



BADLANDS RIDGE

E J ANDERSON

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ONE

Leaning back in her chair, Dakota Grayeagle raked her bangs off her forehead. They fell back into her eyes, but she ignored it as she studied the menu.

This was the first opportunity she'd had to unwind in the past four days—and she'd *made* the time, since she had to eat, anyway. Doing it alone at a moderately priced restaurant so she could relax completely had been her boss's idea.

Rick Weaver was a well-meaning man, but he could be overprotective. As sweet of him as it was, she already had six brothers in South Dakota. She didn't need another one here in Las Vegas, Nevada. Not that she wasn't glad that he cared, because she was. But she was also concerned that he wanted more than a boss/paralegal relationship.

Dakota laid her menu down and glanced around the dining room. She hadn't noticed how unobtrusive it was, with simple lighting, a single carnation decorating each table, and ... Her gaze fell on a table halfway across the room. Before she could stop it, a horrified gasp escaped from her.

Those were the same two men she'd seen in several places over the past three days. She'd noticed them but hadn't thought anything of their presence until now. She had to have seen them at least a dozen times, which meant their being in this restaurant was no mere coincidence. They were following her!

Brock Jones pulled up to the stoplight and looked into his rearview mirror to adjust his tie. Damn, he hated dinner meetings. They always gave him indigestion because he couldn't relax and enjoy his food.

Sliding his hand into his suitcoat pocket, he pressed on the accelerator. He grinned. Thank God, he hadn't forgotten his Roloids. He would need them later if the meeting went like he expected.

Wyatt Romain was one of the most egotistical, arrogant, insolent people he'd ever met. Convincing him that he had to improve his image or lose everything wouldn't be easy. The man truly believed that his voice alone would keep the customers coming into the casino theater where he'd performed regularly for eight years. Apparently, Romain hadn't noticed that the crowds were steadily dwindling. That was why Romain's manager had hired him in the first place. As a public relations expert, he was supposed to turn the guy around and make him human.

Judging from the conversation he'd had with Romain on the phone when he'd set up this meeting, that was probably an impossible feat. Las Vegas's self-proclaimed Prince of Pop had no desire to change his image and was only doing it because both his agent and his manager had insisted. Twelve years of experience told Brock that a person wouldn't succeed in changing his image unless he truly wanted to.

Brock sighed. Oh, how, he wished this evening were over.

"Are you ready to order yet, ma'am?" the waitress asked.

Dakota turned her gaze toward the voice. How could a woman who held a job waitressing look like she'd just come off a page of *Vogue*? Dakota wondered. But that was beside the point. She had to get out of there and see if those men followed her.

"I've never been in this restaurant before," Dakota said, letting her instinct take over. "Where's the bathroom? I need to use it so bad I can't concentrate on the menu."

The waitress smiled with obviously fraudulent cheer. "You passed it when you came in. I'll keep an eye on your table and come back when you're done."

Thanking the waitress, Dakota draped her purse strap over her shoulder, rose, then wandered toward the restrooms. She could only hope it appeared casual because her nerves were like rubber bands stretched so tight they made music when plucked. Her insides churned, ready to expel anything she might try to eat.

She had to get out of there, but she couldn't let those men know what she was doing. Pushing open the door to the ladies' room, she went inside then leaned against the counter with her cold, clammy palms flat on the glossy Formica. Her heart raced; her chest felt tight. The expression on the face and in the nearly black eyes that stared back at her from the mirror showed her terror.

Maybe she was overreacting. Just because she'd seen those men several times each day for the past three days didn't mean she was being followed. Did it? If it didn't, the odds of such constant coincidences were astronomical.

With a sigh, Dakota bowed her head. Whether these were coincidences or not, she couldn't stay here. She had to get away before she got an answer to her suspicions.

Okay, God, she thought as she stared at the white porcelain sink. I need Your help to get me out of here without those guys following me.

He was only two blocks from the restaurant now, and Brock felt the familiar dread of meeting with an immovable person surge through him. Oh, how he hated arguing with people like Wyatt Romain. Just getting Romain to agree to eat at a restaurant he could afford as a business expense had been more work than he ordinarily put forth. He could just imagine what this dinner meeting would be like. If only he could think of a way to get out of it.

As he approached the restaurant on the opposite side of the street, he noticed a lone woman saunter out the door and start toward the parking lot. He turned on his left blinker in preparation for his turn.

Dakota walked halfway across the front of the building. As soon as she passed the windows, she lifted first one foot then the other and removed her high heels. If they were following her, she wanted to be able to run. *If?* She was going to run whether they were coming or not.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the door move. She turned her head for a better look as she sprinted toward the parking lot. It was them! She had to hurry if she

was going to get away.

As he accelerated into his turn, Brock saw a movement out of the corner of his left eye. Turning his head, he saw the woman racing straight into the path of his car. And she didn't know it because she was looking behind her!

With a harsh expletive, he slammed on his brakes and swerved to the right. The metal of his fender scraped against another car's bumper as he came to a halt.

Squealing tires brought Dakota's attention back to where she was going. A car crashed into another one only a few feet before her. Instinctively, she tried to stop, but her speed was already so great that she hurtled headlong toward the vehicle.

She turned, took one uncontrolled step on a diagonal, and slammed into the metal fender. Instantaneous pain shot through her right hip and down her leg. With a cry of agony, she bounced off the car and dropped to the concrete. First her left arm and shoulder hit, then the left side of her head cracked on the pavement.

Momentarily unable to move, Brock stared down at her motionless body lying just outside his car. Then he burst into action. He slapped his stick shift into neutral and yanked up the emergency brake as he threw open his door.

He scrambled from behind the wheel and dropped to his knees as she rolled onto her back with a groan. Her long black hair splayed around her head and shoulders, some of it reaching nearly to her waist. A pair of agony-filled dark brown eyes gazed up at him. He stared into the orbs, unable to think of anything but Bambi—and how expressive this woman's eyes were.

Dakota moved, slowly and with a grimace, as she tried to look back toward the building. The men were just standing near the corner of the restaurant, staring in her direction. She had to get out of there before they came after her.

Then a deep, resonant voice filled with concern interrupted her thoughts, drawing her attention back to the man at her side. "Are you all right?"

Grabbing his arm with both hands, she pleaded, "Get me out of here."

"Just relax," the man replied as he glanced toward the building. Returning his gaze to her, he pulled his arm free and reached toward his back pocket. "Let me call 911."

"No!" She grabbed his arm again and held it tightly so he couldn't get away from her. "I'm fine. Just get me out of here. *Please.*"

"Are you sure?" he asked skeptically. "You hit my car awfully hard."

Determined to show him that she wasn't hurt, Dakota scrambled to her feet, wincing in pain. The man hurried up as well. But the moment she was completely erect, dizziness engulfed her; her knees buckled under her weight. A strong arm encircled her shoulder, causing pain to shoot through it. She cried out as he turned her until she collided with an immobile object. A moment later a second arm came to rest around

her back.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just wanted to keep you from falling again. *Now* will you let me call for an ambulance?"

She gazed into his smoky gray eyes and absently thought how pretty they were—a deep gray, not pale. She'd never seen eyes that color before. And he was only slightly taller than she, so she had a very good view of them. In the dim light of the parking lot, his hair looked sandy blond with streaks of lighter blond intermingled. Other than his eyes, though, his features were average.

Dragging her mind from her thoughts, Dakota said, "Please. Just take me home. I have to get out of here."

Staring down at her, he shook his head. "At least, let me take you to the emergency room."

"Fine," she agreed, her patience with this man waning. "Just get me out of here."

While helping her in the driver's door, the man glanced around as she gingerly moved over the center console and gear shift to the passenger seat. Then he grabbed up one high heel lying on the hood of his car and tossed it to her. She caught it as he turned away, apparently to look for the other one.

"Where are you going?" she asked when he moved away from the car.

He smiled at her reassuringly. "To find your other shoe."

"Forget the damned shoe!" she snapped. "Let's go."

"At least, let me put my business card on the window of the car I hit."

"There's no time." Grabbing his arm again, she pulled until he gave up and got in behind the wheel. "Get this thing in gear."

"All right," he agreed. Reaching into his inside coat pocket, he pulled out a small card and a pen. "Write down the license number, and I'll call them tomorrow. My sister works for the DMV, so she can get me the name and address."

Metal scraped metal, and Dakota cringed as he backed away from the car. As soon as she could see the license plate, she wrote the number on the card he'd handed her. He backed out of the parking lot then put his car in forward and headed away to their right.

Dakota flipped over the card to see what it was and saw: *Brock Jones, People to People Public Relations.*

Glancing over at her, he smiled. "Now that you know the name of your knight in shining armor, how about telling me the name of my damsel in distress?"

"Dakota Grayeagle," she mumbled.

"Great name," he replied. "Are you a Native American?"

"Seven-eighths. I'm sorry that I caused your accident. What a coincidence that your sister's with the DMV."

Brock said nothing. His sister was a proud homemaker who had never worked for *any* government agency, much less the Department of Motor Vehicles. And he had no idea why he'd lied to Dakota about it. To conceal his embarrassment, he changed back to the original topic. "I hope it doesn't sound crass, but you do have that stereotypical Native American appearance—high cheekbones, kind of a crook in your nose. I don't think I've ever met one before."

"Actually, I prefer American Indian. If you'll think about it, every person who's born in America is a *native* American. But that's just my preference. Not all of us feel that

way.”

“I suppose you have a point. What tribe are you from?”

“Lakota Sioux.” She hesitated then questioned him anxiously. “Are you really taking me to the hospital?”

Brock glanced in his rearview mirror as he slowed and signaled a right turn. There was a dark sedan about a block behind them. Hopefully, it wasn't some cop who'd witnessed his accident.

After negotiating his turn, he looked over at Dakota. Blood streamed down the left side of her face. But she just sat there, her head resting against the whiplash protector, as she stared straight ahead. Apparently, she had no idea how badly she'd been injured. In fact, he wasn't sure how coherent she was, and that meant a possible concussion. He really needed to get her to a hospital.

Stopping at a red light, Brock unsnapped his seatbelt and dug his handkerchief from his back pocket.

A warm weight came down on Dakota's hand, and she turned her stunned gaze to her lap. A large hand covering hers stuffed some white cloth into her palm, closed her long, slender fingers around it, then squeezed her fist with tender reassurance.

What a nice sensation to have a man show so much concern for somebody he didn't even know. It made her feel comfortable and at ease when she'd been so worked up lately. In fact, the calm that enveloped her was almost astounding given the panic she'd felt only minutes earlier.

“Your head's bleeding quite a bit,” he announced. “I know my handkerchief isn't much, but it's a hell of a lot better than letting you bleed to death. Hold it on your cut until I get you to the hospital.”

Absently following instructions, she said, “I really don't think I need a hospital, Mr. Jones. Head wounds always look worse than they are. I'm sure this is just a minor cut.”

“You still hit your head pretty hard. You could have a concussion.” Dakota gazed at him as he glanced in his rearview mirror again. A concerned expression crossed his somewhat craggy features. “Did you run out on a boyfriend or something?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I have the distinct impression that we're being followed.”

Startled, Dakota glanced behind them. The blue car that she'd seen so often lately was about a half a block behind them, but there was only one man in it, not two. Maybe it wasn't the same car after all.

“Do you recognize that car back there?” he asked.

“I've seen one like it several times, but it's no boyfriend of mine. There must be a zillion of those cars around town.”

Brock sighed. “I suppose it is a common model, but from the way you were acting when you came out of the restaurant, I'm not taking any chances. Let's see what he does if I make a few turns.”

“Okay,” Dakota agreed as she buckled her seatbelt.

“What are you doing that for?”

“It's the law,” she replied calmly, “and I forgot. Maybe I should tell you where my apartment is so you don't inadvertently lead that person to it.” Brock shot his suspicious gaze to her, and she shrugged, hoping that she appeared casual. “If he's really following us, I mean.”

"Why do I have a feeling there's more to it than that?"

"I don't know. I suppose it could have something to do with how we met. I mean, I was a bit thrown off by having run into your car and causing your accident. By the way, I expect to pay at least the deductible on your insurance."

Brock executed a left turn then glanced at her with a grin. "I doubt you could afford a thousand bucks."

"For the deductible?" she asked in shock.

"This Porsche Cayman isn't a cheap vehicle. To make my insurance payments lower, I had to request a higher deductible."

"Oh. I suppose I could make monthly payments until it's paid off. Then, of course, I'd have to pay the increase in your rates. It's the least I can do. After all, I caused the accident because I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"Would you not worry about it? I have no-fault insurance, and I'm sure this qualifies. Now where do you live?"

Dakota gave him the address and dabbed at the cut on her head as she settled back in her seat. After negotiating several turns in a different direction, Brock glanced in his rearview mirror again.

"Did they follow us?" she asked anxiously.

Brock nodded and turned right. "Looks like it. I'm going to try to lose him. Are you up to it?"

Grabbing the armrest with her right hand and the seat with her left, Dakota nodded. She didn't like the sound of this, but she was at Brock's mercy. He apparently had some experience at this, too, because he negotiated one turn after another without losing control of his speeding automobile.

"You're awfully good at this," she observed.

"I did some off-road racing in my youth. Now, hush. I need to concentrate."

Dakota fell silent. She didn't want to distract him and cause another accident. He hadn't been hurt the last time, but he could be at this speed. Unfortunately, these fast turns were making her queasy. If they didn't lose the man following them soon, she was going to throw up in his nice, shiny, *dented* Porsche Cayman.

What had she gotten this stranger into, anyway? She'd been so desperate to get away from the men following her that she'd dragged an innocent person into whatever had happened to have them tailing her.

Across the car, Brock decelerated and turned onto Las Vegas Boulevard. Lights illuminated the casinos along the Strip. Now it looked more like daylight than twilight. Surely, the man behind them would see them here.

Concerned that Brock had made a grave mistake, Dakota asked, "How come you're taking the Strip? He's going to find us here."

"If he does," Brock explained, "I doubt he'll try anything with so many people around. Now, I think it's time for you to come clean. Was that guy following you?"

"I suppose I should. For the past three days, two men have been in the same place I am more times than would warrant being a coincidence. So, yes, I assume I'm being followed. But for the life of me, I can't figure out why. I'm a paralegal/court recorter, for Pete's sake. And my boss Rick isn't even a junior partner yet. He's just a lawyer who works for the firm. For heaven's sake, I've never done anything except type up wills, take and transcribe depositions, do mundane research, and take care of divorce matters. Why would anybody want to follow me? It doesn't make sense."

"There must be some reason," Brock insisted, "or they wouldn't be on your tail. Have they tried anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have they made any attempt to talk to you, maybe come up to you when you weren't looking?"

"No. They just follow me around and watch me. I saw them in the restaurant tonight, too. That's why I was running across the lot. I was hoping to get in my car and get out of there before they could see where I was going."

"It's a good thing I came along then. You probably would have headed straight home, and they could have caught up with you there." Brock gasped, startling Dakota, then exclaimed, "Damn! I forgot about my meeting."

While Dakota watched, Brock pulled his cell phone from his back pocket and asked her to dial a number he had on a pad of paper attached to his dashboard. She returned his phone, and a moment later he said, "This is Brock Jones, Mr. Romain. I won't be able to meet you at the restaurant after all. Come to my condo after you eat so we can discuss your career." Then he left his address and turned off his phone.

"Mr. Romain?" Dakota asked. "Is that *Wyatt* Romain?"

"Yeah. I was hired to see if I improve his public image. Apparently, he's been losing a lot of clients for the casino, and they're not pleased. His manager, his agent, and the casino owners think it's his attitude. It's my job to convince him to change his ways and develop a new image for him. Quite frankly, I'm dreading the job."

"Do you really think it's that bad?"

"Everybody close to him seems to think so, and I did meet the guy once. I'm afraid he came across pretty badly. He's got a head on him the size of Alaska. I'd like to shrink it to the size of Montana—if I don't knock it off first."

"Why do you say that?"

"He's pretty stubborn." Turning off the main drag, Brock started through a smaller section of town. "You mind a little fast food that we can eat at my place?"

Dakota stared at him in shock. "Aren't you taking me home?"

"I don't dare yet. Whoever was following us must know where you live if they've been behind you for several days. You'll have to come to my place—at least for the night. It's the safest way to go."

Resigned to her fate, she sighed. "I suppose you're right. Fast food would be fine, but I don't want much. I'm not used to fast driving, and I'm a bit sick to my stomach."

"I know you're going to be mad, Jeff," one man said into his cell phone, "but we lost her."

"How the hell did you do that?" Jeff asked irritably.

"She spotted us in the restaurant and snuck out. She must have realized that we've been tailing her. Some guy took off with her after she ran into his car. And I mean that literally. The guy even hit another car to avoid hitting Dakota. He must have been on to us because I've never seen anybody who wasn't on a racetrack drive like him. The best we could do was get the guy's license number."

"What is it? I'll call and see if I can get an address on him. Maybe you can pick up her trail there. If he lost you, it's likely that he was on to you."

“That’s what we figured. Brad stayed down so Dakota wouldn’t suspect that it was us. We thought she might get suspicious if she saw two men in the car.”

“Okay, Greg. You did what you could. There were never any guarantees that she wouldn’t catch on to us. We’ve known all along that she’s street-smart. We’ll just have to deal with it the best we can. Give me about an hour and call back for the address. In the meantime, have some dinner. Maybe go back to the same restaurant and see if the owner of the car the guy hit filed a complaint. If so, tell him we should have an address for him by the end of the evening.”

“Will do,” Greg agreed. “But I have a feeling he’ll contact them himself. He was driving an awfully expensive car. And it’s yellow with a nice dent, so it should be easy to make sure we have the right place. I doubt he was the type to skip out on an accident like that, too. He probably did it to take care of Dakota because she took quite a fall.”

“We can’t take any chances. We’ve got to get back on her tail.”

“Okay. We’ll call again in about an hour.”

TWO

Dakota leaned against the marble sink in Brock's bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. Now that she'd brushed out her hair, she looked more presentable—except for the large bruise and cut on the side of her head. Brock had given her a Band-Aid for her injury, but the blood still seeped through a little. There was also a nasty scrape on her elbow, which Brock had covered with a larger bandage and some antiseptic ointment, and not quite as bad of one on her shoulder where the skin had rubbed the pavement. And her thigh had a huge bruise on the side of it from where she'd run into Brock's car.

She still couldn't believe that she'd been stupid enough to not watch where she was going. She could have been hurt much worse if Brock hadn't been quick on the brakes. A shudder coursed through her at the thought. That had been a close call.

Pushing herself upright, Dakota shook her head. Where was she going to come up with a thousand dollars to pay Brock's deductible? Granted, he'd said that she didn't have to pay it; but she didn't feel right not doing so, especially after he'd come to her rescue without even knowing the circumstances behind her running into him.

The doorbell buzzed, and Dakota shot her startled gaze to the closed bathroom door. That had to be Wyatt Romain—the handsome Prince of Pop. Of all the times to meet him! Her clothes were dirty, and she was all skinned up. On top of that, she smelled like the Bactine she'd sprayed on her injuries.

She'd seen Wyatt perform once, and she'd thought he gave a wonderful show. In fact, there had been a few times that she'd fantasized about him. He was one of the best-looking guys she'd ever run across, and one tall enough for her to wear high heels when they were together. She just couldn't understand why Brock believed that Wyatt was losing money for the casino instead of raking it in. Surely, there must be some miscommunication for the owners to make such an accusation.

Inhaling deeply to still her anxiety, Dakota straightened her shoulders. She may as well get this meeting over with, because she had no desire to spend an indefinite amount of time hiding out in a bathroom. Steeling herself, she opened the door and strode toward the living room.

Dakota wandered up to stand near Brock. Now that she'd calmed down, she felt more confident and stood in her usual posture—back straight and shoulders squared. Brock's face told her everything. He wasn't sure she was the same woman he had rescued earlier, and she knew why. After all, she'd been injured and scared. She'd been bent in an attempt to alleviate her pain. Now that she was erect, her height of "five-foot-twelve" would startle him.

Before she could say anything, Wyatt rose from his seat in the living room and said, "Well, well, well. You didn't tell me you had such an attractive girlfriend, Jones."

"I'm not his girlfriend," Dakota replied.

"That's right," Brock said as he draped his arm around her shoulders. Dakota stifled a grimace at the pain his gesture caused. "She's my cousin, so be nice to her. Dakota,

this is Wyatt Romain. Wyatt, Dakota Grayeagle.”

“And the most beautiful Indian I’ve ever set eyes on,” Wyatt insisted, grasping her hand lightly. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

Dakota hated being called Indian, despite calling herself an American Indian, because it had such a derogatory connotation to it. Still, she replied in a casual tone. “Thank you.”

Brock steered her to the couch, announcing sharply, “We should get down to business, Romain.” Without releasing his protective hold, he sank onto the sofa, forcing Dakota to sit beside him. “Do you mind if Dakota sits in on this?”

Why did Brock sound so angry? she wondered.

“I don’t mind at all,” Wyatt replied as he sat down on her left. “But first let me ask her a question. That’s a horrible bruise on your head. What happened?”

“She was in a car accident,” Brock said with a note of irritation in his voice. “Now let’s talk business. If you want more fans coming in to see your act, you’ve got to straighten up. This swelled head you’ve got *must* shrink or you’re going down the tubes.”

“Have you seen my act, Dakota?” Wyatt asked.

She nodded. “And I really liked it.”

Wyatt turned his gaze to Brock. “There, you see, Jones? She likes my act. What makes you think I need to change?”

“The bottom line, pal,” Brock shot back. “Damn it, Romain, can’t you get it through that thick skull of yours? You’re losing money for the casino. The owners are ready to give you your walking papers when your contract comes up for renewal in a couple of months. Is that what you want?”

Wyatt chuckled. “They wouldn’t do that. I’ve been there a long time, and I’ve made a hell of a lot of money for them.”

“They would, and they *will* if you don’t get your off-stage act together. You’re alienating customers.”

“How so?” Wyatt asked, his voice filled with anger.

“Let’s start with your Casanova approach to the ladies. While their husbands are gambling in the casino, you’re hustling to get every woman you set your sights on into bed. And the miraculous thing to me is that you’re succeeding. Judging from what I’ve seen, I find it hard to believe that you actually get away with it.”

“You’re talking about one incident where that bitch filed a paternity suit. You know damned good and well that was trumped up, because I submitted to a DNA test. The chances of me being that kid’s father are nonexistent. The test came back saying there was a one hundred percent certainty that I’m *not* the kid’s father.”

“That doesn’t matter. The scandal hasn’t helped your reputation,” Brock insisted as Dakota rose and wandered to the window. “Besides, there have been reports of more than that one woman. This happens almost every night. Men don’t like you trying to seduce their significant others. There’s also this thing with your drinking. The owners think it’s out of hand.”

Dakota leaned back against the windowsill to study the men while they argued. Wyatt was probably one of the most handsome men she’d ever seen, with immaculately styled brown hair and dimples that showed even when he spoke. On the other hand, Brock was a bit on the scraggly side, with longish sandy blond hair. In the light, she could see that it was streaked with gray. Wyatt was long and wiry, and he appeared to

be about six-five. At maybe six-one or -two, Brock was close to her own height. And now that he wore a T-shirt and jeans instead of a suit, she could see that he was *very* well built.

But Wyatt was tall, and she liked that in a man. All she would have to do would be get Wyatt to lift weights a few times a week, and he would be perfect for her. She didn't care *what* kind of accusations Brock was making concerning Wyatt's womanizing.

The drinking, though, did cause her concern. One of the worst plagues on reservations was alcoholism. She'd left her only serious relationship because of it. Jimmy Ray was a fine man, until he started drinking. Then he turned into a man she wanted nothing to do with. It was one of the main reasons she'd left the res, too. She'd wanted to get away from that kind of influence.

And it didn't help that her grandmother had been raped by a half-breed man and conceived her mother. In turn, her "breed" mother had been raped by a full-blooded Sioux, but she'd been lucky not to get pregnant. To this day, she didn't understand how her mother could have married an American Indian when she'd been treated like that. It could only have been love.

With a heavy sigh, Dakota wandered over to the rocking recliner and dropped into it. She began to rock slowly, not paying any attention to the men's conversation. She had no desire to hear what they were saying, so she drifted aimlessly in her thoughts.

Wyatt seemed like a gentleman, and she wasn't sure why Brock would accuse him of being anything else. Maybe she could convince him to spend some time in rehab and dry out. After all, he did seem interested in her when they met. He'd even rubbed the underside of her wrist when they'd grasped hands in greeting, undoubtedly a silent symbol of his interest. And if he wanted to date her badly enough, he might try rehab for the opportunity.

Then Brock's angry voice brought her back to reality. "Listen, Romain. If you don't check yourself in somewhere, you're going to get fired for sure. They're willing to give you time off so you can get treatment for your drinking—and maybe even for your sexual desires. You've got to lay off both completely, or get yourself a girlfriend—at least for publicity. If you're discrete, they won't take any action, but no more flaunting your affairs. Is this all understood?"

"A girlfriend, huh?" Wyatt turned his gaze on Dakota again. She stiffened in her seat and stopped rocking. The expression of desire in his dusty blue eyes made her uneasy, but it also excited her. "I think I could do that—if your cousin's interested."

Dakota smiled. It was flattering to have such a handsome man be so overt in his admiration.

"You keep your damned hands off my cousin, Romain!" Brock declared.

Stunned by his words, Dakota shot to her feet to reply in a calm, yet firm tone. She didn't understand why, but she felt she should rein in her anger about Brock's drawing her into his discussion with a lie. "You can't tell me what to do, Brock. If I want to date Wyatt, I will, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. And I think I *would* like that, Wyatt. On one condition, that is. I want assurance that you aren't an alcoholic, Wyatt. I don't tolerate that sort of behavior."

"You have my word," Wyatt assured her.

"I'm afraid that's not good enough," she said. "You see, I've been in a relationship like that before, and I was given all kinds of promises and vows. None of them held any more water than a sieve does. I need to decide on my own if I can trust you. And until I

do, there won't be any serious dating. Is that agreed?"

"Oh, all right," Wyatt reluctantly agreed.

"It sounds to me," Brock said, "like my cousin's being rational about this, so I'll abide by her wishes. Besides, it might get you off the bottle long enough to realize what you're doing to your career. That's the most important thing here, you know. That's why we were brought together. Now let's *work* together—all three of us if need be—on seeing that you improve your image. Are we in agreement, Romain?"

"Sure, but I don't need rehab. I'm not an alcoholic, and I plan to prove it to Dakota." Wyatt turned his gaze to her and smiled. "Should we start dating tonight? You've probably already figured it out that I'm off. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

Dakota returned his smile. "Thanks for asking, but I'm too sore and exhausted from my accident. I'd rather take a raincheck."

"That's understandable." Rising, Wyatt strode over to her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'd better leave so you can get some rest. It's been a pleasure to meet you." Then he faced Brock, who rose as well, and added, "We'll play it your way for the time being. But that doesn't mean I believe I'm causing such a heavy loss to the casino owners. I'm just playing the game to keep my job."

"That's all we're asking," Brock said as Wyatt wandered to the door. "Cooperation. And it just might *be* the only way to keep your job."

"Well, I'll do everything I can to cooperate. You have my word on it." Glancing at Dakota, he said, "I'll call you tomorrow. I'm assuming you have a cell?"

"I do."

After giving him her phone number while he put it in his phone, he said, "Thanks. Good night."

Dakota returned his good night as Brock closed the door behind Wyatt. Shaking his head, Brock returned to the couch and dropped onto it with a heavy sigh.

"Are you sure you know what you're getting into, Dakota?" Brock asked.

"I know you won't understand this, but coming from the reservation, I've both seen and been through a lot in my life. I'm a fairly good judge of character, and I'm not convinced that Wyatt's telling the truth about his drinking, which is exactly why I want him to prove it to me."

"But do you know that some alcoholics can go for months without a drink then start all over again?"

"Very well."

"What about his womanizing? Do you think you can handle it? Because I really don't think he's going to give it up just because you're with him."

"At the moment. I have no doubt that I won't get involved with him to that extent unless he proves that he's not an alcoholic. I can't and won't abide such behavior, mainly because of my experiences on the res."

Brock smiled. "If nothing else you've got a good head on your shoulders—despite the fact that you're going to date Romain."

"As sore as one of those shoulders is right now," she added with a playful grin.

"I'm glad you have a sense of humor about this, but we need to talk about what happened tonight."

"I don't know what's to talk about," she replied. "I've told you everything I know. Two guys have shown up where I am several times over the last three days, and I don't know why. I don't even know for sure if they're following me. In fact, all I *am* sure of is

that it's the same two guys."

"There's *got* to be a reason, Dakota," Brock insisted. "People don't just follow other people around for the fun of it. And before you claim that we can't be sure they're following you, there's no other reason for them to have tried to keep up with me when I evaded them."

"I suppose not," she mumbled in agreement. Then she forced a firm, declarative tone into her voice. "But that doesn't mean I've *done* anything to warrant this. This could be a simple case of stalking." In her heart, though, she wasn't sure about anything right now.

"Stalking's never simple, Dakota, but you're right. Although, I've never heard of a stalker having an accomplice, and you said there were two men. Just keep in mind that you could also know something you don't know you know."

"Meaning?"

"You said you work for a lawyer. Maybe you came in contact with some criminals you weren't aware of, or maybe they think you have some information that could incriminate them in something. Is either of those possibilities likely?"

"I suppose, but anything's possible."

"Think hard, Dakota. What have you done at the office lately? Say in the last week. Did you type anything up that might be incriminating? Did you take any important depositions? Did *anything* seem out of the ordinary?"

Dakota sighed and began to rock again as she stared at her lap. *The last week*. She'd typed up several sets of divorce papers, probably ten of them. She'd also done about four wills, but none of them had any serious monetary value that would prompt her being followed. And she'd typed a lot of standard letters, not a one of which was out of the ordinary.

This just didn't make sense. Brock was right when he claimed that their following her was probably the case, because they wouldn't have gone to such lengths to stay on their tail if they weren't. But that didn't mean any of this made sense.

Startled by her next thought, she shot her gaze back to Brock.

"What is it?" he asked excitedly. "Did you think of something?"

"Yeah. If they're following me, how am I going to get my car back? They're probably watching the parking lot."

"Your life could be in danger," Brock said in amazement, "and you're worried about your *car*?"

"I sure can't afford to buy a new one."

Brock smiled reassuringly, and Dakota's tension decreased a bit. "Don't worry, Dakota. We'll get your car back somehow. Right now, though, you need to concentrate on deciding who these guys might be. You work for an attorney, so you must have typed up divorce papers. Might somebody be after you because of that?"

"I doubt it, Mr. Jones."

"Hey! What happened to Brock?"

"I only called you that when you were supposed to be my cousin, although quite frankly, I'm not sure where that notion came from. Now you're back to being a virtual stranger."

"Quite frankly, *I'm* not sure where the notion came from, either. It just popped out of my mouth. But you may as well go back to Brock, because I prefer it. So, what about any angry divorced men coming after you?"

"Nothing I typed up was anything but legal mumbo-jumbo, and it was all straightforward. This is Las Vegas, Brock. A lot of people come here for a divorce. I don't recall anything I've done as being more than routine. I did a few wills, too, but they were all relatively small amounts. Definitely nothing to follow me around about. And I typed up a couple of prenups, but again, those were routine and very equitable to all parties concerned."

"What about depositions?" he asked.

Dakota inhaled and released the air through her mouth. Depositions. She must have done six of those. One was for a custody trial, just a neighbor who couldn't be at the actual hearing because she had to be out of town on business when she was scheduled. Again, routine. Three of them were for automobile accidents. Two of those three had been fender-benders with minor injuries, but the other had been a serious accident that had paralyzed one person and killed another. But that one wouldn't create a problem, because the deceased had been at fault and his insurance company was going to pay. Everything had been standard.

What were the other two depositions? Oh, yes. One dealt with a case of petty theft, and the other was about an accident somebody had at someone else's private residence. There was absolutely nothing sinister there, either.

Shaking her head, Dakota frowned. "I can't come up with anything, Brock. All those depositions were routine. There wasn't a one of them that could be even remotely give anybody reason to follow me. This whole thing just doesn't make sense."

Brock grimaced then wandered to the window overlooking the well-lit parking lot of his condominium complex. After a few moments, he turned and said, "I could use a beer. Would you like one?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink."

"Not at all, huh? I don't drink a lot, but I like a beer occasionally, so I keep some around." After getting a canned beer from the refrigerator, he returned to the living room and sat down again. Popping the top, he took a long swallow then said, "I hate to say this, because I'm pretty sure how you'll react, but you're going to have to spend the night here. I know I told you earlier that you could probably go home in the middle of the night, but I don't think that's such a good idea now."

"Why not?"

"Because I saw that car in the parking lot. I don't think I can get you out of the condo without them seeing you."

Was this a ploy to get her into his bed? "I don't believe you."

"I'd tell you to look out the window yourself, but I'm afraid they'll see you. Right now, they can't be sure, because they were nowhere around when we got here. I have two bedrooms, too, so it wouldn't be an imposition and I wouldn't be trying to seduce you."

Dakota considered his words. If those men really were out there, she sure didn't want them to know she was here, so she *should* stay away from the window. And if they somehow got in during the night, she would at least have somebody around who could protect her.

Studying Brock as he took another drink, she gave his suggestion more serious consideration. He was very muscular, even if he wasn't as tall as Wyatt. Brock could undoubtedly protect her if something transpired. She didn't have a doubt in her mind about that. Although, she'd been known to blacken a few men's eyes when they'd tried

to go further than she wanted them to. She could probably do some pretty serious damage to an assailant if she set her mind to it.

"All right, Brock," she finally agreed. "I'll stay here tonight."

"I'm glad," he replied with a grin. "I was afraid we were going to have to argue until you agreed. I really didn't think it would be that easy."

"I'm not stupid, Brock, and I'm not unrealistic. I'm quite capable of knowing when a man's being honest with me in regard to something like this—even if I've never had an experience like this before. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to tell me when I'm in trouble. I can figure it out all by myself, just like I can figure out that staying here where I'm not alone is much safer than going to my own apartment where I am."

"Then I'll make the spare bed for you and get you a pair of my pajamas to sleep in."

"As long as I'm staying," she requested as they both rose and started down the hallway, "would you mind if I take a bath? I really feel dirty after the *cementing* of our meeting."

Brock laughed, a deep, rich sound that Dakota liked more than she was willing to admit. Maybe she should let a little more of her sense of humor show so she could hear him do it again.

"I adore the way you turn your tragedy into humor," he said with a smile. "I'll bet you have very little problem coping with the normal trials of life. Help yourself to the bubble bath under the sink. I hide it there so my guests of either the male or female persuasion don't know that I love a good, hot bubble bath once in a while. There's also spa-safe skin softener if you want to use the Jacuzzi jets."

"Thanks. I think I'll do the latter," she said as she disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

"Don't get undressed until I give you my pajamas!" he shouted as his footsteps continued down the hall. "I wouldn't want to walk in on you when I shouldn't."

Dakota smiled. Brock was being a real gentleman about this whole incident. In fact, he was almost a complete opposite from almost every man she'd ever dated. It was refreshing to have met a man she thought could be nothing more than a friend to her. Refreshing and *very* reassuring. She unexpectedly hoped that he wouldn't walk out of her life as soon as they figured out why those men were following her around Las Vegas.

THREE

Brock looked out his living room window the following morning. That car was still in the lot. Sighing, he shook his head and wandered to his recliner. How could he tell her those men were still watching his condo? More importantly, how could he convince her to take the day off work and stay put? Dakota didn't seem to be the type to let something like this keep her from her duties.

Maybe he should take the day off, too. That way he might deter anybody who might want to break into his condo to see if Dakota was still there. On the other hand, if things didn't look normal, the men might suspect that was exactly what he was doing. Too bad he hadn't taken some courses in criminology while he was in college. Maybe then he'd have some idea of how to combat these people.

A noise in the kitchen startled him, and he shot his gaze to the doorway. A moment later, Dakota appeared with a cup of coffee. As far as he could tell, she wore only his pajama tops, which left her long, dark-skinned, well-defined legs exposed to nearly her hip.

He stared at her in awe, his mouth gaping slightly, as she wandered to the sofa. There was a dark bruise the size of a dessert plate on her upper right thigh. And that was just what he could see! The bruise disappeared under his pajama tops. He couldn't believe that she could move so smoothly with an injury like that.

Setting her mug on the coaster on the end table, she lowered herself onto the couch with her left leg under her then asked, "Are you sure you don't own a Mack truck?"

Brock turned his gaze to her face and saw the remnants of a smile as it disappeared from her full lips. Still amazed that she could have a sense of humor about the incident, he chuckled. "Feeling that bad this morning, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Maybe you should call in sick."

"I wish I could, but I've got too much to do. One of the secretaries called in sick yesterday and said she'd be off the rest of the week—CoVid. There are plenty of secretaries in the firm, but I've been helping her boss, as well as doing my own job."

"And just how much do you think you're going to get done if you're in as much pain as it looks like?"

"Probably not a heck of a lot, but at least it will be something."

"Okay. Say you go to work. That means I'll have to take you back to your car." Realizing how self-centered that sounded, he quickly added, "Which is fine. But my point is that those men are still out there. I don't doubt for a second that they'd follow us then take up where they left off last night."

Scowling, Dakota took a sip of her coffee then said, "I couldn't sleep very well last night, so I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what they want from me. And I came up with nothing, Brock. There's absolutely no reason for them to be tailing me like that. Maybe they've mistaken me for somebody else."

"That's possible," he granted, "but how likely is it? Not very. People who do things

like this normally know exactly what's going on in their victims' lives. At least, that's *my theory*."

"Then what should I do to shake them? I can't stay hidden away forever—or at least until they get tired of waiting for me to show up again."

"I'm not sure shaking them's going to work. They found us after we did that last night, and I'd take a ten grand bet on the fact that they'll find you again if we succeed in giving them the slip a second time."

"Well, there must be something I can do," she said irritably. "I refuse to be forced into a self-imposed prison by two men I don't even know."

"The only thing I can think of is that you lay low for a few days. Maybe they'll finally believe that you're not here like they think."

Dakota stared at him, her dark eyes wide with surprise. "You mean stay *here* for a few days?" She shook her head. "Oh, no. I couldn't do that, Brock. If you'll stop to think about it, I don't know you, either. In fact, if I hadn't been so scared last night, I never would have agreed to this."

"You don't think I'm in on this, do you?" he asked, hoping her answer would be an instant no.

Instead, she said, "I don't know *what* to think. I'm not used to men following me all the time. Whether you're in on this or not, though, I don't feel comfortable staying here."

"If I *were* involved, Dakota," he said, "I assure you they wouldn't be outside my condo building. Besides, can you think of another way to get those guys off your back other than staying here?"

"No, but ..."

"Then it's settled. You'll take off work and stay here, and I'll go about my business as though nothing's out of the ordinary. Or maybe your boss would let you work here during that time. You know, work remotely like a lot of people did during CoVid. It would give you something to do, and you wouldn't be roaming around where those guys can see you. Unless there's a second car out there somewhere, they can't be two places at once."

"It's not so much my job, Brock," she explained. "The secretaries can cover for the both of us—especially since both of our bosses are in court all day for the next few days. But I have a kitten at home. If I stay here, somebody's going to have to go over and take care of her. You know, clean her litter box, feed her, things like that."

Brock took several sips of coffee before he asked, "How's she set for today?"

"She probably has enough food to get by, but she's a big eater. It's hard to tell how much she'll go through."

"Let me see if they follow me this morning. If they don't, I'll find a way to get her to you without causing suspicion. I'll take your keys in case I can shake them or they decide to leave me alone."

"So you're basically holding me hostage here?" she asked, her sorrow evident in her voice.

Brock's heart went out to her. She wasn't accustomed to this kind of life, but what else could he do? He couldn't let her wander around town when there were two men after her, two men who could get a second car at any moment and follow both Dakota and him.

Smiling, he replied, "Actually, those men have turned you into my hostage." His

smiled faded, and he sighed at length. "Look, Dakota, I know this isn't easy for you, but try to see it my way. I can't, in good conscience, let you go out there now. I know my involvement in this is just an accident, but I feel obligated to keep you safe until we figure out what's going on. Can't you understand that?"

"Did you ever consider calling the police?" she asked. "Surely, they would know what to do."

Brock pushed down the footrest and rose, taking his coffee mug with him. As he stood before her, he replied. "Did *you*, Dakota? I think not since you were running away from those guys last night. And if you *didn't* contact the cops, I suspect there's something in the back of your mind keeping you from doing it, something that you aren't telling me. But that's okay. I won't push you—at least, not yet." He started from the room then added, "By the way, call your office and let them know you won't be there today. Tell them the truth—that you had an accident."

"Nobody's there yet."

"You work for an attorney without an answering machine or voice mail?" he asked pointedly.

"Okay, okay," she replied in exasperation. "I'll call."

"Good. Then go back to bed. Maybe you can get some more sleep. I'm going to get ready for work."

Dakota paced Brock's condo for over an hour. She didn't particularly want to stay there, but the blue car had returned about an hour and a half after Brock had gone to work. Apparently, those men still believed that she was there. And if that was the case, how would she ever get back to her own apartment?

