



Hard Shell Word Factory

To Vern, the Hero in my life.

To Mom, you are the wind beneath my wings.

To Chris, my hero-in-training, thanks for lending me your name.

To the Windy City RWA members, past and present,
for their constant support and encouragement.

And to Mary and her staff at HARD SHELL for all
their hard work and for giving me this opportunity.

Copyright 2000, Elysa Hendricks
ISBN: 1-58200-541-9

Published June 2000 by
Hard Shell Word Factory
PO Box 161
Amherst Jct. WI 54407
books@hardshell.com
<http://www.hardshell.com>
All electronic rights reserved.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

Chapter 1

Peaceful, Texas—1870

THE SMOKE-FILLED air of the cantina made Christopher Goodwin's eyes burn. His growing sense of unease prompted him to try the questionable liquid forced on him by his unwelcome companions. Reluctantly, he finished the whiskey in his glass and grimaced in distaste as the rotgut seared a path to his belly.

"Gentlemen, please, as you can see I've nothing left with which to wager. Perhaps we can call it an evening. I, for one, have to rise early tomorrow to proceed on my journey." Christopher kept his voice steady, but couldn't stop the slight tremor of his hands as he stood.

He glanced from the men surrounding him to the unsavory group's leader, Rico. The man's beady eyes stared back. Rico's short, fat form reminded Christopher of a well-fed rat.

The men grumbled. The sound made Christopher think of a pack of wild dogs closing in for a kill. Apparently, winning all his money wasn't enough to satisfy this group. Fear gripped

Christopher. Fear, not for himself, but for the one sleeping in the room above the cantina. Only he stood between her and this pack of animals masquerading as men.

Rico grabbed Christopher's arm. "No, my *gringo* friend. You must stay. *Si?* Drink with us. Miguel, get our friend a drink."

Rico swung his arm at the small, wiry man. Miguel ducked the blow and scurried off. Unlike Christopher, the barkeep had wisely vacated the cantina when Rico and his men first arrived.

Moments later, Miguel returned with a whisky-filled beer mug. The whiskey sloshed onto Christopher's arm.

"*Estupido!*"

This time Miguel was not quick enough to dodge Rico's blow. He fell. Glass shattered. Spilt whiskey soaked quickly into the dry wooden floor. Swearing, the little man rolled away.

"Forgive his clumsiness, *amigo*. Come...drink with me."

Christopher glanced around the room. Hidden in the shadows under the stairs, a bit apart from the other men, only one man didn't seem eager to finish what Rico had started. His feet propped on the table in front of him; his hat pulled low over his eyes the man appeared to

observe without any interest in participating. Christopher didn't expect any help from that quarter.

Slowly Christopher sat down. "Well, maybe just one more drink. Then I really must go." A chill crept over him. Unarmed, outnumbered, what chance did he stand? If he fell, what would become of Christina?

Why had he let Christina convince him to flee the Rocking A Ranch? He should have faced his stepfather with what Christina had overheard. He should have forced the man whom he'd hated since childhood, to leave the ranch the same way he'd come to it years ago, empty-handed. Instead he'd let Christina's tears and pleas sway him. Why?

Because you lacked the confidence or the courage to face Anderson with his plans, afraid you'd fail again. The answer crept into his head, eroding what little remained of his equanimity.

He tried once more. "I assure you, I've nothing left."

"*Amigo*, you must have something of value to wager." Rico turned toward another man. "Esteban, go to our *amigo's* room. Maybe you will find something, *sí*?"

Esteban nodded and started up the stairs.

"No!"

Christopher bolted out of his chair. Somehow, he had to protect Christina.

He shoved past Rico. The chair tipped, dumping Rico onto the floor. Christopher's only thought was for Christina, asleep and helpless. He couldn't allow these men to find her.

"You will pay for that, *Gringo!*"

Christopher ignored Rico's threat. He darted up the stairs after Esteban.

Christina's scream nearly drowned out the sound of the shot. Something hit him between his shoulders. He froze. Sharp, blinding pain exploded across his back. He felt himself falling into a deep well of darkness.

"Christina," he rasped. Then he knew nothing more.

ARMS AND LEGS at odd angles in death, a man lay on his side amid the rocky, scrub covered ground. Blood covered his upper back, but the bullet hole in his coat, just below his left shoulder, was small.

KC leaned over him and fingered the rich cloth. Once she'd soaked out the blood, she could easily mend it.

She turned her attention back to the man at her feet. Too bad he was dead. Thick, gold blond hair covered his head and stubble of beard shaded his square chin. Beneath his tan, his strong classic features had a pale, waxy look. A thin trickle of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth. Creases bracketed that same mouth, indicating he had either smiled or frowned a lot. KC bet on the former. Blue, she thought, with that fair hair, his eyes would have been blue.

His broad shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist, his legs long and lean beneath his tight trousers. KC estimated his height at least six inches over her own five foot seven.

Though KC didn't much like men, she could appreciate this one's male beauty. Gold and bronze, he reminded KC of the pictures she'd seen in Mama's books, of the Greek god Apollo.

Books the Indians had torn apart and used to start the fire that...no, she wouldn't think about that time. She turned her thoughts back to the man.

There'd only been one shot during the night. That, in itself, was unusual. Peaceful, Texas was usually anything but. One shot in the dark meant a slow night. It awakened her from her nightmare and for that she'd been thankful.

The hot Texas sun beat down on KC's bent head. Sweat trickled between her breasts reminding her the dead didn't keep long in the heat. Already a lone buzzard circled above,

waiting.

With a grimace of distaste, KC searched the man's pockets. Other than a pale, pink lace, nothing-of-a-handkerchief, they were empty. She stroked the soft silk, her rough fingers snagging the delicate fabric. With a scowl she shoved it into her vest pocket and continued her search.

Whoever shot the man also picked him clean. Probably Rico, she thought. That mean little snake would think nothing of shooting a man in the back. Rico must have been in a hurry, only the stranger's boots were missing.

Well, Rico's loss was KC's gain. Made of quality material, the stranger's clothes could be reused. The man's silk shirt alone had nearly enough fabric to make a shirt each for Eli and herself. KC silently thanked her deceased mother for the needlework lessons.

Already the morning had proven quite profitable. Just before dawn, shouts and gunshots roused her from her bed yet again. Peering out of the hayloft window, she caught a glimpse of Rico and his men taking off after a dark stranger riding a big rawboned horse. KC wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a woman riding double with the stranger. She wished the man luck and put the incident out of her mind. This was, after all, Peaceful. Shootouts and murders happened

on a regular basis.

When KC came down from the loft, she found over a dozen books lying strewn on the barn floor. Beautiful, leather-bound, gold-embossed books, books like the ones Mama had so loved.

Glancing quickly around, she waited for someone to step out of the shadows to claim them. No one came. She collected them and carried them up to the loft. Before she hid them away, she stole a few minutes to stroke the smooth leather, to smell the familiar scent of paper and ink. Later she would open them and read the words, savoring them like the rare and wonderful things they were. Then she had scooted back down to begin the day's chores.

Sweat soaked through the bandanna tied around her forehead, and rolled down her chest and back under the heavy leather vest she wore. If she stayed to strip and bury the dead man, she wouldn't have time to slip away for a quick dip in the river before she'd be needed back at the stable.

Of course, she didn't have to bury the man. What was one more body in a town like Peaceful? This far from town no one would notice the smell. Even if they did, it wouldn't concern them, dead bodies were not uncommon in and around town. Few of those who died in Peaceful ever received a proper burial. Besides, the buzzards gathering above wouldn't leave

much.

As if summoned, a buzzard landed a few yards away, its beady eyes focused on the man's still figure. KC gazed longingly at the silver swathe of water glistening in the distance, then looked down at the man's lifeless form. She gave a resigned sigh.

"Don't worry stranger. The buzzards won't have you. And," something made her add, "I'll leave you enough so you won't meet your maker buck-naked."

Standing, KC swept the broad-brimmed hat from her head and shooed the buzzard away. The bird rose squawking into the air. It would be awhile before the ugly creature worked up its nerve to approach again. By then it would be too late.

KC knelt next to the man and grasped his shoulders, rolling him onto his back. Only when he lay flat on the ground did she realize the scope of the loss his death was. Beautiful, she thought. Even in death, his face held the power to move her. A lump formed in her throat. No matter how often she encountered it, the ending of a life affected her. Unbidden, tears stung the back of her eyes.

Savagely, she rubbed her knuckles into her eyes. She would not cry for some unknown man—no matter how beautiful. She never cried. She hadn't cried for Mama, or for Papa. She

didn't cry for her lost brother, Brendan. Crying didn't bring the dead back. Crying didn't ease the pain of grief. She swallowed the lump in her throat, pressed her lips into a tight line and reached for the pearl buttons of the man's shirt.

His eyes blinked opened.

Shock held her rigid.

He reached out. His hand closed around her wrist, trapping her. His grip brought her nightmares to life.

A strangled shriek bubbled in her throat. Her heart pounded in fright. With a gasp, she yanked her hand free. Overbalanced she landed on her backside in the dust. She scooted away crab-like.

His hand fell limply to his side. "Please," he croaked. "Help me." Deep aquamarine eyes focused on her for just a moment, then flickered shut. Again, he lay still as death.

Trembling, KC crawled to his side and placed hesitant fingers on the column of his throat. There, beneath the warm, smooth skin, she could feel the blood pulsing through his veins.

Alive. He was alive!

Breathing raggedly, she scrambled to her feet and ran toward the stable. Minutes later she

barreled into Eli's small room at the back of the barn.

"Eli," she sputtered, unable to catch her breath.

Tall and gaunt, his shoulders bowed, Eli appeared unchanging to KC. Grey streaked his dark hair. His pale blue eyes missed nothing.

Seemingly unalarmed by her unheralded entry, Eli took her arm. "Sit down, boy."

Long ago she and Eli decided on KC's charade of masculinity. Peaceful boasted only a few women, none of them respectable. A couple of Mexican women did business in town, and while KC felt sympathy for their lot in life, she had no desire to join their ranks. Her tall, slim frame and modest bust line made it easy for her to fool all but the most discerning eye. Sometimes, KC thought even Eli forgot she was female. How much easier things would be if she weren't.

"Easy now. Take a bit of air and spit it out." Eli pushed her into a chair, then sat himself on the edge of his cot.

"A man. I found a man. Outside of town. Shot. Left for dead." She managed to wheeze out.

Eli's eyes narrowed. "What man? Are you hurt?"

"No. No." She shook her head. The bandanna around her forehead dislodged at her sudden

movement and fell down over one eye. Impatiently she pulled it off and used it to mop the sweat from her face and throat. "I found a dead man outside of town." Her words came easier as her breathing slowed closer to normal. "Or what I thought was a dead man. Only he's alive! He's been shot in the back, but he's still alive." She grabbed Eli's arm and pulled him up and toward the door. "We've got to help him. Hurry!"

Gently Eli freed his arm. "Easy, Boy. Let me get my boots on. Go hitch up the wagon."

"There's no time. He may be dying."

"He may be, but we'll still need the wagon to bring him back." Eli bent to pull on his boots. Each action was deliberate and sure. He never rushed, no matter what the circumstances.

KC hesitated.

"Go on with you. Get the wagon."

KC nodded and hurried out.

Eli had barely finished gathering his medicines and bandages when KC pulled the wagon up outside the door.

HANDS TOUCHED him. Firm yet gentle hands. Christopher struggled to open his eyes. He couldn't, a heavy weight held them tightly shut. Blackness surrounded him, lightened only by a red haze of pain. Smells filled the darkness. The heavy earthy scents of horses, leather and hay mixed with the subtle fragrances of sage and mint.

"Christina?" he questioned, trying to rise.

"Lay down. Don't try and talk. You're safe now. Sleep."

He turned toward the disembodied voice as it asked, "Will he live?"

Another voice replied, "I don't know. The bullet seems to have hit his shoulder blade here in the back, then traveled up and out. Lucky it didn't puncture his lung. Now if those cracked ribs of his don't do the job, that's one problem we won't have to worry about. He took a knock on his head, too, but I don't think it's likely to kill him. If infection doesn't set in I'd say he might survive. Whether or not he'll have full use of his arm only time will tell."

The second voice was masculine, low and gravelly, the first light and musical. He wanted the first voice to speak again. The sound eased the burning agony lancing through him with

every breath. The voice held him still when he longed to lash out.

“I’m going to try and clean out this wound and see how much damage has been done.” The gravelly voice again. “Hold the rag over his nose and mouth. Careful with that chloroform, just a bit. Hold his head still. Don’t let him jerk. That’s right, easy now.”

Something covered his face. Pungent fumes filled his nose and mouth, burning his lips and mouth, scorching its way down his throat. His back arched and his head jerked as he fought futilely to escape. Hands pressed him down. Acid fire seared its way through him, seeming to last an eternity though only seconds passed before he sank into oblivion.

KC LIFTED the bandage from the man’s back. Beneath it the flesh looked red and angry. A sickly yellow fluid oozed from the inflamed wound. Gently she cleaned the pus away and sprinkled the area with carbolic acid to fight against infection. In the week since she found the man, Apollo, as she came to call him, grew progressively weaker. Fever ravaged his body. His breathing grew shallow and labored. He moaned and tossed restlessly on the bed, his skin tight and hot to her touch. Despite their every effort, he fought a desperate battle with infection.

Again, she bathed him with water-soaked cloths, trying to cool him down. Earlier Eli had looked at Apollo. Though Eli hadn't said anything, KC could tell he didn't have much hope the man would survive.

Turning Apollo over, she lifted his head into her lap and trickled some water between his parched lips. She wasn't ready to give up yet. She found him. She would make him live.

"Leave him now."

Eli stood silhouetted in the doorway. KC started to protest, but stopped when Eli raised his hand.

"Light the lamp. I'll sit with him while you get a bite to eat."

He moved into the room and set a plate down on the small table by the bed. Two crusty slices of bread surrounded a thick slab of juicy pink ham. Next to it he placed a mug of cider, which filled the room with the sweet smell of apples. "After you eat I want you to get some sleep. Wearing yourself down to nothing won't help him heal one minute faster."

"I know, but he seems to rest easier when I'm here." She brushed a lock of hair from the man's forehead. Ever since he opened his eyes and asked her for help, KC felt bound to this man in some way she couldn't begin to explain.

Eli frowned. “The man’s not another one of your strays.”

A flush crept up under her skin. She ducked her head, but not before Eli saw it. “I know.” Apollo was a man. A human being with a life of his own, but until he got better—or died—he was hers. It had been a long time since she’d felt anything for another human being, other than Eli, and despite the pain it might bring, she relished the feeling.

“Did you find out anything more about him?” she asked.

“Nope. Slick didn’t know much. Our man here came into town in the company of a young woman. They rented one of the rooms above the cantina, but after Rico and his bunch rode in, Slick snuck out.”

“He would, the little weasel.” The cantina owner wasn’t brave or foolish enough to tangle with Rico.

Eli smiled in agreement. “Their wagon and oxen are still here.”

“Oxen?” KC questioned. “He strikes me as more the thoroughbred type.”

Eli shrugged. “I was out when they rode in. Never saw either of them. The woman’s gone. Heard Rico’s men talking about how some gunslinger stole her out from under Rico’s nose. All that’s left at the cantina is a blood stain and some very angry bandits.”

KC felt the blood drain from her face. “You didn’t question Rico? Or tell anyone about Apollo?”

“Not a chance. I like my body lead-free. Rico looked ready to shoot first and ask questions later. I think Slick was a mite suspicious, but I don’t think he’ll open his mouth. Yet.”

“But, what about...”

“When and if he comes around we’ll get answers. If he doesn’t, it won’t matter. Now, you eat and get some sleep. That’s an order.”

KC smiled at Eli’s gruff tone. “Aye, aye, Sir.” Gently she eased Apollo’s head from her lap. He moaned.

KC looked up at Eli. “Don’t let him die.”

“He’s more dead than alive. He should have died days ago. I don’t know if it’s his own stubborn will to live, or your determination to keep him alive, that’s kept him from meeting his maker.” Eli’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ll do my best, but sometimes it just isn’t good enough. Don’t give him your heart, he’s likely to break it.”

Eli meant well. Because he was the closest thing to family she had, KC let him talk. All she said was, “I don’t have a heart. The Comanches ripped it out years ago.”

She grabbed the food and hurried out of the room, before he saw the lie in her eyes.

Raised voices from the street pulled KC's attention from her dinner. Though normally she ignored the happenings in Peaceful, this time she let curiosity draw her to the stable door. Anything to take her mind from the fact Apollo might yet die.

Daylight lingered in the middle of the dusty street where Rico and two of his henchmen accosted another man. Seated on a dappled gray stallion the man leaned casually over his saddle horn to address Rico. KC admired the man's calm demeanor even while she called him a fool for approaching Rico.

"What's your business here, *Gringo*," Rico asked.

The man on Rico's right laughed. "He's no *gringo*, he's *mestizo*, a half-breed."

The man fixed his attention on Rico. "Your friend is right. I'm part Comanche. Breed's the name."

KC's body tensed. She had little reason to care for the Comanche. Still, the man was only part Indian, and as far as she knew, hadn't done anything to deserve death at Rico's hand.

For a moment Rico toyed with the butt of his gun, then he seemed to think better of it and let his coat fall back into place. "What do you want in Peaceful?"

“I’m looking for a man.”

KC held her breath. Was this dangerous looking man hunting for Apollo? No one other than Slick and Eli knew about the injured man lying helpless in the stable’s back room. But KC didn’t think Slick would keep the secret long if pressed.

“Friend or foe?” Rico asked.

The stranger shrugged. “Just a man. Tall. Dark. Answers to the name of Gallagher.”

Before KC could take a relieved breath, Rico responded with a howl of rage. “Gallagher!”

Rico’s curses burned KC’s ears.

The stranger stiffened. KC could almost see the man calculating his odds against the three men in the street.

“I gather you’ve had dealings with Mr. Gallagher?” The man interrupted Rico’s raving.

“*Sí*. If he is a friend of yours *Señor*, when you find him tell him I want back what he took from me.”

“When I see him I’ll be sure and mention it. Do you mind pointing me in the direction he headed?”

A sly look came over Rico’s face. “*Sí*. But first you must come and drink with us.”

“Don’t do it stranger,” KC whispered.

As if he’d heard her, the stranger swiveled in his saddle and looked toward the stable. “Don’t mind if I do. I’m a mite thirsty. First let me bed down my horse.” He patted the animal’s dusty, sweat-covered neck. “We’ve come a long way. He deserves his dinner and a rubdown.” The man reined his horse away from Rico and headed to the stable.

KC scrambled away from the door and out of sight. She waited for the blast of Rico’s gun. When it didn’t come, she peeked around the corner in time to see Rico and his men disappear into the cantina.

“Hey, Boy,” the stranger’s voice startled her. She whirled around and almost knocked into the gray’s legs. The horse pranced away.

“Yes, Sir,” she squeaked, unable to find her voice. She stared up at the part Indian stranger, her eyes wide, terror only a breath away. In her mind she heard screams, smelled smoke and saw...she blinked rapidly to dispel the memories and found herself looking into smoky gray eyes.

“You all right, Boy?” the man asked, not unkindly. His eyes raked over her trembling body.

“I’m fine, but you sure as hell won’t be if you go into that cantina.” KC spat the words. She wanted to hate the man for his Indian blood, but found she couldn’t. She had to warn him.

The man chuckled. "Thanks for the warning. BOY."

The way he emphasized the word, boy, and looked her up and down again made KC back away. A thread of apprehension ran through her.

"Is there a back way out of here?"

She nodded and pointed toward the far end of the stable.

"Tell me, Boy." Again the emphasis. "Just what did this Gallagher take from Rico?"

"Does your friend ride a big, brown, rawboned horse?"

A flicker of surprise crossed the man's face. "Yes."

"Then I think he took a woman."

The man gave a little laugh. "I should have known. They going to give you trouble over my coming through here?"

"Naw, Eli, the owner, is the only doctor here 'bouts. They don't bother him, 'cause they know someday they'll need him to patch them up. They leave me be 'cause if they don't it makes Eli mad." KC roughed up her speech.

"Well, Boy. I guess you're safe enough until one of them takes a good look, then I don't think even Eli's anger is going to be enough to protect you. Take my advice and get yourself out

of this little piece of paradise before it's too late."

He tipped his hat at KC and moved toward the back entrance.

KC sputtered in rage. She didn't need some dirty half-breed giving her advice and she'd tell him so. Before she could form the words, he was gone. Leaning low over his saddle, he rode down the track toward the mountains. Despite the way he'd riled her, KC wished him luck.

Chapter 2

NEAR A SMALL creek, Red Buffalo stopped his horse. Four days and nights of hard riding brought his raiding party hundreds of miles from the site of their successful raid. Any who sought to pursue them had been left behind long ago. Swinging his leg over his horse's back he slid to the ground and led his sweat lathered animal to the water. They would make camp and rest here for awhile.

Half-a-dozen warriors joined him at the creek. They drank in silence. Quiet, determined and intense, during the hard ride, they now looked to him, their leader. At his almost imperceptible nod, the air erupted with bloodcurdling howls and shrieks of delight. Red Buffalo grinned in satisfaction. They deserved to celebrate. They had done well.

The raid on the hated Tejanos had been almost too easy. He and his warriors swept through the unsuspecting Texan settlement like a sharp knife through flesh. In minutes, it ended. Tejano men lay dead and dying, their bodies broken and bloodied, arrows and lances piercing their hated, pale skin. Fire purged the land of their obscene dwellings. Acrid smoke filled the air,

which echoed with the screams of women and children's cries of terror. Not one of his warriors bore even a scratch.

Red Buffalo allowed himself a small smile as he relished the memory of the Texans shrieking in pain and pleading for mercy. He hated the Texans. Someday he would drive them from Comanche land forever. He chose to ignore the fact his own mother came from that hated breed. Only his greenish-gray eyes and the striking red highlights in his shoulder length hair gave evidence of the white blood flowing through his veins. In all else, he was Eka kura, Red Buffalo, Comanche, son of, Tomooru Tosa nakaai, Winter Hawk.

Not joining in his men's celebration, Red Buffalo surveyed the spoils of their raid. Twenty, fine ponies crowded the banks of the creek, herded by the youth brought on the raid for just that purpose. Goods of all kinds lay across the backs of his warrior's ponies, bolts of colored cloth, pots, rifles and jugs of firewater.

He frowned. Red Buffalo did not like the white man's poison, it made strong men weak and weak men foolish. But he knew, now that they were safe from pursuit, he could do little to prevent the warriors from drinking it.

Their captives crouched on the ground, where the warriors had dropped them. One man,

two women and three children. Red Buffalo had limited the number his warriors took. With only himself, a boy and six warriors, more captives would have slowed them down too greatly. By keeping their number small, Red Buffalo led his warriors deep into country the Tejanos thought safe from Comanche attack. The illusion of safety made the Texans lax. They paid for their carelessness with their lives.

Even his father could not object to this small number of captives. Of late, Winter Hawk spoke openly of his desire for peace with the whites. In order to keep the soldiers from their camps, he said, they must not take captives. But like all warriors of the Comanche Red Buffalo was free to make his own decisions. While Winter Hawk might promise the white emissaries he would not raid their settlements or steal their women and children, Red Buffalo was not bound by his father's word.

The male captive looked half-dead. A broken arrow shaft protruded from his left thigh and blood matted his graying hair. His eyes stared vacantly upward. Red Buffalo nudged the man. No flicker of awareness crossed his face. His death would provide little amusement, his mind already gone from his body. One of the women knelt next to him, crooning softly. Plump and gray, well past her prime, she held little interest for Red Buffalo. If she caused no trouble and

survived his men's attention, the women of the tribe would decide her fate.

Red Buffalo looked briefly at the children, two boys and a girl child of less than two summers. A boy, about ten, glared defiantly at Red Buffalo. The younger one, about six, clung to the older boy's leg. As Red Buffalo drew closer, the older boy stood up and pushed the smaller boy behind him.

Good, the boy had courage. Now, if he had sense he might someday be a Comanche. Children were always welcome among the Comanche.

The other woman sat a few feet away the girl child held tightly in her arms. Back at the settlement, this woman had caught Red Buffalo's eye. Young, less than twenty summers, she now appeared pallid and weak. Ripped and torn in a dozen places, her simple calico dress barely covered her slender body. Only her hair, the color of straw with streaks of red, lent her any luster. She trembled at his approach. He crouched in front of her. The girl child screamed at the sight of him and buried her head in the woman's chest.

The woman shrank away, her watery blue eyes overlarge and terror-stricken in her small face. "Please, don't hurt us none," she whispered.

Red Buffalo reached out and grabbed her by the hair. Tangled and dirty, it didn't shine as it

had when he first saw her running through the settlement. He rubbed the strands between his fingers. It wasn't a true red like that of Firebird. Anger started deep inside of him. He flung the woman's hair away. His hand caught the woman on the side of the face, knocking her to the ground. Clutching the child, she attempted to crawl away. Red Buffalo rose. His foot on her hair, he pinned her to the ground. Her whimpers of fear enraged him.

Firebird never showed fear, only strength and defiance.

This woman, this pale imitation, would not do. There was no magic in the dull red of her hair. To lie with her would sap his power, make it less. She was unworthy.

Anger made his temples throb. Pain, ice hot and sharp, crashed through him with every beat of his heart. He needed the flame-haired one, his Firebird. Only when she was finally his would his magic be complete.

The woman clawed at Red Buffalo's leg, her nails leaving bloody tracks as she tried to pry herself loose. The girl child's screams went on and on, pounding in Red Buffalo's head. In rage, he grabbed her up. For a moment her screams stopped. She looked at him, her eyes wide, tear tracks down her dirty, round baby face. His hands pressed into soft yielding flesh.

Her mouth opened and air rushed in, then her face crumpled as another scream began. Pain

lanced behind his eyes, turning the edges of the world a hazy red. Red Buffalo whipped her small body through the air. With a dull thud, her head struck the side of a boulder. Quiet now, she hung limp in his hand. He released his grip and her body slid down to the ground next to the woman. Silent, he stood and watched as the child twitched once then went still. Nothing stirred in him at the sight, not satisfaction, not horror, not regret. He felt nothing but relief at an end to the noise.

A shrill shriek pierced the air. Without thought Red Buffalo kicked the woman in the face. Her nose shattered. Blood splattered his moccasin and the shriek died to a strangled gurgle. Turning, he strode away.

Yellow Wolf grabbed his arm. "The girl child was my captive," he complained. "She was for my wife, to take the place of the child we lost. Why did you kill her?"

Red Buffalo shook off Yellow Wolf's hand. He did not wish to talk now. He needed to think. He restrained the urge to smash his fist into the warrior's face. "You may have the pale woman." He pointed to the blond woman crying on the ground. "A slave will be more use to your wife than a mewling child."

Smiling and nodding his agreement, Yellow Wolf went to claim his new prize. Red Buffalo

knew the woman would suit Yellow Wolf well, for his wife was a sickly woman of limited use to a virile warrior.

Long even strides took Red Buffalo away from the sound of renewed female screams. He had no desire to join with his warriors. They foolishly spent their strength in the bodies of worthless women.

Red Buffalo knew better. A man's power was limited; it should not be wasted. He must guard it wisely. Only a woman of equal strength would not deplete a man. From such a woman a man could add to his own vitality.

Worry kept Red Buffalo walking. Despite the success of this raid, he felt his magic fading. Even the red in his hair no longer shone like fresh blood, no matter how he greased and groomed it. When he saw the woman at the settlement, he'd felt a glimmer of hope she might be one he could draw power from. Hope died when he looked into her terrified eyes.

In the darkness, Red Buffalo contemplated his life. Except for the encroachment of the white men, his life was good. Son of a great chief and a warrior in his own right, Red Buffalo's place in the tribe was a strong one. Men listened to him in council, followed him into battle. Though he rarely acknowledged them, women looked at him with admiring eyes.

Nor did he often make use of captive women, only when the urge inside him grew too large to ignore. He found little satisfaction in their weak, trembling bodies. Only one woman held his thoughts. Firebird.

In his fourteenth summer, he'd first laid eyes on Firebird. Tied to his saddle like a sack of grain, his father brought her home from a successful raid. Red Buffalo never doubted that one day she would be his, that she would be the one to make his magic complete. Winter Hawk had eyes only for his second wife, Huwuni, he had no use for his dirty, defiant captive.

As Winter Hawk's slave, Firebird had to be beaten often and forever fetched back from her escape attempts. More than once Red Buffalo stayed Winter Hawk's hand from slaying the girl. In her defiance, she never acknowledged or thanked Red Buffalo for his intervention. She bore her beatings without a whimper, neither asking for pardon nor begging for mercy. Her eyes spat green fire at all her captors, including him. Only his stepmother and the smallest of the tribe's children received anything other than her hatred.

Gentle Huwuni did her best to shield the girl from Winter Hawk's easily provoked rage and the hostility of the other women of the tribe who had lost loved ones to the Tejanos. It was rare to find Firebird without an infant in her arms and a little one dragging on her skirt. For them her

eyes softened to the emerald green of a summer day, clear and sweet. Red Buffalo longed for her eyes to touch him that way.

Her refusal to submit to her captivity and her foolish courage drew him to her like a starving bear to a honey tree. Willingly he withstood her stings in the hope of someday tasting her sweetness.

For two long years, he waited patiently while she matured from a child into a young woman. He planned to gift his father with many horses and make her his wife.

The winter before Firebird would have become a woman, Huwuni grew ill in childbirth. Desperate when the tribe's shaman could do nothing, Winter Hawk brought in the white healer, Eli Hosea.

Red Buffalo remembered the strange healer with revulsion and fear. Despite the gray streaking his dark hair, his skin remained pallid and unlined. Ageless eyes stared out from under the healer's brow. He spoke little Comanche, making himself understood by use of sign language with his long, thin fingers. Well known in the area, Hosea never refused to aid those in need. But frightened by his strong magic, the Comanche seldom sought his help. Only Winter Hawk's fear of losing his beloved wife gave him the courage to summon the white healer. Under

his care Huwuni survived and delivered a healthy boy child.

Recognizing the man's great power, Red Buffalo, just sixteen summers and an unproven warrior, could not protest when Winter Hawk gifted the man with Firebird. He watched, in impotent fury, as his future rode away with the healer. Then and there, he vowed one day to bring her back.

Three long years passed before he located her again in the wild border town of Peaceful, Texas. His first instinct was to take her then. She was a woman grown, he a warrior of skill and cunning. Caution made him wait. While the white man's law did not operate in Peaceful, the bandits and outlaws there had little love for Indians. They would not sit back and allow an Indian to take one of their own. She belonged to the shaman, a powerful and protected man. Also, with him she learned the shaman's mighty healing magic, increasing her valuable to Red Buffalo. He decided to wait.

From then on, he used Peaceful as a passing through point when he raided into Mexico. He saw her often. He even, on occasion, let the healer patch up his injured warriors.

She did not recognize him. Living and working with the healer as his apprentice, she looked at no Indians and few men. Red Buffalo laughed at the stupidity of the white men who could not

see past the cropped hair and the boy's clothing she wore. Still, he was glad. She was his, no other could have her. He would and had killed any man who dared to touch her. He smiled grimly as he remembered the deaths of the few men who saw beyond her disguise and sought to act on that knowledge. Firebird never knew of his vigilant protection. It was part of his power.

Soon the time would be right. Red Buffalo could feel it deep inside himself. He'd proven himself a warrior time and again. Rich with horses and possessions, he needed the woman, her magic, to compliment his own, to make it stronger, invincible. With her at his side, he would sweep the white man from the land. Nothing and no one would stop him.

PEACEFUL DOZED in the mid-afternoon sun. The dusty streets went empty. The only sounds in the hot, still air were the tinny tinkle of the cantina piano and the occasional feminine giggle from one of the rooms above.

KC mopped the sweat from her face with her bandanna, then dipped it into the water trough and ran it around the back of her neck. It came away grimy from the dirt accumulated there. Since she'd found Apollo, she'd been unable to get away to bathe. Even behind closed doors,

she couldn't risk a bath in town, and a sponge bath was little help against her work in the barn.

A week earlier Eli had been called away to a distant homestead to doctor an injured man. He hadn't wanted to leave her alone, but he couldn't ignore the call for help. KC insisted she could manage on her own. If she really needed help, there was always Dead Eye Charlie. Though he usually could be counted on to disappear when there was work to be done, if it came right down to it and there was no other option, he'd help out.

Apollo while still extremely ill, no longer needed Eli's skill. If he survived it would be because of his own inner strength and will to live, rather than any outside assistance. Anything that needed to be done for him, KC could handle herself.

She straightened with a groan and massaged the small of her back. The sound of horses in the street drew her to the door. She shaded her eyes against the glare. At first she could only make out the vague shape of riders, dark shadows surrounded by a haze of dust. Her stomach tightened, few people who came to Peaceful were up to anything good. Had Rico and his men returned? KC prayed not. Apollo's presence was no longer a secret in town. While none of the other riffraff showed any interest in the man, Rico might take exception to his still breathing. KC didn't know if she could stop Rico if he decided to finish what he'd started. She only knew

she'd die trying.

The horses pranced a little as they came closer, tossing their heads at the smell of hay and water from the barn. The leader moved out of the glare. KC recognized him immediately. Red Buffalo.

Alarm chased through her, the fine hairs on her arms and legs standing erect. She stepped back quickly, out of sight into the shadows.

Red Buffalo. In the six months since he last come through town KC had prayed he'd found his way to the happy hunting ground. No such luck. There he was, riding toward her, straight and proud, his dark hair gleaming with red highlights in the sun. Damn his hide!

As he rode past the barn door, his head swiveled around, his pale eyes seeming to search the darkness. Cold and unblinking, his gaze touched her. She shivered and froze, unable to break free.

She knew Red Buffalo believed she did not remember him. She carefully let him think that, never showing in any manner she recognized him. She knew he watched her. Whenever she heard he was in the area, she moved about with caution, rarely traveling far from the safety Eli provided. Fortunately for KC, Red Buffalo feared the white medicine man.

Three years ago, Red Buffalo rode into town, nearly frightening KC to death. When he did nothing and then left, she tried to convince herself his obsession with her had faded, but she knew it hadn't. From then on, he returned to Peaceful on a regular basis. Each time he sought her out with his eyes. One day she knew he'd make a move toward her.

On that day one of them would die.

His horse trotted by and the spell broke. Sweat trickled down KC's back and prickled under her arms. She shook off the feeling of being trapped and helpless. Years had passed since she was a Comanche slave. Never again would she allow anyone control over her life. She was free now and intended to stay that way, no matter what the cost.

More riders filed by. Some of the warriors she recognized, men who rode with Red Buffalo on other raids or she'd known as children in the Comanche camp, like Yellow Wolf with his broad, flat, smiling face, round body and short, bowed legs. A year younger than herself, KC remembered him as a happy child, who never took the same delight in tormenting captives, as did some of the other older children. At seventeen summers, he seemed an unlikely warrior, but the vacant-eyed, battered young woman riding behind him gave evidence of his prowess.

Laughing Fox came next. A few years KC's senior, his name both reflected his personality

and was ironic at the same time. Cunning and sly as his namesake, KC never saw the man laugh or even smile. In front of him sat a small boy, about six years old. Though dirty, his clothes torn, otherwise he appeared unharmed. He looked around the town; his eyes alight with interest. KC felt a pang as she recalled seeing the same look in her brother, Brendan's eyes, so long ago.

Two of the other warriors looked familiar. She didn't know their names. The last two were strangers to her. An older boy rode behind one of them. The boy's eyes were defiant. KC knew that look well. Bruises and scrapes covered his thin arms and legs. If Brendan was still alive, he would be only a few years older than this boy.

One of the warriors led a horse with a plump older woman tied to its blanket covered back. Her gray hair trailed wildly around her swollen, tear-streaked face and her torn dress barely covered her ample bosom.

A myriad of emotions assailed KC, rage, compassion, horror and awe. It seemed like only yesterday she'd been the one riding captive behind a triumphant warrior, minutes since she watched her family cut down by marauding Indians.

Bold and fearless, Red Buffalo rode into town. Smeared war paint decorated his face, one half red, the other black. Fresh scalps hung from his waist. Bile rose in KC's throat at the sight

of one tiny, blood-splattered, blonde scalp.

One by one, people emerged from the buildings lining the street or peered out of doorways and windows. They stared with curiosity, a few sympathetically. None said a word. Filled with outlaws, whores and drifters, no one in town protested Red Buffalo's taking of women and children. Still, never before had he paraded through town with his captives. The man grew brazen. KC shivered. Her time of freedom was running out.

Soft feminine sobs could barely be heard over the clop of the horse's hooves. The captives. She had to help them.

Eli often traded with the Comanche who came through Peaceful. They all knew of him and his strong medicine. Some, braver than most, came to him for healing. If he were here he'd bargain with the warriors, offer them horses, furs and supplies in trade for the captives' release. On more than one occasion KC knew Eli had arranged for a captive's freedom, as he had hers. Only Eli wasn't here. She'd have to do it.

Nausea churned in KC's belly. Could she do it? Walk up to Red Buffalo; look him in the face and bargain with him.

"What is happening?" Carmelita's voice from behind made KC jump.

The woman laughed at KC's reaction and purred in a low, throaty tone. "I am so sorry, *Niño*, that I scare you." Her hand rested on KC's tense forearm. Her heavy perfume made KC want to gasp for air. Even if she hadn't heard Carmelita coming, she should have smelled her.

Carmelita sounded anything but sorry. Her fingers massaged KC's arm beneath her shirt. KC snatched her arm away to the accompaniment of the woman's continued laughter.

"You jump at the touch of a woman, *Niño*. Come to me. I will show how better to use your energy." When KC didn't answer Carmelita turned her attention to the commotion outside. Her gaze landed on Red Buffalo. "He is *mucho hombre*, eh *Niño*?" She smoothed her dress and patted back the hair straying from the smooth roll at the nape of her neck.

Disgust thickened KC's words. "Red Buffalo is a slimy snake who'd slit your throat as quick as he'd swat a fly."

"But such a pretty snake, so lean, so tall, so strong." Carmelita gave an exaggerated sigh of longing. "He could make Carmelita's heart beat fast."

"He could make Carmelita's heart stop beating," KC muttered, never taking her eyes off the riders. They stopped at the cantina, the logical place if they had it in mind to do some trading. Slick often traded guns to the Indians for whatever liquor they managed not to drink.

“This Red Buffalo, I think I might be available if he wants a woman.” Carmelita stepped out of the barn.

KC snagged the woman by the arm and hauled her back. “You’re crazy as a coot. Look at them, woman, they’re savages, fresh off the warpath. They’d eat you alive.”

“But...”

“If that’s not good enough, what makes you think they need a woman when they all ready have two.” KC pointed at the two women riding with Red Buffalo’s band.

Carmelita’s eyes widened as she looked at the blood and bruises covering the two captives. Her face paled. With a strangled gulp, she took a step behind KC. “*Madre de Dios*,” she whispered and crossed herself. “*Pobrecitas*.”

“Don’t faint on me,” KC ordered, giving the smaller woman a shake. The whore wasn’t a bad person, just a bit flighty and only as bright as she needed to be. Even KC admitted Red Buffalo was an imposing sight, sitting atop his horse, nearly naked, his bronzed flesh rippling in the sunlight, lean and well muscled, his red-black hair falling like a dark curtain around his chiseled features.

“Do not let them take me.” Carmelita’s voice lost its husky, seductive note. She squeaked

like a frightened child. With a start, KC realized the whore, for all her curves, rouge and perfume, was little more than a baby, probably no more than sixteen.

“Relax. No one’s taking you anywhere. Just stay out of sight. Go on back and keep an eye on Apollo.”

“*Sí, sí, Señor.*” Carmelita nodded agreement, backing away from the barn door. “Carmelita will take good care of the blond gringo for you.”

At least he’s harmless, KC thought. For the moment, she amended, remembering the corded muscles of the man’s chest and arms and the heart wrenching beauty of his pain ravaged features. Lord only knew what woman could resist that face if it were animated with laughter, his eyes alight with love and passion.

Apollo and Red Buffalo. Light and dark. Two sides of a coin, both held an appeal for women.

If she didn’t need to take care of the animals, KC knew she’d never let Carmelita within spitting distance of Apollo. The thought made KC angry. The man was nothing to her, nothing more than a drain on her time and energy. A useless Easterner by the look of him, the cut of his clothes, his uncalled hands, his tan still tinged with the pink of someone who spends more

time indoors than out. With a muttered oath, she forced thoughts of Apollo from her mind. She had more important matters to tend to. After Carmelita vanished into the shadows, KC straightened her shoulders and headed toward the cantina. No use putting it off. Mentally she catalogued what she might offer the Indians in trade. How much she'd have to give would depend on how eager they were to unload their captives.

As she got closer, KC studied the captives. The older woman shouldn't be hard to free; she was too old to be of much use to the Indians. With the army harassing them, the Comanche had little enough with which to provide for their own elderly. The younger woman and the children might be impossible.

Dry, hard dirt crunched beneath her booted feet. Tiny puffs of dust swirled around her ankles, floating just above the heated ground. KC could feel eyes on her as she strode down the middle of the street. None of the bad hombres of Peaceful seemed to have the nerve to confront Red Buffalo face to face. They hovered in doorways and peered out of windows. Curious, but cowardly. Slick stood in the door of the cantina his shotgun cradled in his arms, a greasy towel wrapped around his thin waist.

KC stepped up onto the porch. "Afternoon Slick. See you have company."

Slick acknowledged her with a sniff. “Yep.”

“Think they’d be interested in doing some trading?”

A surprised look crossed Slick’s face. “Might be, but Eli ain’t here. You goin’ ta dicker with them?”

“Thought I might give it a try, unless you feel the urge.”

“Nope. Don’t reckon I do. They ain’t got anything I need. No whiskey, just some cheap cloth and household junk.” They didn’t call him Slick because of the grease he combed his thinning hair with. The man always had his eyes open for a trade, usually managing to get the better end of the bargain.

“No, I don’t suppose you’d have any need of an old woman, two children and a young girl.” Though not an outlaw in the true sense of the word, Slick’s callousness angered KC. Unless it put coin in his pocket, he’d do nothing to save Red Buffalo’s captives.

Slick hesitated a minute, stroked his chin and looked a little closer at the captives. “Well, now that ya mention it, a boy around the bar ta clean up might come in handy.” His gaze slid over to the woman clinging to Yellow Wolf. Despite her ragged state and colorful bruises, the girl was a pretty little thing. “And I’ve been thinking of gettin’ me in a couple of gals regular

like. Them free lance whores ain't reliable. Take off with the first hombre they take a shine ta. If'n I owned me one, she couldn't leave and I wouldn't have ta split the money with her."

KC felt her stomach knot. The man was pure slime; he'd buy the captives off the Indians, make one his slave, the other a whore. "Don't think you'd better try Slick. Looks like Yellow Wolf's taken a shine to the gal."

Yellow Wolf glared at Slick as if daring him to try and take the girl.

Slick's normally pale skin turned nearly white. "Yep. Think ya may be right. Damn savages," he mumbled, then turned and disappeared into the cantina.

This was it then. KC skin felt chilled despite the heat of the sun beating down on her head. Sweat, like trickles of ice water rolled down her chest and back as she turned to face Red Buffalo.

Chapter 3

TO BEGIN WITH, the bargaining went easily enough. As if anticipating her, Red Buffalo pointed at the older boy and named his price, three wool blankets. Before she could offer for the others, he cut her off. The hard look in his eyes warned her to count the others lost.

The warrior with the younger boy refused to meet KC's gaze. He turned his horse and rode away. The boy clung to his captor's back. KC fought the urge to chase after them. She comforted herself with the thought the boy was young. Chances were he'd be adopted quickly into the tribe.

Yellow Wolf started to follow.

KC stopped him. "Does Yellow Wolf wish to trade? I have many more blankets," she asked in Comanche. This was the first time since Red Buffalo's band started coming through Peaceful KC spoke to them. Her voice shook slightly.

A frown creased Yellow Wolf's face. "No. Yellow Wolf will keep woman." Pride crept into his voice, his bare chest swelled. "I am warrior. Have many horses, but no papoose in my

tepee. Woman will give me papoose.”

“Perhaps.” KC nodded, then added, “White women are not strong like Comanche women. Maybe it would be better you take blankets.” KC argued with little hope. He wanted the girl, KC could see the lust in Yellow Wolf’s eyes. From what she’d heard from Eli, Yellow Wolf’s wife was incapable of carrying a child to term. Yellow Wolf, like most Comanche, wanted children, sons to follow him into battle and daughters to bring him comfort in his old age.

“No,” he repeated.

The girl leaned against Yellow Wolf, unaware as her fate was decided. Past terror, she’d retreated into herself. Blood streaked her swollen face. Still, her grip around Yellow Wolf was strong. If she pleased him and he took her to wife, she might survive and make a place for herself in the tribe. KC knew she couldn’t help the girl.

“How ‘bout the old woman?” KC asked.

The woman sat head bent, weeping silently. Sweat, mingled with tears, ran down her chalky skin and soaked her torn dress.

“She is old and useless to you. I will give you one blanket for her.”

As if she knew she was being discussed, the woman raised her head for the first time since

they'd ridden into town. Hope dawned in her eyes at the sight of people. Her sobs grew louder and she pulled against the ropes binding her. "Please, please," she begged, "help us."

Onlookers who lined the street turned their heads and melted away. Some darted sympathetic looks at the captives, a few even had the grace to look guilty. None made a move to help.

The woman's gaze turned toward KC. "Help me, boy." She kicked her pony. Obediently, the animal stepped forward.

With a snarl of rage, the warrior leading the pony yanked on its tether. Confused, the pony stumbled. Unable, because of her bound wrists, to catch herself, the woman cried out in fear as she slipped sideways. Her ankles lashed together beneath the pony, she hung head down under the pony's belly. Panicked by the sudden yell, the rough tug and the unaccustomed feeling under him, the pony sidestepped.

The woman screamed and twisted her body, knocking into the pony's prancing legs. Eyes rolling, he tossed his head and kicked out.

Yards away, KC watched as the pony's sharp hooves connected with the woman's dangling body again and again. Horror froze KC in place. Along with the metallic scent of blood,

screams of terror and pain, both human and animal, filled the air.

A second passed before KC leaped forward, caught the pony's dangling reins and pulled his head down to her chest. Almost immediately, the well-trained pony calmed. He leaned into her, his body quivering.

Too late. The woman hung limp beneath the pony, her arms trailing in the dust. Blood dripped from her head turning the ground dark. Gray, matted hair hid the woman's crushed features. KC pulled her knife and cut the ropes holding the woman's ankles. The body slid limply to the ground. The pony stepped gingerly over it and stood patiently awaiting his next command.

Bile clogged KC's throat. Death happened so quickly. In a breath, life ended.

Though she knew the woman was dead, KC knelt down and felt for a pulse. A shadow moved over her. She looked up at Red Buffalo.

How she hated him. He represented everything cruel and evil.

His gaze traveled down her body, flaunting his knowledge of her secret. Why did he keep it? What did he plan? When would he strike? Ever since she first saw him in Winter Hawk's camp, KC knew Red Buffalo wanted her. Not just her body. As she'd been a slave, he could

have had her easily enough.

No, he didn't want just her body. He wanted her heart. He wanted her soul. He wanted to possess her spirit and make it his. If all he wanted was her body, she'd know what weapons to fight him with.

She shivered as his gaze locked with hers, compelling her, holding her captive. He looked into her and saw the darkness lurking there, waiting, the rage and anger she struggled against setting free.

"The woman is yours." Red Buffalo's ironic words released KC.

He turned his horse and motioned to the rest of the band. In minutes, the street was again deserted.

HE FLOATED in a soft, gray void. After the searing pain, the mist felt cool, stroking his skin like velvet. Awareness came slowly to him. Bit by bit, the world again grew solid with shape and form, light and color, sound and smell.

The acrid stench of a sick room blended with the earthy smell of horses and hay. Shadows

flickered around him. He followed them, struggling to force open his eyes. A shape hovered over him, blocking the light. The fragrance of sage tickled his memory.

A voice, low and musical, spoke, but the meaning of the words eluded him. Firm, soothing hands touched him, easing his pain. Warm, salty liquid stroked his lips until they opened and a rich beefy broth trickled into his mouth. He swallowed it eagerly, licking the last drops from parched lips.

He struggled against his growing lassitude to remember what he needed to do. A sense of urgency built inside him. His lips moved, trying to form words without substance in his mind. A harsh, croaking sound rasped in his ears.

“THAT’S ENOUGH for now.” KC handed the bowl and spoon to the boy standing behind her.

The boy shifted from one foot to the other. “Is he goin’ ta live?”

She glanced at the boy. Scrubbed clean and dressed in new clothes, only the bruises remained. Those and the haunted look in his eyes. That would take longer to disappear, if it ever did. “I don’t know Willie. The infection seems to be clearing up, but he’s still running a

fever. All he can keep down is broth. I wish Eli would get back.” Eli would know what to do for both Apollo and the boy.

“You go on now and get your supper, then come on back and settle in for the night.”

The boy hesitated. “What about you, ain’t you goin’ ta eat? I kin sit with him awhile, if’n you want.”

“You’re a good boy, Willie. Your Mama would be proud of you.”

A shadow crossed the boy’s young features. His Mama was probably dead along with his Pa and who knew how many others from his small settlement. KC had gotten all the information she could from the boy about his family, but it would be a time before she found out if any survived Red Buffalo’s attack. She’d written a letter and sent it out with a drifter headed in that direction. If it would actually get there, she couldn’t be sure. Though the man seemed willing to carry the letter, KC feared the coin she gave him wasted and the letter used to feed his campfire.

“No, you go. I’ll stay with Apollo for a bit.”

Still, the boy waited. “Is that his name?”

“Nope.”

A frown creased the lad’s face. “Then why do ya call him that? It’s a strange name.”

Heat rose under KC's collar. She turned her face away. "It's from Greek mythology."

"Huh? Greek what?"

"Greek mythology. Stories the ancient Greeks used to tell themselves to explain the things in the world around them they didn't understand. Apollo was sort of the sun god. All golden and glowing he rode a chariot pulled by white horses to drag the sun up in the sky every day. He," she motioned toward the man, "kind of reminds me of a drawing of Apollo I saw once."

Willie looked at the man for a minute. "He is awfully blond. That's a good story, where'd ya hear it?"

"I read it in a book a long time ago."

A look of awe dawned in Willie's eyes. "You kin read?"

"Of course, everyone..." KC stopped. Not everyone could read. In fact, in Peaceful she and Eli were probably the only two people who could read or write more than their name. Except maybe for Apollo. KC knew reading and writing would be only one of many talents the man possessed. "I can read." Her tone was harsher than she intended. "Go get your dinner," she added on a softer note.

At the door Willie turned back. "Can ya, I mean will ya teach me?"

“Yes.” Before she could say more, Willie smiled his quick, shy smile and hurried from the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts and Apollo.

In the waning evening light, Apollo appeared less pale than when the sun streamed through the window. Though still broad of shoulder, his frame well muscled; illness left its mark. Deep grooves bracketed his mouth and his eyes, surrounded by dark shadows, seemed sunk into his skull. His skin felt hot and dry to her touch, his lips parched and cracked despite the liquid she forced on him and in him.

She watched as he tossed restlessly on the narrow bed, throwing the sheet aside no matter how often she tucked it tightly around him. His eyes moved constantly behind his eyelids, his fevered dreams giving him no peace. His lips formed words, but no sound emerged. Neither dead nor quite alive, he was caught in a never-ending nightmare, from which, KC could not free him.

IMAGES FORMED IN his mind, vague at first then they solidified.

“Texas! You’re going to Texas?” The woman’s voice, though soft and genteel, held a note

of angry shock she couldn't hide. "How can you even consider going to Texas...now?" She emphasized the word, letting Christopher know she was aware of the question he hadn't yet posed to her. The one that would ask her to be his wife.

He watched her rise and pace the drawing room in undisguised agitation. He admired the sway of her hips as she moved away from him toward the window. Rachelle DuBois was a beautiful woman.

Woman? At 18, she was hardly more than a child in a woman's body. It occurred to him, in all those years no one ever thought to tell her no. The beloved only daughter of a wealthy widower, there were few things in life Rachelle wanted that Rachelle didn't get. Though basically a nice person, the girl was spoiled rotten.

A frown crossed Christopher's face. He bore part of the guilt of spoiling her. Since he met her ten years ago, a child of eight to his fourteen, he willingly complied with her wishes, along with her father, his uncle and just about anyone else she turned her smile on. Even at the tender age of eight, she'd been a pretty little thing with the promise of beauty hinted at in her delicate features. Christopher admitted the promise had been more than kept.

Masses of rich mahogany hair rested on a head that barely reached his shoulder. The artful

arrangement complimented her regal posture and haughty, touch-me-not attitude, making him long to pull the pins and send it tumbling down around her face. Her amber colored eyes slanted up cat-like under perfectly shaped brows. Soft pink tinged her high cheekbones and her mouth looked moist and kissable, though now it trembled slightly.

His gaze traced the slender column of her throat, resting for a moment on the pulse beating there, then down to the rise of her full breasts straining against the sheer fabric of her dress. He wondered how they would feel in his hands, against his chest?

Shock stilled his tongue. When had he started thinking about her in that way? Though he planned to ask her to marry him, he'd never seen her with passion's eyes. For years, she'd been like a younger sister, following him around when he was home, playing games with him in the evenings when he visited, teasing him and asking him questions.

Even after he found himself considering marriage to her, he hadn't felt more interest in her as a woman than any normal, healthy male would feel toward an attractive female. He'd simply decided it was time to marry, set up a household and start a family. Attractive, intelligent, healthy and respectable, Rachelle was a perfectly suitable candidate for his wife. Her father and his uncle were partners in a law firm, the same firm that claimed Christopher as a junior partner.

She would make him an ideal wife and a mother for his children.

Though he knew she loved him or at least imagined she did, he never claimed to feel the same emotion for her. He was honest with her on that point, telling her he was fond of her and he felt they would suit. He promised to be a good husband and a faithful one, but he did not intend to let himself love a woman more than was necessary.

Still, as he watched her move around the room, her scent wafting in the air, he felt his body harden. Her short, angry strides did little to distract from her feminine grace.

“Sit down, Rachelle.” Though low and softly spoken there was no denying the order couched in the words.

Rachelle stopped her pacing and peered over her shoulder at him. She hesitated a moment as if determining just how far she could go in this matter.

Christopher kept his features even, not allowing even a hint of the amusement he felt to show. She was a clever little cat, with her show of feminine outrage, but he’d known her for too long to be taken in by her act. “Sit down,” he repeated, patting the seat beside him.

Ignoring the space on the sofa, she settled herself regally on a dainty chair across from him, arranging her skirts around her ankles. “Texas,” she sniffed. “What’s so important in Texas?”

She dipped her head coyly and gazed at him from under her thick lashes. “You, Sir, are not the only gentleman paying me court. Tobias Weathersby has asked for my hand...”

Christopher could barely restrain his bark of laughter. “Tobias Weathersby is a toad and you know it.”

The look Rachelle threw at him should have scorched his soul, but it only made him laugh louder. She hunched her shoulders and glared at him.

“I have had offers, you know,” she muttered.

“Of course you have, my dear.” Christopher struggled to curb his mirth at the thought of the beautiful, fragile, refined Rachelle married to the short, squat, pig-faced Tobias.

Tears glistened in Rachelle’s eyes. “I know you don’t truly love me, but you have no need to mock me.”

Instantly contrite, Christopher knelt next to her and took her hands in his. “No tears. I do love you, just not in the way those silly romances you read say a man should love a woman. Life isn’t at all like that. We have a background in common and the same goals in life. These things make a strong marriage, not the so-called grand passion that only occurs between the covers of novels. Now, don’t cry. I didn’t mean to tease.”

“Maybe.” Rachelle sounded less than convinced. “Why do you have to go to Texas? It’s so far away, so dangerous. I’ve heard there are fearsome savages roaming loose there.” Her slender fingers clutched his arm. “What if something were to happen to you?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. I’m a grown man and more than capable of taking care of myself. I’ve heard the tales of wild Indians are vastly exaggerated. After the ravages of the War Between the States, Texas is just lobbying for as much Federal assistance as they can get. Claiming Indian trouble is a way to get more money out of the governmental coffers.

“I have to go to Texas to settle my father’s estate. Remember I told you when I turn twenty-five I’ll inherit half of the Rocking A Ranch? My sister, Christina will inherit the other half when she turns twenty-one. I’m going to collect her from the convent she’s been living in and take her with me to the ranch. Our stepfather has been managing it for us. I have to go look it over and decide what’s to be done with it.”

Horror dawned in Rachelle’s eyes. “You don’t intend to keep it and live there, do you?”

“No. No, of course not.” The words came easily to Christopher’s lips, but some part of him, the child who remembered his early years growing up in the wild beauty of Texas, longed to cry, yes. Yes, the Rocking A was his home, where else would he live?

He forced the thought away. The Rocking A hadn't been his home for more than sixteen years. He hadn't even been back since he was eight years old. Despite having been born on a Texas cattle ranch, he knew himself ill equipped for life on the edge of the frontier. The city of St. Louis was his home now, and in the future.

"Don't worry, Rachelle. I'll be back in September." He pulled her up and into his arms. Her tiny frame seemed to disappear in his embrace. With her mouth in motion, he often forgot her small stature. He grinned at the thought.

She tilted her head back to look up at him and twisted her body as if trying to make it fit against his. "Promise?"

"I promise."

I promise. The words echoed in his mind and the images faded. He tossed on the bed.

"I PROMISE." Apollo's hoarse whisper broke the night silence.

KC wondered what Apollo had promised to make him so restless.

Outside, the night lay still and dark. A lantern, the wick turned low, cast a small circle of

light around them. Apollo's fever raged, his body either burning or shaking. All through the evening KC sat and listened to him ramble. Who were Rachelle and Christina? Wife? Sweetheart? Mother? He mumbled, his words unclear, the meanings lost in his delirium.

She'd heard of the Rocking A, a big spread north of Peaceful, but she'd never been there or met anyone from there. What connection did he have with the place? Should she send a letter there? No. She'd wait to see if he recovered. She'd lived too long with people who didn't want anyone to know who or where they were to easily reveal a man's location without his knowledge.

