

# **NEVER SURRENDER**

By

Deanna Jewel

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my family and daughters, *Lisa* and *Lauren*, who stood behind me during the writing of this work and always believed that one day I would be in print. Thank you so much for your love, understanding and encouragement and for putting up with me during vacations to Wyoming and the constant quizzing on history as we traveled.

Thank you to fellow author, *Patricia A. Rasey*, for your critiques during the writing of this work. Your input and suggestions only made the use of my senses more intense. I miss you immensely.

Thank you to *Millie Ingram* for your critiques in the final edits of this work and for helping me to correct the remaining mistakes that were still there after so many other edits. I loved your input.

Thank you to *Jon Dayley*, Professor of Linguistics at Boise State University for translating some of my dialogue to the Shoshone language. We talked a long time ago but I knew one day I'd be able to thank you. You helped add life to my characters and make my dream become a reality. I am forever grateful.

To the *Shoshone Nation*, I hope I have given a fair view of your people and your language, thank you.

To my husband, *John*, I thank you for your continued support and encouragement for me to never give up my dream of being published. You have made so many dreams happen for me. *I love you!*

## Chapter One

July, 1997 Dubois, Wyoming

Katelyn Bradach shaded her eyes and glanced around in awe at the western town, just one more of several she hoped to tour. Managing the historical museum, especially the Native American section, back in Pennsylvania had stressed her this year and this laidback town would help her relax.

Perhaps her haunting nightmares would subside now, hoping they were just a carryover from her job. Too often she'd dreamed of a warrior who sat atop a sleek black horse as thick mist from the lake swirled around him. The surrounding valley lay nestled before two snow-capped mountains. She could never clearly see his features, but his dark hair touched the middle of his bare chest and two eagle feathers hung from his headband. He always appeared to stare at her, but never once did he nudge his horse to move closer, yet one hand reached out to her.

Though she couldn't make out the color of his eyes, his gaze sent her heart racing, made her breath catch in her throat. The dream always left her with sensual tingles along her moist skin each time she woke up. The passion created by the dream disturbed her, since nothing ever happened except when their gazes met. Then it was as though she could read his thoughts of how much he needed her, wanted her for his own. She would always wake up trembling and out of breath but the dream never changed nor finished.

Would she find her warrior out here? Something had drawn her west, yet she couldn't put her finger on it but the pull was extraordinary.

Strolling along the wooden walkways, the heels of her dark snakeskin boots echoed. The design of the mid-1800s town looked like a movie set from an old western and it suited Kate. She smiled as she looked around at the peaceful town. The warm morning air smelled of fresh rain and held a hint of sagebrush. An old stagecoach rumbled by, rocking on the huge iron wheels, and three youngsters sat on top joyously waving to their parents who waited at the ticket area.

The large window of the local Mercantile General Store displayed Native American-made moccasins, colorful dream catchers and jewelry, cowboy hats and boots. Kate stepped in and joined the few customers who milled about the wooden-floored store. The smell of leather came from the boots and saddlebags in the tack area on her left. After browsing over linens, knickknacks, and souvenirs, she headed toward a rack of sweatshirts near the checkout.

A deep velvety voice froze Kate and she rested her hand atop a sweatshirt. Familiarity astounded her as she listened. Her heart raced as though she'd just awakened from the dream and those images of the warrior atop his horse flooded her mind's eye. Was it possible for souls to travel through time and reunite more than one hundred years later? She supposed anything was possible when one believed in soul reincarnation.

"Thank you," the man said in an unhurried manner. "I've been waiting a long time for these."

A sack crinkled. He must have picked it up, she thought.

"Any time, Brandon, you know I'm more than happy to do what I can for you," the sales girl said.

At the sound of his retreating boot steps, still breathless, Kate glanced over her shoulder in the man's direction. The sales girl didn't bother to hide her dreamy stare as she watched the man

saunter toward the door. A dark brown duster draped his tall frame, a matching Stetson upon his head. Straight, black hair hung past his shoulders. Something about the stranger made her body tingle the same way her dream affected her. Realization hit. Could there be some connection?

Kate's heart pounded, and she could barely breathe. She took a few moments to compose herself, then glanced back at the sales girl and waited for her attention. "Who is he?"

"Brandon Wakiza. His Shoshone heritage gives him those handsome dark features and every unmarried woman in Dubois is vying for his attention, but he mostly keeps to himself on his ranch. He usually only comes into town once a week." The girl placed Brandon Wakiza's money in the register.

Kate thanked her and stepped out onto the wooden walkway as she mulled over her reaction to a total stranger. That he should cause her heart go out of control and make her unable to breathe was ridiculous. Those reactions only happened in her dream. She glanced up and down the street. The man was nowhere to be found. Both relief and disappointment shifted through her. She took a deep breath and decided not to dwell on the stranger. She was here to relax and get away from her life for a while. A gift shop of Indian articles caught her eye. Putting thoughts of the stranger behind her, Kate opened the door.

She gasped.

Brandon Wakiza stood not three feet away.

Again, Kate couldn't breathe. *Who was he and why did his presence have such an effect on her?* She watched him as a sense of familiarity shrouded her. He looked so much like the sensual warrior in her dream who watched her from afar though she'd never seen his eyes in her dream. Her pulse raced as pieces of her dream floated through her mind like a haunting mist.

