

# The Still Sexy Ladies Guide to Dating Immortals Hawk's Rayne

By

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to my best friend, Kara. Thanks for being there with me almost every single step of the way. For the last second edits, the long movies, late night phone calls, and helping me flesh out Rayne and Flint. We have dessert night coming up soon!

To my mom for not freaking out when she saw the "good" parts.

To my hubby and kids for letting mom work at all hours, picking up the slack, and for supporting my efforts.

Rae, you're a doll! Jenny thanks for the help!

~~Donica ~~

#### **PROLOGUE**

Northeastern Territory Summer 1609

A lone red-tailed hawk circled lazily in the bright sun warmed sky. It seemed to watch over the People as they worked below. Some hunted; others cleaned or practiced their skills with hunting instruments. Slowly the hawk descended from the sky to land in a stand of trees. From where the hawk had landed, a man moved from the grove and walked out among the people of the village. He called out greetings as he passed the lodges that served as their homes.

The shaman entered his wigwam and sat down crossed legged near the fire. Reaching out, he placed his herbs on the mound of wood, the flames greedily licking up the dried bundle. A sweet scent filled the air and the shaman deepened his breathing and slowed his heart rate allowing his body to relax as the images filled his mind for his trance: the vision confused and unnerved him. Pale skinned strangers, some with hair of sunshine, others of earthen tones, a few with fire hair, were entering the land; none resembled the People. A sense of foreboding swooped in like clouds before a storm. The trance slowly dissipated and he feared what the future would hold for his people.

~ \* ~

New York 1818

The People were being herded from their lands; overhead a hawk emitted a shrill cry. Several of them glanced skyward captured by the aerial performance of the bird.

The hawk soared above the People as they were forcibly moved from the land that had been their home for longer than any could recall. The unhappiness felt by each member was evident in the droop of their shoulder and plodding step of each moccasin that could be felt as strongly as the hot summer air. The hawk circled to the earth, landing with outstretched wings. Once landed the sleek feathered body grew taller, feathers morphing into bronzed skin, taking the shape of a man. He watched as, dispirited and defeated, the People disappeared from sight.

~ \* ~

Georgia, winter 1839

The hawk circled above the long column of people trudging forward, prodded on by mounted soldiers. Cold, tired, hungry and solemn, where there had once been many, sickness brought on by the

forced marched had slowly killed them.

Taking to land, the hawk transformed into a man. He stood to the side, the biting wind whipping his hair and clothing around him. He'd known this time was inevitable; still, his soul ached deeply. A lone tear slipped down his cheek and froze in place as he was smothered with feelings of loss and pain for having to leave behind the only life they'd ever known.

~ \* ~

New York, 2004

Rayne Amitola arrived by cab at Callahan's. She was supposed to be meeting the girls at seven, but thanks to a last minute phone call at the office, she was almost forty-five minutes late. She jumped out of the cab and had to duck as a hawk swooped low over her head and landed in a tree. It struck her as odd; she couldn't recall noticing a hawk in the city before. She shrugged it off; there were many things she'd been too busy to notice lately. She hurried to the door and entering the bar in searched for the girls.

The glorious red mop of Mona Nichols curly hair stood out in the crowded room. She and the rest of the girls were seated at a large round table near the back of the bar.

"Sorry I'm late," she apologized. "Strawberry margarita, please." She ordered from the waiter.

"Nice to see you finally made it," Holly Tate teased.

Drink in hand; she relaxed into the seat allowing the conversation to wash over her; reveling in the soothing atmosphere her friends provided. It was Friday night, the beginning of the long anticipated weekend.

"Anyone had any luck with the dating thing lately?" Mona piped up.

Dating was not the topic on the top of Rayne's list. There really weren't any good, single males left interested in single women over twenty-five unless you had more money than "The Donald". And if you had that kind of money, did you really need a guy?

Holly ordered another round and slid a chip into her mouth. "You know what the problem is? These men are beneath us."

"What?" Isabella Girarardi sloshed her blue martini onto the table.

"Excuse me?" Karri Rhodes snapped her breadstick in two.

Mona raised a hand. "Holly's right. Look at us; we're single," she sipped her chocolate martini, "we're definitely sexy, yet, the guys we meet aren't worth the time of day."

Rayne's drinks were going down far too easily causing warmth to gather in her stomach and her

brain to fuzz over. "So what you're saying is we're screwed."

Mona smiled, picked up her drink and finished it off in one swallow. She knew her friends were as tired of the single life as she was. They all wanted someone to share the good days with, complain to over the bad.

"We just need to set higher standards for ourselves."

"The man doesn't exist that meets my standards," Isabella confided.

"Who said I was talking about mortal men?" Mona watched their expressions.

"Umm, excuse me again, but huh?" Karri said

"I think someone has had one drink too many," Rayne added.

"Last time I checked, mortal men were all we had to choose from," Holly spoke, her glass held in midair.

"Is there anything but mortals?" Isabella chuckled.

Mona paused long enough for the waiter to distribute the next round and leave. "The immortals are another option." She watched as Holly choked on her seven and seven.

Isabella snorted indelicately. "Pretend men?"

"Immortals? Examples, please." Karri piped up.

"You know; immortals- vampires, werewolves- that sort of thing." Mona explained.

Rayne shook her head in an effort to remove the fog. "You've got to be kidding. That's it, no more drinks for Mona." She looked off at the crowd. "Gran used to tell us stories about a shape shifting shaman. I swear, she believed it was true."

"A good example," Mona smiled, "I grew up on tales of faerie folk and elves. We've all heard or seen stories about immortals."

"And what are we supposed to do, climb Mt. Olympus in search of a god?" Isabella shot back

"Not exactly, we can find places here." Mona defended.

Rayne looked at Mona closely. "Hold the phone, guys, I think she's serious!" She shook her head in disbelief.

"Look at it this way, we've been knocking ourselves out on the wrong guys; maybe it's time we start looking at the ones worthy of us." Holly's eyes gleamed wickedly.

"Now there are *two* of them." Groaned ice-water-Isabella.

"What can it hurt?" Karri asked.

"What the hell, why not?" Rayne smiled and winked at Karri.

"I still think you all need to put the drinks down and tomorrow, if you still consider this, sign up for sessions with a good shrink." Isabella glared at them.

"Come on, Bella, there's no harm in it," Mona wheedled.

Isabella was sure they'd all gone over the edge. A thought snaked its way into her mind of a hunk of muscles she'd seen on Charmed. She surely must be toasted. "I guess it couldn't hurt." She agreed reluctantly.

"Another one? You never drink this much." Karri said as Rayne ordered again. When it arrived, Rayne took the middle glass and sucked down the drink.

"Been a long week," she slurred drunkenly. She finished and watched the world swirl in a hazy fog.

Rayne awoke late Saturday morning; the sun that managed to sneak around her room darkening curtains sliced into her head. She'd never drunk as much as she had the night before; the hangover would make her useless for the rest of the day. "I'll never do it again." She promised herself.

She stretched lazily in the bed and rolled over to look at the clock on the nightstand. This was the first time she'd slept past ten a.m. in years. The ringing of the phone jarred her senses and shot an agonizing pain through her head.

"Hello?" She gritted out in a voice as loud as she dared.

"Rayne? What's wrong, are you sick?" Dian Amitola's worried voice came across the line.

"No Ma, just tired is all."

"Good, are you still going to drive down for lunch tomorrow? The family is going to be here."

Great, just what she needed, an entire day surrounded by well meaning interfering people asking her when she was going to settle down, get married and raise a bunch of kids. "I don't know Ma, I've got a lot going on right now."

"Why do you always do this? You put your family last all the time. Family should be your first priority, not something you just dismiss as unimportant."

And so it begins, Rayne thought. "Look Ma, I'll be there if I can. I miss you and Dad." She felt herself wavering. "What time?"

"Noon, but you could drive out tonight and spend the day with us."

Rayne heard, "Maybe even come to church", though her mom didn't say it. She had nothing against religion as a whole, and church wasn't a bad thing, but it didn't fit her life. It made her feel like a hypocrite. "I don't know Ma, I'll try and make it for lunch, but don't plan on me coming in tonight."

"All right, we'll see you tomorrow." Her mom's disappointment was barely suppressed. "We love you."

"Love to you and Dad too. Bye." Nothing like a hangover and a good dose of guilt to start her day.

She dressed in her work out gear. Today, she'd skip the gym and take a run through the park. She left the apartment, took the three flights of stairs to the lobby and headed out the door for the park.

The smell of the flowers blooming lingered in the hot summer air. The bold greens of the trees stood out against the bright blue of the sky; hundreds of blossoms in a myriad of colors accented the

lovely lush green grass. As she jogged under a large tree, the large red tailed hawk perched on the branch caught her eye.

"Well now, are you following me?" The bird watched her in unblinking interest. "At last, my prince has come." She laughed remembering the conversation from the night before.

Realizing how foolish she must look talking to a bird, she moved out from under the tree and resumed her jogging. She pushed the memory of the previous night from her mind and pulled her upcoming presentation to the forefront.

The Bina Company was launching a new perfume, Jobina, and she felt sure she had organized the perfect ad campaign. She would pitch it Monday morning and, if her boss accepted it, present it to the company representatives.

She collided with another jogger bringing her attention back to the present. "Oh, I'm sorry." Dark eyes of the man she'd run into captured her own in their depths.

Flint Kestrel smiled down at the lovely woman he held in his arms. "Not a problem, really." She was lovely, and he felt the electric current from his fingertips course up his arms and searing into his soul.

Rayne felt a tingling sensation from the fingers holding her arms, and wondered at it. He wasn't holding her tight, by any means, and she couldn't explain it. Finally, she pulled free of his grasp. "Again, I'm sorry." She apologized, leaving him standing as she sprinted away.

Flint watched her and smiled deeply. This was the woman he searched for, he was certain. "We'll be meeting again." He promised them both.

Returning to her apartment, she headed straight to the bathroom to shower. The water removed sweat, grime, and the remnants of her hangover.

Next stop-the kitchen; she was far from being on her schedule. Instead of breakfast, she was now in search of lunch. She pulled out a container of vanilla yogurt, fresh berries and put it into a bowl. She sprinkled some granola over the top and sat down to enjoy lunch. She did the dishes, tidied up the apartment, and then relaxed onto the sofa. It was after five p.m. by the time she was finished.

She could now immerse herself in the monthly tradition of pampering herself silly. She returned to the bathroom; filled her whirlpool tub with hot water, turned on the jets and allowed the water to swirl about her tired muscles until she felt her batteries beginning to recharge. Turning off the jets, she released some of the water, refilled the tub and added the silky cream of her signature rose scented bubble bath under the tap.

The bubbles lathered around her; she shut off the water and relaxed into the water. She felt the tensions of her world melt away. Thirty minutes of relaxation had her looking like a prune.

She stood, draining the tub and rinsing the bubbles from her skin, washed her hair, shaved her legs, and finally, shut off the water. These monthly sessions spiked her hot water bill, but it was well worth the cost to feel brand new.

The mirrors were coated with steam so she flipped on the fan. Slathering the coordinating rose scented lotion on her water droplet covered skin; she waited the two minutes it took for the moisture to absorb into her skin and briskly toweled her hair. She blotted the lotion and little remaining water from her body, pulled on the bra and panty set in tonight's color choice, turquoise. She grabbed the blow dryer to begin care of her hair, pulling a vent brush through her waist length black hair. Satisfied in the reflection, she left the bathroom.

Going to the large walk in closet in her bedroom, she pushed past the Liz Claiborne and Laura Ashley suits and found her Lee faded wash jeans and the turquoise handkerchief blouse. She laid the outfit on the bed and moved to her dressing table. She pulled out her manicure implements, carefully removing all traces of the old polish, buffing and fixing her nails, then applying the turquoise nail polish in light layers. She dried them under the nail dryer she'd received as a Christmas gift. Once her nails were dried, she polished her toenails in the same shade.

She pulled on the jeans, admiring the way they fit like a second skin, accenting her carefully sculpted body. Next, she slipped on the silky blouse knotting the turquoise and silver satin belt at her waist. She went to the closet and pulled out her strappy turquoise mules and slid them on.

Rayne carefully lined her eyes with the black kohl liner; applied turquoise and white shadows to her lids and brick red blush to the apples of her cheeks. Lining her lips, she filled them in with the brick red lipstick and a clear coat of gloss. A turquoise and silver necklace, earrings, bracelet, and watch set completed the outfit. She turned and smiled at the finished product reflected in the mirror.

All her basic essentials transferred into a snakeskin look cloth handbag. Almost to the door, she laughed at the memory of the first time her best friend LeeAnn had witnessed this routine. They'd argued; Rayne adamantly denying she had a secret date, Lee believing she was keeping a secret from her. Her wacky friend had gone so far as to show up at the restaurant convinced she'd catch Rayne with a man; the look of shock at finding her completely dateless had been a true Kodak moment.

Tonight, she'd try the newest Mexican restaurant in town, El Mariachi. She hailed a cab. Having your own car was nice but the great thing about living in the city was you didn't have to have one. At

the restaurant, she paid the fare and got out. Inside, she followed the hostess to a table in the back of the room, near to the bar, but far enough to be out of the path of the traffic.

Taking the menu, she looked over the offerings. Tonight, as with all her pamper-me-silly nights, would be complete no-guilt self-indulgence. She could order the most fattening, delectable appetizers, entrees and desserts with no one to criticize or question. Her many hours at exercise made it all possible. She nibbled on the salsa and chips as she decided what to order; everything on the menu sounded wonderful. Finally, she decided on three cheese-mounded enchiladas, with a ton of sour cream, and a strawberry margarita. She enjoyed each fabulous bite. She snagged the passing waiter and ordered the sopiapillas praying they'd be as good as she remembered from childhood. She wasn't disappointed when the large platter containing the deep golden fried rectangles of dough and the bottle of honey arrived. She bit off the corner and filled the cavernous insides with as much honey as would fit.

She turned her focus to the ridiculous conversation from the girl's night. She couldn't prevent the image of the Shaman from filling her mind. She could almost smell his musky scent, see his collar length raven's wing black hair and imagine twining its silkiness in her fingers. Imagining him standing in the wigwam, the only thing between him and nakedness was the scant breechcloth. He stood near the fire pit, his well-muscled arms reaching out to her, his brown eyes darkening to obsidian with desire. She moved into his strong embrace and was folded tightly against his broad chest. A blush crept up her neck and stained her cheeks from the build of desire she felt mounting for him. It was ridiculous to desire a man who didn't exist. She had to shake her head twice to realize the eyes she'd imagined looking back at her across the table belonged to a flesh and blood man.

He was really there; her fantasy man was standing beside her table watching her. The margarita must've been stronger than she thought. "Can I help you?" She felt foolish for speaking to a man only she could see, but she couldn't help it.

~ \* ~

Flint smiled, as he got ready for the evening. Finally, after centuries of searching, he'd meet herthe woman he needed to accomplish his goal. She didn't know it yet but her life was in for a major
change. He removed every trace of the oil paint from his fingers, combed his hair, and pulled on a navy
t-shirt and khakis. He combed his hair and concentrated on the woman. Even now, she was heading to
the restaurant to spend the evening alone.

He arrived at the restaurant and while waiting for the hostess, scanned the main room for a sign

"Welcome to El Mariachi, sir. I can seat you now." The dark haired woman spoke with a slight Spanish accent and smiled at him.

"Could I have a seat in the back, please?" Following the hostess to a small table in the back, his eyes surveyed the room spying the beautiful young woman sitting alone at a table near his. He was seated at was at an angle so he could watch her without being obvious. The turquoise of her blouse made her golden skin glow.

He sipped an iced tea as he alternately looked over the menu and watched the woman. She was what he was interested in, not food. Finally, he ordered a beef fajita and returned to observing her as he waited on his order. Their food arrived almost at the same time and he was able to enjoy watching her take small conservative bites as he devoured his own. Her eye shadow, fingernails and toenails were all the same bold shade as her blouse and, curiously, he found this quirk more than a little interesting. He admired the well-defined eyebrows arched delicately over her large brown eyes, the colors of the shadows making them pop. He watched as a far away look came over her face and he was mesmerized when a secretive, almost seductive smile played on her lips. He licked his own lips in unconscious response.

A blush slowly crept its way up her neck. He chuckled at how the blush was unlike any he'd seen before. Her neck started out a sort of blotched pinky shade and slowly deepened to a dark red. The apples of her cheeks blotched a pink tint and deepened to a dark red. Her forehead assumed two small blotches that spread like ink on silk from the pink to the red. He wondered what she thought about to cause such a reaction. He worked up his courage to speak to the woman but when he arrived at her table felt uncertain for the first time in his life. What would he say? Unable to find the words, he stood beside the table looking like a silly high school boy. He hadn't realized he'd been standing there for a while until she spoke.

"Can I help you?"

Her melodious voice sang inside him. "I was going to ask if I could join you for dessert but it looks like I'm too late."

He watched her smile and the entire building seemed five hundred watts brighter. "Since I missed dessert, how about a drink?" *And a good night kiss* his hormones prompted.

"That's very kind of you Mr.?"

He felt ridiculous; how could he have failed to properly introduce himself? "Kestrel. Flint

Kestrel."

He informed her and extended his hand. When he clasped her smaller one, the lightening bolts sparked again. Her widening eyes and "O" circled mouth indicated she'd felt it too.

The minute his hand took hers she felt the electricity sliver its way up her arm. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Kestrel. My name is Brandy, Brandy Toliver." Her hand clutched his. She'd used the alias enough to be able to recognize it if they ever met again. A funny pained sensation entered her chest as she lied.

He noted a slight flush and strange look in her eye when she introduced herself but he didn't comment on it. "Brandy, would you like to join me for a night cap?"

"I'm sorry, I was just about to call it a night."

He watched as she continued to look at him.

"Have we met before?"

He smiled. "You almost ran me over this morning in the park." The fascinating blush returned as recognition zinged in her eyes.

"Oh! I really am sorry now, I think I owe you something for almost barreling you down."

He chuckled deeply. "I doubt you could have 'barreled me down'." The idea of her petite form doing any serious damage to anyone larger than a small dog was preposterous.

Her silky laughter mingled with his. "I guess it would be hard for me to knock you over anyway."

"Are you sure I can't change your mind, Brandy?"

She shook her head and pushed her chair out. Picking up the bill, she moved to leave him behind. "Maybe another time."

"Can I have your phone number?" .

She paused for longer than he'd hoped and shook her head again. "Sorry, I don't give my number to strangers. Maybe we'll run into each other again some day."

"I'm sure of it." He murmured under his breath. He watched as she swayed out of the room. Flint smiled as he left the restaurant. Now he knew her name, and it wouldn't be soon enough he'd see her again.

~ \* ~

She hefted a sigh as she left the room to pay her bill. Leaving the restaurant she moved outside; the night had cooled slightly, and in the gentle summer breeze that made the leaves dance on the tree

limbs, she waited on the cab.

~ \* ~

She changed and went to bed. A mist engulfed her, transporting her to a lush green field. In the distance, the sun sparkled on the water.

He took her into his arms and kissed her, his tongue tracing the outline of her lips. She opened her mouth and he dipped his tongue in. As they kissed, his hand trailed down her chest, opening the buttons of her blouse. He pushed it open and placed his hand on her breast. It perked beneath his hand and she moaned aloud. He slid the material from her shoulders and removed the pink lace bra she wore underneath. His mouth trailed fire down her breastbone and her knees buckled. She collapsed against him and he pressed her to the ground.

A shrill birdcall ripped the sky and refused to cease. She looked and saw it sitting above her head; it's red eyes showing the numbers five thirty.

"Crap." She groaned and shut off the alarm clock.

#### CHAPTER TWO

Rayne rose early on Sunday morning to prepare for her drive to her parents' home. She'd passed a fitful night, her dreams waking her and leaving her body tingling and longing for the satisfaction promised by the dream lover. She forced herself out of bed and moved to dress for the day. She chose white denim shorts and a turquoise t-shirt. After making sure she looked fifty times better than she felt, she moved down to the parking garage and started the forty minute drive to her family home.

Schooling herself in patience, she made a silent vow that no matter what, she wouldn't get into a row with her family. They were a large, loud, loving group of people with their hearts in the right places but their noses firmly entrenched in her life.

Her mother's favorite past time was pressuring her about the fact she'd chosen career over marriage and family, turning her back on her duty to become a wife and mother.

Cadence, her baby sister, had married only five years ago and was living the life their mother truly believed Rayne should follow. Cadence was a stay at home mom, June Cleaver minus the pearls, with two boys aged four and three, a girl aged two and another baby due in only two short months.

"Sister Perfect" baked, was a member of all the right clubs and researched their Native American past in a firm belief her children should grow up proud of who they were and where they came from all while raising her children and keeping her husband happy. It made her tired to think of all she managed to accomplish.

When Rayne had argued she didn't want to give up her career, her mother had thrown up her sister-in-law, Lacey. Married to her brother J.D., she juggled raising twin seven month olds, a boy Jett and daughter Payton, with a career as an intensive care nurse.

Given the fact the Amitola's already had five, soon to be six, grandchildren to focus on, the scurry of rugrats beneath their feet should be plenty, but still, they clamored for more.

Rayne had reached an impasse with them and now she tried not to argue, simply nod noncommittally, and then deftly change the subject. It worked only about twenty five percent of the time but it was better than leaving the house after every visit with an ulcer.

She pulled onto the long gravel drive that led to her parents home, the house where she'd grown up. It was a large log cabin home with a wrap around cedar porch. There was a bay window that looked out into the west where they could watch the sunset every night. A brown wooden porch swing hung by

a copper chain from hooks near the front door. The sidewalk that led to the porch was guarded by her mother's well-tended rose garden. The roses were arranged to open in a multitude of shades that made up a rainbow. The fragrances mingled in a pleasant almost intoxicating manner. Off to the right, the new experimental roses were planted; on the other side grew the old world roses that had been imported from all over the globe. Situated in the middle of the old world roses was a river stone path wending its way into the depths of the garden and emerging at a cedar gazebo. On a hill, behind the house, was a small patch of protected forest where wildlife had returned and a myriad of animals now made their homes.

It was in this small patch of trees their father had taught his children to track and identify different tracks they uncovered. J.D. had been an adept tracker; able to identify every print they came across. Cadence had mastered tracking and bird identification. But Rayne had been able to name birds simply by their calls and on the wing.

She parked near the garage and headed up the porch entering the front door, which opened onto the large main room. Since the kids had grown and moved out on their own, her parents had remodeled the home; removing walls to open up bedrooms, the great room and a stair well that led to the master suite in the loft. The decor was modern age meets wikkiup. They had hand hewn log furniture with soft overstuffed cushions in a geometric print. A matching love seat and rocking recliner sat across the room. The blond hard wood floors were dotted with hand woven Native American rugs and there were old Indian blankets tossed over the furniture. A large stone fireplace covered the north wall: a big screen television with its twenty first century technology, satellite receiver, DVD player and surround sound home stereo system sat on a carefully handcrafted cedar entertainment stand covering the east wall. The kitchen was on the south wall hidden behind swinging saloon styled doors. Glass French doors led out onto a large deck.

The smell of pot roast filled the house and mingled wonderfully with the smell of home baked apple and pecan pies. If her mother were true to form, there would also be a butter yellow cake with chocolate fudge poured over the top to make the icing.

Her stomach rumbled with longing as she strolled out the French doors onto the deck. On the ground below, the older kids chased each other around the playground equipment her parents had installed after the birth of their first grandchild. There were slides, tunnels, swing, and a sandbox to keep them occupied. She moved her gaze down the well-manicured lawn, the lush green grass reminiscent of a park. The twins napped on a blanket near the adults sitting on chairs in a ragged circle.

Her heart gave a small hitch and she had an unfamiliar longing to have a man standing beside her sharing the restful happy scene with her.

Her father spied her and waved her down as he bellowed out a greeting. "Time to face the firing squad."

She descended the deck steps to join them on the lawn. "Hi Daddy."

"Glad to see you could make it, Hun." Ray Amitola pulled her into one of his trademark bear hugs.

"Hello, Smudge." Her brother hugged her next.

"Hey Dork, how's the dad?" She laughed at him.

"He's great as long as I don't ask him to change any diapers," Lacey quipped.

Cadence, her brother-in-law Jeff, and then her mother followed suit in hugs and greetings. She moved gracefully around the circle and almost made it into a chair when baby Payton woke, crying. She reached down and picked her up hoping to avoid a full-scale yowl fest. "Hello Pay-Pay. How are you?"

"You need one of those." Her mother smiled.

"Ding, ding round one commences." Rayne thought tiredly. She'd lulled herself into a false sense of preparedness; she really wasn't ready for a battle of wits with her mother. Before she could say anything a chorus of "Auntie Rayne", preceded an attack of arms and legs resembling an octopus. She hugged and kissed every niece and nephew.

"EW! Who let the monkeys out?" She laughed passing the baby to her brother so she could wrestle with the kids. "How are the monsters?" She asked between breaths.

"Tired", "Hungry", and "I want to go swimming" garbled together in reply.

"No swimming right now." Cadence answered as she maneuvered into the ruckus. "Let Auntie Rayne up off the ground."

"I still say you need one of those." Dian informed her oldest daughter when the children had found something else to occupy their attention.

"There are enough kids around here Ma. I'm hungry." She tried to change the subject.

"It should be ready. Let's eat." She called out to the group.

Rayne followed the family back into the house. Once inside, the normally large room seemed to close in on her. The family filled it with happy voices and smiles. They formed a loose line and moved through the kitchen filling plates and glasses. Her mother had set up a child sized card table and chairs for the kids while the adults sat on benches around the large trestle table.

Rayne breathed a mental sigh of relief as the conversation avoided landing on her lack of a love life and centered on the babies and Cadence's recent doctor's visit. J.D. and Lacey updated them on their jobs and the twins' activities. They were beginning to roll over and push themselves up. They gurgled and cooed whenever talked to, a sure sign of intelligence.

After they finished the meal, food was wrapped to send home with kids and the dishes done, her father pulled out the deck of Uno cards.

"We could play guys versus the girls." Cadence offered then looked at Rayne. "Oh, we'd be a player short."

"Ding, ding round two." Rayne thought.

"You could sit out."

Rayne smiled at her sister. "Actually, you guys go ahead. I have to head back to the city anyway." She moved to leave the room.

Dian shot Cadence a quelling look. "You only just got here. Stay a while longer."

"I really can't, Ma. I've got to make sure the presentation is ready for tomorrow. I should get some rest while I've got the chance. Once I land this account, my spare time will be in short supply."

She grabbed Cadence to show there were no hard feelings. "Call me about coming out and doing some shopping."

"I will." Cadence promised.

Rayne left the kitchen and moved to the front door, her every step dogged by her mother. "Bye kids!" She shouted to the small herd gathered in front of a Disney DVD.

"I don't want you to go away mad."

"I'm not, Ma. I'm just going away." She laughed at her own weak attempt at humor. "Honest, I've got things I need to take care of at home." She hugged her mother tightly, opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight. "Keep your fingers crossed. If I land this account, it will be a huge feather in my cap."

"Fingers are crossed, and call me soon!" Her mother called as Rayne got into her car.

"Winner and still champion." She spoke to her reflection in the rear view mirror. She made the trip into the city and arrived early enough to hit Kresslers. She'd earned a reward for the day on her best behavior. She parked near the entrance and headed for the professional apparel department. She walked passed the traditional gray, navy, and black business suits and moved into the rainbow near the back of the department. She spied a beautiful linen suit; it had crisp lines, satin-coated buttons and satin trim

piping in a circled pattern on the breast lapels of the jacket. Its only downfall was the color, a delightful sunshine yellow that would have made her appear sallow and ill. She walked around the four way and spied it in a rich, deep burgundy.

Grabbing the suit she headed for the fitting rooms, stopping only long enough to find a pale pink, almost white silk shell. She went into the room and tried it on. It was perfect! It accented her figure, and the color made her copper skin seem a deeper tan. She put it back on the hanger and headed to the check out.

On her way to the check out counter, she ran through her shoe wardrobe. She had decided her black patent leather pumps would be a great accessory when the shoe department called out to her. She spied a pair of burgundy pumps with a crisscross lacing design on the toe that ended in a simple bow; sitting next to the pumps was a matching handbag.

She held the suit above the set and found they matched as if from the same dye lot. Giving into the vain whim, she decided to add them to her purchase.

She finished the transaction and moved out into the parking lot, a triumphant smile on her lips. Whoever said retail therapy cured all ills was right on the money.

She hurried back to the apartment and hung her purchases in the closet. She'd wear the suit tomorrow; it was sure to be the finishing touch on the package.

She went into the bathroom to remove her make up and change from her denim shorts to a comfortable t-shirt and lounge shorts. After the ritual was complete, she passed the answering machine and spied the red light blinking. Pressing it, she listened to the messages.

One wrong number, one hang up, and then her best friend LeeAnn's voice called over the air. "Ola Chicka, I know you're supposed to be at your parents' house but I had to call. I'm so bored!" She sighed dramatically. "Call me and let's do something."

LeeAnn Tompkins, life long best friend and dramaticist extraordinaire. She never stopped buzzing or moving, and she was to be counted on for lifting spirits, credit card bills and egos. She dialed Lee's number and waited the two rings before she heard her friend's voice.

"Hey butthead." Lee's laughter floated in her ear.

"Caller ID is truly a wonderful thing. What's going on with you?"

"Not a whole lot here. I haven't talked to you in a couple of days. How'd the visit with the folks go?"

"I won both rounds."

"Only two? You got off easy, my friend. What punches did you have to bob and weave around this time?"

"Round one began when I picked up Payton and before I could pass her off to someone else Ma started with her 'you need a baby' kick".

"Yikes."

"I swear, you all know I was born without estrogen; why can't they just accept it and leave me alone?"

"You know they make pills and patches for that now. Tell them you're pregnant."

"Funny." Rayne's voice dripped with sarcasm. "In my 'husband first, children next' family that would go over like a lead balloon. I want them to lay off not drop dead...most of the time, anyway.

Round two was begun by none other than Sister Perfect."

"What did June pull now?"

"I don't think it was intentional, but after dinner Dad pulled out the cards and she suggested a guys versus dolls game. After looking at me, she amended the suggestion, as we'd 'be a man short'."

"Nice, you stayed longer than usual; the rounds spaced that far apart?"

"Actually, I've been back in the city for a while so I did some shopping before coming home. I got a new suit, blouse, shoes and purse for the presentation tomorrow."

Lee's voice took on a solemn tone. "You really need to join S.A."

"S.A.?"

"Yeah, Shopaholics Anonymous, you spend too much." She laughed.