Sweat beaded on Apollo's face and chest as his fever finally broke. The tension of fighting infection drained out of him, and he fell into peaceful sleep. Wringing out a water-soaked rag, KC bathed his lax body. Though gaunt, his body was still impressive. When he woke, he would be a force to be reckoned with. What kind of patient would he be? Irritable, snapping at those who tried to help him, or cheerful and grateful?

She ran the cloth around his neck and across the firm muscles of his chest. A strange quiver started deep in her belly. She yanked her hand away.

She'd been close to men on numerous occasions. They didn't affect her. After her years as

Eli's assistant, male anatomy held no mysteries. Because the men they treated thought her a boy, they hid nothing. Other than a feeling of disgust, their bodies left her unmoved.

The tingling Apollo inspired, scared her. Made her unsure. She didn't care for the feeling.

Gripping the cloth tighter, she moved it down over the hard plane of his belly, then lower, following the faint arrow of blond hair below his navel. She knew every inch of this man's body, having cared for all his personal needs for more than a month. He had no secrets from her.

Still, she hesitated. With the breaking of his fever, something changed. No longer just a patient needing her help, unconscious and unaware, now Apollo was a man, asleep, but capable of waking at any moment. Her hand on his groin felt like an invasion. Damp, warm and surprisingly soft, the hair there curled around her fingers.

The cloth slipped from her fingers. Her breath caught in her throat. She touched him gently. His skin felt like the muzzle of a horse, smooth and delicate, yet strong and resilient. Bolder now, she stroked his length, then gasped as it hardened beneath her touch. It drew her gaze. Pale against the tan of her skin, his erection throbbed in her hand.

A man's erection wasn't something she'd never seen. Odd as it seemed to her, many men in pain had erections. Then there was her time in the Comanche camp. The Indian warrior she was

slave to thought nothing of having sex with his wife, despite her presence. KC refused to think about what she saw during the Indian attack on her home and family.

This was different from either. His heat burned her palm. Pagan and primitive, his unknowing response to her touch made her feel dizzy. Power surged through her. It didn't frighten her, as she knew it should. Instead, it left her longing for something she couldn't name. It wasn't dirty or ugly, rather as natural and beautiful as an eagle in flight.

"Rachelle?" Apollo let out a low moan.

Horried, KC snatched her hand away. Heat burned in her cheeks as she covered his torso with the sheet and scrubbed her palm against her thigh. Humiliation washed over her. Though he didn't know, KC felt like she'd raped him.

Chapter 4

CHRISTOPHER Goodwin regained consciousness with a groan. Sand coated his tongue. Gritty glue held his eyes closed. A thousand drums beat a dozen different rhythms between his ears and the aches in his body were too numerous to catalogue.

Dead. He had to be dead. No one could hurt this bad and still be alive. Uncle Jack always told him he was headed for Hell. Judging by the way he felt, it appeared he'd made it. Just what did Hell look like? Curiosity made him pry one eye open. Surprise opened the other.

The boy hovering over him had hair red enough to put a dance hall girl's dress to shame.

"So you've finally decided to rejoin the land of the living." Low and musical the boy's voice held a note of laughter. His eyes, the color of summer grass glinted with amusement. "You had us worried for awhile there. Even after your fever broke you just wouldn't wake up. Eli said you'd come around when you were ready. I just didn't figure it would take so long." The boy rambled on.

Christopher found himself following the lilting quality of the sound rather than the meaning

of the words until.

“...Guess you’d like something to drink and a bite to eat.”

“Water.” The word grated past his lips.

The boy slipped a slim hand around the back of Christopher’s neck and raised his head to meet the cup of water. Cool and sweet as nectar, the liquid slid easily down his throat, rinsing away the sand. He gulped it eagerly. It dribbled out the corners of his mouth and down his chin. Too soon, the cup was empty. He licked at the drops beading on his parched lips.

“More,” he croaked.

“Easy.” The boy lowered Christopher back onto the pillow and refilled the cup. Again, he lifted Christopher’s head. Slower now, Christopher sipped the water, grateful for the boy’s hand on his neck supporting him. “Not too much, your stomach won’t hold it. Rest now. In a bit I’ll bring you some food. You need to build your strength.”

Christopher settled back against the bed. His eyes burned from the effort of keeping them open. He focused on the lad. Smooth-cheeked, tall and thin, the boy was young, probably less than 15, with finely drawn features better suited to a girl. His clothing consisted of coarse, rough woven baggy trousers, a long-sleeved, white cotton shirt and a heavy leather vest. At first

glance, other than his definitely red hair and girlish features, the boy was unremarkable, just another of the many young cowhands populating the frontier. Since arriving in Texas, Christopher had seen this boy or one like him at every corner. Barely men, they headed west to escape lives of poverty and hopelessness. Still, this lad was different; something about him caught and held Christopher's interest in a way the others never had.

Questions hammered in Christopher's mind. He couldn't close his eyes. He needed answers. What had happened? Where was he? Where was Christina? What had happened to her?

"Christina!" He surged up from the bed. He grabbed the boy's wrist in an iron grip. Fear lent him strength until fiery pain streaked through him and he fell back, gasping, his body soaked in sweat.

Hands pressed him down. "You damned fool idiot! If you've pulled open your wound, I'll feed you to the buzzards myself. Lay still."

No thought of argument occurred to Christopher. No thoughts at all occurred to him as waves of pain washed over him, tossing him to and fro in a red tinged sea of agony. Harsh groans echoed in his ears.

KC HELD him down until she was sure he wouldn't attempt to rise again. She sank into the chair next to the bed, her gaze never leaving him. A sheen of sweat glistened on his body, his face even whiter than the sheet covering him. His lashes, dark brown despite his blond coloring, lay against his pale cheeks, giving him a vulnerable, little boy look, until she took in the square, stubborn line of his whisker-shadowed jaw. This was no little boy. This was a man. One badly injured and in pain, but no less a man. Somehow, while caring for him KC lost sight of that fact. The feel of his fingers locked around her arm reminded her forcefully that Apollo was no less dangerous than an injured wolf. No matter she had saved his life and nursed him, he was an unknown quantity. In Peaceful, what you didn't know could kill you.

Still, she couldn't stop herself from brushing back the lock of hair falling across his forehead. She trailed her hand down his cheek. The rough stubble of his beard scraped her fingertips. His beard like his lashes was a couple of shades darker than his hair. Ragged, it lent him an air of menace that hadn't been present when she'd found him clean-shaven.

“Is he awake yet?”

KC jumped, jerking back her hand. She'd been so lost in her perusal of the man she hadn't heard Eli enter the room. Her lack of attention bothered her. In order to survive a person couldn't afford to be distracted. She turned to greet the older man. “He was for a few minutes. Drank two cups of water. Then he got upset and tried to get up. Passed out, from the pain, I guess. He called some women's name. Christina. Think that was the woman he rode into town with, the one the drifter snatched out from under Rico's nose?”

KC grinned at the thought of Rico's anger. Anything that upset the slimy little rat was great with her. She'd patched up a few of the whores after he and his men were through with them. Shortly after he chased the man and woman out of town Rico had returned in a rage. They'd slipped away.

Eli moved her aside. “Let me take a look at him, make sure he didn't break open his wound.” Efficiently, Eli handled Apollo's large frame, turning the man on his side and peeling back the bandage. “Good. No bleeding. See how the flesh is knitting, no more infection or drainage.” Gesturing KC closer Eli continued the lessons in healing he'd been giving her for the last six years.

She nodded her understanding. Everything she knew about doctoring she'd learned from Eli. Young though she was already the people in Peaceful sought her out for her skills when Eli was unavailable, sometimes even when he was. Of course, the fact they thought her male helped.

Eli continued his inventory of Apollo's injuries. "Ribs have healed nicely, though I wouldn't advise any strenuous activity for at least another month." He laughed dryly. "Not that he's likely to be up to chopping wood or mucking stalls for quite a bit."

KC picked up Apollo's hand and turned it palm up. "Don't think he has much experience in that line." Though large and well made, the palms of Apollo's hands were smooth and uncalledoused. "A gunfighter?"

After a quick glance, Eli shook his head. "No powder burns. Besides what kind of gunfighter would turn his back on Rico?"

"A stupid one." She laughed and laid Apollo's hand on his chest. "I wonder just what his story is," she mused.

Straightening Eli tucked the sheet over Apollo. Rather like a father might tuck in a sleeping child KC thought.

“If he’s a mind to he’ll be telling us himself before too long. It’ll be awhile before he’s up and around and even longer until he’s a hundred percent, but he’s going to live.”

“I’m glad,” she whispered. A quick flush of heat had KC ducking her head as she felt Eli’s sharp gaze on her.

“Don’t get too attached to the man,” he warned. “Judging by his fancy clothes I’d guess he’s some kind of gambler. His kind never stick around in one place too long.”

“And the woman, Christina?”

Eli shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. If Rico couldn’t find her, I don’t think he will either. Let him sleep for bit then wake him up and get some food into him.”

ANOTHER WEEK passed before Christopher became fully aware of the world around him. Until that point all he had were vague impressions of a redheaded devil who tormented him without mercy. Who forced water into him until he thought his bladder would burst, and poked and prodded him when all he wanted to do was sink into oblivion, away from the pain throbbing in his body. He remembered a low husky voice urging him to eat and small capable hands

bracing his head as rich meaty broths found their way into his mouth.

He opened his eyes and stared around the room, taking it in for the first time. Small and cramped, with rough-hewn plank walls and the earthy smell of hay and horse filling it, the room was obviously part of some kind of barn. The bed he lay on took up most of the floor space, the only other furniture a straight-backed chair, a battered washstand and a scarred bureau. Though cluttered the room was clean and neat. Clothing hung from pegs on the walls along with tack; all of it well cared for. His gaze settled on the chair and he frowned. The image of a boy with red hair formed in his mind. Who was the boy? Where was he? The questions started. Christopher stirred restlessly as he ticked them off one by one.

Where was he? What had happened? Why did he feel like a horse and carriage had run him down? Who had been caring for him? And how long had he been ill?

He struggled to rise. His left arm lay against his bare chest, a cloth sling holding it there. Using his right arm Christopher levered himself up and braced his back on the wall behind the bed. The effort left him weak and dizzy. Sweat beaded on his body. He shivered as it dried in the warm air. For a moment he rested, eyes closed. Then he swallowed and forced them open. He would not pass out again. Despite the pain, he was awake now and he intended to stay that

way.

Starting from the bottom up he did an inventory of himself. He'd been injured. He pushed the details aside, before he could deal with the how, he needed to know how bad those injuries were. Logically, without emotion, he catalogued his body parts. Toes wiggled, his legs shifted beneath the thin sheet covering him. Only a vague stiffness, as if his body had forgotten how to move, greeted his actions. His hips ached and his chest felt like a tight band bound it. Neither, though uncomfortable, was incapacitating. He turned his head to look at his bound arm. Sharp, piercing pain speared him. A groan slipped through his lips. Black blobs threatened his vision. Gritting his teeth, he blinked them away, holding tight to consciousness. When the pain settled to a dull pounding behind his temples, he again turned his attention to his arm.

It lay in the sling, limp and flaccid. Try as he might he couldn't make his hand move. With his right hand, he touched his fingers. He could feel as he bent the fingers into a fist but he could not flex them open again.

A cold calm came over him. The same kind of calm he often got in court when a case seemed to be turning against him. He let it take him. Now was not the time to panic.

He moved his right hand up his left arm, searching. The arm was unbandaged except for the

sling. At the top of his shoulder, he felt the edges of a piece of cloth. Shifting he twisted to move his hand over his shoulder. He pressed into the wall and he collapsed with a hoarse cry.

His injury, whatever it might be, was definitely to his back. He lay panting, waiting for the pain to subside. His head rested against the wall at an awkward angle to his body. Biting his lip, he willed the pain away. He would not faint.

“You danged fool!”

At the sound of the boy’s voice Christopher turned his head toward the door. The movement caused the black blobs to return. With a groan, he let his eyes close.

Firm hands eased him down. “I swear, you ain’t got the sense the good Lord gave a three-legged, one-eyed jackrabbit. Whatever possessed you to try and sit up?”

Christopher listened to the boy’s smooth, rough tones, wondering at the uneven quality of his grammar. At turns all Texas twang and proper English, the mix was unusual and appealing. Christopher wanted the boy to speak again, but the only sound in the small room was the rustle of cloth. A hand touched Christopher’s forehead, brushing away a lock of hair. A whiff of sage drifted past him mingling with the stronger odors of leather, hay and horses.

“There now, don’t go trying to get up again. You’re healing nicely, but if you tear yourself

open Eli will skin you alive.” The boy chuckled softly. “He don’t like it much when his patients up and die on him.” The boy straightened. “Feel up to something to eat?”

Suddenly food seemed like the most important thing. Christopher’s stomach gave a loud grumble.

The boy laughed. “Guess that answers my question. I’ll get you something.”

Questions. Christopher opened his eyes. “Wait.”

At the door the boy turned back. “It’ll only be a minute.”

“Who are you? What happened? Where am I?” The questions tumbled out of Christopher one after another. With his good arm, he levered himself up ignoring the sharp stabs of pain. He needed answers.

“Damned fool, stubborn idiot!” The boy swore and came back to the bed. “Lay down!”

Defeated by the anger in the boy’s voice and his own weakness Christopher complied.

Like an avenging fury, the boy stood over him, hands on his hips, red hair a flaming halo around his face. His green eyes narrowed cat-like as he looked down. “You listen up. I’m going to bring you something to eat. You’re going to eat it. Then and only then will we get to questions and answers. You damned near died.” As if he’d run out of steam the boy’s voice

softened. “Be patient.” He turned and walked to the door. “And be good,” he added as he disappeared through the opening.

A smile crossed Christopher’s lips. Such a fierce little doctor. Little, Christopher’s grin widened, the boy was five foot seven if he was an inch. So why then did he seem tiny to Christopher?

STUBBORN, FOOL of a man. KC banged around the room added to the back of the barn that she and Eli used as a kitchen. Anger made her movements sharp and jerky. Milk splattered across the table, a knife clattered to the floor. Short, expressive curses flowed out of her clenched teeth. What was wrong with her? The man was awake, finally, after months of illness. He would live. Wasn’t that what she’d worked so hard to accomplish? She’d achieved her goal. Why did his simple questions make her wish him unconscious again?

Awake, Apollo was even more appealing. Animated, the strong lines of his features made her stomach flutter alarmingly. The tiny crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the grooves around his mobile mouth were definitely from smiling. After just a few minutes in his company,

he'd flashed that smile at her more than once. KC decided the man must smile naturally, he hadn't seemed to even be aware of it. Or her reaction to it.

With a sigh, KC assembled a light meal for Apollo...for the man. She couldn't keep calling him Apollo. He had a name of his own, a life of his own, beyond the confines of the small barn room. Probably as soon as she answered his questions and he was capable of sitting a horse he'd ride out of Peaceful and her life. Why did the thought leave her feeling let down? He was nothing to her, just a burden of work and care. Eli would be glad when the man was gone. He'd get his bed back. At his age, whatever that might be, Eli needed a bed to sleep in, not a stall. He'd earned it.

Willie wandered into the kitchen. "Whatcha doing?"

The bruises marking his thin face and body were all but faded. Even some of the shadows had drained from his eyes. How resilient the young were. In the short time he'd been with them, Willie had made himself a home. Unlike KC, he didn't seem to dwell on the past or worry about the future. He lived in the present content with a warm, dry place to sleep and food to keep his belly full. Speaking of food, KC noticed Willie was eyeing the tray she'd prepared for Apollo. She'd seen that look before. Food disappeared into Willie at an alarming rate.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, trying but not succeeding in hiding her grin.

“Yes, Sir,” came Willie’s eager response.

“Well help yourself to dinner.”

“Thank you, Sir. First I gotta take Doc his bag.”

Try as she might KC couldn’t convince Willie he needn’t call her sir. The fact the boy thought her male bothered her more than it should have. Even Eli referred to her as “he” or “boy.”

“What’s Eli need his bag for?” she asked.

Willie laughed. “Slick’s got a boil that needs lancing.”

KC added a napkin to the tray and asked, “What’s funny about a boil?”

“It’s not the boil that’s funny, it’s where he’s got it.”

It must be in a particularly uncomfortable place for Willie to find it funny. The two hadn’t taken to each other at all. Willie remembered exactly what Slick had had in mind for him and apparently resented it. He went out of his way to irritate the older man every chance he got.

“Run along now. Wouldn’t want Slick to suffer any longer than necessary, would we.”

Color rushed up under Willie’s skin and he ducked his head. KC could hear him strangle

another laugh.

“Course not.” With that he darted out of the room. Laughter echoed behind him.

Lifting the tray, KC headed back to Apollo’s room.

He lay like she’d left him, stretched out on the too small bed, his knees slightly bent to keep his feet from hanging over the edge. His hair tangled around his head and brushed his bare shoulders, giving him a wild, untamed look. Her fingers itched to smooth it off his face. All sleek, muscled flesh he reminded KC of a big, tawny cat lazing in the sun. Over the days and weeks, she’d touched that body repeatedly, intimately. She’d come to think of it as belonging to her. She knew that was over now. No longer could she comb his hair, stroke his cheek or massage the tight muscles of his arms and legs. The sense of loss she felt lay like a heavy lump in her throat. For a short time, she’d been totally responsible for another person’s well being. He’d been hers. Now that he was awake, he’d again be his own man.

She set the tray on the chair, reached out, and touched his good arm. The skin felt firm and warm, the fine hairs there crisp beneath her fingers. A tingle seemed to spread upward through her arm, across her chest and settle deep in her belly. Startled, she jerked her hand back.

“Wake up.” Her voice sounded over-loud and harsh in the quiet. “Are you hungry?” She

softened her tone.

His eyes opened and comprehension slowly dawned. He studied her for long moments, moving from her roughly chopped red hair over her face and down her figure. Heat rose under her skin, probably staining it as red as her hair. Fair skinned, she couldn't seem to keep from blushing. The whores in town took special delight in the fact, forever brushing up against her and teasing her verbally. Wouldn't they be surprised if she took them up on some of their offers? Amusement caused her lips to twitch.

"Hungry enough to eat a grizzly bear." Apollo shifted, then grimaced in pain. "But I think you'll have to wrestle it for me." He smiled up at her.

KC felt her heart melt. Whoever or whatever this man might be, one thing was certain, he was a charmer. One she'd have to take great care around. "No grizzly bear, just some poached eggs and toast." At his groan of disgust she smiled and added, "you'll have to start small, you haven't had anything solid for a long time. You're stomach's not ready for grizzly, quite yet."

He struggled to push himself into a sitting position. Automatically she slipped her arm around his back to assist him. With a grateful sigh, he leaned into her. The action brought her chest up against his good arm. Even through the thick cotton of her shirt and the heavy leather

vest she always wore, the contact made her breasts prickle, her nipples pucker.

She looked at him. He never noticed, his attention was focused on sitting up and bracing himself against the wall. A flicker of disappointment rushed through her before she pushed it away. It was best all the way around if she remained a boy.

“How’s our patient feeling?”

CHRISTOPHER looked up at the sound of the deep raspy voice. Surprise had him holding the fork half way to his mouth, the runny egg yolk dripping unheeded onto his chest. The man’s voice didn’t match his appearance. Thin to the point of gauntness, shoulders rounded under an unseen weight, the man looked to Christopher like death revisited. Lank dark hair liberally streaked with gray lay on a head that was devoid of flesh, merely skin laid over bone, cadaverous and without color. Sunken cheeks and non-existent lips were nearly hidden behind his large, hawk-like nose. Only his black glittering eyes revealed the life force living in the man’s emaciated body. That and the warm smile curving his lips.

“Cat got your tongue, boy?” the man asked. “Finish your food, then I’ll have a look see.”

The fork dropped to the plate. Here was someone who could answer his questions. The boy...where was he? Christopher looked around but the boy seemed to have vanished. Anger at his situation lent Christopher strength. He scowled at the older man and demanded, "Who are you?"

The man chuckled, the sound surprisingly rich and mellow. "I guess introductions are in order. Name's Eli Hosea. The boy here..." Eli looked around then frowned and shook his head. "He's a shy one. Name's KC O'Connor. Helps around the stable and with the doctoring."

"You're a doctor?" Christopher couldn't help his skeptical tone. The man looked more as if he needed the services of a physician rather than being one. The man gave a hacking cough, reinforcing Christopher's thoughts.

"Been a doctor since before you gave up your mother's tit and probably a bit longer than that. KC's my assistant; he'll make a fine physician someday. After we dug the slug out of your back, he did all of the caring for you. The fact that you're still alive is due to his stubborn nature. You were in kissing distance of the hereafter, but he just wouldn't give up on you. Next time he wanders in here you might want to express your gratitude."

Christopher could hear a note of reprimand in the old man's voice, though what he'd done to

deserve it he wasn't quite sure. The man's way of talking, half down home country and half big city elite rang a bell in Christopher's mind. Now he knew where the boy came by it. "You both have my gratitude."

"Good. Now how 'bout your name. KC hung the name Apollo on you." Eli grimaced. "Don't know that you want to keep it."

"Good Lord, no! Apollo? Why Apollo?"

"KC has rather a fanciful way of thinking. Your blond hair and blue eyes put him in mind of some of the pictures in a book he has on Greek mythology. If you don't want it to stick I suggest you give us another to call you by."

Christopher couldn't help but notice the man's phrasing, as if he was saying, "You don't have to tell us your real name." For a moment, Christopher considered giving an alias. Then he discarded the notion. If these people had planned to harm him, they'd had more than enough opportunity. They deserved the truth. Besides there were things he needed to do that he couldn't do under an alias.

"Name's Christopher Goodwin." He put out his good arm. After only the briefest of hesitations, Eli clasped his hand. The man's grip was firm, but his fingers felt like fragile twigs

in Christopher's grasp.

"Pleased to meet you."

Warmth flowed through Christopher. He felt as if he'd passed some kind of test successfully to have this strange old man consent to call him friend.

"Get busy with that there food, before it gets cold. Nothing worse in my book than cold, runny eggs. I'll just set here a spell and rest my bones. When you're done I'll see what I can do about answering some of those questions I see crowding you brain." Eli settled himself on the chair. Christopher turned his attention to the quickly cooling food, realizing that he was hungry.

KC STOOD outside the door eavesdropping unashamedly. She wanted, no, she needed to know about Apollo. But she found herself suddenly uneasy in his presence. Thoughts of how she'd touched him so intimately kept forming in her mind every time she looked at him. Flashes of heat kept coming and going under her skin, making her shift in discomfort.

"...He'll make a fine physician someday." She flushed at Eli's unexpected praise. In all the years she'd known him he rarely complimented her. The most she'd ever expected for a job well

done was a quick nod of approval. She didn't begrudge Eli his quiet ways, for he never yelled or berated her. Though he'd cared for her needs she knew he considered her free of any obligation to stay with him. That he'd saved her life seemed unimportant to him. It meant everything to her. She not only owed him, she respected him and though loath to admit to it, she loved him.

There was the clatter of dishes then Eli said, "Why don't you tell me everything you can remember about what happened to you and I'll pick up from when KC found you."

After a moment of silence Christopher started. "Though I was born in Texas, I've been living in St. Louis for the last sixteen years. I came back to settle my father's estate, The Rocking A Ranch. He died many years ago, but the ranch has been in trust for my sister and me until we came of age. My stepfather, John Anderson, has been managing it for us."

KC could hear the underlying rage in Christopher's voice as he spit out his stepfather's name, almost as if it were an obscene word.

"My sister, Christina, has been living in a convent."

His sister. A feeling of unexpected relief washed over KC. But who was Rachelle?

"...When we got to the Rocking A Christina overheard Anderson saying he had no intention of turning the ranch over to us. Instead of confronting Anderson with the knowledge I let

Christina convince me to leave and get outside help. I should have stayed, instead of running away.” Guilt laced his voice.

“Nope. You probably did the right thing,” Eli said. “You might have chosen a better place to hide out than Peaceful, but confronting Anderson would have been foolish. I’ve heard of the man, he’s developed quite a reputation in these parts. I don’t think anyone remembers the Rocking A isn’t truly his. Besides, I hear tell he’s got a bunch of gunslingers on his payroll to make sure no one remembers. Just what kind of plans did he have for you and your sister? I don’t suppose he figured you just up and let him have the ranch?”

“I was going to have a fatal accident. Poor, helpless city boy who just couldn’t take care of himself.” Self-disgust dripped from Christopher’s words.

Poor? Judging by his clothes, KC didn’t think so. And helpless? Not likely, she’d bathed him too often and massaged the bed kinks out of his muscles too many times. Untrained maybe, but helpless, never.

“And your sister?” Eli asked. “What did he intend to do about her?”

KC could almost see Christopher’s shrug. “I guess he thought twelve years in a convent would make her biddable. He planned to force her to marry him. When she conveniently died,

he'd have total control of the ranch. He was wrong. Christina is anything but compliant. She was terrified Anderson would succeed in having me killed." He laughed without humor. "He almost did and he didn't even have to try."

"Don't take it too hard boy. Rico's a mean one."

"And he has Christina. Is she all right? How bad did he hurt her? Where is she? I have to see her."

Eli hesitated. "She isn't here. Rico doesn't have her. Some gunslinger snatched her out from under Rico's nose."

"What!"

"Settle down boy. This all happened over two months ago."

"Who? Why?"

"Lay down and I'll tell you all I know. Same day you rode in so did the stranger."

"What's his name?"

"Don't know, he didn't say. Said he was looking for Rico and his bunch. Struck me as odd."

"Why?"

“Didn’t look much like Rico’s sort. Not shifty-eyed or mean enough. Took good care of that ugly horse of his.”

KC stepped into the room. “Man’s name is Gallagher.”

Eli shot her a sharp look. “How do you know that?”

She told them about the half-breed. With each word, Apollo’s...no Christopher’s, she reminded herself, face grew paler.

“Oh my God, Christina. Have you notified the law?”

KC snorted. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? There is no law in Peaceful or anywhere near here. The closest thing we got is a six-shooter,” she patted the gun strapped to her hip, “and these.” She lifted her hands and curled her fingers into fists.

“But...”

“Closest law would be up in Ramblin,” Eli said.

Christopher pushed himself up against the wall, grimacing. “Then send someone to contact the state Marshall.”

KC softened a bit at the look of pain and worry on his face. “Sorry, Mister. That’s a far piece. Besides there ain’t nobody in this town that’ll go anywhere near the law.”

Christopher looked hard at Eli. “Not even you, Doctor?”

A deep ragged cough kept Eli from answering, but the guilt in his eyes was all the answer Christopher needed. Even the healer in this God-forsaken hellhole had a reason to hide. He looked over at the lad. So young, what could he possibly have done to be on the run from the law?

The boy put his arm around Eli. “You’ve been over doing it again. You need to rest. Go take your medicine and lie down for a bit. I’ll take care of our guest.”

Pale and sweating from his bout of coughing, Eli nodded and rose. He started to speak to Christopher, but the words were torn away by another hacking cough.

“Go on now,” KC gave him a gentle push toward the door. She stood and watched until Eli disappeared, then she turned back to Christopher. “Don’t you ever speak to Eli like that again.” Clipped and cold, each word sliced into him like ice. “Without him you’d be nothing but bones bleaching in the sun.”

The boy was right. Still, Christina was out there somewhere, alone and helpless. He had to find her and if that meant insulting the man who’d saved his life, so be it.

“And you, Boy, are you afraid of the law?”

“No.” The answer came in icy tones. “I haven’t done anything they’d be interested in and neither has Eli.” The last was spoken heatedly as if the boy were trying to convince himself as well as Christopher.

“Maybe so, but the Doctor didn’t seem too eager to leave Peaceful.”

“Eli is ill. Traveling takes too much out of him.”

“I understand, but I have to find Christina. She’s such a fragile little thing, hardly more than a child. The thought of her in some outlaw’s hands...” Christopher’s words trailed off. He felt so helpless, useless, weak as a babe, unable to even summon the strength to get out of bed. He closed his eyes. Once more he’d failed to protect one in his care.

KC TOUCHED Christopher’s hand lightly. His eyes opened. The look of love mixed with worry and guilt softened KC’s anger. “At least Rico doesn’t have her.”

“What’s the difference? One outlaw or another?”

“Obviously you don’t know Rico.”

Christopher shifted on the bed and grimaced. “Well enough.”

“I talked to a few people in town.” KC didn’t mention she’d mostly talked to the whores. They were the best source of information about the men that came through Peaceful. “This Gallagher fellow doesn’t have much of reputation. In fact nobody seems to know anything about him.”

“Not much comfort in that. He could be an axe murder.”

KC shook her head. “I just saw him for a second when he rode out of town chased by Rico, but I don’t think so.” KC didn’t put it into words for Christopher, but something about the way Gallagher had seemed to shelter Christina with his body led KC to think he’d been protecting her. What she did say was, “I met the man who came looking for Gallagher.”

“Probably a bounty hunter.”

“No, more like a concerned friend.”

“So, I suppose even outlaws have friends.”

“He seemed a decent man to me.” KC remembered the half-breed’s gentle warning. If his friend Gallagher’s heart was half as good, Christopher’s sister was safe. Or at least as safe as any woman could be with a man, KC amended.

Christopher moved again and groaned.

KC pressed him down, surprised at the strength with which he resisted. “Lie down. There’s nothing you can do right now. Rest. I’ll check around town and see if there’s anyone willing to get word to the law.” KC silenced his protests with that promise.

With a sigh he relaxed and let his eyes close. “Thanks, KC, you’re a good boy.”

KC felt as if something hard and cold had pierced her chest at his softly spoken words. Boy. She was starting to hate that word.

Chapter 5

BY THE TIME Christopher made it back to the narrow bed, sweat soaked his shirt, his heart beat a rapid tattoo, and his breath came in short, ragged gasps. Will power alone kept him upright. Who would have thought a short trip to the outhouse would be more than he could handle? Gratefully, he sank onto the bed and leaned against the wall, careful not to put any pressure on his wound. He'd thought he was stronger, but right now he didn't have the energy left to swat a fly.

He groaned in despair. He was better. Only his recovery was taking too long. Each day he lay around was one more day of who knew what horrors for Christina. He had to get out of Peaceful and find her. But how?

Though the boy had tried, KC had been unable to locate anyone in town willing to go to Ramblin, the nearest town boasting a sheriff. KC promised to go as soon as Eli recovered. Shortly after their first meeting, the old man had collapsed. Nothing Christopher had promised or threatened had shaken KC's resolve. The boy refused to leave until Eli was back on his feet.

When he'd woken up Christopher had decided to go to Ramblin himself, even if he had to steal a horse to do so. What difference would it make? Near as he could determine, all the horses in Peaceful were already stolen. It only took a trip to the privy to prove he was going nowhere.

He slumped down. A groan escaped him as he jarred his shoulder. Each day the pain eased a fraction. Still any sudden movement caused a wave of nausea to wash over him. His left arm hung at his side, useless. Gritting his teeth against the agony that resulted Christopher worked the arm, manipulating it with his right hand and massaged it. He'd been doing the same every day. Just the day before he'd been rewarded when the little finger on his left hand twitched during the exercise. Though it wasn't much, it gave him hope he wasn't going to end up a cripple. Once KC had walked in when he was exercising. He hadn't said anything except to offer a few suggestions to improve the exercises and a caution not to overdo.

A knock sounded. Christopher looked up at the open door. KC stood in the opening; a large bundle filled his arms. He shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Pulling himself up Christopher smiled. Whenever KC was around Christopher found himself unable to dwell on his problems. The boy had a way of making him smile even when

things looked hopeless. “Come on in. What’s that?”

Color flooded KC’s face. “These are yours.”

KC placed the bundle on the bed next to Christopher and took a step back.

“Christina’s books.” Christopher pulled a dog-eared copy of Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities” out of the bundle. Holding the book gave Christopher a strange pang. He’d sent it to her for her sixteenth birthday. The inscription on the flyleaf read, *To Christina, although we’re far apart I’ll always be here for you. Love, your brother, Christopher.*

He gripped the book tightly, but didn’t look at the others. All bore similar inscriptions either from himself or Uncle Jack. She’d kept every book, even insisting on taking them with her when they’d fled from the Rocking A.

Why, Christopher asked himself again, why had he and Uncle Jack left Christina alone in that harsh convent for so many years with only books for company? Would it have inconvenienced them so much to include a lonely young girl in their lives?

“I thought you might like to have them,” KC interrupted Christopher’s thoughts.

“Thank you. I do.” He stroked the soft leather of the book.

KC stood near. His short hair curled in tight wet ringlets around his head. Moisture trickled

down the side of his smooth cheeks and throat to disappear beneath his collar. His shirt stuck to his arms and his chest above his ever-present vest, telling Christopher he'd just come from bathing or from swimming. The smell of water, cool and fresh in the dry dusty barn air tickled Christopher's nose along with the subtle scent of sage that always seemed to surround the boy. Christopher breathed deeply enjoying the fragrance until a prickle of unease started inside him.

"I'm afraid nothing else is left. Whatever Rico and his bunch didn't take Slick helped himself to. The room was picked clean. When you're up and around, if you see anything that belonged to you or your sister let me know and I'll see what I can do to get it back. Don't...ah...don't..." KC stumbled over his next words. "Don't try and take it back yourself," he warned.

The laugh that came out of Christopher had little to do with humor. "Right now I'm just about helpless. A one-armed idiot who got himself shot in the back and lost his sister to some outlaw. Don't worry I won't make the same error twice, I learn from my mistakes." The whinny note of self-pity in his voice made Christopher cringe. Anger replaced the self-pity when KC tipped back his head and laughed.

"What's so funny, boy?"

“You. I came in here to offer some sympathy, but I can see you don’t need it, you’re feeling sorry enough for yourself without my help.” KC’s laughter echoed low and throaty in the small room until even Christopher’s lips started to twitch. He had been feeling low. Finally, he chuckled in response. The boy did have a way of bringing out the best in him.

“Thank you again for the books. Christina will appreciate getting them back.” Christopher reached out and touched KC’s hand in gratitude.

“Well, yeah, I suppose so.” KC jerked his hand away and ducked his head, a rush of color staining his pale cheeks. “I just thought you should have them. Everyone should have something to remember their loved ones by.”

That Christina may never return remained unspoken between them. Still, Christopher could tell there was more to KC’s actions. Did KC have anything to remember a lost loved one by? Christopher doubted it. Self-pity was forgotten in a rush of compassion for this young boy trapped in a hostile world with little chance of escape. The heavy gun strapped low on KC’s lean hip gave a good indication of how he’d end his life.

Christopher patted the bed with his good hand. “Come and sit with me for awhile. It gets pretty boring being cooped up in here all the time.”

Cautiously, KC perched on the end of the bed. “You should have said something sooner, Eli’s got plenty of books you could read. Some near as nice as your sister’s, though most are just medical books. I’ve read them, but I don’t suppose you’d be interested.”

“You can read?” Christopher couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice. Though when he thought about it, why shouldn’t he read? Eli was obviously an educated man and KC was his protegee.

KC snorted in disgust, his back ramrod straight.

“Sorry,” Christopher apologized. “Did Eli teach you?”

“No, Mama did. She died. A long time ago.”

The soft, wistful note in KC’s voice tugged at Christopher’s heart. “I miss my mother too.” The words slipped out before he could stop them. Now it was his turn to color. He busied himself sorting through Christina’s books until KC put his hand on his arm.

The warmth Christopher felt at KC’s light touch startled him. He looked up and froze. KC’s eyes shimmered, wide and green. Tears trembled unshed on sooty lashes. The urge to gather the boy close and hold him made Christopher go cold. The things he’d learned about himself since coming west had shaken Christopher’s self-confidence badly, but his attraction to

KC horrified him.

Over the years in his Uncle's household, Christopher thought he'd become accustomed to his Uncle's occasional, discrete gentleman friends. Nothing was ever said or done that Christopher had been able to point to and say, "yes, Uncle Jack prefers men to women." Still it seemed that he'd always known from the very early days. That was why although Uncle Jack bore affection for Christina he'd never suggested bringing her to St. Louis to live with them. Uncle Jack's household was strictly male.

Had living with a man who preferred men over women warped him somehow? Christopher had never thought so before. He'd always looked on tolerantly, keeping his uncle's secret, secure in his own sexuality. Through the years, Christopher had his share of relationships with women, all of them eminently satisfying. Never before had he been drawn to another man or boy. Why now? Why this boy?

"Apol...Christopher," KC amended. "Are you all right?" Concerned, KC put her hand on Christopher's forehead. He'd gone suddenly pale.

He shook it off. "I'm fine. I just need to rest."

* * *

KC FELT the chill in his tone. She nodded and rose, biting her lip to keep from asking what she'd done to deserve it. Only a moment before he'd been warm and caring. She'd looked into his eyes, the clear blue of a morning sky and felt like their souls had touched. He'd known her, looked beyond her short-cropped hair and boy clothes and seen the woman's heart beneath. His gentleness and talk of missing his mother almost released the tears she never allowed herself to shed. She stiffened. She would never cry. Crying didn't help. It hadn't helped Mama. None of Mama's tears of grief or pain had helped. Only the strong survived and the strong never cried.

At the door she said, "Tomorrow Willie and I are taking the wagon into Ramblin. Eli's feeling better and we need some supplies. While I'm there I'll talk to the sheriff for you and send off any letters you care to write."

"I appreciate it."

KC left without another word.

RAMBLIN, Texas dozed in the mid-afternoon sun. Though further north than Peaceful, the fact that the calendar read September didn't mean much. The sun beat down hot as any day in high summer. Smart people kept to the slightly cooler confines of the town's buildings. Still, the street wasn't entirely empty. Three rough looking men and a young woman stood in front of the general mercantile. KC could hear raised voices but couldn't make out any words.

Her booted feet rang hollowly on the wooden boardwalk running the length of the main street. Outside the sheriff's office a man leaned back in his chair against the building, his hat tipped over his eyes, his hands folded across an ample belly. KC could just see the shiny star pinned to his vest. Occasionally a hoarse snore broke the quiet. Three dusty horses lined the hitching rail in front of the tavern, their noses practically touching the ground, their tails swishing idly at the flies buzzing around them. Doors and windows stood open to catch any stray breeze. Music and muted laughter drifted out of the tavern. As KC walked past, the smell of stale tobacco and cheap whiskey made her nose wrinkle in disgust. Even in this so-called civilized town the stink was the same.

Willie hugged KC side. Having grown up in a small settlement the relative bustle of Ramblin left him nervous. His gaze darted from one thing to another.

“Relax, Willie. Ramblin isn’t much different than Peaceful.” Having voiced the lie KC bit her lip. Ramblin was as different from Peaceful as she was from Apollo. It had been a long time since she’d been in a normal town, where people lived by and within the law, where not all of the women were whores and the men made their living by means other than their use of a gun. The sight of women dressed in respectable clothing left KC feeling out of place, her short cropped hair, trousers and the gun strapped to her hip foreign instead of normal. Lost in thought she jostled the young woman who now stood alone on the boardwalk. The woman’s reticule dropped from her hand.

KC bent to pick it up and hand it back. “Cuse me Miss,” she apologized.

The first thing KC noticed was the girl’s tearstained face; the next, the bruise decorating her cheek. “You all right, Miss?” she asked in concern.

The girl turned swollen eyes on the young man standing in front of her. A hiccuping sob slipped through her lips. She shook her head as she accepted her bag from KC. “I’m fine,” she stuttered, tears sliding down her face.

All KC's instincts went on alert. She turned to look at the three men just entering the tavern. They were responsible for the girl's tears. "Did those men hurt you? Do you want me to get the sheriff?"

"No!" the girl wailed and clutched KC's arm. "No, they're my brothers." She sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"Here." KC dug a clean handkerchief out of her back pocket and shoved it in the girl's hand. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, truly I am. My brothers are just upset with me. Thank you for your kindness and concern. I'm fine," she repeated. With that she lifted her skirts and hurried into the store. Just inside the door she turned and looked back at KC. Despite the heat of the day, KC felt a chill at the calculating look in the girl's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Willie asked.

KC shook her head. "I'm not real sure." She shrugged. "But I guess it don't matter. Come on. Let's get our wagon and head on home. I sent the wire to the army. Now we'll just wait and see."

They'd come into town for supplies and to send the wire about Willie's family. Nothing had

come of the letter KC had sent. Normally Eli came into Ramblin a couple of times a year to pick up supplies unavailable in Peaceful. He ordered his medical supplies through Ramblin. But lately Eli's cough had been acting up. He hadn't had the strength to argue over KC's coming.

She'd even worked up the courage to talk to the sheriff about the man who had Apollo's sister. But while expressing concern over Christina's fate Sheriff Burack didn't know anything about a man named Gallagher. There didn't seem to be a wanted poster on the man, though the sheriff admitted he didn't always get all posters. Judging by the messy stack of papers lying around the sheriff's office, KC thought the poster was probably buried amongst them. He promised to check further and wanted to know where to reach KC. Unwilling to name Peaceful as her home, KC put the sheriff off, saying she'd stop back in soon.

Through a couple of carefully worded questions KC was able to determine John Anderson still held sway over the Rocking A Ranch and Rico and his bunch hadn't been seen in the area for months. Both facts seemed to please Sheriff Burack. KC didn't think Apo...Christopher, she had to start thinking of him by his real name, would find the sheriff of Ramblin much help in his quest to locate his sister.

Just as she was about to climb onto the wagon seat, the sound of shouting and of boots

hitting the boardwalk hard made KC turn.

“Look out!” Willie yelled.

In the second, before a fist drove into her midsection KC took in the scene. Three men rushed toward her, their faces twisted in anger. Behind them stood the young woman KC had talked to earlier. Her expression flickered between fear and triumph. Last came the sheriff, shaken from his nap he looked thoroughly confused at the commotion erupting around him. If KC had more time she might have seen the humor in the situation as the plump little sheriff tried to untangle himself from the chair which had collapsed under him.

She didn't have the time. She bent over, the air knocked from her body, gasping for breath. She knew as soon as she started breathing again she'd feel the pain. Before she could recover and react to the first blow, two of the men grabbed her arms. She struggled to shake them off. With a gasp, air flooded back into her lungs. She coughed and choked, fighting the urge to vomit.

“Worthless Irish scum!”

KC blinked and tried to focus on the man in front of her. Pain made her vision fuzzy.

“What?” she managed to choke out.

“Don’t ya back talk me, boy. And don’t ya go passing out, my brothers and me got business with you.” The man grabbed KC by the vest and pulled her close. If the punch in the stomach hadn’t been enough to make her pass out, she’d be danged if she’d let his whiskey rank breath do it.

Sheriff Burack came huffing up. “Now see here Harold, you and your brothers can’t go accosting people on the street.”

The man on KC’s right answered, “We ain’t accosting, Sheriff, this here’s family business. Right Lonny?” he asked the man on KC’s left.

Lonny snickered. “Right, Davey boy.”

The smells assailing KC from all sides nearly finished off what Harold had started. Gritting her teeth, she took a deep breath.

“Sheriff, I don’t know these men...” she started.

Harold let go of KC and took a step back. “He don’t know us, Sheriff, but he knows Emmy real good. Come here gal and tell the Sheriff what you done told me.” He reached out and dragged the girl forward.

The girl looked uncertain, triumph was gone from her face, and now only fear remained,

tears threatened.

KC stared at the girl in confusion. Know the girl? She'd only spoken to her briefly.

Emmy stared back for a moment, then straightened. Anger sparked in her eyes damping down on the fear. "You hit him! You promised you wouldn't hurt him if I told you. You lied to me." With each word, Emmy emphasized her growing anger by poking her finger at Harold's chest.

The large man blustered for a moment, backing away until he teetered at the edge of the boardwalk. "Aw, Emmy. We didn't hurt him none," he soothed. "Did we boys?"

Lonny and Davey released KC's arms. "Naw. Just kinda a welcome to the family," Lonny said. When they tried to straighten her clothing KC brushed their hands away. The pain in her stomach settled to a dull throb, the urge to vomit subsided and though her breathing was still a bit uneven, her vision was clear.

She took a step toward Emmy. "Do you mind telling me just what you told these men?"

Emmy hesitated. For a second KC thought the girl would bolt in panic. Then her lashes fluttered and she moved to KC's side, putting her arm through KC's. A terrible unease began in KC's stomach, worse than the ache that remained.

“There’s no need to hide it anymore, darling.” She drawled the word. “I’ve told my brothers everything.”

Emmy’s giggle told KC just what it was that Emmy had led her brothers to believe.

“Don’t worry, once we’re married the boys will be your brothers too. And Baker’s don’t hurt family.”

“Married!” KC practically shouted the word. She yanked herself loose from Emmy and backed away. “I can’t marry you!” The look in Harold’s, Lonny’s and Davey’s eyes told her one way or another they were determined to make Emmy a blushing bride. “Sheriff.” KC looked at the man.

Sheriff Burack just grinned. “Like Harold said, this is family business.”

Was the girl mad? KC’s mind ran in circles. Of all the possible problems she’d imagined running into, being on the wrong end of a shotgun in a “shotgun wedding” had not been one of them. How did she tell the truth? And if she did, how safe would she be from little Emmy’s brothers? Somehow, looking at them, KC thought she might be safer as the man who jilted their sister, than as a woman who made them look foolish.

“Why me? You don’t even know me, my name?”

Emmy bowed her head, managing to look properly demure and chastened. Her voice when she answered was small and shy, as if embarrassed. “We didn’t exchange names, but we got to know each other real well at the Fourth of July celebration. You can’t have forgotten already.” Her voice broke on a choked sob. KC could only stare in awe at the girl’s acting ability.

“I never...I don’t know...” KC stuttered.

“Oh-h,” the girl wailed and threw herself into Harold’s arms sobbing. Her words though muffled came through clearly to KC. “Harold, you’ve got to make him marry me, in six months I’m going to have a baby.”

A baby! KC about fainted. She backed quickly away, her hand resting on the butt of her gun, where it had been since Lonny and Davey had let her go. “Willie,” she called.

“Yes, Sir.” He popped up at her side, shotgun in hand.

KC grabbed the gun. “Get in the wagon Willie, we’re leaving.”

With a growl of anger Harold pushed Emmy away and started toward KC. Until KC lowered the barrel of the shotgun, then he stopped. “Always knew you Irish were a no good bunch, running out on a pregnant woman. Well, keep an eye on your back Mister, ‘cause your gonna marry Emmy here, give that baby yar name ‘n then my brothers ‘n me are gonna hang ya

from the nearest tree.”

KC climbed backwards into the wagon, holding the shotgun on the three men. “Emmy,” she said to the girl who stood with her mouth open. “You’d better get busy and tell your brothers the truth, whatever it might be, real soon, or I’m going to have to kill them.”

The sheriff sputtered. “Now see hear young man, you can’t go around threatening to kill people. This is a law-abiding town...”

“Shut up Sheriff. These men just threatened to hang me. There’s no law against self-defense. That baby ain’t mine. It isn’t possible.” KC laughed. “You have no idea just how impossible it is. I’m going now. If the Baker boys here can leave it at that, good, otherwise...” she motioned with the gun, then nodded at Willie. “Let’s go.”

The wagon moved out of town at a brisk pace. KC never took her eyes off the four men and one woman standing on the boardwalk. Even after the town disappeared from view, she kept alert. There was little doubt in her mind that they’d come after her. Maybe she should have told them the truth. The thought flickered in KC’s mind, only to be banished quickly. Truth or not the Baker boys would be after her, if not for one thing then another. And if they caught her, she’d rather be Emmy’s reluctant bridegroom and hung than be used by them. KC had seen their

like too many times, ignorant and clannish, to hold out any hope they'd just forget her. The question was whether she could manage to get away from them or whether she'd have to kill them.

"Those men going to come after you, KC?" Willie asked after awhile.

"I'm afraid so."

"You gonna kill them?"

"I sure hope I don't have to."

"Well, if'n you do, I'll help." Willie's voice shook with repressed rage; he gripped the wagon reins with white-knuckled fists.

KC looked over at Willie in surprise. Never in all the time since Willie had been with her had he ever expressed any anger or emotion. He hadn't cried for his family or even mentioned them unless pressed. Only in his sleep did he let down his guard and his feelings came out in his nightmares. Now his eyes sparked and two patches of red stood out like flags on his pale cheeks. A bruise swelled on one cheek where either Lonny or Davey had cuffed him aside when he'd tried to come to her defense. She reached out to touch it gently, then pulled back knowing he wouldn't appreciate the gesture. He really was quite a self-contained little boy.

“That baby ain’t yours,” Willie said.

“How do you know?” KC asked softly taking the reins from Willie’s hands.

A bit of tension eased out of the boy. He shrugged his shoulders. “You said it wasn’t and you don’t lie,” he answered simply, refusing to add more.

Guilt ate at KC. She’d known Willie had elected her his hero, but she hadn’t realized just how much the boy idolized her. What would his reaction be if he ever found out just how big a lie KC lived? “Everybody lies sometimes.”

Willie shook his head stubbornly. “You don’t.”

KC studied the boy next to her, though still young, already the makings of the man he would be were clearly drawn in the rigid set of Willie’s shoulders and the stubborn tilt of his head.

At that moment, he reminded her of Brendan. Even at five, Brendan had a stubborn streak and a temper that would have done her red hair proud, though his was jet black. Her mouth softened in memory. He’d be only a few years older than Willie, if he was still alive. KC hadn’t seen him for nearly eight years, when Winter Hawk had torn him screaming from her arms and given him to another Comanche warrior. During her years with the Comanche she’d had occasional word of the boy, Tuwikaa?, the Raven as he was called. But since she’d been with

Eli, she'd heard nothing of him. KC had little doubt Brendan, having been adopted into a Comanche family at such a young age, remembered nothing of his white life. If she ever did find him, he'd probably hate her as a white-eyes as she should hate him as a Comanche. She persisted in her search. He was the only true family left to her. Until she knew for sure that he was dead, she couldn't give up.

Chapter 6

EACH DAY THAT passed Christopher could feel his strength returning. The first few days he considered successful when he managed to make it to and from the privy unassisted. By the end of the week, he'd done a full tour of the barn. Being out of that small, stuffy room felt wonderful. Eli warned him not to venture out until he was fully recovered and then never to go unarmed.

Large and well maintained for such a seedy little town, the barn had ten stalls, five on each side with a wide center aisle. Eli's horses occupied four of the stalls, the other six he rented out. Christopher was surprised to find that more often than not, the stalls were filled and when the barn filled up, there were always the paddocks. The outlaws and riffraff passing through Peaceful might not care for the law or themselves, but they took care of their horses.

When he mentioned his amazement to Eli, the older man laughed and said, "You take good care of an animal that might be the only thing standing between you being hung or scalped."

Today the barn stood nearly empty, only three of Eli's animals in residence, an old,

swaybacked dun mare, a large palomino mare and a blood bay stallion. Except for the dun mare, Christopher couldn't fault Eli's choice of horseflesh. The palomino stood fifteen hands high with a deep chest, long legs and intelligent eyes. He'd introduced himself to the mare with an apple and a few gentle strokes. Now when he passed she nickered to him in greeting. Good natured and even tempered she possessed her share of spirit and demanded her treat before allowing him any liberties.

The stallion was not so easily won over. Though also a good fifteen hands high, he appeared smaller than the mare due to his more elegant lines. The Arabian blood flowing through his veins was more than evident in the shape of his head and the arch of his neck. Christopher guessed that like the mare he must have some racing blood to account for his long legs and probably a touch of mustang. Whenever Christopher approached the stallion pawed the ground, tossed his head and retreated to the far end of the stall. No amount of coaxing or offered treats interested this haughty gentleman. He snorted and flicked his tail as if insulted.

As Christopher passed the dun stuck her head over the stall door and whinnied hopefully at the smell of the apples he carried. Much smaller than the bay or the palomino, the dun was of the compact variety of animal Christopher knew Texas cowhands seemed to prefer. For himself

the dun would never do. He laughed at the thought. As tall as he was his feet would trail on the ground if he ever mounted an animal that small.

Christopher stopped. "All right little lady I suppose I can spare one for you, especially since his majesty doesn't seem to be interested."

Eagerly, the dun seized the apple Christopher offered. Her soft muzzle tickled his hand. When the apple disappeared, she butted him with her head. Idly he scratched behind her ears. He used his left hand. Though stiff and awkward at times, he was pleased he'd regained its mobility. Everyday he exercised the arm, forcing it a little further each time.

The dun practically purred in contentment. She leaned her head against his chest, eyes closed.

"Wonder why Eli keeps you, old girl? You've got to be way past your prime."

"He keeps her because she's got him out of more scrapes than he can count."

KC's voice made Christopher start. The boy moved like a shadow. He came up on the other side of the dun and stroked the animal's muzzle. With a nicker of welcome, the dun swung her head toward KC.

"Two-timer," Christopher whispered, oddly betrayed by the old mare's desertion.

“Smokey here is a loyal friend. Eli doesn’t abandon his friends when they outlive their usefulness. She’s earned her oats and hay.”

Christopher accepted the reprimand without comment. He offered Smokey another apple. She pulled her head from KC’s hands.

KC laughed. “Go on you greedy old thing. Have you met the rest of the crew?” she asked and walked over to the palomino’s stall. The palomino whinnied and nudged KC over the stall door then turned toward Christopher. “I see you’ve made a friend.” Another apple disappeared. “This is Sultan’s Lady. She’s seven years old and as good a mount as any man could want. Come spring she’ll give me a beautiful foal, won’t you pretty lady.” KC crooned to the mare.

Christopher found himself mesmerized by the husky sound of KC’s voice and the sight of his hands stroking the mare’s golden hide. A shudder ran through him. He moved away, his steps jerky and awkward. “And who’s the proud young prince over there?” he asked. With an effort, he shoved his reaction to KC deep inside himself.

KC whistled softly. The stallion that had been snorting and stomping since KC entered the barn let out a shrill squeal. His hooves thudded against the side of the stall. Before Christopher could react, KC was up and over the stall door and out of sight.

The stallion squealed again. Christopher saw a flash of hoof as the stallion reared. He landed. Dust clouded the air.

Christopher's heart pounded, an iced chill shot through him. "KC," he yelled and rushed toward the now quiet stall.

His hand was on the latch when KC's voice stopped him. "I wouldn't come in. Sultan doesn't like men." Dwarfed by the animal KC stood unharmed, his arms draped over the horse's neck. Sultan twisted his head and nibbled on KC's vest. One dark eye gazed balefully at Christopher.

The ice in Christopher's blood melted and soaked through his shirt. He sagged in relief.

"This young fella is Sultan. I'm afraid he's not quite as well behaved as Lady." She tweaked his ear. "He's rather a naughty boy with a lot of bad habits, but he's strong, intelligent and he knows what to do with a mare. Don't you boy? He and Lady are the start of my horse ranch. Someday O'Connor horses will be known far and wide. People will..." KC broke off.

She couldn't believe she'd told him her dream. Not even Eli knew for sure what she planned for her future, though he'd probably guessed. What was it about this golden-haired giant that broke through all the barriers she'd erected over the years? All he had to do was look

at her and the words spilled out like grain from a torn bag. She turned her face into Sultan's mane and breathed in his clean horsy scent.

"Why don't you come out of there now?"

The note of nervousness in Christopher's voice surprised her. He was actually worried Sultan would hurt her. The thought made her feel funny inside. No one other than Eli had worried about her for a long time.

"KC, do you want I should brush old Danny here before I turn him out in the paddock?" Willie led the fourth member of Eli's herd into the barn. Though far from pretty, with his shaggy, dirty brown coat and mule-like head, Danny was strong, steady and sure. The gelding could pull a heavier load than his compact size indicated. Nothing upset his calm demeanor, except the feel of a saddle on his back. At the first touch of leather, he'd buck until he either collapsed or he managed to lose the saddle. Anyone wanting to ride Danny did it bareback or not at all.

KC leaned over the stall door. "Take him down to the creek and wash him down. He deserves it. He worked hard hauling that heavy load. We'll unload the wagon later."

With a nod, Willie led the lathered horse out of the barn. During the trip home, KC had

pushed the animal hard, making the journey in less than two days when it usually took more than three. The thought of the Baker brothers on their trail kept her tense and edgy. Not so much for herself, she was confident she could handle the brothers. Still if it came to trouble, she didn't want Willie caught in the crossfire.

Put out at being ignored, Sultan nudged her in the back with his head. The air whooshed out of her as she was squeezed between the stall door and Sultan's hard head. She let out a startled cry. The panic on Christopher's face caught her attention. Before she could regain her breath and assure him she was okay, she found herself lifted over the door and held in his arms. Sultan snorted, his head lunged outward teeth bared. KC's head spun as Christopher pulled her away. Off balance, they went down in a heap. KC found herself stretched out on top of Christopher, his hands still gripping her upper arms. His fingers bit so hard she knew there'd be bruises.

"Are you crazy?" She scrambled to her feet, shaking off his hands. Her breath came in erratic pants, more from the strange feelings the contact with his hard body aroused in her, than Sultan's blow.

Christopher didn't answer. He lay on the stable floor. Moisture beaded his suddenly pale face. "You're welcome," he muttered.

Concerned, she knelt next to him. “Christopher, are you all right? No, don’t try and get up yet.” She ran her hands over his chest and down his weak arm.

With a low growl, he pushed her hands away. “I’m fine. You don’t weigh enough to damage even me.” He struggled up to a sitting position. Color surged back under his skin. “Quit fussing. I didn’t bust anything new.”

KC sat back on her heels and looked him over. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. Covered with dust, an unknown smudge gracing one cheek and straw decorating his hair, Christopher looked like a petulant, grubby little boy. She reached out and plucked a piece of straw from his hair.

“There was no need you know,” KC said softly. “Sultan would never hurt me.”

“Maybe not deliberately, but a young stallion is never safe. How old is he anyway?”

“Four years. You’re wrong. I’m as safe with Sultan as I am with you.”

“What makes you think you’re safe with me?”

KC smothered the smile his sulky tone caused. No man liked to think he was safe. Their egos were such fragile things. Unlike their bodies. She shrugged her shoulders. “Instinct. Besides I raised Sultan from the day he was born. I’m not sure who his father was, but his

mother was an Arabian mare. A wild stallion must have stolen her. Apparently, she couldn't keep up with the herd when her time came and for some reason they couldn't wait for her. I found her in labor and helped deliver Sultan. Something went wrong. I couldn't save her."

KC stopped speaking for a minute. Though it had been nearly four years, the memory of the beautiful mare dying in her hands was as fresh as yesterday.

