

MILLS & BOON



**Vintage** INTRIGUE

**Navajo's  
Woman**

**BEVERLY BARTON**

**Beverly Barton**  
**Navajo's Woman**  
Серия «Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue»

**Аннотация**

He was the hot-blooded cop who once stole her heart— right before he turned in his fellow cop: her own father! Now Navajo Joe Ornelas was back, playing the « good guy» once more. And— sweet mercy save her!— Andi Stephens was powerless to deny the passion that still beat within her proud heart....She was the only woman he'd ever loved. The only one who'd mattered when his duty had torn their tender union apart. And now that Andi needed him, this powerful protector was determined to do all he could. For this time, Joe wouldn't walk away without his honor— or his woman!

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**She turned to face the man she had once believed to be not only the person she would one day marry, but the hero of her heart.**

Despite his years away from the reservation, Joe Ornelas looked every inch the proud Navajo. Just the sight of him created unwelcome quivers inside her. Leftover mementos of a time when she had thought herself falling in love with him. Wasn't it perfectly natural for her body to react in such a way?

Joe came toward her. Slowly. Hesitantly. She waited. Holding her breath. He was as handsome, as utterly masculine, as he had been the day they first met. Never before had she felt such an instant attraction to a man.

Never before did she have to fight so hard to deny it....

Dear Reader,

You've loved Beverly Barton's miniseries **THE PROTECTORS** since it started, so I know you'll be thrilled to find another installment leading off this month. *Navajo's Woman* features a to-swoon-for Native American hero, a heroine capable of standing up to this tough cop—and enough steam to heat your house. Enjoy!

**A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY** continues with

bestselling author Linda Turner's *The Enemy's Daughter*. This story of subterfuge and irresistible passion—not to mention heart-stopping suspense—is set in the Australian outback, and I know you'll want to go along for the ride. Ruth Langan completes her trilogy with *Seducing Celeste*, the last of **THE SULLIVAN SISTERS**. Don't miss this emotional read. Then check out Karen Templeton's *Runaway Bridesmaid*, a reunion romance with a heroine who's got quite a secret. Elane Osborn's *Which Twin?* offers a new twist on the popular twins plotline, while Linda Winstead Jones rounds out the month with *Madigan's Wife*, a wonderful tale of an ex-couple who truly belong together.

As always, we've got six exciting romances to tempt you—and we'll be back next month with six more. Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Leslie J. Wainger". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Leslie J. Wainger  
Executive Senior Editor

# Navajo's Woman

## Beverly Barton



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# BEVERLY BARTON

has been in love with romance since her grandfather gave her an illustrated book of Beauty and the Beast. An avid reader since childhood, Beverly wrote her first book at the age of nine. After marriage to her own “hero” and the births of her daughter and son, Beverly chose to be a full-time homemaker, aka wife, mother, friend and volunteer. The author of over thirty-five books, Beverly is a member of Romance Writers of America and helped found the Heart of Dixie chapter in Alabama. She has won numerous awards and made the Waldenbooks and USA Today bestseller lists.

To some strong, brave ladies, who have recently gone through a trial of fire, each in her own way. My friends, Marilyn Elrod, Wendy Corsi Staub, Jan Powell and my dear sister-in-law, Winnie Bradford.

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# Prologue

Bobby Yazzi lay on the floor. Dead. Blood from two fatal bullet wounds covered his yellow shirt and stained the handwoven rug beneath him. Russ Lapahie stood frozen to the spot, his body partially blocking Jewel Begay, who waited in the shadows several feet behind him. If the killer could see her in the semidarkness, he probably wouldn't be able to tell anything except that she was female. With a backward wave of his hand, Russ warned her to escape while she could.

Suddenly he heard the sound of running feet and the outside door slamming shut. Momentary relief spread through him when he realized that she had understood his signal to get the hell out of there. But that relief was shortlived. Across the room, hovering like a fire-breathing dragon preparing to emerge from his den, Bobby's murderer narrowed his gaze and aimed his weapon once again. Light from the lone lamp shining in the living room of Bobby's apartment hit the metal of the gun, which glimmered like diamonds.

Russ had seen the killer's face and recognized him. He was a witness to the murder, and the killer couldn't allow him to live. If he moved, he'd be shot. But if he didn't move... Hell, he was damned no matter what he did.

"Russ, what's going on in here?" Eddie Whitehorn called out as he came barreling through the front door. "Jewel just came

out, got in the car and she—” Eddie came to an abrupt halt at Russ’s side when he saw the body lying in the middle of the living room floor.

The next thing Russ knew, the dragon emerged. A couple of shots rang out. He and Eddie hit the floor. Crawling. Then they jumped up and ran as fast as their legs would carry them. Breathless. The cool night breeze enveloped their warm, perspiring bodies. Air on dampness. Cold on hot.

“Where’s the car?” Russ screamed, in order to hear his own voice over the drumbeat of his heart thundering inside his head.

“Jewel and Martina left us.” Eddie ran to keep up with Russ.

Each trying to catch his breath, the two boys hid behind a car parked across the street. Porch lights began coming on. Window blinds and shades came up. A couple of doors opened and several brave residents emerged from their homes.

“We’ve got to keep running,” Russ said. “We have to get out of here before he comes after us.”

“We need to call the police,” Eddie replied.

“Yeah, sure. And have them ask us what we were doing at Bobby Yazzi’s. They’ll think we went there for drugs. Man, they’re liable to think we killed him!”

“But we didn’t—”

“We can talk about this later.” Russ grabbed Eddie’s arm. “We have to go before he comes after us. I’m telling you, I’m in big trouble. The guy saw me. He knows I can identify him.”

Sucking in air hurriedly, the boys eased out from behind the

car and ran between a couple of houses. As they passed, Russ caught a glimpse of two men on the porch of the nearest house. The boys didn't linger, didn't slow their pace. Running faster and faster, Russ could think of nothing but getting away from the man who had killed Bobby. He had never seen a human being killed. Shot down. Never watched the blood drain quickly from a body until the heart stopped.

He couldn't let Bobby's murderer find him. And he couldn't call the police. With his reputation as a teenage delinquent, they'd probably lock him up and throw away the key. He had only one choice. Run and hide. And since those people back there had seen Eddie with him, had seen both of them running away from the scene of the crime, then his best friend was in almost as much trouble as he was. If they were going to stay one step ahead of the killer and the police, they'd have to stick together.

# Chapter 1

Andi Stephens wandered about inside her house, meandering from room to room in search of something to do—something to occupy her mind. Maybe she should have stayed at the store and taken inventory or priced items for the upcoming sale, but her assistant Barbara Redhorse usually took care of those matters. When she had decided to remain in New Mexico after her initial visit over five years ago, she had needed something to do, something that would occupy her time and also involve her in learning more about her Navajo roots. Her good friend, Joanna Blackwood, had been the one to suggest opening a Native American Arts and Crafts store in Gallup. So, she had delved in to her sizable inheritance from her grandfather and invested in a local business, which actually turned a profit the very first year. But today even her flourishing store couldn't keep her focused. Having been restless and slightly on edge for the past hour, she couldn't seem to relax. She had taken a shower and changed into her soft cotton pajamas, hoping that would put her in the mood for sleep. But she was too wired. And the odd thing was, she wasn't quite sure why. It was as if something was wrong, but she didn't know what. She had been prone to having uneasy feelings ever since she'd been a child. Not that she possessed psychic abilities or anything like that. Not really. She just occasionally got a sense of foreboding. And nine times out of ten, she was

right.

She was worried enough to have called to check on her mother, who lived in South Carolina. But Rosemary Stephens had been entertaining a group of society friends and hadn't had time to say more than hello and goodbye. Andi had been tempted to telephone her stepmother who lived on the nearby Navajo Reservation, to check on her and Russ. And she had even started dialing her friend Joanna Blackwood's number before common sense took over and she hung up the phone. Joanna was expecting her fourth child, and although the pregnancy had been perfectly normal, there was always the chance that—

Stop this! an inner voice ordered. Do you hear me? Stop borrowing trouble. If something is wrong, you'll find out soon enough. No need to make yourself sick.

