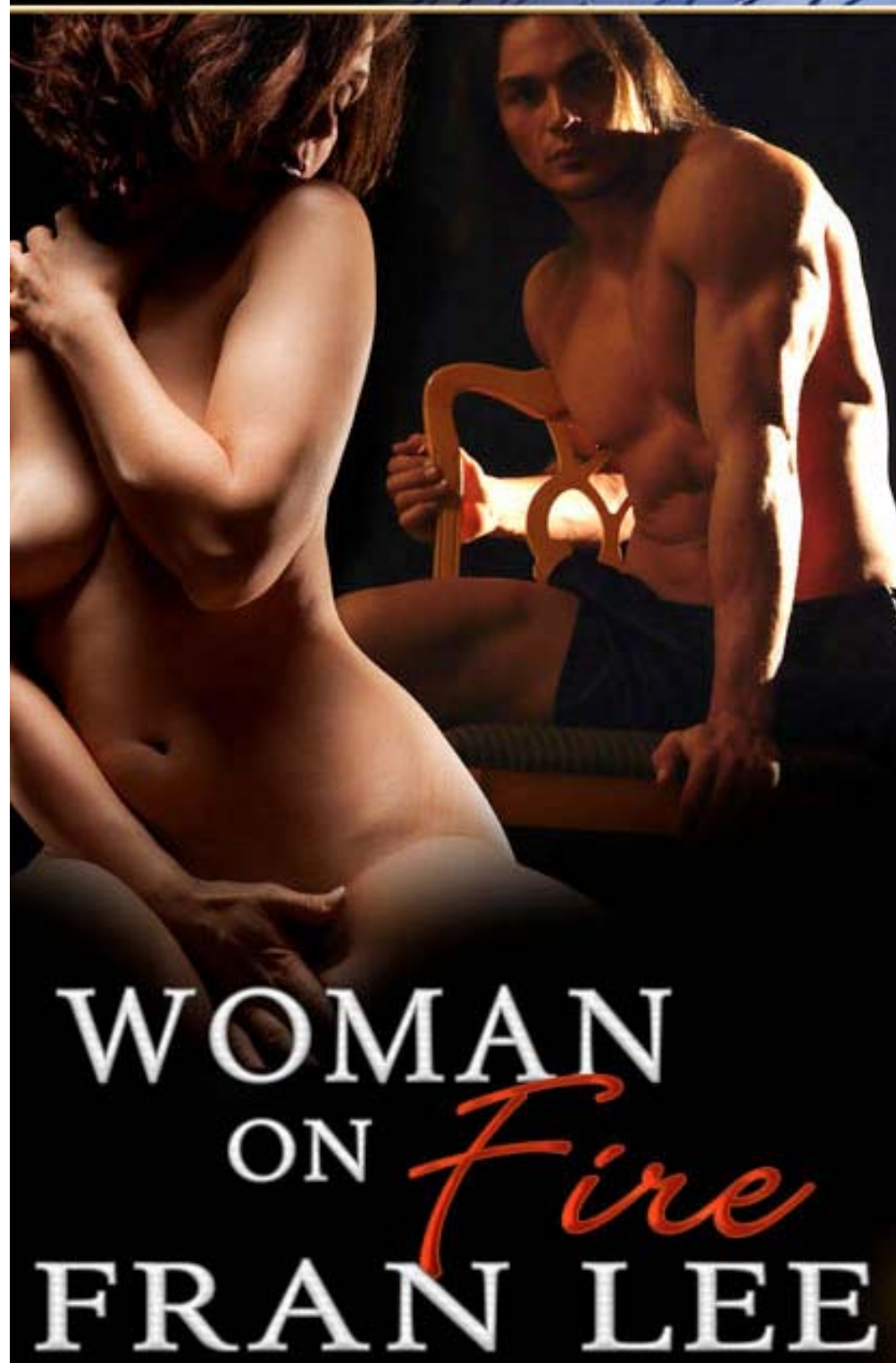


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



WOMAN
ON *Fire*
FRAN LEE

Woman on Fire

Fran Lee

Azrael Thunder Horse never thought another Anglo woman could possibly knock him for a loop after leaving Hollywood. Despite the instant shot of lust he feels when he first lays eyes on his new Native American Studies teacher, he's determined to get rid of her. After all...she misled him with that damn Indian name of hers! But the stubborn redhead has a thing or two to say when he tries to fire her.

Cheyenne Red Wolf has never met a more maddening, arrogant, downright irritating man. He hates her on sight. Too bad he's the hottest thing she's ever seen...and her new boss. The man tried to fire her because she wasn't a "real" Indian. Good thing he can't stand her, because she sure as hell wouldn't be able to say no to all that sexy, hardheaded, Lakota masculinity.

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Woman on Fire

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WOMAN ON FIRE

Fran Lee

Dedication

To my dear pals Rita Thedford and Heidi Telpner, without whose friendship and support I would have certainly imploded during my first year as a newbie author. You are my inspiration!

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to the wonderful folks at the Lakota Language Consortium for their untiring work to bring the Lakota language back to The People and the world. Please note that any errors in translation or grammar are entirely my own, but without these fine people, this book could not have been written.

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Oscar: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Corporation

Ritz: Ritz-Carlton Hotels Co.

Stetson: John B. Stetson Company

T-Bird: The Ford Motor Company

Toyota: Toyota Jidosha Kabushiki Kaisha TA Toyota Motor Corporation

UPS: United Parcel Service of America, Inc.

Wikipedia: Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.

Chapter One

The first day's classes had gone well, and she had learned as much from her new students as they had from her. She loved it when learning went both ways. Cheyenne couldn't have hoped for a better group. Most had been eager to learn, since none of them had ever before attended any of the Native American Studies classes that had been made available over the past couple of years through the Standing Rock Agency's extension service. It was good to know that there were a lot of parents who wanted their kids to learn more about their very special Native American heritage.

Most of her students were kids who had grown up off-res, but whose parents were now moving back for economic reasons. The good-paying jobs they'd left the res to go work had evaporated with the shrinking dollar. And bringing Anglo husbands or wives and kids back to the res for survival meant culture shock to many—especially the kids who were used to the big cities and huge schools. Many of these kids had not an inkling of the deep roots that drew their NA parents back home.

And many of them couldn't have cared less.

Being swallowed up by the melting pot society of the cities made it virtually impossible for NA families to practice a culture that seemed "antiquated to the max", as one of her more outspoken ninth grade students had quipped earlier in the day.

She smiled as she thought about the questions she'd gotten from several of the kids. The same questions she always got, and she always answered with a wry sense of humor and a ready grin.

"What tribe do you belong to?"

"I come from the tribe known as the Celts."

"How come you have red hair and blue eyes?"

"A lot of us have red hair and blue eyes."

She shook her head and picked up the books the kids had not returned to the bookshelves like she'd asked as they had trooped out of her last class of the day. It would take a few more classes to get them into the habit of being kind to their teacher. As she placed the books on the shelves, she saw the classroom door open and glanced up expecting to see Mr. Wyatt, the principal, and found herself staring at a man she could only describe as the prime piece of oh-my-god-beautiful masculinity she'd had the pleasure of ogling in a long time. Her belly fluttered a joyful salute to his delicious, hot looks. Sheesh! Down girl. It hit her on a primal level that she couldn't quite define...

"Can I help you?" Her quickly pasted-on smile was polite and pleasant. Probably a parent, checking out the new teacher. Damn. They didn't build single males like him these days.

Night-dark eyes slid past her, wandered around the classroom slowly, and then returned to her. Eyes that would normally have set her pulse off like a shot, but these held a cold, aloof quality that let her know she was beneath his interest.

"Is Ms. Red Wolf still here?" The dark-chocolate voice held a quiet, tense note.

"I'm Cheyenne Red Wolf." She repeated the polite smile. "How can I help you?"

The look of shock in those obsidian eyes made her bite back a grin. It wasn't an unusual reaction to her definitely un-Indian looks attached to a very Indian name. But the desire to grin dissolved the instant those eyes turned angry.

"*You are Cheyenne Red Wolf? Our new Native American Studies teacher?*" Every word was clipped and reflected a fury that was barely held at bay.

She moved away from the bookshelf and resisted the urge to cross her arms defensively over her chest. The animosity rolling off that man was enough to choke her. It was only through sheer willpower that she didn't cut and run. He took a step toward her and she had to crane her neck to meet his glare. She drew herself up to her tallest possible height which wasn't much over five foot six in shoes and lifted her chin slightly in answer to his unspoken but clearly heard challenge. Damn! She wished now that she'd worn heels.

Forcing her voice to remain softly calm wasn't easy. "I am. And you are...?" she coached gently, refusing to retreat as he invaded her personal space with all that hulking, broad-shouldered menace he exuded.

His eyes moved from the copper-penny red hair she'd dragged back into a bun before her first class, all the way down her fuzzy blue cardigan sweater and travel-wrinkled beige linen slacks to her vintage fifties penny loafers, then back with a disbelieving insolence that was as insulting as it was scary. Every nerve in her body screamed at her to take a few steps back and get a desk between them, but she'd be damned if she'd let him intimidate her.

She had no real reason to fear him, after all—it was broad daylight and they were in a school full of—empty classrooms. *Oh, shit.* As the realization hit her that regular classes had let out over half an hour ago, and most of the teachers were gone for the day, she inhaled slowly and wondered if maybe it might be wiser if she turned tail and sprinted for the still open door.

But her common sense returned after one panicky moment, and she frowned at her own silliness. What the hell was he gonna do? Attack her? He was understandably shocked to find a non-Native American woman teaching a class that should by all rights be taught by a Native American. There were a lot of Native Americans who resented what she did, simply because she was not one of them. Not really. And being one in spirit didn't quite cut the mustard.

She made a point of glancing at her watch and lifted her eyes back to his face. "I really can't take time to go over lesson plans right now. If you'll just tell me which student is yours, I can give you a call tomorrow —"

"There's been a mistake, Ms. Red Wolf." The voice was low and controlled.

"A mistake?" She had to work damn hard to keep a tremor of anger out of her own voice.

Those almost-too-damn-sexy-to-be-real lips twisted into a sneer as he seemed to loom even closer in the suddenly airless classroom. "A big one."

Her breath caught in her throat and she hated the fact that she was shaking under his glare. "If you have a problem with me teaching this class, you'll need to take it up with Mr. Wyatt or Ms. Running Deer of the school board. Now if you'll excuse me, I have someone waiting." A lie was better than letting him think she had no backup here.

"He can keep on waiting." The clipped statement startled her, but only because it was coupled with another forward movement of that intimidating body that had somehow moved so close she could feel the heat sizzling off him through her clothes.

This guy had absolutely no friggin' concept of personal space.

She suddenly decided that retreat was entirely acceptable under such unfriendly fire. She took a quick step backward and felt the bite of a wooden desk on the soft flesh of her fanny. The startled gasp she gave seemed to make those nearly black eyes darken even more, and she blushed hotly to have let him know he frightened her. Her temper rose.

When under attack, counter attack, Frank had always said.

"Excuse me—*whoever you are*—but if you have a complaint about me teaching your child, like I said, take it up with the school board and the principal, who felt I was very well qualified—"

She gave a yelp of shock as a book that had been too close to the edge of the desk she was nearly sitting on fell to the floor with a resounding smack, and she jumped away from the desk automatically, coming into full frontal contact with her tormentor. And he didn't miss a beat as he caught her around the waist with a pair of lean, strong hands and glared down at her.

His beautiful lip curled. "Just like a woman—trying to use any weapon at hand to avoid the consequences of her actions." His voice was scathing and she blinked up at him, not getting his meaning.

"Weapon? Consequences? What the hell are you talking about?" she gasped and shoved at his hands without much success as she twisted to try to get free.

"Those weapons." He hissed a breath inward through his teeth as her hips twisted against his. Her movements brought her generous chest tight against his. His rasping words instantly halted her movements as she realized what he was talking about and her eyes widened in horror, then narrowed in fury. Damn, but the man was blaming her for his own actions now.

"If you will take your hands off me, I will happily remove my *weapons* from your vicinity," she hissed, her temper flaring at his insinuation that she was trying to use sex to escape whatever "consequences" he imagined were due her. It didn't take a Rhodes Scholar to get his meaning and it didn't take much imagination to realize their confrontation had produced a hard-on from hell on his part. It was jabbing against her belly quite insistently. It had already grown even larger and more dangerous in the several seconds they'd been plastered together.

For a moment, he didn't respond, and in that tense moment she sensed that he was considering his next response with extreme care. Her incensed glare met his and she waited with lips compressed and indignant fury in her expression. Dark eyes warred with blue. It became a battle of wills as he remained tautly silent, staring down into her furious face without any change in his expression of angry disdain. His hands remained firmly clamped around her body, making it impossible to move away without a struggle, and she'd be damned if she was going to give him his jollies by wiggling and twisting against him to try to get loose again. His hands were long and powerful. The pads of his fingertips rested firmly on the upper swell of her buttocks. The sensations running rampant inside her traitorous pussy were indescribable.

After what felt like hours of silent, glaring antagonism so thick it could easily be cut with a knife, she irritably decided the only way she was going to get him to let go of her was to say something. She slowly drew a shaky breath and spoke in a low, careful tone like one might use when talking to a suicide jumper on a ledge. "How about you and me calling a truce? You take your hands off me, and we'll both back away. Then maybe you can calmly tell me what the hell you are so damn bent out of shape over."

Chapter Two

Azrael Thunder Horse glanced at his watch as he stepped through the battered metal and glass front doors of the low-slung school building that housed eighteen classrooms that taught K through 12. It was one of many similar small schools that served the Standing Rock Res, with its wide-flung student base. The last school bus had pulled out some time ago, leaving only his T-Bird and a couple of cars belonging to the custodian and, hopefully, the new Native American Studies teacher. He knew he should have given her a call earlier to welcome her to the staff but he had been too damn busy.

He strode past the brand new donated glass case that held a few older rodeo trophies, a more recent football trophy and a couple of baseball plaques, and he turned his long legs down the west hall toward the auditorium the school board had just had built last summer. The small temporary classroom they had given Ms. Red Wolf was just an instrument storage room, really and the class would have to be moved to a relocatable as soon as it could be assembled. The classroom was far too small to house the initial fifteen students who had clamored to take the class. Even five or six desks were hard to fit in the tiny space, so they had improvised, using a long table and a few stray school desks.

He had searched a long time for a qualified Native American Studies teacher, finding very few legitimate, college-educated people who were interested in teaching at a smaller school in the middle of nowhere. He felt lucky to have gotten word of her leaving a job in Bismarck from a friend in the school system there. He had emailed her instantly and made an offer, telling her how very important he felt this project was and how badly the children needed her. He had been damn glad she had accepted.

He was relieved he had found a qualified NAS teacher so easily. He knew the money wasn't very good. Most of the applicants he'd gotten earlier weren't even Native American. He knew he was going to have to petition the school board for more funds for the next school year to encourage her to stay on. Or increase the amount he had already sunk into the damn project. He frowned as he figured that it would most likely be the latter.

It wouldn't be easy to wring more money out of them. They hadn't been interested in having a class that taught kids what most of them should be learning at home, but the curriculum that was being handed out in most schools in the area was ridiculously skewed to denigrate the very people they served. Custer was portrayed as a patriot who'd been massacred by unruly redskins while "just doing his job" and Wounded Knee was nothing more than a two-paragraph blurb on page 123 of the American History book. A whole fucking two paragraphs. *Yee Haw!*

The door to room 11A was slightly open. He hadn't missed her. He reached for the knob and stepped inside, then stopped dead in his tracks.

He frowned at the sight of the nicely put together Anglo woman stacking books on the shelves, and then his eyes swept the room questioningly. There was no other person in the room and that didn't sit well on his nerves after a stress-filled day of wrangling financial help for his pet projects. He asked if his new teacher was still on the premises and got an answer he didn't exactly take pleasure in hearing.

No way was this lily-white redhead the highly qualified and very highly recommended Ms. Cheyenne Red Wolf.

No fucking way!

He'd had a shitty day already, and he was in no mood to accept this new twist in his shorts. So he'd overreacted. And now here he stood, staring down at one of the most maddeningly sexy, easy-on-the-eyes females he'd ever laid hands on. He'd caught himself one pissed-off *wasicu* woman and he had no fucking idea what he was going to

do with her. The idea of letting go and taking a step back didn't even occur to him. Holding onto her felt like heaven after his years of self-imposed celibacy.

It'd been damn stupid of him to try to intimidate the woman in the first place. He had almost bitten her head off, then instantly felt ashamed of his actions—then had found her maddeningly aggravating as she'd refused to be intimidated and had challenged him. It had gone from bad to worse, and now all he could do was pray she didn't do any more of that damn wiggling around like a fish on a hook and getting him into a worse state. An Anglo woman. A white woman with a fucking Indian name.

He should have asked for a goddamn photo.

When her quiet, matter-of-fact voice broke through to his petrified brain, while he was trying madly to figure out how to get himself out of this mess, he brought his agitated thoughts back under control and stared down at her with relief, although he hid it. He nodded stiffly and reluctantly forced his clenched hands to relax their death grip on her and as she took a quick step back to put a couple of inches between her soft belly and his aching cock. He exhaled slowly. He took a slow step back, as well, and reached up to lift his expensive black Stetson and run a hand in frustration through his unbound hair.

His voice was a hiss between clenched teeth as he felt his face grow red from embarrassment. "I'm sorry. It's been a damn shitty day."

Cheyenne had thought he was going to just stand there like a statue until his steel-hard erection went away or she made the mistake of giving him another reason to attack her. So when he responded so readily and rationally to her quiet statement, she wasn't really sure if the sudden rush of emotion that ran through her was relief or disappointment. It had occurred to her while they were in the middle of their standoff that there were worse places to be than up tight against the body of a man built like a Greek god—and she loved men with long, silky hair and dark eyes. Of course, the way he was glaring at her told her he didn't share her tactile pleasure in their impromptu

and unusual embrace. She swallowed a sound of disappointment. He was one hell of an intense, scary – *sexy* – male.

“Okay – you know who I am – but I don’t know who you are. And now that we’ve called a truce, maybe you could let me know what the problem is.” She was surprised that her voice was almost calm. She scooted out from between his large frame and the desk behind her and put a couple of extra desks between them, waiting for him to get his cool back and respond. Those dark eyes flickered with an odd intensity.

He drew a deep breath and said flatly, “I’m your boss.”

Her eyes widened in horror. Oh right. Just peachy. This maddeningly misogynistic hunk in form-fitting jeans, sleek white dress shirt and alligator boots was her boss? No way. “*You’re Azrael Thunder Horse?*” Her gut clenched and she barely hid the wince.

“I was expecting someone with black hair and brown eyes, Ms. Red Wolf. I certainly didn’t expect a woman named Cheyenne Red Wolf to be a redhead with blue eyes.”

Anger flashed. Well, since he was being so forthright... “And I didn’t expect a Tribal Representative to be so racially prejudiced, Mr. Thunder Horse.”

He glared at her then his face seemed to relax a bit. “*Touché*, Ms. Red Wolf. But you have to admit, you laid yourself wide open to that one.”

Chy inhaled very slowly and bit off the angry and rather uncomplimentary words she so badly wanted to use on this man. She drew a calming breath and said coolly, “I may not have been born a Native American, Mr. Thunder Horse, but rest assured that I am as highly qualified, or even more so, than most others in my field.” Her chin lifted challengingly.

He seemed to be fighting a grudging smile. “So where did you get your Native American name? You marry it?”

Chy clenched her teeth. Another chauvinist thinking a woman had to marry into a name to claim it. She inhaled slowly. She didn’t have to answer his impertinent and insulting question, but she did.

"From my adoptive father. My own died when I was three. Frank Red Wolf was my father from age four until last year, when he died. And I assure you, Mr. Thunder Horse, that I grew up in a home that was probably more traditionally Native American than most you'd find right here."

Azrael counted slowly to ten before he raised his eyes from the floor to meet hers, and he still felt as if he'd been kicked in the gut by a mule. He normally didn't see many women with that coloring—hair like flame and eyes like a sun-glazed summer sky. And he was having a little trouble breathing. He shouldn't. There should be no attraction for him in her pale skin and lush body. He'd had his fill of women like her years back and there was no novelty anymore. At least, there hadn't been for years.

Until right now.

Her voice was tight. He could sense her tears, even though they didn't show in her eyes. Those incredibly brilliant, sexy-as-hell blue eyes. And he fucking well didn't need to get all tangled up with another Anglo woman who craved to become an Indian. He looked away from her and then said wearily, "Look, I made a mistake in hiring you, Ms. Red Wolf. I apologize for any inconvenience to you, and I'll see that you get a month's severance and travel expenses. I was looking for a *real* Indian." He heard her sharp intake of breath and he winced at his own choice of words. *Christ, Az...sometimes you take the cake.*

The woman stiffened and glared at him. He expected maybe shouting or angry tears but when she spoke, her voice was amazingly cool. "I have a contract that says I'm hired for the entire school year, Mr. Thunder Horse and unless you plan on paying me a year's salary and giving me health insurance for the duration, I'm afraid you're stuck with my unfortunately non-Indian ass."

Azrael stared at her incredulously. His anger and irritation dissolved into something resembling respect. She was a fighter. And she had a goddamn good point. Unless he could find some reason to fire her for incompetence, she was right. She had a

fucking signed, sealed and delivered contract. And if he didn't keep his damn mouth shut, he might end up with an EEO lawsuit as well.

He glared. She glared back. And then she turned away, grabbed her purse from under the big desk at the head of the room and stalked out the door, leaving him standing there looking like a total jackass.

He resettled his hat and drew a deep, calming breath. His body felt like a fucking charged-up load of explosives. His cock was still as hard as a rock. And he couldn't hold back a wicked grin. Something told him he'd just met his match. No woman had ever had this much of an effect on him on first sight. And he had the sneaking suspicion that no woman ever would again.

She'd shut him down and he would let her have this round. But he would certainly enjoy another. And he had no intention of losing the next one.

He caught up to her in the parking lot where she was fumbling in her purse and he realized she was crying. He felt like a damn heel as she turned away at his approach. He heard her curse foully and he hooked his thumbs over his snakeskin belt. It was safer than accidentally touching her again.

"Problem?" he asked gruffly, frowning down at her bent head. Frustration and rage rolled off her.

She glanced up at him, wiping tears from her cheeks angrily with the back of a hand. "Besides having you for a boss? Yes! I locked my damn keys in my car."

He had to bite his tongue to keep from grinning as she looked around for a rock to break her window with. When she found one, he stepped between her and the hapless window, fully expecting her to target him with the jagged chunk of feldspar.

"Hold on. Save the cost of a replacement. I'll have Gregg Willis come out from the Selfridge police station and use his slim jim to get your keys out when he starts his shift in the morning. Where you staying? I'll give you a lift."

She frowned up at him warily. "All my things are locked in my car. I barely got in this morning and I haven't even got a place to stay lined up yet." She leaned wearily against her fender and blew a flyaway strand of red out of her face in frustration. "I can't just leave my car here. It'll get broken into. Besides, I may have to camp in it tonight."

Azrael lifted his brows. "Not here. It won't get broken into in Jacobs. But then, you did come from Bismarck. A lot of creeps in Bismarck. I think your car and belongings will be pretty safe until morning." He watched her decide. God, but her sweetly blushing face was so innocent and her thoughts so easy to read. Too bad he was not interested in her type. Not at all. But he was gonna enjoy seeing how far he could push her.

