

The background of the book cover is a composite image. The top half features a close-up of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace, nearly kissing, with a large, glowing full moon in the dark sky behind them. The bottom half shows a silhouette of a horse in the foreground, looking towards a small, rustic house in a field. In the distance, there are rolling hills or mountains under a hazy sky.

H. L.

Another heart-pounding Morgan's Mercenary tale  
from *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# LINDSAY MCKENNA

SHADOWS FROM THE  
PAST

# **Lindsay McKenna**

## **Shadows from the Past**

### **Аннотация**

When photojournalist Kamaria Trayhern goes undercover at the Mason family ranch, she's hoping to find her real father, not romance. But keeping everyone convinced she is who she claims to be will be harder than she expects—especially where one sexy ranch hand is concerned. After all he's been through, there's no way Wesley Sheridan wants to tangle with more heartache and lies. So the last thing he needs is to be drawn to the pretty new caretaker. But with a jealous killer out to rewrite Mason family history forever, two lonely hearts must learn to trust each other...if they hope to survive the season.

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# **Praise for LINDSAY MCKENNA**

“McKenna’s latest is an intriguing tale...a unique twist on the romance novel, and one that’s sure to please.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Dangerous Prey*

“Riveting.”

—RT Book Reviews on *The Quest*

“Gunfire, emotions, suspense, tension, and sexuality abound in this fast-paced, absorbing novel.”

—Affaire de Coeur on *Wild Woman*

“Another masterpiece.”

—Affaire de Coeur on *Enemy Mine*

“Emotionally charged...riveting and deeply touching.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Firstborn*

“Ms. McKenna brings readers along for a fabulous odyssey in which complex characters experience the danger, passion and beauty of the mystical jungle.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Man of Passion*

“Talented Lindsay McKenna delivers excitement and romance in equal measure.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Protecting His Own*

“Lindsay McKenna will have you flying with the daring and deadly women pilots who risk their lives...buckle in for the ride

of your life.”

—WritersUnlimited on Heart of Stone

# LINDSAY MCKENNA

## SHADOWS FROM THE PAST



Dear Reader,

At last! Morgan and Laura's last child, Kamaria Trayhern, gets her story! She was adopted as a baby after a terrifying earthquake struck Los Angeles, California. It was then that the Trayherns adopted the beautiful dark-haired baby girl found in the rubble of an apartment.

Kamaria grew up in the loving home of this dynastic family. She was loved by her four older siblings. Yet as she grew she wondered who her father was. Her mother had lost her life by covering Kamaria with her body when the second floor of an apartment caved in on them during the earthquake. But her father? Who was he? Had he known that her mother was pregnant? If he had, why hadn't he shown up to claim her?

Kamaria has more questions than answers. And truth be told,

she is afraid to strike out on her own and find her father. Yet something deep and unnamed within her pushes her toward an unknown destiny fraught with danger from all sides. And through it all, she discovers the love of a cowboy.

Like you, I've waited a long time to get this book written before I step off and start to write about Noah and Alyssa's children. Kamaria is the last of Morgan and Laura's family. It feels good to pen her story and share it with you. My hope is that you will feel her journey, her hurdles, her challenges to find love and her real family by bloodline. Like all things in our lives, nothing is ever easy or straightforward. Enjoy Kamaria's journey and walk with her. I love to hear from my readers at [www.lindsaymckenna.com](http://www.lindsaymckenna.com) or <http://twitter.com/lindsaymckenna>, or catch me on Facebook as Eileen Nauman. Happy reading!

Warmly,

Lindsay McKenna

To the ladies of Quilter's Corners, Cottonwood, Arizona ([www.quiltersquartersaz.com](http://www.quiltersquartersaz.com)).

Thank you, Mary Beth Grosetta, owner, for teaching me how to quilt. And to all the wonderful staff who are quilting queens in their own right: Carla Armstrong, Karen Crowder, Jody, Joy Albanese and Sherri Morstman. And to an incredible Tuesday Group Ladies who come in every Tuesday and create comfort quilts for the poor, the sick and infirm. Connie Hanks, Dorothy Esper,



Eileen Crandall, Jeanne Bollen, Judy Bishop,  
Mary Beth Grosetta and Vivian Raines—you rock!  
Your compassion and care for others is truly inspirational.  
Joyce Cook, long arm instructor—you are  
just the best teacher! Thank you.

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# CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS time. As she sat at her bedroom table in Montana, Kam Trayhern's hands grew damp. Outside her window, the May dusk turned a lush pink and orange above the Douglas firs surrounding the two-story Montana home of her adopted parents, Morgan and Laura Trayhern.

Now that she'd returned from a harrowing trip to Africa, she had to face the rest of her life, starting with her birth. Kam lifted a folder marked Tracy Elizabeth Fielding. She opened it and smoothed out the papers inside with trembling hands. She shouldn't be so emotional about this. But she was.

Her gaze fell upon the black-and-white photo that had haunted her for years. The edges were stained and darkened from age and damage from the earthquake that had hit Los Angeles twenty-eight years earlier. A marine dog handler and her golden retriever had found Kam and her biological mother in the debris of their destroyed apartment complex. That day, Kam's mother had died but she had lived, thanks to that marine, Callie Evans. Kam had been taken to Camp Reed on the Marine Corps base for treatment of her minor injuries.

Kam turned on the desk light to get a better look at the old photo. Just like that the dusk within the room disappeared, but nothing could make her nightmares disappear. She had to face facts. Morgan and Laura Trayhern had adopted her when they

discovered she had no family. Her mother had been an orphan and there was no trace of her father. At the time of the quake, many records, memories and photos had been lost—forever. All Kam had from the apartment was this photo. It had been found in her mother's purse.

The photo showed her mother, Elizabeth, with black curly hair like her own, standing with three men. She wore a white lab coat for a Los Angeles veterinary convention. Another vet stood next to her, smiling toothily for the photo. The note on the back identified the veterinary convention. A businessman in a dark gray suit stood on the other side. Kam's gaze drifted to the third man, the tallest one, to the left of her mother. He looked like a cowboy with his black Stetson. His weathered square face, a mustache and narrowed eyes spoke of the harsh elements, most likely from ranching.

How many times had Kam looked at this photo and wondered if one of these three men were her father? Kam frowned and peered more closely at the man standing with her mother. She felt an instinctive churn of her gut as she looked almost longingly at the cowboy. He stood out from the others. Taller than all of them, he was built lean, like a wolf. His face was darkly sunburned, deep creases and laugh lines showed at the corners of his eyes. Everyone in the photo was smiling except him. And her mother was caught looking in his direction. Was this a secret look of love?

A lump formed in Kam's throat. Of course, her adopted

father, Morgan, had turned over every stone to find her biological father. After all, Morgan was in the security business at the highest levels of the government with his super-secret Perseus and Medusa companies. No one in the outside world knew what he did for a living. As a cover, Morgan had created a real-estate front to hide his real reasons for being in Phillipsburg, Montana. His secret offices were located deep below the basement level of the turn-of-the-century Victorian house. Kam had been raised in a two-story cedar home not far from the office.

Morgan had promised Kam to find every possible scrap of information on her mother, and over the years, he had. The questions remained: Who had fathered her? And why hadn't that man ever come forward to claim her? These questions cut like a knife. Because she owed Morgan and Laura everything, Kam had waited a long time to approach them about seeking her biological father herself. She simply did not want to hurt them. But now she couldn't put it off. She had decided to take a hiatus from her professional photography job as a stringer for several global newspapers and magazines. This way, she'd have the time and energy to conduct her search. And her parents had to know her plan.

Kam wiped her damp hands on the sides of her jeans. How would they react? Again, her gut tightened with fear. Would they be angry? Throw her out of the house that she had called home for twenty-eight years? Oh, it was true that she was a globetrotter and had come home only about once a year since turning twenty-

one, but still...Kam dreaded the possibility that they would kick her out of their lives.

And then, where would she be? Without any family. Her mother had been an adopted child, and the people who had adopted her were dead along with whatever memories and information they had. It was the worst kind of ending for Kam—to be an orphan of an orphan. What had she done to be a lost spirit in this lifetime? Kam believed in reincarnation, believed that her soul would never die, but that it would return lifetime after lifetime into different bodies to learn how to become a compassionate and spiritually enlightened human being.

Two of the few items retrieved from Elizabeth's destroyed apartment had been a book on Buddhism and one on reincarnation. These books were now dog-eared from being read so many times. Kam had wanted to adopt her mother's views on life and, to a degree, she had. Consequently, her beliefs were different from those of the Trayhern family. They didn't mind nor did they try to force her into their belief system.

It was time. Now was the time to focus and not dwell on the past. As scared as she was, Kam knew she had to initiate the search and conquer this fear. Why should she be afraid anyway? She was wise and worldly thanks to her career. Many times, she'd gone into war-torn and ravaged third-world countries to bring people's suffering and needs to the world's attention. Her photos had garnered her many awards over the years and she'd made more than enough money to take time off to hunt for her real

father.

Taking a deep breath, Kam glanced down at the watch on her wrist. The family would sit down to dinner at 7:00 p.m., as always. She'd arrived three days earlier from her last assignment in Africa. Her mother, Laura, was throwing a party for her this weekend. Her brother Jason and his wife, Annie, and their children lived nearby and would attend. Kathy, one of the fraternal twins, had just married raptor rehabilitator, Sky McCoy. They, too, would be at her return celebration dinner.

Knowing her father would be home by now, Kam decided to talk with him first. Morgan always had a glass of red wine and relaxed from the day's pressures before dinner in the airy library. Standing up, Kam rubbed her knotted stomach. Above all, she didn't want to upset Morgan and Laura. They were the last people she ever wanted to hurt. Torn because she loved them deeply, she sighed.

Kam picked up the photo and headed downstairs. Classical music wafted through the cathedral roof of the cedar home. She smelled basil and knew her mother was probably cooking up a pesto sauce to go with some Italian dish. If only Kam had an appetite.

Her father sat in the study surrounded on three sides by floor-to-ceiling shelves of books. He was in his favorite burgundy leather chair reading. Her heart blossomed with a fierce love for this man. Never had he or Laura ever treated her as anything but their treasured daughter. He lifted his head and a smiled with



welcome as she entered the room. She noted he was graying at the temples, but his hair still gleamed black beneath the stained-glass lamp suspended above him.

“Hi, Dad,” she greeted, her voice hoarse and wavering.

“Kam. Well, are you finally caught up on sleep and out of the jet lag?”

She forced a smile she didn’t feel and brought up an upholstered burgundy stool. “Yeah, I think I’ve left Africa behind.”

Morgan closed his book and gave her an assessing look. “Is something wrong? You seem upset.”

“I could never hide a thing from you, could I?” She managed a strangled chuckle. Her hands shook slightly as she nervously held the picture between them.

Morgan took a sip of his wine and placed the glass back on the cherry lamp table next to his chair. “No,” he murmured, giving her a softened look. “What are you holding?”

Kam was forever surprised by Morgan’s keen alertness. He always knew when something was on her mind. “What? Oh this...” Her mouth grew dry and the fear amped up so much that she felt nearly suffocated. She held out the photo to him. “Dad, you remember this picture they took from my mom’s purse after I was rescued?”

Frowning, Morgan studied the photo. “Yes, I do, Kam.” Softening his tone, he added, “What have you decided to do?”

Kam cleared her throat. “Dad, I think that one of these men

might be my biological father.” She rushed on when his brows raised. “I know this probably sounds silly and far-fetched but my gut instinct tells me this. I—I want the chance to find out. I want to take the next year off and run down the leads.”

Nodding, Morgan rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and clasped his hands. “It’s time, Kam. Laura and I were wondering when you would begin the long, hard journey to try and find your father.”

“You did?” Her voice sounded thin and stretched. Heart pounding furiously in her breast, she lowered her eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you, Dad. Or Mom. I—I know this has to be painful for both of you.”

