



Silhouette®

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The Doctor's Medicine Woman

DONNA CLAYTON



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Donna Clayton

The Doctor's Medicine Woman

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She'd never in her life seen such fierce hunger.

Such concentrated intensity.

Travis had moved her. Affected her. Diana had realized it almost from the very moment she'd met him. She'd vowed to suppress the attraction. Extinguish it completely. But it kept rekindling itself, like the embers of some smoldering fire that were fanned and brought back to blazing life by its very presence.

And she'd been certain that he, too, had meant to crush any visceral urges he might have. She'd witnessed his determination to deny the attraction he felt.

What she was feeling was only a whim. A whim that could be conquered. That would be suppressed.

Otherwise, both their lives were bound to change forever....



Donna Clayton's SINGLE DOCTOR DADS series:
THE NANNY PROPOSAL (SR#1477)
THE DOCTOR'S MEDICINE WOMAN (SR#1483)
RACHEL AND THE M.D. (SR#1489)

Dear Reader,

There's something for everyone in a Silhouette Romance, be it moms (or daughters!) or women who've found—or who still seek!—that special man in their lives. Just revel in this month's diverse offerings as we continue to celebrate Silhouette's 20th Anniversary.

It's last stop: STORKVILLE, USA, as Karen Rose Smith winds this adorable series to its dramatic conclusion. A virgin with amnesia finds shelter in the town sheriff's home, but will she find lasting love with Her Honor-Bound Lawman? New York Times bestselling author Kasey Michaels brings her delightful trilogy THE CHANDLERS REQUEST... to an end with the sparkling bachelor-auction story Raffling Ryan. The Millionaire's Waitress Wife becomes the latest of THE BRUBAKER BRIDES as Carolyn Zane's much-loved miniseries continues.

In the second installment of Donna Clayton's SINGLE DOCTOR DADS, The Doctor's Medicine Woman holds the key to his adoption of twin Native American boys—and to his guarded heart. The Third Kiss is a charmer from Leanna Wilson—a must-read pretend engagement story! And a one-night marriage that began with "The Wedding March" leads to The Wedding Lullaby in Melissa McClone's latest offering....

Happy Reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary-Theresa Hussey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

The Doctor's Medicine Woman

Donna Clayton



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Books by Donna Clayton

Silhouette Romance

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Nanny and the Professor #1066

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*Nanny in the Nick of Time #1217

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†The Stand-By Significant Other #1284

†Who's the Father of Jenny's Baby? #1302

The Boss and the Beauty #1342

His Ten-Year-Old Secret #1373

Her Dream Come True #1399

Adopted Dad #1417

His Wild Young Bride #1441

**The Nanny Proposal #1477

**The Doctor's Medicine Woman #1483

DONNA CLAYTON

is proud to be a recipient of the Holt Medallion, an award honoring outstanding literary talent, for her Silhouette Romance Wife for a While. And seeing her work appear on the Waldenbooks Series Bestsellers List has given her a great deal of joy and satisfaction.

Reading is one of Donna's favorite ways to while away a rainy afternoon. She loves to hike, too. Another hobby added to her list of fun things to do is traveling. She fell in love with Europe during her first trip abroad and plans to return often. Oh, and Donna still collects cookbooks, but as her writing career grows, she finds herself using them less and less.

Donna loves to hear from her readers. Please write to her care of Silhouette Books, 300 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017.

Travis Westcott, M.D. Family Practice Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	
Patient File	
Name:	Me
Diagnosis:	Lovesick Single Doctor Dad
Symptoms:	Rapid pulse, difficulty concentrating...long, sleepless nights
Prescription:	Kiss a certain Kolheek Medicine Woman senseless!
 Physician's Signature	

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Chapter One

“We have decided to permit the adoption—”

Travis Westcott felt pure and utter joy rush through his body as he stood before the Kolheek Council of Elders.

“—but there is one, very small—” the speaker paused, her bronze, wizened face showing little emotion “—catch.”

His stomach lurching with sudden suspicion, Travis couldn't keep the dismay from his voice as he repeated, “Catch?” His brow furrowed, his head tilting a fraction. “What sort of catch?”

He'd worked so hard to prove himself worthy to these people. He'd traveled from Philadelphia to the northern Vermont reservation four times over the past two months in order to appear before the Council to plead his case, to explain to the Elders that his single status would not keep him from being a good father to the five-year-old twin brothers, Jared and Josh. And just when he thought the boys would be his, he was being presented with yet another obstacle, yet another mountain to climb. He couldn't help but worry how high and steep this one might turn out to be.

“Dr. Westcott,” a second member of the Council of six men and women spoke up, “maybe we shouldn't say ‘catch.’ The word has such an underhanded connotation attached to it. What we should say is stipulation. And please know that this...condition was decided upon with our best intentions and the boys' best interests in mind, we assure you.”

“The boys' best interests were all that ever concerned me.” Irritation tinged his quiet tone, cloaking Travis's fear of disappointment. Becoming the twins' father had become so important to him. More important than he'd ever imagined.

“If this has something to do with the fact that I'm not married,” he said. “I've already explained —”

“No.” The first Elder shook her head.

Travis couldn't believe that the state and federal governments of the United States had no say in this matter. But he'd learned that the Kolheek were totally in control of who did or did not adopt the orphans from their small tribe. The Council had complete authority in the matter.

“This has nothing to do with the fact that you cannot provide the boys with a mother.”

Guilt swept through him when he heard the situation voiced in those terms. He'd thought he could give the boys everything they needed by way of a parent. Resolve made his spine straighten. He could give Jared and Josh all they needed. He was certain of it. And if this catch, this stipulation, they were suddenly presenting him with, didn't have to do with his marital status, then the Council, too, thought he could give the boys all they needed.

Then what? he wondered. What was this condition they were hinting at?

Patience, he silently chided. If he'd learned nothing else over the months of dealing with the Native Americans, he'd learned that they revealed their thoughts, plans and opinions in their own good time. No matter what kind of hurry or rush anyone else might be in.

“You've made your arguments,” the elderly woman said. “You've convinced us that you will love the boys. Provide for them. And the fact that you are half Kolheek only served to help your cause. You showed us just how much you cared by seeing to it that the boys were provided with the medical attention they needed two years ago. Their heart conditions might have killed them were it not for your intervention, Dr. Westcott. We know all these things.”

