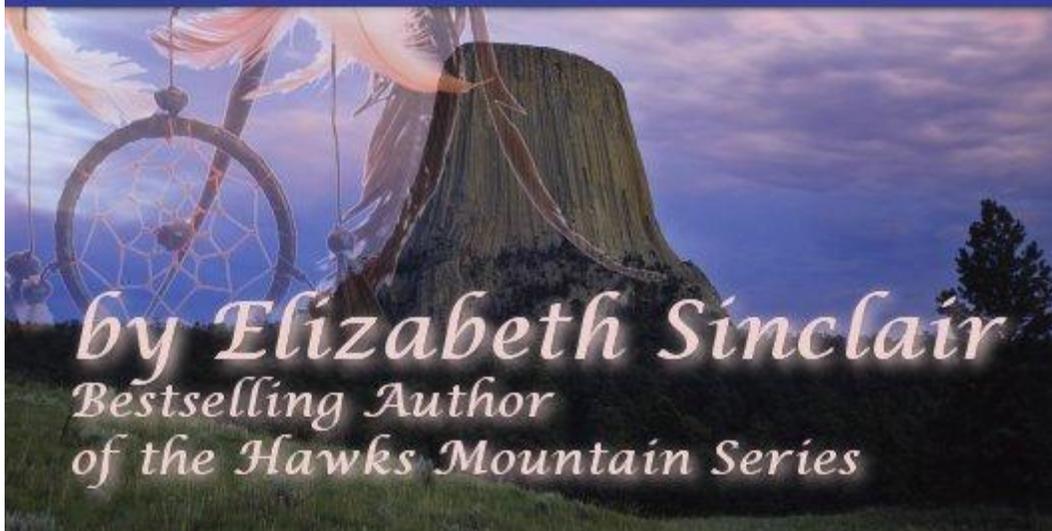


*To save their son,
and themselves,
they must
step into the...*

Eye of the Dream



by Elizabeth Sinclair
Bestselling Author
of the Hawks Mountain Series

PROLOGUE

A gauzy mist swirls around her. It cloaks her in a smothering, ethereal blanket. She gasps for air. It smells earthy, like the thirsty desert sands after a torrential rain. She spins away into another wall of white nothingness. The mist thickens, robs her of all sense of direction, pulls her ever deeper into the milky haze. Panic paralyzes her. She opens her mouth to call out. No sound emerges. The mist thickens. Her panic becomes palpable, breathing more difficult.

Suddenly, as if an unseen force has taken charge, the mist parts. Fearing it will close and trap her again, she runs through the opening, unseeing, uncaring about what waits on the other side. She knows only that she must escape the suffocating, white fog.

As she adjusts her eyes to the glaring brightness, a strange scene takes form. A withered old Navajo sits cross-legged before a boarded-up hogan; a twisted mesquite stump to his right resembles a snake coiled to strike. His ancient, leathery face bears the evidence of many summers spent beneath the hot, desert sun. Observing her closely through large, owl-like eyes, he measures her approach. That sharp, brown-eyed gaze, brimming with the wisdom of his years, never wavers from her.

With a sharp wave of his gnarled hand, he motions for her to join him on the ground. Welcome serenity replaces her panic. She obeys.

From beside him, the old Navajo picks up a small, leather pouch, then taking her hand, dumps the contents into her palm. She stares down at a silver chain coiled around a rainbow pendant. With her fingertip, she nudges the chain aside to better see the pendant. Inlaid with bands of turquoise, abalone, jet, and white shell, the rainbow's arches catch the sunlight and glitter, as though alive.

His guttural voice, crusty and angry, comes from inside her head. "Sa?ah naghai bikeh."

The pendant suddenly takes on an eerie luminescence, and with it, comes heat that intensifies steadily until it burns her palm. She cries out, but the sound is only in her mind. Dropping the necklace, she looks to the old man for an explanation. He's vanished and so has the necklace.

In his place stands another man, younger, his muscular body untouched by time. His features, concealed in shadow behind a swath of dark hair, need not be illuminated for her to know his identity. As familiar to her as her own mirrored reflection, they live in her dreams nightly and reflect from her son's face daily.

Hair, dark as a desert night. High cheekbones carved out by shadows. Eyes, dark and mysterious, haloed in amber, luminous, haunting, judging, accusing. And his mouth . . . Lord, his mouth. The mouth that loved her to the heights of passion and took her to worlds far beyond earthly reaches. His lips turn up slightly, as if reading her thoughts and finding amusement in her reaction.

A phantom breeze picks up his long, black hair from his broad shoulders and whips it away from his face. Light bounces off the contours of his coppery skin. He towers like a giant oak, strong, immovable, silent—always silent.

