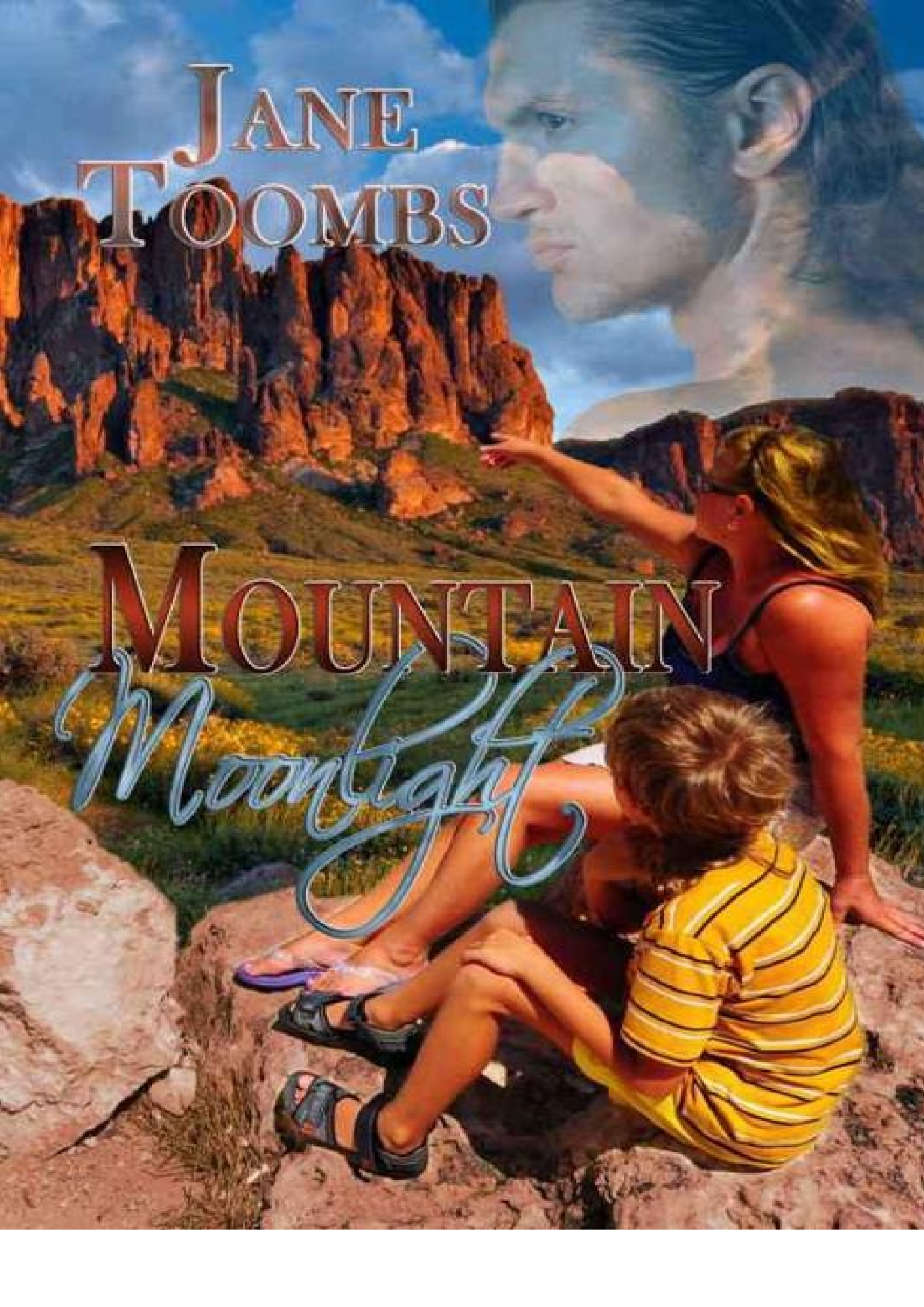


JANE TOOMBS



MOUNTAIN

Moonlight



MOUNTAIN MOONLIGHT

By

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Chapter 1

"Apache Junction," Davis said as Vala stopped the rental car in front of a store advertising camping equipment. "That's a really cool name for a town, Mom."

Seeing his enthusiasm made her almost forget the hassle to get here--how she'd argued and pleaded for ten days off so they could fly to Arizona after the Christmas holidays, which she already knew she couldn't take off. Davis would have to miss a week or so of school, but that couldn't be helped. Finally her employer had rather begrudgingly given her the seven vacation days she had coming plus another three days leave of absence.

She was grateful she hadn't been fired. Heaven knows she needed the job. Since Neal's new wife had blessed him with a son last May, he tended to be careless about his child-support payments for Davis. He was equally careless about keeping in touch with his first-born son. Or maybe heartless was the right word.

Davis tugged at her arm. "Look!" He pointed. "That's it, that's Superstition Mountain."

She stared at the towering mass of rock--volcanic, she'd read somewhere--off to the northeast. It wasn't her first view of the mountain because she'd lived in Phoenix when she was young. Her thought now was the same as she'd had back then--Superstition Mountain didn't look real, thrusting up forbiddingly like it did in the middle of this flat land.

"I'm glad we came," Davis said, his gaze fixed on the mountain. "Really, really glad."

So was she. Davis probably believed he'd convinced her to make the trip because of his earnest arguments about how finding the treasure was going to make up for having to spend a lot of money to get to Arizona. She didn't intend to admit to her son that she was willing to do anything to keep the bright glow of enthusiasm in his eyes. Before John Mokesh had given him the old deer skin map, Davis hadn't been interested in anything. Even his Christmas computer game, one he wanted, failed to fill the bill.

Poor Mr. Mokesh had died in his sleep the night after he'd presented Davis with the map. To her surprise, her son had accepted the old man's death without excessive grief, saying, "Mokesh told me it was his time to die. That's why he gave me his treasure map."

"Mom, you're lollygagging," Davis said. The word came from her father and probably from her father, but it had caught Davis's attention and he liked to use it.

"I was just thinking," she said.

He grabbed her hand, tugging her toward the store entrance. Once inside, Vala told the clerk, a tanned, healthy-looking woman with a long braid down her back, that she and her son planned to make a trip into the Superstitions. "But I don't know much about camping," she admitted, "and so I haven't the faintest idea what we'll need."

The clerk's eyebrows raised. "You're planning to trek into the Superstitions without knowing anything about camping? I hate to rain on your parade but that is not a good idea. Not without a guide. That mountain isn't greenhorn-friendly. Fact is, Superstition Mountain can't be called friendly to anyone."

"A guide?" Vala repeated. "How do I go about finding one?" She hadn't planned on any extra expenses but maybe guides took credit cards.

"We got a list posted." The woman jerked a thumb toward a bulletin board near the front of the store. "Names and phone numbers. We don't guarantee any of the guides but, as far as we've heard, they're all able to bring you out of the Superstitions in almost as good a shape as you were when you

went in. Any one of them can tell you what you need to buy and we'll be more than glad to sell you whatever they recommend."

Thanking her, Vala went to take a look at the list while Davis roamed through the store examining the camping gear. The third name on the guide list was crossed off. Perversely, she wondered why, leaning closer to see if she could make out the letters beneath the heavy dark line. Was it Bruce something? Or Brian? No, that was an "a" and then an "m" after the Br. She gasped, staring at the paper in disbelief. Bram! Was it possible? The last name certainly looked like Hunter.

Turning toward the clerk, she called, "What about this Bram Hunter? Why is he crossed off?"

The woman shrugged. "That's Bram for you. He only works when he feels like it."

Glancing at the list again, Vala took a pen from her bag and squinted at the paper as she wrote down the barely legible phone number, all the time telling herself it was a waste of time. Bram had taken his name off the list, so why call him? She already knew he wasn't available as a guide and she made the call for old time's sake, he probably wouldn't remember her anyway. Why should he? She'd left Phoenix with her family when she was sixteen and, at that age, she'd been a bookish, mousey, overly shy girl.

