



THE COLTONS

FAMILY. PRIVILEGE. POWER.



Wed to the
Witness

Karen Hughes



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We have to get married—or you'll do hard time! When Jackson Colton became a suspect in his uncle's attempted murder, the handsome loner had to risk it all to prove he was being framed. But he wasn't alone for long. For he found sweet solace when he joined forces with beguiling Cheyenne James to clear his name. The mystical Native American woman understood how it felt to be ostracized...and she wasn't about to let the man she passionately loved take the fall! Not even when Cheyenne was named a key witness for the prosecution. Determined to beat the evil perpetrator at his—or her—own game, the star witness and prime suspect breathlessly said, "I do." But would this whirlwind marriage come at too great a cost?

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JOE COLTON'S JOURNAL

Of all the atrocities I've seen during my sixty years on this green earth—and believe me, I've seen plenty!—having my nephew, Jackson Colton, stand accused for my attempted murder has to top them all. The case those dim-witted boys in blue have against Jackson is purely circumstantial. Don't they see that they are wasting valuable time with these trumped-up charges when the real culprit is still out there? I'll put a stop to this if it's the last thing I ever do. Luckily, the star witness, Cheyenne James, is secretly sweet on my nephew and believes in his innocence. Those two put their heads—not to mention their lips!—together and figured out a way to beat the system by getting hitched. So Jackson's clairvoyant bride won't have to testify, and the case will surely crumble! Now it's only a matter of time before those two soul mates fess up their true feelings and make a lifelong commitment....

About the Author

KAREN HUGHES

enjoys writing about men and women who want to commit their lives to each other, share dreams and grow old together. She believes romance lives in everyday life and thinks there is a hero inside every man—he just needs the right woman to bring out his best qualities. Wide open spaces call to her, yet she also likes the bustle and convenience of city life. Experience has taught her that true love can be found anywhere. To research this action-packed thriller, the author drove the California coast and fell in love with the mist-swept, rocky shoreline.

Wed to the Witness

Karen Hughes



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THE COLTONS

Meet the Coltons—

a California dynasty with a legacy of privilege and power.

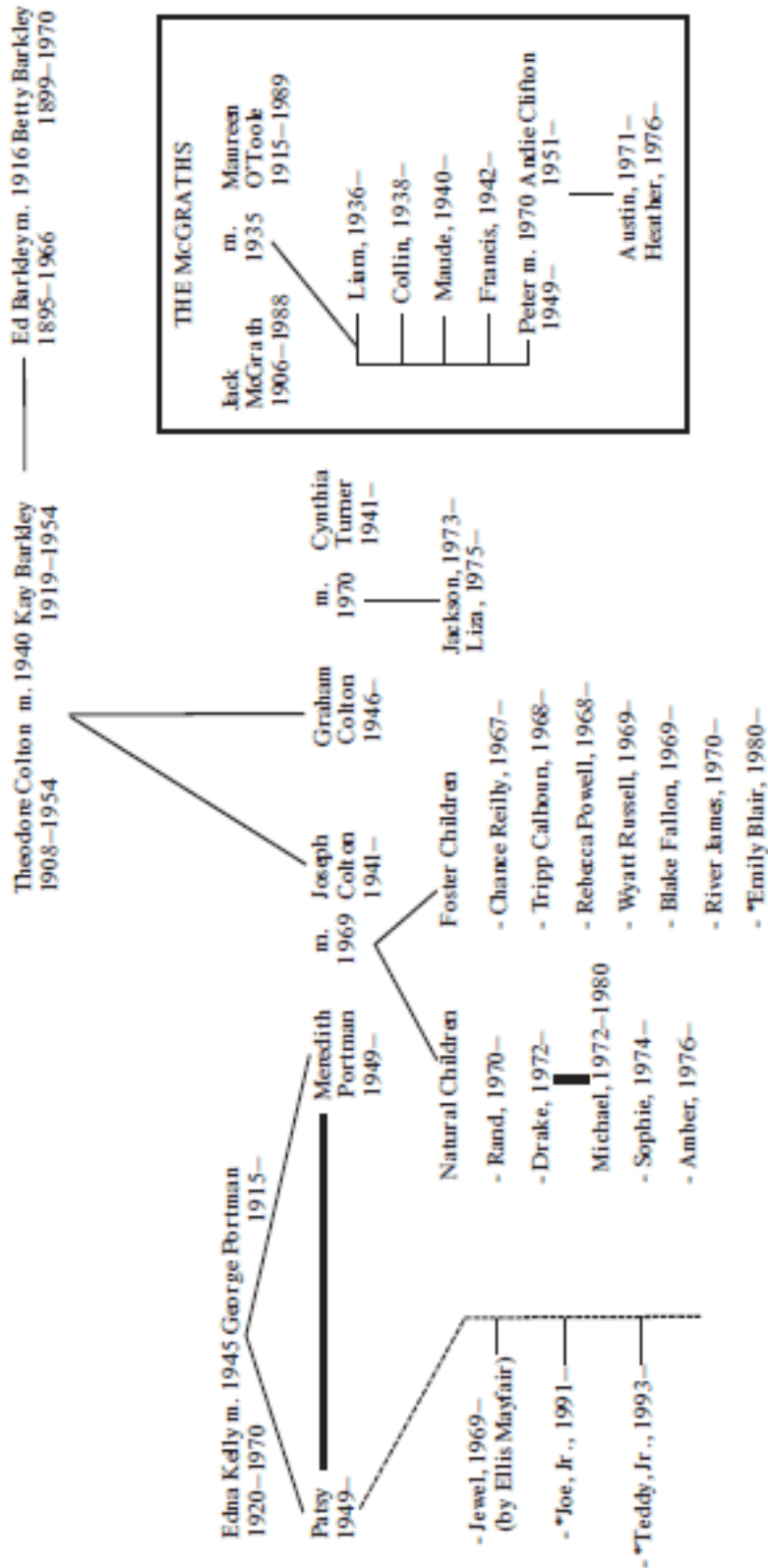
Jackson Colton: Lawyer on trial. Falsely charged with Joe Colton's attempted murder, this loner's only defense is to wed the witness. But now that he's legally bound to this dark beauty, he can only hope that the judge grants him a life sentence...to love!

Cheyenne James: Native American psychic. This counselor will do anything to stand up for her convictions—even if it means marrying a stranger who appears to have murder on his mind.

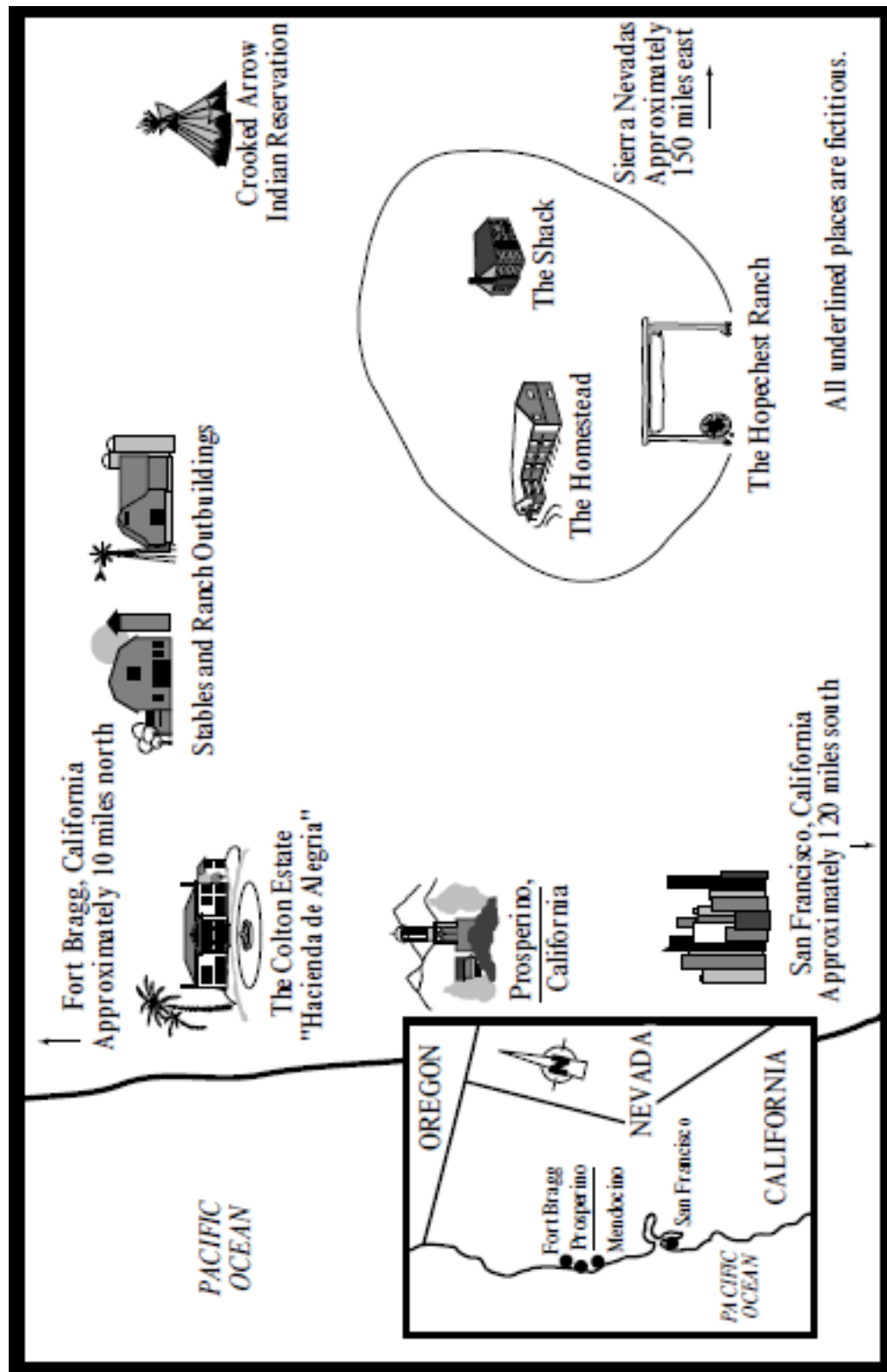
Thad Law: Man with a mission. Still assigned to the Colton case, this newly married detective smells something fishy. Could they have arrested the wrong man?

