



THE RENEGADE'S WOMAN

BY

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The Renegade's Woman
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Warning:

This erotic romance is not for the reader who likes her romance sweet. It depicts graphic, politically incorrect situations and fantasies, designed for the woman who is not afraid to explore the edgy side of human relationships and sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

COLORADO TERRITORY, 1862

Sally Hewitt lay back on a low granite slab, relishing the feel of the sun's dappled rays on her naked skin. Her long, honey-colored hair was spread out on the rock to dry, her calico dress and camisole draped over a nearby bush. Lord have mercy, it felt glorious to be clean again.

She slipped a hand into the stream swirling below the rock and dribbled water over her face and neck, shivering at the contrast between the early summer heat and the chilly Rocky Mountain snowmelt. The scent of warm pine needles drifted up from the meadow surrounding the small pool where she'd bathed, and she could hear the chatter of jaybirds in the trees overhead.

She dipped into the cool water again, this time letting it run in rivulets down between her breasts and over her stomach. Her muscles clenched in sensual delight. God, she missed the simple pleasures of life on her grandma's Virginia farm. Swimming in the pond, clean feather beds, riding old Dancer, eating anything but biscuits and beans.

Gregory.

The memory of the boy from the farm next door made her smile. She'd let him kiss her once. That had felt glorious, too.

Slowly, the stream water dripped down between her fingers and over her body. She let out a gasp when a cold drop landed on her sensitive nipple. The impertinent bud beaded up and begged for more.

Mmmm. Yes, like that. It had felt exactly like that when Gregory had pressed his lips to hers. She'd quickened then, too, and would have begged for more. But the polecat had just chucked her under the chin and gone looking for her sister, Alyssa.

Not that she blamed him, she thought with a sigh. Alyssa had always been the pretty one. The feminine one. Sally was the tomboy. What they called 'sassy,' for lack of a more flattering term.

She closed her eyes and grinned. Well, that was just fine by her. She was the clean one now, and Alyssa was cowering back at the wagon, safely ensconced in two weeks' worth of dirt and grime, scared witless by Ernie Tompkin's campfire stories

about a war party of Arapaho renegades which he claimed roamed this part of the Territory.

She snorted. Like Ernie Tompkins would know anything about wild Indians.

The water lapped peacefully against the granite, and she pushed out a breath. How would she ever make herself quit this green, tranquil eden to go back to the clouds of dust, the ever-present smell of ox manure, and the eternal squeaking of ungreased wagon wheels?

But go she must. The wagon train waited for no one, and she didn't want to have to kill herself getting back to the Tompkins' covered wagon before it got too far ahead of her.

She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair to comb out the worst tangles the breeze had woven into it as it dried. The sharp snap of a twig behind her made her quickly turn.

Holy mother of God! She froze in terror.

An Indian! On a horse, holding a rifle on his buckskin-clad knee, feathers flying from his long, black hair, and red war paint slashed across his face. A warrior, who was staring at her naked body in a way that told her men were men, regardless of the language they spoke or the color of their skin.

Her heart slammed into her throat and she tried to cover herself with her hands. She bit down hard to keep from screaming. Screeching like a ninny would accomplish nothing. She had to use her wits to get herself out of this. Fingering a thin rope slung bandoleer-style around one of his shoulders, the warrior urged his horse a step toward her.

Sally scrambled to the back edge of her stony perch. "Don't come any closer," she called out, holding up a hand to show what she meant.

Silently, the warrior's dark eyes raked over her body, pausing at her upheld hand, then drilled into hers. Her blood thundered in her ears as she returned his frank stare.

He sat tall and proud on the colorfully woven blanket that served as his saddle. His broad chest gleamed smooth and bronze under a peculiar covering designed of pipe-beads and quills. The thighs that hugged his painted horse's sides were powerful, every corded muscle emphasized by the supple leather leggings covering them. A long knife was sheathed at his hip. She shivered, instinctively reacting to the man's raw virility, and her own vulnerability.

She tried to reason with him. "There's a wagon train just over there," she bluffed in a shaky voice, "and they'll hear me if I scream. They'll kill you if they find you this close. Go away and I won't say a thing about seeing you here."

Her courage flagged badly when it occurred to her that, even if he understood what she was saying, he no doubt knew exactly where the wagon train was, and that there was no way in hell anyone would hear her if she screamed. Her courage failed completely when he holstered his rifle, slid lithely from the horse and started moving

toward her.

His graceful, wolf-like gait, and the exotically sensual angles of his handsome face momentarily captivated her. There was a feral, predatory look in his eyes. And he was coming straight for her.

She screamed and jumped off the rock, slogging as fast as she could across the stream. She couldn't let him take her! She'd heard tales of what women were forced to endure at the hands of these renegades.

Sure-footed steps splashed right behind her as she lurched and tripped over the river cobbles, desperate to reach the other bank of the stream. He caught her by the hair and yanked her to a stop in the middle of the whirling current.

"No!" she shouted. She turned and pounded at him with her fists. Her head jerked back and she felt his hand winding 'round and 'round in her long hair, reeling her in like a fish on a line. He tugged at her again, bringing her tight against his chest, and grabbed one of her wrists in mid-punch.

"Let me go!"

She pummeled his thick biceps with her free hand until she was bruised and exhausted. He just stared down at her, holding her by the hair and wrist, crushing her to him with an arm on her back. She hadn't a prayer of escape. He would take her. She knew it.

Panting and close to tears, she stopped fighting. "Please, let me go."

She drew in a deep gulp of air to steady herself and was assailed by the scent of him. He smelled purely male — of musk and leather and horse, a hint of berries and sweetgrass, and something she couldn't identify. An earthy, erotic smell that spoke to her of forbidden acts and desires.

He shifted against her.

Her body pressed firmly into his solid frame. Strong fingers circled her wrist securely. Her other hand rested on smooth, warm, slightly damp skin. Her bare breasts were squashed to his chest plate, her naked thighs surrounded by the powerful columns of his legs as he braced himself against her attack. She felt the bulge between them grow long and thick against her belly.

An irrational, unwanted flutter of arousal skated from the tips of her breasts down her abdomen and straight to the moist center between her legs.

She met his eyes, and knew that he knew.

Her face heated in horror at her reaction. She had to get away! But her renewed struggles were as ineffectual as a daisy fighting a hurricane.

"Stop," he quietly ordered.

Startled by his utterance, she froze. "You speak English!"

He adjusted his grip in her hair and silently studied her face, taking in her cheekbones, her eyes, her forehead, her nose. Her lips.

Her heartbeat doubled.

His gaze lingered on her lips, and when they parted — completely against her

will — he let go her wrist and reached up to glide a finger over her bottom lip. It felt so good she almost moaned.

The feathers tied in his hair fluttered on the breeze. The chilly stream swirled about their legs, churning up pebbles and mud in a cloud around them, but she barely noticed. He unwound his hand from her hair and spread the thick strands over her shoulders, fingering the texture, examining the golden color in the sunlight. He reached up and brushed her cheeks with both hands, tracing over her trembling jaw and down her neck with the rough pads of his fingers.

She watched his fierce expression as he touched her, mesmerized by the hunger she saw reflected in his eyes. He wanted her. He meant to have her. Her heart hammered in her chest, telling her to run for her life. But the cold water must have numbed the muscles in her legs for they were as leaden as two anchors holding her in place.

His gaze latched with hers as he slid his hand along her collarbone, then dropped it in a slow glide to cover her breast. She gasped. Her shamelessly eager nipple hardened at his touch, sending an agonizing stab of desire all the way to her toes and back up to lodge in her most intimate place. She jerked away, embarrassed by the intensity of her body's response to his trespass.

"No!" she cried again and bolted. She got as far as the bank before she heard his deep, rumbling laugh. She whirled in surprise.

"I will catch you, Pale As Moonlight," he called to her, the devil's own smile on his face. "And then I will make you my woman."

Pale as — "W — What?"

"But we can play eagle and mouse if it is what you want." His eyes challenged her to either come to him or run like the wind.

Panic flooded her as she realized she had little hope of escape. She swallowed. What would it be like to lie beneath this savage stranger, to open herself and accept his body into hers? Terrified of the answer, she turned and flew across the meadow.

He gave her a head start, but was never far behind. She could hear his quiet footfalls, his steady breathing, the rustle of dry leaves beneath his moccasins.

"You're making a big mistake," she panted. "They won't allow this to go unpunished. They'll send the cavalry to hunt you down."

She ran and ran, darted around the trees and bushes, trying her best to elude him. But he was always there, closing the gap between them, slowly but surely. Effortlessly.

It was useless. She felt his hands grasp her around the waist, hauling her to a stop. Winded, she grabbed for the knife at his hip. He easily brushed her off. She squealed a protest when he hoisted her like a sack of feed over his broad shoulder. *Oh, Lord.* Images of what would happen to her flashed through her mind, galvanizing her resistance.

He carried her like so much kindling, despite her kicking and screaming.

"Quiet," he admonished. "The others will hear you."

"Good!" She yelled at the top of her lungs, "Heeeellllp!" beating his back with her fists.

"They'll want their turn."

She clamped her mouth shut.

How could she have been so foolish? Of course he wouldn't be alone. *A war party*, Ernie had said.

He walked back to the meadow with her, and whisked the blanket off his horse, tossing it on the ground and her on top of it.

She peered up at him, frightened. "You'd let them?"

"I'd kill them first," he said calmly.

He swiftly straddled her, gripping her hips between his knees, and stuck his knife into the ground beside the blanket. He unwound the thin sweetgrass rope from around his shoulder, wrapped the middle of it's generous length a couple of times around the trunk of a sapling at the head of the blanket, and with the rope's end proceeded to bind her hands over her head. It didn't seem to bother him that the other end was still looped around his neck so he was as much a prisoner as she. His eyes captured hers in a piercing gaze and he reached down to slowly withdraw his loincloth from under the belt of his leggings. The soft leather rectangle slid away from his hand and slithered onto her stomach.

