

LOVING SHADOW

cccc

© Angie Porter

PROLOGUE

Summoning all the courage in her twelve-year-old body, Jeni managed to squeak, "Don't come any closer, or I swear I'll scream for my dad." She buried all but her face under the quilt, then tightened her knuckles to a death grip on the golden medallion. "I mean it! Go away!"

Midnight cloaked her room in different shades of ebony velvet, but a darker ink-black outline of a man's shadow ambled steadily toward the bed. A disbelieving whimper lodged in her throat. Not a man. Just his shadow. When the silhouette stepped closer, an icy spider of fear shimmied up her spine, shaking her frame with shudders.

Jeni threw off the covers, jumped off the bed, and planted her feet on the worn gray carpet. "You're not real! My dad says there's no such thing as the bogeyman!"

Well, there! That froze the shadow mid-stride. A long index finger slid the cowboy hat back on the man's forehead and he seemed to chuckle at her boldness. Her fear, forcing her to stand her ground, dissolved under an aura of gentleness, which poured off the solid sable silhouette like a cascading waterfall. She didn't know how long they stood there scrutinizing one another, but eventually Jeni couldn't focus on the tall man's shadow as his broad shoulders and long legs blended into the normal shadows of her pitch-black bedroom.

Rubbing her hands over her eyes, she bit her lip to stifle a hysterical giggle. What would her father say if she told him she finally had an imaginary friend?

After a yawn so powerful it threatened to suck cobwebs off the ceiling, Jeni dropped back on the bed. As the wings of sleep swooped down upon her, she grinned. Surely twelve was too old to develop an imaginary friend?

Jeni murmured in her slumber and closed her fingers over her antique necklace. Earlier that evening she'd stubbed her toe in a shallow creek, unearthing the intricately designed jewelry buried in the muck and mud. She hid it under her shirt, hoping for the golden medallion to serve as her personal amulet. God knew she needed some kind of protection from her stepmother.

She nuzzled an almost elusive cold touch, a gentle hand brushing the hair back from her face. Tenderness. How long had it been since someone touched her in other than anger and brutal violence?

With that subliminal question, she sank deeper into sleep and resurfaced in dreamland to rehash the scene from that morning. The first thing Jeni saw was her new imaginary friend, the shadow, standing beside her. She frowned, not wanting him to witness the nightmare she called life.

Her stepmother continued in her sermon over Jeni's latest sin. Laughing. This time, Brenda had just backhanded Jeni in the mouth. "Shut off that whore's laughter! Only twelve and already more trouble than you're worth."

Oh, yeah? Well you'll never beat the spirit out of me, you wicked witch! Of course, the silent words only echoed in Jeni Linson's head, mingling with the metallic taste of blood in her mouth.

The brrring of the telephone called a time-out in their stare down. Brenda snarled at Jeni before placing the receiver to her diamond-studded ear.

Jeni shook her head in bewilderment as she did every time Brenda shifted instantly into the Mrs. Wonderful mode—as quickly as the demented banshee mode she transformed into whenever Jeni's dad left the house.

Brenda hung up the phone, pivoted, and rammed her fist into Jeni's ribs.

Jeni jerked violently.

The cowboy's shadow growled and loomed in front of her, blocking the dreamed recollection of Brenda's heavy-handed admonishment. Although she couldn't actually see any of the shadow's features, for every shadow is made of only ebony reflection, she felt male rage rumble from him like thunder.

Jeni smiled at the protective phantom. "I think I'll call you Shadow. I'm Jeni. We can be friends. Don't worry; Brenda can't hurt me. I'm not afraid!"

With a humiliated humph, she curled her hands into fists. "If only Dad didn't love her, I'd tell him about psycho Brenda. He's been awfully lonely since my mom died."

Inside her head, as if her brain were wearing headphones, Jeni heard her imaginary friend ask, "And are you not lonely, Jeni? I see your courage, little one, but every human needs to be touched gently by loving hands."

"Not me, Shadow. I don't need anything from anybody!"

After hearing his sigh, like he understood her declaration only too well, Jeni nervously fingered the golden chain around her neck. Shadow covered her small warm hand with his large frozen one, sliding their palms onto the medallion. A surge of reluctance jolted into her, from him, just as they fell into the cursed chasm of time and space where century-old scenes became an actual part of her dream.

As if from far away, Jeni could hear a battle raging, could hear agonized and outraged cries, gunshots, and the thuwonk of arrows piercing flesh and bone. From some corner of her brain, she could hear her imaginary friend stating

fragments of facts even as she glimpsed the slaughter of the Cheyenne by Chivington. Overwhelmed by the stench of hatred and gore, Jeni watched water run red with the blood of massacred Indians.

A fierce warrior, the whispered name Rumbling Thunder, shouted at another Cheyenne battle survivor. "Half-breed, you will wish you died at Sand Creek."

Almost immediately, she and Shadow were jerked from that bloody backdrop and transported to another. Inside a tepee, an older Indian woman entrusted a golden necklace to the half-Cheyenne warrior before uttering foreign-sounding words on her last breath.

From that place of bloodshed, this male survivor delivered the dead Indian woman to the home of a dressed-to-the-hilt gentleman. As if in fast-forward, Jeni observed the copper-colored young man studying books and being taught by the white man.

The well-dressed gentleman told the half-civilized warrior, "Honor your heritage." He handed the younger man an ivory statue before dubbing the foot-tall figurine the "Summerfield totem pole."

Shadow's deep baritone reverberated in her mind. With every tidbit of information he supplied, Jeni could see flashes of the past unfold.

She watched as the vengeful warrior Rumbling Thunder enlisted the aid of a demented Arapaho priestess in witchcraft. Moon Rising's black magic skills were forbidden by all of the Indian tribes, banishing her to make her hellish home in an upper cave on Pikes Peak.

Six Arapaho warriors, slaves to Moon Rising's evil power, and Rumbling Thunder chased a cowboy who was capturing wild stallions. They hunted and ambushed the man, forcing him up Pikes Peak, until they had him staked to the ground of Moon Rising's cave. Leather thongs lashed the cowboy to stone stakes, immobilizing his wrists and ankles, arms and legs spread wide, as Moon Rising danced around him.

Laughing wickedly, the witchcraft priestess yanked the golden medallion from around the captive's neck. Moon Rising snaked the heavy chain in a path down corded abdomen muscles to his loincloth.

After dropping the necklace, the witch shoved her hand into his saddlebags and snatched out a one-foot-high figurine chiseled out of ivory. The two-sided carved statue portrayed, on each side, a different sculpture of the restrained man.

Then the sorceress also seized the captive's gray Stetson, a short-bladed dagger tucked into the headband.

Jeni tossed restlessly before digging her fingernails into the bedspread. This nightmare-land fuzzed from color to snowy black and white like watching wretched reception on cable. From only what bits and pieces of the scene she could make out, Jeni wanted to lose any connection with this channel.

Instantly, the dream zoomed into full color.

The bronzed woman, Moon Rising, with tangled black hair and wearing nothing but a violent smile, pulled out a dagger from the headband of the hat she held in her hands. After burying the blade tip in the bound man's abdomen, dark rich blood squirting in a high arc, she jabbed the knife deeper like an attempt to make him cry out with the pain.

Jeni, struggling to awaken from this pit of terror, screamed into a void, "Leave him alone!" His appearance stayed blurry, an Indian girded in the briefest of loincloths or a cowboy in a Stetson?

Moon Rising now enraged, with the quivering handle the only visible sign of the knife, the evil high priestess traced bizarre patterns in the pooling crimson tide flowing from the man's stomach. After ordering him cut loose, her guttural words beseeched the powers of darkness.

Rumbling Thunder slapped the cowboy across the face with the Stetson and vowed vengeance.

Even though the cave filled with putrid smells of sulfur, as if the bowels of hell cracked open, the wounded cowboy jerked into action. His brawny arm captured Rumbling Thunder and snapped his neck before throwing the bulky warrior into the Indian witch. Jamming his hat on his head, the cowboy's feet took on the swiftness of wings as he dashed from the cave into a blizzard.

Jeni watched him halt at a cliff and peer over his shoulder. Watched him as the warriors neared and Moon Rising continued her curse chant. Watched him jump!

Downward he spun and tumbled, bouncing against the gray mountain twice as he plummeted.

Wide-awake after freefalling with him, Jeni tilted her head back and screamed with every decibel her little girl's voice could summon.

Her father ran into the bedroom and flicked on the light beside her bed. He explained it all away as nothing more than a preteen's overactive imagination, yet he never once touched her comfortingly. She saw the evil glint in Brenda's glittering green eyes, promising to touch Jeni for this wake-up call, promising the touch would not be tender.

By midmorning, thirty minutes after her father departed for the airport and a weeklong business convention, Jeni flinched from the fury radiating off Shadow. His bellowed roar of male rage echoed in her head.

Humiliated, she covered her right cheek with cool fingers, hoping to hide the blazing and puffy outline of Brenda's brutal hand. Her left eye ached. Her line of vision was already swelling shut, retribution for failing to cry as Brenda beat her. And Brenda was still not done doling out punishment.

Finally worked into a psychotic fury, Brenda knocked Jeni, backward, down the flight of oak stairs leading to the basement.

After lying there dazed, Jeni gathered her wits, ignored her aches, and slowly staggered to her feet. She clenched her jaw and notched up her chin, drawing on an inner strength that even Brenda couldn't beat out of her.

At that point God intervened, for the telephone rang, turning Brenda into the perfect wife flirting with her new husband over his cell phone.

Jeni escaped to her refuge, the small creek emptying into a river. She didn't dare cry; she might never stop. Reclining in the grass, she hardened her resolve to ignore the pain. "I am *not* afraid!" she chanted repeatedly, hoping to build her courage to the point of believing it.

It didn't help when Shadow tilted his head back and practically howled every single time he looked at her face. She heard his agonized whisper into her mind, "I am powerless to protect you in my accursed silhouette form;" and then he let out a war cry like a wounded warrior.

