



Chapter One

Utah 1869

Dayton trembled uncontrollably doing her best to breathe. Her heart was racing as she crouched in the corner of the Crow lodge. She covered her ears from the shouting and screaming outside. Dayton shut her eyes so tightly; tears streaked her small eight-year old cheeks.

The terrors of just a few months ago were vivid again in her memory. The day she was taken by these people from her family's ranch. On that day there had been nowhere to hide when the Crow warriors suddenly appeared from the woods beyond the creek. Dayton had been just as frightened then and stood like a frozen statue between the barn and the house.

Dayton had heard her mother call to her. She had watched as her mother picked up her baby sister and ran into the house. Her mother would hide with baby Jerica in the secret wall behind the kitchen. Joseph, her father, and her big brother Todd were gone for the day. They had gone on a hunting trip to start stockpiling meat for the winter.

Still frozen in fear Dayton stood as a Crow warrior bent down from his painted pony and scooped her up. The warrior roughly placed her on the blanket saddle in front of him and held her tiny waist with one strong hand. The Crow warrior directed his pony with leg movements and screamed fiercely with words Dayton did not understand. That day, just a few short months ago, Dayton had also covered her ears to the horrible screeching.

She remembered sitting in front of that Crow warrior as he circled the barn and ranch house many times while other warriors plundered the barn and the ranch home for anything they thought might be of value. The warriors did not seem interested in people. They just wanted plunder. The Crow party left when the other warriors remounted. Dayton was taken away from her family, but she knew her family had been unharmed and was still alive. Dayton believed her father and brother would come for her.

Dayton had been taken to a strange place where people lived in hide cones. The Crow had been cruel to her at first. The women and children taunted her. The men ignored her. Dayton learned quickly that if she did the chores the women directed her to do she would be left



alone. Soon Dayton had become accustomed to the daily work schedule of her captors and lived in relative contentment. Everyday she hoped her father and brother would find her and take home. She had kept that hope until today. *Will these people take me away? Will they kill me? Pa and Todd will never find me.* The yelling and screaming was just as terrifying as the Crow Warrior attack upon her family.

Dayton remembered that last week the Crow warriors had been celebrating their victory on an attack at a Sosoni' tribe. The Crow woman Turtle Shell had even given her a gift of an elaborately beaded Sosoni' necklace. *Where these people the dreaded Sosoni'? Were these the Sosoni' come to retaliate the raid?*

These past two months Dayton had learned much of the Crow language and heard the Crow women scream bad words at the Sosoni' as they raided the Crow lodges. Warriors fought against warriors.

Turtle Shell had ordered Dayton to stay in their lodge while she, her baby and mate went to a trading post. Dayton wished with all her heart they had taken her with them. Life in this Crow village was hard, but Turtle Shell had not been cruel. Dayton was determined she could survive it and hope her white family would find her. Now this!

Fear, terror, and hopelessness filled little Dayton's mind. She heard the entrance flap open and grabbing an oak twig used for kindling the fire she closed her eyes and held her breath.

A soothing quiet voice of a strange but similar language to the Crow filled the shelter.

Dayton kept her eyes squeezed shut. She was too terrified to open them. Still clutching the oak twig to use as a weapon against this invader.

Suddenly Dayton felt her small body lifted and held by a powerful and muscled arm. She opened her eyes to the fierce war paint of a Sosoni' warrior. Dayton struggled frantically and swung out violently with the oak twig at the powerful lean man holding her.

Following a laugh and chuckle Dayton heard the strange man speak.

"Little one, you seek to hurt me with a twig?" The Sosoni' warrior grabbed the twig from Dayton's hand. "Come little Oak Twig. My mate and I have lost a daughter just your age. You will be our daughter and mend the sadness in our heart."

This strange voice soft and gentle made Dayton stop struggling. She stared into the dark brown eyes of the warrior. Those eyes were kind and told her not to be afraid.

The voice spoke again, "You will be my daughter and sister to my sons, Oak Twig."

Dayton didn't understand the Sosoni' language but some sounds were similar. "Daughter?" Dayton asked in American.



The Sosoni' warrior looked at her quizzically. "What tongue is this you speak?" the warrior asked in Sosoni'. "It sounds like the tongue of the white man."

The Sosoni' warrior held Dayton tightly. He spoke to many of the Sosoni' warriors. Soon Dayton found herself upon a painted pony in front of this Sosoni' warrior heading Northeast.

Dayton knew directions. Her Pa and brother Todd had taught her many things she was determined not to forget. Her Ma had taught her to read, cipher, and write. Dayton promised herself she would practice everything she had learned every day.

The sun rose and set three days before they reached the Sosoni' camp of Bright Moon. At night the Sosoni' warrior had spread a woven blanket on the ground and kept Dayton cradled in his arms. His muscled forearm was her pillow and she found she felt safe in those big strong arms. Dayton had learned Crow quickly and was starting to comprehend some Sosoni' just as quickly since the words were sometimes similar.

At the camp the Sosoni' warrior, whom she came to know as Blue Pool, gently lifted her from his pony and carried her to a large and well painted lodge. Dayton had learned such a painted lodge indicated the inhabitants were important in the camp. A smiling young woman greeted the man and two older boys soon to be warriors, greeted Blue Pool.

There was a brief conversation and Dayton saw the boys smile at her and nod to their father. The Sosoni' woman opened the flap for Dayton and Blue Pool. Dayton found herself placed upon his lap in the lodge and his mate, Wooden Bowl, brought a buffalo bone comb to him.

Blue Pool carefully and gently began to comb Dayton's hair. The tangled snarled mess was soon shining and in order. Blue Pool tied a leather thong about it and cradled her in his arms humming softly.

Dayton had watched this manner with other children and wives in the Crow camp. She knew it signified a deep love and favor for the child or wife. Dayton smiled contentedly; even the war paint no longer frightened her. She had been adopted and knew she would be well cared for as a member of this family.

Wooden Bowl brought a hearty stew for both Dayton and Blue Pool. Dayton was so hungry she ate the stew so fast Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl chuckled. Dayton was soon taken by Wooden Bowl's hand and removed from Blue Pool's lap. She was led to a small stream nearby where Wooden Bowl removed her Crow doeskin dress for a bath. Dayton heard a small gasp and turned to see Wooden Bowl's surprise and wide eyes.

"You are white!" Wooden Bowl exclaimed in Sosoni'.

Dayton didn't understand then, but many years later learned that was the day it was discovered their new daughter was white, not half-breed Crow as Blue Pool had originally thought when he found her



holding that twig. It was a logical assumption of mixed heritage with her hazel eyes and dark brown hair highlighted with wisps of fire red and gold.

Wooden Bowl took great pains to keep Oak Twig's secret from her own people, the blue coats, settlers, traders, or anyone that would be in contact in one form or another.

Oak Twig learned the Sosoni' tongue but secretly listened to the white men talk to remember her language. Many times she would tell Wooden Bowl or Blue Pool what had been said. Oak Twig saved Blue Pool, Wooden Bowl and the Sosoni' people of Bright Moon from being cheated. She used her language, reading, writing and cipher skills for the benefit of Bright Moon's camp. It was not long after her adoption that she became a favored child of the Bright Moon people. It was a mutual conspiracy to keep her knowledge a secret from the white men.

Bright Moon would never hold a council with any white man until Oak Twig would be in the lodge serving or working. The bluecoats, settlers, or traders never noticed Oak Twig would gesture or nod a certain way to let Bright Moon know if the translations were as spoken or not. Oak Twig would be there for trades in the background gesturing with a nod, frown, or smile to let her people know if they were being swindled. Most important of all, as a quiet maid working and blending into the background of the camp, Oak Twig would listen to the white men's private words and then tell Bright Moon or Blue Pool what truths were really in their hearts.

The next eight years were idyllic for Oak Twig. Her adoptive older brothers doted on her and saw to her care and needs. Wooden Bowl was devoted to her and spent many hours grooming Oak Twig, teaching her the ways of the Sosoni, the medicinal herbs of the people, and the spiritualism of Tam Apo and Mother Earth.

After her first flow and the rite of the maiden, the men of the people began to ask Blue Pool to accept their dowry offers and make Oak Twig their mate. Because she was the daughter of Puhagan and the niece of Chief Bright Moon, Blue Pool was able to keep his daughter by demanding too high of a price. When the warriors would meet it, Blue Pool would make it higher.

Oak Twig was pleased with her father's ploy. She never found any one of the warrior's interesting and never considered being a mate. Oak Twig was comfortable and happy with her adoptive parents and had no desire to leave her happy and contented home. Oak Twig's adopted brothers, Yellow Star and Broken Cup protected her from admiring warriors to her delight. One of the most persistent of these suitors was Horse Tail.

It was the ninth year Oak Twig had lived as the adopted daughter of Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl when Bright Moon signed a



peace treaty with the white man and her people sent to a reservation in a place they called Utah. Everything the white man had promised on this paper did not happen. The different peoples were mixed together in this small place devoid of good hunting.

Without good hunting and the ability to move to sheltered havens in the mountains to protect from the harsh winters the peoples soon died of starvation, illness and exposure.

Wooden Bowl succumbed to the winter lung sickness and Oak Twig cursed the white men for the liars and cheaters they were. In the tradition of the mourning Shoshone, Oak Twig cut her hair. The warriors allowed her time to mourn the death of her mother. Blue Pool became more dependent on Oak Twig to care for him. Oak Twig mourned with the families as their babies, children and mates died.

Bright Moon struggled to keep peace with the white man for another year. He talked with traders, the settlers, bluecoats, and Indian agent, as he was called, begging for the food, medicine, lodging, clothing, and blankets that had been promised in the white man writing.

Nothing changed and Oak Twig overhearing conversations told her father and Chief Blue Moon, the white agent purposely starved the people to keep them weak. If the people were weak they could be controlled. If they died, there were less of them to be a problem. Oak Twig learned that the agent kept most of the provisions sent for her people and sold them to white settlers for a profit making him a rich man. Oak Twig learned to hate the white man for their treachery in these ten years. Her own white family had faded into a distant memory a long time ago. To Oak Twig, she was a Sосoni'. She was the daughter of Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl and the sister of Yellow Star and Broken Cup.

The young warriors of the people were ready to fight and kill. They wanted white blood for the blood of the children and families lost. Very few of the woman were able to carry children to full term. It was time to make a decision for the people.

Bright Moon knew his people were to weak to fight, but unless he did something his entire tribe would perish in this wasteland in the white man called Utah. A decision was made. Bright Moon gave the order for his people to move and seek refuge in the mountains where the sun sets. The people of Bright Moon fled the reservation.

It was a desperate flight. The white men considered such a move off the reservation a breaking of the treaty. It was odd to Oak Twig that the white men did not consider their violations of the treaty when they did not supply all that was promised, but the people's scouts and blue coats were sent after them to bring them back.

Bright Moon had split his people into many small groups and had instructed them to leave false trails and then conceal the real ones to meet at the sacred place in the western mountains known to them.



There was little food, but it was more to eat for everyone than on the reservation. Spotted Fawn, the wife of Oak Twig's eldest brother, Yellow Star, gave birth to a little girl in the sacred hiding place. Spotted Fawn was one of the few women that managed to carry her child to term and there had been a great celebration.

Oak Twig separated herself from their joy at the birth of Lighted Path. Oak Twig feared for her brother, his mate and their new baby. She worried if there would be food enough to feed her people, could they hide from the blue coats, and where would they go. The whites were all over, no matter where you turned.

The next morning Oak Twig prepared food for the people with Torn Dress, the mate of her adoptive uncle, Chief Bright Moon. Silently caught in their own thoughts and concerns Torn Dress spoke to Oak Twig, "tomorrow Bright Moon sends your father over the hills to a place known to us as the Sosoni' camp of Eye of Hawk. He is the son of Cougar's Paw who was the friend to Bright Moon."

"Why does he send my father to this tribe? Are they not in the same troubles as this people?" Oak Twig asked.

"No! It is said they are healthy, happy, and prosperous," Torn Dress answered emotionally.

"How is this?"

"Eye of Hawk's people live on white man's land in peace treaty with an honorable white man. He gives all that he promises," Torn Dress told Oak Twig earnestly.

"Impossible. All white men are liars and cheats," Oak Twig argued angrily.

"You will tell us when your eyes see and your ears hear what is really truth."

"What do you speak?"

"My mate Bright Moon sends you with your father to determine if all we hear is the truth," Torn Dress replied and patted Oak Twig's hand.

"If I go, you will hear all that is the truth."

"We know this," Torn Dress smiled. "And it will take you away from these persistent warriors that desire you and wish too fill you with their seed."

"That is another blessing of Mother Earth I will be grateful for," Oak Twig laughed. "I enjoy such time with my father and the attention's of the warriors do grow tiresome."



Chapter Two

Nevada 1879

"Ryan!" Dwayne shouted for the third time as he approached the log ranch his brother had built.

Ryan came out of the ranch wiping the white plaster off his hands. "What is it Dwayne? The men and I are just finishing a room upstairs."

"Everything okay boss?"

"It's just baby brother, Cassidy," Ryan yelled up to his foreman and friend.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that!" Dwayne grouched.

"But that's what you are," Ryan chuckled. "What brings you out to Geneva's Branch?"

"Auntie Alyson asked me to fetch you back to the ranch. It seems that sis is coming home with the baby. We just got a wire."

"I'll be back by sundown," Ryan answered and returned to the interior of his ranch house.

Dwayne slipped off his pinto, Patchwork, and tied his reins to the porch rail. Dwayne followed his brother inside. "Don't you want to hear about sis coming home?"

"No baby brother. I want sis home, not talk about it. If you had told me that she was waiting at Geneva, you wouldn't have been able to catch my dust."

"You still jawing with the kid?" Cassidy yelled down the stairs.

"Nope, I'm coming back up right now. I want to finish Kerry's room right quick," Ryan answered.

"You still think sis will visit you here and stay a day or two?"

"Course I do. Kerry will be proud of the ranch I built and she'll need to get away from that lust beast she married," Ryan snorted.

"Somehow I don't think Braden is going to let her go that easily, especially to you," Dwayne taunted. "You're not one of his favorite brother in laws like Ayden or me."

"Good! I don't want to be his favorite brother in law. I want to make sure sis has a haven to come to," Ryan replied testily.

"Will you quit jawing and git up here so we can finish by sundown," Cassidy complained.

Ryan grinned and started climbing the steps.



"Need some help?" Dwayne volunteered.

"I'd appreciate that baby brother. I really would," Ryan quipped over his shoulder.

"Quit calling me that!" Dwayne protested heatedly.

"When you start working," Ryan chortled. "Here's a plaster brush."

A little while later Dwayne stood back and admiring his work said, "You did a great job, brother. The ranch is real nice."

"I hope to complete the ranch house before summer. The house structure had been finished by the first snowfall last year. I only have the details in the interior to finish," Ryan said standing back and admiring his work.

"What I can't understand is why you want to leave Geneva and all our luxuries? I mean live here all alone?" Dwayne asked.

"Because this is mine, I did it!" Ryan answered putting more plaster on the log walls. "Besides, sis is bringing Garrett home and there will be more with that lustful man she married. Their family will need more room. You know Pa wants Kerry to have Geneva's Hope."

"Yeah, I know," Dwayne agreed and rolled up his sleeves to once again start putting plaster on the wall. "Sis and that Wessex sure started on a family right away, didn't they?"

"That monger surely did. Didn't even give sis a chance to be a wife first."

"But, I thought that was the whole idea of a wife, the pleasures," Dwayne responded innocently. "Babies come out of those pleasures."

Ryan took a handful of plaster and hurled it at his younger brother. "Don't talk about sis like that. She's a lady! It's that bloody Brit that is a fiend."

Dwayne ducked the plaster and just laughed.

The two brothers worked together the rest of the morning and just sat down on the porch for a break. They were hungry and talked about eating some of the lunch that Aumond had sent with Ryan the night before. Cassidy and the others had been called to the herd by the ranch hands. There might have been some problems with a cougar.

In the distance Dwayne and Ryan noticed two riders approaching and from the look of their ponies they were Sosoni'.

Blue Pool and Oak Twig had viewed the ranch as they approached from the east side of the hill and decided it might be a place to ask where and how far the Eye of Hawk camp would be. Blue Pool brought his pony in front of Oak Twig as they approached the two men sitting on the porch of the ranch house. If there would be trouble he would shield Oak Twig. Blue Pool slowly brought his pony in to face the men. Speaking in Sosoni' he said, "We come in peace. We seek the camp of Eye of Hawk."



Ryan replied in Sosoni', "Eye of Hawk's camp is past the second hill as you ride straight from here." Ryan then pointed in the direction.

"You speak our language?" Blue Pool asked in surprise. He would not need his Oak Twig to translate on this occasion and that pleased him. The little white men would see or know of her, the better.

"My Pa's second wife, Morning Song, is Sosoni'. She is the mother of Eye of Hawk. It is she that has taught us to speak Sosoni'," Ryan replied respectfully. He could tell by the pony trappings and exquisite beadwork on the warrior's buckskins that this was an important man with his people.

"I am Blue Pool and this is my daughter, Oak Twig," Blue Pool answered somewhat surprised that this man was related to Sosoni' and the chief of the tribe he sought.

Dwayne stepped forward. "I am Dwayne and this is my brother, Ryan. Do you need drink or food?" Dwayne had noticed the obvious. They had been traveling for several days.

Oak Twig had been watching the men and listening as they spoke. Did she dare say anything? All white men were deceitful, but these men made her feel different. They spoke her tongue. They spoke it well. These two men said they were related to Eye of Hawk and they offered refreshment just as her own people would to travelers. The voice of Wooden Bowl was felt. *You are white. There will be a time when to reveal your true self. You will know this time.*

Oak Twig spoke quietly, "That would be kind of you." Oak Twig had responded in American. It had impressed her that these two men spoke Sosoni' and deemed to respond in Sosoni'. She would return the respect.

Blue Pool turned his head quickly at the sound of the words and gave Oak Twig a silencing scowl. He was not pleased that she let these men know she spoke American. Oak Twig was his daughter, even though she was a woman at eighteen seasons. Blue Pool had kept the Sosoni' bucks at bay and was not about to lose her to white men if they discovered her true lineage.

Ryan's attention was drawn from the proud and older warrior to the young beautiful maiden. Since Ryan was a part of Geneva and well acquainted with Sosoni' culture, he knew the woman was still a maiden by her dress and hair. Ryan's eyes surveyed the woman. She was dainty and probably no more than five feet tall. The maiden was slender of frame. *A good wind would pick her up and blow her away.* Ryan mused. The woman's face was without blemish a deep tan but not the same color as most Sosoni'. Her smile was enchanting revealing white pearls. Her eyes were the hazel brown of liquid gold, unusual for Sosoni' blood lines. Ryan guessed Blue Pool must have fathered Oak Twig by a captive white woman.

Dwayne didn't miss the scowl on Blue Pool's face as Ryan had while he stared at Oak Twig. "Have we offended?"



Blue Pool returned his attention to the men. "It was not an offense of yours, but my daughter's offense. She has spoken out of turn," Blue Pool replied and slid off his pony. "We accept your offer of rest and food."

Oak Twig did not hear Blue Pool's reprimand. Instead she was focused upon the huge man walking toward her pony. His gray eyes captivated her. He looked gentle and kind for a large man. Although her true mother's memory had faded, Oak Twig was reminded of those same gentle loving eyes. Oak Twig shook her head slightly as if to clear it. All white men were deceitful and evil. She was Sosoni'. The large hands that placed themselves on her waist and lifted her from her pony surprised her with the gentleness in which she was handled. Oak Twig's body had been lifted quite easily and then slowly allowed to slide down the great man's frame. A strange sensation accosted her as she slid down feeling the hardness of the chest and the bulge she knew was his manshaft.

Ryan had been immediately enchanted by this Sosoni' half-breed. He felt himself harden in desire the moment he touched her waist. When their eyes locked, he knew that something was happening inside and the area around them seemed to light up in an electrical charge similar to a bolt of lightening. Ryan had picked her up with such ease and without thought slid her down upon his long lean body. The result was his immediate undeniable physical passion.

Blue Pool turned as he felt the powerful electricity in the air and the scent of male lust. Blue Pool took Oak Twig's hand yanking her to his side and away from the giant.

Ryan knew the warrior had been angered by the awareness of the electrical charge of their touch. He didn't understand why the warrior was so protective of his daughter. The love of family was powerful with Sosoni', but this protectiveness was different somehow. He thought it must be because he was white and she a half-breed, but then it was obvious no buck had been allowed to claim her either. Something was unusual here. Ryan wanted to find out more about this maiden and her father and just why they were journeying to visit his half brother's camp. "Eye of Hawk's camp is almost a full day ride. Won't you rest and dine here as my guest? You can leave in the morning at sunrise."

"That is kind but strange for white men to offer to traveling Sosoni'," Blue Pool answered skeptically.

"Not so strange. It is the way of the Sosoni' and there here have been many Sosoni' camps offered to us for rest on our journeys. Dark Stone and Eagle's Beak have many times given my family respite. My half brother Eye of Hawk would offer you rest, so must I," Ryan countered. "It is our honor and duty to return the hospitality of our Sosoni' brother."



In dignity Blue Pool answered, "We accept your offer." Blue Pool was impressed by this white man's understanding of the Sosoni' people and their custom.

Blue Pool's acceptance pleased Ryan. Oak Twig intrigued him. Ryan wanted more time with the beautiful Sosoni' half-breed. "Come with me and I will show you my lodging. I haven't completed it, but the lodging will offer comfort."

The group walked into Ryan's ranch house. Blue Pool and Oak Twig's eyes widened at the spacious area. The entry was pale green plaster. A wooden structure resembled a cliff rising to another level. A carpet of green weavings lay on the floor. To the left was a place this Ryan called '*Parlor*'.

Oak Twig could not believe the sight of this '*Parlor*'. A great stone hearth rose majestically to the ceiling. The hardwood floor shined to reflect all that stood upon it. The carpet was a deep green with white borders that intricate flowers had been woven in design. Oak Twig had never seen such a carpet. Even the most talented weavers of her people could not have created such as the like as that rug. The furniture had green and white stripes in a shiny fabric. The furniture itself was made exquisitely by a master hand and highly polished reflecting the afternoon sunlight that danced through the deep green curtained windows. The windows were hard reminding Oak Twig of looking through a frozen lake. Her memory took her to a smaller cabin with a dirt floor. White curtains covered windows with oiled skins.

Ryan pointed out the next room on the left after the parlor. He called it, Dining room. A large table made of shiny wood and matching chairs graced the plastered white washed room. A large cabinet filled with sparkling white dishes decorated in flowers and gold caught Oak Twig's attention. Her real mother had dishes like that. A large red patterned carpet lay under this table. Memories not thought of in ten years began to flood Oak Twigs mind.

Ryan then led them to the place he called '*Kitchen*'. A large cook stove stood in the corner of one end. Glass cabinets stretched along the wall and they were filled with glass jars. Oak Twig remembered as a child her mother made those jars and filled them with the summer's fruits and vegetables from the garden. Her mother had called them '*preserves*'. There were racks under the cabinets and one of them held two loaves of freshly made bread. The aroma was heavenly and brought back more childhood memories for Oak Twig.

On the pine floor were braided rugs. A large braided rug was under the great trestle table and benches. There were two more cabinets filled with dishes in the room and a strange looking chair in the corner. Oak Twig recognized the chair as similar to the one her mother had put her little sister in. Oak Twig blurted out in Sosoni' to Ryan, "Where is your woman?"



Ryan turned in surprise. "Whatever had brought that question about? I have no woman," Ryan replied and then for no explainable reason of his own he looked into Oak Twig's golden eyes. "At least not yet."

Oak Twig would not be dissuaded. She pointed to the child's highchair in the corner. "You have the chair for children."

"Oh that," Ryan chuckled. The baby chair is for my nephew, Garrett. It is for my sister's son when they will visit me."

"Oh!" Oak Twig let her language escape once more and blushed through her deepened tan in embarrassment.

"You speak American well, don't you?" Ryan queried.

Oak Twig recognized her blunder immediately and looked to Blue Pool for guidance. How should she answer that? Oak Twig knew how much her secret meant to Blue Pool, especially since Wooden Bowl walked with the Spirits these two years past.

"Oak Twig does speak your tongue. She was taught in a white school and we use her almost everyday to translate for us with traders, blue coats, and other white men that come to our camp that would lie to us and cheat us," Blue Pool lied for Oak Twig.

"That must be why she is still a maiden," Ryan surmised. With his knowledge of Sosoni' culture she would be extremely valuable to their people. "Oak Twig must be valuable to your people. That is why she has not been taken as mate."

Blue Pool nodded his head in agreement again marveling at this white man's knowledge of his people and their ways.

Oak Twig felt herself blushing deeply. She did not understand why it upset her that this white man had noticed she was old to be a maiden. *'Perhaps he must think something is wrong with me.'* Oak Twig felt herself blushing more and not understanding why a white man's thought of her would upset her.

Ryan set about preparing the stove with kindling and old newspapers. Soon the cook stove was blazing and he walked to the larder closet and pulled out fresh cream butter, radishes, onions, a clove of garlic and potatoes. Ryan then reached into the cabinets and pulled out preserve jars of pickles, carrots and broccoli. Ryan went to the sink with a well water pump and used it to wash the potatoes and radishes.

Oak Twig watched in astonishment as the primed pump pulled the water out into the house and that this man contemplated making the meal when such was women's work.

Taking a knife out from one of the drawers in one of the lower cabinets, Ryan carefully sliced the radishes, onions and potatoes. Ryan put the onions, potatoes and a slab of creamy butter in a large black skillet with some garlic clove and put it on the cook stove.



"This is work I should do," Oak Twig said derisively in American and grabbed the skillet's handle. Her pained expression and quick movement indicated she had burnt her hand.

"Well you see, that would normally be your work, ma'am, but you don't know this kitchen and see what you've done?" Ryan chided her and took her hand gently palm up. "I'll tend it for you." Ryan pulled her the sink and ran cool water over the burn. He took a clean napkin from the china cabinet drawer and wrapped the burn carefully. "Just keep it wrapped up and let me do the cooking. This is my kitchen." There was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke to Oak Twig and both felt a sensation of comfort and belonging passing between them while he held her hand.

Oak Twig recalled her mistrust of white men. She could not allow herself to feel comfortable with them. She pulled her tiny hand from his large gentle one. "Thank you. It feels better and until I learn this magic of your kitchen I will let you cook, but I feel I must serve."

"Okay, if you feel the need, but let me get to work. You two must be starved!" Ryan said wishing he could caress more than her hand. Her golden eyes enticed while her slender body remained secret and hidden beneath that three-skinned doeskin Sosoni' dress.

Ryan focused on preparing the meal. Going to the cold box he pulled out some cured salted beef steaks Aumond had given him this morning for supper if he had planned staying late at the ranch. Ryan put those in a very large skillet with creamy butter and spiced them with pepper kept up on the rack near the cook stove. Last but not least the broccoli and carrot preserves were put in a large pan with some more creamy butter and flavored with pepper. Ryan used a large fork turning the sizzling steaks continually as he stirred the potatoes and vegetables.

Dwayne helped by putting large plates in the middle of the trestle table. He took the china dishes and flatware from their cabinets to set the table with. Dwayne then took a loaf of the bread and sliced it into about fifteen pieces and put a slab of creamy butter on the table. Dwayne went outside to the well and pulled out the can of fresh milk to serve with the meal and filled a glass pitcher with the ice-cold water to also put on the table.

"Napkins?" Ryan asked his brother. They were missing from the table. "Didn't Auntie Alyson teach you proper manners?"

Dwayne chuckled, "Oops. I forgot." He moved quickly to the china cabinet and pulled out four clean white linen napkins and placed them beside each plate.

Oak Twig and Blue Pool were in a state of shock. What were they to do? Oak Twig's memory again tweaked her mind. She whispered to Blue Pool, "Whatever they do, we do. That way we will not insult their ways."

Dwayne sat down on the bench by the table. Blue Pool and Oak Twig mimicked Dwayne and sat down.



"Dinner is served," Ryan announced as he put the steaks on a large platter and brought it to the table. Ryan turned and brought the potatoes and vegetable in the same manner. The radishes garnished the steak platter. "You may serve now, Oak Twig," Ryan smiled to the beautiful maiden and sat beside her.

Oak Twig rose and dutifully served Blue Pool, Ryan and Dwayne a steak from the platter, the potatoes, and vegetables. When they were served she sat next to Ryan waiting for them to eat.

"I know women eat after the men in your traditions, but this is my kitchen and you will eat with us Oak Twig," Ryan ordered in Sosoni' so Blue Pool would understand and picked up a steak carefully putting it on Oak Twig's plate. He then placed a large portion of potatoes and vegetables on her plate. "Eat! You are as scrawny as a starved grouse hen."

Oak Twig looked to Blue Pool and received a nod of approval. While she ate she remembered a scene of her childhood when she sat at the table with her white family.

The meal was delicious and although Blue Pool had difficulty with the knife and fork, he made a gallant effort to cut the meat and eat as his hosts did and consumed their meal.

Oak Twig had little problems. It was all coming back to her. "You have been very kind to us," Oak Twig remarked in Sosoni' taking a small bite of potato. "I hope that all works out well with our visit and we can return your hospitality."

"What is the purpose of your visit?" Dwayne asked Blue Pool.



Chapter Three

Blue Pool sat straight and answered quietly, "Our people have suffered under the hand of the agent and the reservation in the place you call Utah. Our women do not bear children and those that do, have not the milk to keep the babies alive. Our children, women and warriors are weak with hunger and exposure. They die of this hunger and of sickness. The white man has kept none of the promises from their treaty. There is no food, proper shelter, or blankets to protect our people. Many of our children and people have died from lung fever these past winters including my mate and mother to Oak Twig. The white people forbid our children to speak our language and are sent to their white schools set up on the land they call reservation."

"They come home with bruises on their bodies and tears in their eyes from white men punishment for speaking Sosoni', or telling of our ways," Oak Twig added.

"Tracker has told us of these cruelties," Ryan uttered thoughtfully. "How can Eye of Hawk help you?"

"Our people have heard that Eye of Hawk set up a permanent camp and has learned the white man ways of keeping their cattle and cutting the soil of Mother Earth," Oak Twig responded to Ryan's question and continued, "Our people have heard his people are healthy and healthy babies are born nourished to life by their mothers."

"Our people have also heard the white men do not plague Eye of Hawk to follow only their ways," Blue Pool added. "Eye of Hawk is still a proud chief teaching the ways of the Sosoni' warrior."

"Are these words true?" Oak Twig asked Ryan.

Ryan sipped from the glass of water and responded, "It is all true. Eye of Hawk is my brother and his camp and people are protected by Geneva's Hope."

"What is this Ge-ne-va?" Oak Twig asked carefully repeating the word Ryan had used. This time Oak Twig asked in American, "Is Ge-ne-va a reservation?"

Dwayne laughed, "Good God, no ma'am!"

"Geneva's Hope is my father's ranch. Pa gave land to Cougar's Paw, Eye of Hawk's father to use as a permanent camp," Ryan explained. "The Sosoni' live in peace learning our ways, keeping the Sosoni' ways."



They help protect the land from the evil hands and we learn many of the Sosoni' wisdoms. It is an equal barter."

"White men are evil," Oak Twig quickly agreed.

"I think there are good and bad on both sides, Oak Twig," Ryan stated. "At least from what I have seen so far. There is always some pompous scoundrel stirring up trouble for someone in every nationality."

Oak Twig looked at Ryan in confusion, "I do not understand these words you spoke."

Ryan became bold and touched her hand rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "Sorry Oak Twig. I just mean that there are bad men everywhere and two sides to every story."

Oak Twig's body jerked with Ryan's touch. She felt strange and sensations ran through her body, but she enjoyed his touch and did not move her hand. Oak Twig just stared into those gray eyes and felt a gentleness and kindness she recognized in Blue Pool, Wooden Bowl, and of course such a long time ago, her birth mother and father.

The two sat staring at each other for a length of time and Dwayne interrupted noting Blue Pool's displeasure, "Ryan, perhaps your guests would like to freshen up a bit."

"Huh? O yeah! Can I offer the two of you the comfort of a bath and privacy for a change of clothes or something"" Ryan offered quickly feeling embarrassment for his lingering stares.

Oak Twig removed her hand and translated for Blue Pool since Ryan had spoken in American, "Our good hosts offer a place to clean ourselves from our dusty ride."

Blue Pool nodded, "We would enjoy time to wash the dust from today's journey."

"Great! Dwayne, would you take Blue Pool and show him around Geneva's Branch?" Ryan suggested. "I'll take Oak Twig upstairs to the bathing room and show her how the heater works and the room she can spend the night in."

"Sure big brother," Dwayne told Ryan and then turned to Blue Pool and spoke in Sosoni', "My brother is going to show your daughter the bathing room and her room for the night. Would you like to see my brother's ranch?"

Blue Pool nodded, "I would like to see this Ge-ne-va of your brother's named for the father's."

"Good, we can start with the barn," Dwayne said and rose from the table. "Who does the dishes?"

"I will after I show Oak Twig the bathing room," Ryan volunteered.

"You know brother, you should either get a wife or a housekeeper if you're going to live here. I just can't see you roping steers with dish pan hands!" Dwayne teased.



Oak Twig heard another word she did not understand but she knew the word wife. The new word must mean wife she surmised. Trying to understand the words these men spoke was becoming more difficult, not like the simple and many times bad language of the white traders.

"Get outta here!" Ryan roared and threw a napkin at his brother.

Blue Pool looked at the two men quizzically. The volume was loud but the tone was playful. Sometimes you didn't need translations. They were brothers having fun with each other.

"This way my lady," Ryan bowed to Oak Twig and using his arm to indicate the direction of the entry to the house.

Oak Twig followed Ryan to the stairs and watched in confusion as he began mounting the stairs. She did not know how to climb such ledges and watched him carefully. His wanting to climb these small ledges for a bath also confused her. *Was there a small pool up there?*

Oak Twig climbed the small ledges one at a time solidly placing each foot next to each other before raising the next foot to put upon the next higher ledge. "I thought you were going to show me a place to bathe?"

"Indeed I am ma'am. It is up these stairs and then to the right."

"These small ledges are called stairs?"

Ryan grinned, "Yes, Oak Twig the small ledges are called stairs. You have learned another new word."

Oak Twig creased her brows, "How can one bathe up these stairs when the streams flow lower through Mother Earth?"

"Oh my little maiden, we have water up here just like we bring the water into the kitchen and we have another new word for you, tub," Ryan clucked in delight. It was fun teaching this innocent maiden the comforts of the white man. At least she wouldn't be too surprised at Eye of Hawk's lodgings when she saw some of these luxuries his people had adopted. "We even offer sweet fragrances to add to your warm bath water."

"Fragrances?" Oak Twig asked bringing her brows together once more.

"Sweet flower scents. They are oils of juniper, lavender and Kerry's favorite, Lilac. I bought the oils for my sister when she will come and visit."

"A chair for your sister's son and oils for her bath?" Oak Twig said skeptically. Surely this man is a typical lying and deceitful white man. *What white man could love a sister so dearly? Why am I feeling this way? I could not be envious of this white woman, Kerry!* "Your love for her is special."

"Kerry is very special to me. I do love her dearly," Ryan admitted walking up the stairs and then waiting at the landing for Oak Twig. "I can't wait to see my new nephew, Garrett."

"You have not seen her child?"



"No, she gave birth in a place called England," Ryan sighed. "I don't think I will ever forgive her Braden for taking her away from us."

Oak Twig smiled at the tenderness Ryan showed for his sister. She followed Ryan to a room at the end of the upstairs part of the lodge and gasped in surprise when he opened the door. "What are these things?" Oak Twig asked in bewilderment. Her eyes settled on the water closet.

"That's a little bit too difficult for me to explain to you," Ryan blushed noticing her staring at the water closet. How do you explain it, much less demonstrate it? He moved quickly to the large marble bowl with a brass pump handle. "This is a sink." Ryan pumped the handle and water flowed from it like a stream. These are the scents to put in your bath. Ryan opened the juniper one and let Oak Twig enjoy the aroma. You can open each of these and decide which one you prefer to put in your bath. These bottles are mine, I prefer sandalwood."

Oak Twig found she was staring in amazement at the mirror on the wall above the sink and touched it gingerly expecting it to be cold like ice. "Hard smooth water?"

"No, another new word. Mirror," Ryan explained. He chuckled at the wonder he presented to the Sosoni' maiden. It was like teaching a young child the wonders surrounding it. He removed Oak Twig's hand and stood behind her holding her shoulders. "You are very beautiful Oak Twig. The mirror reflects your beauty." Ryan rested his chin upon Oak Twig's head. "Yes, you are very beautiful."

Oak Twig saw Ryan's reflection, turned and saw him, touched his face and looked at the reflection and touched the hard cool surface. "Mir-ror," she repeated.

"Beautiful Oak Twig," Ryan repeated.

Oak Twig pulled away. This white man's nearness and manly scent was making her feel unknown and strange things. Her body was doing things she had never felt before. "Thank you, I think," Oak Twig stepped away and looked at this mirror again. Her face was no longer there. She was relieved. This mirror did not trap her image. Oak Twig stood in front of it again, stepped back and then checked to make sure her face was no longer in it. "What do you use this Mir-ror for?"

"A beautiful maiden uses it to comb her hair and make sure it is just right. She may apply paint if she wishes, which you have no need of. Or perhaps to check to see that her bonnet is set upon her hair just right," Ryan answered grinning. "I use the Mir-ror to shave. Take these whiskers off." Ryan took her hand and rubbed the palm gently over his face stubble.

"Your face grows hair?" Oak Twig asked. Sosoni' men grew hair on their heads, not face.

"Unfortunately, yes," Ryan chuckled. "We have to shave everyday unless we want a beard."



"Beard?" Oak Twig again wrinkled her forehead in question.

"Never mind," Ryan laughed. He moved to the tub explaining the new word, the pump to bring water into the tub and the heater above it. Ryan lit the kerosene heater. He pumped the water, which filled the heater, and the blue veined marble claw footed tub. He explained how the copper hot water heater worked. "While the water is heating, I will show you to your room that you can use to change and sleep tonight."

Oak Twig still amazed at the wonders of this man's lodging followed Ryan out of the bathing room into the hallway. Ryan led her back to the first door by the stairs.

"This will be your room for the night if you wish." Ryan walked into the room to allow Oak Twig to see it.

"Where will my father sleep?" Oak Twig asked as she gazed longingly at the soft feather bed with the beautiful red patterned quilt. As a child she had always snuck onto her mother and father's bed to take a nap. It was so soft and smelled of her mother.

"He will sleep in the room next to the bathing room. I'll show it to you if you like," Ryan offered to the wide-eyed woman.

"No, I need not see it," Oak Twig replied. *What manner of lodge was this that people slept in different rooms?* "Your lodge is filled with wonders. We thank you for your generous spirit."

"If you like my Geneva's Branch, you will love Geneva's Hope," Ryan chuckled. "I'll let you alone so you can clean up."

Ryan descended the stairs and went into the kitchen to clean up from the dinner. While he washed the dishes he heard Oak Twig move around upstairs and his imagination took him to watching her bathe in the tub. He imagined he was washing her back and then envisioned taking a warm soapy rag to her breasts. His body was soon hurting and he went to his own bathing room downstairs and splashed himself with cold water. It would not be wise to continue this imagining. Ryan towed his wet hair. He had never imagined about a woman before. This Oak Twig was affecting him like none other.

Oak Twig eased into the hot juniper scented water and could not believe this luxury. She had mixed the hot water from the heater and cold water from the pump. She had also remembered to turn off the kerosene heater when the water had drained from it as Ryan had instructed. Leisurely Oak Twig washed her body with the scented bar soap and washrag Ryan had laid out for her. Using the soap, Oak Twig washed her hair, rinsed it in the tub and lay within its water enjoying the tingling sensation of a hot bath. Oak Twig's skin began to wrinkle and reluctantly she left the tub. Oak Twig removed the stopper over the drain and watched the water disappear. *This lodge is a wonder!*

Wrapped only in a large towel, Oak Twig walked with her three skinned Sosoni' dress in hand to the bedroom she would use. She dried herself there with the soft towel and redressed in her breechclout, dress, leggings and moccasins.



Ryan had finished cleaning up the kitchen and went to the larder to retrieve some chicken eggs and put them on the trestle table. He pulled out a slab of cured bacon from the cold box and carefully placed it in a sealed glass container. "That should make a good breakfast for them," Ryan thought aloud. Ryan remembered the bedrooms did not have any firewood in them as they had yet to be used. *'I don't want Oak Twig catching a chill tonight.'* Odd, why had he thought of that? He went outside and pulled some large pine logs from the back porch and carried them upstairs. Ryan was thinking that Oak Twig was still in the bathing room since the door to the bedroom was ajar. Ryan startled Oak Twig when he entered.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were still bathing," Ryan apologized.

"As you can see I am not, but this is your lodge. You may come and go as you wish," Oak Twig replied as she gathered her wits and returned to brushing her hair with her buffalo bone comb.

"This is my lodge, but rude of me to intrude upon your privacy without permission," Ryan answered. "I brought firewood for tonight."

"I have never made a fire in a lodge as yours," Oak Twig said quietly. She was unsure how to accomplish the task although she had watched Ryan light the cook stove in the kitchen. The cook stove, another wonder.

"I'll light it for you and bring more logs to keep it going until tonight. I'll do the same for Blue Pool and his room," Ryan informed Oak Twig gallantly.

"Why are you doing this? So much trouble, for what purpose?" Oak Twig asked skeptically as she tugged on a persistent snarl with the comb.

"Just repaying debts on several Sosoni' acts of kindness to my family," Ryan answered bending down in front of the fireplace stirring kindling and old newspapers.

Oak Twig stared at Ryan's back. To her view he was a mountain. Even on the strongest bucks in the Sosoni' camps she had never seen such a broad expanse. A temptation pricked at her to walk over and touch the mountain, but Oak Twig refrained. "What you do for us is repayment?"

The fire started to blaze and Ryan put three large logs on the fire. He turned and with a trembling voice he replied, "It was Tracker and Little Bear of the Sosoni' that found and saved my sister from horror and possible death. My sister was carrying my nephew. The Sosoni' saved two lives most dear to me. Will it ever be enough to repay?"

"I'm sorry," Oak Twig replied feeling the depth of his words. "I did not realize. White men are so dishonest and selfish. They always want something."



"The white men you have seen are traders and pony soldiers. They are not all bad, but most that deal with your people are. Oak Twig, all white men are not like that," Ryan explained.

"I am beginning to see that," Oak Twig stated and tugged once more at the stubborn snarl.

"Let me help with that," Ryan chuckled at the woman straining to rid herself of the snarl on the back of her head and sat on the bed behind her. "Come sit on my lap. I'll show you we are not all bad."

Oak Twig moved gracefully to sit between Ryan's legs. Both knew immediately it was a bad idea, but neither admitted to it.

Oak Twig felt the hard muscles of Ryan's thighs and placed her hands gently on them to see if they felt like rock as much as they look like rock. She immediately felt a desire to see his nude body. The Sosoni' warriors would be seen shirtless and without leggings so one could see the body. This white man had everything covered and to her chagrin, Oak Twig wanted to see and touch this one.

At the touch of Oak Twig's hands Ryan felt a desire to crush Oak Twig to his chest and swallow her with intimate kisses. He felt his loins harden and the bulge was painful and rock hard against his jeans. Lord what was this woman doing to him? With concentration, Ryan untangled the snarl in Oak Twig's hair and found relief by combing through her deep brown hair noticing the red gold highlights that twinkled in the sunlight peeking through the window. The juniper scent accosted his nostrils and for the first time, Ryan actually felt light headed and giddy. "You have beautiful hair," Ryan noted and taking a lock in his hand pressed it to his nose and inhaled the hair scent deeply.

Blue Pool and Dwayne walked into the room at that moment.

"What is this?" Blue Pool demanded angrily. It was not accepted other than a betrothal that a warrior would comb the hair of a woman, a husband or a father was permitted. Not a stranger! Much less a white stranger!

Oak Twig leaped from Ryan's legs on to the floor by the bed. She was blushing from her head to her toes. "Father, have you seen this Geneva Branch?"

"The ranch is shown to me and I think enough has been shown to you, daughter. Come attend me in my cleaning," Blue Pool ordered.

Oak Twig obeyed meekly and walked to the bathing room, "Come Father, I will prepare everything for you."

Blue Pool glared at Ryan and left to follow Oak Twig.

After Blue Pool and Oak Twig were in the bathing room Dwayne taunted, "I think you've been snared big brother."

"What do you mean by that?" Ryan growled.

"I've seen you with many women and none interested you until this one," Dwayne snorted. "Other than your occasional paid liaisons, I've never seen you so hard. Are you in pain big brother?"



Ryan growled and threw a small pine log at Dwayne, "Shut up baby brother!"

"Oh ho! You do have it bad!" Dwayne laughed as he ducked the flung pine log. He sat on the bed holding his ribs as he continued to laugh and watched Ryan storm down the stairs.

Ryan brought more logs up to Oak Twigs room and ignored Dwayne's laughter. He brought logs for Blue Pool's room and was setting them down when Blue Pool walked in wrapped only in his buffalo robe. "My daughter reminded me I have been rude to your generosity. I am sorry," Blue Pool apologized.

"It's alright. I never meant to offend," Ryan said like a little boy pouting.

My daughter has also reminded me that you might not be aware of all our customs," Blue Pool grunted grudgingly.

"That is true Blue Pool. I am not aware of all Sosoni' customs, just some of them," Ryan admitted standing up to his full height.

Oak Twig walked in then carrying the exquisitely beaded and quilled bags belonging to Blue Pool. She looked hesitantly at her father and then Ryan.

"Don't look like such frightened rabbit, daughter. I apologized," Blue Pool chided. "Now go while I start my fire and dress."

Dwayne sauntered in the hallway as Ryan and Oak Twig left Blue Pool. "Big brother, we have to get going or Auntie Alyson will have our hides."

"Right baby brother. Go saddle our horses and I'll be right there," Ryan ordered. "Come with me Oak Twig. I want to show you where everything is that you and Blue Pool will need before Dwayne and I leave."

"Leave?" Oak Twig gasped. "You will leave us in your lodge alone?"

"I'm really sorry I can't be a better host, but I have to get back to Geneva's Hope with Dwayne," Ryan's eyes twinkled as he laughed. "I'm terrified of Auntie Alyson and I sure don't want her to get angry."

"Neither do I!" Dwayne exclaimed in agreement," and she told me to bring Ryan back with me."

Oak Twig giggled. It was funny to see such a mountain of a man afraid of a woman. It did remind her of her Sosoni' sisters and how many a brave warrior feared the anger of their women.

Ryan quickly showed Oak Twig the eggs, bacon, butter and bread. He pulled out a bottle of wild berry preserves that Auntie Alyson had made and then showed her where the milk was kept in the well. "Take whatever you need," Ryan offered.

"Ryan!" Dwayne shouted impatiently.

"Got to go!" Ryan told Oak Twig. "Take care, I'll see you soon."



Oak Twig walked out to the back porch with Ryan and watched the brothers ride away. She was pondering her strange feelings when her musing was interrupted by Blue Pool's voice.

"This man attracts you, daughter?"



Chapter Four

"Where have you boys been?" Auntie Alyson scolded.

"I was just working on Geneva's Branch," Ryan answered. "It's almost finished."

"It should be by now with all the time and effort you have put in it," Alyson Jameson said sternly. "You two go wash up. Dinner is ready and we have a lot to plan."

"Yes Auntie," the boys said in unison and left for the kitchen to clean up.

The dinner table at Geneva Ranch that night was filled not with conversation but orders from Alyson Jameson.

"Your Father sent a letter from England telling me that Ayden will be staying there."

"Aw shit!" Dwayne exclaimed.

"Watch your language Dwayne Sean McGillinen. You're not to old to have your mouth washed out with lye soap," Alyson threatened.

"Sorry, but that means I'm stuck with the financials of the ranch if Ayden isn't here to help Pa," Dwayne complained.

"I think you're forgetting that Braden is coming back with your sister and he has more experience with financial matters," Alyson reminded Dwayne. "He showed your Father he was quite adept at it when they worked together."

"Can I forget he is coming back?" Ryan groused.

"Braden is a fine gentleman, Ryan Patrick McGillinen," Alyson reprimanded. "He is your sister's husband and a permanent member of this household."

Ryan just shrugged his shoulders, "When is Kerry coming back?"

"Everyone should be back in about a week," Alyson told the boys and pulled out a wire. "I just got this today. Everyone has arrived in New York and they will be on the way here in day or two."

"Including Kerry and my new nephew?" Ryan asked excitedly.



"Everyone! Grady, Morning Song, Braden, Kerry, Bennett, Garrett, Grant and Celeste," Alyson beamed. She was as anxious as Ryan to see the new baby.

"When do we go to the whistle stop?" Dwayne asked his Auntie.

"They're going to send another wire at a stop half way," Alyson answered. "We need to ready Braden's carriage for their arrival."

"Huh? What for?" Dwayne asked. "What needs to be done to it?"

"It needs to be cleaned completely with lye soap and then polished with saddle soap so there won't be any germs or dirt to make Garrett sick. You have to clean things thoroughly for babies," Alyson replied indignantly.

"But why a carriage? Last time we just brought her horse, Maiden, and a change of clothes for sis," Dwayne foolishly tried to argue with his Auntie.

"Your sister is married and just had a baby! You twit!" Alyson nearly shouted red faced. "Certainly you can expect her to act like a tomboy anymore, and she has to take care of Garrett you nincompoop! She can't very well do that on Maiden's saddle in jean pants!"

Ryan chuckled listening to Dwayne and Auntie Alyson. His thoughts were suddenly drawn to the Sosoni' maiden with enchanting hazel eyes. He wondered what her child would look like and he concentrated on holding that little baby in his arms.

"Ryan, Hello! Hello! Are you there?" Dwayne interrupted Ryan's thoughts.

"What?" Ryan growled as he chewed a slice of rib steak.

"I asked if we should go check out Bright Moon's camp before we go to the rail stop," Dwayne repeated for the fourth time.

"Who is Bright Moon?"

"Boy, you are so roped up in Oak Twig you didn't learn anything did you?" Dwayne chided.

"I guess not, so why don't you enlighten me baby brother?"

"Blue Pool is Bright Moon's brother. Blue Pool is Puhagan and Bright Moon is Chief of your girlfriend's people."

"Oak Twig is not my girlfriend," Ryan denied with embarrassment.

"Could've fooled me big brother. Not when we walked into her room and saw you combing her hair. You sure looked hooked to me," Dwayne tormented in delight.

"What?" Alyson shrieked in dismay. "You were in a room alone with a Sosoni' Maiden?"

"I'm not a Braden Wessex!" Ryan growled angrily. "I didn't touch her. I was just helping her comb out a snarl in her hair. That's all!" Ryan got up from the table and stormed out of the house. He needed time to calm down. Just thinking of Oak Twig made him want and need her.



Several hours later in the cool dark evening Dwayne approached Ryan who was sitting on the porch, "Hey, I'm sorry to get you so lathered up. I was just teasing. I didn't realize how much she might mean to you."

"I don't care for your teasing at all baby brother," Ryan snarled. "I'm not a Braden Wessex you know! I wouldn't take a maiden without marriage."

"Well big brother, that's easy enough to say, but I would guess hard to do in some cases," Dwayne disagreed gently trying to defend his brother in law.

"It isn't that hard if you really respect a woman," Ryan disagreed.

"Respect yeah, but when a passion is lit, well it takes precedence over respect," Dwayne said knowingly.

"You got a lot of experience in that do you?" Ryan reproved.

"Actually yes! You guys always tease me about my good looks," Dwayne laughed. "The women like igniting my passion, that's all. They all want to sample this good looking body."

"Heaven protect them!" Ryan chortled and lifted his arms in supplication to the sky.

"Heaven doesn't but Dutch rubbers do!"

Ryan and Dwayne both laughed together on that statement.

"Are you going to answer me? Do you want to check out Bright Moon's camp? It's right over our mountains and north a little in Utah territory. They deserted the reservation and are hiding in the mountains along the border," Dwayne asked Ryan.

"Yeah, I want to see the people for myself. I want to see if it is as bad as they said," Ryan answered. "Tomorrow I'll go to Eye of Hawk's camp and listen to what Blue Pool's plan is."

"I wish I could go with you, but I have more financials to care of in Ely tomorrow with the bank. Pa wanted me to check on some stock he heard about last winter that they planned on selling in Ely this spring."

"We both have a lot to do tomorrow so let's get a good night's sleep and plan on checking out Bright Moon's camp in a day or two," Ryan said yawning.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Dwayne agreed as they walked back into the ranch house and into their respective bedrooms.

At dawn Ryan and Dwayne were both up, bathed, shaved, dressed and ate a hearty breakfast of griddlecakes, eggs, buttered bread with berry preserves, bacon, and hot coffee.

Ryan found he was thinking about Oak Twig and hoped she had a good night and a good breakfast with the food he left.

Dwayne and Ryan saddled their horses and parted company just outside of Eye of Hawk's camp. Dwayne continued on to Ely.



Ryan stopped at Eye of Hawk's lodge and was welcomed by Fragrant Flower when she opened the door hearing the horse's iron hooves. "Greetings Ryan my brother. What brings you to our lodge so early this morning?"

"I came to speak with Eye of Hawk," Ryan answered.

"He is inside our lodge with Bear Claw and Small Fox teaching them how to string a bow," Fragrant Flower indicated. "Come in."

"Eye of Hawk's back was to Ryan, "Welcome Ryan, what brings you to my lodge?"

"How did you know it was me?"

Eye of Hawk laughed, "I know your walk, I know your scent, and I heard Fragrant Flower say your name."

"I forgot how smart you Sosoni' are," Ryan guffawed.

Still laughing Eye of Hawk asked, "you know I am not a Tracker, so what do you want brother?"

"Some Sosoni' came to my ranch yesterday. They plan on visiting you today. I would like to be here for the gathering if it's okay with you," Ryan suggested.

"Who are these Sosoni'?"

"There is a Puhagan named Blue Pool and his daughter Oak Twig," Ryan replied. "Blue Pool is the brother of Bright Moon the chief of their people."

"I have heard of Bright Moon. He went to the white man's reservation seeking peace and hope for his people. The whites at the reservation betrayed him and now his people are almost gone from sickness and starvation," Eye of Hawk continued, "I heard he left the reservation and is hiding in mountains nearby."

"It appears everything that was said is true, but why the meeting with you?" Ryan asked.

"I am not blessed with Spirit vision as my mother and brother, Ryan McGillinen. Whatever they seek my brother, we will find out when they arrive at our camp won't we?" Eye of Hawk teased. "Have you news of my mother. Morning Song told me she would return in the spring."

"Yes, we heard they have returned from England and will be here in about two weeks," Ryan shared. "That is the other news I came here to tell you. I will have Kerry, Ben, and Garrett soon."

"My sons have missed their Morning Song as have I. Little Thundercloud is a playmate Bear Claw and Small Fox have missed."

"I'll sure be happy to have sis at home again," Ryan added thoughtfully.

"It is time you take a wife my brother," Eye of Hawk told Ryan placing a hand upon his shoulder. "I sense you have a need to protect and love. It would be a good thing for you to mate and fulfill those needs that grow within you. You are a true warrior, Ryan."



"What of Small Bird?" Fragrant Flower asked Ryan sitting next to her husband. "We have not seen her for seven sun risings."

"Her man Edward watches and dotes over her, Fragrant Flower. She is soon near her delivery time and Edward will not allow her to leave his side," Ryan answered. "Edward prepares for Braden's return and fears for Small Bird. He will not let her leave his sight."

"That is good that Edward cares so much for my sister," Eye of Hawk nodded in agreement to his brother in law's fretting. "Delivery time of the child can be dangerous for the woman. We should protect and worry."

"Small Bird told me she waits for sis to return," Ryan chuckled. "Small Bird wants Kerry to be with her when she delivers Edward's son."

"Ho Ho!" Fragrant Flower laughed, "The babe chooses when to be born, not the mother. Small Bird knows this."

"You will send for us when Small Bird's time arrives?" Eye of Hawk requested of Ryan smiling in silent agreement with his wife.

"Of course," Ryan promised.

"Good. Let us walk and look at the fields. We must plant soon and I wish to discuss the crops this year, since Grady and Ayden are not here," Eye of Hawk suggested rising to leave the cabin.

"I want to talk to you about the herds as well," Ryan added rising to walk with Eye of Hawk.

It was a few hours later when Eye of Hawk was notified that two Sosoni', Blue Pool and Oak Twig were riding toward their camp and were being lead by Tracker and Hunter. Tracker had been out at sunrise hunting rabbit for stew.

Eye of Hawk walked to the edge of the camp lodge area and greeted them, "welcome to our camp Blue Pool and Oak Twig. Come in side to rest and eat."

"I come to talk with Eye of Hawk," Blue Pool announced not surprised the warrior knew who he was.

"I am Eye of Hawk."

"I wish to council with you," Blue Pool said. "This is my daughter, Oak Twig. I would have her sit in council with us."

"So be it," Eye of Hawk agreed. "Come into my lodge and rest from your journey." Eye of Hawk instructed Little Bear to bring the council to his lodge.

Ryan was sitting with Bear Claw helping him string his bow when Eye of Hawk walked in with Blue Pool and Oak Twig.

"What is this man doing here?" Blue Pool asked Eye of Hawk surprised to see the large man Ryan in the camp of Eye of Hawk.

"He is my brother, a member of my house and council," Eye of Hawk replied firmly leaving no room for disapproval.



Oak Twig inhaled quickly and silently. She was happy to see Ryan again and very happy to know that Eye of Hawk trusted him as a brother and council member. Oak Twig did not know any other white man that could be so trusted and for some reason, that pleased her.

"Would you need nourishment?" Eye of Hawk questioned Blue Pool gesturing to sit.

"No, your brother saw to our care most generously," Blue Pool acknowledged. "I am not surprised that this Ryan is your brother and member of your council."

Soon the other council members arrived. The old wise ones were the first. They were Cherry Tree, Builder of Blinding Smoke, and Notched Red Wing. The council for the young warriors arrived next. They were Standing Rock, Bent Bow, and Crooked Smile. To Blue Pool's surprise two women entered and were introduced as the women's representatives on the council, they were White Dove and Fox Tail.

"My mother, Morning Song is with her mate Grady, so your daughter may sit in our council," Eye of Hawk announced.

"You have women sit on your council?" Blue Pool asked in amazement.

"My father, Cougar's Paw, had found the women's insight to be most helpful on many occasions. I have also," Eye of Hawk answered again leaving no quarter for dispute. Then with a smile, "It also brings a man a happier bed at night if the women have a say."

"That is very wise of you and your father, Cougar's Paw," Blue Pool agreed in amusement. "Your father's wisdom as well known in the Sosoni'."

Ryan took his seat to the right of Eye of Hawk and Blue Pool to the left. Oak Twig sat with the women across from Ryan and he was hard pressed to concentrate on the meeting as Ryan found that he kept returning to look at Oak Twig sitting proudly.

"Why have you come to my council?" Eye of Hawk requested of his guest.

"My people are dying of sickness and starvation. We have fled the white man's reservation where my people are made to beg and plead for all those things that were to be given us by treaty. None of this has happened. The white man takes our children and forces them to dress and learn the white man ways. We are punished if we practice or teach our children the way of the Sosoni'," Blue Pool expounded. "We have heard that you live in peace and prosper. You have your own land and the white traders and blue coats leave you in peace," taking a breath Blue Pool continued, "your people flourish and practice the way of the Sosoni' without trouble."

"It is true we own the land, but it is through the blood of the white man. Morning Song as the wife of Grady McGillinen owns this land by gift of her mate," Eye of Hawk explained. "It will continue to be the Sosoni's haven by inheritance of white man laws."



"We live in peace under the protection of Grady McGillinen and his Geneva's Hope," Notched Red Wing added.

"In return we protect his lands and cattle from invaders as the Crow, Arapahoe, Apache, and many times bad white men some of which they call rustlers," Standing Rock informed Blue Pool.

"We learn the ways of farming and ranching from Grady and his sons, but we can keep the ways of the Sосoni' as Grady and his family have learned our ways and respect them," Bent Bow said in his turn to speak. "We trade our labors and still live as before. We can no longer hunt the buffalo, but have learned to use the cattle in same way and even have milk cows to provide milk for our children and butter for our cooking."