Brandon Wakiza counted money, his long, work-roughened fingers stretched out. Nodding at something the clerk said, a smile firmed the muscles of his chiseled jaw; the brim of his hat blocked his eyes from her view. He placed the rest of his change into his snug pants pocket, drawing Kate's glance down to the sinewy thighs beneath the close-fitting jeans. She'd hate to be caught staring but he was gorgeous.

When she looked up from his sinewy thighs, she was unprepared for the shock of meeting his gaze full-force. Kate reached out for the counter for support. The blue of his eyes penetrated clear to her soul, calling to her. Tiny hairs stood up on the back of her neck. It was as though the two of them communicated without words, almost being pulled toward one another. Was he the man from her dream? He looked back at her for a long, intense moment, and then he smiled. For that moment, she felt he knew her deepest thoughts and her cheeks heated.

To her surprise, he spoke to her. "Do I know you? You look so familiar, like we've met before. Perhaps the spirits have guided you to me."

"No, I'm just here on vacation." She smiled, but wished with all her heart she'd met him before. Then again, maybe the spirits did guide her here. Crossing behind him to the back of the store, she continued shopping but she'd never forget his blue eyes. The spicy scent of his cologne surrounded her. A scent she would forever link to this unknown stranger. Her spine still tingled as she thought of her warrior and the way he made her skin damp each time she'd woken up, wanting more of him, needing him to touch her, but the dream never went that far. She longed for those touches, and then fantasized about the stranger touching her, his fingers tingling along her skin, and her nipples tightened. Taking a deep breath, Kate tried to ignore those around her.

After Brandon moved toward the door, Kate stepped forward to look at something on the counter. The Native American clerk watched her though he kept busy.

Kate laid a beaded necklace on the counter and fumbled in her purse for money. "I'm traveling through on vacation. Is there an area around here with a lake near two mountains?" She prayed he would give her at least some information about the location she sought and not send her to another town. If she found the lake with the two mountains then she'd know she was closer to finding the meaning of her dream. The connection she felt toward Brandon easily compared to what she felt for her warrior. Hoping she was correct, Kate anxiously waited for the clerk's directions.

His eyes lit up like lanterns within his weathered face as he rung up her sale. "That would be Brook's Lake, north of town beyond Union Pass."

Excited, Kate pressed further. "Can you tell me anything about the petroglyphs on a boulder in the hills south of town? I saw them as I drove around earlier." From her work at the museum, petroglyphs were a big part of the Indian culture centuries ago.

"You speak of Whiskey Basin. The markings have been there for centuries. There are more paintings up in that area. Be careful wandering around those parts, though. The rocks can be dangerous for someone climbing alone."

"Thank you, I'll be careful. I'm anxious to see them up close." Kate quickly placed her change back into her purse as she headed toward the door. An uncanny sense of being watched made her glance up in time to stop herself from crashing into Brandon where he leaned against the door frame.

She stared into his blue eyes in silence for nearly a full minute, still feeling the electrical charge between them. She wanted to speak but couldn't.

He smiled and spoke first. "I'm Brandon Wakiza. I couldn't help but hear you ask about Brook's Lake and the petroglyphs at Whiskey Basin. I know this area like the back of my hand and I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have about the petroglyphs."

"Thank you. I'm Kate Bradach." Brandon's presence definitely influenced her reactions, making her feel like a wanton. But why? She had to find out and what better way than to spend time with him in town. Kate gave the handsome stranger a sideways glance. She smiled and took a deep breath, scolding herself for being so ridiculous. "I do have a few questions."

Brandon stepped out of her way and held the door open.

His hand touched her waist as he ushered her out the door and she caught her breath. Calming herself, she stepped onto the wooden sidewalk unable to believe her luck. Thoughts of the warrior reincarnated drifted through her brain. Her heart raced with excitement thinking she may have found him.

"I manage a Native American department at a museum back in Pennsylvania and I find everything about their cultures so interesting. I'd love to hear whatever you can tell me about the petroglyphs at Whiskey Basin."

He smiled down at her. "There are many legends about the Basin and how the drawings came to be. Of course, we'll never really know. They're just stories passed down from our elders. I belong to the Shoshone Nation. We've been in this area for hundreds of years."

Gazing into a shop window, she saw a beautiful lodge pole bed. "That's gorgeous. I'd love to have furniture like that but it would be so out of place back in Pittsburgh." Kate noticed the sales tag on the bed and leaned closer to see it. The tag showed the name of the company, then the builder's name – Brandon Wakiza. Her gazed quickly met his.

He presented her with a full smile. "All this is hand-made by Red Bird Furniture at the north end of town. I'm good friends with the owner and we built all this furniture ourselves," Brandon said with pride. "I've also furnished my home with it."

“The furniture is beautiful. I love that this type of furniture is like bringing a bit of nature indoors.”

“We’ve had movie stars purchase from us and people as far away as Alaska and New York. Most of our business is by word of mouth so their friends have called too.”

Kate and Brandon walked on, heading back toward her Trailblazer. As they walked, he slipped off his duster and slung it over his shoulder, wafting the spicy scent of his cologne her way. Smiling to herself, she still couldn’t believe she might be with the warrior from her dreams.

