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*****From the Old West to Modern day, Janet Mills brings you the best of romance!*****

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ISBN: 1-59374-002-6 (electronic)

ISBN: 1-59374-003-4 (trade paperback)

When Jade Mackenzie ventures through Wyoming Territory on her way to adventure and fortune in the Black Hills, the last person she wants to see is Landon Burdett, the man she holds responsible for her father's death eight years earlier. After her traveling companion abandons her at Landon's ranch, however, Jade discovers qualities about the man that conflict with her feelings of resentment toward him. How can she care so much about someone who has caused her such grief?

The accidental drowning of Jade's father still haunts Landon, and he's held strong feelings for the girl ever since that terrible day. His memories of Jade as a darling tomboy are shattered when she arrives at his ranch fully grown...and utterly beautiful. An unexpected kiss ignites a shared passion neither of them wishes to acknowledge. Will old hurts continue to keep them apart, or can they reconcile the past?

-A Whiskey Creek Press Bestseller

-A Whiskey Creek Press Publisher's Pick

Read the excerpt and reviews at:

http://www.janetmills.net/the_sweetest_gift.htm

SUNDANCE

ISBN 1-931742-17-0 (electronic or print)

When California Dalton arrives at the home of her new employer, she steps across the threshold into utter chaos. Callie's fantasy of tutoring a sweet little girl vanishes as she meets the young woman the citizens of Sundance, Nevada consider insane. Pride keeps Callie from leaving, however, and she builds a unique friendship with her extraordinary pupil. In the process, she gains respect

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from the people of Sundance...and discovers love with the girl's darkly handsome brother.

Marshal Trevor Jacobs disapproves of his sister's tutor from the moment he lays eyes on her. He expected a matronly woman, not a delicate young beauty. She won't be able to handle Bethany's frightening episodes, and her presence will only serve to remind him that he can never marry. If he succumbs to the temptation of a relationship with Callie, it could jeopardize everything.

-A Top 5 Finalist in Affaire de Coeur's Reader/Writer Poll for Best American Historical

-Janet was named Author of the Year 2003 from

Fallen Angel Reviews for **SUNDANCE**

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One will marry the girl of his dreams, only to be plagued by doubts over the paternity of their child. One will spend the next two decades longing for the return of the fourth, who left town in the wake of a murder.

BEST OF ALL

A Reviewer's Choice award winner from The Road to Romance

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Wyoming Territory, 1886

When a young cowboy saves spinster Catherine Campbell from being gored by a bull during a cattle drive, the encounter sets local tongues to wagging.

Catherine's desire to marry for nothing less than love combined with her father's vigilance at keeping potential suitors at bay spell a life without the husband and family she always has wanted.

Their age difference matters little to Luke Matthews, while Sheriff Campbell's warnings only serve as a challenge. But something—or someone—haunts Luke, reminding him that he can never be the kind of man Catherine deserves.

NOTHING LESS THAN LOVE

-A Recommended Read winner from Fallen Angel Reviews

-Janet won Favorite Feature of the Month from The Romance Studio for

NOTHING LESS THAN LOVE, then went on to win Favorite Feature of the Year 2004 - Read the excerpts and reviews at:

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Who is stalking Lenzi Newman, and why?

When Lenzi Newman breaks up with her abusive boyfriend, strange and frightening things begin to happen. Is he still trying to control her life, or is there someone else who wants to intimidate her?

Jayson Kendrick loves Lenzi's gentle spirit, her sense of humor, her eternal optimism. He can't imagine why someone would want to hurt her, but he is determined

to find out.

MIDSUMMER NIGHTS

-A Recommended Read winner from Cinny's Place Reviews!

Read the excerpt and reviews at:

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ALONG THE WAY

By

Janet Mills

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Western Nevada, August, 1861

From the moment the door swung open, Ellie Randall knew a dog inhabited the shadowy interior of the stagecoach. She could smell him. Sharp talons of fear curled around her spine as swiftly as the musty, undeniably canine odor assailed her nostrils. Ellie's heart pounded. She stood immobile with fear when she should have spun on the heel of her black high shoes and walked away. If she ever doubted the memory of her long ago encounter with a stranger's vicious pet, the ugly scar above her right knee served as a grim reminder. Her next thought assembled her wits and afforded her a measure of reassurance. Inside the gloomy confines of the coach there must be a person who would grab the dog by the scruff of the neck should he make a snarling leap for Ellie.

"Like I said, ma'am," the driver repeated from beside her, "you may want to wait for the next stage."

"I have no choice. I need to get to San Francisco."

He shrugged and picked up her suitcase, tossing it to a young man on top of the transport who swiftly secured it beside a large bundle of mail. "It makes no difference to me. The passenger inside said he'd pay any fare I lost on account of his mutt."

"And doctor bills for hapless victims?" Ellie wondered aloud.

"Tell the lass that Baird willna harm her." The deep Scottish voice from within the darkened coach drifted like a melody on the

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breeze. "And I promise he willna put his nose where it isna welcome." Heat climbed Ellie's throat. Self-consciously, she reached up a gloved hand to adjust her straw hat over sedately coifed reddishbrown hair.

Another man, big and burly and bristling with weapons, perched on the driving bench above her. He turned to declare, "Baird can ride with the luggage."

The driver nodded. "Whatever you say, Mr. Murray."

The image of any animal being pitched off the roof of the stage when the conveyance hit the inevitable bump on the road caused a sprinkling of guilt in Ellie. She worried her bottom lip while considering her dilemma.

"Thank you, sir, but that won't be necessary," she decided.

Taking hold of her courage with one hand and the skirt of her dove gray traveling suit with the other, Ellie mounted the shiny black steps and ducked to pass beneath the words "Overland Mail Company" lettered in gold leaf above the bright red stagecoach

door.

The dimness felt pleasantly cool. Blinking to adapt to the change in light, Ellie slid her hand across one padded bench and froze when she happened upon a large furry paw. Before she could yank her fingers away, Baird's wet tongue drenched the back of her glove. The door shut and latched behind her. Ellie stumbled toward the window, intent on throwing open the curtain. A grunt confirmed that she'd managed to step on her traveling companion's feet. Then a hand, strong and firm around her wrist, halted her efforts.

"Dinna be doing that."

The stage lurched to a start. Ellie suspected she was pulled more than thrown, but however it occurred, she found herself sitting in a distinctly masculine lap. A wicked chuckle mixed with Ellie's gasp of indignation as she scrambled off the odious Scot to land on the seat opposite him.

"Are you all right, Miss...?"

It took a few breaths and a mental count to ten before Ellie could summon an answer. "Randall, Elinore Randall."

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"I'm Nick Lachlan." He paused. "You sound more like an Ellie."

And you sound like a man who thinks an awful lot of himself, Ellie wanted to retort. She brushed nervously at unseen and no doubt imaginary lint on her voluminous skirt. She suddenly realized she'd dropped her reticule somewhere in the coach. Bending to locate it, her fingertips brushed a pair of polished boots before fastening around the drawstring of the small bag. She straightened and set the purse next to her on the cushioned seat.

"He doesna usually take so well to strangers."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Baird. Normally he growls at anyone he doesna know."

"What kind of dog is he?"

"A collie."

Ellie tried to picture the breed but had no luck. From what she could see of the hulking shadow across the coach, the animal could rival a small horse. Her acclimating gaze moved from Baird to linger on his master's silhouette. The man was twice Ellie's size. A fresh wave of apprehension swept through her.

She was a woman alone, sharing accommodations with a large dog and a huge man who obviously preferred the dark. Ellie slid toward the curtained window. Slivers of sunlight around the edges afforded meager illumination on her plight.

"Don't you wish to see where we're going, Mr. Lachlan?"

He let out a long-suffering breath. "I suppose I canna begrudge you a peek, Miss Randall. My only request is that you dinna open the window all the way."

Curiosity began to nudge at Ellie's anxiety. She heard the man remove something from his pocket. She pulled the cord on the heavy leather curtain beside her. It lifted a few inches. Fresh air entered the coach and light slanted across the opposite seat, rewarding Ellie with her first good look at Baird. The dog now lay with his head resting on his master's thigh. The animal was well groomed, a shiny marvel of black, white, and golden brown. Small pointed ears were raised in question, their tips folded forward. Big chocolate

brown eyes met Ellie's. The dog's long fluffy tail slapped the seat cheerfully.

Ellie had to smile. "You've very handsome."

"Why, thank you, Miss Randall."

"I meant Baird," she explained in a rush.

The man gave her another low, delighted chuckle. "And he would like to say that you're a fine bonny lass as well."

The light really wasn't bright enough. Ellie had never been called fine nor pretty, not by anyone besides her father or brother in her thirty-four years. She'd never possessed the brand of looks that turned a man's head. She was short and thin, and she knew her face lacked other women's delicate beauty.

She kept her gaze on Baird and didn't thank either of them.

"Why do you have to get to San Francisco?" the man asked.

"My father is ill."

"I'm verra sorry to hear that, lass." His voice was respectfully solemn and rang with sincerity. Ellie's eyes rose from Baird's beguiling face to travel up an impressively broad chest. Nick Lachlan wore a tailored, white linen shirt under a brocade vest. A string tie loosely banded the open collar of the shirt, revealing a corded neck and wisps of dark hair.

The air in the coach suddenly grew hot and stuffy. Ellie experienced a dire need to pull at her own collar as her eyes continued the journey of their own accord. The man had a strong jaw and a full mouth. A neatly trimmed moustache graced his upper lip. He had an aristocratic nose. She was startled to learn that the big Scot wore a pair of tinted spectacles that obscured the color of his eyes. He had wavy dark hair as shiny as Baird's. He looked about Ellie's age. A finer man she'd rarely seen.

"Do I pass inspection, Miss Randall?"

"Wh-what?" Ellie stammered. Good heavens, she'd been staring like a hypnotized rabbit! He didn't repeat the question and she didn't answer it. A man who looked like him knew his effect on a woman well enough.

"The light bothers my eyes," he admitted after a moment.

"Would you tell me what you see outside the window?"

Ellie was all too happy to train her gaze elsewhere. She drew up the curtain a few more inches and looked out. They were already beginning their ascent into the rugged Sierras above Carson Valley.

Ellie loved the mountains. Her employment as nanny for a wealthy family in Virginia City left her with limited time for exploration.

Now she let her eyes bask on the picturesque scene before her.

"It's beautiful," she gushed, her affection for the rocky, evergreen-dotted terrain overcoming her discomfort at being so close to the handsome Scot. She couldn't even say she minded the bumpy ride. Tall, majestic pines bordered verdant green meadows. Everywhere she looked, brilliant splashes of wildflowers gifted Ellie's wide-eyed gaze. She pulled the heavenly scents deep into her lungs.

It gave her little difficulty to describe the splendor her eyes lit upon.

Politely, Nick Lachlan remained silent until she was through with her long, inspired discourse. "You have a lovely voice, Ellie Randall," he said in a gentle baritone she admired as well. "Through

your eyes I can actually see all that you do. How lucky for me that you possess such a precious gift."

She wasn't accustomed to being at the receiving end of lavish praise from an attractive man. She peered at the Scot again. He'd said the light bothered him, so he mustn't be completely blind. Was she anything more than a small blur to him?

"Are you a poet?"

She swallowed an unladylike guffaw at the man's suggestion.

"Heavens, no. But the children enjoy my stories." She wouldn't be so bold as to say they literally clamored for them.

"Children? Then you're married with wee ones of your own?"

"No," Ellie replied, her voice tinged with regret. She discovered it was all too easy telling Nick Lachlan nearly everything about herself. How she'd taken the job as nanny to be around children, how she missed the ocean but loved the rugged mountain range bordering Virginia City to the west. Once more the man listened attentively, filling her pauses with thoughtful questions.

The stage pulled into the first station before Ellie had finished her life story. They disembarked in front of a small log cabin where the stationmaster greeted them before tending to the horses. Ponder

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osa pines scented refreshingly cool air. Baird loped off to relieve himself on the nearest tree. Ellie couldn't help but gape at her handsome traveling companion again as he raised strong arms above his tall, lean body and stretched.

"Everythin' all right, Nick?" the other Scotsman who had been riding with the driver inquired.

"Verra fine, Murray."

Ellie was dazzled by the smile Nick sent her way. He introduced Murray as his friend and escort. Baird returned to stand beside his master. Ellie noted how Nick kept his hand on the dog's head as they entered the rustic little building to eat.

A short while later they were back in the stagecoach being jostled along a rough mountain road through the Sierra Nevadas. Ellie could only pray that the driver was an accomplished reinsman. Her full stomach protested the station mistress's generous serving of venison stew and buttery biscuits. Perhaps conversation would take her mind off the constant threat of whiplash.

"Why are you going to San Francisco, Mr. Lachlan?"

"A doctor there may be able to help me," he replied quietly. "I moved to America from Scotland almost ten years ago," he went on after a moment. "I have a ranch in the northern Rocky Mountains. Last October I was thrown from a horse that wasna fit to be ridden yet. My sight's been verro poor ever since."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lachlan."

"Please, call me Nick."

Ellie didn't think she should, but she encouraged him to continue talking. By the time he was done with his fascinating tale, she yearned to set eyes on Scotland as well as the wilderness territory he now called home. She told him as much.

"And I would love to hear you describe them, Ellie."

She smiled to herself. The man's kind words and gentle tone touched her like a tender caress. Impulsively, she reached for him, longing to place her hand over his. Baird gave a low warning growl.

Ellie jerked her hand back into her lap.

Nick's voice held a mild reprimand. "Och, Baird. The bonny lass means no harm to either of us." His full, sensuous mouth

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curved into a smile while one large hand stroked the dog's back. He turned his head to address Ellie. "My companion here has saved me from several robbery attempts during our journey. At one station he took a bite from the seat of a man's trousers." Nick chuckled. "It seems Murray was courting a comely servant girl at the time and didn't notice the man move in on the pile of coins at our table."

"I was bitten by a dog once myself," Ellie admitted. "I'll never forget it."

"Give me your hand, lass."

He held his toward her, palm up. Ellie stared first at the Scot's strong fingertips, then at the man himself. His lips twitched again as if he felt her gaze on his face. She leaned forward. Her fingers trembled as they sought his. Instantly, heat from the contact raced up Ellie's arm. Nick rubbed his thumb slowly across her knuckles.

"Consider yourself fortunate, Baird," he said, his voice a sensual rumble that had Ellie curling her toes inside her stiff shoes.

"Her hand is verra soft." He placed it on the dog's head.

Tentatively, Ellie petted the animal's shiny crown, then her hand ventured down Baird's neck. Her fingers dove into a thick, rich carpet of fur. The dog shuddered with pleasure and a joyful giggle spilled from Ellie's throat. Baird rolled over to allow her touch on his belly, his front paws lifting in a begging gesture while his back legs spread wide in relaxed bliss.

"He isna a modest lad," Nick said, and Ellie laughed again.

They stopped for the night in a small town boasting one inn.

After the long ride, Ellie wished for a hot bath and a soft feather bed to ease the aches from her body. She received neither. The thoughts she had before finally drifting off to sleep on her lumpy straw mattress led to the sort of dreams that would make an encounter with Nick Lachlan in the morning a rather embarrassing endeavor.

She was late for breakfast. Quietly, Ellie entered the dining room of the inn only to halt in her tracks when she realized Nick and Murray were talking about her. A step backward concealed her behind a burdened coat tree.

"Och, Murray. I canna believe it. She's a lovely young woman with the voice of an angel."

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"I'm not tryin' to be cruel, Nick, but you wouldna have given her a second glance had you met her a year ago."

"You say she's petite, her hair is a lustrous auburn, her eyes a warm brown. She sounds like a bonny lass."

Murray hesitated. "Her face is verra plain."

"Nay, that canna be."

"I wouldna say so if it werena true."

Ellie squeezed her eyes shut. So that was that. Now Nick would virtually ignore her. With more grace than she knew she could muster, Ellie walked toward the two Scotsmen. Baird rose from the floor near his master's feet and came to greet her. Distractedly, she stroked the dog's soft muzzle.

"Good morning, Miss Randall," Murray said with a polite

nod. He stood. Nick followed suit, smiling in her general vicinity.

"Join us, lass," he invited.

Ellie didn't feel very hungry, but she decided she needed to eat regardless. It would be many hours between meals.

Later, as the stage careened along the rutted road, she gazed forlornly out the window. She'd lifted the curtain enough for a glimpse of the passing countryside, finding no joy in it today.

"Why so silent, Ellie?"

The deep, rich voice that had mesmerized her throughout the night in her dreams now sounded worried. She shrugged, then remembered he couldn't see her. "I didn't sleep well."

"I didna either."

"Then perhaps we should just sit quietly today."

"Surely you canna rest verra well in here."

She sighed. "I can try."

Since it didn't matter what sort of picture she made, Ellie removed her hat, pulled off her black high shoes, and curled her legs beneath her on the seat. Using her reticule as a pillow, she laid down as best she could. The last thing she did was reach to loosen the cord on the leather curtain, shutting out all the light.

She awoke with a start. Someone or something was very close. Instead of dog, Ellie inhaled the heady fragrance of warm spice and man. Nick gently stroked her cheek with the back of his

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hand. He drank up the sound of her gasp with his mouth. As Ellie's heart and mind reeled, she realized Nick was kneeling on the narrow floorboard between their seats. Then she could think of nothing except the exquisite feel of his lips on hers. His kiss was tender and reverent.

"I've been wanting to do that since yesterday," he revealed huskily, his breath hot against her lips. "Such a fine mouth...and such a bonny lass."

She managed to shove him away and sit up. "Don't call me that. We both know I'm not pretty."

Nick's oath burned Ellie's ears. "So that's why you willna speak to me. I'm verra sorry if you heard what Murray said, but I dinna believe him."

"You should."

"I willna. You're a bonny lass, make no mistake."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he found it as if by instinct. His next tantalizing kiss made her forget what she'd been ready to shout at him.

"Now," he said, long delicious moments later as he settled back onto his own seat, "look out that window, lass, and tell me what you see."

Ellie touched her hand to her heart and willed the incessant pounding beneath her ribs to still. She needed a drink of water or a cool and thorough dousing in the river below the road.

Baird discouraged any would-be travelers from joining them in the stagecoach over the next few days, while Nick cheerfully covered the cost of the fares. After a myriad of stage stops their journey ended in San Francisco. Along the way, Ellie had found laughter... and love. When it came time to part, she knew she would cherish the memories for the rest of her life.

"I'll send Murray for you tomorrow," Nick told her at the station. The sea air was pungent around them. Seagulls cried out overhead. Ellie wanted to cry as well.

"No. We must say goodbye."

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Dark eyebrows knitted above tinted eyeglasses. "I willna. After the operation, yours is the first face I wish to see. Now you'll be telling me where your father lives."

Ellie's brother pulled up in her family's carriage. She stepped away from Nick. The anguished sound of his voice as he called her name bruised her heart and shattered her spirit.

She would never see him again.

* * * *

Clutching a bouquet of Shasta daisies, Ellie wept over her father's grave. She mouthed a silent prayer of gratitude that she'd come home in time to talk with him and tell him goodbye. She'd been in San Francisco for several weeks. In just a few days she would return to Nevada to collect her personal belongings and resign her position, though she would miss the children terribly. The inheritance from her father's estate would allow her to travel the way she'd always wanted.

On bended knee, Ellie prayed for Nick Lachlan. She hoped his operation had been a success and that he would soon see his beloved ranch beneath the Rocky Mountains again. It had taken every ounce of strength she possessed not to go to him at the hospital. Even when Murray had found her and begged her to come, she'd refused. She wanted Nick to always remember her as his bonny lass.