“Baby girl,” Morgan whispered, reaching out to her, “we expected you someday to try to locate the man who made it possible for you to be in our life.” He gave her a quick squeeze on the shoulders and released her. “You’re human, Kam. Every person wants to know who their mother and father are. You’re no different.” He tousled her short hair. “Frankly, we were concerned because you didn’t seem to want to go on that journey. We know you wear your heart on your sleeve. And we know how sensitive you are toward all living things. We felt you just hadn’t built up enough of a desire to go after him yet. I’m glad this moment has come, Kam. For you.”

Blinking through sudden, hot tears, Kam absorbed Morgan’s quick embrace. It was filled with such love and caring. “I—I just don’t want to lose you two.”

“You won’t ever lose us, Kam,” Morgan assured her, his voice growing raspy.

Kam searched his blue-gray eyes and saw tears. “You’ve given me so much. You are so generous, kind and caring...”

“And we’ll always be that way with you, Kam. When you love someone, that never changes. Time only deepens love. And that’s how we feel about you. I’m sure Laura will be glad to hear your plans.”

Just like that, Kam’s heart stopped racing and she felt more at peace. “So, you really think Mom will be okay with this?”

Morgan chuckled and sat back in his chair. “If I know her, she’ll want to help you find your birth father. Listen to me, Kam. All we want is for you to be happy. We know how much it means to have those few items from your mother’s apartment. Parents are bedrock for a child. They tell you where you came from, what kind of person loved you enough to have you. And now, you need to find your birth father.”

“He’s never come to find me...” Kam choked. Tears blurred her vision for a moment. “You don’t know how many nights I lay up there in my bed wondering why he never came to see me. I—I have had so many nightmares about this, Dad. That he didn’t want me...”

The words were terrible to say. To admit. Kam thought them often, but to say them out loud was like having a weight sit on her that she could no longer avoid or dodge. She saw Morgan’s face twist with concern.

“Kammie, don’t go there. At least, not yet. What if he didn’t know about you?”

“I’ve run through that scenario,” Kam admitted. “But if that was so, why didn’t my mother contact him? Tell him she was pregnant with me? Why didn’t he return to her life and take the responsibility?”

Shrugging, Morgan said gently, “We won’t know those answers until you find him and confront him.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “I just get so envious of people who know who their birth moms and dads are. I ache inside because I don’t. I just feel this huge hole in my heart and there’s nothing that can really fill it except to know who my father is.”

“I know,” Morgan whispered, a catch in his tone. Reaching out, he squeezed Kam’s hand. “One step at a time, baby girl. When we have dinner tonight, let your mom know what you want to do. I’ll bet she can help.”

Nodding, Kam clung to his hand. Morgan Trayhern was a giant in the military and spy business. His reputation was one of respect, integrity and admiration. This man, who was so powerful, was also her dad, the man who had raised her with nothing but love. Kam knew how lucky she was, and, as she sat there clinging to his grip, she understood that her biological father would never meet his stature of this man.

LAURA AND MORGAN sat with Kam after the dinner table had been cleared. Having just finished dessert—Napoleons

that Laura had made from scratch—they regarded the photo. Fragrant coffee steamed nearby in white ceramic mugs.

“I’ve looked at this photo before,” Laura told her daughter, as she took a sip of her coffee. “You know what drew me?”

“What?” Kam asked, excited that her adoptive parents were proactive on her decision.

“See that bolo tie that cowboy is wearing?”

Kam looked closely. There was a handsome sterling-silver bolo tie, oval in shape, with an elk head on it. The antlers spread from the middle to the top of the bolo. “Yes.”

“I’ve often wondered about that bolo tie. Whether it was a hint,” Laura said.

“Plus,” Morgan added, “a long time ago I had my assistant research the veterinary convention and we got the names of two out of the three men in that photograph with your mother. The one we don’t have is the cowboy on the end. Maybe he wasn’t really attending the convention but was there because of your mother. Or maybe their records are incomplete and he was a convention guest.”

“I know,” Kam said, frowning. “The dairy and beef convention was held annually in Los Angeles. Mom was a veterinary researcher and she was one of the speakers.” She pointed to the two men in the photo. “We know the guy in the business suit was a sales rep for a testing lab and the other one was a scientist who worked with Mom.” Her gaze drifted back to the unidentified cowboy. “My gut just tells me he’s the one. I

can't prove it, but I know it."

Laura patted her hand. "Women have that strong intuition. We know without knowing why we know what we know." She grinned over at Kam.

Laura's touch made Kam feel steadier and stronger. "So, all we have to go on is a bolo tie. I've wracked my brain on this for years trying to figure out what the bolo tie might mean, Mom. There's no writing on the bolo tie to say it was this ranch or that. No leads."

"Maybe we need to look on Google," Laura said. She had been a military researcher and writer in the Pentagon for years before she'd met and married Morgan, and she hadn't lost her knack for research. "I know you've been looking for the image on the Net without success."

"I've tried many times before but nothing comes up," Kam said. "Images are always being added and I keep hoping you'll find something on it."

"Because you're not a researcher," Laura said, smiling. "So now, let me show you some of the tools I use now that you're ready to find him."

Kam rose, excited. She knew her mother was an ace researcher. Not only that but she'd waited for Kam to be ready in her search. "Dad? You want to come?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, you two go ahead. There's not much room in that makeshift office you moved into your bedroom," and he smiled.

Understanding, Kam got to her feet. Laura picked up her coffee and they went up the stairs to her room.

Typing in the two words as she and Laura sat close to one another before the laptop, Kam saw a slew of listings from an archival Web site that Laura used. She quickly strolled through the possibilities and then went to the next set of ten. For the next hour, Laura went through decades of images on the site.

Finally, when Kam was losing hope, Laura gave her a smile.

“Look at this,” Laura said, pointing a finger at one entry. “Elkhorn Ranch, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.” She clicked on the link and immediately a Web page for a dude ranch came up.

Kam gasped. “There’s the elk symbol from his bolo tie!” The exact symbol from her photograph was emblazoned in the upper left-hand corner. Her heart started galloping once more.

“Hmmm,” Laura murmured, running her finger over the pad to get the pointer to the left in a column. She clicked on About Us.

Kam saw a multigenerational family portrait. Her breath hitched. In the back, the tallest figure standing in the middle of the family was the man in her photo, only older. Graying at his temples, he still wore a handlebar mustache and a black Stetson cowboy hat. His long arms were wrapped around his wife and an older woman. Two teenage children sat in front of them. An ache built in her chest. “His name is Rudd Mason,” she read out loud in a hushed tone.

“And he owns this dude ranch,” Laura rapidly read below the

family portrait. “Wife is Allison Dubois-Mason, children Regan and Zach. The other woman is Rudd’s mother, Iris Mason.”

“It says he owns a fifty-thousand-acre family ranch surrounded by the Grand Teton National Park,” Kam murmured, rapidly devouring the rest of the information. “He runs an organic beef herd and sells nationally to restaurants and food stores who want the clean meat.”

“Iris Mason sounds like a real interesting woman,” Laura noted, tapping her finger to the paragraph below. “She’s a herbalist and sells her flower essences worldwide.” Laura glanced over at Kam. “Remember how much you love gardening? You even loved weeding.”

Kam nodded. Her favorite thing growing up had been helping Laura plant, weed and grow the vegetables in their huge garden out back. “If Rudd is my father then Iris could be my grandmother. That’s probably where I got the gardening gene.”

“Anything’s possible,” Laura said. “There are so many questions yet to be answered. Rudd’s obviously got a family. What if he had an affair with your mother and his wife never knew about it? Or you?”

Mouth quirking, Kam whispered, “I was already thinking that myself.”

Patting her hand, Laura said, “One step at a time. Look, there’s a help-wanted page.” She clicked on it.

Kam’s eyes widened. “Wow, look at this, Mom.” She put her finger on the screen. “Caregiver wanted with medical



background to attend elderly person at the ranch. Must be an EMT or paramedic or registered nurse.”

“Good thing you’re a certified EMT,” Laura said, giving her a quick smile. “Maybe you could be hired and just go in and check them out?”

“I have cold sweats at the thought of walking up to Rudd Mason and saying I’m possibly his daughter and can I get a DNA test to prove it,” Kam admitted.

“I know. I’ve often wondered how you would handle that,” Laura confided. “It’s got to be scary for you.”

“It is. It’s my biggest fear. What if I walk up to this man and say, ‘Hey, I’m your daughter. Did you want me in your life? Do you even know I existed? Will you let me into your life? Do you love me? Did you ever love me?’” Shaking her head, Kam felt tears coming to her eyes. Looking down at her clasped hands in her lap, she said in a wobbly voice, “Oh, Mom, I’m just so scared.”

Placing her arm about her, Laura whispered, “I know you are. Maybe if you tried to get a job there, it would help answer some of your questions on your own. It would give the Mason family time to get to know you, too, before you sprang the big news.”

Nodding, Kam admitted, “It’s a coward’s way out, I know, but I just don’t have the courage to go up to him at this point. For all I know, he’s not my father. Just a cowboy who was at the conference who met my mother and by chance, got into this photo just because he was at their booth at the time it was shot.”

“It could be that simple,” Laura acknowledged. “If you could gain his trust, it might make it easier for you eventually to approach him.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Kam wiped her eyes. “I just wish I had the gumption it took just to call him up or write him an e-mail.”

Laura shrugged. “You could. But what if he knows you’re out there and doesn’t want this blown up because of his family? Maybe there are family dynamics in play we don’t know about. And maybe going in as a hired person at the ranch would give him an opportunity to get to know you over time. And if he is your father, then a lot of the way is smoothed because he will know you. It will lessen the shock of finding out you’re the lost daughter coming back to the family. At least he’ll know you to be a decent, kind and intelligent person.”

Kam closed her eyes and hung her head. “What would I do without you two? It has taken me so long to work up to this, and now you’re helping me once again.”

“Kammie, all we want is for you to be happy. We feel like your life has been on hold because you haven’t wanted to investigate your origins. We’ve seen you walk away from several developing relationships. We felt that because this basic, fundamental question had not been answered yet, you couldn’t commit to one.”

“You’re right about that.” Kam looked up and then over at Laura. “I don’t want to fall in love with a man and have a child

who doesn't know about my life and background. I don't ever want my child to go through what I'm going through, Mom."

"We understand," Laura said, patting her shoulder. "This is a good step to take. Just remember that Rudd Mason might not be your father, though he's the most obvious lead right now. And we may not ever know who your real father is...."

"I can't even go there, Mom. It just hurts too much." An intense sadness flooded her. "If I can earn Rudd Mason's trust and situate myself into his family as a caregiver, that's as good as it gets for now. Maybe after this, I'll sit down and talk to him privately about who I really am."

"I hope he doesn't feel hoodwinked by you coming like a wolf in sheep's clothing," Laura said. "That's the real caveat in your approach, Kam. He may think you sneaked into his family to cause problems."

"I thought of that, too. There just isn't an easy way to do this, Mom. No matter how I break the news, it'll be messy."

"Well," Laura said comfortingly, "apply for the position and send the e-mail. See if you can get hired. If you get hired, I'd take that as a sign from the universe that this is the way you should go."

Kam watched as Laura stood up and pulled the second chair out of the way so she could sit in front of her laptop. "This is scary, Mom."

"Life is scary, honey," Laura said, patting Kam's shoulder. "But life demands we step up to the plate and just do it. No one said it was easy. Now, get going on that e-mail and we'll go from

there.”

With a mixture of fear and excitement, Kam did as instructed. She had to start her new journey somewhere.

## CHAPTER TWO

RUDD MASON mentally crossed his fingers. He sat behind his ranch office desk on the north side of the sprawling single-story log dwelling, hoping against hope. Would this be the right caregiver for his mother? He'd gone through five already. His mother, Iris Mason, was a tour de force, and none of them could cope with her. Glancing up at the clock, whose face was surrounded by a series of elk antlers, he noted that Kamaria Trayhern would arrive in an hour for her interview.