Andi found herself in her small kitchen—a bright, light room, with oak cabinets, cream walls and uncurtained windows that overlooked an enclosed backyard. Tea. She'd make herself a cup of herbal tea.

Within minutes, she removed the cup of water she'd heated in the microwave, added a raspberry tea bag and dunked it several times. She preferred her tea mild and plain.

Now what? she asked herself. Try to read? Listen to music? Watch TV? Finding herself back in the living room, she sat in her favorite seat, an oversize, hunter-green leather chair. She stretched her legs out atop the matching ottoman, took a sip of tea and considered her choices. Glancing at the mantel clock, she

decided to catch the late-night news and weather.

The remote lay under a couple of magazines on the side table at her right. After several clicks, she found the local channel. But while she drank her tea, her mind wandered, so she paid little attention to the series of commercials that flickered across the twenty-six-inch screen. Ever since she'd had lunch with Joanna this past week, she'd been thinking about Joe Ornelas. Joanna had casually mentioned that Joe, her husband J.T.'s cousin, had sent her a baby gift, with a sweet note attached.

"I can't believe he picked out that adorable little frilly dress himself," Joanna had said.

"Maybe his girlfriend chose it," Andi had replied.

"Maybe. But J.T. says that Joe doesn't have anyone special in his life these days."

Yeah, sure. Like she'd believe that. Joe Ornelas wasn't the type to live without a woman. Perhaps there was no one he considered special, but she'd bet every dime of her inheritance that living there in Atlanta, Georgia, Joe had women swarming around him like bees. She figured he probably had to beat them off with a stick. After all, Joe was a hunk. And a lot of women had a penchant for handsome Native Americans.

Oh, great! You're batting a thousand tonight, aren't you, she scolded herself. You go from being disturbed by uneasy feelings to mooning over a man who walked out on you five years ago. Andi Stephens, you need to get a life!

Suddenly the news story on the television caught Andi's

attention. She thought she'd heard her brother's name mentioned. Surely, not. The newscaster was talking about a murder case.

After turning up the sound, she focused on the screen. The female news anchor switched over to a live report from the scene of a shooting in Castle Springs, a small town northeast of Gallup and situated within the boundaries of the Navajo Reservation.

“According to his neighbors, Bobby Yazzi, the murder victim, was believed to be involved in selling drugs,” the male news reporter said, while the cameraman gave a wide-angle shot of the victim's apartment and of residents milling around on the street. “Although the police haven't released any information about the murder itself, our sources have told us that some neighbors saw two young men running out of the duplex-apartment and into the alley behind their houses. The police have not confirmed this, nor have they identified the young men, but we're told that the eyewitnesses know who the men are and identified them as Russell Lapahie, Jr. and Eddie Whitehorn, both Navajo youths.”

Andi set her tea aside, then listened carefully, trying to absorb every tidbit of information. How was this possible? What were Russ and Eddie doing anywhere near a man like Bobby Yazzi? Russ might be a bit of a hell-raiser, but he really wasn't a bad kid. He was a boy without a father. At sixteen, he was rebelling against his mother, his Native American heritage and anything that even hinted of adult authority.

Five years ago, her half-brother's life had been vastly altered, just as hers had been, when their father committed suicide. Andi

had suspected that Russ wanted to distance himself from what friends and family considered his father's shame. Now this had happened. What could it mean?

She had to contact Doli. If her stepmother didn't know about this, then Andi would have to be the one to break the news to her. Poor Doli. She'd felt lost and confused trying to raise a strong-willed boy without a man to guide him. She would blame herself for any trouble Russ had landed in this time, as she had numerous times in the past.

"This just in," the newscaster reported. "The police have put out an APB on Russell Lapahie, Jr. and Eddie Whitehorn. Both young men are wanted for questioning in the shooting death of Bobby Yazzi."

Poor boys, Andi thought. They had to be frightened. Scared out of their minds. If they had witnessed the murder, then whoever killed Bobby would know that her brother and Eddie could identify him.

Just as Andi stood, the telephone rang. With an unsteady hand, she lifted the receiver.

"Hello."

"Andi, this is J.T. By any chance, have you been watching TV or listening to the radio?"

"Yes, I heard. Russ and Eddie are wanted for questioning." Andi gripped the phone tightly. "What were they doing at Bobby Yazzi's apartment? Neither of them are into drugs."

"I have no idea," J.T. said. "Have you spoken with Doli?"

“No, I was just going to call her, but— Have you spoken to Eddie’s parents?”

“Yeah.” J.T. paused, took a deep breath and continued. “I’m on my way over to Castle Springs now to meet Ed and Kate at the police station. Do you want me to contact Doli?”

“No, I’ll call her and then I’ll drive over to the reservation and stay with her until we find out what’s going on.”

Andi said goodbye, hung up the receiver and huffed out a long, loud sigh. Her uneasy feeling had proven to be right, once again. Her unerringly accurate premonition of trouble had been fulfilled. That sense of foreboding had, in the past, forecast sickness, death and accidents, usually involving someone close to her. She wished that just this once she could have been wrong.

Russ hot-wired the old truck, a rusty relic from the fifties, but one that purred like a kitten when the motor turned over.

“Damn it, Russ, this is stealing!” Eddie, who sat alongside his friend in the cab of the truck, looked from side to side out the windows, then glanced over his shoulder.

“Hey, we have to get some kind of transportation, don’t we?” Russ shifted gears, eased the truck backward and quickly maneuvered it onto the road. “We can’t get very far on foot and we can’t keep hiding out here in town. We’re taking Mr. Lovato’s truck in order to save our lives.”

“Yeah, well, the police will call what we’re doing stealing.”

“I call it borrowing,” Russ reiterated.

On the road out of Castle Springs, they met several trucks and

a couple of cars, but traffic was slow and no one followed them. Eddie rolled down a window and the cool night wind whipped his long hair into his face.

He didn't know what the heck he was doing here, on the run with Russ. Everything had happened so fast, too fast for him to think straight, to reason the right and wrong, the good and the bad. If he'd had any sense at all, he'd have vetoed the idea of going to Bobby Yazzi's to pick up some beer. Everybody knew that Bobby could provide not only the drug of your choice, but liquor of any kind to underage drinkers. When Russ's date, Jewel Begay, had made the suggestion to pick up some beer and Russ had agreed, Eddie hadn't wanted to come off sounding like some scared little boy. After all, he'd had a date to impress. If Jewel hadn't arranged the double date, he wouldn't have had a prayer of going out with a girl like Martina. Pretty and popular and from a good Navajo family.

When his parents found out he'd been at Bobby Yazzi's, what would they think? God, he hated even imagining their reaction. Their eldest son, of whom they were so proud, involved in a murder!

Russ flipped on the radio and fiddled with the dials, zipping from one station to another, finally settling on one. A country hit whined down to the last stanza, then news on the half hour began.

"There's an update on the murder case we told you about at ten," the announcer said. "Two Navajo youths— Russell Lapahie, Jr. and Eddie Whitehorn, are wanted for questioning

in regard to the Bobby Yazzi murder that occurred around eight o'clock tonight. Both Lapahie and Whitehorn were seen running from the victim's apartment shortly after neighbors heard several shots fired.

"Lapahie, the son of former Navajo police captain, Russell Lapahie, Sr., is a resident of Castle Springs and well known in town. The other youth, Whitehorn, lives on a sheep ranch between Castle Springs and Trinidad. Police aren't saying if the boys are suspects in the case, but they have issued an APB on the two."

Russ shut off the radio and increased the speed of the truck. "Hell! I knew the police would think I did it. With my record of trouble making and my father's reputation ruined because your uncle Joe ratted on him, I'm as good as dead."

"The police just want us for questioning," Eddie said. "I think we should go back, turn ourselves in and tell them what happened."

"Do you honestly think they're going to believe us?"

"They might."

"Yeah, well, even if they do—and I don't think they will—what about the guy who really killed Bobby? He won't have any trouble killing both of us to keep us quiet."