The second Council Elder continued, “The boys will be six soon. And you know that with each day, each week, each month that passes, their chances of being adopted diminish. It is a sad but true fact that couples want to adopt impressionable babies, not adolescents already on their way to being grown. We want you to adopt Jared and Josh. We believe the three of you will make a happy family. If we didn't, you wouldn't be here today.”

“Then what is it?” Travis leveled a steady gaze on the group, his impatience thinly, if at all, veiled. “What’s the catch?”

Attempting to intimidate the Elders was futile. It was apparent that these people had lived long, full lives. They had endured hardships, pain and sorrow the likes of which he would never know. They had experienced happiness, laughter and tranquillity. These six men and women were the dignitaries of their tribe. Only the oldest and wisest could sit on the Council. Their vast life experiences showed in their proud faces. In the set of their shoulders. In the unmistakably enlightened glints of their dark, deep-set eyes.

“There is no easy way to present the problem we see,” the woman told him. “We find it disturbing to know that you will be taking the twins far from the reservation. Far from their home. Far from The People.”

Travis frowned, finding her words quite alarming. “But you knew from the beginning that I lived in Pennsylvania. You don’t expect me to move here to Vermont? Here to the reservation? I have a medical practice in Philadelphia...”

She shook her head in silent answer, somewhat calming his rising panic. “But we are concerned that the boys will lose touch with their heritage. Their past. Their ancestors.” Her voice grew soft and gentle as she added, “Dr. Westcott, you are ignorant in the ways of The People.”

Although he realized that the woman tried to relay her concern without insulting him, he bristled at what felt like an ugly criticism. Ignorant was not a word that would normally describe him. He was a successful physician. Co-author of a textbook widely used by medical colleges all over the world. He was a sought-after speaker at conventions and seminars. Because of his dogged determination and his knowledge of the workings of the human body, he’d saved lives. As these facts rolled through his head, Travis knew he wasn’t being conceited. He was simply being honest about himself and his accomplishments.

However, if he were to continue being honest, he’d have to concede to the Council woman’s criticism. For her observation was true. He knew nothing of his Native American heritage.

His mother, a full-blooded Kolheek, had left the reservation as a teenager when she’d married his father. She had never returned. She had gladly adopted her husband’s culture, his religion, his whole way of life. And she had never attempted to reveal anything about her Indian background to her two sons. Even after her bitter divorce, Lila Westcott had never returned to the reservation. Travis had grown up thinking of himself as nothing more than a...proud American.

“I love those boys.” He silently thanked heaven that his voice didn’t break with the tremendous emotion welling inside him. The idea that he could lose the chance to be their father distressed him mightily.

He wasn’t used to making himself vulnerable to others, but at this moment he felt it was necessary. He could think of no other response to the woman’s accusation. He did love Jared and Josh. And he planned to be the best father he could be. He wanted to give them everything. But how could he give them something he didn’t have? He couldn’t offer the boys knowledge of the past when he didn’t know it himself. He couldn’t furnish them with the wisdom of a culture of which he was unfamiliar.

The old woman’s eyes softened in her wrinkled face. “We don’t doubt your deep affection for the children, Dr. Westcott. We know you will feed and clothe them. We know you’ll provide them with a safe home, a good education. With tremendous emotional support.” She inhaled, her chin lifting a fraction. “But we feel they need more.”

“Due to their medical condition, they have lived in a state orphanage,” the second Council member added. “Like you, they know little to nothing of their heritage, of the Kolheek ways. They need a link to their past. And we’ve found just the person who can give them that. Our Medicine Woman.”

Diana Chapman sat in the waiting area outside the Council room. The last thing she wanted to do was spend two months in the home of Dr. Travis Westcott—single Dr. Travis Westcott.

But her grandmother, the senior member of the Council Elders, had asked Diana to make this trip, to prepare a set of five-year-old twin boys for their naming ceremony, as a personal favor. Diana had been taught to grant all her Elders the utmost respect, and she'd have at least considered the request no matter which Council member had approached her. But she loved her grandmother dearly. She'd move heaven and earth if doing so would please the woman who had raised her.

Diana knew that the doctor was a successful man. Someone who could afford to raise and educate the young twins. A man who took his responsibilities seriously. And he was half Kolheek. These had been the facts that had swayed the Council to allow their own to be adopted by someone living off the reservation.

But the thing that concerned Diana was Travis Westcott's single status. With her heart barely mended from her difficult divorce, she didn't relish the thought of being cooped up in a house with a man who was most probably "on the hunt." Since returning to the reservation ten months ago, she'd been pursued by every bachelor within the reservation boundaries, and even some outside them. She'd turned down more date invitations than a Christmas turkey had feathers. Why couldn't men take no for an answer without getting their pride all knocked out of joint?

Her grandmother had told Diana that her worry about suffering the doctor's attentions was like interest on a loan she may never owe. Then the woman had gone on to assuredly say that she felt Diana could handle herself in any situation. "If the need arises, simply be honest with the man," her grandmother had suggested. "Just as you've been with the others."

So Diana had decided to do just that. She'd help Jared and Josh, and she'd do her best to steer clear of Travis Westcott.

However, she couldn't help but wonder how the doctor was going to react to the Elder's condition of having a Medicine Woman live in his home for a while. Men were strange creatures who didn't take very well to ideas that weren't their own. Diana's mouth quirked up at one corner. Her grandmother—amazing woman that she was—would convince him that the stipulation was necessary, Diana was certain of it.

Just then the door opened, and she was summoned into the Council room.

The air was thick, and one look at Travis Westcott's face told her he wasn't happy. He wasn't happy at all. But even with a frown marring his high, intelligent forehead, she couldn't help but recognize that he was a handsome man. A very handsome man.

Surprisingly, her knees turned rubbery and her stomach churned as if it had been invaded by a slew of fluttering butterflies. This anxiety bewildered her. Was she worried because the man was so obviously irritated? Or because he was so startlingly handsome?

What nonsense, she silently chided. She stood a little straighter. Never again would she be intimidated by an angry man. Or a handsome one, either, for that matter.