Suddenly she found it impossible to breathe. The sight of his huge, erect rod, erotically framed in the cutout of his chaps-like leggings, its angry head bobbing inches above her, filled her with terror.

And something else.

Something that felt strangely thrilling.

Excitement.

She slammed down on the feeling.

No! She didn't want this! Couldn't want this! He was a godless savage, and no decent white woman would willingly let a renegade like him touch her. She tugged frantically on her bonds.

"You don't have to do this," she pleaded desperately.

"I want you," he answered, removing his moccasins and quill chest-plate as he knelt over her. A huge bear claw tumbled onto his bare chest, suspended on a leather thong around his neck. "And I see your desire for me."

"You don't." Again, she yanked at her restraints, twisting her body under him, trying to rid herself of his all too tempting weight. "I don't... desire you."

He looked down at her, eyes smoldering, his shapely lips curved in a sensual invitation. Did he know what the sight of those masculine lips did to her?

"You do."

She felt her resistance waver when he gently ran his fingers through her hair, fanning it out on the blanket. The bear claw tickled her throat.

"Your hair is beautiful. The color of a newborn fawn."

She swallowed. Nobody had ever called her beautiful. Not even Gregory. Alyssa was beautiful. Not her.

"And your eyes," he said, tracing a finger over her eyebrows and around her cheekbones. "Like an icy lake in winter, reflecting the blue mountain sky."

She blinked, totally shaken by his admiration. What was he trying to do? Ravish her or woo her? Her eyes squeezed tightly shut when he stroked his hands down her bound arms, over her ribs to the curve of her waist where his knees rested. The rope binding her to him scraped erotically over her nipples. Slowly, his hands retraced a path upward, until he touched the sides of her aching breasts. Unbidden, a whimper of enjoyment escaped her throat.

"Your skin is soft as a rabbit's ears. And pale as moonlight."

She had to resist him. No matter how much her body disagreed.

He leaned in close, gently caressing her. "That shall be your name. Pale As Moonlight."

"I already have a name," she croaked, fast loosing the battle raging within her. "It's Sally. Sally Hewitt."

"There is no more Sally Hewitt." He spoke low in her ear, brushing his broad chest over her so he grazed the points of her beaded nipples. "You belong to me now. You are Standing Bear's woman."

His hands enveloped her breasts and she arched into him. Pleasure lanced through her every pore.

Oh, God.

"Yes!"

Standing Bear smiled in satisfaction over his beautiful enemy's surrender. He'd known the minute he spotted her lying like a vision on that rock, sensually dripping water onto her breasts, that she would be unlike any other woman he'd known. Here was a woman who would match his own passion and love of physical pleasure.

He had to have her.

Not by force. But hot and willing, pleading and moaning for his hard cock to thrust into her.

He squeezed her breasts, savoring their pale weight in his hands. So firm and soft. Her nipples swirled into tight points. So full and responsive. A low moan floated up to his ears.

He would keep her, this spirited woman who feared nothing and lit like a flaming arrow under his touch. This was the woman whose life was meant to replace those so cruelly taken from him. He would keep her, to serve him and pleasure him, and bury himself deep inside her whenever he wished to feel the thunder. She would be his sweet revenge. He would treat this captive well and make her happy so she would

never want to run from him.

"Untie me," she whispered. Her voice was husky, but still uncertain.

He shook his head. "We played your game, now we shall play mine."

She writhed under him, her abdomen rubbing provocatively against his taut balls. Already he was full to bursting, burning to spew his seed into her. But he wanted her ready, slick with need, and hungering for his penetration just as much as he wanted to give it to her.

"What game?"

"This."

He lowered his mouth to her breast and licked her. His senses delighted. She tasted different from anything he'd ever experienced. Like the sweet cream his aunt, White Lily, had once given him. And how could her skin smell like crushed spring blossoms all over?

Starting at the outer edge of her breast, he worked his way inward in a spiral. She shuddered, and he rewarded her response by covering the rosy tip with his whole mouth and suckling. She cried out, a keening sound of pleasure and need. His own need flared. He sucked her again, laving the captive nipple with his tongue. Back and forth, around and around, sucking and biting until she sobbed with pleasure. And he throbbed with lust.

"And this."

Settling onto her body, he moved to her other breast and subjected it to the same teasing. As she lost herself in the talents of his mouth, he sent his hands to explore the rest of her. Everywhere she was smooth and silky, her skin soft as a summer cloud.

"Oh, Standing Bear."

She breathed his name on a trembling moan. The sound of it filled his heart with unexpected emotion. He wanted to hear it again and again. To have her always look at him with the dreams he saw in her eyes at this moment.

How had this woman of his enemy bewitched him so quickly?

Grasping her rosy nipples between his fingers, he trailed his tongue up her chest, tasting her long, slim neck, her delicate earlobes, her shapely jaw. He nibbled her ear and plunged his tongue deep into the whorling center. Exquisite.

She moaned and turned her face to his. Her eyes were glazed with passion, her lips parted. He wanted to lick her there, too. Inside her mouth.

"Will you... kiss me?"

Her eyes were focused on his, and she was watching him with shy trepidation. His cock swelled. "My aunt does this... kissing. It is for babies."

The corner of his lip twitched at the memory of his mother's brother's reaction the first time his captive wife had kissed him in front of friends and family. Such a thing was unheard of. But she had persisted in the habit, and gradually his uncle's embarrassment had turned to something else, more akin to amused indulgence. Pride, even.

But it was still better practiced on the heads of babes, not warriors. The whole business seemed very strange to him.

"Men and women do it, too," Pale As Moonlight said, an odd light in her eyes. It was obvious she wished to do this thing.

If it would ease her way to becoming his, he could tolerate it. "Teach me."

The pink tip of her tongue peeked out from between her moist lips and he nearly groaned out loud. How he longed to feel that tongue paint over his body like a wet chamois in a sweat lodge.

"Then untie me."

He came back to himself. A wicked grin creased his face. "No. I think we will save this kissing for later. I am not ready to let you loose yet."

"I won't run."

"I know." He reached between them and touched her breasts again. She was helpless to resist him when he did that, and he wanted her to have no doubt he could control her as he wished.

She sucked in a breath. "Then why?"

"It excites me."

He lifted up and rose to stand above her, one foot on either side of her hips, the rope giving him just enough slack to straighten up. He saw her swallow heavily, from both his words and the sight of his masculinity displayed so blatantly before her. She glanced at his belt buckle as he unfastened it, and he saw the flash of recognition at the familiar design worn by the white man's Horse Soldiers.

Her ice-blue eyes widened as he stripped off his leggings and tossed them aside. The implications of the buckle had brought a sheen of fear back into her eyes as they swept over his now-naked body. That was fine. A little fear enhanced a woman's passion.

"Spread your legs," he ordered.

CHAPTER TWO

Sally stared at Standing Bear, mortified by his softly spoken command.

"I—"

"Now." His expression brooked no resistance.

What choice did she have but to submit? If she did so, he'd have no reason to harm her, and she'd be on her way back to the wagon train as soon as it was over. He couldn't possibly kidnap her this close to the wagon train. The consequences would be too dire, even for a lawless renegade.

She squeezed her eyes shut and moved her legs a fraction apart, turning her head so he couldn't see her raging blush. She coiled her fingers about the ropes that bound her, holding tight against what surely would follow. There would be no cavalry rescue from this man. His belt buckle said loud and clear who would win that battle. He would take what he wanted, and she must make it easy for him to let her go afterwards.

He knelt over her and wedged a knee between her thighs. First one muscular leg insinuated itself into the gap, then the other. He splayed her wide, opening her to his sight and his carnal demands.

She shook with terror. What had ever possessed her to think she might like this?

To her surprise, his hands began caressing her legs, running up and down them with light, almost tickling fingers. With every stroke he came nearer and nearer the site of her womanhood, the secret place no man had looked upon—or touched—before this day. For long moments she dared not even breathe.

"Be calm, Pale As Moonlight. I will not hurt you."

She was beginning to believe him. If he had meant to roughly violate her, he would have done so by now. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

At his persistent gentleness, her fear slowly ebbed, but her trembling continued. She couldn't control it. Whenever his fingers neared the juncture of her thighs, she shook like a leaf caught in a lightening storm. Chills and hot bolts streaked through her body, radiating outward from the dark, velvet place she most feared he would touch.

She squirmed, opening her legs more fully.

The place she most *wished* he would touch.

Her eyes shot open at the realization. *She wanted his hands on her.* All over her. On every exposed curve and in every hidden furrow.

Oh, she was shamelessly wanton! His gaze was on her face now, measuring the depth of her depravity. How could he possibly miss her arousal at the sublime wickedness of her exposed position? At the way this savage stranger spread her legs

apart to accept his male invasion? At the feel of his bronze fingers probing the moist folds of her untried virgin flesh?

His eyes darkened to raven black as he slid his thumb up, up her woman's crease to glide around the hard pearl at the apex. She convulsed, crying out at the tumult of sensation that exploded within her. She strained at her ropes, bucking and gasping with each pass he made over the sensitive nub. It was heaven. It was hell.

"What are you doing to me?" she moaned. "Is this some kind of barbaric magic?"

She was going to come apart. She'd never felt such blinding pleasure! She wanted it to go on and on, and yet every touch of his hands made her groan in frustration for... for what she didn't know.

"Do you like this magic?" he crooned.

"No! Yes..."

"Look at you, unfurling like a spring bud, dripping with nectar. Longing for the sting of the hummingbird's feed."

She thrashed about, wanting to free her hands. She wanted to bury her fingers in his hair, pull him to her and —

"Or a sweet honeycomb craving the lap of the bear's tongue."

His thumbs spread her nether lips and his unrelenting mouth covered her, sealing her in white-hot pleasure. His tongue stroked her and began a searing, twirling, primitive dance around the flaming bonfire of her need.