"Jewel can back up your story. She went in at Bobby's with you."

"Jewel was so scared that she ran, didn't she? She didn't hang around to see if we got out okay. She's not going to want to get

involved. She could easily deny having seen or heard anything, just to cover her own butt.”

As much as Eddie hated to admit that Russ was right, he nodded his head in agreement. Being on the run from the police and from a ruthless killer wasn't what Eddie wanted. But what choice did he have? He couldn't turn against his best friend, could he?

“We're in this together, right?” Russ cut Eddie a sideways glance.

“Yeah. Right.”

Joe Ornelas popped the caps off six bottles, placed the open beer on a tray and carried the refreshments out from behind the bar that separated his compact kitchen from his combination dining and living room. Hunter Whitelaw and Jack Parker still sat at the table where they'd been playing cards. Matt O'Brien picked up the TV remote and said something about checking ball scores on ESPN. Wolfe stood by the windows, his back to the rest of the Dundee agents, as he stared out into the rainy Atlanta night. Ellen Denby, their boss lady, came toward Joe, smiling.

“Need some help?” she asked.

“Just help yourself,” he replied, holding the tray out to her. “What's up with Wolfe?” Joe nodded toward the solitary figure by the double windows that overlooked Salle Street. “This is the first time he's taken me up on my offer to play cards. I had begun to think he was avoiding our company.”

Ellen lifted a bottle from the tray. “He knows all of us a little

better than he did a few months ago. I think working closely with you and Hunter on rescuing Egan Cassidy's kid might have helped." Ellen glanced over her shoulder at Wolfe, who seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts. "He's a loner if I ever saw one."

"Where's that beer?" Hunter threw up his hand and motioned to Joe to come to him. "While you're making brownie points with the boss, I'm dying of thirst." Hunter laughed. Long, low, deep, grunting chuckles.

As Joe passed the sofa where Matt sat engrossed in the sportscast, Joe handed him a beer, then headed toward the table. He placed the tray in the center, which only five minutes earlier had held the night's winnings. After Jack and Hunter grabbed their beverages, Joe picked up the two remaining bottles and walked toward the man who had separated himself from the others.

"Beer?" Joe held up a bottle in offering.

Wolfe turned slowly, nodded, accepted the beer and said, "Thanks."

"I'm glad you decided to join us tonight," Joe told him.

"I appreciate your asking me." Wolfe lifted the bottle to his lips and downed a hefty swig.

"Feel free to join us anytime. The players change, depending on who's in town, and we rotate apartments. Next week, it's Ellen's turn."

"Uh-huh."

Joe had thought himself a man of few words, but compared to Wolfe he was a regular chatterbox. The others had speculated about the reclusive agent, who'd been with Dundee's Private Security and Investigation less than a year. Unlike the rest of them, who'd been hired by Ellen, Wolfe held the distinction of having been chosen by the owner of the agency, Sam Dundee. No one knew anything about Wolfe—not even Ellen. But she had quickly ascertained that the man had undeniable abilities. He was not only an expert marksman, but he had a knowledge of every aspect of the business, from weapons to strategy, from equipment to psychology.

“Damn!” Matt jumped up from the sofa. “I just lost fifty bucks on the Braves game.”

“That's what you get for gambling,” Ellen said.

“Look who's talking,” Matt told her. “You lost thirty dollars tonight playing cards. Hell, add the fifty I lost on the ball game to the forty-five I lost here and I'm nearly a hundred dollars poorer.”

“We had no idea what an expert card player Wolfe was,” Hunter said. “He took us all to the cleaners.”

“Are you sure you've never been a professional?” Matt asked, looking directly at Wolfe.

Wolfe shook his head. “No.”

“Ah, the guy's just good at cards, the way he is at everything else.” Hunter rose from his chair to his full six-four height.

Joe noted a pained expression on Wolfe's face, as if Hunter's comment had somehow hurt him. But surely, no one would be

hurt by a sincere compliment, would they?

“I should be going.” Wolfe placed his half-empty bottle down on the tray atop the table.

“Yeah, me, too.” Matt downed the last drops of his beer, then tossed the empty bottle to Joe, who caught it effortlessly in his left hand while continuing to hold his own bottle in his right.

“Yeah, it’s about time I called it a night,” Jack Parker said in his deep, Texas drawl, then scooted back his chair and got up.

The telephone rang just as Wolfe opened the apartment door. Not looking back, he made a hasty exit. Jack Parker waved goodbye and followed Wolfe. Matt lingered in the doorway.

“Need a ride home, Denby?” He smiled, showing a set of movie-star teeth.

“You know Hunter’s taking me home,” she replied.

“Yeah, I know, but you can’t shoot a guy for trying.”

“Our Ellen can and would shoot you.” Hunter chuckled.

“You guys hold it down,” Joe told them as he lifted the telephone receiver. “Yeah, Ornelas here.”

“Matt, you can give up trying,” Ellen said, smiling. “I don’t date Dundee employees.”

“So how come Hunter can escort you around and I can’t?” Matt leaned against the door.

Joe covered the receiver with his hand, gave his companions a stern look and repeated, “Hold it down. I can’t hear what my sister’s saying.”

“Because Hunter is a gentleman and you’re not,” Ellen said

softly, then nodded and waved to Joe, letting him know that she'd heard him, understood and would be quiet now.

Joe removed his hand from the mouthpiece. "Sorry about that, Kate, but I've got a few friends over tonight."

"You must come home, Joseph." Kate's voice held an edge of near hysteria and it wasn't normal for his sweet, easygoing sister to be this upset.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Eddie. He's in big trouble. We need you very badly."

"What kind of trouble is Eddie in?"

"Trouble with the—" Kate's voice broke "—the police." She sighed. "He and Russ Lapahie are wanted for questioning in the murder of Bobby Yazzi, a man who is known for selling drugs to our children."

Joe's heartbeat accelerated. Eddie was in trouble with the police? He couldn't imagine anything so ridiculous. Not a good kid like his eldest nephew, who was a bright student, an obedient son and a hard worker, helping his father on the ranch since he'd been not much more than a toddler.

"You said that Eddie is wanted by the police. Where is he now? Why hasn't he turned himself in?"

"We don't know where he is. Eddie and Russ are both missing. They've run away—"

Kate whimpered, and Joe knew she was struggling with her emotions, trying to not break down and cry.

"Andi says that their running makes them look guilty," Kate

said.

“Andi’s good at finding people guilty.” The mention of Andi’s name struck a disharmonious chord in Joe. He had spent five years trying to forget about the past, trying to put Andrea Stephens out of his mind.

“No, you misunderstand,” Kate told him. “Andi doesn’t think the boys are guilty. She knows they aren’t capable of murder. She simply pointed out what is so obvious—that by running, Eddie and Russ have only made matters worse for themselves.”

Ellen laid a hand on Joe’s shoulder and whispered, “Is there anything we can do?”

“Hold on, Kate.” Joe turned to Ellen. “Yeah. I’m going to need some time off. I have to go home. My nephew’s in trouble.”

“Take all the time you need,” Ellen said. “If I or the agency can help, all you have to do is call me.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll let ourselves out.” Hunter escorted Ellen to the open door, and they and Matt waved good-night, then closed the door behind them.

“I’ll take the first flight I can get. The Dundee jet isn’t available right now. I’ll call you back when I’ve made arrangements.”

“Ed and I will meet your plane.”

“Be brave.”

“Yes, I am trying.”

Joe replaced the receiver when the dial tone hummed in his ear. He and Kate had been as close as a brother and sister could

be. He was the younger sibling, but only two years separated them in age. She had married Ed Whitehorn when she was twenty and had given birth to her first child at twenty-one. The entire family had adored Eddie, such a beautiful, clever child. Until Joe had resigned from the Navajo Tribal police force and left his home in New Mexico five years ago, he and his nephew had been the best of buddies. And even now, the two spoke often on the phone. He simply could not imagine how a good boy like Eddie could be involved in anyone's murder, even as a witness. Unless he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But why would Eddie have been anywhere near a known drug dealer? And why had the boy run away?

