

***Rainbow Fire* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter 1

She had landed on the moon. Without benefit of rocket, space suit or NASA's famed countdown, she had landed on the moon, and the trip had only taken three hours, ninety-one dollars and the wind-tossed flight of a Cessna 421.

Kelsey Donovan squinted at the dusty landscape that spread in front of her like a Jules Verne fantasy. She half expected to see astronaut litter: abandoned space buggies, useless rocket modules, or, at the very least, competitively waving flags proclaiming a race for control of the heavens.

Instead the sun beat down on her bare head, reminding her that this was Coober Pedy, South Australia. If she didn't find shade quickly, her legs were going to crumple, and she was going to litter this remote corner of Planet Earth with her slender body and small, battered suitcase.

Kelsey picked up the suitcase once more and began to trudge down the track that had been pointed out to her by the airport taxi driver who had grudgingly dropped her off half a mile back. Half a mile was nothing. In her quest for mastery of her body and emotions, she had once run miles every day as a prelude to more difficult training. Her small-boned frame and delicate milkmaid skin said nothing about the strength of the woman underneath.

But even a strong woman could be defeated by a blazing midafternoon sun that reflected off coarse red earth like a raging bonfire.

She wouldn't think about it. She would put one foot in front of the other and keep walking. She would not curse herself for turning down liquids on the flight from Adelaide; she would not curse herself for wearing her best forest green dress and matching heels. She would not curse the faith that had brought her to this strange place.

This place. This strange, sterile, desolate place. Why would a man like Jake Donovan choose to live among barren red hills in a country that wasn't his own? He would be sixty now, a time when even rugged men begin to think about reaping the rewards of years of hard work. Kelsey had been told often enough that Jake was a dreamer, a man with no common sense and no sense of responsibility. She had been told that he chased the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and found his pleasure in the chase. But there was no rainbow here, and no pleasure that she could see. Just

an endless vista of dust and earth and shimmering heat.

And one slowly melting woman with a dream she had nurtured since she was three years old.

She stopped again, pulling a tissue from her pocket to wipe her forehead. Surely she should have reached the house by now. But there wasn't a house in sight; in fact, she had seen nothing resembling one since she had left the airfield. Perhaps if she had gone into town, as the taxi driver had insisted, she wouldn't be so disoriented now. Certainly there had been houses in town. She could have checked into the motel, along with the other three passengers and the rest of her luggage, then found a ride to Jake's front doorstep. But she had been stubborn—a trait that some people claimed was synonymous with the Donovan name. She had waited twenty-one years for this moment, and she hadn't wanted to wait even one more hour.

So the disgruntled driver had dropped her at a fork in the road and pointed, muttering something with a heavy accent that she hadn't taken the time to decipher. Half a mile later, she wished she had made more of an effort.

Kelsey trudged along the dusty track again, lifting one foot, then the other. The track curved, skirting a clump of naked hills to her right, but she had almost passed the first before she noticed a door in its side.

A door in a hill.

"Curious and curiouser," she mumbled with a tongue that felt swollen and heavy. She wondered if the door led to a mine. This was opal mining country. If she opened the door, would it lead to riches beyond imagining? Or would there be nothing except darkness and mildew and disappointment?

She wished she could find out. Instead she hiked on to the next hill, past another door, and then to the next.

There was a door in this hill, too, but unlike the others, it wasn't constructed of ill-fitted planks leaning haphazardly against a narrow hole. The door was sturdy and green, a door meant for a brick ranch house in some suburban subdivision. And in front of the door was a flat stone porch crowded with plants and shaded by a grass roof like a South Sea island hut.

On the porch, in a straight back chair, was a man. Kelsey felt a voluminous surge of relief. Only then did she allow herself to recognize the fear that she had struggled so hard to suppress. She had learned something about the Australian outback today. She would never underestimate it

again.

"Excuse me." She cleared her throat, then tried again, moving off the track toward the man.

