for gathering all of this information for me. What do I owe you?”

“You’re making perfect sense, Sheena, and you owe me nothing.” He spoke quietly, his thumb making soft, unconscious circles over the bruise. Then he withdrew his hand and looked at her with a sincerity that made her feel cherished. “I wouldn’t have told you all of this so soon unless I knew you were a very strong lady, a survivor. I wanted you to know as much as I do. I wish it was everything, but that will come in time. You’ll need this information now to make decisions, and when your memory does return there should be few surprises.”

She chewed her bottom lip. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Her voice was stronger now; the emotions within had subsided a bit. She wasn’t sure whether the shock was over or if she were just numb. Maybe it was his calm manner that somehow reassured her everything would work out.

“There are several other things I need to share, Sheena. I want you to know that you and I knew each other briefly before your arrival here in Arizona.”

This news was not surprising, but it gained him her full attention. She had suspected they had been acquainted even before he said it.

She started to tell him then stopped as he went on.

"Sheena, you and I...well, there isn't an easy way to say this. It sounds wrong, although there was nothing wrong in what happened between us. We met on campus one day six months ago, but we became immediate friends—more than friends."

"More than friends..." she repeated as she sat up, alerted by the extra emphasis he had placed on the word *friends*.

"Let me finish, please, then you can question all you like. We both knew what we did was right at the time, even though it was entirely spontaneous and not normal for either of us. You must remember there were circumstances you don't recall at this time that led to our attraction for each other.

"Then, over the next five months, we talked often on the phone and through correspondence, old-fashioned letters as well as email, but we never saw one another again. I was the one who told you about the retiring vet here in Tempe, and you're the one who made the decision to come west and lease it without telling me."

He paused to let her absorb, then: "Rob didn't tell you I was his brother on the train because there was no reason to do so at the time and because he had no idea I had known you before. He only told you he was coming home to meet with a disgruntled older brother who would be angry at him for something that happened years ago. The coincidence of you two meeting like you did is as surprising as our meeting was five months ago.

"I suppose there can be something to be said for the metaphysical belief in predestination. At least the oddness of our joint meetings seems to scream of something metaphysical to me, and I'm positive it would to you, if you had your memory."

His statement was oddly compelling to her rather than threatening. It made her curious about a subject she was ignorant of at this point, and about his interest, as well.

"Rob did tell you about our ranch, which stimulated quite a conversation, although you did not put together the connection between us at the time. You bombarded him with questions about the people, the countryside, even the vegetation. I believe your interest and enthusiasm is what led to your developing a trust and attachment

so quickly, Sheena. After all, he was a native of the area you had decided to adopt. Everything he said would be fascinating, exciting to you.

"Whatever drew you together doesn't matter. After you left your purse on the train your future was tied to his. My entrance on the scene came the next morning. When I approached you, I was furious with Rob. I took my anger out on you without allowing you the chance to give an explanation. I know I must have roared like a bear, frightening you, and you had every right to try to escape."

He paused, as if evaluating her reaction.

"I can see I've lost you, but stay with me, please." He smiled slightly again, and she noted his dimple deepened in the side of his cheek. "Rob left home more than six years ago. Just before our mother was killed in a freak air accident with her third husband. When he came home from the Navy for her funeral, he took the deeds and all the property records from the ranch. Her estate has been in limbo since."

"When he called me from Albuquerque to say he was coming home, I flew into Flagstaff to have it out with him about this. I wanted to surprise him, but nothing worked as I planned. I was the one surprised when you, of all people, were the only one in the room I thought was his. You were caught in the middle of our family feud—I couldn't control my temper and took out my frustration on you."

"I hesitated a fraction too long before following you when you ran away. Then you dashed in front of the pickup. I wasted no time getting you to the hospital, but you were unconscious from the start. We weren't even sure you would survive, at first."

He cleared his throat, meeting her gaze levelly, his eyes telling her how disgusted he was with himself. "Rob's and my disagreement over the ownership of our mother's ranch does not concern you, but we have discussed your problem extensively and we both agree on this."

He retrieved another folder from his briefcase and laid it across her lap. "Open it, Sheena. Hopefully, it will clear up any confusion concerning the two of us you feel."

She looked at the plain folder then, uncertainly, at him.

"Go ahead. I believe you'll find the contents interesting."

Sheena opened the folder slowly, finding a very official-looking contract inside. She studied it without speaking for a few minutes. He and Rob would cover her entire hospital costs, any extended care she required; and they wanted to hire her as their ranch's vet until such time as her memory returned or she felt it was time to pursue her life elsewhere.

She would be free at any time to pursue her interests in court concerning any other restitution she felt was hers to claim at any time. Even if she couldn't recall her science, she would be allowed to recover at their ranch until she was strong enough to leave on her own.

Sheena reread the last statement twice before looking back at him.

"This isn't necessary. I happen to feel it was my mistake for dashing into traffic and as an adult, I should pay the price, nothing more or less." Her voice was firm as she defended her decision. Travis O'Keefe put her on edge. She really had no desire to be in constant contact with him. His self-assured manner was daunting, and in her current state she knew how easy it would be to fall under his seductive power.

She continued before he could protest. "I can't accept your benevolence. Surely, you can see this is way too generous. I would feel the need to pay you back, and from the record of my recent past you've provided, I'm in no position to ask for credit until I can recall my past obligations. I just know this isn't my way."

Sheena held the folder out to him.

He refused to take it, leaning back in his chair, appearing prepared to argue with her. "I'm quite certain charity is not your way at all."

His voice sounded official again. She felt a chill touch her spine—for the first time she actually could believe he was a very good lawyer.

"From everything I've learned about you, Sheena, I would say you've always paid your own way, which is admirable. But you've never been in this type of situation before, or been so far from home and friends. Since you will not be a guest at the ranch but an employee, you can't possibly look on this as charity."

"But it isn't fair. I'm not holding you or Rob responsible for this..." She touched the bandage on her head. "...or my irrational behavior at the time. I don't want either of you to feel obligated to do any more for me than you already have done."

"Why not?" He leaned toward her again, his arresting charisma making her nerves shout a warning. "Are you afraid of us, Sheena? If it's me you're worried about, I can assure you I won't be around most of the time. As I told you, I am a lawyer and I have an office in Phoenix."

"If you're concerned about the legality of this contract, I will tell you the name at the bottom is that of a state civil judge, and it is perfectly legal. I had him draw it up at my request—it's fair to all concerned. There is even a duress clause at the end of it. You did read that, didn't you?"

He lifted a dark eyebrow at her hesitation. "Think about it, Sheena. Don't act impulsively and do something you may later regret. As you can see, we will all gain by this. Your services are definitely required at the ranch, and even if you can't recall your science you will need a safe place to recover once you're released from here. Our ranch house will be at your disposal for as long as you require it. We have a live-in housekeeper and several hands who also live onsite. Besides, Rob has decided to remain there until you leave."

It was all so overwhelming—he definitely must have plenty of experience convincing people of things. She didn't feel he realized he and Rob who would be paying a heavy price for something she considered wasn't their fault. She closed her eyes to shut out his forceful image, trying to think clearly and form an argument that would get her out of this without making him feel at fault or responsible.

That was what all of this was about, wasn't it? She didn't want anyone feeling responsible over her mad dash into traffic—she knew it had been her fault. She had always been shy, hating scenes. She knew she had run from this man's anger into the parking lot. The consequences were entirely hers, no one else's. He didn't have to pay for her bad judgment.

"If you're doing this to relieve yourself of guilt the accident

brought you, please..."

Travis stood, looming over her so swiftly she only registered his movement after the fact. His hands now rested on either side of her, not touching her, yet she couldn't help being aware of his warmth any less than if they were locked together in an embrace.

"I won't have you talking about guilt. One thing you're going to learn about me is that I rarely regret any of my own actions. I deserved to be angry as hell with Rob and you in those moments. How I handled that anger was despicable in your case, but anger makes irrational behavior seem normal.

"Don't fool yourself into thinking this contract is only because of what I did in the motel room. I just wish I had kissed you longer while I had the chance. I might have realized how innocent you were after all."

He was looking at her lips with an intensity that made her tremble and her heart pound. She wondered if he might decide to kiss her again and recoiled instinctively.

"I suppose...even if I had a family to return to..." She stared at the dimple in his cheek rather than risk looking at his eyes or lips. "I'd be a fool to turn something like this down. I will need a place to recover." She wished he would move.

"You *can* be sensible—I'm surprised." He grinned as he stepped back, a mysterious light in his eyes. "Too bad you didn't weigh all the factors before taking Rob up on his motel offer."

Sheena gasped. He was being totally insolent, trying to wound or get a reaction out of her—she wasn't sure which.

"I know what you must think of me, Mr. O'Keefe. I've no answers, though, to defend myself with at this time, other than that your brother's offer must have looked a lot better than an alleyway at midnight in a strange city."

She spoke with a reserved dignity she could tell stung him. He straightened, his arms at his sides now. She wished she had the nerve to slap him, but he was too far away—and her words had done it for her anyway.

"You've spirit, Sheena Lassiter. I don't intimidate you, or even impress you, I can tell. I'm very glad to see you haven't lost your



courage along with your memory. Even if you can't understand the logic of Rob's offer, I can. I would have done exactly the same in his position, only I..." He paused a fraction of a second for emphasis. "...I would never have let you sleep alone."

"You really are an insensitive brute! How do you get away with it? As a lawyer you must know the results of sexual harassment, and I'm sure there is a woman out there who will make short work of your bravado if you don't watch out."

His lips twisted into a devilish smirk. "Sheena, you can't know this now, but I do love seeing steam come out of that pixie nose of yours. You're a dark angel, straight from Hades. Do you know, I even believe you may be my weakness. I can't help myself. I've loved teasing you from the first moment we met."

Sheena had no idea how to react to this confession. She closed her eyes, hoping he would be gone when she opened them again. Instead, he picked up her hand, and they flipped opened in fear. He talked as if he had known her very well before, maybe even intimately; and the way he scanned her face and body made every nerve scream in warning. What on earth was he doing to her, and why?

She told herself she did not appreciate his forward attitude, or the way his lips brushed across the abraded flesh of her hand. Their touch was too alive and strange, too personal. She stared at him, speechless, as he turned her hand over to kiss her palm very softly. Her gaze was fixed on his mouth, so strong and purposeful, holding the promise of male passion.

Sheena yanked her hand from his grasp, hating herself and the knowing smile she saw in his jade eyes as he straightened and faced her annoyance without flinching.

"I believe you've had enough of my endearing company for one session, Sheena. Unless, of course, you have more questions about these?" He touched the folder on her lap, though his gaze slid up her torso with obvious pleasure. "I think I'll be on my way otherwise. You won't see me again until you're released. There's a cell telephone number inside the first folder, as well as my office and apartment phones in Phoenix. If you need to get in touch with me, call anytime."

If there had been a shoe close enough she would have hurled it at him. Instead, she could only watch with narrowed eyes as he picked up his briefcase and strode confidently to the door. His hand rested on the handle as he spoke again.

"Sign the contract, angel. It will put your mind at ease and stop the brooding about how you're going to take care of yourself until you're well." The wicked glitter in his crystal eyes told her he knew she wanted to throw something at him.

Before she could find words to respond, the door thrust open; and Rob Ivory arrived, carrying a huge bouquet of carnations. His eyes were level with the top of the flowers.

"Whoops, didn't realize you were still here, Travis." He glanced at Sheena then whistled. "Boy, what two full days have done for you."

He placed the flowers in front of the roses, leaning to plant a light kiss on her forehead, ignoring his brother entirely. He caught her hand and squeezed it.

"You look more lovely than the first time I saw you, Sheena, and that is no exaggeration." He laughed at the doubt in her expression.

She knew it was flattery, but she couldn't help smiling warmly at him, liking him instantly. His vivacious manner seemed to chase away all of her previous annoyance with his brother. For the first time, she noticed a slight resemblance between the two men. There was a devil-may-care attitude about both that was intriguing and strangely compelling.

Rob was still chattering. "Boy, if you can look this delicious after a truck knocks you over, just think what you'll look like when you've gotten some good old Arizona sun, huh, Travis?"

"Most certainly, Rob, and now I must be going." Travis's voice was deeper, and Sheena glanced past Rob to see an undeniable flare behind that emerald gaze fastened on Rob's hand holding hers. He looked up and caught her expression of surprise.

"No further questions, Miss Lassiter? Anything else you need or desire, don't hesitate to call me. Sign the agreement, and I'll see you again soon." He nodded before exiting the room, a slight smile curving his full lips.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

**W**HAT'S EATING HIM?" ROB QUESTIONED AS SOON AS THE DOOR closed. "You don't know?" Sheena's voice was husky again. Reaching for her glass of water she sipped it, avoiding his eyes. She had the queerest feeling she did know what was behind Travis's strange behavior, but why would Travis O'Keefe be jealous of his younger brother? It had been jealousy she had seen in his eyes, she was sure of it.

"Knowing Trav, it could be anything," Rob said cheerfully. "I confess he's always been too stuffy for me, all his legal mumbo-jumbo, always needing contracts, agreements, rarely spontaneous...not like us."

He grinned with a boyish charm that touched Sheena's heart. No wonder she had liked and trusted him instantly.

She handed him the folder on her lap. "It would seem he worked up another contract, only this time it's for me."

She waited while he flipped open the folder, instantly intent on the contents. He skimmed quickly.

"Looks excellent to me. We talked about this, but I never expected anything so quickly. I suppose I should know better than to underestimate Travis, though. What do you think?" Rob's light-gray eyes were alight with mischief and she relaxed.

"I'm not sure what I should think." She paused, forming her next question carefully. "Rob, could you please tell me how we met. Travis and the doctor have given me different versions and I must know."

He flipped the folder closed and sank into the chair. He studied her shrewdly for a long moment.

Sheena realized there was much about the brothers that was alike

and very little about them that was the same except for their resemblance to one another. They were both dark-complected men with straight black hair, almond-shaped eyes and straight noses. She wondered if there might not be Indian or Mexican blood in their veins, although it was obvious from the color of their eyes that their English or Scottish heredity was strong. Travis had an athletic build, a torso that spoke of brute strength. Rob, on the other hand, was a more refined version of the same genes. His face was softer, handsomer, and there was less of the outdoorsman about him. He would be much more comfortable with books and women than Travis would ever be. She found it hard to visualize Rob remaining on a ranch for long.

Sheena smiled to herself. Yes, she was suddenly positive that Rob would always possess an easy charm that would win most of his battles for him. Travis, however, would have to fight with brains and brawn to win.

“What can I say, Sheena? You and I were traveling companions, and I’ve never been one to ignore a beautiful woman. You intrigued me instantly. You were aloof, silent, lost in your own thoughts, and I had to find out if you were real or a figment of my starved sailor’s imagination.

“When I approached you, I was delighted. You were everything and more than I expected. Together we made the long ride between Albuquerque and Flag pass in a matter of minutes. You were fascinated by everything I could tell you about your new home, and I was equally fascinated by the fact that you are a veterinarian—I had never met a woman vet before. You were so calm, solid as oak, even though you had just left everything you knew and recently lost your entire family. It was like we were brother and sister meeting after a long absence...it was wonderful.”

His expression was serious when he ended, and she saw the romantic in him when he called her *sister*. She liked his relaxed manner—there was nothing about him that was threatening or intimidating, unlike Travis, who seemed to trigger every alarm in her body.

“Sheena, I know this may sound strange to you, but we did

recognize each other instantly as someone we could trust and confide in. When we arrived here in Flag, and you discovered you had left your purse on the train, it was only natural for me to offer to get your room for the night. Unfortunately, I signed the register, and Travis saw my name and thought the room was mine."

The light burned out of his eyes as he remembered.

"He woke you, frightening you with his threats, whatever they were. He was angry with me and took it out on you." Rob cleared his throat before continuing in the same matter-of-fact voice. "Good old Trav. Never could control his rotten Scorpio temper. He must have been seeing red. But, then, he has always been stiff-necked and hotheaded since the day I was born. Especially about anything to do with me, or anything he thought should be his."

Sheena wondered at his somewhat unflattering description of Travis, but she had to admit it did seem accurate. She had recognized the passion in his brother herself.

"Still," Rob said, "I can't figure how he could misjudge a girl like you. He must have been wanting blood not to realize you weren't some cheap pickup I had brought to my bed, but he didn't." He gave a lift of his shoulder. "He should be strung up by his toes and tied to a giant saguaro, and if he wasn't such a damn good lawyer I would personality see to it."

His voice rose several decibels with the threat; then he touched her hand as he saw her eyes dilate. "I'm sorry if I'm upsetting you. I didn't mean to."

Sheena smiled. "I need to know, Rob. Tell me why he would burst into your room like that? Why would he want to scare you?"

"Tactics," said Rob without hesitation. "He's a professional at making the guilty confess on the stand in front of a filled courtroom before they even realize what they've done. That's what makes him so frigging good." He grinned suddenly. "And as to why he wanted to get his hands on me, I stole the deeds to our mother's property years before, and he wants them back."

"But...why?"

"Sheena, all of this is so involved. I don't want to tire you."

Sheena was disturbed by the sudden evasive attitude. The more

she heard of the situation she found herself in, the more she needed to know so she could decide what to do.

"I'm much stronger than I look, Rob," she assured him.

He patted her hand. "I found that out while we were on the train, Sheena. You're made from sturdy oak despite your petite build. Even this injury hasn't made you fearful, I don't think." He smiled. "You're a pure wonder."

He reached out and tapped her turned-up nose playfully.

"Okay, sister, you asked for it, so don't complain if I get tedious. Travis and I are half-brothers. I suppose you've figured that out by now?" He waited to see the assurance in her eyes, then continued.

Their mother had favored Travis as the older son, and Rob had always harbored a grudge, never quite succeeding at living up to his older brother's model. There was more than thirteen years difference in their ages, so they had never been close. When their mother decided to marry for the third time, Rob had run away from home, taking the deeds to the ranch in revenge and joining the Navy. He had done that to capture her attention, but when she was killed on her honeymoon it was too late to resign from the Navy as he was already out of the country.

Travis tried to track him down then, but Rob had managed to elude him for six years.

"When I was discharged two weeks ago, I got the deeds from a lawyer in Albuquerque and called Travis that I was coming back to Arizona. I knew this thing had gone on long enough. I was very immature and headstrong at eighteen when I took those deeds. It was wrong, and I knew I was going to have to face the music sooner or later. But now, after what's happened to you, I don't think I'm going to give in so easily."

"Rob! You have to. Don't you see? The longer this thing goes on between you, the harder it's going to be to straighten out. Travis is angry now, but I think he's realized you were young and hurting when you did this. Have you talked to him at all?"

"Nope, and I don't plan to for awhile. Right now, we've called a truce because of you. We've agreed not to talk about the ranch until you're well and on your own again. It's for the best, Sheena. It will

give me a chance to see if he's actually worthy of my trust, and it will give him time to see that I'm a grown man now, not the little boy who ran away because he couldn't face reality."

"I suppose it's your business, and I shouldn't get involved," Sheena admitted. "Besides, this explains why he would burst in on you—on me—then try to scare me into telling him where you were. He must have thought I was your accomplice."

"As I said before, when Trav is angry he attacks or intimidates. I'm quite certain he saw you as the scarlet woman behind the boy...so to speak." He grinned with boyish glee. "He frightened you in order to make you run, or flush me out."

"Am I? The scarlet woman, Rob?" Sheena ran a dry tongue over drier lips. She needed him to either confirm her suspicions or release her from the guilty conscience that made her feel so uneasy.

"No, you aren't." His answer was firm. The steady gaze of his silver eyes told her without reservation there was nothing physical between them. "Sheena, we had just met. I told you there was an immediate rapport between us, like brother and sister. We even jokingly adopted each other. Oh, I'll admit I'm attracted to you. After all, you're a darn good-looking lady, but I *like* you, too.

"And I have very old-fashioned morals underneath all of the jokester bravado—unlike my brother, who is a cagey devil, at best. I didn't want to run the risk of ruining this special feeling between us. It's rare to meet your sister after twenty-six years.

"This feeling of trust we have between us may blossom in time to be much more, but right now it remains an acceptance of one another as friends."

She could tell he was sincere; and despite the fact he was a total stranger, she knew what he meant. She could feel it, too. She liked him, trusted him. Her heart told her they would always be friends—and only friends.

Rob lifted the forgotten folder. "I hope you'll accept that we really do want to help you through this thing, Sheena. We're both agreed on this, at least. I can understand why you're feeling awkward about it, but don't. Think of it this way—if it hadn't been for my hormones and Trav's brutish nature none of this would have happened. Take

advantage of the breather we're offering you. You'll love the ranch. Learn about Arizona firsthand before you open your clinic. There are plenty of animals at the ranch to practice on, and a wonderful library to relax with.

"And what is most important..." He squeezed her hand. "...you and I will be together. I've always wanted a kid sister to teach things to, to protect and chaperon. This..." He tapped the folder. "...is the first thing Trav and I've done together in years. Who knows?" He grinned mischievously. "You just might be the catalyst that will bring two warring brothers together at last."

Sheena bit her lip. What on earth was she to do? She suspected that, rather than being the catalyst bringing two warring brothers together, she might just be the wedge that drove them further apart. She liked Rob instinctively, sensing he was an honorable man, and admitted to herself the same was true of Travis. In spite of the way her nerves reacted to Travis's virile body, she liked him, trusted him.

Both brothers were persuasive men, respectable men. Neither would force his attentions on her nor do anything to slow her recovery. She thought of Travis again, of how attracted she was to him. She thought of his aggressive nature and felt a circus of butterflies flutter in her stomach.

If he did make advances would she have the strength of will to ignore them? Would she even want to? His very touch already sent fiery sparks through her healing body. Would it be safe to put herself into their care? Even for a short period of time?

Rob leaned toward her, smoothing the worried pucker from between her brows.

"Well," he said, "look at it this way, sis. We're giving you a chance to gain a whole new family, a new beginning. That was the whole reason you came out west in the first place. Trav and I were responsible for the events that led to your accident, and we are both willing to share our home with you while you recover. Wouldn't it be better, in your present condition, to be with people you know at least a little bit than to be alone, in case your memory doesn't return for some time?"

He had obviously taken lessons in persuasion from his big



brother, however unconsciously. "At least with us, at the ranch, you'll have animals to care for, new things to learn, a new area to explore and people who are truly concerned for your welfare."

Sheena met his steady gaze. Her options were few enough, and this one did seem the most reasonable. If she could remember her science, there would be no reason to feel like she was sponging off their good nature.

"I'm afraid your brother thinks I'm too impetuous to be trusted. He thought I might sue you both."

"Does he now?" Rob laughed and slapped his thigh. "Shows how much he knows about you, doesn't it? And even if you did sue, you would be entitled to do it. Don't let Trav worry you, Sheena. You won't be seeing much of him, anyway. I doubt seriously if he ever leaves his office in Phoenix the entire time you're at the ranch."

"And you, Rob?"

"Me?" His eyes danced wickedly. "Well, little sister, you'll be seeing plenty of me, so be prepared. I forgot to tell you I'm a writer, and I've decided to pattern my next heroine after you. I'll need to do extensive research."

His flippancy removed any suspicions she might still harbor about his motives once and for all.

"Then I'll sign." Reaching for the folder she signed her name using a pen he provided. There were spaces for Rob's and Travis's signatures as well; Rob took the folder and followed her example.

He sat back and leveled his gaze on her when he completed his signature.

"Enough of dees rrrubbish," he said in a dreadful Bela Lugosi accent. "Tell me, when doss de doctor release you from dees sterile environment?"

Sheena laughed out loud, and enjoyed the next forty-five minutes of his visit. He was rising to leave when she remembered the flowers.

"Rob, I want to thank you for all the flowers. It was very kind of you." She motioned to the roses and carnations.

"Too bad I didn't bring the roses—too rich for my blood, unfortunately." He leaned forward, taking a whiff of the twelve-bud bouquet.

“But I don’t understand.” She was bewildered. “If you didn’t send them, then who...?”

“Well, well.” Rob touched a rose bud speculatively. “It would seem baby sister has gained a secret admirer. If you ever need a big brother backup, just yell. I’ll be there in a flash to ward off any would-be seducers.” He tweaked her nose, amusement alive on his face. “Another mystery for us to puzzle over, huh? Mañana, sweetheart, get some rest.”

He was gone. Later, as the nurse tucked her in for the night, Sheena was in a blur of exhaustion. Her mind whirled with all of the events of the evening. The last thing she saw was the red of the rose petals.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

**T**HE NEXT THREE DAYS PASSED QUICKLY. SHEENA WAS SELDOM ALONE, FOR either Rob or the nurses were in talking with her most of the day. Travis had gone back to Phoenix after she signed the agreement. He hadn't even come in to say goodbye; instead, he had called congratulating her on being so sensible. His voice had been businesslike and formal, and his cold impersonal attitude incensed her. She was disappointed he had not come in person to collect the contract—she wouldn't have minded seeing him again.

On the other hand, this way was definitely safer. Maybe he knew that, too.

Rob, however, was just the opposite. Easygoing and fun to be with, he told her endless stories about Arizona, its people, the land; and she found herself laughing easily whenever he was around. He brought her a stuffed rabbit with a torn ear one day, and a stuffed squirrel with a missing eye the next, on the pretext he didn't want her skills to get rusty.

He confided his plans for the future, sharing his latest manuscript with her, telling her his ideas for a novel. He told her about his friends, the horses he had loved as a boy, the secret places at the ranch where a child could hide and nurse his real or imagined wounds. She felt surprised and honored when he told her about the woman who had stolen his heart at sixteen. She knew the flame was still alive within him, wondered if he realized how much he gave away.

It was as if he wanted no secrets between them, and she felt strange, since she had nothing she could share with him. His presence made her think deeply about her past, but nothing changed.

That part of her life remained a blank, and the hollowness inside her screamed for answers. How could everything be familiar, and yet no memories be awakened?

She began to look forward to her time at the ranch.

Rob arrived late in the afternoon on her tenth day. He had just made a whirlwind trip to Tempe in Travis's Jet Ranger and was still excited by the ride. He had volunteered to pick up her personal belongings from the storage facility where she had them shipped and deliver them to the ranch. He brought the boxes of books she had requested. By the time he dropped the fourth one on the floor of her hospital room she was already leafing through a massive volume, her eyes bright.

"I wasn't sure which one would have the reference work you needed, so I brought them all." He leaned over and stared at what she was studying. "How in the world did you ever learn all this stuff?" He pointed to a word. "What in the world are 'sulfonamides?' Sounds like a sick rock to me!"

Sheena giggled. Her sides already ached from watching his antics with the boxes; she ignored the catch in her side.

"Sulfonamides are a class of organic compounds used in the treatment of disease." She told him easily as she released the book to him and picked up another one. "That book you're holding is one of the classic works veterinarians use. The *Merck Manual* and I have spent many sleepless nights together."

"A shame I wasn't there during those sleepless nights," he teased. "I'm certain we could have had more fun. This seems very dull to me."

"Never." Sheena opened another volume and studied the contents with intent interest. "It was like learning to read for me when I found there were actual books written about veterinary medicine." She paused and met his gaze. "Or at least I think it was like that. Yes, it was like that. How do I know that?"

"Anyway, for me the study of animal husbandry was the most exciting thing I had ever done...I think." She continued to flip pages.

Rob watched her, a smile curving his lips. Sheena paused over an equine photograph.

"Well, I can see where I would have rated. No wonder you've never gotten hitched." He made his voice sound sullen. "Even after years poring over this stuff, you would still rather stare at some horse's anatomy than mine. It's a wonder I ever caught your attention on that train."

Sheena was startled—had she offended him? But there was a mischievous glow in his eyes that relaxed her. He was an incurable tease, and a flirt. He made her feel good about herself.

He continued, "It must be wonderful, though, to make a sick creature well. I envy you, little sister, for knowing at a young age what your mission in life was."

"Wonderful..." She considered this. "Yes, I believe it was." She pushed her knuckle against the corner of her lip as she remembered suddenly how fluently she had spoken of sulfonamides. Had she been right? She flipped to the index and looked up the reference. The facts had just popped out, no thought involved. Was she starting to remember? Maybe soon she would recall everything.

The thought was exciting. When would Doctor Barrie release her? She just knew the rest of her memory would return as soon as she was back into her normal life with animals. The hospital was not even close to a normal life for her.

"One thing about the ranch, you're going to have plenty of live specimens to work with. Trav has truly improved things while I've been gone."

He had dropped off most of her belongings there before returning to Flagstaff. As it was his first time home in six years, he had, he said, been amazed by the positive changes that had occurred in his absence. He described these in detail as she continued to dig through her books.

"I'm sure it will fascinate me." She bit the inside of her cheek. "I guess I'm beginning to recall some things at last. Nothing about myself, not yet, but these—the books—I do know these, Rob. Even with only a casual glance I remember where to look for specific things. Strange..." She met his eyes. "The doctor was in a while ago and told me I was improving so quickly he could see no reason why I shouldn't leave tomorrow. He thought my memory might return in a

short time, especially once I was with animals again. I can't thank you enough for getting my books for me today."

"Don't thank me, sis. Thank Trav. He's the one who thought they might help you, even pulled the strings so I could claim your personal belongings from storage. I just flew down to Tempe in his chopper and picked them up."

Sheena used the excuse of studying the book in her hands to hide her expression.

"When do you think Travis will be back?" She tried to keep the question casual, but it was difficult.

"Who knows? He didn't tell me, and I didn't ask. I do know he's involved in a big case right now, a murder or something as gruesome. I'm sure he's up to his neck in getting the guy convicted." There was little sympathy in Rob's tone. "He did mention, though, that the doctor would call him when you were to be released."

Maybe he would be here tomorrow, then, she thought. She felt a slight quiver near her heart. She realized she wanted to see him now that she was feeling more like herself. Her initial impression of him surely had been blurred by pain and drugs. She had probably overreacted to his overpowering male presence that day when he had given her the contract.

Sheena laid the book aside and smiled at Rob. "Well, at least I won't be entirely useless when I get to your ranch. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember enough to be of any help, but I think with just a little effort I'll be able to pursue my vocation. I'm relieved to know that. I hope I won't disappoint you or Travis."

"Never, love. How could you even consider that? Even if you couldn't lift a finger to help the livestock, your very presence would be enough to keep my spirits up. As a matter of fact, Sheena, I'm trying to think of a way to make sure you stay forever." He touched the tip of her nose playfully, a gesture that had become a familiar and delightful habit between them.

"Rob, you're an incurable flirt." She laughed at him, not wanting to take him seriously. At that moment, the door opened. Travis O'Keefe walked into the room.

"Well, well, I can see how you two get on together." His

expression was indulgent.

Sheena choked on her laughter. He was exactly as she remembered him—a man totally in control, firm, purposeful and, at the moment, studying her flushed face with keen interest. She felt her blood rush. What was there about this man that made her heart skip, her mouth water? She had an almost insane urge to run into the security of the bathroom to escape the cool scrutiny of those crystal eyes.

He examined the deep maroon satin robe she was wearing. The robe and the matching pajamas had been delivered to her two days prior. She had assumed they were from Rob, but suddenly she knew otherwise. Travis had sent them, just as, she now realized, he had sent the roses.

Wishing she had the plain hospital gown on again she touched the satin labels in a self-conscious gesture. Travis's inspection took only the briefest of moments, but for her it felt like an eternity.

Rob stood up, offering his hand. The two brothers were the same height, she noticed for the first time, and with similar builds; but where Rob hadn't developed, Travis had. They completed the formality with a casual ease that surprised her, then Travis was again eyeing her, taking a step forward to stand over her where she sat on the floor.