Russ Lapahie was the answer to all Joe's questions. J.T. had told him that Russell's son had been in and out of trouble ever since Russell's death. Trouble at school, trouble at home and trouble with the law.

"Doli can't do anything with him," J.T. had said. "And he won't listen to Andi, either. They're both 'just women,' as far as Russ is concerned."

Joe grunted. To think that he had been the one to advise Ed and Kate not to forbid Eddie to hang out with Russ. He had mistakenly hoped that his nephew would be a good influence on Andi's brother. Now, it looked as if he'd been wrong. The opposite had happened.

He couldn't deny that his bad advice had been prompted partly out of guilt. After all, if Joe had looked the other way and kept

his mouth shut five years ago, when he had discovered Russell Sr. was covering up his brother-in-law's livestock smuggling ring, his former police captain would still be alive. And Russ and Andi would still have their father. The way Joe figured it, he not only had to go home to help Eddie, but to help Russell's son, too.

"I want those boys found!" The dark hand that slammed down on the desk bore several crisscrossed scars, reminders of a long-ago knife fight. A fight he had won. Three diamond rings sparkled on various fingers, each catching the light from the green-shaded lamp to his right.

LeCroy Lanza glowered at his subordinates, both men killers by instinct and training. In his line of work, it didn't pay to send out a boy to do a man's job. He wanted Russ Lapahie and Eddie Whitehorn found and taken care of so that neither boy could identify him. He'd seen Russ's face and had laughed silently at the boy's wide-eyed shock after he'd witnessed the murder. He had seen the shadow of another person behind Russ, but LeCroy hadn't been able to make out much. At the time, he'd thought the second kid was female. Apparently, it had been Eddie.

In retrospect, he realized that he should have sent someone else to take care of Bobby Yazzi, the two-timing little son of a bitch. But LeCroy Lanza had a reputation to uphold. He was known for taking care of his problems personally. And Bobby had become a major problem. Who had he thought he was—lying and cheating, stealing from the man who'd set him up in business? Nobody cheated LeCroy Lanza and lived.

“Charlie, you find out where those boys went. Hire some trackers, if necessary. I’ll call in a few favors and see if I can get any information that might help us.” LeCroy gripped Charlie Kirk’s shoulder. “I want those boys dead before they have a chance to talk to the police.”

## Chapter 2

Joe hadn't been home in five years, although his job as a Dundee agent had brought him out west a couple of times. When he'd left the reservation three weeks after Russell Lapahie's suicide, he'd gone straight to Atlanta and had begun working for the Dundee agency. A couple of times his sister Kate and her family had come to Georgia to visit, and he kept in contact weekly by phone. And he and his cousin J. T. Blackwood e-mailed each other on a regular basis and spoke on the phone from time to time. Otherwise, he had cut himself off from his past, from his people and from his heritage.

Did he ever miss his old life? Did a part of him still long to truly be one of the Dine? Yeah, sure, in those dark, lonely moments when he had allowed himself to remember, he'd longed to see the Dinehtah. The land of the Navajo. He had been born here in New Mexico, on the reservation, and had grown to manhood within the closely knit family of his mother's clan, just outside the town of Castle Springs. He had been proud of his heritage and honored to become a member of the Navajo Tribal Police. Once, Joe had thought of himself as a good guy, a role model for other Navajo youths, and at times, even a hero. But his days of being a hero, in anyone's eyes, including his own, died along with Russell Lapahie.

His devotion to his family and his people had been the driving

factor in his life, but all of that had ended the day Russell committed suicide. His friends, acquaintances and fellow officers seemed to forget that Russell had been the one who had betrayed his trusted position on the police force. That Russell had been the one who had committed a crime. During the worst of the maelstrom that infected their lives from the moment he arrested his captain until after Russell's funeral, Joe had begun to doubt himself. Had he been wrong to reveal the crime and arrest the culprit because that man had been his friend and a superior officer? A lot of people seemed to think so. Including Andi, Russell's daughter. She had turned on Joe with a vengeance.

If she had stood by him, supported him, believed in him, would he have stayed in Castle Springs? Maybe. After all these years, he wasn't sure anymore. Not about himself. And certainly not about his feelings for Andi. All he knew was that at some time during the past five years, his guilt and remorse over Russell's death had turned to anger. How could a man he had hero-worshiped have acted so dishonorably? Russell's actions had not only destroyed his own life, but altered the course of other lives. Joe's. Andi's. Russ, Jr.'s. Doli's. Everyone who had loved and trusted Russell.

Joe could not help thinking how odd it was that he, a Navajo born on the reservation, who spoke Saad and had tried to follow the traditional ways, who had once worn a medicine pouch inside his trousers and kept a feather attached to the rearview mirror of his truck to ward off evil spirits, who had attended the Navajo

Community College in Tsaile, had been forced to leave all that he cherished. And Andi, born and reared as a bilagaana, had stayed on in New Mexico and embraced the heritage of a father she had barely known, of a people who had been strangers to her.

Whenever J.T. happened to mention Andi, Joe always managed to change the subject. He hadn't wanted to hear anything about her, hadn't wanted to know if she had married, if she'd had children. She was nothing to him. Less than nothing. But today he would have to see her again, come face-to-face with the woman who, if she had truly loved him, might now be his wife.

There was a stark, majestic beauty to his homeland. Mesas and canyons, wide valleys and narrow mountain ranges. On this drive from the police station to Kate's ranch outside Castle Springs, he felt more homesick than he had when he'd been far away in Georgia. In five years, he had almost forgotten what it meant to be a Navajo, even though by his appearance alone he proclaimed his Native American ancestry. In Atlanta, he had grown accustomed to living a white man's life, which in many ways he enjoyed. He had once thought he could never survive in the outside world, the world to which Andi had belonged. Strange that he now felt like an outsider in his own land. When they had been dating, Andi had told him that she wasn't sure she could live on the reservation and adapt to Navajo life. Back then, he had thought their lifestyles might be the only factor that could keep them apart.

The road leading from the highway to Kate and Ed's ranch lay just ahead on the right. They had lived in a trailer when he'd left the reservation, but three years ago they'd built a house in the middle of their land. He and Kate shared acres of land that comprised the sheep ranch, and his own small house still stood several miles from his sister's.

Kate had offered to meet him at the airport, but he'd told her that he would just rent a car and drive out to their place. His first stop after landing in Gallup had been the police station in Castle Springs. He hadn't been sure what to expect, since most of the people working there had been his fellow officers five years ago. The reunion had been surprisingly friendly. The new captain and an old friend, Bill Cummings, had shared all the information they had on the Bobby Yazzi murder case.

"Do you really think that Russ and Eddie might have killed Bobby?" Joe had asked.

"I would like to believe that the boys only witnessed the murder," Bill had said. "Sometimes the innocent run, but... They are not helping themselves by trying to elude us. If they didn't kill Bobby, they should not have run."

Joe eased the rental car off onto the long, narrow road winding through the ranch land. He dreaded facing Kate, seeing the fear and agony in her eyes. Her first born was in danger, and she was powerless to help him. She was counting on her brother to save her son. Joe only hoped he could.

When Joe drew near the house—a clapboard painted the color

of golden sand—his sister and brother-in-law came out onto the porch. Kate lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the sun when she walked into the yard. She was a lovely woman. Short, slightly plump and exotically dark. A pair of faded jeans clung to her womanly curves.

The moment he parked, Kate ran toward him. He had no more than slammed the door shut when she stopped directly in front of him. Tears clouded her black eyes. He grasped her shoulders.

“You must find Eddie,” she said.

The trembling in her body vibrated through his hands. “I will find him. I promise.” Let me be able to keep that vow, he prayed silently.

In his peripheral vision, Joe saw his brother-in-law’s short, barrel-chested, stocky frame shadowed by the edge of the porch roof. At his side stood six-year-old Joey, Joe’s namesake. And there, hiding halfway behind her brother, was ten-year-old Summer.