Returning home three hours later, Jeni snatched up the ringing cordless phone on the way to her bedroom. Within minutes, it banged to the carpet from numb fingers. "Brenda, . . . Dad's plane crashed. He d-died."

Dry-eyed, Jeni bottled the suffocating pain with the others inside her.

CHAPTER ONE

Five years passed after the court assigned Jeni as a ward under Brenda's care. Brenda's physical abuse had declined as her new husband, John Ludd, commented often on the accident proneness of his seventeen-year-old stepdaughter. Instead, her stepmother excelled in verbal abuse until the injuries she inflicted with her rapier tongue hurt much more, the painful scars lasting substantially longer, than when Jeni bled.

Brenda burst into Jeni's room and lifted her nose as if scenting blood. "I don't want you here; I never did. We're leaving for the weekend. You're eighteen tomorrow, so leave!"

Jeni smiled sweetly although Shadow's warning to ignore Brenda's hatefulness echoed in her mind like her brain was wearing headphones.

Instead of keeping her mouth shut, Jeni spoke quietly in an artful tone. "And leave this house, my inheritance, to you? You can't force me to run away from my own home, but I'll leave soon forever. As in never again, Brenda. No druggings. No beatings."

Brenda wrapped the medallion in her left fist for leverage and hoisted Jeni from the bed. "Once more and you *will* cry this time!"

Her huge right hand closed over Jeni's throat. While Jeni choked and tried to pry pudgy fingers free, Brenda cackled. "Tonight I'll either break your spirit or kill you; I don't give a damn which happens first! No one would miss you, Jeni, because no one loves you, and no one will ever love someone as worthless as you, Jeni Linson."

Jeni struggled while watching Shadow pace like a caged panther, pacing like he wanted to be loosed to rip Brenda to shreds. He lunged at Brenda and her slimy green eyes registered a soul-deep fear.

Brenda screeched like a demented banshee, dropping the golden disc and her stranglehold on Jeni.

John strode into the bedroom and sent his shrieking wife to finish packing. In truth, Brenda's new husband John terrified Jeni more than Brenda had ever managed to do. Although he'd never touched her in anger, her skin felt dirty at the thinly veiled lust in his eyes.

Jeni crossed her room in three quick strides and blocked her stepfather's entrance. She retreated when he entered her personal space, but he still gripped her

chin and surveyed her face before his brown eyes trailed mud where they touched her. "Nearly ripe."

Jerking her head away from his fingers, it thudded against the wall behind her. "Don't touch me, John."

His hands gripped her shoulders; his fingers bit into her flesh. "Show your gratitude. I did halt Brenda's brutal hand."

Jeni growled low in her inflamed throat. "Twisted perverts!"

She clearly heard Shadow whisper advice into her mind. "Don't provoke him, Jenifer. Break free. Run. Call the law!"

As Jeni squeezed her lids shut and exhaled slowly, Shadow barked an expletive that only she could hear. Opening her eyes, she raised her chin and disregarded Shadow's demand to attack instead of preparing to defend.

She jerked away her stepfather. "John, I'm really quite insane thanks to Brenda. Leave me alone or I'll listen to my Shadow and report you to the authorities."

John unhooked his belt and pulled it from the loops. "It's time you learned to respect your elders, young lady."

In a flash, Shadow slid his large icy body behind her, fitted his knee against the back of hers, and rammed up into John's groin.

Her stepfather doubled-over, but when Jeni dashed for the door, John wrapped his sweaty arm around her waist and rasped, "Not so fast, ungrateful girl. Next time, you'll thank me proper."

She stepped on the thick belt, holding it to the floor, so John couldn't strike her, and clawed at the clammy palm creeping over her midriff. Jeni prodded John toward the exit, but he clutched the antique necklace and tugged her body closer to his.

"Tomorrow you're a legal lay, fireball."

She watched his shameless eyes gloss over to resemble mindless terror before he gaped like a goldfish, dropped the medallion, turned, and ran.

After finally managing to shut and lock her door, Jeni panted and slid to the floor. Shock waves of fury crashed over her. Peering past her shoulder, she

viewed the outline of Shadow's big body lowering behind her. "You scared them away, didn't you? No one sees you but me, not even when you pluck me out of thin air as Brenda tosses me down the stairs. How did you do it?"

Although he didn't answer her, Jeni remembered the many times Shadow had explained that "*the curse*" prevented him from telling her. Instead, Shadow cocked her head against this cold shoulder. His gentle icy touch nearly froze her, but Jeni, needing his comfort, never once complained.

Sounding almost as if he were in pain, Shadow urged, "Cry, you stubborn courageous female. For once in your life, let it out!"

When she wouldn't open her bottled pain and allow the floodgates down, he sighed. "You never wish to talk about it either."

Refusing to reply, she moved away from him, sat on the bed and stared at the phone.

The next thing Jeni knew, she'd waited through her boyfriend's message for the beep. "Hi. I hate to do this over your machine, Mark, but I want to back out of our date tomorrow. As in terminate our—"

"Date?" Mark's suave voice answered on an anxious note. "Did you tumble down the stairs again? I've never known anyone so graceless."

When she didn't grace his goad with a response, he cursed. "You wouldn't tell me if you were hurt, would you? I'm not a fool, Jenifer! Brenda *abuses* you. Marry me, babe, and she won't anymore. I promise! Let me be your husband in every way."

"*Marry* you? You are joking, right?"

"I'm coming for you when my shift ends at midnight. Be ready to leave with me, Jeni. You'll come to a bad end if you continue to stay in that house."

"No, Mark! I want to break," the line went dead, "Up," she added disgustedly.

Groaning with dismay, she plopped back on her bed and flung an arm over her eyes. Gentleness lapped at her like the licking waves of the mighty ocean. Shadow.

Sub-zero cold engulfed her fingers as Shadow clasped her hand. White-hot sparks ignited at his feather-light tenderness and heat tingled up her arm.

Yes, she desired him. Her loving shadow.

Lately, she'd even gone so far as to flat out flirt with him. In her dreams, Shadow whispered he wanted her for his woman. He wished he could be her lover.

Yeah right! That's all she needed. An imaginary lover! No safer sex than that.

Shadow sat beside her and stroked her hair, scalp to waist, draining her of tension. His touch always worked magic. The last thing Jeni saw before drifting to sleep was Shadow rubbing a few strands of her hair across the shadowy expanse of his face where he lips should be.

There he was again. Wasn't it enough Shadow haunted her everywhere during her waking hours? Several years past, she'd decided he was no imaginary friend, but a figment of her insanity to deal with Brenda's abuse. While Brenda harped on about some supposed sin, Shadow whispered sweet lies in her ear. Like she was beautiful, brainy, and brave.

The familiar ebony shadow, broad shoulders, long powerful legs, and that damn cowboy hat, plopped beside her on the grassy riverbank where Jeni visited often in and out of her dreams to find peace.

She heard his question and ignored it. Normally, she didn't precisely hear his voice—more like a reverberation of her own voice inside her mind. Yet in her dreams it wasn't her voice, but an all-male one speaking. She wondered briefly how long before she snapped her thin hold on reality. "Leave me alone with my craziness, Shadow. I don't need your help to the ledge of lunacy."

Still his baritone buzzed around her brain, reiterating the question of a moment ago. "Do you plan to break it off with Mark as you did with all the others?"

"Yes."

He humphed like it couldn't happen soon enough. "Jeni, why do you always slam the door on relationships as soon as the man confesses his love for you?"

"The idiot did more than ruin it all by declaring his love; he asked me to marry him. Do you think he'll want a consolation prize before I break up? After all, I've dated Mark for nearly a year."

As usual, she felt waves of masculine rage sweep off Shadow and surge onto her. Anytime she mentioned having sex, the powerful thundering reaction

rumbling off him was the same as his reaction to Brenda's abuse. But the outrage was different somehow.

It was ridiculous arguing with herself, since he was a part of her shattered mind, but still she heard the gruff male voice quietly echoing inside her head. "He wants you."

"Yeah. Imagine that. And Brenda swears no one wants me."

His cold knuckles brushed her cheek. "That sick jealous bitch is a liar."

He paused before whispering, "The curse would intensify if I revealed how I'm here with you. For that matter, I don't know how to break free from the evil holding me captive in my accursed world of frozen shadows. Please, Jeni, do not force me to watch Mark touch you . . . seduce you."

Standing abruptly, she twirled in a circle and changed the scenery of her dream. Jeni basked in the brightest sunlight, surrounded by an endless field of wildflowers. She smiled when Shadow gripped her tense shoulders from behind.

His rich laughter held a note of wistfulness. "It won't work you know, little one. No matter how bright the light, or sunshine, you can't see me. Not as any more than a shadow."

Spinning around, she slit her eyes on him and tried for the zillionth time to focus on more than his ebony-filled outline. Puffing out a frustrated breath, she shook her head slowly. "I need to see you, the man, to know you're more than my imagination."

Although she couldn't see his face, she knew he was smiling. She could always feel his emotions.

"Jeni, I have told you, I am very much real."

With a loud snort, she stomped away from him. "If that's true, then why won't you ever tell me about yourself? Well, mister, I don't believe a damned word about this curse, or about it intensifying if you tell me! You're gentle, brave, and loving—only because that's what I needed and invented you to be."

"If I were only a product of your mind, then your imagination could have long ago provided me with a body and a history. I wish you could! Mark is a real man to you, Jeni. Don't you think I want to be a flesh and blood man to you? I'd have stopped the abuse years ago and protected you as a true warrior."

Now her dream placed them in a small boat that rocked softly on the crystal water of an oval pond. "A warrior? Hmm. Are we playing cowboys and Indians? Which will you choose to be?"

For a moment, he seemed to tense. "Neither. Both. Which would you prefer me to be, Jeni?"