He might not remember her but she'd never quite forgotten him. At eighteen Bram Hunter was the most devastatingly handsome boy in the school with just enough of a shadowed reputation to intrigue every girl she knew. Including her. Her mother, unlike the mothers of her friends, had never bothered to warn her to steer clear of Bram Hunter, believing Vala was too shy to speak to any boy. Her mother had been right--in a way. But there were some things her mother never found out.

Is it possible Bram recalls that night with the same awful clarity that I do? Vala wondered.

Bram Hunter lounged on his terrace, gazing at Camelback Mountain, absently stroking Sheba the Siamese draped across his lap. The day was warm and sunny, no more than Phoenix deserved after a week of rain. He hoped the good weather held until Friday when he'd be leaving for the Caribbean.

A squeak from the depths of the house roused the Siamese and she leaped off his lap to hurry inside to her five tiny kittens.

Motherhood had certainly changed Sheba's personality-- tied to her kittens, she'd actually become a worrier. He hoped she'd regain her zany, carefree attitude once her brood was old enough to leave for homes of their own. He'd made mistakes in his life but luckily none of them had been the mistake of tying himself down to a wife and family.

Marriage had never been on his agenda. He yawned and settled back on the lounge. In less than a week he'd be scuba-diving off St. Amaris, one of the islands the tourists hadn't yet found. He hated crowds. He wouldn't mind a stray blonde or two to spice up the night life, though, the kind of woman who wasn't looking for any real involvement, just a few laughs. He smiled and closed his eyes.

The phone rang, jolting him. Muttering a curse, he rose and padded into the house, aware he'd left the answering machine turned off.

"Hunter," he growled into the phone.

"Uh, hello," a woman said. "This is Bram Hunter, isn't it?" He didn't recognize her voice.

He grunted an assent. When she didn't immediately continue, he said impatiently, "What was you wanted?"

"I was wondering if you--that is, do you remember me?" Bram rolled his eyes. Guessing games. He hated cutesy. "How the hell do I know?"

There was a pause and then she said, "I'm Vala Channing."

Vala. For a long moment he forgot to breathe. She was the last person in the world he'd even expected to hear from. "Yes," he said finally. "I remember you."

"I wasn't sure you would. I'm in Apache Junction and I happened to see your name on a guide"

list."

He frowned. "I thought I took my name off that list." "Well, it was crossed off."

After another pause, he said, "Are you living in Arizona now?"

"No. Davis and I--he's my son--are just visiting here."

So she was married. "Your husband's not with you?"

"I'm divorced."

I'm, not we're. Most people said we're divorced. Was that significant? Bram shook his head. Why should he care how she worded it?

"I was wondering," she added, then paused again. Evidently Vala hadn't conquered her shyness.

"What were you wondering?" he asked.

"Well, I know you're a guide. Would you be willing to tell me something about Superstition Mountain? Davis and I are planning to hike in there and I'm not much of a camper."

Bram scowled and his annoyance showed in his voice.

"The Superstitions are no place for amateur campers."

"I've already been told that. I was hoping you'd give me a few pointers."

Her persistence reminded him of another characteristic of Vala's--she was shy but stubborn. What the hell, he had time to spend an hour or so talking to her--it would take at least that long, he supposed, to convince her to try camping somewhere else. Besides, he was sort of curious to see what she looked like after fifteen years.

That didn't mean he was going to ask her into his home. Very few people even knew where he lived, much less got invited to visit. "You're in Apache Junction?" he asked.

"Yes."

"There's a cafe in town called Auntie Mame's. I'll meet you there in about forty-five minutes, okay?"

After hanging up, he didn't move for a minute or two. Vala Channing. At sixteen she'd been slender and fair-haired. Though not exactly pretty, there'd been something about her that caught his attention--maybe the somewhat exotic upward tilt to her blue eyes, eyes that reminded him of a spring sky, clear and unclouded. Or maybe the hesitant smile that lit her face on all-too-rare occasions.

It wasn't that he'd thought of her often over the years, because he hadn't. But, somehow, that one night they'd been together stuck in his memory with the tenacity of a cactus spine. And equally barbed.

In the booth at Auntie Mame's, Davis slurped the last of his chocolate shake through the straw and then eased back in his seat. "I still don't see why we can't just buy a tent and stuff and start off," he said. "We've got a map, haven't we?"

"Superstition Mountain isn't like the Catskills back home," Vala said. "I want Mr. Hunter's advice before we go any farther." What she'd actually hoped was that, once Bram recognized her name, he might offer to be their guide even though he'd taken his name off the list.

His gruffness on the phone had convinced her that would never come to pass. In fact, after his go-away-and-don't-bother-me manner, she was surprised he'd even agreed to meet her here--meeting she was looking forward to with both anticipation and trepidation. She touched her hair with nervous fingers and ran her tongue over her lips. Did she have time to go to the ladies room to check her lipstick again? Probably not, but there ought to be a mirror somewhere in her shoulder bag....

"Is that him?" Davis asked.

Vala stopped burrowing in her bag and glanced at the tall, dark-haired man striding toward the booth, suddenly finding she hardly had enough breath to say, "Yes," to Davis.

He stopped at the booth, his gaze holding hers for a long moment. "Vala," he said, nodding. The

he turned to look at her son. "I'm Bram Hunter," he said, "Do you mind if I sit next to you, Davis?"

~~"I guess not," Davis mumbled, sliding over to make room. Bram eased onto the seat, said~~
"Coffee," to the approaching waitress and looked at Vala again. "Why the Superstitions?" he asked.

"It's a long story. Back in Westchester, where we live, Davis inherited a map from an old
Apache."

"Ndee," Davis said almost inaudibly without looking at either of them.

Bram glanced at him. "Tell me about the man who gave you the map," he said to the boy.

"His name was Mokesh and he's dead." Davis ran the words together as though getting them out
fast so he could withdraw into silence once again.

"He was Ndee?" Bram persisted.

Vala noted a glimmer of interest lighten her son's sullen face. "Mokesh said Apache was an
enemy word."

"Do you know what Ndee means?" Bram asked.

Davis nodded. "The Dream People. I know lots about them. Like how their Thunder God made
Superstition Mountain his home. And about Swift Wind. And how the buffalo came to the Ndee."

Vala was amazed. Davis rarely spoke more than a word or two to strangers and then only if she
insisted.

"Mokesh must have been a good friend of yours," Bram said.

"He was my best friend. And I was his. That's why he gave me the map when he knew it was his
time to die."

"If you want to show it to me, I'd like to see the map."

"Sure. I got it right here in my pack." Davis unzipped the pack and removed the rolled deer skin
wrapped in plastic. The waitress set Bram's coffee in front of him and he pushed it across the table
toward Vala, shoving the other dishes aside, too, to make room to spread out the deer skin map. Her
attention was fixed on Davis, not once did he look at Vala.

Both he and Davis bent over the map, Davis pointing to the various strange and primitive
markings and telling Bram what Mokesh had said about them. "He told me when I came to the X, I
find my heart's desire. So then I knew it was a treasure map."

"Heart's desire," Bram repeated. "Mokesh didn't say treasure?"

Davis shook his head. "But what else could he mean?"

They've both forgotten me, Vala thought. I might as well not be here in the booth. Or even the
cafe. Despite being pleased that Davis had taken to Bram, it miffed her a little to be so totally ignored.

"Mom said I ought to make a paper copy of the map on account of the deer skin's so old and
cracked and all," Davis said, "so I did." He pulled the copy from his pack and handed it to Bram.

After comparing the copy to the original, Bram nodded. "Good job."

"I tried to be careful." Davis's pleasure at the praise showed in his voice.

It occurred to Vala that she had never once, in the years before or after their divorce, heard Neal
praise his son. Quite the opposite. Neal always seemed to be pointing up Davis's flaws. Two left feet.
All thumbs. A snail could run faster. Couldn't throw a ball straight if your life depended on it. The
name of the game is to hit the ball. Neal blamed her. She couldn't count the times he'd said so, not
caring whether Davis heard or not. Look at him-- short and skinny, takes after your side of the family,
even to the glasses, just like your old man.