"The day I quit shopping will be a black day for the economy. Businesses would have to close; manufacturers would have to shut down. There'd be even more unemployment than there is now. I'm doing my share for the economic stability of my country."

"How very patriotic of you," Lee giggled. "It's still early; should I invite myself over or do you want the honors?"

"Decisions, decisions. I haven't been home all day; I have to make it an early night because I have that presentation tomorrow. Why don't you come on over?"

"Cool, I'll see you in about ten minutes."

Rayne hung up the phone and went into the kitchen to check her snack cabinet. Cheesecake, chocolate and Dr. Pepper were plentiful. She was also pleased to find two full boxes of movie theater butter and caramel popcorn sat on the shelves. She also found a super-sized box of Lee's favorite Sno-

The downstairs buzzer sounded alerting her to Lee's arrival. She opened the door and stood waiting for the elevator doors to open and Lee to emerge.

"Hey Beavis, I brought a DVD, Ya, Ya." Lee's laugh rang in the hall.

"The munchies are all lined up, butthead. Before we do anything, I need to do my nails. They can dry while we watch the movie."

Once in the apartment, Lee headed off down the hall. "I have to see this new outfit." She announced as she sashayed off.

Rayne followed her lead. "Before you ask; no, you can't borrow it."

Lee turned and stuck her tongue out, "We both know it would never fit anyway. I'm thinner and have a much better figure than you."

Giggling, Rayne displayed her newly acquired treasures for Lee's inspection. "Ta da!" While Lee reverently examined the pieces, Rayne went to her manicure kit and pulled out two shades of burgundy.

"It's perfect!" She gushed. "The color is so right for you; this is awesome. The blouse, the pumps, the purse, all fabulous. Look out now! You're really going to make those anorexic runway models green with envy."

Rayne could only laugh as she flipped on the fluorescent lights and held up the two nail polish shades, comparing to find the closest match. "I just want everything to be perfect for this presentation." Satisfied in the choice of polish she smiled. "Now to do the nails."

Lee examined the nails in question. "While I agree your current color is all wrong for the occasion, I've never understood your anal obsession." She followed Rayne back down the hall to the kitchen table.

"I've been like this for years."

Lee took a seat in the chair across the table from her. "I know and, frankly, it's irritating. Why? I mean its just nail polish."

"Remember when I had the job at the apartment complex in college?"

"Yeah?"

"I mentioned to the my boss, a corporate head honcho how great and perfect her nails always looked."

Lee waited all of two minutes. "What does that have to do with your nail fetish?"

"I sat in on some job interviews she held once. The job came down between two candidates. After the final interviews and finding both applicants were equally qualified, I wondered how she chose." Rayne dipped her finger in the polish remover.

Lee drummed her fingers on the table. She never could just sit and wait. "And?"

"And she told me candidate number two always had well manicured, perfectly polished nails, while candidate number one didn't. She never bothered to fix her chipped polish or file her nails."

"Because candidate number one, a well qualified person, didn't obsess over her nails she missed out on the job? Sounds like some kind of discrimination to me."

"I thought so too, at first. I asked her to explain her reasoning. She said if candidate number one skimped on the tiniest details in her personal grooming life, how did she know the woman wouldn't do the same in her professional life." Rayne shrugged. "It always stuck with me. Besides, it's a little something I can do to make myself feel more confident."

"Still sounds anal to me." Lee inspected her own worn and neglected nails. She reached over and grabbed the remover.

Rayne smiled as she buffed her nails then applied a coat of nail ridge filler. She passed the bottle to Lee without comment and placed her nails under the dryer.

Rayne then took the bottle of polish and carefully applied a thin coat. After it had dried, she applied the second coat. She placed her nails under the dryer again as Lee retrieved Rayne's large stash of nail polish bottles.

She watched surreptitiously as Lee chose and carefully applied a lovely pale iridescent purple. "I'm glad you pulled that one out. I keep forgetting about it. I meant to give it to you. That color looks a thousand times better on you than it ever would on me."

"I can't take your polish." Lee argued as she inspected the first coat of color.

"Why not? It's purple and you know I don't do purples. When I got it, I immediately thought of you. Someone had given it to me."

"I'll keep it here, since I'm not obsessed with perfect nails like you are. But, I thank you." She beamed at the color.

When the polish was dry, Rayne applied a clear satin coat over the top and waited on that one to dry. After Lee had completed her manicure, she pushed the dryer towards her and waited. "Want to watch the movie now?"

"Ya-Ya." Lee laughed and headed to the living room to plop into her favorite chair, a large

overstuffed deep blue velvet rocking recliner she always occupied when visiting. She tucked her legs up under her lap. "Roll 'em!" She commanded.

Rayne put the DVD into the player. "Now is the time for any bathroom trips or snacks if you need them."

Lee didn't wait for a second invitation but jumped out of the chair and disappeared down the hall. While she was gone, Rayne went into the kitchen and put popcorn in the microwave then pulled the sodas out of the fridge.

Rayne smiled as she pulled out a large box of Sno-Caps. The microwave beeped and she pulled the first bag out, opened it, placed the caramel rectangle on the top of the popped corn, folded the top back down and reset the timer to melt it to the popcorn.

"The person who invented microwave caramel popcorn deserves some kind of medal." She announced as Lee came back into the room.

Lee grabbed a can of Dr. Pepper and smiled as she took a drink. When the microwave beeped the second time, she reached for a bowl with one hand as she pulled some of the popcorn out with the other. She let out a small yelp as she burned her fingers on the hot caramel drizzling on the popcorn.

"Did you know when the popcorn, especially the caramel variety, first comes out of the microwave it can be a little hot?"

"Gee thanks for that important news flash, wench." She spied the candy let loose a child like squeal of delight. "Yummy! My favorite."

Rayne placed a second bowl on the counter, separated the caramel corn into the two bowls, gave Lee one, then picking up her own soda, bag of M&M's, and bowl of popcorn, followed her into the living room.

As the movie opened, Lee laughed at the girls on the screen. "Look at them cutting themselves. We never did anything that stupid."

"But at least you admit we did stupid things. Admission is the first step in getting help." Rayne laughed as Lee stuck out her tongue.

They watched the movie, commenting on little things; disagreeing about the fact whether the romantic heroine's love interest had a sexy Irish accent or not. Lee firmly stood by it being sexy while Rayne found it more annoying. They laughed over the demise of photos that occurred when the two leading female characters sent ripped and torn or cut ones back and forth to each other.

They shared fantasies about which they'd rather have, a sleigh or a canopy bed. When the topic

of the mother character's romance with the friend's brother came up, Rayne sat nervously wondering if it would spark the conversation circling around her romance with Lee's brother like it usually did.

She exhaled a sigh of relief when Lee let it pass this time. "Bunch of old biddies." Rayne laughed.

"We'll be them one day." Lee warned.

"You, maybe. I'm going to stay young and sexy forever."

When the movie ended, Lee exhaled disgustedly. "Did you notice how awful the costumes were? I mean really. Sandra's did nothing for her figure. She has no boobs and the little black dress at the end made her look like she had a table for a butt."

"And Ashley Judd has no chest space to offer either." Rayne nodded in agreement.

"Honey, we got their share of chest space." Lee inhaled and stuck her chest out comically.

Rayne laughed, turned the lights up and sat back on the sofa. "Did I tell you about Friday night?"

"No." Lee answered. She wasn't a part of the little group that had formed a friendship in college and met once every two or three months to update each other on lives, jobs and romances. Lee wasn't a bar scene gal, but she enjoyed being kept up to speed on the shenanigans.

"We had a serious discussion on men." Rayne confided.

"Ha! You guys did anything seriously? As far as men go, I bet you all visibly devoured every man in the place."

"No, really, we talked about how to find a truly good man, one worthy of our time and attention."

Lee sat up in her chair and leaned forward. "So tell me, how can I find a good man worthy of me?"

Rayne grinned mischievously. "Go for one of the immortal men. Because we know, there isn't a mortal man worthy of us."

"Umm, yeah. You all had far too much to drink."

"It was more than that. The perfect man doesn't exist in mortal men. We talked about finding an immortal man to fulfill the missing piece in our lives." Rayne omitted the fact she'd immediately imagined the shape-shifting shaman.

Lee was silent for a few minutes and then smiled. "I know who I want. I want Jareth." Seeing Rayne's blank look, "David Bowie, in Labyrinth." She explained.

"Oh, yeah, I guess a goblin king would qualify." Rayne smiled knowing how Lee had always found David Bowie sexy. "I never have figured out what you see in him."

Lee made a pitying face at her. "Everything about him is sexy." She looked at the clock. "Time for me to beat a hasty retreat. I'll see you soon." She collected her movie and headed for the door. "Call me and let me know how your presentation goes." She hugged Rayne before she left.

"I'll call you." Rayne promised returning the hug. "Night."
"Night."

Rayne moved through the apartment shutting off lights as she headed to her bedroom. She stopped at the den and did a last minute review of the campaign presentation. She smiled at the creative idea she'd come up with; it was a one of a kind! The light, clean springtime fragrance of the perfume lent itself toward her train of thought. She wanted to make sure every detail was perfect. Satisfied one last time she was prepared, she shut off the lights and went to bed.

## CHAPTER THREE

Flint arose before the sun and, in the quiet of the morning mist, offered prayers to the creator before beginning his day. He went into the kitchen to make his breakfast as he reviewed what he had been able to find out about the woman.

He'd known she was the one destined to belong to him, having seen her in visions at first. Now, he'd found her in the flesh. He knew she jogged and worked out, as testified by her perfectly sculpted body. He knew she enjoyed drinking, a habit he'd hope to break her of as soon as they were together, by the amount she'd drunk Friday night with her friends and the fact she'd had a margarita with dinner, but also, indulged in a shot of tequila with a Corona chaser.

He placed yogurt, oat bran and orange juice into the blender and pureed the mixture. When it had reached the right consistency, he poured the concoction into a glass and drank it. He finished his breakfast as the sun crested the rise and moved out to the large barn like shed that served as his workshop and studio. Inside were the mediums he used to create his sculptures, paintings and sketches.

He'd been many things over the centuries; a shaman, a warrior, a teacher, a lawyer, and, in recent times, his art had become highly sought after providing him the money needed to sustain him while he searched for her.

He moved to the large metal piece and began to hammer away, but the diagram sketch wasn't translating to the metal. It angered and confused him; never before had he encountered this kind of trouble with his designs. He was distracted and it wasn't natural for him. Instead of focusing on his work, he was filled with images of her.

The momentary physical touches they'd shared had been enough to establish a connection to her. He could perceive her emotions and sensed she was feeling some stress with her family.

He left the shed, moving quietly to the stand of trees and their protection, where his transformation took place. Minutes later, a hawk burst from the trees and raced off in the direction that, even now, her car was traveling.

Spotting her vehicle, the bird made lazy circles above the lovely log home she'd parked in front of and watched as she left the car, entered the house and emerged onto the back deck.

When she moved down the stairs to join the family, the bird lit on a large tree limb. It watched as she was hugged by the members in turn, picked up an infant and was tackled by a small mob of children.

Her lilting laughter floated upward and mingled with the ruffle of leaves on the gentle summer breeze. The family disappeared into the house and the hawk returned from whence it came.

Flint, dusting himself off, left the safety of the trees and strolled to his studio. He grabbed his sketch pad, lifting and discarding the sketch of a feminine figure clutching a child. He picked up a charcoal pencil and furiously sketched the vision that filled his brain; a man and a woman in a lovers' embrace. The woman's face took on the planes and angles of Brandy's face. She'd told him her name was Brandy but he was sure Rayne was her true name, but that wasn't the important thing.

The woman in the sketch had her hair pulled over her left shoulder, covering her bare breast. Her other breast was shielded by being pressed into her lover's chest. The man's face became his own, and the lines led downward where the torsos of their bodies merged into the hawk's wings. The hawk was silhouetted in the background with his wings wrapped protectively about the couple.

He moved from sketch pad to canvas, transferring the charcoal sketch into an oil interpretation. Like a man possessed, he carefully painted every detail. Her lips were full, painted a dusky pink color, and parted slightly begging to be kissed. Her satin skin glistened in a soft light; her long silky mane, the midnight blue black color of her living, breathing twin.

Her lover's strong arm wrapped about and pulled her close as they gazed into each other's eyes. The bodies merged becoming the feathered wings the hawk had wrapped about them. The hawk's face was centered above the lovers' heads, its golden eyes watching to keep out the world beyond them.

Outside the sky dimmed to darkness and still he painted. In the early hours of the next morning, he finally cleaned and put away his brushes.

Wearily, yet invigorated in spirit, he entered the house and climbed the stairs leading to his bedroom. Stretching out on the bed, he relaxed his body as his mind reached out for her. In a dream like haze, they met and came together, hungry kisses and desire fueled fondling

caresses; they explored every sensual inch of the other's body. After the release, they fell into a deep satisfied slumber entangled in each other's arms.

The dream fell away and the sun stretched its rays selfishly across the sky, chasing away the last remnants of the night.

Flint rose and, following his morning routine, dressed casually in khakis and a deep navy t-shirt. He pulled a comb through his black hair, applied his cologne, then moved his way through the house and onto the porch.

His plan was to be in town and "bump" into her, surprising her when she left her office for lunch and be at the same restaurant she chose for the day. He decided to spend time in the museum to wait for her lunchtime. He wandered around noting the inaccurate facts some pieces had attached to them. He smiled at the changes that had taken place over the ages. Once, all things Indian carried a negative stigma, but no longer was this the case.

Now, Indians were sought for their wisdom, creativity, and craftsmanship. The people were slowly starting to find pride in their heritage and while religions were still being explored, there were those who were returning to the path of the Great Spirit. It pleased him to know this was happening without his interference and made him question the need to cling to his vow. Was he still needed? Did he still have a purpose in the world?

He left the museum, his mind whirling in confusion. Before, his goal and vow had given him purpose; what was to become of him? Was he to pursue his destiny as planned? Did he have to find a new reason to go on? The feeling of self-doubt was new to him.

Flint shook his head in an effort to clear his wondering thoughts. No, he'd been designed with the need to bring the child into the world; the child who'd unite the people and return them to the old ways. He'd keep his vow no matter the cost.

He stood outside the large building he knew held her office. A feeling of anger and disappointment reached out to him, the urge to go to her almost overwhelming.

The door opened and she stormed out of the building, anger pulsating from every pore. She stomped down the sidewalk and disappeared into the crowd. He entered a small dark alley and the hawk emerged from its shadows flying low over the crowd, searching until he found her as she left the sidewalks and entered the apartment building.

Rayne got up early, her nerves making sleep impossible. She showered, today layering on the Jobina perfume carefully, in place of her signature rose scent.

She dressed with care, focusing on every detail. She placed the jacket on the back of her chair as she sat and alternately took bites of her yogurt and granola breakfast and changed out her handbag. She grabbed her portfolio and rushed out of the apartment for the office. She jumped in the cab that would take her the five blocks she usually walked to the office building, however today, every thing had to be perfect. She pulled the door shut, not noticing the strap to her handbag was hanging out the door and being dragged along the street beside the cab. She paid the driver and got out; finding the damage to her new bag, she groaned in despair. Carefully avoiding getting anything from the strap on her new jacket, she ran in and caught the elevator to her floor.

She rushed off the elevator and felt her heel catch in the door tracks. She wrenched her foot trying to dislodge the heel. With a sickening snap, the heel broke off the shoe. She slipped it off and popped the broken piece out of the track. Mumbling an embarrassed apology to those in the elevator car, she hurried off down the hall. She wanted to cry, between the loss of the new pumps and the almost certain irreparable damage to her purse, this day was starting off lousy.

She flew past her assistant, calling a quick hello over her shoulder as she ran inside. She had exactly half an hour to figure out what to do about the shoe situation before she had to be ready for the presentation. Maggie followed her flustered boss into the office.

"Are you ready for the meeting?" She asked Rayne.

"Argh!" Rayne cried out as she dropped the shoes, handbag, and portfolio in a heap on the floor. She ran to the closet and yanked the door open. "Please, please," She begged. "No!" She shouted and ran to the desk. Pulling the drawers opened, she dug about.

"Why are you barefoot?" Maggie ventured the question cautiously.

Rayne glared at her and went over and slipped on the damaged shoes. She bobbled in a circle demonstrating for the younger woman the reason she was shoeless.

"You look like Katherine Hepburn in a scene from 'Bringing up Baby." She laughed and spying her boss' angry glance quickly squelched it.

"What am I going to do? I have to have shoes. I thought I had a pair here." She groaned as she searched for the spare pair that were obviously no longer there.

"I think you took them home." Maggie spoke quietly.

"What am I going to do?" She dropped into the chair behind her mahogany desk. "I'm sunk."

Maggie picked up the damaged shoe. "Such a shame, and they completed the look perfectly. Is it a new suit?"

"Yeah I bought it all yesterday just for the meeting today."

Maggie slipped her foot out of her black pump and into the unbroken burgundy one. She smiled, took off her shoes, and handed them to Rayne. "They aren't burgundy but I think they'll fit. I've got a pair of tennis shoes in my bag."

"You're a doll!" Rayne gushed as she slipped on the shoes. She stood and walked a few steps making sure they were passably comfortable.

"You look great. While you're in the meeting, I'll see about getting these repaired. You've got five minutes left." Maggie turned and left the office.

Rayne grabbed her portfolio and headed to the conference room. "How did I ever get such a great assistant like you? Wish me luck." She spoke as she passed Maggie's desk.

"Knock 'em dead." Maggie called after her.

In the conference room, she set up the pictures for the television commercials on one easel; on the other, she put the mock-ups for the magazine and news ads. She carefully looked over the note cards she'd made in case she floundered. The door opened; the time to sink or swim had come. She smiled and greeted her boss. "Good morning Mr. Anders."

"Good morning Rayne, I'm very interested in seeing what my company's brightest star has come up with for this campaign."

Rayne nodded and moved to the magazine spread first. "I've got to tell you I've really come to love this perfume. It has such a lovely clean fragrance." Noting his expression, she hastily moved on. "This is what I've envisioned for the magazine ads. The bottle will be computer generated in a larger than life size. The butterflies added by computer graphic artists."

The spread showed green, blue and gold butterflies flittering above the model, trailing in her wake and hovering or perching on the bottle.

"For the television campaign, we can shoot the films at the butterfly house in Mendl.

Again, the butterflies will be computer generated to be exactly where we want them. One ad will have a woman's silhouette made up of monarch butterflies for her body and face. There will be two blue ones for her eyes, and one pink one for her lips."

She pulled out the next mock up. "For a different commercial, we will have the model exit the butterfly house, a million butterflies following in her wake out the door."

She turned back to face him, "I truly believe this will be a successful launch campaign."

Mr. Anders sat quietly for a minute. "I'm frankly a little disappointed in you Rayne. I expected a bit more originality from you."

Rayne felt confused. "I'm sorry?"

"I've already seen this presentation, Rayne. Of course, your models are a little older than the ones shown in the original presentation, but it is basically the same idea."

"But I don't understand, sir. I just recently put this campaign together. The models are familiar faces to the target audience. Mr. Anders, I've worked very hard on this presentation and I'm certain the Bina Company will be impressed by this campaign."

"I'm sure they will, when Angie Siddow makes the presentation, the one she did this morning, the original idea." He was becoming irritated.

Rayne raged inwardly. "How could she possibly have come up with this idea? I've been working on it for weeks! I came up with this idea and did all the research for it. I deserve this account." She knew her voice was rising and she didn't care.

Mr. Anders's face took on an angry flush. "Rayne, you've not failed me in the past. I know you're a dedicated employee, and I am always impressed with you. The two of you coming up with the same idea must've been some kind of fluke, but as she presented it to me first, in a very knowledgeable fashion, I've decided to give the account to her." He rose from the chair and headed for the door.

Rayne gathered her artwork. She left the conference room, stalking down the hallway, the anger and disappointment filling her deep inside. As she passed the break room, she saw Angie deep in concentration on her cup of coffee.

"How did it...Never mind, I can tell by your face it didn't go well." Maggie said as Rayne entered her office.

Rayne didn't acknowledge her but went inside her office and shut the door behind her.

How did they manage to come up with the same campaign?

Maggie knocked and entered the room carrying a cup of hot mango tea. She handed the cup to Rayne and stood fidgeting near the door.

"Thanks Maggie." Rayne said and sipped the hot, sweet tea. "What's on your mind?"

Maggie stopped absently tracing circles in the doorframe. "I guess the gossip from Sherry, Mr. Anders' secretary, is true."

"Gossip? If you mean about that little probate twit Angie Siddow, yeah, it's true. What I can't figure out is how that bleach-blond-Brittany-Spears-wanna-be-bimbo could have possibly had the brains to come up with the same idea I had?"

Maggie shuffled and closed the door behind her. "Maybe she didn't. Could she have possibly seen some of your sketches and worked it up on her own?"

"My office is always locked, she'd have had to pick the lock. Even if she were dishonest enough for that, surely she'd be too smart to do it. She has to know she'd be caught in the lie."

Maggie looked as if she wanted to say something comforting but couldn't find the words. "I'm sorry Rayne."

Rayne nodded silently and watched her leave the room. She wanted to scream and rail against it all. This was her campaign, her brainchild. It took a while but, finally, she clamped the lid on her frustrations. She sat back, closed her eyes and imagined herself far away.

She took only urgent calls, refusing all others with a 'not at my desk' message delivered by Maggie. When she felt human enough to leave the office, she saw Angie in the lady's room wearing what she was sure was an 'I beat the old hag' smirk on her face that Rayne itched to slap off.

Rayne could take no more for the day; she grabbed her bag and headed out. "I'm gone for the day, Maggie."

Maggie didn't try to stop her as she hit the elevator and kept moving until she landed in her apartment.

She stripped off her suit, pulled on some old plaid shorts and an oversized t-shirt. She went into the living room and threw herself on the sofa. It was childish to throw the temper tantrum but she'd earned it. She punched the cushions, threw the pillows and raved at the world.

In her agitated state, she didn't see the hawk that had landed on her balcony watching her in intense interest through the shears covering the glass doors.

Finally, the rage seeped from her and ragged breathing became the deeper breath of a fitful sleep. Slowly, a dream emerged from the haze in her brain; a dream of a man standing in a green field, his arms reaching out to hold her. He folded her close into his chest giving her strength and support; all he had to offer. He held her tightly until she craved a different kind of warmth from him. Her lips went to his, kissing him lightly first, then more deeply and hungrily.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and held him fast. Her other hand slid down his back, trailing its way across his chest, pulling impatiently at his clothes.

He was more than willing to offer her the comfort she desired. He met her hunger with his own; carefully, he lowered her to the ground and stripped her of her clothing. He slid his fingers across her skin toying with her breast.

Sliding his hands down her silken body, to the mound between her legs, he teased her with his gentle touches. Rayne's desire pushed her over the edge and she grabbed at him, encouraging him to enter her. She met his every thrust with the same intensity. Her mounting climax made her call out his name in ecstasy as she crested, wave after orgasmic wave that sluiced its way through her body.

When her dream ceased, the hawk took wing and disappeared into the sky. It landed in the stand of trees behind his home and Flint left its protective cover on shaking legs. He hurried into the house and jumped into a shower as cold as ice in an effort to quench the fire that still raged within him.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Rayne awoke on the sofa to find it still dark outside. Her dream teetered on the edge of her awareness and when she climbed into the shower to ease the ache in her muscles, it hit her full force.

Her body ached like she'd spent the night with her lover rather than slept on the lumpy sofa. Remembering the soul shattering satisfaction he brought her made her long for more. It had been ages since any man had made her this aroused, awake or asleep.

Under the hot water coming from the shower head, she ran her fingers over lips that should've been bruised with the intensity of his kisses but found them unchanged. Still, the memory made her tingle, and she wondered if she would ever find a real man to make her so alive. She remembered how he made her blood sing and burned with the memory of the erotic dream. Reaching over to the handles, she turned off the hot water and felt the invigorating icy droplets pulsate over her body as she tried to make the memory freeze away.

She left the shower and in her room the bed called invitingly to her. It encouraged her to lie down and just close her eyes for a little while. She gave in to the temptation and cocooned herself under the black satin comforter. Closing her eyes was a mistake, as the dream formed in her mind again. "Stop it and leave me alone!" She shouted in the empty room. She sat up but the prospect of going into the office wasn't any better. Yesterday had been horrible and she was afraid the week would only get worse.

Before any conscious design had been made, she reached out and picked up the phone and did something she'd never done before in her life - well, at least in the last fifteen years. She punched in the number and called in sick.

She hung up the phone and lay back down on the bed. The whole day to herself; what was she going to do? She supposed she could play tourist, but then thought better of it. Instead, she pushed herself off the bed, put on her old khakis and an old blue t-shirt. She slipped on tennis shoes and stopped in the living room. Opening the front closet door, she pulled out an worn patchwork quilt bag and headed out. Downstairs on the sidewalk, she hailed a cab. "Trinity Children's Hospital, please." She told the driver as she crawled into the back seat.

She breathed deeply and placed her head on the seat back. This was her favorite thing to do. Her biggest secret, no one, not even LeeAnn, knew about this monthly tradition. Even at

the hospital among the staff, the only ones who knew her true identity were a select few in the personnel department. She paid the cab and entered the lobby of the hospital. The walls, decorated with children in mind, held large framed paintings of circus animals, jungle animals, rainbows, puppies, kittens, and child handprints.

She stopped at the desk and signed her name on the clipboard. Glancing around to make sure no one noticed her, she slipped into the ladies room. Inside, she quickly stripped off her street clothes; from the open bag, she pulled a red and white-checkered dress, pulled it on and secured the zipper in the back. Next, the mismatched striped socks then she slipped into a pair of black patent leather MaryJanes. Lastly, she tied in place a crisp white apron. She twisted her long hair into a tight bun, covering the shiny mass with a bright orange yarn wig. She smeared on white face paint and smoothed it out till it covered all trace of her skin. A black pencil line traced her eyes and made large black lash lines above and below. A red pencil colored in bold lips, large cheek circles and a red triangle replacing her nose. Finally, she added small stitch marks on the corners of her mouth. Stepping back from the mirror, she made a detailed examination. "Goodbye Rayne, Hello Raggedy." She smiled at the reflection.

After pulling on her white gloves, she grabbed the bag and exited the bathroom, smiling and waving at the visitors who stopped to gawk at her. A quick stop at the lockers where, she swapped out her patchwork bag for the goodie bag, and made her way to the first stop.

To start, the short stay ward; children who had illness induced by dehydration or other things that were quick fixes stayed here. She knocked on door after door, entering rooms and making balloon animals, passing out coloring books and crayons, simple readers and age appropriate toys picked up in dollar stores. She visited ward after ward and reached the cancer unit by mid afternoon. First, she'd stop in her little sweetheart's room. Andy Morgan was battling leukemia and even though the illness ravaged his small five-year-old body, and the treatments made him sick a majority of the time, he was always smiling. This young child displayed more courage and strength than any adult she'd ever known.

"Andy?" Rayne called softly as she opened the door and entered his room. She found him asleep on the bed and smiled at the peaceful scene. He seemed to be resting well and for that she was relieved, she couldn't imagine the suffering he endured. Whenever she thought about it, it made her angry and sad; angry he'd been brought into the world only to suffer all his young life, and sad he face an uncertain future.

"Raggedy?" The little towheaded boy called from the bed.

"Hey, champ." She smiled as she sat in a chair pulled near the bed. "How's my little darlin'?"

"I'm tired today." He said in a sleep-thickened tone and yawned. "But I'm glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you, too." She moved into the small out stretched arms and returned the hug he offered.

"Are you going to take the kids into the big room today?"

"Don't I always?" He seemed so weak today it unnerved her. "Want me to take you with me?"

Andy shook his head. "Not today, Raggedy, I'm just too tired."

Warning bells went off in her mind, should he really be this tired? "Did you have a treatment today?"

Again, he shook his head negatively. "I'm just tired." He laid back and closed his eyes. Slowly he opened them and laboriously sat up. "There's a new girl. Her name is Daisy. They say she's really scared and she hurts a lot. She really needs a Raggedy smile."

She felt tears prick her eyes, here he was miserable himself, yet, he still managed to think of someone else who needed a smile. This kid was amazing and she wouldn't let him down. "I'll make sure I see Daisy." She lightly kissed the top of his head.

"Raggedy?" He called.

His voice was so weak. "Yes?"

"Mommy's been crying a lot lately. I think she's scared, can you make sure my Mommy's all right?"

She was glad he couldn't see the tear that managed to escape. "I'll take care of her until you get better."

He sighed. "I don't think I'm going to get better. I love you."

"Don't say that Andy, you will get better." She felt her throat catch. "I love you too, very much." She pulled away and got up from the bed. "I'll come back and see you soon."

She thought he nodded, but when she looked closer she realized he had laid back and was already starting to drift off.

The nurses had seen her get off the elevator and when she made her way to large

waiting room area they had already gathered the children. One stood to the side waiting for her.

"I saw you coming out of his room."

Rayne nodded but didn't trust herself to speak. She had to get control of herself, other wise, she wouldn't be able to do her job and bring smiles to the children who needed them.

The nurse gave her a hug and walked away. Rayne wondered what she was leaving unsaid but knew better than to ask her. She moved in among the children. "Hello!" She called to them.

"Hello!" They chorused the reply.

"Are we all ready for a story?"

"Yes!" They shouted back.

"Good, who wants to tell me one?" She asked and ripples of laughter raced among them. "No one has a story to tell me?" She looked at them one by one. "Shoot, guess I better come up with one. Hmmm, now let me think. Long ago before there were any people, the earth was a great island floating in a sea of water. It was held in place by four cords hanging down from the sky. The sky was made of solid rock. It was dark and the animals couldn't see, so they got the sun and put it in a track to provide light. The sun moved along its trail every day running from east to west above their heads."

"The Creator told the animals and plants to stay awake for seven nights, a whole week! Can you imagine being told not to sleep for a whole week?" She looked at the kids. "But, not all the animals could make it that long without sleep. Only a few types of animals could like the owls and the cats so the Creator gave them the power to move around in the dark; that's why they can see at night!"

"The only plants that could stay awake were the cedar trees, pine trees, spruce trees and the laurel's so they were given the ability to stay green all year long even during the winter! The Creator also gave them leaves and sap that make the best medicines for the rest of the animals. Because the other trees couldn't last for the seven nights, they were cursed to loose their leaves every winter. Last, the Creator made people, and that's how the world was made, according to the Indians." She smiled at the children, impressed by how well they had listened, sitting still in the chairs and not fidgeting.