Ellie lowered the flowers onto the mound of newly bladed earth and bid her father a last farewell. Rising, she swiped at her tears with the back of one gloved hand. It would do her good to walk home through the moist, bay-cooled air.

As she drew near the house where her brother would now live alone, Ellie's heart quickened inside her chest. Nick Lachlan stood on the front porch, observing her approach. He wore clear spectacles. The breeze feathered his dark hair back from the strongly chiseled features of his face. Ellie had pictured that face in her dreams every night since their parting.

Baird gave an excited bark and dashed to her side, happy to see her. But Nick wasn't smiling. Dread wrapped around Ellie like a vine. There was nothing to do except gather her dignity close and

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confront the man. She mounted the steps and hitched her chin at the big Scot.

"So you came to find out for yourself why I've been avoiding you." Ellie's voice belied her trembling disquiet as she gauged his reaction to her.

"You should have come to me, Ellie. I longed for you."

Nick's disarming blue eyes searched her face, then lowered to take her measure. When his gaze returned to hers he gave her a smile as slow and sure as the sunrise.

"I can see verra well that you are still my bonny lass. I willna ever listen to a word against you."

Ellie's throat felt achy and tight. Hope fluttered inside her like a hummingbird's wings.

"It's a pity that doctor could not help you," she managed.
"Sweet Ellie," Nick said with a deep, rumbling laugh. His skyblue eyes sparkled merrily. "You have something far better than your beauty. I will love you all my days."
His words bathed her in warmth, healing all the wounded places in her soul. Ellie's father had said she would one day find a man who'd love her as she was. That day had come.
She stepped into the circle of Nick's arms.

* * * *

Janet writes award-winning romantic novels. Please visit her website at: www.janetmills.net
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Read Old West romances

by Kristy McCaffrey

Don't miss her Wings of the West Series

The Wren

Book One

ISBN 1-59374-043-3 (print)

ISBN 1-59374-042-5 (electronic)

Ten years have passed since her ranch was attacked, her folks murdered and Molly Hart was abducted. Now, at nineteen, she's finally returning home to north Texas after spending the remainder of her childhood with a tribe of Kwahadi Comanche. What she finds is a deserted home coated with dust and the passage of time, the chilling discovery of her own gravesite, and the presence of a man she thought never to see again.

Matt Ryan is pushed by a restless wind to the broken-down remains of the Hart ranch. Recently recovered from an imprisonment that nearly ended his life, the drive for truth and fairness has all but abandoned him. For ten years he faithfully served the U.S. Army and the Texas Rangers, seeking justice for the brutal murder of a little girl, only to find closure and healing beyond his grasp. Returning to the place where it all began, he's surprised to stumble across a woman with the same blue eyes as the child he can't put out of his mind.

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The Dove

Book Two

ISBN 1-59374-139-1 (electronic)

ISBN 1-59374-374-2 (print)

Disappointment hits ex-deputy Logan Ryan hard when he finds Claire Waters in the midst of a bustling Santa Fe Trail town. The woman he remembers is gone—in her place is a working girl with enticing curves and a load of trouble. As a web of deceit entangles them with men both desperate and dangerous, Logan tries to protect Claire, unaware his own past poses the greatest threat.

Plagued by shame all her life, Claire is stunned when Logan catches her on the doorstep of The White Dove Saloon dressed as a prostitute. She lets him believe the worst but with her mama missing and the fancy girls deserting the place, she's hard-pressed to refuse his offer of help. As she embarks on a journey that will unravel the fabric of her life one thing becomes clear—opening her heart may be the most dangerous proposition of all.

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Read an excerpt at:

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CONFLUENCE

By

Kristy McCaffrey

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The Grand Canyon, 1894

Taggart Mason never saw her until she slammed into him with the force of a half-witted buffalo running for its life. He dropped his mining pick and braced his legs. As his arms wrapped around her waist, his boots slipped on the bank and the two of them tumbled into the warm blue waters of the Little Colorado. The woman screamed and landed on top of him. He held her tight as they sank below the surface, then he quickly brought his head up to get his bearings.

The river wasn't deep and the current none too swift; Tag sat upright, grasped the woman's shoulders and pushed her back. A thick mat of brown hair hung in her face.

"You all right?" he asked.

She coughed and pushed the wet hair from her eyes. "Yes."

She twisted away from him and looked toward the embankment.

"There was a snake! I'm sorry. It scared the daylights out of me."

She noticed her pack floating in the water. "Oh no, my gear!"

She tried to stand but fell back. Tag caught her upper arm just in time. "Easy there. Is your leg hurt?"

The woman grimaced. "My ankle, I think."

Tag stood. He lifted the woman under her arms and deposited her on the bank, then grabbed the bag and tossed it to the ground.

"Don't throw it!" Her scream startled him.

She struggled to raise herself off the ground, then stopped and settled back on her rump.

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Tag knelt beside her. "You got a set of china packed away?"

He pushed up her dark wool trousers to examine her ankle. He ran a hand along her calf as he would've a horse, but noted the woman's skin felt a damn sight better.

She cleared her throat.

Tag paused as blue eyes locked with his and awareness hit him square in the face.

"It's the other leg." The strain in her voice was slight, he

sensed the cause like a mountain cat stalking its prey. She averted her eyes.

And just like that he wanted her.

He moved his sun-darkened hands to her other foot, unlaced her boot and carefully removed it. Shocked by his sudden desire for this woman, he rolled down her sock to have a look at the ankle.

This was crazy. Just because he'd been down here several months, maybe more, didn't mean he'd pounce on the first female who fell on him. She probably had company coming down the trail behind her.

"You got a husband?"

She squirmed when he twisted her foot. "No," she replied through clenched teeth. "Ouch, that hurts." She pushed at his hands.

"You came down here alone?" Inwardly he shook his head—didn't it just beat all that he craved a woman with the brains of a prairie dog.

"I haven't committed a crime, if that's what you're thinking," she said, a glimpse of worry flashing in her blue eyes.

That wasn't what he was thinking, but obviously she was.

"The name's Tag Mason. Your foot's not broken, just twisted. You'd better stay off it a day or so."

She took possession of her nicely shaped ankle and calf and put everything to right again. Tag leaned back and regarded the lady.

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Mason. I certainly never meant to imply that you were on the run or anything like that," she stammered, intent on tying her boot.

Her cheeks were flushed and Tag watched like a man who'd never seen a pretty girl. But pretty had never quite done it for him in

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the past. And a subtle flick of his eyes told him she was no girl—her wet clothes clung to curves that appealed to him in as much time as it took to take a breath.

Had God simply dropped Eve into his lap? Tag knew he hadn't been that good of a boy so he let his natural caution guide him.

"What's your name, miss?"

"Elise Wingate." She extended her hand.

She definitely didn't belong down here—there was little use for manners at the bottom of the world. Wait until he showed her home sweet home. He took her hand and enjoyed the feel of her slender fingers and delicate bones, her skin so much paler than his and as soft as a woman's bos—

"What brings you down here, Miss Wingate?"

Her gaze became pensive, almost wary. "I've come to lay my pa to rest," she said slowly.

Tag raised an eyebrow and looked behind her for the body.

The lady certainly had grand ideas.

"Oh no, I didn't bring...all of him. I have his remains—cremated—packed in my gear. It was a dream of his to come here."

A shadow crossed her features and Tag felt envious of the grief she carried for this man. Tag wondered who would mourn him, when he was gone.

"I've come a long way, Mr. Mason," she continued. "I didn't have any real trouble until today, with the snake. And of course

landing on you, which I'm terribly sorry for."

"I've a place up against the cliff. You can rest up, if you like.

At least until your foot heals a bit."

She twisted her head and looked over her shoulder. Her eyes scanned the embankment and the river. "Thank you, but I've been taking care of myself. I don't see why I couldn't make camp somewhere along here." She flashed an agreeable smile. "I wouldn't want to be a bother since I'm sure you're very busy."

The grin broadened and Tag's stomach went into knots.

"And you're down here because..." Curiosity laced her words.

He frowned. "Because I like to be alone."

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Her smile dropped a notch and she appeared a bit embarrassed.

"Oh, well, then I won't bother you anymore." She tried to stand but her injured leg gave out. Tag grabbed her knapsack and slung it onto his shoulder, then scooped up Miss Wingate, who grabbed hold of his shoulders with a surprised gasp.

"It's not far," he said.

He carried Eve—no, Elise—to the dwelling he'd occupied in solitude for the many months he'd lived here. There'd been visitors—Hopi and Navajo Indians, the occasional miner, adventurer, thrill seeker and tourist. But never a woman who fit in his arms like a hurt animal seeking protection.

She'd hiked into the Grand Canyon alone, he reminded himself.

She was hardly in need of refuge.

Safeguarding her wasn't real high on his list of priorities anyhow.

If Eve was obliging he'd just as soon make love to her.

But Tag had always been a man who listened to his gut, and though he barely knew Miss Wingate, he sensed she wasn't a woman who would slide under a man easily. Just his luck, he was attracted to a female who reminded him of a horny toad.

No, maybe he was thinking of himself.

Elise could finally breathe now that Mr. Mason deposited her into a chair, inside his very *small* cabin. Maybe cabin wasn't quite the word for it. The dwelling had three walls of stone built beneath the overhang of a cliff, which served as the fourth wall. A door and two windows brought light inside and at one end a flat boulder provided a fire and cooking area. There was a wooden table and chair, which she now occupied on one side, and a cot across from her. In the back corner lay various shovels and picks, and a trunk. Would she and Mr. Mason be sharing such tight accommodations? Trepidation filled her, but it wasn't necessarily from fear.

She hoped her foot would heal in record time, then she would bid her father goodbye and be on her way.

"So you're down here mining?" she asked, glancing at the man's broad shoulders as he knelt away from her and pulled a blanket from the trunk.

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"Sometimes."

"What do you do in the winter? How do you stay warm?"

He pulled the blanket from the cot—the one that would surely smell of him—and Elise lingered on that thought. She'd caught his scent when he'd carried her: sweat and sun and the suggestion of the

man beneath it. Tag Mason stirred something inside her. Stunned by how quickly she'd succumbed to his presence, she stared at her hands.

"I wear a coat," he replied and snapped the new blanket with a flick of his wrists and lay it on the somewhat lumpy mattress.

"You're being awfully hospitable," she said. "How can I repay you?"

She glanced up and froze—he looked directly at her. Elise wondered if the dried bread she'd eaten earlier, climbed back out of her stomach and into her throat. With her heart racing, she attempted to steady her breath.

"Do you have any books?" he asked, moving to the cook fire; no flame burned, just a heap full of ashes sat at the center. He leaned against the boulder that served as shelf, kitchen and heat source and crossed his arms.

"Just one," she replied, pleased she could still speak.

She took note of his dark wavy hair that brushed the edge of his shirt collar, his angular face and narrow eyes. He consumed the tiny cabin with his predatory stare and she felt acutely on display. Despite having every feminine instinct on alert, she helplessly acknowledged that while he wasn't exactly handsome he was without doubt the most compelling man she'd ever encountered.

"If you're finished with it, maybe you could leave it behind. I do have trouble getting my hands on anything to read."

"Of course," she replied, wondering what else he might have trouble getting his hands on. "It's a guidebook about the flora and fauna in West Africa."

She couldn't be certain, but an almost amused expression crossed his face.

"That makes sense." He flexed his jaw then smiled.

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Her heart continued its race around her ribcage. She was wrong—he was a handsome devil.

"You travel down into the Grand Canyon, alone, with your father's ashes and bring a book about plants that exist in Africa."

Taken aback by his tone, she realized it was the first time she'd ever been accused of being witless. Did that mean she'd gotten prettier? And why did she care that she was either for this man?

He pushed away from the boulder and moved toward her. "Alright Miss Wingate, I'll take your book. You never know, it might come in handy down here."

He stepped around her legs and Elise was intensely aware of every inch of the man looming over her. He stopped at the door.

"I'll fetch some water and cook up some supper."

"I'll help," she offered, dismayed when her voice was nothing more than a croak.

He laughed at her. "Naw." He walked outside. "I'm afraid I don't feel terribly confident about your ability to identify the local plant life." His voice faded as he left her alone inside his tiny dwelling.

Confidence. Elise knew hers had always been in short supply.

It took every ounce of fortitude she possessed to make this journey, and she'd still been scared out of her wits time and again. Now she was forced to spend time with a man who made her insides quiver. But not with fright.

Tag Mason filled her with anticipation.

If she were a different kind of woman perhaps she would embrace the situation for what it was—a rugged mountain man at her beck and call, and not another soul in sight for miles. Shocked by her thoughts, she felt her cheeks burn. No amount of wishing would turn her into the kind of woman who could seduce and satisfy a man like Mr. Mason.

Elise shook her head and closed her eyes. Good Lord, her pa would turn over in his grave if he had any inkling of what was going through her mind. But her father didn't have a grave—yet. She needed to remember why she was here. The Grand Canyon would be the final resting place for Thomas Andrew Wingate. Elise fought

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her doubts and won—her father would soon be where he'd always dreamed to go.

Tag swung the ax and hacked another spindly branch from the mesquite tree. He paused and shucked his shirt. It was the middle of summer, in the middle of a very hot day, and damn if erotic images of Miss Wingate pressed against his naked torso didn't bombard his mind as soon as he was shirtless. For three days he tried to keep his distance from her, but his body wasn't getting the hint. He wanted her more now than when he'd first laid eyes on her.

He attacked the tree with a vengeance. When he finally took a break, his chest heaving, he realized he'd chopped the limbs to pieces. He grimaced. Now he'd have to carry his handiwork back to home sweet home. But the small dwelling felt far from sweet—cramped and frustrating were more apt descriptions.

As he approached the cabin he caught sight of Miss Wingate in the distance. His eyes locked on her shapely backside, outlined in her dark trousers, as she moved away from him and toward the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado Rivers. She'd slung her knapsack over one shoulder and leaned her right arm on the makeshift crutch he'd fashioned for her. He dropped his bundle of splinters to follow her, telling himself he was just curious. But in truth, he disliked being too far from her.

The rocky shoreline and shrubs gave way to a sandy beach.

Tag halted when he saw her set her pack down and pull something from it. She abandoned the crutch and walked into the water, her injured foot working quite well. She removed the lid from the canister and emptied the black ashes into the mighty Colorado as the river wound its way slowly through the high canyon walls. Then she sat in the sand, where she stayed for some time.

Tag backtracked to the cabin with a sense of dread. Elise had buried her father and her injury was nearly healed.

She would leave any day now.

Elise left the crutch behind when she returned to the cabin.

With only a slight twinge in her foot, she knew it was time to make

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plans to leave. Saying goodbye to her pa at the Colorado had been the right thing to do. The magnificence of the river and the surrounding canyon walls overshadowed any doubts about making the journey. She was beginning to understand why Tag lived here,

alone.

The sun blazed hot overhead. Sweat trickled down her back and between her breasts. She longed for a swim.

Tag stood near the edge of the Little Colorado. As Elise came closer, her gaze skimmed his bare upper body; his lean muscles and broad shoulders ignited a warmth deep in her abdomen that had nothing to do with the sun. He watched her.

She knew what he wanted—it would have been impossible not to—and moved toward him. Staying away became unbearable and she simply didn't want to anymore. She stopped several feet from where he stood and his eyes skimmed her breasts. Elise's breath caught when her nipples reacted as if he'd touched them.

Tag turned and removed his boots. Elise stared at the muscles of his back as they tightened and flexed, entranced by the beauty of him. Then he removed his trousers and her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. His backside was as taut as every other part of him.

She watched, breathless, as he slipped into the water, completely naked.

Elise's body responded as if a fire blazed from within. Her common sense fled, her sense of propriety vanished. No amount of willpower could make her turn around and walk away from what Tag offered her.

The truth was simple—she burned for him.

"Stay with me, Elise."

The sound of her name on his lips undid her. She went into the water with him, fully clothed, and the moment his lips met hers time fell away.

Her mouth and her hands responded in hunger, holding him, touching him, consuming him as Tag peeled her shirt and trousers from her. His long fingers caressed her breasts, followed by his lips

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and then his tongue. Elise trembled from the desire he ignited, her body gripped by a force that consumed her.

He made love to her in the water, stringing her body so tight that the ensuing release overwhelmed her. When it was over she cried.

Tag held her, murmured words into her ear that she didn't comprehend, then lifted her from the water and carried her back to the cabin. Elise's mind and body floated in a haze of pleasure.

Tag turned the tables—he'd seduced and satisfied her.

And thankfully, he was far from done with her.

"I need to go home."

Tag's insides clenched and he looked at the woman who had become his lover these past weeks. "Back to Virginia," he confirmed.

She sat next to him as he fished from the shores of the Colorado.

She wore one of his shirts, untucked, her hair loosely braided.

A slight sunburn on her nose aroused him—everything about her aroused him. His hunger hadn't tapered off as yet. He envisioned baring her breasts, tracing his finger around the enticing curves, continuing down to the flair of her hips, then further...

But she was leaving him. It was time to let her go.

"You could...what will you do, Tag? Do you plan to stay

down here forever?"

Forever. "It suits me."

She stood, dusted off her graceful rear end, and walked away.

Tag knew she felt frustrated. So was he.

She turned back. "You're hiding down here." Her anger lit the space between them. "And that's all right with you? I've stayed with you, and now you'll just let me leave?"

"Then don't." He rose to his feet, pulled the fishing line out of the water and faced her. "I never asked you to go."

She glanced away. "I can't live like this anymore," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Time stops down here and it's been...magical. But I need my old life back. Don't you want yours?"

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"The life I lived wasn't worth the years put into it."

Elise watched him and Tag knew he owed her an explanation.

He wasn't a fool, he knew she shared more than her body with him—her heart and soul poured into him every time he touched her.

But he never asked for that. She was a treasure, but not one that belonged to him. Still, he selfishly bound her to him with the needs of the flesh—the needs of his flesh.

"Elise." He squinted against the sun as he looked to the confluence of the two rivers, where he chose to live, where he found peace from the wanderings of his soul. "My pa was a drunk and my ma died of a broken heart in Denver. I've been on my own ever since." His voice faded. "There've been people, but they've always come and gone. It's just the way of things."

He saw the tears in her eyes. He'd let her down and it twisted his gut. Maybe he should've told her this would happen, in the beginning, but he'd wanted her too much to risk scaring her away. He knew this would end the moment it began, but he'd been consumed with her laughter, her intelligence and the feel of her body next to his, night after night, to think beyond the moment.

"If it's any consolation, this isn't easy for me either," he said.

Her eyes flashed with rage. "Easy?" she yelled. "This can end right here, right now, and you'll let it?"

"If we leave here together, it won't be the same." He didn't like the ache in his chest. He held no feeling for this. "But of all the women I've known, you've gotten to me the most."

"You ass! I love you." Her voice caught on a sob.

"You...this." She waved an arm in the air. "It's changed my life."

In silence he felt the weight of her words, and rather than fill him with joy they were a burden he didn't want to bear. He'd been with other women, and none ever clawed at him with the intensity of Elise. *All the more reason to let her go.* Her love would bring obligation. Her love would bring expectations. The truth was simple—he would never measure up in the long run.

She walked away from him. Within a day she was gone.

* * * *

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It was late fall and the nights, even at the bottom of the Canyon, were cold. Tag swung his legs over the hound asleep at the bottom of what passed for a mattress and stood in the predawn light. He'd saved the canine from being served as dinner to a group of

Hopi Indians, and the doe-eyed shepherd gave him undying love and affection in return.

God knew he was starved for it. He'd even named the animal Wingate.

Tag felt miserable.

Day after day he waited for it to pass because it had to—surely he wouldn't live the rest of his life regretting the loss of Elise. Each sunrise brought renewed hope that she wouldn't consume his thoughts, but it quickly faded—he grieved for her with a potency that staggered him. It wasn't just her touch that he missed, although every fiber of his body ached for it. He missed *her*. Her warmth, her voice, her essence.