"Can my people come into the shelter you have found?" Blue Pool asked hopefully.

Ryan had remained silent to this point and took his turn to speak. "There are many in Ely and other cities that do not like Eye of Hawk's protected lands. They are greedy and resent that your people have what they desire and would destroy. It is the marriage and blood relation of Grady McGillinen that silences them. To add another peoples to this camp would cause trouble."

"As Chief, would Bright Moon accept Eye of Hawk as his Chief?" White Dove asked Blue Pool.

"For the survival of his people I believe he would," Blue Pool answered.

"Believing would not be good enough," Standing Rock protested.

"It would still cause trouble with my people," Ryan argued.

"Then we have no choice but to return to the reservation and die," Blue Pool replied dejectedly.

"There is another way," Ryan suggested.

Blue Pool looked at the white man hopefully, "What path will that be?"

"Can you speak for Grady, your father?" Eye of Hawk queried.

"Father?" Oak Twig gasped and out of turn. Sheepishly she bowed her head knowing of her faux pas in the council.

Ryan grinned and looked at Oak Twig, "I do not speak for my father, I speak for myself. I have purchased and own a large ranch spread to the north of here. I will set aside 40 acres of it for Bright Moon's people with the agreement that they learn ranching, farming and protect my lands as Eye of Hawk's people protect Geneva's Hope. The people can hunt freely across my land and live in peace. In return I would share in their labors and promise my assistance in the accomplishment of this agreement."

Blue Pool was dumbfounded.



"Would you agree to this?" Eye of Hawk asked Blue Pool.
"Would Bright Moon agree to this?"

"I can speak for him and say he would agree," Blue Pool confirmed. Turning and looking to Ryan, "Why would you do this?"

"Two reasons. The first, as I told your daughter Oak Twig, it was Sосoni' that saved my sister and her baby's life," Ryan continued. "Second, a working relationship would benefit the both of us."

"It is agreed," Blue Pool nodded in joy.

"Good. You can read can't you, Oak Twig?" Ryan asked noticing her look of amazement. "That way you will know that we write an honest paper and neither will be cheated."

Oak Twig nodded.

Eye of Hawk concluded the council and ordered a feast of celebration to welcome Chief Bright Moon's people as neighbors. "When the feast is over you can journey to Geneva's Hope," Eye of Hawk whispered to Blue Pool.

Ryan walked to Oak Twig offering his hand as assistance to help her stand. "If you were impressed with Geneva's Branch, wait until you see Geneva's Hope!"

At dusk Ryan, Oak Twig and Blue Pool arrived at Geneva's Hope.

"This is the lodging of your people?" Oak Twig asked with astonishment. She sat motionless on her pony staring at the immense house. "How many of your people live in this house?"

"All of my people," Ryan chuckled. "It is the house of my father, Grady McGillinen."

Old George came from the barn to greet Ryan, "You didn't tell me you would have visitors."

"Didn't know until later this morning," Ryan responded. "Can you take our horses?"

"Sho Nuf, Mr. Ryan. I'll groom and feed 'em for ya."

Blue Pool looked dubiously at the old hand as he took the ponies, but Oak Twig translated that the man George would take the ponies to shelter and food.

Ryan boldly took Oak Twig's hand, "Come on in, Twiggy. I want to show you my father's house. Maybe you'll be more comfortable when you visit my ranch again."

"Twiggy?" Oak Twig repeated.

"If you don't mind I like that name for you. It seems to suit a tiny little thing like you much better," Ryan chuckled. "If all your people are as scrawny as you they could indeed need some fattening up."

"My people are hungry," Oak Twig replied seriously in contrast to Ryan's lighthearted teasing. "I pray to Tam Apo that all you have offered comes to be."



Chapter Five

Ryan gallantly opened the door for Oak Twig to enter Geneva's Hope ranch home. She stopped cold at the entrance and took in the twin circular staircases, the marble statue, the golden mirrors, exquisite rugs and the blue painted walls the color of the sky. Oak Twig looked up at the candelabra that lit the entrance and watched as prisms sparkled reflections in the mirror. "Is this real?"

Ryan laughed and took her hand, "It is very real, Twiggy." Ryan began leading her into the dining room. He knew he would find Auntie Alyson there or in her sewing room off the dining room.

Dwayne had been home for a while and came out of Grady's study when he heard Ryan laughing.

Blue Pool followed Oak Twig and he too was staring at the sight before him.

"If it's alright with you, I'll show you to your room," Dwayne offered speaking Sосoni' and showing his arm toward the stairs. Dwayne didn't have to be told they would be having dinner and spending the night. He was aware of Ryan's fascination with Oak Twig and it was too late to travel anymore. "You'll use Ayden's room. It's next to Ryan's. You can share the bathing room. Perhaps you would like to rest before dinner."

"My daughter, where is this Ryan taking her" Blue Pool asked as he walked up the stairs behind Dwayne.

"I believe he is looking for our Auntie Alyson. She will take Oak Twig in hand and settle her in for the night. Perhaps Oak Twig will rest before dinner," Dwayne answered in reassurance to Oak Twig's security.

Alyson looked up from her sewing machine as Ryan and a Sосoni' woman walked into the room. Alyson had been working on baby



clothes for Garrett as a surprise for Kerry when she returned home. "Well hello Ryan, do we have guests for dinner?"

"Yes we do, Auntie Alyson. I would like you to meet Twiggy, and Dwayne has taken her father, Blue Pool, up to Ayden's room," Ryan introduced. "Twiggy speaks American but her father speaks only Sосoni'."

"Welcome to Geneva's Hope, Twiggy," Alyson invited warmly and extended her hand to take Oak Twig's hand. "I'll take you to Kerry's room, it was just cleaned and has fresh sheets. Would you like to rest before dinner?"

Oak Twig's head was still spinning from the walk through the dining room. Never before had Oak Twig even guessed there was such beauty and elegance in a home. She thought the house a castle a princess lived in from a story her white mother read to her as a child. *Perhaps this Kerry is a Princess and Ryan is a Prince.*

"Dear?" Alyson pursued trying to get Oak Twig's attention. "Would you like to rest dear?"

Auntie Alyson's voice reached Oak Twig at last. "Yes, I would like to rest. Please."

Alyson began to lead Oak Twig upstairs when Ryan took her arm. "Auntie, a moment with you."

"One minute dear," Auntie Alyson excused herself politely. "Ryan wants a word with me. Possible instructions I'm sure." Alyson returned to Ryan.

"Auntie, would you do me a favor," Ryan asked. "Twiggy doesn't know what a water closet is and I thought you might show her, well you know..." Ryan blushed to a crimson hue.

Alyson Jameson chuckled at her nephew, "Of course. I would be glad to show her all about toilette."

"I'll let Aumond know we will have two more guests for dinner," Ryan offered in appreciation for her understanding of the delicate matter.

"Let Aumond know who our guests are as well nephew," Alyson suggested. "If he hears we have guests he'll want to show off his cuisine skills and I don't think Twiggy or her father would care very much for escargot."

"Yes ma'am," Ryan laughed in agreement.

Oak Twig was in a delirium. She had never heard words like this Ryan and his Auntie spoke. She had never seen such a home, and when she was led into Kerry's bedroom Oak Twig actually felt faint. The room was so large Oak Twig thought all of her camp might be seated comfortably there. The bed flowered satin quilt was as soft as a cloud. Oak Twig looked at the candelabra that lit the room and she saw more mirrors, paintings, desk and furniture. "It's beautiful!" Oak Twig exclaimed.



"I'm sure that would make Kerry happy to know you feel that way," Alyson said politely. "Would you like to bathe, my dear?"

"I think I should like to go back downstairs and relieve my body," Oak Twig whispered shyly. "Then I would take a bath if it is like the bath in the house of Ryan."

"Oh it is! Only it is prettier and larger," Alyson answered. "But you don't have to go downstairs to take care of relief my dear." Alyson took her into the bathing room and gave instructions on the use of the water closet.

Oak Twig was amazed at the device. "Everything is a wonder since I have met this Ryan."

"It is good to learn new things my dear. I'll leave you to your toilette. Do you need any help to bathe?"

"No, your Ryan showed me how to use the *f a u c e t* and *h e a t e r* at his ranch," Oak Twig said carefully.

"Very well my dear. I'll leave you and tend to helping Aumond prepare a dinner for you," Alyson said and left Oak Twig in the bathing room. She searched out Ryan quickly. "Out of curiosity, when was Twiggy at your ranch?"

"She and her father showed up yesterday when Dwayne was with me," Ryan explained. "Why?"

"Twiggy said you showed her how to work the faucet and heater in the bathing room."

"Auntie, she and her father had been on the trail for some time and they both looked like they would enjoy a hot bath," Ryan told his Auntie Alyson. "I had to show her. You wouldn't want me to give her a bath, would you?"

"Certainly not!" Alyson retorted. "Now tell me what your feelings are toward the girl."

"What feelings?" Ryan tried to deny but knew better than try to hide anything from a Stuart woman. They were strange that way.

"You know perfectly well I can read you like a book, Ryan Patrick McGillinen," Alyson scolded shaking her finger at Ryan. "You never brought any woman home before and I can see the light in your eyes when you look at her."

"I admit that she's different, and I do like her," Ryan confessed.

"Well it's about time. You and Ayden both should be married by now," Alyson reprimanded. "I like Twiggy as well. She'll make you a good wife. You'll see."

"Whoa Auntie," Ryan protested. "I just met her yesterday. I am not a Braden Wessex."

"Your father asked Ashley to marry him the first day," Alyson informed her nephew. "He knew he was in love and she was meant for him."

"Pa never told us that," Ryan gulped in astonishment.



"I remember that day very well," Alyson reminisced. "Grant Wessex was courting Ashley for a month when Grady met your mother. I was with Ashley when she walked across the road seeing Grant wave to her. A runaway carriage careened down the street heading right for Ashley. Your father ran into the road and pulled your mother out of the carriage's path just in time. Grant and Ashley invited Grady to dinner and the rest is history."

"Pa proposed to her that night?"

"Right after dinner. He swept her off her feet. One solid kiss and she was his," Alyson said sincerely. "Your mother was flattered by Grant Wessex's attention. An English Lord and all, but she fell head over heels in love with your father. It was love at first sight."

"They never told us," Ryan said thoughtfully.

"That's something special between two people, Ryan," Alyson replied with moisture filling her eyes. She remembered her own husband and how he had swept her off her feet. How she had loved him. "Just like you wouldn't like to tell me that you fell head over heels in love with Twiggy and she with you. I'm certain. You wouldn't talk about it, but I can see it."

"Auntie Alyson, I..." Ryan tried to say he wasn't sure about his feelings.

Alyson shook her head, "Remember Ryan, your mother and father loved each other deeply and were extremely happy until the day Ashley died."

"I'd better freshen up," Ryan excused. He needed time to think. Why did Auntie Alyson always know what was in his heart? Reality was, he did love Twiggy at first sight.

"That's a good idea nephew," Alyson chided. "Don't let that jewel get away from you. The two of you were created for each other."

Ryan walked swiftly away from Auntie Alyson. He felt an overwhelming desire to take Twiggy in his arms and keep her there. He did love her.

Oak Twig used the water closet and flushed it three times watching the water disappear and reappear in amazement. She pinched herself to see if she was awake or dreaming. Oak Twig felt like she was losing her grip on reality. Then there was Ryan. She didn't understand her feelings. When her father asked her if she was attracted to him. She had admitted that she was but explained it as admiring a kind and generous white man. There were so few of them that she had met. Admitting to herself, she was attracted to this gentle giant. She often thought of how comfortable she felt sitting on his lap as he combed her hair. She liked the feel of his rock hard thighs. She loved everything about this Ryan.

Slowly Oak Twig removed her three-skin dress and placed it carefully on the floor. After Oak Twig removed her breechclout, leggings, and moccasins her eye caught her reflection in the standing



mirror. Oak Twig stared at the white skin revealed from her neck down to her calves. She was a white woman. No one must ever find that out. Blue Pool loved her and needed her. Oak Twig remembered when she, Wooden Bowl, and Blue Pool had visited a white town in a place called Utah. A blue coat had brought a young woman into the town. The woman was wearing a Crow dress and had hair the color of the noon sun. Oak Twig heard the white people make horrible and cruel comments about her. Oak Twig heard them say she was taken from the Crow and would be returned to her white family. Oak Twig saw how badly she was treated. A warrior would have never treated the woman so badly. Remembering made Oak Twig cry. *No, the white man will never take me! I will stay with my people. Yes, they truly are my people.*

Ryan saw to Blue Pool's comfort and decided to take a quick bath. As he soaked he thought about what Auntie Alyson had said and what he was feeling about the beautiful half-breed. He was sure she was only part Sosoni'. Her mother must have taught her the American Language. Did that make a difference to him? *No, not one small bit.* If his father could fall in love at first sight, so could he.

Ryan stood and pulled out the chair next to his when Oak Twig entered the room behind Auntie Alyson. "For you ma'am," he said graciously.

"Thank you," Oak Twig said meekly and sat on the chair. She was more than uncomfortable in this room. In Ryan's ranch it was a trestle table with benches similar to her memory of her childhood home. This was different. The chairs were padded and upholstered with silken white flowered material. The frame of the chair was elegantly carved wood. The table was highly polished and if you looked you could see reflections in it. Paintings like she had never seen before graced the walls. A huge fireplace emitted warmth to the room as the flames danced in orange and blue lights upon the logs in the hearth. In Ryan's ranch there had been a spoon, a fork and knife set before her. Those simple utensils she could understand their usage as she watched Ryan use them while eating his meal. In front of her now were two or three of everything including shining crystal goblets.

A woman dressed in a gray linen frock with white apron appeared and poured water into one of each of the goblets set on the table. She then came back and poured a red liquid into each of the other goblets that had been set.

Oak Twig watched as the woman in the gray frock placed a shiny bowl with gold trim upon a matching plate. Another woman dressed in the same color frock placed a large bowl near Auntie Alyson.

"Thank you Marie," Alyson acknowledged the maid. "I'll serve." Alyson extended her arm and asked Oak Twig for her bowl.

Oak Twig watched as Auntie Alyson dipped a large bent spoon into the steaming liquid and poured its contents into her bowl. Ryan took



the bowl back and placed it back upon her plate. She watched as he passed his bowl to his Auntie and she filled it as well. Alyson was spooning a serving into her bowl when Oak Twig noticed a Sosoni' woman entering the room. Following the Sosoni' woman that was heavy with child was a tall handsome sandy haired man with her same eye color. The man was holding a Sosoni' girl about the age of three seasons.

Ryan stood up and walked immediately around the table to pull a chair. "I'm happy to see you joining us for dinner, Small Bird," Ryan greeted. "Edward seems to keep you locked up and away from our company."

"Edward frets about my comfort too much," Small Bird complained in fluent American. "He would have me in bed and serve me with trays all day if I allowed it."

"I merely want to care for my beloved," Edward stated matter of factly in proper British stoicism. He put Willow down and sought out the large book that was used to enhance her seat when she ate in the dining room with the family.

Oak Twig's brow creased together in confusion. A Sosoni' dressed in her doeskins, a white man fawning over her and concerned over her welfare, and also a young child.

Edward noted the woman's look when his eyes sought to find out where Willow had scampered off too. "Madam, is something amiss?"

Oak Twig dropped her eyes from her stare at the man. "You speak funny." She felt Ryan's body shake and then suddenly explode with a burst of laughter.

"I always told him that!" Ryan guffawed. "My dear Twiggy, wait until you meet Braden. You will find that all Brits speak funny."

"Brits?" Oak Twig asked with more confusion looking to the man Edward. "Is that the name of your people?"

"Indeed Madam. Lord Wessex and I are indeed British," Edward confirmed haughtily. "A lineage I am proud and grateful for as opposed to such barbarian ruffians such as Master Ryan."

"Boys, behave yourselves," Alyson admonished. "You're confusing and frightening Twiggy, and you, Edward, for shame! You could upset Small Bird. We can't have that in her delicate condition."

"Duly admonished," Edward conceded. "I would hold myself in dire accountability if I upset my wife in any manner."

"Wife?" Oak Twig heard herself mutter aloud just as a small hand reached for hers and tried to sit on her lap.

"Who?" the little voice asked as she crawled up on Oak Twig's lap.

"I am Oak Twig, and who are you?"

"Wil low," the little girl said carefully as she crawled upon her knees and took Oak Twig's face in her little hands. "Papa, eyes. Your eyes."



Edward was already retrieving Willow with his strong arms when he looked at Oak Twig, "Indeed Willow. Miss Oak Twig has the same color eyes. You are my smart little girl."

"Twiggy!" Ryan corrected stubbornly.

"As you wish Master Ryan, Miss Twiggy has the same color eyes," Edward complied and a small grin crossed his lips. "Perhaps there is some British blood in Miss Twiggy's bloodline, sir."

Ryan glared murderously at his stepbrother in law.

Oak Twig missed the jab. She was still in confusion regarding the Sosoni' woman with child and the little Sosoni' girl calling this Edward, 'Papa'. She turned to Ryan and whispered, "That Brit is Willow's father?"

"Yes Twiggy. He is Willow's father in a manner. If you define love over blood he is most certainly Willow's father," Ryan chuckled refraining from laughter at her description of Edward. "But the little one due any day is love and blood." Ryan took his soup spoon and dipped it into the bowl in front of him. "Eat Twiggy, you need to fatten up a bit."

"A child growing within does that quickly, brother," Small Bird teased patting her extended abdomen.

Ryan looked at Small Bird, "obviously!"

Again Oak Twig missed the family taunting. She took the same type spoon by her bowl and watching Ryan imitated his motions. She was bit more awkward but accomplished the feat despite her ignorance of eating with such utensils.

Dwayne entered the room and taking his own bowl dipped the ladle and served his own soup. After he placed the bowl in front of his chair he announced, "Blue Pool requested to eat quietly in his room. He wishes to meditate on the coming council with his brother and Chief Bright Moon."

"Does my father require me?" Oak Twig asked hopefully feeling rather uncomfortable at this formal eating.

"Blue Pool asks only that you send prayers for him. He wishes to say all the right words in explanation to his chief and brothers," Dwayne answered. "Your father wants desperately to help his people. He told me there are still young warriors with your people that stir anger and hatred. They want to kill all whites innocent or guilty. He fears they will stir the people against doing what will help them survive."

"Must we discuss such things at the dinner table?" Alyson reprimanded quickly. "You men can discuss your dreary politics after dinner in the study." She feared the topic would bring lengthy discussions upsetting to the two Sosoni' women seated at her table. Alyson had no children of her own but her motherly instincts projected to everyone within the reach of motherly love in her family, and she knew Oak Twig would soon be a part of her family just as Small Bird and Morning Song were.



Dwayne sat down quietly feeling quite admonished.

"I shall pray with you, Oak Twig," Small Bird told her with an understanding of the plight of Oak Twig's people. "Our people faced the same with my father, Cougar's Paw."

"No you shall not Madam," Edward discharged angrily. "I understand the need for your prayers but you are in no condition to participate in such strenuous labors. I forbid it!"

Small Bird looked meekly at Edward. She adored him the most when he acted in such a dominating manner. Of course it was allowed because he loved her and worried for her well being. Small Bird had no doubts Edward would love his child.

"Prayers? Strenuous?" Alyson attacked on behalf of her niece and her religious nature challenged.

"If you have seen Sosoni' prayers, Auntie Alyson, you would understand," Dwayne defended for Edward.

"Very well, if you say so," Alyson relented. "If Sosoni' prayers are too strenuous I have a suggestion. I will pray with you, Twiggy. God and Tam Apo are the same to me. I shall pray in my language and you in yours, but He will hear both our prayers for your people."

Oak Twig nodded. Never before had she met such a white family with the loving memories she had of her own loving family as a child. She watched Ryan carefully as the maid named Marie brought in salad, steak, and bread. Oak Twig used every utensil imitating Ryan's usage. When a large piece of brown cake was served to her she waited until Ryan began to eat his. Using her last fork she placed the brown cake in her mouth and found it was a most pleasurable experience. It was sweet and soft, melting in her mouth with a rich taste of butter and another flavor that she found she liked very much. "What is this brown piece?"

Ryan's eyes twinkled in delight as he responded, "This is chocolate cake my dear Twiggy."

"Cho co lit," Oak Twig imitated. "I like it."

Ryan beamed. Not only did he like having Oak Twig near to him, he found he relished every new experience with her like teaching a child and enjoying each new discovery. Ryan felt his paternal instincts grow within him. He felt a need to protect and care for Twiggy. He found his mind wander to holding a tiny babe in his arms to protect and nurture. It would be his and Twiggy's baby. Dwayne jolted his thoughts.

"Big brother, Hello! Are you there?" Dwayne reproached. "Good God man, ever since you met Twiggy you seem to float off into a different world."

Ryan turned crimson in embarrassment and after wiping his mouth with a napkin turned to Twiggy, "Excuse me ma'am, I need to have a private word with my brother." Ryan rose and walked briskly to Dwayne's side, "Let's go for a walk baby brother."



"I don't think so!" Dwayne retorted. "I want to have some more chocolate cake."

"You'll get fat baby brother," Ryan growled. "You need to take a walk."

"I don't think so!" Dwayne repeated. "I think my body would be in much better health if I just stayed in here. Wouldn't it Auntie Alyson?"

Aware of her nephew's antics, Alyson agreed with Dwayne, "I think Dwayne would remain much healthier avoiding the night air tonight."

"I'll talk to you later baby brother," Ryan vowed.

"I think Twiggy might like a brisk walk, Ryan," Alyson suggested. "Why don't you show her my rose garden while I help Marie and Andrea clean up the dinner dishes."

"I'll help you," Small Bird offered struggling to raise her girth from the chair.

"You'll do no such thing," Alyson admonished. "Edward is right to fret young lady. You are near your time and you must rest as much as possible for the labor ahead of you."

"Thank you for your support Madam," Edward said appreciatively. "Come my love. I'll help you to bed."

"Me too, Papa!" Willow stated wanting to be included.

"You too, my little Willow," Edward replied picking up Willow and his wife carefully extending his arm to encase Small Bird as they walked out of the dining room. "When I have my women safely tucked in bed, I will return to assist you."

Oak Twig simply could not believe this scene. She could not believe a white man caring so lovingly for a child and Sosoni' woman.

"Would you care to see Auntie Alyson's rose garden?" Ryan invited Oak Twig.

"Yes, very much," Oak Twig replied accepting Ryan's extended arm. "What is a rose garden?"

"A flower that would hide in shame at your beauty and a fragrance that entices," Ryan answered. "Much like how you entice me with your fragrance."

"You use so many words I do not understand," Oak Twig sighed.

They walked in silence to the rose garden.



Chapter Six

Once in the garden Oak Twig bent to smell a lovely red blossom and inhaled deeply. Another childhood memory rose to her mind. Her mother had a potted bush with these flowers that she cared for tenderly as she cared for her two daughters.

"A penny for your thoughts," Ryan said quietly watching Oak Twig finger the blossoms.

"I don't understand," Oak Twig asked pressing her brows together. It was an affectation Ryan knew signaled her confusion.

"It's just a saying, nothing important. What are you thinking about?"

"Since I have met you I am reminded of many things, and seem to be always asking questions. I don't understand much."

"You understand much that I don't. We understand different things. You teach me, and I'll teach you," Ryan answered reassuringly. "What questions do you have right now?"

"Since my memory with Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl," Oak Twig began.

"Wooden Bowl?"

"My adoptive mother," Oak Twig said too easily and bit her lip for the slip.

"Sorry, continue. You haven't mentioned that name," Ryan said in apology. He hadn't meant to interrupt and fortunately did not pick up on Twiggy's slip of the tongue.

"Well, since my memory with my family, I only have learned what we spoke of before. The lies and cruelty of white men," Oak Twig said and took a deep breath. "Here everything is so different. You live in no conflict with the Sosoni' way and I have seen a white man cherish and love a Sosoni' woman like a Sosoni' warrior would his mate."

"Does that really surprise you, Twiggy?" Ryan asked trying to understand such prejudice when he had grown up with none.

"Yes it does," Oak Twig replied. Taking another long breath to tell him the story she shared with no other. "I was in a white place you



call town with Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl. We were trading for food and cloth when a blue coat brought in a Crow woman. The woman had yellow hair and eyes as blue as the sky. The soldier had her hands tied and did not treat her well as he pulled her off her pony. She struggled against him and I heard him say white man bad words, 'Bitch, Harlot! I should return you to the savages. You prefer that filth touching you over me!' The blue coat slapped her so hard she stumbled and fell into the mud of the street. He laughed and I noticed all whites around also laughed. The whites said such a pig deserved to wallow in the mud. They said she should have killed herself rather than let a savage take her."

"I'm sorry, Twiggy. How old were you?" Ryan said sympathetically.

"I'm not sure of my age but I think I was eleven or twelve seasons," Oak Twig replied and continued her story. "The blue coat grabbed her shining hair and pulled her up. He threw her into a small cabin in the town, bolted the door outside and told her he would be contacting her family. I waited until dark and since I spoke some Crow and American I went to the window outside to talk to her. She was crying and sobbing like her heart was breaking. I asked her why she cried. She told me that she had been taken by the Crow as a child and although it was rough the first few years, later it became better and she fell in love with a Crow warrior. They had mated and had a baby girl. The blue coats left her baby but took her from the tepee telling her they were going to take her back to her own people. She begged them to let her get her baby, but they said let the savages take care of their own kind. She had been separated from her mate and her child. Both of whom she loved very much. The blue coats abused her with words, taunts, and even hit her. Her face was bruised badly. My heart went out to her. The blue coat walked in then and I hid underneath the window. I heard a muffled scream and the tearing of her doeskin. I peeked inside and saw the soldier lying on top of her. His backside bare and moving violently. She was struggling and screaming but no one could hear because his hand was over her mouth. I heard him tell her she should enjoy the taste of a white man instead of the filth she had chosen to sleep with."

"You saw a rape at such a young age," Ryan whispered and drew her close to him. He wanted to wipe away that memory of a white man. "We're not all like that, honest."

"You are showing me," Oak Twig agreed and allowed her small frame to be secured by his massive arms enfolding her in the security of his large frame.

"Did you tell your family" Ryan asked wondering what such an innocent would do seeing such a shocking scene.

"No, I waited until the blue coat had left and quietly in the dark unbolted the door. I helped the weeping woman to her feet and we fled



into the night. I did not return to my parents until the morning. I had made certain we could not be found. Soon a Crow warrior appeared in the woods. On his back he had the cradleboard of an infant. It was her mate. He and the child had come for her. They fled into the mountains and thanked me with a token. It was their baby's bracelet. They told me Tam Apo would smile upon me for helping them and to place this blessing on my child when I would have one. When I did return home, I felt Tam Apo was none to happy with me. Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl gave me a proper scolding and doing all the washing alone for a week as punishment.

Ryan smiled, "You were a naughty girl disappearing all night. I would have been worried as sick as your parents. But you did the right thing. Did you tell them?"

"No, because she was Crow. I thought better of it."

"You are a little imp!" Ryan chuckled and held her closer. She felt so right in his arms.

Oak Twig wiggled in his arms, "Again you use a word I do not know."

"Your American words are very good for a Sosoni', even a schooled Sosoni'. I am curious, where did you learn to speak the language so well?" Ryan asked.

Oak Twig looked into Ryan's gentle gray eyes and made no move to dislodge herself from his strong protective arms. Oak Twig wanted to tell Ryan the truth, she was white like he and had been born to a white family. Oak Twig feared the possibility of loathing and rejection from this white man she was growing fond of. It would be better to give him half-truths she decided. "I took schooling as a young one and Blue Pool thought it good to bring me to all trades with white men. My words grew with every trade including the bad words I heard about us and other of our people."

"I hope you never have to hear bad words again," Ryan wished holding her closely and inhaling the fresh juniper scent of her hair. A scent he liked even better than the lilac scent his sister favored.

The silence cloaked them. Oak Twig found she enjoyed being folded in Ryan's arms. It was like a haven, a place of safety, and a sacred place she could learn to trust and need. "You spoke of your sister and how Sosoni' saved her. Would you tell me this story as I have told you mine?"

"How could I refuse to tell my story showing the same trust you have shared with me?" Ryan questioned his eyes still twinkling. Ryan told her the story of Braden, Kerry, and Everett Mann. He told her how Everett had taken her. How Tracker, Little Bear and Hunter found the trail and found her. He told her of his fury when he saw his sister's bruised body. "Never in my life had I ever wanted to kill a man until that moment."



Oak Twig saw tears well in Ryan's eyes and she brushed them away with her hand. "But you did not. I think even if you had it would have been right to do."

"Oh Twiggy, I want to kiss you," Ryan moaned huskily.

"Kiss?" Oak Twig creased her brows once again.

"Kiss!" Ryan stated. "It goes like this..." He bent his head low and his lips lighted upon hers.

Oak Twig felt his tongue gently part her lips and reach to touch her tongue. Instinctively she pushed at his tongue not knowing what do. It caused him to hold her more tightly and press his mouth more firmly over hers and his tongue penetrated more deeply and urgently. Oak Twig felt his large hands slide down to her buttocks and felt those strong hands grasp her contoured bottom firmly pressing against his loins. She felt his manshaft become hard as stone bulging against his black jeans. To her own surprise she felt her body responding in a heady giddiness and felt a warmth flow through her body. Her shock disappeared and soon responded to his caress with rubbing her loins willingly against his.

"Ahem! Big Brother! Auntie Alyson is on her way out here," Dwayne chortled in delight. "I'm sure you wouldn't want her to see you acting like Braden, would you?"

Oak Twig heard a quiet roar as their lips separated.

"Baby brother, your timing is unspeakable as usual. I am going to thrash you!" Ryan threatened. "I will thrash you, I swear it."

"Not while Auntie Alyson is near," Dwayne taunted.

"It's time for our walk baby brother," Ryan snarled.

Oak Twig pulled on Ryan's arm. "Why are you so angry with him?"

"Here is a new word for you my sweet, nuisance!"

"What's a nuisance?" Alyson asked as she entered the rose garden. "Has Ryan disturbed you my dear?"

"He could have," Dwayne butted in mischievously.

"Shut Up!" Ryan bellowed irritably.

"Will you boys ever grow up?" Alyson admonished. "Come with me dear, we can say our prayers together. You boys run along and stay out of mischief. I should be very unhappy if I have to rub balms over cuts and bruises, or take a raw steak out for a black eye. I shall be very unhappy indeed!"

Alyson led Oak Twig to a stone bench a little further into the garden. Near the bench was carved structure of a woman with wings of a bird. "This is Ashley's grave. She was Ryan's mother and my sister. I often come here to talk to her. I ask her advice in raising her children. I tell her I miss her."

Oak Twig touched the woman's small hand. Many times she had spoken to the wind talking to her mother, Wooden Bowl. "I understand. I too speak to the spirits of my heart."



Alyson sat on the bench and folded her hands. In one hand she clutched a pink beaded rosary and began reciting her Hail Mary.

Oak Twig chanted softly to Tam Apo asking for guidance in her confused state and sudden womanly desires.

Ryan and Dwayne had disappeared quickly and no one knew where. It became evident later that Dwayne was hiding and Ryan was searching for him regardless of Auntie Alyson's warning.

About an hour later, Alyson led Oak Twig to Kerry's room and handed her a soft white cotton nightgown, "If you put this on tonight. You might sleep more comfortably. Do you know how to put it on?"

Oak Twig nodded her head. She was only eight at the time, but she remembered how her mother had placed one on her every night before she crept into her bed in the loft of the cabin. All these memories long submerged were flooding her with tearing emotions. Ten years had passed and she only knew the Sosoni' way. The white men were dirty; foul mouthed, liars, and cruel people. Suddenly these gentle memories flooded her. She remembered the love of her mother and father, and they were white. Oak Twig shook her head. She could not think of these things. Soon she would be back with Bright Moon's people and she would no longer be here among this family and the man, Ryan who was making her feel all these strange things. Oak Twig pulled off her doeskin and put on the nightgown. It felt so soft on her body and she liked the lilac scent it had. She pulled back the covers and climbing into the soft bed was soon asleep thinking she had climbed onto a cloud.

Oak Twig was roused from the comfortable bed by a gentle soft voice penetrating her pleasant dream.

"Wake up dear, the boys are getting ready," Alyson cooed gently.

"Mama?" Oak Twig responded in half sleep. She had been dreaming about her childhood and her parents, her white parents.

Alyson stood straight in surprised at the American word. *Why would a half breed or Sosoni' call out Mama?*

Oak Twig had never slept past sunrise before, but she had never slept in such a bed as this before either. Oak Twig threw off her covers and jumped from the bed. She did not realize in so doing she had revealed her creamy white thighs to Auntie Alyson.

"My God, Twiggy! You're white!" Alyson gasped in astonishment.

Tears poured from Oak Twig's eyes, "Please, Auntie Alyson, don't tell anyone, please!" Oak Twig fell to the floor on her knees and pleaded holding on to Alyson's robe.

"Twiggy dear, why wouldn't you want anyone to know?" Alyson asked in bewilderment.

"They would take me away from Blue Pool and my people."



"Who would take you away?"

"The blue coats would, and have you seen what happens to a white woman that had been taken by our people, raised and loved by our people, and then returned to their white families?" Oak Twig sobbed. Her body trembled in fear still clutching Alyson's robe.

Alyson could not understand the terror Oak Twig was showing but offered her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, "Twiggy dear, I won't tell a soul. If it's that important to you, I won't tell anyone."

Oak Twig caught her breath and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thank you!"

Alyson offered her hand to raise Oak Twig from her knees, "Twiggy dear, do you remember when you were taken?"

"Yes. I was about eight seasons when the Crow took me from my family's ranch."

"The Crow?"

"It was the Crow that took me. Several years later I learned from Blue Pool that the Crow had raided their Sosoni' camp shortly after they had taken me and Sosoni' warriors returned the raid in kind. That is when Blue Pool found me and took me as his daughter."

"Do you remember anything about your white family?" Alyson questioned taking Oak Twig's hand and sitting down on Kerry's bed.

"I remember bits and pieces, especially since I have visited Ryan's ranch and your home."

"Do you remember your name, your family's name?"

"Mama called me Dayton, and my older brother was Todd. I had a baby sister. She was called Jessica I think. It was so long ago." Oak Twig rubbed her temples as if in pain.

"Do you remember your family name, like mine is Alyson Jameson, Ryan McGillinen. You were Dayton..." Alyson prodded.

"Cay or Craw, oh I don't remember," Oak Twig sighed. "Is it really so important?"

"No dear, it isn't. I'm sorry." Alyson apologized.

"Don't tell, you promised," Oak Twig again pleaded to the older but beautiful woman.

"I won't tell. I promise," Alyson vowed. She wouldn't tell but she had other things in mind that she would put in motion. "You'd better get ready. The boys and your Blue Pool must be waiting breakfast for you by now."

Oak Twig rushed into the bathing room to freshen and even though it was late she just had to use that water closet once more before she left this marvelous ranch. She dressed quickly and almost flew into the dining room.

Blue Pool looked at her quizzically, "You have never slept so late my daughter. Are you ill?"

"I'm well my father," Oak Twig puffed catching her breath.



Ryan was up at first sight of her and pulled out the chair next to his place, "It won't hurt us to leave a little later. Take some time and eat a good breakfast."

The maid Marie came in carrying a warmed plate of griddlecakes, eggs, bacon and bread so fresh the butter spread upon it was melted. A cup of fresh cold milk was placed in front of Oak Twig. The food was so wonderful she felt a twinge of guilt enjoying such a feast knowing how hungry her people were.

Blue Pool and Dwayne left the table to check on the horses and supplies they would use for the two or three day trip.

The trip's duration would depend upon the weather in the mountains and if Bright Moon's people had come closer to the ranch trying to evade the blue coats hunting them.

Ryan sat back on his chair and lowly sipped his hot coffee watching Twiggy eating.

When Oak Twig had finished she drank some of the cold milk and smiled at Ryan.

"Are you still hungry? Would you want anything else?" Ryan asked thoughtfully. He could imagine how hungry Bright Moon's people must be since Blue Pool and Twiggy consumed so much food so quickly.

"I could not eat another bite, but could we...?" Oak Twig hesitated.

"What do you want Twiggy? Just ask me," Ryan leaned forward and chuckled.

"Could we bring some of that Choc co lit cake?" Oak Twig asked shyly with her hazel eyes twinkling brightly.

"Your wish is my command," Ryan bowed gallantly. He rose from the table and reappeared several minutes later with a box in his hand. "Monsieur Aumond is delighted that you desire his chocolate cake. I have brought all of it to take with us."

Oak Twig smiled and clapped her hands with childlike glee.

Ryan's heart melted and wished he could make Twiggy so happy all the time.

When Ryan and Twiggy walked outside they found two buckboards waiting in the front of the ranch house. One of the wagons had been filled with bags of flour, salt, pepper, and sugar. There were bags of dried beans, corn, oats, and potatoes. Beef Jerky, which the people knew as Pemmican, slabs of bacon, and crates of chickens filled one of the buckboards.

"What is this?" Oak Twig looked to Ryan.

"Dwayne and I thought your people might need some staples as they made their way to Geneva's Branch," Ryan explained. "But we only filled the one large buckboard. I don't know what the little buckboard is for."

Dwayne gave the explanation, "Old George told me that Auntie Alyson called down to him from the guest room telling him to get the



small buckboard ready and take her into town. Apparently she has important business with Duffey and Marshall Ewal."

"That's odd," Ryan mused.

"Ain't it though? Auntie Alyson usually talks about her plans with us and you would think if it concerned Duffey and Ewal she would have let us know," Dwayne agreed.

"Auntie Alyson never does anything in short notice or haste," Ryan added.

"No she doesn't."

"I hope it doesn't have anything to do with Mann or Kerry," Ryan stated furiously as the thought struck him. "If I get a chance I'd still geld that no good bastard."

Alyson heard Ryan as she walked out to bid the party a safe trip, "It's a private matter I need to take care of Ryan, nothing more. Don't worry. Have a safe trip and take good care of my dear Twiggy."

"Are you sure you don't want to wait until Dwayne and I come back and go with you to Duffey's office?" Ryan asked worriedly. He had never known his Auntie Alyson to be this evasive.

Alyson replied, "No. I don't choose to wait for you." She walked over to Oak Twig. "Do take care dear. I hope to see you again very soon." Alyson offered a light kiss upon Oak Twig's cheek.

Oak Twig hugged Alyson. Ryan helped Twiggy mount her pony.

The small party began their journey to the camp of Bright Moon.

Alyson Jameson ate a quick breakfast and left for Ely on her own mission.

George stopped the buckboard in front of Duffey's law office. Alyson had dressed in one of her best traveling suits of beige linen accented with black velvet lapels and cuffs. The form fitted jacket sparkling with ebony buttons. A matching parasol protected her fair skin from the sun and in her reticule she now kept a small derringer Grady had taught her to use.

Alyson walked into the office and identified herself. "Please inform Mr. Duffey that Alyson Jameson would like to see him about a private matter."

The young woman had looked up from her scribing and rose to announce the visitor. Breena walked into the next office announcing, "Uncle Duffey, Mrs. Alyson Jameson to see you."

Duffey rose quickly and followed his young niece out to greet Alyson. "Mrs. Jameson, what a delight to see you. I have not had the pleasure of your countenance for several weeks."

"Oh Mr. Duffey, how you do go on," Alyson blushed.

"Did your nephew Dwayne come with you?" Breen interjected hopefully.



"No Breena. Dwayne and Ryan are off on an important mission. A mission that will include your Uncle soon enough," Alyson reassured the young woman that obviously held a crush on her nephew. *One of many young women in Ely!* "My business is of another nature."

"Come into my office," Duffey invited. Duffey had his own crush on Alyson Jameson and delighted at the fact she had come to him for assistance. It would give him more of an opportunity to be in her company more often, whatever it was she needed. He showed her to a comfortable leather divan in the corner of his office and sat in the chair next to it, "What can I do for you Mrs. Jameson?"

"Oh Duffey, we have known each other so many years now, could you possibly call me Alyson?"

"I would be honored, Alyson. What can I do for you?"

"I would like to hire your services to find information for me. I would assume people in your venue require private detectives on occasion?"

"My curiosity is aroused, Alyson."

"I want you to find out about any abducted children reported taken by the Crow or any other peoples. The girl's name was Dayton and she had an older brother, a younger sister, and family name was Cay or Craw, or something like it," Alyson expounded and handed Duffey a piece of paper with the written information.

Duffey took the paper and looked into those lovely gray eyes of the Stuart family. "What has brought this about?"

"I believe I can help a lovely young woman with this information," Alyson volunteered.

"And just who is this woman?" Duffey asked skeptically.

"Let's just say I believe she will become a member of our family quite soon," Alyson giggled happily.

"Dwayne?" Duffey asked with a broad smile affected by the giddy mood of his client.

"Ryan," Alyson answered. "I do believe he has found his true love. He isn't sure just yet and neither is she, but they were meant for each other."

"What you're asking me to do is reveal the true identity of a white captive?"

"What I'm asking you to do is find out information on Dayton, Mr. Duffey," Alyson insisted.

"Brian!"

"Her name is Dayton."

"Alyson, please call me Brian," Duffey requested.

Alyson found the request made her feel like a young schoolgirl, but she liked the feeling. "Of course, Brian."

Duffey sat back against the chair and relaxed his guard a little more. "I do know some private detectives in Carson City. Do you know where this Crow abduction took place?"



"No. I really don't know. I guess it could have taken place in northern Arizona, southern Utah, or southern Nevada."

"I'll get the Pinkerton detectives on it right away. I'll wire them with all the information today," Duffey promised and boldly took Alyson's hand in his.

Alyson did not withdraw her hand but squeezed his hand. "Good. Please let me know anything you find out," Alyson instructed and rose to leave Duffey's office. She opened her reticule and offered Duffey several large bills.

"No Alyson. I'll let you know about the charges of the Pinkerton detectives, but my payment would be an invitation to share your person over dinner."

Alyson beamed, "Of course, Brian. You are invited to Geneva's Hope for dinner anytime."

Duffey walked Alyson to the boardwalk and helped her onto the buckboard. He left to send the wires as soon as George headed the buckboard back to Geneva's Hope. *I will get on this right away! There is nothing like dinner with the lovely Alyson Jameson.* Duffey whistled happily walking to the wire offices of Ely.



Chapter Seven

The travel to Bright Moon's camp had been relatively easy the first day. There were no spring rains to muddy the mountain paths making them slippery or entrapping the heavily laden buckboard.

Dwayne and Ryan selected to camp in a natural lea made of mountain cliffs and a shallow cave. It was a wise decision since at dusk a gentle rain fell upon the land and the group had the protection of the cave for their warming fire. The cave was large enough to house and protect their horses and the buckboard.

Oak Twig set about making a delicious meal of corn cake, beans, and stew. This was her kitchen, a place she knew very well. The hungry men were grateful for her talents.

After the meal Ryan presented the protected box of chocolate cake. "Your reward for a fine meal, Twiggy."

Oak Twig flashed Ryan a broad smile eagerly taking the box. Quickly she opened it and her mouth watered for the delicacy. Oak Twig removed her knife from her pouch and sliced a large piece. Oak Twig put it on a tin camp plate but picked up the large slice in her hand and devoured it in moments.

Oak Twig reminded Ryan of an impish child with her fingers, cheeks, and mouth covered with chocolate cake and icing. Ryan chuckled and removed a kerchief from his jeans. He took his canteen and damped the cloth with water. He leaned over and began wiping the offending chocolate from Oak Twig's cheeks and mouth. "You're a mess, Twiggy."

Oak Twig sat demurely allowing the gentle attentions of the giant. Blue Pool watched the couple carefully. Blue Pool had been given a vision by Tam Apo last night. His daughter and this white man would pair and save his people. What Tam Apo had revealed to him, he would abide with. It seemed after all he and Wooden Bowl had done to keep their beloved daughter safe from the hands of the white man was to save her for one special one. Oak Twig was destined to mate with her own people. Blue Pool shrugged and cast his eyes to the cave opening. He knew someone was approaching. Slowly he moved his hand to the knife on his belt.



Dwayne was reaching for the box of chocolate cake when a lone shadowed figure stood before the cave's mouth.

"Ho, I seek Blue Pool and Oak Twig," the figure said in Sosoni'.

Ryan dropped the kerchief and his hand went to his colt. "Who are you?" Ryan asked in Sosoni'.

Dwayne slid back into the shadows, his hand resting upon his colt.

Oak Twig placed her hand gently on the hand Ryan placed upon his gun. "It is Horse Tail. He is of Bright Moon's people. He is a scout warrior, our friend," she reassured in whispers.

Blue Pool rose silently and walked to the shadowed figure.

Standing tall and unafraid the figure answered the question, "I am Horse Tail of Bright Moon's camp. I would speak with Blue Pool and Oak Twig. I have seen their pony tracks with white men ponies and a travois."

Blue Pool reached Horse Tail and greeted him warmly. "I have much to discuss with my brother Bright Moon. Where is his camp?"

Oak Twig stood and gathered one of the many woolen blankets Eye of Hawk had sent for her people and walking briskly wrapped it around the wet and shaking body of Horse tail. "This will warm you."

Ryan felt a twinge of jealousy. Twiggy knew this warrior and the way Horse Tail had looked at her, Ryan knew he was a suitor. Ryan almost jumped out of his skin when he heard Horse Tail ask her to share the blanket with him to keep him warm by the fire.

Oak Twig giggled and told Horse Tail, "You can sit by the fire and warm yourself. You have no need of an extra body with you."

"Oh, but my Oak Twig, I would like you to share my blanket ever night," Horse Tail offered once again. It seemed like the thousandth time he had asked Oak Twig to become his mate.

Ryan was furious. Last night he had vowed he would accept love and first sight. He did love Twiggy and he wanted to marry her. He would ask Blue Pool for Twiggy's hand as soon as Bright Moon's people had settled on Geneva's Branch. Twiggy loved him. He knew she did from the way she kissed him back. His intentions couldn't wait another minute. He had to know if the gold he found had the same interest for him to stake a claim. "Twiggy, can I have a word with you?"

Blue Pool, Horse Tail, and Oak Twig looked at Ryan. His voice had been quiet but tinged with an icy calm. Ryan had also asked to speak to Oak Twig in American.

Oak Twig nodded her head and rose from her knees to walk to Ryan. Horse Tail grabbed her arm and tried to bring her back down next to him. Blue Pool interceded and withdrew Horse Tail's hand. "They would speak. This white man is good and kind. Let her be, Horse Tail."

Oak Twig looked to her father after he spoke. Blue Pool gave her a nod of consent and she walked to Ryan's side.



Ryan took Oak Twig's hand and pulled her to the farthest part of the cave away from the others. He spoke softly, "Who is this Horse Tail to you?"

"Why?" Oak Twig smiled sensing Ryan was jealous of her. Could he have felt these strange desires as she had when near him? Could he think of her in a special way as she thought of him?

"Because he acts like he owns you. I understand Sostoni' you know. He wants you in his blanket, Dammit!" Ryan protested.

"Horse Tail has sought me for his blanket many seasons. What makes this a concern to you?" Twiggy demanded hoping Ryan would admit he wanted her as she wanted him. "And you Ryan have used a bad word. You told me you never used bad words like other white men."

"It concerns me because..." Ryan choked and could not finish his words. He was afraid Twiggy would reject him until he had proved he was an honorable and worthy mate and white man.

"You see, you have no reason to be angry that Horse Tail wants me," Twiggy countered. Disappointment flooded through her. Ryan did not tell her he wanted her.

"Because I want you," Ryan uttered barely above a whisper.

"What?" Twiggy asked leaning closer to Ryan. Did he say the words she hoped?

"Because I want you!" Ryan said louder and pulled Twiggy in his arms. "Can't you tell how much I want you?"

"Kiss?" Twiggy teased and settled into Ryan's powerful arms. She was happy beyond words. Ryan gave his heart to her as he held her heart. Twiggy felt warm, safe, and secure in the haven of Ryan's arms. This would be her chosen mate. She would talk to her father when she had the opportunity.

"Oh yes. Kiss!" Ryan breathed huskily and covered Twiggy's mouth with his. Ryan pulled Twiggy against the hollow of his body. She fit so perfectly. His lips pressed against hers and his tongue parted her lips. In the dueling of their tongues they shared the passion growing between them, hot and moist passion growing and growing.

Twiggy's breasts were rubbing and tantalizing against his chest. The woman Ryan felt drove him to frenzy. His hands cupped her round and perfect derriere pulling her body into him more. He wanted her close and closer to keep her there.

Twiggy pulled away a moment to breath. Gasping erratically Twiggy muttered, "I want you also."

"Oh yes, my love." Ryan murmured in return his lips laving her creamy neck and sending tingling sensations soaring through Twiggy's body.

"I choose you to share my blanket every night," Twiggy whispered seductively in Ryan's ear. He was bringing her body to a peak of demand that revealed itself physically. Twiggy was hot and wet in desire.



Ryan inhaled her femininity and it took all the inner strength he had not to take Twiggy right there and then and to hell with consequence, but he would not dishonor Twiggy in front of her father. "I'll speak to Blue Pool about our marriage when there is a proper moment."

"Kiss?" Twiggy asked again. She liked Ryan's kissing as much as she liked the Choc co lit cake.

"Oh yes!" Ryan agreed maintaining his resolve not to be a Braden Wessex. However, it was several more minutes before they left the protection of the cavern's dark shadows.

Ryan excused himself and removing his jacket and shirt walked into the cool rain. His body was on fire with passion for Twiggy and he had to get it under control before facing Twiggy's father, suitor and his baby brother.

Oak Twig was feeling the warmth of her own ignited passion and watched worriedly as Ryan left the protection of the cave into the night rain.

Blue Pool and Horse Tail were aware of Oak Twig's agitated state. It displeased Horse Tail that Oak Twig had such interest in that white man.

"Daughter, come set up our beds for the night," Blue Pool interceded before words were spoken that should not be. "Place our beds by that corner." Blue Pool indicated where the beds should be placed. It was a small corner with just enough room for the two of them. "Horse Tail, you tend the fire."

Oak Twig quickly complied. Blue Pool and Oak Twig were soon tucked into their corner for the night.

Ryan returned several hours later after a long and cool wet walk. He was delighted to see Twiggy and her father secure in a corner. Horse Tail was by the fire and Dwayne calmly was reading a ledger book. Ryan removed his wet boots and jeans and wrapped an extra woolen blanket around his body. Ryan found refuge and a quiet sleep in his bedroll. He dreamed of his Twiggy, and their children. *Yep, Twiggy accepted my proposal.* He was very happy. Twiggy loved him as he loved her.

In the morning Ryan woke to the humming of Oak Twig as she made all a breakfast of corn cakes, bacon, and the precious eggs the chickens had laid the day before. Dwayne was already up and helping Oak Twig. Dwayne had made fresh hot coffee. It smelled wonderful.

Blue Pool was sitting at the fire with an agitated and irritated young warrior. "Horse tail tells me Bright Moon's camp is over that ridge. We should be to our camp by sun setting."

"So close?" Dwayne asked in Sосoni'.

Horse Tail jerked at the sound of the Sосoni' words coming from the young white man.



Blue Pool put his hand on Horse Tail's shoulder in reassurance. "They speak our Sosoni', Horse Tail. They are blood brothers to Eye of Hawk and our friends."

"Bah!" Horse Tail complained as he rose and stomped out of the cave. "All white men lie and cheat. They are no friend to the Sosoni'."

Ryan looked to Blue Pool and was about to ask him for Twiggy's hand, but Blue Pool raised his hand to silence him.

"Horse Tail tells me Bright Moon had to move camp twice since our journey," Blue Pool told Dwayne and Ryan. "The blue coats send our own people as scouts. Two scouts have not returned to the blue coat camp and stay with us, but there are others that follow and come."

"It is desperate then," Ryan concluded correctly.

Blue Pool nodded. "Our people do not have time to hunt. Their kettles are empty. Your ranch food is needed."

"Let's get going!" Ryan exclaimed. His need for Twiggy would have to wait until Bright Moon's people were fed and safe.

That night they sat at the campfire of Bright Moon and his council. Ryan and Dwayne spoke to the chief of their offer and protection. Bright Moon would have eagerly accepted the pact immediately. His niece, Oak Twig had told him of their honesty and generosity. Even the food he had brought was a blessing to his hungry people and they would all dine well this evening. Blue Pool had told his brother, Bright Moon, of Eye of Hawk's prosperity and happiness. It was everything that Bright Moon wanted for his people, but there were others on the council that did not believe or trust the white men. They had lost their mates and children under the benevolent hand of those traitorous and evil white man.

"All white men speak lies!" Fire Embers roared angrily. "Why would these be any different or trusted? Because they speak Sosoni'?"

"No, because we are brothers to your people," Dwayne replied.

"What blood of ours do you claim?" shouted Painted Pony.

"I am Dwayne McGillinen, son of Morning Song. You have heard of Morning Song? Mother of Eye of Hawk!" Dwayne answered calmly not allowing the warriors to irritate them.

"Bah!" Horse Tail emitted in denial. "You are white, not the son of Morning Song!"

"Morning Song is the mother of my heart. She raised me as her own son," Ryan protested quietly.

"Morning Song is mated to Grady McGillinen, our father," Ryan added trying to keep his temper in check.

"Where is your Morning Song then?" Deep Snow asked defiantly.

"Our mother is with our father on the great iron horse. She is returning from a distant land called England. Morning Song was with



our sister helping her birth her son," Dwayne explained with great control. "It is the Sosoni' way to have the grandmother there at birth."

"It is a tall story you tell. Most convenient!" Horse Tail scoffed.

Ryan was losing his temper. "Look, we came to offer you peace and shelter. If you do not want it, then so be it. Take the food and blankets we give and try to survive as you will."

Oak Twig looked to her father Blue Pool for help. She did not want Ryan to leave and lose their last hope for survival. Blue Pool knew what to do. Tam Apo had told him in a vision.

"If you do not believe their blood is ours, then you do not believe me," Blue Pool announced. "I have seen with my own eyes and spoken to Eye of Hawk who confirms these men are his blood and highly respected with his people. They are allowed and asked to sit on Eye of Hawk's council. Do any of you call me a liar and cheat?"

"I still do not trust white man papers!" Deep Snow snapped angrily. "My children have died because of their agreements and my mate is now barren."

"Would you trust our own blood tie?" Blue Pool asked the council.

A quiet mumbling surround the council and Bright Moon asked, "Blue Pool of what blood tie do you speak?"

"All you here know how valuable our Oak Twig and my daughter is to this people and my heart?" Blue Pool asked.

The entire council nodded.

"I offer my daughter to Ryan as mated. She will be the blood tie to seal this agreement," Blue Pool declared slowly for all to understand.

Oak Twig gasped in surprise or joy, she was not certain.

Ryan couldn't believe what he heard. A wide smile crossed his lips and nodded to Blue Pool. "I accept the pact with joy and happy heart."

Blue Pool looked at Ryan, "What do you offer as dowry for my daughter?"

If Ryan had been asked to give Blue Pool the moon he would have roped it and brought it down from the sky. Quickly and without thought Ryan began listing all he would give. "100 head of beef cattle, 50 milk cows, 50 sheep consisting of 10 rams, 30 ewes, and 10 lambs. I will give Blue Pool 15 mustang ponies, 200 woolen blankets, and all seed he would need for the first year crop."

Chief Bright Moon laughed loudly and swatted his brother Blue Pool on the back. "I should ask Torn Dress to give me a daughter. You are suddenly a very rich man, Blue Pool. Richer than your chief!"

Ryan turned to Bright Pool and addressed him, "To you, as Chief, I offer the pact of a camp and wood to build lodges upon Geneva's Branch land. I give you 200 head of beef cattle, 100 milk cows, 50 calves, 25 mustang ponies and 200 woolen blankets. I will give you all



the seed you need for the first year crop. I will have my ranch hands teach you the way of cutting Mother Earth for food. For every tree that is cut for lodging, two seedlings will be planted to replace it so the Eagle's may still build their nests."

"Ho! You are now richer brother, and Mother Earth still protected," Blue Pool teased.

"Bah!" Horse Tail snarled. "It is all lies! You would have us turn away from our Tam Apo and become as the white man."

Ryan looked at Horse Tail and said quietly, "In your own camp you may continue the way of Sosoni'. Upon my marriage to Oak Twig, I will sign the land under the camp of Bright Moon to her. It will be done legally under the law of white men. In their eyes, my wife, your Oak Twig will own the land. It will be as with Eye of Hawk. His mother, Morning Song, the wife of Grady McGillinen owns the camp land legally in white man law."

Dwayne looked in astonishment at his brother, but kept writing with the charcoal upon the ledgers he brought with him. The dowry was a tiny dent in the ranch financials Ryan had built up, but the marriage arrangements with Twiggy were astounding. Dwayne could not believe his hard working, bachelor work a holic brother would be marrying.

"Not just words my friend," Ryan declared. "My brother Dwayne keeps the ledgers, he has written down all that I have offered in payment and will see to it that all promised will be delivered. Show these words to Oak Twig. She told me she could read white man words."

Dwayne stood up and handed the ledger book to Oak Twig. "Welcome to our family, Twiggy." Dwayne shot Oak Twig a broad smile as he handed her the book.

Oak Twig smiled back to Dwayne. She was happy to be a member of their family and the kind, loving, gentle giant, Ryan. She took the ledger book. Oak Twig read the markings slowly and carefully and then announced, "All that Ryan has spoken has been written down and accounted for."

"Bah! Those are just markings. It means nothing with white men," Horse Tail growled and rose angrily. He walked toward Oak Twig. "Come with me Oak Twig, defy your father and this council. This man will only defile and hurt you! I will love and cherish you!"

Oak Twig rose and squared her shoulders. "No Horse Tail! I will not defy my father or this council. It is a wise council. It is a happy council. I trust this man Ryan with my life and heart. He will not defile or hurt me. I happily accept this blood tie."

Ryan was on his feet to face Horse Tail. "I will love and cherish Oak Twig. There should be no doubt."

"This white man will have to give great value to Oak Twig for all he will pay Blue Pool," Fire Embers noted.

"Bah!" Horse Tail spat.



"You will abide by the council or remove yourself to another camp," Bright Moon ordered Horse Tail.

Horse Tail knew there was no where else to go, "I will abide by the council, but I will wait for Oak Twig when she and all you discover you can trust no white man or give them your heart." Horse Tail left the council.

"This council is ended. We will begin the journey to our new camp on Geneva's Branch land. The blood tie will be our pact and we will sign the papers of this Ryan," Bright Moon announced ending all discussions. "When will you set the time of uniting, Blue Pool?"

"To make sure that all of our people feel comfortable with their new camp, I will wait for one moon cycle after we arrive on Geneva's Branch and the papers are signed."

"It is so!" Bright Moon decreed without opposition.



Chapter Eight

Ryan walked to Oak Twig and boldly took her in his arms, "I'm so happy, Twiggy!"

"I had no idea how valuable I am to you," Twiggy grinned. "You have paid a fortune for me that has never been heard of before with my people."

"I'd throw in cash money and gold pieces if Blue Pool could use them," Ryan told Twiggy lovingly. "You made me happy and proud when you told the council our mating is good. It will be, I promise you!"

"Come daughter, you are not his mate yet!" Blue Pool scolded. "Ryan, Bright Moon has said you and your brother can sleep in his lodge tonight."

Ryan acknowledged Blue Pool's words and walked back to Bright Moon, but gave Twiggy a look to let her know how much he loved her.

As Oak Twig and Blue Pool walked to the cave shelter that had been set-aside for them she asked her father, "Why did you offer me as the blood tie for our camp pact with Geneva's Branch land?"

"Two nights ago in the room of Geneva's Hope Ranch, Tam Apo gave me a vision. A white cloud surrounded a White Mountain peak and stayed there. It rained with nourishment for Mother Earth, but also allowed the sun to shine upon the people. I saw our people in the valley under the White Mountains grow healthy and happy. There were smiling children and they were well fed and learning the Sosoni' way. Our people lived in peace and prosperity. The white cloud was you, as you are white woman. The White Mountain peak was Ryan as the white man of power and strength. His peak was surrounded by your essence. It is this vision that showed me of your mating and the good medicine it will bring."

"You have protected me from the white hatred, and now you give me to white love, father," Oak Twig said philosophically.

"Yes, you see it is good medicine. The Tam Apo has told me this."

"I am happy my father. I feel good in Ryan's arms and will find comfort in his blanket, but he does not know I am white as he. I fear telling him," Oak Twig said hesitantly. "Should I tell him today?"