Warmth covered her hand. She blinked and saw Christopher's hand on hers. "I'm sure you did your best."

Heat traveled up her arm along with a tingle that settled disturbingly in the pit of her stomach. Twisting slightly KC escaped from Christopher's touch, but the feeling remained.

"It wasn't good enough."

"No, sometimes it isn't."

KC got the feeling he was no longer talking about a dead mare.

Sultan whinnied and stretched his neck over the door trying to reach the apples that lay scattered on the ground where they'd fallen.

Rising to his feet Christopher held out his hand to KC. "Come on, I think we both need to get cleaned up."

KC ignored his hand and scrambled up. She also ignored the frown that crossed his features at her obvious aversion to touching him. She picked up an apple and fed it to the complaining stallion. “You go ahead. I want to check in with Eli.”

“Last time I looked he was sleeping. He’s back on his feet, but still needs a lot of rest.” Christopher hesitated. “He’s consumptive, isn’t he?” At KC’s brief nod he asked, “How long does he have?”

“Not long.” She walked away unable to say more.

KC knew Eli was dying, though he’d tried hard to hide the knowledge from her. Over the years, he’d trained her too well. Now it was a secret they kept from each other. His, that he was dying. Her’s, that she knew. Yet, both knew the truth. None of the medicines or treatments did more than ease Eli’s symptoms for short periods of time.

The sympathy in Christopher’s voice made her long to throw herself into his arms and weep. The thought bought a brief smile to her lips. Wouldn’t he be shocked if KC, the boy, burrowed into his arms? What would he think if he knew the truth? She shivered a bit in wonder and temptation. Never before had she felt the urge to reveal herself to any man. Why now? Why him? She forced herself not to look back, to walk away, and to ignore what her heart whispered

to her.

CHRISTOPHER WATCHED KC disappear into Eli's room. Once back on his feet Christopher insisted Eli return to his own bed. A stall filled with clean, fragrant hay had proved quite comfortable.

The slump of KC's shoulders bothered Christopher. What would happen to the boy and his dream when Eli died? When the tenuous protection Eli offered was gone, the human vultures inhabiting Peaceful were sure to close in on KC. Christopher could sense KC's soft inner core despite his hard as nails surface. He straightened. What was it to him, he had his own concerns to deal with. Time had proven him little use as someone's protector. Then why did he have this overwhelming urge to take on the job of watching over a singularly independent young man?

Sultan snorted, spraying him with moisture.

Wiping the grime from his cheek, Christopher picked up an apple and offered it to the stallion. With another snort, Sultan tossed his head and whirled around presenting Christopher with his raised tail. What he did next Christopher didn't stick around to watch.

Rubbing his arm, he wandered toward the stable door facing the street. The loaded wagon sat in the building's shade guarded by Dead Eye Charlie. Though the last few weeks had seen little traffic through Peaceful Christopher knew the guard was necessary. Things had a way of disappearing if unwatched. He headed toward the old man.

Of an indeterminate age, far past fifty yet somewhere this side of the grave, Dead Eye struck Christopher as an unlikely sort of outlaw. His fingers gnarled with age, Dead Eye's nickname came from the dirty patch he wore over one eye rather than any claim to accuracy with a gun.

Every time he told the story of how he lost the eye it changed. One time he claimed a bear clawed it out, the next he lost it to an Apache arrow. He spent his time in Peaceful earning his keep by spinning tales to amuse those passing through. A story for a meal or a drink, sometimes a coin.

Though he had what he called "a healthy aversion to work," while KC was gone to Ramblin and Eli recovered from his bout of sickness, he'd come every day to feed and water the animals. Though still recovering himself Christopher worked along with the old man listening in fascination as he spun his yarns.

Across the street, four horses stood tied to the hitching post in front of the cantina. Laughter

and music from Slick's piano drifted out. Christopher grimaced at the tinny out of tune sound.

"Afternoon, Goodwin."

"Dead Eye."

Dead Eye straightened and came over by Christopher in the doorway. "Ya ain't thinking of goin' to Slick's for a drink, now are ya?"

"If I was?" He wasn't, but looking out across the dusty street, Christopher felt that if he didn't break loose soon he'd explode. Locked inside the haven of the barn by Eli's concern and his own weakness, Christopher knew the time was rapidly approaching when he'd have to face the world. He flexed his left hand and folded the fingers into a tight fist. There were things he had to do.

"Wouldn't recommend it none. That thar's a mean bunch. Mean as Rico's, though thar's not quite as many of them. Brody, the head honcho, he keeps getting angry and shooting them. Short tempered cuss. Must be his Irish blood. If'n yar wise, yu'll steer clear."

"Sounds like good advise."

Dead Eye nodded. "Knew right off ya were a smart young fella."

"Let's get this wagon unloaded."

Rubbing his shoulder Dead Eye backed away. “Well now, I don’t know. Did I ever tell ya about the time I wrasseled a gator down in Louisiana? He bit down on my arm here and damned near tore it off. Only quick thinking on my part saved the day. Had me some of them thar hot chili peppers in my pocket. When that old gator opened his mouth for another bite I shoved those peppers down that critter’s throat. It was a sight I tell ya. He stopped a biting on me, and started a chokin’ and a coughin’. His breath was hot as blazes, near singed my eyebrows and his eyes rolled back in his head. I swear his green hide turned red just afore he jumped back in the bayou and hightailed it out of thar.”

Christopher worked while Dead Eye rambled on. By the time he finished recounting his tale, the wagon was empty. Christopher mopped his face with his sleeve. Though late and the shadows were lengthening, the afternoon heat still held the day in its grip. His body ached, his muscles protesting the unaccustomed activity. Still, the feeling was not unpleasant. Pleased, he straightened the kinks from his back with a satisfied sigh. Dead Eye lounged against the building, silent now.

All of Peaceful seemed to doze.

A high-pitched, feminine scream of pain and terror shattered the silence.

“No!” She screamed again. “Don’t!”

Christopher froze, the sound echoed in his mind and memory. Christina.

Even Dead Eye reacted to the sound, his gaze zeroing in on the window of the room above the cantina. “Brody,” he muttered.

Again, the woman screamed; the sound cut suddenly short.

“Give me your gun.” Christopher held out his hand to Dead Eye.

“Don’t be foolish boy.” He pulled out his gun and handed it to Christopher as he spoke. “Ya know how to use that thar gun?”

A curt nod was Christopher’s only answer as he checked the gun’s chambers. Though he found the use of guns as a way to solve a problem distasteful, Christopher was no fool. Uncle Jack may have preferred men to women, but he believed that every man should know how to protect himself.

Holding the gun by his side Christopher headed toward the now quiet cantina. Even the tinny piano music had ceased.

KC STARTED at the sound of the scream. A thin film of sweat broke out over her body. She forced herself to relax. Screams weren't unusual in Peaceful, though the feminine variety were more rare.

She smoothed the clean sheets over Eli and sat next to the bed. Sleeping now, he labored to breathe, racked by bouts of hacking coughs. Splotches of blood stained the bedding. He was little better than when she'd left for Ramblin. His skin, thin and dry as ancient parchment, stretched taut over his bones. Two hectic patches of red colored his sallow cheeks. The medicine did little for him now, barely easing the cough so he could sleep.

KC rose and stretched. The darkening of the room told her evening was drawing near. Willie hadn't returned yet with Danny and the wagon still needed to be unloaded. Her stomach rumbled reminding her supper was long overdue.

The second scream made her forget. Worried, she headed toward the street. Her step hastened at the sound of the last choked scream. She exited the stable just in time to see Christopher disappear into the cantina.

Pushing past the grinning Dead Eye she reached under the wagon seat and pulled out her shotgun. With quick, efficient motions she checked the chambers and started across the street.

Dead Eye kept pace beside her, his short steps two to each of her long strides. “Don’t worry none, Boy. He’s got my gun.”

“Damn fool.” KC wasn’t sure if she cursed the old man or Christopher. She’d pulled one bullet out of his stubborn hide already. Did the man have a death wish?

“You heard me Boy? He’s got my gun.”

“Maybe, but does he know how to use it?”

The cantina swallowed her up before Dead Eye could answer. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim light after the glare in the street. Three men sat at a table playing cards, seemingly unconcerned. KC knew them all by sight, petty thieves that ran with Brody. By themselves they were mostly just troublesome, with Brody at their head they could be dangerous. Still, they didn’t look interested in what was happening around them.

A crash came from above, followed by a grunt and the sound of weeping. No one moved.

The piano player huddled over the keyboard, waiting. Slick leaned against the bar. He motioned toward the stairs with his head.

One foot on the bottom step KC turned and lifted the shotgun. The men at the table stiffened but didn't move.

"That's right fellas just finish your game." One man's hand hovered over his gun. KC swung the shotgun in his direction. "I wouldn't if I were you. I'm pretty good with a gun and with a shotgun at this range I can't miss."

"Y'all listen to him. He may be just a boy, but I've seen him shoot," Slick said.

Watching them, KC climbed the stairs. The door to the room at the top stood open, a rectangle of light in the dimness. Not wanting to distract Christopher she moved quietly to the opening and peered in.

Brody lay sprawled on the floor. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and one eye was starting to blacken. At the far end of the room, Christopher knelt in front of a woman. KC could hear him speaking in low, gentle tones, but couldn't make out the words.

The woman cowered on the floor. Dressed in only a torn chemise, her body folded in on itself, her knees drawn up to her chest, her head buried in her arms. She wept softly, her hair a wild tangle around her.

KC skirted Brody's unconscious body and stood behind Christopher. Closer now she

recognized Carmelita.

“You’re safe now Carmelita.”

At the sound of KC’s voice Carmelita raised her head. KC caught her breath in horror. Carmelita’s pleasant features had been reduced to a bloody mess, her eyes blackened, her nose smashed, her lips swollen and split. Bruises covered her arms and throat.

Carmelita let out a choked cry and flung herself into KC’s arms, sobbing. Instinctively KC embraced the girl, holding her close with one arm. The shotgun hung loose by her side. Next to her, Christopher rose to his feet with a low growl. He held himself taut and tucked Dead Eye’s gun in his waistband. KC could feel the rage churning inside him. His eyes darkened to a midnight blue. A muscle in his cheek twitched and the column of his throat stood out in high relief. Everything about him had shifted from the gentle warmth of a hearth fire to the scorching heat of an inferno. Here was the dark, dangerous man KC had sensed lurked inside the golden god.

KC’s anger echoed his. Carmelita might be a whore, but Brody had gone too far. KC had always known the man was cruel. She’d seen it in the way he treated his horses. She’d warned the whores about him, Carmelita especially, knowing her attraction to the glitter of gold and to

handsome men. As usual, thinking KC an untried boy, the whores had ignored him. And now Carmelita had paid the price.

Shifting her hold on the sobbing Carmelita KC waited to see what Christopher would do next. Suddenly he was an unknown quantity, like a big cat, no longer tame and safe. She waited for him to pounce. Why she was nervous of his actions, she wasn't quite sure. She had no reason to fear him; she'd done nothing to stir his ire.

Christopher nudged Brody with his foot. Brody groaned and blinked. With even features and a nicely formed body, the man wasn't unattractive, but he had a cruel twist to his mouth even when smiling and his eyes were cold.

He put a hand to his head. "What'cha hit me for?"

KC didn't trust the whinny, conciliatory note in Brody's voice. As he looked up at Christopher, she could see him measuring the distance to his gun belt hanging over the bedpost.

"Get dressed and get out of town."

"What for, I paid the bitch." Brody staggered to his feet. One hand rubbed his jaw; the other gripped the bedpost to pull himself up.

KC saw the glint in his eye a second before his fingers closed around the butt of his gun and

pulled it free.

Shoving Carmelita away KC fumbled to raise the shotgun into firing position. Christopher's body blocked her shot. "Look out," she cried.

The next was a blur. Two shots rang out. The window behind KC shattered. Christopher dropped to a crouch his arm extended. Brody tumbled backward slamming into the wall and sliding down. The gun fell from his hand with a thunk. Red slowly blossomed over the middle of his chest.

He looked down at his chest then up at Christopher. "You've killed me, you bastard. Over a whore."

Christopher straightened and let the gun drop to his side. He could see the confusion in the man's eyes. Brody didn't understand and now he never would. Christopher felt no satisfaction at killing the man.

Brody coughed raggedly. "I know who you are. You're that Easterner Rico thought he killed." He laughed, then choked. "Who'd of thought I'd die at the hands of a dead man."

Christopher crouched next to Brody and gripped his arm. "You know Rico? Where is he?"

Brody wiped away the blood trickling out his nose. "Don't know where he is. But even if

ya do find him won't do ya no good." He gasped and shuddered.

"Tell me."

"Rico caught up with your pretty little sister. After he took care of the fella that snatched her he and his bunch..." he broke off coughing. His eyes took on a glazed look and drifted shut.

"What?" Christopher shook Brody.

He blinked and stared at Christopher without comprehension. Then for a moment his eyes cleared. His lips twisted in a mocking smile. He gasped out the rest. "She's dead. When they were done with her she was dead. Had a piece of that sweet flesh myself before she was gone. The buzzards got what was left."

A cold, icy calm settled over Christopher. He'd always known Christina was dead, but he'd prayed she hadn't suffered. The image of Carmelita's face and the echo of her screams shattered that hope. His fingers bit into Brody's arm. The man was past feeling any pain, his eyes staring sightlessly in death.

Silence fell over the room, the only sound Carmelita's muffled weeping.

KC watched Christopher warily, unsure what he would do next. The creak of saddle leather and a horse's whinny drew her gaze to the window. Outside, Brody's three sometime partners

mounted up and rode away. Apparently, they had no interest in coming to their friend's assistance. When KC turned back, Christopher was gone. A few minutes later she saw him exit below, cross the street and vanish into the barn.

After settling Carmelita into bed and cleaning her up, KC went through Brody's clothing. There wasn't much, a handful of coins, a pouch of tobacco, a deck of cards and a piece of jerky. She pocketed the coins and lifted his gun belt off the bedpost. Holstering his gun she stepped over his body and left the room. Slick was welcome to the rest of the man's belongings as payment for the broken window and burying him.

At the bar KC ordered a shot and downed it in one gulp. The raw whiskey burned its way down her throat. She choked on the unaccustomed fiery brew. Warmth settled in her belly. It helped thaw the ice in her blood from the look in Christopher's eyes when he heard how his sister died.

No one should die like that. Brody's words awakened deeply buried memories in KC's mind. Memories she struggled hard to avoid. Memories of her mother screaming as the Indians attacked and killed her father. Her mother crying out in pain as they pinned her to the ground with a lance through her shoulder and took turns raping her. Memories of fire and blood, of pain

and fear.

She took another shot of whiskey. This time it went down smoothly, her throat already numb, and blurred the edges of the sharp images in her mind. She tossed a coin at Slick and said, "Send for one of the other whores Carmelita lives with. She's badly beat up and she's going to need some help. I'll send over some laudanum to help her sleep." She tossed a few more coins on the bar. "Let her stay in the room for a few days. You might want to get rid of Brody's body before it starts to draw flies."

"You kill 'em KC?" the piano player asked.

"Nope."

Outside Dead Eye stood next to Brody's horse, a large pinto gelding. Must be a new animal, KC observed. Its ribs didn't show and its belly lacked the spur marks Brody was prone to inflicting on his animals.

"Brody dead?" Dead Eye asked.

"Yep."

Dead Eye untied the horse and followed KC as she headed toward the stable. "Guess Mr. Goodwin just got himself a horse."

Chapter 7

THE WARRIORS LIMPED back into camp after dark. No cries of welcome greeted them. One warrior slid off his horse and slipped into his tepee. Red Buffalo could hear a woman's soft murmurs as she tended to her man's injuries.

The uninjured sought out their homes, fading into the twilight, seeking to hide from their shame.

Red Buffalo rode through the quiet camp. Across his pony's back lay Smiling Fox's cold body. It gave Red Buffalo no ease to know he'd risked his life to retrieve his fallen friend nor would it comfort Smiling Fox's widow. The blame for his friend's death was his. Flush with his previous successes he'd disregarded the bad omens and led his warriors to death and dishonor. In front of the tepee Red Buffalo dismounted and pulled Smiling Fox's body into his arms. He scratched for admittance.

A shrill wail of grief greeted his entrance. Gently he placed Smiling Fox's body on the bed robes and left the tepee without speaking. Summer Moon would not wish to hear his words of

Smiling Fox's bravery yet.

No one greeted him as he walked on through the camp. He ignored the twitching of the tepee flaps and the eyes that followed him, some hard with anger, others soft with sympathy. Neither mattered to him.

Camp dogs whined as he passed, pulling at their tethers. Dry grass crunched beneath his moccasins. The smell of wood smoke and the coming winter filled the crisp fall air. Wisps of smoke drifted from the tops of the tepees to disappear into the bare-branched trees.

He moved through the village, a dark wraith dressed only in breechclout and moccasins. Blood, both his own and Smiling Fox's, caked his chest. The chill night air touched the wound dissecting his chest from left shoulder to right hip laying bare both muscle and bone. Pain did not slow his step. It was nothing to the agony clawing deep inside him. Razor sharp talons ripped at him, giving him no peace, draining away his puha. His power. Even the blood flowing from his body carried a cursed taint, sickly red-brown.

Behind him the village faded into the mist. Ahead glowed a blood-red light drawing him near.

Only once before in his life had Red Buffalo approached the powerful shaman, He Who

Sees. Then he had come to seek his power. Now he came to regain it.

A small fire burned in front of the isolated tepee. He Who Sees sat cross-legged between the fire and the tepee. Ancient even when Red Buffalo's father had been a young man, He Who Sees' puha came not from his body but from the powerful spirits.

Red Buffalo approached the shaman with more fear than he would a regiment of armed horse soldiers. They could only kill his body. He Who Sees could kill his soul.

"Come." He Who Sees beckoned Red Buffalo closer. "Come into the light. My eyes do not see so clearly anymore. Come closer and sit, my son."

Red Buffalo seated himself across the fire. Its flickering light cast dancing shadows of He Who Sees on the tepee behind him. Red Buffalo shivered at the dark and dangerous images that seemed to foretell his destiny, if only he had the knowledge to decipher them.

"Why do you seek me out?"

"I seek your assistance, oh great one. My medicine has deserted me. I would regain it."

"You know the way of it. Why come to me? I am but an old man. What do you wish of me?"

Red Buffalo cringed at He Who Sees' tone. It no longer welcomed, it denied. *Be gone,*

annoying pup. Do not bother me, it seemed to say. He longed to creep away, to hide his shame, to lick his wounds. He could not.

“I need your wise counsel, honored one. Repeatedly I have sought a vision. None have appeared.” How many times had he gone into the hills, alone, unarmed, dressed in naught but breechclout and moccasins? How many days and nights had he fasted and smoked his pipe and prayed? His medicine, his power had fled as the buffalo flees before the hunter. Or had it been stolen? Drained from him bit by bit, until nothing remained but an empty, useless husk?

No more would he flee. Now the buffalo turned to face his foe. He stood prepared to fight.

The shaman nodded thoughtfully. He stared into the fire, then his eyes drifted shut. Time passed slowly. The fire crackled, a log shifted, embers cascaded in the night air. Glowing fireflies of light, they drifted downward to land on Red Buffalo’s bare thighs. He didn’t flinch. The acrid odor of singed hair and scorched flesh burnt his nostrils. It meant nothing. He would wait. Impatience would gain him nothing.

After a time He Who Sees’ eyes opened. Black as the night sky above, his eyes looked deep into Red Buffalo’s. Red Buffalo did not turn away from that intense stare. He opened his mind, his thoughts, and his soul. Laid them bare to He Who Sees.

“I will help.” The shaman reached into his robes and drew out a pipe. With careful, elaborate movements he loaded the pipe and lit it. Placing it against his lips, he pulled the pungent tobacco smoke deeply into his lungs. Four times he inhaled. Each time he exhaled in a different direction, to the earth, the sky, the sun and the moon. He passed the pipe to Red Buffalo who repeated He Who Sees’ action and returned the pipe. The agreement was made.

He Who Sees stretched his hand over the fire. The flames flared higher, licking at his gnarled fingers, weaving around, but never touching.

Hesitantly, Red Buffalo clutched the pouch strung from a leather thong at his waist. Inside that pouch rested the remains of his puha. It never left his person and no other had ever seen its contents.

The shaman said nothing. He waited, his hand untouched by the greedy flames.

Red Buffalo shuddered like an unproven warrior. Quickly, before his nerve failed he yanked the pouch loose and placed it in He Who Sees’ hand. Fire touched his fingers and forearm. His skin contracted and started to redden and blister. He pulled back.

Eyes closed, He Who Sees chanted softly. The pouch dangled from his fingers, hanging down into the center of the fire. On and on went the wordless chant. Wisps of smoke curled

around the edges of the pouch. The soft skin darkened, glowed then burst into a brilliant red ball. In moments it was gone. Consumed in a sudden flash, the charred remains fell free of the leather thong tethering it to the shaman's hand. The fire flared. Two columns of flame rose up around the shaman's outstretched hand.

He Who Sees drew back his hand. The fire now settled to glowing embers casting little light. "You are free now to seek your vision." The shaman's words dismissed Red Buffalo.

Rising, Red Buffalo turned to leave. The shaman's last words held him back. "Have care that what you seek does not destroy you, my son. Chose your path wisely."

With a curt nod, Red Buffalo strode away. Anger and fear stiffened his back. His medicine was truly gone. The shaman had destroyed it. He was without power, empty, cast adrift, helpless to fight the evil forces he felt stirring in the darkness even now.

He Who Sees shook his head sadly as the young warrior faded into the shadows. Not many men who were offered the chance to change their future. Would Red Buffalo divert from his chosen path of self-destruction? Or would he charge headlong down that road seeking what he could never possess? He Who Sees did not know. He had been given much power and many years to learn to use it wisely. Still, even to him, the future was not always clear. Only time

would provide the answers. Fate would have its way despite his interference.

CHRISTOPHER LEANED against the wall inside the first empty stall and closed his eyes. Dead Eye's pistol hung from his hand, the barrel still warm. The smell of gunpowder and blood burned his nostrils. He'd killed a man. One who needed killing, no doubt, but still a man. Cold sweat bathed his body. His heart pounded. No. Not a man, a snake that walked upright. A snake who'd put his hands on Christina. Who'd watched her die, then laughed when he told about it.

Christina. Dead. Sweet, funny, trusting little Christina. Violated. Her body left to the buzzards. The vision crystallized in Christopher's mind. His eyes flew open trying to banish the image of her lying naked and broken. How short a time he'd had to truly know her. Now she was gone. Snatched away by Anderson's greed and betrayal.

Anderson would pay. The vow sprang unbidden in Christopher's soul. Never before had he felt such a violent need to exact vengeance from another. All his life he'd been a peaceful man, using the law as a shield against the world's evils. When he was a child, his mother's abuse and

death at Anderson's hands had spawned anger and hatred for his stepfather. But it had been a child's hatred, without power, helpless and hopeless to avenge. Now he was a man, no longer helpless, capable of striking the blow which would fell his enemy. Anderson would die at his hands. Christopher spared little thought to Rico and his bunch. When the time was right he would kill them too. First Anderson, then the others.

He pushed away from the wall unmindful of his body's protest, its aches from the abuse he'd heaped upon it this day. What must be done to see Anderson dead? His fingers curled around the butt of Dead Eye's gun, squeezing tightly as if it were Anderson's throat.

Willie appeared at the stall door. He stared at Christopher his eyes wide, his face pale. When Christopher looked up Willie gasped and stumbled backward.

"KC, Willie?" From his room, Eli called, followed by a fit of coughing.

Christopher forced away the rage he felt, smoothing his features so as not to scare the boy more. He stuffed the gun in his waistband and headed toward the water trough in the paddock. As he passed, Willie shrank away. His reflection in the water told Christopher why. Vivid red streaks of blood stained his shirt and hands. His hair tangled wildly around his face and the scowl there drew his features taut and angry.

The cool water did little to ease the heat pounding in his veins. With impatient hands he ripped off his shirt and tossed it away. He plunged his head into the trough and scoured the blood from his hands and chest. He lifted his head. Water sluiced down his body washing away the crimson stains, but it couldn't touch the dirt clinging to his soul. A low groan of anguish slipped between his lips. He gripped the edge of the trough and sank to his knees.

From the barn door, KC watched. Pain radiated from Christopher like heat waves from the desert floor. She could see the tension in the rigid set of his broad shoulders, his bent head and his white-knuckled grip. Moisture beaded on his face, but his eyes remained dry. No tears tracked down his cheeks. She knew his agony went too deep to be cleansed by tears.

His suffering was hers. Too well she knew the depth of his despair. She longed to comfort him. To lay her hand on his bare shoulder and soothe the hurt. Her eyes feasted on the curve of his muscled back, his hair lying in dark, wet clumps, water rolling down his chest glistening in the sunlight like liquid diamonds. Her fingers tingled with the urge to touch his smooth golden flesh. To draw out the pain and replace it with pleasure.

"Is Mr. Christopher all right?" Willie asked. His voice wobbled.

KC looked down at the pale boy, understanding his fear. "He'll be fine. Killing doesn't

come easy to most folks even when it's needed."

Willie's eyes grew wide. "Dead Eye told me Mr. Christopher shot Brody. Did he?"

KC nodded. She watched as the boy regained his control, his mask of maturity falling into place over his painfully young features. Sadly she acknowledged the fact, childhood didn't last long in this unforgiving land. It was often torn away violently.

"The Doc wants to see ya," Willie told her.

Eli. Of course, the commotion would have woken him. From inside the barn she could hear the sound of his coughing and if she strained Dead Eye's low tones.

She looked back at Christopher. While she'd talked to Willie, Christopher had raised his mask back in place. No trace of the tortured, guilt-ridden man remained. A hard-eyed stranger stared out over the paddock toward the distant mountains. Gone was the gentle, teasing, half-dead Easterner she'd found. All his golden softness burned away, leaving behind a core of sharpened steel. Steel that would soon demand satisfaction.

He turned toward her. She shivered as his cold, hard gaze slid over her. Then he disappeared past her into the barn.

Willie tugged on her sleeve. "Ya gotta go see Eli. He's coughing real bad."

“Yes, of course.” KC shook herself. How quickly everything faded from her mind when Christopher was near.

“KC.” Eli half rose from the edge of his bed then fell back as a fit of coughing caught him.

Dead Eye eased the older man back. “There, didn’t I tell ya, ya stubborn old coot. KC is fine.” He looked up at KC. “You tell him, boy.”

KC sat on the bed and took Eli’s hand. His skin felt hot and dry, his bones thin and fragile, but his grip was surprisingly strong. He struggled to catch his breath and subdue his coughing. “Dead Eye’s right. I wasn’t in any danger.” She didn’t mention Brody’s shot had whistled past her head and shattered the window behind her. Quickly she told Eli what had happened.

With her explanation she felt Eli relax, the tension fading from his body. She reached over and poured out a measure of laudanum from the small brown bottle next to the bed. “Take this now and rest.”

He pushed the spoon away. “Not yet. I want to talk to Christopher.”

“Not now, Eli. You’re too weak and Christopher’s hurting right now.” She rose to leave.

Eli locked his fingers around her wrist in a tight grip. “You might as well go get him, girl.”

KC shot a quick glance at Dead Eye, but it appeared he hadn’t heard Eli’s slip. “Eli,” she

hissed at him.

“Get Christopher,” Eli insisted. He leaned back against the pillows; his face as white as the sheets except for the hectic flags of red that colored his sunken cheeks and his fevered eyes.

“All right,” KC agreed reluctantly. What on earth could Eli want with Christopher?

“And get that old reprobate out of here.” Eli waved his hand weakly in Dead Eye’s direction. “He hovers over me like an undertaker.”

Dead Eye grunted and stalked out. KC had to grin. He’d be back. Nothing Eli said or did seemed to tempt the man to leave. Still, she had to admit he most often gave as good as he got. The two men bickered constantly, and while they might deny it she knew they both enjoyed it. Despite their obvious differences, Eli’s educated restraint to Dead Eye’s exuberant crudeness, there was a bond between them.

Three years ago Dead Eye had ridden into Peaceful nearly dead from a gunshot wound. After Eli dug out the bullet and kept Dead Eye from dying, he’d attached himself to Eli with a devotion that withstood Eli’s every attempt to detach him.

With a sigh, Eli released KC. “Bring me Christopher, then I’ll rest.” He offered her a small smile.

IN CONTROL now, Christopher dressed in the simple clothes KC had obtained for him, a white cotton shirt, dark trousers and a soft leather vest. He pulled on his boots. Due to their large size, the outlaw who took them abandoned them before leaving Slick's cantina. He wasn't sure just how KC convinced Slick to return them and he was sure he didn't want to know. KC might be young, but he commanded a grudging respect from the rough elements of Peaceful.

The boy hadn't blinked at the sight of Brody, a hole in his chest, dying at his feet. Carmelita's battered face burned in Christopher's mind, but KC hadn't even seemed to notice. Just what kind of horrors, he wondered, did you have to see to harden yourself to the violence?

He looked around the stall he'd made his home for the last few weeks. A coarse woolen blanket over a layer of fresh hay made a bed more comfortable than he'd have thought possible. After a lifetime of elegant surroundings and luxurious living, he found himself amazed at how little he truly needed to survive. His uncle's palatial home, with its rich furnishings and multitude of servants to cater to his every need seemed part of another world, another life. A life lived by another man. A man Christopher no longer recognized as himself.

He felt a strange reluctance to leave this new world in which he'd made a place for himself. As if something remained undiscovered. Something important, if as yet unknown.

He shook his head at these fanciful notions. He had to leave. Christina was dead because of Anderson's greed. He could not be allowed to go unpunished. How he would accomplish the task Christopher didn't know. His life in St. Louis had done nothing to prepare him for a crusade of vengeance.

This day proved he could shoot and kill a man. The thought gave him little comfort and Brody's death left him feeling empty. Even after the man confessed his part in Christina's rape and murder, Christopher felt no satisfaction when Brody died. He was afraid even killing Anderson wouldn't fill the emptiness inside him or ease his own guilt.

He moved around the stall gathering up the meager belongings he'd collected: a spare shirt, a comb and a razor and tied them all together in compact bundle. He'd need a horse. What could he offer Eli in exchange? On a ledge in a corner of the stall lay Christina's books. Perhaps Eli might consider them worth trading for.

"You might need this."

KC stood at the stall door Brody's gun belt in his hand.

He reached out, took it and strapped it around his waist. “Thanks.” He pulled Dead Eye’s gun from his waistband and laid it atop his bundle.

“Dead Eye put Brody’s horse out in the paddock. He’s yours too. Nice, sturdy gelding. Big enough even for you.” The sadness in KC’s eyes contradicted his easy smile.

Something tightened in Christopher’s gut as he looked into the boy’s face. No one that young should have such shadows in their eyes.

“Brody’s horse?”

“Yeah. It’s not like he has any next of kin that’ll be coming around to claim it. His so-called partners lit out of town at the first shot. Eli and I sure don’t need another hay-burner.” KC stuffed his hands deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward and he scuffed his feet in the thick hay.

Since Christopher had first opened his eyes, the red curls that framed KC’s face had grown. Now those tight copper ringlets brushed the collar of KC’s shirt. Christopher wondered if they were soft or crisp. Sweat dampened the boy’s temples, the hair clinging there dark with moisture. Bright emerald green eyes studied Christopher.

“You’ll be leaving.” KC’s words were more statement than question.

“Yes. I’ll head out first light tomorrow.”

KC seemed to struggle silently for a minute. “What do you plan on doing? Anderson is a powerful man. You can’t just ride in and shoot him.”

Christopher smiled. KC didn’t pull any punches; he got right to the point. He asked the same questions Christopher had asked himself. “Don’t know exactly what I’ll do yet.”

“Be careful. Next time Eli and I might not be around to keep you alive.” KC’s voice caught then trailed off on a husky note. He turned away as if self-conscious about revealing the fact he might care what happened to Christopher.

“KC.” Christopher came up behind and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. They felt slender and fragile in his grip, reminding him how young KC truly was. The top of KC’s head brushed against Christopher’s lips. Soft as down the curls tickled his face. The familiar odor of sage filled his nose. Something stirred in him. Regret, sharp and bitter, clawed him. Unable to stop himself he bent his head to KC’s and pulled the boy back into his chest.

For a moment KC stiffened, then with a quiet sigh he allowed the rough embrace.

The feel of that slender body held against his forced Christopher to acknowledge the depth of his feelings for this odd boy. Respect, affection, love...desire. A chill, at the thought of what

that meant, made him tense. Though those feelings might frighten him, no longer could he deny them, but neither would he act on them. He turned KC around and held him at arm's length.

"I've never said how grateful I am for your's and Eli's help. I owe you a debt I can never repay. You saved my life and for what's its worth, you have my thanks."

"No need. We're healers, that's what we do." In a gruff voice, KC brushed away Christopher's thanks.

Christopher looked down at the boy standing so close. His skin bore not the slightest hint of hair and the freckles so common to most red heads were visibly absent. His skin was smooth and soft, the color of pink tinged ivory. His features were finely drawn, almost delicate, his nose straight and small, his lips full, his teeth even and white. His eyebrows arched above wide, thick-lashed, green eyes that seemed to offer a secret. The thin column of his throat appeared as fragile as the bones beneath Christopher's fingers felt. The barn odors of horse, hay, leather and KC's own special scent of sage filled Christopher's nostrils along with another subtle smell that he couldn't quite place.

Drawn by an urge he couldn't deny he stroked his knuckles down KC's cheek and touched the pulse beating rapidly beneath the fragile skin at the hollow of his throat. The boy didn't

flinch, but color surged up under his skin. Something sparked deep in his green eyes. He seemed to lean closer, then he stiffened and his lids dropped, shielding whatever emotion lurked there.

A thought hovered in Christopher's mind, not quite formed yet insistent. He frowned and stared hard at KC's bent head. "What is it about you that makes me..." He stopped realizing he'd been about to put his inner questions into words.

KC's head snapped up and he stared at Christopher with startled, wary eyes, the eyes of a trapped wild thing. Then his eyes became shuttered, large pools of green that revealed nothing. He stepped back, pulling away from Christopher's grip.

"Eli would like to see you. Don't stay long. He's very weak." He turned to leave.

"KC."

Christopher's words stopped KC at the stall door, but he didn't turn around.

"I'd like you to have Christina's books."

A shudder ran through KC's slim frame. He gave a quick nod and walked away without a word.

For a long time, Christopher stood in the middle of the stall looking at the empty space

where KC had been. His body felt hard and heavy and the fact angered him. Never before had any person, male or female, effected him so, stirring such conflicting emotions within him. An illusive image teased his thoughts. Yet each time he reached out, it dissolved into mist, leaving him frustrated and longing to lash out.

CONTRARY TO USUAL custom Red Buffalo traveled far from the village to begin his vision quest. The place he sought was well known to him. He'd come often as a young boy to these hills to hunt game and test his growing skills. Here he felt himself close to the source of his power. Peaceful lay a day's ride east.

Clad only in breechclout and moccasins he approached the mountains respectfully, honoring their agelessness and their dominion over the surrounding lands. The bundle tied behind him held few items: his buffalo robe, a bone pipe, tobacco and material for fire making. Because he'd come so far, he also carried his bow and a quiver full of arrows. From his waist hung his hunting knife. Once his quest began he would fast, but until then he needed to eat and he would need to again, after.

As he traveled toward his chosen spot, he stopped four times. Each time he smoked and prayed.

Situated on the south slope of the mountain, he selected a solitary place, where he could see both east and west. In a small valley, lush with rich grass and a tiny spring he hobbled his pony and retreated to his quest. As darkness fell, he prayed for power, letting the smoke from his pipe rise upward carrying his request.

For four days and four nights, he fasted, sitting motionless on the mountainside until his muscles cramped and screamed for release. At night, he lay facing east, covered by his buffalo robe. When daybreak came, he threw back the robe to receive the power radiating from the sun. He smoked and prayed and waited patiently. He did not wail, moan or demean himself in lamentation and self-pity. He would be granted his power. There was no arrogance in his assumption only humble reverence toward the power-giving spirits. He knew, as did all Comanche, that the gods were beneficent.

He grew weak from hunger and thirst, his voice rasped as he chanted his prayers; the smoke from his pipe irritated his dry, gritty eyes.

The morning of the fifth day dawned. He pushed aside his robe and staggered to his feet to

greet the sun. In the valley below him, the earth spread its bounty, hardy grasses, sweet pure water, and plentiful game. Here the people lived and had lived for countless generations. This was their land. Land granted them by the gods. He raised his arms to the sun, letting its warm rays touch him.

The rumble of the ground drew his gaze to the gods' greatest gift to the people, the buffalo. A large herd led by a massive red bull thundered across the vast open plain, churning the ground beneath their hooves. He gloried in their number, their size, their strength, until he realized they fled from some unseen foe. He lifted his eyes to the horizon and saw the haze of white blotting the landscape as it moved toward the herd. Thick and dense it covered the land, eating up the grass, swallowing the mountains, devouring the water, until all that remained was a smooth expanse of frozen wasteland, fit for neither man nor beast.

The herd flowed into the valley. There they milled about trapped on three sides by the steep sides of the mountains and the fourth by the creeping tide of white. Snorting his rage, the red bull buffalo turned to face the threat to his herd. He pawed the ground and bellowed his challenge. Nothing halted the creeping fog. With long seeking wisps, it swirled into the valley. One by one, the buffalo succumbed, disappearing into the mist until the red buffalo stood alone

amidst a colorless world.

Bone chilling cold crept into Red Buffalo's body, numbing his feet and hands. Fear crept in also. What vision was this? What did this unfamiliar image mean? Many times he had sought power through the vision quest and always he'd received a vision filled with the color of his puha, red. What did this white world represent?

He pushed the questions from his mind and let the vision take him where it would. The answers would come, he was sure, in time. For now, he let the spirits show him their will.

He shivered and started chanting, offering up his acceptance. Pain seized his belly, sharp and piercing, doubling him over, sending him to his knees. He lurched forward, his palms slapping the hard white ground. Tremors racked him, coursing through his rigid body one after another, until unable to restrain himself he lifted his head and screamed out his pain. The sound echoed the roar of a bull buffalo.

As quickly as it came the pain was gone along with the cold. He felt strong, filled with power. He let out another yell, one of victory and delight. The buffalo roared back. With a start, he realized he was the buffalo, his body transformed into that of the great beast. A shaggy coat of rusty red hair covered him shielding him against the frigid air. For a time, he toyed with

the experience of being his namesake, the Red Buffalo. He gloried in his strength, feeling his muscles flow and ripple as he moved his massive head and pawed the ground with his hooves.

He swung around looking for his herd, his people. All gone. He stood alone in an alien landscape, everything around him strange and unfamiliar. Loneliness ate at him. He longed for the comfort of his fellow creatures, but there were none.

Ahead a tiny point of light glowed red. Drawn by its tempting heat as he moved closer it grew to a fiery column of flame hovering above the frozen ground. Bit by bit it took the form of a woman, lithe and supple, her body undulating enticingly. Slowly the flames faded until only a halo of fire burning around her face remained. She stood before him her body bare of clothing, yet unashamed.

Firebird. She was Firebird. Eagerly he reached out to embrace her, to make her his, to absorb the power her body held as his own. No longer did he have the form of the buffalo; once more he was a man, weak and alone, shivering in the cold, craving her warmth.

His hands touched her flesh. A scream ripped from his throat. Searing pain raced up his arms and over his body, white-hot agony burnt through him. He flew back through the air to land at her feet. She looked down at him. Compassion filled her eyes. He stretched out his

hand to her. Sadly, she shook her head. Sparks jumped from the halo of her hair. They glowed and sizzled as they touched the white ground, leaving behind charred holes. From each hole ragged cracks spread outward.

Red Buffalo crawled along the now broken ground; shards of razor sharp white cut his flesh. He left a glistening trail of blood that was quickly absorbed into the all consuming white. Weak, he felt the power drain from his body devoured by the hungry ground.

Firebird. He must reach her. From her he could regain his strength and banish the cold white blanket covering the earth. Inch by inch he moved toward her glowing figure. Her eyes, the color of newly sprouted grass, watched him. Tears coursed down her pale cheeks, drops of red flowed over her breasts and pooled at her feet. Her heat drew him.

Behind her the ground heaved and cracked with a roar. White tinged with gold a great eagle rose up. Red Buffalo watched in awe as the bird spread its wings. Its eyes were the color of blue ice, hard and cold until they rested on Firebird. Then they softened, reflecting her radiant warmth. As the bird's wings folded around her, her fingertips touched Red Buffalo's. For a brief moment, he felt her heat sear through him, giving him strength, restoring his power. Then she vanished within the bird's embrace. The world turned blinding white and he collapsed.

When his eyes opened again the world was as it should be. The earth below shades of browns and greens, the rivers thin slivers of silver cutting through, the sky above a clear blue, with only white wisps of clouds. He lay face down miles from his spot on the slope of the mountain. Dirt, sweat and blood streaked his body. Behind him, he could see the trail of broken grass where he'd dragged himself along the ground.

He remained in the valley with his pony for seven days, regaining his strength and puzzling over his strange vision, unsure if he'd been granted his power or not. The vision was hazy now, unclear in its meaning. He remembered the surge of energy that had flowed through him at Firebird's touch. She was the answer.

When he left the valley, he turned his pony not toward his village but toward Peaceful. The time had come to seek out and claim his Firebird.

Chapter 8

CHRISTOPHER TAPPED at the doorway. “Eli. Are you awake? KC said you’d like to see me.”

Eli’s eyes flickered open. He took short shallow breaths, each one punctuated by a strangled cough. Flecks of pinkish foam spewed from his mouth.

Bending to avoid the low doorframe, Christopher stepped into the room. “Do you need some laudanum?”

“No—no, not yet. I need a clear head. Set down, boy. I’m getting an ache in my neck from looking up at you.” Eli’s words rasped through his teeth ending with a choked cough.

“I can come back later.”

“No, no. Come in. Sit. Now or later, it won’t matter.” Eli beckoned Christopher forward.

Cautiously Christopher sat on the edge of the narrow bed.

“I’ll be blunt boy. I haven’t got much time.” Eli shook his head as Christopher started to object. “I’m dying. I know it. You know it. And KC knows it. The whole damned town

knows it. It's just a matter of time. And not too God damned much of it.

You planning on leaving?"

Christopher turned his head away. "I have to. There are things I need to do."

"I know. There are things a man must do in order to remain a man. But I'm going to ask you to hold off on doing them for a time. I'm going to do something I've never done before in all my life, I'm going to call in a favor."

Christopher frowned.

"If it weren't for me you'd be nothing but bones bleaching in the sun..."

"I realize that I owe you a great deal, but..."

"No buts, boy. You owe me every breath you take for the rest of your life."

A fit of coughing racked Eli. Christopher braced him, holding him upright until the spasms eased. Eli lay back on the bed, while Christopher gently wiped the spittle from his mouth. His breath rattled in his chest. "Time, I've so little of it left."

"Shall I call KC?" Christopher asked.

"No." Eli opened his eyes and gripped Christopher's hand. "I haven't much time. I ask you, as a dying man to grant me this request. Stay in Peaceful. Be here for KC when I go. And

after you plant me in the ground take him away from here. When I'm gone, he won't last long in this godforsaken place. I would have sent him away long ago, but he wouldn't go without me. And I couldn't leave." His voice dropped to a whisper. "My life is over and I can change none of it. Now only KC matters. I've been a healer for more than forty years and never once have I demanded such a heavy payment for my services. Payment has never been the reason I use my skill. Still, I have no choice, no other options. I have money. Use some of it to set him up somewhere safe. The rest is yours."

"I don't need your money, Eli."

"No, you don't." Eli struggled upward. "You know killing Anderson and Rico won't give you peace. It won't change a thing that's happened. It won't bring your sister back. It will make no difference if you go after them now or later."

"True," Christopher admitted reluctantly. He refused to meet Eli's eyes.

"However, your presence here may save KC and young Willie. They need your protection."

A short humorless bark of laughter was Christopher's response. "Protection. What makes you think I'm capable of protecting anyone? I'm just a soft city lawyer. This world is yours and KC's, he's far more able than I'll ever be."

“Maybe. Has KC told you anything about himself?” Eli asked.

“No. I assumed you and he are family of some kind.”

“Actually, I own the boy.”

“Own?” Christopher repeated in confusion.

Eli grinned. “Thought that might interest you. How old do you think KC is?” He changed the subject.

“Fourteen, fifteen maybe.”

“Nope, he’s eighteen. Been with me six years now, since the Comanche chief, Winter Hawk gave him to me in gratitude. You know I treat anyone who needs help, farmer, outlaw and Indian alike and I don’t ask questions. Well, six years ago a Comanche warrior dragged me to his camp to treat his wife. The woman was in the middle of a difficult delivery. When the local shaman’s medicine didn’t help he told Winter Hawk about me. Good man, He Who Sees. Lucky for me I was able to save both the woman and her baby boy. As a reward, Winter Hawk presented me with KC.

“From what I could gather, KC and his younger brother had been taken on a raid two years earlier. The rest of his family was slaughtered. KC’s brother was only five. He was quickly

adopted into a family that took him with them to another band. KC hasn't seen him since. The life of a Comanche captive is not pleasant. And one who fights that captivity and his captors suffers for it. KC being who and what he is spent those years trying to escape. He bears scars, both inner and on his flesh, attesting to his attempts. If I hadn't come along he probably would have died trying.

"To be honest, I think Winter Hawk was pleased not to have to kill the boy. Winter Hawk isn't a cruel or unkind man, but he is Comanche."

Christopher looked at Eli and shook his head. Though effected by what he'd heard he remained unconvinced. "KC's history doesn't change anything. It only proves what I said earlier. He doesn't need me to protect him."

"What can I say to convince you to stay? KC needs you and whether you admit it or not you need KC."

A hacking cough racked Eli's frame; he slumped against Christopher until the spasm passed.

Eli searched Christopher's face, then he seemed to come to some decision. "You're wrong. KC's strong, but he's not what you think he is, he's..."

"Eli." From the doorway, KC growled a low warning.

Both startled and relieved by KC's appearance, Christopher rose. Another spasm of coughing shook Eli.

"You're supposed to be resting." KC moved to the side of the bed. With quick, efficient motions he poured out a measure of laudanum and eased his arm around Eli's thin shoulders. "Take this now and sleep. No more talking. You know it brings on your spells."

"Quit fussing. I'll be getting a long rest soon enough." Eli protested, but opened his lips to take the medicine. His eyes sought Christopher's with an unspoken plea.

Unable to give the answer he knew Eli wanted, Christopher turned away. Guilt made him angry. He strode out of the room into the barn. Eli had no right to demand this of him. Liar, his conscience argued, he has every right. You owe both him and KC whatever they ask. But what, his heart cried, did he owe Christina? His fists clenched and unclenched as he paced the length of the barn.

You can't help her, she's dead. Horribly dead. The ache in his chest threatened to send him to his knees. He wanted. He needed to shout out his pain. To purge himself of his failure and his guilt. Instead, he swung his fist against the rough wooden wall, relishing the sharp sting of the impact. The physical pain did little to alleviate his anguish.

“Christopher.”

KC’s husky voice pulled him away from the wall. He turned to face the boy.

“Eli’s wrong. There’s no need for you to stay. You owe us nothing.”

How much the boy had suffered in his short life. The murder of his family, the loss of his brother, captivity and abuse. He bore it all with serene courage. Now once again his life was about to change. Eli was right; the slim youth standing before him could not take on the world alone and survive. He stepped closer, until only a few inches separated them. The heat from KC’s body enveloped him.

KC tilted his head upward; his eyes wide pools of shimmering green that searched his face.

“Eli is right. I do need to stay. Not for you or Eli or Willie. I need to stay for me.”

KC touched his arm, his fingers gripping tightly. “What happened to Christina wasn’t your fault. You did the best you could.”

“My best wasn’t good enough.”

A small, sad smile curved KC’s lips. “No, sometimes it isn’t.”

Christopher knew it wasn’t his failure KC referred to. He covered KC’s hand with his own. The feel of those long, slender fingers beneath his sent shock waves through his body. Neither

Rico nor his stepfather had the power to destroy him as completely as his feelings for this boy did. An awareness of what he was about to do made his mouth go dry with fear.

“Will you let me stay?” he asked. “Anderson can wait. He’s not going anywhere.”

KC’s lips parted on a sigh. “Yes. Stay.” The words came out in a husky whisper. He raised his free hand to Christopher’s cheek.

At the touch of those slightly callused fingertips stroking his skin Christopher’s breath caught in his throat. Delicate as the brush of a butterfly’s wing the sensation coursed through his body like a flaming brand. Hot blood pooled in his groin.

No! With a harsh groan and a muttered oath he closed his eyes and pulled away.

KC’s muffled gasp of dismay grated on his conscience. Before he could say anything more the boy was gone.

What kind of man was he? Never before had he felt this way about another person, male or female. At the tender age of sixteen when he’d discovered first hand the passion that can flare between a man and a woman he’d known he didn’t share his uncle’s preferences. And over the years he’d learned he not only enjoyed women in his bed, he liked them for what they were, their softness, the way they smelled and moved, the many differences between them. So what was it

about this quiet, self-contained boy that drew him as surely as the flame drew a moth?

He didn't know. But he did know he was no moth. He was a man. To answer KC's flame would destroy not only himself, but KC as well. That he'd never do. He had to resist what was fast becoming an obsession.

SUMMER SLID INTO fall. In Peaceful little changed. The hot sun still baked the parched ground. Outlaws came and went.

To the west, the mountains changed their hue from dusty green to shades of brown.

The days passed. Peaceful seemed to slumber as if forgotten by the riffraff. Only an occasional fistfight broke the quiet. Slick complained constantly about the shortage of customers.

Even the whores moaned about the lack of business. A couple took to hanging around the stable. They flirted shamefully with Christopher, though he never seemed to take them up on their blatant offers.

Eli rallied briefly from his illness. He improved enough to rise from his bed. Still weak, he

spent his days sitting in the shade playing cards and arguing with Dead Eye.

Christopher spent his time working around the stable. He did the myriad of tasks Eli's illness prevented him from doing and KC was too busy to accomplish. He fixed fences, mended tack, mucked stalls and cared for the horses. What he didn't know he learned from either Dead Eye or Eli, the two men, more than happy to rest in the shade and direct his labors. He rose early and retired late.

Christopher had changed in the months since KC dragged him home more dead than alive. Calluses now covered his once smooth palms and firm, hard muscles corded his chest and arms. His broad shouldered frame was leaner, his skin a deep golden brown, his soft city look burnt away by the hot Texas sun.

The feelings he stirred inside KC both scared and fascinated her. The same as she sensed the feelings he had for her scared and fascinated him.

As the days passed, guilt at her deception made her keep her distance, no matter how much she longed to be near him. She could see the pain his unwanted feelings for her generated inside of him. How they made him doubt his own masculinity. Every time they were close, something burst free inside her. She found herself unable to resist touching him and when he touched her in

return, she watched his eyes darken in self-disgust. Still, she couldn't bring herself to reveal to him what she truly was.

Just what held her back? Fear? Maybe, though she knew he would never deliberately hurt her. Of course, if once he knew her as a woman, he rejected her, that would be the greatest pain of all.

And why wouldn't he? He came from a world of elegant women. Women who dressed in fine satins and lace, not coarse cotton and leather. Women who smelled of perfumes and sweetly scented oils, not manure and horse sweat. It was a world she could never enter and he could never completely abandon. All she could do was stay away and let the attraction die.

From the barn loft, she watched him while he groomed Lady. Bare to the waist, covered with a sheen of sweat, the muscles in his back rippled with each sweep of his arm over Lady's golden flank. Playfully she turned and nibbled at his head with her teeth. With a tug she pulled loose the piece of rawhide tying back his hair and shook her head up and down. Hair spilled over his shoulders clinging to his damp skin in white gold clumps. Saliva pooled in KC's throat. Heat settled low in her belly and between her thighs.

With a laugh he snatched back the tie and tapped Lady's nose lightly. His voice drifted up.

“Feeling frisky?” he asked the mare. In one smooth move he swung himself onto her bare back and untied the reins tethering her to the fence. She pranced, her skin twitching, her ears flicking back and forth in anticipation. He leaned forward and spoke into her ear. “Let’s ride.” She responded with a little hopping buck and then moved into her smooth ground-eating lope.

Christopher’s powerful thighs gripped Lady’s side, becoming a part of her. In moments, they were gone from view.

KC sank back onto her pallet and stared sightlessly up into the rafters. The sweet scent of hay, horses and leather filling the loft comforted her. Dust motes floated lazily in the sunbeams. For six years this corner of the barn had been her place. Here she slept and dreamed. A small trunk held her few belongings, a change of clothing, some coins, a comb, and her books.

How little, she pondered, she had to show for her time on earth. Still, other than her horses and her books there was nothing she needed. With a groan she rolled over and buried her face in the blanket. The wool scratched her skin. What she truly wanted could never be hers.

She’d learned early nothing lasted. Before the Comanche attacked her parents’ farm, she’d been a happy little girl. Laughing, playing and helping her mother, she learned the skills she would need to be a wife and mother herself someday. In the evenings, the family, Papa, Mama,

Brendan and she would gather close to the fire. She and Brendan would do their lessons, while Mama rocked, mended and occasionally helped. Papa would smoke his pipe, filling the small one room cabin with the sweet, pungent smell of tobacco. When the lessons were done, Mama would read to them from the books she loved, books she'd carefully carried with her on their trip west.

A lump formed in KC's throat. The few books resting in her trunk were not the books her mother had loved. Mama's books were nothing more than dust now. Burned along with the cabin and KC's former life.

LADY'S LONG legs ate up the rough ground. Wind tore past Christopher, stinging his eyes, drying the sweat from his skin and whipping the hair from his face. He leaned forward guiding the mare with soft whispers and the pressure of his knees. Her body flowed smoothly beneath him, responding instantly to his slightest touch. Tension drained from his body as he gave himself over to the race. Behind them, Peaceful faded from sight. Ahead the silver swath of the

Rio Grande grew until he pulled Lady to a halt at its bank.

Here, the water flowed wide and shallow, the stream interrupted by constantly shifting sandbars. On the other side lay Mexico.

Lady bent her head and drank noisily. Christopher looked back toward Peaceful, his fingers tightening on the reins. He welcomed the bite of the leather against his now callused palms.

In the days since he'd told KC he'd stay, Christopher had thrown himself into work around the stable. By keeping his hands busy and his body exhausted he kept his mind blank.

Only in the dark hours of the night did his thoughts escape him, roaming over forbidden ground, leading him where he ought not to go. Into fantasies that ended with him groaning in frustration and disgust. What he wanted could never be. That other life style might suit his uncle, but Christopher knew he could not live it. While his body responded to KC, the thought of consummating their relationship in a physical way made his stomach churn with nausea.

Though he could control his body's reactions, he couldn't keep his mind from dwelling on a connection with the boy. He enjoyed KC's company, his quiet, peaceful silences, his soothing presence, his gentle nature, his quick humor and rare laughter. Time spent with KC was both pleasure and pain.

That KC had feelings for him, Christopher didn't doubt. That those feelings frightened and confused the boy he was sure of. He could see it in KC's eyes, the yearning, wary look and the soft hesitant touch of his hand. Funny how it hurt when KC took to avoiding him, when that's what he'd told himself he wanted all along.

It was for the best. Though Eli seemed improved Christopher knew the man had little time left. Soon he'd be gone. After he settled KC somewhere where he could start a new, safe life, Christopher would leave. Yes, it was best they kept their distance from each other. KC was wiser than his years, knowing instinctively what drew them together, if allowed to develop, would destroy them both. Christopher prayed the boy remained strong. Because, God help him, with every passing day his resolve weakened.

SULTAN pranced eagerly beneath KC, almost as if he knew where they headed. She glanced back toward the stable. In the shade of the open doorway, she could just make out Eli, Dead Eye and Willie. All three sat dozing in the midday heat. From inside the barn she could hear Christopher's tuneless whistle as he worked. None of them would miss her for a few hours. She

kicked Sultan into a easy lope and headed toward the river.

It had been weeks since she'd been able to visit her secret place. Her skin felt caked and dry. Grit and grime had worked its way into every pore of her body. She wanted...she needed a bath. The hurried washes she was able to manage in the loft did little toward achieving cleanliness. While Christopher and the others washed daily under the pump or in the trough, stripping down to nothing but their underthings, she didn't have that luxury. Even Willie had started to look at her oddly when she refused to bathe with them.

In the bundle behind her, she carried not only soap and a towel, but clean clothing. For once in long time, she intended to be clean from the skin out.

A half-hour later she and Sultan entered the stand of trees sheltering her secret place. Pulling the bundle from Sultan's back she turned him loose to graze, knowing he'd come instantly if she whistled.

Shaded and cool, the cottonwood grove welcomed her, an oasis of silver-green in an otherwise dry, barren land. Impatiently she kicked off her boots and sank her bare toes into the sandy earth. Articles of clothing dropped unheeded as she made her way toward the small spring fed pool, her private bathtub. Normal caution was forgotten at the sweet smell of water.

Carelessly she splashed into the pond shrieking in delight at the touch of the refreshing liquid.

Within minutes her flesh became accustom to the water. Briskly she scrubbed her body, washing away weeks worth of accumulated grime. Her skin tingled and turned pink beneath the rasp of the coarse cloth and harsh soap. Next, she lathered her hair, then ducked under the surface of the water to rinse. She rose sputtering, her eyes stinging. Wet, her curls relaxed and her hair touched her shoulders. She fingered it thoughtfully knowing she should cut it shorter, yet oddly reluctant to do so.

She opened her eyes and stared at her reflection in the water. An unfamiliar woman stared back at her. A woman with a pale oval face surrounded by a sleek cap of wine colored hair, dominated by two large green eyes. Water lapped around her chest caressing her small breasts, her nipples puckered and hard from the cold. A woman KC didn't recognize, didn't know; a stranger who lived hidden inside of her. Would that woman ever be allowed to emerge? Did she want her to? KC shivered. Rivulets of water rolled down her cheeks and plopped onto the pool surface blurring the image.