He was incomplete without her.

"C'mon, girl," he said, the dog doing her best to console his daily black moods. He donned his coat, pushed his hat on his head and left the cabin that without mercy made him think of Elise and the sounds of her sweet release, night after night, from the hungry demands of his body.

He walked the quarter-mile to where the two rivers met, one wide and murky, the other clear and blue. The joining was inevitable, the point of contact swirling with eddies as each force of nature fought the merging. The confluence turned into a place of chaos, but it also offered life. Tag hadn't built the cabin he occupied, but it obviously was a place that drew men.

Elise's memory pulled at Tag.

He threw a stick and Wingate eagerly chased after it, her ears flat and her tail whipping back and forth. The dog suddenly stopped, the hair on her rump shot straight up as she growled. Tag looked in the direction of the animal's undivided attention. Through the thick shrubs he saw movement. He walked forward to meet friend or foe, too weary to care which it might be.

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The visitor approached, wearing a black wool coat, a hat and a gray scarf, which slender fingers slowly unwrapped from the face it protected. Tag went stone cold when Elise stared back at him, fatigue lining her face and her skin pale as snow. But her eyes gleamed and he'd never been so glad to see anyone or anything in his life.

"I really had no idea if you'd still be here," she said.

Wingate stepped close and sniffed Elise. The woman who invaded his dreams and tortured him with her absence reached out to the animal. "When did you get a dog?"

"Not long after you left."

"I guess I was easily replaced." She smiled at the hound and stroked the dog's muzzle.

"Hardly. I named her after you."

Elise's eye's met his. "We need to talk, Tag."

He stepped closer and was glad when she didn't retreat. He brought his hands to her face and kissed her, quickly taking possession of her mouth and wrapping his arms tightly around her. God, how he'd missed her.

"I need you." Desperation flooded him. "Right now."

She trembled in his arms, but he wouldn't let her go. He had no illusions that God would drop Eve into his lap a third time. This

was the only chance he'd get. He lifted her in his arms and strode quickly to the cabin. Once inside he couldn't keep his hands from her. He kissed her face, her neck, her chin—everywhere and anywhere he could. Her presence squeezed his heart.

"Tag," she gasped, burying her fingers in his hair as he pushed off her shirt.

He noticed the swell of her belly immediately. He looked up at her and saw the question in her eyes.

"Tell me I didn't make a mistake coming back," she whispered.

He placed one of his hands on the child that grew inside her.

His child. "I was the one who made the mistake." Gently he kissed her stomach. Elise sank to her knees, her mouth devouring his as she tugged at his clothing.

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He guided her to the cot and loved her with as much restraint as he could muster, but when his release came he was powerless to hold back.

Shaken by his need for her, but blissfully happy to have her in his arms, he remained inside her as he shifted his weight so he wasn't directly atop her. "I'll go anywhere you want," he said softly, running a hand along her naked body. "I can't believe you came back. I was about ready to hunt you down."

"You took too long." She ran her thumb along his jaw line and watched him with somber eyes. "This babe will come soon enough."

"Even without a child, I'd make an honest woman of you."

He'd beg if need be.

"I'll take you any way I can get you."

It hit Tag like a landslide, what a selfish bastard he'd been. He shifted his face close to hers and stirred in the depths of her body.

He hoped he wasn't too late. "I love you, Elise."

Tears spilled down the sides of her face. He held her close.

"If the baby's a girl, I want to name her Eve," he said.

Elise laughed and Tag proceeded to love her for a second time, savoring the feel and texture of her, savoring the union he'd fought.

As the rivers couldn't be kept from merging, neither could Tag deny the confluence that brought Elise to him, filling his heart with a gift beyond measure.

Yes, there was definitely life down here.

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CHAD BROOKS is the owner of the corporation of which Twin Pines is a part. He arrives in Evergreen as a means to get out of the city for a while and to observe his prime candidate for the position of corporate activities consultant...Heather Mann. Her resume and references are in direct conflict from the reports he is receiving from Wyoming. Sparks fly when CHAD and

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HEATHER meet and continue as they sort their way through mystery and possibly murder.

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WILDFLOWER

By

Chancie Love

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Elizabeth Adams braked her car in the parking lot and nudged her husband, Rich. "Wake up, sleepy head, we're here." He didn't have to tell her he wasn't interested in the reenactment today. Sleeping was his escape. "I can't believe you fell asleep in the short distance from our hotel in Lead to here...It's only like four miles!" Rich opened one eye a crack, and peeked at her, then closed it, pretending to be asleep.

Pushing back a dirty, battered hat to the back of her head, she continued, "Seriously, Rich, come on."

"Yeah, well, this is your dream not mine. I'd rather sleep in the car until time for the parade." He pulled the flat-brimmed hat over his face.

"Silly, man," she said, snatching the hat from his face and tossing it onto his lap. "Come on. Get out of the car we don't have that much time to waste." Elizabeth threw open the door and stepped onto the black top, she glanced at Richard reluctantly doing the same. "Boy howdy, do you ever look good in that costume."

"Yeah right. Me the science teacher dressed up like this. I hope none of my students are in the area." He swept back his midback length brown hair and donned the hat. The day was a bit breezy up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. "Remind me again why I'm doing this, Lib?"

Walking up to his side, she playfully punched his upper arm.

"You know why you're doing this. It's for me and you love me. Besides, your body looks great in that western suit," she laughed.

Arm in arm, they navigated the sidewalk leading to the steps of the Adams Museum. Libby dressed in old time men's clothing as Calamity Jane and Rich...he depicted his great-great uncle, Wild Bill Hickok, two notorious characters in Deadwood's history.

Libby raced up the steps pulling Rich behind her. "Come on, there's something I have to check out before we go to the reenactment."

They had tried tracing Rich's ancestry to the Adams of museum fame, but had come up empty handed.

"Libby, this is crazy."

She stopped on the top step and looked down at him. This man drove her crazy; he owned her heart and soul, emotionally as

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well as physically. Today he was getting on her nerves, but he did look sexy. Rich's dark brown hair and sleek mustache glistened in the sun, his bright blue eyes caught the light and the white lines radiating through his irises drew the breath from her. He looked so handsome in his eighteen hundreds attire, even better today than in past years—he looked the part. Maybe his age had something to do with it. This year, he was thirty-nine the same age as Wild Bill at the

time of his death, killed in Nuttall & Mann's Saloon No. 10.

"Libby, this is nothing but a wild goose chase."

She shook her head, refusing to listen to him. "My book has to be accurate, Rich. If there are any inaccuracies, well, we've talked about this before, no one will believe my big disclosure!"

"Like anyone in this day and age really cares who killed my great-great uncle? They won't care that you think a member of the bad element hired Jack McCall to kill him."

Anger flared through her. "It *does* matter to me, it's my book, my thesis and by damn, I'm going in is museum to look for the journal. It's the last piece of the puzzle, Rich."

"You don't need it, Elizabeth! Your thesis is complete the way it is."

She blinked back tears.

"Okay, don't go getting all weepy on me, lets go find it, then head over to the reenactment. I can't wait for this day to be over. I'm sick of my role as Wild Bill at the No. 10 Saloon. I'm sick of dying year after year."

Sighing loudly, so she would know just how put out he felt, Rich moved to the landing and stood by her, wrapping his arm around her he spoke quietly into her ear. "I'm sorry Libby, I guess I should have slept last night instead of playing the slots until one this morning. Now *that's* been the fun part of this trip."

"I know Rich, so let's go in and get this over with. Before you know it, we'll be heading home tonight."

"Or in the morning," he laughed lightly, "I might feel lucky tonight and win a bundle on the machines."

"Yeah right, darling. You could hit the big one, but on nickels, it still would only add up to dinner at McDonalds." Libby narMIDNIGHT
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rowed her eyes and looked at him, "So you aren't as ready to head back to Laramie as you indicated?" She turned and opened the heavy entrance door to the Adam's Museum and stepped inside the cool atmosphere, walking to the back she took in displays of early writings, which stood encased in glass. This was not what she was looking for. The item she needed was in the room beyond. Reaching in her pocket, she removed the formal letter from the state curator allowing her in to the bowels of history.

"Come on Rich, I need your help," Libby spoke softly as she handed the letter to the woman assigned duty to protect the documents. After reading the letter, she granted them access into the inner sanctum of history.

"Okay Madame Professor, what are we looking for?"

Libby smiled and said, "A small book or journal written by a woman named Martha. Her working name was Wildflower. So, it could be either one. It's supposed to be a small diary with pressed flowers inside."

"Why didn't you ask the woman to help us find it when we came in?"

"No. It's... well, it's not supposed to exist."

Rich leveled a stern gaze at her. "So we're looking for an elusive diary..."

"From all my research, Martha was one of the few women in early Deadwood that came here under false pretenses. She left her

home and family, in the east, to come to a new life as a lady's maid to a wealthy family, but when she got here, she found the family was other working girls at the Gem Theater, and worse than that, she was owned like a pig by Al Swearington, the most vile man in the area. The diary will prove that Swearington was the man behind the bad element in Deadwood and that he had Wild Bill killed because all the unscrupulous business men were afraid he would clean up the town as he had done with other rough towns in the past."

"And if you find this documentation you can do what, Libby?" Rich asked softly. His easy demeanor filled her with love for him. He had been behind her project and her thesis would gain

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her the doctorate in history she had struggled to acquire over the years.

"Libby, look behind you, on the bookshelf. She turned and saw a tiny, glowing blue dried flower. "Rich, it has to be near."

They began looking for the diary and after an hour were ready to give up. "I don't think it's here, Lib," Rich said, pulling her from the search

"Just a minute. I have one more box to check."

"Lib..."

"Ah! Here it is Rich! It's the only thing in this box."

Libby gingerly removed the diary. It was cloth wrapped and tied with a faded blue ribbon.

Ever so gently, she untied the ribbon and let it gracefully fall away from the book, then she gently opened the cover.

"Oh God...NO!"

"What's the matter, Libby?" Rich reached for the book.

"The pages...there is nothing left, only blank pages and dry flowers. Everything of importance was ripped out of the book!"

As their fingers touched, the light in the room faltered.

Libby's stomach lurched, but she continued to watch Rich's eyes.

Suddenly, he disappeared. *Poof*. "Rich! No..." As the words flew from her lips, Libby looked down at herself as she dissolved into her surroundings. Everything turned black in her mind the moment she completely disappeared.

The sun sneaked in past the brim of her hat and burned the light into her eyes. She opened them and looked around. Rich? Where was he? Or for that matter, where in the world was she? Everything looked different. Instead of standing in the museum, she now was stretched out in a stable.

Hearing someone moan, she pushed herself up on her elbow and looked around the gloomy barn. Rich was in the corner of the stall, partially covered with straw. "Rich, wake up. Something has happened."

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"Likely story, Libby. We should have stayed home today and let someone else continue on the history. I don't want to do it anymore."

"From what I'm looking at, Rich we are somewhere we've never been before. I don't know how we did it, but I think we were jolted back to 1876. Holy crap, Rich, listen to what I'm saying!"

Rich shot to his feet and reached out a hand to Libby. "1876, Holy God! I thought it was bad enough reenacting Wild Bill, but

this, no way, I want to go back, now, Lib!"

"Yeah, well, since I have no clue how this happened in the first place, I hate to tell you..." she hesitated in stating her fear, "I have no clue in how we are getting back."

Rich brushed off the hay from his clothing. Why do you think it's the 1800s?"

"Because, from my research, we're standing in the middle of a stable that was built and burned to the ground the same year, 1876. See that bell hanging in the middle of the wide entrance?" Rich nodded. "It indicates this building belonged to Silas Bell. His signature, so to speak."

"This is completely incredible, it can't be happening, not really! Right...?"

Libby looked around the stable. "You're right. This can't be happening. It's not possible...but here we are anyway. Do you think it was because of the diary?"

Nodding, Rich said, "Well, it all happened when we both touched that little book."

"Guess that must be the key to why we are here."

"Hmmm...well...I'm ready to get back to our correct century!"

Taking her arm, he steered her into the larger opening just as a heavily built man walked into the darkness from the bright light outside.

"Bill...Clam...what are you two doing in here?"

Libby looked at Rich, Rich snapped his head in Libby's direction, his eyes wide with surprise. "He thinks we're them," Rich whispered.

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"I don't know what to do, Rich." She whispered, trying not to arouse the man's suspicions. This time period doesn't need two Bills and two Calamity's. "Let's walk out of here and see if we can figure out a way back to our time."

Libby nodded at the man staring at them as she ambled past him, "Later," she said.

The man's heavy eyebrows drew together in a frown.

"Clam, you look different. What ya do, get thrown in the creek?" he laughed a boisterous, open mouth guffaw revealing a mouth filled with broken teeth. "You look clean for a change and you don't stink like the inside of a whiskey bottle." Libby stifled a full-body shudder. Shaking her head at the man, she continued making her way from the stable. Rich followed her.

Mud, dung and slop comprised the street and it really didn't surprise Libby. These conditions filled history books. What wasn't represented in all the books she had read over the years, were the smells. Deadwood, a mining camp of epic proportions, reeked. She wanted to gulp fresh air, but there wasn't any to be had. The gulch held the putrid odors close to the ground.

"Why do you think we're here?" Rich asked.

Libby shook her head. "The only thing I can think of is that I need to find Martha and get her diary."

"And just how are you going to do that, Madame Professor. You don't even know what she looks like or where she lives."

"Wrong." Libby stepped out into the most shallow area of the street and headed in what she felt was a southerly direction. "I

wish you would quit calling me that. You make it sound like a putdown.”

“Ok-Ok, but where are you going?” Rich cried, following her, imploring her for answers.

“To the Gem Theater, that’s where she was known to live.

Or exist. Just look at these conditions Rich. Women had to be really tough to make it out of here alive.”

“I think it will be a wonder if ~~we~~ make it out of here alive,

Libby. We don’t even know if we can get home.”

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The large two-story structure of the Gem Theater stood before them. It didn’t look nearly as glamorous as history had drawn it. It was made of limestone and the upper floor had a balcony spanning the distance across the front. For a showplace of Deadwood, it was sorely lacking in anything beyond planks and square nails.

“Wait for me out here, Rich,” Libby said as she turned to enter the building. “I have to find Martha.”

“Okay, I’ll try to look inconspicuous, but it’s going to be difficult if everyone thinks I’m Bill Hickok.”

“Make sure you’re here...*Bill!*” She turned around, gave him a peck on the cheek, and then walked into the infamous business.

The front held a bar with seats for patrons and spectators on each side. The rear of the building she knew from her research on the area, was divided up into small rooms where the Gem girls entertained customers. Sidling up to the bar, Libby pretended an inebriated state, one she had read Calamity Jane stayed in most of the time.

The bartender walked up to her on his side of the bar and shook his head. “Calamity, you’re not in good shape this morning.”

She nodded, “Yessh, b’ I have to assu you somethin’ afore I crawl off to sleep. Can you tell me if that girl Martha is around? And the date, I’m a bit mixed up today.”

The man’s eyes grew large. “You’re joshing me, right Calamity? Do you need your key, is that what you’re asking?”

“My key?”

“For your room—Martha? What’s the matter with you? Are you so drunk that you forgot who your really are? I think you must have drank the gulch dry.” He reached under the counter, came up with a large key, and tossed it at her. “Now will you go on up and let me be? I have work to do.”

Libby had to stifle her glee. Calamity Jane was really Martha? Of course, Martha Jane Cannary, the woman’s real name! This knowledge would make her book come to life. She had to get Rich and take him up to the room and together, they would look for the diary.

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Turning, she pocketed the key and turned to walk back out of the Gem.

“Calamity, don’t loose that gift I gave you. It’s the only one.

Oh, and the date is August second of seventy-six.”

Her body seemed to freeze, and it took all her effort to turn and tip her hat to the bartender and then continued out the door. She stepped outside only to find Rich wasn’t where she left him. Where the heck could he have gone? It wasn’t safe for him to be anywhere in this town, not on this day, August 2, 1876, the day the real Wild

Bill Hickok was shot dead.

Libby's blood chilled in her veins. She didn't know much about the ideas Einstein had regarding physics, but she wondered if Rich could be drawn to the saloon and if so, would history attempt to repeat itself? Libby stood in the middle of the street, her head spinning as she thought about the location of the infamous bar. This real Deadwood didn't look anything like the pictures and maps she had studied for her thesis. Suddenly it dawned on her where it was located. Running what would be the equivalent of six blocks, she neared what she thought was the Number 10. There, standing in the doorway, was Rich.

"Richard!" Libby screamed. "Get your ass over here...NOW!" He turned and smiled at her. "Ok, Lib, I just wanted to see where it all went down. I wanted to see if I got it right for the reenactment. Come on, let's go in." He pulled at her arm. Shaking his hand from her arm she said, "Rich, you could be killed if you go in there!" Her eyes searched his face to see any semblance of understanding, but his brows drew together in question. "Richard, I have a half mind to let you go in there and get your ass blown away! Now come on. I found something at the Gem."

Rich stood there; his feet planted, refusing to budge.

"Richard Adams, today is the day Wild Bill gets killed in there. Do you get it now? You can't go in there."

Rich pulled out of the trance and his eyes glistened as he looked at her. "God Libby, I could have been killed."

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"No kidding. Now come on. We have to go back to the Gem. I know where the diary is."

As they made their way through the mud, Libby told Rich about the key and about Martha.

Entering the Gem, they looked straight ahead and took the stairs two at a time leading up to the upper floor. People were calling to them, thinking they were in fact the real couple. Libby reached into her pocket, pulled out the key, and saw it had the number four stamped on it. Putting the metal in the large hole, the key turned easily.

Libby stepped into the room and walked over to a small table beside a narrow bed. The room had a washbasin, narrow bed and a window. Reaching under the table, she pulled out a small journal. Glancing through it, she saw the scrawled handwriting.

"Okay, what did we do earlier when we were at the museum that tossed us back here?" Libby asked.

Rich shook his head. "Heck if I know. One minute we were in the museum and the next minute in the stable."

Libby's head snapped up from reading Calamity's words.

"That's it. We have to go back to the stable. I think we'd end up in the parking lot by the Celebrity Hotel if we stay here. We have to be alone at the museum." Tucking the book into her loose shirt, Libby took hold of Rich's hand and they left the room after only moments of being there.

As they raced down the steps, they exited the building to the sounds of catcalls and laughter from the bar patrons. They didn't look back.

When they were a distance from the Gem, Libby slowed to a walk. "Okay, Rich, we have to go past Saloon No. 10 to get to the stable. Are you going to be okay? Don't go getting weird on me." He nodded, but the far away look in his eyes worried Libby a bit. She would hang tightly on to him and maybe, just maybe that would be enough to keep him by her side. At the last minute, Libby decided it might be better if they circled around the No. 10 and headed across the street to a small copse of trees that butted up

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against the rock wall of the gulch. That way, they wouldn't have to walk directly past the saloon.

Suddenly, they heard voices coming from inside the small forest.

"Well you have to do it Jack. He can't go getting no wife and not telling me about it. It's jest not right. I wanted him for myself and if I can't have him, no circus performer will have him either!"

"Clam, I'll get away from here and they won't be no one a tall to stop me. I'll do it for ya. You've helped me out the last little bit I've been in Deadwood."

Libby gripped her husband's hand. "Sounds like the man at the stable. Didn't he call me Clam?"

Rich nodded, but put his finger over his lips to call her silence.

"What if you're caught? Are you going to tell them about me?"

"Course not. Bill killed my brother in Kansas. I'm doing this for myself as well. If they catch me, I'll tell em that no good drunk killed my brother Jim."