Patsy Colton: The manic matron. Masquerading as her sister Meredith, she'd thought she was on easy street, but now she's getting cranky as her house of cards begins to tumble....

THE COLTONS



LEGEND
--- Child of Affair
--- Twins
* Adopted by Joe Colton



A special thanks goes to my former colleagues in the Crime Analysis Unit of the Oklahoma City Police Department.

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One

Jackson Colton knew all about how cops operated. Although he practiced corporate law, he'd spent two summers during college interning in the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office. He knew that, when fishing for suspects or talking to witnesses who might be less than truthful, the boys in blue preferred to conduct interviews on their own turf. Doing so tended to intimidate people and make them feel like they were a captive audience, whether they legally were or not.

By summoning him to the Prosperino Police Department, Jackson theorized that Detective Thaddeus Law had embarked on a world-class fishing expedition. Which was why he now sat across the scarred table from the sharp-eyed detective in a small interview room that smelled of cigarettes and sweat. The only thing Jackson hadn't yet sorted out was why he was the fish Law had chosen to reel in.

Granted, he'd been at his Uncle Joe's sixtieth birthday party nearly a year ago when someone took a shot at the Colton family patriarch. Nevertheless, hundreds of people had gathered in the courtyard of Hacienda de Alegria, where white doves soared, champagne flowed and exotic flowers floated in the bubbling fountain. Jackson knew that just his presence that night shouldn't have put him in a suspicious light. Nor did Law have reason to view him as the guilty party simply because he'd again been at the Colton ranch four months ago when a second shot barely missed his uncle. Yet, for reasons unclear to Jackson, the detective had turned a suspicious eye his way.

"So," Law said, leaning back in his chair. "Not one family member, staff person or guest at your uncle's birthday party can verify your whereabouts at the time the shot was fired."

Jackson regarded the cop. He had a small scar on his left cheek, a bump on his nose from where it had been broken and the bear-size build to knock anything out of his path without breaking stride. A formidable man, Jackson thought. One who obviously believed he had something on him or they wouldn't now be sparring in the stale-smelling room with stark fluorescent lighting and a single pane of one-way glass.

Since Jackson knew he hadn't tried to kill Joe Colton, Detective Law was headed for disappointment.

"I didn't know at the time I would need someone to swear to my whereabouts every minute of the evening." Jackson raised a shoulder. "So, I didn't bother interrogating the hundreds of people at my uncle's party. That was your job."

"True. I've talked to a lot of those people lately. No one remembers seeing you at the exact moment the shot was fired."

Jackson narrowed his eyes. "That was almost a year ago. Why are you suddenly asking people my whereabouts?"

"It's my job to get a clear picture of the events that occurred," Law said blandly, then glanced at the notepad on the table in front of him. "You say you'd cut across the courtyard, then took a shortcut through the service hallway to get to the bar. From the angle the slug hit the column behind your uncle, our ballistics expert figures that the shooter was standing a few feet from that hallway. Kind of a coincidence you were right there, too."

"If you believe in coincidence, you're the first cop I know who does."

Law's mouth curved. "I don't. Do you remember seeing anyone on your way to the bar?"

"I saw a lot of people. The courtyard was packed."

"What about after you reached the hallway?" Law persisted. "See anyone coming or going?"

Jackson slid a look at the tape recorder sitting beside Law's notepad. During those summers he'd worked at the D.A.'s office he'd learned never to underestimate cops. Now that he knew where the shooter had stood, he realized Law's seemingly harmless questions were designed to get his taped

admission that he was in nearly the same location as the person who made the attempt on his uncle's life.

Which he had been. And, Jackson reminded himself, a certain gorgeous, sexy woman could place him in that exact location until he'd dropped out of sight.

His thoughts went back to the instant he'd spied the woman whose fall of blue-black hair and bronzed complexion attested to her Native American heritage. As if drawn to her by some unseen force, he'd made his way through the milling birthday crowd. When he reached her, he'd discovered she was nearly as tall as he, and wand-slim in the black slide of a dress that hugged her delicate curves. Her nose was slender, her cheeks softly curved, her eyebrows finely arched above eyes the color of rich earth.

When he introduced himself, she'd smiled coolly while the candlelight flickering around them transformed her face into a compelling play of light and shadow. He'd been surprised to discover she was Cheyenne James, sister of River James who'd been Hacienda de Alegria's foreman for years. Throughout the night, he and Cheyenne had talked, drifted apart, yet always seemed to wind up back together. They'd been chatting with River and Jackson's cousin, Sophie, when Cheyenne had turned his way, her mouth curving in a smile he found beguiling. She asked him to get her a drink, then she excused herself to greet a friend. Just then, the band played a flourishing crescendo. Then Jackson's father stepped into the center of the makeshift dance floor and announced it was nearing time to toast the evening's guest of honor. With no waiter hovering to refill their empty glasses, and guests lined up three-deep at the small bars set up around the courtyard, Jackson had decided he would make better time getting drinks from the small wet bar in his uncle's study. With Cheyenne's subtle, haunting scent in his lungs, he wove his way across the courtyard toward the service hallway—the shortest route to the study.

Just before he'd stepped out of sight, he glanced back through the crowd and saw that Cheyenne's gaze had tracked his movements. That she was interested sent a primitive streak of male satisfaction through him. He, too, was interested and he planned to learn a lot more about her than just the fact she was River's younger sister. Maybe, if the chemistry between them was right, he would find out before the night was over exactly what she wore under that curve-baring dress.

Hearing the gunshot's thunderclap moments later changed all that. With a dry mouth and hammering pulse, he'd dashed out of the hallway into the panicked crowd. Keeping one eye out for Cheyenne, he'd shoved toward the dance floor to check on his family. To Jackson's relief, the shot fired at his Uncle Joe had shattered his champagne glass and grazed Joe's cheek, then lodged harmlessly in an ivy-wrapped column behind him. In the resulting confusion, Jackson had tended his shaken family and the panicked guests, then dealt with the swarm of police that had descended on Hacienda de Alegria. He hadn't seen Cheyenne again that night.

Two harried days later, when no leads developed on the investigation, urgent Colton business had required him to return to his office in San Diego. Although he'd felt an innate curiosity about Cheyenne, he'd told himself that getting to know the dark-haired beauty simply hadn't been in the cards. Still, hers wasn't a face a man could easily forget, and he hadn't. Over the eleven months since the party, he'd discovered he had memorized it, feature by lovely feature.

Jackson scowled. As with each time he thought of Cheyenne, he felt the now-familiar restlessness stir inside him, as if everything in his world was a half beat out of sync.

Maybe it was. After all, he hadn't returned to Prosperino three weeks ago only to attend his sister's wedding. He'd taken extra time off from the law office at Colton Enterprises so he could stay in Prosperino until he made a decision about his life. A decision that wasn't going to get made while he cooled his heels at the cop shop.

Tiring of Detective Law's innuendoes, Jackson locked his gaze with the cop's. "Okay, we've established I was at the ranch both times someone took a shot at my uncle."

“You were more than just at the ranch both times. We also recovered the slug from the second attempt when someone fired a shot into your uncle’s bedroom. We know that the shooter was positioned on the south side of the house.” Law angled his chin. “I responded to the call, I found you outside the door. Your Porsche—its engine still warm—was parked near the garage. Which just happens to be on the south side of the house. You say you drove in alone from San Diego and parked there right after the incident. That puts you in the shooter’s vicinity that night, too.”

“Believe me, Detective, I wish I had seen whoever it was who tried to kill my uncle. I didn’t, so I can’t help you.”

A thought occurred to Jackson and he gave the cop a sardonic look. “You jealous, Law? Is that what this is about?”

Law scowled. “I take it you’re talking about Heather,” he said, referring to the daughter of Peter McGrath, the CFO of Colton Enterprises. And the woman who was now Law’s wife.

“That’s right. She was staying at Hacienda de Alegria when the second attempt occurred. As I recall, you weren’t exactly happy that she and I kept running into each other while I was there. We’re friends, Law. That’s all.”

“Yeah, that’s what my wife says.” Law leaned in, his eyes stony. “The fact that you’re here has nothing to do with her, so leave Heather the hell out of this.”

“Fine. Are we finished?”

“Do you own a handgun, Colton?”

Jackson let out a slow breath. “I keep a .32 Walther in my nightstand at home. It’s registered in my name. I expect you’ve done a records check and already know that.”

“Do you have any other handguns, registered or otherwise?”

That Law hadn’t obtained a search warrant for the Walther told Jackson that the slugs recovered from both crime scenes indicated a different model of gun had been used in the two attempts on his uncle’s life. “No, only the Walther.”

“I understand several Colton Enterprise subsidiaries have buy-out clauses. Which means if your Uncle Joe died, you’d be closer to inheriting a fortune.”

Jackson hesitated. He knew Law’s change in rhythm had been intended to throw him off. “My father, Graham Colton, would inherit.”

“I said you’d be closer to the money,” Law countered, then cocked his head. “Are you familiar with a court case titled Amalgamated Industries vs. Jones?”

The hand Jackson rested against his khaki-clad thigh curled into a fist. Knowing Law had checked so deep into his background that he’d found the obscure, years-old case sent a ripple of unease down his spine. “Since you brought up the case, you know I am.”