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

Unconsciously, she clamped her knees, holding him tight against her in the only way she could. She wanted him to — needed him to —

The earth stood still and in that instant she knew pure lust. "Oh, God!" It crashed in on her, erupting in a gatling canopy of sensation, ripping her world apart with the intensity of a cannon blast.

She screamed.

When she came to, her bonds had been untied and Standing Bear lay on top of her, his broad chest pinning her to the blanket. She lowered her arms gingerly and with her fingertips touched his corded neck, the bear claw necklace, his darkly handsome face, until her head stopped spinning. He turned and pressed his mouth to her palm, licking and nipping at her.

She smiled uncertainly, utterly amazed. "I had no idea..."

He glanced up, his half-lidded eyes heavy with intent. "Good?"

She curled her arms around his neck, playing with the long strands of midnight hair. "Good doesn't even come close." The two red stripes painted across his cheekbones had smudged.

He grunted, then teased the sensitive spot just below her ear with his tongue. "There's more."

"I —" Unbelievably, a coil of desire tightened her womb to a tense spring of heated wanting. *The man was a demon.* He moved and she felt the thick, steely length of

him nestle against her eager opening.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he ordered, nipping at her neck when she didn't obey fast enough. His arms slid around her and held her in a tight embrace. She felt the plum-shaped tip of his erection push into her slick passage, stopping when it met resistance.

"I am your first."

She dug her fingers into his shoulders and braced herself in his massive strength. "Yes," she whispered, her face burning.

With a feral growl, he grasped her hips and held her immobile. "You are mine. Only mine." He thrust into her with one swift, powerful stroke. She cried out at the sharp pain of the breaching, but it was over as soon as it started.

She felt him throb inside her, a huge, hard presence, filling her where before there had been only emptiness.

His face contorted with restraint as he hovered above her. He took the bear claw necklace from his neck and placed it around hers, the look in his eyes fiercely possessive. "You belong to me, now," he said in a low, rough voice.

He felt so very big and... heavy inside her. *And exquisitely perfect.* She licked her lips, moving a little, rocking experimentally so his massive length slid further in.

He groaned. "You are hungry for me, Pale As Moonlight. I am pleased." He dragged his cheek across her temple. His tongue crept out and flicked over her ear. "Teach me this kissing."

Her eyes widened. "Now?"

She wanted to explore the delicious feeling of being one with him, plumb the new senses shimmering in her body at his conquest of it. Kissing seemed rather a tame pursuit at the moment.

He licked her eyelids and down her nose, slanting his mouth over hers. "It will help me go slowly. I would make your first joining last longer than the call of the whippoorwill."

His strained smile held concern, and a touch of self-amusement.

At his expression, something inside her melted to mush. In that moment she knew this wild, untamed renegade had not only claimed her body for his own, but her heart as well.

"I am so glad –" She reached up and tenderly pressed her lips to his. " – to have a man such as you for my first lover."

"Only lover," he corrected absently, paying close attention to the way she moved her lips against his.

A masculine purr rumbled against her breasts and he settled more comfortably into the cradle of her thighs, pushing his hard arousal yet further in. Her breath caught at the bursting fullness of his penetration into her. But he was concentrating on their mouths, and nipped at her bottom lip impatiently when she didn't continue kissing him.

"Ow!"

Bringing her focus back, she feathered her fingers through his hair and held his head. "Purse your lips like this," she instructed when he didn't seem to get the position right. "Yes, like that. Then make a little noise, like this." She bussed the air.

He gave her an incredulous look. "Foolishness." But he tried it, somewhat reluctantly planting a kiss smack on her lips.

She giggled, but it swiftly turned into a moan at the resulting tightness between her legs. She wriggled up against him, impaling herself more thoroughly upon his splendid staff. "Um, Standing Bear, could we —"

He kissed her again, this time more competently.

Momentarily distracted, she murmured her approval, "Mmmm. Yes, I think you've got it."

She kissed him back, wandering back and forth across his mouth with hers, giving him little kisses at the corners of his lips and up his cheek. He responded in kind, tilting the angle of his face to better fit. His tongue joined his lips as they trailed over hers. A shiver zinged up her spine followed by a very naughty thought.

"I've heard," she murmured breathlessly, "that some people open their mouths while they kiss."

"Oh?"

"It's considered very wicked."

"You like being wicked..." he softly suggested, catching her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He moved within her as he pulled her mouth open. "...don't you?"

Oh, yes. His tongue extended slowly and entered her mouth. It touched hers and she tasted him. He tasted like tangy smoke and savory spice and a lingering hint of her own ecstasy. *Ohhhh, yes.* She curled her tongue up and tentatively stroked his, answering his movement below with a ripple of her inner muscles.

A guttural sound ripped through his chest and his body ground into hers. He covered her mouth and plunged his tongue into her, sucking, biting, laving every surface he could reach with his fiendishly clever appendage. She closed her eyes, drowning in the wonderfully lascivious sensations he wrought upon her, each one more delicious than the next.

Working her mouth thoroughly, he seized the back of her knee in his large hand and lifted, stretching her wide. Slowly — excruciatingly slowly — he withdrew his fiery rod from her tight passage, until only the very tip was left inside her. She nearly swooned. She wanted more.

"Please," she moaned into his mouth. "Put it back in!"

She thought she would die if he didn't put it back in. Her civilized veneer shattered and she became as wild and untamed as he. She rolled her hips, seeking him. He drove in, filled her to the hilt. She clutched at his back, raking him with her nails.

"Again!"

He pumped into her and she arched to meet his thrust, greedy for his ownership, wanting his hot brand deep within her. His tongue mimicked his sex, ravishing her mouth as he ravished her body. His strong arms crushed her to his broad chest. She felt totally claimed, consumed, filled. *Whole.*

For the first time in her life, she felt whole.

Over and over he sank his potent male shaft into her, plunging in and out, in and out, until she thought she would ignite. Gasping and panting, she clung to his powerful body as he rode her, spurring her faster and faster to a beautiful, primitive ecstasy.

"Come with me," he urged, his voice rough with passion. "Hear the thunder!"

His back muscles leaped and strained under her hands, his hips slapped against hers. The edges of her vision prisms into a million bright colors. He scythed into her, her body screaming in savage pleasure.

She cried out and her climax exploded, fueled by the hot liquid flame of his seed spurting into her. Her muscles clenched around him, milking his hard, pulsing length as he pumped, until they both lay spent and exhausted, tangled in each other's arms, fighting for breath.

She was a witch.

Standing Bear gulped down air to his starving lungs and lifted his sweating brow from the woman's mass of blond hair. He had heard white women could drive a warrior crazy with lust. Some said it was a special witchcraft they possessed. He'd always thought the rumors were just jealous gossip by women in the tribe who'd lost their sweethearts to female captives.

Now he wasn't so sure.

He'd never lost control like that before. Pale As Moonlight had driven him to heights he'd never have believed possible between a man and a woman, even in his most fevered vision dreams. He was more determined than ever to keep her as his captive. He wanted that fire for himself, for always.

He started to withdraw his body from hers, but to his surprise she held him tight.

"Don't go. Stay for a minute."

He settled back down on her, more pleased by her request than was wise. He must remember she was his enemy, however delectable. "A short time. Then we must go. Am I not heavy?"

Smiling, she kissed his jaw. "A little. But I like it. I want to remember this moment for the rest of my life."

"I will remind you every night."

Her expression turned wistful and she caressed him. "Yes, you'll be with me in all my dreams."

"Dreams? No, Pale As Moonlight, I'll be with you under the sleeping rug,

making you shudder and sigh my name."

Her body went still. "Wh— What do you mean? Surely you don't think — I couldn't possibly —"

"You will." He looked at her seriously, fingering the bear claw about her neck. "You are my woman now. I told you this."

"But I thought..." Alarm filled her expressive blue eyes, then panic. She tried to push him away, struggling to sit up. "No! You got what you wanted from me. And God help me, I even enjoyed it. A lot. But I have to get back to the wagon train. My sister —"

He wrestled her arms to the blanket, annoyed at the change that had come over her. "You are my captive. You'll do as I say."

"But that's barbaric! I refuse to be slave to a savage!"

The impact of her words hit him like a hard slap. It was *her* people who were the savages, not his. Incensed, he growled out, "You will be what I tell you. Slave, wife or sister — you will obey me. If I want to sell you to another man, you will obey me! If you don't want me to slit your pretty white throat, *you will obey me!*"

She let out a gasp, her eyes wide with fright, like a doe facing a hunter's arrow. His cock grew hard inside her, and he was filled with the urge to slake his anger in her pliant body. To rape her as her people had raped the sacred lands of the buffalo, and much, much more. Rape her as he had wanted to when he first saw her lying like a vision on that rock, hot and naked and ready for the taking.

He rolled off her, disgusted with his thoughts. This was not his way. He was a Leader of the Club Men, a respected Badger Men warrior who acted with honor in all things.

The People of Our Own Kind had always taken captives in war. All tribes did. It was a good practice, bringing in new blood, keeping the tribe vigorous and healthy. Women grew up knowing it could happen any time. Expecting it. Just as a warrior of the Badger Men expected to tie his rope to his staked club and die defending them.

This woman would grow used to the idea in time. They all did.

He leapt to his feet, dragging her with him. A stab of guilt lanced through his belly when he saw her blood-smeared thighs. He had done this to her. He should be tenderly holding her, soothing her discomfort, not howling at her like the north wind.

Calming himself, he took a deep breath and looked into her frightened eyes. "I will not let you go."

She stared at him, her fear dissolving to outrage. "They'll find me. They'll hunt you down and kill you."

He turned to the stream, coiling his sweetgrass rope back into position over his left shoulder. "Come. I will wash you."

She yanked her arm from his grip. "I can wash myself," she said, and flounced toward the water.

His teeth ground together as he held his temper. "It is my duty as your man."

"What kind of man would hold a woman against her will?" she spat out,

splashing in up to her knees, her shapely bottom turned to him.