“You’re very easy to talk to,” she said, pushing up the sleeves of her sweatshirt from her wrists. Tourists over-dressed as cowboys passed them, their gazes taking in the length of her. She smiled at them as they strolled by but chuckled to herself at their silly outfits.

Gently biting her lower lip, she took in a deep breath of sagebrush-scented air and enjoyed her walk with Brandon. He seemed to be very genuine in helping to answer her questions. She remembered the muscled thighs beneath the taut blue jeans as the breeze brought the scent of his cologne her way. Brandon definitely had an effect on her senses.

She quickly glanced at Brandon, hoping he didn’t notice the heated blush creeping up her neck to her face. Why did his very presence create the reaction she had experienced in the Mercantile General Store? Or worse yet, her reaction to him in the second store when his blue eyes penetrated to her very soul? She definitely couldn’t tell Brandon why she was in town, he’d think she was nuts.

She couldn’t wait to call her friend, Monica, to tell her who was with her and to discuss the change in her dream last night. The warrior had actually coaxed his horse forward toward her. That had never happened in the dream. Monica had encouraged her to come out west to see if the area might hold the answers that she sought, but it held way more than that for Kate. Her mind raced with anticipation at what this new friendship with Brandon might mean, though it was all too soon to tell yet.

Kate looked around. “People back in Pittsburgh have no idea this way of life still exists here in America; it even surprises me. No one hurries, or is rushing to an appointment, or making a mad dash for a parking spot. The slower pace agrees with me; it’s a nice change from home.”

Kate stopped at her Trailblazer, hating that she would soon have to say goodbye as she glanced up at Brandon. God, he was handsome. His blue gaze entranced her, making her speechless, yet there were so many questions she wanted answers to. “This is my car. I should go now. I’d like to head over to Whiskey Basin.”

“I’d hate to think our time together is over so soon today,” Brandon said as he leaned back against another car.

“I’ve enjoyed talking with you and I want to know more about the petroglyphs. Can you tell me about them?”

\* \* \* \*

Brandon adjusted his hat as he took a better look at Kate. Her petite frame and long legs had drawn his immediate attention back in the store. The emerald green of her eyes, set in the face of an angel, complemented her long dark hair. He liked her curiosity of their town. Though she was a total stranger, she seemed so familiar to him.

Then he recalled what his grandfather had told him long ago when he’d been given a gold ring with emerald stones. It was tethered on a piece of leather he now wore around his neck tucked under his shirt. His tribal legend had it that each son would pass this ring on to his son

and one day a woman would claim the ring as her own. Brandon noticed that Kate happened to wear a similar ring. The stones matched her eyes, he thought. "I hope you don't mind me being so forward. Normally, I'm not. I'd like to offer you and your traveling companion a tour of the area."

Kate tipped her head in confusion. "Offer us a tour? I'm not traveling with anyone."

Brandon squinted his eyes in the sun as if he were taken by surprise. "You can't possibly be here alone...are you?"

Kate didn't answer right away but turned toward her Trailblazer to unlock the door. "Yes, I came out west alone on vacation." Opening the door, she tossed her purse across the seat then smiled at him openly. "Does being alone disqualify me from a tour?"

Her eyes twinkled when she smiled. He laughed but also wondered who would let this beautiful woman travel across the United States alone? Did she not have a boyfriend or husband back home? He replied with a smile of his own, one that he hoped would put her at ease. "Certainly not. Where would you like to start?"

"At Whiskey Basin and learn whatever you can tell me about them. I'll drive, if it's all right."

"I think that's a good idea," Brandon agreed, realizing she would be in control of her situation then. Spending the afternoon with her would be fun and he could get to know her better. Getting into the car, Kate unlocked the doors and moved her purse. Brandon got in, tossed his duster in the backseat, and stretched his long legs in front of him. He noticed that Kate watched him and he smiled to himself. Her light perfume filled the car, throwing off his train of thought. Laughing to himself at how easily he was affected, Brandon buckled his seatbelt, as did Kate.

"Can I buy you a coffee before we head out of town? The drive-through coffee shop near the Branding Iron Inn is run by a friend of mine." A large chocolate-almond latte sounded great to Brandon. Kate pulled into The Pony Espresso, run by Prudy, a good friend of his parents.

"Hi Brandon, nice to see you today. Where you headed?"

"Out to Whiskey Basin to check out the petroglyphs," he said. "Kate is here on vacation and interested in them."

\* \* \* \*

While she waited for their order, Kate glanced at Brandon. The dark T-shirt he wore fit him like a second skin. She moistened her lips.

A gorgeous smile crossed his face. "I feel as though we've already met. It's uncanny," he said.

"I don't want you to think I always allow strangers in my car, but...I also had that same feeling. I'm comfortable with you. Thank you for going out to the basin with me."

The cheerful woman inside passed Kate the hot drinks. When Brandon took his cup, his fingers happened to cover Kate's and an electric shock traveled up her arm, straight to her heart. She nearly jerked her hand away, and hoped he hadn't noticed. Those same warm feelings from her dream came rushing back, the one's she'd felt when she'd dreamt of the warrior upon his horse. The similarities between Brandon and the warrior stunned her.

Steam seeped through the hole in the lid. She took small sips of the delicious latte and headed toward the petroglyphs using Brandon's direction.