"Is there an open store close by a motel where I can buy a few things, like a toothbrush and toothpaste?"

Az didn't want to burst her balloon, but the only motel was closed down until the winter fishing season and the one and only boarding house in town was full up. The economy in Jacobs had gone into the shitter over the past few years and the only real "industry" in town was the school and the outlying ranching. Plus a few new oil wells. He had only come back because his mom had needed him and he'd only stayed because he was tired of the way things were in the outside world. He'd had enough of that to last him a lifetime. He indicated his car with a lift of his chin and she turned to frown at the gleaming black T-Bird.

"Fancy car. I see you don't go for the customary reservation ride of a rusty Chevy pickup on bald tires." He held back a bark of laughter. She followed him warily to the passenger door. He unlocked it and opened it for her and she slid into the luxury of the black leather interior.

As he walked around and folded his long body to slide in under the wheel, she already had her belt fastened and she glanced questioningly at him as he left his off and

turned the key. With a wicked smile, he said quietly, "Speed limit's twenty-five miles per hour."

"And you actually stay under the speed limit in this car?" Her lips pursed.

"In town. But as soon as I hit the outskirts, I go wild Injun and let 'er rip up to thirty-five." His mouth was enough to set off alarms in her body as he half-smiled at her and started the car. He put the T-Bird into gear and backed out of the parking space beside her dusty old Toyota and swung out onto the two lane road that was Main Street Jacobs.

Chapter Three

She tried not to stare at his strong, lean hands on the steering wheel as he pulled out of the little parking lot and turned the T-Bird toward the tiny cluster of small businesses about eight miles down along the main street she'd traversed on the way to the school very early this morning. She shifted her eyes to the approaching buildings to keep her mind off him.

Jacobs was a tiny town of one hundred fifty souls, give or take a chicken or two, with a single pump gas station, a ma and pa grocery and a little cafe that seated about a dozen people. She knew because she had eaten breakfast there at 6:45 after driving all night from Bismarck. There were two booths, a small table and six stools at the little counter.

She'd grown up in a small res town like Jacobs, after her mom had married Frank. She was used to having to drive seventy miles to buy items you couldn't find in a small town, or shopping for school clothes from catalogs. Big businesses didn't bother with little hamlets where the customer base was scarce, and money scarcer. As he drove, she sighed as memories kicked in with a vengeance. Not *all* her memories were all bad.

Frank had been a retired Marine Sergeant who had returned injured from 'Nam when Madeline Coleman had met him. A young widow with a small child, alone, being hounded by an unwanted predator interested in a no-strings-for-fun relationship with a needy woman. Frank had wiped up the floor with the creep, in spite of being minus a leg, and had instantly offered her mom a job on his little ranch. Cooking, cleaning and companionship for a good man who had spent his life alone after mustering out with his Navy Cross and his purple heart.

Madeline had accepted and after a few months, Frank had asked her if she wanted to move into the master bedroom. Being a woman who expected a wedding ring to go

with the upgraded position, she had told him to take his job and shove it. A week later, they were married and Chy had a real live daddy.

Frank had seen to it that his adopted daughter got a damn good education and he had taught her so many things that schools couldn't teach. He had taught her to love his Lakota heritage as much as he did. He had taught her how to read weather, how to read signs, how to read people. He had shown her his native plants and had taught her how to use them for healing. He had sat with her night after night telling her the stories of his ancestors and from Frank she had learned of the intricately beautiful beliefs he had grown to manhood with. It had been Frank's great love of nature and his deep respect for all life that had impressed her most and she had desperately wanted to be his real daughter. And since Nature hadn't made her an Indian, she tried to make herself into one.

At thirteen, she had dyed her hair black and had worn it in braids. Her mother had let her, knowing that she would outgrow it after a while. Especially when folks jokingly commented on the little squaw with the blue eyes and freckles. And then she had run off and scared the hell out of everyone by vanishing for a week on a dream walk that only boys were supposed to have, and Frank had frowned at her and called her his little *wasicu* miscreant.

Then, for a couple of years, she'd refused to wear anything but handmade leather clothes and mocs that she'd learned how to make from an old woman who made Indian stuff for tourists. She had tossed all her "white clothes" into a bag and had almost succeeded in tricking Frank into donating them to Goodwill. But he'd caught her.

She shook her head.

Azrael Thunder Horse's comment on wanting a "real" Indian had hurt far more than he could ever have imagined. But it was impossible for a zebra to be a horse, and it was not possible for a tabby cat to be a leopard. You were what you were born to be. And despite her youthful illusions that she could make herself an Indian by simply dying her hair and wearing handmade buckskin clothing, she still had red hair and blue

eyes. And freckles. And no amount of black hair dye or brown contact lenses would change that fact.

She was completely lost in her own thoughts until she realized with a start that the T-Bird had passed right by an old motel with dark, shuttered windows and was picking up speed west along the highway. "You just passed..." she began, then bit her lip. She frowned across the console at him and said angrily, "Where the hell are you taking me?"

He waved his hand to the road ahead and replied cryptically, "About ten more miles up the road. A lot better than sleeping in your car. That motel is closed until fishing season starts. There's a small boarding house but it's full up. I figure you might be able to get a cheap room from a woman I know who has a big farmhouse. It's not exactly the Ritz but the price is right, the food is great and you'll like her."

Chy stared at him, her mouth hanging open, until he glanced at her and grinned again. Her mouth snapped shut and she swallowed. "Oh." She hid her blush. For a minute there, she had thought... She felt a bit foolish for her wayward imagination.

As the T-Bird picked up more speed, she glanced at the speedometer and bit back a comment as the needle edged up to seventy. She hadn't really believed that bit about keeping this car to thirty-five. Men just didn't have that kind of willpower. Somewhere during her trip down memory lane, he'd fastened his own seat belt. She shook her head and hid a grin.

The ten miles didn't take long at that speed and when he slowed to leave the main highway, she noted that the secondary road was fairly well-maintained. Off to each side were rolling fields of cut alfalfa drying in the sun and sugar beets. A beet harvester and two big stake-side trucks were slowly working their way through what remained of the almost harvested fields.

The road went on for a couple of miles. Up ahead she could see a large ranch house, surrounded by tall shade trees. It reminded her of Frank's place. Except for the beets. Frank had only planted alfalfa and timothy fields but he often bought truckloads of beet

tops for the cattle to vary their diet. The smells of cut hay and freshly turned earth brought back so many memories.

The T-Bird rolled to a stop in front of a fairly new three-car garage and Chy unbuckled her seat belt as her boss got out and walked around to open her door. Damn! A woman could get real used to this kind of treatment. She blinked as he extended his hand to help her from the car as if she were a princess and she took it before she thought about it much. His big hand swallowed hers and made her feel almost dainty. And Cheyenne Red Wolf was anything but dainty.

A trickle of awareness ran up her arm to her chest and she released his hand the moment she was on her feet. He seemed to notice her reaction and she fumed that he was so damn perceptive. She followed him up the four white-painted wooden steps to the wide porch and lifted her brows as he walked in without knocking. He closed the door behind them as she stepped into the bright entryway and smiled at the beautifully kept house.

"This is really nice."

"Is that you, darlin'?" a woman's husky voice called out from the hallway and Chy flushed. As she turned toward the voice, a stunningly beautiful woman of indeterminate age emerged from the archway and stopped in her tracks as she caught sight of Chy. A gorgeous, welcoming smile spread over her face, then she returned her gaze to the man, opened her arms and hugged him, kissing his tanned cheek. "I wasn't expecting you to be so late." Then those beautiful eyes turned to Chy and she smiled again. "And who is this?"

"This is Cheyenne Red Wolf. *My new NAS teacher.*" His emphasis on her job description brought a look of surprise to the woman's face. His dark eyes shifted from the woman to her and she blushed warmly. Then he said quietly, "This is Maude Thunder Horse." *Oh God – he was married?* She should have known. The best-looking ones were always taken.

Chy must have looked as stunned as she felt, because the woman chuckled and extended her hand to take hers in a warm grip. "You look a bit shell-shocked, honey. Has my son given you a taste of his 'no palefaces allowed' mentality?"

Son? Much better. Chy smiled back, her eyes darting to his quietly stoic face. "Oh, yeah. And the experience ranks right up there next to having my teeth drilled."

Maude laughed, a beautiful sound that washed over Chy's weary spirit. The woman glanced at her son, then back at her and asked, "Have you had dinner yet, honey?"

Cheyenne hesitated, then Azrael said quietly, "She just hauled into Jacobs this morning and she has no place to stay. Think you can set her up?"

Maude lifted her brows. "Sure. There's the guest room at the end of the hall, across from yours. It'll only take a minute to get the bed made up and the windows open to air it out."

Chy's eyes must have shown her instant panic because Maude patted her on the shoulder and said, "He really doesn't bite, honey. He just barks real loud." Then she looked at him and said, "You two go on into the kitchen. Dish her up some food. I have a couple of chickens I just took out of the oven that are ready for carving. There's mashed and gravy ready to serve and I was just working on the salad. I'll get her room ready and be back down in a jiff."

Feeling as if she'd just been picked up by a small tornado, Cheyenne slid her purse strap from her shoulder and clutched it to her chest. She turned her gaze to her host and he nodded toward the hallway. "Bathroom's that way if you want to wash up. Kitchen's down there. Come on in when you're done."

Feeling pathetically grateful that he'd thought of that, she nodded and left him standing there as she sought the indicated door. When she glanced back before stepping into the bathroom, he was still there, his dark gaze following her.

Damn the man. He had enough overt, completely succulent sex appeal to send a woman through the roof and Chy was too tired and too stressed to deal with that at the

moment. She closed the door and stared at her pale reflection in the mirror over the sink, wondering why Azrael Thunder Horse seemed so damn familiar. She'd never seen him before. She would have remembered. Those hot-as-hell dark eyes did things to her that left her in a dither. *But she sure as hell knew him from somewhere...*

She splashed cold water on her face and dried off with a small towel. The moment she had seen him, her pussy had clenched. Her pulses had shifted to overdrive. But it hadn't been just those hot looks. It was something more. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. She shook her head and brought herself back to reality. She swallowed hard and used the facilities, then washed her hands and stared at them as she dried them. He was just—so familiar...

She stepped out of the bathroom feeling much better and followed her nose to the archway leading into the bright kitchen. Maude was setting plates out while Azrael was carving the chickens. The woman glanced up and said, "Hope you're hungry. I usually make enough for an army. I keep forgetting my son's appetite isn't the same as it was when he was seventeen."

Her stomach growled and she flushed. "Lord! I guess I *am* hungry. I had breakfast at 6:45 and no lunch."

"Well, sit down, honey and dig in."

Az watched her tuck into the simple but delicious food like she hadn't eaten in three days and he took note of his mother's thoughtful look as she met his eyes. He scowled repressively at her. He knew that look. He shook his head imperceptibly but she just laughed softly and handed the large salad bowl to their guest so she could take seconds.

"It's been a while since I had such a wonderful meal, Mrs. Thunder Horse." Chy smiled as she took the salad bowl and shoveled more onto her plate.

"It's Maude, honey. And I'm happy you like to eat. Az eats like a bird. Afraid he'll get a paunch now that he's over thirty-five. Afraid he's not a hot young buck anymore."

"Mom..." He glared at her across the table but she ignored him. He avoided the blue gaze that swiveled his way.

"I don't think he has to worry about that." He felt a trickle of warmth run along every nerve in his body at her quiet statement and he lifted his eyes to her pink face. She looked instantly back at her plate.

"See, sweetheart? Cheyenne thinks you look just fine. Eat up!" Maude was grinning at him wickedly.

He shot her a murderous look and took another helping of potatoes. He added a dollop of steaming gravy and settled down to eating, wondering if he'd go to prison for long if he strangled his own mother.

* * * * *

Maude didn't object when Cheyenne offered to help with the dishes and they stood side by side at the sink as Chy washed and Maude dried and put them away. Azrael vanished as soon as supper ended, probably to get away from his mother's comments about him being old enough to find some pretty young woman and give her some grandkids. Chy couldn't help but grin that he had someone who could make him squirm. He'd certainly enjoyed making her squirm earlier. However, once Azrael was out of the room, his mother never brought him up again.

A mother who didn't talk about her son when he wasn't present? Unusual. Chy liked her very much. She reminded her of her own mother and as they worked side by side, she enjoyed talking about her curriculum and how she wanted the kids to learn more than just what the books told. Maude had some ideas that sounded like they would fit well into her study package and she made a mental note to try them.

Not another word passed Maude's lips about her son as they worked. But she just couldn't resist asking.

"Azrael – that's the Islamic/Hebrew name for the angel of death, isn't it?"

Maude chuckled and glanced sideways at her. "You're the first person who knew that before they asked." She shrugged and went on, "I wanted a strong name that wasn't the same name every other mother used. So I started reading baby names in these books from the library. I'll tell you, I was an outcast with my family for months after I named him. But they got over it." They laughed softly and the subject changed many times as they finished the dishes.

Cheyenne was dazed from driving all night and teaching all day. She felt shell-shocked and bone tired. Maude smiled at her as they left the kitchen and said, "Az told me your luggage and things are all locked up in your car back at the school, so I put a nightgown you can use on the bed and there are always extra toothbrushes under the sink. Your room is the one on the left, far end of the hall. Upstairs bathroom's the second door on the right. You go on up, honey and get a decent night's sleep."

Cheyenne sighed in relief and thanked her and climbed the stairs feeling as if her legs would give out at any moment. She found the nightgown on the bed, along with a bathrobe and she headed back down the hall to the bathroom. She barely caught herself before just barging in and knocked to make sure the bathroom was empty. She was startled when the door opened and she found herself staring mutely at Azrael, standing there in nothing but low-slung pajama bottoms that revealed more than they concealed, his long black hair wet from a shower and his toothbrush in his hand. Her eyes widened at the marvelous sight. Oh, Lord. He didn't have to worry about a paunch. She hadn't seen a heavenly body like that since high school when Joe Pilford had streaked across the football field in nothing but his jock strap.

Dragging her eyes back to his too-damn-gorgeous face, she managed to squeak, "I can come back in a few minutes. Sorry."

"I'm almost done. Come on in." He slid his toothbrush into the holder and wiped his mouth with a hand towel.

"Thanks." Chy inhaled deeply wet, heavenly male skin and a tangy aftershave as he stepped out into the hallway and she nodded jerkily, scooting past that hard mass of rippling muscles to close the door with a snap and lean on it while she gasped for air.

Dear God. She had seen some pretty damn hot men in her life but none of them could hold a candle to Azrael Thunder Horse! Her belly was flip-flopping crazily and she blushed as she realized that her damn panties were wet, too. His steamy, delicious scent lingered in the bathroom and she bit her lip.

This was *sooo* not going to be easy.

The hallway was dark when she stepped out of the steamy bathroom over half an hour later. She sighed. It couldn't be any later than 8:30! Surely they didn't go to bed that early here? She sighed and flicked off the bathroom light and paused a moment to allow her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark before she made her way carefully down the hall toward her door. With every light in the place off, and only a faint tinge of moonlight filtering through lace curtains at the far end of the hall, she mostly felt her way along the wall. She saw a dark shape moving and she stopped, holding her breath. "Maude?" she whispered.

"She's asleep. She has to get up at four for work." His quiet voice set her pulse off like a shot. A zing of heat raced from her pounding heart to her clenched pussy. She barely withheld a whimper.

"Sorry. I thought everyone was asleep."

His soft growl made her body tingle. "No such luck, *wihopA*. I wondered how much longer you'd be in there."

Her thoughts scattered at his use of that term. She couldn't see him clearly but she could sense that he was a whole lot closer than he had been when he'd first spoken. And when his hands slid up her arms to her shoulders, she gave a startled gasp and jerked back.

"Like she said, I don't bite." His voice was just above her ear and she could feel the heat of his body within inches of hers.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked shakily.

“I’d think it was pretty obvious. We left something hanging this afternoon—and I can’t stand loose ends.” The depth and timbre of his voice set off that damn flip-flop in her belly again and her pussy ached and grew wet.

Chy stiffened as he slowly dragged her against his naked chest, and as she started to protest, his mouth dropped to hers, taking it slow and hot, nibbling at her stiff lips until they softened and opened. His tongue slid between her lips in a possessive way that set her body on fire. She lost hold of her rumpled armful of clothes and her traitorous hands slid up that oh-so-delicious body to lock behind his head under a river of still damp hair. His hands slid down to her ass and pulled her tight against his hard length.

Once again her body was plastered against his and she could feel his cock swelling as he kissed her with urgent, sensuous enjoyment. She ran one palm down from his shoulders over his solid, smooth chest to slip over a copper nipple. His body trembled and he pressed her back against the wall behind her.

“Careful, Cheyenne—we’re back to where we started, but this time if you just stand there I won’t let it stop me.” His husky words against her mouth sent a frisson of something hot and raw shimmering along every nerve in her body, and when his hands slid from her ass to her hips to hold her against his rock-hard power, she gave a mindless little cry of need and leaned in to kiss him back.

What the hell was she doing? Alarms rang through the haze of lust that swamped her. This man had hated her on sight. He had made no bones about what he thought of her. And now he was kissing her as if he expected her to roll over and accept the fact that despite his aversion to her he didn’t mind pushing for a hot roll in the hay? No way!

He wasn’t going to offer her more than one night of hot monkey sex here. And for pity’s sake—he was her boss. That should have been the clincher. But for the life of her, she couldn’t find the strength to shove him away and smack him upside the head like

her mind yelled at her to do. She was melting like a bowl of Jell-O that had been set too close to the stove.

Cheyenne thought her heart was going to explode inside her chest as he made mincemeat of her willpower with his highly effective and obviously experienced hands and mouth. She knew she should be struggling to free herself, telling him to go straight to hell, biting that hot, amazingly erotic tongue hard in anger instead of stroking it with her own. And she should absolutely not be slipping her palms down that rippling, decadent body to cup his cock like some horny groupie at a backstage party! She felt the tremor of reaction go through him like a firestorm as her hand caressed him through his thin cotton pajama bottoms.

For God's sake, girl. Don't you know you are playing with fire?

His hands had just moved to her chest to cup and squeeze her breasts when a door down the hall opened and the light inside his mother's room flipped on. He tensed and jerked back as if he'd been shocked by an electric fence and she dragged her robe back around her twisted gown like some teenager caught necking on the sofa. They both turned their shaken gazes to the woman who squinted at them from her doorway with arms folded over her chest like a schoolmarm. Hot embarrassment filled her face and she wanted to fade into the wallpaper.

"The hallway is not the place for making out. Choose one bedroom or the other, and keep it quiet. I have an early morning, kids. And you better be damn sure she's willing, Az or I'll flay you with far worse than a willow switch!"

They stared in mute embarrassment as she shook her head, switched off her light and closed her door once more.

God, how he wanted to take this woman but he shouldn't be putting moves on her in his own hallway, especially when he was her employer. But then, his common sense had deserted him the moment she had knocked on that bathroom door. Her wide eyes had caressed his body into instant hardness and her furious blush had made him nearly

lose it and grab her to drag her inside and strip her. She was a walking sexual harassment case and he should be using his upper head instead of his lower head in this matter.

And then his mom stepped into the hall...damn it! He realized he'd blown it. Even as his mother went back inside her room and closed the door, he realized it was over. Fuck!

He wanted desperately to take right back up where they'd been interrupted but the lust-filled haze of their erotic, amazing kiss was lifting and Chy was shakily backing toward her door. He cleared his throat and picked up her dropped clothes, handing them to her. She was backing away as if she'd been stung. She fumbled her door open and whispered hoarsely, "Good night." The door closed with a sharp click as he stood there in agony.

What lousy timing, Mom...

Chapter Four

She fell back against the door, afraid her legs were going to give out as she struggled to regain her breath, as well as regain control over her brain. Her body was a complete tangle of emotions and needs that she hadn't felt before. Ever. *And he was her goddamn boss.*

This was nothing but trouble coming along the highway like a runaway Mack truck. She had to get a damn grip. But that was easier said than done when she could still feel that deliciously hot mouth dragging responses from her that shocked even her, and those wonderful hands of his as they cupped and caressed. And although she had made love a few times before, she instinctively knew that making love to Azrael Thunder Horse would be like trying to ride a lightning bolt in a wild storm—incredibly hot, electric and—dangerous as hell.

She fought to calm herself. Nothing seemed to work. She found herself wondering what would happen if she crossed the hallway to knock on his door. She instantly nixed that thought. She would just have to grit her teeth and take it like a man. Um...woman. With a little groan of regret, she moved across the dark floor and flopped face first onto the open bed, wondering where the hell her weariness of an hour ago had fled to. She desperately needed to find it so she could sleep.

She had never before gone bonkers over a man on first sight. Never had let a total stranger kiss her like Azrael Thunder Horse had just kissed her. Never had wanted to strip off her clothes and offer herself to a man she'd barely known for a few hours.

WTF?

It must be because she had too much stress in her life—the job change and the long overnight trip—then having her new boss explode because she wasn't a *real* Indian. Even when he'd been glaring at her in anger she had sensed his anger wasn't simply

about her being white. Waves of seductive desire had been rolling off that prime body, washing through her own as they had stood there, locked together as if their lives had depended upon remaining pressed chest to chest—thigh to thigh—raging erection to eagerly receptive mons.

She rolled onto her back and squeezed her trembling thighs together. She could still taste the heat and mint of his mouth. Still feel the press of his cock against her trembling belly. Still feel the shaking hands that had gently cupped her aching breasts just before Maude had opened her door and squelched the seduction scene. Her legs fell limply apart.

She swallowed hard, closing her eyes tightly to envision him sliding his shaft of satiny steel past her slick, wet labia and burying himself deep inside her, filling her as she gasped and bit back a cry of delirious pleasure. Her trembling fingers did nothing to ease the ache as she slipped them over her wet clit and sank them into her pussy. She reached up under her gown and rolled her throbbing nipple between thumb and forefinger before clamping her hand over her breast to squeeze, desperate for his hot, delicious mouth to suck hard on her puffy nipples.

Dear Lord. If he knew what she was doing now, he would probably wonder how desperate she truly was. Here she lay, fantasizing over her boss as she fucked herself with her slim fingers, aching for fulfillment as she imagined his mouth on her, his body on hers and his marvelous cock pounding her to a quivering, earth-splintering orgasm...

* * * * *

Az convulsed with a shaking groan as he exploded into the hand towel he'd snatched from the bathroom right after leaving Cheyenne in the hallway. He had been so fucking hard he had been unable to even lie down without it sticking up like a flagpole. And he really hated jacking off like some damn horny teenager. It'd been a very long time since he'd felt the need to get his rocks off with his own hand. But it was

either that or stalk across the hall and into her room and take her like a wild man until he came so fucking hard his eyes rolled back in his head.

For a moment there, she'd been hot and willing but she'd instantly lost the mood the minute his mother had appeared and he'd known that the moment had passed. Any further attempt to bed her would have resulted in her having a screaming fit and probably doing some serious damage to his balls.

He lay in his bed, gently milking the remainder of his ejaculation from his cock and calming his thrumming body. Several years of self-imposed celibacy had certainly not dampened his libido when the right woman came along. He was afraid of how he might have hurt her if his mother hadn't stepped out to put the skids on his lust at just that moment. He drew a shaking sigh and exhaled it slowly, trying to put his mind out of the world and into his spirit place. But his damn mind was stubbornly clinging to the hand towel still wrapped around his now limp cock.