Radiating ferocity as strong as the foreboding prediction of a storm's onslaught, he beckons, drawing her with his powerful magnetism. She reaches for him, the need to touch overriding all else, compelling her as surely as her need for her next breath.

Then he vanishes. The fog closes in again, swirling, suffocating, threatening. The panic returns.

Laura Kincaid bolted upright in her bed, choking and clutching at her throat. A soft, early, summer breeze laden with the fragrance of the rain-soaked Arizona desert blew through the open bedroom window. The air currents played with the white, organdy curtains, encouraging them to writhe in a mocking, ghostly dance, a twin to the mist of her nightmare.

She tore her gaze away and dragged deep breaths into her starving lungs. Finally able to breathe easily again, she fell back against the pillows, exhausted.

Rolling to her side, she checked the glowing face of her bedside clock. Four AM. Trying to shrug off the nightmare as the byproduct of her late-night, fast-food supper the evening before, she snuggled deep into the warm folds of her blankets.

But the panic she'd experienced in the dream remained with her. Even though she didn't understand them, the harsh, angry words of the old Navajo settled heavily on her soul, chilling her to the bone. As hard as she tried to dismiss their dire tones and make the excuse that some gastro-connected upset had caused her to dream about the old Indian, it still sent chills down her spine.

Not surprisingly, she found the appearance of the younger man, the man she'd walked out on eight years ago, the man who had haunted her dreams many times before last night, even more upsetting.

Chapter 1

From her vantage point atop the slope of green lawn, Laura Kincaid scanned the rows of booths marching across the fairgrounds like soldiers in a dress parade. Red, white, and blue bunting fluttered in a warm desert breeze. The mixed aromas of pizza, tacos, hot dogs, refried beans, and cotton candy wafted out over the crowds milling about, tantalizing their palates, enticing them to sample the vendors' wares.

Laura couldn't hold back a satisfied smile. It looked as though the Tucson Children's Clinic would have more than enough reserve-fund cash to underwrite the Organ Transplant Program. The hard work she and her aides had done had paid off. Justifiably proud of her efforts to gather funds for the medical facility, she sighed; glad that today marked the last in a weeklong task that had sapped her energy.

A young boy in a Dallas Cowboys T-shirt whizzed past her, obviously targeting the money clutched in his hand for the cotton candy booth. Thank goodness her best friend and neighbor Anne Yatzee had volunteered to take Peter to her clan's powwow or Laura's son would be darting about the crowd as well. Keeping track of him in this confusion, while still monitoring the booths, would have been impossible. Not to mention, he would have wanted one of everything.

She chuckled. Typical eight-year-old.

For some unknown reason, the thought of Peter triggered the memory of her dream from the night before. If she wanted to be honest, figuring out why one prompted the other didn't really take much effort. It was an inevitable connection. Seeing Peter's father, even in a dream-state, had a way of disrupting her thoughts for days afterward, making her wonder if, when she'd elected to keep Peter's birth from him, she'd made the right decision. But eight years of silence made that a moot point. Even if she wanted to, she could hardly walk into the man's life now and announce he had a son that only she, Ada and her friend Anne knew he'd fathered.

Kicking both problems to the back of her mind, she concentrated on aiming what energy she had left toward the successful concluding day of the fair.

Picking up her purse and the clipboard she'd used for making notes over the last three days, she got ready to make her way along the wooden booths where vendors hawked everything from abstract art to stuffed, toy zebras.

She glanced at her watch. Two more hours, then this year's fair would be a memory, and she could relax. If she took the time to close her eyes, she could already smell the fragrant aroma of a soothing bubble bath. Visions of a decadent supper of pizza and Rocky Road ice cream began to fill her mind, but when she recalled the aftermath of her last fast-food binge, a nightmare to end all nightmares, she decided instead on a healthy salad.

A movement at the end of the row of booths drew her attention, effectively erasing all thought of food. "Mary Jane, who's that?" she asked an aide who had dashed past her to the cashbox for change.

"Where?" The aide strained to see where Laura pointed and then laughed. "There are too

many people. You'll have to be more specific."

"Down at the end of the sixth row. It looks like someone's just setting up booth 6F."

"Are you sure? Maybe they're breaking down their booth early." The aide's wide-eyed gaze zeroed in on the spot Laura indicated. "Gee, Laura, I don't know, but you're right. It sure looks as if they're just setting up." She grinned. "They're gonna be real surprised when we close up in a few hours." She grabbed a pack of singles out of the box, closed it, and then snapped the padlock shut. "After I take these singles to Mrs. Rodriguez, do you want me to check it out for you?"

"No. I'll take care of it. I was just about to take my hourly stroll through the multitude." She smiled at the young redhead. "You better get that change over to Mrs. Rodriguez. You know how easily she panics."