Determinedly she pushed away the uncomfortable questions plaguing her. Still, she wondered, what would it be like to bathe in a big brass tub filled with steaming hot, sweetly

scented water, to wash with a cloth that didn't scrape her flesh and soap that was soft and fine and didn't burn her eyes and flesh? To dress in silks and satins, flounces and lace? To have smooth, uncalled hands and smell of lilac and roses rather than leather and manure?

Flopping back in the water, she banished the forbidden images from her mind. What she longed for could never be. For a few minutes longer she enjoyed the freedom from her ever-confining clothes, then she rose, shivering despite the warmth of the air.

Above a bird called out a shrill warning and in a flutter of feathers flew off. Suddenly aware of her carelessness, KC hurried to dress. The silence in the grove, the lack of the normal noises, the low buzz of insects, the twitter of birds and rustle of small rodents, told her someone was coming. Her clothes stuck to her wet skin, outlining her sex more obviously than even her nakedness had done.

A horse whickered. Sultan answered with an enthusiastic welcome, crashing through the trees to greet the newcomer. Tense and angry with herself for her lack of caution, KC tugged on her vest and quickly strapped on her gun belt. Strewn around the pool her discarded clothing made it impossible to prevent the stranger from discovering her presence. She moved to shelter behind a tree and waited.

Only when Lady's golden head came into view, followed by Sultan's did she allow herself to breathe easy.

She stepped out from behind the tree. "That's a damn good way to get yourself shot."

Christopher laughed and swung off of Lady's back. "You're not the type to shoot first and ask questions later. Eli told me where you'd gone."

KC bit back the curses bubbling up inside her at Eli's sneakiness. He knew she only came here to bathe. Though she'd made him promise not to reveal her secret to Christopher, apparently he figured sending the man to catch her naked didn't count as breaking a promise. He'd learn different next time she saw him.

"This is nice." Christopher wandered around the small grove. "Now I see why the pump and the trough don't interest you." He tied Lady's reins to a nearby tree. "Hope you don't mind sharing." Without waiting for her answer, he pulled off his shirt.

The sight of his smooth chest brought tightness to KC's throat. She swallowed, looked away and answered, her voice cracking slightly. "No, I was just leaving." She reached for her boots as he sat and pulled his off.

"Don't leave on my account. Stay and talk with me."

KC yanked her gaze away as he stood and stripped off his trousers. She thanked the stars his back was to her. She wasn't sure what her reaction to the front of his nude body might be. Her view of his backside was bad enough. The flex of his buttocks, pale compared to the deep gold of his back and arms, made her body grow warm.

At the sound of a small splash and his deep cry, she turned to look at him standing waist deep in the pool. She had to laugh at the betrayed look on his face.

"You didn't tell me to was so cool."

"You never asked. It's spring fed."

"Mm. Feels good." He sank to his chin then rose again. He glanced over at her hovering near the edge. "Are you coming in?"

"I just got out." She couldn't help her tone, stiff and unfriendly. She should turn and leave, but couldn't force herself to do so. Her eyes drank in the sight of him as he bobbed up and down, lower each time, until only his shoulders and head remained above the water line.

THANKFUL for the water lapping around him, surprised it didn't start to steam, Christopher

watched the expressions flickered across KC's usual calm face. Hope, fear, despair.

Why had he followed the boy? He knew he shouldn't be here. Even back in Peaceful, constantly surrounded by people, his attraction to KC was nearly irresistible. Here he courted disaster. Still, he couldn't find it in him to send the boy away.

KC's hair lay wet and sleek against his head, nearly touching his narrow shoulders, his finely drawn features tense and wary. Christopher could read the distrust in his eyes.

"Toss me the soap and cloth, please," Christopher asked.

KC's throw went high. Christopher jumped up to catch the items. He caught them but stumbled on the uneven pool floor and landed with a splash. He came up sputtering; wondering if the awkward throw had been deliberate. No, the horrified look on KC's face said otherwise. Wiping the water from his eyes and slicking back his hair he said, "Sit down and visit. Haven't seen much of you lately." That was a laugh, the boy was definitely avoiding him.

Hesitantly KC sat cross-legged on the ground. Sultan nibbled at the collar of his shirt. He stroked the stallion muzzle. Christopher held his breath as the big animal's hooves came inches from stepping on KC. Finally Lady nickered and Sultan wandered over to visit her. Some of the tension eased out of Christopher's body.

“Other than you and Willie I haven’t seen Sultan let another soul near him. The bond between you and that horse is amazing.” When KC was on Sultan’s back the two seemed to flow together, moving as one. “You have a unique rapport with horses, you understand them and they know it.”

KC didn’t respond to Christopher’s praise, he seemed preoccupied.

Finished with his bathing, Christopher stepped out of the water and pulled on his trousers.

“That felt good.” He ran his hand through his wet hair.

KC glanced up, his green eyes wide. A tinge of red colored his pale cheeks and he looked away.

Christopher retrieved the bundle tied to the back of Lady’s saddle. From it he spread a blanket on the ground and proceeded to set out the picnic lunch he had brought with him. Slices of crusty bread made by of all people Dead Eye were spread with rich, creamy butter. Thick pieces of juicy pink ham and cold crispy fried chicken came next, followed by container of jam, some apples and a bottle of wine.

KC looked at the wine.

Christopher shrugged and answered the unspoken question. “I got the wine from Slick

along with a small amount of cash in exchange for the oxen and wagon. They're little use to me now."

"Why were you travelling in a wagon instead of on horseback?" KC asked the question that had puzzled her.

Pain knifed through Christopher. "For some reason Christina is—was, terrified of horses. As frightened as she was of staying on the Rocking A and taking a chance on confronting our stepfather, she still refused to even let me harness the wagon with a horse, insisting we take the oxen." Pushing away his memories of Christina, Christopher dug further into the bundle and triumphantly pulled out two cups.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "I brought enough for two, in case you were."

KC's mouth watered at the sight and smell of the food. Breakfast was long past, she'd missed dinner and supper was still hours away. She peered over at Christopher as he arranged the tempting food on the blanket. Only inches away, the sight and scent of him was even more enticing than the picnic he'd brought. The strong planes of his chest and arms glistened with moisture. Like pale, wet silk his hair lay against his scalp and trailed in clumps over his shoulders, small rivulets of water dripping from the ends. He smelled of cool water, sun and his

own particular scent.

Her fingers curled into tight fists, nails digging into her palms to keep her from reaching out to brush away a lock of wet hair hanging over his eyes.

“Who’s Rachelle?” she blurted out. Where did the question come from? She felt heat surge up under her skin and ducked her head, afraid to meet his eyes.

“Where did you hear about Rachelle?”

“You called out her name and Christina’s when you had the fever. I was just curious.”

He answered without thought. “Rachelle is the woman I plan to marry.” Bread and meat fell to the ground as he jumped up. “My God! She must think me dead. How could I have forgotten?”

Marry. KC grew cold inside. All her unspoken dreams withered and died. She’d known all along even if Christopher knew she was a woman her fantasies were just that, fantasies. Someone like Christopher needed a woman of silk and lace on his arm, a sweet smelling woman with soft hands and gentle manners. Not an underdeveloped girl who masqueraded as a boy, who wore leather and strapped a pistol to her hip. If he knew, surely he’d laugh. Suddenly her appetite deserted her, leaving a ache deep in her belly that had nothing to do with hunger.

“Is she very pretty?” The words slipped out before she could stop them. She groaned and longed to bury her flaming face in the dirt. Instead, she watched him as he paced in front of her. At her question, he paused.

“Yes, I suppose she is. I don’t recall thinking about it much. She’s been around as long as I can remember. Ever since I came to live with my uncle, she’s been my shadow. Rachelle is the daughter of my uncle’s partner, Pierre DuBois. She’s just turned eighteen. It’s always been understood we would marry when she came of age.” He smiled. “All I need do is propose.”

KC watched the confusion settle over his face as he discussed the woman who would be his wife. “Do you love her?” Again, she spoke without thinking.

“Love her?” he repeated the question, then seemed to consider it. “I’m very fond of her. She’s everything a man could want in a wife. Besides being beautiful, she’s well trained to be a good homemaker and hostess. And she’s intelligent, not like most young women her age, their heads full of nothing but clothing and parties. A man can talk to Rachelle about things that matter. She’s fun to be with, full of laughter and an impish sense of humor. It’s gotten her into trouble more than once.” He smiled at some unspoken memory. “That and the fact she’s impulsive, daring, reckless sometimes, and willful. Life with her will be anything but boring.”

He laughed softly. "It will take all my energy to keep her in line. But whether I love her, as a woman deserves to be loved by a husband, I don't know. She's always been more like a sister to me." A look of guilt and sadness crossed his face. "More so than Christina was ever allowed to be."

Absently he rubbed his hand across his chest wiping away the water still dripping from his hair. KC watched his hand move over his smooth golden skin. Her mouth grew dry. She gulped her wine, then filled her cup again and drank deeply.

Christopher sank back down on the ground. He toyed idly with his empty cup. "I'll have to let her know I'm still alive."

She filled his cup and her own from the bottle. While he set his down untouched she finished hers and refilled it again.

"Next week I'm going into Ramblin to see if the sheriff there's learned anything about Willie's family. You can write her a letter if you like. I can send it for you from there." She sipped at her fourth cup of wine welcoming the tart taste and the way the mellow glow it gave her dissolved the depression she felt at his description of his fiancée. It gave her the courage to reach out and touch his arm as she spoke. His skin felt cool and moist, the hairs covering it

crisp. Her fingers tingled from the contact, her body vibrating with the need to be closer. Without thinking, she stroked him lightly from elbow to wrist. His flesh contracted, the skin tightening, the hairs rising. Fascinated she started to repeat the touch.

Like lightning he grabbed her wrist, his grip crushing. She flinched and raised her startled eyes to his. His blue eyes turned nearly black with anger and another dangerous emotion.

“Don’t!” he growled.

She stared up at his face, mesmerized by the flare of unwanted passion. He held her wrist in a vise-like grip, her hand inches from his chest. If she moved her palm would press against the flesh just over his heart. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, warm and damp.

Made bold by the wine, she leaned toward him and with her free hand touched his hard jaw. Only the slightest rasp of bristles scraped her fingertips. A muscle twitched in his cheek. On his face, she could read the conflict raging inside him. Desire fought with disgust, need with fear, want with horror.

She held her breath, waiting. Her dry lips parted and she moistened them with her tongue. His head tilted toward hers. His eyes searched her face and centered on her mouth. Caught in the moment she forgot her deception. She forgot who and what she was. Only her longing for

his touch remained. She strained toward him, one hand stroking his jaw the other now pressed against the warmth of his chest. His heart beat rapidly beneath her hand. His breath touched her face. A shiver rippled through her. Her body seemed to hang suspended in time, tense yet oddly relaxed, floating.

Slowly, reluctantly, he pulled her toward him closing the gap between their bodies. She could feel the battle he fought with himself, yet she forgot the reason, knowing only she must be close, she must touch him or die. His hot gaze bore into her, scorching her, feeding the flame that leapt within to meet the one burning in his eyes. Unable to hold his gaze her eyelids dropped.

“No!”

With a sharp curse he shoved her away and surged to his feet. Body throbbing, her head whirling dizzily, she lay on the ground.

“This is wrong,” he muttered. He scrubbed his jaw and chest where she’d touched him as if trying to wipe away the feel of her hands. “Damn. I can’t do this.”

Dazed and confused, she raised her head and watched him through blurry eyes while he pulled on his boots and mounted Lady. He didn’t bother to put on his shirt before he rode away

without another word.

For a long time she remained prone her head buried in her arms, her body shook with sobs until she sank into a wine induced slumber. Later when she woke, she had no memory of the tears she'd shed, only a deep sense of humiliation and shame.

Chapter 9

ON THE EDGE of Peaceful sat the four small cabins, the whores called home when not working above Slick's. Weather-beaten, unpainted, rotting, the cabins reflected the occupants, women who'd been cast off by society, used and abused, left to deteriorate. Christopher headed there when he rode away from KC.

Anger vibrated through his body. Anger at KC. Anger at himself. Lady responded by racing across the countryside until he gained control of himself and slowed her to a walk. His heart pounded in his chest, his breathing as heavy as Lady's as they approached the cabins.

Why, he asked himself for the hundredth time, had he followed KC to the pool? When would he learn to keep his distance from the boy? Being near him was rapidly becoming impossible. Though disgusted with his own weakness, Christopher found himself unable to resist. His skin still burned from KC's touch. He wanted, he needed....

It didn't matter, he couldn't allow it.

What he needed, he told himself, was a woman. In the months since he'd left St. Louis

there'd been none. He stopped Lady outside the cabin he knew Carmelita occupied.

Since Brody had attacked her, the young whore had taken to hanging around Christopher. He knew she considered him her savior, some kind of hero for coming to her rescue. After her bruises faded, she'd become bolder, actively courting his interest. Until this moment, he'd never thought to answer her invitation.

Of the four cabins, Carmelita's was in the least disrepair. Loose boards were nailed back in place, the little porch swept clean. Colorful calico curtains fluttered in the cabin's one small window. He smiled at the sight of the tiny flower patch struggling to survive in the dry, dusty ground just outside the door. Sliding from Lady's back, he tied her away from Carmelita's precious blooms.

At his knock the door opened wide. Dressed in nothing but a loose cotton wrapper, her hair a dark cloud around her face, Carmelita's sharp eyes took in his wet hair and bare chest. Her lips stretched into an eager welcoming smile. "Ah, Señor. I am honored you finally come to visit me." She looped her arm through his and pulled him inside. The door closed behind him, dimming the light in the cabin.

Warm and still, filled with the scent of the woman leaning against his side and the odor of

stale sex, the room closed in on him. Christopher found himself wondering just what he was doing. The throbbing in his groin, that had plagued him since he'd first seen KC alone by the pool, faded away.

Carmelita's soft hand stroked across his chest. Her unbound breasts pressed against him, the nipples pebble hard. She trailed her fingers to his waist.

"I knew you would come to Carmelita. She will be good for you." Her nimble fingers undid his trousers and slid inside to cup him.

He felt nothing. The near constant swelling was gone. He stood motionless while she teased and stroked his unresponsive flesh.

"What is wrong Señor Christopher?"

When he didn't answer, she sank to her knees at his feet and tugged down his trousers. He groaned as she took him into her warm mouth, but nothing happened. Nothing she did stirred a response.

Finally, he looked down at her dark head as she applied herself to rousing him, her head bobbing as her sharp little tongue learned all his secrets. Shame washed over him. He had no business using this girl. Gently he raised her to her feet. She looked at him in confusion as he

pulled up his trousers.

“Did I do wrong? Do you not like Carmelita?”

“You did nothing wrong. I shouldn’t have come here. Thank you, Carmelita. Unfortunately what you’re offering isn’t what I need.”

Carmelita straightened. “I am sorry Señor Christopher. I am a whore, I offer what I can.” Her gaze was clear and direct, full of an odd sort of dignity. “What you want will destroy you.”

Her eyes softened. “My madre, she said I always see much that others do not. Take what I offer Señor before it is too late.”

He shook his head. “I can’t.” Before he left he pressed some money in her hand.

IN THE MONTH since they’d been there, Ramblin hadn’t changed. KC reined Sultan up in front of the sheriff’s office. Down the street, Willie pulled the wagon up to the mercantile.

Reluctantly KC dismounted and tied Sultan to the hitching post. She cast a long look around. The last thing she wanted to do was to run into the Baker brothers. Only one horse stood dozing outside the tavern and she didn’t recognize it from before. Slapping her hat against

her leg to dislodge the trail dust, she strode into the building.

Sheriff Burack sat in his chair, his feet propped up on his desk, head back, eyes closed and mouth open. Rumbling snores filled the room.

KC looked around the office in disdain. If cleanliness was next to Godliness, the sheriff was a prime candidate for hell. Stacks of paper littered his desk. The bulletin board used to display wanted posters held only one, a poster for a man long dead. KC recognized him as a man who had been shot down in Peaceful more than a year ago. Notices of merchandise for sale and racy pictures occupied the rest of the space. KC's cheeks grew warm as her gaze brushed over a picture of a nearly naked buxom woman. Dust covered the floor and every other free surface. It was fortunate for the good people of Ramblin that crime was rare. Sheriff Burack appeared to be less than useless. In one corner a tarnished brass spittoon overflowed. KC swallowed heavily and looked away back to the sleeping sheriff.

“Sheriff Burack.”

At the sound of her voice, Burack jumped. “What?” He yanked his feet off the desk dislodging a stack of papers. “Who...what...” he sputtered groggily and grabbed for the stack. For a moment, it teetered then tumbled to the floor in blizzard of crumpled white. With a thunk

his feet hit the floor, he leaned forward and blinked up at KC. “What in the hell you want, boy? Oh, it’s you.”

“Have you heard from the army about Willie Smith’s family?” KC didn’t waste time with small talk. The stale, musty odor in the airless room made her stomach churn.

With one hand Burack rummaged through the papers scattered across his desk, the other crept inside his shirt and scratched. “Here it is,” he cried triumphantly and waved a piece of paper in front of KC. “It says here...hey!”

KC snatched the paper from Burack’s hand and scanned the small print quickly. She couldn’t help the smile that softened and curved her lips upward at the unaccustomed feeling of warmth flooding through her. Willie’s parents were alive and well, they’d survived the attack and were hunting for him.

Though Willie never spoke of his parents or the attack, KC had seen the shadows that haunted his too old eyes. How well she knew the pain of losing those you loved. Like herself, she’d seen him wall himself away from his need to love, refusing to let another into his life, afraid to take the risk of losing again. She clutched the wrinkled paper to her chest. It might be too late for her, but Willie had another chance. She turned to go.

“Hey, now, boy. You can’t take that, it’s official.” Sheriff Burack rose to his feet. “Oh, all right. By the way, them Baker boys is still a lookin’ for ya. They’re right riled up. If’n I were you I’d steer clear.” He warmed to his subject. “Emmy finally got smart. She up and run off with some cowboy passing through. Got clean away. Now them boys got to eat their own cooking.” He laughed at his own joke, his belly shaking.

“Thanks for the warning, Sheriff.”

“My pleasure.” His beady little eyes slid over her, making her skin crawl. “Never did think you knocked the gal up. Don’t appear to me that you got the juice in ya. Yar just too pretty to be a boy, much less a man.”

KC stiffened. Just how much did this slimy bastard see? KC worked hard to erase all that was soft and feminine in herself, but she could do nothing about her fair skin and slim build.

“You get on down to Mother Nellie’s house. One of her gals will show ya what to do with a female.” He collapsed back in his chair laughing uproariously.

Anger pounded through her veins, sending heat surging under her skin as she fought the urge to smash in the man’s oily face. Outside she sagged against Sultan’s warm side her rage fading. Just who was she angry with? He was right, she wasn’t a man, but neither was she a

woman. What was she?

“KC?” Willie stood next to her. “The shopkeeper’s finished filling your order. He gave me this.” He held up a sticky stick of peppermint candy. “Do you want some?” His voice held other questions. Questions she knew he’d never speak.

Straightening, KC adjusted Sultan’s saddle before turning to face him. “No. You keep it.”

Willie’s gaze focused on the crumpled paper in her hand. He raised his eyes to hers, asking without words.

Joy blossomed in KC’s heart. Her smile came from deep inside, banishing her own despair. “They’re alive. You’re parents are alive and waiting for you, Willie boy.”

Disbelief crossed Willie’s face, then awareness dawned and the hard, adult mask he wore cracked, giving her a look at the little boy hiding beneath. “Alive? Ma and Pa are alive?” he whispered. The candy fell unheeded to the ground.

“Alive and well. They escaped the attack unscathed. They’re in San Antonio now. Waiting while the army hunts for you.” Though he still could read only a bit she pushed the paper into his hands.

Reverently he held it. His fingers traced the words, his lips moving silently. Then he

looked up at KC, tears tracking down his cheeks. “My folks are alive.” With a sob he threw his skinny arms around her waist and buried his face against her. Awkwardly KC returned his embrace.

Something inside her softened and crumpled, washed away by Willie’s tears. It had been years since she’d been so close to another human being. She guarded the space around her jealously. Even Eli never did more than touch her arm or hand. Only Christopher came close to breaking through the wall she’d laboriously built around herself. Now in one swift move Willie crashed through and wrapped himself around her heart. She rocked him, stroked his hair and murmured nonsense phrases to him while he cried.

She blinked away the moisture burning her eyes. There was only so much she’d allow herself. She coughed self-consciously and pried Willie loose. “Enough now. Let’s go write your folks a letter telling them you’re coming home to them. Then we’ll head back to Peaceful. From there we’ll make arrangements to get you to San Antonio.” She wiped his eyes with her sleeve. “You dropped your peppermint. I think we have time to stop for another piece before we leave.”

Willie sniffed and swiped his arm across his face. With a smile, he appeared a different

child than the quiet, solemn one she'd lived with for the past few months. "Thanks, KC." His soft words spoke of more than a piece of candy.

KC KICKED SULTAN into a gallop. The slow pace of wagon the last few days made the stallion, as well as herself, restless. Now, only a few hours away from Peaceful, she let him out to stretch his legs. His long stride ate up the ground until when KC glanced back, Willie and the wagon were only a speck on the horizon. Then she turned the big animal and headed him back.

The wind whipped over her. Sultan's mane snapped in her face. Like Pegasus he flew, his hooves digging into the dirt, leaping over small gullies and brush, his pace never faltering. She leaned low over his neck and let him race, relishing the feel of his powerful body beneath her, the sense of freedom it gave her to control his strength with only her hands, knees and voice.

Ahead three men on horseback surrounded the wagon. Fear coiled in KC's belly. It couldn't be the Baker brothers. Throughout the trip home she'd kept a sharp eye out for them. When she and Willie got this close to home and she hadn't seen a trace of the brothers, she'd decided they weren't around. She urged Sultan forward, coaxing more speed from the animal.

Closer. It was them.

A shot rang out and Danny collapsed in a heap. KC heard Willie's anguished cry and saw him jump at the man holding the smoking gun.

No, she cried silently, reaching for her gun. The sound of Sultan's hooves pounding the ground alerted the men to KC's approach.

The man, Harold, struck Willie across the face and caught him as he crumpled. He held Willie against his chest with one arm and brought the gun up to the boy's temple.

Sultan skidded to a halt; his sides heaving, sweat darkening his coat. Even over the horse's hard blowing and the thud of her heart KC heard the sharp click of the gun's hammer.

"Let the gun drop, boy," Harold ordered, pressing the muzzle to Willie's head.

KC's gaze went from man to man. Davey and Lonny grinned back at her; their hands hovered over their guns. Harold's face was mask of rage. Slowly, reluctantly she loosened her grip and let the gun slide from her fingers. It landed on the soft ground soundlessly.

"Get yar hands up and get down. Lonny get his gun. Davey tie this one up." Harold tossed Willie's limp body at Davey.

Never taking her eyes from Harold's face, KC dismounted. He was the boss here.

Whatever happened would happen at his order. The other two were under his control, without his direction they'd be lost. She waited, poised to move at the first sign of Harold's inattention. A deadly calm came over her. Her skin felt cold. Fear seemed a distant emotion unrelated to the coiling tightness in her belly.

Willie moaned where he lay on the hard ground, his hands and feet bound. KC glanced down at him. Already a bruise formed across his cheek. His eyes fluttered open and he looked up at KC.

"Easy. You'll be fine," she told him.

Harold grabbed her arm, his fingers biting painfully into her flesh. "Maybe." He turned toward Lonny who rummaged through the wagon bed. "What they all got in there?"

"Not much. Some food, cloth, tack. Ah-ha, lookee here."

KC groaned as Lonny held up the bottle of brandy she'd gotten for Eli. The smooth liquor eased his discomfort without burning the lining of his throat and stomach.

"Give it here." Lonny tossed the bottle to Harold. He pulled the cork with his teeth, took a long swallow, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "That's real good." He looked at KC. "You got expensive taste, boy. You and me got business to settle." He yanked her forward

until their bodies almost touched. Though no taller than KC, Harold outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. She didn't try to break away. "On account of you, Emmy done run off with some no good cowboy."

"I told you before Mr. Baker, I didn't father Emmy's child. I never met her until that day in Ramblin." KC attempted to reason with him.

His fist slammed into her stomach. She doubled over in pain, gasping for breath. Tears burned her eyes. She sagged in his grip.

"Shut up, boy. The kind of business I got with you don't require you to talk none. No one takes advantage of a Baker and gets away with it. You need ta learn a lesson and I'm gonna teach it ta ya." He shoved her to the ground. "Davey get me my whip."

Grabbing her chin in his hand he put his face close to hers. "Ya ever been horsewhipped, boy?"

KC shuddered at the evil leering out at her from Harold's eyes. She knew it didn't matter to him whether she'd been with Emmy as a man or not. Harold was the kind of man who enjoyed inflicting pain. Despite what Emmy had done to her KC was glad the girl had escaped from her brother. KC knew she wasn't going to be as lucky.

Harold pulled a knife from his waistband and sliced the laces tying the front of KC's vest, the heavy leather vest that had hid her sex successfully for so long. Still weak from his blow she tried to stop him. He rewarded her effort with a backhanded slap across her face. Stars swam behind her closed eyes. She lay face down in the dirt while he stripped away the vest and tore off the back of her cotton shirt. She hugged the ground. Warm sun touched her bare flesh.

"Damn!" Davey swore above her. "Is that boy pale." A hand stroked her backbone. "Smooth as silk too."

She shivered despite the heat of the day. She'd lived among men and around whores too long not to know some men would take their pleasure where they found it. By his raspy tone, heavy with sexual excitement, she feared she might be raped no matter if they discovered she was female or not.

"Quit your droolin' Davey. I ain't havin' no brother of mine screwing boys."

"Ah, jeez Harold, I was just a lookin'."

Her relief at Harold's objection to Davey's urges was short-lived. Harold grabbed her shoulder and yanked her to her feet. She bent double, her arms across her chest, clutching the tatters of her shirt close. Head down she staggered along where he dragged her, afraid to look up

and see the recognition of her womanhood in their eyes. The whipping Harold planned to give her would be nothing compared to her fate if they discovered her sex. Pain she could stand. As a Comanche slave she'd endured more than one beating. But she didn't think she could survive the humiliation and degradation of rape. Too well, she remembered her mother's agonized screams. And later, those of the other female captives old enough to serve their master's needs. She could recall clearly the dead look in their eyes when the Indians finished with them.

"When I'm done it won't be so smooth no more." Harold laughed and shoved her at Davey. "Stand him up and tie his arms around that tree. Make sure it's tight. Don't want him to wiggle away when the leather bites into his flesh."

Davey caught and held her. She struggled to conceal herself. Though not as big as Harold, Davey was still stronger than she. He yanked her arms in front of her and lashed them together at the wrists. The coarse rope bit abrasively into her skin. Like a unwilling dog on a lead he pulled her over to the tree Harold indicated.

"Not together you fool," Harold yelled and stomped over. "Around the trunk of the tree." He reached out and grabbed KC's wrists, pulling her arms up and over her head.

She felt the front of her shirt fall away. The air caressed her unbound breasts.

Davey gasped. She gave a sharp jerk and slipped from Harold's grasp. Her knee came up and connected with his groin. He doubled over and stumbled into Davey, knocking them both to the ground. She turned to flee. Lonny's bulk brought her up short. He grabbed her and spun her around. There he held her, an arm around her middle pressing her back against his chest. She thrashed in his grip until he squeezed the breath from her lungs and she hung limp, gulping for air.

Harold climbed to his feet, cupping himself in one hand. The other hand shot out and captured her chin, forcing her face up to his. If the look in his eyes had scared her before, what she saw now made her blood run cold. She gulped and closed her eyes.

She was going to die. Die in the most horrible and painful fashion this man could conceive.

"Guess you were right. Boy," he spat the word. "You sure didn't father Emmy's baby." He pinched her face between his fingers. "Look at me," he ordered. As the pressure increased she opened her eyes. An evil grin that didn't touch his eyes curved his lips. "Course me and the boys here can show ya how it's done. Can't we fellas?" He stroked his other hand down her throat and over her breasts, stopping only briefly to rip away what remained of her shirt, leaving her bare from the waist up. "Kinda small, ain't they Lonny?" He covered one breast with his

hand, squeezing until she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

Lonny touched her other breast massaging it almost gently. “Big enough I suppose.” His hand slipped down to her waist and then to the juncture of her thighs. He cupped his hand there and pulled her back against him, grinding his hips into her backside. “It’s what’s here that matters.”

KC stood motionless while their hands roved over her body. She kicked out once when Davey went to pull off her boots. Harold slapped her. Blood flooded her mouth and she went limp. Escaped was impossible. They stripped off her trousers leaving her bare, exposed, vulnerable. Hands touched her, pinching, poking, prodding, invasive, painful. She tried to block them out. Every time she closed her eyes Harold forced them open, sometimes with his voice rasping threats of forms of torture that made her eyes go wide in fear, other times with his fingers gouging a tender portion of her body. She wished herself dead.

For awhile she fought them with all her strength hoping if she hurt them enough they might kill her, but her efforts were puny against their combined strength. Her bare feet made little impact and her bound hands defeated her attempts. They merely laughed, pinning her helpless between their bulky bodies.

And what of poor Willie, so close to finding himself restored to his family. If she died, who would help him? Would they let him live? She doubted it. She had to survive.

She refused to let herself think of what she had lost by not telling Christopher the truth. Suddenly, she knew with him she could have dared to be a woman. He could have freed her from the fear that kept her locked away pretending to be a boy. Whether or not she could have made the transition into his world or whether he would have even wanted her to no longer mattered. She'd given it all up without trying. A coward, she'd condemned herself to a lifetime without love and him to one of self-disgust. Afraid to face her past she'd let him believe her a boy. Let him believe the feelings he had for her were perverse, that he was less than a man. This was her punishment for her lie.

"Enough!" Harold roared. He pulled her sharply away from Lonny into his embrace. His arm tight around her waist he pressed her against him from shoulder to knee. His thigh shoved between her legs until she straddled it, forcing her to rise on tip toe.

Davey stroked the skin of her buttocks and thigh. "Kin I have her first." He pleaded like a child for a special treat.

"Don't let him, Harold," Lonny argued. "Last time ya let him go first thar weren't nothing

left. Remember.”

KC couldn't prevent the shudders coursing through her body. To these men she was less than human, a toy to use, break and then discard. That they would kill her was no longer in doubt, the only questions remaining were how much abuse her body could endure before she died and whether she could keep herself from begging.

Harold pulled back her head and grinned. “Having fun?” he asked. In response, KC spat in his face. She never saw his fist coming. Pain, sharp and welcome, lanced behind her eyes. The world went black.

Chapter 10

THE SKY, blue and cloudless, filled Willie's vision, as he regained consciousness. He blinked, wincing at the pain lancing behind his eyes and nausea claimed him. With a choked groan he twisted and vomited onto the hard, parched ground beneath him. His mouth tasted of bile and blood. He closed his eyes and waited for the pounding in his head to ease and his stomach to stop churning.

Loud, angry voices roused him from his stupor. He tried to sit up only to find his hands bound behind his back and his ankles lashed together. He wiggled uselessly on the ground.

"Let me have her first," Davey whined. "Please Harold."

"No," shouted Lonny.

The Baker brothers. Where was KC? What had they done to him? Willie tugged determinedly at the bonds. He bit his lip as the coarse rope tore his skin. He had to help KC. By squirming, he managed to sit up. His head swam, the edges of his vision grew fuzzy and his stomach lurched again. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, he swallowed heavily until he regained

control.

The argument raged on.

“Shut up,” Harold said. “I go first. Then Lonny and then you, Davey.”

“Ah, but...”

“Take it or leave it. Lonny’s right, last time I let you go first with a woman she was dead afore we got our turn.”

A woman? Who were they talking about?

Willie opened his eyes and looked around. The three men stood near the wagon about twenty feet away. The supplies that had been so neatly loaded in the wagon bed now lay strewn around. The few items the brothers had decided to keep, a tin of tobacco, a sack of coffee beans, and a couple pieces of tack, sat in a pile while everything else was tossed carelessly into the dirt and trampled beneath their feet. Flour spilled from its sack dusting the area white. A length of blue cotton lay draped over Danny’s corpse. Flies already buzzed around the blood pooled on the ground. Their glittering blue-black bodies swarmed over the gaping hole in the animal’s large head and his glazed-over eyes.

Pulling his gaze away, Willie searched the area for KC. He gulped and blinked. Ten feet

away a woman lay sprawled on the ground, her pale, nude body bruised and bloody, her hands tied together at the wrists, her arms stretched over her head. Where had she come from?

Never before had Willie seen an unclothed woman. He couldn't help but stare, fascinated by the differences between her body and his own. Her softly rounded breasts, the curve of her waist, the flare of her hips, and the swath of unbroken hair nestled between her thighs. Embarrassed, he looked away.

Now the Baker brothers' words made sense. They planned to rape her. Willie shuddered. He knew all about rape. Before the Comanche had traded him to KC, he'd been forced to listen while they repeatedly raped the two women captives taken along with him and the Martin boy. He remembered their screams and their crying, the harsh grunts of the Indians as they covered the women. Shamefully, he also remembered how he and Andrew Martin clung together, closing their eyes and doing nothing, too afraid to move, to help. Logic told him he'd been as helpless then as he was now, but deep inside he knew he should have done something.

His father had always told him a true man never hurt women, they protected women. Willie knew he'd failed to be a man. He'd failed his father.

This time he didn't intend to hide his face in fear. As long as there was breath in his body

he'd do his best to protect this unknown woman. Both his father and KC would expect him to act. He didn't intend to fail.

But what could he do? Trying to keep his gaze away from the woman's pale flesh, he looked around. If only he could locate KC. KC would help. A flash of white against the ground caught his eye, a piece of cotton torn from a shirt. Next to it lay the remains of KC's vest and a few feet away he saw a pair of boots and trousers. He recognized them as KC's. But his friend was no where to be seen.

He struggled to slip out of his bonds. Understanding came in a flash. He went still. No. She couldn't be. KC couldn't be a woman. That fragile, battered woman lying there could not be the same strong young man Willie knew as KC. Hesitantly Willie forced himself to study the woman's face. Though pale and swollen, it was KC's face. If there'd been any doubt in Willie's mind the tangle of red hair surrounding her face dispersed it.

Shock. Anger. Hurt. Violent emotions hit him one after another. KC was a woman. Confusion left Willie feeling weak. He looked at KC, willing him...her to open her eyes. Tell me, he begged silently, tell me what I should do. She didn't answer; her green eyes remained closed.

“Get me some water.” Harold moved toward KC’s motionless body. “I like my women awake.” The man’s cruel laughter made Willie’s skin crawl.

Some instinct of self-preservation made him lie down before the brothers noticed he was conscious. A few yards in the opposite direction Sultan browsed on the dry grass. At his feet lay KC’s gun. As quietly as possible Willie started inching his way toward it. He kept one eye on the men, going completely still when they happened to glance his way. His heart pounded in fear. The distance stretched out like miles in front of him. Could he get there before it was too late for KC?

The rough, brush-covered ground bit into his flesh, tearing through his shirt.

Harold stood over KC’s body. He grinned and poked her ribs with his foot. She didn’t move. His grin faded.

Lonny hovered behind him. “Damn. Is she dead?”

Harold knelt down and put his hand on KC’s neck. “Naw. She’s still breathing. Where’s that water?”

Davey handed him a canteen. “Here.”

Willie groaned. The gun still lay yards away.

“Wake up, bitch.”

Water splashed KC’s face.

She moaned and her eyes fluttered open. Dazed and uncomprehending she stared upward, barely conscious. But it was enough for Harold.

“Good,” he said, “you’re awake.” He shoved her thighs apart and moved between them.

No. This couldn’t happen. Willie pushed across the ground toward the gun. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from KC.

She moved once, uttering a strangled cry. Harold laughed an evil sound and slapped her. When her eyes started to close he grabbed her chin and swore. “Look at me,” he demanded. He freed himself from his trousers. “I’m gonna enjoy this. But I don’t think you will.” He threw back his head and laughed.

Willie couldn’t stop himself from gagging. He squeezed his eyes closed unable to watch. The gun still lay out of reach.

He’d failed. Again.

“*Aiiyee.*” An unearthly shriek split the silence. Something whistled through the air. The deep rumble of pounding hooves shook the ground.

Willie's eyes flew open.

"*Awugh.*" Harold gave a strangled cry. He clutched his throat with both hands; blood gushed over his finger. Feathers protruded from his neck. His eyes bulged as he struggled to pull air through his punctured throat and a pinkish froth bubbled from his nose and mouth. He clawed at the arrow piercing his neck. Then his body arched as another slammed into his back. And another.

In horror, Willie watched as Harold's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell forward. Dead. His body lay still, draped across KC's. Blood dripped from his mouth, nose and neck staining her chest crimson.

"Indians!" Davey screamed and raced for his horse. He stumbled and fell as an arrow went through the back of his knee. He screamed a high-pitched animalistic sound of agony. He lay thrashing, his screams going on and on.

Lonny dropped into a crouch and pulled his gun. Over and over he fired, until the hammer clicked on empty chambers. He didn't notice, continuing to pull the trigger until the Indian rode him down. From the back of his charging horse the Indian leapt. In seconds Lonny lay unmoving. The Indian stood above him a look of fierce triumph on his face.

Willie lay frozen. He recognized that face. It haunted his nightmares. Red Buffalo. The same Comanche who'd raided Willie's home and taken him captive. Hate and fear held him motionless.

Red Buffalo's eyes glittered with satisfaction. He threw back his head and screamed a piercing cry. Then with strips of cloth torn from the men's shirts he tied them up. He calmly ignored Davey's screams of pain and terror. He yanked clods of dirt from the earth and silenced the men's cries by shoving them into their mouths. Leaving the two men trussed like chickens waiting for slaughter, he turned toward KC.

Grunting, he shoved Harold's body aside and knelt over her.

Willie twisted on the ground scrambling for the gun. Sweat burned his eyes and his swollen cheek. His breath rasped in his lungs. Inch by inch he moved along the ground. Then the gun lay touching his forehead, the metal cool and hard. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulders, he wiggled his body, pulling his arms over and around his legs and torso until his hands were in front of him. For a minute, he lay gasping, blinded by tears of pain. His hands trembled as he reached out and picked up the gun. Numb from being tightly tied his fingers would not answer his mind's commands. The gun wobbled erratically in his grasp. Ignoring the

sharp stab of pins and needles tingling through his hands he gripped the gun and pushed himself into a sitting position.

Only once before had he ever held a gun, this very same one, KC's. He struggled to remember the careful instructions she had given him, her patient voice and words echoing in his mind.

"Guns are nothing but tools, Willie. They are only as good or bad as the man who uses them. Treat them with the care and respect you would any valuable tool. And always remember they have only one purpose. To kill."

To kill. Could he kill?

Red Buffalo leaned over KC. In his hand the sun reflected off the blade of his knife.

Kill! Willie surged to his knees, the gun clenched between his stinging hands. His eyes blurred. His fingers squeezed the trigger.

The gun roared, jerked upward and slipped from his hands. The recoil threw him backwards. Stunned, the breath knocked from his body, his ears ringing, he lay waiting for the Indian's cry of pain. It didn't come.

Again, he had to try again.

“No, Willie, don’t.” KC’s voice pierced his haze.

He shook his head and tried to sit up. He twisted to look for the gun. Instead, he saw two dusty moccasins resting inches from his face. His gaze traveled upward over the strong brown legs and solid torso of Red Buffalo, to the man’s angry face.

Willie closed his eyes in defeat and waited for the feel of the knife slicing into his flesh. Silently he prayed his death would be swift.

“EKA KURA. Kee.” KC called Red Buffalo’s name. She stumbled to her feet. “No.”

Red Buffalo stood motionless, poised, the knife in his hand, his massive body taut with tension, his muscles tight and hard. Sweat glistened over his rich mahogany skin. His black hair flowed loose over his shoulders, the sun catching its red highlights. KC knew it would take him but a second to reach down and slice Willie’s throat. The boy wouldn’t stand a chance. She had to reach them, to stop Red Buffalo. How she would accomplish that she had no idea. She only knew she had to try.

She approached him slowly, as she would a fearsome wild animal. She ignored the aches

and bruises of her body, her whole focus on Red Buffalo's harsh features and glittering eyes. She spoke to him in the clipped consonants of Comanche, her tone low and soft, begging for Willie's life.

"Let him go, Red Buffalo. He is only a boy, small and weak against your great strength and power. I, who have never begged, beg this of you." She felt no shame in her plea. No sense of loss of self in begging for her young friend's life.

With each word, she stepped closer until she stood directly in front of him. He didn't answer, his hard, dark gaze moving over her. She didn't flinch or attempt to hide her nakedness, she stood proudly, head held high, knowing he would honor courage and disdain fear.

Forcing herself to a steadiness she did not feel, she reached out and laid her hand on his forearm. Beneath her cold fingers his flesh felt warm and solid. "Please. Don't kill the boy."

Red Buffalo looked at her. As tall as she was she didn't have to look up to meet his eyes.

Some of the rage drained out of his eyes, through his body remained rigid. "Why should I let him live?" he demanded.

What could she say? She searched his face for a trace of the young boy he'd been. The boy who during her captivity had been her unappreciated protector. Many times he'd stayed his

father's hand, taking blows meant for her. The other boys had let her be, knowing if Red Buffalo were around, he would defend her. Often it had been he who followed and brought her back from her many escape attempts. She had cursed and fought, scratching, biting, kicking and striking him, yet he never retaliated, merely returning her unharmed to camp. Nor had he told his father of those attempts, saving her from severe beatings time and again.

KC trembled. Why did she remember these things now? They had meant little to her then. She'd known he didn't do them for her, but for what she represented to him, some kind of receptacle of magic. And she'd hated him despite his championship of her.

Besides Red Buffalo was no longer that boy. She must not forget who this man was. He was Comanche. Her enemy. Son of the man who had led the raid that killed her parents and shattered her life. A man who made it clear he would someday own her body and soul. She could still hear his words as she rode out of Winter Hawk's camp with Eli. "You are mine Firebird. I will come for you."

"Give me the words, woman, that will convince me to let the white eyes boy live."

She closed her eyes in despair. How could she say the words that would bind her to Red Buffalo? She knew what he sought. In his superstitious mind he believed she held some great

power. A power he sought to possess. That she was just a woman like any other he couldn't accept. The color of her hair had doomed her from the moment she'd ridden into Winter Hawk's camp. Red was the color of his magic.

Though only a boy then, untried in battle, he had marked her as his own. She'd known when she became a woman and he a warrior, he intended to claim her as wife. And she'd also known she would never accept the Indian life. She'd courted death and disaster trying to escape it.

Now she was trapped. Her affection for young Willie made it impossible for her to resist. She had little doubt Red Buffalo would slay the boy. Though not a particularly cruel man, to kill an enemy, whether it be a man, a woman or a child was merely a way of life for him. That he might consider letting a hated Tejano live in order to gain her favor told her just how highly he valued her.

Still, she fought her fate. To give herself willingly to this man was unthinkable.

"Think carefully Red Buffalo. Though I am but a woman, God has given me a strong spirit." She lifted a hand to her hair. "Kaatu has even marked me so all may know a warrior's spirit resides in this woman's body, to warn away the unwary man who would try to claim me."

“No man claims what it is mine.” He reached out an arm, wrapped it around her waist and pulled her flush against his hard body. His eyes bore into hers.

She met his gaze boldly, showing him she was no meek, timid maiden, rather his equal. Still, she could not prevent the shudder of pain coursing through her as his rough embrace pressed into the bruises decorating her body.

“I am no man’s. I belong to myself. Only I can bestow myself on a man. Any man who takes me by force will suffer for it. If you kill the boy I will never come to you willingly. My spirit will fight until it bursts free of my body.”

For a moment, he held her tight then his hold eased. He nodded curtly and stepped away. His acceptance of her terms left her feeling drained and hopeless. She had saved Willie’s life. He would have his chance. Hers was gone.

Though she had promised Red Buffalo nothing, she knew in his mind she was his by her own word. He would not force her. Yet. But neither would he let her go. He would keep her by his side. She feared he might even attempt to court her.

How long, she wondered, would he be content to wait before his patience ended. Never would she submit to him in any way, not as a woman to a man nor as a slave to a master. In a

way she'd lied to him, promising him the possibility of something she knew could never be. Part of her hoped his patience would end soon. Another dreaded the time when he would come to her and ask payment for Willie's life. For then she would break her unspoken word and die.

Red Buffalo placed the knife in her hand. He picked up her gun and walked away.

"KC?" Willie stared up at her with wide, shocked eyes.

Suddenly her nakedness embarrassed her. She felt the color rise under her skin. She was thankful Willie said nothing about it or her unexpected change in gender. How could she explain? Quickly she sliced through the ropes that bound him. "You'll be fine. Take Sultan and head back to Peaceful. Tell Eli..." her voice broke. She closed her eyes for a moment somehow sure she'd never again see the man who had been a father to her.

"What about you? I can't leave you with that Indian. You've got to come with me. He's not looking now. I can get the shotgun from the wagon."

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "No. I can't. You wouldn't stand a chance. Red Buffalo has chosen to let you go free. Go back to Peaceful. Tell Eli about your folks. He'll make sure you get safely back to them."

Willie looked at her in confusion. "But what's gonna to happen to you?"

“I’m going to go with Red Buffalo.”

“No. You can’t do that. He’s an Indian.”

She smiled at his comment. There was no way she could make him understand the bargain she’d struck with Red Buffalo. And even if she could, she wouldn’t. She would never burden Willie with guilt for her fate. She gladly gave up her future so he could have one.

She helped him to his feet and led him over to Sultan.

“Easy boy,” she soothed the nervous stallion. Handing the reins to Willie she cupped her hands for his foot and gave him a boost onto the animal’s back. He perched there uncertainly and stared down at her. She could see the tears he struggled so hard to blink away. “Take care of him.” She wasn’t sure if she spoke to the stallion or the boy. “Hang on tight,” she ordered and smacked Sultan’s rump. The horse took off gratefully toward Peaceful. Willie clung tight, looking backwards.

She stood watching until he disappeared from view. Now, her body failed her. The world around her grew dim and fuzzy, whirling sickeningly. Her legs buckled and with a startled cry she collapsed.

AT THE sound of Firebird's cry, Red Buffalo turned to see her crumple to the ground. In seconds, he reached her side. His fingers sought and found the strong beat of her heart at the base of her throat. Gently he gathered her in his arms and carried her into the shade. There he spread out his buffalo robe and laid her on it.

Looking at the colorful bruises covering her slim, pale flesh, his eyes grew dark and his jaw clenched in fury. Those who had touched his Firebird would pay for their sins. He glared at the two men bound and gagged on the ground. They would suffer for daring to lay hands on Firebird. The third man already lay dead. Red Buffalo's rage on seeing the man about to violate Firebird had driven his arrow too surely home. The man had died too easily.

Red Buffalo moved quickly. The boy would reach Peaceful soon and the white shaman would come for her. After seeing to Firebird's comfort, he went to take care of his captives.

KC STRETCHED, her battered body protesting the move. She groaned softly and tested each

ache. Young and healthy, she would recover; her injuries while painful were not life threatening.

She looked around at the fading daylight. To the west, the sun sank behind the mountains, streaking the sky with vivid pinks and purples, throwing long shadows over the rough ground. She watched the sun paint the drab brown landscape with shades of yellow, orange and red, transforming it from a bare rocky plain to a wonderland of vivid shapes and colors that changed second by second. How she loved this harsh unforgiving country, it's subtle beauty seen only by those willing to look beyond its stark emptiness and unrelenting openness.

"Arrgh!" A long, drawn out scream of pain and terror split the air. "No-o-o-o..." The scream ended in a liquid gurgle.

KC bolted upright. An appalling sight met her questing eyes.

Silhouetted against the multi-hued sky stood Red Buffalo. Legs spread he tilted his head back and lifted his hands high. He let loose a piercing warrior's cry of victory. In one hand he gripped his knife, blood dripping down his arm and across his chest. The other hand held a grisly trophy.

KC gagged and turned her eyes away.

Lonny's tongue hung from Red Buffalo's hand.

The screams went on and on. She curled into a ball and pulled the buffalo robe around her. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands tightly over her ears. Still, she could hear their agonized cries. Even without tongues the Baker brothers gave voice to the torment they suffered.

Shivering in spite the warmth of the fur surrounding her, KC retreated deep inside herself. Wordlessly she prayed for their souls. Despite what they had done and would have done to her, she could not bring herself to wish them this fate.

How long it went on she couldn't say. Long after the shrieks faded she heard them still. She burrowed into the dark, sheltering comfort of her soul and hid.

BEFORE RED Buffalo went to Firebird, he washed the blood from his hands and body. Nothing of those men would he allow to dirty her again.

The last fading rays of the sun revealed to him the damage they had inflicted on her. Wrapped in his buffalo robe, her face a pale oval in the shadowy depths, she lay curled in a tight ball. A large bruise covered her lower jaw, her lower lip split and swollen. Gently he pulled the fur away from her. His body tightened in rage. Blood, both her own and Harold's, crusted the skin of her chest. She whimpered in her sleep and hugged herself.

The men's moans of agony pleased his ears. He restrained himself from returning to torment them further. Any more and they would escape this world too soon. For what they had done, they must suffer long. He regretted he could not stay to witness it. Soon the white shaman would come. He took satisfaction in knowing when the men died their spirits would enter the next world torn and mutilated.

Firebird didn't waken as he washed the blood from her, tended to her wounds, and then dressed her in the extra clothes he found in the wagon. Quickly he gathered up what he would need for the long trip to his village. Of the Baker brothers three horses he picked the strongest, a plain brown gelding. The others he unsaddled and set free. In a matter of minutes, he was ready to leave. With Firebird held securely in his arms he mounted his patient pony and headed him home.

Behind him the moon rose on a scene of carnage.

NIGHT fell before Willie rode into Peaceful. Lather covered Sultan's heaving sides. Willie swayed in the saddle. Lights and music spilled out of the cantina into the street. The barn lay dark and quiet. He slid to the ground and led the blowing horse into the dim building.

Legs trembling Willie bent over, his body shook so, he could barely stand.

Something hard and cold dug into his back.

"Hold right there," a harsh voice whispered. Then hands grabbed and spun him around. "Willie?"

A match flared. Willie blinked as the light from a lantern blinded him for a moment.

CHRISTOPHER placed the lantern on a hook and turned back toward the boy. With a swift glance he took in Willie's battered face, his pale complexion, and the dark shadows under his drooping eyes. Next to him stood Sultan, his nose nearly touching the floor, sweat dripped off

his quivering body.

Christopher felt a shiver of alarm. Where was KC? Easing the boy down onto a bale of hay before he collapsed, Christopher knelt in front of him. "Tell me what happened."

Willie gulped and stared into Christopher's eyes. "Three men...shot Danny...hurt KC...An Indian..." He struggled to catch his breath. His voice strained as he gasped out the story.

"Slow down, boy. You're safe now. Tell it to me slowly."

"The Baker brothers."

"Who?"

"Last time KC and I were in Ramblin the Baker brothers jumped KC. Their sister said KC got her pregnant and they were hopping mad. We got away then and KC said not to worry, but this time 'bout half a day's ride from here they caught us. KC was letting Sultan run when the brothers shot Danny. When KC came back, they held a gun to my head. The older brother was going to whip KC."

KC whipped. Fear made Christopher's stomach clench. "What happened?"

Willie shuddered and dropped his head into his hands. Sobs shook his body. He raised his tear stained face. "Did you know?"

“Know what?”

Willie shook his head. “They didn’t whip KC.”

Gently Christopher put his hand on the boy’s trembling shoulder. “Why not?”

For a minute, Willie just stared at him. “KC’s a girl.”

Shock ripped through Christopher holding him in its rigid grip. KC, a girl. Not a boy. A woman. Female.

His first response was relief. The feelings he had for KC weren’t twisted. They were normal, right.

How could he not have known? All along, his body had known what his eyes couldn’t tell him. Why hadn’t KC told him? Didn’t he—she realize how he felt? Questions without answers left Christopher confused. Anger at KC’s deception grew in him.

What Willie said next wiped away the anger and made his blood freeze.

“They took off her clothes.” Willie sobbed his words. “They would of raped her, ‘cept for the Indian. He killed Harold. Shot an arrow right through his neck. He was a gonna kill me too. He woulda slit my throat, but KC stopped him.”

An Indian. “What happened to KC?”

"I don't know. They talked for awhile in Comanche. Then KC made me get on Sultan and sent me here."

"How long ago?"

"I don't...it was still light when I left. Four, maybe five hours." He described the area where he'd left KC, then his tear-swollen eyes drooped. His body swayed slightly under Christopher's hands. "I tried to stop him. Shot at him, but I missed. I'm sorry, Mr. Christopher."

"Go lie down, Willie. Get some sleep. I'm going to talk to Eli and Dead Eye." He steered the groggy boy into an empty stall and settled him on the straw.

"Mr. Christopher." Willie called as Christopher turned to leave.

"I knew the Indian. He's called Red Buffalo. He's the one that attacked my home. KC seemed to know him too."

"Rest now. Oh," Christopher paused at the stall door, "and Willie, you did good."

"Ya gotta save her."

"I will, Willie, I will."

Christopher stood in Eli's door. The old man slept quietly for once, his slumber undisturbed

by the almost constant cough that now racked his body. How would he handle this news? KC was like family to him. The two shared a close if undemonstrative relationship. Christopher doubted if KC showed her emotions to anyone. He supposed years of hiding your true self would force a person to grow reserved. Did Eli know KC's secret? He had to know. Was that what he'd tried to tell him the other day. That KC was a girl.

KC's sex no longer mattered. She was in danger. And the only ones who could help her were a sick old man and himself, a man who knew little about how to survive in this harsh Texas country. Could he save her? Christopher didn't know, he only knew he was willing to die trying.

Something stirred in a dark corner of the room. Christopher tensed then relaxed as Dead Eye spoke.

"What ya doing, boy?"

"Willie just rode in on Sultan. He and KC were attacked. KC's been taken captive by some Indian by the name of Red Buffalo."

Eli sat up and lit a lamp. "Red Buffalo's always wanted KC," he said.

Christopher blinked at the sudden light.

Dead Eye motioned him in. “Come on in, boy. We got us some planning to do, if’n were gonna get that little gal back.”

“You know KC’s a girl?” Christopher asked. Eli’s eyes echoed his question.

“Damn. Anyone who looked could see that weren’t no boy.” Dead Eye stared at Christopher. “I may have only one eye, but I ain’t blind like some folks I know.”

“Who is Red Buffalo?” Christopher asked Eli.

Dead Eye answered for Eli. “He’s a half-breed who hates whites worse than any full-blooded Comanche I know. His sole goal in life is to kill as many whites as he can and those he can’t kill, drive off Comanche land.”

Eli continued. “All true, but he’s also extremely superstitious. When his father, Winter Hawk, took KC on a raid years ago, Red Buffalo somehow got it into his head she has some kind of power because of her red hair. I heard as a young man he had a vision that the power of the Firebird would drive the whites from the land. He’s convinced KC is this Firebird. When Winter Hawk gave her to me Red Buffalo swore he’d get her back someday. The last few years he’s come around Peaceful, but he’s never made any move toward her. I’d hoped he’d forgotten.”

Anger surged through Christopher at Eli's careless disregard for KC's safety. "If you knew he was around why the hell didn't you take her away from here?"

"Don't you think I tried. He...she...Damn, it's going to be hard to start thinking of her as female. She wouldn't leave. Even if she didn't love this godforsaken country, she has a younger brother who was adopted into a Comanche tribe. She's been looking for him for years. Until she knows he's either safe or dead she won't budge. Peaceful is a perfect place to center her search. The Comancheros come through here regularly. They always seem to know about any whites living with the Comanche, though they've never had any information about Brendan. No, I've tried to get her to go East but she's stubborn. So here we've stayed."

A cough stopped Eli. He bent over as spasms of coughing racked his body. Dead Eye supported him until the attack passed then handed him a glass of water. Eli gulped it. In the lamplight sweat beaded on his face. "You have to go after her. She'll never give Red Buffalo what he wants and being who and what he is he'll have to kill her."

"I'll do my best." The words stuck in Christopher's throat. His best. He alone knew how inadequate that was. The thought of what his failure would mean this time made him shake. Already his best had been less than enough for two women he loved.

Loved. The realization hit him hard. What he felt for KC was love. The feeling had grown deep inside of him, a feeling he'd denied, tried to bury, to force away, was love. Not the love of a man for a young boy, a brother, a son, but the love of a man for a woman. A love that demanded a physical expression, that demanded he act. This time he wouldn't fail, he couldn't.

"I expect yar gonna need a bit of help. Ain't no one can track as good as me. And I'm right handy with a gun, too." Christopher nodded his agreement to Dead Eye's offer of assistance. Pride wouldn't help him get KC back, Dead Eye just might.

"Go with him Dead Eye, but you won't need to do much tracking. I know where Red Buffalo is headed, Winter Hawk's camp up north of here. Bring me that box over there."

Dead Eye placed a wooden cigar box in Eli's lap.

Eli opened the box and pulled out four long, pure white feathers attached by thin strips of braided rawhide to an intricately beaded headband. He stroked the feathers with a reverent touch. "Winter Hawk gave me this, along with KC, for saving his wife and son." He lifted the headband and motioned Christopher closer. "The Comanche will recognize these hawk feathers as Winter Hawk's totem. With them you can ride unmolested through Comanche country and into his camp."

Christopher bent down so Eli could tie the headband around his head. The beads felt cool against his forehead, the feathers brushed his bare shoulder.

“Looks right purty. Got any gee gaw for me in that thar box, Eli?”

Eli closed the box with a snap and glared up at the grinning Dead Eye. “You don’t need one, you’re so ugly no self-respecting Comanche would want you.”

“Reckon ya might be right. Glad for it too. Saved my hide more than once. Did I ever tell ya about some Tonkawas what thought I’d make a tasty snack?”

Eli groaned. “You don’t have time to stand around spinning yarns now. Every minute you waste here puts Red Buffalo that much further ahead of you. You can talk Christopher’s ears off later; you’ve got a long ride in front of you. Get moving.”

Despite the worry eating at him, Christopher smiled at their good-natured bickering.

“For once Eli’s got the right of it. If’n ya’ll see ta the horses I’ll get some supplies together.”

Christopher nodded and headed out of the room. As he left he heard Dead Eye. “Don’t worry old friend, me and Christopher’ll bring that little gal back to ya.”