Kate drove south as she rolled down her window while current cattle prices echoed from the radio, but her thoughts were on the man beside her and how fate worked the events in her life lately. "I'd like to be able to take some valuable information back to the museum with me about the rock drawings."

“They are said to be thousands of years old. Some of the elders still come here for their rituals.”

Clouds filled the afternoon sky. Darker ones floated above the distant, snow-capped mountains. She could detect rain beneath them, or possibly snow, forming an eerie mist that cloaked the high mountaintops. Out here, the weather seemed to change quickly. A sudden drop in temperature cooled the interior of Kate’s car, making her glad she’d worn a sweatshirt. Her jacket lay on the back seat should she need it during her walk among the rocks.

She turned right onto the narrow road leading up over a hill and into a small open meadow filled with tall grasses, sagebrush and pink, spotted knapweed. This is where she’d seen the painted boulder earlier and pulled off the trail, parking near the huge rock. The quiet wilderness cloaked Kate with a sense of serenity as she enjoyed the hot latte. Jagged, red rocky hills on the right jutted into the sky, some areas being smoothed by weather over time, others were sharp protruding crags. She wondered if petroglyphs would be there also.

“This area is filled with ancient drawings.” Brandon sipped his coffee.

Kate snapped her head around to look at him. Could he possibly read her thoughts? His seductive voice distracted her. Before he could see her reaction, she stepped from the SUV. Grabbing her jacket, she shut the door, and glanced in the opposite direction. Brandon shut his door.

Dead silence.

No horseback riders roamed in the vicinity, not even antelope or big horn sheep, though a crow cawed in the distance, then quickly flew away. The wind blew her hair into her face and she brushed it away.

Dark clouds descended over the meadow as the cool wind increased, and blew through Kate’s sweatshirt, sending chills down her spine. Setting her cup on the hood of the car, she shrugged into her green canvas jacket and pulled the collar about her neck.

Brandon looked up. “Storms out here come upon us fast.”

He now stood beside her, pointing out the area and she realized how tall he was. “Many of the drawings are up along the higher hills. You have to go up there if you want to see them, but its well worth the hike. Tribes would come here and paint their drawings of deer, buffalo and other tribesmen of their time. Most of these are thousands of centuries old yet have withstood the weather through centuries. Stories can be put to some paintings while others depict the fun nature of the Native American and their way of life.”

“Are there any down here?” Kate asked.

“Some, but you really have to look. Not all the sites are marked for the tourists. It’s said many lovers also came here to paint together, to enjoy the serenity of the basin.”

Brandon placed his hand on Kate’s shoulder, leaned closer and pointed up into the hills at more rock pictures. Kate followed the direction of his finger while at the same time enjoying his closeness. She took a step closer to him to see better where he pointed. Peacefulness settled inside Kate. A comfort level if that was possible with a stranger she’d only met today.

She strode toward the huge boulder. A four-foot tree grew not more than ten inches away on the left side, its leaves fluttering in the wind. “Look, the tree’s branches grow on the opposite side of the rock, yet none grow next to the boulder, as if it has somehow prevented the tree’s growth.”

Glancing at the swift-moving dark clouds, Kate pulled the collar of her jacket tighter around her neck. Wind whipped through the tall grasses around her, whispering a dangerous message of its own; possibly the spirits telling her to leave while she could.

“There are many things in this basin that can’t be explained. Many of my people believe some of the warriors’ spirits still live here. Can you sense it?”

Dare she tell him that she could definitely feel it? She listened intently as he told her of the area and his people. She wondered what it might have been like in this area so many years ago. Brandon interested her and she wanted to learn more about him. He had a reverence about him as he talked of his people. She immediately respected him for that. “I can feel there’s a quiet difference here. It’s almost eerie.”

Stepping toward a stone, she knelt in front of it, and sat on her heels. Running her fingers up the boulder-side of the small tree trunk, the smooth bark held no protrusion of previous branches, as though the tree knew better than to thrust an intruding arm toward the rock. To Kate, a few of the rock pictures resembled creatures from outer space more than they did ancient Indian drawings but they were all interesting.

The centuries-old paintings on the granite beckoned her. She touched the cold, bumpy rock, her fingers caressing the ancient elk and big horn sheep drawings. Though the force of the cool wind increased, the stone seemed to grow warm beneath her hand.

Lightning flashed across the sky; thunder boomed in the distance.

When she placed both hands on the warm petroglyphs, an immediate dizziness overwhelmed her. She closed her eyes, not understanding why, but knowing she needed to. A radiating sensation crept up her arms, questing into her body as if trying to find a perch. She tried to remove her hands, but couldn’t. They were well and truly stuck. Thunder crackled again and the wind increased. Her breathing tore through her lungs fast and hard. She tried to calm herself with sane thoughts of home. This was just a dream. No more, no less. When stray tendrils of hair stung her face as they escaped her braid, she had to face reality. This was not a dream.

The dizziness grew, swirling inside her body like an arrow shot in a circular storm. Higher and higher, faster and faster it swam insider her. There was no beginning or no end to the torment. The swirling would keep on going forever unless she could stop it. But how? Her fingers tightened on the boulder. Was this the strength of the spirits in this basin? Were they trying to tell her something? Perhaps to leave the area? Kate winced at the sensation drifting over her, depleting her ability to fight off the impending sense of helplessness. The wind circled around her, and she tried to open her eyes, to take her hands from the rock again, but the dizziness pulled her further into its dark abyss. She wanted to cry out for help but her lips wouldn’t form the words.