His displeasure seemed tempered, even if only for a moment, as his jet-black gaze perused her face. Something lit in his eyes. Surprise? Appreciation? Interest? Mere curiosity? Diana couldn't tell. But she felt her mouth draw into a hard line. She refused to be concerned with his curiosity, his appreciation or his interest, and she immediately averted her gaze, focusing her attention on the Council members. More specifically, her grandmother.

"Dr. Westcott," her grandmother said to the doctor, "I'd like you to meet my granddaughter, Diana Chapman. Diana, Dr. Westcott."

The doctor met her halfway and reached out to shake her hand.

His grip was firm and warm and...secure.

She had to force herself not to step back in surprise at the thought. Why would that descriptive term come to mind? But she didn't have time to linger over the unsettling question.

"Please," he said to her softly, "call me Travis."

She offered him a professional smile. “Only if you’ll call me Diana.”

He nodded, holding onto her hand for what she felt was a little longer than necessary. Then every inch of her skin prickled with awkwardness and her palm felt distinctly chilled when contact between their hands was broken.

“Congratulations on the successful adoption of Jared and Josh,” she said.

“Thanks.” He then added, “I think.”

Was the aside his attempt at good-natured teasing? she wondered. His own self-doubt? Or was he rebelling against her presence being forced on himself and the boys?

“I’m not sure yet that the adoption is successful,” he said.

“Be assured—”

Diana looked toward the Council table as her grandmother spoke to Travis.

“—the adoption is complete. Now that you have agreed to accept Diana’s help, we are happy to release the boys to you.”

The doctor’s immense happiness seemed to fairly pulse from him, Diana observed. But the frown on his brow quickly returned.

“For how long?” he asked.

The Council, as a whole, looked confused by his question. But it was Diana’s grandmother who continued to speak on their behalf.

“Forever,” she told him. “Or at least until Jared and Josh reach maturity.”

“No, no,” he said. “I wasn’t referring to the boys. Um...no offence to Ms. Chapman—”

“Diana,” she softly reminded him. Surely they could be on a first name basis and still act professionally toward each other.

At her prompt, his mouth curled slightly at the corners as he cast her a quick glance, and Diana got the nerve-racking and overwhelming sense that, if this man were to ever truly smile at her, his face would be transformed from merely handsome to utterly and breathtakingly gorgeous.

He directed his gaze at her grandmother. “Just how long will I be expected to...” His words trailed into a brief and awkward pause. He tried again. “How long will Diana be with me and the boys?”

The elderly woman nodded her understanding. “In two short months the boys will turn six. It is the Kolheek tradition to hold a naming ceremony on—or close to—a child’s sixth birthday.”

Diana watched Travis shake his head.

“Naming ceremony? But the boys already have names.”

“Kolheek names,” the Council woman explained.

Knowing she could clarify in a way he would understand, Diana offered, “Long ago, the infant mortality rate was very high. Parents discovered it was best to wait—”

“That is the rationalization given by cultural professors at colleges and universities.” Diana’s grandmother enunciated the words with gentle but firm disapproval. “The real reason is that the Kolheek believe a child should have the chance to develop a personality before he is gifted with a name.”

A patient smile tugged at the corners of Diana’s mouth. This wasn’t the first time she and her grandmother had clashed over her academic cultural studies of the Kolheek people.

“Had you given me a chance, Grandmother, I’d have explained fully.”

“I know you would have,” her grandmother granted. “But the day is quickly passing. And surely the good doctor is anxious to collect his children.”

Now Travis was smiling. At the Council. Diana could sense the warmth of it, but because she stood slightly behind him and to one side, she could not see his face and was only left to wonder if her thoughts about how a smile would transform his features was true or not. Somehow, she felt deprived.

When next her grandmother spoke, the woman’s voice was louder, more formal than it had been just a moment before, and Diana knew an edict of the Council was being declared.

“Our Medicine Woman will live with Dr. Westcott and the boys until such time as she deems them ready to be named. She will teach the children all she can of the Kolheek and the essence of what it means to be part of The People. She will prepare Jared and Josh for their naming ceremony, and she will perform that ceremony.” After the very briefest of pauses, she added, “Then we shall see what fate has in store.”

Diana shot her grandmother a curious glance. What on earth had she meant by that last peculiar statement?

The flight back to Philadelphia was packed with business travelers and vacationers, but Travis paid little attention to his fellow passengers—except the two young boys sitting beside him. Jared and Josh were craning to see out the small window on what was so very obviously their first trip in an airplane. Jared chattered away excitedly, while Josh just seemed to silently take in everything with his huge, dark eyes.

All Travis had to do was look at the boys and his chest swelled with pride, his heart with paternal love. He’d thought the fatherly feelings would take time to develop, that becoming the boys’ daddy would have to grow on him. However, he’d discovered rather quickly when he’d picked up the children at the orphanage this afternoon just how wrong he’d been.

Jared and Josh already knew Travis as he’d been to visit them twice a year since arranging their operations—and more often since he’d started the adoption process—so that made the meeting less stressful for everyone concerned. Upon being told that Dr. Travis, as the boys had referred to him until now, was taking them home to live with him, the boys’ reactions had made Travis’s heart literally ache with throat-closing emotion.

Jared had grinned and seemed to accept the situation eagerly. He’d asked if Travis was really going to be his daddy. The question had made Travis nearly strangle with the surprising magnitude of love that surged through him. He hadn’t been able to answer with anything other than a silent nod.

Josh’s reaction had been poignant, too, but in a very different way. His silence was profound, his large, chocolate eyes shadowed with some emotion Travis couldn’t quite identify, but that he suspected was suspicion. And fear. Travis had wanted desperately to comfort the boy, embrace him, assure him there was nothing to be afraid of. However, he’d been worried that becoming physical too soon would only compound the child’s fear. Trust would come in time, Travis was certain.

The child’s misgivings were abated somewhat when Jared had tossed his arm over his brother’s shoulder and had said, “It’s going to be okay, Josh. You’ll see.”