"The idea of both entertains my raging hormones." She shot him a smile. "I've fallen in love with you and I don't even know if you're hideously ugly. It honest to God doesn't matter. Can't you feel it? I'm big-time lusting after you!"

This time he laughed so hard it rocked the little metal boat. "I'm cursed, Jen, not stupid. Nor dead. I spend every night in your subconscious dreams. I've felt your um—whew!—sexual curiosity."

One long cold finger traced down her cheek and he added almost reluctantly, "A Cheyenne warrior highly values a virtuous woman, expecting a virginal bride on their wedding night."

"You are Cheyenne? Then what's up with the cowboy hat?"

He tossed aside his hat and dove overboard.

Jeni watched his black velvet silhouette break the surface before he treaded in the crystal water and finally spoke. "People in this millennium are, no doubt, still familiar with the hateful term 'half-breed.'"

It was mostly a flat statement. Emotionless. Yet, 'half-breed' was uttered with complete contempt. "Jeni, feel the prejudice! Don't happily accept my mixed blood," he huffed in a totally exasperated tone.

His deep voice dropped to a near whisper. "What are you trying to do to me? Isn't it enough that I can only love you from afar? I stand between you and Brenda, covering you in a false shadow of protection, even as she beats you! You smile at me like I gave you a present when I tell you I'm a half-breed. It would be much easier for me if you would feel revulsion, Jenifer."

She closed her eyes. "Don't belittle yourself, Shadow. I'm cool with it. Why aren't you?"

She dove into the water before surfacing beside him. "I know the loving man you are inside. If ignorant people hurt you, I'm_sorry. Not everyone is so stupid."

Somewhere in the background, the clock struck half-past midnight like the firing of a single gun signaling the start of a race. She shot her hand forward through the water, wanting to reassure him with her touch, innocently initiating contact with a different part of his anatomy than his hand. As her fingertips slid over his cold ebony silhouette, she grazed his abdomen.

Shadow inhaled sharply.

The ripping stab of a knife wound tore at Jeni's stomach and she cried out her agony unlike the silence she maintained as she defended herself against Brenda.

Her bedroom door crashed open. Mark rushed in, gripped her shoulders, and shook her roughly. "Wake up this instant! You're having a nightmare. I'm taking you away from this house before they kill you! You're done living in hell."

He mussed his blond hair and sighed. "Honey, as a doctor, I must insist to see if you're injured. Purely professional," he whispered as he slowly raised her t-shirt out of her shorts and revealed her lower rib cage. Soothing words of comfort, his shaky fingers probed her flesh while his eyes sought hers for pain.

"I don't like to share my space, Mark," she said stonily.

Groaning, he pinned her with his golden eyes. "Babe, I *want* you!" Wrapping his arm around her waist and stretching his body next to hers, he pressed his arousal into the side of her thigh. "Feel what you do to me? Marry me, Jeni," he begged breathlessly.

Deep down, hadn't she always wanted someone to protect her from the endless violence? Even as she closed her eyes and tried to will her body to relax and accept Mark's intrusion of her personal space, Shadow's tormented voice taunted her.

"You're going to let him make love to you? Damn you, Jenifer! He doesn't heat your passions. Nor do you love him. Don't do this. Please. I cannot watch another man possess you!"

As she always did, Jeni spoke aloud to Shadow. "I wish you could teach me to please you."

Mark nuzzled her neck and murmured his desires into her ear. She elbowed him. "Not you!"

Blond eyebrows lifted and he smirked. "Oh really? So to whom were you speaking? Don't be embarrassed, babe. I'll teach you."

With a low growl into her subconscious, Shadow demanded, "Take off the accursed medallion! Free me from contact with your body, so I may be released from you . . . and your claim on me."

Jeni fingered the heavy golden jewelry.

Mark studied the medallion before reading the front inscription. "Brett loves Gentle Rain Summerfield?" He flipped it over and squinted at the worn surface. "1845—May our son overcome the shadows of both our worlds." As Mark settled the large circle back in place above her heart, he brushed the underside of her breast.

Shadow's agonized roar resounded into her head. "Now, Jenifer! Take it off, *now!*"

Since she found her treasured amulet nearly six years ago, Jeni had never once taken it off. It felt as vital a piece of her as her heart. If nothing else, hadn't her imaginary best friend developed the very night she dug the necklace out of the shallow creek bed, during one of her searches for peace?

"No!" She shoved Mark's chest. "I have no intentions of granting you access to my body."

It hurt deeply that Shadow so doubted her, but wasn't he simply a phantom? Her imaginary man? Did she doubt her own ability to ever come to love Mark, or any real man? "I'm sorry, Mark, but I have no romantic feelings for you. You're a great guy, in the *brotherly* sense, but—"

Placing his fingers over her mouth, Mark silenced her words. "I love you, Jenifer, and I won't force you to do anything you don't want. My declarations of love scare you, but I want to *marry* you. Think about it. We can wait for intimacy."

"Besides, Jeni, you need me," Mark added smugly. He settled his fingers over her sore throat where she suspected signs of Brenda's stranglehold showed. With that, he pressed his dry lips against her forehead and exited. "We'll leave for my Aunt Abby's in an hour."

She glanced toward the corner of her room. Shadow sat on the little wicker chair, head in hands, elbows on his knees. Feeling the hurt, frustration, and fury that shook his body, she scowled. "I wasn't going to have sex with Mark, thank

you very much! Why did you wish me to take off the medallion? Is it yours, Shadow?"

"Sorry, Jeni. I am a very jealous man, very possessive of what I consider mine. Even if I can't have you, I love you!"

"Ohmigosh!" She slapped her palm to her forehead. "It was *you* in that nightmare . . . only it wasn't a nightmare, huh? That's it, isn't it? The medallion. Shadow *Summerfield*."

The fragments of the old nightmare slammed together with the ruthlessness of a tsunami fitting together puzzle pieces. It was true. Jeni growled low in her throat before demanding, "Tell me how to break the curse!"

She rose from the bed and stomped toward him. "How dare you let *me* be the one keeping you a prisoner in your frozen world of accursed shadows!"

After lifting her hand to the golden chain, she took a deep breath and pulled the antique charm over her head.

Before the necklace cleared her mass of thick hair, breaking free from her possession, Shadow jumped to his feet to stop her. "Don't let me go!" echoed through the caverns of her brain.

His wounded cry silenced the second she released the medallion from her fingers, shoving it into the shadowy hand trying to stop her movements.

"Be free, Shadow," she whispered. But the necklace clattered to the floor. "Take it and be free!" Help me, Lord, losing him hurts! When he slid sluggishly to the floor and stared at the golden disc, she dropped to her haunches beside him. "What's wrong?"

He didn't even look up, almost as if he couldn't hear her. His dark silhouette began to fade to nothingness as he slowly shook his head.

Panicked, she yanked the jewelry from the floor and slipped it back into place over her heart. "Don't leave me, Shadow. I love you!"

His outline darkened . . . and the long minutes stretched forth in utter silence. She couldn't hear him, touch him, nor could he hear her, touch her. "What have I done?" Burying her face in her knees, she sobbed her despair.

CHAPTER TWO

Despite the fact Mark pulled Jeni into the bosom of his family, Shadow liked Miss Abigail Fairview on sight. The sprightly petite woman, who looked eighty-five but acted twenty-five, took an instant grandmotherly fancy to Jeni. Showering Jeni with love, the white-haired lady ignored Mark's protests, moved to Texas with Jeni, and rented a house large enough to double as a small hotel.

Every single day, Jeni tried to communicate with Shadow. For the first month after she tried to break the curse, but instead blocked their relationship into total silence, he avoided her. Not that it was easy to do. His medallion stayed warm above her heart, snuggled on the tops of her firm breasts, luring him. When he simply walked away from her, she left him written messages *everywhere* in the house. No doubt why Abby's staff regarded Jeni as unstable.

Damn persistent woman, he thought and read her millionth note.

Welcome to Texas! We'll be here until I graduate college. I apologize. I'll find a way around the silence. Promise! I love you, Shadow Summerfield!

Finally giving in, he stepped through her closed bedroom door to confront her. How the hell he thought he'd accomplish it, he had no idea, but he missed her. At least he could easily identify every facial expression and read her deep-blue-ocean eyes for her true moods.

The frigid temperatures in the land of the cursed soared to the heat of hades. Shadow stood rooted, staring at her. Holy shit! He may be half savage, but he was also a gentleman who had always given her privacy when she undressed. Here in the middle of the day, Jeni untied her bathing suit top and it floated to the floor in a flash of red before she could snatch it back.

Her arms crossed in front of her, but then an impish grin flashed briefly across her oval face. Removing her hands, she circled in front of him. His medallion swung above her cleavage, branding her as his.

He couldn't touch her. It was as if he were nothing more than a mere reflection now. They both knew it. Still, his palms itched, fingers twitching, to touch her full breasts.

Devilishness lit her dark-blue eyes. I love you, she mouthed very slowly.

Shadow groaned and walked out of the room while she redressed.

Although a person couldn't see a silhouette's face, nevertheless lips, her slow mouthing of her love for him gave him an idea. Secretly, Shadow learned how to read lips. Hers. Even though he could hear everyone else *but* Jeni, his hunger for her companionship made him a quick study.

Jeni specialized in physical therapy for children, involving the healing and loving touch of animals. Her lack of communication with him prompted her desire to work specifically with the deaf and mute physically challenged. Shadow learned sign language with her, not only giving him a form of communication with her, but also making signing second nature to her. He never told her that he, too, had found a way around the silence.

He often stretched out beside her on the bed as she poured over her studies, soaking up knowledge along with her. Over the years, she'd crammed her schedule every semester, including the summers. Now her reward was to graduate in four years instead of the required five.

Shadow sat on the floor, staring at her face, as she repeated the text for her Colorado state board exams. Sometimes he couldn't help but chuckle at her extremely colorful language when she was highly agitated, like when she forgot something. His independent Jeni was a perfectionist. She didn't only wish to pass, she wanted to ace the test. It'd be a spring thaw in the land of the cursed before he told her, but her constant studying assured him to pass the test if he could take it.