She wondered again if it was the warriors’ spirits taking hold of her. Suddenly the dream images appeared behind her closed eyes. The warrior beckoned her, but this time nudged his horse and moved toward her. She could see how blue his eyes were and their gazes connected. She wanted to know more when it all disappeared with another crack of thunder. No! She had to see the rest of the dream!

Her mind went blank. She couldn’t pull her hands away and panic replaced fear. Had she made a mistake in coming here, digging into something that may be better left alone? Kate chided herself on always wanting to push the envelope, to know more than perhaps she should be seeking. She should not have tempted fate by touching the rocks and this was the spirit world’s way of telling her.

Then still with her eyes closed, visions of an Indian raid appeared. They attacked a wagon train of settlers, fighting for their lives, men protecting their women and children. She could almost hear their screams; almost feel the arrows tear at her flesh.

Then it was too late.

Something hard and unforgiving smashed into her forehead. The pain was swift and sharp. “Brandon . . .” she cried out in a hoarse voice. Then the swirling blackness that had tried to consume her finally did.

She couldn’t seem to sit upright and her head hit against the rock, blackness consuming her.

## Chapter Two

1835, Rocky Mountains

Suddenly a mass confusion of guns, flying arrows and hair-raising screams surrounded Kate as fear exploded in her brain. Raiding Indians attacked frightened people dressed in pioneer-type clothing, running in all directions. Arrow-riddled bodies lay scattered around her. Savage war cries rent the dust-clouded air.

Kate shook her head, bewildered. She’d wake up shortly, wouldn’t she? The bullets and arrows whizzing by her head seemed so real, and she stood smack in the middle of it.

Taking a deep breath to control her state of panic, she glanced all around her. Being abducted by rampaging Indians didn’t appeal to her, dream or no dream.

Behind her, more screams rose above the confusion while she ducked to avoid the arrows flying past her. Gunfire from the settlers made her cover her ears. She needed to find shelter. Quickly scanning the area again, she spotted covered wagons across the way and dug in the heels of her snakeskin boots as she sprinted toward them, still dodging arrows and horses alike. Fear ignited her adrenaline like a stick of dynamite; she had to make it around the wagon’s far side.

Kate turned her head to see a painted warhorse galloping toward her. Though she met the mounted warrior’s fierce dark eyes for the briefest of moments, she would never forget the horrid scar that slashed through his brow and down his cheek, missing his eye. Holding up his rifle, he shrieked a battle cry, and urged his horse forward. Kate barely escaped his far-reaching arm as she ducked and forced herself to run faster. Another warrior let out a cry as he held up a woman’s bloodied scalp of long dark hair--his war trophy from among the many dead bodies. She prayed not to be their next victim.

Darting around the wagon with relief, she leaned against its solid wooden side, her chest heaving with every breath. Her raw throat made her cough and she struggled to moisten her dry, dust-coated lips.

Where could she possibly be in this day and age that Indians would be shooting arrows at her? This had to be another dream, a very vivid dream, and she wanted it to end. Why was this continuing rather than her waking up?

She brushed back her hair just in time to see an arrow being aimed straight toward her. As she jumped away from the wagon, the arrow slammed into the wood, narrowly missing her shoulder. Now she stood in the open. The swirling dust choked and blinded her.

From behind, pounding horse hooves vibrated the ground beneath her boots. A muscular arm snaked out from nowhere, lifted her onto his horse and back against a rock-hard chest. She twisted her head only to meet the gaze of the scarred warrior’s.

“Noooo! Put me down!” She kicked and scratched frantically, but he held fast. She had to wake up from this nightmare, yet the terror was too real; his chest too hard. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t scream. Fear gripped her as the horse galloped away amongst five other mounted warriors while she was jostled about, thinking she’d be tossed and trampled beneath the massive hooves.

In front of her, arrows penetrated the backs of two of the warriors, and they fell from their horses. She stretched to look back over her captor's shoulder. Two more Indians thundered toward them with bows drawn. These Indians differed from her captors, but she couldn't say how.

Kate screamed as the two released their arrows at her and her captor.

One struck the scarred Indian's leg, tumbling them from his horse. The fall knocked the wind from her lungs as she rolled several times, stunning her, but she somehow managed to get to her feet. Her life depended on it. She staggered across the open meadow toward the edge of the forest as fast as she could muster, knowing the other two Indians were close behind.

In less than five strides, she was lifted onto another horse, and they galloped off into the trees and up the ascending mountainside. Her new captors changed direction once they were deep in the woods, and swiftly traveled along the land, neither climbing, nor descending. Kate dodged branches as the horse moved through the trees. Foliage gave way to a green, open meadow again.

She estimated they'd traveled over an hour and not once had this Indian loosened his hold on her. His warm, bronzed hand splayed across her stomach, his fingers extending to the other side of her ribs as she rode in front of him, his hard thighs resting beneath her own.