Although Jared’s chin had lifted with what looked like much bravado, Travis hadn’t missed the anxiety lacing the boy’s reassuring remark. He’d wanted to hug the boys to him, to tell them they needn’t worry another second, that he’d move mountains to see that they were loved and well cared for. But he’d stifled the urge, silently noting again that trust—like Rome—wasn’t built in a day.

The boys’ meager belongings had been packed into one suitcase and they had spent a tearful half hour saying goodbye to the friends they’d made at the state home and the staff there that had cared for them for the first five years of their lives. Travis had patiently given the children as long as he could before telling them they had to get on the road to the airport.

At the mention of airplanes and runways, Jared had come alive with excitement. Josh did his best to underplay his feelings about all this commotion, but Travis knew the child was just as eager for this new experience as his brother.

As he now watched the boys press their faces against the small, double-paned window, Travis sighed. The trip to the reservation had been pretty close to perfect. He’d come home with the boys...

The sigh he now expelled was filled to the brim with doubt and agitation. He wasn’t really angry that he’d had to agree to Diana Chapman’s presence in his home for the next couple of months. He agreed with the Kolheek Council’s opinion that Jared and Josh needed some roots. They were young. And impressionable. They needed a sense of heritage. A heritage that Travis couldn’t give them because he didn’t have it himself.

He looked across the aisle at the woman's arrow-straight, black-as-midnight hair, her tawny skin, noble cheekbones, perfect nose.

What was it about Diana Chapman that unsettled him so? Was it because she was a Medicine Woman? Someone living the very culture he was so totally ignorant of? Or was it because she had been forced on him? Because she was someone he'd see as an invader in his house? In his new family? Or, a quiet voice silently stressed, was it because she was too darned beautiful for words?

She turned her head, her nut-brown eyes connecting with his, and she caught him staring for what seemed the umpteenth time since they'd boarded the plane. Awkwardness crept over him, thick and straining. What was it about her that made him feel so...rough and unrefined? Ham-fisted, even?

Her dark, steady gaze was trained on him, and he felt the silence swell and grow even more awkward than it had been only a moment before. The urge to reach up and tug at his collar welled up in him like an unreachable itch, but he firmly squelched it.

Her quiet dignity, her almost patrician manner, was what had him feeling so damned uncouth.

Say something, you idiot, his brain silently poked him like a stick. Say something that will bridge this difficult stillness.

"So," he began, hating the dry-as-dust sound of his voice, "tell me...what exactly does a Medicine Woman do?"

Diana went utterly still. When she had left the reservation in order to attend college in southern California, she'd shied away from telling anyone in the outside world that she was training to become a Kolheek Medicine Woman. The title was archaic to the modern world. And to people who weren't familiar with Native American culture, the term often provoked snickers and thinly disguised jeers.

She remained silent for several seconds as she tried to decipher whether the doctor's query had been prompted by disdain or honest curiosity.

He hadn't said much to her since they had left the reservation together and traveled to the nearby small town of Iron Hill, Vermont, to pick up the boys at the state orphanage. Diana had pretty much stayed in the background as Travis happily broke the news to Jared and Josh that the adoption had been successful, that they would be going home with him. To stay.

Jared had been all smiles, but Josh had taken the information in silence. Over the next half hour or so that they were at the home, Diana watched in silence as Travis interacted with his new sons. The only introduction she'd received was that she was a 'lady from the reservation who'll be staying with us for a while.' She hadn't minded being brushed over. Travis had only told the truth, and it was important that the focus of the moment be placed on the boys, who needed to understand the change that was about to take place in their lives now that they had been adopted by Travis.

The trip to the airport was filled with Jared's questions. The child wanted to know how big the plane would be, how high they would fly, if they'd be above the clouds, if they'd eat a meal. His questions had rung like the peals of a high-pitched bell. Travis had remained patient, and that had impressed Diana.

Finding no guile in Travis's eyes now, Diana said, "It would probably be easier to tell you what a Medicine Woman doesn't do."

He obviously recognized her quip for what it was—an attempt to reduce the strain between them. He smiled, and Diana's breath literally caught in her throat. She'd been right. His smile really did change his already handsome features into a countenance that stole away all thought. For a moment her mind went blank, her heart raced, as she took in his even, white teeth, the smile lines around his mouth and eyes. My, but he was a handsome man.

"Jack-of-all-trades, are you?" he said, interrupting her chaotic thoughts.

She blinked, struggling to calm her jangling nerves, her racing mind. What had they been talking about? Taking a deep, soul-soothing breath, she swiftly gathered her composure.

Her job. That was it. He'd asked about her responsibilities.

"I do...everything. I lead celebrations. I pray for the sick. I council alcoholics, unwed mothers and couples whose marriages are in trouble. I deliver babies. I diagnose illness and prescribe medication—"

"You deliver babies? And prescribe medicine?"

"Yes," she answered. One corner of her mouth pulled back a bit. "Well, the babies would come with or without my help. And the medication I prescribe is in the form of herbs, mostly. I'm what you would call a holistic healer. I'm an N.D. Doctor of Naturopathy. Certified by the state of Vermont."

"You're a bona fide doctor?"

There was no hint of derision in his tone, and for that Diana was relieved. She nodded.

"Wow, I didn't realize."

Did she hear apology in his words?

She couldn't stop the grin that took over her face. "Please don't tell me you were expecting a peace pipe and a feather headdress."

Her gentle teasing seemed to ease the awkwardness that hung between them.

"Don't get me wrong," she continued. "I have ceremonial paraphernalia. Brought it with me, in fact. For the ceremony. But I don't use it on a daily basis."

His breathy chuckle was so soft she barely heard it. "I have to admit, when the Council said Medicine Woman, I had no idea what to expect."

"Usually a Kolheek Shaman is—"

"Don't you mean Sha-person?"

The wisecrack was only voiced to make her laugh, she realized that.

"I've never concerned myself too much with political correctness," she told him. "And I'm not radically into feminism, either." Seeing his surprised expression, she pointedly added, "Living among the Kolheek tribe has taught me exactly which sex wields the power."

His smile waning, Travis seemed momentarily unsure of the meaning of her statement. Diana liked the idea of keeping him on his toes and made no effort to explain her thoughts further.