She reached into the goodie bag and pulled out a balloon. She held it up and looked it

from all angles. "Now, what's this thing?"

"A balloon," the children called out.

"A balloon? Now what can I do with it?"

"Blow it up!"

She held it above her face and blew on it. "Nothing's happening."

"You have to put it in your mouth and blow it up," they called to her.

She put the piece of rubber into her mouth and blew watching as it flapped. "Still nothing." She complained. She took it out and stretched it, then inhaled deeply and blew the balloon up. Once she filled it, she clasped it closed with her fingers. "Well, that was easy, now what do I do with it?"

"Make it into something," they called to her.

Without knotting it closed, she moved one hand around the width of the balloon; she frowned dramatically and looked at them. "I can't make anything from it."

"You need both hand," two children called to her.

She shrugged and released the balloon and it shot out of her hand. "Well, that didn't work." She pouted.

"You have to tie a knot in it first," a child called.

She took the limp piece of rubber and tied it in a knot, holding it up she beamed. "Like this? But it doesn't look like anything."

A single boy stood up. "You have to blow in it first, then tie it in a knot at the opened end, and then make something out of it." He rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Oh!" She held the mangled balloon to her lips, inflated it, the knot in the center prevented air from passing into the other end. She tied the opening closed and held it up in triumph, "I did it!" She smiled and held it out for them to see. "What did I make?"

"A snake with a rock in its bell," called one.

"No! It's an elephants trunk half filled with water," called another. It always amazed her that children managed to see things adults missed. When did a person grow out of their imagination? She wondered silently. She held the deflated end in her fist and began punching the inflated half. "A punch ball!" A child called in glee.

She sat it down on the floor beside her and reached into her bag to pull out another balloon. Stretching it, she inflated it, and after expertly twisting it, held up the balloon poodle.

The kids laughed and cheered at her antics. She got up and gave the purple creation to the youngest child.

She spent the next half hour blowing up balloons and creating animals, swords and crowns. After every child received one, she said good-bye as they disappeared down the hallway to their rooms. She went to the nurse's station to find out about Daisy.

"You always make their day, Raggedy." A nurse smiled at her when she stood at the counter.

"They are the ones who make the difference." She confided. "I was asked to see Daisy?"

"Oh Daisy Stephens, she's scared to death. When her family got the news of her cancer, someone said something about it killing people so now she's convinced she is going to die very soon." The nurse shook her head.

"Andy told me she needed a Raggedy smile, poor kid. Which room?"

"She's in room five eleven."

"Thanks." Rayne moved off down the hall to keep her smile and share some time with the child.

She entered the room to find the curtains pulled tight and no lights on in the room. "Hello?" She called out into the dim room.

"Who's there?" A churlish voice replied.

Rayne looked around and saw the child sitting in the bed. "Hi there. My name is Raggedy, I've come to see how you are today."

"I'm sick, leave me alone." The girl grumbled.

This was going to be a tough nut to crack. "I only want to spend sometime with you. I know it can be scary to be in the hospital. And it's no fun being sick."

"How would you know, you rotten clown. Have you ever been sick?"

"Not like you're sick, but most of my best friends are. They were pretty scared at first too, but once you get to know everyone here and get used to the treatments, you'll be all right."

"I'm not getting those stupid treatments, why should I? They will make me sick and won't do any good, I'm just going to die anyway."

"That's not true, not everyone who has cancer dies from it. There are a lot of people

who have cancer, they get the treatments, and that puts the cancer into remission. They live for a long time." Rayne explained.

The girl lay back on the bed, silent for a bit. "Please, just leave me alone for now." She begged. "I just want to sleep."

Rayne moved to the side of the bed, pulled out a small stuffed bear and placed on the mattress beside her. "I hope you feel better soon." She told her and left the room.

"You can't help them all." The nurse said as she fell into step beside Rayne. "She doesn't want anyone's help. Until she is ready to turn her anger on the disease and use it to fight the cancer, she doesn't stand a chance."

"I know. How do we get her to fight?"

"She has to find it in herself." The nurse went quiet for a minute. "I wanted to talk to you privately for a minute." She led Rayne to a small room reserved for doctors to talk to the families of the patients.

Rayne sat down and waited, a sick feeling gathering in the pit of her stomach. "It's Andy, isn't it?"

The nurse nodded. "I know how you feel about him. We all adore him." She swallowed hard. "He doesn't have much time left. The cancer has invaded his pancreas, liver and both kidneys. His little body just can't take anymore."

"But I thought he had leukemia?"

The nurse nodded, "When he began having a lot of pain they did more tests. They found the growths on his liver first. It's a very aggressive cancer and has advanced so fast."

Rayne digested the information. "I know, technically, you weren't supposed to share this information with me."

The nurse smiled, "His family asked us to let you know. They said Andy has talked about you so much, and the times they talked to you, you felt more like family than some hospital volunteer." She reached over and squeezed Rayne's hand.

"How much longer?"

The nurse shook her head. "That is the question. The doctor feels he can go any time. I just wanted to let you know so you can try to be prepared."

"Thank you, I think I'll go see him now." She stood up and left the room. She inhaled deeply and made her way slowly to Andy's room. She stopped outside the door and waited.

Steeling herself, she went into the room.

Andy's mother and father held each other tightly, tears coursing down their cheeks.

Andy was sleeping on the bed so she moved quietly to them. "I'm so sorry." She said softly.

They released each other and Mrs. Morgan moved to her. "He..." She choked and Rayne held her tightly. Neither spoke as they stood hugging and crying.

"Raggedy?" Andy's weak voice softly called.

She went to him and held his small hand. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Please...don't cry. Will you smile for me?"

Rayne tried her best to smile. "Can I do anything for you?"

Andy shook his small head tiredly. "I love you." He smiled. "Please...don't cry."

Rayne nodded and watched as he lay down and closed his eyes. She moved over, his mom sat down on his bed taking him in her arms; his father sitting behind his mother and took them both in his arms. She stepped further back, feeling out of place in the scene, she turned to leave.

Suddenly, she heard Mrs. Morgan cry out and begin to sob uncontrollably. She stopped in her tracks afraid to move or turn back. She knew without asking Andy was no longer in pain. She ran from the room and dashed blindly down the hall.

Once back to the main floor, she grabbed her bag from the locker and dashed into the bathroom. Scrubbing madly, she removed all traces of makeup off her face. She threw the wig and clothes into the bag, changed into her street clothes and hurried back to the apartment.

Inside, she threw the bag into the closet and dropped on the sofa. Finally, safe from view, she allowed the tears to wrack her body. She wished her reputation as a woman with no emotions was really true. Maybe then, her heart wouldn't be broken into so many pieces all the king's horses and all the king's men wouldn't be able to find them.

She started to call Lee, knowing her friend would drop everything and come to try and offer some comfort, at the very least it would be a shoulder to cry on. She picked up the phone then put it back down.

Calling Lee would require her confessing the whole clown thing, and she refused to do that. She didn't want to prove Lee was right; she was really nothing but a huge pile of mush inside.

She considered calling her mother and quickly discounted that thought, too. Her mom

Hawk's Rayne 42 would gloat it was time she accepted her feminine side and have children of her own.

Eventually she drifted off, the phone still clutched in her hand.

Donica Covey CHAPTER SIX

Flint was standing before the portrait when he felt her anguished cry call out to him. He dropped the paintbrush and ran from the studio. As he left the doors, the hawk took to the sky and flew to her apartment. He landed on the balcony and watched her through the doors. She was crying as if her heart had been shattered. He watched as she alternately sobbed and raged. She left the sofa and moved into the kitchen where she pulled out a bottle of tequila from a cabinet.

He longed to go to her, yank the liquor from her hands and hold her as she told him what caused her such pain. He wondered why she chose to be alone when he knew she was in pain. Why did she turn to alcohol when a loving embrace was what she needed? He watched as she didn't bother to get a glass but picked up the bottle and pulled a long dose from it. She did it repeatedly and he knew she would soon be drunk. He concentrated on her and filled her mind with a vision. In it, the shaman took the bottle from her hand and placed it on the table, out of her reach. "You don't need to drink; it will only dull your brain and when you awaken, the pain in your heart will be added to by the pain in your head. It solves nothing."

He folded her into his chest. "Tell me what has made you hurt so badly." He encouraged gently.

She coughed on the tears and spoke. "He's gone, he died." She wailed miserably. "Who?"

"Andy, a little boy at the hospital. He had cancer, it ate him alive and now he's gone." She cried harder.

Flint was confused as he tried to understand what she was talking about when he was filled with the explanation. He saw her in clown make up standing in the room as the child's spirit left its body. So, she really was more than she showed to the outside world. Relief and sorrow mingled together; he was relieved she wasn't the shallow figure he'd imagined and sorrowed for the pain she had to endure.

"Don't be selfish my love. He is no longer in pain; I know you hurt for not being able to see and hold him, but now he is in a better place."

She nodded against his chest and he moved on the sofa so he could lie down against

him. Slowly, her tears stopped and her breathing evened out in slumber.

She was sleeping now, but the hawk remained perched in place keeping watch over her. As the sun slipped behind the western horizon, he remained steadfast.

The ringing of the phone pulled her out of the comforting slumber and she reached across the dimly lit sofa to answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Rayne! What's the matter? You sound terrible. You didn't call me last night, and today they said you weren't in the office, you were home sick. I've been calling all day."

Rayne groaned and sniffed. "Look Lee, I'm very tired and I just want to be alone."

"Well, I guess you didn't get the account. What happened? Why didn't you call me?"

The account, ha! That meant nothing compared to what she was feeling right now. "Please Lee, I just want to be alone."

"I promise not to come over, but tell me what happened." Lee pressed her.

Rayne wanted to tell it all to her but decided against it. "That little intern Angie Siddow somehow managed to present my campaign to Mr. Anders," she finally told her.

"Great minds think alike?" Lee said her tone clearly indicated she didn't believe it for a minute.

"I guess she got lucky." Rayne said tiredly.

"Lucky, my butt, she stole it from you; now, get out of the pity party you're throwing for yourself and figure out how to trap the little witch."

"Lee, I don't feel up to anything right now. I'll call you later, all right?"

"Humph! Fine. You have exactly twenty-four hours to cry into your beer, after which, you will buck up and kick some ass, got it? You see Mr. Anders and get this straightened out and then enjoy stomping her into the ground."

Rayne smiled in spite of herself. "I got it." When Lee went silent Rayne deluded herself into thinking she was off the hook, she was wrong.

"Now that I've raged, tell me what else is bothering you."

"Nothing, I'm just upset about the job," Rayne defended.

"Come now, how long have we been friends? You have never been one to cower in the dark alone and from the sound of your voice you've been GASP! Crying."

"You know better; I don't cry. I have a summer cold."

"Uh huh, your crown is slipping, oh Queen of Denial. I know something else is

Donica Covey bothering you."

Rayne exhaled in an exaggerated fashion. "I just need some rest if I am supposed to go into battle tomorrow."

"I know that tone; I hit a nerve, but I surrender for now. Call me when you're ready to talk."

"Thanks Lee, bye." She didn't even wait for Lee to hang up; she clicked the phone off and sat up on the sofa.

The hawk's beak curved into a smile; so she wouldn't take comfort from anyone right now. His woman was an enigma, choosing to stand alone and find the strength within herself.

He watched as she left the living room and lights came on in the bedroom. When the apartment darkened, he knew she was in bed. He remained for a while longer until he was sure she was asleep then returned home.

He walked into the house and went to his room. "Creator, give my woman strength to endure the pain, and the wisdom to search out the love and support of her friends and family. Show me the path that leads into her life so we may join together and fulfill our destiny." He prayed then turned to his own bed.

He couldn't sleep, his thoughts filled with her. To the entire world, friends, family, and business encounters she showed a career focused, emotionless, fashion plate, keeping the truly kind hearted person she was hidden from view. It made no sense to him she seemed ashamed of having basic human emotions. Why did she choose to be alone?

The connection between them was stronger than he'd ever envisioned. He was able to feel her every emotion, the pain of the child's death, her disappointment at missing the opportunity at work, the way their lovemaking made her feel ecstasy she'd never felt before. She was so receptive to his presence in her dreams, but he ached to be with her in person not only in spirit. Even now, as she curled in her bed, she reached across the city to him. His lips curved in a purely human, satisfied way at the fact she wanted him again. Who was he to deny her?

He sent his spirit shade to her dream, and they made love with a fierce passion that threatened to consume them both. Once they'd come to the plateau of fulfillment, sleep pulled him under a blanket of darkness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rayne faced the new day with fierce determination. She planned to talk to Mr. Anders, and together, they would figure out, not only how Angie had stolen the campaign, but how to catch her at her schemes. She pushed all thoughts of the previous day from her mind as she exited the elevator on her floor.

"He's in." Sherry, Mr. Anders' receptionist nodded as she passed by the desk.

Rayne nodded her thanks and with out knocking, stormed inside. "Good morning Dick."

Dick Anders looked up from his papers in surprise at her far too personal use of his name. "Rayne, glad to see your feeling better. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the Bina account, my account." She emphasized this last.

"I told you Monday, the account was going to Angie, she has..."

"She has stolen my work and research." Rayne interrupted. "I know there is no possible way she could have come up with the exact same campaign I designed. It wasn't an accident. Even if she had the brains to do it on her own, which I sincerely doubt, it is an impossibility."

"You're accusing her of theft?"

"I'm not accusing anything, I'm spelling it out for you. How, I have no idea but I know she did."

"You're not the only creative genius in this firm."

"I'm not saying I am, but I do know I have more talent in my little toe than Angie will ever have in her entire body. I'm not playing games here, Dick, I want what's rightfully mine. I worked for that account and I want it."

"Calm down, Rayne. Can you prove your allegations?"

"I took my preliminary sketches to Mitchell DeMarco more than two weeks ago. He's the one who did the mock ups for my presentation. When did she take her presentation down?"

"I don't want to argue with you, Rayne, and I hate to think you're making false accusations to try and keep a multimillion dollar account for yourself. You're one of the best, but you need to step back and let someone else take a chance at things once in a while."

Rayne felt as if she'd been hit with a sledgehammer. "So you're not willing to even consider this as a possibility?" Seeing his firm stance against her, she pulled out the trump

card. "I have an excellent business relationship with every high profile account this company has. I've received offers from other firms in the city that, until now, I haven't even considered. If I go, it won't be long before those accounts follow me."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, it's a promise."

"I've no fear of losing the accounts; we have contracts with them. You'll be missed, but I don't deal with threats."

Rayne was livid. Was he really going to let her walk out? Surely not. She stood in place for several seconds then left the office, slamming the door behind her.

She took the elevator to her office. She didn't even acknowledge Maggie as she slammed the door to her office. Standing inside, she looked at the room that had served her for the last twelve years, since her promotion after only three years with the firm.

She moved around the room like a sleepwalker. She'd been in here for so long the line between what was corporate property and personal property blurred. Slowly, she began taking the certificates from the walls and the awards from the shelves.

Maggie opened the door and entered. "What are you doing? You're not really leaving, are you?"

Rayne nodded at her. "Can you track me down some boxes?" She turned back to taking things she was sure were hers and putting them in a pile on the desk. By the time Maggie returned with the boxes, she was ready to pack them and go.

Silently, they packed all her things and, in only a few short minutes, there was no trace it had ever been Rayne's at all. "Ask security to come and escort me out of the building." She ordered softly.

"They don't have to be here." Maggie argued.

"I have to have someone do the heavy lifting." She laughed weakly. "Besides, you know it's policy."

Maggie gave a halfhearted smile and put the call in to security. Five minutes later, two guards arrived on the elevator.

Rayne clutched one box like a security blanket as one of the guards picked up the second. She held back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. It was over, fifteen years of dedication, working overtime, sacrificed nights and weekends; accomplishments and

Hawk's Rayne disappointments all gone.

She followed her escorts out to the sidewalk and gave the cab driver her address. Two boxes were all she had to show for the last fifteen years. What a joke, she thought bitterly.

She went into the building and put her boxes on the floor inside the door and looked at the clock, in less than three hours she'd gone from one of the highest paid positions in Anders and Walters to unemployed.

Listlessly she moved around the apartment, what was she going to do now? She hadn't lied about the job offers, but was she ready to start over again? Her finances were secure for at least six months. She knew the funeral for Andy was on Friday, so she'd wait until next week to find a new job. She went into the bedroom and changed from her black skirt and gray silk blouse into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, grabbed her gym bag and headed out to work off her aggressions.

She worked out on the step machine for fifteen minutes, rowed, did crunches, sat in the sauna, and did some laps in the pool. After an hour, she showered and felt like a new person.

She walked out of the door and into someone. "I'm terribly sorry." She apologized as the man picked up her bag. "You!"

Flint smiled and handed her the bag. "We have to stop meeting like this." He laughed. "Have a nice work out?"

"It was fine." She laughed. "You must think I'm a total nitwit. I have done nothing but walk into you and drop things."

"You obviously have something on your mind."

"I really do." She moved to leave.

"Brandy, wait."

She stopped and felt a twinge of guilt. "I have to tell you the truth. My name isn't Brandy, it's Rayne."

He smiled. "I understand. Would you like some lunch, Rayne?"

Her stomach rumbled loudly before she could respond and blushed furiously. "There goes my saying I'm not hungry." She laughed.

"Shall we?" He offered her his arm and they headed down the sidewalk. "Sandwiches all right or would you like something more?"

"A sandwich sounds great." She walked in the sub shop as he held the door for her.

Inside, she stood next to him as she looked over the menu.

"Can I help you?" The counter girl asked.

"Know what you'd like?" Flint asked her.

"Ummm, tuna salad on honey wheat."

"That sounds pretty good." Flint turned to the counter girl, "Two tuna salads on honey wheat." He turned back to Rayne. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Dr. Pepper."

"One Dr. Pepper, one unsweetened iced tea."

They took their tray and sandwiches to a table where, after setting down the tray, he pulled the chair out for her. She smiled and sat down; it had been ages since any man had treated her like a lady. "Thank you."

He took a seat across from her and watched her face as he passed her a sandwich. "Is there something I can do?"

She paused her hand in mid air, holding the waxed paper wrapped lunch. "What?"

"Something's bothering you and I wondered if there was something I can do to help?"

She placed the sandwich on the table and looked out the window beyond Flint's face. She studied the people walking by on the sidewalk as she chewed on her words. "I've had the week from hell and I'm afraid it isn't going to get any better."

"Want to tell me about it?" He offered not sure she'd confide in him.

Again she was quiet for a moment, unsure of what to say. Suddenly the urge to share it all welled up inside of her. "I'm an advertising executive, or I was until this morning, but I'll get to that in a minute. Anyway, I went in Monday morning to show my boss a campaign I worked very hard on; hours of research, I spent on it. It was an awesome campaign."

"When I showed him my presentation, he told me he'd already seen it right before he came to see me. Some plebe intern had 'come up with' the exact same ideas." She sneered.

"This other person stole your idea?"

Rayne nodded and took a drink of her soda before continuing. "So, anyway, I didn't get the presentation. Then yesterday, now mind you I have never called in sick a day in my life, but yesterday I called in sick and I went to the hospital..." She caught herself.

"The hospital? Is someone ill?" He wanted to bite his tongue, knowing it would cause her pain.

She felt her eyes prick with tears. "I volunteer at Trinity and one of the patients is - was - very dear to me. He died yesterday; I was in the room with his family when he died." She roughly brushed the tear that escaped her lid. "I can't believe I just told you that."

"It's all right, sometimes it's easier to tell a stranger your pain."

"No, I mean yes, but that's not what I meant. I've never told a soul about my volunteering at the hospital."

"Why not? Being a volunteer is a very noble thing to do."

"But it isn't me." She looked at him hard. "You don't know me, so you don't understand. I'm not known for my humanitarian efforts. I have had to work very hard to get ahead in my career. I've had to put aside my emotions so I could concentrate on my job."

"How can you be that way? You seem to be a warm, caring person; why act like something you're not?"

She shrugged and opened her sandwich, took a bite and chewed it thoughtfully. "You do what you got to do to make it."

He shook his head. "So how did you become unemployed? They catch you playing hooky?"

"No, I went to my boss with my allegations against Angie. He opted not to check it out so I opted to end my association with the company. And so," She spread her arms wide and pasted a phony smile, "here I am."

"I'm sorry you've had such a terrible time, but I am glad you're here."

"How long of a lunch hour do you get? What do you do anyway?"

"I get as long for lunch as I want, the benefits of being your own boss. I'm an artist; I paint, sculpt and work with metals."

"Is your studio near here?"

He swallowed his bite and consider what to tell her. "Actually, no. My studio is behind my house. I just happened to be in the area when we bumped into each other."

She smiled and finished the last of her sandwich. "I really am sorry about all those times I barreled you down."

"I'm not, I'm glad I'm getting to see you again." He was glad when her smile beamed and it was brighter than the sun.

"I've enjoyed lunch." She pushed the chair and stood, surprised when he stood also. She

reached for the tray, but he took it.

"Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Not really, but I should be heading home."

"Maybe we could go for a walk in the park?"

She nodded and took the arm he offered as they left the shop. The funny tingling sensation zinged its way up from her fingertips and moved up her arm. He made her feel the same funny sensation in her stomach that the dream man made her feel. She shivered despite the heat.

"Something wrong?" He asked in concern.

"Nothing." What could she say? You're turning me on. No, she'd stick with her original answer.

They walked on in silence enjoying the sunshine and laughter of the children playing. Birds flew in the bright blue sky and Rayne looked at the tree limbs.

"Are you looking for something?" Flint asked her.

"Lately I've been seeing a beautiful red tailed hawk around."

Flint coughed and stumbled in his step. "A hawk, really?"

"Yes, it's a lovely bird."

Flint stood an inch taller. "He is, isn't he?"

"Oh, then, you've seen it, too."

Again he choked. "I've seen one near my place."

They walked along in silence enjoying each other's company. They took time to stop and smell the honeysuckle that floated on the warm gentle breeze.

"I really should be heading home soon."

"May I walk you home?"

"I'd like that." She led him towards her apartment building.

"May I buy you dinner this evening?"

"I don't know, Andy's funeral is tomorrow and I haven't slept very well lately. I need to get some rest."

"You need to eat. I promise not to keep you out late."

As they walked up the step to her front door, she smiled. "Dinner sounds great."

"I'll come for you at seven?"

"Wonderful, I'll see you at seven." She gave him a slight hug and opened the door. "Bye for now."

"See you in a few hours." He smiled and walked off into the crowd.

She went upstairs feeling lighter than she'd felt in days. She'd shared her secret and pain with someone and instead of making her feel worse, she felt better! She went inside and put her gym bag away.

She had to be ready for her date in less than three hours. What was she going to wear? Where were they going? How did she know what to wear when she didn't know where they were going?

She pulled out a Dolce red silk blouse, and a black midi skirt. In the bathroom, she plaited her hair into a French braid and wrapped a silky red ribbon around the black elastic band, tying it into a flirty little bow.

She pulled out the manicure basket and quickly removed the old polish. She chose dragon lady red for her finger and toenails. Once the manicure was finished and all was dry, she fastened on a lacy red push up bra.

She slipped into the blouse; it was one of her favorites. It was cut like any ordinary blouse but the material bordered on immodestly thin. She pulled on the skirt and fastened it. She pulled out the box containing her red leather Gucci sandals and slipped them on.

She carefully applied her make up and opened the jewelry armoire and decided on the ruby and diamond heart pendant and matching earrings. She wore a simple red leather banded watch with mother-of-pearl face. She picked up her matching red leather handbag, spritzed on her cologne and looked at the reflection in her full-length mirror. She looked hot enough to sizzle Flint where he stood.

Pacing around the living room, she looked at the clock. She'd managed to be ready for her date in less than two hours, with ten minutes to spare. That was some kind of record for her.

Her heart was pounding and her palms were sweaty. What was wrong with her? "I must be coming down with something." She finally decided. She checked the mirror one last time as the buzzer rang to let her know he'd arrived.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

He buzzed the door promptly at seven p.m. She pressed the button to allow him entrance to the building and was waiting for him when he got off the elevator. "Hey there." She called to him.

When he stepped off, she saw he was dressed in a snug black shirt, white summer weight jacket and tight wrangler jeans. On any one else it would look decidedly retro, nineteen eighties Don Johnson. On him, it was more than sexy.

"Hello." He walked to the door and felt like he'd been sucker punched. "You look amazing." He stepped in the door she opened farther for him.

"Thank you." She smiled at him. "I wasn't sure where we were going so I hope this is all right."

"It's more than all right. Do you have anything in mind?" Looking at her in that outfit, he knew what he had in mind and needed to get out of that path.

She saw the smoldering look in his eyes and against her will; she straightened to stand a little taller. It was then she realized, like the dream version of him, his eyes darkened to obsidian.

"What do you have in mind for dinner?" He asked again.

"We could try Seigo's." She offered.

"Seigo's?"

"It's a great Japanese restaurant a few blocks away." Rayne felt her smile slip. "You do like Japanese don't you?"

"To be honest, I've never tried it before."

"We can go somewhere else, there's Chinese a few blocks the other direction, Thai, Greek, Vietnamese, all near by. New York City, the melting pot of the world."

He returned her laugh. "Japanese sounds fine, I look forward to trying it out. Are you ready?"

"Ready, willing and hungry." She grabbed her purse and preceded him out the door. In the elevator, the smell of him filled the small car. He smelled of musk, pine, and cedar; a decidedly masculine smell that pushed every one of her buttons. His nearness made her mind wander in directions it should avoid.

Flint stood next to her, the soft feminine fragrance filling his nostrils. Her silky smooth skin invited his caress; her lips begging to be kissed. He almost gave in but the slight jar of the car stopping stopped his movement in her direction.

They left the building and walked in silence to the restaurant, her hand comfortably resting on his arm. The large white building trimmed in black with red geraniums under black boards made to look like windows. The fact there were no windows made him feel a little uncomfortable. "Looks like a house of ill repute." He murmured.

Though he'd said it under his breath, Rayne heard him and chuckled. "A whorehouse? I don't believe it was ever one of those. It just adds to the atmosphere to have you totally immersed in the Japanese ambiance and decorations."

"I still think it looks like a bawdy house." He grumbled. How could anyone not want to be able to look outside? It was unnatural. Once inside the door, his feelings flittered away. The smells and sounds that circulated about the room were intriguing.

There were rooms that held tables low to the floor and could only been seen when the rice paper, bamboo framed doors were slid open. Other tables in the main room were regular height and had grills to the one side where Japanese chef's worked their magic with the food.

To the back of the room were wooden topped tables under a low ceiling with fans and Japanese lanterns strung about the room on wires.

The scent of meats sautéed in various juices and tossed on the grill tickled his palette and made his stomach grumble in appreciation. "It smells good anyway."

"It smells fabulous." She enthused. "Which table do you prefer?"

"Whatever works for you." He wasn't sure he liked the idea of sitting near a hot grill, but he waited to see what she'd suggest.

"Why don't we take one of those tables in the back. I've never been good with the grill tables. I'm always afraid I'll get burned. And the traditional tables aren't very comfortable."

He waited on the hostess and informed her of their choice. He took Rayne's arm as they were led to the back of the room. He didn't fail to notice the appreciative looks from some of the men they passed along the way and his chest swelled in male pride knowing she was with him.

He pulled out the chair and waited for her to take the seat and settle before moving to

sit across from her at angle that allowed him to watch her face with out staring.

Rayne smiled at his manners, his attentions stroking her feminine ego. Thanks to women's lib and even her own attitude, she'd had to sacrifice being pampered and treated like a real lady.

Flint smiled and looked at the menu. "I have no idea what to order."

"Maybe I can help you out, which do you prefer beef, chicken, pork or seafood?"
"Pork."

"Then I suggest you try *Tonkatsu* under the dinner menu. It's a pork tenderloin coated in bread crumbs and deep fried."

"That sounds really good. What are you going to have?"

"I'm probably going to have *Negimaki*. Beef rolled tightly and made with green onions. They slice it thinly and serve it with vegetables."

"You eat here a lot do you?" He chuckled.

"I've been here a few times." She chuckled. "If you are interested in appetizers, *Goyza* is really good. It's dumplings stuffed with beef and sautéed until golden brown."

Flint's mouth watered in appreciation, it all sounded wonderful. "All right Miss Eatsalot, what do you recommend we drink?"

"Saki?" She laughed. "I really like the green tea but they also have Coke products."

"Why don't we have green tea with our *Goyza*." He said the unfamiliar word and felt it trip on his tongue. "And then have Coke with our meal?"

"Sounds like a plan to me." Rayne smiled at him and when he returned it with one of his own she felt her heart melt in her chest. She knew deep inside she could be herself with him; after all, she'd been able to confide in him about her job, even telling him about her volunteer work.

The waitress came over and Flint placed their order. While they waited on the appetizer and green tea, he wondered when the time would be right to tell her why they were always 'bumping' into each other. Would she run? Get angry and accuse him of stalking her? He was sure she wouldn't throw herself into his arms and be overcome with joy that he finally came in to her life to reveal her destiny to her.

"What are you thinking about?" Rayne's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you look...bewildered, kind of sad...I'm not really sure, but you don't look like a man who is having fun on a date."

"I'm with an absolutely stunning woman, how could I not be having a wonderful time?" Even to his own ears his voice sounded sharp. "I'm really sorry, I truly am having a great time I just have something bothering me. I'll figure it out eventually."

Before Rayne could say anything else, the waitress returned with their appetizer and tea. She smiled and speared one of the dumplings. She cut it in half, allowed the steam to dissipate then popped it into her mouth.

The pot containing the green tea sat in the middle of the table and Flint poured some of the hot liquid into her small cup and his own.

Rayne accepted the cup with a smile then searched the table, not finding what she looked for she hailed a passing waitress. "May I have some honey, please?"

The waitress nodded, disappeared into the kitchen, returning a short time later with tiny packets of honey. Rayne accepted them and added them to her tea. "I prefer honey, much better for you than sugar." She smiled at him.

He took a packet and added it to the bitter amber colored liquid in his cup, stirring he watched the honey dissolve. He took a sip and smiled. "That helps, I guess it's an acquired taste."

He speared a dumpling for himself and took a bite. "This really is good." Although he didn't care for the tea, the dumplings made up for it and he hoped dinner would be even better.

Again, his thoughts drifted on what would happen when he told her the truth. He could see it all now; she'd probably rant and rave, yell 'how dare he assume she wanted children period much less his.' She'd argue her career was her first and only love.

And when he told her who he really was, oh boy! That's when it would get really hairy. She'd doubt him, question his sanity then when he'd shown her, would she doubt her own? Probably.