Kate grabbed Joe’s hand. “Come. You must be tired and hungry after your long flight. I have stew ready for lunch.”

Kate was so much like their mother had been, a gracious hostess to family and friends. Always enough food to share. Always a warm smile and a generous heart.

His dark-eyed niece and nephew stared at Joe, as Kate twined her arm through his and led him toward the house. Smiling at Joey, he ruffled the boy’s hair.

Joey smiled back at him and said, “Ya’at’eeh.”

“Welcome, Joseph.” Ed Whitehorn nodded his head in greeting.

“Thank you.” Joe liked Ed, a quiet, soft-spoken man, a hard worker and a devoted husband and father. Joe turned his attention to his shy little niece, a carbon copy of her mother. “Aren’t you going to say hello to me, Summer?”

Leaning her head to one side and smiling timidly, she fluttered her long black eyelashes and spoke softly. “Hello, Uncle Joe.”

“You’ve certainly grown since the last time I saw you. And you’re as pretty as your mother.”

Summer awarded Joe with a broad smile. “Ahehee’,” she said, thanking him for the compliment.

Joe lifted Joey to his shoulders, much to the boy’s delight, then grasped Summer’s hand and tugged her closer to him. “Your mother has promised me lunch. Is anyone else hungry?”

The children giggled as they entered the house with their uncle. Side by side, touching only in spirit, their parents followed.

Just an inch shy of six feet, Joe had to duck down to enter through the front door, in order to make sure Joey’s head didn’t strike the door frame. Once inside the house, Joe came to an abrupt halt before he had taken more than two steps into the cosy, colorful family room.

Standing there in the archway between the family room and the dining area was a woman. Long, flowing, dark brown hair cascaded over her shoulders. Pale golden eyes gazed at him. Andrea Stephens was tall, slender and somehow elegant

in her jeans, boots and bold red-and-blue plaid shirt. Tiny diamonds sparkled in her earlobes, a remnant of her wealthy South Carolina upbringing. And a wide band of turquoise-laden silver circled her right wrist. Joe's stomach knotted painfully. He had given her the bracelet, created by his silversmith great-grandfather and passed down to him by his mother. Why did she still wear the bracelet? Or had she simply put it on today, to taunt him?

Joe eased Joey from his shoulders and placed the boy on his feet. Both children stayed at his side as he stood frozen to the spot. He said nothing, only stared at Andi. Kate and Ed came inside, and within minutes Kate hurried toward her guest.

"Andi is going to have lunch with us," Kate said. "She asked to be here to meet with you. She is as anxious to find the boys as we are. She is going to represent the Lapahie family today."

"Where is Doli Lapahie?" Joe asked, without breaking eye contact with Andi.

"My stepmother has been distraught since she learned about Bobby Yazzi's murder and the possibility that Russ witnessed the crime," Andi said. "Dr. Harvey gave her a sedative last night and left instructions with her sister to keep her medicated if necessary. Doli is not a strong woman. Not since..."

Joe felt the sting of accusation without Andi actually blasting him with the words. He knew what she'd been about to say. Not since my father killed himself. Not since you betrayed a man who had treated you like a son.

Averting his gaze from her face, Joe cleared his throat. “I stopped by the police station in Castle Springs, and Bill Cummings filled me in on what happened. I can’t understand why Eddie and Russ ran away. If they weren’t involved—”

Kate and Andi cut him off simultaneously, saying, “They weren’t involved.”

“How can you think such a thing?” Kate glowered at her brother.

“Did Captain Cummings say that he believes Russ and Eddie were involved in Bobby Yazzi’s murder?” Andi asked.

“He didn’t come right out and say so, but he’s puzzled by their running away. I’m sure he told you that he sees it as a possible sign of guilt.”

“I do not believe my son is capable of killing another human being, and I told this to Bill Cummings last night.” Kate shook her head, regret in her voice and apparent in the desolation of her expression.

“I agree,” Joe said. “I don’t think Eddie would kill someone.”

Andi lurched forward, as if shoved by an unseen hand. Her topaz eyes gleamed brightly when she confronted Joe. “But you think Russ might have killed Bobby, don’t you. You are only too eager to believe that this is all my brother’s fault, just as you once —” Andi broke off, then rushed past Joe and outside, crashing the storm door closed behind her.

“Damn it, I didn’t accuse Russ of anything!” Joe hammered his fist against the nearby wall. Nothing had changed—not

between Andi and him. Her distrust and hatred pulsed with energy. She had not forgiven him and probably never would.

“Do not curse in front of my children,” Kate scolded.

“Sorry.” Joe rubbed his knuckles.

“You must go after Andi and tell her that you—”

“I’m not going after her. I didn’t invite her here. I didn’t want to see her or talk to her. As far as I’m concerned, she can go back to wherever she came from and stay there.” He couldn’t say—wouldn’t admit to his family—that just the sight of Andi Stephens brought back all the emotions he had tried so hard to forget. The love and passion. The anger, guilt and remorse. She would forever be a reminder of his own shortcomings, his failure to live up to the expectations of all who had known and admired him.

Ed laid his hand on Joe’s shoulder, but looked at his wife. “Take the children into the kitchen and prepare our lunch.” The moment Kate scurried Joey and Summer through the house and disappeared into the kitchen, Ed tightened his hold on Joe. “We are all very worried. Kate and I. Doli and Andi. We are concerned about Eddie and Russ. They are both only sixteen. Young men now, but in many ways still boys. Boys who need our help.”

Joe realized that Ed had just chastised him in his own kind, subtle way. “That’s why I came home. To help Eddie. And to help Russ, too. I figure I owe it to Russell to do what I can for his son.”

Ed patted Joe on the back. “You are a good man.”

Joe shrugged. "I'm not so sure about that. Nobody around here thought I was much of a hero five years ago, did they?"

"When Russell died, feelings were running high among family and friends," Ed told him. "You did not give anyone a chance to recover from the shock, before you ran away."

Yeah, he'd run, all right. As far and as fast as he could. Back in the good old days, when he'd been a policeman, he had respected himself and enjoyed the admiration of others. He had prided himself on being a good Navajo and a good man. But for the past five years he had questioned himself, every choice, every decision he'd made. He had thought he was doing the right thing when he exposed Russell's duplicity. The man had been his captain, his friend, a father figure to him since he'd been a teenager. And at the same time Russell Lapahie had been a man torn between duty and family loyalty, between upholding the law and breaking the commandments he had revered all his life.

And Joe had faced his own moment of truth. He had done the legally correct thing. But had he been wrong to expose Russell's crime? Damn the man for having put him in such a position. A part of him could not forgive Russell for having placed him in such a no-win situation. And another part would never forgive himself.

"Go. Speak with Andi." Ed squeezed Joe's shoulder, then released his gentle hold and joined his wife in the kitchen.

Joe didn't move for several minutes. Everything within him balked at the suggestion. He couldn't talk to Andi, couldn't make

her see reason. He'd been in her presence only a few minutes, and already she had put words into his mouth, immediately assuming the worst about him.

How would it be possible for the two of them to act like normal, rational people when they distrusted each other so vehemently? The past lay between them, an old wound reopened, or perhaps never truly healed. He suspected that Andi had no more come to terms with Russell's death than he had. Five years and fifteen-hundred miles apart—and yet they shared a grief that would forever bind them, and just as surely keep them apart.

Shaded by the branches of a pair of scraggly pinyon pines, Andi breathed deeply, drawing huge gulps of air into her lungs as she struggled to regain control of her emotions. She had known this would happen and yet she'd been given little choice but to come here today and meet Joe again after all these years. He had no more than opened his mouth before he'd practically accused Russ of being a murderer. Oh, he hadn't come right out and put his feelings into words, not exactly. But his meaning had been clear. He thought the worst of her brother, just as he had of her father.

If Doli were capable of dealing with this horrendous situation, Andi might be spared seeing Joe again, spending time with him. But Doli was an emotionally and physically fragile woman, even more so since her husband's death. Her stepmother had held her hand last night and pleaded with her to help Russ.