The aide tucked the bills in her pocket and then started down the hill. Halfway down, she stopped. "Great fair, Laura!"

"Thanks. I couldn't have done it without my able-bodied staff of aides."

Even as she mouthed the words, in her heart she knew that while she felt satisfaction in the fair's success, it was a long way from filling the niche inside her that had been carved out for her and her alone. As a fair organizer and nurse, she excelled. Beyond that, beyond her job, there was only Peter—and, as much as she doted on her active, young son, she needed more.

The girl grinned. "Think we're over the top from last year?"

"I'm about certain. Now, get those singles over to booth twelve."

"Gotcha." The young girl gave Laura a thumbs-up, and then trotted off at a run down the slope.

Laura checked her clipboard for the name of the vendor who'd rented that booth. The line beside 6F was empty. She frowned and recalled that, oddly enough, 6F had been the one booth she hadn't been able to rent. Shaking her head in confusion, she followed Mary Jane down the slope at a slower pace.

Ah, the vitality of the young. She could use just a small portion of Mary Jane's energy today. She'd always been an early riser, but four o'clock pushed the envelope too far, even for her. With that disturbing dream still fresh in her mind, relaxing enough to go back to sleep last night had not been an option or a possibility.

The dream. Peter's face popped into her mind. Was he all right? *Oh, for Heaven's sake, Laura, get a grip. One dream and right away you begin imagining the worst.*

Dismissing her uneasiness as lack of sleep playing games with her head, she zeroed in on the renegade vendor and made her way through the milling throng of people. Oblivious to the fair and the bright Arizona sun, her thoughts and direction centered on booth 6F.

Nearing the booth, she caught sight of a woman in traditional Navajo dress, a long-sleeved, white velvet blouse and a flowing skirt of the same color, balanced precariously on a stool while hanging a colorful rug to the booth's crossbeams. Her black hair, caught back in a figure-eight, bulged on both ends of a bun bound in the middle by a strip of snowy cloth.

While waiting for her to come down from the shaky perch, Laura surveyed the items the Navajo woman had lain out for sale. Arranged on what appeared to be a beautifully woven rug, pieces of silver jewelry glittered in the sun, one more exquisite than the next. Squash-blossoms made from finely cut and polished needlepoint turquoise shared space with chunky, coral-encrusted bracelets and *concho* belts buffed to a bright, silvery sheen.

The woman finished her task, made her way down off the stool and then turned to face Laura. For a long moment, her chocolate-brown gaze held Laura's; then, almost imperceptibly,

she nodded.

All thought of Laura's original reason for approaching the booth evaporated from her mind. She studied the heavy necklace the woman wore. Perfectly round, it was surrounded by featherlike rays made of turquoise and abalone. At its center black, slitted eyes peered at her from a face made up of geometric shapes fashioned of turquoise, coral, abalone, and jet. She recognized it immediately as a *tewa*, the face of the Navajo Sun God. Without a doubt, a very rare piece and one of the most intricate bits of silversmithing Laura had ever seen.

Realizing she was being rude, she dragged her gaze from the mocking sun to the woman's face. Lovely; and, in a strange way, familiar. Time had not yet sketched the woman's skin with wrinkles and the hot sun had not baked lines of weathering into her smooth copper flesh. While not really attractive, she seemed to possess an inner beauty that lay hidden in her course features like a cactus flower awaiting the kiss of a refreshing rain to burst forth into breathtaking loveliness.

"Your necklace is very beautiful," Laura offered, hoping to divert the woman's piercing stare. Laura gestured to the jewelry display. "It's too bad you got here so late. These pieces would have sold like hotcakes."

The woman shrugged, as though selling the jewelry mattered little, reached into the pocket of her skirt and then extracted a small leather pouch much like the one the old Navajo had had in Laura's dream. Removing something from the pouch, she cupped it in her palm and then returned the pouch to her skirt pocket. As the old man of the dream had done, she reached for Laura's hand.

Laura felt the chill of the cold metal against her skin. She looked down and gasped. A wave of déjà vu passed over her. Nestled in the center of her palm lay a silver chain coiled around a rainbow-shaped pendant—an exact duplicate of the pendant from her dream. Unlike in her dream, however, the metal chilled Laura's palm, sending an inexplicable sense of urgency surging through her.

I must have this necklace.

When she reached for her purse to pay the woman, a graceful hand closed over hers. The woman shook her head; then slipped the chain around Laura's neck. Laura blinked and looked down at the pendant lying against her blouse. When she looked back, the woman was gone. Laura looked around her to see where she'd disappeared to, but she saw no one that even resembled the Navajo woman. If it hadn't been for the weight of the necklace around her neck, Laura would have sworn she'd been dreaming again.