And the lily-white woman with the lightly freckled nose who had just knocked him off his fucking high horse with a resounding thud.

He swallowed hard and tossed the hand towel across the room. Disgusted with himself for his lack of restraint, and his need for this woman, he flung his arms wide across his bed and closed his eyes, hearing the chants of his ancestors deep in his soul and hoping to hell it would work this time.

But he was still wide awake at three a.m., his body trembling as he slid his hand around his uncooperative cock for the third time in as many hours and closed his eyes as he imagined slipping his shaft powerfully into her widespread, waiting pink pussy. He imagined her glazed eyes on him as he fed himself deep into her weeping cunt. He imagined the tight, silken channel that welcomed his intrusion and the way her hips canted up to take every inch of him inside. He imagined his mouth sucking hungrily on those sweetly pouty nipples, watching her arch her back with each deep stroke of his cock and each deep pull of his mouth.

He reached under his clenched fist to cup his balls in his free hand to gently massage and squeeze, his breathing ragged and his heart pounding wildly as he thought of her mouth sucking hard on the sensitive muscle between his throat and his collarbone—her hands clasping the ridges of his pecs as her nails dragged over his nipples. *Sweet Jesus*. If the woman could only see what he was doing as he envisioned her body bouncing hard and fast on his cock, she would be shocked.

As he exploded again, he wondered if his mother was gonna ask what the fuck he'd done to all her hand towels. He really needed to toss them into the wash before she saw them.

He lay there in a state of weary numbness as his mind and body drifted and he thought about what his life had been before. It had been many years, but he had never truly forgotten how far down he had sunk.

Azrael had never expected to want a woman so feverishly again. He hadn't bothered with women at all over the past few years. He'd grown weary to the empty depths of his soul of them after six years in California. He'd gone just a little crazy when he'd ridden the high of being one of Hollywood's most sought-after Native American actors. It seemed that every blue-eyed, platinum-blond in the world wanted to experience what it was like to roll in the hay with a real, genuine wild Indian.

He'd been hungry for it. He'd spent most of his nights in some woman's bed, so easily dumping all the values his mother had taught him for the instant gratification of sinking hot and hard into every gorgeous body that sought him out.

And there had been a great many.

He had been in tight with a hot group of other NA actors, like Howard Blackhorse and Tommy Walks-in-Shadow. They had all gone a bit wild. More than just a bit. They had all gone totally crazy. Howard had been a few years older than the rest and despite his success in one big bucks film, he had gotten fewer and fewer parts and had ended up tossing in the towel first and heading home to the res. Said he was gonna find

himself a rich *wasicu* woman and live the good life. Tommy had caved next, unable to find decent paying roles anymore. But Az had stayed, still at the top of the casting lists.

The life hadn't been what it'd been touted to be. Drugs, high living, constant sex had all taken a toll on his body and spirit. He had lost himself somewhere along the way.

After just six short but seemingly interminable years making a seven figure yearly income and spending it like water, Azrael had dumped his Oscar and his two Golden Globe Awards in the trash, packed a roll of cash, a couple pairs of jeans and a couple of shirts into a duffel bag and had walked out. Literally. He'd left his cars, his house and his lifestyle behind and simply walked away, sick to death of it all.

He had hitchhiked to Nevada, where he had thankfully hooked up with an older Native American actor he'd met, who was actually a real, genuine Shoshone Medicine Man and he had spent the next two years fighting his addictions and his illness of spirit, living on Earl Smith's Nevada ranch, working as a cowhand to earn his keep while spending hours every evening working on healing his body and spirit.

It had been hard, back-breaking work, riding for hours each day, lugging hay, learning to run – and repair – the tractor, the swather and the big round baling machine. Spending hundreds of long hours bouncing along in a pickup truck to rewire miles and miles of damaged fencing.

His body had grown soft during his time in California. His spirit had gone softer. Both grew hard and strong once again under the hot Nevada sun. And when his weakened body had healed, Earl had encouraged him to seek his medicine dream.

For the first time in many years, he had felt whole – at peace again.

He had returned to North Dakota when he'd gotten word through a friend that his father had died and his mother needed his help. He had stayed away because of the shame he felt. But when his mother's arms had folded around him and her tears had dampened his shirt, he had realized how damn much he had missed home. And he would never leave again, for any reason.

He hadn't known until he had come home that his business manager in Los Angeles had kept in touch regularly with Maude, since he had named her as his beneficiary and his power of attorney in case something happened to him. He had discovered that his mother and his business manager had salvaged much of his money – the money he'd walked away from, thinking it unimportant. They had sold his house and cars and had rid him of the mountain of debt he had left behind. He had returned home a fairly wealthy man, despite his excesses and his wasteful lifestyle.

So he had used a considerable amount to pay for his father's funeral as well as the huge mortgage on this place. He used more to pay his tuition to complete college. He'd left a large sum in investments for the future, but a very large amount was sunk into the Native American Studies program he had sponsored with the Standing Rock Agency. It was his baby.

He'd been dragged into working with the tribal council because of his earlier fame and his knowledge of dealing with Anglo businessmen and politicians. *Good thing his fame and his reputation were good for something.* After he had finished his education, his close relationship with the political forces and the institutions controlling grants had brought him into contact with a number of Native American groups who tapped him for help getting things moving. He had become a mover and a shaker among The People.

Women had become unimportant in his life. Oh, there had always been women who liked what they saw. Often he had cursed his own looks. If he'd been badly scarred or had a face like a badger's ass, the women would have left him alone. He'd still had to do some broken field running to avoid entanglements, so he had eschewed women completely, not even dating casually. He had thought he had hardened himself against them – until he had seen Cheyenne Red Wolf standing in her tiny makeshift classroom, looking like some wet dream that'd dropped straight out of heaven.

Sweet Jesus.

She had hit him like a mortar shot. He had never wanted a woman on first sight before, not even when he'd been into debauchery and perversion, but she had reached deep inside him with those electric blue eyes and had touched every part of him with her hot sensuality and her breathless essence and he had gotten as hard as a goddamn rock the minute she'd lifted those eyes to his face. A white woman had knocked his fucking socks off. And it had pissed him off royally. Then he'd tried to fire her ass.

A lot of good that had done him.

He drifted off to a weary sleep, his thoughts tangled around blue eyes and flame red hair...

* * * * *

She was wide awake at four a.m. She wasn't used to sleeping more than six to eight hours and she lay in her little bed staring at the pre-dawn dimness outside her lace curtains. She heard Maude's alarm go off and the door open. She listened to the shower and after the woman had padded quietly back down the hall to her room once again, Chy slipped from her bed and dressed quickly, without turning on the light, and hurried into the hall to head for the bathroom.

She had just started in the bathroom door when Maude stepped from her room, her purse over her shoulder and her hair pulled back into a bun. Chy blushed hotly and smiled at her. "Good morning. Um—I'm sorry about..."

Maude smiled. "I'm not. About time he got his shit together." She walked toward Chy and paused before starting down the stairs.

Cheyenne blushed even hotter and shook her head. "Nothing happened—really."

Maude stared at her thoughtfully, an odd smile on her face. "You think not? I think something happened and it's about damn time. I'm glad you're here, Cheyenne Red Wolf. You're most welcome in this house."

With those cryptic words, Maude went soundlessly down the stairs and out the front door while Chy stared after her. She was completely lost in thought until a deep

voice asked slowly from behind her, “You gonna use it or just stand there like a deer caught in the headlights?”

She jerked around and barely managed to keep from falling over as she saw Azrael standing a couple feet away, wearing jeans and a plaid work shirt and a pair of dusty work boots. “Oh. Sorry,” she said hurriedly. “I’ll only be a second.”

“What are you waiting for?” he prompted with a wolfish grin as she still stood there. “You hoping I’ll join you?”

She darted into the bathroom, slamming the door and quickly using the facilities. When she opened the door to hurry back to her room, he was standing there with one hand on each side of the door frame, completely blocking her exit and she swallowed hard. He smelled as delicious as he had last night and she felt oddly faint. “Um—excuse me.” She drew back a step and waited for him to move aside. He didn’t.

“Excuse you for what? You haven’t tried to shimmy past me yet. Go ahead and use your weapons on me, woman. Then I’ll let you know if I can excuse you.” His voice dipped low.

Giving a groan of embarrassment, she shoved him back. She slipped past him as he laughed softly and she didn’t dare glance back as she hurried to her room and inside. She flicked on her light switch, turning to reach for her purse that contained her small hairbrush. Her eyes slid over her luggage standing just inside the door and she almost gave vent to some gnarly swear words.

He must have come in sometime during the night and left her bags here. She could only guess that he had already sent someone to jimmy her car lock and bring her things out here.

She dragged in a couple of deep breaths, wondering how he could have been so silent that she hadn’t heard him. And then she wondered if he’d simply brought in the bags, or if he’d watched her sleeping. *She slept all over the damn bed.* She usually ended up on top of the covers and nightgowns weren’t her thing. She almost always slept nude. She tried to recall whether her borrowed nightgown had been wadded up around

her neck when she'd awakened or if she'd managed to stay under the sheet. Her face went hot with mortification.

The heat of her red cheeks wasn't nearly as hot as her thoughts. The idea of him slipping into her bedroom left her in a damn lather. Dear God. Living under the same roof with that walking male smorgasbord was going to be a real joy. She'd be lucky if she could remember her own name by the end of each day. She had to find another place before this flew out of control.

She glanced at her watch. It was barely five. She supposed she could at least fix them some breakfast since she was already up, and obviously he was headed outside. She had almost forgotten getting up before dawn to feed the horses, gather eggs in the hen house and get breakfast ready for her folks.

The school day didn't even start for nearly three hours. She dragged on jeans and a tank top and found her boots in her canvas shoe bag. She found her big brush and tore it through her hair until it crackled, then caught it back into a ponytail with a scrunchy. The bathroom was empty when she headed there to wash her face and brush her teeth. A few minutes later she was stepping into the kitchen where her boss was pouring a cup of coffee. Seeing her in work clothes, he pulled out a second cup and asked quietly, "You always get up this early?"

"Not for the last few years. I was always up this early when I lived at home. Dad had a ranch something like this. I got horse and chicken duty. Mom did the milking and house work." Her casual shrug made him smile. Then she glanced around and said, "You had breakfast yet? I'm a fair hand with a skillet."

Azrael handed her a cup and lifted one brow. "Mom leaves too early to fix it, so I usually just grab a bite in town. But if you're offering..."

She sensed a double entendre, but ignored it. "Eggs and pancakes? Or cereal and toast?"

"Whatever you're cooking, I'll eat. Have at it. I'm lousy at fixing anything but soup and sandwiches, or gutting and baking trout on a campfire."

She was already searching through the cupboards for ingredients, and found a bag of pancake mix and a big pitcher of fresh milk. A basket of eggs sat in the fridge and as she pulled out pans and mixing bowls, she asked, "I can do more than fix breakfast in the mornings. Tell me what chores you want to give me, and I'll do those, too." He rubbed the side of his nose as if considering her offer, those obsidian eyes running over her makeup-free face. She tried not to show how his gaze affected her. Damn the man for being so frigging hot!

He watched her quickly and efficiently measure out the ingredients for a batch of hotcakes and cut a few thick slices of bacon from a slab that she found in the fridge. He wouldn't have guessed she was a rancher's kid by looking at her. He would have thought her to be more the career woman type—genteel and fastidious. In fact, it was surprising how quickly she worked and how competent she appeared in the kitchen. She organized the cooking so that hot bacon and over-easy eggs came off the griddle at the same time a batch of pancakes was ready and as she handed him his plate, he grinned at her and shook his head.

He slathered his hotcakes with fresh butter, then reached for the syrup. He normally wasn't so free with the cholesterol but the smell of the food made his stomach growl. She set the pans aside on the stovetop and set her own plate down across from his. They ate in silence, while she shoveled in more food than he'd seen any woman of her size eat in his entire life.

He wasn't really thinking about the chores he would like to give her, since there was only one he could think of, and she would probably smack him upside the head for suggesting it. But when she had finished her own plate and leaned back with a happy sigh to take a swallow of coffee, she said affably, "I can gather the eggs and do the milking if that'll make it easier on you."

"Mom buys fresh milk from a woman with six kids and no husband who has a little place down the road. Gives the lady some income. We let her have our milk cow last

year." He mopped up his egg yolk with a forkful of hotcake and licked syrup off his upper lip with relish.

Chy smiled at the idea. Giving your cow away so you could buy fresh milk from a person who needed income. That was a novel idea, and a kind one. She liked Maude Thunder Horse more and more. "Well, then, how about feeding the chickens and gathering the eggs?"

"Mom gave the hens to Miriam Running Deer along with the cow. We buy our eggs from her every day or two."

Cheyenne gazed across the table at him and watched him clean his plate until it almost wouldn't need washing. "I am a fair hand with livestock. Horses? Cattle? Sheep?"

Azrael shoved his plate away and leaned back as if to let the delicious breakfast settle and lifted his dark eyes to her face. "Mom has to be out the door by 4:45. If you get up this early every day, she'd probably really love a breakfast like this. And we have several horses that need some hard exercise every day. I usually try to ride them each day, but you could take over with two of them for a half hour each morning." He smiled. "The crew takes care of the rest of the livestock."

"Okay." She nodded as she got up to take their plates to the sink.

He rose and followed her. He stood right next to her, helping as she washed and he dried and put away. She did her best not to shiver and jerk each time his shoulder or arm brushed against her but she just couldn't help it. She emptied the dishwater, dried her hands and glanced at her watch. Go exercise the horses. Anything to put distance between his body and hers.

"Did you already exercise the horses?" She tried to speak normally.

He turned to face her, leaning back against the countertop like a long, lean jungle cat flexing its claws. His eyes slipped over her face, down over her snug tank top and back up to her hot face again and she barely kept herself from crossing her arms over

her chest. He made no move to touch her but it oddly felt as if he had just stroked her body. "Cheyenne..." His voice was soft and held a deeper note.

"What?" She tried to appear oblivious to the tension that had suddenly gathered between them once again.

"About last night – the hallway?"

"Forgotten. No problem. I was overtired and not thinking straight. I want to apologize for that," she swallowed, babbling as she tried to excuse her full participation in what had happened. And tried hard not to recall how many hours she had lain awake, aching to feel him inside her.

"Cheyenne..." He shook his head as a slow smile curved his delectable mouth.

"What?" Her response was too sharp.

"Nothing to apologize to me for. Because I'm not about to apologize to you. I wanted that. I think I was pretty damn open about wanting that. But I know that we have to work together, and..." He hesitated as if trying to phrase things correctly.

She bit her lower lip. "I know. You don't have to remind me you're my boss. It won't happen again!" Her eyes lifted to his face. Oh, God. Could he see how much she wanted him?

Without moving a muscle, he replied quietly, "Oh, yes it will. I'll see to it that it does. But just for the record, I'm not one to take what isn't freely offered. If you don't want me, you need to stop acting like you do. I do know how to accept no for an answer. All you have to do is stop looking at me like you are right now, and stop wanting me like you are right now. If you want this to stop, just tell me you aren't interested in me as a man and walk away."

His words stunned her into silence. He continued to lean his long, utterly mouth-watering body back against the countertop and folded his corded arms over his chest as he just stared into her eyes, waiting. Caught in the heat of his sizzling invitation, Chy stood like a startled deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi, her mouth open but wordless, her heart pounding wildly. She could no more have spoken a single word

at that moment than she could have flown away like a fleeing sparrow. Her thoughts, normally so organized and cogent, deserted her completely. And her hesitation brought an amused curve to those sexy, chiseled lips.

He straightened away from the counter and she took two rapid steps backward. His smile was reminiscent of a cat stalking a canary with a broken wing. "Now that that's settled, let's get to work. There isn't enough time to really do you justice right now. I can hold out until tonight. You can take the black and white filly and the bay gelding." His voice had dropped to a deep purr and his eyes positively glittered.

His smugly satisfied tone brought her out of her trance and she spluttered, "Oh! You—you—oh!" Her fists clenched and she felt the heat rising in her cheeks. He had to be trying to humiliate her even more, playing this ridiculous cat-and-mouse game. She whirled and stalked furiously out of the kitchen and threw open the front door hard enough to rattle the windows. Casting a glance around to get her bearings, she drew in several deep breaths. The bastard was just trying to get her into a lather. He certainly knew exactly what to say to get her to rise to the bait and make a total idiot of herself. She scowled at him as he stepped out onto the porch, and settled a battered hat down on his head, a wicked curve on his lips.

"Ready for a long, hard ride?" His barely disguised innuendo and wicked look made her bristle and she barely bit back a foul retort. She wouldn't give him that much satisfaction. The images his statement had just brought to mind made her even more furious and she groaned in frustration, whirling away and walking quickly around the house to the corrals she could see out back. She wasn't going to be the butt of his macho man jokes. No way.

* * * * *

Azrael felt a tight pull in his gut as he watched the woman swing onto his horse as naturally and as easily as a reservation-born kid and he drew a deep breath. She genuinely thought he had been joking. She was about to get a lesson in paying

attention. She was his. She just didn't know it yet. And he was going to enjoy teaching her exactly what that meant, even if he had to tie her down to do it.

He swung easily onto a big sorrel and leaned low over the flying red mane as he caught up to her. He laughed when she glanced back over her shoulder and saw him. She leaned low on the young mare's neck and started to draw away but he knew the mare didn't yet have the stamina to keep up a dead-out run for more than a couple of miles. She would wear down and he would catch her again with his more powerful mount.

But he needn't have worried about the mare getting worn out. Cheyenne eased the animal back to a smooth, ground-eating canter and as she topped the rise she had been heading for, she pulled up and sat, her eyes taking in the magnificent view of the rich green land that was his pride and joy. Cattle grazed far down the valley, and an early-morning crew was at work loading ton bales into a big trailer for transport to the hay barn.

He hauled up beside her, bringing his stallion to face the other way so that he and Cheyenne were facing each other. The look on her flushed face and in her stunning blue eyes as she turned her gaze from the view to him was enough to make him swallow his tongue. She had completely forgotten her anger in the freedom of the gallop and she grinned at him broadly, her eyes alight and her color a hectic pink from the wind. "She's a wonderful animal. Thanks for letting me ride her."

It was his turn to be rendered speechless. He just nodded quietly, lost in her enjoyment of his horse and the carefree race across the range. She rode as if she had grown up on horseback. Most Anglos needed a saddle to keep from toppling off. She had looked like a part of the horse as she had crested the rise and he had felt as if his heart might burst free at the sight of her with her red gold hair blowing around her face, her ponytail half undone and her body barely moving with the flowing strides of the horse.

His cock jumped and he thought about dragging her off the filly and taking her right there on the rise as the sun rose slowly to warm them.

Instead, he just smiled back and said, "You're a good rider. I'm surprised."

"Frank gave me my first horse when I was four." Her eyes laughed. "I'd almost forgotten how much I love riding. I didn't have much chance to ride in Bismarck." Her voice sounded wistful.

He turned the stallion back toward the ranch house and she followed with the filly. They rode side by side at a relaxing canter. When they reached the corral, she slid to the ground and gave the pinto a hug and led her through the gate that he'd opened. She reached for a brush and a rag from a tack box in the utility shed behind the lean-to that gave the horses some shade during the hot parts of the day and gave the mare a rubdown before turning her loose and haltering the bay gelding.

As they rode out once more, she on the bay gelding and he on his tall palomino quarter horse mare, Az realized that his feelings were as muddled as his thoughts. She was a surprise, in more ways than one. And she was as mercurial as a drop of rain. The kind you tried to catch on your tongue but it splashed instead onto your nose. He shook his head. No matter how things progressed, it wasn't going to be boring. Anticipation made his body thrum.

Chapter Five

He drove them into Jacobs at 8:30, pulling into the parking area beside her dust-coated old Toyota. He came around the car to open her door once more and as she slid out of the deep leather seat and stood, he didn't step back, but stood right where he was. She glanced up into his face warily. He fished a set of familiar keys from his jeans pocket and dropped them into the hand she automatically held out.

"I managed to get ahold of Gregg Willis last night. He was patrolling close to Jacobs township and he met me here. Had a bit of trouble falling asleep last night, so I figured, 'what the hell'."

That was putting it mildly. Getting her stuff had given him something else to focus on for an hour or so instead of thinking about her across the hall in her bed. But putting her luggage inside her door, knowing she slept just a few feet away had left him hot and horny again. He could swear he'd spent more time jacking off than sleeping.

"Thanks. I was wondering when you got my stuff." She cleared her throat. "I really need to get to my classroom and get set up."

He hated moving away from her. She smelled like a spring rain with wildflowers blooming in carefree abandon. Whatever her shampoo was, he liked it. Loved it. And he loved the way she dropped her eyes to his shirt front when things got too hot for her to handle—like right now. He resisted the urge to dip his finger under that adorable chin and force her head up so he could kiss her again, but that would be pushing it in the school parking lot. He sighed as Freddy Weston's pickup rolled in and pulled up on the far side of the Toyota.

He stepped back and let her scoot past him and closed the car door, lifting his chin in greeting as Freddy slid out of his truck. He turned to follow her with his eyes as she

swung her purse strap over her shoulder and strode with sexy long strides to the glass doors.

That woman had such a walk...

"I'd think you'd want that one roped and haltered before anyone else had a toss at her," Freddy said in Lakota.

He turned his eyes back to Freddy, who had paused beside him to appreciate the same view. "How're Molly and the kids, Freddy?" His mouth twisted slightly in humor as he responded in his native tongue.

Freddy switched back to English. "Hey—don't fault me for lookin'! I was just makin' conversation. I know there're quite a few bucks who'd give their right nut to saddle that filly and ride her into the ground."

Azrael shook his head. "Better put a halter on that tongue, Freddy. That one's a lady. I doubt she'd stand for anyone trying to throw a saddle on her."

Freddy lifted his brows. His handsome, round face proclaimed his Hunkpapa Sioux bloodlines. "You already try?" His grin was infectious.

"Like I said—she's a lady."

"Never stopped the Azrael Thunder Horse I knew. Hey—don't let the white skin stop you, old friend. She's real cool. I know you have an aversion but she's way different."

"You seem to know a lot about the *winyan*. You met her before she came here?" Azrael lifted his brows and met the other's gaze.

"Met her with her daddy at the Rosebud powwow a few years back. You were out West. She's one hell of a sweet woman, that one. Molly took to her real quick. An' Molly ain't one to strike up friendships with outsiders." Freddy's gaze slid over his face.

"I'm her boss, Freddy," he replied dryly as he shook his head.

"So fire her."

"Already tried. She told me to stick it up my ass."

“You are one hell of a hard-nosed son of a bitch, aren’t you?” Freddy laughed. “Get over it, man. Times are changing.” Freddy slapped him on the back and headed for the school doors. He glanced back and called out, “Everybody in town knows she’s out at your place. You can pretend all you want, but you can’t fool your oldest buddy.”

Azrael rubbed his nose and sighed. Jacobs, like most res towns, was small and tightly knit. Not much went on that was a secret. And Azrael Thunder Horse taking an Anglo girl home to momma was definitely going to be a subject for talk for a long time to come. They all knew how he felt about mixing red and white. After his time in California he’d come back with a passion to keep the res solely for Indians. He’d thrown himself wholeheartedly into Native American projects, eschewing any but necessary contact with Anglos and wannabes.