"A man who wants to share his lodge with her for the rest of his life."

He saw the nearly imperceptible wilt of her spine and recognized the sign of weakening in her defiance. Pressing his advantage, he closed the gap between them, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. He stood behind her and tugged her to him, back to chest. Her skin was still warm and fragrant from their loving. He breathed in of her scent, of their scent together, and swallowed down the desire that swelled him anew. He didn't know what it was about her that pulled at him so. He only knew she was meant to be his.

"What do you leave behind? There is no man. This trail of wagons carries you to an unknown place. What will you miss if you stay?"

"My sister —"

"Does your sister keep you warm at night? Feed and protect you? Make you feel like I did this day?"

He felt her swallow deeply. "No. But I'm responsible—"

He turned her in his arms and held her face between his hands. "She will find her own man. Her own place. Yours is with me."

Her eyes grew soft and luminous, the delicate snowflake fringe around them dancing in the sunlight. As he looked into those pale blue eyes, something stirred inside him, a feeling for her that ran deeper than mere physical lust.

Swiftly, he brushed the feeling aside. She was his revenge, nothing more. A sweet revenge, true, but poor compensation for the lives lost to him. It would be dangerous to care for her. She was the enemy, and he was deep in enemy territory. At any given moment his life depended on the decisions he made. Emotions could lead even a seasoned warrior to become careless.

Just by taking her captive, he violated the rules of the band of warriors he rode with. He would have a fight on his hands when he met the others. Keeping her would jeopardize their trading mission with the Leader of the Wagons. But Standing Bear would not let her go. He couldn't. Not after tasting the pleasures hidden in her tantalizing body, and after seeing the vision of his future in her eyes.

As if reading his thoughts, she said softly, "I've never met a man like you. And a part of me wants to throw all caution to the wind and come with you. But think about what would happen if I vanished!"

The inner glow that had begun with her first words squelched. "You will be with me."

"There are a lot of men on that wagon train, and you know every one of them is itching to kill himself an Indian. You wouldn't stand a chance."

He smiled indulgently. How little she knew of him. Of this country. If he so chose, they could live for years without ever seeing another human. The land was big and bountiful, and he knew of high mountain valleys where they could stay hidden for as long as they wished, making love all day, with only an occasional break to bring in

food from his traps.

For the first time in his warrior's life, the idea held a certain appeal.

Not that he would ever act on it. Not without his people by his side.

"It is your Wagon Men who will not stand a chance," he said, deadly serious, "if they try to take you from me."

He tipped her face to his and bent down to give her one of the kisses he knew she cherished. Her lips were soft and yielding. A tiny tremor ran through her as he claimed her mouth.

Let them try to take her from me.

Sally stepped back from the sensual assault Standing Bear was putting her mouth through, afraid if she gave in to him completely, she would lose all ability for thought and reason.

"Please, wait. We need to talk about this."

She couldn't believe she was actually entertaining the notion of running off with a wild Arapaho Indian. Lord, she would probably be dead within a month, if not by the hand of his tribesmen, or a stray cavalry bullet, then from the weak, helpless state his carnal use would surely put her in.

Not that that last part sounded so bad...

"Come here." Standing Bear knelt and poured icy water over her thighs with cupped hands. "I will wash you and then we will go. My companions —"

His head jerked up at the sound of a distinctive bird call coming from deep within the forest. "We must hurry," he said, and proceeded to cleanse her quickly but thoroughly.

She blushed at the intimate caress of his fingers and shivered at the chilly water spilling over the sensitive area. But it felt so good, she sank to her knees, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Maybe there were other means to convince a man. One way or the other, she had to talk him into letting her go.

She would be nobody's slave. Not in this lifetime. She'd seen enough slaves on the Virginia plantations surrounding her grandma's farm to know that was not what she wished from life. Her family had never believed in the horrible practice of owning other human beings. The war raging over this very issue was the reason she'd been forced to flee her Southern home.

But she didn't want to leave Standing Bear without tasting him one last time.

She parted her lips and teased him with her tongue until he made a strangled sound and opened to her. She led the kiss, showing him with her mouth how much she had savored his loving.

The water swirled around them, the current rapid and cold. Sharp rocks jabbed into her knees, but she didn't care. She would miss this man with all her heart. If only he were white, one of the many single men on the wagon train heading for a new life

out West, as she was. It was so unfair that the man she had given herself to, the man she found herself inexplicably drawn to, was forbidden to her. A man who would keep her as a slave.

A second bird called out from the opposite side of the stream. Standing Bear broke the kiss, glancing around.

"Get dressed," he ordered abruptly and tugged her to her feet. "They are coming."

"Who?" she asked nervously, struggling to keep up with him as he strode up the bank.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and the air was filled with the loud, shrill whistle of a third strange birdcall.

"What was that for?" she said, plucking her clothes from the bush and feeling to see if they were dry. Satisfied they were, she slipped her camisole over her head.

"I'm calling the others." He'd pulled his leggings on, tucked in his loincloth, and was working on tying his chest plate. He eyed her.

She glanced down. A mixture of embarrassment and illicit pleasure filled her at the sight of her own half-clothed body.

There was something very sexy about standing in front of a man, her breasts covered in thin lawn but her curly intimate triangle exposed to his eyes. Standing Bear's reaction was powerful, immediately visible beneath the soft leather at his groin.

With a choke, he turned determinedly and swiped up the knife from the ground, and the blanket as well. "Cover yourself."

Inordinately pleased, she nevertheless did as she was bid. She'd just finished fastening the top button of her dress when three Indian warriors galloped pell mell into the clearing, horses snorting and weapons flashing in the sun.

They pulled to a stop, glanced at Standing Bear, then spurred toward her, circling her with rearing, outlandishly painted horses. Yelping war cries at the top of their lungs, they swung clubs and tomahawks over their heads. One brave pulled his rifle from its holster and shook it in the air. Then he pointed it right at her.

She took one look at his harsh, glittering eyes and sank to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER THREE

With narrowed gaze, Standing Bear watched his companions circle his captive on their ponies. He knew Two Otters would not fire. They were too close to the wagons. His friend Whistling Hills and Black Crow, the Cheyenne who'd joined them for the trading mission, looked more surprised at finding him with a white woman than eager for trouble.

When Pale As Moonlight's spirit fled and she started to fall, Standing Bear moved like lightning and caught her before her head hit the ground.

"I claim her," he said, and watched the men's reactions. He lifted her limp body across his arms and stood, defying any one of them to challenge his right to the woman.

"Have you gone crazy?" shouted Whistling Hills, who had known him since his first winter, a look of horror on his face.

"We will all have a turn and then we will kill her," said Two Otters, dismounting with the grace of a cat, still holding his rifle trained at her — and him.

Pale As Moonlight stirred. Standing Bear cradled her against his chest, adjusting her weight. She murmured something unintelligible and her eyes fluttered open, gazing up at him with slow recognition. She smiled, then gasped as she remembered what had happened, her body going rigid when she spotted the three warriors closing in on them. An unexpected wave of protectiveness swept over him. He would not let them hurt her.

Everyone spoke at once, loudly. He knew it was a mark of the extraordinary situation that the usual calm council between warrior brothers did not reign. Standing Bear carefully let the woman's feet drop to the ground and held her while she gained her legs before he quietly interrupted the chaos.

"She is mine. She comes with us."

She slid around behind his back, her trembling hands clutching his waist like a drowning child. He was gratified at the way she hid herself from the other men's prying eyes, telling them she belonged to him alone.

"She will leave her scent like a bitch in heat," Two Otters snarled. "And the white dogs will track us down for violating her. They will kill us and everyone in our village. Better to put a knife in her heart right here and now."

"The village is well hidden. The whites will never find us."

Whistling Hills laid a hand on his shoulder. "Do not do this thing, my friend. You must think of the mission. Many are counting on a good trade with the wagons. Without the exchange of our hides and dried meat for their cloth, blankets and trinkets, we will have nothing to offer when the Pawnee come to trade their crops. Then we must

live on buffalo."

Whistling Hills might as well have said, 'Then we must live on thin air,' for they all knew how hard the buffalo were to find these days. It was the only reason their band had joined with the Cheyenne to organize a trading mission with their mutually sworn enemy, who had recently begun bringing their trail of wagons through the territory.

Standing Bear sloughed off his friend's hand and ground out, "Then we shall live on buffalo. I will have her."

His head ached. He shouldn't have to think about something as natural as keeping a woman. It was the way things had always been done, since ancient times. Always, until the white man came — along with their unnatural weapons and wagons and their unnaturally hostile reaction to the abduction of their women. Against these, the ancient ways of the Indian did not stand a chance.

A sickening feeling settled in his stomach. Could he really sacrifice the welfare of his people for the sake of his misplaced lust? For that was all this white woman meant to him. A sweet, warm receptacle to slide his hungry cock into. Nothing more.

He wouldn't let her mean more.

"Have you had a dream?" Whistling Hills asked.

He was tempted to lie. To say he had. For that would close the discussion right there, and they could mount up and ride back to the village in agreement, Pale As Moonlight behind him on his pony, regardless of the consequences.

He shook his head regretfully. "No dream."

"Then let's kill her and be done with it. She'll tell the Wagon Men where we are, what you have done." Two Otters' obscene gesture told him exactly what the man thought had transpired. "What we all did..." He took a step toward them, his rifle still raised.

Up to that point, the Cheyenne had remained silent, observing. Ignoring Two Otters' threat, he now spoke up.

"Cloud Man," Black Crow said, at once reminding Standing Bear of his place within his people, Black Crow's own position as honored guest among them, and the respect due the man's age and status from all three of the younger braves. "Cloud Man, let us sit and we will all speak our hearts on this matter."

Sally shifted nervously, sitting astride Standing Bear's horse. He'd led her over and hoisted her onto its back what seemed like hours ago. Ever since, the four Indian men had been sitting on their haunches in a tight circle, arguing and glaring at each other. She had a sinking feeling she knew exactly what they were discussing so vehemently.