By the time Laura returned home, the mystery that surrounded the connection to her dream and the sudden appearance, then sudden disappearance, of the Navajo woman still gnawed at her mind. As crazy as it seemed, the more she thought about the extraordinary circumstances, the more she believed the woman had come to the fair, not to hawk her wares to the fairgoers, but specifically to give Laura the necklace. But why? Why would a Navajo seek her out and then give her such a valuable gift with no explanation? And why the same pendant from her dream? And how had she disappeared within the space of a few seconds?

This series of sudden and inexplicable happenings and their connections to the Navajo made Laura very uneasy. Aside from Anne Yatzee, who had befriended her from the day she's arrived in Tucson and had become Laura's closest confidant, she'd studiously avoided any close contact with Arizona's Native Americans ever since she'd walked out of her Navajo husband's house eight years earlier. Now, they appeared to be pushing back into her life. Why? Whatever

the reason, she couldn't allow it. She had too much to lose.

Standing just inside her living room, she glanced down to where the pendant's bright silver setting glowed starkly against her black silk blouse. Her hand went to where it nestled between her breasts. At the precise moment before her fingers closed around the metal, her gaze locked onto Peter's school picture sitting on the mantel. The urgency she'd felt at the fair returned. This time sheer terror accompanied it.

"Peter!"

From deep in her gut came the certainty that something was wrong with Peter.

Quickly dumping the contents of her purse on the coffee table, she rummaged through it for the slip of paper Anne had given her containing her cell phone number. When it wasn't immediately forthcoming, she began to tear frantically at the purse's contents. Still nothing.

"Where is it?" she cried, her gaze darting around the living room.

She cursed herself. Why hadn't she tacked it to the kitchen bulletin board? Over and over she searched through the pile of items she'd emptied from her purse. It wasn't there. Again, her gaze shot around the small, Southwest-style room.

"Think! Where did you put it, Laura?"

Clawing through the purse's contents once more, she cursed herself anew, this time for letting Peter go with Anne. Why? He was only eight years old, for God's sake. Close to tears, she threw herself on the sofa and covered her face with her hands, trying to think.

The pendant hit her wrist.

Unconsciously, she clutched at it like a lifeline. Slowly, very slowly, her nerves began to loosen from the tangled ball they'd formed, and she began to calm down. Her taut body began to relax. The urgency ebbed. Rational thought replaced the panic.

She had to get a hold on herself. Between that weird nightmare last night and the old Navajo woman today, she had built a case out of thin air brought on solely by exhaustion. Despite her weird dream and even weirder experience with the Navajo woman at the fair, Laura was convinced that nothing except her sleep-deprived mind indicated Peter was in any trouble. Anne would have called if anything had happened. Her gaze flew to her answering machine. The dark message light indicated no one had tried to reach her during her absence.

She had to calm down. Her decision to allow Peter to go with Anne had been sound. Peter had begun asking questions about his Navajo heritage. No matter how she felt about her husband, Peter had the right to know who he was and understand what that meant. She owed that much to him and Peter's Navajo father.

One badly digested Super Buddy Burger had turned her into a paranoid mother experiencing the throes of a first-time separation anxiety from her child. The rest, the dream and the woman in white and the pendant, were all just weird coincidences that, after a good night's sleep, she'd find easy enough to explain. She scoffed at her own foolishness.

Feeling more at ease, she kicked off her shoes and then padded to the kitchen. A good, strong cup of coffee would help clear the cobwebs of exhaustion from her brain and get her thinking straight. The cold, ceramic tiles felt good on her aching feet. As she prepared the small coffeemaker, she inhaled the aroma of the ground coffee.

A smile crossed her lips. Peter always said he was going to find her perfume that smelled like coffee beans because she liked it so much, and then he'd produce that grin that tore at her heart. Looking into Peter's smiling eyes reminded Laura of looking into his father's, seeing herself reflected in their luminous depths. Many times she'd gazed at her beautiful son and had to hide the tears that sprang to the surface so easily. And contrary to what everyone said, time did

not make it easier. Only to herself could she admit that she'd never completely gotten over Peter's father.

A shrill ringing roused Laura from her thoughts. She quickly grabbed the beige receiver from the wall phone next to the refrigerator.

"Hello. Yes, this is Laura Kincaid."

Apprehension filled the room while Laura listened to the deep voice of a Navajo Tribal Police officer tearing apart her world, her life, her heart. Peter had wandered away from the powwow and was lost somewhere in the Arizona wilderness.

"What do you mean you're calling off the search?" Laura's voice rose in panic. She strained toward the uniformed Navajo Tribal Police Lieutenant sitting behind the desk in the cramped office. "It's only been three days. That's not nearly long enough to search. You've barely gotten started." She swallowed hard, frantically trying to hold back the terror that had been threatening to choke her since she'd arrived in town three days ago. She might never see Peter again. Reddened and stinging from too little sleep and too many tears, her eyes burned in their sockets, like hot coals.