The voices melted away as the couple walked out of the trees.

"Now what?" Rich asked.

"We'd better stay here a bit. Could Calamity have hired Jack McCall to kill Wild Bill?"

"Could be, but if that's the case, we'd better get to the stable now. It won't do to have a dead Wild Bill on the loose!"

"Right you are, let's go."

It didn't take very long to reach the stable. No one was around, and the stable didn't even hold any horses as it had earlier. Libby was reluctant to attempt anything with the journal, until Rich was in place as he had been at the museum.

"Where do I stand, Libby?" he asked.

Reaching out, she said, "I had just untied the ribbon, opened the book and found the pages ripped out. Then you reached for the book and our fingers touched. Lets try it."

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Libby opened the book, Rich reached for it, and as their fingers touched, Deadwood began to melt away. This time, instead of her physical body melting, she watched as the stable fell away to become an empty space, followed by the rapid building of a house.

Could this be the museum? As suddenly as the thought struck her mind, she returned to the present. She and Rich were standing just as they had been earlier.

Libby looked at the large clock on the wall. Only fifteen minutes had passed since they had entered the back room of the Adam's Museum.

"We made it," Rich whispered.

"I'm afraid to look in the journal. What if the pages are still gone?"

"What does it matter, Libby? We both know the truth. You have enough for your thesis as it is. You don't have to go proving that through all time they had it wrong. And that poor woman, Calamity Jane. She was so desperately in love with a man that didn't love her. What a sad story that is."

Libby looked at the book again. Now, it was aged and yellowed, not the bright journal of 1876. "You're right. I do have enough. Now that I know what happened, why make Calamity Jane any worse a character than she was?"

As she closed the journal, Libby saw that the pages were back and the temptation to read them assaulted her. No, she couldn't do it. Placing the journal back in the box, Libby whispered, "Rest in peace Martha Jane Cannary."

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ESSIE

By

Chancie Love

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ESSIE

Essie nervously rubbed the toe of her old battered shoe across the wooden floor of the homestead Soddy. It was early afternoon, but the low clouds spilled over the pine-covered hills. A monstrous, rolling blackness sucked up all the light in its path. Standing at the only window in the house, she peered into the darkening afternoon sky.

Suddenly, gusts of wind drove rain against the glass as lightning flashed and thunder shook the ground making the water roll down to the sill in fast moving waves creating a chevron pattern on the surface. As the rain turned to hail, Essie jumped back, the noise deafening. Summer storms terrified her, and had since she was a little girl. Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around herself and felt her heart fiercely beating against her ribs.

"Caleb, where are you?" Essie wondered aloud. Tears stung her eyes as she tried to look through the window into the heart of the storm. As she turned away from her futile efforts to see outside, a bolt of lightning struck nearby. The blinding flash shocked her, weakening her knees and the tremendous jolt of thunder shook the one room house. Her heart hammered in her chest and she began to pace back and forth over the rough wood.

Her husband took the team and wagon down to Old Woman Creek. He was hauling wood for a room they planned to build now that the weather cleared. Essie wondered what was worse; the bitter blizzards with feet of snow that nearly buried the house or these

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wicked thunderstorms that threatened to burn it to the ground? The house with its dirt walls and dirt floor, not much more than a shack, and it was much too small since the birth of their daughter, Viola. The harder the rain fell, the faster Essie paced the floor. Her imagination ran as wild as the horses that ran free in the hills. In her

mind's eye, she saw the creek running amuck, filled with old tree trunks and debris. It could sweep Caleb along in its path. Another burst of thunder, just as close as the last, made her jump again. This time, it woke the baby and the little one let out a distressed cry.

Essie rushed to the corner of the room where the cradle sat safely away from drafts and gathered her daughter in her arms. She sank into the comfort of her most treasured piece of furniture, the thick feather bed. Essie's mother always told her that lightning wouldn't strike where feathers lay.

She tugged at the edge of her newly stitched quilt, drew it up and wrapped the cozy thickness about her shoulders, encasing herself and the baby. Viola's screams tapered off into little sobs and Essie felt the baby's tiny body begin to relax.

Huddled in the quilt for the longest time, scared to death for her husband's safety, she dozed as the storm passed over the homestead and moved on to the east, taking with it the violent lightning and thunder. Essie woke slowly, Viola nestled against her breast. Easing herself from the bed, she gently placed her daughter back into the wooden cradle.

Silently, she walked across the room and opened the door. In the distance, she saw Caleb turn the team toward the house. Essie ran through the wet, soggy grass to meet him.

As they neared each other, her breath caught in her throat.

He was so handsome even dripping wet as he was, his black hair glistening in the sunshine that peeked through the last of the clouds. Oh, and his dark blue eyes sparkled as he looked down at her. Love flowed through them thick as molasses in the deep of winter.

Thank the heavens above he was all right. Her lover jumped from the wagon, crushed her thin body to his muscular chest and wrapped his thick-muscled arms around her, protecting her, loving her. Essie's feet left the ground as he spun her around.

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Crying through her laughter she said, "I was so afraid something had happened to you." Caleb kissed her soundly and helped her into the wagon. He stepped up, swung himself onto the wooden seat, and grasped the reins. It was just a short distance back to the house, but she treasured sitting by this man of hers. She never wanted him to leave her side.

When Caleb stopped the horses in front of the house, Essie kissed him squarely on the lips. He would want supper after he unhitched the team and did his chores; she needed to finish the stew. A short time later, Essie was stirring the contents in the pot, when she heard someone calling her name.

"Essie...Essie...wake up."

She shook her head and tried to make the voice stop. She didn't want to hear it. "Go away," she whispered. "Leave me alone. I'm happy here."

A pain in Essie's head pounded and throbbed. She pressed the palms of her hands over her ears. Stumbling, she hardly had the energy to make it the few steps to the table and feared that she would collapse across Viola's cradle. As she dropped onto the chair, she laid her head on her arms and closed her eyes. If she could sleep for a few moments, her headache might go away.

"Wake up." The voice rang sharp and clear, but it held a

feminine quality.

Who was calling to her, she wondered. Essie tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids felt so heavy. The storm must have circled around because she could hear the deep rumble of thunder once again.

"Momma! Can you hear me?"

Essie struggled with her stubborn eyelids; slowly they fluttered open. As her vision cleared, she saw the gray haired woman in front of her holding a spoon that contained a soggy mass of green. Essie looked around the room. There were old people everywhere. Most of them sitting in wheelchairs around tables and younger people fed them.

The woman in front of her spoke. *"Momma, its Vi. Do you recognize me today? Come on...eat your lunch."*

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Essie slammed her eyes shut.

No! She wouldn't remember. They couldn't make her! But the memories flooded to the front of her consciousness anyway. She tried to block out thoughts of losing dear Caleb to illness and she struggled to prevent the memory of her son dying in an automobile accident. The only memories she wanted were happy recollections. "Go away...go away...go away," Essie mumbled. She squeezed her eyelids tighter until the memories holding her reality fled from her mind.

"Caleb, come in and eat. Supper is ready." Essie called to him from the doorway. The evening air was fresh and smelled—washed clean from the pouring rain. She breathed deeply and savored the sweet aroma. Thank heavens that wicked headache was gone, she thought. She wanted to look her best for Caleb tonight. Maybe tonight they would make that son he wanted so badly. God had been good to her today by protecting her family from the assault of the storm. This is true happiness, she thought, and closed the heavy wood door.

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SNEAK PEEK

Of

SAVAGE DESTINY

By

Jewel Adams

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

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SAVAGE DESTINY

THE STORY OF

BLACKHAWK AND CALI

By

Jewel Adams

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR, Jewel Adams - Savage Destiny is a work of fiction. Although, much research on North American Indians and their cultures was done by Ms. Adams in preparation for this story, she in no way claims the story to be true or correct in the representations of the Native North American Indian Tribes made throughout the story. Ms. Adams believes that only members of the Tribes of North America could ever be experts on their culture and beliefs. The author hopes she has given a positive representation of how life may have been during this turbulent time in history, while creating an exciting adventure of two beautiful people...Blackhawk and Cali.

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CHAPTER 1 – The Hawk

A black shadow drifted lazily over the green meadow...forever circling. The hawk's flight drew tighter, passing through the billowy clouds across the sun's fiery orb. Closing the distance on its prey each skilled sweep drew him nearer, nearer until the triumphant cry shattered the silent air warning of death's descent.

Pride swelled in the man for his brother hawk's skill. His own hunter eyes riveted back to the meadow, steeling again on his quarry. Swift as his brother, he too would soon move to...capture. Stalking his prey since early morning, the sharp savage eyes watched the dark haired innocent move among the plentiful berry vines on the knoll. Fascination for the beauty and grace in each tantalizing gesture became potent medicine to his hunter instincts.

Blackhawk's senses were racing under the powerful awareness of her fluid body that sent the wild pulse of possessive yearning through his Shawnee blood. Patience and skill earned him honor as a great hunter, only the prey changed.

Coal black eyes lit with intent. Soon she would near; he would strike then, with deadly cunning. Bronze shoulders flexed the broad expanse of his powerful chest; the hours of waiting would make the catch all the more rewarding. Moving silently through the shadows, his fine warrior body tensed in readiness as his vigil neared its end.

* * * *

The summer blades caressed Cali's calves as the grass parted like water before her slippered steps. Freedom echoed all around her in the open sea of the windswept meadow. The warm breeze teased the dark silken strands of her hair, tossing it in abandon around her shoulders. Raising her deeply tanned face up to capture the sun, Cali felt the exhilaration in the new land. Large dewy eyes reflecting the

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summer sky, glowed in secret excitement over each new discovery. Not since the start of their journey did she felt so at peace.

A shrill cry shattered the meadow's peaceful silence. Cali's eyes searched the sky...there; the shadow skittered across the hill, bringing with it a chill that smothered the day's warmth. The hawk dove at a neck breaking speed. Swallowing hard, she knew some poor creature would soon be caught in those outstretched talons.

Pulling her eyes away, she shook off the strange fright. Cali checked the sun's position. Sighing heavily, she realized it was nearly time to return to the wagons. The day still felt too glorious to let the sudden, eerie feelings stay, but thoughts of returning to the wagons darkened her sapphire gaze. Cherishing the rare day of freedom, Cali wished it could go on forever.

Waiting for Mrs. Whitman to have her baby gave the group a day of rest. Biting her lip, Cali looked shamefully down at the half empty bucket of berries. Her mother would expect a full one for as long as she'd been gone from camp. Cali should feel guilty over her poor efforts; but the day was so very beautiful and such a shame to waste on chores, even one as pleasurable as picking berries and watching little Jennie.

Her soft blue eyes sought out the sleeping bundle lying so peacefully on Cali's blue shawl. Hidden, as the baby was in the tall grass, the breeze gently fluffed Jennie's curly blonde locks. Such a pretty baby, Cali's sister Mary was indeed lucky.

Looking at the lush beauty surrounding her, made it hard to envision all the killings and battles Mr. Willow told her about. She could almost understand why the Indians fought so hard for this valley, it was Eden. Mr. Willow saw it too. He was so different than the men in Baltimore. A guide and trapper, and older than any one usually was that lived their life in the wilderness, he told her that with pride flowing over his weathered face.

A soft gurgle reached Cali, smiling she rose from her berry picking, the bucket three quarters full was more satisfying than the half one she dreaded returning with. As she made her way back to Jennie Cali felt sorry to leave the haven of their meadow. Looking down the hill she mentally checked the course she would have to

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travel through the wooded glen and across the small stream to reach the camp. She notched the trail this morning in order not to get lost. Spying the sun's low position she sighed, it was time to head back. Jennie crawled all around Cali while she fashioned the shawl into a cradle. The sling Willow taught her to make allowed her hands to be free, while Jennie rode safely in the halter at her chest. Cali didn't try to suppress her grin over her mother's reaction this morning to the cradle.

"Cali you look like some kind of savage, carrying the baby like that." How her mother would know what a 'savage' looked like made Cali's defiance flare even higher. She caught Willow's smothered mirth as she trotted away, her head held proud, refusing to let her mother degrade her accomplishment.

Smiling at Jennie, she settled her in the holder. Jennie nuzzled her breast drawing out Cali's laughter. She wished she could give the child what she sought. Mary barely produced enough milk to satisfy the baby. Cali kept trying to wean her, but she still needed her mother's milk.

The girl couldn't see the picture she made. A slight framed woman, whose long black hair floated in caressing waves about her, protected her squirming bundle. The slight sway of her full hips caught the folds of her skirt, hinting at the warmly curved beauty hidden beneath. Graceful as a forest deer she picked her way through the high grass. Like a child unable to resist the beauty she

passed, she would stop and pick a flower or gather more of the dark lush berries. Unknowingly attractive with each sleek, subtle movement, each tiny alluring step revealed the girl's loveliness.

Dark savage eyes watched her movements, caught in the spell she cast out before her, softening the hard coldness in his hunter eyes. The stern straight lips eased their tight line, slightly curving under the fierce pressure in his powerful jaw. Proud and virile his nostrils flared as her scent floated closer to the shadows that hid his presence. Long black hair moved hesitantly over his bronzed shoulder as he moved through the cover of the trees in unison with his prey.

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Blackhawk stalked her patiently this long afternoon, waiting, knowing he would soon have what he sought. The deer he tracked all but forgotten by this new quarry. Always a careful hunter, he insured none of her people were near.

Nighteyes and Snowman confirmed what he already discovered during his vigil over her. His friends found the White's camp, saw their numbers, but only this woman came out so far alone. The other two riders rode out, Blackhawk knew, to check the false trails they laid out during the early morning. The wagons' movements were known for many days now. He felt his anger rise that the Whites were once again coming to their lands, taking their game; game already scarce. He and his friends needed to hunt far a field to bring in meat for his people. When they found the wagons they discovered why the game scattered. At least the noise these Whites made didn't put meat in their pots. How foolish these men were not to realize the warnings they sent out of their arrival.

His eyes clouded, knowing his own people wouldn't have any fresh meat either. But he would have a prize to bring back. Eyes full of hate and anger watched the figure descending the hill. He found her trail marking the exit from this spot and now he waited for her return.

The Whites were ignorant indeed; never did their women leave camp unguarded like this one. He took precautions; always there were dangers. The Whites were more than a danger; they were a poison that couldn't be stopped. He and his warriors turned the earth red with their blood, but still more came. With them came harder times for his people.

Blackhawk thought again of his plans. The other tribes, their enemies, could he make them see? Would they listen? Would his own people accept what he planned? Blackhawk's jaw tightened as he thought about the fight he would have to convince the council. It was the only answer. Together they could battle their common enemy... the Whites.

His thoughts fled, she drew closer now, almost reaching his position. He waited, not wanting her up any higher than the tree line so no one would see, then he would show himself.

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Blackhawk wondered how this White woman would look up close. Watching the grace of her movements, even through all those folds of her garment, he could see what he thought was a strong body. Maybe their women weren't all weak.

Blackhawk did not approve of his behavior concerning this

White woman. He remembered watching her at their camp after leaving his companions. Only a strong woman could work as she did. Not like the one with her. He was relieved she came alone to the meadow, the other one was weak and of no use. He held hatred for these people, but killing women didn't make a warrior strong, there was no great deed to be won in the act. He would never hold to the belief that any White killed meant a victory.

Blackhawk thought again on his reason for taking this woman. Unable to find the answer puzzled him further.

His eyes and senses sharpened as she moved closer. Every muscle in his strong tanned body tightened in anticipation. He flexed his wide shoulders feeling the thrill almost as keen as before a game kill flowing in a fierce rush through his body.

* * * *

Cali slid cautiously down the slope, fighting with the clumsy bucket hoping she didn't spill too many berries, glad again for the cradle holding Jennie safe and secure to her breast.

Something in the tree line caught her awareness. The hairs at the back of her neck stood up and tingled at a shocking velocity. Cali tried to shake the scary feeling overtaking her as she straightened at the bottom of the hill. The trees were about twenty feet in front of her and yet she couldn't bring herself to move towards them. She saw the tree marking the spot where she should enter. "Jennie those are the ones."

She was talking to ease her sudden fear. Cali tried to rationalize her feelings, but couldn't. Instead, she moved off to her right, hugging the base of the hill, some inner warning forbidding her to enter the trees where she exited from this morning. Following the hill Cali wondered if she wasn't being more foolish, possibly getting lost by her actions. But when she did enter the woods she could find the camp, even if it meant heading back the way she came. She

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would just follow the stream; the camp would be simple to find from there.

Her steps slowed as the sensation ran anew up her spine. Now she felt certain she was being watched. It didn't make sense and she fought down the dark panic rising in her mind. Her hand went protectively about Jennie, stilling her movements. Looking quickly down at the baby Cali tried to smile. Jennie seemed to be feeling Cali's growing apprehension, she was very still, clutching at Cali's bodice.

Maybe if she dashed into the woods she would feel safer? Cali realized how exposed she and Jennie really were. She took small steps, straining to hear anything that might tell her something, nearly panicking when she realized the birds were silent.

"One of the signs Willow spoke of. What are the others?"

She heard a whippoorwill in the trees directly beside her, then an answering call from the area up in front of her. If she stopped she would be telling them she knew they were there. Could she make a run for it? The hill was too steep, carrying Jennie she would never be able to make the top before they caught her. Yes, they were there in the trees...she could feel them, even if she couldn't see them. She swallowed down the mounting fear, needing all her thoughts to plan.

Blackhawk was stalking her. She pleasantly surprised him by her evasive movement. He saw her casual look and the hesitant steps turning from her planned path. She looked at the tree that bore her mark of the broken twig, but she felt him and turned away. Her eyes stayed ahead, only once did he see her fear when she thought of running up the hill. He actually thought he could feel her rejection, knowing he would overtake her too easily.

Blackhawk now saw why she wasn't trying to run for escape.

A baby so well covered, he only now noticed it when her arm went protectively around the child. He knew he would be fighting a mother's instincts, like a bear protecting her cub. But she would also be hindered in her flight, easier to capture.

Her movements nearly stopped when Nighteyes answered his call. So, she realized she was trapped. Blackhawk wondered how

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she would try to escape them. He felt her tense; she was ready to act. Blackhawk waited for her.

Hopelessness engulfed Cali, there were at least two and one was very close. She knew there were likely more, but where? She couldn't put it off much longer. God, did an animal feel like this? She felt sorry for them and herself even more, for she believed any action would probably be her last, just like a deer in a death flight. She must try, just as any animal in a trap would fight. Besides, she carried Jennie. Oh dear God what would they do to Jennie? She'd fight! She knew this, but to what avail?

Making her decision, Cali made her move.

Pulling back her arm as slowly as possible, she hoped the one beside her wouldn't notice as her arm with the pail was beside the hill. Cali hurled the bucket! Berries flew threw the air. She screamed at the top of her lungs before turning about-face, running along the base of the hill. Without looking she sensed when he broke out of the brush. She turned sharply towards the woods, praying she could reach the haven before they caught her. All the time she held Jennie, saying over and over to her not to cry, and praying she wouldn't stumble and fall on her precious bundle.

Although he'd been ready for her, what she did surprised him.

The pail barely missed his head, making him jump back and wonder if she really saw his exact spot. Her scream had been for Nighteyes benefit.

Blackhawk cleared the woods and was right behind her. She hadn't once turned to see his pursuit and he respected her control, for he was sure of her fear. Her scent was heavy in his nostrils, increasing his own excitement. Even with her burden her body moved with extreme agility. She turned suddenly, and headed towards the trees. Blackhawk almost wanted to let her escape as a reward for her brave attempt. She realized how futile her attempt would be, but she gave it a strong try and something inside him made him feel proud of her unexpected effort.