Things looked very bleak. To begin with, she didn't know who was following her—or why! The whole thing was ridiculous. If she knew something she shouldn't, like Brock had suggested, she had no idea what it could be. She'd racked her brain both during the night and this morning, but nothing came to her. Those men were apparently stalking her for some reason only they knew.

Roaming into the kitchen, Dakota began loading the dishes on the counter into the dishwasher. Brock had told her not to bother cleaning when she'd offered, but she had to do something. Just sitting around was driving her nuts. Too bad Rick had insisted that he didn't need her for anything. If he had, she could have at least done something at the condo. This waiting was worse than being followed.

With the dishwasher going, she returned to the living room and turned on the television. Maybe a little noise would be a diversion. She sat down in the rocker-recliner, put her feet up, then picked up the remote control and flipped through the channels until she found a criminal justice show. Somebody else's problems should take her mind off her own.

But after twenty minutes of watching the commentary about a trial in Florida, she got up and began to gather the newspapers into a neat pile. She could listen to the lawyer and retired judge discuss the embezzlement case while she made herself useful.

Within a half an hour, she had dusted the living room, dining room, and the bedroom in which she'd spent the night. The only thing left was Brock's bedroom. She considered going on in but decided against it. A person's bedroom was his private domain. She had no intention of going into Brock's or anybody else's bedroom without permission.

Returning to the living room, she peered out the window, moving the closed curtains only far enough to give her a decent view. That blue car was *still* there. Those men were relentless.

She returned to the recliner and sank into it. That big trial in New Mexico was on the television now, with the commentator announcing that there had been yet another delay but that it should only last about an hour. Dakota decided to stay put and listen to the discussion about yesterday's events since she hadn't seen the proceedings.

Just as the trial was getting started again, Brock's condo door opened. Startled, Dakota scrambled to her feet, gasping in pain at her sudden movement. To her relief, Brock strode in the door with a large paper grocery bag in one arm and a smaller one with the top rolled up in his hand. He closed the door with his free hand while she lowered herself back into the recliner.

"You scared the life out of me," she scolded. "I thought you were those men."

Brock chuckled. "I doubt they have a key, Dakota."

Striding over to her, he set the smaller bag on her lap. It moved as a plaintive mew came from inside. Dakota released a happy squeal, then opened the bag and scooped out the kitten. The tiny animal mewed louder, jumped from her hand, and climbed up her dress to sniff her face in greeting. A moment later, the kitten hopped into her lap, curled into a tight ball, and promptly fell asleep.

Dakota smiled and stroked the short hair on the kitten's body then let her long fingers wrap around the bushy tail as she stroked it as well. "Poor Hetkala. She's beat."

"*She's beat*," Brock said with a laugh as he dropped onto the sofa. "I thought I'd *never* catch her. Hell, it took me a good half hour to even *find* her."

"She doesn't like strangers," Dakota explained as she stroked her pet.

"No kidding! I finally found her in a kitchen drawer. She took off like lightning when I opened the drawer. Just when I thought I had her cornered, she'd get by me again. Not only does she look like a squirrel, she's as fast as one, too."

"That's why I named her Hetkala. It's Lakota for squirrel."

Again, Brock chuckled. "Perfect name. Anyway, once I got my hands on her, I put her in the bag. And she hasn't shut up since, not that I blame her. I wouldn't want to be shoved into a bag, either."

"No wonder she's so tired. I think I'll let her sleep while I watch the trial. What else did you bring?"

"Some of her food and litter. The box is in the car, so I'll have to get it soon. But for now, I think I'd better let it be. Those guys are still in the lot."

Dakota grimaced. "I know. I saw them out there a while ago."

"They followed me this morning, but I guess I didn't take them where they expected. I kept an eye out for them from my office, and they left when I didn't come out for over an hour." Brock perused the room then grinned at Dakota. "I don't suppose you came up with any ideas about why they're doing this while you were cleaning."

She shook her head and stared at the kitten. After several seconds, she returned her gaze to his face. "Not a one. I don't understand any of this, Brock. It just doesn't make sense to me. But I have been thinking about my staying here. It's really not a good idea, Brock. If I am in danger, that's going to put you in danger, too, and I would really feel guilty if anything happened to you."

"You're a hell of a lot safer hanging out with me than you are running around alone. Besides, if they didn't try anything when I was alone this morning, I doubt they're

worried about me. They probably just tailed me to see if I would take them to you.”

“Don’t you at least have a girlfriend who would frown on my being here?”

“Nope. Left my ex-wife and former girlfriend in L.A. and came here eight months ago. And quite frankly, I don’t regret it for a second. There was just too much pressure in Los Angeles, and the women just weren’t my type anymore. Although, I do regret not being near my boy. He’s ten now and should really have a father figure around who’s better at being one than his stepfather. And I’m not ashamed to say that I *like* not having a girlfriend. It’s refreshing not to have to worry about supporting my end of a relationship.”

Glad to have something other than herself to talk about, Dakota asked, “Did you live in L.A. very long?”

“All thirty-nine years of my life. I got tired of the environment, so I hit the road. Of course, as a public relations expert specializing in entertainment, I needed to move somewhere my services might be in demand. So here I am. Busting my buns in Vegas.”

“I know how you feel. I left South Dakota for basically the same reasons. I got tired of the environment. It’s just that our environments were entirely different.”

“I suppose they were.” Brock rose with a sigh. “I hate to say this, but I have to leave again. I need to get more *groceries* out of the car before I go back to work. At least, I hope that’s what those guys are thinking.”

“So do I.”

On his next trip into the house, Brock brought two more grocery bags. Then he left again, grinning impishly while telling her to take it easy and let her injuries heal instead of cleaning.

Dakota smiled as he closed the door behind him. Brock seemed like a true gentleman. She already knew that he would probably end up being one of the best friends she’d ever made. And since he didn’t have so much as a girlfriend, she didn’t feel guilty about staying with him. If he had had a girlfriend, she would have insisted that she leave by the weekend whether he agreed to it or not.

Carefully rising and laying Hetkala on the chair, she followed him to the dinette table in the kitchen, where he set the grocery bags he carried and questioned him curiously. “What are in those?”

His face turned deep red, and she smiled. Obviously, he’d done something that was very embarrassing to him. He turned away from her and wandered to the refrigerator, saying, “I thought you might want a change of clothes, so I raided your closet and drawers. I hope you don’t mind.”

“For clean clothes?” she asked with a grin. “I don’t mind in the least—except maybe if you came upon my lingerie drawer.”

“As a matter of fact, I did,” he replied, opening a can of Coke on his way back to the table. “You’ve got so much conservative stuff, and I was surprised to see what ... sexy nighties you have. I expected flannel or cotton, not silk and satin.”

“It isn’t exactly satin, just nylon. Besides, every woman likes pretty things on occasion. I happen to like them at night—when I’m alone so nobody can see them.”

“You’re not going to be alone for long,” he reminded her. “You have a boyfriend now, remember?”

“No, I don’t,” she replied, startled by his remark.

“That’s what Romain thinks.”

“Oh, yeah! I forgot about that, only I wouldn’t call him a boyfriend yet. A

prospective suitor, possibly, or maybe a man who's enamored for some reason. But I certainly wouldn't call him a boyfriend."

"Whatever," he said as he leaned against the table. "I'm sure *he* considers you a girlfriend. That's the kind of guy he is—arrogant and possessive. You really don't have to do this, you know. You could back out before a relationship even gets started."

"But I *want* to date him. I think it would be fun. And how do you know he's arrogant and possessive? You're not a woman, so you can't speculate on it." Deciding that she'd had enough of the present line of conversation, she asked, "By the way, did you find out who owns the car you hit last night?"

Brock laid his hand on the small of her back to escort her into the living room. "Sure did. I didn't bother my sister, though. I went back to the restaurant and asked if anybody had reported a damaged car. The guy left his number with the Matre'd, so I called him to explain."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I'd hit his car to avoid missing a woman who wasn't watching where she was going," he said as they sank onto the sofa. "I didn't give him your name, because I didn't want you to look like an airhead. Anyway, I told him that you ran into my car, and I was in a hurry to get you medical treatment."

"And he didn't get mad about you not leaving a note?"

"Not in the least. In fact, he seemed to understand and promised to call the cops and tell them that everything was resolved between us."

"He'd called the police?" she asked in shock.

"It was the smart thing to do. But he figured he didn't need to bother them anymore since I came forth with all the information he needs for his insurance."

"So the cops won't be involved?"

"Nope."

When she sighed in relief, he studied her with his gray eyes narrowed in suspicion. She examined him curiously then asked, "What?"

"I was just wondering why you would word it like that. I thought you didn't know anything about why those guys are following you. And this is the second time you've given me reason to wonder if you're hiding something illegal, something you don't want the cops to know about."

"I am *not* hiding anything," she said, offended by his remark. "You asked me about my job, and I answered you. I've done nothing on my job that could possibly cause somebody to want to stalk me. I just don't trust police."

"Why not?"

"I grew up on a reservation, Brock. The police in nearby towns don't get along well with the American Indians. We're more often than not treated like the blacks in a big city. The justice for the white man is different than that for the red man."

"I think I understand. Kind of like 1973 when the Oglala Sioux occupied Wounded Knee. Are there a lot of Native Americans jailed on trumped-up charges? Or do the cops just come down harder on your people?"

"As with any minority race, it's six of one half a dozen of the other. But it's the way of life there. We don't get used to it, and we don't accept it. All we can do is try to change it, and that's not easy."

"You need a good public relations man," he mumbled.

"You volunteering for the job?" she asked with a playful grin. "Or are you drumming

up business for your South Dakota partner?"

"I'm serious, Dakota. A good publicist can do wonders for your cause. Unfortunately, I'm not your man, because I specialize in celebrities, not politics. Besides, I don't know beans about your people's problems. I wouldn't have the slightest idea of how to go about attacking the problems your people face."

"Maybe I should call my brother and suggest it."

"Your brother?" Brock repeated curiously.

"He's a member of the American Indian Movement. AIM? Our mother was at Wounded Knee in '73, too. She had to leave when he was born. After that, she was jailed for a while due to her participation. I don't think the charges were trumped up, as you call it, but I do think they were exaggerated. So he's always been super interested in it."

"What's he do now?"

"Like I said, he's still involved with AIM to some extent, but mostly he runs a horse ranch in South Dakota. Unfortunately, I don't know if he's involved enough with AIM to bring up the notion of a public relations campaign."

"You don't discuss the movement?"

"No. What we discuss when we talk is more personal, stuff like how his family's doing, how I'm doing, when I'm coming back for my next visit." She smiled and shook her head. "Actually, he thinks I should *move* back so he can take care of me."

"Take care of you? Why would he want to do that? unless there's something you're not telling me about those guys following you. You'd better fess up, Dakota, because ..."

"Wait a minute!" she shouted over his tirade. "I'm not lying to you. Chayt wants me home because he's always taken care of me, ever since Mom died. I thought getting away would cure that, but it didn't. I'm not going back because I'm not ready. You see, I'd just gotten out of a bad relationship when I came here. I wanted to get away from the influence of the res—like I mentioned last night. But I kind of like it here—especially the weather. It gets downright *cold* in South Dakota. I'm not too fond of going back to stay, even if I do keep telling my brother that I will someday."

Again, Brock laughed. "So you keep hanging out in the *hot* weather. I can't say I blame you. I'm not so sure I'd like frigid winters, either."

When Brock left a few minutes later, Dakota went to the front window to see if the car would follow him. To her dismay, it didn't move. Either those men were sound asleep, which she highly doubted, or they knew she was in the condo. How would she ever get out of there and back to her normal life if that were the case?

And after her discussion with Brock, she was a bit concerned that she just might know why those guys were suddenly following her. If she was right, she didn't like this in the least.

FOUR

By the next day, the blue car that had been following Dakota disappeared from the parking lot of Brock's condo. Relief flooded through her that morning. They had given up and gone away. Now she could go home and back to work.

But when she mentioned it to Brock, he shook his head. "You can't go anywhere yet, Dakota. We don't know that those guys aren't staking out your place instead. They didn't find you here, so it's likely that they'll go watch your apartment for a while."

Dakota frowned. "I suppose you're right. Does that mean I can't go to work, either? I don't like taking time off when I'm not sick or on vacation. There's never anything to do."

"I don't know how else to handle this without going to the cops," he replied as they ate the omelets that she made for breakfast, "and you don't want to do that. Unless, perhaps, you've changed your mind."

"I haven't."

"That's what I thought, so you'll have to stick around here until I can make sure that all they've changed is their tactics. I'll drive by your place this morning and see if their car's there, then I'll call you at nine o'clock. Of course, I'll need your cell number. Don't touch it if it shows a number or a name you don't know. Be smart about this."

"I never answer I those calls." She paused then asked, "If they're not at my place, do you think it would be okay if I go to work? I'm tired of sitting around here."

Brock grinned and shook his head again. "Let's compromise, okay? If they're not at your apartment complex, I'll drive by where you work—if you'll tell me where that is. If they're not there, either, I'll swing back here, pick you up, and take you to your car."

Glad that he was being so accommodating, she returned his smile. "That sounds like a reasonable compromise. Should I expect either a nine o'clock call or an appearance shortly thereafter?"

"Spoken like a true paralegal," he said with a chuckle. "Sure. If I don't find them, I'll come right back."

After Brock left, Dakota roamed his condo aimlessly. She'd already done the breakfast dishes, and she'd dusted and cleaned the day before. There was absolutely nothing to do.

Glancing around the living room, she wondered if there was something to do other than watch television. Her gaze fell upon his bookcase. Maybe he had something interesting to read. A good number of the titles he had she'd already read, and those that she hadn't were science fiction, which she detested.

With a sigh, she returned to the couch and dropped onto it. A moment later Hetkala hopped onto her lap for attention. Absently stroking the kitten's back, Dakota contemplated what she could do if she couldn't leave.

Picking up the remote control, she turned on the television to watch *Good Morning, America*. If nothing else, the voices would keep her company until Brock called.

At nine o'clock, she picked up her cell phone. Brock would be calling any moment, and she didn't want to waste a second to find out if she had a life again. This hiding out was driving her nuts—and she'd only been doing it about thirty-six hours!

The landline beside her rang, startling her from her thoughts. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she hadn't given him her phone number. Grabbing up the phone, she pushed the button to answer it. "Hi. What did you find out?"

There was a pause, then a woman replied, "I'm sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number."

What was wrong with her? she wondered. Why had she assumed it was Brock?

"Maybe not," Dakota said nervously. Was this a girlfriend that Brock hadn't mentioned? Had she unintentionally gotten him in trouble? No, he'd told her he didn't have a girlfriend—unless he'd lied to get her to stay with him for a while. And if that was the case, he *deserved* to get in trouble. Still, he was being awfully helpful, so she owed him something for that. Deciding it was best to waylay any possible problems for him, she asked, "Are you calling for Brock Jones?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. Who am I talking to?"

"This is his cousin," she replied, deciding it was better to keep her cover just in case.

"Really?" the woman asked excitedly. "This is Bethany! Which cousin are you?"

Bethany? Dakota wondered. She sounded awfully excited about her being Brock's cousin. Obviously, Brock talked more about his family to other women than he did to her. Not sure what to do, she replied, "Dakota Grayeagle."

"Who?" Bethany asked curiously. "We don't have a cousin by that name."

"We?" Dakota repeated. "Are you Brock's sister?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. Now who are you?"

"Dakota Grayeagle *is* my name, but as you've already ascertained, I'm not your cousin."

"Are you his girlfriend? I talked to him just the day before yesterday, and he told me that he hadn't met anybody he'd want to date in Vegas yet, let alone have spend the night. And I assume that's what you did since you're answering the phone at this hour of the morning."

"I did, but not in the sense you mean. Brock is just helping me out of a bind. We're not dating in any sense of the word."

"Oh. I take it he's not there or you wouldn't have answered."

"He's not."

"Would you let him know that I called? It's nothing important, just wanted to talk. That's why I called him at home instead of his cell. I was kind of hoping he might be going in late today like he does sometimes."

"I'll tell him. Is there any other message?"

"Nope. Just that I called. It was nice talking to you, Dakota. Brock must like you a lot or he wouldn't be helping you out. I hope we can meet sometime."

"That would be nice," Dakota replied. "Good-bye."

"Bye-bye."

With a sigh of relief that the conversation was over, Dakota turned off the phone. So Brock really did have a sister in the area. He'd acted so nervous when he'd told her that Bethany worked for the DMV that she'd doubted he even had a sister. But she'd let him get away with his obvious lie, thinking that it didn't make a difference, anyway.

Now, for some reason, she was glad to know that he hadn't deceived her.

The phone rang again, and Dakota answered it with much less eagerness this time. "Hello?"

"Hi, Dakota. It's Brock."

"What did you find out?"

"That you have company in your parking lot. I tried to call you a couple of minutes ago, but the line was busy. I sure as hell hope it was one of those junk calls offering me extended auto maintenance coverage."

"No, it was your sister."

"Beth?" he asked in surprise. "What did she want?"

"Just to talk, she said."

Brock laughed. "That's what she does best, next to taking care of her kids."

"Wait a minute. I thought you said that she works for the DMV."

"Well," he said hesitantly, "I kind of lied about that. It was the only thing I could think of at the time to justify my crime of hit and run. I *was* going to call there and see if I could get information, but I went with the restaurant owner instead. Thank God, it worked out. Everything's taken care of. Which reminds me. I'm going to make arrangements to get my car fixed."

"What will you do about transportation?"

"Either get a loaner or a rental car. I haven't decided which yet."

"I should pay for that, too."

"Don't be silly. It's included in my insurance policy. I know you must be going nuts there, so I wondered if there's anything you need. Not from your apartment, of course, because those guys are out there. But maybe I can get you something from a store somewhere."

"That would be great!" she exclaimed happily. "I've been dying to read that new John Grisham novel. Would you pick it up for me? I'll pay you back."

"No problem. Paper or hardback?"

"It's not out in paper yet, so you'll have to get hardback."

"Gotcha covered. I'll hit a store and see if I can find it. I'll bring it to you right away." He paused then continued in an excited tone. "Wait! We don't have to do that. You can download it on my iPad and read the digital."

"Don't be silly," she replied. "Besides, I prefer a paper book. I can wait until you come home at your usual time."

"All right. My usual time's around noon for lunch. See you then."

"I'm not going anywhere. Bye now."

Dakota turned off the phone again and set it on the coffee table. Something told her that Brock wasn't about to take repayment for the book, but she was still going to try.

"I just need your phone number," she said, "and I can Zelle you the money."

"I'll just Zelle it back," Brock replied. "Now eat your sandwich."

"Ah," she retorted to add some levity to her life, "then I would Zelle it back to you, and you would Zelle it back to me, and it would be unending. Besides, I had a feeling you would grumble about this."

Dakota picked up her turkey club sandwich. "I'm glad you brought this. I know this sounds un-American, but I don't like peanut butter, and that's all you have. I thought I was going to have to have chips, dip and chocolate chip mint ice cream for lunch."

“Let’s see. You’d have gotten calcium from the ice cream and carbohydrates from the chips—vegetables, too, I guess, since they’re *corn* chips. But you would have gotten the veggies from the salsa, anyway. Oh, and fruits from the jalepeno peppers. Sounds pretty well-rounded to me—except for the lack of protein from the peanut butter.”

“Geez!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “With a nutritional mentality like that, it’s no wonder you have that kind of food in your home.”

“I eat most of my meals out. Cooking is definitely *not* my forte.”

Dakota hesitated to respond. Should she offer to make him dinner that night? It would be a nice way to thank him for taking a stranger under his wing and protecting her, but she was afraid that he might draw a different connotation from the act than she wanted to put forth.

His still-merry voice startled her back from her thoughts. “That’s why Beth called this morning. She invites me to dinner at least three times a week. I pay her, of course, because I don’t feel right about eating so much of her food.”

So much for fixing him dinner. He wasn’t going to be there, anyway. Still, she needed to fix herself something to eat, and he didn’t have anything in his cupboards or refrigerator except junk food, coffee, eggs, tomatoes, onions, milk, beer, and Coke.

“She told me to bring you along,” he added casually.

Dakota shot her startled gaze to his face and saw that he was grinning at her like a mischievous little boy. She didn’t know him very well, but she could tell one thing. He was up to something. And his next words proved it.

“I told her I would.” He paused then said, “But I had second thoughts. Bethany’s been trying to marry me off since I got divorced three years ago, and I decided I didn’t need her involving you in her matrimonial plot. You have enough problems without my sister’s meddling—although, at times I have had fun with the women she finds for me.”

“I appreciate that.”

“So what should I bring home tonight? Pizza? Chinese? Italian?”

“Do you like teriyaki stir fry?” she asked curiously.

“Love it.”

“Then why don’t you just pick up some things at the store for me, and I’ll cook for you—to thank you for helping me out last night.”

“I’ll be darned. A Native ...” Grinning, he paused and winked at her. “An American Indian who likes Japanese food. Interesting. You make a list, and I’ll pick up what you need.”

While they were eating dinner, Dakota’s phone rang. Wandering over to it, she noted that she didn’t recognize the phone number. Did she dare answer it? Something inside her, though, told her she should.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dakota,” Wyatt Romain said.

“Oh, hi, Wyatt,” she replied, glancing over at Brock. “How are you?”

“I’d be better if I could see you tonight, but I know that’s not possible. I have to work.”

“That’s okay. I’m still not up to doing anything.”

“Pretty sore, huh?”

“Yeah, but not as bad as yesterday.”

Despite his sad expression, Brock continued eating. Just moments earlier, he had

been cheerful. Had Wyatt's call changed his mood? If so, why? It wasn't like Brock wasn't aware that Wyatt would be calling on her.

"I don't suppose you might feel more like it around one a.m.," Wyatt said into her ear. "We could get together after my last show."

"I go to bed no later than eleven."

Wyatt laughed loudly. "I don't think that's legal here in Las Vegas. But all right. I won't pressure you. We'll still be going out on Saturday night."

"I'm planning on it."

"Good. Do you have time to talk now?"

"Not really. Brock and I are in the middle of dinner. I'd like to finish it before it gets cold, and I don't eat while I'm talking on the phone. It's rude."

"I don't mind hearing you eat. All I want to do is talk."

"It's not just rude to you," Dakota returned. "It's rude to my dinner companion. I should be talking with him, not on the phone. I appreciate you wanting to get to know me better, but now isn't a good time. You can call me another time, okay?"

"Doesn't sound like I have a choice."

"You don't. I'll talk to you later. Bye now."

Dakota disconnected the call and laid her phone on the table before Brock questioned her. "How come you made it so short? I don't mind if you talk to him."

"I wouldn't have felt right about it," she said with a smile. "I was raised that it's rude to talk on the phone when you're visiting with somebody else, especially during dinner."

"You were so excited about meeting him the other night that I'm surprised you keep putting off dating him. What's up?"

"Nothing. It's exactly what I told him. I'm still sore and don't particularly *want* to go out. Although, I suppose I should admit that he makes me a little nervous. I'm not used to associating with celebrities."

"Especially celebrities who have such a big head," Brock mumbled.

"What?"

He turned his steady gaze on her and asked, "I'm curious, Dakota, because I just don't get it. What do women see in that guy? Every time I'm around him, he comes across as being arrogant and self-involved."

Dakota shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose it's his height and good looks. Any woman would be thrilled to have such a handsome man shower her with attention, just like men are thrilled to have a beautiful woman's attention."

"I suppose height means a lot to you, given how tall you are."

"I'll be honest. It does mean a little—but not a *lot*. I've dated guys shorter than I several times."

"Have you gone steady with them?"

"No, but ..."

"What about a long-term relationship?"

"Well, no, they were just dates. But you're making it sound like I'm prejudiced. I'm really ..."

Brock grinned at her. "I rest my case, Miss Paralegal. You may *date* somebody short, but you don't *stay* with them."

"Okay, you win. Now can we discuss something that isn't going to make either of us uneasy?"

For the rest of the meal, they discussed Brock's job, both in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. He didn't particularly like talking about himself so much, but every time he brought up questions about Dakota, she gave a brief, indefinite answer and directed the conversation back to him. After a while, he gave up trying to learn more about her and just continued to talk about himself.

When they'd loaded the dishwasher and started it, they sat down to watch CNN on television. They discussed the news reports and the hurricane in the Atlantic that was headed toward Florida. Then the conversation lagged.

Unsure what to say next, Brock asked, "Are you stir crazy from sitting around my place yet?"

"Am I ever!" she exclaimed happily. "That's why I needed the book. I'm not a big television watcher—the news, legal TV, a few sitcoms and a couple of mysteries is about it."

"Do you plan to read tonight or watch sitcoms?" he asked in a lightly pointed tone.

"Well, it's rude of me to read when I'm a guest at somebody's house. And there's really nothing on that interests me tonight."

"Then may I make a suggestion?"

"What's that?"

"How about let's get out of here and go to Romain's show. That way you can see him, and I can get a feel about how his performance affects people without him knowing I'm there. I evaluated it about a month ago and submitted a report to his manager and the casino owner. What I'd like to do tonight is see if there's been any change in his demeanor and the audience's reaction. It would give me a better feel of how to handle his case."

"You don't have to do that. I can wait until Saturday night."

"I'm sure you can, but I'd planned to do this last night and didn't get to. I figured, if you'd like to get out of here, I could kill two birds with one stone. What do you say? Are you really too sore to go out?"

Dakota smiled. "As long as we're in agreement that this *isn't* a date. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression by agreeing to this."

"It's absolutely *not* a date, just a couple of friends going out for the evening. Let's go get dressed in better clothes than shorts. That dress you were wearing when you ran into me should be fine now that you've washed it."

Dakota sat at the table in the back and listened quietly to Wyatt's upbeat song. He had a great voice and a smooth style, and she'd loved his music the only other time she'd heard him. But she did notice that his approach to the music was different. He seemed a little less seductive with his movements, less passionate with his words. She wasn't sure she liked this change.

Leaning closer to Brock, she asked, "What do you think? Is this what you were aiming for?"

"Not really," Brock admitted as he shook his head. "I didn't mean for him to take out the parts where he seduces the audience. Hell, that's what his kind of music's all about. What do *you* think?"

Taken aback, she stared at him in shock. "Surely, you don't want *my* opinion. I don't know anything about performers' images. I couldn't possibly give you an educated opinion on it."

"That's not what I mean. I need your opinion as a woman. How does he come across to you?"

"Insincere," she said. "It's like he doesn't really care about his audience, like he's doing what he was told, not what comes naturally. He seems sort of stilted, don't you think?"

"Absolutely."

"What did you tell him about this, anyway?"

"Nothing about his actual performance. I'm taking care of the outside stuff. His manager's taking care of his on-stage image."

"Apparently, his manager is doing a lousy job." Dakota glanced around the room and groaned. This wasn't a very good turn-out, but it wasn't terrible, either. And it certainly wasn't as good as the Romain show she'd attended two years ago. "Pretty sparse pickings in the audience department, too. I know it's only the nine o'clock show, but I'd still think there would be more people here."

"I agree. I guess I'm going to have to talk to his manager again and see if I can't make things a little better on this front."

"Good idea, because I *know* he could pull in more than this."

"Will you come with me?" he asked. "Maybe it would help if I had a live woman to back up my findings. That way his manager will probably lend more credence to my opinions, which are apparently very close to yours."

"I suppose I could do that."

"Great! Now, do you want to hang around till the end? Or have you heard enough? I have a strong compulsion to find a coffee shop that serves pie."

"Actually," she said with a grimace, "I'd kind of like to stay for the rest of it. I do like Wyatt's singing, even if it isn't up to what it used to be."

"No problem. That coffee shop's not going anywhere. We can go when he's done. Besides, he might see us walk out and get suspicious. We wouldn't want him to think that you're two-timing him before you've had your first date."

Dakota giggled. She enjoyed Brock's sense of humor; she was going to miss it when she could finally go home.

FIVE

Friday night Brock returned to his apartment and announced that he'd been to both her apartment and her office building but hadn't seen the blue car.

"That's great!" she said excitedly. "I can go home tonight."

Brock shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea yet. After all, today was the first that they didn't show up anywhere. Besides, they could be using a different car. I know I would if I were following somebody. But I'm hoping that they think you left town, because your papers are still outside your door and the mail's overflowing your box. I took what was in your mailbox and on the table nearby up to your apartment. I'm hoping that, if they check, they'll think you're there."

"Then why can't I go home?"

"We don't know that I didn't just miss them. I figure, if they're not around tomorrow morning when I check things out, I'll take you home. Is that a reasonable compromise?"

"I suppose it's probably better that way, but I'm beginning to feel like I'm intruding on you." She paused a moment, then added, "Well, not beginning. I've always felt that way. Surely, you have a life. It doesn't seem to me that you've done anything but take care of me and my problems since we met."

"Hey," he said cheerfully as Hetkala jumped into his lap, "I *like* protecting you. Now that Beth's married and has kids, she doesn't need me like she used to. I've felt pretty good these past few days, taking care of your problems and all. It's been a long time since I've had to take care of a little sister."

Dakota offered him a pleasant smile. Hetkala didn't usually like people other than herself, but she sure did like Brock. Maybe that was because she herself liked Brock. "I must admit that I didn't expect to make a friend the night I ran into your car."

"I didn't, either, but I'm glad I did."

"Me, too. So tomorrow I take my kitty and go home where I belong—if those guys are still gone. Does that mean I get my car back, too?"

"Sure, why not. I'm just glad I let the manager of the restaurant know it would be in the lot until you felt better. I was afraid they would have it towed if I didn't. Besides, from everything I've seen, your independence means a lot to you. I certainly couldn't let you waste away in a different apartment just because you don't have wheels."

"You're very observant—and *right*. I really hate being cooped up like I have been the last few days. I guess I'm just a nomad at heart."

Dakota opened her door and carried Hetkala and a bag of belongings into her apartment. Brock followed with her mail, laying it on the coffee table as he passed.

"So," he asked as Dakota set Hetkala on the floor, "are we going to stay in touch? Or do I lose a new friend now that you're back home?"

"I *hope* we'll stay in touch," she agreed, trying to disguise her distress at the notion that they might not. Then she realized how desperate her tone had been and, not wanting to give him the wrong impression, added, "But you know how things can go. Sometimes friends lose contact because life happens. It doesn't mean anything's wrong with the friendship; they just drift apart."

"I suppose you're right," he said downheartedly. Then his mood brightened, and he grinned at her. "Guess I'll just have to see that *doesn't* happen. So what's on your agenda for today?"

"Nothing in particular. I thought I'd get rid of all the food in my refrigerator that's spoiled over the last few days. Then I thought I'd buy some more. See? Nothing exciting."

"That's one thing I don't have to do," he replied, still grinning. "When one doesn't keep much food, one doesn't have to worry about what's spoiled and what hasn't."

Dakota smiled at him. "Good point."

"I suppose I should leave now." Reaching into his pocket, he removed his wallet and took out a business card. "Here's my card just in case."

"I don't have a card I can give you," she said. "Let's exchange numbers. We haven't really needed to when we were together so much and you had your landline."

"Sounds good. I mentioned it once, but we never did it. Now's the time." He turned on his cell phone and opened it to contacts before he handed it to her. She removed hers from her back pocket and did the same. Together they put their phone numbers in the other's cell and returned the phones before he asked, "Mind if I call you tomorrow to see how your date with Romain went tonight?"

"Not at all. I know you're interested in how he's coming across with his image."

"Exactly. I'd better get out of here. You still need to get ready for that date and do whatever it is you do around here on a normal Saturday."

"Okay," she agreed as she walked him to the door. "Just don't call me until after noon tomorrow, okay? I like to sleep in on Sundays."

"Will do. Talk to you tomorrow."

Dakota closed the door then wandered to the window and watched Brock stride to his car in the lot. He was awfully nice and would probably be a very good friend. But she had no desire for a relationship with him. Experience told her that he had the capability of being much too possessive, too protective.

When Brock drove out of the parking lot, Dakota went to the couch and sank onto it with a sigh. Now to go through the mail and pay whatever bills necessary. She leafed through the letters on the coffee table.

No bills, thank goodness, but that was probably because she paid almost everything online now. And, of course, there was the requisite junk mail. Hetkala jumped onto the coffee table and nosed through the junk mail, playfully pushing it around with her front paws. Dakota smiled at her game.

She tossed two junk-mail catalogs on the floor between the couch and the end table and set one on the couch to browse through later. Then her gaze fell on the small package addressed to her brother at her address. Curious, she picked it up and examined it.

The padded envelope had something inside that felt like a book. But why would anybody send Chayton a book to her address? It just didn't make sense. Now she didn't know whether to forward it or not. It had been mailed Express rate, but she didn't want

to spend that much money if it wasn't necessary.

With an idea, she picked up cell phone. Hetkala sniffed the package then rubbed her face against it, marking it as her territory. Dakota pushed her back then tapped icon with Chayton's photo. Hetkala rubbed against the package again, almost knocking it from Dakota's hands.

"Knock it off, Hettie," Dakota said as she pushed her pet away again.

But Hetkala continued her antics while the Chayton's phone rang, so Dakota set her on the floor. Immediately, the kitten jumped back onto the table and sniffed the package.

Chayton's voice mail answered, and Dakota waited impatiently as brother's voice announced that he couldn't come to the phone right now. After the tone, Dakota said, "It's me, Chayt. Somebody sent you a package to my place—express mail. I'm going to open it and see if I need to forward it to you at the same rate or if I can mail it third class. I'll call back and let you know what it is and which way it's coming. Bye."

Dakota hung up and set the persistent kitten back on the floor. She'd just started opening it at the adhesive tab when Hetkala jumped up again. The tab tore farther, and there was a sizzling sound. Heat seared her hands. The package flew onto the table with Hetkala landing on it. Startled, Dakota scrambled away as the package exploded. She released a scream of shock that was drowned out by the blast.

Instinctively, she ran to the kitchen for the extinguisher to put out the fire on the floor. Her hands burned when she touched it, but she ignored the pain to save her furniture. As she sprayed the carpeted area, she glanced around. All that remained of her precious Hetkala was a bloody, bushy tail and part of a leg. Otherwise, there were just indistinguishable pieces of fur and cat insides scattered around her living room.

Nausea rose within her, but she stifled it until the fire was out. Then she raced to the bathroom and threw up—over and over until there was nothing left in her stomach.

A distant, demanding knock brought her back to reality, growing louder and louder as she sat on the bathroom floor. Somebody was hollering her name, a female, her next-door neighbor Vickie. Forcing herself to move, she wandered to the living room and opened the door.

Vickie's jaw dropped in shock as Dakota stared down at her. Then her friend questioned her in a panic-stricken tone. "My God, Dakota. What happened?"

"I ... I don't know," she stammered. "Come in."

"You're damned right I'm coming in," Vickie declared as she pushed past Dakota. While Dakota closed the door, Vickie surveyed the mess. "My God! There *was* an explosion."

Dakota's heart raced, but she felt numb. "Yeah."

Vickie spun to face her. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know. Hetkala's dead. She knocked the package out of my hands."

While Dakota stood there staring at the floor where the fire had been, Vickie grabbed her forearms, exclaiming, "We've got to get you to a hospital!"

"No," Dakota declared. "I'll be fine."

Her own hands appeared before her eyes, and Dakota stared at them. They were red and covered with blisters. The right one was just her hand, but the left had second degree burns halfway to her elbow.

Then she was moving quickly to the kitchen. The water started running, and Vickie thrust her arms under the relatively cold liquid flowing from the faucet.

"Keep those there," Vickie ordered. "I'm calling 911."

"I don't need to go to the hospital," Dakota protested. "Besides, if you do that, the cops will come, and I don't want to deal with them."

"Who's this Brock Jones?" Vickie asked from the living room.

"He's a new friend of mine."

"Then I'm calling him."

Dakota hated to bother Brock again, but if it would keep Vickie from calling the authorities, she would agree. "He just left a few minutes ago, so use his cell phone number. He's probably still on the road. My code is 3921." She stared at her wet, red hands. "I don't think the cops could get my fingerprint right now."

Startled, Brock touched the green phone light on his car media console. "This is Brock Jones."

"Hi. This is Vickie Ramsey. I'm Dakota's neighbor."

He didn't need to hear anything else. If there wasn't a problem Dakota wouldn't be having a neighbor call him so soon after they'd parted company. Panic raced through him, and he gasped in shock. "What happened?"

"Apparently, she opened a letter bomb."

"Oh, my God! Is she hurt bad?"

"She says not, but I'm not so sure. She's got a few cuts on her face, and her hands are all burnt up. I can't convince her that she needs emergency treatment. Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

"I'm on my way."

"Thanks."

Without hesitating, Brock squealed around a corner and headed back to Dakota's apartment.

Dakota gazed at her hands, stunned by what she'd heard. Her face had cuts? She hadn't even noticed. Her hands burnt so badly that she hadn't considered other injuries.

There was another knock at the door, and Dakota watched Vickie hurry to answer it. She couldn't help but smile when Vickie exclaimed, "You're Wyatt Romain!"

"That's right," he boasted. "Is Dakota Grayeagle here?"

"In the kitchen," Dakota replied, gazing at the pair over her shoulder. "That's my friend Vickie Ramsey. She was just on her way out."

Wyatt smiled at Vickie as he passed her and said, "It was nice to meet you, Vickie."

"Yeah, right," she said. With a scowl, she glanced back at Dakota. "Try to get that stubborn woman to a hospital, will you? And see if she'll agree to call the cops. This needs to be reported."

Closing the door after Vickie, Wyatt glanced around the room and frowned. "What happened here? And why is she so mad about it?"

Dakota turned off the water and tenderly patted her hands and left arm dry on a dishtowel. Wandering to the living room, she sank onto the sofa. Wyatt dropped down

next to her, and she moaned in discomfort at the sudden movement. With everything that had happened, she'd forgotten that she was still a little sore from her run-in with Brock's car.

"I don't know what happened, Wyatt. All I know is that a package I was opening exploded. Thank God, I wasn't actually holding it at the time."

"How could you be opening it and not be holding it at the same time?"

"It's a long story that I don't want to go into it right now. I just want to relax then put some medication on my injuries."

"Maybe Vickie's right. Maybe we should call 911."

"No," she denied. "They can't do anything for me that I can't do for myself."

"It stinks to high heaven in here, too. Think it's the bomb?"

"Probably." Dakota rose and headed out of the room, saying, "Excuse me, Wyatt. I'm going back into the bathroom. I still feel a little queasy. I think I'm going to throw up again."

Truthfully, she didn't feel sick at all. She just didn't want to deal with Wyatt's questions, although she would probably still have to answer them when Brock arrived. Oh, well, better once than twice—two times as opposed three if she counted what she'd already told Vickie.

Wyatt was showing true concern, even though he had shown up unannounced on her doorstep. One of her pet peeves was having people visit her without calling first. She was always ready for visitors, but she preferred that they just pick up the phone and warn her before they came by. To her it was nothing more than courtesy.

Suddenly, she wondered if Wyatt had seen them at his performance the other night. Probably not, considering the fact that he hadn't come to the table to chat between sets. She didn't doubt for a second that he would do that, either, because he seemed awfully jealous of Brock.

That was another thing she didn't understand. She'd met Brock just a few minutes before she'd met Wyatt, so there couldn't be any reason for his jealousy on that count. Besides, he thought she and Brock were cousins. That shouldn't create jealousy, either. She just didn't understand why Wyatt would be jealous of a man who was supposed to be a relative—unless, possibly, he didn't believe the cover Brock had devised.

Dakota stared at the toilet. Her burns were really starting to sting. Too bad the water in the apartment never got extremely cold. Although ...

With an idea, Dakota gingerly removed the cover on the back of the toilet tank and laid it across the sink. Striding the commode, she thrust her hands into the icy water, released a startled gasp, then sighed, glad for the little relief it gave her. No wonder Hetkala would always drink the toilet water. It was never cold enough for her out of the faucet.

Someone knocked on her front door again, but she didn't move. That was Brock, and she wanted time to collect herself before she explained what had happened after he left. Still, she could hear the pair in the living room.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" Brock demanded. "And where's Dakota?"

"I dropped by to welcome her back," Wyatt said. "But I walked into this mess instead. Right now she's in the bathroom being sick."

"Then I'll wait until she comes out." Brock paused then said, "Looks like Hetkala took the brunt of the blast."

"How do *you* know what happened?" Wyatt asked. "You weren't even here, were

you?"

"If I had been," he shot back, "I sure as hell wouldn't have left. Dakota!" His footfalls down the hallway alerted her to his approach, as did his voice, which got louder. He banged on the closed door. "Dakota! Are you in there?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Are you decent? I want to come in."

"I'm decent."

Pushing open the door, he stopped short in the threshold. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he stared in shock at her, with her hands in the tank. "What the hell are you doing?"

"First aid," she said with a pained smile. "My hands were burned when I opened the package. Frankly, I don't know if I'd even have them right now if Hetkala hadn't knocked the package from me. In fact, it's likely that she saved my life. I was sitting on the couch at the time, and if I recall correctly, it's pretty torn up by the shrapnel."

"It is."