"In Canyon Country, three days *can* be too long, Mrs. Kincaid." The coarsely featured, young officer shifted uncomfortably in the cracked vinyl desk chair. He placed his elbows on the desktop, steeping his hands in front of him. After peering at her over his fingers for several seconds, he closed his eyes, as if the sight of her pain-ravaged face were more than he could stand. Finally, he opened them and looked at a spot somewhere over her right shoulder. "We've exhausted every avenue. Other than your friend's account, we haven't a clue as to where to look for the boy."

She flinched. "Peter. His name is Peter." Somehow, making the Navajo officer use Peter's name made the situation less impersonal, less hopeless. "He's my son, Lieutenant Klah, not a nameless statistic."

The lieutenant dipped his head, then raised his gaze to hers. Genuine compassion shown from his deep brown eyes. "I'm sorry. Peter."

His softly spoken apology made her regret her sharpness. Laura shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking my impatience out on you. I know you're doing everything possible to find him. It's just . . . so frustrating."

He smiled. "No problem. I don't bruise easy. Fear and grief make people do and say things that, under normal circumstances, they would never consider."

Grief? Did that mean . . . ? She swallowed again, afraid to ask the next question, afraid of what his answer would be. But she had to know. For her own sanity. "Are you saying Peter is . . ." Try as she might, the word wouldn't come. She licked her dry lips and shifted her gaze from her cold hands to the officer's face, hoping he wouldn't make her say the word she dreaded hearing.

"No, ma'am. I'm saying a lot can happen out there. I'm saying there are no clues, no footprints, nothing to tell us where to start looking for Peter. It's as if he vanished like a puff of smoke."

Laura bit down on her bottom lip to keep from screaming. Not Peter. He was all she had, all she'd had for a very long time. When Ada Dooley had found her eight-and-a-half years ago, pregnant and hungry, wandering the streets of Los Angeles, she'd taken her in. For the last eight years, she'd had Ada and Peter, but then ten months ago her friend and mentor had died suddenly, leaving her only Peter. She couldn't lose him, too.

The world closed in on her, suffocating her. She had to clear her mind. She had to think about how she could convince the lieutenant to continue the search.

While searching her mind for answers, Laura scanned the dusty room and its meager furnishing. A coat tree, holding a khaki jacket that bore the green and yellow Navajo Tribal Police emblem, stood near a windowless door. A fan, churning noiselessly in front of an open window, sucked in dust and warm air from the street and did nothing to dispel the stuffiness from the room. On the scarred, wooden desk, backed up by an old, brown vinyl chair that squeaked every time the lieutenant moved, a coffee mug with a laminated picture of three children, their copper-skinned faces grinning at her from beneath black type reading *#1 Dad*, taunted her.

Would she ever see Peter's toothy grin again? Would she ever groan at his humorous antics again, or smile tearfully when he said or did something that reminded her of his father? Pain seared a path through her heart, nearly making her double over with agony.

She tore her gaze away from the lieutenant's little family and concentrated on the map of what the Navajo referred to as the Big Rez hanging behind the desk—the twenty-six thousand square miles of land making up the Northern Arizona Navajo Reservation. Round-headed pins in various colors protruded randomly from the map, marking, she supposed, the crime scenes the NTP was investigating.

On the north rim of the canyons, a single red pin glared at her. The place where Peter had last been seen. Her hand went automatically to the rainbow pendant still hanging around her neck. Calmness stole over her like a wash of warm water.

“Mrs. Kincaid?”

Laura swung her attention back to the lieutenant. “You can't give up,” she said, her voice controlled and reasonable. “He's out there somewhere, alive.” He raised a dark eyebrow at her words. How did she explain to a man about that built-in instinct mothers have concerning their children? A great sense of frustration settled over her.

“Mrs. Kincaid, we—”

“Lieutenant, I'd feel it if Peter were . . . dead. He's alive. I know it.” She placed her hand over her heart, telling him without words where this intuition came from. “Somewhere, out there, he's alive.”

Lieutenant Klah rounded his desk. He perched one hip on the rough, wooden surface, then leaned his forearms on his knees, putting his face on the same level as hers. He gently took her hand from the pendant and enfolded it in his. His eyes held understanding, sympathy, compassion, but no sign of relenting.

“I've been at this job for over six years. Sometimes, I think six years too long. I've put those red pins in that map, and I've removed them. Sometimes, we never find the missing person—alive or dead. There's a great many things out there in those canyons that we can't explain. There are even more that we can explain, and they all spell danger.”