It was true her father wore glasses. Unfortunately for Davis, her bookish father was always
disappointed in the boy because he wasn't much of a reader.

"So, are you going to help us find the treasure, Mr. Hunter?" Davis asked, startling Vala. "Are
you going to be our guide?"

She hadn't thought to caution her son not to mention guiding because she hadn't dreamed Davis

would come far enough out of his shell to say any more than he had to-- certainly not to a stranger. She tensed, waiting for Bram's terse refusal--after all, he had crossed his name off the list.

Bram didn't reply immediately. Instead, he helped Davis roll up the deer skin. "I don't know if I can," he said at last, speaking to the boy rather than to Vala. "I've made plans that I'm not sure I can change."

He pulled a couple of bills from his pocket and jerked his head toward the electronic game at the back of the cafe. "Why don't you try your luck at zapping space monsters--my treat--while I discuss things with your mother?"

Davis hesitated but when Vala didn't say anything, he took the money Bram offered, saying "Okay. Thanks."

Both she and Bram watched him until he got the bills changed, reached the machine and fed in the money. When the beeps and whizzes and other exotic noises began, Bram abruptly faced her.

"What in hell are you thinking of, letting your son believe in that map?" he demanded. "Or do you believe it in, too?" His tone implied that only a child or a fool would. Startled at his attack, Vala sat back and crossed her arms over her breasts. "I'm not saying the map will lead to treasure. But you must admit it is old. Like John Mokesh-- he was in his nineties. And he was also an Apache. If anyone knew Superstition Mountain in the past, the Apache did."

Bram scowled. "I don't doubt this Mokesh was old but that doesn't mean the map is. Faking a map with deer skin or paper isn't difficult. Do you have any idea how many different bogus maps of the Old Dutchman Mine are in circulation? I've personally seen at least twenty variations and God only knows how many copies of each variation have been circulated since Jacob Walz died in 1891. Walz was the old Dutchman, in case you don't remember."

"I never heard of Jacob Walz. Or the Old Dutchman Mine," she said indignantly. "What does that have to do with the map Mr. Mokesh gave my son?"

"Maps purporting to lead the way to treasure somewhere in the Superstitions are a dime a dozen. And not one of them worth a damn. Apparently people never ask themselves why, if the map leads to a gold mine, the person who sold it to them didn't use the map to find the gold himself. You're setting Davis up for a mighty big disappointment. Do you think that's fair?"

She glared at him. "You have no right to criticize what I'm doing. Especially when you haven't a clue as to the circumstances."

He glared right back at her. "What are the circumstances that would lead a mother to promise her son something she can't deliver?"

"I'm not promising Davis anything!" she cried, so furious at Bram's presumption that she forgot to be careful about what she said. "All I want is for him to be himself again. Except for John Mokesh the map is the first thing my son has taken any real interest in for well over a year. He believes in the map. Do you expect me to tell him it's a fake and then watch him slump back into apathy? Well, I'm damn well not going to!"

"Keep your voice down," Bram warned, increasing her annoyance even though she knew he was right. She didn't care about the others in the cafe but Davis mustn't hear any of this.

Bram put his arms on the table and leaned toward her. "What are you going to do, then?"

"Follow the map into the Superstitions," she snapped. "That's what Davis wants and so that's what we'll do."

Bram shook his head. "I see you're still as stubborn as ever."

She unfolded her arms and pushed his cup of coffee toward him. "I'm not stubborn, just determined to help my son in any way I can."

He ignored the coffee. "But will this be a help in the long run?"

Vala didn't answer immediately. "I can't deal with long range planning at the moment," she said.

finally. "I can only deal with today. I'm sorry to have bothered you--this is no concern of yours."

—Belatedly realizing he probably was married, with children of his own, she added, "I guess I was so wound up in my own problems that I forgot everything else. I should have realized you'd have plans, this being a family time of year and all."

He half-smiled. "I'm one up on you--I didn't make the mistake of getting married. Apparently that was a mistake?" Vala wasn't accustomed to sharing her private life with anyone but since he already knew she was divorced, why not admit the truth? It wasn't as though she was confessing her innermost secrets to a total stranger.

"A mistake, yes. Maybe not the worst I've ever made but right up there near the top. But something good came of it-- Davis."

"I like him." Surprise tinged Bram's words, whether because of the feeling or because he had admitted to it, she wasn't sure.

She smiled, her anger at him gone. "So do I."

He smiled back and, for a moment, she felt something pass between them and go tingling along her nerves, making her feel more alive than she had in years. How could she have forgotten how dark his eyes were, or how he'd once made her feel when she'd gazed into them? She'd best remember that looking into Bram's eyes could prove to be a dangerous occupation.

"Strange, you showing up in town," he said.

"Not any stranger than me seeing your name on that guide list," she countered.

"Next time I'll have to remember to use a darker pen when I cross it out."

His words made the moment of awareness vanish as if it had never been.

Vala didn't realize the electronic noises had ceased until Davis appeared at the booth and Bram slid over to make room.

"How'd you do?" Bram asked.

Davis shrugged. "So-so." He glanced at Vala, then back at Bram. "Did you decide?" he asked.

"You have to answer a question of mine first," Bram said. "Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"Sure," Davis said. "I learned two years ago at camp and I go to the same place every summer. I get to practice."

Bram looked at Vala. "You?"

Since she'd figured he'd ask her next, she'd already made up her mind what she had to do. She nodded, avoiding Davis's eye.

"In that case," Bram said, "since I couldn't talk your mother out of the camping trip, it looks like it's up to me to keep you two greenhorns out of trouble."

"Yay!" Davis cried. "Can we start off right now?"

"Tomorrow morning early. You two have to get equipped first and I have to arrange for the horses and collect my own gear."

And cancel your plans, Vala thought, wondering what Bram was giving up to be their guide. After his lecture to her about fake maps, she was amazed he'd changed his mind and agreed to take them. Her glow of happiness was, she assured herself, for Davis's sake.

Once he'd finished supervising her purchases at the camping store, Bram left them, saying he'd come by their motel at six the next morning so they could follow him to the place where the horses were.

"Be ready to roll," he warned.

"We will," Davis promised fervently.

He was quiet on the ride back to the motel and so was she, going over and over in her mind the strange moment or two of silent communication between her and Bram. What did it mean? She took a deep breath and shook her head. Never mind what it meant, she had no intention of getting involved.

with any man. And certainly not Bram Hunter.

~~After they reached the motel and had carried all their purchases into their room, Davis said, "I didn't want to say anything before in case Mr. Hunter might change his mind. But, Mom, you lied to him."~~

Vala nodded. "I know. I suppose I ought to be sorry. It was in a good cause, though."

"He'll find out real soon," Davis warned her.

"Maybe not. At least not right away. After all, what's so difficult about riding a horse?"

Davis rolled his eyes. "Whoa. I can't believe you said that. You don't even know how to get on a horse."

"So you'll teach me how before tomorrow. I'm a quick study."

"I can tell you how to mount a horse," he said, "but there's a lot more to it than that. "Tomorrow you're gonna be really, really sorry."

Chapter 2

The wariness in the kid's eyes had decided him, Bram thought as he tucked his denim shirt into his jeans in the early morning darkness. Though Davis, fair-haired and blue-eyed, didn't look anything like the young boy Bram had once been, he'd recognized a kindred spirit, a lonely, confused youngster on his way to becoming embittered.

Bram knew the feeling well and he meant to do his damndest to make an adventure out of the trip into the Superstitions. Since talking with Vala and her son had convinced him that Davis was determined to believe in the fake deer skin map, he'd try to give the boy some excitement to make up for the disappointment that was bound to come when Davis discovered the old Apache's gift didn't point the way to a treasure lode.

Ndee, not Apache, Davis was right. Not that it made a hell of a lot of difference.

In any case, Bram wasn't giving up his long-planned trip to the Caribbean for Vala's sake. Not all. It was for her son. No nine-year-old boy should have to feel rejected. Rejected. Bram gritted his teeth, reminded of what he'd long ago buried with the rest of his unhappy past.