Tenderly grasping her elbows, he lifted her arms from the water. The burns were definitely second degree. In fact, she'd never seen such large blisters. When he took her to the sink, she turned her gaze to the face in the mirror and saw blood flowing from two cuts, while it seeped from several more.

"That woman who called me was right," he declared. "I have to get you to a hospital. You can't doctor these injuries yourself."

"But if you call 911, the cops will come, too."

"They *should* come," he proclaimed. "This has gone way too far. Now those men following you are trying to do you in. Don't you get it, woman? They're not just following you anymore."

"I don't want the cops involved, Brock," she declared. "And that's that."

"Then at least let me take you to the emergency room. Somebody can stitch up those cuts and give you some medicine to keep you from getting infection in your burns. Some of those blisters have already popped, and you've got some open wounds."

Frowning, she glanced at her hands then returned her gaze to his face. He was right. She needed professional medical attention. "All right. I'll get my purse." She flashed him a brief smile. "If it still exists. It was sitting on the coffee table."

Not wanting an extended argument, Dakota agreed when Wyatt asked if he could join them on the trip to the hospital. They were on the way out the door when someone else knocked. Brock opened the door to find two policemen standing in the hallway.

"Is this the Grayeagle residence?" one of them asked.

"I'm Dakota Grayeagle," she replied. His nametag gave his name as Fredricks. "Can I help you, Officer Fredricks?"

"We got a call that there was an explosion here. We came to check it out."

Dakota sighed. Vickie must have called them. She couldn't blame Vickie. After all, she would have done the same if the situation had been reversed. Now she didn't have a choice but to let them in. Her brother must be in serious trouble if he'd been sent a letter bomb, and she wanted to check with him before she gave the police any details about the incident.

"We were just leaving for the hospital," Brock announced. "Do you think you can come back?"

"Is it an emergency?" the officer asked. "We really do need to make a report on

what happened here.”

As badly as Dakota wanted to leave, she knew that she would eventually have to talk to these people, so she decided getting it over with was best. She stepped back so the two officers could enter. “Come in, please. Although, I’m afraid there’s not much to tell.”

“The explosive experts will be here soon, too, miss,” the second officer, who’s nametag read Carter, said as they passed the trio in the doorway. “Is there anything you can tell us?”

This was starting to get out of hand, and Dakota knew she needed to defuse their thinking. Before she could do anything else, she needed talk to Chayton about the incident. “I don’t see the why everybody’s making such a fuss about a little explosion that killed my cat. For heaven’s sake, people must have little accidents like this all the time.”

Going to the Boston rocker in the corner, she sat down to watch the police work. Brock knelt on the floor beside her. This whole thing was out of her control now, and she didn’t particularly like that. The police wandered the room, apparently in search of remnants of the bomb, and Dakota could only hope that they didn’t notice anything.

“Was there a return address on the bomb?” Carter asked curiously.

“*Bomb?*” she exclaimed in shock, desperately trying to hide the panic racing through her. Of course, she knew it was a bomb, but she didn’t want them to know it yet. Somehow, she needed to put these cops off the track—at least temporarily. “Why would you think it was a *bomb*? Any number of things could cause an explosion.”

Dakota absently picked a scrap of paper off the arm of her chair. It was part of a postmark—from Nebraska! Somehow, she had to divert this conversation, because Nebraska wasn’t that far from where Chayton lived in South Dakota. If he’d gone back to his deep involvement in the American Indian Movement again, he could be in serious trouble.

Maybe she should tell the police that the bomb had been addressed to Chayton and not her. No! She had to talk to her brother first—to warn him about what was happening in Nevada. Then he could take measures to protect himself without getting into trouble in the process.

“Are you all right, Dakota?” Brock asked in concern.

“I hurt,” she explained, careful to keep her voice even so nobody would suspect her thoughts. “I just want to get to the hospital so I can get some treatment.”

“Do you guys need us here?” Brock asked Fredricks as he rose. “If not, I’d like to take Dakota to the hospital. You can question her there if you want to.”

Dakota couldn’t comprehend the speed with which things seemed to be happening. She glanced at the clock on her TV stand. She’d only gotten home twenty-three minutes ago! Things really *were* happening fast. This wasn’t just her imagination.

“Which one?” Brock told him which hospital he’d planned to use, and Fredricks nodded his agreement. “Go ahead. We’ll catch up with you, and she can give us her statement there.”

“Thank you,” Dakota said as Brock escorted her toward the door. Stopping beside Wyatt, she asked, “Would you please stay here and keep an eye on things for me? You can come to the hospital when they’re gone—unless I’m back by then.”

“Will do,” he agreed. “You just go get your injuries taken care of.”

In the car, Brock turned toward Dakota and questioned her paternally. “What the

hell were you doing back there? You should have told them that you knew it was a damned letter bomb.”

“I can’t yet,” she returned.

“Why the hell not? They need to bring in the ATF, or the FBI or whoever, because sending any bomb through the mail is a federal offense.”

“No, Brock,” she insisted. “I can’t do that. Not yet.”

“At least, tell *me* what’s going on.”

“No. There are some things you’re better off not knowing. Now just shut up and take me to the hospital. The pain’s starting to set it pretty strong now.”

“Will you tell me there?”

“I’m not telling you anything, Brock. Just get it through your head. You’re my friend, not my guardian. Now start the car and put it in gear.”

Brock slid his key into the ignition and revved the motor to life, muttering, “God, you’re stubborn, woman.”

Dakota sat in her hospital bed and stared at her bandaged hands and arm. Shock, the doctor had said. Worrisome high blood pressure. He wanted to keep her overnight for observation. Again, her life had been put on hold because of some stupid injuries; and again, she was forced to stay away from her apartment.

Of course, she didn’t particularly want to go back there right now, anyway. She had that mess to clean up and the insurance company to contact. There was just too much going on in her life right now. She had to get away from it. And she knew exactly where to go.

Until the doctor released her from the hospital, though, she was stuck in Vegas.

SIX

Staring at the closed hospital room door, Dakota contemplated her interview with the FBI agents who had unexpectedly shown up at her room. Apparently, either the cops or Brock had called them. If the latter was the case, she would jump on him the second he walked in the door to visit her like he'd said he would.

The agents asked her every kind of question she could have imagined—plus some. But two in particular stuck out in her mind: Did she have any enemies? Was there anything unusual that happened to her recently?

They'd seemed a bit disconcerted by her negative answer to the latter question, but they hadn't pursued it, either. Not that she wasn't glad. She hadn't particularly wanted to go through explaining that she had no idea why those people were following her. She was just surprised, and she wasn't about to offer information when they didn't ask about it.

But she was most glad that the agents hadn't asked if the letter bomb had been addressed to her. Apparently, they'd either found pieces of the address or just assumed that she'd been the addressee. But if the former was the case, surely they would have questioned her about Chayton.

A tapping on the door dragged Dakota from her thoughts. A moment later it opened, and Wyatt entered carrying a tray with covered dishes on it.

"I figured," he announced as he strode to her bed, "that if my date couldn't come to me, I'd have to go to my date."

"That's right!" she exclaimed, glad for the reprieve from her thoughts. "We were supposed to go out tonight."

"Don't tell me you had such a bad day that you forgot." Wyatt set the tray on the table that slid over Dakota's bed and pushed it closer to her. "I thought you might like something better than hospital food."

"Would I!"

Lifting a metal lid, he revealed a large plate of spaghetti. Dakota frowned. How in the world did he think she was going to be able to eat spaghetti when her hands were bandaged? Yes, she liked it, but how did he expect her to use the proper utensils when she was practically wearing mittens?

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you like spaghetti?"

"I love it," she replied as she lifted her hands to show him. "I just can't eat it very easily. But I do appreciate the thought. Tell you what. You eat it, and I'll nibble on the garlic bread I smell."

"But I already ate. I only brought this to please you."

"I *am* pleased, Wyatt. But it's not fair to expect me to eat something like spaghetti when my hands are bandaged. The bread I can handle. I might even be able to handle a salad if you brought one."

"I did."

"There, you see? It isn't a total loss. Sometimes bread and salad is all I have for

dinner. I'm sure this is going to be fine."

While Dakota ate her dinner sides, she chatted amicably with Wyatt. Now that they had some time alone together, she discovered that he was a charming man, who could be witty one second and sullen the next. But mostly he was a cheerful man, who helped lift her mood. By the time he left about an hour later, she felt much better about her situation.

Wyatt had only been gone about fifteen minutes when there was another rap on the door and Brock stuck his head into the room, asking cheerfully, "Up to a visitor yet?"

"Sure!" she returned. "Come on in."

"I hope you like surprises." Brock shouldered his way through the door and approached her with both hands behind his back.

"I love them."

"Good, because I brought you two." He pulled a single, long-stemmed yellow rose around his body and handed it to her. "You only get one, because you're only here for one night, but it didn't feel right to show up without flowers. And yellow roses are a symbol for friendship."

Dakota smiled at him. Even Wyatt, who claimed to be a smooth operator, hadn't thought to bring her a single flower for a single night in the hospital. Taking the rose, she slipped it into her glass of water. "That's sweet, Brock. Thank you. Now what's in your other hand?"

"Now that I see those bandages," he admitted with a grimace as he handed her a brown paper bag, "I'm not sure I should have brought this."

Eagerly opening the bag, she peered in then released a squeal of delight. "Ice cream! This is *great*." She pulled the Dairy Queen container from the bag and carefully worked off the plastic top. "All right! A hot fudge sundae. This is a heck of a lot better than the spaghetti Wyatt brought me."

While Dakota dug into her sundae with the plastic spoon in the bag, Brock sank onto the chair beside her bed. "Romain was here?"

"Yep. He brought the date to me since I couldn't make it. I thought that was sweet. And he was a perfect gentlemen—even helped me out of my doldrums a little bit. Although, a hot fudge sundae goes a lot further in accomplishing that."

"I was going to bring you some dinner, too," he admitted, frowning. "Unfortunately, I got waylaid by our friendly boys in blue. Apparently, they figured out that you'd spent the last few days with me and wanted to question me."

Dakota took a spoonful of ice cream and licked it from the plastic utensil while waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, she asked, "Did you tell them anything?"

"You're damned right I did. I figured it was about time to let this whole secret out of the bag."

With a groan, she took another bite. No wonder Brock was plying her with flowers and sweets. He was trying to get on her good side.

"It doesn't sound like you agree," he observed.

Dakota shrugged. "In a way, I do, but in another way, I wish you'd kept your mouth shut. What did you tell them, anyway?"

"That somebody was following us the other night, that you were so scared you ran into my car, ..." He paused, and Dakota glared at him, hoping he would be completely honest without her demanding it. Then he shook his head and continued. "And, yes, I told them that you were not only followed that night, but for a couple of days after it."

"But I wasn't followed for a couple of days after that," she reminded him. "I was holed up at your apartment, remember?"

"Too well. But the point isn't that you were literally followed. The point is that they staked out your apartment, not to mention mine."

"Did you tell the police that they stopped, too?"

"Of course."

"Did they say anything to you about the bomb?" she asked.

Brock grimaced again. "I tried to get an idea of what they were thinking, but they were as closed lipped as anybody I've ever seen. They never once mentioned anything about a bomb—letter or otherwise. In fact, they kind of treated it like an accident after I eased their minds about you no longer being followed."

Sighing at length, Dakota dipped her spoon into her sundae again. Maybe an angry confrontation wasn't the way to handle her irritation that the federal authorities had been brought in. Maybe it would be better to nonchalantly mention it and see how Brock reacted. That way she could see how he reacted to her news. "The FBI agents didn't open up to me, either, although I was kind of hoping they would."

"FBI visited you?" he asked in surprise. "Who the hell told them about it? The cops? What did they say? What kind of questions did they ask? What'd they ask, hell! How'd you answer them?"

Dakota shook her head and nursed the bite of ice cream in her mouth. Given his response, he had no idea that the FBI had been called in on the case. But she couldn't understand why Brock was acting like this. They barely knew each other, and he acted like he was her big brother, trying to protect her and failing miserably.

"They asked a bunch of questions," she replied, "and I answered them honestly."

"But what *kind* of questions?"

"How was I feeling? Do I have any idea who might want to blow me up? Well, they didn't exactly word it that way, but that was the gist of their question. They wanted to know if I had any enemies, of course."

"What did you say to *that* one?" he demanded.

"I told them the truth—not that I know of. But I did think of something odd. They didn't ask me a single thing that would lead me to believe that they'd discussed this with the police. I mean, it was like they were starting at the bottom floor and working their way to the top."

"They probably just wanted to see if your answers matched the ones you gave to the cops. They were probably checking for consistency."

"Yeah," she replied, unconvinced that was the case, "I suppose you're right."

Brock's gray eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You don't sound like you believe that. What else happened?"

"Nothing really." And that was the truth. She really had no reason to believe that the agents hadn't spoken to the police. Just because they hadn't mentioned it didn't mean they hadn't done it. Besides, how else would they have known to talk to her?

How else, indeed? she thought as she licked some fudge off the spoon. Had Brock spoken to them and was just hiding it from her? Probably not, considering his surprise at hearing they'd visited her. Maybe Wyatt? She doubted it. But somebody had to have told them.

Returning her gaze to Brock, she asked, "Did you call them in?"

He jolted upright in his chair. "No! Why would you even *ask* such a thing when I

told you I wouldn't? Do you think I'm a liar?"

"I don't know. They never mentioned the cops, Brock, so all I can do is *assume* that's where they got wind of what happened if you didn't tell them."

"What explanation did they give for showing up here?"

"None. They just walked into the room, announced who they were, and showed me their badges. I didn't even *think* to ask how they knew about the bomb until I started hashing their interview out with you."

Taking another bite of ice cream, Dakota watched suspiciously as Brock shot to his feet and stalked back and forth in front of the window. He clearly didn't like what she'd just said, and her confession without a doubt made him nervous.

"What is it, Brock?" she asked. "What do you know that I don't?"

He spun to face her. "I know that the cops hadn't called the FBI when I left headquarters—about forty-five minutes ago. I can't believe that you've had time to talk to them *and* have dinner with Romain in that short of a time."

"Oh, my God!" she gasped in horror. "Then how could the FBI have known?"

"Maybe Romain called them."

"He sure didn't *act* like he did."

"What about your friend who called me?"

"I doubt she would think of it."

"You know who that leaves, don't you?" he asked as he sank onto the edge of her bed.

Dakota nodded. "Those guys who were following me are back."

"That's my guess."

Setting her sundae on the nightstand, she straightened up in the bed so she could concentrate better. "You know what? I think it's time to get the heck out of Dodge."

"What are you talking about?"

"Leaving town, of course."

"Are you crazy, woman? If you leave now, the cops and FBI guys are going to have a fit."

"I really don't care. I'm *not* sticking around when there are people following me and I don't even know why. I plan to go where I *know* I'll be safe."

Although, she thought, was it really safe to visit Chayton when somebody had sent him a letter bomb to her address? If the person who had mailed it didn't know where he lived, she could lead that person to him. Well, that would just have to be. She needed to talk to him and find out what he was up to this time. Sometimes he hung out with some pretty radical people in the American Indian Movement—at least, he used to. He'd told her years ago that he'd put all that in the past and moved on, and she had no reason to doubt him. Except for that stupid bomb. Now she didn't know *what* to think.

Yes, the best thing to do was go home. Only Chayton could make sense of what had happened today, and she wasn't about to discuss it with him over the phone.

"Dakota?" Brock prompted, bringing her from her thoughts.

She smiled at him. "I'm sorry. I kind of got lost in my daydreams."

"About what?" he asked.

"About leaving Dodge, of course."

"Where will you go?"

"Home. Well, to my brother's house in South Dakota. He lives on a ranch, so I'll be safer there than in a city like Las Vegas."

“How so?”

“I’ll know for *sure* if I’m being followed,” she explained with a casual shrug, “because it will be obvious. Unless, perhaps, the perpetrators disguise themselves as pronghorns or horses.”

“Or rattlesnakes,” Brock added with a scowl. “I don’t like it. You being out in the open isn’t a good idea.”

She jerked her head in stunned disbelief at his words. She just couldn’t believe he was being so protective. “Look, Brock, I don’t want to sound ungrateful for everything you’ve done for me in the past few days, but I’ve got a surprise for you. I really don’t care what you do or do not like. I’m going to my brother’s house.”

“And how the hell will you get there? You sure can’t drive.”

“So I’ll take a bus.”

“Oh, that’s *real* safe,” he said sarcastically.

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do, anyway?” she demanded, her patience at an end. “I don’t owe you explanations, Brock. I only owe you money to fix your car, and it would probably be nice if I could pay you back for the trouble you went through. Unfortunately, I don’t have enough to do it all at once, so I’ll have to do it over a period of time. But that also means I can’t fly to Rapid City. I don’t have a *choice* but to take a bus. The train doesn’t even come close to his ranch, and I’d have to take a bus to get there, anyway.”

“You’re really determined to do this, aren’t you.” He dropped back onto the chair and gripped the arms. Dakota barely had time to think that he seemed awfully angry before he spoke again. “I suppose I won’t be able to change your mind.”

“Not a chance.”

“Then I guess all that’s left is to warn you to be careful. If you get on a bus and one of the guys who’ve been following you is on it, get off. Okay?”

“Of course. But, Brock, you really don’t need to worry about me. If I hadn’t run into your car the other night, I could have gotten away from them. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Really.”

Without a word, he leaned forward and tenderly grasped her forearms. Lifting them so her bandaged hands were level with her face, he asked, “How can I *not* worry about you when things like this happen? Look, I know you think I’m nuts because I’ve been so eager to help you. So do I sometimes. I don’t know you, and I sure as hell don’t know if you’re telling me the truth or not. But I’m in this with you now because they know where I live. That means, in legal terms, that I have a vested interest in what happens to you until we figure out what’s going on.”

Dakota studied him for a moment. He seemed disconcerted by his concern for her well-being, but she didn’t want to think about that right now. She wanted to think about his insinuation that she could be lying to him. To get an answer, she prompted, “Not telling you the truth about what?”

“About you not knowing why those guys are following you,” he replied, laying her hands back on her lap. “Don’t get me wrong, though. I *do* believe you. I just don’t know why I should. I don’t know you from Eve.” He paused and grinned. “It’s obvious that you aren’t Adam.”

Dakota smiled back. But she wasn’t about to let Brock out of this conversation so easily. “Then why are you so protective of me?”

He shrugged. “Because my baby sister has a husband to do that now, I suppose. I

really don't know the answer. All I know is that I feel needed again. If you go away, I won't be needed anymore."

"So your not wanting me to leave," she said with a soft smile, "is purely selfish."

"I guess it is."

Still smiling, Dakota nodded. "You know something, Brock? It's nice having a male friend who isn't going to put the moves on me just because I'm female. I'm not sure I've ever been in that situation before—not since high school, anyway."

"And I'm absolutely *not* going to," he declared. "I consider you more like a little sister, somebody I can take care of. Although, I'm apparently not very good at it."

"You did fine," she assured him. "Now let's watch some TV. I understand there's a good movie on tonight—something about a woman being followed and a strange guy coming to her rescue."

Brock laughed as she turned on the television. "All right! Maybe I'll get some tips on how to keep you from risking your neck to get out of Dodge."

Halfway through the movie, an announcement came over the intercom that all visitors must leave. Although disappointed that she could no longer enjoy the cheerful conversation she'd been having with Brock during the movie, Dakota said good-bye with a smile.

"Guess I'll have to watch the ending at home," Brock replied with a grin. "So far I haven't gotten a clue as to how to keep you in town."

"And I'm sure you never will," she retaliated merrily. "I'm a very stubborn person, Brock. If I set my mind on something, chances are I'll find a way to do it. So you're just going to have to get used to me leaving."

"Then *you're* going to have to get used to the idea that that's not going to happen. Got a ride home tomorrow?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't. Are you offering?"

"You bet I am, but tonight I want to clean up the mess in your apartment so it won't be so hard for you to come home to."

"I'd really appreciate that, Brock. My neighbor across the hall has a key. I'll call her so she'll expect you and know that you have my okay to use it."

"Great. I'll come for you tomorrow morning about ten. I'd make it earlier, but I need to run a couple of errands first."

"All right. I'll see you then."

Brock pushed himself out of the chair. "Good night, Dakota. I hope you sleep well."

"Night," she replied as he strode out the door.

She'd realized before that he had a good body, but for some reason, tonight it seemed even better. His buttocks looked firm beneath his tight jeans; his biceps and triceps strained against his knit shirt sleeves. And now she realized that his pectorals had been obvious as he sat near her. But his large hands were so gentle, so warm against her skin when he'd lifted her forearms earlier.

On second thought, maybe she should stay in town and see if all he really wanted was a friendship. If she left, she would probably never know, because they would probably never see each other again. After all, they'd only spent a few days together. There was absolutely no reason to believe that they would go their separate ways and come back together again in the end.

But she *couldn't* stay. She had to go to South Dakota and see what Chayton was up to. He'd lied over the phone to spare her feelings before, and she hadn't suspected for

several months. But he'd never lied to her to her face without her catching his dishonesty. What had happened today was much too important to let him lie his way out of it again. She had to confront him in person or he could get hurt—or worse. And there was no way she was going to let that happen without a fight.

SEVEN

Sitting at his kitchen table, Brock toyed with his Eggos. He didn't like the idea of Dakota leaving town to escape the people following her. He didn't like that she was going on a bus even more. And he *definitely* didn't like her hiding out on a ranch. He didn't care if it *was* her brother's home. She simply wasn't safe out in the middle of nowhere. Somehow, he had to stop her—or go with her.

That was it! He would go with her. She couldn't stop him from buying a bus ticket; she couldn't stop him from boarding. Brock sighed. All she could stop him from doing was going to the ranch with her. And what good would following her do if she got out of his sight once they were in South Dakota?

Maybe if he knew her brother's name, he could call and get himself invited. If her brother agreed to his coming, she couldn't keep him away. But he *didn't* know her brother's name, and he didn't know where the man lived. The only way he could get there was to convince Dakota to let him join her. Judging from everything he'd seen so far, that wouldn't be easy.

But something else ate at him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. From the minute he'd arrived at Dakota's apartment yesterday, he'd sensed there was more to that letter bomb than she was telling him. She hadn't seemed forthcoming about the circumstances surrounding it, but he had nothing concrete on which to base that opinion. It was just a feeling. Maybe that was why he was so uncomfortable about her going to her brother's house.

Deciding that he wasn't hungry, Brock took his breakfast to the sink and stuffed it down the garbage disposal. Now that it was eight, maybe he could call around and find a car rental agency. Whether he could convince Dakota to let him accompany her or not, he needed transportation.

After three calls, he realized that taking a rental car to South Dakota for an indefinite amount of time would be too expensive—even for him. If he was going to rent a car, he needed to find one after he got to his destination, not drive one from Nevada. Unless ...

Turning on his phone again, he tapped the icon of his sister's face. After only two rings, his sister greeted him, obviously out of breath.

"So which one were you chasing this time?" he asked.

"Jacob, who else?" she returned. "What's up that you're calling at this hour?"

"I was wondering if I could strike a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?"

"How would you like to drive around a brand, spanking new car for a while—a nice 4-by-4 that will hold all three kids just like the one you've got now does?"

"What's the catch?"

"Let me borrow your car indefinitely?"

"*Why?* You've got a *great* car."

"I had an accident, and it's going into the shop this morning."

"Oh, you're poor car. Is it all right?"

Brock chuckled. Bethany was just too used to his life-long bumps and bruises if she was more interested in his car than she was in him. "What? No sympathy for your big brother? I'm fine, by the way, but my car's in dire need of a new fender."

"So why don't you just rent the car for yourself?"

"I have to go out of town for a while," he explained, "and I won't be here to pick up my car. I hoped you and hubby could get my car when it's done, and he can drive it while you drive his SUV."

"Where are you going?"

"South Dakota. A new friend of mine is having some problems and wants to go to her brother's house. I'm not sure how long I'm going to be gone. It could be as much as a month."

"A new female friend?" Bethany asked with a mysterious note in her voice. "She must be pretty special."

Brock paused. Would he classify Dakota as special? No, he didn't think so. "I wouldn't exactly say special, Beth. She just needed some help when I met her, and I was there. We kind of hit it off, and I don't want her traipsing around the country alone."

"Then why aren't you taking her to her brother's and coming straight home? Surely, her brother could take over for you."

"He probably could, but I suspect there's more behind her troubles than she's telling me."

"And you want to get to the bottom of it," she interpreted.

Grinning, Brock shook his head. If anybody could read between the lines of his story, it was Beth. Knowing that he would never convince her otherwise, he acquiesced. "All right, you win. You're right—*again*. Some strange things have been happening where Dakota's concerned, and I want to know what's going on. Maybe I can help her out. After all, my little sister up and got married on me. Now I don't have anybody to protect. I decided to make Dakota my surrogate sister."

"Her brother might frown on that."

"I don't give a damned. Now I've got to go. I have a more phone calls to make before I can get on the road with Dakota. Are you going to let me use your Cherokee or not?"

"Sure," she agreed with a chuckle. "Just be sure you bring me something *good* to drive."

"I only choose the best," he retaliated.

"Which is exactly why I'm suspicious. Jacob Warren! Get out of there."

"Sounds like I'd better let you go," Brock said. "I'll be by later this morning, but I'm not sure what time. Will you be there?"

"Sure will. Jacob, stop it! I gotta go. Bye."

Laughing, Brock disconnected the call. Bethany sure had her hands full with Jacob, and if his experience with his own childhood was any indication, her life wouldn't get any easier until Jacob was out of his teens. Although, Brock wasn't sure if he didn't still cause a little concern for his family, especially when he did things like he was about to do.

Taking his address book from the table beside him, Brock pushed the phone button and put the handset to his ear. After getting the dial tone, he flipped to the Rs and dialed Wyatt's phone number. Two rings later, Wyatt answered groggily.

"Morning, Romain," Brock said. "I just thought I should let you know that I'm going

to have to drop you as a client. I have to leave town on an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?” Wyatt replied.

Brock debated the advisability of telling Wyatt the truth. After all, Dakota might not even agree to what he had in mind. Then again, he didn’t really care. As far as he could tell, Dakota wasn’t nearly as interested in Wyatt as Wyatt thought she was. This would get that point across as well as anything else—maybe better.

“I’m taking Dakota home to South Dakota,” Brock explained.

“You’re *what?*” Wyatt exclaimed. “Why are you doing that?”

“Because she wants to go home, and it isn’t a good idea for her to travel alone.” Brock paused then added, “She can’t safely drive a car with her hands bandaged, you know.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re dropping me. I can’t believe a trip like that would take more than a week at the most.”

“I don’t know how long I’m staying. In fact, I’m dropping any client that I can’t work with through Zoom. It’s the best way to handle the matter.”

“I don’t like it,” Wyatt proclaimed.

“And I don’t care,” Brock countered. “This isn’t your decision. I just wanted you to know I was dropping you before I call your manager and tell him he needs to find another publicist. Now I’ve got to go. I’ve got a bunch of calls to make.”

Without a good-bye, Brock hung up. To his amazement, relief flooded through him. Now he didn’t have to deal with Wyatt Romain. Every time he booked a new client, he made it abundantly clear family obligations came ahead of business, and he had a phrase inserted into every contract to cover it. He also made sure that he didn’t have to reveal the nature of his personal obligations. Until this day, he’d never used the clause, so nobody should question that he wanted to now. People would probably just assume it was legitimate family business. Even if Romain tried to start trouble, he’d already mentioned that Dakota was his cousin, and cousins were family.

Now to get on with making the call to Romain’s manager and the rental car company. Despite what he’d told Romain, those were the only two calls he needed to make. He had no other clients that he couldn’t deal with from a distance.

A knock at her door startled Dakota as she packed her suitcase. Glancing at the alarm clock beside her bed, she sighed. She really didn’t have time for company right now. The bus she’d scheduled before she left the hospital by Uber was due to depart in about an hour and a half, and she’d just started packing. She was determined to keep Brock from going with her, which was why she’d left a note at the nurses’ station letting him know that she’d left. Hopefully, she could be out of her apartment before he could follow her.

Whoever was at the door knocked again, this time louder. She didn’t want to answer it, but she sensed the person wouldn’t go away until she did. Dropping the socks she held into her suitcase, she strode to the living room, shouting, “Who is it?”

“Wyatt,” he replied. “May I come in? I need to talk to you.”

Dakota sighed again. She didn’t want to talk to him, but she didn’t know how she could avoid it, either. From the persistent sound of his knock, he wasn’t about to take no for an answer. Reaching out, she opened the door to admit him.

"Hi, Wyatt," she said. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm fine," he replied as he entered and she closed the door, "but you look exhausted."

"That's probably because I am. Between my hands hurting and my mind on what happened, I didn't get much sleep. I'm hoping I'll sleep on the bus."

"What bus?"

"The one I'm taking to South Dakota. And don't try to talk me out of it. Brock already tried, and it didn't work. It won't work with you, either."

"I was under the impression that Brock was *driving* you there."

Dakota bristled at his words and declared, "Brock's not taking me *anywhere*. I told him last night that I was perfectly capable of getting myself home."

"Then you weren't expecting him to take you?"

"Well," she admitted as her face heated in embarrassment, "I can't exactly say that it's a surprise. He was pretty insistent about it, but I thought I'd talked him out of it."

"If you don't want him to take you," Wyatt said with a sheepish grin, "I have an idea of how to stop him."

"At this point, I'm open to all suggestions. What is it?"

"Let *me* take you. We'll hop on my private jet and be there before he can realize we even left."

Shaking her head, she said, "Thanks, but I don't think so. I already have my tickets waiting at the depot."

"Wouldn't you rather go in luxury?"

"I'd *rather* go alone," she said, struggling to keep her temper in check. "I don't want you *or* Brock taking me. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to finish packing."

"Before I go, tell me why Jones dropped me as his client so he could run off to South Dakota with you. It sounds to me like you knew about it all along. Just how distant of cousins are you and Jones, anyway? Distant enough that you and he can have something more than a familial relationship going?"

Unable to restrain her anger, she lashed out at him and slapped his cheek. Wyatt's head snapped to his right. Her hand stung from her blow, and tears stung her eyes. She'd forgotten about her injuries. But she ignored the pain shouted, "Get out of here! You're a vile man to even suggest such a thing!"

He grabbed her arm just above the bandages that came nearly to her elbow and held her tightly. "Don't you *ever* do that again."

"Let go of me," she demanded, glaring at him. "And get out of my apartment, or I'll call the police. I am *not* interested in Brock that way, and I resent your insinuation."

"Why else would he be so interested in getting you out of town?"

"Because I want to go. And just because that's what he's interested in doesn't mean I'm going to let him go with me. I don't need *his* help, and I don't need *yours*. I'd just as soon have *both* of you out of my life right now."

She jerked her arm down to get him to release her, but he held her tightly. When she looked up into his eyes, he was studying her.

"You want your own cousin out of your life?" Wyatt asked.

"When he acts like an overprotective parent, I do," she declared.

"He's not really your cousin, is he."

"Why would we lie about something like that?" she asked, struggling to keep a straight face. If he suspected that she was lying, she might not be able to get him to

leave. "What possible motive could we have?"

"To hide your relationship from me."

"Why would I want to do that when I agreed to date you?"

"Which you haven't done."

"Only because of circumstances. Now would you *please let* me go. I have better things to do than stand around here placating your ego."

Wyatt released her. "And you swear you aren't involved with the man—even if he is your cousin?"

"I am *not* involved in him."

"All right. I'll leave for now. You could probably use some time to calm down."

As she escorted Wyatt to the door, somebody else knocked on it. Dreading the thought that it could be Brock, she opened it slowly. To her surprise, two men she'd never seen before stood in the hallway.

"May I help you?" she asked curiously.

"Are you ...?" The taller of two men looked at a piece of paper in his hand and continued slowly. "... Takchawee D. Grayeagle?"

"Yes."

Both men opened wallets, exposing badges and FBI identification cards.

"Do you have a few minutes to talk to us?" The taller man paused then added pointedly, "Privately?"

"I don't know what you would want to talk to me about," she said as she pushed Wyatt out the door, "but, sure. I can talk for a few minutes. Bye, Wyatt."

The men parted while Wyatt strode between them, then they entered the apartment. Dakota closed the door, curious as to what these men could want.

"I don't have any coffee, but I could offer you each a soda," she said.

"No thanks," the shorter man said. "Could we sit down?"

"Sure." Once they were all seated in her living room, she asked, "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

"To begin with," the taller man said, "my name is Agent Carson, and this is Agent Malone."

"Yes, I saw that on your IDs. Why are you here?"

"We're with the FBI, and we need to ask you some questions about what happened here yesterday."

"But I already talked to your people last night."

The men glanced at each other then returned their gazes to Dakota before Malone asked, "What were their names?"

"I don't know. They didn't show me their IDs, just their badges." Suddenly, she understood their question. "Wait a minute. You showed me your IDs, but they didn't. Now I have a feeling those men last night weren't with the FBI."

"Not if they didn't give you their names."

Dakota gasped. "Why do I have another feeling that I shouldn't have said word one to anybody who didn't show me identification?"

"You shouldn't have."

"I wasn't thinking right last night. Now I get I shouldn't have talked to them. So much had happened, though, and I was so dopey on painkillers and blood pressure meds that I didn't think. If I had, I would have known better. I guess maybe I was even in a little shock."

"We understand, Ms. Grayeagle," Carson said.

"Dakota, please."

"All right. Now that you know who we are, we need you to explain what happened here yesterday."

"What happened was that I received a letter bomb."

"Do you know who it was from?"

Dakota shook her head in disbelief. "If *you* were sending somebody a letter bomb, would *you* use your return address?"

"Okay, there was no return address. What about a post mark?"

"I didn't look at it, because I had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong. No reason except that my kitten kept nudging it. But she was a kitten. They do things like that all the time, so I didn't think it was out of the ordinary." A flash of a piece of envelope on the arm of her recliner caused her to hesitate. "Wait a minute. I think there was a partial postmark that came from Nebraska. But it only had the state abbreviation—no city or zip. Maybe the police have that now, because I don't see it here."

"We'll check with them. Where is your kitten?"

Closing her eyes, Dakota swallowed hard. Returning her sorrowful gaze to the men, she said, "She was killed. There was nothing left of her except a few pieces of her insides, part of her leg, and her tail. A friend of mine cleaned up the mess. Come to think of it, he might have unintentionally thrown out the paper, too."

"I see. Do you have any idea who might want to do something like this to you?"

"If I did, I would have told the men last night. No, wait. I guess I'm still a little confused."

Rising, she wandered to the window and noticed Wyatt standing in the parking lot. This whole thing had started the night they met. Was it a sign of the future? Or was it a warning for her to be wary of everybody?

"Dakota?" Carson asked.

Turning back to face them, she leaned against the windowsill. "I'm sorry. You know, I really can't tell you much. It's like all of this has been a bad dream. I didn't have any reason to suspect a bomb, so I didn't have any reason to take a good look at the postmark. Frankly," she said, coming up with the lie on the spot, "I thought it was junk mail when I didn't see a return address."

"Did you give any thought to who the sender might have been?" Malone asked.

"Yes, but I couldn't come up with anything."

"We're going to give you our cards," Carson said as he pulled one from the wallet containing his badge. Beside him, Malone did the same. "If you think of anything, no matter how minute a detail you think it is, let us know. It could be very important to our case."

Accepting their cards, Dakota nodded. "Okay. Now could I ask *you* a question."

"What is it?"

"How did you know about what happened?"

"The police called us yesterday afternoon. We would have gone to the hospital last night, but the officer told us that you weren't very coherent. We decided to wait until you were home to talk to you since you were only going to be there overnight."

"I'm glad you did. Do you have any idea who those men last night could have been? Might I have just *thought* they were with the FBI?"

"It's possible. Would you mind if we look into that? By the way, you said your friend cleaned up. Since it's a small apartment, I imagine the cops finished their work. Do you think your friend might have left evidence in the trash?"

"Maybe. I'll check."

"I've got it," Carson said as he rose. "Trash under the sink like most?"

Dakota nodded with a shrug. "I suppose you will who the other supposed agents were."

"We will," Malone said.

"It would be nice if you would tell me what you learn. If you can, I mean."

"We'll see, ma'am. We'll have to determined it they could be a threat or not first."

"Okay. Do you have any more questions?"

"No, I guess we're done."

Carson wandered out of the kitchen with a bag in his hand. "There appears to be something in here. We'll check with the police to see what they have."

Malone rose, and Dakota wandered to the door and opened it. "Thank you for coming by. It really is nice to know that government officials pay attention to what happens to us citizens."

Closing the door after the agents, Dakota leaned against it. Now she was more concerned about Chayton than ever. The FBI people were undeniably involved now, and she had to talk to him before something more serious happened. After all, children lived in his house. Something more disastrous than a fizzled bomb could wreak havoc with her entire family if she didn't find out what Chayton was up to and stop him before it was too late.

Determined to get answers, Dakota picked up her cell phone and stared at it. No, this wasn't something to discuss over the phone. She needed to wait to discuss it with him in person.

Then another person knocked on the door. With a sigh, she went to answer it. If this kept up, she was never going to get out of town without Brock knowing.

EIGHT

“What are you doing back, Wyatt?” she asked irritably as he strode past her into her apartment.

“I want to know what’s going on,” he demanded. “You’ve got cops out there watching your every move through binoculars.”

“Cops?” she repeated, striding to the window. Scanning the lot, she saw the blue sedan. Two men stood outside it, one of whom had a pair of binoculars in his hand. They’d found her again! “Now what am I going to do?”

“You’re going to let them protect you,” Wyatt said. “They’re probably doing it so they can be sure you’re safe.”

“Yeah, right,” she said sarcastically. “I need to take some more pain medication, Wyatt. Would you do me a favor and take me to Brock’s? I convinced the doctor to let me get rid of the bandages so I can function, but I had to promise to take the medicine without fail. One kind is an antibiotic to prevent infection, and the other is something to relieve the pain. They kind of knock me senseless, so I don’t want to drive.”

“Why do you want to go to *his* place?”

“I need to talk to him.”

“About what?”

“That’s none of your business. He’s my cousin, and I can talk to him if I want to. Now, are you going to take me, or do I call an Uber?”

“All right. I’ll take you.”

She shouldn’t be wasting time going to Brock’s apartment, but she needed to talk to him, especially if she didn’t want him to know when she was leaving, which will obviously now be pushed back. Since the FBI agents who visited her last night weren’t really agents, she needed him to know. Other than leave town, she didn’t know what else to do, and now she wasn’t sure that was a good idea since that blue sedan was in the parking lot again.

Turning in the passenger seat of Wyatt’s BMW convertible, she checked for the other car. Thank goodness, it wasn’t back there. That meant they probably expected her to return to her apartment. She returned her gaze to the road with a heavy sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Wyatt asked.

“Nothing,” she replied.

“You were looking for something, weren’t you.”

“So what if I was? It’s a free country. I can look behind me when I’m in a car if I want to.”

“Yeah, but I know you were looking for the cops. Did you see them? I’ve been watching, and I haven’t seen anything for several blocks.”

“Maybe they lost us in traffic.”

Wyatt glanced in the rearview mirror. “I hope not. You should be protected.”

“I don’t need it,” she insisted. “And I wish you’d quit talking like I do.”

“If they think you need it, you do. When are you going to get that through that thick

skull of yours?"

"Never, because I don't buy it. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like some peace and quiet. I have to think of a way to explain what's happened to Brock."

"What's happened?" Wyatt asked suspiciously. "Just what did those agents want, anyway?"

"They wanted to discuss what happened yesterday. It's not that big a deal. I have a tendency to ramble when I'm nervous about something, and I want to be clear when I talk to Brock. It's as simple as that."

"I just don't get it, Dakota," Wyatt said. "I've never seen cousins as close as you two are. Is he kind of like your big brother or something?"

Dakota nodded. "In a way. I have several brothers, but they all live in South Dakota. Brock's closer, so I talk to him instead."

"I don't have any brothers or sisters, and I've *never* gotten along very well with my cousins."

"Maybe that's why you can't understand. Our family is very close, which is why I want to go home for a while after everything that's happened recently. I need to get away from here and relax."

"I can understand *that*."

"Good. Now, let's just be quiet until we get to Brock's, because I want to collect my thoughts before I explain what happened this morning to him."

Dakota could hardly wait to get up the elevator to Brock's apartment. For some reason, she felt safe with him, quite unlike how she felt with Wyatt. Granted, Wyatt was bigger, but Brock looked a lot stronger. If anybody could protect her until she got on the bus, it was Brock Jones—not Wyatt Romain.

With Wyatt at her side, she knocked on Brock's door and waited for him to answer. When he opened the door and saw them, his mouth dropped.

"What the hell are you doing *here*?" he asked in shock. "I was just getting ready to go pick you up like we'd planned."

"The doctor released me over an hour ago," Dakota explained, not waiting for an invitation to enter. As soon as she did, she scanned the room. A small suitcase sat off to one side near the door.

Her temper flared, but she held it in check by speaking flatly. "Going somewhere, Jones?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," he replied with a grin.

"Don't get smart *or* charming with me, Brock. I'm in no mood for it. If you think you're coming with me to South Dakota, you can just think again, because it isn't going to happen."