"Excuse me," she said a little louder.

The man had one hand buried deep in the fur of a dust-drenched cat at his feet. At her words, he lifted his head and stared at her as if she were a mirage.

Kelsey noted brown hair not yet touched by gray and the bronzed skin of a man in his early thirties. This man was certainly not her father, but maybe he could lead her to him. "I'm looking for Jake Donovan's house." She swallowed painfully. "Would you mind pointing me in the right direction?" She watched surprise spread across his features as she swayed in the blazing sunlight. His face blurred as sweat dripped into her eyes, and she blinked twice. "Please?" she added when he didn't say anything.

"Jake Donovan?" he asked finally, his voice resonant with the music of Australia. He stood, stretching to a height that towered over her five foot four. "Who's looking for him?"

She shut her eyes and swayed again, half expecting to feel the earth rise to meet her. "Kelsey Donovan," she said through thirst-parched lips. "His daughter."

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The apparition was real. The wraithlike female was flesh and bones and pale red-gold hair, a curling mane of it that reached past her shoulder blades in a fiercely glorious profusion. Her skin was cream, scorching to an unhealthy rose as Dillon watched. And if his first impression had been correct, her eyes, now squeezed tightly shut, were the pale brown of outback desert before the spring rains.

Dillon took two huge strides to the collapsing woman and circled her with arms that were turning black and blue from the battering of another rescue mission that day. "Here, let's get you into the shade."

Kelsey let him take her weight for a moment. Gratefully she leaned against his chest, barely aware of anything except strong arms and the rasp of a cotton shirt against her face. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I guess I'm just not used to the sun. I feel like a fool."

Dillon realized he was just about to stroke her hair. His right hand hovered over the gold-red mass like a falcon with no place to roost. "Let's get you into the shade," he repeated awkwardly. He was suddenly very much aware that he was holding a beautiful stranger in his arms and that the smell of his own filthy clothing had been replaced by the fragrance of lavender.

Half-assisting, half-dragging, he helped her to the porch and seated her in the chair he had just vacated. He gave the cat a helpful nudge with the toe of his boot and watched him slink a yard or two to rest between potted plants. "Are you going to pass out?" he asked, turning his attention back to the young woman.

Kelsey shook her head, and Dillon nodded in satisfaction. "I'll get you a drink." Without waiting for her answer, he disappeared inside, coming back out a moment later with a glass of water. "Take it slow, a sip at a time."

Kelsey gripped the glass with trembling hands. Every bit of coordination she still possessed went into guiding it to her mouth. The first sip tasted like salvation. Three sips later she cleared her throat. "Thanks."

Dillon went back inside and returned with a wet washcloth. Kelsey flashed him a wan, grateful smile and bathed her face and hands, appreciating the moist coolness against her heated skin. "I don't even know your name."

"My name's Dillon. Dillon Ward." Dillon satisfied himself that she was recovering before he took the chair next to her. He watched her smooth the cloth over her cheeks until the worst of the flush disappeared. Only then did he let himself think about her announcement. "So you're looking for Jake."

"Am I looking in the right part of the universe?"

Dillon didn't know how to answer. He made a steeple of his hands, resting his unshaven chin on his fingertips. "You say you're his daughter."

Kelsey drained the glass and wished for another. She turned to examine the man she had only viewed through sweat-tainted eyes. He wasn't just tall, he was broad, although she would stake her life on the fact that there wasn't an ounce of fat on him anywhere. His shoulders were wide enough to create problems in doorways, and his chest strained against the buttons of a remarkably grimy shirt. His curly hair was shaggy and ruffled, and what might otherwise be an intriguing face was dirt-streaked and unshaven. He was an unlikely savior, but her savior nonetheless. "I *am* his daughter." She set the glass beside the washcloth on a wooden table. "Can you tell me where to find him, or shall I push on?"

"You won't find him if you push on," Dillon said grimly.