“But—”

“Ma'am, please try to understand. This country is wild and inhospitable to adults. For kids . . . well, for kids it's worse.” Pain glittered in his velvet eyes. A deep frown creased his wide forehead.

Nothing he could say could convince her. Stark fear returned. “He's alive. I know he is.” Laura pulled her hand from his before again clutching the pendant. Calm ebbed through her. “If you can't find him, I'll look for him myself.”

“That's foolishness.” The officer sat up straight. “You know nothing of this country. What can you do that we haven't already done?” His strained patience began to make itself

evident in the tone of his voice.

“I don’t know yet, but one thing I won’t do, Lieutenant, is give up.” She stood and gathered her purse from the desk. Releasing her death grip on the pendant, she shook his hand. “Thank you for all you’ve done. I know you did your best. It just wasn’t enough.”

Turning, she made her way to the door.

“Mrs. Kincaid?”

Laura stopped. She glanced over her shoulder at him. He scribbled something on a small notepad, ripped the sheet off, folded it, then held it out to her.

“If you do decide to go into the Canyon Country, and I sincerely hope you’ll change your mind, call this guy. A good part of the canyon is sacred to the Navajo and restricted to *bilagáanaas*, Anglos. You’ll need a permit and a Navajo guide to get in there. This man was raised there. He knows the canyons as well as he knows his reflection.” Lieutenant Klah paused, and then flashed an encouraging smile. “If Peter can be found, he’ll find him.”

She accepted the note. She liked this man. He knew what she was up against. And, even though he couldn’t do any more to help her, she had a feeling, if his child were lost out there, he’d do exactly what she planned to do. But with his hands tied by rules, he could offer only this name and his heartfelt concern, and right now, she needed them both.

“Thanks.”

“Good luck.”

She nodded and left the office.

Clutching the paper, she exited the Window Rock substation. As she stepped into the dusty street, the sun beat down on her, warding off the chill that threatened to overcome her again. Dust devils chased each other across the asphalt parking lot. A hot breeze ruffled her shoulder-length hair, its careless fingers flinging the loosened black strands across her eyes. Impatiently, she swept them behind her ear.

Unidentifiable cooking odors mixed with the dry air. When had she last eaten? No answer came readily to mind, and she didn’t search farther. Locating the Navajo guide who could help her find Peter filled her mind to the exclusion of all else.

Slipping behind the wheel of her rented, blue Ford Taurus, she carefully unfolded the paper the lieutenant had given her and read the name he’d scrawled across it. Her blood ran cold. The name rose off the paper like the heat waves wafting up from the baking earth, branding the identity of her only hope across her heart.

The one person she loved most in the world had wandered into the Arizona wilderness, and the man who could locate him was the man she’d been avoiding for eight years, the man who could take her son from her, the man from her dream—Kaine Cloudwalker, Peter’s father.

Chapter 2

Kaine Cloudwalker dragged several French fries through a smeared puddle of ketchup, popped them in his mouth, and chewed thoughtfully. He hadn't done it because he was particularly hungry. The hamburger, salad, and apple pie he'd just finished had served to appease the hunger that had been gnawing at his gut since noontime. The French fries simply filled his mouth and gave him thinking time to answer the two men sitting across the booth from him.

While he chewed, he silently studied each man.

Agent Henry Oates was relatively new to the area, assigned six months ago to the Sedona FBI offices. Having spent most of his time in a comfortable office in Washington, the desert sun had turned his virgin facial skin bright red with sunburn. Kaine wondered absently what infraction the agent had committed to be sentenced to duty out here in the wilderness. Whatever it had been, he also decided the agent wouldn't last long in Arizona. He didn't understand the People or the land and from the looks of his sunburn, the climate. And out here that could kill you in many ways.

Oates frowned at Kaine's silence and draped one arm over the back of the red vinyl booth. His wrinkled blue suit fit his overweight body badly and where his jacket gaped open, dark perspiration stains radiated from his armpits. In the twenty minutes he'd been here, he'd guzzled two glasses of iced tea, but sweat still beaded his wide forehead, despite the iced drinks and the AC that cooled the diner's interior.

As he waited for Kaine to speak, Oates' beady blue eyes studied him. The fingers of his right hand drummed impatiently on the tabletop. Everything about the agent fairly screamed *tension*.

Jim Longtree, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, had grown up here. He knew this land, the climate and its people well, and he revealed his impatience as any Navajo would, only through his eyes. His gaze centered on Kaine, hard and unswerving. Longtree's well-built, athletic body, tanned by the desert sun, appeared relaxed. Kaine knew that it was just a front. Like other Navajos, Jim held his emotions carefully within him, so as not to disturb the *hozho* of those around him. Harmony was a very important part of the Navajo life. Everything had a black and white, a good and bad, a positive and a negative, and they worked hard at making sure that balance was never disturbed.

