

Jesse leaned forward to switch on the radio but stopped when something up ahead caught his attention. Even in the fading light of dusk he could see that she was beautiful as she came toward him astride a brown horse. Her body rocked rhythmically to the gait of the horse. A stream of dark hair fanned out behind her in the breeze. As they passed on the narrow dirt road she looked at him briefly, and Jesse barely caught a flash of blue from her eyes before she was gone.

He turned his head and craned his neck out the window, staring after her. Was she truly as lovely as he thought, or was it a trick of the twilight? He was still looking behind him when the car suddenly tilted, the steering wheel spinning through his fingers. He snapped his head forward, too late. He had driven up the side of an embankment. He jammed his foot on the brake, but the momentum carried him up over the embankment, and the angle of the car made it impossible to gain control.

The car teetered at the top before careening down the embankment, flipping over, and coming to a halt on its roof, its wheels spinning idly in the air.

At the sound of the crash, Carly McAllister spun her head around. She couldn't see the car, but it was easy enough to read the cloud of dust rising from the other side of the embankment. Jerking hard on the reins, she wheeled her horse around and galloped back. Reining up sharply at the top of the rise, she gasped at the grim sight that greeted her.

She jumped down and ran to the car and looked inside, but there was no sign of the driver. Glancing around, she spotted him sprawled on the ground several yards away. She rushed to him and knelt at his side. Placing two fingers against the side of his neck, she checked for a sign of life. The pulse beneath her touch confirmed that he was alive. But he was far from safe, for the smell of gasoline was strong in the air. She glanced back anxiously at the car. It could blow at any moment. She knew it was dangerous to move him, but she had no choice. Placing both arms under him, she dragged the unconscious man away from the wreckage.

She dropped to her knees beside him and with grim determination set about examining him. She began with his arms, gently probing the well-defined biceps, then traveling slowly, purposefully along his rib cage, kneading the taut flesh, and lower still, up and down the length of each muscular thigh.

Jesse came to. Except for a knot at the back of his head that throbbed without mercy, he felt okay. He lifted himself onto his elbows and watched with a lopsided grin as she poked and prodded him.

"Do you always manhandle your victims this way?"

Carly froze and looked up. "Victims?"

"Yes. If you weren't so pretty, I wouldn't be lying here near death."

Her mouth dropped open. If that was a compliment, it was the most arrogant one she'd ever heard. Wryly, she asked, "And do you always drive looking backward?"

"Not generally," he admitted. "Are there any broken bones?"

"No."

"Good. Then I'll be on my way."

"Not so fast," she said. "No broken bones doesn't mean there isn't any internal bleeding."

He gave her a skeptical look and laughed. "What are you, a doctor or something?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Oh. Well, look Doc, I feel fine."

"Don't kid yourself, mister," Carly told him. "If you were thrown from the car, it means you weren't wearing a seat belt, and if you weren't wearing a seat belt, you must have bounced around inside that thing like a Ping-Pong ball. You could have a concussion or be injured in

ways you don't even know. I'll bet by this time tomorrow you'll be feeling muscles you didn't know you had."

But Jesse was insistent. "I'm all right, I tell you."

"A minute ago you claimed to be near death."

His look turned sheepish. "That was just—"

"It was just the male ego straining for sympathy after the male libido ran amok."

With an exasperated sigh Jesse sank back to the ground. "I have to tell you, Doc, your bedside manner stinks."

"Sorry. I haven't had much time to cultivate one. I've been too busy convincing my people to trust my medical skills. A lot of people in these parts still rely on old tribal remedies."

"Your people?" He gave her a quizzical look. "I've never heard of a blue-eyed Indian before."

"My great-great-grandmother was a Brulé Sioux who married a French-Canadian trapper. The blue eyes show up every other generation or so."

And what a striking combination it was, thought Jesse. The fading light captured features that were more than lovely. They were radiant—at least to his eyes, which were admittedly still a little fuzzy from the accident. His gaze moved over her admiringly. "So, you're a doctor, huh?"

There was that tone of skepticism Carly had heard all her life. "Yes. And I've had a hard enough time convincing them. I don't need to convince you." She started to rise, but his hand clamped over her arm, pulling her back down.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Carly sighed. "That's all right." She hadn't meant to be curt with him. She'd been on edge for days, ever since they brought old Johnny Starbuck in with a bullet hole in his chest. There hadn't been much she could do for him with her limited facilities, so she'd driven him to the hospital in Pine Ridge in Luke Lightfoot's old pickup. Death was common in her profession, but Johnny Starbuck's had shaken her up more than she cared to admit.