But Cheyenne Red Wolf was a whole different can of beans. After his abortive attempt to hate her and drive her out, he’d instantly tried to bed her. Not his usual M.O. since coming back home. And now everyone else in the world—his small, exclusive world—had him pegged. No use trying to hide it now. The thought made him laugh.

He hadn’t even fooled his mother. She had given him her silent “give me grandbabies” blessing. It was fucking irritating how that woman could read him like a book. But it wasn’t a long-term, grandbabies type of relationship that Az wanted from the redhead. It was a hot, delicious, mind-blowing sexual thing he wanted. Just to get her out of his damn head so he could think straight again. And that thought gave him a shot of sexual heat that made it hard to climb back into his T-Bird and head for Fort Yates.

* * * * *

Chy sighed and put the books back onto the shelves again. She’d taught four classes today and there had been even more kids in each class. It seemed as if every kid in the whole school suddenly wanted to be in her class. She smiled. It felt good.

When she'd first taken the job, she'd been told that she would be teaching between fifteen and twenty-one students. That number had doubled since yesterday and although she was happy that the parents and kids seemed to like what she taught, she couldn't help but wonder when they would have the big, air-conditioned relocatable unit ready for her to move her class into. This little classroom wouldn't cut it for much longer. She wiped a trickle of perspiration from her forehead with the back of one hand and reached for a fallen book.

As the last book was settled into place, her cell phone rang and she glanced at the caller ID before flipping her phone open.

"Hi, Mom! How's it going?"

"What's the matter? You break all your fingers? I expected a play-by-play on your first day of teaching. So what's up, Woman-on-Fire?" Her mother used the Anglo translation of the Lakota name her adopted father had given her years back.

"Sorry, Mom. Nothing seemed to go right yesterday. I got into town and came straight to the school. I locked my things, including my phone and my keys, in the damn car. Had to get a res cop to use his slim jim and rescue my stuff. It was too late to call by then." She avoided any mention of the rest of her evening and night.

"So, after you got your phone back, why didn't you call?" she prodded gently.

Chy paused briefly. "I didn't get it back until this morning."

"So, where you staying? They don't have a phone?"

"Mom, I'm not fourteen anymore. I was...preoccupied."

"Hmm. That was fast. Some knight in shining armor rescued you and carried you off on his white horse to a place where there are no phones."

"Mom!" She laughed. "It was a black T-Bird and I'm staying at his mother's house."

"I hope you don't smash his nuts and crush his ego before you give him a chance this time."

"Mother," she sighed. "Stop jumping to ridiculous conclusions. You seem to think that every man who talks to me is a prospective mate. Not! And Jeremy deserved what he got. He didn't know how to take no for an answer."

Madeline snorted softly. "I admit I had high hopes for the man. He really was crazy about you, honey. I sort of hoped you wouldn't keep saying no. Look, I want grandbabies some day in the very near future, and the way your batting average has gone into the shitter, that's not likely to happen anytime soon!"

Cheyenne loved her mother dearly but the woman had gotten a burr under her saddle and figured that at twenty-eight, her daughter should be married happily and pumping out grandbabies for her to spoil rotten. The three "possible" hadn't panned out. For some reason, Chy had no desire to marry some respectable *wasicu* and forget her dream.

"Is the knight errant there right now?"

"No, Mom. People have lives, you know. I'm just finishing up at the school. I need to get supper in my gut before I faint. I'll call you after I am pleasantly stuffed and capable of lucid conversation, okay?"

"Your knight errant have a name?"

Chy sighed. "He's not 'my knight errant' Mom—he's my boss, for God's sake. So stop with the twenty questions and don't unpack the wedding dress just yet, okay? You're just going to have to wait!"

"So, this boss have a name?"

Chy knew exactly what her mom was getting to. She heaved a long-suffering sigh and replied, "His name's Azrael Thunder Horse. He's Lakota. Okay?"

Madeline didn't speak for almost a minute. Then she asked, "*The* Azrael Thunder Horse?"

Chy frowned at the crayon sketch of a horse that one of her students had made on a scratched desktop and she shook her head. "Is there more than one? Whatdya mean, *the?*"

"So—does this particular Azrael Thunder Horse just happen to be one drop-dead-gorgeous hunk of Lakota pulchritude?" Madeline's thoughtful voice came through the line.

"You know him?" she asked before she realized she'd just given her mother way too much ammunition with her response. She winced.

"No wonder you couldn't find a phone. At least you'll have to think twice before shoving this one away like yesterday's hash. There's no excuse for acting like you don't know what I'm talking about, either. He's exactly what you've always wanted."

Exactly what she'd always wanted.

She wished now that she'd never confided her very personal desires to her mother. The woman would be completely insufferable from here on. Cheyenne drew a deep, calming breath and said heavily, "This one insulted me for being white. He even tried to fire me when he found out I wasn't Native American. Said he was looking for a REAL Indian."

"Right. And then he took you home to momma." Madeline's grin was obvious even through the phone.

Despite her irritation at her mom's attitude, Chy couldn't help but ask. "You know who he is? My boss, I mean?"

"If you hadn't had your nose buried in books and got out a bit more in high school, I'm pretty sure you'd have noticed his face plastered on magazine covers and movie billboards. Your boss was one hot property in Hollywood back when Indians were the thing. He made about a dozen films. I'm pretty certain you could find one if you hunted in the rental places. Oh! By the way—he looks hot in a breechclout and leather leggings. In case you decide to give him a chance, that is."

Her mother's laugh ended the conversation and Chy flipped the phone shut with a frustrated groan. *He looked pretty damn hot in a pair of cotton PJ bottoms, too.* She let her vivid imagination picture the damn man in costume from some cowboy and Indians flick and she shivered at the thought. He was devastating in lean jeans and a white dress shirt. She didn't think she could handle him in buckskins and mocs. That would put him right up there with her dream man...and...

Oh. My. God.

She stared at the little red crayon drawing and wondered why she hadn't seen it instantly. Maybe the instant animosity? Or the clean-cut, expensive clothes and boots? She sank numbly onto one of the chairs that lined the wall under the blackboard. How the hell could she have missed it?

Azrael Thunder Horse was the spitting image of the nebulous man from her feverish dreams. How on earth could she have not recognized that? She closed her eyes and sank onto a chair. It was not something she could easily forget...

It had been fifteen years, but as memories flooded back in, it seemed as if it had only happened yesterday. She covered her face with both hands and scrubbed the foggy feeling away impatiently. The terror and the fear reared up to nearly overwhelm her once more and she dragged in deep, calming breaths.

She had been so young. So stubborn. So foolish. So sure she knew everything. And it had nearly killed her.

Chapter Six

They had found her in one of the many small caves on the side of Wolf Mountain, half-dead and delirious. They had almost given up on finding her. If not for her spirit dream, they would have. She would have died alone and terrified.

That had been the year she had dyed her hair black. It had grown out by summer and she'd cut off the black ends and had finally seemed to accept the fact that her hair was red. Frank had hoped his adoptive daughter would also outgrow her desire to pierce her body and participate in the Sun Dance. So he had let her think about a dream walk. That was safe enough. *Or so he'd thought.* He had never expected her to go through with it.

She'd taken off, leaving only a note that they shouldn't worry about her because she was going on a dream walk. She'd planned to head for the mountain where Frank told her he had been given his vision, take a few days and make her little camp and catch fish and enjoy being out of school for the summer. She'd taken her horse and enough provisions for a week just to be sure, and she'd made sure to take a wad of fishing line and some bait, just in case her provisions got low.

She'd gone off on short camping trips alone a few times but usually only for a day or so. She didn't expect them to be concerned. Wolf Mountain was only a couple of days' ride from the ranch and she figured it'd only take her two days to get a vision if she tried hard. That made the trip about a week at most. At thirteen, Cheyenne Red Wolf had been utterly fearless. Frank had more aptly called it boneheaded. And after all these years, she had to agree.

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She'd left her horse picketed in a small patch of lush grass in the creek bottom several hundred feet below, while she had climbed the ragged face of the steep slopes and scrambled to the jagged set of cliffs Frank had shown her from horseback when she was much smaller.

She found the eagle's nest but it was long vacant, its weathered branches and many small animal bones strewn by weather and those predators that could reach it. The eagles that had been there so long ago had probably moved to safer, higher ground, further from the incursions of men. She was terribly disappointed that there were no eagle feathers in the ancient nest. Not even a tiny one.

She made her little camp and hoped that the spirits would be able to find her. Frank had told her that only boys wanting to be warriors could call out to them, and only if the eagles deemed them to be brave and strong and ready to be given their visions.

But without the eagles, she was on her own with the spirits. Too bad Frank had forbidden her to join the Sun Dance. The dream walk was a far less harsh option for getting visions. He'd firmly told her he would never permit her to try for a vision in the Sun Dance Ceremony and probably hoped she would forget all about the whole vision quest thingy when she outgrew it in a few years.

But he had seriously underestimated her tenacity.

She made a palette of leafy branches and built her little banked fire. She danced for hours that night, calling out to the spirits the way Frank had taught her. She decided she wouldn't eat, because the whole deal was to fast and make yourself get a vision, right? Supposedly the spirits didn't like you to take shortcuts.

She thought about Frank's words. She couldn't make herself too comfortable. That would make the spirits think she was a wuss. So she got up and tossed away the soft leaves and green branches and settled back down to sleep.

When morning came, she squinted up into the bright sunny sky and sighed. No vision. But then, Frank had told her it didn't always come right away. So she shifted on

the hard ground, feeling every rock and pebble digging into her skin and she spread out her arms and chanted a song for a while.

She finally sat up slowly, because the noon sun was burning her pasty-white skin, and dragged her sweater off and put it over her head. She was gonna have a sunburn from hell if she didn't.

She lay back again and wondered if her stomach would ever stop growling and burning. She was used to three good meals and loads of snacks every day. It took a lot of willpower not to climb down to her horse and sneak a few raisins and a couple of granola bars. If she was gonna get a vision, she had to do it right. No cheating.

By the time the sun had gone down and it was getting cold on the cliff, Cheyenne doubted the spirits would ever see her out here. Not unless they were looking for a sunburned squaw with chapped lips and a pinched, grumbling belly. Her mother was probably right. Indian spirits didn't answer the call of a *wasicu* child.

She dragged her sweater tighter about her body and rolled onto her side, groaning from the stiffness of her body after twenty-four hours of lying on her back on rocks and sticks. But she refused to climb down and admit defeat just yet. She shivered and closed her eyes and fell asleep listening to the sound of night-feeding rodents and the owl that was hunting them.

Morning found her curled up in her sweater in a shivering ball and she unfurled to catch as many of the blessedly warm rays of the sun as possible. As she rolled over, a soft scuttling sound made her blink and frown and she found that she had disturbed the young red fox who had curled up with her for warmth sometime during the night. The sight made her spirits soar. He was very young, probably just barely old enough to make long trips outside his den, but the fact remained that he had felt secure enough with her to join her for the night. That could be considered a sign—couldn't it?

She smiled down at him, enthralled, as he yawned and scratched behind his huge ears, and then without a backward glance, bounded off into the rocks to search out a fat ground squirrel for breakfast.

Breakfast. Her stomach was so pinched the thought made her want to cry and eat one of the lizards sunning themselves on the rocks. But she licked her chapped, flaking lips and sat up slowly, running her hands through her filthy hair, dislodging a few of the leaves and sticks that were growing out of it. She staggered to her feet a bit stiffly and lifted her arms to the rising sun, closing her eyes and chanting a welcome. She greeted each of the other directions, not wanting to leave anyone out.

She hoped her horse hadn't decided to cut and run, since she'd been up here for nearly three full days. *Damn. Where was that vision?* After having given a halfhearted acknowledgement to the four points of the compass, she was turning around to sit when the shivery sound of a rattler made her stop instantly, her heart in her throat.

Make no move.

Her instinct and Frank's warnings flooded over her and she stood like a statue made of stone as her eyes found the small diamondback slowly pulling back into an unmistakable coil, its head nearly level with its outer flesh. Rattlers didn't even have to coil to strike. They could strike so damn fast you wouldn't know what hit you until you were bitten. She calmed herself with difficulty. She was alone and two days away from help. If she got bitten, she knew what her chances were. She'd had it drilled into her head often enough.

Although rattler bites wouldn't normally kill a full grown person, the nerve toxins and anticoagulants could paralyze a person and cause them to bleed out. She didn't like the idea of being the one in twenty-five who died from such a bite. So she remained still and kept her eyes on the snake.

She waited for what seemed like hours before the rattler uncoiled itself from the warm rock and slithered off through the brush. She sank down in a heap on the rocks and let the tears flow.

Who was she kidding? She was not brave. She was a coward. No real Indian would have been so scared. And no real Indian would be crying like a baby.

She wasn't sure how long she just sat there, almost in shock, unable to think clearly. But the sun was going down in the western sky and dark clouds were scudding in when she finally rose shakily and started to climb warily down the cliff, watching for more rattlers.

She had just reached the bottom of the stone cliff when the sun seemed to vanish and large drops of rain began to splatter over her body, taking away the late afternoon warmth and making her shiver with cold again. She leaned into the rocks and looked up. Half the sky was covered with black storm clouds and they were rolling in fast. The wind was picking up, carrying the rain drops ahead of the storm. Great! On top of failing miserably in her vision quest, she now had to find shelter from a freak summer thunderstorm.

As she felt the stinging cold rain pelt her like pebbles, driven by a wildly howling wind that was unusual in its ferocity, she managed to get back down to where her horse was picketed—just in time for a deafening clap of thunder that shook the ground and a blinding fork of lightning to strike the little stream, arcing back up on itself like a demon from hell.

Her terrified horse plunged and squealed in fright and she stared helplessly as her transportation tugged the stake from the softened ground and galloped off toward home as if he were being chased by the devil himself.

She sought temporary shelter in one of the many small, low caves that riddled the foothill. She wrung out her sweater and hoped that her little pack of supplies hadn't been washed down the stream with the freakish storm. Once the rain stopped she would go hunt for it.

But the storm didn't stop. It was like nothing she'd ever seen in her life. The thin little creek had swollen to a tumbling river of mud as the storm poured enough water onto the mountainside to wash half of it to the flats below, making her have to seek shelter in a still higher cave that the water didn't reach. Lightning and deafening

thunder assaulted the mountain throughout the rest of the day and she was almost in total despair of it ever stopping.

She settled into a niche in the back of the wide-mouthed overhang to stay out of the blowing rain. And then she heard the ominous deep rumbling as huge rocks loosened by the torrential rains uprooted from their high perches on the slopes above and began to slide and roll. She gave a little cry of terror. The spirits must be royally pissed off that a stupid little *wasicun wakanheya* had dared to try to change her world.

She began to chant, closing her eyes and begging them to let her live. She decided she'd go home and completely forget about wanting to be something she wasn't—and then a huge boulder crashed into the top of the rock shelf that was sheltering her and rocks inside started to fall like the rain outside. She rolled toward the rock wall behind her and covered her head with her arms as sharp granite and crumbled feldspar pummeled her. And then the rock split right where she was lying and a large piece toppled in almost slow motion to rest against the rock at her feet. She gasped in fear as a big shard of granite pinned her left leg in the crevice.

She could still feel her foot and realized she was still in one piece, nothing broken, although her leg was trapped between two immovable pieces of stone. As the realization of her horrifying predicament became clear, she closed her eyes and tried to picture her mom and Frank.

Because she probably would never see them again.

The rain continued for many more hours and when a little trickle of rainwater ran down the face of the granite to her side, she leaned in and cupped her hand under it, bringing it to her parched mouth. It tasted slightly dusty and metallic but she drank thirstily until the source ran out. She was unsure how many hours had passed before darkness filled the cave, and she tried to adjust her body so that she could prevent the circulation in her trapped leg from being cut off. She wriggled her toes and flexed her muscles to keep the circulation up.

Morning's light brought the sun and even though it never reached into her dark little crevice, the warmth it brought to the air was welcome. She was so hungry she even considered trying to catch one of the chipmunks that occasionally poked its nose between the rocks to blink at her before scuttling away. She shifted wearily, unable to even muster enough strength to cry.

The third night in the cave she heard the sounds of a large animal outside the entrance, snuffling about, deciding whether she smelled like prey or some pesky human. She bit her lip and sang out as loudly as she could, filling the cavern with a plaintive, echoing chant that must have sent the creature off into the night, searching for something that didn't sound so big and aggressive.

By the fifth day in the cave, she was out of her mind with thirst and hunger and was just praying she could go to sleep and not feel so scared anymore. She could barely make a sound come through her dry throat but she sobbed and began an odd singsong chant that came from deep inside her—one she didn't remember and couldn't even understand. A deep peace settled over her weary body and the light filtering in from the narrowed cave entrance seemed to flicker and became a brilliant glow that surrounded her.

She must be half dead and she had no doubt that it was simply an hallucination, but as she sang her strange, keening chant she heard the high-pitched cry of an eagle and felt a breeze from the fluttering of wings. She rolled her head to see a great golden eagle less than an arm's reach from her, ruffling its gleaming feathers and cocking its head to one side as it appeared to be looking her over for a possible meal.

She laughed aloud and asked the eagle if it meant to eat her or if it could maybe do her a favor and get her out of the cave. The bird ruffled its feathers and edged a trifle closer. Without thinking of those deadly talons or that wickedly curving beak, Chy reached out a hand and touched the bird's amazingly silken chest feathers.

The eagle gave another shrieking cry and hissed oddly before hopping and spreading its massive wings with a great flapping sound and lifting from the rock floor

of the cave. She begged it to stay and grabbed at it, catching the tip of one wing before it squawked and took to the air, vanishing into the light beyond the cave's entrance. As she dissolved into tears a quiet voice spoke to her and she blinked up at a wavering face that seemed to shimmer in the brightness around her.

Why do you cry? You have been strong. You have been brave. The spirits have touched you. Why are you afraid? He spoke in Lakota. The man smiled at her quietly and took the eagle feather from his hair ornament and placed it into her outstretched hand.

"I don't want to die all alone," she whispered. The image reached out to touch her tangled, filthy hair and she felt an odd easing inside of her, as if he had taken some of her fear away with that brief, gentle touch. He seemed to be moving away, and she croaked, "Don't go! I don't want to be alone anymore!"

Don't be afraid. I found you once. I will find you again. You will never be alone.

And as she caught at his shimmering hand, he dissolved into the brightness surrounding her and the cave slowly went dark again.

She felt a warmth filter through her and found the courage and the strength to sing—*loudly*. And she sang until she thought her lungs would give out.

* * * * *

When Frank and the search party that had been combing the area for days had heard the sound of her voice echoing up from the crevice, they had been overwhelmed that they found her. It had taken ten men and a pair of ton jacks and lots of hastily built shorings to extract her from the back of the almost buried crevice in the rocks, but she had been virtually unscathed—though nearly starved—and suffering from severe dehydration.

Frank had accompanied her to the hospital in the life flight they'd called in and her mom had met them as the chopper had landed and she had fallen into a deep, untroubled sleep under the tear-filled gazes of her parents, her arms threaded with IV tubes.

Her mother had brokenly declared that if Frank continued to encourage her daughter with his Indian stories and his myths and legends, she would leave his sorry ass and take her daughter back to Fargo, where she would never again be subjected to such harebrained schemes as vision quests and medicine dreams.

Frank, afraid of losing the woman he adored, ceased teaching her about his people openly, but later on he would answer her many questions and he would tell her stories when she begged. Just not in front of her mom. And after a while, her mom relented and didn't begrudge her daughter what she seemed to love most.

On her eighteenth birthday, Frank had given her a Lakota name. He had done so in a jocular fashion, but Chy knew that he had asked the spirits for an adult name for his little *wasicu* child. And it was not just a cute nickname as her mother suspected. The words did not simply refer to her red mane of wild hair that often looked like flame in the wind. *Winyan itkonyahan*. It had a far deeper meaning.

She still remembered the night Frank had taken her riding out to the sacred place and camped overnight with her, telling her the story of his great grandmother, Woman who stands tall among the People. He told her she was much like her in many ways, even though she was not the child of his body, but rather the child of his spirit. She could still recall the story of Frank's great grandmother who had saved her entire village from an enemy attack with her courage and resourcefulness.

She had listened to his deep, resonant voice and when he had asked her if she had received her vision in the cave in the mountain she had been afraid to tell him. They had never discussed what had happened. He never asked her if she had received what she had gone in search of.

She had thought back to her ordeal and told him about the hallucination of seeing and touching the huge bird of prey and then the hallucination of the man who smiled so beautifully at her and gave her the strength to sing out.

Frank had nodded slowly and reached for his medicine bag. She expected him to bring out some sacred tobacco, or maybe some small totem to put into her own smaller

bag that she carried in her purse everywhere she went. But then he had drawn out a long, stunningly beautiful feather—a long, marbled brown wing feather with its tiny area of white near the quill end—and she had thought her heart would jump out of her chest.

He had said quietly, “Your hallucination left this in the cave with you. Your hallucination gave you the strength to live. Your vision was granted, daughter. Whether the eagle or the man gave this to you, your life path will tell. The eagle gave you her power. The man gave you reason to live.

“Heed the words of the vision. You were given two great gifts. The giving of an eagle’s feather is an honor only afforded the greatest of warriors—and as I have told, the greatest of warriors are not always men.”

~

The warmth that traveled through her at the memory of that night so many years ago left her breathless. The memory of the face in her vision left her even more breathless. Because as she had grown to young womanhood, that face had returned to her many times in dreams, breathtakingly erotic dreams that could melt wallpaper off a wall. He called her by her Lakota name. And each time he had come to her he had touched her red-gold hair lovingly, had smiled at her and whispered that their lives were one. That one day he would find her beyond the dream world.

Had he?

Chapter Seven

Azrael glanced at his watch, frustrated as hell. He heaved a weary sigh and wondered how time went so damn fast when he was trying to get things done. He had spoken to the Tribal Council but they had not heard. He had spoken to the school board but they had not heard either. He had just spent nine long, frustrating hours trying his damndest to get funding for an additional two programs that meant one hell of a lot to the kids in Fort Yates, but it seemed that the only person who cared about it was him.

He supposed he could ante up a goodly sum of his own cash as seed money to get it going but he had done that so fucking often lately, he would eventually run out of money. He had to get outside funding or it was a lost cause.

He dragged his cell phone out of his pocket and pressed the speed dial number for home. His mother answered after three rings. "I'm late getting out of Fort Yates. Don't bother to wait on dinner for me. I'll probably be hauling in about 9:00, so if you think you hear a burglar, it's just me. I'll get the horses fed when I get there."

Maude laughed softly. "Your chores have been done, sweetheart. And there'll be leftovers in the fridge to put into the microwave, so don't worry."

Azrael frowned. "You shouldn't have to take on my chores after a full day at work, Mom..."

"I didn't. It's nice to have a young person with oodles of energy around. The horses have been fed, the lean-to shed's been mucked, the horses got plenty of grooming and now she's putting supper on the table. And I didn't have to lift a finger. It's good to be Queen."

Azrael inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. "Cheyenne." His body responded to the name.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, sweetheart. If you let this one get away, I'll have no choice but to disown you completely."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, sighing. "See you in a couple of hours." He closed his phone and shook his head. He brought an image of blue eyes and red-gold hair to his mind and felt his mood elevate considerably, as his mental status lifted out of the shitter for the first time since noon. His body heated and his spirit soared. He slid under the T-Bird's leather-wrapped steering wheel and turned the key. And cursed softly.