There was no place for her to look politely but at the toes of his cowboy boots. She let her gaze run up his lean thighs, covered by tan corduroy jeans. Racing past his sandcast silver Navajo belt buckle she noticed, in the open throat of his shirt, an obsidian arrowhead pendant caught in the dark hairs of his chest.

She focused on his face as he extended his hand to help her to rise. A light shone out from his jade eyes, like a beacon glimmering through the limbs of a tree. The light captured her attention for a long, silent moment. She had no difficulty remembering his lean body, but for some reason she had totally forgotten the startling beauty of his eyes—and the arrowhead pendant.

"You're looking five hundred times better than the last time I saw you, Sheena."

Her attitude became guarded as he squeezed her hand. She didn't

fully understand her erratic feelings, the apprehension she felt, the tingling sensation racing up her arm or the slight dizziness that made her sway toward him as he pulled her to her feet. The apprehension she suspected was purely instinctive, but the others puzzled her. How well had she known him before, or someone nearly like him? Had she been hurt in a rocky love affair by a man who reminded her of Travis? Or was it only that she felt overwhelmed?

"I'm feeling much better, Mr. O'Keefe."

"And the memory?"

"That, too, is starting to return, Travis," Rob supplied. "She was just giving me a lecture on chemical compounds and their benefits to the animal kingdom."

"Hopefully, I wasn't that boring," Sheena teased, grinning at him, glad of Rob's presence that distracted her from the pure sexual thrill that shot through her system as Travis continued to hold her hand.

"How soon can you come home with us, Sheena?" Travis questioned in a low tone. She moved then; she had to get away from him so she could think clearly.

"The doctor gave her the good news just a bit ago," Rob answered for her.

"He feels I could leave as early as tomorrow. He makes his rounds after dinner—I should know then." Her voice was husky; she was surprised she could even talk. Her mouth felt incredibly dry. She picked up her glass of water, taking a deep swallow.

"Good." Travis turned to Rob. "Did you have any problem picking up her things? No hassles, I hope, with the Ranger?"

Rob shrugged and tilted his chin to a stubborn angle. "I'm not fifteen anymore, Travis. I managed."

"Glad to hear it." Travis seemed unaware of Rob's defensive posture. "Then everything is already at the ranch, except, of course, these boxes of books." He bent, picking up a heavy volume with apparent interest.

"The books were my fault." Sheena felt compelled to defend Rob, hoping to keep Travis from starting an argument with him. "When Rob told me he was going to claim my things, I requested my books." She spread her hands toward the boxes. "I didn't tell him which ones



to bring so he brought them all.”

She smiled at Rob, hoping to end the subject with her explanation.

“Then they’ve helped you remember something already?” Travis asked, still paging through the book in his hand.

“I...well...” Sheena paused to gather her thoughts. “I suppose they helped to jog something loose, although nothing specific. Nothing personal.” She finished her water nervously.

“It’s a start, at least.” Travis flipped the book closed and set it on her nightstand, then propped one foot on the bedrail.

“By the way, what brings you here, Travis? I thought you would be totally wrapped up in your murder case until the weekend.” Rob’s voice sounded stiff and strained.

“The trial had an unexpected delay today. You can see the results for yourself tonight on the late news, I expect.” Travis gave nothing away.

Rob apparently wasn’t satisfied with the vagueness of his answer. “You got a conviction fairly easily, didn’t you? The jury must have been prejudiced, or you’re even a better lawyer than I thought.”

Travis shrugged. “Nothing is that simple, Rob, and I don’t recall saying it was over. The judge put the case to rest for the weekend, that’s all.” He glanced sideways at Sheena. “Now, let’s talk about something else. Sheena, do you need anything before we leave tomorrow?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Rob got all of my personal things from storage in Tempe. I won’t know what I’ll need until we’re at the ranch and I’ve had a chance to go through them.”

“Well, if you need anything while you’re with us, you’ve only to ask.” Travis smiled into her taut face. “What time can you leave tomorrow?”

“The doctor makes his morning rounds early, and he mentioned he would like to meet with you and Rob before discharging me. Would seven be too early?”

“Excellent.” Travis hadn’t taken his eyes off her. “I’ll file a flight plan tonight for tomorrow morning, then.”

He nodded to her, patting the bed beside him in invitation. At first,

Sheena didn't move; but as he waited patiently, she realized she was being foolish. She had nothing to fear from him. It wasn't his fault her body reacted in such a bewildering fashion to his presence. Slowly, she stepped over and sat on the edge of the bed, making sure she was far enough away from him there was no chance they might touch. Travis turned his attention back to Rob once she was settled.

"What did you think of the ranch, Rob?"

His question was casual, but as she watched him she saw his dimple deepen. Was it so important for Rob to be impressed by the changes he had made to the ranch?

"You've remodeled quite a few things—all for the best, I'm sure. It's too bad Mom couldn't have seen the addition to the house. She would have loved it. The new horses are a bonus also, I guess, and the barn never looked better."

"I'm glad you approve." Travis hooked a thumb in his belt, and there was a long moment of silence, as if he were sizing Rob up. "How would you like to manage it?"

For a second, Sheena thought Rob wasn't going to answer; then a slow grin spread across his face.

"You're serious?"

"Yes. I can't handle both the ranch and my office in Phoenix right now. I need a manager, Rob, and who better than you?"

Rob considered this, the grin disappearing. Sheena felt she should leave—this conversation was none of her business. And she was sure Travis had an ulterior motive for asking Rob in front of her. She felt irritation narrow her eyes; she had no desire to become further involved in their personal problems.

But as she watched the brothers she had to admire their casual manner, the slow appraisal they gave each other. Travis's manner was one of nonchalance, Rob mirrored his brother and suddenly, she knew what Travis was about. In his own way, he was offering Rob the chance to trust him; and from Rob's expression, it seemed to be working. She couldn't help but smile. Travis had made his offer public on purpose, to show them both he wasn't beyond compromising or even sacrificing. She found herself liking him for the first time.

"How long would this manager's job last?" Rob was still inclined to be cautious.

"Until either you decide to move on, or we settle the shares."

"Isn't this rather sudden?"

"Not at all. As Max told you at the ranch today, in the past I was able to sink a lot of time and energy into it, but lately I've just been too bloody busy to take proper care of it. I need a manager I can trust, and I've been looking for one. Max has tried to fill in during my absence, but because of his age it's too hard on him. He just doesn't have the education to handle the books or even to make important money decisions. You do, and besides, you have a vested interest in the ranch as a business. That alone makes you better than anyone I could hire. And the salary I pay will allow you to do almost anything you want. I know you have always planned to write that Great American Novel. This way you can do it in comfort."

Rob didn't respond for another long moment.

"I like to travel," he said at last. "Not that I'm not interested in the offer, Trav, but I've been tied down for more than six years in the Navy, and I need some freedom now, and time to write, not hassle over the ranch finances. Writing requires space, time and freedom."

"Of course, it does. You would be free to come and go as you like, since the hands are there to do the manual work. All you need do is oversee operations. What I need is a man on the spot to make the big decisions, keep the books, make the purchases and so on. The helicopter would be at your disposal, since I usually leave it there in the barn." Travis's voice hadn't changed, but the impact of his words had. "It would relieve my mind if I could count on you, Rob."

"I don't know anything about running a ranch, as you well know, Travis. You're selling and buying horses all the time, Max told me. What if my ignorance lost you money?"

"I would leave explicit instructions, and you would have the benefit of Mark's and Max's experience. As a last resort, the telephone is always ready to work for you. I would give you a dollar limit and expect you to use your own judgment."

Rob was as shrewd as Travis, she realized. He wasn't going to give an answer until he was sure of all of the rules. "Why offer this now,

and in front of Sheena?"

Travis smiled slowly. "You were always too cautious, Rob. But if you must know, I want someone I can trust in this job, and I wanted a witness when you agreed."

Rob considered this, drawing the silence out until Sheena felt her nerves might snap. Finally, he leaned forward, offering his hand. "I'll stay until Sheena leaves, no longer. After that you'll have to find yourself another manager."

"Fair enough." Travis dropped his foot from the bedrail and took Rob's hand. "When we get home tomorrow, I'll run you through the mill, give you my basic guidelines and the rest I leave to you."

He was smiling, and Sheena wondered what she had just witnessed. It seemed they had just agreed on something far more serious than just a manager's job. Before she could sort it all out, the door opened. Carlotta arrived carrying her dinner tray. She took three steps into the room before she came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh!" Her glance flew among the occupants, recognition and surprise conflicting for a place on her pretty Spanish face. "I should have knocked. I'm dreadfully sorry..." Her anxious survey stopped, glued to Travis's handsome face. "It is Mr. O'Keefe, the attorney, isn't it?"

Something strangely resembling fear replaced her earlier expression as she backed toward the door.

Travis noted her wide-eyed expression with obvious interest. He rose and went to her, taking the tray from her hands.

"I'm Travis O'Keefe, Miss..." He quickly read her nametag. "Miss Gomez." He smiled at her.

"I didn't realize that Sheena...Miss Lassiter...had anything to do with the Henkins murder trial. Is that how her accident occurred?"

Travis's expression remained friendly, although the sudden tension in his shoulders was clear. "I'm afraid not. Sheena and my brother aren't involved in that case, thank God."

He set the dinner tray down on the rolling side table and returned to where Carlotta waited.

"But I saw the noon news today. That man tried to kill you in the courtroom. He threatened revenge on your family. He shot you on TV.

Shouldn't you be under police protection or something, even in the hospital?"

Travis's voice was low but firm as he opened the door. "The man tried to shoot me yes, but as you can see, he didn't succeed. His other threats were just that. I expect he is regretting them tonight."

Carlotta obviously wanted to ask other questions, but Travis smoothly pushed her out the door, speaking to her in an undertone. Sheena saw the young nurse's brown skin flush as his voice rose.

"Thank you, Miss Gomez. I'm sure Sheena will enjoy her meal." He turned back to the room and faced them, smiling a little lopsidedly at her. "Aren't you hungry, Sheena? Here, let me move the table to the bed."

He maneuvered it into position.

"What was that all about?" Her tongue felt swollen too thick for her mouth. Fear sent shivers through her.

"You can't leave us hanging, Trav. What was the nurse jabbering about?" Rob demanded.

"The defendant's brother tried to murder me today in the courtroom. He is now in jail, so there's nothing to be concerned about. As you can imagine, it wasn't one of my more pleasant experiences, and definitely not a topic for dinner." He raised a dark eyebrow at Sheena. "I hope it hasn't destroyed your appetite, Sheena?" His voice became light, teasing. "We've got to start putting some meat on those bones, you know. A vet should be the first one to know how important proper nutrition is after a traumatic injury."

Sheena stared blankly at the covered tray. She could not keep the image of him bleeding and dying on a courtroom floor from flooding her mind.

Turning away from his all-seeing eyes, she hoped to prevent him from knowing about the terror that gripped her heart. Every nerve in her body was aware as he lifted the cover from her meal, handing her a fork. Rob got to his feet and came to her side.

"Your dinner just reminded me, Sheena, I promised to meet Phil and Mary at the Gables tonight. I've got to run. See you first light." He bent, touching dry lips to her cheek in a light peck. "I'll be back to the motel around midnight, Trav, if you need me for anything."

He nodded to both of them before he disappeared out the door.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ONCE HE WAS GONE, SHEENA FOUND HERSELF WITH NOTHING TO SAY, but it was apparent Travis didn't suffer the same problem. He lifted her meat dish, sniffing it.

"Smells interesting, what do you think it is?"

"Pork chops smothered in gravy." She kept her focus on the plate.

"You've even got chocolate pudding." He smacked his lips, "What's the matter, Sheena, don't you like chocolate pudding?"

"I do, but the hospital variety taste likes paste. You can have it, if you like." She fiddled with the wrap around her salt and pepper. She decided she had better eat something—she didn't want him feeding her, and she was suddenly sure he would if she ignored her tray.

He picked up the pudding and took the chair Rob had vacated. He took a bite, swallowing and reaching instantly for her water, clearing his throat.

"Like eating mashed paper, isn't it? Bland and tasteless." He put the dish and spoon back down, grinning into her face. "Would you like me to smuggle in a hamburger, fries and shake?"

Sheena felt her lips curve into a smile. "You can't do that. There are rules, Travis."

She tried to sound logical and firm, but the thought of a grilled hamburger was almost too much for her.

"Rules are meant to be stretched, Angel. Give me your order. I'll deliver."

"You shouldn't." She tried to sound like she meant it. "I mean, you could get in trouble. It isn't necessary, really."

He was already out of the chair. He lifted her chin with one finger,

tilting her face so he could look into her eyes.

"Just give me your order, Sheena, and I'll bring it back to you." The look in his jade eyes made her heart pound. His voice was soft, persuasive; and she couldn't resist it. There was a warmth in the way he looked at her that made her head spin.

"A cheeseburger, fries and a strawberry shake."

"Good girl. I'll be back before Miss Gomez can reclaim her tray." He trailed his fingers down the side of her neck in the merest caress.

Sheena was still trying to think of something to say after the door closed behind him. It was obvious he had made up his mind to bring her a smuggled meal, and she was hungry for something other than the hospital choices.

With an impatient sigh, she went to the window, arriving just in time to see his broad back as he stepped off the curb and strode to a low-slung car. Of course, he would own a sports model. Everything about him spoke of wealth and position. He moved with confidence, a slight swagger to his stride as if he could manage everything that came his way without any trouble.

Sheena lifted her chin to a stubborn angle. Well, he might be able to win most women with a charming smile, manipulate men with his cajoling methods, convince a jury of a man's guilt or innocence, but he would not have such an easy time with her.

She had observed his conversation with Rob in fascination. It wasn't what he had said but the way he had carefully phrased his request that had won him the victory he was seeking. He had talked to Rob of trust, as if there were no differences between them. He *was* a master at persuasion, she decided.

She felt a cold shiver of premonition run up her spine.

Every look they had exchanged tonight had been charged. Just a glance from his dark eyes made her conscious of her body in a way that made her blush. She went to the bathroom mirror to stare at herself.

The bruises were fading. The knot on her forehead was concealed, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She patted her hair as she wrinkled her nose at her image. Why was she concerned how she looked? She had just told herself she wasn't about to be maneuvered



into anything, and yet...

No, she wouldn't allow him to wield her with soft words or smuggled meals. She would not be intimidated by his virility, either. But it didn't hurt, she defended herself, to look as attractive as possible while she discovered his real motives.

Sheena studied her face. No one would ever call her homely, but she wasn't a raving beauty, either, she didn't think. There was a perky, energetic quality to her face that saved it from being lost in a crowd. Her hair tumbled about her shoulders, framing her face, giving it a pixyish look that was attractive. It must be that he found interesting about her, she decided. That he was interested in her was obvious.

A man like Travis wouldn't normally go out of his way for others, she was sure of that, yet he had sent her the satin robe and flowers. That alone proved he was aware of her in a different way. Then, Sheena admitted to herself, she might never know why she couldn't seem to avoid responding to him, either. Why he was never out of her mind.

With an impatient shrug, she left the mirror to return to the window. What did it all matter, anyway? Without a memory her past was dead. She probably wouldn't know him long enough to get any of her questions answered. Actually, she hoped she would have little to do with him once she got to the ranch.

Sheena decided she really didn't even like Travis O'Keefe. He was far too straightforward and aggressive for her taste. She chuckled as she wondered what his reaction would be if she told him as much. That he wouldn't like it shouldn't matter to her, but it did.

It was dark outside—she could barely make out the tall San Francisco peaks. Traffic was light, and she envied every car on its way home. At least the people inside them knew where they were, and what to expect. They knew themselves, and where they were going.

"Hungry yet?" Travis asked from the door, and she jumped.

"Starved."

He laughed, low and mischievous, as he picked up the tray and replaced it with a white paper bag.

"A double cheeseburger, a shake, fries and a dessert for the lady,

a burrito and taco for me.” He passed her a shake. “I hope you like catsup,” he said, then, “I’ve no fondness for mustard myself, and I told them to hold yours before I thought.”

He handed her a small package of catsup for the fries.

She looked into the dark pools of his eyes, feeling she might willingly drown in their depths, before she hastily turned away.

“Thank you,” she said formally before taking her first bite of the burger.

They were silent as they ate, and she imagining the dim interior of her room was a candlelit restaurant. What made her think such things? she asked herself as she wiped her hands on a napkin. It was ridiculous to think of intimate dinners and candlelight during her first meal with him. Surely, she wasn’t the type to fantasize just because a man showed her some attention.

Looking at him through her thick lashes, she wondered what he must think of her. She noted his strong jaw and the absurd dimple in his cheek as he chewed the last of his taco. Does he see me as young, impulsive, an aggravation? He definitely aggravated her, she decided, yet she couldn’t forget the warmth of his lips on her bruised hand, the tenderness as he kissed her palm or the way he had tilted her head before leaving minutes before.

Sheena felt an unusual warmth enter her face—what would it feel like to have him make love to her? Hear him whisper sweet love words in her ear? The thoughts were too close to the surface to hide if he met her eyes, so she quickly picked up her trash, making a show of putting them in the original sack.

Travis finished his meal and leaned back, stretching his long legs so they came near hers where they hung from the side of her bed. He put his hands behind his head as he relaxed in the chair, sighing as he closed his eyes. He would definitely have a woman in his life somewhere, more than likely several dozen, she decided. It wouldn’t do to have too many of these private thoughts. They could only lead to trouble, and she didn’t need any more problems to deal with. Especially with a man as smart as he must be.

Sheena admitted she had enjoyed their companionable silence as they ate, but now she searched her mind to find a way to start a

conversation. She reminded herself she would have to be careful. She couldn't afford to let him take advantage of her. She was positive he was capable of turning any conversation around to what he wanted it to be, just as he had with Rob.

Memory or no memory, she could manage by herself; it was time she let him know that. If he would be willing to give her a temporary loan she could stay here in Flagstaff until she decided what to do. But even as the thought passed through her mind another, stronger image replaced it.

He was offering her too much to ignore because of stubborn pride; and if nothing else, he was a challenge she knew she could not back away from. Any price was worth finding out why he sparked fear and desire in her at the same moment. Maybe through him she might remember her past, and at the moment he was the only link she had to it. Wasn't that worth everything?

Coward, she thought next, it would be too easy to allow him to take over her life, and yet...it would be foolish to think she could do everything on her own, especially now.

"What are you thinking?" His voice was warm, deep and soothing.

Sheena closed her eyes for an instant. His voice relaxed her, made her want to trust him, but sparked no memory.

"Could it be, Sheena, that you're beginning to remember something?"

Her eyes flipped open, but she couldn't tell from his demeanor whether he was amused or just curious.

"I wish I were. I was just wondering how to ask you something."

"I don't mind questions, Sheena."

"I've no right to be curious, or to pry, but this case—the murder case—are you in jeopardy?"

A slight movement of his shoulders brought him upright. He leaned toward her. She was thankful the table was still between them.

"I don't want you concerned about that. What happened today in court was unfortunate, but the man is now under lock and key and will remain that way for some time to come. His family won't carry out his threats, either. No one is that self-sacrificing, or stupid." His eyes were dark and serious. "It was a case of courtroom dramatics,

nothing more or less. I'm not hurt nor was anyone else. Does that put your mind at ease?"

"I just don't want to be another hindrance to you, especially at this critical time, with a murder trail to concentrate on." She shifted away from his dark intensity. "I can take care of myself, Travis. If you'll just give me a small loan until I remember I could remain here in Flagstaff. I'll pay it back with interest," she assured him quickly. "I'm feeling better each day, and I think it would be better for all of us if I just stayed here with the doctors until my memory returns."

He sat back, considering her rushed speech. "What gives you the idea you could ever be a hindrance to me, Sheena? As a matter of fact, I'm hoping it will be you who brings Rob to his senses. Also, the ranch does need a vet—several of my mares are going to foal soon, and I always hire one to stand by in case of problems.

"Did I tell you I raise palominos and Arabians? It's a lucrative business, but it requires more managing than I've been able to give it recently. You won't find yourself bored, I can assure you."

"I just don't want to put anyone out because of my problems. You must realize how awkward I find this whole situation. I don't know you, Rob—or myself. How can I be sure the reason you're staying away from your ranch isn't because of me? How can I not think you're doing this because I was foolish and got hurt because I was frightened?"

For a long moment he didn't respond, and she felt her nerves tighten. She had phrased that poorly. She opened her mouth to speak again, but he headed her off.

"I'm not sure I can convince you my absence has nothing to do with you. But I must be away to do the research for my present case. The defendant committed crimes in other states, and I need to fly there to meet with other lawyers. I never convict a man before I know all of the facts, Sheena." He watched her almost idly as he continued, "As to whether you're involved in my decision to stay away, I must honestly admit I don't know."

He considered her with masculine interest. "I usually only go to the ranch on weekends anymore, and that probably won't change while you're there. With Rob's guarantee he will remain as long as

you do, there will even be even less reason for me to be there. So, don't worry about my presence, if that is what is bothering you. As a matter of fact, I've many businesses and social commitments I've ignored for sometime. Your presence at the ranch will keep Rob there and give me some free time to pursue those social commitments. Besides, Sheena, you would prove a distraction for me I don't think either of us is ready for."

She understood his tactful innuendo and opened her mouth, then shut it. There was nothing she could say.

"I'm not saying I wouldn't enjoy a romantic liaison with you," he admitted, "but I'm giving you time to orient yourself first. Despite what you've been thinking, or been told, I do understand how confusing and unsettling this entire situation is for you. It's never useful to become involved in an...an affair of the heart when you're not at your prime, no matter the circumstances. Affairs, by their very definition, are already bordering on chaos, and to keep control of the situation our emotions need to be at our best."

"I don't like what you're suggesting, Mr. O'Keefe." She quickly decided to be formal with him, hoping this would put some distance between them. "I believe you've a very big ego."

"Have I?" He grinned. "How interesting."

Did she annoy him as much as he annoyed her? Pushing the table aside she stood, not noticing he caught her partially finished shake as it skidded toward his lap. What did he think she was, some oversexed female out for everything she could get? How dare he insinuate she was looking for a romantic fling with him. Sheena glared at him, seeing the ill-concealed twinkle in the depths of his eyes.

"Don't think I'm not grateful for your generous offer of hospitality, Mr. O'Keefe, but I don't think I like you at all. You're used to manipulating people, controlling their lives, but I won't stand for it. Nor will I let you think for a moment I'm interested in some type of...of...liaison with you—or your brother." She put her hand up to keep him from interrupting. "I know I'm vulnerable in my current condition, but it isn't likely to be permanent. I know I must have a well-thought-out plan for myself once I regain my memory, and I'm positive you aren't a part of it."

"First, I think you and I have gone far beyond formality, Sheena. Please call me Travis in the future. And, second, I never meant to interfere in your future. I happen to admire your incredible independence under the circumstances. I even understand your logic, although I think you're overreacting, more from emotion than reason, at the moment. I never meant to frighten you."

"I am not frightened of you. That's your ego talking. But I won't stand for innuendoes and propositions from you. You use them to confuse me, and..." She felt backed into a wall, knowing full well this whole discussion was only making her look foolish, but she couldn't stop. "...and I don't like how you look at me, either."

What in the world was wrong with her? she asked herself, it seemed for the hundredth time this evening. She was saying things she had never meant to say.

"I'm curious. How do I look at you?" He was obviously intrigued.

It was the last question she expected. He looked so calm and composed. Why had she started this in the first place?

"You know exactly what I mean. You're doing it right now, Travis O'Keefe."

His eyes narrowed slowly, and she saw a twitch start at the corner of his mouth as he unsuccessfully tried to suppress the grin that tugged at his lips.

"Sheena, you remember that agreement we signed?" He avoided further comment on the way he looked at her or his earlier innuendo. "That is a legal contract on both sides. How would you feel if I tried to back out of it now, hmm?"

"You agreed to act as my vet during your recovery, and pursue whatever course you wanted inside or outside the courts afterwards. I've told you I won't be around most of the time, and I've hopefully made it clear I'm as reluctant to get romantically involved with you as you are with me. I hadn't thought you were the type of woman to be insulted just because I alluded to an attraction between us."

He was hitting the nail on the head and she knew it, but she still couldn't admit it as he continued in the same tone.

"Believe me, Sheena, the courts take a dim view of unsubstantiated fear as due cause for backing out of a contract."

"But that was before...before I thought of so many things. I mean..." She faced the window, taking a deep breath to steady her voice. "I mean I can't accept your generous offer. I don't feel I'm capable of handling the job you've created for me. I wouldn't want to jeopardize your animals just because I can't remember something at the critical moment. You wouldn't be getting anything from your investment, and I would be getting everything." She had worked her hands into a knot. "I would feel safer...I mean...better...if I remained here in Flagstaff, near my doctor, maybe even tried contacting some of my friends back East."

Sheena heard him stand and knew before he touched her chin what was about to happen. When his fingers locked around her jaw, she sucked in her breath. With a casual tightening of his fingers, he turned her to face him.

"It's only natural to be frightened, Sheena. I would be amazed if you weren't. But it isn't natural to lock yourself away because of an unfortunate accident, or because the future is an unknown." He had dropped his hand but the warm imprint of his fingers remained. "Quit tormenting yourself. If you want answers to the questions in your mind you've got to seek them. That includes accepting things as they are now between you and me."

His expression was tender, compassionate, and she relaxed in spite of her anxiety, wanting to believe him.

"You and I affect each other on some elemental level—we're both aware of it. Sexual attraction happens between males and females of every species. It is nothing to be ashamed—or frightened—of. Find out for yourself if it's good or bad in our case, but don't hide from it. Don't lock yourself away because of the emotions I arouse in that empty place that is now your memory."

"I promise you I won't take advantage of this situation, and later, when your memory fully returns, we will decide together what we should do about it."

Sheena stood hypnotized by his lips as he went on.

"You'll never discover yourself by hiding from life, Sheena. I think the ranch will be especially good for you now. Not only is it quiet and peaceful, but you'll see life—raw, beautiful life as it is. You need that

now, but without me there to confuse you. So, I'll stay away for a while, and when I'm there I'll make sure we stay far enough apart we don't strike sparks off each other. Give it time. I promise you I will."

Travis stopped, his voice soaking into her brain with warm understanding and persuasive power. He touched her neck in the tiniest caress; her nerves seemed to ignite at the brush of his fingers. She wanted to press them to her rapidly beating heart.

Instead, she opened her eyes to find him standing directly in front of her, the heat of his body searing hers.

"You promise." Her voice was barely audible as she met his serious gaze.

"I'm not about to rush you into anything you're not prepared for. That isn't my style. If anything happens between us, you'll be the one to make the move."

"I'll remember that...Travis."

He grinned, his focus now on her lips. "And now, I'm going to kiss that ridiculous smear of ice cream from your lips and seal our bargain."

He bent before she registered what he'd said; his mouth opened wide on hers. His tongue smoothly removed the sticky residue of her shake. His kiss lasted only a fraction of a second, but she felt her knees go weak, glad of the support of the wall behind her.

He lifted his head, running his tongue across his mouth carefully, holding her gaze. "I'll leave you now. Tomorrow will be a long day, Sheena, you'll need your rest."

Travis walked calmly toward the door. His hand rested on the metal handle before she found her voice.

"Thank you, Travis...for the food."

He nodded, once more taking a long, all-over look at her. "Sleep well, Angel. By the way, maroon satin suits your complexion as well as I thought it would."

Her hands flew to her cheeks.

"Tomorrow, Sheena. You won't regret it." He was gone.



## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

**B**Y THE END OF THE FOLLOWING DAY SHEENA WAS DRAGGING. SHE FELT she had absorbed more than her mind could possibly ever sort out, and her body ached from sheer weariness. Yet she hid her exhaustion behind calm interest as Travis led her to the barn to introduce her to the mares that were expecting.

Everything had happened so quickly since the doctor had released her from the hospital in Rob's and Travis's care. The three of them had gone to the airport, where Rob said goodbye, explaining he would be taking Travis's car to the ranch while Travis flew her over the Grand Canyon and Lake Powell. Sheena's heart raced at the news, but she protested just the same.

"That isn't necessary, really." She was sitting in the passenger seat of their car.

Travis glanced at her briefly as he opened his door, but it was Rob who laughed at her protest, saying, "Sheena, you're a wonder. You do want to see the Grand Canyon, don't you? Believe me, the aerial view is magnificent. It will be much more comfortable for you in the helicopter, too. The roads between here and the ranch are rough and dusty."

"But surely, this will be going out of the way. I never expected..."

"Would you stop protesting, sweetheart?" Rob looked into her eyes. "It isn't out of the way for Trav. He has a meeting in Page at noon, and since you've never seen the greatest natural wonder in the world, it's only natural he fly you over. Take it from me, Travis isn't doing you a special favor or going out of his way at all."

Sheena glanced at Travis, who had been strangely preoccupied since his arrival this morning. He neither confirmed nor argued the

point—nor acted as if he had heard his brother.

“If you're certain.” She was still watching Travis as he stepped away from the car.

He glanced back at her. His eyes were warm as he leaned into the door and answered. “We're certain, Sheena. Page is on the other side of the Canyon, and I have to fly over the east rim to get there. I wouldn't mind the company if you don't.”

Sheena automatically stiffened, wishing he wouldn't look at her as if he wanted to eat her.

“I think I've always wanted to see the Grand Canyon,” she replied rather lamely, wishing she had known this the previous night.

“You shouldn't worry about flying with him, Sheena. Travis is an excellent pilot—had to be to get out of Desert Storm alive.”

Rob was leading her across the runway to the waiting Jet Ranger helicopter.

“I'm not worried about his skills,” she assured him. The one thing she didn't doubt was Travis's ability to pilot the craft. He was too good at everything for her to be concerned about that. What bothered her was being alone with him for hours.

“Then relax, sister of mine,” Rob teased, speaking for her ears alone. “You'll enjoy the flight, and you couldn't ask for a better guide than Travis. He loves the country, and he worked one summer in the Grand Canyon when he was twenty. Ask him questions, pick his brain. You'll learn a lot. I'll see you tonight at the house.” He grinned as he squeezed her hand. “Take the copilot's seat, and get ready for the thrill of your life.”

He waved goodbye and disappeared. Sheena was still trying to tighten her seatbelt when Travis climbed in beside her. He leaned over and pulled the belt tight with a quick jerk, his breath touching her cheek. Sheena was too conscious of the way his shirt hugged his chest, the way his jeans hugged his thighs to notice anything else. She stared directly ahead, knowing instinctively he had read her reaction and was amused.

He put on the headphones and started the engine, talking to the tower; then they began to move forward. Sheena could feel her heart in her throat as they began their slow ascent. Travis turned the

chopper to the east as they gained altitude, moving at considerable speed.

"Nervous?" he asked when they leveled out and she obeyed as he motioned for her to put on the second headset.

She knew it would do no good to lie, so she nodded.

"I'm not sure if I've ever been in a helicopter before." She looked out the window at her side. He reached over and adjusted her headset as they moved over Flagstaff. "It's so picturesque. I had no idea the town curved into the sides of the mountains like this. When was it settled?"

The countryside below was intriguing, and she wanted to know as much about it as possible. Sheena forgot for a moment whom she was with.

"It was incorporated in 1894, settled by lumbermen. To your right..." He pointed. "...right there is one of the old mills. See it?"

Sheena leaned forward. "How high are the peaks?"

He grinned, but she didn't notice. She was totally absorbed by the view.

"The high one is Humphrey's Peak. It rises to more than twelve thousand, six hundred feet. It has snow on it even in August most years."

Sheena's natural curiosity had replaced any fear she still had left. "Is the whole region made up of volcanic peaks and craters like that one?"

She pointed to a sizable mountain coming into view.