She suddenly snapped her book shut, signed, "*Abby's calling me,*" and then descended the stairs.

Jeni stood in stunned silence after learning she was the honored recipient of a surprise celebration, her twenty-second birthday party; Abby and an old gypsy fortuneteller as the only attending guests.

Abby cackled with glee even while Jeni faced her down with the sternest of expressions.

One candle, spuddering and hissing, flickered pale light in the cloak of darkness covering the living room. Abby and the gypsy motioned for Jeni to join them at a small table that supported a crystal ball. The room fairly crackled with electricity.

Jeni scanned for Shadow. She appeared breathless and frightened but gave him a lopsided grin.

Gray eyes glowing brightly, Abby's scratchy voice broke the silence. "My dear, I fear I will truly miss both of you."

Jeni broke eye contact with the one green eye and one blue of the gypsy. "Excuse me, Abby? Both? To whom are you referring?"

Snorting her disapproval, Abby lifted one snowy eyebrow. "Poppycock! You know very well to whom I'm referring. Your young gentleman. The cowboy specter, or, more accurately, shadow."

Jeni slapped a graceful hand over her mouth as her nearly navy eyes flew toward him. "You can see Shadow? But, Abby, you've never said a word!"

"Of course not, dear," she chuckled while tapping one wrinkled finger against the golden disc of the medallion. Abby winked at Shadow. "We mustn't have Mark suspect I'm encouraging your love for his competition. Although he frowns when I speak of my psychic abilities, my nephew knows you pine for someone other than him. Mark believes Shadow was your boyfriend, who died, but whom you still love."

The fortuneteller closed her mismatched eyes and tilted her head back, moaning and mumbling foreign words. Jeni clasped her hand over her nose as the stench of sulfur saturated the air. As soon as Shadow recognized the stale scent of evil, he moved closer to Jeni.

The gypsy's eyes rolled back in her head while speaking to the black soul of Moon Rising. The naked, bronzed priestess of witchcraft hovered in the center of the crystal ball. She shouted obscenities, displaying her unwillingness to be summoned from the pits of hell. Evil high-pitched laughter swirled about the room as she sighted Shadow standing behind Jeni.

The crystal-gazing gypsy translated Moon Rising's words. "Turned powerless, the perfect curse for a fearless warrior. You pulled the dagger out of your stomach as you leapt off the cliff, but even your magical hands were not enough to save you from the curse. Painful for you, half-breed, to look but not touch her? Does the young white woman have your medallion or totem pole?"

"Totem pole?" Jeni croaked.

Shadow uttered a low curse when Jeni's protective instincts flared. She purposely drew the witch's attention away from him.

Moon Rising's laughter increased the sulfuric evilness casting a yellow hue on the living room. "Ivory statue."

"Where is it?" Jeni demanded, gripping the edge of the table. "Tell me how to break the curse!"

"Who knows where it is now? I sold it to travelers."

Abby coughed from the overpowering fumes in the room before asking, "Does the young man exist only as a spirit trapped between worlds of life and death?"

Moon Rising's spirit disappeared from the crystal ball, making the old gypsy sway in her chair.

When the next faces clarified in the magical globe, Shadow came down on one knee next to Jeni. Her big blue orbs reflected the beautiful Native American woman and an impossibly handsome white man who had materialized in the crystal ball's center. Jeni immediately glanced toward him and Shadow nodded his head while he signed, *My mother and father, Gentle Rain and Brett Summerfield.*

Although Jeni couldn't hear his voice, he swallowed around the swell of emotion clogging his throat and said, "Mom, Dad, meet my vision, Jeni."

Gentle Rain pointed at Shadow. "My son," she cried, "you live! Your young woman must go to the mountain of Moon Rising's evil. Jeni is the other half of your own heart, just as your father is the other half of mine."

Brett grinned. "The Summerfield totem pole waits on Pikes Peak. Moon Rising lied, son. In a fit of rage, she threw it after you over the cliff."

His father's smile increased until glowing with a mix of pride and pleasure. "Wise choice, Shadow, loving Jeni."

The gorgeous couple in the center of the crystal ball flickered.

"Wait! Please," Jeni wailed. "What am I supposed to do with his possessions to break the curse?"

The images of his parents dwindled to misty nothingness.

The fortuneteller fell prostrate onto the floor.

Abby strolled into the kitchen, retrieving refreshments as if it were the most normal of birthday parties.

Jeni roused the old gypsy and helped her onto the couch.

Just then, the front door slammed open, relieving the stench of stale hell in the room with a gust of fresh air. Jeni jumped a foot in the air. Shadow knew her

nerves were tied in a squiggly knot after discovering so much about him. Not imaginary, nor delusional, but a *real* man trapped in a curse.

Mark dropped the dozen red roses onto the floor and waved his hands in the yellowish air. Burrowing his blond brows into a scowl of epic proportions, he choked, "What the hell is happening here?"

Abby kissed his cheek. "Oh, stop your glowering and wish Jeni a happy birthday."

After pulling her from the sofa, Mark embraced Jeni. "Happy birthday, babe!" Clucking her on the chin, he searched her eyes.

Shadow mashed his molars, hoping the obsessive bastard was actually understanding the zero romantic affection in his woman's eyes. When Mark must have realized it, too, and muttered a particularly wicked curse, a jolt of satisfaction surged through Shadow. It just got better and better as Jeni stepped backward, so Mark didn't invade her space.

Mark pointed to his great aunt, admonishing her. "I asked you to discourage her love for a dead man!"

Then Mark regarded Jeni again and groaned. "Damnation, Jenifer, you grow lovelier by the year." It wasn't false flattery. At twenty-two, Jeni no longer seemed pretty bordering on beautiful, but beautiful bordering on gorgeous.

After Fairview handed her a present, Jeni flashed the jerk the delighted smile of a child and ripped into the bright blue paper.

"A brochure of a luxurious condominium in Denver and two first class airline tickets?" she asked in obvious confusion. Her earlier dazzling smile transformed into a crinkled brow before understanding seemed to dawn.

Although she raised both hands stop-sign style, shaking her head rapidly, Mark spoke up before she could wiggle out of it. "Yes, Jenifer. We'll go together and you can take your board exams. The condo is . . . you'll see." He grabbed her upraised hands, jerked her into his arms, and crushed his mouth to her unresponsive lips.

Jeni swiped her bruised mouth clean with the back of her hand. Abby snorted. Mark blushed.

Shadow stalked the room, ready to kill her doctor friend. Mark wanted to take her away from him! *His lust flares out of control*, Shadow signed when Jeni glanced toward him.

Both eyebrows shooting skyward, Mark observed her signing toward one corner of the room. Stepping in front of her, he grinned sardonically. "Should I consider it a challenge, the thrown gauntlet, that you will *never* have sex with me?"

Jeni lowered her eyes from Abby's blatant stare. Abby, never missing a beat, handed Jeni a scotch on the rocks and a piece of birthday cake.

If Mark found the party a little unusual, he said nothing about it. Instead, he and Shadow watched while a visibly nervous Jeni downed her drinks by alarming proportions. A few hours later, Mark cradled her in his arms and carried her upstairs.

Shadow noticed the jerk's silky voice seemed to penetrate Jeni's drunken stupor. "Well now, Miss Linson, for one who never indulges, you've certainly tied one on tonight. Perhaps the birthday girl fortified her courage to gift me with her virginity? That's something you can't give your ghost, Jenifer."

Mark nuzzled her neck. "Mmm, come on, Jeni. Let him go! I'll help you forget his memory. You need a flesh and blood man buried inside you. Twenty-two and chaste, that's nearly a medical miracle nowadays." Chuckling, Mark lowered her onto the bed.

Hating Mark with an intensity only jealousy could summon, Shadow growled into his accursed world as the obsessed bastard's deft digits set to work on the buttons down the front of Jeni's short, form-fitting, red dress.

Jeni shook her head, fumbling at his fingers, so Mark let her think she'd won that little war. She gasped as his palm snuck under her dress. "No, Mark!" she ordered, shoving at his hand.

He caressed her lean thigh and breathed into her ear. Shadow started pacing when Mark's suave voice rasped with desire. "I'm a doctor, babe. There's no need to be embarrassed."

"I-I'm not 'mbarrassed! Just don't want—"

"Damn it, Jeni," Mark rushed, "I *want* you! I've waited and ached for five long years to make love to you. Pretend I'm your beloved ghost. I don't care anymore! My body hurts. I need you!"

"No!"

"Just close your eyes and pretend I'm him," he purred huskily.

Temptation knocked on Jeni's door, hard enough that Shadow heard it.

"It would be easy! Close your eyes, Jeni. Open your legs. Pretend I'm him."

"You're not him!"

Mark cupped her face as if compelling her to listen. "How the hell am I supposed to compete against a ghost? I'm flesh and blood, Jenifer, not some damned saint, and I'm here and I love you. Give us a chance! You could love me, Jeni; I just know you could."

She yawned. "How many times have I told ya I don't love ya, Mark, or asked ya to stop stalkin' me? Ya won't wear me down. I 'njoy your company when ya don't crowd me. Intellectual intercourse. Period."

Muttering obscene words in more than one language, Mark rolled away from her. "When we leave for Denver, your fantasies of your phantom lover stay here! Maybe I'll have a chance with you then."

Jeni promptly fell into a drunken slumber.

Rubbing the fingers of one hand together, the lustful creep stared at Jeni as if he were battling his conscience. It was a decidedly short fight. Fairview wrapped his fingers around the golden chain of the medallion and whispered, "This is surely a beloved present from my competition, since you never remove it."

Mark slipped it over her head and free from her long dark hair, after nearly waking her when Jeni reached for it in her sleep. Then he shifted the heavy gold from one hand to the other.