Vala obviously loved her son but what she'd told him, combined with what he'd seen in Davis's eyes, had echoed in Bram's heart. He knew from his own experience that the love of a mother never quite made up for an absent, uncaring father.

If I was worth anything, he'd pay attention to me.

Did those words haunt Davis as they had young Bram?

I can't solve the problem, Bram told himself, but I can do my best to give Davis a slam-bang western adventure to take home with him.

As for Vala--well, what about her? He'd be lying if he didn't admit she still appealed to him. (That what had happened years ago didn't still rankle. Gentlemen never stooped to getting even, he reminded himself--but then no one had ever accused him of being a gentleman. He half-smiled, contemplating the enforced togetherness of a camping trip with pleasurable anticipation.

All right, so he had more than one motive for agreeing to take mother and son into the mountains. So what? Both he and Vala were over thirty--God, where had the years gone--? And free entanglements.

He finished pulling on his boots and strode to the kitchen to get his wake-me-up slug of coffee before driving the pickup to the Apache Junction motel to pick up his two happy campers. He'd already told them they'd have breakfast at the horse ranch.

His evaluation of Vala went up a notch when he found both her and her son ready to go. He had little patience with dawdlers. "Pancakes and sausage at Brenden's Bronco Corral," he told Davis.

Davis glanced at his mother before saying, "There's a whole lot of cholesterol in sausages."

"We'll work it off, I promise you," Bram assured him. "And while we're on the subject of food--" He paused to look at Vala before turning back to Davis--"everybody eats what the cook--that's me-- packs in. The first complainer gets to take over the cooking."

Vala lifted her hands. "Hey, I'm on vacation. You won't hear any complaints from me."

"Me neither," Davis agreed, eyeing the pickup wistfully. "I found out in summer camp that cooking over a camp fire is hard."

"Want to ride with me?" Bram asked him.

"Okay, Mom?"

Vala nodded and Davis wasted no time climbing into the cab of the truck.

"You'll be following me on up the Apache Trail--that's Route 88--for about four miles," Bram told Vala. "You'll see a sign for Brenden's to the right. We'll turn off there."

She nodded and got into her small rental car, packed with camping gear. As she pulled onto the highway after his truck, she tried not to think about what was to come after the pancakes and sausage at Brenden's. As the time crept closer to actually mounting a horse, she became more and more nervous.

Before they went to bed last night, she'd picked Davis's brain for all the tips he could remember about riding and horses and discovered there was more to it than she'd imagined. You even had to get on the animal from a certain side.

"You mean to tell me the horse will know the difference if I try to mount him from his right side instead of his left?" she'd asked. "Who made up these rules anyway?"

"They told us at summer camp that in the olden days the knights used to carry their swords on their left side so it was easier for them to throw their right leg over the saddle first. I guess it just sort of became a tradition to train horses that way."

"I'm never going to remember all this stuff," she muttered.

"Don't sweat it, Mom," he'd advised finally. "Just remember that you and not the horse is in charge and you'll be okay."

I shouldn't have any trouble with that, she thought now. I'm a human and humans are smarter than horses.

All she had to do was get into the saddle without mishap and then her horse would follow the one ahead of him. Or so Davis had assured her. She ought to be able to manage that. In fact, she had to or she'd give herself away and Bram might well back out of the trip altogether. For Davis's sake, that mustn't happen.

All of this was for Davis's sake. It really didn't make any difference that the idea of following the old map into the mountains had much more appeal to her ever since Bram had offered to guide them. Why shouldn't it? He was not only a camping expert but also someone she'd known in the past. Not a friend, exactly, but not a stranger either.

Who knows, maybe they'd be friends by the time the trip was over. She found herself humming "Getting To Know You" and stopped abruptly. Getting to know Bram was not the reason she was on this journey.

Though the sun wasn't up, to her right she could see the dark silhouette of Superstition Mountain against the lightening sky. On the flat land to the left, a lone saguaro cactus thrust up two giant arms as though welcoming her back to the country where she'd been born.

Vala knew that Phoenix was a green oasis in the midst of dry country but she hadn't clearly remembered how desert-like the surroundings actually were. Not sand dune desert but arid country where little grew except cacti and small trees like the palo verde that could make do without much water. She'd grown accustomed to the greenery of the east coast but somehow this starkness seemed right to her, giving her a strange feeling she'd come home.

Could this feeling have anything to do with seeing Bram Hunter again?

Vala shook her head in denial. She'd already made one mistake in choosing a man; she had no intention of making another. Not that Bram had given her any reason to believe he wanted to be chosen! In fact, she'd gotten the impression he didn't think much of her.

He'd made it very clear that in his opinion the map was a fake and he'd blamed her for encouraging her son to believe in a treasure. She was well aware Bram was guiding them only because he'd taken a liking to Davis and had come to the conclusion that nothing he said would prevent him from bringing her son into the Superstitions with or without a guide.

I wouldn't want it any other way, she told herself firmly. Since Bram's not interested in me, I can relax and not worry about being more or less alone with him for the next week.

In any case, the presence of a nine-year-old was a powerful deterrent to romance, even if that particular one, once he fell asleep, couldn't easily be roused by anything less than a twenty-gun salute. Besides, she didn't want a romance. Not now, and not with Bram Hunter.

The sun was up by the time they reached Brenden's Bronco Corral--something out of a western movie. Davis was entranced, looking around excitedly as Mac Brenden greeted Bram with the ease of a long acquaintance, then sized up her and Davis. Davis seemed to pass muster but she thought Mac's shrewd blue eyes saw through her brave assertion that "any horse will do."

Tense with foreboding, she could only make a pretense of enjoying the excellent pancakes and sizzling sausage. All too soon, the time came for her to actually get into--or was it onto?--the saddle of her mount.

"Susie Q's a real easy-goer," Mac assured her. "Getting on a bit but that makes for a smart trail horse. You can't go wrong with old Susie."

Her son and Bram were already mounted, Bram on a frisky chestnut gelding named Fremont and Davis on a much smaller gelding that Mac had called a Morgan. "Wish I had a dozen as dependable as Nate," he'd said. "You can't beat a Morgan for stamina combined with an even disposition."

Taking a deep breath and reciting under her breath what her son had told her, Vala approached the mare. From the left. Standing even with the saddle, facing Susie Q, she took the reins into her left hand, then placed that hand firmly on the mare's neck and her right on the saddle horn. Relieved that Susie Q didn't move, she managed to get her left foot into the stirrup and tried her best to brace her knee against the horse. Now came the tricky part.

Pushing with her right foot. She sprang up until she was standing in the stirrup. At this point she almost lost her balance but leaned forward in time to avoid a fall. She then swung her right leg over the saddle and there she was, sitting square in the saddle, on top of Susie Q.

Flushed with triumph, she glanced around only to discover nobody was watching her. They'd all even Davis, taken it for granted she could mount a horse. This is only the beginning, she reminded herself. Keep your mind on what to do next--heels down, hold the reins neither loose nor tight with your index finger between the two strips of leather. Don't ever hang onto the saddle horn.

In addition to the three riding horses, Bram had arranged for a pack horse. Loaded with the gear, the pack horse followed Bram's Fremont, then came Nate with Davis.

She and Susie Q brought up the rear.

Good, she thought. If I make mistakes Bram won't be so likely to notice them.

Davis had told her to lean slightly forward and move with the horse but she soon discovered that was easier said than done. Still, she wasn't too uncomfortable until they passed through the gates of the horse ranch and Bram increased Fremont's pace from a walk to what she thought might be a trot. Obediently, the other horses matched the leader's gait.

No matter what she tried to do, she kept bouncing up and down in the saddle rather than moving with Susie Q. Though jarring, it didn't bother her too much. At first.

The morning was cool enough to be coat weather, in her case a lined denim jacket. In addition she wore a broad-brimmed hat, jeans, and a pair of riding boots comfortable enough to hike in, boots that Bram had suggested she buy. Davis wore a similar outfit. Bram, she'd noticed, looked like a real honest-to-goodness cowboy.