Her.

They were deciding whether to take her away as a captive or just kill her and be done with it.

What a fate to choose between.

Four months earlier, her grandma had pressed what little money she'd saved into Sally's hand, insisting that she and Alyssa leave Virginia, just so the sisters wouldn't be forced to endure a similar doom there. Units of unruly Union soldiers made regular forays to their area, wrecking havoc on crops, livestock and any young women they ran into. The Confederates knew of the family's long-time stand against slavery, so they were regularly harassed by them as well. It was only a matter of time before one of the sisters was subjected to a fate neither she nor Alyssa cared to contemplate. So they'd reluctantly agreed to the long trek West, to the home of a distant cousin in far-off California.

Sally thought of the sacrifice her aging grandma had made in order to keep her only granddaughters safe. She must survive her present ordeal, if only for Grandma's sake.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Sally fingered the odd wooden, sword-like club hanging from a leather strap over the horse's withers. It was painted and decorated all along its edges with feathers. A strange-looking weapon. Beside it hung a sheathed Winchester rifle. For a brief second, she considered lifting the gun and shooting her way out of this, but decided she didn't stand a chance of living through the attempt. With her shooting skills, she could kill one of them, maybe two, before they returned fire. But not four. And not Standing Bear. No matter what he intended, she could never kill him.

But what of him? Would he use that rifle on her today? Or would she live out her days sleeping in a teepee, playing servant and concubine to a savage renegade? She bit back the tears that threatened.

No. That was unfair. There was nothing savage about Standing Bear. Yes, it was true he'd taken her virginity, and would probably have done so even if she hadn't wanted it herself. But she'd never met a man so gentle and thoughtful in all his ways, despite his overpowering strength. Or so passionate. Or so deeply, provocatively sexual. He had but to glance her way and she was wet and longing for his touch.

It was *she* who was the renegade, ready to throw herself under a stranger, a wild red Indian, and slake his every lusty urge at a moment's notice. She was a wicked, wicked woman. A lascivious wanton who deserved everything she got and more.

She nearly tumbled to the ground when, suddenly, the men rose as one and went for their horses. Standing Bear jumped up behind her, slid an arm around her waist and pulled her back to fit her body against his. He didn't say a word, his face grim, but simply fell in with the others as they wheeled and nickered to the horses, moving out as a tight unit.

With one hand on the reins, he used the other to unfasten a couple of buttons on her dress. He slipped his hand inside, fondling her breast as they rode. The heat of arousal mingled with that of embarrassment when she noticed the other men watching with interest.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked timidly, growing more aroused and

more nervous by the minute. Her nipple was long and aching tight between his fingers. What would he do next? And did he plan on doing it in front of his friends?

He continued to play with her for a while before he answered, and she thought maybe he'd just ignore her question. But after several breathless minutes, he buttoned up her dress, tucked the bear claw necklace into it, and said, "Plans have changed."

Her heart quailed. "Changed? How?"

He refused to say more. She swallowed heavily.

She would die. She knew it had been decided.

They arrived at a small clearing at the base of a hill, surrounded by tall trees. Her heart pounded like heavy artillery when Standing Bear handed her down from the horse and slid off beside her. Glancing at the others, she wondered if they would rape her before she died. She trembled with fright as he led her to the edge of the trees and stood to face her.

"You are mine now," he said, "and will be for all time." He pulled his long knife from its sheath at his hip.

A small cry came from her throat. "Please," she whispered. "Don't—"

He lifted the knife and she closed her eyes, unwilling to watch him spill her lifeblood. But instead of the kiss of cold steel on her neck, she felt a slight tug on a lock of hair at her temple. Her eyes shot open in time to see him curl the lock in a loop and tuck it into a small leather pouch she hadn't noticed before, hanging on his belt.

"Standing Bear?" she said on a breath, hardly believing her eyes.

"We part now," he said softly, sheathing his knife. "But soon, I will come for you."

He didn't touch her. She ached for his arms to surround her and soothe her fears. Would he send her away and then have his friend shoot her in the back? But no, he'd just said he would come for her. She shook her head. "I don't understand. You're setting me free?"

He looked at her long and hard. "It is best you stay with the wagons." He jerked his pursed lips toward the forest behind her. "You will find them just through those trees. Now, go."

Her mouth dropped open.

Just like that?

With no hug? No kiss good-bye? No 'Thanks for the roll on the blanket, Miss Hewitt, it's been fun,' at least? She snapped her mouth shut and ruthlessly cut off her irrational hurt and betrayal. Instead, she sent up a heartfelt prayer of thanks for her life and His deliverance from the temptations of the flesh.

As she lifted her skirts and fled through the pines at a dead run, she vowed she'd never touch a man again in her life. She swore to God she wouldn't. Especially not a darkly handsome man with the eyes of the devil himself — and the touch of a heavenly angel.

Letting out a long sigh, Standing Bear turned to face his companions. He needed a sweat. He needed some of his uncle's Forgetting Herbs. He needed a sing to rid himself of the bewitchment of the woman who had just high-tailed it away from him like a frightened jackrabbit. How fickle women were.

Then again, he should expect no less from a woman of his enemy. He knew firsthand the white man was as changeable as the wind. A man's friend one day, the next his executioner. Why should he believe their women were any more honorable?

He'd made her body feel good, and she'd rewarded him with smiles. He was a fool to believe she'd give him loyalty. Or her heart.

Whistling Hills watched him, sympathy painted on his kindly face. Standing Bear avoided his eyes and swiftly mounted his pony. He didn't need his friend's sympathy. He needed a good kick in the ass for letting himself want this woman enough to spoil the trading mission, ruin his status in the tribe, and haunt his body and spirit to the point of physical pain. For already he felt the pangs of her absence, deep in his gut.

He had accepted Black Crow's ultimatum, but he didn't have to like it. His only consolation was that, in the end, he'd have this woman back. One way or another, he would have her back. On this he swore his life.

"Indians up ahead!"

The shout came from an outrider galloping along the line of wagons, spreading the wagonmaster's orders. Sally's heart stalled, then beat double-time in her breast. *Indians?* He just wouldn't give up...

"Stay next to yer wagons and stash all weapons!" the outrider, Jeb, yelled as he continued down the line. "It's a friendly scouting party comin' to organize a trade in a few days, and Mr. Dexter don't want no trouble! Jest act like they ain't even thar!"

Yeah, sure. If it was Standing Bear, she could ignore him like she could ignore a bad case of the hives.

He'd been hunting her for four days now — or four *nights*, to be strictly accurate. Ever since he'd let her go.

The first night, it had been her own shameless body that had summoned his memory, dreaming of his touch, endlessly reliving the ecstasy they'd shared that day by the stream. In one erotic dream after another all through the night, he touched her and kissed her and made passionate love to her, until she'd awakened in a haze of sublimely sated frustration.

Lord, she wanted him back.

If he had called then, she would have gone. Like Ulysses to the siren's song, she would have succumbed to the lure of his potent sexual appeal, sacrificing all else — her judgment, her good reputation, and more than likely her very life — to the hedonistic pleasures she knew he would gift her with.

Luckily, she'd come to her senses.

She was shameless! And he was a dangerous brute who wanted only to tear her away from her only family and the new life she sought at the end of the trail West.

The next night the birdcalls had started. The ones she knew were really him. Deep in the dead of night they had come. First softly, then more insistent. She'd firmly covered her ears and buried her head under the coat she used as a pillow.

"Oh, Sally, I'm so frightened!"

Alyssa's long fingers painfully clutching her arm brought Sally back to the present with a start. She gathered her wits.

"Don't be silly. Jeb said it was a friendly trading party."

Her sister had no idea just how friendly. At least, one of them.

"But everyone knows all Indians are bloodthirsty savages!"

Alyssa'd been talking to Ernie again. The man was a terrible influence. Her sister wasn't normally so wrongfully unjust. Not even back on the slave plantations in Virginia had Alyssa had an unkind word for any man, regardless of his color.

"Sis, they're just people like you and me. You'd be mad, too, if they took away Gramma's farm and stampeded buffalo through all the crops."

Alyssa stared at her as if she'd grown horns. "What are you talking about? We're about to be scalped in our sleep and you're talking about buffalo on Gramma's farm?"

Sally gave her sister a hug. Ernie must have spun some pretty gruesome tales. And heaven knew, they were probably true. But she'd take her chances with the Indians rather than put up with Ernie's brand of self-important swaggering.

"Lys, Mr. Dexter would have had us circle the wagons if there was any danger."

That seemed to mollify Alyssa. "Still, I think I'll ride in the wagon with the Tompkins' for a while. Come with me? Please?"

"No. I'm not afraid and the poor oxen have enough to pull without adding me to the weight."

Sally trudged on, keeping her distance of about fifty feet from the trail so she wouldn't be breathing in the dust and odors of the horses, oxen and wagon wheels. There was another seventy feet or so to the edge of the woods on her left, and a spread of prairie grass to the right.

Up ahead, a deathly silence enveloped the wagons. Usually, there was talking and shouting amongst the men and families traveling along together, the clang of pots and the cheerful whoops of children playing as they ran alongside the slow-moving conveyances. Now, though, everything was suddenly still except for the grinding of iron wheel-guards on gravel and the occasional low of an ox. A shudder ran down Sally's spine as she spotted four Indian warriors sitting like statues on their horses at the forest edge far ahead, watching the progress of the wagons roll by.

Lord have mercy, what would he do when he saw her?

There was no doubt in her mind it was Standing Bear and his companions. She'd recognize that meltingly masculine silhouette anywhere. They'd come to organize a day

of trading, Jeb had said. She wondered just what Standing Bear had in mind to trade...

Keeping her eyes to the ground, she walked on. As she neared the warriors, she felt four sets of eyes drill into her. *She would not look up.* He could do nothing to her here. Just as he could do nothing about it for the last three nights when she'd refused to answer his calls.