"Yes and no. Everything around the San Francisco Peaks is volcanic. That peak there..." He pointed again to the east. "...is Sunset Crater National Monument. But the desert areas to the north are mostly sedimentary rocks. You'll get a bird's-eye view of the strata when we fly through the Grand Canyon."

His voice was pleasant and impersonal. Sheena was happy about that—it made it much easier to question him. She didn't have to think about being alone with him more than eighteen hundred feet from solid ground.

He was pointing again. "The place where the trees give out ahead is Wupatki National Monument. It was partly set aside to preserve the

ancient Indian culture that once lived there, but I find it very scenic myself."

She glanced at his face; she could tell he was thoroughly enjoying himself. He obviously loved to fly, and was extremely efficient with his movements. She noticed he was monitoring the gauges before him with studied casualness at the same time he showed her the countryside. Was there anything this man couldn't do? Why did he have to be so proficient at everything?

Instantly, she chided herself. She was here to enjoy the tour, not to think about Travis. She looked back toward the ground, pleased that he had kept his comments nonchalant. Maybe what she'd told him had soaked in last night. If he could remember, then she definitely could.

Gazing out the window she took a deep breath, noting the contours of the changing landscape below them. How rapidly the trees had vanished, and the desert had appeared. She knew as she watched the changing pattern of vegetation that this was a totally foreign environment to her. She could feel the vastness of the country; and even from the sterile atmosphere of the helicopter cockpit, Sheena knew the land beneath her was harsh but also very beautiful.

There were no homes or people to be seen; and the emptiness made her shudder. Back east people lived in every valley and curve of hill. Here was only open space, a rare road and hundreds of miles of bare land. The very bareness spoke of freedom, independence and sacredness. It was a delicate place, the Earth, despite its apparent ruggedness. It required special handling by angels. Or men with foresight and courage, men like...

She saw the erosion that had cut deep arroyos and understood water was the rarest thing here, and the most powerful. She saw a deep canyon cutting down into the living rock. Sucking in her breath, she asked.

"Is that the Grand Canyon?"

Travis chuckled, and she shot him a wounded glance.

"Not yet, honey. The Grand Canyon is more than twenty air miles from here. This is the place where the Little Colorado River begins to

cut down so it can meet its sister the Colorado. It has nothing on the Grand Canyon."

Sheena frowned. "But that one must be several hundred feet deep."

Again Travis chuckled. "Try more than four hundred. The Grand Canyon is over a mile deep, Sheena, and almost twenty miles across." He began turning the helicopter to the west.

She was thrilled by the rugged beauty spread below her and forgot to ask any more questions for a while—or even to be upset that he had laughed at her observations...and called her "honey."

Sheena was awestruck when suddenly the earth seemed to split apart and the narrow, deep gorge they had been following spilled into the widest, deepest, most beautiful canyon she had ever seen. She wasn't aware of her gasp as the variety of colors and harsh, angled rocks took shape below her; she had no way to judge the depth or width of the split earth. Travis spoke as she pressed her forehead against the window in an effort to see everything.

"Do that long, angel, and you'll be airsick, guaranteed."

"But..." She swung her head round to stare at him. "...it was as if the earth suddenly sank, and everything became unreal. I..." She turned back to the window so as not to miss anything. "I could never have dreamed anything like this. It's so huge, so..."

Words failed as he dropped the chopper down below the rim of the canyon. Her mouth hung open as she absorbed the beauty surrounding her. It was too fantastic for her to grasp. When Travis began to talk it registered only dimly in her dazed brain.

"So, do you think that Arizona's great natural wonder deserves all of the hype?" he asked. She only nodded, and he chuckled. "Don't tell me something has finally robbed you of speech, Sheena. I never thought to see it."

His amusement didn't faze her.

"It's so rugged, so wild...unearthly..." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "People actually hike through it, don't they?"

"Sure do. It's a place you must walk through to understand, and even then it's elusive. You must hear, feel, breathe and sweat to touch the essence of this place. Someday, you and I'll return and backpack

through it together.”

Sheena sighed—it sounded so intriguing, to meet the land on its own terms, come to know it intimately. Then her brain clicked as she registered what he’d said. She couldn’t believe she’d heard right. They would never be on such terms with each other.

Travis sent her a sidelong glance, gauging her reaction. She blushed at the intimate thoughts that swirled through her brain. Damn him, he wasn’t honoring their agreement, and he had taken her completely off-guard.

She opened her mouth to protest, but he pointed to his left and said, “The canyon is a geologist’s paradise, Sheena. Right there you can easily see a million years of earth’s history spread before you like the layers of a cake.”

She looked where he pointed as he continued. “Every layer represents a different era in Earth’s life. It makes human problems and conflicts seem completely insignificant. This view humbles even the most arrogant. They may not be able to express it, but everyone who first sees this is silenced in wonder.”

He lowered the chopper into the inner gorge, giving her a spectacular view of the lavender-colored walls and talus slopes leading to the green ribbon of water that was the Colorado River. Her heart beat erratically as she mentally estimated the height of the walls, but before she could question Travis’s judgment for bringing them so close to them he was climbing again. When they rose above the sandstone he pointed once more.

“That’s the South Rim Village, Sheena, and that trail is the Bright Angel. It’s the most popular trail into the inner canyon, and probably the safest route. We’ll turn now and head for the North Rim. It rises more than seventy-five hundred feet and has a completely different feel than the South Rim.”

Sheena watched as the canyon spread below her. She felt as if she were in a wonderful dream, floating like a cloud. He continued to point out landmarks to her: the bridge over the Colorado, Phantom Ranch, the Kaibab Trail leading to Yaki Point. When they topped the cliffs again, she saw the few buildings that made up the North Rim Village.

She was awed and speechless—she didn't even know the questions to ask anymore. She was happy Travis needed no encouragement to continue telling her about all she was seeing. She would never remember half of it, but she was thrilled by the level of his knowledge.

It seemed only a matter of minutes before the canyon narrowed again. He pointed out Lee's Ferry as they flew over it; then, in the next instant, it seemed, he was contacting Page's airport as they settled to the ground.

Sheena could hardly believe she was on the same planet as the one they had left this morning in Flagstaff. Everything had changed drastically. There were no trees here. The chill of the mountains was gone, replaced by the hot breath of the desert. She could feel the heat of the noonday sun coming up through the soles of her tennis shoes, and the land had turned a pale yellow—none of the lavender glow here. She was happy for her foresight in wearing jeans as the wind gusted around her legs.

Travis led her to a small building that served as Page's air terminal; her stomach quivered as he left her for a moment. She wanted to thank him for the trip and all he had shown her, but when he returned the man they were to have lunch with accompanied him, and there was no opportunity.

Ronald Palmer shook her hand when Travis introduced her as a member of his family. He smiled at her then led them to a pickup. Once she was safely tucked between the two men, Travis asked her, "Hungry?"

"As long as it isn't mashed potatoes." She couldn't hide her pleasure. This man was a product of the incredible land he lived in, answering its challenge with an independence and self-assurance that made her heart flutter. She wondered suddenly if it would have been less difficult for her to deal with him if he wasn't so independent and self-assured.

"I promise—no mashed potatoes or chocolate pudding. Page has a good Mexican restaurant, and they specialize in flan."

"The hospital served tacos one night. They were greasy and tasted of fish," she said.

Travis grinned. "Well, you're in for a treat. These won't be rancid, I can guarantee that, and the salsa..." He smacked his lips and winked. "...will make your mouth water."

"Or your eyes," Palmer added. Then he asked about their trip.

Travis explained Sheena had never flown over the Grand Canyon before, which accounted for her being with him. Ronald accepted that and seemed to be more at ease.

As they waited on their meal, Travis got down to business, asking Palmer very specific questions. Sheena realized as the interview continued that his interrogation was very pointed, meant to get the most information about his current client from this man without being leading or provocative. He displayed an intuitive quality that amazed her, and she developed new respect for him as she listened.

When the meal was served, he ended his questions, and the rest of the time was passed pleasantly with small talk. An hour later they were back at the truck, and Palmer gave the keys to Travis.

"You'll want to take your friend by the gorge—I can pick up the vehicle at the airport later. Have a good flight."

The two men shook hands as Travis accepted the offer.

All of Sheena's earlier irritation with him had vanished as they ate. She had seen how committed he was to his work and observed some of his principals in action today; and she was affected by it.

She realized he would never be a man to make an enemy of, but if he were your friend he would be loyal to the end. She could tell by the set of his jaw that he rarely ever failed. Her observations only enhanced his very vital sexual attraction, and even though she knew he represented everything that was dangerous she couldn't help wanting to get to know more about him.

She shook her head. She must quit thinking such thoughts.

Travis turned the vehicle in the opposite direction from the one they had arrived from and she asked, "Isn't this the wrong way?"

"Yes, but I'm surprised you noticed—you've been so preoccupied since we landed."

She cleared her throat before answering. "I've always had a good sense of direction, I guess. Are we going straight to the gorge, then?"

"Yes." He shifted gears before looking at her. "It's quite



spectacular, even if I have some basic philosophical differences with the way the water is managed. You shouldn't miss it."

Sheena was too ignorant of the politics of the West to even comment on that.

"I hadn't realized the dam was controversial. Do you mean it shouldn't be where it is?"

They were climbing a hill, and as they topped it she sucked in her breath at the great expanse of water suddenly in front of her. It was disturbingly beautiful and foreign to the landscape, so much water trapped between red sandstone mesas that she felt repulsed.

He noted her expression.

"I'll let you read Ed Abbey's books, especially *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Desert Solitaire*. Then, I believe, you'll understand some of my philosophical differences with the dam."

"If you mean it's foreign to the landscape, I understand that. But it is strangely beautiful in a bizarre way, all that water and red rock. I've the feeling it destroyed many miles of equally beautiful desert. Yet...it must provide recreation, irrigation, even water for the people of Arizona. I don't think I like it, but I can't help admiring it."

He had parked the pickup at a pull-out, and they followed the concrete walk out to watch the water pour from the spillway in the side of the beautiful red sandstone cliffs.

"You're amazing, Sheena." Travis spoke just loud enough that she could hear him above the roar of the water and noisy traffic. "And you wonder why we're attracted to each other."

She stiffened, aware all at once of how close he stood to her. His arm rested against the metal fence above her head; his thigh brushed against hers. The way his close-clipped hair curved around his ear—the very timbre of his voice—set sparks off in her chest.

"I don't think my observation is that unusual," she defended herself. "I'm quite certain many people react to the dam in the same manner."

"I wish that were true." He turned and leaned against the fence. "Most people, when they see something as dramatic as this..." He swung his arm to encompass the scene around them. "...see only the pluses, never the things that were lost. You saw it immediately."

"Why didn't you go into environmental law if you feel so strongly about it?"

His gaze glided over her, lingering on her feminine curves. "I thought about it. I even practiced it for a short while, but I'm too emotionally involved to be any good at it. I'm much better as a criminal prosecutor, and the pay is better."

He said it cynically, but there was a wicked glow behind his eyes as he ended.

She couldn't resist the temptation. "Sometimes the reward is in knowing you're doing something you believe in."

Travis grinned, answering as she had known he would. "I believe in my current work. Any time I can put a criminal out of society's path, I know I made the right decision."

"Even if it means you might be murdered in revenge?"

He nodded, eyes locked with hers. "Even if it means I'm murdered or injured. I know justice must have defenders, and I plan to remain a very active defender until someone throws me out of the game."

He stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets, returning to stare at the wild gorge.

Yes, she decided, he would always defend the helpless, whether through legal means or in his own independent fashion. Just as he was willing to help her. She would hate to be a guilty criminal facing him in court—she doubted she could ever lie to those eyes, that deep voice.

Looking quickly away she took a deep breath, wishing she had some cool water to bathe her face. The traffic had disappeared, and for a few moments she marveled at the red rock scar below her, intrigued by the depth of the silence that surrounded them despite the roar of water. Travis, too, seemed to be lost in thought.

She watched a profusion of fluffy clouds playing with the horizon against an azure sky. They made her feel carefree, and she smiled. Whatever was to be would happen, and in that instant she knew she had made the right decision in coming west. No matter that she had no idea what her true motive had been—everything felt right.

"We'd better be going, Sheena." Travis took her elbow. "It's more

than two hours to the ranch from here, and there's a storm brewing. See those rain clouds?" He pointed to the fluffy giants building on the horizon.

In the chopper, he continued the tour in the same impersonal manner. She had recognized his deep affection for the land earlier; but now as he described the people who lived below, she realized he understood them as well from years of close contact and sincere interest.

"Those mesas there," he pointed out, "are the ancestral homes of the Hopi Indians, who were probably the first people to settle North America. They still hold their seasonal calendar dances, the origins of which date back to their primeval beginnings. Someday, I hope you can see them. The people are fascinating, and bring home the basic values we so often forget in our rush to live life to the fullest, without regard for our fellow human beings or the land itself."

Sheena chewed her lower lip as she studied the isolated towns, the winding road that was like an umbilical cord attaching each separate pueblo to the next. The setting transported her back in time as she pondered the isolation and the amity that fed it. There was a slower way of life below her, one she had never experienced before. And she wondered if this was also part of the reason she had decided to come west.

Then she wondered why it all seemed familiar, if she had never been here before.

The chopper left the Hopi homelands too quickly, and soon they were over the Painted Desert. Once again Travis spoke of geology, telling her about the ancient petrified logs that were strewn across the desert like gems. She loved his descriptions of things, and knew he was giving her a tremendous introduction to the cool highland region of northern Arizona. She didn't think words could adequately thank him but she tried.

"I want to thank you, Travis." She said it shyly, still looking out at the ground below, seeing trees begin to loom ahead. "You've been a wonderful guide, giving me a feel for the land as well as the people. I appreciate it more than I can tell you."

She glanced at him as his lips curved into a smile.

"I'm glad, Sheena. Someday, we can drive over what I've just shown you from the air and share it." He pointed before she could respond. "There it is." He indicated several low buildings that had just popped into view. "The Rocking-K Ranch—our cattle brand is a circle with a capital K 'rocking' at a perilous angle inside."

He passed over a herd of cattle, pointing out several grazing horses before circling the ranch buildings. She admired everything in surprised silence as they descended.

## CHAPTER NINE

SHEENA HADN'T KNOWN WHAT TO EXPECT, BUT THE FRESHLY PAINTED buildings and metal fence line was not it. Her mind had created a desert scene, with well-seasoned buildings isolated on a great expanse of scrubland. Instead, she discovered a large metal barn, a yellow house, mesas and grassland dotted with huge ponderosa pines and a row of parked vehicles. She could see a dozen or more people milling around a barbeque pit as they landed near an outbuilding.

Travis hopped out of the helicopter, coming round to her side. He lifted her down with ease; and as he lowered her, their eyes met and held with curious intensity. Sheena's heart raced at the touch of his hands. She wondered what he expected her to say.

"It looks wonderful, and there are trees!"

He laughed, a full hearty sound.

"What were you expecting, angel? A burned-out desert filled with tumbleweeds?"

"What are tumbleweeds?"

He removed his hands, reaching behind her for his briefcase and her small case—the rest of her possessions had accompanied Rob this morning.

"You'll see soon enough. Ah..." He was looking past her. "If I don't miss my guess, there comes our welcoming party."

Sheena then saw a yellow jeep headed toward them; a dog loped beside it. As the vehicle drew close, she saw the driver was bronze-skinned with a full, oval face. His nose was broad, and the hair under his black Stetson was white. She realized he must be an Indian, but she had no idea which tribe he might be from.

"Ray Blackhorn is a Navajo, Sheena. Max is his grandson and lead

wrangler here,” Travis informed her in a whisper. “You’ll be meeting Molly, Ray’s wife, when we get to the house—she’s an Apache and my mom’s sister. Ray and Molly worked for my parents at the old trading post and, later, here on the ranch after my dad died.

“I learned all I know about ranching from Ray. He’s a good man—has a way with the animals you’ll appreciate, and a very sly sense of humor.”

The dog was a large blue heeler and ran straight up to Travis. Big furry paws hit him square in the chest.

“And this critter is Weaver. He’s never walked a straight path in his life—his eyes are crossed.”

Weaver was currently licking his master’s cheek with obvious delight.

“Thought you might have had trouble.” Ray’s voice was very nasal and heavily accented. “We were expecting you over an hour ago.”

“No problems, Ray, we just took the scenic route. I want you to meet our new vet. Sheena Lassiter . . . Ray Blackhorn.” Travis watched as she extended her hand with a warm smile.

Ray whipped off his black Stetson. “Heard all about you, miss. Rob hasn’t been able to talk of much else since he got in this afternoon. He said you had the warmest smile he ever saw, and I’ve got to agree.”

“Please call me Sheena, Mr. Blackhorn.”

“Ray is the name, Sheena.”

She wasn’t sure if she saw a flash of humor in his berry-brown eyes or not as Travis put an arm lightly across her shoulders. A wolf whistle sounded from the direction of two fast-approaching horses before she could shake the arm away.

“You didn’t tell us how pretty she is, Rob, and a vet, too! Why can’t I ever be as lucky as you two hombres?”

The young man was about Rob’s age and grinned at her with obvious appreciation. Ray made the introductions.

“This is my rude grandson Max, Sheena. I’m afraid he has already started taking part in the celebration. Rob, I warned you . . .”

He was obviously upset as Rob pulled his horse to a stop beside the jeep, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Travis smoothly intervened. "What's this about a celebration?"

"Well..." Ray looked sheepish. "The girls and Molly wanted to welcome Rob home proper. We were supposed to keep it a secret until we got you two to the house."

He glared at his grandson.

"I see," Travis responded, humor in his tone.

"You should see who's here, Travis," Rob volunteered. "Even old Yellow Horse came, and Martha Whitewind. Molly called everyone, and we're just waiting on the two of you to start the feast. Come on, Sheena." He offered her his hand, meaning to pull her up behind him on the stallion he was riding.

Sheena wondered what Travis thought of this surprise move as he dropped his arm and walked to the jeep, opening the door. She shook her head at Rob.

"I'm not sure my healing ribs can take a jog like that."

Rob laughed. "I won't trot, I promise. We can walk back. Come on."

"I've no choice at this stage, do I." She met Travis's worried frown; then his brow smoothed out and he winked. She relaxed and let Rob carefully help her into the saddle.

They didn't talk as they rode to the house, and Sheena got only a vague impression of the lay of the land before they were surrounded. Rob introduced her to an array of people as everyone talked at once. Her head spun with names and faces, and she hoped no one would expect her to remember them. She could feel herself withdrawing—had she been uncomfortable with crowds, preferring to have the ground swallow her rather than be the center of attention?

Travis arrived moments later, and he refused to leave her side as they made the circuit of the crowd of cowboys, their wives and children. He greeted the kids like adults, and it was obvious he was well-liked and respected by all present.

When they came at last to an older woman he stopped and kissed both of her cheeks.

"This is Molly, Sheena, my second mother."

"So, you're the vet?" The elderly woman pulled Sheena close to her, eyes running over her face and petite figure with curiosity. "I'm

thinking you're a mite small to be handling the horses, but when I look into your eyes I get another feeling altogether. You're not easily buffaloed by man or beast."

Sheena liked this straightforward woman immediately and smiled as Molly asked, "How old are you, Sheena?"

"How old are *you*, Molly?"

Molly threw back her head and laughed, a full, rich sound.

"Yep." She strangled her laugh as she spoke. "You've got spirit, and I can see why my boys are so taken with you. Yes, I can see why. But look at me. Travis, get everyone to the tables, it's time to eat."

The meal was delicious, and Sheena wished she hadn't eaten as much lunch. She sampled a little of everything, enjoying the Indian fry bread most, and the delicious chili and salsa despite their spicy heat that made her eyes water until she quickly downed her iced tea. Then there was an array of desserts to choose from, and Rob got her a smidgen of each one. Everyone was laughing and talking, catching up on news.

Sheena was surprised when a sophisticated-looking woman arrived. Her pants were new, deep-blue jeans, and the wispy scarf at her throat flirted with the open third button on her red-lace blouse. Every eye turned toward her, and silence accompanied her to the table.

Travis stood to greet her, and Sheena heard Rob suck in his breath as the woman gave Travis a smacking kiss on the lips.

"You're back!" The willowy newcomer threw her arms around Travis's neck and kissed him again full on the mouth. "It's been more than six months, Travis. You haven't even called me." She spoke loudly, her eyelashes fluttering in a flirtatious manner. "One of these days..."

"I've been busy, Violet." He made an effort to detach her arms from his neck and move her toward Rob.

"You scoundrel. You're too damned independent for your own good." She pulled his head back down, at which point he caught her wrists and set her away from him as he turned to Sheena, introducing her in the same breath.

"Sheena, I want you to meet our nearest neighbor, Violet Gaylock.



Her ranch runs along the east side of ours.”

Sheena extended her hand as Rob whispered in her ear, “They’re old friends, Sheena, don’t let her bother you.”

She shrugged, acting as if they didn’t interest her in the least; but her heart beat rapidly as she felt Travis watching her.

Violet ran friendly black eyes over Sheena before sliding past Rob to take her offered hand.

“Ray and Molly told me about you, Sheena. It must be marvelous to be a vet. I was always interested in that myself, but I’ve never had the patience to make a go of anything involving school.”

She laughed at herself as Travis pulled up a chair for her. She pointedly ignored Rob.

Sheena accepted her friendliness at face value. No matter what Violet might mean to Travis—or, if her suspicions were correct, Rob—she was going to be warm and friendly.

“I take it you’ve seen Rob since his return, Violet?” Travis picked up a tortilla and spread honey butter on it.

Violet finally looked at Rob, and a sudden bright light entered her eyes. “Rob, you’re looking well. Through with the Navy, are you?”

“I’m through,” he stated with no elaboration, taking an apple from a bowl. Ray staved off anything else he might have said, calling out that the fiddler had arrived and was ready to start if the couples would make squares.

Instantly, the table was deserted except for Sheena, Violet and the brothers. Everyone spread out in the yard for the dancing.

Rob stood, reaching for Sheena’s hand. “You’ve got to dance at least a few minutes, sweetheart. I promise to take it easy.”

She resisted when he tried to pull her from her chair.

“Rob, I don’t know if I’ve ever square-danced before. Please let me sit this one out and watch.”

He only grinned and got her on her feet. “Not on your life, sis. It isn’t that hard to learn, and I need an escape.”

They now had their backs to Travis and Violet.

“Don’t you recognize her?” Rob probed under his breath. Her confusion must have been reflected on her face. “Violet is the girl I told you about. She’s been in love with big brother since puberty, and

I've never been able to compete."

So, it was exactly as Sheena had suspected—what a triangle!

She took an empty place next to three other women—she couldn't recall their names and smiled shyly in greeting. The caller and a man with a fiddle were already in action, and she followed along with the steps until she ended up alongside Rob. Breathing rapidly after less than a minute, she yearned for escape.

Violet suddenly took her place as a hand caught her wrist and pulled her from the whirling dancers. The warm darkness of Travis's face beamed down at her.

"I must sit down," she whispered, and he led her to a chair.

"You should have protested, Sheena, and Rob should be shot. He knows better." His annoyance was apparent as he glared at his brother's back.

"I could have protested, Travis." She managed to catch her breath. "But I wanted to dance, so don't blame it all on Rob. I *am* weaker than I thought, though—it's been a long day."

She hadn't wanted to admit that, but she didn't like the way he continued glaring at Rob as the younger man swung Violet in a circle.

Travis finally relaxed, and his whole expression changed, becoming softer, warmer. There was concern in the wrinkles between his dark brows, and she could see the sun-sculpted crow's-feet deepen near his eyes in the dim light of early evening. Her breathing had almost returned to normal, but as his eyes met hers she realized she was holding it.

"Let's get out of here. I think we both could use some air." He caught her wrist again and led her into the dim glow of sunset toward the barn. They stood side-by-side at the corral. Sheena leaned her chin on the top rail, pretending not to notice the way Travis continued to study her, his back braced against the fence.

"You're exhausted, aren't you?" His warm voice caressed her ears.

"No," she lied. Darkness was fast falling around them this warm April evening. "My mind is too active, too much has happened to me today for me to rest yet."

She took a deep breath, liking the smell of horses and hay, the

clear Arizona air.

"Come on, then." He gripped her hand, pulling her along in his wake. "Let me introduce you to your new patients."

Sheena laughed, stumbling along behind him. "Isn't this a bit sudden? I was enjoying absorbing the atmosphere."

"Not sudden, since the only other thing I could think about doing was kissing you," he said without breaking stride.

Sheena felt a rush of blood in her face and neck. She hadn't expected him to be so straightforward or abrupt.

"My patients might be more interesting." Sheena tried to be flippant as he dropped her hand to open the barn door.

"You'll enjoy this also, if I don't miss my guess." He winked as he ushered her into a large room, flipping on a switch hidden in the shadows, lighting the interior in soft yellow illumination.

Sheena didn't wait for him to take her to the horses; she was beside them instantly on her own. Looking the first three over with a knowledgeable eye, she definitely liked what she saw. They were well-groomed, healthy; and she patted the nose of a beautiful palomino mare that whinnied at them. Nuzzling her bare palm, the young mare clearly expected a treat.

"Her name is Zephra. Although during the season she's made a reputation for herself as a spirited flirt, she's always been reliable. If you like, you can ride her while you're here."

Sheena smiled her thanks, turning to move further down the long aisle. The next stall was occupied by a beautiful, very pregnant Arabian mare, who was lying on her side, salivating profusely.

"This mare is sick, Travis," she said as she opened the gate and went to the pregnant horse.

"How can you tell that?" He was right behind her.

"Look at her—it's obvious. She's choking on her grain. It could already be pneumonia by the way she's breathing so shallowly."

"I'll call Doc Simpson immediately." Travis was already turning away when she stopped him, placing a hand on his arm.

"I'm a vet, remember?" she enunciated the words carefully, judging his reaction. "I think I know what's wrong with her, and what to do. If you'll just get my bag—they took it into the house when we

arrived—”

He cut her off. “But you're not sure that's her problem, are you, Sheena?” His dark eyes met hers steadily. “She's my prize mare, and she should be foaling soon. I can't trust her to a vet without a memory. You might miss something critical, and this particular mare is very important to me.”

Sheena felt the blood drain from her face; and she had an incredible urge to kick him as a reminder she had warned him herself in the hospital just last evening of the same thing. That she shouldn't be responsible for his animals without a memory. He had willingly accepted her condition then, but now?

Still, as long as she had her books it should be okay—she hoped.

The mare snorted, and she went to her knees beside the animal. She did understand his concern—she didn't want to be responsible for hurting his mare or her foal because of her memory lapse. Yet she did seem to know what was wrong with the horse. It was only a case of simple choking—the mare had either been bored or eaten dry grain too fast without drinking. She doubted it was anything truly serious, and she had the medication in her bag to prevent pneumonia if it was needed.

So, she replied in a soft tone that would have alerted him to her feelings if he had known her better.

“I know I haven't a normal memory, but I do know what this mare needs. If you can't trust me, call your regular vet. In the meantime, bring me my bag. Rob took it to my room, wherever that is.”

She did not look at him when he replied.

“All I said was—is—that I would like a second opinion.” His voice was pleasant, but she couldn't help herself.

“Then why did you want me here?” she flared at him. Standing, she confronted him. “If you won't let me do my job, why were you so insistent that I sign your contract?”

He shrugged. “You needed a safe place to recuperate, and I could offer it. I never really expected a problem during the first hours after you arrived. I hoped you would have time to rest before you jumped into the fray.”

"I thought you had confidence in my abilities, even to the point of introducing me to your staff and friends as an accomplished veterinarian. You may think you're only being kind to me, but I happen to take my skills seriously, Mr. O'Keefe. I may not be able to remember my own name, but I have forgotten neither my compassion nor all of my science."

She was pleasantly surprised she had the courage to stand up to him. She had now captured his full attention, however, so she rushed on.

"I admit I don't actually remember studying to be a vet, but I do recall working with animals. I know what your mare needs, and she needs it now."

Stopping for breath, she watched as his lips curved into a wry smile. His eyes glinted at her in the soft barn lights.

"So, it would seem you've begun to remember."

Sheena closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened them again, she looked at the mare instead of him. "Are you going to get my bag, or do I find Rob and ask him to take me back to Flagstaff?"

"Of course, I'll get your bag. I'll be back in a minute."

## CHAPTER TEN

**W**HEN HE DISAPPEARED THROUGH THE DOOR, SHE RELEASED HER BREATH. Kneeling again beside the mare, she soothed the strong neck as she steadied her heartbeats, running a hand through the silky mane to calm herself.

Why was it that no matter how she tried to deal with Travis O'Keefe it always turned into an emotional encounter? It took far too much energy; and at the moment, she felt she had none to spare. The day had been fabulous but tiring—she needed to rest. But every nerve inside was wide-awake, and she felt them vibrate as she recalled what Travis had said as they entered the barn.

She shook her head slightly; it didn't surprise her he might want to kiss her, but that he would admit it was unnerving. At least she now knew for certain he was attracted to her. Why else would he admit to the desire to kiss her? He must know there was nothing he needed to do to impress her, since she had shown so clearly how overwhelmed she had been by all he had shared today.

Shrugging her frustrated thoughts aside, Sheena made a thorough examination of the mare. Once she made sure the foal was fine, she let soothing words have their desired effect on the uncomfortable animal as she coaxed her to her feet. She was breathing easier now, seeming to trust Sheena instinctively.

"You're a pretty girl," Sheena whispered in her ear. "You're going to drop your foal pretty soon aren't you, girl?"

The mare snorted, lifting her head and shaking it as she whinnied. Sheena heard the barn door open and without turning she greeted Travis.

"The foal is okay. The mare just overindulged in oats tonight

without drinking. If you could help me walk her around for a while she should be fine."

"I was wondering where you slipped off to." Rob's voice was warm. "I suppose I should have known you would find the horses as quickly as possible."

Sheena swallowed her surprise, hiding her face against the mare's smooth coat. He continued before she could answer him.

"You are a shy one, Sheena Lassiter, and a rare woman. You must be totally exhausted but here you are taking care of our livestock." He studied her bent back curiously. "I suppose we overwhelmed you with our welcome tonight. But you must understand—Molly wanted to surprise me, and she did that, for sure."

"I'm happy for you, Rob. It must be wonderful having friends who think so much of you." She faced him.

"Any excuse to have a party out here. You'll learn that if you stick around long. There isn't much entertainment in the backwoods, and folks like to get together and gossip." He was swinging the stall gate back and forth. "What do you think of Violet?"

Somehow, she had known he was going to ask her that, and she felt a cold spot where her heart should be.

"Violet is an old friend of your family's, I take it?" She tried not to give her feelings away.

"Actually, she's my fourth cousin. She's two years older than I, and as I told you, she has eyes only for Travis. Always has. But he never does more than he did tonight—kiss her and put her aside."

Sheena kept stroking the mare's neck. It was as bad as she suspected. She felt sorry for Rob, and Violet as well. Unrequited love was always painful.

"Did Travis send you here, Rob?" She hoped to change the subject.

"Nope. Should he have?"

"He went to the house to get my medical bag. I just thought...but he was probably detained."

"Oh, he was that. Violet grabbed him as her partner in a circle dance." He sounded bitter, and for the first time Sheena realized he was slurring his words. Poor Rob, he had obviously overindulged in

the beer in an effort to submerge his feelings.

"Rob." She looked into his dull eyes. "Have you ever told Violet how you feel?"

Slowly, he grinned. He had rested his chin on his arms on the stall gate.

"Nope, and I don't plan to make a total fool of myself anytime soon. Why should I? After all, she made it clear before I left—"

The barn door opened, forestalling anything further he might have added. Travis arrived carrying her bag; he ran a quick cursory glance over his brother.