"Actually, I don't care *what* you say. I'm going." Brock turned toward Wyatt and asked, "What are *you* doing here, Romain?"

"I asked him to drive me because of my medicine," she replied. "Now I need to talk to you." She faced Wyatt and added, "*Alone* if you don't mind."

"In a minute," Brock replied as he stalked to the living room window. Below the blue sedan drove into the parking lot. "Damn! What the hell's wrong with you, woman? Traipsing around like that is stupid. Now you've got a tail on you."

"It's the police," Wyatt interrupted. "And stop yelling at her. It's good for them to be there, because they can protect her."

"Protect her? You're a damned fool if you think that. Romain, you're by far the most irresponsible, imbecilic man I've ever met. Get the hell out of my apartment."

"Not without Dakota. She and I have an understanding."

"Just go, Wyatt," she said.

"Sorry, Babe. I'm not leaving you alone with him."

"Fine. Stay." She gazed at Brock. "Please, Brock. This is important. I need to talk to you—right away, not in a minute."

Gently grasping her arm just above her elbow, he said, "I'm busy doing something, but I can still talk. Let's go to my bedroom. Romain, you can stay, but wait here."

Dakota was amazed at how tender his touch was. She didn't know why the men were at odds with each other, and she didn't care. Right now, she needed the calm, sensible Brock, who had never given her any signs that he was interested in her. She needed a dispassionate man who could think clearly. Wyatt wasn't that.

"What's going on with you two?"

"It doesn't matter. Now what do you need to talk to me about?"

In his bedroom, he released her, and she dropped onto the edge of his bed, where his half-filled suitcase lay. "I can't believe you're doing this."

"Doing what?"

Tapping the suitcase, she said, "Packing to take me to South Dakota. Why are you doing this when you have a job?"

"Because I don't believe you should be traveling alone right now. It's as simple as that."

"But you don't have bus tickets, do you?"

"No, and I don't plan to get any. You and I are going in my sister's Jeep Cherokee."

"Why do you want to get involved in something that's already proven to be dangerous?"

Brock shrugged. "I have no idea. All I know is that I feel responsible for your safety after the other night."

"You're not, you know."

"I know, but that doesn't stop the feeling. Now are you going to tell me what's so important, or do I have to drag it out of you?"

Sinking onto the bed, she stared him in the eyes as he dropped down beside her. "Remember I told you that the FBI guys had been at the hospital to talk to me?"

"What about it?"

"Well, FBI agents came to my apartment a while ago to ask me a few questions. They told me that nobody from their office had been to the hospital because the police had told them that I'd probably be pretty incoherent."

"So the guys this morning were phonies?"

"More like the guys last night. The ones today showed me their IDs without me even having to ask. The ones last night didn't show me anything until I asked. Then they only flashed their badges."

Brock gasped. "You mean you told those guys yesterday things that you shouldn't have? You mean you didn't even *ask* to see identification?"

"I didn't think of it, Brock," she admitted. "I feel like a fool now, but at least I didn't tell them everything I know."

"Wait a minute," he replied suspiciously. "I thought you said you didn't know anything."

"I didn't—about the guys following me the other night. But I know a lot about the bomb." She hesitated, chewing on her lower lip. "Uh, Brock, there's probably something I should tell you since I don't think I'm getting out of you taking me home."

"And just what might *that* be?"

"That bomb? Well, um, it wasn't exactly addressed to me."

His gray eyes widened in shock. "It *wasn't*? Who the hell *was* it addressed to?"

"My brother. That's why I need to go to South Dakota. I have to find out what he's been up to and see that he doesn't get in any more trouble."

"What do you mean by any more trouble?"

"Like I said, he's an AIM member."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Quite a while back, he got himself in pretty deep, and he spent a little under five years behind bars. He's been good ever since and stayed on the political side of AIM—as far as I *know*. Now I'm not so sure. So you see, going with me is a really bad idea. You could get yourself in deeper than you want to be. It's why I can't let you do this."

Brock sank down beside her and ran his hand down her back. "And it's precisely why I can't let you go alone. Can't you understand that?"

Dakota stifled the excitement that raced through her at his tender caress. Now was no time for them to get involved, because there was probably too much danger ahead of her. "But you don't even know me, Brock."

"I don't care." Rising, he strode to his dresser and pulled out a handful of white, athletic socks. Returning to the bed, he dropped them into his suitcase. "Look, Dakota, I can't let you go alone, mainly because I was raised to be a gentleman. And gentlemen don't let women walk into potential traps without being there to spring them. You may not know this, but it wasn't the cops who were at your apartment this morning like Romain thought. It wasn't them protecting you. It was that blue sedan who followed us the night we met."

"I know. I saw it. But it didn't follow us here, Brock. I looked myself to be sure."

"You need glasses then, because it drove into the parking lot as I looked outside."

With a gasp, Dakota raced to the window and peeked out the closed drapes. Sure enough, the blue sedan sat in the lot below. She spun back to face Brock. "What are we going to do now?"

"Get the hell out of Dodge, just like you want—only we're going to have to find some way to disguise you. We want those guys to think that he's left you here, then we want them to think that *I* left you here."

"I don't know what you're up to, but ..."

"I don't know yet, either, but I'll think of something after we get Romain to go home. Come on. Let's see what we can do."

"Where do you get off claiming I'm irresponsible?" Wyatt demanded when Brock and Dakota returned to the living room. "I haven't even done anything but bring your cousin to your apartment—just like she asked me to."

"But you also brought a tail," Brock declared. "Now I want you out of my apartment."

Is that simple enough language that you can understand? Or do I have to *show* you what I mean by throwing you out?"

"I'm not leaving without Dakota."

"The hell you're not. You're going to create a diversion so I can get her out of here safely."

"If you think I'm going to leave her here alone with you, you're crazy," Wyatt proclaimed. "I don't trust you for a second. It doesn't take a genius to see how attracted you are to your cousin. You just want me out so you two can make time, and I'll be damned if I'll let that happen. It's called incest, and it's illegal."

Unable to control his fury, Brock grabbed Wyatt by the shirt and slammed him against the wall. Wyatt's eyes widened in horror.

"Look, buster, you'd better get your act together in more ways than one. And stop insulting my cousin. She knows me better than you, and she knows I'm not about to do anything that would hurt her—emotionally *or* physically."

"She's *my* girlfriend now."

"The hell she is!" Brock glanced over at Dakota and asked, "You're not, are you?"

"I'm not *anybody's* girlfriend at the moment," she said.

"There, you see, Romain?" Brock said. "She's *not* your girlfriend, and I'm guessing she would know. I don't care how attracted to her you are, stay away from her. Now get your sorry ass out of here and don't come back." He opened the door and shoved Wyatt into the hallway. "I'll throw you out again if you do."

Filled with a sense of power that he hadn't had in a long time, Brock slammed the door and turned to Dakota. A broad grin spread across his mouth as Wyatt's footsteps faded in the distance.

"God, that felt good," he said. "I haven't had a decent fight in years."

"It was more like a bully picking on the little kid on the block."

"True, but he's hardly little. I also accomplished my mission of getting him out of here without him suspecting anything was wrong."

"All right. So now what? I've got to get back to my place as soon as I can, because I'm not done packing and my bus leaves in about forty-five minutes."

Brock continued to grin and winked at her. "You're not taking the bus, remember, ma'am? I'm driving you."

"But I've already ordered the tickets."

"So call and cancel them."

"Well," she agreed hesitantly, "okay—but only because I just don't think I'm going to have enough time to make the bus, anyway. Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, it's not too late to back out."

"Not only do I *want* to, I insist on it. Those guys are still out there, and you need to avoid them. So far, you haven't been very good at it without me, so you need my help." He paused, then added, "Surely, you're not going to argue with me about that one, are you?"

"Surely not," she said with a smile. "So what do we do next?"

"You cancel your bus reservation. I'm going to make a phone call, too. I think I have an idea."

Brock stared at Dakota in awe. He couldn't believe this was the same woman who had gone into the spare bedroom a few minutes ago. Instead of wearing a shirt that showed off her gorgeous figure, she wore one of his button-down shirts with a leather vest over it. Instead of the snug jeans she'd worn to his apartment, she wore a pair of his jeans, which were a little short. Her black hair, once long and loose, was braided and wrapped around her head.

"What a change!" he exclaimed. "You hardly look like a woman at all."

"I thought that was the point," she replied. "I thought that was why you asked your friend to bring over some clothes."

"It is. I just didn't expect the change to be so dramatic. There's just one little detail that needs to be worked out."

"What's that?" she asked curiously when he didn't continue right away.

"I'm not sure how to say it, but it's still a little obvious that you're a woman."

"I've already taken off my bra. What more can I do?"

"I guess you'll just have to wear a jacket, too." Reaching down beside his chair, he handed her a pair of cowboy boots. "Here, I wrangled up a pair of boots your size. They should hide the fact that your pants don't fit."

Taking the boots, she sat down on the sofa and pulled them on as she questioned him hesitantly. "Do you really think this is going to work, Brock?"

"I don't see why not. I have a cowboy hat that I wear when I go riding, and that will hide your hair, not to mention part of your face. I've made arrangements with a friend for you to borrow his car, so you can drive to the nearest convenience store. I'm going to throw the clothes you just took off into my briefcase and make it look like I'm going to the office. Hopefully, those guys will stay here and wait for you to come out."

"What about your suitcases?"

"You'll take them with you. Do you think you can handle this without giving yourself away?"

"That all depends. Is the car a standard transmission or automatic?"

"Automatic. I thought it would be easier for you to drive with your hands so burned up. Do they still sting?"

"Quite a bit, but I can live with it." She paused and smiled up at him.

"Good. My friend's already left the building under the pretext of taking a nice little jog around the neighborhood. He said he'd meet you at the store so he could get the keys. You can leave whenever you're ready."

"What should I do if they figure out what's happening and follow me?"

"I'll be right behind you, but I doubt that's going to happen." Taking the keys from the dinette table, he strode over to the sofa and sat down beside her. "The round one is for the trunk, and the square one is for the door and ignition. Just remember to act like you do this every day. It's the only way we have a chance. If you show that you're nervous, they might get suspicious."

"How will I recognize your friend?"

"He's wearing a bright green jogging suit. You won't be able to miss him. Turn right out of the parking lot, go three blocks, turn left, then five blocks. You'll see the Circle K off to the right."

"Right—three blocks," she repeated, "left—five blocks. Circle K on the right."

"Perfect. Now I'll get my hat and you can get out of here. Oh, and slump a little and try to walk like a guy."

NINE

As Brock's friend chatting while he sat on the hood of his car, Dakota paced anxiously. Brock had told her that he would leave about five minutes after she did. That's all the time it had taken her to get to the convenience store. She glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes had passed since they parted at the bottom of the complex elevator. Where was he?

"What's going on, anyway?" the man who had introduced himself as Jason Parker asked.

She shot her startled gaze to his face. "Nothing. Why?"

"To start with, your hands are burned and you have wounds on your face."

"Oh, that. I had a run-in with my gas stove." She didn't know where that lie came from, but she was glad it showed up.

"Aw. You can't stand still, either. Are you and Brock eloping or something?"

"Yeah, that's it," Dakota replied absently as she scanned the street for a Jeep Cherokee. "We're eloping."

"No, you're not."

Again she stared at him in shock. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you were too eager to agree. Besides, Brock told me about a month ago when I tried to set him up that he wasn't ready to get married again. In fact, he told me that he'd probably *never* get married again."

Dakota studied him. His dark blue eyes were ringed with what seemed to be permanent discoloration that made him look like he never got enough sleep. His pock-marked face would have been more than a little attractive if it hadn't been for his adult acne. Even so, his average height was well enough built that any woman would look at him more than once.

Drawing in a deep breath to still her nerves, she asked, "Why did you ask if we were eloping if you'd already decided you wouldn't believe me?"

"To test you. You're awfully nervous, so I figure it's something pretty big. That was the only thing I could think of."

Before she could respond, a Cherokee pulled into the parking lot and turned into the space three away from theirs. Dakota rushed over to it as soon as Brock started getting out and she could see who it was.

"What took you so long?" she demanded.

He grinned. "I was playing cat-and-mouse. At the last minute, I decided to circle back and see if they were still in the lot because I didn't see them behind me. They were, so I waited a few minutes. It didn't look like they were going to follow anytime soon, so I came on over." His grin broadened and he winked at her. "Did you miss me?"

"Who you trying to get off your tail?" Jason asked as he joined them.

"Dakota's brothers," Brock replied, slipping his arm around Dakota's shoulders. To her surprise, he pulled her closer, bent a little, and kissed her lightly on the lips. "They're not too keen on the idea of us getting hitched, so we're leaving town. Right,

sweetheart?"

Not knowing how to react to the unexpected sensations that swept through her at his unobtrusive peck, she nodded.

Jason stared at them in shock. "You really *are* eloping?"

"Her brothers think we haven't known each other long enough to know if we're in love, but we believe differently."

"You must *not* have. A month ago you told me you weren't ready for marriage. Now you're rushing into it. Just how long *have* you known each other?"

"A couple of weeks."

"Her brothers are right," Jason mumbled.

"Look, we don't have time for your lecture," Brock said. "We've got a preacher to meet. Let's just get my suitcases out of your car so we can be on our way."

"Where're you going? Reno?"

"Yep," Brock replied as they strode to Jason's car. "We're hoping it will take them a while to figure out that we're both gone, then they'll start checking the local chapels. Hopefully, Reno will be their second choice. By the time they figure out what's going on and get there, though, we'll already have consummated the marriage. They won't be able to stop us. At least, that's what we're hoping."

Opening his trunk, Jason said, "I've gotta tell you, pal, I'm not sure this is a good idea. You don't even know the woman."

"I know her as well as anybody can. We've spent almost every minute together since we met. And I tell you, I've never met another woman like her. She's sweet and innocent and smart—and *very* sexy. Those are hard traits to combine, and they're everything I always wanted my ex to be. So I'm grabbing this one before some other guy can get his hands on her and spoil those traits."

Jason slammed the trunk closed and carried one of the suitcases toward the Cherokee while Brock carried the other one. "I hope you're not making a mistake, man."

"I've never felt so sure about anything in my life, not even my first marriage. I don't even have cold feet this time."

"What about your new bride? You sure *she's* not having second thoughts? She was awfully nervous before you got here."

"Aren't all brides nervous?" Brock asked as he and Jason reached the Jeep. "Hell, I'm a little nervous myself. It's normal, right, sweetheart?"

Dakota couldn't believe this was happening. What was she supposed to do? Cuddle up to a man she hardly knew and pretend like all was well with the world? Although, he had just given her an explanation for her behavior, which Jason already suspected unusual, anyway.

Trying to play the part Brock had given her, she slid her arms under his and snuggled up against him. She stared up into his gray eyes, which seemed to have a new, almost adoring look in them, and said, "Every single bride who ever walked down the aisle."

Brock wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her closer. "Didn't I tell you, Jason?"

His lips met hers in a more heated kiss than the first one. His tongue slipped between her lips. Uncontrollable sensations swept through her, and she instinctively kissed him back. Then she felt a movement against her thigh—where his pelvis made contact with her. Oh, no! He was reacting to the kiss, and Jason would probably notice.

A moment later, he released her and dug into his pants pocket for the keys. Her mouth dropped in amazement. How could he kiss her like that then act like it was nothing out of the ordinary? Here she was, startled by how good a kisser he was, and he was calmly opening the tailgate and putting in his suitcases. If he drew such strong feelings from her while playing a part, what in the world would he do to her if he was serious about kissing her?

He slammed the tailgate shut and turned to face her. "You drive, sweetheart. I want to sit back and revel in our love."

Unable to stop what was happening, she let him steer her to the driver's door and help her in. Then, after shutting her door, he rounded the front of the Jeep and stood by the passenger door to address Jason.

"Thanks a lot for everything, Jase," he said. "You'll never know how much we appreciate it."

Jason laughed. "Anything to promote true love, even if I do think you're making a mistake. You two have a nice honeymoon." He leaned over and waved to Dakota. "Nice to meet you, soon-to-be Mrs. Jones."

"It was nice to meet you, too," she said. "If you're ready, Brock, I could use the keys."

"It's keyless. Just step on the brake and push the button," he said cheerfully while Dakota started the car. "Bye, Jason. If they figure out you're involved, don't tell her brothers where we went until at least tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," Jason agreed. "Drive carefully."

Dakota put the Cherokee in gear and backed out of the parking space. When they were out of the lot, Brock waved back at Jason then collapsed back against the seat with a heavy sigh of relief.

"Man, that was close," he said. "I wasn't sure I could pull it off. I had to keep talking just to distract him—because *you're* such a lousy actress."

"It's not my life's calling," she snapped, offended by his remark. "Besides, I was nervous that those guys might still be on our tail. Now what was all that about?"

"I was only kidding about the acting thing, Dakota, so don't take offense. Surely, you didn't expect me to tell him the *real* reason we're leaving town."

"No, but you didn't have to play your part so *well*," she replied, more than a little peeved by his nonchalant attitude. "I had no idea you were going to do that."

"Do what?"

"*You* know what. The least you could have done was warn me before I left your apartment."

"I didn't think of the ruse until after you left," he admitted. "I knew he was suspicious, and I knew I had to come up with something, because he's one of the nosiest people I know."

"Then why did you bother to involve him in the first place?"

"Because he's the only person I know who's so close to your size. Everybody else I hang out with is much shorter than you are—or much taller. And I only wanted to involve one person. It's easier to keep a story straight that way."

Growing less tolerant of their conversation with each of his sentences, she glanced over at him. When she saw the smirk on his lips, she said, "You sound like you've had a lot of experience in that area. I thought you didn't go around playing knight-in-shining-armor. At least, that's what you told me the first night."

"Come on, Dakota," he said in a voice filled with irritation. "Would you chill out? I

did what I had to do to keep our cover realistic. Why are you so angry about it?"

"I'm angry because of what you did."

"And what would that be? I said we were eloping to buy us some time, and I acted like a man in love. If you're mad because I kissed you, ..."

"You didn't need to use your tongue!"

Brock laughed as Dakota stopped at a red light. Glaring over at him, she declared, "It isn't funny."

"Sure it is. Can't you see it? You're not mad because I *kissed* you. You're mad because I was starting to get into it. Come on, Dakota. Surely, you see the humor in it. Here I was putting on the best performance of my life, and it backfired on me."

The anger drained from her in an instant, and she studied him suspiciously, unsure she should believe him. "Backfired?"

"*Hell*, yeah. I really thought I could pull it off without getting excited. It's not like we're anything other than friends, you know. How was I supposed to know that I'd like a little kiss more than I thought?"

The light turned green, and Dakota pulled away from the stop line. "You should have thought about that *before* you put your plan into action."

"I did. That's why I thought it would work." He paused then added seductively, "You're one hell of a kisser, you know."

"I don't know," she said, carefully negotiating a corner. Now that she knew his reaction was an accidental result of his acting, she didn't want him to know that she'd enjoyed the kiss herself. To keep the information private, she continued with a forced bitter tone in her voice. "And I'd rather you not bring up the subject again. What happened, happened. We got out of a tight spot, and now we're on the road. Which reminds me, where are we going? You're not giving me any directions."

"To your place, of course. We have to get your bags so we can get the hell out of Dodge, remember?"

"Good. I'm getting hot in this jacket and vest. I want to take them off."

"Not until you're back in the car. We don't know if the blue sedan guys have any cohorts watching your place for them, so we have to be careful. You need to stay in character until we're out of town and know they aren't following."

After watching Dakota go into the building, Brock used the lever beside his seat to recline the back of it. He pushed his own cowboy hat forward by the back of the brim so it covered his face.

That was one hell of a kiss he and Dakota had shared. He'd been surprised that she'd reciprocated, but he wasn't about to tell her, either. The whole scene had been his fault, and he was willing to admit it. He didn't want her feeling like she'd created a problem by doing her part in their act for Jason.

But she *had* created a problem—or *he* had by even thinking he could kiss her without getting excited. Since she hadn't responded to his first kiss, though, he hadn't expected her to respond if he kissed her again. And he certainly hadn't expected that he would *want* her.

He released a heavy sigh. This was something he needed to keep secret. Kissing her again—as badly as he wanted to—was something he had to avoid. He couldn't even put

himself in the position of the possibility of it happening. That meant he had to scrap his idea of getting a single motel room with two beds so he could protect her if necessary. He would just have to make sure they had rooms next to each other so she could bang on the wall if she needed him.

Now that he thought about it, maybe Romain had been right. Maybe he was interested in Dakota, like Romain claimed. Naw, that wasn't possible. He didn't know the woman well enough to have that kind of reaction to her. Or did he *need* to know her well just to be attracted to her? Romain had been attracted to her from the second they met. Could he himself have been as obvious as Romain had been?

A knock on his window startled him from his thoughts, and she asked him to open the tail gate. As badly as he wanted to scramble out of the car and help her, he felt it was better if he didn't. Neither one of them knew if anybody else was following her, so they should act like she was a man until they were out of town. Stretching across the car, he pushed the tailgate button.

When door slammed, he moved his seat back upright and slid his hat back on his head. As she got in behind the wheel again, he said, "That didn't take long."

"I was almost done when Wyatt dropped by," she replied as she started the car. "Where are we headed?"

"North out of town, I guess." Suddenly remembering that he didn't have a road atlas, he said, "No, wait. Let's hit a bookstore first. I want an atlas so we can determine the best route. The GPS will get us there, but I don't want to take an obvious route. It won't take me but a minute or two, so you can wait in the car while I get it. Once we're on the interstate, we'll stop at the first rest stop, and you can get into something more comfortable while I study the map. That's not to say that they'll figure out where we went, of course, but it doesn't hurt to be safe. How's that sound?"

"Perfect," she drawled. "I'm about to roast to death in all these clothes. I also won't have to worry about those guys doing me in *or* following me. Why don't you turn the air on as high as it will go for a while?"

Brock couldn't believe the change in her attitude. When they'd headed back to her apartment, she'd been irritable and sullen. Now she was cheerful and talkative. He didn't know what to make of it, but he was afraid to ask, too. Since they'd basically stopped talking after he'd admitted that his kiss had only been an act, he was terrified that she would tell him that hers had, as well. And he certainly didn't want to know if that was the case. He liked thinking that she'd reacted because she hadn't been able to resist.

He did know one thing, though. This Dakota wasn't the same one he'd rescued a few days ago. That one had been much quieter. But he liked this new Dakota better than the old one.

When she pulled into the first interstate rest stop, she grabbed up her smaller, fabric suitcase and rushed into the bathroom with it. He smiled after her and went into the men's room at a slower pace.

Returning to the car, he laid the atlas on the hood and tried to figure out the route he wanted to take. Maybe they should go straight to her brother's house, after all. If they took a longer route, it could delay them long enough for the blue sedan guys to stake out her brother's place.

What was he thinking? He didn't know that they were even aware that she had a brother. Of course, he didn't know that they weren't aware of it, either.

He shook his head slowly. What was he thinking, indeed! He knew nothing about helping a woman in distress. He didn't even know why he was forcing her to depend on his help. All he knew was that he'd vowed he would help her, and now he didn't see any way to get out of following through on his promise.

Looking around the parking lot, he checked to see if the blue sedan was there. No, apparently, they were still in the parking lot at his apartment. At least, that much was working as he'd hoped. Now if he could just get his body to do the same thing. Every time he thought of their kiss, his body started to respond; and every time, he had to think of something else to stop it.

As he scanned the lot, he noticed Dakota approaching. He stifled a startled gasp and muttered, "Oh, my God."

Instead of wearing jeans as she had whenever they were together before, she was in exercise shorts that showed off her long, shapely legs. Her knit tank top left little to his imagination. And he'd thought it was hard to ignore her when she was fully clothed. Now it would be impossible! She had a figure that just wouldn't quit. Of course, he'd checked when he put her clothes in his briefcase, and her bra size was 36D. What did he expect but a well-proportioned woman?

"You look like you're about ready to start drooling," she said when she reached the Jeep. "Want a bib?"

He snapped his mouth shut and turned the atlas to the interstate map of the United States. Focusing his attention on it, he forced a casual reply. "Just surprised that you're wearing shorts instead of jeans like you usually wear."

"I don't like to travel in jeans. Shorts are more comfortable." She wandered up beside him and stared at the map. "So what do you think? Should we take 15 to 70 and go to Denver that way? Or should we go up to 80 and go through Wyoming?"

"I have to admit, I'm not sure," he said. "Should I get you there quickly? Or should we take our time?"

"I thought you wanted to be sure those guys were off our backs."

"I do, but I thought maybe it would be better to just get you there."

"It seems to me that it's six of one, a half a dozen of the other. You know, we do have another choice. We could take the back roads part of the way. No matter which interstate we take, we'll have to backtrack to get to Chayt's place. Interstates just don't go through the area where he lives."

Brock straightened up and stared down at her long, black hair, now free of its braided constraints. "Where's that?"

"On the Rosebud Indian Reservation—here on the Nebraska border. It's closer to Route 20, but Route 18 can get us there, too."

Suddenly, he wanted to run his fingers through her hair, and he knew just how he could do it without her realizing what was in his mind. Since her hair was partially covering the atlas, he tenderly gasped her soft, thick mane and pulled it back behind her shoulders.

"Where's that?" he asked, holding her hair back with one hand while he laid the other on the hood of the Jeep and bent over.

She leafed through the book of maps until she came to the one for South Dakota. Her long, slender index finger, with its perfectly manicured nail, pointed to a city name on the map. He leaned a little closer so he could see better.

"He lives in Spring Creek?" Brock asked curiously.

"Between there and St. Francis. Actually, his ranch is a little south of both but almost directly between them."

"There's no road to it?"

"Sure there is. It's just not marked on the map."

"All right. Tell you what. *You* decide how long you want to take to get there. Do you want to drag it out, or do you want to just go?"

"I'd *like* to drag it out," she admitted as they both straightened up and he released her hair. "Unfortunately, I'm not sure that's a good idea. I told you that letter bomb was addressed to Chayt, so I should probably get there as soon as I can."

"Do you know the best way for that?"

"Well, I've only driven it twice, but I took 15 to 80. I took some back roads through Wyoming then hooked up to I25 at Casper, took that to 90 over to Rapid City. I can get to his place without a map from there."

"Then that's what we'll do. Do you have any preferences as to how far you want to travel in a day?"

"I usually drive about eight hours, but that's just me. We could go a little longer if you want to."

"How far is it?"

"Not quite 1200 miles."

"Tell you what. Since we got a late start today, how about if we cut it off around eight tonight. Maybe we can make the rest of the trip tomorrow—after I've had a good night's sleep."

Dakota shrugged. "Whatever you feel comfortable with. If I'd had enough money saved up, I could have flown, but it was going to take at least thirty-six hours for me to go by bus. I figure a car is more comfortable, so drive however long you want. I'm sure I'll be happy just to get there in one piece."

"I certainly hope so," Brock said with a laugh. "Because that's exactly how I intend to get you there."

They got into the car, and Brock decided he needed to tell her what he'd done earlier. He reluctantly told her that he had let the police know they were leaving town and asked them to tell the FBI agents know where they were going. "I told them that if they needed us for anything, we'd come back right away. I hope you're not mad."

"Not at all. In fact, I was feeling a little guilty about skipping out on the investigation. Now I know it's okay."

The interstate drive went so smooth, Brock decided to stop a little earlier than he'd planned—just after they got to Interstate 80. The first Comfort Inn they found, he pulled off the highway and got them each a room. After taking their things to their rooms and freshening up, they met in the hallway.

"Ready for dinner?" Brock asked cheerfully.

"Absolutely," she replied in a like tone.

"Then let's head out."

After eating, they returned to the motel. But in the hall, Brock found it difficult to just say good night. He wanted to kiss her again so badly he couldn't stand it. To keep her with him and keep open the possibility of that happening, he kept talking about

anything that came to his mind. Finally, Dakota interrupted him.

"Aren't you tired?" she asked curiously.

"Kind of, but not real. Why?"

"I didn't think you'd want to stand around and shoot the breeze after such a long day. Are you sure you don't want to get some sleep?"

"Frankly, I'm kind of wound up after all that driving. I need to relax."

"Then why don't we go across the street and get a glass of wine? I'm a little wound up myself tonight."

"I thought that you didn't drink."

"On rare occasions, I do. Tonight I'm afraid I won't fall asleep, so one glass might help."

Despite his better judgment, Brock agreed to take her back to the little bar and grill where they'd eaten dinner. He wanted to stay with her, but he knew that a beer would probably relax his better judgment, as well as his body.

After one glass of wine which she sipped very slowly and two beers for him, they returned to the motel room. Now was the telling moment. She'd said at the bar that she could probably sleep now, so she would probably just go into her room.

But she didn't. Instead, she just stood there with her key card in her hand, staring at it as though she was also hesitant about saying good night.

"What time do you want to leave in the morning?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"I like to get up early and get on the road. Do you mind leaving around seven?"

"Not a problem with me."

"Good."

"Well, I suppose we should get some sleep."

"I suppose."

Still she didn't move to open her door. Did that mean she would welcome another kiss? If only he knew what to do. "Oh, what the hell."

Grabbing her upper arms, he jerked her closer to him and pressed his lips firmly against hers. Despite the desire raging through him, he kept his tongue in his own mouth. He'd already antagonized her once by doing that, and he didn't want to risk her making him go home because he'd gone too far.

A moment later he released her and stepped back. He stared at her, trying to read her reaction. Those nearly black eyes showed nothing but surprise. He smiled and shook his head. Then he admitted, "Sorry. I didn't know what to do, but it just seemed right. Good night."

Without another word, he tapped the lock with his key card, opened his door, and went into his room. Closing the door, he leaned back against it with a sigh until he heard her door close. At least, she hadn't slapped him. And now he'd done what he'd wanted to do all day, he could probably sleep very well. Then tomorrow they'd go all the way to her brother's house, and he'd be safe from his inexplicable attraction to her.

TEN

"We couldn't help it, Jeff," Greg said into the phone. "That guy's really cagey. We searched his apartment when he didn't come back after work, and his suitcases are gone—along with a bunch of his clothes. I even looked for something that might tell us where he was going, but nothing showed up."

"So you're saying you lost her *again*?" Jeff asked irritably.

"Yeah, but we'll go check her apartment next. I don't think she's going to be there, though, because she never came out of the building. One of us was watching the door every second. What I can't figure out is how Jones got his suitcases out without us seeing him. The only thing I can come up with is that he already had them in the car before we got there. Which reminds me, he's driving a Jeep now. I think he might have taken his car to the shop."

"That makes sense. Did you see anybody else coming out with suitcases?"

"Some guy. Looked like he was headed out on a vacation."

"Well, see if she got over to her apartment and let me know what you find. Hopefully, she'll be there. You *can't* let her get out of your sight again, is that clear? This matter is too serious to keep losing her."

"I know, I know," Greg snapped. "I'll call again after we try her apartment."

"You'd better find her," Jeff declared, "because if you don't, I'm going to have to report in again. The last time he wasn't very happy about us losing her, but he calmed down when he heard that you found her again. If I have to tell him it happened a second time, he's going to be furious. Only this time I'm not going to call unless you can't find her. I'd kind of like to spare myself his anger. The guy's got one *hot* temper, and I don't like having to deal with it."

"We'll do our best," Greg said. "Now let me go so we can check her apartment."

"Shit!" Jeff exclaimed when the second phone call came through and he got the necessary information. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. We checked everywhere, Jeff. She's taken her suitcase and disappeared. I asked a few of her neighbors, and one of them suggested that she was either at Jones' place or maybe even Wyatt Romain's place. It must be Romain's since Jones left town."

"You damned fool! Put two and two together. Jones left town because he was getting Dakota out of there."

"Oh, shit, you're probably right. But how the hell did they do it? We were watching the building every second. There's no way they couldn't have gotten away at the same time."

"Wait a minute!" Greg's partner, Brad, exclaimed. "Remember that guy with the bags who left the building?"

"Just a minute, Jeff," Greg said into the phone. "What about him?"

"I'll bet that's how they did it. I'll bet that was Dakota disguised as a man."

"Why do you figure that?"

“Think about it. He was the only person to take bags from the apartment building. Then a few minutes later out comes Jones with a briefcase—like he was going to work. But he never came home from work, and his bags were gone—along with Dakota. If that was Dakota coming out and not some man, that’s how they did it.”

“But that wasn’t Dakota’s car the guy got into.”

“And it wasn’t Jones’ car that *he* left in. I’ll bet they had people helping them get out of town, because there was another car that looked a lot like the one the guy with the suitcases had that came back in the lot about twenty minutes after he left. Remember? I said something about there were sure a lot of cars like that in the lot, because a guy in a jogging suit got out of it. And now that I’m thinking about it, that same jogger left the building about a half an hour before he came back. I didn’t say anything at the time, but I thought it was awfully strange that he would jog away and drive back. Now I think I know why.”

“Sounds like Brad’s got it figured out,” Jeff said into Greg’s ear. “Go back to Jones’ apartment building and see if you can find out who might have helped them.”

“Will do,” Greg agreed. “But I doubt anybody’s going to know where they are. If Jones concocted this whole thing, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to tell the guy where they were going.”

“Probably not but give it a shot. You might get lucky. I’ll hold off making my phone call ‘til morning to give you plenty of time for follow-up.”

After a restless night riddled with erotic dreams of Brock seducing her, Dakota woke weary and depressed. What had she started when she ran into his car that night? At first, she’d been desperate and hadn’t considered possible consequences. Then he’d made sense, claiming that she needed his help to get away from those men. But after that, ... Well, she kind of *liked* having him there to protect her. It was the only plausible explanation why she would have had Vickie call him after the explosion.

Now things had changed. When he’d kissed her in front of his friend, she’d sensed that more lay behind it than a cover-up—despite his denials.

Dakota threw back the covers and padded into the bathroom for a shower. As she got ready, she recalled the look of lust in his eyes after his second kiss, the awed expression on his face when he saw her wearing shorts and a tank top, the boyishly nervous twitching of his lips just before he’d kissed her good night. Yes, things had definitely changed; and given the circumstances, she wasn’t sure it was for the better.

After washing and shampooing, she dried off then stood naked before the large mirror above the vanity. By the time she was fourteen she looked like this—tall and well-endowed. She’d always hated the way men and boys looked at her, and she’d always played down her figure with large T-shirts and sweatshirts. But she hadn’t minded when Brock looked at her, because it was different. He didn’t ogle her, except when he wasn’t expecting her appearance. Then he’d stopped, apparently as soon as he realized what he was doing.

Dakota combed out her hair and blow-dried it part way then dressed in the same type of outfit as the previous day. Ready to leave, she went to the next motel room and knocked on Brock’s door. A few seconds later he answered it—wearing only a towel!

Her jaw dropped in amazement. She’d never seen him without his shirt before, and

he was a lot better proportioned than she'd imagined. His pectoral muscles were very prominent, and his stomach was ripped. This was a man who took care to his body! The medium brown hair that covered his chest ran in a stripe down his abdomen and disappeared beneath the towel.

She swallowed hard to still the desire engulfing her, and the towel moved. Oh, what she wouldn't give to have the courage to tear it from his body and attack him! Instead, she forced her gaze upward, to his smiling lips and the face half-covered with shaving cream.

Then his deep voice broke through her thoughts. "I'd let you come in, but we probably wouldn't leave for quite a while. Give me another twenty minutes, and I'll be ready. Okay?"

"Okay," she absently agreed.

Dakota went back to her room and tried to forget what she'd just seen. Not a chance! The image stuck in her mind. She couldn't stop thinking about what a great physique he had and wondering what it would have been like if she'd gone into his room and not left for quite a while.

A knock at the door startled her from her thoughts, and she scurried to answer it. Outside, Brock grinned at her.

"I think I should start by apologizing for all the kissing I did yesterday. I was just trying to create a story and a diversion, and things kind of got out of hand. I promise it won't happen again."

Despite her disappointment, she returned his smile. "That's all right. I understand. But you're right. We should probably call it quits. We need to get to South Dakota and finding out what Chayt's up to."

"You really believe he's gotten himself into something he shouldn't, don't you," Brock observed as he strode past her, picked up her suitcases and exited the room. "How can you be so sure about that?"

"I know my brother. He's got a heart of gold, Brock, but sometimes he lets his political views overrule his logic. He tends to get way too involved in the American Indian Movement, even if it isn't as big as it used to be. He doesn't think about the ramifications of what he does until it's too late to turn back."

She followed him to the Jeep and watched as he put the luggage into the back. He closed the tailgate and turned to face her.

"Do you think he's doing that right now?" Brock asked.

"I don't know *what* to think. All I know is that he must be into something, because somebody sent him a mail bomb to my address. I'm guessing they didn't expect me to open it to see what was inside. They probably thought I'd just forward it to Chayt."

They got into the car before he spoke again. "Why *did* you open it, anyway?"

"I wanted to see if it was urgent or if I could send it parcel post. I'm always scrimping where I can, but I thought Chayt might need it."

"Why didn't you just forward it? Then you wouldn't have had to pay anything."

While Brock pulled out of the parking space, Dakota buckled her seatbelt. "I didn't think of it."

"I don't suppose you have any idea of why somebody would send something to him at your address."

"Not a clue. He's never lived there. In fact, he's only visited once—when he came to Nevada for some livestock for his ranch."

"Do you know how whoever sent it would get your address?"

"The only thing I can think of is that they got it from Chayt's address book."

Brock nodded his agreement. "That means it's probably somebody he knows."

"Somebody with a grudge?" Dakota asked.

"Or something to gain by involving you."

"What kind of something? I've *never* been involved in AIM. I've never even done anything remotely connected to it. Involving me in whatever Chayt might be up to would accomplish nothing."

"Accept maybe teach your brother a lesson. Is he protective of you?"

"Very," Dakota admitted. "He'd never let anything happen to me, and he certainly wouldn't let anybody he knew get me involved in something illegal."

"What makes you think it's illegal?"

"In case you haven't heard," she said, "letter bombs are illegal."

"Good point, but that wasn't what I was getting at. The second that person mailed that package to your address, he—or she—involved you. Do you think that bomb was *meant* to only do minor damage? Or should I ask if the FBI guys mentioned what they thought about it?"

"They didn't say. Years ago, Chayt got himself in some pretty dangerous stuff, so it's possible that he's done it again. He was nineteen then, though, and he's stayed out of trouble ever since. I won't know until I talk to him. I need to talk to him in person, too, he can fool me too well over the phone. I want *honest* answers, and I can always tell by the look in his eyes if he's lying."

Wyatt stared at the two men in disbelief. Were these the men following Dakota or the FBI men she'd mentioned visited her in the hospital? Either way, he didn't know how much he should tell them about her.

"Do you have identification?" Wyatt asked.

Reaching into his pocket, the dark-haired man pulled out his wallet and opened it. The ID card said that he was Greg Garrett, a private investigator from South Dakota. Wyatt glanced over at the other man's card. Apparently, he was Brad Holden, also a South Dakota investigator.

"I don't understand," Wyatt admitted. "Why would you people be after Dakota?"

"We're not *after* her in the sense you mean," Greg said. "We're just following her to see that nothing happens to her. Unfortunately, she keeps disappearing on us—thanks to Brock Jones."

"You're protecting her?"

"In a sense."

"Well, you're doing a damned bad job of it if you can't keep up with her," Wyatt declared. "Who hired you to do this, anyway?"

"We're not at liberty to divulge that information."

Infuriated by Greg's response, Wyatt strode to the door and opened it. "Then I'm not at liberty to divulge anything I *might* know about where she is."

"You really should cooperate with us," Brad advised calmly. "She could be in danger."

Wyatt slammed the door. "*Could be?* Where the hell were you when that letter

bomb exploded? She could have been killed.”

“We were in the lot, and we did what we should have. We contacted the police.”

“So *that’s* why the cops showed up at her place. Nobody could figure out how they knew about the explosion.”

“Look,” Greg said. “We really need your help. You can’t let us hang up to dry, because that would mean Miss Grayeagle is in even more trouble. At least, she’s left unprotected now that we don’t know where she is.”

“Following the woman around doesn’t do anything but scare her. That’s why she left town.” Oh no! He hadn’t meant for that to slip, but it was already out. There was nothing he could do to change it.

Greg chuckled. “Don’t worry, Romain. We already know that she left town, so you didn’t spill any beans. We just need to know where she went—so we can catch up with her, of course. We have no intention of bothering her.”

“And I have no intention of telling you where she is.”

“We’ll find her without your help, you know,” Brad said. “It will just take us longer, and we might be too late to stop something from happening to her.”

“Jones won’t let anything happen to her,” Wyatt replied. “He’s been protecting her from you guys ever since you scared her so bad she ran into his car.”

Grinning in victory, Greg said, “So they *are* together. We suspected as much. Now where did they go?”

Wyatt shrugged. “Another city, another state? Hell, they could be in another *country* for all I know. They didn’t tell me where they were headed. They were damned tight lipped about all this.” He opened the door again and pointed into the hallway. “Now why don’t you go do your job and find her? I’m sure whoever hired you will appreciate it if you do what you were hired for.”

His unwanted guests rose and strode to the door. But Greg stopped just inside the apartment and glared at Wyatt. “If I find out you lied to us about this, Romain, you’re going to be sorry. I don’t like liars.”