The horses followed a trail toward Superstition Mountain, passing between clumps of ocotillo which she seemed to recall was a shrub, not a cactus, never mind that it looked like cactus--and various large round cacti that were all leaning toward the southwest. Beyond the vegetation close to the trail were various other unfriendly-looking plants whose wicked spines and spikes made her wary.

to grab hold of the saddle horn just in case Susie Q took a notion to buck and send her flying head over teakettle. She resisted the temptation, reminding herself that the mare was not only a tried and true trail horse but seemed to have a placid disposition as well.

The Superstitions loomed ahead, far more rugged-looking at close range than from the highway. Near the topmost peaks, the sun glinted off a broad white streak running across the otherwise reddish-brown rocks making up the mountain. Unlike New York's Catskills, Superstition Mountain had no foothills, it rose straight up. Daunted and awed by the forbidding crags facing her, she realized how foolish she'd been to even think of tackling this mountain without a guide.

By the time the horses entered the mountains via a cobble-strewn wash and began to pick their way up a steep ridge, Vala's muscles were aching from the jouncing. Surely Bram would halt soon for a rest, she told herself. As the trail grew steeper, she realized that, even if they did stop, she wouldn't have enough room to dismount and ease her aches and pains. There was no choice but to grin and bear it--or at least bear it, grinning being a bit beyond her right now. The rocky, tumbled terrain around them seemed as confusing as a maze. The only consistent feature was a vast stone pillar rising in the distance--Weaver's Needle. In addition to the stands of prickly-pear cactus and the grayish jojoba shrubs, green-barked palo verde trees were strewn at random among the rocks, making her wonder how they found enough dirt to grow.

After a while she stopped noticing what was around her because she hurt too much to pay attention to anything but her own discomfort. When Susie Q finally quit moving, it took Vala a moment or two to realize they'd stopped on a small plateau. Bram and Davis had already dismounted and both were looking expectantly at her. Unfortunately, though she remembered Davis had told her to get off a horse the same way she got on, only in reverse, she was in too much pain to be able to recall how she'd mounted. And even if she did remember, she wasn't sure her aching muscles would obey her. Bram ambled toward her. "Thought we'd take a rest here," he said, obviously waiting for her to dismount.

I can simply fall off, she told herself, or I can admit to the truth. Taking a deep breath, which hurt, she let it out slowly and admitted the truth. "I can't get off unless you help me."

His eyebrows rose and he shook his head. "Stubborn," he muttered. "Have you ever been on a horse before?"

"No. And it won't do any good for you to tell me how to dismount because I hurt too much to try."

He scowled at her. "If you got on, you can get off. Listen up. Keep hold of the reins while you put your left hand on Susie Q's neck. Now put your right hand on the saddle horn. Good. Lean slightly forward and shift your weight to the left stirrup."

Vala groaned as she obeyed. When he told her to swing her right leg over the saddle, it took her two tries and a few more groans before she managed it. She was certain she'd never be able to step straight down and free her left foot from the stirrup as she did so and she was right. If Bram hadn't caught her, extricating her from the stirrup at the same time, she would have sprawled onto the ground with her left foot still caught in the damn stirrup.

She clung to Bram, hurting all over, not sure she could stand by herself, in too much pain to feel humiliated. Susie Q snorted and, when Vala involuntarily glanced at her, she found the mare had turned her head and was staring, quite possibly in disgust, at this tenderfoot rider who couldn't even dismount properly.

With Bram's help, she hobbled a few steps but, when she tried to ease down so she could stretch out on the ground, he wouldn't let her, saying, "You won't be able to get up if you do."

"I don't care," she mumbled.

"I do." His voice was hard and cold. "We're not going to camp early just for your convenience."

You lied to me and you're going to suffer the consequences. We'll rest for a bit, then either we go on or we turn around and give up any idea of camping in the Superstitions."

Vala wanted nothing more than to get back to the motel as fast as possible and fall onto the bed, but one look at Davis's apprehensive face and she gave up the idea. She didn't know how she'd manage it, but go on she would. Even if it killed her.

"You may have to lift me onto the horse," she told Bram, "but I'm not giving up."

"Way to go, Mom," Davis said.

"You may think so," Bram growled, "but by the time we camp this afternoon, your mother is going to be extremely sorry she didn't choose the other alternative."

"I think she was afraid you wouldn't guide us if she told you she couldn't ride," Davis said.

She was right, Bram thought. He wouldn't have. His annoyance with her was mixed with reluctant admiration for her tenacity. Vala just wasn't the kind who gave up, even when the odds were against her.

"We'll walk the horses for the next stretch and give them a rest," he said, aware he was doing it for Vala's sake. The horses weren't anywhere near ridden out but neither she nor Davis would know that. While she'd find walking painful, it wouldn't hurt as much as getting back into the saddle. They went on, Vala hobbling gamely along, leading Susie Q. Bram decided that Mac must have had a sixth sense about Vala's non-existent riding skills because the mare was the most amiable and tractable horse in his corral. Susie Q would never take advantage of her rider.

Near noon he called a halt for lunch and they ate the cheese sandwiches put up for them by Brenden's, Vala leaning against a rocky outcropping rather than trying to sit. When they were ready to go on, he hoisted her into the saddle, watching her bite her lip rather than moan as her aching muscles protested.

When they finally reached the spot where, revising his original plans, he'd decided to camp for the night it was only three in the afternoon but he knew she couldn't go on much longer. He'd originally figured three days in and three days out but now he added two additional days to his estimate. Food wouldn't be a problem because he always brought more than he expected to need.

After Davis helped Bram with the horses, they put up the tent where the boy and his mother would sleep. "It sure goes faster with four hands than it does with two," Bram told him when they finished. "Thanks."

Davis nodded, flushing with pleasure, then turned to look at Vala who was sprawled on her sleeping bag, eyes closed. "Do you think she'll feel better tomorrow?"

"Some, anyway."

"Where's your tent?" Davis asked.

"I like looking up at the stars so I don't use a tent unless it rains."

"I've slept outside before," Davis said. "At camp. I don't need to be in the tent with my mom."

"For her sake you should be tonight at least," Bram told him. "She might need you."

"Yeah, you're right."

Vala heard them talking but, in her relief at being able to stretch out at last, she didn't bother to pay attention to what they said until Davis knelt beside her, insisting she take a pill, claiming that Bram said it would help her.

"Mr. Hunter," she mumbled reflexively.

"He says on the trail we use first names."

She opened her eyes and Davis showed her the pill. "Ibu-something," he said. "It's for sore muscles." "Ibuprofen." She raised herself onto one elbow, swallowed the pill with a sip of water, then fell back onto the sleeping bag and didn't move again until sunset, when it was time to eat Bram's camp stew served with biscuits and hot tea.

She managed to walk to the camp fire by herself, where she sat on a folded sleeping bag, her back propped against a second rolled-up bag while she ate.

"Tonight's lesson," Bram announced, "is what to do if you get lost."

"You serve lessons with the meals?" she asked.

"Our walking wounded must be mending," Bram said to Davis. "She's beginning to talk." Turning to her, he added, "One lesson each evening--you might call it dessert."

"A kid at my camp got lost on a hike once," Davis said. "He wandered around until he came to a road and some guy on one of those big Harleys gave him a ride back to camp."

"We don't have any bikers in the Superstitions," Bram said, "so listen up. Rule 1. As soon as you know you're lost, stop, sit down and try to figure out where you are in relation to where you came from. Use your head, not your legs. Rule 2. If you have no idea where you are, make camp in a nearby sheltered spot. Rule 3. Don't wander. If you must move, travel downhill. Rule 4. If you're hurt, try to light a fire and make a smoke signal. Rule 5. Don't yell, run, or get panicky. And never give up."

Vala closed her eyes and let his words flow over her, thinking that when he wasn't angrily growling, Bram's deep voice was really quite soothing.