Shadow could have pinpointed the precise second when the hairs on the back of Fairview's neck stood up. The horny doctor gulped, staring across the bed. With absolute certainty, the scientific doctor in Mark rebelled at seeing a six foot three silhouette of a man, fisted hands on hips, regarding Mark as intensely as Shadow was being studied. Shadow resisted the urge to tip his hat in mock salute.

"By God, I can't believe it. Stop haunting her, you bastard! She's wasting her life loving you. Jenifer will marry *me*! If this medallion is what binds you to her, I'll melt it down and mail pieces throughout the world."

After Shadow signed, *Try it and I will castrate you*, Mark dropped a palm over his genitals.

Shadow willed his rumbling laughter to chase circles in Mark's head. The frightened man quickly slipped the golden chain back over Jeni's head.

With the medallion no longer in his possession, Mark acted braver as the seconds ticked and he no longer saw, nor heard, Shadow. "Fine."

In an obvious attempt to retrieve some of his arrogant dignity, Mark shot a parting vow over his shoulder. A shot that grazed Shadow's heart. "I'll be sure to take her sainted virginity while she's wearing that accursed medallion, so you can watch her writhe away her innocence under a *real* man."

Dawn came and went, Jeni waking only to return to the dregs of sleep. She seemed to opt for slumber until she no longer looked ready to retch every time she opened her eyes. When she blinked again, Shadow sat on her bed and pointed at the clock. He chuckled when she noticed the time and the adrenaline surge hit her. She had one hour until her college graduation ceremony.

Four hours later, during her mad rush to pack and leave for the airport, Shadow stepped before her, pointed at her college degree and began signing. *I am very proud of you, my sexy, brainy love.*

Shadow stilled, viewing the glossy sheen to her eyes even as she attempted to dash away the shiny droplets and hide how much his support moved her. She'd lived under his loving shadow for ten years. As surely as if he could still read her mind, Shadow saw her longing for him flit across her lovely face. Her cheeks stained crimson and he gritted his teeth, guessing the reason.

What was she ashamed of, dammit? He knew she was a flesh and blood woman with sexual needs too long denied. Did she seek his endorsement to work off her carnal tension on the doctor? Well, it would be a winter July Fourth festival in hades before Shadow encouraged the coupling! She neither loved Mark, nor desired him. If Fairview heated her blood at all, she would now be his wife and lover.

Am I ruining her life by wasting her youth? Am I that selfish? Maybe it was time for him to step back and see what would blossom between Jeni and the doctor without his shadow hovering over her.

Mark entered her bedroom, grabbed her suitcase, and they left.

Jeni, recalling how her dad had died in a plane crash, tensed one muscle after another during the entire flight from Dallas to Denver. Worrying how Shadow adjusted to flying nearly thirty thousand feet in the air, but unable to see him anywhere, her fingers lovingly caressed the intricate designs and lettering on the antique jewelry. Mark gave her an indulgent smile when she caught him watching her unconscious habit.

Sighing, she closed her eyes. Jeni dreamed of children.

A neon sign dropped before her, blinking, Artificial insemination or Mark? She shivered, suddenly cold and standing in the snow. The baby's dimpled smiling face in front of her looked nothing like Mark. If only Shadow were real!

After landing, when Mark left her alone, so did Shadow. If she didn't know the significance of the medallion, warm over her heart, Jeni would have thought Shadow out of her life. He didn't even say goodbye as Mark dropped her off for her exams. Nor did he ride along when Mark took her out for dinner to celebrate acing her Colorado board tests.

Mark drove them back to the plush condo and prepared a romantic candlelight champagne bar on the edge of the Jacuzzi. He pushed the expensive bubbly her way.

Laughing, she relaxed in the swirling warm water. Mark congratulated her again, hugging her bikini-clad breasts to his smooth bare chest. Without a thought to his feelings, she sighed. "I always wanted a brother, a champion of sorts."

A muscle in his jaw ticked, but he smiled and refilled her crystal glass.

Shadow watched Jeni in her bikini as Mark poured his champagne into the water behind him and urged her to keep up with him. She did. Time and again.

Shadow squeezed his eyes shut, knowing this day would eventually come and hating it anyway. Mark was seducing her in the water.

Jeni loved water. Jeni needed sex. Jeni was drunk.

Ripping a war cry into his accursed world of silence, he turned and paced out in the hallway. He couldn't watch.

"Did we drink all those?" Jeni gaped as Mark nodded affirmatively toward the three empty bottles. His smile grew sixty watts brighter. Slapping her hand over her mouth, she attempted to stifle the newest set of snickers turning into sinfully sensual sounding laughter. "I think I'm a little tipsy, Mark."

He actually rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Yes, I agree with your diagnosis." After sliding closer to her, invading her space, his head dipped to kiss the flesh directly above the medallion. "On second thought, I believe I need to conduct a thorough examination before I can definitely concur." He grabbed her hand and rested it over his pounding heart. "Touch me, Jen, please!"

It would be easy! Close your eyes, Jeni. Pretend I'm him.

Mark slipped a hand under her hair and she closed her eyes. He pulled her toward him by his hold on her nape. His lips touched hers briefly, as if waiting for her to rebel. But she didn't.

He lowered his mouth to nibble on her neck, encouraging her to touch him by rubbing her hand over his chest. Repositioning his thigh between her legs, he rocked into her pelvis lightly. Her hands began to hesitantly roam over his chest by their own accord.

"Good God, Jeni, I've waited a long time for this!" He groaned and increased the pressure to the juncture of her long legs. "I love you!"

"I love you, too, Shad—"

"You're pretending I'm *him*!" With a ferocity he'd never before exhibited, Mark locked his hands around her waist and ground her onto his thigh. "You like that. Don't start fighting me dammit," he barked as she struggled for freedom. "I'm the one who's always been there for you. I, Mark, am the one about to make love to you."

"Please—"

"Please what? Please hurry and give you what your hot little body is aching for?"

"No! I'm sorry," she swore, fighting him. "I wanted to believe you were him. It was wrong of me, I know, but I've wanted him for so long now. I love *Shadow*, Mark!"

Catching the fists pelting him with one hand and pulling her legs apart with his other, Mark forced her lower body in front of a pulsating jet spray and ignored her screams of 'no.' "It will arouse you, Jenifer, even if I don't." Waiting until her hips shifted with unconscious need into the massaging fingers of water, he smiled wickedly and hauled her out of the Jacuzzi.

Mark pushed her to the floor and pressed his straining Speedos into her pelvis. "Stop fighting me and open your legs. Right here. Right now. You'll enjoy it, babe, after this first time."

Jeni scratched him, fighting like a wild woman, raging, "No, you bastard!"

He clamped his hands over her wrists.

As his teeth worked feverishly on the wet knot of her bikini top, Jeni tilted back her head and screamed, "*Shadow!* I need you. Help me!"

"That's it. Call him. I want him to see that you're mine."

Twisting her neck to the side, she saw Shadow watching her resist and punching through the wall in frustration. She knew he couldn't help her, hear her, but he could see her begging him to help her for the first time ever.

Jeni reached for the medallion before Shadow could be forced to witness Mark raping her. Battling against Mark's hold, she ignored the hairs catching on the chain and ripping out of her scalp as she freed Shadow.

Mark snatched the necklace from her. "No way! He's going to play voyeur even if I have to be the one to hold him here with the medallion. Stay and watch, Shadow."

As soon as Mark dropped the chain over his neck, Shadow linked with him, sending his thoughts into Mark's head, listening to Mark's inner reaction.

Mark rumbled with laughter as Shadow stomped toward him. Only it wasn't his laughter, but . . . the cowboy's? Death threats! Is that what his own voice was reverberating around in his head?

Shadow's laughter turned down right evil sounding, hearing and experiencing Mark's inner fear of him. Clear as a bell, Shadow raged his threats into Mark's mind. "Get the hell away from her! Touch her again and I'll happily kill you!" Shadow closed an icy hand over Mark's windpipe.

While Mark clawed at his throat, Shadow continued. "Since it's the first time you put on the medallion, claimed it as yours, I can do all these things to you. It's my right in the land of the cursed to haunt the person possessing my property. The Cheyenne believed I had magical powers of touch, but as a warrior, I know more about torture than you've ever heard of healing, Doctor Rapist."

Gasping for breath, Mark pleaded with Jeni. "Call—him off before—he kills me!"

Although Mark's face turned scarlet, Jeni scampered out from under him, scanned the room and signed, *Where are you, Shadow?*

A high-piercing war cry ricocheted around in Mark's eardrums. "She doesn't even see me, Doc; she can't hear me. Miss Linson isn't aware of my ability to haunt you, now that you foolishly hung my mother's medallion around your lily-white neck. You see, Jeni hasn't been able to invite me into her subconscious dream world, hear me, or feel my sub-zero touch ever since the night you took her from her father's home."

Squeezing with frigid fingers, Shadow cut off all Mark's oxygen.

Something is wrong with Mark, Jeni signed frantically as Mark's face changed into a mottling purple. *It scares me!*

Shadow growled, but he released his death grip. "You will beg the lady's pardon, Fairview, then stay the hell out of her life!"

Coughing while gulping air into his deprived lungs, Mark rolled onto his back.

Shadow watched his reflection, the dark outline of a cowboy, glittering in the doctor's golden eyes. He rammed a frozen chunk of fist into Mark's belly, doubling the attempted rapist over onto his side. Another jab of ice cracked a rib. Crouching beside him, Shadow slammed an elbow into Mark's groin. Mark shrieked and welcomed blessed oblivion.

Sitting on the ground beside the unaware Jeni, Shadow waited until she started to sign, rapidly; the soft, southern-accented words tumbled out of her mouth just as quickly, only not what her graceful hands said. Her hands thanked him for somehow managing to intervene while her whispered words vowed to release him from the frozen silent land of cursed shadows.

He could hear her sexy voice for the first time in years. She sounded like an angel, but Jeni had no idea he could hear her as long as Fairview held claim to the medallion.