“Yeah.” Law tapped a finger against his pad. “A CEO’s son has his drug-dependent father declared incompetent and removed from the company’s leadership. Then the son steps in and takes charge. You, Mr. Colton, are listed as the attorney of record on Amalgamated Industries vs. Jones.”

“Make your point, Detective.”

“That case proves you know how to use the law to remove a father from a company and put a son in control. It’s no secret Joe Colton is both the brains and muscle behind Colton Enterprises, not your father. It’s also no secret that Graham Colton likes to drink and party. A lot.”

Jackson learned long ago how to keep his face unreadable, and he did so now. It would only cement the cop’s theory if he found out about the blackmail money his father had been paying to his aunt. According to an unrepentant Graham, the money was in exchange for Meredith Colton’s promise not to reveal to Joe that Graham had fathered the son Meredith had at first tried to pass off as her husband’s.

“To my way of thinking,” Law continued, “if your Uncle Joe were to die and your fun-loving Dad inherited, not much would stand in the way of your removing him from control and taking over

Colton Enterprises.” Law raised his chin. “You drive a Porsche. With your uncle dead, you could drive a fleet of them.”

Jackson felt anger growing inside him, a black heat that bubbled in his blood. “Money and power aren’t important enough to me to kill for them.”

“Some people think you can never have too much of both.”

“I’m not one of them. Everything about the Amalgamated case was on the up-and-up. Adam Jones’s father was addicted to cocaine, alcohol and gambling. Left in the man’s control, Amalgamated Industries would have gone bankrupt in less than a year. Adam did what he had to do.”

“And, by doing so, he wound up a very rich man.”

“Are you prepared to charge me with a crime, Detective?”

“Not right this minute.”

Jackson rose. “Then I’m ending this chat.”

He turned and was halfway to the door when Law said, “If money isn’t important to you, why did you take out an insurance policy on your uncle?”

Jackson froze. He blinked, then turned. “I didn’t.”

“This says differently.” Rising, Law drew folded papers out of the inside pocket of his suit coat, then laid them on the table. Locking his gaze with Jackson’s, the cop nudged the papers his way. “A policy for one million dollars on Joe Colton’s life. Sole beneficiary, Jackson Colton.”

A cold fist of dread settled in Jackson’s stomach as he walked back to the table. Through sheer will, his hand remained steady when he lifted the policy. “I’ve never seen this before.”

“The insurance agent who sold it disagrees. I put together a photo lineup using head shots from the newspaper’s society page. Those pictures are public domain, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“The agent picked your photo. Says he’s positive you’re the man who purchased the policy.”

“He’s mistaken.”

“Says he’ll testify to that in court.”

Jackson looked up slowly. “Are we going to court, Detective?”

Law slid a hip onto the edge of the table and crossed his arms over his chest. “Anything’s possible.”

Jackson’s mind worked while he studied the policy. “This is dated three weeks ago. If I’d wanted to collect money on my uncle’s death, I would have had to purchase this policy before the attempts on his life. The first being eleven months ago at his birthday party.”

“And the second four months ago,” Law added. “The timing occurred to me, too. Maybe to deflect suspicion from yourself, the first two attempts on your uncle’s life were intended to be just that. Attempts. You wait awhile, take out the policy, then the next time you shoot, you aim to kill.” Law gave him a slow smile. “Third time’s a charm.”

“You’re way off base.”

“Growing up, you spent a lot of time on your aunt and uncle’s ranch. You and your cousins used to target shoot on the banks of the Noyo River. Word is, you’re proficient with all types of firearms.”

And you’re proficient in doing your homework. “That doesn’t prove I tried to kill my uncle.”

“True.”

“How was this policy paid for?”

“Cashier’s check. No way to track the money.” The cop nodded toward the papers still in Jackson’s hand. “The purchaser’s signature is on the last page. We could clear up all this tonight if you’d give me a handwriting sample for comparison.”

Jackson braced himself as he flipped through the pages. Even before he saw the signature, the sick feeling in his gut told him it would be close to his. It was. Nearly identical.

He replaced the policy on the table. At this point, he would have advised any person in his same situation to keep his mouth shut and seek counsel.

"This isn't my signature," he said.

"Looks like yours."

"It's not." The anger already heating his blood intensified. "Apparently the man who purchased the policy disguised himself to look a great deal like me, too. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to set me up."

Law cocked his head. "Why would someone do that, Mr. Colton?"

"To divert suspicion away from himself. Someone wants my uncle dead. It will be a lot easier to make that happen if your attention is focused on me."

"An interesting theory."

"It's more than a theory, it's the truth. I know, because I didn't try to murder my uncle." Jackson stared at Law, his jaw rigidly set while his mind worked. "There's no way you stumbled onto that policy," he said after a moment. "And you didn't just happen to find out I'm the attorney of record on the Amalgamated case. Someone tossed all that into your lap. Suppose you tell me who that was? That will go a long way in telling me who's behind this."

Law kept his gaze locked with Jackson's. "I can't give you information acquired during an interview or through investigative procedure. As an attorney, you know that."

"I also know if you were going to charge me with anything, you'd have done so by now."

"That law degree of yours is coming in handy. You're right, I'm not charging you with anything. Not yet." Law plucked the policy off the table, refolded it. "You planning on leaving Prosperino anytime soon?"

Jackson slid his hands into his pockets, then clenched them into fists. At this point, he wasn't charged with anything, nor was he a material witness to a crime. Therefore, Law had no power to keep him in Prosperino. If he walked out the door, climbed into his Porsche and headed back to San Diego tonight, the cop couldn't do anything about it. Legally.

Jackson exhaled a slow breath. All that could change later on. If he did leave town, Law might be able to use his departure as circumstantial evidence that he'd fled the jurisdiction after becoming aware he was a suspect in two attempted murders. Law had the taped proof he'd made his suspect aware of that fact.

"I'm staying in Prosperino," Jackson said evenly. He turned and headed for the door. Pausing, he looked across his shoulder. "I'll be at my aunt and uncle's until I find out who decided I should take the fall for this."

Law nodded while reaching for the tape recorder. "If your travel plans change, give me a call."

The anger he'd strapped in broke free as Jackson walked out of the building and into the adjacent dimly lit parking lot. He took exception at being accused of trying to murder a man he loved and respected. And he had one hell of a problem with being set up!

He unlocked the Porsche, climbed inside; the engine roared to life when he twisted the key. Hands clenched on the steering wheel, he pulled out of the lot, swung in and out of evening traffic, then punched the Porsche into high gear when he reached open road.

Dammit, he didn't need this. He had stayed in Prosperino after his sister Liza's wedding to decide if he wanted to continue working with his father. Now, here he was, contemplating a future that might involve jail.

Jackson shoved a hand through his dark hair as the red Porsche slashed up the highway like a bolt of fiery lightning. To his way of thinking, things were either right or unquestionably wrong; he disliked intensely any murky in-betweens. This evening, Detective Law had shoved him into dark, murky water. He didn't intend on getting sucked under.

He was an attorney. He knew how to tear apart a case to get to the facts. His case was no different. All he needed was to figure out where to start.

As he drove, he began to sift his conversation with Law around in his head—pulling it apart, dissecting it. He liked things to fall neatly into place, in their proper order, according to consequence.

Habitually, he worked puzzles out through long, quiet contemplation. Slow and meticulous. Over the years, he'd discovered he did his best thinking in the flickering shadows of a movie theater.

Since his very future now lay on the line, Jackson figured the faster he settled in front of a movie and decided on a game plan, the better.

Blowing out a breath, he steered the Porsche around a corner, then headed toward the Cinema Prosperino.

Cheyenne James had better things to do that evening than take in a movie. Gripping the ticket she'd bought—and had yet to use—she glanced around the red-carpeted lobby of the Cinema Prosperino, vaguely aware of the murmur of conversation and warm, buttery scent of popcorn that filled the air.

She knew that the case files on the three adolescents she'd counseled in private that morning sat on her small desk at home, waiting her attention. Her late-afternoon meeting with her boss, Blake Fallon, had resulted in her obtaining permission to submit a grant for funding of a vocational work-training program for several of the teenagers who, like her, lived at Hopechest Ranch.

She had planned on starting a draft of a proposal for the grant later tonight when she finished updating her case files. What she hadn't anticipated was turning her back on her work and driving to the remodeled movie theater nestled between an espresso bar and art gallery on Prosperino's main street.

After the vision came, nothing could have kept her away.

Her visions were her legacy, a gift from her mother of the blood through the blood. A gift she had embraced years ago and learned never to discount. The pictures she saw in her mind's eye were not always pleasant, but had always proved accurate. When they came, she accepted them, and responded. Just as she had nearly an hour ago when the vision of the man's eyes slid, cool and clean, into her head.

Closing her eyes, Cheyenne pulled back the memory. Her breath shallowed as she pictured again gray eyes with the same hardness as rocks hacked out of a cliff. Her vision had revealed only the man's eyes, not his face. She didn't know his name. She had sensed only that he was in trouble and needed her help. And that she would encounter him at the movie theater.

Flipping her heavy braid behind one shoulder, she watched as the doors to the still-darkened theater swung open. Several couples emerged, tossing empty popcorn sacks and soda cups into the container outside the door. A pair of teenage girls strolled out, whispering to each other as if trying to keep a secret from the two tall, gangly boys who trailed just behind them.

Seconds later, a lone man emerged from the theater's dim depths, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his khaki slacks. Cheyenne's heart took a hard leap into her throat and snapped it shut.

Jackson Colton looked tall, rangy and intimidatingly fit, like a long-distance runner at his peak. His sharpfeatured face, full of planes and angles, looked as darkly handsome now as it had at his uncle's birthday party. Yet, she noted the changes in him. Eleven months ago he'd stood relaxed, gazing down at her with smoky silver eyes while he oozed charm and sex appeal with an easy smile. Now his shoulders looked wire-tense beneath his deep-blue linen shirt, his mouth was set in a grim line and his eyes were no longer the color of cool smoke, but the gray, rock-hard agates from her vision.