He's so very close! She strained under the burden of the baby clutched to her breast. Blackhawk increased his stride, he would

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have to scoop her up in his arms or they would both fall on the child. Her efforts were too great to let that happen.

Cali could actually feel his hot breath at her back. He was

nearly on top of her. She wanted to scream out with the fright gripping every inch of her. She felt near collapse, her breathing hurt from the strain she put on her lungs. Her legs felt weak with her fright as her feet hit the bare ground. The slippers did little to protect her and the rocks cut deep through the sole, but the pain helped fight the panic and she concentrated on it. The trees were almost within her reach.

Suddenly Cali felt weightless, like she was floating in the air. She wondered if she fell and waited for the hard landing to slam into her. The stunning realization of where she actually landed shocked her into frightful stillness. Only her heaving breasts moved as she gasped for each painful breath.

Arms so large they locked about her like an iron trap, held her firmly against a hard, rock solid chest heaving from the same exertion. Cali couldn't make herself open her eyes, refusing to accept what might meet her gaze. Hoping maybe her death would be quick and she wouldn't feel it come.

Like a wild animal she quivered with fear in his hold. Hair as dark as any woman in his camp flowed over his arm, the waves of ermine softness were startling to his senses. Blackhawk held her tight, knowing that very quickly her shock would fade and she would act to break his hold. He watched her eyes held tightly shut, the thick black lashes feathered her cheeks. Her skin held a fine shine over the rich tan coloring, very much the same brown tones of his own, but much softer. Red lips pulsed and trembled as she fought to control her fears. He felt her shudder in his arms, causing something Blackhawk never felt before strike through his strong body, weakening him with the force pulsing through his veins. His eyes dropped meeting the baby's, almost smiling at the light face staring with wide eyes up at him. Not making a sound, but he saw the small hands tight hold on the woman's breasts that heaved hard and heavy from the chase; full firm globes that strained against those little fingers.

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He pulled his eyes back to the beauty in his possession. She tensed and he could feel every movement inside of her. He wondered what she was thinking. He could almost taste the sweetness of her fear lingering on those full parted lips that showed a glimpse of straight White teeth clenched tight in fear.

Snowman was coming with the mounts and Nighteyes was near. Blackhawk lowered the woman's legs to the firm ground, keeping her close in his hold. His one arm spanned her small frame as he pulled her hard against his large body, hindering any movement from her. He waited to see her eyes, knowing she would have to look, now that his touch against her where the baby left off was strong. Her quick intake of breath told him how keenly she felt him. Suddenly he grew anxious to have the child that separated her from him, gone!

With his free hand Blackhawk began to untie the knot beneath her hair, letting its softness touch him. His eyes never left the proud lines of her gentle face as he waited for her eyes to open. He wondered who taught her to carry her child in their way. Never did he see the Whites do this, even the knot was made in their fashion. The hard body pressing against her stunned and confused Cali.

The hold forbade any movement, but Cali couldn't understand why she was being held and not already dead. The pain in her feet as she touched the ground told her she still lived.

When she felt the strong fingers moving beneath her hair, Cali nearly screamed at the hot touch on her skin as it moved across her neck to the back of her head. Was he going to break her neck? His hand was certainly capable of doing the dreadful task. Fear stopped any protest from coming. But Cali couldn't let this happen without seeing, just once, the one that would kill her. Some perverse need to see her slayer drove her to open her eyes. She would take his image to the grave. Maybe she could get revenge and haunt him in death. Flinging her tortured lids open, Cali locked her gaze boldly on the image before her. His grip tightened, knocking her breath from her. If the hand on her neck didn't kill her, Cali felt sure he could snap her spine like a small twig. She wondered at her own calmness in looking at death like this.

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She forced her eyes up from the broad chest filling her vision, afraid to look at its expanse, knowing what she saw proved frightening enough. Her eyes caught the throbbing movement of the bulging neck muscles. The strong pulse of the vein stilled her gaze for an alarming moment. Pulling on her waning strength, her large blue eyes raised above the forceful chin, up over the fiercely thinned lips, hesitating at the flaring nostrils of his straight proud nose. But Cali could go no further when she brazenly met his endless black eyes. Dark savage eyes that held hers so strongly that Cali couldn't drop her gaze even as her fear rose in her throat. Never had she seen such hardness, the cold depth bore down on her, stealing the last of her strength. Cali fought the blackness back, refusing to give the beast any pleasure in her death. She wanted to see him and remember every detail of this man, this Indian savage.

Indian he was, his long ebony hair laid heavily down his neck, held away from the striking features by a leather band pulled tight across his wide forehead. Cali marveled at the handsome features of this savage. She had no idea they were attractive, the way people talked she expected an ugly animal likeness. Instead she looked into a fine, proud face, only the cold dark eyes held evil and they were fierce in their possession.

She wanted to pull away from his scrutiny, but again found any movement effectively useless in his hold about her. The realization that escape would be impossible renewed her fear.

Jennie moved against her and Cali could sense the baby's fright and discomfort at being held so tightly. The tug at her neck suddenly called her attention to exactly what he was doing. Cali panicked and struggled desperately to reach for Jennie, but her arms were held tight to her sides.

She heard the animalistic cry torn from deep within her, knowing she couldn't help Jennie or herself. She kicked furiously against him only to find herself dangling above the ground for her efforts. All breath pushed out of her once again, making her fight the blackness that wanted to flood her senses.

His words rang harsh in her ears, his breath hot against her cheek. She knew the others were there, but she didn't dare look at

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them. Cali couldn't understand their words, but knew they concerned Jennie. She called on all the strength left inside her to break the steel band around her, crushing her. She felt Jennie's loss before she landed forcefully against the hard wall of the man holding her. Trapping her painfully to him with a force that sent her senses flying against the violence he was capable of inflicting. Cali called for Jennie, fighting the tears walling up in her. She strained against his naked chest, trying to see her, gasping in terror when she saw Jennie held by another Indian.

Black and red paint added fierceness to the other man. Cali felt the ugly decoration unnecessary, she'd never been more afraid. A shorter man, with a barrel chest and hard, full body, his eyes were small and filled with their hate for her. His look caused her to freeze, almost wanting to hide and seek comfort from the arms about her. Cali held little doubt she wouldn't find any compassion from these men. All Willow's horrible stories came back in a terrifying flash.

Cali felt her hold on sanity slipping as she watched Jennie being lifted high above the hateful man's head. The glee in his eyes told her what he planned and Cali blanched violently. "No!" Her protest was a whispered plea that no one could hear and those that could weren't listening.

The one holding her shouted something and she watched in startled relief as another Indian rode up and took Jennie from her high, deadly perch. The man on the horse now held Jennie to him and Cali watched as the baby gripped his braid in her small hands like she always did with her. Cali felt herself slump in relief against the solid wall of flesh that kept her upright. Jennie was safe. She shrank back from the anger and violence glaring at her from the one that wanted to kill Jennie. His look told her he felt the same loathing for her. She chanced a look at her captor; his heavy breathing pressed painfully against her breast.

The powerful eyes of this man held such a force she couldn't believe anyone would refute his authority. His look was cold and hard, filled with anger at the man standing beside them, glaring at

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her. Another order was issued and Cali was thrown brutally into the arms of the man that held nothing but death in his eyes for her. She stood motionless, scared beyond reason of the man now gripping her arm. She fought her anger over what he almost did, reason told her he wouldn't hesitate to finish his hateful desire with her own blood.

Her eyes never left his heated gaze, feeling that if she looked away he would strike. When the arms circled her waist and lifted her up, Cali could only gasp in surprise over finding herself placed before the larger man now astride his horse. He pulled Cali's back hard against his frame. His arm secured her to him. The force of the horse taking off in a run pinned her further into his iron hold.

The feeling of complete loss swam around her as she realized the direction they were taking. Each thud of the powerful hooves drummed into Cali's muddled thoughts, lending one clear picture that echoed in finality. She would never see the wagon train or her family again. Why she felt so positive, Cali wasn't sure, but the hopeless reality of her situation increased as the distance from the

woods lengthened.

The remembered freedom of the afternoon gave her a new burst of strength. She faced the harsh truth that her life as she knew it and maybe even her death were all that lay before her. A great wave of denial found its own force inside her. Pride, anger, maybe only pure desperation, all Cali understood was that she couldn't let this happen. For only a moment she thought about her action, any longer and she would have realized the foolishness of what she contemplated.

Her hands were free from her elbows down. The reins were in front of her, without thinking she gripped the horse's mane in her left hand, her right fingers closed over the reins and pulled viciously on them. The horse lunged back on his hunches almost flipping over with both its riders. Cali felt the man's arms instinctively release her, his action came so fast she nearly lost her chance. As she felt him trying to regain his balance, she brought her elbow back and punched him with all her might. Cali didn't stop to savor the joy she

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felt at unseating him. Trying to regain her own shaky seat, she whipped the horse to the right and dug in her heels.

She saw the other rider, heard the vicious words following her, knowing it was some Indian curse and a violent one at that. The shocked expression of the other man gave her a surge of hope. Cali urged the horse towards him, somehow she prayed she would be able to get hold of Jennie and make their escape. Cali wouldn't leave without Jennie.

The shrill noise reached Cali's ears, but before she could figure out what it meant the horse suddenly stopped, violently throwing Cali over his head. The ground loomed before her, she instinctively curled into a ball, remembering what Willow taught her about falling during her riding lessons.

Hard and painfully punishing, she hit the ground with a force she never imagined she could live through. The moan came uninhibited as she rolled until she flattened out. She wasn't sure by what power or how she managed to do it, but she found herself on her feet.

Weaving dangerously, she fought the pain of her movements, hesitating, not sure where to run to. She saw him then as her eyes sought escape. She never believed anyone could be as angry as he looked with her. The air vibrated with his fury.

Now that he didn't hold her, Cali took her first true look at the man. A man she just tossed to the ground.

The large coppery chest and shoulders were bare of any covering. Only two thick silver bands circled the bulging muscles of each massive arm. Her eyes lowered to take in his rippling stomach; she couldn't stop herself from looking at the breechcloth hanging from his hips. Large strong thighs showed at each side of the cloth before tapering down the long powerful legs. Legs held tight and ready to spring into action against her. She jerked her eyes back to his ominous black gaze, refusing to let the fear overtake her. Seeing how his large capable body gleamed with the force of his strength, told her just how stupid her action against him might have been.

Cali stepped back; he suddenly grew very large and forbidding.

His legs stood apart, his naked chest heaved dangerously at

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her. The other one, with Jennie, just sat there on his horse watching them. Cali had no idea where the mean one went and didn't care, all her attention was captured by the angry man staring hard and meaningfully across the distance at her. She sensed he wanted to wait and see what she would do next. If he knew how badly her body protested at just standing, she doubted he would be so careful in his approach. As if answering her thoughts, he took a step forward shortening the distance. Cali didn't think her body could move, let alone run, but the thought of being captured by those arms as angry as he looked with her right now, made Cali sure she better try. She stood before him and whether Indian or White, injured pride in a man was something Cali instinctively knew to fear.

Cautiously she stepped back, never dropping her gaze from his. His movement equaled her own, as if daring her to go farther. Bringing her chin up in defiance against the obvious, Cali decided then she would loose, but he would work at it, she wouldn't give up so easily. She could have sworn the corner of his mouth twitched in a smile, but the sternness she again spied immediately eliminated any hope.

Lifting her skirts high Cali pivoted, taking off in a hard run. Unlady like and fighting the pain shooting through her at each step, she pushed as hard as she could to escape the demon at her heels. The sound of his footfalls grew stronger. Each of his long strides ate up two of hers. She could feel him, knowing that any second his hands would take their deadly hold.

When it came Cali screamed out her anger and fear, regretting the defeat she knew would come, refusing to give in to the inevitable. His heavy body tackled her to the ground. They hit hard and Cali struck out at him with a violence stronger than anything she thought herself capable of using. Remembering too late the strength he possessed, she struck out, her small fist hitting uselessly in their struggle until their flaring efforts were stopped by one large hand.

The easy effort he exerted as he straddled her squirming body aggravated her further. She knew he barely used his strength to hold her and her own ineffectual attack made her furious. Cali continued

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to struggle against his superior strength only to have her efforts met by the breath being pushed out of her as he pressed his full body into her own, preventing any further movement on her part.

She felt her arms being slowly lifted over her head and held down tight into the damp soil. She couldn't move, crying out her frustration as it built inside her.

Cali felt beaten!

She didn't want this to be happening. Exhaustion won out, her slowly body stilled and quieted beneath the heavy weight barring down on her. All the hurt and anger raging inside glared defiantly up at the man. His face came so close she could feel his breath fanning her cheeks. She wished the hate she held could make him vanish. She wanted to be free. Some dreadful knowledge kept screaming in her mind that she never would be again.

Cali wasn't sure how long they stared at each other like that.

His dark anger pitted against her dying hope, but Cali finally gave up the fight she waged with her eyes, no longer able to battle the ravenous black gaze that stole her strength. Her silent defeat became

more devastating than all her lost battles against him. He sensed the second she gave up, she could feel the tension leave him, but his eyes were forever alert on her now. Never again would she fool this man. There would be no further chance to escape. A lone tear fell across her dust covered cheek. Cali saw the door closing on life as she knew it. Everything told her this man now controlled her destiny. A shiver vibrated through her, her blue eyes looked deep into the coal black depths that confirmed her savage destiny!

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CHAPTER 2 – Secrets to Uncover

“Over here, hurry Mr. Tucker, Mr. Willow, I found something!” Willow didn’t hurry, his steps actually hung back. Anything they found couldn’t help her now. Wise grey eyes saw their excited discovery; the signs would only confirm what he already determined. Impatience made him leave them, waiting to get Tucker alone.

Troubled eyes watched them tramp over the now useless prints. Willow knew he was right in not bringing up what he discovered a good mile from this spot. No, these city men would only destroy the valuable tracks. He would show Tucker later, when they were rid of the others.

Already the sun was almost gone. It would be morning before he could even start out. Biting hard on the inside of his cheek Willow cursed violently. ... *of all of them why did it have to be this one?* Willow didn’t like the way his thoughts were turning. *Foolish thoughts of a foolish old man.* But still they came, unwelcome though they were. *Shit! How can I think of trying to find her? I alone, know how useless it will be to try to get her back, even if I do locate her.* Arguing with himself, Willow sank back into the trees where he first spotted her mark.

Sharp eyes that learned long ago to look further than the surface soon found their target. *So, he waited for her here.* Willow could see where he’d taken off after her. He guessed Cali figured out he was there and took off around the hill to get away. If she hadn’t carried little Jennie with her he thought she just might have made it. Guts alone could have saved her and that girl surely possessed backbone.

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Ever since the start Willow sensed Cali was different, nothing like what he’d run into before on these trains. Willow smiled, *if only I were younger, she could have been the one to tie me down.* He shook off his useless wishing. But he still thought about the girl now in the hands of those savages.

She’d been one hell of a pest and Willow tried damn hard to be rid of her. Attachments for a man like him weren’t something he cottoned to. Persistent was an understatement for how she hung onto him. Willow admitted he’d been surprised when she didn’t give up. Even after the riding lessons, he’d been darn hard on her too. She sure learned fast. And very well if that scene he just came upon held any truth of her abilities. Willow’s laugh was low and sad, deciding that Indian got a hell of a lot more than he bargained for with this White woman. The thought boosted his flagging spirits, knowing

Cali wouldn't give up easily and that could save her. At least she might last long enough for him to reach her and help somehow. No one but Willow saw the blood, little though it was, he couldn't help worrying. He'd seen it again over at the other spot. What ever happened cause some kind of ruckus. More than likely Cali wasn't going with them in quiet acceptance. Willow figured out quite a bit from what he'd seen and he felt sure Cali caused it. At least they hadn't killed either of them ... yet. Willow'd been relieved in not finding any death signs. Those two horses that left there did so with the same burdens they started from here with. The third one, on foot, worried Willow. He hadn't left with the others and neither was he following them to cover their tracks. That one's trail headed towards the wagons. Why had the Indian stayed? Tucker would have to take extra precautions. Spotting Jim Titus coming towards him, Willow left his cover in the trees. Jim, Willow knew, was one very troubled man and this wouldn't ease his burden any. Willow truly felt sorry that they'd taken the baby, but if they hadn't it could have been worse. "Did you find anything Mr. Willow?" The man's shoulders were slumped and his voice strained with pain over the day's dark event.

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Not a bad looking sort and stronger than most. Willow wondered how he could let himself become so entangled by that terrible woman. Then, thinking of the man's wife Willow knew the answer. But if any woman ever fit the dreaded mother-in-law stories, that Mrs. Graham was the prime example. It still amazed him to think she mothered someone like Cali. Cali's father must have been a good man. More than once that woman tried to destroy the girl's spirit by comparing her to her father. He'd felt right proud when Cali would throw her head up in pride. Never once did she back down before that tyrant.

"Sorry Jim, you've seen what there is to see."

"Yes, but did they take them both?"

Grey eyes hardened at the man's question, deciding he'd better be truthful. "If they hadn't Jim, you would have known."

What little color the man had left vanished. "Then they are alive."

Hope wasn't a good thing to hold out in a situation like this and Willow thought the man better know all the possibilities. "Why don't you walk back to camp with me. We better talk ... alone" The tall sandy haired man hesitated only a minute before joining the older man. A resigned swagger inflicted his youthful gait.

"Tell me Willow, I think I would rather know up front."

Willow hoped the man meant what he said. "Indians are a strange lot, Jim. You never know what they are thinking. Sometimes, I wonder if they know why they do things. But one thing is certain, everything they do is directed as revenge against us for taking what once belonged to them and them alone."

"But a girl and a baby? What good can come from taking them?"

It was a hard question for Willow to answer, especially as this man was the father of the baby and brother-in-law to Cali.

"It doesn't matter to most Indians, it isn't anything but the fact

their skin is White.”

“What will they do to them?”

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“There are many different ways Indians handle captives. Sometimes they are taken into the tribe like one of their own ... especially children.”

“Jennie would be adopted by one of them?”

Willow gave the answer Jim sought. “Yes, the baby could be put in a family.”

“What of Cali?”

The hard grey shafts of the older man’s eyes met blue, both stood silent for sometime.

“Willow, tell me.”

“Women captives are usually taken by the man that stole her.”

“As a wife?”

“Well, maybe a slave for his wife or mother.”

“But Cali is only a child herself, wouldn’t they...”

“No! Jim, your sister-in-law is not a child, least not by Indian standards.”

Jim studied the man whose words came out in such anger.

They shocked him with the viciousness he heard.

“There is more, isn’t there?”

“No, leave it Jim.” Willow lied, the fears growing in him didn’t do anyone, least of all Jim, any good.

“Will they kill them?”

Did he dare tell the man that it might be better if they were killed, at least for Cali? “They could, but if that was their intent I doubt they would have taken them from here. If they only wanted a coup, than they could have done the job right here and been rid of them.”

“I see.”

Willow doubted if the man did, but enlightening him would serve little purpose. “Why don’t you head back to camp Jim and help your wife.”

Jim stopped before turning to go. “Willow, are you going after them?”

“Yeah ... I’m going.”

“Thank you.” Jim turned unhappily towards the ring of wagons.

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Willow watched the beaten man lumber off. If he hadn’t asked, Willow wondered if he might not be going. No, he already knew he must try to help the girl.

He’d been right in not telling what he feared most for Cali.

“Damn! The little slip of a thing wouldn’t let on any differently either.”

Even he had thought at first that Jennie was her baby. He knew those Indians would too. Cali’s love for that child could be the worst thing to happen to her right now.