“You will find him,” Doli had said. “And prove that he is an

innocent boy.”

From the moment she learned what had happened with Russ and Eddie, Andi had known that Kate and Ed would notify Joe. Who in their family was better qualified to track down his nephew than Joe Ornelas, former Navajo Tribal police officer and now an agent with a prestigious protection and security firm? And there had been no question in her mind that she would be the one to protect her brother, to make sure no one—especially not Joe—would place all the blame on Russ’s shoulders. Somehow she had to find a way to grow a tougher hide, and do it immediately. Their meeting didn’t bode well for future cooperation. But cooperate she would, even if it killed her. Whatever Joe did, she would be looking over his shoulder. Wherever he went, she would be one step behind him. When he found the boys, she would be at his side. No way would she trust him to look out for Russ’s best interests. Only she could do that.

Andi would never allow Joe to destroy her brother, de-file his reputation and publicly crucify him. She had been unable to help her father, to prevent him from taking his own life. But by God, she could and would do everything in her power to save Russ. She owed him that much. Owed her father, too, to protect his only son, not only from the real killer and the Navajo police, but from Joe Ornelas.

“Andi.”

She went rigid at the sound of Joe’s voice. Only in her dreams, often nightmares, had she heard Joe call to her. Go away. Leave

me alone, she wanted to shout. He was the last man on earth she wanted to see, to be with. But they shared a common goal—the rescue of two young boys, each a family member, each a beloved child of people for whom they cared deeply.

You can do this, she told herself. Put aside whatever you feel for Joe and do what must be done in order to save Russ.

She turned to face the man she had once believed to be not only the person she would one day marry, but the hero of her heart. But Joe Ornelas was no hero. Not in her eyes or the eyes of his people.

Just the sight of him created unwelcome quivers inside her. Leftover mementos of a time when she had thought herself falling in love with him. Wasn't it perfectly natural for her body to react in such a way? It was possible to intensely dislike someone and yet still find them devastatingly attractive.

Another uphill battle to fight, she surmised. Although she had stopped caring for Joe years ago, her body had not forgotten the pleasure of his touch. Her one regret had become her one comfort—that in the past, their relationship had not had time to reach the point of complete sexual intimacy, before he betrayed her.

Joe came toward her. Slowly. Hesitantly. She waited. Holding her breath. He was as handsome, as utterly masculine, as he had been the day they first met. She remembered so well when her father had introduced them—the young man he thought of as a son and the daughter he'd never known existed. Her heart

had beaten a little faster. Her stomach had filled with dancing butterflies. Never before had she felt such an instant attraction to a man.

Don't let those old feelings confuse you now, she cautioned herself. Joe isn't here to help Russ. He's come home to help Eddie. She didn't dare trust him.

A warm August breeze caressed Joe's long black hair. Several silky locks fell across his face. He brushed them aside with a sweep of his large, wide hand. A gray, short-sleeved cotton sweater covered his broad, muscular upper body and a pair of black jeans clung to his lean hips and long legs. The turquoise-nugget necklace with a circular silver center that he had always worn shone brightly against the coppery tan of his neck. Despite his years away from the reservation, he looked every inch the proud Navajo.

But this man wasn't the Joe Ornelas she had known. He had gone out into the world, far from his roots, and experienced life as the white man lived it. He had become a part of the society into which she had been born and reared. There had been a time when he had thought he could never survive in the white man's world, and she had been certain that she could never live the Navajo life. When they had first begun dating that difference had been the only thing she'd thought would ever come between them.

Joe halted several feet away from her. "Kate has lunch ready. Won't you come back inside and eat with us?"

"Yes, of course, I will," Andi replied. "I would never do

anything to offend Kate. I know she's as distraught over what has happened with Russ and Eddie as Doli and I are."

"If I need to apologize—"

"You don't!" Andi's gaze locked with Joe's, and for one timeless moment she felt light-headed. Breaking eye contact, she shifted her feet back and forth in the dry soil, sending tiny dust storms up and about her ankles.

"Both J.T. and Kate have mentioned several times over the past few years that Doli has been having problems with Russ." Joe stood rigid as a statue, his hands tense, his expression guarded. "But I didn't mean to imply that I thought he had killed Bobby Yazzi."

"There isn't much point in our having this conversation, is there? Even if you don't believe that Russ is a murderer, you are convinced that however Russ and Eddie are involved with Bobby, Russ is somehow the one to blame."

"Why must you put words in my mouth?"

"Are you denying that you think Russ somehow influenced Eddie, that he's the one who got the two of them into trouble?"

"No, I cannot deny that I don't think Eddie would be in this situation on his own. But that doesn't mean I—"

"Why is it that you can so easily be judge, jury and executioner, when you don't have all the facts?" Andi walked over and stood in front of him, then lifted her head and glared into his solemn eyes.

"Damn," Joe cursed under his breath.

Andi trembled from head to toe. She balled her hands into tight fists as she held them on either side of her hips. With only the slightest provocation, she could easily pummel that broad chest, venting years of anger and frustration on his hard body. Joe had discovered her father's crime, and without giving him the benefit of the doubt or trying to understand what had motivated Russell, he had arrested a good man for one forgivable error in judgment. Joe had judged Russell Lapahie guilty and unknowingly sentenced him to death. The fact that Joe had not been the one who pulled the trigger on the gun that killed her father did not make him any the less guilty of his execution.

And it didn't help any more now than it had been five years ago that Joe felt guilty, that he was filled with remorse. She understood that Joe never meant to harm her father, but all the regrets in the world couldn't change what had happened, couldn't bring Russell back to life. And no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to trust Joe. Never again. She had trusted him completely once, and not only had he betrayed her trust in him, but he had run away instead of staying and facing the consequences of his actions.

"Maybe it's best if you and I don't see each other again after today," Joe said. "Any information I have, I can pass along to you through a third party. Kate or—"

"Wrong." Andi glowered at him, her heartbeat drumming inside her head. "If you think, for one minute, that I'm going to let you go after Russ and Eddie alone, then you'd better think

again. Wherever you go and whatever you do from now until the moment we find those boys, I'm going to be your shadow."

"No, you won't. I don't need you or want you..." Joe hesitated, shifted mental gears, then cleared his throat. "You'll just get in the way."

"I don't care what you want. I'm coming with you and that's that."

"No. J.T. and I can handle things. We are both trained for this type of situation. You are not. So just get any ideas you have of tagging along with us out of your head. You are not going."

Andi punched him in the center of his chest with her index finger. "You just try to stop me."

## Chapter 3

I have no intention of giving Joe a choice in the matter! He's not leaving me out of the search for Russ and Eddie. Andi was determined to be involved in every aspect of the hunt. She couldn't trust Joe, not when it came to her brother's life. The initial meeting at Kate and Ed Whitehorn's earlier today had been less than productive. She'd found Joe to be as stubborn and unbending as he'd been five years ago, when his go-by-the-rules-at-any-cost attitude had destroyed her father.

Remembering Russell Lapahie still evoked a mixture of emotions within Andi, but foremost a great sense of loss. The man had been a father she'd barely known, and to this day she felt cheated by his death. Only six months before that fateful day when Russell had taken his own life, she had been living in South Carolina, the daughter of wealthy, socially prominent parents, with her life as a socialite all mapped out for her. She'd been practically engaged to a childhood friend, Tyler Markey IV, an up-and-coming young state senator. But everything had changed when her parents decided to divorce, the result of her father's adulterous affair with a girl half his age. Distraught and filled with rage, Rosemary Stephens had blurted out to Andi that Randall Stephens wasn't even her real father. At that moment, Andi realized why she'd always felt different, as if she didn't quite fit into her parents' neat little world. And it had suddenly made

sense why she had never felt loved by the man she'd thought was her father.