Nothing. He drew an exasperated breath and tried again. He climbed out and pulled the hood lever. He checked the battery cables, taking them off and resettling them over the posts and then tried again. With a very descriptive curse, he pulled out his cell again and speed dialed AAA.

By the time they'd brought him a brand new battery and he was on the road it was nearly ten. He kept one eye on the speed because his gleaming black T-Bird was a prime target for radar guns. By the time he reached the smooth, packed-dirt road that took him from the highway to the ranch it was just past 11:30. He parked next to the dusty Toyota and stretched wearily, feeling like a dog that'd just spent the day chasing his own tail. He climbed the steps to the porch and went in quietly, hanging his fringed leather jacket on the coat rack inside the entry hall. He bent to drag off his boots so that he could move silently around the house and then padded into the kitchen, opening the fridge door and pulling out a couple of plastic food containers with a sigh.

He was just peering under the lids by the light of the open fridge door when the overhead light flicked on. He glanced up with a frown to stare at Cheyenne who was standing scratching her head and rumpling her sleep-tousled hair as she yawned. An unbelievably needful shot of heat moved through his body at the sight of her padding barefoot across his kitchen floor to take the blue container from his hands and say, "Sit. I'll heat this stuff up. You look tired as hell."

He stared down at the top of her coppery head as she relieved him of the pink container as well and stepped between his body and the fridge. "Sit!" She closed the fridge and stepped over to the microwave and popped the containers, one at a time, inside to heat them for a minute each. He found himself unwilling to obey. If he sat, he would not be standing close enough to inhale the warm, sleepy scent of her hair or feel the heat of her body as she scooted around him while he stood there like a stone monolith. He was tired. He was in need of a hot shower to relax his stiff body.

And he was as hard as a fucking iron rod.

When she brushed past him to get a plate out of the cupboard he almost whimpered. God, he was pathetic! He was inches from her. All he had to do was reach out. And she didn't seem to be shy about brushing his stiff body as she efficiently fixed him something to eat and set his plate on the table. What the hell had changed? All her glares and frowns had gone away and she was all softly yawning, smiling female – and he was anything but soft.

"Okay. What have you done with Cheyenne Red Wolf?" he asked in a bemused tone as she waved him toward the chair she'd pulled out for him. She shot him a wry glance before laughing.

Cheyenne heard the car pull in. She had been lying awake for hours, waiting. Wondering. All the hours of hard work in the feedlot and corrals hadn't been enough to make it possible to fall sleep after she had pieced together the feelings he had been arousing in her since the first moment she'd seen him enter the classroom. She slipped out of bed and pulled her robe on over her cotton PJs.

She heard him in the entryway and went silently down the stairs, following him into the kitchen where he was snooping in the leftovers for something quick and easy to wolf down before falling into bed. As she watched him, she felt a burst of warmth spread through her. He was so beautiful.

She wasn't afraid of what she felt now. She was curious about why she felt it. And curious about the man who had simply walked away from a lucrative profession as a multimillion-dollar Hollywood property. After talking to her mom she'd gone online on her laptop and had Googled her new boss.

And she'd been utterly floored.

Azrael Thunder Horse had been at the top of the food chain in Hollywood for several years and then one day he had simply vanished. She had read the magazine articles. Had read the Wikipedia articles. Had read the news articles about his disappearance. Had read the gossip rags and the movie mags. And she had devoured every tiny bit of information available on the man. She had wondered why anyone would simply walk away from a career that had made him a multimillionaire by the age of twenty-seven. He was truly an enigma.

It had been rumored at the time of his disappearance that he'd had some sort of mental breakdown. And when he had finally surfaced it had been virtually impossible for the media to get interviews or to learn what had caused the meltdown. The wild speculation and gossip had finally died down, relegating his story to yesterday's news. And now she knew where he had gone. She just had no idea why.

Holding back her own curiosity, she went about heating the leftovers, sensing that he would not appreciate her prying into his reasons or his secrets.

As she sank into the chair opposite the one he was standing beside, she said softly, "You look like a bomb blast hit you. Please sit down and eat. I know you're probably starving."

She watched as he ran both hands over his head to shove his mussed black hair back from his face. The movement flexed every muscle in his arms and chest and she inhaled carefully, forcing her eyes to remain calmly on his handsome face.

He was the most magnificent specimen she'd ever had the pleasure of looking at.

"I didn't expect anyone to be up this late," he murmured, finally sinking onto the chair and reaching for the fork she'd placed beside his plate.

"Had trouble sleeping. I heard the T-Bird pull in. You're later than Maude said you'd be." Her tone was lightly conversational but he sensed questions that were not being asked.

"Battery on the T-Bird was dead. Had to call AAA. Took them a couple of hours to get a truck out." He took a bite of the hot roast beef and sighed. He was hungrier than he'd thought. "Why? You worried maybe I was with another woman?"

She blushed as she frowned. "No. Just curious."

"And a lousy liar." His teeth flashed white in his sun-bronzed face. "Pissed me off, too. Couldn't wait to get back here. Was worried about chores left unfinished."

"Your mom and I finished up. It's all been taken care of."

"You miss me?"

"Not particularly. I was just awake and thought you might be hungry." She shrugged.

Azrael swallowed his bite and took another, his thoughts on those sweet, succulent lips and the way they would feel on his body. Oh, hell yeah.

"You were right about that."

The blush that suffused her face again told him she understood him completely, but she still didn't get up and hightail it for the safety of her room. She simply sat there, watching him eat. He wondered what she would do if he shoved the plate aside and hauled her over the table and spread her out like a smorgasbord – and his cock jerked to full attention with a life all its own.

He wondered what her game was. A woman didn't simply go from ice maiden to hot and delicious in half a day. Hell, he wasn't above finding out why but he was always just a bit suspicious of things that seemed too good to be true. And seeing this

woman sitting there as if waiting for him to carry her upstairs and fuck her until they were both unconscious was just too damn good to be true.

He finished the food on his plate and sighed, leaning back in the chair to return her thoughtful gaze quietly. Drawing in a deep breath, he asked in a conversational tone, "So—have you decided you wouldn't be averse to putting in some quality time in my bed?"

Her instant frown made him want to grin broadly. "No! I'm just trying to be nice. We didn't exactly get off to the greatest start in the world. I had sort of hoped we could call a truce. After all, we do have to work together and I'm temporarily staying in your mother's house." She worried that lush lower lip, then sighed. "I just think it would be better if we cleared the air between us and got the tensions out in the open."

Azrael let his eyes rove over her pink face and down over the thick terry robe that he could tell was there for armor—armor against him. "I think I pretty much put it all out in the open this morning. You want me and I sure as hell want you. So why are we having this discussion when we could be upstairs naked?"

Her eyes widened and she inhaled quickly. She was completely adorable when she acted as if she didn't know what the hell he was talking about. Jesus. Did she know she was playing with fire here?

Cheyenne tried to form a fitting response but couldn't. The man was incorrigible. He had a one-track mind. But as his eyes moved over her she realized with a sinking feeling that he wasn't the only one that couldn't get their mind off seeing the other naked. She had almost creamed her jeans earlier as she had read his bio and pored over the movie promo photos of him. *Holy hell*. The man had been even more breathtakingly gorgeous fifteen years back and she was even worse off now knowing what he looked like in a breechclout and leggings.

Damn her mom for telling her about that.

She swallowed hard and shook her head, lowering her eyes to the top button of his shirt. "Um...I know we seem to have some sort of—weird attraction to each other—but..." Her thoughts wandered dangerously before she picked up her brain and then went on. "But under the circumstances, I'd hoped we could sort of set it aside. Then maybe it would sort of..." She shrugged, trying to find the right words.

"Go away all by itself?" he finished her sentence with a quirked brow.

She realized she was staring at his chest again and it seemed to beckon to her curled hands. She wanted to drag his shirt off and run her hands all over him like last night in the hallway. The man was seriously, terminally hot. He would be what...forty? Forty-two? And he was still built like this? Her belly flip-flopped.

Her eyes lifted to his face and his pupils got darker. "Maybe. You have to know up front that although I find you exceedingly attractive I'm not the kind of woman to simply let go and have a wild fling. And I genuinely believe you aren't the kind of man who would hop into the sack with just anybody you took a momentary fancy to."

His dark eyes held hers and she felt as if she were staring down a cobra. "You are right about that, Cheyenne. But you're not somebody I just took a 'momentary fancy' to. You couldn't possibly call what I feel toward you anything as trivial as a 'fancy'."

She felt as if she had jumped into the deep end of the pool without her water wings. "You can't tell me that you can call it anything else!" she scoffed. "You just met me yesterday afternoon. It takes more than one day to develop a grand passion. What you're feeling is a grand hard-on and I'm not interested in a one-night fling, no matter how goddamn sexy or good-looking a man is." Oh, what a damn liar she was becoming.

She winced inwardly as she realized with a sinking feeling that she'd just given the man way TMI. Damn her runaway mouth. She sat there staring him down for a good three minutes before she realized he wasn't going to speak or move. "Well, now that we have that straight, good night."

Azrael was utterly captivated. How could this female tell him to go straight to hell in one breath, then turn around and tell him she thought he was a “sexy, good-looking man”? She needed to make up her mind. And he was going to have a wonderful time helping her do just that.

As she rose from the table and gathered her terry cloth armor around her, he rose as well, stretching lithely and looming over her like a vulture with a sweet tooth looking at a candy apple. He could feel her wanting him, as if her hands were already moving hungrily over his naked flesh. He could feel her heart pounding against his. And he could feel her body aching to feel his cock deep inside of her. *And that thought was enough to put him into a fucking frenzy.*

From the moment he had first laid eyes on her the woman had become an obsession to him. She had seemed oddly familiar as he had stared into those amazing eyes. Her sensual appeal tugged at him even when he was over a hundred miles away from her. He found himself thinking of her every moment he wasn't fully occupied with other thoughts. And if she thought for one minute that she was going up those stairs to bed alone, she was out of her pea-pickin' mind.

She hesitated before moving past him. He knew he must look as if he were ready to have her for dessert because her face went pink and her pulse pounded in her throat like a rabbit staring down a coyote. She eased past him where he stood and when he didn't make a move toward her, she said with a relieved tone, “Good night.”

Az let her take a couple of steps before reaching out and catching her wrist and whirling her back into his arms. She didn't yelp. She didn't do much more than stare up into his face with those bottomless blue eyes as he bent his head and traced her lips with his tongue gently. The little whimper that came from her throat told him all he needed to know.

He took her mouth slowly—hungrily, delving between lush lips, tasting her sweet tongue and stroking it as his hands moved over the fluffy white robe and the trembling

body inside it. He felt her stiffen against him, then melt and he groaned deep in his throat as she seemed to lose the ability to stand on her own legs.

As she sagged against him, he bent slightly to swing her from the floor and up against his chest. His mouth still holding hers in a feast of dancing tongues and nibbling teeth, he turned off the kitchen light and carried her up the stairs in the dark, knowing he was about to take another long, scary as hell step on his life journey—and heaven help him, he didn't have the foggiest fucking idea where he was heading.

Chapter Eight

Cheyenne knew what he wanted from her. And she feared what would happen in the morning light. But heaven help her, she just couldn't make herself give a damn. She wanted this man like she'd never wanted anything in her life. He was the face from her dream. He was the one she'd been searching for. And she had been waiting fifteen long, lonely years for him.

As he stepped through her open bedroom door and pressed it quietly closed with his hip, she felt as if everything in her life were suddenly jolting into focus. He set her on her feet and his hands moved to ease her robe off her shoulders. She felt cool air touch her as the robe dropped at her feet. He had not lifted his mouth from her lips, still drinking her in like a glass of sweet wine he could not get enough of.

She slid her palms up his marvelous body and traced his taut abs before fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. Her chest felt as if her heart would burst out at any moment as she shoved his crisp white shirt back from his sculpted chest and eased it down his arms to land in a heap at his feet.

Her hands drank in the naked, hard angles and ripples of his pecs and ribs and then lowered to the buckle of his belt. While she undressed him, he slowly unfastened the buttons of her PJ top and when his palms slipped under the open cotton to move slowly over her bare flesh, she shuddered with reaction. Still he held her mouth captive beneath his and his tongue stroked hers heatedly as she whimpered and unfastened his belt.

As they slowly and hungrily removed each other's clothing, Azrael was so fucking ready he thought he might come too fast and embarrass himself. When she released his belt and unzipped him, he groaned against her lips and lifted his mouth from hers,

growling raggedly, "I need to get my jeans off. Hold that thought." He jammed a hand into the rear pocket of his sagging jeans and dragged out a condom packet. "I believe in being prepared."

Her PJ bottoms were pooled around her ankles and his jeans were around his. He bent and tugged his jeans and socks off in mere seconds and had the condom on just as quickly. As he straightened, he lifted her clear of her PJs and then adjusted her so that her legs were wrapped around his hips and her clenched, hot center was pressed deliciously against the rigid length of his latex-sheathed cock.

Her sigh was lost as he caught her mouth once more and walked her very slowly up against the wall beside her bed. He stood there, his legs planted wide to keep from losing control of his body as he flexed his hips slowly to enjoy the feel of her cream-slick labia rubbing so deliciously over his aching shaft. He heard her adorable little moan of need. He took his lips from hers just long enough to say, "It's been one hell of a long time for me, Cheyenne, so if I get too rough, you need to tell me. I'll stop."

She gave a soft moan as he lifted her and his wide cock nudged into the wet warmth of her welcoming pussy. "Guide me home," he rasped huskily against her mouth. She slid one trembling hand between their bellies and circled his thick shaft as he lowered her over his solid, unyielding cock. She inhaled sharply and stiffened. He kissed her throat, her chin, her forehead. He gently flexed his hips to let her take just what she could handle, until she moaned and rocked harder against his body. He was trembling like a leaf as he slid a little deeper. She gasped. She felt so damn good cradling his hot flesh. Like heaven. Like she was created just for him. He hesitated and rasped against her ear, "Am I hurting you?"

"God, no..." Her voice was a whimper of need that sent his blood tearing through him.

He inhaled deeply and said in a hoarse whisper against her temple, "I hope you're ready for me, because I can't hold off much longer..." He plunged his cock into her to

his root as both of them arched and bit back muffled cries of pleasure. He held her tightly against his hips, gasping for breath as he reveled in the feel of her greedy pussy clutching his body inside hers. When she whimpered and tried to drag him tighter to her, he lifted her slightly and then stroked deep into her with a hunger he could no longer control. She pressed her mouth into the curve of his sweat-slicked shoulder and muffled her cries of pleasure against his skin. He shuddered in ecstasy as she bit him. Damn! She was a little wildcat!

She could barely breathe as he drove his shaft hard and deep into her. The pleasure of being totally filled nearly overwhelmed her. She had hungered for this for too damn long. She moved instinctively with each heated thrust of his body into hers, finally understanding the very delicious concept of riding a man into the ground.

She wanted to feel him touch her soul as she met his driving hips with deep gasps of primal pleasure. He ran his tongue over her shoulder and throat as he stroked into her again and again, his entire body as taut as a bowstring, ready to unfurl and release. She heard his rough breathing and thrilled to the knowledge that she was the reason for his lustful need – this unstoppable passion that ignited her own.

She gave in to the crazy need to bite into that succulent, copper skin beneath her gasping mouth and instantly felt a change in the angle and depth of his powerful thrusts. She realized with a rising wildness she was about to receive the most incredible orgasm of her life, so she gave herself up to it with a muffled cry against his long black hair and as her pussy clenched like a fist around his cock, she felt him stiffen and shudder and knew he was coming with her.

Never in her life had she ever experienced this shattering, pulse-pounding need to consume a man. To wrap herself around him and milk every shuddering drop he had to give. To devour him with mouth, arms and pussy until he was an integral part of her own self. It was a scary feeling. An euphoric feeling. A desperate, needy feeling. And as

he emptied into her, his powerful body trembling, she knew that no man would ever again make her feel this...desperately possessive.

Azrael felt her pulsing, clenching climax as her cunt clamped tightly around him and he couldn't stop his own. He came hard, feeling his cock emptying in wild spurts for several incredibly satisfying seconds as he continued to thrust like a wild man until he turned from the wall and sank down onto the mattress, cradling her in his arms as he lay back on the rumpled covers of her small bed.

He had known from the moment he had seen her that she had been made for him. He had known she would be breathtaking in his bed. But he would never have believed she would somehow complete his soul as they lay entangled, his body still buried in hers. Her legs tangled about his and their mouths joined once more in a deep draught of sated delight, tongues dancing and stroking as if they could not get enough of each other. Deep in his heart he heard the voice telling him he had at last found the one he had been seeking. The one who had come to him in his vision so many years ago.

Winyan itkonyahan.

He closed his eyes tight and swallowed his elation.

Was she?

~

As a rebellious teen, he never truly believed in "medicine dreams" or the "old ways" his grandfather had clung to. It was what had kept his pathetically backward people from becoming modern and enlightened. People simply had to face their problems and work them out. There were no "ancestral spirits" to pray to. He had firmly believed that you were on your own from birth to death. He was too damn modern for that "old ways" shit. And that philosophy had followed him into his later life.

So when Earl Smith built the sweat lodge out in his pasture and told him he needed to cleanse his spirit and bring the lost part back into his body, he was extremely skeptical but decided to do it just to keep the old man happy.

Even though the lodge had not been created for the formal *Inipi* of the People, he knew Earl had studied the Cheyenne and Lakota practices over his many years and even participated in several Sundance ceremonies and sweat lodges when he was younger. The old man had been insistent. He warned Az that part of his spirit was missing and unless he found it, his life would not be a fulfilling one. The *Oinikiga*, or spiritual cleansing, would clear the way to insight.

And so he humored the old man and followed Earl's lead, entering the specially constructed hut wearing nothing but a pair of cotton sweatpants cut off at mid-thigh. He listened to the man's prayers, offered first in Earl's own Shoshone dialect and then again in Lakota. He had to admit, the old medicine man was well versed in many tribal languages.

Words that were almost forgotten bubbled up from his childhood memories of listening to his grandfather speaking the language of the People in song and prayer and he began to pray hesitantly, his body and mind floating in the intense heat of the lodge. The nearly claustrophobic feel of total darkness alleviated only by the cracked flap at the door settled back in and his heart pounded in his chest as rational thought gave way to an almost panicked need to leap up and race out.

When the hide door lifted for the first time, he was almost desperate for the cooler air to touch his slick, reddened skin. But when the flap closed again, the fear and panic seemed to float away from him. Something light and calming began to fill his mind and it felt as if he had suddenly lifted from his own body to float in the heat and heaviness of the air above him.

The sound of Earl's men outside as they sang and drummed filled his thoughts and then he was flying. Looking out across a place where he had never been, he heard the eagle before he saw her. Unable to mentally grasp the fearless elation that filled him, he

simply rode the feeling. The eagle was far below him, her brown and tan wings spread wide as she caught an updraft and soared closer.

As the great bird slowly came abreast of him, he heard a voice calling...a small, frightened voice. The voice was tormented. Begging for help. And as the golden eye of the bird met his, he was suddenly standing in a dark place, illuminated only by light coming between jagged rocks behind him and he heard the crying. Sobs of pain and fear.

What he saw almost stopped his pounding heart. A weeping, frightened child was trapped at the very narrow inner edge of the cavern he stood in, and as he approached, huge agonized eyes lifted to his face and he spoke to her in Lakota, trying to ease her fears. He could see she was terrified but not physically injured. Inside his heart he knew that rescue was on its way and he wanted her to know she was not going to die here, or now. That she would survive. He closed his eyes and prayed as she stared at him and in his heart's eye he saw her in her future—standing firm and strong against the wind as fire whipped about her face and head—*Winyan itkonyahan*. And he swore to her that she would never be alone.

He was swept from the cavern to awaken from his dream within the confines of the now open sweat lodge, Earl's dripping face watching him closely as the old medicine man waved a burning branch of tied sage across his trembling body. He sat up shakily and ran trembling hands through his sopping hair and the old man said with a satisfied nod, "Your spirit is complete."

After he showered and drank about two quarts of water, the entire thing seemed like some oddly disjointed hallucination.

~

He had never mentioned his experience to a living soul. But when he left Nevada to return home to North Dakota, something inside him had felt...different.

And now he was more confused and elated than he had ever been in his entire life.

He gathered her closer into his trembling body and they drifted between ecstasy and completion, lost in each other's embrace and the feel of each other's pounding hearts.

He wasn't sure if they'd lain like that for just minutes, or many hours. She kissed his neck and shoulder as he caressed her body with slow, appreciative fingertips and he felt each little shudder of enjoyment that passed through her. They remained silent and only the sound of their ragged breathing and wildly beating hearts belied their stillness.

When she lifted away slightly, he caught her swollen nipple into his mouth and she gasped and moaned softly, clutching his head to her. "Yes...please."

"Hush, little one. I know," he whispered against her breast, and without another moment's hesitation, he rolled her onto her back and began to thrust with a slow, deep rhythm that made her arch and gasp as he gave her what they both so desperately craved. He buried himself in her incredible body, feeling the rapid staccato beat of her pulse against his lips as he drove himself deep again and again.

How many bodies had he caressed with empty mind and heart, seeking the one who would one day fulfill his deepest needs? And there had been many, much to his shame. Bodies that had given him pleasure without fulfillment. He had wasted seven lost years of his life looking for someone to complete him. And when he had walked away from that life, he had sworn he would never again seek his salvation in a woman's arms. Even his life-altering "hallucination" hadn't changed his mind...until now.

The sound of her little whimpers and moans were a salve to his bruised and battered soul. The knowledge that she wanted him so desperately lifted him to new heights of sexual stamina and he could swear he heard the drums and voices of his ancestors rising in his spirit as he threw back his head with a hiss of pleasure and joined her as she clenched about him in the throes of another mind-blowing orgasm.

If he believed in love, he might too easily imagine himself in love with this woman.

Cheyenne lay in the curve of Azrael's long body, both of them breathing slowly and deeply as they returned to earth from their mutual ecstasy. She relished the feel of his heart beating beneath her cheek as he lay on his side in her small bed, his arms wrapped about her possessively while she cuddled into his sweat-slick chest. She had never once, in her entire life, felt so completely wanted—so desired. She didn't want to think about the morning. She had experienced once too often the feeling when a man's eyes would seem distant and his smile would be aloof and cool once again.

She needed this closeness. This feeling of being needed and wanted by a man so beautiful—so strong—so amazing—was a welcome change from being a competent, educated woman who stood strong on her own without needing anyone. She had found her dream man. But she knew she couldn't keep him. She had simply borrowed him—sort of like a coveted library book—and she would have to store up enough precious memories of this night to last her a lifetime.

She turned her face and gently pressed her lips and tongue to his damp skin and felt the little shudder of awareness her caress caused.

"You need something?" he rumbled deep in his chest, shifting to let her feel that he was still perfectly capable of going another round. She heard the soft tearing of another condom packet and she shivered in anticipation.

She smiled and her cheeks burned at her own audacity, but she lifted her face and said a trifle breathlessly, "You."