"I called Doc Simpson," he said as he came to her side, "but he's away for the weekend. I hope you're right about this."

She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of justifying herself again as she took the bag. Opening it, she immediately withdrew a small bottle and a syringe. She was surprised when Violet spoke—she hadn't seen the other woman arrive.

"What's wrong with her, Travis? She looks okay to me. Maybe quieter than usual, but not sick." Violet stepped around Travis to confront Sheena. "It must be wonderful to know when an animal is sick, then know what to do about it. There's nothing that makes me feel more helpless."

Sheena glanced into Violet's Elizabeth Taylor eyes, knowing the reason for her name. Her comment was sincere, and she wondered if the woman could be as warm and friendly as she sounded.

"I envy you, Sheena," she continued. "How many years did it take you to become a doctor of veterinary medicine?"

Sheena grasped the mare's neck and calmly inserted the needle, pushing the plunger before she answered.

"I'm not sure, actually."

"Oh, goodness, listen to me. I'm sorry, Sheena. Molly told me about the accident. If I've made you uncomfortable, can you forgive me?"

Sheena smiled at her, but it was Travis who answered.

"Sheena forgives easily, Violet. As to how long it took her to earn her degree, more than eight years. But when she finished, she left Cornell as number one in her class." His tone was proud and very



sure of the knowledge.

Violet looked back and forth between them, a flicker of something darkening her eyes.

"So, that's where you met her." She focused on Travis. "I should have known. You were always one to find a pretty female no matter where you went." She was goading him, but she managed to do it lightly.

Then the meaning of what she said hit Sheena. Rob had told her that Travis also graduated from an Ivy League school—could it be that was where they had met? Where they had become...friends? She had never really considered this possibility before.

"You were always too curious, Violet." Travis's jade eyes censured her before he turned his attention back at Sheena. She closed her bag, pretending to ignore his burning gaze. "Tell me, Sheena, do you think I should have Max sit with the mare tonight?"

"No...yes." She touched her lips with a dry tongue, stepping around him. "She should be walked until she quits salivating like this then checked before you retire. Let her outdoors into the corral for the night with no further oats but plenty of water. The medication I've given her will help her relax, and the antibiotic will go to work on any infection she might have. I think she'll be fine."

She glanced at Rob, seeing a nerve jump in his cheek as he jingled the change in his pocket.

"Why don't we all get back to the party, then? And send one of the wranglers to watch the horse," he suggested, his eyes on Violet.

She laughed. "Sounds wonderful to me. Besides, the guest of honor shouldn't be absent for too long." She winked at Travis as she hooked an arm through Rob's. "I've a feeling, though, Rob, that Sheena and Travis have something more they want to discuss in private. Can't you feel it?"

Rob was too absorbed in getting her out of the barn to notice when Travis swatted Violet's bottom playfully as they passed him. Violet laughed gaily as the door closed behind her.

Sheena was alone with Travis. She really hadn't wanted to face him again tonight. She tried to ignore his presence but she was desperately aware when he walked up behind her, putting his large

hands on her shoulders, kneading the tension out of them.

She wasn't about to make his apology easy for him. She didn't like the way he had doubted her before, and she needed to know if they really had known each other at Cornell. When he began massaging her neck, her breath caught in her lungs and she leaned her head back against his wide chest.

"You're still annoyed with me, aren't you?" His voice was husky, deep. "I'm sorry, Sheena. I never meant to insinuate that you aren't a capable vet. I hope you understand that."

She knew he could feel her heart thud against her backbone as he pressed his warm body solidly against hers. He held her so she had to lean her weight into his to remain standing as his soothing fingers moved to the tops of her shoulders. For a moment, she closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his warm hands, the firm pressure of his gentle touch.

She was aware of the strength of his lean torso with every nerve of her back. She should yank away from him, she told herself, but as his strong fingers worked their relaxing magic, tiny electrical pulses flowed through her body as every erogenous zone in her body awoke. She was weak-kneed and breathless, and the longer he touched her the less likely she it was she would find the courage to step away.

His whisper broke the spell.

"Relax, Angel. I don't usually bite veterinarians." He was laughing at her, and she swung around angrily.

"I thought you said you wouldn't get close enough to strike sparks," she challenged him. "I wish you would just go back to Phoenix and leave me alone."

He grinned, making her flush in fury.

"I should slap that smile from your face, then you could easily fire me. That way we both would be out of a tough spot." She was churning with a threatening emotion she did not understand. She told herself she had every right to be angry with him, and all she wanted to do was wipe the grin from his face. "Why do you act so familiar with me? We *are* strangers, aren't we?"

She remembered the vague words he had used to describe their acquaintance at college. It was time to understand that much, at least.

His lips tightened, and the grin disappeared. A guarded expression entered his eyes.

"We are...and we aren't...strangers, Sheena." His reply was evasive again, and maddened her even more.

"What does that mean?" she demanded, very close to completely losing her temper. If nothing else, Travis had helped her to remember she had a fighting spirit and a hot disposition.

"Can't you guess, Sheena?" His voice gave nothing away. "I've told you we were instantly attracted to one another at college."

"Do you get a kick out of tantalizing me? Annoying me to distraction?" Her hands were clamped into tight fists by her sides. "Are you enjoying seeing me spit flames, or are you waging some elaborate cross-examiner's game? I don't recall ever seeing you before the hospital. Stop playing games with me when you know I don't have the full deck. It isn't fair."

He stepped back. "Whoever told you life was fair, Sheena, was a con artist." He paused, letting his words sink in, his jade eyes almost covered by heavy lids now. "I'm not playing a game with you. Actually, I've been brutally honest. I would never play an emotional game with you, even though you do rise to the bait so wonderfully I can't resist watching you do it." He wasn't smiling as he continued. "Sheena, I've told you why I wanted you here already. You needed a safe place to recuperate, time to find yourself, and I could offer it without any strings attached, nothing more or less."

He was being matter-of-fact now; and she bit her lip, wishing he wasn't so close. She restrained an insane urge to reach up and put her arms around his neck, lifting her face in case he still wanted to kiss her, like he had Violet.

"You still haven't answered my question. Did we, or did we not know each other intimately before?" She forced the words out, trying desperately to remember why she was angry with him.

"We did."

"Then why the act? Why...?"

"Because I knew how you would take it. You aren't very trusting in your present condition, are you, Sheena?" He stopped long enough for her to absorb this. "Yes, we knew each other before. It was a very

special relationship, much more than the one-night affair I would have had to tell you about. One-night stands always sound so ugly and cheap later on, but ours was anything but that. We made tender, passionate, adult love for hours. It was a night made of pure magic for both of us. We ignored all of society's rules and formalities. There was nothing in what we did to be ashamed of then..." He paused to emphasize the statement. "...or now."

His voice assured her, becoming soft and intimate. His eyes, like forest pools, pulled her down into their mysterious depths. She felt no desire to fight back to the surface or doubt.

"We kept in touch by phone and letter afterwards, but I didn't know about your trip west until I found you in Rob's motel room. My reaction to that event is now history. When I took my anger out on you, you ran away. So, now you understand, Sheena. There's nothing else."

He loomed over her, tall and convincing; his strength was comforting. His face was dark with controlled emotion. She had no idea whether to believe him or not. Yet her body was reacting in a way that warned her every word was true. She took three strides away then turned to face him. He had moved as rapidly and stood less than a foot away.

"So, guilt is the only reason you're wasting your time on me. I don't need it, Travis. I don't need your or anyone else's guilt. I'm sure I have enough of my own." She had no idea where she found the courage to spit those words at him, or even why she did. She watched his brows draw together and knew she had at last made him angry.

"If you weren't so damn attractive to me, Sheena Annette Lassiter, I doubt I would waste any of my time, energy, sympathy or guilt on you, or even offer you any explanations. Just goes to prove one-night stands aren't good for making decisions of the heart, are they?"

"I don't need any of those things from you, especially not any more of your explanations. I'll be gone tomorrow." She all but ran for the door, but once again she was amazed how quickly he caught her, penning her in his embrace.

"Maybe you don't need explanations, Sheena Lassiter. But I do, and I think this is the only way I can convince you that nothing I've

done was motivated by guilt.”

He lowered his head, his lips taking hers. She beat her fists against his back, hearing the thuds like a heartbeat. The taste of him shocked her. With all of the strength she had she fought him, but he was impervious to her meager defenses. With no effort he caught her hands, pinning them behind her back and pulling her body into the curve of his own, pressing her pelvis against his as he cupped her bottom, showing her his hard masculine need.

His mouth had complete possession of hers now, claiming her with total mastery to the depths of her soul. Sheena went limp; her legs liquefied as he held her, keeping her from falling. Her mind was blank as his kiss slowly softened. Every inch of her body knew this was where she belonged, in his arms, a part of him. They might as well have been in bed so vividly could she feel his desire for her.

His fingers had found the soft swell of a breast, pressing against it as she opened her eyes. He lifted his head for a moment, waiting for her negative response. He shook his head as he whispered, his voice low and resonant.

“Now you know what it was like, Angel, that night. It hasn’t changed for me.”

His lips moved over her face lightly, lovingly, across her cheekbone to her hair, finding the curve of her ear, his tongue darting. He met her green gaze as she stared at him, dumbfounded, shocked by her body’s response to his tender lovemaking. She wanted—needed—more, but she wasn’t sure how to request it.

Her body was on fire. She had forgotten their argument, forgotten her fears as she tightened her arms around his neck. He reached up very carefully and removed them, keeping a tight grip on her wrists as she slumped against him, needing his warmth now that he had openly showed her a glimpse into their past.

“I want you, Sheena, right now and right here, just as I wanted you the first moment we met on the steps at the lecture hall. But you’re played out tonight. This day has been too much for you, for anyone who has been through all you have. Let me take you to your room, get you settled. Tomorrow we can talk, explore the feelings, when we’re both rested. They’ll make more sense then.”

She had never seen a face so alive with warmth, tenderness or desire. It frightened her.

"No." The word came from deep within her chest as a guttural whisper.

His eyes bored into her with disbelief. "No?"

He spat an obscenity, all but dropping her to her knees as he released her. She fell forward, doing a quick sidestep to remain upright, catching the mare's stall gate.

"Get out of here, then." At her hesitation he snapped. "Now!"

She didn't wait to have him repeat the order. She ran all of the way to the house.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

**H**OW MUCH LONGER, SHE WONDERED AS SHE STARED AT THE SINKING SUN, her back pressed hard against a warm rock. She knew Travis and Rob were wondering the same thing, although neither had said anything during the five weeks since her arrival. Actually, everyone had been wonderful to her, even Travis.

The morning after the party, Travis made no sign that anything had happened between them. He gave her space and silent support as Rob quizzed her.

Sheena discovered she recalled enough of her science to talk knowledgeably about the animals; and Sunday evening she delivered twin foals, to everyone's amazement including her own, to the palomino mare.

The following weekend Max discovered a suspicious bonfire behind the barn that threatened the livestock and could even have spread to the ranch house. He managed to keep the inferno under control while he and his dad put it out. After that everyone was alert to strangers on the property but nothing further had occurred.

During the first two weeks she and Rob and the hired staff vaccinated most of the other stock and rode over the six sections comprising the ranch. She had delivered kittens in the middle of the night, and lambs in the pasture, and become good friends with Weaver, the dog. She knew Molly and Ray appreciated her willingness to help with household chores, and that everyone else connected with the ranch liked her and was learning to trust her abilities.

She knew she hadn't been an inconvenience to anyone. Still, there was a problem, and she knew it was her own conscience.

Sheena knew without a doubt that she had never accepted charity

in her life before, yet she felt this was exactly what she was doing. She had called her banker in New Hampshire and found out the extent of her holdings. She had also contacted several friends on campus and knew how appalled they were by her exodus and her accident. Still, there wasn't much she could do about that, nor could they.

On the Rocking K she was safe and well cared for. She didn't know what coping with the outside world might be like in her condition, and that made her reluctant to step out on her own. But often, at night in the darkness of her room or whenever she was alone, she knew she should leave before she made the biggest mistake of her life.

Travis had been pleasant and businesslike each time she spoke with him on the phone concerning the animals. Neither of them mentioned anything about their confrontation in the barn; but for her, at least, the memory was always there, pestering her and making her nervous. She felt sure she knew what would happen the next time she was alone with him.

Despite that, however, she didn't seem able to control her feelings where he was concerned. Whenever she was alone or not busy, she found herself daydreaming about the heat his eyes sparked within her, the way her body reacted to him. Her dreams were even worse.

There were too many dangers here. Travis hadn't touched her again, had not even spoken to her the next morning after the scene in the barn before he left; but she feared that, should the opportunity arise again, she might be the one to make a move. This passionate side of her frightened her more than her lack of memory. She couldn't afford the risk, not in her present condition. She had to know more before she committed herself to the emotions his touch and kiss aroused.

At least with Rob she felt safe. He was fun to be with and put no demands on their friendship. Once Travis was gone he had relaxed, spending a good part of each day with her, showing her the ranch while he reacquainted himself with it. In the evenings they sat in the den and talked, played rummy, read books. She often studied one of her textbooks in the evening after he left with Max for the bar in town. Sometimes, she wrote notes in the diary the doctor had



prescribed for her while he typed notes he wouldn't let her read or quick sentences on a story he joked about. Still, she recognized this was serious work for him.

On Friday, exactly five weeks to the day after her arrival Sheena studied the dark underbellies of the northern clouds, amazed at how familiar everything had become. She thought about the work she had just completed with the horses. Next week she should be able to complete all of their inoculations. She enjoyed the ride out to the far pastures the most. She preferred the solitude and knew the horses also seemed to prefer this area.

But as the sun sank behind a huge bank of clouds she felt the weariness to her bones—or was it depression?

Thank goodness, she thought, that when she got back to the house she would have it all to herself. Rob and Max had taken off for Flagstaff early this afternoon. Molly and Ray had also left to visit Molly's family on the reservation for the weekend. Travis undoubtedly would stay in Phoenix.

Sheena tried to convince herself she was happy with his absence, but she knew better—she had found the man of her dreams. She didn't kid herself. She had always lived in a fantasy world where the hero would arrive to rescue her from the pain of reality—or of remaining alone, something only an only child could fear. He had awakened her romantic bent by stationing her in this Southwestern paradise, protecting her from the world she couldn't remember. Now, she expected a virtual stranger to share the daily routines of life with her.

Absurd. His absence only proved how totally she had accepted this flight of the imagination, to the point of expecting him to erase the fear her lack of memory brought.

Sheena sighed, listening to the sounds of another dying high-desert day. She inhaled deeply the sweet evening air.

She heard a light plane in the distance and watched as it sped over a mesa. It was flying lower than normal, headed toward Showlow's airport. She was sure of this, as Showlow was the nearest town to the ranch. Molly and Rob had taken her there to update her wardrobe so she could tend the livestock her first week.

She cupped her hand to shade her eyes as the plane circled to the west. Could Travis be coming in after all? She felt her heart skip at the thought—she was too tired tonight to be careful yet she knew she must remain on the alert whenever he was around.

Dismissing the plane, she drank in the solitude that surrounded her. It was peaceful here. Everything was so incredibly beautiful. The cooling breeze blew her hair away from her sunburned face. The late June light highlighted a new bridge of freckles on her nose. For a moment she forgot her worries, as well as her impatience with her continued amnesia, in the beauty of the sunset.

It was exhilarating being a part of this landscape, a small speck upon the crust of the planet and yet a living, breathing part of the whole. Her feelings were as wide, deep and long as the vista spread before her. She could taste the sage on the air, hear birdsongs orchestrating the closing curtain of another early summer day.

The vivid hues of the failing sunlight were enhanced by the northern bank of clouds strutting above the horizon. She noted their golden glow with a sense of pure joy. It was so exquisite. She held her breath, studying the deceptive flatness of the land. She knew now it was just that, deceptive. The rolling hills of the Sitgraves National Forest could not only swallow up telephone lines and roads, but whole ranches and towns as well.

She heard the plane again, but this time she couldn't see it. It made her feel slightly uneasy to know someone was cruising above her, seeing everything she couldn't see. The pilot had no right, she decided, flying so low.

Sheena shaded her eyes again as the plane came into view above the treetops, not more than two hundred feet above her. Travis had said something to Ray about a plane. Was he circling his ranch to see how his herds were doing? Flying this low, he certainly would frighten the horses, and she didn't think he would do that.

The thought made her move away from her rock support, deciding it was time to ride back to the ranch. If she was going to make it before full dark she had best hurry. With a lithe movement she jumped off the ledge and hurried to the beautiful palomino Travis had given her to ride. She mounted easily, having grown accustomed

to riding in the western saddle. Her stiffness was much less this week, though the tape still encircled her ribs.

Zephra pitched her head, snorting her impatience.

"You're just thinking about Travis's black stallion, you little flirt," Sheena teased the feisty mare. "He's caught your wandering eye, and you're determined to make him notice you. No matter that Travis has other plans for you, huh? Well, let me tell you about flirting, Zephra. The results might be more than you can handle."

She turned toward home, letting Zephra pick her own way across the forest loam. She knew she was approximately five miles from the house, and she knew the evening shadows would soon cover the path they had followed earlier. Zephra snorted again.

"What in the world would you do if Thunder took you up on your offer, girl?" Sheena ran a hand down the horse's neck as she considered the stud's sleek lines, his haughty manner, and laughed aloud as she smoothed the mare's creamy mane. "It wouldn't matter if I told you Max said Travis has been saving you for Concho, would it, my feisty flirt? You had better behave yourself, or you're going to be in trouble with the wrong stallion—and the boss."

The horse pulled impatiently on the reins, wanting to gallop, but Sheena knew it wasn't wise to give the mare her head in the broken terrain.

"No." She leaned forward in the saddle, speaking into the horse's ear. "This time I know best, Zephra. We will walk home even if it gets dark. At least this way we'll make it safely. I can't afford any more accidents." The horse switched her tail across Sheena's legs, and her rider laughed again. "Don't get impertinent, you hairy beast. I know you know the way home blindfolded, but right now you take orders from me."

She looked west again as she heard the rumble of thunder, and absorbed the last glow of sunset in breathless amazement. She loved this time of day, the time of twilight. She smiled at the diffused shadows—it was always so beautiful and dramatic here. The countryside took on another character just before full dark, becoming mysterious and more intriguing than it ever was in daylight.

She listened to the clop of Zephra's shod feet against the slick

rock they rode over; it wasn't the only sound. There was the wind, her own breathing and the continued growl of distant thunder.

Actually, she realized, the thunder was getting closer, and she studied the bank of clouds again. Their bellies seemed to have grown darker and fuller as she descended the mesa. That was the result of night coming on, she told herself, but they did look more ominous now. She suppressed a shiver as lightning streaked from cloud to cloud.

"I wish Rob was with us, girl. I guess I shouldn't have stayed so long admiring the sunset."

The horse whinnied an answer as thunder boomed behind them. Zephra flattened her ears and made a skittish movement, her nostrils flaring as she tossed her head. Sheena heard the plane again and turned in her saddle to see where it was just as a bolt of lightning hit the hill in front of them.

The crash of thunder was immediate. Zephra bunched her hindquarters and bolted.

Sheena's breath was knocked out of her as she hit the slick rock. By the time she stood and poked two fingers in her mouth to whistle, Zephra was over the next rise.

"Zephra!" She raced after the galloping mare, the thick forest soil hindering her efforts as much as the evening shadows. "Zephra, you oversexed beast, come back here!"

She made the ridge in time to see the ivory tail of the palomino disappear into the trees ahead. Her race had been useless—the horse wasn't trained to respond to a whistle, and had no loyalty to her. With a despairing groan, Sheena muttered angrily under her breath.

She looked around, surprised to find her western shirt was ripped at the shoulder. The palms of her hands were freshly skinned, but otherwise, unbelievably, she was unharmed. She knew she had been lucky to get off so lightly, so with an impatient grimace she followed the mare's tracks.

The uneven surface and deep shadows made for hard going as she slipped along, knowing it would take her hours to walk home. At least the dense loam had prevented her from jarring her healing ribs

too much, she thought as she touched new tender spots.

She slid down a steep slope on her bottom. She had planned to remove the tape from around her rib cage the following day. Thank goodness she hadn't damaged herself again, because she was excited about removing the itchy tape. It was one positive sign she was getting over the accident, no matter that her memory was still blank.

Squaring her shoulders, she put the accident out of her mind and concentrated on each step. The storm was becoming more threatening by the moment. Distant lightning was the only illumination now, and she knew the rough terrain would be hazardous. She could feel a cool breeze against her sunburned skin and shivered. Her jacket was inside the saddle pouch, as were her gloves. If the storm broke she would be drenched in a minute.

Was there any shelter out here? Where was the small line shack she had ridden past earlier? If she could make that, she would have shelter until the storm blew over. With a new resolve she set out toward the shack at a good pace. Rob would know to check there, she thought, since it was the only shelter on the range.

She felt a shiver race through her again, this time having nothing to do with the oncoming storm, as she thought of Travis and what he might do if he learned she was missing. She had ridden the mare every day with no misadventure until tonight. She felt the hair stand up on her neck as a brilliant flash arced through the sky to touch the top of a piñon less than twenty feet in front of her.

The resulting explosion knocked her to the ground as wild flames leapt within the dry branches. She stared at the licking blaze, knowing she needed to move as a torrent of rain arrived to douse the budding wildfire. Concentrating on the image she struck out for the shack as huge drops pummeled her full in the face. They soaked her hair and clothes in seconds; she had never experienced any downpour this fierce before.

The soil had become slippery, and she fell several times as full darkness blanketed her. The sound of thunder made her heart race as she rounded the edge of another outcrop of rock. Lightning lit the landscape for a brilliant moment, and she saw the outline of the building. How different the surroundings looked now she was no

longer in a saddle.

Feeling more disoriented by the second she hugged herself as she squinted, then slid down the side of another hill, afraid she had imagined the building outline as the aggressive storm thundered once more. She knew being on a hillside, fully exposed in the midst of scattered trees, made her a prime target for lightning. It could hit anywhere, at any time.

She recalled Rob saying that desert storms could move as swift as an antelope and with the vengeance of a Sherman tank. A shiver of fear rippled down her spine. The wind whipped her hair into her eyes.

"It isn't uncommon for a summer storm to drop over an inch of water in only minutes in the desert," he'd told her. "It can turn every dry arroyo into a raging torment in a few minutes, so make sure you're inside unless you want to be soaked."

She recalled, too, Molly's warning her of much the same thing as she had left the barn this morning.

She saw evidence of that phenomenon now as streams of water ran down the neck of her blouse, over her boots, across the slick rock face. She hoped the storm would end as quickly as it had arrived, but she quickened her stride and her struggle in case it didn't.

Sheena hunched her shoulders as she slid down another embankment into the trees. She needed to get down the side of this mesa so she could find the shack if she didn't want to be a lightning rod. Another bolt of lightning snaked through the trees and found a target. She screamed involuntarily as she fell backwards against a solid ponderosa trunk, seeing more fire ahead of her. The thunderclap was so loud her eardrums spasmed.

It was then the sky really opened its spigot and released water in buckets. She sat in the mud in amazement. The shack was only a few feet away now—she realized she had made it when another flash highlighted the outline. With firm resolve, she forced herself to stand. Scrambling over brush and fallen trees, she no longer felt the drenching rain as it streamed inside her shirt and pants, soaking her socks in her boots.

Sheena fell several more times, but despite the sting of sharp cactus spines she reached the tiny building, huddling against the wall as another bolt of lightning slammed the hill behind her. She pushed at the door—and remembered the bar that barricaded it and the steel lock that sealed it. She slid down until she was sitting in the mud and covered her eyes with her abraded palms.

Why on earth did they lock a building when it was hidden miles from the road or ranch? The frustration made her want to spit. Angry tears mixed with the rivers of water that inundated her.

She heard a far-off whinny and thought it must be Zephra. She whistled, but the horse did not come; and she was too afraid of the storm to venture away from the building now that she had found it. Shivering with cold she buried her face between her knees as she berated herself and Travis O'Keefe for having to lock everything up, even an old shack in the middle of nowhere.

A sound in the darkness bought her head up, but it was the feel of a wet muzzle that made her scream. She flung herself to the side away from the intruder instinctively at the same moment logic told her it must be Zephra. The horse blew softly in her face as she dragged a forehoof several times in the mud.

Sheena caught the velvety muzzle between her hands. Her tears mixed with the rain as she kissed the mare in relief.

"You dumb animal," she scolded softly. "Why didn't you go home and send someone out to help me? You know the way!"

The horse pawed the earth again.

"So, there you are."

The tone was mild, but Sheena almost screamed again. Instead, she sucked in her breath and choked, realizing she had leaped to her feet. Travis sat above her on Black Thunder—it wasn't Zephra after all. How had they found her?

"Damn your eyes, Travis O'Keefe. You could give a person a heart attack coming out of nowhere like that. How did you find me?"

Her voice was shrill, the rain stinging her eyes as she stared into the blackness above her. Without light, she depended on the flashing storm to let her see him. She heard a thump as he dismounted, coming round to her.

"I can see five weeks haven't improved your temper, Sheena Annette. Let's get inside." His Stetson was low over his eyes, hiding any expression as he flicked on a flashlight. His rain slicker rasped as he moved forward. Another bolt of lightning hit above them, and she couldn't prevent a small shriek as her hands instinctively covered her ears to protect them against the thunder's instant blast.

She heard the door thud open, saw his silhouette disappear inside. For a moment she could not make her legs obey to follow him. He reached out and caught her arm, pulling her into the building.

Once out of the pelting rain she rested her head against his slicker then straightened to look up at him, pushing the wet strands of hair from her eyes. She stepped back, only to lose her balance as she tripped over an old crate that collapsed under her weight. She lay on the floor as he flashed a bright light into her eyes. She glared at him, her head atop an old sack, her arms helplessly at her sides, her butt captured by the remains of the collapsed create, her feet flailing the air.

The roar of his laughter made the thunder outside sound distant.

She tried vainly to lift herself from the rubble, but it was useless—she was stuck. "I hate people who laugh at others," she shrieked at him. "How can you laugh? Oh, damn, why did it have to be you? I hate you."

She kicked her feet furiously, trying to use her stomach muscles to swing them to the ground so she could stand. He sidestepped, aiming the flashlight to the side. Sheena couldn't see him very well, just the silhouette of the slicker and the dark, dripping hat set rakishly on his head. She had never been so humiliated in her life.

He swallowed his laughter with a choking sound. He caught her under the armpits and lifted her free easily, turning her so she could see where the flashlight highlighted a bed and folded blankets. There was an iron potbelly stove a few feet beyond the bed and cabinets along another wall.

"Well, while you're hating me, why don't you strip and wrap those wool blankets around you."

With an impatient shove he stepped past her now that she was on



her feet. He pushed her toward the cot, grabbing a towel and placing it over her head.

"Get out of your clothes before you catch pneumonia, Sheena. I'll light a fire then go out and take care of Thunder."

He bent to the stove and lit a preset fire in its belly then disappeared through the open door, closing it behind him.

She was shivering so hard she couldn't make her fingers work as she tried to unbutton her blouse. The cold had not only affected her joints but also her reactions. She realized she was still crying, choking on emotion. At last she gave up and pushed her fingers through her clinging hair. Cold water cascading down her neck set off a new flurry of shakes.

She was still struggling with her boots when the door opened. For a brief second she was caught in the full glare of his flashlight. He flicked it off, stepping inside as a gust of wind blew past him, touching her skin and making the fire crackle.

"Please...shut the door." Her tongue was caught between her chattering teeth.

She heard his slicker hit the floor, then something else. Going immobile in the darkness, she totally forgot about her pants lying around her ankles and boots. "I—"

But it was too late. He was already standing over her. With an impatient shove he pushed her flat against the cot, catching her feet, pulling the boots and pants off together.

"Travis...please..."

"Shut up for once, Sheena. You're freezing cold, and we have to get these wet things off you pronto."

She felt her wet socks stripped away, followed by her blouse. Then he wrapped her torso in wool blankets. She heard him pick up her wet clothes, taking them to the door where he wrung them out. He went to the table, shaking her pants out. He put dry wood inside the stove, shutting the door, but not before she saw he placed her pants over a chair, her shirt over the table facing the stove.

Once again they were in darkness, and she heard him shrug out of his own clothes. Then he was beside her on the narrow cot, pressing his warm skin against her blanketed body. She was still

trembling as he threw another blanket over both of them.

“Good Lord.” His muscles contracted as they came in contact with her wet skin. “You’re all but frozen, woman.”

His arms encircled her, pulling her tight against his hard body. His hands smoothed her hair away from their faces; then he rested his fingers against her neck.

She shivered harder for several minutes, but she could not resist the warmth his body offered. The smooth, tantalizing warmth of his mouth against her forehead brought her to the amazing reality that he was here with her. She could feel the strength of his thighs and shoulders as he pressed her against him, the rough stubble on his chin; and for a long moment she reveled in his male strength.

Suddenly, it was hard for her to breathe as awareness of his desire twitched against her.

“Warmer now?” he asked, his voice a mixture of husky concern and erotic fantasy in the darkness. She blushed automatically at her sex-starved thoughts, going rigid in his arms.

“I’m okay, now.” She pulled her hand free and pushed against his hairy chest. “Let me up!”

He moved with a suddenness she hadn’t expected, almost tearing his body from hers.

“I’m sorry if I’ve invaded your sacred territory, Angel. How could I forget myself. We agreed, no touching? Well, then, I hope you can find your way back to the ranch. I’m out of here”

She heard a rustle as he threw on his damp pants and shirt, thumping as he briefly struggled with his boots. He flipped on the flashlight and reached for his slicker.

Sheena searched her mind for a way to apologize. She didn’t know why she had sounded so peevish, except that she was afraid of her own strong desires. How could she forget his quick temper...

Or was he the one who was overreacting?

Travis turned the light, shining it in her eyes. “I realize you aren’t interested in my advice, but I wouldn’t try anything tonight.”

The door slammed shut behind him.

Sheena stared blindly at where she knew the door was, dropping her head into her hands. She was a fool, a stupid fool. It didn’t take a

genius to recognize hurt pride and anger—he had just risked his life to save her from the storm.

The thunder had retreated now, but the rain still pounded on the tin roof of the shack. He had just been helping her, not amusing himself. Why on earth had she reacted as she had? She might as well have accused him of rape.

If he had only given her a chance to explain.

Bitter disappointment flooded through her as she wondered where he had gone. Why feel guilty? He knew this country like a map, and she was positive he trod it with the sureness of a mountain goat. But she was certain he would never touch her again, and suddenly she realized how badly she needed his touch. She hated her imperious tongue in that moment as she sank beneath the musty wool blanket.

A crash of thunder sent shivers through her. It was not safe for him to be outside, and it was her fault that he was. Rob had told her how Travis's father had died years before—struck by lightning from a rainless cloud. If anyone knew how dangerous a storm like this one was, it would be Travis. Sobbing with self-contempt, Sheena fell asleep huddled against the wall.

\* \* \*

The door banged open, and Sheena felt her tired body go rigid. Then she realized the wind must have risen and blown it open.

The room was pitch dark. Hesitantly, she crawled off the cot, reminded of the storm's ferocity as the wind collided with the walls of the shack. She held the blanket tight against her now-dry skin as she took a step forward.

"It's me." Travis's voice cut through the darkness as he stepped forward. "Sorry if I frightened you. Go back to sleep."

The door slammed shut. She retreated until the backs of her knees were pressed against the cot.

"I've never seen a storm last so long, or be so ferocious. It isn't safe to try for the ranch yet." He dropped an armload of wood on the floor then flipped on the flashlight. He aimed the beam with care away from her at the stove.