Outside, the May sky was moody with clouds that had drifted across the majestic Tetons on the south side of the fifty-thousand-acre ranch. The typical May weather brought a mix of fronts, delivering below-freezing temps, only to rebound to the sixties during the day. Snow had finally melted around the dude-ranch portion, and his wranglers were busy with last-minute finishes, painting and repair on the ten cabins that would house their clientele.

Rudd nervously moved his work-worn fingers across his red handlebar mustache, now sprinkled with gray. At forty-eight years old, he didn't think much about the gray at his temples, either. His red hair was cut short and mostly hidden beneath his beat-up black Stetson. His wife, Allison, continually chided him about wearing the hat inside the house, telling him he should remove it since it was the gentlemanly thing to do. Well, he was a

cowboy, from the bloodlines of trappers who had discovered this area and eventually settled it long before the pioneers had arrived. His blood was connected to the pulse of the earth where he'd been born. It felt good to be so deeply rooted when most people never knew much about their family history. Such ignorance was unforgivable in Rudd's mind.

Watching out the window of his corner office, Rudd felt a frisson of tension. Few applicants had responded to his ad to take care for his ailing mother. Jackson Hole, Wyoming, wasn't exactly Grand Central Station. In fact, just the opposite—it was out in the middle of some of the most beautiful landscape and mountains the U.S.A. had to offer. But not much city, that was for sure. Would this woman, Kamaria Trayhern, be a city slicker in disguise? Unable, like the others, to adjust to ranch life and his mother's pace? Her résumé was interesting and, as an EMT, she'd be perfect for his mother's needs. What was Kamaria really like? Only a face-to-face meeting would tell the tale. Fretting, Rudd tugged at his long handlebar mustache and waited the long hour.

KAM UNCONSCIOUSLY rubbed her tightened stomach as she drove slowly through the sleepy Western town of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The sky was cloudy and threatened rain. Maybe snow? Here and there on her way up to the small town that was the gateway to the Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks, Kam had seen patches of snow across the rolling green hills. She

crawled along at twenty-five miles an hour in the early-afternoon Monday traffic. The town seemed clean, neat and very Western. She had stayed at the Wyoming Inn of Jackson Hole on the main drag and been treated like royalty. Not only had the staff provided her with a delicious breakfast but they had gone out of their way to help her with directions to the Elkhorn Ranch.

She'd found many quaint establishments off the four-lane highway. One that caught her attention was Jedidiah's Restaurant, which, she'd been told, served the best sourdough pancakes. Kam loved sourdough and made a note to herself to go back real soon.

As she climbed the hill out of town, Kam was not prepared for what she saw at the top. On the left the dragon-teeth Grand Tetons emerged. Wreathed in winter snow, their cragginess evident, the mountain chain resembled the sharp scales on the back of a sleeping dragon. The mountains soared upward out of the flat plain, which made them even more dramatic and spectacular. The beauty of the early afternoon was enhanced by a line of thick, fluffy white clouds scudding across the sharp peaks like soldiers on a march.

To her right was a long rolling valley. The Hole in Jackson Hole was an early trapper word that meant valley. Kam spotted many herds of elk who were leaving their wintering ground for the higher reaches of the hills and mountains that surrounded the valley.

The friendly staff at the Wyoming Inn had told her that as many as ten thousand elk wintered in this long, wide valley just

outside of town. Now that spring had come and the snow melt at the higher elevations was in full swing, the herds were leaving their valley digs. They would go to their homes high above that were covered with thick stands of willows, deciduous trees and pines.

The four-lane highway narrowed into two lanes. The beauty of the Grand Tetons kept calling to her. Kam wanted so badly to stop and park off to the side and photograph the majesty of these incredible mountains. But not today. She had an appointment to keep for an interview. She wondered idly who would conduct her interview. An office manager? From what Kam could find out from the staff at the Wyoming Inn, this was the largest ranch in the state. Plus, her research had told her that the Elkhorn Ranch was one of the most popular dude-ranch destinations, as well.

Moose Junction came up. It was one of the entrances to Grand Teton National Park. Kam sped on by the turn. The junction looked enticing and Kam longed to make that right turn and put on her backpack and hiking boots and take off with her camera in hand. The beauty of the area was overwhelming and deserved to be captured in photos. According to all the warning signs along the highway, moose were prevalent in the area. Kam had never seen one. Wyoming wildlife was all around her and she smiled a little. This was the first time she'd been to this state and she was beginning to realize how much she'd missed by not visiting it sooner.

In the back of her mind she never stopped wondering if Rudd



Mason was her father. All she had was a photo, a memento of her mother's life before the quake. Mason might have been at the right place at the right time. For all she knew, this trip might be a big waste of time. Did other orphans or adopted children go through this pattern of fear and questioning? They must.

Frowning, Kam pushed strands of her wavy hair off her brow. Lucky for her the weather in Wyoming was very similar to that back home in Montana. She wore a conservative dark brown wool pantsuit with a tasteful white blouse beneath the jacket. Her mother had given her a strand of pink pearls when she was twelve years old. Kam had loved pearls ever since she could remember. They were her favorite gem. Touching them briefly, Kam felt Laura's steadying presence. On her thirteenth birthday, her adopted parents had given her a pair of pink pearl earrings to go with the necklace. She wore them today, maybe for luck in her interview, or maybe it was a way to have Morgan and Laura close to her on one of the most important days of her life.

Up ahead, Kam noted a huge sign indicating that Elkhorn Ranch was a mile away. The bolo-tie symbol stood out in the carved-pine rectangular sign. Fear shot through Kam and she gulped unsteadily. Her hands tightened on the wheel. All her sense of inner peace fled. The sign might as well have read: This is your life. Are you ready for it? That's how she felt deep inside. What if Rudd Mason really was her father? What if he recognized her? The questions pummeled at Kam until she felt like a badly beaten-up boxer in the last round of a fifteen-round

match.

The asphalt road stopped where the turnoff for the Elkhorn Ranch began. Two pine poles sat on either side of the road with a sign running across the middle: Elkhorn Ranch. There were elk antlers on either side of the sign, anchored into place with unseen wires or bolts. The road was rutted and still muddy from recent rains. She had rented a Toyota Prius and now wondered about the wisdom of the choice. The car had a very low clearance and some of the ruts looked a lot deeper than it could handle. Well, too late. Somehow she had to crawl down the long, wide dirt road.

Weaving around so that she wouldn't bottom out, Kam tried to take in some of the scenery. The sides of the road were fenced. The wire on the left was a good ten feet high, and considerably thicker than that on the right. In a bit, Kam saw why as a herd of shaggy buffalo, numbering close to one hundred, foraged on the green grass. Here and there, newly born buffalo calves raced around like roadsters. Again, she wanted to stop and take photos, but she didn't dare give in to that need.

On the right, as she approached the horizon line, Kam noted hundreds of white-faced Herefords. Buffalo on the left. Cows on the right. Kam recalled that Buffalo carried some disease that could infect cattle, but it seemed that the owners of the ranch kept them well separated. She wondered why there was such a large herd of buffalo. Coming over the slight hill, Kam gasped and stepped on the brake.

Below her on a gently rolling road stood a sprawling ranch.

Men rode on horseback, some of them herding groups of cows to other pens, others walking with brooms and buckets toward a row of small cabins below the main area. There was a single-story ranch house made of pine logs and plaster. The structure must easily have been ten thousand square feet. The ranch house seemed to have been built in sections over time. The sheen of the timber contained color changes, which indicated a gradual build. As Kam eased her foot off the brake and allowed the Prius to amble down the slight incline, she wondered just how old the structures were.

A bright red two-story barn on her left appeared to be the center of activity. Kam spotted cowboys holding a line of several horses waiting for the farrier to put new iron shoes on the animals. Two dogs, a yellow Labrador and a golden retriever, bounded around the group, tongues hanging out of their mouths as they frolicked. In front of the ranch house sat a huge garden surrounded with six-foot-high cyclone fence with bird netting over the top. The rich, black soil had been tilled and furrowed but she didn't see anything growing. No one would plant until June for fear of frost in areas such as this. In this valley, she'd read, there were only sixty days a year above freezing. That was tough on any gardening activities. Still, her photographer's eye absorbed the neatness of the garden that surely fed a huge group of people. It was easily two acres in size.

Cottonwoods stood in a semicircle around the conglomerate ranch, their yellow-green leaves just starting to emerge after the

hard Wyoming winter. Behind and to the south of the ranch was a delightful brook that reminded her of a lazily moving snake across the valley. Kam wondered if there were trout in it, something that Wyoming was famous for. Her heart started to pound in earnest as she eased into the parking area. Tires crunched the gravel. A number of hitching posts were scattered around the area.

A sign at the main ranch entrance said Enter Here. Okay, she would. Kam got out and slid the leather purse strap across her shoulder. The May breeze was warming. Sunlight poured down strongly, lifting the coolness from the air. Fingers tightening around the strap, Kam was locking the car when she heard someone riding at a gallop and turned. A wrangler raced by. She took in his dark blue shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, leather gloves on his hands. He wore a red bandanna around his throat and a tan Stetson low across his eyes. The gray horse was long and lanky, probably part thoroughbred. Still, the man's squinted eyes had briefly met hers, and she had felt a sudden, unexpected leap of her heart. But this wasn't fear. He was terribly handsome in a raw, natural way. Under any other circumstances, Kam would have given this guy a second look, but not now.

Grimacing, she turned and walked with determination up the steps to the front door of the Elkhorn Ranch. The dark green screen door had been recently painted and didn't utter a sound when she opened it. Someone had paid attention and oiled it. The inner door was wide open, and she stepped into the immaculate,

pine-floored hall. To her left was a sign that said Office.

Taking a deep, final breath to try and steady her fraying nerves, Kam turned into the office. Behind the counter Rudd Mason was sitting at a blond oak desk, frowning as he read some paperwork. Kam stood staring. This man was tall, probably six foot four and about two hundred and thirty pounds. His face was narrow, nose hooked and skin deeply tanned, weathered and lined from living so long in the elements. His hair was red! Kam swallowed her shock. Flaming red hair peppered with some silver throughout the strands. He wore his hair short but what got her attention was that elegant red handlebar mustache. Rudd Mason looked like he'd just stepped out of the 1860s from the OK Corral gunfight. Still so much like the man in the photo.

If she hadn't been so nervous and afraid, Kam could have appreciated the man's simple cowboy garments: jeans, a checked red-and-white long-sleeved shirt, a blue bandanna around his throat. When he lifted his head to see her standing there, his turquoise-blue eyes narrowed.

"Afternoon, missy. Might you be Kamaria Trayhern?"

Her skin shivered with excitement. Rudd's voice was deep and the drawl took away some of her angst. "Yes, sir, I am. Are you Rudd Mason? The owner?"

He gave her a curt nod. "I'm him." He gestured for her to come around the end of the counter. "Come and sit here next to me. I'm glad you could make it. Any problems with the flight? Nowadays, I never fly. Such a hassle."

Kam smiled. She liked his straightforward demeanor. He stood waiting for her, the epitome of that old cowboy custom of being a gentleman. His hair was plastered against his skull and his black cowboy hat, stained with sweat around the band, sat on the desk next to his pile of papers.

“Thanks. And my flight from Billings was uneventful, thank goodness.”

“Can I get you anything to drink? Cup of coffee? Tea?”

At least he was pleasant, Kam thought. “No, thank you. I ate lunch in Jackson Hole just an hour ago. I’m fine.” Kam sat down and kept her purse in her lap, hands across it. She watched him settle back down in the wooden chair, which creaked under his full weight. Rudd picked up a yellowed mug and lifted it in her direction. “Well, I’ll take a cup of joe anytime someone offers it to me.” He took a long sip and set it down in front of him. Rummaging around, he found her résumé and put it on top of the stack of papers.

“I liked your qualifications. You’ve got EMT certification, but I see you aren’t with the fire department. Usually, most EMTs are.”

Kam squirmed beneath those assessing blue eyes. “I’m a photographer, Mr. Mason. I do a lot of work overseas in areas where there aren’t many hospitals. I decided to get certified as an EMT a long time ago in case it was me who got hurt in the middle of nowhere.”