The instant his gaze met hers, recognition flashed across his face. His chin rose. Turning with catlike fluidity, he veered from the exit and strode toward her.

Cheyenne's pulse raced with the knowledge that fate had brought her to the man who had filled her thoughts so often since that long-ago night.

"Cheyenne." He said her name soft and low, as if he couldn't quite believe she was there.

"Hello, Jackson. How are you?" Just his nearness had her pulse thudding at the base of her throat.

"Surprised to see you. Especially now."

“Now?”

He raked his fingers through his jet-black hair. “After so long,” he amended. “It’s been nearly a year since my uncle’s party.”

“Yes.” Once or twice, she had even caught herself wondering if he would come back to Prosperino again this year to help celebrate his uncle’s birthday. And if she would see him if he did.

His gaze dropped to her hand. “I see you have a ticket for the next show.”

“That’s right.”

His gaze swept the lobby. “Are you here with someone?”

“No.”

“Meeting someone, then?”

“I didn’t make plans with anyone.”

“You haven’t used your ticket yet. We could get you a refund.”

She tilted her head. “Was the movie that bad?”

“No.” His smile came and went. “To tell you the truth, I was working something out in my mind. I didn’t pay attention to what was on the screen.”

“That alone doesn’t say a lot for the movie.”

“I guess not.”

Her vision had brought with it the sense that he was in trouble, yet his eyes had cleared and told her nothing. He knew how to keep his thoughts to himself, she realized.

As did she. Her gift might have brought them together again, but she was under no obligation to tell him that. There was a richness to her power, as well as bitterness. Her heart had learned well just how devastating relationships could be when people were unable to accept others for what they were.

“At my uncle’s party,” Jackson continued, “I promised you I’d be back so we could have a drink together. That didn’t happen.”

She arched a brow. “What happened was someone fired a shot at your uncle. I didn’t hold your not keeping your promise against you.”

“How about if I keep it now? I hear the espresso bar next door brews a mean latte.”

The same warm, musky scent that had infused a pang of desire into her blood so long ago slid into her lungs. Jackson Colton was attractive, magnetically sexual and she had lost count of how many times she had thought about him since they’d met. Now, as she always did, she reminded herself she was giving far too much importance to a man in whose presence she’d spent so little time.

Yet, tonight fate had brought her to him. She didn’t know why. The answer would come. It always did. Until then, she would not—could not—turn away from him.

“I’d love some coffee.”

“Great.” When he reached and slid the ticket from her grasp, his fingers grazed hers. “I’ll see about getting you a refund.”

“Fine,” she said, struggling to ignore the quick jumpiness in her stomach. “I’ll wait here.”

When he walked away, she closed her eyes and waited for her system to level.

Two

What were the chances, Jackson wondered, that just hours after his being questioned by the police, the one woman would walk back into his life whose testimony could put him behind bars? He had left her and dropped out of sight moments before someone took a shot at his uncle. Cheyenne James had seen him in almost the exact spot where the shooter stood. If she told Law that, the cop would have one more piece of circumstantial evidence against him.

An important piece.

Jackson gazed across the small table they'd settled at in the cozy espresso café that was cluttered with people and thick with noise. He had forgotten nothing about her, he confirmed as he watched Cheyenne sip a latte from an oversize cup. Not the high curve of her cheeks, her softly defined mouth, the dark eyebrows above those arresting brown eyes, or the jet-black hair that tonight was pulled back into a loose braid.

As he sipped his cappuccino, it occurred to him how striking the resemblance was between her and her brother, River.

"Marriage to River has made Sophie happier than I've ever seen her. That and motherhood."

At the reference to her niece, Cheyenne's smile tipped into a grin that sent heat into Jackson's stomach and made him wonder if her mouth tasted as passionate as it looked. He didn't make a habit out of wanting the hell out of a woman the minute he laid eyes on her. Yet, that was the very thing that had happened at his uncle's party. He felt the same way tonight. He didn't know exactly why. He had no idea what made Cheyenne James different from any other woman he'd met. He just knew she was.

"Sophie has promised to let me baby-sit soon for Meggie," Cheyenne said. "I can't wait."

"That's understandable. That kid's a real charmer. All it took was one of her dimpled smiles, and Meggie had me hooked."

Laughing, Cheyenne tossed her braid across her shoulder. "You sound like River. He goes around, grinning like an idiot day and night. He'll have Meggie spoiled rotten before she can even crawl."

"I don't blame him."

Jackson caught the whiff of Cheyenne's warm scent and thought of the tea roses that bloomed in his aunt's garden. His gaze dropped to the hand Cheyenne rested on the table beside her cup. Her fingers were long and as wand-thin as the rest of her. Her nails were oval and perfect, with the gleam of clear polish. She had hands made for rings, he thought, but wore none.

"It's a shame you and I didn't meet until my Uncle's party. And that I was out of the country on business when River and Sophie got married. I would have liked to have seen you again."

Cheyenne arched a brow. "Actually, you and I met years ago, Jackson."

"We did?"

"Yes. River and I grew up apart. He was nearly sixteen when he came to live on your family's ranch. That was the same year he and I reunited. Your uncle used to pick me up from the reservation on the weekends and bring me to Hacienda de Alegria so I could spend time with River. You and your sister stayed at the ranch on some of those same weekends."

Jackson narrowed his eyes. "I have the image of a skinny girl with long legs and a dark ponytail trailing around the stables on River's heels. That was you?"

"Yes." Cheyenne tilted her head. "I was about eleven years old when you and I first met. You were in high school. Some of your friends used to come to the ranch to ride horses when you were there. Your taste seemed to run to voluptuous blond cheerleaders."

Chuckling, Jackson leaned his forearms on the table. After the hours he'd spent in Detective Law's presence, it was hard to believe someone could make him laugh. "Miss James, are you implying I have a reputation to live down?"

“It depends on if what I heard about you when I got to high school is to be believed.”

“What did you hear?”

“Among other things, that you always dated a handful of girls at the same time. You had a Monday night girl, a Tuesday night girl and so on. One time you got your days confused and showed up at your Tuesday girl’s house on the Wednesday girl’s night.”

“Although I’ll point out all that is hearsay, I’d better plead the fifth,” Jackson countered, resting one of his hands near hers. “With the stipulation that things get blown out of proportion over time.”

But not too much out of proportion, he thought wryly. He’d learned early not to take relationships seriously. After experiencing firsthand his parents’ farce of a marriage, then watching his aunt and uncle’s relationship slowly disintegrate, he’d resolved to never bring that kind of misery down on his own head. Even in high school he’d made a point to get involved only with females who knew how to laugh and to love without undercurrents. Whatever emotions came into play in those associations only skimmed the surface. That was the way he’d always wanted things. Nothing had happened over the years to change his thinking.

Until now. Now, he found himself incomprehensibly drawn to a woman who seemed to hold some underlying mystique for him.

Although that knowledge sent a stab of unease through him, Jackson pushed it back. Those moments he’d spent with Cheyenne at his uncle’s party had played in his mind too often for him to shrug off her having walked back into his life.

“I’m remembering something else about that skinny little girl who followed her brother around like a shadow.”

“That she was desperately shy?”

“That, and she read palms.” He creased his brow in thought, trying to bring back the long-ago memory. “Or maybe it was minds?”

The words were barely out of his mouth when her eyes went cool and remote. Her chin angled like a sword. “I don’t do either.”

“My mistake.” He’d hit a nerve. Which nerve, Jackson had no idea. All he knew was that it was a sensitive one. Judging from the absolute stillness about her, he knew it would be wise to change the subject.

“You said my Uncle Joe used to pick you up at the reservation. Do you still live there?”

“No.” She looked away, her gaze settling on a glass display case that bulged with cakes and cookies. Beside the case, a waiter worked a hissing espresso machine while steam rose from the metal pitcher he held.

Jackson laid his hand on hers. “Cheyenne,” he said quietly, and waited until her gaze re-met his. “I apologize if I offended you.”

“You didn’t. You reminded me of something important. To answer your question about where I live, I’m a counselor at Hopechest Ranch. I live in one of the small staff houses there.”

“Hopechest.” His thumb moved lightly up and down the length of her finger. “My aunt and uncle used to be involved with the kids there. They’ve probably lost count of how many kids from Hopechest Ranch they’ve been foster parents for over the years.”

“One of those kids being my boss, Blake Fallon. He thinks a lot of your Uncle Joe. The exact term he uses is ‘walks on water.’”

“I agree with Blake.” Jackson paused. At one time, most people had also held his Aunt Meredith in equal esteem. That was years ago before she’d undergone a personality change that had the whole family wondering what had happened to transform the once sweet, sensitive wife and mother into a woman whose severe mood swings could on occasion rock the entire household.

For Jackson, living half the state away in San Diego had insulated him from the majority of the family tremors caused by his aunt. That is, until his recent discovery that Meredith had blackmailed his father into paying her two million dollars to keep secret the fact he’d fathered her son, Teddy.

The revelation had been even more bitter for Jackson because he remembered the caring, generous Meredith who had lavished love and attention on himself and his sister when their own parents left their upbringing in the hands of nannies and housekeepers.

That he remembered—and mourned—the woman he'd once adored was the thing that had prompted him to confront his aunt weeks ago about the blackmail. Maybe he'd hoped to see some regret in the dark eyes that had once sparked with love. Perhaps a softening in the brittle shell she'd built around herself. All sentimental feelings he'd harbored for his aunt had died when she'd displayed even less remorse than his father had over their affair. Faced with her cold aloofness, Jackson had warned her he would report her extortion to the police if she didn't end it.