"I was told his house was nearby."

"This is his dugout." Dillon gestured behind him. "Rather, it's my dugout. He's been living

with me recently. Jake and I are partners."

"Partners?" She savored the sweet thrill of being so close to the end of a search that had begun a lifetime ago. In strange ways she had been searching for Jake Donovan since he had walked out of her life with nothing more than a kiss on her chubby, baby cheek.

"Mining partners."

Kelsey wet her lips and tried to figure out how anyone could live inside a hill. "Is he inside?"

"He's not."

She ignored her frustration. "Then where is he?"

Dillon wondered how he had worked beside Jake for years and never once heard him mention a daughter. He wanted to dispute her claim, at the least tell her she was mistaken, that this was not the Jake Donovan she was looking for. But there was something about the anticipation in her brown eyes that forced him to be silent about his qualms. And if she were indeed Jake's daughter, he sensed how devastating it would be if he told Kelsey Donovan that in all the years Dillon had known him Jake had never mentioned a daughter, never mentioned a marriage, never mentioned anyone name Kelsey. The news would be almost as devastating as what he had to tell her instead.

"Where is he?" she repeated.

"Jake's been hurt," he said, watching to see if he was going to have to pick her up off the ground after all. "There was an accident at the mine. Jake's in the hospital."

Kelsey heard the words, but she couldn't absorb them. They skittered somewhere in the sunshine, just out of reach. "Hurt?"

He passed a hand over his hair, belatedly giving a thought to his appearance. If he and Kelsey had met on a dark city street, he would probably have struck terror in her heart. But then, no one looked like a prince after crawling through mine drives dragging rescue equipment and lights and.

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"There's no pretty way to tell you," Dillon said. He stared at the horizon, wishing for the first time that there was a tree to focus on. But there was nothing, just red-brown dirt and conical hills, a numbing sameness that was broken only by patches of scruffy saltbush. There might still be the occasional wildflower—pink hops and even Sturts desert pea—hiding in the shade. But from his porch he couldn't see them.

Kelsey felt herself deflate, like a balloon slowly losing helium. She had come so far. So far.

"What happened?"

"He fell down a fifty-foot shaft."

She nodded blankly, as if she understood. "He's been hurt."

Dillon was exhausted. He hadn't slept for sixty hours; he hadn't eaten for twelve, and then he had only wolfed down someone's idea of a sandwich so he could keep searching for the man who now lay unconscious in a hospital bed. Dillon was a man of both warmth and wit—or so he had been told by the occasional women in his life. Now his insides were frozen, and each word he spoke was a death knell.

"I'll take you to him," he said wearily.

Jake was hurt, maybe dying. Kelsey mentally repeated the words, trying them out like a half-memorized poem. Jake was hurt. *Her father* was hurt. She felt nothing except the first sting of sunburn on her cheeks. Giving up, she looked down at her sweat-stained, dust-covered dress. "I should change."

Dillon wondered if Kelsey even knew what she had said. She was in shock; the response had been rote. Someone, somewhere, had taught her that a clean dress could solve any of life's problems. "Have you got something else?"

Kelsey gestured to the small suitcase she had brought with her. "Only photographs," she said softly. "Photographs of me with my father. And my birth certificate. I didn't want to leave them in the taxi." She sighed. When she looked up, Dillon saw that her eyes were still dry. "I've come too far to be stopped by a dirty dress." She stood and inclined her head toward him, jutting her strong, pointed chin in a movement that made his heart drop to his stomach. "Will you please take me to see him now?"

And because Dillon had seen Jake's own pointed chin assume the same angle more times than he could begin to count, he rose to his feet. There was nothing else about Kelsey Donovan that was like Jake, but at that moment there was no one in the world who could have persuaded him that she wasn't Jake's child. And Jake was Dillon's partner, his mate.

He grasped her elbow, although for whose support he wasn't sure. "We'll be there in ten minutes."