"Not yet, it is not the time," Blue Pool responded firmly. "Tam Apo will have you reveal the truth to this Ryan when it is time for him to



know. It will be at a critical time for you my daughter. A time when you must face your insecurity."

The next morning Ryan sought his Twiggy after breakfast. She was busy washing her doeskins and her father's buckskins. Ryan was frustrated because although he was now betrothed to Twiggy, the Sosoni' were purposely keeping them apart. This was another custom he was not aware of. The people shadowed him and several stayed close to him as he sought Twiggy out. He would definitely talk to Small Bird about this to find out if it was the people's custom or the custom of Bright Moon's people alone.

"Ryan, we should not be seen together," Twiggy chastised as she turned to his voice calling her.

"Why? We are going to marry," Ryan protested.

"It is not our way," Oak Twig giggled. "Besides you have not yet paid for me."

"Sweetheart, I came to tell you that Dwayne and I must leave this morning," Ryan said lovingly. "I'll miss you desperately, and now that I know payment is required before I touch you. I will have the dowry payment waiting for Blue Pool and Bright Moon upon your people's arrival at Geneva's Branch."

"The dowry still will not allow access to me until we share our blanket after uniting," Twiggy giggled once more. "I cannot wait until that time. Then we can kiss again, yes?"

"Oh Yes!" Ryan stated emphatically and bent down to kiss her luscious lips.

Twiggy stepped back quickly, "No! No! You cannot, it is bad medicine."

Ryan looked rejected and sighed. "This uniting can be none to soon for me."

"Perhaps at your Geneva's Branch we can sneak away and kiss. It is not bad medicine if no one can see us," Twiggy whispered giving Ryan hope once more.

"I'll take care of my business and bring Kerry home quickly so we can have that time," Ryan breathed huskily. Lord, he wanted Twiggy and to his chagrin he was beginning to understand the bonding issue that breaks propriety and be damned if passion doesn't take over.

Twiggy looked longingly to Ryan. Again he talked of the Kerry. Twiggy wasn't sure if she wanted to meet this woman, albeit sister, who was so important to Ryan. Would this sister condemn her for not killing herself and instead accepting and loving her people? Twiggy also hoped that she would hold a stronger place in Ryan's heart. "Return to your lodge quickly my heart. I shall miss you."

"As fast as I can," Ryan promised.



Without the buckboard and with the clear weather, Dwayne and Ryan were back to Geneva's Hope in a day and a half. Ryan returned to Geneva's Branch and informed Cassidy to cut the beef cattle, milk cows, sheep, and mustangs for Blue Pool and Bright Moon according to the ledgers Dwayne had copied. Ryan then called his ranch hands and told them of the land to be set-aside for Bright Moon's people and the agreement that would be made. Since the hands were all aware of the agreement Eye of Hawk's tribe had with Geneva's Hope, they were not surprised and grateful that Geneva's Branch would also have the same protection and working agreement with the Sosoni'. The agreement would provide Geneva's Branch protection from renegade, Sosoni', Crow, Paiute, Bannock, Apaches, and their own bandits, such as rustlers. Most of Ryan's hands even volunteered to help them build the people permanent lodgings and some teach them to farm.

Once the land for the camp had been marked, Ryan put Cassidy in charge and made a hurried trip into Ely to purchase furniture to complete his ranch home. Ryan took special pains for the purchase of a bed that he and Twiggy would share. It had to be special.

Ryan's next stop would be the law office of his family's friend and counsel, Brian Duffey.

"Ryan," Breena greeted. She looked around the man mountain and then asked, "Is Dwayne with you?"

"No, he's back at Geneva's Hope," Ryan chuckled. Everywhere he went there was a woman just waiting for his little brother, the rakehell. "I need to speak to Duffey."

"Sorry to say Ryan, he's not in at the moment," Breena replied disappointed his brother was not with him.

"When will he be back?"

"Uncle Brian had some business at the Wicker ranch and should be back this evening," Breena answered. "I'm sure he will be since he has been fidgeting waiting for these wires that came today."

"If you don't mind I'll leave a note for him and this copy of an agreement that Dwayne helped draw up," Ryan requested. "I need this all nice and legal and submitted to the capitol."

"I'll be sure to give it to Uncle Brian upon his return and we'll take care of it."

Ryan took some time and wrote down explicit instructions regarding the agreement with the Sosoni' people of Bright Moon and handed the papers to Breena, "Thank you."

"You are very welcome, Ryan. Please send my regards to Dwayne," Breena fluttered revealing her girlish crush on his brother.

"I surely will give Dwayne your greetings, Miss Breena," Ryan vowed smiling at the young girl's fruitless crush.

Upon Brian Duffey's return to his office, Breena handed him the papers Ryan McGillinen had left for him and the wires he had been



waiting for. Opening the wires he smiled broadly. He would be able to give Alyson Jameson all her answers, and Ryan well, wouldn't he be surprised. Duffey spent the rest of the afternoon preparing Ryan's legal documents for signature and submission to the State Capitol.

"Breena, I'll be leaving for Carson City tomorrow or the day after, but I'll be dropping these documents off at Geneva's Hope tomorrow first light. When Ryan McGillinen returns, make sure a copy is given to him, one copy remains in our safe and send the other off to the capitol," Duffey instructed.

"How long will you be gone, Uncle Brian?"

"I'm not certain, but you are doing well with your apprenticeship. I'm sure you can handle the office in my temporary absence. I'll be sure to wire you of my itinerary and you will be able to reach me by wire," Duffey told his niece. "You'll do just fine without me."

Ryan decided to do some shopping for his future bride at the Ely mercantile and town gossips left with mouthfuls. Ryan McGillinen was purchasing bolts of feminine material and ready-made frocks for a woman. He was reportedly buying toiletry for women and even unmentionables.

Ryan finished his purchasing and walked out into the glaring sun. While he was adjusting his eyesight he bumped into a heavily perfumed feminine body that the other good Christian ladies of Ely were ignoring. "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"Whoa big boy, you don't have to beg my pardon," the young voluptuous blonde cooed. "You wouldn't need some company tonight would you?"

Focusing on the blur and recognizing the woman's come on, Ryan answered, "No ma'am. I am in no need of company tonight or any other night."

"More the pity," the blonde sighed. "Are you married?"

"Not yet, but soon. And extremely in love," Ryan chuckled. "Are you one of Mrs. Arden's girls?"

"Does she run the cat house here?" the blonde asked.

"Don't you know?" Ryan countered in surprise.

"Nope, just got into town from Virginia City," the blonde sighed once more. "Didn't care for the clientele."

"I'm not sure you'll like the clientele here in the back alley district either," Ryan chortled.

"Not much else for a girl like me to do anyway," the blonde replied sadly. "No folks or kin. Raised by a bar maid."

"There are opportunities in hotels for cooks, waitresses, or chambermaids in Ely," Ryan expressed to the young blue-eyed blonde.



"Did you take a good look at me, mister? I'm not exactly the type good people want be served by even though I can sew with the best of the quilt makers," she responded regretfully. "If I were given a chance to change my life, don't you think I would?"

"Do you really want a chance?" Ryan offered thinking about his Twiggy and how he would take care of her. Geneva's Branch would need at least one housekeeper and a cook.

"You offering?"

"Can you cook, clean, and sew?" Ryan asked.

"I can clean and sew," the blonde answered. "I can't cook very well at all, but I would be willing to learn."

"I have need of a housekeeper at my ranch," Ryan offered. "I will pay \$20 a month, and that includes room, board, uniforms, and meals. You interested?"

"You'd give me a chance and pay me \$20 a month to boot?" the blonde gasped.

"Are you interested?" Ryan repeated.

"Yes sir! You bet sir! When do I start and where is your ranch?" the blonde said eagerly.

"You can start right now. I have to rent a buckboard and pick up my furniture and then I'll take you to my ranch," Ryan replied. "Do you have a name?"

"Lucy, Lucy Gates."

"I'm Ryan, Ryan McGillinen."

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Ryan McGillinen," Lucy laughed and offered her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Lucy," Ryan responded with his own smile and took her hand to shake it.

Ryan took her valise and walked to the livery. He rented a buckboard and just as he helped Lucy on to the bench he turned to a commotion in front of the Mercantile.

A group of Chinese indentures were lined up in front of the store. Fleeing their country, many came to American to be sold for their passage. Entrepreneur's bought the conscripts in San Francisco and sold them for a profit in frontier cities across the West.

Ryan turned to Lucy and asked, "Mind if we watch?"

"No sir! You're the boss."

Ryan tied his mustang to the buckboard and then jumped on the bench next to Lucy. He reined the team and pulled up to the action.

Several Chinese were sold and some were not. A small middle aged Chinese was brought up for sale. The auctioneer announced that the little Chinese man spoke broken American and had been a cook for the railroad gang.

Ryan's interest was perked. He was looking to hire a cook for his ranch. He wanted Twiggy to have a life of luxury and have a ranch filled with servants to do her bidding and take care of her.



The bid for the Chinese man came to \$250. It appeared others were interested in obtaining a good cook, and he must be good to be auctioned for that high of a price. Maybe it was because he spoke broken American, but the cooking is what Ryan was interested in.

"Five hundred dollars," Ryan bid.

All heads turned to his direction. The bidding ended. The people of Ely weren't going to try and outbid a McGillinen. Not with their great wealth reserve.

"Sold," the auctioneer yelled. "Bring your money and pay the little lady over there."

Ryan went to the middle aged woman whom he guessed was the auctioneer's wife and wrote a bank draft for the \$500. The little Chinese mans was brought to Ryan by a young man, most likely the son of the auctioneer. It was amazing how this business was a family affair.

"I am Cho Ling honolabre Rord."

Ryan laughed, "Pleased to meet you Cho Ling. I am Ryan and definitely no Lord, but if you want to meet one I'll let you meet my brother in law."

"Mr. Lyan, I am preased to meet you," Cho Ling bowed.

"Follow me," Ryan ordered and walked to the buckboard where Lucy was waiting.

After putting Cho Ling's valise on the buckboard, Ryan helped the little man onto the bench next to Lucy.

"Cho Ling, this is Lucy Gates. Lucy, this is Cho Ling," Ryan introduced.

"Hello, Cho Ling," Lucy addressed politely.

"Miss Rucy," Cho Ling returned.

"Lucy is going to Geneva's Branch housekeeper," Ryan told the Chinese man.

"And he's gonna be the cook, right?" Lucy asked.

"Yep, I'm going to pay him \$20 a month just like you," Ryan answered. " And I think I have everything taken care of. All I have yet to do is pick up the furniture for the ranch."

"One question boss!"

"What is it Lucy?"

"With Cho's mixed up r's and l's, is his name really Ling or Ring?" Lucy teased.

Ryan guffawed, "That Lucy will be the question of the ages!"

The trio in the buckboard made its way to Milford's Furniture Shop and the fine furniture was loaded into the wagon carefully and padded with thick woolen blankets. It was near midday when they left Ely and arrived at Geneva's Branch at dusk.

"I'll show you to your temporary room, Lucy. The hands can unload the furniture tomorrow. You can see to its proper placement," Ryan told her. "I have an open account at the Mercantile and I want you



to add some feminine touches to the rest of decorating, especially my room and the room I want finished for my sister and her baby when they visit."

"When are you getting married?" Lucy asked wondering just what his plans really were for her, and why he wanted his room decorated with a feminine touch when that should be the prerogative for wife.

"Not soon enough, but my bride will be moving in with me in about two months, so you should have enough time," Ryan answered.

"Mail order?" Lucy asked curiously.

"No, she's not," Ryan chuckled. "Twiggy and her family are moving here in a few days."

"Twiggy?" Lucy giggled. "That sure is a funny name."

"I gave her that special name. She's mighty special," Ryan responded.

"You sure do look like a man in love," Lucy observed. "I sure wish I could find a man to love me like that."

"I'm sure you'll find someone someday," Ryan stated. "I never thought I would find that someone and she just rode into my life."

"How romantic!" Lucy said with a little envy.

Ryan took her valise and offered his arm to lead her into the ranch. He turned to Cho Ling and said, "The kitchen is straight ahead and then to the right. It's late and I think we are all hungry. Do you think you can find the larder and fix us a meal?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Lyan. No plobrem. No plobrem!" Cho Ling smiled revealing his bright white teeth and took off to the kitchen.

Ryan led Lucy upstairs to the room Twiggy had stayed. "This will be your room until we can build you a small cabin behind the ranch." Ryan put her valise on the bed. "If you come with me I'll show you the bathing room and how to work the heater."

"You giving me this big room?" Lucy asked in shock. "And what is a heater?"

Ryan took her to the bathing room and Lucy's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"You've got an indoor water closet and tub!" Lucy gasped gazing in the bathing room.

"Yes ma'am," Ryan answered. "This is the heater, for a hot water bath." Ryan showed Lucy the primed water pump and the faucets for hot and cold. He showed her how to light the kerosene heater over the tub.

"Lord of Mercy if this ain't the fanciest place I have ever seen," Lucy regaled. "Even the finest cat house in Virginia City didn't have a hot water bath like this or an indoor water closet."

"Glad you like it," Ryan uttered and showed her the fragrances, soaps and towels. "Use what ever you like and make sure it is replaced before it runs out."



"You want to pinch me, just to make sure I'm awake!" Lucy chortled.

Ryan laughed and told Lucy, "If you want you can take a hot bath now and settle in. I bought some gray silk for your uniform frock and you can use some of the other bolts of fabric for other dresses, but I do want some of the silks and satins for my Twiggy."

"I simply can't believe all this," Lucy said in wonder.

"You can start everything tomorrow. I'm going downstairs to see if Cho Ling needs any help."

"I'd like to take a bath. I've been on the stage for several days and I could use one," Lucy admitted. "Thanks Ryan McGillinen. Thanks for the chance, your kindness and well, everything."

"You're welcome Lucy Gates."

Ryan left Lucy and walked down the stairs to check in the kitchen. It turns out that Cho Ling did indeed know the functions of a kitchen. He had already gone into the larder and was preparing what looked like to Ryan a fine meal.

"You get out my kitchen, Mr. Lyan. Cho Ling no like anyone in my kitchen," Cho Ling ordered adamantly.

"Great!" Ryan guffawed. "I'll show you to your temporary room in the bunk house later."

Ryan went to the parlor and helped himself to a snifter of brandy. He put his feet up and let his imagination take him into the arms of his Twiggy. Everything would be in order for his bride.



Chapter Nine

"Hey there big brother," Dwayne greeted when he noticed Ryan riding his mustang up to Geneva's Hope. Dwayne had been helping George finish adding more padding to the seats of Braden's carriage per Auntie Alyson's order. It was only one of Auntie Alyson's many commands to be followed in preparation for the arrival of Kerry and the new baby.

"Have you heard from Pa and Kerry yet?" Ryan asked as he dismounted and gave the reins of his mustang to Jed, one of the ranch's many hands.

"Yep, we leave tomorrow for the whistle stop at Wells," Dwayne grinned. You came back just before I had to come get you. I suppose you've been busy preparing for your bride."

Auntie Alyson had been directing some of the servants in the cleaning and laundry preparations when she turned and saw Ryan. She approached her nephew with a large smile. "Ryan, I'm so happy! I have already started preparing for your wedding." Alyson stood on her tiptoes and stretched to brush Ryan's cheeks with a congratulations kiss on his cheek.

"I guess that means that Dwayne has already told you about me and Twiggy," Ryan chuckled.

"You didn't think he would keep it a secret did you? Not this wonderful news! I could just burst! Your father and sister will be thrilled for you. I sent Marie to Ely yesterday for some bridal satin, lace, and veiling," Alyson babbled on. "Why I've already started the wedding gown for Twiggy. I noticed that she and Small Bird were about the same size and when you bring her back to Geneva's Hope I can fit her properly. Lord, I have a hundred things to do for your wedding and the baby coming home. I don't know if an old woman could be any happier."

"Twiggy might prefer a Sosoni' ceremony, Auntie Alyson," Ryan suggested gently.

"Oh pish posh! The two of you will have a proper Christian wedding and no *butts* young man," Auntie Alyson left no quarter. "Wait



until your father hears. He'll want a proper wedding and Kerry will be thrilled to pieces to be a part of it."

Ryan laughed. When Auntie Alyson was firm like this there was no way around it. He could hardly wait to hold Twiggy and tell her the wonderful celebration that would be planned for their wedding. If Twiggy still wanted a Sosoni' ceremony for her people he would gladly marry her again. Hell, he'd marry her as many times as she wanted him too.

Small Bird waddled behind Auntie Alyson. "Ho, Ryan. Dwayne told me the news of you and Twiggy. I bless you with much happiness and many children."

Ryan walked to Small Bird and gave her a hug, "Thank you Small Bird. I am very happy. How did you sneak away from Edward's watchful eye?"

Small bird giggled, "He is quite busy preparing the house and people for your sister and her man's arrival. It is times like this when I can sneak away and walk. The child has become most uncomfortable. Bring your sister home quickly. I fear Edward's son will not wait much longer."

Ryan bent over Small Bird and kissed her gently upon her forehead. "You're looking really beautiful Small Bird. I will bring Kerry back for you. I promise."

"Dwayne tells us you must wait for two months before you can take Twiggy into your blanket. Bright Moon's people have set that time limit to make sure everything goes well in your pact with them?" Small Bird asked.

"That brother of mine can't keep a thing quiet. I ought to swell his lip so he can't talk," Ryan said loud enough for Dwayne to hear. When Dwayne turned to look, Ryan glared menacingly at him.

Dwayne shrugged his shoulders and started walking to allow a more discreet distance between the two of them.

Small Bird noticed Dwayne's retreat and looked up to the giant. "Men tremble in your shadow. We women find comfort and protection in your gentleness. If men knew how kind you really are, they would fear you less."

"That is a secret you must keep," Ryan warned gently and with good humor.

"It is no secret to keep. As kind and gentle as you are, we know that if one of yours is in danger or in trouble you would tear down a mountain in rage," Small Bird noted.

"Robyn!" Edward's voice thundered from the porch of the ranch home. The tall and strong sandy blonde haired man began walking briskly toward his wife. "You were supposed to be resting!"

Small Bird suddenly bent over cradling her abdomen and grasping for breath.



"You okay? Is it time?" Ryan asked in panic. With ease of carrying a feather, the gentle giant picked Small Bird up and carried her to Edward.

"Ryan, put me down. I can walk! It's not time yet. My son is just kicking with the force of a brave warrior," Small Bird protested.

"Where do you want me to put her, Brit?" Ryan asked Edward as soon he neared them.

"You can place Robyn in my arms and I'll put her to bed immediately," Edward instructed.

As Ryan gently transferred Small Bird into Edward's arms. Edward scolded her, "Why you insist upon wandering about and scaring me half out of my wits, I will never know."

Small Bird rolled her eyes and shot an endearing smile to Ryan as Edward carried her off to their small cabin behind the Geneva's Hope ranch house.

Ryan watched little Willow tagging behind pulling on Edward's waistcoat. Ryan wanted a little girl of his own, maybe two or three. He would have to talk to Twiggy about that.

"You ready lover boy?" Dwayne teased noticing his brother was again lost in thought. Dwayne had inherited the Stuart woman's knack of knowing what people were really thinking and felt a little daring because he was already mounted on his pinto. "Can't wait to make your own little ones, huh?"

Ryan growled and charged toward Dwayne.

Dwayne nudged his pony and took off leaving the ranch hands and Ryan scrambling to mount their horses. George had been waiting on the carriage and took off after Dwayne. Jed was third on the trail with the buckboard.

Alyson watched as everyone disappeared from her sight. She sighed in contentment. Kerry and the new baby would be home in four to five days. Bennett would be back bringing children's noise, laughter, and delight back to their home. Alyson was almost giddy with joy. In determination, Alyson walked back into the house to direct the preparations for the family's return and the wedding. She turned back when she heard a buggy approaching. It was Brian Duffey. Alyson greeted him, "Duffey! Have you news?"

Duffey leapt from the buggy and took Alyson's hand. He brushed his lips across her knuckles gallantly. "Indeed I do madam. Will I be invited to dine with you? Brunch perhaps?"

"You are invited to dine. I will of course see what Aumond can tantalize your palette with, Mr. Duffey," Alyson invited graciously. She really liked the McGillinen counselor and had for some years.

Duffey handed his reins over to Mac, one of the younger ranch hands at Geneva's Hope. "Thank you lad. Give Melinda some oats would you?"

"Sho Nuf," Mac answered and led the mare to the barn.



Alyson could not contain her curiosity. "What have you found out Mr. Duffey?"

"The Pinkerton's found a match to your profile. A Miss Dayton Sara Crawford was taken as a child of eight by a Crow raiding party in southern Nevada ten years ago. The kind of fits your query doesn't it my lady?" Duffey taunted and took her arm in his and walked to the ranch house.

"You know very well it does, Mr. Duffey," Alyson retorted enjoying his gentlemanly attentions.

The two were soon sitting in the parlor sipping tea and nibbling on warm sugar cookies Aumond had just baked. Sugar Cookies were Kerry's favorite since she was a child.

"Tell me everything," Alyson encouraged eagerly.

"The Pinkerton men told me it took no time to find out the information on Dayton Crawford. They simply went through some old reports right in Carson City. It seems the Crawford family filed the complaint of the Crow raiding party there with a military commander and the story for the local paper. Joseph Crawford and his son Todd had tracked the Crow party up toward Carson City and then lost them, "Duffey related some of the tale.

"The girl's name is Dayton Crawford," Alyson mulled over thoughtfully.

"Which girl? Are you going to tell me what this is all about? Duffey insisted even though he knew it was Oak Twig. He brought copies of the agreement Ryan left with him.

"Not until you tell me the rest of the story," Alyson replied. "Did Pinkerton find the Crawford family?"

"Didn't have to find them. They live in Carson City. Joseph Crawford runs a dry goods store there. It seems they met a storekeeper that wanted to sell and Joseph was tired of ranching. Crawford brought his wife Samantha and little daughter Jerica from his ranch after he sold it and settled down in Carson City," Duffey elaborated. "The entire family still lives there, Joseph, Samantha, Todd, Jerica and they had another little boy after Dayton was taken. They call him Joshua."

"Everything matches, everything fits!" Alyson exclaimed in delight.

"Mrs. Jameson, are you going to tell me what this is all about? Just who is this girl that matches the tale?"

"Do you have a mail address for the Crawford family so I could contact them?" Alyson queried ignoring Duffey's persistent question.

"I do madam, but you shall not have it until you tell me just what the Sam Hill is going on here?" Duffey scowled. "Who is this Dayton and why are you involved in trying to unite this broken family?"

"I promised her I would not say who she is. I made her a solemn vow," Alyson defended.



"Madam, may I remind you that information exchanged between a counsel and client are unbreakably and legally *quite confidential*," Duffey flustered.

Alyson sipped her tea. She gently placed her cup upon the table and folded her hands. "Ryan is going to marry Dayton Crawford. He knows her as Twiggy, a Sosoni' maiden or half-breed, he thinks. Her people know her as Oak Twig. I know her as Dayton," Alyson answered slowly and quietly. "I found out she is really white and her story. Ryan knows nothing of her true lineage. I am also planning a Christian wedding and wanted to know her Christian name. Since I know her family is alive and well, I can invite them."

"Do you think that is wise, Alyson?" Duffey asked using her given name for the first time. Duffey had reservations about springing this information on Ryan, Dayton, or Dayton's family too suddenly. "If this girl was raised by the Sosoni', she is more Sosoni' than white. The girl might not want a Christian wedding. The girl just might want a Sosoni' wedding."

"I've already told Ryan my decision to give him a Christian wedding. He won't dare defy my wishes. I'm sure that he can convince Twiggy to see it my way and we like each other. I'm sure if Ryan can't persuade her, I could," Alyson responded confidently.

"You could persuade a rattlesnake to seek peace with a rabbit," Duffey chuckled. "Yes ma'am. Indeed you could do that!"

"You're such a tease, Brian Duffey!"

"You're a beautiful and beguiling woman, Alyson," Duffey offered huskily. "Would it be amiss if I called you Alyson and you referred to me as Brian?"

Alyson felt herself blush. It had been years since she had acted like a silly schoolgirl, but it felt wonderful. "It would not be amiss, Brian."

"Good! Let us discuss our conspiracy," Brian chortled with glee.

"Conspiracy sir?" Alyson asked befuddled and placed her hand upon her heart. "What ever do you mean?"

"What I mean is my dear Alyson, a plan to bring the Crawford family together for this wedding, and you will tell my why Ryan's future wife made you promise secrecy," Brian leaned over and boldly took Alyson's hand to hold it. "I am quite intrigued."

Again Alyson found herself blushing like a schoolgirl with Brian Duffey's attentions. "It seems that Dayton thinks white people would tear her away from her Sosoni' family that she has come to love. She also believes that her family and other whites would treat her badly. Can you imagine?"

"Unfortunately I can imagine. I've seen it for myself in Ely and other places. She's right," Brian assured the truth of the matter.



"You can't mean others hold being taken captive against a body?" Alyson gasped in surprise.

"Indeed they do my dear Alyson," Brian reaffirmed. "Not everyone has the capability to be a true Christian and live life to love each as an individual without prejudice such as you my dear."

"I really never thought about such prejudice, but there was the War and slaves," Alyson mused.

"Aye, so we must tread lightly and discuss a plan," Brian Duffey chuckled.

The two co-conspirators spent the rest of the morning and afternoon coming up with such a plan. Part of that plan would be for Duffey to travel to Carson City and the Crawford Dry Goods store. There he would mention that he would be buying a wedding gift for his client's son, Ryan McGillinen and his future bride, Dayton Crawford. It would be commented that it was coincidental that the lovely bride and the dry goods store would have the same name. In that way Duffey would ease into the discussion of their lost daughter's years. He would determine the family's mindset about their lost daughter and whether to unite them or not.

Alyson concurred whole-heartedly, but she still had another small problem. Ryan thought Twiggy was a half-breed. The other question would be how would she let her nephew know the truth without breaking her promise to Twiggy.

Duffey choked in private snickers, "Don't you think he'll learn on his own on their wedding night?"

"That's not funny!" Alyson blushed profusely.

"Yes it is dear Alyson," Duffey countered. "I don't think you need worry about it. One way or another Ryan will have to find out. Dayton will need to tell him before the wedding and if the Crawford family does come to the wedding, she will have to face them and Ryan will know."

"But what if you determine the Crawford family can be invited to the wedding?" Alyson asked. "What kind of shock will that be for Twiggy and Ryan?"

"I think you worry too much," Duffey assuaged. "The Stuart women aren't the only people with gut feelings. We counselors do as well with it. We have to determine our client's guilt or innocence. I have a feeling love will conquer all. I believe in love."

"Why Brian Duffey, you are a romantic!" Alyson exclaimed.

"Incurable madam. Absolutely incurable," Brian admitted. "I've never given that attribute up, even in my old age."

"You sir are not old," Alyson rebutted fondly.

"And you my dear are a lovely innocent child that I have admired from a far for sometime," Duffey revealed.

"Really?"



"Indeed!"

"Perhaps you could stay for supper and we could discuss this revelation?" Alyson quipped in delight.

"It would be a privilege and most delightful discussion," Brian Duffey clucked like a rooster about to have his chicken.

After dinner and an enlightening romantic walk in Alyson's rose garden lent itself to a delightful evening in which both Alyson and Brian discovered each other, their youthful desires, and a knowledge that Kerry and Braden were not the only lustful lovers at Geneva's Hope.

Duffey reluctantly left Alyson the next morning with a proposal, "Alyson, I wish you to become my wife to have and to hold."

"I shall think on it while you are in Carson City," Alyson replied chewing on her lower lip. A Stuart woman affectation when they were nervous.

"Very well, but I shan't take no for an answer. The new Wessex family will require every room available in Geneva's Hope for their offspring would be my guess, and I have a large home in Ely waiting for us, madam," Brian Duffey insisted leaving no argument.

Alyson watched Brian's buggy disappear down the trail. Her smile indicated the pleasure they shared last night. A pleasure long withheld from a widow raising her sister's four children. She would be happy as Mrs. Brian Duffey. Her answer was yes! Emphatically! Alyson vowed she would tell Duffey as soon as he returned from Carson City.



Chapter Ten

"Where the Hell is that train?" Ryan cursed vehemently. He was anxious to see his sister, greet Ben, hold his new nephew, and be the first one to tell Kerry of his upcoming nuptials. They had camped three nights. They had hoped the train would be there yesterday, but they had to camp at Wells whistle stop last night.

"Anxious to be with Twiggy?" Dwayne taunted with his usual endearing brotherly way.

"Dwayne, keep that up and you are going to have a fat lip," Ryan threatened shaking his fist at his brother. "I'm anxious to see sis and my nephews. And baby brother, I want to tell sis about Twiggy. Got that!"

"Got it!" Dwayne answered holding up his hands in surrender. "Sheesh! You're temper is getting worse!"

"My temper is not getting worse. You are getting more and more irritating!" Ryan snarled impatiently.

"Getting all fired up isn't gonna git that train here any sooner," George mumbled as he continued whittling a wooden horse from a pine log he had picked up last night. "You boys should git a hobby."

"Ryan found a new hobby. Problem is she's off moving with her people and just not handy at the moment," Dwayne goaded risking life and limb with Ryan's temper, but he couldn't help it. He'd never seen the big lug so tense before.

"Dwayne!" Ryan roared. "So help me you're going to get knocked from here to Salt Lake!"

"The train's comin'," George announced casually as he put down his whittling and stood up from the boulder rock he was resting against.

"Where?" Ryan craned his neck looking down the tracks to see it.

"If you'd quit shoutin and listen, you'd hear it," George reprimanded.

"Next time I have to pick up Miss Kerry with you boys, I'm gonna make sure Miss Alyson comes along to keep you in tow."



"Yeah! Auntie Alyson could keep your temper tied up," Dwayne agreed.

"And she could keep yer big mouth full of lye soap," George barked getting irritated somewhat with the chiding himself.

Ryan laughed heartily with the old man that actually tongue-tied his baby brother. Ryan was seriously thinking about how Ayden and he used to tease Dwayne about being the pretty boy that the women chased. Dwayne was becoming more adept at becoming a silver-tongued politician. Perhaps that would be a career for the baby brother.

A puff of white gray smoke was seen just above the hill. Soon the train pulled alongside the whistle stop spur. A train crew quickly detached three cars and pushed them to the spur. Once the cars were secured on the spur, a six-year-old boy bolted out of the middle car.

"Uncle Ryan! Uncle Dwayne!" Bennett shouted with glee running to his big uncles.

Ryan gave Bennett a bear hug and put him on his shoulders. "Where's your little brother?"

"Mamma's got him, over there!" Bennett pointed as Braden emerged from the parlor car and turned to help Kerry and the baby down the train steps.

In a few giant steps Ryan was next to his sister. He bent down and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. "Let me see the little guy!"

Kerry gladly obliged her big bear of a brother and lifted the quilt corner that covered Garrett's face. "Here is your new nephew, Ryan."

Ryan looked at the baby's face and had an unexplainable urge to hold the little tyke himself.

Dwayne came up behind Ryan and peered over his brother's shoulder. "Little ain't he?"

"Handsome lad," Ryan commented staring at the sleeping babe.

"You come here to me, Ben!" Dwayne ordered the boy on his brother's shoulder. "I brought you a pony. Your Pa wrote me that you learned to ride like a real cowboy."

Bennett reached out to Dwayne's arms right away. "A pony? Where?"

"Right over here," Dwayne answered swinging Bennett into his arms and walking to the lea they put their horses while they waited for the train to arrive.

"Sis, can I hold Garrett?" Ryan asked quietly.

"You want to hold him?" Kerry gulped in surprise.

"Please sis. I'd like to hold him if you'd let me?" Ryan asked once more.

Braden cocked a curious brow to his wife.

"Sure Ryan, here," Kerry smiled and carefully put the tiny bundle in Ryan's enormous arms.

Garrett stirred in Ryan's arms and responded to a new voice by slowly opening his eyes.



"He looks just like Ben!" Ryan laughed softly looking down at Garrett's little face. "Garrett has Ben's eyes."

"Garrett has his father's eyes for sure, and he looks just like Braden," Kerry agreed proudly.

"He looks like Ben!" Ryan insisted. He still hadn't forgiven Braden for taking his sister to wife and then carting her off to England so he missed the birth of his nephew, Garrett.

Ryan was also feeling something very paternal. It was a new and strange feeling of need, but Ryan liked the feeling. He and Twigg would soon have a little baby of their own. Maybe they would have a pretty little girl Ryan could spoil.

"Ryan, Ryan! Ryan!" Kerry repeated.

"Huh?" Ryan replied.

"Ryan, where are you? I asked you twice now about Small Bird," Kerry reiterated irritably. "How is she doing? Did she have the baby yet?"

"Uh, no sis," Ryan answered absentmindedly and then remembered his promise to Small Bird. "But she can deliver any day or minute. Small Bird asked me to get you back home real quick so you can be there when her baby comes. She wants you with her."

"Well then big brother, let's get me home!" Kerry ordered. "Let's get our things unloaded from the train and onto the buckboard."

"Sure sis," Ryan obeyed hesitantly. He really didn't want to give up holding Garrett.

"You'd better give me Garrett back. I don't want you trying to hold him and cart our luggage at the same time," Kerry teased. "Besides, you've woken him up and he'll want to eat for certain. I swear he's going to grow up as big as you the way he eats, Ryan."

Ryan grinned broadly as he handed Garrett back to his sister.

"God help the boy," Braden mumbled under his breath.

Kerry heard his remark and playfully elbowed Braden in his ribs.

Grady and Morning Song greeted their sons and hugged them warmly.

"Pa, when there's a chance we got to talk," Ryan told his father when he had a moment between unloading the rail car and loading the buckboard.

Celeste and Morning Song helped with small bundles, Kerry was feeding Garrett, and Braden, Grant, Grady, Dwayne and Ryan loaded the heavy cases, trunks, and boxes on the buckboard. One of them was the new fangled sewing machine that Ryan had asked for. Kerry bought it but she was curious as to why Ryan wanted one.

The men had loaded the buckboard and there was only a small space left for George to sit when they were finished.



"Did you people buy *all* of that there place called England and bring it back?" George quipped playfully.

"We didn't," Grant Wessex returned in jest. "Our wives did!"

"And just who insisted upon buying out nearly an entire toy store in London for his two grandsons?" Celeste countered.

"Grady?" Grant asked innocently.

Celeste rolled her eyes. "Help me up to the carriage, dear."

"Yes my love," Grant obeyed mouthing an affectionate kiss.

"If we hurry we can get in a good seven hours of travel before the sun rests," Morning Song said. She was worried about her daughter, Small Bird, and anxiously wanted to get home to be with her before the baby decided to be born. They just made it for the birth of Garrett and it looked like they would just make it for the birth of Small Bird and Edward's child.

Grady was just as anxious as Morning Song. He wanted to be there when another grandchild arrived. "Morning Song is right. Let's get going!"

"Dwayne, where's Maiden? My jeans? My colt?" Kerry quizzed her brother consecutively not waiting for responses.

"Auntie Alyson wouldn't hear of it! She said you're a married woman and mother. You can't take care of Bennett and Garrett on a horse," Dwayne chuckled.

"The Hell I can't!" Kerry snapped stubbornly. "Let me borrow some of your clothes, Dwayne."

"Don't worry sis," Dwayne consoled. "I didn't listen to Auntie Alyson. Maiden's waiting in the lea and your colt and clothes are in her saddle bag."

"I love you, Dwayne!" Kerry crowed. "You're the best!"

"Yeah, I know," Dwayne feigned conceit. Dwayne picked up Bennett and placed him upon his new pony. Dwayne mounted his pinto next to Bennett's pony and they waited patiently for the family.

"Hurry up girl and change," Grady barked. "We want to get going."

Kerry handed Garrett to Celeste as she walked by with Grant to take possession of Garrett.

"Kerry, no!" Braden objected.

"What do you mean, no?" Kerry asked her husband in bewilderment.

"I mean N-O! NO!" You will not change into your range clothes and ride Maiden!" Braden replied stubbornly. "Bloody Hell woman, you just had a baby and Garrett needs you!"

"I did not just have Garrett! He's more than two months old and between our mothers I rarely get to hold him. That's not counting his doting grandfathers. The only time I can hold our son is when I feed him, which I just did, husband!" Kerry countered angrily.



"Are you hungry woman?" Braden queried testily. "Is that why you're so cranky all of a sudden?"

"Braden Morgan Wessex, hunger is not the only thing to make me cranky. Did you think that maybe an overprotective husband might irritate a woman every now and then?"

"Hunger and your monthly usually are the problem and I happen to know it isn't your monthly," Braden shot back.

"You're impossible!" Kerry blushed crimson.

"You're still too delicate," Braden resisted the temptation to chuckle.

"As delicate as forged iron," Ryan interjected.

"Lord this bickering is in the McGillinen blood," George grumbled. "You McGillinen's waste more time bickering than the Mormons and the settlers!"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Okay George, we get the picture," Ryan conceded. "I brought Socks for you, Wessex!"

"Socks?" Braden turned about immediately, "Where?" Braden saw Ryan leading Socks by his reins.

Socks recognized his master and pranced daintily in greeting.

"Socks old friend!" Braden exclaimed grabbing the bridle and nuzzling the thoroughbred stallion. "Old boy, it is good to see you!"

"You should see his foal. He's a beauty, too!" Ryan bragged.

"So you are a Papa! Good man, old friend," Braden beamed petting Socks proudly.

Kerry took advantage of the diversion and went to seek out Maiden.

"Can we get going?" Grady growled irritably.

"I'll stay with Kerry. You go on ahead. We'll catch up," Ryan volunteered.

"Oh no you don't. I'm not letting my wife out of my sight. You go ahead. I'll wait," Braden countermanded.

"Wessex, please. I really would like a few private words with sis if you would let me," Ryan asked quietly.

"Please? You did say please, didn't you?" Braden held his ribs in laughter. "It must be the end of the world. Good God help me. Oooh, I can't stand it. Please! Ryan said please."

"If you've had your fun, can I please talk to sis alone," Ryan asked caustically.

"Well that tone is more recognizable," Braden guffawed.

"Alright, I'll go on ahead but if anything happens to my Kerry...."

Ryan squared his shoulders and stood tall. "Look at me, Wessex. Do you really think I would allow anything to happen to sis?"

Braden eased on his laughter. "No I don't, but I don't like being too far away from my wife. Understand?"



Ryan nodded. While he waited for Kerry to change he found himself thinking of Twiggy and wondering what she was doing and where she and her people were now.

"Ryan. Ryan! Ryan!"

"Huh?" Kerry's voice reached into Ryan's daydreaming.

"What is it with you big brother. I've never seen you so distracted before," Kerry observed. "You act like a moonstruck schoolboy." What Kerry just said to her brother struck her suddenly. "Ryan is that it? Are you in love? Is that what you want to talk to me about? Do you want some feminine advice? Is that why you wanted me to buy you a sewing machine?"

"Whoa, sis! One question at a time," Ryan grinned. "Yes, I'm in love. Yes, I wanted to tell you first before big mouth Dwayne blurted it out. No, I don't want advice. Yes, that's why I wanted the sewing machine. I'm going to be married in two months."

Kerry looked at her brother wide eyed and dumbfounded. "Married?"

"Is that so odd?"

"Yes it is!" Kerry exclaimed. "You married in two months? Big brother you are so provincial, so Victorian. I would have thought you would court the woman at least a year or two. What have I missed? Who is she?"

"How can you ask so many questions in one breath?" Ryan teased.

"Will you please just tell me who this amazing woman is that stole your heart?" Kerry demanded impatiently.

"Twiggy is a Sosoni' woman I met from Bright Moon's camp," Ryan answered matter of factly.

"Twiggy? That's a strange name for a Sosoni'," Kerry remarked. "And who is Bright Moon?"

"Her Uncle," Ryan answered succinctly.

"Big brother, we are going to ride together mighty slow before we catch up with the family and you are going to tell me every detail if I have to rope and hog tie you."

They mounted their horses and Ryan started from the beginning. He told Kerry about Blue Pool and Oak Twig riding onto his ranch. The meeting they had with Eye of Hawk and the plight of bright Moon's people. Twiggy's stay at his ranch and Geneva's Hope. He told Kerry about Horse Tail and his marriage proposal to Twiggy in the cave. He told her about what happened at Bright Moon's council and the agreement he would have with the people on Geneva's Branch.

Kerry listened patiently to every word and saw the love in her brother's eyes as he spoke of this Twiggy. "What does she look like?"

"Oh sis, she's as beautiful as you are. She's shorter than you, but just as perfectly formed. Twiggy only comes up to my arm crook. She has dark brown hair with red twinkles in it and hazel eyes. Her eyes are



the same color as Edward Laurel's eyes. Little Willow noticed that," Ryan described almost poetically.

"Twiggy doesn't sound like pure blood Sosoni'," Kerry said thoughtfully.

"I think she's a half breed, but I haven't asked her. I can tell it causes her discomfort when she thinks about her mother, Wooden Bowl," Ryan explained.

"Oh Ryan, it really doesn't matter if she's white, black, yellow, or red," Kerry chuckled. "You love her and that's all that matters to me."

"I knew you would understand," Ryan said contentedly.

"Of course I understand, and the entire family will, silly!" Kerry scolded.

"Auntie Alyson is already planning our wedding."

"That can't surprise you at all!"

"Nope, not Auntie Alyson. She already loves Twiggy. A special bond between the two of them I haven't figured out yet."

"You see, you have nothing to worry about," Kerry grinned.

"I'm not sure about that," Ryan hesitated. "Dwayne's been harassing me constantly."

"Ryan, you know very well that Dwayne teases you like that because he loves you and is happy for you," Kerry chided. "If Ayden were here you'd have to endure more of the teasing, but it is our love. Really it is."

"I guess I worry about Twiggy in that respect. She's real sensitive to white folk poking fun of her people. She told me a story about something that happened to her when she was a child. It affected her deeply. A real emotional scar," Ryan confided.

"You just tuck away that worry right now big brother. I'll talk to Dwayne and Braden. They'll lay off or face me!" Kerry said with bravado. "You know you don't have to worry about Pa and Morning Song."

"Thanks, Kerry." Ryan reached over and squeezed Kerry's hand. "Thanks a lot, sis."

"Anything for you, big brother," Kerry smiled at him. "Anything I can do for you. You know I love you to pieces and always will."

"I love you too, sis," Ryan beamed. "I would like to hold my new nephew again."

"That I can't promise," Kerry laughed loudly. "I can barely get him away from Morning Song, Celeste, Pa, Grant, or Braden. But I'll make sure they give you some time, and Twiggy!"

Kerry recognized the rider coming toward them at a fast gait, "Braden? What is on his tail?"

"Is your husband testing Socks' ability for racing already?" Ryan asked in good humor.



"I guess we'll find out in a second," Kerry chuckled. "Socks is the fastest racing horse in the county I'd bet!"

In the breadth of a moment, Braden reined Socks next to Ryan, "Congratulations Old Boy! Dwayne told us the great news," Braden turned to look at Kerry. "Did Ryan tell you he's getting married, my sweet?"

"Yes my darling. Ryan told me he's getting married in two months and her name is Twiggy," Kerry said calmly.

"Twiggy? Twiggy? What kind of name is that for a Sosoni' half breed?" Braden asked teasingly.

Ryan dug his heels into Chiseler's flank and took off in a huff.

Braden looked bewildered. "What is that all about? I'm happy for the big oaf."

"Braden, Ryan can't handle any more teasing about his marriage. Apparently Dwayne has been merciless and it seems Twiggy is sensitive to her people being made fun of, so I don't think we should use the word half breed."

"I didn't mean to be cruel, sweets. I'm happy for him," Braden apologized. "I truly am happy for the big lug, honest!"

"Truly happy for him?" Kerry asked skeptically.

"Yes I am!" Braden insisted. "But I am happy for me too. If the big bear has a wife he might get off my back and forgive me for marrying you and taking away his little sister."

"That I do believe," Kerry giggled. "That's more the truth of the matter."

"Yes, well maybe he'll understand what it means to really love a woman beyond sanity, reason, and logic," Braden hoped out loud.

"That I would like to believe," Kerry snorted.

"Can't help it. I'm selfish. I want you all to myself and I don't want that big brother demanding some of your time."

"Braden Morgan Wessex!" Kerry scolded irritated that Braden would ignore her family, or so she thought at the moment. Braden had to be taught he couldn't get away with that kind of thinking.

"Yes Love? What?"

"Oooh, you are impossible at times," Kerry reprimanded and nudged Maiden in a full run to catch Ryan and her family.

Even with her head start, Socks was soon by Maiden's side in an easy gait side by side.

"Bloody Hell woman, if you don't slow down I'll stop you and take you over my knee!" Braden reprimanded shouting over the pounding of the horses' hooves.

"You wouldn't dare!" Kerry challenged.

"Wouldn't I?" Braden returned as he brought Socks close and grabbed the reins slowing Maiden.

"Give me back the reins, Braden!" Kerry demanded.

"Will you behave?" Braden asked.



"Will you?"

"Unlikely, I like you too much!" Braden teased.

Kerry gave in to her adorable husband and laughed, "I like you too much."

Braden sat back in his saddle. "How wonderful life can be when two wantons like each other too much as we do!"

Kerry leaned over her saddle and gave Braden a loving and lengthy kiss. With it came a request, "Braden, please hold back on teasing Ryan."

"For you, anything my sweet," Braden promised solemnly. "But I do expect a reward. Will you climb into my bedroll tonight?"

"You couldn't stop me!"

"God, I am a happy man!"



Chapter Eleven

The moment Ryan approached the family Grady signaled him to ride by his side.

Morning Song peeked out the carriage window and gave Ryan a beaming smile as he rode by to his father.

"Dwayne tells me that you plan on marrying a Sosoni' woman that you paid an unheard of dowry for her," Grady related somberly. "He told me about the agreement you made with Bright Moon's people."

Ryan had misunderstood his father's tone to be reprimanding. "I wish Dwayne would let me do the telling just once," Ryan complained.

"I wish I would have known what you planned on doing, and I wish I would have been there with you," Grady said and put his hand on Ryan's shoulder reassuringly. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, son. Sometimes I'm just not a good father."

"You're the best, Pa!" Ryan disagreed. "I learned everything from you."

"I left you alone to selfishly be with Kerry. I wasn't here when you needed me."

"Pa, you were with Kerry when she needed you, and you raised me to be my own man. You did a fine job. I turned out great! One in three ain't bad," Ryan joked.

Grady laughed with his son and turned serious again. "Ryan, I want you to know that I will support you in your endeavors and give my help to you at any time with Bright Moon's people. I promise," Grady offered.

"Thanks, Pa. That means a lot to me."

"I also want you to know Morning Song and I are pleased as we can be that you found happiness at last with a woman. I hope you can be one tenth as happy as I was with your mother and I am now with Morning Song."

"If it's possible Pa, I hope to be even happier," Ryan grinned cheerfully. "But I can use your help, Pa."

"What do you need?" Grady queried.



"I need you to use your parental authority over Dwayne, Ayden, and Braden regarding Twiggy. You see she's real sensitive to jokes and words made about her people. Twiggy had a real bad experience as a child and she hasn't been exposed to a real loving white family like ours. She doesn't know the kind of family that will bicker and tease each other with love. She only knows the bad blooded blue coats, mean settlers, corrupt Indian agents, and traders," Ryan explained.

"I understand, Ryan, I'll keep Dwayne in line. Ayden is staying in England, and as for Braden? Well, I think Kerry can handle him well enough," Grady grinned to his son. "Like Morning Song keeps me in line and soon your Twiggy will keep you in line. When do I get to meet my future daughter in law?"

"I'm not sure, but I hope real soon," Ryan answered hopefully.

"We'll ride together in a day or two and I'll meet her and Bright Moon's people," Grady said as he relaxed in the saddle. "I mean that promise, Ryan. I'll support you all the way."

After seven long hours of travel, the family camped for the night and soon after dinner everyone was snug in their bedrolls. Grant and Celeste, Grady and Morning Song, Kerry and Braden all off in far corners murmuring sweet words of love making. Ryan, Dwayne, and George camped on the other end of the campfire.

Ryan started wishing he had his Twiggy snuggled in his body sharing his bedroll. His body heated up in passion and sleep became difficult. He rose in the middle of the night and went to a nearby stream to bathe in the icy water.

"He's got it bad," George grumbled after being woken up by Ryan's movements.

"He surely does," Dwayne agreed.

The family arrived at Geneva's Hope the next evening. Alyson had wisely assisted Marseille Aumond in creating a lavish banquet for the expected arrivals. When Alyson saw the carriage enter the ranch grounds she ran to it and opened the door. "Let me hold that little darling," Alyson commanded taking Garrett out of Celeste's arms. She spent the next half hour cooing over Garrett. She checked him from the tip of his thick black hair to the tiniest baby toe on his pink foot.

Garrett gurgled at the attention this new sweet smelling soft woman was rendering him. He blew little bubbles to his Great Auntie Alyson's delight.

Bennett and Dwayne left for the barn to care for Ben's new pony and Dwayne's pinto. Bennett was instructed in proper pony grooming by his Uncle Dwayne.

When dinner was served, Edward walked in the dining room with Small Bird by his side. The family had only begun to eat the banquet masterpiece.



"Edward finally let me out of his cabin prison to greet you," Shining Star," Small Bird greeted cheerfully. "I am happy you have come in time for the birth of our child. Where is your new son, Garrett?"

"Auntie Alyson has him in the parlor. She won't let go of him even to eat. She told us she'll eat later," Kerry answered. "How are you feeling Small Bird?"

"I feel like one of Grady's milk cows nurturing two kicking calves within my bruised ribs," Small Bird laughed and then was suddenly silent.

Kerry felt her abdomen. "How long have you had the tightening, Small Bird?"

"Tightening! What tightening?" Edward screeched. "You told me of no tightening!"

"The pain in my ears was something I wished to avoid for as long as I could," Small Bird responded breathing carefully. "The pain I labor with can not be put off."

"It's your time!" Edward screeched once more.

"Intelligent man I wed," Small Bird snorted. "Don't you agree, Shining Star?"

"Very intelligent," Kerry snickered. "Quit ignoring my question, Small Bird. How long have you had the tightening?"

"Since this morning at the sun rise."

"What?" Edward yelled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Husband, please stop hurting my ears," Small Bird reprimanded and gasped once more as a band stretched around her from her back across her abdomen.

Edward slipped his arms under Small Bird's knees while he kept a strong hold on her back and lifted her gently into his arms. Edward turned suddenly and walked so briskly to their cabin that Kerry had to run to keep up with them.

It was apparent to Marseille Aumond that his lavish banquet would have to be kept warmed or served as leftovers for the next dinner. He chuckled at the family. He had four children and went through the same thing Edward was going through for each birth.

Morning Song and Celeste followed Kerry into the cabin. Edward gently placed Small Bird on their bed and covered her with a quilt.

"I love you, Robyn," Edward whispered in Small Bird's ear.

"I love you too," Small Bird replied and laid back on the bed's pillows as another band swept across her.

"I'll get my medicines, Small Bird," Morning Song comforted soothingly. "I'll be right here with you, my daughter."

"Where is Willow?" Kerry asked looking around for her little niece who was always near her mother.



"Fragrant Flower rode with Eye of Hawk to see us yesterday. They took Willow back with them. A special holiday for Willow," Small Bird answered.

Celeste shooed Edward out of the cabin, "This is women's work. Go stay with the men in the ranch house."

It was evident Edward did not want to leave Small Bird's side. He looked longingly at his wife lying on the bed. "I love you, Robyn."

Small Bird nodded and Celeste physically pushed Edward out, "Go!"

Kerry set about collecting the linens and towels they would need.

Celeste began heating the water and finding the scissor and cord she would sterilize.

Small Bird told Kerry where the swaddling and blankets had been placed in preparation between the bands of labor pains.

Hours dragged on. The men were overwrought with worry. Alyson had been taking care of Garrett for Kerry. Garrett was ready to eat. Alyson took Garrett to Edward's cabin to be fed. Kerry nursed her son and Garrett fell sound asleep. Great Auntie Alyson took charge of Garrett and carried him back to the nursery and placed him in the bassinet in the nursery. She had told Kerry she would take care of Garrett and asked to be told when Small Bird's baby came.

Kerry had nodded to Auntie Alyson and buttoned her dress and fretted over Small Bird's long tightening bands with no change in her labor indicating delivery.

Ryan tucked Bennett into bed in the nursery next to Garrett's and listened to his prayers. It was a strained first night and Ryan wished he would have the warm body of Twiggy to embrace and hold while all waited for Small Bird's baby to be born. Ryan sat on the bed next to Bennett watching the little boy's eyes flutter trying to stay awake until they remained closed and his soft even breathing indicated Bennett had fallen asleep. Ryan couldn't help but stroke the little boy's hair. Rising from Bennett's bed he drew the quilt up to Bennett's neck and tucked it around his little body carefully. Those paternal hormones were attacking again.

Ryan joined the rest of the men in Grady's study and poured himself a brandy. Normally Ryan didn't drink, but tonight was one of those rare exceptions. Edward was pacing rapidly. His face was pale and crooked with worry. Braden had attempted many times to reassure and cajole his friend and valet but found it impossible. Edward would not be assuaged. He was far too concerned over his Robyn.

The night dragged on to the morning.

"What is taking so long?" Edward moaned pathetically. "Something has to be wrong. I know it!"



"Morning Song would tell us if something were amiss," Grady attempted in trying to console the nervous man, but he was worried as well.

Alyson woke to hearing Garrett crying in the nursery. She quickly put on her robe and tied her sash. In moments she had picked Garrett up and changed his nappies. Alyson had correctly assumed that Small Bird still had not given birth to the child. It concerned her that the labor was so long.

"Auntie Alyson?" Bennett asked wiping his sleep-blurred eyes. Garrett's crying had woken him and he came into Garrett's nursery hearing his Auntie Alyson. "Where is Mamma?"

"Come with me, Bennett. We'll find you breakfast," Alyson told the little boy still in his nightshirt. Wrapping Garrett in a soft blanket, Alyson cuddled the baby in her arm and with her other hand led Bennett downstairs. Alyson walked into the study to find the men still awake and all faces showed nervousness.

"Alyson!" Grady addressed and walked to her briskly. "Would you please check on Small Bird? We still have no word."

Alyson nodded to Grady. She looked to Ryan. "Ryan, can you take Bennett and see to feeding him breakfast and dressing him. Alyson had asked Ryan because she knew that her nephew was Bennett's favorite uncle.

"Absolutely! Come on Little Thundercloud. Let's check out some breeches and then get some grub in the little tummy of yours before it rumbles louder than your name," Ryan teased as he picked Bennett up and placed him on his shoulders.

"Be a good boy for Uncle Ryan," Braden said to Bennett needlessly.

"I will Papa."

Alyson disappeared from the study still holding Garrett. She made her way to Edward and Small Bird's cabin and lightly tapped on the door. Alyson heard murmuring and Small Bird crying softly in pain.

Kerry opened the door, "Auntie Alyson?"

"Don't look so surprised Kerry Wessex, your son needs to be fed," Alyson admonished her niece.

"I'm sorry Auntie, we are all so worried," Kerry confessed as she began to unbutton her dress to feed Garrett.

"What's wrong?" Alyson queried perusing the anxious faces of the other women present.

Morning Song answered her, "The baby will not turn. Small Bird labors but the child does not present its head."

"A breech baby!" Alyson declared. "Why haven't you turned it?"

"Turn it?" Morning Song questioned.



"Oh dear, none of you know how," Alyson sighed. "That poor dear girl. Why didn't you wake me?"

"We didn't know you knew what to do," Celeste replied.

"Well you could have asked instead of letting this poor girl suffer," Alyson answered. "Kerry, you take Garrett out of here and you stay out! You're too young to see this. Celeste, Morning Song, if you have a faint heart you had better leave as well.

Kerry left the cabin and took Garrett to her old room by the back stairs. She had no intentions of running into the men and having to tell them something was wrong with the delivery. She couldn't face Edward or Braden.

"Morning Song, how much pain medicine do you have with you?"

"I have plenty," Morning Song answered.

"Good, give her as much as you can without putting her life in danger. Trust me Morning Song, she will need it with what I have to do," Alyson said sternly. Alyson began rolling up her sleeves and went to the boiling water. She picked up a kettle and mixed it with the cold water from the well that was in a bucket. Alyson scrubbed her hands and arms with lye soap. Alyson explained to Celeste, Morning Song, and Small Bird what needed to be done.

Small Bird nodded her head. The pain medicine was working already and not matter what she must endure, she would endure it to give birth to Edward's son.

Celeste knew she would not be able to bear watching what had to be done. Celeste told Alyson she would leave and stay with the men.

Alyson asked Celeste to inform the men it would be a little bit longer, but soon the child would be born. Alyson told Celeste she should tell the men the baby was breech.

As Celeste left the cabin she heard Small Bird screaming. Alyson had begun turning the baby for delivery. Celeste ran into the ranch's kitchen and closed the door to escape Small Bird's screams. It didn't work. Celeste heard Small Bird in the kitchen. Celeste caught her breath and stilled her wildly beating heart. She smoothed her dress and calmly walked into the study.

A look of relief ran across the male faces when they saw Celeste enter. The men assumed Celeste was there to tell them the baby was finally here. Their assumption was wrong.

The silence and frown of Celeste caused Edward to wobble. "What is it? What happened? Robyn?"

Celeste went to Edward. "Small Bird is having a hard time, Edward. Alyson assured me that it is almost over, just a little while longer."

"Alyson said? Is there a problem?" Grady demanded to know. He could tell from Celeste's voice that something was amiss and Alyson



would not give up Garrett unless something was very wrong and her help was needed.

"The baby is breech," Celeste said quickly before she lost the courage to tell the men.

The men in the room took in deep breaths.

Edward's knees gave way. Braden ran to his aid and helped him to a chair.

"I must see Robyn," Edward uttered mournfully.

Celeste knelt at Edward's side. "Alyson said just a little longer, it would soon be over."

Edward buried his head in his hands and cried openly. "Robyn, I love you," Edward repeated over and over.

Kerry regained some of her courage and decided to enter the study. She spotted Celeste and hoped that meant the baby had been born. "Any word yet?"

"I don't know any more than you did when Alyson shooed you out," Celeste answered still kneeling by Edward trying to offer comfort.

Ryan came in with Bennett. Bennett was still eating a French pastry that Marseille Aumond had made for breakfast.

"I take it by the looks on everyone's face the baby has decided not to be born yet," Ryan observed.

Edward looked up. His face was pale and his eyes were red and swollen with tears.

Ryan choked. He knew childbirth could be dangerous. His own mother had died shortly after delivering Kerry.

Bennett sensed the drama and ran to Kerry. "Mamma, is Willow's Mamma going to be okay?"

Kerry gave Garrett to Braden and immediately soothed away Bennett's anxiety. "Everything is going to be fine, Auntie Alyson said so. Let's put Garrett to bed."

"Uh huh. Uncle Ryan? Do you want to come?" Bennett asked.

"Sure do. Can I carry my nephew, sis?" Ryan requested.

"Of course," Kerry replied looking to her husband.

Braden was cuddling Garrett. He was giving a prayer of silent thanks that his son was born healthy without serious trouble to his Kerry.

Braden carefully transferred his precious bundle to the gentle giant's arms after he placed a tender kiss on his son's forehead.

After putting Garrett to bed, Kerry and Ryan played with Bennett in his room and had some more quiet time to discuss Twiggy. It helped to keep their minds occupied while they waited for word about Small Bird.

"Sis, when Twiggy's people come to live on Geneva's Branch would you mind staying a week or two. Sort of a chaperone for Twiggy and I," Ryan requested. "She'll need some help adapting to the ranch."

"I'd be more than happy to help," Kerry agreed. "But Ryan, that means Bennett and Braden come along with Garrett and I."



"Garrett and Bennett I want to come with you," Ryan complained. "Braden? Can't you lose him for a little while?"

"You don't like Papa?" Bennett asked innocently.

"Sure I like your Papa," Ryan consoled. "I just like him better when he's in another place."

"Oh," Bennett answered and began concentrating on the chess game once more. He thinks he understood his Uncle Ryan.

Kerry chuckled, "Ryan, you are such a tease."

Ryan winked at Kerry and concentrated on Bennett's chess move. "Smart Kid!"