Sheena watched as he picked up some of the dry wood, jamming it into the firebox where the earlier blaze had already burned down to coals. He included a few stray sheets of old newspaper at the same time, wadding them up on top of the new fire before laying the damper wood on top of that.

He closed the door, and she tried to read his darkly shadowed face in the dim glow of the flashlight on the table; but it was useless. He picked up a small coffeepot, and taking three strides to the door, held it out to the pelting rain. When the pot was filled, he returned to the stove.

He took off his hat then and set it on the table near the edge, away from her drying clothes, then looked uncertainly at her for a moment before flinging his slicker at the door. If only she could read his mind. He was doing a grand job of ignoring her. She wondered what he might do if she spoke.

Travis picked up the flashlight, pointing it to a stool where a kerosene lamp perched. With the expertise of long practice he lifted the globe, turned the wick up and struck a match. The lamp caught instantly; a soft yellow light illuminated the shack. He flipped off the flashlight, his back to Sheena as he twirled a chair around and set it before the stove.

"Travis." Her soft voice sounded hesitant. He didn't turn or give any sign he heard her. "Travis, I'm sorry. I was frightened, angry, hurt. I..."

What was the use? He acted as if he couldn't hear her. He straddled the chair, his arms on its back.

"How badly?"

"What?"

"How badly are you hurt?"

"Only a few new bruises, some scrapes, I think. My dignity—what little was left—was damaged more than anything." She had decided complete honesty was necessary between them.

He didn't respond immediately; instead, he stood and went to the small cupboard and removed a can.

"Want some coffee?" he asked, adding two mugs.

The water was boiling already—she could see the steam rise. He

sprinkled some coffee into the cups, glancing at her. "This will be cowboy coffee—no sugar or cream, and it isn't instant."

Sheena nodded slowly, trying to capture his eyes, but he was already pouring the water into the cups. He stirred them, offered her one formally, avoided touching her fingers as she withdrew her hand from the concealing blanket.

He went back to his chair. Sheena sipped the drink—it tasted awful, but it was hot. She realized as it entered her stomach she hadn't eaten since noon. What time was it now?

Travis looked up from contemplation of his cup when she spoke.

"There wouldn't be something to eat in that cupboard, would there?"

"I should have known," he muttered as he stood up, and she felt herself shrink.

Damn him. She felt a flare of annoyance. Why did he always seem to do this to her? It had been a simple question. She was hungry. She couldn't help that Zephra had bolted, stranding her, leaving her without supplies or her jacket. After all, she had only been doing her job. He had no right to make her feel guilty.

Forcefully, she released her breath, watching as he rummaged in the cabinet.

"Forget it, Travis."

He straightened. "Are you sure? I've just found a tin of beef stew, and...what's this? Granola bars and honey." He returned to the table, placing his finds in a pile, reaching into his pocket for a Swiss Army knife and poking a hole in the top of the tin. "Actually, I'm hungry myself. I didn't waste any time in coming to look for you." He unwrapped the granola bar and bit into it. "It's too bad you've lost your appetite, Sheena. This isn't half bad."

She could see a wicked glow in his eyes as he placed the tin on top of the stove. She bit her lip to keep from telling him to go straight to hell.

"Need more coffee?" he offered.

"What do you expect me to do, Travis? I apologized, tried to explain why I acted like a fool. I won't beg for your forgiveness or grovel."

Her voice sounded strained, and she hated the words as soon as they were out of her mouth.

"You should eat something, then." He handed her his granola bar, his eyes warm and friendly. "You'll feel better if you do."

She saw a nerve twitch near his dimple as he waited on her response. Very slowly, Sheena stepped toward the table, taking the second chair, wrapping the blanket tight around her. Her pulse quickened in anticipation; but he returned to the cupboard, pulling out a knife and spreading honey on another granola bar then offering to do the same for her. The blanket slipped from her shoulder, and his eyes told her how much was revealed. She pulled the cover back into place and finished the honeyed granola bar.

They shared the tin of stew in silence then polished off the meal with another granola bar.

"There aren't any magic towels or washcloths in that cupboard, are there?" She wagged her sticky fingers.

He grinned as she began to lick the honey from her fingertips.

"No, but I have something just as good."

He separated her fingers one-by-one and brought them to his mouth. He looked deeply into her eyes as he sucked one deep inside.

"Hmm..." He made the sound deep in his throat, watching her intently. "Better than the original—much better. I may write the company and offer them the recipe."

Sheena's skin flamed. She shouldn't let him do this, tasting each finger in turn, sucking it deep into the warm cavern of his mouth with sensual control, his tongue twisting and turning around every inch. When he reached her thumb, she pulled back.

"What time is it?" She tried to forget the feel of his mouth on her skin.

"Probably around midnight. As you can see, there are no clocks here, and I'm not wearing a watch." He held up his bare wrists. He knew why she had asked, reading her easily.

"Don't you think the others at the ranch might be worried about us?"

"I'm sure they would be, but when I arrived no one was there, just a note on the kitchen table telling me you were out with the herds

and they had gone to town. When they get back tomorrow, they'll send someone out looking for us if we're not back. In the meantime..."

Sheena turned her head; but he caught her chin, making her face him. "You've got honey all over your lips, too."

His voice was low, husky, as he traced her bottom lip with his thumb. He leaned toward her, and she could feel his vibration like the distant thunder outside. For a long moment they stared at each other, and a feeling of pure wonder grew within her. Magic—he had talked of magic once before, and it was definitely in the air tonight.

She sat, enchanted, as he leaned closer, his tongue sweeping across her lips with gentle assertiveness. His arms locked softly around her healing ribs, drawing her face into the curve of his neck. She found herself sitting on his lap.

"Sheena, my lovely, darling Sheena," he whispered as he smoothed her damp hair. "I've waited my entire life for a woman who could make me feel all the emotions you do. You are so lovely you make me feel like dancing in the rain, especially when you smile at me."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her lips pressed to his; she didn't even notice when he carried her to the cot.

His mouth never left hers as he pulled the blanket from her body; then he was dropping searing kisses down her neck, across her shoulder to her bare breasts. His chest rose and fell sharply as he lifted his head, looking deeply into her eyes.

She had wanted this from the first moment. Why had she tried to prevent it? she wondered as their bodies easily melded. He gently brushed the clinging tape that acted as a bodice, lifting her breasts for his inspection.

"Put your arms around me, hold me, Sheena. Trust me. I want you to want me, more than I've ever wanted any woman to want me in my life. You're so beautiful, exciting and filled with life. Open yourself for me, Angel. You know how perfect we are together when we make love. I've hungered for this ever since I found you in Rob's motel room, ever since I left you at Cornell. We've waited so long for each other already, don't make me wait. Kiss me, my ladylove. It's been too

long, and you know it.”

“You’re not bad yourself, Travis O’Keefe.” She wanted to remain flippant, but her yawn ruined it. “And very, very sexy,” she mumbled as she pushed his shirt away from his shoulder letting her smooth his nearly hairless chest.

He smelled of rain and everything male as she planted dainty kisses along his collarbone. He lifted his hand to her cheek, holding her face tenderly as they smiled at each other. His gaze darkened as he saw the exhaustion in her face. Realizing he must wait another day before claiming her, he watched as she yawned again and smiled.

“Go to sleep, angel of mine,” he insisted gently. His arm rested intimately across her breasts now. “Go to sleep, sweetheart.”

She didn’t hear his whisper. She was already fast asleep as he pulled the wool blankets over them.



## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

**S**HEENA STRETCHED LAZILY, LIKE A CONTENTED CAT, AS SHE AWOKE AND touched a rough wall. Sitting up, she felt disoriented for a second; then she saw Travis's yellow slicker. Like distilled sunshine, it brightened the corner near the door. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, stretching again as her mind filled with the memory of the storm and his arrival.

It had happened, the very thing she had wanted to prevent. She had slept with Travis O'Keefe. She wasn't sure how she felt about it, but she admitted she had never enjoyed anything as much. Or had she dreamed his lovemaking, the lovely words he had whispered in her ear? Everything had blended into a sleep-induced fog.

Sitting cross-legged on the cot, she wondered where he was. Heavens, what time was it?

She dropped the rough blanket and reached for her clothes. At some point, he had laid them over the stove after the fire had died out. They were horribly wrinkled and mud-stained but at least they were dry.

Sheena pulled on her panties, hooking her lace bra. The door opened, and she turned to face Travis. For a long moment they stared at each other. Sheena ran a self-conscious hand over her hair, knowing she had never looked worse.

"Did I wake you?" he asked as he shut the door, taking a step toward her. He surveyed her lazily, taking in every detail of her seminude body.

"No, you didn't." She turned her back, reaching for her shirt, but almost before she could move he slid his hands round her ribs, cupping her breasts. She wanted nothing more than to relax in his

arms, allowing him to do anything he wanted; but her conscience was awake now. Surely, there would be a search party looking for them.

She covered his hands with hers, gently pulling them away. Then, she turned and pressed against him, needing to understand what had happened to them in the night. Whether everything had been a dream or they had actually made love.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?" Her voice reflected her uncertainty.

His lips dropped touching her cheek.

"No, thank God. It wasn't a dream. I found you, and you're safe." He didn't take his mouth from her cheek as he spoke and she felt the vibration as he spoke as well as hearing the deep emotion behind the words. For a moment, she pressed her head into his shoulder, shy of the feelings boiling just below the surface.

Sheena was reluctant to break the spell that held them. His hands slipped down her sides to the tape that still surrounded her ribs to span her waist.

He straightened. "When can you remove this?"

She pulled back, very aware of how thin her lace underclothes were. How much she had reveled in the warmth of his body. Embarrassment replaced her earlier sense of comfort.

"Actually, I was going to ask Molly to help me today." She reached for her shirt. "Has the rain stopped?" She didn't dare look at him—it would be too easy to fall back into his eyes and drown. "Did they send someone looking for us?"

She quickly sealed the buttons, noting the ripped sleeve again as she flexed her arm.

"Yes to both questions. Rob and Max came by a bit ago, and I told them you were safe." He cleared away their dinner wrappers and stuffed them into the stove. "I had them ride out to check on the herd and the fences."

His tone was conversational, the moment of sensual anticipation gone. She reached for her jeans.

"I see." She glanced at him as she zipped them. "I hope there isn't too much damage—the lightning was really fierce for a while. That plane probably frightened your horses, too."

He had his eyes fixed on her, his head tilted to the side. "We'll

soon see about the damage. What's this about a plane?"

Sheena struggled with a wet boot. "I thought it might be you at first, but then when it flew so low that didn't seem logical. I mean, taking a chance of spooking the horses. It wasn't you, was it?"

"It wasn't me. What were the colors and numbers?"

Sheena felt safe enough looking up at him now that she was dressed as she ran a hand through her tangled hair.

"Only a few numbers I could see, but it was red and white."

He leaned against the table, absorbing this information as he jingled the change in his pocket. Was he nervous, too? she wondered. She could hardly believe it, but he did seem hesitant.

"Sheena?" He paused as their eyes met. "I want to apologize about last night. I never meant to go as far as we did. I don't want to rush you. But now..." He paused again, his expression warming her blood as she waited. "Since we both know how we feel about each other, I want you to come back to Phoenix with me. I've a very nice two-bedroom apartment. We could be together as you recuperate."

He looked suddenly uncomfortable, as if he knew her reaction before she did.

"I don't think so. Why would you want that?" The words seemed to explode from her lips, fueled by fear. She couldn't believe she had heard right. He was the one who had been against starting an affair. What was different now?

"You heard me, Angel. We need time together. I want you to come live with me. Besides the obvious reason, you will be closer to your clinic."

She yanked on her other boot and strode to the door. Opening it, she was almost blinded by the sudden bright light outside.

"Sheena..." His voice sounded right behind her. "...I want you with me, darling, not here at the ranch. You don't know how hard it's been for me to stay away from you these past weeks. I've tried, for your mind's sake, but last night your body remembered what your mind won't. It surprises me as much as it must you, but I can't stand not having you near me any longer."

She stiffened her spine. "Why do you want me?"

"You know why, Angel." His voice was low, sensual. He rested his

hands on her shoulders ever so lightly, touching the bare skin at the ripped seam.

She flinched, taking several quick strides away from the building and him.

"Sheena." His voice deepened as he tried to convince her. "We may not understand it all now, but in time we will. Last night confirmed everything for me. I want you with me all of the time from now on. Partly, I admit, I want you for selfish reasons, and if you're with me I won't have to worry you may be hurt doing something foolish like riding alone during a thunderstorm. I'm only half a man without you, sweetheart. Isn't that enough for now?"

The words cut through her like a double-edged blade. The sweet sound of what they promised made her tremble with hot desire, and her skin flamed at the possibilities. Her eyes stung as he continued.

"Don't try and convince yourself it isn't mutual, either, Sheena. You want me as badly as I want you, so why should we play games with each other? We're both adults, and we've both learned that life is too short to risk what we've found in one another just because of social convention." His voice was very soft now.

She felt a response deep within. Every nerve told her she wanted him, but was it safe? No, she told herself, not yet, not without her memory.

"My work here, our agreement, what about those?" she asked.

"To hell with that agreement, Sheena. That was only to make sure you came home with me—us. I told you before that I'm a selfish heel. Now you know it for a fact."

She turned to stare at him, meeting his intense green gaze. She did not know what to say.

"Trust me, Sheena, I won't do anything to hurt you. I couldn't let you slip through my fingers in your condition, could I?" He smiled, his voice gentle, his words convincing.

She remained silent for a moment.

"It's because of Rob, isn't it, Travis?" She gritted her teeth. She couldn't trust herself yet so how could it be possible for her to trust him. "You make me so mad, Travis O'Keefe. Can't you see what you're doing to me? My work is my life right now. I can't just walk out

on it because..."

Because what? Because her body had turned traitor?

"I thought you took our agreement seriously. I believed you...I believed you had faith in me."

He frowned, tipping his hat over his eyes. "You've taken me the wrong way, Sheena. I never said—"

"You weren't implying that the work I've done here on your ranch hasn't been as useful as having me in your bed?" She felt her face flush dark with controlled humiliation. How dare he look as if she had just thrown water in his face? "I don't know you, Travis. More importantly, I don't know myself. It frightens me, my ignorance about myself..." She paused, then rushed on before he could interrupt. "...and my passion. Especially after I allow something to happen like it did last night between us, without thinking of the results. It just doesn't seem right to hop into bed with a man simply because..."

She stopped. Did she even know why?

"Would I have moved in with you before I lost my memory? Had you asked me to do that before, or is this because I'm defenseless now, vulnerable, and living here with your younger brother?"

"Sheena, I never meant to take advantage of you last night—and we didn't make love. in case you aren't sure. Things just got out of hand for awhile, but you were so exhausted...But with time together, living together, we can—"

"You didn't ask me to live with you before, did you? And I won't do it now. Would you just leave me alone?"

"If that's the way you want it, Angel, then that's the way it will be from now on," he snapped. He passed her so fast she winced, mounting Thunder in one swift movement. He didn't spare her a glance as he swung the horse around and galloped over the hill.

Sheena stood, staring at where he had been.

"Travis!" she shouted once, then stomped back into the shack, slamming the door behind her. Damn their Scorpio tempers, she thought as she leaned against the door. Travis shared her birthday, and Rob had told her that people with Scorpio as their birth sign were forever cursed with quick, childish tempers.

This whole situation was becoming too much for her to handle,

and he knew it. Was she being too defensive, or was he being too insensitive? He knew as well as she did that once he touched her, her resistance disappeared. Her desire was overwhelming, and it melted her logic and common sense. He knew how confused she was right now, so why was he pushing her? She hadn't even had time to absorb the full impact of their night together before he was pressing her to join him in Phoenix. Now he had left her stranded to walk home.

Sheena tidied the line shack, folding the blanket they had shared in the night. She had done very well these past few weeks, she reminded herself. Her life had calmed down, and she had enjoyed the companionship Rob offered, the friendly manner of the Blackhorns. There was no undue stress here. She had read her textbooks, slowly recalling more and more about her studies—even occasional episodes from her past. There had even been times she could almost see the Rocking K as her new home. She had been excited about introducing Travis to the two new foals in his herd when he returned.

But now, as she surveyed the dimly lit shack, all she wanted was to leave. But go where?

Her chin came up defiantly as her nose wrinkled. She didn't need Travis O'Keefe or his bloody approval to leave. She had never needed to rely on a man for her security before. She went outside, stuffing her hands in her pockets with renewed determination. She was hungry and it would be a long walk, so she should get started.

Sheena slipped twice before reaching the crest of the first hill; but it was a lovely day, and the sun was hot on her shoulders. As it was so often in the desert after a rain, everything was washed clean, with a crispness all its own. She couldn't remain angry for long—the very air made her heart feel light, carefree. She smiled when she found a small yellow flower directly in her path. She knelt to pick it, hearing a horse's snort at the same moment, and looked up into Travis's green eyes.

“Want a ride?”

She stared at him, forgetting the flower as she stood. Shame glowed in his eyes as he waited for her response.

“I would like something clear between us first.” She kept her eyes on the snap buttons of his shirt as she recalled too vividly his bare

chest. "I need your assurance that from now on you won't—" She forced herself to meet his eyes. "That you won't try and manipulate me or my life." She held up her hand before he could interrupt. "I need to find out who I am again, and what I want, Travis, before I can let anything more develop between us." She could see the nerve twitch near his dimple. "I think that's only fair. When I can remember my past...I may find I do have room in my life for...us...but right now I don't."

"You're asking a lot of me, Sheena." He seemed to choose his words with care. "The way I feel about you is tied as much to the emotional realm as it is to the sexual. I want you in my life, sharing the day-to-day realities with me as well as the nights. I don't believe I have the willpower to keep my hands off that perfect body of yours when you're near, much less to stay out of your life." He removed his Stetson, running a hand through his dark hair. "But I suppose, if that's what it takes to keep you here, safe on my ranch, it's the least I can do. Just don't expect too much of me for too long. I'm human, after all, and it took you to show that to me graphically."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounded like. I won't promise to keep my hands off you all of the time, or keep my nose out of your life, but I will try to keep it at a minimum for your current peace of mind—and restrain myself in public." His deep voice sounded sincere.

She realized she couldn't ask for more. Besides, she really didn't want him to completely ignore her. His attention excited her, and after last night she knew how wonderfully each of their bodies responded to the other's.

He held out his hand and she took it, smiling at him as he lifted her.

"Is it a pact?" he asked as he settled her in front of him.

She nodded solemnly as he shook her hand. She sat astride in front of him, his arms locked round her. Suddenly, she felt lighthearted. Maybe, if they were careful and didn't rush anything, everything would work out for the best.

She made herself sit straight, though, gripping the saddle horn—it wouldn't do to lean against him now. She knew how tenuous their

pact was, and how fast passion could ruin their good intentions.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY RODE OVER THE NEXT HILL IN THE DIRECTION OF THE RANCH. THE RAIN had left its mark on the hillsides and arroyos; new erosion had started. There were deep puddles in every low spot around, but otherwise the world was washed clean.

"Everything is so lovely this morning. Everything looks brand new." She gazed into the distance, thrilled by the fresh-scrubbed look of the piñon juniper forest around them. "I really love it here, Travis," she confided.

She turned her head to look at him just as his gaze returned from following hers to rest on the pure delight in her face. They smiled at each other in understanding as he rested his free hand on her flat stomach.

She watched a blue jay flipping through the branches. The steady rocking of Thunder's stride relaxed her, and she gradually rested against Travis's chest. She felt his strong arm curved underneath her breasts.

"By the way, I'm going to get you a better horse," he told her. "Apparently, Zephra can't be trusted."

She licked her lips, her voice sounding nervous when she spoke to defend Zephra.

"The plane and thunder were responsible for Zephra bolting, Travis. That, and the fact I wasn't paying attention to the storm. Don't blame her. She's a good horse."

"If you feel you can trust her, and you're not hurt, I suppose I will. Tell me more about this plane."

"I tried to read the numbers as it was flying very slow and low. It was the same one that buzzed Rob and me day before yesterday, I

think. He told you about it when you called, remember?"

"I remember. Did you get any cactus spines or new bruises when you were thrown?"

Sheena stiffened as her hand returned to the saddle horn. She wasn't a china doll who got injured every time she went outside, and she needed him to know that. She also knew she was being too defensive, but she couldn't help feeling butterflies as the warmth of his breath touched her cheek, his hand pressed lightly against her belly.

"I wasn't hurt, Travis. I'm a grown woman, and I don't break that easily."

"I know you don't, love. I'm very happy about that. Otherwise, I'd be accused of abuse after all of the bruises you've sustained in my care."

The humor in his tone irritated her further. She tried to pull away from him, but his hold was secure—he had anticipated her reaction.

"Relax, beloved," he whispered in her ear. "I think what you need is a little tender loving now. How about the good morning kiss we forgot to share? Fighting demons all night is hard work, you know." He nuzzled her ear. His fingers slipped between the waistband of her jeans and her shirt.

Sheena was instantly fuming. How dare he?

His lips tickled her earlobe; then she felt his tongue draw small circles along the edge before dipping inside. Fighting the tingling sensation in her middle she sat stiff-backed. She wouldn't respond to his seductive ways, she told herself bravely, but it took all of her concentration to turn her head away.

"I don't want you doing this, Travis. I asked politely before, but you've ignored me. I'm serious." Her voice was, she was happy to note, firm despite the butterflies tumbling, churning inside.

He didn't loosen his grip. Instead, she felt his long fingers shift. His hand worked further inside the waistband of her jeans to caress bare skin.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was sharp as she stiffened even more, seizing his wrist.

"Relieving some of that sexual tension you've got bottled up

inside, Angel. Everyone—man, woman and child—suffers from some type of sexual tension. It does no one any good to remain frustrated, so I'm taking care of yours by touching you. We weren't able to consummate our love last night, and this will take away some of the strain we're both feeling."

She gripped his wrist, but he had already managed to unzip her jeans and slide his thumb underneath the elastic of her panties. It was obvious he didn't take her protest seriously—or if he did, thought his highhanded manner would break down her restraints, making her accept what he was doing to her.

Sheena struggled, trying to pull his hand away, but he only pressed harder. His long fingers easily followed his thumb inside the elastic, pressing her tighter against his chest as he touched her intimately. It was wildly, wickedly exciting. She couldn't believe he was doing this, while at the same time she faced the realization that she was totally under his control—and liked it.

"No," she protested in a breathless voice, "this is insane. Please, you shouldn't, we..." She gasped as he touched her warm, slick flesh. He knew hers was a feeble protest when the sensitive skin he was touching was already on fire and wet. She wiggled in an effort to avoid his touch, but that only allowed him to curve his fingers deeper between her legs, sliding smoothly inside her wet core.

He took ruthless advantage of the fact she couldn't close her legs to his search, riding astride as she was. Sheena gasped again as his mouth warmed her ear. He began whispering love words to her in a combination of Spanish, Navajo and Apache.

He moved his hand with a steady rhythm against her most secret of places, and she heard her own ragged breathing. His lips traveled down her neck in small wet kisses. She was now straining against him, yearning for the release his fingers would soon bring her. Oh, dear God, what was happening to her? How could she allow this? She blinked, staring ahead at the rolling, empty terrain.

She looked downward and saw his hand covering her. She closed her eyes, and in the next moment was shocked to find herself floating above them then sinking into heady consciousness. It felt so good, so carnal, so...

There were no words as he slowly explored her hot cavern. She felt his hard manhood press against her back as she began to jerk in rapid response to the steady rhythm of his fingers. Together their breath shattered the stillness as she writhed against his knowing hand, the sensual invasion moving her quickly toward its inevitable conclusion.

Sheena experienced a wild sense of freedom, an exhilaration like no other she had ever experienced as she grasped his hand, holding it pressed inside her.

"Let yourself go, Sheena, love. Give it to us, to me. All of it. All of it, Angel. Do you feel how badly I want to make love to you, Sheena?" he whispered as his tongue took possession of the inner depths of her ear. "How badly I want you to enjoy this."

She felt it—and what was worse she wanted him to throw her to the ground and grind their bodies together in the mud.

Sheena couldn't form words, only gasp again as he found the core of her being, filling her with his long, tender fingers, moving in and out, up and down in the ageless rhythm of time. She pressed helplessly against his hand as the growing dampness spread between her legs.

The climax came with a power that was almost beyond her comprehension. She shuddered and trembled until she was spent. She had become the woman nature intended her to be, and she owed it all to him.

He continued to explore her secret cavern with roughened fingers until she couldn't think of anything but the mind-numbing passion his touch aroused. She didn't hear herself call his name as her body shook again or Thunder snort, growing impatient with her jerks. In a semiconscious state she fought a dual battle of hungry desire and fear. She must stop this, but it was impossible to make her rational mind work when his fingers were befogging her brain. Damn him he knew it, too, and was taking ruthless advantage.

"I thought..." She blew a puff of air out. "I...thought..."

"I know, love." His soft voice was filled with understanding as his hand stilled. "I'm moving too fast again. Will you forgive me?"

She looked down at her gaping jeans, the curling hairs peeking

out of her panties, his tanned hand against the nylon as he pulled free. It was hard to resist the feelings growing inside her. The feelings his touch had awakened. What if she were actually in love with someone else? What if...?

It didn't matter. She was planning to leave, wasn't she? Leaving because she couldn't deal with the emotions he aroused.

He kissed the top of her head softly, holding her close to his warm body. Why did he have to be so understanding and kind? she wondered next as he smoothly zipped her jeans, shifting his body so his hard pelvis no longer pressed against her back?

"I'll remember our pact from now on, Sheena." His voice was huskily quiet. "I'm afraid, though, you'll have to be diligent in reminding me from time to time. You know now how weak I am with you. You make the most incredible sounds deep in your throat when you're excited. They're a powerful incentive for a man to make you cum."

He kissed her cheek, his tongue touching the corner of her lips. His words made her smile all the while she flushed in embarrassment. She was positive no other man had ever said anything like this to her before. It was so erotic, wicked, forbidden.

Travis was clearly not a man used to restraining himself. Life and living came very naturally to him, but he was willing to make the effort for her peace of mind when she complained. It made her feel special, very special.

Then Sheena's stomach growled.

"Listen to that!" Travis glanced worriedly around, "I wasn't aware I had mountain lions on my property."

"What?" She straightened.

"A cougar." Her stomach growled again. "There must be a pair of them. They always hunt as a team." His eyes were dancing when she glanced over her shoulder, and she realized he was teasing her.

Sheena relaxed, unconsciously touching his chest with her shoulder. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?" she asked.

He laughed, a deep pleasant sound, and with a slight pressure of his knee he urged the stallion into a lope. Sheena gripped the horn to keep from bouncing off. His strong arm held her close, making the

ride safe—and completely filled with the wanton emotions he had awakened, making her even more aware of the rain-polished beauty of her new home.

"I'm teasing you a bit and you're starving, hold on. When we get back, go get cleaned up. Molly and I will have a feast for you when you come downstairs."

It took them less than twenty minutes to reach the ranch house. He rode straight into the barn and swung to the ground, reaching for her; but Sheena avoided his hands and slid off on her own.

"My lands! 'Bout time you two showed up. My goodness, girl, what happened to you?" Molly ran disapproving eyes over Sheena's muddy clothes. "You need a bath."

Sheena looked at herself and then with a laugh threw her arm around the older woman. "You're right, but first I need to eat."

"Where did you two hole up, Travis? I haven't seen a storm like that since I was a girl. It washed out the road from the Zane cabin into Payson, and it probably ruined most of the dirt roads into the reservation," Molly informed them.

Sheena glanced at Travis, but he was unhitching the saddle, so she replied as she led the way from the barn. "We were at the line shack—Travis found me near there. I found it myself but the door was locked. He opened it, built a fire, and we were comfortable."

Molly caught her hand, pulling her toward the house. "Well, I can see who got the worst of it. You must have been scared to death, child."

Sheena smiled to herself. Yes, she had been frightened by the storm, but the fear had vanished when Travis arrived. Right now, she preferred to concentrate on Molly's warmhearted manner and her welcome rather than the events of the night—and this morning.

"Run up and shower." Molly motioned to the stairs as they entered. "It'll take me at least twenty minutes to put together omelets for the two of you."

Sheena did as she was told, appreciating the opportunity to escape. She entered the bathroom she shared with the vacant room next to hers. Looking in the mirror almost sent her into hysterics—her hair was plastered against her skull, her face was streaked with

mud, her clothes were ripped like a rag doll's. She couldn't believe she'd had the nerve to face Travis, much less talk about a relationship.

Or sit on his stallion while he played with her in that brazen manner. He had exposed her most private self to the world and any curious eye. Thank God there had been no mirrors at the shack. Or any way anyone could have witnessed his foreplay earlier and her erotic reaction.

Quickly, she stripped and stepped into the warm shower, and within seconds she felt human again. Inspecting her hands, she found them scraped and bruised, her nails caked with mud. There was a new bruise on her left hip, but otherwise she was amazingly unharmed.

She soaped a washcloth and rubbed it over her face and breasts. She had never felt more like a woman in her entire life. Travis had introduced her to the erotic excitement of voyeurism. He had awakened not only her feminine desires but the latent passion she kept carefully clamped down as well.

She felt the tape, and began tugging at it. She was tired of the binding and all it represented. The bathroom door opened, and her heart fluttered an alert.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHO IS IT?"

"Just me, sweetheart. Don't be alarmed."

Sheena heard water flow into the vanity sink as he began washing.

"Travis?" Her voice broke. She stared through the plastic at his silhouette, inches from her. "Get out!"

"I'm just washing my hands before breakfast," he told her calmly, appearing to do just that.

"This is my bathroom. There's another downstairs." Her voice was ragged.

"You're wrong, Sheena, this is *our* bathroom." He reached for a towel.

"You may own the house, but this is my private bath while I'm in it. *Private* means just that."

He seemed to be laughing at her, and she wanted him to realize how rude he was being.

"Once again I will correct you, Sheena. This bathroom belongs to the room you're in and to my room. Therefore, it is *our* bathroom." He opened the medicine cabinet.

"Ooh..." She glared at his profile, feeling the warm water cascade over her breasts, down her thighs. With impatient hands she rinsed the shampoo from her hair. Maybe if she ignored him he would leave.

She turned off the water, running her hands down her body to push the excess water away. The faucet was still running in the sink—he was shaving. Oh, God, why was he still here?

"Since you haven't the common decency to leave, hand me a towel." She made her voice cold.



Immediately, he stuck his hand around the curtain, a towel hanging from his fingers.

"By the way," he asked conversationally, "did you have any trouble removing the tape?"

Sheena seethed. She had completely forgotten about trying to get it off—it clung to her right side. He took her silence for an answer.

"You did have problems. Let me help you." He drew the curtain back and stood in front of her bare-chested, his face streaked with shaving soap. His dimple peeked out of the foam.

"You're a liar, aren't you?" she fumed at him, eyes narrow as she clutched the towel around her. "You said you would leave me alone from now on."

He shrugged indifferently, "I just want to be helpful."

"Then get out of here. If you don't...I'll scream."

His jade eyes twinkled at her. "That wouldn't gain you any privacy. Rob and Max came in when I did. It could become quiet the crowd, Angel, and I don't believe you're an exhibitionist."

She swatted his helping hand aside as she stepped from the tub. "You're a beast—a dominating male beast. You're taking full advantage of me when I'm in no position to deal with you. I don't trust you at all."

His traced the curve of her chin with his fingertips. "I don't trust myself, not with you."

His lips were lowering toward her. He caught the towel and pulled her toward him.

"Travis..." Whatever she meant to say was never spoken. Instead, their mouths met. He again tugged playfully on the towel, letting her know how easily he could remove it if he wanted. The kiss was light, promising, yet holding at bay the true passion she knew lay behind it.