"Normally," she said, "I would become the apprentice of another Shaman. I would have learned everything I needed to know without leaving the reservation. But I wanted more. I wanted a formal education. And my grandmother agreed. So I attended college, and then medical school."

"What if your grandmother hadn't agreed?"

Diana lifted one shoulder slightly. "That wouldn't have happened. My grandmother is a wise woman. She knows there is very little opportunity on the reservation. We already have two family physicians. It's a small tribe. Too small to support three doctors. She knew I would someday have to find another path to follow."

"A different path? You're thinking of quitting—"

"No, no," she assured him. "I am a Kolheek Medicine Woman, first and foremost. I will remain on my chosen path. But if I'm to support myself, it will someday take me to a different place. Off the reservation."

"I see." He glanced over to check on the boys, and then his dark gaze leveled on her once again. "How do you feel about that? Leaving your home? Your grandmother?"

Diana averted her gaze for an instant. She moistened her lips, and tilted up her chin as she told him, "I love my grandmother dearly. She raised me. But all baby birds must someday leave the nest, fly on their own, isn't that so?"

She'd left the nest once. She'd married and thought she'd made a home for herself in California. But then she'd been wounded, she'd fled back to the reservation, her heart ripped and torn to shreds, her wings broken and bleeding.

"Sounds like you and your grandmother are very close."

“Yes,” she answered softly. She would miss her grandmother this holiday season. But Diana was determined to make her grandmother proud by doing right by the twins. Jared and Josh would know what it meant to be Kolheek when she was through. She could take great pride in that.

A frown bit into his brow as if something worrisome had just then entered his mind. “Maybe you can help me to understand something. Can you tell me what she meant today? Your grandmother, I mean. With that cryptic parting phrase she gave me? The one about fate? And seeing what it had in store?”

The sudden anxiety clouding Travis’s gaze had a startling effect on Diana. Empathy enveloped her like the warm blanket of sunshine that covers the New England mountains each summer.

Travis continued, “She wouldn’t let me bring the boys home, get them settled, only to deny me the right to adopt them after your stay, would she?”

His distress turned to raw fear, and Diana thought her heart would surely rend in two. And in that instant, bells and whistles sounded in her head, red warning flags waved furiously. She had no business caring so much about this man’s reactions to her grandmother’s words. No business whatsoever.

Chapter Two

Then we'll see what fate has in store.

Her grandmother's words had flitted through Diana's head more than once since she'd left the reservation with Travis. She remembered the unsettled feeling the obscure yet seemingly momentous statement had stirred in her as she stood with Travis before the Council.

Diana's first thought had been that the remark had been meant for her benefit, and she'd been bewildered by what message her grandmother might be trying to relay to her. But hearing Travis's doubts regarding her grandmother's intentions now had Diana wondering if maybe he was right. Maybe her grandmother had been issuing some kind of warning to Travis about the boys. That did make more sense. But if this was so, then it was a cruel thing for her grandmother to have done to Travis. The man was trying to do something good here. Something honorable and compassionate. Now he was being made to worry about having the twins taken from him after opening his home—and his heart—to Jared and Josh. Would her grandmother have done something so unkind?

Sympathy for Travis pained Diana's heart. He needed reassurance. She could tell from the expression on his face, from the doubt shadowing his intense, black eyes.

"To my knowledge, the Council has never retracted a promise," she told him softly. "And they did make you a promise today. They said they wanted you and the boys to become a family. To the Kolheek, a person's word means everything—honor, pride, honesty, integrity. A person's character is only as good as his or her word. I cannot believe..."

Her voice faltered and then trailed away as she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. As much as she wanted to assure him, she refused to tell him anything other than the full and honest truth.

After expelling a resigned sigh, she said, "But I cannot mislead you. This situation is far different than any I've ever experienced. The Council is concerned about the boys. About their living away from their culture. About your being single." She sighed. "Until the adoption papers are signed by each Council member and the documents are in your hands, then...I would suppose that anything is possible."

"Great." His utterance was soft, more to himself than to anyone else.

Again, compassion squeezed her in its tight grip. "The Council did say they wanted you to have the boys."

"Only two of the members actually spoke," he reminded her.

"They were the Council representatives. They spoke the thoughts of everyone. If even one member had disagreed, you can be sure he or she would have spoken up."

Gratitude tinged his tone as he murmured his appreciation. She smiled at him, her stomach suddenly feeling all giddy and...and strange.

Just then a plastic drinking straw from one of the boys' sodas came flying over Travis's head, landing on the blue carpeted aisle separating Travis's and Diana's seats. Automatically she reached down to pick it up. After quietly warning the boys to settle down, Travis turned back to her and took the straw from her.

The pads of his fingers were warm as they gently brushed the backs of hers. A chill shimmied up her arm, churning up gooseflesh, and she shivered. She darted a glance at his strong hand, and then again at his handsome profile. Luckily Travis was in motion, swinging back around to speak to the twins, and he didn't seem to notice her astonishing response to his touch.

She curled her fingers into a fist and stuffed her hand into her lap. Reacting to Travis was the very last thing she wanted to do. She didn't want to be affected by him. Men were the cause of too much pain. Too much humiliation. Her only goal on this trip was to spend time with Jared and Josh, to acquaint them with their heritage. If she could help assuage Travis's doubts and fears about the adoption, she would. If she could help the boys feel more comfortable with their new father, she'd

do that, too. But she didn't want any involvement with Travis other than what was necessary for the boys' sake.

Okay, so she found him handsome. Any woman would. His onyx eyes were appealingly intelligent, his long, neat hair glossy and inviting, his sexy mouth sent sensuous ideas flitting through her mind—

She cut the thought to the quick. Her body was only reacting to his good looks. This was mere physiology. She was smart enough to know that.

The steward ambled by, instructing passengers to return seats to the full, upright position and gathering used napkins and empty soda cans in preparation for landing. But Diana barely heard, so involved was she in her thoughts.

The fact that she'd identified her attraction to Travis early was a good thing. She gave a mental nod. A very good thing. What she was experiencing was a completely natural response. Purely physical in nature...hence, totally controllable if she remained vigilantly cognizant of it.

Diana glanced over at Travis, but saw only the back of his sleek, dark head, his broad shoulders and the full length of his back as he snapped young Jared's seat belt securely into place.