Two hours later, Morning Song walked into the study. A large smile on her face reassured everyone in the room as she walked to Edward. "You have a strong healthy son."

As Edward looked up, a sense of joy overwhelmed him when he looked into Morning song's face. "Robyn?"

"Small Bird is well but tired. She must rest for a long time," Morning Song answered and left the room to return to be with her daughter.

Dwayne and Grady were not assuaged. They both remembered it was in that resting they lost Ashley.

Braden had to restrain Edward from bolting after Morning Song. "She'll call you when you can see Robyn."

Edward almost slammed a fist into Braden, but Grady interceded and Grant helped restrain him until they calmed him down and talked some sense into him.

It was thirty minutes later Alyson walked into the room carrying a precious new addition to the family. Edward was released and jumped up to greet his son. Alyson placed the little bundle in Edward's arms. "He's going to look just like you."

Edward peeled off the blanket covering the baby's head exposing wisps of sandy blonde hair. The baby's skin was pink and gave no indication of the mixed blood of Sosoni'.

Suddenly good wishes and everyone looking at the baby surrounded Edward.

"Have you thought of a name?" Grady asked while looking at his new grandson.

"Corey, Corey Edward Laurel."

"Your father's name," Braden recognized.

"Yes," Edward acknowledged but looked at Alyson Jameson.

"My wife, can I see her?"

Alyson nodded, "She's still sleeping but you can see her. Morning Song is still with her. Where's Kerry?"



"Kerry and Ryan are upstairs keeping Bennett occupied," Braden informed Alyson. "I think perhaps they might still be sharing confidential conversations about Twiggy."

Edward reluctantly turned his son over to Alyson, but his main concern was seeing Robyn immediately.

Braden accompanied Edward to the cabin where Small Bird lay sleeping. He stood by silently and watched Edward kneel next to Robyn's bed taking her hand and kissing her gently on the lips.

Small Bird stirred after the kiss and it gave Edward a little relief in his worry. He saw her breathe and move.

"I had to give her more medicine than usual, Edward," Morning Song explained. "It will take almost the entire day for the medicine to wear off. The medicine makes her sleep. That is why she isn't awake to talk to you."

"She will be alright?" Edward asked quietly.

"Small Bird is fine and tomorrow the two of you can share the joy of your son's birth," Morning song promised.

Alyson carried Corey to the nursery. She had assumed that is where Ryan and Kerry would be and she was correct.

Ryan and Kerry were on the floor with Bennett. They were engaged in a game of chess. Bennett had been learning chess since the boat trip on the way to England. Braden and Bennett played it many times while they stayed in England waiting for Garrett to be born.

Ryan was the first to see Alyson and rose immediately. "Is Small Bird okay?"

"She's sleeping, but she's fine. This is her son, come see," Alyson invited.

Ryan opened the blanket and blocking Kerry's view drew a deep breath, "I don't believe it."

"What?" Kerry asked rising quickly. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Ryan answered taking the boy from Alyson's arms and turning, "but you have to see this to believe it!"

Kerry saw the blonde wisps of hair, the lighter brown eyes and the pink skin. "He looks just like Edward!"

"Can I see?" Bennett asked standing on his tiptoes.

Ryan knelt on one knee to bring Corey Laurel to Bennett's eye level.

"Willow has a little brother like I do. Let's go tell her!" Bennett exclaimed.

"We'll get Willow right now and bring her home to her little brother," Ryan offered grinning at the little baby in his arms. He found himself thinking about Twiggy again and what their baby would look like. He really wanted his own baby. Those paternal hormones were getting stronger. "Want to come with us, Kerry?"



Chapter Twelve

Oak Twig watched Geneva's Branch house waiting for Ryan to come back. Her people had been camped on the land for three full days. Everything had been as Ryan had said. The ranch hands were friendly and helpful. The lodges were erected quickly. The hands had already built temporary corrals to keep the horses and cattle promised to Blue Pool and Chief Bright Moon. Her people had plenty of food and blankets. Oak Twig couldn't wait for Ryan to return. She wanted to thank him for all he had done. *A kiss would be very nice.* She found she missed Ryan. She missed his arms, his gentleness, his humor, and his strong body.

Suddenly Oak Twig remembered they were betrothed and would be wed. She remembered she was white, not Sosoni'. What would Ryan do? Would he reject her? Would he call her bad names?

"What troubles you, Oak Twig?" Brook Pebble remarked.

"I am just thinking of my Ryan," Oak Twig replied.

"Thoughts of your Ryan should make you happy, not troubled," Brook Pebble commented. "We people thought your father's choice was happiness for you. Is it not?"

"It is happiness and all that is good. I feel strongly for Ryan, but if it remains good medicine will be his choice," Oak Twig told her still contemplating Ryan's reaction to her secret.

"Whatever is this that troubles you should be said between you," Brook Pebble noted. "Our people come here in hope and happiness. In these few sunrises we already feel the comfort and peace of your Ryan's lands. He feeds and shelters us with warmth. What ever doubt is in your heart must be said for the sake of our people."

"I must speak of it only to my betrothed," Oak Twig responded.

"Horse Tail waits for you, if this medicine is not good with you and Ryan, we must know and he will take you," Brook Pebble suggested.

The people of Bright Moon's tribe held Oak Twig in esteem. It was she that had protected the people with her understanding of the white man's language. They would sacrifice all to protect her if necessary.



Brook Pebble had already felt the same peace and contentment the people felt upon this land and agreement with Oak Twig's Ryan. Brook Pebble did not want to give it up. The medicine was good. "Tomorrow we will seek out your Ryan. We will find out why he has not come to us yet and you will talk to him of what troubles you."

"What if Ryan rejects me?" Oak Twig asked.

"For all that he paid for you? I cannot understand why you think he would reject you," Brook Pebble comforted. "I think you are a nervous bride. Let your Ryan soothe your worries."

"I am not so certain he will choose to soothe me," Oak Twig replied remembering the white woman raised by the Crow.

"You and I will seek your Ryan tomorrow. We must put your worry to rest for your sake and the sake of our people," Brook Pebble insisted.

Oak Twig realized the time had come to speak with Ryan about her secret. It could no longer wait. The lives of her people were at risk.

Ryan had taken Bennett to Eye of Hawk's camp and told Small Bird's family of the birth of her son. Fragrant Flower, Eye of Hawk and his two sons, Little Bear, and Willow left for Geneva's Hope with Bennett and Ryan immediately.

Small Bird was still resting when they arrived. Edward had taken charge of his son and greeted Willow warmly with kisses and showed Corey to her. Fragrant Flower and Morning Song stayed with Small Bird. Celeste and Kerry took charge of the children and Bennett had his three cousins to share his nursery with that evening. Eye of Hawk and Little Bear were introduced to Garrett on this family visit.

In the morning at breakfast Ryan announced, "Pa, I need to go to Geneva's Branch today. Twiggy's people should be settled and I should be there."

"Of course, son," Grady agreed. "Once we get settled, I'll be up to visit you."

"You need to bring Twiggy to Geneva's Hope, Ryan," Auntie Alyson interjected. "Kerry needs to meet her and I need to fit her wedding dress."

Ryan smiled, "I'll ask Twiggy right away, Auntie."

"Good! Don't forget or I'll come and get her myself," Alyson ordered.

Marseille walked in the dining room with a box. "I thought you would be returning to Geneva's Branch today so I baked your Twiggy a chocolate cake last night. You will please give it to her with my compliments."

Ryan smiled broadly, "I sure will Aumond. Twiggy will be delighted. She loves your chocolate cake. With your help, I will be able to put a little meat on her bones."



"Adieu!" Marseille grinned with pride. He liked anyone that appreciated his culinary skills.

Ryan excused himself from the table.

"Ryan, I will be out to your ranch as soon as possible. I want to meet my new daughter in law," Grady said as he rose and gave his middle son a bear hug.

"I'll be out later with Pa," Kerry announced.

"No you won't," Braden objected. "You've got a handful right here. You'll wait until Ryan brings his Twiggy here."

"Excuse me?" Kerry stammered. "I will go where and when I choose."

"Kerry!" Braden stated emphatically.

Recognizing that tone, Kerry backed down. She would discuss this with her husband later. She would visit Geneva's Branch. She had promised Ryan. Braden would have to live with it, one way or another.

Oak Twig and Brook Pebble had finished their chores early in the morning and walked to Geneva's Branch house. They saw Ryan's foreman Cassidy, speak to someone in the shadows of the ranch porch and enter the house. The door had been left open so Oak Twig and Brook Pebble walked in.

Oak Twig heard the conversation coming from the room her Ryan called parlor. She heard a feminine voice.

"I'm finished with his sister's room. Most of the ranch had been completed by the time I got here. I've just added some touches like he asked."

"You did a great job, Lucy," Cassidy said. "The house really has a nice homey feel to it."

Lucy screamed when she saw the two Sosoni' women.

Cassidy jumped and pulled his gun out aiming it in the direction of Lucy's frightened eyes.

"Oh it's you," Cassidy laughed putting his gun back in the holster. "What can I do for you ladies?"

"We have come to speak to Ryan," Oak Twig answered in American.

Cassidy had gone to Lucy's side and held her in his arms comforting her. "These are some women from the Shoshone that Ryan will have live on his land. It's perfectly safe Lucy. Don't fret."

"Is Ryan here?" Oak Twig asked again.

"Nope, he hasn't come back from picking up his sister yet," Cassidy replied. "Is there something I can help you with? Ryan told me to do everything needed to make your people comfortable."

Brook Pebble whispered to Oak Twig, "Is she one of Ryan's women? I heard his people take many wives."



Oak Twig's heart sank. Looking directly at the blonde woman Oak Twig asked, "Are you Ryan's woman?"

Cassidy looked at Oak Twig in surprise.

Lucy looked at Cassidy and asked, "How do you explain housekeeper?"

"Housekeeper?" Oak Twig gasped. That was a word associated with the American word wife. Tears swelled in her eyes and flooded over in sobs. Putting her hand to her mouth Oak Twig took flight. Brook Pebble had no idea what was said and stood transfixed in astonishment.

Oak Twig ran from the ranch house into the path of a man riding a horse. "Twiggy!" The rider shouted.

Oak Twig saw only a blur and her sobs so loud she did not hear the voice call her.

Ryan dismounted and ran after Oak Twig. "Twiggy, for Pete's Sake wait up." Ryan's long legs in full stride quickly caught up to her and pulled into his arms.

Oak Twig struggled against the handling and looked up to see Ryan's questioning eyes. "Liar, liar!" She shouted. "You are a liar, like all the white men!" Oak Twig pounded furiously against Ryan's chest.

"What the Sam Hill is going on?" Ryan questioned. Twiggy continued struggling in his arms. "In the name of God, what is the problem? Have any of my men hurt you?"

"You have hurt me! You are a liar!" Oak Twig accused hotly.

"Twiggy, calm down and tell me what is wrong!" Ryan demanded not letting go of her.

Horse Tail had been following the women on his pony and suddenly appeared. He spoke in Sosoni', "Let Oak Twig go. You heard her. She does not want you." Horse Tail pulled his knife.

Ryan picked up Oak Twig and slung her across his shoulder face down with an 'Oomph' from her. He pulled his colt from his holster and gave Horse Tail warning in Sosoni', "put that knife down or you're going to get hurt. Twiggy is my woman and this is my problem, not yours. I'll handle this. Go away peaceful like."

Oak Twig stopped struggling. "Ryan, do not kill Horse Tail!" Oak Twig begged.

"So you can talk!" Ryan teased. "I won't kill him. I'll hurt him, now tell him real nice you're coming with me and we are going to have a nice quiet talk."

Oak Twig complied, "Ryan and I will talk. I'll be back later. He will not hurt me."

Horse Tail left grudgingly, "If you are not returned to camp by sun setting I will return."

"You can put me down," Oak Twig told Ryan caustically.



"Oh no I'm not until I get you in the house and find out what this is all about, Twiggy," Ryan countered. "I'm not about to let go of you until I find out what burr got under your saddle."

Oak Twig began struggling again. It was pointless under the strong hand of Ryan McGillinen. She was rewarded for her struggling with a swift and painful swat on the behind.

Brook Pebble had followed Oak Twig out to see the confrontation between Horse Tail and Ryan. She also saw Ryan swat Oak Twig. Brook Pebble smiled and yelled to Oak Twig, "You see, he treats you as wife already! A warrior will discipline an errant wife."

Oak Twig ceased her struggles after the swat and blushed crimson in humiliation. "Ryan, put me down!"

This time Ryan complied but held her firmly, "Twiggy, you will tell me what this is all about!"

"Ask your woman!" Oak Twig snapped angrily pointing to Lucy who had walked out of the ranch house with Cassidy behind her.

"Cassidy, what is this all about?" Ryan queried his ranch foreman.

"Danged if I know," Cassidy answered shrugging his shoulders. These two women came in here asking for you. That one asked Lucy if she was your woman. The next thing I know she's running out in tears. Who is she anyway?"

"This is Twiggy, Cassidy," Ryan replied. "What did you tell her?"

"Didn't get a chance to say anything after Lucy asked me how to explain to her the word 'housekeeper'," Cassidy responded shrugging his shoulder.

Ryan looked at Twiggy. Her eyes were blazing in anger, confusion, and filled with tears.

"You liar! You have a woman. I will not be a second wife even for my people," Oak Twig sobbed as she began to pound her fists on Ryan's chest once more. "You white men may think it good to have many wives. I do not."

"Neither do I!" Ryan growled. "Lord knows why you think Lucy is my woman. Lucy is the housekeeper."

"Housekeeper, that is word for wife," Oak Twig growled back.

"Twiggy, housekeeper is not a wife. She is our Marie!"

"Marie?"

"Yes, Marie the woman at Geneva's Hope. Auntie Alyson's housekeeper."

"Woman in the gray frock?" Oak Twig looked up and asked quietly.

Feeling a bit more assured, Ryan answered calmly, "Yes, the woman in the gray frock."



"That woman does not wear a gray frock!" Twiggy snarled and pulled away from Ryan. "You make fun of me."

Ryan grabbed Oak Twig's arm and pulled her back, "Lucy hasn't had time to make a gray frock. The color of her dress doesn't matter. Lucy has been hired to keep house for us, haven't you Lucy?"

"Yes, sir Mr. McGillinen," Lucy answered quickly. "So this pretty little thing is your Twiggy?"

"Yep, this is my Twiggy. My future bride," Ryan laughed as Oak Twig still struggled against him. "Cassidy, meet Twiggy."

Cassidy grinned, "a little spitfire. I would say you are going to have your hands full. No wonder you hired Lucy to take care of the ranch house. Your Twiggy will occupy a lot of your time."

"She wears no gray frock!" Oak Twig said stubbornly.

"A dress color doesn't matter, Twiggy," Ryan insisted just as stubbornly.

"Yes it does! Color does matter! Frock or skin!" Oak Twig sobbed falling into Ryan's arms.

"This really isn't about Lucy is it?" Ryan asked suddenly enlightened.

Oak Twig nodded. She was crying even more.

"We need to talk privately," Ryan stated in understanding.

Oak Twig nodded her head again in agreement

Ryan picked her up gently and carried her into his bedroom. He bolted the door behind him. "Twiggy, I want you tell me what is really bothering you. I want you to tell me right now!"

Catching her breath Oak Twig began, "My father and I have kept a secret from our people and you."

"Go on," Ryan ordered crossing his arms.

"I am white, not Sosoni," Oak Twig confessed. "You see?" Oak Twig raised her doeskin to reveal her creamy white thighs.

"Alright, what else?" Ryan asked observing those luscious looking thighs.

"What else?"

"That's the question I asked," Ryan chuckled. "Is there an echo?"

Oak Twig creased her brows, "You don't care that I am white?"

"Should I?" Ryan grinned mischievously. "I thought I merely had to love you, my Twiggy. Why should I care if you're red, white, or blue?"

"You would hate me for not killing myself and submitting to the way of Sosoni'."

Ryan became serious, "So that's it! You think I'm like that no good blue coat or the white people of that town?"

The change in Ryan's tone suddenly frightened Oak Twig. She looked into his eyes and saw the gentleness change to anger. "You are angry!"



"You damned right I'm angry!" Ryan hissed strengthening his hold on Twiggy. "You've hurt me deeply to put me in the same category as those people. You doubt my love for you, so you doubt me."

"You use a bad word," Twiggy said sheepishly. She had no idea her own fears would hurt the man she loved.

"Damned right, and I'll use more like it when you hurt me," Ryan snapped. "You must not love me as much as I love you if you put me in the same line as all the others."

"Ryan, I do love you. I want you to love me! I am afraid that you would reject me for living with the people," Twiggy sighed.

"If you really love me you can't have these doubts anymore, Twiggy," Ryan whispered taking her into his arms. "You must love and trust me as much as I love and trust you."

"You are a good man. I love you, Ryan," Twiggy replied snuggling into his strong chest and wrapping her arms around his thick neck. "Kiss?"

"Kiss and chocolate cake," Ryan teased. "Which do you like best?"

"Kiss! Then chocolate cake."

Ryan complied. His mouth covered Twiggy's. Eagerly their tongues met and dueled in passion. Both had missed each other and longed for each other's touch and warmth.

Soon Twiggy had her hands unbuttoning Ryan's shirt and touching the hard muscles of his chest. She was touching his taut nipples and stroking the hair on his chest.

Ryan moaned, "I love your creamy white thighs." His hand began stroking the soft skin edging towards the breechclout and pushing it aside. Taking her down on the bed with him, his fingers entered that warm and welcoming soft flesh between her thighs.

Twiggy suddenly felt a wet warmth between her legs as her body responded to Ryan's gentle massaging there. A fire took control of her thinking, which was contrary to logic and reason. She wanted Ryan inside her. With awkward fingers she stroked the hard bulge in Ryan's trousers she knew was his manhood.

Ryan did not resist, lost in his own passion that was growing more powerful and controlling his body without reason or logic. Ryan moved his hand up toward her breast taking her doeskin dress with it until her white breasts with the inviting pink rosebuds tantalized him. He bent his head over one and licked the hard nipple with his tongue sending a jolt through Twiggy.

Immediately Twiggy succumbed to her primal urge and awkwardly began unbuttoning Ryan's trousers until her hand caressed his hard shaft that was pulsing in heat.

Both of them gave into the mating urges flooding their bodies. Ryan rolled on top of Twiggy's willing body and braced himself against



the bed so she would not have his entire weight. Slowly and methodically he parted her legs with his knee and the tip of his manhood tasted the wet warmth welcoming its presence.

Twiggy arched her back in pleasure as Ryan's mouth suckled her breast taking all of the rose pink bud in his mouth. Her body rose to his manhood and it sheathed itself at the tip within her femininity.

Ryan felt her and wanted more. His body was demanding more. Slowly he entered her. Her warmth fit tightly and his pleasure was pain. Ryan felt the barrier of his woman. He knew pain would come, but she wanted him and Lord he needed her.

"Ryan! Ryan!" Dwayne's voice suddenly was heard shouting.

Ryan withdrew to the sound. It was like a bath in an ice-cold mountain stream.

"Hey Boss, you'd better get out here right quick!" Cassidy was heard to say. There was something about the tone of voice to warn Ryan something was really wrong.

Ryan quickly buttoned his trousers and was buttoning his shirt as he walked to the door to unbolt it, "Stay here Twiggy. Something is up. I want you safe."

Oak Twig nodded. "I love you, Ryan. Be careful."

Ryan smiled at Twiggy, "I love you too! Stay safe in here." He turned and walked out the bedroom door as he buttoned his shirt.

"Braden?" Dwayne teased noticing his brother's disheveled appearance. Dwayne couldn't resist noting he interrupted a passionate tryst in his brother's bedroom regardless of the dire circumstance outside.

Ryan knew what his brother was indicating and normally would have hauled off and fisted him but Cassidy was next to Dwayne and his face showed that there was trouble. "What's up Cassidy?"

"We got trouble boss," Cassidy told him. "Your Pa is outside with almost all his ranch hands. I'm getting ours together right now."

"Dammit, Cassidy! "Ryan growled. "This is bad, what is it?"



Chapter Thirteen

"Tracker came to Geneva's Hope with word that a troop of Calvary was on its way here," Dwayne told his brother seriously. "Pa brought the ranch hands in case. If it's Colonel Howell we can talk, but if it's someone else we may have to show our own strength and sovereign land rights."

Ryan reacted immediately walking briskly outside to the porch, "Cassidy, how many hands do we have here?"

"Only ten. Ten are with the Shoshone people helping them build shelter for the animals, the rest are on the spread working with the mustangs and cattle herd," Cassidy answered. "I've sent a man out to get the rest."

Ryan saw his father sitting on Runner, "Pa!"

"No time for social graces son, we have to get to Bright Moon's camp, Pronto!" Grady ordered and nudged Runner to a full run signaling his hands to follow him.

Tracker held Chiseler's reins and handed them to Ryan, "Come brother!"

A large troop of Calvary was seen in the distance nearing Bright Moon's camp. Bright Moon had ordered all into their lodges upon seeing the ranch hands form a straight line as barrier between the camp and the intruding white soldiers. The warriors of the camp were furious to be told to hide like women, but obeyed their chief. Bright Moon and Blue Pool stood behind the white ranch hands.

The sound of hooves traveling fast thundered in the distance catching Bright Moon's attention. He saw Chiseler with its master riding fast and hard. "Your son in law comes to visit," Bright Moon chuckled to Blue Pool.

"And other guests arrive as well," Blue Pool laughed pointing to the cavalry. "Have we enough food to entertain?"



"I'm not sure, but perhaps some of our surprise guests will not stay," Bright Moon said thoughtfully. "At least I hope some will not stay."

Ryan urged Chiseler to ride faster and soon pushed between the ranch hands and the approaching cavalry. He reined Chiseler to a halt when he approached Colonel Howell. "Randy, what are you doing on Geneva's Branch lands?"

"Ryan, we heard there is a tribe of renegade Shoshone that had made camp here," Randolph Howell answered. "I see by the lodges up ahead, that is true."

"It is the people of Bright Moon and I have invited them to live here," Ryan replied quickly. "They are not renegades. They are my guests by invitation."

Colonel Howell straightened his back on the saddle of his army pony. "I received a wire from the Indian agent in Utah territory that a tribe of Shoshone escaped the reservation to cause trouble."

Grady had ridden up alongside his son, "Well Randy, the only trouble I know of is that one of the people have taken my son's heart and they will be married."

"You marrying a Shoshone?" Colonel Howell asked Ryan.

"No, I'm marrying Twiggy!" Ryan retorted. "These people are her people and friends as we are friends and family to Eye of Hawk. I have invited them to live and work the land here. If you come to my ranch I will show you our legal contract. Dwayne wrote it up and it is in Brian Duffey's hands. It will be sent to the Capital as a legal agreement. You can check in Ely if you wish."

"I don't want to turn down such a kind invitation. My men are tired, thirsty and hungry as am I." Colonel Howell accepted graciously. "If there is such a document, it seems that the agent in Utah territory will need to be corrected in his assumption of trouble and of course, he will need to be told of the invitation."

"We'd appreciate that Randy," Grady said appreciatively.

"We people of Nevada State take our invitations seriously," Colonel Howell grinned. "If more of us could live in peace I'd be a lot happier. The war made me hate death and useless destruction. I have had my fill of blood and now only want peace."

"We all do, Randy." Grady agreed. "Let's get back to Geneva's Branch and we'll see to it that your troop gets food and drink."

Ryan and Grady led the troop past the ranch hands and past the camp of Bright Moon.

Dwayne stayed behind and told Blue Pool and Bright Moon what had happened, not to be afraid, and how proud he was that they showed such great courage to restrain his people.

Oak Twig had remained behind in the ranch home and Lucy had gone to her.



"Why didn't you tell us you were Twiggy?" Lucy asked taking Oak Twig's hands in hers.

"Would that make a difference?" Twiggy asked surprised at the gentle voice of the woman.

"Of course it would, silly. Ryan loves you! I could have told you he hired me to make your life comfortable and easy," Lucy answered. "Why are you wearing that Indian dress?"

"It's comfortable," Twiggy answered with a smile. "Besides, I have no frocks like yours."

"Of course you don't. Yours are much nicer," Lucy giggled. "And that's not including the bolts of fabric your Ryan bought for you to make more dresses. Why I declare, I am almost jealous of you."

"What dresses?" Oak Twig asked.

"The ones I cleaned and pressed and put in the closet in your room, you silly goose," Lucy laughed. "Why are you teasing me? Or don't you know? Was it supposed to be a surprise? Oh dear, Ryan will be upset with me."

"He won't be upset," Twiggy grinned. "Show me!"

Lucy took Twiggy's hand and led her back to Ryan's bedroom. She opened the closet to show her several beautiful dresses of satin, brocade, and velvet.

Twiggy touched them unbelieving the softness and beauty of the fabric. "Which one do you think Ryan would like most?" Twiggy asked Lucy.

"The green one, the one with the pretty bows and pearls would be my guess. He seems to be partial to green," Lucy giggled.

"Would you help me put it on?" Twiggy asked politely.

"My dear, that's what I was hired for," Lucy giggled again. "The bathing room is behind this door, let's get you cleaned up and dressed real pretty for your man."

"Lucy, do you love my Ryan?" Twiggy heard herself ask.

"Of course I like your Ryan, but love? No my dear. I don't think love is something I will ever find myself feeling," Lucy sighed. "I have only seen the worst of men."

"You will not love?"

"Twiggy, I cannot love. My ...well my past is rather shaded. Most good folk are sort of repulsed by me," Lucy shared. "I'm glad you're like your Ryan. You're kind and nice."

"Good folk, bah!" Twiggy mimicked Horse Tail. "These good folk you speak of have snakes for tongues and wood for hearts."

Lucy laughed, "I sure am glad I came to work here. I think I could learn to love you!"

"Tell me of your past, and why it causes you pain," Twiggy requested.



Lucy told Twiggy the story of her life and the employment as a shaded woman without fear of condemnation. Twiggy had made her feel comfortable.

During and after the bath while Lucy dressed Twiggy, the two women shared their deepest secrets of their lives. Lucy even confided in Twiggy that she was growing quite fond of Trevor Cassidy, Ryan's foreman. Lucy also warned Twiggy about Cho Ling and his territory called the kitchen. Both women laughed together about the little Chinese man that kept everyone from that room, but prepared fine meals.

Lucy had finished putting the last curl in place upon Twiggy's head when they heard the horses approaching.

"There are many horses," Twiggy quivered. "I am afraid for my Ryan."

"I think we'd better go to the porch and see," Lucy concurred in panic of her own. "I hope Cassidy is with them."

Twiggy smiled and took Lucy's trembling hand. Together they stood at the door. Twiggy quavered when she saw Ryan riding with a strange older man and the large troop of blue coats.

"It's okay honey, Cassidy is with them," Lucy reassured Twiggy smiling happily at the sight of the big strong handsome foreman.

Ryan saw Twiggy on the steps with Lucy and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't believe the vision of loveliness before him. Chiseler found himself once more nudged into a full gallop to stop short before the house. Ryan dismounted and ran to Twiggy. "My God woman, you are beautiful!" Ryan breathed huskily and covered Twiggy's mouth before she could say a word.

Twiggy put her arms around Ryan's neck and returned the kiss with relief and passion.

It was this scene Grady and Colonel Howell were greeted with.

"Ahem," Grady cleared his throat for attention.

Ryan lifted his head and offered his father a broad and proud smile, "Pa, Colonel Howell, this is my betrothed, Twiggy."

Grady and Howell doffed their hats, "Pleased to meet you ma'am!"

Colonel Howell dismounted and walked to Oak Twig, "It is an honor ma'am. I can see why Ryan was anxious to return to his ranch." Colonel Howell bowed and took Twiggy's hand brushing his lips across her knuckles.

Taken aback by the blue coat, Ryan felt Twiggy quiver. "It's okay my love, Colonel Howell is an honorable and good man."

Twiggy took courage from Ryan's words and his strong arm around her waist, "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, sir."

"We've invited the Colonel to dinner, and his troop is hungry and thirsty," Ryan told his future bride. "The ranch hands will offer food, drink and shelter to the troop for this evening."



"Of course, you must be tired from your journey," Twiggy offered graciously.

"That I am ma'am, but your beautiful countenance is food for a poor man's eyes," Colonel Howell returned.

"That's enough flirting, Randy!" Ryan growled in jealousy. "Twiggy is going to be my wife."

"Understood my friend, but you cannot stop a starving man from feasting on such rare beauty," Randolph Howell chuckled.

"That's enough, Randy," Grady interjected with humor. "Let's go into the house and talk before you start another war with your starvation." Grady pushed the Colonel inside and took Twiggy's hand. "I'm Ryan's father, Grady McGillinen. Welcome to our family, Twiggy." Grady then released her hand, grinned to his son, "Fine choice, son. She's a real beauty. Didn't know you could tell the difference between champagne and beer, but glad you can."

"Thanks, Pa!" Ryan answered smiling. He understood exactly what his father meant and at this moment in time he was very proud of his beautiful Twiggy.

"You like this frock on me?" Twiggy asked taunting Ryan knowing full well why he hadn't taken his eyes off her once.

"Twiggy, if I liked that frock on you any more, it would be off you already," Ryan answered huskily. "I like that dress on you more than you like chocolate cake."

"I like kissing with you more," Twiggy teased seductively.

"Not now sweetheart, I wouldn't be able to stop and I'd make a fool of myself right quick," Ryan chuckled. "Why I would turn into a Braden Wessex!"

"This Braden, you keep saying that you would turn into. Is he not the man of your sister?" Twiggy asked in curiosity.

"Another story, another time my love. Let's go into the house before everyone of those troopers out there trip over their tongues and go blind staring at your beauty," Ryan ordered.

"My Ryan, there are times when your words confuse me," Twiggy giggled.

Ryan responded with a gentle kiss on her cheek and led her into the house. He walked her into the parlor where Cho Ling was serving Colonel Howell and Grady the brown cake Twiggy loved so dearly.

"Cho co lit cake!" Twiggy exclaimed. "You brought some!"

"Compliments of Aumond," Ryan laughed. "Cho Ling, cut your mistress a slice of cake, would you please."

"Celtainry, Mr. Lyan," Cho Ling obeyed and offered a slice of the scrumptious dessert on a plate with fork to Twiggy.

While Cho Ling prepared a feast for the guests and family. Ryan took out a copy of the contract between Bright Moon's people and



Geneva's Branch and handed it to Randy Howell. Colonel Howell reviewed it carefully.

"Everything appears to be in order here," Colonel Howell stated. "I'll leave in the morning for Ely and send a wire to the agent in Utah territory. They'll have to live with these people accepting our invitation. I'll stop at Duffey's offices and make sure the legal documentation is being done and a copy sent to Washington."

"We would appreciate your help, Randy," Ryan said pulling Twiggy close to him. Her dress rustled a wonderful sound every time he hugged her. He liked the sound. He liked her hair. He liked her dress. For the first time he realized that like Braden, he could not resist the woman he had come to love. He wanted her desperately and was not about to let her go back to the people. Twiggy was his and that was that.

"Who would that be?" Grady asked hearing horses and a buggy approach the house.

Keeping Twiggy's hand in his, Ryan rose and walked to the entry pulling Twiggy with him. He opened the door to Braden, Kerry, Bennett, Garrett and Morning Song. Behind his family that had arrived in the carriage were Eye of Hawk and Tracker on their ponies.

Grady pushed his way past Ryan and Twiggy. "Morning Song, I told you to stay at Geneva's Hope where it was safe!" Grady scolded his wife.

"Husband, Tracker came and told us that all was well and that it was Colonel Howell. Tracker said you were here at Geneva's Branch in peace."

Grady turned on Braden, "Couldn't you stop the women from coming here?"

"Grady, they were going to leave me behind. I was fortunate they let me come with them to protect them," Braden complained.

"Oh Pa, we wouldn't have come if we thought it was dangerous. You don't think I would have brought Garrett or Bennett if it were dangerous, do you?" Kerry scolded back to her father. "Besides, I promised Ryan I would come and visit Geneva's Branch. I wanted to meet Twiggy." Kerry walked to Ryan and Twiggy still holding sleeping Garrett. "You must be Twiggy! Lord, but you are beautiful! What do you see in my brother?" Kerry remarked and gave Twiggy a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome to the family!"

"Thank you, Kerry. Ryan has told me much about you," Twiggy returned happily. She liked Kerry already. "This is your baby, Garrett?"

"Would you like to hold him?" Kerry offered.

"Yes I would like that very much," Twiggy smiled as she took little Garrett in her arms and looked at the sleeping cherub. Twiggy looked up to Braden as he walked to his wife's side and put his arm around her shoulder. "Your son looks like you."



"Yes he does," Braden said proudly. "I'm Braden Wessex and this is our older son, Bennett. Say hello to Twiggy, Bennett."

"You sure are pretty," Bennett said bowing before Twiggy politely. "You are almost as pretty as Mamma."

"Why thank you, Bennett," Twiggy acknowledged. "And you are almost as handsome as your Papa."

Ryan burst out laughing, "Not even close! Bennett is much better looking than his Papa." Ryan's hold on Twiggy's waist became tighter as he looked upon his sleeping nephew Garrett.

"Aren't you going to invite us in, Ryan?" Braden asked sarcastically. "We did come to visit you."

"Forgive us, please," Twiggy apologized. "I think we were so captivated by your baby boy."

"Come in Kerry, Twiggy and I will show you to your room. Lucy has just finished it for you," Ryan offered as he took Kerry's arm in one arm and led Twiggy and Garrett inside with the other.

Braden stayed behind Kerry while Grady and Morning Song took Bennett in hand to the parlor to meet Colonel Howell.

"A real Colonel?" Bennett exclaimed. "Wow!"

Kerry squeezed her brother's arm when she saw the room that had been prepared for her. "It's truly lovely, brother."

"I wanted to make sure you and Garrett would be comfortable whenever you would stay here," Ryan told his sister. "You are spending the night here, aren't you?"

"I should think so," Kerry grinned. "The room is lovely and comfortable. It is too late to travel back Geneva's Hope. Isn't it Braden?"

"No, not at all. Especially if we leave right now," Braden responded quickly.

"Don't let me keep you, Wessex," Ryan growled. "I'll keep my sister here for the night."

Braden rolled his eyes, "Where Kerry sleeps, I sleep!"

"Unfortunately," Ryan taunted. "The bed is brand new so I am somewhat confident you won't break it."

Braden cocked his head. "What do you mean by that, Ryan?"

"Nothing," Ryan crowed being assured he had gotten Braden's goat. "Nothing that an over lustful husband has a tendency to do even as a houseguest."

"That's enough, Ryan!" Kerry interjected playfully slapping Ryan's arm. "Behave yourself. Whatever might Twiggy think of Braden and I?"

"The same thing Ryan is thinking about Twiggy would be my guess," Braden retorted and grinned broadly to his brother in law. "You get comfortable with Garrett my sweet, and I'll check on getting us some dinner. You do have a cook don't you old boy?"



"Why yes I do brother in law. His name is Cho Ling and he just loves company in his kitchen. Why don't you go check on him there?" Ryan said seriously setting Braden up.

Twiggy nudged Ryan and looked at him wide eyed.

"Braden will get along splendidly with Cho Ling, my love. Don't worry," Ryan chortled.

The next sounds were an angry Cho Ling sputtering Chinese expletives chasing out a confused Braden that was just trying to be friendly and assist in providing a light meal for his wife.

Ryan chuckled in delight as Kerry cocked an eyebrow at her brother, "Cho Ling likes company in his kitchen?"

Ryan looked wide-eyed and innocent. "I guess Braden got on his wrong side."

Colonel Howell took a liking to Braden right away. It was decided that Grady, Morning Song, Bennett, and Braden would ride into Ely with Colonel Howell as witnesses to the legal documentation he would be sending off to Washington. Eye of Hawk and Tracker went to spend the evening with Bright Moon's people.

Geneva's Branch was not as large as Geneva's Hope and many had to double up for the night. Lucy took Bennett into her room for the night. She fell in love with the energetic and curious young boy. Kerry and Braden slept together with Garrett in the crib next to their bed. Grady and Morning Song slept together in the extra third bedroom. That left Twiggy and Ryan to share the master bedroom.

"We are not yet married. What would your sister and our guests think?" Twiggy said closing the door behind her leaving Ryan to sleep in the parlor with Colonel Howell.



Chapter Fourteen

In the morning Twiggy had found a more functional working dress in the closet between the lavish satins, brocades, and velvets. She met Lucy in the dining room taking care of a talkative Bennett.

"Where is Ryan?" Twiggy asked Lucy hoping she would know.

"He's off to Bright Moon's camp with the ranch hands. He wanted to show the people how to build permanent lodges to protect them from the hard winter. He told me and Bennett that it was important to start building them now so they'll be done before the cold winds blow." Lucy told Twiggy as she poured a glass of cold milk for Bennett. "Your man is a truly wonderful caring person."

"Yes he is," Twiggy smiled. "Where is the Colonel and Ryan's father?"

"Everybody is outside getting ready to leave. The Colonel, Calvary, Bennett's Papa, Ryan's father and mother," Lucy responded. "You and Bennett's Mamma slept in today."

"That always seems to happen when I sleep on such a soft and comfy bed," Twiggy admitted shyly.

"I'm finished eating, Miss Lucy," Bennett blurted out and then ran to the door. "Papa is waiting for me to leave with him. I get to ride a pony right next to Colonel Howell. Whoopee!"

"Bennett Grant Wessex!" Kerry's voice came from the stairs scolding. "You aren't going to leave without a kiss for Mamma and Garrett!"

Bennett turned on his heels and ran to the stairs giving Kerry and his brother big wet kisses. "I'm going to ride with Colonel Howell, Mamma!"

"I know Ben, I know!" Kerry smiled. "Have a good time and be a good boy for Papa."

Bennett nodded and ran out the door.

Kerry stood up holding Garrett in her arms and noticed the blonde woman for the first time.



Lucy saw Kerry for the first time since the Wessex family had arrived at Geneva's Branch.

"It's you!" They said in unison staring at each other.

Twiggy looked at Kerry, then at Lucy and back and forth.

"You're alright?" They both questioned at the same time.

"Would someone tell me what is going on?" Twiggy asked in frustration.

"Everett Mann!" Both said together.

Twiggy began laughing, "Okay, that explains everything, yes it does."

Kerry handed a gurgling and contented Garrett to Twiggy, "I think we can explain everything. Is breakfast ready?"

"Cho Ling has set a fine table once more," Lucy grinned. "I am so happy that awful beast didn't kill you!"

"He tried, but my husband and brother saved me," Kerry answered with a frown and hugged Lucy. "I'm so glad you're alright and away from that horrible city."

"You mean a more proper employment?" Lucy asked hesitantly.

"No, I mean safe in Geneva's Branch with good people," Kerry contradicted gently. "You have no idea how I fretted over you and all the other women in the path of Everett Mann."

"You were worried about me?" Lucy gasped.

"Not at first. I was more worried about staying alive and protecting my baby when I first saw you," Kerry confessed. "After my Braden and Ryan saved me, I recovered, and we began legal proceedings I began fretting for you and every other woman that animal would go near."

"You were expecting when he got you in Virginia City?" Lucy questioned as they both walked into the dining room leaving a very confused Twiggy carrying Garrett behind them.

"Yes, Braden's child, our little Garrett."

Twiggy was exasperated as they all sat down. "Who is this beast? Animal? Everett Mann?"

Holding each other's hands in reassurance Kerry and Lucy told the story of Everett Mann. Kerry told of her kidnapping, beatings, recovery and legal suits.

It was then Twiggy understood the full obligation her Ryan felt to the Sosoni' people. Twiggy remembered the pain in Ryan's eyes when he told her of Kerry's abduction and how Tracker, Hunter, and Little Bear had helped. "Is this Everett now in prison?"

"No, unfortunately his family's wealth helped him elude justice, but they keep him in line with a bodyguard not to protect him, but protect others," Kerry told Twiggy sadly.

"He should be punished!" Twiggy pouted.

"Oh he was," Kerry laughed. "The Sosoni' Eye of Hawk people punished him."



"Eye of Hawk's people?" Twiggy asked in amazement that a people could punish a white man and not be obliterated.

"It's quite a story," Kerry elucidated. She told Lucy and Twiggy everything Small Bird had told her starting with being tied to ponies as he was brought to the camp up to Tracker taking out his knife and Everett fainting.

The three women laughed so hard tears rolled down their cheeks and little Garrett gurgled in delight with the fun.

"This is so famous," Kerry said seriously. "All my life I have wanted a sister and found happiness with being a tomboy and the Sosoni' people. The only women in my life were my Auntie Alyson and Morning Song. Mothers are wonderful but sisters are better. Small Bird was the closest I came to one. Now I have two more to share my life with. I am so happy! Dear Twiggy and Dear Lucy."

"I've never felt so happy and contented in my life," Lucy expelled in joy. "I would be proud to be your sister."

"I love you too, Kerry," Twiggy agreed happily. "I had a sister, but I was so young I really don't remember much."

"Ryan told me you were the daughter of Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl," Kerry said quietly. "He told me Wooden Bowl walked the ghost path and it upset you to talk about her. Is your sister with her?"

"Ryan did not know until two sunrises ago that Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl were my adoptive parents," Twiggy told Kerry. She felt comfortable enough to tell the entire story to Lucy and Kerry without fear of humiliation or contempt. "My real name is Dayton. I can't remember my last name. I remember my mother, my father only vaguely and I remember I had an older brother named Todd, and a baby sister named Jerica. The Crow took me as a captive and slave when I was eight seasons old. We were raided by the Sosoni' and that is when Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl adopted me. They had lost a daughter my age. The next eight years were happy for me. Then Bright Moon signed a treaty with the white men and suddenly all were dying of sickness, starvation, and exposure including our beloved Wooden Bowl. Blue Pool's sons Yellow Star and Broken Cup survive. Yellow Star and his mate Spotted Fawn even have a baby daughter now. I am certain they will survive and be happy on Ryan's land."

"I am certain they will!" Kerry reassured Twiggy. "May I call you Twiggy? Even though I know your name is Dayton, I think I prefer Twiggy. It suits you."

Twiggy nodded and laughed with delight when Garrett's little hand caught a strand of errant hair and pulled on it trying to put it in his mouth. "Your son has a hearty appetite, I think. It would appear he wishes to try tasting everything in his hand."

"I think he will grow up as tall and strong as his father and uncle," Kerry agreed. "Twiggy, Ryan told me of your people and what



he found in the mountains. Could we visit your people today? I understand the camp isn't too far from here. We could walk?"

"I'd like to visit with you if you don't mind," Lucy interposed. "After hearing about Sosoni' justice with Everett Mann, I think I like these people. No, I know I like these people. I'll ask Cho Ling to pack us a picnic basket."

Kerry sent a ranch hand back to Geneva's Hope to let Auntie Alyson know everyone's plans and then requested a trunk of clothes including her comfortable range clothes, and Maiden be brought back for her stay at Geneva's Branch. Garrett would require more changes of clothes and nappies also.

Ryan saw the three women approaching the camp as he was trimming a pine log for Bright Moon's lodge. As chief of the people, Bright Moon's lodge would be completed first. In Ryan's absence while picking up his sister, the ranch hands had already put up stock fences and a barn. He put down his saw and walked briskly to Twiggy who was still carrying a contented Garrett. Pulling her in his arms he whispered, "You are so beautiful holding Garrett. I can't wait until you hold our child." He leaned over to kiss her, but she quickly backed off.

"The people," Twiggy reminded him. "We are not yet mated."

"I hate this custom," Ryan snarled. "You will definitely stay at Geneva's Branch house from now on. At least I can kiss you in the privacy of our home."

"But Kerry is there and so is Lucy," Twiggy countered willing that Ryan deny all custom for her. She was not disappointed.

"Kerry and Lucy would wonder if something was wrong with me if I didn't kiss you," Ryan grinned devilishly.

"Oak Twig, return to your father's lodge," Horse Tail ordered abruptly as he suddenly descended upon the quiet moment disrupting it. "It is good you have returned this morning light. I would soon be at this house of Ryan's to return you to your father."

"Over my dead body," Ryan growled. "Twiggy is my betrothed and will stay with me. Your will be damned."

"Your dead body is what I want," Horse Tail warned menacingly. "Let us fight now for the Sosoni' maiden Oak Twig before you have completely changed her and denied her people. I see you have her dress in the white man clothes already."

"Horse Tail, I have chosen Ryan not you. I dress in these clothes because I choose too, not because Ryan demands it and further more you brain of a bird, he does not ask me to deny my people. Ryan is more of the Sosoni' than you and greater of a warrior!" Twiggy shouted to Horse Tail hotly. "It is you that desires to dominate my will, not Ryan."

This insult by Oak Twig was far too much for Horse Tail. He was in a rage that she would call this white man more of a warrior than



he. "We fight now!" Horse Tail withdrew his knife and every muscle in his body taught with anger ready to attack.

A hand held back the knife in Horse Tail's hand followed by an angry voice. "Put down your knife Horse Tail. You cannot fight for a woman who has chosen her mate by love and destiny. You break the promise of the Sosoni', you insult our people. Go now quickly, before we seek to punish you for your wrongs."

Horse Tail looked at the warriors of the people frowning at him. They had surrounded him and there was no doubt in Horse Tail's mind they supported Blue Pool's words. Bright Moon stood in regal stance ready to send the warriors upon him for discipline if he did not comply. Horse Tail sheathed his knife and stalked angrily away.

Blue Pool spoke to Ryan, "You have kept all promises. You have shown your courage and your wisdom. We of the council have discussed your mating with Oak Twig and have decreed you will not wait the allotted two moons. We have agreed you will unite today in ceremony and our blood pact complete."

Bright Moon approached Ryan, "Will you accept this bonding of spirit with Oak Twig on this day?"

"Yes!" Ryan smiled holding Twiggy closer.

"Come we will prepare you with the sacred waters, scents and dress," Blue Pool commanded. "Ryan you will come with me as we warriors prepare you. Oak Twig will go with Torn Dress. Your sister, her child, and friend may go with Oak Twig and Torn Dress."

The warriors carried Ryan to the stream, stripped him and threw him in the icy cold river. They jumped in after him and rubbed him thoroughly with some type of scented oil. It was a time for fun, laughter and gentle teasing between men. Each warrior took a turn in relating their own prowess and experience with pleasing women. Ryan enjoyed every moment of the bath. They took him out to the shore and dried him with soft pelts, again teasing and making comments on the lustiness of men and their experience. He was laid upon a large buffalo hide where he received a relaxing as well as invigorating massage. The warriors decided to give him advice on the breaking of the virgin barrier noticing how large of a manshaft he possessed. Ryan found himself being dressed in the softest buckskin of pure white he had ever felt or seen. The white buckskin was a shirt with holy designs made with silver, shells, and beads. The breechclout was the same white buckskin. The trousers and moccasins were also soft white buckskin with holy markings, and long fringes. His head received a beaded decoration with feathers hanging down over the beadwork. The Sosoni' warriors added beautiful adornments of chokers, armbands, bracelets, anklets, and breastplate. Ryan was overwhelmed by the generosity of the people. At the call of a warrior, Ryan was taken to the lodge of Bright Moon. There he saw his Twiggy. Ryan was mesmerized.



Twiggy was dressed in soft white doeskins. A three skinned dress, leggings and moccasins. Twiggy was also adorned with lavish jewelry. Earrings, hair beads, chokers, bracelets, anklets, and long beaded necklaces added to her beauty. Twiggy was beautiful beyond words.

Blue Pool came between them and somewhere in the distance Ryan and Twiggy heard the words of the Puhagan and the great wisdoms of uniting as mates. They heard distantly the duties of the man and the woman but were lost in each other.

In the ancient custom they walked around the holy fire the number of seasons each separately and then together.

Blue Pool declared them one and in the eyes of the Sosoni' they were wed.

Kerry and Lucy both cried in happiness at the sacred act they had been allowed to witness. Kerry knew that Ryan and Twiggy would still be wed in the Christian manner but it would just be for the family's benefit. Her brother and Twiggy were married in the eyes of the Revered One regardless of the name assigned. This was a consecrated act. Kerry kissed her brother and her new sister in law wishing them happiness.

During the great feast of celebration Ryan asked Kerry where Garrett was. He had not seen his nephew since the ceremony.

"Garrett was taken by a Sosoni' woman named Little Rain," Kerry told Ryan. "She was enamored with Garrett and begged to care for him while I helped Twiggy prepare for the wedding."

"Did you say Little Rain?" Twiggy asked.

"Yes, do you know her? Garrett is safe with her, isn't he?" Kerry questioned suddenly concerned with trusting a strange woman with her son.

"Very safe with Little Rain," Twiggy assured Kerry. "You have done a great act of kindness, Kerry."

"Kindness?"

"Yes, Little Rain's mate died of exposure last winter. She was with child and gave birth to a son. Her son gave her reason to continue life, but her son died of hunger and exposure when he was about the same age as Garrett," Twiggy explained to Kerry. " She had no milk to feed him and no warm blankets or hides to keep him warm. When her son walked the Ghost path we had to stop her from taking her own life. She has never been the same. Your son has touched her spirit. Little Rain will care for Garrett like no other could."

"She seems so young to have suffered such great losses," Kerry wept openly touched by the story.

"Little Rain was only sixteen summers when Tall Elk took her to mate, and she was only seventeen summers when her mate and son were taken from her," Twiggy concurred. "She is a good woman with a great heart."



"Kerry, didn't you tell me that you and Braden were looking for a proper nanny for the children?" Ryan questioned coming up with an idea.

"Ryan, I did tell you that and that is a wonderful plan!" Kerry exclaimed reaching over and hugging her brother.

"Plan, I heard no plan." Twiggy contested.

"Of course you did, you were part of it," Kerry teased.

"Certainly, of course I was part of the plan," Twiggy giggled. "What plan did I plan?"

"You planned that Little Rain should become Ben and Garrett's nanny," Kerry laughed. "Remember?"

"Little Rain would be so happy to care for Ben and Garrett as her own," Twiggy exclaimed. "I did have a wonderful idea, didn't I?"

"My wife is the best. Is she not?" Ryan asked his sister as he leaned over and kissed Twiggy passionately. "Let's go to our lodge and share our blanket this evening."

Twiggy looked into her Ryan's passion filled eyes. "It is my wish to be your wife tonight."

"Grrrroowwwlllll!" Ryan responded. He rose and taking Twiggy's hand led her to Chiseler. After mounting his mustang, Ryan lifted Twiggy onto his lap and nudged Chiseler into a quiet gait taking his bride home to Geneva's Branch.

Blue Pool came up behind Kerry and Lucy. "If you like you are invited to stay in our lodges tonight or would you prefer to have our warriors escort you to the home of Ryan's Geneva's Branch."

"We would ask you have warriors escort us back to Geneva's Branch, but first I would speak to Bright Moon," Kerry replied.

Blue Pool led her to Bright Moon and in perfect Sosoni', Kerry made her request. "There is a woman with your people known as Little Rain. I am in need of a teacher and nurse for my sons. Little Rain shows the love my children will need. I would like to employ her for that purpose."

"I will give my blessing but it shall be Little Rain's choice," Bright Moon answered. "Send for Little Rain and tell her she is to bring the child with her that she cares for now."

"Thank you, Bright Moon," Kerry addressed politely.

"It still surprises me that your family knows and respects the customs of our people and speak our language as well as you do," Bright Moon remarked. He also gave the orders to prepare horses and warriors to carry and ride with the family of Ryan back to Geneva's Branch.

A short while later Little Rain entered the lodge of Bright Moon still holding a contented Garrett in her arms. "I have come to your summons my chief."

"Kerry tells me her name is Shining Star of the Eye of Hawk people," Bright Moon told the young Sosoni' woman. "She has asked



that you might stay with her and her people to care for her sons, one of which is he that you protect and treasure in your arms. Would you like to stay and care for the sons of Shining Star?"

Tears of happiness welled in Little Rain's eyes. She nodded eagerly sending a smile to Kerry.

"It is agreed then," Kerry told Little Rain in Sosoni'. "You must pack what you need and desire quickly for we must return to Geneva's Branch before the sunset."



Chapter Fifteen

Ryan could not believe his good fortune this day. In his arms was his wife, Twiggy. Auntie Alyson was preparing for a Christian wedding, but the Sosoni' had united them today. Blue Pool had told the people it was because he had kept all promises and the people were happy in the camp, but Ryan knew in his heart that Blue Pool wanted to end Horse Tail's constant claim over Twiggy. Blue Pool was wise enough to realize this uniting would end Horse Tail's interfering with what best and good for the people.

"Twiggy, I love you," Ryan whispered happily near her ear. Twiggy was snuggled next to his chest as he guided Chiseler slowly toward Geneva's Branch.

"Husband," Twiggy sighed softly rubbing her fingers on the soft white buckskins. Twiggy could not resist feeling the hard muscles she claimed as hers and hers alone. At last she was free to caress, touch, and kiss this great man.

Ryan's hands were wandering freely also. He touched her hair and inhaled its fragrance of juniper. He loved that aroma. Boldly he took husbandly rights and fondled the perky firm breasts lying tantalizing under her white doeskin.

Both husband and wife were preparing to taste and enjoy each other to unite in the privacy of Geneva's Branch master bedroom.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" Cassidy chuckled observing the beautiful ornate Sosoni' white skins and decorations. He took Chiseler's bridle as Ryan came to a stop in front of the ranch house.

"It does," Ryan grinned. "Cassidy, the new mistress of Geneva's Branch, Mrs. Ryan McGillinen."

"Congratulations," Cassidy offered with a big smile. "I'll make sure that the two of you aren't disturbed for a day or two, or longer if you prefer."



"Don't fret, I can ignore you and the door has a bolt on the inside," Ryan countered in good humor. "If you don't mind though, take Chiseler and give him oats and a good rub down." Ryan then gently slid Twiggy to the ground and he followed immediately.

"I'll take care of it right now," Cassidy answered taking Chiseler to the stables.

Ryan picked Twiggy up and carried her into the house making a beeline directly to the master bedroom. "Our room," Ryan emphasized kicking the door shut with his foot. Ryan slid Twiggy down slowly over his hard muscled frame and with a free hand bolted the door. "Wife!"

Twiggy looked up invitingly into the gray eyes filled with passion and love. "Husband!"

Their lips met and their tongues danced across each other's lips. It was soft and teasing at first but soon Ryan covered her lips with his and the passion fires were ignited. Twiggy responding in a passionate desire she was not aware her body capable.

Twiggy removed the ties of Ryan's buckskin shirt. She pulled the shirt off and her tongue tasted the muscles of his chest that her fingers had been touching. He was a magnificent man; of that there was no doubt. Daring to go further, her hands boldly loosened the trouser ties and felt the taut muscles of his buttocks. Teasingly she massaged the firm mounds with her soft and gentle hands. Her mouth returned to the wild and heated lips of her husband.

Ryan had limited himself until then to kissing the lips of his wife. Her sensual fingers had aroused him to a feverous need. His mouth slipped to her neck as he untied the strings of her doeskin dress and as it slipped off he quickly carried her to the bed.

After Ryan placed her on the bed and lay next to her, Twiggy's nimble fingers quickly removed his trousers and breechclout. Twiggy wanted to touch all of Ryan every muscle would be caressed. One of her hands slid down the firm quads of his thighs and began a slow sensual stroke upward to his hips, up to his abdominal and down to his manhood. Twiggy stopped and stroked his rigid manhood staring at the size of this great man she loved.

Ryan was in ecstasy and agony. He groaned quietly as Twiggy sensually massaged his male organ. "It's yours Twiggy. Yours to keep, and yours alone."

"My husband, I would keep your manhood alone and together we will create our child," Twiggy breathed huskily.

Ryan took her in his arms and laid her gently on her back. With his body half covering hers he removed her leggings, moccasins, and breechclout. His eyes beheld her nude beauty from her perfectly shaped lips, down her inviting throat, her perky rose tipped breasts, the perfect curves of her rib cage to her abdomen, the curled inviting apex of her womanhood, her perfectly formed thighs and calves to the delicate tiny toes. Ryan took his time caressing all of her, discovering her body and



seeing her react to his touch on the different parts of her body. He watched as her body flushed pink in desire starting from her breasts and coming down to her apex.

Ryan's mouth engulfed a breast completely causing Twiggy to sigh in impatience. He smelled her. He smelled her femininity. His finger wandered to enter the soft flesh surrounded by her curly mound. Twiggy was wet, wet with desire for him. His fingers were drenched with her womanly heat.

Twiggy arched to Ryan's investigative finger, she wanted him in her. Her body was demanding his entrance. Twiggy pulled Ryan's mouth to hers and their tongues played the act of love experience. Twiggy heard herself moaning and begging Ryan to enter her "Ryan, Ryan," Twiggy whispered pleadingly. "Ryan take me and make me yours and only yours."

Ryan positioned himself above Twiggy carefully. He was beyond reason or caution. Even knowing Twiggy was a virgin and she would suffer pain with his intrusion as he broke her virginal barrier he couldn't think. Ryan was driven by primal lust and he sheathed himself in her warm and tight womanhood.

A quick breath from Twiggy stopped his entrance. Twiggy trembled and bit her lip. Ryan was pressing her barrier and there was discomfort. The women had told her this would happen and Twiggy knew it would be painful when she saw the large hardened muscle she massaged.

Ryan had never taken a virgin before, but the men had told him what the barrier would feel like and that it would be painful for his woman but it was not good to slowly push. A quick hard thrust was what the men had told him would be better for the woman because once the barrier was torn there would be no more pain. Ryan's own body was controlling what he would do. Ryan needed to sheath himself fully and completely in his woman's womb. Ryan's seed was ready to be planted. Ryan's body shook and a quick and complete thrust sent him home to the cone of her womb.

Twiggy screamed and arched to meet Ryan's thrust. Tears rolled from her eyes but once the pain had come she felt the fullness of his manhood and rhythmically rocked enjoying the sensation tingling through her body.

Ryan responded to Twiggy's rhythmic thrusting with his own. He felt a warm gush when he penetrated her virginal barrier and Twiggy's shaking made his organ grew larger. At the point of extreme agony and ecstasy both partners growled in heavenly orgasms. Ryan planted his seed at the core of Twiggy's womb.

Both were breathing heavily and their heartbeats beating rapidly. Their skin was moist with physical exertion and their minds soared to the high of ecstasy.



Ryan completely expelled stayed sheathed in the warm tightness of his woman.

Twiggy contracted her soft flesh tighter around the muscled organ that brought her such pleasure.

They began their passionate kissing once more and Ryan found his organ rigid and ready to release more of his seed into the womb of his wife.

On and off throughout the night they kissed, napped, cuddled, massaged and consummated their marriage.

It was the morning with the sun bright coming through the windows Ryan found his Twiggy breathing softly with her head on his chest and her leg covering his thigh. Ryan looked down and saw the stains of blood across the sheets, his Twiggy's legs, his legs and his manhood was crusted with dry virgin blood. Ryan gasped. He had been told there would be virginal blood but no one had told him there would be this much. He began to wonder if he had permanently hurt his Twiggy. He knew he was well endowed and she was so tiny.

"Twiggy, Twiggy my love," Ryan whispered into her hair. "Please wake up."

Twiggy responded and slowly her eyes fluttered open, "No more right now my love. I feel I am a bit sensitive."

"Did I hurt you?" Ryan asked deeply concerned.

"No, you are wonderful my husband. I have been told that some men give pleasure and some men cannot make you feel anything," Twiggy smiled up at her Ryan. "You my husband give me great pleasure. I think we over pleased this wedding night."

"Twiggy, there is a lot of blood," Ryan told her as calmly as he could. "Is there a possibility I could have hurt you?"

"No my love. Sometimes there is a lot of maiden's blood and with the pleasure you give, I am not surprised my maiden's blood came heavily with your manshaft," Twiggy answered. "Don't be worried. I am not hurt. I am just sensitive."

"I think we should bathe," Ryan suggested.

Looking upon her body, the bed sheets, and Ryan's body Twiggy agreed, "I think you are also very wise as well as pleasurable my husband."

Ryan heated the water and filled the tub. He added juniper oil and carried Twiggy into the tub to clean her. With tender loving care, Ryan washed her carefully. He washed her hair and while she soaked in the relaxing tub, Ryan combed her hair.

While Twiggy dried herself, Ryan took the sheets from the bed and put them in the corner to give to Lucy to wash. He then pulled sheets from the chest and remade the bed.

Twiggy dried herself and wrapped in a towel prepared a hot bath for Ryan. The hot bath had eased the sensitivity of her private area, but



she thought it best for Ryan's sake they did not pursue another joining until tonight.