If the Coober Pedy landscape resembled the moon's surface the Coober Pedy hospital resembled Star Trek's *Enterprise*. Contemporary and low-lying, with a corrugated roof that

overlapped and intermittently swept to the ground in bold architectural statements, the building had been perfectly designed for its outback environment. With her sense of reality suspended, Kelsey followed Dillon through its corridors. She knew she had suffered too much sun, too much disappointment. But the sense of being trapped in a bubble wasn't vanishing quickly enough.

Her father had been hurt. The man she hadn't seen in more than two decades had fallen fifty feet down a mine shaft. Yet she could feel nothing.

The waiting area was sparkling clean and freshly painted, with nothing except a tiny, brightly trimmed Christmas tree to mar its antiseptic perfection. Kelsey watched as Dillon murmured something to a young woman behind a counter marked "Enquiries." The woman didn't seem surprised to see a man as disheveled as Dillon in the immaculate hallway. She only nodded and pointed to two chairs. Dillon came back to Kelsey and led her to them.

He waited until she was seated. "The doctor is still with Jake. The nursing sister says she'll tell him you're here."

Kelsey closed her eyes. "I'm surprised there's a doctor and a hospital in this town."

"I'll bet you're surprised there's anything here."

"Or anyone."

"There's opal here."

Kelsey heard the unspoken coda. "And that's enough of a reason to live in the middle of nowhere?"

Dillon tipped up the wide brim of the rust-colored felt hat he had jammed on his head before guiding Kelsey into the truck he called a "ute." "We call it the never-never when we're not calling it home."

"Does my father call it home?" She heard her own longing and knew the protective bubble had burst.

Dillon heard the longing, too, and he didn't know what to do about it. Jake's daughter was as much of a mystery as Jake's accident. "Jake's not much of a talker," he said, closing his eyes. "He doesn't call it anything."

"I've heard he *was* quite a talker." She couldn't remember, herself. Sometimes she thought she could glimpse the past. She could almost hear a man's laughter or a rough, gravelly voice, almost feel strong arms lifting her into the air, tossing her high and catching her as she squealed in delight. Strong arms catching her.

Always catching her.

Dillon didn't ask Kelsey what she had meant. He had spent years in the States, but he had never gotten used to the ease with which people there delved into each other's souls. For all their hearty, matey-good-cheer, Australians were more reticent when it came to talking about their pasts. It wasn't a difficult attitude to understand in a nation that had once been a convict colony.

He wasn't sure which was better or worse; he was only sure that though he was curious, asking Kelsey Donovan to tell him about her relationship with her father would be as foreign as lying on a bed of nails.

Kelsey saved him the trouble. Now that reality was beginning to intrude again, she felt the first tingling of fear. She rarely chattered, but now she couldn't avoid it. She had to talk or explode. "I haven't seen my father for twenty-one years."

His answer was safely innocuous. "A long time."

"What's he like?"

What was Jake Donovan like? Or rather, what could Dillon tell the brown-eyed, butterscotch-blond beauty sitting beside him? Jake was a dinkum partner and mate, a man who would stand up for you in a pub brawl and suffer the consequences. But he was also a boozier, a storyteller who often didn't know the truth from a lie, and a hopelessly restless dreamer. He would be the worst kind of father. Dillon had to shove down the desire to tell Kelsey to run for her life. There was nothing waiting for her down the hall except sorrow and disappointment. "I don't know how to answer that," he said at last. "Exactly what did you want to know?"

Everything. She wanted to know everything. How Jake looked, how he dressed. What he ate for breakfast and drank with his dinner. Did he have a new wife? Were there other children bearing the Donovan name, sisters and brothers with Australian accents?

Kelsey stifled the barrage of questions, recognizing a thread of hysteria among them. This was no time to be crushed by emotions she had carefully suppressed most of her life. She forced herself to go slowly. "Tell me how long you've known my father."

"Four years."