“I see....” He smiled slightly. “You’re a gal with some brains

in your head. Ever used your EMT skills?"

At least he appreciated common sense. Kam felt her hammering heart slow down a tad. She liked Rudd Mason. He seemed very laid-back, easygoing and able to communicate. "Yes, sir, I have. Usually on villagers. I never had to use it on myself."

"You ever work with older folks, Ms. Trayhern?"

"Old as in..."

"My mother, Iris Mason, is eighty-two. She's the one who needs taking care of. She lives here with us." He waved his hand in the direction of the rest of the ranch house.

"I've dealt with villagers in Africa and Eurasia who were very old," Kam said. "And I used my EMT knowledge to help them. I think I put in my résumé that I had never actually been a caregiver."

"Right," Rudd rumbled, "you put that in here." He poked at the paper. "You get along with the elderly okay?"

"I think I do. In my business as a photographer I meet all kinds of people of all ages and nationalities. I try to be a good listener and keep my own stuff out of the way."

"Humph."

A lump began to form in Kam's throat. She saw Mason frowning and studying her résumé again. Struck by how lean and scarred his brown hands were, she began to understand how much this man battled the harsh elements of this state.

"Ever deal with a cranky senior?"

When he lifted his head and nailed her with that dark look, Kam gulped inwardly. “Well, uh, anyone can get cranky from time to time.”

“My mother is headstrong, opinionated and stubborn, Ms. Trayhern. You can’t sweet-talk her, and once she’s got her mind made up, nothin’ is gonna change it.”

“Oh, I see. That kind of cranky.” She saw the left corner of Rudd’s mouth twitch upward.

“Yes, missy. The doctor tells her she has high blood pressure and she won’t take her medication. She’s already had a TIA, a mild stroke, but she won’t take the medicine to lower her blood pressure so she won’t get another one.”

“Ouch,” Kam murmured sympathetically. Clearly, Rudd Mason was worried about his mother, but he seemed helpless to get her to change her mind.

“Yes, ‘ouch,’” Rudd dryly agreed. “My mother is a tough ol’ buzzard. She’s lived on this ranch since she married my father, Trevor, at age twenty. My father’s dead now, but she runs this family ranch in his stead.”

Kam nodded. “A true matriarch.”

“You could say that.”

His dry sense of humor rubbed off on her, and Kam met his slight grin beneath the mustache. There was nothing to dislike about this man so far. Kam wondered if she should just blurt out her real reason for being here. He seemed to be the kind of person who could handle any adversity. Something cautioned



her not to rush. Still, the words ached to leap out of her throat and pass her lips. She longed to scream out, I'm your daughter! Maturity won out and Kam sat, mute.

"My mother is the boss," Rudd told her. "She's sharp, but the mild stroke has addled her memory somewhat. She's got arthritis and sometimes needs help getting around. Iris loves to drive, but her license got yanked by a local judge about a year ago, thank God. If he hadn't done that, she was bound to have an accident that killed her or some other person. You'd be expected to drive her wherever she wanted to go."

"That wouldn't be a problem."

Rudd assessed Kamaria. "You a city slicker?"

"Uhh...no. I'm a country girl. Why?"

"Humph."

Just what did that mean? Kam almost asked but decided against it.

"You got a young man in your life?"

"Not presently. My life as a photographer was pretty much on the go. I didn't have time for something like that."

"Humph."

She blinked once. He scowled and put on a pair of bifocal glasses to study her résumé again.

"You like gardening?"

"I love it. My parents have a huge garden, certainly not the size of the one I saw at the side of your home, but my mother and I raised a lot of veggies over the summer."

“How about flowers? You like them, too?”

Kam grinned. “Who doesn’t like flowers?”

“That’s what I always thought, but you’d be surprised,” Rudd muttered. He made some notes out in the margin of her résumé. “I’m curious about why a photographer would suddenly want to become a caregiver.”

Kam licked her lips and said carefully, “I’ve been on the move since I graduated from college, Mr. Mason. I’m twenty-eight now. I’ve been kicked around this globe and seen a lot. I guess I want to have a life. I don’t want to lie awake half the night scared out of my wits, wondering if some rebel is skulking about to behead me. Or, that I’ll contract malaria or yellow fever and die alone out in the bush.” Kam shrugged. What she said was the truth, but not all of it. “I figure I’ll continue to do some photography and make a little money on the side as a caregiver. It won’t interfere with my job here.”

“Your nesting phase, as my mother would say.”

“Pardon me?”

“Nesting. You know—settling down. You’ve been a tumbleweed rolling all around the world and you’re tired. You want to settle down and sink some roots like the rest of us.”

“That’s another way to put it,” Kam agreed. She liked his cowboy insight and use of colorful Western slang.

“Iris is unique,” he began, leaning back in the creaking chair, his hands resting on his hips. “My family came from a line of trappers who first discovered this area in the mid 1800s. My

great-great-grandfather, Rudyard Mason, married a Blackfoot gal by the name of Buffalo Woman. This ranch became his home. He claimed it and worked it and eventually owned the land outright long before Yellowstone or the Grand Tetons were made into national parks.”

He tugged at his mustache. “It seems that each Mason man married an Indian woman, so we have a lot of that in our blood to this day. My mother’s father was a full-blood Crow. Her mother was white. Iris lives close to the earth and practices Native American ways. That’s her garden out there.” He pointed in that general direction. “She also has flowers that she grows in and around the ranch. Her company is Tetons Flower Essences, and she sells what she makes around the world. My mother spends from dawn to dusk with her plants and loves every second of it. I’m happy she’s happy. With her brain addled by the stroke, she’ll be needing someone to help her with the packing, shipping and making out bills to customers. Your job as her caregiver would be a lot more than that. I need a person who is very flexible, who loves nature, who can deal with a cranky woman who gets her back up every once in a while, but who can appreciate her passion for life.”

Kam swallowed hard over the fact that this fascinating woman could be her grandmother. What a rich gift that would be. Fighting back tears, Kam blinked several times and whispered, “I’d love doing anything to help her, Mr. Mason. I love the earth, too. Gardening is a healing meditation to me.”

“Humph. Iris says the same thing. Says that when she gets out weeding in that garden of hers, any bad feelings she carried out with her just go back into the ground. She always feels better afterward.”

Never had Kam wanted a job more than this one. Something about Rudd Mason struck a chord so deep. “Mrs. Mason sounds like a dream come true to me.”

“Plenty of people around here consider her an ongoing nightmare.”

Kam noted Rudd scowling, his gaze off in the distance. Who wouldn’t love a senior like Iris? “Maybe a person who didn’t work in a garden might not understand,” Kam said forcefully, “but my experience is that gardeners are some of the most peaceful, calm and centered people I’ve ever known.”

Rudd chuckled. “I hear you, Ms. Trayhern. There’s folks I’d like to throw into a garden and not let them out until they got it, but that ain’t gonna happen.”

Kam watched him as he looked up at the ribbed pole ceiling of the office, as if considering something. She had to be bold. “I’d really like this job, Mr. Mason. I believe I could get along very well with Mrs. Mason.”

“Call her Iris,” he said finally, glancing over at her. “She hates standing on protocol. And she loves her first name, Iris. Her parents named her an Indian name that means Iris Blooms in the Morning. It fits her. My mother is the backbone of this ranch, and she made it into what it is today alongside my father. She’s

worked hard all her life. She's got arthritic knuckles to show for it, too."

As she heard the pride and love in his voice, Kam hoped he would speak to her in such a tone someday. It all hinged on this job. Gripping the leather purse, she waited for his decision.

"Okay, Ms. Trayhern, let's give you a whirl. First, you gotta meet Iris. She will be the one who decides whether or not you stay or go. Fair enough?"

A shock of relief shot through Kam. "Fair enough."

"Okey-dokey," he said, unwinding and standing. "Let's go find Iris. Chances are she's out back in her greenhouse with her flowers."

Joy mixed with dread as Kam followed him out of the office and down the hall. Her heart hammered again and she wondered if Rudd could feel her nervousness. She tried to steady her breathing and contain her excitement.

# CHAPTER THREE

“IRIS, I want you to meet Kamaria Trayhern.”

Kam smiled as she approached Iris Mason, who sat on a stool in front of her baker’s table. In her hand she held dark, rich soil that she was putting into a small clay pot. The woman was about five feet six inches tall with short silver hair that seem to glow around her head like a halo. Her blue eyes were lively and sharp. Kam could easily see the Native American features in her deeply wrinkled, copper-colored face.

“Hello, dearie,” she said, holding out a long, lean hand caked with soil.

Kam didn’t hesitate but grasped her hand. “Hello, Iris. Just call me Kam. What are you planting?”

Iris chuckled and released her hand. “Not afraid of a little dirt, are you?” Kam took in the woman’s dress. She wore a T-shirt covered with a white blouse and a very old denim jacket adorned with Indian beading on the back.

Rudd stood behind his mother, hands on his hips as the two women conversed.

Kam knew he watched and assessed their interaction. However, Iris was the one in charge. “I love gardening. Mr. Mason said you had a huge plot and I got excited. I grew up with one about half the size of yours in Montana.”

“Maybe we got lucky, son?” Iris quipped, looking up at him

and grinning.

“I hope so, Iris,” Rudd rumbled good-naturedly.

Iris gave Kam a keen, long look. “Ever since my head decided to get slightly addled, my son has been trying to fix me up with a babysitter. I’ve chased all of ’em off. I’m only eighty-two and I’m not in diapers—yet.”

Chuckling, Kam enjoyed the feisty elder and hoped they were related. Iris was small but mighty. She kept putting soil in each of the six pots in front of her. Several packets of flower seeds sat on the table. “I hope you won’t see me as a babysitter, Iris. I’ll be here to help you when you need it. Otherwise, I’ll stay out of the way. How does that sound?”

“Oh, you mean you aren’t going to tail me around like a proverbial shadow, waiting for me to stroke out? You aren’t going to jaw me to death for not taking a high blood pressure pill? Complain that you’re outside too long with me in the garden? Whine about pulling weeds?”

Kam grinned. “No, ma’am, I won’t. I grew up in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains. My mother always had a huge garden and I loved weeding it. We froze and canned everything we grew. My mother believes in living organically off the land.”

“You’re a healthy-looking specimen, I’ll give you that,” Iris said, raising her thinned, arched silver brows. She twisted a look up at Rudd. “Since you insist upon me having a babysitter, this one looks hopeful compared to the others you’ve dragged kicking and screaming in here.”

Kam noted the relief on Rudd's weathered features. He touched his handlebar and smoothed it between his thumb and index finger. "So you'll give Kam a whirl, Iris?"

Shrugging, the old woman eyed Kam slyly and winked. "Oh, I might just do that, son. Why don't you fetch Wes and let him know I need to go into Jackson Hole later for a few things from the feed and seed store? Kamaria can ride along and get used to my routines."

Hands slipping off his hips, Rudd nodded. "I'll do that, Iris."

"I can get my bags. Just tell me where I'll be staying," she said to him.

"Oh, you'll be right across the hall from me, Kamaria. A nice suite with a lovely bedroom," Iris said. "I made the quilt you'll see on your bed. And the curtains, too. The other room is an office and living room. I think you'll like the suite," Iris said.

"I'm sure I will." Kam watched Iris open up the first packet of seeds. "After I get my bags in the suite, would you like me to come out here and help you?"

Iris shook her head. She looked at the watch on her thin right arm. "Are you hungry?"

"No," Kam said, grateful for the woman's consideration. "I ate before I drove out here."

"Rudd, you need to tell Hazel that we have one more for dinner tonight."

Kam saw his face go tight, his eyes flash with shock.

"Iris? You never wanted your caregiver to eat with the family



before.”

“Well, I do now,” she snapped, giving her son a look of finality. Iris poked her finger into the soft soil and then dropped in two seeds and patted more soil over them.

“I’ll tell Hazel,” he said abruptly, then turned to Kam. “Come with me. I’ll show you where your quarters are located.”