Ryan was pleased when he returned to the bathing room and willingly eased into the tub for Twiggy's gentle administrations. Ryan could not remember a more relaxing and enjoyable bath. Twiggy washed him gently and rubbed his back and legs.

"I think I am the happiest man in the State of Nevada, Twiggy," Ryan uttered in contentment.

Twiggy whispered back to her love, "Then I must be the happiest woman in this State of Nevada."

Ryan loosened her towel and as it dropped he pulled her into the tub with him and they kissed with an ardor unmatched before.

Twiggy broke from the kiss first to breathe, "Our joining is truly blessed by the Great Father."

Ryan agreed with another kiss.

The bath water had been barely tepid when Ryan and Twiggy left the bathing room.

They helped each other dress, teasing, tickling, and laughing as they did so.

Balling the sheets in his arms, Ryan unbolted the bedroom door and the two newly weds made their appearance.

Kerry's eyes sparkled and a wicked grin greeted her brother and new sister in law. "Coming out so soon? Cassidy, Cho Ling, Lucy and I had bets as to when you two would emerge from the wedding bed."

Ryan chuckled in good humor, "Who won?"

Kerry checked a folded paper in the middle of the dining room table and then looked at the clock, "Lucy! I thought you would need at least another four hours, Cho Ling was giving you until supper, and Cassidy thought you would go on for another full day."

"Any other bets we can get in on?" Ryan teased.

Kerry's mouth curved wickedly, "Actually, brother, we have bets on when your first child will be born."

"And what dates do you have?" Ryan snorted.

"I've got nine months from today, Lucy says a year and a half, Cho Ling says two years, and Cassidy says fourteen months. What do you say?" Kerry giggled mischievously.

"I believe I will pick the same nine months as you have chosen," Twiggy interposed. "My husband is very much a man. A pleasurable man."

Ryan blushed with the frankness of his wife and sister. "I won't play this one."

"If those are your wedding sheets I'd better take them and get them soaked in cold water with lye soap right quick," Lucy said quite seriously as she entered the room and saw the sheets bundled in Ryan's arms.



"They are," Ryan answered and gave them quickly to Lucy.

Brian Duffey had spent several days in Carson City learning everything he could about the Crawford family before he would approach them with the news of Dayton. Duffey considered himself somewhat of a sleuth even his true calling was being a lawyer. His was enjoying dinner with his good acquaintance, Cutler Brody, a Pinkerton man.

"What more do you need to know, Brian?" Cutler inquired. There was no doubt his agency had found the family Duffey had been looking for.

"I need to find out what kind of people they really are," Duffey explained trying to make his friend Cutler realize there was more to a person a physical identity. He was not about to let them know about their daughter Dayton until he felt reassured they would want to know and could handle it. Getting Ryan McGillinen upset with him was not part of the plan. Duffey was already aware of Ryan's protectiveness through Kerry's experience and Alyson had told him of the obvious love Ryan had for Dayton.

"They're shopkeepers, plain and simple," Cutler stated matter of factly. "Crawford & Sons General Store. You've seen the sign."

"Cutler, I know that! What I have to tell them has to do with their reaction and if I think that reaction will be negative I won't tell them," Duffey told his friend firmly.

"You spend money to track them down and then aren't sure if you want to tell them? Tell them what?" Cutler blustered indignantly. "You never did tell me why you were looking for this Dayton girl's family."

Duffey took a drink of beer. "The girl is alive and didn't live with the Crow but the Sosoni'. The Sosoni' raided the Crow camp she was taken to and then a Sosoni' warrior adopted her as his daughter."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me? I understand now. I've seen more than enough of a white family rejecting their own flesh and blood because they lived happily with the Indians," Cutler Brody said understanding the significance of attitudes. "A lot of stupid prejudice misplaced, if you ask me."

"The girl is about to marry into a very powerful and white family in Ely area," Duffey told his friend. "I won't be the one to spoil her happiness and possibly get her husband very angry."

"She's marrying into the McGillinen family?" Cutler queried.

"I didn't say that. I didn't mention any names. Why would you say that?" Duffey felt himself blush in guilt for saying too much.

"I'm Pinkerton. We do have a tendency to put two and two together coming up with four," Cutler laughed heartily. "I know you work for the McGillinens. I read the story of Kerry McGillinen's abduction and your going all the way to Boston for the trial. The McGillinens are a powerful and rich family well known in the State of



Nevada, and Duffey, they are friends with the Sosoni'. I understand they have their own private treaty with them Sosoni'. Ergo, four!"

"Why don't you use that brilliance and help me determine what kind of people the Crawfords are. Will they accept or reject their daughter?" Duffey challenged Cutler Brody.

"From what I've heard they are a fair and honest good Christian family," Cutler shared openly with Duffey.

"That doesn't comfort me, Cutler. You know as well as I it was those good Christian families that rejected and treated their long lost children in a most unchristian like manner," Duffey countered.

"Would it help if I told you I heard Samantha Crawford donates time and goods to the Indians around these parts? She believes that if she shows kindness to the Indians they would be kind to her daughter wherever she might be," Cutler shared with Duffey.

"That does help. What about Joseph Crawford and the rest of his family? Do you know anymore about what they think?" Duffey asked his interest peaked.

"Joseph lets Samantha do all she does. That says something. I don't know about their boy Todd. He's married now and has a little girl of his own. They named her, Dayton. That says something doesn't it?" Cutler added. "The girl Jerica and boy Joshua, well they are only eleven and four years old."

"You've been holding back on me, Brody!" Duffey growled.

"Course I have, Duffey. I'm not a Pinkerton for nothing. You get what you pay for, but we share what we need to know," Cutler guffawed.

"Oh God!" Brian Duffey exclaimed and suddenly paled.

"What is it man, you look like you just watched the devil walk in," Cutler remarked with concern over the sudden pallid color of his friend.

"It's Grady and Morning Song McGillinen with Braden Wessex and Colonel Howell. That group together worries me. I hope they don't know why I'm here," Duffey gasped.

"I guess we're going to find out. Looks like they recognized you and are coming over," Cutler observed.

"Duffey!" Grady called from across the room.

Duffey rose in acknowledgment and greeting. He waved the family over to their table.

Grady approached first and extended his hand, "Duffey, I had no idea you were in Carson City. This is a surprise. You remember my Morning Song and son in law, Braden Wessex, and my grandson, Ben. You know Colonel Howell of course."

"I could never forget such a fair woman as you, Morning Song," Duffey bowed gallantly. "Hello, Ben!" Duffey said tousling the little boy's thick black hair.



Morning Song smiled and said quietly, "It is true the Irish people are men of exaggeration, but I appreciate the compliment."

"It's called Blarney, my love," Grady laughed.

"I would like to introduce my friend, Cutler Brody," Duffey said politely. "He is the reason I'm visiting Carson City. I have some private business with Cutler."

"A Pinkerton is your friend?" Grady queried quirkily his brow.

"I never said he was Pinkerton, but yes he is my friend," Duffey acknowledged.

"How did you know I was Pinkerton?" Cutler asked curiously.

"You all dress alike, bowler hat, tweed suit with vest, funny button shoes, starched collar, and bow tie," Grady ribbed. "It's like a uniform. Sort of like Colonel Howell wears so you know he is U.S. Army."

"Saints preserve us you are right," Duffey chortled. "I'm curious as to the reasons you're here Grady with Morning Song and Colonel Howell. I am most interested in why you, Braden, are here without your wife. That is very strange indeed."

"We're here to assist your legal papers for the Sosoni' agreement with Geneva's Branch are filed properly with witnesses for Colonel Howell," Braden answered quickly. "Since you are here we get it handled it better. The less time I am away from my Kerry, the happier I will be. I do despise being separated from my Kerry."

"Were there problems with the papers or Sosoni' of Geneva's Branch?" Duffey asked quite concerned.

"We have no problems, but an Indian agent in Utah needs proper and legal information," Colonel Howell said to Duffey. "I'm not to happy to have our government make me chase down hostiles that aren't hostile."

"Come sit down, we'll all have dinner together and discuss the agreement," Duffey suggested. "We'll make sure everything is handled properly and legally."



Chapter Sixteen

The next morning Duffey met with Colonel Howell and the papers were properly notarized before Judge Linden, sent by special courier to Washington D.C., and a copy with letter from Brian Duffey to the Indian agent in Utah territory. With that accomplished Duffey begged leave of Grady and Braden to take care of some private business that had brought him to Carson City.

Grady, Morning Song, and Braden respecting the confidential client relationship with counselors did not ask questions. They made their own plans while they were in the State Capitol. Bennett would be spending a day with Colonel Howell learning military tactics.

"Bright boy you have, Braden," Colonel Howell praised holding Bennett's hand in his as they left the hotel for the day.

Duffey lingered in his hotel savoring breakfast and letting his mind wander between two subjects, Alyson Jameson and the Crawfords. His daydreaming lent itself primarily to the subject of Alyson Jameson.

Finishing his third cup of hot coffee Duffey rose and walked to Crawford and Sons General Store. It was a fairly large store even for Carson City. The retail business offered many shelves with a variety of goods including foodstuffs, ammunitions, pelts, toys, and bolts of fabrics, dishes, pots, and pans. The store contained a plethora of different types of useable items edible and non-edible. There was a potbellied stove for cold winters to keep the store warm and barrels full of different varieties of fruits and vegetables. The Crawfords kept all the shelves stocked orderly and clean. Nearly everything had a price tag attached to it so there would be no question of gouging prices or price haggling. Duffey was impressed with the clean store. It appeared the Crawfords were honest merchants.

Crawford was behind the counter cleaning stock, his son Todd was going in and out of the store unloading an order of fabric and sewing articles. A young woman appeared from the stairwell behind the counter



holding a little girl about two years old. Cutler had told Duffey she was Eleanor, Todd's wife, and she was holding their daughter, Dayton.

Duffey came up with a plan. He lingered over some silver service sets when Joseph Crawford approached him, "Looking for a special type of service?"

"No, these seem like they'll do for a wedding gift," Duffey replied.

"A wedding, how exciting!" Eleanor imposed happily. "Is it someone we might know in Carson City?"

"No, this wedding is taking place in a month near Ely," Duffey responded fingering the fine silver service. "That is an adorable little girl you have. She has such rich hazel eyes and fine dark auburn hair. What's her name?"

"This is our baby girl, Dayton Sara Crawford," Eleanor beamed. "She is such a lamb and my husband Todd tells me she looks like his dear departed sister. We named her for his sister."

Duffey felt moved by the loving gesture but kept his emotions in check. "Dayton, is that a common name around here?" Duffey asked knowing that the name was quite unique, but it was part of his plan.

Todd came forward interested in the conversation. "Dayton is a special name, not common at all!"

"My daughter was named for a great aunt, very dear to my wife and my mother, Sara," Joseph Crawford answered emotionally. "Why do you ask?"

Duffey let a small grin curl his lips, "No reason. It's just coincidental that I'm buying a wedding present for my dear friend's son who is getting married next month to a woman named Dayton."

Todd and Joseph's eyes widened. Eleanor bubbled, "How fascinating considering it is an unusual name." Eleanor played with her daughter's hair, "Did you hear that Dayton, someone with your name is getting married, how exciting."

Joseph whispered to Todd and he nodded. "Eleanor, come outside with me a moment. I want you to look at the bolts of fabric that arrived. You could help me check the list to make certain the order is correct."

"Of course my dear. I'll be happy to help," Eleanor complied with cheer. "Come Dayton, let's help Papa."

Joseph watched the couple leave and then turned to Duffey, "How old is this Dayton that is marrying your friend's son?"

"My guess is that she's about eighteen. I'm not certain, why do you ask?" Duffey queried leading Joseph into the position he wanted him to be in.

"My daughter Dayton was taken by the Crow ten years ago. She was eight years old," Joseph informed Duffey.



"My, that is a coincidence isn't it?" Duffey answered rubbing his fingers over his lips feigning deep thought. "But didn't that woman say her daughter was named for a deceased aunt?"

"After ten years only my wife, Samantha, has hope our daughter Dayton could still be alive," Joseph answered choking back his emotion and his own building hopes.

"Are you thinking my Dayton might be your missing daughter?" Duffey suggested leading Joseph where he wanted him to go.

"It is too much of a coincidence. What else do you know about her? Who is she marrying?" Joseph asked trying to keep his hopes from blooming after all these years.

"I don't really know much about her, never met her yet," Duffey told the man. It appeared to him Joseph was genuinely interested and Duffey thought he saw a spark of hope in Joseph's eyes. "She's about to marry my friend Grady McGillinen's son, Ryan."

"The McGillinen's of Ely?" Joseph gasped. If this truly were his daughter it would be wonderful news that she was marrying into that wealthy and well-known family of Nevada.

"The same," Duffey chuckled. "Obviously you have heard of the McGillinens."

"Anyone that has lived in Nevada more than six years knows of the McGillinen family. They are a right Christian family," Joseph said in admiration. "I understand they are one of the wealthiest families in Nevada."

"That is my understanding," Duffey agreed.

Joseph shook his head and then looked at Duffey with questioning eyes, "Do you think it's a possibility Dayton could have survived and she could be the same woman about to marry Ryan McGillinen?"

Joseph and Duffey were so engaged in their conversation neither man saw Samantha enter the store with Jerica and Joshua through the front door. "Dayton?" Samantha gasped, "Dayton survived?"

Joseph turned around quickly to his wife's voice. "We don't know that honey, this man and I were talking about someone he knows. It might be just a coincidence. Don't get your hopes up again."

"Jerica, take your brother Joshua upstairs. You can have a piece of that freshly baked apple pie if you like," Samantha ordered lovingly.

Jerica took her little brother's hand and walked quickly to the stairs leading to their upstairs living quarters. Jerica did love her mother's fresh apple pie.

Joseph walked to his wife's side and put his arm around her, "Honey, it could be a coincidence. I don't want you to get your hopes up again. It hurts us both when we don't find her."

"You're just as hopeful, Joseph Crawford!" Samantha countered. "I can see it in your eyes."



"I'm Brian Duffey, ma'am," he introduced himself to the woman with dark auburn hair and beautiful hazel eyes.

Samantha didn't mince words. "I'm Samantha Crawford. You know where my daughter Dayton is?"

"I was talking with your husband about a coincidence, ma'am," Duffey explained. "We aren't sure this woman is your daughter."

"Just what type of a coincidence are we discussing?" Samantha demanded.

"I was talking about my friend's son is going to marry a woman named Dayton and she is about eighteen years old," Duffey related.

"Dayton! That is our Dayton! I know it is, Joseph!" Samantha swooned placing her hand over her rapidly beating heart. "You must take me to her!"

"Honey, we can't ask a stranger to do any such thing," Joseph warned his wife. Inside he wanted to ride out with his family right then and there to Ely, but outside he had to be the strong husband and protect his wife from possible disappointment.

"Duffey!" Braden exclaimed as he walked in the general store. "I seem to keep running into you."

"Braden, what brings you into the store?" Duffey greeted covering his irritation. This was a matter better kept private and he would do his best to get Braden out of this store quickly.

"I came to buy a present for my Kerry," Braden said innocently not realizing at all what the previous conversations were. "Grady and Morning Song are looking for a present for Robyn and Corey in the mercantile down the street. I thought I'd come in here and look around for the new baby for them as well."

"Grady? Grady McGillinen is in Carson City?" Joseph gasped in disbelief at the opportunity to find out if this Dayton could possibly be his daughter.

"Yes, Grady McGillinen. You know him?" Braden asked unaware of the reason behind the question of Joseph Crawford.

Duffey groaned. He had planned this carefully and thanks to Braden, Duffey wasn't certain what would happen.

Samantha was holding Joseph's hand so tight it was losing color. She looked searchingly into her husband's eyes. *Who was this Grady McGillinen and what did he have to do with her Dayton?* She knew it had to do with Dayton by the emotion of her husband's question.

"You stay here and take care of the store, honey," Joseph told his wife bending down to brush his lips across her brow. "I'll be right back."

"I'm not staying here Joseph Wentworth Crawford!" Samantha retaliated vehemently. "This Grady McGillinen has something to do with our Dayton. That's where you're going and that's exactly where I'm going too!"



"Honey, we don't know if this is our Dayton," Joseph argued. "If it isn't I don't want you upset. You know what the doc said."

"I'll be upset one way or another. I'm coming!"

"All right," Joseph agreed. He walked to the back door where he had sent his son. "Todd, would you and Eleanor come in and watch the store. Your mother and I will be back shortly."

While Joseph went outside, Braden pulled Duffey next to him. "What is this all about Duffey? Just why do these people want to see Grady? And, who is this Dayton?"

"It's a long story and I'll tell you when the time is right," Duffey answered but noticed Samantha and Joseph Crawford crossing the street heading towards the mercantile. "I'd better get to Grady."

"Sir, my Pa said to give you two a 20% discount on any purchase," Todd called as he entered the store.

Duffey didn't hear Todd Crawford at all. He was already out the front door briskly walking to the mercantile.

Braden was close on Duffey's heels as he yelled over his shoulder, "Thank you, we'll be back."

"Crawford, what you doing in here?" Mitch Green asked seeing his competitor enter his mercantile. "You doing some price checking, or do you need a favor?"

"Neither today, thanks Mitch," Joseph answered his friendly competitor. Joseph looked at the people in Mitch's store. There in the corner by denims were an older man and an older Indian woman. Joseph walked right up to Grady McGillinen with his wife right behind him. "You are Grady McGillinen?"

Grady turned to the strange male voice, "I am. Can I help you?"

A frown of worry crossed Morning Song's face. It was not a good sign when a stranger came up and said your name like he knew you. Morning Song boldly stepped in front of Grady as a sign of protection.

Grady put his hands on Morning Song's shoulder. It was a symbol of love but in reality he wanted a good hold of her if he had to push her out of the way to safety.

"I heard you have a son named Ryan that is going to marry a woman named, Dayton," Joseph asked bluntly but politely.

"I have a son named Ryan, but he is marrying a woman named Twiggy," Grady answered confused at the question.

Joseph's face turned from hope to despair. "I'm sorry sir, I have been misinformed. We just hoped...."

Samantha Crawford came from behind Joseph's back, her prairie bonnet covering her face until she stood in front of Morning Song and pushed her from Grady. Not caring what anyone thought Samantha grabbed Grady's leather vest and held on to it, shaking the vest with all her might she looked up into Grady's eyes and cried, "Tell us the truth."



You've got to tell us that your son's wife is my Dayton! Please tell us the truth!"

Grady put his large hands on Samantha's and stared down into her tear filled hazel eyes. Gently he took one hand and removed her prairie bonnet. "I'll be damned!"

Morning Song still at her husband's side clung tighter to his arm, "What?"

"Ma'am, would your Dayton have your hair and eye color?" Grady asked as he picked up Samantha's chin to look deeply in her eyes.

"Yes! Oh Yes! Dear God Yes!" Samantha sobbed.

"Then I think my son might be marrying your daughter, but we know her as Twiggy," Grady spoke to the woman softly.

"I don't care what you call her! I want to see my little girl!" Samantha choked.

"Who told you about Ryan?" Grady asked Joseph Crawford as Samantha folded into Grady's arms sobbing.

Morning Song patted Samantha's back as the woman cried into Grady's chest.

"That man over there!" Joseph responded pointed to Brian Duffey.

"Duffey! I should have known," Grady growled menacingly. "What do you have to do with all this Brian Duffey?"

"It's a client and counselor confidentiality issue, Grady," Duffey attempted in avoidance.

"The Hell it is! Pardon me ladies!" Grady said taking Samantha gently off his chest and turning her over to Morning Song. Grady moved suddenly and had Duffey's jacket in his fists and Duffey found himself raised two inches off the floor. "You will tell me what this is all about or the McGillinen family will hire a new family counselor!"

"Good God, but you have a temper! I know where your children get their tempers from," Duffey grunted. "Don't you think we should find a more private place to discuss this?" Duffey nodded his head toward an interested Mitch Green.

Grady released Duffey and addressed all involved, "I have a nice suite rented at the Richmond Grand. I suggest we all go over there for a refreshment and discussion. Duffey, you lead the way."

In the hotel suite Joseph sat on the back of the settee behind his wife Samantha. Morning Song sat next to Samantha Crawford. Grady sat in a large chair and Braden sat on the arm of Grady's chair. Duffey sat next to the women on another chair. A hotel waiter was sent up with tea, brandy and biscuits.

Everyone remained silent until the waiter had left the suite leaving the silver service trays filled with the tea and biscuits. A bottle of brandy remained on the table next to Grady.



"We're waiting for you to begin Duffey," Grady stated gruffly. "Up until now, I was under the assumption Twiggy was a half-breed Sosoni'. It appears you know differently."

"Sosoni?" Samantha gasped in surprise. "Dayton was taken by the Crow!"

"My daughter is no half-breed, sir!" Joseph denied angrily.

"I believe you sir, Duffey is about to clear all of this, aren't you?" Grady demanded.

"Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, your daughter, Dayton Sara Crawford was taken from your ranch in Nevada by a Crow raiding party June 16, 1869. You, Mr. Crawford and your son tracked the Crow near Utah and lost them. The two of you went to Carson City to file the abduction of your daughter with the military. You met Johan Svengard who owned the store you now own. You bought it to remain in a large city hoping to find your daughter," Duffey elucidated. "Is all of this true so far?"

Joseph Crawford nodded his head.

"I'll continue then," Duffey said taking a deep breath to relate the story. "The Crow raided Bright Moon's Sosoni' camp. In retaliation the Sosoni' raided the Crows. One of the warrior's of the Sosoni' named Blue Pool found your Dayton and took her thinking she was a half-breed Crow. He adopted your daughter and raised her as his own. Blue Pool gave her the name Oak Twig. Blue Pool and his wife Wooden Bowl soon discovered Oak Twig was white but kept it secret from everyone in the camp. The people soon learned to love Oak Twig and she saved them from being cheated by whites since she spoke the American Language, but the whites didn't know she did."

"How did Grady's son meet my daughter?" Joseph asked Duffey.

"Well, your daughter is so valuable to the Bright Moon camp she was sent with her adoptive father, Blue Pool, to parlay with Eye of Hawk's people," Duffey answered.

"Eye of Hawk is the son of Cougar's Paw and chief of the people. He is also my son," Morning Song explained to the Crawfords. "Our people live in peace on the land of Geneva's Hope."

Samantha and Joseph Crawford were listening carefully. Twiggy was their missing daughter. There was no doubt now and their hearts were singing in joy.

"You did right, honey," Joseph complimented. "You treated all Indians with love and kindness and sure enough our daughter was cared for by some of them."

"Well, that's how Ryan met Twiggy," Duffey explained relaxing a little. He shouldn't have relaxed. Grady wasn't finished with him yet.

"You want to explain to me how you knew all of this?" Grady asked irritably.



Chapter Seventeen

This was a situation Duffey did not like. It was the betrayal of client confidentiality, but it was all in the family and he was sure Alyson wouldn't mind if it united Twiggy with her family.

"I was requested to find information on a girl named Dayton abducted some ten years ago by the Crow people," Duffey replied hesitantly.

"And who hired you?" Braden popped in asking. He thought it might have been Kerry. "Is your good friend, Cutler the Pinkerton, a part of this investigation?"

Duffey nodded his head. "Cutler is a good friend and an extremely talented investigative Pinkerton. He found the Crawford family rather quickly."

"You still haven't told us who hired you for this investigation, Mr. Duffey," Braden pursued. "Could it possibly have been my Kerry?"

Duffey hesitated pulling his collar.

"We're waiting Duffey," Grady snarled.

"I did this for Alyson," Duffey confessed.

"Alyson?" Grady, Braden and Morning Song gasped together.

"How did Alyson know?" Grady asked in surprise.

"It seems Alyson had spent some time with Twiggy," Duffey clarified. "Alyson found out Twiggy was white and asked Twiggy for the information she gave to me."

"Who is this Alyson, Mr. Duffey?" Samantha Crawford asked breaking her silence.

"Alyson Jameson is Ryan McGillinen's aunt. She is the sister of Grady's deceased first wife, Ashley who was the mother of his four children, Ayden, Ryan, Dwayne and Braden's wife Kerry," Duffey answered attempting to explicate the relations involved.

"Why did Alyson Jameson want to find us," Joseph asked with curiosity.

"Her dear nephew is getting married to the girl and Alyson is planning a Christian wedding. Naturally Alyson wanted Twiggy to be



with all her family. That included her white family. Alyson Jameson is funny that way. Family is all that is important," Duffey responded.

Grady nodded his head in agreement. "I can honestly say that Duffey is correct with that information. Alyson Jameson is very strong about family ties and relationships."

"It seems to me that nothing matters now other than we have found our missing daughter," Samantha wept with joy. "I'm so happy, Joseph. After all these years of hope our daughter is being returned to us."

"I wish it were that easy," Duffey stated putting a damper on the Crawfords happiness.

"Meaning?" Joseph asked creasing his brows.

"You two must consider that Dayton was raised by a loving Sosoni' family. She spent more time with the Sosoni' than with you," Duffey reminded the Crawfords. "Your Dayton is more of an Oak Twig."

"She's my Dayton! I gave birth to her!" Samantha exclaimed. "Surely you're not telling me she would reject us?"

"I think you need to know that as a child your Dayton had many bad experiences with whites and one very bad experience involving a white woman who was being returned to a white family after being a captive since a child," Duffey informed the Crawfords.

"But she is marrying Grady's son, he's white!" Samantha declared not understanding the counselor's logic.

"Yes he's white, but she fell in love with him. He wooed her," Duffey explained. "It takes time to fall in love."

"Not necessarily," Grady protested. "I have personally experienced love at first sight."

"Yeah, all well and good. Maybe Twiggy and Ryan did have love at first sight, but you're talking about parents she has been separated from for ten years," Duffey explained logically.

"What if we give her a chance to learn to love us as people, and then tell her who we are," Joseph suggested. "I certainly want to be at my daughter's wedding."

"I want you to give her to this Ryan," Samantha agreed.

"And if I don't like my future son in law?" Joseph teased.

"Then you'd have to try and talk her out of it," Morning Song chuckled.

"You'd also have to fight Ryan," Braden chortled and shuddered in feigned fear.

"I'd like the chance," Joseph laughed. "At least give me the chance, Mr. McGillinen. Dayton is our daughter."

"I believe Twiggy is still with the people," Morning Song interposed. "You and your family could be our guests at Geneva's Hope."



"You could meet my sister in law, Alyson," Grady added, "and you could help prepare for the wedding."

"Alyson would like that I'm certain," Morning Song agreed.

"We wouldn't want to impose," Samantha said not knowing anything about the McGillinen family. "Todd and Eleanor could remain to run the store, but we have another daughter, Jerica and son, Joshua."

"We could stay at a hotel in Ely," Joseph recommended knowing both he and his wife wanted to go to meet with Dayton.

"Don't be silly," Morning Song countered. "We have plenty of room in Geneva's Hope."

"I can assure you Mr. and Mrs. Crawford that the ranch house of Geneva's Hope is almost a large castle," Braden said smiling. "There is plenty of room for more guests."

"Our Jerica and Joshua are quite young," Samantha added wanting to make sure her family would not be too much of an intrusion.

"How old are Jerica and Joshua?" Braden asked.

"Jerica is eleven and Joshua is four," Samantha told the handsome young son in law of Grady McGillinen.

"Kerry and I have a six year old son and three month old baby boy," Braden told Samantha Crawford. "I hope that won't be an inconvenience for you. I can assure you our six year old son, Bennett would love the playmates."

"Bennett and Joshua could share the bed next to the baby's nursery," Morning Song mentally prepared. "Your daughter could sleep in Kerry's old room."

"You see, there is plenty of room," Grady supported his wife's planning. "We'd love to have you."

"We could take your children to meet the children of the Sosoni," Morning Song said hoping her instincts about the Crawfords was accurate. She believed them not to be nor raise their children with prejudice.

"Can we my darling?" Samantha looked up at her husband with pleading eyes.

"If we really won't be an imposition," Joseph answered looking at Grady. "It would make me very happy, honey."

"It won't be an imposition," Grady responded. "We plan to leave tomorrow for Geneva's Hope. When do you think you would be able to come?"

"If you don't mind, we would like to travel with you," Joseph told Grady. "We could be ready to leave tomorrow."

"We'll rent a buckboard today," Samantha grinned cheerfully. "I'll start packing right away."

"You needn't rent a buckboard, madam," Braden interjected. "We travel with a carriage for Morning Song and my son Bennett when I can get him off his pony."



"Braden's right," Grady agreed. "There is plenty of room for Mrs. Crawford and the children. I just bought two chestnut thoroughbreds. I'm sure you wouldn't mind setting one of them Mr. Crawford."

"Please call me Joseph."

"And I'm Samantha."

"He is Grady, and I am Morning Song," Morning Song smiled. "And that is Braden."

"I'm Brian Duffey!"

"That is Duffey," Grady laughed heartily. "Will you be joining us or do you have other secret investigative work?"

"My work is finished here," Duffey stated. "I'll be joining all of you tomorrow."

The Crawfords were packed and ready the next day. Bennett was introduced to Jerica and Joshua who became fast friends instantly. Todd Crawford with his wife Eleanor at his side and daughter Dayton Sara in his arms waved farewell to his parents and siblings. Todd had been told his sister had been found and would be marrying a rich man. Todd and his wife were jubilant and looked forward to the reuniting of the family. Todd wanted his sister Dayton to meet her namesake niece and be a part of her life.

The one-week return trip to Ely was pleasant. Samantha was an eager student for Morning Song's crash course in the lifestyles of the Sosoni'. If Samantha's daughter was raised by the Sosoni' she wanted to know everything about the people.

Alyson Jameson, Celeste, and Grant Wessex greeted the returning family.

Alyson quickly assigned rooms for the houseguests and after all were settled and comfortable they met in the parlor.

Duffey had explained to Alyson everything that happened in Carson City.

"It's not exactly the way it was supposed to happen, but I'm glad it happened," Alyson reassured Duffey. "I'm absolutely thrilled the Crawfords are here and only want their daughter. They don't care she was raised by Sosoni'"

"No, it really doesn't matter to them. They are happy she is alive and well," Duffey grinned sharing Alyson's happiness. He wanted to make her happy.

"But we must proceed cautiously," Alyson mused using her intuition. "We just can't confront Twiggy with it. She is so sensitive."

"I agree my love," Duffey smiled wickedly taking Alyson's hand in his. "I must insist that you give me your answer, however."

"My answer?" Alyson teased. "I should give you an answer?"



"Will you marry me, Alyson Jameson," Duffey asked holding both of her hands tightly. "Will you make a lonely old man happy?"

"Yes, Mr. Duffey, I will," Alyson grinned.

They shared a warm and passionate kiss.

"When?" Duffey whispered breathless with hope and happiness.

"When do you wish?" Alyson asked coyly.

"Tonight if possible," Duffey suggested.

"Would tomorrow do?" Alyson offered.

"Yes!" Duffey agreed immediately.

"We'll go into town tomorrow together and visit Reverend Weems," Alyson said. "We'll say we have business to attend to."

"You will stay with me after we're married," Duffey insisted. "I'm tired of sleeping alone in my big bed."

"Why sir, are you offering ardor?" Alyson giggled.

"You'd better believe that my love," Duffey growled huskily. "We'll tell the family tonight."

"No, I think I want to surprise them," Alyson said stubbornly.

"As you wish," Duffey caved in. It didn't matter to him who knew they were going to get married. He just knew the lovely Alyson Jameson agreed to be his wife.

At dinner Alyson noticed that Braden was missing. "Where is Braden?"

Morning Song laughed. "He found out upon arriving that Kerry was still at Geneva's Branch with Ryan and Twiggy."

"He took off on Socks like he was being chased by a prairie fire," Grady snorted. "We're assuming he is off to Geneva's Branch to fetch Kerry."

"He has been away from Kerry for two weeks," Grant defended his son. "I can understand his immediate need."

"Grant!" Celeste chided. "Please behave. Grady has company!"

"I think my wife and I understand," Joseph chuckled squeezing his wife's hand.

Ryan stepped out of the house hearing the thundering of horse hooves approaching Geneva's Branch. Twiggy followed him to the door.

"Get back in the house, Twiggy," Ryan ordered. "I don't know who it is yet. All I see is a cloud of dust."

"Are you going to be alright, Ryan?" Twiggy asked concerned.

"I'll be fine. Cassidy heard it too! See, he's already calling ranch hands out," Ryan answered. "You get in the house with Kerry in the great room with her. I don't want to worry about your safety."

The fast riding figure took form.

Cassidy was standing next to Ryan, "I'll be damned if that isn't your brother in law, Braden Wessex."

"It is," Ryan acknowledged.

"He sure is in a hurry," Cassidy noted.



"He sure is," Ryan agreed.

Braden reined Socks to a short stop from the full run. Leaping off Socks Braden handed the reins to Ryan. "Be a good brother in law and groom Socks for me. Some good oats would be a nice reward. Where's my Kerry?"

Ryan chuckled. He actually understood Braden's need now that he was married to Twiggy. "She's in the house with Twiggy in the great room."

Braden strode like a man on a mission walking into the house, "Kerry! Kerry!"

Hearing Braden's insistent voice Kerry rose from the sewing machine and walked to the door as Braden burst into the room.

"Woman, come with me!" Braden ordered as he grabbed Kerry's hand and pulled her out of the room out to the stairs. He picked her up into his arms and carried her up the stairs to the bedroom Ryan had made for her.

Twiggy heard the door slam and the door bolt slammed down impatiently. Garrett had responded to his father's voice and started demanding attention. "You'll have to wait a little while to say hello to your Papa," Twiggy told the tiny babe as she picked Garrett up from his cradle. "I think your Mamma is going to keep your Papa company for an hour or two."

Cassidy took Socks to the barn and Ryan returned to the house. Ryan walked into the great room seeing Twiggy carrying Garrett in her arms and walking to the rocking chair.

"Sweetheart, you make my heart sing when I see you holding little Garrett," Ryan admitted to his Twiggy. "I can't wait until I see you holding our baby."

"You are as hungry as your brother in law my love," Twiggy giggled. "There is no doubt in my mind your seed will soon be growing in my belly and we will have our child."

Ryan smiled broadly and planted a sweet kiss upon his wife's lips. He then knelt by her side and played with Garrett's little finger. "We'll keep you entertained, Garrett. Your parents will be occupied for awhile."

"I told him that already," Twiggy laughed.

Garrett grabbed Ryan's finger and pulled it close to his mouth gurgling with delight.

"I want our baby also," Twiggy admitted smiling to her husband.



Chapter Eighteen

Twiggy woke to the gentle sensual persuasions of her new husband. Every morning since their Sosoni' wedding for the past two weeks Ryan would wake her with his kisses. "I love your kiss," Twiggy managed to breathe as Ryan positioned himself on her tiny frame.

"I love your kiss, too!" Ryan answered raggedly. "I especially like the nice wet one I am about to enter."

Twiggy felt his hardened shaft penetrate her womanhood. He felt so wonderful buried deep inside. When he began his rhythmic ministrations he would take her to the heights of ecstasy. Twiggy clung to his sweated body and responded matching his rhythm arching her hips to receive him. Her nails dug deeply into the powerful biceps of his arms as she reached her orgasm.

Feeling Twiggy's response Ryan penetrated deeper and thrust his manhood faster until his hot seeds spasmodically released in exquisite torture and delight.

Sated, Ryan rolled to Twiggy's side and his large hand played with her perfectly formed breast. "I love you, Twiggy. I love you with all that I am." He felt a tear roll down his cheek. He loved Twiggy so much it hurt.

Twiggy didn't say a word. She took her finger and wiped away the tear on his cheek then snuggled into his strong chest and purred contentedly.

It was sometime later that Twiggy and Ryan joined Braden and Kerry in the dining room for breakfast. Braden and Kerry had arrived only a moment before.

Little Rain was sitting with Lucy holding a sleeping Garrett. After Kerry had fed an early rising Garrett this morning, Kerry had called for Little Rain to take Garrett so she and Braden could have private time to talk. At least that is what Kerry had told Little Rain in Sosoni'.

Lucy teased the couples, "My, my, aren't we the late ones this morning. I guess important discussions must have been taking place.



Don't worry though. Little Rain and I have kept breakfast warm for the four of you."

Kerry and Twiggy blushed. Braden and Ryan glared at each other.

Braden pulled out a chair for Kerry, "I'm happy you found a governess for Garrett and Bennett, my love."

"Little Rain loves our little Garrett, and her Sosoni' heritage will help our sons understand the people and Geneva's Hope," Kerry smiled to her husband stroking his arm lovingly.

"I agree," Braden said softly brushing a kiss on his wife's brow before he took a seat next to her. "Today we will all return to Geneva's Hope."

Twiggy looked up with sadness in her eyes, "Must you return so soon? You have helped me understand so much."

"I was not happy to find my wife was not at home when I returned yesterday. Our son, Bennett, needs his mother there," Braden pouted.

"More like you couldn't stand another night with a cold bed," Ryan chortled.

"It appears that you seem to enjoy a hot bed yourself, Ryan," Braden snapped back cocking a brow. It felt good to get even with Ryan's constant teasing about his lustiness toward his wife, Kerry.

Ryan's good mood since his Sosoni' marriage to Twiggy would not be altered by his brother in law's taunts. "It would seem I have come to comprehend the delight of a warm bed."

"Indeed!" Braden snorted. "In that case you will begin to comprehend the feel of a cold one."

"Excuse me?" Ryan choked on his sip of hot coffee as he chewed Braden's words.

"Before I left to collect my wife and son I was ordered to tell you to return to Geneva's Hope," Braden answered quietly sipping his coffee. "Duffey's order. You are to come alone."

"Alone?" Ryan growled fiercely.

"I'm sure Duffey didn't know that you and Twiggy got married by the Sosoni'," Braden calmly replied. "However, we have some guests at Geneva's Hope that you are instructed to meet and you must meet them alone."

"What guests? You didn't tell me about any guests, Braden Morgan Wessex!" Kerry grouched.

"I'm not going anywhere without Twiggy," Ryan protested angrily. His mood had finally been altered.

"I'm afraid you must, Ryan," Braden almost whispered. The taunting was fun between them, but the Crawfords were serious business. "You must have faith that there is an important reason to the singular summons."



"I'll be back this evening," Ryan relented and took Twiggy's hand in reassurance.

"I'm not sure of that," Braden interrupted. "These guests may require a day or two of your time."

"Braden, what the devil is going on?" Kerry demanded. "Who in the blue blazes are these special house guests?"

"All in good time, my love," Braden reassured. "You'll understand when you meet them."

"In other words, these people would be offended by a white woman raised by Sosoni?" Twiggy said holding back her sobs. She rose and left the table in tears running outside to hide her sorrows.

"See what you've done you nit wit twit Brit!" Ryan roared angrily. "You've made my Twiggy feel bad."

Kerry punched Braden in the shoulder. "How could you, beast?" Kerry rose in a snit of anger herself and attempted to walk out to Twiggy behind Ryan.

Braden pulled her back, "Listen to me before you make any assumptions."

"You hurt Twiggy!" Kerry accused.

"I didn't mean too, but she can't come with Ryan and he has to meet the Crawfords before Twiggy does," Braden tried to explain to the struggling and angry wife he held tightly in his grip.

"Braden you had better tell me who these people are or so help me I will be the first wife in Nevada to be jailed for giving black eyes to her husband," Kerry threatened.

"I would assume by now that you know Twiggy is white, not half breed or Sosoni?" Braden queried.

"Yes, Twiggy told me everything, and because I have also been raised by both we have a lot in common and much to share," Kerry replied heatedly. "That still doesn't tell me who these Crawfords are!"

The raised voices frightened Garrett stirring him into a wail being woken up by the angry words of his mother.

"I'll take Garrett outside," Little Rain excused in Sosoni' as she rose with Garrett crying in her arms and quickly strode towards the front door. Little Rain understood only a few of the words between Kerry and Braden but she knew anger when she heard it and she thought it best if she and Garrett leave the room. As soon as Little Rain was outside Garrett calmed down with the soothing Sosoni' lullaby Little Rain began singing.

"Now see what you've done!" Kerry shouted. "You've woken Garrett and scared him!"

"Me? You're the one shouting," Braden roared with angered voice himself. There were times when Kerry cut to his temper quite efficiently. There was no doubt in his mind Kerry could run him through a gamut of emotions in no time and he was putty in her hands.



"Don't you shout at me!" Kerry countered with the same volume.

"Bloody Hell, how can I tell you anything with you shouting at me," Braden growled.

"You haven't even tried!" Kerry snarled.

Braden gave up. He wouldn't get anywhere this way so he did the next best thing. Grabbing Kerry he covered his mouth over hers and kissed her passionately. His tongue parted her lips and dueled until he felt Kerry sag in his arms. He removed his lips from her mouth and laved her ear lobe as he whispered, "The Crawford's are Twiggy's parents."

Kerry pulled back. "Her parents?"

"Alyson found out about Twiggy being white by accident. She sent Duffey off to find Twiggy's white parents. He did. We did. And now they are guests at Geneva's Hope. The Crawford's are biting at the bit to see their long lost daughter, but everyone is concerned about Twiggy's reaction and Duffey believes Ryan should meet them first," Braden finally explained in one breath before Kerry could say another word.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kerry demanded hotly.

"I thought I just did," Braden smiled his eyes twinkling.

"You could have told me last night!" Kerry argued.

"I was too occupied with more important personal matters," Braden excused. "Remember my love?"

Kerry's lips curled into a smile. "Yes, I remember. You're forgiven."

"Thank you!" Braden chortled. "You've spent a lot of time with Twiggy?"

"Yes I have. She's a wonderful caring and loving person. She'll make Ryan a happy man," Kerry grinned.

"So do you have any insights into what her reactions will be to her white parents?" Braden questioned seriously.

"Her reaction to them would depend upon their reaction to her," Kerry offered. Kerry told Braden the story of the Crow woman brought by a soldier for return to her white family.

Ryan was behind Twiggy in an instant. He pulled her into his strong arms putting his chin on her head as he rubbed her back. Ryan's shirt became soaked with the tears flowing freely from Twiggy's eyes. "There, there sweetheart. It's alright," Ryan said soothingly.

"No it's not alright," Twiggy sobbed in Ryan's chest. "I knew this would happen. Your family would be embarrassed having a Sosoni' in their family."

"You know that's not true. Pa is married to Morning Song. Did you forget Morning Song is Sosoni'?" Ryan reminded Twiggy.



"But it must make some difference or your Pa would let me come with you," Twiggy answered mournfully. "I thought your Pa liked me."

"Pa loves you!" Ryan soothed. "Pa has a reason for this. I trust him. Remember we talked about trust and love?"

Twiggy looked into her husband's loving gray eyes. "Yes, I remember. I seem not to have much trust, but I do love you. I love you with all my heart."

"I understand that you need more reassurance in trusting others, but you must trust me because I love you back," Ryan whispered into her hair hugging her tightly. "Let me go with Kerry and Braden. I'll find out what this is all about and then I'll be back home faster than you can miss me. Okay?" Ryan picked up her chin with his forefinger and thumb. "Okay?"

Twiggy nodded. "I'll miss you so much!"

"Not half as much as I'll miss you. I guess chocolate cake will have to make up for my kisses," Ryan teased. "I'll be sure to have Cho Ling make three or four to keep you busy for two days."

"If you must constantly go alone places I'll end up fat!" Twiggy giggled snuggled in Ryan's comforting arms.

"You'll end up fat with my baby growing in your belly if I stay," Ryan teased back. "Either way I intend to make you fat, but I hope for a baby first."

"So do I," Twiggy smiled. "I do want our baby, Ryan."

"Sweetheart," Ryan murmured. "I'll be back before you miss me."

Twiggy packed Ryan's saddlebags for his trip to Geneva's Hope.

Ryan instructed Cassidy to sleep in the house for protection of the women and keep Twiggy safe. Anything Twiggy wanted she was to have, no questions asked. If she wanted to spend some time with the people as she did every day with Kerry that was okay but Cassidy was to escort her. He didn't trust Horse Tail. It was a gut feeling but he wanted to make sure Twiggy would have protection. If Twiggy wanted to order something from Ely, she was to have carte blanche.

Cassidy chuckled silently. The love bug had bitten his boss real bad. Cassidy stroked his chin, come to think of it; he was bit by love also. It would be difficult to control his lust knowing he was in the same house with Lucy Gates and she would be sleeping right down the hall from him. His male organ suddenly sprang to life. *God this is embarrassing. There must be something about the word Geneva. It surely has us men falling in love right quick.*

Braden assisted Kerry, Little Rain, and Garrett to seats on the buckboard. Kerry handled the team. Ryan gave Twiggy a quick kiss and a promise of a quick return and mounted Chiseler. Braden mounted Socks and they left for Geneva's Hope.



Twiggy returned to the ranch house and changed into her Sosoni' three skin dress, leggings and moccasins. She left the house and walked briskly to the stables where her mare, Princess, a gift from Ryan was kept. Twiggy asked one of the ranch hands to saddle Princess for her. She was becoming accustomed to the western saddle but she could not lift the heavy saddle for strapping.

Cassidy came in behind her, "Are you planning to go somewhere, Twiggy?"

"I want to visit my father, Blue Pool," Twiggy answered waiting patiently for her horse.

"I'll saddle up and go with you," Cassidy told her casually.

"That isn't necessary Mr. Cassidy. I know the way and I might spend the night with the people. I may not miss my Ryan so much if I do," Twiggy responded.

"I'm afraid the boss gave me explicit instructions to go wherever you go and I don't think he wants you to spend the night at camp," Cassidy countered. "Besides, I can't possibly eat all that chocolate cake that Cho Ling is making for us by myself."

Twiggy giggled. "Ryan is protective of me."

"My dear Twiggy," Cassidy guffawed. "That is an understatement!"

Twiggy creased her brows, "understatement?"

"It means I agree with you. Ryan is extremely protective of you. Let's not fight him on this, Okay?" Cassidy asked laughing loudly.

"Okay!" Twiggy complied. "I still want to visit my father. I worry for him since he will not live in the house of Ryan with me."

"We're building him his own place," Cassidy responded as he helped Twiggy mount Princess.

"There is no woman to take his care or his lodge," Twiggy replied. "This is why I worry for him."

"I understand. We'll see what we can do to help even if the boss has to hire someone to take care of him. We'll find a solution," Cassidy said mounting his own mustang.

"What is so lu shun?" Twiggy asked.

"It means things will work out," Cassidy answered and the two made their way to the Sosoni' camp of Bright Moon.

Brook Pebble and Blue Pool greeted Twiggy as soon as she rode in with Cassidy.

"Where is the sister of your husband that comes to camp with you every day?" Brook Pebble asked.

"Her husband returned last night and she must return to their home," Twiggy answered.



"I see your man sends you with escort," Blue Pool observed watching Cassidy dismount and help Twiggy off Princess. "Your husband is wise in his protection."

"He should be protective of our Oak Twig," Brook Pebble quipped. "His dowry will be spoken of by the people for many generations."

Twiggy blushed. There had never been a dowry as large as the one her husband paid for her. "I have come to make sure you eat your meals, my father. I wish you would come to live with us in Ryan's lodge. It is very large and plenty of room."

"You worry needlessly my daughter," Blue Pool replied reassuringly. "Have you already forgotten your Ryan has made me a rich man?"

"Father, there is no woman to care for you," Twiggy insisted. "Who will see to your needs?"

"As a rich man I can afford a mate to care for me," Blue Pool stated.

"Mate?" Twiggy gasped.

"Brook Pebble lost her husband with the same sickness I lost your mother. They walk the Spirit Path together. As a rich man I spoke to Brook Pebble's brother and we mated yesterday."

"My dowry was not close to yours, but Blue Pool makes me happy. I am content," Brook Pebble told Twiggy taking her hands and squeezing them.

"This is a surprise but a happy one," Twiggy said wiping a tear of happiness from her cheek.

"Everything okay here?" Cassidy interrupted seeing Twiggy's tear.

"Yes Cassidy. It is your so lu shun. Brook Pebble and Blue Pool have mated," Twiggy turned to tell Cassidy.

"In that case I better get to work helping the hands build the lodge for your father and his new wife," Cassidy guffawed. "You enjoy your day with the family and I'll get right on it."

Twiggy spent the day with Brook Pebble and her father. They talked of all the happiness and joy the people enjoyed since their arrival on Geneva's Branch lands. Even the doctor from Ely came to visit and offer medicines for the sick. There had been plenty of food for everyone to eat. Two more healthy babies were born and their mothers had milk to feed them. There was great joy in the camp of Bright Moon.

"Eye of Hawk has sent many of his people to help with the sowing of seeds and planting. They send food and help for us to begin," Brook Pebble confided in Twiggy as they prepared a meal together.

Blue Pool who had been sitting watching added, "We are allowed to speak our own tongue, practice our ways, and live as Sosoni' with pride. Even the white hands that help us build and farm learn our language as we learn theirs. It is a fair trade."

Geneva's Branch



"This is truly a good pact," Twiggy praised. "My husband is a good man."

"It is as my vision, child," Blue Pool said with love in his heart.

"You are good medicine. I knew it when I found you in the Crow lodge."

"When I tried to beat you with an oak branch," Twiggy laughed.



Chapter Nineteen

Ryan rode ahead of Braden and Kerry. Arriving at Geneva's Hope he gave his reins to George. "Better bed him for the day and night. I was told I was required to be here a day or two."

"Sho Nuf." George answered.

"Do you know what this is all about? Who these people are?" Ryan asked the old ranch hand.

"You know well enough there isn't much that goes on here that I don't know about, but you need to hear this from your Pa," George retorted. "So if I was you, which I ain't, I'd get my butt in the house and find out."

Ryan entered the house and after putting his gun belt and hat on the hall tree he walked to the study. Grady usually spent the morning in there going over finances. "Pa?"

"Ryan, glad Braden sent you here. We have to talk and then I want you to meet the Crawfords," Grady greeted in his usual get to the point right away.

"Twiggy is heart broken, Pa. She thinks you don't like her and are embarrassed that she's Sosoni'," Ryan directed imitating his fathers straight to the point directness. "I want to know who these Crawfords are."

"I found out your Twiggy isn't Sosoni'," Grady responded quickly. "Your Twiggy is white, Ryan."

"Her heart is Sosoni'. Her skin is white," Ryan clarified.

"You know?" Grady exclaimed.

"A husband can't miss that fact, can he, Pa?" Ryan teased knowing his father didn't know about the Sosoni' ceremony.

"Husband?"

"Twiggy and I were married by the Sosoni' two weeks ago with Blue Pool's blessings," Ryan informed his father with a large smile.

"For God's sake don't tell Alyson yet," Grady warned but smiled and looking at Ryan said, "congratulations, son. I'm happy for you."

"I want to know who these Crawfords are, Pa," Ryan repeated referring again to his reason for being summoned to Geneva's Hope.



"The Crawfords are Twiggy's blood parents," Grady told Ryan thoughtfully. "Her name is Dayton Sara Crawford. Dayton was taken ten years ago by a Crow raiding party from the Crawfords Ranch in Nevada."

"Tell me more," Ryan insisted his curiosity piqued.

Grady told Ryan everything he knew starting with Alyson's finding out Twiggy was white, including her hiring Duffey to find the parents and why. He explained their meeting the Crawfords in Carson City, and the Crawfords being guests at the ranch.

Ryan sat thoughtfully for several moments mulling over everything he had heard. His finger brushed over his lips several times.

Grady watched his son carefully. He was determined to support his middle son in whatever Ryan thought best. Grady was full of pride for Ryan. He was not only a strong and powerful son, Ryan had built his own spread and would soon be as wealthy as his father. Ryan knew his limits and let Ayden and now Braden handle his investments. Ryan knew ranching and his spread was magnificent. Grady knew that Ryan loved his Twiggy and he knew Ryan would make the best decision concerning Twiggy or Dayton, her Christian name.

"Twiggy is sensitive to treatment of woman taken by the people and returned to the white families," Ryan mused stilling rubbing his finger across his lips.

"You told me that some time ago, son," Grady reminded Ryan. "The point is right now, how do you want to handle this? The Crawfords want to be reunited with their daughter. Remember their feelings, boy. They have been separated for ten years and began to think their daughter had been killed."

"The worst thing we can do is spring this on her without warning," Ryan mused. "If she wants to see them, it should be her decision. Not mine. Not yours. Not theirs. It should be Twiggy that wants to meet them."

"I agree with you, son," Grady nodded thoughtfully. "For the Crawfords sake I hope you can talk her into it."

"You can't talk Twiggy into anything," Ryan chuckled. "My woman has a mind of her own and I love her for it."

Grady put his hand on Ryan's shoulder, "I have double that knowledge, son."

"I think it's time I meet the Crawfords," Ryan suggested standing up from sitting in the large leather chair.

Grady walked with him to the parlor where the Samantha and Joseph sat with Jerica and Joshua.

Celeste and Grant Wessex, and Morning Song were talking quietly with Samantha and Joseph who were nervous wondering what was being said in Grady's study. Morning Song had told Samantha and Joseph when Ryan had arrived.



Braden and Kerry arrived with Garrett shortly after Ryan and then went into the library with the children. Bennett introduced Jerica and Joshua to his baby brother. The three children played under the watchful eyes of Kerry, Braden, and Little Rain.

Samantha jumped up when Grady walked in the room with a tall, handsome, and muscular man. "You must be Ryan."

"Ma'am, and you must be Samantha Crawford. My Twiggy's mother," Ryan acknowledged striding into the room.

"Twiggy?" Samantha repeated in question. "Oh yes, Morning Song told us that is the name you gave our Dayton."

"Your Dayton is my Twiggy," Ryan said possessively uncaring to the feelings of Samantha Crawford. No one's feelings but Twiggy's mattered to him.

"Sir, Dayton is our daughter. The wedding has not yet taken place," Joseph corrected miffed at the man's tone with his wife. "Until she becomes your wife, Dayton will remain our daughter."

This is the rise Ryan was waiting for. The next information would determine to him what kind of people the Crawfords really were and if he would even allow them near his Twiggy.

"You are incorrect, Mr. Crawford." Ryan felt his lips curving as he dropped the cannon ball. "Twiggy is my wife. We were married by and with her Sosoni' family's blessing two weeks ago."

Samantha's eyes widened and tears swelled.

Joseph bent to his wife giving her attention immediately.

"And Twiggy doesn't remember anyone but her Sosoni' family, Blue Pool, Yellow Star, Broken Cup, Spotted Fawn, her new niece Lighted Path, and her adopted mother Wooden Bowl that walks the ghost path," Ryan said rudely.

Grady and Morning Song were not surprised with Ryan. They thought they understood why he spoke as he did.

Celeste and Grant looked at each other. They were perplexed. Grady was not the type of man to stand by while one of his sons behaved so crudely.

Samantha could no longer control her emotions. Her tears flooded her cheeks. "I'm her mother. I will always be her mother. I am happy she was adopted by kindly and loving people, but sir, I am her mother and I love her!"

"My wife speaks for our entire family. We are grateful she was treated kindly and well, but I am her father and we want to love her. We have missed ten years of her life. She is your wife? That is all well and good if she is happy, but we are her family and want the chance to make up ten long lost years with our love," Joseph said adamantly.

"It makes no difference to you Dayton was raised by the Sosoni'?" Morning Song questioned, as Ryan stood square shouldered in silence.



"My daughter is alive, well, and married," Samantha said through her tears. "That is all I care about. I want the chance to tell her I love her and never stopped praying I would find her."

"I think you should hear a story my Twiggy told me so you can understand why I have been seemingly rude to you, and why I need to protect my wife," Ryan remarked stoically.

"We're all ears," Joseph responded sitting next to his wife placing a protective hand on Samantha's shoulder.

Ryan told the story of the Crow woman and the impression it left on an innocent twelve-year-old girl.

Celeste found herself wiping tears from her eyes, "How cruel!" Grant found he was consoling his wife as he choked with his own emotion.

Joseph patted Samantha's arm. "I think we understand you reason for your rudeness. I would do no less to protect my own wife from sorrow."

"As you have done my dear," Samantha choked between sobs. "You have done your best to protect me from all disappointments when we thought we might have found our Dayton."

"I'm glad you understand," Ryan noted walking toward the Crawfords.

"I would still like my daughter to have a Christian marriage," Joseph remarked carefully. "That is if she would agree to it." Joseph reached out his hand in friendship.

Ryan grasped Joseph's hand firmly and nodded.

"Twiggy knows she has no choice in that matter," Morning Song broke through the sobriety of the moment. "Why Alyson wouldn't tolerate it, and Twiggy knows and likes Alyson from what I'm told."

"Twiggy does like Auntie Alyson and we intend to have the Christian marriage vows spoken, but we are truly man and wife by Sosoni' and Tam Apo's love."

"Any mother would be proud to have a son in law such as you," Samantha smiled taking Ryan's hand and brushing his knuckles across her cheek. "Our Dayton will be happy, I know it."

"Why do you call my daughter Twiggy?" Joseph questioned.

"Her Sosoni' name is Oak Twig. When I first met her she was half starved and walking stick. A brisk wind would have carried her off. Twiggy became my special name for my special love," Ryan replied grinning with pride.

"I have seen many Indian camps with half starved and sick men, women, and children," Samantha concurred.

"As have I," Morning Song sighed morosely.

"That is why Samantha offered blankets, food, and medicines from our store for the Indians," Joseph said sympathetically. "Samantha kept her hope that in her kindness to them someone would be kind to our



abducted daughter. By God above, Samantha was right. I want you to know that Ryan McGillinen."

"Pa told me," Ryan acknowledged.

"Are you going to allow us to speak with our daughter?" Samantha asked wringing a kerchief in her hands nervously.

"What if I said, no?" Ryan asked wondering what the Crawfords would really do.

"We would adhere to your decision," Samantha gulped hard. "We would never do anything to hurt our daughter. If you believe we would do that, we have no choice but understand you know what is best for Dayton. At least I know my daughter is alive, well, and happy."

"I'll go tomorrow and tell Twiggy about you," Ryan offered. "I'll let it up to her and let her decide. I will abide by my Twiggy's decision."

"Thank you," Joseph Crawford said softly squeezing Samantha's shoulder tenderly.

"Where is Auntie Alyson?" Ryan suddenly became aware of her absence.

No one had noticed Dwayne enter the room. He had silently slipped into the shadows and observed all that happened. "Auntie Alyson and Duffey left for Ely early this morning. They told me they had some private matters to attend."

"More private matters?" Grady chortled. "Just what are those two up to?"

"I'm sure it's no good," Morning Song laughed. "I have seen the look of desire in Duffey's eyes."

"That old goat?" Dwayne guffawed.

"He may have snow on the roof, but there's fire in the stove," Grady countered. "You'll do good to remember that when you get older."

Dwayne looked in astonishment at his father. He couldn't believe his pure and holy Auntie involved with any man.

Ryan walked to his younger brother. "He'll learn, Pa."

"It's time for lunch," Morning Song announced. "Let's have a quiet comfortable meal and we can all get to know each other better."

"I'll get Kerry," Ryan offered. "Where are she and Braden hiding?"

"Miss Kerry and Mr. Braden are in the library with the children," Marie informed responding to Celeste's summons on the bell and entered the parlor. "They both thought it best to keep the children content and shielded from such grown up goings on."

The lunch was pleasant and conversation controlled for the sake of the children. Ryan became more comfortable with the Crawfords and realized they would not do or say anything that might hurt or offend his Twiggy. He would be sure to tell her. More importantly he would only be away from his Twiggy for only one night.



After dinner the men went to Grady's study for brandy and cigars. Ryan continued in depth conversations with Joseph about his wife's young childhood years and learned that the older son Todd was married to a woman named Eleanor and they had a daughter who looked just like Twiggy as a child and they had named their little girl, Dayton Sara Crawford.

It was late when Dwayne mentioned, "I'm really worried about Auntie Audrey, and don't tell me it's okay she's with Duffey!"

"I'm worried too, Pa," Ryan agreed. "It's not like Auntie Audrey to stay in town this long or overnight. I don't like it at all."

"I am sure she's perfectly well," Grady attempted to cajole his sons.

"I really miss Twiggy, but I am going into Ely first thing in the morning and check on this," Ryan said stubbornly. "Your possible reunion with Twiggy will just have to wait one more day."

Joseph took a sip of the excellent French brandy. "Son, I have waited and prayed for ten years. A day or two longer is tolerable."