Controllable, she firmly thought. What I'm feeling is totally controllable.

The boys were so excited. They had explored every inch of the house and yard as soon as they'd arrived home. Travis had been lucky several years ago in finding an old stone manor house on a large piece of property thick with trees. A perfect setting in which to raise children, although he hadn't had that in mind when he'd purchased it. The last thing Travis had thought he'd ever have was a family of his own. He was a dyed-in-the-wool bachelor. And quite naturally, as a man without a wife, he'd never contemplated having children.

Until six months ago.

During one of his visits with the twins—a visit planned only to check on their medical condition, take them out for a meal and buy them some clothes and a few toys—Travis had heard murmuring among the staff at the state home. Phrases like “getting beyond adoptable age” and “special needs children” and “undesirable” kept popping up.

The orphanage administrator had told Travis they were even thinking of splitting the boys up in order to find them homes. That thought had disturbed Travis, and it had got him thinking...about becoming the boys' daddy himself, about taking them into his own home.

His friends and partners, Greg and Sloan, had thought he was crazy when he'd first voiced his idea of becoming an adoptive dad to the Native American twins. But Travis had prevailed. Something about the rambunctious boys, something about what seemed to be turning into a dire situation for them, kept calling to Travis. Wouldn't leave him alone. He had been meant to raise these boys. He could feel it in the very pit of his gut. He might not have been able to find the right words to make anyone fully understand his feelings, but he knew it in his heart. Thank the good Lord above, he'd been able to clarify his feelings to the Kolheek Council well enough that they had allowed him to bring the boys home with him to Philadelphia.

And as he listened to the thumps and bumps coming from the upstairs bedroom, he smiled to himself and knew he hadn't made a mistake. Jared and Josh belonged here with him. And having them here was worth every ounce of worry and apprehension he'd suffered to get them here.

And the anxiety you continue to suffer, he thought, remembering the Kolheek Elder's odd parting words about seeing what fate had in store. Had he fallen in love with these children only to have them taken away from him in a mere two months? The idea was too disturbing for him to even contemplate, so he closed the lid on it, shut it out of his mind.

He climbed the stairs, and when he knocked softly on the closed door of their bedroom, the bumps and scuffling stopped. Travis turned the knob and stepped into the room.

His eyebrows raised when he saw that the blankets and quilted spreads of both twin beds were mangled and twisted. Jared stood on one mattress, towering over his brother Josh, the pillow in his grasp drawn back for a playful blow.

One look at Travis's face had Jared's grip on the pillowcase loosening. The pillow dropped to the mattress, bouncing once before coming to rest on top of the swirl of sheets and blankets. Jared slowly lowered himself until he was sitting next to his wide-eyed brother.

"Sorry," Jared muttered. "We was only playin'."

Scolding the boys hadn't even crossed his mind, but the fear he read on little Josh's face made Travis wonder what kind of trouble their roughhouse games had gotten them into at the orphanage.

"I used to have pillow fights with my brother when we were kids." Travis went to Jared's empty bed and began to straighten the blankets.

"You did?" Realizing that Travis wasn't angry, Jared grinned like an imp.

"Yeah," Travis said. "It was a lot of fun." He turned down the top blanket and smoothed his hand over it. "But it's really late. You two need to get some sleep."

"But we ain't tired." Even as he said the words, Jared bounded off Josh's bed and onto his own, sliding down onto the mattress and tucking his feet under the covers.

"New situations have a way of getting you all worked up." Travis picked up the forgotten pillow from where it lay on Josh's bed, plumped it up and then tucked it behind Jared's head. "But if you'll lay still for a bit, I'm sure you'll fall asleep soon enough." Then he began to untangle Josh's bedclothes.

Josh just stared at him. Finally the boy said, "It's quiet here."

Travis smiled as he drew the blanket up over Josh's legs. He had no idea what the child meant by the remark.

Then Jared spoke up. "At the home, Sammy cries. A lot. And Mrs. Basset turns up the TV really loud at night. She says we give her big pains 'cause she can't hear her shows. She gets pretty mad. Her face gets all red."

Realizing that the boys were explaining the difference between bedtime at the orphanage and here, Travis nodded. "I see."

"Mrs. Basset yells." Josh's voice was tiny. "Jared couldn't sleep with me. One boy to a bed. That's the rule."

The state home had housed at least two dozen other children. The twins were probably used to constant chaos, noise and mayhem. Living here would be a distinct contrast for them. It would take some getting used to, Travis silently surmised.

"You want Jared to sleep in your bed?"

Josh swallowed, blinked in anxious hesitation, then he nodded.

Travis looked over at Jared, lifted Josh's blanket and swiped his hand through the air in a movement meant to stir things into motion. "Don't worry," he told them softly. "You'll get used to the quiet. Silence can be a nice thing."

Jared scooted down onto the bed next to Josh. "B-but we ain't tired," he repeated his original complaint.

"We aren't tired." Travis couldn't help correcting the boy's improper grammar. "Like I said, if you lay still—"

"How about a story?"

Travis directed his gaze toward the soft, feminine voice coming from the doorway.

Diana was dressed in a simple white robe that was tied at the waist with a sash. Light glistened on the long, straight rope of hair that was pulled over one shoulder. The pristine fabric of the robe accentuated the coppery skin of her bare arms and legs.

Legs. Travis couldn't help but notice the shapely knees, firm calves and tiny ankles. Even her feet were cute.

The thought startled him and he felt his eyes go wide for a millisecond, before he forced his gaze back up to her face. Damn it! Ogling this woman's body was the last thing he'd meant to do!

He was human. A human male. The testosterone pumping through his veins made appreciating the female form a most inherent act. But if he was going to eye the woman every time they were in the same room together, he was going to be in for a long and uncomfortable couple of months.

"You—" His mouth and throat had gone dry at the sight of her and that made his voice sound gravelly. He shoved the awareness he felt aside, cleared his throat and started again. "You want to tell the boys a story?"

She nodded, her wide, sensuous mouth twisting wryly.

Her very kissable lips made his heart thud against his ribs.

"If I'm to get to sleep anytime soon," she quipped lightly, "I think Jared and Josh need a little spirit-calming medicine."