Wyatt pushed him out the door. “Stay the hell out of my life, Garrett. And don’t send your good-cop friend to do your dirty work.”

Dakota had never been angrier with Chayton in her life. With every mile, her anger had grown. Now that she and Brock got out of the Jeep in front of Chayton’s house, she was livid. There was nothing he could say to still the tirade she intended to start the moment she set eyes on him.

Striding up to the porch of the log-style house that could have come off the “Bonanza” set, she pounded on the door. A moment later a seven-year-old girl with dark blonde braids opened it. Her face lit in excitement as she exclaimed, “Aunt Koty!” Then she flew into Dakota’s arms.

From a nearby room, Chayton’s deep voice shouted in shock. “What the hell?”

His footsteps echoed through the room as Dakota and Brock stepped into the house. She hugged her niece and calmed a little with the child in her arms. “Hi, Chelsea. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Chelsea proclaimed as Dakota set her back on the floor. “How come you’re here?”

"That's *my* question, Takchawee," Chayton proclaimed, giving Dakota a bear hug. "What the hell are you *doing* here?"

"I came to find out exactly what's going on," Dakota shot back. "And I intend to get answers. Let's go where we can talk privately."

He grimaced and slid his arm around her shoulders to escort to his office. "What? Don't I even get a *hau* before you lay into me?"

"I'll give you *hau* after you give me answers."

Chayton opened the door, and Dakota preceded him into the room. It was tastefully decorated in a Western motif, with a lot of wood furniture and file cabinets. Pictures of horses adorned the walls, and a horseshoe hung above the door. That horseshoe meant good luck, and her brother was going to need it by the time she was done. Chayton wandered to the leather overstuffed sofa and sank down on it. But Dakota remained standing, determined not to let him calm her down. Not wanting anybody to understand what they were saying if their voices rose above enough for others to hear, she scolded him in Lakota.

"You lied to me, Chayton. You said you would stay away from AIM activities. Now you are doing something you know you shouldn't."

"I am not. In fact, I'm not with AIM any longer."

"Do not lie to me!" Thrusting her still-red hands toward him so he could get a good look at them, she declared, "You are doing something you shouldn't, because I got a package addressed to you. It was a bomb! And this is what it did to me."

"A bomb?" he repeated. "Where was it from? If it was addressed to *me*, why did you open it so it *could* explode?"

"I was trying to do you a favor and save some money at the same time. Tell me everything."

Chayton returned to English and spoke calmly. "Okay, I guess you're right. Now that I know this, I owe you an explanation. Sit down, and let's discuss this like two adults instead of a hot-tempered little girl and her defensive big brother."

Brock turned his attention from the door where Dakota and her brother had disappeared then smiled down at the little girl staring up at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's Brock Jones. And you're Chelsea, right?"

"Yeah. How come you came with Aunt Koty?"

"I didn't think she should come this far alone. It's not safe for women to be driving across the country without a man to protect her."

"Aunt Koty can take care of herself."

"Maybe, but she got hurt the other day, and I didn't want her driving. I thought it was better if I come with."

"How'd she get hurt?"

"She burned her hands a little."

"Who is it, Chelsea?" a blonde woman asked as she entered the foyer. She stared at Brock silently for a second, then asked, "Can I help you?"

"This is Aunt Koty's friend, Mama," Chelsea announced. "He brought her here to visit."

"Dakota's *here*?" the woman asked in amazement.

Brock studied her. She was very attractive, but obviously not an Indian. Her blue eyes and blonde hair attested to that. Then, unable to contain his curiosity, he asked, "Why do you sound so surprised by Dakota being here?"

"Well, uh," the woman stammered, "we just thought that she was, uh, in Las Vegas. We didn't know she was coming. By the way, I'm Jeanette Grayeagle."

Brock extended his hand and smiled. "Brock Jones, ma'am." They shook hands then released each other. "I drove Dakota here."

"That's odd. She usually drives herself. Where is she?"

"In the room over there," Brock said, pointing in the direction that Dakota had gone. "She and her brother had something to discuss. They were shouting, but I don't know about what. I couldn't understand them. They're using a language I've never heard before."

Jeanette stared at the door and shook her head slowly. "It must be awfully serious if they're resorting to Lakota. Maybe we should make ourselves at home until they get done. I'm sure they'll come find us. Could I get you a Coke or a glass of wine?"

"Wine sounds good, thank you," he said as he followed her into the living room.

As he sank onto the rust-colored, leather sofa, he sighed. This was one hell of a night. He didn't know if he would ever know what they were talking about, but he was at least going to try and get Dakota to open up about it.

TEN

"We couldn't help it, Jeff," Greg said into the phone. "That guy's really cagey. We searched his apartment when he didn't come back after work, and his suitcases are gone—along with a bunch of his clothes. I even looked for something that might tell us where he was going, but nothing showed up."

"So you're saying you lost her *again*?" Jeff asked irritably.

"Yeah, but we'll go check her apartment next. I don't think she's going to be there, though, because she never came out of the building. One of us was watching the door every second. What I can't figure out is how Jones got his suitcases out without us seeing him. The only thing I can come up with is that he already had them in the car before we got there. Which reminds me, he's driving a Jeep now. I think he might have taken his car to the shop."

"That makes sense. Did you see anybody else coming out with suitcases?"

"Some guy. Looked like he was headed out on a vacation."

"Well, see if she got over to her apartment and let me know what you find. Hopefully, she'll be there. You *can't* let her get out of your sight again, is that clear? This matter is too serious to keep losing her."

"I know, I know," Greg snapped. "I'll call again after we try her apartment."

"You'd better find her," Jeff declared, "because if you don't, I'm going to have to report in again. The last time he wasn't very happy about us losing her, but he calmed down when he heard that you found her again. If I have to tell him it happened a second time, he's going to be furious. Only this time I'm not going to call unless you can't find her. I'd kind of like to spare myself his anger. The guy's got one *hot* temper, and I don't like having to deal with it."

"We'll do our best," Greg said. "Now let me go so we can check her apartment."

"Shit!" Jeff exclaimed when the second phone call came through and he got the necessary information. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. We checked everywhere, Jeff. She's taken her suitcase and disappeared. I asked a few of her neighbors, and one of them suggested that she was either at Jones' place or maybe even Wyatt Romain's place. It must be Romain's since Jones left town."

"You damned fool! Put two and two together. Jones left town because he was getting Dakota out of there."

"Oh, shit, you're probably right. But how the hell did they do it? We were watching the building every second. There's no way they couldn't have gotten away at the same time."

"Wait a minute!" Greg's partner, Brad, exclaimed. "Remember that guy with the bags who left the building?"

"Just a minute, Jeff," Greg said into the phone. "What about him?"

"I'll bet that's how they did it. I'll bet that was Dakota disguised as a man."

"Why do you figure that?"

“Think about it. He was the only person to take bags from the apartment building. Then a few minutes later out comes Jones with a briefcase—like he was going to work. But he never came home from work, and his bags were gone—along with Dakota. If that was Dakota coming out and not some man, that’s how they did it.”

“But that wasn’t Dakota’s car the guy got into.”

“And it wasn’t Jones’ car that *he* left in. I’ll bet they had people helping them get out of town, because there was another car that looked a lot like the one the guy with the suitcases had that came back in the lot about twenty minutes after he left. Remember? I said something about there were sure a lot of cars like that in the lot, because a guy in a jogging suit got out of it. And now that I’m thinking about it, that same jogger left the building about a half an hour before he came back. I didn’t say anything at the time, but I thought it was awfully strange that he would jog away and drive back. Now I think I know why.”

“Sounds like Brad’s got it figured out,” Jeff said into Greg’s ear. “Go back to Jones’ apartment building and see if you can find out who might have helped them.”

“Will do,” Greg agreed. “But I doubt anybody’s going to know where they are. If Jones concocted this whole thing, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to tell the guy where they were going.”

“Probably not but give it a shot. You might get lucky. I’ll hold off making my phone call ‘til morning to give you plenty of time for follow-up.”

After a restless night riddled with erotic dreams of Brock seducing her, Dakota woke weary and depressed. What had she started when she ran into his car that night? At first, she’d been desperate and hadn’t considered possible consequences. Then he’d made sense, claiming that she needed his help to get away from those men. But after that, ... Well, she kind of *liked* having him there to protect her. It was the only plausible explanation why she would have had Vickie call him after the explosion.

Now things had changed. When he’d kissed her in front of his friend, she’d sensed that more lay behind it than a cover-up—despite his denials.

Dakota threw back the covers and padded into the bathroom for a shower. As she got ready, she recalled the look of lust in his eyes after his second kiss, the awed expression on his face when he saw her wearing shorts and a tank top, the boyishly nervous twitching of his lips just before he’d kissed her good night. Yes, things had definitely changed; and given the circumstances, she wasn’t sure it was for the better.

After washing and shampooing, she dried off then stood naked before the large mirror above the vanity. By the time she was fourteen she looked like this—tall and well-endowed. She’d always hated the way men and boys looked at her, and she’d always played down her figure with large T-shirts and sweatshirts. But she hadn’t minded when Brock looked at her, because it was different. He didn’t ogle her, except when he wasn’t expecting her appearance. Then he’d stopped, apparently as soon as he realized what he was doing.

Dakota combed out her hair and blow-dried it part way then dressed in the same type of outfit as the previous day. Ready to leave, she went to the next motel room and knocked on Brock’s door. A few seconds later he answered it—wearing only a towel!

Her jaw dropped in amazement. She’d never seen him without his shirt before, and

he was a lot better proportioned than she'd imagined. His pectoral muscles were very prominent, and his stomach was ripped. This was a man who took care to his body! The medium brown hair that covered his chest ran in a stripe down his abdomen and disappeared beneath the towel.

She swallowed hard to still the desire engulfing her, and the towel moved. Oh, what she wouldn't give to have the courage to tear it from his body and attack him! Instead, she forced her gaze upward, to his smiling lips and the face half-covered with shaving cream.

Then his deep voice broke through her thoughts. "I'd let you come in, but we probably wouldn't leave for quite a while. Give me another twenty minutes, and I'll be ready. Okay?"

"Okay," she absently agreed.

Dakota went back to her room and tried to forget what she'd just seen. Not a chance! The image stuck in her mind. She couldn't stop thinking about what a great physique he had and wondering what it would have been like if she'd gone into his room and not left for quite a while.

A knock at the door startled her from her thoughts, and she scurried to answer it. Outside, Brock grinned at her.

"I think I should start by apologizing for all the kissing I did yesterday. I was just trying to create a story and a diversion, and things kind of got out of hand. I promise it won't happen again."

Despite her disappointment, she returned his smile. "That's all right. I understand. But you're right. We should probably call it quits. We need to get to South Dakota and finding out what Chayt's up to."

"You really believe he's gotten himself into something he shouldn't, don't you," Brock observed as he strode past her, picked up her suitcases and exited the room. "How can you be so sure about that?"

"I know my brother. He's got a heart of gold, Brock, but sometimes he lets his political views overrule his logic. He tends to get way too involved in the American Indian Movement, even if it isn't as big as it used to be. He doesn't think about the ramifications of what he does until it's too late to turn back."

She followed him to the Jeep and watched as he put the luggage into the back. He closed the tailgate and turned to face her.

"Do you think he's doing that right now?" Brock asked.

"I don't know *what* to think. All I know is that he must be into something, because somebody sent him a mail bomb to my address. I'm guessing they didn't expect me to open it to see what was inside. They probably thought I'd just forward it to Chayt."

They got into the car before he spoke again. "Why *did* you open it, anyway?"

"I wanted to see if it was urgent or if I could send it parcel post. I'm always scrimping where I can, but I thought Chayt might need it."

"Why didn't you just forward it? Then you wouldn't have had to pay anything."

While Brock pulled out of the parking space, Dakota buckled her seatbelt. "I didn't think of it."

"I don't suppose you have any idea of why somebody would send something to him at your address."

"Not a clue. He's never lived there. In fact, he's only visited once—when he came to Nevada for some livestock for his ranch."

"Do you know how whoever sent it would get your address?"

"The only thing I can think of is that they got it from Chayt's address book."

Brock nodded his agreement. "That means it's probably somebody he knows."

"Somebody with a grudge?" Dakota asked.

"Or something to gain by involving you."

"What kind of something? I've *never* been involved in AIM. I've never even done anything remotely connected to it. Involving me in whatever Chayt might be up to would accomplish nothing."

"Accept maybe teach your brother a lesson. Is he protective of you?"

"Very," Dakota admitted. "He'd never let anything happen to me, and he certainly wouldn't let anybody he knew get me involved in something illegal."

"What makes you think it's illegal?"

"In case you haven't heard," she said, "letter bombs are illegal."

"Good point, but that wasn't what I was getting at. The second that person mailed that package to your address, he—or she—involved you. Do you think that bomb was *meant* to only do minor damage? Or should I ask if the FBI guys mentioned what they thought about it?"

"They didn't say. Years ago, Chayt got himself in some pretty dangerous stuff, so it's possible that he's done it again. He was nineteen then, though, and he's stayed out of trouble ever since. I won't know until I talk to him. I need to talk to him in person, too, he can fool me too well over the phone. I want *honest* answers, and I can always tell by the look in his eyes if he's lying."

Wyatt stared at the two men in disbelief. Were these the men following Dakota or the FBI men she'd mentioned visited her in the hospital? Either way, he didn't know how much he should tell them about her.

"Do you have identification?" Wyatt asked.

Reaching into his pocket, the dark-haired man pulled out his wallet and opened it. The ID card said that he was Greg Garrett, a private investigator from South Dakota. Wyatt glanced over at the other man's card. Apparently, he was Brad Holden, also a South Dakota investigator.

"I don't understand," Wyatt admitted. "Why would you people be after Dakota?"

"We're not *after* her in the sense you mean," Greg said. "We're just following her to see that nothing happens to her. Unfortunately, she keeps disappearing on us—thanks to Brock Jones."

"You're protecting her?"

"In a sense."

"Well, you're doing a damned bad job of it if you can't keep up with her," Wyatt declared. "Who hired you to do this, anyway?"

"We're not at liberty to divulge that information."

Infuriated by Greg's response, Wyatt strode to the door and opened it. "Then I'm not at liberty to divulge anything I *might* know about where she is."

"You really should cooperate with us," Brad advised calmly. "She could be in danger."

Wyatt slammed the door. "*Could be?* Where the hell were you when that letter

bomb exploded? She could have been killed.”

“We were in the lot, and we did what we should have. We contacted the police.”

“So *that’s* why the cops showed up at her place. Nobody could figure out how they knew about the explosion.”

“Look,” Greg said. “We really need your help. You can’t let us hang up to dry, because that would mean Miss Grayeagle is in even more trouble. At least, she’s left unprotected now that we don’t know where she is.”

“Following the woman around doesn’t do anything but scare her. That’s why she left town.” Oh no! He hadn’t meant for that to slip, but it was already out. There was nothing he could do to change it.

Greg chuckled. “Don’t worry, Romain. We already know that she left town, so you didn’t spill any beans. We just need to know where she went—so we can catch up with her, of course. We have no intention of bothering her.”

“And I have no intention of telling you where she is.”

“We’ll find her without your help, you know,” Brad said. “It will just take us longer, and we might be too late to stop something from happening to her.”

“Jones won’t let anything happen to her,” Wyatt replied. “He’s been protecting her from you guys ever since you scared her so bad she ran into his car.”

Grinning in victory, Greg said, “So they *are* together. We suspected as much. Now where did they go?”

Wyatt shrugged. “Another city, another state? Hell, they could be in another *country* for all I know. They didn’t tell me where they were headed. They were damned tight lipped about all this.” He opened the door again and pointed into the hallway. “Now why don’t you go do your job and find her? I’m sure whoever hired you will appreciate it if you do what you were hired for.”

His unwanted guests rose and strode to the door. But Greg stopped just inside the apartment and glared at Wyatt. “If I find out you lied to us about this, Romain, you’re going to be sorry. I don’t like liars.”

Wyatt pushed him out the door. “Stay the hell out of my life, Garrett. And don’t send your good-cop friend to do your dirty work.”

Dakota had never been angrier with Chayton in her life. With every mile, her anger had grown. Now that she and Brock got out of the Jeep in front of Chayton’s house, she was livid. There was nothing he could say to still the tirade she intended to start the moment she set eyes on him.

Striding up to the porch of the log-style house that could have come off the “Bonanza” set, she pounded on the door. A moment later a seven-year-old girl with dark blonde braids opened it. Her face lit in excitement as she exclaimed, “Aunt Koty!” Then she flew into Dakota’s arms.

From a nearby room, Chayton’s deep voice shouted in shock. “What the hell?”

His footsteps echoed through the room as Dakota and Brock stepped into the house. She hugged her niece and calmed a little with the child in her arms. “Hi, Chelsea. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Chelsea proclaimed as Dakota set her back on the floor. “How come you’re here?”

"That's *my* question, Takchawee," Chayton proclaimed, giving Dakota a bear hug. "What the hell are you *doing* here?"

"I came to find out exactly what's going on," Dakota shot back. "And I intend to get answers. Let's go where we can talk privately."

He grimaced and slid his arm around her shoulders to escort to his office. "What? Don't I even get a *hau* before you lay into me?"

"I'll give you *hau* after you give me answers."

Chayton opened the door, and Dakota preceded him into the room. It was tastefully decorated in a Western motif, with a lot of wood furniture and file cabinets. Pictures of horses adorned the walls, and a horseshoe hung above the door. That horseshoe meant good luck, and her brother was going to need it by the time she was done. Chayton wandered to the leather overstuffed sofa and sank down on it. But Dakota remained standing, determined not to let him calm her down. Not wanting anybody to understand what they were saying if their voices rose above enough for others to hear, she scolded him in Lakota.

"You lied to me, Chayton. You said you would stay away from AIM activities. Now you are doing something you know you shouldn't."

"I am not. In fact, I'm not with AIM any longer."

"Do not lie to me!" Thrusting her still-red hands toward him so he could get a good look at them, she declared, "You are doing something you shouldn't, because I got a package addressed to you. It was a bomb! And this is what it did to me."

"A bomb?" he repeated. "Where was it from? If it was addressed to *me*, why did you open it so it *could* explode?"

"I was trying to do you a favor and save some money at the same time. Tell me everything."

Chayton returned to English and spoke calmly. "Okay, I guess you're right. Now that I know this, I owe you an explanation. Sit down, and let's discuss this like two adults instead of a hot-tempered little girl and her defensive big brother."

Brock turned his attention from the door where Dakota and her brother had disappeared then smiled down at the little girl staring up at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's Brock Jones. And you're Chelsea, right?"

"Yeah. How come you came with Aunt Koty?"

"I didn't think she should come this far alone. It's not safe for women to be driving across the country without a man to protect her."

"Aunt Koty can take care of herself."

"Maybe, but she got hurt the other day, and I didn't want her driving. I thought it was better if I come with."

"How'd she get hurt?"

"She burned her hands a little."

"Who is it, Chelsea?" a blonde woman asked as she entered the foyer. She stared at Brock silently for a second, then asked, "Can I help you?"

"This is Aunt Koty's friend, Mama," Chelsea announced. "He brought her here to visit."

"Dakota's *here*?" the woman asked in amazement.

Brock studied her. She was very attractive, but obviously not an Indian. Her blue eyes and blonde hair attested to that. Then, unable to contain his curiosity, he asked, "Why do you sound so surprised by Dakota being here?"

"Well, uh," the woman stammered, "we just thought that she was, uh, in Las Vegas. We didn't know she was coming. By the way, I'm Jeanette Grayeagle."

Brock extended his hand and smiled. "Brock Jones, ma'am." They shook hands then released each other. "I drove Dakota here."

"That's odd. She usually drives herself. Where is she?"

"In the room over there," Brock said, pointing in the direction that Dakota had gone. "She and her brother had something to discuss. They were shouting, but I don't know about what. I couldn't understand them. They're using a language I've never heard before."

Jeanette stared at the door and shook her head slowly. "It must be awfully serious if they're resorting to Lakota. Maybe we should make ourselves at home until they get done. I'm sure they'll come find us. Could I get you a Coke or a glass of wine?"

"Wine sounds good, thank you," he said as he followed her into the living room.

As he sank onto the rust-colored, leather sofa, he sighed. This was one hell of a night. He didn't know if he would ever know what they were talking about, but he was at least going to try and get Dakota to open up about it.

TWELVE

After a good night's sleep, Brock woke refreshed and very hungry. Dressing quickly, he strode to the main house and knocked on the front door. Within seconds, the door opened, and Chayton greeted him.

"*Hau*, Brock," he said as he stood back from the doorway. "Come on in."

"Do you really say *hau* around here?"

"Sure. It's Lakota for several words, including hello, good morning, and you're welcome."

"I see. Is Dakota up yet?"

"Not likely. She usually sleeps like a rock here." Closing the door behind Brock, Chayton led him toward the kitchen.

"I don't understand," Brock said. "Last night Dakota told me that things get pretty noisy early around the ranch. That was the reason she didn't want to stay and talk with me."

"She's right. They do get noisy, but she still sleeps well." Chayton strode to the stove and used a hot mitt to take a platter from the oven. "Jeanette made a big batch of pancakes this morning so everybody could eat when ready."

"Glad to hear it," Brock said cheerfully. "I'm starved. Dakota and I didn't eat a whole lot yesterday so we could get here faster."

"I'll show you where everything is, but then I have to leave. I have an awful lot to do today."

"That's fine. I understand how busy you must be running a ranch *and* a campaign. By the way, I'd love to discuss your campaign with you sometime. Maybe there's something I can do to help while I'm here sponging off you."

Chayton studied him with a suspicious glare in his dark eyes. "How could you possibly help?"

Despite Chayton's obvious distrust, Brock smiled brightly. "Apparently, Dakota didn't tell you what I do for a living. I'm a public relations expert, Chayton. If I get some answers to the appropriate questions, I might be able to come up with some ideas."

"I have a campaign manager who takes care of that."

"Judging from what Dakota told me—which, admittedly, wasn't a lot—your manager's not doing a very good job. I might be able to come up with fresh ideas—gratis, of course, since I'm living in one of your rental cabins."

"Gratis, huh?" Chayton said with a thoughtful expression. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to talk with you. Like I said, I'm awful busy today, so what are you and Takchawee doing tonight?"

"Doing?" Brock repeated, confused.

"Are you going out or staying home?"

"Staying here, I guess. It's not like we're dating or anything."

Chayton's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean you're really *not* her boyfriend. I'll be damned. You're exactly her type—the look, the intelligence, the sense of humor. I

thought she was just denying it so I wouldn't question you to death." Putting two pancakes onto a plate, Chayton turned toward Brock and handed them to him. "Tell you what. We'll talk after dinner. Right now I've got to go. The syrup, butter and silverware are on the table. Have a good day."

And Chayton rushed out the door. Brock stared after him in amazement. Could Dakota's brother be right? Was it possible that he was Dakota's type of man? More importantly, did he dare get to know her better? Should he take the extra step to pursue a relationship with her? Probably not, because so much bad had happened to her recently.

Then again, she was safe now—on the ranch she had once called home, with people who loved her. What better time, when she was relaxed and unafraid, to see if a serious relationship between them would work. And he would begin right after breakfast.

As soon as he finished eating and downed a couple cups of coffee, he wandered out the back door then down to the corral near the barn. Two paint ponies, their heads between the wooden rails, grazed nearby. Large black and brown splotches covered the otherwise white coat of one, while the other had only black splotches. They were beautiful animals, a little shorter than quarter horses but built very sturdy, precisely the type of mounts that Indians of the Nineteenth Century had needed.

Brock put his foot on the bottom rail and crossed his arms on the top. The tri-colored pinto pulled back and lifted his head. When he saw Brock standing there, the animal strolled over to greet him.

"Hi there, boy," Brock said. "You're sure friendly this morning."

The horse sniffed Brock's hands, and Brock laughed. "Sorry, pal. I didn't bring any treats." The horse nuzzled Brock's arms, so Brock stroked his powerful neck. "My guess is that you're a pet, not part of Chayton's inventory. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come up to me."

"Are you buttering up my horse, Mr. Jones?" Dakota asked from behind him.

Startled, Brock spun to face her, fully intending to counter with witty repartee. But the moment he saw her, all thought slipped from his mind. Dakota approached him with a bounce in her step that he'd never seen before. Knee-high moccasins covered the lower half of her skin-tight jeans. Her denim, short-sleeved shirt had an embroidered wolf emblem on the left breast pocket and an eagle emblem on the right. That morning, she'd braided her long, black hair into a single plait that fell over her right shoulder. Then she stopped before him, grinning mischievously.

"Catching flies this morning, Jones?" she asked in a taunting tone.

He snapped his mouth shut then grinned back at her. "Can I help it if you turn into a different woman when you get down on the farm?"

"You know what they say," she countered. "You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl."

"I guess not! Chayton told me you were still asleep only a few minutes ago, but it looks to me that you've been up for at least an hour."

"I have. Chayt and I just kept missing each other. You ready for our early-morning ride? Although, I wouldn't really call nine o'clock early around here. To get the full effect of the area, you need to be up and out before the sun rises."

"If riding doesn't bother your hands today, maybe we can check that out tomorrow."

Dakota held her hand out to the horse and opened her palm. "There you go,

Patches. Maybe Brock didn't, but *I* brought you a treat." After her horse took the carrot, she turned toward Brock and extended her hands toward him, palms out. "Actually, my hands feel a lot better this morning because Jeanette gave me some aloe to use on them."

Tenderly grasping her wrists, Brock studied her palms. They looked a lot better than they had last night. In fact, the blisters seemed to have dried up quite a bit. Nodding in agreement, he said, "They definitely look better, but you should still protect them while we're riding."

"Not a problem," she replied, pulling one arm free. Reaching around her back, she whipped out a pair of leather riding gloves. "I think these should work just fine."

"Are we taking these two horses?"

"I would think so since Patches is mine and there are only two in the corral."

Brock winked at her and draped his arm around her neck. "Then let's get them saddled and get on the trail."

As they exited the corral for their ride, Jeanette ran from the house carrying a rifle in a leather saddle holster and shouting, "Wait a minute, Dakota!"

Dakota grimaced when she saw the weapon then groaned. "Don't tell me. Chayt's being overprotective again."

"He doesn't want you going anywhere on the ranch without protection," Jeanette announced as she handed Dakota the weapon. "He said he'd make you take it with you even when you left the ranch if he could, so I know he's really serious about this."

"Yeah, I know." Accepting the rifle, she anchored the holster to the right side of the saddle. "I wish he wouldn't act like this, though. It's really annoying. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I got away from those guys he had following me, didn't I?"

"Humor him, Dakota. He's got enough on his mind."

"That's why I took it. Now would you tell him not to worry? Brock and I will be just fine." Dakota gently kicked her horse in the ribs to urge him on. "Come on, Brock. I've got a lot to show you."

"Can you really use that thing?" Brock asked as they rode toward the pastures.

"I'm a halfway decent shot," she replied, not wanting to tell him the truth.

"I wonder if Chayton's had trouble here on the ranch since he wants you to carry a weapon."

"Probably not, but he wouldn't want me to take any chances, either, especially since they got to me in Las Vegas."

"Well, that's one thing we agree on," Brock said in a slightly bitter tone.

Dakota didn't have a doubt in her mind about what he was thinking, but she wasn't sure as to the reasoning behind it. To find out what it was, she asked curiously, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just don't think Chayton's telling us everything."

"He wouldn't lie to me."

"I'm not claiming that he is," Brock said. "I just don't think he wants us to know the whole story. I talked to him this morning, though, and he agreed to sit down with me after dinner to discuss his campaign plan."

"Why would he do that?" she asked in surprise.

"Because I offered to give him some free advice. His campaign manager doesn't

seem to be doing a very good job, and I thought he might open up a little if I offered to help. Actually, I'm going to try and get as much info from him as I can."

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked.

"For God's sake, Dakota, it's the least I can do since I'm living in his cabin and eating his food. Besides, I can't help effectively if I don't know everything about his campaign tactics."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Skillfully directing her horse along the rocky pastureland, Dakota silently led Brock around the ranch. Occasionally, he asked a question concerning the area, but most of the time, they simply rode in silence.

Dakota liked that. For the first time she met Brock, she felt at ease in his presence, relaxed even. Now that she was here, she realized that coming to the ranch had been the best decision she'd made in a couple of weeks. For the first time since she met him, she felt as though they didn't *need* to talk, not even about inconsequential matters. Just being together was enough. Now that she thought about it, that gave her a very peaceful feeling deep inside—a feeling that she'd never had with another man.

"So," she asked, breaking the long silence, "are you ready for some *real* riding?"

"Ready to run them for a while?" he asked with a hopeful tone.

"Actually, no. I want to show you something and the land's pretty treacherous where we're headed."

"Lead the way," he said.

For the next twenty minutes, Dakota led the way through increasingly rocky terrain. The horses strained to plod up several steep inclines, the last of which ended at a rocky ridge that overlooked an expanse of deep, mountainous crevasses with virtually no foliage of any sort.

Stopping her horse, Dakota swung down out of the saddle and stood beside her horse, overlooking the canyon vista. Brock dismounted and went to stand beside her.

"*This* is what you wanted to show me?" he asked, his voice filled with awe. "It's the most incredible view I've ever seen. It's like God stuck his hand out and shot bolts of lightning into the mountains, burning them out like giant, detailed woodcarvings and leaving no trees."

"I never thought of it that way, but it does, doesn't it." With a wide sweep of her arm, she said, "*This* is my home, the reservation where I grew up. *This* is the land the United States government gave my Sioux ancestors to live on—if you can call it living. And do you know what that's called? The Badlands. The name says it all, doesn't it. Is it any wonder that poverty plagues the American Indian population when we're forced to live on land that can't produce enough food to exist on?"

Brock stared at her in shock. "But there's so much grazing land on your brother's ranch."

"*Grazing* land," Dakota emphasized. "You have no idea how difficult it is to grow any food in this area. Besides, my direct ancestors were lucky. They were given some halfway decent land. Most people weren't that fortunate."

Draping the reins over the saddle horn, Brock wandered closer to the edge. Dakota smiled. He seemed genuinely surprised by her explanation, like he'd never given the American Indians' plight much consideration. With any luck, she could convince him of the plan she'd begun developing after that dream had awakened her this morning—that he should become an advocate for Indian rights and put his public relations

knowledge to use for a *worthy* cause, not Wyatt Romain.

"This is absolutely breathtaking," he muttered.

But a sound near him distracted her. Quickly scanning the ground around him, she searched for the noise's origin. There, not four feet away from his right foot, a rattlesnake coiled into striking position. At the same moment, he shook his rattles, Dakota whipped the rifle from her saddle holster, snapped off the safety, aimed and pulled the trigger. Less than two seconds from the moment the snake coiled, he flew through the air, propelled by the force of the bullet.

Dakota's gaze went to Brock. Apparently, she'd startled him, because he struggled to keep his balance—and he stood dangerously close to the edge of the cliff!

Tossing the rifle aside, she bolted toward him and dove against him from the side and slightly ahead of him. The impact sent them sprawling away from the edge, tumbling over each other four times until they came to rest with Brock lying atop her.

He stared down at her for a moment then inhaled, as though his lungs had just started working. Then he began to pant like he couldn't catch his breath.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked angrily as he lay in an extremely compromising position with his legs between hers.

"I had to shoot a rattler before he bit you," she replied, struggling to squelch the unexpected feelings of desire that swept through her. "And I had to keep you from falling to your death."

"You saved my life?" he asked, obviously dumbfounded by the news. "Twice? In a matter of seconds?"

"Once maybe," she admitted. "You probably wouldn't have died from the rattler bite. I could have gotten you to a hospital for the anti-venom serum before that happened."

Suddenly, his expression changed. He looked half-playful, half-serious—and maybe half-lustful, if that was possible—as he stared down at her. His panting stopped, and he began taking deeper breaths, as if to control his emotions. Then he moved between her legs until their pelvises met seductively. He propped himself up with his forearms on the ground on either side of her.

"I thought you said you could shoot halfway decent," he whispered, his voice husky with desire. "You must be one hell of a shot if you took on a rattler and won."

"I've won a few contests in my time," she admitted with a taunting smile, hoping her levity would take his attention off what was so obviously in his mind. "But it really wasn't a big deal. It was practically a point-blank shot. I doubt I would have missed if I'd been an amateur."

"You know, Dakota. Now I'm obligated to thank you for saving my life."

"You're welcome."

"Not like that," he said, slowly lowering his head toward hers.

She knew she should stop the impending kiss, but she didn't want to, either. The way everything to this point had happened—so easy, so naturally, as though God had reached down and put them into a position He shouldn't have—made resisting too difficult.

"Like this," he whispered just above her mouth.

His lips covered hers gently, but the intensity of the caress startled her. She gasped at the contradictory actions. This was the most incredible beginning of a kiss she'd ever had! And she knew it was just the beginning, because his head moved into a better

position. Their noses bumped in passing, and she inhaled sharply again.

Unable to resist, she grabbed his upper arms tightly. His kiss became harder, but not to the point of hurting her. He ground his lips against hers and cupped her head between his hands. To show her acceptance, she parted her lips slightly. His tongue dove into her mouth to clash with hers.

His hips ground against hers seductively, drawing deeper excitement to her loins. Out of control, she moved against him in return. One of his hands went to the snaps on her shirt. Slowly, methodically, he released each one, until he could spread her shirt out of the way.

His hand felt cool on the hot skin covering her ribs. It moved closer to her stomach then up to her lace-covered breast. When she'd dressed that morning, she hadn't known what prompted her to put on her sexiest bra, but now she did. She must have sensed that something like this would happen between her and Brock.

But the thought was fleeting. His hand caressed her firm, full mound; the nipple hardened almost on contact. Oh, how she wanted him! Like she'd never wanted another man! A moment later his hand started to work its way under her back, so she grabbed his wrist and directed it to the center of her bra at her cleavage.

He broke the kiss and stared down at her in amazement, asking in surprise, "It's okay?"

"Oh, yes!" she breathed in excitement.

Brock's actions became almost frantic as he unhooked her brassiere. He kissed her again and massaged both naked breasts, gently toying with the nipples. Then he kissed his way over her chin, down her throat and across her chest until he reached her hard buds. He kissed each tenderly before he suckled on one while he undid her jeans.

She lifted her hips so he could push them down, but instead of doing so, he stopped his actions again to gaze down at her.

"Are you absolutely certain about this, Dakota?" he asked. "I want you more than I've ever wanted a woman before, but I don't want you to do this just because you think you have to. I don't want you to think it's rape like your mother and grandmother."

"Rape could *never* feel as good as you're making me feel right now," she assured him with a smile. "And yes, Brock. I'm absolutely positive. I want this at *least* as much as you do."

That was all the encouragement he needed. He scrambled to get her lace-up moccasins off her then pulled her jeans from her body. When he finally removed his own jeans a few minutes later, she reached out to caress his manhood. For the first time in her life, she *wanted* a man, and she didn't want to wait another minute.

Bending her knees, she gave him easy access to her body and guided him to her. In one hard thrust, he filled her. Then he cut off her excited sigh as his lips caught hers again.

They moved together as though they'd been made for lovemaking. Their motions seemed timed to each other so perfectly that she couldn't hold back her joyful release. But even when she relaxed a little, Brock continued to move in her, until she felt her desire return.

This time when fulfillment neared, Dakota held back until she was sure Brock was also close. Then she thrashed beneath him. A moment later their cries of ecstasy echoed through the Badlands.

After several minutes of rest, Brock kissed her one more time then rolled off her,

saying, "That was incredible, Dakota."

"Wasn't it, though?" she replied, unable to hide the contentment that crept into her voice.

"I have a confession to make. I've never done it outside like that before—not that I might not try it again sometime."

"Quite frankly, neither have I. But we should probably get dressed now. I told Jeanette we'd be back in time for lunch."

"As much as I hate to see you fully clothed again, you're probably right."

The moment they were dressed, however, Brock swept her into his arms. Dakota stared at him in shock as he closed in for another kiss. The moment his lips met hers, a crack echoed through the Badlands. Something stung the ground beside him.

In an instant, he broke the kiss. "What was that?"

"A gunshot."

"Shit!" he exclaimed. "They're after you again."

Grabbing her hand, he raced to cover behind a large boulder nearby. Another shot rang out, barely missing them.

"Where's your rifle?" he asked as they dropped down behind the boulder.

"I don't know. I just threw it when I stopped you from falling. I think I heard it fall into the canyon."

"Damn it!" He paused a moment, as though he was trying to think of a way to defend them. "Well, we can't stay here. We're sitting ducks. Let's get on the horses and get the hell out of here. Just keep low in the saddle and get to those trees over there as fast as you can."

THIRTEEN

Brock wasn't sure how they had managed to escape their attackers, unless the culprits had *wanted* them to get away. Both he and Dakota had been in the open for several yards before they reached the horses. The bullets had stung the ground but never threatened to hit them. Looking back on it, the shots had to have been very well targeted to accomplish that.

"Dakota," he said as they unsaddled their mounts in the corral, "what do you make of what happened out there?"

"What do I *make* of it?" she asked as she slid the saddle from Patches. "We were attacked. What else *can* I make of it?"

Picking up a nearby brush, Brock began to rub down his horse. "Whoever was shooting at us didn't hit either of us even once. Don't you think that's odd?"

Dakota shrugged then crossed her arms over Patches' back. "They could have bad aim."

"Or as good an aim as *you* have," he countered. "And you keep saying *they*. How many do you think were out there?"

"One," she replied as she also began to brush her horse. "At least, that's how the shots seemed to be timed."

"I wonder why he was shooting at us."

"It could have been a she," Dakota said. "That's why I used the term *they*—because I didn't know which it was."

Suddenly, Brock had enough of her cavalier attitude and threw down his brush, causing Dakota to stare over at him in shock.

"Damn it, Dakota," he declared, "don't take this so calmly. We could have been killed this afternoon. That makes it a very serious matter."

"At the moment, I would have agreed, Brock, but I thought about it all the way back here. Those bullets hit the ground awfully close to us, but none of them hit us. I'm assuming—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—that you know virtually nothing about guns."

"I've never even held a weapon more dangerous than a cap gun."

"That's what I thought. I didn't want to alarm you, so I decided to let you get us out of there. Look, Brock, I don't like being shot at any more than you do, but I honestly don't think either one of us was in danger this morning. Yes, it was scary to have somebody shooting at us, and I was more than willing to get out of there. But I think it was just a warning."

"What *kind* of warning?"

"How do I know? Maybe something connected to Chayt. That's the only thing I can think of, anyway. After all, that's why he wanted me to take his rifle. For all I know, he could have been receiving threats and didn't want to tell me about them."

Brock didn't like her words. If Dakota was right, Chayton could have been aware of the danger. And if he had been, he never should have let her ride the ranch unless he

could have assured her safety.

“Could I ask a favor of you?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“Would you take care of my horse? I need to do a little business now that people in Nevada and California are awake. I’m going to my cabin and make a few phone calls.”

“No problem. Go take care of your work. In fact,” she added, “I’ll make you some lunch when I’m done here and bring it to you.”

Striding over to stand beside her, he grasped her shoulders. “That sounds perfect if you’ll join me to eat.”

She smiled. “That was my intention.”

“You’re a sweetheart, Dakota.” After a quick kiss on her lips, he grinned. “Try not to take *too* long, sugar. I’m starved after our unplanned tryst.”

Then he turned and strode out the door, knowing that he needed to hurry when he confronted Chayton about what had happened if he didn’t want Dakota to know. But when he got to the house, he learned that Chayton had left to meet with his attorney.

Dakota smiled fondly as Brock stalked out of the stable. When he was gone, she returned to her chore.

The morning had been the most pleasant of her life—until somebody had taken potshots at Brock. And she knew he had been the target, because none of the bullets had even come close to her. She just didn’t understand why somebody was after Brock now.

Yes, at first, she’d been concerned by the attack; but once she’d had time to think, she realized they’d never actually been in danger. Then she could revel in the fun aspects of their outing. Now, while she rubbed down their mounts, she could enjoy her memories.

Brock was a wonderful lover, gentle and commanding and giving all at once. He seemed genuinely interested in her pleasure, but he also seemed like he wanted pleasure, as well. And she had no doubt that he had accomplished both. In fact, for the first time in her life, she felt completely satisfied by a man.

Why? It was amazing that she didn’t have an answer. She could claim it was because she was more relaxed on the ranch or because they’d begun their relationship as nothing more than friends going through a bad situation. But in her heart, she didn’t believe either explanation. One of her old boyfriends had insisted that they were soulmates, but Dakota had disagreed because she didn’t believe in soulmates. Now, though, she thought she understood the term. Maybe her liaison with Brock had come out of something deeper than friendship. For some reason, she felt like she’d known him for years, not weeks. She felt like ...

“Well, I’ll be damned,” a man said from behind her, startling her from her thoughts. “What are you doing here?”

Spinning to face him, she smiled when she saw Jimmy Ray Stockton standing in the doorway. He hadn’t changed much since she’d broken up with him six years ago. There were a few strands of gray in his long, black hair, and his dark eyes appeared much more sober than they used to. Maybe that meant he wasn’t drinking anymore.