Ryan was up before the break of dawn and in Aumond's kitchen. Marseille was preparing an elaborate breakfast displaying to the McGillinen guests his culinary skills.

Ryan helped himself to some fresh cold milk and sweet donuts Aumond called crullers.

Moments later Chiseler was saddled and Ryan was on his way to Ely. He arrived in town about eight o'clock and went directly to Duffey's law office.

Breana was just opening up the office when Ryan walked in behind her.

"Why Ryan McGillinen, you startled me half to death!" Breana gasped holding her hand over her heart. "Is Dwayne with you?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I came alone." Ryan answered grinning. Everyone knew about Breana's crush on Dwayne. Her crush had started in the Ely School they attended as children. Ryan was glad Duffey had been training her in legal matters so she would have a trade. He was afraid the rakish younger brother of his would break her heart. "When do you expect your uncle to be in today?"

"I don't expect him at all with..." Breana stopped herself. "You don't know?"

"Know? Am I supposed to know something?" Ryan questioned.

"Yes, you should know, but it's not up to me to tell you," Breana barked. "Uncle Duffey is at home. You will find him there."



Chapter Twenty

Ryan walked to the stone house and climbed the rock steps to the porch. His mind was filled with Breena's evasiveness. It wasn't normal and just what was he supposed to know about? His large powerful hand gripped the brass knocker and banged on the brass plate with it.

A moment later the door opened. "Mr. Ryan! It's a bit early to call."

"Good morning, Bert!" Ryan said pushing himself into the foyer past the stodgy valet. "I'm here to see Mr. Duffey. I was told he is here."

"Of course, sir!" Bert Kepler answered. "He is however a bit preoccupied. I don't think I will be able to interrupt him."

"You don't have too. I will!" Ryan growled. He was getting irritated at the evasiveness he was running into in his pursuit of his Auntie's well being.

"Sir, I don't think..."

Bert was cut short by Ryan's strong hand on his starched collar and white tie. "I think I wish to speak to Brian Duffey, so tell me where he is!"

Grasping for breath Bert squeaked, "They are in the parlor there!" Bert pointed flushing because he lost the full capability of breathing.

"Thank you, Bert," Ryan smiled putting the man down and brushing his lapels.

Ryan walked briskly to the closed parlor door and abruptly opened it. Ryan's eyes widened in shock and fury.

Duffey was leaning over kissing his Auntie Alyson who was dressed only in sheer pink nightgown with a matching sheer robe decorated with tiny pink rosebuds. Worse yet, Duffey's mouth was fully covering his Auntie's mouth passionately while his hand roamed down into the bodice of her nightgown and was obviously playing with her breast.

"What the Hell!" Ryan roared.

Duffey jumped.

Alyson turned to Ryan's voice.

Ryan pulled his gun, and pointed it at Duffey, "You no good polecat! How dare you ravage my auntie?"



"Ryan," Alyson attempted to address her nephew.

"You go on upstairs and get dressed, Auntie Alyson. I'm taking you home right now," Ryan growled. "Don't fret none. I'll handle this no good excuse for a man."

"Ryan," Duffey addressed politely.

"You just keep quiet!" Ryan ordered. "You won't be able to talk for awhile after I break your face. Go on Auntie Alyson!"

"My wife is staying!" Duffey snarled losing patience with the hardheaded young man.

Ryan dropped his gun. The noise as it hit the floor thundered in the dead silence of the parlor. "Wife?"

"Alyson and I were married last night," Duffey grinned. "You aren't the only one in love or protective of his own."

"Married?"

"Yes, married! Have you developed a hearing problem?" Alyson snapped. "You could offer congratulations and goodness I am so ashamed of you. I thought I taught you better manners. Next time knock on the door before you enter."

Ryan felt the room swim and quickly grabbed a chair to sit in.

"Are you alright, Ryan?" Duffey asked in concern.

"Of course he is. He's fine!" Alyson replied stubbornly.

"I don't know, sweet cakes. He looks awfully pale," Duffey observed.

"Serves him right. No manners whatsoever!" Alyson grouched.

Ryan looked at his auntie in Duffey's arms. "Auntie Alyson, would you mind getting dressed? What you're wearing is indecent."

"Indecent? We didn't invite you in!" Auntie Alyson roared angrily. "I should take a switch to your backside, you impudent manner less..."

"Sweet cakes, the boy didn't know. You were the one that wanted to keep this a secret, remember?" Duffey said in calming tones.

"For you darling, I'll change for company," Alyson responded gently to her new husband. "But you young nephew I still might take a switch to your backside to remind you of your manners."

"I'm sorry Auntie Alyson," Ryan offered apologetically. "I really didn't know or expect..."

"Expect that I'm a woman like your Twiggy?" Alyson accused.

Ryan blushed into deep crimson. "You have always been the pure and sainted ideal of us kids. It's hard to see you as a woman, Auntie."

"I guess I understand," Alyson relented a little. "I'll go upstairs and change and then we'll have a long talk."

Alyson left the room and Duffey adjusted his burgundy-quilted smoking jacket. "I love Alyson. I want you to know I'll love and care for her."



Ryan groaned, "You have any coffee, Duffey?"

"I'll send for some," Duffey answered and left the room finding his maid, Melanie. He gave her instructions to make and bring hot coffee into the parlor.

Duffey returned to the room finding Ryan's head buried in his hands and his head between his knees. "I'm worried about you Ryan, should I send for a doctor?"

Ryan brought his body back up straight and then eased back into the chair. "No, don't send for the doc. Physically I am fine. Emotionally? Well, frankly I don't think I can handle another jolt. First the Crawfords and now this!"

He realized Ryan needed to talk about things. All of this must have been a bit much for the boy whose only concern several months ago was building his ranch house.

"Yesterday I met the Crawfords, and today this," Ryan replied.

"Have you determined the kind of people they are yet?" Duffey inquired.

"They're good and decent people. I have no doubt to that!"

"That they are. Did your Pa tell you Twiggy is their daughter Dayton and she is white, not a half breed as you thought?"

"Don't tell Auntie Alyson yet, but Twiggy and I were married two weeks ago by the Sosoni'. I found out she was white a day or two before. Twiggy told me. Can't say it mattered to me one way or another, but it mattered to Twiggy," Ryan confessed.

"Alyson wants to give you a big Christian wedding. She wanted it to be nice for Dayton as well. That's why she had me and Pinkerton track Dayton's folks down," Duffey shared quietly waiting to find out Ryan's reaction to the affair.

"Twiggy and I still intend to give Auntie Alyson her day," Ryan reassured. "And don't worry. I like the Crawfords, but it is going to be up to Twiggy regarding her white family and the Crawfords had agreed to that."

"If that's all settled, why did you come here?" Duffey questioned raising a curious brow.

"I was worried about Auntie Alyson," Ryan replied impulsively. "She never has stayed away from the ranch for a night unless she was in town or out of state with family."

"Against my better judgment your auntie wanted to keep our courtship and marriage a secret until everything was settled with the Crawfords and your Twiggy. She also wanted to wait until after your wedding," Duffey told Ryan quietly. "I would not allow her to deny me our wedding night."

"Well, the cat's out of the bag," Ryan chuckled. "I did forget to congratulate you two. I apologize."



"Personally I'm glad you know. I want all the McGillinens to know," Duffey smirked. "Hell, I want all of Ely and Nevada to know I have married Alyson."

"Duffey, your language!" Alyson reprimanded entering the parlor dressed in a gray travel suit.

"I apologize sweet cakes," Duffey said contritely.

"You're forgiven," Alyson allowed reaching over and giving her new husband a peck on the cheek. "You'd better get dressed so we can go to Geneva's Hope. No use pretending a minute longer. We'll tell the family our happy news together."

"I'll be ready in a minute, sweet cakes," Duffey laughed gaily and left the parlor to dress.

Breana entered the parlor and walked to Ryan sitting in the chair. "I guess you know?"

"Yes," Ryan answered and then cocked a brow to Breana. "How did you come to know?"

Breana giggled, "Why marriage is a legal matter. That's my profession Mr. McGillinen, remember, legal assistant. I was their witness."

"How ignorant of me. I beg your pardon," Ryan teased.

"Your pardon given," Breana shot back with her own taunt. "You are happy for my Uncle aren't you?"

"I'm happy for your Uncle and my Auntie," Ryan answered holding back his mirth at the sassy but bright young woman that was Duffey's niece.

"I'm certainly happy to hear that," Alyson enjoined in the conversation.

Melanie walked in with the coffee service.

"Breana, we are going to Geneva's Hope as soon as your uncle is ready," Alyson told the young woman. "Would you like to join us? You are part of the family you know."

Breana sipped her cup of hot coffee. "I would love to join you."

"Yes, Dwayne is at the ranch," Ryan answered the saucy niece before she asked.

"Your intuition is equal to a woman's. I'm impressed," Breana ragged Ryan.

"Not that women's liberation thing again," Ryan groaned. "For Pete's sake Breana, we all know women are superior. You run us quite well already. Why lower yourself?"

"Why Ryan McGillinen. I'm glad you see it my way. When did you become so smart?" Breana taunted.

"When I met my Twiggy!" Ryan grinned. "And I'm a quick learner. The Sosoni' had it right long before us poor dumb white folk."

"I've always admired the Sosoni' and the People's nations. Why did you know our government was based on the five tribal nations?"



Breana rambled on. "Of course the men messed it up with financials and power and greed later, but it is still a good foundation."

"No, I didn't know that," Ryan chided. "What other brilliant idiom are you going to enlighten me with this morning?"

"Why nothing more than you've learned already," Breana sneered mischievously. "The people's nation had a matriarchal society. It was the women that owned the lodges and passed inheritances to the female."

"And did a wonderful job in councils. It wasn't until the invasion of the Europeans that the peoples learned about evil, corruption, and violence," Alyson added. "Morning Song told me all about it."

"I guess we got our morning lesson," Duffey grinned as he entered the parlor hearing the conversation from the hall and seeing Ryan's pained expression.

"No wonder Dwayne avoids you, Breana," Ryan moaned. "You're smarter than him."

"I can't help that. I was born that way. Wasn't I Uncle Duffey?"

Brian Duffey smiled broadly and refrained from a large guffaw, "Yep, she takes after her mother. My sister."

"Well, I'm glad you got some intelligence from the bloodline," Alyson teased Duffey poking him in his ribs.

"Let's go sweet cakes. We'll discuss intelligence later," Duffey said successfully ending this conversation that would never end amicably.

Breana rode in the buggy with Alyson and Duffey. She was looking forward to seeing Dwayne. Why she liked him was a question Breana couldn't answer.

Ryan arrived at Geneva's Hope first. Everyone was just sitting down to supper. Even Small Bird was feeling better and she was at the table with her new son, Corey Edward. Samantha Crawford oohed and aaahed the little new born asking to hold him.

Grady relinquished Garrett occasionally to Joseph Crawford and Grant Wessex. Grady couldn't be a happier man surrounded by his children and grandchildren.

Jerica and Joshua were caught up in the family life and had been playing with Bennett and Willow. The two had already asked if they could visit the Sosoni' camp like Bennett and Willow did. The Crawfords of course gave permission for Morning Song and Grady to take them.

Samantha had asked Morning Song if she could accompany her to camp and the two made arrangements to take the children in the buckboard tomorrow.

When Ryan entered the busy dining room Grady asked, "Did you find Alyson and bring her back?"



Ryan grinned, "I found Auntie Alyson and brought her back with guests and some interesting news. I'll let her tell you the news."

A few minutes later Alyson and Duffey walked in behind Breena.

Dwayne rose immediately recognizing Breena. "You've grown up a bit."

"I'm glad you noticed, Dwayne," Breena flashed long dark eyelashes. "How have you been?"

"Er, actually rather busy with Kerry, Ayden, and Ryan," Dwayne said sheepishly. Breena had seemed to grow up overnight. Those were real bosoms in that dress. Her dark hair coiffure perfected in dainty ringlets. Her figure grown mature was no longer the skinny kid with long arms and legs. "What are you up too?"

"I'm in apprenticeship as legal assistant for Uncle Brian's law firm," Breena announced proudly.

"She's very talented and a great assistant," Duffey bragged as he seated Alyson.

Grady wouldn't wait for the news. He asked, "Ryan said you have news for us Alyson. Do you care to share it?"

"Happily," Alyson declared. "But I think it best if Brian tells it."

"Brian?" Grady and Grant asked creasing their brows together.

Duffey seated himself next to Alyson and took her hand in his. "Grady, Morning Song, and all family and friends present. I'm pleased to announce the marriage of Alyson and myself yesterday evening. I present Mrs. Brian Duffey."

Morning Song rose and kissed Alyson on the cheek. "We wish you every happiness."

"Like you said Pa, snow on the roof and fire in the stove," Ryan guffawed.

Dwayne sat in shock. He had never thought of his auntie in the type of way. Loving a man?

Grady and Grant were speechless.

Celeste went to Alyson's side and gave her good wishes as Morning Song had.

Joseph held his wine glass high and offered a toast to the newly weds.

The clinking of crystal saluted Alyson and Brian Duffey.

After the meal Grady joined everyone in the parlor and held his grandson, Corey.

Grant wouldn't give Garrett up.

Jerica and Joshua were playing checkers with Bennett and Willow.



Grady commented to Alyson, "You really surprised me. It seems I have been endowed with numerous surprises this past year. All of them filled with happiness."

"We have been blessed, haven't we?" Alyson agreed holding tightly to Brian's hand.

"I for one am not complaining. I don't mind the full house and joy one bit," Grady laughed. "This can continue for a long time. I don't think I'll tire of the joy." Grady cuddled his new grandson and cast a glance to the grandson sleeping in Grant's arms. "All we need is a little girl."

"I'll work on that for you, Grady," Braden volunteered wickedly. Kerry elbowed him in the ribs. "What will the Crawfords think?"

"Hopefully they'll think I am madly in love with my wife," Braden winked.

"Or they'll think you're a lustful Brit dandy," Ryan countered.

Samantha giggled at the playfulness of the McGillinen family. It reminded her of her own childhood with two sisters and a brother.

"You seem to be lusting over your new wife. I didn't notice that the two of you didn't emerge from your bedroom until after Kerry and I did," Braden taunted in retribution.

"Wife?" Alyson gasped. "You and Twiggy are married? What about the planned Church wedding?"

"Now see what you've done, Brit?" Ryan growled.

"Ooops!" Braden said with good humor. "I guess I let the cat out of the bag."

"Ryan, did you and Twiggy get married?" Alyson demanded.

"The Sosoni' performed our first wedding ceremony. Twiggy and I fully intend to have our Christian Church wedding too!" Ryan explained.

"I wonder if I will ever get used to your special name of Twiggy for our Dayton," Joseph said shaking his head.

"I like it," Samantha commented. "It's sweet and special like my dear, sweetheart, my love, honey, ..."

"Or sweet cakes," Duffey added and kissed Alyson's cheek.

"I suppose if you put it like that, my love," Joseph exaggerated and kissed his wife's cheek.

Breena was caught up in the family, "This is so famous, so much love here!"

Dwayne couldn't help but feel it and comment, "The McGillinen family is growing for sure and love is a big part of it. Kind of nice, isn't it?"

"It certainly is contagious," Breena observed.

"Would you care to go for a walk?" Dwayne asked Breena politely.



"Yes, I would enjoy that," Breena accepted quickly and took Dwayne's hand.

"Behave yourself baby brother!" Ryan ordered as his body trembled with mirth.

"The pot calling the kettle black big brother?" Dwayne voiced over his shoulder as he escorted Breena through the door.

"Let's take a walk with the children," Duffey suggested.

"Don't you trust my nephew?" Alyson cocked a brow in question.

"Do you?" Duffey asked quickly.

"I'd love to take a walk," Alyson responded immediately.



Chapter Twenty One

Twiggy spent almost the entire day at Bright Moon's camp and reluctantly returned at dusk at Cassidy's insistence.

She had kept her mind busy concentrating on her adopted father's new happiness and enjoyed caring for her new niece, Lighted Path. Surrounded by her Sosoni' family there had been little time to miss her Ryan.

At Geneva's Branch the house was silent. Twiggy did not hear the laughter of Bennett or could no longer enjoy the cuddling of Garrett. Her sister Kerry had left with her husband Braden.

"This house is too quiet!" Lucy said seating herself next to Twiggy in the great room after they had eaten their dinner.

"I agree," Twiggy said morosely. "It is too quiet with the children gone and our sister, Kerry."

"And you miss Ryan," Lucy whispered squeezing Twiggy's hand compassionately.

"It seems we are always separated for some reason or another," Twiggy sighed.

"Is there anything I can do?" Lucy offered hopefully.

"Not tonight," Twiggy answered. "I'll finish sewing this dress for Brook Pebble and then I'll go to bed."

"I can at least help you with Brook Pebbles' dress," Lucy volunteered.

"Lucy, how do you stay so happy all the time?"

"This is the best my life has been since I was borne," Lucy admitted gaily. "Your Ryan is a generous and honorable man. He pays me a more than fair wage. He treats me with respect. He paid for these ladylike clothes. I have enough food to eat and soft bed to sleep in at night."

"But you're alone," Twiggy finished.

"Oh, I'm not alone either," Lucy blurted without thinking.

"You're not?"



"This Geneva's Branch seems to get a lot of company. Your Ryan's woman and you live here," Lucy tried to compensate for her overactive mouth.

"And?"

"And what?"

"And I get a feeling there is more too it," Twiggy urged.

"Well, there is Mr. Cassidy," Lucy blushed. "We seem to get along with each other rather well. He treats me like a real lady."

"You are a real lady, Lucy," Twiggy contradicted her friend.

"Not in a lot of people's eyes, Twiggy," Lucy sighed heavily. "You aren't the only one that has to worry about people's tongues wagging and saying mean and hurtful words."

"Do you wonder if your Cassidy will leave you because of what people say?" Twiggy asked Lucy the question that had been burning her very mugwa since Ryan left to meet these people she was not allowed to meet.

"Looks like we've got that in common too, Twiggy!" Lucy exclaimed. "I worry about it all the time. Always wondering if he'll be embarrassed about what I was, and forget about who I really am."

"It hurts to love a man so much," Twiggy proclaimed. "I love Ryan that way. If I were to lose him by bad words and evil tongues I don't know what I would do, but the worst would be if he put me aside because he was ashamed of me in his white world."

"Twiggy, you are a white woman," Lucy reminded her friend.

"So are you, but we both are what the Christian people call tainted women," Twiggy reminded her.

"Yeah, I remember that all too well. It hurts so much deep inside and I do think about it, a lot." Tears welled up in Lucy's eyes and she saw tears forming in Twiggy's eyes.

Both women turned to the door at the boisterous and loud, "Shit!"

Cassidy entered the room. "Aw shit, what the hell is going on here? If Ryan comes back and finds both you women crying I'm in for big trouble."

"Don't be so dramatic, Trevor," Lucy sniffed wiping her eyes. "I doubt Ryan would hold you accountable for our tears."

"That's where you're wrong. Ryan and I are both sensitive men," Cassidy disagreed. "Do you two want to tell me why you're crying?"

"You wouldn't understand," Lucy answered gaining control.

"You don't know if I would understand or not. I told you, Ryan and I are sensitive guys. Try me," Cassidy persisted.

"Lucy and I were talking about who and what we are," Twiggy explained. "We talked of what others think and say of us."



"Like what? Two beautiful charming women that we men fall hopelessly in love with?" Cassidy questioned quickly.

Lucy raised her eyebrows at his words; *we men fall hopelessly in love with*, could it be that Cassidy did love her truly?

"We are tainted women in your Christian people's eyes," Twiggy said trying to explain.

"What the Sam Hill are you talking about, tainted women?" Cassidy growled. "Where do you come off with notions like this?"

"It's true Cassidy and you know it. I am a white who lived with the people. Good Christians believe women should kill themselves before living with the people and learning their ways," Twiggy declared. "The people are animals to the white Christians. We are not allowed to own land or have rights in this country they call America. I read about the war in your country. Even your black slaves had law protect and provide for them. They were allowed to become a part of your country. The people are not. We must beg like dogs for food and medicines. There is hatred toward us as if we are full of sickness and disease. The whites tell us we cannot speak our tongue nor practice our beliefs."

"You think the people are the only people that have ever suffered?" Cassidy countered and sat down in a chair near the two women sitting by the sewing machine. "Because if you think that, I need to give you a history lesson from my people. The Irish."

"Who are your Irish people?" Twiggy asked befuddled by Cassidy. Didn't he know how her people suffered under the Great White Father in Washington and the bluecoats, traders, and settlers?

"My Irish people had their land taken from them by the Protestant British two centuries ago, and the land still belongs to the Protestants. We were not allowed to farm on fertile ground, own property of any kind, marry other than our own, practice our beliefs, or even own a horse. My Irish people starved. We watched our families and children die of sickness, exposure, and starvation," Cassidy told Twiggy and Lucy. "It still goes on today. Many left Eirinn for America hoping for a better life. Here in America we found ourselves put into filthy places the city folk call slums. We weren't allowed education or good jobs. Even in this country we felt hatred and prejudice. We went hungry, lacked shelter and watched our families and children die of sickness, starvation, and exposure."

"But you're white!" Twiggy gasped.

"Your people don't hold the market on suffering and pain, Twiggy," Cassidy said quietly with deep emotions. "It doesn't matter if your white, black, or red. All peoples have suffered in one form or another in some time or another."

"Why is this? Why does this happen?" Twiggy asked shaking her head in disbelief at the history lesson of the Irish and apparently other types of peoples.



"It's all money. Some are richer and some are poorer. If you're richer you're in power so you have to feel good about yourself. The only way some folk can feel good about themselves is to walk over other people. They have to humiliate them, take away everything they own including their pride. These people want people to serve them. Sometimes I think these people want to play God and have others worship them. A superior attitude that wants to control," Cassidy explained.

"Your people, the Irish. They suffered as we have," Twiggy comprehended.

"It's not just the Irish. I could give you history lessons of the Russians, the Jewish, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Scots just to name a few," Cassidy told Twiggy. "That's not counting the black slaves that were sent here by their own people who were paid money for capturing them and selling them. As if you can really sell a man."

"The black ones sold each other to be captives and slaves?" Lucy gasped as she listened intently to Cassidy. He was such a smart man.

"All these people have suffered as much as my people," Twiggy recognized. "There is nothing that can be done."

"A man could be sold, but a man's spirit cannot. That which we all are remains in us regardless of any name, color, or tag they put on us," Cassidy noted. "There are only truly two types of people in the world, The Good and The Bad. The Chinese call it Yin and Yang, Light and Dark. All of us are one or the other it don't matter what color or name you have. What can be done is to make your choice. Will you be good or will you be evil? We all are given that choice. We can all do that Twiggy."

"Your understanding equals the visions of our Puhagans, Cassidy," Twiggy praised.

"I was a soldier in the War, Twiggy," Cassidy announced humbly. "When you have lived in hatred and prejudice and then fight a bloody war, and see things that turn your stomach you start thinking. You see all the good Christians die together. The good Christians of the North and the good Christians of the South worshipping the same God but slaughtering each other until the blood runs so heavy the blue streams become red. It makes you think real hard."

"Is this why you and the ranch hands are kind to my people?" Twiggy asked understanding much more about Cassidy and the others at the ranches.

"The ranch hands call you Cap'n," Lucy said suddenly enlightened. "They were with you during the War."

"All good people that were sickened with the War's tragedy and destruction. We all came out here looking for a fresh start. That's when we met the McGillinens. They are good people. We started out with



Grady and Geneva's Hope and later when Ryan and I became good friends we came to Geneva's Branch," Cassidy clarified. "We've found a refuge here in these lands. Peace and Tranquility. And yes, Lucy and Twiggy, we are kind to your people because at one point or another all of us have felt the heavy hands of prejudice."

"Oh Trevor," Lucy sighed walking to him and sitting by his side. "You've helped us to understand."

"And what about you, Lucy?" Cassidy asked. "Where you crying for the people or were those tears for you?"

"You're sensitive alright. I give that to you," Lucy grinned feeling a lot better about a lot of things. Cassidy was understanding and sensitive. She was so lucky to have met him. He was smart too!

"Are you going to tell me what was troubling you, or do I have to guess?" Cassidy queried not relenting in finding out what the problems were with both women.

"Lucy is conscious of her past, Cassidy. And how the good Christians look at her through their holy book," Twiggy answered for a shy Lucy.

"I can tell you this dear Lucy, I read the good book cover to cover and you would be surprised what is in it. The good book has stories of greed, rape, incest, violence, hatred, and every other sin you can imagine. But you know what God's son Jesus did?" Cassidy asked and looked at the women shaking their heads. "Well, good Jesus took himself a fancy to a Jewish Prostitute named Mary Magdalene. He even made her a part of his apostles. Did you know that? Seems to me what Jesus thought is a bit more important than what Sunday Christians think."

"Sunday Christians?" Twiggy asked creasing her brow.

"That's what I call the bad people that go to church on Sunday proclaiming they're good when in reality they're bad. They kind of like to use God's forgiveness as an out for all the hurt and pain they cause during the week. You know, lie, cheat, steal and sometimes even kill during the week but go to church on Sunday and ask for forgiveness or say they did those bad things for God's sake and in his name," Cassidy explained. "I read in the good book even Jesus, God's Son couldn't stand the bad people and their lies and cheats that he took a whip and cleaned out the temple. I kinda like Jesus. He was some kinda man."

Twiggy laughed. "I like this Jesus man. He was wise like you Cassidy."

"Wish I could be that kinda good, Twiggy," Cassidy chuckled. "But I haven't learned to turn the other cheek yet."

Twiggy looked confused and Lucy laughed out loud.

Lucy squeezed Cassidy's hand and looked deeply into his eyes, "I think I love you Trevor Cassidy."

"Honey, you're gonna have to do more than think about loving me," Cassidy grinned. "I bought you this here engagement ring. I want



you to be my wife. So I hope you will love me and not think about it any more." Cassidy pulled out a ring with a shiny stone.

"Trevor!" Lucy gasped.

"You can't say no, honey," Cassidy declared. "I won't take no for an answer. I love you too much to let go and Ryan, well he thinks it's a great idea. He even said we could build our own private cabin near the ranch house."

Lucy jumped into Cassidy's lap. "Yes, Yes! Yes! I will marry you. I love you Trevor Cassidy. I love you with all my heart. I'll be a good wife, you'll see." Lucy then smothered Cassidy with kisses forgetting about Twiggy being in the same room. Lucy was that happy.

Cassidy forgot Twiggy was there too when Lucy kissed him. Ever since he had met Lucy he had lost his head, reason and logic were the first to go whenever he was around her. She was beautiful and made him laugh. Lucy was everything he hoped to find in a woman. She was also strong in spirit. It took a real woman to survive what she had to live through.

Twiggy left the room quietly knowing that Lucy and Cassidy required private time. She was grateful to Cassidy for sharing with her the understanding and wisdom he had learned.

Cassidy had made Twiggy feel a lot better about herself and her situation. It was true. You had a choice to be good or bad. Ryan was right, there are good and bad in every color. A smile crossed her face. She loved Ryan and he was a good man. She was a good woman and Ryan loved her. Those were the only things that mattered. 'It doesn't matter who those people are you had to see. You love me and you will come home and love me just as Cassidy loves Lucy.'

With those positive thoughts Twiggy changed into her nightclothes and slipped under the covers of their bed. Twiggy inhaled the essence she had come to recognize as her Ryan. She inhaled deeply and sighed. Slowly she rubbed the sheet where Ryan usually lay next to her. "I love you, Ryan. Come home to me soon. Let me love you."

Twiggy closed her eyes and in moments she was fast asleep with her happy thoughts.



Chapter Twenty Two

Ryan woke before dawn, dressed, ate a quick breakfast and took Chiseler on a good run to return to Geneva's Branch. Ryan found he didn't like sleeping without Twiggy next to him and the pleasure of being a husband was an addiction he truly enjoyed and missed these two days.

Twiggy had found a comfortable sleep last night after mulling through Cassidy's words. Ryan had hired a really good man as ranch foreman. There was no doubt Cassidy had lived through a great deal of pain and sorrow. It had made him the man he was and Twiggy was glad she knew him. Twiggy was also thrilled for Lucy. Cassidy would make her a fine husband. Twiggy could hardly wait to tell Ryan and their sister, Kerry.

With the windows covered and a contented sleep Twiggy overslept well past sunrise.

Ryan entered the house to smell breakfast cooking. He walked into the kitchen to find an upset Cho Ling.

"Mr. Lyan! Grad you back. Want breakfast?" Cho Ling greeted cheerily. "My breakfast go to waste. Evleyone still asreep."

"Everyone? Cassidy is usually up before dawn," Ryan queried. It was unusual to not find Cassidy or Lucy up and about. He was happy Twiggy was being a sleepy head, because he had every intention of taking her back to bed if she had been awake. "I guess you'll have to keep breakfast warm a little longer for us."

"I do it. I keep breakfast, but onry because of you, Mr. Lyan," Cho Ling muttered and went about his kitchen taking serving plates off the table and putting them into a warm oven.

Ryan quickly went to his bedroom and found the door wasn't bolted from the inside. He felt a sigh of relief emerge from his lips. Quietly he entered and removed his clothes. Ryan lifted the quilt and after spending a moment to gaze upon the angelic face of his sleeping Twiggy, he slid into the bed beside her. His hot naked body reacted



immediately to the scent of Twiggy's juniper essence and the soft cotton nightdress touching his solid muscular thighs.

In her sleep Twiggy sensed Ryan. Instinctively she cuddled to his body and sighed contentedly. She began to wake when Ryan had successfully unbuttoned her nightdress and while caressing her breasts feathered her face with his soft kisses.

"Mmmm, Ryan," Twiggy whispered seductively taking his head in her hand and bringing his mouth to hers. Opening her mouth to Ryan, he responded with deep and penetrating thrusts from his tongue.

"My Twiggy," Ryan moaned quietly. "I've missed making love to you."

"I've missed you so much," Twiggy muttered sensually. "I don't want you to leave me again, not even for a day." Twiggy boldly reached to stroke Ryan's bulging manhood.

Ryan pulled the nightdress from Twiggy's body and threw it on the floor. Quickly positioning himself over her tiny body he braced his arms to protect her from his weight as she guided his satiny soft tip to her buttery hot womanhood pulsating for his entrance. One quick thrust and Ryan was in the welcoming heat both their bodies were demanding.

Twiggy arched into Ryan's penetration with a soft growl and quickly began pulsating in the same rhythm as Ryan thrusting.

Both peaked into orgasm in moments. Twiggy felt a pleasurable groan escape her lips as Ryan collapsed onto her with a guttural growl of orgasm. His seed withheld for two days poured into her like a flowing river.

Their hearts racing, their bodies slick with sweat, they both looked into each other's eyes and at the same time said to each other, "I love you!"

Ryan rolled to her side and fondled her delicate body. His hand gently rubbed her calf to her hip, to her flat belly, continuing on to her ribs, arms, neck and holding her head in his large hand he whispered again, "I love you."

Twiggy pulled closer to his body and snuggled into his massive rock hard chest. "You have met these people?"

"Yes and they want to meet you, but I don't know if you want to meet them," Ryan spoke just barely above a whisper. His mouth came down to her neck and his tongue danced upon her throat.

"Why do you think I would not want to meet them, husband?" Twiggy asked speaking softly to Ryan while she used her hand touching his massive biceps with her fingertips.

"Knowing how kind and wise you are and I believe you will meet them. I'm just not sure if you would really want to meet them," Ryan answered between kissing her nose and cheeks. "I do know that I would rather die than force you to do something you didn't want to or



might hurt you. I know how you feel about white people and what they have done to your people."

"Husband, I have you and your love. That is all I need," Twiggy replied between their sweet little kisses. "I have learned from a smart man our people's suffering is no greater and no less than others. He has made me see I can be good or bad as all can be, and all I need is your love and to love you."

Ryan leaned on his side and braced himself with one arm, "The wisdom of a sage. Whom do I owe a large gratitude?"

Twiggy cradled Ryan's large square jaw with her hands, "I owe all my happiness and joy to you my husband. The lesson in wisdom came from your Cassidy."

"Cassidy has been to Hell and back, I know that. What did Cassidy tell you? I'm really interested," Ryan asked stroking his fingertip across Twiggy's passion swollen lips.

"Cassidy told us of a General Cromwell in England. He slaughtered thousands of innocent Irish men, women and children like the bluecoats had done to our people. He told us of how the English people stole their lands. He told us of starvation, sickness, and exposure even here in this country against the Irish because of hate. Cassidy told us of horrible death in the War in this country between brothers in the name of God. He told us of the good book and Jesus."

"All of that in one day?" Ryan grinned. "Who is *us*?"

"Lucy and I," Twiggy answered smiling back to Ryan. "Cassidy asked her to marry him. He said you approved."

Ryan pulled Twiggy closer and pressed her head against his chest. "I do approve. Cassidy is thirty-eight years old and never been married. Never even came close. He confided in me that Lucy attracted him. She was cute and funny. She made him smile."

"Like you make me smile?" Twiggy snickered wickedly.

"Yeah, just like you make me smile," Ryan laughed. "I told him the truth about her and it made no never mind to him. He only sees that she is a good and kind person. That's all that mattered to him. When he told me that, I approved right away. He'll be good to her sweetheart."

"I know he will be my love," Twiggy said her eyes tearing just a little. "Cassidy is a good man and will be good to Lucy. You are a good man and you are good to me."

"You mean I finally convinced you I'm a good man?" Ryan cracked in laughter.

"Yes, you finally convinced me," Twiggy laughed with him and playfully pinched his hard abdomen.

"Ouch, woman!" Ryan chuckled. "You don't have to hurt me! I'll be good all the time!"

"You are good all the time," Twiggy said pushing him away playfully. "Now husband quit avoiding the subject. Who are these people?"



"I think we should eat, bathe, dress for the day and then sit quietly in the great room and discuss it," Ryan suggested seriously.

Twiggy caught his change in tone instantly, "Who are these people? I don't even know who they are but they bring an unwelcome seriousness to us, my husband."

Taking Twiggy's hand in his he brought her knuckles to his lips. "This is serious my love, but it has nothing to do with our love. Not a thing. I won't allow that."

Ryan swung his thick legs over the bed and upon rising turned to Twiggy and helped raise her from the bed. "Let's be up, love. Cho Ling is a teapot steaming. We are already late for breakfast."

Ryan pulled on silken trousers and a leisure smoking jacket from his chest. He put a pair of soft moccasins on his feet. Twiggy retrieved her nightdress and after re-buttoning it, she took a thick quilted robe from the closet to wrap around her tiny little body. Twiggy also choose a pair of soft moccasins for her feet.

Wrapped securely in Ryan's arm they entered the dining room to be greeted by Cassidy dressed in jeans and an open shirt and Lucy dressed similarly to Twiggy. They had arrived in the dining room moments before Ryan and Twiggy and were enjoying a cup of hot coffee.

"It's about time!" Cho Ling scolded. "You no rike cord food. I no rike cooking and no one eat. What is with this today? Evelyone sreep rate!"

"We already said we were sorry, Cho Ling," Cassidy attempted to appease the angry little China man.

Ryan grinned, "We promise it won't happen very often, Cho Ling."

"Plomises, plomises! I no tlust that rine," Cho Ling mumbled as he served the re-warmed griddlecakes, eggs, and bacon.

When Cho Ling left the dining room Ryan prepared a plate of food for Twiggy and himself and spoke to Cassidy, "I hear from Twiggy that congratulations are in order."

"Thanks! Lucy made me happy when she accepted," Cassidy grinned squeezing Lucy's hand. "Of course, I gave her no other option but yes."

"When are you getting hitched?" Ryan asked. "I see you're practicing marriage already. Make it legal real quick before she changes her mind."

"Good advice! If it's all right with you, Lucy and I want to go into Ely today and take our vows. I want to make it real nice with a special dinner and night in the hotel. We'll be back tomorrow around noon."

"I don't know how the ranch will run without you, but you know we approve!" Ryan smiled to his foreman. "We wish you all the best, but hurry back. Geneva's Branch will fall in ruin if you're gone too long."



"Hardly, but thanks for the confidence," Cassidy quipped.

"Are you going to need help with your cabin?" Ryan asked willing to volunteer money and supplies.

"Matt and Drew Parker have already started on it. They told me they knew I was hooked the first time I looked at Lucy," Cassidy snorted. "Said I was thunderstruck!"

"And they knew you would want your own place," Ryan stated quirking his eyebrow in curiosity.

"Smart men, aren't they?" Cassidy bellowed raucously. "They knew Lucy and I would want our privacy."

Ryan laughed and observed Twiggy taking a second helping of griddlecakes. "Didn't you eat while I was gone?"

"Of course. Isn't this delicious today. I'm famished and the food is soooo good!" Twiggy answered taking another large forkful of buttered and syrup topped griddlecake in her mouth.

Ryan watched in astonishment as Twiggy added more eggs and bacon to her plate as she sipped more coffee. "Where do you put it all? You still look half starved?"

"You exercise me well, husband," Twiggy answered mischievously winking her eye to Ryan.

Cassidy was in the middle of a sip of hot coffee and it went down the wrong throat when he heard Twiggy's response. He started choking and coughing.

Lucy patted his back worriedly, "You all right, Honey?"

"I will be when you give me the same answer Twiggy gave Ryan," Cassidy snorted. "Let's get dressed and get married real quick."

Both couples went to their respective bathing rooms and indulged in fragrant hot baths and changed into fresh clothes.

About two hours later Ryan and Twiggy waved their adieus to Lucy and Cassidy followed by Matt Parker and his wife, Marlene. The Parkers would be witnesses to the marriage vows given by Reverend Weems.

"I'm so happy for them," Twiggy wept and snuggled in Ryan's arms.

"So am I," Ryan agreed holding Twiggy tightly. "It's time for us to go to the great room."

"I will finally get to find out about these people who have come to Geneva's Hope." Twiggy wrinkled her nose teasing Ryan.

"Lord, I married a smart women, didn't I?" Ryan taunted equally.

"Let's stop in the kitchen for some of Cho Ling's choc o lit cake first. I'm hungry for dessert," Twiggy giggled.

"You know I wouldn't deny you anything, but where do you put it?" Ryan asked in amazement. Twiggy was eating like a starved person



this morning. Ryan became concerned that she had quit eating in his absence.

Stopping in the kitchen, Twiggy cut a large slice of chocolate cake and placing it on a plate with fork carried it into the great room.

Ryan sat her in the divan next to him and watched her devour the cake in short order. "Are you ready to talk now?" Ryan asked wiping a piece of chocolate icing from Twiggy's lips.

"Mmmm! This cake is soooo good," Twiggy answered with her eyes twinkling in delight. "Yes, I'm ready to talk." Twiggy placed the empty plate and used fork on the floor. She folded her legs under her and placed her hands demurely on her lap.

"Twiggy, sweetheart, the people that want to meet you are called the Crawfords," Ryan began slowly and waited for a response.

Twiggy cocked her brow, "Crawfords?" The name was familiar in some way, but Twiggy wasn't certain why it reminded her of something.

"Their names are Joseph and Samantha Crawford," Ryan said and again waited for a response.

"Those names," Twiggy furrowed her brow. "I know them."

"They left their one son Todd at home with his wife and baby girl, but they brought two of their other children with them, Jerica and Joshua," Ryan finished and inhaled a deep breath.

"Jerica! Jerica!" Twiggy jumped from the divan and shouted. "That is the name of my baby sister! Todd is my older brother. Joseph and Samantha are my mother and father. My white family!"

Ryan looked at Twiggy with concern. Her tan was lost to a pallid color. Twiggy put her hands against her temples. Her head was hurting. Memories were flooding in her mind. The room began to spin and darkness started taking over.

Ryan leapt from the divan to catch Twiggy in his arms. His powerful body easily caught Twiggy and carried her limp body into their bedroom and laid her gently on the bed.



Chapter Twenty Three

Twiggy slowly opened her eyes. The first unfocused blur slowly cleared into the concerned face of her husband. Ryan was carefully applying cool cloths to her head and body. The buttons on her dress had been opened and Ryan patted the cool cloth on her neck, clavicle, and the chest.

"Hi Sweetheart," Ryan smiled. "You're back with me again."

"I didn't know I left," Twiggy attempted at humor and tried to rise from the bed. Still feeling a little dizzy, Twiggy sank back into the bed and pillows. Putting her hands to her temples she asked, "What happened? How did I get here?"

"You fainted and I carried you in here," Ryan told her as he continued his cool cloth administrations.

Closing her eyes Twiggy remembered the conversation and the memories that flooded her. "I'm sorry," Twiggy apologized. "I think I'm a strong woman, but I'm really weak. I'm glad you put up with me."

"Sweetheart, I love you. You received a shock. That's all," Ryan excused for her.

"My white family!" Twiggy exclaimed. "After all these seasons they've come for me. What do I do?"

"You must decide what to do," Ryan replied sitting on the bed next to her. "Whatever you decide, I'll support you."

"What kind of people are they? Are they good or bad?" Twiggy asked in the simple terms of Cassidy's philosophy.

"Sweetheart, they are good people. They never stopped searching for you. I know that," Ryan assured gently. "They want to see you so bad. Your Ma took care of people with medicines, food, and clothing from the store your Pa owns."

"They own a store?" Twiggy questioned. "I remember a ranch."

"After you were taken by the Crow your Pa and brother Todd followed them to near Carson City. They reported your abduction and your Pa couldn't go back to ranching. It was too dangerous for his family. He also figured if he stayed in a big city they would have a better chance of finding you. More people. More information. Your Pa sold the ranch and bought a general store."

"They really want to see me?" Twiggy asked.

"Yes sweetheart. They really want to see you," Ryan repeated. "Your little sister Jerica is eleven years old and they have another son, Joshua. Your older brother Todd is married to a woman named Eleanor



and they have a little girl named after you, Dayton Crawford. I'm told she looks like you."

"When am I supposed to see them?"

"Like I told you. Everything is up to you. If you want to meet them, you set the day. If you don't want to meet them, I'll make certain you never have too," Ryan soothed. "I told them everything depends on what you want. I wouldn't make any decision for you."

"Can I have two weeks?" Twiggy queried. "I really need some time to adjust to this. I want to spend this time with you and only you, here at Geneva's Branch."

"And time with Blue Pool?" Ryan questioned wondering how he would react.

"No, my Ryan," Twiggy answered. "Blue Pool just mated with Brook Pebble. My people are protected and secure here. I only want to be with you. I want to work the ranch with you. This will give me time to think."

"Blue Pool took Brook Pebble?" Ryan laughed.

Twiggy looked at her husband in confusion, "What is funny about Blue Pool and Brook Pebble mating?"

"Auntie Alyson just married Brian Duffey. And think about this. We were just married and Cassidy and Lucy are getting married today," Ryan continued laughing. "This has to be the season of weddings for certain."

"The signs are strong for sure," Twiggy giggled. "Tam Apo is spreading blessings of happiness to many. This is good medicine."

"You're the best medicine for me," Ryan chuckled leaning over and brushing a kiss across Twiggy's mouth. "You can take two weeks or three weeks with me, but we have to go to Geneva's Hope the end of this month. Auntie Alyson is staying with Duffey there preparing for our wedding."

"A white Christian wedding," Twiggy mused. "My parents want to see me married that way?"

"I'm sure it would make them happy, but if you don't want them to be a part of it, I'll send the word," Ryan promised.

"I must face them for my sake. I will face them," Twiggy looked into Ryan's soft and loving gray eyes. "But, I still want three weeks as your wife. Learning how to be a good wife, learning the house, learning the ranch. Okay?"

"Oh sweetheart, you are a good wife," Ryan teased moving his eyebrows up and down mischievously. "You prove it every night and every morning."

"That's not what I mean," Twiggy scowled playfully. "I should get up. You must think I'm very lazy spending so much time in bed."

"Personally you are the best wife in bed, and the more time we spend here together, the happier I am," Ryan grinned wickedly as his



hand roamed freely across the soft swells of Twiggy's breasts. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry," Twiggy replied quickly. "I want some choc o lit cake."

"I was hoping you were feeling better and hungry for me," Ryan responded slightly dejected. "It hurts a man's pride to be dumped for chocolate cake."

Taking Ryan's strong square jaw in her delicate hands Twiggy teased, "I feasted upon you this morning. I want choc o lit cake. I'm really hungry for choc o lit cake."

Twiggy tried getting up from bed and Ryan held her down. "You're still light headed. You should rest awhile. I'll get you the chocolate cake."

"Thank you, my Ryan," Twiggy said appreciatively.

Ryan walked into the kitchen meeting Cho Ling preparing their lunch.

"Missy Twiggy feeling better?" Cho Ling asked in worriedly.

"Yes, Cho Ling. Thanks for helping get me the cloths and cold water," Ryan answered. "Cassidy and Lucy won't be here for lunch. It will be Twiggy and me only. You look like you're preparing lunch for an army."

"I know Missy Rucy and Cassidy won't be here. This is for Missy Twiggy," Cho Ling answered matter of factly while he continued preparing lunch.

"Didn't Twiggy eat while I was gone?" Ryan questioned. He believed that was Cho Ling's concern. If Twiggy hadn't eaten while he was gone she must be starved.

Cho Ling looked up at Ryan like he grew two heads suddenly, "Not Eat? Missy Twiggy has giant appetite, Mr. Lyan. Why you come in my kitchen?"

"Twiggy wants some chocolate cake," Ryan told Cho Ling casually. "Where is it?"

Cho Ling went to the larder and opened it. To Ryan's surprise there were two freshly baked chocolate cakes and the one Twiggy took a piece from this morning.

"Good God, Cho Ling, why did you bake so many cakes today?" Ryan gasped.

"Missy Twiggy eat one evely day. She learry rike my cake," Cho Ling grinned broadly with pride. "I make two so some wirr be reft." Cho Ling sliced another large slice and placed it on plate he had in his hand.

Ryan grabbed a fork and napkin from the china cabinet drawer. He took the plate from Cho Ling's hand and put the fork upon it. "Are you telling me that my little wife is eating a complete chocolate cake all be herself everyday?"



Cho Ling nodded his head, "Yes, Mr. Lyan. Missy Twiggy has a large appetite."

"How long has this been going on?" Ryan asked. He hadn't noticed until today, and he was only gone two days.

"Missy Twiggy eat rike this for five days," Cho Ling answered nonchalantly. He quickly buried himself into baking fresh bread for lunch.

Ryan shrugged his shoulders thinking Twiggy must eat when she gets depressed, and with the Crawfords she had depression to worry about. Kerry was gone back to Geneva's Hope. That must have depressed her as well.

"Here's your chocolate cake," Ryan announced handing Twiggy the plate. "Are you sure you can eat this?"

"Mmmm," Twiggy cooed devouring the cake in short order. "Can I have some milk? And another piece?"

Ryan stared in disbelief. "Sure, I'll get it for you."

Ryan went back to the kitchen for another piece of cake and a glass of cold milk.

Cho Ling commented, "You see Mr. Lyan, Missy Twiggy eat whore cake in one day! Now you berieve Cho Ling!"

"Yes, I do believe you Cho Ling, I hope she doesn't get sick."

"Onry once and awhire," Cho Ling said unthinking.

"Twiggy has been getting sick?" Ryan queried in real concern for his wife.

"Onry once and awhire. Sometimes one day sometimes not," Cho Ling replied absentminded.

"Ryan!" Twiggy called from the bedroom.

"Coming sweetheart," Ryan answered and returned quickly to the bedroom. He watched in awe as Twiggy again consumed the slice of cake quickly and drank the milk in almost one gulp. "You feeling okay?"

Wiping her mouth with the napkin and handing the plate, fork, and napkin with the glass back to Ryan she said sleepily, "I'm really fine, but I suddenly feel tired. I think I should take a nap." Twiggy laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. She was asleep.

Ryan carefully covered her with a quilt and left the room. He walked into the great room and worked on the ledgers of Geneva's Branch. Tomorrow he would take Twiggy for a ride and show her the ranch lands. "That's if I can pack enough chocolate cake," he chuckled to himself.

Early morning Twiggy and Ryan enjoyed each other as husband and wife. They bathed together and dressed for the day. Kerry had sent to Geneva's Hope for more of her range clothes and had fitted them for Twiggy while she had been visiting.



Twiggy wore the blue denims fitting snug to her curvaceous figure. She wore a white cotton blouse and her soft calf length moccasins. A soft doeskin shirt was pulled over her white blouse since it was still a bit chilly in the mornings. Kerry had also given her one of her black Stetsons. When Twiggy had finished dressing Ryan whistled in delight.

"Lord woman, you would tempt a Benedictine monk!" Ryan wore his black denims, deep blue cotton shirt with a woolen jacket, boots, and brown Stetson.

"Monk?" Twiggy giggled. "You talk so funny sometimes, husband. If you say I am pretty dressed like this. Thank you."

"Sweetheart, you just aren't pretty. You are beautifully tempting," Ryan growled sensually.

"And you husband are so handsome if we ever go to Ely I will have to use my knife in warning to keep the women away from you," Twiggy said taking out her sheathed belt knife and raising it playfully.

"Woman, let's go before I ravish you again and I never get any work done," Ryan sighed wanting to take her back to bed and indulge in husbandly rights.

Twiggy raced out the door into the dining room. Playfully she called over her shoulder, "I'm too hungry to miss breakfast. Even for you!"

They sat down and Cho Ling brought fresh baked bread, bacon, eggs, cherry preserves and hot coffee.

Twiggy sat down heaping her plate full of breakfast leaving some for Ryan. As Cho Ling brought in the griddle cakes Twiggy asked, "Cho Ling, you remember them preserve dill pickles we had for supper last night?"

Cho Ling nodded, "Yes, Missy Twiggy. I know pickles"

"Could you bring them to me?"

"Sure Missy, I bring them. Why you want for breakfast?"

"I'm hungry for them. I sure liked them last night."

Cho Ling hurried and brought them in as Ryan sat down to the table.

"Dill pickles for breakfast, Twiggy?" Ryan asked smiling.

Twiggy opened the jar of pickles and the jar of cherry preserves. She took a bite of the pickle and then swirled the bitten pickle in the jar of the cherry preserves until it was thickly coated with it. Twiggy put it in her mouth and savored the flavor. "Mmmm, this is soooo good!"

Ryan's eyes opened wide in astonishment. *How could anyone eat that concoction?* His mouth dropped open when Twiggy re-dipped the pickle back in the preserves and swirled it to a thick coating once more.

"Want some? It's good!" Twiggy declared offering the tidbit to her husband by waving it delicately under his nose.



"Er, no thanks sweetheart. I'll let you enjoy this unusual treat," Ryan backed off gracefully.

"Okay," Twiggy announced and ate another large bite.

Ryan shook his head in disbelief. His wife sure had strange eating habits. *It would be an interesting life being her husband* he mused to himself, *a very interesting but happy life indeed.*

Twiggy continued with her breakfast. Ryan was still wondering where his little wife put it all.

A quick trip to the water closet after breakfast and Twiggy was ready to spend the rest of the day on Geneva's Branch lands with her husband.

Ryan helped her up on Princess. He had saddled the Appaloosa mare and was waiting with his mustang, Chiseler.

Twiggy felt wonderfully free as Princess rode and charged across the valley expanse known as Geneva's Branch. The wind whipped around her Stetson giving a soft whistling sound. The powerful muscles of Princess beneath her gave her a feeling of strength shared.

Ryan and Twiggy enjoyed the fast ride until he reined Chiseler short and pointed to the sky. "Buzzards!"

Twiggy recognized the black ugly birds. They were the omen of death.

Ryan and Twiggy rode to where the buzzards circled overhead and they came upon the carcass of a sheep. It had been dragged to this spot and cougar prints were all around. What was left of the sheep was a mangled mess, only enough left for the buzzards to finish off.

Staying on Chiseler Ryan stated, "I'd better go check on Hal Decker."

Twiggy looked at the carcass. "A cougar does not attack sheep unless it is weak or impaired and who is Hal Decker?"

"Hal handles my sheep herd," Ryan answered. "His cabin is just over the rise. I want to make sure the cougar hasn't bothered him. This cat is dangerous."

"A cougar does not attack animals like this usually, husband," Twiggy repeated.

"I know. This cat was wounded by some stupid Easterners from Ely that trespassed on Geneva's Hope." Ryan said angrily. "They shot the cougar in sport and left it as a lark. The cat is wounded and dangerous! Let's go. I want to make sure Hal is okay."



Chapter Twenty Four

The ride to Hal Decker's cabin was short. Twiggy spotted the small cabin and a large man standing outside the lodge with a long rifle. "Is that Hal?"

"Yeah, he has three of his dogs with him and he's on the look out," Ryan told Twiggy. "Something happened for certain."

"How do you know?" Twiggy quizzed.

"Hal usually keeps only one dog at the cabin and he has four sons and two daughters. I usually see the girls and the young boy outside with their mother during this time of day," Ryan answered urging Chiseler on a little faster gait. Princess followed suit.

"Ho there, Hal!" Ryan yelled to the man standing by the cabin.

"Ho there, Ryan!" Hal yelled in reply.

At the cabin Ryan dismounted and greeted the man, Hal warmly. Both gave each other big bear hugs and thumped each other on the back.

"Who's yer woman?" Hal asked pointing at Twiggy.

Ryan walked to Princess and using his large hands easily lifted Twiggy from the saddle gently placing her in front of him. "This is my wife, Twiggy," Ryan introduced. "Twiggy, this is Hal Decker."

"Mighty purty little filly, but a might skinny. Needs more flesh!" Hal sniggered. "Welcome Twiggy. Come in the cabin. My woman will be fixing lunch soon after she cares for the boy, Tom."

"Is Tom hurt?" Twiggy asked. "Or sick?"

"Got chewed up by that mean cat," Hal informed his boss.

"That's what I was afraid of when I saw the sheep carcass," Ryan sighed. "Is there anything I can do? I'll fetch a doc."

"Nope, my woman knows all them Sosoni' medicines. Tom's doing fine," Hal reassured Ryan. "Bad news though, the cat tasted human blood."

"I know. That makes the cougar even more of a threat. I'll let Cassidy know and contact Tracker. We'll see if we can kill that cougar before all the people in Ely get all fired up and destroy a lot of innocent animals," Ryan said sitting down on a stump in front of the cabin. "Slaughter of innocent animals make me sick to my stomach."



"Yeah. We wouldn't even have this bad cat if it weren't for those Holt boys. Bad lot the Holts," Hal agreed.

"Where are Nick, Mark, and Paul?" Ryan asked. "I usually see Paul outside with Alma and Dixie."

"Alma and Dixie are inside with Paul helping Pine Needle care for Tom," Hal replied spitting a wad of chewing tobacco from his mouth. "Sides the cat attacked Tom near the house. I think it best if we keep the young uns safe in the house for awhile."

Twiggy had stood by and listened carefully to everything the men had discussed. It frightened her to think the good people of Ely would come onto her husband's land and slaughter innocent animals. Some white people with hate might just even shoot a few of her people by 'accident'. The thought made her shiver.

Ryan noticed the trembling. "You okay sweetheart. Are you getting cold?"

"No my love, I was thinking about slaughter of innocent animals. That's all," Twiggy replied. "I'll go in the cabin and see if I can help the boy."

"Pine Needle is taking care of it. She knows Sosoni' medicines," Hal reminded her.

"I know Sosoni' medicines also," Twiggy retorted. "That's why I might be able to help."

Hal looked at the white woman dressed in men's clothes. He doubted she could help or even know the medicines, but it was the boss's wife. Hal stepped in front of her and opened the door. "Pine Needle, you got some company."

Twiggy walked in the cabin to be greeted by a Sosoni' woman of large girth. Two younger girls maybe six and eight were sitting next to a young man of about sixteen with a bandage on his arm.

The woman of large girth smiled and greeted, "Welcome, I am Pine Needle. These are my daughters Alma and Dixie. My son Tom, and this here is Paul." A little face peered out from behind the Sosoni' woman's calico skirt.

"Hello, I am Twiggy. Wife of Ryan McGillinen and daughter of Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl," Twiggy introduced herself.

The Sosoni' woman's face creased in doubt, "You don't look Sosoni'."

"I am white but was raised as the daughter of Blue Pool and Wooden Bowl," Twiggy said easily. More easily than she thought it would be to admit she was white. "I am from the camp of Bright Moon."

"I came from the camp of Dark Stone," Pine Needle grinned broadly happy to have company of another Sosoni' even if she was white. "You said you are Ryan's woman?"

"Yes," Twiggy said proudly.



"Good, Ryan needs a woman and children," Pine Needle declared. "How long are you Ryan's woman?"

"We've been mated almost five weeks," Twiggy answered quickly feeling very comfortable with Pine Needle.

"You got his seed growing in you fast," Pine Needle laughed. "Good medicine between you like my Hal and me."

"What do you mean?" Twiggy asked blushing.

"You carry Ryan's baby already," Pine Needle replied and then looked at Twiggy curiously. "Don't you know you are with child?"

"No, I didn't. I wouldn't know..." Twiggy stuttered. "How do you know?"

Pine Needle brought a mirror to Twiggy and then putting a finger on the shallow of Twiggy's neck by the clavicle she said, "See the heart beat of your child."

Twiggy looked as gasped, "I can see it."

"Have you had your maiden flow since you mated?" Pine Needle asked.

"No, I haven't." Twiggy answered.

"Didn't your mother tell you these things when you mated?" Pine Needle asked in astonishment.

"Wooden Bowl had past to the ghost trail two seasons prior," Twiggy replied tearing a little.

"Don't cry Twiggy, I'll tell you what you should know as I put fresh medicines on Tom," Pine Needle soothed taking Twiggy in her arms and embracing her.

"I can help with the medicines," Twiggy volunteered. "Blue Pool is Puhagan of the people and Wooden Bowl taught me many medicines."

Ryan and Hal continued their conversation about the renegade cougar.

"Did Tom figure out what made the cougar go berserk?" Ryan asked.

"Tom was too busy fighting the dang thing and screaming like hell to get his older brothers attention," Hal replied. "A good thing too. Tom yelled so loud the dogs picked up the cat's scent and took off in a pack to help Tom. Gave me and the boys enough time to get our guns and save Tom."

"So you all saw the cougar?" Ryan asked really worried about their safety out here on the isolated mountain ridge.

"The dang cat was trying to chew Tom. The dogs came and started attacking the cat," Hal took a deep breath to continue. "Me nor the boys could take a shot at it in case we missed and hit Tom or the dogs, but I did see the cat was a male and wounded in the hind leg. Made him weak."



"Being a weak male he was probably ousted from the pride," Ryan said thinking aloud.

"Yeah, weak and in pain. The poor dumb beast has to pick on weaker animals thanks to them idiot Holt boys," Hal shrugged angrily. "Always bothers me when a fine animal has to be destroyed because of the stupidity of people."

"I agree with you, Hal," Ryan nodded. "But we have to hunt that cat down and kill it. It has tasted human blood. It will start to attack humans."

"Yeah, I knew that when I saw it on Tom, but I couldn't get a clear shot, neither could the boys," Hal complained.

"Do you want to come down and stay at the ranch house with us for awhile until we can get the cat?" Ryan offered.

"Heck no, this is our home. We ain't in no danger," Hal chuckled. "We just have to be a little more careful. Both boys are bringing the sheep in from the grasslands to shelter them in the keep. If the cat comes here the dogs will warn us and we can kill him. I'll let you know right away when that happens."

"I just worry about you and your family up here, so isolated," Ryan said sincerely.

"Don't you fret any, we're real happy here. You've been good to us. You gave us a home and all when others looked down their lily white noses at Pine Needle, me and the kids," Hal answered quickly. "We're real happy here and my children are learning to read, write, and cipher with Pine Needle teaching them and your Ely school master sending up new books once a month. Why a man couldn't be happier."

"You be sure to let me know if you need anything, you hear," Ryan insisted.

"You worry about that purty little filly and fatten her up a bit," Hal laughed boisterously. "Nothing like a big woman to keep you warm on cold nights."

Ryan laughed with his good friend, Hal Decker and entered the house.

"My God," Ryan exclaimed when he saw the claw marks on Tom's forearms.

Twiggy was preparing the poultice, Alma and Dixie were tearing a clean sheet for more bandages and Pine Needle was cleansing the wounds once more to prevent infection.

"Ain't nothing but some scratches Mr. McGillinen," Tom said bravely.

"Those are some scratches," Ryan countered. "You were mauled by that cougar real good."

"We had a close spat for sure," Tom winced as his mother applied the warm poultices on his arm.



"Do me a favor and try not to make a better acquaintance," Ryan teased.