She nodded as if the answer were a pearl of great price. "And have you been partners that long?"

"I'd say we have."

"Here?"

"On and off."

Kelsey controlled her frustration. "What does that mean?"

"Mining opals takes money. If you're not on opal, you've got to make money somewhere else. At one time or another Jake or I have had to go off and make enough to continue here."

"What does...Jake—" she momentarily pondered how strange the name sounded sliding off her tongue "—do when he goes off?"

"Anything he can. He's tried his hand at shearing sheep on some properties east of here, fishing up near Darwin."

She nodded, her brow wrinkling as she began to slowly picture the Jake Donovan in her photographs doing those things. "And then he comes back here?"

"When he has the cash."

Kelsey turned to get a better look at Dillon. Under a deep, dirt-streaked tan, he was pale with exhaustion—if such a thing were possible. "None of that matters, though, does it? He's lying in there hurt, maybe dying."

"It won't help Jake any for you to be thinking like that," he warned her.

"Tell me what happened."

Dillon had been waiting for this question, but he still wasn't prepared to answer it. How could he explain what he didn't understand? "Jake's as sure-footed as a goat. I've seen him walk a rail fence when he was a stubbie away from being embalmed. Then two nights ago he fell down a fifty-foot mine shaft that he'd dug himself."

"Were you with him?"

"Not blooming likely. He was supposed to be with *me*. We were going to drive up to Mintabie in my ute to see an old mate of his. When Jake didn't show, I went looking for him. Found him this morning."

Kelsey felt her head spin. Her father had lain helpless and alone for more than a day in the bottom of an opal mine. "Why did it take so long?"

Dillon had asked himself the same question repeatedly since he had come across Jake's chilled body wedged in the dead-end mine drive. "Because we looked in the wrong places," he said, tipping his hat back, then thinking better of it. He grabbed it by the brim and slammed it to the floor. "We looked in the wrong places like a mob of bloody drongos!"

"Nobody thought to look in the mine?" Kelsey's head no longer spun. It buzzed with the

beginnings of anger. "He's a miner. Wouldn't that make sense?"

Dillon heard steel replacing the soft music of her voice. He admired the sound at the same time that he felt a jolt of irritation at the words. "Make sense? What sense was there for Jake to be at the mine, down a shaft and wedged in a drive we abandoned six months ago?"

"How do you know he fell?"

"From his injuries. It looks like he fell, then started to crawl in a daze. Maybe he thought he could get out."

"Why shouldn't he have been at the mine?"

"We'd knocked off work an hour before. I took him into town in my ute. He was going to nip in for something to eat and then meet me at the Opal Showcase to have some stones looked at. Nothing more than potch with a little color, but Jake was hopeful they'd bring a few dollars. He was running low."

She ignored the unfamiliar terms. "And when he didn't show?"

He heard the steel harden into a razor-edged weapon. "I didn't think much about it. I waited at the pub to give him a ride to Mintabie, another town up the road. Going there was his idea, so I knew he'd come. But he didn't."

"And that's when you started to look for him."

"That's right. Only we wasted time looking everywhere we shouldn't have. We even searched the mine at dawn the next morning, but we didn't search the parts that were closed off. There wasn't any reason for Jake to be there."

Kelsey was too upset to probe Dillon's voice for emotion. Other than one display of temper, he sounded like a dead man. And he probably was dead on his feet, if he had been searching for her father since Friday night. "Who's the 'we' you keep referring to? Were the police looking for him, too?"

He exhaled forcefully, blowing a brown curl off his forehead. "This is Coober Pedy, not Sydney. We settle most of our problems ourselves. I found a couple of miners to help me search." He paused, then decided to tell her the truth. "Everyone else thought Jake was sleeping off a bender somewhere. It's happened before."

"But he'd only been missing an hour or two when you began to worry. How could he have drunk enough?"

"It doesn't take Jake that long to tie one on when he's trying hard. Especially on a Friday

night."