Eli’s response was lost in a ragged cough.

A short while later he and Dead Eye rode into the night after KC.

Chapter 11

PALE STREAKS OF light brightened the sky, promising a clear cloudless day. The night air already held a hint of the day's coming warmth. Christopher shifted in Lady's saddle and scanned the sky. Ahead half a dozen dark specks floated in lazy circles.

"Buzzards." Dead Eye spat a stream of tobacco onto the dry ground. "Ain't too far now. Sure yar ready for what yar gonna see?" he asked Christopher. "What the Comanche leave behind ain't always purty."

No, he wasn't sure. Despite what Willie had said and Eli's assurances, he feared he would see KC's broken and lifeless body.

With a nod, he nudged Lady forward over the next rise. Once there he pulled her up short. She snorted and pranced as the smell of blood and death reached her nose. His stomach lurched and his skin grew cold.

"Easy, girl, easy." He patted the animal's damp neck.

Dead Eye rode up behind him and spat again. "Told ya." He reined his horse around the

now motionless Christopher. “Are ya coming?”

Swallowing the horror he felt at the scene before him, Christopher urged Lady into hell.

The first man was dead. One arrow pierced his throat from left to right, two more protruded from his back. His eyes stared upward, glazed and vacant, his scalp sliced from his head, leaving his bare skull exposed. Flies crawled over his face.

The other two men were stripped naked and staked out spread-eagle on the ground, their scalped heads propped up to look across their mutilated bodies. Their eyelids were sliced away, their genitals cut off and stuffed into their gaping mouths. Bellies slit open from groin to breastbone, their slippery pink intestines spilled from their bodies to lie in the dirt. After a quick glance, Christopher turned away, bile churning in his throat.

Dead Eye knelt next to one of the men. “This one’s still alive.”

He couldn’t be. No man could live through such torture. Christopher forced himself to look at what remained of what had once been a man. The man’s chest rose and fell erratically. In his eyes, nothing survived except agony. Still, he struggled to live, to breathe, to continue to exist.

With a twig, Dead Eye pulled the mangled flesh from the man’s mouth.

Christopher felt himself blanch at the sight. “Who is he?”

“Don’t think we’ll ever know. Red Buffalo cut out his tongue.”

The man let out a gurgling moan.

Dead Eye tossed the twig and its gruesome prize into the dirt. He rose to his feet, dusted his hands against his thighs and moved around the area, stepping carefully over the sticky mud that had formed from the ground being soaked with blood. He worked his way away from the men in ever-increased circles. Christopher followed a few paces behind.

Finally Dead Eye stopped and bent down. “Here,” he said, “see it, boy. The marks of two ponies.”

Christopher forced his thoughts from the men; dead and dying, lying only yards away. They were beyond help and no doubt had earned their fate.

He studied the tracks Dead Eye indicated. One bore the impression of metal shoes, the other while deeper was unshod. He said as much.

“Good. I’ll make a tracker outa ya yet, boy. That one,” Dead Eye pointed to the shod pony’s tracks, “belonged to one of them fellas. He’s going empty. The other must be Red Buffalo’s pony. He’s carrying double.” He grabbed his horse’s reins and swung up into the saddle with a grace at odds with his short, stocky build.

When Christopher hesitated, Dead Eye turned in his saddle. “Whatcha waiting for?”

“What about him?” Christopher looked toward the man on the ground. He knew those pleading eyes would haunt his dreams for a long time, if not forever.

“He’s already dead, his body just don’t know it yet.”

“We can’t just leave him like that.”

“Don’t know why the hell not. If Red Buffalo hadn’t come along KC wouldn’t of fared much better. Leave ‘em.”

When Christopher still didn’t move Dead Eye swore. “Only one thing ya can do for him. But he don’t deserve it.”

There was no doubt in Christopher’s mind as to what “it” was. The only question was who would do the deed. When Dead Eye turned away, Christopher forced himself to kneel next to the man. The gun felt cold and heavy in his hand as he placed it against the man’s temple. Swollen and caked with blood the man’s eyes sought Christopher’s. *Do it*, they pleaded.

The roar of the gun drowned out Christopher’s cry of denial. Blood and bits of flesh and bone splattered his face and chest. Eyes closed, he crouched next to the dead man. The gun dangled from his fingers. He knew he should feel something. Regret, horror, disgust. Instead,

there was nothing but numbness inside him.

“Get a move on, boy. Red Buffalo’s a good half day ahead of us and he’ll be moving fast.”

Christopher rose to his feet and holstered his gun. Lady shied away from him when he tried to mount, the smell of blood making her nervous. With soothing words he calmed the mare and mounted. As they rode after Red Buffalo, he didn’t look back at the man he’d just killed.

TRAVELING HARD and fast, making allowances only for Firebird’s comfort, the trip north to his village took Red Buffalo five days. The first two days she rode in front of him, limp and silent, on the third she let him know she could ride alone. He found he missed her warm body pressed against his.

Long before sunrise they rose, stopping briefly to eat and halting for the night when the light failed. Never once did she falter or attempt to slow their speed.

Red Buffalo could sense his pursuers, as the rabbit senses the fox. Being the hunted rather than the hunter made him uneasy. He wanted to turn and confront his foe, but knew to do so would lose him all he sought to gain. The white shaman would come for Firebird. If he killed

the man, Firebird would never be his. So he turned his back to the fight, knowing it would come to him soon enough. The white shaman must die, but it could not be at his hand. Red Buffalo had seen the sickness in the old man, if he waited, time would do what he could not.

Red Buffalo did not regret releasing the boy. Killing him would have merely delayed the pursuit, while letting him live gained Red Buffalo Firebird's gratitude. Though her words promised nothing, he'd take whatever advantage he could. He could not imagine her never being his. She would come to him. Though not by nature a patient man, for her he would wait as long as it took. It would be better if he did not have to force her. Her slim body housed a warrior's spirit. Offered freely her power would flow into him. To take it by force he risked having it turn and destroy him.

They traveled in a silence he found comfortable. When they camped at night, he watched her prepare their meal and care for her horse. She moved about her self-appointed tasks with an unconscious grace, her presence soothing and restful. Though she offered him nothing of her emotions, as if in her eyes he did not exist, he was content. For the moment. She didn't complain of her injuries, though occasionally a flicker of pain crossed her features. Each time he looked at her fading bruises he felt a resurgence of his rage. He wished those who'd dared to

harm her an eternity of torment.

The further north they went the cooler the weather became. Still, on the open plain he did not light a fire, knowing it would be seen for miles. When they settled down to sleep he didn't object as she curled into his buffalo robe, leaving him to lay alone on the cold, bare ground. Soon enough he would warm himself in her fire.

SCRAWNY DOGS greeted them at the edge of camp, their yapping alerting the people of their arrival. On the outside, KC appeared calm; her eyes reflected none of the horror she felt at again being a captive. They made their way through the camp, a group of about thirty widely spaced tepees that followed the lightly wooded riverbank. Warriors lounged in the sun smoking, talking and gambling with small, wooden dice, while women tended the cook fires and gathered at the river's edge to wash clothing. Drawn by the commotion from their play, children came running and crowded around. The dogs snapped and worried the horse's legs making them prance nervously. Hostile eyes peered out from inside the tepees.

Looking neither left nor right, KC sat straight and stiff in her saddle, ignoring the pinches

and pokes of the women and curious children and kept her eyes on Red Buffalo's broad back. He turned to look at her. With a frown and a wave of his hand, he scattered those that followed.

"Greetings, my son." Winter Hawk waited at the entrance to his tepee. He was as KC remembered him, a short, powerfully built man, his bare, muscled chest bearing the scars of many battles fought and won. A few strands of gray joined the snowy white feathers he always wore in his long black hair. Creases marked his weathered bronze skin, but he stood straight, his shoulders unbowed by age.

His piercing black eyes studied her silently. In her years as his slave she'd seen those eyes reveal many emotions, from the glee of a warrior caught up in blood lust, to that of a father gazing for the first time on his new born son. As they rested on her now, they darkened with disapproval.

Inside the tepee she could just make out Huwuni, bustling around.

"Honored father," Red Buffalo greeted the older man.

Winter Hawk frowned, then looked to Red Buffalo. "I am pleased you return safely. Come inside and eat, then we must talk."

"Let me see to my horses and I will come."

With a brief nod Winter Hawk bent low and disappeared into his tepee.

About twenty feet behind Winter Hawk's tepee stood a smaller one. Red Buffalo motioned her forward. He slipped from his pony's back and before KC could object lifted her from her horse. His strong hands gripped her waist and easily held her off the ground, inches from his chest. Her fingers rested on his forearms. She could feel the tensile strength in his muscles, the force of his desire held in check just beneath the surface, while in his eyes she saw the hungry patience of a big cat. He would wait, but he would not be denied. Not by a flicker of an eye did she reveal her fear of what would happen when his patience finally failed, as she knew it surely must.

He held her, his fingers biting into her flesh, firm and demanding, but not hurtful. He stared, testing. Then he let her slide down his body and released her. Unable to stop herself, she took a quick step back so their bodies no longer touched. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Wait for me in my tepee. Do not leave it until I come for you. I will care for the horses."

After a moments hesitation she nodded her agreement. Lifting the flap covering the opening, she entered the tepee.

Inside the air was still and warm compared to the crisp freshness outside. She tried to shake

off the strange sense of homecoming that enveloped her. How familiar it felt and smelled. The odors of wood smoke, cured hides and roasting meat blended with the scent of dried grass and moist earth. Sunlight streamed in from the open smoke flap above and filtered through the tough buffalo hide walls. Ten feet across, on one side fur bed robes lay rolled and tied, awaiting use, on the other, provisions, such as skin bags filled with dried meats and fruits were stored. Bows, arrows and other weapons hung from the tepee poles.

She walked over the hard packed earthen floor toward the center fire pit. Finding the makings to start a fire, she went to work. She sat back on her heels and fed twigs to the growing flame. She was back where she'd vowed never to be again, her life out of her control.

What else could she have done? She'd had no choice. Willie deserved a chance and she had given it to him. Now she had to decide what was left for her.

Could she give Red Buffalo what he wanted? Though she'd seen the spark of desire in his eyes, she didn't fear his invasion of her body.

What he sought from her went much further. Despite the heat of the flames, she shivered. He wanted to possess her heart, her very soul. She couldn't give him what she no longer owned. What he wanted belonged to another, now and forever. Christopher.

She hugged herself, rocking back and forth in grief for what she'd lost through her own foolish fear. In silent agony, she relived those moments when she had come close to reaching out and grabbing what she desired, only to run away. Scared of being a woman, of opening herself to another, of exposing her weaknesses, of being a vulnerable human being, she'd thrown away her chance to escape the prison of her own fears.

Christopher came to her freely, unafraid to express his feelings. Only his need to protect her from what she knew he felt were his unnatural desires had kept him from following through. Still, he offered her friendship, willing to deny himself in order to help her. And she responded by pushing him away and hiding behind her boy's facade. She bit back bitter tears. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

A soft scratching roused her from self-pity. Hastily she composed her features and turned to face the entrance.

"Huwuni." She jumped up and greeted the woman with an embrace.

"Firebird, it is good to see you. You are well? What has happened to your hair? It is so short."

KC laughed, Huwuni had changed little in six years. She still chattered like a noisy squirrel.

“I’m fine.” She held Huwuni at arm’s length and frowned at the sight of the woman’s rounded belly. “You’re expecting. Eli told you not to get pregnant again. It’s not safe for you.”

KC memories of the birth of Huwuni’s first child were ones of blood and strangled screams of pain. Huwuni had labored unsuccessfully for three days before Eli arrived. Even then, her life had hung by a slender thread. When he had managed to save her and the life of her son, Eli had told both her and Winter Hawk, she should not risk bearing another child.

Of all the Indians in Winter Hawk’s camp Huwuni alone held a special place in KC’s heart. Though only a few years KC’s senior Huwuni had made Indian life as bearable for her as possible. KC grimaced when she remembered just how difficult she’d made it for the patient Indian girl to be kind to her rebellious slave. She’d balked at doing the simplest chore or task set for her. When forced to the job by Winter Hawk or one of the older women, she’d managed to deliberately do it so badly all she could hope for was to survive the beating she’d be sure to receive.

More than once Huwuni silently came to her rescue, salvaging the mangled hides and ruined meals, saving her from those beatings. After awhile KC’s innate sense of fair play forced her to do her share. Especially when Huwuni grew big and clumsy with child. Slowly a bond formed

between them, forged by shared hardships and laughter. One, KC realized, that had not weakened with time. She loved this small, round Indian woman who was part sister, part mother and all friend.

All these years she'd thought of nothing but the horror of her capture and captivity. While she couldn't deny the brutal, violent nature of the Comanche, she now remembered the other gentler side of Indian life, the laughter, and the friendships. Things she'd pushed from her memory came flooding back.

She hugged Huwuni close. "I've missed you. Come and sit. Tell me of Little Ha..."

Huwuni shook her head and placed her fingers over KC's lips. "Do not speak the name of one who is no longer with us." Her chocolate brown eyes misted over as she spoke of her life since KC had left. "The yellow sickness came over him when we lived on the reservation."

"Two summers ago Winter Hawk convinced the council the Comanche's days of freedom were numbered, that we had to give up the old ways and learn new ones. So we went to the reservation like good little Indians. We tried the white man's ways, digging in the ground, staying in the same camp until the water and air stank. Our warriors could find little game so we ate the rotten meat provided." Her lips curled in disgust.

Sweet, gentle Huwuni had changed in ways KC couldn't see.

“The white eye's life was no good for Comanche. The warriors were restless, with nothing to do but sit all day and gamble and drink the crazy water. Some would leave the reservation to raid then come back to gamble and drink some more. Others just drank and beat their wives and children. Still, until the yellow sickness came Winter Hawk and the elders insisted we keep trying. Even after the sickness took my mother and his sisters, he stood firm. When Little Hawk died of the black vomit it was too much.” She broke the Comanche tabu and spoke the name of one dead. “Winter Hawk gathered up our people and we rejoined with Red Buffalo and the warriors who refused to go to the reservation.”

KC had heard about the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek in '67, but she hadn't realized Winter Hawk's people had tried the reservation. Red Buffalo's trips into Peaceful had led her to believe they still roamed free on the Comancheria. Knowing the wild nature of the Comanche people she never could imagine them happy confined to a small strip of land, unable to hunt and raid. As captives the Comanche would surely wither and die, in spirit, if not body. Her sympathy for the people who'd killed her mother and father and stolen her baby brother from her, surprised KC. Her bonds with these savage people were written in blood and were not

easily broken.

“I’m sorry, Huwuni.”

“Enough sadness. We are free now.” Huwuni placed her hand over her swollen abdomen.

“My son will be born free. I bring food. You are hungry?”

“Yes,” KC said in surprise. “I am hungry.”

“Good, then we will eat.”

RED BUFFALO ENTERED his father’s tepee and seated himself. Outside the sun sank in a ball of fiery color, the sky streaked with red and black. Inside the fire crackled creating a circle of warmth and light in the cool fall night. Fragrant smoke drifted upward, scenting the air. They ate in silence, roasting chunks of meat stuck on sharpened sticks over the fire. Fat dripped into the fire sizzling and spitting at them. Charred on the outside, bloody inside, the meat burnt their lips and tongues.

Full, Red Buffalo wiped his fingers across his chest massaging the grease into his flesh. He accepted the pipe his father offered and drew deeply of the rich tobacco. For a time they

smoked, not speaking.

Finally Winter Hawk spoke. “The woman can not stay here.” He held up his hand to stop Red Buffalo’s denial. “It has been decided. No white captives may stay in our camp. Since we left the reservation we have run fast and hard from the white eyes. The taking and keeping of white captives draws the soldiers to us like flies to a corpse.”

Red Buffalo rose and stood over his father. “Are we to become the mouse harried by the hawk? Must we run and hide? Are we not the Nermernuh, the people? Are we no longer warriors? Do we accept defeat and take only what the Tejanos choose to give us, rather than live as our ancestors did?

“Firebird is mine as she was always meant to be. I do not give her up. What of the other captives, those adopted into our families? Have you torn the children from their mother’s arms, the wives from their husbands and babies?”

“Sit,” Winter Hawk said.

Well schooled in respect for his elders Red Buffalo did so.

“No whites remain in our camp. Those warriors who had white wives and children who wished to remain with them have left this camp. The others were taken and ransomed back to

their white families. The choice is yours to make. Send the woman back or keep her and leave this camp. This decision was not made lightly, but all here have agreed to it. Our people wish to live in freedom. To do this we must have peace with the whites. We are too few in number to drive them away. If we wish to remain free we must fade from their view.”

“Bah! You speak not of freedom, but of a living death. Does the eagle hide from the rabbit? Is this a camp of Comanche? Of warriors? Or of women, children and old men who have forgotten what it means to be free?”

“Enough!” White Hawk roared, though he didn’t move.

Red Buffalo fell silent at his father’s reproach, dropping his gaze to the fire. While he roamed the countryside living the warrior’s life what had changed his father? Who was this subdued, broken man who spoke of peace at any price, even that of their very souls? Red Buffalo did not know this man. The reservation had changed his people. Would they ever regain the freedom they had lost while caged in the white man’s world?

“Tell me, my son. How did you obtain the woman? Did the white shaman gift you with her?”

Red Buffalo stiffened at Winter Hawk’s soft question. He knew where his father led.

Firebird had been his father's gift to the white shaman. When Winter Hawk learned Red Buffalo had taken her without the shaman's blessing; he would have yet another reason to send her back.

"Did she come willingly with you?"

Could he lie to his father? No, even if the white shaman didn't come after Firebird Red Buffalo knew he could not meet his father's dark gaze and speak words of untruth.

"No," he answered.

"I did not think so." Winter Hawk chuckled. "She did not come willingly with me either. The white shaman will come for her. My honor demands she be returned, but the choice is yours, I cannot force you. Think well what you choose. Firebird is well named. Her flame will either warm you or destroy you. Do not let your desires destroy the rest of us as well."

His father's words caused images of his vision to drift through Red Buffalo's mind. A mist of cold hard white devouring the land and the buffalo. Firebird rising before him, drawing him near then searing him with her touch. And the great white and gold eagle who claimed her as his own. What did it mean? Could he give her up? For years, she had been the center of his dreams. To abandon them now would leave him adrift in a meaningless world.

The urge to see her, to warm himself with her touch made him rise and take his leave

without answering his father's unspoken questions.

HUWUNI LEFT QUICKLY when Red Buffalo entered the tepee. She slipped by him her eyes downcast. Though his father's only wife and Red Buffalo's stepmother, KC knew she was uncomfortable in his presence. He had been too old and she too young when she came to Winter Hawk as wife for a relationship to form between them.

After she departed Red Buffalo closed and tied the tepee flap behind him, sealing himself and KC inside. She kept her eyes on the fire sensing his tension. Something had changed since their arrival in the camp. Like a caged beast, his muscles rippling under skin glistening with a sheen of sweat and grease, he moved around the tepee. The smell of smoke and bloody meat hung on him. She didn't speak or move. What had been said in Winter Hawk's tepee, she wondered, that had snapped Red Buffalo's patience?

She watched from the corner of her eye as he crouched by the bed robes and spread them out. He ran his hand over the soft furs, stroking them as he would a living animal...or a woman's flesh. Shivering she forced herself to concentrate on the flickering flames.

“Come here, woman.”

She jumped at his hoarse command. Had he decided possessing her body was enough?

“Come,” he called again, softer this time.

To refuse would do no good. If she fled the tepee there was nowhere to run he couldn't easily catch her. The wall of the tepee brushed her head as she stepped to his side and stood over him. Resting on the balls of his feet his hands continued to stroke the furs. She waited until he turned his face up to her. It was all she could do to stand motionless as his gaze traveled up her body to rest on her face.

“Remove your clothes. I wish to see what I possess.”

She took a step back and shook her head. The moment had come. She hadn't expected it so soon, she wasn't ready. Suddenly she knew she'd never be ready. Her body was not a possession, it was hers to give or not and without love no man could own it. She thought she could accept if he tried to take what she didn't offer. Now she found she couldn't, she would fight until unable to do so any longer.

“No.”

He rose to his feet and reached out for her. His fingers closed around her wrist jerking her

forward against his chest. Panic flared in her, she twisted futilely in his embrace. Even when Harold had held her naked in his grasp her terror had not been so complete. The Baker brothers would have raped her body.

Red Buffalo would rape her soul.

Like a crazed wild thing, she fought him. She raked his face and chest with her nails, sank her teeth into his arm, drawing blood, and beat his shoulders with her fists. There was no logic, no rational thought in her actions. No care that he could easily crush her with one hand. All she knew was the need to escape before it was too late.

She felt her shirt rip away from her, baring her breasts. Her feet tangled in her trousers as he stripped them from her legs. Then the furs were at her back, his frame pressing her into their plush softness. Pinned helplessly she squirmed under his weight.

Dimly she heard Red Buffalo's voice. "Do not fight me Firebird, you only hurt yourself. This was meant to be. You belong to me and I to you. I had meant to wait for you to come to me, but there is no time. Soon you will understand. Together our power will be unstoppable. We will drive the Tejanos from Comanche land." He smoothed her hair from her face with a tender touch. "Do not fight. I can be gentle."

Understanding pierced a wedge in her blind panic. “You’re crazy. I am not a thing you can own. I’m a person, a Tejano, a white eyes. My power, if I have any, can’t be drained from my body like blood for you to use. What you want you can’t take by force and I will never give.” She let herself go limp and closed her eyes. “Take what you can, for it’s all you’ll ever have of me.”

He shoved his knee between her thighs. “I will have it all.”

Chapter 12

KC BIT HER LIP and waited for the pain of his thrust.

“Red Buffalo,” He Who Sees called. “Winter Hawk has sent me for the woman. She is to go to him until a decision is made.”

Red Buffalo stopped, his body tensed and ready.

She opened her eyes. Red Buffalo’s gaze glittered with rage and frustration.

“Red Buffalo,” He Who Sees called again. “Do you hear me?” He scratched on the hide.

With a grunt Red Buffalo heaved to his feet and stood over her. She stared up at him, refusing to blink at the sight of his desire jutting from his hard body. He glared back, all softness erased from his features. His look promised next time he would have her.

“She is coming,” he answered. To KC he said, “Get dressed and go to Winter Hawk’s tepee.”

She didn’t question her reprieve; she threw on her torn clothes and hurried out.

In Winter Hawk’s tepee Huwuni greeted her warmly and unrolled a bed robe for her. She

burrowed into the furs, her body aching from Red Buffalo's rough embrace and her lingering bruises.

She'd thought she had time, that Red Buffalo wanted her to come to him, that he would try to coax her, that he wouldn't force her. She'd thought he'd be patient, giving her time to plan her escape. His actions proved her wrong. Only He Who Sees timely interruption saved her from rape and probably death. Because if Red Buffalo had succeeded, she knew she would have tried to kill him and most likely would have died in the attempt.

She'd thought herself ready to die, to give up, to let Red Buffalo take what he wanted without fighting him. She was wrong. She wanted to live. She wanted a chance. A chance to be a woman rather than a make-believe boy who would never be a man.

In the dark, she stirred restlessly. Why did Winter Hawk want her in his tepee? What would Red Buffalo do next? Could she keep him from raping her? If she couldn't, what then? Had Willie made it back to Peaceful safely? And Eli, would she ever see him again?

She refused to think of Christopher and things that had slipped away before she'd even realized their possibility. Questions chased one after another through her mind until Huwuni's and Winter Hawk's low murmurs lulled her to sleep.

ICE EDGED the riverbank, reaching like pale ghostly fingers into the silvery flow. The whisper of the water rushing over the rocks sounded loud in the still night. Above, in a cold black sky, the moon shone white and round its light drowning out the stars, its rays sparkling like flickering fireflies on the river's rippled surface. Beneath Red Buffalo's feet the grass snapped as he walked.

The chill night air did little to cool the raging heat in Red Buffalo's body. Blood, hot and thick, pounded raggedly through his veins. His body pulsed and throbbed with a rhythm older than time. A restless beast, he prowled the night.

His thoughts turned to Firebird, lying untouched in the safety of Winter Hawk's tepee. His flesh burned with his memories; the feel of her body under his, slim and sleek, the musky woman smell of her filling his nostrils, her breath hot and moist on his skin, the rapid beating of her heart vibrating against his chest. How close he'd come to possessing her, to plunging into her body, burying himself in her fire, capturing her power and drawing it into himself.

Silently he cursed He Who Sees, Winter Hawk, the white shaman and all who stood between

him and what he sought. He felt things slipping away, disappearing into the mist. Apprehension prickled his skin as his vision returned to him. He stopped and waited while the images formed again in his memory, the all-enveloping sheet of white creeping over the land, swallowing everything in its path, Firebird in front of him, beckoning then scorching him with her flaming heat.

He'd come too close to give her up. Time had run out. Patience would no longer serve; he must act now or lose all. He would return to camp and take her. If Winter Hawk and the other old men decreed no whites were to remain in camp, they would leave. Surely, others resisted the constraints of peace. Others who would join him in his quest to destroy the Tejanos who sought to steal from the Comanche their land and their lives.

JUST BEFORE dawn, KC woke. She stretched and stirred beneath the warm bed robes, her stiff body protesting the movement. During the night the fire had died to embers, leaving the air cool on her exposed face. She fought the urge to sink back into the comforting dark of sleep.

Across the tepee, in the dim light, she could see the shape of Winter Hawk and Huwuni

entwined within their bed robes, hear their soft even breathing.

Often KC had wondered about the man Winter Hawk was. She'd seen so many sides of him. Which was the true Winter Hawk: the shrieking, painted savage who raided, killed and raped with unholy glee, the wise leader who spoke eloquently to his people in council, the patient loving husband who tenderly eased his timid new wife's fears, the proud father holding his newborn son or the harsh angry man who'd raised his hand again and again against a stubborn, willful slave? Just who was this man?

Long ago KC had ceased to hate Winter Hawk. Could one hate the wind, the sun, a raging river, a sudden storm? He was part of nature, wild, untamed and unpredictable.

Her stomach gave a low rumble and her bladder demanded release. Sleepiness vanished like the morning mist touched by the sun. Quickly before she changed her mind and burrowed back under the robes, she threw them off to brave the morning chill.

Shivering in her torn shirt she crouched by the fire, gently stirred the embers and fed it twigs until they flared into flames. She chewed on dried fruit while she warmed herself and set some water to boil.

A soft giggle came from the mound of furs that held Winter Hawk and Huwuni. Tension

tightened KC's stomach. Huwuni giggled again and Winter Hawk answered with a low growl. KC jumped up. She couldn't stay and listen while they made love. Quietly she slipped out of the tepee into the breaking dawn.

Goose bumps rose on her skin at the touch of the cool air. She breathed deeply of the clean, fresh scents of moist earth, pine and the lingering smell of campfires, and headed toward the river shimmering through the trees ahead. Despite the chill in the air, the sound of water dancing over rocks drew her forward. She broke through the stand of trees and found herself on a grassy knoll overlooking the rushing water. With a sigh, she sank down on the ground. Pulling her knees close to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them and rested her chin there. Her toes curled into the cool, wet grass. She stared sightlessly into the glistening water.

What now, she wondered.

It would be easy to stand and walk away. She could even steal a horse. The thought of escape tempted her, although she knew the attempt would prove futile. Though well versed in the ways of survival she was no match for Red Buffalo's skill. He would track her down and... and what?

She wasn't quite sure just what he would do. Already his mood was strained and volatile.

He would rape her, of that she had little doubt. If she pushed him, how much worse would be her fate.

She found it strange even as he prepared to enter her body she'd felt little passion in him for her or even the act itself. Just what did she represent to him? She'd long been aware he believed her possessed of some power that he coveted and was determined to have at whatever cost. Would the cost include her life?

While the Comanche were known to torture captives, she wasn't aware they practiced any form of ritual sacrifice. Maybe Red Buffalo sought to start a new custom with her as the first victim.

A twig snapped behind her. She didn't move or turn to face whoever hunted for her. She couldn't run, but she could fight. And fight she would. Never again would she allow another to determine her destiny. She would live her time on earth free. Someone moved to stand behind her.

If it was Red Buffalo, her time had just run out.

"So the Firebird returns."

KC recognized the voice of the ancient shaman, He Who Sees. Years ago it was he who had

named her.

He came around and stood in front of her. “I wonder, does she come to warm us with her heat or scorch us from the land. Which do you seek, Firebird? Our salvation or our destruction?”

KC rose to her feet to tower over the diminutive shaman.

Deep expressionless eyes gazed out of his creased face. His frail body projected an inner strength that commanded respect from even the most fearless warrior. He Who Sees had terrified her as a child. Traumatized by the violent deaths of her parents and the horrors she’d seen, she thought him the dark angel of death come to take her soul to everlasting damnation. Now she saw him for what he was, a man, old, nearing the end of his time, wise with the knowledge he’d gleaned from living so many years. But still only a man. Not the demon or the devil of her nightmares.

“I seek nothing from the Comanche but my freedom. I’m not the Firebird of Red Buffalo’s visions. I’m nothing but a woman. I have no power to either help or hurt the Comanche.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Sit my child and speak for awhile with an old man.” He Who Sees lowered himself awkwardly to the ground, groaning as his old bones protested the action.

Without thinking, KC took his arm to help. Beneath her fingers his bones were thin and fragile, his skin dry and crepe like.

“Thank you, child. Now sit.” He patted the ground next to him.

Though she had little desire to speak with this remnant of her childhood terror, she found herself seated next to him. For a time, they sat side by side, not speaking. She stared into the river, letting the sight of the rushing water mesmerize her into an unthinking state, until she became aware of the feel of his eyes on her, studying, measuring. Irritated she turned to confront him, to demand he leave her in peace, but he sat his head facing forward, his eyes closed.

When she made to rise and leave, his eyes flickered open and he placed his hand on her arm. “Do not fear me, Little One. Winter Hawk and the council have decreed you must leave our camp. No white captives can be allowed to remain among us to draw the soldiers. Red Buffalo challenges this. He would keep you even at the risk of banishment from his tribe.”

“Why do you tell me this?” KC demanded. She ran her hand through her hair, grimacing as her fingers caught and pulled in the tangles there. Tears of pain and frustration pricked the back of her eyes. She blinked them away angrily. “I have no say in my future. No choice. I didn’t come willingly with Red Buffalo. I am his captive. Whether he releases me or not is up to him,

not me.”

He Who Sees gazed at her patiently. “We all have choices. Each one, large or small, directs the path of our lives.”

She glared at him impatiently. “Of course we have choices to make, but this particular choice isn’t mine, talk to Red Buffalo. If you’re afraid he’ll chose to keep me and be banished rather than obey his father, don’t worry about it, he’ll not have me long.”

“That is what I fear.”

What did the old man mean? KC couldn’t believe he was concerned for her.

“You doubt I wish you to live? The day of the Comanche is ending. Soon we will be forced back onto the reservation. I have seen this. Then the Comanche will have need of Tejano friends to help us.”

She laughed shortly. “I am no friend to the Comanche. The Comanche killed my parents and stole my brother. Why would I want to aid my enemy?”

“What you say is true, but you hold no hatred in your heart. You have ties to my people you cannot deny. Though you were not with us long, a part of you is now Comanche. You would not see Huwuni or the children harmed. When the time comes you will come to their aid despite

your losses.”

As much as KC wanted to cry out that she would laugh to see all Comanches forced onto a reservation, broken and humbled, she knew her heart would break if anything happened to Huwuni. And the children, they should never suffer for the sins of their fathers. She buried her face against her knees. “What would you have me do?” What could she do? For now, Red Buffalo was the master of her fate. He Who Sees’ words would mean nothing to him.

“I ask nothing of you, Firebird. You will do what you must when the time comes. Remember only our words.” Silently he rose and left her.

That day she thought of little else. She was surprised at how easily she slipped back into the life of the Comanche. Only this time she was treated as an equal rather than a slave. She helped Huwuni with her many jobs; cooking, sewing, preparing meat and hides for the coming winter months. The other women of the tribe varied in their response to her. Some like Huwuni were friendly, other cautious, a few openly hostile. The warriors pretended to ignore her, but she could feel their eyes watching when they thought her unaware.

Though she knew none would dare touch her while Red Buffalo claimed her and she was under Winter Hawk’s protection, the fine hairs on her body prickled and her heart beat more

rapidly under their gaze. She knew as well as they her presence in their camp put them at risk of attack by soldiers. She could see they wanted her gone from their midst, one way or another.

Her red curls, green eyes and white skin fascinated the children. An older girl taunted and dared by her playmates overcame her fear and rushed up to KC and touched her hair.

“It is not fire.”

The surprise on the girl’s face when her fingers weren’t burnt made KC laugh. At the sound of her laughter, the other children grew bold and crowded around. All wanted to touch her hair. By the end of the day children followed her everywhere. She didn’t mind, they distracted her thoughts from the coming confrontation with Red Buffalo.

Of Red Buffalo she saw little, which suited her fine. She knew it wouldn’t last. For long hours through the day he, Winter Hawk and the other members of the tribal council met. KC longed to creep close to the tepee and listen while they decided her fate, but the warriors who guarded outside stood alert. All she could hear was a murmur of voices and an occasional angry shout.

Red Buffalo stormed from the tepee. His face taut with rage, he glared at her as he strode past. His look promised retribution. Then he swung up onto his pony and galloped away. A few

minutes later Winter Hawk emerged, his features creased with a worried frown until he caught sight of her. Red Buffalo's anger paled next to his. KC shivered and moved out of sight, suddenly glad her life did not rest in Winter Hawk's hands alone.

RED BUFFALO rode his pony until sweat covered both their hides and exhaustion drained the rage from his body. Then he stopped. The council meetings went badly for him. Most of the members were old men who had long forgotten the thrill of battle. No longer did their blood run hot and thick, it had grown thin and cold, their bones brittle, their eyes dim. Now they wanted only to sit before their lodge fires, smoke their pipes, and tell their grandchildren of days of glory long past. They were tired of war; they sought peace with the white eyes.

Peace. Red Buffalo spat on the ground. There could be no peace with the Tejanos until they were driven from Comanche land. Why did the old men not see this? If the Comanche did not fight, the Tejanos would steal it all. They would corral the Comanche like cattle on reservations, force them to dig in the dirt for their food, to give up their freedom for rotten meat and dirty, disease ridden blankets.

No, he would not surrender his manhood to the white eyes, to live as their forgotten children. He was Comanche. He would live as a Comanche.

The council could not deny him or other young warriors the right to continue fighting the Tejanos.

But what of Firebird? Winter Hawk had stood in council and challenged his claim to the woman. Red Buffalo could still see clearly as Winter Hawk rose in council to speak.

“Red Buffalo words are well chosen to stir the hearts of young warriors eager to do battle and to count coup. But does he speak for the women and children who are left behind to face the wrath of the soldiers who come to punish the warriors? When we steal their horses and cattle the white eyes are angry, they grumble and increase their guard. When we take their women and children they send their soldiers to kill ours.” Winter Hawk turned and pointed at Red Buffalo. “Red Buffalo has not merely stolen a woman from the white eyes he has stolen my honor. This same woman was given by me to the white shaman Hosea. He will come for her.”

Red Buffalo jumped to his feet and shouted. “I will challenge him for Firebird.”

The tepee erupted into chaos, everyone speaking and shouting at once.

“Silence!” Winter Hawk roared. All fell quiet. Even Red Buffalo sank back down and

waited. "You would challenge an old man? What honor would you find in that?"

Red Buffalo knew his father spoke true. He could not fight the white shaman for Firebird. But if he could not fight for her, he must return her and that he would never do. "I will have her. The white shaman may chose a champion from among us. I will fight him. When I win I will take her and leave so the white soldiers do not search for her here."

"And if you lose?" Winter Hawk asked softly.

"I will not lose."

"If you do?" Winter Hawk insisted.

Red Buffalo stood, his fists and teeth clenched against his anger. "I will abide by your wishes." He turned and stalked out of the tepee.

The memory faded from his mind. He stared into the lowering sun, then started to turn his pony to return to camp. A movement on the horizon made him hesitate. Two riders approached, their bodies haloed by the glare of the sun.

In his anger he'd left camp with no weapons save the knife strapped to his waist. Lost as he'd been in his thoughts he had no doubt they'd seen him. Sunlight glinted off the metal of the rifle one man held. He doubted he could out run the range of that gun in open country. His pony

was strong and sure, but one man rode a long-legged palomino Red Buffalo recognized as belonging to Firebird. He'd seen the horse run. His pony was no match. So he sat and waited.

He squinted against the glare. The two men drew closer. Neither was Eli Hosea. One he knew, the old one-eyed man. The other on the palomino was a stranger. In his hair, he wore Winter Hawk's totem of white hawk feathers. They fluttered in the breeze. It seemed the white shaman had already chosen his own champion.

He should kill him now and be done with it. His fingers closed around his knife, a few more yards and the man would lay dead at his feet, the knife buried to the hilt in his throat.

"Wouldn't do it if'n I were you, Injun." The one-eyed man cocked his rifle.

Red Buffalo froze then let his hand slip away from his knife. The time to kill would come. He would wait.

CHRISTOPHER watched the Indian's eyes and prepared to move. Judging by Eli's description this had to be Red Buffalo. While his height and the red highlights in his hair betrayed his white heritage, there was nothing remotely civilized about the man. He looked hard and mean, his

half-naked body glistening with sweat, his red-black hair long and loose around his broad shoulders. Christopher had seen just how savage this man could be. What had KC suffered at his hands? He pushed the thought from his mind.

The Comanche admire courage, never show them fear or doubt. Never be defensive with Red Buffalo, attack. There'll be need for diplomacy, but not with him. Christopher remembered Eli's advice.

Christopher glanced over at Dead Eye. "Translate for me."

"No need, white eyes, I speak your tongue."

"Good. I come for Eli Hosea's woman. You have her and he wishes her back." Christopher spoke bluntly.

Red Buffalo's features tightened, he whirled his lathered pony. "Come." He kicked the winded animal into a gallop.

They followed close behind. Dogs and children scattered as they pounded into camp.

Christopher looked around at the collection of tepees stretched out along the riverbank and the faces of the Indians, men, women and children, who watched his progress through the camp. No where did he see KC.

At the far end of the camp Red Buffalo halted in front of a large tepee. He jumped from his pony, shoved the animal's reins into the hands of a waiting boy and stalked off.

"What now?" Dead Eye mumbled. He kept a tight grip on his rifle. Christopher could see the sweat dripping off the older man's forehead and dampening his shirt despite the crisp air. Strangely enough Christopher felt calm. The fear was there but it gave him strength rather than draining it away.

Before he could answer a man emerged from the tepee; behind him came a pregnant Indian woman.

Her eyes widened. "Tabe kwi?ne."

"She just named you Sun Eagle," Dead Eye told him with a grin. "Guess it kinda fits, what with all that yellow hair and them thar feathers."

"Shut up Dead Eye and translate for me."

"Now I can't hardly do both now, can I? I think that thar's Winter Hawk," Dead Eye nodded at the Indian. "He's wearing matching feathers."

"I bring you greetings from Eli Hosea, Winter Hawk. Am I welcome in your camp?"

Dead Eye translated.

Winter Hawk nodded and spoke rapidly to the woman, then to a young boy nearby. To Christopher he spoke in English. "You are welcome Sun Eagle. Come into my lodge and we will speak. You," he pointed at Dead Eye, "will remain outside." He turned and disappeared into the tepee.

"Guess yar on yar own now, boy," Dead Eye said. "Watch yar step, these Comanche are slippery devils. Remind me ta tell ya 'bout the time I was trapped in a box canyon by a whole danged war party of them all screaming for my scalp."

The man was incorrigible. Christopher grinned and dismounted. He handed Lady's reins to the waiting boy. "I'll do that, Dead Eye."

It took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the filtered light inside the tepee. When they did he looked around with interest. The interior was clean and well organized, warm and fragrant with the smell of roasting meat and pinon wood. A small cook fire burned in the center, a thin blue column of smoke drifting upward. The woman crouched by the fire until Winter Hawk spoke sharply in Comanche. She glanced up at him; her lips set in a stubborn line and didn't move. Winter Hawk spoke again this time more gently. Her features softened, she nodded, stood and hurried out past Christopher.

After she was gone, he moved further into the tepee toward the rear where Winter Hawk was seated. He circled to the right as Dead Eye had told him and waited for Winter Hawk to invite him to sit. At Winter Hawk's invitation, Christopher sat down to his left.

Christopher studied the man next to him. During his years in court, Christopher had learned to read a man's face, to judge what he might do by the look in his eye. Once before he'd misread a man's intentions and it had cost his sister her life. He prayed the ability wouldn't fail him now.

Few streaks of gray touched Winter Hawk's ebony hair which lay around his powerful shoulders like a sleek shiny pelt, the white feathers standing out in sharp relief. His black eyes stared out of a face burnt to leather by the sun and creased with a lifetime's worth of experience. There was no doubt in Christopher's mind Winter Hawk was a dangerous man, old in years but young in vitality. He was a man devoted to his people, willing to do what he must to see they survived the coming of the white man to their land. Eli had warned him of Winter Hawk and his own observations told him the same.

While Christopher studied Winter Hawk, Winter Hawk studied Christopher. Finally he spoke.

"How is my haint, my brother/friend, Eli Hosea? It has been many years since he visited my

camp and sat in my lodge. You wear my totem, why does he not come himself?"

"Eli is ill, he has the coughing sickness. Soon he will leave this life for a better one."

"I am saddened. What does my haint wish from me?"

"He only wants returned what you have already given him.

"I have given Eli many gifts, of which do you speak?"

Christopher held his temper as Winter Hawk hedged. "The girl, Firebird." An appropriate name for KC, a mythical winged creature that rose again and again from the flames. "She is a daughter to Eli, a comfort in his old age and illness. He would have her at his side to ease his passing."

Winter Hawk cast him a sly look. Christopher felt he'd made an error. What had he said to put that calculating glint in Winter Hawk's eyes, as if the man had just discovered the solution to a sticky problem.

"Why is Firebird unmarried? She is of an age."

What was the man getting at? "Eli could not bear to part with her."

Winter Hawk shook his head. "It is not good. Soon he will leave her and she will be alone. A woman needs a man, a warrior, to protect and provide for her. As Eli is my haint and cannot

do so I will see to this matter for him.”

“That’s unnecessary.” Christopher made a quick decision. Whatever Winter Hawk had in mind, he was sure KC wouldn’t care for it. “I’ll provide for Firebird.”

“Firebird must marry. I will see her safe for my haint.”

“Eli sent me for her. I won’t leave without her.”

“There is another with a claim on her. Red Buffalo would make her his wife and see willingly to her care.”

“No.”

“You wear the totem I gave Eli. Are you his champion? Will you fight Red Buffalo for the woman?”

Christopher had known he might have to fight for KC, but not in this manner. Eli had told him Winter Hawk would be eager to be rid of a white captive, to keep the soldiers uninterested in his band. Eli had figured if Christopher appealed to Winter Hawk’s sense of honor he would agree to return KC with little argument. They’d forgotten Red Buffalo’s influence. How could they have discounted the fact that he was Winter Hawk’s son and a power in the tribe in his own right?

Could he fight Red Buffalo? That wasn't the question. He would fight for KC. There was no way he'd willingly leave without her. The question was, could he win?

Christopher sat motionless watching the smoke from the fire drift upward. Silence reigned. He drew the image of Red Buffalo into his mind. Though shorter than him and a few pounds lighter, Red Buffalo's body was hard and strong, well trained for hand-to-hand combat. Why not, his whole life consisted of fighting; fighting to survive in a savage land, fighting both nature and men.

Christopher wondered if he could win in a contest against the man? What did he know of fighting? His experience was limited to a few tavern brawls. Still, what choice did he have, he had to fight and he had to win. To lose was unthinkable.

"I'll fight for her."

Chapter 13

“THAT IS GOOD.” Winter Hawk leaned forward and picked up a long pipe. The polished wood held strong images of Winter Hawk’s totem; hawks in flight, wings spread; hawks, talons extended, striking its prey. Small white feathers dangled from narrow rawhide strips below the bowl. With careful, reverent motions Winter Hawk filled the pipe with tobacco and lit it. Silently he puffed then handed the pipe to Christopher.

The scent of raw tobacco filled the air. Christopher drew in the pungent smoke and let it trickle out of his nose. For a time they smoked in quiet contemplation, passing the pipe back and forth. Christopher sensed the strange bond forming with the sharing. The smoke they exhaled swirled in the air above their heads, mingled and rose to drift out into the night as one. For a brief moment, he felt as if a part of himself joined with Winter Hawk.

The Indian woman re-entered the tepee circling to the left. She knelt just behind and to the right of Winter Hawk. He tilted his head as she whispered. His harsh features soften slightly.

“Huwuni, my wife, has prepared a place and a meal for you and your friend. Go now. In

two days, you will meet Red Buffalo in combat. You will fight with fists and knives for the woman. Until then rest and enjoy the hospitality of my camp.”

“I wish to see the woman,” Christopher dared to ask.

For a moment Winter Hawk seemed to consider the request, then he nodded. “Tomorrow you may speak with her.”

With that Christopher had to be content.

“Come,” Huwuni said. When she rose Christopher followed her.

She led him to a tepee set close enough to the rest of the camp to still be part of it but far enough away to be separate. At the entrance she gave him a shy smile and hurried away.

Inside Christopher found Dead Eye sprawled comfortably on a thick buffalo robe, chewing on a piece of meat. He lifted on one elbow. “‘Bout time ya got here. I was starting to think old Winter Hawk changed his mind and lifted yar scalp. Set yarself down and grab a bite ta eat. That little squaw ain’t a half-bad cook.” He waved a hand at the rabbit spitted over the fire.

Christopher’s stomach grumbled at the enticing aroma, reminding him it had been hours since their last meal.

Tearing a leg off the carcass, he settled himself across the fire from Dead Eye and looked

around the small, sparsely furnished tepee. Their saddles and bedrolls lay off to one side, the only other things in the tepee, the bed robes Huwuni had provided. While outside the sun set and the air grew cold, inside it was warm and comfortable, a haven of peace in a hostile land.

“So what did the chief have ta say?” Dead Eye asked.

The succulent rabbit tasted like ashes in Christopher’s mouth. He stared into the fire, knowing before he spoke what Dead Eye’s reaction would be. “In two days Red Buffalo and I will have a knife fight for her.”

Dead Eye didn’t disappoint; he bolted upright the meat dropping from his fingers. “Damn it all, boy! Now why in tarnation did ya agree to something so stupid? I’ll admit yar a fair hand with a gun, but hand-to-hand with Red Buffalo. That brave’s gonna carve out yar innards and serve them ta ya on a platter. He’s down right savagerous, as mean as the devil and twice as dangerous. Of all the thick headed, pea-brained, plumb idiotic...” Words failed him. He flopped back onto the robe.

Already Christopher could feel the steel of Red Buffalo’s knife slicing into his flesh, the blade cold then hot. And when he died at Red Buffalo’s hand what would become of KC? He looked into Dead Eye’s worried gaze. “My thoughts exactly, but what choice do I have?”

“None, I reckon.” Dead Eye answered reluctantly. He reached up and scratched under his patch, peering at Christopher with his one good eye. “I don’t suppose ya’d consider just riding on out of here?”

Had the thought even crossed his mind? Christopher didn’t recall, but if it had, he’d dismissed it before it reached his consciousness. “The only way I’ll leave this camp without KC is dead.”

“Probably,” Dead Eye muttered then asked. “How much ya know ‘bout knife fighting?”

“Well, I know which end to hold onto.”

A low groan was Dead Eye’s response. He threw his arm over his face. “Get some sleep boy. We’ve got just two days to teach ya.”

A short while later Dead Eye’s loud snores filled the tepee. So much, thought Christopher, for his concern.

He lay on his back and stared upward. Above, just visible through the tepee’s small smoke hole, stars filled the blue-black sky. Sleep eluded him now as it had every night since he’d learned of KC’s abduction and her true identity. Each time his eyes closed her image formed in his mind.

Always he saw her as the quiet boy of his memories, standing hesitantly before him dressed in dark trousers, a white shirt and a thick leather vest, her hair a wild tangle of vivid red curls around her face. Her delicate features seemed solemn and reserved, until he looked close into her sparkling green eyes and saw the hint of humor and mischief lurking in their depths. But when he tried to visualize her in a dress the picture refused to form. Still, he knew long before he'd discovered her deception, his body had told him what his eyes had not. Hidden beneath the layers of cotton and leather lay the body and heart of a woman.

How could he have mistaken his feelings for KC as something unnatural, when his every sense shouted the truth? *You saw what you expected to see and fear kept you from looking deeper.* He answered his question. The only question he found no answer for was why she had continued to deceive him.

As he thought back on their time together, he could see her attraction for him growing as his had grown for her. Why had she denied her sex? It hurt that she might have lumped him with the other scum populating Peaceful. Now that he knew the truth, he allowed himself to think of how their association might develop. While a physical relationship with KC, the boy, was forbidden to him, that wasn't the case with KC, the woman.

Whom was he kidding? In a little more than forty-eight hours he'd most likely be dead. The chances of him surviving a knife fight with Red Buffalo were slim. Still, as he'd told Dead Eye he had no choice. He had to fight. He forced away his fears and doubts and settled down to sleep. Tomorrow he would learn all he could from Dead Eye and pray it would prove to be enough.

If determination counted for anything, he might even win.

KC STIRRED restlessly. Time in Winter Hawk's camp passed quickly, the hours filled with activities, keeping her mind as well as her body too busy to think, to worry, but the night dragged by endlessly. The hours of darkness and quiet left her open to fear and doubt and her longings rose to the surface along with useless hopes.

From across the tepee she heard Huwuni's gentle breathing mingling with Winter Hawk's rumbling snores. In many ways, she envied them. How simple their lives seemed, how few their needs. Food, shelter and clothing. The earth beneath them to provide those riches and the sky above to encompass their hopes and dreams. She knew it was an illusion. Their lives were no

simpler, no easier than any other. Their struggle for survival in a harsh land merely pared the meaningless from their lives.

He Who Sees was right. Soon the life of the Comanche would change beyond anything they could comprehend. Time alone would tell if their spirit could accept those changes.

Though her body and mind ached with exhaustion, sleep eluded her. Finally, she slipped from her bed robes and out of the tepee. She shivered as the night air touched her skin and her breath clouded the air before her face. During the day, the sun warmed the air, but now the temperature hovered near freezing. She welcomed the cold, hoping it would clear the fog from her mind and show her the direction she must take.

Behind her, the tepee flap fell silently closed. On bare feet, she padded away from the camp into the darkness toward the sound of the river, her chill forgotten as she contemplated her future.

Though surrounded by Comanche, a people she had just cause to hate and who had little love of whites, she didn't fear for her safety. Everyone in camp knew Red Buffalo claimed her as his. None would challenge him by accosting her. The only person in camp she had reason to fear was Red Buffalo himself and since he had stormed out of the council meeting earlier in the

day, she had not seen him. His tepee stood dark and empty, his favorite pony missing.

At her feet the shallow river dawdled along while only a short distance away she knew it deepened and picked up its pace, to rush wildly, madly through the canyon walls it had carved out of rock eons ago. Where it ended its journey, she was unsure, as she was unsure of where her own journey would end.

Sitting at the river's edge she idly tossed dried leaves into the stream. She watched them being caught up in the current, swirled around, some carried away to disappear into the darkness, while others sank into the inky water. Neither the flowing water or the myriad of stars twinkling overhead held the answers. The night chill seeped into her bones, forcing her to rise and move or become one with the ground.

She wandered further from camp toward where the horses were corralled. A boy stepped out of the shadows challenging her presence.

"You stand watch vigilantly, Bear Claw," she greeted him.

He stared at her suspiciously, his young face scowling.

"Relax," she reassured him. "I am not so foolish as to try and steal a horse from under your nose. I want only to..." She stopped. What did she want?

Something in her tone placated Bear Claw. He grunted and faded back into the shadows. Gratefully she moved toward the herd of Indian ponies.

Instinct drew her to the horses. As always their warm, solid bodies, the pungent aroma of horseflesh and hay, the sound of their breathing, and the stamp of their feet comforted her. Even as a Comanche slave, she'd felt a deep affinity for the beasts. Despite their captivity, she'd sensed in them the strength and freedom she craved.

The Comanche did dearly love their ponies, treating them like beloved children, pampering and lavishing love on them. And like any animal showered with affection they responded in kind. For them, all things good came from the human hand.

At the sound of her voice, crooning softly, they crowded the edge of the corral each eager for her touch. They nibbled at her clothes with velvety muzzles, their breath moist and warm on her skin. Their rough coats felt like satin beneath her fingertips, draining the tension from her body. Moonlight gilded their bodies with a silvery glow, giving them a mythical aura.

After awhile all but a few drifted away. Only then did she notice the lone animal at the far side of the corral. Her calm vanished in a heartbeat. Bigger than the Indian ponies, its coat gleaming like polished brass, it could only be one horse. Sultan's Lady.

If Lady was here, had Eli come? And if he was here, why hadn't she seen him? What could he hope to do? Sick as he was he had to know he was no match for Red Buffalo.

KC whistled softly. Lady's head came up, her ears pricked backwards. She nickered in response, her body shifted toward KC, but she didn't come.

Without regard for her bare feet or the rough ground of the corral KC ducked under the ropes and made her way to Lady's side. The mare tossed her head and greeted KC with a whicker.

Tied next to Lady stood another horse, a pinto gelding. KC froze. The pinto was Brody's horse, now Christopher's. Christopher was here. He'd come with Eli for her. It hadn't occurred to her he would come after her.

How could it not have? Christopher was a man who always paid his debts and he felt he owed her and Eli the biggest debt of all. His life. Willie must have made it back to Peaceful safely. For that she was grateful. He would have told Christopher the truth about her, her carefully concealed secret. Of course, he would come; his honor would demand it.

Now, because of her, he would die. She had to find him, to convince him to leave before it was too late, before Red Buffalo discovered her love for him and killed him.

She loved him. The realization washed over her. It left her weak, her legs trembling. With a cry, she buried her face against Lady's warm neck. As if in sympathy Lady nudged her gently, blowing moist air across her neck and back.

She remembered now why she'd sworn never to love again. The pain was too great. If Christopher died, so would she.

CHRISTOPHER lay listening to Dead Eye's loud snores, unable to sleep. He knew he needed to rest, but his thoughts kept him awake. Over and over he'd tried to come up with a better plan than fighting Red Buffalo. Nothing occurred to him. Finally he sat up, pulled on his boots and slipped quietly out of the tepee, leaving Dead Eye to dream on.

Outside the moon had vanished, the stars faded. On the eastern horizon, a yellowish gray crept across the blue-black night sky, hinting of morning.

He strode away from the camp knowing how foolish it was to do so. Red Buffalo was out there. Christopher didn't doubt the man would kill him if the opportunity presented itself. Still, he couldn't stay inside the tepee any longer. Guided by the sound of the water and the faint light

of the coming sun, he walked toward the river. His gaze touched the world around him, the bare-branched trees, the frost-covered ground, but he didn't truly see it. His vision turned inward, focusing on the coming confrontation and its outcome.

Where was KC? Winter Hawk had said he could speak with her tomorrow...no, today now. Christopher wondered how she had survived her abduction by Red Buffalo. Had the Baker brothers hurt her? Had Red Buffalo? The Baker brothers had already paid for their crimes, but if Red Buffalo had harmed her, Christopher vowed to...to do what, kill him? Even if he were capable, would Winter Hawk allow him to kill his son? When they discussed it Christopher assumed the fight would be to the death, knowing Winter Hawk had every confidence the death would be Christopher's.

With difficulty, Christopher forced himself not to dwell on the abuse KC might have suffered at Red Buffalo's hands. Since coming to Texas he'd heard tales of how the Comanche treated their captives, especially female captives, none of them pleasant. In a few short hours, he would see for himself.

Would she be glad to see him?

Ahead he could make out a corral filled with horses. In the shadows lurked a young brave.

Christopher could feel the Indian's gaze daring him to approach. Instead, he turned toward the water. For a long time, until the sun rose and turned the stream from inky black to transparent blue, he stared into the flowing river.

A low voice interrupted his thoughts. "You seek answers in the water, my son?"

Christopher turned toward the voice. Silhouetted against the glare of the rising sun stood an elderly Indian. Despite his stooped shoulders and lined face, he carried an air of strength and authority. Dressed in simple buckskin leggings and shirt, a buffalo robe around his shoulders against the chill, he had no need of brawn to command. His power lay in his dark all-seeing eyes. Without being told, Christopher knew this was He Who Sees, the shaman of Winter Hawk's band.

"Water is not the purveyor of knowledge, it is the cleanser of souls." Stiffly, the old man bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt. He crumbled it between his gnarled fingers and let it fall back to the earth, leaving a brown, muddy smear across his palm. Plunging his hand into the river, he waited for a moment. When he rose, he held out his hand to Christopher. Water dripped from the leathery flesh, washed clean of mud. "See."

Christopher looked at him in confusion. What was the old man getting at?

The shaman shook his head and sighed. "So young," he muttered. "Water will wash away what troubles your soul, but it will give no answer to your problem."

"What do you know of my problem, old man?" Christopher asked.

He Who Sees laughed. The dry, rusty sound rasped across Christopher's nerves.

"I know in two days you will fight Red Buffalo to possess the woman."

"The whole camp knows that." Christopher dismissed the shaman and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling the old man generated in him. He Who Sees was just a man, old surely, wise probably, but just a man.

"True," He Who Sees agreed readily enough. His dark eyes probed Christopher's face.

Though he wanted to avoid the penetrating stare that seemed to see deep into his soul, Christopher returned the man's gaze steadily.

As if satisfied by what he saw there He Who Sees nodded. "The spirits have sent me a vision. I have seen who will triumph."

Unable to control his look of disdain, Christopher turned away. Magic. Visions. Superstitions. None of them existed. They were for children and the ignorant, to explain what was not understood. Educated men gave no credence to the like. Not wishing to hurt the old

man's feelings or anger him, Christopher said nothing.

"You do not believe."

Christopher started to deny his disbelief.

"No, do not argue. Sadly you are correct; the time for magic in this land is fading, as are the Comanche. Do not feign a belief to humor an old man. Few white men can see with more than their eyes. This is both their strength and their weakness. You are no different."