His deep intake of breath and soft laugh made her blush even more hotly. "I thought I was the only one who wanted one more," he growled softly and kissed her slowly, holding her lips captive as he slowly rolled her onto her side facing away from him and drew her back against his aroused cock. He released her mouth and pressed his lips to the back of her shoulder as he lifted her right leg with his own to open her to him. With a shuddering groan of enjoyment, he slid slowly into her slick, welcoming channel from behind. OMG. The angle was mind-boggling. He was hitting her G-spot

with every deep, slow thrust and she wasn't sure if she could hold off for very long with the delicious fullness of him stretching every part of her.

She arched and gasped as he filled her completely, his strong hands cupping her breasts as he flexed his hips and drove himself into her again and again. She arched back against his chest, wanting—needing—and then his hands left her breasts and slid down her belly to tangle deliciously in her red-gold curls, seeking her throbbing clit and teasing her to an instant climax as she bit her lip to keep quiet.

“That’s right—take it all—enjoy it...” His lips caressed her shoulder as he whispered huskily against her flushed skin, urging her to orgasm yet again. He was magnificent—amazing—and knew exactly how to give a woman enough pleasure to last her the rest of her life.

Azrael smiled against her shoulder. She was adorable—incredible—insatiable! And she was his. Who knew how long she would be his. At the moment, he felt as if she had become a part of him, despite his reluctance to believe love actually existed. He would happily take whatever she gave him, as long as he could keep her.

He only hoped he could do her justice.

He was amazed he could give her this much pleasure. Goes to show what good, clean living did for a man’s stamina. He felt her body writhe so deliciously in his arms as he gave her yet another orgasm and he knew he was going to come hard again. So fucking hard—he bit back a whoop of pure elation as he released once more and drove his spurting cock as deep as he could to give her as much throbbing pleasure as possible.

He enclosed her in his arms, kissing the sweat-beaded skin of her neck. Heard her mumbled words telling him how marvelous he had just made her feel. Felt her body go slowly limp as she fell into a deep, untroubled sleep. And he lay holding her, his mind and body slipping into a place where only the two of them existed... Without the lines of color and birth drawn in the shimmering sand of reality. Without the knowledge that

he had stepped firmly over that line and had broken every promise he had made to himself so long ago.

He knew he was meant to be here. With her. But in the back of his mind, he fought the idea that he was betraying his people. Hadn't he been the one to shout out upon his return that the res should be kept for Indians? Now he was backing away from his own words.

Clearing out the clutter of prejudice was not an easy thing, no matter how much he wanted to.

* * * * *

The faint sound of Maude's alarm going off roused her from her utterly sated, completely refreshing sleep and she smiled as she felt his body shift to a more comfortable position behind her. She didn't want to get up but she had promised she would get Maude breakfast and she always kept her promises. She gently disengaged his heavy arm that was draped over her body and slipped silently from the bed, leaving her light off as she quickly dragged on her bathrobe and grabbed jeans and a t-shirt. She slipped out and down the stairs to use the bathroom off the downstairs hallway, not wanting to keep Maude from her morning shower.

By the time Maude stepped into the kitchen, there was a fresh pot of coffee and a stack of hotcakes with scrambled eggs and bacon waiting for her and the woman's face was a joy to behold as she looked from the plate to Cheyenne's face.

"Bless you, honey! I think I've died and gone to heaven."

As Maude sank onto the chair to eat, Chy moved to the sink to wash up the bowls she had used to mix the batter and whip up the eggs. Maude's voice came from behind her as she dried the bowls. "I knew your dad long ago."

Cheyenne turned and crossed to the table with a cup of coffee in her hand. "Really?"

"Franklin Red Wolf was a wonderful man. He helped our people get through some pretty tough days. He held the line for our people against several government attempts to gobble up some prime real estate that a couple of developers wanted for a fancy high priced hunting resort. The bastards tried to get the government to declare the land part of a new 'National Park'. Tried to get it ceded from tribal lands." She sighed and took another bite, chewing happily for a while before going on.

"He sure was something back then. Even the Anglos had a lot of respect for him when he got on a roll." She took another bite and made a sound of enjoyment. She ate happily for a couple of minutes, then continued.

"You should have seen him when he was a young buck like Az. Ooo Eeee! All the women wanted him. He was so hot. But then he got blown apart in 'Nam and he sort of drew into a shell. Wouldn't bother with anyone. Pushed away the women who were interested. Used his GI Bill money to get himself a nice little place up north. Last I heard, he had finally found himself a woman and settled down." Her smile curved gently. "He always wanted kids. Loved 'em. 'Nam left him wounded in a lot more ways than one."

Cheyenne swallowed hard. "I never knew that about him. He didn't talk about his life much. So, I guess he married mom because she had a kid."

Maude took another bite and shook her head slowly. "Franklin Red Wolf married your mom because he was crazy in love. You were just a big bonus. And you do him proud, Cheyenne. You are a good daughter. You learned well."

* * * * *

She glanced at her watch. It was just past 6:45. She reined in the pinto and looped the halter rope over her satiny, sweat-damp neck as she leaned over and slid onto the wide back of the bay gelding. The horse snorted his eagerness for a run and she laughed, patting his glossy neck. Giving a soft click of her tongue to the others, she led him into a fast-moving canter and the others in the loosely tied string followed suit,

moving willingly along on both sides of her mount, like multicolored wings on a dark Pegasus.

Frank had taught her how to run a string when she was just eight. He'd had twenty horses that needed exercise every other day, and they only got hard exercise during roundup and occasionally when Frank led out a camping tour of city "cowpokes" wanting a fishing guide. So she had learned how to string half a dozen horses together and ride first one, then the next, while they all got a good round of work to get the kinks out. She'd even tried Roman riding once but that had resulted in a broken collarbone and Frank had nixed that.

As she approached the corrals again, she saw a tall figure standing beside the gate and her stomach did a couple of little flip-flops as she slowed the horses to a jog and finally to a walk as Azrael unlatched the swinging gate and let her bring them back in. She slid to the ground in the corral, ignoring the twinges in her body that had come more from the hard riding the night before than from the hard riding this morning. She untied the halter ropes of each horse from the knotted line she'd fashioned and slid their halters off. There wasn't time to groom them all before she had to get to the school. That could wait until this afternoon.

"Did you get any breakfast? I left some for you," she called over her shoulder as she put the rope halters into the tack box under the lean-to and flexed her back. She was afraid to turn and look him in the eye. Afraid of what she might see. Knowing that ardor cooled in the bright morning light.

Azrael awakened to the light of dawn filtering in through the curtains and instantly realized he had not only slept in but he was dismally alone in the narrow bed. He closed his eyes and dragged her pillow to his face, inhaling her scent with a groan. He must have been dead to the world, not feeling a thing when she'd left her bed. He hadn't slept much last night. His body ached pleasantly in those muscles he rarely used

anymore. The ones that had been so well-used during his spree on the coast way back when.

With a grimace, he stretched and felt the bones in his spine crack back into place. He hated the thought of getting older. Less capable. Less flexible. But damn, he had been flexible as hell last night. And he was paying for it now. He needed to work those damn muscles more.

He rolled over and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. He could smell bacon and coffee, so he dragged on his discarded jeans and padded down the hall to use the john. He then went downstairs only to find the kitchen empty, the dishes washed and a note on the table telling him his breakfast was on the counter and would just need a minute in the microwave.

Shaking his head, he ate the plate of breakfast she'd left for him, wondering where she was. He was rinsing his dish in the sink when he lifted his eyes to see a line of horses—his—coming down the slope beyond the hay barn and he couldn't help the hot feeling deep in his gut as she rode—the wind blowing her halo of hair around her head and face like a flame. He stared, mesmerized for a moment, before he moved quickly to drag his boots and shirt on. He swore at the aches in his back and arms and then headed out to greet her.

As she rode down the slope and slowed the string of all six of his horses, he had wanted so fucking badly to reach up and pull her off and bury his lips in her fragrant copper curls but he'd refrained, simply opening the gate to let her take the horses inside. When she was finished putting the halters and the long sisal lead rope back into the tack box and stood brushing her hair back from her flushed face, he didn't bother to hold himself back. He reached out an arm and snaked her close and ignored her squeak of protest as he took her succulent mouth and tasted what he craved to his soul.

Cheyenne had expected a totally different greeting than this heart-stopping, seductive kiss. She had let him sleep because she had been afraid of what she might see

in those dark eyes in the morning light. Men could feel all hot and romantic in the night but it seldom lasted past the wonderful moment when they had gotten what they wanted and then the interest waned. She hadn't wanted to see that evasive, slightly embarrassed look that came over their faces when they realized the woman might think what they'd said and done in the night would be expected to continue in the cold glare of daylight.

She'd had that experience once and that had been one experience she never wanted to repeat. So she had given him space and had been determined to act as if nothing unusual had happened between them, letting him off the hook without making him uncomfortable. She had certainly not expected to be swept into his arms and kissed silly.

Her initial shock was overcome by her natural enjoyment and she surrendered her weight to his arms and let him plunder her lips and tongue to his heart's content. Who knew when she might wear out her welcome? If he still wanted more of her, she wasn't going to miss out. She couldn't stop her hands from moving over his utterly mouth-watering chest, dragging her fingertips over the flat masculine nipples she could feel under the light cotton shirt. He shivered in response and he lifted his mouth to growl, "Careful what you ask for. I'm in a willing mood this morning."

"Sorry! I have a nipple fetish. And yours are so hot." She laughed as he growled and kissed her again, unable to stop his own laugh from filling her mouth.

"I need a shower—work—remember?" Her voice was breathless when he at last lifted his head and moved his lips to her throat.

"I can scrub your back," he murmured against her throat as his teeth gently nibbled.

"Sounds like a deal." She sighed as her body shuddered with pleasant reaction to his hands cupping her breasts through her tank top.

"You could call in sick today," he growled against her mouth as he caught her lips again.

“After just two days on the job? My boss might object...” She laughed as he ran his tongue over the outline of her lips.

“I can put in a good word for you—I know him personally.”

“Why so eager? We have all night tonight.”

“I want to hear you scream out when you come. And it’s damn hard to feel free to make love on the sofa—and the table—and the floor—when there’s an audience.”

His words set off all sorts of shivers and naughty feelings and she looked up into those black eyes and heard herself say breathlessly, “You definitely have a good point there.”

“Come let me show you my other good point.” His voice was a rasp in his throat as he swung her off her feet and drove his tongue into her mouth.

Chapter Nine

He had wasted no time in removing their clothes and pulling her into the frosted glass shower stall in the upstairs bathroom. As they kissed deeply and sweetly, he took the soap from the holder and began to run it over her body slowly and sensuously as she closed her eyes and spread her thighs for his hands to stroke the soap seductively between her legs. He left her lips to kiss down the side of her neck, then to run his mouth over her water-slick, soapy breasts. Oh God, but that felt delicious. Her head lolled back as he sucked each nipple deep into his mouth.

He laughed as he rinsed the lather from his mouth under the spray and turned her so that he could smooth the soap over her back and ass. He ran his palms over every inch of her skin and then turned her under the spray so the lather rinsed off. She was nearly wild from his hands when he shocked her by bending to suck her nipple hard into his mouth once again as his hand cupped her mound. She arched and clutched his head and gasped as he laughed softly and dropped to his knees in the shower, looking up into her eyes.

“What are you—oh! *Oh my God!*” Her eyes closed as she threw her head back at the feel of him using his thumbs to open her folds. He gave a little growl of wicked intent and took her with his mouth while she gave a wailing cry of wild pleasure. Her legs nearly gave out. He lifted one leg over his shoulder then the other and he pulled her to his wicked mouth and ravished her like a starving man. His hot tongue swirled and dipped, sucking gently, then dipping hard and hot into her. She threw her arms out against the wet tiles to keep from slipping sideways.

She had often wondered what this would feel like—and now she knew! Wild, orgasmic, incredible, erotic and as she convulsed into a completely mind-blowing

climax, he laughed softly and drove his tongue into her, intensifying the orgasm to a near-death experience.

She gasped and begged him to stop. The unrelenting waves of nearly painful pleasure racked her body until she thought she would die of it. And when he withdrew his tongue, and gently suckled her throbbing clitoris for a moment before setting her back on her feet and sliding up her body to catch her nipple and suck it deep.

“My god, Azrael—I never—I mean—you...”

He laughed softly against her breast and then moved his mouth to her lips again, letting her taste herself on his tongue. She almost lost her ability to stand.

He reached to shut off the water then wrapped her in a huge towel, drying her skin with loving strokes of the fluffy terrycloth. She stood there like she'd just been hit by a mortar shell, her eyes glazed and wide on his face as he kissed her belly and her breasts and her shoulder, his mouth following the towel on its journey over her body.

He knew he had given his woman deep, delicious pleasure. If there was anything he knew how to do well, it was that. And before she had burst into his dead, cold existence, the wildly wanton sexual release he had just given this woman would have made him curl his lip and feel soiled. But with Cheyenne Red Wolf, he felt completed. Powerful. And he knew that there would be no other woman in his bed for the rest of his existence if he could not make her believe she belonged to him, body and soul.

But would this modern woman believe he had seen her coming into his life in a dream? He doubted that.

Azrael zipped his jeans and reached for his shirt, his body and mind pleasantly satisfied that he had made his woman happy. She was standing there watching him, the soft terry cloth pulled tightly about her body after her shower, and he smiled into her eyes. His mind suddenly somehow became disconnected from his body, making movement virtually impossible. He drew a shuddering breath at the look in those amazing blue eyes and he swallowed hard to try to remove the constriction he felt in his

throat. He wondered what she was thinking as she chewed the corner of her lower lip and seemed to be calling out to him without a word passing her lips.

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

He was quietly pulling his jeans over those long, muscular legs as if he hadn't just rocked her world to its foundation. As if he hadn't just ruined her for any other man. As if he hadn't done anything out of the ordinary. He shoved his long, wet hair back from his face with an incredibly sexy flexing of every muscle in his succulent torso and reached for his shirt as if what he had done to her was nothing special.

But Chy knew it had been something very special. She would never be able to think of sex again in the same way. Not just as a joining of two bodies in heated rhythm and enjoyable friction. Not just a short, pleasurable interaction that resulted in mutual climactic accord.

In fact, she was going to be lucky if she didn't experience an orgasm every time she thought of him or heard his voice. And she wanted to reciprocate. To give him so much mind-blowing pleasure that he would never know what the hell had hit him. But she had so damn little experience—certainly not nearly as much as it seemed he'd had. What could she possibly offer him in return for that life-altering moment? She only knew she didn't want him to pull that shirt over his beautiful body. She wanted those damn scratchy jeans off those wonderful long legs. She wanted all that incredible dark hair to brush her breasts as he made love to her again.

She needed to touch him. To explore him. Every deep, ridged valley between hard muscle. Every sweeping, hard mountain of flesh. She needed it as badly as she needed air.

"Can I please touch you?" She flushed at the needy sound in her own voice. Lord. What was he going to think of her after last night and this morning? He must think her some mindless nympho. But she desperately wanted to do for him what he had just done for her.

"Feel free," he murmured as her fingertips gently touched his skin and trailed so deliciously over his collarbone, dragging slowly and maddeningly over his pecs to his nipples, then lower to his abs, to trace a gentle circle around his navel. He closed his eyes and reveled in that featherlight touch. He wanted to reach for her. He wanted to devour her once again. But he couldn't, for the fucking life of him, manage to move.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the small, gentle fingers that traced the fine line of hair down his belly to the front of his suddenly bulging jeans and released the snap, then slowly dragged the zipper down to free him. His jeans dropped like lead around his ankles.

He heard her sharp, needy little gasp for air but he remained completely still, waiting breathlessly. Her fingertips gently touched the silken skin of his cock, tracing slowly over the swollen crown, pausing as she felt the drop of moisture he couldn't prevent from emerging. He held himself in tight check as she so innocently explored his package and then he exhaled in a whoosh as she looked up into his face, her eyes a scintillating azure that left him speechless.

"Would you mind very much if I just wanted to touch you for a while longer?"

He couldn't use his voice, so he simply gave a weak shake of his head. She bit that damn lower lip again and ran her hands around his ribs, to let them wander over the ridges of muscle and bone. He shivered but maintained his calm, only with massive willpower. He felt her hands move over his hips and then rove over his ass, only to move slowly back to the small of his back and toy with the dip of his spine.

She had moved behind him and he clenched his teeth and managed not to collapse as her hands slid slowly down the back of his thighs, then around to the front as she appeared once again on his other side. Her expression was almost like that of a woman who had never seen a man's body before.

He certainly wasn't going to stop her if she wanted to look and touch. He felt an overwhelming wave of protectiveness open up in his body and soul, and he had to force his hands to remain at his sides.

She blushed adorably, and whispered again. "If I—I mean—If I wanted to..."

He saved her the trouble of finding the words. "Cheyenne, you can do anything you want to me. I won't be embarrassed as long as you feel comfortable doing it." He wondered exactly what it was she was so shyly tiptoeing around.

He didn't have long to wait for his answer.

Her hand gently cupped his sac and he inhaled to stay calm as her other hand circled his cock and stroked it gently from tip to root. But when she sank to her knees on the carpet before him, right in the middle of her bedroom floor and slowly nibbled the crown and then licked it, he damn near lost control of his legs. The whimper that emerged from his throat brought her eyes up quickly.

"I'm sorry—should I stop?" She looked adorably worried, as if she'd done some damage with her sweet little pink tongue.

He shook his head jerkily as he widened his stance to get a better center of balance and he rasped hoarsely, "Christ, no!"

She blinked up at him and then, to his utter amazement and delight, she kissed the crown then opened her lips and slowly took him into her hot, sweet mouth, working her tongue over the shaft as she sucked gently, her hand still firmly stroking his length.

He threaded his shaking fingers into her bright copper hair and hissed through his teeth, fighting the instant need to come, wanting to enjoy this—needing her gentle sucking and caresses like a drowning man needs air. He stared down at her hair bobbing so beautifully against his belly as she tightened her fist on him and began to stroke more firmly. He felt her other hand gently squeeze his tightening sac and he hissed brokenly, "That feels so fucking good..."

His profanity did nothing to hinder her as she took him deeper into her mouth and moaned as she sucked. His fingers clenched tightly in her hair and he gasped and

shuddered, his legs trembling. “Oh, baby—you are—*oh, god...*” his voice was a rasp in his throat. Her sweet, hot mouth continued to devour him as he gasped hoarsely, “Stop—back off—I’m coming...”

He knew she heard him, but she chose not to obey, and as he gave a cry of deep pleasure and a massive shudder, he drove himself against her mouth and came with trembling ferocity. She kept stroking hard, unfazed by the amount of semen he was releasing with such abandon into her mouth. He had warned her but she wasn’t experienced with this, and he was worried that it would upset her. She didn’t back off, even as hot cream filled her mouth. She sucked and licked the crown and he stood on trembling legs staring down at her as she wiped her mouth slowly with the back of her wrist and smiled shyly up into his face.

Azrael thought he was going to fall over. His legs felt weaker than a baby’s when taking those first few steps. He couldn’t believe she’d just done that for him. He realized numbly that he should be cleaning up his own mess but he couldn’t manage to move his body. He stared in silence as she slipped her robe off and used it to wipe her sticky, stunning face. He felt her soft breasts brush his thighs as she kissed his hipbone, then his belly, then his semisolid cock, before she rose and kissed his mouth with his own flavor still on her tongue. He enclosed her in his arms and met her tongue stroke for delicious stroke, until his body had subsided to match his limp shaft. And then he lifted his mouth from hers and growled huskily, “Did I say thank you?”

Chapter Ten

Friday marked the end of her second week at the little school and she was damn near walking on air, doing the one thing she loved most and being the center of attention of the hottest, most amazing man on the face of the planet. As she smiled at Mr. Wyatt and carried her lunch tray out of the cafeteria to head back to her classroom, she hesitated as she heard the muted conversation coming from the teachers' lounge.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" the soft tones of Miriam Walking Fawn chuckled.

"She's living out there! It's plain as the nose on your face something's going on..." Joyce Whitlock giggled and then someone else chuckled and the conversation was no longer audible as the other teachers began to clear away their lunch trays. Chy backed rapidly away and hurried back to her classroom, her face hot.

She sighed as she rubbed her temples and steadied her nerves. The one thing she had not really given much thought to was the usual small-town gossip mill. And it was all because of her stupid inability to keep her boss at arm's length.

The very last thing either of them needed was gossip. She glanced at her watch and realized lunch wasn't quite so appetizing at the moment. She put the untouched tray on the floor behind the flag and prepared for her next class.

* * * * *

Still feeling the negative effects of the conversation she had overheard at lunch, Cheyenne did her best to smile encouragingly at the fourteen-year-old boy who stood before the blackboard showing a picture of his grandfather's peace pipe to the class.

As Nate explained to the class that his grandfather's peace pipe was made of the sacred black pipestone his great grandfather had brought back from his spirit walk, a muffled laugh from the back of the class made her glance back to see three young men

who seemed more engrossed in a book they were all ogling than in the presentation at the front of the class. Nate glanced at her, nervous about continuing and she winked at him and put a fingertip to her lips as others followed her gaze.

The rest of the class covered their giggles and tried to remain silent as she walked softly back to the single desk where the three boys were clustering around what appeared to be a text book, but was, most likely, in her estimation, the centerfold of a men's magazine being ogled to the exclusion of all else.

They didn't know she was standing there until one boy looked up and inhaled sharply. The two leaped back to their seats, their faces bright red and the owner of the item snapped the book shut with a gasp of fear. Chy held out her hand for the now-closed book and he turned beet red as he held it slowly out for her to lift from his hand.

Instead of opening it and ridiculing the boys for doing what comes naturally to all fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, she smiled at them and said softly, "Now you owe an apology to the class, and to Nate. And I would like to see all three of you at my desk after class has been excused."

The boys stammered apologies and she turned back to nod at Nate to continue. At the end of the hour, when she dismissed the class, the boys remained seated until she called them over to her desk. The book lay on her blotter, closed, and all three boys stared at it, their throats working as they tried to remain calm.

"Jimmy, is this your book?" she asked softly.

The boy chewed his bottom lip and nodded jerkily. "Yes, Miss Red Wolf."

Her eyes slipped from his face to the other two and she asked innocently, "Would you mind if I read what was so entertaining that you couldn't pay attention in class?"

Jimmy shook his head rapidly and looked like he might turn blue.

She wondered why he would be so terrified that she would see he was reading a girlie magazine. They were fairly common and showed very little. But the looks on their faces told her the picture was no ordinary men's mag. She lifted her eyes to Jimmy's face and asked, "Is it so bad you wouldn't want me to look at it?"

"Yes ma'am." His voice was a croak.

"Yet you brought it to school where other boys and girls could see it when you showed it?"

Jimmy's face turned bright crimson.

"Is it a magazine picture?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Is it a drawing?" Her eyes held his. He looked like he was about to burst.

"Yes."

"Of what?"

Poor Billy was about to melt into the floor when the classroom door opened and Mrs. Hatfield, the bus driver, glanced in, her brows lifted. "The bus is leaving. These three have to be on it."

Chy inhaled thankfully and said calmly, "I will take a look. Then I can decide what to do with the three of you."

After she excused the three and they flew out the door like the devil himself was on their tails, she closed the door and slowly opened the book and just stared. She closed the book, trembling with indignation at what had been drawn on a sheet of college-ruled paper and her cheeks grew hot.

Tears of humiliation slid down her cheeks slowly and she sank back into her chair.

"*Naked?* He drew me naked! With humongous..." She bit her lower lip and barely stopped her anger.