"You have my word on that," Tom agreed.

"You got any vittles to feed our guest, Ma?" Hal asked his wife grabbing her large buttocks from behind in a sensual manner.

Pine Needle giggled and brushed his hands away, "Later husband. I have some nice venison stew in the pot and the girls just made some fresh bread and butter."

Alma and Dixie quickly set the table. Pine Needle served the stew. The whole family ate together at the large trestle table and was warmed by the cook stove.

Twiggy was in awe with the family. They were half white and half Sosoni' a perfect blend of both cultures and they seemed very happy with each other. Twiggy was delighted to hear the story of Hal Decker and her wonderful and kind husband, Ryan. She was proud listening to Hal's story of how Ryan defended them and provided work for the family on his land, Geneva's Branch. Her husband is truly a good man.

"We hate to eat and run Pine Needle, but we have to get back to the ranch before dusk," Ryan apologized to Hal's wife. "But the meal was great. Thank you so much."

"You and your woman are welcome anytime," Hal offered. "But you'd better get back to where it's safer."

"Yeah, it's not safe for Twiggy to be out here," Ryan agreed.

"Is it any safer for you, husband?" Twiggy asked crooking her brows.

"Sure it is. I'm a man. You're a fluff of a woman. Why, one hot breath from that cougar would knock you down," Ryan answered too seriously for Twiggy's taste.

Before Twiggy could utter a protest, Ryan swooped her up in his arms and planted a kiss on her lips. Ryan placed her gently on Princess and mounted Chiseler.

Hal and Pine Needle watched their visitors leave. Hal hugged Pine Needle affectionately. "They make a fine couple don't they, Ma?"

"They are good medicine for each other," Pine Needle replied. "Really good medicine like you and I share."

"That a fact?" Hal grinned. "That good huh?"

"She carries his child," Pine Needle told her husband.

"Ryan told me they got married Sosoni' style only about a month ago," Hal said skeptically. "How can she be with child so soon?"

"Good medicine like us," Pine Needle teased. "Remember our son Nick was created on our marriage night."

"Like you said, Ma. Good medicine like us," Hal laughed and hugged his wife a little tighter. "Does Ryan guess?"

"No, even Twiggy didn't know," Pine Needle answered. "I had to explain to her things a mother does before the mating."



"You really liked the white woman, didn't you?" Hal asked surprised. "You usually don't cotton to white women."

"Twiggy was raised by the people. She is Sosoni' of the camp of Bright Moon," Pine Needle explained.

"Well in that case I guess I have to agree. Ryan got himself a really good woman. He'll be real lucky just like me."

Riding at a comfortable pace Ryan and Twiggy were back at the ranch well before dusk. Helping Twiggy off Princess Ryan looked for a sign of Cassidy. "Looks like the newly weds didn't make it back yet."

"Should we send someone to see if they're alright?" Twiggy asked worried about Lucy and thinking about Tom Decker being mauled by the cat.

"Don't worry that pretty little head, Cassidy can handle it if you're thinking about the cougar," Ryan reassured noting her furrowed brow. "Why he's handled a lot worse than a mean cat."

"It's my right to worry," Twiggy looked up to Ryan and stated defiantly. "It's a job I do very well."

"Yes you do, little one," Ryan agreed. "I think I'll go and talk to the hands. I need to give them instructions. I don't want anyone leaving that isn't paired off until we kill that cougar."

"I am feeling tired from the ride," Twiggy confessed. "If you don't mind, I think I would like to take a nap."

"You go right on," Ryan replied brushing a kiss across her cheek. "I'll be back later."

Twiggy removed her doeskin shirt, unbuttoned her blouse, removed her moccasins and lay upon their bed. She was sleeping seconds after she laid her head on the pillow.

At dusk a pounding on the door and Cho Ling muttering irritably in Chinese awakened her. Quickly buttoning her blouse and putting on her moccasins she hurried to the entry.

Tracker was standing in the framework carrying the limp body of Cutler Hammond one of the ranch hands and good friend of Cassidy.

Twiggy immediately ushered commands in Sosoni' at the sight of Tracker, "Take Cutler upstairs to the room next to the bathing room."

Tracker obeyed and Twiggy noted a wolf dog and pup followed him. She preceded them upstairs and turned down the quilt on the bed.

After Tracker laid Cutler on the bed Twiggy asked, "This man has been mauled by that cougar. Where did you find him?"

Tracker answered Twiggy's question. "I found him on the ridge north near Decker's cabin, by the place Ryan calls Cherry Valley. I heard screams and found the cougar upon him. Hunter and his pup chased the cougar away."



Cutler groaned and grabbed Twiggy's attention. "I need to clean him up and reapply the poultices to his wounds. Thank you for applying them, Tracker."

"It is the way of our people," Tracker responded not taking thanks for that which is normal to living. "You know this."

"Tracker, can you gather more of our herbs for the poultices while I wash his wounds?" Twiggy asked as she checked the wounds.

Tracker nodded. "First I give you my wedding gift." Tracker pointed to the wolf pup. "This is gift is for you and Ryan. He is the pup of Hunter and Linger. We give him to you."

As if a secret signal was given, Hunter picked the pup up by the scruff of its neck and deposited him in front of Twiggy.

Twiggy knelt to pet the pup. "We will treasure your gift, Tracker and Hunter."

Cutler groaned again.

"Tracker, he is awakening. I must mix some herbs for pain and wash him," Twiggy said. "We must hurry."

Tracker nodded and left with Hunter. The pup stayed near the nice smelling lady that petted him as she scurried into the kitchen and pulled the herbs from the cabinets that she had gathered. Then she grabbed some clean towels from the bathing room and heated the water. While it heated she took a basin of cool water and began washing the poultice from the wounds Tracker had hurriedly applied.

Cutler's eyes opened and he suddenly felt the pain. "God, where am I? Twiggy?"

"Yes its me. You're in our lodge. Tracker brought you here," Twiggy soothed and reached for the oily bark and morphine mixture she had prepared. "Here drink this. It's for the pain. It will help."

Cutler obeyed. He was weakened by his struggle with the cougar and blood loss. Slowly with Twiggy's hand behind his head he sank back down into the pillows. Without complaint he allowed Twiggy to wash his wounds.

Tracker returned with the herbs and together they quickly made the poultices. The morphine and bark medicines had worked and Cutler was in a semiconscious painless state. Twiggy and Tracker applied the poultice and bandages quickly. They had just finished when they heard Ryan shouting in the entry, "Twiggy? Twiggy? Where are you, the men said they saw Tracker and Hunter bring some one here." Ryan was beside himself in worry.

"Up here," Twiggy shouted.

Ryan flew up the stairs to Twiggy's voice. He found her finishing the bandages of Cutler who was sleeping soundly. You could tell by the snoring. "Cutler Hammond!"

Tracker stood tall. "He was attacked by the bad cat. Hunter and I found him and brought him here to your woman."



"I heard he was out looking after a sick calf by himself," Ryan muttered. "At least the rest of the hands know they aren't to leave anywhere alone."

Tracker pointed to the herb poultices and bandages, "You have a good woman, Ryan."

"That I know, Tracker. That I know," Ryan chuckled grabbing Twiggy by the waist and planting a quick kiss on her forehead.

"I brought you present. Linger and Hunter had pups. We give pup to your woman," Tracker announced pointing to the pup lying at Twiggy's feet. "It is present for your mating."

Twiggy knelt down to the pup and scratched behind his ears. "Isn't he cute?"

The wolf pup rolled over on his back and let Twiggy rub his tummy.

"We accept your present Tracker and Hunter," Ryan acknowledged. "It's a mighty fine present. Twiggy loves him already."

Twiggy had picked the pup up in her arms and he was licking her face.

"Hey, cut that out. I'm the only one to kiss my wife," Ryan protested.

Hunter responded with a growl to Ryan.

"Okay, okay!" Ryan held his hands up in submission. "Your pup can kiss my wife."

"Cutler will sleep for awhile and I'm hungry. Let's eat!" Twiggy said as her stomach growled loudly enough for Hunter to look up.

"Hunter's pup is always hungry. It is good medicine for these two," Tracker laughed.

"That's what we'll name him," Twiggy declared. "His father is Hunter and his mother is Linger. We'll call him Hunger."

Ryan and Tracker laughed. "Good name."

Ryan pulled one of the steaks from the plate Cho Ling had served and cut it up for Hunter and Hunger. The wolf pups devoured the treat immediately and sat by the table begging for more scraps that were given to them after dinner.

Cho Ling came out of the kitchen to see the wolf dogs licking the skimpy leftovers and commented, "Mole mouths to feed. I must get mole food. Missy Twiggy eating so much nothing left, now even resseft."

They heard a buckboard pull up to the house and left the dining room quickly. Their hearts sank thinking someone else had been mauled by the cat. They were relieved to see Lucy, Cassidy, Matt and Marlene Parker.

The look of relief on the house occupants faces were so obvious Cassidy said jumping from the buckboard and helping Lucy down, "Something happened I should know about?"



"Cutler Hammond is upstairs in the spare bedroom, Cassidy," Ryan told him somberly. "He was mauled real bad. Tracker brought him here and he and Twiggy patched him up."

"God no!" Cassidy exclaimed his face paling a little. "That bad cat's attacking people now. Cutler going to make it?"

"He's going to be fine judging by the way he's sawing logs upstairs," Ryan chuckled. "Tracker and Hunter got to him just in time."

"I owe you one, Tracker," Cassidy sighed embracing the tall Sosoni'.

Tracker received the embrace gracefully. "It is our way."

"It is our way, too." Cassidy smiled. "I owe you one."

Tracker nodded. "Hunter and I should return to the people."

Ryan protested, "It's too late Tracker, especially with that bad cat out there. You'll spend the night here."

"You can take Cutler's bunk," Cassidy insisted. "I'll show you. The other boys should meet you and Hunter. A lot of them have only heard of your legend. Now they can meet you."

Tracker nodded and whistled. Hunter was by his side and they walked to the bunkhouse.

Cassidy was right. The ranch hands treated Tracker like a living legend and went out of their way to make him and Hunter comfortable. Cassidy also explained to the ranch hands how Tracker and Hunter had saved Cutler Hammond's life.

When Cassidy returned to the house Lucy and Twiggy were engaged in private conversations in the dining room. Cassidy joined Ryan in the great room for a brandy. "What do you think they're talking about?"

"Cassidy, I'm sure I don't want to know," Ryan laughed. "I'm sure you don't want to know either."

It was late in the evening when Twiggy and Lucy emerged from the dining room. They both looked like a cat that swallowed the canary.

Cassidy looked to Ryan, "You're right. I don't want to know."



Chapter Twenty Five

Twiggy remained awake after an exceptionally wonderful lovemaking. She was held tightly in Ryan's strong arms. Her back was pressed to his chest and her tiny form neatly tucked into his body. Twiggy stroked her flat belly. "We're having a baby," she whispered knowing Ryan was sound asleep. She could tell by his deep steady breathing. Thank goodness he didn't snore like Cutler. She had never heard that kind of noise before and knew she would never be able to sleep with a man making that noise. She chuckled to herself and concentrated on her happiness.

Lucy had confirmed the little Pine Needle explained to her. Lucy was the same age as Twiggy but was worldlier due to her past. Lucy explained even more of the signs she had heard from the women she had worked with in the past. Lucy shared with Twiggy that she too was expecting a child, her Cassidy's, and was thrilled.

Twiggy checked the color of her nipples. They were changing color and her breasts were slightly larger. Twiggy giggled to herself. She was so happy. Pine Needle said she thought it would be a girl since the beating of the heart was very rapid. Pine Needle told Twiggy girl's heartbeats are faster than boys.

"A little girl for us," Twiggy mused. She pictured her big strong husband holding their little girl and a broad smile spread across her lips.

Twiggy decided she wouldn't tell Ryan until she was absolutely sure she would carry the child. Twiggy had seen too many of her people bleed and lose the babies they carried. The women and men deeply mourned the loss of that child. She would bear the grief alone and not make her Ryan feel any sorrow if she could help it.

Something else was on Twiggy's mind. She returned to thoughts of her real parents, Joseph and Samantha Crawford. "What are you really like?" Twiggy thought of her older brother who was married with a little girl of his own. He even named her Dayton. She thought of her baby sister that was now a young woman of eleven, and a new four-year-old brother. Twiggy thought and thought of what she would do and say when she met the family. Did she want to meet them? Her answer was, yes she wanted to meet them. She wanted them to be a part of her



life. They should share her wonderful life with a wonderful man. Twiggy moved and sighed deeply.

"What's wrong sweetheart?" Ryan asked sensing Twiggy's restlessness and waking up to find her wide-awake. "You alright?"

Hunger jumped into the conversation whining and pulling on the quilt covers until Twiggy picked him up and put him on the bed.

Ryan protested, "No sweetheart, that's not good. We don't want Hunger to get used to being in bed with us."

"Oh please," Twiggy begged. Her eyes welled up in tears.

"That's not fair, Twiggy," Ryan groaned. "Alright, Hunger can be on the bed. Are you all right sweetheart? I've come to know you to be a sound sleeper."

Twiggy bowed her head and looked at Ryan sheepishly and pouted. "I'm hungry." Her stomach growled loudly in agreement. Twiggy was grateful. She didn't want to share with Ryan what was really on her mind. At least not yet.

"Lord woman, I will never know where you put it all. What do you want?" Ryan chuckled. "Let me guess! Chocolate cake and cold milk!"

Twiggy nodded happily like a young child. "And maybe you can find a bone for Hunger?"

Ryan shook his head and tsked. "I doubt there is a bone to be found. Cho Ling is right. You're eating us out of house and home." Ryan slipped on his denims and walked into the kitchen. He found Cassidy digging through the cold box.

"You hungry too?" Ryan yawned.

"Nope, Lucy can't sleep. Says she's hungry and wants some of that chocolate cake and milk," Cassidy answered yawning back.

"I'm here to get the same thing for Twiggy," Ryan responded in jest.

"These women shore do have strange cravings at strange times of the night," Cassidy said thinking aloud.

"Or we just tucker them out and exercise them a bit much," Ryan bragged.

"Yep, it could be that!" Cassidy laughed pouring two glasses of cold milk.

Ryan had cut two pieces of chocolate cake and put them on the plates with a fork. "Looks like I'll have to give Cho Ling a raise just for baking three chocolate cakes a day."

"Looks like I'll have to start giving you some of my wages for the chocolate, sugar, flour and eggs to make em." Cassidy said laughing even harder. "Either that or you will go bankrupt feeding my wife. I sure do intend to exercise my woman every day."

"It would be a happy way to go broke," Ryan guffawed with his good friend. "I'll withhold some of your wages so you can be happy broke too."



"With Lucy at my side, I sure don't mind," Cassidy grinned.

"You see any leftover bones in the cold box?" Ryan asked.
"Seems Hunger wants to eat like his adopted mommy."

"Nope, not a scrap of leftover anything, but the larder has some good beef jerky. Maybe Hunger would like that," Cassidy suggested.

"Great idea," Ryan agreed and went to the larder to pull out a number of jerky strips. "Let's go feed our women."

Cassidy still chuckling mounted the stairs heading for their room but looked over his shoulder and told Ryan, "Don't make no never mind if you hear the bed a squeaking on the floors."

"Don't break the springs," Ryan teased and walked to the master bedroom carrying his fare for his lady.

Ryan gave the plate of chocolate cake to Twiggy with the glass of milk. He reached into his pocket and handed Hunger the few strips of jerky he retrieved. Hunger chewed as happily as his mistress consumed her cake and milk.

"Thank you my Ryan," Twiggy said sincerely. "You are so good to me."

"You're good to me too, sweetheart," Ryan answered sensually while he sat on the bed ready to play husband and wife again.

Hunger growled.

"See I told you this wasn't a good idea," Ryan grumbled.

"No husband, listen!" Twiggy whispered.

Ryan heard Hunter barking and growling furiously. He watched as Hunger sat straight up and his ears perked straight. Hunger was at the door scratching.

Ryan bolted from bed and slipped on his boots and threw a shirt on to cover his bared torso. Opening the door he was out following the flash of wolf pup they called Hunger. Cassidy was coming down the steps at the same time quickly putting his shirt on. Hunger was scratching at the front door howling angrily.

Cassidy yelled up to Lucy when he saw her by the stairs tying her robe, "You women stay in the house. You hear me? That's an order!"

"Aye, Captain Cassidy," Lucy saluted in humor, but she knew he meant what he said and planned on staying in the house. "I'll stay with Twiggy."

Cassidy followed Ryan and Hunger out the door telling Lucy over his shoulder, "Good girl!"

Twiggy was racing out the master bedroom door tying her robe. She was calling for Ryan.

"He went out to see what the ruckus was about with Cassidy," Lucy said calmly coming behind her and holding her arms.

"Hunger went with him. I know something's wrong. They could be in danger!" Twiggy cried.



"These men grew up in danger. We best stay here like they said," Lucy reasoned with her friend. Lucy was good at covering up her own fears and worries. "Sides, we have our young uns to worry about."

"When are you going to tell Cassidy?" Twiggy asked wondering if she should tell Ryan sooner than she planned.

"Since ours was conceived out of wedlock I thought I'd wait awhile and make sure the breeding took. How about you?" Lucy asked curious if Twiggy was going to tell Ryan soon.

"I want to wait until I'm sure I'll keep our baby. Ryan is so sensitive that if I lose the baby he would be hurt. If I can, I want to spare him that," Twiggy told her good friend Lucy.

"I feel the same way. We'll just keep our little secret for now," Lucy giggled conspiratorially.

They heard the men shouting and went to the parlor to look out the window. Most of the ranch hands in the bunkhouse were outside with pants on and guns strapped to their hips, but Twiggy and Lucy giggled as they saw some without boots and some without shirts. Some were just wearing their long johns with the guns strapped to the woolens. It was a sight indeed. Hunter's hair was straight up and his growling was vicious. Hunger stood by his father imitating the angry wolf dog.

Twiggy watched as Tracker knelt to soothe the angered wolf dog.

"We'll track him for you," Tracker offered Ryan as he and Cassidy stood watching the sleek cat escape into the ridges.

"We will need your help, Tracker and Hunter, but not tonight," Ryan told the Sosoni' scout. "It's a quarter moon and not enough light. Two men have been mauled by that killer and I'm not about to get another hurt."

"Hunter and I need no light for our path," Tracker bragged haughtily.

"That I know, Tracker, but you're one man and a wolf dog. Why you don't even carry a rifle. It'll take a rifle to kill that berserk cat. No, Tracker. We'll look for it tomorrow," Ryan insisted.

"You are wise. Hunter and I will sleep. We will wait for you in the morning and we will find this killer before he attacks more people," Tracker finally relented.

The ranch hands and Tracker and Hunter returned to the bunkhouse. Hunger headed to the ranch house and Twiggy opened the door to his scratching.

Cassidy and Ryan stood outside between the ranch house and the barn.

"I don't like this one bit," Ryan complained. "That cat is dangerous. It is even coming into places where people live. That ain't normal for a cougar."



"Yeah I know. Cougars don't cotton to the scent of man. They avoid humans," Cassidy agreed. "Those Holt boys should be stropped for what they did."

"It's a shame the cat doesn't go to Ely and taste the boys that crippled him," Ryan chuckled. "That would be a good lesson, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, it shore would, but in the meantime we have to warn the Sosoni' people and we need to set guards," Cassidy said quite seriously. "We got to get that cougar before our fine folks around here slaughter a whole bunch of God's good creatures."

"Yeah, the Sosoni' teach the cycle of nature. These good people don't know that we'd be run over with jackrabbits if it weren't for the cougar and wolves. Rats too! And then we'd have Bubonic plague around here," Ryan grumbled.

"We got to kill that cat quick!" Cassidy exclaimed and they walked back to the ranch house.

Ryan gazed upon Twiggy holding the wolf pup, Hunger, as she opened the door for the men. "You keep Hunger close to you all the time, Twiggy," Ryan ordered. "We'll even let the mongrel sleep with us, but you keep Hunger close."

Lucy creased her brow in worry, "Cassidy, something going on out there?"

Cassidy closed the gap between him and his new wife and told her gently, "That berserk cat came a visiting. It's getting desperate. That means it's dangerous to go out of the ranch house. I want you and Twiggy to stay inside all the time or go out with us or make sure you've got a ranch hand with you who is armed with a rifle. Got that? That's an order!"

"Aye Captain!" Lucy teased. "I'll follow orders, sir!"

"I'm serious, Lucy!" Cassidy growled.

"Yes dear," Lucy said contritely. "I'll obey. I promise."

"That goes for you too, Twiggy," Ryan mimicked Cassidy's tone. "And keep Hunger with you. He's just a pup, but his scent might keep that cat away. Hunter has scared that big cat twice now."

"Good, let's get to bed," Cassidy ordered in his authoritative tone once more. "I'm ready for some exercise."

"More?" Lucy chortled. "Lord, you are going to wear me out. No wonder I'm so hungry lately."

"No problem, I told the boss he can take some of my wages to feed you," Cassidy crowed. "Up to bed, woman."

Ryan snorted, "You too woman!"

Ryan and Cassidy were up early and on the trail with Tracker and Hunter. Both men left their wives sleeping soundly.



Ryan carefully picked Hunger up and placed him next to Twiggy. "Stay close to Twiggy, Hunger. You hear?"

The pup wagged his tail and then lay down quietly next to the sleeping Twiggy.

"Good boy," Ryan told the pup petting him gently in reward.

Twiggy woke up later to a tongue licking her face and whining.

"You have to do your duty, Hunger?" Twiggy asked the pup.

Hunger wagged his tail eagerly and jumped off the bed heading to the door.

Twiggy rose and donning her quilted robe let Hunger outside. In the air was the smell of fresh brewed coffee and she met Lucy at the stairs that was wakened by the rumble in her stomach.

They sat down to consume the wonderful fair Cho Ling had prepared. There were sausages, sliced ham, fried eggs, cold milk and toasted bread. Cho Ling served the women hot coffee and asked Twiggy, "You want them pickles for breakfast again, Miss Twiggy?"

Twiggy eyed the cherry preserves and her mouth began to water, "Oh yes, please Cho Ling."

Cho Ling brought in a large jar of the pickles.

Twiggy opened the jar. She took out a large pickle and dipped the delicacy in the jar of cherry preserves. Smacking her lips she savored the unusual treat.

Lucy looked at Twiggy and then grabbed her own pickle. "Lord that looks delicious and swabbed her pickle in the preserves."

The women not only ate all the served breakfast but consumed the entire jar of pickles and cherry preserves as well.

A surprised Cho Ling came in and shook his head in mirth, "When you going to tell Mr. Ryan and Mr. Cassidy you women are with baby?"

Lucy and Twiggy choked.

"How do you know?" Lucy asked.

"I have many sisters, they all eat funny like you when they glow baby in berry," Cho Ling scoffed. "They also eat like staved people. No leave leftovers."

"Please don't tell," Lucy pleaded. "We want to make sure everything is right before we tell them."

"The way you eat, everything fine, but I no tell like you say." Cho Ling bounced his head bowing. "I no tell. Big secret safe with me."

"Thank you Cho Ling," Twiggy sighed in relief.

"It's amazing that Pine Needle and Cho Ling can tell our conditions, but our own husbands don't have a clue," Lucy giggled.

"Pine Needle said husbands are more interested in making babies than paying attention to having made them," Twiggy returned in giggles. "But she warned me once they know they get overprotective to the point a woman wants to scream for air."



"I can see Cassidy getting that way," Lucy mused.

"Ryan definitely will be overprotective also," Twiggy agreed.

"We're really lucky women," Lucy smiled thoughtfully.

"As Cho Ling would say, we are rucky women!" Twiggy imitated the Chinese man.

Lucy and Twiggy burst out laughing. Hunger heard and was scratching at the door to get in.



Chapter Twenty Six

Twiggy and Lucy tended Cutler together changing his dressings and poultices. They agreed Cutler was already on the mend. Cutler ate a good breakfast and lunch so Twiggy gave him some more bark and morphine potion to sleep. There was no doubt in their minds with careful ministering; Cutler would be up and about in a day or two.

After lunch Lucy and Twiggy decided to do some wash. It was a warm sun and the clothes would dry quickly on the line outside. They were just about to put the clothes in the tub when they heard Hunger growling and howling. They also heard Cho Ling screaming in terror.

Running to the kitchen they saw Cho Ling slamming the door and the mountain cougar right behind him. Fortunately the door closed before the cat could get in.

Cho Ling sat on the floor breathless using his body as a brace against the cat's charge.

The women heard a loud thud and Cho Ling was moved slightly forward. The door held. Hunger was making a loud ruckus. Twiggy turned suddenly to see Cutler standing behind them in his nightshirt holding his colt. "It's the cougar, ain't it?"

Twiggy and Lucy nodded their head.

Cutler went to the door to look. The cat was already out of range. It was heading back to the mountain ridge. "Damn," Cutler muttered. "Looks like it didn't like the sound of your wolf pup."

Twiggy knelt to Hunger and soothed the barking and growling pup. "No it didn't. Hunger's father, Hunter has scared the cat twice now. A crippled cougar doesn't want to tangle with a wolf."

At that moment Hunter bolted into the kitchen and leapt toward the kitchen door. Cho Ling managed to roll out of the way just in time.

A few minutes later Cassidy, Tracker, and Ryan walked into the kitchen. Cassidy and Ryan eyed Cutler in his nightshirt with his colt in hand.

"Something going on here we should know about?" Cassidy demanded with a hint of jealous tone.

Lucy ran to her husband's arms. "The cougar was here. It just scared the willies out of Cho Ling. The poor man almost got mauled."

Cassidy embraced his shaking wife.



"Hunger and Cho Ling made such a ruckus, Cutler heard it and thinking it might be the cougar came downstairs right away," Twiggy explained cradling the pup. "Hunger scared the cat off, just like you said he would, husband."

Ryan noted that Cutler appeared a bit shaky. He quickly caught the man as Cutler wobbled on his knees. "Let's get you back up to bed."

Cassidy released Lucy and helped Ryan get Cutler back upstairs.

"I'm fine," Cutler protested. "It's the medicine that makes me weak and sleepy."

"We know," Cassidy countered. "That's why you need to be in bed. You're getting better real quick and we need you to help track that cat."

Twiggy and Lucy moved to help Cho Ling up.

Brushing himself off Cho Ling complained, "Cho Ling no go outside any mole. Not without lifre."

"Ryan has an extra rifle in the parlor locked in the cabinet. I'll get it for you," Twiggy offered.

Hunger followed Twiggy into the parlor as she retrieved the rifle and bullets.

When Ryan came downstairs he found Twiggy handing the rifle to Cho Ling. "Good plan, Twiggy," Ryan praised. "You may want to go upstairs and check Cutler's bandages. Make sure he hasn't started bleeding again."

Twiggy nodded in agreement and she and Lucy went upstairs to check on Cutler.

Tracker approached Ryan and Cassidy. "That cougar is smart. It back tracked to the ranch and went back the same way to confuse us and Hunter."

"It sure did," Cassidy agreed. "No use trying to get it today. We'll have to keep trying."

"The cougar won't be back here," Tracker said wisely. "Three times the crippled cat has scented the wolf. That cat is too smart to tangle with the wolf."

"Cassidy, I still want you to stay near the ranch in case the cat suddenly gets stupid or real hungry for the calves in the barn."

"A hatred for the people that crippled it might override its fear of man and wolf," Cassidy added.

Tracker shook his head in agreement. "That could be a possibility."

"Tracker, you should warn the people of Eye of Hawk and set up guards to protect your people," Ryan suggested. "I've already sent two men to warn Bright Moon's camp."

"I will be off now," Tracker agreed. "Come Hunter!"



The next three days Cassidy and Ryan stayed close to the ranch and like Tracker had said, the cougar stayed away from the ranch, but every other day the ranch hands reported an attack on the herd. It was usually a calf that the cougar took to eat.

Twiggy and Lucy did their chores but checked the outside carefully before they left the house. They didn't want any fright or injury to cause them to lose their babies.

Ryan kept his promise to take Twiggy with him out and about doing ranch business for the next week but they left with several ranch hands and all were armed with rifles.

Cassidy stayed at home with Lucy and other hands guarding the barn holding the milk cows and their calves.

The cougar would hit and run on the open herds.

One of the chores was to go to town and get supplies. Cassidy and Lucy went together with an armed guard. They stopped at Geneva's Hope on their return from Ely to warn them about the cat. The cat had been wounded on Grady's land, but had not made an appearance back and his herds were not disturbed. Grady was grateful for the information and warned his hands to be on the lookout for the bad cat. He didn't tell the women who were involved in Alyson's planned wedding for Twiggy and Ryan.

Kerry urged Braden and Dwayne to return to Geneva's Branch and convince Twiggy to come to the ranch. They needed her for the wedding dress fittings and thought it was about time to face up to the Crawfords whether she wanted to or not.

Reluctantly the men caved into the urgings of Kerry, Alyson, Celeste and Morning Song.

"I can't fight all of you," Braden moaned in complaint and went to the barn to saddle Socks.

"I don't even want to try," Dwayne complained in agreement. He followed Braden out the door and went to saddle his pinto, Patchwork.

It was sundown when the group arrived at Geneva's Branch. Cho Ling met them.

"It's about time!" Cho Ling grumbled. "No food left in house. Arr food gone. You bling what I asked?"

"Everything, right down to the cherry preserves from Geneva's Hope," Cassidy grinned. "It's a good thing Alyson made a whole bunch."

"You make fun. You no rike it when women get angry cause they hungry!" Cho Ling grumbled some more.

Braden dismounted from Socks and helped unload the wagon. "You have enough food here to feed an army."

"I have to feed almy!" Cho Ling muttered. "You see! You wirr see!"



Cho Ling soon had steaks and red cabbage boiling with baked potatoes for supper served on the table for everyone to eat.

Twiggy noticed an aroma coming from the kitchen that whetted her appetite. She went to the kitchen before she went into the dining room. She found a pot of Chinese peanut sauce and rice on the cook stove. Taking a bowl she served herself a pile of the rice and sauce. Twiggy took it into the dining room and placed it next to her plate. Twiggy sat down and added the boiled red cabbage to the sauce and rice and poured milk over it. Twiggy took her spoon and ate the food greedily. Lucy smelled it and asked for a taste. Twiggy moved aside for Lucy to sample some with her spoon.

"Lord that's good. Where did you get it?"

"On the cook stove in the kitchen," Twiggy said between bites of the steak potatoes and red cabbage, sauce, and milk porridge.

Lucy got up and went to the kitchen bringing back the same concoction. Cho Ling behind her grumbling loudly as he brought more cold milk, "Now they eat my food arso!"

Ryan and Cassidy looked at each other in puzzlement.

Braden looked at the women eating and turned the other way.

Dwayne got up and left the table, "I think I'm not hungry any more. I had enough to eat. Mind if I help myself to a brandy big brother."

"No, go ahead," Ryan answered. "We'll join you in a minute."

Lucy and Twiggy each took another helping of red cabbage, steak and potatoes.

Cho Ling brought in a freshly baked chocolate cake. "You want some Missy Rucy and Missy Twiggy?"

Both women nodded and Cho Ling sliced two large pieces for the women.

The two women finished their food and attacked the cake. It was gone in moments followed by gulps of cold milk.

Cho Ling shook his head and looked at Braden, "Now you see the almy I have to feed."

Braden nodded his head in acknowledgement but asked, "Can I have some of that chocolate cake. It's one of my favorite desserts."

"Celtainry, Mr. Bladen," Cho Ling answered with pride. "I bake vely good cake." He sliced pieces for Cassidy and Ryan also. The women had second helpings.

After the women were helping Cho Ling clean the dining room table of the dirty dishes, Braden asked, "Where do these women put it?"

"You got me!" Cassidy chuckled. "It seems these past couple of weeks the women have found large appetites."

They entered the great room where Dwayne was relaxing watching the fire and drinking a glass of brandy.



"Kerry used to eat like a horse and cranky when she couldn't get food while she was carrying Garrett," Braden said unthinking.

"Ayden used to tell me about Ma eating strange foods when she was expecting Kerry," Dwayne added.

"I remember," Ryan acknowledged his baby brother. "Ma would eat real strange things when she was expecting Kerry."

Ryan and Cassidy looked at each other and the conclusions were jumped on at the same time.

"Strange things like pickles and cherry preserves for breakfast," Ryan guffawed.

"And cabbage, rice and peanut sauce for supper," Cassidy laughed.

Braden and Dwayne paid attention real quick.

"And eating enough food for two people," Braden added. "Congratulations, Ryan and Cassidy. Well done old boys."

"This mean I'm going to be an uncle again?" Dwayne asked sarcastically. "Boy you men are sure fertile."

"Must be the drinking water," Braden chided his young brother in law. "Better be careful, Dwayne."

"I'll be a son of a bitch," Cassidy exclaimed with glee. "I'm going to be a daddy."

"When do you think they were planning on telling us?" Ryan grinned broadly.

"Don't rightly know, but let's go tell them how happy we are," Cassidy beamed.

"Oh boy, this is famous! I can't wait to tell Kerry her brother upped and made a baby," Braden taunted in joyous rapture.

"Gloat all you want, Brit," Ryan came back. "I'm as happy and proud as I can be and I can't get riled by you right now. Twiggy is making me a daddy."

"Like I said, good job old man," Braden congratulated.

Cassidy and Ryan went into the kitchen. Both men took their wives and kissed them passionately.

Ryan was the first to speak, "When were you planning on telling us?"

"Telling you what?" Twiggy answered innocently.

"Telling us that we're going to be daddies," Ryan chortled gleefully.

"You know?" Lucy asked pulling away from her amorous husband.

"We guessed," Cassidy grinned. "Eating like a starved person and coming up with weird concoctions."

"And waking up in the middle of the night, hungry," Ryan added.

"Are you happy?" Twiggy asked.



"Sweetheart, I am delighted!" Ryan exclaimed whirling Twiggy in a circle. "I've wanted to share our love with a baby since I first saw you on that pony next to Blue Pool. You're really mine, sweetheart. Now you're really mine."

"And you're happy too, Trevor?" Lucy asked.

"Honey bun, there ain't a word to describe how happy I am," Cassidy grinned with excitement. His eyes were twinkling in joy. "This old man never once thought he could find a woman to bring him happiness, much less give me a child."

"Cho Ling happy no rongel a secler," the Chinese man said cheerily. "Now you know why Cho Ling need so much food!"

"You knew?" Ryan and Cassidy asked in surprise.

"Of course I know," Cho Ling said proudly. "I no herp it you men to dumb to notice."

"Well, Cho Ling I guess we are a couple of chumps, but for all the extra cooking you're going to have to do around here. I'm going to give you a big raise," Ryan presented happily to his cook.

Cho Ling smiled showing his bright white pearly teeth, "Thank you, Mr. Lyan. Glad you see how much work Cho Ling must do."

"I appreciate you," Ryan smiled. "And we need to take real good care of Twiggy and Lucy from now on."

"No problem, Mr. Lyan."

The couples did not see Braden and Dwayne enter.

"I hate to break this up, but it's getting late and I'm tired," Braden interrupted.

"I suspected there was a reason the two of you came here. Especially without Kerry," Ryan surmised accurately.

"The woman are after us to bring you and Twiggy back for the wedding," Braden told them.

"And meet the Crawford family," Twiggy guessed.

"And meet your family, Twiggy," Dwayne countered. "It's time don't you think?"



Chapter Twenty Seven

Alone in the bedroom with Braden and Dwayne neatly tucked away in Kerry's room and Lucy with Cassidy, Twiggy and Ryan shared their private happiness.

Ryan removed his clothes and climbed into bed while Twiggy removed hers. He called her into bed before she put on a nightgown. "Come to bed sweetheart, don't bother with the gown because it's coming off."

Twiggy walked to the bed unashamed of her nudity and snuggled into his open arms.

Ryan pulled her close and his large hand stroked her abdomen from her navel down to her brown thatch. His hand would slowly caress her tummy where their baby was growing. "You can't even tell yet."

Twiggy nuzzled her husband, "No it is just a tiny seed."

"Soon to grow into my big pumpkin!" Ryan laughed stopping at the thatch and lingering there massaging sensually. He leaned over and kissed the tummy where his baby lay. "I hope we have a little girl." His fingers slipped into Twiggy's buttery warmth. Ryan's fingers slid in and out easily with her passion juices covering them.

"Pine Needle said she thought we have a little girl," Twiggy moaned in ecstasy. "Make love to me husband, now!"

"Not yet my adorable little mommy," Ryan taunted as he laid her on her back and slid down the bed leaving a trail of wet kisses from her neck to her tummy where he stopped and tenderly kissed his future daughter.

"Daddy, mommy wants you now!" Twiggy breathed raggedly.

"Not yet, mommy," Ryan rasped. "This is a special night."

Without Ryan's arm restraining, Twiggy would have jumped off the bed and out of her skin when Ryan's tongue delved into her womanly folds and thrust deeply savoring her feminine juices. "Lord you are hot woman!"

Twiggy's fingers dug into Ryan's hair. "I love you!"

Ryan responding by positioning his body over hers and penetrating her wanting heat.

In harmony they made love to each other until they both reached the pinnacle of ecstasy and released into each other. Ryan's hot seeds released into Twiggy's pulsating femininity.



They were both breathless gasping for breath in the expulsions of their lovemaking. Twiggy and Ryan stroked each other's body like they had discovered each other for the first time.

"Sweetheart, each time it gets better," Ryan rasped between kissing his Twiggy's cheeks, lips, forehead, and neck. "I am going to die a happy man."

"You will die a happy man after many long years of pleasuring me, Daddy," Twiggy cooed seductively between her husbands ardent kissing. "I like kiss."

"I know you like kisses, sweetheart," Ryan braced his arms and looked into her hazel liquid gold eyes. "Our kisses even made our baby."

"Our baby," Twiggy sighed. "Our baby will be born healthy and happy."

"And I will spoil her. She will have everything I can give her," Ryan promised.

"What if it is a boy and Pine Needle is wrong?" Twiggy giggled.

"Then I'll spoil him and he will have everything I can give him," Ryan chuckled. "Sweetheart I don't care if we have a boy or girl. I want us to have a healthy happy baby."

Twiggy snuggled next to her ardent husband and in the security of his arms fell sound asleep.

Ryan embraced Twiggy in her sleep and whispered, "Thank you for giving me our baby, Twiggy. I love you." Ryan closed his eyes and was soon sound asleep in heaven on earth.

In the morning before sunrise, Ryan and Twiggy took a bath together, an enjoyment they found satisfying and fun.

Sitting down at the dining room table they found Lucy and Cassidy as well as Braden and Dwayne.

"Good morning Mommy," Braden greeted cheerfully. "I can't wait to get home and tell Kerry."

"Couldn't you let me do that, Brit," Ryan complained testily. "It is my baby and Kerry is my sister."

"Not on your life cowpoke," Braden snickered. "I've waited too long to see you walk into fatherhood. You aren't going to take away the pleasure of telling my Kerry."

"Wait until I tell Pa and Morning Song," Dwayne taunted. "Woo Hoo! Auntie Alyson is going to have a conniption fit! She still doesn't even know you and Twiggy got married Sosoni' yet."

"Tsk! Tsk! Ryan," Braden teased. "Such a lustful animal you are, seeding without Christian vows. Where have I heard those words before? This is so famous!"

Cassidy laughed with good humor at Ryan and Braden. Lucy was getting irritated and so was Twiggy. It was a relief when Cho Ling started bringing breakfast into the dining room.



Cho Ling brought the plates of griddlecakes, sausages, eggs, and ham. A few minutes later he brought the hot coffee and poured everyone a cup.

Braden and Dwayne looked wide-eyed when Cho Ling brought in a large jar of dill pickles and cherry preserves.

"Missy Twiggy and Missy Lucy, Cho Ling bling you the pickre and chelly pleselves you rike so much for breakfast."

"Thank you, Cho Ling," the women appreciated in unison and Lucy opened the pickles while Twiggy opened the cherry preserves.

Braden stared and his mouth dropped when Lucy and Twiggy dunked the pickles in the cherry preserves and consumed the delicacy.

Dwayne covered his mouth with napkin and excused himself from the table taking his plate and coffee with him. "How can they eat that?"

"If you've never tried it, don't criticize it," Lucy told Dwayne as he left. She continued to chew on the sweetened dill pickle.

Ryan and Cassidy smiled.

"I don't remember Kerry wanting any bizarre concoctions when she was expecting Garrett," Braden piped in.

Ryan jumped in on the statement, "No, but Kerry ate for two or three as I recall."

Braden smiled at the memory, "Yes she did."

"And Lucy is right, if you haven't tried it, don't criticize," Ryan said smugly.

"I don't see you trying any of that delight," Braden taunted.

"I'm not criticizing it either, Brit," Ryan defied. "If Twiggy wants it, it's good for her and she can have it."

After breakfast Lucy helped Twiggy pack for a few days stay at Geneva's Hope. Lucy offered some advice to the nervous Twiggy who was about to be reunited with her family she hadn't seen in ten years. Lucy helped Twiggy pack some of her prettiest dresses.

Hunger stayed at Twiggy's heels the entire time. It was as if he knew he was Twiggy's and was supposed to guard her.

For the trip, Twiggy had dressed in black denims, a white cotton shirt, and her comfortable moccasins. When Ryan came in the bedroom with the hands to get the baggage he raised his eyebrows.

"Why are you wearing your range clothes?" Ryan asked. "You're not planning on riding Princess are you?"

"Of course I'm riding Princess," Twiggy responded in surprise. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you're a mommy now," Ryan said stubbornly. "You'll ride in the buckboard with Cutler and Lonesome."

Twiggy never wanted to quarrel with her husband so instead of being stubborn she tried another ploy. "Women of my people with child



ride until they deliver and do their work until there time as well. I am not even showing, yet. I really prefer to ride Princess, my Ryan."

"You're unfair Twiggy," Ryan grinned pulling her close. "You're forgetting a lot of your people lost their babies."

"Only because they had been starved or exposed to the cold winds," Twiggy contradicted fluttering her long eyelashes.

"You really want to ride Princess?" Ryan relented. He didn't ever want to quarrel with Twiggy either, at least for something as small as this. Now if she ever put herself in danger, well that would be something different.

"Yes, my Ryan. I really want to ride Princess. Right next to you and Chiseler."

"I give in," Ryan yielded. "I want to make you happy, but when you get further along with our baby, you are going to ride in the buckboard."

"I will. I promise," Twiggy conceded grinning in her victory.

After Ryan and the men left with the baggage Lucy grabbed Twiggy's arm and whispered, "Great job. I admire your tactics. Where did you learn that technique?"

"Wooden Bowl used it all the time when she wanted something special from Blue Pool," Twiggy giggled. "It always worked."

"I'm going to remember that with Trevor," Lucy winked and they walked outside to the buckboard.

Lucy and Twiggy exchanged numerous whisperings while they waited for Princess to be saddled. When Twiggy mounted Princess, Hunger sat next to the Appaloosa with his little tail wagging.

"Get in the house Hunger," Ryan ordered. "You're going to stay home."

"But Ryan, you told him to stay by me and guard me." Twiggy dissented protruding her lower lip to a pout. "I would miss him terribly. Can't he come along? Hunger could ride in the back of the buckboard."

"We don't mind, Ryan," Cutler interjected. "I kind of like the little critter. He shore put on a big fit for that bad cat."

"A man doesn't have a chance with you for a wife," Ryan chuckled. "You win again. You even have my men on your side." Ryan picked up the wolf pup and gently placed him in the back of the buckboard. The wolf pup licked Ryan's hand and wagged his tail.

The ride to Geneva's Hope was too short for Twiggy. Ryan would go back and forth talking to Braden and Dwayne who were leading the way. All the men on horseback had rifles as part of their tack. Cutler Hammond, who was still recovering from his wounds, was chosen to ride shotgun on the buckboard. Lonesome Stills was an older ranch hand that often did the lighter work since he could no longer ride the range.



Twiggy learned much over these wonderful weeks with her husband. He was a kind and gentle man that took personal interest and care of all in his employ. She knew Ryan would always be there for her. He would always care for her and always have her best interest at heart. Twiggy knew Ryan would care for her people and they would flourish as Eye of Hawk's people had. Then there were the Crawfords. Twiggy still didn't know how she could handle that. Silently she prayed to the Tam Apo for guidance.

Ryan noticed Twiggy closing her eyes and was by her side instantly, "You alright, sweetheart? Are you feeling a little sick? You can ride in the buckboard if you like." His hand reached out and closed in on hers.

"I'm fine, my Ryan," Twiggy answered. "I was just talking to the Tam Apo. I'm still not certain of myself with the Crawfords, my family, I mean."

"I know you're real worried about that, but you don't have to be. I know they love you and you'll love them," Ryan reassured and gently squeezed her hand. "Lord, how can anyone not love you?"

Twiggy spoke with her golden hazel eyes to the soft gray kind and gentle eyes of her husband. Their eyes exchanged the deep bond of eternal love they shared and the assurance that both would love and protect each other for as long as they lived.

When Geneva's Hope ranch was in sight Braden and Dwayne rode ahead to let the family know they were coming.

As the buckboard, Ryan, and Twiggy pulled in front of the ranch house. The family was waiting for them. Kerry was already in Braden's arms. Bennett ran to the buckboard when he saw the wolf pup. Celeste was sheltered in Grant's arms as she held four month old Garrett. Morning Song was in Grady's arms and she held Corey. Dwayne stood next to Grady with a huge grin plastered on his face.

Ryan had told Dwayne he wanted to tell his Pa about Twiggy's condition, but even Ryan knew Dwayne would let the cat out of the bag as soon as he had a chance.

Grady walked up to Twiggy, "Welcome to Geneva's Hope again daughter. Dwayne tells me you're growing another grandchild for me."

Twiggy blushed, "Yes, it's true."

Morning Song came up to her and kissed her cheek as Grady helped her down from Princess. "I am Morning Song, daughter. We are very happy you have chosen our Ryan to be your mated."

Twiggy almost cried at the love she felt and Ryan had told her the truth. Morning Song was Ssoni'. In their people's language Twiggy asked, "I do not see Auntie Alyson and the Crawfords."

Morning Song whispered in return, "They did not know when you would be arriving and their heart was heavy waiting. Alyson, Duffey and the family went into Ely to purchase more things for your



wedding and other business matters that I think they should tell you themselves."

"Are they truly good people as my Ryan has said?"

"They are good people. You need not fear them my daughter. Alyson and Ryan have told us of your experience as a young innocent child. The Crawfords are not like that. You will see," Morning Song said reassuringly.

"Mamma! Mamma! Come see the doggie!" Bennett shouted as the wolf pup licked his face and wagged its tail.

Kerry went to the buckboard and scratched the wolf pup's head, "Where did this pup come from, big brother. It resembles Hunter."

"Well sis, that might because he's Hunter and Linger's pup. Twiggy named him Hunger," Ryan clarified and scratched the pup's head also. "Hunger was a wedding gift to Twiggy from Tracker."

"Can I have him, Mamma?" Bennett begged.

"No, I'm afraid not Ben. He belongs to Auntie Twiggy," Kerry said sadly. She had never before had to deny Ben something he wanted. "Perhaps Papa and I can ask Tracker for another pup or we can find you a puppy of your own."

Hunger jumped from the buckboard and followed Twiggy and Morning Song as they walked to the house.

"Is it okay for Hunger to come in the house?" Twiggy asked Morning Song. "He is a good pup and won't be a bother."

"Son of Hunter is welcome in our home," Morning Song smiled to her new daughter in law. "I see you look upon our Corey. Would you like to hold him?"

"Oh yes," Twiggy answered quickly. "He's beautiful. Corey is the son of your daughter Small Bird?" Twiggy asked taking the little bundle in her arms. Twiggy sighed with warmth of happiness. This was a loving family and soon she would be holding her own daughter in her arms.

Ryan watched as Morning Song handed his nephew Corey to Twiggy. Everything was going well and he knew Twiggy was in good hands. He looked for Dwayne. Spotting him in the corner of the house porch he called, "Dwayne, I need to have a word with you."

"Sorry, big brother. I got a whole bunch of chores to take care of," Dwayne gulped. Dwayne knew Ryan wanted to tell the family about Twiggy's being in the family way and the devil in him just wouldn't let that happen. Dwayne knew he was in for a whacking from big brother so he jumped the porch rail and took off.

Ryan was right behind him chasing the little brother past the bunkhouse into the open field where Ryan finally caught him. The family could see the two boys scuffling in the tall grass. Grady and Grant chuckled as they watched the two.

"Boys will be boys," Grady chuckled.



"It took awhile for my boys to learn to love each other. Maybe that's what they should have had when they were younger. A good fight," Grant snickered.

"Wouldn't hurt," Grady guffawed. "I'll tell Morning Song to have her poultices ready and Aumond to keep a fresh steak cold."

"That's what I always liked about you, Grady," Grant laughed aloud. "Always prepared."

"Aren't you going to stop that, Grady McGillinen?" Celeste asked in surprise watching the two fight in the field. "They could hurt each other."

"Yep, they usually do, but a good fight and black eye between brothers is all that usually happens," Grady answered. "That's brotherly love."

"Braden and Carlton didn't fight like that," Celeste contradicted.

"Maybe they should have," Grant imposed. "Maybe they should have."

"Whatever do you mean?" Celeste gasped.

Grant took Garrett from Celeste's arms and played with his grandson's finger. "I'll tell you exactly what I mean." Grant walked with Celeste toward the two brothers scuffling and explained everything. By the time they reached Ryan and Dwayne the brothers were tired out from the sparring. "Maybe our sons would have been closer if they had scuffled with each other."

"Maybe you're right," Celeste agreed.

"Want to save some strength for holding your nephew, Ryan?" Grant called out.

Ryan let go of Dwayne's shirt and laughed as Dwayne dropped to his knees. "I've plenty of strength left to hold Garrett. I think Dwayne has learned his lesson anyway."

Ryan walked to Garrett and took the baby raising him over his head shaking the little body gently, "Hi, Garrett!"

Garrett gurgled in glee for his uncle.

"Practicing big brother?" Dwayne taunted recklessly as he rose from his knees.

Ryan folded Garrett into his strong arms and massive chest. Garrett snuggled into his uncle's embrace. "Want to eat some more dirt, baby brother?"

"God, are you touchy or what?" Dwayne complained.

Celeste with her mothering instinct at full speed brushed Dwayne off and looked over his bruises. "Let's get you to the house and mended."

Dwayne took advantage, "Thank you ma'am. I surely do need some attention."

Ryan rolled his eyes in disdain and walked with them back to the ranch house.



Chapter Twenty Eight

Twiggy enjoyed a wonderful evening getting to know everyone in the McGillinen family. Even Willow found herself on Twiggy's lap for a time before Small Bird took her daughter for bed. Twiggy liked Edward Laurel, even if he was a stuffy, Brit. She saw the love reflected in his eyes for Small Bird and Willow. Twiggy even watched carefully as he cradled his baby son by blood, Corey. Twiggy was amazed at how much the baby resembled his white father.

Everyone in this McGillinen family circle had been raised with love and appreciation for themselves, their family, the people, and nature or Mother Earth has Twiggy referred to it. Twiggy found no room in these hearts full of love for prejudice, hate, or any anger other than when others crossed their bounds of family, duty, and honor.

Morning Song was exceptionally good to Twiggy and made her feel comfortable in the overwhelming household.

If the McGillinens liked the Crawfords, well then they must be good people. Twiggy thought to herself.

Through out the night, Ryan was by her side aiding her with his strength lest she get lost in the large family circle. Twiggy noticed how Ryan took the kidding from his family in good humor regarding his discovery of imminent fatherhood. He actually seemed more than happy, but proud and ecstatic at the prospect.

"So do you want a son?" Grady asked Ryan while he was seating his wife in the parlor.

"Pa, I would really prefer a little girl. I think there are way to many boys in this family," Ryan said as he glanced around all the babies and boys gathering near the fireplace. "And we all know that womenfolk are smarter then men, but whatever the Lord chooses us to have, I'll be happy and proud to be the child's daddy."



Twiggy sometimes could not believe how lucky she was to have married this man Ryan McGillinen.

Braden started teasing Ryan on his fertility and was even bold enough to suggest Ryan didn't wait for marriage. "I'll be interested to see if your baby is premature and...Oomph!"

Braden got a swift and hard elbow in his ribs before he finished that sentence from Kerry.

"What Braden means, Ryan, is that we both hope everything goes well with Twiggy and the baby."

"I think I know what Braden meant, sis," Ryan snarled. "If any one black kettle dare call a kettle black, it would be him."

"Now wait a minute," Braden objected. "All I'm saying is you proved what true love and passion can do to a man that loves his woman."

"That's some excuse, Brit," Ryan growled.

Twiggy looked up pleading with her eyes to end this discussion. She certainly did not like her husband's tone. Twiggy would soon learn that bantering with each other was Braden and Ryan's favorite sport and neither took each other really seriously. Underneath the quarreling, Braden and Ryan really liked each other as men.

Kerry seemed to know that fact already and just rolled her eyes and raised her arms in defeat.

"Why I'll wager that you and Twiggy have two babies before your second wedding anniversary," Braden challenged. "They way you two goo goo eye each other."

"Braden, shut up!" Kerry snapped irritably.

"That's a bet," Ryan accepted. "I'll wager the same thing for you and Kerry, but not the goo goo eyes. Because you are a lustful animal."

"You're.... Oomph!" Braden caught a harder elbow in the rib.

"Shut Up!" Kerry shouted angrily to the surprise of everyone in the room. When Kerry noticed all eyes upon her she excused herself and left the room followed by Braden who wanted to know why she was so upset with him.

"Surely you know Ryan and I tease each other," Braden pleaded pathetically to Kerry as she stomped into their bedroom. The door slammed in his face.

"Darling, open the door," Braden said as he knocked on their door. After several minutes with no answer, Braden slipped out the back door and found an empty bed in the bunkhouse. He could handle the razing from the hands but not Ryan.

Braden was up before the sun and found the bedroom door unlocked. Kerry was dressing in her riding skirt and blue silk blouse. "Darling, I'm sorry. I thought you knew I was just kidding, Ryan," Braden offered lamely.



"I did know you were kidding," Kerry said slowly and turned to Braden. "We have to talk."

"I'm here, darling," Braden said and sat on the bed waiting.

"I don't want to talk to you here," Kerry told her husband stubbornly. "I was going out to find you after I had Maiden and Socks saddled for us. Where were you all night?"

"You were so upset with me I slept in the bunkhouse," Braden said sheepishly.

"You didn't?" Kerry laughed holding her ribs in amusement.

"It's not that funny!" Braden grumped.

"Yes it is!" Kerry giggled.

"Where were we planning on riding?" Braden asked to change the subject.

"I thought we would go to Eye of Hawk's camp and see if Tracker and Hunter would mind giving a pup to Ben. Didn't you see how taken he is with Hunger, and remember his sweet little momma cat in England he befriended? I really like that Ben is so attuned to animals. I want to encourage it, and I know Ben would love his own little wolf pup from Linger's litter."

Braden went to the barn and asked George to saddle Maiden and Socks for a ride to Eye of Hawk's camp.

"Do you think you two should be off with that berserk cat running around?" George asked.

"Thanks for reminding me, George," Braden told the old ranch hand. "Please be sure to sheath a rifle in Socks' tack. And Grady doesn't want to worry the womenfolk, so don't say anything to Kerry."

"Okay Braden, but I'll send a party out if you and Miss Kerry aren't back by dusk," George warned.

"We'll be back. Kerry and I want to see if we can get one of Hunter's pups for Bennett at Eye of Hawk's camp," Braden told old George.

"Miss Twiggy's pup, Hunger, sho is cute ain't he. The little critter follows her around like he can't live without her," George added in his own thinking. "A pup like that would be right good for little Ben. The boy has a way with critters."

"I feel even better that you agree, George," Braden said sincerely and returned to the ranch house in time to share breakfast with Kerry.

No one else had woken so early in the morning and Braden didn't know that Kerry was eating her second helping of breakfast by the time he entered the dining room.

Half way to Eye of Hawk's camp Kerry reined Maiden to a stop and called Braden. They looked over the valley.

"Geneva's Hope has a rare beauty like its heiress," Braden told Kerry softly as he looked over the scenic view.



Kerry took a deep breath, "Braden, I want to talk to you about last night."

"Darling, I told you I was sorry. You know Ryan and I tease each other," Braden defended.

"Braden, it was about that bet!"

"Darling, why would a wager upset you? That's only a game," Braden said in astonishment.

"Because you already lost," Kerry replied calmly.

"What?" Braden questioned in shock. "I already lost?"

"We're going to have another child, Braden."

Braden grinned broadly, "How long?"

"I think he will be born in winter since this time you seeded me in spring."

"You won't give me a daughter, will you?"

"Not yet Braden Wessex, not yet."

"And what do we name this little one?"

"His name will be Jared Grady Wessex."

"I like it, but if it does turn out to be a she, her name will be Christina Ashley Wessex."

"Conceded. Are you happy?"

"With all my heart. We are Geneva my love, and our children will be Geneva's Hope." Braden sat back on Socks and looked with love to his wife. "I understand it now, my love."

"Braden, you lost the bet," Kerry reminded.

"Darling, I'd gladly lose that bet anytime. Anytime at all."

Arriving at Eye of Hawk's camp they were met by Fragrant Flower. "Eye of Hawk has left the camp, sister. He and Small Bear are checking on a cougar spotted near the camp."

"A renegade cougar?" Braden asked in alarm. The last he heard it was still on Geneva's Branch property.

"They don't think so, but because they have been warned they feel they should check on it," Fragrant Flower related. "Come into the lodge and eat with us."

"Actually we came to ask Tracker if we could have one of Hunter and Linger's litter for Ben," Kerry told her sister in law.

"Tracker is in his lodge with Hunter. Linger dwells there with her pups," Fragrant Flower continued in conversation. "You can visit them after you share our meal. Tracker is resting from his trail of the renegade cougar on Geneva's Branch."

"That bad cat is as elusive as the phantom stallion," Braden commented.

"Tracker would disagree with you," Fragrant Flower grinned. "He has an easier time finding the phantom stallion than the bad cat."

After a filling meal Fragrant Flower walked to Tracker's lodge with Kerry and Braden.



Tracker and his children greeted them warmly. In the corner Hunter sat with Linger and the two pups left were lying by their sides. One of the pups was very dark, almost pure black.

"Tracker, our little Thundercloud has fallen in love with Hunger, your present to Twiggy," Kerry asked boldly. "I was wondering if we could trade for one of Hunter's pups for our son."

Tracker shook his head. "The children of Hunter and Linger are not for trade. They are for gifts as Tam Apo has given us."

"Little Thundercloud loves Hunger, he would love a child of Hunter and Linger," Kerry attempted in persuasion.

"Our Bennett is good with animals. He even befriended a scraggly cat in England, and he takes good care of his pony," Braden added.

Tracker laughed and Hunter perked up his ears, "You need not persuade me my friends. Hunter and Linger will allow Little Thundercloud to have one of their pups."

Hunter picked up the black pup and brought it to Kerry.

"You see," Tracker smiled with pride. "Hunter gives you the female pup for Little Thundercloud."

"Was it he that picked Hunger for Twiggy?" Braden asked in amazement at the intelligence of the wolf dog.

"Yes," Tracker answered. "I asked Hunter if Twiggy of the Soseni' would like a pup as a present for her marriage. Hunter selected Hunger."

"I am confident of Hunter's wisdom," Kerry stated. "Little Thundercloud will love her."

Tracker rose, "Go in peace and send our blessings to Little Thundercloud."

Hunter barked in agreement.

Putting the pup in a canvas bag for protection, Kerry placed the pup on her lap after she mounted Maiden.

Bennett was outside playing with Twiggy and Hunger when he saw his mother and father returning.

The wolf pup caught the scent of her littermate, Hunger, she began fidgeting and barking in recognition.

Hunger heard his sister and ran to Maiden.

Kerry dismounted in time for Bennett as he reached her and let the pup free of the canvas sack. "Hunter and Linger gave you one of their pups. What are you going to call her, Ben?"

"Oh Mamma, she is beautiful. She is all dressed in black and regal like the picture you showed me of Queen Victoria," Bennett squealed in delight and the wolf pup began licking his face. "I'll call her Victoria after Her Royal Majesty."

"I think that is a very good name, son," Braden concurred.



Hunger played a little with his littermate and then returned to Twiggy's side for a petting.

Morning Song appeared announcing dinner and approved of the black wolf pup.