"You're right, I don't believe. So what is it you want to tell me?" Tired and worried, Christopher found himself unwilling to continue this cryptic conversation any longer. "Who will triumph?"

For a moment the shaman seemed surprised by Christopher's bluntness, then he laughed. "You are bold, Tabe kwi?ne, for a white man surrounded by your enemies. That is good. Remember, each challenge in life must be met anew. Do not let defeat trail after you as the stink follows the skunk. Your past failures mean nothing here."

Shock held Christopher rigid. What did this old man know of his past? How could he know of the fears and doubts he buried deep inside himself? Of his mother? Of Christina? Of the guilt he carried for their deaths, because of his shortcomings.

Nothing. The old man could know nothing. Christopher's eyes narrowed in anger. He clenched his fists.

"That is good, Sun Eagle. Be strong. Be sure. Let your disbelief be your strength, let it carry you into battle."

With that He Who Sees turned and walked away. In moments, the sun's glare obscured him from Christopher's view. It wasn't until a long time later he realized the shaman had not told him who would triumph. Still, he hastened to assured himself, an old man's vision meant nothing, would have no impact on the outcome of the coming fight. Why then did he return to his tepee wondering just what the shaman had foreseen?

Chapter 14

KC LIFTED the tepee flap and stepped out. Delicate wisps of frost covered the ground and wavering columns of steam hung in the still air just above the river. A lone bird chirped its morning song, but receiving no answer fell silent. In the east the sun rose gracefully above the mountain peaks, turning the cloudless sky from smoky gray to crystalline blue, giving a promise of warmth to come. KC shivered, hugged herself and urged the sun to hurry.

Behind her she could hear Huwuni stirring and Winter Hawk's grumbling demands for breakfast. She knew she should go back inside and eat. Instead, she looked down the straggling line of tepees stretched along the river. Smoke drifted from a few, but most sat still and quiet in the early morning mist.

Christopher was out there. Somewhere. She had to find him, to warn him, to make him leave. She'd made her choice. She could not let him die for it.

She would hunt for him now, while the camp still slept.

"Firebird." Huwuni's soft call made her stop and turn. "Come now and eat."

“I’m not hungry.”

Huwuni knelt just inside the tepee. “The food is hot and ready to eat. Sun Eagle, the white man who comes for you, will wait. You must eat and be strong,” she insisted. “Come. You will see him later.”

Reluctantly KC entered the tepee. “You are right.”

Throughout the meal, KC felt Winter Hawk’s dark eyes on her. Though she no longer feared the man as she had as a child, she was well aware of the power he held over her life. She doubted he would kill her while Red Buffalo claimed her. Still, she’d felt the force of his temper too often in the past not to be wary. No longer his slave, she refused to cower before him. She lifted her eyes to his and met his stare.

For a long time he regarded her thoughtfully, his features hard and impassive. What thoughts, she wondered, did he have as he gazed so intensely at her? Then suddenly he smiled, the creases of his leathery skin deepening at the unaccustomed expression.

“The flame still burns bright within you, Firebird.”

She blinked in surprise. He called her by name. Always before he called her na?raiboo?, slave.

“It is good.” He grunted and turned his attention back to his food. After eating he dressed and left the tepee.

Huwuni bustled around, clearing the remains of the meal and straightening the rumpled bed robes. KC helped with the well-remembered work. She had only to close her eyes to picture her own mother performing the same tasks in their tiny sod house long ago. Women’s chores varied little whether they be Indian or white. Together they soon finished.

Outside the camp came to life. What little frost the sun had not yet melted was soon trampled beneath the feet of Indians coming and going about their daily business. Half-naked children dashed around, running and yelling to warm their blood in the chilly morning air. Camp dogs barked and chased after them, stopping when the opportunity presented itself to steal a scrap left from breakfast. Women congregated, their arms full of clothing to be washed, chattering as they headed downstream. A group of young warriors gathered at the edge of camp, near the horses, preparing to head out on a hunt. Other warriors lounged in the sun, settling down to smoke and gamble.

Laughter and shouts filled the air with sound. The smell of charred meat mingled with the scents of humanity and nature. For two years these sights, sounds and smells had been KC’s life.

How familiar it was.

Huwuni took KC's arm. "Come. I have promised to watch the youngest of the children while their mothers work to cure hides from the buffalo hunt." She pulled KC along with her.

KC started to protest. "But..."

"Please, Firebird," Huwuni pleaded. "I have need of your help. The children are active and I tire easily. It is not safe for you to see Sun Eagle now. Red Buffalo has returned to camp. Even now he watches you." She gestured with her head toward Red Buffalo's tepee.

KC turned to look and met Red Buffalo's glittering glare. He stood in front of his tepee, legs spread, arms folded across his massive chest. His whole body radiated rage. KC shivered, but lifted her chin. Only when Huwuni tugged at her arm did she break eye contact with him.

"You are foolish to try Red Buffalo's temper, Firebird." Huwuni shook her head and led KC away.

KC followed without protest, glad to be out from under Red Buffalo's hot eyes. If just his look made her tremble how could she bear his touch? She knew she could not ... would not allow it. Only one way existed to prevent it, one she was unsure if she was ready to accept.

Huwuni's voice shook her from her contemplation of her possible fate. "Sun Eagle has

challenged Red Buffalo for you, in two days they will fight. When Red Buffalo kills the white man, you will be his. Winter Hawk and the council have decided no whites may remain in camp. So Red Buffalo will take you away and there will be none to curb his anger with you. Take care how you go, my friend,” Huwuni warned.

“It doesn’t matter.” KC pulled back and slowed Huwuni to a more sedate pace.

Breathing heavily, the tiny Indian woman smiled her gratitude.

“There must be no fight. I must see Sun Eagle.” How appropriate, KC smiled at the name given to Christopher. He was like a golden bird of prey.

Huwuni stopped walking and shook her head. “No, it is dangerous.”

“Has Winter Hawk forbidden Sun Eagle to see me?”

“No, but...” Huwuni hesitated, then turned her head away. “I have heard Red Buffalo plans to kill the white man before they can fight.”

“Are you sure?” Though KC had little love for Red Buffalo, she’d never seen him do anything to dishonor himself. He must fear Christopher beyond the ordinary to even consider such an act.

“Yes...no...I do not know,” Huwuni muttered. “You must not go to Sun Eagle. If Red

Buffalo does what I have heard whispered and catches you with the white man, he may kill you also. Do not tempt fate. I have lost too many already to the hatred between my people and the white man. I do not wish to lose you too.” Tears glistened in Huwuni’s eyes; her whole body trembled with emotion. “Stay with me, Firebird. I have need of you.” She placed her hand over her rounded belly, her voice breaking on a sob. “I am afraid.”

KC hugged Huwuni and let her cry. “Shhh.”

As the wife of Winter Hawk, Huwuni knew most everything that went on in camp. KC had hoped to find Christopher with Huwuni’s help. That hoped died. KC would have to find him alone; she couldn’t force the distraught young woman to reveal her knowledge.

“Cease your weeping woman or your little one will drown before he can be born,” KC teased gently, coaxing a wavering smile from Huwuni. “Come now. The children wait and their mother’s grow impatient to start their work.”

Downstream and thankfully downwind of camp they found a group of women busy stretching, scraping and curing the buffalo hides taken on the last hunt. The women chattered happily among themselves as if unaware of the hot, dirty, smelly work they did, their attitude one of acceptance, even joy that the spirit of the buffalo had been generous to them.

KC's nose wrinkled at the odors of rancid fat, wood ash and damp fur hanging in the air, glad she'd been called to a different duty this day. While a slave, how many hides had she scraped and cured, her back and arms aching from the effort of scraping away the flesh and fat, her fingers raw from the mixture of buffalo brains, grease and water used to cure the hides? At Huwuni's direction KC gathered the small children and led them away from distracting their mothers.

Six little ones ranging in age from two to five followed like ducklings, their high piping voices sounding much the same. Huwuni herded them from behind making sure none strayed. They stopped near the edge of the river, just out of sight and smell of the women. Like children everywhere they played and laughed, splashing in the cold, shallow water, squealing in delight. They dug into the moist, sandy ground with sharp sticks then eagerly displayed their treasures, a shiny rock or a bit of moss, to Huwuni and KC.

The sun climbed steadily higher warming the air and the active children. After a time, the children slowed their hectic activity. One by one, they joined Huwuni and KC in sitting on the bank. Grubby and panting, they sprawled limply in repose like tired puppies; their eyes already starting to drift shut in exhaustion.

One little girl of three, climbed boldly into KC's lap. KC felt honored. Pipiku, daughter of Summer Moon, was a solemn child not normally given to displays of affection. Warm and solid, she cuddled into KC as if it was her right. Her thumb made a small popping sound as she pulled it from her mouth. "Story," she demanded and replaced the moist digit between her lips.

In an instant, the others took up the cry. "Story, story." Even Huwuni added her plea. Apparently, she had not forgotten the tales KC used to tell her years ago. Even Winter Hawk had listened to KC as she repeated the legends of the gods of Olympus.

"Very well, a story it is." KC smiled at the eager, hopeful, little faces watching her. "But you all must be very quiet and as still as the mouse who hides from the hungry hawk."

Six small dark heads nodded their agreement and KC began.

"Once, very long ago, many summers before you or even your parents' parents were born, there lived a young maiden. She lived quietly and happily with her mother and father on the great open prairie. There was much love and joy in their tepee, so much that it spilled out into the air and leaked into the ground. All around that little tepee the grass grew greener, the buffalo fatter, the rain fell softer, the birds sang clearer, and the air smelled sweeter."

KC started her story thinking to tell one of the many Greek myths she'd heard at her

mother's knee. Something made her lift her gaze and look above the heads of her small charges. A short distance away stood Red Buffalo; his hard eyes focused on her. She could read the anger in his body's stance. The cold of fear slid down her spine, but she met him stare for stare until Pipiku complained at the break in the story.

She bent her head to the little girl and continued the story that changed as she spoke. "All the world knew of the happiness of the young maiden and her small family. Soon a tutusuana, an evil spirit, grew jealous. He watched them with hate-filled eyes and vowed if he could not have what they had he would destroy them. He twisted the wind and had it whisper poison into the ears of a group of warriors. He told them lies about the maiden and filled their minds with a murderous rage.

"Without stopping to think about where these evil thoughts came from the warriors rode down upon the little tepee whooping their war cries. Confused and frightened, the maiden and her parents burst out to see what the yelling was about. Before they could speak and break the evil spell on the young warriors, the maiden's parents were struck down and killed. The maiden fell weeping to her knees beside her parents' bodies. Only then did her heart-felt cries of grief pierce the warriors' enchantment and they stayed their hands from slaying her.

“Guilt-ridden, the warriors called upon the benevolent spirits to help them make amends for shattering the maiden’s happiness. They took her with them to their village and tried to make her one of them. But anger had entered the maiden’s heart and she could not accept their attempts to make it up to her. She turned from all their kindness and nurtured the hate in her heart. Finally, a wise chief sent her from the tribe into the care of a powerful shaman.

“There the maiden lived for many years. She grew to love the shaman and learned to be content, but no longer did she smile or laugh with happiness.

“The good spirits saw the gift of joy they had given the maiden had been stolen, so they sent her another. They filled her slight body with a great power, a power that when the time was right she would bestow upon her heart-mate.”

KC snuck a peek at Red Buffalo. He hadn’t moved from his position. The intense look on his face made her heart jump, but she pressed on.

“When the tutusuana saw this he became enraged. Why should this mere mortal girl possess such power? Such power should be his.

“He stormed over the earth, stirring the whirlwinds, making the land quake and tremble, filling the sky with mountainous thunderclouds that spat bolts of blue-white light. None of it

touched the maiden until again the tutusuana whispered his venomous poison into a warrior's ear. He told the warrior of the great power that could be his if only he possessed the body of the maiden.

"For a long while the warrior proved stronger than the tutusuana's words, but finally he succumbed to the lure. He abducted the maiden and carried her away.

"The good spirits saw this and were dismayed. Once again their gift to the maiden was being stolen. This was not right, they thought, but what could they do? The spirit of the sun looked down at this injustice and became so angry fire leapt from his body and flew to earth like a great golden eagle. Dismayed, the other spirits watched the sun spirit take the shape of a man. No spirit had ever done such a thing. What did he plan?

"Now the tutusuana started to worry. The sun spirit was a mighty foe even in the form of a man. The tutusuana whispered frantically into the warrior's ear, filling his head with thoughts of power and glory, not giving the warrior a chance to think of the coming battle with the sun spirit. Who would win such a battle?"

A soft snuffle drew KC's attention. Pipiku lay asleep in KC's arms, her small body lax, her thumb falling from her lips. All around KC the children slept, curled together in a tangled heap

of plump, rounded limbs and tousled heads. Even Huwuni sprawled dozing in the afternoon's warmth.

A shadow moved across the sun. KC looked up and gasped. Red Buffalo stood over her, radiating dark menace. The muscles beneath his red-brown skin bulged, the cords in his neck stood out in high relief, betraying the tension he held tightly in check.

"There is no doubt who will win the coming battle, Firebird."

He leaned closer, until KC could feel the heat of his body and inhale his musky scent.

"Do not think to flee from me. Sun Eagle is nothing. I will snuff his light like the flame of a candle." Red Buffalo pressed his thumb and forefinger together inches from KC's face.

Unable to stop herself, KC cringed. Pipiku protested the move, stirring restlessly in her sleep. KC forced herself to be still even as Red Buffalo gripped her chin with his fingers.

"You will be mine," he said, his voice low and rough.

"You're mistaken. I'll never belong to you." She faced him with rapidly faltering courage.

The many scars crisscrossing his massive chest and powerful arms gave mute evidence of his prowess in battle. What chance would Christopher stand against him in hand-to-hand combat?

Still, she dared to ask. “Do you think the night can defeat the sun?”

Red Buffalo growled in anger, leaning closer. “You are mine.” The words hissed through his taut lips.

KC trembled, in his eyes she read his desire to possess her soul, no matter the cost.

Pipiku stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked sleepily, then let out a shriek of terror at the scowling warrior whose face filled her vision. “Tutusuana!” She bolted upward, knocking away Red Buffalo’s hand and wrapped her chubby arms tightly around KC’s neck. Her wails roused the other children, who soon took up the cry.

“Tutusuana! Tutusuana!”

The children, confused and frightened, crowded KC; they clung to her arms and legs, nearly knocking her to the ground in their panic. KC struggled to maintain her balance under the assault.

Red Buffalo jerked back as the children surged around him. His startled look of dismay almost made being crushed worthwhile. He straightened away from the wiggling mass of children covering KC. For a moment his expression cleared, laughter lurked around the corners of his mouth and eyes, and KC glimpsed the man he might have been if not for his obsessive

hatred of the whites. Then the hint of humor disappeared and his hard mask fell back into place.

“Do not forget, Firebird. You are mine.” He turned and stalked away.

“I fear for you, Firebird.” Over the diminishing sobs of the children, Huwuni’s soft words echoed KC’s own fear. Despite the warmth of the afternoon sun beating down on her, she felt cold clear through.

“What is wrong? What is wrong?” The children’s mothers burst into the clearing. Armed with rocks, sticks and curing tools they came prepared to battle for their screaming children and stayed to laugh at the squirming tangle of bodies that greeted them.

With the ease of the very young, the children’s tears turned to giggles, fear easily pushed aside and forgotten in their innocence. KC disengaged herself from them, wishing her own fear could vanish as well.

The children jumped to their feet eager to tell of their day. Amid the childish chatter and the gentle scolding of tired mothers the group sorted itself out and headed back toward camp, until only Huwuni and KC remained at the river bank.

Huwuni groaned as she rose to her feet her hands braced against the small of her back. “I grow too large for sleeping on the hard ground with the hot sun beating on my head. Come we

will finish our nap on soft furs.” She eased the complaint in her tone with a gentle smile.

KC shook her head. “You go on ahead. I’ll remain here for awhile.” She needed time alone, time to think, time to plan what she would do.

Huwuni’s smile faded, replaced by concern. “Then I too will stay.”

“No, go on. I need to be alone.” She silenced Huwuni’s protest by giving the smaller woman a slight push. “Don’t worry, Red Buffalo won’t bother me.”

The frown on Huwuni’s expressive face reflected her doubt, but she nodded and left at KC’s insistence.

With the children gone silence fell over the land, broken only by the rustle of the wind through bare-branched trees, the shrill cry of a hunting bird and the sound of water trickling over rocks. If not for the worry in her heart KC would have been at peace. This was the world she knew and loved, the wild, untamed soul of Texas. For a time she stood gazing out over the river toward the cliffs surrounding this valley hidden deep within the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plains. Then she began to walk along the bank, her moccasins leaving shallow impressions in the damp earth.

How long she walked she was unsure, but the shadows were long and the air growing cooler

before she turned to retrace her steps. She found no answer to her plight, no escape, no way to prevent the battle between Red Buffalo and Christopher.

A dull thud and a low grunt interrupted her thoughts. Startled, she froze, her head cocked to locate the direction of the sound. Ahead she caught a flash of gold and heard a male voice mutter a curse. Christopher's voice.

Listening, she recognized Dead Eye's voice. She crept closer through the jumble of brush and rocks and paused, hidden behind a large boulder. She longed to rush out and throw herself into Christopher's arms. A sudden shyness held her back. How many times had he turned from her, disgust written in his eyes? Though he'd come to rescue her, would he welcome her embrace? She'd endured much without defeat, but if he pushed her away this time, she knew she would die inside.

Instead she stood and watched as he practiced fighting with Dead Eye. Dressed only in boots and buckskins, Christopher crouched low and circled Dead Eye warily. Sweat streaked the dirt covering his back and chest and matted his hair to his head, turning it from white blond to honey gold. Muscles, knotted and tense, rippled beneath his skin, yet he moved with a fluid grace. Determination etched his features. A trickle of blood oozed from a long, shallow scratch

on his upper arm.

Dead Eye lunged, his knife catching the light as it sliced the air where seconds before Christopher stood.

The metallic taste of blood filled KC's mouth as she bit her lip to muffle her gasp. For a long time, she watched them at their all too real mock fight. Knives flashing, bodies swaying, moving in a macabre dance, they waltzed around the rocky ground, their heavy breathing and grunts the only sounds.

Despite his lack of expertise, Christopher held himself well. He seemed to have an instinctive awareness of his opponent.

Dead Eye lunged forward. Christopher stepped aside, the blade missing him. Dead Eye twisted sideways, his leg shot out tangling with Christopher's. Dust rose as they went down. Christopher landed on his back arms splayed wide. His knife flew from his hand, landing only yards from where KC stood. With a speed and grace that belied his small stature, Dead Eye straddled Christopher's prone body, his knife pressed to Christopher's throat.

Dead Eye lifted his knee from Christopher's chest and rose to his feet. He shoved his knife into its scabbard at his waist and held out his hand to Christopher.

“That’s a mite better, boy. Next time watch yar opponent’s eyes, see where he’s gonna aim afore he makes his move. We’ll work more tomorrow. Light’s starting ta fade and I got me a hankering for some of that little squaw’s cooking. My stomach’s ‘bout ta cave in from hunger.”

In the waning daylight, KC could see the signs of their activity; the tall, dry grass flattened, the bushes with their branches broken and twisted, and a dark, liquid smear across a flat rock.

“Ya Coming?” Dead Eye asked.

“Go on ahead, I’ll be along soon.”

Dead Eye looked doubtful. “Don’t worry so much. If’n ya keep yar head and watch his eyes, ya’ll do fine.”

“But will I win?”

Dead Eye hesitated, then started to speak.

“Don’t say it. I’m not in the mood for one of your tall tales right now. Go on and eat. I need a bit of time alone.

Muttering under his breath about stubborn Easterners and troublesome Injuns, Dead Eye disappeared into the twilight.

KC squeezed her eyes shut; too easily she could visualize Christopher lying helpless with

Red Buffalo's knife at his throat. More than once, as a child, she'd seen Red Buffalo fight. Like a sleek, black panther he was an efficient and merciless killer. He would cut Christopher to pieces. She had to stop them from fighting.

A branch cracked beneath the weight of a foot. Quietly she slid back into the brush and waited motionless as Dead Eye approached. He passed by, unaware of her presence. She turned to watch as Christopher pulled on his shirt and headed away from the camp.

What could she do to convince him not to fight Red Buffalo? A shiver coursed over her. There was only one argument he might accept to leave her with the Comanche. The question was could she make him believe it?

"Ya shouldn't wander about alone."

KC jumped and whirled around. "Dead Eye," she managed to squeak. "Don't scare me like that."

"Ya gonna let him go through with this?"

"What choice do I have?"

"Only one I reckon. Think ya can do it?"

KC shifted uneasily under Dead Eye's stare. "Yes...no...I...I don't know."

“Well, only you can decide. I’m right fond of the boy. I’d hate ta see him carved up like a plump turkey.”

Hurt washed over KC. Over the years she’d always felt Dead Eye held some affection for her. Did the fact she wasn’t the boy he’d thought her make her less in his eyes?

She couldn’t keep from voicing the question. “What about me?”

Surprise crossed Dead Eye’s craggy face. “Aw, gal. Don’t ya worry none. Old Dead Eye ain’t planning on leaving ya with that snake.”

“But...”

“Just never ya mind the how. Yar job is ta keep that thar boy alive.”

“He doesn’t stand any chance of winning against Red Buffalo, does he?”

Dead Eye shook his head. “Naw. If’n I had a couple of months ta train him proper like, maybe. He’s good, got natural instincts, but no discipline.” He hesitated for a moment then looked straight into KC’s eyes. “Ya do know that if’n ya convince him not ta fight, he’s never gonna forgive either of us.”

She slumped in defeat. “I know,” she whispered. Either way she was going to lose him.

At the touch of Dead Eye’s hand on her shoulder, she straightened and met his

compassionate gaze. Nothing mattered except that Christopher live.

“Ya see him tonight. He’ll be alone.”

Before KC could question him further, Dead Eye left, vanishing into the shadow of the rocks.

In the west the sun dipped low, nearly below the ridge of the cliffs. Deprived of the sun’s warming rays the air chilled rapidly. KC shook off her lethargy and headed toward the river to bathe.

Tonight she would meet Christopher for the first time as a woman.

Chapter 15

EARLIER, BEFORE he'd started working with Dead Eye, Christopher walked throughout the camp, braving the hostile stares of the warriors and the curious ones of the women and children. Questions and worries plagued him. He needed to see KC. To find out if Red Buffalo had prevented the Baker brothers from raping her and if he'd raped her himself. Until he saw her, spoke to her, reassured himself of her well being, he couldn't concentrate. And he needed to concentrate if he was to win the coming battle.

Christopher didn't doubt KC's innocence. He remembered clearly her tentative overtures toward him. Her shy, gentle touches, the look of fear clouding her eyes along with the first stirring of desire, the way her fair skin turned pink with excitement, her breath shallow and short. All these things told him she knew nothing of the passion that could flare between a man and a woman. If he'd known, they could have shared that journey together.

He wanted to be the man who ignited the fire he'd sensed smoldering inside her. His body grew tight and hard as he thought of them together, man and woman, their bodies meeting hot

and eager, her fair skin touching his sun-darkened flesh from breast to knee. With a groan, he tried to banish the image from his mind. Stripping off his clothes he plunged into the river and let the water cool the heat in his body.

As he shivered in the night air, he prayed the embers glowing inside KC hadn't been stomped and smothered by terror and violence.

CHRISTOPHER leaned back on his bed robe and watched Dead Eye straighten his clothing and slick back his hair. He struggled without success to smooth the ratty salt 'n' pepper beard covering the lower half of his face.

The grizzled old man preened for a minute longer then turned toward Christopher. "How do I look?"

"What are you up to?" Suspicion laced Christopher's tone.

A grin creased Dead Eye's craggy features. "I's got me an assignation."

"A what?"

"I's meeting me a little Injun gal."

Christopher bolted upright and practically shouted. “When on earth did you manage to meet and arrange an assignation? And are you crazy?”

“Rest easy, boy. She’s a widow woman, right grateful to have a man to warm her bed robes. Don’t worry none, ain’t no problem. The Comanche ain’t so stuffy like about natural functions.” He flashed a grin at Christopher. “Don’t be surprised if’n one of them little squaws comes a knockin’. Thar was a couple of them a watchin’ you earlier.”

His tone softened for a brief moment. “I had me an Injun wife once.” Grief, buried but not forgotten surfaced in his one good eye. Then it was gone, banished and his familiar twinkle returned.

He shook his head and straightened. “Besides, I ain’t stupid and I’m kinda fond of my scalp, so thar’s no call to get all het up. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

Before Christopher could come up with an argument Dead Eye left.

With only his thoughts for company, Christopher sat in the dark. Being alone wasn’t new to him. Through the years, he’d been by himself more often than not.

After his father died, he’d turned to his mother for comfort and found only her grief. Her death followed two years later, but she’d left him much earlier. At ten he’d been sent to live

with his uncle in St. Louis far away from the free open spaces of the Texas land he loved. Though his uncle did his best, he had little idea of what to do with a sullen, grief-stricken young boy.

In desperation he'd sent Christopher to a series of expensive boarding schools until assured the wildness inside him had been tamed and civilized. There Christopher learned to curb his exuberant nature and fierce temper, to fit into the refined atmosphere of his elderly uncle's life.

Yes, Christopher knew all about being alone. Only this time there was someone he wanted to be with.

KC.

Outside he could hear the camp settling down for the night; the high-pitched complaints of tired children dragged from play, the scolding tone of women worn from a day's labor, the laughter of men engaged in games of chance, dogs growling over the dinner scrapes, all the sounds normal to a place where people dwelt.

KC was out there somewhere. Was she alone? Afraid? Hurting? The questions made Christopher tense and restless, unable to sleep. He needed to sleep, to marshal his strength for the battle to come. But until he saw her, he knew he couldn't.

He lay back on the bed robes and stared sightlessly upward. “Where are you KC?” he murmured.

The tepee flap lifted with a rustle and as if summoned by his words a woman stood outlined in the opening.

The camp lay quiet in the twilight, the night crisp and clear. With trembling fingers, KC lifted the tepee door flap. Warm, wood smoke scented air did little to ease the chill from her flesh. In the tepee’s center a fire burned low, casting a narrow ring of light that didn’t reach far into the darkness. A thin wisp of smoke, dispersed by the opening of the flap, broke apart like a dream upon waking. KC searched the dim recesses of the tepee for Christopher.

The loud click of a pistol’s hammer froze her in place.

“Who’s there?”

“KC.”

She waited a moment, then stepped into the light. Cold and numb despite the warmth in the small tepee, she lifted her gaze to meet Christopher’s.

Breath stopped in her throat as he moved out of the shadows. Wearing nothing but trousers, he loomed before her, a figure sculpted of bronze. Firelight turned his hair to liquid gold around

his shoulders and gleamed on the powerful planes of his chest and arms. Like water-parched earth, she drank in the sight of him, alive and well. She wasn't too late.

With a cry of relief she sank to her knees and buried her face in her hands. Though her eyes remained dry, her body shook.

"KC," he whispered.

He reached out and gathered her close. She fitted into the curve of his arms as if their bodies had been formed of one mold. Her head rested in the hollow of his shoulder. Her cheek against his chest, she breathed in the musky odor of his smooth skin. The rapid thud of his heart sounded loud in her ear.

Words of explanation and apology clogged KC's throat. When she tried to speak, Christopher tightened his grip and hushed her. With one arm, he held her securely, while his free hand threaded through her hair, raking her scalp with a firm yet gentle touch. He stroked her closed eyelids and trailed his finger down the bridge of her nose to outline her lips. A delicate shudder ran through her and her lips parted on a sigh. His hand slid lower, down her throat to her breast, his fingers cool yet leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Possessively he palmed her through her buckskin dress.

Her eyes opened to meet his. Dark pools of black rimmed in blue probed her with hot intensity. Her skinned burned under his gaze.

“I want you KC,” he told her, his voice low and rough. “I wanted you when I thought you a boy and I want you now. If you don’t want this, tell me now.”

She should stop him, tell him no. This was not why she’d come. How could she convince him of her desire to remain with Red Buffalo if she lay with him? She opened her lips to speak the words. Words that would turn him away from her. Words that would keep him safe. She looked up at him unaware her eyes begged him not to let her.

“I...”

His mouth came down over hers sealing up the words, driving them from her mind in a rain of glittering stars. Not giving her a chance to object he took command. His kiss demanded a response, yet didn’t force. He led her slowly and deeply into a haze of passion she had never imagined. With patience and skill he took her to a place where time ceased to exist, where the line between them dissolved, where his pleasure became hers and words meant nothing.

In the shadows, Christopher lay KC back on the bed robes and knelt over her. She went willingly, her lithe body arching into his in a mute appeal. With fingers grown clumsy in desire

he stripped off her soft buckskin dress, exposing the pale satin of her flesh to his gaze. Like honeyed cream her skin glowed in the firelight.

He found himself awed by the perfection of her slim body, her small round breasts with their dusty rose nipples, which pebbled to tiny nubs at his slightest touch, her long legs twining restlessly with his and the thick, fiery red thatch of curls nestled between her thighs. How could he have mistaken her for a boy?

Anger tightened the corners of his mouth at the sight of the bruises marring her, the discolored impressions of fingers that had bit into her arms, breasts and thighs. He brushed his knuckles over the bruise on her cheek. His rage against the Baker brothers was tempered by the memory of their fate at Red Buffalo's hand. For a second he felt a savage sense of gratitude toward the Indian. Still, which of the marks she carried had Red Buffalo inflicted?

She moved beneath him, her hands urging him closer, her body undulating against his in an appeal older than time. She stroked his arms and chest, mimicking his actions.

Had she been raped? Christopher didn't think so. Fear did not seem to enter into her assault on his person. There was no hesitation in her response to his touch, nor a reluctance to return it.

He had to stop. He had no right to do this, to take her, as if in payment for a service not yet

rendered. He could give her nothing, not even his life. And if he did survive, did win out against Red Buffalo, he was still promised to another. His life and hers lay in different directions. Honor demanded he refuse what she offered so generously.

He groaned as her fingers found his nipple and proceeded to fondle it. His body thickened in reply, his trousers growing snug.

A sly smile curled her lips. Her hands slipped down his front and quickly worked the fastenings of his trousers. Honor forgotten in the rush of feelings, coherent thought deserted him when her fingers closed around him. Pulling away so it didn't end before it even began, he kicked off his trousers and moved over her.

KC whimpered and stiffened as he settled between her thighs. His weight pinned her nearly motionless against the bed furs. Breath fled her body as a prickle of fear penetrated the haze of passion surrounding her. What was happening? It wasn't the feel of his body against hers, the touch of his hands or even the act to follow that frightened her. Never before had she allowed control to slip away from her. With his caress, he stole her restraint and the freedom scared her.

At her first sound Christopher's grip loosened.

"Easy, KC. Slow and easy." He braced himself over her.

She blinked and stared up at him. Eyes smoky with passion, he grinned down at her. Draping a leg across her thighs, he shifted to her side and propped himself up on one arm. His other hand continued to stroke her.

Dazed by the intense feelings his touch generated inside her, KC could only lie and watch as he fondled her breasts, as he plucked at her nipples, rolling them gently between his long, elegant fingers.

“Whatever you want KC.” He bent forward his lips closing over the hard, aching bud.

KC gasped in surprise at the sweet suction of his mouth on her breast. Fear drained away, replaced by a different kind of tension deep in her belly, spreading like licks of fire outward, turning her limbs weak and boneless. She whimpered again, her eyes closing.

“Christopher,” she whispered. Never had she imagined the mere touch of a man could cause her body to catch fire.

No, not just any man. Christopher. Only for him would she ignite into a raging inferno.

“Tell me, KC. Tell me what you want.” He rained kisses, sweet and cool, across her chest and throat, up over her chin and cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered as his tongue dampened her lashes. His chest pressed against hers, flattening her breasts, making them ache for the return of his

mouth.

“I...I want...you,” she managed to croak, her throat dry and raspy.

“Now and forever, my love.” His words were lost as his mouth closed over hers in a kiss that demanded everything inside of her and gave back the moist nectar of his tongue.

Not since she’d seen her parents’ brutal and senseless deaths, had she allowed another person to penetrate her inner core. Even Eli, for all that she loved him, hadn’t been given a place so deep in her heart. Losing Christopher could cripple her. Frightened and unsure, she guarded her love like a miser his coin, hoarding her scraps of affection, afraid to spend foolishly.

Though she knew to give in now would only mean more pain later, suddenly she didn’t care. She threw away caution and flung herself into the arms of the sun, embracing his heat and light after years of cold and dark. If she died in the blaze so be it. Without hesitation she gave, opening herself and welcoming him within.

KC gripped Christopher’s arms urging him closer. She parted her thighs to make a place for him. The air felt cool against her dampness. Heat, smooth and hard, probed her. She shivered, her body tense, both eager and afraid.

Sex held no secrets, no mystery for KC, but this was different, nothing like what the whores

in Peaceful boasted of, nor the violent rapes she'd witnessed. This was sweet and intense, as much a joining of minds and souls as of bodies. When he entered her, two would become one for a brief moment in time, linked together in a most elemental way.

Moist and warm, Christopher's breath fanned her cheek. Braced on his forearms he held his weight off her. Shifting slightly he slipped one hand between them. Her breath caught as his fingers searched through her nether curls, then nearly stopped as he probed her wet depths. Heat flooded through her and she squirmed trying to escape the exquisite sensations his touch engendered.

"Let me please you," Christopher whispered. He traced the outer edge of her ear with his tongue.

Sparks exploded inside her. Though liquid fire seemed to flow through her veins, she shook as if from cold.

With sure strokes, he explored her secrets, easing his fingers inside her, sliding in and out until her hips rocked against him in an ancient rhythm. The tension within her built.

Jaws locked in concentration; Christopher continued the assault on KC's senses. Instinct urged him to hurry, to join his body with hers, to plunge into her again and again until he found

his release. Still, he held back, stroking her, watching her face, her eyes growing dark and glazed, her tongue licking dry lips, leaving them parted and shiny. He felt her body, the minute contractions of the muscles in her thighs against his, her small hesitations in breathing, the quiver of her breasts rubbing his chest. Moisture slicked his fingers. He breathed deeply of her scent, a mixture of feminine musk and sage.

She bucked against him. His arousal brushed her wet curls; it strained toward her, resentful of the commands of his mind. A shudder ran through him and sweat broke out over his body, beading on his brow. With thumb and forefinger he sought and found the tiny nub hidden within the folds of her flesh.

At his first touch, her eyes flew wide and her mouth opened in a surprised “O.” Before she could object, he began a rhythmic massage. In seconds, her back arched and she let out a cry.

Smothering her scream with his mouth, Christopher slid into her.

Icy cold and fiery hot, lava erupted inside KC, spreading from the tips of Christopher’s fingers like bolts of lightning, coursing under her skin. Lights exploded behind her eyelids, more brilliant in color than any Texas sunset. Head thrown back, she dug her nails into Christopher’s arms to anchor herself to a world turned suddenly inside out.

The small pain of Christopher's entry was lost in the sensations overwhelming her.

His fullness stretched her, intensifying the heated bursts of pleasure throbbing throughout her with every beat of her heart. She strained toward him, her legs wrapped around his, her heels anchored against his calves. The scrape of his hair-covered thighs against her smoother ones tantalized her. Intrigued, she rocked her hips. Another shot of liquid fire rewarded her efforts. He groaned in her ear.

Smiling in satisfaction, she moved again, delighting in the continuation of pleasure the movement engendered.

"Be still woman," Christopher voice rasped in her ear. "Or it will end before it begins."

Hot and wet, she sheathed the length of him, her inner muscles stroking him with her every breath and movement. He gritted his teeth against a pleasure almost painful. Her response was everything he'd dreamed of, uninhibited and honest. No coy tricks or false tears. Earthy and elemental, she gave without hesitation and demanded the same in return. Even when he'd thought her a boy, Christopher had known when KC gave, it would be with her whole being, with no doubts or reservations. Beneath her cool, controlled boy disguise lay the heart and body of a wanton.

He'd known she was innocent of passion, but knowing of her captivity among the Comanche her virginity surprised him. Though it made no difference in his feelings toward her, he still found himself glad he was the first. What she had given him could not be taken by force.

With a whimper of protest she moved against him, thrusting her hips upward. Christopher groaned in surrender and gave her what she sought. He rocked into her setting a pounding rhythm. She met his every plunge, eagerly impaling herself. When she cried out yet again, her body stiffening, he embedded himself deep within her. Slick with sweat they clung together riding the tail of a blazing comet that lit the night sky in a burst of glory.

Sated and spent, they lay together, their bodies limp and damp, their breathing slowly returning to normal, their hearts still racing. Christopher rolled to his back pulling KC against his side. She went willingly. Only the crackle of the fire and the occasional yelp of a dog broke the silence.

In the quiet, the contented glow of their lovemaking began to fade. KC stirred, once again aware of why she'd come, of what she had yet to accomplish. Despair washed over her.

Christopher stilled her restless movements by draping a leg over hers. His fingers idly toyed with her hair. For a time she postponed what she must do, letting herself pretend she could

remain wrapped safely in his arms, that the world outside would not intrude.

She sighed. Reluctantly, she moved out of the circle of his arms and sat up. “Christopher, we need to talk.”

He chuckled softly and tucked his hands beneath his head. “So talk.”

He lay stretched out on the bed robes, unashamed and unconcerned about his nakedness. A rapid heat flooded KC’s veins leaving her weak and trembling as she remembered the feel of his long, lean body moving over and in hers. To hide her flushed cheeks she turned toward the fire and fed it another log. In a shower of sparks, flames shot upward filling the tepee with light and heat.

Words died in her throat when she faced him again. Flickering firelight danced over his frame. Her hungry gaze traveled down his upraised arms to the pale tufts of hair beneath them, across his broad, smooth chest, then lower still to where his manhood lay at rest in a nest of dark gold. Shimmering like silver pearls, moisture beaded on those crisp hairs. Drying red streaks on his thighs and flaccid length gave evidence of her introduction to passion at his hands. Unable to look away she watched as he swelled.

“No.” She yanked her gaze back to his face to meet his laughing eyes. “No,” she repeated

more forcefully.

Christopher turned and propped himself up. He watched as a mask slipped over KC's face and the warm willing woman became the self-contained *boy* of his memory. Kneeling by the fire, nothing remained of the ardent woman who had writhed in his arms. Only her eyes reflected a trace of the stormy passion they'd shared.

What, if anything did their lovemaking mean to KC? What did it mean to him? Just the sight of her sitting naked in the firelight, her breasts small and proud, nipples hard, her back straight, head high, the marks of his passion glistening on her thighs, made him want her again. Where and how did this *boy*/woman fit into his carefully ordered life?

Lost in his thoughts it took him a moment to realize KC spoke to him, her tone low and intense. When her words registered on him, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him.

"Repeat what you just said," he demanded.

The startled look on her face broke the smooth surface of her mask.

"I...I said, you and Dead Eye have to leave camp tonight. No one will stop you. There's no need for you to fight Red Buffalo, because I've decided to stay with him." She stammered over her words. The color left her face as Christopher pushed her down on the bed robes and leaned

over her. "You have to listen..."

"No, you listen to me," he ground out the words. "I've seen what Red Buffalo does to people. There's no way I'm going to ride away from this camp without you. I will fight him."

"But, you don't understand, there's no need. I want to stay here. I can make a life here with Red Buffalo. He wants me as his wife. He's not going to hurt me. I know these people, their way of life. It can be good; I can make it so. My skills as a healer make me valuable to them as well as Red Buffalo. What do I have back in Peaceful? If the people there knew my sex would they come to me for doctoring? How much longer before my secret is discovered and I end up on my back in one of Slick's upstairs rooms? There's nothing else for me."

Her hands clutched Christopher's arms, her nails biting into his flesh. She spoke in low, rapid tones her voice hoarse and ragged.

"Who are you trying to convince? Me or you?" Christopher asked in anger. "What about Eli?"

Her eyes closed briefly then opened again brimming with unshed tears. She shook her head, her lips curling in a mocking grin. "Eli will understand. He's been after me to leave Peaceful for ages."

Despite himself Christopher's lips twitched also. "I don't think this is what he had in mind."

"Maybe not, but it's my life and my choice." She tilted her chin upward; her lips set in a tight, thin line.

Christopher studied her features, from the stubborn glint in her sea green eyes to the slight trembling of her lower lip. Could she really want to stay with that savage? He had to admit Red Buffalo was a handsome man, strong and cunning, capable of taking care of a woman. And she was right, among the Comanche she would be an honored medicine woman. Back in Peaceful her only choices were *boy* or *whore*.

But Peaceful wasn't the only place in the world for KC. She belonged with him, at his side and in his bed. He pushed away the thought of the promise he'd made to another. He opened his mouth to speak then closed it, realizing just what she was doing. She knew as well as he, he had little chance of prevailing over Red Buffalo.

Her words were nothing but a smoke screen; a way to allow him to escape unharmed. She'd willingly sacrifice herself to spare him the humiliation of losing to Red Buffalo. No, it went further than that; she'd condemn herself to a life she hated to save his life.

KC pushed against him. "So let me up and I'll help you pack. You can be gone and far

away before dawn breaks.”

He grinned down at her, locking her squirming body against his. “I don’t think so. Whether you stay with Red Buffalo or come away with me may be your choice, but before you decide let me refresh you on your options.”

“What...” She turned her confused gaze to his face as his mouth settled over hers. It wasn’t long before her sputter of indignation became whimpers of ecstasy and her body molded itself to his.

Christopher’s last rational thought before he gave himself over to desire, was he had to win against Red Buffalo. No one was going to take this woman from him while there was breath left in his body.

DAWN LAY hours away when KC eased out of Christopher’s embrace. He mumbled and turned in his sleep. She waited a moment to see if he would wake. When he settled, she pulled on her dress and moccasins. She winced at the soreness between her thighs, but found she did not regret the cause.

At the door she paused and looked back at the sleeping man. Belly down he sprawled on the bed robes, his body lean and hard, yet relaxed in repose. His long fingers combed through the fur as they had earlier through her hair. Unconsciously, she brushed the tangles from her eyes, her hand lingering where his had wandered. Her scalp tingled in memory of his touch.

Gilded gold by the glow of the fire's embers, thick strands of hair lay across his cheek and trailed over his shoulders. Her gaze traveled downward across his bronzed and well-muscled back. Along with the puckered scar marring his smooth skin, thin red marks scored his flesh. She blinked in confusion at the evidence of her loss of control and looked lower to where his skin was shades lighter, over his taut buttocks to the shadowy area between his thighs. Her stomach clenched and heat rushed through her. Quickly she averted her eyes, less she weaken and find herself creeping back into the circle of his arms.

After the warmth of the tepee, the chill night air set her teeth to chattering, dispelling any lingering passion. With brisk steps, she headed back to Winter Hawk's tepee. She could only hope she hadn't yet been missed.

Nothing stirred in the darkness. The coming winter's cold had long since silenced the insect symphony and the camp lay sleeping. Used to her scent, even the dogs ignored her as she moved

past them. With only the faint flickering light of the stars and their reflection on the river's surface to guide her, she stumbled often.

A half-hour later she approached the main body of the camp. In the dark, she had difficulty identifying Winter Hawk's tepee from a score of others. KC hesitated at the door of a large tepee and tentatively pulled at the flap, praying it was the right one.

A soft grunt was her only sound as a hard hand came down over her mouth and nose and an arm wrapped tightly around her middle, squeezing the air out of her. Instinctively, she twisted and kicked, her feet flailing uselessly. Her captor's grip never lessened as he dragged her further into the darkness.

Bursts of inky black blocked the thin bit of lightness the night provided. Her lungs screamed for air and her ribs creaked under the pressure of the man's hold. Still, she struggled. Her heel connected sharply with a hard shin. Pain radiated up her leg. She clawed frantically at the hand over her mouth, feeling her nails biting into flesh, a sticky warmth running over her fingers.

"Be still!" the man rasped, his mouth against her ear.

Red Buffalo!

She went limp. Whether from fear or shock or lack of air she no longer knew. Blackness descended like a heavy cloud over her. She seemed to float in it. Then suddenly the pressure eased. Oxygen flooded into her lungs. She gasped and coughed, gulping the frigid air like the sweetest nectar.

She blinked to clear the spots from her vision. Red Buffalo held her, her back to his chest, his arm resting just below the swell of her breasts. His hand still lay over her mouth silencing her cry of protest. She tried to look around but the camp had disappeared from view. He walked ahead half carrying, half dragging her, despite her attempts to loosen his hold.

Finally, after what seemed like hours though only minutes passed, he stopped. He pulled his hand from her mouth and yanked her around until they stood chest to chest, his arms locked at the small of her back.

Even in the darkness, KC could see the dangerous glitter in Red Buffalo's eyes. Anger thrummed through his taut frame. She could feel it in the rapid beat of his heart against her chest, see it in the muscle twitching at the corner of his mouth and smell it in his acrid sweat. She twisted and tried to break free.

“Cease your struggles, woman. I wish only to talk.”

When she didn't answer, he gripped her upper arms and gave her a shake. His fingers pressed painfully into her half-healed bruises.

She swallowed heavily and nodded her agreement.

"Why do you wander the night?"

His question surprised her and left her without the ability to speak. Relief flooded her. He didn't know where she'd been.

"Where have you been?"

"I...I..." What could she tell him? If she lied, would it satisfy him? What would he do? She could feel his manhood pressing against her belly, telling her where his thoughts strayed.

No! She couldn't bear the thought of him using her, spoiling the sweet memories of what she'd shared with Christopher. She'd die first.

Die. Yes, that was the answer. She must die, so Christopher might live. Without her, he would have no reason to challenge Red Buffalo.

Do it! Tell him where you've been. What you've done. Fan the flames of his anger until the inferno of his rage engulfs you.

Chapter 16

RED BUFFALO held Firebird's gaze with his own. Fear lurked in the depths of the stormy green eyes that met his without blinking. She was right to fear him. Rising on her body heat, the scent of passion clung to her flesh. It filled his nostrils and fed the rage burning inside him.

She had laid with Tabe kwi?ne, had given him what belonged to Red Buffalo. His grip on her arms tightened until pain joined the fear in her eyes.

"I..." Firebird's voice cracked then grew clear and strong. "I have been..."

Red Buffalo stopped her words with his hand. "Do not speak the words that will force me to kill you."

She shook her head free of his hand. "You would have me lie?"

"No, just do not speak. It is enough that I know." It was more than enough. The knowledge ate at him like acid in his gut. Some small, never acknowledged hope died deep inside him. "I had wished that you would come to me willingly."

"Then you are a fool." Her gaze turned cool and hard, hiding her fear and pain. "I do not

come willingly to the tepee of my enemy.”

He pulled her closer, until her breasts brushed against his chest. “A fool I may be, but you are mine, your power is mine, willing or not.”

“I have no power, save that of love, and love cannot be commanded. What I’ve given to Sun Eagle you can never claim. Kill me now, if you must, but I cannot give you what I no longer own.”

“No, I will not kill you.” He stroked her cheek and curled his fingers around her slim throat. “But Sun Eagle will die at my hand for taking what is mine. Killing Sun Eagle will give me great satisfaction. I will relish the feel of my knife plunging deep into his flesh, ripping tissue, the blade rasping against bone, draining the life from him. Already I can feel his blood, warm and sticky, flowing over my hands and arms as he dies. Before I slit his pale throat, I will tell him how you will forget him in my arms. Only then will I take his colorless hair to decorate my belt.” The words spilled from Red Buffalo’s lips.

“Then your power will again be yours to give. I am a patient man. In time you will give me your...love,” he stumbled over the word. As a warrior and a Comanche, love was something he seldom considered. Still, in Firebird’s mind her power and her love were as one and he would

have both.

KC watched expressions of anger, hate, fear and compassion flicker across her captor's normally impassive face. Red Buffalo's touch was almost tender, his tone low and husky.

She shook her head in confusion. This was wrong. Red Buffalo should want to kill her not Christopher. What had she said? What had she done?

"No!" Hands curled into claws, she launched herself at Red Buffalo. "I will not let you kill him!"

Her attack caught him off guard. Her nails raked his cheek, leaving long, red scratches, before he grabbed her arms and held her away. Twisting and turning she fought. Using his greater muscle and weight, he subdued her frantic struggles with ease, until she hung limp in his arms, her strength spent.

She'd failed. Because of her, Christopher would die.

Red Buffalo turned her so she lay against his chest, her face resting in the hollow of his neck. She didn't protest as his hands rubbed her back. She no longer had the heart to fight him. Like the relentless desert wind Red Buffalo would not be stopped.

"Please, Red Buffalo. I beg you, don't kill him. Let him live and I will stay with you." Her

voice broke as she pleaded with him, her fingers clutching his buckskin shirt.

He tilted her face to his and shook his head. "While he lives you will hold yourself from me. He must die. Return to Winter Hawk's tepee. I will come for you when it is finished." He pushed her from him.

KC stumbled and grabbed for his arm, stopping him as he turned to walk away. "I give my word I will not."

For a moment he seemed to hesitate, then his features hardened. "No. I will kill him."

KC fell to her knees as he pulled from her grip. "If Sun Eagle dies at your hand, then you kill me too."

A cold chill touched Red Buffalo at her words. He turned back. Her skin had a sickly hue in the dim light, her eyes a blank and dead look. Had Firebird's attachment to the white man already drained her of her life force, her power? No. He could not weaken in this.

He knelt before her and raised her chin. "You will find that dying is not so easy. You are young and strong. Though you may not desire it for awhile, life will cling to you. When your belly swells with my son you will forget Sun Eagle and be as you were meant to be. Mine." He rose and walked quickly away. Her words followed him into the darkness.

“I will never forget.”

THOUGH NEARLY asleep, Christopher knew the minute KC left his side. Through half-closed eyes, he watched her rise. Her slim body reflected the fire's glow as she dressed and slipped quietly from the tepee. Part of him wanted to reach out and drag her beneath him, but he knew she must return to Winter Hawk's tepee before she was missed. And he needed to rest; he had one day left to master the necessary skills to fight Red Buffalo. So he let her go. Still, a long time passed before his body calmed enough to sleep.

Much later he blinked and opened his eyes to the first rays of dawn struggling to lighten the day. Shivering in the chilly morning air he pulled the bed robes closer. KC's subtle scent lingered on the furs and on his flesh. Remembering her touch and taste, his body responded. With a groan, he closed his eyes and buried his face in the fur.

“Rise ‘n’ shine, boy. Time's a wasting.” Dead Eye's gravelly tones tore Christopher from his sweet thoughts of KC.

Without waiting for an answer, Dead Eye yanked the robes off Christopher. His one eye

widened and he gave a low whistle.

“Guess the gal done took my advice and came a calling.” He laughed and turned to tend the fire.

A blush rose under Christopher’s skin. The evidence of their loving stained his thighs and crisscrossed his back. Ignoring Dead Eye’s obvious amusement, he hurried into his clothes.

“Looks like them Baker boys never done got a chance at her.” Dead Eye chuckled. “Surprised though that Red Buffalo let her be.”

“Dead Eye,” Christopher said.

Something in Christopher’s low tone must have warned Dead Eye. “No need to get ornery, just makin’ conversation.”

When Christopher didn’t answer Dead Eye fell silent. In a short time they ate and left the tepee.

All around them the camp began to stir. Tousled, sleepy-eyed children stumbled into the light. Dogs stretched and yawned, showing long, yellowed teeth and lolling pink tongues. Women rose and the smell of roasting meat soon drifted on the morning air, rousing warriors from their cozy beds.

A weak sun struggled to break through the mass of heavy, gray clouds hanging low and ominous over the valley. Cold and damp, the air smelled of coming rain or snow, depending on which direction the temperature went.

Christopher strode through the camp, aware of the curious and hostile eyes watching him. As he passed Winter Hawk's tepee he slowed in hope KC would emerge. The tepee door flap remained shut and then they were past.

At the edge of the camp, a child stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop. The child, a little girl of about three, looked up at him with solemn eyes. Christopher glanced around in confusion. No mother hovered near, ready to snatch her child from the danger of approaching an unknown white enemy. Dead Eye answered his questioning gaze with a shrug.

The little girl pulled her thumb from her mouth with an audible pop. When she spoke, Dead Eye translated.

"Are you the *sun spirit* that will rescue the maiden from the tutusuana?" She took his hand in hers and tugged downward.

Christopher bent down at the child's bidding. His hair, which he had tied back with a piece of rawhide, came loose and fell around his face. She reached up her free hand and stroked it.

A smile broke over her face. "It is warm like the sun."

"Pipiku?!" a woman cried.

"Fight well, *sun spirit*." The child patted his cheek then darted away.

Christopher straightened. "What was that all about?"

"Darned if I know...*sun spirit*."

SUN SPIRIT. Sun Eagle. The chill Red Buffalo felt had little to do with the frigid fall air. Filled with a strange sense of foreboding, he watched the two white men walk away from camp. At that moment the sun broke through the threatening clouds. A beam of sunlight streamed down, bathing Sun Eagle in a golden glow that nearly blinded Red Buffalo. Shaken, he turned from the view.

Firebird stood just outside Winter Hawk's tepee her gaze locked on Sun Eagle. What Red Buffalo saw in her eyes was like a knife thrust in his belly.

Gone were fear, pain and defiance. Her eyes shone with a yielding, soft light, her whole face aglow. Her body, though motionless, strained toward the man. Red Buffalo felt a pang of

uncertainty. Would she ever turn that look on him? He shook his head against the doubt creeping over him. Firebird was his. No man...or *sun spirit*, would steal her from him. Still, the question remained in his mind.

STRIPPED TO THE waist, body slick with sweat and blood, Christopher crouched low and waited. A frigid drizzle made the ground beneath his feet slippery, but did not cool the heat flooding his veins. His fingers gripped the handle of the knife without conscious thought. No longer was the wicked looking blade merely a piece of sharpened metal; it was an extension of himself, welded to his arm, obeying his slightest command. He balanced on the balls of his feet and waited for Dead Eye to make his move.

The older, smaller man swayed lightly to the right, his one good eye never leaving Christopher. Then suddenly he twisted to the left, throwing his body forward, the point of his knife aimed at Christopher's unprotected right side.

Ready for Dead Eye's move, warned by the shift of the man's weight to his left foot despite

the sway of his body, Christopher met Dead Eye's plunge. His right arm deflected the blow knocking Dead Eye off balance. With a muffled curse, Dead Eye stumbled, his knife flying from his hand, his feet sliding out from under him. The ground greeted him with a wet, sucking sound. Before he could rise, Christopher straddled him, the edge of his knife hovering above his throat.

Dead Eye wiped the cold mud from his face and looked up. "Four out of five falls to you. Yar learning, boy."

Battle lust drained out of Christopher as he gazed down at the wiry, old man pinned to the ground. While a seasoned fighter and an excellent teacher, Dead Eye bore no resemblance to Red Buffalo. That he could now best the man in a fight did little to reassure Christopher about his chances against the Indian. Sheathing his knife in the holder at his waist, Christopher rose to his feet and pulled Dead Eye with him.

With the fever of the fight leaving him, the cold rain now penetrated his consciousness. His hair lay wet and lank around his shoulders. He shivered as water dripped from the ends of his hair to run down his back and chest, mingling with the sweat and streaks of blood, stinging the scratches and small cuts there. Thick clumps of sandy mud clung to his boots and trousers, with

smears decorating his arms.

“Let’s head on back. It’ll be dark soon.” Dead Eye didn’t wait for an answer; he turned and searched the churned up ground until he found his knife. “I’m purty near froze through and my stomach’s dun startin’ ta believe my throat’s been cut. That little, widowed squaw cooks up a nice bunch of vittles and she’s woman enough to warm any man. I’ll see ya first light.” Wiping the blade on his already muddy trousers, he walked away.

Christopher watched the man with mixed feelings. How could he be so calm, so unconcerned? Then again, why not, he didn’t have to face Red Buffalo the next day. His job was done. Christopher’s hadn’t yet started.

Icy river water along with the rain washed away the sweat, blood and mud from his body before he headed back toward his tepee. The camp lay quiet as darkness descended.

Smoke rose from the closed tepees, firelight glow seeping through the heavy hides. A steady downpour now, the freezing rain kept everyone huddled inside. Water pounded against the ground, running in rivulets toward the river wherever the land slanted downward. As he approached his small isolated tepee, his feet dragged.

After sharing his bed robes with KC, the thought of lying there alone this night, held no

appeal. Despite the cold rain sluicing down his body, he grew warm and hard at the memory of her flesh becoming one with his. No woman he'd known had ever given herself so freely, holding nothing back, asking nothing.

The soft light spilling from his tepee made Christopher hesitate. Had Dead Eye changed his mind? Or had his little squaw changed hers? Either way, Christopher found he had no desire for Dead Eye's caustic company this night. Still, where else could he go? Rain, more solid than liquid now, pelted him, the cold seeping into his flesh. If he were to stand any chance at all tomorrow, he needed warmth, rest and food tonight. With a resigned sigh, he lifted the flap, bent and entered the tepee.

Heated air, fragrant with the smell of pinion wood, roasting meat, and the subtle scent of sage, surrounded him in a welcome gush.

KC. Her gaze met his as he raised his head. She knelt on the far side of the tepee, leaning over the fire to check the meat hanging on a spit. Never before had she seemed more a woman. Not a hint of the *boy* remained. Her buckskin shift accentuated the slender line of her body, the butter soft material molding and draping her frame, leaving little to his imagination. The delicate fringe decorating the bodice shimmered with her every breath, the intricate bead work catching

and holding the firelight. A cloud of fiery curls framed her face. In the pale oval of her face, her eyes shone like emeralds and her lips curved upward in a welcoming smile, soft and full and red.

“Are you hungry?” She held out a bowl filled with food. The succulent aroma of meat and onions wafted by his nose.

His stomach growled, reminding him his noon meal of dried beef and river water was a long time past. Still, the sight of her chased all thought of food from his mind. There were other hungers a man could feel that bit deeper than those of his stomach.

He stalked toward her. The smile on her face faltered, replaced by apprehension.

KC watched Christopher round the fire and approach her. The bowl in her hand shook. The ravenous look in his eyes had nothing to do with the food she offered.