After several minutes of fuming and trembling with fury, she drew a deep breath and slipped the paper from the book, staring at it with fresh eyes. She gave a shuddery sigh and chewed her bottom lip. Was this an isolated incident? Or was it an indication of how her students saw their new teacher? Gossip had a bad way of trickling downhill to ears that shouldn't hear. Were parents openly talking about the new *wasicu* teacher and their handsome, virile movie hero? Had small-town speculation begun to color the

way her students viewed her? She closed her eyes and realized she had opened herself up to that kind of gossip by accepting Maude's hospitality.

There was only one thing possible to remedy the situation and she had to do it fast. She had to find a place to stay out from under her boss's roof. She had no other choice. She tore the drawing into dozens of small, unreadable pieces and then swept the bits into the trash.

It had been amazing while it had lasted. But now she had to use her brain instead of her libido. This was wonderful but it was going nowhere.

Her instant attraction to Azrael had begun to turn into something much deeper on her part, but his enjoyment of her in bed didn't mean he felt the same deep, scary connection. She had gone to bed with him the day after she met him, for Pete's sake! What was most likely a hot fling for him was something totally different to her and she had no illusions about him falling crazily in love with her in just twenty-four hours. Crazily in lust, maybe. But love? No. She had waited for him for fifteen years. But that didn't guarantee a happily-ever-after for her. Just a happy-for-now. And sweet Lord, did he ever make her feel the happy-for-now. Unfortunately, falling into his bed like an eager groupie was not going to make him suddenly fall madly in love with her. He was simply scratching an itch. And no matter how much she adored the way he scratched it, she was deluding herself here.

She sat in her chair for a while, tapping her pencil on the blotter numbly. When she finally rose to leave the school, she knew she had only one choice. She had to make her choice and move on it.

Mr. Wyatt was locking up as she left the building and as she passed him on the steps, she turned and asked in a conversational tone, "Do you know of anyone who has a cabin or an empty house they might be willing to rent or lease? I hate to keep imposing on Maude Thunder Horse's good graces. I hadn't really checked into the housing possibilities before taking the job here, I'm afraid." She smiled sweetly at the older man.

He glanced at her questioningly. "I'm sure it's no imposition. I've known Maude for twenty years. She told me you are great company for her."

Drawing a steadying breath, Chy smiled. "Oh, I adore being there, too, but I know having a temporary guest is much easier than having a boarder and she works a full-time job. She's been so kind but I prefer to be independent if possible."

He nodded and rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully. "Old Jake Emery has a hunting cabin a few miles up the road. He owns the motel, too, but it's boarded up right now. He's the only one I know of."

Chy smiled quickly. "Can I have his phone number?"

Chy stepped inside the front door nervously. How was she going to tell Maude that she had found other accommodations without hurting the woman's feelings? She hung up her sweater and nearly tripped over a heavy UPS carton that stood beside the entry way table. Rubbing her knee, she glanced at the label that proclaimed it was addressed to her. She set her bag and briefcase on the small telephone table and bent to lift it but it was bulky and very heavy. Maude stepped out of the kitchen again, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "It came about noon. It was too heavy to move without help."

Inside, carefully wrapped and beautifully illustrated NAS books greeted her wide eyes and she bit her lip. The invoice showed the box contained four dozen of the lovely, expensive books—but instead of the name on the invoice showing the sender as the Standing Rock Agency or the School District, it showed that the books were sent—by her boss. She frowned, realizing he had spent his own money to purchase the texts. Wasn't the Agency supposed to cover those costs?

How much of his own money was Azrael actually spending on the NAS classes? She hugged one of the books to her chest and swore that she would, somehow, make it up to him.

"Ooooh, what beautiful books!"

"Azrael paid for them..." Chy sighed. "Does he do that a lot?" Her eyes held Maude's for a moment before the older woman smiled and patted her hand.

"This program means a lot to him. Unfortunately, the school board doesn't believe in teaching these kids what they ought to be learning at home. That's ridiculous, but they are short on cash. He would pay for the whole damn school to insure that it stays alive and well, honey. And I agree with him. He's done it before. He'll do it again. This is his baby and he feels strongly that our kids desperately need this."

Maude squeezed her shoulder and left her to stare at the treasure trove of wonderful textbooks. Tears threatened to fall, but she dashed them away impatiently and sniffed. He never ceased to amaze her. He most definitely was becoming more and more her dream man. And she was getting in way over her head here—in a one-sided relationship that would take her nowhere but to more heartache.

Chy left the books by the door so they could be more easily loaded into her car in the morning and then she helped Maude finish up making supper. She managed to keep up a quiet, friendly stream of conversation despite her twisting insides and the sense of being in way over her head here. As Maude glanced at her watch and started to make fruit punch from frozen concentrate, Chy wiped her hands on her apron and said in a subdued tone, "Um...I need to talk to you, Maude. I don't want you to think I'm not truly grateful for your kindness and hospitality but I found a place earlier today, and I will be moving out tomorrow."

The can slid from Maude's fingers, splattering all over the kitchen cabinets and floor and Chy looked up into Maude's face. The dark eyes were full of dismay. Chy grabbed a damp tea towel and started to mop up the spill, her own face hot with mortification at having shocked her new friend.

"God, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. I just realize that I can't keep imposing on your kindness. You and your son have been so sweet to let me stay here while I was looking for my own place. I owe you so much as it is..." She was babbling.

She sensed that Maude was just standing there, staring at her as she fumbled to clean up the mess.

She rose from her haunches and rinsed the tea towel out, then bent to finish the job. When she rinsed the towel again and placed it carefully on the counter, she was afraid to look Maude in the eye. When she managed to meet Maude's dark gaze, she chewed her lower lip and silently begged the woman not to make a big deal out of this. Maude simply stared at her flushed face, a concerned frown turning her lips down at the corners.

Dragging in a long breath, she removed and hung up the apron and headed into the hallway and up the stairs, not wanting to have to further explain herself to the woman—and not wanting to be in the kitchen when Azrael arrived home. "I... Excuse me, please. I don't feel hungry."

She swore to herself as her empty stomach gave a snarl of frustration. Damn it all to hell. She would just have to deal with her hunger. And she would just have to deal with her own pain.

She pulled on her PJs and slid into the cozy bed, closing her eyes, praying she would be able to fall asleep before Az came home. She couldn't face him tonight. Not while she was trying so damn hard to maintain her calm decision.

She had been in his mother's home for such a short time but she knew she had no choice but to move out. She couldn't possibly allow this brief, sizzling love affair to jeopardize her reputation—or his. If it weren't for the fact that she was a teacher, it wouldn't bother her. She could easily handle the sideways glances and whispers of adults—of coworkers. But to have to endure the questioning eyes of children she was responsible for teaching? No way! The drawing today was only the tip of the iceberg. And she knew from harsh experience that when a teacher lost credibility with her students, it was time to move on.

She heard the T-bird's tires crunch in the gravel of the drive and she slid from her bed to quickly lock the door. She was back in bed by the time she heard the front door

open and she pulled the covers up over her head as she heard his voice, then Maude's. Boots came up the stairs and stopped outside her door. A light knock. His voice asking her to talk with him. She huddled in the covers and prayed he would just go back downstairs and let her feel sorry for herself.

Another knock. "Cheyenne...are you all right?"

She heard Maude's quiet voice telling him she had the right to privacy and for him to just leave her be for the night.

Bless you, Maude...

And then she let the tears fall.

Az stepped into the house and hung up his jacket, glancing around for Cheyenne. When Maude stepped out of the kitchen and told him that supper was on the table and that Cheyenne had gone up to bed, he headed straight up the stairs and strode down the hall to her door. He tried the knob. *Locked, dammit*. He knocked lightly. "Cheyenne? We need to talk."

When there was no response, he drew a deep breath and knocked harder. "Cheyenne...are you all right?"

He was about to knock again, when his mother's hand touched his arm and he jerked around to stare down into her frowning face.

"You can talk tomorrow. She has a right to her own privacy in this house, Azrael. If she doesn't want to talk to you, that is her right. Now go eat your supper and let her be."

He opened his mouth to say it was none of her business then thought better of it and clamped his jaw shut, turning away and heading back downstairs. As always, she was right. But it didn't make it any easier to accept.

He ate supper silently, his mind on the woman upstairs instead of the delicious homemade chili and cornbread. He helped his mother clear away and wash the dishes

then climbed the stairs to his own room, pausing in front of her door for a moment until he glanced to where his mother stood in front of the bathroom door, giving him a gimlet eye. He gave up and stepped into his own room and swore foully.

Chapter Eleven

She'd been up for a couple of hours, packing and taking her stuff out to the car and she was a trifle dusty. She scrubbed her hands and face with cold water and then slipped silently back down the stairs to the kitchen and started breakfast for Maude. She had everything on a plate when the woman stepped off the bottom stair and turned toward the smell of fresh coffee and bacon. Chy glanced at the hall clock. It was not five yet.

She knew from Maude's expression that she was going to have to answer some questions and she sank into the chair across from Maude's as the woman thanked her and started eating. She decided she should at least offer an explanation.

"Um...Maude..."

"Just say it, darlin'." Maude swallowed some coffee and took another bite of scrambled eggs.

Blushing, Chy licked her lips and spoke in a husky, quiet tone. "I wanted to thank you for having me here. You have been very kind, and I feel like a louse for having to tell you that I just can't accept your hospitality any longer."

Maude's dark eyes seemed to be reading her deepest thoughts and it brought a deeper blush to her cheeks. "Where will you be staying?"

Chy swallowed hard. "I spoke to Jake Emery and he has a little two-room cabin a few miles south..."

"If my son has given you any reason to want to leave, I will strip some hide off him..."

Holding up her hands quickly, she shook her head. "Um...no! He has been kindness itself after our first little misunderstanding."

Maude's brows shot up as she chewed. "You sure his damn big mouth hasn't made you cut and run?"

Licking her lips nervously, she managed to look the woman in the eye. "Um... I simply decided that I needed to find a place. It's not fair to you to have to feed an extra mouth. I've pushed my welcome as far as I dared without losing your friendship. I should have done this when I first arrived, instead of imposing on your kindness for so long."

Maude chewed slowly, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Are you sure this move has nothing to do with my son?"

Twisting her fingers into knots in her lap, Chy swallowed hard. "I'm very sure. He has been a complete gentleman..."

"It was no hardship for me to have you stay here, Cheyenne. I had actually begun to hope..." Maude's voice was slow and thoughtful. "I thought maybe you felt something for my son."

"I do!" she replied quickly. "I like him way more than is proper between an employee and employer. This could become a very big problem for him, if people thought he was sleeping with an employee..." She stopped herself with a groan and buried her face in her hands.

"And has he? Been sleeping with an employee?" Maude coached softly.

"No! Of course not!" she lied. "But, if it LOOKED like he was—and of course he isn't—he might get into hot water with the school board." OMG. She was making it worse and worse.

Maude's lips curved and she lifted the coffee cup to take another sip. "So. Do you need any help moving?"

Chy swallowed convulsively. "Um—no. I only have a few things. Mr. Emery said the place is furnished."

Maude sighed as she finished her coffee, then rose from her chair to carry her empty plate to the sink.

Chy rose and followed, taking the plate away and setting it on the counter next to the sink. "I really have enjoyed being here with you, Maude. I hope that I haven't upset you by seeming ungrateful."

Maude gave her a quick, hard hug and sighed, turning to reach for her purse. "I can't begin to tell you how much I enjoyed having you here. Don't be a stranger, you hear?"

Azrael stood at the top of the stairs, frozen. As Maude crossed the hall to the door, she glanced up at him and shot him a frown, then slowly closed the door behind her.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair and swallowed hard. She was going to leave. Shit! He shook his head and tried to focus on how best to convince her to stay. But she appeared in the hallway before he could get his thoughts arranged and she stared up at him like she'd been caught stealing candy at the dime store.

"You heard?" she asked tensely.

Her tone made him feel like a peeping tom or eavesdropper and he recoiled quickly. "Heard what?" he hedged. She was coming up the stairs, so he waited.

When she was within two stairs of the top, she stopped, eyeing him warily, as if she expected him to pounce. "Heard me telling Maude that I got another place to stay."

He inhaled slowly, taking in the scent of her skin—her hair—that clawed at him to sweep her off her feet and carry her to bed again. He controlled himself with difficulty, not wanting to make her angry. He shifted slightly from one foot to the other, moving enough to show her he wasn't about to grab her as she passed him.

"Why?" His voice sounded rough, even to him.

Her face grew pink and she started nibbling her lush lower lip again, inviting him to kiss her silly, yet he held himself carefully under control. "I didn't use my brain and

make sure I had a place lined up to stay for the school year. It was very kind of you and your mother to allow me to stay until I found a place.” She blushed warmly.

“Try again, Cheyenne. You are a terrible liar.”

She swallowed hard. “People are starting to talk. I can’t stay here. It would become an embarrassment to your mother. To you.”

“And so you think finding somewhere else to stay will change anything?” He was aching to reach out and touch her. He saw a wounded look cross her face and she licked her lips.

“I don’t know. But I can’t keep falling into your bed every time I look at you. It’s gotten pathetically obvious to—others—that we have become lovers. Damn it, Azrael, even my own mother made a comment about me staying here. I’ve never done anything this crazy before. I need to back off and give myself some space here.”

He reached out and touched her face, running his thumb over her mouth to cut off her tirade and she closed her eyes with a little gasp. He stepped closer and drew her away from the stairs, backing her up against the upstairs hallway wall. He didn’t press against her like he wanted to. He simply stared into her flushed face as her eyes opened and he whispered huskily, “I don’t want you to get a place. If my wanting you has spooked you, I’ll back the hell off. I’m a big boy. I can take no for an answer.” He clenched his fists against the wall. “There’s no need to run away.”

His body screamed for him to lean closer—to press his long length into her softness. His breath brushed her forehead and her heat soaked into his skin like a warm blanket but he stayed just far enough away to leave her room to feel secure.

She jerked her gaze to his face and she looked like a guppy that had jumped out of the fish tank, because her mouth was moving but no sound was coming out. His dark eyes slid to her mouth, then back to her wide eyes and she seemed to be thinking about it. His lips brushed her forehead and he inhaled the warm, delicious scent of her soft skin and sweet breath, watching her eyes drooping shut as she shivered.

“You cold?”

She shook her head. "Um—no. Could you—just step back and let me breathe?"

Her eyes opened and fastened onto his lips, staring at them. But instead of obeying and stepping back, he surrounded her with his trembling body as his lips slowly slid from her forehead to her chin and then to her parted, panting lips.

He caught her mouth and devoured it like a starving man finding sustenance. Her arms snaked up around the back of his neck to hold him to her as his hands moved to her butt and lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his hips. The feel of her pressed tight to his aching, swollen groin made him forget she didn't want to live under his roof. That she was trying to run away from her feelings.

Az wasn't about to let her move out. If he had to put a chain on her and keep her under lock and key, he would do it. He pressed her into the wall and rocked his hips into her crotch, wanting nothing more than to feel the slide of his hard cock into that delectable pussy again. When she wrapped herself around him, he carried her down the hall and into his own room, kicked the door shut and walked to the bed, unwilling to even set her on her feet for fear she would bolt again.

"Please—please!" she moaned as he sank backward onto the mattress and settled her on his lap facing him. Her hands were on his belt, then on his zipper. He dragged her t-shirt over her head and had her bra off before his zipper was all the way down. She moaned as his lips caught one diamond-hard nipple, sucking it deep into his mouth with a growl of pleasure. She lifted off him enough to reach into his jeans to tug his aching cock through his boxers and fly. He groaned as he unzipped her jeans and rolled her onto her side to drag them off before he pulled her astride his hips and watched her as she guided him home with a soft, gentle hand.

Her hands were planted on his shirt front over his nipples and as she sank down over him and closed her eyes with pleasure, he tore the snaps of his shirt open so he could feel her palms on his hot skin. It felt decadently kinky to have her riding him with his clothes on but he didn't want to stop long enough to strip. He needed to feel his cock fill her slick cunt with every surge of her hot body. He needed to feel her hands on

his body, her nails scraping teasingly over his aroused nipples. He needed to see her as she undulated and surged, her pussy rubbing hard and fast over his painfully stiff cock until he exploded inside her, and to see her as she came with him, her wild orgasm clenching and milking him. The thought was almost enough to make him lose control and come too soon.

His hands moved from her hips to her delightfully bouncing breasts as he rolled her tight nipples between his thumbs and fingers and met every downward plunge of her body with a hard upward thrust, meeting her halfway. Fighting to hold off and make it last, he watched her flushed face as she showed him her pleasure.

When he felt her cunt clamp tightly around him and saw her arch and cry out in her orgasm, he couldn't stop the instant release of his own ejaculation. He gave a shout and filled her with heavy, almost painfully pleasurable spurts that continued for several heady, breathtaking seconds, before she sank down on him and lay panting against his perspiration-slick shoulder, her warm breath tickling his skin.

Her inner walls still trembled, milking him of every drop. He slid his hands from her breasts to her back, caressing every inch of soft, round flesh from her shoulders to her plump ass cheeks, unable to believe his good luck in having found the other part of his spirit. She didn't know it yet, but she was his.

She would know.

Very soon.

* * * * *

Damn it! She'd done it again. The minute he'd touched her, she'd come unglued and begged him to fuck her. She had to put some distance between them or she would make a complete fool of herself. She stood under the hot shower and smacked the tiles with a balled fist, wincing at the self-induced pain.

Belatedly recalling her decision to stop this before she got in way over her head, she had refused to shower with him, insisting he go eat his breakfast while she cleaned up.

Her skin felt as if his lips and hands had left permanent imprints and she tried hard to scrub away the memory of what he had done to her – with her – in the last hour and a half. It was a losing battle. She was a total wuss.

Every stroke of the washcloth brought back the memory of his mouth—his fingertips—his tongue. By the time she crawled out of the shower she was a wad of horny jelly. Her legs shook as she dried off and dragged on her panties and bra and tugged her linen slacks over her damp skin to zip and snap them. As she was buttoning her silk blouse, the bathroom door opened slowly and he stood there, ready to get into the shower, his body naked and his cock at full attention.

“I’m done. Let me get out of here so you can take yours.” Her voice felt tight and she didn’t sound like herself.

She grabbed the wet towels and started to move past him into the hall but he moved just enough to force her to rub up against his body—against that rampant, amazing erection—to leave the room. The deep growl of enjoyment that issued from his throat set off every nerve in her body but she forced herself to step out into the hall and hurry down the stairs to the laundry room with her towels.

Her well-sated pussy had come back to eager life with a vengeance when he had pressed his hard cock against her as they had passed in the bathroom doorway. Dear Lord. The man was insatiable.

And so, apparently, was she.

She was in the entry hall, preparing to leave as he stepped out of the bathroom and stalked to the top of the stairs.

“You leaving so early?” he asked. “It’s only seven.”

“I have some papers to finish grading and I will be taking the books in. I can get one of the other teachers to help me get them out of the car. No need for both of us to show up in one car again.” She was doing her very best to avoid looking at him.

“You’re truly worried about gossip?”

At that, she turned her eyes up to meet his, avoiding staring at the rippling, delicious body on full display for her and she said shortly, "Ask me that again when one of the girls in my class draws YOU naked..." As his dark eyes widened in surprise, she grabbed her purse and went out the door, giving a little whimper of frustration as she hurried to climb behind the wheel of her car. Dear God. This was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

Chapter Twelve

After leaving the house, she called Jake Emery and met with him at his place to sign a lease and to get the keys from him. Chy was glad she had packed all of her clothes and personal books into her bags and had loaded them into her car, along with the heavy box of books. After school she planned to simply go straight to her new little home and clean it up and stay there from now on.

She asked Mr. Wyatt if he minded her taking the day off so that she could get set up and he agreed, looking at her curiously as she thanked him and packed up the work that needed grading into her briefcase. "You take care and have a good weekend." His voice was quiet. Another teacher would be taking over the NAS classes today.

Jake had agreed to take a mop, broom and cleaning supplies to the cabin so that she could make it habitable. He'd also promised to have the big propane tank out back refilled. But she still drove to the bigger mercantile store in Selfridge and purchased new linens, towels, a pillow and enough canned goods to last a couple of weeks. Jake had said the propane fridge, stove and water heater were in good shape, so she also bought fresh veggies and some fresh beef and trout. And just as an afterthought, she picked up a couple of oil lanterns and a gallon of lamp oil. No sense wasting expensive gas in the generator to keep her lights on all night.

By the time she had managed to get everything done and had found the almost invisible, overgrown track that was the road to the cabin, the afternoon light was waning and her biggest fear was getting herself lost. She did miss the turn a couple of times but thankfully managed to pull up in front of her rustic little home just before it got too damn dark to see her hand in front of her face.

Taking no chances on breaking her neck in the dark, she left the Toyota running with the headlights flooding the front porch while she unloaded the car and found the

generator under the porch. Once she had the small generator running, she switched on the lights and turned off the car.

By midnight, she was about to drop. The thick layer of dust and dirt that had coated the wooden floor was gone. The well pump had been primed and she was actually getting almost clear water through the ancient pipes. The fridge was scrubbed out so it didn't smell like stale beer and mold. And she had gotten the propane condenser on the little fridge started. It would take hours before it was cold enough to keep fish from going bad, so she had scoured the fifty years' worth of grime out of the big cast iron fry pan hanging on the wall and she had grilled the fish and eaten some raw carrots for supper.

She varmint-proofed the door and the battered window screens and flopped fully dressed onto the hastily-flipped old mattress with nothing but a newly opened blanket over it, seeking a few hours of desperately needed sleep.

And she lay there desperately missing the feel, smell and sound of the man she had fallen wildly, crazily, madly in love with in just two short weeks...

Az stared around the vacant, sterile-looking guest bedroom, feeling as if someone had kicked him in the gut. She had cut and run without a single word. He should have known. She was simply one more white woman who'd run roughshod over his libido. Had used him for a few easy fucks and had moved on. He inhaled deeply, trying to smell her essence, despite his anger at her for walking away as if he were nothing but yesterday's leftover hash. Pain ripped through his chest as he stared at the laundry hamper where the sheets from the stripped bed were rolled up. He felt like burning them.

She had packed everything up last night, obviously. He stepped over to the pine dresser and slid open one of the drawers. Empty. There was a lingering scent of lavender. He turned to the laundry hamper and lifted the pillowcase out and held it to his face, inhaling deeply and instantly growing hard as granite at the sweet scent of her

hair and skin. With a soft curse he wadded the damn piece of cotton into a ball and stalked back across the hall to his own room, ripping his own pillowcase off and replacing it with hers.

He sensed his mother in the doorway behind him and he straightened, tossing the pillow back onto the comforter. "Did you know she was not gonna be here tonight?" he demanded huskily.

"I had a feeling. But no, she didn't tell me anything except that she had found herself another place."

He turned and rested his hands on his hips, trying desperately not to tear things apart. His mother's face was quiet. Expressionless. But he could sense her need to say something she figured he wouldn't want to hear. He inhaled deeply and let the breath out slowly to remain calm. "Just say it..." he grated.

Maude had never wanted to smack her errant child upside the head so desperately in her entire life. Not even when he'd pulled a vanishing act so long ago and left her waiting for two years for any word that he was still alive. But she wanted to yell at him for driving that sweet creature away. Wanted to tear him a new asshole. She fought to remain calm as he waited for her to speak.