And now, he thought, he had his own problems with the police. Serious problems.

"Is something wrong?" Cheyenne's quiet question told him his face mirrored his grim thoughts.

"Just some things I need to work out." He massaged his fingers across her knuckles. "Tell me about Cheyenne James. Why did she wind up counseling kids from troubled homes?"

"My reasons have a lot to do with River. Our mother was full blood Mokee-kittuun, our father white. When she died giving birth to me, my father let my aunts raise me on the rez as long as they sent me to Anglo schools. He took River to live with him on his ranch. I lost contact with my brother after that," she said with an edge of regret. "Before either River or I were born, our mother had another son, Rafe. My father adopted him, but because Rafe is full-blood Indian, my father shunned him when our mother died. From the stories Rafe tells me, our father was an alcoholic. A mean drunk. For years Rafe took the brunt of his anger to save River. That changed after I was born and our father left Rafe and me on the rez and took River away."

Jackson shook his head. "Rough life for a kid."

"Yes. One day, River showed up at school covered with bruises. A social worker took him to live at Hopechest. Your aunt and uncle later became his foster parents and River moved to their ranch."

"So, was it a happy coincidence that you and River found each other again?"

Cheyenne matched his gaze. "Some people have called it that."

Jackson cocked his head. Those rich, dark eyes held secrets, he realized. Perhaps that was why she was beginning to fascinate him. "What do you call your finding your brother again?"

"Destiny," she said almost reverently. "Living with the Coltons was the first time River had ever known a real family life. Your uncle encouraged him to work with his horses and that built River's self-esteem."

"Uncle Joe's good with people."

"Yes." Cheyenne played her index finger along the handle of her cup. "When I realized the foster care the Coltons gave my brother saved his life, I knew I wanted to help kids who had no control over the circumstances they were born into. I went to college, got a Masters in Social Work. I've been at Hopechest about a year. I counsel the kids, help them get the work skills they need to support themselves. I also teach a sport."

"What sport?"

"Archery."

"Archery?"

She rolled her eyes. "Go ahead and make your comment. I'm used to hearing them."

"What comment?"

Her mouth curved. "About how I must have reverted back to ancient days when my people rode swift ponies and hunted with bows and arrows."

"Now that you mention it," Jackson said with consideration while his hand stroked hers, "You riding bareback, armed with a bow and arrow while all that dark hair flies behind you conjures up an interesting image."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but an image is all it is. I didn't learn archery on the rez. I learned it at the college."

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Actually, I didn’t think about Indians or bows and arrows when you mentioned archery.” As he spoke, he cupped his hand around her bare, tanned forearm.

She was tense, muscles tight. What would it be like, he wondered, to loosen her, to get to the soft woman beneath the tenseness?

“Jackson?”

He skimmed his thumb up until he felt the pulse inside her elbow skitter. “Yes?”

“I…” She took a deep breath. “What did you think about when I told you I teach archery?”

Hearing her voice hitch gave him a small thrill of power—and pleasure. He smiled. “I thought that you must be stronger than you look.” He squeezed her arm. “You are. You fascinate me, Cheyenne. I’m not quite sure why.”

He saw a brief, uneasy flicker in her dark eyes before she shifted away, forcing his hand from her arm.

“I’ve told you about myself. Why don’t you tell me something about Jackson Colton?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Why are you a lawyer?”

Resigned with her distance for the time being, he leaned back in his chair. “Because my father groomed me to be one,” he replied, then hesitated. He had never thought of things that way, but it was the truth. His mother had barely acknowledged his existence, which had made him as pliable as clay in his father’s hands. Jackson supposed he would have agreed to a career of digging ditches if that would have gained him the love of the one parent who’d paid him any attention.

That he’d never felt truly satisfied working at his father’s side had been something Jackson had chosen to overlook. Until last month when he’d discovered Graham’s affair with Meredith. Learning his father had paid for his aunt’s silence not out of remorse for his actions, but from fear that Joe Colton would write him out of his will if he found out the truth had put a sick feeling in Jackson’s gut.

“Is that what you wanted, too?” Cheyenne asked. “To be a lawyer?”

“I thought I did until recently.” He moved his shoulders carelessly. “I don’t know. Could be I’m just in the wrong area of the law. One reason I’m hanging around Prosperino for a while is to figure that out.”

She sipped her latte. “What’s another reason?”

For the space of a heartbeat, he considered telling her that the police suspected him in the two attempts on his uncle’s life. That he could be arrested. Go to jail. And that she might be in a position to help the cops put him there.

Just as quickly, Jackson pushed away the urge. He was innocent and he planned to clear his name—maybe as early as the following day if the trip he planned to make to L.A. paid off. If it did, there wouldn’t be any reason for Cheyenne to know he’d even been questioned by Detective Law. No reason for this woman, who had slid into his thoughts so easily and often over the past months, to have cause to avoid him.

He took in her fine-boned features, dark eyes, the seductive arch of her throat. She looked… elegant, he decided. A kind of inner elegance that wasn’t the least diminished by the simple blouse and slacks she wore. Granted, he’d always preferred more flamboyant women, but this was the first time in his life he’d felt so intensely drawn to one woman. Right now, he didn’t know why. He was only sure that he wanted her in his world where he could see and touch her. And find out just what those secrets were he saw in her eyes.

“I’ve thought about you a lot since my uncle’s party,” he said quietly. “I’m not going to let you get away this time. I have to go into L.A. tomorrow. Will you have breakfast with me the day after?”

She regarded him steadily. He had the uncomfortable feeling she knew more was going on than what he’d said.

“I have an early archery lesson,” she said after a moment. “And a counseling session later that morning.”

“I’ll come to Hopechest Ranch. We can squeeze in breakfast between the two.” He linked his fingers with hers and thought of how good her hand felt against his. “Say yes, Cheyenne. I need to see you again. Say yes.”

“Yes, Jackson, I’ll have breakfast with you.”

Never before had she fascinated a man.

The thought tightened Cheyenne’s belly as she walked at Jackson’s side along the neat sidewalk illuminated by streetlights that took on the hazy glow of tiny moons.

When they’d sat across from each other at the café’s small table, it had not been a simple matter to ignore the heat that raced up her arm when he touched her. His hand wasn’t soft, but hard and callused. That had been the first wayward thought that stumbled into her brain. Now, with that same hand pressed against the small of her back, she felt the pressure of each of his fingers, the strength. Power.

Jackson Colton might make his living as a smooth, sophisticated attorney but he knew how to work with his hands. And the feel of those hands made her knees go weak.

She rubbed an unsteady palm across her throat. She knew she was breathing too fast. Feeling more than the brief contact of a man’s palm against her back warranted.

“Which car is yours?” he asked when they turned a corner and stepped into the parking lot on one side of the Cinema Prosperino.

She tried not to think about the fact that his arm was brushing hers.

“The white Mustang.”

As they neared the car, she dug in her purse for her keys. Very deliberately, she turned enough away from Jackson that he was forced to drop his hand.

Cool, common sense was the order of the day, she reminded herself. He was in trouble—that was the reason her vision had brought her to him. She didn’t yet know why, but she doubted fate had reunited her with Jackson Colton just so she could get a reminder of how a man’s touch could stir her. She’d found that out years ago. That knowledge had left her with a bruised heart. She wasn’t likely to ever forget that experience.

She shoved the key into the door’s lock, then swung it open. Before she could slide behind the wheel, Jackson’s hand settled on her shoulder.

“Cheyenne?”

She closed her eyes for an instant, then turned to find him standing only inches away. His face was bathed in a mix of moonlight and shadows; the woody scent of his cologne drifted to her on the cool, night air.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad we had the good luck to run into each other.” As he spoke, he ran a fingertip down her jawline.

The lightning response of her body to his touch sent a wariness through her that had her wanting to back away. Even if she chose to retreat, it wasn’t an option, she realized. She was trapped with him in the small V formed by the side of the car and the open door.

Her breath shuddered. Her gift of sight, not luck, had brought them together tonight. Destiny would guide them from here. “I enjoyed talking with you, Jackson.”

“Talking was good.” His fingers closed over one of her hands. “At my uncle’s party, I wondered if your skin felt as soft as it looks. Tonight I found out it does. Now I’m wondering if your skin tastes as rich as it feels.” Moonlight glittered in his gray eyes when he pressed his lips deep in the center of her palm. “It does,” he murmured.

Her heart shot straight up and lodged in her throat. “I don’t think...” Her voice trailed off when his lips brushed across hers, soft as a whisper.

“You don’t think what?” he asked, touching his mouth to hers again with a lightness that had the blood pounding in her head.

She had ignored her physical needs for so long, she had forgotten what it was to want a man. One man. “I...don’t know...what to think.”

“Me, either.” One of his hands slid beneath her heavy braid to cup the base of her neck. His fingers felt cool and strong against her heated flesh. He lowered his lips to within a whisper of hers. “Why don’t we forget about thinking and just let ourselves feel?”

Softly, slowly, his mouth roamed over hers, sending thick, liquefying pleasure seeping into her. Her eyes fluttered shut. Her hands went limp; in the recesses of her mind she heard the jingle of metal when her keys hit the pavement.

“You stir something in me, Cheyenne,” he murmured as his mouth took hers, warm and coaxing. His fingers stroked the back of her neck. She didn’t need a vision to see the teasing image of what his hands could do to her body.

Her arms moved upward; her fingers locked tight on his shoulders. Beneath her hands she felt the bunch of muscles that veered toward a hard, dangerous strength. Passion came to life inside her like a fire that had been smoldering beneath cold ash. Her lips parted beneath his, opening, accepting, urging.

His arm slid around her waist, drawing her closer until she fit tightly against his hard, lean body. His mouth became more greedy, taking her deeper, demanding equal response. Her legs trembled, and blood swam so fast in her veins that she could hear the roar of it in her head. A low moan sounded in her throat while reason slipped against the pull of need.