Dinner arrived and the pork looked tender and juicy. He dug in with enthusiasm and wasn't disappointed by the taste. Between bites, he watched her take bites of her own meal. She had manners but wasn't the dainty type and she had a healthy appetite. "Good?"

"Good doesn't even begin to describe it." She smiled at him. "How about yours? Do

Hawk's Rayne you like it?"

"Definitely. Not that I'd want to eat it every day, but I wouldn't mind eating here again."

Rayne reached over and stuck her fork into a piece of his pork and popped it into her mouth. "Yummy, you're right it's good." She picked up her plate. "Here, have a piece of mine."

Flint floundered for a bit, he'd been stunned by her taking food from his plate and wasn't sure he was comfortable taking some from hers. It was the intimate act of a married couple not two people on their first official date. Still, at her encouraging smile, he did take a small piece of her beef roll and sampled it. "Very good." He took a drink of his iced tea.

Rayne relaxed and enjoyed her meal. She had surprised them both by taking a bite off his plate, that was something she'd do with Lee, her sister or her brother, not a man she'd never been out with before.

She watched him under her lashes and could sense unease and wondered what was bothering him. Maybe he was growing uncomfortable with her. "Is something wrong?" She asked nervously. "If there's some place you'd rather be..." She offered him a chance to bolt.

"No, I'm right where I want to be." He assured her. He had to make sure he focused more on her and the moment, not worry about what might happen next.

Rayne was beginning to get irritated with him. He said he wanted to be with her, and even though he sat across the table from her, he wasn't with her. His mind was somewhere and it wasn't with her. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Why had he asked her out to dinner if he was going to ignore her all night? What was so freaking important he couldn't think of anything but? Maybe there was someone else.

No she discounted the thought the minute it popped into her mind. He wasn't the type to cheat on anyone, she didn't know why she believed it but she did.

Flint could tell his attitude was causing her grief and he felt bad about it. He reached out and touched her hand. Just like all the other times before, a spark skittered up his arm. Unlike the previous times it was stronger, in fact, it seemed to increase in intensity with each touch.

Rayne felt the tingling again from his touch and she jumped lightly at its intensity. It left an almost spiritually connected feeling in its wake; like he'd been created for her and her

alone.

She pushed the thought away. She was being foolish, just because he looked exactly like her dream man, exactly as she'd always imagined the shaman looking didn't mean anything. She had to stop this nonsense.

"Was dinner good?" Flint asked jerking her attention back.

She flushed, she got irritated with him for thinking of something else and here she was doing the same thing. "It was fabulous. I love coming here. Did you like it?"

"Very much, especially the company." He watched her take a final bite. He took a drink of his tea and wondered if the Creator would ever show him the sign of when the time was right to tell her all. "Would you like to go somewhere for dessert?"

"I'm not sure I could force another bite."

Flint squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. He upbraided himself mentally, why was he acting like a schoolboy? He was well past the age of teen angst.

Rayne concentrated to keep the scowl from her face. Obviously he was uncomfortable and she was sure she was the cause of his ill ease. "I'm ready to go if you are." She smiled a saccharine sweet smile. It was his own fault, she hadn't dragged the invitation to dinner by gunpoint, he'd been the one who insisted on it. Why was he being so ridiculous?

They walked out into the evening air in silence. He was upset with himself for allowing her proximity to make him act the fool; she angry at herself for spending time with him.

She headed off in the direction of her apartment, walking at a clipped pace trying to hurry so she wouldn't have to watch him endure her presence any longer than needed.

Flint matched her pace wondering why she was in search a hurry. "Would you like to go to a movie or something?"

She stopped dead in her tracks. "What?" She looked at him in shocked surprise.

"Movie? You know, moving pictures." He looked beyond her at the park. "I know, wait right here." He moved to the horse drawn carriage parked at the curb. After speaking to the driver, he returned to her side. "Your carriage awaits my lady."

Rayne smiled in spite of herself. In all the years she'd lived here, and out of all the men she'd dated, none had ever offered her a carriage ride. She allowed him to help her inside and waited while he settled in next to her.

The gentle clop of the horse's shod hooves echoed off the cobblestones in the park. The

smell of night blooming jasmine floated on the warm summer breeze.

She exhaled and relaxed into the red velvet cushions of the carriage seats. The whole thing was like a fairy tale, a handsome Prince Charming, dark and bold seated beside her. It was everything she'd ever dreamed of.

Well, almost everything, instead of sharing the most romantic evening of her life with a man madly in love with her, she was sharing it with a man who was made uncomfortable with her very presence.

Flint watched her relax, her eyes closed and a ghost of a smile on her lips. She was here, within arms reach and before he could think any further, he claimed her lips in a heated kiss.

The surge of emotions pushed him towards the brink, she was intoxicating and one kiss wasn't enough. He wondered if he'd ever be able to get enough of her as he deepened his kiss.

Rayne reveled in his hungry kiss, matching his urgency with her own. She was starving for his touch. Suddenly her senses returned in an ice flow, she pushed him away. "Stop." She demanded in a slightly breathless voice.

She knew the cabby thought she meant him as the horse and carriage came to a stop. Not looking back, she jumped out of the carriage and headed off into the park.

Flint was stunned, without intent he'd offended her and now she was rushing to get away from him. He regained his thoughts, paid the cabby and took off after her retreating form.

Rayne moved into the trees, she had to think this out. He had to be psychotic, yeah, that was it, it had to be. No one could be as perfect as he'd appeared. The shifts fit, one minute he was acting as if he couldn't wait to be rid of her, next he acted like he couldn't get enough of her.

He must be crazy and she was crazy for being with him. She had to get away. She turned and raced toward the safety of her building. The sound of his footsteps behind her urged her rapid increase in strides and soon she found herself running.

She emerged from the bushes when his hand snaked around her wrist. The familiar electrical current surged through her and she stopped dead.

"Rayne, what's wrong?" Flint begged her.

She struggled to catch her breath before responding. Finally, she turned to him. "I was only trying to help you."

He couldn't mask the shock he felt. "Help me?"

"Help you be rid of me, it's what you wanted all night long." She trembled with the emotions running wild in her. "You've been distracted all night, acting like you don't want to be near me one minute longer on one hand, and then acting like you can't get enough of me the next. I refuse to spend any more time with a man who isn't operating on all cylinders." She yanked her hand free and began to put space between them.

Flint's laughter erupted in such a loud explosion, he was sure the entire city heard him. "You think I want to be rid of you? That I'm insane?" Watching her wide-eyed reaction he toned himself down. "Can we sit and talk for a minute?"

She looked at him warily then nodded. "If you keep your distance." She must be insane to be agreeing to spend more time with him.

She moved to a bench under a maple tree and sat down, making sure there was plenty of space between them. She felt drawn to him, wanting more of him. Well, that's what you get when you allow yourself to believe a fantasy man has come to life.

"I've been distracted because of you, that's for sure. But it isn't because of what you think; it's because I can't get enough of you." He told her with impassioned honesty. "And because I want you so desperately, I have to force myself to be respectful of you. I wouldn't dishonor you for anything in the world. You mean far too much to me to be anything less than honest."

Rayne wasn't sure what to say, the man seemed to be making a confession of love. How could he be? This was the first time they'd ever been out together. They didn't know each other at all. It should terrify her, but it made her heart tingle straight to her toes. "How could you dishonor me?"

"By taking advantage of you, by pressing physical intimacy before...before we had a chance to...get to know each other better."

Rayne suffered from selective deafness over his stutter and didn't even wonder what he'd started to say. He was treating her like a lady. She laughed uncontrollably.

"You think my values silly and old fashioned?" He asked her gruffly. Maybe he was mistaken; maybe she really was the type to go for a one-night tumble with a man she barely

knew. He rose stiffly and turned to look at her. "I'll see you home, now."

"I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you. It's been a crazy week and I'm just over tired. Please forgive me. Maybe we can try again some other time?"

Now it was his turn to feel confused. She was the one who was crazy. He stood staring at her, no, she wasn't crazy, she was having a rough time and he was pushing things. "You need to get some rest, I'll see you home and then we can talk about a second date later."

She nodded and placed her hand on his arm. They walked together to her building. At the door, she turned to him. "Thank you for the dinner. I'm sorry for the confusion and all. I really want to see you again."

"We'll see each other again soon." He promised, placed a gentle chaste kiss on her cheek and left her standing there alone.

She watched as he disappeared around the corner. Tonight definitely qualified as the weirdest date in history, she thought as the elevator took her up to her apartment.

Inside, she saw the red light blinking on her answering machine. Checking caller ID on the phone, she saw Lee had called. She didn't call back given the late hour and Lee would be getting up to go to work in the morning.

## CHAPTER NINE

Friday dawned gray and cloudy, appropriate for the coming event. Today, little Andy would be laid to rest. She felt more tears well up inside.

She dressed in a charcoal gray suit, black shell and hose for the funeral. She had debated and agonized over her place at the gathering but she decided she needed to say goodbye.

She gave the cab driver the name of the funeral home. When they stopped in front of the funeral home, she felt the pain build to the breaking point. She sobbed and didn't care that she was being seen.

"Lady? Is there someone I can get for you? Some one who can help you out?" The cab driver questioned in an awkward attempt to get her out of his car.

"No." She sniffed. "I'm sorry, but could I have a minute, please?" She blotted her eyes and tried to regain her composure.

She entered the funeral home, hating everything involved with death. She stopped outside the door of the Eternal Room; spying the name, she found she was in the right place. She signed the book, Raggedy Ann, and moved inside.

There were dozens of people milling about and she recognized Andy's parents standing in the front of the room near the head of a pale blue casket which held the earthly remains of the child who had touched her heart.

She stiffened her resolve and moved towards them. "Mr. and Mrs. Morgan? I'd like to offer my condolences on the loss of your son. Andy was such a dear soul." She sniffed and clutched her tissue. "I'll miss him very much."

She staggered over the words. One look at Mrs. Morgan's tear stained face and she felt her resolve start to crumble again. An awkward tension filled her.

Mrs. Morgan smiled a shaky smile. "Thank you so much. I'm very sorry but where do I know you from?"

Rayne glanced around the room and moved closer. "From the hospital, I'm Raggedy Ann." She whispered.

Mrs. Morgan smiled through her tears. "Andy loved you so much; what you do is important to all the kids. Even on his worst days he smiled about you. You're truly an angel."

"Those kids mean the world to me, but please, let's not tell anyone. It's kind of a secret identity, being her."

"You're secret's safe with me." Mrs. Morgan hugged her and moved on to another visitor.

Rayne took the opportunity to move to the casket. She stopped beside it and pulled a small blue stuffed dog from her bag. She placed it on the pillow beside his head and made her way out of the room.

People passed by her and she nodded politely to a few of them as she went out of the building. She crossed the street and entered a small coffee house, ordered a cappuccino and went to sit at a table near the window.

As she looked out the window, the tears pricked her eyes. The pain and anger at his death filled her. It was unfair he'd been born only to suffer pain as the cancer invaded his little body, the sickness the chemotherapy caused, only to have his fighting end in death.

"Rayne?"

She looked up to see Flint standing beside the table. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

He motioned to the chair and when she nodded he sat down. "I'm sorry, I'm not following you, really. But I knew how much you were hurting and when I saw his name in the paper and the funeral home name, I wanted to come and see that you were all right."

She was touched, not angry and reached over to touch his hand. "Thank you. I'm all right, I suppose." The moving of the funeral procession caught her eye. She watched the cars head out to the cemetery

"I'll go with you if you'd like."

She nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

He waited for her to finish and stood up to help pull out her chair. "Ready?"

Rayne trembled and choked softly then nodded. "I think I'm as ready as I can be."

They walked out of the shop and he hailed a cab, riding to the cemetery in silence. He put his arm around her and was pleased when she laid her head on his shoulder.

At the cemetery, he followed her lead and watched as she knelt in the freshly turned earth, letting the tears fall as they would. "I'm going to miss my little Andy Panda Bear." She wept softly. She remained near as memories of him filled her mind. She saw the first day, his

balding head with its small patches of blond hair. She could hear his laughter as she remembered the tickle sessions. His blue eyes shined with glee, despite being ringed with exhaustion, whenever she visited him.

She couldn't stand the memories as they flooded in on her. She cried not caring who listened or saw. When she felt weak and unable to go on, she felt Flint's strong arm wrap around her waist.

The pain slowly ebbed away by a vision of being held by her shaman. She was safe, supported, and loved. Her pain was finally eased; in its place, overtaken by a deep soul wrenching exhaustion.

"Let me take you home." Flint spoke quietly.

She nodded and moved into his embrace feeling his strength radiating into her. She was glad he'd had the cab wait on them and she sat inside, not willing to give up his warmth.

At her building, she took the hand he offered and allowed him to take control of the situation. She handed him her key. For the first time in her life, she let someone else make all the decisions for her.

He led the way into her apartment and to the sofa. He plumped her pillows and when she was seated, he sat beside her; swinging her legs on top of his lap, he slipped her shoes from her feet. Gently, he began massaging her feet.

She moaned softly and relaxed, content to let him keep control for a while longer. She had barely opened her eyes when he moved from the sofa and went into the kitchen. She heard the sound of ice clinking in a glass and the soothing sound of water coming from the refrigerator, then he was returning to hand her the glass.

"Thank you." She murmured.

He said nothing but returned to his place and resumed the massage. The phone rang and he paused but she didn't move from the spot and he realized she'd fallen asleep. He reached over and answered her phone. "Hello."

"Umm, sorry, I think I've got the wrong number."

The woman on the other end sounded confused. "That depends on who you're looking for." He replied softly, unwilling to disturb Rayne. "I'm looking for Rayne Amitola." She demanded.

"She's here but she's resting, may I take a message?"

"Just who in the hell are you?"

"I'm a friend of Rayne's, she's had a very difficult day and I'm trying to help her out. Care to tell me who you are?"

"I'm her sister, Cadence. Is she all right? What happened?"

Flint knew he'd made a mistake answering the phone but he'd been trying to prevent the ringing from waking her. "She's just had a really bad day and as her friend I wanted to help her out as much as I can. I'll be happy to let her know you called and she'll call you back."

"Just who are you? I want a name, buster, and I intend to check this whole thing out." Flint smiled at the protective threat. "My name is Flint Kestrel, and I can assure you, your sister is fine; she's just resting. She'll call, I promise." He didn't bother with formalities but hung up the phone.

He moved to sit in a large rocking recliner and watch her sleep; he could sense she was being plagued by troubled dreams, so he relaxed and concentrated on her. Before long they were back in the field.

He smiled as she ran barefoot in the lush green grass, stopping to pick various wild flowers. When she'd collected a large bouquet, she hurried back to him and plopped down.

He sat beside her watching her graceful fingers expertly weave the stems of the flowers together. When they'd all been woven and joined into a ring, she placed the crown on his head. She laughed at the sour expression he gave her.

She didn't remove it and when he began to, she pouted so prettily he didn't have the heart, leaving it in place on his head. This was the part of her he longed to see everyday, the happy, carefree, openly loving woman she truly was.

He reached out and held her, cuddling until she fell into a peaceful sleep, then he pulled himself out of the vision. He stood, stretched the kinks from his back and put a note on her phone letting her know to call her sister. He also put his number down and asked her to call him when she wanted to talk. He kissed his fingertips and placed them gently on the top of her head.

At home, Flint tossed and turned in his bed. After an hour, he gave up and went out to his studio. He pulled out a fresh canvas and began to paint. The picture emerged of Rayne cuddling a small infant with a patch of dark silken hair.

He poured all his emotions into the painting and, when it was complete, the love that shone in her eyes made his heart ache. He longed for the day when all the scenes he'd envisioned would become a reality. It was getting too hard; he wasn't ready to accept he was developing human feelings for her, but they were overwhelming him.

He needed her to bring the child of his vow into the world. He wanted her for the physical release of the building desire he'd dammed for so long. More than that, he loved her and this startled him. Love was a human emotion; one he had never felt before. In all the life times he'd lived, he'd loved the mothers who bore him, but never had he loved a woman in this way.

Hawk's Rayne
CHAPTER TEN

The sun shining through the shears on the balcony door pricked her eyes and Rayne woke. Her back cried out in pain from the night spent on the sofa. She sat up and realized she'd slept in her clothes.

With aching muscles she made her way into her bedroom, stripped from the suit and into her lounge shorts and t-shirt. The reflection in the mirror showed smeared make up that would clog her pores and, more from habit than concern, she washed her face.

In the living room, she found the note he'd left for her. She looked at the phone but didn't pick it up. Her sister could wait; she should call and thank him for all he'd done the day before but she didn't. She wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone.

The phone rang for what seemed like the zillionth time and, still, she refused to answer. Lee'd left three messages demanding to hear back immediately. Her sister had called twice threatening to send the police if she didn't call soon, and this last, was her mother's voice pleading for her to pick up the phone.

In aggravation, she snatched up the phone. "I'm fine! Please just leave me alone! I don't feel like talking to or seeing anyone. Can't you all figure out I'm avoiding you, that I just want some peace and to be left alone?" She shouted, her voice nearing hysteria.

"Rayne, we're worried. We just need to know you're all right. Who was that man? Did he hurt you? Is there something you're not telling us?" Dian asked.

"Yes, Ma, every attacker answers his victims' phone calls." She felt the steam run out. "Ma, he's just a friend, that's all. He was helping me through a rough day. Now, please, can you all respect my feelings and let me be for a while? I just want to be alone."

"All right. When you need us, you call."

"I will, Ma. Love to the family, bye." She hung up without waiting for her mother to say anything. She moved to the liquor cabinet. She opened it and looked at the tequila bottle. It was still early morning but she didn't care. She wanted to get drunk and stupid. She pulled the bottle out and went to sit on the sofa. She held the bottle in her hand, rolling it back and forth. Finally, she sat it on the coffee table, lay back on the cushions and closed her eyes.

Frustrated, she pushed up and went to her bedroom. The room darkening shades offered her a nighttime reprieve from the mid morning sun. She plopped on the bed and curled into a ball.

Sleep claimed her and she tumbled into the comforting abyss.

Several hours later, the phone ringing pulled her out of the depths and she reached over to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hey, Rayne, I was wondering if you'd like to spend the day together? But I can tell from your voice you've been sleeping." He felt bad for disturbing her.

Rayne stretched lazily and considered the offer. "What time is it?"

"Its after twelve. We could go to the park, or the museum, whatever you'd like to do."

"I can be ready by one, if I rush."

"Great! Dress casual and be ready for anything."

"I'll see you at one." She smiled and hung up the phone. She took a quick shower and pulled her hair damp hair into a ponytail. Jean shorts, a red tank top, red socks and white tennis shoes completed her transformation.

Flint dressed in his oldest jeans, a beige t-shirt and headed out to his old truck in the garage. The engine coughed, sputtered then roared to life. He backed out of the garage and headed to her apartment.

When he'd pulled to a stop and rung her buzzer, it was five minutes to one. She buzzed him in and, once more, feeling like a teen, the excitement at seeing her built with every step.

He stepped out of the elevator and saw her waiting for him. "Hello, beautiful lady."

"Hello yourself. Want to come in for a minute?"

"Actually, if you're ready, we should go now." He offered her his arm and, when she placed her hand on it, the welcome tingling current returned.

Once outside, Rayne turned to him, "Where's your car?"

"Right here." He indicated the truck.

Rayne looked at the gray, rusting seventies something Chevy truck and back at him. "You're joking, right?"

Flint opened the door and motioned for her to get in, he wondered if this was the point she'd cut and run on him, but she smiled at him and crawled into the passenger seat.

Flint climbed in and started the engine; they made their way through the city traffic and soon were emerging onto the highway speeding towards the country.

Rayne fought the temptation to ask him where they were going. The surprise would make the entire venture more fun. She felt like a kid dying to find out what was hidden under

the Christmas tree. As they drove southward, she recognized the route she drove to her parents home. Surely there was no way he knew where they lived. Was it some kind of an elaborate set up? She opened her mouth to question him but clamped it shut when they passed the exit Flint wondered at the worry which had passed across her face until he remembered her folks lived nearby. He grinned when she leaned against the seat and put her feet on the worn dashboard. Her shoulders, which had been bunched up around her neck, were relaxed as she put her arm on the window sill of the door. A slight smile played at her lips. They pulled off the highway and drove towards the very first home he'd ever known. She let him help her out of the truck and continued to hold his hand as he led her off towards a gently rolling slope. As they reached the top, she gazed out over the field with its view of the Hudson River below. The scene was breathtakingly beautiful. Slowly, she realized the field as the place she'd seen in most of her dreams.

Flint saw the flicker of recognition in her eyes and hoped she was remembering their many encounters. Even though he'd lived in many places over many life times, this was the one place he considered his true ancestral home; it's why he'd chosen it for their dream encounters. Now, he was sharing it with her in the flesh.

He led her down the slope and, before he could think, he was speaking.

"My people lived here long before the white man came to this country. They erected their homes all over the area below us."

Rayne could picture in her mind's eye the people milling about as they did their daily routine. She envisioned the women cleaning fish and hides; men and boys working with bows and arrows, the children running and playing around them.

"White men came and forced the people to leave the only home they'd ever known. They were forced to move from place to place until they had become lost and out of touch with their roots. One day a child will be born to reunite the tribes and return them to all they had forgotten and thought lost.."

Rayne looked up into his eyes; he believed the legend. It was written all over his face; it radiated in his voice. "My grandmother used to tell me that legend; she believed it, too."

Flint stopped himself before he entered the territory of the reason he met her. "Don't you believe it?"

Rayne chuckled. "You're not serious?" Seeing his stricken look and remembering the look from moments before, she quickly added, "I've never really thought about it. I'm not sure

what I believe right now."

Flint said nothing but was disappointed with her reply; he'd hoped for a yes. He moved them down the hill to the river. "Once this water was crystal clear; one could swim, drink or bath in it. Now..." He shook his head.

"It may not be as clean now as it was then, but it's still not bad." She slipped off her shoes and socks and stepped into the water. The inch deep water was sun warmed and felt delicious on her toes. She smiled each time the cooler water lapped up on her ankles.

Flint watched the joy spread across her face and he couldn't help but smile at her. She had let the prim princess cover slip and she was showing her true self to him: he reveled in it.

He watched as she left the water, walk barefoot through the grass and begin to pick flowers. He watched her reenact the actions of her dream self.

Once the flowers were gathered, she sat crossed legged on the ground, the flowers piled up in front of her, picking them up and weaving them into a ring. Even knowing what was coming, he went and sat near her.

She wove it in place, secured it and placed it on her head. She looked at him and smiled while she modeled her crown. She took it off and placed it on his head. "I now present their royal highnesses, King Jubal, Queen Lation. The Royal Jubilations!" She laughed as he reached up to straighten the crown on his head.

Flint loved the sound of her laugh; its musical tone touched him and made him laugh along with her. He knew he'd made the right decision to bring her here. Rayne had managed to push the entire week's pains and disappointments to the far recesses of her mind. She laughed and ran through the grass, finally flinging onto the ground. Laying back, she looked up at the sky.

Flint lay down beside her and peered into the turquoise blue of the bright morning sky. He pointed out a small cloud passing across the sun. "That one looks like a fish."

"Look, a horse."

"There's a dragon."

They spent an hour imagining shapes in the sky. Standing, he reached out his hand to help her off the ground watching as she dusted her shorts clean and valiantly resisting the urge to reach out and help her.

They strolled leisurely to the truck. She wondered what else he had in store for her.

Settling into the seat, Rayne smiled her thanks to him.

Flint jumped into the truck and grinned like a fool; he knew she was happy and feeling free of all the burdens she'd had to endure all week. He drove back to the city, hoping to take her back to his studio and spend more time with her.

Even though it was already three, she wasn't ready to end their day. Maybe he was shocked at her immature behavior. She was almost thirty-six years old, yet today, she'd acted like she was six. That was it; she'd embarrassed him.

They rode north past the exit to her apartment which caused her to wonder what was next on the list. Entering a small community, they turned down a quiet street and stopped in front of a cape cod style house with a large screened in porch and two out buildings that looked out of place in a subdivision full of two story colonial style homes.

The house was covered with brown vinyl siding, the windows sporting a light beige trim around them. The whole picture was calm and inviting; a "welcome home" feeling spread inside her. She ignored the funny way it made her feel and she waited for him to come open the door for her.

"Welcome to my home and studio." He bowed comically and offered her his arm.

"It's lovely," she spoke without thinking, "it feels like home."

He grinned and led her into his sanctuary.

Inside, the smell of cedar filled her nose; it was a pleasant manly fragrance. She surveyed the items decorating his home; mismatched furniture and Native American artifacts. "It looks like a museum." She laughed. "How can you keep these things?"

"It's a personal collection. I gathered them from my home a long time ago." He answered. "Are you hungry? I know we're early for dinner and late for lunch."

"Actually, I am."

"Great, the kitchen is back here." Flint led the way. "Some host I am." He lamented after searching his cabinets and refrigerator. "I can offer peanut butter, tuna fish, bologna, or I have some frozen steaks we can thaw and put on the grill, but those may take a while."

"Peanut butter sounds good."

He pulled out the jar, and pulled out a loaf of bread. "White or wheat?" "Wheat."

He spread the creamy peanut butter on the bread slices, put them on paper plates,

removed a pitcher of lemonade from the fridge and asked Rayne to grab two glasses. Together they carried the mini picnic out the back door to a picnic table under some maple trees.

Rayne sat across from him, took a bite of the sandwich he offered, and accepted the glass of lemonade. The cool liquid hit her tongue, her lips puckered involuntarily and she shivered at the bitter taste. "Oh my." She exclaimed.

Flint cringed. "I'm sorry, I forgot to warn you; I prefer it a little tangy. Let me get you some sugar."

"No wewwy, its aw wite." She protested through pursed lips.

Flint smiled and rose from the table. "I'll be right back." He laughed at her pinched face and returned with a small bowl. He chuckled as she spooned teaspoon after teaspoon full into the large glass. After she mixed it together, she tentatively took a drink, the lines of her face smoothing in relief as he laughed. "Better?"

"Much, thank you." She took a bite of the peanut butter sandwich and required another drink to try and remove the small pit clinging to the roof of her mouth. "I didn't realize I was hungry."

Flint nodded his agreement. "We must be hungry for peanut butter to taste this good. You'd think we were eating steak or lobster."

"I don't care for steak," she shrugged, "but lobster sounds pretty good."

"Ok, for our next date we have lobster."

Rayne had just taken a bite of her sandwich and was trying desperately to get the sticky morsel from her mouth so she could speak. Finally, she opened her mouth. "This is a date?"

"Isn't it?"

"I thought it was two friends spending the day together."

"I prefer to think of it as a date." He grinned.

"And I say it's..." She smiled against the hand he put to her mouth.

"Don't argue with the host, it's rude."

"For the sake of manners, I won't disagree with you, but it isn't a date." She laughed and tossed a napkin at him.

He shared her laugh and finished his lunch. "What would you like to do next?"

"You said your studio was here. I'd love to see it."

As soon as she finished, he led her to the studio and he unlocked the doors. He flipped

on the string of fluorescent lights bathing the dark room in light.

Rayne stared at the mass of metal still sitting in the middle of the room. She turned to him, eyebrows raised the question on her face.

"It was supposed to be my interpretation of the mother and child, but I got distracted." He admitted sheepishly.

She wandered around the room studying the sketches and paintings. Her breath caught in her throat when she realized the woman in every painting resembled her. She turned and looked at him.

"What can I say, you inspired me. You're the perfect model."

"I'm flattered, thank you." She smiled at him. Moving closer to inspect the portraits, she was amazed at the detailing. He'd made them so life-like she felt as if she were looking at a mirror's reflection rather than a painting. "It's amazing how well you did from memory, or are you stalking me?"

"I'm not stalking you." He laughed.

"At least you're attractive, some stalkers are regular nightmares."

She moved to scrutinize the picture of the woman and child and sighed deeply. Would their child look like that? She stopped herself before the laugh escaped her lips. The thought had come from so far in left field it caught her off guard. What was she doing thinking along those lines?

He examined her face and the shocked look took him by surprise. What was she thinking about? He was pleased she enjoyed his work and glad she was happy to be the subject of his art. He wanted to pull her close and nuzzle her hair. Instead, he held back watching her move among his other sketches and paintings.

She sauntered outside. Flint was sure there was nothing more beautiful than seeing her standing bathed in the late afternoon sunlight that danced through the tree leaves. He placed his hands on her trembling shoulders. "Rayne, what's wrong?"

She turned a tear stained face to him. "Today has been absolutely glorious, but I have to face the real world again."

"Don't think about it now."

"I have to think about it, sometime. I have no job; I have to update my résumé, send it out and then wait and pray." She wiped her eyes and looked at him. "What did you do before

you became an artist?"

He had to answer it carefully. "I've been an artist, a sculptor, a writer; I guess I've just about done it all." He laughed.

"Which one did you like the most?"

"All of them, but I love being my own boss and painting is really soothing to me. Have you always been an advertising genius?"

"I'm not exactly a genius. In college, I was a rental manager for an apartment complex, plus I've been a waitress, a short order cook and a baby sitter."

"A well rounded woman. If you don't get any hits on the résumé, I'm sure you could find a baby sitting job."

"So anything else on the menu?"

"We could watch a movie, or play some cards or just sit and listen to some music while we talk and get to know each other better."

"Any of it sounds fine." She followed his lead back to the house. She made herself comfortable on his sofa as he rummaged through his small collection of VHS tapes.

"I have Pearl Harbor, Wind Talkers, all the Star Wars movies, Patton, Platoon." He stopped and looked at her. "I don't guess you're interested in any of those."

She chuckled lightly; so he was a war action buff. "I'm not much on dramas, if I watch movies, they're usually romantic comedies. Wind Talkers sounds like it might be interesting." Funny, she was willing to sit through a movie just to spend more time with him.

He placed the tape in the player and sat next to her. "I know I'm behind the times, but I have yet to see a reason to buy a DVD player."

"Tape is just as good." She was impressed he wasn't concerned about the whole keeping-up-with-the-Jones' mentality. He was comfortable with the minimum and it seemed to fit him.

She settled back to watch the movie and quickly regretted her decision. She wasn't much for violence, the blood and guts movies, and this one, though about the important role native Americans played in World War Two was interesting in fact, the film portrayal made her uncomfortable. She shifted and tried to hide her discomfort.

Flint saw her fidgeting and quickly realized what the problem was. "Maybe we should find something we might both enjoy? Maybe we could just talk and get to know each other

She smiled her relief at him. "I'm not much of a movie buff, anyway. I make movie exceptions for Lee, my best friend, but for the rest of the world, I just don't go for movies."