He lifted his head, taking a deep breath.

"You shouldn't...You agreed..." She was breathing too fast to make a complete sentence. "I shouldn't let you get away with this."

"Hush." His arms locked behind her as his lips silenced her again. He slid his hands down her naked back to cup her buttocks and press her all but naked body intimately against his bare chest. The rough cloth of his jeans scratched her legs as he slipped one

hand beneath the towel to explore the full curve of her breast, a taut nipple, before falling to her waist.

Sheena accepted his kiss with a desire that destroyed her anger. Her ache for him was all-consuming, and she knew he felt the same. His fingers toyed for a moment with the loose tape; then he lifted his head to look into her eyes.

"You did have problems." He tugged gently on the tape. "Here." He pushed her toward the toilet. "Hold on. At least this way we'll have an excuse when you scream."

He wiped his face before taking a pair of scissors from the medicine cabinet. The wickedness of his glance made her flush as she held the towel demurely against her chest.

"I saw everything last night, lover, and it's all lovely. You don't need to feel embarrassed." He gently lowered the towel to her lap.

She looked away from him covering her breasts shyly with her arm. Last night, she told herself, the light had been dim, and the wicked storm had held most of their attention.

He snipped the tape. "Close your eyes, Sheena, and take a deep breath."

The next instant she felt a ripping along her middle. Suppressing a scream, she felt hot tears in her eyes. He threw the tape away. Then he lifted the towel to cover her, keeping his eyes on hers.

"I had better get out of here." He spoke softly. "Or I'm likely to forget our bargain totally, and make passionate love to you right here on the floor."

Sheena sat staring at the place where he had been. How could he do this to her? Her whole body was on fire for his touch, and he was able to just walk out. Was he punishing her for making him agree to her terms? Well, she wouldn't allow him to get away with it again. As soon as she could manage it, she would frustrate him in the same way he had her. Oh, yes, it might be great fun to do that.

Her stomach grumbled again, and she hurried to finish drying and go to her room. It only took minutes to clean off what remained of the adhesive then slide into a pair of jeans and a soft cotton top, combing her hair and putting on a dab of lipstick before she went out the door.

When she arrived in the kitchen, facing Travis took all of her courage; but she managed not to blush when he looked at her. She wasn't about to let him know how frustrated she was. Instead she gave all her attention to Molly.

"Molly, this looks delicious." She took her plate from the stove and took a seat between Rob and Max.

"You're amazing, Sheena." Rob grinned at her. "You come through the most harrowing experiences totally intact. I envy you the talent."

Sheena laughed as she poured a glass of milk. Leave it to Rob to make her feel good about herself.

"I admit I was badly frightened by the storm, but I was lucky to be near the shack when Zephra bolted." She bit into her toast, savoring the flavor of the homemade butter.

"Bolted?" Travis asked as he sat across from her.

She could feel him observing her, but she didn't look back. They hadn't talked enough for her to tell him the entire story. She wondered what the others would make of his surprise.

"It was my fault. I didn't have a good grip on her reins. I was watching that plane I told you about when the thunder frightened her." She swallowed some milk, smiling shyly when at last their eyes met.

Travis shook his head without commenting, but Max said, "Storms like last night are rare, but not as unusual as you might think, Sheena. You can't afford to take chances when you're out alone, especially on a filly like Zephra. Next time, head home if you see thunderheads."

"Why were you alone in the first place?" Travis questioned, "I left strict orders that someone was to be with you at all times." He frowned at Rob and Max.

Sheena jumped to their defense. "They were with me, Travis. We'd been inoculating the herd horses. But they wanted to get into town before dark, so I sent them ahead."

She stopped as she read the tension in him.

"Until you know the country better," he ordered in a tone that allowed no argument, "I prefer you have someone with you. Last

evening we were all lucky, but in the future. . .”

“Trav, drop it,” Rob butted in. “We all know what could have happened. Don’t run it into the ground. Sheena is an excellent horsewoman. She doesn’t take unnecessary risks, and she needs her freedom.”

The brothers glared at each other, and Travis’s lips thinned; but he only shrugged and picked up his coffee mug. When his eyes met hers again, they told her plainly he didn’t like the situation, but he wouldn’t argue about it anymore.

Molly placed her hand on his shoulder. “Tell me about the case you’re working on? We haven’t heard a word since that man tried to shoot you.”

Travis helped himself to more coffee before answering. “Not too much to tell, Molly. The judge put the case in recess until I’ve completed my investigation. The defendant was all too happy to delay, but it shouldn’t take much longer.”

Molly shook her white head. “I don’t mind telling you, Travis, I’ve a bad feeling about this case. Ray told me to keep my opinions to myself, son, but I’ve had a dream. . .” She was serious. “Like when your Ma was killed. That family you’re dealing with is bad to the core—nothing good will come of this. If you don’t like what I say, don’t listen to me, but I had to warn you.”

She clasped her arms around herself, looking stern as she waited for his reaction.

“I know how to take care of myself, Molly, as you well know. But thanks for the concern.” He stood, dropping a light kiss on the old woman’s forehead. “Max, Rob, I thought you were ready to show me the new foals. I’ll have to leave shortly.”

Max followed Travis out the door as Molly shook her aged head. “You boys will never understand. Dreams don’t lie when they’re medicine dreams. You can’t ignore or forget the symbols just because you’re caught in the white man’s world. You two boys are half-Apache—your great-grandfather was Geronimo, the greatest medicine man of our people. It’s unwise to make light of this. . .” She touched her forehead. “. . .or ignore the signs.”

Sheena looked at Rob as he buttered another piece of toast. He

nodded at Molly's back as she went to the sink, muttering softly.

"She's always having 'medicine dreams,' Sheena, but I happen to agree with this one. That family Travis is involved with is nothing but trouble. They're mean—he'd better watch his step." He bit into his toast, studying her face with interest. "Tell me," he asked then, "did big brother get fresh last night?"

Sheena went hot. "That is none of your business, Rob, and you know it. How would you feel if I asked about the personal details of your love life? I'm surprised at you."

"I don't see why, little sister. It's obvious Trav is more than mildly interested in you. You two can hardly keep your eyes off one another, and you know that's been true since you woke up in the hospital." His shrewd brown eyes moved over her face. "He didn't even know about Zephra bolting. I find that pretty odd, especially since you two were alone all night and this morning and you rode in together."

He took another bite of his toast, looking pleased with his powers of observation and deduction.

"He did know about Zephra bolting, but we're always arguing and everything gets muddled." She stood. "I should help Molly." She hoped to avoid further explanations.

"Not so fast." Rob grabbed her wrist, holding her securely. "I just don't want to see you hurt again. I feel responsible for you while you're here, and I want to warn you before you get in over your head."

"Trav hasn't been known for his permanent relationships with women. He's had more women than you would care to count, actually. He's ten years older than either of us. I just don't want to see you weeping over him when he drops you flat." His voice had dropped to a whisper so Molly couldn't hear. "Especially when I'm free and willing to move our relationship forward to something more if you'll just give me the nod."

"I won't be weeping over him—or you, Rob." She said it with firm determination, although her voice was no louder than his. "I don't even like your brother. He's too boorish, too sure of himself," she lied bravely. "You needn't worry, Rob. I can take care of myself. I have for years now, *brother*."

She wrinkled her pert nose at him and winked.

Rob laughed, dropping her wrist and leaning back in his chair.

"Stubborn and independent. You're both as stubborn as mules. He won't take Molly's advice, and you won't take mine. I know you're old enough to take care of yourself, little sister, but when one's heart is involved good sense flies into the twilight zone.' He shrugged. "Forgive me for butting in. I won't do it again unless you ask." He reached for the jam.

Her anger dissolved—Rob was the one person she could never stay annoyed with for long.

The screen door banged shut, and Max ran into the room.

"Sheena!" he shouted, his breathing fast. "Come quick! It's Dakota. She's down, and there's a hoof showing. Travis says it's too early."

Sheena was halfway to the door, her mind in a whirl as she called to Rob, "Get the *Merck Manual* and my bag. Molly, call Doc Simpson. Max, come on!"

They ran to the barn, and Sheena closed her eyes briefly against the glare of the noon sun. Her blood was pumping fast as she prayed. Everything depended on her remembering exactly what to do. Travis loved this mare. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Taking a deep breath, she composed herself before entering the barn. She needed to be calm and professional when she faced him.

She had checked Dakota yesterday before going out to the herd. At that time, the foal hadn't turned—a breech birth was the worst thing that could happen.

Travis knelt beside the mare, rubbing her beautiful velvet nose. He spoke soothing words as she tossed her head in agitation, snorting as Sheena dropped beside him. Her examination was quick and professional; she didn't even pause to look at him.

Her voice was calm when she finished.

"The foal hasn't turned yet. We're going to have to turn it so it doesn't strangle in its cord. It's going to be hard, bloody work. Prepare yourself, men."

"Doc Simpson?" Travis asked, his deep voice resonating around them.

"Is too far away, and we haven't time to wait." She took her bag

from Rob as he arrived. She felt Travis watching as she rummaged, searching for her gloves and the sedative.

"Sheena." She glanced at him then, her face serious as she met his frown.

"I've done it before, Travis. I can do it again. Just keep her distracted and pray." There was no time for anything else, and he finally accepted her diagnosis and returned to devoting his attention to the mare.

For Sheena, the next hours were like a hundred days. Rob, Ray and Max watched her and Travis in tense silence. She was vaguely aware that Molly had come and gone several times bringing hot coffee, warm tortillas. Rob held a cup to her lips at some point, and she found it reviving.

Hands deep inside Dakota, she fought to keep her doubts at bay. She must remain calm, professional, she told herself over and over. She didn't know she was biting her lips.

Salty sweat rolled into her eyes, and she hunched a shoulder to wipe it away. A hand came out and wiped a bandanna across her forehead then tied it around her head. Sheena looked up into Travis's face. His eyes were warm, and so near her whole body quivered in sudden awareness. She thought he might say something, but then Dakota tossed her head with another contraction.

"I've turned it," she reported. "Ray, I need rope...with a loop." Instantly, he was beside her, handing her the looped end of a rope.

Travis crooned to the mare. "Hang in there, girl. You've got the best vet Cornell ever produced beside you. She'll pull you through."

Sheena took strength from his whispered comment. She knew the words were meant as much for her as the mare, and as their eyes met she swallowed a huge lump in her throat. She slid the rope into the birth canal, feeling for the front legs of the foal. Working the rope along the slippery body, she knew it couldn't be much longer.

Dakota rolled her eyes with pain, moaning as Sheena pulled the rope tight. It had taken most of her strength to get this far; and for a moment, she rested her head against the mare's flank. Then, she stood and wrapped the rope around her bare hands, bracing herself to pull.

Sheena took a deep breath as Dakota moaned with another contraction, pulling as hard as her one hundred and six pounds would allow. She was concentrating so hard on her task she didn't see Travis stand as Doc Simpson's arrived. When his hands locked around her waist, she startled, almost dropping the rope.

"We'll do this part together, Sheena," he whispered in her ear, one hand covering hers on the rope, the other locked around her middle, careful not to crush her healing ribs.

Another contraction. Another. She lost count of the times they pulled, oblivious to the spectators around them and the numbness in her hands. It became hard to breathe as they strained; her ribs ached from his grip; the rope cut into her flesh. Travis's hard body supported her as they rested between contractions. Their sweat combined with the other odors that filled the room.

They pulled again, harder this time; and she gasped in pain as his grip tightened on her waist.

"Rob, Doc." Travis's voice was hard. "Take over for Sheena. She's done enough."

She was engulfed in pure-white anger. Damn his arrogance. She could do this, and she would. When Rob stepped in front of her reaching for the rope, she glared at him with a fury that turned her eyes to glittering emeralds. He lifted an eyebrow, recognizing the determination flashing from those eyes.

Travis had no time to comment on his hesitation because at that instant Dakota gave a convulsive shudder, and the foal slid free. The release of tension on the rope sent Travis and Sheena sprawling into the hay. She lay atop him, breath coming in a ragged groan.

For a second, she held quite still, trying to control it; she didn't hear him cursing. Then, she struggled to her feet, pushing past Rob to the mare's side as quickly as she could manage.

Doc Simpson was already there, and she blinked. When had he arrived? Her ordeal was over, as was Dakota's. The mare was already licking her offspring clean with affection.

Doc looked up into her anxious face.

"It's a colt. He's healthy and a beauty. I couldn't have done better, little lady. Look at those markings, Travis." Travis was standing right



behind her. "He'll be the prize of your herd."

Sheena felt a lump in her throat. She really had managed to save the foal and the mare. The evidence in front of her filled her with wonder. She actually felt like a vet for the first time since she had awakened in the hospital.

She realized her arms were covered with blood, her shirt and jeans ruined. Her body felt as though it had been through a wringer. She lifted a crusted hand to rub her neck, realizing for the first time the lights were on. Glancing toward the open barn door, she was shocked to discover it was totally dark outside. How long had this taken?

Rob threw a warm arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to his side. His voice was triumphant as he told Travis, "I told you she could do it. She's a wonder woman."

He grinned into Sheena's tired eyes as he kissed her lips.

"Wonder woman or not, I'm beat!" Sheena sighed, trying to smile.

"Of course, you are." Travis had finished a brief inspection of the new foal before leaving Dakota to Doc Simpson. His eyes were warm on Sheena's face as he detached Rob's arm, replacing it with his own. He ignored Rob entirely as he dropped a light kiss on her lips.

"You're coming inside with me, Angel," he commanded as he guided her toward the barn door. "I'll get you cleaned up while Molly makes us something to eat, then it's off to bed for you."

Sheena stiffened. How dare he? Who did he think he was? What right did he have...?

But he went right on as he led her out into the darkness. "I know you're annoyed with me, Sheena, but why don't you wait until you're less tired to berate me. Just think of it this way, Angel. Now you can clean up and save the explanations for the spectators until later, when you feel like it."

Sheena yanked away, staring at him transfixed. What made him think he could treat her this way? Didn't he realize what she had just accomplished?

"You're an unfeeling beast!" Her voice was harsh and low. "I don't understand you. What makes you think I don't want to be congratulated? God, Travis, don't you know what I just did? How

important it was for me to feel proud of a job well done?"

"Then go back inside with them." His voice was just as low as hers, his eyes boring holes into her. "I'm sorry, but I thought I might have hurt you when we fell. All I wanted to do was give you time to relax before dealing with anything else. Do you have any idea how long that took us?"

Sheena shivered, her anger dissolving as she realized his logic. He correctly understood her hesitation.

"It's almost midnight, Sheena, and with the lack of sleep we had last night, the stresses of this afternoon and evening, I think you should go get cleaned up, eat something, and then get some rest."

Sheena licked her lips, taking a deep breath. Was she constantly going to act like a fool whenever they were together? Still, she wasn't going to let him dictate to her—give an inch and he would take a mile, she was sure of it.

"I'll go inside and clean up, but without your help." She looked at the porch light. "Goodnight, Travis."

Lifting her chin, she marched to the house alone.

Molly was bending over the stove when she entered. Sheena took a deep breath to clear her head as Molly smiled, coming to her side.

"It's a colt, Molly, a beautiful colt. Doc Simpson says he's going to be fine despite the rugged start." Sheena felt as if she were walking in a dream—lightheaded, stumbling.

"You're plumb exhausted, child. Those men should be whooped letting you do so much when you're still recovering. Mind you, I'll have a long talk with the lot of them over this one."

Sheena barely heard. She didn't resist as Molly helped her to her room, out of her clothes and into the shower. She had performed like a true veterinarian tonight, she told herself as Molly placed the covers around her, not a weak memory-less woman. She had remembered exactly what to do, and had done it.

So, why had Travis treated her like a child? Her chin rose to a stubborn angle. She heard Molly come and go, muttering about her ruined clothes, the bruises on her body.

She was too tired to contemplate the events of the day in any depth. Too tired to be annoyed any longer with Travis, or even

excited by the birth of the colt. She tasted the tempting soup Molly tried to feed her, taking a few sips as she fought exhaustion; but she fell asleep despite Molly's insistence that she should eat.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS A HORRIBLE DREAM. SHE *KNEW* IT WAS A DREAM, BUT THAT DID NOT stop it. Sheena felt the sweat on her body as a fire surrounded her. She heard the bellowing herd of cattle coming through the darkness toward her, their hooves thundering against the solid earth. She saw the wave of flame flash through the branches of another tree and smelled the animals' fear. Every hair on her head stood up as she fell behind a log seeking safety. She coughed as the smoke filled her lungs. Her mind screamed in panic as the animals neared her. She had to get away! Away from their feet...the fire...

\* \* \*

Sheena jerked upright as she saw her parent's faces, the flames that had claimed them. A scream left her throat as she felt the fire engulf her as well. She fought with the covers, her breath coming in gasps. The fire. Dear God, what was holding her here? She had to get away!

Slapping at the hands that bound her, she screamed again.

"Sheena, darling, wake up."

She heard the voice dimly. She did not recognize it. She pushed the hands away, feeling them return to grasp her shoulders, keeping her in the flames. Her body was imprisoned in a searing embrace; and she screamed again and landed a solid punch to something soft, heard someone gasp. She struggled frantically to escape like a terrified creature. She tried to kick and found her legs anchored to the sheets.

Eventually the soothing quality of his voice broke through the dream images.

"Stop this. You'll hurt yourself, Sheena. It's only a dream, sweetheart, open your eyes."

It was Travis's husky voice in her ear, and slowly she opened her eyes to stare at him. His hair was ruffled, his eyelids heavy from lack of sleep. She could feel his heart pounding next to hers as if he had just run the hundred-yard dash in ten seconds. She clung to him, her own breath rasping against his T-shirt as she rubbed her jaw on the solid, reassuring mass of his shoulder.

"The fire was so real—the smoke, their faces, the screams." The words came out broken as she trembled. "I saw the fire. The herd of cows...I saw the house. Mom and Dad's faces...I had to escape." She stopped, catching her breath on a wet sob.

She knew she had seen her parent's home, smelled the fire, felt the overwhelming fear as she escaped. Sorrow filled her as she stared at Travis; tears flooded from her eyes as the memory receded.

There was a brisk knock at her door; then it was thrust open. Rob stood outlined in the frame, hair standing on end. His eyes were as heavy as Travis's.

"Are you okay, Sheena? Travis?"

"She's all right," Travis answered for her, holding her face against his shoulder, hiding her tears. "It was a nightmare. She was hysterical."

His grip relaxed as he turned to his brother. Sheena raised her head and looked between them, making a gallant effort to brush the tears from her cheeks, trying to regain some composure.

"I'm okay now. It was a nightmare." She sniffed. "I'm okay, Rob, Travis...I'm fine now...thank you both." She tried to extract herself from Travis's firm embrace.

Rob wasn't satisfied with her answer. "Are you sure you don't need anything? Brandy? Milk? I'd be happy to get anything."

"I'm positive, Rob, thank you." She realized it was she who was still clinging to Travis, not the other way around; and that Rob had noticed it. She dropped her arms from Travis's neck as she remembered how thin a gown she wore. Thank goodness Travis had only turned on the bathroom light between their two rooms. She doubted either brother could make out much of her.

"Thank you, Travis." She saw the concern in his crystal eyes deepen. "I'm fine now, I really am," she attempted to reassure them as she sniffed again, wiping her eyes. Travis handed her a Kleenex as he watched her rub her wrists.

"You've just had too much excitement in the past twenty-four hours, that's all. Don't let one bad dream scare you." His voice reassured her, as it was meant to. There was nothing she wouldn't believe when he looked at her like that.

He got up, catching the sheet and covering her as she lay back. His fingers brushed her cheek as he cleared the hair from her eyes. "Go back to sleep, love. It's only around three in the morning, and you need your rest."

He made her feel treasured, his gaze loving and tender. His voice was soft and comforting. He pressed his hand over her eyes, pushing her back onto her pillow; then he turned away, accompanying Rob through the open hall door.

Sheena turned on her side. She heard Travis ask Rob, "Has she been having nightmares all this time?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Rob replied. "But she was upset tonight. You've got to go easy with her, Travis. She isn't like most of the women you're used to dealing with. She needs a gentle hand."

"I know that. I've known that since I first met her. I don't need your advice."

"But you'd better take it, brother, because that girl, that woman in there, means more to me than you do. I won't stand by while you pull her through the mire or into your usual mind games." Rob's voice had gotten louder.

"That's enough, Rob. You'll disturb her." Travis emphasized the words. "I happen to care more for her than you know. As a matter of fact, tomorrow I plan to tell her how much I care, but tonight I plan on sleeping, so goodnight."

"Just remember what I said, Travis. I won't see her hurt."

She never heard Travis's response, if he made one. The door closed softly, and their footsteps faded away down the hall.

Sheena buried her head in the pillow, feeling more hot tears on her cheeks. What in the world was she to do? She was trembling. Her

hands covered her mouth to block the sobs that threatened to overcome her again. She knew she had seen her parents and the fatal fire in her dream. She had relived the horror of it, and she knew the memory was real, though strangely unfocused and totally illogical. What did cows have to do with her parent's house fire?

She lay in the darkness, her eyes wide open, her head throbbing. Why couldn't things come one at a time? She had enough problems without having to deal with their libidos.

Sheena sat up. She really did need something for her headache. With supreme effort she forced herself to her feet and into the bathroom. Fumbling in the bright light she blew her nose and saw her red-rimmed eyes. She washed her face then opened the medicine chest.

She heard Travis's bedroom door open and close, and held her breath. She hoped he would not check on her and fought an incredible urge to run and hide, but she was too slow. His face joined hers in the mirror as the door opened.

"What are you doing up?" He stood more than a yard away, but she had the sensation he was much closer. She closed her eyes on the vision of his suntanned face, his bare legs and T-shirted chest, silently wishing him away. When she opened them, he was still there.

"My head aches. I wanted something for it." The huskiness of her voice made his lips curve. It wasn't exactly a smile, but rather a softening.

"Go back to bed. I'll bring you some aspirin."

A flare of independence returned as she said.

"I can get it myself, thank you." She looked into the cabinet not understanding her need to oppose him. Searching for the bottle, she was about to give up when he reached around her to the top shelf. She met his disconcerting steady gaze in the mirror as he dropped two tablets in her hand. Reaching around her again, he filled a glass with water and watched as she swallowed, his expression one of resigned gentleness.

"Go back to bed, Sheena."

"I..."

He laid one hand on her shoulder and turned her toward her room.

She wished she had the courage to lay her cheek against those strong fingers.

Instead, she said, "I want to thank you—"

"Go to bed, Sheena. We'll talk in the morning."

She didn't want to talk in the morning. She didn't want to be alone tonight—the shadows were too haunting. She was afraid to go back to sleep by herself. What if the dream returned? What if...?

What did it all mean—or matter?

She faced him, feeling the pulse in her neck beating erratically. Travis looked exhausted, yet he had been patient, caring and composed. She knew if she hesitated much longer he was likely to pick her up and carry her back to bed. Head down, she returned to her room. Things could never be simple between them, and she was too unsure of herself to trust her own feelings.

She was more traditional than she cared to admit. She could never be the hard, callous type who took her pleasure and forgot easily. She sat on her bed, head in hands, staring at the blackness, feeling her heart beat heavily in her chest. With the return of the memory of her parents, other doors were opening. Distant glimpses of school friends, apartments, smells, her pets and the rural home she had grown up in. The taste of baked bread, the chocolate dream cakes her mother had made. She shook her head as she attempted to make sense of the collage that confronted her.

She hadn't heard him follow her, and when his arms crept round her, she jerked her head up.

"I can't pretend to be indifferent, Sheena. I want to, for your sake, but your dejection tonight is too much for me." He kissed her brow. His words made her nerves tighten, but she didn't resist as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a prone position on the bed beside him. "Just relax, sweetheart, you're safe here with me tonight." He gently smoothed her curling hair from their faces. "Close your eyes, Angel. I'll keep the dragons away. You needn't worry anymore. Whatever happened in your dream is over."

There was no laughter in his voice, only soft command. She acquiesced, snuggling into the crook of his arm with a deep sigh of contentment. It wasn't long before she was asleep again.



\* \* \*

Blinking tiredly, Sheena focused bewildered on the face resting beside hers. She was afraid to move, her breathing shallow. Her brain spun in circles as she recalled the terrifying dream, her search for aspirin and the way she had accepted him into her bed without protest. It embarrassed her, but the next moment she knew here was where she wanted him to be, beside her forever.

She struggled against a sudden urge to cry. This was ridiculous, she told herself. How could she care so much about him? He didn't respect her wishes. He ordered her about, tried to manipulate her...but no matter. She wanted him to hold her forever just as he was now. Or was she overreacting, being too susceptible to the comfort his support provided?

She sighed as the dim dawn light filtered through the curtain. She should get up and check on Dakota. It was Sunday, and she knew that Max, Molly and Ray would already have left for church more than seventy miles away. Rob would still be sleeping—his usual practice was to snore until ten. She would have the yard to herself.

Sheena needed time to come to grips with her wayward emotions, and the few scattered memories she could still recall from her dream. She had to confront Travis soon, and she must be prepared.

But for a moment longer she rejoiced in the sensation of his hard, relaxed body pressed against hers, the good healthy smell of him. She fought a desire to kiss his relaxed lips, his neck that was almost too much to resist.

She slid from the bed, taking care not to wake him. She watched as he turned over, hugging her pillow. No, she couldn't allow herself to feel such tenderness—not now, not yet, with only partial memories.

She gathered her clothes quietly and went into the bathroom to wash and dress. When she came back into the room to get her shoes, he had rolled onto his stomach, his arms thrown across the bed. He looked so vulnerable now—not strong or arrogant, just very natural, very lovable and all male with the dark stubble on his chin.

No, she wouldn't think this way. She *couldn't* think this way and remain safe.

In the kitchen she picked up an apple for Dakota and went out into the warmth of a new day. The rain had left humidity behind, and she could see the bellies of new clouds forming near the horizon. She did some stretching on the way to the barn. She had risen early all of her life, always loving the dawn air and the smell of a new day. She checked the six new kittens first, petted Weaver as she went through the corral. The dog's friendly eyes studied her.

"Weaver, don't you like mornings best? Everything is so fresh, so new. I love the morning." She scratched the dog's ears. "Have you been in to see the new colt? I bet Dakota had him on display all night."

They walked to the stall. Dakota stood proudly and whinnied a greeting as Sheena opened the gate.

"Here you are." She gave the horse the apple, but Dakota refused the offering, nudging her newborn to stand instead. Sheena laughed and hugged the wobbly new colt.

"What did they name you, boy?" she asked, making a quick, thorough examination of the baby and then his mother. Dakota picked up the apple and made short work of it as Sheena brushed her neck. "You came through your ordeal none the worse for wear, Dakota, girl. I'm happy to see that. I wish I could say the same for myself."

The horse tossed her head as Sheena gave her new oats. She went out the gate and leaned her chin on top as she fought a growing sadness inside. She had to leave here, and soon. The dream had not only awakened past memories, but the reality that she truly was alone—no family to rely on, only these two men she had just met and really didn't understand.

She knew they had their own baggage to work through before either could accept a woman into his life. So, she frowned and thought about where she should go.

There were too many emotions spinning inside her for her to see anyone, or anything, without feeling confused. The leading one at the moment was the nightmare memory of her parents' death. Why did that have to be the first memory to return, she wondered?

Her eyes stung with unshed tears. Life wasn't fair. The pain in her

chest made horrifying sense. She should feel wonderful for having recalled her training last night and be able to help Dakota. Instead, the frightening memory of her parents' death ruined the elation. She felt bruised and scarred, as if achieving her veterinarian's degree had turned out to be a monumental letdown because the two people who mattered to her the most had not been with her to share the accomplishment.

Though she had done the nearly impossible last night with the mare, it would never be enough to counteract her awakening bereavement. The birth of the colt didn't mean a thing now that her parents' deaths were once again real in her mind.

Then she thought of Travis and Rob and released a heavy sigh.

She might as well admit it. She had fallen hopelessly, madly in love with the man upstairs in her bed, with his lifestyle, his family and his home. Her mind rebelled at the thought, but her body and emotions told her it was useless to deny the reality. She was in love with Travis O'Keefe, and the only sensible thing to do was to leave before the situation could get any worse—or he found out.

So far, she had only managed to make a fool of herself with her temper and could hope he had no idea how deeply she cared about him. Sheena chose not to consider the tenderness he showed her when he was with her after her nightmare or during the downpour, and his spontaneous invitation for her to join him in Phoenix. If she looked too closely at those, she would be lost.

Yet the memories of the night past and the rainstorm haunted her. Travis hadn't made love to her either time, just held her close, shielding her from the sorrows of the past with his strong body. Even the erotic ride back to the house had been tempered with compassion and self-control. No matter what the logical part of her mind said, she wanted to rely on him to continue protecting her.

Did it really matter that they came from two such different backgrounds? Their life's goals weren't at odds, were they? He was a fair man, accepting that she needed the freedom of her career and time to heal. Could she trust her instincts when what they had been to one another in the past remained hidden behind a dark curtain inside her mind?

One thing she knew for certain—they affected each other on the same elemental, physical level. As long as he was near, she couldn't think clearly or objectively about her future. So, she should leave, at least for a while, until she recalled everything, although she wondered for a moment why it was so important to remember her past if it was filled with tragic events like the fire and the loss of her family.

She shrugged this aside as she recalled the dream. Something about it bothered her, and it had to do with Travis, she just knew it. What had he said or done in the motel room when she ran away from him? How long had she really known him? His actions so far had been straightforward and honest, but there had to be a reason she had run from him in panic, didn't there?

That part of the story worried her. Had she not recognized him when he appeared in her motel room and thought he was a burglar, or worse? She still had not a scrap of memory of that fateful day. Why not?

She shut her eye, trying to force names and traumatic memories from the hidden corners of her mind; but they refused to come. Nor did any actual dates of the events of her life, or anything specific about her parents or their home. She couldn't recall their address, their ages, their interests, or why she had decided to study veterinary medicine. The blank spaces in her mind were huge chunks out of a life that must have been filled with activity, friends and associates.

She suddenly wanted to weep again as she felt the loss.

She should go. But where? Back east?

Sheena slowly saddled Zephra as she debated a course of action. She didn't notice the path the mare took as they left the ranch, just blanked her mind to everything, letting it run with the loping mare and the early morning breeze.

When they slowed to a walk sometime later, her sober thoughts returned. One thing was definite. She had remembered two things last night: the correct way to deliver a breaching foal and her parents' death. That must mean her other memories weren't far behind—a good sign. Could she risk staying here at the ranch until they all returned; or ought she to leave before she was ensnared in a love

affair with Travis, with no way out except for the pain of a broken romance? Somehow, she knew a love affair with him would be dangerous to her overall wellbeing. She also knew it would be too easy to open her arms to him if she remained here.

She might long for his body against hers, but that didn't make up for their hot tempers or disagreements and there had been plenty of those already. She recognized his short-fused temper as a match for her own.

On the other hand, he did have his work in the city, so he would be leaving again soon, wouldn't he? If he wasn't here, would that be any better, since everything in this place reminded her of him?

Physical attraction wasn't enough to keep two people together when they had no other common interests. She refused to see the ranch, or their common love of animals as a linking force. Passion wasn't the same for a man, she rationalized. It was a passing thing, quickly extinguished once the man got what he wanted from a woman.

Rob had warned her Travis wasn't known for his permanent relationships. Otherwise, he would have married Violet or another woman long ago. That he was known for his conquests she was certain of, and apparently, she had joined those ranks months ago at college. Since it seemed he had gained her trust and bedroom there then used his influence to make sure she joined him here, there were few challenges ahead for him.