He cast her a quizzical glance. "Medicine?"

Her chuckle was velvety rich, like sweet cream, and the fine hairs on the back of his neck raised. Damn, but this woman was too...appealing.

Control yourself! he silently demanded.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not suggesting drugs. I'm talking about good, old-fashioned entertainment. Entertainment designed especially for..." she then turned her attention first to Jared and then to Josh as she stole closer "...little boys at bedtime."

She sat down on the edge of Jared's bed. Travis was conscious of how close she was. He could smell the warm, clean, lemony fragrance of her.

"Long ago," she began, "before there were such things as paper and pencils, The People kept their history through stories. They sat around a fire at night with the stars winking at them high above, and they taught their children where they came from. They recounted tales of brave warriors and hunters. They told of times gone by. They told of their hopes and dreams to come. The children heard about floods and fire and acts of nature that formed the tribe into what it was. Through the Shaman's words, battles were relived. Wars with other tribes over hunting rights disputes. Wars with the Europeans. The children learned of the good times, when crops and hunting were bountiful. And they heard about hardships, when blizzards came, and stayed, and made hunting impossible. The Shaman would also tell of brave leaders and great chiefs..."

Travis looked at the faces of the twins, saw that Diana had caught them up in the web she was spinning. Easing himself down to sit on Josh's bed, Travis was extremely careful not to allow his knee to touch hers. She was so close. He looked at her face, at her expressive eyes, and found himself quickly pulled into the past right along with the boys. Her soft voice was lulling, mesmerizing, and he clearly understood what she meant when she'd said that storytelling was spirit-calming medicine.

"One such chief," she continued, "was called Half Moon. He got his name from the pale, crescent-shaped scar he had here." She reached up and gingerly touched her face high on the left cheekbone. "When he was a small child, he wandered into a pen of wild horses. His mother watched helplessly as the animals stampeded. They reared and bolted and bucked. They thrashed and finally broke the fence. Half Moon could have been killed. Should have been killed. But instead he walked from the pen all on his own. He'd been kicked in the face, the horse's hoof leaving a curved gash on his cheek. The whole tribe knew that Half Moon had survived what any normal child would not have. The People knew that Half Moon would be a great man when he grew. He would be smart. And brave. And he would lead The People toward wonderful things."

Her words were like magic, drawing them deeper and deeper into the moment. Her eyes danced with emotion, her tone rose and then softened for the greatest impact. It was clearly evident that she'd told this tale many times. That she herself reveled in the history of her tribe. And that in this verbal tradition—whether the story was myth or reality—she was celebrating her proud heritage.

Travis tore his eyes from her beaming face and looked at the boys. They, too, were held entranced by the enchantment she conjured. This connection to the past was a good thing for Jared and Josh. Of that he couldn't be more sure than he was at this moment, seeing the fascination in their eyes.

"And Half Moon did grow to be a great man," Diana said. "He was all the things The People knew he would be. He was a great chief. Wiser than many others. Half Moon was the man who made the Big Negotiation. He knew the Europeans were in our land to stay. He knew they would soon outnumber The People. So he made it possible for us to have a place. A home. He gathered his tribe and moved them to what is now known as Vermont. The Kolheek, People Of The Smoke—your people—survive today because Half Moon knew when to talk peace rather than engage in war."

Pride seemed to emanate from her. Her spine was straight, her slender shoulders square. There was no conceit or arrogance in the way her chin tipped upward; however, there was a good measure of old-fashioned self-respect. And Travis couldn't help but admit that he found it alluring. Highly alluring.

Movement at the periphery of his vision had him darting a glance down the length of her body. Gravity tugged at the hem of her robe, parting the bottom facings to reveal a slice of her bronze-hued thigh. The sight of her finely honed muscle caused heat to curl in the bottom of his belly, his abdomen tensing with a sharp but pleasant pain. The sudden discomfort was a shock and the urge to suck in a lungful of air was overwhelming, but he successfully restrained it.

As inconspicuously as possible, he pressed his balled-up fist to his diaphragm, hoping to quell the constriction. Never before had he reacted to a woman in such a...a physical manner.

Women are trouble, a shadowy voice in his head warned.

Averting his gaze to the far corner of the room, he clenched his jaw. He didn't need any dark warnings. He knew all about women. Knew the kind of wounds love inflicted. Had seen it in his parent's marriage. His brother's. Hell, he'd even experienced the pain firsthand back in college.

He wasn't interested in becoming trapped in any woman's web, no matter how beguiling it might seem.

He was just going to have to snuff out these feelings of attraction he felt for Diana. He could do it. Anytime—every time—he felt something even remotely resembling desire, he'd simply squash it. Like an irritating gnat.

Simple plans were the easiest to accomplish. And this plan couldn't be more simple. He could do it. She wasn't going to be here for long.

Apparently she'd finished her story. She was standing now, smiling at Jared and Josh. Then Diana turned that gorgeous smile on Travis, and it was as if he'd been struck between the eyes with a ball peen hammer.

"I'm going to say good-night," she told him.

Her voice flowed over him—through him—like the mellifluous notes of some haunting melody. Again, his gut tightened.

This is crazy, he told himself. Damned crazy!

"I'll leave you to tuck in the boys."

And then she was gone.

You can fight this. You're stronger than these idiotic feelings. Ignore this ridiculous attraction. Just ignore it.

But even as the thoughts marched drill-like through his brain, he unwittingly turned his head to inhale the faint, citrusy scent she'd left behind.

At last the house was quiet. Diana had brewed a pot of her own herb tea and was sitting in the all-season sunroom, looking out at the darkness, listening to the muffled quiet of the silent, wintry night. Pale moonlight cast a beautiful *mélange* of deep shadow and pearly glow among the thicket of pine and bare hardwood trees.

When she'd left Travis and his boys, Jared and Josh were both sleepy-eyed and ready for the sandman to take them on whatever dream adventure was in store for them this night. They were great kids, full of energy and imagination. They had delighted in the story she'd told of Half Moon, that much had been clear to Diana. But then, they were bright, inquisitive children. She knew she was going to enjoy spending time with them, acquainting them with their Kolheek heritage.