"What do you do for fun then?" He asked and grinned when she looked at him like he'd spoken a foreign language. "Fun, you know, down time, relaxation. Don't you know what fun means?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Of course I know what fun is. I have fun, but there is more to life than fun. Hard work gets you where you want to be. I go out with my friends, we play cards, maybe have a drink or two. Spending time with my family is fun." She explained.

"So as long as it involves alcohol or stress it can be fun?"

Rayne shrugged. "I didn't say I had to drink to have fun and I also don't recall having mentioned stress."

Flint knew he'd goofed. He shouldn't have mentioned her feeling stressed when spending time with her family. "I guess I was assuming because most people experience a certain amount of stress when spending time with relations."

"Seems you are also a student of human nature. I know I feel a great deal of stress when I have to spend any amount of time with my family." She paused.

"But it's stress I help to create myself by my insistence that I be allowed to live my life my way. They can't accept it, so I try to make sure I stay on my toes dodging the issues they throw up in front of me."

Flint smiled. "Would it be so bad to see things their way?"

"Whose side are you on?" She demanded lightly. "You don't have any idea what it is they want me to do."

Careful fellow, he cautioned mentally. "Being as you're their daughter, I would venture to guess they wish you to marry and have children."

"Exactly! At the expense of my career and my dreams, I should become June Cleaver! They don't think about how I feel."

"Maybe they are concerned about your happiness and worried about your being alone."

Rayne sat back. Maybe he was right about her parents' concerns over her. Still-. "They should let me decide for myself, if and when, I decide it's time for me to marry and Donica Covey have children."

"Is it such a terrible thing to marry and have babies?"

"Not for most people, but I'm not the right person."

Flint ran through his options. He could press the issue and make her uncomfortable, possibly scaring her off in the process, or he could change the subject. "So besides being an ad whiz, what else do you do?"

"I've already confessed my deepest secret to you. You know I volunteer as a clown at Trinity. I spend one Sunday a month at my parents home with my sister, her husband and children, my brother, his wife and their children, even though, they try to get me to come out more often."

She paused and looked at him, surprised at finding him listening with interest, she continued. "I meet some girl friends at a pub called Callahan's, but, more often than not, I spend time with Lee, shopping, at dinner, and once in a while, watching a movie, that sort of thing. What about you?"

"I'm an artist. I love to sketch, paint, spend time at museums, and reading. I also love the outdoors and spending quiet time with you."

Rayne was startled and looked at him. "You barely know me. How can you be so convinced you enjoy spending time with me?"

"I feel it inside." He had so much more he longed to tell her but he held back. She already had that cut-and-run look on her face.

They sat in silence; only the sound of a clock ticking could be heard. In the silence, her mind was able to dance and dwell on her current situation. She was going to have to figure out what to do about a job, bills and the lack of funds that could seriously cut into her fun time. She also had to decide what she thought about Flint and his declaration of feelings. It was too soon.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked.

"Since I quit my job, I have to figure out what I'm going to do for work. You know, I got mad when that little twit stole my ideas. I just wonder if she was being rewarded for rocking the bosses' world." She shook her head. "I'm sorry do I sound bitter?"

"Only a little." He laughed and moved closer to her. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I need to do some serious job hunting in the coming weeks. I have to balance my books, but I really believe I'll be all right for a while." She paced to the window to look out at the darkening sky.

He moved to stand behind her, gently lifting her hair to her left shoulder and began to massage her back. Her muscles were tense and knotted, so with gentle pressure he worked it out. He moved his fingers from her back up to her graceful neck. Working his fingers in slow gentle circles, he kneaded out the stress she'd been dealing with for the last few days.

Rayne relaxed under his gentle ministrations. She knew the dream-Flint was nothing compared to the real thing. His hands felt soothing, strong and comforting on her. She moaned unconsciously, reaching her arms up and back, she placed her them around his neck.

She pulled him down towards her. He bent his head over and pressed kisses into her neck, sending a shiver through her spine. He kissed her cheeks and nuzzled her ear.

She turned in his arms and kissed him deeply. She tangled her fingers in his hair finding it silkier than the dream-Flint. She slid her hands down his back and groped his well-sculpted butt. She felt herself being led to the sofa.

He moved back and pulled her with him. Soon, they were laying on the sofa, her on top of him, her kisses fueling the burning desire mounting inside him. The dreams had increased in erotic levels and now, holding her this way, there was nothing stopping him from touching and tasting every inch of her.

She slid her hand down the front of his t-shirt pulling it up from the waistband of his jeans. Soon it was free from the confines of his jeans and she was able to run her hand across his broad chest. She pushed it up even further encouraging him to pull it off. Between kisses, he yanked it over his head, dropping it to the floor and she was able to run her hands over his muscled chest. She felt his hands grazing over her back and she scooted around trying to move so she could feel his hands on her bare skin.

The contact of her silken skin under his hands stoked his desire for more. He tugged her tank top over her velvet black hair. Her nipples hardened underneath his hand. He rained kisses across her chest, took one nipple into his mouth and suckled deeply. He felt the need pushing to the brink. Suddenly, he inhaled deeply and pushed away from her. He tossed her tank top to her and moved away from the sofa.

Rayne felt shock at being rejected so bluntly. She was never one for sex with someone

she hardly knew and was glad, in a way, he'd stopped, but she felt he'd stopped because she'd repulsed him somehow. Quickly, she pulled her tank top on and straightened her clothes. "I think you should take me home now."

Flint was angry he'd allowed the base human need for satisfaction make him nearly commit an act that would have shamed her. He wouldn't allow them to become intimate before he'd told her the truth about himself--their destiny.

No matter what the current trends were he focused on the morals that still applied. He'd make love to her when they'd made a commitment, no matter how much he desired her.

He could tell he'd made her angry and knew it was because he'd pulled away so quickly. "If you're sure you're ready to head home, I'll be happy to take you."

"I'm sure I'm ready." She gritted out and moved through the front door to wait for him on the porch. So much for her glorious day; he'd managed to ruin it completely. She got into the truck without bothering to wait for him to open her door.

In bitter silence, they passed the ride from his house to her apartment. He'd barely stopped before she had the door opened and was getting out. "I had a really nice time." The words were laced with sarcasm. "Good night."

She rushed inside refusing to look back. She felt foolish and rejected, even though he'd saved her from herself, she knew she'd come across as a cheap tramp, and he'd turned down what she had to offer. Now, she'd probably blown any chance with him. As she rode up in the elevator, it never occurred to her to question her feelings of wanting to be with him.

She entered the apartment, headed to the bedroom and stopped in front of the mirror. She stripped and carefully examined her reflection. Why had he been turned off by her? Was she not physically appealing? Her body was lithe and firm, breasts a little small, but still, was she ugly? Was the fact she'd acted like the town slut the reason he refused her?

She grabbed her old flannel, nine patch, square pajama shorts and an oversized, butter soft t-shirt. She knew she had messages on the machine reminding her she'd yet to call Lee and let her know what was going on. She also had never called and apologized to her mother for being rude, sharp and then hanging up on her. She pushed the play button and listened to the messages.

"Rayne, it's Lee, call me, will you? I've been worried about you. Call me and let me know you're all right."

"Rayne, dear, it's mom. Why don't you pack a few things and come out here for the weekend? We barely see you any more and now that you have time, it would be nice if you spent it with us." Her mother had a good heart, but Rayne knew she didn't want to spend the weekend dodging pitying looks and matchmaking suggestions. Besides, it was all ready late Saturday evening, by the time she would get there, it would be time to crawl in bed.

"Rayne, it's Maggie. Have I got a scoop for you! Mr. Anders has been shown the error of his ways; that little twit screwed up big time and he knows she stole your work! I know he wants you back. Call me as soon as you can!"

Rayne plopped on the bed. So, he finally deigned to see the error of his ways? Well, she'd call Maggie back, but Mr. Dick Anders would have to come crawling on his knees and beg her to come back.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rayne punched in Lee's number and waited for her to answer. "Hey you, what's going on?"

"Where have you been? I haven't spoken to you since Tuesday; you don't tell me what happened with the job; your mom calls me in hysterics because your sister called your apartment and some man answered the phone! What's going on?" Lee demanded.

"Give me a minute." Rayne took a deep breath. "Ok, Wednesday I marched in, spoke with Anders and told him my suspicions; he chose not to believe me, so, I quit and packed up my office."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Well, there've been a few offers over the years, so I'm going to spiff up my résumé and send it out to the places I know were interested, then, wait and see. I got a phone message from Maggie and, apparently, Anders has seen the error of his ways and wants me back. I intend to sit back and let him crawl to me on his hands and knees pleading for my return."

"Good for you. So, that's Wednesday. What have you been doing the rest of the time? And who is the mystery man?"

"What is this, twenty questions?"

"I'm serious now. You know we always do a calendar call when we haven't spoken for a few days. Now, what has been going on?"

"I relaxed, worked out, had dinner at Seigo's, locked myself in my apartment and avoided the world for a while. Today, I went to the park."

"You spent the day at the park? Come on, spill; what are you hiding from me?"

"I spent the day with a man, a perfectly wonderful man; the same one who answered my phone on Friday, the same one I had lunch with on Wednesday, and dinner on Wednesday night. A wonderful, handsome, sexy man."

"A new love interest? How wonderful! What's his name, where did you meet him? What does he look like? What's he do?"

"Slow down, Columbo. First, his name is Flint Kestrel. I met him a few days ago and we've bumped into each other several times since. He's about six foot three with dark blue black hair to his collar, piercing brown black eyes and an all over, to-die-for tan on his fabulous body which shows off his broad chest, muscled arms, and great ass."

Lee sighed dreamily as Rayne continued. "Now for the rest of the survey; he's about thirty-six and an artist. Today, we spent the day in a park. Then, he drove me to his place and shared his studio and paintings with me, and now I'm home."

"When are you seeing him again?"

It was Rayne's turn to sigh. "I don't know if I'll be seeing him again."

"Why? What happened?"

Rayne fidgeted. "I really don't want to talk about it right now."

"Rayne, what's going on? Why are you shutting down on me all of a sudden?"

"I just need to think this through, I'm not trying to shut you out, honestly. I'm just not sure what's going on. I have all these feelings swirling and confusing me. I'll call you when I'm ready to talk, OK?"

"Do I have a choice? I'll be waiting so, please, don't keep me in suspense too long."
"I promise. Bye, Lee."

"Bye."

Rayne relaxed onto the sofa. Had she really ruined any chance with him at all? Maybe she should call and talk it out with him? No, that was the act of a desperate woman, and Rayne wasn't desperate.

Why did it matter so much to her anyway? He was handsome, sexy as sin and seemed like he had a good heart. He also suffered mood swings that made her wonder just how many personalities he housed in the body that caused the lustful thoughts to rise in her mind.

She knew his uncanny resemblance to her fantasy man was the main cause for her confusion. She laid back and closed her eyes. The fantasy man had strong hands, well-muscled arms, broad chest, and deep eyes.

All those things were physical. What about the real man? He'd shown material things didn't matter to him; he didn't have the latest thing in technology, and his truck was more than a decade old. He dressed in simple clothes that looked great on his body.

No! That was taking her back down the physical road again. She knew she needed more time to get to know Flint, but she really liked the things she already knew. Well, most of the things she knew. She wouldn't be completely comfortable until she was sure he wasn't a mental patient in desperate need of an adjustment to his medication dosage.

She crawled into bed and tried to get some sleep. She relaxed her breathing and focused

on him, hoping she'd be able to dream about him like she had on so many other nights. He didn't come and she felt as if he'd turned away from her. When she awoke in the middle of the night, her pillow was damp from her tears.

~ \* ~

Flint tossed and turned. He'd enjoyed the day with her. She'd shown him so many facets to her personality. The childlike joy she'd found in the simple things; the kind-hearted woman who cried at the death of the child she'd developed such a fondness for; the woman who secretly made up as a clown and shared her time with sick children and the sexual siren she turned into at his single touch.

He'd wanted to go further today and knew she was more than willing, but honor kept him from acting on the desire. Never before had he felt this way for any woman. She'd made him long for her, dream about her; she was the very air he breathed. He was rapidly falling into the trap he'd set for her, but unlike the prey, he was a very willing captive.

~ \* ~

Rayne opened her eyes but didn't move out of bed; she'd battled with insomnia all night long and lost. Knowing it was useless to remain in bed all day, she reluctantly got up.

She dressed in her oldest clothes and threw herself into cleaning the apartment. She dusted all her knickknacks, polished all her furniture, vacuumed, swept, mopped, scrubbed, and cleaned for the better part of three hours. It was well worth it. When she was done, the place sparkled and gleamed.

The apartment was spotless but she wasn't. She took a shower and removed every speck of dirt. After the shower, she lounged on the sofa for all of fifteen minutes until the inactivity began to drive her up the wall. She went to the den, flipped on the computer and went to work updating the much talk about but, as yet, unseen résumé.

After finishing the résumé, she drug herself to the sofa again, and sat staring at the ceiling, fidgeting and driving herself slowly insane. Finally, she surrendered to the mounting irritation and left the apartment.

She stepped out into the warm sunlit day. She aimlessly wandering the sidewalks, paying no attention to the people hustling by. She walked for blocks; her mind focused on what a mess her life was. How could one person go through so much misery, pain and confusion and still go on? The scenery around her changed but she barely noticed she'd moved from the

familiar to the alien. She was near ground zero and wasn't even aware she'd walked to that point. When conscious thought returned, she looked up to see she had stopped in front of the memorial.

She stood staring at the names of those who'd lost their lives in the brutal, senseless attack of September 11th. Flowers placed in vials honored the loved ones that had been ripped from the lives of family and friends.

Around her people came to stop and look, brushing tears from their eyes and placing more flowers and tokens to those whose lives had been cut short. Suddenly, she was very angry with herself. How dare she stand here having her personal pity party when all these people had families left behind hurting and struggling with real pain every day of their lives? Children who would never see their parents again; wives who would never be held the arms of their husbands; parents whose children would never grow up and become parents themselves. She thought of the Morgan's. They would never again hold Andy in their arms, tell him bedtime stories or tuck him into bed at night.

All these things put her misery in prospective; she had nothing to complain about. Her problems were miniscule compared to the pain of others. She went to a little shop and purchased a rose then returned to the memorial where she placed her own small token.

She meandered in and out of shops. Near home, she stopped at the park and walked amid the trees. She found a semi-secluded spot and sat cross-legged on the ground, gazing into the sky, watching the birds making lazy circles in the sky and, at one point, thought she caught sight of the hawk.

She lay back, relaxed her breathing and drifted off into slumber. Dreams of the field she shared with Flint filled her mind. Her slumber was light enough that she sensed when a shadow passed over her. She opened her eyes and looked up. "Hello there."

"Hello yourself." Flint said as he stretched out beside her. "You're pretty hard to track down."

"So that means you were looking for me? Interesting." She smiled. "What made you come here?"

"A little bird told me." He chuckled. "What are you doing today, besides being lazy?"

"Being lazy? I cleaned my apartment spotless then spent part of the day walking around this wonderful city of ours. I deserve a break. What have you been doing?"

"I told you, I've been looking for you. I wanted to talk to you, maybe we could do dinner."

"Hmm, free dinner to a lady who's not sure she is going to have a job any time soon. Sounds like an irresistible offer."

"So, that's a yes?"

"I believe it was. What time would you like to get together?"

"I'll come by for you around six thirty." He looked at his watch. "That gives you almost two hours."

Rayne shoved off the ground. "Two hours? I need to head for home if I'm suppose to be fabulous in time for you to come and get me."

"There's no improving on perfection." He stood beside her and brushed the hair from her face. "You look fantastic just as you are."

Rayne smiled at him. "That's the sweetest crock I've ever heard." She laughed.

He laughed in reply. "I was being honest." He began to laugh harder when she crossed her eyes and puffed out her cheeks in a fish face.

"See, you can't even say it without cracking up."

Flint took a deep breath and pulled her closer in his embrace. "You are truly the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. *Ever*." He emphasized.

All thought of laughter left her brain she looked deep into his eyes and moved closer to him. Cautiously she kissed him, felt him shudder and when crushed to him, she melted into his chest.

Flint felt intoxicated by his woman, and he ached to possess every inch of her. Steeling his body, forcing it to respond to his orders rather than her kisses, he pulled away from her. "I think it's best if we put this off until later."

"So I guess I'll see you a little later?"

"Of course. I'll be round to get you at six thirty." He smiled at her.

Rayne turned, smiled and waved at him. She continued home. So, she hadn't blown it with him. She felt the bounce to her step knowing she was still in the running.

Flint watched the gentle sway of hips as she walked away from him. He went into the cover of the trees and took wing back home. Soon, he'd be with her again. He'd only just left her but he had to be with her again.

Rayne moved into her closet and sorted through her options. Last time, he'd taken her to Seigo's; what did he have in store for her tonight?

She took her shower and used her signature rose scent. She washed and dried her hair, deciding to go with a twist and curled the ends. She wove pearls through the curls and did her make up.

She pulled a little black dress from her closet, laid it out on her bed then changed out her handbag putting the very basic essentials in a small black sequined bag.

She made sure her nails were done to perfection and she pulled out her black heels. She was finished and ready when he buzzed the door promptly at six thirty p.m. She pressed the button to allow him entrance to the building.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Flint smiled as he walked to her door, the large bouquet of red roses held lightly in his arms so as not to crush a single petal. He wanted them to be perfect for her, as perfect as she was for him. He reached out to knock, surprised to see the door wasn't already opened. He knocked twice and waited.

Rayne answered and smiled at him. "Hello Flint.. Would you like to come in?"

The vision of her in that little black dress made his mouth dry and his mind went blank. When he finally remembered to breath, he couldn't get enough air in his lungs. He found his voice again. "I didn't believe it was possible but you are even more stunning than usual."

She blushed and smiled. "Are those for me?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm sorry." He handed to bouquet to her.

She led him inside and pulled a crystal vase from the china cupboard. Arranging the dazzling bouquet in the water filled vase, she carried the roses into the living room and displayed them on the coffee table. "They're beautiful and so fragrant." She inhaled deeply, stood then picked up her bag. "Shall we go?"

He offered her his arm and they walked to the street where he hailed a cab, whispered the address to the driver and sat admiring her.

When they arrived at the Versailles, Rayne was surprised. The menu offered the best steak and seafood on the planet, and the highest prices. It didn't fit with what she thought she knew about him.

Flint opened the cab door and helped her out. He wanted tonight to be perfect. He held the door for her and followed her inside. "Reservations for Kestrel." He told the hostess.

"Welcome Mr. Kestrel, follow me, please."

They followed her to a secluded table, Flint, pulled out and then scooted in Rayne's chair. When he had seated himself and they were alone, she looked at him intently. "Just when did you make these reservations?"

He smiled mischievously. "This morning."

"But you didn't know I would say yes. You said you'd been looking for me all day."

"I know. I was hoping I'd find you in time; this isn't the kind of place I'd enjoy alone. Would you mind if I ordered for the both of us?"

She put the menu on the table. Any other time, with any other person, she'd have been more than a little irritated. With him, she was flattered. "Not at all." The waitress arrived and Flint smiled at her. "We'd like two lobster dinners, the garden salads with thousand island", he checked with Rayne and, at her nod, continued, "with thousand island dressing. One unsweetened iced tea, one Dr. Pepper. And, may we have a dessert menu?"

"Certainly, sir. I'll bring your drinks right out."

"Lobster?" Rayne questioned him.

"I remember the other day you mentioned you enjoyed it almost as much as peanut butter. I hope it was all right."

"It was perfect." She smiled.

When their drinks arrived, he took a sip of the iced tea. He knew the time was coming to tell her the truth. He wanted to show her as many positives about himself as possible.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked.

"You. Seems all I can do lately. I'm not complaining. I rather enjoy thinking about you."

She flushed. "I've been thinking about you too." She admitted. Why on earth did she admit that?

He sat up taller. "Really? Only good thoughts, I hope."

Remembering the erotic dreams, she felt a flush wash over her face. "Yes, very good." She murmured softly.

The waitress brought their dinners and they dug in with a vengeance, neither quite trusting themselves to speak. Rayne pulled out a bite and dipped the lobster into melted butter. "Oh this fabulous, almost better than..."

She looked at him and stopped. Had she been with Lee, she'd have said "Better than sex." She didn't because she was with a fabulous man who treated her like a lady, but also, because she knew this meal wouldn't hold a candle to how great sex with him would be.

"What were you going to compare it to?" Flint hedged and was treated to the deepening of her blush.

"Never mind, suffice it to say the food is exquisite."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it."

The meal complete, Flint opened the dessert menu and scanned it. The waitress cleared

their dinner plates. "Dessert?"

"One piece of death-by-chocolate cheesecake, one creamy style cheesecake with strawberries, and whipped cream. Can you do something for me though?"

"If I can." The waitress replied.

"On the plate with the strawberry one, can you swirl chocolate syrup and maybe some caramel, then put the slice on, and cover it with the strawberries and whip cream?"

"I think I can arrange it."

Rayne caught the waitress's face looking like a schoolgirl with a crush; willing to do anything, short of murder, for the dark eyed man.

The feeling of jealousy was one she'd not experienced in ages and had never felt for a man she'd only known less than a week. When the girl left, Rayne smiled at him, "Looks like a conquest."

"What?" He had no idea what she was talking about. He was only aware of the beautiful woman sitting across from him.

"The waitress seems to be developing a crush on you. She was falling all over herself to please you."

The jealousy in her voice pleased him. "I didn't notice. How can a man notice chopped liver when he has filet mignons?"

Rayne laughed at the comparison, "So I'm a piece of meat?"

"Cheesecake?" The waitress placed it on the table.

"That, too." Flint laughed. He took the plates, cut the large pieces into halves and placed one of each on both plates. He passed one to Rayne and smiled. "If you're like me you can't choose between the two."

"A man after my own heart." She took a bite of the chocolate and moaned in ecstasy. "Wonderful." She took a bite of the strawberry. "Very good, but I think I like the chocolate better."

He sampled each piece also. "I like them both but I think I prefer the strawberry."

"Oh, I don't think I can eat another bite."

"I'm pretty full, too." Flint agreed.

"I never thought I'd see the time come when I was this stuffed."

He watched her lean back and relax. After a few minutes of observation, he grew

impatient to have her all to himself.

He picked up the black book containing the bill, slipped the money into it and placed it back on the table. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

He went to her chair and slid it out for her. On the walk out, he placed his hand on the small of her back rather than offering her his arm.

"Would you like to come back to my place for a drink?" She offered.

"Yes." In the cab, he placed his arm around her shoulder and gathered her close to him.

~\*~

In the kitchen of her apartment, she asked, "What can I offer you to drink?"

"Water?"

She stopped and looked at him. "Anything with it?"

"Ice?"

"All right." She got his ice water, a Dr. Pepper for herself and joined him on the sofa. "Here you are."

He accepted it with a smile and took a healthy drink. "What?" He asked as he noticed her watching him.

"Do you drink anything besides water, iced tea and lemonade?"

"No, I don't drink alcohol of any kind, don't care for soda or coffee as they have too much caffeine."

"Ah, a purist, or a health nut?"

"Bit of both."

He reached out and was pleased when she moved into his arms. He held her close listening to her breathing. "I could very easily fall in love with a woman like you, Rayne Amitola."

She stiffened slightly. Had he meant he might be falling in love with her, or he simply wanted someone like her? She wasn't sure which answer she hoped it would be.

Flint felt her body tense and knew he must tell her. It was time to come clean. "Rayne, I need to talk to you. It's very important you listen to me and let me finish before you say anything."

The urgency in his tone made her uneasy. She pulled away to look at his face. "All

right, tell me what's on your mind." She replied softly.

"It isn't easy. There's so much to say, and I don't know where to begin." He scrubbed his hand roughly across his face.

"Starting at the beginning is always a good idea."

"Many years ago a Shaman walked this earth. He lived, worked, laughed and grieved with his people. When he died, it was never an ending for he was reborn into many different tribes with the memory of the lives he'd lived before, and always with the same purpose: To find the perfect woman who would bear his son. A son who'd reunite all the tribes and return them to their roots."

"It's a variation, but my Gran used to tell us the same fairy tale when I was a kid. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Please, you promised to let me talk." He reminded her. "The shaman has returned century after century to look for his woman. I'm telling you this because I want you to understand why we met."

He took her hand in his. "I've looked for you over all my life times. You're the woman who was created to fulfill my vow. You were created for me."

Rayne stared at him. He really had slipped a cog in the works somewhere. Carefully and slowly, so as not to set him off, she slid her hand from his. "Let me see if I understand this. You're an immortal shaman who has come to the twenty first century in search of this perfect woman, and you think you've found her in me."

When he nodded, she took a deep breath. "So now what? We're to get together, I commit to you, we marry and have a child together?" Again, he nodded and she slowly moved away from him. Oh, yeah, he'd lost it big time. He was totally off his nut. "I think maybe you should go and get some rest."

"I swear, it's true." He reached out and grasped her hand tightly. "I'm the man you've been dreaming about, the man who comes to you in your visions. I know where you are, how you're feeling at all times because we're connected on a deep, spiritual level."

Hold the phone, she thought in shock. She'd never told anyone, much less him, about her dreams. There's no way he could know. Maybe he'd been guessing and managed to guess the truth. Yeah, and maybe pigs would sprout wings and fly. "It really is getting late."

"You can't tell me you don't feel it whenever we touch, or kiss; the electrical current

that feels like a lightening strike. I know all of the feelings that surge inside you. I know my caresses and kisses make you tremble in the night. I know how to make you ride wave after wave of desire and reach the ultimate heights of sexual pleasure." He purred seductively as he reached out and traced his fingers down her face.

She jerked away. He'd lost it and he'd drag her down into his delusion if she weren't careful. "I really do think you need to leave now."

"Wait, I hadn't wanted to show you yet, but I know how to convince you." He stepped back and transformed into the large hawk he knew she'd seen.

Oh yeah, it was way too late. He'd sucked her into his insanity. He was some kind of magician like David Copperfield or something. He was trying to lure her from her sanity into his madness. Right before her eyes, he changed into the hawk and then resumed the shape of the man.

"I want you to leave, right now, before I call the police and have you removed." She moved across the room clutching the phone tightly and trying to stay out of his reach.

"Rayne, I..." He saw the barely hidden fear in her eyes and knew he'd botched it. "All right, I'm leaving." He went to the door. "Please think about what I've said."

Rayne stared at him and as soon as he shut the door, she rushed to it, locking the bolts and chaining it. Once she was sure he was locked out, she collapsed on the floor.

Despite the hour, she dialed Lee's number. She hated to do it but she needed her now more than ever. Lee's tired voice answered the phone. "What?"

"Lee, can you come over, right now?"

Lee arrived a short time later. Rayne had moved as far as the sofa and no further. She opened the door when Lee buzzed and went to plop back down.

"What's wrong?" Lee demanded as she came through the door. At the shell shocked look on Rayne's face, she moved to her side.

"He's insane."

"Who?"

"Flint-he's absolutely insane."

Lee sat down next to her friend. "What happened?"

"He took me to dinner tonight, to Versailles."

"Impressive."

"Yeah, and I was suitably impressed. We had lobster and two kinds of cheesecake which we shared."

"So far, so good."

"Yeah, I thought so too, but then it got weird. I invited him back here for a drink. He wanted water." She leaned back on the cushion.

"Water isn't weird."

"Just wait, it gets better. He tells me how he could really fall in love with someone like me. We cuddle for a while then he tells me a variation on the legend my Gran used to tell me, with a twist. He thinks *he's* the shaman."

"Oh, boy."

"Oh, yeah, and he thinks I'm the woman he's been searching for to breed his son."

"Miss I-have-no-estrogen-and-no-desire-for-children?"

"And he pulled some kind of...never mind, you'd never believe it. I saw it and I don't believe it."

"Saw what?"

"Ok, but I warned you; you won't believe it. He pulled some kind of Siegfried and Roy thing. He somehow 'transformed' into a hawk right in front of my eyes. I don't have any idea where he got it from or where it went but I saw him do it. Maybe he put something in my drink, or it was some kind of hypnosis thing. I invited him into my home and life. I should've

*known* he was too good to be true. There had to be something wrong with him and damned if there wasn't."

"A psychotic magician? Maybe you can get him on some kind of medication?" Lee offered with a laugh.

"Not funny. I thought that before, not about planning a future with a man who needed medicating daily, but that he needed psychiatric care. Besides, I'm already on the edge, if I spend too much time with him, we'd need connecting padded rooms."

"What makes you think you're crazy?"

Rayne swallowed hard not sure what to say. She loved Lee and rarely did they hold secrets from each other, maybe she should tell her everything.

"Every since the night in the bar, I've been thinking about that stupid legend. The man is in my thoughts so much I've begun dreaming about him, and they're not regular dreams, sometimes they're so hot...you get the idea."

"Oh, those kind of dreams."

"Yeah, and the man has always looked the same, just like Flint; and then when I met him at El Mariachis last Saturday night...I freaked because my dream man and he were the same man! Tonight, he told me he knew all about the dreams and the feelings I had from and during them."

"Lucky guess; a lot of women have erotic dreams."

Rayne flushed. "That's what I thought but I'm not sure. He is so identical to the image I've held every since Gran first told me the tale. He knew about my dreams and visions, hell, he changed into a bird right in front of me. Maybe he is who he says he is."

"It's official, you really do need to be taken to a psych ward if you believe he's a fairy tale shaman."

Rayne laughed, she was crazy if she believed it; there was bound to be a logical explanation for what she thought she'd seen earlier. "You're right, I'm losing it."

Lee went into the kitchen. She opened the cabinet under the sink, selected a bottle, got a glass and rejoined Rayne. She poured a healthy dose and handed it to her. "The doctor is in."

Rayne took the glass and swallowed the mint-flavored alcohol. Her head jerked back and forth. "Wow, I'd forgotten I had that in there. I haven't had McGillicuddy's in ages."

Lee grinned and took the bottle back into the kitchen. "One's enough. I want to calm your nerves not get you plowed."

Rayne lay down and breathed deeply. "I'm not insane, I'm perfectly rational. I find him attractive because he looks so much like a childhood fantasy I'd imagined, I couldn't help but find him appealing. Since he had a name, it was easier to let him be the man in my fantasy."

"Now, I really need to get some sleep if I'm going to get anything done at work tomorrow. Will you be all right?"

Rayne nodded. "Thanks for coming, I'll see you soon."

"You betcha, now get in bed and get some sleep yourself." Lee opened the door. "Good night."

"Night." She heard the door close and relaxed for a bit longer before going and securing the locks.