Kicking the dust in booted frustration, Willow went back to search for Tucker. His decision made Willow feel impatient to be off. Dawn was too long to wait, but after all those false trails this morning he knew he needed daylight to track them. This Indian that took Cali was a lot smarter than most he’d run across. Willow knew he would never lead them directly back to their camp. No, he expected to be going on a very long ride before getting to his destination.

* * * *

Night's darkness settled over the silent riders. Their steady vigil never slackened as the sky darkened the land around them. Both horses and men seemed to know the way, pushing on to where only they could see.

The straight broad shoulders supported the small, slumping figure sheltered against them. Softly spoken words passed between the two men, bringing the second up abreast of the larger man. A small baby was passed silently from one rider to the other, the horses never slowed their pace. The exchange completed, the smaller of the two riders fell back behind the tall rider.

Strong capable arms eased the tiny woman into a safer position, bringing her up against his chest where he could cradle her to him. Feeling her warmth against his cool skin filled Blackhawk with excitement.

It had been the same all afternoon while he held her back tight into his larger frame. He relaxed his iron hold on her now; her deep breaths told him she still slept. The fact that he had been able to take the sleeping babe from her previous death grip on the child also told

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him she wasn't pretending to have fallen asleep. Her exhaustion finally beat the silent fight she waged against him.

Remembering how she out smarted him made Blackhawk alert to her every move. She deserved all the attention he allowed; he wouldn't be fooled again.

He'd been furious finding himself on the ground like that.

Fingering his ribs, he cursed again over the bruise she inflicted. The way she accepted his silent challenge to run, after he unseated her, lent further proof of just what he held in his arms. Looking down at her now as the moon's new light shined softly over her fine features, Blackhawk still felt amazed at the hidden strength she possessed.

When she fell off the horse he expected her to break her neck or worse. But she curled into that tight ball and rolled instead of hitting hard on the ground. Rising to her feet like that she looked like a panther ready to attack. Yet, he also spied the pain her movements caused. His own anger became so great that if he'd taken her then, as he knew he could, he felt he would have killed her. No woman or man ever bettered him before. Instead, he issued his dark challenge, wanting to see more of what this woman hid. Blackhawk admitted right then that she fascinated him. He felt no shame in his feelings. Even Snowman was at first stunned by her actions, grew as curious as Blackhawk to test her further. Blackhawk thought that if his horse hadn't been trained so well, she would have achieved her goal of getting the infant from Snowman.

What Blackhawk discovered confused him further. Without the child to hinder her, she was extremely swift. Blackhawk honestly admitted she could run as fast as he could. He would never admit this, but he pushed himself to catch her even with the pain she fought against.

Catching her should have been the end of it, but she fought with more strength than he believed her capable. His own tempered strength far out matched her and yet she wouldn't stop fighting him. Hurting her was the one thing he immediately decided against. She became some wild thing, full of life and spirit, so untamed she filled

him with a surge of desire to master her and at the same time he

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wanted to keep her spirit safe, much like he would want in a fine horse.

He easily won the battle against her strength. The strength of her will and conquering it, filled him with a keen sense of victory. He sensed that he won something very important between them at that moment. Blackhawk spent his time since then deciding just what he would do with his victory.

Riding together, with her against him, awakened feelings that went beyond the exhilaration he felt at conquering her. Feelings he felt earlier when she was pinned beneath him. Her fine body moving to counter his, stirred emotions a man only felt for a woman he desires. She was his by law. A captive, his possession and one Blackhawk decided he wanted to claim. As chief of his tribe he held rights over all captives, but never did he chose to enforce his authority in this matter. With her he didn't have to take her away from another brave as he himself captured her. But Blackhawk knew he faced a larger problem.

As chief, to take a captive into his house could only be accomplished one way. He had no wife or mother to give the girl to. If he took her in his house it could only be as...his wife.

Taking a wife hadn't been something he planned on doing any time soon. The demands in his life prevented expending his energies in that direction. Prowess as a warrior, hunter and leader for his people directed his life. The name Blackhawk set fear in his enemies and respect in his tribe and all others.

The tribe would want a test from this woman, to prove her worthy for their chief. Physically she could take what ever they put to her. But Blackhawk knew his people would find a test that would take more than her strength to overcome. Would she want to do it? If she did not, Blackhawk refused to reflect on what would happen to her. The knowledge of how harsh her life could become in his tribe, filled him with dread. What she would become bothered him even more. But he couldn't help her, it would mean going against his tribe, he would never do that. Not for a mere woman and a White woman at that.

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Blackhawk heard the child's movement from behind him, where she rode with Snowman. Instantly his eyes fell to her, waiting to see if she heard. His tense muscles relaxed slightly as her breathing remained deep and peaceful. Her child brought another problem. Blackhawk knew it might be the one that answered all the others. He deliberately ignored this, not liking the defeat it meant to him. Never could he take her if she belonged to another man, White or Indian. Even as chief, he couldn't. Yes, he could take a captive as a wife, but never another man's wife. Only if she were alone and had no other protector, could she become his wife.

Smilingeyes could find out from her. His sister knew their tongue and he could share his feelings with her. He would put the woman in Smilingeyes house until all could be learned. Snowman would allow it. His brother saw his admiration for this woman. He would give his permission; it would be necessary as Smilingeyes' husband. The woman's destiny would be in the gods' hands after

that.

Blackhawk knew if the gods were generous he would find a way to please them. His people would accept her if the gods did. Blackhawk thought hard about his people and their feelings. Most of them felt as he did about women and children of the Whites. A few were like Nighteyes, hating all, wanting only to draw blood. Nighteyes defied him today. His own words were harsh against the man. Blackhawk wasn't surprised when he went off on his own. Even as children they never became friends, many times their parents separated their fights.

Blackhawk could understand Nighteyes hate for the Whites; he held more reason than most. His desire for revenge lived inside the man and he would soon be eaten up by the hate he fed. The loss of his father and brother in battle with the Whites only made Nighteyes dark nature fester. No doubt he went off to find the revenge he sought to take out on the child. Nighteyes wouldn't be satisfied until he spilled the White's blood. Blackhawk knew the man was dangerous.

Dark thoughts were drawn slowly back to the present. They would stop for the horses around dawn. Starting back towards the

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village after circling through the foothills, Blackhawk knew the Whites brought a tracker with them. How long and far he would come Blackhawk wasn't sure, but he wouldn't take any chances. Snowman would go back, wipe the trail, and set out new tracks when they stopped. They would do that again before turning back. Leaving a good trail to this point should give the false direction Blackhawk wanted.

The village was far north of here. Coming this far south, the Whites should not realize they came from the land to the north. If she did have a man, he should be with the tracker. Snowman could stay back. Would a White man come after his woman like they would? They didn't guard their women. Maybe they put little value on them. He would talk to Snowman about it.

Through the darkness the two rode. Soon the Snowman brought the child back to Blackhawk and he left his companion's side. Blackhawk watched until Snowman disappeared from his sight and senses.

Both his small captives stirred, but settled back against him as the baby cuddled up to the woman. His arms formed a protective circle about them before urging his horse on. The hastened movement caused the girl to instinctively clutch the child to her.

Her sleepy action drew his dark attentive gaze. Watching as the small child sought out her breast, Blackhawk watched the child make this movement earlier, several times. The woman's lack of response concerned him, for all but this she showed great love and care for the child. The only answer Blackhawk could find rested with him. His presence must be preventing her from feeding the child. Another of the White's peculiar ways. Blackhawk shrugged off his concern; she could tend the child when they stopped. He would give her the time she needed.

* * * *

The flowing movement ceased, and with the stillness came awareness. Cali's small body ached all over from the abuse inflicted

on it. Her arms were so stiff she was afraid she would lose her hold on Jennie. She could feel the warmth and weight of the baby against her chest.

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Cali's eyes protested the inevitable waking, as did her body. The sudden feel of his body against hers brought them instantly open. A small gasp left her as she met his intense gaze. The strong, dark fierceness of this man did not diminish during the night. She hadn't meant to sleep. Trying to right herself in her embarrassment, Cali realized how closely cradled against him she was. Sometime during the night he must have moved her into this embrace. More than ever Cali wanted to be free of his arms. Arms that encircled her, while he watched her in caution; she also saw something in his heated gaze she hadn't noticed before. An almost tender light, trying to penetrate her waking senses. The chilling hardness returned all too quickly and Cali wished it hadn't. Even the warmth of his body didn't reach beyond the cold his eyes now contained. Cali thought she must have hit her head during the fall yesterday. Her thoughts were slightly irrational about this Indian. Her wish for the gentleness to return didn't make sense. But she couldn't stop herself from wondering what it would be like to have this man look at her with real caring in his eyes.

Eyes so deep and black she could lose herself in their volatile depths. She wondered if she would ever feel the warmth inside this man.

Realizing where her thoughts were going made Cali fight to rise. His arms suddenly assisted her, yet they seemed to pull her closer as they did. Instinctively her hand went out to stop his actions, bringing her open palm against his firm, heated skin. The closeness of their coloring fascinated her. She could feel the shudder that passed through him to her, causing her fingers to shake. As if burned Cali drew her fingers away from his chest. But her eyes fell to the spot of the lost contact. She felt the color rise over her face, knowing her healthy tan just turned a deep dusty rose. Blue eyes flew up to his, needing to know if he too felt what passed between them and what it meant. Meeting the stern jaw, emphasized by his hooded gaze, Cali couldn't make herself face him any longer. This closeness between them created a strange effect inside her. Fear over the feelings he caused loomed larger than the fright she held for her present danger as his captive.

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Unable to control her thoughts or reactions to this man, Cali felt relieved when he abruptly dismounted. She forced herself to concentrate on keeping her balance without his supporting hold. Blackhawk motioned her to give him the child. He watched her fight down the fear his request set to life. Her response to him and the confusion were still fresh. The way her eyes looked up at him with such questioning innocence...he hadn't known what to make of her. She acted the way a very young girl would when she lacked any knowledge of the ways between a man and woman. But Blackhawk knew that to be impossible. He fought his impatience with her, once again trying to ask before taking the child from her. The battle she fought with her own emotions proved agonizing,

but she slowly passed Jennie into his large hands, rationale thought told her he wouldn't hurt Jennie. If he wanted to harm her he wouldn't have stopped the other one. Would he? Her eyes were filled with apprehension as he placed Jennie down in the grass behind him.

Thinking about the other cruel Indian, Cali realized the other man no longer rode with them. Absorbed in thoughts over where he might be she didn't realize he'd come back to her. Before she could protest his hands were on her waist lifting her off the horse. Bringing her to him he held her body up in the air. Cali looked down into his strong chiseled features. He let her body slowly come to rest against his, his jaw came even with her breast, the heat from his controlled breaths penetrated the dress material, invading her skin. All breathing stopped as she felt an awakening stir in the recesses of her being. The undeniable sensation pulsed steadily upward, seizing parts of her, infusing them with a warm heavy feeling. She sucked in the dewy morning air, making the elements contrast inside her body until a torpid vibration eased through her. Her amazement became all too evident as she gazed into the agate pools of his eyes.

Cali hands fell to his shoulders, smooth coppery skin spread like warm butter beneath her nervous touch. His face looked so perfect, she saw beauty in the stern sharp lines and more, the fierce

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pride and courage that ruled this powerful man. Remembering the authority he wielded to save Jennie, she wondered just what his standing might be with his people.

The strength he possessed flexed beneath her fingers. There wasn't an ounce of strain in his fine body for the weight he still held up. Neither broke the silence they shared. As if dreaming Cali felt him begin to lower her, ever closer against him. The languid act heightened their awareness of each other as she slid over his bronzed boldness. Every nerve seemed to rally at his touch causing Cali to draw in deep, quickened breaths. Her heart fluttered uncontrollably as he drew her over the corded power of his muscled form.

Her fingers dug deep into the rippling power at her fingertips. As her face came even with his, his eyes locked on hers, forbidding her in their intensity to pull away. They were so close Cali could feel his breath against her lips. The heat and sweet scent captured and played with her senses. Cali had never been this close to a man. The contact of her soft curves pressing into the solid force of naked muscle left her bewitched.

Stopping the direction of her wayward thoughts wasn't possible; she wanted to know what he felt like. How his strong lips would feel and taste against her own. She nervously trailed her tongue over her lips to take away the dryness.

The man's sharp intake of air over her action sent a volley of warnings off inside her head that even Cali couldn't ignore. But before she could make herself move back, his lips captured hers with all the possessive drive available in his mastering strength.

A large, powerful hand suddenly held her head, stilling, preventing the retreat she sought. Unable to escape, all her heightened senses were battered by the invading force as he pressed forward his advantage. Earth against the sky, rock against water, his hard

strength against giving softness won his victory.

Cali moaned in dismay over her frailty, made more obvious beneath his warm embrace than any battle they yet waged. Not realizing her mistake she parted her lips to protest his gentle assault only to succumb to the hot ravages of his tongue. Driving deep he

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explored her sweetness, taking from her all restraint by the probing sensations left in his wake.

Fighting her own response to him as well as the man himself, Cali struggled against the solid wall of conquering flesh. With a suddenness that left her reeling, she was set from him and left to weave dangerously without his support. The force he just freed felt raw and frightening, leaving her weak like some newborn and too afraid to comfort the rocking adolescent.

Anger and hurt were safer, less hostile emotions and she clung to them instead of what she couldn't understand.

The pull on her skirts drew her down to her knees. Mechanically she lifted Jennie and watched as the man left with the pretext of tending the horse. Cali didn't know if embarrassment or frustrated anger made her react so brazenly. With Jennie propped on her hip she rushed after him. Without thinking she reached out and forcefully pulled the man's arm, causing him to swing violently around to face her.

Fear of what she just did struck her numb. His angry eyes bore down on her. The lips once full were now narrowed in grim rebuke. She saw his muscles tense and firm as he fought to control his rising outrage with her.

When he pointed to the baby, then her and back from where she left, Cali thought she would cry. She knew what he meant, but all the wishing in the world wouldn't make it happen. In this Cali couldn't help her beloved Jennie. Absently she stroked Jennie's soft curls trying to hush her fussing.

His eyes never eased their metallic stance, when he again forcefully indicated for her to go and tend the child, Cali turned away. The tears she fought so valiantly to hold back fell unchecked. Cali could do nothing to help Jennie.

Dropping to the grass with the baby, Cali tried to think of something. She lowered her head to Jennie talking soothingly to the fitful child, placing gentle consoling kisses on her blonde head.

The leather leggings forcefully entered her blurred vision.

Standing with legs spread apart before her, Cali knew he was waiting for her to look up at him. Tear swollen eyes met more anger in

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that harshly drawn face than he'd yet shown her. Even his anger when she injured his pride by throwing him off the horse yesterday, didn't compare to smoldering violence just beneath the man's control. She witnessed the hate he now held for her, believing what he felt she denied the child.

Everything about this man told Cali he thought her to be Jennie's mother. As her mother nothing should prevent her from feeding the baby, not even his presence. His harsh gaze and actions told her how he felt and that he thought she denied Jennie because he was there. Repeated points and jesters reinforced his belief. With a heavy heart Cali shook her head side ways, trying to

tell him she couldn't do as he wanted. Something deep inside her wanted to stop his terrible opinion of her. His disdain grew deeper with the passing of each panicky minute.

The suddenness with which he moved to kneel in front of her sent Cali sliding back from him. The painful grip on her arm stopped any further retreat. Cali couldn't help but wince at the cruel pain his fingers were inflicting. Understanding came swiftly that his frustration with her could lead to worse. She needed to make him understand. "Please, I can't." shaking her head furiously with each spoken word.

His hands cupped her head ending her frantic movements. His hold softened as his thumb wiped at the tears Cali forgot about in her attempt to make him listen. Imploring, gentler eyes looked to her then Jennie, asking in their silence for her to help the baby. Small trembling hands covered his large ones. Cali moved her head indicating her refusal. It took some tense moments before he pulled his hands out from under her grasp. Rising, he walked back to his horse.

A short time later he came back, but Cali couldn't bring herself to look at the condemnation she knew he held her in. Silently he dropped two pouches beside her then left. Cali forced herself to take the pouches up. Beneath lowered lids she saw he sat quietly a short distance away, watching her movements.

The one pouch contained water, which Cali tried to give to Jennie. Jennie took very little pushing it away. Cali knew the baby

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was cranky because of her hunger. Another deep fear began forming in Cali's mind. If Jennie acted up too much, would this Indian decided to be rid of the baby? Cali thought he could easily be finished with her the way he kept staring at her and with what she knew he believed.

Opening the other pouch she managed to control the shaking in her fingers. Cali found a hard, dry, meaty substance that resembled jerky. Swallowing hard Cali knew she must try something to ease Jennie's discomfort. Taking a sip of the water Cali bit off a piece. The taste was strong, but not as bad as she expected. It wasn't beef or deer meat, she didn't want to know the source. Taking more water in her mouth Cali chewed until the meat was soft and pliable. Biting off small bits she pushed them into Jennie's mouth. After a few tries Jennie finally accepted it and swallowed. Cali was pleased with the amount she got into the baby and kept the process going until Jennie seemed content. Cali then forced some water into Jennie by tearing off a strip of her slip, soaking it and placing it in Jennie's mouth as she sucked the liquid out of the material. The whole process was watched under the intense gaze of the silent man. With each maneuver of the girl to coax and feed the baby, the deep furrows of concern eased from Blackhawk's brow. When she refused to feed her baby he'd been ready to force her to give the child nourishment. Her constant denials confused and angered him, making his temper flare. The wet tears on her cheeks only frustrated him more. He knew she fought back against showing him any weakness. Even the cuts on her feet and the fall hadn't made her expose herself before him like this. So why her stubbornness would, didn't make any sense. The gentleness in her hands told him more

than her insistent head movements. Blackhawk felt her compassion and pain then. And he saw the deep hurt in her eyes for the child's pain.

Something was very strange. Blackhawk watched her get the baby to eat. She cared deeply for the child. He sat here and watched everything she did, even when she raised her skirts in front of him she showed no embarrassment knowing his eyes were on her naked

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flesh. Yet, she couldn't feed the baby in front of him? It made no sense to him. He knew he was missing something.

They should be going, but he couldn't stop watching her.

When he held her to him before, he could still see her eyes. They held such innocent wonder, like a man never touched her. She devoured him with those bright blue eyes. The honesty in her eyes nearly choked him. She liked what she saw in his face and body.

He also, liked what he saw in her. The loveliest eyes as blue as a deep summer sky, looked openly upon him. Black full lashes framed those large warm eyes. Dark and long, her thick hair fell forward, caressing the soft gentle lines of her face. A perfect oval, slender and smooth tanned skin, not White at all. Her sweet scent was heady and reached far into his senses.

Her full red lips held his fascination until he knew he could not resist tasting her. As he lowered her over him he felt her body freely respond to his. The surprise he'd seen in her had been so honest and full of wonderment.

He devoured her lips, taking more than a gentle taste of her honeyed sweetness. When he plundered her mouth he wanted to drive into her, knowing he wanted to possess her like a man should. The response she gave only heightened his desire, but it also tossed him into maze of confusion. He sensed her shock and thought it strange that she showed no fear of their contact. If anything he believed her to be curious ... like an innocent girl?

He knew it wouldn't last. When her struggles became earnest he let her go. The stunned disbelief and confusion she exhibited reflected his feeling over the impact of her touch on him. Her anger wasn't directed at him, she'd been angry with herself. Just like now, watching her, it seemed the more he learned about her the larger the puzzle became.

Rising, Blackhawk felt the urgency to get her to the village.

He needed answers that only Smilingeyes could obtain. Snowman would also have answers he needed. Impatient to learn all he could about her and end his questions, he didn't bother to hide his rising temper over his troubled thoughts.

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He didn't want to believe this woman could be capable of cruelty to her child. Neither could he shake the thoughts her body and actions conveyed to him when the evidence of just the opposite stared up at him with the same blue eyes.