“Hi, Jimmy Ray,” she greeted cheerfully. “You look well.”

And he did! His knit shirt hugged his muscular body, and unlike Brock, she had to look up to see his face as he approached her. That was the main reason she'd agreed to date him in the first place. He was quite a bit taller than she. But he was a far cry from Brock—in more ways than one!

"I've been living pretty clean lately," he replied with that lopsided grin.

That smile had always made her heart melt, but this time it was nothing more than a lopsided grin. The thought made Dakota sigh. The smile that had melted her heart in the past was more honest than this one.

"Dakota?" he asked, dragging her reluctantly from her vision of Brock's smile. "Are you paying any attention to me at all?"

"I'm sorry," she replied. "You know me. My mind tends to wander. What did you say?"

"I wondered why you're here. Chayton didn't tell me you were coming."

"That's because he didn't know. I just showed up on his doorstep like a foundling."

"How long are you here for?"

"I'm not sure."

"Long enough to go to dinner with me tonight? I'd love to sit and talk old times."

"I can't," she said. "I brought a friend with me."

"A boyfriend?"

"Not really. He's male, but I wouldn't call him my boyfriend. We've never dated; we just spend time together."

Then an unexpected memory crossed her mind. Jimmy Ray had been involved with AIM at one point, and he knew an awful lot about Chayton's background. Could *he* be involved in what was happening to Chayton's campaign? Given Jimmy Ray's past, it was possible—even probable. But she couldn't broach the topic directly. She needed to get her answers without him realizing what she was up to. Maybe the best way to do that was go to dinner with him and casually pick away at him until she learned the details of what he was doing now.

"That's one thing about our relationship that always drove me nuts," Jimmy Ray said with a chuckle. "I've always hated your frequent trips into your mind. You never let anybody else go there with you."

"What can I say?" she asked with a smile. "I *like* thinking."

"No kidding! So what do you say? Do you think you can leave your friend for one night and go to dinner with me? I promise to have you home early."

"I don't know. Where do you want to go?"

"How about the Firehouse? You always liked the food there."

"Especially the buffalo burgers. Sure. I'll go with you. What time?"

"How about if I pick you up at six?"

"Sounds good. Now, I've really got to rub down these horses. I told my friend that I'd make him some lunch so he can get some work done."

"I'd help, but your slave-driver brother has me on a project. I just dropped by the stable to get a few supplies and saw you outside."

"You work for Chayt now? When did that start?"

"A few months ago."

"After our past together, I'm surprised he hired you."

"It sure wasn't easy to get the job," he admitted with a grin. "I had to convince him that I was clean and sober before he'd hire me permanently, and that took two months

of probation to work for him.”

“So you’re off the drugs and bottle?”

“Sure am. Anyway, I’d better get back to work. Sorry I can’t help you.”

“You know I can handle this. Go ahead and do what you need to. I’ll see you at six.”

Dakota went back to her work without another word. Six o’clock, huh? Well, unless he’d changed in that area as well, that meant at least six-thirty. She didn’t particularly like eating at seven-thirty or eight o’clock, and that included the hour ride into Rapid City. But she didn’t see what choice she had if she wanted to check out Jimmy Ray’s possible involvement in Chayton’s campaign problems. He didn’t get off work until between five and five-thirty, and he had to clean up before their date.

But it wasn’t a *real* date, she reminded herself. She had no intention of doing anything more than sitting at a table and discussing the past over a buffalo burger and some steak fries. And somehow, she would work in a few questions about if he was involved with AIM anymore.

After making two club sandwiches and dishing up some of Jeanette’s coleslaw and homemade dill pickles, Dakota took the two plates to Brock’s cabin. Since she had two bottles of Dr. Pepper under her arm, she knocked on the door with her foot. Moments later, he opened it with a wide grin.

“Come on in,” he said as he held the screen door open for her. “I’ve still got a client on the line, but I’ll only be a few minutes more.”

“Okay. I’ll just put this stuff on the table.”

While she watched him from the small kitchenette, he finished his conversation. As she set at the table, she relived what had happened on that Badlands ridge. She still couldn’t believe that she hadn’t objected, that she’d actually *wanted* to make love to him right there. For the first time, she’d let her emotions overtake her logic.

And for the first time, she felt like she’d never done anything so *right* in her life. Strangely enough, she felt as though she and Brock belonged in each other’s arms like they had been that morning. After two weeks of constantly putting off Wyatt, Brock’s first kiss sent her into a tailspin from which she wasn’t sure she would ever recover. And for the first time in her life, she *liked* feeling out of control.

“So,” Brock said as he sat down opposite her, “I’m assuming you finished rubbing down the horses.”

“Of course,” she replied. “I’ve been doing things like that all my life. It didn’t take me any time at all. I even had time for a brief conversation with an old flame.”

“An old flame?” Brock repeated.

Startled by the distressed tone of his voice, Dakota studied his expression. If she didn’t know better, she’d think that smile on his lips was designed to hide the lack of luster in his gray eyes. Could it be possible that it bothered him that she’d spoken to Jimmy Ray? Could he feel the same way she did about their short relationship and the culmination of their newfound closeness on the ridge?

He took a bite of his sandwich and nodded approvingly. But when he spoke, none of the earlier distress came through in his voice. “Very good, woman. You even went to the trouble of frying up some bacon. I hope you didn’t leave the dirty dishes for Jeanette to clean up.”

"Of course not."

"By the way, how do you say very good in Lakota?"

"*Lila waste*," she replied, curious as to why he asked.

"*Lila waste*," he repeated. "*Lila waste*. And woman?"

"*Winyan*."

He repeated it incorrectly.

"No, Brock. It's a nasal sound. *Winyan*."

The next time he repeated it properly, and she smiled at him. "You know, you really don't have to learn Lakota to get along on the res. Everybody speaks English. *Not* everybody speaks Lakota."

"My asking doesn't have anything to do with getting along here. I *want* to learn some."

"Why?" she asked, startled by his admission.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Because you're Lakota, I guess. Besides, it's enriching to know other people's languages. I know a smidgen of several different languages, but I'm only fluent in Spanish and English. If I had to go overseas, though, I could get by in Germany, Italy, France, and Russia. And Spain and maybe Portugal, of course, but that's a different kind of Spanish than I know. I know the Mexican and South American dialect of Spanish. Since I grew up in California, I thought it would be a good career move to be well-versed in it."

"That's probably true," she agreed. Then she paused, unsure she should mention her date with Jimmy Ray after the way Brock had reacted to her talking to him. But she knew she must, because he would find out when Jimmy Ray called for her, anyway.

"I think I should tell you something, Brock."

"What is it?" he asked when she didn't continue after several seconds.

"Well, it's about this old flame of mine."

He inhaled then studied his sandwich. "You're going out with him, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"I see."

Dakota's heart went out to him. He sounded so upset that she wasn't sure what to say. All she knew was that she had to explain her motives. "It's not like you're making it sound."

He shot his startled gaze to her face. "I didn't think I was making it sound *any way*."

"You may not be aware of it, but I can hear the disappointment in your voice. Really, Brock. It's no big deal. We're just reliving old times."

Again he shrugged. "It's none of my business. You're free to come and go as you please. Just because we made love, it doesn't mean I own you."

Although Dakota half-expected him to tell her that it was no big deal, that it was just something that happened, he didn't. Did that mean he took their liaison seriously? If so, she needed to give more consideration to her relationship with him.

"If it's any consolation," she explained, "I'm only doing it because he used to be involved with AIM, and I want to see if he still is."

"What?" he asked as irritation crept into his voice. "You couldn't ask him in your conversation earlier? You have to accept a date with him just to find it out?"

"He knew a lot about Chayt's activities in the cause, Brock. It's possible that he

knows enough to give out information that could damage Chayt's chances to win the House seat."

Suddenly, Brock scrambled from his chair, knocking it over in the process. He righted it then glared down at Dakota while she stared up at him in disbelief. She'd never seen him act this way before.

"Are you telling me," he demanded, "that you're only going out with him to get information on his possible involvement in Chayton's problems?"

Not wanting to antagonize him further, she replied, "Of course." Rising, she grasped his wrists and gazed into his eyes. As badly as she wanted to embrace him and ease his fears, she thought it would be foolhardy. Instead, she continued in a quiet tone to still his anxiety. "I'm not going to do anything stupid, Brock. I know Jimmy Ray very well—at least, I used to—and I think I can get more information from him surreptitiously than I can coming right out and asking the questions. If he knows he's being grilled, he's a *great* liar. If he doesn't suspect it, he can't hide anything, because he loves to talk."

"And you promise not to say or do anything that will put you in danger? I've been protecting your hide for a couple of weeks now, and I'd hate to see you get knocked off now that you're back with your brother."

She smiled. It was sweet of him to try and protect her like that, but it was also unnecessary. "I promise."

"All right then," he agreed as he sat back down at the table and picked up his sandwich. "Where are you going?"

Sinking back onto her chair, she grabbed her fork and slid it into her coleslaw. "To a place in Rapid City called the Firehouse. Now enough about this. Let's just enjoy lunch, rest for a while, then take a dip in Chayt's pool."

Brock stood by the four-foot marker, his body partially concealed by the cool water and his arms resting on the edge of the pool. Then he saw Dakota approaching. His jaw dropped in amazement. Despite their liaison that morning, he hadn't taken a good look at her body. Now that he saw her incredible figure in a bikini, he remembered the joy of being in her arms, and his body began to react.

Somehow, he needed to get her to cancel her date so he could spend more time with her, maybe take her to Rapid City himself. But how could he convince her not to delve into Jimmy Ray's possible involvement with Chayton's problems without her realizing what he was doing? She was too smart not to suspect something.

She sauntered down the steps in the shallow end of the pool and waded through the water until she reached him. Her dark eyes sparkled as she slid her arms around his neck.

"I was kind of hoping you'd be sunning yourself so I could get a better look," she said seductively.

"I was kind of staying in the water so you *couldn't*," he countered as he laid his hands on her bare hips. "Did anybody ever tell you that you have an incredible body? No, don't answer that. I want to keep the illusion that I'm the first man who ever said those words to you."

Unable to resist, he pulled her to him and kissed her soundly. As he did, an idea came to his mind. Maybe this was the way to get her to stay home tonight. Maybe he

could spend time seducing her to the point where she wouldn't *want* to go out with Jimmy Ray.

He increased the passion in his embrace, holding her tightly against his body so she could feel his desire for her while slipping his tongue into her mouth. It clashed with hers deliciously, causing his body to react even more. Oh, how he wanted her! But he needed to restrain himself until he could convince her to stay.

Then, just as he was beginning to get into the kiss, she pushed away from him. He frowned, unable to believe that she didn't want to continue.

With a wide grin, she said, "Sorry, Charlie, but we've got company coming. I asked Jeanette to join us, so as much as I'm enjoying myself, you'll have to put this on hold."

"Geez, *winyan*. You should have warned me before I got amorous."

"And when did I have the chance?" she retaliated with a laugh. "Come on. Let's swim."

Brock paced Chayton's office. He didn't like the way Jimmy Ray had looked at Dakota when he'd picked her up about six-fifteen. It was like the man wanted to take her the second they got in the car. But Dakota had noticed, too, and told him that if he had those kinds of notions in his mind, he could forget about the date. Although Jimmy Ray had agreed to be good, the look in his eyes hadn't changed.

Now Brock was haunted by Dakota's remark that rape was much more common in the community than people wanted to admit. Would she become one of the statistics before the end of the evening?

"Would you relax?" Chayton asked as Brock peered out the window for the fifth time since they entered the room about fifteen minutes ago. "She's fine. Jimmy Ray knows she won't take any guff from him."

"I suppose," Brock admitted, dropping onto the chair before Chayton's desk. "I sure wish I could concentrate on what we're discussing here. I'm afraid I'm not being much help."

"Actually, I feel a little better just airing all of my campaign problems with an independent source. And I think I'm coming up with an idea."

"Can you go through those problems in a nutshell again?" Brock asked. "I promise you my undivided attention this time. Then you can tell me what your idea is."

"First of all, I started getting messages that somebody knew about the time I spent in prison. But I came clean about it in my campaign and told everybody I got out when I was in my twenties, and I've been clean the whole time since then. Yes, I've had connections to AIM. I've never denied that, and I'm not about to start now if somebody asks me. I haven't, however, made that announcement yet. Jeff doesn't think it's advisable. He thinks it might get a bad response from the whites who support me."

"What kind of connections are you talking about?"

"I've supported them financially and physically. I was involved in a few demonstrations but always stayed clear of anything illegal. And I've never gotten into anything extreme."

"I disagree with this Jeff. I think you should come clean about it. Is there anything else that could cause you problems?"

Chayton shook his head. "Nothing as important as AIM. You see, it got a bad rap

when I was in my teens. The activists might have been a little too zealous at times—and I was one of them. But everything the American Indian Movement stands for is valid.”

“I agree, Chayt. My only concern is that prison record.”

“It’s not a record anymore. I was young and stupid—not to mention easily led around by the nose. But I wised up, Brock. I got myself the best attorney I could find and paid an exorbitant amount of money to work with the legal system and get all the charges erased from the books. So you see, I don’t *have* a record now. Whoever’s behind the threat has to know me from the past. The thing is, I did my time without complaint, even pleaded guilty to the charge. Now my knowledge of AIM can be a good thing. But I’ve been away from them for ten years now.”

“You’re probably right. Has there been anything else?”

“Just AIM sending me stuff in the mail that they never did before—stuff that could make me look more deeply involved than I am if anybody finds out about it.”

“So AIM seems to be the major problem.”

“Exactly.”

Again, Brock nodded. “I see. What kind of issues are you running on?”

“I’ve been focusing on equal representation for the Native American community. That’s why this AIM thing has me so worried. I’ve been promising to work for better living conditions, better schooling, more opportunities in the job market, fewer race-related arrests—things like that. I’d like to get the white communities to understand what those of us on reservations go through.”

“Sounds pretty harmless, even commendable. So why would somebody want to sabotage good intentions like those?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet—except maybe a grudge. But that’s *all* I’ve come up with.”

Brock paused several seconds to concentrate on the task at hand, not easy considering his mind kept wanting to go to Dakota and her date. Forcing his attention back to the topic, he drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. Finally, he looked directly into Chayton’s eyes, hoping to read the man’s thoughts rather than listen to his words about what Brock planned to say.

“Fess up,” Brock said bluntly.

To Brock’s relief, Chayton’s expression mirrored his shocked reply. “*What?*”

“Tell *everything* about your past—the jail term and everything connected to it, even that your record was expunged, AIM, and all of it. Call a press conference for tomorrow morning and *tell* the voters so they don’t think you’re trying to hide something. Don’t hold anything back. What the public wants these days is honesty. More people will respect you for coming forth than will hate you for it.”

“Do you really think it will work?”

“I can’t guarantee anything, Chayt, but you’ll feel better about yourself if you’re honest. And your campaign will have a hell of a lot better chance if you beat these people at their own game. Explain everything the way you explained it to me, and you should be fine.” Brock rose and stared down at Chayton. “Now do me a favor. Give me directions to this Firehouse restaurant that Jimmy Ray took Dakota to. I don’t like her being out there unprotected, and I just want to go keep an eye on her. I have no intention of interfering with her date.”

Chayton smiled and picked up a pen. “You know, man, you’re a little too obvious

where Dakota's concerned. And so you know, the only reason I'm doing this is because I think you two are going to be together before long, anyway. Otherwise, I wouldn't risk my sister's rage for anything in the world—not even for a seat in the U.S. Senate.”

FOURTEEN

Sitting on the porch of Brock's cabin, Dakota mused over the evening. She couldn't believe that she got nothing out of Jimmy Ray, but she *could* believe that Brock had followed her to the restaurant. She'd seen him enter the building, scanning the dining room while waiting to be seated. To her surprise, he'd smiled at her but hadn't come to their table.

For a moment, she'd been disappointed, but she'd rallied when she'd realized that he'd only followed her to see that Jimmy Ray didn't get out of hand. The notion made her feel as warm inside then as it did now. It felt kind of nice to be protected without being smothered as well.

Too bad Brock hadn't followed them home right away. If he had, he could have taught Jimmy Ray a lesson when he'd tried to say good night. Although, that knee she'd firmly planted in Jimmy Ray's groin probably got across her message that she didn't want to be kissed. Still, it would have been nice to watch Brock come to her "rescue" again, even if she hadn't needed it.

The thing she didn't understand was what was taking Brock so long to get home. He hadn't eaten anything—just sipped on a single beer the entire time. And she'd seen him get into his sister's Jeep as she and Jimmy Ray were driving away. Dakota glanced at her watch. She'd been home for thirty minutes. Surely, he should be back by now.

Rising, she paced across the porch. What was taking him so long? Had he had an accident? She stopped and gasped in horror at her next thought. Or had the person shooting at him that morning gone gunning for him again?

Terrified that might have happened, Dakota sprinted toward the house. Halfway there she heard a car approaching on the gravel drive. She stopped short and watched the headlights until she knew for sure that it was Bethany's Jeep. Determined to find out where he'd been, she raced back to wait for Brock on the porch.

When he ground to a halt, got out of the car, and slammed the door shut, she ran up to him, questioning him frantically. "Where have you *been*, Brock? I've been worried sick about you."

"Some damned fool ran me off the road," he explained angrily. "Do you think Chayt has a high-powered flashlight. I think I did some damage to Beth's car."

"Forget about the car. What about you?"

"I'm fine, but I came damned close to rolling this baby. And I'm almost positive I did something to the axle. Man, Beth's going to finish the job that idiot driver tried to accomplish. She's going to *kill* me when she finds out."

"You're worried about your sister's reaction to her *car*? Brock, she'll just be glad that you're all right." Grabbing his forearm, she pulled him over and sat down on the porch step. He dropped down beside her with a heavy sigh. "Now tell me what happened."

Brock ran his fingers through his thick hair and groaned. "I don't know for sure. I was going to follow you back from the restaurant, but your date lost me in traffic while

we were still in Rapid City.”

“He *saw* you?” Dakota asked in dismay.

“I don’t know *that*, either. What I meant was that *I* lost *you* in the traffic. I must have scattered my brains when I hit my head on the doorframe. Whichever it was—whether he saw me or not—I lost you guys before I was even out of town.”

“You hit your head?” she repeated. “Brock Jones, you told me you were fine.”

“I am now. I was out for ... I don’t know, about fifteen minutes, I guess. But I’m fi...”

“Damn it, Brock!” she declared as she grabbed his arm and dragged him to his feet. “Get over to the house so I can check out your injuries. If you were out, you could have a concussion And if you’re not going to take care of yourself, I’m going to have to do it for you.”

Brock chuckled as he strode along beside her. “Those words sound vaguely familiar, *mitawa skuya*.”

Stopping short, Dakota stared at him in shock. He’d called her his sweet in the Lakota language! But she hadn’t told him the words, so somebody else must have, probably Chayton. Then a wide, playful grin crossed his lips.

“I asked Chayt how to say sweetheart, but I didn’t think I could pronounce it correctly. He suggested my sweet instead. *Mitawa skuya*, right?”

“Absolutely, but ...”

“It doesn’t matter why, Dakota, but I’ll answer, anyway. I wanted to know the language, and I wanted to impress you.” Winking at her, he added, “Looks like I did, too.”

Dakota nerves exploded. Even though they’d made love that morning, she hadn’t expected Brock to do something so sweet as to learn a term of endearment in Lakota. When she replied, she rambled on. “That was shock, Brock, not being impressed, which isn’t saying that I’m not—impressed that is. You just weren’t supposed to be so sweet.” Feeling that she’d gone too far, she cleared her throat. “Let’s get in the house and check out your injuries.”

In the fluorescent-lit kitchen, Dakota could easily see the large bump and bruise under the hair on the left, back of Brock’s head. Shaking her head, she went to the refrigerator and dumped some ice cubes from the ice dispenser directly into her hand. Then she went to the closet where Jeanette kept the kitchen towels and took one out. Returning to the table where Brock sat, she wrapped the ice cubes in the towel then laid the ice pack against his injury.

“I can’t believe you were more worried about Beth’s car than you were about a head injury,” she said. “That’s a nasty bump you’ve got there, and you should have told me about it right away.”

“It was practically right away, Mother,” he replied with a grin.

“Don’t try to charm your way out of this, Brock Jones. You should take better care of yourself.” The door to the house opened, and Dakota glanced over to see Chayton grinning in the portal. She glared at him, saying, “And *you’re* no help.”

The grin disappeared, and his dark eyes widened as he asked, “What did *I* do?”

“This never would have happened if *you* hadn’t given this addle-brained, overprotective, sometimes nuisance of a man directions on how to get to the restaurant.”

“Don’t blame your brother,” Brock said in Chayton’s defense. “If he hadn’t told me where to go, I would have looked it up on my GPS, which I did anyway so I could get

there quickly.”

“No kidding!”

“Come on, Takchawee,” Chayton said. “You’re blowing this whole thing out of proportion.”

“Out of proportion! I don’t *think* so.” Furious with their attitudes, she slapped Brock hard on the shoulder. “Did you tell him about what happened this morning?”

“Ow!” Brock cried out with a wide, playful grin. “Did you see that, Chayt? She hit an injured man.”

“Stop it! You know as well as I do that this isn’t funny. Did you or did you *not* tell him?”

“Which part?” he asked, gazing up at her with a lusty expression in his gray eyes. “Because I have no intention of telling anybody everything, especially not your adoring big brother.”

Even though she wished she could stop it, blood rushed to her face, heating it in embarrassment. She knew exactly what Brock was insinuating, but he knew exactly what she was talking about, too.

She turned her irritated gaze on her brother, who wandered to the table and sat down in the chair opposite Brock’s. He was grinning like he knew what was going on, and she didn’t like it. These two men were acting like everything was fine, when she had no doubt that Chayton knew how serious this was as well as Brock did.

“Both of you stop it!” she shrieked.

“There she goes dragging me into her rage again,” Chayton said, “and I don’t even know what’s going on. Does somebody here want to fess up, or do I have to hire a more adept detective than the last ones I hired?”

“Somebody took potshots at us on the ridge today,” Dakota declared.

Chayton sobered. “*What?* Why the hell didn’t either of you tell me before this?”

“Because it was nothing more than a warning,” Brock explained. “Dakota and I agreed on that much. I can’t speak for Dakota, but I didn’t say anything because I couldn’t find you when we got back. Then tonight she had that date, and we were talking about your campaign. Quite frankly, it slipped my mind.”

“Something that serious slipped your mind,” Chayton said sarcastically. “I suppose you can understand why I find that hard to believe.”

“I don’t care whether you believe it or not. It’s true. I had other things on my mind.” He turned his irritated look to Dakota. “Like your stubborn sister taking off on a date with her old boyfriend just to try and get information to confirm her suspicions that he’s involved in your campaign problems.”

“*What?*” Chayton exclaimed again.

With a heavy sigh, Dakota lifted herself to sit on the counter. How had this all turned around to her? More importantly, how could she get it back on Brock now that he’d mentioned her reason for dating Jimmy Ray?

“What the hell did you do, Takchawee?” Chayton asked, his tone stern. Then he calmed again and shook his head. “Damn it. I *knew* I should have told you the reason I hired Jimmy Ray in the first place. That way you would have stayed out of it.”

“What are *you* talking about?” Brock asked. “What’s going on here, anyway? Is there more about this guy that I should have known from the beginning?”

“He’s one of many people who know about my background. When he wanted a job here shortly after I got the first threat to expose my prison term, I thought he might be

involved. I only hired him to keep an eye on him.” Chayton turned his pained gaze on Dakota. “I know I should have told you about it, Takchawee, but he had been your boyfriend. I didn’t you want to think he might turn on you by attacking my reputation.”

Brock shot his startled gaze to Dakota. “You two were *serious*?”

Too embarrassed to look him in the eye, she bowed her head and mumbled, “Kind of.”

“The hell it *was* kind of,” Chayton proclaimed. “They were so serious that they were talking marriage. They were so serious that she let him be her first lover. They were so serious that he cleaned up his act in the hope of getting her back.”

Unable to bear the shame that swept through her for not having explained everything to Brock, she jumped off the counter. “Shut up, Chayton Gray Eagle.” She stalked to the door and grabbed the knob, then turned back toward them. “By the way, those shots today didn’t come anywhere *close* to me. Every last one of them was meant to warn Brock.” And she darted outside, slamming the door behind her.

Brock stared at the door in shock. A moment before, his chest felt heavy with grief. Dakota had hidden important information about her relationship with Jimmy Ray from him, and he couldn’t believe how much it hurt. But her parting words, even though they were spoken in anger, lifted the grief in an instant.

Someone had been shooting at *him*, not her like he’d thought. But who? And why would they want to warn *him*? He’d never even been to South Dakota before.

“I don’t get it,” he admitted. “I don’t even know anybody here except your family.”

“I don’t get it, either,” Chayton said. “By the way, what’s with the ice pack?”

“I hit my head when I was run off the road a while ago.” Brock took the ice from his head and laid it on the table. With Dakota gone, he didn’t need to please her and keep it on his injury. “You’ve sure got some idiot drivers here on the reservation.”

“You were run off the road?” Chayton asked in concern.

“Yeah, but it was no big deal. Some jerk straightened out a curve.”

“How far away from here?”

“I’m not sure. Once I regained consciousness, I couldn’t figure out where I was. It took me a while to get oriented. I drove around for a while before I realized I was going in the wrong direction. I had to reset the GPS.”

“Do you think it might have been on my property?”

“I don’t know where your property ends, so I couldn’t say. I can only guess that it was about five minutes from here.”

Chayton rose and wandered to the refrigerator. Opening it, he asked, “Want a beer?”

“That’d be great.”

Pulling two bottles from the shelf, he closed the refrigerator door then opened the bottles by hand. He passed one to Brock, then leaned back against the counter and took a swig from his own. Finally, he said, “Seems like too much of a coincidence that you were shot at *and* run off the road in the same day.”

“What are you thinking?” Brock asked.

“I wonder if whoever did it knows you offered to help me on my campaign. Granted, we didn’t discuss details until tonight, but we did discuss the possibility this morning. Maybe somebody heard us. Or maybe somebody knows what you do for a living and assumed that you’d want to help.”

"That's not very likely, Chayt. Like I said, I don't know anybody here."

"Good point."

After several seconds of silence and two swallows of beer, Brock said, "So tell me more about Dakota and Jimmy Ray's relationship."

Chayton shook his head. "I don't think I should. If you want information like that, you should ask Takchawee. She'd go on the warpath if she ever found out I was talking about it behind her back. I probably *can* tell you one thing, though. It's over for her. I don't see her *ever* going back with the guy, no matter how badly he wants it."

"And just how badly does he want it?"

"Pretty badly, I guess. He told me that he'll never find another woman he loves as much as he does Takchawee."

Brock took another long swallow of his beer. Almost as soon as he and Dakota finished dressing after making love on the ridge, somebody began shooting at them. Was it possible that Jimmy Ray had seen them and shot at him to get him to stay away from Dakota? Was it possible that the same man had forced him off the road? Possible, sure. Likely, he really didn't think so. He'd been behind them when he lost them, so Jimmy Ray had already gotten farther away than five minutes down the road.

"How long ago did you say you got run off the road?" Chayton asked, startling Brock from his thoughts.

"I'm not sure. Somewhere between forty-five minutes and an hour, I guess—probably closer to forty-five minutes."

"Then I doubt it was Jimmy Ray. I heard him bring Takchawee home at least an hour ago. And he left shortly thereafter. I know, because I was watching them from my office window." Chayton grinned. "And I can guarantee that she didn't let him have the good night kiss he wanted. In fact, when he tried to steal one, she let him have it."

"She *hit* him?" Brock asked in amazement.

But Chayton laughed. "Not my Takchawee. Although, he probably would have *preferred* being hit."

"Went straight for the groin, huh?" he said with a laugh. "I'll remember that. Well, I suppose I should get over to the cabin. Maybe I'll even try to find Dakota. I sure don't want her to go to bed mad at me." He rose and wandered toward the door. "Thanks for chatting with me, but I've got to get some sleep. I'm exhausted. Maybe we can put our heads together tomorrow and come up with a suspect who might want to warn me away. Tonight my brain's too muddled."

The first place Brock went was to the stables, but Dakota wasn't there. He wandered the area for a while, absently sipping his beer, but he still couldn't find her. Deciding that she must have already gone to bed, he went back to his cabin. He didn't want to disturb Chayton and Jeanette again that night.

When he opened the door and flicked on the light, Dakota's voice startled him. He spun to face her, wobbling slightly as a wave of dizziness swept over him. She scrambled off the couch and raced to his side.

Sliding her arm around his waist, she walked him to the sofa and pushed him down. "Are you okay?"

"I just moved too fast," he replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, of course." Sinking down beside him, she asked, "What took you so long? Did you and Chayt try to figure out who's trying to hurt you?"

"Scare me away's more like it," he corrected. "And no. We didn't give it a lot of consideration. Like I told him, my head's too muddled to think straight right now. Why were you waiting for me?"

"I couldn't leave things the way they were, Brock. I wanted to explain why I didn't tell you all about my relationship with Jimmy Ray."

"You don't have to, sweetheart," he replied as he slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him. "Chayton didn't tell me everything, but he did tell me enough so I would understand. You didn't tell me because you didn't want me to think you were as close as you really were. I don't know for sure, but I might have done the same thing under the same conditions."

Dakota snuggled against him and sighed in contentment. "You're too understanding. I should have told you that we were lovers and had planned to get married. I probably would have gone on the warpath if you'd hidden the same kind of facts from me."

"I've heard that rumor." Wrapping both arms around her, he kissed her temple. "Maybe I should tell you the truth. Your not telling me how close you were didn't bother me nearly as much as the fact that he'd been your first lover. The first is always special, and it hurt that you wouldn't tell me something so important."

"It *hurt*?" she repeated, her voice giving testament to her disbelief.

"Of course. Dakota, surely you didn't think that I made love with you this morning because it just happened. Surely you know there was more to it than that." When she shook her head, he frowned. "I don't arbitrarily decide that I want a woman, Dakota. I need to know her, like her—and most importantly, respect her."

"Can I be honest with you then?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About my past. Some things happened that, if you ever cross Jimmy Ray, he won't hesitate to tell you. Now that you've explained yourself, I think this is something you'd rather hear from me than him."

Again she fell silent. This time Brock tightened his hold and kept it secure. He wanted her to know that he supported her decision to open up to him and that he would never divulge her confidence.

"It's okay, Dakota. You can tell me anything, because I'll never judge you."

"It happened right after I broke up with Jimmy Ray. Do you remember when I told you about my heritage?"

His eyes narrowed in anger. He didn't like what she was saying. Her heritage had been a cloudy one to put it nicely. Her mother had been the product of rape and had been raped herself. Now Dakota was telling him that this had to do with her heritage.

"If somebody raped you, Dakota," he proclaimed, "I'll hunt him down and ..."

"No, no, Brock," she interrupted. "It's not like that. I told you I'd never been raped, and I was honest about it. But I did go to bed with a few guys after I broke up with Jimmy Ray. I didn't particularly *want* to, and I tried to tell them that. But they were so insistent that I gave in, because I didn't want to become another statistic like my mother and grandmother. Actually, that's how it started with Jimmy Ray, too. It was getting to the point that he was becoming so insistent that I was afraid he would get out of hand, so I did it. After that, I didn't know how to stop our affair."

His heart went out to her. She obviously didn't understand the psychology of what had happened, because it sounded like she was putting all the blame on herself.

"Oh, Dakota," he sighed. "Don't you see it? You were raped, too—if not physically, but emotionally. You didn't want it, but you were terrified that you would become the next generation of victims. Giving in to avoid being raped is practically the same. Many women become promiscuous after a rape for that very reason. Granted, many women don't want anything to do with men for a while, but some reactions are opposite. Don't blame yourself for coping the only way you knew how."

Dakota slid her hand across his stomach, and his body reacted of its own accord. He scolded himself for not being able to stop his excitement, but it did no good. What was wrong with him? Dakota was pouring her heart out to him about being a sexual victim. He should restrain himself, not perpetrate further to her guilt.

"No, Brock," she said quietly. "You don't understand what I'm saying. When I got off the res, I realized that I didn't have to put up with that—and I stopped. I'm trying to explain this morning on the ridge. Chayt was only partially right. Yes, Jimmy Ray was the first man I had sex with. I admit that. But this morning was the first time I ever felt like I *made love* to a man."

Startled, he pushed her away and held her at arms' length. "My God, Dakota. Are you saying what I think you are?"

"Only if you think I'm saying that you're the first man I've ever *wanted* to make love to. Only if you think I'm saying that I can't begin to explain how much I appreciate you not stopping just because we were in the open. If you had, I don't know if we ever would have had the opportunity to please each other like that again."

"God, am I glad I had to stop at that gas station."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I adore you, and more than anything I want to show you how much."

"What are you talking about?"

Grinning, he dug into his pocket and pulled out a square, foil packet. "I picked up a box of condoms and threw one in my pocket just in case. That was before I got run off the road, though, and got conked on the noggin. As much as I want you right this second, I don't think it's advisable. My head hurts too bad, and I don't think I should be moving around that much. But I wanted you to know that I'm prepared now. I don't want us to take any chances."

She smiled at him. "The more I'm with you, Brock, the surer I am that you're different from every other man I've ever known." After kissing him on the lips, she stood up and took his hand in both of hers. "If you've got such a headache, you should go to bed."

"I'll take a couple of aspirins, too."

"Nope, not allowed. Aspirin thins the blood, and you could hemorrhage. Just go to bed. I'll get a blanket out of the closet and take a pillow off your bed, because I'm spending the night to keep an eye on you. I'll just sleep on the couch so I don't disturb you—or get a little too amorous from sleeping in your bed."

"That's probably best," he agreed as he started toward the bedroom door. "*Hanhepi waste, mitawa skuya.*"

She smiled at him fondly and replied, "*Hanhepi waste. Iyunka yo.* Good night. Go to bed."

Laughing, Brock disappeared into the bedroom and closed the door quietly behind

him.

Dakota let her smile slip into a frown. As glad as she was that he wanted her again, she was concerned. From her experience, a man didn't turn down a woman just because he had a headache. She could only assume that it was awfully bad if he wasn't interested in lovemaking, and it worried her that he could be hurt worse than he was letting on.

She would just have to wake him up often during the night to assure herself that he was easily roused. That would tell her if he was really all right.

FIFTEEN

“What do you think?” Chayton asked after he finished the speech he’d written for the press conference.

“I think I’m exhausted,” Brock said.

Chayton grinned. “Since it looked like she hadn’t slept in her bed when I went to wake her up about nine, I figured that you two had a good time last night.”

“The hell I did. That fool woman woke me up every hour on the hour just to make sure I was okay. About four a.m., I made her lie down with me. She must not have slept a *wink* before that, because she fell right off.” He chuckled at the thought. “And I thanked God, because I was tired of her constantly waking me up. When I left, she was still asleep.”

“Well, you’re going to have to wake her up so she can get ready for my speech. As long as she’s here, I want her at all my political functions. You’re welcome, too, of course; but I want Takchawee’s so the world knows she’s here with me. I want *some* control of what happens to her. Now tell me what you thought of my speech. I also want the world to know.”

“It was good. You explained why you hadn’t mentioned it early on in your campaign very clearly. You explained about any misdemeanors you had, too. You put everything I know of out in the open for everybody to know. At first, I wasn’t sure you should mention that part about an anonymous source turning you in, but it came across very well. And telling the public that you understood the Native American plight better because of your experience was almost ingenious.” Brock nodded his approval. “I honestly think you’ll make some points today. I can see your poll numbers rising. Where and when is your press conference?”

“Right here in an hour and a half. That’s why I need Takchawee to get up. Do you want me to take care of it?”

“Naw,” Brock said, pushing himself out of the chair. “I’ll do it. That way I can get some semblance of revenge.”

“By the way,” Chayton said as Brock headed toward the door, “how’s the head this morning?”

“Better, thanks. I’d better wake Dakota up. I need a shower, too.”

Leaning closer to Dakota, Brock questioned her in a whisper. “Did you know about his trying to stop a mining company from getting tribal land?”

Dakota stared at her brother as he stood at the podium and fielded questions from reporters. Instead of answering verbally, she shook her head.

Brock concentrated as best as he could on the rest of Chayton’s presser, but he found it difficult. His thoughts continually returned to Chayton’s reply to the question about the mining company’s plans. What better reason to sabotage a politician’s

campaign than a serious dispute like that?

As soon as the press conference ended and Dakota had gone off with Jeanette to make lunch, Brock turned his full attention to Chayton. He wanted to see the man's reaction to his questions. If nothing else, those reactions would give him a better idea of what was happening, as well as Chayton's truthfulness. In his opinion, body language never lied.

"What's all this about you fighting a mining company over tribal land?" Brock asked. "Why didn't you mention it to me before I had to hear it during an interview?"

Chayton shrugged. "I didn't think of it. Besides, you only wanted to know about my time in prison. You didn't ask about any other possible scenarios. If you had, it probably would have jogged my memory."

"But we were racking our brains to come up with reasons. What better reason can you think of than that mining company's revenge?"

"It was a *long* time ago. Besides, I didn't see any correlation." Chayton hesitated a few moments, then added, "Now that you mention it, though, I suppose it makes sense."

"Who are these people?"

"Lone Star Mining. As you can probably guess, they're out of Texas. That's why I didn't consider them part of a plot to ruin my Senate race. They're so far away, it didn't even cross my mind."

"Do you know of any Native American movement that backs their plans?"

"No *movement* would do such a thing. Individuals might, though. They're offering to hire a lot of Lakota, but I don't trust them to follow through on their promises. From everything I've dug up in their past dealings with other tribes, they get what they want then conveniently forget their promises. And if they don't say they forgot, they tell us that they changed management, and the new management didn't accept those terms."

"Okay, that makes sense. Do you personally know anybody who supports their buy-out?"

Chayton shook his head. "I wish I did."

"What about the casinos that you're supporting for the Native American community? That came up during your press conference, too, and it's another possibility of somebody trying to oust you."

"I know, but I can't see us getting revenge for that. It's one of the best ways for them to better themselves and get off the reservations. Very few of us don't support casinos."

"What about whites?"

"A *lot* of them don't support it. As you know, most churches believe gambling is a sin. Not that some of those fine church ladies and gents don't frequent them. I personally see it as an opportunity, just like most others on the res do. Hell, even my brother owns a casino up near Deadwood."

"Do you think somebody against gaming would try to undermine your campaign?"

"Anything's possible, but I doubt it. More likely, you were dead on when you came up with the land buy-out angle. Let me do a little checking around. Maybe I can find out who's interested in seeing Lone Star Mining move into the area. Or for that matter, any other mining company."

"Are you sure *you* should do that? Maybe *I'd* get more information than you could. After all, I'm not known; and since I'm not from these parts, I'm obviously not running for any office."

"Let me check up on a few things first. I have a couple of friends working on halting

the negotiations. If they can't tell me anything I don't already know, I'll turn the investigation over to you."

Brock nodded. That sounded like a reasonable compromise. Besides, he had a different project he could pursue until Chayton had time to get information.

"Tell you what, Chayt," he suggested. "You go ahead and do that while I'll check out the gambling angle. Do you think your brother would talk to me?"

"Sure. Just have Takchawee take you up there. It's only a couple of hours away. You easily could make it there and back today."

"Great. We'll leave as soon as we finish lunch."

Brock glanced around the small casino. Slot machines lined the walls with rows of them sitting in the area. In the middle of the room stood three poker tables and two craps tables. A large roulette wheel stood at each end of the building. The noise level reached that of an LA Lakers game.

He leaned closer to Dakota and shouted, "Is it always like this in here?"

"Unfortunately," she replied loudly, "but don't worry. Doug has a soundproofed office. We'll be able to hear each other quite well there."

"I sure hope so. I wouldn't want to get any wrong signals on this one."

"I wouldn't want you to, either. Come on. Let's go find him."

Before they took two steps farther into the casino, Brock heard a man call out for Dakota to wait. Glancing to his left, he saw a man with dark blond hair approach as fast as he could through the crowd. He turned his questioning gaze to Dakota, who grinned happily as the man finally joined them.

"Dakota Grayeagle," the man proclaimed as he hugged her, "why the hell didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Apparently, Chayt didn't get hold of you," she replied as she pushed away from him. "Brock and I came to ask you a few questions about the gaming industry."

"Brock, huh?" the man said, turning his attention to Brock. "So my baby sister's finally got herself a boyfriend." His right hand shot out toward Brock in a gesture of friendship. "*Hau, mitakola*. I'm Douglas Grayeagle, but as you can tell, everybody calls me Doug."

"Brock Jones," he replied, firmly shaking Doug's hand. "I recognize *hau*, but what does *mitakola* mean?"

"My friend," Dakota replied with a giggle.

"But I thought Dakota meant friend," he said, thoroughly confused.

"It does, only in a different connotation. Besides, English has many words that are different but mean the same thing. You shouldn't be all that shocked."

Brock smiled. "You're right. And this is really no time for such frivolous conversation." Turning his gaze to Doug, he said, "Dakota tells me that your office is soundproof. Could we talk with you there?"