When Bram finished, he and Davis cleaned up, leaving her sitting alone by the fire. If she didn't try to move, she was fairly comfortable. But then Davis returned, asking for his sleeping bag, the one she was leaning against.

"I'm going to turn in, Mom," he said. "We've been climbing all day and the higher elevation makes you tired, you know."

She didn't argue, aware that, though he might be using it as an excuse for feeling sleepy so early in the evening, he actually was telling the truth. He took his sleeping bag to the tent, leaving her still sitting but now uncomfortably. She was trying to gather the energy as well as the courage-- it was going to hurt--to clamber to her feet when Bram came back to the fire carrying her unrolled sleeping bag and the old gray sweat suit she'd tucked inside it.

"You planning to sleep in these?" he asked.

Taken aback, she stammered, "Uh--yes."

He dropped the clothes on her lap. "Get into them." Before she could think what to do or say, he walked off, making it clear he didn't plan to stay and watch.

She shrugged, wincing at the soreness in her shoulders, and thought, why not? I have to get undressed sooner or later and it'll be easier here than in the tent.

When Bram returned, she was standing with the sweats on and trying to decide if she could manage to bend over and retrieve the clothes she'd discarded. He knelt and rolled her clothes into a bundle, then smoothed her sleeping bag. "Lie on this," he ordered.

She stared at him in confusion.

He half-smiled and pulled a tube from his jacket pocket. "Liniment. Good for sore muscles. Don't forget you have to get back on Susie Q tomorrow."

Vala grimaced at the thought.

"This liniment won't cure you," he added, "but you have my personal guarantee it'll help."

Deciding she couldn't feel any worse, Vala eased herself down onto the sleeping bag, lying on her stomach. She tensed when he lifted her sweat shirt and put his hand on her bare back.

"Relax," he ordered.

She tried to obey. His hands were warm, the liniment cool at first, then, as he rubbed it in, pleasantly hot.

He kneaded her muscles with an incredibly gentle touch.

"That feels good," she murmured, thinking, as he went on to her lower back, that perhaps it felt a little too good for her peace of mind.

Good wasn't exactly the word he'd choose, Bram thought as his hands stroked the curve of her hip. ~~When he decided the liniment might help her, it hadn't occurred to him just what the treatment was going to do to him.~~

Her skin was so soft and smooth, satiny under his fingers and when he cupped her round buttocks he found himself imagining her in his arms, tight against him while he held her like this.

Keep your mind on what you're doing, Hunter, he warned himself as desire began to thrum insistently through him. You're supposed to be a masseur at the moment, not a lover. Why was touching Vala different than touching any other woman? Because she'd been a mystery he'd never had a chance to solve?

He'd thought he came on this trip for the kid's sake, but he had to admit that sure as hell wasn't the way it looked now.

Chapter 3

Vala slept so soundly she didn't hear Davis get up, dress and leave the tent. She roused to a loud clanging, sitting up abruptly, then wincing as her sore muscles protested the sudden move.

"Breakfast, Mom!" Davis shouted from somewhere outside the tent. She wondered if he was the one who'd banged on a pan with a spoon or if that was Bram's idea of fun.

"I'm awake," she called back. "Be there in a jiff."

She dressed as quickly as she could, ignoring the twinges, trying to convince herself riding would prove easier today, and joined the two males. The morning air held a touch of crispness that she knew the sun would soon banish.

"Bram's oatmeal is way cool," Davis informed her. "He puts cinnamon in it."

Vala raised her eyebrows. Davis eating oatmeal? The stuff he called gooey yuck when she tried to serve it at home?

"Sticks to the ribs, with or without cinnamon," Bram said. "Good on the trail. Right, partner?"

Davis nodded with enthusiasm.

Once finished with breakfast, Bram said, "Today's dessert is a message from the chain fru cholla." He pointed at a gangly-looking cactus to their left. "The cholla warns, 'Brush against me and I'll break off a chunk of myself to attach to you. Trust me, you won't like it.'"

"Isn't that what we used to call jumping cactus?" Vala asked.

He nodded.

"Did you guys really go to high school together like Mom said?" Davis asked. "I mean when you were teenagers." He sounded dubious about the possibility of either of them ever having been that young.

Bram grinned at him "Yup. In fact, I can even remember way, way back when I was nine, like you are now. I was a really rotten kid. But I grew up and learned how to behave--when I work at a job. Speaking of work, time to pack up and hit the trail."

Vala and Davis pitched in to help, although her painful muscles slowed her considerably. All too soon it was time to climb aboard Susie Q once more, whether she wanted to or not. Bram had already saddled the mare--she supposed that would be the next thing she'd have to learn--so all she had to do right now was remember how to get on.

The first thing she forgot was which was the mounting side and she approached from the wrong one, earning an astounded look from Susie Q.

"Mom!" Davis yelled. "Get on her other side!"

As Vala switched, she thanked her lucky stars for the mare's patience and placidity. If she had to ride, at least she had an unflappable horse that forgave her mistakes. She got up onto Susie Q with no difficulty despite her aches, but as soon as they started off single file, she groaned.

How she was going to endure one more day of this, much less four or more, heaven only knew.

Up ahead of her she heard Davis whistling, something he hadn't done in months, and she resigned herself. If he was happy, what were a few aches and pains?

"All right back there in the rear?" Bram called.

"Yo!" Davis answered.

A lot of the problem was in her rear, Vala thought ruefully, her affirmation a lot less enthusiastic than her son's.

But as they rode on, she felt herself loosening up and settling into Susie Q's rhythm without

consciously willing it. As she'd predicted, the rising sun's heat began to warm the crisp air and little chirping birds--cactus wrens, maybe?--flitted back and forth. Vala had always enjoyed the outdoors. She couldn't deny the day was beautiful and her companions cheerful company, Bram now whistling in counterpoint to Davis.

Bram was so good with her son. She could wish he'd donate a few dabs of his considerateness to her, but she didn't expect it. Although, come to think of it, massaging her sore muscles with the liniment last night was thoughtful. She didn't think he'd realized how his hands on her body had done more than ease muscle aches. If he had, she'd rather not be aware of it.

There'd always been something about Bram that had turned her on--not that she ever planned to let him know it. He was every bit as good-looking as he'd been as a teenager, with the added attractiveness maturity brings. Easy does it, she warned herself.

When they stopped to rest the horses, she was pleasantly surprised to find she was able to dismount without help and without falling on her face.

Looked like they'd be going on, Bram thought, watching Vala covertly. She was smiling today, even though he could tell by the way she moved that she still hurt. Definitely not the droopy, sorry-for-herself type he couldn't bear. But then she never had been. Kind of a loner in high school, as he remembered. Though she'd had friends, she hadn't been a part of any of the in crowds.

"I might just turn into a real horsewoman and surprise everyone." Vala was speaking to her son but he knew she wanted him to hear.

"Might," he said. "Might not."

"You don't faze me," she told him. "Susie Q's as smart as they come. You'd be amazed at what she's taught me already."

"I'm not a bad teacher myself--depending on what you want to learn," he said with a grin.

He could see she wasn't sure she wanted to reply to that one. Davis saved her the trouble of deciding by saying, "Yeah, Mom, he knows a lot of neat stuff."

"I'll bet," she muttered.

"How much?" Bram asked her.

"How much what?"

"Do you want to bet?"

"I'm not entirely sure what we're supposed to be betting on."

"My mom doesn't ever bet money," Davis put in.

Bram raised an eyebrow.

"He's talking about the state lotteries," she said.

"I don't do them."

"I wasn't thinking about money," Bram told her.

She shot him what was meant to be a quelling glance, but he had no intention of dropping the subject. "What I meant was," he drawled, "I'm willing to bet I can teach you to do something you never dreamed you could do."

"Like bungee jumping? No, thanks."

"We'll exclude death-defying stunts. Scared to take me up on it?"

Again Davis took her off the hook by saying, "Whoa, look at that weird lizard." He pointed.

Just before it slithered into a crevice, Bram saw the big, brownish lizard whose skin appeared too big for him. "That's a chuckwalla," he said. "Non-poisonous. They like these mountains."