Desire gripped her as if it had claws. His mouth continued its assault on hers, seducing her senses, peeling away the layers of caution that guarded her secrets.

An alarm sounded somewhere in the recesses of her dazed mind.

The will to survive smothered the yearning for pleasure. She hadn’t come here tonight to be kissed. She was here because the man whose mouth was currently ravishing hers was in trouble and fate had brought her to him.

“Stop.” She dug her fingers into his shoulders. “Jackson, we need to stop.”

“Why?” His voice was a raw whisper as his mouth trailed down her jaw, nuzzled her throat.

“I... Because.” She flattened her palm against his chest, forced him back. Breathing jerky, she stared at him while every pulse point in her body hammered. “Just...because,” she managed in a hoarse whisper.

“Well.” He expelled a ragged breath. “I guess that’s as good a reason as any.”

“I...” She waved a hand vaguely. “We don’t even know each other.”

His smile was slow and potent. “Seems to me we’re working on changing that.”

When he reached to touch her cheek, she jerked her head back. “I have to go. Now. Right now.”

“I didn’t mean to come on so strong.”

He bent down, scooped up her keys, then stood with them in his hand while his concerned eyes skimmed over her face, lingering on each feature. “It’s just that you’ve been in my thoughts for so long. I still can’t quite believe you’re here tonight.” He handed her the keys, his fingers sliding against hers. “With me.”

She stared into his face, the shadowy lights of the far-off street lamps emphasized his ruthless good looks. She scraped her teeth over her bottom lip, bringing his taste back to flood her mouth... and a swell of fresh desire into her system that made her legs go weak all over again.

“Good night.” It didn’t matter that her voice was unsteady. What mattered was that she get into her car before her wobbly legs gave out.

“Good night.” The eyes that had looked so rock-hard in her vision were now the color of smoke. “I’ll see you the day after tomorrow.”

“Yes.” She was reasonably sure her system would have settled by then.

It wasn't until she pulled the Mustang out of the lot that she released the breath she'd been holding. Whatever trouble Jackson Colton was in, it had brought her to him. Until she knew why, she needed to keep a clear head. Then, when the knowledge came, she would be capable of putting two rational thoughts together. Unlike she had been while wrapped in Jackson's arms.

When she turned onto the winding coast road she flexed her fingers against the steering wheel, pleased that her hands no longer trembled. Her breathing had evened. Finally.

Before this night, only one man had ever rocked her senses and taken her so swiftly toward the edge of control. After she'd given herself to him and told him about her gift, he'd looked at her as if she were crazy. Even now, the memory of the names Paul called her had her blinking back tears.

Holding a part of yourself back wasn't deception, she reminded herself. It was self-preservation—as she'd learned through hard experience.

With Jackson, she would let fate take her hands and lead her.

And she would hold her secrets close.

Three

Jackson knew the drive along the dark coastal highway should have calmed him, helped his thoughts steady. Instead, his mind was as restless as the sea that churned against the ragged cliffs edging the shoreline.

How many women had he kissed? Slept with? He neither knew nor cared. He'd indulged in nights of mutual pleasure, then walked away unscathed. Tonight he and Cheyenne had shared a few kisses, nothing more. They'd been exceptional kisses, but kisses all the same.

Why, then, while he held her in his arms, had he been hit with aching desire when he had expected to feel the usual careless, carefree passion? The memory of her hot, unrestrained mouth pressed against his crept into his mind like a seductive phantom. He wanted her taste again. Wanted to hold her. Wanted her. Just her.

"Dammit."

Something was happening inside him. Because he wasn't precisely certain what that something was, he felt a tug of worry. He'd always been sure of his ground when it came to the opposite sex, yet he could have sworn he'd felt the earth move beneath his feet when Cheyenne's mouth opened beneath his, inviting him in.

He just needed to get his balance back, he told himself as he steered the Porsche off Highway 1 onto Colton land. After all, his usual afternoon and evening didn't include having the cops accuse him of two attempted murders, then running into—and ravishing—the woman whose testimony could place him in almost the exact spot a wannabe killer had stood during one of those attempts.

No matter how perverse, right now dealing with the dilemma of how to keep his butt out of jail was preferable to trying to figure out what was going on inside him where Cheyenne James was concerned.

In Jackson's mind, the first order of business was to tell his uncle that the cops suspected he was the person who'd tried to put a slug into him. Twice.

"Can't wait," he muttered.

Blowing out a breath, he swung the Porsche around a corner. In the distance, the barn, stable and bunkhouses huddled in shadowy outlines against the starry night sky. The neat white-railed fence that lined the two-lane road stood ghostlike beneath the moon's silver glow. Beyond the fence, shadowy trees dotted the hillside pastures. Jackson knew the security cameras his uncle had installed after the second attempt on his life were recording the Porsche's progress along the private road. Monitors had been installed in his uncle's study that displayed the views picked up by the cameras placed in strategic spots across Colton property.

Moments later, Jackson eased to a stop in the driveway that curved in front of the sprawling two-story house painted in soft white with jutting balconies, a terra-cotta roof and high-columned porch. Colorful lakes of flowers and shrubs pooled nearby. Swinging open the car door, he breathed in the salty tang of the ocean that lay just past the steep face of rough rock bordering the house's manicured back lawn. The beat of his footsteps against the driveway mixed with the pounding of the surf.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught movement at the right of the porch. An armed security guard nodded to him, then melted back into the shadows.

Twin carriage lamps on either side of the towering front door cast overlapping puddles of light onto the porch. Twisting his key in the lock, Jackson pushed open the door, closed it behind him, then veered across the tiled foyer. He paused beneath the arched doorway that marked the entrance to his uncle's beamed study.

As always, Jackson was struck by the coziness of the room with its leather sofas and chairs, polished brasses and thick rugs that spread vibrant color across the wood floor. The walls were paneled in oak mellowed by time, housing row after row of shelves lined with leather-bound books. Across

from the stone fireplace in which flames ate greedily at logs to ward off the cool night air was a mahogany desk almost as imposing as the man who sat behind it.

Joe Colton was over six feet of solid muscle with a linebacker's shoulders and a square-jawed face softened by kind blue eyes. The gray that had begun peppering his dark brown hair only a few months before his sixtieth birthday lent the Colton patriarch a distinguished air.

As a rule, his uncle worked alone in his study after dinner. Tonight was clearly an exception, Jackson noted. On the far side of the room, his Aunt Meredith curled like a cat on the leather sofa, her beautiful face framed by the wavy, golden-blond hair that cascaded to her shoulders. As she thumbed idly through a magazine, the diamond brooch on the lapel of her sleek black jumpsuit caught the flash of the flames in the fireplace.

Jackson remained in the doorway, his brow furrowed. He remembered other long-ago nights when his aunt and uncle sat in silence together in this room. Then, an unspoken contentment had existed between them. The sense of companionship they had once shared had vanished years ago. Even now, Jackson had a hard time accepting that the woman who'd lavished so much love on him and his sister was the same person he'd confronted weeks ago and warned he would go to the police if she didn't stop blackmailing his father.

As if sensing his presence, Meredith raised her bored gaze from her magazine and glanced toward the doorway. Annoyance flashed in her eyes like lightning, then was instantly replaced by concern.

"Jackson," she said, laying her magazine aside. "Thank goodness."

Joe Colton snapped his gaze from the panel of security monitors installed in the wall near his desk. "Glad you made it back, son," he said, his voice booming across the study.

"Finally," Meredith added as she uncurled off the couch. "We've been worried sick about you."

"Why?"

"Why?" Meredith repeated, arching a perfect blond brow. "It's not every day a Colton gets called to police headquarters for questioning."

Jackson winced. "River wasn't supposed to tell you about that phone call."

"River didn't." When Joe leaned back in his leather chair, Jackson noted the shrewd assessment in his uncle's eyes. "Sophie overheard you tell River that the police called and asked you to come to the station. She blurted it out at dinner."

"Good going, cousin," Jackson muttered. When he stepped into the room the scent of leather and wood smoke settled around him.

Meredith flicked a wrist. "Never mind about Sophie, Jackson. We've been worried to death about you."

"Sorry. If I'd known, I would have called."

"You've been gone for hours," she persisted, glancing at her husband. "Joe wouldn't let me phone the station to check on you. He kept saying you're a lawyer and if you needed us, you'd call."

"That's right, I would have."

She took another step toward him. "Have the police been questioning you all this time?"

"No. After I left the station, I went to a movie. Then I..."

With thoughts of Cheyenne crowding in on him, Jackson hesitated. It was impossible to pin down what he thought about her, what he already felt about her. Instinct told him she was capable of igniting a spark in him that he wasn't sure he wanted stirred to life.

"Then you what?" Meredith prodded.

"Stopped and had coffee."

"You saw a movie," Joe said, tilting his head. Jackson knew his uncle was aware of his penchant for losing himself in heavy thought while a movie played on the big screen. "Is everything okay?"

"I handled things." Shrugging, Jackson walked to the desk, slid one hip onto the front edge. "Uncle Joe, there's no easy way to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it. Thad Law thinks it's possible I'm the person who tried to kill you. Both times."

In the silent seconds that followed, Jackson watched the initial shock in his uncle's eyes veer to anger.

"Has the man lost his mind?"

"I didn't get that impress—"

"I don't care if he is married to my foster brother's daughter, he's crazy," Joe protested. "There's no way Law has reason to even look at you. I've got a good mind to call Peter McGrath and tell him his Heather has married a blockhead. Then I'll call Mayor Longstreet and let him know exactly what I think about his police force."

"His police force is doing its job," Jackson countered. "And Law isn't a blockhead. He has what he believes are solid reasons to suspect me."