Shadow followed her to the bedroom, feeling more like a thief than a warrior, sneaking into her room while she trusted him to show himself. He truly couldn't, since his medallion hung around the horny doctor's neck; nevertheless, he couldn't leave either.

He settled into position at the back of the shower, envying the soap caressing, watching her touch ivory flesh. Reaching for her, his hand passed through her body.

Her face tilted directly into the stream of water under the showerhead while her shoulders shook with the sobs she thought she hid from everyone. It was the second time he'd seen her cry in ten years, cleaving his soul with the need to comfort her. Just as his ten years of powerlessness had ripped him asunder, unmanned him, with his need to protect her from hurt and insure she was never again afraid.

The water long ago cold, her skin glowing from a harsh scrubbing to remove Mark's touch, she left the shower with a towel wrapped around her. While working a pick through her long hair, Jeni noticed the note propped on the bed.

Sweet Jeni,

You should read this after we've made love. Forgive me for forcing the man you love to watch us, but it was the only way to free you from him. This condo is your wedding gift. You want children, so maybe the Fairview heir grows in your womb even now. I'll always love you!

As Shadow finished reading over her shoulder, Jeni sank to her knees. Unable to soothe her with his healing hands, his heart ached for her.

She threw back her head and alternated between begging God to free him, so he could give her a child, and raging against Heaven for allowing him to be cursed in the first place. Finally she hiccupped, opened her suitcase, and threw her belongings in it.

After Jeni called a cab, she marched toward Mark and dumped a pitcher of icy water onto his head. She smiled when he gasped and jerked upright, clutching his ribs before sputtering profanities.

"I loathe you, Fairview! Deal with it! I never want to see you again. Not ever. Do you understand me? No more stalking me. Stay the hell away from me!"

Shadow strengthened his link with Mark, sharpening the bastard's memory and pain into focus. "I-I, please, Jeni, I beg your forgiveness forCum, well—"

Slicing her hand through the air to connect with his cheek, Jeni supplied the word for which he had been searching. "*Rape*, Mark? Dr. Fairview, the attempted rapist. Oh how your colleagues would look up to you if they only knew."

Although she walked back a few steps, Jeni closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. "I'm sorry to hurt you, but I don't love you, Mark. I never did and I never will. I love Shadow. Accept it. You can do nothing to change that fact."

The intercom buzzed. A horn honked in the distance even as the doorman announced Jeni's taxi. She clicked the wall unit off and spun back toward Mark.

"You planted the seed to pretend you were Shadow. Very clever, doctor. I yearn and burn to make love with him." Her laughter rang hollow like she was disgusted with herself. "I'm in love with an Indian playing cowboy mixed into a curse as a shadow."

She extended her hand upon reaching the front door. "Give me *my* Shadow's medallion back. You were so wrong, Mark. I'm the selfish one; I keep him bound to me by an accursed medallion. You can't free me from him, but I can free him from you and me."

A sharp clanging sounded as the telephone rang. Mark scrambled to his feet and answered it while Jeni waited for her link with Shadow.

After hanging up the phone, Mark hobbled over to her. He dropped Shadow's golden jewelry around her neck and cupped her cheek. "Aunt Abby is dead."

CHAPTER THREE

Fall's season colored the Colorado mountains with every imaginable autumn color from God's master stroke of palette and brush. Jeni bumped along the off-road path in her new four-wheel drive land cruiser, heading toward the southern pasture of ranch land she now owned. Somewhere, Jeni knew Abby was cackling in her scratchy voice, watching Jeni try to adjust to being independently wealthy. Perhaps Jenifer Linson wasn't set for life, but she assuredly had enough to build her dream.

Hitting an especially deep rut, she glanced toward Shadow. He quickly signed his opinion of her driving abilities. Jeni snorted before replying with words and sign language—as always. "*Typical male! I'm sure you're correct about it being easier and more fun for you if we'd come on horseback. However, Mr. Cowboy, we weren't all born in the saddle.*"

He signed what else a man and woman could do in the saddle. A different sort of ride.

Too shocked to hide it, her mouth gaped. *"You've had sex on horseback?"* She mashed her molars together, jealousy striking her harder than Brenda had ever managed to do. *"Lucky ladies."*

When he started to describe it in detail, using his hands, she turned away from him. Trying to concentrate on driving, her stomach flip-flopped at the thought of him sliding her onto him, mounted atop his horse. "Tease," she grumbled under her breath.

Although secretly pleased that Abby had found the location and purchased Shadow's former homestead, Jeni wondered why Shadow didn't confide that the land she owned had been his. His house had long ago folded into a dilapidated heap on the ground, as had his stables and corrals.

She stopped and exited her vehicle. Shadow followed her exit, but through the closed door.

She smiled at him and twirled around in a circle, holding her hands above her head. "I love it! Can you believe Abby found this great tract of land? Some dude had a horse ranch here, back in the dinosaur era." Jeni signed what she'd just said, but added, *I guess this place is nearly as ancient as you, old man.*

Tilting up her head to the sun, she hooted as he playfully stalked her.

Shadow halted mid-step. Then he signed disjointedly, *This is all I can do to you! I want to throw you on the ground and drive into you until you convulse around me, screaming my name.* His head tilted toward Heaven for long minutes.

She waved her hands in front of the solid gray space of his shadowed face, to break into his thoughts. *"Hello in there? I asked if you'll choose the horses for me? Since I'm clueless how to ride, other than trail nags trained to follow a path no matter what the rider does, I don't think I'm necessarily the best choice to select gentle mounts for kids."*

Jeni stopped signing, fisted hands on hips, and spoke her disbelief aloud. "You don't approve of me running a summer camp for physically challenged deaf and mute children?"

When he didn't respond, she signed, *I can give those children more than physical therapy, Shadow. I can give them gentleness and love! Proven fact—children respond to loving acceptance while working with horses.*

Curling her lip, she shook her head. *"Fine! Don't help. I'll find another cowboy more willing to share his opinion of horseflesh."* She hurt, childishly striking to hurt him, since she wrestled with her Halloween secret, his birthday present. While she waited for his large hands to speak, his uncooperative attitude only concreted her decision to carry out her plan.

Although his outline heaved one broad shoulder in a careless shrug, the gesture was fraught with pain. *Will you find another like me, Jeni? I think not. Recall, I am half-Indian blood, half-gentleman blood, equaling a full-fledged warrior-cowboy. And this is all the intimacy I can offer you. Do you wish to replace me with a flesh and blood man?*

Staring toward the horizon, sadness tugged on her heartstrings and she whispered, "You're irreplaceable."

They returned to the building site for her resort. The pre-fab company and carpenters had arrived and started construction on a large log cabin house. Her own home. One without Shadow.

She and Shadow were camping in a tent. "Roughing it," she called it, but Shadow's shoulders shook with laughter.

Although he didn't need food, she did, and he wrapped his arms around his sides when she charcoaled her steak into a black lump of coal. *Well not everyone is Betty Crocker over an open campfire!* She smiled sweetly, wishing he had to try and eat the pathetic meal. *I am so pleased to entertain you to such extremes,* she signed.

Snuggled deep in her sleeping bag that night, with Shadow at her side, her stomach rumbled repeatedly in protest to no supper. Shadow picked up the frequent growling vibrations off the ground. She was starving. He didn't have to hide his grin since a shadow has no facial features. Even the poor coyote she tossed her steak toward, sniffed it, whined, and ran from her and it with his tail tucked. No doubt, Jeni wouldn't have survived in comfort in the nineteenth century. At least she wouldn't have starved, since he could cook over an open flame.

He sighed and closed his eyes, picturing how well she would have done under his gentle care. As his wife. He yearned to protect her, make her happy, and build a life together. *A real life. Damn it all to hell!*

Before dawn, Shadow stood next to the cold remains of her campfire, thinking of Jeni. She nearly froze last night as silent snowflakes piled upon the ground and the top of her little tent. Shadow had wanted nothing more than to hold

her against him. Although as a mere silhouette trapped in the frozen land of the cursed, if he still had the ability to touch her, then his touch would have been more frigid than the air around her.

Well, no nice way around it, he decided to stomp her pride and teach her the basic rules of surviving outdoors. If only he could do something, *anything*, but he couldn't touch or move a thing in this world. Instead, his shadow drifted through closed doors, people, and everything else like a damned phantom!

When the first pink streaks lit the sky, Jeni popped out of the tent. She hopped on first one sneakered foot and then the other as if to keep her circulation flowing. That must have maintained a tiny ray of heat, because she kept bopping and signed, "*Good morning, birthday boy!*"

Angling her head to one side, she rolled huge dark eyes when he denied it being his birthday. "*I know you refuse to have birthdays when you aren't growing any older than twenty-five, but I distinctly recall celebrating on Halloween every year.*" With a big evil grin, she cocked one eyebrow and curtsied before him. "*Isn't having a Halloween birthday why you said you look so scary?*"

Although she teased him, Jeni had made it perfectly clear that she truly could care less if behind his shadow lurked a man who frightened in the looks department. She genuinely loved him, mixed blood and all, for the complex man he was inside. Until Jeni, he had never known such unconditional acceptance and love.

Dressed in faded tight jeans, an oversized navy sweatshirt, and red high-top tennis shoes, she left her hair hanging down her back to her waist, the way he expressed he liked it best. He loved her hair. Mixed with auburn, pure strands of gold, and every imaginable color of brown, her thick tresses were as diverse as her personality.

"*Let's go,*" she signed and spoke.

They piled into her four-wheel drive land yacht and she slammed it into gear. "*I'm stopping for fast food, instead of repeating last night's fiasco. Then I've got a birthday surprise for you.*" After nearly crashing into a ditch, she put both hands on the wheel, silencing her sign language and her voice.

Riding for over an hour while snow fell again in near blizzard conditions, Shadow shifted restlessly in the seat. Something was very wrong with Jeni. Oh sure, she talked and smiled, but her smile never quite lost the sad edge. In fact, several times, he saw her blink rapidly to avoid spilling tears. "*What is your problem?*" he signed.