Kam felt the tension between mother and son. One moment there was warmth and then, just as suddenly, it was as if a storm had arrived. Iris seemed to be smiling over some secret known only to her as she focused on her seed pots in front of her. Rudd appeared suddenly nervous and began to twist the ends of his handlebar. What was going on? There was no way to tell. She’d just have to wait and find out.

“Meet me out front at 2:00 p.m.,” Iris called to Kam. “Wes will take us into town. I can fill you in on a lot of things at that time.”

“Of course,” Kam murmured. She smiled at Iris, said goodbye for now and followed Rudd out of the large, airy greenhouse. The glass panels were set into a steel frame. Across the roof, thicker glass handled the snow’s weight during the winter. Some of the panes were louvered to allow fresh air into the area. Everywhere Kam looked small pots of young, green plants sat on every available space. Iris obviously started her garden in here early so she could get a leap ahead for the June planting time. Kam knew from experience living in the Rockies that the growing season was short. Iris was smart and got around that by starting

her veggies in the greenhouse.

As she followed Rudd down the immaculately clean concrete floor toward the ranch house through a screen door, Kam smiled to herself. She liked Iris a lot. Her next adventure would be with this guy called Wes who was Iris's driver. One by one, she was meeting the people who made this beautiful ranch what it was. In so many ways, Kam felt at home. The only question left to ask was whether this was her real father and grandmother—or not?

“HEY, SHERIDAN,” the ranch manager called at the opening to the main horse barn, “Mrs. Mason wants you at the main house.”

Wes was unsaddling his big gray gelding when he heard Chappy Andrews's booming voice echo down the concrete walkway between the airy box stalls. Bolt, his ten-year-old gelding, a mix of quarter horse and Thoroughbred breeding, stood quietly in the cross ties in the center of the barn. Wes had just taken off the saddle, brushed him down and was getting ready to let him out into a nearby pasture filled with spring grass. Lifting his head, brush in hand, Wes called back, “Okay, I'll be right there.”

What now? He'd seen that blue Toyota Prius hybrid come crawling down the hill. After working with a bunch of cows and newly born calves in the pasture, Wes was hurrying to grab a bite to eat before Hazel, the cook, refused to let him in the bunkhouse kitchen between meals. He'd galloped past the parked car but

liked what he saw as the driver had emerged from it. Wes figured she was the next applicant for the caregiver's job.

Unsnapping the ties from Bolt's halter, Wes turned the tall, rangy gelding around and led him out the end of the barn. A small corral nearby, containing several cow horses, was used by the wranglers during the day. The sun was warm and felt good across his shoulders. Bolt whinnied anxiously to a group of horses who eagerly munched on newly sprouted grass.

Smiling, Wes opened the latch on the gate and released Bolt's halter. The gelding galloped into the pasture, silver tail held high as he hurtled toward the small waiting group. Horses were herd-oriented animals, and Bolt would slow down and pretty soon have his nose to the ground munching away. Horse heaven. Wes grinned wider as he watched his favorite cow horse slow and then drop his long, thin neck to grab at the grass. If only his life was this simple. But it never had been for him.

After closing the gate, Wes took off his elkskin gloves and tucked them in his belt. He walked back to the barn to put his gear in the tack room, unbuckled his chaps and hauled them off from around his hips and legs. Even though Rudd Mason had four-wheel ATV vehicles to herd the cattle, Wes preferred being in a saddle with a good horse under him. And he was thankful that his boss gave him that choice.

Once he finished his duties in the barn, Wes knew that Iris wanted to go to town. She did every day unless the dude ranch was in session, and right now it wasn't. He always enjoyed the

crotchety old matriarch even though she was hated by Rudd's entire family. Iris was not tactful nor was she tolerant of fools. Wes liked those attributes in her.

He took long strides across the graveled ground and resettled the tan cowboy hat on his head. He made sure his dark blue shirt was tucked neatly into the waist of his Levi's. He kicked off the worst of the mud and crud his boots had picked up, wanting to look somewhat presentable. Iris didn't like sloppy-looking cowboys working for the Elkhorn. He didn't, either. Rudd might be the day-to-day boss running this huge operation, and Chappy was the field boss, but Iris was the actual owner and creator of this viable and robust ranch. At eighty-two, the matriarch was the brains of the operation despite what Rudd's Hollywood wife might like to think.

As he took the steps up to the office, Wes removed his hat and kicked his boots on a hog-hair brush anchored to the porch. This kept most of the mud and dust and manure out of the house. Feeling happy for no discernible reason, Wes entered.

"There you are!"

Iris stood near the entrance to the sitting room opposite the office. She was dressed in her fringed buckskin jacket, a pair of cranberry slacks, a pink sweater and the beat-up straw hat that rarely left her head. It had a chunk missing from the brim where a horse had taken a chomp. Iris said it gave the hat character. He smiled and nodded.

"Hi, Iris. We going into Jackson today?"

“Yep, we are.” Iris motioned for him to come into the sitting room. “Come here, I want you to meet my latest babysitter.”

Wes moved into the large room, admiring the white lacy curtains on all the windows. The room was filled with turn-of-the-last-century oak furniture over a large and century-old oriental rug that covered part of the blond oak floor. And then he saw her.

This was the woman he’d noticed emerging from her car. Now, as he drowned in her large blue eyes, his heart thudded, underscoring how her beauty affected him. Her slightly wavy hair was short and black like a raven’s wing. Her oval face, high-set cheekbones and olive complexion made him think she might have some Indian blood. Even better, he liked her full lips that made him think of lush tulips in bloom.

“Wes Sheridan, meet Kamaria Trayhern,” Iris told him with a cackle.

Wes moved forward, his hand extended toward the tall, lean woman. She was dressed casually but tastefully in a dark brown pantsuit that emphasized her natural carriage, her head held high. “Hi, I’m Wes. Welcome to the Elkhorn Ranch, Ms. Trayhern.”

The moment his hand slid into hers, Wes felt his world had been rocked. Her hand was warm and firm. He saw her eyes widen momentarily and those soft, petal-like lips part. Yes, she was definitely eye candy.

“Call me Kamaria or Kam,” she responded a little breathlessly. Reluctantly, Wes removed his hand from hers. “Kamaria?”

That's an unusual name. What does it mean? Is it Native American?"

"No, it's African," Kam said. "My mother chose a Swahili name for me."

Iris nodded, properly impressed. "Our family has plenty of Native American blood in it and we always gave our children meaningful names. So what does Kamaria mean in Swahili?"

With heat tunneling up into her face and two pairs of interested eyes on her, Kamaria said, "It means beautiful, like the moon." She didn't know why divulging this personal piece of information made her feel so vulnerable, but it did. Iris's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. And Wes seemed awed by the information.

"You are a pretty-looking little thing," Iris agreed. She glanced over at Wes and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "You see, Wes? Here I thought she was Indian like us. The color of her skin? Her broad face and high cheekbones?"

Kam moved tensely. Iris was getting too close to her family situation, the fact she'd been adopted. Kam didn't want to go there with them just yet. "How did you get your name, Iris?" Desperate, Kam shifted focus back to them and away from her. Right now, she felt like the proverbial bug under their collective microscope. And, if she was honest, she found Wes Sheridan devastatingly handsome. He was lean and just a little bit dangerous to her. There was no wedding ring on his left hand, either. Maybe it was his wide-spaced eyes, their gray depths and

large black pupils that held her in thrall. Or, maybe it was his square, broad tan face that drew her. As her gaze flitted from his straight nose to his mouth, she felt hot and shaky inside. Few men had that kind of effect on her.

“Oh, I got named early on by my mother,” Iris told her. “I had a deep love of irises. And that’s how I received my name.” Iris motioned toward the east side of the ranch building. “I’ve got about fifty different types of irises planted out there. Pretty soon, they’ll be coming up and you’ll see.”

Wes smiled. “We have a standing joke around here, Kamaria. If it’s early June, we know where to find Iris—in the iris beds.”

Kam laughed politely, noticing more how Iris beamed up at the tall, athletic cowboy. The red bandanna around his throat only emphasized the proud breadth of his shoulders and the well-sprung chest beneath his blue canvas shirt. In his belt was a leather sheath with a knife, along with well-used leather gloves. Indeed, Wes Sheridan was a stud of a man. And she felt her body respond to him whether she wanted it to or not. Kam cautioned herself against relationships. Her only reason for being here was to find her father. Until that was settled, Kam couldn’t get involved.

“Let’s go, young ’uns.” Iris lifted her hand and shooed them out the door. “Wes, I need you to drop us off at the feed and seed store. I gotta get some items.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he murmured, going to open the front door for them. As he held the screen wide open, Iris went through first and

then Kamaria followed. For a moment, Wes swore he could smell her feminine scent. Was she wearing perfume? She seemed like a no-frills type. There was a naturalness to Kamaria Trayhern that Wes liked a lot. Maybe too much. She seemed very confident in herself and he liked that, too. But she wasn't pushy like his ex-wife, Carla, had been.

Releasing the door, Wes hurried down the steps to the white Chevy Suburban and opened the passenger door for Iris. He helped the woman negotiate the high climb into the front seat, and, once she was in, he opened the door behind for Kamaria.

"Thanks," she said, climbing in. The inside of the cabin was warm and snug. Sunlight lancing through the darkened windows made it pleasant on the coolish May day. Kam watched Wes as he walked around to the driver's seat and slid in. He had an unconscious grace, almost as if he were boneless. As Kam sat in the back, the vision of a wolf sitting on a rock watching the world came to her. Wes seemed as one with the land and moved with it naturally. If he was arrogant, it didn't show. No, he was quite gentle toward Iris, and Kam sensed he liked the elderly lady. Iris liked him, that was for sure.

As Wes backed the big Suburban out of the parking area and headed up the dirt road to the main highway, Iris was constantly touching his arm and chatting away. The big, wide SUV negotiated the muddy tracks a lot better than her Prius had, but then, Kam told herself, the Prius was not an SUV. She bet this big hog of an SUV got very poor gas mileage in comparison



to the fifty miles to the gallon her trusty Prius hybrid gave her.

In no time, they were in Jackson and parked at Hardy's Feed and Seed Store. Iris climbed out with vigor from the Suburban before Wes could come around and open her door. Kam was out, too, and following Iris. The midafternoon was a tad warmer in the town, Kam noted. There were a number of ranchers in pickup trucks getting feed for their stock. It was a busy place.

"I need some peeps," Iris told her as they walked down the creaky wooden floor between two aisles. "I'd told Chappy there was a sly ol' red fox getting my hens. He needed to repair a tear I saw in the fence, but he didn't assign a cowboy soon enough. That fox got in my henhouse and killed ten of my best girls." She shook her head and made a right turn to the corner.

"That's sad," Kam said. "I hate to see anything killed."

Iris grunted. She led Kam to the corner where heat lamps were suspended and about a hundred fluffy yellow baby chicks chirped away. "Listen, you live in the natural world with life and death. We're all gonna die some day." She stopped and placed her hands on top of the board that surrounded the area to keep the peeps warm and protected from any cooler breezes. There were plenty of feeders and water bowls for the young chicks.

Kam joined her and enjoyed the little babies. "I've seen life and death in Africa and Eurasia," she said. "It's still hard to accept."

"At my age, you do because you don't have a choice." Iris chuckled as she eyed the milling chicks. "I come from tough

stock. My grandmother lived to be a hundred. It's the Indian blood in us. They knew not only how to live on the land, but how to care for it. We lost all these things when Columbus came here, the bastard."

Laughing softly, Kam enjoyed Iris's honesty. If this was her grandmother, Kam would love to have her in her life. Suddenly, she felt very lucky. Iris was a hoot. Wes was—well, damned good-looking, very quiet, introspective, but sensitive to the needs of others. And the romanticism of him being a hardworking cowboy didn't hurt, either. Kam had always been drawn to men who challenged nature on a regular basis.

"How many peeps are you going to get, Iris?"