His nearness created a sense of déjà vu, yet that was absurd. She thought of the stranger in the brown duster, unable to understand what the two would have in common. Her mind reeled with thoughts and the past excitement still raced through her body as though she'd just finished a race. She couldn't concentrate on anything but being held so close, yet wanting to escape.

Shaking off the eerie foreboding, she gazed out over the meadow, tracking their direction. For the moment, Kate rode in silence until they stopped. Still not a sound could be heard but the rushing of blood through her veins.

She glanced toward the distant, snow-peaked mountains where the sun descended, taking with it most of the day's light and leaving the promise of a cool evening.

Defeated and scared, she thought about the massacre of those left behind, of the one whose scalp had been cut away--something she wouldn't soon forget. A warm tear slipped down her cheek for those who'd died. These savages could easily make her their victim and though she had to escape somehow, she refused to give them a reason to kill her right now. Why was she forced to endure this? When would she wake up?

Ahead, dense trees hugged the hillsides, yet allowed for large, open areas of grass and sagebrush to spread invitingly across small valleys. A herd of buffalo grazed to the left near the river. Their large numbers amazed her when buffalo were nearly extinct.

She stilled, trying to push away the thought that beat at her, but it wouldn't abate. Could she have been thrust back in time? She chewed at the inside of her cheek, feeling the pain yet making it real enough...as did the hard chest against her back, but certainly it couldn't be real. Yet here she was.

Two thoughts nagged at her as she rode within a stranger's grasp; alone, with one other warrior, as dusk closed in around them. As absurd as it sounded, even to her, she could have traveled back through the passage of time. It frightened her, yet at the same time, excited her. This familiar feeling she sensed, with the man who now held her and the stranger in the Mercantile, played havoc with her mind. Perhaps if this was a dream, she'd now have the answers she sought.

Again, anger tormented her when she thought about the senseless massacre by the Indians. They hated whites and killed without thought or mercy, yet here she sat in the arms of a warrior, sensing such a familiarity. She couldn't explain it and wanted desperately to know the answer.

When her captors stopped, they were at a spot Kate assumed had been their current camp. Bedding and skin-pouches sat about the ground and around the fire pit.

After the man dismounted, she was yanked from the horse and attempted to yank her arm from his grasp, without success. "I won't go with you!"

He laughed at her, then glanced at his friend. His companion led the horses away, leaving the two of them alone, staring at one another, though darkness shadowed his eyes. She refused to be the first to back down, though she knew better, but couldn't resist.

Dusk settled around them, but she could see he wore a wide strip of deerskin across his forehead, holding back his long, dark hair that hung forward, draping over his bare chest. A breechcloth joined fringed leggings, and beaded moccasins covered his feet. A strip of deerskin stretched above the muscle of each upper arm, the ties hanging to his elbows.

Apprehensive, she stared back at the warrior as he observed her jeans and sweatshirt with interest. He knelt down and caressed the snakeskin of her boot. A smile continued to curve his lips as he shook his head. Still, shadows covered his eyes.

She waited for him to make the first move.

He did.

He released her arm and walked a few steps away, heading for the copse of trees, but she didn't follow. Then he spun around, pointed up the mountain toward the trees and waited for her to move. She took a few steps in his direction, so he turned and walked ahead of her.

Immediately, she ran in the opposite direction as fast as she could; or so she thought. After twenty strides, a muscular arm encircled her waist and a hand covered her mouth as her feet lifted off the ground.

*Damn him!*

Kicking and screaming behind his hand, she struggled as he effortlessly strode into the trees. If she wiggled enough, he'd have to drop her. She was so enraged at being restrained that she paid little attention to the path he took.

Since this had to be a dream, she could be as brave as she wanted, Kate mused. She tried to bite the hand covering her mouth. She'd had enough!

"Kaisuanten taipo wa'ippe!" Agitation laced his deep voice as his warm breath touched her ear before depositing her in front of a cold fire pit.

He'd likely told her to be still. Which she certainly wouldn't be doing!

Her heart ceased its beating as his gaze shot through her. Though she couldn't see his eyes, there was no mistaking his threat. His voice created a shiver that ran the length of her spine, tightening every muscle in her body. Kate struggled for another breath. The image of the warrior from her dream materialized in her mind. Could it be him? But how would that be possible? Perhaps her nightmare had been a warning and not one she should have pursued! *Too late now.*

Dismissing the vision, she brushed back stray strands of hair from her face that had escaped her long, French braid.

She scooted back when the second warrior joined them, his appearance much the same as the first, though not as tall. This one wore a beaded, fringed leather shirt.

He pointed at her black jeans and boots. Amused, he looked at his friend. "Kai kia sotem manankuhten nukkiwa'iyu sukka tahimahkaute."

More words she didn't understand, and though she refused to look at her captor, Kate sensed his gaze upon her. Again visions of her warrior filled her mind, confusing her even more since all this seemed so unreal.

Sore muscles knotted throughout her body from traveling so far and she scrunched her shoulders in an attempt to relieve the tension. Despite her weariness, she pushed away any thought of sleep; she had to stay awake. Prisoners were raped and killed. She had no idea what they intended to do with her, but knew she had to take the first opportunity to escape.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her captor open a pouch, pull out a piece of dried meat, then grab a blanket. He dropped the blanket at her feet and held the food out to her. Kate took it, the hunger in her stomach being greater than her pride at the moment. Tired and hungry, she would have eaten anything. The tough meat forced her to tug at it with her teeth, yet the flavor surprised her; it actually tasted good.