Kelsey had been prepared to meet a hard-drinking, hard-living man. That description and many less flattering ones had been thrown up to her for twenty-one years. Apparently the assorted relatives who had tried to convince her that her father was worse than no good had been right about his drinking. And apparently he hadn't changed.

But lots of people drank. Lots of working men tied one on after a hard week. She would have been more surprised if Jake had been different.

Carefully she assembled the details of Dillon's story in a brain still numb from near heatstroke and shock. Her father had failed to show up for an appointment. She wondered what most men would have done if they'd been waiting for Jake Donovan to appear and he hadn't. Obviously Dillon and her father had a special relationship. Although he wasn't blowing his own horn, Dillon's explanation made it clear that he had saved her father's life. Through her shock and sadness she felt a surge of warmth for the man beside her.

"It sounds like my father was lucky you cared enough about him to worry." Kelsey hesitantly leaned over and reached out to touch Dillon's arm. His bare flesh was as hard as the gem he mined.

Dillon felt the delicate brush of her fingertips and smelled the enticing scent of lavender. He didn't want to respond to Kelsey Donovan. He was too weary to respond. He responded anyway. "Your father's my mate. He would have done the same for me." He shifted his head so that their eyes were level. "Now we just have to help him pull through his stay in the hospital."

Kelsey noted the deep sea-green of Dillon's eyes. They were absolutely sincere, but there was a spark igniting in them that had nothing to do with sincerity. She lifted her hand, then dropped it back in her lap. Dillon was a stranger, and she was a long way from home.

"Dillon?" A short, round man in a white coat approached. Kelsey noted the universal symbols of silver chart and stethoscope. She stood as Dillon did.

"Is my father going to be all right?" she asked before either man could speak.

Dillon exchanged looks with the physician, who was an old friend. He knew immediately that the news wasn't going to be good. He moved closer to Kelsey, and his arm brushed her side for support. "This is Dr. Munvelt," he said in introduction. "He's been with your father since we brought him in."

"We'll be transferring Jake to the hospital in Adelaide as soon as a plane arrives." Dr.

Munvelt looked at his shoe, as if he might catch something from meeting the eyes of a healthy person. "He regained consciousness briefly, but he wasn't alert. We'll know more after tests."

"Is he going to be all right?" Kelsey had to restrain the urge to cradle Dr. Munvelt's chin in the palm of her hand to align his eyes with hers.

"Is he going to live? I think so. Yes, I think so. But he's going to be crook for some time yet. The brain is a funny thing." He continued to examine his shoe. "A funny, funny thing."

She was horrified by all the things he didn't say. She knew Dillon sensed her feelings, because he moved closer. "Will he make a complete recovery?" she asked.

"I'm not certain what you mean, but if you want to know if he'll be able to walk and talk and—"

"Of course that's what I mean."

"I truly don't know. Time will tell."

Dillon felt Kelsey's slight body crumple. His arm moved to her shoulder to steady her. "Miss Donovan is understandably concerned," he told the doctor. "She hasn't seen her father in years, and she's traveled a long way."

"How long?"

For a moment Kelsey wondered if he was asking for a mileage count. Then she realized he wanted to know how long since she had seen Jake. "Twenty-one years." She watched his head snap up. "May I see him now?"

"Did he know you were coming?" the doctor asked.

Kelsey realized she had both men's rapt attention. "No. I didn't hear from him during those years, either." She was surprised that it still hurt to admit her father's abandonment. There had been times as a child when she had written long, tearful letters to her absent father, then written her own replies in the most masculine script she could manage. Back then she had needed to pretend that his reasons for leaving her were good ones. But those days were long gone. She was an adult now, with an adult's understanding of human frailties. She straightened her shoulders and cast the hurt away.

"You must be very disappointed to find things in such a state," Dr. Munvelt murmured.

"I'll be going to Adelaide with him," Kelsey said, taking charge of the conversation and her feelings again. "I'll stay with him while he recovers. But I'd like to see him now, if you don't mind."