"What reasons?" Meredith scooted behind the desk to stand beside her husband. "You mean evidence? Thad Law claims he has some sort of evidence that proves you're the one who shot at Joe?"

"He doesn't just claim to have evidence," Jackson stated, then told them about the insurance policy on his uncle's life and the years-old court case the detective alluded to.

As Jackson spoke, a log in the fireplace broke apart and fell with a shower of sparks. "At the birthday party," he added, "I was a couple of feet from where the suspect stood only seconds before he or she fired the shot."

"Can someone say they saw you there?" Joe asked. "In that spot?"

"Yes." Jackson thought about the undercurrents that had pulled at him while his mouth ravaged Cheyenne's. Undercurrents, he reminded himself, had a habit of dragging in the unwary. He had spent his life avoiding just that.

"Who?" Meredith asked. "Who told the police they saw you in the same spot as the person who shot at Joe?"

"Actually, I told Law I was near that spot."

His aunt's eyes widened. "You told him? Why?"

"Because that's where I happened to be," Jackson said, giving her a mild look. "I'd cut through the service hallway to get a drink refill. I was there when I heard the shot."

Joe shook his head. "Did it occur to Law that hundreds of other people were milling around the house and courtyard that night?"

"I pointed that out. It didn't seem to make a difference."

"The man ought to stop harassing innocent people and find some real evidence." As he spoke, Joe stabbed holes in the air with an index finger. "Like the gun the bastard used to take those shots at me. Find that, and you've got some real proof."

"I agree." Jackson raised a shoulder. "Meanwhile, someone appears to want me as the scapegoat for the shootings. He or she has done one hell of a job of setting me up. I have a real problem with that."

"You're not alone," Joe huffed. "And we're not going to stand for it."

"Of course we're not," Meredith said with a flip of her slender, flame-tipped fingers. "Jackson, pour us all a brandy. Joe, we need to get Jackson the best criminal lawyer money can buy."

Joe's gaze shot up to meet hers, his brow creased in annoyance. "If you're referring to our eldest son, I doubt Rand will send us a bill for services."

"It was just an expression, darling."

Jackson noted the way his aunt's shoulders had gone rigid beneath her black jumpsuit. It was as if he could almost see the wall of tension shoot up between husband and wife.

"I don't need a lawyer." Rising off the front of the desk, Jackson walked to the wet bar built into a small alcove between bookcases. He poured two snifters of brandy, reached for a third glass, then

changed his mind. The last time he'd tasted alcohol was two weeks ago at Liza's wedding reception. The one drink he'd had hit him like a ton of cement. He didn't want to chance that happening again, especially now when he needed to keep a clear head.

"At this point, I'm not charged with anything." He crossed the room with the two snifters of brandy. "Yet," he added as he offered a glass to his aunt.

"It might be a good idea for me to call your cousin and put him on notice," Joe said, accepting the snifter Jackson handed him. "Just in case."

"That's not necessary," Jackson said. "Rand has his hands full in D.C. trying criminal cases. Besides, there's nothing for him to do, except tell Law his evidence isn't solid enough to make an arrest. I already delivered the message."

Joe inclined his head Jackson's way. "If you don't feel like brandy, I can have Inez bring in coffee," he said, referring to the longtime housekeeper.

"No thanks."

"Bam! Bam!" The shouted words echoed off the high ceiling just outside the study. "You're gut-shot, slime-ball!"

Meredith rolled her eyes, then looked at Joe. "Those boys were supposed to be in bed an hour ago."

Joe's mouth curved. "Sounds like another war interrupted their sleep. Joe! Teddy!" he said in a booming voice. "Get in here now!"

Seconds later, two barefoot boys clad in camouflage pajamas and toting toy rifles skidded through the door side-by-side.

"Yes, sir?" they asked in unison.

Joe sent a stern look across the desk. "Your mother informs me you were supposed to be in bed an hour ago."

"Aw, Dad, we just needed to see who wins the war," Joe, Jr. said, his sandy brown hair looking as if it had been combed by a hurricane.

Jackson held back a smile. Nearly ten years ago, Joe, Jr. had been abandoned on the Coltons' front porch. His uncle and aunt had taken in the infant and raised him as their own. As far as everyone was concerned, the kid was one hundred percent Colton.

"Yeah, and I'm about to win," Teddy boasted.

Joe, Jr.'s gaze swung sideways, his green eyes flashing. "It's not over till it's over, as Mama always says," he commented, then gave his mother a knowing grin.

"I'm glad someone around here listens to me," Meredith murmured, then checked her slim gold-and-diamond watch. "All right, you two, pay attention. The war must be won in five minutes or this general is calling a draw."

"Yes, ma'am," Teddy replied, giving her a military-precise salute. Shifting his gaze, the boy flashed Jackson a grin. "Hi ya, cousin."

"General Colton," Jackson replied mildly. "It appears the war is going well for you."

"Yeah, I'm winning."

"Are not!"

Jackson had known for three weeks that Teddy was the product of a one-night stand between his father and his aunt. Still, Jackson couldn't quite get used to the idea that the mischievous eight-year-old standing before him with tousled blond hair and sparkling blue eyes was his half brother.

The thought had Jackson glancing at his uncle in time to see Joe beam at both boys as they raced out of the study, their bare feet slapping against the wood floor.

Years ago a bout of mumps had rendered his uncle sterile. What had it done to him, Jackson wondered, when he found out Meredith had been unfaithful? That she'd conceived another man's child? What inner strength did Joe Colton possess that had compelled him to continue his marriage with Meredith and raise Teddy as his own son?

And what, Jackson wondered as a fist knotted in his gut, would the family patriarch do if he ever found out his brother, Graham, was the boy's father?

"I'd better make sure our troops brush their teeth," Meredith said. Setting her snifter on the desk, she met Jackson's gaze. "I'm sorry to hear about your problems with the police, Jackson. No one should have to endure something like that."

He slid a hand into the pocket of his khakis. It didn't take a genius to figure out she was referring to his promise to turn her in to the cops if she didn't stop blackmailing his father.

"Not when they haven't done anything wrong," he commented. "I'll get it resolved, Aunt Meredith. One way or the other."

"I'm sure you will." She dropped a kiss on top of her husband's head, then walked toward the door, her grace perfect in her black spiked heels.

Remaining silent, Jackson watched his uncle's expression while his gaze tracked his wife out the door. He felt a twist of sorrow at the dull resignation that clouded the man's eyes.

"Well," Joe said after a moment as he leaned back in his chair and swirled the brandy in his glass. "I figure while you sat through that movie you came up with a plan on how to deal with this mess?"

"The start of one." Jackson dropped into one of the leather visitor chairs in front of the desk and stretched out his long legs. "First thing in the morning I'll call Adam Jones at Amalgamated. I want to know if someone's been asking questions lately about the lawsuit I filed for him against his father. If so, I want to know who that person is."

"Good. After that?"

"I need to go to L.A. I plan to pay a visit to the insurance agent who's ready to swear I was the one who took out the policy on your life. It wasn't me, and I'm hoping his seeing me in person will convince him he's wrong."

"Take the corporate jet."

"I planned on hopping a commuter."

"Nonsense." Joe sent a wry smile over the rim of his snifter. "I'm not only your uncle, son, I'm your boss."

"Who's talking to an employee taking a leave of absence to decide if he wants to continue in his job?"

"You're a fine lawyer, Jackson, and I'm proud you're a part of Colton Enterprises. But if it's not a job you can put your heart into, you'll never be happy." Joe shrugged. "Until or unless something changes, you work for me and I'm ordering you to take the corporate jet tomorrow. Is your mother in L.A. these days?"

Jackson frowned. "Last I heard." His parents had always maintained an arrangement that suited them. Graham lived near Jackson in San Diego; Cynthia Colton, a high-powered entertainment attorney, kept an office and condo in L.A. Throughout their marriage they had led their lives, together and separately. Mostly separately.

"If Cynthia's there, take some extra time if you want and drop by to see her."

Jackson thought about the impersonal air kiss and polite "how are you?" he'd received when his mother arrived at Hacienda de Alegria for his sister's wedding. That had been the first time he'd seen her in nearly a year. He didn't see a point in stopping by her office for another token kiss and disinterested greeting.

"I'll take the jet, Uncle Joe. Thanks."

"No need to thank me, son. We're family. Family sticks together."

"Yeah." Jackson rubbed at the muscles knotted in the back of his neck while his gaze drifted to one of the bookshelves where picture frames and books vied for space. A woman with a wavy mane of chestnut hair and dimples smiled out from a pewter frame. Emily Blair Colton, the youngest of Joe and Meredith's daughters, adopted as a toddler, had disappeared months ago in what had initially

been thought of as a kidnapping. After receiving a ransom note, Joe had paid a heart-stopping amount of money for Emily's return. Days later, Joe had informed the family that he'd heard from a trusted source that his adopted daughter had fled Prosperino after an intruder tried to kill her. All Joe would tell anyone was that Emily was safe. If he knew her whereabouts, he wasn't saying. The FBI was still trying to get a lead on the person who had sent the fake ransom note and collected the money.

"Uncle Joe, I'm sorry to bring my problems to your doorstep," Jackson said quietly. "You've got enough to worry about with someone taking potshots at you and all that's happened to Emily."

"I'd have been hurt and insulted if you hadn't brought your problems to me." Joe ran a hand through his thick hair. "I want Emily home. More important, I want her safe."

"We all want that."

"Everyone, except the person who tried to kill her."

"True."

Joe plucked a brass paperweight shaped like an oil rig off his desk blotter. "Emmett Fallon gave this to me when the first wildcat well we dug in Wyoming came in," he said, hefting the paperweight in his palm. "Back then, I was young, headstrong and arrogant enough to think nothing bad could happen to myself and the people I cared about." Sighing, Joe resettled the paperweight on the blotter. "These past ten years, life has proved me wrong."