Morning Song placed a jar of pickles and cherry preserves in front of Twiggy at the dinner table. "I brought what you asked for, daughter."

Twiggy reached in and pulled out a large dill pickle and dipped it in the cherry preserves.

Kerry looked at her and asked, "Do you mind if I try some? That looks delicious."

Twiggy nodded her head and handed the large dipped pickle to her sister in law across the table.

Kerry took a bite and cooed, "This is ever so good. I don't know why I haven't tried it before." Still eating the pickle Kerry added large portions of mashed potatoes, roast beef, carrots, and horseradish to her plate.

Twiggy following suit filled her plate with the same, including the horseradish.

Ryan threw a look at Braden sitting across the table from him, "Well?"

Braden laughed, "Bloody Hell man, they're expecting. What do you think?"

"You got Kerry with child again, so soon?" Ryan growled.

"I lost the wager," Braden sneered. "But I've gained another son."

"Looks like I'll have to double the order from the general store," Grady added in humor. "Congratulations, Braden."

"Thank you, sir," Braden acknowledged Grady's felicitations. "We're quite happy over it."

"When is my new grandson due?" Grant asked.

"Kerry figures sometime in winter, in early December," Braden answered his father.

"Your Papa and I are returning to England after Ryan and Twiggy's wedding," Celeste announced. "Carlton and Edith are having another baby and she expects to deliver in late October. Then we'll be back for the Nevada Statehood Celebration, or close to it. We believe our house near Ely will be completed by then."

"I'm sure happy for Carlton and Edith," Braden commented. "It's like they have found each other again, and a new baby. It's great."

"Isn't that the fifth child for them?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, it is," Grant answered.

"You Wessex men surely are prolific," Ryan taunted Braden specifically.



"Must be the drinking water," Braden rebounded. "Jealous, Ryan? You can always visit England and participate in our water if you need."

"If I need, I'll let you be the first to know," Ryan growled in rebuttal.

After dinner the two men continued their verbal duels to the consternation of their wives, but both men slept blissfully that evening with their individual wives tucked securely in their loving arms.



Chapter Twenty Nine

Kerry, Morning Song, and Twiggy spent most of the day together making plans for the wedding. Twiggy found herself caught up in the excitement. Kerry helped Twiggy don the wedding dress and did the fitting. They were busy little bees working on the details of the Christian wedding Alyson had arranged for Ryan and Twiggy.

As often as she could, Kerry made reference to the Crawfords and their excitement and interest in their daughter's wedding. "They really love you and are good people."

"You keep telling me that," Twiggy giggled. "Soon I will believe it completely."

"Well, you just do that," Kerry teased. "They do love you. Your mother never gave up hope. Twiggy, I always had Morning Song, Auntie Alyson and Auntie Audrey but I never knew my real mother. It doesn't matter that I never knew her. I still love her because she gave birth to me."

"I understand what you're saying," Twiggy smiled to her sister in law.

"Good, because I had lots of motherly love, but my mother is gone from this earth. You have a second chance. Don't muck it up," Kerry warned gently.

Hunger started scratching at the door.

"Hunger needs to go outside," Twiggy told Kerry. "I'll let him out."

Twiggy walked outside with Hunger and saw the huge black carriage enter the yard. Behind the carriage was a black buggy and she recognized Auntie Alyson sitting next to a middle-aged man with a kind face. "That must be Duffey," Twiggy said aloud.

A man came out of the black carriage and the man helped out young girl with sandy brown hair and brown eyes. A little boy was put on the ground next to the girl and then a woman about forty some years old was helped out of the carriage by the man. The woman saw Twiggy and their eyes locked.

Twiggy stood in silence as she stared at the woman. It was her mother. She knew that. She remembered her face; only it was a little older.



Samantha stared at her daughter. Dayton had grown to be a woman and was the image of Samantha at the same age. Tears streamed down Samantha's face, but she didn't move. Samantha Crawford stood transfixed as she gazed upon her daughter abducted ten years ago. "It's a miracle."

Joseph Crawford turned to find the object his wife's stare and what it was attached too. He quit breathing for a moment as he saw the visage of his wife some twenty years ago. "Dayton?" he whispered.

Jerica and Joshua ran to Bennett who was playing with Victoria.

Samantha and Joseph couldn't move. Their hearts were racing. It was their Dayton, their daughter.

Twiggy couldn't move either. What could she say or do. Where was Ryan? Where was her rock and foundation?

Hunger placed himself in front of Twiggy. He sensed high emotions and took a protective stance in front of his mistress.

Ryan came out on the porch just then and standing behind Twiggy he embraced her. "It's your parents, Twiggy."

Twiggy broke the eternal silence and looked up to her husband, "I don't know what to say or do. Help me, Ryan."

"I'm here for you," Ryan answered firmly. "I'm here for you."

Ryan's appearance broke the trance and Samantha ran to her daughter. "Dayton, oh my Dayton."

Twiggy found the women's arms surrounding her and wet tears falling on her as Samantha pressed her cheek to Twiggy's cheek. "My darling daughter. I never gave up hope to find you."

Joseph folded his arms around Samantha and Dayton. "Dayton, my little girl. You're alive. You're really alive."

Twiggy pulled back and retreated to Ryan's arms once more, "I was raised by the Sosoni'. I lived with the people."

"Yes, dear," Samantha answered soothingly. "We know. Grady and Alyson told us everything. We're so grateful to Bright Moon's people for keeping you healthy and happy."

"Your mother and I want to meet Blue Pool and thank him," Joseph Crawford told his daughter reassuringly. "We must thank him for keeping you for us and for your Ryan."

"You are grateful?" Twiggy gasped retreating further into Ryan's arms.

"Of course we are," Samantha told her daughter. "We are very grateful and want to repay Blue Pool for all the love he raised you in."

"Oh mother," Twiggy cried and left Ryan's security into the open arms of her mother.

Samantha's tears once more began flowing as she hugged her daughter tightly. "I love you, Dayton."

Joseph called to the children playing with the black wolf pup, Victoria, "Jerica, Joshua, come meet your big sister, Dayton."



"My name is Twiggy. My Ryan gave me that name, father."

"May we call you Twiggy?" Samantha asked through the sobs and tears of happiness.

"Yes, you may call me Twiggy."

"Hi Twiggy," Jerica gushed. "Mommy and Daddy told me we would finally meet you. You were taken from us but we've found you again. We're so happy." Jerica hugged her sister with all her might. "I've always wanted a big sister, and now I have you!"

Twiggy found it hard to breath. The emotions were flooding her and everything was so wonderful. It was not at all what she expected.

Little Joshua bowed politely, "I'm Joshua, Twiggy. Or are you Dayton? One of you is my sister."

Twiggy grinned and knelt to hug the little boy, "I've always wanted a little brother."

Joshua blushed, "Awww."

Twiggy stood and asked Samantha, "Where is Todd? Is he really married with a baby girl?"

"Yes daughter," Joseph answered. "Todd sends his love and wanted to come but he had to mind the store. He named his daughter Dayton Sara Crawford for you. Little Dayton looks just like you."

"Ryan told me you had a store," Twiggy shared.

"We sold the ranch shortly after you were taken," Joseph told his daughter. "It was too hard on us remembering you. Todd and I had followed the Crow and returning to Carson City and we sold the ranch and stayed there hoping it would be easier to find you again. I bought the store and your mother helped out all Indians hoping her kindness would be repaid to you and keep you in good health."

Alyson and Duffey remained behind the Crawfords but watched the happy reunion.

"Oh Brian, look at Twiggy," Alyson sighed. "She is happy to be reunited with her family."

"You are wonderful, my sweet cake." Duffey agreed and tucked his new bride in closely to him.

Ryan left Twiggy's side assured she was doing fine without him and walked to Alyson Duffey. "Auntie Alyson I want to tell you my news."

"What is it Ryan?" Alyson questioned. She was hoping her nephew hadn't changed his mind about the wedding.

"Twiggy and I were married by the Sosoni' about five weeks ago, and," Ryan hesitated.

"And?" Alyson questioned once more. She was really worried Ryan planned on calling off the wedding.

"We're expecting," Ryan released and hoped Auntie Alyson wouldn't fly off the handle.

Instead Alyson Duffey asked calmly, "When is your baby due, Ryan?"



"Pine Needle Decker told her she thinks she should expect to deliver the end of December or the New Year."

"I cannot believe all the joy this family has suddenly been blessed with," Alyson sighed contentedly. "First Garrett, then Corey, now Kerry and Twiggy will bring more children to this house. It's a blessing I tell you."

"You knew Kerry was expecting?" Ryan quizzed.

"Yes, Kerry told me two weeks ago when she was certain," Alyson told her nephew. "Kerry is very happy about it. Garrett will have a baby brother and Ben rises to greater heights as the eldest brother."

"Kerry thinks it is a boy?" Duffey asked.

"Kerry knows it is another boy," Alyson took her husband to task for doubting the intuition of the Stuart women.

"Twiggy thinks our baby is a little girl," Ryan shared with his Auntie.

"Well its about time," Alyson chuckled. "We have way to many boys in this family."

"That's what I told Pa," Ryan guffawed. "We have way to many boys and girls are smarter."

"I'm glad to see I raised you right and Twiggy keeps you in line," Alyson told Ryan affectionately.

Ryan heard Samantha shout, "A baby! You and Ryan are going to have a baby!"

Samantha turned to find Ryan and ran to give him a hug. "I couldn't believe we could be any happier. A baby!"

Soon everyone was shaking hands, hugging, crying, and offering congratulations.

Two days later the official wedding took place. The parlor was decorated with spring mountain flowers and roses from Auntie Alyson's rose garden. White satin ribbons decorated the chairs that were placed for the guests. Reverend Weems conducted the ceremony. Kerry was matron of honor and Jerica was flower girl and bridesmaid. Dwayne stood as best man for Ryan.

Joseph Crawford had the honor of escorting his daughter Dayton down the aisle and give her to Ryan Patrick McGillinen as his lawfully wedded wife.

Kerry wore a gown of rose pink taffeta. It was corseted with a full skirt resting upon white silk petticoats. It was off shoulder with pink ribbons and seed pearls decorating the neckline. Braden thought the only time Kerry had looked more beautiful was on their wedding day.

Alyson, Morning Song, and Small Bird wore silk deep burgundy dresses in the bustle style.



The men wore good Sunday black suits and each had a red rose in their lapel buttonholes.

Everyone inhaled and held their breath including all the good guests from Ely when Twiggy entered the parlor on her father's arms. Radiating like an angel descending from heaven, Twiggy entered with her hair done in perfect ringlets. The ringlets glistened with pearl hair pins purchased by the Crawfords for their daughter's wedding day. Her veil glistened with sparkling tiny pearls and sequins hand sewn by Auntie Alyson. The veil's crown was made of white silk roses that crowned her head in a circlet. Twiggy's wedding dress was an off shoulder white silk gown with corseted bodice. Like Kerry, Twiggy preferred the less restrictive layers of petticoats. The white silk petticoats showed themselves beneath the skirt as layers of ruffles. The skirt of the wedding dress had appliqués of rose lace covered with rhinestones and pearls to accent the center of each lace rose. Twiggy's six foot long train had silk roses and the same lace rose appliqués of her wedding gown.

Ryan felt a little weak kneed when he watched his Twiggy march down the aisle with her father. Twiggy was always beautiful to him but today she looked like an angel come down from heaven for a visit.

In the background a wolf pup named Hunger could be heard scratching at the door to be let in.

The vows were exchanged and Ryan found he was quite tongue-tied. Reverend Weems had to help him several times to get the vows repeated correctly.

Samantha Crawford wept openly when Reverend Weems asked, "Do you, Dayton Sara Crawford take Ryan Patrick McGillinen as your lawfully wedded husband."

Kerry choked back her own tears as she watched her brother marry her dear Twiggy.

Marseille Aumond had prepared a feast worthy of a royal wedding. Champagne flowed freely in glasses offered to the guests. Pate', caviar, and escargot were appetizers. Orange duck and pheasant under glass were the entrée. Potatoes Marseille and okra Françoise were the vegetables.

Samantha was dressed in violet organdy and stood by her daughter when Marseille presented the wedding cake. It was three tiers tall and white painted wooden pillars were shaped in Grecian columns to hold the tiers. The cake was decorated with white icing roses and scallops.

Samantha whispered to Twiggy, "I asked Monsieur Aumond to make the wedding cake chocolate. It was your favorite cake as a little girl."

Twiggy smiled, "It still is."

With Ryan's hand on hers, they cut the cake.



Ryan offered a piece to his Twiggy, "It's your favorite my little mommy. It's chocolate."

Twiggy laughed in glorious wonderful happiness and after taking a bite took the cake piece and offered it to Ryan. "For you, daddy." She said quietly and smashed the cake into Ryan's nose to the delight of the guests."

The wedding couldn't have been more perfect if Alyson had tried.

Extra servants hired for the wedding cleared the dining room and the floor was cleared for the wedding dance.

Ryan took his Twiggy and began to dance with her to the tune of the violinists Grady had hired.

The rest of the guests followed suit and soon everyone was twirling around the large dining room.

Everyone was happy until a thin and hawk nosed woman approached Twiggy who had walked to the punch table for a refreshing drink.

"Congratulations, Dayton. I'm Harriet Hampton. We haven't been introduced but I must say you are such a surprise. We heard that Ryan here had been engaged to a Sосoni' heathen. A half-breed no less! We're all delighted that the rumors were ill founded and he married into a good white Christian family."

Dayton was shocked into speechlessness by the woman's blatant prejudice.

"Why whatever is the matter girl?" Harriet persisted. "You look pale. Didn't you know he was involved with a heathen Indian?"

"I knew," Twiggy choked in anger.

"Well make no never mind dear," Harriet said haughtily. "At least he married you."

"It seems he married the heathen Indian," Twiggy spat out in fury.

Everyone turned to look at the crimson-faced bride.

"Whatever do you mean, child. You're white!" Harriet exclaimed.

"And you are a black hearted bigot!" Twiggy snarled unable to control her anger at the spiteful woman that ruined her wedding day.

Ryan was at Twiggy's side instantly and embraced her with his arms. "Making trouble again, Mrs. Hampton?"

A wolf pup suddenly appeared from the kitchen behind a waiter bringing in a tray of champagne glasses.

Hunger positioned his body between his mistress and Harriet Hampton. He bared his teeth and snarled at the hawk nosed woman.

"Why Hunger, you seem to be a very good judge of character," Ryan chuckled. "Good boy!"



Chapter Thirty

Mrs. Hampton was known as the gossip of Ely and unfortunately before the incident, she had heard Trevor Cassidy, Cutler Hammond, Grady, Ryan, and Dwayne McGillinen, and Brady Wessex discussing the renegade cougar in the study as she passed by taking an unescorted tour of Geneva's Hope ranch house. By Mrs. Hampton's side was her daughter, a clone to the widow, Claudia.

Claudia had for many years attempted to gain attentions of one of the McGillinen boys. Like her mother she was after wealth and position in the community.

Harriet had tried for many years to get the attentions of Grady McGillinen. She had hoped he would send that heathen, Morning Song, back to her tribe and take her as a wife. Harriet had always hated Indians. She hated them more when Grady had taken Morning Song as his wife.

The day after the wedding, Harriet Hampton had informed all of her church social acquaintances about the bloodthirsty cat that had eaten several of the Indian children. Harriet Hampton was generous with her embellishments of the man eating cougar stories.

The women of the church social society were frantic with fear. Their husband's were informed of the man-eater with more embellished stories. The story of a renegade cougar grew in proportion until the good people of Ely thought every man, woman, child, and stock herd of the valley were being consumed by packs of roaming cougars.

Back at Geneva's Hope the family was enjoying quality time with each other. Ryan and Twiggy agreed to stay at the ranch, using the white room as their honeymoon nest for several days, allowing Twiggy to re-acquaint herself with her family.

"You bought the Ely Mercantile?" Twiggy gasped in surprise at her father's announcement.

"We bought it to be closer to you," Joseph Crawford told his eldest daughter. "We lost ten years of your life and we want to be a part



of it now. Especially now that we find out you and your husband are going to make us grandparents again."

"What about Todd and Eleanor?" Twiggy asked wondering about her oldest brother.

"Todd and Eleanor are happy in Carson City and he runs the general store there efficiently," Joseph explained. "Eleanor's family is in Carson City. She has her Father, Mother, two brothers, three sisters, aunts, and uncles."

"Todd, Eleanor, and Dayton plan on visiting real soon, Twiggy," Samantha stated. "He wants to see you and introduce you to your namesake."

"What does Eleanor think about all of this?" Twiggy asked still uncertain of the white people's attitudes.

"You worry too much, Twiggy," Samantha reprimanded gently. "It's not healthy for you or our grandchild."

"I have reason to worry. Remember Mrs. Hampton?" Twiggy reminded.

"That old crone is going to pay double the price for any purchase at the mercantile," Joseph grinned mischievously. "The extra profit I get from people like her will pay for medicines, food, and clothing for the Ely poor."

"Your father did the same in Carson City to help cover those costs for our charity work," Samantha admitted. "Course those pompous hypocrites deserved it."

In the next few days Geneva's Hope began to empty of visitors.

Grant and Celeste Wessex left the ranch knowing their house near Ely was under construction and would be completed by their return in the fall. They returned to England to be present for the birth of Carlton and Edith's baby.

Joseph and Samantha took Jerica and Joshua back to Carson City so they could move their belongings and return for possession of the Ely Mercantile.

Alyson and Brian Duffey returned to Ely with their niece Breena, who enjoyed the wedding with Dwayne as escort. Brian needed to concentrate on some important land issues his law practice was involved in.

The men would leave after breakfast with the excuse of tending the herd and mending fence lines.

Twiggy and Kerry found themselves alone many times while the children played under the watchful eye of Little Rain. Morning Song and Small Bird would be busy with running the household. Even though that was not Morning Song's favorite chore, she accepted the duty after Alyson's departure and executed it well.

"I am really bored," Kerry told Twiggy one morning.



"I am too. I want to ride the valley free like the mustangs, like I was able to as the daughter of Blue Pool," Twiggy said nostalgically.

"Speaking of mustangs. I heard one of the ranch hands say the Phantom was spotted near Cherry Creek Canyon."

Before another word could be spoken the door flew open and there was a clamor to wake the dead. Kerry and Twiggy could hear a loud moan and cursing. They also heard orders coming from Grady, "Get him upstairs in Ayden's room."

"Dwayne, go to town and fetch the doc," Ryan growled. "Someone get Morning Song and Small Bird."

Kerry and Twiggy ran into the entrance to see Bert Wilcox. His shirt and jeans were covered with blood. A primitive bandage had been placed on his left arm. "Damned city folk are more dangerous than the meanest critter God put on the face of the earth."

"We're going to get the trespassers," Braden consoled. "Dwayne, be sure you bring Marshall Ewal with you to jail the trespassers."

"Oww! Watch it!" Bert complained when Ryan hoisted the man over his shoulder to carry him upstairs.

"Ryan?" Twiggy questioned closing the gap between them.

"Sweetheart, you go back into the sewing room," Ryan ordered as he shifted Bert's weight. "Morning Song and Small Bird can handle this."

"Bert is wounded. I know medicines and can take care of him," Twiggy disputed.

"You're going to have our baby. I don't want you to exert yourself," Ryan said to Twiggy lovingly.

"Taking care of a wounded man is hardly exertion unless you want me to carry him," Twiggy snickered. "I'm following you upstairs, and I'm going to help."

Ryan didn't say another word. He would handle Twiggy later. Right now he had to get Bert to bed.

After Ryan laid Bert on the bed, Twiggy removed his boots and pulled her belt knife. With skilled strokes she cut open the bandage and sleeve to look at the wound. "Bert, you're bleeding so much because the bullet went through your arm. There is a wound for the bullet entering and a wound for the bullet leaving. There are no broken bones. We'll clean the wound and put healing poultices. You'll be as good as new in a few days."

Morning Song walked in and confirmed Twiggy's diagnosis. Twiggy proceeded to cut away the shirt and undershirt Bert was wearing. Morning Song made the poultice while Twiggy cleaned the wound and Small Bird made clean bandages from an old clean sheet. Kerry had an argument with Braden before she arrived with hot water in a basin for cleaning the wound and whiskey for sterilizing the wound.



"You ain't gonna waste all that good whiskey on that cut are ya?" Bert complained.

"No, Bert," Kerry laughed and produced a glass from the pocket of her apron. Kerry filled the glass and handed it to Bert Wilcox.

"This ain't too bad having you pretty ladies fuss over me," Bert grinned taking a sip of whiskey. "Maybe I should thank that two legged critter for being so stupid."

Small Bird handed the bandages to Morning Song so she could make the mixture for pain relief. "Ryan and Cutler, would you hold Bert down so I can apply the poultices Morning Song made," Twiggy asked holding the herbal medicines in her hand. "It's going to burn at first."

"Then Twiggy will bandage the wounds," Morning Song added.

The men held Bert as instructed and he screamed when Twiggy placed the poultices on the wounds. "I take it back! This ain't nice at all. The fires of hell can't burn like this!"

Morning Song wrapped the first bandage around the poultice as Twiggy held it in place and then Twiggy finished the bandaging. "There, it's all done! It doesn't burn anymore does it Bert?"

Bert shook his head. "Nope, but let's not do this again."

"Fortunately, we won't have too!" Morning Song reassured him. "Twiggy is quite knowledgeable in healing."

Ryan and Cutler let go of Bert.

"And you my son," Morning Song addressed Ryan. "You will not again attempt to prohibit Twiggy from helping heal. It would be wrong. I was told she tended you Cutler Hammond."

"That she did, Miss Morning Song," Cutler admitted. "And I healed up real fast, too."

Morning Song cast a disapproving glance to Ryan.

"Okay, I was wrong," Ryan confessed. "I'm sorry, Twiggy. I won't try to stop you from helping with your medicines again."

"From what I can see you're a real lucky man, son," Grady approved. "Twiggy have I told you how proud I am to have you in the family?"

"Many times, Grady," Twiggy beamed. "Many times."

"You know, Pa. I think I'm getting jealous," Ryan protested with humor. "I think you like Twiggy more than me."

"You were the one to say women are smarter, son," Grady teased. "Not a matter of liking more. It's a matter of recognizing a smart woman."

"That's enough, husband," Morning Song reprimanded. "You men need to undress Wilcox and put this clean night shirt on him. He needs his rest to heal."

"First drink this," Small Bird ordered Bert. "It is the pain medicine. You'll sleep well."

Bert took a sip, "Woman, if this ain't the nastiest..."



"Quiet!" Morning Song commanded. "Be quiet and drink it!"

Bert obeyed meekly. There was no way any half-wit of a man would try to argue with a tone like that from a woman.

The women left the room and waited in the hall while the men undressed Bert Wilcox and put on a clean nightshirt.

When the men emerged from the room, all four of the women were standing with their arms crossed over their breasts and fingers tapping on their arms.

Morning Song was the first to speak, "Are you going to tell us what this is all about?"

"Nothing for you to worry your pretty little heads about," Grady answered cheerily. Deep inside he had a feeling it wouldn't work and he was right.

"Nothing to worry about?" Kerry objected staunchly. "You bring a man with holes in him for the women to patch up and you dare tell us not to worry?"

"Ryan, why was this man wounded?" Twiggy demanded. "Why did he say city folk are more dangerous than critters?"

"It seems someone has been telling the good people of Ely that there are packs of wild cougars that are eating children and stock," Ryan replied with humor. "So they've decided to trespass on Geneva's Hope and shoot everything that moves including Bert."

"Wild packs of man eating cougars?" Kerry questioned in disbelief.

"There's only one crippled cougar," Twiggy told her quickly.

"The packs are gross exaggerations," Ryan informed his sister. "There is only one and so far he has stayed on Geneva's Branch land."

"How did the cougar get crippled?" Morning Song demanded to know. How she hated to see the animals of Mother Earth suffer.

"The Holt boys took some pot shots and wounded the cougar in the hind quarters," Cutler reported to the women. "At least from what I saw when the cat jumped me and when I saw it run away. It favored its left hind leg and there was a scar and infection it looked like."

Morning Song shook her head in disgust. "Now the fine animal must be killed."

"Yes honey," Grady agreed. "A real shame but the cat has mauled two people on Ryan's ranch. It has to be killed."

"Is that where you have been these past days?" Kerry asked Braden impatiently. "Hunting the cougar and not telling me."

"No darling," Braden reassured his wife. "We have been out chasing all the trespassing hunters off Geneva's Hope."

"Thanks to someone talking about the cougar, we have to spend time getting people off the land instead of putting that poor animal out of its misery," Grady spewed out angrily. "The hands are busy guarding Geneva's Hope and we're getting behind in daily work."



"I still have my ranch hands and Bright Moon's camp out looking for the cougar," Ryan reminded his father. "I'm certain Cassidy will send us word soon that he got the cat."

"I hope so," Small Bird muttered. "A crippled cougar is very dangerous to people."

"Cho Ling would agree with you, Small Bird," Ryan chuckled. "The cougar tried to make him an appetizer."

"Guess the cougar decided it didn't like Chinese food," Braden added. "Unlike your wife, Ryan. I still remember that peanut sauce, rice, cabbage, and milk mixture." Braden shook his head in distaste. "God, Kerry the pickles and preserves are bad enough. I hope you don't take to Chinese food."

"Oh, that sounded so yummy," Kerry teased. "I think I'll ask Marseille if he knows how to make some of that peanut sauce."

"Let's go eat lunch," Grady said and took Morning Song in his arms. "I think we've worn out this conversation."

Morning Song took charge of Bert's care. Kerry and Twiggy took naps after lunch. It was a need that arose from the pregnancy and boredom.

The men rode out again after lunch to guard the land from trespassers.

In the evening Doctor Hamlin came to check out Bert Wilcox accompanied by Marshall Kent Ewal.

"I heard about the pack of man killing cougars. I ignored it. Guess I shouldn't have," Kent confessed. "I'll get the judge to write up trespassing warrants. That should keep the good folk of Ely off your lands."

"We'd appreciate any help you can give, Kent," Grady said to the Marshall. "I'm losing good time from my hands tending the concerns of two legged varmints instead of the four legged ones they're hired to tend."



Chapter Thirty One

"There! It's finished," Kerry proclaimed holding up the riding pants she created for Twiggy. "This gives us room to ride comfortably and room to grow with our babies." Kerry grinned and patted her still flat stomach.

"They are perfect," Twiggy agreed holding up the riding pants that looked like a skirt but was buttoned from the waist to the leg. "I can even wear my knife belt comfortably. I prefer the men's jeans, but this does allow growth for the baby."

"I'm glad we decided to make these," Kerry said holding her canvas riding skirt to her waist. "We had to wait a few days for Marshall Ewal to take care of ridding Geneva's Hope of trespassers."

"Ryan would be so angry with me if I got shot by one of those gun happy men from Ely," Twiggy volunteered. "Why he even might beat me."

"No. Ryan would kill the man that shot you is more like it," Kerry giggled. "Braden would be furious with me too."

"We would see bad tempers, wouldn't we?" Twiggy chortled.

"Exactly why we waited a few days before I take you to Cherry Creek Canyon to find our Phantom," Kerry replied with a devilish twinkling in her eyes.

"Tomorrow morning after breakfast we ride out," Twiggy confirmed delightfully. "Tomorrow morning we can ride free again. I do miss riding."

"I miss riding also," Kerry sighed. "Why the last time I was able to ride was when we returned from England and I rode to Eye of Hawk's camp to pickup Victoria for Ben."

"I hate not to tell my Ryan," Twiggy confessed. "But he is so protective of me since he discovered we are having a child. I think he would keep me locked up in the bedroom at Geneva's Branch."

"Our men are sure funny that way," Kerry concurred. "You'd think we were breakable or something."

"To them I think we are, but I really like being so treasured," Twiggy responded.

"Yeah, I would be upset if Braden didn't love me that much, but we still keep this our secret," Kerry grinned. "Finger's crossed secret."



Twiggy crossed her fingers in symbolism of the pledge.

While the women were planning their outing, Ryan and Grady got news. Marshall Ewal had placed trespassing warrants on identified men that wandered on Geneva's Hope and that had deterred more Ely people from hunting the bad cat, but one of Grady's ranch hands brought news. Red Thorne caught up with Grady and Ryan on the outer edge of Cherry Creek Valley.

"I got bad news, Mr. McGillinen," Red said somberly. "I found a mauled calf in the northern herd just over that ridge."

"Was it the cat?" Grady asked leaning forward in his saddle and resting his hand on the pommel.

"It was the renegade for sure," Red informed his boss. "Cougar paw prints all over."

"So he's come back to home territory," Ryan observed. "He's come home to die. The cat will be more dangerous than ever."

"Red, go to Eye of Hawk's camp and send for Tracker and Hunter," Grady ordered his hand. "Come with him first thing in the morning and meet us at Cherry Creek Valley. You can spend the night at their camp."

"Okay boss," Red Thorne acknowledged and kicked his horse heading it to the Sosoni' camp. "I'll be sure to warn the people to keep watch and keep the little ones close to camp."

"Thanks Red," Ryan said in gratitude. "We'd better tell the women to stay put at the ranch till we get that cat. I'm not about to take Twiggy back to Geneva's Branch until I know that cat is dead."

"We do have a better chance of tracking the cougar in Cherry Creek Valley," Grady replied. "But I don't want to worry the women. Kerry and Twiggy are having fun with that new fangled sewing machine, so they're kept pretty busy at the ranch anyway."

"If you say so, Pa," Ryan deferred to his father's wisdom. "I don't want to upset Twiggy or Kerry in their delicate conditions."

"Let's get back to the ranch and let Cutler and Braden know we are going out cougar hunting tomorrow. "We'll meet up with Red and Tracker in the valley tomorrow morning."

"Sounds like a plan," Ryan agreed.

They returned to Geneva's Hope together and arrived in time for supper.

"I still think something is strange," Kerry mentioned to Twiggy as they walked to the barn to saddle Maiden and Princess. "All the men left together this morning, like they were on a hunt."

"Do you think there is still trouble with trespassers on your land?" Twiggy asked.



"I guess that must be the problem. A few stragglers might be hanging around and this will take care of them," Kerry answered thoughtfully. "But we're going to have a great day. We have a fine lunch packed and I know you'll get to see the Phantom today."

"I'm so excited," Twiggy giggled in joy. "I've heard so much about this animal. Is it true he stands almost 17 hands high?"

"Uh Huh," Kerry nodded. "At least 17 and a half hands. He is really unusual for mustangs that are 14 to 16 at the tallest. I can only believe he is a rogue thoroughbred and he is a beautiful jet black with white stockings and white snip."

Kerry and Twiggy began their ride in a great mood. They wore their new tan colored riding skirts. Kerry wore a blue cotton shirt and Twiggy wore a white cotton shirt. Both women wore their doeskin jackets with fringes decorating the jacket yokes, bottom, and sleeves. Kerry and Twiggy were the same shoe size so Twiggy borrowed a pair of Kerry's brown leather cowboy boots, and Kerry wore a pair of dark brown leather English riding boots she had purchased in England.

Both women wore tan Stetson's and black leather riding gloves. They were a beautiful sight riding together. Twiggy and Kerry had their hair tied by a ribbon in the back of their head by the napes.

They enjoyed the crisp morning air and a good gallop for the first few hours of the ride. A stop was made to view the early summer panorama of the snow-topped mountains encasing the valley below. A creek snaked its way through a grove of Cherry trees blossoming and providing the valley with a wonderful fragrant aroma.

"Look there's an Elk!" Kerry pointed out to Twiggy.

They enjoyed the beauty and grace of the giant animal for several moments when they saw a golden condor swoop the air with its wings spreading across five feet coasting on the winds.

"God, I love this country," Kerry breathed as she inhaled deeply.

"Mother Earth is beautiful and bountiful," Twiggy agreed. "Ryan explained to me the heritage promise of Geneva's Hope and his land Geneva's Branch. It will be ours to hold and maintain."

"Yes, we will keep out the spoilers, the contaminators," Kerry vowed. "We will treasure this special place, our Geneva's!"

The women then continued their ride on to Cherry Creek Canyon. Kerry and Twiggy dismounted and looked into the canyon. They found a group of ten to twelve mustangs grazing peacefully on some scrub. Some were drinking from the creek that ran through the rocks.

"I don't see a stallion in the group and that Sorrel is apparently the lead mare," Kerry noticed. "When I've seen phantom, I have usually seen the Sorrel."

"If we wait patiently we should see the phantom soon," Twiggy said excitedly.

"Want something to eat while we wait?" Kerry asked.



"Let's do eat. I am hungry," Twiggy announced.

The two women went to their saddlebags and pulled out their lunches they had packed. They drank some water from the canteens and sat down on two rocks to eat.

Princess, Twiggy's Appaloosa, started whining. Her ears were straight up and then cocked back in fear. She began rearing up and pulling on the sage scrub Twiggy had tied her reins too.

Twiggy looked to see what the problem was and Kerry craned to see her own horse Maiden moving nervously and stomping on the ground with her forelegs.

Suddenly Princess broke loose and ran towards the canyon opening.

"Good God!" Twiggy exclaimed. "It's the cougar!"

The cougar suddenly appeared from behind a rock and pounced on the racing Appaloosa. The cougar was a little too slow for the horse. It managed to claw the hindquarters and hocks of Princess.

"Damn, the cougar is out of range for my colt," Kerry complained. She watched as the cat gave chase. They lost sight of the cougar and Princess when they turned on the bend that was the entrance to the canyon.

"Looks like we'll have to ride double on the way home," Twiggy sighed. Princess wasn't as well trained as Maiden.

"Oh heck, Maiden won't never mind," Kerry answered lightheartedly so Twiggy wouldn't worry.

Just then they heard more whinnying and turned to see the Sorrel flaring nostrils and making quite a racket.

"There he is!" Kerry gasped pointing to the magnificent wild stallion, calling his mares to attention on a rock cliff above the canyon wall. The stallion began its trek down the canyon wall.

Kerry and Twiggy were spell bound as they watched the Phantom make its way to his mares.

"The Phantom is gathering his mares," Twiggy noted as transfixed as Kerry.

Neither had paid attention to how much time had passed and had totally forgotten about the cougar that had been too near them.

Red and Tracker were on their way to meet Ryan, Grady, Dwayne, Braden, and Cutler. Hunter was keeping near to Tracker's painted pony. Hunter suddenly ran ahead and held his nose high in the air. Hunter began howling a warning and Red and Tracker saw the leopard Appaloosa belonging to Twiggy.

"Shit, that horse is saddled," Red exclaimed in Sосoni'.

"And has no rider," Tracker added as he nudged his pony and took off after the runaway horse. Fortunately they were close and just



ahead of Princess so it was easy for Tracker to grab her bridle and pull her to a halt.

Red brought his chestnut quarter horse next to Princess, "Isn't this Ryan's wife's horse?"

"Yes she is, and look at her wounds," Tracker said showing the bloody cut marks.

"Looks like the cat got her," Red choked.

"She came out of the canyon area," Tracker noted. "Hunter, find Ryan's woman."

Hunter took off and went towards the canyon.

"The McGillinen's are up ahead, we should get them," Red suggested. "Can you follow Hunter's tracks once we meet up with them?"

"I can. Hurry we must get them," Tracker urged. Keeping Princess' reins in his hands, Tracker mounted his pony and they went at full run to meet with the McGillinens just beyond the bend in the creek. They found them dismounted and waiting.

Ryan saw the two men riding hard and fast, then he saw Princess. "Where'd you find her?" Ryan shouted running towards them. He thought his heart stopped when he saw Twiggy was not with them. When Tracker stopped in front of him he saw the claw wounds of the cougar. Ryan choked. "No!"

Grady and Braden recognized the Appaloosa and mounted immediately. They brought Chiseler to Ryan who mounted in a jump.

"We must go quickly. Hunter is just ahead," Tracker yelled nudging his pony to a full run. "He finds Twiggy for us."

Braden spoke to Socks and he was flying across the valley like the wind across the plains. Chiseler sharing a spiritual bond with his owner kept up with the thoroughbred.



Chapter Thirty Two

Soon the riders caught sight of Hunter running with all his power to the entrance of the canyon.

Kerry and Twiggy were so absorbed watching the Phantom they did not notice Maiden flaring her nostrils and rearing until Maiden pulled away and ran toward the canyon entrance. Kerry and Twiggy stood frozen as Maiden ran out of sight. Then they spotted the cougar. The cat was chasing Maiden. Unfortunately Maiden had run too fast ahead of the cat. The cougar immediately gave up on the chase and headed back to the canyon for the easier two-legged prey.

"Oh great!" Kerry moaned. "Now we have to walk back."

"Let's gather our lunch and start back right now," Twiggy declared. "Nothing like a good healthy walk."

"We should get back by sundown," Kerry said looking at the sun rising high in the sky.

Nearing the canyon, Hunter stopped short and stood motionless. The men slowed their horses to see what had stopped Hunter.

Braden screamed when he saw Maiden run from the canyon walls.

The special bonds Ryan and Braden had with their mounts served them well. Socks and Chiseler flared their nostrils and began a run that would have the others behind believe the horses flew. Hunter began to run into the canyon walls with Socks and Chiseler close behind him.

Kerry and Twiggy started to pickup the food when they heard a cat growl. On the ledge above them was the cougar.

Hissing and growling a painful cry the cat jumped from the ledge.

Twiggy pulled the knife from her sheath.

Kerry pulled her colt and aimed it at the jumping cat. She squeezed the trigger and pulled it back cocking the colt with her thumb.



A strange calm took control of Kerry and she aimed with precision accuracy. The bullet left the colt in an explosion and hit the cat on target, directly to the heart.

Meeting the bullet the cat fell short of its target, but upon landing its outstretched paws caught Kerry and the force of the cat's fall pulled Kerry down.

Twiggy was upon the cat and with one strong and swift stroke she severed the jugular vein of the cat. Blood from the bullet and the vein where everywhere. Kerry and Twiggy were covered with the cat's blood.

The cougar twitched and soon gave up its life.

Still lying next to Kerry near the cougar Twiggy said sadly, "The poor beast was suffering greatly. His leg is festered with poison."

Gasping for breath after her fall to the ground Kerry agreed, "The poor beast was in such pain it went mad. From the looks of that leg it was going to die very soon."

Braden and Ryan had entered the canyon and heard the gunshot.

"It's Kerry's colt!" Braden screamed to Ryan.

Both men rode frantically toward the sound. Ryan held back the terror in his heart. *Was Twiggy dead? Was she mauled? Our baby?*

Braden was praying silently. *Let Kerry live! Dear God let me get there in time! Our baby!*

Faster the hooves pounded the earth and they saw the women lying on the ground of the canyon between two small boulders and a ledge overhead. They looked for the cat and Braden saw it lying by Kerry.

Ryan saw Twiggy lying next to his sister and the renegade cougar lying on the ground.

Both men realized the women were very still.

Hunter walked next to the women.

"Hunter!" Kerry exclaimed.

Hunter sniffed the cat and sat next to Twiggy.

Rising slowly to her knees Twiggy scratched Hunter's ears. She turned to see the thundering horses and their husbands. "Kerry, it's Braden and Ryan."

Kerry twisted away from the cat's paws and turned to see Braden jumping from his horse. "Uh Oh! I think we're in trouble judging by the look on his face and the situation we're in."

"I think we're in deep big trouble," Twiggy gasped watching Ryan jump from Chiseler's back and running towards her. "I don't think I have ever seen such anger in Ryan's eyes."

Ryan ahead of Braden for reason of longer legs reached for Twiggy and lifted her off the ground. "My God Twiggy," Ryan cried in horror. "You're covered in blood!" He put her down gently. Holding her



arms with his large hands he asked in dread, "Did the cat get you? How bad are you hurt?"

"Husband, this is the cat's blood. I slit the cat's throat to let it die quickly and painlessly after Kerry's bullet hit its target," Twiggy grinned proudly. She was surprised at Ryan's response.

Ryan's hands tightened around her arms and he shook her. "Don't you ever do anything this foolhardy again! Do you hear me? I ought to tan your hide for this!" No sooner had Ryan's anger flown from his mouth than his lips crushed Twiggy's lips. "Thank God you're alive. Thank God you're alive!" He breathed softly into her hair. His hands left her arms and moved to embrace her in a hug that made her lose her breath.

"Ryan, I can't breathe," Twiggy told her big bear of a husband. She saw tears flowing down his cheeks. As he released her slightly she cupped his face in her hands. "I'm alright. I love you."

To Twiggy's amazement Ryan asked tenderly, "What about our baby? Is she all right?"

"My Ryan, nothing happened to me, we're fine! Both of us are fine, really!" Twiggy reassured Ryan.

"How could you do such a fool thing and risk your life and our baby's?" Ryan demanded.

"Don't you talk to me like that, Ryan Patrick McGillinen," Twiggy retorted hotly. "All Kerry and I did was go for a ride to see the Phantom. Which we did see, look he's over there."

Ryan glanced to see the wild stallion with his herd of mares grazing along the creek grasses. "You still were wandering around knowing about a berserk cat and just as dangerous townspeople."

"Kerry and I waited until we heard that trespassers were all removed," Twiggy replied hotly. "And we knew the cat was near Geneva's Branch. Did you know the cat was sighted here?"

Ryan's face took on a very sheepish look.

"I thought so! But you didn't bother to tell us women, did you?" Twiggy accused.

Ryan found his voice once more, "Wait a minute! That's not the point!"

"It is so the point!" Twiggy retorted. "I have been riding free since I was ten years old and Blue Pool gave me my first pony. If there was ever a danger in, near, or by the camp we people all knew about it! We never left the camp unprepared."

"Dammit, you're a woman! A breeding woman!" Ryan rebuked.

"Don't you use bad words with me!" Twiggy hissed stubbornly. "Didn't you notice it was us women that killed the cougar you men couldn't catch or kill?"

Tracker who had been listening as he sat next to Hunter started to chuckle, "Your woman has a point!"



"Stay out of this!" Ryan complained and found a smile spreading across his face.

Twiggy looked at her husband and smiled back to him.

The argument ended with a warm and loving shared kiss.

Meanwhile Kerry and Braden were having their own dispute. As Ryan was pulling Twiggy up, Braden knelt down next to his wife.

"Don't move darling," Braden carefully unbuttoned the bottom of her new riding skirt that was covered in blood.

"Braden, why are you doing that?" Kerry asked innocently.

"I'll see how badly the cougar hurt you, angel," Braden insisted.

"Don't move yet."

"Braden, I appreciate your concern but I'm not hurt except for some bruises on my bottom when I fell," Kerry giggled.

That giggle was too much for Braden and he did see she was not mauled. He exploded. "Kerry Wessex, you are the most stubborn, pigheaded, fool hardy, woman on the face of this earth. Didn't you know you could have been killed?"

"Now wait a minute!" Kerry roared back in anger. "We came out to see the Phantom. We didn't know the rogue cougar was any where near here."

"Don't you know you get into trouble every time you take off by yourself," Braden countered heatedly.

"What?" Kerry shrieked. "How dare you say such a thing?"

"How dare I?" Braden shouted. "You're carrying our baby and you take off all alone not telling me."

"In the first place, I was not alone," Kerry shouted back. "In the second place, why should I tell you everything I'm doing? Do you want to hear about the pie we made two days ago? Perhaps the skirts we were making yesterday? Maybe you'd like to hear about my trip to the water closet this morning!"

"You know what I mean?" Braden growled.

"No I don't know what you mean," Kerry snarled. "Did Twiggy and I know the cat was around here? No! Did you?"

Braden lowered his lashes and tried to look away.

Kerry grabbed his face with her hands. "Look at me Braden Morgan Wessex! You knew didn't you? That's why all of you went out so early this morning. You were going to track the cat?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with anything," Braden protested removing his wife's hands from his face. "You're a woman and have no business out here alone." He reached out to embrace Kerry.

Kerry pushed him back with a hard shove. "Husband," Kerry countered with disgust. "I have been riding the lands of Geneva's Hope since I was knee high to a grasshopper. I know these lands better than anyone except Pa, my brothers, and the people. I can handle myself."



"Not carrying my baby you can't!" Braden snapped. He knew Kerry was right but he couldn't give in. The terrors of his imagination when he saw Maiden and heard her colt 45 were still burning in his mind. "What would Bennett, Garrett, and I do without you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Find another governess?" Kerry shot back sarcastically. Her temper had been fired by Braden's angry words.

Braden sat back on his heels. The look of his shock penetrated through to Kerry's anger. She felt guilty for saying such hurtful words and was about to apologize when Braden said, "Bloody Hell woman, I love you. I was terrified when I saw Maiden coming out of the canyon and you were no where to be seen," Braden bellowed. "I thought my life had ended. If anything happened to you my life would cease to be. I would be a walking shell."

Kerry cocked her brow, "Really?"

"I love you more than I ever imagined I could love. I love you more than Laura. I love you more than life!" Braden yelled. Tears began to roll down his cheeks. "Kerry, I love you. Bloody Hell, I can't even think of living without you!"

"Really?" Kerry teased. Her mouth began forming a small mischievous grin.

"Bloody Hell!" Braden roared and leaned over his wife. Braden's lips captured Kerry's and he didn't release his lip lock until he knew they would both pass out from lack of air. "Does that answer your question?"

Kerry lowered her long eyelashes covering her eyes in a demure ladylike fashion. "I think I got pretty badly bruised. Can you help me up?"

Grady, Dwayne, and Red rode up as Braden lifted Kerry into his arms and walked toward Socks.

"God, is Kerry mauled?" Dwayne shouted anxiously when he saw Braden carry her and saw her bloodied skirt.

"No, she's bruised," Braden answered. He lifted Kerry up and put her on Socks. "Stay there! Don't move! Wait for me."

Princess was behind Runner. She pulled her reins from Grady's hand. Princess pranced until she was next to Twiggy and nuzzled her. Her ears cocked in attention to her mistresses soothing voice. "Princess, come here girl. Are you hurt badly?" Twiggy walked to her side and scratched her withers reassuringly. Twiggy then saw the caked blood wounds of cougar claw marks on her dock, thigh, stifle, and gaskin.

Ryan stayed close behind Twiggy. He never let her get more than a hand grasp away.

"My Ryan, I need to get medicines for Princess. Her cuts could become infected if we don't clean them and poultice them now," Twiggy told Ryan beseechingly. Twiggy loved her horse. The horse her husband Ryan had selected and given as his gift to her.



Tracker stepped forward. "I'll help Twiggy. The medicine plants are by the creek and the moss on the rocks."

"We'll take Princess to the creek and care for her there as we wash her wounds," Twiggy explained to Ryan.

Hesitantly, Ryan agreed. "Stay very close to her Tracker."

Hunter stood up at attention and growled playfully.

"Okay, okay! I trust you Hunter. You'll watch over my Twiggy," Ryan chuckled. His body released some of its tension that had built up when he first saw Princess and her mauled backside.

"Come on Ryan," Braden and Grady called. "We must make a litter to carry this cat."

"Coming," Ryan turned to Twiggy and kissed her gently. "Sweetheart, my heart stopped when for a moment I thought the cat had killed you. I'm sorry if I seem rough or mean, but it's only because I love you."

"I love you more and more every day, husband," Twiggy smiled to Ryan. "Even when you yell at me."

Ryan cast her a sly grin and watched as she turned to take Princess' reins. Tracker and Twiggy led the Appaloosa to the creek with Hunter tagging behind.

While Grady, Braden, Red, and Ryan cut large pine limbs and roped a makeshift travois together, Twiggy cleaned Princess' wounds with clear creek water while Tracker gathered the medicinal plants and ground them into a paste.

Together, Tracker and Twiggy put the paste poultice on the cougar's claw marks. Princess stood patiently as the two ministered her wounds. When Tracker and Twiggy were finished, the men had finished the litter and loaded the dead cougar on it. They had attached the travois to Maiden.

"It sure seems funny that Maiden ran from the cat," Grady murmured. "I know she's not afraid of any cougar, wolf, coyote, or any other four legged varmint."

Kerry still sat patiently on Socks and interjected her own thoughts. "I don't think Maiden ran, Pa. I think she tried to lure the cougar away from Twiggy and me."

"That must be it," Grady agreed.

Twiggy walked Princess up from the creek. "I believe Princess did the same thing for us. She proved her true bravery as she stood without complaint when we put the medicines upon her, and she came to me when you brought her back." Twiggy petted her muzzle, "Didn't you girl?"

Princess snorted and raised her head haughtily in an answer of yes.

Ryan came up behind Twiggy and picked her up. He carried her in his strong arms to Chiseler. Carefully he put Twiggy on his saddle. "We're riding double. Princess is hurt to bad for a rider right now."



Twiggy remained silent as Ryan mounted behind her and positioned her comfortably on his lap. Once he was saddled she turned to look into his loving gray eyes. "I think you use any excuse to keep me snuggled in your arms."

"That's a fact ma'am," Ryan chuckled and pulled her closer to his muscled chest. His hand just below her breasts and a wandering thumb stroked a taut nub every now and then.

"I think Braden has the same plan," Kerry teased her husband as he mounted Socks behind her.

"The exact same plan and the same wandering hand," Braden snickered and cast a knowing glance to Ryan.

Red ignored the men and took Maiden's tether. "Come on girl, let's go home."

Maiden gave a loud snort followed by a whinny. She was ready to head home for the barn.

Grady led the family back to Geneva's Hope ranch house. Braden and Kerry rode on Socks behind Grady. Tracker rode on his pony behind Ryan and Twiggy holding tight to Princess' reins. Red followed Princess with Maiden and the cougar's remains on the travois. Dwayne took end position behind the travois.

Morning Song met the family upon their return. She saw the dried blood on Kerry and Twiggy. "Tam Apo! Protect them!" She ran to Kerry and touched the bloodied skirt. She then turned to Twiggy and saw her bloodied skirt and blouse. "My children!" Morning Song cried and then she saw the wounded Appaloosa. "What has happened?"

Grady dismounted and ran to Morning Song. He embraced his wife and with a soothing voice said, "Kerry and Twiggy killed the crazy cougar. They're not hurt. Princess is the only casualty, but she'll be fine."

"The killer cougar?" Morning Song gasped. "The babies?"

"We're fine, honest," Kerry reassured her stepmother. "And I am one hell of a shot!"

Twiggy giggled, "It's true, mother of my husband. My sister Kerry, calmly aimed her colt and killed it with one bullet."

Morning Song shook her head. "I wish our daughters would stop trying to be warriors."

Little Rain came out holding Garrett and Bennett was by her side. Victoria pranced behind Bennett and greeted her father, Hunter, with a howl.

Hunger followed Victoria but raced to Twiggy as Ryan gently lifted her from the saddle and placed her on the ground. Twiggy knelt to pet Hunger's warm welcome.

Hunger sniffed at the blood on his mistress' skirt and walked up to the dead cat. He howled angrily at it.



Kerry allowed Braden to ease her gently to the ground and she took Garrett in her arms. Garrett cooed happily and snuggled his black haired head into her chin and his face into her breasts.

"Just like your Papa," Kerry laughed.

Garrett gurgled happily.

Bennett saw the blood on his mother's skirt. "Mamma, are you hurt?"

"No Ben. Not even a scratch. Your Mamma killed the bad cougar, honey," Kerry bragged.

"Wow!" Bennett uttered in awe.

"She did it with one shot," Twiggy added for the boy's benefit. "Your Mamma is brave and strong!"

"Wow!" Bennett repeated and he and Victoria joined Hunger at the litter to stare at the cougar. "It's so big!"

Red laughed aloud, "It sure is Ben. I would say that cougar is a trophy all right. Bigger than most cougars I've ever seen."

Braden dismounted and handed Socks' reins to old George. "Will you guys stop this? You're going to give Kerry a swollen head."

"Give me a swollen head, or you won't be able to live it down that a poor little ole helpless female killed a trophy cougar that none of you big ole men could?" Kerry taunted playfully still cuddling her baby son.

"I'm actually grateful you're a top marksman, darling," Braden protested. "You can best me any place but one."

"I wonder where that place could possibly be?" Ryan groaned. He pulled Twiggy close to him. "I think it's time we went home."



Epilogue

October 1879

A buckboard arrived at Geneva's Branch. Samantha, Jerica, and Jason had arrived as planned. Samantha Crawford thanked Trevor Cassidy for the ride from Ely.

Once every two months Samantha would bring her youngest children with her to visit with her daughter, Dayton, or Twiggy as she was now known. The Crawfords would spend a week on the ranch. Jerica and Jason would visit the camp of Bright Moon and were accepted as part of the people. The two children looked forward to their mother's visit with their older sister.

Samantha asked Cassidy to bring in the large box she brought with her whenever he had the chance. She found her daughter with Lucy in the great room. They were sewing baby clothes.

"My just look at you," Samantha beamed. "How is my granddaughter treating you?"

"She's very active," Twiggy smiled and walked to her mother bestowing a hug and kiss on her cheek. "But I'm not complaining. She's going to be very healthy."

Samantha hugged her daughter back and turned to Lucy. "How is your little boy?"

"Making himself known," Lucy chuckled. "Trevor loves to feel our son kicking."

Samantha walked to Lucy and gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Twiggy, I have something for Blue Pool and Brook Pebble. I'd like to give it to him personally."

"Of course, Momma," Twiggy agreed quickly. "What is it?"

"Nothing much, just a little something I'd made," Samantha said evasively. "Where is Ryan?"



"He's upstairs bathing," Twiggy replied raising her brow as she wondered what it was her mother made for her adopted father and his wife. "Ryan had to help deliver one of the foals this morning and he got pretty messed up."

"Speaking of foals, how is Princess?" Samantha asked.

"Princess is as happy as I am. She exercises daily, and somehow I think Chiseler is keeping a close eye on her, just like Ryan does with me," Twiggy teased. "Her and Chiseler's foal should be born early spring."

"Remember, you promised their foal to Jerica," Samantha reminded.

"She would never let me forget," Twiggy giggled. "Why the first thing Jerica does on her arrival is visit Princess and tell her she's going to have a little girl that is going to be dark like her daddy, with Appaloosa spots like her mommy, and a big star on her head. Jerica has already named her Star. I do believe that Princess is going to make it happen just for Jerica."

"I know," Samantha agreed. "As soon as Cassidy helped us down from the buckboard she took off to talk to Princess."

"Why did you want to know where Ryan is?" Twiggy asked in curiosity.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Samantha blushed. "A letter came for him and I was asked to deliver it since we were coming here today."

"A letter?"

"Yes, all the way from England," Samantha replied. "Do you think it's from his brother, Ayden?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Ryan's voice boomed from the doorway. "Good Day, Mother Crawford."

"Good Day, Ryan," Samantha returned cheerily. She did like her son in law. "Here's your post."

"Thank you," Ryan said taking the envelope and going to Twiggy's side. He gave her a kiss and rubbed his hand across her swollen belly. "How are my two girls doing?"

"Just fine, Daddy," Twiggy grinned while she looked into her husband's eyes lovingly. "Oops, she's kicking for Daddy's attention again."

"So I feel," Ryan chuckled. He bent down to kiss Twiggy's belly. "Settle down girl, you've a ways to grow yet before Daddy can hold you."

"We're going to visit Blue Pool tomorrow," Twiggy informed her husband. "Do you want to come?"

"Such a question," Ryan snorted. "If you think you're going to get further away from me than the length of a room, you're wrong! I'll drive the buckboard for you."

"Can't I ride Princess?" Twiggy complained. "The exercise would do us good."



Ryan and Samantha both shouted, "No!"

Ryan continued, "No, absolutely not! You are in no condition to ride a horse! Besides, Princess gets her exercise every day. I don't think Chiseler would like anyone riding her right now. Both of you are in a delicate condition."

"I don't think Chiseler would mind," Twiggy argued.

"Chiseler would mind, just as I mind your even thinking about jostling my little girl around on a horse," Ryan protested.

"A woman in your condition at this time does not ride, Twiggy!" Samantha reinforced Ryan's argument.

"I give up," Twiggy responded. "I'd wear myself out fighting the both of you. Open the post, Ryan."

Ryan sat down on the large divan facing the fireplace and opened the letter. Twiggy crawled next to his side and snuggled as Ryan read the many-paged letter.

"Is it from your brother, Ayden?" Twiggy asked impatiently.

"Uh huh."

Twiggy waited a few more minutes. "What does it say?"

"Curious little one aren't you?" Ryan teased.

"Yes!" Twiggy breathed out in exasperation and punched him playfully on his hard chest. "What does he say?"

Ryan leaned back prolonging the Twiggy's anxiety. He stretched and playfully replied, "Oomph!" when she socked his chest again. "Ayden is coming back to Geneva's Hope the end of this month. He wants to celebrate statehood and he's coming specifically to be here for Lucy's, Kerry's, and our baby's birth."

"How precious," Samantha sighed.

"He also wants to be home for Christmas," Ryan added. "He doesn't expect to leave until spring."

"How wonderful and happy for us," Twiggy beamed. "Ayden will spend some time with us here at Geneva's Branch, won't he?"

"I'll try to persuade him, sweetheart," Ryan answered Twiggy pulling her close to him. He loved the feel of his wife in his arms. "He's bringing guests with him to Geneva's Hope."

"Really? Who?" Twiggy asked.

"A Lord Amherst and his daughter, Lady Paige," Ryan replied nonchalantly. Then the softness of his face changed. It hardened slightly. "It seems Lord Amherst and Ayden have conspired to bring Lady Paige here and keep her captive through the winter in Geneva's Hope."

"Why ever would your brother do that?" Samantha gasped.

"It seems Everett Mann is in pursuit of the lady," Ryan dropped the cannon ball in the middle of the room. "And the lady is now Ayden's wife."



"Everett Mann!" Lucy shrieked in terror just as Trevor Cassidy walked in carrying the box Mrs. Crawford asked him to bring. Cassidy dropped the box on the floor and ran to Lucy.

"It's okay honey bun," Cassidy assured his wife as he embraced her in his arms. "I'm here! Don't upset our little Trace. That man can't touch you! I'll kill him first."

"Everett Mann?" Twiggy choked. "The Everett Mann that did those horrible things to Lucy and Kerry?"

"Who is Everett Mann?" Samantha asked in astonishment at the terror in Lucy's eyes and the disruption the name alone had caused.

"A man who should be dead, but isn't," Ryan answered. "Ayden wrote this is the only place the man won't follow her. He's right!"

"He's got that right! If I see that man's face I'll shoot to kill," Cassidy said with venom. "For what he did to my Lucy, your Kerry, and Lord knows how many other women. There isn't a jury in Nevada that would convict me."

"I think he's more afraid of the people," Twiggy stated on a lighter note and began to giggle.

Her humor was contagious as Lucy, Ryan, and Cassidy started to laugh remembering the stories of Morning Song and Small Bird while Everett Mann was a guest at Eye of Hawk's camp.

"You are ready to kill a man," Samantha sighed indignantly, "and then you begin laughing. I don't understand. What do the Sосoni' have to do with this devil?"

"Sit down mother Crawford," Ryan urged. "We'll tell you."

After Samantha heard the story of Everett Mann at the Eye of Hawk camp she too was laughing solidly. Tears ran down her cheeks and her ribs hurt from the guffaws. "Lord, the man deserved every bit of it. How ingenious of Morning Song and her son, Little Bear."

The next morning the family rode in the buckboard to Bright Moon's camp. Nearly all the lodges had been built. The harvest was plentiful as well as the hunts for game. There would be plenty of firewood, food, and a warm shelter for the people this winter. Like the Eye of Hawk camp, the people were thriving and happy.

Twiggy took Samantha to Blue Pool's lodge. Jerica and Joshua found their friends and went off into the woods nearby to play.

Blue Pool and Brook Pebble greeted the blood mother of Twiggy, "Welcome to our lodge. Come and sit with us."

Ryan walked in carrying the large box Samantha asked him to bring. Sitting down on the floor with Blue Pool she opened it. Two beautiful hand made patchwork quilts were inside.

"I made these quilts from Dayton's old clothes. I had kept them these ten years. I had promised myself I would keep them until I knew for certain my daughter was alive or ... or gone. When we found her, I began making these quilts. One is for you, Twiggy. I want you to give it



to your daughter when she is born. The other is for you Blue Pool. It is my way of thanking you for keeping my daughter alive and well, and for loving her. She has grown into a fine women with your guidance."

Blue Pool accepted the handmade quilt. He smiled at the woman who bore his daughter. "We accept your gift. It will warm us through all the winters Tam Apo gives us. You gave us happiness with your daughter and now with your handwork of love. It is good medicine."