She watched with caution as the men built a fire, and then ate their portions of meat as they conversed. While the friend talked with her captor, his gaze kept drifting back to her, and he almost appeared to be enjoying this. Kate met the dark gaze of the shorter Indian and stiffened her back. "What do you intend to do with me?"

He glanced from her to his companion and back, though his handsome friend had yet to raise his dark lashes in her direction.

"Is he afraid to speak for himself?" She ignored them both for a moment and again sank her teeth into the delicious meat, wrenching off another piece. The succulent flavor of the course meat made her mouth water as she kept her gaze trained on the man across from her. The dark gaze of her captor's friend left hers for only a moment to eye his companion, who had stood and now faced the looming, snow-capped mountains ahead, staring into the night.

With her legs crossed, Kate rested her wrists on her knees and glared at the man still sitting. "What do you want with me?"

"Ne kai en tsaya'a. Usen kai nean tenimmapaianna."

She didn't understand his nonchalant reply. "Do you think I'm going to go up into those mountains with the two of you without a fight?"

Only a deep chuckle reverberated from his chest.

Frustrated and sore, she finished her meal, then wrapped the blanket about her shoulders. The warrior across from her rose to retrieve his blanket from a stiff-skinned pouch, and returned to the other side of the fire to bed down for the night.

He waved his hand in her direction. "Eppeikku. Imaa tammen nahato'i so'i."

She assumed he gave her an order to sleep, which, of course, she would ignore.

Kate glanced at the other warrior. He stood with his broad shoulders straight and tall, never once turning to see what the argument might be between her and his friend. Then he raised his arms, fingers reaching toward the heavens and began to chant in a low voice, the sound of which sent another chill shivering down her spine at the near similarity.

Weariness attacking her, Kate curled up closer to the fire for warmth. Though they were in a wooded area, the trees blocked little of the wind, and the cold seeped into her body. Thoughts of Brandon invaded her mind and she remembered how the sound of his voice had created the feeling of warm silk. Had that actually happened today? It seemed so long ago. For some unknown reason, the sound of her captor's voice made her feel the same way, and they both wore their hair alike, but what could the connection be? They both also made her feel the same comforting feeling when they spoke, but she dared not let him know how his voice affected her. Yet, though his voice might be comforting, his actions so far were not.

Unseen crickets chirped in the night.

The fire hissed and snapped. Kate watched the orange flames lick at the crackling, glowing logs that sent red embers floating toward the flickering stars. A wave of sleepiness washed over Kate, and her eyes finally closed against her will as she snuggled into her blanket and breathed in the smell of the open fire.

Sometime later, warmth at Kate's back startled her from her sleep. Before she reached a full sitting position, an arm with the strength of a bear trap encircled her waist, dragging her back down against the ground and the firmness of a warm chest. The cold hand of fear gripped her heart and she struck out at the arm of steel with all her might. As quick as a trap, he confined her wrists atop one another in a tight grip. Sharp pains shot through her delicate bones as if they were breaking, and she cried out from the pain.

He loosened his hold some. Then with a shake of her wrists, he growled, "Yuu napi. Ne eppeimi'a."

Glancing beyond the glowing embers of the once-blazing fire, Kate noted the smaller warrior lay asleep across from her. She wondered if her whole body shook with fear or just her insides. Or was it something else that tightened every muscle? The stranger in a brown duster again came to mind, his blue eyes had penetrated hers. Even now, her heart raced at the memories.

She wiggled her cold, numb fingers and to her surprise, his grip loosened enough for her to move them. Then his hand slid to her waist, splaying his fingers over her stomach, securing her where she lay. Her heart beat like butterfly wings. Kate held her breath, not wanting to experience the melting at her woman's center. He'd captured her and could rape her should he choose, yet she couldn't explain the sensual betrayal of her own body. And damn the musky scent of his body that drifted her way. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been with a man but she yearned to be touched and caressed. The way he'd watched her sometimes told her more than he meant to, she was sure.

His breathing evened out as he slept. Though she detested this man for not releasing her, she was thankful for his warmth; if she could only stop her rapid heartbeat and the fluttering in her stomach. She decided to remain still and sleep once again overtook her.

Later, when something struck the bottom of Kate's boot, her eyes snapped open to bright sunshine. Instantly she regretted it. Protecting her eyes against the sunlight, she met the dark eyes of the smaller warrior.

"Oh, God!" She sighed, realizing this was no nightmare, but hard, cold reality.

The warrior held a hard, crusty biscuit out to her. She closed her eyes, shook her head in disgust, then opened her eyes as she sat up to accept it, knowing she might travel all day without another bite.

Kate glanced around. The taller warrior knelt next to the pouches, his back to her, packing to move on.

The man who'd offered her the biscuit stared at her and she took the opportunity to speak her mind. "I'll be heading *down* the mountain today, *alone*, but thank you for the food."

She rose with her blanket around her shoulders, and strode away, not looking back. Perhaps they would allow her to leave. Long strides carried her into the distant trees to descend the mountain, only to collide with the hard body of the shorter Indian who appeared in front of her. He pointed behind her, toward her other captor.

"Hakappu mi'akwanto'i mai e suakka?"