All day she’d fought with herself over whether or not to seek him out yet again. Though she didn’t regret what had happened between them, she couldn’t allow it to be repeated. She had to convince him to leave. His life depended on it. The thought of him dead, Red Buffalo’s knife buried in his flesh, his blood soaking into the ground, turned her weak. She could face anything; a life as a Comanche slave, as a whore in Peaceful, or as Red Buffalo’s woman, anything but the knowledge Christopher no longer inhabited the same world as she.

For a brief moment, the sight of him, so big and powerful, his muscles rippling in the flicker of the firelight, made her wonder if maybe he stood a chance of defeating Red Buffalo.

No. Even if he was capable of the feat, it couldn't make any difference to her. She had no place in his life. Last night she'd selfishly blocked the memory from her mind, eager to grab what she could of him, but there was another in his life. One whom he would wed.

She steeled herself to the desire she read in his eyes. A desire that heated her blood and left her shivering in response.

As he knelt before her, she shoved the bowl into his hands. "Eat now, you'll need your strength."

He set the bowl down and grinned. "The sight of you gives me all the strength I need."

Blushing, she evaded his hand. "I've packed your gear. With the rain no one will stop you when you leave and your tracks will be washed away."

He caught her arm, pulling her to him. Startled at his unexpected quickness, KC could only stare up at his angry face.

"I told you last night, I have no intention of leaving here without you. Are you telling me you want us to sneak away now?"

Warm and filled with his scent, the damp from his wet clothing seeped through her buckskin. His body pressed rock hard against hers. His grip on her arms tightened as she squirmed.

“Answer me,” he demanded.

“No!” Anger came to her rescue. “Do you have a death wish? I don’t intend to sneak away with you. If I did, Red Buffalo would just come after us.”

“Let him. I will not run away.”

“Then you are a fool.” Hot angry words bubbled to her lips. “Don’t you understand, Red Buffalo won’t be satisfied with just winning the fight, he means to kill you.”

“I thought we’d already had this argument.”

She sagged in his arms, defeated. If he was determined to die, she couldn’t stop him. Her words seemed to make no dent in his resolve. What more could she say, do, to convince him not to fight?

“Trust me, KC.” His tone softened, as did his hold. “I have no desire to die tomorrow. Have a little faith in my abilities.”

Christopher felt her body go lax against his. At her first words he’d felt rage encompass

him. How could she believe he would abandon her? Leave her to Red Buffalo? He thought he'd driven the notion out of her head the night before. Did she think him so weak, so unskilled?

Yes, honesty forced him to admit she did. His rage died. What evidence had he given her of his strength, his abilities? Why shouldn't she doubt him? Fear for him? He'd given her no reason not to. He hadn't even had the strength to resist the gift of her body.

Her fears, fears she felt for him not herself, tore at his soul.

A sense of peace came over him. He lifted KC's face to his. "Too many times before I let my doubts prevail, I've faltered and lost those dearest to me. My mother. Christina. Not this time. I'm no longer a child facing a powerful adult, nor an unarmed city boy facing unbeatable odds. This time I'm prepared, I have the skill to defeat Red Buffalo. I will win. To do otherwise is unthinkable. Let's not waste the night arguing."

She nodded, slipping her arms around his waist. If all she could have was this one night, then she would not waste another minute in hesitation.

Food was forgotten as clothes melted away in their haste. Damp, cool flesh pressed to dry, kindling to fire. Tonight there were no tentative, shy touches, only the heated strokes of two persons straining toward a common goal. They joyously let the flames consume them.

When their first rush of passion burnt itself to embers, KC pushed Christopher to his back and knelt over him. He gazed up at her, a small smile of contentment playing around his mouth.

The touch of her lips, first cool then hot, soothed the sting of his cuts and scrapes, the brush of her hands eased the ache of his muscles. Her head moved down his body, leaving a moist, shimmering trail. He tensed. His fingers fisted in her hair, holding her back from her goal.

“Don’t...” he started.

She turned her head to look at him, her gaze questioning, as her hands continuing the journey her lips had begun. With a tortured groan, he surrendered to her power over him. His eyelids fluttered shut and his grip loosened, becoming a sensuous caress.

“... Stop,” he finished. Hot and wet, her mouth closed over him, banishing rational thought.

The spark caught, bursting into a fireball. Gripping her around the waist, he lifted her over him and thrust into her. She braced her palms against his shoulders, accepting him.

Afterward they lay entwined, her head against his shoulder, her leg draped possessively across his thighs, a hand tracing idle paths down his chest. The steady lub-dub of Christopher’s heart beneath her ear filled KC with contentment. Outside the wind lashed against the tepee, swirling around as if seeking entrance, while inside the fire burned low, the air, warm and moist,

filled with the scent of their loving.

An inelegant gurgling rumble emanated from inside Christopher. He grinned sheepishly at her, then joined her in laughter. Wrapping themselves in the lush bed robes, they rescued the meal from the fire and devoured the overcooked, yet somehow delicious meat and vegetables.

“What does KC stand for?”

Christopher’s question caught KC off guard. No one, not even Eli, knew her real name. Like some tribes of Indians, she hid that piece of herself, as if to tell her name was to give away part of herself.

“Kathleen Claire.” The words sounded rusty on her tongue. In her mind she could hear her father calling her by name, his voice heavy with his Irish brogue, her mother, her voice lilting the words sweetly, and Brendan’s baby lisp struggling to wrap his tongue around the syllables.

“Kathleen Claire. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.” He stroked the curve of her cheek, his fingers trailing down her throat to the rise of her breast above the fur robe.

Again she heard her father’s voice screaming, “*Run, Kathleen Claire!*” as Comanche arrows riddled his body, her mother repeating the cry as she ran to her husband’s side.

KC jerked away from his touch. “Don’t call me that!” She turned on him, on the sweet,

gentleness he offered.

“Never call me that! Kathleen Claire is no more. She died the same day as Patrick and Maureen O’Connor. Only KC is left.”

Confusion and anger darkened Christopher’s features, but he didn’t argue. He turned toward the fire, stirring the embers.

Remorse made KC open her mouth to speak, to take back her denial of what he offered, but no words came out. What could she say to ease the pain of rejection? How could she explain the torment those two simple words caused her?

She gathered up her clothes. “It’s late. I have to get back.”

“Don’t go. Stay with me tonight,” Christopher whispered.

Something hard and cold inside her crumbled at the humble tone in his voice. What, KC wondered, did those words cost Christopher? What courage did it take to reach out again? This proud, brave man should not have to beg.

Clothes fell from her limp fingers. His hand on her shoulder turned her to him. With a fierce cry she encircled him with her arms, clinging to the dream he offered her. If it ended with the morning light, so be it, but she would hold it tight through this night.

RED BUFFALO strode through the dark. Freezing rain plastered his hair to his head and spiked his lashes. Trickle of water, icy as death, seeped relentlessly beneath the comfort of his thick buffalo robe. The wet ground sucked at his feet, as if to delay him.

Through the day Red Buffalo had wandered, his restless feet carrying him far from camp. He barely noticed when the rain began, paying little heed to its damp chill and discomfort. Doubts and fear assailed him as he sought to marshal his power for the coming fight.

For the first time since he'd seen Firebird perched behind his father, so many years ago, Red Buffalo faltered on his chosen path. Images of his vision rose in his mind, mingling ominously with those of Firebird and Sun Eagle; her body rising like a flaming brand in a world washed of color, a great white and gold bird wrapping her in his embrace.

What did it mean? Had his power truly deserted him? Was he destined to lose all?

Each event pulled his puha from him, bit by bit he felt it draining away. None of his actions prevented his weakening. All he remained sure of was only Firebird could restore his power.

Ahead the soft glow of He Who Sees' tepee drew him forward.

Small and unadorned with pictures, the tepee sat apart from the rest of the camp, nestled amid the rocks and brush of the valley. Few approached the shaman's abode, waiting instead for him to sense their need and come to them. Fear did not keep them away, rather respect for his strong magic.

At He Who Sees' permission, Red Buffalo entered the tepee. Once inside, he shed the wet buffalo robe and seated himself across the fire from the medicine man.

"Why do you seek me out on such a foul night?" He Who Sees asked.

"I would gain your wise counsel and your assistance."

The shaman's dark eyes seemed to pierce deep into Red Buffalo's soul, searching out his secrets, exposing his fears. A shudder rippled through his body despite the warmth inside the tepee. "With each passing hour my power grows weaker. Why? Tell me which spirits I have offended, so I may offer them tribute."

"You already possess the answers to your questions, my son. You need only look within yourself. The spirit you have offended is in you. You seek to deny that which is part of you. In doing so you will be destroyed. No man can cast out a piece of himself and survive. You must accept who and what you are, if you would prevail."

He Who Sees leaned forward across the fire and gripped Red Buffalo's arm. "Accept the white blood flowing through your veins, make peace with it and the white man. You cannot destroy the white man without destroying yourself in the process. Use your power for the good of your people, both white and red. Only in this way will your heart be at ease. Let me be your guide in this."

Rage quickly overwhelmed the despair He Who Sees' words kindled in Red Buffalo. Roaring his denial, he threw off the shaman's fragile hold, knocking him backward. "No. I do not believe your words. I cannot. I will not."

Feet planted apart, he towered over He Who Sees. "Make your medicine, old man. Restore my puha and cast a spell to drain the power from Sun Eagle."

He Who Sees rose on his elbows. "Naught I do or say will have any effect on tomorrow's battle, the outcome is already decided."

A red haze enveloped Red Buffalo, chasing the chill from his body and the doubts from his mind. "You are wrong, old man. You must be wrong. My destiny does not lie in walking the white man's crooked path. I am Comanche. Though my mother came to Winter Hawk an unwilling captive, long before she died her heart was truly Comanche. Before I accept the white

ways I will open my veins and let my life's blood drain into the earth.”

By refusing to give his help, He Who Sees gave voice to his lies. Gripping the shaman by his robes, Red Buffalo lifted him, surprised at the man's slight weight. “You will do as I say...or die!”

Sadly, the shaman shook his head, his gray-streaked hair falling around his withered face.

“Do not force me to this.” Red Buffalo cringed at the pleading note that crept into his voice. Killing was a small thing to him. But to cause the death of a holy man gave even him pause.

“I force you to nothing, my son. Your actions are yours and yours alone.”

Anger at his own weakness, prompted Red Buffalo's next move. With a cry of disgust, he threw the shaman to the ground. He could not kill the old man. He turned away.

Could he travel the path the shaman called him to? Give up his hatred of whites? Be a man of both worlds? Make peace? Find peace? Deep inside a tiny flicker of hope sprang to life. Elusive as a wisp of smoke it eluded him.

He sank to his knees, suddenly weak of body as well as spirit. Alone, the task loomed before him. Alone, he could not succeed. But alone he'd always been.

“Guide me in this, wise one. Show me the way to go.”

No response came to his hoarse plea. He lifted his head and gazed down at the crumbled body of He Who Sees. Wide and lifeless, the shaman's eyes stared upward, his neck broken.

A fierce howl of grief tore from Red Buffalo's throat as hope slipped through his desperate grasp. Choice had been wrenched from him, his destiny sealed.

Chapter 17

LIKE DELICATE crystalline sculptures against a sapphire blue sky, bare tree branches glittered in the sunlight. Everywhere a fragile, shimmering veil of ice encased the world. Beneath a thin, lacy blanket of white the river surged along, its banks lined with familiar yet surreal shapes. Shards of ice melted and broke loose in the wintry sun, playing a lilting, tuneless song.

Tepee flaps crunched as people ventured out, showering them with sheets of ice. Eyes wide in awe at the spectacle, young children crept out to examine the wonder nature had wrought, while older ones yelled in glee as they charged out to meet the day. Even the adults, normally oblivious to the natural world around them, except to meet their survival needs, paused for a moment. Dogs rose from their curled sleep, yelping as ice encrusted fur refused to yield its hold on the frozen ground. They shook themselves wildly, flinging bits of ice every which direction, then scampered off.

KC stared out at the crystal fairyland. Coated with nothing more than a layer of frozen water, the world altered its appearance, from a harsh, dangerous land, fit only for renegade

Indians and rattlesnakes, and emerged a mythical place of ancient gods, miracles and magic. In this strange and beautiful world, all things were possible.

Hope, as fragile as the ice around her, grew in her heart. She turned and re-entered the tepee to help Christopher prepare.

RED BUFFALO stalked across the ground, his moccasins crushing nature's brittle sculptures without regard. The sights and sounds of the camp readying itself for the coming fight did not impinge on his consciousness. He moved through the camp unaware of the whispers and sidelong glances following him, the bets being made or the giggles of the young girls who looked at him with longing and admiration.

All around, the world lay buried beneath a sheet of blue white ice. The sight brought sweat to his brow as he remembered the cold, all-encompassing wasteland of his vision. Since rising, he'd tried without success to banish the fears and doubts crowding in on him. He sent up prayers, but no answering surety met his appeals.

He Who Sees' dead eyes mocked his attempts to appease the spirits. The chill of his vision

crept over him, draining him of his remaining power, leaving him weak, trembling.

Winter Hawk waited outside his tepee. When Red Buffalo approached he nodded and entered. Red Buffalo followed. Together they sat before the fire and let Huwuni serve them. The food passed through Red Buffalo's mouth without taste. He hardly noticed as Huwuni left the tepee.

"Are you ready?" Winter Hawk asked. At Red Buffalo's nod he added, "There is yet time to end this. Gift Sun Eagle with the woman and be rid of her hold on you. Possessing her body will not bring you what you desire. Her heart and soul already belong to another. Your win will prove an empty victory, as you will lose your place here."

"I understand. I value your council, father, but I cannot." The words slipped from his mouth even as he longed to deny them. To renounce his purpose now meant the end of him. Whether or not he still possessed the ability to vanquish the spirit in human form known as Sun Eagle, he no longer had a choice but to fight. He Who Sees' death at his hand he sealed his fate. Once the truth was known, banishment from the tribe was the least he could hope for and he would not leave without Firebird. Better to die honorably in battle and release his spirit for the afterlife, than to creep away like a beaten dog.

“So be it. When the sun is high you will fight Sun Eagle.”

“We will fight to the death.”

His father blanched. “This I can not allow.”

Red Buffalo did not argue his father’s decision. It did not matter; the white man would die at his hand. He rose to go. His father’s words stopped him at the door.

“Fight well, my son.”

“REMEMBER ta watch his eyes.” Dead Eye hovered over him like an anxious mother hen.

Christopher nodded absently, only half hearing Dead Eye’s words. His thoughts centered on KC as she moved around the tepee.

This morning she wore her shirt, trousers and boots rather than the buckskin dress and moccasins, her silent way of showing who she favored in the coming fight. She smiled at him when he caught her eye, her fair skin coloring before she ducked her head. His body’s response to her shy look made him wish Dead Eye hadn’t returned quite so early. “Ya listenin’ ta me, boy?”

“What?”

With a glance at KC, Dead Eye let out an exaggerated sigh and said, “Keep yar mind on business. Ya got the moves, now I’m gonna up the odds for ya.” He produced a few small pouches and crouched down in front of Christopher. “Take off yar shirt.”

KC shook her head in answer to his unspoken question. Wondering just what Dead Eye had in mind, Christopher did as he was told. He jerked back when Dead Eye started to smear a yellow substance across his chest.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

“Sit still and quit yar fussing. Ain’t nothing but a little war paint. He Who Sees gave it ta me yesterday. I think the old boy’s taken a likin’ ta ya. In general Indians are a superstitious bunch and Red Buffalo more so than most. He’s convinced KC here’s filled with some powerful medicine, on account of her red hair, and if’n he has her he’ll be able to drive the whites out of Comanche country.”

He stopped Christopher when he started to protest. “I never said it made sense, just that Red Buffalo believes it. I have been listening to talk. Rumors spread fast in an Indian camp. The word is yar not quite human, more like some kinda sun spirit, Firebird’s own guardian angel. So

if'n a bit of white and yellow paint help make him believe it, whar's the hurt?"

Christopher cringed but gave his approval. God knows he needed every bit of assistance he could get. If the humiliation of having his skin painted like a whore gave him any edge, he'd endure it without protest.

The pungent smelling paste slid over his flesh easily. It tingled and pulled his skin taut. Something about the feel of the paint coating his skin seemed to wipe away his fears and doubts. Like armor it covered him. Though his reasons to fear remained, somehow he no longer did. Though there was no logic to his sudden belief he would prevail, he couldn't quell the certainty he would. Part of him wanted to ask what kind of magic the paint held, but another no longer cared to know.

In a short while, Dead Eye rocked back on his heels to admire his handiwork. "Watcha think, KC?"

KC stared at the man she thought she knew, only to discover a stranger seated before her. Bathed in a wash of white sunlight streaming through the tepee door, Christopher looked magnificent. His hair was pulled back and bound in a warrior's knot. White paint covered the left side of his face, neck and chest, yellow the right. The paint highlighted the contours of his

muscled body like skintight silk. Crimson streaks slashed downward on his cheeks, angling from the inside corners of his eyes to his jaw and zigzagged down his arms like angry lightning bolts.

Across his chest, Dead Eye had drawn a bird of prey in red, its wings spread wide so the tips touched Christopher's shoulders. As he breathed, the bird appeared to move as if ready to take flight. With nothing but a few simple strokes of color, Dead Eye brought the creature to life.

The transformation stole KC's breath. Gone was the elegant, refined Easterner, with his fancy clothes and soft hands. In his place sat a warrior primed for battle. His eyes glinted with determination and a touch of arrogance.

"Beautiful," she whispered in awe.

Christopher shrugged his shoulder and grinned. "I feel like a painted lady."

"You look like Tabe kwi?ne, the powerful sun spirit sent to guard the Firebird from harm."

"You don't truly believe all that nonsense, do you?"

Before she could deny or confirm her belief, Dead Eye broke in. "Don't matter none what ya two believe, it's what Red Buffalo believes that counts. Ya'd better hope this shakes him up a bit, yar gonna need all the help ya can git."

KC hugged herself against the cold fear settling over her at the thought of Christopher going

up against Red Buffalo. If she could convince him to turn and leave now, there was nothing she wouldn't do to keep him safe, but she didn't have the words.

"Sun's nearly straight up. Ya ready?" Dead Eye asked.

No! KC wanted to scream. He isn't ready. He'd never be ready. He was a good fighter, she'd seen that much, but he lacked Red Buffalo's sly cunning and savage nature. When pushed, Christopher would do battle, but at heart he was a gentle man. What chance would he stand against a cold-blooded killer?

Still, she stood quietly and watched as Christopher rose and left the tepee. He moved with a fluid grace and confidence, his features unmarred by any sign of doubt. Then he was gone, without a look or a word.

Dead Eye paused at the door. "Why don't ya just wait here. Ain't no reason for ya ta watch."

The sympathy in Dead Eye's voice stirred KC to anger. "Are we so sure of Christopher's defeat? Do we already count him gone?" No, she would believe in him until proved wrong. "I'll stand behind him. If he falls to Red Buffalo I'll avenge him."

She brushed past Dead Eye.

After the dim light of the tepee the brightness of the day nearly blinded KC. All around sunlight reflected off the ice crusted landscape, magnifying the glare.

Blinking away the moisture filling her eyes she hurried toward the crowd gathered around the arena where the fight would take place. With hands and elbows, she pushed her way through. A few grumbled at her, but gave way when they met her determined stare.

A circle twenty feet in diameter had been marked for the fight; the ground cleared of ice and rocks. The two men waited at opposite sides.

Arms crossed and legs spread, dressed in nothing but his breechclout and moccasins, Red Buffalo stood beside his father. Red and black decorated his face and chest. Well-greased hair lay loose around his massive shoulders, the sun highlighting the red hidden in its black depths.

On the other side, Christopher stood alone, looking deceptively relaxed. One hand rested casually on the hilt of his knife. Tan buckskin trousers molded his powerful thighs and moccasins covered his feet.

Winter Hawk spoke, first in Comanche, then English.

“There are two here who lay claim to the woman known as Firebird. Does either wish to deny their claim?”

All eyes focused on the two opponents. Neither said a word.

“Very well, let the fight begin.”

KC watched as the men moved into the circle. She barely felt as Dead Eye came to stand behind her and placed his hands on her arms.

Cautiously the two circled each other, slightly crouched, arms wide and forward. They teased and taunted silently, dancing around, feigning and pulling back. Testing. Men in the crowd yelled encouragement and insults, jeering them for their restraint. Girls giggled and commented on the combatants’ various attributes.

Sunlight flashed off Red Buffalo’s knife blade, hitting Christopher’s eyes. His opponent momentarily blinded, Red Buffalo lunged forward, thrusting toward Christopher’s chest. At the last second Christopher twisted sideways and avoided the blow. His arm came down, the edge of his blade leaving a shallow slice across Red Buffalo’s chest.

The crowd roared at the sight of blood. Bets were made and re-made. Men grumbled that one of their own took the first blow.

KC watched as Red Buffalo stepped back. He ran his hand over the cut, then held it up. Blood mixed with paint dripped off his fingers. With a low growl, he rubbed his palm over his

chest, smearing the blood.

A few yards away Christopher stood poised, waiting for Red Buffalo's next move. He hadn't long to wait.

Red Buffalo charged forward. Christopher met him halfway. Their bodies met with a dull thud. Locked together they battled. Christopher gripped Red Buffalo's wrist as he gripped Christopher's wrist. The two strained against one another, each trying to drive their blade home while holding the other's away. Chest to chest, arms wide, legs spread, they struggled.

Salty and metallic, the taste of her own blood filled KC's mouth as she bit down on her lip to keep from crying out. She pulled against Dead Eye's hold.

Like wild stallions they fought, chests heaving, bodies bathed in sweat, features twisted. Dust swirled around their feet.

They broke apart and staggered back. Again, they circled, knives flashing. Blood streaked their bodies from nicks and cuts inflicted. Neither uttered a sound as their opponent's blade found its mark. Only the harsh rasp of their breathing told of their pain and exhaustion.

The crowd grew silent and intense as the battle raged on. The sun moved across the sky, the shadows lengthening.

Pivoting on one foot Red Buffalo kicked out at Christopher's belly. Just before it made contact Christopher caught Red Buffalo's foot and with all his might heaved him up and back. Off balance, the Indian flew backward. Before Christopher could press his advantage, Red Buffalo twisted his body in mid-air, landed on one shoulder, rolled and came instantly to his feet, facing Christopher.

KC gasped as Red Buffalo feinted to the right then came in on Christopher's left, aiming for his heart. Christopher turned and Red Buffalo's blade cut a long, deep gash across his ribs. A flash of white bone showed for a moment, then blood welled out staining his chest crimson. He stumbled to one knee, his knife hand hitting the ground as he tried to regain his feet. He shook his head. His hair fell loose from its restraint, raining down around his face, hiding his grimace of pain.

Red Buffalo kicked out catching Christopher in his injured side. With a grunt of pain, he rolled away, avoiding Red Buffalo's feet. At the very edge of the circle, he climbed to his feet; his knife still clutched in his hand. He whirled around and met Red Buffalo's charge. Again, they came together, legs tangling in a bizarre dance. This time they moved together slowly, both tiring, weakened by the loss of blood.

KC tugged futilely against Dead Eye's grip. She couldn't bear to see, yet could not tear her gaze away. No longer could she predict the outcome. Despite their differences, the men were evenly matched. Though inches taller and pounds heavier, Christopher lacked Red Buffalo's agility and skill in battle, but he made up for it in strength and determination. Still, the sheen of madness held Red Buffalo in its grasp. Nothing less than Christopher's death would satisfy him. She had to stop this before it was too late.

"Easy, gal, easy." Dead Eye held her tight. "He's doing good. Either way, let him finish it."

She went limp and leaned into Dead Eye, grateful for his strength at her back. He was right. She could do nothing now. This was Christopher's challenge, one he had to meet, to win...or lose, on his own.

Red Buffalo knocked Christopher's legs out from under him. He went down backwards with Red Buffalo on top. As he fell the knife slipped from Christopher's grasp and slid across the ground.

The Comanche screamed their delight, calling for blood.

Only Dead Eye's grip kept KC from sinking to her knees as she watched in horror. A low

moan escaped her lips.

Though Christopher fought to hold Red Buffalo's knife away, bit by bit the Indian brought the blade closer until it hovered inches from his throat.

Sweat stung his eyes. Christopher's lungs struggled to expand against the weight pressing down on him. Sunlight glinted off the knife as it crept toward his neck. He bucked beneath Red Buffalo, trying to throw him off.

How much longer could he hold out? Sweat and grime blinded him. Weakened by the loss of blood, he fought on nothing more than sheer will power.

Like a crazed beast, Red Buffalo snarled, his lips curled back over his teeth. Blood dripped off his body, his colors of red and black now a streaked, rusty brown. Coated with dirt, his hair hung in ratty clumps around his face.

"Firebird is mine. She has always been mine," Red Buffalo cried triumphantly. "I will rip you from her heart as I will rip your heart from your body. Now you die, white eyes."

He lunged forward, seeking to break Christopher's hold and drive the point of the blade deep into his neck.

KC would never be Red Buffalo's. At the thought of KC in Red Buffalo's arms, strength

born of rage filled Christopher.

“Not—just—yet!” He gasped.

Suddenly, Christopher twisted and heaved at the same time. Caught unaware by the movement, Red Buffalo grunted as Christopher’s hip struck his belly. He tumbled sideways, taking Christopher with him. Over and over they rolled, first one on top then the other, the knife clutched between them, its blade pressing into both their flesh. Across the circle they went, bodies locked in a macabre embrace.

Spectators laughed and jumped aside as the combatants breached the boundaries of the circle. Eager hands and feet shoved them back.

With hands, elbows, and knees they pummeled one another until both gasped for breath. The knife bit into Christopher’s chest, his blood mingling with Red Buffalo’s, as each struggled to gain control. They fought up to their knees, muscles straining, face to face, eyes locked. Only one would walk away.

“Die!” Red Buffalo pushed forward.

Christopher turned his arm and with it Red Buffalo’s and let himself fall back. Between them the knife pointed upward, the weight of Red Buffalo’s body impaled him on it.

Red Buffalo's eyes widened in shock. He pulled back. The hilt of the knife protruded from the left side of his chest. A thin trickle of red made a track through the grime smeared there.

With both hands he gripped the knife and yanked. The knife came free with a wet sucking sound and blood gushed forth. He knelt there, arms spread wide, one hand clutching the knife, and watched his lifeblood spill into the dirt. The knife slipped from his suddenly lax fingers and clattered to the ground. Still, he felt no pain, merely a strange tingling warmth at his center.

He raised his gaze from the sight of the growing puddle between his knees, to meet Sun Eagle's eyes. There was no triumph there, only a soul deep sadness. The sun spirit seemed to waver in the air, dissolving, then reforming, his body fading in and out of the glowing sun setting at his back. Red Buffalo blinked to clear his vision.

He lurched to his feet, refusing to die on his knees.

The warmth receded. Cold, sharp-edged and hard, came over him, numbing his senses. Around him the world turned white, draining away all color, all sound.

He turned drunkenly, swaying as he searched the crowd for *her*. People backed away as he approached. He did not hear their cries of concern. An annoying buzz filled his ears. He pushed away the hands seeking to help him. Only *she* could melt the ice encasing his heart.

At the edge of the circle, she stood alone. No, the one-eyed man was behind her. It did not matter. Like a flame on a cold winter's night, she beckoned him closer. That she would consume him in her fire meant nothing. As foretold in his vision, it was at her feet he would give up this life and find glory in the next.

He staggered toward her, his legs refusing to answer his mind's commands. She caught him as he fell. His weight pulled her to the ground with him. She cradled his body across her lap as had his mother, so long ago when he was but a child. Warm like the caress of the sun, her hand smoothed the tangled hair from his face.

Tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks. He reached up and touched them. His fingers left bloody smudges on her fair skin.

"Do not cry for me, Firebird. I have proved myself unworthy." His voice was little more than a raspy whisper. Pain started deep in his chest, radiating outward with each breath. "I sought to take what was not mine...to command what can only be given."

Firebird shook her head in denial. "I never cry! Never!" She scrubbed the tears from her face.

A cough racked his body. Something gave way inside him. "My brave, valiant, little

Firebird. No, you never cry, yet you weep for me, your enemy. Do not. It is better I die now, before the white man's ways steal my life and kill my soul. I know now what I wanted could never be. My vision warned me, but I chose to ignore it. Your destiny lies elsewhere. Do not be afraid to reach for it. I would speak with my father. Go now."

Winter Hawk knelt at his son's side. His eyes were dry, but KC could see the new marks of grief etched in his craggy features. Easing his body carefully into Winter Hawk's arms, she released her hold on Red Buffalo. Blinded by her tears she rose and stumbled away. The crowd parted to let her pass. She ignored Dead Eye's arm and offer of comfort and refused to stop when she heard Christopher's call.

As much as she wanted to burrow into his arms, she couldn't face him now. He'd done only what he had to do. She knew it could have easily been he who now lay dying.

Still, as much as she'd feared Red Buffalo and fought against his plans for her, she'd never wished him dead. In his death, she saw the death of the Comanche people's proud, defiant way of life. Already they gave up little pieces of themselves to survive along side the white man. But only with their complete and unconditional surrender would the whites allow them to continue to exist. Would the cost prove too high for their way of life to endure?

So she grieved. Not for the man, but for the people whom she had come to care for, despite her forced introduction to their life.

Chapter 18

THOUGH SHE FLED the scene, KC's heart rejoiced. Christopher still lived. He'd won.

Then the truth hit her. He'd fought for her, taken a human life to protect hers. Red Buffalo's death, his blood, was on her hands, not Christopher's. She couldn't face him.

Light no longer shimmered off the ice-crusts landscape. Now the crystalline sculptures reflected the heavy, pewter gray of the clouds looming above, obscuring the sun. KC paid little heed to the sharp, cold wind biting through her thin cotton shirt or the fat, moist flakes of snow that hit her face, melted and mingled with the tears there.

Dimly she heard Dead Eye call her name. She saw Huwuni reach out to her as she passed. Ignoring them, she sought escape from her thoughts and her guilt. How long or how far she ran she didn't know. When her breaths came in ragged gulps and her side began to ache, she slowed.

Snow swirled in the air around her, blowing across the frozen ground in miniature tornadoes, to pile in ever growing drifts. No longer soft and wet, the flakes fell fast and hard,

stinging as they pelted her skin.

Oblivious to the weather, she cried until her tears were spent. Tears for the wasted life of Red Buffalo, for the destruction of the Comanche people, for her mother and father, long ago sacrificed to hatred, for her little brother, forever lost to her, and tears for herself, for her hopeless, foolish dreams. She sagged against a boulder. Slowly she became aware of the cold rock at her back and the wind driven snow collecting around her ankles.

She turned to head back. Christopher would need medical attention. For all Dead Eye's talents, a doctor he was not. She shuddered at the memory of Red Buffalo's knife finding its mark on Christopher's flesh. The sight of his blood washing away the red bird painted on his chest would forever be engraved in her mind. Christopher needed her. He deserved better than her desertion. Even if he hadn't already owned her heart, she owed him; he'd bought her freedom with his blood.

She stepped from behind the shelter of the boulder. The wind buffeted her back. A whirl of white obscured the world around her. Bracing herself with a hand against the rock, she squinted, trying to find a familiar landmark. In the maelstrom, the cliffs bordering the canyon were invisible, the sound of the river drowned out by the wail of the wind.

How far had she wandered? Where was the camp? Already the light of day failed, only the glare of the falling snow held the darkness at bay.

A tremor of fear and a growing chill passed over her. The knowledge she was lost in a blizzard dawned on her, driving out her feelings of grief and guilt. Now, only survival mattered. She didn't want to die.

CHRISTOPHER staggered to his feet and watched as Red Buffalo fell into KC's arms. Tears flowed down her pale cheeks; her head bent to the Indian's to hear his hoarse whisper. Pain, that had nothing to do with the myriad of cuts and bruises decorating his body, stabbed him. How was it possible she cried for Red Buffalo? Had she truly felt something for him, despite her words to the contrary?

When Winter Hawk approached, she gently released her hold on Red Buffalo, rose and made her way through the crowd. She didn't look back when Christopher called to her. Then she was gone, swallowed up by the Indians milling about.

Blood loss left Christopher dizzy and disorientated. He tried to follow, but the world grew

fuzzy, fading away.

“Easy thar, boy.” Dead Eye’s voice seemed to come from a great distance. “Let’s get ya back to the tepee and take a look see at them thar cuts.”

Christopher blinked away the haze that threatened to envelop him. “Is he...” the question trailed off.

Even when he’d shot Brody, Christopher hadn’t felt so responsible for the taking of a human life. Then, a cold white rage left him empty, closing him off from emotion. With Red Buffalo, the feel of the knife cutting through skin and gristle, and rasping against bone, until it sank easily into soft tissue, would remain forever engraved on his mind.

“Deader than a snake bit jackrabbit,” Dead Eye answered cheerfully. Death didn’t seem to bother the man.

“KC?” Talking got more difficult. The world spun around him in nauseating circles. He resisted Dead Eye’s tugging on his arm. He had to see her, find out what she was thinking, how she felt.

Dead Eye shoved his shoulder under Christopher’s arm and urged him toward the tepee. “She’ll be just fine. I’ll go git her after I gits ya settled. The way some of them bucks is glaring

at you, getting outa sight is a good idea.”

The earth seemed to tilt from under him as Christopher tried to walk. Reluctantly, he let Dead Eye lead him away.

Later he could vaguely recall stumbling through the growing snow and coming darkness into the warmth of the tepee. Without protest he allowed Dead Eye and the woman, Huwuni, to tend his wounds while he sank gratefully into pain induced unconsciousness.

KC BIT DOWN on the panic threatening to overwhelm her. She squinted against the blowing snow, trying to make out any recognizable feature in a world gone suddenly white. She strained to hear the sound of the river, but the roar of the wind blocked any other sound. Already the skin of her face and hands were numb with cold, her feet throbbing painfully. Her body shook.

She fought the urge to lay down and curl into a ball. Tucking her hands beneath her arms she set off in what she hoped was the direction back to camp. If she didn't find shelter soon Christopher's battle and Red Buffalo's death would have been for nothing.

Vaguely, she remembered the wind being at her back as she'd fled from camp. Now she

struggled against the gale. How far had she come? Ice spiked her eyelashes and brows; snow coated her hair and collected on her clothes. She stumbled on. Snowdrifts grabbed at her ankles, until she faltered and fell. She felt nothing as shards of ice sliced her palms and blood oozed slowly from her half-frozen flesh. Beneath her cheek the snow felt almost warm and comforting.

How easy it would be to close her eyes and surrender. No longer would she have to fight to survive in a hostile world, to hide her identity, to force herself into another's mold.

Sleep, the wind seemed to whisper. Close your eyes and embrace me. Let it all go. Come to me...to me....

Bit by bit her lids dropped. Close to her ear, the ice and snow crunched beneath a heavy weight. She blinked. Tiny crystals of ice flaked off her eyelashes and rained down, unfelt, on her cheeks.

Two moccasin-clad feet filled her vision. Her gaze traveled up over bare, brown legs and breechclout covered hips. Straddle-legged and bare-chested, an Indian stood over her, oblivious to the cold and the snow swirling around him. High above, the storm obscured his face. Deep inside she knew him, but her mind refused to believe what her heart told her. Reason told her it couldn't be. Her arms trembled as she pushed herself upward to grip the hand he held out to her.

Hard and warm, his touch filled her with new energy. She tried to speak, to thank him for his help, when she was a child and now, but no words came from her frozen lips. Through the snow lit darkness, she trailed awkwardly behind him, his hand her only lifeline. She pushed through waist high drifts. Drifts that remained untouched by his passing.

One moment her hand was enfolded within his, the next she clutched only empty air. Tears froze on her cheeks as she sank to her knees and bowed her head in defeat. Here, alone, in the cold and dark, she was going to die.

“No!” She raised her face to the blizzard, her scream lost in the howl of the wind. “I don’t want to die!”

The wind swirled around her kneeling form. No longer did she feel the frozen flakes as they pelted her skin. There, beneath the stinging cold smell of snow lay the thick, rich aroma of pinon wood.

She inhaled, drawing in the scent. On unsteady legs, she rose and followed the odor, letting her nose guide her.

Only five feet in front of her loomed a tepee, the glow of the fire burning inside hidden behind the storm. With a glad cry, she hurried forward. For what seemed like forever her

fingers fumbled with the door flap. Then she was inside.

Warmth, heavy like a thick buffalo robe, wrapped around her. She sank to her knees and stretched out her hands to the fire. Moisture, wet and cold, dripped off her head, ran down her throat and between her breasts. Like tears, droplets of melted ice trembled on her eyelashes and fell sizzling into the flames.

“Not too close, petu.”

At the sound of He Who Sees’ voice calling her daughter, KC jumped. She gave a self-conscious laugh and accepted the fur robe he held out to her.

“Come sit with me and we will speak.” He patted the ground.

Clutching the robe around her, KC crawled to the shaman’s side. Her limbs moved sluggishly. Where only moments before she’d welcomed the heat of the tepee and the heavy scent of wood smoke, now it seemed to sap her strength, leaving her groggy and disorientated. Still, her teeth chattered with remnants of the cold that had tried to suck the life from her body.

She huddled beneath the robe and leaned as close as she dared to the fire. As the chill eased from her, pain stabbed the torn flesh of her hands and blood again seeped out. Her face tingled as sensation returned and her toes began to ache. She relished each feeling as proof she still

lived, that she didn't lie frozen beneath a blanket of snow.

She thought suddenly of the silent Indian who had led her from that fate. Could it have been whom she thought? No, Red Buffalo lay dead; his blood still stained her clothing.

Memories of Red Buffalo flooded her mind; as a young boy standing before her against her tormentors, rescuing her time after time from circumstances and her own foolishness. Now again, despite her disdain and words of hatred, he'd been there to save her. Almost, she wished she could have given him what he'd desired, could have been the woman he wanted. Almost.

The cold must have muddled her brain. His being there was impossible. She refused to acknowledge what her heart told her of her savior's identity.

"Do not grieve for Red Buffalo. He is at peace now."

Though she knew she shouldn't be, KC was surprised He Who Sees already knew of Red Buffalo's death. The ancient shaman rarely entered the camp proper, yet he always seemed to know everything that happened. Sometimes before it happened. She shivered again, this time not from cold.

"He died because of me."

The shaman shook his head. "Red Buffalo is gone because he could not accept who he was.

You were nothing but a symbol of the battle he waged with himself.”

“So many times I wished him dead, but when he finally lay there in my arms, his life slipping away, I didn’t want to let him go. He never did me any harm, he protected me, rescued me, kept me alive more than once. Why did I hate him so?”

“Was it truly him you hated or did you hate what he represented to you, the loss of the life you’d had? In his ignorance, he tried to take what can only be given. In the end, if you had given him your love, he would have destroyed you. He did not realize what he sought can not be found in another, it must come from within.”

He Who Sees’ words eased some of the guilt from KC’s heart, but the sorrow, for something precious lost, remained.

“In some way, I think I did love him. Not as he wanted, but as a sister might love a brother. I never offered him that love. I must have known he wouldn’t...couldn’t accept it. Now, like everyone I’ve ever loved he’s left me.”

“No, Petu, those you love never leave you. They remain in your heart forever. Forgive him for the wrongs he did you.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Then forgive yourself and go on with your life. Honor the memory of your loved ones with your actions and they will live on in you. The future is before you.”

The heat from the fire seeped into her bones. From head to toes her body ached, her thawed flesh, raw and painful, her palms swollen and throbbing. The air in the tepee was warm and heavy, thick with the scent of pinion and some fragrance she could not identify. It teased her memory when she inhaled deeply. Lassitude washed over her with every breath, stealing away her fears, easing her tension, until she seemed to float above the packed floor, swaying in rhythm with the wavering flames dancing in front of her drooping eyes.

With a tired sigh she lay down and pulled the fur close around her. “I will try.”

“Sleep now, little one, sleep,” He Who Sees crooned softly.

Her breathing grew slow and even, her eyes falling shut to the sound of his low, melodic chanting.

KC!

The wind tore away Christopher’s shout, beating him back until she disappeared in a veil of

white.

Heart pounding, muscles clenching, he bolted upright.

She was out there. In the storm. Alone. He could still hear her cries echoing in his ears as he battled against the wind to reach her.

He blinked as the inside of the tepee took shape in front of him. Some of the tension eased out of him. A dream. It was only a dream. How real it seemed.

He saw it again in his memory. KC lying facedown, motionless, the snow burying her slim body, rapidly blotting out the vivid red of her hair. Despite the warmth in the tepee, he shivered.

Dead Eye's rumbling snores filled the quiet of the early morning. The fire's embers glowed blood red in the pre-dawn darkness. Nothing else stirred. Outside silence reigned. No longer did the wind howl around the tepee seeking entrance and the frozen snow ceased its sharp, rapid tattoo against the stiff buffalo hides.

With a grimace of pain, Christopher gingerly lay back down. The odor of the pungent concoction Huwuni had smeared over his wounds made his nose wrinkle in distaste. Still, he admitted his wounds pained him less than he'd expected. In a few days time, he knew he'd be ready to leave.

Except for a remaining unease from the remnants of his dream, he felt remarkable well. Though he deeply regretted his part in Red Buffalo's death, a sense of satisfaction filled him. He'd done battle and survived. If KC lay by his side, his contentment would be complete.

Doubt nibbled at him. Why had she run off? Christopher frowned as he remembered the tears she'd shed for the fallen Indian. Had she really wanted to stay with Red Buffalo? Had he misread her that badly?

No. He couldn't bring himself to believe the hours she'd spent in his arms were a lie. No woman, especially one as honest as KC, could give herself so freely to one man, when her heart belonged to another. Though she'd never said the words, her actions told him what he needed to know. She said it sweetly with her body. She loved him. When she came to him, as she surely would with the morning light, he would tell her of his love.

He let his eyes close and allowed himself to drift back into slumber.

When next he opened his eyes, light flooded the tepee. He squinted against the brightness and sat up with a groan. Each and every nick, cut and scrape screamed at him to lay back down. Gritting his teeth, he ignored their demands.

"Mornin'. Wants some coffee?" Dead Eye held up a battered tin pot.

“Sounds good.” Moving cautiously, Christopher pulled on his clothes, careful not to disturb the poultices and bandages that seemed to cover just about every square inch of his body. “Has KC been by yet this morning?”

“Nope. Ain’t seen a soul, ‘cepting for Winter Hawk’s woman. She had a look see at your wounds. Didn’t say much, ‘cept that ya’ll live.” Dead Eye grinned broadly at his own humor and handed Christopher a cup of steaming coffee.

The black mud masquerading as coffee burned Christopher’s mouth and throat, but despite its bitter, biting flavor he downed it all and held out the cup for more. The brew revived him and cleared his mind, made him forget the aches and pains plaguing him.

“Did you talk to KC after the fight? Is she all right? It worries me that she ran off like that.”

“Didn’t get ta see her. Winter Hawk’s woman and me were a might busy patching ya back together. I reckon she went back to Winter Hawk’s tepee. She’ll be by soon enough ta check on ya.”

Dead Eye’s words didn’t ease Christopher’s mind. The image, from his dream, of KC out in the snow would not leave him.

An hour and three cups of coffee later Christopher decided if she wouldn’t come to him,

he'd go to her.

Dead Eye did his best to stop him. "I don't think going to Winter Hawk's tepee is a real good idea right now. For an Indian, Winter Hawk is mostly a reasonable man, but ya just done kilt his only son. And even if he's in a forgivin' mood, the rest of them thar bucks looked ready to lift yar scalp if'n ya give them the slightest reason. They don't much like it ya bested one of them."

Dead Eye's arguments made sense, but Christopher had a growing feeling something was wrong. KC should have been there by now. Even if he was deluding himself and she didn't love him, she would have come to take care of his wounds. So where was she? Had Winter Hawk refused to let her leave his tepee? Finally, he couldn't wait any longer. He had to go find out for himself.

"Don't tempt fate, boy. Ya got real lucky yesterday."

"I've got to go." Christopher pulled on his coat and stepped out of the tepee.

The glare of light reflecting off the thick blanket of white blinded him. Snow, piled in deep drifts, transformed the landscape yet again. As if sprinkled with diamonds, the snow sparkled and shimmered beneath a cloudless blue sky. The sun shone down with blazing intensity yet

held not a hint of warmth. The air grabbed his breath and turned it to tiny puffs of white.

Snow crackled beneath his feet, the sharp sound loud in the quiet morning air. Around him the camp lay silent, its occupants reluctant to venture out into this strange, new world. An occasional face peeped from beneath a tepee flap, then disappeared back inside. Not even the dogs stirred from their curled positions as he moved passed them. They lay nose to tail, huddled close together for warmth in the frigid air.

Winter Hawk's tepee sat ahead, the only sign of life the thin trickle of smoke drifting from the top. The flap lifted just as he was about to scratch for admittance.

Huwuni looked at him in surprise, then glanced quickly back inside. She let the flap drop, grabbed Christopher's arm and silently urged him to go with her. When he started to speak, she placed her fingers to his lips and shook her head.

Confused by her strange actions and the concern etched on her usually placid face, he followed her away from the camp.

Once the tepees were out of view, Huwuni stopped. Her breath came in rapid pants, her brown cheeks flushed with both exertion and cold. Her fingers gripped his arm, biting into his flesh even through his heavy coat.

“You must leave,” she said in halting English. “The warriors are angry. There is talk of vengeance against you and all whites. Even Firebird is no longer safe. Winter Hawk is so lost in his grief, he says nothing to sway them away from their anger. Leave now, while they wait for Winter Hawk to bury his son.”

She refrained from speaking Red Buffalo’s name. Christopher knew the Comanche rarely said the name of the dead, afraid to do so would encourage their spirits to linger.

“I will do what I can to delay their following you.”

Huwuni was right. If Winter Hawk did nothing to stop the Comanche braves from seeking revenge for Red Buffalo’s death, neither he nor KC would be safe. “Tell KC...Firebird to come to me and we will leave.”

Huwuni’s look spoke of shock and fear. “Firebird is not with you?”

“Dead Eye thought she returned to your tepee last night, didn’t she?”

“Firebird did not come to our tepee.”

The polar air felt heated in comparison to the ice encasing Christopher’s heart. While he slept, KC faced some unknown danger. Had she wandered out into the storm? Or had another brave, made bold by Red Buffalo’s death, claimed her for his own?

“Come, we must search for her,” Huwuni said.

He looked out over the snow-covered landscape. The canyon stretched for miles, surrounded by jagged peaks and sheer rock walls, filled with dozens of twists and turns. Large boulders lay strewn around like some giant child’s forgotten toys. KC could lie unseen behind any one of them. If she were out there, would he ever find her? Or did she already lie frozen beneath a blanket of white?

Huwuni’s hand trembled on his arm. Whether from fear or cold, he didn’t know. The diminutive Indian woman looked pale and strained, her lips tight with pain, one hand placed protectively over her swollen belly. Though she seemed determined to begin the search for KC, Christopher knew the woman was too near her time to go slogging through the snow.

Where do I begin? He wondered silently. To Huwuni he said, “Go back to your tepee. I will search alone.”

For a moment she looked doubtful and studied his face.

He met her gaze without flinching.

She sighed, then nodded. “Around the bend, in the stand of trees you will find He Who Sees’ tepee. Go to him. He is most skilled in finding that which is lost. When you find her, do

not hesitate, take her and leave. I would have my friend safe.”

Before he could thank her for her help, she was gone. He hesitated. Should he go back for Dead Eye first? A sense of urgency started him in the direction Huwuni had indicated. Something told him not to wait, that KC’s time was running short. He braced himself against the pain every movement caused. Even if Huwuni hadn’t advised him to seek out the ancient shaman, he still would have done so. His one meeting with the man had impressed him more deeply than he’d been comfortable with. There was something not quite of this world about He Who Sees. God knew, without help he stood only a slim chance of finding KC in this labyrinth-like valley.

Twenty minutes later he stood outside the shaman’s seemingly deserted tepee. No smoke rose from its peak. It sat cold and silent in a landscape washed of life and color by a deep blanket of white. A chill settled around Christopher’s heart. Had he been mistaken? If He Who Sees was gone or unable to help him, he had no idea where to begin searching for KC. Dead Eye would do his best, but with snow covering everything there was little possibility of being able to track her. And it was doubtful the Comanches would be willing to help. More than likely they’d take the opportunity to kill them both.

No, he was on his own and again he faced the prospect of failing to protect the one he loved.

Steeling himself for no answer, he scratched for entrance. As he feared, silence met him. He called out and waited. Again nothing. He turned to leave, the taste of defeat and burgeoning grief sour in his mouth. Some strange sense made him pause. The faintest aroma of pinion wood, the scent of a fire recently gone dead, teased his nostrils.

The flap lifted easily. Inside the air still held a lingering warmth from the near cold fire. He glanced around the small, neat interior his gaze caught by the mound beneath some furs on the far side of the tepee.

He moved inside, letting the flap close behind him. With the glare of the sun off the snow blocked by the tepee's walls, the interior light was muted.

"He Who Sees," he called softly.

The shaman didn't wake. Christopher crouched by the fire. Already the chill seeped into the tepee. He stirred the ashes and was rewarded by a small red ember. In a few minutes, he coaxed the fire to life. Cheerful red flames licked eagerly at the wood he fed it. Still, He Who Sees slept on.

Christopher could wait no longer. Every second KC remained lost lessened the chance of

finding her alive. Made bold by his need of the shaman's help, he pulled the fur away.

Chapter 19

THE BAND SQUEEZING Christopher's heart let go. Tight curls, the startling color of hot chili peppers, surrounded the sleeper's head.

Though her skin was pale, KC's chest rose and fell with each breath, her lips slightly parted. The musky scent of sleep-warmed woman along with a hint of sage teased his nose and tempted him. Christopher fought the urge to press his mouth against hers, to strip off his clothes and hers and lay beside her. He knew how quickly she'd mold herself to him, how she'd welcome him, embrace him, accept him deep inside of her. Instead he knelt and drank in the sight of her. Relief at finding her alive washed over him, leaving him drained and strangely weak.

"KC," he whispered, reluctant to wake her.

KC's lashes fluttered and her eyes opened. She smiled sleepily. "Apollo," she murmured. He grinned. "Nope, just Christopher."

She didn't object as he pushed aside the fur robe and ran his hands over her. She gazed up at him, her eyes hooded as if she saw not him, but some secret dream.

Apollo. Christopher. They were the same in her mind, in her dreams. Warm and slightly rough, his fingers grazed over her arms and chest, then down her legs. Her skin tingled, coming alive at his touch. Her breasts tightened, nipples pebbling. Liquid heat pooled in her belly and between her thighs. Like a cat she arched into his hand, savoring the feeling. She let her eyes drift shut again, unwilling to wake and find him gone.

“Are you hurt?”

Her eyes snapped opened to meet his worried gaze. This was no dream. He was real. “Christopher?”

“In the flesh.”

She sat up, surprised at how weak she felt. She didn’t object when he helped her. Disappointment flared as he moved away. She wanted...needed him to stay close, to thaw out the ice inside her the way the fire warmed her flesh. Instead, she answered, “No, I’m fine.”

A frown crossed his face. “You don’t deserve to be,” he chided, his tone harsh and angry. “What ever possessed you to run off like that?”

Quick and hot, her anger rose to meet his. She didn’t have to answer to him. She opened her mouth to retort. His next words, softly spoken, stopped her.

“You scared the hell out of me when you weren’t in Winter Hawk’s tepee this morning. You could have died out in that storm,” he ended on a quavering note that told her more than words.

For the first time, KC noticed the lines of strain bracketing Christopher’s mouth, the paleness beneath his golden tan and the fear lingering in his eyes.

Fear for her. It had been a long time since she’d had to consider anyone else’s feelings in regards to her actions.

Despite their age difference, her relationship with Eli was one of equals. Their feelings for one another were rarely acknowledged and never spoken of. They understood each other without words.

“Did you love Red Buffalo?”

Christopher’s question echoed her conversation with He Who Sees.

Now that Red Buffalo was dead, she found it easier to admit to the sentiments she’d held for him. “Yes, in a way, I did.” She knew while he’d lived, those emotions would have destroyed her. Only his death made them safe to acknowledge.

Christopher’s turned away, his face ashen. “I had no intention of killing him.”

She laid her hand on his arm. "You did what you had to do. Red Buffalo meant to kill you, one way or another."

He nodded. "I know."

For awhile they sat quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. There was much left to be said between them, but now was not the time.

"We have to leave today," Christopher finally broke the silence. "Both Dead Eye and Huwuni warned me the warriors are unhappy with Red Buffalo's death."

"They're right. Red Buffalo was an honored leader. Some of the warriors might feel the need to avenge his death." She stood up and prepared to leave. "Where's He Who Sees?"

"I don't know. He wasn't here when I came."

KC glanced around the small tepee. Other than the fur robe He Who Sees had given her the night before, nothing else looked out of place or missing. His winter robe hung neatly from a pole; his fur lined moccasins below. Of the shaman there was no sign. She lifted the door flap. Only Christopher's prints disturbed the pristine snow. Unease slithered down KC's spine. He Who Sees had been there, now he was gone without a trace.

Christopher draped the heavy buffalo fur around her shoulders. "He must have gone out.

We have to go. The camp will be rising soon.”

Sharp, cold air seared KC's lungs. She hugged the fur and followed Christopher. Had He Who Sees truly been in the tepee with her? Her memories seemed vague and dreamlike now. And what of her faceless rescuer? She shivered and pushed the thoughts from her mind. Whether real or imagined, the two men had saved her life and she was grateful.

Christopher moved slowly through the deep snow, breaking a path for her. They walked quietly through the sleeping camp. Smoke rose straight up from each tepee, to hang motionless in the still air.

At Winter Hawk's tepee KC hesitated. Today Winter Hawk would bury another son who had died because of the white man. What could she say or do to ease the heartache she knew he felt? And why did she feel the need to do so for the man who had caused her so much anguish?

The door flap lifted. Winter Hawk emerged and straightened. Blood encrusted cuts lined his arms and black paint covered his face. In mourning, the hair on the left side of his head was shaved close to his scalp. As was his custom, he ignored KC's presence. His gaze met Christopher's. Raw grief stared out of Winter Hawk's dark eyes.

Huwuni came and stood behind him. She took his gnarled, yet still powerful hand and

placed it gently on her belly. The pain in Winter Hawk's eyes eased a small bit.

"You are an honorable man, Tabe kwi?ne. Take your woman and go in peace," he said in halting, broken English. Then he turned and reentered his tepee.

A low, guttural wailing echoed throughout the canyon.

Huwuni's sad gaze fell on KC. "Your heart is good, but it could never be Comanche." She turned, then hesitated and looked back. "Unlike you, your little brother has made a place for himself with my people."

"Brendan? You know where he is?" KC asked.

Huwuni nodded. "He dwells with Quannah's band. Soon the Comanche's time of freedom will end. When this happens, you must seek out Tuwikaa?, The Raven and help him find his way in the white man's world.

"Now you must hurry. Red Buffalo's friends speak of vengeance. They may not honor Winter Hawk's wish that you leave in peace." Tears dampened her dark lashes as she disappeared into the tepee.

"Brendan's alive." Hope lit KC's face.

"And someday you'll find him." Her joy at learning of her brother's whereabouts caused

Christopher's heart to ache for Christina, the little sister he'd barely known. His resolve to punish those responsible for her brutal murder hardened. But first he would see to KC's safety and future. He held out his hand. "Come."

Lost in a haze of her memories, she followed him to the corral.

Somehow Christopher wasn't surprised to find Dead Eye waiting for them, horses saddled and packs ready. He raised an eyebrow as Dead Eye mounted a strange buckskin mare.

"Present from Winter Hawk," was Dead Eye's only comment.

Lady nickered a soft greeting to KC, while Christopher swung up onto his still unnamed pinto. Without another word they headed out of camp. No one looked back.

For three days they rode hard and fast, pushing their horses and themselves, breaking camp with morning's first rays of sun, falling out of their saddles and to sleep with the last. During the day they stopped briefly to rest and water the horses. There was little energy for conversation, but KC found her gaze and thoughts wandering to Christopher.

She drank in the sight of him as he rode, saddled and unsaddled his horse, made camp, and slept. Like a miser hoarding gold, she stored up images of him for the day when he'd be gone. At night she lay sleepless, tense with longing and stared up at the stars. She ruthlessly ignored

her desire to crawl into his bedroll, refusing to bind him further with her body.

Dressed in buckskins, his hair hanging loose with Winter Hawk's white feather fluttering in the wind, Christopher bore no resemblance to the elegant greenhorn she'd found near dead in the desert. In his place sat a man hardened by his surroundings, tested by events. But despite his rugged demeanor, wild clothing, hard body and steely gaze, he belonged to another world—another woman. A soft, feminine woman who'd complement his tempered masculinity.

There was no place for her in his world, a world of refined, soft-spoken women and educated sophisticated men. A world where she would be as welcome as a burr under a saddle blanket. Once they reached Peaceful, he would leave and return to that life.

His honor would demand he offer her something in return for what they had shared. Pride and fear would force her to refuse. She couldn't be the companion he needed at his side in St. Louis.

He'd proven his ability to survive and thrive in her hostile, unforgiving land, but she lacked the courage to face the tests his world would throw at her.

To show her love she'd do the only thing she could. She'd let him go.

Near noon on the fourth day, Dead Eye pulled his horse to a stop and twisted in his saddle to

look at KC. “Don’t appear them Injuns is following us. Can’t say as how I blame ‘em. It’s damned miserable.” He tucked his head down into the collar of his coat and shivered.

Both a blessing and a curse first snow then rain had fallen. The snow and rain had hidden and washed away their tracks, but afraid a fire would alert any pursuers, they traveled across the vast Texas plain cold and wet. Despite their fears, they weren’t followed.

“Either them warriors reconsidered their anger or they listened to Winter Hawk’s feelings on the matter.”

KC pulled up next to Dead Eye. “I don’t care what their reasons, I’m glad not to have a band of vengeful Comanche on our trail.”

“Amen ta that.”

KC looked back at Christopher lagging behind them. She frowned with worry. Had she pushed him too hard? “I think we can ease our pace.”

Lips thinned in pain, he slumped in the saddle, his ashen skin moist with sweat in spite of the chilled air.

“The horses could use the rest and so can I.”

They made camp next to a small stream and Dead Eye went off to hunt up some game for

dinner. Christopher built a fire then sat by the flickering flames and watched KC care for the horses.