Blackhawk noted the pain he'd seen in her for the child appeared gone now that she fed the infant. No, she didn't run true in anything so far. He needed answers. His own feelings were growing too fast and deep for this woman. A woman that could look and act as young as a child, but whose body spoke of all the secrets and grace of a passion only a woman could possess.

CHAPTER 3 – Hearts Exposed

The hint of smoke tingled in the late afternoon air causing the large animal beneath them to pick up his pace. Cali watched the new alertness in the horse and felt the man straighten behind her. No one had to tell Cali where they were. Her heightened awareness of her constant companion over the last three days spoke volumes. She felt sure they were fast approaching this man's village.

Cali almost felt relieved their journey would be coming to an end. Even the feeling of dread filling her stomach didn't stop her wish to end his disruptive touch that even now invaded her senses. Jennie desperately needed food. The child grew weaker each day. Today she refused to eat. The Indian knew it too. He surprised Cali more than once with his compassion for Jennie. This morning he stopped and caught a fish after crossing the river. Cali wondered if the river might be the Ohio. After all the traveling they did before turning back north she wasn't sure, there were other rivers.

The man cooked the fish for the baby, but none of Cali's coaxing could get Jennie to eat. She even ceased her constant whining. Cali saw the Indian's concerned gaze moving over the baby. She herself avoided the hard question she would receive from him. A feeling of hopelessness invaded Cali.

Remembering her dreams of death at the beginning of this trip from Baltimore, she started to wonder if they might still come true for Jennie and herself. Somehow, she must find a way of communicating to the women of the village about Jennie's needs. Surely one of them could help her.

What she would face in the village was something Cali refused to dwell on. All of Willow's stories came back to her over the last few days. She made a strong effort not to think about the burnMIDNIGHT
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ings and torture that Willow spoke of and concentrated on the things he told about the people. Although she found little comfort in her situation, she remembered the respect and admiration Willow obviously held for these people.

Knowing how this man treated them, she held to her faith they would not hurt Jennie. Her own emotions concerning her Indian were too volatile to worry much about herself. He hadn't stopped except to feed Jennie. She often wondered how he managed; he never slept. They slept in his capable arms though she fought her exhaustion it invariably overcame her. If she could have told him she would have explained that she wouldn't run away. As much as she wanted to, to do so would end all hope of helping her niece. Did he realize she couldn't even try to escape? If it were only herself, Cali knew she wouldn't hesitate to get away from him. The dangers in the woods seemed tame in light of staying with this man.

What bothered her more than her body's weakness, where he was concerned, were the effects he continued to have on her emotions. Since that first morning he never repeated their embrace, yet she remained in constant contact with him. Touching him became a warm, never ending reminder of just how he could affect her. Nothing Cali tried would rid her memory of his kiss. She didn't like her thoughts or feelings, not sure how to deal with them. Over and over again she told herself that this man was an Indian.

The fact he took her from her family didn't diminish his strengthening hold on her. Bonds that were invisible, but held a force she believed she would never escape. She should hate him, it would be easier.

Sighing, Cali decided she'd grown too tired to think clearly about him. She concentrated only on Jennie and finding her help. Hopefully she wouldn't disgrace herself when the time came to face her own fate.

Topping the rise, her eyes took in the scene below them.

Through the trees she could see hundreds of dark mounds that she realized were wigwams by the way the hides were stretched over the pole frames. Smoke from the fires hung over the valley like a protective blanket in the fading daylight. Many figures moved about,

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their activities looked similar to that of any town where people go about their daily business. Only Cali understood this wasn't like any town she'd known.

She was a stranger here. If Willow's teachings were right she would be hated and looked down upon. Cali shivered at her thoughts and felt the instant tightening of his arms about her. By his action he must still think her capable of trying to escape. Cali almost laughed hysterically at the prospect, but managed to fight down her panic. Shaking her head more for her own benefit than his, she denied his silent assertion. Sadly, it became more impossible for her to believe she would ever escape the fate he now held her in.

As they descended into the village something alive and vital stirred inside Cali. A pride born out of circumstance forced her to pull herself together. Never would she allow these people to see their affect on her. The fears she felt would remain hidden at all cost, if they thought her weak she sensed it would only make things worse for her and Jennie.

Cali brought her back ramrod straight, absently her hand went to the tangled mess now existing in place of her normally well groomed hair. Under the uselessness of her effort she dropped her hand, but her eyes remained open, staring boldly ahead, refusing to let the growing number of faces intimidate her shaky hold on her emotions.

Shouts and whoops greeted them. The excitement moved ahead of their entrance like a great wave. A shrilling whistle reverberated through the enlarging crowd. There were so many more than she ever imagined. She kept her eyes forward above their heads, keeping herself from looking into the dark-eyed, coppery faces.

Their hands seemed to come from everywhere, pulling and touching her. Cali's growing panic made her seek the safety the arms about her afforded. She gripped his forearm with her own quivering hand, holding on to him as if her life depended on him, wishing she could draw some of his unending strength into herself. She knew these were his people, but he'd been with her for these last days and suddenly, Cali felt he was the only thing between her and them. She

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needed him! The truth proved frightening and more unsettling than the horde trying to press over her.

The girl had no way of knowing how her reaction affected Blackhawk. The anger growing for her these last days as he watched

the baby grow weak suddenly disappeared. A strong desire to protect this woman surged within his body. That she sought his protection with her touch only reinforced his growing need to give her what she sought.

Guiding his stallion through the mass of his people Blackhawk headed towards Smilingeyes' wigwam. The girl's strength pleased him, but he could sense her rising alarm. He didn't want her to shame herself in front of his people. Exhaustion brought her weakness forward, Blackhawk knew her strength and knew she needed time to rest, grow stronger, before facing his people. He regretted not being able to give her time to clean and wash before arriving, but the child grew weak, reaching the village became an urgent call.

The horse stopped, Cali stiffened with apprehension. She suddenly didn't want to leave the safety of her lofty seat. These people, with their curious eyes, looked like they would devour her if she dismounted.

The strong arms left her and Cali bit the inside of her cheek not to groan and keep from reaching out to him. She clung to Jennie hoping they wouldn't take her from her arms. It took Cali a few seconds to realize the man reached up to her for Jennie. Scared blue eyes swept across the shiny dark heads waiting for her response. Could she trust him? Would he throw Jennie to them to tear apart? Was her life just minutes from ending?

Meeting those endless black pools Cali realized there were no choices. She prayed he would not deceive her. Ever so gently, Cali lowered Jennie into his hands. Afraid to move as a hush spread over the crowd, she watched as he took Jennie over to a small pretty woman and placed Jennie in her arms. Cali's heart fell as the girl turned and entered the small, low opening of the wigwam with Jennie. Too numb to move, Cali could only watch as her niece disappeared.

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When he lifted her off the horse Cali nearly fell into his arms with the weakness in her stiff limbs. But he forbade her weakness, his eyes drove hard into hers silently demanding she take hold of herself. Shocked by the harsh treatment she stiffened away from him, forcing him to take her arm, directing her movements. Shocked by his unusual rough treatment Cali tried to pull her arm out of his grip only to cause his fingers to tighten until she followed him. Anger and hurt rose in her throat, how foolish of her to have placed her hopes in this heathen. She wanted to scream at the broad back he presented to her and beat her fist against the rock solid wall of his back, but her better sense prevailed, smothering her desire to fight. Watching these people's reaction to him, Cali could see he held considerable authority in this village. Cali found herself wondering again who this man might be.

He stopped so abruptly she almost walked into his back.

Pointing at the same entrance she saw Jennie taken into, she hoped she didn't misunderstand him. Bending down Cali crawled into the darkness, stopping just inside as her eyes adjusted, not sure exactly what they expected of her. He came in right beside her then rose in the small confines of what Cali decided must be someone's home. His largeness seemed all too real and overpowering in the close space they stood in.

As she adjusted to her surroundings she became awed by what she saw. The hard ground was covered with thick woven grass mats. To the one side a neatly arranged mound of furs were placed. A dug out bowl of open dirt dominated the center of the room. Her curious gaze flowed upward to the hole where the poles came together and the open sky above. The smoke from winter fires would easily find its exit there and warm the interior very comfortably. There were many smaller items in the room that Cali felt belonged to the lady of the house. A large painted shield and deadly looking lance, with feathers hanging down the shaft, dominated one wall. The sign of a warrior, looking at it closer Cali could see that between the feathers there were gathered groupings of...hair...scalps!

Swallowing hard she fought back her revulsion. No, she didn't mistake what she saw and silently thanked Willow for telling her

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everything he did about the Indians. At least she wasn't totally ignorant of their ways. The knowledge helped accept the sights she couldn't avoid. The truth lifted her spirits even if she did imagine seeing her own raven lengths mixed with the other unfortunates, lending evidence to how unstable her existence truly became. Again the man motioned her to take the seat he indicated. Cali almost defied him, her anger still high from his recent treatment. But the need to find Jennie and insure her well being prevented any such act. Cali suspected they would soon find their wills tested against each other. The challenge in his eyes came in answer to her silent question.

Cali took the seat, not realizing how tired she was until she did and the weariness washed over her. Closing her eyes she fought it back, she needed to find Jennie. Flinging her eyes open she confronted his knowing stare. The dark coldness in his glare told Cali how he felt about her.

The girl who took Jennie walked over to join them around the cold cooking hole. The girl's intervention thankfully drew his attention, knowing she could not tolerate the condemnation in his explosive gaze. She tried to put all her concentration into remaining in control of her skittish emotions. To realize what he must think of her and it hurt to a depth Cali couldn't believe possible. She didn't want to feel anything for this man and yet she admitted how impossible the feelings were to ignore.

The man's voice flowed in a strange timber over to the small woman sitting across from them. Cali saw the girl's alert eyes take in every word; her nods were slight but acknowledging. Cali could see the respect and yes...love, this girl carried for the man beside her.

The realization the girl held love for the Indian did very strange and dark things to Cali, sending her senses reeling. No, she wouldn't think about her feelings. Schooling herself, she focused all her thoughts on the girl across from her.

She couldn't understand his words nor the woman's when she finally spoke. It gave Cali the time to really see the girl before her.

She looked very young, but oh so lovely. Cali saw just how beautiful

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ful this Indian woman was. Large doe like eyes were soft and shiny, filled with a gentleness that astounded Cali. Features so soft that

unless one really looked they would miss the strength the girl possessed.

The woman was also very pregnant.

The revelation made Cali look at the man, but all she saw in his gaze for the woman rested in respect for the girl's intelligence.

Cali could feel a closeness flowing between these two.

Their silence finally reached Cali, making her drop her eyes in embarrassment for being caught staring so hard at the woman.

Automatically Cali issued her apology. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help seeing how beautiful you are." Voicing her thoughts made her realize how foolish she was being. "I wish you understood me."

"It is alright, I too find you very beautiful."

Open mouthed with her astonishment, Cali could only gape.

What she prayed for happened and she couldn't stop herself from rushing forward.

"Oh it is wonderful, you understand. Please where is Jennie?"

The girl looked to the man. Cali followed her gaze, somehow she knew he controlled the girl's answers, even in their silent communication.

"The baby is sleeping over there."

Trying to rise to see if what she said were true, Cali was stopped by his grip on her arm. The glare of black coldness stilled her protest as she sunk back to the ground. She found herself suddenly very nervous under his scrutiny. His eyes never left Cali as he issued his next harsh words to the girl.

"Blackhawk, my brother and chief of our people, the Shawnee, would like to ask you some questions."

Biting her lip Cali nodded her consent. She really had no choice if Jennie were to be helped. She waited as Blackhawk talked to his sister.

Blackhawk, how well the name fit him. The girl, his sister, also called him chief of these people. Cali wasn't surprised. If ever there was a leader she felt he perfected the role.

"Blackhawk wishes you to explain your baby."

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The girl should have asked *why didn't Cali feed her baby*. She knew that is what he wanted to know. Cali wasn't sure what to do. If she told them the truth they might take Jennie from her. They may do that anyway and Cali knew Jennie needed help she couldn't give her. There were no choices to make.

"I..." Cali raised her gaze to his, she knew what she must say and it seemed very important that he believe her words. "Please, tell Blackhawk, that Jennie, the baby, is not my baby. She is my sister's baby." She wanted to add her painful admission that that is the reason she couldn't feed her, but she held the words back hoping he understood.

It seemed an eternity before the girl relayed Cali's explanation. Blue eyes searched for that softening he once showed her, but the cool dark pools stayed impenetrable. She couldn't blame him his anger.

As Blackhawk spoke, Cali noticed his words weren't as harsh, but maybe she only wished for what she wanted to hear.

"Blackhawk ask if you have a child of your own?"

Cali shook her head no, then answered, dropping her eyes unable to stand his driving gaze any longer.

"No."

They spoke back and forth. Her gaze remained with the girl, needing to avoid Blackhawk least he see the hurt she suffered from him. Cali almost wished he would have remained nameless to her. Hearing his name seemed to multiply his effect on her. "My brother wonders if your man will try and follow you here?"

The question was unexpected and strange to Cali, she thought of Jim and Willow, and wondered if he could mean them. "My man? I do not understand?"

The girl's warm smile to her brother baffled Cali further. She wished she understood what they wanted from her.

"Blackhawk believes your husband should come for you."

"But I don't have a husband." Did that mean no one would come to rescue her? Cali's brow furrowed with the truth. Was he implying no one cared unless you were married? For the first time

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since that day, Cali started asking herself and admitting Blackhawk was probably right. No one would try to find her. Jim couldn't leave Mary and Mother. Willow couldn't leave the train. There really wasn't anyone to help her. Was that why he asked, to stop her from hoping?

Her bottom lip trembled as the knowledge settled coldly inside her. She knew that deep in her mind she did believe someone would come for her. She didn't want to see the empty future that the reality left in its wake.

They were both silently watching the girl beside him. Blackhawk witnessed the devastation his question had on her. Her indigo eyes lost their vibrancy. Smilingeyes saw it too. Blackhawk knew the girl answered in all honesty, though he didn't understand her language. Her eyes held such open questions for him, he knew she didn't understand and now Blackhawk held the answers...to so many mysteries concerning his captive.

She waited for the girl to ask his next question.

"Blackhawk would like to know your name."

Cali looked at him. Would knowing her name have any impact on him? "Cali."

The change she hoped for never surfaced. Only his words to his sister kept Cali from breaking down in tears in front of him. When he rose Cali started to follow him, but his hand stayed her.

"You are to remain here. Blackhawk will post a guard at the door."

She didn't need to ask the meaning of that.

"Please ask your brother if he can help Jennie?"

"Blackhawk will send someone for her needs."

"Will you please thank him for me...and tell him I thank him for his help before, on the trail."

The girl did as Cali asked, not once did Blackhawk acknowledge her. Cali watched in hurt silence as he left.

"Cali?"

Turning towards the girl, Cali tried to put aside her painful feelings that seemed worse now that he left her. She could feel the

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panic rising inside, wishing he would come back or take her with

him.

Realizing she hadn't answered the girl, Cali tried to gain some control over her emotions.

"I'm sorry...I don't know your name."

"I am Smilingeyes, wife of Snowman, sister to Blackhawk."

Intuitively Cali's eyes went to the shield and lance.

"Snowman is a great warrior like Blackhawk. He was with Blackhawk...."

Cali knew why the girl didn't finish, she hoped Smilingeyes husband would be the one that took Jennie from the cruel one filled with hate. Yes, he would be Snowman; this girl was too gentle and loving to be married to the mean one. His memory made her shiver.

"Smilingeyes thank you for letting me stay with you."

Cali immediately saw that she made a mistake and wondered what it could be. Awareness soon came as Cali understood she wasn't a guest but a captive prisoner.

"Please Cali, you lie here and sleep."

"No thank you, I must care for Jennie."

"Jennie will soon be fine."

Cali sat where Smilingeyes indicated, not wanting to start any trouble. She could watch Jennie from here and Cali sat there silently guarding the sleeping baby, refusing to succumb to the demands of her aching body. First she must be sure Jennie would be alright then she could rest.

It seemed like an eternity that she sat there waiting, she felt her eyelids drooping. The silence became strained between them. Cali could feel the girl's gaze upon her and thought she wanted to talk. Cali just started to get up enough nerve to attempt a conversation when another woman came into the wigwam.

Neither of the Indian women spoke, but Cali saw Smilingeyes indicate the furs where Jennie slept.

Jennie's startled cry at being woken soon changed to contented coos. Cali heard the strong sucking sounds from the baby and knew her niece would be fine.

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Her baby? Stubbornly Cali couldn't see why she should not call Jennie hers. Cali needed to face facts. Neither of them were leaving here. Cali couldn't leave without Jennie and their escape would take some time to plan. Jennie would have to be older and on solid foods. It all meant time.

How far away were the wagons by now? If they stayed a day or two to search for them, wouldn't compare to the distance Cali feared now separated her from her people.

Willow would have found her trail and discovered what happened. Would he come after her?

She knew by the second day that Blackhawk had been backtracking and circling to confuse the tracks. When he finally swung north she'd known they were headed for his village. She figured Willow could follow the real trail.

Everything Willow taught her helped so far. She felt confident he would find their tracks. One thing did bother her. Willow told her many times that to follow tracks successfully you must know *what* you were following, especially a man. Thinking about what she knew of Blackhawk, Cali doubted Willow could know enough.

Blackhawk appeared to be so many different things, the least of which he was very intelligent.

Looking again at Snowman's weapons on the wall, she could imagine that Blackhawk's armor closely resembled this man's. He must be a great warrior to lead his people and Smilingeyes did say as much. Cali knew firsthand his harshness, that fierce anger and unshakable pride, but she didn't think it would compare to a Blackhawk engaged in a death battle. Involuntarily, she shuddered over what her imagination pictured. Thinking of her friend, maybe it would be better if Willow lost the trail or if he never came at all. Jennie's feeding completed, the woman left in silence. Cali thought it strange that no words were exchanged. She had so much to learn.

"Cali, you can sleep now, Jennie is fed and asleep."

"Do you mind if I sleep over by her?"

"No, do as you wish." The girl's gaze followed Cali's progress to the child. Hooded eyes watched the girl quickly fall beneath the

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exhaustion no longer held at bay. The slim arm went protectively about the infant at her side.

Smilingeyes studied the sleeping pair. Blackhawk chose this girl, whose beauty showed even through the dirt and grime clinging to her dark skin and hair. Only those bright blue eyes spoke of her White blood. She could easily be mistaken for a Shawnee sister unless one looked into her summer blue eyes.

Her brother saw something deeper in this girl. Blackhawk could have any maiden he desired from their village. Smilingeyes saw how the maidens tried to win his attention. She laughed silently at their efforts. Her brother would take what and who he wanted only when he decided.

Cali was his choice. Smilingeyes would help the little stranger adjust for her brother. She became anxious to hear what Snowman knew about this girl that made her so special. Blackhawk arrived furious at the girl for her rejection of the baby. Smilingeyes could see how badly it bothered her brother. She felt her own heart lighten with the girl's answer. The confusion in her brother's eyes also vanished. Smiling to herself she knew the girl would be fine, her eyes told her what she needed to know for her brother's sake. Blackhawk also showed his sister his feelings, but Smilingeyes knew neither of them saw what their hearts held.

She would remain quiet about her knowledge; they would have to find their own truths. Only then would they know what they held together. These two would face many things to learn about each other. Smilingeyes could see they had only just begun their discoveries into each other's spirit. They were both strong people. The growing hate of both races would be a vicious enemy. A deep worry filled Smilingeyes for what it could bring against these two.

* * * *

The little hands pulled on the long dark waves. Happy gurgles poured out as each tug brought a protesting moan from the sleeping form.