"Hmmm, probably thirty." She looked up and pointed toward the office on the opposite side of the feed store. "Go get Susan, the office manager. She always helps us."

Nodding, Kam walked toward the office. Most of the people in the store were rugged cowboys. The lifestyle in Wyoming seemed to keep everyone fit. There was plenty of walking, riding, fence-building and hay-moving. She spotted Wes over in the cattle feed section. He was taking down one-hundred-pound sacks of grain as if they were featherlight. He looked masculine and strong, and her heart fluttered again.

Tearing her gaze from him, she went into the office and found Susan. Together, they got the items for Iris to pick out her chicks.

Iris giggled indulgently as she chose her thirty peeps. Some weren't as plump or as large as others, but Iris left the scrawnier

ones behind and chose only the healthiest among them. This was a woman who missed nothing. Kam liked learning from Iris by simply watching her.

Kam put the box of chicks on the backseat beside her. Wes had the rear of the Suburban open and carried sacks of grain over his shoulder with ease. He could have slammed the grain sacks down on the floor of the SUV, but he didn't. He saw Kam putting the box of chicks on the seat and gently placed the grain inside. Kam liked that about him.

"Don't want to shake up the peeps?" she called, smiling at him. His face gleamed with sweat and it made his gray eyes look even more arresting. Flat black brows above them emphasized his large, dark pupils. His mouth twisted into a slight grin.

"Iris wouldn't like her chicks upset by earthquakes," he teased, meeting her gaze. Wes was having a helluva time keeping his eyes off Kamaria. The breeze had tousled her hair. Her cheeks were flushed and Wes liked the soft smile across her full lips. That was a mouth made for kissing and loving. Abruptly, Wes redirected the thought as he straightened, took off his hat and wiped his sweaty brow with the back of his arm. After a disastrous marriage to Carla, Wes didn't want to tangle with another woman for a long time to come. And chances were Iris would dump Kamaria just like she did all the rest within a month. So, there was no reason to see Kamaria as anything other than a transient among the Mason family.

"Still," Kam said, making sure the cardboard box was stable

on the seat, “it’s nice that you realized the situation. A lot of men wouldn’t.”

Nodding, Wes settled the hat back on his head. “That’s true,” he said.

“How long have you worked for the Masons?” Kam’s curiosity got the better of her. She saw him frown and wondered if she’d gone too far.

“I’ve been a wrangler at Elkhorn for two years now.”

“And before that? Did you always work as a wrangler?”

Uncomfortable, Wes put his hands on his narrow hips. “I worked at the Bar S over in Cody, Wyoming, before that. And yeah, I was born and raised on a ranch.” He managed a smile. “I can’t see being anything else.” Turning, he left the vehicle and headed back into the feed store to retrieve the four other sacks of grain that Chappy needed for the brood mares.

Kam stood simply watching Wes walk away. His grace was confident and smooth. What a hunk of a man. She hadn’t come here expecting to be drawn to anyone.

“Now there’s a man to be proud of,” Iris said, coming up behind her. “Any woman worth her salt would chase Wes Sheridan down and hog-tie him right and proper.”

Coloring fiercely, Kam turned to Iris. She was at the door grinning, her blue eyes sparkling with humor. “Oh...”

Iris patted her arm. “That’s okay, dearie, you’re young, and why shouldn’t you salivate after a man like that?”

Kam choked as she opened the door for Iris to climb in.

“Where I live there aren’t many cowboys. I love the iconic symbol of them. They stand for the rugged independence that made America what it is today.”

Strapping herself in, Iris said, “I love cowboys, too. I married one. Trevor was born and raised on the Elkhorn. He was a man’s man.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “He died too damned young. It was Rudd’s wife, Allison, that gave him that heart attack, damn her. I miss Trevor so much. You know we made the Elkhorn what it is today?”

Kam climbed in and kept the door open to allow the breeze to flow through the vehicle. The peeps were cheeping contentedly next to her. She tried to keep the shock out of her voice over Iris’s accusations about Rudd’s wife. At Iris’s upset expression, Kam tried to divert her. “Tell me about how you built the ranch, Iris.”

“Trevor was a cowboy through and through. I have the Sight, dearie,” and she tapped the middle of her brow. “That was passed on to me through my Native American blood. I saw that whites were spoiling and poisoning our land and water. I saw them poisoning the food we ate. I told Trevor twenty years ago to switch to organic beef. He stopped giving his cattle all those hormone shots, antibiotics and other crap and got the herd cleaned up. I worked with high-end restaurants on both coasts and convinced them that clean beef was the only way to go.”

“That was farsighted,” Kam said, impressed. She saw Iris turn around and look between the seats at her.

“Not only that, but I got him to buy a buffalo herd and we

started selling buffalo meat long before it was popular. That meat is low in cholesterol and lean. Right now, I make five million dollars a year selling our clean beef and buffalo meat to restaurants all over the U.S. We've made a name for ourselves and my husband and me did it all." She scowled. "And stupid Allison kept whining that we were throwing good money after bad as we made the switch. She kept filling Rudd's head with dire predictions that no restaurant owner in his or her right mind would ever buy our clean beef. She'd be snarky at the dinner table and ask who would ever buy buffalo meat?" Chuckling darkly, Iris said, "Allison is the kind of person who tells you what you can't do. Not what you can do."

"I see..."

Waving her hand, Iris said, "Anyway, the Elkhorn is known for its clean beef and buffalo meat. Then, I told Trevor ten years ago to start a dude ranch. I saw so many American families losing touch with the earth. If we can't get these families and especially the children back and connected to her, we're going to kill this planet. My dude-ranch idea was not just the normal hayrides and trail-riding, but also providing lots of fun things for the kids to do with nature. For example, we just harvested about twenty thousand acres of timber. We have our own mill and we sell the wood to suppliers. Children can choose to go with the wranglers assigned to replanting the hills with new pine-tree babies. We teach them that everything has to be sustainable. We care for the land and we take, but we give back. Those are Native American

attributes and we teach them that.”

“I love the idea,” Kam said, meaning it. She saw the liveliness in Iris’s eyes and heard the passion in her husky voice. Truly, she was the matriarch of the ranch in more than one way. “Kids do need to be reconnected with the earth. Especially city children.”

“Yes, and I developed a program—despite Allison’s objections—to pay for inner-city children from all over this country to come here, free of charge, for seven days to work with us and the land. I got several corporate sponsors to pay for their flights and we pick ’em up at the Jackson Hole airport and truck them out here. These are children of all colors and from all backgrounds, all poor, who have never seen a horse, much less a buffalo or a herd of cattle. We spend a lot of time teaching them about nature and how to live in harmony with it. My husband, bless him, had faith in me and my Sight. He backed me every time. We were a good team...” Her voice trailed off in sadness.

“How long ago did your husband leave you?” Kam asked her gently.

“Five years ago. He was too young to die. Allison drove him to it,” she said bitterly. “She hated us. Rudd had the damned bad luck of falling for her Hollywood starlet background and married her on impulse. When he brought her home to the Elkhorn, she hated it and us.”

“That’s so sad,” Kam said, noting the agony in Iris’s eyes and face. “Surely Allison has adjusted to life at the ranch now?” Kam tilted her head and searched Iris’s angry features.

“Humph. Never. She doesn’t even try,” Iris stated flatly. “Oh, you’ll meet her soon enough. Tonight at dinner I’m sure she’ll be in fine form. You’re new meat to brainwash.”

“What do you mean?”

“Allison runs Rudd. She’s the queen bee. Or she thinks she is. She forgets who I am. I still own the ranch.” Her lips flattened. “Which is why Allison keeps trying to have a doctor and a judge rule me mentally incompetent. Once I had that mild stroke, she became obsessed with having me taken down.”

Frowning, Kam said, “What do you mean taken down?”

“Trevor left the ranch to me in his will. If I’m ruled incompetent and need a power of attorney—that’s Rudd—then the ownership is transferred to him and Allison. I know her. The bitch wants to dismantle and destroy everything that Trevor and I did to build this ranch into what it is today. She’ll sell it off. She keeps nagging at Rudd to get me to sell off five thousand acres so a developer can come in and set up condos. She keeps telling him that we’ll make millions. But we make millions now, the right way. I told her I don’t want a bunch of condos on our ranch. It will pollute the water system. I don’t want more people out here. If I wanted city life, I’d have moved to the city. I don’t want five thousand people on one-acre lots to deal with. But Allison is riding Rudd about this all the time. Any opportunity she gets, she sticks it to me about the development.”

“But she can’t do anything about it because you own the ranch, right?” Kam said.



Iris gave her a triumphant look. “That’s right, dearie. As long as the ranch is in my name, and I’m alive and kicking, I can keep the vision for this ranch alive and viable. The day I die, this ranch is going to hell in a handbasket because Allison runs Rudd. He can’t say no to her and gives her anything she wants. Never mind her two spoiled children, my grandchildren. Humph!”

Kam sat back digesting all the information. Clearly, she had walked into a hornet’s nest. Iris turned around as Wes shut the back of the SUV. The look he gave Kam was warm and inviting. The slight smile on his mouth made her go hot with longing once more. And then, as quick as the look was there, it was gone.

They drove back to the ranch, and Kam began to dread the family dinner tonight. What would happen next?

## CHAPTER FOUR

IRIS OFFICIALLY DECIDED to hire Kam as her caregiver. It was a relief. Kam had overcome one obstacle, one of many. The tension leading up to the family dinner became her focus. Her upbringing as a Trayhern hadn't prepared her for this family, which seemed built on politics, intrigue and power struggles. Where was the love between them?

Kam sat at Iris's elbow while Rudd was at the head. The rectangular maple table was covered with an old-fashioned hand-crocheted white cloth across its gleaming surface. Hazel, their chef, had her assistant, Becky Long, a smiling young woman, help serve the meal. The plates were blue and white and Iris told Kam that she and Trevor had bought them shortly after their wedding. They were used to this day, a sign of her love for him.

Above the table hung a massive elkhorn display with lights. No matter where she looked, there were elkhorn tables, chairs and lamps. Soft classical music, the same kind that her mother Laura loved, played softly in the background. That was Iris's doing, too. She proudly informed Kam that at one time, she'd played classical piano. After trying to break a horse, she'd broken her hand and had suffered a fracture that prevented her from going on to a career in piano. Kam wondered how such things would steer a person's life. If not for the finger fracture, Iris would have never stayed in the Wyoming area to meet Trevor several months later.

They had met, fallen in love and begun this ranching empire. Kam's respect for the elder Mason grew by the hour as Iris let her into her inner world of business and personal information.

The crystal water and wineglasses were old and hand-cut. Kam felt as if she'd stepped back into the 1870s of Western America. It was comforting to her in one way because she loved antiques. The rug on the blond oak floor beneath the massive table was from Turkey, Iris had told her. It had been bought by Trevor on a business trip to the Middle East shortly after their were married.

Everything that Kam could see had a history. Had importance to the Mason family. Her heart swelled with incredible emotion as she sat with her hands in her lap quietly waiting for the rest of the family. There were three empty chairs. Becky stood near the kitchen door, a frown on her round face.

Rudd kept looking up from his place at the head of the table toward the entrance.

Kam could see annoyance in his features although she suspected that he was trying to hide it. Iris, however, was not so cloaked.

"I'm eating, Rudd. I'm hungry." Iris took a soft, warm sourdough biscuit from the basket at the center of the table. "If they can't be on time, I'm not waiting for them!"

Giving her a pained look, Rudd said nothing. He tried to smile but failed. "Kamaria, if you want to start eating, go right ahead. Sometimes, my family arrives late. We don't want the food to

go cold.”

Kam nodded and took a biscuit. She slathered butter, hand-churned from their dairy-cow herd, across the fragrant, steaming surface. Iris proudly told her they had sourdough starter a hundred years old. Kam knew her mother Laura just loved baking with sourdough starter. She made a mental note to ask for a jar of it and transport it back to Laura, who would be thrilled.

“Starting without us?”