One of them had to be sensible. If the Indians took her forcibly, there would be trouble. Lots of people would die, probably on both sides.

And how could she even *think* of going willingly? As much as she felt for Standing Bear, as much as her body ached for him, and as sure as she was that she could love him madly if given but half a chance, how could she ever give herself over to a life as his... whore?

For that's exactly what she'd be. He'd made no promises of marriage. Indeed, she didn't even know if Indians had such a thing. Although he'd mentioned the word 'wife' at one point, so probably they did. But as she recalled, in the next breath, he'd also mentioned selling her to another man.

Surely, he must see that no sane woman would willingly submit to such a life? Regardless of the fact that she'd had no sleep for the past four nights thinking of him and his magical hands and wonderful lovemaking.

She heard a commotion, and looked over to see two of the other braves trying to restrain Standing Bear. He flayed her with a furious look. Breaking away, he wheeled his horse along the forest edge a few yards behind her. She quickly turned forward and resumed walking, deliberately ignoring him. The last thing she needed was a confrontation with the man in front of the whole damned world.

She felt his wrath scorching the back of her neck as he kept pace on his horse behind her. She could hear whispering from behind the canvas flaps of the nearby wagons, and the quietly called advice to run to her wagon and hide from the dangerous renegade who'd taken such an interest in her. Alyssa was weeping audibly inside the Tompkins' wagon, lamenting the certain, horrible fate Sally was sure to be carried off to.

If only she knew.

Standing Bear trailed her for what seemed like hours. Each minute that dragged by, his angry gaze bored deeper and deeper into her spine, making her itch with its intensity. It was a good thing she'd decided not to go to him — he'd probably as soon kill her as make love to her at this point.

Finally, she could take no more. She spun to face him. "Stop following me!" she shouted.

Muffled gasps echoed all along the line of wagons.

He didn't say a word, but reined his horse and sat staring at her, an inscrutable look on his face.

She stomped over to him. "I will not go with you," she hissed out under her breath, for his ears only. "And you can't make me."

A muscle in his jaw worked up and down.

"So, just stop calling me with your stupid bird whistles and let me get some damned sleep! I won't come!"

His eyes narrowed.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, feeling the heavy bear claw hanging under her dress poke into her skin. "I won't let you tempt me with your gorgeous body and your wicked hands. It's *wrong*, and I won't let myself want you."

He continued to stare down at her. She could see her words were having no effect on his plans whatsoever. If anything, he looked more determined than ever.

Moisture pooled in her eyes, blurring her vision. "You don't love me. You won't marry me. Why should I throw my life away on a man who —"

"Come to me tonight. If you don't, I'll come and get you." With that, he turned his horse and trotted back towards his friends.

She squeezed her hands into fists and stamped her foot on the hard ground. "You goddamn stubborn son of a bitch!" she whispered, kicking a nearby clump of weeds soundly. "Why won't you leave me alone?"

"My heavens, who *is* that man?" Alyssa asked for the tenth time that night.

After supper, they'd all gathered around the campfire inside the circle of wagons — she and Alyssa, the Tompkins', and the three other families who'd started out with them from Virginia. Sally's sister had been feverishly speculating as to the identity of the new guard standing in the moonlight out at the tree line. Mr. Dexter had apparently heard of the Indians' peculiar interest in Sally and decided to post an extra man by their wagon.

The man did look unusually good in his cavalry-striped trousers, she had to admit. The blue wool rode low on his lean hips and trim thighs. His snug flannel shirt encased a broad chest and muscular arms which carried a Winchester rifle at the ready. He had his collar flipped up against the chill and a cowboy hat covered most of his face and dark hair so it was impossible to tell from this distance who he was. Though, there was something vaguely familiar about the way he moved... Something intense, like a wolf...

Suddenly, she squinted and stood abruptly. No! It couldn't be. He wouldn't dare!

"Is there something wrong, dear?" Mrs. Tompkins asked.

"No! I mean yes. I have to take a walk," she said, using the polite euphemism they'd all adopted when someone needed to slip into the forest and use the non-existent facilities. She grabbed a tin cup and filled it with coffee from the fire. "Maybe I'll take our new guard some coffee on my way."

Alyssa's mouth dropped open. "Why, I declare, Sally Ann Hewitt! Whatever has come over you?"

She shot her a grin. "Maybe some of your high-falootin' manners have finally rubbed off." Alyssa was no doubt peeved she hadn't thought of it herself. Just as well. She'd have gotten a nasty shock when she got close enough to see Standing Bear's bronze face, handsome as it was.

"As I live and breathe," her sister muttered as Sally strode away from the circle of amused faces.

"Oh," she halted after a few steps and called over her shoulder as an afterthought, "Don't wait up for me. I really am taking a walk."

She left the group and marched determinedly across the dark no-man's land to where Standing Bear leaned against a tree in a puddle of moonlight, his Winchester cocked casually over a shoulder.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing? Are you out of your mind?" She thrust the coffee at him, spilling half of it in the process.

"What's this?" He sniffed the cup suspiciously.

"Arsenic," she answered, wishfully. "Go on, try it." She planted her fists on her hips and watched him take a tentative sip, imagining him keeling over dead right there and solving her dilemma once and for all.

"Mmm. Good," he said, nodding. "How is it made?"

"Beans," she answered, hardly able to suppress her irritation. "Ground up beans from South America."

"Beans," he muttered, then shot a glance toward the wagons and handed her his rifle. "Hold this while I drink your arsenic. The others are watching."

"I ought to shoot you, you know," she said, cradling the heavy gun in her arms.

"If you did, you wouldn't get what you came for." His eyes slid to her and glittered over the rim of the cup.

"And what would that be?"

"To be fucked, good, long and hard."

She sucked in a breath, and raised the rifle to shoot his arrogant, conceited, annoyingly perceptive brains out. But before she'd moved two inches, she heard the clink of tin landing on dirt, and he'd grabbed her and slipped behind the nearest tree.

"No!" With her free hand she pummeled him, knocking his hat to the ground.

His mouth crushed down on hers, his tongue thrusting into her surprised gasp. He tasted like coffee and bruised ego and hot male fury. His fingers stabbed through her hair, seizing it in his fist and jerking her head back to give him complete control over her supplication. She bit back a moan, fighting the overwhelming wave of desire that engulfed her.

He backed her up, propelling her deeper and deeper into the forest as he ravaged her mouth, further and further away from prying eyes... and the safety of the wagons... until finally he pushed her against the trunk of a huge pine. She still clung to his Winchester, hanging onto it like a lifeline to sanity.

"You fight me, but you came to me." Covering her mouth with one hand, he

ripped her dress down the front with the other, then the camisole beneath it. "As I knew you would. Because you want me."

He spread the shredded cloth wide, baring her to his ravenous gaze. He touched her and she told herself it was the cold that made the goosebumps cascade down her flesh.

"You want my red hands on your white body, making you tremble for my touch."

She shook her head. *No.*

He released her mouth and covered her breasts with his hands, sending a shock of need shimmering through her entire body. She couldn't help it, a moan of pleasure escaped her throat.

"You want my savage mouth sucking you, biting you, licking your innocent flesh so your body burns with excitement."

He cupped her breasts and illustrated his words with a sinful skill and thoroughness. She arched into him, crying out at the pleasure she was completely helpless to resist.

"You want my untamed cock inside you, pumping into you until you scream my name. Isn't that true, Pale As Moonlight?"

"No! Please, no," she begged. He took the gun from her and set it down, watching her with feral eyes. Then his hands were all over her, tearing her dress away, her camisole, her petticoat. Until she was naked in his arms again, just as she wanted to be. Needed to be.

"Oh, yes, it's true," she moaned. "I tried to stay away." She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him close, breathing in his musky scent, burying her face in his long, raven-black hair. "I wanted to stay away."

"But you couldn't."

"No." She writhed under his touch. He touched her everywhere he could reach, probing, pinching, stroking her heated skin with his rough fingers. "I couldn't keep away from you."

"You dreamed of me. Of my body conquering yours, in every way you could imagine—" He spread her wide and slid a finger into her, then two, plumbing her slippery depths, drawing out, then plunging back in. "—and even ways you couldn't." The forefinger of his other hand dipped into her, then probed her back entry, penetrating her there as well.

She gasped in shock, struggling to wriggle free of his pinioning fingers. He slammed his chest against her, and thrust his knee between her thighs, pinning her against the tree so she couldn't move. Relentlessly, he continued to stroke in and out of her until her knees were liquid and her bones turned to quicksilver. She told herself she should scream in protest, but she was too aroused to summon the strength, unable to do more than cling to him and let him have his devilish way with her.

"It didn't matter that I was an Indian—different, wild and forbidden. Every

waking minute you thought only of me, of our bodies locked together, sweating and naked, and how good I make you feel between your legs."

She whimpered, beyond reason, beyond anything but surrendering to his unrelenting sensual assault. "Yes, damn you! Yes!"

His fingers dove deep into her. She cried out, but his mouth was on hers, capturing the sound before she could betray them both. With his callused thumb, he circled the fiery nubbin at the center of her trembling desire. She clutched at him, her nails piercing the soft flannel on his back, shaking with the craving to once again feel his hard male weapon slay the moist, hungry need deep within her.

"And you hate me for making you crazy like this," he said, low and rough. "Crazy for wanting something that is so forbidden to us both. Yet impossible to live without."

His thumb swirled around her, bringing her to her knees. She clung to him and cried, "God, how I hate you!"

He followed her down, relentless. Her climax burst over her, merciless, violent, shudderingly intense.

"I hate you, too—" he said, his voice threaded with dark torment, wringing every last morsel of sensation from her limp and throbbing body. She held onto him like a capsized sailor clinging to his vessel.

He wrestled with his trousers and yanked them down his thighs, then peeled her off his body, turned her and pushed her to her hands and knees, swiftly moving behind her.

"—More than I've hated anything in my life—" he gritted out and mounted her, plunging his thick, iron-like rod straight into her.