"Let me get this straight. You think skinwalkers are pillaging the burial sites out there?" Kaine was sure his skepticism showed on his face, and he did nothing to cover it up.

"That's what we're told," Oates said, but his tone told Kaine he didn't think the mythical man/animal legend any more credible than any other Anglo. "The guy who saw it described it as an animal moving on all fours with glowing, red eyes. Jim tells me that's a skinwalker."

Kaine chuckled. He'd heard tales of skinwalkers since he was a child, but had never encountered one himself. A few years back Kaine might have believed it to be skinwalkers, too, but not anymore. Now, Kaine believed that it was no more than the vivid imagination of a frightened man who saw what he wanted to see, an explanation for the inexplicable. "And I take

it that this skinwalker was carrying pottery in his teeth; or maybe he had a backpack?"

Jim glared at him. "This is not a joke. How do you explain the prints that were found that turned from a man's to an animal's?"

Kaine scoffed and shook his head. "You've worked on enough of these grave robber cases to know that the robbers will invent any means they can to use the Native Americans' beliefs to spook them and to throw the authorities off their trail. My bet is that, when you find these guys, they will be no different than you and me. They'll walk upright and their eyes will be blue, green, or whatever."

Jim looked out the window at a car pulling into the diner lot.

"Well, Cloudwalker?" Oates pulled an off-white handkerchief from his pocket and swiped at the latest crop of moisture gathering on his forehead. "Are you going to help us?"

Kaine took a deep breath, pushed his dinner plate to the side and then leaned on the table. "No, I'm not." He had no desire to go roaming around the canyons with these two looking for bad guys wearing animal skins to scare the hell out of the locals.

Oates cursed softly under his breath while cramming the handkerchief back into the pocket of his jacket.

For the first time, Jim displayed emotion. His fingers tightened into a balled fist on the table. "I remember a time when you would have jumped at the chance to get to the bottom of this, to protect what belongs to your ancestors."

"Yeah. Well, no more. I gave that up a long time ago." He offered no more explanation, explanations that could drift into memories of his mother and of Laura that were too painful to think about. "Besides, as of three hours ago, I'm on vacation." He smiled. "First one I've taken in years, and I have plans for how I'm spending it, and it's not with the two of you."

Once more, the memories tugged at him. Once more he fought them off.

"Have you forgotten you're Navajo? Those relics are as much a part of you as your heritage is." Jim's jaw worked spasmodically.

Kaine sat back. No, he hadn't forgotten. How could he when his so-called heritage had stolen his mother and his wife from him? He may be full-blooded Navajo, but that's as far as it went. The only reason he'd remained here was because he loved the canyons, the risks they represented and the danger. He loved the freedom his job afforded him.

"You owe your people."

Unaccustomed anger exploded inside Kaine. "I don't owe them shit!" he said, slapping the palm of his hand on the table and making Oates jump nervously. "I paid my debt a long time ago. I spent years of my life in Washington preaching to a bunch of deaf, white-collared Congressmen about Indian rights. What good did it do me? What good did it do the People? Washington ignores them and they go right on shunning the Anglos medical help, singing their Ways, making their sandpaintings, immersing themselves in a past made up of legends and myths, and then they die anyway."

He stopped talking abruptly, realizing he'd strayed from the subject of the stolen Indian relics that concerned Oates and Longtree and had begun venting about things he'd never spoken of to anyone. He leaned back and crossed his arms, as if holding the rest of his thoughts at bay.

"Find someone else to take you into the canyon to find your ground-pickers."

"They aren't ground-pickers." Oates wiped his pudgy hands on the handkerchief. His dark eyebrows drew together to form a straight line across his eyes. "Whatever these guys are, they dig. They're grave robbers, and whether or not I believe the Navajo mumbo-jumbo about skinwalkers, that's against the law. They're finding caches of Mimbres pottery that are making

them damned rich. Someone is feeding them information, and we can't figure out who it is. We think, if we go into the canyons, we can follow them and see where they go, then track them back to the brains behind this." He wagged a finger at Kaine. "That's where you come in."

"No, that's where I go out. Besides, Jim knows the canyons as well as I do. He can guide you through them."

Jim shook his head. "I've been away from the land for too long, forgotten too much. There's no one around here who knows the canyons like you do, Kaine. Reconsider."

Kaine stood, took a few bills from his jeans pocket and dropped them on the table. He paused and looked from one man to the other. "Good luck."

He stopped long enough to pay his tab at the cash register and then strode from the diner to his Land Rover. Halfway down the street, he noted a blue sedan in the parking lot beside the NTP substation. Inside the car, a woman stared down at a piece of paper she held against the steering wheel. It was her long, dark hair that caught Kaine's attention. He did a double take and then looked away, cursing himself for every kind of fool.