Trust—did she trust him? She shivered. It would be easy to let him take over and handle everything, but somehow she knew that was not her way. She was pragmatic, not a bemused romantic like Rob. She had learned this much about herself during the past weeks.

Last night had taught her one thing more. She was the take-charge type. That was evidenced in the way she had delivered the colt despite her exhaustion and the men's protective manner. Everyone had stepped back and followed her lead, waiting on her to give directions—even Travis and Doc Simpson when she demanded they leave her to her charge.

Her heart ached as she thought about the new colt and how beautiful he was. He was large, which was partly why Dakota had had

such difficulties. Her confidence had shot up as she saw the respect and admiration everyone gave her, and the glow in Travis's eyes had made her heart soar.

He had said she was special, that he had waited his whole life for a woman who could make him feel what she did. When had he said that? Were the words part of a dream, or reality?

She couldn't trust the memory. The need she felt for him must be nothing more than a part of her overall confusion. Her unconscious clung to the one human who had offered her stability and renewed self-confidence. His feelings would pass, but for her, what she felt meant her future happiness. If he dropped her the pain, disappointment and sense of abandonment might be too much.

Travis would get over her once she was gone and turn his attention to one of the dozen other women who waited in the wings for his jade eyes to flash at them. She should leave today as soon as he returned to Phoenix. She would go to Flagstaff, rent a room until the rest of her memory returned then decide what she should do next. Brave words, and...

"I heard all about your delivery last night, Sheena. Congratulations!"

She twisted in the saddle to stare at Violet. She hadn't remembered the other woman being so pretty, but the morning light brought out her exquisite skin tones and lovely blue eyes. Her blond hair was piled on top of her head with soft strands stealing around her neck and cheeks. She sat easily on a great bay stallion. Her jeans hugged her hips tightly, and a green silk blouse was opened to the fourth button, the curve of a full breast barely hidden by the shiny material.

"Who told you?" She hid her surprise as she reined in Zephra.

"Several people—you can't keep anything quiet around here for long. As a matter of fact, Rob told me the other night at the bar you were doing just fine, remembering more and more each day.

"You've captured Rob's imagination, I'm afraid, Sheena. But then, you must know that already, living in the same house with him during the past weeks."

She sounded jealous, and Sheena's eyes narrowed at her next

words.

"He's serious about you, you know. Rob has always been an incurable romantic, and your condition touched that nerve in him. It's part of his charm—his softer side."

Sheena turned Zephra toward the ranch as Violet let herself through the boundary gate and joined her.

"Rob does tend to exaggerate things, but he's harmless." Sheena commented. She really didn't feel like talking to anyone, much less a jealous Violet. Her nerves quaked as Violet spoke again.

"You and Rob get on well together, don't you?"

"We do." What was she getting at?

"I thought so; he talks of no one else. 'Sheena is so bright,' he says, or 'Sheena is so pretty. She did this today,' or 'Did you know that Sheena can sing as well as shoe a stallion?' I think you've actually stolen his heart as well as his imagination and that alone tells me how special you are to him." Violet shook her head as she petted her horse's neck.

Sheena reined Zephra to a standstill, looking straight at the woman. Surely, she was kidding. Rob and she did enjoy each other's company. He was easy to talk with, curious, funny and intelligent. But she couldn't believe he had lost his heart to her. He had never even made a pass. Why would Violet be jealous of her? What did she want—both brothers?

"I'm positive you've made a mistake, Violet."

"Have I?" Her voice was pleasant, her downcast eyes hidden by long lashes. "Somehow, I doubt it. You're everything Rob could want in a woman. You're self-assured, ambitious, successful, beautiful and, to quote his own description, 'as solid as juniper.'" A brief flash from those blue eyes warned Sheena the woman didn't like her very well. "Yes, you could provide him with everything. A home, income while he writes, children when he wants them. It would be perfect for him. He's a creative genius, and he needs a stable place to live and do his work. And if nothing else, Sheena, I think you're very stable."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you really that naive, or is what Rob told me about you true?" Violet grinned suddenly. "I do think you're innocent. It's hard to

believe, but possible.”

“I’m sure you know what you’re getting at, but I don’t, Violet. I like Rob, he’s entertaining, but that’s as far as it goes. There is nothing physical between us. He has been the perfect gentleman and friend since we met, nothing more or less.” Sheena was surprised at how calmly she made the statement.

“I’m very glad to hear you say that, Sheena.” Travis rode out of the trees ahead of them. She felt a brilliant flush dye her cheeks as she faced him. His eyes twinkled wickedly at her. He had obviously overheard everything.

“Travis.” Violet smiled into his face. “You devil man. You could make the horses bolt riding out of nowhere like that. Why didn’t you call out, or at least make a noise.” She rushed on before he could respond. “Isn’t it wonderful about Dakota and the new colt?”

Sheena kept her head down, hoping Travis hadn’t seen the jealous flare that stabbed her as Violet reached out and caught his arm. She had no right to feel that way, she scolded herself.

Travis moved Thunder next to Zephra. The stallion stopped near the mare’s right shoulder.

“Good morning, early riser.” It was obvious his greeting was for her ears only, but she refused to acknowledge it. After a second he spoke to Violet. “You’re looking super-sexy today, Violet. What’s the big event?”

“This old rag?” Violet laughed gaily at his attention, her hand resting on the skin exposed between her breasts. “I was hoping to go into Holbrook, to the Indian Market today. I thought I might be able to talk someone into going with me.” She laughed again, her hand tracing the swooping V of her neckline suggestively.

Travis raised an eyebrow, his eyes moving back to Sheena. “How about it, Sheena? Do you feel up to it after last night?” They both watched her with intent interest, though it was obvious not for the same reason. “I would understand if you don’t want to join us. If you need to rest or...”

His eyes communicated his perception, caring—and something else

Sheena leaned forward and stroked Zephra’s ears. “What’s an



Indian market?"

She tried to keep the interest from her voice but failed.

"A lot of little stalls where native craftsmen sit and sell their wares," Violet explained. "Everything from silver-and-turquoise jewelry to pottery or rugs is for sale. Remember, we *are* in the heart of Indian country here. The people make some remarkable things, quite different from anything you've seen back east, I'm sure."

"You'll enjoy it." Travis encouraged as she met his gaze.

Sheena nodded and smiled at Violet. She knew she would enjoy the experience, especially if he was planning to join them. "Okay, but I'll need to get my wallet from the house."

"In an hour, then," Violet said. "Tell Rob I expect him to go with us, too. I'll get the Blazer back at the house and meet everyone at your place." She turned her horse and cantered into the trees.

The ride back to the barn was accomplished without any discussion. Sheena hid her questions by quickly dismounting and entering the house as Travis took charge of the horses without a word. For some reason, she saw their companionable silence as heartwarming and a good sign. Maybe there was a chance she might not have to leave if he remained in control of himself.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SHEENA HEARD ROB AND MAX IN THE FRONT ROOM TALKING. RATHER THAN go in and interrupt them she went straight to her room. She swiftly went through her few clothes, finding a soft apricot summer blouse and an A-line denim skirt. She looked at her image in the mirror on the dresser, studying her face. It glowed with health, her hair was shiny and her eyes sparkled. Despite last night's dream and Dakota's laborious foaling she knew she looked good, and she couldn't help feeling happy.

That happiness filled her with confidence that making her future in the West was the right thing to do. Meeting Rob and Travis only showed there was something about her that attracted the best.

Everything about Travis proved he was a man of the world and used to dealing with women, so the fact she had caught his eye had to mean she was deserving of his attention. She must remember that. His endearments might be no more sincere or meant especially for her than his legal contracts were, yet there was something about him that engendered trust. She felt warmth rush through her as she recalled the heat in his voice the previous night as he told her he understood, all the while holding her like something precious.

She heard him enter his room; and for a wicked moment, she closed her eyes, visualizing him changing. It was a real temptation to peek; the thought made her flush. She loved watching his body, the smooth, animal grace of it. What made her think such things? Was she so weak she couldn't control her wayward emotions?

She must harden herself. Otherwise, he would never believe her when she asked him to leave her alone again.

She sketched blush on her cheeks to take the strain from her

eyes. A light knock on her door made her jump, and she turned to face Travis.

His gaze was guarded. He wore an expensive suede vest and a cotton yellow shirt open at the throat, exposing the beautiful obsidian arrowhead pendent he always wore. Sheena braced herself for another encounter, her hands aching to touch him.

"Perfect," he complimented as he took in her slender figure. "You've the uncanny knack of knowing exactly what looks best on you, Sheena. Even the ponytail is perfect for today. It gives you a young and carefree look. Just like I want you to be." He took her hand and pulled her from the room. "Come on, Rob and Violet left five minutes ago. We'll follow them in the pickup."

Sheena grabbed her purse from the dresser, but he took it and tossed it on her unmade bed.

"You won't need that," he informed her. "Anything you need or want today, I'll buy for you." He saw her straighten and correctly interpreted it, adding smoothly, "Payment for your work with my horses and delivering Dakota's colt." He paused to search her face for a moment, reading the conflicting emotions. "We're going to enjoy this day, Sheena. Let's keep our personal conflicts for another time."

She hadn't been away from the ranch since Rob had taken her to Flag for a checkup with her doctor. She surveyed the changing countryside with silent interest as they sped down the dirt road.

"How far are we from pavement?" she asked as he avoided a pothole.

"Not too far now. As a matter of fact, that up ahead..." He nodded toward a cluster of ranch buildings, slowing the truck as they went over a washout. "...is Violet's place, the Lazy G. Her grandfather built it around the turn of the century."

Sheena lapsed back into silence. Why had she asked him that question? For a while Violet had been forgotten. Then she realized it might be a good time to ask him how he felt about the woman. It might make her own decision easier.

"You've known Violet all of her life?" She knew the question sounded leading and awkward. Of course, he had known Violet

forever. It was obvious. They were more than friends. What was wrong with her? At least while she hadn't known she didn't need to face the truth.

Travis glanced sideways at her, sending a thrill to her very soul as he smiled. "Violet has been a friend since childhood, yes. She can be a living doll, or a possessive bore. She's never liked competition, but she does like sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. She comes from good sturdy stock, though. I suppose Rob told you lavish stories about her family and ours?"

She knew he was looking at her, but she refused to meet his glance.

"I'm afraid not. Rob has been unusually quiet about your family, and he hasn't said a word about Violet other than..."

She stopped, but Travis didn't seem to notice.

"Good." He looked pleased. "Finally, he's left me something to tell you."

Sheena knew her puzzlement was apparent on her face. He chuckled and began his story, asking if she had seen the pictures of his parents. When she nodded, he said, "Mom was not only a good looker but also a very astute businesswoman, even though she lacked a formal education. Everything she knew she learned from my father, or taught herself. She was better at running the trading posts than he was, once she grasped the white man's ways."

They turned onto the pavement as he continued.

"You already know she was part-Apache and Mexican."

A slight pause while she nodded.

"Her name was Adie. When she was fourteen, she and Molly were orphaned on the White Mountain Apache reservation, and my dad took her in, teaching her English, to help out in his trading post. Dad's first attempt at running a post, on the Navajo Reservation, failed because he couldn't learn their language. So, when Mr. Gaylock, Violet's grandfather, offered him a post at the White Mountain Trading Company he jumped at the chance.

"Adie proved invaluable in the first months she was with Dad there, teaching him basic trading Apache as well as taking over the bothersome bookkeeping work. Well, one thing led to another, and

the old Irish bachelor James K. O'Keefe married the fifteen-year-old Apache beauty. He was already fifty-five by then. It was a marriage of convenience as well as one of passion. After seven years, they had four children and were expecting their fifth—me.”

Sheena was looking at him fully now, surprised at this. Why hadn't anyone told her Rob and Travis had other siblings?

“Mom and Dad went into town for supplies one fine December day that year, leaving the other kids with an old man who was Molly's and Mom's uncle. He helped them out at the trading post, and they trusted him. Well, Dad had lived in the West most of his life and had his share of enemies. While they were gone, someone torched the post, killing the four kids and the old man.”

He paused as he shifted gears, clearing his throat before continuing.

“Dad's health began to fail then, and Donald Gaylock, Violet's father, took them in. I was born six months later.”

“When did your father die?” she asked quietly.

“I was ten. Mom and Mr. Gaylock had built up the Rocking K by then, and though we were poor we were a happy family. Dad's mind was very childlike after the fire. One day, when we were riding back from the west range not far from the line shack you and I holed up in, he was doing some trick riding, showing me stunts he had learned as a kid in the rodeo. It was near twilight, and a storm was moving in, although it was still miles away.

“I remember riding ahead of him then hearing a crack of thunder. The next instant there came a blood-chilling scream. When I turned back Dad was beneath his stallion. He and the horse died instantly when the lightning struck them—I was told this later.”

Travis cleared his throat again, his voice growing strained at the memory. She wasn't sure how to react, but before she could respond he continued.

“It was a rude awakening for a kid of ten who'd had everything his own way until then. Mom struggled for several years to keep the ranch, but prejudice and local opinion were against her. Mr. Gaylock suffered a stroke. I wasn't old enough to fight for her, though I tried.” His voice was deep now.

"That's when Mr. Ivory came on the scene. He was Violet's mother's second or third cousin, from England. I didn't like him when he started coming round, but Mom did. She was very beautiful and still quite young, only in her mid-thirties. I suppose my reaction was jealousy for the attention he showed her.

"When Mom decided to marry him, I ran away. When she found me she explained that, without Mr. Ivory, she would have to sell the ranch, and since I would be in boarding school most of the year it would be easier if I accepted him than to panic." He shifted gears, sending her a quick glance.

"After that, I basically ignored him when I was around. He let me go my own way. He was a good man, though, and very rich. He had contacts back East and got me accepted to Cornell and Harvard when I graduated from high school. I was fifteen years old when Rob was born. I don't need to tell you how I took that.

"Unfortunately for both of us, I ignored him, too, like I had his father. By the time Rob was a teenager, I was in graduate school. It wasn't until Mr. Ivory was killed in a hunting accident that I made my first attempt to befriend Rob, but of course, it was too late by then.

"Rob is his father made over—intelligent, lively, studious, charming. I know I made a serious mistake all those years ago with him, and his attitude toward me is only a reflection of mine toward him. I probably can't blame him for taking the deeds to the ranch, but he knew he had no right to them. Has he told you anything about where he has them stashed?"

Sheena glanced away. "He hasn't mentioned them to me since the hospital, and then all he said was that he had them, and he took them to get your mother's attention before her third wedding."

Travis shrugged, his eyes on the road. The silence drew out between them, making Sheena oddly nervous.

"Well, there you have it, Sheena. The tainted history of the O'Keefes, Ivories and Gaylocks. I suppose any family harbors the same type of past misunderstandings, some darker, some lighter, some less tragic."

Sheena was thinking about Rob. No wonder he was bitter over Violet. Not only did the beautiful girl love his brother, a brother he

had never really known or cared for but she was his father's cousin to boot. He had every right to feel upset, but his revenge was costing him more than he knew.

Travis reached out, picking up her hand from the seat between them. He held it gently for a long time without speaking. Sheena had an urge to be honest with him, to explain why she had to leave. But there were so many things she was unsure of. So many reasons why she felt empathy with him, and so many reasons she couldn't stay near him.

For one thing, he had neither confirmed nor denied a relationship with Violet. She was convinced that if it weren't Violet it would be another woman she didn't even know about. He could easily have anyone he wanted—all he had to do was turn those brilliant eyes on her to have her groveling at his feet. There was a magnetic attraction between him and the opposite sex. He knew it and wasn't beyond using it to his advantage.

Look at her. Despite her firm resolve, she had forgotten everything when he gave her that special look last night. No, she couldn't tell him, give him a chance to use his powers of logic to talk her out of her decision. For this moment, at least, she was clear on what she had to do.

"Did you hear me, Sheena?" He squeezed her limp fingers. "You're not paying any attention. I was telling you about the countryside, about the fair." He smiled, and again, her heart stopped. Why did he have to be so attractive? Why couldn't he be mean, a bully?

She pulled her hand from his warm grasp, working her fingers into a knot in her lap.

"I...guess I'm preoccupied." She had almost been lost in the green depths of his eyes. She had to be careful.

"Are you thinking about the nightmare last night?" he asked gently. "You remembered something, didn't you?"

She hadn't been thinking about the nightmare, but now he mentioned it she felt her eyes cloud. Travis stretched his hand to the back of her neck, slowly massaging the tension from it.

"Love, it will help if you share your misery. Pain is meant to be

shared between people who care for each other.”

Sheena had been studying the dashboard in front of her, but she turned her face toward him. Their eyes held for a long, silent moment—as long as he could afford to look away from the road. His voice was persuasive when he continued, “Can you tell me about it?”

“It was a nightmare.” She hesitated an instant before continuing. “It was confusing at first. There were stampeding cattle, a forest fire, I could smell the fire, taste the smoke...and hear their screams.” She stopped, closing her eyes against the vivid images. “Through the smoke I could see a white-framed house, two stories with blue trim...our house...their home...”

Travis’s hand remained securely at the nape of her neck.

“I see.” He digested her rapid speech. “Anything else?”

He accepted that she had remembered her parent’s tragedy without question. She felt a wave of something more than just relief. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and hold him tight. Instead, she answered very softly, “No.”

“They’ll come, Sheena, the rest of your memories, with time. You mustn’t try and force them, though. Dr. Barrie was very specific about that. Come here, darling.” He gently put pressure on her neck, urging her toward him. She only remembered her decision just before giving in to him.

“You gave me your word, Travis.” Her voice was rough with emotion—too much had happened in too short a time for her to sound composed. His hand relaxed against her neck but did not drop. She wondered what he was thinking, feeling as the vehicle surged forward.

“I don’t recall giving my word, Sheena, or telling you I wouldn’t offer comfort when you needed it. I remember saying I wouldn’t make advances in public, and that I wouldn’t try to arrange your life for you. Surely, you’re not calling the front seat of a pickup a public place?”

His voice was soft, teasing, but she sensed how hard it was for him to keep the sarcasm out.

“I just don’t want you touching me.” She knew she was being ridiculous even as the words were spoken. He didn’t drop his hand.



"What about last night, Angel? I don't recall you pushing me away then. I even thought you wanted me to make love to you, and I still acted like the perfect gentleman. Believe me, Sheena, I'm not one."

His voice chafed her sensitive nerves. She was being a first-class fool again, and she knew it.

"Last night was different."

"How?" The word hit her in the vicinity of her heart even though it was whispered. "You needed comfort and I gave it to you, no strings attached. Didn't I? Just like during the storm. I thought—"

She reached up and took his hand from her neck.

"I just can't deal with any advances now, Travis." Her tone pleaded for understanding. "I need time to work things out for myself. Can't you understand I'm afraid of becoming involved with you?"

He responded with silence, unnerving her totally until she looked back at him. His eyes when they met hers were so wonderfully warm. A gasp escaped her throat. She had hurt him, and the pain she saw in his face was a reflection of hers.

Sheena never knew at what point he stopped the truck, only that suddenly his warm arms were around her, his lips covering hers. It was a kiss filled with such complex emotion they both shivered as he lifted his head, his hands framing her face as he looked into her eyes.

"Oh, Sheena, love. Blast this amnesia, I wish I had the control of a saint, but I don't." His mouth touched her forehead gently, moving to her cheekbone. His voice was a husky groan of desire and something else, but she didn't analyze it.

The only security in her world was this man. He was solid, tangible, and he was willing to give her the warmth and security of his home and family. Nothing in the world mattered except the feel of his arms at this moment.

He massaged a pert nipple through her blouse, and she lifted her arms so he could pull the garment over her head as she worked the snaps of his shirt. Her body bent to his will as his hands gently explored, pushing her skirt up her thighs, sliding her hose down her legs. Their eyes met, held. His were deep pools of forest night, hers the mystery of all time.

"I want you, Travis," she groaned. "I need you."

Her breasts swelled toward him as he lowered himself on top of her. His kisses were hot against her cheek, her mouth, then moved downwards across her shoulder to her breasts. She writhed, alternately offering herself and pulling back as he lifted her, positioning her on the seat. She felt like hot steam blazing heavenward in his arms as he nuzzled her neck, her lips.

Her exclamation of surrender was beyond her command. "Now, Travis, now...please."

His mouth found hers again as he sought the place of her eternal warmth. Sheena was swept along on an exultant tidal wave of pure need. All her fears were swept aside by the whirlwind of passion they generated together as a shattering finish brought them both back to reality.

She knew her satisfaction was equal to his as he relaxed on top of her, both breathing deeply. Her hand trembled, making her conscious of herself again as she laid it on his shoulder.

Wow! She had just told him she didn't want any advances, no touching; and then they made love on the front seat of the big pickup. She wanted to disappear her embarrassment was so great.

"One of these days, Angel," he teased, "we're going to make love properly, in a bed meant for two adults, so we have all the time in the world to enjoy ourselves." He trailed the fingers of his left hand down her exposed hip as he nuzzled her neck.

"Are you trying to tickle me, Mr. O'Keefe?" She couldn't contain the slight tremor as his fingers slipped up to caress her breast. He opened his eyes, smiling into hers.

"Just testing your reflexes, sweetheart." He sat up, straightening his clothes as he looked down on her. "You're so beautiful at this moment to me, Sheena. All woman, abandoned passion lingering in the depths of your eyes. I could almost take you again." His voice was a deep husky growl. "As a matter of fact..."

She scrambled upright, not liking the hot twinkle in his eyes. "I thought we were headed to a fair."

She tried to sound nonchalant as she straightened her clothes but knew she failed horribly as he leaned forward and nipped her

earlobe.

She yelped. Then she gasped. They had stopped less than three hundred yards from the entrance to the fair. She sucked in her breath in amazement. Good grief, he had just made passionate love to her less than a stone's throw from the nearest car. She could see a variety of booths, people milling around.

Suddenly, her excitement was lost as a wall of anger made her shudder. How dare he? His exhibitionism startled and amazed her at the same time she felt a flutter of bedeviled butterflies fly in her stomach. He was the most exciting man in the world, and his aggressive sexual behavior stunned her.

"I'm not like the other women in your life, Travis," she snapped at him, dissolving any lingering magic between them. "I won't be displayed like a conquered lamb. I won't let you make a fool of me again while you hand out the scraps of your affection—you have Violet for that."

Her voice was ragged.

"And you love me despite it, don't you, Sheena." He smiled at her, offering his hand as she slid across the seat away from him. He caught her hair as she pivoted toward the passenger door—she had meant to jump out and walk alone into the fairgrounds.

He gently pulled her back across the vehicle to face him. "I don't hand out scraps, Sheena Annette Lassiter. If you think I do, you're sadly mistaken. What I hand out are lessons, and you had better learn this one fast."

His lips came down hard on hers, demanding but not cruel. Closing her eyes she avoided seeing the angry light in his. He was branding her for the coward she was. That she deserved his white-hot fury for her intransigence wasn't debatable; but that he forced her to recognize and admit to her deep-seated emotions about him was unnerving.

Travis lifted her chin with one of his hands, his fingers touching her throat. She allowed him to explore her mouth at will, offering no resistance; but it wasn't until he felt her total surrender that he let the kiss become a caress.

*This is insane*, she told herself as she felt his hands on her body.

Everything about him triggered a deep shudder of pleasure inside her, and she couldn't help responding.

When he was certain he had taken her past the point of caring what he did to her, or where, he lifted his head and waited until she opened wide, bemused eyes.

"Now..." His voice was very soft. "...if that doesn't tell you something about us, nothing ever will."

Sheena dropped her head, taking her hands from the back of his neck, feeling shame wash over her. She was in love with him. Why had she struck out at him because she had been carried away by a passion they seemed to jointly share? He had been as helpless, it seemed, as she to stop what had happened between them. She could blame him no more than she could blame herself for being so overwhelmed that responsibility and logic were lost.

Her heart was slowing down as he opened his door wide.

"I think I can see Rob and Vi moving through the crowd. Coming?" He extended his hand, and she placed hers in it. Together they walked hand-in-hand toward the entrance.

"Perk up, Sheena, love. You wouldn't want Violet or Rob to guess what happened, would you?" His teasing tone made her angry all over again. "Remember, this is our day to enjoy. Don't let yourself ruin it by harboring bad feelings just because I'm stronger and took advantage of the perfect situation. I told you before—you're a lovely temptation and I can't resist your bait. Smile..." He ran a finger down her flushed cheek. "You can fool them if I can."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROB AND VIOLET HAD NOT GOTTEN FAR INTO THE CROWD WHEN THEY JOINED them. Sheena was still out of breath, knowing her lips were pink and swollen from Travis's kisses. Rob's gaze slid over her, not missing the healthy flush of her skin, their tucked hands. She could tell he knew she had just been soundly kissed; and if he did, so did Violet.

A sly smile touched the other woman's lips as she spoke.

"Well, well..." Violet let the tone of her greeting hang for a second. "We thought you two might decide to remain at the ranch and take advantage of the privacy." There was a wicked glow in her dark-blue eyes as she winked at Travis. "But now you've decided to join us, there are some wonderful things here today. Sheena, what do you think of the beadwork in this Apache comb?"

She held up a beautiful yellow-green barrette. Sheena concentrated on the beadwork, wishing the ground would open under her feet. They knew. She could read it in Rob's hastily averted glance, in Violet's smug slyness. At least there were things here to take her mind off the past hour's happenings.

She studied the vivid colors in the barrette with sincere curiosity.

"It is lovely," she commented, bending for a closer look at the other displayed items. The angle forced Travis to drop her hand as she moved away from him. He stepped behind her, his body radiating warmth as surely as the noonday sun.

They moved as a group from one booth to another, and gradually Sheena's natural curiosity replaced her embarrassment. They were all acting normally, so why shouldn't she?

She soon realized the three born-and-bred Arizonans were

recognized and liked by all the tribes at the fair. She began to enjoy everything she saw, the smiles of the artists as she explored the wide array of arts and crafts. Her every question was quickly answered, leading to others. She marveled at the pottery at one booth, the delicate black lines as she ran a hand over a paper-thin Acoma pot while the potter explained the animal motifs carefully placed around the white walls.

"This is a traditional hand-built pot," the woman explained proudly as she described the bold figures. "The lizard and jagged lines represent water and lightning, the triangles clouds."

Sheena asked about the paints that were used, where she got her clay, how much time was involved in making such a delicate thing of beauty. The pueblo woman was pleased at her interest, handing her another pot as she explained the polishing process, the firing. Travis laughed as Sheena asked about the ancient coiling method used in shaping the pot. He tweaked her turned-up nose, winking at the woman.

"If you quiz every vendor like this, Sheena, love, we'll be here all day," he teased.

Sheena was disconcerted. There was a tenderness in his eyes that made her forget the crowd. Violet's high-pitched voice brought her back to reality with a start.

"Look at this." She was holding an exquisite miniature Navajo squash blossom necklace. "Isn't this delicate and feminine?"

She modeled it against her neck. Rob reached around her shoulders, holding it securely for a moment. Violet's smooth, creamy skin emphasized the turquoise points. Sheena couldn't help but admire it.

"It's lovely, Violet." She placed a finger on a turquoise stone, marveling at the depth of color, the matrix of the black-veined intrusions.

Something caught her eye then—two men standing off to the side watching them from beneath wide-brimmed black cowboy hats. The shadow from the brim of their hats hid their eyes. Sheena felt a chill but dismissed it as imagination. Violet was pretty enough to attract attention no matter where she was at, and her sexy blouse was boldly

inviting. There was nothing odd in two men staring at her.

Yet, for a moment, she couldn't shake the crawling sensation that touched her spine. She had an eerie intuition the men were really watching someone else. Someone behind them in the crowd.

As their party moved on to the next dealer, Sheena watched the men, hoping to see them move on as well, but they didn't.

At the next table she lifted a Navajo rug tapestry, touching the soft weave, exclaiming in awe at the silken texture.

"That's a Two Gray Hills design, Sheena. The best rug we've seen today." Travis explained, running a knowledgeable eye over it.

He held one end, rubbing it expertly between his thumb and forefinger as he evaluated it. Sheena lifted it to her cheek as she complimented the weaver on the texture and colors of the wool. The woman smiled shyly.

"You like it?" Travis asked as she dropped her end.

"Like it? I love it. It's absolutely the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Her answer was spontaneous and wistful at the same time.

"I'll take it," Travis told the weaver behind the table. They exchanged a few words in guttural Navajo before he removed several large bills from his wallet. Sheena watched in stunned silence. When he completed the transaction, he handed her the rug.

"A small token of my appreciation, Sheena, for all you did for Dakota and her colt last night." He looked deeply into her eyes. Sheena felt moisture dampen her palms as the heat of his gaze slid over her. He was waiting on her answer.

"I don't. . . I couldn't. Travis, this is too much."

His thumb gently touched her lips, closing them on further protest.

"Don't insult the artist, sweetheart. You do like the rug, don't you?"

She hugged it to her chest, meeting his dark gaze in fascination as she nodded.

"Then your admiration of it is like my admiration of the colt you delivered last night."

Sheena saw that Rob and Violet were nodding their approval. She knew she could not refuse the gift, even though it had cost him more

than she had ever spent in one day.

"You don't play fair," she whispered, and he laughed.

"I agree. I do make my own rules at times, Sheena."

Rob touched the rug. "You've gotten a real beauty there, Sheena. Take it while he's in a generous mood. If I recall right, Trav has never been known to hand out gifts or compliments."

He grinned at her unease as Violet also caressed the fine rug. Rob leaned forward and placed a brotherly kiss on her brow.

"You happen to deserve this, Sheena. I've never seen anyone as determined or as competent as you were last night."

He tapped her nose playfully. She had to smile.

"Now, little sister..." He threw an arm around her shoulders, guiding her away from Violet and Travis. "I want your opinion on something over here."

Sheena threw a quick glance at Travis, seeing his frown at Rob's highhanded manner. She hadn't even thanked him for the rug. But he was already turning to Violet as the girl said something before leading him in the opposite direction. Sheena felt as if she were walking in a daze. Just when she was confident she was beginning to understand Travis, he let her slip away from him.

Rob was speaking, and she forced herself to pay attention to the two silver-and-gold-inlaid turquoise wedding bands he cradled in his palm.

"What do you think? They're Zuñi channel work—see the gold-incised image of the Sun Father?" he asked her again.

"Why, they're beautiful, Rob. So simple yet lovely." She looked into his face, wondering suddenly why he would want her opinion of wedding bands. Surely, he wasn't planning on proposing to her?

"Do you think Vi will like them?" he asked next as he bent his dark head, contemplating the overlay work, the gold and turquoise making a sundial face. She wasn't sure what it represented, but she knew the design was unusual and very striking and would make unique wedding bands.

Sheena felt a wave of relief—he was asking about Violet not her. When had he grown so confident? Had he and Violet decided something on their long ride into Holbrook today? Had she been so



wrapped up in herself she hadn't noticed their changed attitude toward each other?

She now recalled they had been holding hands as they strolled through the booths, looking at one another with love shining in their eyes. She hadn't realized, hadn't even considered...but now she saw the change in Rob. The new confidence in his walk, his eyes and in his manner. He was obviously very pleased with something.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks. Rob was surprised. He looked at her quizzically then grinned.

"Well?" He winked at her. "What do you think?"

"Rob, you devil. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because little sisters are usually the last to know when their big brother decides to pop the question to his sweetheart." He laughed at her genuine amazement. "Do you think she'll like them or not?"

He turned the rings over again.

"I think she would be a fool to turn you down, but I'm the last person you should ask. Show them to her. This should be a joint decision."

Rob chuckled, smiling at the vendor.