Kam looked up at the dripping, husky voice at the entrance. A woman in her mid-forties, her hair dyed blond, stood there with her hands resting imperiously on her thick hips. She was dressed like a Hollywood goddess, Kam thought as she put the biscuit down on her plate. This had to be Allison Dubois-Mason. She was short and shapely, her breasts as ample as her hips and thin-waisted. She had the coveted hourglass figure from a bygone era. Her blond hair was coifed and swept up on her head and glittering diamond earrings and necklace set it all off. Her green eyes were heavily made up and Kam thought the false eyelashes looked more like caterpillars crawling across them. Her rouge was too bright, making her resemble one of those Kewpie dolls at carnivals.

“Come in,” Rudd said, standing. He moved around to the chair at the opposite end of the table. Pulling it out, he waited for his wife to approach. “Allison, I want you to meet Kamaria Trayhern. We’ve just hired her as caregiver to Iris. Kamaria, this is my wife, Allison.”

Kam nodded in the woman's direction. She walked like a queen gliding down an invisible red carpet. The dress she wore was out of place for this rugged Western setting. It was a ball gown made of gleaming gold silk that showed off her considerable cleavage and swathed around her ankles. Her heels were a good three inches high and Kam winced inwardly. The woman obviously didn't care about her feet.

Kam felt the glare from the mascara-framed green eyes. It was not a welcoming gaze at all and her gut tightened.

Halting at the chair, Allison flashed daggers at Rudd.

"And just what is she doing at our table? Hired help does not eat with us. Ever."

The venom seemed to drip from her mouth like acid. Kam started to rise.

Iris clamped a hand over her arm and stopped her.

"Stay right where you are, Kam," Iris growled. And then, the senior shot a poisonous look at her daughter-in-law. "Since when do you care who sits at this table, Allison? On most nights, we wait a half hour for you to appear. Your children never show up. Regan's too busy to sit down with us, and Zach has his head in computer games. So don't go getting high and mighty saying who can or can't be at our dinner table."

Laughing liltingly, Allison waved her bejeweled hand toward Iris. She batted her eyes at Rudd and smiled. "And here I thought you were the boss, Rudd." She sat down with aplomb and Rudd pushed the chair toward the table.

Iris glared at Allison. “Maybe you need reminding that I’m the owner of this ranch, Allison, and I’m not dead yet. Until I am, I’m the one who decides who will have dinner with us or not. Rudd has nothing to say about this and you know it.”

Allison took her white linen napkin and smiled fully. Becky came over and poured her some red wine. “Oh, you never allow me to forget that you’re the boss, Iris.”

Kam watched the maid pour the red wine and thought that blood had been drawn symbolically between Iris, the matriarch, and Allison, the upstart. What a group! She couldn’t believe the rage behind the words of the two women. It made her evening meals with her parents in Montana look alien in comparison to this family.

Iris said nothing. Becky gave her a pained look.

“Miss Iris? Should I serve dinner? Or wait?”

Iris addressed Allison. “Are Zach and Regan comin’ or not?” Shrugging, Allison said, “They’re busy.”

“Would have been nice to let Hazel and Becky know ahead of time,” Iris growled. “They aren’t slaves to do our bidding around here.”

Kam couldn’t believe the drama around Allison. Gulping, she realized that if Rudd was her father, this woman was her stepmother. Not exactly a great package. And nothing like Laura, who was the epitome of grace, good manners and kindness. Kam searched the woman’s heavily made-up oval face to see if she could find generosity or kindness. She could not.

“Please serve the meal,” Rudd requested of Becky. “And thank Hazel in advance for her help in makin’ our dinner.”

Kam found Rudd’s sensitivity toward others positive. Becky rushed out of the room, through the swinging oak door. Shortly, she came back with squash soup, which smelled wonderful.

“Now this,” Iris told her, pointing to the yellow soup in front of her, “is from my garden last year, Kamaria. Hubbard squash from last fall’s crop. The best squash in the world to give a nutlike flavor to soup. Hazel always puts on bacon bits and tops it with a tad of sour cream. Makes for a wonderful beginning to our meal.”

Kam waited until Rudd picked up his soup spoon and then she followed suit. “Are you going to plant Hubbard squash in your garden this year?” she asked Iris. The soup tasted heavenly. The salty bacon enhanced the nutty flavor of the squash. The sour cream melted and swirled in the golden contents and reminded her of an abstract painting. It was a beautiful presentation.

“Absolutely,” Iris gushed, excitement in her voice. “In fact, I’m going to add another squash this year, a Lakota squash. This kind has orange and green vertical stripes. Some of my friends tell me it has the same firm consistency as Hubbard. You need a good, meaty flesh for a good squash soup.”

“Good to know,” Kam said, finishing off her soup. She glanced over at Allison who seemed bored, her soup untouched.

“Just because Ms. Trayhern is here you trotted out your squash soup. You know I hate squash, Iris,” Allison said defiantly.

Rudd sighed. “Allison, Hazel always cooks one soup a day and

you know that. And we have squash soup at least once every two weeks.”

Kam could feel Rudd’s concern that his wife’s petulance would ruin the festive atmosphere. Iris slurped down the soup with relish and seemed content, her appetite clearly in place. Kam felt she had to speak up. “I thought the soup was wonderful, Becky. Thank Hazel for me. I’d love to get this recipe.” She almost added that her mother would love to have it. She certainly didn’t want them to get entangled in her family background. At least not until the time was right.

“Thank you, Kamaria,” Becky said, adroitly moving around the table and removing soup bowls. “Hazel loves to have feedback on her meals. She wants to make people smile over her creations.”

Iris smacked her lips, drank a bit of her red wine and patted her mouth with the white linen napkin. “Now, that’s a great start to a great meal, Kamaria. You see? Food like this is a special treat and I can see you appreciate it.”

“I do,” Kam said. “At home, my mother uses all the veggies from her garden to cook with, too.”

“Oh,” Allison groaned, shooting a look at Kam. “Don’t tell me you’re into gardening, too?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am.” Kam felt the only way to deal with Allison, who wanted to be queen bee, was to treat her with respect.

Allison sighed. “Well, Iris, this will be your first caregiver who



loves gardening.” Then she looked at Kam. “You know, every caregiver we’ve hired has left a month after arriving here.”

Iris gave Allison a narrow-eyed look. “And I wonder why?”

Kam felt the tension sizzle between the two women.

“No, Iris,” Rudd rumbled, “let’s not go there. I want a peaceful meal for once. Kamaria is our guest. Can we table some of our conversations at least for tonight?”

Kam saw the faces of the three players. Iris looked incensed. Allison became smug. Rudd appeared frazzled, as if playing the referee between two boxers. Of course, with the dissension here between Allison and Iris, Kam could see how the family dynamic drove off previous employees.

Becky brought out a small garden salad drizzled with buttermilk dressing. The portions were small and she was glad.

“I’m leaving for L.A. tomorrow, Rudd. My friends are throwing a party at the Beverly Hills Hotel and they want me to attend.” Allison smoothed her hair and affected a matter-of-fact tone. “I’ll be gone for five days.”

Rudd nodded and handed Becky his emptied salad bowl. “Is Regan going along?”

“Probably. She hasn’t made up her mind yet. You know she has that Goth boyfriend in Jackson Hole.” She smirked. “I’m trying to pull her away from that slovenly thing. I checked on him and his parents are truckers. Trash, Rudd. Regan needs to understand she has to get into her own class and not go to the belly of the whale for friends or relationships. It’s so frustrating!”

Kam glanced over to Iris, who shook her head in dismay.

“No one is trash, Allison,” Iris shot back. “Classism didn’t build this ranch, you know. A lot of people worked untold hours. Truckers are very important people to us. And I’ve found them to be more than honorable folks. Charlie and Rose Burger do a lot for the poor of that town. He’s with the Elks and she’s with the Soroptomist Club. They raise a lot of money for the needy. I don’t see them bein’ called trash by the likes of you.”

Kam gritted her teeth and stared down at her salad bowl. Did they spar like this at every meal? Iris took no prisoners, but then, Allison seem to delight in dropping bombs to goad the old woman. Conversation like this was murderous to sit through, Kam decided.

“Regan’s boyfriend, Justin, is a good enough boy,” Rudd said. “He’s hard-working, Allison. Charlie and Rose raised him right.”

Allison sniffed. “I just don’t want our daughter hanging around with the likes of him. She’s better than that. I’m hoping she’ll meet an actor to marry.”

Iris snickered. “Oh, yeah, that’s right—marry an egotistical monster who can’t do without bright lights, fawning people and a bunch of hangers-on. Right.”

Allison glared at Iris, then looked down the table at Rudd, as if to say silently that he should protect her from his mother’s acidic comments.

Rudd did nothing but scowl, and spread butter across a warm biscuit.

Kam remained silent. How lucky she had been to have Morgan and Laura as parents! Their dinner table was full of lively conversation, searching talks, excitement about things each family member was doing—never this kind of nastiness. First of all, they would not have allowed these types of personal attacks at the dinner table. Secondly, this was a place to meet and talk and catch up on what everyone else was doing. She wiped her mouth with the linen napkin and thanked Becky as she came by to pick up the bowl.

“Hollywood is much more than that, Iris,” Allison sniffed. She saw Becky coming with the main course and halted her tirade.

A delicious stew was placed in front of Kam, along with some freshly steamed asparagus bathed in cheese sauce.

“Now, Kamaria, this is our own buffalo meat,” Iris crowed proudly. She swept her hand down toward her plate. “Do you know I’ve got a Web site where we sell our bison products? Allison said going online was a bust but I proved her wrong,” Iris gloated and grinned over at Allison, who pointedly ignored her. “We make five hundred thousand dollars a year off Internet orders from folks around the world. Isn’t that something? I might be old, but I sure like the gizmos we have at our disposal for marketing and advertising on the Net. You on the Net at all?”

Smiling, Kam swallowed her food. “Yes, I am. I’d love to see what you’ve done with your Web site, Iris.”

“My geek guy, Tom Courtland, takes care of my server in Jackson Hole. He’s a peach. I give him fresh veggies and fruit

from our orchard every year. Of course, he's well paid for what he does and he's endlessly creative. I've asked Tom to bring a computer into your suite tomorrow. Then you and I can have some fun."

Kam warmed to Iris even more. She was passionate, unafraid to try out new things and was obviously inventive in her businesses. "I'd love to sit down with you, Iris."

"She's the geek in our family," Rudd said, smiling. "I don't care for the darned things. Never could warm up to them. Can't hardly use my cell phone, but I'm forced to in today's world."

Kam understood his complaint. "A lot of people are turned off by computers."

"It's the e-mails," Rudd complained.

"Well, I told you to hire an office assistant who could field all the e-mail requests for information on our dude ranch," Iris chastised him. "But you won't do it. Sometimes I think you like to be miserable, Rudd. Just getting a young person in there for at least the summer dude-ranch time to help you seems like a better way to go. Instead, you sit in that office fuming and cursing under your breath as you use two fingers to try and type out a message."

Kam tried to squelch her chuckle but couldn't. "Hey, my sympathy is with Mr. Mason," she teased Iris. "A lot of people are ham-handed when it comes to computers. Not that I'm a geek, but I practically grew up using a computer."

Giggling, Iris nodded. "And some people just don't want to learn new tricks. My son has a stubborn streak. One of these days

when he's bald after pulling out what's left of his hair, he'll see the wisdom of hiring an office assistant."

Rudd grinned. "I don't want to go bald, Iris."

"Well, then, let me put out feelers to the employment office in Jackson and let's see what I can scare up for you."

"Maybe it's time," he agreed. "Besides, I'm better served dealing with daily ranch life. I hate the office."

"Not much of a saddle to sit in, is it?" Iris quipped with a laugh.

Shrugging his broad shoulders, Rudd smiled sheepishly. "No, it isn't."

Allison shook her head and rolled her eyes again. She'd played with the food on her plate. "If you'll excuse me..."

"You've barely eaten a thing," Iris said.

"I like keeping my svelte figure. If Hollywood calls asking me to fly in to try out for a part, I can't look fat."