For one split second, he'd thought the woman was Laura. Then his sane mind cut in, and he knew it was nothing more than the power of suggestion brought on by the long-suppressed thoughts of her that had surfaced in the diner.

Use you head, Kaine. What would Laura be doing here?

Eight years ago, she'd gotten away from him and this country as quickly as she could. He'd be willing to bet that it would take a team of wild horses to drag her back.

With a huff of impatience with himself, he steered the Rover toward Jesse Begay's hardware store. With any luck, Jesse had been able to get the building supplies Kaine had ordered and tomorrow, he could start the long-awaited renovations on the house where he and Laura had lived, sell it and finally close that chapter of his life. But even as he tried to picture the new porch he had planned, visions of a dark-haired woman intruded.

Moments later, memories of the night he'd come home to find Laura's terse little note began to bombard him. He'd been away for three weeks and had missed her with an intensity that had astonished him. All the way back on the plane from Washington he'd been entertaining the idea of slipping into their warm bed, pulling her into his arms and making passionate love to her for hours.

Many other times, since they'd gotten married, he'd had to go to Washington on behalf of his people, but for some reason, this time, leaving Laura had been like tearing off his arm. He'd felt less than whole for the entire three weeks and had made up his mind that this trip would be his last. He'd leave the lobbying for Indian Affairs to the younger men, and he'd stay home, and spend more time with his wife, maybe even start a family.

Their house had been quiet, which he'd expected at two in the morning. What he hadn't expected was to walk into the bedroom and find the bed empty and undisturbed and an envelope propped against his pillow. Even now, the pain of her abandonment had hit him like a gunshot to his gut.

Less than a year later, his mother succumbed to cancer while a so-called *hataalii* sang over her and drew pictures on the ground with colored sand. Kaine had begged her to go to the Anglo hospital in Phoenix, but true to the Ways of the People, she'd refused. Her death had marked the beginning of Kaine's disillusionment with his heritage.

That was saying a lot considering that at one time he'd trained to be a singer at his grandfather's knee. His grandfather, Brother To The Owl, had been one of the most powerful singers his people had ever known and word had it that Kaine possessed even greater powers

than his grandfather. But even by invoking the help of the Holy People, there had been no way to save Kaine's mother.

Over time, Kaine had come to terms with his mother's death and his loss of faith in the teachings of his people, but the bitterness he felt for Laura remained as strong today as it had been the night he'd read her note.

Laura guided her car carefully through the growing desert twilight. Beside her on the seat were the directions the woman at the diner had given her to Kaine's house. As she'd suspected it would be, it was isolated, far from any friends and neighbors he might have enjoyed in town had he one social bone in his body.

Her nerves were strung as tight as the strings on a guitar. The steering wheel was slick with sweat from her palms, and the uneven ground upon which she drove made it hard for her to maintain control. Motivated by her jangled nerves, haunting questions skittered through her mind.

What if Kaine found out Peter was his son? What if he wanted Peter to come live with him?

From what she could recall, these men were very possessive of their children, especially the boys. She remembered an incident when a woman had run off with her child and her husband had gone after her, left her behind, and brought the boy home with him. They'd heard months later that she'd committed suicide over the loss of her son.

When she'd mentioned it to Kaine, he'd agreed with the father's actions.

"A boy belongs with his father," Kaine had said firmly, "with his people, not in a strange society where he'll lose his heritage and his identity. If it had been me, I would have done exactly the same thing."

Now, here she was, driving through the Arizona wilderness to ask for Kaine's help in finding his son. Could she do this and not tell him? Could she risk losing Peter?

She gripped the steering wheel tighter. A humorless laugh burst unbidden from her pursed lips.

Fate had a warped sense of humor, she decided, navigating around a large saguaro cactus that had sprung up in front of her car out of nowhere. Eight years ago she'd have staked her life on it that she and Kaine would never cross paths again and here she was meeting him to ask him to do one of the most important favors she would ever ask of anyone. What chance did she have that he'd agree?

Despite her trepidations at coming face to face with her estranged husband, the closer she got to Kaine's home, the more a strange anticipation grew within her and the more Laura's heartbeat increased in equal proportions to the decrease in miles she covered.

What would she say to him after all this time? Would he slam the door in her face?

Before she was ready for the confrontation, a house appeared around a curve in the road. Her headlights washed over the plain adobe structure. A Land Rover was parked haphazardly parallel to the porch that spanned the front of the house.

For a while, she sat in her car and stared at it. Then making up her mind that her nervousness at seeing Kaine was far outweighed by Peter's disappearance, she slipped from the car, closed the door softly, and then climbed the steps to the front door. Taking a deep breath, she knocked.