She flashed him an overly bright smile and shrugged.

His gut wrenched when he saw her driving toward Pikes Peak.

Fear. He could smell it. Hers and his.

Snow drifted across the closed road that led to Pikes Peak. She drove as close to the top as her four-wheel drive could plow.

Jeni hopped out and coiled a rope around her shoulder. Staring at her red shoes like they were the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen, she spoke and signed at the same time. *"Point out the cave where Moon Rising staked you to the ground, stabbed you, and stole your possessions before cursing you into the frozen land of silent shadows."*

After visibly struggling to regain her composure, she looked sad but determined eyes on him. *"Dammit, Shadow, show me!"*

When he finally complied with her request, she squinted through the blowing snow at the cave high above them. Then she immediately squeezed her temples. "I should've rented a helicopter." *What do I do with your possessions once we have them? Please tell me!*

Swiping off his hat, his eyes burned with the dark need to cry. Oh, Jeni love, please don't let me go. He slammed his hat angrily back in place before he signed, *I don't know. I swear it!*

Jeni nodded resignedly and worried her bottom lip as if she were deciding. Then placing one foot above the other, she started her climb to the cave where his life had been wrecked. She glanced down toward him and mouthed, "Please stay here."

Shadow slowly shook his head at her protective nature. That's my Jen.

Half way up, she threw down her gloves before the next faulty grip cost her life.

He watched her climb, fearing she would fall at any minute to her death. Jeni might have more courage and inner strength than any woman he'd ever known, but even in her early tomboy years, she'd never scaled a mountain. Jeni hated heights. Although he comprehended she wished to spare his feelings, plus his uselessness to grab her if she should slip, Shadow set his jaw. He was going after her.

Her arms tired from heaving her body up to another foothold, Jeni rested her forehead against the solid gray rock and panted. Big mistake. Without total concentration centered on climbing, the heartache ebbed and flowed, spilling over, raining sadness down her face. Even as her breath caught on a sob, she followed through with her decision to set her beloved free. What else did you give a cursed man on his birthday?

The little hairs raised on her neck as soon as Jeni reached her destination. She may have been only twelve when she met Shadow, but she vividly recalled the terror from the nightmare when she saw fuzzy bits and pieces of what happened to him in this very cave. Now though, it was only dark, cold, and lonely.

She dug in her back pocket for the flashlight stuffed there, then pointed the lighted beam into the cavern. After waving it back and forth across the floor, she froze in place. The four granite stakes where Moon Rising held Shadow captive were still embedded in stone. A streak of fear shot up her spine and she stopped fighting her tears.

Throwing her head back, Jeni raged at the long dead Arapaho priestess. "You damned evil bitch! How dare you do this to him?"

She slid her hand into the collar of her shirt and raised his medallion in her fist. "I'll beat you. I'll set Shadow free!"

Between the stakes on the cold stone floor, rusty-brown bloodstains mocked her. Scrubbing the dusty stains with a handful of sweatshirt, trying to erase the proof of his pain, she sobbed.

Shadow squatted beside her. Her chin quivered when she lifted her cold, tear-dampened, face. He pointed at the cursed bloodstains and Jeni recalled his words from long ago. "I was once a flesh and blood man. Real and not imaginary."

She acknowledged the remembrance with a snuffle and hiccup.

"It's not h-here, of course," she stammered while signing by habit. Taking tiny steps toward the ledge, Jeni added, "Your father said she pitched it over the cliff. I will find it, Shadow. You have my word; I'll break the curse before I leave this mountain. An ivory totem pole. How hard could it be to find?"

Indeed. On this giant snow-covered mountain, after more than a century, how hard could it be to locate a foot tall ivory statue? Shadow walked toward her, signing, while she looped and securely tied the rope over an icy boulder. *I'd rather*

be cursed and be with you, Jeni, than lose you and be set free. Please do not go through with this.

“Happy birthday, Shadow; I give you freedom.”

Audibly gulping, she peeked down the side of the cliff where she'd dreamt she fell with him. In childlike awe, she squeaked, "You *jumped* from here?" Heartless words, she decided, either spoken or signed. *Sorry, head rush. I'm allergic to heights. I would ask you to kiss me for luck, but . . .*

After a moment's silence, she hated to ask, to sign, but she needed to know. He'd jumped over a century ago. *"Do you feel cursed and alive . . . or umSdo you expect me to ahSfind you down there? You know, your b-bones?"* At least her fingers didn't stutter.

Shadow stepped close enough to whisper in her ear. Large gentle hands signed, *I love you, Jeni! Always remember that.* He closed the distance to the edge of the cliff. *I will go first.*

Jeni reached for him instinctively, despite the fruitlessness of it, before she dropped her arms back to her sides. She curled hands into fists; she didn't sign, yet demanded answers. "And how will you go first? We both know you can't use the rope!"

Jump. I did once before as you well know. Nothing can hurt a shadow. You wait until I see if I can find the Summerfield totem pole. That's what my father meant the statue to be, he signed. *A sculpture of me, one side as a warrior and one as a gentleman.*

Jeni tilted her head, straining to hear the distant rumble of masculine laughter, listening intently to a baritone whisper. "Long ago, I saw you in those clothes, your hands dripping blood into the snow. You lost your gloves. Do not bleed for me, Jeni."

"I can hear you, Shadow!"

"Yes, my sweet love, and I hear your sexy southern voice. Whew! You sound just like an angel. My gorgeous avenging angel come to free me from the silent frigid land of the cursed."

He lowered his shadowy face to hers. "Promise me . . . no matter what happens, forge ahead with your life. Fall in love and have the babies you so desire. Find a loving gentle man who will protect and cherish you as you so deserve. I want your husband to fire your blood, make passionate spontaneous love to you

until you lose all control and scream his name as he brings you to volcanic climaxes."

"Jeez, Shadow, you're impossible."

"Promise me!"

Jeni blinked rapidly, fighting her tears. "What will you do if I don't? Haunt me?"

She pointed at him, gesturing wildly. "You're saying goodbye, Shadow. I love *you!* You're the man I want. How can you expect me to promise what you're asking? I'll set you free from your curse, but I refuse to tell you goodbye."

"You, Jenifer Elizabeth Linson, are the true love of my life." Then he stepped off the edge.

"*Shadow!*" Her scream echoed off the mountain.

When she couldn't see him, or hear him, she tucked the rope under her belt and started down to the bottom of the crevasse. Rough hemp cut her forearm where she wrapped it to slow her descent. Pain shot through her hands as they burned, blistered, and popped. She ran out of rope and dropped. Landing hard in an undignified heap, she twisted her ankle. "Shadow?"

Out of the corner of her right eye, she thought she saw his ebony outline. She fished the flashlight from her back pocket and beamed it to her right. "Where are you? Allie allie all in free?"

With only a half day of sunlight left, she uttered a heartfelt prayer. Sliding her way along, she dug impatiently to unearth the Summerfield totem pole. She dug for hours. Fingers raw and freezing, Jeni closed her eyes, exhaled a white cloud of breath, and fortified her resolve.

She maneuvered to the farthest back corner on her right, where she thought she'd earlier seen movement in the shadows, and clawed at the packed snow. "Shadow! Please, *Shadow*, let me know where you are!"

After hearing shouts above her, Jeni listened for the echo. Male voices? . . . Gunfire? Stumbling to her feet, she tilted her head all the way back and tried to get a glimpse of what was happening above the cliff's rim. Three more steps backward, another gunshot. Another step and Jeni fell into a hole in the loose snow as the mountain rumbled above her.

Shrieking, she slipped backward into a hidden icy crack in the mountainside just as an avalanche of snow showered into the crevasse.

Cold. Jeni shivered as she regained consciousness. Silent. Her hand flexed. Something long and-and bone like!

No! Gasping for air, she opened her eyes. Buried alive? The avalanche! Shadow's silent frigid world of the cursed.

She clutched her fingers around the hard icy object. Stomach heaving, she forced her hand onto her lap. After her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she peeked. Her fingers had been bleeding, smeared on the—she smiled—ivory statue.

Comprehending her little pocket of air wouldn't hold out forever, Jeni fought her way to the surface while thanking God.

Night's darkness had descended and her flashlight was history.

Men's voices reached her. "Anyone down there?"

"Yes! Help!"

As lights and a rescue team lowered into the deep crevasse, Shadow's ivory statue slipped through her numb fingers.

Begging God to help her, she wiggled back into the narrow tunnel she'd scooped out only a short time ago. Immediately hurdled into darkness again, she patted the ice-encrusted snow and glacial rocks, frantic to recover the Summerfield totem pole.

Whew! She found it, firmly seizing the sub-zero surface and yanking her way to the men and lights peering down at her. Yet, she jerked to an almost immediate stop. She shot a glare down at the statue, but the scream that escaped her lips turned even the most stouthearted rescue men pale.

It wasn't the totem pole in her fingers, but a man's wrist!

One of the older members of the rescue team wrenched her out and deposited her a short distance away as they began to excavate the ice and snow away from the man. A knife, coated to the hilt with blood, was clenched in his frozen fist. The jagged gash on his abdomen gaped, revealing oozing innards.

Jeni stumbled a few feet away, fell to her knees, and puked.

Trembling, she weaved back to where the five men worked urgently to unearth the buried man. As one worker hopped out of the hole to trade places with another, Jeni jumped in first, horrified she did so.

Digging desperately, she found the Summerfield totem pole. Jeni stuffed it inside her shirt, and turned to wipe snow-crystal away from bluish-tinted skin by the man's mouth. After scraping away the frozen powder, she rested her ear against his bare chest. "He's alive! . . . Barely."

The rescue and helicopter ride to the hospital blurred reality. Both the recovered man and Jeni had been strapped to stretchers and winched out of the crevasse.