No longer did he see the *boy*, her cropped hair, coarse clothing and rough manner projected to the world. How, he wondered, could anyone think her male? To him, her smooth, unblemished skin, the slim column of her throat, the touch of her slender fingers on the reins guiding Lady with confidence, and the easy sway of her body in the saddle, all shouted, *Woman*.

To take his mind off the throbbing ache in his side, he tried to imagine her clothed as the women he'd known in St. Louis. The image escaped him. He couldn't envision KC's slim legs hidden beneath voluminous skirts, her already tiny waist pinched tight by a corset, her wild curls laboriously tamed into an elaborate coiffure. He smiled at the thought of the stir she'd create in society when he took her home.

His smile faded. When? More like if. She'd made it clear she did not intend to leave Texas. And she refused to speak to him about her future.

During the day, they rode side by side, silent, speaking of campsites and watering holes. At night he lay in the dark unable to sleep and listened to the sound of her breathing. Though mere feet separated them, a chasm lay between them. One he had no idea how to cross. Since she

opened her eyes in He Who Sees' tepee she'd been pulling away, putting barriers between them.

For now, he had little choice but to accept those barriers. Dead Eye's presence prevented him from confronting her. But, he vowed when they reached Peaceful, he'd tear down any walls she erected. He intended to honor the promise he made Eli. If he had to, he'd drag her out of that hellhole kicking and screaming, back to St. Louis where she'd be safe.

How a trouser-wearing, pistol-packing young woman would fit in there he didn't allow himself to dwell on. Nor did he let himself consider the role, beyond that of her lover, he wanted to play in her life.

The ache in his side demanded his attention. He pulled up his shirt and tried to unwrap the bandage. Breath hissed through his clenched teeth as Huwuni's poultice tore away from his flesh. Fresh blood oozed.

"Let me see."

He turned to find KC standing behind him. "You move like a cat."

She shrugged and sat at his side. "Out here, you either learn caution or you die."

With deft hands she removed the blood soaked bandage, washed the area and wrapped a clean length of cloth around him. Cool fingers grazed his rib cage as she stretched her arms

around his waist. Her vest covered breasts pressed against his back. A shaft of desire surged through him.

“That should be fine. As long as you don’t pull open the wound, it’ll heal nicely. Huwuni’s medicine is good. You’ll have an interesting scar to show your friends back in St. Louis.”

Her brisk, no-nonsense tone almost convinced him she felt nothing when she touched him, but he heard her breath grow uneven and felt the slight tremble in her hands as she tucked in the end of the bandage.

“We need to talk, KC.”

She stood over him; her mouth set in a stubborn frown. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Come with me to St. Louis. There’s nothing left for you in Peaceful.”

“Peaceful’s my home. Eli’s there. My work is there.”

“You can work in St. Louis.”

She snorted. “As a doctor? Will your fancy friends accept me, a woman as their physician? Will they even acknowledge I am a woman?”

Her words stunned him into silence. She truly believed herself unfeminine. What could he say to convince her otherwise?

When he didn't answer, she turned to leave.

"Running away again?" Sometimes actions spoke louder than words. Anger and frustration made him reach out and grab her wrist. "You're going to listen to reason if I have to hog-tie you." He tugged her around to face him.

Startled, she lost her balance and tumbled into his lap. Beneath his fingers her pulse pounded. Their eyes met. At her hungry look, his voice trailed away.

"Don't." She turned her face aside.

"Don't what? Touch you?" He cupped her cheek with his palm, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Kiss you?" Unable to resist the lure of her soft lips he closed his eyes and bent his head toward her.

Like a cornered wild thing, she jerked away. He let her go.

Cursing his impatience, he watched her run. He'd meant to talk to her, to convince her to return to St. Louis with him. Instead, the feel of her warm weight in his arms proved his undoing.

Once her got her to St. Louis, what was he going to do with her?

After long, weary days of travelling, Peaceful came into view. The ramshackle collection of

buildings lay motionless in the afternoon sun, a haze of dust hanging in the air. Though KC had always known Peaceful was a poor excuse for a town, it had been her home. Now, if not for Eli and Willie, she would turn Lady's head in the opposite direction and never look back. Peaceful held nothing for her. It was no longer home.

She had no home.

Lady nickered softly and tossed her head impatiently.

KC leaned forward and patted the mare's neck. "I know girl, to you, Peaceful means a clean, warm stall, fresh oats and Sultan. Come on then, let's go...home."

She could feel curious eyes watching them as they rode quietly into town. Jarring, off-key music blared from Slick's cantina along with the high-pitched giggle of whores. She ignored it all.

In front of the stable, she slid off Lady's back.

"Glad ta see ya back, boy."

She stiffened at the sound of Slick's oily tones.

He stood in the door of the cantina, wiping his hands on a greasy apron. "Told Eli not ta look for you. Didn't think you'd make it, what with only a greenhorn and an one-eyed old man

coming after you.”

Next to her Dead Eye turned, his hand resting on the butt of his pistol. He spat in Slick’s direction.

Slick paused. When Dead Eye sniffed and disappeared into the barn Slick continued, “Offered Eli a good price for the stable. Offer still stands. Think it over...boy.”

At Slick’s hesitation, a chill crawled up KC’s spine. He knew. The curious eyes following their progress through town took on a more ominous meaning. She felt more than saw as Christopher came to stand at her side.

Slick eyes widened as he took in the man he’d just called a greenhorn.

Tall and bronzed, his sun-streaked hair falling unbound around his shoulders; Christopher no longer resembled the soft, elegant Easterner who had lain near death only a few months ago. Dressed in travel stained buckskins, Winter Hawk’s feathers decorating his hair, a pistol strapped to his lean hip, Christopher looked hard and dangerous.

Slick gulped and sputtered. “Well, ya just think about it.” He turned and beat a hasty retreat inside the cantina.

KC only had a moment to relish the warmth of Christopher’s hand on her shoulder, before a

small whirlwind erupted from the shadow of the barn door.

“KC!”

Without warning, Willie barreled into her, nearly knocking her off her feet.

Tears coursed unchecked and unheeded down the boy’s grimy face. He clutched her around her waist.

“You’re back. I knew you’d come back. I told Eli not to listen to Slick. I knew they’d find you.” Sniffs and wheezing punctuated Willie’s words.

Awkwardly she patted the boy’s trembling back, accepting his embrace. Tears pricked her eyes at the feel of his solid warmth pressed against her. She barely noticed as Christopher moved them inside the barn, away from prying eyes.

After the harsh glare of the sun, the barn’s interior seemed dim and cool. The familiar fragrance of hay and horseflesh filled KC’s nostrils. From his stall, Sultan nickered a greeting. Behind her, Christopher went about unsaddling and stabling Lady and his gelding. Willie continued to cling to her. He talked on unintelligibly, his face buried against her chest.

“KC. You’d better come.” Dead Eye stood just outside the door to Eli’s room.

Willie didn’t object as Christopher gently pulled him away. He turned and burrowed into

Christopher's embrace.

With leaden feet, KC walked down the barn's shadowy corridor. Like a cold, gray fog, grief surrounded her. At the doorway, Dead Eye stepped aside. The anguish and compassion in his one eye told her all she needed to know.

The room smelled of death. Sickly sweet. Steeling herself, KC looked at the corpse of the man who had been her salvation, mother, father, teacher, mentor, and friend.

Death had been recent. Eli's body was not bloated, nor had the ever-present flies found him. Eyes closed, face relaxed in repose he appeared to sleep. The lines of pain, both physical and mental, that had etched his features for years were gone. In death, he finally found peace.

Though the sheets covering him were flecked with dried blood, his skin was clean, his frail, bony hands neatly folded atop his chest. Gently she took one of those hands in her own. She leaned forward and for the first and last time touched her lips to his cheek. His skin felt like cool, dry parchment, no trace of warmth remained.

"Why didn't you wait?" Her whisper broke on a sob. "I never told you I loved you. You should have waited for me." Tears flowed down her face. For a long while she rested her head against his chest and cried.

Just outside the door Christopher stood and listened to KC's harsh weeping and broken whispers as she spoke of her love and grief for an old man. His heart bled for her. He wanted to go to her, take her in his arms and ease the pain he knew she felt, but fear held him back. What if she turned away from him, rejected his offer of comfort as she rejected everything else he tried to give her?

“Coward.”

Christopher jumped at Dead Eye's words.

“Ya just gonna stand thar and listen. The gal needs ya.” Dead Eye reached under his eye patch and scratched, then he pinned Christopher with his one good eye. “If’n yar man enough.” With that, he strolled away.

Man enough? What in blazes did the old coot mean? He'd fought a knife duel for KC. What more did she expect?

Your love, a small voice inside him whispered. Your love and acceptance for who and what she is, not what you think you can make her into or what you think she should be.

I do accept her, he argued silently.

Do you?

Did he? Or did he want to dress her in silks and lace, and turn her into another of the women he'd known back East? Make her fit into some mold of what he thought a woman should be? Could he accept her as she was, a piece of unpolished, pure gold? What did he really fear she'd reject, his love or his selfish expectations? What could he offer her, a life of misery in a strange city where she'd never truly belong, with a man who had in one way or another failed everyone he'd ever loved?

No. Not everyone. He hadn't failed KC. Yet.

Putting aside his doubts, he turned to enter the room, but KC was gone.

THEY BURIED Eli just after dawn the next day. The Texas sun beat down on their bent heads with its promise of heat. But for the moment, the air was clear and cool by the stand of trees KC had chosen for Eli's resting-place.

A small group from town gathered to pay their respects, among them, Slick and Carmelita. A few others stood a distance away, watching. KC knew they were there to see her. She could feel their stares as they came to terms with the news of her true sex. The skin on the back of her

neck prickled. Her hair, which had grown long enough to brush her collar, blew around her face.

Willie clung close to her side, his stance belligerent, as if daring anyone to approach. Dead Eye stood on her other side, hat in hand. Together they guarded her, silently warning the low life of Peaceful though Eli may be gone, she was not alone. Their championship filled her aching heart with warmth. Still, it wasn't their presence holding the riffraff at bay. A few paces behind her, Christopher lounged against a tree.

One hand held his hat; his other hand rested loosely on the butt of his pistol. Like a big tawny cat, he exuded an air of restrained threat. More than one outlaw shifted his gaze from her to Christopher and slunk away.

While Dead Eye and Willie's guardianship made her feel loved and protected, Christopher's made her angry. She didn't want to need him in any way. Needing someone left you open to pain.

He'd be leaving now, like everyone else in her life.

The hard, dry ground accepted Eli's body. Dead Eye read a passage from the Bible. KC barely heard the words. Eli had given little attention to paper religion, choosing instead to live his faith through his actions. Dirt covered the simple pine box. Then it was done.

Carmelita approached KC. The little whore chewed her lower lip nervously as if unsure of her reception. Though she'd tried to dress appropriately for the solemn occasion the garish colors and over abundance of ruffles and lace of her clothing looked cheap and tawdry in the harsh Texas sun. KC watched her without acknowledgement until the girl touched her arm.

"KC," Carmelita spoke in a husky whisper.

Reluctantly KC looked down at the girl.

"You must leave Peaceful. This is no longer a safe place for you."

Laughter from a group of men a few yards away made Carmelita jump. Instinctively, in a gesture of reassurance, KC covered Carmelita's hand with her own. Though who was reassuring whom she didn't know. The girl gave her a small, thankful smile and slipped away.

"The whore's right, boy." Slick slid up next to KC. "My offer for the livery's still good. Ya won't get a better price from any of them." He waved his arm toward the men. "Though ya might get some interesting offers of a different sort." He winked and laughed at his own humor.

The thought of turning over the result of Eli's hard work to Slick, left KC feeling slightly ill. But both Carmelita and Slick were right. She could no longer remain in Peaceful. With her disguise gone, she would be a challenge to every man in town. She was good with her gun, but

she couldn't take them all. If she stayed, eventually her fate would be little better than Carmelita's.

KC didn't fear Slick and his like, but she had a healthy respect for the threat they posed. They were like the rattlers making their home in the desert, a natural danger to be avoided if possible and destroyed if necessary.

Where would she go? Where else but Texas could she survive? The land was in her blood and her blood was in the land. The future stretched out in front of her, a long, lonely road with no familiar landmarks.

She couldn't leave. Huwuni was right. Soon the Comanche would be driven from the land onto reservations. Until she found Brendan, she had to stay in Texas.

The solid warmth of a hand covered her shoulder. She looked back into Christopher's face. With the sun at his back, she could see nothing of his expression, but apparently, Slick could. He took a step backward, stumbling over his own feet.

Tension radiated from Christopher's body as it pressed against hers.

"KC will let you know his decision, soon enough. Now, get out of here before I decide for him."

At Christopher's use of the masculine pronoun when referring to her, deep inside, KC's last flicker of hope died. Despite their lovemaking, he still thought of her as a boy. She'd never be the woman he needed in his life.

Slick scurried away. The others glanced at Christopher and followed hastily. Within minutes only KC, Christopher, Dead Eye and Willie remained.

Chapter 20

CHRISTOPHER crawled up into KC's loft. Hay crunched beneath his feet, sending up a stir of dust with its sweet, dry scent. Head bent; she sat on her bare cot, packing her meager belongings into a battered satchel. At first, she seemed unaware of his presence, then the stiff set of her shoulders told him different.

What could he say to this stubborn woman? What words would sway her? He made his living with words, convincing people with words a lie was the truth and the truth a lie, twisting words to fit his needs. Why did he find it so difficult to find the right words now?

He stood next to her. "After I resolve things at the Rocking A, come back to St. Louis with me," he asked again.

KC's hands stilled and she looked up at him. Her heart tempted her to jump at his offer. Pride made her refuse. "And just what will I do in St. Louis?" Sarcasm dripped from her words. "Wear satin and lace? Attend the opera and go to balls? Sip tea in the afternoon with your lady friends?" How could she bear to be so near to him and yet so far away? It was better she put as

much distance as possible between them, before she found herself begging him to keep her close.

Impatience tinged his tone. "I can help you get settled there. Find you a nice house. I made a promise to Eli...."

"You've fulfilled that promise. I'm leaving Peaceful." She turned back to her packing.

He touched her arm. "Where will you go? The money you got from Slick, for the stable, won't last long."

She didn't bother to tell him she'd given most of the money to Carmelita. The little whore was probably halfway home to her village in Mexico by now. At least she had a home to go to. "Don't worry, I'll find a place to live, but it won't be St. Louis."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

"Brendan's here. I have to look for him."

"I'll hire men to track him down and bring him to you."

"No. He's my brother. I know the Comanche. I'll find him. Besides, what makes you think you'll live through a confrontation with either Rico or your stepfather?"

"I managed well enough against Brody and Red Buffalo." Hurt flashed in his eyes, but his tone was even. "I'll survive."

She bit back an apology. “Maybe.”

“At least consider St. Louis. You might like it there.”

“I think not.” She shrugged off his hand and hardened her heart, unable to believe the note of pleading in his voice. He couldn’t truly want her with him in St. Louis. He had to know she’d never fit into his world. *Go*, she begged silently. If he continued, she might weaken and fool herself into believing she could become a lady. That she could be what he needed in his life.

“I’ll stay with you until Rico and Anderson are brought to justice or are dead. I owe you that.” He owned her heart, but she couldn’t give him her soul.

“You don’t owe me anything. But you do owe yourself a chance at a better life.”

“Better by whose definition? There’s nothing in St. Louis that appeals to me.”

Anger blazed in Christopher’s blue-green eyes, turning them the color of storm clouds over the prairie. “Nothing?” He advanced on her. A muscle twitched beside his mouth, his lips set in a firm, hard line.

Before she could react, his hands closed around her upper arms and dragged her up against his chest.

“Nothing?” he repeated, seconds before his lips crushed hers.

He took her mouth with a savage fury. Unlike his other kisses, this one demanded. No gentle seduction, he plundered her mouth with his, holding her tight, her body pressed to his from shoulder to knee, his arms locked across her back.

In seconds, the fire burning in him set her ablaze. She returned his kiss with her own, her tongue meeting his in a desperate duel, for which there could be no victor. Her body molded to his, until every soft curve pressed against a hard angle. They strained together, seeking to turn two into one.

They fumbled with buttons and ties, until they lay naked on her bed, the coarse cotton mattress ticking scraping against her sensitized skin. Then she felt nothing but the slide of slick flesh against slick flesh, the stroke of hands across her chest, cupping her breasts, and of lips teasing, tormenting. Mindlessly she gave herself over to sensation after sensation, her body, hands and mouth stroking, teasing and tormenting in turn.

Afterwards they lay entwined, their bodies damp with sweat, hearts slowing.

“Nothing?” Christopher questioned softly.

“Nothing,” KC answered. “This changes nothing.”

For a moment Christopher’s body stiffened, then he relaxed and pulled her closer. “We’ll

see,” he whispered. “We’ll see.”

THE NEXT MORNING they left Peaceful, headed for San Antonio and Willie’s parents. Dead Eye elected to accompany them, claiming “thar’s nothing left of interest in this old town.”

Slick watched them leave, eyes glinting with satisfaction.

During the trip, KC did her best to avoid Christopher. When he tried to talk with her, she gave Sultan his head, outdistancing Lady. At night, in camp, she kept close to Willie and Dead Eye, knowing Christopher would not confront her with them present.

Besides the strain between them, the trip passed uneventfully. Fours days later they rode up to a small settlement near San Antonio.

She cringed and tried not to see the scars left by Red Buffalo’s attack: the trampled crops, broken fencing, burnt buildings, lack of livestock and the carefully tended graveyard with its fresh earthen mounds. Memories of another time, another place, another attack threatened to swamp her.

Barking furiously, a shaggy, black and white dog darted toward them. The sound drew a

man and a woman out of the cabin.

“Mama! Papa!” Willie threw himself off his horse and rushed into the woman’s outstretched arms. The dog raced after him.

Tears stung KC’s eyes. Now that the dam had broken, her tears flowed at the slightest provocation. She sniffed and blinked rapidly.

Mr. & Mrs. Smith looked like good people. A short round woman with just a hint of gray running through the bun of brown hair at the nape of her neck, Mrs. Smith’s warm hazel eyes twinkled with good humor. Her plump arms hugged Willie tightly to her ample bosom, tears streaming unchecked down her rosy cheeks.

Thin and angular of build, a generous amount of gray streaking his own brown hair, Mr. Smith towered over his wife. He coughed to hide his emotion and wrapped long wiry arms around both his wife and son.

“We’re much obliged to you,” Mr. Smith said. “We owe you a debt we can never repay. If’n there’s ever anything we can do for you, you just call on us, boy.”

KC flinched. Even here, the masquerade went on. Lost in his joy at being reunited with his folks, Willie never noticed.

Christopher stood apart, a distant look in his eyes.

“Stay and eat with us,” Mrs. Smith urged.

She started to refuse.

Christopher’s hand clamped around her elbow. “Thank you. We’d be pleased to stay.”

Willie’s excited yell killed her protest. He grabbed her hand and dragged her toward the cabin. The dog added a yelp, dancing around their feet.

“I’ll see ta the horses,” Dead Eye said.

KC glared over her shoulder at Christopher. He just smiled.

Dinner turned into a lively affair. The Smiths, eager to celebrate their son’s return, invited the rest of the settlement. Food laden tables appeared as if by magic as people arrived. A pit was dug, a fire started, and soon the tantalizing aroma of roasting meat teased her nose. Laughter filled the evening air as people ate and talked.

Texans. A hardy breed, these people survived a Comanche raid. They mourned their dead, replanted their crops, and went on living. Could she do the same?

Beneath a spreading willow tree, Dead Eye held court. He told the tale of Willie’s rescue and the battle between Sun Eagle and Red Buffalo. With each telling the story grew and

changed until KC didn't recognize it. Spellbound by the old man's words, men, women and children listened and begged for more. She grinned as Dead Eye settled back to oblige.

The people here didn't quite know what to make of her. Though everyone tried to include her in the festivities, their curious glances and questions made her uncomfortable. She frowned and answered in monosyllables until they gave up and left her alone. Perversely, once they did, she discovered she wanted to be accepted.

If she couldn't fit in this remote settlement what chance would she have in the city?

Food stuck in KC's throat. Was she actually considering going to St. Louis? Fear churned in her stomach. She moved away.

The sun set. Lamps were lit. A fiddle twanged and tables were pushed aside.

"Dance with me."

She shivered as Christopher's breath brushed her cheek. Lost in her thoughts she hadn't heard him approach.

"I don't know how."

He turned her toward him. "I'll teach you." His words held a meaning beyond the simple steps to a dance.

“They think I’m a boy.” She watched the couples; the women, their faces flushed and alight with pleasure, their long hair and full skirts swirling as their partners swung them in circles to the music. Longing grew in her to be one of those laughing women; to have Christopher hold her close and twirl her around. She glanced down at her trousers and tried unsuccessfully to squelch the feeling. “It’ll look strange for you to dance with me.”

He pulled her into the shadows. “They can’t see us here.”

He took one of her hands in his and placed the other on his shoulder. A foot of space separated them, but she felt the heat radiating off his body. He smelled of warm buckskin and Texas dust. His breath held a hint of tobacco and a whiff of whiskey from when some of the men had dragged him aside to smoke and sample their home brew. Awareness coursed through her.

Before she could tear herself away, he launched them into motion. She stumbled. Her boot came down hard on the moccasins he wore.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry. I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Don’t think, just listen to the music and follow my lead.” He tightened his hold and spun

her around.

Their bodies found the cadence of the music and they moved together as one. She grew breathless, whether from the vigorous dancing or his nearness, she didn't know. In his arms, in the darkness, she felt free. Alive. Feminine. Doubts and fears melted away.

"My, my. Mr. Goodwin. There's no need for you to *tie a scarf* for a partner." Mrs. Smith referred to the custom of men tying a scarf around their arms to partner other men in a dance when there weren't enough women to go around. "I'm sure one of our young ladies would be happy to dance with you."

The woman's words shattered KC's fragile illusion. Glad for the shadows that hid the color in her cheeks, she lurched to a halt. Her boots came down on Christopher's feet.

He grimaced, but held her tight. "Thank you, Mrs. Smith, but Miss O'Connor here is my partner for the evening."

Mrs. Smith's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open at the revelation. KC twisted in his arms.

"Miss O'Connor?" Mrs. Smith sputtered. "Oh, my. I had no idea."

"Let me go," KC whispered.

“No.”

Her boot stomped on his toes. He flinched. She slid out of his grasp and disappeared into the darkness.

For a moment, while they danced her had resolve weakened. Then with a few words Mrs. Smith had destroyed her fantasy.

KC HELD OUT her arms to Willie. Without hesitation, he stepped into her embrace, his thin arms clinging tightly to her waist.

“Don’t go. Stay here with me and Ma and Pa.”

Despite their gratitude, the Smiths didn’t echo Willie’s plea. Since Christopher’s announcement the night before, she could sense the discomfort and disapproval they tried to hide.

“I can’t do that, Willie.” Part of KC longed to do what Willie asked, but as much as she loved him, there was no place for her here.

Civilization had reached this small settlement. Here men were men, and women were

expected to be women.

Was there anyplace she belonged?

Gently she pulled away. "You keep up with your letters and you'll soon be reading those books Christopher's given you." Along with Eli's mare, Smokey, KC had agreed when Christopher suggested giving Willie Christina's books. "When I get settled, I'll write and you can write back. Be good to your folks."

"I will, KC. I promise." Willie's voice broke on a sob. He turned and buried his head against his mother's chest.

Sensing KC's distress, Sultan pranced restlessly as she mounted.

"Let's go," KC said her voice low and gruff.

Dead Eye tipped his hat to the Smiths and followed KC and Christopher out of the yard.

Behind them, the Smiths grew smaller and smaller, then disappeared from view.

Though it hurt to leave Willie, he was in good hands. Still, a piece of her heart remained with him.

“YOU’D best be leaving now, son.”

Christopher eyed the sheriff with dissatisfaction.

“Stepson or not, I can’t let you in to see Anderson without permission.” The sheriff backed up his words with the rifle he held across his chest.

Only KC’s grip on his arm kept Christopher from grabbing the sheriff by the throat and forcing him to...to what? Christopher wasn’t quite sure. According to the sheriff, Anderson lay near death’s door and Rico had met his demise not long ago. Other than those bits of information the sheriff refused to answer any more of Christopher’s questions. Christina’s name elicited a non-committal shrug.

“If you have any questions about what went on at the Rocking A, I suggest you take them up with either Ranger Parker or Jake Gallagher. You’ll find them both out at the ranch.”

At the mention of Gallagher’s name, a blind rage came over Christopher. He lurched forward. The sheriff stiffened, lifting his rifle.

Before the sheriff decided to lock him up, KC and Dead Eye dragged him out of town.

Once clear of town, Christopher brought himself under control. He needed to keep his wits about him to face Gallagher. The need for vengeance churned in his gut. Someone had to pay for what Christina had suffered. Since Rico was dead and Anderson nearly so, Gallagher would do.

The next day they crossed onto Rocking A land. The beauty of his childhood home calmed his spirit.

It surprised him how much he remembered about the ranch, from the stand of cottonwood trees just over the next rise, to the stream that ran clear and swift behind the house even during the driest summers. When he'd come from St. Louis, he'd only been there for a few short weeks, before that it had been years since he'd seen the place.

As he rode toward the ranch house in the distance, he recalled his childhood. The smell of sage and dust, mingled with the pungent aroma of cattle, stirred memories of long, busy days; days spent on horseback trailing after his father and ranch hands, roping and herding stupid, stubborn beasts.

The best life a man could live, his father had said. At the time, Christopher had agreed, sure he'd never leave, sure his future lay within the confines of the Rocking A's boundaries. Only

now did he admit to himself how he'd loved the ranch and the life he'd lived as a child.

When his father died, he'd tried desperately to become the man his mother needed. He'd failed. Instead she'd turned to Anderson and he'd killed her. Christopher remembered his impotent rage at his mother's death and being sent away from his home. How different his life had turned out from his childish dreams. Anger threatened to crack his calm façade. He turned his thoughts and gaze to KC.

She rode beside him; her eyes alight with pleasure as she surveyed the rich rolling land, dotted with cattle and horses.

Sultan pranced and nickered, straining against her firm hold on his reins. The animal wanted to run across the open land, to let the wind whip through his mane and the ground rush by beneath his feet. Though Christopher could see the longing in KC's eyes to let the stallion loose, head high, back straight, she held him to a sedate walk. Soft, red wisps of hair lay against her pale cheeks, her lips set in a tight, thin line.

Could he give up all he'd worked for and forgo vengeance, for such an elusive prize?

Lady tossed her head and answered the restive stallion. She too felt the pull of this barely tamed land.

How at home KC looked, a part of the land, one with it, as he'd once been.

Could he be again?

The thought stunned him. The Rocking A was his.

Could he return to the land? Turn his back on his career and future as a lawyer, to become a rancher? Was he strong enough to take on the difficulties and challenges of pitting himself against nature? Could he transform himself to conform to the dictates of the harsh Texas land?

Would he survive his path of justice and revenge against Christina's murder? If he was killed, what of his promise to Eli to see KC safe?

Ahead the ranch yard grew closer. The house lay quiet in the late afternoon sun, long shadows stretching across the deserted yard. Bare from the waist up, a lone man hammered at a fence post. At their approach the man straightened. He reached for his gun belt and strapped it around his lean middle.

Christopher's thoughts went dark. This was the man he sought.

Gallagher.

KC STARED at one of the men responsible for the death of Christopher's sister. Attractive in a dark, dangerous way, with his chiseled features and unruly mahogany hair, Gallagher wasn't quite what she'd expected. He didn't have Anderson's slimy good looks, nor did he have the look of Rico, Brody or their ilk. Gallagher was in a class by himself. She shivered as his gray eyes raked over and dismissed her.

She turned her attention to Christopher. His silence since they'd left town frightened her. She could feel the frustrated anger churning inside him.

Denied vengeance against his stepfather, she knew Christopher needed a target for his rage. By the look in his eyes, she was afraid he'd chosen Gallagher.

Since she'd first found Christopher and nursed him back to health, he'd changed both physically and emotionally. No longer an unwary Easterner, soft and unskilled in the ways of survival, now, he was tough inside and out. She sorely missed his easy smile and gentle laughter. She wondered if they were gone forever.

Still, despite his changes, he stood little chance against the man watching them. Gallagher's

years of experience in self-preservation, showed in his eyes and his easy stance in the face of danger.

Christopher reined in Lady and leaned forward. "I'm looking for Jake Gallagher."

Tension radiated throughout KC's body. "No," she whispered.

"I'm Gallagher. What can I do for you?" Gallagher's gray eyes were cold and hard.

After that, everything seemed to happen at once. She heard Dead Eye yell. Before Christopher's gun cleared leather, Gallagher trained the bore of his gun on him.

"Christopher! No!" She threw herself at him. She hit him hard, grabbed his gun arm and yanked it aside. A shot roared past her ear. They fell. The ground rushed up to meet them. She felt his body twist so she landed on top of him rather than under. He grunted and his face went white.

Stunned by the impact with his hard body, she lay still. Her ribs ached. Her breath caught in her throat. Sprawled over Christopher, she waited for Gallagher to shoot, for the sharp bite of a bullet.

Before she could move, Christopher rolled her over, his body pressing hers into the ground. He reached for his gun lying a few feet away, then froze.

“Don’t move,” Gallagher ordered.

KC peered over Christopher’s shoulder. Gallagher stood above them, the barrel of his gun pointed at the center of Christopher’s back.

Christopher groaned. He could feel Gallagher’s eyes boring into his back. He tensed, waiting for the feel of a bullet plowing into his flesh.

Stupid. He’d failed. Again.

“Get up,” Gallagher said.

Slowly Christopher rose to his feet. The fall and KC’s weight had broken open his wound. He ignored the sting and warmth trickling down his side and pulled KC up with him, shielding her body with his own.

“Who the hell are you?”

Christopher faced the man. Something stirred in his memory. He’d seen the man before. “You all right, KC?” He ignored Gallagher’s question.

KC nodded. Her fingers bit into his arm. He could feel her trembling; the only evidence of her fear, her pale face was an expressionless mask.

“I asked you a question, stranger.” Gallagher’s eyes narrowed, his gaze moved to Dead Eye

and back. "Tell your friend to just set easy."

"Jake?" a feminine voice called from the ranch house porch.

Gallagher didn't take his eyes off of Christopher, but he answered. "Stay in the house, Christina."

Christina!

Christopher's head shot up. He looked past Gallagher to the woman framed in the doorway, her blonde hair glowing like burnished bronze in the shadows. She stepped into the light.

"Christina," he breathed softly. His heart began to race. Without regard for Gallagher or the gun he held, Christopher headed toward her.

"Christina!" His pace increased as he brushed past a startled Gallagher.

"Hold it right there..." Gallagher started.

Christina stepped off the porch, her hand shading her eyes against the glare of the setting sun. "Christopher?" Then she was running toward him, her hair flying behind her like a golden banner.

He caught her mid-stride, whirled her around, then pressed her close. Laughing and crying, she clung to his neck. Small, moist kisses showered his face. In between, she babbled

breathlessly. More than half her words were lost on him. They didn't matter. The feel of her, alive and well, in the circle of his arms, melted the hard rock of guilt inside him. He breathed in her sweet, clean scent, unaware tears coursed down his cheeks. He buried his face in the cloud of her hair and let the tears wash away his pain.

People surrounded them. A buzz of voices slowly penetrated his consciousness. He kept his eyes closed, afraid if he opened them Christina would be gone, that this would prove nothing but a dream.

“Christopher, is it truly you?” a familiar voice questioned.

He lifted his head and forced his lids up. “Rachelle?”

A slender brunette looked at him with uncertain eyes. She reached out and touched his cheek. Her fingers trembled. “*Oui*, it is I.”

In response, he stretched out one arm. With a choked cry, she burrowed into his embrace. His body shook with the force of emotions, his heart felt as if it would burst. Everything around him, except for the two sweet-smelling bundles of femininity locked in his embrace, was forgotten.

“Mister, you'd better have a damned good reason for holding my wife,” a low voice,

vibrating with suppressed humor, growled in his ear.

Gallagher. How could he have forgotten the man? Christopher stiffened.

The two women sniffled and giggled softly. They both pulled back slightly, until one leaned against either side of him. He straightened, but kept an arm tightly around each of them, anchoring their petite forms to him.

“Oh, Christopher.” Christina drew in a shaky breath. “This is my husband, Jake Gallagher.”

Her husband? Gallagher? Christopher looked first at Christina then Gallagher.

Love and happiness shone like beacons of light out of her eyes as she gazed at Gallagher. He returned the look, his hard features softening, his steel gray eyes turning silvery.

Slipping from his side, Christina moved gracefully into the man’s arms. They fit perfectly, his dark to her light, his male to her female. They looked right together.

Christopher’s arms felt suddenly empty, although Rachelle’s warm, feminine shape pressed against his side.

Jake stuck out his free hand, a challenge in his eyes. Reluctantly, Christopher returned the gesture. The man’s clasp was firm and strong. For long moments they stared at one another, blue eyes holding gray, gripping, testing.

Then a smile creased Jake's face. He pumped Christopher's arm twice. "You look a mite healthier than the last time I saw you in Peaceful."

That's where he'd seen Gallagher, lurking in a dark corner of Peaceful's cantina, the night he'd been shot. At the time he'd dismissed the man as just another of Rico's outlaws. Apparently, he'd been wrong about that as well as other things. There was more here than he knew.

Still, none of it truly mattered. He looked at his sister as she leaned against Gallagher's bare chest. Her arms around his waist, her eyes glowed with love and happiness. The rest could wait.

Christopher grinned. "Welcome to the family."

When Gallagher grinned in return, a weight lifted inside Christopher. The chill and darkness that had been such a part of his soul, since Brody had lied to him about Christina's horrible death, parted, letting the warmth of the sun touch him.

"I would suggest we all adjourn to the house to continue this most intriguing discussion."

Christopher turned to the elderly gentleman who approached him. "Pierre, Pierre DuBois. Is it you?"

"Most assuredly, young Goodwin. I am pleased to discover you are still among the living. I

find myself most curious to hear the whole tale of your miraculous resurrection. However, I think you should invite your unusual friends to stay, as well. It appears they are preparing to depart.” He held out his hand. “Rachelle, come along, my dear.”

“But, Papa,” she protested.

“Christopher will be along shortly, I’m sure.”

Christopher barely noticed as the girl slid reluctantly from his side. Christina hesitated for a moment as she and Jake moved toward the house. Her gaze went from Christopher to KC and Dead Eye, then back.

“Come on, Honey,” Gallagher said. “Christopher will answer your questions soon enough.” He urged her on, leaving Christopher to stand alone in the yard.

Christopher’s gaze locked on KC’s slender frame. Looking at her, he wondered how he could ever have mistaken her for a boy. To his eye, everything about her, from her silky red curls and delicate features, to her long, elegant limbs, cried woman. He’d had her strong legs wrapped around his hips, felt her lips soften beneath his own, caressed her lithe body. No trace of the boy existed in his mind.

Her downcast eyes never met his.

“Damn it all, KC! You’re going to ride away? After everything, you’d just leave, without a word?”

Dead Eye leaned over and spat, disgust written on his face and in his rigid posture.

The sight of him, the two women pressed to his side, one fair, one dark, both petite and feminine, drove home to her just how little she knew about being a woman. About talking soft and genteel, and wearing clothing made up of yards of silk and lace, all colors of the rainbow.

“I don’t belong in this world. I’ll never belong here. My world consists of leather and spurs, horses and guns, violence and death.” Blinking and swallowing the tears that threatened, she told herself it was only the glare of the sun moistening her eyes, though the rays pounded her back. With a sharp jerk, she pulled Sultan’s head around. Her legs tensed ready to kick him into a lope.

Christopher’s quietly spoken words stopped her. “Just where do you think you’re going, Miss Kathleen Claire O’Connor?”

KC gripped Sultan’s reins tightly, feeling the leather bite into her damp palms. “It’s time for me to leave. You’re home now. Rico’s dead. Anderson nearly so. Your sister’s alive. Your... Rachelle is here.” She couldn’t bring herself to call the woman his fiancée. “You’re back in

your world.”

A world in which she could never fit.

Chapter 21

“DEAD EYE,” Christopher said. “Would you see to the horses, then go inside and tell the others Miss O’Connor and I will be along shortly?”

“Sure ‘nuff.”

Stunned, KC didn’t object when Christopher reached up and lifted her off of Sultan. Nor did she attempt to pull away as he nearly dragged her toward the far side of the barn. She could hear Dead Eye chuckling as he led the horses inside.

Not until she found herself pinned to the rough wooden planks of the barn wall, Christopher’s body hard against hers, did she find her tongue and her anger. She tried to push him away, but he remained immovable.

“Just what in the hell do you think you’re up to?”

“I asked you a question Miss Kathleen Claire O’Connor and I expect an answer. Where are you going?”

“Where I go is none of your damned business. And I told you never to call me that.”

“Why not, it’s your name isn’t it.” He bent his head closer. “Kathleen Claire. I like the sound of it. Much more feminine than KC. It suits you.”

KC snorted. “It’s a woman’s name.”

“And you’re a woman, Kathleen Claire.” Moist and warm in the cool air, his breath touched her cheek.

She twisted her head away from his.

His hands caught and held her face, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Don’t turn away from me. You’re a woman, Kathleen Claire, the most feminine woman I’ve ever known.”

Tears blurred her vision. “Please...don’t,” KC choked out. How could he do this to her? Force her to face her shortcomings? Though she knew she could never be the woman for him, she thought he cared enough for her to spare her this humiliation. “They, your sister and the other one, are women. I’m...I’m some kind of freak.”

She thought of the two petite women, one a vision of white and gold, the other dark and sultry, both tiny and fragile in Christopher’s arms. “I’m too tall, too thin. My hair’s too short. Too red. Lace would shred if I touched it.” She held up her callused hands.

His thumbs stroked her cheeks, wiping at the tears. He took her fingers in his hands.

Slowly he touched her palms tracing the ridges of the rein hardened flesh. First one then the other, he lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them. His gaze never left hers.

A shudder started deep inside KC, expanding outward, until her whole body shook with the force of it.

“Christopher...please...don’t...”

“Don’t what, my love? Make you look at yourself, at who you are? Knowing you has made me examine myself, made me discover who I am. Ah, Kathleen.”

Her name on his lips sounded sweet, sweeter than she’d imagined it could ever again be. It drowned out her parents’ last cries, replacing the horror with promise.

“Don’t you realize just how much a woman you are?”

“But...”

He stilled her protest with the tips of his fingers. “Neither the length of your hair, the calluses on your hands, nor the clothes you wear define your femininity. That part of you, you carry inside, in your heart, in your mind, in your soul. Even when what you showed to the world fooled my eyes into believing you were a boy, my heart told me different. In spite of the disgust I felt for myself, I wanted you then as I want you now.

“You’re a sleek mountain lioness compared to a docile, well fed house cat. You’re wild and free. Being with you brings me to life, challenges me to explore my limits and horizons.

“I need you with me, at my side, now and forever.”

Love blazed in his sea green eyes. Hope, held dormant in her heart, blossomed like Texas wild flowers after the first spring shower. Still, she hesitated. She had to warn him, to be sure he understood who she was.

“I can’t be like the women you know. I’d suffocate in satin and lace. And I’d die in the city.”

He laughed softly. “I’d as soon turn a kitten loose on the Texas prairie as tie you up in corsets and petticoats and confine you to the city. The Rocking A is my home. Until I returned I never knew just how much I missed it. If you’ll have me I’d like to stay and make my life here on it with you.”

She searched his eyes. Did she dare believe? “You’re sure? I’ll try, but I don’t know how much I can change into being a proper woman.”

“You are a proper woman. Be my wife, KC. You needn’t change a thing about yourself. Wear trousers if you like, it makes no difference.”

His wife!

The rest of his words faded away. He wanted to marry her. Fear cut her flower of hope, a knife slicing through the stem of that tender shoot. He wanted her to be his wife as well as a woman.

“If we get married we’ll be bound together forever.”

“That’s the idea.”

She could hear the grin in his voice. “What happens when you get tired of me and my rough ways? When I can’t live up to your expectations of what a woman...a wife should be? What happens to me then?”

His hesitations spoke louder than words.

“I can’t marry you. Stay here.”

“Kathleen...”

“No!” She twisted out of his grip and turned her back to him. “Don’t call me that, Kathleen Claire died eight years ago, only KC is left.”

“Nonsense, you’re both the same person. Marry me, KC and bring a bit of Kathleen back to life. Give yourself a chance. Trust me.”

“I can’t. Don’t you see? What kind of wife could I be to you? You’d be better off hiring me as a ranch hand. I’m more suited to the role. I can’t marry you.”

Christopher’s hand on her arm stopped her from striding away. “Can’t? Or won’t. I never would have believed you were a coward, KC.”

She kept her back to him, not answering.

“Very well, I won’t press you to marry me, but I want your word you won’t leave the ranch.”

She turned toward him. “What? You can’t really expect me to stay?”

Nothing of his emotions showed in his eyes. He looked at her coolly. “I can and I do. I made a promise to Eli to see you settled someplace. With or without your cooperation I intend to honor that promise. Give me your word you won’t leave the Rocking A and you can move around freely. If not, I’ll just lock you up someplace until I figure out what to do with you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He took a step toward her. The determined look on his face told her he just might.

“Oh, all right, you have my word.” She whirled around and stomped off, missing the look of relief that flashed across Christopher’s features.

“QUITE A SPIRITED *jeune fille* you have chosen. I had always hoped you would marry my Rachelle, but I can see your heart is engaged elsewhere.”

Christopher turned reluctantly to face Pierre DuBois. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know you will not be returning to St. Louis with Rachelle and myself.” Pierre stepped forward and threaded his arm through Christopher’s, an affectation which was not out of place for the dapper Frenchman.

Christopher could imagine the sight they made strolling arm-in-arm toward the house. Pierre, dark and slight, dressed in the height of fashion, next to a blond, buckskin clad wild man with feathers in his hair.

“I am afraid I have sad news for you,” Pierre continued. “When your uncle heard of your death at the hands of outlaws his heart gave out on him.”

Sorrow, for the loss of the man who’d raised him, swamped Christopher. Though they’d never truly been close, Christopher had loved his uncle and had known his uncle loved him.

“Do not grieve over much, he lived a long and full life. He went as he would have liked,

quickly, without pain and fuss. It was only months later upon going through his papers that I discovered Christina's letters, else we would have been here sooner to see to her welfare. As it is, our assistance was unnecessary, her husband has it well in hand.

"Come into the house now. Everyone wishes to hear of your adventures and I am sure you would like to learn of your sister's."

His uncle was dead. Christina was alive. KC refused to marry him. Nothing in Christopher's life made sense anymore. In a daze, he followed Pierre into the house.

OVER SUPPER, he learned what had happened to Christina during the past six months. How Gallagher rescued her from Rico and his men and spirited her away to his ranch in New Mexico. He listened as she glossed over her later abduction by Rico and read between the lines about her treatment by the outlaw as he took her back to the Rocking A and John Anderson. He learned of Rico's death and she told him about Anderson's plans and how he'd been shot. Christopher could feel only satisfaction at the men's fates and pride in his sister's inner strength.

He watched the looks passing between Christina and Gallagher, envious of their obvious

love for one another.

The house smelled of beeswax, pine and cinnamon, a far cry from the tense, empty place he remembered from Anderson's rule. Now, it brought back memories of an earlier time, a time when he, Christina and his parents had lived in the house. Then, as now, it rang with laughter, life and love.

All the while he related his tale, Christopher wondered where KC was, what she was doing, thinking, feeling. He ate the food set before him, not knowing or caring what it was. Though he knew she'd keep her word and not leave the ranch, he had no idea where on its vast acreage she holed up. Neither she nor Dead Eye came to the house for the evening meal. He cautioned himself to be patient, eventually she'd come to ask to be released from her promise. Then he would have another opportunity to convince her to stay.

In the parlor the conversation continued. Rachelle sat next to him on the divan. Her full skirt brushed against his buckskin clad legs, reminding him he still wore his travel stained clothing. Pierre had barely allowed him time to wash before ushering him into the dining room.

The scent of lilacs rose from Rachelle's skin. It made him long for the freshness of sage. Smooth and dark, her hair cascaded in artificial coils around her milky, sun starved skin. In his

mind he could see only wild red ringlets blowing around a defiant face, dominated by eyes the color of jade.

“I’m so pleased you survived this horrible ordeal. Soon you’ll be back home with us and this will all seem like a bad dream.”

He opened his mouth to tell her his plans to stay on at the Rocking A, that he couldn’t marry her, then snapped it shut. She deserved better. Their discussion needed to be private. He wouldn’t shame or embarrass her in front of her father and strangers.

She laid one slim, smooth, white hand on his arm.

He couldn’t help but compare it to KC’s work roughened, chapped one.

“It must have been just awful for you. How could you bear to live in a tepee near those dirty savages?” She gave a delicate shudder, her fingers gripping his arm.

“The Comanche aren’t dirty savages.”

All heads turned toward the newcomer.

KC stood silhouetted in the doorway. “They’re people just like you and I, they merely live closer to nature.”

Rachelle’s brown eyes grew wide. Her mouth fell open.

Pierre graciously rose and walked over to KC. “Welcome, my dear. I am Pierre DuBois. I am most pleased to make your acquaintance.” He took her arm and pulled her forward. “Do come and sit. Christopher is too modest to do proper justice to his tale. Perhaps you would be so kind as to elaborate. Allow me to introduce you to everyone. This is Christina Gallagher, Christopher’s sister, and her husband Jacob. And the young lady seated next to Christopher is my daughter, Rachelle.”

Gallagher rose and took KC’s outstretched hand. Christopher could tell Gallagher didn’t realize KC was a woman. Christina looked puzzled as she murmured a greeting.

Pierre’s next words dropped into the silence like a rock into a still pond. “This is Miss Kathleen Claire O’Connor. Christopher’s own guardian angel, KC.”

Damn, the man, thought Christopher, he always managed to throw the fox in with the hens.

Before anyone could react to Pierre’s announcement, Dead Eye sauntered into the room.

“Well, I’ll be tied to a grizzly’s tail, ain’t this the purtiest room. Somethang sure smells good. Hope ya got more of them vittles a lying around. I’m hungry enough ta eat...” he paused. “Well, I ain’t right sure what, but I’m darned hungry.”

“Ah, you must be Dead Eye. Christopher has told us of your exploits and ability as a

raconteur. Welcome.” Pierre crossed over to Dead Eye and took his hand.

Everyone else in the room sat in silent shock. Only KC seemed unfazed by Dead Eye’s untimely entrance.

Dead Eye stared at the slim, well-dressed man in front of him. His hand slid to the butt of his pistol. “What did this here fella just call me? Do I need ta teach him some manners?”

Pierre had the good sense to let go of Dead Eye’s hand and take a hasty step backwards.

Christopher groaned. Rachelle gave a nervous little laugh and edged closer to him. Christina’s eyes were bright with curiosity; he avoided the questions he read there. Gallagher seemed to be doing his best to keep from laughing.

“A raconteur,” KC said. “A teller of tales and stories.” Head held high, she turned her gaze on Christopher. “I’ve come to tell you I’m leaving in the morning.”

Dressed in dusty boots and trousers, her once white shirt, torn and dirty, her pistol strapped low on her hip, her ever present vest and hat hiding her sex, she stood in their midst like a queen. Not by a flicker of an eyelash did she reveal the discomfort Christopher knew she must be feeling. Even Dead Eye’s crude threats and tasteless manners couldn’t shake her dignity. How could she doubt her ability to fit in wherever she choose? The woman was truly amazing.

Christina jumped up and clasped KC's hands in her own. "No, you must stay, Miss O'Connor. There's so much I want to hear about. Please stay, at least through Christmas. Let us show you our gratitude for saving Christopher's life. Jake." She turned toward her husband in appeal.

To his credit, Gallagher regained his aplomb and moved to Christina's side. "Yes, unless you have plans for the holiday, stay. It would give us great pleasure to have you with us."

"Yes, my dear, do stay," Pierre added.

Confusion washed over KC. This wasn't what she'd expected. When she'd barged into the parlor, she'd been ready for shock, horror, distaste, even fear, but not this eager acceptance. She'd meant to show Christopher her unsuitability for life in his world. Instead, Christina seemed unconcerned the woman she'd just invited to stay the holidays, looked more like a cow hand than a lady. Gallagher merely smiled, his arm around Christina's waist, as if gun-toting women occupied his parlor on a regular basis. The elderly dandy grinned like a cat in the cream.

Only the dark-haired beauty reacted in what KC figured was a normal manner. She sat with her pretty pink mouth open in an O of surprise. Her gaze darted back and forth between Christopher, Dead Eye and KC.

Honesty forced KC to admit she had no plans.

Before she could focus on Christopher and find out what he thought, Christina grabbed her arm and urged her toward the stairs. “Come, I’ll show you to your room. I’m sure you’d like to freshen up. You’ll have to forgive the condition of the house; it’s a bit run down. I’m afraid my stepfather didn’t care to spend money on its upkeep. But now that Christopher is back I’m sure things will soon be put to rights. He does have a taste for nice things.”

The woman chattered on, not giving KC a chance to object or even respond. Before she knew it, she found herself ensconced in a room. Minutes later, a plump middle-aged woman appeared bearing a tray of food. Christina coaxed and cajoled KC into eating then organized the servants as a copper tub was carried in and filled with steaming water.

A small, Texas whirlwind, Christina moved around the room until KC head began to spin. Almost without KC’s knowing it, Christina managed to strip away her clothing and maneuver her into the tub. A fire blazed in the room’s large hearth, casting a mellow glow over the slightly shabby furnishings. With a tired sigh, KC let the tension slip away. There would be time enough later to make decisions.

KC SAT QUIETLY in a corner and watched the three women, Christina, Rachelle and the plump Mexican housekeeper bustle around the kitchen.

Though KC tried to stay away, Christina had a talent for hunting her down and dragging her into the middle of whatever project she had going. The woman's enthusiasm was contagious. She refused to believe that KC had no interest in Christopher and didn't intend to remain on the Rocking A any longer than necessary. She forced KC to consider the future. The feeling was not comfortable.

Even dressed in simple day gowns covered with food stained aprons, the women were a picture of elegant femininity as they expertly mixed the ingredients that filled the warm room with mouthwatering aromas of roasting turkey, baking ham, apple, cinnamon and pumpkin.

The scene brought back memories of her early life—other Christmases spent with her family; learning to cook and bake at her mother's side, Brendan playing at their feet, Father resting before the hearth, smoking and carving some small toy. The women's smiles and laughter made her heart ache for what she'd lost.

“Jake!” Christina shrieked in startled laughter as Jake snuck into the kitchen and grabbed her around the waist. Flour dusted his dark vest where her hands came to rest. Their foreheads touched and they were lost in each other. Rachelle turned away and busied herself straightening the room.

Christopher entered. Though he’d exchanged his moccasins for boots and now wore trousers, he still wore the buckskin shirt and the headband Eli had given him. The scents of fresh air and horse swirled around KC. With his presence the spacious kitchen shrank. He filled the room and stole the air. She huddled against the wall hoping he’d ignore her.

His gaze brushed over Christina and Jake entwined in a loving embrace, the housekeeper who hid her smile behind her apron, Rachelle who blushed prettily, and focused on KC.

His eyebrow lifted as he studied her, but otherwise his gaze remained impassive. “Still here?”

“I gave my word.” KC shook off the hurt at his apparent disinterest and raised her chin. “When will you release me from my promise?” Soon, she begged silently. Each day, each minute in his company her resolve weakened. She couldn’t stay. She’d experienced her share of slavery. Wasn’t love just another form?

“Not until you’re settled somewhere safe. I gave my word as well. To Eli.”

She stood and edged toward the door.

“Running away?”

“No. I just have better things to do than bake cookies and pies.” There was no place for her here. She could never be like Christina or Rachelle. No matter how much pleasure she found in watching them, she had no desire to wear skirts and join them in their domestic pursuits.

The outdoors called to her. She needed freedom; the open air around her, the scent of sagebrush and cattle in her nostrils, the feel of a horse between her knees. Memory of another mount beneath her caused heat to flood her cheeks.

As if he could read her thoughts, the corner of his mouth rose to match his eyebrow. “Like what?”

She glanced longingly at the door, thankful her voice didn’t betray her unease. “I’ve been helping break some yearling colts and mend fences. The Rocking A has potential, but it needs a lot of work. Your stepfather wasn’t much interested in running a ranch, was he?”

Christopher’s mouth tightened. “He was more interested in running guns to the Comanche. May he rot in Hell.”

News had come a few days earlier of Anderson's death.

The effort it took to put thoughts of Anderson from his mind showed on Christopher's face. Then he smiled. "If you're not interested in cooking, come ride with me. There's a small herd of cattle to be brought in from the south pasture. I need some practice dealing with the stubborn beasts."

How easily he owned up to his lack of skill and asked for help. Could she do the same? Ask for help becoming a real woman. Temptation fought with fear.

"I'd love to take a ride." Rachelle's slender fingers clutched Christopher's arm as she smiled up at him. "This kitchen is positively sweltering. I could use some fresh air."

Christopher's gaze softened when he looked down at the petite woman hanging on his arm. Fear won. KC turned and fled.

Hope shriveled and died. She could never compete with such a creature for Christopher's affections. Why did she even want to try?

Christopher held back his sign of frustration. Rachelle meant no harm, but her untimely approach chased KC away just as he saw her weakening.

OUTSIDE, THE night sky glittered with stars. A cool breeze stirred the air bringing with it the subtle scent of dried grasses and livestock. Behind them, the ranch house stood dark and quiet, its occupants asleep.

Christopher leaned against the corral fence, his casual stance at odds with the tension inside him. He looked down at the small woman on his arm.

Rachelle stared at Christopher, her face a mask of shock. “You’re joking, of course. You can’t really be serious about marrying that...that, creature? What kind of wife will she make you? She’ll never fit into the St. Louis social circle. Imagine the harm she could do to your law practice.” She gave a delicate little shudder and clutched his arm tighter.

With gentle but firm fingers he disengaged her hand from his arm and stepped away from her. “I’m sorry Rachelle, I do intend to marry Miss O’Connor. I know it’s always been assumed we would marry, but...” Words failed him as he tried to explain his feelings for KC.

For a moment Rachelle’s gaze searched his eyes, then she sighed. “You love her, don’t you?”

“Yes, more than I thought it possible to love a woman.”

“Enough to give up the life you’ve built in St. Louis for this godforsaken Texas?”

“Yes. Even if KC refuses to marry me, I intend to stay on the Rocking A. I love the law, it will always be a big part of my life, but this land is in my blood.” He reached down and picked up a handful of dirt. Dry and grainy to his palm, like everything else he’d encountered since his arrival the earth was hostile and raw, but he loved the feel of the land just as he loved KC. “I never realized just how much I missed the Rocking A until I came back.”

Rachelle watched him caress the dirt, a wistful expression on her face. “Well, from what I’ve seen, Texas has need of lawyers as much if not more than St. Louis.” Her tone grew somber. “You realize, of course, you’ve broken my heart and I shall never recover. Never marry.”

Christopher froze, then relaxed, his mouth curving into a smile as he noticed the laughter lurking in Rachelle’s expressive brown eyes and hovering around her soft mouth.

Her expressions turned thoughtful. “When I first heard you were killed, I thought my heart would break. But before long I realized my grief was that of a sister for a beloved brother. There’s never been any passion between us. Since arriving in this wild frontier, I’ve discovered

that I'm not willing to settle for affection and friendship from my relationship with a man. I want what your sister's found, what you've found—love, passion, excitement. So though we were never formally betrothed, I release you and wish you luck with your wild woman. I'm sure that you will have need of it.”

“You've become a very wise woman in the months I've been away.”

She cocked her head and smiled. “Took you long enough to notice I'm a *woman*.”

She leaned forward and stretched up on her toes. Warm and slightly moist, her lips brushed his, then she turned and was gone.

Long after she'd left, Christopher stood alone, staring unseeingly out into the night. The dirt trickled through his fingers, falling unheeded. Now, all he had to do was convince KC.

KC WATCHED the woman slip into the house. Christopher's words spun in KC's head. He loved her. Enough to turn his back on the life he'd built in St. Louis and this lovely, feminine woman.

It took courage on his part to start a new life in a difficult land. If he was willing to take the

risk, could she do any less? Fear made her shake. Did she dare to love again?

She stepped out of the shadows. “Christopher.”

He turned, body tense. How quickly he’d learned how to survive.

The thin nightdress Christina had provided felt strange. Soft, laced-trimmed cotton fluttered in the breeze, caressing her skin. She shivered, but not from the cool night air.

“How long have you been there?”

His neutral tone gave KC no clue as to his emotions. Despite his words to Rachelle, KC felt a moment of doubt. “You love me.” It was a statement, not a question.

He answered anyway. “Yes, I love you. The question is, do you love me?”

“I...” The words stuck in her throat. Once said there’d be no turning back. Her life of freedom would end. But without Christopher what was that freedom worth: without him, her life and heart would be empty. Love demanded risk. She stepped toward him, one hand out.

He took her hand, his warm fingers enfolding her cold ones. With a gentle tug, he pulled her into the circle of his arms. She went willingly, needing the comfort he offered. He smelled of buckskin, horse sweat and fresh air. The familiar scents soothed the tremors coursing through her.

“If you’ll still have me, I’ll marry you.” KC forced out the words. She buried her face against his chest.

“Is it so hard to say the words?” he coaxed.

She lifted her head to meet his gaze.

His hands stroked her back from shoulder to hip, stirring a trembling deep inside that had nothing to do with fear. Her body softened to his touch, an ache starting low in her belly. Moisture gathered between her thighs. She strained closer. The coarse cotton of his shirt chafed her swelling breasts.

Lightning streaked through her, banishing conscious thought. She clung to him, surrendering.

“I was mad to think I could protect my heart by leaving you. At your side or miles away, my heart is yours. I thought if I refused to love anyone I’d be free from the pain of losing them, but in fear I denied myself the joy of love. I lacked the courage to reach out and grab what life offered. No more. I love you.”

“Besides.” She pulled back to grin up at him. “You’re still a bit wet behind the ears. You need me. Imagine pulling a gun on your own brother-in-law. You need a keeper and...”

“Kathleen.” With a choked laugh, Christopher’s mouth covered hers, sealing up the rest of her words.

~ The End ~