The angry shout of her taller captor caught her attention, stiffening every muscle in her body before she even turned around. If they wanted her to understand, they should speak English. Damn them! The man before her raised a brow, waiting for her to move.

These men frightened her, but if she showed it, perhaps things would be worse. Releasing a disgusted moan, Kate clenched her fists and turned to walk toward the smoldering fire pit. The taller warrior strode away, and she glanced at the man behind her, who pointed in his companion's direction.

"No!" Kate shouted, but he prodded her shoulder, forcing her to take a few more steps, only to stop again. Shaking her head and widening her eyes, she had enough. "No, I'm not going up that mountain with you. Why can't you just release me?"

His gaze appeared as determined as her own, and he slowly reached for the knife sheathed at the waist of his buckskin leggings. Her breath caught as new fear seized her stomach, knotting it.

Kate held up her hands in protest. "Fine...I'm going."

She walked with the Indians, their horses trailing behind while they traveled through a thick forest. A meadow before them on the mountainside ended at the dense forest line ahead. Above the trees, snow covered the mountain's peak, amazing Kate at its height. Though sunshine began to warm the morning, she knew the weather would grow cooler the higher they traveled. Reluctant, she trudged on through the meadow, then followed the warrior already entering the woods on the meadow's far side.

She turned around to look one last time from where they had come. A stream snaked through the beautiful green valley below, weaving itself around sparsely scattered trees and bushes. A warm, sage-scented breeze caught at her hair, blowing it back from her face as she began to walk, sending warmth into her cold, stiff muscles.

Hours later, the soles of her feet tender, Kate refused to give in to her need for rest, hoping instead the warriors would stop sometime soon. She wished for her softer Asics walking shoes rather than her good snakeskin boots she now wore. Blisters wouldn't be forming then!

The cool water rushing down the narrow mountain stream would feel exquisite on her throbbing feet right now; even though she knew it was impossible. The warriors must be in a hurry to arrive at their destination, wherever that might be in this rocky wilderness; they seemed to trudge on forever.

Except for the roar of the water over the rocks, the woods were silent. Perspiration trickled down Kate's back. She carried the blanket in her hand now, and she brought up her other arm up to wipe the dampness from her face. Not daring to stop even for a moment's rest, she moved ahead.

The path became steeper, and her energy waned. Her heart raced from the exertion and the high altitude stole her breath. She continued to climb over rocks and skirt around tree stumps. Then stepping upon a decayed log, Kate's foot slipped.

She cried out as her feet scrambled to keep her upright. Losing the battle, she stumbled downhill, unable to grasp anything to stop her descent.

Reaching out for trees she passed, Kate's fingers burned when the bark split open her skin. By digging in her heels, she steadied her feet and slowed her pace, then tripped over a large rock. Her head and back slammed into a tree where she landed at its base. Pain shot through her shoulder blades and finally giving up the struggle, she allowed herself to slump to the ground in agony.

\* \* \* \*

Taima walked farther ahead of his companions, but the woman's scream made him turn around. He watched her slender body topple down the hillside, watched her desperately attempt to hold on. Dropping the parfleches he carried, Taima ran toward her, his long hair tugging on his scalp as it caught on low branches. Before he could reach the woman, he saw her body crumpled at the base of a pine tree, face down among the brown needles. He hurried to her side. Though he hadn't wanted a woman traveling with them, he didn't wish her any harm. He'd only brought her along to keep her away from the treacherous Blackfoot warrior, who would have killed her for sure.

Kneeling at her side, he lifted her long, dark braid from her back, ignoring its silkiness. Gently, Taima touched the back of her head, which rested on her extended arm. Something warm and sticky met his fingers as he located the swollen bump and he looked into the dark gaze of his friend, Ahanu.

Taima took care while he cut a piece of cloth from the lower half of the back of her shirt. Moving his fingers over her skin, he noted its softness, then quickly stepped to the stream.

Returning to her side with the wet cloth, he touched the back of her head, his fingers lightly grazing the tender skin of her neck. The woman moaned and tried to move, then stilled. He dabbed at the wound, cleansing away the blood and dirt, seeing the cut wasn't as serious as he'd first thought. She would need tending once they arrived back with his people; their shaman would know which ointment to use to prevent infection.

Touching her like this reminded him of how, last night, he'd observed her while she watched Ahanu across the fire. Her dark hair had cascaded down her back like the mountain waterfalls, and her delicate facial features had reflected the glow from the flames. Since he hadn't been able to see into her eyes last night, he wondered at their color. Would he be able to read her thoughts with the same ease he read his mother's when he used to look into her eyes?

He also wondered if this woman was as outspoken as she appeared to be, always speaking her opinions and telling others what she would and would not do? A woman like that was only trouble.

As Taima tended her back, checking for broken bones, he ripped more cloth and handed it to Ahanu to wet in the stream. With concern evident on his features, Ahanu did as requested.

Taima continued to rinse the wound, when a moan broke the silence and the woman's back arched away from his touch. Slender, white fingers moved to her temple as she uttered another sound. The woman rose on one elbow and turned her head toward him.

Long, dark lashes fluttered before opening, then brilliant green eyes stared into his; eyes so different from those of his people. Eyes more like that of a wary cougar.

Then her green eyes widened.