"Sure," Doug agreed as he led the way toward the back of the building. "What's going on?"

"It would be easier to wait until we're in your office. I wouldn't want anybody to overhear our conversation."

Within minutes, Doug closed his office door behind them, and most of the outside

noise disappeared. With a sigh of resignation, Brock sank onto the leather sofa and pulled Dakota down beside him. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he waited until Doug strode over and dropped into his desk chair before he opened the conversation.

"Are you aware that Chayt's been having serious threats made against him in his campaign?" Brock asked.

"No!" Doug exclaimed. "What kind of threats?"

"Nothing direct, only a few incidents that point to political sabotage. Dakota here had some men following her for a while, but we found out after we ditched them that Chayt had hired them to keep an eye on her. Then she opened a letter bomb that was addressed to Chayt. Thank God, it was a dud and didn't go off like it should have. It just burned her a little and killed her cat."

Doug shot his gaze to his sister. "You were *hurt*?"

"Just a little," she admitted with a blush. "A few second-degree burns on my hands. I'm perfectly fine now—thanks to Jeanette's aloe concoction. But what's been happening doesn't seem to have a pattern."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Brock replied, "Chayt's received threats from somebody wanting to expose his prison sentence."

"So that's why he admitted it. He wasn't quite eighteen at the time, and he had everything purged from his record. That's the only reason he was tried as an adult in the first place, because he was just a couple months shy of eighteen. That, and the fact that he's Lakota, of course. Besides, he did his time."

"I think he effectively put that behind him this morning," Brock explained. "He held a press conference explaining everything from why he was imprisoned to why he was released and the charges, as well as his record, expunged. Now all we're trying to do is find out why somebody made the threat in the first place. He's following one lead, and Dakota and I are handling this one. I'm sure you're aware that he believes legalized reservation casinos are a way out of poverty for the Native Americans."

"Of course."

"Well, we wondered if you might have some insight as to the possibility of somebody who disagrees with that philosophy wanting to sabotage his campaign."

"Nobody I know of, that's for sure. Everybody *I* know agrees with Chayt. Our whole family does, of course, and a bunch of our mutual friends."

"Then you do know of people who disagree?"

"Of course. But none of them are my friends or relatives, and all of them are super-religious, almost fundamentalist, in fact. And I sure couldn't give you names, because they're just out there making noises."

"Would any of those people have access to old prison records? Or maybe those people know other people who knew Chayt back then."

"A *lot* of people knew Chayt back then, Brock," Dakota told him. "I always envied the number of friends he had."

"Maybe they weren't all *friends*," Brock said. "Maybe some of them only made that claim."

"I suppose that's possible," Doug agreed. "But what would motivate them to drag up something that happened almost thirty years ago?"

"What motivates *most* people? Money."

“So you think somebody’s being bought off?”

“It’s possible, but so is revenge. Could he have made any enemies back then?”

Doug shrugged. “Probably a lot of them.”

“Anybody who might be involved with getting rid of state gaming laws?”

This time Doug shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. Gambling’s been good to us in South Dakota. I’ve even made enough since all this started to add on a lounge upstairs, which I might add,” he said as he grinned at Dakota, “could use a good singer to bring in a little more business.”

Startled by the abrupt change of conversation, Brock shot his gaze to the woman at his side.

She shook her head and said, “Sorry, Doug. We’re only here to ask a few questions. We told Chayt that we’d come right back. Besides, we didn’t bring our jammies or toothbrushes.”

“Aw, come on. You can buy toothbrushes.” He paused and grinned before he continued in a mischievous tone. “And since when do a man and woman need jammies to go to bed?”

“Doug!” she exclaimed.

Brock squeezed her shoulder. As badly as he wanted to mention that she hadn’t denied that he was her boyfriend—and didn’t appear to have any intention of doing so—he kept his thoughts to himself. He certainly didn’t want to risk any chance he might have of her spending the night with him again, this time in a more intimate manner.

Instead of bringing up something he knew she would object to, he said, “Would you kindly explain why you didn’t tell me, a terrific public relations expert, that you’re an entertainer?”

“Because I’m not,” she replied, her face turning even redder with embarrassment.

“My foot, you’re not an entertainer,” Doug said before turning his gaze back to Brock. “This woman can sing a skunk out of spraying you, a porcupine out of sticking you, a jackass out of being a damned fool.”

“Douglas, stop it!” she scolded.

“Well, then, I guess we’ll have to stay,” Brock said. “I wouldn’t be doing my job well if I didn’t at least hear what she sounds like on a stage.”

“Now see what you’ve started?” she proclaimed, glaring at her brother. “Look, Brock, I only sing in this lounge. Never anywhere else. And I have no desire to change that.”

“At least, let me hear you,” he pleaded. “If we stay, we can pick your brother’s brain a little more.”

“Not tonight, Brock,” she said, shaking her head. “I just want to go back to the house and get a good night’s sleep. Thanks to your running off the road last night, I didn’t get much rest.”

“That’s not *my* fault,” he countered with a grin. “*You’re* the one who decided you had to wake me up every hour.”

“Will you at least come back and give me a night of your time while you’re still in South Dakota?” Doug asked.

“Sure,” she agreed with a fond smile at Doug. “Why not. I have an idea. Why don’t we all go to the churches in town and talk to the preachers? Maybe they’ll have some answers.”

“Great idea, *winyan*,” Brock said. “I should have thought of that before. Want to give us a hand, Doug?”

But Doug didn’t want to go, claiming he had too much work to do. With a cheerful good-bye and a promise that Dakota would be back to sing for him, Brock escorted her from the office.

The couple, however, learned nothing. Disappointed that they made no progress, Brock drove most of the way back to the ranch in silence, only speaking when he got hungry and asked Dakota if she wanted something to eat.

“Why are you so quiet?” she asked curiously as they ate their burgers.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I guess I just don’t have a lot to say right now. We didn’t come up with anything, so I didn’t see much point in discussing our trip.”

“Are you disappointed that we didn’t spend the night?”

“I don’t think so.” He took a long swig of his strawberry shake then smiled across the table at her. “Maybe I’m just tired. You did keep waking me up last night, you know.”

“For your own good,” she countered.

“I know, I know. You just wanted to make sure I didn’t have any head injury that wasn’t obvious, and I thank you for it. But I really think I should actually sleep tonight. Or are you planning a repeat?”

She smiled at him. “I guess not. You’re obviously hard-headed enough that I don’t have to do it two nights in a row.”

Brock laughed. “You’re such a charmer. From the sound of things that means you’ll be sleeping in your own room again.”

“I think I should—if either one of us want to *sleep*, that is.”

“Good point. Let’s eat fast and get back. I want to find out what Chayt learned before I get that much-needed sleep we keep talking about.”

Chayton had learned nothing from his friends. All he could suggest was that they use the scheduled fundraiser the next night to feel out people in the crowd. If nothing else, somebody might have overheard a conversation that might lead them to a valid explanation.

When he and Dakota left the house, Brock questioned her. “What about tomorrow night?”

“Pardon me?” she asked.

“Why don’t you let me hear you sing at the fundraiser? If you can sing a jackass out of being a damned fool like Doug claims, maybe you can sing some money out of a few jackasses’ pockets.”

“That’s a good idea,” she agreed, much to his surprise.

“You mean I don’t have to argue with you about it?”

“Not if it involves making some money to finance my brother’s dream.”

“Great!” He stopped by the corral fence and leaned back against it. “Now about that spending the night together thing we discussed at dinner.”

She smiled as she also leaned against the fence. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t be sleeping much if we did that.”

“I thought that sounded pretty good.” Stepping in front of her, he caressed her soft shoulders, bare now since she wore a tank top.

"I agree, but ..."

She shivered under his touch as he stroked her upper arms. "But what?"

"But I, for one, didn't sleep last night, and tomorrow night's going to be a long one."

Without ceasing his seductive movements, he stepped up against her so their torsos touched. "You realize, don't you, that we've only had that one time together—that one time when there had been danger only a few seconds before. Wouldn't you like to find out if it's that good when everything's safe and sane?"

"Yes," she admitted, "but I'd also like to be awake enough to enjoy the moment."

"Would you have any objection to me at least *trying* to change your mind?"

"I can't think of any."

He needed no further encouragement. In an instant, he pinned her against the fence with his body. His mouth caught hers in a hungry kiss. That was odd! He could still taste the chocolate from the shake she had with dinner. And, oh, what it did to his desire! He wanted her more now than he had on the ride home.

Could she feel it? he wondered. He pressed his pelvis against hers, and she began to grind against him as she slid her arms around his back. Man, she was good at that! And she was exceptionally receptive tonight. He could tell, because she pushed his tongue from her mouth with hers then ran hers across his teeth.

He caressed her pliant breast, causing her to moan into his mouth. He increased the intensity of the embrace. Then, just as he was beginning to think that this could last all night, she broke the kiss by pushing his head away. To his delight, however, she continued her taunting massage of his pelvis.

"We should go to bed," she whispered.

"I agree," he replied. "My cabin or ..."

"I *mean* to sleep, Brock. This is great, but I'm really exhausted."

"But you said I could change your mind."

She smiled at him. "I said you could *try*."

"You're right," he acquiesced as he stepped back from her. "You did. And I'll live up to my end of the bargain. I didn't succeed tonight, but that doesn't mean I won't try again tomorrow night."

"I hope not."

"Do you want me to escort you back to the house?"

"No thanks. I think I can find my way. Good night, Brock."

"Night," he replied as he watched her saunter away.

As much as he hated to let her go, he knew he had to. He suspected that their embrace had been a test to see if he would pressure her, and he suspected that he had passed that test. If he ever wanted to make love to her again, he had to let her decide the time. He would just keep planting the idea until she finally acquiesced.

With a heavy sigh, he strode toward the cabin. But as he passed the barn door, Jimmy Ray stalked out from inside, demanding, "What the hell do you think you were doing?"

Brock didn't want to deal with a jealous ex-boyfriend right now, but he didn't see any way to avoid it. "Giving Dakota a good night kiss, although that's really none of your business, is it?"

"Maybe none of mine, but I have some information you might find interesting."

"And that might be?"

"A man named Wyatt Romain was here while you were gone today."

Brock's heart leapt into his throat. How the hell had Romain found them? And why the hell had he come? That was a stupid question! He had come to take up where he'd left off with Dakota. Well, Brock wasn't about to let that happen. So far, he'd gotten further than Romain probably ever would—not that it mattered. It just gave him a little better ground to stand on.

"And I'm supposed to care about this?" Brock asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant.

"He was looking for Dakota, so I figured you'd care. After all, she did bring you here to meet her family."

"Well, you figured wrong. To begin with, *I* brought Dakota here, not the other way around. Besides that, Romain's part of her past." Brock paused. "And I *don't* worry about Dakota's past boyfriends, and I'm not saying Romain was her boyfriend. He wasn't. Now if you'll excuse me. I need to get some sleep."

Although Brock started away, he stopped short when Jimmy Ray said, "Jeanette sure liked him, but she told him that they didn't have any place for him to sleep—probably because *you're* here. He went back into Rapid City for the night, but he'll be back tomorrow."

"Then I guess I'll see him later. Now good night."

Despite his curiosity as to how Romain found them, Brock strode calmly to his cabin. For a man who seemed so infatuated with Dakota, Jimmy Ray sure was taking Romain's appearance casually—maybe *too* casually. It made him wonder what Jimmy Ray was up to.

Brock he was so tired, the thought drifted from his mind. He needed to take his time with Dakota. That way he wouldn't become another Wyatt Romain or Jimmy Ray. As obvious as it was that Dakota wasn't attracted to either of them, he believed that the key to his success would be his patience. In fact, he suspected she despised aggressive men. And he did *not* want her to despise him.

To be honest, he wanted to create the opposite effect on her. After these past few days alone with her, he'd come to realize—and admit the truth to himself. He desperately wanted her to love him.

SIXTEEN

“Did Chayt tell you the news?” Brock asked Dakota over coffee the next morning.

Dakota stared at him, stunned by his question. “I haven’t seen either Chayt or Jeanette this morning, and neither of them said anything about any news to me last night. What is it?”

“I heard that Romain’s in Rapid City. Apparently, he’s already been here to see you, because Jeanette was quite taken with his charm.”

Unable to believe that this was happening, Dakota took another sip of her coffee. She’d just realized that she was attracted to Brock, and now his only possible rival was in town. But she’d never really been attracted to Wyatt—not like she was to Brock. Wyatt’s presence in town didn’t change her intense reactions to Brock’s mere presence in a room.

Unfortunately, Wyatt could also be very persuasive and charming. She hadn’t been able to resist his charm before, so what made her think she was any less vulnerable to it now? She would just have to be extra careful to watch his actions and listen to his words when he was with her.

With a heavy sigh, she set her mug on the breakfast bar and leaned against the edge. Turning her gaze to Brock, she asked, “How did he find us?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that he was at the ranch last night and went back to Rapid City when he learned that you weren’t here.”

“What did Jeanette say about him?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you said ...”

“I *said* she was charmed by him. I didn’t say that I’d spoken to her about him. I got the information from your old boyfriend.”

“You talked to Jimmy Ray?” she asked in shock. This conversation was getting weirder, and she didn’t particularly like where it was headed. “When? Why?”

“Last night. I ran into him when he came out of the barn, and he told me then. As for *why*, I don’t know. I guess he wanted to make me jealous.”

Dakota couldn’t resist grinning at him. This was the perfect opening to learn a little more. “Did he succeed?”

But she didn’t get the light answer she expected. Instead, he responded so soberly that she wasn’t sure she should have asked in the first place.

“You were there when we said good night, Dakota,” he said, gazing directly into her eyes. “What do *you* think?”

Determined to keep the conversation light, she replied with a wink. “I think you’d like to have a little more of that fun we had on the ridge. And quite frankly, I wondered if you’d like to go riding again this morning. I know I would—now that I’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

To her delight, he slid his arm around her waist and leaned against her. With a seductive grin, he said, “I love riding, but I love comfort more. Maybe we should just

take a walk—all the way over to my cabin.”

“I don’t know, Brock,” she countered playfully. “I wouldn’t want people to think I’m a loose woman, ready to hop into bed with any man who kisses me like you do. Although, it was awfully hard to resist last night. If I hadn’t been so tired, I probably wouldn’t have.”

His head closed in on hers, and he kissed her. When he pulled back a moment later, he smiled at her. “If I’d known you were so easy to please, I would have put a little more effort into it. Now are you serious about going to my cabin?”

“Absolutely,” she breathed.

Dakota snuggled against Brock in the double bed. For the first time in her life, she felt truly content after a liaison. What could that mean? And how could it happen with a man she’d only known for a couple of weeks? Was it possible that she was more deeply involved with him than she’d realized? If so, she needed to get her mind back on track so she could help Chayton find out who wanted to destroy his campaign.

As much as she’d enjoyed their lovemaking, as good as he was at satisfying her, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was making a mistake. She didn’t need to get involved with a man she hardly knew. In fact, it was probably one of the most foolhardy things she’d ever done in her life—especially at this point.

But she *was* involved. Somehow Brock had charmed her more than Wyatt, who was obvious about it. Brock, if he did in fact work at it, had a more subtle approach to his charm.

“What are you thinking?” he asked as he stroked her hair.

She grimaced. Lying in bed, comparing the man holding you to another man, wasn’t exactly post-lovemaking conversation. “You probably don’t want to know.”

“Comparing me to earlier lovers, huh?” he asked.

“Actually, no,” she replied. “Just another man.”

“Okay, let’s see if I’m really cut out for the detective work I’ve been doing lately. You were comparing me to another man, but not an earlier lover. My guess is Romain. How did I do?”

“Too well.” Rising up on her elbows, she gazed down into his gray eyes to see his reaction. “But I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, Brock. I think he came to mind because he showed up here. I wasn’t thinking about what it might be like to make love to him.”

“I know.”

Startled, she jerked her head and widened her eyes. “You *know*?”

Brock laughed. “Don’t be so surprised. Whether you realize it or not, Dakota, you’re an open book. You’re not the kind of woman who would do such a thing. If anything, you were thinking about how guilty you feel. Of course, I’m also sorry I brought it up to remind you of him.”

She punched him playfully in the bicep. “You’re not as smart as you look. I don’t feel a *bit* guilty. And don’t be sorry. At least, I won’t be surprised when he shows up again.” Lying down again, she cuddled against him and ran her hand through the hair covering his chest. “Right now, though, I just want to forget about him. I have a real compulsion to not think about anything except being content and satisfied.”

“And I do that to you?”

“Unequivocally.”

His laughter rumbled in her ear. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard that word used in a conversation before.” He hugged her shoulders. “And no woman has ever used it in reference to my abilities in bed. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate knowing that *you* appreciate me.” After kissing her head, he sighed. “I know this sounds crazy considering everything that’s gone on with us, but I really feel guilty about not romancing you.”

“Well, don’t. I’ve never been impressed by romance, Brock. As far as I’m concerned, it’s all a game. The *real* man is the one who’s your friend, not the one who goes out of his way to romance you.”

“You don’t like romance?” he asked in amazement.

“I didn’t say that. I like romance as much as the next woman, but I don’t build relationships on it. Romance clouds one’s judgment. I prefer to know exactly what I’m getting into. That means keeping a clear head.”

“What happens if love just suddenly hits you? Like a brick falling out of the sky. How do you react then?”

His somber question startled her, and she wanted to be as honest with him. “I don’t know, Brock. It’s never happened to me.”

He fell silent, causing Dakota some concern. Had he wanted her to tell him that she’d fallen in love with him? If that was the case, he would just have to be disappointed, because she had no intention of lying to him.

“Do you at least think it’s possible?” he asked, his voice filled with anxiety.

“Love at first sight?” she replied, shaking her head. “I don’t believe in it. I suppose it’s possible, but I honestly don’t see how.”

“Not at first sight. My question was more like you’ve been friends for a while then, all of a sudden—*boom!* You stand there and say, ‘Good Lord, when the hell did I fall in love with this person?’ Has anything like *that* ever happened to you?”

“No. In fact, I’m not sure I was *ever* in love with anybody. The closest I’ve ever come was a serious case of infatuation.”

“Jimmy Ray?”

“Uh-huh. Now would you like to explain why you asked the question?”

“I was just curious. Women like to talk after making love, so I had to find something to say.” Rolling to the edge of the bed, he sat up. “I should probably take a shower.”

“Me, too,” she replied, sitting up under the covers, “but I’ll do it at the house. We might not get out of here for the rest of the day if I shower here.”

“That’s probably true. And we have a lot to do today if we’re going to make some progress before the fundraiser tonight.”

“I didn’t realize we’d planned to do anything. What do you have in mind?”

“I thought we could visit a few of the local churches to see if they know anything about anti-gambling activities in the area. You are going with me, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

A mischievous grin crossed his lips. “And if a certain lounge singer comes calling, are you going to back out?”

“Absolutely not.”

“A certain ex-boyfriend?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” she asked, unable to hide her suspicions in her tone.

"Absolutely not. I'm just trying to make sure you're mine for this excursion."

"I'm yours, Brock," she assured him with a laugh. "*Nobody's* going to keep me here. I want to do everything I can to help Chayt find out who's behind his problems."

"I'm glad to hear that." He turned toward her and kissed her solidly on the lips, then he rose and started toward the bathroom. "After this morning, I might have to beat up a couple of guys if you try to stay here with them."

As Dakota wandered back to the house, Wyatt drove up in a Lexus. Rolling her eyes in disgust, she shook her head and continued toward the house until he called out to her. She stopped at the bottom of the steps and turned to wait for him.

"Morning, Wyatt," she greeted, showing her disinterest in her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't your sister-in-law tell you I came to town yesterday?" he replied as he joined her.

"I haven't seen her since yesterday morning. How did you find me?"

"Well, I knew about your brother, so I talked your neighbor into letting me in your apartment. I looked his address up in your address book."

"You did *what*?" she asked, furious that he would invade her privacy like that. "How *dare* you."

"I just wanted to be with you, Dakota," he said. "Is that really so bad?"

Continuing up the steps to the house, she proclaimed, "I don't like people following me around. Just go home, because I'm not interested in seeing you anymore."

Wyatt grabbed her arm as she reached for the doorknob and spun her to face him. She glared up at him, demanding, "Let go of me."

"Not until you listen to me."

"I don't *have* to listen to a stalker. Now get the hell off my brother's property. I have things to do, so I don't have time for you, anyway."

"Should I come back later?"

"Don't come back at all. Go back to Las Vegas where you belong."

"Is this because of Jones?" he demanded as he released her.

"How I feel about your tracking me here has nothing to do with Brock. Now go home."

After enunciating each word clearly, she opened the door, entered the house, then slammed the door behind her. Unable to resist, she went to the window in the living room to see what Wyatt would do. To her amazement, he stalked over to the barn and shouted for Jimmy Ray. A moment later, Jimmy Ray strode out the door.

Curious, Dakota opened the window in the hope of hearing at least some of their conversation. But she probably wouldn't have needed to. After only a few quiet sentences, Wyatt became so angry that he shouted at Jimmy Ray even though the man stood right before him.

"Damn!" Wyatt said. "I *knew* those two weren't related. I never should have believed either one of them. Why the hell did you bring me here if you *knew* she was with Jones all the time?"

Jimmy Ray was equally irate in his reply. "I told you. You were the only person I could think of who had even a *remote* chance of getting her away from him."

"I didn't have a snowball's chance in hell, you damned fool. She doesn't want anything to do with me. Why the hell didn't *you* try to take her away from him?"

"Because she doesn't want anything to do with me, either."

"Well, I'm getting my ass out of here. I'm going back to Vegas where I can have my fill of women. If you don't think she should be around Jones, take care of it yourself."

Before Jimmy Ray could respond, Wyatt stalked back to the car. A few seconds later, he gave it the gas and peeled out of the driveway, leaving dust and flying gravel in his wake.

Dakota smiled and shut the window as quietly as she could, so as not to attract Jimmy Ray's attention. At least, she didn't have to worry about Wyatt bothering her again. But she wasn't sure about how to handle Jimmy Ray. All she could do was hang around with Brock most of the time and see how things progressed on that front.

When they came back from visiting clergymen with no more information than they had when they left, Dakota wondered if they were on the right track. Apparently, the gambling angle was all wrong. The only thing left that made any sense was the mining angle.

Then Brock strode away from her without a word and disappeared into Chayton's office without knocking. Determined not to let him push her into the background, she followed him.

Chayton gazed over at them while he held the phone to his ear. His face masked in confusion, he asked, "What are you two doing here?"

"We need to talk," Brock announced. "Can you cut that short?"

"Jeff?" Chayton said into the speaker. "I'm going to have to call you back? ... I don't know what the hell's going on, but it sounds important. ... Of course. I'll let you know as soon as I can. ... Yeah, that's a good idea. Come on over." Slamming the handset back onto the base, Chayton glanced at Dakota then back to Brock. "Well, what's so damned important?"

"I'll tell you as soon as your sister leaves us alone," Brock announced.

Infuriated by his dismissal, Dakota went over to a chair and dropped down into it. "I'm staying, Brock. I'm in this up to my neck already, and I'm not going to let you two boss me around. Now sit town and tell us *both* what you're thinking."

"Irritating woman," he grumbled as he dropped into the chair next to hers. "Can't you do anything about her, Chayt? *You're* her brother."

Chayton chuckled. "But I'm not her keeper. Besides, nobody's ever been able to do anything about her when she sets her mind on something. Now what's going on?"

"We visited as many ministers and priests in Rapid City as we could today, and not one of them has heard anything about people complaining about casinos. That leaves one politically motivated group left."

"The mining people," Dakota proclaimed.

"Exactly." Brock nodded then asked, "Have you made any headway in that area?"

"Not a thing," Chayton admitted. "I've been on the phone with everybody I can think of, and I can't confirm or deny anything. None of my contacts have heard of anything, but none of them are people I would call trustworthy, either. They could be hiding information from me."

"What if *I* try?"

"I doubt they're going to be any more open to a stranger. They'll just figure that

you're working for me—which wouldn't be hard to confirm with you living right here on the ranch."

"I could move to town."

"Don't you dare!" Dakota shrieked. Her face heated in embarrassment when both men stared at her in shock. She'd been too quick to respond. Now she had to cover her tracks. But how? Without considering which words could follow, she just started talking. "You shouldn't have to move to town just because Chayton's got problems. You didn't come here to spend a fortune on motel rooms; you came to help. There's no way I'm going to let you stay in a motel when we don't know how long this is going to last. You're going to stay right here, and that's that. Besides, I'm a paralegal. I can do some searching without people connecting me."

"Everybody in the area knows you're my sister, Takchawee," Chayton said, "and I'm not letting you get involved. Unfortunately, now's not the time to go into it. First, we need to figure out what to do about the fundraiser tonight."

"You're going to have to cancel it," Brock declared.

"I can't. I need the funds, or I'll have to drop out of the race."

"What if somebody tries ..."

"I doubt anybody will try something right here on my own ranch. That would be stupid. Besides, I'm more worried about somebody sabotaging the party or maybe running off with any funds I collect. I need somebody to guard all the checks."

"What about an off-duty cop from Rapid City?"

"Good idea. I'll dig one up. You guys going to do anything before the shindig?"

"Just get ready," Dakota said. "I don't remember what time it starts, though."

"Six o'clock. It's a barbecue."

"I'll help Jeanette. She must be going nuts with everything she needs to do."

"It's catered, but she could still use a little help if you're willing to part with your new friend."

She glanced over at Brock and grinned. "Well, I suppose I could handle separation for a couple of hours." Rising she started toward the door, then stopped and said, "Try not to miss me too much, Jones." Then she left the room.

Chayton chuckled as she closed the door behind her. "I knew she was smitten the second I saw you two together. I don't suppose something happened to change the fact that she's not hiding it anymore."

As badly as he wanted to confide in Chayton, Brock thought better of it. She probably wouldn't like it if he divulged too much information, especially since she hadn't admitted her feelings for him.

"Actually," he said, "she saved my life. Remember I told you that we were shot at up on the Badlands ridge?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, just before that a rattler was poised to strike me. She took aim and shot it to smithereens. It startled me, and I started to fall off the ridge. But she jumped against me, so I fell on land instead. That's when she lost the rifle. She just tossed it aside, and she thinks it went over the ridge. At least, we didn't see it anywhere nearby."

"Ah, I see. That explains why it's missing. I just thought she forgot to return it to the rack—or maybe you kept it in case you guys needed it again. I probably should have asked, but I wasn't concerned."

"I can go look for it if you want."

"Naw, it's not important. That wasn't one of my favorites, anyway. I'll send one of my hands out to get it in the morning. Whoever I pick will be a lot more familiar with the land, anyway. He can probably find it quicker than you could."

"If it will help, I'll go with. I think I know where we were at the time. Although, I'll admit I was in a bit of a daze when we rode back to the ranch. I'm not used to having people shoot at me."

Again Chayton laughed. "I doubt any of us *are*."

"So, is there anything I can do to help you get ready for the fundraiser?"

"As a matter of fact, I was just going to help a few of my hands put up the little stage I set up. Takchawee promised to sing a couple of Lakota songs, and of course, I need to give a speech. I even hired a few Lakota to dance and play instruments."

"How long is this thing going to last?"

"Hopefully, until well after midnight." Chayton rose and started toward the door. "Come on. We'll see if my hands can use about four more—unless, of course, you'd rather steer clear of Jimmy Ray Stockton."

Chuckling, Brock followed Chayton out of the room. "I'll admit he's not my favorite person, but I think I can deal with him."

"Well, if he gets out of hand, you can hang the tealights Jeanette insisted on and help the ladies with their decorating."

"I'll do that instead. After all, I could be a lot closer to Dakota—and maybe I could show Stockton that he doesn't have a prayer."

"My guess is he already knows it."

"Well, at least, I could be nearby in case she falls off a ladder. I was just telling her this morning that I haven't done much in the way of romancing her, and I understand women think things like that are romantic."

Chayton laughed as they exited the house. "Not my Takchawee! She'd sooner fall on her ass than have a man rescue her like that. Besides, I'm not sure she knows what the word romantic means."

"Give me twenty-four hours," Brock proclaimed with a sexy drawl, "and *I'll* teach her."

"If it helps, pal, I'm rooting for you. I think my sister needs some good old-fashioned romance. Maybe it will knock just a little of that spunk out of her, not to mention a little of that sometimes-annoying independence."

SEVENTEEN

Brock stared at Dakota in stunned disbelief. He had no idea she could sing so well! Granted, he'd expected her to have a good voice if it always helped her brother's lounge receipts, but what he heard now far exceeded that. And he couldn't even understand the words!

The moment she stepped from the makeshift stage, he grabbed her upper arm gently and pulled her off to the side. He had an idea that he couldn't wait to discuss with her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"You're incredible!" he exclaimed, unable to contain his enthusiasm. "We've got to talk about your career."

Her dark eyes widened in amazement. "*What* career?"

"Your singing career, of course. Dakota, do you know what you could do with a voice like that? You could be the next Shania Twain."

"I don't *want* to be a singer. I want to learn as much as I can about the legal profession—at least, as much as I can without a law degree. I'm not smart enough to pass the bar or remember all those cases. I want come back to the res and help my people."

Drawing her closer to the corral and farther away from the crowd, he said, "You could help them a hell of a lot more with that voice, Dakota."

"How do you figure?"

"You could make helping the Lakota your cause, and you could promote that cause on tour and on television. Hell, I'll bet I could even get you a movie role—even if you need a few acting lessons. I've still got plenty of connections in L.A."

"You really get into this publicity stuff, don't you," she said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Brock, but I'm just not interested in a singing career. I don't care *how* excited you are about the prospect. And that acting stuff you can *really* forget about."

"Don't you get it, Dakota?" he asked, exasperated by her stubbornness. "You could reach so many more people that way. I can't begin to count the numbers. I can get you in to a music producer for an audition—and I know just the one who'll take you. Then we'll get you on late-night shows. Maybe a daytime talk show or two."

Dakota shook her head. "I don't know, Brock. They'd all ask me about *my* life. How could that possibly promote the American Indian cause?"

"When you tell them about your life, you tell them all the nitty-gritty stuff you told me. In case you don't realize it, you could, by default, get the word out that things aren't much better in the Twenty-First Century. Then we get somebody to write a movie—just for you. We get them to tell a modern-day Native American story. There aren't nearly enough of them out there, and it's the perfect vehicle for you."

"I wouldn't want some hack knocking out a story that's white man's propaganda," she insisted. "Who would do something like that with the accuracy I would insist on?"

"Whoever I can convince, and I'd make sure he or she was the best in the business.

If we come up with the idea, all we have to do is pitch it. The producer will find somebody to write it. What's the last really *good* modern-day Indian movie you saw?"

"Probably *Thunderheart*, and a miniseries set on the Pine Ridge Reservation. I'm partial to it, though, because it's Lakota."

"So let's remedy the lack of realistic, modern Indian movies. I could promote you to the hilt, Dakota. I can see it all now." He raised his arm and swept his hand through the air like he was reading something in the sky. "Takchawee. Nothing else. Like Cher, only longer." He returned his gaze to Dakota, "What do you think?"

"I think you've gone off the deep end."

His enthusiasm died, and he frowned. "You're not even going to consider this, are you."

"For Pete's sake, Brock. You've got all these ideas, but they ..."

Her words were cut off by a crack immediately followed by a woman's scream. Silence reigned as she shot her gaze to the stage where Chayton was giving his speech. Brock spun to face the stage, as well.

Chayton still stood at the podium. He looked shocked. Brock noticed a growing patch of red on Chayton's chest in the instant before he disappeared behind the podium. At the same time, the stunned crowd began to react. Some scrambled away; some raced onto the stage. A woman screamed again.

"He's been shot!" Jeanette cried out over the turmoil. "Help him!"

Grabbing Dakota's hand, Brock sprinted toward the stage. As they reached it, a man shouted, "Call 911!"

"No," Jeanette replied frantically. "It will take too long."

"I'll get his truck!" Brock declared, racing up to the scene.

Jeanette dug the keys from her husband's pocket and tossed them to Brock. "I don't know which one it is, but here."

Without releasing Dakota, Brock ran to the truck. After pushing her into the passenger seat, he dashed around the vehicle and got in behind the wheel. The first three keys he tried wouldn't even slide into the ignition, but the fourth one did. He turned it and revved the motor loudly.

"Wait a minute," Dakota said as he put the truck into reverse. "We're going to need towels. I'm going to get some from the kitchen."

Brock waited while Dakota raced into the house then returned only moments later with a stack of towels. Once she was back in the truck, he drove it over to the stage, honking the horn to get people out of the way.

After he backed it to the edge, three men lifted Chayton and put him in the bed of the truck. Then one helped Jeanette in and got in with her.

"Get the hell out of here!" the man called.

"Somebody watch my kids!" Jeanette cried out as Brock tore out of the area.

"Okay, sweetheart," Brock said in the truck. "You're going to have to give me directions. I'll get him there as soon as I can. With any luck, we'll run into a cop who'll give us a siren escort."

Dakota paced the waiting room. Why didn't the doctor come out and at least give them an update? She stopped and leaned against the wall. Brock sat on a yellow plastic

and chrome sofa with his arm around Jeanette's shoulders, holding her against him. Oh, how she longed to have Brock hold her like that! But she'd sent him to support Jeanette. After all, Jeanette needed it much more than she herself did right now.

With a sigh, Dakota turned away from them and leaned her shoulder against the wall. What had Brock been thinking when he suggested that she make singing her career? She'd never even considered such a thing. All her life, she'd dreamed of helping her people, but she'd never considered music as a way of doing it. He'd really gone off the rails, though, when he'd suggested acting, not that it wasn't a good way to promote the cause.

Even with all her hard work, she'd never been more than a slightly above-average student. As far as she was concerned, that made becoming a lawyer unlikely. But being a paralegal was perfectly fine. It gave her information she needed and could eventually use.

How could she help the Lakota—or any other American Indian tribe for that matter—by doing something she loved as much as she loved to be on stage? Although, it was a possibility now that she knew a publicist.

She sighed again. Why was she thinking about such things at a time like this? She needed to figure out why those cops hadn't done their jobs and protected Chayton? How could they have been so negligent as to let somebody with a weapon onto the premises? For heaven's sake, that's why they were stationed at the main gate—to check people for guns or knives and confiscate anything that might do harm. Unless, ...

Striding over to the couch, she sat down beside Brock.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he draped his arm around her neck.

"Not bad," she replied. "How do you think this happened if we had guards at the main gate?"

"I don't know."

"Then what do you think of this theory? What if it was an inside job? Maybe somebody in the campaign who Chayt trusted."

"I suppose it's possible, but what motive would a campaign member have?"

Dakota grimaced. "I don't know. I hadn't thought that far ahead. But we've *got* to come up with something, because the police are going to ask questions."

"That's true, but ..."

At that moment, a man came into the waiting room and asked for Jeanette Grayeagle. She scrambled to her feet while Dakota and Brock rose.

"I'm Jeanette Grayeagle," she said. "Are you the doctor?"

"Dr. Forsyth," he replied.

"This is Chayton's sister Dakota Grayeagle, and I'm Brock Jones. Have you determined his condition yet?"

"I'm afraid it isn't very good right now," he said. "Why don't we sit down and discuss this."

The trio sank back onto the couch while the doctor sat in a matching chair adjacent to it.

Grabbing Brock's hand, Jeanette asked, "How bad is it?"

"He's in critical condition, and I'm having him admitted to CICU."

"CICU?" she repeated with a note of curiosity in her voice.

"The Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. The bullet missed his heart, but it stopped while we were working on him. We had to use the paddles on it to get it started again. We got

him stabilized. The bullet went completely through his body. It collapsed his lung, though, so we have to deal with that. And he's lost a lot of blood, even though whoever brought him in did a good job of trying to control it."

"What's the most serious problem?" Brock asked.

"Naturally, the heart stopping. That's why he's going to CICU."

"Is he conscious?"

"Barely. I've given him some medication for the pain, so he's pretty out of it right now. I've also put him on oxygen."

"Can I see him?" Jeanette asked.

Dr. Forsyth smiled. "As soon as he's settled in his room, you can visit for a while. But only members of his immediate family—you and Ms. Grayeagle." He turned his gaze on Brock. "You can't visit with him yet, you understand."

"I understand," Brock agreed.

"Good." Rising, Dr. Forsyth gazed down at them. "They'll be moving him to the fourth floor, so you can wait in that waiting room until they come for you." He started to leave then stopped. "By the way, I've alerted the police to the shooting. They're sending somebody over to talk to you."

"We assumed they would. Will somebody let them know where we are?"

"I'll tell them at the ER nurses' desk."

Frowning, Dakota stared after the departing officers. This was ridiculous. After all the things that had been happening lately, they were no closer to finding out who was behind everything than they had been. Whoever had sent that letter bomb to her apartment, whoever had shot at her and Brock on the ridge, whoever had shot Chayton, it didn't matter. They were no closer to a culprit's identity than they had been when she and Brock had met.

"I don't like this," Dakota said to Brock as Jeanette wandered toward Chayton's room.

"I don't like it, either," Brock admitted. "That's, why we need to call a news conference."

"A news conference?" she asked in shock. "Why?"

"To put a little spin on what happened."

"Spin?"

"Yeah. We know the press is going to report this, so we need to do a little damage control."

"But how?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll figure something out by the time they get here."

"You've already called them?"

"I didn't see what choice I had."

"Don't you think you should have left that up to Chayt's campaign manager?"

"As I see it, his manager doesn't know what the hell he's doing. I want to do this right so your brother has a good chance to win this race. We'll work this attempted assassination to our advantage."

"Attempted assassination?"

Brock smiled at her. "God, *winyan*, you're beginning to sound like an echo. Almost

every time I say something, you repeat it. Get a grip so you can help me figure this out.”

“What’s to help, Brock? Somebody tried to kill my brother—and almost succeeded. That reminds me, I need to call my other brothers and let them know what happened before it hits the news.”

“You go someplace quiet. If I’m not here, stay put. Better yet, you stay here since nobody else is in the waiting room. I’m going to find the doctor and see if I can convince him to make a statement on Chayt’s condition. Then I’m going to try to convince him to get a room set aside for the press. I’ll leave a message at nurses’ station so you’ll know where to find me. I’m going to set up the conference myself.”

After making her calls, Dakota went to see if she could relieve Jeanette at Chayton’s bedside for a while. Although Jeanette was reluctant to leave, the nurse declared that, at this point, only one visitor at a time was allowed. Since Dakota assured her that she would only be a few minutes, Jeanette left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Dakota sank onto the chair by Chayton’s bedside that Jeanette had occupied. Tenderly taking his hand in hers, she asked, “How are you feeling?”

He offered her a weak smile. “Like I was run over by that truck I hear your boyfriend drove like an off-road racer—and did a damned good job at it.”

“That’s because he *was* an off-road racer,” she replied with a grin. “And it’s a good thing he was. He got you here in time to save your life.”

“I want him to do something for me, Takchawee. Do you think he would?”

“Probably. What is it?”

“I want *him* to hold a press conference to report this. I don’t want Jeff doing it.”

“He’s already setting it up. I called our brothers first so they wouldn’t hear it over TV or see it in the papers before it was reported. I know they usually hold these things until the next of kin are notified, but you’re a public figure. Brock and I were afraid it would hit the news before the guys heard from me.”

“Good idea. Look, I’m really weak and woozy, so I’m going to keep this short. I don’t want Jeff running the publicity end of my campaign anymore. I’m going to pay Brock to do it. Do you think he would work for me without a contract until I get out of here?”

“Of course. But isn’t he’s already working for you—gratis?”

“I don’t want it gratis, anymore. I need him to put a positive spin on this incident.”

“There is nothing positive about what happened, Chayt. Don’t you see that?”

“Of course, I do. But I think he can *make* something positive for us. I know for a fact Jeff can’t do that. Now would *you* do me a favor?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Find him and represent me while I’m in here.”

“Man, Chayt,” she said, shaking her head, “I don’t think I can do that.”

“Sure, you can. I know it’s going to be a while, but I don’t want to be out of action for how long it could take. I need a representative who’s as committed to the American Indian cause as I am. You’re the only family member who meets that criterion. You’re the only one who can substitute for me in my campaign.”

“But I don’t have any experience.”

“Who was the best debater in her class? Who could get up on that stage, and sing and act like nobody’s business? It was you, Takchawee. You can do this.”

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “I suppose I could give it a *try*. But I’ll need to go over your all notes and information if I’m going to pull it off.”

"Everything's at your disposal. The key to my file cabinet's in my desk, and the key to my desk is on my key chain. You'll be working closely with Brock, so I'm not worried. Now go find him. He needs to know that you're going to be my representative before he starts the press conference."

"All right. You take care of yourself. Concentrate on getting well. *I'll* concentrate on your campaign."

As she left the room, Dakota wondered what had gotten into her. Acting well with rehearsed lines was one thing. Acting well without being prompted was something entirely different. That was improvisation, and she wasn't sure she could do it. But she'd told Chayton that she would try, and she intended to live up to her promise. She could only hope that she didn't lose the election for him.