"Ouch!" Cali brushed lightly at the source of her pain. Her hand instantly captured by little ones that again pulled impatiently to

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draw her aunt awake. Slowly, Cali's senses broke free of the deep exhaustion and she forced herself to push up past the protest in her bruised body. Cali felt sure every bone had been jarred from its socket.

Jennie crawled over her lap, the child's attention now taken up by another.

Smilingeyes entered the room calling softly to the baby.

"Ah, you wake. I tell her not to wake you, but she not listen."

"She rarely does. She seems much stronger."

"The woman came earlier, she will return later. Come, we go."

Cali almost asked where but stopped herself. She would have to hold back until she learned what exactly they expected of her.

As they left the hut Cali saw a man following them. Adjusting Jennie on her hip, Cali knew he must be Blackhawk's guard. Deciding to ignore him Cali kept pace with Smilingeyes, while her gaze took in as much as possible. Stubbornly, Cali ignored the hard stares being thrown at her. Questions mounted inside her head, but she needed to know this girl before she started to ask about her people. They made their way down to a beautiful river. Its gentle current seemed to call out to her. She knew how awful she must look. She didn't need the disgust she saw in some of the women's eyes to tell her.

"I thought you would like to start here."

"Oh yes, thank you." Looking down at her filthy clothes. "I certainly am a mess."

She didn't expect an answer and laughed at Smilingeyes hesitant nod of agreement.

Smilingeyes reached out for Jennie and Cali didn't hesitate to pass the child over. Cali started to undo her buttons and slip the dress bodice down over her chemise when her eyes riveted on the figure standing on the rise above them, abruptly halting her actions. Smilingeyes looked where Cali's attention remained. "Cali, he will not leave."

"But I can't."

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Smilingeyes wondered if Cali would act differently if she knew Blackhawk took Lonewolf's place. "Blackhawk is there for your protection, Cali."

Unbelieving eyes sought him out. Yes, it was Blackhawk. Cali wished she could believe his sister's statement. Was he really protecting her?

Debating with herself for some minutes Cali finally admitted she couldn't stand to remain this dirty. He once thought her incapable of feeding a child in front of him. What would he think if she stripped in front of him now?

The dress slipped to the ground and Cali stepped out of its circle. Still in her petticoat and chemise Cali picked up her ragged garment taking it to the river's edge. Swirling the dress in the cool water she beat the soiled spots out as best she could. She was stalling, trying to find the courage to enter the water herself.

Hoping he wouldn't notice, Cali sought out Blackhawk. He remained as he was, she wished she could see his face but the sun's glare prevented it.

Unable to delay any longer Cali spread her dress out to dry over a large rock. Untying the petticoats Cali pulled the mass over her head, clutching it to her. The chemise did little to hide her body. She knew her long legs were bare and easily seen by him, stubbornly she threw it up and over a bush, turned and marched out into the swirling water.

Cali felt smug that she hadn't allowed him into bullying her to strip naked before him. She knew it was a minor victory on her part. Taking the fine grainy sand from the river bottom she rubbed herself clean until she thought she would start taking off layers of skin. She wished for soap to do her hair. Deciding the sand did such a fine job on her skin Cali applied it to the wet heavy strands of her hair, washing the thick locks repeatedly until she rid herself of the trail dust. Totally immersing herself in a deeper area she rinsed her hair, letting the current pull the thick strands clean. She was amazed at how clean she felt, her hair squeaked when she pulled her fingers through it in the water to get the tangles out.

She never felt such luxury and enjoyed herself tremendously.

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"Smilingeyes could you pass me Jennie."

The girl happily gave the squirming baby over to Cali.

Jennie's dress was soon clean as was Jennie. Placing Jennie on her chest and turning on her back Cali floated out into the river with Jennie. Cali couldn't resist swimming with Jennie listening to her happy gurgles over the movement.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught Blackhawk's movement, realizing her mistake she immediately headed for the shore.

She saw him relax as she did so. Cali felt sorely tempted to keep swimming, but knew her only success would be in angering him.

Sighing, she felt the sand under her feet and knew she would have to leave the little freedom she found in the river.

Cali began to shiver by the time she finished with Jennie. But she felt fresh and clean once again. Drying Jennie with the petticoat, the thin material dried quicker than her dress. Wrapping Jennie in the garment Cali decided she would have to figure out something for clothes for both of them. Slipping her damp dress over her wet chemise did little to warm her. Her wet hair dripped heavily down her back.

Throughout the whole event Blackhawk remained exactly where Cali first saw him. Except for his slight reaction when he thought her trying to escape he could have been a statue. As they clamored up the bank Cali fought the urge to smile at his stern features, knowing he would only get mad at her taunt. Cali wondered if he ever smiled or laughed.

Blackhawk followed them back to Smilingeyes' home before Lonewolf once again appeared. Smilingeyes told her his name when they saw him by her wigwam. Blackhawk's silence bothered Cali, but she tried not to show how upset it made her.

Once in the wigwam she tried not to feel her disappointment over leaving Blackhawk. Cali stripped off her dress draping it over a pole to dry.

"Cali, why do you not put this on?"

Smilingeyes held out a soft White doeskin dress. Hand worked beads had been embroidered in a beautiful pattern across the

front. Cali thought it was beautiful.

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"Oh Smilingeyes I couldn't, it is too beautiful."

"Cali, it is a gift from Blackhawk he would be insulted if you did not accept."

"A gift? Did he really give this to me?"

"Yes Cali."

Cali handled the garment with care. Her face grew rosy with the blush she couldn't stop as her thoughts went again to him and the memory of his touch. As if to savor the special feelings swelling inside, Cali laid the dress out over the furs. Untying the ribbon of her chemise she let it fall away. The doeskin was too fitted for any undergarments to remain.

The softness caressed her tingling skin, still sensitive from the hard washing she'd administered. Cali ran her hand lovingly over the soft skin of the dress. She never wore anything this exquisite and to think it came from here.

Cali burst out laughing as she thought about what her mother would say and what she'd call her, *a savage, nothing but a savage!*

"Oh Smilingeyes it really is the most beautiful of dresses."

Smilingeyes gave her doeskin moccasins with tie up leggings like her own. There was also a dress for Jennie and little slippers for her. Cali didn't know what to say.

She did wish she could look in a mirror to see the dress that fit her so lovingly. A freedom of movement came as an added bonus, no longer hampered by the long folds of material. The slight fullness that reached her calves caressed her legs as she moved. Spinning around to feel her legs move in the air, Cali spun, landing hard against the rock firm chest of...Blackhawk.

Before she could right herself his arms were around her. For what seemed like a long time Cali stared up at him. She missed his touch, his arms about her now told her that and nothing she did could block the admission out of her eyes.

Since he left her last night Cali felt an emptiness inside.

Standing once again in his embrace, she knew that feeling was gone. In its place she felt warm, safe, yet a disturbing ache came from deep within her belly. Her legs felt heavy, too clumsy to move away as she probably should.

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Slowly he eased her away from him. Did his eyes look saddened by his action? Cali wanted to believe he felt the same loss she did.

A warm smile came over her as her hand ran over his gift.

Turning from him, Cali bent and picked up Jennie to show him how she looked. Blackhawk surprised her by taking the baby into his arms and cradling her to him. His large fingers easily straightened the baby's dress down.

Cali silently gasped at the smile he gave Jennie. Oh how beautiful he looked when he smiled. The hard fierce lines were gone as a warm pleasantness invaded his proud features. Cali could have cried when she realized how obvious she was being to let him see her amazement. She embarrassed him, causing him to thrust Jennie back at her.

Afraid he would leave Cali rushed into her words hoping to

stop him.

"Smilingeyes, please tell Blackhawk how happy and pleased I am with his gifts. The dress is beautiful, I will always cherish his thoughtfulness."

She waited for the translation to reach him. No smile came, but she saw a soft light enter his dark eyes. She could have shouted over the joy this gave her. He wasn't immune to her after all. She thought she would explode with the knowledge.

Cali waited for Smilingeyes to tell her what Blackhawk said, but before she did he left the wigwam. A coldness entered Cali's heart, it wasn't only his leave that left her troubled, something was wrong.

"What did he say?"

"He was glad you liked your gifts."

"Is that all?"

Cali turned to the silent girl and instinctively knew there was more. She could tell the girl was upset. "Something is wrong, you best tell me."

"Cali..." The girl turned away, making Cali's insides twist in warning as she waited for her to continue. "I had hoped Snowman

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would be back before...and I wanted time to show and explain things to you."

"What is going to happen?" Cali couldn't stand the suspense.

Large worried eyes looked at Cali. "Come sit down, I have many things to tell you."

Cali followed her to the furs. Jennie crawled around exploring her new surroundings.

"Cali, I do not want to frighten you. You must try to understand our ways. It will be... hard for you, worse if you not try...believe all I tell you."

Cali caught the broken words telling of girl's nervousness that made speaking another's tongue difficult. Her throat went terribly dry. Cali could taste the fear building with each of Smilingeyes' words. What she dreaded would happen and soon. Cali knew she was in terrible trouble.

Absently, her fingers began combing through her hair. Pulling it all to one side Cali worked the groupings into one long thick braid that hung over her breast and past her waist.

When she finished, she faced the girl who waited patiently for Cali to regain her composure.

"I think you better tell me what is to happen."

"Cali, to a captive many different things may happen to your life in my village." Smilingeyes waited to be sure Cali was listening.

"You could be given by your captor to his mother or wife as slave."

Wife! Did he have a wife? Cali never thought about that possibility.

"You could not be wanted by your captor. You then become the tribe's property, for all to use."

Cali could sense Smilingeyes uneasiness with this possibility.

"In what way would I be...used?"

The woman saw the girl's distress and the strength she called on to fight back the fear. "You would be what White men call...whore."

Smilingeyes never witnessed anyone turn as pale and as

quickly as Cali did, trembling before her. "Cali you must listen to what I tell you. Please Cali, there is little time."

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Fighting the nausea in her throat, she made herself hear what the woman wanted to tell her, she couldn't give up, not yet. "Go on, I'm alright now."

"There is another way. You could be taken as wife by your captor, if he chooses."

"Are there any more?"

Smilingeyes nodded slowly. "Terrible death...torture."

All the horrible things Willow told her about she could see being done to her. "What has Blackhawk decided to do with me?"

Cali closed her eyes as she waited for the verdict. For Cali felt certain she'd just been condemned.

"Blackhawk decided to take you...for wife."

Slowly Cali opened her eyes in astonished shock. "Doesn't he have a wife?"

"No Cali."

"But he is the chief of your village, will your people let me, a White, be the chief's wife?"

Admiration flowed through Smilingeyes for this girl. Knowing she realized the problems they both faced, would help them.

"They will, if they feel you are right for Blackhawk and them."

"Has it happened before?"

"No, only children have ever been accepted into the tribe. I have heard other tribe women have been accepted, it happens."

"But not White women?" It wasn't really a question.

"No Cali."

"How could they know if I am right? I only came here last night, can't they wait. I will learn your ways, they could see what kind of person I am."

Defeat seemed to glare out at her. For these people to judge her like this, Cali's anger flared at the unfairness.

"My people will give you tests. Blackhawk told the council of his decision. Now Cali, it is up to you."

"But how can I show them? Smilingeyes...I don't know if I can." Cali was being honest with his sister.

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"You must Cali. Blackhawk will be shamed forever if you fail. I must tell you, Jennie will also be judged for what you do."

"How would Blackhawk be shamed? How could they hold it against him?"

Her concerns for Blackhawk eased Smilingeyes own fear for these two. She wondered if Cali understood why she cared what happened to him.

"Cali, why do you care what happens to Blackhawk?"

"Why? Because I..." Her voice tripped in her throat. Shaking herself, Cali couldn't believe what she almost blurted out to his sister.

"What were you going to say Cali? Tell me!"

Shocked by the sudden vehemence in the girl, Cali felt she needed to answer her. She was his sister and Cali realized she deeply loved her brother. Would this girl hate her for what she was going to admit to them both? "I think...I care for him."

Smilingeyes visibly relaxed, this alone could save them. "Cali no matter what happens I want you to remember your words to me. You must do as they ask Cali, you must! If you fail you destroy Blackhawk, yourself, Jennie and many more that you do not know." Cali shuddered at what Smilingeyes implied.

"Smilingeyes, why did he do this? It is such a risk. What ever made him do it?"

"He must tell you himself his reasons. Remember Cali, Blackhawk chose you. He chose you over all the women in the village, he knows what he is doing, what his reasons are. Be honest with my people Cali. Show them what you have shown my brother."

"I hope I don't let you or Blackhawk down."

Smilingeyes rose to leave, taking Jennie, Cali needed to be alone with her thoughts.

"Wait, when will it happen?"

"Tonight, when the council meets."

"What kind of test will they give me?"

"I do not know Cali. Most times there is physical test."

"But that is not all, is it?"

"No, for you there will be more."

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"Because I am White?" Cali knew the answer. How strong would their hate carry their revenge? A White woman marrying their chief couldn't be an acceptable event in their lives.

Cali tried to keep her rising panic at bay, knowing it would only drain her strength. Strength she would dearly need.

She wondered if she really would be able to pass their test.

What horrible thing would they expect her to do to show her worth?

Was she worthy of Blackhawk? She knew he wouldn't come to her, but Cali desperately wished he was there, beside her. She needed to talk to him. She needed his strength. Smilingeyes spoke of the dangers that existed. Cali couldn't believe Blackhawk put himself in such jeopardy. Why?

If she failed would they kill her? Cali could never live the way Smilingeyes described. To be used like that, Cali would rather they end her torment, but their hate may prevent any mercy.

And what did she really feel for him? All these strange feelings he unearthed inside her. Cali never felt anything like this before.

How could she be sure?

One thing she did know, it didn't matter to her that he was an Indian. Or that she would be here. That declaration would bring the hate of her own people against her. Would they be as cruel as these Indians? Regretfully, she admitted they would be. Yet, the thought of losing her freedom gave her true grief. If she failed, Cali knew, she would have to escape ... or die.

Honesty made her admit that before her desire to flee only came because of him, because of her growing feelings for him, they scared her. If it were love, she no longer feared it. She felt so lost without him, so alone. She needed to be with him. Today when he came to see her she never felt as happy as she was in his presence. His smile filled her heart with joy. She wanted him to give her the warmth of that smile.

She lay back on the furs staring up at the blue sky she could glimpse through the smoke hole. If she were a hawk she could fly

high above all this, but then she couldn't love him. Cali knew she did love Blackhawk. Now she must prepare herself for what would come.

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She remembered the Indian gods that Willow told her about. She picked mother earth and prayed to her for strength to face her battle, she needed one of their own gods to win. Only their god would be strong enough to destroy their hate.

* * * *

Dark savage eyes watched the swift hawk hunting the skies. Blackhawk envied his brother the hawk. As a man he lacked the hunter's freedom. He pushed back the troubling thoughts of what the night would bring. He wanted only to fill his mind with Cali and her beauty.

At the river she teased him unmercifully, bringing his anger to a high pitch. But when she stepped out into the clear water Blackhawk almost laughed aloud at what she unwittingly exposed.

The White shift she left on betrayed her plan to deny her beauty from his eyes. Wet, the clinging material hugged her like a second skin, showing him all too well the truth his images of her fascinating body held. The wet material also became transparent against her dark skin. What he couldn't see clearly he imagined, aided by his new knowledge. Her alluring secrets tantalized him with more power than her nakedness would have.

Full rounded hips curved lovingly before tapering down to her long slender legs. The firm strength he knew them capable of moved gracefully in the clear river water. Blackhawk remembered their feel against his thighs during the ride here and he wanted, as he did then, to run his hands over the soft skin. Her rounded bottom that fit him so well shined in its purity, letting him lavish his senses in every molded curve.

His willpower had been taken to the limits when she rose like a goddess out of the water. The glistening drops sparkled with sunlight as they danced down her shapely body. The dark hair hanging heavily down her back followed the smooth line of her splendid shape. The firm flatness of her stomach emphasized the descent to her womanhood. Full rounded breasts that he once thought to be heavy in milk for Jennie, stood out proudly against her small chest, making Blackhawk burn with his desire to feel her.

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He caught the laughter in her blue eyes when she passed him. Keeping his face impassive took considerable concentration on his part. He knew she didn't realize what she showed of herself. Soon he would tease her about this day. He wanted to see her cheeks go rosy in color again and display how much he affected her.

Never would he want another man to watch her as he did. The thought of other men touching her drove the final part of his decision. Blackhawk could not tolerate what she would become in his village without his protection.

Speaking to the council had not been easy. Hate ran high in his tribe for Cali's people. Blackhawk carried his own hate for the Whites, but not for Cali. What he felt for her he still wasn't sure. But he knew he wanted her above all others. Regardless of his tribe, regardless of her feelings...Blackhawk would have her.

She was innocent of men, he knew this now. He swore she would only learn of the passion between a man and woman by his hands. His body would lead her to womanhood and no others. Blackhawk never experienced such a violent conviction concerning a woman. Cali would be his wife.

Lonewolf told Blackhawk what he already knew. "The woman will not run, it would hurt the baby and she would not do such a thing."

Blackhawk knew Cali wouldn't leave Jennie. Neither would she be foolish enough to take the baby and run. Now that he knew she could not take care of her niece, Blackhawk knew Cali would remain because of the baby. She would never leave without her. Lonewolf's words were true, Cali would not try and escape, the babe held her back. But Blackhawk saw her eyes and their desire to be free. If the baby wasn't here he felt sure she would run. He could never let her. At the river she held Jennie. When she swam out he could feel himself sweat with the tension he felt thinking she would try and leave him. He almost took off after her. Blackhawk knew he would have if she hadn't turned when she did. She would never escape from him, he wouldn't let her.

The guard he placed on her now would remain for her safety. There were many that would hurt her. Once she was his wife those

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few that thought of it would not touch her because of him. Having the guard wouldn't hurt Cali either. It was better to make her believe she couldn't run, eventually he hoped she wouldn't want to leave. Remembering how capable she could be, Blackhawk would always be careful.

Tonight she would have to prove to his people she held the strength to be a chief's woman. Even he did not know the test the council decided upon. They would be very hard on her. Blackhawk needed to control his anger over this, but tonight seeing her hurt and in pain might be more than he could tolerate.

Schooling his emotions since a boy, Blackhawk would draw on all his training and strength not to interfere. He knew he would destroy her if he did. Any weakness on his part would call down a vote against her. A chief could not be weak, even for his woman. To show weakness for a White woman would be unforgivable in the tribe's eyes.

Blackhawk would have to remain silent. Ignoring the call in her eyes for him would be the hardest thing he ever faced. She could use her eyes to talk to him. Not looking at her would be difficult, but the only way. By doing this he would be hurting her. All he could hope for is that she would draw strength from her anger. He'd seen her pride before. He hoped she would call on it again. If there were a way to help and he found it, nothing would stop him from coming to her side.

This morning in Smilingeyes home, Cali told him how happy his gift made her. Watching her dance, she enjoyed the freedom her legs found. Cali held such life in her; she acted more of his people than of what he knew of hers. She lived as a wild, spirited thing. Her life here could be very beautiful, there were so many things he could teach her.

If only they will let her be free to be a part of their lives.

The hawk called down to his brother. Blackhawk hoped their magic would be strong enough to help Cali. Defeat was something he didn't want to think about. The burden it put on him grew heavy. If Cali failed it would be his responsibility. He brought her here. If

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he'd known what taking her meant, the changes that she brought to his life ... would he have let her escape into the woods?

No! Blackhawk could never let her out of his life.

Will Cali pass the test? If so, can Blackhawk and Cali find the love that can beat all the odds? You won't want to miss this exciting adventure in history of SAVAGE DESTINY!

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