"It happened while I was in New Mexico with friends, shortly before I married your...before I married Randall," Rosemary had explained. "He was a handsome young Navajo man, and we were instantly attracted to each other. The affair lasted for one glorious week. He was so smitten that he asked me to marry him. But, of course, that was out of the question. He was poor. I was rich. He was an Indian and I was—"

"You were a bigot," Andi had all but screamed at her mother. "He was good enough to have sex with, but not good enough to marry."

"I didn't love Russell," Rosemary had admitted. "It was hot sex and nothing more. I'm sorry, Andrea, but that's the truth."

"Russell? His name is Russell...what?"

"Lapahie. Russell Lapahie. He lived on the reservation. His dream was to be a Tribal police officer."

"Is he still alive?" Andi had asked.

"I have no idea." Rosemary had gasped when she realized her daughter's intentions. "You aren't thinking of trying to find him, are you? Darling, he has no idea you even exist."

Two weeks after that revealing conversation with her mother, Andi had headed west. In search of a father who didn't know his brief affair with a vacationing Southern belle had resulted in a child. In search of a heritage that had been denied her, a birthright she had every intention of claiming. That had been

five-and-a-half years ago.

As Andi drove her white Ford Expedition up to the open gates at the end of the long stretch of road leading from the main highway, the Blackwood's house came into view. A sprawling, Spanish stucco built only seven years ago, the home of her dear friend Joanna seemed as welcoming as ever. But just how welcome would she be, now that Joe was back and J.T. was joining forces with him to find their young kinsman, Joe's nephew and J.T.'s cousin?

The moment she pulled up beside the vehicle she recognized as Joe's rental car, Andi's stomach knotted painfully. He'd said his goodbyes to her at his sister's house and had assured her that he'd contact her when he had any news of Russ and Eddie. Despite her protests, Joe Ornelas had dismissed her and left for the Blackwood ranch shortly after lunch. If he'd thought she wouldn't follow him, then he didn't know her very well. Of course, he doesn't know you! an inner voice taunted. He never did.

Before Andi's foot even hit the ground, Joanna Blackwood, round and rosy in her eighth month of pregnancy, came waddling out of the house. Her long red hair hung down her back in a cascading ponytail. Turquoise-and-silver earrings dangled in her ears, and a flowing white-and-aqua striped tent dress hit her mid-calf. Andi had always thought that Joanna was a lovely woman, and the bloom of pregnancy only added to her beauty.

"You were expecting me, weren't you?" Andi smiled as

she approached her friend, who waited on the wide, expansive veranda.

Grinning, Joanna nodded. “Joe arrived about an hour ago, so I assumed you wouldn’t be far behind.”

“Where is he?” Andi hugged Joanna, then pulled back, looked at her swollen tummy and gave it a gentle pat. “You’re bigger than you were last week.”

“If the ultrasound hadn’t shown us differently, I’d swear I was having twins again.” Joanna placed both hands atop her stomach. “Joe’s in the den with J.T. They’re talking strategy. Want to join them?”

Andi laughed as she laced her arm through Joanna’s. “You know that Joe all but forbid me to interfere. He told me that he’d keep in touch through you or Kate, and inform me when he had any news about the boys.”

“Typical macho man.” Joanna led Andi inside, into the large, terra-cotta tiled foyer. “But my guess is that neither Joe nor J.T. will be surprised to see you. Especially not my J.T. He’s gotten to know you pretty well these past five years and he’s acquainted with your mile-wide stubborn streak.”

“I’m not going to let Joe bully me. I have every right to be involved in the search. I may not have his qualifications, but—”

“Save your arguments for Joe. I’m on your side, remember? We women have to stick together against our ultra-masculine Navajo males.”

“Joe isn’t my Navajo male,” Andi reminded her friend.

Joanna eyed the silver-and-turquoise bracelet that adorned Andi's wrist. "Then why are you wearing his brand?"

Why, indeed! Andi fingered the magnificent piece of jewelry, handcrafted by Joe and J.T.'s great-grandfather, Benjamin Greymountain. The sentimentally priceless bracelet had been a gift from Joe on her twenty-fifth birthday, shortly before her father's death.

"It's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I own, but I wore it today for a reason. I'm going to give it back to Joe. I would have given it to him five years ago, if he hadn't left in such a hurry. He didn't stick around long enough even to say goodbye."

"And you still resent his speedy departure," Joanna commented. "Admit it to yourself, even if you won't admit it to me—you still care about Joe. Otherwise, you'd already have found someone else."

"I think we've had this conversation before, haven't we? But I'll tell you again—I don't care about Joe. He means nothing to me. And as you well know, I've had several interesting men in my life during the past few years, so that should prove I haven't been pining away for some lost love."

"Just how many of those interesting men lasted longer than a couple of months?" Joanna asked. "Not one of those relationships got beyond the kissing—"

Much to Andi's relief, Joanna's assessment of her love life, or lack thereof, was cut short by the interruption of two redheaded twin toddlers. Annabelle grabbed her mother's right leg as her

brother Benjamin manacled the left. They gazed up at Andi with their father's dark eyes. Then a tall, lanky boy of six entered the foyer, halting abruptly when he saw his young siblings attached to Joanna.

"Hi, Andi," the black-haired, green-eyed boy said. "Sorry, Mama, but they got away from me before I knew what was happening." John Thomas Blackwood acted if he were a grown-up, though he was nothing more than a child himself. J.T. and Joanna's eldest had been born an old soul, a protector and a caretaker. Every time Andi was around the boy she sensed his ancient spirit.

"It's all right, honey. No one can keep up with these two." Joanna pried the twins away from her legs and grasped each one by a hand, keeping them separated by her body. Then she turned to Andi. "It's almost supper-time, so I need to get my brood cleaned up and ready to eat. You know where J.T.'s den is. Feel free to interrupt, and tell Joe and him that Rita will be serving dinner in about thirty minutes."

"I intend to tell them more than that." Andi's voice was edged with tension.

"What's wrong, Andi?" John Thomas asked. "Are you angry with my daddy?"

"Good heavens, no," Andi said. "I'm angry with—"

Joanna cleared her throat.

"I'm a little annoyed with your cousin Joe," Andi amended.

"I like Joe," John Thomas told her. "He brought me an Atlanta

Braves cap and a baseball signed by Chipper Jones.”

Andi forced a smile. Joanna chuckled under her breath, then shoed her brood down the hall, leaving Andi alone in the foyer. Okay, get this over with, she told herself. Walk right into J.T.’s den and tell those infuriating, old-fashioned, domineering men that in order to represent the Lapahie family, you insist on having a personal involvement in the search for Russ and Eddie.

J.T. handed Joe a bottle of beer, then sat across from him in a huge wing chair upholstered in a striking Navajo blanket-style fabric, a mate to Joe’s chair. Joe liked the masculine look of the room, which he thought reflected his cousin’s mixed heritage and his own unique personality quite well. It was obvious that the woman who had decorated this room not only knew J.T. well, but cared deeply for him. His cousin was a lucky man to have found someone like Joanna.

Crossing one leg over the other, J.T. shook his head. “There’s no evidence that the boys were involved in the crime.”

“Circumstantial evidence at best,” Joe agreed. “They were seen running from Bobby Yazzi’s home shortly after gunshots were fired, which places them with Bobby at the time of his death. And they haven’t turned themselves in to the police, which makes them look guilty of something, even if they’re not.”

“Do you think they’re guilty of something other than being scared kids?” J.T. asked, then took a swig from his beer.

Joe circled his thumb around the mouth of his bottle. “Eddie’s never been in any kind of trouble. I know he couldn’t have killed

Bobby or even been a party to his murder. I'm sure he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"What about Russ?"

"I don't know about that boy. The last thing I want is to believe that Russell's son has committed a crime. If I have to bring in Russ, it'll be like arresting Russell all over again. Is anybody going to believe that I want to help that boy, and not condemn him?"

"Anybody' being Andi Stephens?" J.T.'s lips curved up in a hint of a smile.

"I saw her today," Joe said. "She was at Kate and Ed's when I arrived. She still hates me. Still blames me for what happened to Russell."