"There's a lizard drawn on my map," Davis said. "It's the first marker."

Bram nodded. "I think I know what it refers to. We ought to get there sometime this afternoon." He eyed Vala appraisingly.

Following his gaze, Davis said, "Aw, Mom's doing better. She can make it."

After that, Vala felt she had no choice, even though she grew less and less comfortable on Sus Q's back as the day wore on. She was almost past the point of caring when Bram finally called a halt.

"This'll be our night camp," he said. "After we take care of the horses, we'll hike a bit and I show you the marker."

Hike? When it was all she could do to get herself off the horse? How she longed to stretch out on the ground and not move for hours. Maybe days. Gritting her teeth, she controlled the impulse, away once down she wouldn't willingly get up.

The marker turned out to be a rock formation off the trail that to her only vaguely looked like a lizard. Davis, though, was thrilled at the validation of his map and chattered on about finding treasure all the while he helped set up camp.

Vala, by then lying fully dressed on her sleeping bag in a half-doze, was barely aware of what he was saying, though she did hear Bram.

"Treasure comes in different packages," he said. "Sometimes you don't recognize it right away as treasure."

"But this treasure's gold," Davis protested. "Everyone knows what that looks like."

"Old Mokesh didn't tell you it was gold. He didn't even say treasure."

"Uh, no, he didn't. But he must've known what it was 'cause he had the map. I figured it has to be gold on account of Lost Dutchman Mine and all, you know? But maybe it's jewels and stuff, is that what you mean?"

"No, not jewels. We'll talk more about it later. Right now you'd better get your mother up or she'll miss supper. When I cook, no one skips meals."

Vala groaned at the ultimatum, but realized she was too hungry to bypass supper. Getting stiff from lying to her feet, she joined them at the small campfire.

After they'd eaten, Vala made no pretense of helping to clean up because she was just too blamed sore. As the fire died down to coals, Bram and Davis came to sit by her.

"We might run into some weather tomorrow," Bram said. Vala gazed up at the dark sky. The moon hadn't risen but she could see stars.

"How can you tell?" she asked.

"Mom, he's a guide. He knows the area."

Bram chuckled. "I can't take the credit, partner. What I do is make sure I watch the Weather Channel to catch the five day forecast before I go into the Superstitions."

"Hey, cool," Davis said.

Apparently nothing could tarnish her son's image of Bram as a western expert, full of all kinds of esoteric lore even if it came from the TV, Vala thought a bit sourly. Then she wondered if maybe she was overreacting. Could she be the least bit jealous of Davis's hero worship?

Shame on her if she was. Her son needed a man's company, needed the kind of positive attention Bram was giving him. Thank heaven she didn't need such a thing. At least not from Bram.

"The thing is, lightning is always dangerous in the mountains," Bram said. "Rain's a nuisance, but neither people nor horses melt so we could keep going wet, if we had to. Lightning's another matter. We're not up near any of the peaks yet--they're the most dangerous in a storm--but tomorrow we may need to take shelter in a safer place than the trail."

"Mokesh told me the Old Ones sometimes try to keep people away from the Superstitions," Davis said. "Maybe they know we have that map and so they're sending the storm to try to drive us out."

"A storm is a natural force," Vala protested.

"Yeah, I know, but the Old Ones use nature, Mokesh said."

Vala stuck to her guns. "Whoever the Old Ones were, I doubt the coming storm has anything to do with them."

do with them."

—Davis was unconvinced. "You said were, but it's are. Mokesh told me the Old Ones are still here guarding the mountains."

Bram shifted uneasily. Old Ones. His grandmother had spoken of them. Not people, spirits--you believe as the Ndee did. He shook his head. That part of him was long gone.

"You have to remember that Mokesh's world was not ours," Vala told her son. "Is not ours," she corrected.

"Okay, but we're in his world now. Maybe we don't know everything about it."

"Suppose we leave it at that for the moment," Bram said firmly, not wanting to be drawn into an argument that involved the Ndee. Ever. "What we need to do tomorrow is keep an eye out for the new marker the map shows. If it's a rock formation like the lizard was, we might be able to spot it in the distance."

"A bear, Mom," Davis said. "Remember to look for something like a bear."

"Not a real one, I hope!"

"No danger of that, not here," Bram told her.

"Good. Lizards don't faze me, not even gila monsters as long as they don't get too close. But I don't care to come up against an animal that's a lot bigger than I am."

"Wish we'd see a gila monster," Davis said wistfully. "It'd be cool to have a lizard for a pet."

"No reptiles." Vala's voice was so definite that Bram figured they'd had this argument before.

"Well, gee, we can't have a dog 'cause of the condo rules and I don't want fish."

"How about cats?" Bram asked, remembering Sheba's batch of kittens. His friend Nick was looking after them all and he hoped they were doing well.

"Mom?" Davis asked.

"There's nothing in the rules preventing cats," she said.

"Great," Bram said. "I just happen to have a few Siamese kittens that'll be looking for new homes soon. How do you feel about cats, Davis?"

"I never had one on account of my dad was allergic. But I'm not. Would you really give me a kitten?"

"You can take your pick once the Old Ones allow us to leave the mountains."

"Aw--you're like Mom. You don't really believe in them. I wish you could've talked to Mokesh. I really miss him." Davis yawned widely.

"Time to hit the old sleeping bag, partner," Bram said. "Dawn comes early."

After Davis somewhat reluctantly retired to the tent, Bram said to Vala, "Muscles still sore?"

She nodded. "Not quite so bad, though."

"Told you that liniment works. It's in my gear--I'll get it while you change and give you another rubdown." Without waiting for her to agree or disagree, he left the dying fire.

He took his time and, when he returned, she was in the gray sweats she used for camp sleeping. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea," she said.

"Harmless, wouldn't hurt a child," he said, well aware she wasn't referring to the liniment. He also agreed that maybe it wasn't such a good idea, considering how aroused he'd gotten the night before. But, he told himself, he'd risk it because she needed the rubdown so she'd feel better tomorrow.

As soon as his hands touched her bare skin, he realized he'd been lying to himself. He'd wanted to touch her, wanted the feel of her skin, soft and smooth under his fingers, wanted to run his hands over the sweet curve of her butt, to linger along her sides where he could feel the swell of her breasts. In fact, he wanted a hell of a lot more from Vala. Not that he was likely to get it, even if he was unwise enough to try.

Vala's increased awareness of Bram made his massage far more erotic for her than it had been

before. She tried in vain to block out those feelings and concentrate on the easing of her aching muscles. Instead, she found herself wanting him to go on and on, to touch her in places that had begun to ache for a far different reason than riding a horse. Catching herself just before a moan of pure pleasure escaped, she said, "Enough!"

"You're right." His voice held the same husky catch she'd heard in her own. "Or maybe wrong," he added as he stopped and moved away from her. "Maybe it's not nearly enough."

His words jolted Vala. What did he mean? If she agreed it wasn't enough, what might happen? Unable to decide what to say or to face the matter head on, the only thing she could think of to do was ignore what he'd said.

"I could use another ibuprofen, if you have one," she told him.

Once in the tent with her sound-asleep son, Vala didn't dissolve into sleep as easily as she had the night before.

It was as though she could still feel Bram's hands on her body, stroking, arousing....

It made her remember how she daydreamed about him when she was in high school. Not that she'd thought about him caressing her, a kiss was as far as she taken her fantasy about him. She longed to have him notice her, to think she was beautiful--even if she didn't believe she was--to ask her for a date.

Not that she would have been allowed to go out with him if he had asked. Not only was he older, he was also, in the eyes of parents of daughters, at least, dangerous. But that wasn't the only reason she found him fascinating. She carried around like a treasure the one time their glances had crossed when they passed in the hall.

His eyes, dark and fathomless, promised a delicious wickedness she couldn't quite imagine, though she was willing enough to experience it. His hair, equally dark, long and lustrous, never stringy, framed a high-cheek-boned face, a different face, one that made her tingle inside every time she saw him.