Misreading the expression on her face, Jesse observed, "Judging from that look, I'd say I don't have much longer to live."

Carly's thoughts snapped back to the present. She gave a faint, unconvincing smile. "You'll live."

"You don't sound too pleased about it."

"Look," she said, "I saved your life, didn't I?"

"How? By feeling me up for broken bones?"

Carly opened her mouth to protest, but the words were lost amid the explosion that rocked the ground as the car burst into flames, shooting metal and chrome into the air.

They stared at the flaming mess, mouths agape. When she turned back to him, the fire's glow tinted her skin with amber light. "No. By pulling you away from that."

Jesse felt like a jerk. In a grumble low enough to mask his foolish feelings, he said, "Thanks. I owe you one."

"You don't owe me a thing."

"Why do I get the impression that you don't like me?"

She looked at him. She could tell from the way it fit his body so well that the suit he wore, although torn and soiled, was custom-made. The car he'd been driving cost more than the people in these parts made in a lifetime. She'd seen his type before, wealthy businessmen who came to buy up Indian land cheaply. She could tell he wasn't from the power company, though. The

Laramie Fork men were down-home boys. This one had a city slickness about him and an intelligence that she suspected bordered on dangerous. No, she didn't like him very much at all.

Still, there was something compelling about him, and much to her dismay, she found herself reacting to him the way any red-blooded woman reacts to a good-looking man.

His face was hard-boned and handsome. There was toughness ingrained in those features, and although there was no suggestion of cruelty about him, there was the distinct feel of something quick, hard, and dangerous. She guessed that any strains of gentleness within him were deeply guarded.

Shaking herself loose from the impact of his looks, she got to her feet and asked, "Do you think you can walk to my horse?"

"I think so."

She held out her hand. "What's your name?"

"Jesse Black—" A gasp of pain tore from his throat, cutting off the rest of his words. He fell back to the ground, clutching his leg.

She pushed him onto his side and saw the tear in his pants that she hadn't seen when checking for broken bones. Ripping the fabric wider for a better look revealed a gash in his left calf from which the blood still spilled. It was a deep and ugly wound that required immediate attention. She looked around for something to wrap around his leg to staunch the flow of blood. Finding nothing suitable, she acted automatically, pulling her t-shirt up over her head.

Jesse smiled appreciatively at the sight of her flesh so unexpected revealed to his eyes, the generous curves of her breasts confined to a lacy bra commanding his gaze.

She knew he was staring, but what could she do except try to ignore the flame of embarrassment licking her cheeks? With the t-shirt wrapped securely around his leg, she searched the ground for a stick of suitable size and strength. Finding one, she positioned it on the tourniquet and gave it a twist, forcing a grunt from him. The job done, she stood up and said, "I'll take that."

He looked up at her blankly. "Huh?"

"Your jacket, please."

"Oh. Sure. Here." He struggled out of his jacket and tossed it to her. But instead of slipping it on as he expected her to do, she rolled it up and tucked it beneath his leg to elevate the limb. With that, she turned and strode to where her horse waited in the shadows.

"Hey," he called to her. "Where are you going?"

"To get help."

"Can't we ride together?"

"Not with your leg like that."

"And what am I supposed to do while you're gone?"

She slid her boot in the stirrup and mounted in a fluid motion. Grasping the reins in one hand, she turned the horse's head around and guided it over to where Jesse lay on the ground, looking pale in the growing darkness. "Lie as still as you possibly can," she advised.

He let out a groan. "Thanks a lot, Doc, but you don't really expect me to bleed to death if I move, do you?"

His sarcasm was met with blatant disapproval as Carly's blue eyes flashed from above. "I mean it, Mr. Black," she said in a no-nonsense tone. "Don't move. It's not that I think you might bleed to death, it's just that the diamondbacks come out at night, and if they find you squirming around, you're going to stare the daylights out of them. A frightened rattlesnake usually attacks."

He looked up at her astride the horse, her flesh peeking provocatively from over the lace of her bra. “Sure thing. Oh, and Doc. Thanks for the use of the t-shirt. I guess it never occurred to you that you could have used my belt.”

He saw the look of sudden comprehension on her face before she snapped the reins and set her horse to a gallop down the dark road.