"Hazel made a special dessert tonight," Iris said, ignoring her response. "Your favorite."

Groaning, Allison rose with grace and placed her napkin on her plate. "Thank you, Hazel, but I simply can't do it." She turned and left the room.

Kam took note that Allison didn't deign to look at her or say, "It was nice to meet you," or anything else. She had a gut feeling that the woman didn't like her and would just as soon see her leave the ranch in a month.

"Son? I think you hit pure gold when you hired Kamaria. I'm

pleased as punch.”

“I’m glad, Iris. She seems a good fit for you. I just hope she wants to stay for more than a month.”

“Why would I ever want to leave after a month?” Kam asked politely. Based on the family drama, she knew the answer.

“Your predecessors just didn’t seem to fit into our laid-back ranch lifestyle,” he said uncomfortably.

“Actually,” Iris said darkly, “Allison chased all of ’em off. She’d just as soon see me die of a stroke and be out of the picture so she can take over.”

“Iris...” Rudd protested, frowning. “That’s not so. Allison does not want to see you die. And I really don’t think she chased off the other caregivers.”

Snorting, Iris said, “Well, I know better, son. And you’re just gonna have to take my word for it.” She cut Kam a sharp look. “You seem pretty smart. And you seem to see through people quickly. I’m sure you’ll ask questions before jumping to conclusions if Allison starts stirring the pot again.”

“Of course I would,” Kam reassured her. She saw Becky coming around to pick up their emptied plates. “I work for you. My only focus is you, Iris. You and your health. That’s why I’m here. Mr. Mason made it clear that I was to be with you most of the time.”

“And you’ll help me plant and weed the garden?”

Grinning, Kam said, “Wild horses wouldn’t stop me from helping you do that.”

“Music to my ears,” Iris sighed, giving her son a beaming smile of pure pleasure.

Rudd smiled. “Mine, too,” he told Kam, gratitude in his tone. “I think you’re going to fit in well here, Kamaria.”

“Call me Kam, if you want,” she told them. “Most people do.”

“Kam it is,” Rudd said, raising his head to see Becky coming out with dessert.

Patting her arm, Iris said, “Tomorrow is a bright new day around here with you being on board. I have a nice feeling about you, Kam. You’re fun to be around, you’re prudent and you’re a good judge of character, unlike some of the family.”

“Thanks, Iris. I’m really looking forward to being here.” Kam felt a warmth in her heart toward the older woman. Iris was a kick-butt, take-names-and-no-prisoners kind of lady, but she had values, morals and integrity, too. In contrast, Allison was a woman in a mask, playing a part. At least Rudd and Iris were real, down-to-earth people who weren’t narcissistic. Kam figured she could avoid Rudd’s wife most of the time. Or, at least she hoped she could.

“Tomorrow afternoon,” Iris told her, “I want you to take a ride with Wes and start familiarizing yourself with the Elkhorn Ranch. Sound exciting?”

“Yes, it does. I love riding horses.”

“Ah,” Iris sighed, “yet another plus in your column with me. I have a black Morgan mare that I ride almost daily. I’ll tell Wes to assign you a nice horse that you can use as your own. I often

ride out into the hills to gather my flower essences and you can tag along.”

“Sounds great,” Kam murmured. Her heart skipped a beat. Wes. She gazed at Iris whose features looked perfectly innocent. And yet, Kam knew this woman had acumen when it came to evaluating people. Did she see something between her and Wes? Could she be aware of how Kam’s heart beat a little harder when she saw that lanky, wolflike cowboy? Tomorrow was going to be an exciting day for her in many ways, Kam suspected.



# CHAPTER FIVE

WES SHERIDAN felt antsy as he waited for Kam Trayhern at the main stables. Why? Not wanting to look too closely at the reason, Wes reminded himself that his ex-wife, Carla, was enough of a deterrent to getting involved with another woman. Carla had been an alcoholic and he'd blindly walked into the marriage, completely ignorant of her disease. Even though his father was an alcoholic, Wes didn't detect Carla's symptoms until a year into their marriage. Suffice it to say, he had a knack for choosing the wrong women. Even though Kam Trayhern strongly appealed to him, Wes was certainly not going to allow her into his heart. Not a chance.

Besides, he ruminated, standing at the entrance to the horse barn, Kam probably had a steady relationship with some very lucky man. Then, she really would be off-limits to him. Wes found himself hoping like hell she was engaged. He spotted Kam skipping down the steps of the ranch house.

In vain he tried to ignore the way her jeans fitted her long, beautiful legs. She'd traded in her sensible Echo shoes for a pair of newly purchased cowboy boots so that she could ride. In the May afternoon, her short, slightly curled hair glinted with blue highlights. There was such excitement in her features as she spotted him. She eagerly waved.

Wes lifted his hand but without the same exuberance and

joy. She was just too damn pretty for him. The way she moved her tall, lithe form, the way that pink T-shirt fitted her and outlined her small breasts—it all conspired against him. Kam wore a red bandanna around her throat and it only enhanced the elegant lines of her neck. In her hand was a tan Stetson cowboy hat. He wondered if Iris had given it to her as a gift. Wes was glad that Kam and Iris were getting along. That was a good sign. He sincerely loved Iris because she was a no-nonsense, down-to-earth woman who had always made positive and healthy decisions for the ranch.

Frowning, Wes thought of his father, Dan Sheridan, who owned the Bar S in Cody, Wyoming. Because of his alcoholism and his refusal of intervention, the once-prosperous cattle ranch was in decline. Just like his father. There was nothing Wes could do about it. He had tried over the years, only to be angrily rebuffed and eventually disowned. That had hurt then as it did now. Wes tried to redirect the thought but it did no good. He watched Kam's approach, melting inwardly over her sparkling blue eyes. She was a salve to his wounded spirit.

"Hey," Kam called gaily, "you got a horse for me, Wes?"

An unwilling grin tugged at the corners of his mouth as she plunked the cowboy hat down on her head. "I think I do. Chappy told me you were a beginning rider, but that you'd ridden off and on when you were a kid."

The friendly nicker of horses in box stalls echoed down the wide, concrete aisle between them. The May breeze was gentle

and invigorating to Kam. What was there not to be joyous about? She was with Wes, who was too handsome for words. Kam had been looking forward to this moment. “Yes, as a kid I rode, but my big sister Kathy was really the horsewoman. She had a horse and every once in a while I’d get to sit in the saddle as she led him around. I’m a real amateur, Wes. I hope you got me a nice, gentle, slow-moving horse.”

“I think I have.” He turned and motioned her to follow him down the aisle. “Let’s see how you and Freckles get along.”

Kam absorbed his powerful masculine nearness. “Has anyone ever told you that you walk like a wolf on the prowl?”

Startled, Wes glanced over at her. “Why...no.”

Laughing and embarrassed, Kam held up her hands. “It must be me, then! Don’t pay any attention to my creative meanderings. As a professional photographer I see things differently than most people. When I noticed you walking yesterday, you had such an easy grace that you reminded me of a wolf. That was a compliment, by the way.” She laughed nervously.

Wes found himself charmed by Kam’s innocence and the way she saw her world. Just as abruptly, he yanked himself from her spell. “Well, I’ve been called many things in my life, but never a wolf. Thank you.”

Halting at a box stall on the right, Wes opened it and took the halter of a small pinto and led him out to the cross ties. After he quickly hooked the horse’s halter into the metal panic snaps, the gelding stood quietly between them. “This is Freckles. He’s

a mustang, very small but tough.” Wes ran his hand over the paint’s brown-and-white body near the withers. “Chappy thought Freckles would be ideal for you. He’s fifteen years old, savvy about things and will keep you out of trouble on the trail if you’ll let him.” Ruffling his hand through Freckles’s chestnut-and-white silky mane, Wes added, “Freckles is used for the kids who come here to the dude ranch over the summer. He’s one of our safest horses because he was a wild mustang as a youngster. Mustangs are a lot smarter because their wild nature is close to the surface. For instance, if you’re riding down a trail and he spots a rattlesnake, he’ll stop in his tracks and won’t move. He’ll let you have the time to look ahead of him to spot the snake. Some horses will bolt. Others won’t even see the snake and will step on it or get too close and get bitten. But Freckles won’t.”

Kam nodded and moved to where Wes was resting his hand on the horse’s withers. Freckles had big brown eyes set in his small, short head. She liked the alert look in them. Running her hand down his smooth, silky neck, she said, “He sounds perfect. I’m glad he’s not a real tall horse. I have this fear of falling and killing myself. At least if I fall off Freckles, it’s a short trip to the ground.” She grinned.

Wes nodded. “I’m sure Chappy can set up some riding lessons for you when Iris gives you time off.”

Patting Freckles, Kam marveled over the patterns of chestnut and white across his body. “He’s beautifully marked, Wes.”

Standing opposite her, the mustang between them, Wes was

glad Freckles was where he was. It would be too easy to reach out and graze Kam's hand as it rested on the horse's neck. No, he had to keep his hands off Kam. "Yeah, he's what they call a Medicine Hat mustang. They have a very special set of markings." He showed her the brown color across the top of Freckles's head. "You see this brown that looks like a hat over the top of his head and ears?"

"Yes."

"That's called a Medicine Hat pattern. The Native Americans valued a horse with this bonnet because it had powerful medicine. Many of these marked mustangs were kept as breeding stallions to the Native American herds. Iris has a medicine hat stallion named Lightning Bolt. She started a mustang-breeding program on this ranch about forty years ago. We have a paint mustang herd that's internationally known. Iris sells medicine hat babies all over the world."

"She's an amazing woman," Kam said. "What foresight to save a valuable animal and its genetic line."

Wes nodded. "Believe me, you'll find Iris the heart and soul of Elkhorn Ranch." He walked to the tack room and found a blanket and saddle. Coming back, he set them on the floor and quickly brushed Freckles. "This is what you'll do before riding him. A horse needs to be well-brushed." He took a hoof pick from his back pocket. "You need to clean his hooves and pick out any stones or stuff that might be trapped inside the clefts of his hoof. Let me show you how."

Kam came over and watched Wes pick up one of Freckles's front legs. He held the horse's pastern in his large, rough hand. Their heads almost touched as Kam observed him expertly pulling out debris from the two clefts on the hoof. His masculine scent dizzied her, acting like an aphrodisiac.

"See?" Wes said, allowing Freckles to set that leg down once more. He could feel Kam's warmth, she was that close to him. Gulping, he handed her the hoof pick. "Your turn. I'll guide you in cleaning his other three hooves."

Wes's fingers were rough and Kam's hand tingled as he dropped the hoof pick into her palm. "Right. Okay, here we go." She walked to the other side of Freckles, patted him and said, "Be kind to me, Freckles. I'm a rank beginner."

Once again, Wes stood within inches of her as she lifted the mustang's front leg. He took her hand and repositioned it so that Freckles's hoof was cradled comfortably in her palm. Just the act of touching her sent a thrill through him. "Okay, now you can clean his hoof," Wes told her, his voice slightly off-key. Would she notice how she affected him?

"Good work," he praised. "Now, watch how I move beside Freckles to lift his back leg. You always stay close to the horse. Should one kick, they won't have the arcing power to really hurt you if you're close to them. The farther you stand away from them, the more they can injure you. Now, Freckles is not a kicker, but any horse under certain circumstances might become one. If threatened they will automatically kick to defend themselves.

Stay close, put your left hand on his rump to let him know where you're at. Keep the left side of your body in contact. Then, gently run your right hand down his hock here to his pastern just above his hoof."

Kam watched Wes with avid interest. In no time, he had Freckles's rear leg up and the hoof resting on his left thigh just above his knee. "You make this look easy," she said with a smile.

Wes allowed Freckles to stand on all four feet. He backed off and let Kam replace him. "It's easy once you get the motion and contact with the horse. Go ahead, give it a try."

To his surprise, Kam managed it perfectly. She was a fast learner, there was no doubt. Soon, she had both rear hooves cleaned and started to hand the hoof pick to him. He held up his hand in protest.

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