So here she was in the Superstitions with the guy. And he still intrigued her, she may as well admit it. Turned her on as well, since she was being honest with herself.

She definitely was not going to act on the attraction, though. Never. After all there was Davis to consider. Davis, who could and did sleep through vast amounts of noise and commotion....

Stop it, she warned herself. You are not going to throw yourself at Bram or even hint you might be available. You're going to behave in a mature fashion, which doesn't even include the possibility of involvement. He probably isn't really interested in you anyway.

Lying awake, looking up at the stars, Bram saw the first tiny cloud drift across them. Weather coming, definitely. Whatever the storm proved to be like, though, it'd be nothing compared to his own inner storm warnings.

Vala had been the one he'd always noticed in high school. He hadn't been sure why. For one thing, she'd had a long neck that made her look graceful. For another, her aloofness made her mysterious--what was she really like? Pretty enough in a different, less obvious way than some of the other good-looking girls. Fragile was the word that had come to him then.

In reality, Vala had turned out to be anything but fragile. She'd married the wrong man, obviously, but had the courage to divorce him and raise her son alone. She'd even been prepared to venture into these dangerous mountains alone to try to make Davis happy, foolish as that expedition would have been.

And so here they were and he wanted her with a much fiercer need than the boy he'd been in high school. Then he hadn't taken his desire any further than maybe imagining kissing her because, for some reason, he couldn't picture himself doing anything more. Not with Vala Channing, even given that she'd allow it, which he'd doubted.

What would be her reaction now? She'd certainly given him no reason to think she'd be attracted to him when they were teenagers. Did she feel any differently now? Was he the only one feeling the intangible link between them? He didn't think so. He could sense she was as aware of him as he was of her.

Best to leave it alone, he knew that. Always a mistake to get involved with a woman you were paid to guide.

Business and pleasure needed to be kept apart. Making love with Vala would be a risk. Unfortunately, he was a risk-taker. Not so daring a one as he'd been as a teenager, but risk was an intrinsic part of him, impossible to eradicate.

From somewhere far off a coyote howled at the moon. The Ndee thought of Old Man Coyote, a trickster. If he believed in the Old Ones he might think he was being warned. Or challenged.

Remembering the feel of Vala's body under his hands, he smiled, anticipating the challenge to come.

Chapter 4

The next morning the sky was overcast when they saddled up. Feeling much more like herself, Vala made sure to watch just how Susie Q's saddle went on. Maybe tomorrow she'd try doing it.

After about an hour on the trail, they all heard a faint rumble of far-off thunder. Minutes later Bram pulled off the trail, guiding them to a small flat-topped rise that rose several feet above the rest of the niche in the rock wall. Two rugged-looking crags loomed above them.

"Let's get the tent up," he said.

With Vala lending a hand, they soon had her tent ready, plus an extension fastened on and the gear stored inside. As the first rain drops fell, Bram rechecked the horses' tethers and then eased into the tent with her and Davis.

"How come you picked this place?" Davis asked.

"We're not in a hurry, so why not stay dry instead of wet?" he said. "Best to get off the trail anyway. If this turns into a gully washer, water comes pouring down the rocks like a river. Doesn't do to get swept away."

Lightning flashed and a close crack of thunder startled Vala.

"Just like Mokesh said." Davis spoke excitedly. "The thunder spirit really does live here."

Vala had never been afraid of thunderstorms. But she felt they were a lot more vulnerable in the tent than she'd ever been in a house.

"Close!" she cried as a brilliant shaft of lightning heralded a reverberating boom. Rain thrummed on the tent. Close also applied to their quarters. The extension held most of the gear, including saddles, leaving the three of them crowded into the main tent, which was really intended for sleeping. At the moment, the sleeping bags were unrolled on top of the ground cloth for them to sit on.

"You know what Mokesh would say?" Davis asked. Without waiting for an answer he went on. "Bad weather's the time to tell stories 'cause the snakes aren't out so they can't hear."

"What have the snakes got to do with it?" Vala asked.

"If the weather's good they might be hiding close by and hear," Bram said. "There are some stories the snakes don't want people to tell."

She looked at him, astonished.

Davis took the information in stride. "Yeah, you got that right, according to what Mokesh said. So who's gonna go first?"

"How about you, partner?" Bram said, pleasing Vala who could see Davis was bursting to tell one.

"It's a story I heard from Mokesh," Davis began.

"Some things about it I don't understand real well, but it's a story about how an old Ndee medicine man named Wandering Shadow found the pouch lost by the Great Spirit."

He went on to tell about Wandering Shadow getting lost in a blizzard and discovering a shining warrior lying in the snow. "He built a fire and gave this warrior all his water and all his food, but then the warrior left him and disappeared into the blizzard."

"Wandering Shadow decided it was his time to die--" Davis paused. "Mokesh knew when it was his time to die, do you think maybe all the Ndee do?"

"At one time, I believe they did," Bram said. "Now, though--" His words trailed off and he shrugged.

Again he'd surprised Vala with what he seemed to know about the Apache--oops, Ndee.

"Anyway," Davis went on, "instead of dying, Wandering Shadow found this shining lost pouc and knew he had to return it to Spirit Mountain. After he did that, he got one wish--a big wish, thunder wish. On account of 'cause he was a wise old man, he wished his people wouldn't ever have be cold or go hungry again. So do you know what he got for them?"

Vala shook her head.

Bram said, "I do, but this is your story to tell, not mine."

"The gift of the Great Spirit to the Ndee was the buffalo," Davis told them.

"I liked that story," Vala said.

Bram nodded. "That's what I mean about treasure. The buffalo were a greater treasure Wandering Shadow's people than gold or jewels."

"Yeah, I guess they were," Davis agreed. "But they wouldn't be to me. I'd rather have gold an day." He looked at Vala. "Now it's your turn, Mom."

"I don't know any legends," Vala said. "And I've never been any good at making up stories."

"You could tell about when you were a little girl and lived in Arizona," Davis said. "You hardly ever talk about that."

"Sounds good to me," Bram chimed in.

Vala thought a moment. "Okay, I can come up with something about that time. Davis's stor mentioned a thunder wish, mine'll be about rain."

"That leaves me lightning," Bram said.

"You can have lightning, there's only rain in mine."

She paused, wondering how to begin. If it were only Davis and her there'd be no problem, b Bram would be listening, too. "Once upon a time," she finally began, "there was a little girl wh wanted to dress up like a princess for a Halloween party her friend down the street was having."

"The little girl's mother didn't sew and her father thought buying a ready-made costume was waste of money, so her mother taped together a white dress out of old left-over crepe paper stored the attic. She trimmed it with gold fronds meant to decorate a Christmas tree. The little girl thoug she was beautiful in the paper dress, especially after her mother curled her straight hair."

"As she walked down the block to the party house, it began to rain. Her pretty dress just sort turned to mush and her curls disappeared, so she ran home crying."

"Her mother didn't have any more crepe paper, but she found a piece of black cloth. So she cut hole in it for the little girl's head to go through, other holes for her arms and trimmed it off so it ma a long dress. She braided the little girl's hair, made a pointed hat out of cardboard, colored it bla with a crayon and told the little girl it had stopped raining and now she could go as a witch."

"The little girl didn't like that idea one bit, she was sure she looked awful and everyone wou make fun of her. Then her father said, 'A princess is boring. A witch is interesting. Wouldn't yo rather be interesting?'

"Well, she didn't know whether she would or not, but she went to the party as a witch. No on laughed at her and so she had a good time after all."

After a pause, Davis said, "Grandpa was right. I think witches are more interesting. For or thing, they get to turn people into frogs."

"While the poor, boring princess only gets to kiss the frog," Bram put in. "Ribbet," he croaked.

That cracked Davis up.

"The best I can come up with is a story about something funny that happened while I was at la school," Bram said.

In her surprise, Vala blurted, "You're a lawyer?"

He shrugged. "I know everyone hates lawyers but someone has to do it."

"How come you're a guide, then?" Davis asked.

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