"I'm afraid I do." Dr. Munvelt's eyes were troubled. "How old are you, Miss Donovan?"

She couldn't imagine why it mattered, but she humored him. "Twenty-four."

"Then you haven't seen or heard from Jake since you were a child of three?"

She shook her head, stiffening at the sympathy she saw. "He had his reasons."

"I'm sure you're right. But can you guess the impact seeing you now might have on him?"

"I don't know what you mean. He'll be glad—"

"The brain is a funny thing," he said, repeating his earlier statement. "After a trauma like the one your father has suffered, more trauma, emotional trauma, is frightfully unwise. If your father regains consciousness to be told that the young lady sitting beside the bed is his daughter, a daughter who was a baby the last time he saw her, I don't know what might happen."

She stiffened more, drawing away from Dillon's supportive hand. "What are you saying?"

"Simply that if you're going to wait for your father to recover, it will have to be somewhere other than at his side. He'll be monitored and told about you when it's appropriate."

"But I'm his daughter."

"Precisely."

Dillon wanted two things. The first was twenty-four hours of sleep, the second, a good hot meal, preferably fed to him intravenously. He did not want anything to do with the confrontation before him. But even though he was exhausted and famished, he couldn't ignore Kelsey's plight any more than he'd been able to ignore the softness of her breasts pressed against his side. He was discovering that even under the worst of circumstances, Kelsey was hard to ignore, period.

He spoke before the argument could continue. "Look, Ed, Jake's not conscious now, is he?"

Dr. Munvelt shook his head sadly.

"Then let her go in and see him while he's still unconscious. She can't traumatize him if he doesn't know she's there. She's come a few miles for the privilege, wouldn't you say?"

The doctor looked relieved. "Would that be satisfactory?" he asked Kelsey.

She would puzzle out the doctor's logic later. Now she grasped at the chance to realize the dream that had fueled her childhood. "For now."

Dr. Munvelt started down the hall. Kelsey realized she was supposed to follow him, but after several steps she turned back to look at Dillon. His eyes were heavy-lidded, as if he were about to fall asleep standing up. "Thanks," she said, just loudly enough for her voice to carry. "Go home and get some sleep. I'll handle it from here."

As tired as he was, he was strangely reluctant to do that. Who would be there for Kelsey when she emerged from Jake's room, heartsick and wounded? The answer was inescapable. "I'll wait and drive you to the motel."

Kelsey didn't trust easily. She didn't allow herself to be drawn to people, because from experience she knew how disappointing it could be. But despite the training of a lifetime she was filled with warmth for the man who had come to her aid and her father's. Dillon Ward. A most unusual man. "You don't have to," she said.

"I'll be here."

Kelsey took in the weary lines of his face, the pale hue of exhaustion beneath his tan, the tired slope of his shoulders. Dillon was offering support to a stranger when he was drained himself. If a man could be judged by the friends he chose, then her father was the man she believed him to be. She tried to smile, unaware of the effect on Dillon. "I don't know how long they'll let me stay."

"I'll be here."

She nodded and turned back to follow the doctor.

When they were out of sight Dillon turned, too, but it wasn't his comfortable chair he found behind him. "Sergeant Newberry," he said without surprise, nodding at the Coober Pedy police officer. "Spreading the usual cheer?"

Sergeant Newberry's expression didn't change. "I've got some questions for you, Ward."

"I thought we'd already strained your resources."

The man didn't blink. "I've come up with something new to think about."

Dillon was too exhausted to stand a moment longer. He pushed past the policeman and draped his body across the chair. "Thinking at all's unique for you, wouldn't you say?"

"Tired, Ward?"

"A bit," Dillon said, closing his eyes.

"Don't let me keep you awake." Sergeant Newberry paused. "Just tell me why you tried to kill Jake Donovan, then I'll let you sleep as long as you like."