"Russell Lapahie was a good man who made a bad mistake." J.T. rubbed his beer bottle back and forth between the palms of his hands. "You did the legally responsible thing. You were a police officer with a sworn duty. Russell committed a crime. He was wrong. You were right."

"Yeah, sure." Joe set his beer on the round wooden side table that separated the matching chairs, then stood and walked over to the big window facing the U-shaped veranda that circled the back of the house. "If I was right, then why did everyone I knew—except you and Joanna and Kate and Ed—turn against me? Why did even my fellow officers look at me as if I'd been the one who committed the crime?"

"Everyone liked Russell. He was a respected man in the

Navajo community. At the time Russell killed himself, people reacted emotionally. Today, I don't think anyone blames you for what happened. In retrospect, they realize that Russell took the easy way out and that what you did took courage and strong convictions."

"Andi still blames me. And I'm sure Doli and Russ do, too. I doubt I can ever redeem myself in their eyes."

"And is that what you want to do—redeem yourself with Russell's family?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

J.T. stood, walked over and laid his hand on Joe's back. "When we find Eddie and Russ and prove they weren't involved with Bobby's murder, that should go a long way in helping you get back into Andi's good graces."

"What Andi thinks of me doesn't matter. Not anymore. But what happens if when we find the boys, it turns out that Russ did kill Bobby Yazzi? What do I do then? I'm not a police officer now. To whom do I owe my allegiance?"

When Andi approached J.T.'s den, she found the door standing wide open, revealing the backs of the two men silhouetted by the late-afternoon sunshine pouring in through the window that faced west. J.T. was tall and lean, an inheritance from his bilgaana father. Joe, a full-blood Navajo, was an inch shy of six feet and more stockily built. His skin was a shade darker, his hair a rich blue-black. There had been a time when her heart skipped a beat whenever she saw him. Even now, she could not

control the unwanted attraction she felt.

Should I knock? she wondered. Or should I simply barge in? They seemed deep in conversation. The polite thing to do was knock, announce her presence and state her business. But before she could follow through with her intention to use the good manners her mother had drilled into her since childhood, J.T. spoke to Joe.

“Your allegiance is to yourself,” J.T. said. “If Russ is guilty, then you have to do what you believe is right, not what will gain you popularity points. You know that as well as I do.”

“I made a huge mistake telling Kate and Ed that they should let Eddie remain friends with Russ. If only I’d advised them to keep Eddie away from Russ, then my nephew wouldn’t be in the situation he’s in now. On the run. Wanted by the police.”

Andi had heard all she could endure. It was just as she had suspected—Joe and J.T. both thought Russ had killed Bobby Yazzi. Their objective was to find and save Eddie, even if that meant tossing Russ to the wolves. They didn’t care what happened to her brother.

“Russ did not kill Bobby Yazzi!” Andi stormed into the room, anger boiling inside her.

Both men snapped around to face an enraged woman. Noting the startled expressions on their faces, she glared at them, hoping they felt as guilty as they looked.

“Andi, we didn’t know...that is, you should have let us...” J.T. stammered. “I’m sorry you overheard that part of our

conversation and misunderstood. Neither of us believes that Russ is guilty. It's just that we know he's been in trouble quite a bit the past couple of years."

"And Eddie is a saint, who wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for my brother." Andi paused several feet away from the two men, planting herself firmly in front of them.

"You're putting words into our mouths," J.T. told her.

"Andi's very good at doing that." Joe mumbled, but Andi understood what he'd said.

"I'm here to tell both of you that whatever type of search y'all instigate to find the boys, I'm going to be a part of it."

"We don't need you interfering and creating problems," Joe said, his dark gaze narrowing on her.

"We'll keep you informed about—" J.T. tried to explain.

"No!" Andi walked right up to the two men, who stood side by side, stiff and unyielding. With only inches separating her from them, she pointed her finger right in Joe's face. "Just being informed isn't good enough."

"J.T. and I will be splitting up the job of looking for Eddie and Russ," Joe said. "I'll be following up most of the leads that require any traveling, while J.T. spearheads a local investigation for the family. Since Joanna is so close to giving birth, he doesn't want to get very far away from her."

"It seems y'all have everything all figured out." Andi frowned. "Eddie's family is well represented by the two of you, and I intend to make sure Russ's interests aren't forgotten. Wherever Joe goes,

I go. He can look out for Eddie, and I'll look out for Russ."

"Andi..." J.T. held out his hand in a gesture of friendship. "Come on. Sit down and we'll talk this thing through until we reach a satisfactory decision."

"I don't need to sit down or talk anything through. The only decision that will satisfy me is to be included in the search."

"You're being unreasonable," Joe said, his voice deadly soft. Then he added in a growling whisper, "But then, you always were."

"Is it unreasonable to want to protect my brother?" Andi asked. "Is it unreasonable of me not to trust you to do what is best for Russ as you will for Eddie? And it is unreasonable for me to believe that you will not protect our family from further disgrace?"

"You honestly believe that when the time comes, I won't do the right thing, the honorable thing?" Joe broke eye contact with Andi and gazed down at the floor, avoiding her intense scrutiny. "Before we've even begun the search, you've condemned me. How do you think you and I can work together? It would be impossible."

"Impossible or not, we must work together." Andi looked to J.T. for confirmation, but before he could speak, Joe did what he was so very good at doing. He ran away. Again.

"Give my regrets to Joanna," Joe said. "I'll have dinner with your family another time. I need to get settled into my old place. You can follow through and get that ad placed in the Navajo

Times. Maybe the boys will see it and contact us. We'll start out first thing in the morning questioning anyone who has a connection to either Eddie or Russ."

"It won't do you any good to run," Andi said. "You're just postponing the inevitable. I know how to find you, and from now until the boys are safe, you won't get away from me."

Joe nodded to J.T., gave Andi a hard, menacing glare and strode out of the den, leaving behind a fuming Andi and a somber J.T.

Joanna Blackwood stood in the doorway, glancing back and forth from her husband to Andi. "Isn't Joe staying for dinner?"

"No," Andi said. "I think I ran him off."

"What happened?" Joanna asked.

"A difference of opinion," J.T. replied.

"I'm sorry," Andi said. "Under normal circumstances I would never have... I'm only doing what I must. If I don't protect Russ, no one else will. Please understand."

Huffing disgustedly, J.T. shook his head. "Andi, you act as if everyone is against Russ, as if our family— Eddie's family— would be willing to sacrifice Russ in order to save Eddie."

"Not the entire family. Just Joe."

"Why is it that you can't seem to realize that Joe wasn't the one who committed a crime five years ago?" J.T. looked Andi square in the eye. "I liked Russell as much as anybody did, but Joe wasn't responsible for his death. Joe didn't make Russell kill himself. Your father chose—"

Joanna rushed to her husband's side and grabbed his arm.

"J.T., I think you've said enough."

"No, it's all right," Andi assured her friend. "J.T. has every right to defend Joe. Just as I have every right to defend my father and my brother."

"There isn't any reason why we can't all work together, is there?" Joanna gazed pleadingly up at J.T. "Andi needs to be with Joe throughout his search. If Russ were my sixteen-year-old brother, I'd insist on going along."

"Thank you, Joanna, for seeing my side of this situation," Andi said. "I appreciate the predicament y'all find yourselves in and I don't want to cause any friction between the two of you. I think it's best if I leave, too."

Lacing her arm through J.T.'s, Joanna smiled at him and said, "Don't you agree that Andi should go with Joe when he sets out searching for the boys?"

J.T. looked as if he'd been cornered by a grizzly bear. He shrugged, huffed loudly, and then nodded. "You have to do what you think is right, just the same as Joe does."

"Now, Andi, why don't you stay for dinner?" Joanna said.

"I'm afraid I can't. I have somewhere I need to go."

"Right now?" Joanna asked.

"Right now," Andi replied.

J.T. groaned, but then his lips curved into a smile. "You could give him until morning to cool off before you go after him."

"If he gets any information on the boys' whereabouts tonight,

he could be long gone by morning,” Andi said. “I’m not going to give him the opportunity to go anywhere without me.”

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