~ \* ~

She was standing in the middle of the green field on the rise overlooking the river. The sun filled the sky and a soft breeze carried the smell of wild roses to her nose.

"Hello Rayne."

She turned and saw him standing behind her. She reached out her arms to him and pulled him into her embrace. She returned the kisses he gave, allowing the love to pass from her into him and felt it returned ten fold. "I love you." She murmured to him.

He pushed her back only far enough to look deeply into her eyes. Carefully he studied her. "What did you say?" He asked.

"I said I love you. I think I've loved you all my life. I feel as if we were created for each other, like it was planned from the beginning of time for us to be together. I really love you."

A smile curved his lips. "I've searched many life times to find you. Every morning, I offered my prayers to the Creator it would be the day I'd find you. Over the centuries, I felt discouraged when you were not there. Now, here you are, in my life and my arms, right where you belong. I love you more than I ever believed was possible."

He kissed her and the world spun wildly on its axis. Finally, the pieces of her life fit, she was with the man she belonged and she'd spend an eternity loving him more every single day.

A sound shrilled and she looked about for the source. What was making the noise? There on a table was a phone, in the middle of the field—a table? The dream released her and she reached out for the phone. "Hello?"

"Rayne? It's Maggie, did you get my message?"

"Message?" Rayne struggled to separate dream from reality. The message about her job. "I got it. Sorry I haven't called you back. Things have been a little crazy around here."

"I bet if you came in this morning, he'd be glad to see you and offer you the job back."

"He can call *me* if he wants me back. He and I both know I was right. It's time for the man to admit he was wrong."

"What if he doesn't?"

Rayne hadn't thought of that. "There are other firms. Maybe it's time for me to branch out and start my own company." Now where had that come from? She'd never thought it before much less suggested it.

"What? You'd do that?"

"Why not? I've been a successful member of the team long enough. I also have business administration under my belt." The idea definitely appealed to her. "Maggie, I'll call you later."

"OK, bye."

Rayne sat up with renewed purpose to her life. She ran to the study and pulled out all her books. "If I took this from here, I could do it! I wouldn't have any savings left, but I could do this!" She jumped up and ran to the bedroom.

"Where could I put my office?" She wondered as she changed. She dashed out the door and headed to the realtor's office.

The door binged when she opened it and was greeted by the receptionist. "Welcome to Turner Homes, may I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for someone who could show me business properties."

"Of course, let me get him for you."

Rayne waited while the receptionist buzzed the realtor. She was treated to the sight of a handsome blond man walking towards her. She accepted his extended hand. "Hello, Rayne Amitola."

"Pleasure to meet you, Rayne, Mike Winters. I understand you're interested in commercial listings?"

"Yes, I'm thinking of opening my own ad agency and am trying to get my finances ironed out." She followed as he led her to a conference room. She took the seat he offered and waited for him to open the listings.

"Are you interested in buying or leasing?"

"I was hoping to lease, initially." She reconsidered. "However, buying the property might be better in the long run."

He smiled and entered the information in the computer. "And where would you like to settle?"

"I'd like somewhere near here. I don't live far and I'd prefer to stay in the neighborhood."

He again added the information and printed up the listings handing the paper to her.

As she scanned, she saw her worst fears realized; the prices ranged from half a million to five million, way out of her league. She kept the disappointment from her face and looked back at him. "What about the lease properties?"

He retrieved the information for her. "I'm afraid we don't handle many lease properties here, but these are the locations we do deal with." He took the papers from the printer and handed them to her.

Once more, she looked over the offerings. She knew starting the business would be costly and the lease prices high, but this was more than she'd bargained for. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Winters."

"If you'll give me your contact information, I'll be happy to keep my eye open for you."

"Certainly." She put the information down on the paper and rose from the chair. "I look forward to hearing from you."

"If you'd be interested, I can take you to see some of these." He offered.

She stopped. What can it hurt to look, she thought. "Shall we?"

He followed her out of the room. "I'll be out for a while Tina." He led Rayne out of the office, hailed a cab and gave the driver the first address.

Rayne sat back in the seat and glanced sideways at him. He was a very handsome man;

his blond hair curled slightly, his blue green eyes sparkled with life. Definitely a man worthy of her attention, even though her tastes ran toward the tall, dark and handsome, this one wasn't bad on the eyes.

The cab stopped and he opened the door. "Here we are." He walked to front of the building. Rayne followed and peered into the window. For the asking price, it wasn't what she'd pictured. It was over two grand a month and the interior was dismal. She pulled out a pen and made notes on what needed work.

"If you'd like to see the inside, I can contact the agent and get us in."

"Not right now."

"All right, would you like to see the next one?"

She nodded and went back to the cab. They rode on to the next location where, once again, she looked in the windows. This one was in slightly better condition, and the price was twenty-five thousand a month.

She spent the rest of the morning looking at properties with him and making notes. As the properties improved in condition, the prices rose accordingly.

"Are you hungry?" He asked.

"I've taken so much of your time already."

"It's no bother, I need to get some lunch too."

"Yes, I'm a little hungry." She finally agreed.

They stopped at a bistro and ordered sandwiches and sodas, sitting at a little white iron table under a large red and white striped umbrella on the sidewalk.

"Did you see anything that interested you so far?"

She looked at him and smiled. "I've seen several things. There were two places I'd like to see the inside, find out what needs repairing and get estimates so I have a better idea of a budget."

Rayne watched as he nodded but didn't hear what he said; she saw Flint standing on the sidewalk watching her. The look on his face was pain, anger and sadness mingled together. What he thought was written all over his face. He thought she was out on a date with another man.

"Rayne?" He asked her.

"Hello, Flint." She smiled.

His forced smile was unconvincing.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." He said through gritted teeth.

She was becoming annoyed. "I'm sorry, when did what I do become any business of yours?" She saw Mr. Winters fidget uncomfortably in his chair and, while she felt bad for him, she refused to let up. "I'm still my own person; free to come and go as I please. If I choose to have a lunch date with someone, it's no concern of yours."

"No concern of mine?" He roared and people stopped to stare. "I've told you I love you and you think what you do is no concern of mine?"

At this point, Mr. Winters flushed brightly and stood. "Maybe I should go and let you and your boyfriend talk this out."

"He isn't my boyfriend, my husband, nor my fiancé. He's a...a psychotic magician who has the hots for me."

There were nervous titters and some people moved off as others pressed closer, interested in the lovers quarrel playing out before them.

"Psychotic magician?" Flint's mouth dropped.

"How about my stalker? That's what you're doing, isn't it? Everywhere I go, that's where you end up being. How can you find me unless you're stalking me? Maybe you turned into a hawk and flew above the city until you spied me?"

Flint's face darkened. How could she have announced his secret to the world? He knew the crowd assumed she was making light of him, but he felt betrayed. "You don't have to worry about it anymore." He stalked away.

Rayne stood and watched him stomp away her heart breaking in two. She loved him, she had come to the realization earlier, and was going to tell him but now--now, it was pointless. She found Mr. Winters not far away. "I'm terribly sorry. I don't usually stand on the street corner and shout like a fishwife."

He nodded, backing away and hailing a cab. "I'll contact you when I have more listings for you." He climbed into the cab which was quickly swallowed by the noontime traffic.

She stood feeling very foolish and alone. When would she ever learn to keep her mouth shut? No, Flint didn't have the right to assume anything, but she should've kept her cool, pulled him to the side and calmly explained it to him. Instead, she'd bellowed like a raging

bull right back at him.

She headed back to her apartment vowing to concentrate on her own business and not think about men in general, Flint in particular.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the days that followed her decision to open her own business and her wild exchange with Flint, Rayne kept herself busy, visiting possible locations, narrowing the search down, getting estimates on repairs and remodels, filling out loan papers and waiting to hear from the bank. She fell into bed exhausted every night and woke even more tired the next day. Her dreams were conspicuously empty of Flint. If he'd told the truth and they were spiritually connected, he'd severed the connection completely.

Days passed swiftly and it was Saturday before she knew it. The days of no rest pressed on her and she couldn't find the energy to do anything. The phone rang and she reached out to answer it. "Hello?"

"Rayne? Did I wake you?" Lee asked.

"You think I've been sleeping?" She replied bitterly. "I'm sorry, I'm just so tired. What's up?"

"Well I needed to go to the grocery store and wondered if you wanted to come along?"

"I don't know, I guess so. You want to come here or should I pick you up?"

"Since you're the one with the car maybe you could come here?"

"Let me get dressed and I'll be there."

"See you in a bit."

Rayne cut off Lee mid goodbye and hung up the phone. She dressed without any real thought and got into the car. She drove the short three blocks to Lee's apartment and went to the door.

"I'll be right out." Lee shouted.

Rayne got back in her car. In minutes, Lee was jumping in beside her.

"Hey." She started the engine.

"Hold it." Lee commanded. "I know you've been stressing about starting your own business and all, but what's really going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Want me to start at the top?" At Rayne's nod, she did. "You're hair has lost all its luster and shine. You have it pulled into a *sloppy* pony tail, so there is issue one." She ran her gaze up and down Rayne's seated position.

"Number two, you're wearing a red top and pink socks. And I never, *ever* thought I'd see the day when you not only are wearing gold polish instead of red, it's chipped and you haven't filed your nails. What's going on?"

Rayne shrugged. "I'm just busy and tired." She started the car and they drove off. Soon, she was leaving the city and headed southward.

"Are we going to visit your folks?"

"No." Rayne just kept driving.

After passing several exits, Lee spoke again. "Where are we going?"

Rayne shrugged and dropped the top on her convertible. The wind effectively putting a stop to any conversation, as she continued to drive south.

Rayne recognized the exit for the park Flint had taken so she left the thoroughfare and followed the route. She parked under a tree.

Lee sat silently watching her for a few minutes. "What's going on?"

Rayne shrugged and got out of the car. She walked across the rise and stopped to look out over the field she'd shared so many happy times with Flint, both real and in dreams. "He brought me here."

"Flint?"

Rayne nodded and walked to the river's edge. She slipped off her shoes and socks and waded into the water. She was soon standing in water that reached her knees.

Lee stood back watching her best friend stare off into space. It made her feel strange. Rayne was always the brave one, the strong one, the one everyone leaned on for support and answers. Finally, she slipped off her sandals and waded in to stand by her. "Rayne? It happens to the best of us. The question now is; what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not in love with him and what I'm going to do is forget all about him and move on with my life. I'm working on starting my own advertising agency. I'm going to do what I always do, work and succeed. Who needs him anyway? He's just some man who wandered into my life and now he's gone. I'm not in love with him."

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much."

Rayne scowled at her. "I don't love him. I'm not in love with him. Why would I even consider being with a man who is crazy enough to believe he's some fairy tale creature, who stalks my every move, who has spent so much time observing me he has paintings all over his

Donica Covey studio of me?"

She looked at Lee. "He is arrogant, insane, pushy, insane, over bearing, insane, talented, insane, oh, and did I mention, insane?"

"Ok, now that you've exhausted all the negatives tell me about the positives?"

Rayne stared off across the river. "He treats me like a lady; opening doors, pulling out chairs, offering me his arm. He isn't obsessed with material things, no high maintenance life styles. He doesn't drink or smoke and I've never heard him swear. He has the manners of a medieval knight."

"Or a man who has lived forever?"

Rayne ignored the comment. "When he held my hand or touched my face, I felt a lightening strike of energy that seared my soul. When he held me in his arms, I felt like I belonged. When he took me to his house, I felt, like I'd come home."

"And you're going to let a little thing like him thinking he can change into a bird stop you?"

Rayne laughed. "Leave it to you to see the humor in the situation."

"I'm serious, let me play devil's advocate for a minute. The man is sexy, loving, caring, looking for a commitment, he can do magic tricks, and makes you feel like you've come alive for the first time in your life. Honey, what are you waiting for? Grab hold of this chance with both hands and don't let go. Love only comes to us once in a life time and to miss your chance is criminal." Lee turned and sloshed out of the water to lie on the grassy bank.

Rayne flopped down next to her. She churned over what Lee had said and her tumbled feelings mixed and blended in her mind. She sat up. "Look at me and tell me what you see." She demanded.

Lee's forehead crinkled in concentration. "I see an industrious hard working person who has fought hard to get where she is."

"You've described what I do. How would you describe me to someone else?"

"You're beautiful, faithful, tenacious, considerate, and loyal."

"You just described a bloodhound."

"What do you want from me? I don't know what you're fishing for." Lee argued.

"I'm over thirty, physically fit, attractive and definitely a woman. How come for the first time in my life, I realized no other man in my life has ever made me feel this way?"

"I keep telling you, LOVE! I've heard love makes you feel this way."

"I'm not in love: I need to see a shrink." Rayne walked away.

"Where are you going?"

"I need some time to think." She walked off towards a small wooded path and began to meander through the trees, following a footpath illuminated by the tree-filtered sunlight.

She really needed a good psychiatrist; he was sucking her into a fantasy world. She was falling in love with a man from her dreams and fantasies. That should be good for some time in a rest home.

## Donica Covey CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Flint raged and seethed. How could he have acted that way? He'd behaved like a possessive human man. He was above such things. It wasn't right for him. He'd created a scene and hadn't given her the chance to explain. He knew she loved him, she'd admitted it already, though she didn't accept it yet.

Yes, he wanted to know who the man was she was with, but recalling the images now, he realized there was nothing remotely intimate in what he'd seen. She was sitting at the table with him, but they weren't seated near each other. They hadn't been holding hands, or cuddling, or kissing merely having lunch.

What if he'd been a business associate? He reached out to search her mind, to see the truth, but he felt nothing. Had she closed her mind to him? Or had the Creator used this as a way to punish him for his all too mortal behavior. For days, he'd neither slept nor eaten; all he could do was stand before the paintings of her and stare. He could think of nothing but the fact he'd destroyed all possible chance of being with her.

He couldn't stand it any longer. In the early hours he fell to his knees and lifted his voice. "Creator, master of Breath, Wakan Tanka, Great Spirit, I beg you, forgive my mortal actions and allow me to be with she who is the one who holds my heart in her hand. Return our connection; allow us to be together once more. Grant me your absolution for my misdeed and right my feet on the path that leads to the fulfillment of my vow. Reunite me with the one I love."

He remained seated for hours; the sun rose above his head and climbed into the sky. His muscles ached and throbbed, his arms and legs becoming numb; his stomach cried for food. Thirst filled him, yet, he didn't move.

The sun slowly lowered into the west and still, he waited for the Great One above the Sky to show him a sign. The sun slowly reappeared over the eastern horizon, climbed along its path and despair filled him. Because he'd turned from his own path, the Creator had refused him his request.

At the zenith of the sun, just as it was wringing the last bit of moisture from him, a vision clouded his mind. She was standing under trees lost and lonely, longing for him. "Thank you." He lowered his arms and pushed up from the ground. He worked to replace the stiffness

with blood as his circulation returned.

Despite the pinpricks of returning feeling to his extremities, he bathed and dressed then went to her. He lifted on the currents of the air and rushed to her.

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A rustling in the trees ahead made her pause. She wasn't alone and she was afraid it wasn't Lee. "Is someone there?" She called out, waiting but receiving no reply. "Silly twit." She chastised aloud. Must've been a bird or something. Walking ahead further, she heard more movement.

"Rayne?"

She thought she heard his voice coming from the path up ahead. "Flint?"

He seemed to materialize right before her eyes and she stumbled on the path. Her arms tingled and her heart pounded wildly when he reached out to right her step.

"What are you doing here? Where did you come from?"

"I'm here for you. I've come to apologize for my stupid actions and beg for your forgiveness."

"How did you know I was here?"

He smiled and moved towards her. "Do you still not understand? I could find you no matter where you are or what you do. Your heart calls to mine, drawing me to you."

She shivered at his words. "I feel it too sometimes." She moved into the arms he stretched out to her and felt whole being held to him.

"Now we can join, nothing stands in my way. You can bring my son into the world and fulfill your purpose."

Rayne stiffened and pulled away from him. "My purpose? You make me sound like I'm a disposable resource. I'm only to be used once then discarded? You're an arrogant...you keep talking about that stupid myth."

"What more can I do to prove to you I am who I say? I've shown you my transformation. I've repeated your dreams and still, you doubt me."

"Lucky guesses and magic tricks don't mean a lot. I don't know what I think or believe anymore. I have to go. My friend is waiting for me."

"You know all you need to know. You were created for me. You were made to bear my son and be my mate."

"I'm not a damned brood mare. Good bye, Flint." She turned on her heel and stalked away from him.

He followed behind her trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. She should be walking with him not from him. Why was she making it so difficult?

Rayne rushed up to Lee. "We need to go, now." She glanced back and saw him standing at the tree line.

"What happened? What's wrong? Did he hurt you?"

"Yes, but not in the way you meant. That's Flint; he wanted to talk to me."

"Wonderful! Isn't it?"

"It could have been." She said sadly.

"Where did he come from?"

"He just flew in." She started the car. She cut off anything Lee may have said by pulling out and speeding down the highway.

At her apartment, Lee sat on the sofa and watched Rayne pace back and forth across the room.

"When are you going to tell me what happened? Did you tell him you loved him?"

"I started to, until he informed me that, now, we'd been reunited there was nothing to stop from my becoming his mate."

"Mate?"

"Yeah, he wants to mate with me to produce his son like the legend says."

"How romantic." Lee said, sarcastically.

"I didn't think so either. I can't believe I'm in love with a man who not only doesn't love me but thinks he's some legendary shaman and wants to use me as his brood mare."

"And if he loved you?"

"What difference would it make if he loved me? He needs an intervention. I'm am not interested in having a child with anyone who needs mental help!

"That's a change for someone who never wanted children in the first place."

Rayne stopped mid stride. "Who said I've changed my mind?"

"Sounded like you just did."

Before Rayne could say anything, a shadow crossed the window and she ran to look out into the sky. She sighed in relief and heard Lee chuckle.

"I don't think you'll find him out there." Lee laughed.

Rayne stuck her tongue out. "I wasn't looking for him. I was just looking." She sat on the sofa. "I wanted to hear him say he loved me, and me alone, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. I wanted the whole wine and roses bit. Is that asking for too much?"

"And if he gave you the wine and roses routine, it would it make a difference?"

"It wouldn't hurt. You know my Aunt Jenny?"

"The one who thinks she's a lighthouse?"

Rayne nodded. "If Uncle Peter can live with her, then I could live with a man who thinks he's immortal. At least I don't have to worry about him climbing on the roof of the house every time it stormed."

"Definitely could be worse. Will you call him and talk to him?"

"Who needs a phone? We're 'psychically connected' so I'll just turn on the old brain waves, send the signal and wait for him to fly over."

"I can tell you're feeling better now. I need to be going, I still have to get my grocery shopping done."

"I'm so sorry, I forgot all about that. Want me to go with?"

"Only if you want to and promise not to take me off on some wild adventure."

"I promise."

They headed off with the intent of grocery shopping and Rayne tried hard to keep her focus on the task at hand.

Shopping with Lee was always an adventure. Lee was the ultimate coupon clipping budget shopper. She went through her coupons and the sale ad matching them together.

Rayne had never been a budget conscious person. If she saw it and wanted it, she bought it. Now, she was learning Lee's technique to cut costs. "Where to first?"

"Do you have your coupons?"

"I have some."

They went through her coupons and list and bought only sale items. At the meat counter, Rayne felt a twinge of loss. "I really want some pork steaks, but not on my current budget."

"You can still get them." Lee rummaged through the plastic wrapped items. She held up the treasure she found. "Here you go."

Rayne looked at the price, "They're a lot cheaper than the others."

"I know it's a butcher's special. They go through and make price reductions on packages that are at a certain date."

"Old meat? You want me to buy meat passed its expiration date?"

"It's not rancid; I always buy my meat this way. They have to sell these packages within a certain time frame and the longer it has been here the lower the price. The meat is still good and you can take it home, separate it out and freeze it. How do you think I've been able to have steak for dinner the few times?"

Rayne still wasn't sure, but she knew Lee always shopped in the same pattern for herself so she wouldn't steer her wrong. She put the package in her cart and moved on. She cut out the usual delicacies replacing them with knock off versions or cutting them all together. At the check out with a full cart, she was stunned when she paid less than half of her usual grocery bill and still had most everything she normally purchased. "You could make a fortune teaching people how to shop, you know that?"

Lee laughed. "I couldn't, I'd end up having money for the first time in my life and I'd forget how to bargain hunt."

She drove Lee home, helped her carry her groceries in and then went home. She put away her own groceries, then and relaxed on the sofa. Her phone messages were relatively light; her mother called to see if she'd be coming out the next day and Lacey called about setting up the baby shower for Cadence. She'd call them back later. She turned on the television. Channel surfing, she found a nature program on bats. They were focusing on her favorite species, the flying fox. The camera pulled in close on one of the adorable canine-like faces with ears pricked and eyes shining.

"Stop it." She said to the empty room.

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Flint sat in his darkening living room, the sunlight fading away. What had gone wrong that time? She'd been warm and willing in his arms then her personality lunged and she was mad at him again. Why? When they should be together planning their future, they were separated by her anger and he didn't know what he'd done. He concentrated on her, she was sitting on her sofa watching television and thinking...bats? He probed her mind to see why she was upset with him. He felt her block him and he pulled away.

The sun pricked and he fisted his gritty eyes. She was the reason he couldn't sleep and it

irked him. He rubbed his chin and rose to shower. He entered the cedar-paneled room and turned on the hot water stripping from his wrinkled jeans and t-shirt. Under the hot spray, he grabbed the sandalwood and musk soap bar and scrubbed vigorously. Once cleaned, he dressed in a pair of faded wranglers and a black t-shirt. He went to his studio and flipped on the fluorescents that illuminated his sanctuary. He was immediately drawn to the canvas painting of the couple protected by the hawk.

111

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rayne sat up and realized she'd never called her family last night. She got up from the sofa first stretching high to the ceiling and bending low at the waist to release the kinks from her back.

She took a fast shower then selected her outfit for the day. She had to dress carefully otherwise her family was sure to know something was going on if she didn't.

She looked at her sadly neglected nails and sat to do her manicure. She'd chosen a peach colored top and matching sock so she selected her peach polish and made her nails look their very best. She fixed her hair and, glancing at the clock, knew she couldn't call because her parents would be at church. She could be at their house by the time they got home if she left immediately. She drove out to her parents' home determined to think of anything but Flint. It was a battle she was losing; he seemed to be everywhere. She pulled into the drive and parked in front of the house to wait. She didn't wait long.

"Hello Hun." Her father called as he got out of the car.

"Hey there." She called back and walked to them. She put her arm around her mother and they followed her father into the house.

"You can help me with lunch." Her mom dragged her into the kitchen. Once alone in the other room, her mother looked at her. "What's the matter?"

"Excuse me? What makes you think something's wrong."

"I know something is wrong, you're here early preferring to spend time listening to me pressure you to get married and find happiness in raising a family."

"So you admit to pressuring me."

"Only to you, my dear, and after this conversation, I will never admit it again." She smiled and hugged her daughter. "Now tell me what's wrong."

Rayne began peeling potatoes as she considered where to begin. "Don't go getting wild on me, but I think I found someone and have fallen in love."

"Rayne that's wonderful! Who is he, when do we get to meet him?"

"This is what I meant by going wild, Ma. There's a problem with him. Remember the legend Gran used to tell us about the shaman who would father the 'savior' to unite all the tribes?"

"I've been hearing that legend all my life. What has this got to do with your love life?"

"Everything. He looks just like the man I imagined him looking like. And what's worse, he thinks he is the shaman from the legend." She looked at her mother closely.

"Interesting. So the man who has made you admit to falling in love is a little off."

"A little? Ma, he thinks he can change into a hawk! He even made *me* think he could. He was standing in my apartment one minute, and the next there was a hawk there!"

Her mother moved them to the table. "What if he really is who he says he is, Rayne?" "If he is then I'm Queen Elizabeth."

"Just think about it for a minute, your Majesty. What if he really is and you are the chosen one. Rayne, you have admitted to him looking like your fantasy; that can't be coincidence. You act and look like a woman in love, so what is the problem?"

"The problem is he can't be! This is the real world and those things can't happen in the real world."

"Open your mind, Rayne. There are things beyond our explanation, defy logic, but they're real. What if he is?"

Rayne stood back and stared at her mother; surely, she'd lost her mind. Her logical, rational mother had lost it but good. "Let's, for argument's sake, say I buy this whole immortal thing. Being immortal means he lives forever. If we get together and marry, what will happen as we, no I, grow older?"

"You'll be the envy of all the other geriatrics in the retirement home." Her mother smiled.

"And since he's part bird what will I do, lay eggs?"

"That's one way to avoid the pain of labor and delivery, we'll build you a nest." She laughed.

Rayne couldn't help it; she laughed at the whole preposterous situation. "I don't know what to do, Ma. I really haven't known him for very long at all, and yet, I feel like I've known him all my life. I dream about him in very vivid detail. I really think I've fallen in love with him."

Dian sobered and smiled. "That's the main thing, with love, all things are possible. We can have J.D. investigate him if you'd like. Does he love you?"

"He told me he could easily fall in love with someone like me, but that was right before he told me he believed he was immortal."

"It's a start. Now, do we ask J.D. to check him out?"

"I'm afraid of what I might find out. I mean, if he is crazy can I deal with his delusion, and if he isn't crazy and really is what he says, can I handle knowing he will go on and live forever while I'll just get older and older and eventually die?"

"Which one scares you more?"

"The thought of spending my life without him in it. And if he *is* what he claims and we get together, what then?"

"Go forth, be fruitful and multiply with a clear conscious." Her mother smiled and kissed the top of her head. "And you'll have the blessings of your family."

Rayne smiled and moved to finish peeling the potatoes. She put them into the pot, filled it with water and placed them on the stove.

"So when do we get to meet him?"

Of course, she should have known that was coming. "I don't know, Ma. I'm not sure when I'll see him again." She laughed. "I could just send him a mental message and have him fly over."

They laughed together and left the kitchen to welcome the rest of the family as they arrived and filled the house with love and noise.

Flint felt her thinking about him and longed to go to her, only the knowledge she was with her family stopped him. She needed time to process, but he could tell she was becoming more receptive to the truth.

It wouldn't be long before they would be together forever. Soon he'd be holding her, planning their life and within a year he'd be holding their son. It was perfect, and it couldn't come soon enough.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rayne arrived at her new office. Soon she'd be ready to open her door and meet with her first client. She moved around the ladder and picked up the paint tray, excitement building. The deep maroon color she'd chosen had been cause for some concern at first, as she was afraid it'd be too dark. Now that it was partially painted, it was shaping up nicely. She'd paint the trim an oatmeal shade. The Berber carpet she'd chosen had been an oatmeal background with flecks of the maroon, hunter green and navy. She'd ordered walnut bookshelves and a desk for her office. The receptionist's office would have an oak desk and file cabinets.

She'd had to start small but, fortunately, she could do her own artwork and computer graphics. She hadn't hired a receptionist, yet, sure that by the time she needed one, she'd have an established client base.

Concentrating on painting the wall, she was startled by a tap on the window. She looked to see Flint standing outside the door. She climbed down the ladder and opened it to let him in. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you could use a hand." He came in and picked up a brush. "Where would you like me to start?"

"Over there?" She pointed to the opposite wall. She smiled when he took a paint tray, climbed the ladder and started painting.

She watched him paint one wall then finish the one she'd started earlier. She only needed to apply another four-foot square and she was done. She watched him for a bit longer then grinned. "Nice to see you're putting your talent to good use." She laughed at him.

He climbed down and walked toward her, the brush held menacingly in her direction. She backed away from him trying to avoid the wet paint. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd add a little color to your wardrobe." He laughed.

She stopped and glared at him. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh wouldn't I?" He took the brush and skimmed it down the side of her body. "Never dare me." He grinned.

"You rat." She grabbed her own paintbrush and advanced on him.

He stood in place and smiled. "I don't think you're the type to paint a man into a corner."

She moved closer and painted a line from his chest to his left knee. "You look great in maroon."

He pressed her against the freshly painted wall, leaving an impression of her body as he kissed her.

She pushed him back, turning to look at the damage. "My wall, look what you did to it!" She lunged at him and slapped him upside the head with the paintbrush.

"Not fair, no hitting above the shoulders." He laughed.

She hit him in the butt next. "Any rules against below the belt?"

He put his brush down and raised his hands in surrender. "I give. I'll fix it for you, I promise."

"Thank you." She moved to hug him missing the small movement he made.

He placed his hand on the small of her back and pulled her close. Wrapping both arms around her, he placed the palms of his hands solidly on the seat of her jeans and pulled her to him. "You feel so good to me."

"You feel pretty good, too." She heard the door and tried to pull free just as her mother and father came in the office.

"Are we interrupting something?" Her mother choked down a laugh.

"No. Ma, Dad, this is my friend, Flint Kestrel. Flint, my parents Ray and Dian Amitola. I'm glad you're here, two more pair of hands are welcomed additions." She poured more paint into trays. She heard her mother laugh and her father clear his throat roughly.

She turned to look and see what they found so amusing but all three had angelic faces of innocence. Her radar went off the charts. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Her mother smiled.

Flint shrugged his shoulders and her father had a blank look on his face. She didn't buy the act for a minute. "I know you three are up to something." They still said nothing so she passed out the trays. "Fine get to work." She turned to face Flint. "You fix the damage you've done."

He turned to the smudge mark that was the perfect silhouette of her body. "I think you should keep it. It adds a special, personalizing touch."

"I agree." Her mother said in his defense. "It's charming."

Her father snorted, smiled and turned to face the wall, putting more concentration than

needed on the paint strokes.

She shook her head and returned to work on the remaining wall. She listened to her parents' laugh and joke with Flint, his good-natured, rumbling laugh resonating back to her. When Flint said something about a movie, Rayne wanted to die.

"Movies? Don't ever take Rayne to see those silly horror flicks." Dian cautioned with a laugh.

"A decision I can guarantee you'd regret." Ray added.

"Don't go there." Rayne warned and held her paintbrush ready to throw it.

Flint was now curious. "I don't watch those. Why?"

"Because my mother is just dying to embarrass me." Rayne complained. "It's nothing."

"Nothing? We thought someone was dying." Her father argued.

"She had her friend Lee for a sleep over." Dian started.

"So she does it, anyway." Rayne moaned.

Flint looked at them. "And?"

"And the girls were watching some Jason Kruger movie."

"It's Freddy Kruger, Ma. And it wasn't that one; it was a Jason movie." She corrected. "If you're going to shame me, get the facts right."