The look of genuine sorrow in his uncle's face prompted Jackson to veer the subject in a different direction. "Speaking of Emmett, I ran into a woman tonight who works for his son, Blake, at Hopechest Ranch."

"Who?"

"Cheyenne James."

"River's little sister," Joe said, his face instantly brightening. "I used to pick her up from the reservation and bring her to stay here on the weekends. She was so shy, she barely spoke to me. Would hardly even look at me. Years went by and I didn't see her. When she walked up to me at my birthday party and introduced herself, you could have knocked me over with a fingertip. She's a beautiful woman. Took my breath away just looking at her."

"Yes," Jackson agreed quietly.

Joe stared down into his drink, his brow furrowing. "Later at the party, I saw the two of you talking. I remember thinking I wasn't surprised, seeing as how you'd never been one to bypass a gorgeous woman. That wasn't too long before all hell broke loose." Joe's gaze rose slowly to meet Jackson's. "Is Cheyenne the one who saw you a couple of feet from where the person who shot at me stood?"

"Yes. Although I doubt she's aware of the suspect's location."

"Did you tell her the police questioned you?"

"No." Jackson raised a shoulder. "Maybe I will."

Joe's mouth curved. "So, you plan to see her again?"

"We're having breakfast the day after tomorrow."

"Can't say that surprises me. Like I said, I've never known you to let a beautiful woman get away."

He'd let Cheyenne get away once, Jackson acknowledged silently. Then spent months with thoughts of her chasing through his brain. No other woman had ever had that effect on him, ever captured his thoughts for so long. Maybe that was why—until his sister's wedding—he'd made only one short visit to Prosperino. Maybe somewhere in his subconscious he'd known if he had stayed in Prosperino for any length of time, he would seek out Cheyenne. And maybe, just maybe, he harbored a small lick of fear that she was the one woman he couldn't walk away from unscathed.

So, he'd avoided her. Successfully. Until tonight when he walked out of a dark movie theater and found her in the lobby. It was as if she'd been waiting for him. Just him.

Dammit, he could still taste her. And he wanted to taste her again. Soon.

Jackson let out a long breath. What in the hell was he going to do about Cheyenne James?

Patsy had watched the climactic end of Joe, Jr. and Teddy's war game, then kept a sharp eye on both boys while they brushed their teeth. After that, she'd herded them into their separate bedrooms in the north wing and kissed them good-night, leaving them both with a prediction of dire consequences if they didn't stay in bed this time.

Now, an hour later, dressed in a robe of shimmering white silk, she stood in her dark bedroom before the expansive wall of windows that faced the sea. The moon was full and high, cutting a swath of light across the black water.

"What do you mean you're going underground?" Patsy hissed into the cell phone she'd crammed between her shoulder and cheek. She wasn't concerned over the prospect of Joe walking in during her phone call. He hadn't stepped foot into her bedroom in years. "I'm paying you to kill Emily Colton, not lay low while she disappears again," she added.

"Look, the sheriff in this fleabag town—Atkins is his name—has his men working overtime trying to find the bitch's attacker," Silas Pike answered. "I show my face in Keyhole, Wyoming, I'm dead meat."

"What you are is incompetent. I hired you to kill Emily in her bed, in this house. You screwed that up and let her get away. Then, you chased her across the country for heaven knows how many months. By some miracle of God you stumble on her whereabouts, attack her, yet still can't manage to kill her. Now, you expect me to continue to pay you while you hole up somewhere for who knows how long?"

"Ain't gonna be that long," Pike countered. "Just long enough for that sheriff to figure some dude just passing through town is who jumped her. Once that happens, I'll go back for her."

"And fumble things again."

"And kill the bitch. You don't want to pay me to lay low for a while then finish her off, just say the word and I'll go home. Makes no never mind to me."

Patsy closed her eyes, blocking out the moonlight that shimmered on the dark water.

Dammit, was she the only person who could do anything right?

Silas Pike couldn't kill Emily, the private investigator she'd hired to track down her twin sister Meredith had run into a dead end, and the other investigator hadn't been able to locate her sweet baby, Jewel. No, Patsy corrected herself. Not a baby. Jewel was a grown woman now. It had been so long, she thought. So many years since she'd held her darling daughter.

"You still there?"

Pike's voice set Patsy's teeth on edge. Joe Colton had her on such a tight budget she couldn't afford to hire anyone else to find Emily. She didn't have time to hire anyone else. It was as if a force had been set in motion that she couldn't control. She could feel all of her carefully laid plans coming apart, slowly, thread by thread, yet she couldn't seem to pull them all back into place.

"I'm still here." She kept her voice calm and even. "I'll wire you more money in the morning. I warn you, Pike, I'm tired of paying for nothing. I want results, positive results. Soon," she added, then clicked off the phone and dropped it on the French directoire reading table that sat to one side of the windows.

All of her senses screamed it was a matter of time before the police closed in on her. Meredith was her sister, her twin. If she'd died years ago a homeless vagrant like the P.I. had tried to convince her, Patsy would feel it. Bitter regret flooded over her. If only she had gone through with her initial plan and killed Meredith on that long-ago day when she'd run her sister's car off the road and assumed her identity. If only seeing the mirror image of herself after so long hadn't stirred some emotion deep inside her.

Instead, when Meredith came to and Patsy realized a blow to her head during the accident had left her with amnesia, she'd dumped her twin on the grounds of the clinic where Patsy had finished the twenty-five year sentence she'd served for murder. Where the hell had Meredith gone after she'd

left the clinic? Patsy wondered for the thousandth time. And how long would it be before Emily, who had been in the car with Meredith on that fateful day remembered what she'd witnessed?

Emily had been a child then. Now, she was a woman whose nightmares about seeing her "two mommies" right after the accident had intensified over the years. Months ago, Patsy had heard Emily sobbing for her real mother during a nightmare. Patsy had jolted into action, knowing it was inevitable Emily would soon realize the truth of what she'd seen.

And eventually share that truth with the police. As far as Patsy was concerned, that nightmare had sealed Emily's fate.

Patsy dragged in a shaky breath. All Thad Law had to do to discover her deception was run her fingerprints. He would then know she wasn't Meredith, but the twin sister who'd served time for murdering the man who'd fathered—and sold—their daughter, Jewel. And that, for the past ten years, Patsy Portman had deceived the entire Colton clan.

Patsy suspected the clout carried by the Colton name was why Law had yet to request her fingerprints. He had to know she wouldn't have consented willingly to being fingerprinted. And it was doubtful any judge in the state would force her to do so. Still, Law wasn't the type of cop who gave up.

With unsteady hands, she snatched the gold pill case off the table beside her, popped open the lid and scooped up two Valium. She lifted a crystal tumbler full of vodka, and washed down the Valium with one deep swallow. She'd been a fool for not killing both Meredith and Emily that day, Patsy chided herself viciously, slamming the pill case back on the table. If she had, maybe she wouldn't now feel the sickening sensation that they were both getting closer. So close she could almost feel them breathing down her neck.

More money, she thought, fighting back a wave of panic. She needed more money in case she had to leave Prosperino in a hurry. She couldn't support Joe, Jr. and Teddy by herself.

Her eyes narrowed as her thoughts focused on Jackson Colton. He'd been so damn cool and forthright when he'd confronted her about blackmailing his father. Even as Jackson assured her he would go to the police if her extortion didn't end, she had seen a flash of regret in his eyes. It was as if he couldn't believe his Aunt Meredith had stooped so low.

Meredith, who had refused to cover for her own sister when Patsy had killed Jewel's father in a fit of rage. Meredith, who'd been too good to lie to the cops. Instead, she'd let her twin rot in prison for twenty-five years.

Patsy wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging the silk robe closer to her flesh. She would show Jackson Colton just how low she could stoop when she went after what was owed her. His father, Graham, had sniffed around her for years trying to bed her before she'd given him what he wanted. Now she intended to see that he continued to pay her the money he'd agreed to.

She had no doubt that, with his son cooling his heels in prison, Graham would continue making the payments she'd demanded. He would most likely do anything to keep her from telling Joe that his brother had sired Teddy. After all, the two million Graham had agreed to pay for her silence was peanuts compared to what he would lose if Joe wrote him out of his will.

"Evidence," she said, her voice a whisper on the still, night air. The evidence she'd already collected and sent anonymously to Thad Law had clearly caused Jackson some bad moments this afternoon.

She intended to cause him a lot more.

Gone momentarily was the feeling of impending doom that had dogged her for months. Having a good, solid plan—along with the Valium and alcohol that had just begun creeping into her system—calmed her nerves.

She smiled as she pictured the scene earlier in the study when Joe stabbed the air with his finger while he pronounced, "Like the gun the bastard used to take those shots at me. Find that, and you've got some real proof."

"No problem," Patsy murmured.

She had the proof. It was a matter of time before she could deliver it to the police.
Then she would have Jackson out of her way and his father's money would start flowing back in.

Four

The May morning was bright and clear, with the hills sporting color so bold and vivid that Cheyenne had shoved on her sunglasses the instant she walked out of her house. Now she stood in the center of the small archery range near a rushing stream that cut a jagged path across Hopechest Ranch.

“Stance is everything,” she reminded the tall skinny-as-a-rail teenager standing a yard away. At her side was a high table fashioned out of native stone on which she’d laid the bows and the quiver filled with arrows that she’d picked up from the counseling center on her way to the range.

“Yeah, stance.” Johnny Collins gave her an intense look across his shoulder. Repositioning his right foot a half inch, he raised a bow formed out of a curve of polished hickory. Dressed in faded jeans, a white T-shirt and ball cap swiveled backward to keep his dark shaggy hair out of his eyes, Johnny was beginning his second month of lessons.

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