Wandering up to the nurses' station, she followed Brock's instructions and asked if he'd left her a message as to where he would be. After getting directions to a first-floor room, Dakota took the stairs.

This was going to be her first appearance in Chayton's place. That meant it would be her first chance to do something good for the Lakota in specific and the American Indian community in general. She sure hoped she didn't blow this first opportunity. If she did, she might blow his chance to go to Washington and represent the very people she wanted to help.

"Hey, babe!" Brock called, waving his hand over his head as she entered the already crowded room.

Weaving her way among the people, she reached Brock, who stood at a table with microphones attached to it at the front of the room. Frowning, she said, "I talked to Chayton."

"How's he doing?" Brock asked in concern.

"Better, I guess. He says he's weak and woozy, but he did plenty of talking."

"What did he say? Anything about the campaign?"

"Yeah. He wants you to do a press conference, so I told him you'd already planned that. And he wants you on his payroll."

"I can talk to him about that when he's recovered enough. Does he have a message for the press?"

"Yeah. He insisted that I take over the campaign in his name. He says I'm the only family member who feels as strongly about his causes as he does. He's right, too, but I just don't know if I can do the job. I don't care if I was the best debater in my high school. This is something entirely different."

"He has a lot of faith in you," Brock said as he draped his arm around her neck. "If it makes you feel better, I'll help you all I can. Together we can pull this off without much damage."

Dakota shook her head. "I sure hope you're right, Brock, because I'm awfully nervous about this. I'd feel terrible if I ruined Chayton's chance of getting to Washington."

"You won't. Were you able to get hold of all your brothers?"

"Yeah. They all know what happened, and they'll be watching TV so they can find out more details from the doctor."

"Good. Sit down, and I'll get this show on the road."

Sitting at a conference room table, the doctor gave his report and answered a few questions. When he finished, Brock took over the microphones and announced that Chayton was still in the running for the Senate seat. When one of the reporters asked

how that was possible if Chayton was so ill, Brock announced that his sister “Takchawee” would be appearing at all his functions in his place. Then he introduced her.

“Do you have any idea of what your brother wants you to do?” one reporter asked.

“To begin with,” Dakota explained, “he wants me to appear at his scheduled functions, just as Mr. Jones said. Before I can say more than that, however, I need to go over his notes, and through his accumulated materials on his goals and research.”

“How long will that take?”

“I’m not sure, because I don’t know how much he has.”

“Will you schedule a press conference when you’re done?” another reporter asked.

“Of course. And I’ll keep you apprised of my brother’s condition.”

“Mr. Grayeagle’s next appearance is the day after tomorrow,” still another reporter shouted from the back of the crowd. “Do you think you’ll have time?”

“I would imagine, but I won’t guarantee anything until I’ve had a chance to see what’s there.”

“Will you be keeping in contact with your brother?”

“Absolutely. I couldn’t effectively represent him if I didn’t. I intend to get Chayton’s message across in *his* way, hopefully using as many of his own words as possible. This is contingent, of course, on how well he’s feeling each day.”

Brock moved closer to the microphones again. “That’s all for today. Thank you for your attention.”

Rising, he took Dakota’s upper arm and led her away from the table. The crowd milled around, but no one approached them for more questions, which Dakota found odd. Instead, they were allowed to leave the room without being stopped.

“That was awfully easy, don’t you think,” she said once they were in the corridor.

“What was?” he asked.

“Getting away.”

“They probably realized that you were right. You can’t effectively represent him until you’ve gone through his material.”

“Now you need to answer a question from the representative,” she insisted. “Why did you call me Takchawee when you never have before? Are you planning something I don’t know about?”

Brock grinned. “It doesn’t hurt to get that name out there for when I convince you to go into a new career to help your people.”

“You’re not going to give up on that, are you.”

“Not until you say the words ‘Forget it, buster’ and *mean* them. Now let’s get out of here. We’ve got our work cut out for us if you have an appearance to make soon.”

EIGHTEEN

Shocked, Dakota stared at the rifle the plainclothes policeman held. It looked like the one she thought she'd lost over the ridge, but the wooden stock was cracked on this one.

"Well, sweetheart," Brock prompted as they sat in Chayton's office, "what do you think? Is that the one you lost the other day or not?"

She nodded, unable to comprehend why the cop and Brock wanted to know.

"That's what I thought."

Forcing herself to speak, she asked, "You went back to the ridge to find it? When did you go? We've been together practically every minute since I lost it."

"I didn't go back. Johnson here found it in one of the trash cans used last night."

"A trash can!" Dakota exclaimed in amazement. "How did it get *there*?"

"We don't know for sure yet," the tall, blond detective admitted. "But I suspect it's the weapon used to shoot your brother."

"That doesn't make sense. What kind of assassin would shoot somebody then leave the weapon where it's *sure* to be found?"

"One who's pretty confident that his fingerprints aren't on it," Johnson said. "One who wants to set somebody else up to take the rap. Maybe even one who's just plain stupid or scared."

"Come on, Johnson," Brock said, his voice filled with irritation. "Nobody who sets out to kill a politician is stupid, and he *couldn't* get scared. He'd need nerves of steel to pull off a shooting in a crowd like we had here last night."

"I didn't say he *was* stupid or scared—just that it's possible. It's an option. It's one of the things we'll look into. Now where did you say you lost this rifle, Miss Grayeagle?"

"Up on a ridge at the edge of the Badlands," Dakota replied.

"Do you know of anybody who could have seen you lose it?"

"Of course not. Brock and I were al..." With a horrified gasp, she turned her wide-eyed gaze to Brock. "Oh my God! Brock, do you think somebody could have been there the whole time? Do you think somebody could have seen *everything*?"

Brock sighed and collapsed back in the chair he'd set behind Chayton's desk so they could go over paperwork together. "Man, babe, I sure *hope* not."

"What are you two talking about?" Johnson asked curiously.

"Somebody shot at us on that ridge," Brock explained, "shortly after we'd made love. And we've decided that whoever it was, was a damned good shot, because he came close, but never once hit either of us. I don't know about Dakota, but *I'd* just assumed the person came up on us while we were resting. Now that the rifle's shown up, though, I'll bet she's right. I'll bet the person did see everything. There's no other way he could have found that rifle—or even know to look for it there—if he hadn't."

"Then you lost it somewhere on the ridge."

"Actually," Dakota said, "I think it went *over* the ridge."

"Then why isn't it broken to smithereens?"

“How do I know? The stock is cracked, and it looks pretty scratched up. Maybe it landed in a bush or something?”

Johnson rose from the chair on the other side of the desk. “I suppose that’s possible. Tell you what. I’m taking this to town for a ballistics test, just in case my men find the bullet that struck Mr. Grayeagle. We’re having a little trouble figuring the trajectory because Mrs. Grayeagle said that her husband was moving at the time he was hit. That bullet could have gone anywhere, depending on which way he was facing at the moment of impact. Could have come from anywhere, too.”

“You’ll keep us posted, won’t you?” Brock asked.

“Absolutely. As soon as we learn anything new, we’ll tell you. I saw the press conference last night, so I know you’ll need to keep the public aware of our progress. I’ve got to warn you, though, I’m not about to release any information that might endanger our investigation.”

“We understand,” Brock said as Johnson left the room. “And thank you.”

Dakota said nothing. All she could do was think about the possible ramifications of what could happen if the ballistics tests proved that was the weapon. It was quite likely that her fingerprints were the only ones on the rifle. Surely, if someone had planned to use it for a crime, he wouldn’t get his own prints on it. And that meant only one thing: that would automatically make her a suspect in her own brother’s shooting. She didn’t like the sound of that at all.

Rising, she wandered to a file cabinet and opened the top drawer. The best thing to do was keep her mind occupied with other things. She had enough to worry about that weren’t “what-ifs.” She had things she needed to do if she was going to address a political action forum the next night.

Brock’s hands slid around her waist as he planted a tender kiss on her hair. Then he hugged her and said, “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart.”

“How can you say that when my prints are probably on that rifle?”

“Because we’re not suspects.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“When I went to the john a while ago, I ran into Johnson. I asked him when we should give our statements. He said that he’d send one of his men by sometime later today because he already knew that we didn’t see anything.”

“How could he possibly know that?”

“My goodness, *winyan*! You’re beginning to sound like a broken record.”

When she turned in his arms, his sexy, lopsided half-smile melted away some of her tension. She gave him a peck his lips to show her gratitude then asked in her most sheepish voice, “How could he possibly know that?”

“Because, my beautiful doe, several of the guests told him last night that they were watching a couple of lovebirds chat by the corral instead of watching the politician giving a speech. They said that we only had eyes for each other and couldn’t have seen a thing.”

Smiling, she laid her arms on his shoulders and toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck. “They’re very observant people, but they should have been watching their host.”

He tightened his hold then maneuvered her over to the wall. “Does that mean you think we’re lovebirds?”

“It does seem as though we’re at least headed toward that road.”

Glancing around, Brock said, "I wonder how much time we have before somebody bothers us."

Dakota knew what he was talking about and agreed wholeheartedly. Making love in her brother's office was almost like forbidden fruit, and the notion was intoxicating.

Still using the fingers of one hand to toy with his hair, she slid her other hand between them and caressed his covered manhood. While she stared into his brilliant smoky gray eyes, she massaged it and whispered, "Do you think you can reach the lock on the door?"

Without taking his gaze from hers, he reached toward the door. He stretched for the knob but couldn't reach it. Maintaining her seductive embrace, she slid closer. A moment later, she heard the lock snap into place. This was going to be a first for her, but she was determined to make it something neither of them would ever forget.

Brock reached for her breast, but she pushed his hand away while continuing to rub his growing manhood. Turning quickly, she pinned him against the wall and caught his lips with hers. Her tongue slipped into his eager mouth to meet with his.

To her own amazement, she was frantic with desire for him. She could hardly wait! Leaning her breasts against him so he couldn't fondle her, she quickly released his belt then the button on his jeans. Then she slowly lowered the zipper. With a heavy sigh of excitement, she slid her hands into his jockey shorts and squeezed his bare buttocks.

Brock moaned into her mouth, prompting her into more daring actions. She worked both pair of pants over his hips to expose his desire, then she slipped his hands under his knit polo shirt, inching upward while she caressed his bare torso. At last, she broke the kiss, pulled his shirt over his head, and tossed it aside.

She kissed his chin then his chest. Then she trailed her tongue lower, through the hair across his torso, and lower. She kissed his stomach as she unbuttoned her shirt and took it off. She kissed a little lower while she removed her brassiere and tossed it aside.

His arousal danced as she rose and unzipped her own jeans, absently thinking how glad she was that she'd already taken off her boots. In only a moment she stood before him wearing only her socks.

Then, as though he couldn't bear it a moment longer, he grabbed her upper arms and pulled her against him. In moments, he lay on the floor with her straddling him. He caressed her breasts while she rode him to a climax more intense than any she'd ever had. At almost the same moment, Brock growled his own satisfaction. And when it ended, she collapsed atop him with a groan of disappointment.

When she caught her breath, she rolled off him. In a way, she felt kind of empty. She'd wanted the feelings to last forever, but they'd stopped. But in another way, she felt happier than she ever had in her life—almost as if that was exactly what everything was supposed to be like. Then, despite her joy, unexpected tears filled her eyes.

Beside her, Brock rolled onto his side and propped his head up on his hand to gaze down at her. A frown crossed his lips. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Absolutely nothing," she drawled. "And absolutely everything. It was wonderful, and I didn't want it to stop."

"I know the feeling," he said, smiling again. "But I'm afraid we really need to get back to work before somebody decides he needs to talk to us."

"I suppose you're right." Sitting up, she grabbed her bra and put it back on. "But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Brock lay back, raised his hips and pulled his pants back into place. “I know *I* don’t.”
Beside him, Dakota reached for her shirt and slipped into it, saying, “I can’t believe I just did that.”

“I can,” he replied as he grabbed up his shirt and put it on. “That was probably the best experience of my life. I’m not even going to *try* not to believe it.”

“I know you probably won’t believe this, Brock, but I don’t act like that with men. It’s just that I can’t seem to resist you.”

“Lucky for me. Although, I’ve got to admit that the feeling’s mutual.”

Standing before the desk, Brock kept his gaze on her while she dressed. She liked the idea that he couldn’t resist her, either. And she liked the expression of disappointment that came to his face as she finished dressing. It made her feel desirable in a way no other man had ever made her feel.

With a slow shake of her head, she asked, “How am I ever going to concentrate on my new job if I have to work so closely with such a sexy man?”

“I don’t know, but I suppose we should at least try. Chayt’s counting on us.”

“I know. Tell you what. I’m going upstairs to take a quick shower and change my clothes. You can go ahead and go over the paperwork on the desk. Maybe you can come up with something I can use in my speech about the mining company tomorrow night.”

Opening the door, Dakota blew him a kiss. When she turned to leave, Jimmy Ray stood right outside the door. She gasped in surprise and slapped her hand over her chest.

“Damn it, Jimmy Ray!” she exclaimed. “I wish you’d quit sneaking around like that.”

“I didn’t sneak,” he said with a grin. “Johnson sent me over to tell you that they found the bullet—right outside the office window.”

Dakota’s face heated in embarrassment. “How long ago?”

“About ten minutes.”

“Good. Well,” she said, struggling to hide her nervousness that they might have been caught, “if you’ll excuse me, I need to do something. You can give all the details to Brock.”

And she brushed past Jimmy Ray, anxious to get away from the area as soon as she could.

Jimmy Ray laughed and entered the office. Brock glared at him. He never had liked Dakota’s ex-boyfriend, but he liked the man even less with each passing day. There was something about him that bothered Brock—and he didn’t doubt for a moment that it went further than Jimmy Ray’s past association with the woman he loved.

“So what did Johnson want you to tell us?” Brock asked as he dropped into Chayton’s desk chair. “And why isn’t he telling us himself?”

“Just that they found the bullet. And I don’t know why. They’re taking it to the lab so they can get a cross match on that rifle they found.”

“Nothing unexpected there. It’s perfectly routine police work.”

“Yep.” Without being asked, Jimmy Ray sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the desk. “So, what’s going on with you and Dakota?”

“Nothing that’s *your* business,” Brock snapped.

“I heard she’s taking over the campaign ‘til Chayton’s back on his feet.”

“She is.”

“Is that really a good idea under the circumstances?”

"What do you mean?" Brock asked.

"Well, a bunch of stuff has happened, you know. I mean Chayton getting shot isn't the first thing. I hear you and Dakota were shot at on the ridge, and of course, Dakota received a letter bomb in Vegas. She even tells me that you two met because she was being followed. It's not very safe for her to be campaigning, is it?"

"She'll have a police escort everywhere."

"As I see it, that hasn't worked very well so far."

"Now what do you mean?"

"Chayton. He had off-duty cops guarding his fund-raiser last night, and he still got shot."

Brock sat back in his chair. He hated to admit it, but Jimmy Ray was right. The police hadn't done much to stop the attempted assassination. And tomorrow night Dakota was meeting with a Lakota group to discuss the possibility of meeting the mining company halfway. That might not go across very well.

But before Brock could respond, Jimmy Ray said, "I think you should cancel that talk she's supposed to give tomorrow night."

"How did you know about that?" Brock demanded.

"I watch the news, Jones. She said in her interview that she was going to be giving a talk to the Lakota tomorrow night."

"As far as I know, she's still going. I can't tell her what to do, Stockton. I can only give her advice. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do before Dakota comes back."

Jimmy Ray rose and strode to the door, where he stopped and turned back to look at Brock. "By the way, maybe you should hire some more people to take care of her tomorrow night."

Anger surged through Brock. "Is that a threat, Stockton?"

"Nope. Just some advice."

"Well, thanks, but I don't need advice from a ranch hand. I'm perfectly capable of handling this by myself."

Brock glared at Jimmy Ray as he left. That was the most infuriating man he'd ever met, even worse than Romain. But the question was, why? Was it just because he was Dakota's ex-boyfriend? Or was there more behind his distrust of the man?

Startled by his thought, Brock straightened up in the chair. He hadn't considered it before. There was something about Jimmy Ray that he didn't trust, something that had nothing whatsoever to do with his own attraction to Dakota.

At first, he'd thought nothing of Jimmy Ray's being nearby whenever he himself had been with Dakota. He didn't like it, but he didn't think any harm was being done. Now he wasn't so sure Jimmy Ray was just jealous. Now he wondered if there was more behind the ranch hand's actions.

Deep in thought, Brock wandered out onto the front porch. Across the yard, Jimmy Ray disappeared into the stables. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary about that. Then he heard a noise to his left and turned to see what it was.

A uniformed policeman approached him with a pad of paper in his hand. Brock nodded once to acknowledge him as he strode up the steps. "Morning, officer."

"Good morning, sir. Mr. Jones, right?"

"That's right. It looks like you came for my statement."

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"Would you have a problem with my giving it out here on the porch? I've been cooped up in that office since early this morning, and I could use the fresh country air to clear my head."

"No problem."

Leading the officer to a small grouping of a table and four rustic, wooden chairs, Brock sat down and watched the officer sit across from him.

Officer Smith, as his nametag indicated, smiled as he glanced around. "It is kind of nice out here." He laid his notepad on the table and took a pen from his pocket. "You ready?"

Brock shrugged. "Sure, but I don't have much to contribute. Dakota and I were talking away from the crowd when the incident happened."

"So I've heard. Did you notice anything unusual just before the shooting?"

"Not a thing. Dakota was singing and ..."

"I hear she's really good, too," Smith interrupted. "She got rave reviews from the guests last night."

"She's *very* good," Brock agreed with a proud grin. "In fact, I'm trying to convince her to go professional. At least, that's what I was doing when her brother was shot."

"And you didn't notice anything at all out of the ordinary?"

"Nope."

"What about after the shooting? Did you notice anything then?"

Brock shook his head. "I wish I could say yes, but I didn't. All I could think of was getting Chayton to the hospital as soon as possible. We—Dakota and I—ran to the stage as soon as we realized what was going on. Then we took off to get his truck to take him to town."

"Why didn't you call 911?"

"Because Jeanette—that's his wife—said it would take too long for them to get there. I figured we could get him there faster if I drove."

"Why would you figure that?"

"I was an off-road racer in my youth, so I'm good at driving back roads at high speeds. I probably made better time than an ambulance could have."

"Probably. What about at the hospital? Did anything unusual happen there?"

"Nope."

"Then I guess all the guests were right. You can't add anything to the investigation."

"Not a thing. Dakota will be down in a few minutes. She wanted a shower. Do you want to wait for her statement, too?"

"I have to. Det. Johnson said not to leave until I had everybody's."

"Everybody's?" Brock repeated, confused by his terminology. "I thought you had everybody's but ours."

"There are two ranch hands I need to interview, too." He leafed through his notebook, then stopped and added, "I need to talk to Michael Longhorse and Jimmy Ray Stockton."

"I don't know Longhorse," Brock said, nodding toward the stables, "but Stockton just went into the stables over there."

A car door slamming drew Brock's attention toward the cars parked nearby. To his horror, Jimmy Ray started the motor of a truck and pulled out of a parking space.

"There goes Stockton now!" Brock exclaimed.

Smith scrambled from the table, knocking his chair over in his hurry to stop Jimmy

Ray. He waved his arm, and Jimmy Ray stopped his truck. Deciding it was better not to interfere, Brock stayed on the porch and watched while Smith rounded the truck and spoke to the driver. After only a couple of minutes, Smith stepped back, and Jimmy Ray drove down the driveway toward the road.

Curious as to why the officer let Jimmy Ray leave, Brock waited impatiently until Smith returned to the table then asked, "Why'd you let him go?"

"He had some important errands he needed to run for Mr. Grayeagle," Smith explained as he sat down again. "I agreed to wait until he got back for a more in-depth interview. In the meantime, I'll find Longhorse and interview him."

"You didn't make Stockton wait until after you questioned him?"

"I *did* question him. He said he wasn't on duty last night, so he wasn't even here. He spent the evening with his girlfriend—a lady named ..." Smith glanced at his notes. "Amanda Cross. Do you know her?"

Brock shook his head. "Are you going to check his alibi?"

"Of course. But first I'll talk to Miss Grayeagle and Longhorse. I don't want to have to come out here again."

"You know, I'm kind of curious about something. Are you part of the reservation police?"

"Rapid City. Why?"

"I just thought reservation police took care of matters that happened on the reservations."

"Usually, but Chayton Grayeagle is a politician. The res police will probably ask some questions, but they called us in this time. Apparently, they want all the resources we have downtown. Our labs are better staffed and better equipped."

"I suppose that makes sense. Is there anything else *I* can help you with?"

"Not if you can't offer me any more information than you already have."

"Then I'll tell Dakota you're here. Maybe she'll hurry so you can go about your business." Brock rose and gazed down at him with a friendly smile. "Can I get you something to drink while you're waiting?"

"I could sure use some water," Smith said.

"You've got it."

Twenty minutes later, Officer Smith left with no more information than he had the before he spoke to Dakota. No, she hadn't seen anything unusual either before or after the shooting. No, she hadn't seen Longhorse either at the barbeque or that morning. And, no, she didn't know of anybody who had a grudge against her brother.

As soon as he was gone, Dakota and Brock went to the kitchen for lunch. While she made the sandwiches, he sat across the counter from her.

"Tell me something, Dakota," he said soberly. "Do you know anything about Stockton's past?"

"Just from what he did when we were together," she admitted. "He drank a lot and took some drugs. That's why I eventually called off the relationship. I didn't feel that I could trust him."

"He said he spent the evening with girlfriend last night. Let's see." Brock paused a moment. "I think Smith said her name was Amanda Cross."

"Amanda Cross!" she exclaimed. "That's his sister, not his girlfriend. Are you sure you understood him correctly?"

"That's what Smith told me Stockton said."

"I haven't seen her in years, but she and Jimmy Ray didn't used to get along. In fact, they hadn't been on speaking terms for quite a while. They must have made up after he got his act together."

"I think we've got a big problem here, Dakota. Why would he tell Smith that she's his girlfriend if he didn't have anything to hide? It just doesn't make sense. Surely, Stockton knows they'll talk to her. Why make up a lie if it can be so easily verified?"

"When I knew her, she moved to Nebraska. She could have moved back, but it didn't sound like she wanted to."

"Well, something's going on. Of that, I'm *sure*. Maybe they're in cahoots. Or maybe he's threatening her. Or maybe he has some sort of hold over her—like she did something wrong—and he's threatening to rat on her."

"I don't know what it would be, but I suppose it's possible."

"Whatever it is, I hope the cops find out. I'm getting more and more suspicious of Stockton."

NINETEEN

“That’s what I was wondering,” Dakota said. “And do you know where I want to start checking on his possible involvement? With all the information on the mining company as we can find. That’s the only area of Chayt’s campaign that hasn’t checked out okay yet. I don’t know if Chayt thought of this or not yet, but I’m going to call the company president’s office and ask if they have an area liaison.”

Brock draped his arm around her shoulders as they returned to the office. “That’s a good idea. As far as I know, Chayt never asked that question. And it’s a logical assumption that they do. The only question is, is it somebody from *in* the area or somebody from their home office?”

“I’ll bet it’s *both*.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, as I see it, they probably sent somebody here to do the wheeling and dealing—to get the land. But they’d need somebody from the res to get the tribe’s attention and agreement.”

“Who would be the most likely candidate for that?”

“The most likely is Chayt, but he’s dead set against the idea. And look where it almost got him.”

“You, too,” Brock reminded her as they strode into the office. Closing the door behind them, he escorted her to the desk. As she sat in the executive chair, he dropped onto the straight chair beside it.

“Yeah,” she agreed as she thumbed through the papers in the file spread across the desk until she found a letterhead, “but that letter bomb was meant for Chayt. Here’s the address and phone number. I’m going to call it.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, laying his hand over hers to stop her from reaching for the phone. “Maybe that letter bomb was meant for you. Maybe whoever sent it to your address thought you might hand-deliver it. Maybe whoever sent it considered it a way to get you back to the ranch, knowing full well that Chayt would move more carefully if you were here.”

Dakota shook her head. “It would be much more likely that I would forward it to Chayt. Besides, I could easily have been killed instead of just injured.”

“What if it was deliberately made to have a minor impact? What if the sender knew enough to put just the right amount of explosive in it?”

“Don’t you think you’re going a little overboard, Brock? The letter was addressed to Chayt. Whoever sent it couldn’t have been sure that I would open it.”

“Unless that person knew you so well that he could predict such a thing.”

“But who could know me that well, Brock? I’ve been away from the res for a long time, and everybody changes over the years.”

“In some ways, maybe, but not in *all* ways. Basic instincts usually stay the same. If you’re a curious, efficient person deep inside, that’s exactly what you’re going to be forever—unless something drastic happens to change it. I may not have known you for

a long time, Dakota, but I can guarantee one thing: that describes you to a tee. You were curious as to what was in the letter, but you also wanted to make sure Chayton got it as quickly as possible if it was important. Whoever sent it could easily have known that. Do you remember where the post mark was from?"

"All I saw is a piece of envelope that had *part* of the postmark on it—just NE, which is Nebraska. It's not that far away from here, so anybody could have sent it—even Chayt."

"But I believe you told me somebody's sister moved to Nebraska. You know, now that I'm talking about this, it *could* have come from right around here. Maybe without much trouble"

"But anybody around here would know how to contact Chayt. They wouldn't need to send it through me."

"Which supports my theory that the person knew you would open it, get hurt, then come running home."

"Originally, I wasn't going to come home, remember?"

"You said so at the time, but I think you were planning it all along. You just wanted to heal first. That didn't count because you were still being followed. So you *did* come home. And who was one of the first people who knew you did?"

"Jeanette and Chayt."

"And Jimmy Ray Stockton. Don't you remember, Dakota? He came to the house the next morning and said that he'd heard you were home. We'd always just assumed that he'd heard it from Chayt, but what if he didn't? What if he knew it all along? We never even bothered to ask. And curiously, his sister lives in Nebraska."

Dakota leaned back in her chair and studied him for several seconds. He had a point. Jimmy Ray would know that she was a curious person, and he would also know that she was efficient in business matters. But what Brock didn't know was that Jimmy Ray had tried to get her to come back for two years after she'd left the ranch. And with Jimmy Ray's sister living in ...

"I'm going to make this phone call," she said, picking up her cellphone so she didn't have to pay long-distance charges. Tapping in the phone number shown on the letterhead, she waited for the phone to ring twice before it was picked up and answered by a pleasant, female voice. Dakota put the phone on speaker so Brock could hear. "Hello, my name is Dakota Grayeagle. Have I reached the office of the president of Lone Star Mining?"

"Yes, ma'am," she replied.

"Is he available to talk to me for a few minutes? I promise it won't take long."

"Actually, he's eating lunch right now."

"In the office?"

"Yes, but ..."

Dakota sighed in relief. "This is very important, ma'am. I'm calling from South Dakota, where Mr. Kramer is trying to acquire land for mining. It's essential that I speak with him as soon as possible."

"If you'll hold the line a minute, I'll see if he's willing to take your call."

"Thank you." Dakota turned toward Brock and smiled as she whispered, "Wish me luck."

"Luck," he replied with a lopsided grin.

A phone on the other end clicked, and a man's voice said, "This is Frank Kramer."

"Yes, Mr. Kramer," she said, suddenly nervous about what she was doing. "I understand that you've exchanged some correspondence with my brother, Chayton Grayeagle."

"As a matter of fact, I have. By the way, I heard about what happened on CNN this morning. How is he doing?"

"A little better today, thank you."

"What did you say *your* name is?"

"I'm sorry. I'm Dakota Grayeagle. Um, my brother's publicist introduced me to the press as Takchawee."

"Aw, yes. That name's so unusual it's easy to remember."

Although she was startled by his admission to remembering her name, she continued her conversation in a businesslike tone. "I'm trying to do some background checking on what's going on with your firm because I have to give a speech to a Lakota gathering tomorrow night. I was hoping you would give me some background information that Chayt doesn't seem to have."

"I can't tell you a lot, because I leave most of that in the hands of my attorney. He's in Rapid City right now if you want to contact him."

"That would be helpful. I also wondered if you have any local people in your employ."

"Just one—a man named Jimmy Ray Stockton. I'm using him as a liaison between the Lakota and my attorney."

So Brock had been right. Jimmy Ray was involved in this up to his scrawny, little neck. But she couldn't let Kramer know that she suspected Jimmy Ray was causing trouble. To hide it, she asked, "Could you give me the name of your attorney, Mr. Kramer? I'd love to speak with him."

Writing down the attorney's name, as well as the name of his hotel in Rapid City, on the letterhead, Dakota thanked Kramer for his time and disconnected the call. Then she turned her gaze to Brock and grinned.

"Think you're pretty smart right now, don't you," she said with a smile. "Jimmy Ray's involved deeply enough to be able to cause some serious trouble. Let's saddle up and see if we can talk to some of the other hands. I want to ask a few questions."

"Do you have some ideas?"

"*Oh*, yeah," she said as she rose.

Brock watched as Dakota made her phone call. He tried to concentrate on her words, but he couldn't. The hands they'd spoken to all said that Jimmy Ray had the night off the previous night—not a big deal—but they also claimed that Jimmy Ray had just disappeared the day he and Dakota made love on the ridge. Once they were away from the hands, Dakota had even admitted that Jimmy Ray was probably one of the best shots she knew.

"I'm fine, and Chayt's improving, thank you," Dakota said, her voice breaking through Brock's thoughts. "I hate to do this, Amanda, but I really need to keep this conversation short." Now she was calling Jimmy Ray's sister, who could confirm or deny that he was there last night. "Yeah, I know. It's been a *real* long time. I'm surprised you have the same phone number. I'm at Chayt's now, so maybe I'll swing down to

where you are. We should get together sometime.” When was she going to get to the important part? Brock wondered. Ah, apparently, now. “Amanda, it’s really important that you tell me the truth. Have you seen Jimmy Ray lately? ... Not for a couple of *weeks*? ... Okay. Well, I’d better let you go. ... I wish I could, but that will have to wait. ... Okay. Bye.”

Dakota hung up but said nothing. Brock slid his hand across her back, asking, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” She turned her gaze to his face, her dark eyes vividly displaying her concern. “Brock, Amanda hasn’t seen Jimmy Ray in a couple of weeks. He doesn’t have the alibi he thought he did, because Amanda has too many people who saw her. Oh, and she has no idea why he came to visit her the last time. All he said was he just wanted to see how she and her kids were doing. No other reason. I wonder if he’s the one who sent the letter bomb to me.”

“Could be. Now we need to come up with something to trap him, and we’ve *got* to do it with the cops here.”

“Trap him into what?” she asked realistically. “There’s no proof that he was *here*, either. And Jimmy Ray would never be stupid enough to leave his prints on that rifle.”

“Look, we know a lot of things about him. Granted, they’re circumstantial, but everything points to Stockton’s involvement in this whole thing. Let’s get the cops out here and see what they think.”

Dakota really hated what she was doing. It was deceitful and underhanded. It also bordered on being illegal. But what else could she do? She had to find out if Jimmy Ray had shot Chayton, if he’d been behind the letter bomb, if he’d seen her making love with Brock on the Badlands ridge.

A knock at the door startled her from her thoughts, and she stared at it. Her heart raced. The time had arrived. She had to go through with this to regain her life. Oddly, only now did she know she’d felt out of control since the moment in the restaurant when she’d realized she was being followed.

Pulling the door open, she stifled a cringe when she saw the lustful look on Jimmy Ray’s face. Unfortunately, the low-cut mini-skirted dress she’d borrowed from Jeanette had produced the exact effect she’d wanted. Judging from the look in his eyes, Jimmy Ray was interested in what he saw and would probably want to do more than have dinner with her.

“Well, hello,” he greeted in a seductive tone.

“Hi, Jimmy Ray,” she said, forcing her voice to remain calm despite the chill that ran through her.

“I’m glad you called,” he said as he passed her and went into the house. “I’ve been hoping you would want to be alone with me again.”

Dakota closed the door and led him into the living room. “I know. Now that Brock’s gone, I don’t have to feel guilty.”

“He’s gone?”

“Yeah. After everything that’s happened to me,” she explained as they sat down on the sofa, “I finally realized that I was only leaning on him to cope with it all. I told him it would be better if he went home and gave me some time to think.”

"So you called me instead."

"What can I say? I wanted to take a little private time to get to know each other again. I've had *enough* private time with Brock."

"Came on a little strong this morning, did he?" Jimmy Ray asked with a grin. "Can't say I'm not surprised. He can't seem to keep his hands off you. You don't know how hard it was for me to ..."

This could be the telling moment, Dakota thought. All she had to do was act like she didn't know what he was talking about—even though she pretty much figured it was about the incident on the ridge.

"Hard for you to what?" she asked.

"Let's just say, I know he put the moves on you more than once while he was here. I know of *two* times for sure."

Dakota forced surprise into her voice. "You *do*? How?"

"I suppose it's okay to tell you now that he's gone. I was worried about you, Dakota, so I watched you a couple of times. I saw what happened when you were up on the ridge. I mean, I walked up on you in the middle of everything."

Determined to get all the information she could, she asked, "Then why the hell didn't you stop that guy from shooting at us?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"If you were there, you *know* somebody was shooting at us. Why the hell didn't you stop the person?"

"For God's sake, Dakota! I wasn't *armed*. I couldn't help because I didn't have any way of doing it. All I could do was wait until it was all over."

"Yeah, right," Dakota said sarcastically. "And I suppose you didn't see who did it."

"I didn't."

"And you're saying you didn't *follow* us there?"

"I didn't that time."

"Well, you said you followed us a couple of times. When were those?"

"This morning for one. That's why I was surprised when you called and told me that you'd sent him packing."

"I can't believe you invaded my privacy like that."

"I was just trying to protect you, Dakota," he said. "I've been in love with you for years. All I've ever wanted was for you to come home so I could show you that I've changed."

"Then prove it to me now," she said, running her fingers through his long, dark hair. "Prove to me that you've changed by telling me how you knew we were at the ridge."

Bowing his head, he mumbled, "Oh, all right." Then he turned his pleading gaze back on her face. "I did follow you, okay? I wanted to see how close you two were."

"So you *knew* that a rattler almost got him. You *knew* he almost went over the ridge."

"Yeah, but you've got to understand, Dakota. I've loved you for a long time. I thought I'd *never* get you to come home so I could show you that I've changed."

Dakota stifled a gasp. Had Jimmy Ray been the one who sent her the letter bomb like she and Brock suspected? More importantly, could she get him to admit it? She had to be very careful if she did. Maybe it would be better if she changed the subject then eventually worked the letter bomb in later.

Choosing her words carefully, Dakota said, "I called Mr. Kramer this afternoon,

Jimmy Ray.”

Although he looked a bit surprised, he questioned her in a calm manner. “Who’s that?”

“You know, Jimmy Ray. He hired you, so you must know him.”

“I work for your brother, Dakota, not anybody by that name.”

“Sure you do. He’s the president of Lone Star Mining. He told me himself that you’re his Lakota liaison. I was really surprised, too, because I thought you agreed with Chayt about their coming into the area. Do you *really* think mining around here is a good thing?”

“Do you have any idea how many jobs it will give our people?” he asked.

“Do *you* have any idea how much land it will take *away*? I’ve gone over all the information, Jimmy Ray. And I’ve also talked to Mr. Kramer’s lawyer. I know he’s paying you a bundle to keep Chayt from blocking the deal. How can you do this when the Lakota want to get the Black Hills back? It was given to us when we signed the treaties, but it was confiscated by America when gold was found in them. How could you go against something so important to our people?”

“This isn’t about the Black Hills, Dakota.”

“I know. It’s about money. Would you like to hear what the lawyer told me this afternoon, Jimmy Ray? He was really surprised when I showed up at the hotel. He told me that you had assured him that everything was under control as far as Chayt was concerned, that Chayt wouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

“He must have misunderstood me. All I did was tell him that Chayton had been shot. I didn’t say anything about him not being a problem.”

“According to him, you told him this about eight o’clock last night. The press conference wasn’t until ten-thirty. How could you possibly have known what had happened two and a half hours before the announcement?”

“I was *here*,” Jimmy Ray snapped. “You just didn’t see me because you only had eyes for Jones.”

She rose and wandered to the stone fireplace. So Jimmy Ray had just admitted that he was at the ranch. That was good, but she knew it wasn’t enough. Somehow, she needed to get the gun in his hands.

“This is ridiculous, Jimmy Ray,” she said, gazing over at him. “We’re *way* off the subject. We were talking about the other day—on the ridge. How could you have let that person shoot at us?”

“How could I have stopped it?” he countered.

“I don’t know, but you could have tried. And another thing, as long as you want to show me that you’ve changed, tell me if you’re the one who went back to the ridge and got Chayt’s rifle.”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

Dakota stifled a shout of joy. That rifle hadn’t shown up at the house, then Chayton had been shot with it. Now Jimmy Ray admitted that he’d retrieved it from the ridge, as well as that he’d been at the ranch when Chayton was shot. But she had to find a different topic now, because Det. Johnson had called her and told her that the ballistics tests had been positive—Chayton had been shot with his own rifle. She didn’t care about the letter bomb or the shots at her and Brock. She had the important information. The police could get the rest from him.

“Well,” she said, “I guess I should thank you. That wasn’t Chayt’s best rifle, but it

was his favorite.”

At that moment, the phone rang, and Dakota excused herself to answer it. As planned, Brock had called to tell her if the police had what they needed. She followed their scheme, thanked the caller for notifying her, then hung up.

Turning toward Jimmy Ray, she said, “I’m sorry, Jimmy Ray, but I have to leave. That was the hospital, and Chayt wants to see me about something.”

“Do you want me to drive you?”

“No thanks. Apparently, he wants to discuss my speech tomorrow night.”

“All right.”

Rising, Jimmy Ray joined her then escorted her to the front door. When he opened it, Dakota stepped outside. Then, just as he stepped out as well, two uniformed policemen blocked his exit. Almost immediately, one began reading him his rights. The moment they did, Jimmy Ray bolted back into the house. After only three paces into the foyer, two more plainclothes policemen stopped him by grabbing his arms. One of the plainclothesmen handcuffed him and informed him that he was under arrest for attempted murder. Then the uniformed officer finished his Miranda rights.

As the police took Jimmy Ray to the awaiting squad car, Brock joined Dakota on the porch. Sliding his arm around her, he said, “I guess now we can tell Chayt that they have the suspect in custody.”

“Not to mention that we have other evidence that will give some credence to the circumstantial evidence that’s already come to light,” Johnson added. “He wasn’t with his *girlfriend* last night, or with his sister. And I got in touch with the Vegas police. Apparently, Stockton’s been in trouble before, because his prints are on file here. They’re also on a piece of the letter bomb, which connects him to that, as well.”

“I don’t suppose you can connect him to shooting at us on the ridge,” Brock said hopefully.

“Not yet, but maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll fess. I think you two are safe now—and so is Mr. Grayeagle.”

“That’s one message I can’t wait to deliver,” Dakota said as she gazed over at Brock adoringly. “Do you want to help me?”

“I’d love to,” he agreed.

Dakota snuggled against Brock in bed. After they returned from the hospital, they’d celebrated their freedom from Jimmy Ray by making love again. Now she felt she should say something she’d realized on the drive to the hospital that night.

But Brock spoke before she had a chance. “Do you remember when I asked you what you would do if you just woke up one morning and said, ‘When the hell did I fall in love?’”

“That’s almost exactly what I was just going to ask you!” she exclaimed.

“It was?”

“Yeah. I was going to say that it suddenly hit me in the car on the way to the hospital. I looked over at you and wondered when the hell I’d fallen in love with you.”

“You fell in love with me?” he asked in amazement.

“Surely, you saw it coming.”

“I didn’t even see *my* falling in love with *you* coming. How could I see you falling in

love with me?"

"But after what I said this morning, ..."

"I know. We kind of skirted the issue, though. We never actually said it was a given—neither one of us." He paused to hug her and kiss her hair. "So what do you think, Takchawee? Are you one of those Indians who wants to keep your blood as pure as possible?"

"I want to be with a man I love. I don't care what color he is."

"Then let me ask you an important question. *Tawicu icu miye hwo?*"

Dakota's heart nearly burst with joy. He loved her enough to take the time to learn how to ask her to marry him in her ancestors' language. With a smile, she lifted her head and gazed down at him. "There's only one way I can respond to a question like that. *Han.*"

"I already asked Chayt, so I know that means yes. Now all I need to know is should we do it before or after we launch your new careers?"

"Do you really think I should do both music and acting?" she asked, only beginning to believe she could do so much for the Indian movement that way.

"You can do anything you want to, Takchawee," he declared. "But I'm warning you, if you marry me, one year from now, you're going to be a celebrity who has to fight off all the *paparazzi*. If you marry me six months from now, you could have the same problem. I fully intend to make you a star, Takchawee. And you covering for Chayton's only the start of it."

With a sigh of resignation, she cuddled closer to him and trailed her fingertips through the hair on his chest. "I guess I'll just have to get used to the idea of a big wedding bash with the whole world knowing about it."

"Then you'll let me direct your career?"

"I have a feeling you'll make *all* of my dreams come true, Brock—a happy marriage, beautiful children, and helping the American Indians come out of poverty by doing it with something I love as much as I love you."