She almost screamed in pleasure, digging her fingernails into the rich forest sod to brace herself against his fierce onslaught. His hands found her breasts, and his teeth found her neck. He thrust into her again, and again, making deep grunting sounds each time he rammed in to the hilt.

His body stiffened and the last thing she heard before another explosive orgasm blasted her senses was a great roar echoing through the forest, like the cry of a wounded bear.

He collapsed over her, his chest heaving against her back. She could feel the effort it took a moment later to lift himself off and roll to the ground, taking her down on top of him. He pulled her to his sweat-drenched chest and wrapped his strong arms around her, drawing in big gulps of breath.

Her rapid breathing and racing heart finally slowed, and his pulse beat loud and steady under her cheek. He rested his chin against her temple and kissed her hair.

"—More than I knew it was possible to hate," he softly said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Standing Bear sent his woman back to the wagons when the moon was near the horizon and the owl had returned from the hunt. He wanted to keep her with him all night. But it was too dangerous for them both. Even after this relatively short time, there would be questions from her sister and the others.

From the forest edge, he watched her skipping through the dark toward the circle of wagons, pivoting to walk backwards and wave to him one last time, wrapping his stolen shirt around her torn dress and luscious breasts, shooting one of her sweet kisses through the air like an arrow to pierce his heart.

He closed his eyes and hummed a low chant to ward off disaster. But it was too late. He knew it had already befallen him.

He had stepped in some steaming coyote shit this time.

How had it happened? To him of all the People of His Kind? He, Standing Bear, Club Men Warrior and sworn enemy of the whites, had been bewitched by a woman as pale as the stars above. A woman of the very enemy who had raped his mother and butchered his father.

Coyote must surely be laughing at him now.

He had wanted her as a captive, to use for his pleasure, to serve him in his youth and tend him in his old age. To make her bear his children in exchange for the lives of his parents. To keep her bound to him for a lifetime to soothe his anger over their deaths.

Not to love her. Never that.

But somehow, somewhere, between his anguished confession of hatred and the last time she had lain in his arms, his body joined as one with hers, he'd come to realize he would never be happy without this woman in his life.

And he'd also realized he couldn't ever have her.

Not without bringing the wrath of the Horse Soldiers down upon their village as had happened to so many others over the past ten winters. As much as he hated to admit it, Black Crow was right about that. He'd been naive ever to think otherwise. He'd been thinking through his rut, not his wisdom.

Now he was thinking through both, and it was pure torture.

He went without sleep that night, and in the morning he ate nothing as the others filled themselves with fresh trout and cool spring water. He thought of the sharp

taste of Pale As Moonlight's arsenic beans and wondered about this southamerica she said they came from. There was so much their peoples had to teach each other. It was a shame no one had the desire to listen any more. Only to hate and to kill.

He decided he would listen. To his own heart, and the spirit of the earth and skies. See what they had to say about this situation.

Pounding some soap root from his medicine pouch, he carefully bathed in the stream they had camped beside. Next he dressed in his breechclout, looped the sweetgrass rope over his head and wound it around his shoulder. His rifle he handed to Whistling Hills. He only wanted his war club with him on this quest. He went and retrieved it from its place by his sleeping blanket, and squatted next to the fire. Pulling the lock of Pale As Moonlight's hair from his leather pouch, he used a ball of hot pitch from a fire log to attach the long strands to the narrow end of his club, right next to the bunch of eagle feathers and buffalo hair. When he got back to the village, he would do it properly, but he needed her magic with him now.

The others watched him in respectful silence, knowing without being told what he was doing. They would be as bound by the vision he sought as he would be himself. It was the way of things.

Standing Bear was inexorably drawn to the forest perimeter where the trail of wagons wound its way up the foothills toward the great mountains. He rode his pony along the line, carefully keeping to the trees so no one would spot him as he searched for the wagon Pale As Moonlight walked alongside. As he had yesterday, he wondered why she and her sister didn't have their own wagon. He frowned. He should know such things about her.

Then he saw her.

She walked along, arm in arm with her sister — a beautiful but timid-looking creature. His eyes settled on Pale As Moonlight, and he just watched her for a long time, keeping pace in the shadows of the pine forest. Her walk was smooth and supple, like spring water flowing over the dusty trail beneath her feet. Her golden hair was mostly hidden by a cloth bonnet and he felt a knife-prick of impatience. He suddenly needed to see her hair falling free and loose over his arms, her pale skin reposing against the darkness of his own. He needed to feel her warm body nestled right up against him. He needed her taste swirling in his mouth.

Without thinking, he whistled to her.

She stopped short, yanking the other woman to a halt, and stared in his direction. A short, rapid discussion followed. Pale As Moonlight gave her sister a long hug, then broke free and sprang toward him. She tore the ugly bonnet from her head and flung it to the breeze. He smiled. It did his heart good to see the sun dancing in her eyes as she ran to him. Whatever happened after the Trading Day, he would always have the memory of the love in her eyes as she ran to him today.

Love. He slid from his pony, knowing the truth of it.

She loved him as surely as he wanted her with him.

He looked up to the sky and whispered a prayer that he would be allowed to keep her, always.

When he looked down again, she was standing a staff's length away, winded from running and gazing at him with her heart in her eyes. He smiled, and spread his arms, inviting her into his embrace.

CHAPTER FIVE

Today, Sally went to her lover with no uncertainty in her heart. Last night had shown her without a shadow of a doubt that she belonged with him. To him.

She had come West for a new life, far from the angry war raging in the East. She had never in her wildest imagination thought that her life was destined to be lived as an Indian captive — in essence, a slave. To become the very thing men were fighting and dying over, to eradicate back home. Yet, she would embrace that new life, if it meant being with the man she loved.

"Standing Bear," she whispered, and went into his arms. He appeared different today, his tall, powerful frame dressed only in a breechcloth and rippling muscles. "Have you come to take me away?"

"Will you go with me now?" he asked.

"Yes." There was no hesitation. Not even a doubt.

Pleased, he looked deep into her eyes, searching. "Where will we go? For how long?"

"Anywhere you go, I will follow. For as long as you'll have me, I'll stay with you."

His gaze caressed her. "Who is this woman I hold, so different from the one yesterday, who told me to leave her alone and in peace?"

"I am Pale As Moonlight, Standing Bear's woman."

He tugged her close to his chest and held her tight. "Whatever happens," he said, his voice low and unsteady, "I will spend the rest of my life striving to be worthy of your bravery."

She pulled away and studied his expression carefully. "What do you mean, whatever happens? You are taking me away, aren't you?"

His somber smile scared her. But before she could question it, he steered her to his horse and jumped on. He reached down to swing her up behind him. "Come. I will show you my mountains."

She wound her arms around his waist and held on. She felt a momentary pang of remorse at leaving behind her sister and her few worldly possessions. It had all happened so quickly. But Alyssa would be safe with the Thompkins', and their cousin in California would see to her sister's future. She loved Alyssa and would miss her desperately. But Standing Bear was right. A sister did not warm your nights, or keep you safe and give you children. And there was no possession in that wagon or destiny waiting for her in California that Sally couldn't live without. As unlikely as it sounded,

she belonged with Standing Bear, and would never regret the choice she made this day.

The warm rays of the morning sun shone down on them as they rode up the slopes of the foothills and into the great Rocky Mountains. Swaying to the steady rhythm of the horse's gait, she buried her nose in Standing Bear's neck, resting her cheek on the long, black hair coursing down his back. His clean male scent surrounded her, and she wanted to wrap herself in his smell so it would cling to her always. So there would be no doubt to whom she belonged.

She kissed his shoulder, moving aside the sweetgrass rope he had coiled around it. The thick fibers felt scratchy against her palm, strongly woven. Its rich, tangy scent was so much a part of Standing Bear.

"Why do you always wear this?" she asked, curious. She'd never seen him without the strange rope that looped around his throat. Even last night, he'd worn it over his flannel shirt, and had only removed it when they'd made love for the second time.

He slowed the horse to a walk, traversing the length of a grass-filled meadow.

"It is a kind of sash. Worn by the Badger Men," he answered after a pause. "A symbol of our willingness to fight for our people."

She leaned back and stroked a finger down one of its coils. "A symbol, how?"

"We wear one end fastened around our necks, so it is always a part of us. Like the People of Our Kind — the Arapaho, you call us. In battle, if it looks hopeless, we take our club—" He lifted the wooden sword-like object she'd seen hanging from a leather strap on the horse's withers — and put it through the loop on the other end, then push it into the ground. There we stay and fight until we kill our enemy. Or die."

She regarded the crude but effective apparatus, remembering the rope tether to be only about six or eight feet end to end. That wouldn't leave much room to maneuver. Death was the more likely outcome.

And he talked about her bravery.

"But I thought you said you were a Warrior of the Club Men?"

"I am. The Club Men is an ancient society. The Badger Men is new. We are younger Club Men braves who have vowed not to surrender to our enemy, whatever the cost."

She bit her bottom lip. "Which enemy?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

She heard him swallow, then puff out a breath. "Your people. You are a woman of my enemy, which is why, according to our ways, I can take you."

"To be your slave."

He shrugged. "Most captives are adopted into the tribe and become one of us. A man would have to be very bitter to keep a captive slave for many years."

She sensed something in his tone that spoke of just such bitterness. "Will you keep me a slave for many years?"

Silent glimpses of the scenery below flashed between the trees as they climbed higher and higher into the mountains.

Sighing, he looked over his shoulder and gave her a half smile, then placed a kiss on her lips. "My uncle fell in love with his white captive. He had to free her, give her to another family to adopt, so he could court and marry her."

Joy bubbled up inside Sally. *So it was possible to marry him.* She hugged his back and kissed him on the neck below his ear. "That is so romantic."

"Romantic?"

"You know, like when a man brings flowers to the woman he loves. Or a girl bakes a special pie for a boy she likes."

"Bakes?"