Travis had paid close attention to her story, too, Diana silently mused, lifting the mug to her lips and taking a small swallow of tea. Well, she hoped it was the legend that had held him so enthralled. His onyx eyes had latched onto her, making her feel as if he were staring into the very depths of her soul, and she'd had a hard time concentrating on the storytelling. She'd wanted to reach up and smooth her hair, fidget with the sash of her robe, but she'd forced her hands to remain in her lap. She hadn't liked feeling like a silly, squirming schoolgirl. Thank heaven she'd been able to quell the nervousness Travis's intent gaze had provoked in her. Soon, the training she'd received in the nearly lost art of storytelling had kicked in and she'd become engrossed in the past herself.

Still, when she thought about how his gaze had been riveted to her face, his attention focused on her every word...The memory caused shivers to careen down her spine like an icy mist, and she curled her hands around the heated ceramic mug to ward off the imagined chill. She tucked her bare feet under her on the padded seat of the wicker chair.

His interest had been in nothing more than the story, she firmly told herself. She refused to think anything else. He'd been captivated by Half Moon's experience. Anyone would be fascinated by the history of such a great chief's life.

But Travis's gaze was so dark, so...She couldn't quite put a name to what she saw in his eyes. Like secret windows. Seemingly filled with something deep and profound. Something mysterious. Haunting her. Calling to her.

Huffing out a frustrated sigh, she looked toward the ceiling. Why was she so intent on conjuring fantasies around this man? Her thoughts had seemed to have a mind of their own ever since she'd first laid eyes on Travis.

Head shaking slowly, she tried to clear her mind. She simply refused to allow her imagination to get the better of her.

But the thoughts persisted, refusing to be banished. What was it about him that provoked these sensuous notions running through her head? She'd had no trouble whatsoever deflecting the approaches made by other men since her divorce. She'd easily turned down all offers of dates, and she'd done so politely and tactfully so as not to hurt a single living soul. Yet here she was fancying that Travis Westcott—a man she barely knew—was staring at her...desiring her.

Desiring her? Is that where her thoughts were heading?

No. No. No. She couldn't have that. She wouldn't allow herself to be undermined by her own ridiculous imaginings. Travis had become caught up in her story. That was all—

"I'm glad to see you've made yourself at home."

She looked toward the French door that led into the house. His frame was backlit by the soft light being thrown from the kitchen. He looked strong. Safe. Protective.

Shaking her head slightly, she shoved the impressions from her, but not before she realized this wasn't the first time she'd been plagued by these same out-of-the-blue reflections. Ridding herself of the fanciful thoughts shouldn't be very difficult. Especially when she knew that no man would ever make her feel safe and protected.

"I'm in the habit of drinking some chamomile tea before bed," she told him, relieved that her voice sounded much less quivery than she felt inside. "So I made myself a pot."

His dark head bobbed slightly. "I hope you don't mind. I helped myself." He lifted the mug he held in his right hand. "May I join you?"

"Please."

This politeness, this formality, made her feel too awkward for words.

“Look, Travis, I’m awfully sorry that I’ve been foisted on you like this. I know you see me as an intruder in your home. Especially when, I’m sure, all you’re thinking about is getting to know the boys, letting them get to know you and becoming a family so you can enjoy the Christmas holiday together.”

He didn’t say anything at first, just sipped his tea, peering at her over the rim of the mug. Finally one of his shoulders lifted a fraction. “This is what’s best for the boys.”

She couldn’t tell whether or not he believed what he said, but she was fascinated with those eyes of his. Even in the dim light of the porch, his gaze gleamed with some unnameable force, a humming energy she found mesmerizing.

The apology had been meant to somehow lessen the tenseness in the air. But all their small exchange seemed to accomplish was to make the oxygen denser, harder to breathe. She wanted to say something, to somehow break this awful silence, but it was as if the ability to speak had suddenly been lost to her.

“So—”

Not ready for the sound of his satiny voice, Diana actually started.

“—was it true? The story you told the boys?”

Nodding, she answered, “Yes, the events I relayed to the boys really happened. Generations ago. Of course, I didn’t go into too much detail. Jared and Josh are young. The simple version of the story is good enough for the time being.”

“The simple version?” he asked. “There’s more?”

“Oh, yes. Much more.” She shifted in the seat. “Half Moon didn’t come to the decision to negotiate with the Europeans easily. The Kolheek are proud and stubborn people. He fought first.”

“As well he should,” Travis said. “The land he lived on belonged to him.”

Diana slowly shook her head in modest dissent. “No one can really own the earth. But the right to hunt and live on the land was ours.” She paused. “Well,” she lightly amended with a tiny smile, “Half Moon believed the right belonged to The People.”

Travis nodded, a new understanding—or was that interest?—lighting his eyes.

“Many men from the tribe, young and old, lost their lives in battle,” she said, “before Half Moon decided to bargain with the Europeans. The wars went on for years. They were bloody. And relentless. It was an awful time in our history.”

He sat with his feet planted apart, both hands grasping the mug of tea, his elbows resting on his knees. He was utterly silent, his gaze focused. And he was staring directly at her mouth.

Anxiety churned in her stomach at the realization. Was he hearing a word she said? It seemed as if he were in some sort of trance.

Ever so slowly, his tongue roved across his bottom lip. The action appeared utterly subliminal. As if he wasn’t even aware of what he was doing. She didn’t sense he was trying to flirt with her, but she did recognize that her worst fears were true. When she’d thought he might be feeling something for her, it hadn’t just been her imagination. He was attracted to her. She was sure of that now.

Panic sent her thoughts into total commotion. She should tell him this instant that she wasn’t interested in any kind of association with him other than the purpose for her being here. Jared and Josh.

Just be honest with the man. Her grandmother’s wise words echoed through her mind.

Diana opened her mouth to speak, but then the most extraordinary thing happened. Travis sat up straight. He looked out the window into the cold, snow-coated night. His chest rose and fell with a heaving, seemingly steeling breath. And when he directed his gaze at her again, there was not a single nuance of fascination or temptation or intimate interest expressed in his eyes. It was as if he’d extinguished his feelings like they were a candle flame that could easily be snuffed between a moistened index finger and thumb.

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