One of the paramedics was saying something to her, but the alluring face, exposed above the blankets on the nearly frozen man, captured her. What was she thinking? It was too dark to see more than his silhouette. She must have frostbite on the brain! Shaking her head, she concentrated on the paramedic's words.

"You know Halloween. That's why we figured those young men fired at the overhanging snow and set off the avalanche. Good thing one of them made it to help, so we could save the rest."

The young trauma team member continued. "You're not dressed in a costume, so I guess you weren't a part of it. Your friend over there," hitching his thumb toward the stranger on the stretcher, "He's surely lucky they heard you holler for help. Can't imagine dressing like that even if it is Halloween. Deep-freezes my balls—excuse me—to imagine it! We figure his knife got him during the avalanche, but it's a mystery about how he got frozen in all that ice."

Although Jeni struggled against it, her eyes drooped heavily. "Huh?"

"Don't fight it, Miss. The shot I added to your IV ought to make you plumb-relaxed and stress free. Go on to sleep. Don't worry about your boyfriend."

"Hmm? Not . . . my boyfriend."

"Okay then, don't fret about your husband."

The solid blue curtain hung closed around the other patient in her room, but Jeni didn't care if she disturbed the entire hospital. After coming to, she discovered she'd been unconscious for five days! At this moment, she verged on murdering the nurses hovering around her when she woke. "Tell me what you did with the ivory statue inside my sweatshirt and the golden medallion around my neck! How dare you remove it?"

Nurse Rose patted her forearm. "Now, dear, hospital policy, don't you know? We'll return them when you're discharged."

Jeni threw off her blankets. White bandages covering her hands aggravated her speed. "I'm about ready to bash heads until you return *both*. Now!"

After one quick jerk, the IV needle and tape pulled free from the top of her hand, emancipating her to stand. The discomfort was minimal, since she had acquired a high tolerance to pain as a child under Brenda's 'care.' Jeni fisted hands on hips, tapped her foot impatiently, and demanded, "Well? Blame it on PMS or being buried alive, but I'm fresh out of patience!"

Nurse Rose huffed from the room before returning shortly with the medallion and the statue. Also three orderlies. "I'll place these on the table beside you, dear. You're overwrought. Either get back in that bed and let us give you a sedative, or I'll have the orderlies strap you down."

"Oh yeah? Just try—"

A departing doctor yanked open the blue curtain beside the other patient's bed. Jeni whipped her head toward the unexpected noise. Amused ebony eyes impaled her before probing gently as if knowing her innermost thoughts. Her roommate was a man. He winked!

Nurse Rose continued. "You see? You've disturbed your husband. Or is he your boyfriend? Neither of you had a stitch of identification and he barely had a stitch of clothes. Young people these days, I swear!"

The elderly nurse pointed at Jeni. "Well, are you going to calm down and get back into bed, or must we force you?"

Cold air hit her naked backside. Jeni looked down at the hospital gown. Hot fluid sizzled her face. She jerked the back closed, shot the man in the other bed a venomous glare, and hopped into her bed with a mighty huff.

While answering the questions on the hospital forms, she avoided looking toward the stranger and disregarded his steamy stare.

When the nurse asked for his information, Jeni threw her bandaged hands into the air. "How would I know?" Peeking at him, she froze. Once more she got no further than his eyes. Those black eyes—not that she'd ever seen ebony eyes before, but earlier, they seemed to regard her with warmth, glowing with gentleness. Now they were cold inky slits, glowering past Jeni toward the doorway.

"I'm your doctor, Jenifer, but don't scare me like this ever again."

She groaned, "Mark. Maybe I've died and gone to hell? That explains everything. I assure you, *Dr. Fairview*, I'm fine. Discharge me. Now!"

Pulling the curtain closed around her, Mark grinned. "Sorry, Jeni. I need to examine you, *again*, before you can be discharged."

"Damn you, Mark! If you so much as touch me, I'll blab all to your colleagues about your *bedside* manner."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. He glanced at the medallion in her hands and rocked back on his heels. "Blackmail, Miss Linson? I wouldn't advise it. I'll commit you to the psyche ward."

"What?"

"You were about to scream for Shadow again, weren't you? Since no one can see him, the scientific community would be hard-pressed to believe even someone as beautiful as you."

Still making no attempt to touch her, he leaned toward her face. "So who's the boyfriend the rescue team found with you? Pretty slick, especially for you, Miss Proper, to convince the paramedic team he's your husband just to share a room."

She heard nothing past Mark speaking Shadow's name. Jeni slid bandaged hands over her face and attempted to stifle the low moan of pain erupting from her heart. Shadow! Oh, *God*, she was going to die of a broken heart!

Mark pulled battered hands away from her face. "What in the name of all that's holy is the matter with you?" He appeared ready for an explanation, but seemed terrified when she thrust the medallion into his hands.

Her voice cracked, not caring if anyone heard her pleading. "Please, Mark, can you see him? Can you see Shadow? I wanted to break the curse, but I don't know how!"

She laughed bitterly, driven by heartache edged in desperation. "I haven't seen him since he leapt off the edge of the cliff! See," Jeni pointed toward the table. "The Summerfield totem pole, I found it. Discharge me, immediately. I've got to go back into that crevasse—Ow!"

Mark stepped away from her with the hypodermic needle still in his hand. He dropped the medallion on her lap. "You should be getting sleepy. Sorry, babe, you can't leave. You're hysterical! No telling what you'd do."

"Please, Mark," she rasped, fighting the heaviness of her lids, "Have to—find Shadow. Need him. Love . . . him."

After opening the curtained partition, Mark paused to brush the bangs from her closed eyes. He started to walk away, but his gaze caught on the accursed medallion. Despite the hate-filled glower coming from Jeni's new boyfriend, Mark hefted the medallion in his right hand. While scanning the room, he switched it into his left hand. "Nothing."

Mark walked backward to the open door and looked both ways down the corridor. "No more Shadow!"

Grinning like a fool, he tossed the necklace by the woman who he loved and shut off all the lights. He happily shuffled his feet with a merry whistle for accompaniment. At the doorway, he stopped and whispered, "You'll be mine if it's the last thing I do."

Thrashing her head on the pillow, Jeni slurred Shadow's name. Despite the sedative, the deep ache inside her chest felt as if her heart had shattered into ten thousand tiny pieces. She fought the drug and blinked her eyes. The room was dark and smelled strange. A hospital!

Shaking her head to clear the fuzziness didn't work, so she tried rubbing the sleep from her puffy eyes. Jeni turned her head and smiled. There, on the other bed!

"Shadow." Her voice sounded husky to her own ears. "I thought you didn't need sleep? What have you done with your hat?" After sliding off her bed, she staggered toward him. "You scared me. I thought you'd left me. I need you, Shadow."

Reaching his bed, she bumped into the side. The sedative kicked in again. Leaning over him, she laughed. "Covers and all, huh? I'm dreaming again, right?"

Inhaling deeply, she purred, "Mmmm! You smell *very* sexy. Hey, I've never been able to smell your masculine scent before this. Nice dream! *Big* turn on. Will I ruin it all and awaken if I kiss you?"

She lowered her mouth and lightly touched her lips to his. Heat! "You're not cold."

Moving her mouth over his again, she pressed harder and parted her lips as his tongue plunged into her mouth. He growled low in his throat. Jeni's control snapped upon hearing his pleasure.

Cupping one gauze-wrapped hand on his face, she smoothed the other over his muscular chest for balance. It was like caressing a lightening bolt. Contact with his body scorched her, shooting sparks of mind-numbing lust, coiling white-hot desire into her stomach. Dueling with his tongue, hotly, wildly, deeply, Jeni moaned as her breasts tingled.

The lights snapped on and Nurse Rose clucked her tongue. "Really now, Miss Linson! His heart and pulse rates are racing and setting off all kinds of beeping alarms in the nurses' station. I thought he was having some sort of relapse!"

Biting her lower lip, Jeni almost wished this were a dream. Yet, her bandaged hand rested above his rapidly thudding heart. Hating to, she glanced down at the hospital band around his wrist. Sure enough, it was the patient sharing her room.

Snatching back her hands, she clamped her eyes shut and heat blazed up her neck to set her face on fire. Stammering, she backed away from him. "I-I thought you were—um, you see, I was—ah . . . dreaming?"

Rolling her eyes, the nurse switched off the lights and admonished them to wait until they were discharged.

"That's the second time you've let me embarrass myself in front of you," Jeni hissed. "Why the blue bloody blazes didn't you speak up this time? Well?"

He took a deep breath but simply shook his head from side to side.

"Crap! Cat got your tongue?"

Cocking his wrist, he signed out the letters, *No, but you did.*

Gasping in outrage, Jeni raked her bandaged hand down her face.

She swayed to the foot of his bed and boldly snatched up his chart. After turning successive pages and squinting in the dark, she replaced his medical records. "I am quite thoroughly ashamed."

Frowning, she replayed what she'd read. Severe puncture wound by a knife in the upper abdomen resulted an excessive loss of blood, although his

hypothermia stanching the flow until his body temperature raised. Neurological tests showed little muscle response. Possible brain damage from the loss of oxygen. Amnesia.

"John Doe. How original." Through the deep shadows of darkness, she studied him. "You don't look like a John."

He scowled at her.

"I see you don't care for it, either. That's not your name is it?"

His head shook negatively, once.

"Do you know your name?"

He smiled at her as if she were the one with amnesia.

Not a bit pleased with the way he was staring at her, smiling at her, she blew out her cheeks with silent exasperation. "Well, I'm zonked. Good night, . . . mister."

Even before her thoughts returned to Shadow, Jeni glanced over at 'John Doe' in the other bed. Great! He was staring at her. Still . . . something about him. Not the way his kiss or a whiff of his too-sexy scent affected her, or the lust raging about her body, but Lord have mercy there was something about that man.

Sighing heavily, she shut her eyes. Jeni silently vowed to help him back to whoever he was before their accident on the mountain.