"Oh, Violet is a fool, all right, but don't tell her I told you so." He pulled money from his pocket and paid the woman, exchanging an Indian greeting.

It reminded her how well both brothers fit in here. They were as much a part of the landscape as they were comfortable with the inhabitants. She had heard them both speak fluently in Navajo, Pueblo and Spanish. Their multi-lingual talents truly amazed her. She didn't think she had ever been able to grasp even elementary high school French or Spanish. She suddenly realized that to work in this wide-open country would require she go back to school so that she, too, could converse with ease with the residents of her new home.

This thought sent chills down her spine. Could she speak any other language? Had she even considered this before deciding to take on the clinic here? With each new thought came questions that made her head ache and her mind race.

They moved on, and as Rob greeted other booth owners she

recognized the common respect and affection they shared.

Sheena was enchanted by the warm friendliness of the people as Rob introduced her to one after the other. It was wonderful to be here, enjoying the warm breeze, the crafts, the day. She was happy she had agreed to come.

She looked ahead of them and saw Travis's head above the crowd. She asked Rob as they crossed an open space between booths, "Do you plan to ask her, today?"

"Yep, but not here. I'll wait till evening at her place. I've been holding out on you, Sheena. Every night when Max and I would tell you and Molly we were heading into town, I've been actually seeing Violet. I hope you can forgive me, little sister." He grinned mischievously. "Don't look so concerned, Sheena. I've got her primed, and I'll pop the question when we're alone in the most romantic setting possible. She won't refuse me this time—she finally sees I'm a grown man at last and have something to offer now that makes up for all of my past blunders."

They laughed together. Sheena hadn't expected this, but she was extremely pleased it had happened. She wished him the very best as they moved forward again.

Lost in her world of thought she suddenly felt hands lock around her upper arms, steadying her.

"You had best watch whom you walk with in this crowd, Angel," Travis whispered in her ear.

She felt warm annoyance spread through her and shook her shoulders in an effort to displace his hands, but he easily dropped an arm around her waist.

"I'm glad you came with us, Sheena. The fair has added color to your cheeks, and your eyes have been positively dancing since we arrived."

She gripped her rug, remembering she hadn't thanked him yet for her gift.

"Thank you for this." She held the rug out. "Everything, everyone has been wonderful. The people are so friendly, and the crafts—each one is more beautiful or unusual than the last."

He caught her chin, forcing her to look him in the eye. "I agree

with you on that.”

Then he bent and brushed her lips with his. He could read her like a book, she realized, and he could make her feel inches high with a word. It wasn't fair to feel small after feeling so happy. She got the distinct impression they might be talking about different things. For a fraction of a second she thought he might kiss her again. Then he let her go.

“You're still PO'd with me, aren't you?” His whisper was sensual. Someone brushed past them, pushing her against his wide chest. “You know, love,” he said with a gentle smile, “I think your temper is shorter than mine.”

He dropped his arm to his side, looking past her to Violet and Rob as the two cowboy strangers passed them then waited at the end of the row. Sheena was about to bring the strangers to his attention when Travis's shrill whistle turned the other two around.

“Hey, you two, I've found the food booths. Care to join us?”

“Sure thing,” Rob called back.

“Are you hungry?” Travis met her gaze levelly, his eyes friendly and warm.

She nodded as Rob came up. Sheena knew he hadn't missed the exchange between her and Travis.

“I'm starved. How about you, sis?” He winked as he put an arm around her shoulder, displacing Travis as if by accident.

Sheena looked past him, but Violet was nowhere in sight. “What did you do with Violet?”

“She met a friend at the Hopi booth and said she would join us at the tables.”

Travis stepped beside them, capturing Sheena's free hand and leading them through the crowd to where several food vendors were set up under a marquee. As she inhaled the fragrance of frying beef, chili and fry bread, her stomach growled in anticipation.

“That mountain lion is still following us,” Travis quipped, his voice low.

Sheena laughed. His teasing sounded so ridiculous, and here of all places. Rob looked between them in curiosity.

“What are you talking about, Travis? You know as well as I do no

self-respecting cougar would be within fifty miles of here.”

“It’s a private joke, Rob.” Travis looked into Sheena’s eyes, asking her a silent question. She swallowed as he asked aloud, “What would you like, Sheena?”

She looked at the menu displayed overhead. “For starters, some of that lemonade would be great, then fry bread with chili. What’s a Navajo taco?”

“You’ll soon see. Two Navajo tacos, please, and two lemonades,” Travis called to the woman behind the counter. Rob moved to the side as Violet arrived.

Sheena took her first bite, gasping. “Oh, my goodness! What do they put in this, fire?” She swallowed some of her lemonade, but it didn’t put out the flames.

Travis laughed.

“I should have warned you, darling. I’m sorry.” He took his napkin and wiped her cheeks where tears streaked down. “I forgot you’re a greenhorn still.”

He winked at her, picking up his fork and taking his first bite, his eyes smiling.

“Don’t tell me.” Rob sat beside her, Violet next to Travis. “You didn’t warn her about the chili.” He patted Sheena’s hand. “You’ve been spoiled, Sheena. Molly has been giving you Ray’s ulcer chili. You’ll have to get used to this if you stick around this part of the world for long. We don’t know how to cook anything that doesn’t blister the tongue.”

Sheena wiped the remaining tears from her eyes. “I just didn’t expect it to be so hot.”

“Chew it on the back of your tongue, Sheena. It makes it easier to swallow,” Violet offered, her face friendly.

Sheena nodded and took a smaller bite, careful to wash it down immediately with lemonade. It took her longer to finish her meal than the others, but she enjoyed it completely; even the burning sensation on her lips wasn’t too unpleasant.

They discussed the fair, and Violet described a Hopi plaque she had seen.

“I’d like to see that,” Sheena commented, finishing her plate and

drinking the last of her lemonade. "Travis told me about the way the Hopi have lived on the three mesas northeast of here for centuries. I would love to see some of their silver work, as well."

She rubbed her rug with one finger, smiling at him.

"If you're done with your meal, I'll take you there." Travis stood, coming around to take a firm grip on her elbow. Effortlessly, he maneuvered her through the crowd to the booth in question. Violet and Rob followed them like shadows.

Sheena was enchanted by the collage of overlay silver jewelry, the simple elegance of it. There were no stones now to distract from the black-and-silver designs. The delicate and daring motifs inscribed within the silver intrigued her. They were completely different from the Navajo or Zuñi pieces she had seen earlier.

Travis picked up a small pendant, studying it for a long moment before handing it to her.

"This one represents your journey," he told her softly as she looked at the jewelry cradled in his hand. She studied the simple spiral design—a man standing at the center of a clockwise maze. She wondered what he saw in it that made him think of her.

"You're standing at the center of your future, love, trying to find a way out, to find yourself," he explained, "but whenever you are at the center you have found yourself already."

His serious expression and sober words disturbed her. What did he mean? She knew symbols like this spoke volumes to the Indian people. To men like Travis and Rob.

"I suppose it does seem like I'm trapped within an ever-expanding circle, but I won't know that until I regain my entire memory, and after last night's revelation I'm positive it won't be much longer before I remember everything."

"And that frightens you, doesn't it?"

Travis's eyes pinned her to the spot, and she felt goose pimples pop on her arms even though the day was hot. "Yes...and no. I'm just not sure of so many things. It would all be simple, I suppose, if I didn't have this."

She touched her forehead.

"Relax, darling. Everything will work out, and you're not going in

circles. Rather, in an ever-expanding reality.”

He turned and paid the man for the necklace then took it from her hand, lifting her hair and securing it to her neck before she could protest.

“Travis, I can’t—”

“But you will, lover, because it symbolizes much more than your present condition. It speaks of our feelings for each other, as well.” His whisper was meant only for her ears. It made her uneasy—was he testing her? The moment was unsettling, to say the least.

“I’ve a suggestion.” Rob spoke up before Sheena could protest further. “Why don’t we take Violet’s Blazer into Petrified Forest for some sightseeing then come back to the Wrangler’s Bar and Grill for dinner and dancing?”

“Sounds fun to me,” Violet laughed in agreement. It seemed their future was settled before Sheena could grasp the sudden change.

Violet pitched the keys to Rob as they walked to her parked vehicle. She slid in beside him, not leaving enough room, it seemed to Sheena, for him to shift the floor-mounted gears. Travis opened the backdoor for her and watched with amusement as she did the opposite of Violet, placing the rug between them on the backseat. Unaccountably, she was irritated that after Travis’s first amused glance he ignored her.

She was so busy fuming as to not notice the direction Rob took, or even when they entered the park. It was his cheerful voice that brought her back to the moment.

“We’ll stop at the freeway entrance if there’s time later, Sheena. You can gawk at the displays and curios there. For now, it’ll be the natural wonders you’ll see.”

He kissed Violet’s cheek as he pulled into a parking lot sometime later. Sheena felt an ache at watching their unabashed tenderness. She wanted that also, but she had deprived herself of it. She recalled all the times Violet had thrown herself at Travis, realizing now they were meant to make Rob jealous and angry enough to make a move. Violet had even used her to make the men take note of her single status.

She supposed it was only natural for the woman to test them, but

it didn't make her feel any better.

She and Travis hiked behind Rob and Violet past the big logs into the Jasper Forest to Agate House. Her natural curiosity had her plying the group with questions and observations as they walked. They went past Newspaper Rock, where ancient petroglyphs greeted her. These ancient rock art carvings were made by the ancestors of the Pueblo Indians, Rob told her.

Sheena's insatiable hunger for information made everyone laugh as they explained the figures to her. It was Violet who pointed out a rough carving of the man-in-the-maze design on the rock face.

By the time they returned to the Blazer she had thawed. There was no need to do otherwise, since Travis had managed to remain completely impersonal. Rob drove back onto the road.

"It's wonderful to see all of this through your eyes, Sheena," he commented. "We've all seen it before, but with you it's like having a child with us. Everything is brand new, only from an adult's viewpoint and understanding."

They arrived at another viewpoint, and Rob and Violet headed toward the overlook as Travis took off in the other direction. Sheena was slow to leave the vehicle, having to make a decision which way she would go. It was obvious there would be a crowd if she followed Rob and Violet, so she reluctantly followed Travis.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRAVIS LEANED AGAINST A ROCK OUTCROP, STARING OFF INTO THE DESERT vista before them. She halted, also, gazing out at the surreal scene. Slowly, she turned her back on him, taking in the multiple colors before her in wonder.

They were only sixty miles or so from the ranch, but now they were definitely in the desert, and a thousand feet lower. No living trees dotted the landscape, and the temperature was at least fifty degrees warmer than at the ranch. A slight breeze lifted her hair, and she was amazed to realize there were no signs here of the violent rainstorm that had threatened her two days before.

She turned so she could see Rob and Violet out of the corner of her eye as they hugged and kissed. She felt an ache in her core. She wanted nothing less than to disappear into the desert vista, walking away all of her problems, giving them to this isolated place.

Suddenly, she was aware of Travis's gaze resting on her. She clasped the pendant, playing with it unconsciously. The silence of the desert refused to settle her nerves; even the sound of her own pulse in her ears only made her more aware of his lean body so near, yet so far away.

When his words floated to her, she jumped, even though she had been half-prepared for them.

"Come here, Sheena. Please." His voice was soft, even, persuasive.

She turned, taking a hesitant step toward him. Travis didn't move until his arm wrapped around her shoulders when she drew near. He pulled her into his embrace, resting his chin on the crown of her head.

"I'm sorry, Sheena. I must seem like the biggest jerk in the world



not to have seen this coming all along. I was so confident..." He whispered into her hair as he held her tightly to his chest. "Rob doesn't know you're in love with him, does he? This is entirely wrong, so wrong."

Sheena startled. "*What...?*"

"Shh, my darling," he comforted her, holding her gently as he breathed the fragrance of her clean hair.

What was he thinking? Somehow he had misinterpreted her reaction as tears. He held her closer, pressing her face into his shirt. She felt his heart beating fast against her cheek as he kissed her hair.

"We've created quite a triangle, wouldn't you agree, sweetheart? If I hadn't been so blinded by my own desires I would have seen that you and Rob...that he and Violet...that I was taking advantage of you, confusing you more with my tactics." His voice was gentle, compassionate, yet still aggressive as he mentioned his brother. As if he had to say the words aloud to believe them.

Sheena pulled her head away and looked at him with narrowed eyes. He thought she had fallen in love with Rob and that was what caused her confusion and hesitation with him. She couldn't read his expression. Was he shielding himself from the hurt this "realization" had brought him or was this yet another trap?

He was extremely perceptive; but as he himself had said before, when the big emotions were involved misconceptions were easy to make. If he really thought she had fallen for his brother, his keen perception had failed him miserably this time.

But maybe this was for the best. If he was trying to trick her into a confession, she knew better than to let her guard drop. She couldn't afford to.

"Please." She managed to untangle herself from him, taking a step away and facing the desert. "I don't feel like talking about this now. You must understand."

Travis cursed under his breath, and she was again aware of his eyes resting on her back.

"Sheena, is there anything I can do to convince you that Rob is wrong for you? Would it help if I...?" He paused. "I had no idea until moments ago that you and Rob were...that you and he..." He

cleared his throat. "I can make you change your mind if you'll give me a chance. I know I've acted like a fool every time we've been alone, but you must understand it's because I've wanted you every moment since we met, darling. I prayed that, unconsciously, you've known it all along despite this injury to your mind. What happened between us today gave me hope. It still gives me hope that, once your mind clears, this new hurdle will disappear."

Sheena eyed him. She felt hot as their eyes met. Even though he didn't say it, he must be in love with her. Or at least bemused enough not to see that, thanks to the amnesia, any commitment was beyond her at this point. Still she couldn't accept his implication as fact—not yet. It was too sudden, the consequences too permanent.

"Travis, I...I really don't know what to think, what to say. Desire is such a fleeting thing. You and Rob are the only stable things in my life now. What if...there may be...what if...?" She floundered.

"Playing the what-if game is useless, Sheena, and you know it. I understand why you must be cautious. You're very vulnerable now. Is there anything I can do to convince you I have no hidden agenda when I say I want you to come with me to Phoenix? I promise I won't pressure you for favors—or anything else. I believe living so close to Rob and Violet may hurt you worse than losing your memory. He's using you, you know, to make Violet admit what they've felt for one another forever."

"You have a lot of practice convincing people to do what you want, don't you?" She asked, recognizing the ironic humor in the situation as she clenched her hands into a knot.

"That's my profession, Sheena. You know I must leave tomorrow before daylight. Will you come back with me?"

Why was he being so insistent?

"Sheena, I know you'll be happy in Phoenix. We'll go and see the clinic, and you can begin your practice now that you're feeling stronger. Before I knew about Rob, I wanted you with me for selfish reasons. I really didn't think about how you felt at all. But now..." He glanced at Rob and Violet. "Now, I want you with me so you don't have to witness their love affair."

"Sheena, those two have been in love with one another since day

one, just as I thought you and I were.” He cleared his throat. “You’ll be wasting your heart here, darling, if you give it to Rob. Give me a chance to prove how much I care, sweetheart.”

His voice was sad, yet there was still hope in his eyes as they stared at one another for a long moment. Then, her legs were carrying her away from him. She couldn’t bear to hear anymore. He called her name as she began to run.

If only things weren’t so intense between them—her feelings, his feelings, the blankness in her mind. Sheena ran from his deep voice, from the emotions tumbling inside her like clothes in an automatic dryer. She felt as if she were being ripped apart, pulled in so many directions she didn’t recognize herself anymore. If she had ever truly known herself in the first place.

She knew her love for Travis was real, no matter that her mind was blank. Her body knew he was right for her, but her conscious self continued to fight the realization. She couldn’t allow herself to give in, and she didn’t understand why.

She knew she could trust him to take care of her, that his word meant everything to him; but deep instinct told her she had worked her entire life to gain her independence and that if she allowed him to take over control of her life now she might lose it forever. The thought frightened her, and for the moment the only way she knew to escape it was to disappear.

Sheena dropped over the rim of sandstone and saw the cowboy hats of the men from the fair. Shock jarred her as she watched Rob swing his fist, colliding with one man’s jaw. Violet was lifted and swung over a third man’s shoulder kicking and yelling as Rob was engaged with his assailant.

Travis yelled as she sprinted into the parking lot, hearing his heavy footsteps as he passed her. She didn’t see the red Buick until she heard the engine, the horn. Turning, she faced the vehicle, and for a split second she saw a pickup instead of the car. Something solid caught her in the ribs, and she flew out of the car’s path. As she rolled in the gravel, she heard the shriek of brakes accompanied by a scream—hers.

Her head struck something solid. Though only dazed by the blow,

she kept her eyes closed, trying to breathe through the pain in her chest. She heard thuds as fists made contact with flesh. She heard the guttural groans of men in a violent struggle. Violet cursed at her assailant as he dropped her to the ground, knocking the breath out of her with a sickening sound with a fist to her stomach.

Sheena held her right side as she attempted to stand. A gun exploded.

"You bastard," Rob screamed, and she watched Travis fall. Rob attacked like a madman, and another explosion from the weapon knocked him from his feet. She had to get to Travis, to Rob; and in her blind, headlong rush she crashed into the man with the gun, surprising him. He twisted and shot again, this time into the air, then screamed as he fell from the rock ledge.

The sight of the still bodies of the brothers was suddenly too much for her bruised body, her shocked emotions. Sheena collapsed as a dark wall hit her square in the face.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS MUCH LATER WHEN SHE OPENED HER EYES, ALTHOUGH SHEENA HAD NO idea how much later. She stared at the whiteness of another hospital room. Her body felt stiff, her head light and her arm was hooked again to an IV. Her left hand was in a cast.

She touched her face as she heard voices in the distance, the movement of patients and doctors in the hallway. Someone moved in a chair beside her, and she turned to discover Rob's sleeping face. He looked relaxed, like the innocent child he once had been. She noted the sling around his neck, the dark bruise on his cheek. She watched his lids move, and suddenly he was staring at her.

He sat straight up, leaning forward, resting his hand on hers. "You've given us all quite a scare, little sister. How are you feeling?"

Sheena mentally did a self-examination. She wet dry lips several times before responding.

"What happened? Travis...you?" She glanced around wildly, seeking his tall form.

"He's going to be fine. He broke his right arm, has some abrasions and a nick in his left shoulder from the gunshot. Did you know about that? We thought you were unconscious from the start."

Sheena felt herself blanch. It had all been her fault.

"Oh, Lord," she whispered. She closed her eyes, feeling a stab of guilt as images flashed in her mind in a burst of panoramic desert color.

Rob gripped her small hand more firmly in his.

"First, tell me what you're feeling. You were the one hit by another car and thrown head-over-heels again."

"I..." She looked at their hands, flexing her fingers and toes

curiously, stretching her legs and back. She recalled running from Travis. His low voice as he called her back. The pounding of his running footsteps. She closed her eyes, seeing a parking lot, a red sedan.

Then it all blurred together as she attempted to understand the images, the sounds, the memories. "The car—Rob...they swerved to hit us..." she said in disbelief. "The motel...when did this happen?"

"The men in the sedan followed us from the fairgrounds. They took full advantage of your mad dash as you ran straight into their path. Luckily for all of us, Travis grabbed your arm and threw you out of the car's path, or you would have been crushed. As it is, you've only suffered a new set of bruises and a broken arm."

What was he talking about? "I don't understand. I meant your pickup in Flagstaff."

It was Rob's turn to be confused. His eyes widened as he grasped her meaning. He dropped onto her bed and squeezed her hand, his face reflecting relief, wonder and surprise,

"You remember the day at the motel, nothing since?" he questioned, his concern clear.

"I'm not sure. Everything is a blur. I seem to remember a violent thunderstorm, a fire, a new foal, you and...and...Violet. But everything is confused. I recall losing my purse, the train, and...Travis...being angry with me. How did I get here? Where is here? When...what day is it? What happened to us at the Petrified Forest? Why...?"

Rob chuckled at her cascade of words, grasped both her hands in his as he attempted to calm her.

"Not so fast, sweetheart." His silver eyes were dancing. "I'll explain everything in time. First, I need to get Travis. He's been worried sick."

Sheena's heart somersaulted. She knew she wasn't ready to face Travis yet. She was still so confused.

She recalled the overwhelming emotions he could invoke in her with just a glance. There were too many questions, too many raw feelings racing through her now. What had Rob meant when he said they had played right into "their" hands? Whose hands?

"Please, Rob," she pleaded. "Tell me about the red car, the men. Everything is so mixed up, so blurred." A cold shiver shook her. "Where's Violet... what did they do to her? I need to know before I face Travis, please."

Rob sat back down on the bed, smiling into her frightened face with understanding.

"Okay, sis, but if I get in trouble for delaying, it will rest on your pretty head." He tweaked her nose playfully. "Now, where to start?"

"Tell me about the car. I seem to remember the motel accident now, and your pickup, but when did a car hit me?"

Concern flashed through his eyes, but he still smiled. "I'm not sure if you noticed or not, but while we were at the Indian Market there were two men shadowing us. Travis recognized them and alerted me, but we didn't say anything to you or Violet. Two are the brothers of the guy he's prosecuting for murder and embezzlement in Phoenix; the other two are their cousins. Once I alerted the Holbrook police we thought they would be taken into custody for harassment or something and arrested.

"For some reason this didn't happen, and when you ran from Travis on the trail they decided they could make short work of us in a quick hit-and-run accident."

She frowned. How on earth had the two men known where they were?

Rob continued. "Why they weren't picked up by the police before we left the fair is anyone's guess. As you dashed into the parking lot, they saw their opportunity. Travis and Violet are still with the state police, filing their report of the incident. Anyway, Travis dashed in front of the car, and they swerved to hit him, but luckily he had maneuverability on them and pushed or threw you out of their way while at the same moment I distracted them by putting my fist through their open window, socking the driver." He lifted his cast-enclosed arm. "A park ranger showed up then, otherwise who knows what would have happened next. All four were armed and ready to do serious damage to the lot of us."

He shrugged as Sheena suppressed a shiver. She had been right to feel odd about the two black-hatted men at the fair. She closed her

eyes against the horrible possibilities such a situation could have led to. They were all lucky to be alive.

*Lucky* wasn't the word for it. They had been blessed. Rob squeezed her hand, bringing her attention back to him.

"Why did you run from Travis, Sheena?" he asked gently.

"I'm not sure." Uncertainty made her look away. "I...he wanted me to come and live with him in Phoenix. He mistakenly thought...I was in love with you. I didn't want him to guess how deeply I felt so I tried to escape. I didn't look where I ran, and by the time I saw the car...it was too late. I remember I heard the gunshot and saw you fall and Violet scream, the sound of their wheels on gravel, Travis yelling my name, then brakes, a horn, screaming, then everything went black."

"Oh, Sheena, baby sister, how frightened you must have been." Rob's lips brushed her cheek in tender concern. "We've all been a bad luck charm for you since your arrival. Travis must be living in a cave if he hasn't realized your soft heart beats only for him. I'm surprised he hasn't even noticed how Violet and I...what's happened with us."

"I agree his remarkable insight has been dulled, but then, he hasn't been around you in a while." It was absurd even to think a relationship was possible between her and Rob, but she had to admit their friendship was definitely a pleasure as she hugged him like a brother.

"What's going on here?" a rough voice demanded from the doorway.

Rob released Sheena, giving her a wicked wink as he turned to face his brother. "Nothing, Trav. Sheena was explaining—"

Travis walked around the bed to her side. She stared at his left arm in a sling, startled by the striking white color of the cloth against his brown flesh. He used his good hand to detach Rob, his eyes all the while locked with hers.

"Explaining what?" he asked softly.

"I was just..." Sheena felt a mounting tension in her blood vessels as she read his possessive look. It was absolutely insane that his very presence could raise her blood pressure like this, making



her heart skip, her body feel light as air. She knew there was absolutely nothing she could do about it now—or ever.

His hand replaced Rob's on her shoulder, burning her flesh through the thin hospital gown. Neither she nor Travis noticed Rob move to hug Violet as she entered the room.

"Sheena, how are you feeling?" she inquired.

Sheena blinked in surprise, aware of her for the first time. "A little stiff and a bit disoriented but otherwise..." She returned her attention to Travis, letting her eyes roam hungrily over him as he continued to take in every change in her face. His arm hung heavily in the sling; his face was tense and bruised. He hadn't shaved today, and still wore the clothes he'd had on when they left the house that morning.

It had been today, hadn't it? Did it matter? She observed Rob and Violet still wore the same clothes, too—she must have only missed a few hours instead of days as she had first thought. The relief she felt from knowing this made her relax.

"She remembers everything, Travis," Rob supplied in the silence.

"Everything?" Travis scrutinized her face as he asked the simple question.

"Everything that's important, I think." She smiled shyly.

His dimple deepened as a smile replaced the worry in his eyes.

"The police accepted our story, I hope?" Rob wanted to know.

Travis turned and glanced at his brother for the first time since entering.

"They did. But I won't feel comfortable until the entire family is in the state pen with their brother."

Violet came over to the bed, studying Sheena. "How are you really feeling? You seem rested, and we must all look like wrecks since there hasn't been a chance for any of us to clean up or change in the past thirty-eight hours."

"I'll be okay as soon as they let me out of this place." Sheena surveyed the room before meeting Violet's lavender eyes. "It's easy to forget how much one dislikes a hospital once one is away from it for a while."

She did her best to keep her voice light, but Travis gripped her

shoulder, capturing her gaze again. She instantly forgot what else she might have intended to add.

"That won't happen until Doctor Barrie assures me you're okay to leave!" His voice was firm with authority.

Sheena reacted with caution, not sure she should let him know how much she did remember.

"You're dictating again, aren't you?" she teased him gently.

"You bet I am, Miss Spitfire. You've been hurt too many times lately. I won't be held responsible for any more."

The conviction in his voice made her feel guilty, but she couldn't resist her quick response.

"I don't hold you responsible, Mr. O'Keefe. You don't control everyone around you, Travis, in case you haven't noticed. I won't let you take full responsibility for my actions. I've news for you—I was involved in most of those incidents you refer to. In fact, I was the one who dashed into traffic again."

"She's remembered everything, like I said," Rob offered in the silence that followed her announcement.

"Even the reason for the first accident?" Travis questioned her as he dropped his hand from her shoulder, taking a step back, staring at her. "Your family, college, our meeting..."

One dark eyebrow shot up to his hairline.

"Yes. Although I don't recall everything in the correct order, it seems—everything blurs together. But with time I'll recall most, if not all."

For a long moment, he stared coolly into her eyes, reminding her of a frozen pool of forest water. His skin was drawn tightly across the bones of his face; the dimple had disappeared. She shifted uneasily in the bed.

"It's occurring to me, Sheena Annette Lassiter, that you've been playing with me since you first arrived in Arizona." His voice was hard, his shrewd gaze holding her captive as she read the melting tenderness behind his emerald eyes.

He reached out his hand, resting it against the curve of her cheek, totally disconcerting her. An undeniable sensual feeling permeated the skin where he touched, and her lower lip as he brushed it lightly

with his thumb. It was an incredibly seductive gesture. His gaze probed her very soul with dark intensity.

"I've the strong feeling..." He stepped closer to her. "...you even remember why we were drawn together in the first place."

"I remember," she replied softly.

"This is wonderful, Sheena!" Violet exclaimed. "Now there will be nothing preventing you two from tying the knot."

Sheena flushed to the roots of her hair, looking first at Violet then Rob then, lastly, at Travis. Only a few hours ago she had never expected to like Violet, but now she knew better. The girl had said the very words she and Travis had avoided all along.

"Actually..." She glanced at the window in a moment of indecision. She loved Travis. Her world, her life would never be complete without him. He loved her, too—she knew it. There was nothing stopping them from making a union except...

"Actually, there is one huge stumbling block to our getting married, Violet." Sheena looked only at the other woman. "Travis O'Keefe hasn't asked me yet."

She said it lightly, hopefully. She looked out from under lowered lashes at Rob and Violet, then tossed a glance at Travis.

He turned her chin so she had to look at him as he delicately moved his finger on her lower lip. His eyes were positively dancing now as devils flashed in the green fields, and she wondered what imp had left them there.

Rob exploded beside them. "What do you mean, Travis hasn't asked you yet?" He stared at his brother. "You dirty old man. Leading me on with that story the other night that the reason she had come out West was because you had proposed to her. I could—"

Travis lifted his hand, effectively ending his brother's tirade.

"Will you marry me now, Sheena Annette Lassiter?" His eyes never flickered from her face, and Sheena swallowed a huge lump in her throat.

"Yes." Her husky reply seemed to fill the room.

Rob grabbed her before Travis could. He lifted her in his arms in a bear hug. "I told you when we met we were meant to be brother and sister, Sheena. I'm so happy for you, and it's a perfect match, I

think. That is if you two can avoid strangling one another by keeping your jealous Scorpio tempers in check. Just remember that, and you'll be safe." He kissed her soundly on the lips and laughed. "It's settled then," he stated. "Trav will find it impossible to wiggle out of this one. You've got a room-full of eye witnesses, and we'll hold him to it."

He lowered her back to the bed as Sheena glanced again at Travis. A warm surge of blood rushed through her body, making her feel good all over as he winked.

"Now, little brother," he said, "I'm only going to say this once. Get your hands off my woman and put them on your own."

Rob threw up his hands as if he had been burned. He grabbed Violet and kissed her soundly as Sheena moved into Travis's welcoming embrace. His kiss was electric, making her forget where she was and who was present as her heart took flight.

"Would you two mind sharing our anniversary with us?" Violet asked, finally breaking them apart.

"That would be great," Rob agreed. "I was always highly influenced, you know, by romantic endings."

"Would you shut up?" Violet placed her mouth over his.

A warm hand touched Sheena's cheek, and she turned from watching them to sink into the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

"I don't think sharing will be a problem, do you, lover?" Their lips joined in a kiss of such sweetness Sheena forgot all about Rob and Violet's newfound happiness in her own.

"My dark angel," Travis whispered against her lips. "My sweet temptation from Hades. You send me straight to paradise." He crushed her against his chest, the husky whisper echoing in her ear. The strain she had seen on his face earlier was gone as he smiled into her eyes.

"Are you sure we aren't rushing you into this?" he questioned.

"If I've learned anything in life, it's to live in the present moment, Travis. No one knows what the next one may bring." Sheena assured him with the firmness of total commitment.

"I won't be accused of being a dictatorial tyrant again, will I?" His eyes flashed.

Sheena laughed at the reappearance of the devil-may-care in his eyes, and the memory of the first time she had accused him of being a tyrant.

"If I'm your angel from Hades, Mr. O'Keefe, then you must be my devil to match. Of course, I'll accuse you again, but I'll love you no matter what." She slid her arms around his neck, pulling his lips back to hers as she accused, "I do love you, and you've known it all along."

"Of course. I've known it ever since we both fell head-over-heels to the foot of the library steps last summer," he whispered huskily against her mouth, gathering her closer. "I've not been able to think of anyone or anything else since that moment, Sheena. One of these days we're going to have to talk about your teasing. You know it's fatal, don't you?"

Sheena sighed, reveling in his embrace. All of her jealous thoughts dissolved. All of her insecurities vanished along with her nightmares. Here within the circle of his arms was everything she had been searching for, everything she had ever wanted or needed. Like the figure in the spiral, she had always been at the center, only for a while she hadn't realized it.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Gale Storm has written a slew of books, including nonfiction and PBS documentaries using an alter ego, but romance remains her favorite. As a New Mexican she lives in the wide-open country, and her characters reflect this same heritage. Her plots combine likable heroes and heroines who are together because of life's strange quirks. The attraction is immediate, and their stories reflect the tactile chemistry of believable couples living in today's world of conflict, tragedy and happiness.