"Whichever, they invite Cadence, that's our youngest, to watch the movies with them. Ray and I are sound asleep in our beds, and the three of them are huddled together watching these things, scaring themselves to death. Suddenly, there's this horrible scream, then two more join it and the house echoes with them."

She stopped and put the paintbrush down. "Ray and I rush down to find them hugging and screaming. 'What's going? Who's hurt? What happened?' we demand to know. Cadence has tears streaming down her face, Lee is pale and they're all shaking. They'd gotten scared by some shadows."

"Rayne had Cadence sleep in her room for almost two weeks after, she was so afraid to be alone, and Cadence had to have the night light on."

"Cadence was in my room because she was afraid to go to sleep. She was sure Freddy was coming after her." Rayne explained.

"And you had to drag Lee by the collar to get her to go on the lake with you that summer."

"She was the one who started screaming!" Rayne looked at Flint. "At the end of the movie, Jason comes up out of the water and grabs the only survivor by the neck, pulling her under the water. So when we went to the lake, I just casually mentioned at one time it had been known as Crystal Lake, the same name as the lake in the movie. I don't know why she freaked out on me."

Rayne looked at her mother. "I was never scared, I only screamed so Lee and Caddy wouldn't feel stupid." She climbed back up the ladder as the laughter filled the room.

They passed the morning pleasantly and near noon her stomach began to rumble. "I think we need to take a break for lunch soon."

Ray climbed down from the ladder he'd been on and put the brush down on the tray rest. "I, for one, could use some food." He rotated his arm to work out the kink. "Ahh, that feels better."

Dian moved to her husband and massaged his shoulder. "Feel better?"

"Mmm, that feels great." He smiled and reached up to cover her hand with his.

Rayne watched the loving exchange and felt a warmth in her stomach. She saw Flint watching her; she smiled and moved to his side. She snaked her arm around his waist. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starved." He admitted and slid his arm around her waist.

"Ready to eat?" She called to her parents.

"Any time you say." Her father squeezed her mother's hand.

They left the office and, after Rayne locked the door, strolled to the sub shop down the block. As they walked, Rayne noticed the occasional funny looks she was treated to but figured it was the paint the entire crew wore as war marks and dismissed it.

Inside the sub shop, they placed their orders, collected their food and more strange looks. Rayne met each look with a smile and then disregarded the strangers.

After they sat down, her father smiled. "Did you know in the old days when a warrior went into battle he'd put a painted hand print on his pony's neck to identify it as his?"

"Really?" Rayne asked, wondering where the topic had come from.

"Among some tribes." Flint nodded.

"Why are we talking about this?" Rayne asked.

"It's history, dear." Dian smiled at her daughter in a tone that made her feel like a

Hawk's Rayne dense child.

"So Flint, tell us about yourself." Ray prompted.

Rayne stopped chewing for a minute as she waited for what Flint would say. "Please don't let him start talking about being a birdman." She pleaded silently.

"I'm an artist, sir. I do metal sculptures, paintings and sketches."

Rayne breathed a mental sigh of relief and finished her meal. Everyone else was done and she stood to take the trays and dump the trash. Flint rose before her and took them from her hand.

"Thank you."

He smiled and walked away. He was glad her parents had joined them today. They were immensely likeable people who loved their daughter and their love for each other shined like the sun. They were constantly touching and smiling.

As he walked back to the table, Rayne was standing. People were looking at her, some were pointing and whispering. He walked up, put his arm around her waist, and hooked his thumb in the waist of her jeans. He looked back as a younger man grinned and gave him a thumb's up sign.

She watched her parents walk ahead of them, arm in arm and cuddled close. Would she ever find that with Flint, or anyone? His arm around her waist now felt right, her head reaching his chest. She sighed contentedly and felt his grip tighten.

She opened the door, letting her folks go in first, and was held back by Flint. "You need something?"

"Why did you sigh that way?"

"I just realized I am as high as your heart." She hugged him and pressed her face into his chest.

"You are already in it." He kissed the top of her head. He loved her completely, with no reservations. He was sure she felt the same and longed to hear her say so. Inside, he watched her talking to her mother as she examined what they'd done that morning. She was radiant and talked excitedly about when she was ready to open the office. He felt a pang at the knowledge he would disappoint her when they joined and she would be required to give up her career to be his wife and mother of his son.

She flashed a smile at him and he pushed the thoughts away. He'd make her happy and

she'd never regret the things she'd have to sacrifice to be with him.

"While the walls dry, we need to work on the baseboards and trims." She walked around trying to list what remained to be done.

"The window casings need to be painted. The glass needs to be cleaned then the men can come and install the carpet." She clapped her hands together in glee. "It's almost ready! I can't believe it!" She danced around the room lightly.

Dian laughed. "You look like you did when it was almost time to open your Christmas presents."

Rayne laughed. "Give me, give me, give me."

Her father walked into her office and came back out. "You really like bold colors, don't you."

She'd chosen a deep navy for her own office, a color of soothing confidence. Her dark furniture would make a lovely statement. She had decided on light blue curtains to accent the bold walls. Carpet would be laid through out the entire office and the kick boards and trims would be oatmeal, also. "It shows I'm a confident no nonsense business woman." She explained.

"What color have you decided on for the bathroom?" Flint asked.

"A soft sea foam green with pale peach accents. I decided since it was a small room it needed to be a light color."

Rayne put her mother to work on the bathroom while she, her father and Flint worked on the baseboards in her office.

Shortly after five, Lee arrived to lend her help, bringing pizza. "Hey Butthead, I'm here," she called when she opened the door, "I bring pizza and beer."

"Hello Lee." Dian greeted.

"Oh, I didn't know you were here."

Rayne came out of her office, "Hey Beavis. Smells wonderful."

"Beavis and Butthead?" Flint asked Ray.

"You should hear some of the things those two have called each other." Ray chuckled. "Have you met Lee?"

"Not yet."

"About time you do." Ray led him out of the office. "Hello kid." He hugged Lee tight.

"Hey Pop." Lee hugged him back. "If I'd known you were all here I'd have brought more pizza." She spied Flint. "Hello, I'm Lee."

"Nice to meet you, Flint." He introduced himself and shook her hand.

Rayne walked over and whispered "Down girl."

"We're going to need more pizza." She said louder. She walked over to her purse.

"New jeans?"

Rayne turned and looked at Lee. "No, you know I wouldn't wear new jeans to paint in. Why did you ask?"

"The interesting design on the back pockets."

"What?" She turned in circles trying to see what Lee was talking about as her family and Flint rolled in laughter. "What is it? Why are you all laughing?"

She then remembered the full-length mirror in her office closet waiting to be installed in the bathroom. She ran in to see if she could find the answer. There on her butt cheeks were the painted imprints of Flint's hands.

"So that's what the spur of the moment history lesson was all about." She shouted as she came back into the room.

"I obviously missed something good." Lee laughed along with the group.

"Ray just mentioned the fact that some Indian warriors painted hand prints on their pony's necks before battle." Dian laughed.

Lee asked. "What can I do first?"

"We've been working all day, maybe we should just knock off for the night. We could all use some rest." Rayne said.

Dian picked up her bag, "We have a bit of a drive ahead of us, so if you're sure you don't want to do any more work tonight, we'll be going."

Rayne nodded and hugged her mother and father. "Thanks for all you've done today. I really appreciate your help."

"You're welcome baby girl." Her father smiled and extended his hand to Flint. "I'm very glad I got to meet you."

"You also, sir." Flint turned to her mother. "Ma'am my pleasure." He shook her hand.

"We look forward to seeing you again." Dian warmly told him.

"Goodbye girls." She said as they walked out of the office. "And behave." She

cautioned over her shoulder.

"We promise not to get caught." Lee shouted back. "You just want to get rid of us so you can be alone with Mr. Wonderful." She murmured to Rayne and giggled.

"Can you blame me?" Rayne whispered back.

Flint cleared his throat. "I think I should tell you I have above average hearing."

They both flushed furiously and giggled even harder. "I don't blame her one little bit." Lee announced proudly. "I'd do the same thing if I were in your shoes."

Rayne blushed even deeper and shoved Lee hard. "Stick it, would you."

Flint was enjoying the scene; he'd never developed the close friendship Rayne and Lee displayed, with anyone. He'd been too serious and concentrated on seeing his vow brought to fruition.

"I'm kind of tired is all." Rayne explained hoping to detour any further embarrassing words from Lee. "Let's clean this up and head home." She moved picking up brushes, pouring paint back into the gallon and picking up the trash.

When Flint took the brushes to the bathroom and rinsed them clean for her, Rayne looked to make sure he was out of view and hoped he was out of ear shot. "I told Ma about him yesterday." She confided in a low voice to Lee.

"What did she say?"

"That I should go ahead and give him a shot. But she did suggest I have J.D. investigate him. I talked to him about it before we left her house; he said he'd start checking into it right away."

Lee nodded her approval. "Good, but until you're sure try not to be alone with him too much."

"He isn't that kind of crazy, he wouldn't hurt me. That's one thing I'm absolutely sure of."

"Just be careful."

Flint walked back in and saw them with their heads together. He didn't know what they said, but he knew it was something about him. "Are we ready to head out?"

"Yes, thank you. Lee, are you ready?"

"Let's go." She replied.

The trio left the building waiting while Rayne locked the door then walked off together.

"Do you want to get something more to eat? She asked Flint. "I know there wasn't enough pizza for everyone to get full on."

"I'm not really hungry. Are you?"

Rayne was hungry, but not for food. She was hungry for him. She shook her head. "I'm good, how about you Lee?"

"No, I got plenty. I wanted to talk to you about something though."

"Hey, am I too late to help out?" A voice called.

Flint looked up and saw the man walking towards them. He looked to be about thirtyseven with broad shoulders and stood close to six foot.

"J.D.! I'm not surprised you'd show up after the work is done for the day." She took his hand and led him towards Lee and Flint.

"Hey you." Lee said and hugged him tight.

"Flint, this is my brother J.D.; J.D. meet Flint."

Flint took the other man's hand and recognized the protective grip. "I'm glad to know you."

"Glad to know you." J.D. responded. He turned to Rayne, "I left you a phone message. I need to get home to Lacey and the kids but since I was out this way I thought I'd stop and see you."

"I'll call you later." Rayne said and hugged him.

"See you, Lee."

"Give Lacey and the twins my love." She said as he walked off.

Flint put his arm around Rayne's waist. "I'll walk you two home. Where are we off to first?"

"My place." Rayne answered. "I need to get into a shower and try to get some of the paint out of my hair." She held up a hand and inspected it. "My nails will never be the same."

"You and your nails." Lee jibed.

When they arrived at her building, Rayne opened the door. "Would you like to come up, Flint? Maybe for something to drink?"

"I don't think so, not tonight, but thank you anyway. I'll see you soon." He leaned in and kissed her.

Rayne watched him walk away and turned to Lee. "You want to come in?"

Lee nodded and they rode the elevator up.

"I have to get a shower, are you staying?"

"I'll stick around for a bit." Lee went to the refrigerator and pulled out a soda and the makings for a sandwich.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rayne cleaned up and changed into her pajamas. She checked her messages and found her brother's call. She went back in to see Lee. "J.D. wasn't kidding when he said he'd look into Flint right away."

124

"Is that why he was here tonight? Did he find something?"

"He didn't say, he just said he'd started the check and for me to give him a call."

Lee waited in her usual patient manner. About two seconds. "So, what are you waiting for? Call him back."

"I will." She went into the kitchen, got out a soda and a yogurt cup, pulled out a spoon, sprinkled some granola on her yogurt and sat on the sofa.

Lee thrust the phone in her face. "So call him already."

"Patience, Prudence, he needs time to get home."

"I know that, but I want to know what he says."

Rayne laughed and took the phone. "I'm curious myself, but we have to give him time to get home."

"Want to play cards while we wait?" Lee suggested.

They played several rounds of rummy while they waited for J.D to get home.

"Is it time yet?" Lee asked.

Rayne nodded and punched in her brother's number and waited for an answer. "Hi Lacey, did he get home yet?"

"He just walked in." She answered and handed him the phone.

"Hey, what did you find out?

"Not a lot, he really is a painter. There are gallery showings and places listed on the Internet of satisfied customers. He's really very talented his paintings show such emotions. They are full of amazing details."

"You don't have to praise his workmanship, I've seen it first hand. It's even more impressive in person. What else do you know about him? Does it list his parents, a birth date, anything?"

"I haven't found that out yet. What I have found sounds on the level. Can you tell me what kind of things you're looking for specifically? He hasn't got a police record, no military

record."

"So how do you know he doesn't have a police record if there is no birth date."

"Nothing comes up on the records, and he is a high profile personality. He has done business with some of the biggest companies in the country. If there was anything criminal in his history, I'd know it." He assured her.

"Thanks."

"I'd do it on anyone who my little sister showed an interest in. More importantly on anyone who showed an interest in her. I have to look out for you; it's my job."

"Love you, bye."

"Love you too, bye."

She looked at Lee. "Nothing."

"All that just to tell you nothing?"

"He found out Flint really is an artist; he's sold things all over the country. He has no police or military record. So far everything checks out."

"And does that make us happy?"

Rayne smiled. "Yeah, I think it does."

"Well, now, I'll bid thee good night." Lee went to the door. "At least we know he isn't an escaped mental patient. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye Lee, be safe getting home." She went to the door and once she saw Lee step on the elevator, she shut the door, secured the chain and went to relax on the sofa.

Her office would soon be ready; things between her and Flint looked more than promising. Life was good and it was only going to get better.

Flint had made it almost home when he decided he wanted to go and see her again. He turned back to see her.

The buzzer sounded and Rayne got up and went to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Rayne, it's Flint."

Flint? She looked like a slob! What was he doing here now? She panicked unsure of what to do. She couldn't very well leave him standing on the street, but she wouldn't have time to get ready to be presentable for him. No help for it, he'd have to see her at her worst. "Come on up."

She went to the door to let him in. "Is something wrong?" She asked as he came in.

"No, I just wanted to see you."

"Of course you do. I look terrible." She complained.

"You look fabulous to me. You always look great." He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Would you like to sit down? Can I get you something to drink?"

He shook his head and held her in place with an arm about her waist. He watched her eyes as he lifted a finger and gently traced the planes of her face. He followed down her profile then traced her lips.

Rayne stood rooted to the spot; she couldn't have moved if she tried. Just the simple act of his touching her sent her pulse racing. She tried to wet her lips to return the moisture to them and touched his finger with her tongue. Slowly, her eyes glued to his, she ran her tongue up his finger and down. His skin tasted pleasantly salty. She maneuvered his fingertip into her mouth and made small circles around it with her tongue. With gentle pressure, she suckled his finger.

Flint's mouth went dry and a fire burned deep within at her actions. He removed his finger and replaced it with his tongue. As he kissed her, his hand trailed down the soft cotton of her t-shirt. He toyed with the nipple that perked under his attention.

Rayne moved her hands to his waist and pulled his shirt out of his jeans, half afraid he'd react as he had before and leave her wanting for more. When he moved away, she was sure her fear would be realized. She was relieved when he took the shirt tale from her hand and pulled it off himself. He stood there with his shirt off looking like a bronzed god. She moved in and kissed his chest, making swirling motions with her tongue back and forth across it. She toyed with a notion, but discarded it for the time being and slowly moved her way up to his mouth.

Flint knew if he didn't stop soon he wouldn't be able to stop it later. In truth, he didn't want to stop, not now, not ever. He pulled back only an arm's length and looked in her eyes. "Are you sure? You know how I feel. I refuse to dishonor you. If we continue, your mine for now and always."

Fever clouded her brain making it hard to think. She didn't speak but took his hand and led him to her bedroom. She stopped at the side and pulled off her shirt, her eyes only leaving his for the time it took to pull it over her head. She stood erect before him for one

moment, hooked her thumbs in the waist of her shorts and slowly slid them down her legs. She had no inhibitions and it felt wonderful.

He watched as she stood up before him: she was so beautiful it made him ache. She moved to him and reached out to undo the button on his jeans. He couldn't move if he had to. He felt the zipper slide down and she began to tug them off of him. He moved to help her but she stopped him.

"Let me." She said when he moved his arm to undress. She finished and stood back to look at him. He was perfect and he was all hers. The knowledge made her heart sing. She moved and kissed him, sliding her mouth from his lips down his chin, down his throat, his chest, lower and lower until she was at his waist. Slowly, she went to her knees and took him in her mouth. She felt him pulsate. She danced her tongue around him and felt his groin tighten. His hands gripped her hair and he moaned in pleasure.

Flint's knees began to tremble. She was working magic with her mouth and it was driving him wild. He tangled her hair in his fingers and felt the pressure build until he thought he'd burst. At the point he thought he'd erupt, she ceased her ministrations but never removed him from her mouth.

When the momentum eased, she began to slide him slowly in and out of her mouth, sucking him gently in and releasing it slightly as he slid out. Again, he felt the pressure build, sure the dam would rupture when she ceased.

Finally, she rose from her knees and moved to the bed taking him with her. On the bed, he kissed her. Imitating her movements, he moved from her mouth to her chest. He suckled each breast in turn as he slid his hand up her silky thigh and placed it between her legs. He slid his fingers in the moist folds and found the nub he searched for. Gently rubbing and stroking it, he felt the moisture pool between her legs. He heard her moan as her back arched slightly and he moved one finger inside her, while he continued to stroke her. She moaned and bucked as the first wave of pleasure crested inside. He moved between her legs; his hand playing with her all the while. He kissed and nibbled the inside of one thigh, slid his tongue up the juncture and skipped to her other thigh, kissing, nibbling and teasing her.

Rayne was sure she'd burst into flames underneath him. He was driving her wild. Her hands rushed to his head, tangling in his hair encouraging him with gentle pressure. Finally, he relented and she felt his mouth where she'd longed for it to be.

Flint ran his tongue between the folds and his fingers played with her, pushing her to the breaking point. Her shuddered release made him throb painfully. He had to possess her, brand her as his own. He lifted up above her and placed the tip inside of her.

She was drowning in a lake of fire. She'd never known the pleasure he was showing her. When he rose and entered her only part way, she begged for more. Slowly he entered her, filling her completely. The motion was slow at first, building in momentum and she met his every thrust with a wild passion that equaled him. They peaked in unison and collapsed into the mattress exhausted and exhilarated.

He held her in his arms and tried to regulate his breathing and slow his heartbeat. He adjusted his body so he could hold her against him in spoon fashion. He heard her murmur "I love you, Flint" right before she surrendered to the slumber that claimed her. "I love you too." He told her softly and joined her in her dreams.

Rayne had relaxed against him as he cuddled her. She'd climaxed time after time and yearned for more. They'd reached their ultimate release at the same time and it was the most incredible feeling she'd ever experienced.

She was exhausted in a good way and as he held her safe she was ready to admit the truth. "I love you, Flint." And as she was pulled under in sleep, she was sure she'd heard him say he loved her.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rayne woke, still held in his arms, and her body ached in a way that could only be described as good. They'd made love three more times before the night was over; each time better than the one before. She moved cautiously so as not to wake him while she got out of bed.

129

"Where are you going?" He asked and pulled her back to him.

"I need to get up, get a shower and get dressed."

He refused to let go. "I think we should spend the day just as we are."

"We'd get arrested."

"Not if we don't leave the bedroom."

"How am I going to get any work done if I stay here all day?"

"It's a holiday and you can't work on a holiday."

"Oh? What holiday is it, funny man?"

"Our day. The day Flint and Rayne promised to love each other forever." He sat up and looked at her. "I, Flint Kestrel, vow that I will love only you from now until time ends. I will treat you with honor and cherish you for always. I'll try to make sure you know only happiness for the rest of your days. I love you and will put you foremost in my life."

Rayne felt the tears filling her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. It was the most wonderful proposal she'd ever heard. "I love you, Flint, with all my heart and soul. You are the half that makes me whole." She choked out through her tears. "I want to spend the rest of my life going to sleep in your arms and waking up with your face the first thing I see in the morning."

"It is done." He smiled and kissed her deeply. She was his for now and always.

They'd promised before the Creator to be held to each other only. He knew according to law they weren't considered married until they'd exchanged vows and gotten the license from an official, but now that was only a formality.

Rayne's heart soared above the clouds. He loved her and wanted to marry her! Just last night she'd thought her life couldn't get any better, how wrong she'd been. "For this holiday I can take the day off, but I have to have a shower." She moved and got out of bed.

"Sounds good to me." Flint grinned and got out and went to her side.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"It's a holiday law, we have to spend the entire day together." He walked into the bathroom and started the water.

She'd never showered with a man before; the idea excited her. She smiled and followed him. "I have to warn you, I only have two soaps, and both are floral scent."

"Who gets soaped first?" he asked as he stepped under the spray.

"I'm game if you are." She joined him under the warm water. She lathered the slim white bar and rubbed her hands over his body.

He took the soap from her and did the same, paying special attention to her breasts. "I think its safe to say they're clean." She laughed and took the soap back. She lathered her hands again and worked her way down his chest, she soaped the length of him.

He felt her hands wrap around him and the bathing turned erotic. He felt his need rising anew and he pressed her against the wall covering her with kisses and filling her with him. The heat of their passion increased the steam that covered the mirrors. They left the shower and went back to the bedroom and lay on the bed holding each other. "Are you hungry?" He asked her finally.

"Starved." She answered with a smile and kissed him, running her hands over him.

"I was thinking of our stomachs." He grinned at her.

"I knew that. I was just wondering how hungry you were."

He got up and pulled her with him. He padded off down the hallway towards her kitchen. He opened a couple of cabinets and turned to look at her. "Don't you have any food?"

"If you look in the right places." She opened the cupboard to show him her supplies. "Did you have anything in mind?"

"Steak and eggs?"

"Not wanting much are you." She moved to the freezer and pulled out a steak. "I hope you're not in a hurry it will be a little while before it's thawed enough to cook."

"Anything that offers immediate satisfaction?"

"I have yogurt and granola. Eggs, ham, biscuits potatoes, bread." She looked at him. "I'm not home much so I don't cook. I eat out, *a lot*." She emphasized.

"But you can cook, right?" He asked with a hopeful tone.

"I can boil water, open cans and boxes. I can take things from the freezer, open the box and put it in the microwave," she said proudly.

"You better go sit down and let me take this challenge. But don't expect me to do all the cooking all the time." He ordered with a laugh.

She sat down and watched him peel and shred a couple of potatoes. He cracked open some eggs and whipped them up, tossing in a hand full of shredded cheese. He fried up the potatoes, tossed bread in the toaster and expertly whipped up a gourmet breakfast.

She pulled out two plates and he separated the food onto them then took them to the table. She picked up the first bite and held it out looking at it dubiously. "Is it safe?"

He glared at her and shoved a large bite into his mouth, chewing and moaning in pleasure. He took another bite and watched her as she took her first.

"Oh! These eggs are so fluffy! You're amazing." She praised as she shoved in another bite.

After breakfast, she rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher and they moved to the living room to cuddle on the sofa. Usually this much nonproductive inactivity would drive her up the wall, but Rayne felt more relaxed than she'd ever been before. "What are you thinking about?"

He squeezed her in a hug. "You, of course. I'm only sorry you're putting so much work into the office."

"Why? It's going to be great. I have the décor all decided. Most of it I already own so there won't be any expense there. I have a computer I can use for the time being and a laptop, so, I only have to get one for the receptionist, but since I won't be able to afford one for a while I think I can manage."

"But once were living together you won't need it."

She sat up and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You won't need to work, I can support us and then when our son arrives you'll be too busy raising him to even think about working."

"I don't have any intention of leaving my job. I can be a wife, mother and advertising guru."

"I don't want you working, Rayne. There is so much our son will need to be taught and I'm sure there are things you need to learn so you may teach him."

"So, I have to quit working so I can go to school?"

"Not to school, but there are places I want you to see and things you need to know."

Rayne pulled even further away from him. "You never mentioned this before. You know I love what I do."

"And it's fine for now, but soon you're going to have to give it up."

"And how soon is 'soon'?"

"I'd like to have you moved in to my house before the end of the year."

She was getting angry, and the fact he said 'living together' and 'moved in' were like dry logs on a hot flame. He'd never once said married. As she thought about it, she realized he had never asked her to marry him at all. He was still holding to his idea of using her.

"You promised not two hours ago that I would know only happiness, that you'd put me foremost in your life! What a crock! You and your hokey honor!" She stood and moved to the bedroom to put her shorts and t-shirt on and get his clothes.

"I will make you happy!"

"Working makes me happy. And as for not dishonoring me, hah! I know in this day and age people don't put a lot of stock into whether you're married or not when you have a baby, but I don't intend having a child without the benefit of marriage."

"Do you really think I'd allow my son to be born with the stigma of being a bastard? According to my beliefs we are already married, but I know we need to speak it before an official to make it so. Of course there will be a wedding."

"Not with me! Not as long as you insist I have to give up my job!"

He knew it was time to back down or he'd lose any ground he'd gained. "I'm sorry, you're right I'm being unfair to you. I'm already breaking my word and I've caused you unhappiness." He said in a calming tone.

Rayne finished dressing and tossed him his clothes. "Get dressed." She said curtly.

"Are you throwing me out?"

"Yes."

"Of your life or your apartment?"

She faced the wall. "I haven't decided yet. I love you, and I can live with your...funny quirk, but if you insist after we get married I have to quit working, I don't know if I can compromise on that. I'll have to think about it."

He dressed and left the bedroom. He'd let her cool off before he talked to her again. Maybe then, she'd be more receptive to the idea. "I love you." He told her and kissed her on the cheek.

She went to the door and paused before opening it. "I love you, too."

He walked out and she almost called him back, instead, she shut the door and went to the sofa. Was she being stubborn and stupid? He knew all the money and work she'd been putting into starting her own business. If she didn't go through with it, she'd be stuck trying to figure out how to repay the loan.

She wanted to marry him and have children with him. She wanted to spend her life with him but she didn't want to give up her entire life.

There had to be a middle ground. If he'd be willing to let her work part time after they'd been married for a few years, that would give her the chance to prove to herself she could make it on her own. That's really all she wanted was to prove she could do it.

She laid on the pillows that still held his scent. Already she missed his arms around her, the feel of him next to her. She started to run to the doors of the balcony to catch him as he went out the door downstairs.

She was at the living room when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"It's J.D. I found something kind of interesting."

"What?"

"I was going through some archives and found some pictures. At first they were simple sketches and then paintings, then more detailed paintings and even some old photographs."

"And?"

"And in each one was a man who looked the same. They all look like Flint. I think you should see them."

"Have you found a birth date?"

"June fourth."

"Of what year?"

"I'm not sure, it was some kind of typo. It said nineteen hundred and seven. I'm trying to track down the correct year."

Rayne didn't speak. If the year he'd found was right, which it wasn't, it would mean Flint was ninety-seven years old. "Pretty feisty for his age." She laughed.

"I'm sure it was supposed to be sixty seven." J.D. assured her with a laugh.

"I'm sure it was, too. And you think these pictures look like him?"

"I've only seen him once and they look like him to me, I thought you'd get a kick out of it."

Maybe they were him. She pushed the thought away as soon as it surfaced. "When can I come and see them."

"Now if you want. I can meet you somewhere so you don't have to come all the way out here."

"Your house?"

"Fine, I'll be there in about thirty minutes."

"See you then, bye."

Rayne ran down to the car and drove to her brother's house, the possibilities whirling in her mind. In no time at all, she was pulling into his drive. The door was opened for her when she got to it. "It's me." She called and went inside.

"I'm in the kitchen." J.D. called back to her.

She walked down the hall and into the white and lemon yellow kitchen to find her brother seated at the white and yellow tiled table. "Are those the pictures?" She asked, indicating the file laying by his hand.

"Yeah." He slid it to her.

She opened it and looked at them. The sketches and earlier paintings were primitive enough to show a vague similarity, but as they became more recent, the image became clearer. She felt her knees buckle beneath her and she sank into a chair. "It's uncanny. I mean, they are pretty grainy, but it's just amazing how much they look like him."

"The grain is because I had to magnify the images. In all of the originals, I found he was more in the background."

Rayne studied the images closer and couldn't deny the remarkable resemblance. "Must be one of his relatives," she suggested.

"That's possible, but each of these pictures is of geographically different tribes. One was Ojibwa, one was Apache, one was Cherokee, and one was Pueblo. It seems a little odd that his ancestry is so diverse, yet, they all look like him."

"Not if it was the same man."

"But the pictures are anywhere from fifty to one hundred years apart. The first was from a sketch done in the late sixteen hundreds, a couple were from the seventeen hundreds and eighteen hundreds and the more recent from the early part of the last century. They can't all be the same man."

"They can be if he is immortal." She murmured. "Thanks bro, I need to go."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine." She left for her apartment where she sat in the silent room. Was it really possible? Could he really be immortal?

She looked at the window. "Flint, will you come to me?" She called to the empty room. "I need to see you."

Flint stood at the canvas and nearly dropped the brush when she called to him. She wanted to see him and it seemed urgent. He left the studio and winged his way to her.

Rayne saw the shadow cross the balcony and rushed to open the door to find him standing there. "You heard me?"

"I told you I would." He walked in to the room.

"How did you get on my balcony?"

"You know the answer."

"Tell me." She gently urged.

"It felt urgent so I flew. It was the fastest way to come to you."

She nodded and sat on the sofa with a plop. "My brother found some pictures, he showed to me. The man in them looked just like you." She looked at him. "It wasn't an ancestor, was it?"

"You know the answer to that as well. Search your heart, Rayne, you know the truth." "Change for me." She begged him.

"Now?"

She nodded. "I want you to look in my eyes during the entire thing, never look away from me."

Flint nodded and stood before her. He stretched his arms out to the side and slightly above his head. True to her request, he kept his eyes on her face. From the pores of his skin, feathers emerged and his body shrunk in size to take the shape of a hawk.

The eyes staring into her face were now large golden orbs that stared out from above

his beak. *Beak* she thought again. It was too incredible to believe. "Oh, god." She felt the darkness swirl and fell back, sure she was about to faint for the first time in her life. Slowly, the rocking ceased and she could focus on him. His face had returned to normal and he was standing at her side.

"Are you all right?"

"All right? The man I love doesn't die and can change into a bird. Sure, I'm fine, great, wonderful." Her voice climbed hysterically.

He sat down and gathered her into his arms. "I know this is hard for you."

"You know that, do you? I know that according to your...vow, I'm supposed to be your mate."

"My wife." He amended.

"Your wife, and have your child. You never die, never age, but I will. I'll get older and older and, eventually, my body will give out and I'll die. Will our son be immortal?"

"Yes."

"So you will both have to sit back and watch me wither and die. Will he grow like a normal baby? Will he go to school, and graduate high school and go to college while I'm still living or will he age slowly and still be young when I'm ancient."