"What the hell did you do to that woman, Azrael Thunder Horse? What the hell did you say to make her just walk away like that?" Her voice was shaking. "I always believed you had at least a smattering of sense in that thick head of yours, but after this, I am highly doubtful."

He blinked at her as if she had just slapped him. "I did nothing. I said nothing. I have no fucking idea what is running through that crazy head of hers. Do I look like a mind-reader?" His eyes darkened, and his fists clenched at his sides.

Maude stiffened. "Do you love Cheyenne Red Wolf?"

He stared, his jaw dropping. "What the hell does love have to do with this?"

“Obviously nothing. If you can’t even admit to your mother that you are nuts over that girl, you need to get your head together.”

“Are all females totally nuts? Why do you all think that a man has to be in love to enjoy a woman’s company? I enjoyed her. I took what she offered and gave back what she seemed to desperately need from me. Hell, no, I don’t have to love her to want to take her to bed!”

The crack of her hand across his face stung like hell and he recoiled, running his hand over his reddened, aching jaw. “What the fuck...” He dodged the second one just before it struck again and he backed off with a snarl.

Maude shook her hand, wishing she’d used her fist instead of her open palm. “I can’t believe you just said that. But then, you are not the man I thought you were, Azrael. I never raised a hand to you in my life before. But if I hear you talk about her as if she is nothing but some woman who climbed into your bed instead of a woman who is crazy in love with you, I’ll use a baseball bat next time. I am ashamed of you.”

He stared at the empty doorway. *His mother had just pasted him one in the mouth.* He wiggled his jaw between his thumb and forefinger gingerly. Damn, that woman had one hell of a right cross! The sight of his tiny mother stiff with outrage had brought him up short in his own anger. She was usually so sweet and gentle. He wiped the drop of blood off his mouth where his incisor had cut the inside of his lower lip. Women!

He hissed in a deep breath and closed his eyes. What the fuck had he said something like that for? *To his own mother.* He should have just kept his big mouth shut. Women had no concept of what ran through a man’s head when it came to sex. When it came to feelings about love. Love had nothing to do with getting laid. You didn’t love someone in two fucking weeks. You lusted after them.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He just wanted to get roaring drunk and forget he’d ever met Cheyenne Red Wolf...but he couldn’t. He didn’t drink and she was his employee. Besides—he knew that what he’d said to his mother wasn’t entirely true.

He sank onto his bed and flung himself back against the pillow, closing his eyes. He'd gone from flying in the clouds to grubbing in the dirt. All because he had placed his trust in another Anglo female. How could she have simply walked away with not even a goodbye? Didn't he even deserve that much consideration? One minute she was there. The next, she was gone.

They had made love *like there was to be no tomorrow...*

He inhaled slowly, his eyes opening and narrowing as he recalled what she had said before he had run over her defenses like a Mack truck. She *had been* trying to say goodbye. He had simply swept her try aside and demolished her willpower. He sat up slowly and ran his calloused hands over his face. *Sweet Jesus*. What had he done? She had begged him to give her some space. And he had run roughshod over her request like she had no right to her privacy. All because she had him strung out like a bear in a trap.

He was totally out of control here. He wanted her so damn badly he hadn't for one minute thought she didn't feel the same way about him. But she did. Didn't she? He wasn't that lousy at reading people. She had wanted him as badly as he had wanted her. So what had gone wrong? He'd done everything he thought she wanted and expected.

Except listen.

He rubbed his palms over his unshaven, sore jaw. How had he suddenly gone from knowing she was the one he owned to feeling like he was now gonna have to crawl to her on hands and knees and beg her to come back? Could he do that? Give up his pride and his manhood to find out what he'd done wrong here? Closing his eyes, he saw her going down on his aching cock—saw her riding him like a nympho as she orgasmed above him—and knew the answer to that one. It was a fucking no-brainer. She was the first woman he had ever thought of as “his”. The *only* one. And feeling that she didn't want him the same way was killing him.

But when had he ever given up on something he wanted so badly? And he had never wanted anything – anyone – as badly as he wanted Cheyenne Red Wolf. He rose from the mattress with a grimace of anger at himself. He had plans to draw up. He needed some help. And he rubbed his jaw as he headed for the kitchen and the one very pissed-off little person who could definitely be the most help.

* * * * *

Chy had been nervous about going back to work on Monday. She had figured that Az would be there, fuming and angry. And she couldn't handle that yet. Her long, labor-intensive weekend had been spent mucking out the little cabin, repairing leaks in the roof with loose shingles that her landlord had stacked under the porch next to the generator and pushing back the usual invasion of spiders, chipmunks, raccoons and mice. Fixing the ramshackle place up and finishing grading forty papers had taken everything she'd had to give and she was tired and too damn sore to move much.

He wasn't at the school. But her three young artists and art lovers were...

She called the three young men up to her desk at lunchtime and gave them a calm look that belied her inner turmoil. "Since this was your first infraction, I will accept a formal apology from each of you, but I will not hesitate to send all three of you to Mr. Wyatt's office if you disrupt the class again." Her eyes slipped over their red faces. "As for the subject of your artwork, Jimmy, I promise to show it to your grandmother if I ever catch you drawing nude pictures in my class in the future. I believe she will have a most fitting punishment in mind." She didn't let on that she knew the picture had been of her.

The boys nodded jerkily, apologized to her vociferously and raced off to eat lunch like the devil was once again after them. That hadn't been as hard as she imagined it would be. She picked up the books and placed them on the shelves. And she sat in her little classroom to munch on the carrots and cheese she had brought for her own lunch.

* * * * *

Every time she heard a heavy footstep outside the door of her classroom, she wondered if it was him. Every time a man's deep tones wafted through the door to her ears, she wondered if maybe he had come to find her. But by the end of her last class, she had begun to realize he had truly accepted her decision. She wanted to feel relief, but the sigh she drew was one that sounded more disappointed than relieved. And she was angry at herself for feeling disappointed.

She'd known exactly what the outcome of her hot and heavy interlude would be. And she had known it would hurt when it ended. She hadn't really expected it to go on for two marvelous weeks. And now it was in the past and she would only see her boss if it was totally unavoidable. Oddly enough, she didn't feel used or put upon like she had expected to feel. She had enjoyed him tremendously. She had gone into this with her big blue eyes wide open. There could be no excuse for feeling he'd deceived or tricked her. And it had been wonderful.

It had been delicious. Every touch. Every caress. Every orgasm. She would have a very difficult time pushing him out of her mind but she would manage it. Somehow.

At half past three the phone rang inside her purse and she slid the last book onto the shelf before going over to her desk to answer it. She lifted her brows as she flipped it open and said, "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"You didn't tell me how serious this thing was getting between you and your black knight."

Chy drew a deep breath and exhaled wearily before speaking. "What do you mean, serious?"

A long pause made her frown before her mother's voice said quietly, "You can fool a lot of people, honey, but don't try to snow your mother. I've known you way too long. The least you could have done was warn me."

"Warn you? Warn you about what?" Cheyenne sank onto her desk chair and rubbed her temples with her free hand.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with a whole herd of goddamn horses? I barely make enough to feed myself on and now I have twenty very large and hungry mouths to feed. Couldn't he have just given you a goddamn diamond ring?"

Chy stared at the phone for a moment before she put it back to her ear. "Horses? Who gave you twenty horses?"

"Your damn crazy Lakota lover. Who the hell else would send your parent a bride gift of twenty horses?"

"There has to be some mistake." Her mind was swimming.

"According to the guy who delivered them an hour ago, they were purchased Saturday morning at the Bismarck livestock auction by a Native American by the name of A. Thunder Horse, and the bill of sale made out in my name as the mother of C. Red Wolf." Her voice sounded oddly amused but her words were stern. "That sounds to me like your breechclout-wearing boyfriend just bought himself a very expensive bride, according to his customs. At least, that's what his mother said when I just called his house."

"You can't possibly be serious! This is the twenty-first century. A man doesn't just go out and buy a wife. Of course you will be sending those horses right back." Chy's heart was pounding erratically.

"I dunno...got myself some pretty damn good horseflesh. The bill of sale shows he paid over a thousand bucks a head for them at auction. I might just decide to keep them. I have the room here on the ranch." Her mother's voice sounded thoughtful.

"MOM!"

"What are you so up in the trees about? You like him, don't you?"

Chy swallowed hard, unable to frame a fitting response. "That's not the damn point, Mom."

"Oh, I think it is. It's pretty obvious he likes you. Anyway, that's what the letter says that came with the bill of sale."

"Letter? He sent you a letter?" Her throat felt so tight she could barely force the words out.

"Yep. I don't suppose you want me to read it to you?"

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled explosively and said tightly, "Just read it to me. Okay?"

"Okay. He says, 'Dear Mrs. Red Wolf, I am sending you this bride gift of twenty young, sound, green broke horses in the manner of my People, to honor you and ask that you will accept my suit for the hand of your daughter, Cheyenne.'" She paused and Chy made an impatient sound before she continued.

"'It is my deepest desire that you will give your daughter to me as my wife.'" Her mother sighed and she heard her blow her nose.

She sat there, her throat tight. Her mother's voice buzzed inside her head like a gnat. "Chy, baby? You didn't just go and faint on me, did you?"

"Um...no. Not yet. I just can't believe the gall—the utterly pompous—oooooo! He hasn't said one damned word. GIVE me to him as his wife? How positively... *Medieval!*"

"Whatever you do, baby, don't kick him in the balls. I want grandbabies. And if you are stubborn enough to tell this one no, I will totally disown your ass!"

She sat there for a very long time, the shock of what her mother had told her sinking in very slowly. He couldn't possibly love her. Not in just fourteen days. He loved having sex with her but that was another ball of wax. He hadn't said he wanted her beyond a short, torrid fling. *And now he was trying to buy her from her mother for twenty ponies?*

It might have been truly funny if she hadn't so desperately wanted such a display of interest from the damn man. Her heart was pounding madly in her chest as she dialed Maude's number. *Please be there. I need to talk to you.*

Maude picked up on the third ring and the sound of her quiet voice brought tears to Chy's eyes. She dashed them away and sniffed. "I need some answers, Maude..."

* * * * *

Maude was waiting for her when she pulled into the shady patch of trees that surrounded the little cabin she now called home. The little woman sat on the rickety porch, slowly shredding a branch of sage. The scent was heavenly as Chy climbed out of the Toyota and plopped down on the step beside her. Dark eyes slid around the area and Maude managed a quiet smile. "You must have been pretty desperate to escape us to come out to this rat hole, honey."

Hot color flooded her face as the woman sighed and peeled another leaf of sage from the stem. She had to tell Maude the truth.

"I guess I panicked. It was just moving too fast and the last thing I need or want right at this point in my life is a hot and heavy, flash in the pan relationship." She barely stopped herself from admitting that she was wildly in love with the damn man.

"He can get a bit overwhelming when he goes after something he wants." The woman nodded thoughtfully. "But I thought he was making it pretty damn obvious he didn't consider you a one-night wonder." She picked up the little pile of stems and leaves and wrapped them carefully with a piece of twine she drew from her pocket. Chy watched her as she knotted the twine and then wrapped in the other direction.

"I also overreacted when one of the boys in one of my classes had...um... drawn a very risqué picture of me and was showing it around. I—um—assumed that they had started to hear gossip about me... And Az." She shrugged and bit her lower lip. "The last thing I wanted was for your son to get into trouble because he was having an affair with another employee."

Maude nodded slowly then drew a lighter from her pocket and lit the wand of sage. It crackled and began to smoke and Maude stood, wafting the wand across the porch

and mumbling softly under her breath. After a moment, she gently waved a tendril of smoke over Chy's head and she sighed.

"I thought my son had no eyes to see and no heart to give. I was thrilled when he told me he had found his heart. And I had thought that maybe you had found yours. You were both so eager. So happy. And then it all sort of fell apart."

Blinking back tears, Cheyenne rose to her feet and clasped her hands tightly in front of her. "It wasn't real. As wonderful as it was, it had to end sooner or later. And it wasn't worth jeopardizing his job. I can always find another job teaching. I am in fairly high demand. I have no roots to haul up if things get ugly. And small-town gossip can get mighty ugly, Maude."

"So you do love him..." The woman's voice was soft.

"Of course I don't! You can't fall in love with someone that quickly. Not real love. That takes time. And men just don't feel the same way about things that women do. What we had was pleasant to Az. But I will not kid myself into believing it could have been anything more to him. Which brings me to the big question."

"The bride gift." Maude's eyes were quietly calculating.

"Yes. What on earth would possess him to do something so...romantic?"

Maude laughed softly and waved the burning wand skyward. "Because in spite of his own manly doubts and his own disbelief in love, he knows you are the only woman he wants in his life."

"So why the hell couldn't he just tell me he felt something more than an urge to scratch an itch? Why the dramatics?"

"Why question what is under your nose? What on earth is holding you back, child? Has he not made it plain as the nose on your face that he wants you? I cannot stand by and see his heart and spirit broken by his stubbornness or yours."

Chy stared at her, her mouth hanging open. "He hasn't asked me to marry him, Maude. This isn't 1850. You don't just send a batch of horses over and exchange them for a wife. It's a little more complicated than that."

"He sent the bride gift to your mother. She gave her blessing to the union. I, as the widow of a tribal high elder have agreed to your marriage. My son has told me of his desire. You are the only one who has not spoken." Maude looked damn serious.

"Because he hasn't spoken about this 'arrangement' to ME. I don't know what to say..."
Her voice died in her throat.

"You could say yes. You could admit to him that he is what you want. He is a good man. I admit I have had my doubts but I know now he would be a good husband to you, Cheyenne Red Wolf."

Maude smiled and gave her a hug, then turned and left. Stunned beyond words, Chy sank back down on the porch and buried her face in her hands. She sat there for a very long time, her thoughts scattered and confused. She thought about Maude's words and gave a small sigh. *Because, in spite of his own manly doubts and his own disbelief in love, he knows that you are the only woman he wants in his life.* Had Azrael truly spoken those words to his mother?

She sat for a long time, buried in thought. She hadn't realized how dark it was getting until she heard the sound of booted feet on the gravel yard and brought her eyes up just as arms lifted her from the step.

"What the hell..." She yelped as she was thrown over a broad shoulder like a bag of potatoes but the air was knocked from her lungs and her shocked protests ended with an outward whoosh of air. Stunned, she tried to focus on what was happening. Then she gave a cry of indignation, kicking and struggling to get her feet on the ground. The man carried her up the creaking stairs.

"Dammit! Put me down!"

A hand came down with a hard swat on her ass and she screamed, stiffening. A deep voice filtered through her head, warning her to be quiet. She knew that voice!

"Azrael, if you don't put me down this minute, you will regret it!" she seethed between clenched teeth.

"I'm already regretting it, but I bought and paid for you and I'll be damned if I don't get my money's worth." His voice was a deep growl.

"This is *so* not funny, dammit! You can't just buy a woman! Put me down!" She shrieked as another swat made her butt cheek burn.

"You and I need to have a long talk and since you are too fucking stubborn to sit down and do that, this is the only way I could think of to get you to listen to what I have to say."

Az hoped that his mother was being the goodwill ambassador he had hoped for but when she had arrived back at the house empty-handed, he had almost lost his mind. "What'd she say?"

"She said it wasn't 1850, and something about it being a bit outdated to try to buy a wife without at least discussing it with the intended wife first." His mother hung her jacket up on the peg by the front door and ran a hand through her wind-tousled dark hair.

"Did you tell her how I felt?" His heart was beating a staccato drum inside his chest.

She sighed and turned to face him. "The symbolism of the bride gift was a nice touch, honey, but I think it would work out far better for you if you admitted to her face how you feel about her."

How he felt about her? *Sweet Jesus*. How *did* he feel about her? He dragged in a harsh breath and stared down into his mother's serene face. His mother was certain that his feelings were love. But Azrael had never truly believed the emotion existed. At least he didn't think he believed in it. It was just so damn confusing. He knew she was meant for him. He knew he needed her. Why did women always have to complicate things with soft feelings?

Shit. He wanted Cheyenne Red Wolf enough that he had done *the deed*. He had asked for her. He had figured she would understand the meaning behind his gift to her mother. A straight across trade...twenty goddamn good horses for one little *wasicu* she-devil. She should be happy he was showing her the value he placed on her.

The symbolic value, anyway.

How the hell could she turn deaf and blind all of a sudden when she had touted her deep understanding of his tribal customs? What the fuck was she wanting here? A full-out, face to face crawling and begging? No way. A man had his limits. He saw the knowing smile lurking on his mother's lips and he swore again.

"She's all alone out there at the cabin. It's as good a time as any to make her listen to reason."

He frowned at Maude's innocent smile. Did she truly think him such an imbecile that he couldn't see when she was playing him? Did she believe him to be stupid enough to fall for her hints? She patted his arm and went into the kitchen to start supper. He clenched his teeth and growled. Okay. So he was stupid.

It only took fifteen minutes to make it to the little cabin a couple miles into the foothills. The lights were off. Her car was there but it looked like she might be asleep. Until he pulled up a few hundred feet short of the cabin and slid out from behind the wheel, closing the door gently. She was sitting on the porch, her face buried in her hands. And his body ached to touch her. He moved silently until he hit the gravel and then he pounced. He had no idea what his next move would be but he relished the feel of her draped over his shoulder and he loved giving her ass a couple of hard smacks. She deserved them for tying him up in fucking knots like this.

He carried her into the cabin and eased her onto one of the two wooden chairs that had been there since his father and Jake had built it when he was just a boy. He tossed his hat onto the narrow bed that stood against the far wall and turned to flick the light switch on the rough-hewn log wall. The generator wasn't running. He swore softly as

he felt in the semi-darkness of the tiny cabin until he found one of the lanterns and he lit it before turning back to face what he expected to be an infuriated wildcat.

His gut clenched as those bottomless blue eyes lifted to his face. Sweet Jesus, but he wanted to drag her off the chair into his arms and feel her naked flesh pressed to his. She was chewing that full bottom lip again and his thumb gently brushed over her sweet upper lip. He felt a shudder run through her as her eyes drooped closed. She heaved a deep sighing breath and then she whispered shakily, "You wanted to talk. I'm a captive audience, Az. Say what you wanted to say."

When he had so abruptly thrown her over his shoulder and carried her into her cabin, Cheyenne had felt the deep impact of her love for this man hit her hard in the gut. In that moment, she didn't care if he didn't love her in return. She didn't care if he couldn't verbalize what she needed to hear. *He had sent a bride gift to her mom.* He had told her mother that he wanted her. WTF more could a woman ask for in her man? She felt tears slide down her cheeks and when he dropped to his haunches before her she knew that all she wanted was to feel his arms around her, and feel his lips on hers.

He remained on his knees on the floor, his hands gently brushing her hair from her wet cheeks, the look in his eyes confusing her even more. He swallowed hard and she realized he was tongue-tied and that gave her a rush of delight she couldn't fathom. This delicious, handsome, powerful man...tongue-tied? When he couldn't seem to form a lucid word she licked her lips and inhaled deeply.

"Twenty horses? When the going price was maybe four or five?" Her voice shook but she managed to keep talking. "You could have gotten me for far less, you know." She turned her mouth into his palm and slowly kissed it. Her gaze slid back to his face. His eyes slowly widened, and both hands gently cupped her face as he leaned in to take her smiling lips with his open mouth, his tongue diving between her lips and teeth to seek the heat inside.

She slipped to her own knees to bring her body tight against his as he slid his hands through her hair, back down around her throat and then around her body to drag her so tight against him, she could barely breathe. Her own hands ran over his ribs, his back and then up to bury themselves in the river of hair she loved to feel beneath her fingertips. A deep, rumbling groan ripped from his chest, vibrating deep into hers, as he took a solid hold on her and rose to his feet, lifting her with him.

When he drew back from the toe-curling kiss, he ran his lips over her face, across her forehead and down the side of her cheek to gently nibble the lobe of her ear. Her body came to blazing life under his touch. "We have to talk..." he growled breathlessly. His lips returned to hers, and they were lost for some time in the dance of fire their tongues indulged in, as his hands made short work of her buttons and hers made short work of his belt and zipper.

When her blouse was on the floor, her bra followed, then she was toeing off her shoes as he fought to do the same with his boots without breaking the voracious kiss. Somehow they managed to undress each other completely with lips still clinging and he swung her from her feet into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

She managed to tear free of his consuming kiss, panting as she stared up into his flushed face, her body aching for his to fill her. "Does this mean you still want me?"

Az stared down into her pink face, his body and mind full of this creature that had captured him, heart and spirit. "I have wanted you from the moment I saw you."

Her eyes widened. "You had a funny way of showing it." She had an endearing little catch in her voice.

"Do you want me?" He needed to hear it from her lips. He waited in an agony of fear that she would not speak.

She struggled as if to get away and he clenched his teeth and loosened his tight grip. Instead of dropping to the floor, she somehow managed to bring her legs around his hips, her wet, hot pussy cradling his aching shaft and she pressed her open mouth

over his as she drove her little tongue between his lips, stroking his hungrily. He shifted his palms to the sweet round globes of her ass as he lifted her away and let his cock seek a home in her welcoming, wet folds, lowering her over his length as he felt the wide head of his cock slide into her wet, hot cunt. She fit him like a glove. He almost came the instant he felt her shudder of need.

She gave a little cry of delight that sent his mind spinning and when he was seated to his balls inside her, she whispered shakily against his ear, "From the moment I saw you."

He couldn't stop himself from smiling into her tangled red curls as he gently bit the lovely pale expanse of skin that lay just below her earlobe. "You had a funny way of showing it."

She squeezed him with her inner muscles and whispered beside his ear, "I'll have you know that I don't usually fall into bed with men the day after I meet them."

He met her teasing with a deep, slow thrust that made her cry out again. "I'll have you know that I have waited a very long time for you, *winyan itkonyahan*."

She stiffened slightly in his arms and drew her head back to stare into his eyes, her expression enough to break down any reserves he had held in his heart. He found it difficult to breathe as she touched his face with shaking fingers and whispered huskily, "You promised you would find me again—it was you?"

His heart soared. It had been more than just a dream?

"I have been looking for you for a long time. You will marry me, Cheyenne Red Wolf. If I have to keep you naked and in this cabin until you agree to take me for your husband, I will."

Her expression softened and she gently brushed his lips with her own. "That sounds wonderful, but not to sound like a corny old movie, Mr. Thunder Horse, you had me at 'Is Ms. Red Wolf still here?'"

He kissed her hard, his spirit soaring like an eagle as he took what she so sweetly offered—his delicious little *winyan itkonyahan*—his blazing woman—his life.

About the Author

Fran Lee began writing romance novels at the age of 14. Life intruded on a budding writing career—namely, paying the bills, raising a family and the usual run-of-the-mill things that leave a writer no time to pursue a career as frivolous as authoring romance books. Or so everyone told her. But she never gave up on her childhood dreams of writing.

Other things caught her fancy over the years—horses, eBay, martial arts, not necessarily in that order. Over the years, her childish dreams were set on the back burner over and over again. But the things that caught her fancy blossomed into self-confidence—she achieved her black belt in her chosen martial art, spent a fortune on eBay and had the great pleasure of owning a number of wonderful equine friends.

Now she concentrates on her various fancies by collecting horse statues and figurines, teaching karate to kids, and spending time dragging out those old romance novels and bringing them up to snuff for the 21st century. The dream has come true—and it was well worth the wait.

Fran welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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