"It will be like raising any other child. You'll see him take his first steps, his first day of school, and his high school graduation. All of it like any other boy."

Rayne nodded trying to absorb it all. Her husband and son would see her slowly decay and bury her. She would, at least, be the envy of the entire geriatric ward, having the best looking man in the world coming to see her on visiting days. She'd get old and ugly and he'd stay young and sexy and, gradually, come to despise her, looking for younger, sexier pastures to graze in.

"Have you thought all this through?"

He knew what was bothering her. "I always keep my vows. I've waited this long to find you, I can love you twice as long."

"I think you should go now. I have a lot of thinking to do. I need to be absolutely certain I can deal with all of this."

He nodded and hugged her. "I truly love you, Rayne, please don't make me wait too long."

She nodded. "Please be patient." She smiled at him. "Use the door this time." "I planned on it." He chuckled.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Rayne punched in the numbers. "Please be home, please, please," She chanted as the phone rang.

"What's wrong?" Lee said as soon as she picked up the phone.

"Can you come over, right now?"

"I'll be right there."

Rayne hung up the phone and paced in a circle. They'd hash this out if it took all night and with the way her emotions were raging, that's just what it'd take - all night.

She didn't have long to wait, Lee was buzzing downstairs. "Maybe she's some kind of bird, too." She thought with a cynical laugh. She opened the door as Lee emerged from the elevator.

"What's going on?" She demanded as she crossed the threshold.

"He was here."

"Just now?"

Rayne nodded and sat on her recliner. "I went to J.D.'s to look at some old pictures he'd come across in some archives. They were all of Flint. I came home and I called him to me. He flew over to see me and we talked."

"Ha, ha, ha." Lee chuckled sarcastically.

"I'm serious, he really did. I had him look me in the eye and shape shift. I watched him change right in front of me."

"Yeah."

"Well, I know it sounds crazy but it's true. He really is the legendary shaman, and he's positive I'm the woman he's searched over the centuries for. He loves me and he wants to marry me."

"For argument's sake, let's say I buy it. What happens to you? If he lives forever, doesn't age or die, and you, my dear friend, are only human."

"I will be the envy of all the blue haired ladies in the old folk's home. They'll all be wishing it was their bed he was warming."

"If he's half bird, will you lay eggs?"

"Want to help me build my nest?"

"I'm trying to be serious here. What happens to you?"

"I will continue to age and die. But for the next fifty or sixty years, we will be together. I will have a child, and he'll grow and develop just like any other normal little boy, but he too will be immortal."

Lee stared at her. "You've been thinking about this a lot."

Rayne nodded her head. "A whole lot. I love him, really and truly for ever and always." She chuckled. "And just this morning, I thought my biggest obstacle to overcome was his insistence that once we're married I quit working."

"Wait - he swears undying love for you, knows all the work and money you're putting into trying to start your own agency and withheld this important piece of information?"

"I haven't hammered that out yet. I want to do it just to prove to myself I can make it work and in a few years quit."

"I don't understand why you're even thinking about giving up your career."

"When we have a baby, I want to be able to be there with him and teach him all the things he needs to know." She got quiet for a minute. "I was even considering asking Mr. Anders about my old job instead of opening my own agency."

"Go crawling to him?"

"No, go to him with a compromise. When he called he told me if I had a change of heart, he'd make sure there was a place for me."

"But not necessarily your old office and job."

"It's not too late to go back if I go right away."

"I know marriage is supposed to be all about compromise, but why are you the one making all the compromises?"

"I'm not, if I go back to Anders it won't be giving up my career; it will be making things easier on myself. I won't have to worry about how to make ends meet, being afraid because I don't have enough to make all my payments. A lot less stress and still doing what I love doing."

The more she thought about it, the better she liked it. With Anders, she could, some day, work from home and cut her hours back. She'd go see him the next day.

"I'm going to do it, Lee, I'm going to tell him my plan and then I'm going to set the date for the wedding. I want you to be my maid of honor."

"If you're sure this is what you want, nothing in the world would keep me from being there, standing up with you."

"I hope Mr. Anders is as enthusiastic and welcoming." She chewed her bottom lip, worrying it as she mulled it all over. It would be a long night and she planned on seeing him first thing.

~ \* ~

Flint sat cross-legged in his sauna clearing his thoughts to give her the time she needed to make up her mind. He held onto the hope she loved him enough to agree to be in his life forever. Forever...could he stand to sit back and watch the woman he loved age and die then have to go on without her? When the time came, could he bear to let her slip from his life knowing he'd never hear her laugh, see her smile or watch her temper flare at him? He knew there'd be no equal to the pain he'd bear at that point, but he knew he'd cherish every minute he'd be allowed to share with her until that day. It would be worth it.

~ \* ~

Rayne dressed in her coral suit and pink sweater tank. She painted her nail in a coral shade, fixed her make up and left to see Mr. Anders.

She took the elevator to his office, praying she hadn't blown it, and stopped at his secretary's desk. "May I see him?"

"Let me ring him." Sherry announced Rayne's presence and looked at her. "You can go right in."

"Thank you." She went to the door, stopped for a minute to center herself and walked in. "Good morning Mr. Anders."

"I'm glad to see you, Rayne. Sit down."

"Thank you, I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of my resuming my employment with you."

Mr. Anders laced his fingers, pressed the tips of his index fingers and laid them against his lips. "When I spoke to you a few weeks ago you had a very strong desire to branch out on your own."

"Yes, I have looked at that option, secured a location and made some improvements."

"And yet, you're here now. Is it too much a challenge for you?"

"Not at all, the truth is I've recently become engaged and trying to plan a wedding,

launch a business and develop a clientele is a large undertaking and though I am more than prepared for the challenge, would like to make planning my wedding an enjoyable experience."

"Congratulations to you! I'm very happy for you and your lucky young man."

"Thank you." She felt her confidence slipping. Was he toying with her, trying to make her squirm?

"I made a mistake, Rayne. I didn't want to believe a member of my team would be dishonest enough to try and further their career by stealing a proposal."

Rayne almost felt sorry for him if he believed his employees were honest and forthright. While they were all more dependable and trustworthy than the average employees elsewhere, Mr. Anders was still living in the previous century. "I'm sorry it happened."

"Angie has been terminated and the Bina reps have been shown the presentation; you were given the credit and if you are interested, the account is yours. They have requested to meet with you at your earliest convenience. I told them you were out due to illness."

Rayne was stunned, here he'd just been touting high business morals and he lied to clients. "Due to illness?"

"Yes, I just didn't tell them it was because your boss made you sick." He roared a loud laugh. "Your office is waiting for you whenever you're ready to move back in, and Maggie will be pulled back out of the pool and reassigned to you."

"Thank you, I'll be able to be back in by Wednesday, if that's all right. I have to get out of the lease for the office I rented and tie up some loose ends."

"Wednesday will be fine. Welcome back to the team."

Rayne practically floated out of his office. She had her old job, salary and position back. She just hoped breaking the lease would be as easy. Since she'd already started painting, she was afraid she might be locked in.

One worry at a time; she would take it step by step. She wanted to get home, call Flint and let him know about the arrangement she'd made. Then, she could sit down with the calendar and set a date for her wedding. Call him? All she had to do was think about him and he'd be there.

She opened her door in time to hear the phone ringing. She ran and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hello, Rayne."

"Hi, Ma. Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I was calling to check on you and see if you and your young man would like to come out on Saturday."

"I'll have to call you back about dinner until I talk to Flint. I went to see Mr. Anders today. I'm moving back into my old office on Wednesday."

"You're going to go back to the old job?" Dian sounded confused. "But you have the lease and have put all that time and money into the office you had selected for your agency."

"I know Ma, I've just decided it would be best if I went back to Anders."

"If you're sure this is what you really want to do? It's just when I think of all the money you've already invested into the business..."

"Ma, my life, remember?"

"Yes, dear. When can you let me know about Saturday?"

"As soon as I can get in touch with Flint."

"All right, I'll be waiting to hear from you. Bye."

Rayne hung up and dialed Flint's number.

"Hello love." He answered.

She was sure he didn't have caller ID. "Hello. Listen, Ma just called and asked if we wanted to come out there on Saturday. Are you interested?"

"I'd like that. I had wanted to speak to your father anyway. So what did you do today?"

"I went and saw Mr. Anders. I've decided to go back to my old job instead of moving ahead with my own agency."

"Really? Why?"

"Because I believe love and marriage is made up of compromises and I know you don't want me working. I want to keep at it, but I also want to be able to plan our wedding and take time off for a while should any children come along."

It wasn't exactly what he had planned, but it was a step in the right direction. "When would you go back?"

"Wednesday. It's better for all of us, financially. I won't have to stress over how to make the payments or beat on doors trying to get clients."

She sounded so happy he refused to rain on her day. "It sounds great. What time

Saturday are we supposed to be at your mother's?"

"Whenever we get there. I thought if you came about ten we could be there in time for lunch, mess around the property for a while and visit with them."

"Want me to pick you up?"

She laughed at him. "Uh, no you come here and I'll drive my car out. I don't think I'm ready for mom to know I'm in love with a man who drives a rusty death trap, at least not yet. I'll see you then."

"See you then." He waited for her to click off the line then hung up the phone. He still needed to shower from his time in the sauna. It was a wonderful replacement for his traditional sweat lodge, and it was easier to use. He moved on for the shower and was getting ready to spend the evening with her. He'd already met her parents, but he didn't have the chance to talk to her father like he'd wanted to. This weekend, he'd make sure he did.

He moved to the chest of drawers, opened the top one and removed a Birdseye maple box, opening it to expose the emerald green satin lining. He carried it reverently over to the bed and sat down. Carefully, he removed an item wrapped in aged and yellowed newsprint. He held the courting flute he'd carved with care many centuries ago, holding it to his mouth and piped a few gentle, soft trilling notes.

Smiling to himself, he re-wrapped it and placed on the mattress beside him. He then pulled out the second item he searched for. He began to open the silk wrap that cocooned the small gold band that held a single large diamond. He'd found the simple clear stone years ago and had it placed in its present setting over seventy years ago. He would soon place it on her finger.

Saturday wouldn't arrive soon enough. He replaced the items into their resting place and stuck the box back in his drawer, smiling at the empty room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Rayne stepped off the elevator and smiled at Maggie. "Here, can you give me a hand?" she asked as she thrust a box in her direction.

Maggie took a box and carried it into the desk. "Welcome home." She smiled as Rayne walked in.

"It feels great being here." She handed Maggie another box and smiled.

"What's this?" She opened it and found her black pumps inside. "Oh! I never even thought about them. You're shoes are still at the cobblers!"

Rayne laughed and sat down in her chair. "I forgot all about them! It was such a rotten time. I also have some news for you."

Maggie sat down across from her. "Tell me."

"I'm getting married."

"To who? I didn't even know you had a boyfriend."

"It was a whirlwind romance and he swept me off my feet. His name is Flint." She saw Maggie searching her hand and laughed. "It isn't completely official yet. We only just decided a few days ago."

"Congratulations! Let me know if there is anything I can do help you. I better get out of here so you can get down to business."

"Definitely." Rayne stood and began replacing the awards and certificates where they belonged and falling back into step.

By the time Saturday had arrived, Rayne had returned to her old routine. She got up and dressed for the day. The buzzer sounded and she looked at the clock. Not surprised he'd shown up on time, she went to buzz him in and opened the door.

He was dressed in tan jacket, blue t-shirt and jeans. He was easily the most handsome man on the planet and he was hers. "Right on time." She said as she let him in.

"Would I dare be late for you?" He kissed her. "You look fabulous."

"Thank you. You're looking pretty fine yourself. Are you ready?"

"For anything." He smiled and winked. He followed her to the parking garage and her car. It fit her to a "T"; a cute little PT Cruiser in what looked to be a purple color with white convertible top, white leather interior and Birdseye maple trim.

At the sight of the trim, he subconsciously gripped and released the box he had tucked under his arm. "I've never ridden in a purple car before."

She beamed brightly, "Actually, my baby is amethyst with a pearl clear coat. It was kind of silly to sink so much into a car when I rarely drive it, but I fell in love with it." She started the engine and soon they were off to dinner.

He watched the scenery pass, riding in silence beside her. He was feeling nerves he wasn't accustomed to feeling. He would be talking to her father and he felt sure his suit would be accepted but the formality of the situation made him uncomfortable.

They pulled into the drive way and while he'd seen the home before, he'd not taken the time to appreciate the beauty of the setting. "It's incredible."

"I grew up here, it was always beautiful but Ma has added so many more roses it feels like a paradise-secluded and peaceful. I may feel a lot of stress from my family but being here recharges my batteries somehow."

He nodded knowing the feeling well. It was the reason he returned to his land by the river frequently. Being in the quiet semi-wild replaced the spirit that was drained from being in the more hectic city. He followed her to the front door with the large oval stained glass in the middle. Once inside, he saw the occupants reflected in the decorating. There was a collection of Navajo and Micmac blankets tossed on the furniture. Rugs he was sure were Cherokee in origin littered the floor.

There were pieces of pottery decorated with Ojibwa inspired designs and a lovely wedding pot; an eggshell bleeding into a sky blue that became a thin line of purple, red, gold and yellow like a sunset painted across the evening sky. Black silhouettes of horses stampeded across it circling the whole pot.

Dian walked in to find him admiring it. "It was the one we used at our wedding feast." She told him proudly. "Welcome to our home, Flint."

"Thank you. Your home is very beautiful." He watched as she enfolded Rayne into an embrace and Ray entered the room, hugging his daughter then offering him a hand in welcome. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Glad to have you," Ray welcomed warmly.

"Rayne, could you give me a hand in the kitchen please?" Dian asked.

"Sit down and relax." Ray offered and sat in a large recliner chair.

Flint took a seat and looked to the kitchen to see if they were returning. Knowing he should wait but unable to control his ragged nerves any longer, Flint spoke. "Mr. Amitola, I was wondering if I might speak with you privately?"

"Why so formal? Please, call me Ray." The younger man's distress wasn't lost on him. "Why don't we go for a walk and I'll show you around the place. Girls, Flint and I are going for a walk. We'll be back," he called to the other room.

"All right." Dian's reply came floating back.

Flint followed Ray outside not trusting himself to speak. This was ridiculous! How could he be so inept? Why wasn't he able to find the words? He didn't realize the other man had stopped until he bumped into him. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Why don't we sit here and you can tell me what's on your mind?" He offered a chair. Flint sat and stared off into the evening sky. "I'm sorry, sir, I've never been at a loss for words before."

Ray grinned and nodded. "Amazing what happens at a time like this."

Flint looked at him closely. He felt at ease enough finally to start. "I'm in love with your daughter, sir. Very much in love with her, and I would like your permission to make her my wife. I realize it may seem as if we haven't known each other long, but I feel as if I've known her all my life, and I know she feels the same." The words tumbled out in a rush and he failed to breath until he'd said them all.

"Slow down, son." Ray smiled. "How long have you known my daughter?"

"Nearly four months."

He nodded. "Only four months, not very long, for sure." He thought for a bit. "How do you feel about her?"

"When I'm with her I no longer feel lost. I feel united, whole. My blood sings in my veins, my heart races and my spirit soars on the wings of a hawk. I feel as if the Creator made her for no one but me, and made me for her alone," he answered honestly. "When we must part, I count the seconds until I can hold her in my arms again."

Ray nodded. "And if I refused permission because I felt you needed longer to get to know each other?"

Flint felt his heart stop. "I would have to respect your decision and beg when I might ask you again."

"If I said you must wait at least a year, possibly two?"

"I would respect your decision." He stated flatly, his heart had yet to beat.

"You would stay in my daughter's life, and be willing to wait to marry her until I said it was time?"

"As her father, it is your right, sir. Where else could I go? She is the very air I breathe."

Ray looked into Flint's eyes and searched deeply. Given the age of his daughter and Flint's age, he thought it sounded old fashioned and little far fetched the man would be willing to wait. The look in his eyes told him all he needed to know.

The man meant every word. He loved Rayne, respected him as her father and was willing to wait for however long he said to marry her. "You know if I told you to wait and my daughter had her heart set on it, she'd want to proceed regardless of what I said."

"But I couldn't in clear conscious, sir, and wouldn't until such time as you allowed."

"You are an honorable man. One any father would be proud to see marry his daughter. You may ask her when you feel ready." He clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "Relax son, I've never seen my daughter so happy and I know you're the reason for it. She won't say no."

"Thank you, sir." Flint sprang from the seat and ran to the house.

"Don't you want to wait until after supper?" Ray shouted after him.

Flint heard him and slowed his steps. He was anxious, but wanted to make it wonderful for Rayne. He needed to calm down to make it perfect for her.

Ray ambled up to his side. "That's more like it. You'll have the rest of your life to go running for her, enjoy your freedom while you have it." He laughed and entered the house.

Rayne heard the door as she placed the last pot on the table. Her mother had made her favorite dinner; pork steaks, applesauce, broccoli and cheese sauce, sweet white corn and pineapple upside down cake for dessert. She looked at her mother and went into the living room. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved." Her father growled with a laugh. He passed her and went into the kitchen.

"So, did Dad show you around?"

"Yes, it's really a nice place." The aromas that filled the room made his mouth water. "Smells great, shall we eat?"

Rayne nodded and took his hand. They walked in and sat across the table from each other. She watched him fill his plate and eat with enthusiasm.

"You are a wonderful cook, Mrs. Amitola."

She beamed. "Don't be so formal, we're all fa...friends here. Call me Dian. And thank you, nobody around here seems to like my cooking."

Rayne recognized her mother's attempt to fish for compliments and before she could speak her father started in.

"Around here, we don't have a dinner bell. The smoke detector goes off and I know it's time to come and get it. When we have company she makes a run to the local restaurant and picks up a four star meal so people will think she can cook."

"Ma even burns water." Rayne lamented with her father.

Flint listened to the banter and if it hadn't been for the glint in the eyes of the participants would have felt badly for Dian. "My compliments to the cook, who ever it was." He joined in.

"I think we forgot to mention that whoever talks trash about my cooking skills or lack thereof gets to wash the dishes and scrub the kitchen down."

"Wonderful meal, Ma. You've out done yourself tonight," Rayne praised.

"No one can hold a candle to my wife's cooking." Ray said with a wink.

Dian took a bite and smiled. "I really did good this time." She looked at the sink and the table full of dishes. "Well, looks like they don't get done tonight," she laughed.

Flint was enjoying himself immensely. The family around him was very good-natured. He appreciated the fact they could laugh at themselves. He knew they could argue well and they loved each other, certain they would defend any member staunchly no matter what the foe.

Rayne cleared the dinner dishes as her mother cut the cake and passed out a piece to everyone. She took a bite and the rich concoction melted in her mouth. "Ma, I really don't know how you do it, but this cake gets better each time you make it."

"Practice makes perfect," Dian replied. "Can I get anyone coffee? Flint?"

"No, thank you, ma'am. I would like another glass of ice water if it isn't too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." She took his glass and filled it. She sat back to watch them enjoy

Donica Covey their dessert.

Once everyone had finished, Rayne once more cleared the table. "I'll do the dishes, Ma." She offered and began to fill the sink.

"Why don't you and Flint go for a walk and enjoy the moonlight?" Her father insisted. "You're mother can do the dishes."

"And your father can help me. Go on, have a nice time." Dian shooed them from the kitchen.

Rayne didn't wait for a second invitation; she hated doing dishes. She led Flint onto the back deck, the yard below bathed in moonlight.

Flint spied the trees on the ridge and walked in the direction. He held Rayne's hand as he moved across the lawn and into the forest. At the tree line, he sat down on the ground and motioned for her to sit next to him.

She sat and leaned into his shoulder, completely relaxed. He shifted slightly and she thought he was making himself more comfortable. A strange haunting sound filled the air and spoke to her heart in a language only it could understand.

She positioned herself comfortably on his shoulder. He pulled out the box and removed the flute, held it to his lips and began to play the tune he'd learned before. He put all his love into the song and hoped she could feel it.

Rayne sat up and looked at him. "It's beautiful, I don't think I've ever seen an instrument like that before. And you played it beautifully."

"It's a courting flute. When a warrior found the maiden of his heart, he would sit outside her teepee and play for her so she would know someone loved her. I play for you."

She slid the flute from his fingers and examined it closely. The intricate carvings showed plants and animal forms. "It's beautiful. I hope you play for me again some time."

"Every day for the rest of our lives." He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "I have spoken to your father. He has granted me permission to ask you to marry me. So, I sit here before you now, under the eyes of the Creator and ask that you, Rayne Amitola, become my wife. Share your life, your joys, your sorrows, for all our tomorrows with me."

"Oh, yes, yes Flint! I'll marry you." She threw herself into his arms and kissed him.

He pulled away and opened the box again. With shaking hands, he presented her with the silk wrapped bundle and waited for her to open it. "I hope you like it."

Her fingers trembled as badly as his, and she gently pulled the corners of the silk square away to reveal the ring that sat in the center of it. Picking it up, she cried with joy. When he took it from her and slid it on her finger, she smiled through her tears. "It fits perfectly."

"It was made for you." He rained kisses on her face then stood to help her rise. "Shouldn't we tell your parents?"

"I have a feeling they know." She giggled and they floated arm and arm into the house.

Dian and Ray were seated on the sofa cuddling close. When they saw them enter the house, Dian's eyes welled with tears. "Looks like there is going to be a wedding to plan."

Rayne smiled and went to be held in the embraces offered by her mother and father then watched as Flint was on the receiving in end of the offers.

"Have you thought about a date?" Dian asked.

"As soon as possible." Rayne spoke and everyone turned to look at her. She saw a look on her father's face and realized what it sounded like. "No! I just mean I want to get married! I didn't mean that!"

Her mother laughed. "I never thought this day would come. You are going to get married. We have so much to plan, book the church, find a reception hall, hire caterers, find a dress." Her mother began making a list.

Rayne looked at Flint. "I don't need all those frills, Ma. We're not getting married in a church. I want to get married in our field."

"The field?" Ray questioned.

"Not here. There is a field in a park Flint took me to. I've thought of it as our field. We'll have to get the OK for it, but that's where I want to do it. And since it's to be outside, I think we need to plan for it right away."

"We can get married there if you want to." Flint was thrilled she'd chosen that location.

"The owner will be more than happy to let us use it."

"Owner? For a park?"

"It isn't a park, it's my land, our land. It's been in my family for centuries." He looked at Rayne and winked. "I'd planned on building a house there one day."

"The place is settled, now for a date and time, preacher dress, attendants." Dian pressed further.

"You contact the preacher, Ma. Lee will be standing up with me, Dad will give me away. I will find a dress. Can you call the caterers?" Rayne asked.

"Of course," Dian smiled. "When did you want to do it?"

Rayne looked at the calendar. "The last Saturday in August, the twenty-eighth. It will still be nice but not overly warm."

"Not giving yourself a lot of time to plan are you?"

"It's enough, Ma. I have never dreamed of a fairy tale wedding, you know that. As long as my family and a few friends are there, it's all I need."

"What about me?" Flint asked.

"The groom is optional." Rayne smiled. "August twenty-eighth sound good? Do you need to check your calendar?"

"I'll marry you whenever you say."

"Let's let these two work out the details and we'll play some cards, son." Ray smiled and led Flint from the room.

Flint followed the sound of Rayne's making the plans echoing in the house. Soon, very soon, all his dreams and more would be realized. He gladly admitted to the one basic human emotion filling him, love. He loved her more and more every single minute.

Flint and Ray played a few rounds of rummy while Rayne peered over her mother's shoulder on the computer looking at dresses and arguing over which should be chosen.

"Ma, will you stop already? My wedding, my day, my choice." She playfully shoved her mother's chair. "Let me look for a while."

"You're breaking your poor mother's heart, you realize that, don't you?" Dian wailed.

"You're a big girl, get over it. Now shove over, will you?"

"If you two can't get along, I'm going to put you in separate corners," Ray interjected. "Flint and I will pick out the dress, decorations, food and everything."

"And that will mean a pink dress with orange polka dots for you." Flint pointed at Rayne.

"Hot dogs, hamburgers and chips for the menu. The colors will be lime green and that eggplant color." Ray looked at Flint. "While we're at it, we may as well bring a small television so the men can sit and watch a ball game while the women fawn and swoon over the wedding. Of course, you can take a commercial break to say your 'I do's"

"We give up, we'll be good," Dian promised as she pretended to kick Rayne in the shin.

"Good as gold." Rayne promised and with crossed fingers gently yanked her mother's hair.

"I'll get it, you two play nice." Ray laughed and reached for the ringing phone.

"Lime green..." Rayne tapped her chin.

"Time out." Ray called. "That was J.D. Lacey is on her way to Cadence and Jeff's house to sit with the kids. Looks like we have more good news."

Dian went and picked up her purse. "You two want to come with?"

"Of course," Rayne smiled and stood.

The two couples went to the Amitola's car and rode to the hospital. "I wonder what they're going to name this one?" Rayne asked.

"I'm not sure. She hasn't mentioned names in a while. The last one was simply awful, Myrtle Mae." Dian groaned.

"I thought that was a joke, not that they were really considering it."

Flint leaned in to Rayne's ear. "What have you thought you'd like to name our son?"

"I thought that was decided long ago." She whispered back.

He shook his head. "I didn't know when I would find you, besides you deserve some say in the matter."

"Dweezil Harvey Kestrel."

"Dweezil?" Flint asked a little louder.

"No, regular, my truck is diesel." Ray replied.

Rayne and Flint laughed. "I guess that one's out." She smiled.

At the hospital, they met Jeff in the waiting room. "Hi Jeff, any word?" Dian asked him as she hugged him.

"Not yet."

Rayne took Flint to him. "Jeff, my fiancé, Flint. Flint, my brother-in-law Jeff. I'm afraid Cadence is a little busy right now, otherwise, you'd get to meet her, too."

"Nice to meet you. I have to get back to Caddy now. We'll let you know." Jeff disappeared down the hall.

"The sixth time we've made this trip here." Ray smiled and walked over to the coffee

Donica Covey 153 machine.

"I wonder when we'll be coming for number seven." Dian hedged.

"When Cadence or Lacey pop another one, I suppose." Rayne replied shortly and walked to find a soda machine.

"They only just got engaged Dian, don't push," Ray cautioned.

"I know they were talking about names in the car. I wonder if that's why she is in such a hurry for a simple wedding."

"No, Ma," Rayne answered as she walked back into the room. "Someday, but not yet." She smiled.

"It's a boy." Jeff announced as he rushed into the room. "Nine pounds, twelve ounces and twenty inches long."

"Does my newest grandson have a name?"

"Michael James. I promised I'd be right back. You can see him in a few minutes."

They waited for the nurse to take them two at a time to see the baby. When her parents left the room, Rayne smiled at Flint. "She's impossible."

"She has plenty of love in her heart." He kissed her head and hugged her close. "I don't know how long I can wait for Dweezil." He laughed and followed her to visit the latest addition.

Rayne sat up and nudged Flint. "I think it's time."

He shot out of bed. "Are you sure? You're ready?"

"I'm ready as I will ever be." A contraction hit and she winced. "That wasn't fun."

He grabbed her bag, an outfit she'd had the foresight to select and lay out weeks ago, and her shoes then rushed back to her side.

Rayne sat up and struggled to move her awkward body from the bed and into the pants and top. She tried to slide her feet into the mules but couldn't. "My feet are too swollen to wear these."

He went to the closet and pulled out a pair of wool lined soft moccasins and brought them to her. He kneeled down and put them on for her. When she struggled to stand, he pulled her up and walked beside her.

Another contraction made her grip his hand tight and release. "That one came a little faster."

He nodded. "That means we need to hurry."

He placed a wool shawl over her shoulders and helped her out to the car. The drive to the hospital seemed to be taking forever. He saw her double from the force of another contraction. "The hospital is too far."

"You could take me in your talons and fly us there." She offered with a smile.

"I don't think so." He laughed back.

At the hospital, he filled out paper work and was left to pace while they put her in a room and did the examinations.

When he was called back, he rushed to her side. "Do you want me to call your family?"

"Not yet." The pains hit her again. "I want this to be just you and me."

Hours passed at a snails pace and still the child didn't come. "Why is this taking so long? Is something wrong?" He demanded of the doctor.

"Babies come when they're ready, Mr. Kestrel. Some just like to keep their parents waiting longer than others." The doctor assured him and checked Rayne again.

Rayne felt as if she was being ripped apart. She knew childbirth wasn't easy, but this

was hurting more than she'd expected. She reached for Flint's hand and squeezed it as she tried to suppress the urge to scream from the pain.

"It's all right to let us know how you feel Rayne." The nurse smiled and patted her shoulder.

"Fine." She barked. "It hurts...like hell."

"The doctor can give you something for pain, but if you want it, you have to let us know now. It will be too late if you wait much longer." The nurse spoke again.

Rayne shook her head. "No drugs. I don't...want to hurt...him."

"The drugs are perfectly safe." The nurse assured them both.

While he'd never been one to believe in them, he wanted Rayne to be as comfortable as possible. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." She groaned. The pain became more intense and she cried out and held onto him, her grip strengthening.

"Game time." The nurse said and went to bring the doctor into the room.

Flint stood beside the bed, his hand in a death grip by Rayne. Sweat beaded her brow, and tremors wracked her body as she strained to bring their child into the world.

Though he longed for much of the old days, he was grateful for the modern technology that would keep his woman and son safe during this time.

The pressure relaxed for a moment and before he could flex his fingers to return circulation to the tips, she squeezed them again.

"Almost there, Rayne." The nurse soothed.

"I see the head." The doctor called out.

Flint patted her forehead to prevent the perspiration from stinging her eyes. "You're doing great, love," he said to her.

"You...get...to...have the...next...one." She gritted out.

She was in such pain yet she joked and he ached to take it from her. Soon they would be three, and he loved her for enduring this for him.

"One more big push, Rayne." The doctor ordered.

He poured all the strength he had into her and his fingers almost broke in her grip as she pushed the final time.

"It's a girl." The doctor said and Flint swore he heard the Creator laughing at him.

"A girl?" Rayne said in confusion.

"A girl." The doctor affirmed.

"It was supposed to be a boy." Rayne sounded disappointed.

"He never agreed it would be our first born child." Flint said finally. "I guess we try again?" He kissed her and watched as the child was cleaned weighed and measured. He thanked the Great Spirit for keeping them safe and bringing the child into the world healthy.

"We need a name," Rayne laughed. "We can't call her Dweezil."

As they placed her in Rayne's arms, Flint felt as if he was in heaven. "Angel." He decided and kissed her small dark head.