She chuckled. "You know, to cook something in an oven. Like bread, or a pie."

He turned and hiked an eyebrow.

She shook her head and laughed. "No, huh. Okay, how about she makes a special necklace for him from a bear she has killed?" She touched the bear claw necklace still hanging under her bodice.

He shot her an incredulous look. "You have killed a bear?"

"Of course not!" She playfully smacked his arm. "There weren't many bears where I lived. But give me time. There must be plenty of them out here."

His derisive snort spoke volumes as to what he thought of that idea. Okay, so maybe things weren't so different between his people and hers after all. Indian men were just as jug-headed as white men. She'd have to enlighten this one a bit. In due course.

"So where is this place with no bears?" he asked.

"Virginia."

"But there are buffalo, yes?"

"No. No buffalo either. Not where I lived."

He grunted. "No wonder you left."

She ran her hands down his bare torso, experiencing a flush of pleasure at the feel of his warm, solid flesh under her hands. "I left to find my own Bear," she whispered softly.

She slid her hands down his horseman's thighs and up again, lingering wantonly at the edge of his loincloth. His fingers grasped her hand and slipped it under the soft leather, placing it firmly over his burgeoning manhood.

"You like your Bear standing..." He rubbed her hand over him so he grew even harder and thicker. "You couldn't get enough of this Standing Bear last night."

She smiled against his back, heating at the memory of his hot domination, and the too-short hours of tender lovemaking that had followed her unconditional surrender. "I'll never get enough of you," she murmured, wanting to feel him even now between her legs. Settling for between her fingers.

She squeezed, marveling at the steely hardness of his member, the silky softness of the skin covering him, the sheer, burning size of him filling her hand. No wonder she felt full to overflowing when he pounded into her. She shivered. She felt hot and achy,

confined by the close bodice of her gown.

Using her free hand, she unfastened the row of buttons down the front of her dress. Releasing her breasts, she flipped the bear claw over her shoulder and pressed into his back, naked skin to naked skin.

A low sound rumbled through him. "Come here."

Before she knew what was happening, he whipped her around so she straddled the horse, face to face in front of him. His mouth came down on hers, hard. His hands enveloped her breasts, sending raw need zinging through her blood. He peeled her dress up so it lay in a tangled wave around her waist, ripped aside his breechclout and, without missing a beat of the horse's hooves, lifted her up and slid her onto his waiting pike.

She let him claim her, swept away on the sizzling sensations that were still so new and exciting. Instantly her body quickened. It tightened around him — her arms, her legs, her inner muscles — and he ground into her as she rode his carnal saddle. The rhythm of the horse's slow gait frustrated her with its lazy back and forth, back and forth. She wanted Standing Bear like a steam locomotive driving into her over and over, hotter and hotter. Like last night. She moaned and twisted on her mount, seeking to persuade him to gallop.

Instead, the motion stopped altogether. She surfaced from her erotic haze. And gasped as she looked around.

"Oh, my God, it's beautiful!" she cried, temporarily forgetting her heady lust at the sight that surrounded them.

Standing Bear adjusted her legs around his waist and held her close. He surveyed the panoramic view that had appeared below as they crested the top of a wildflower-covered ridge. "Yes. It is beautiful."

The horse lowered its head to munch on the succulent flowers and grass. Accompanied by slow caresses, Standing Bear told her the names of all the peaks and valleys, and about the different clans and tribes who claimed them as summer and winter hunting grounds. It felt indecently delicious to sit on his nickering horse, joined as one with her lover, his rhythmic voice in her ear, the fragrant breeze flowing over them as hot blood pulsed through their intimate union.

"I love it here. Just like this. It's like being on top of the whole world."

He chuckled and swung his gaze from her body to the still-towering mountains ahead of them. "One day I will take you to the highest peak. Today we have other things to do."

"Such as what?" she said, returning her full attention to the thickness piercing between her legs. She moved over him, eliciting a groan.

"I should not have touched you. I must be strong today, Pale As Moonlight, and not spill my seed."

Surprised, she looked up into his face. She thought she would perish of want if he meant to stop now. Memories of his sensual mastery of the night before had her wet

and needy, wriggling to sink deeper onto his magnificent length. "But why?"

"Tonight I will seek a vision. I must not lose myself in you today, or I will also lose the vision I seek."

Ernie had told stories of how Indians would do barbaric things to themselves, mutilation and fasting, strange dances, all to induce some kind of mystical revelation of the future.

She squirmed in frustration and pouted at Standing Bear. He'd picked a hell of a time to tell her about his damned vision. "But why do you have to do it *today*?"

"I must find out what to do about you."

"I can tell you what to do about me," she muttered, determined not to let him escape so easily.

He laughed. "Tell me, my woman. Do not worry. The more I am tortured, the truer my vision will be. I cannot spill my seed, but I can still give you pleasure."

A slow smile spread over her lips. "Oh, really? Well, in that case..."

She took her bunched-up gown from around her waist, lifted it over her head and let it drop behind her. She hadn't worn anything under it — in deference to the day's heat, and in secret hopes that her lover would find a means to waylay her as he had — so she was completely naked in an instant.

His reaction was immediate. He juttied inside her so she felt him nearly to her throat. She purred, and wound her arms around his neck. Her bare skin felt glorious, her back warmed by the dappled sun, her man branding her front with his burning body.

"Do not move," he half ordered, half pleaded.

Standing Bear didn't know if he could last the flick of a bobcat's tail, let alone for a whole day of sex play with the wildcat in his lap. It would be a test worthy of only the most stalwart of warriors. Far worse than counting coup on the enemy or even battle itself.

He forced himself to turn his aching desire inward, to transform his throbbing, all-too-human cock into a weapon of flint — unfeeling but capable of sparking fire in anything it touched. His swollen balls were squashed between Pale As Moonlight and his pony, which was good. The dull pain centered him. Helped him push away the talons of lust, till he was capable of taking a breath without fear he would spurt like one of the steaming geysers in the sacred lands to the north.

With new resolve, he gathered her breasts in his palms and rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers until she shuddered and moaned. "Come, let us dismount."

He lifted her off him and jumped to the ground, hauling her down into his arms. "I want you on your back," he said, pulling the blanket from the pony and leading her down the slope of the ridge. "Here." He pointed to a sunny patch of meadow beneath a

small spring that bubbled out from the ridge wall.

He tossed the blanket on the ground and untied the leather thong holding his breechclout, medicine pouch and knife sheath. Pulling out his knife, he cut a hand's length from the thong and gave it to Pale As Moonlight.

"Bind me," he said, bracing his legs apart.

She blinked at the bit of narrow thong uncomprehendingly, then raised her eyes to his. "Where?"

He stood still as a lodge pole as he brought her hand between his legs and cupped his balls with it. "Here."

He could see the shock and disbelief in her eyes. "But--"

"It will help me." He wasn't up to explaining. He just wanted her to hurry, before he shamed them both.

He snatched the leather strip from her hand and wound it twice just above his turgid sac. "Tie it."

Her mouth parted, but she obeyed, dropping down in front of him to take the ends of the thong in her fingers. Delicately, she tied them.

"Tighter," he said.

On her knees, she looked up, and he nearly lost control. Her moist, plump lips were a mere whisper from his quivering lance. He had only to sway forward, and she would eagerly play out one of his most favored fantasies.

He groaned. "Tighter!"

She jerked the ends of the thong in surprise, and he almost fainted.

"Good," he croaked, sucking in a breath. "That is good."

"Standing Bear --"

Teeth gritted, he ordered, "Make a knot."

She did as he demanded and he hissed out the breath between his teeth. He grasped her head between his hands and held her there, waiting for his eyesight to clear.

He should be limp as a three-legged wolf, but he could feel his staff standing straight and tall. Unbelievable. What could explain this insatiable lust for the woman, and the mystical powers she held over his male parts?

With the deliberate pace of a mountain lion closing in on its prey, he slowly pulled her face closer. Her eyes widened, then fastened on the center of his voracious hunger.

"Lick me," he ordered, low and rough.

He'd gone Windigo. No doubt about it. As insane as one of the Crazy Men. He may as well daub himself with white clay and be done with it, instead of standing here, compelling his beautiful woman to take him in her mouth on the one day he must not hear the thunder.

But every warrior had to seek his vision his own way. And this way would serve him well. He would feel as much torment today as he would for the rest of his life if he

let her walk into the setting sun on the trail of wagons.

Her dewy lips sought his flesh and placed one of her sweet kisses on him. Her tongue crept out, and shyly flicked over him. He jerked in response, wanting more. Wanting to force her mouth over his cock, to put an end to this agony of frustration.

Blood pounded through his veins like a war drum as he watched her lips and tongue explore him, more confidently now. Each moist stroke and lap had his insides in knots, clawing to erupt. The thong went only so far to deaden his powerful need to climax.

Finally, he could take no more of the exquisite punishment. "Enough!" he ground out and pulled her mouth away. Lowering her down beneath him on the blanket, he resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to mate with her.

"Now it is my turn."

He would take it slow. He would stay in control.

Looking around the meadow, he spotted several things he could use in his quest to make her body sing with his own enchantment. He rose and gathered a bunch of long grasses that ended in feathery seed clusters, a few sprigs of spearmint growing near the water, a handful of round, hard berries from a nearby bush, and a length of strong, thin vine.

"Are you going to tie me up?" she asked, eyeing the vine.

He gave her a slow smile. "Would you like me to?"

"No, no. That's quite all right," she hastened to say, but he could see in her eyes she would not mind if he did.

"I will tie you up if you try to escape me," he said, offering to play the game if she wished. He unwound the sweetgrass rope from his neck and shoulder and laid it on the blanket above her head. "But remember, I caught you last time."

The bright color of her eyes darkened to the clear, deep blue of the sky after the winter sun has set. In them, he saw the memories of the first time he'd caught her. And his heart sent out a prayer of thanks to the forest spirits who had led him to her.

"You were so handsome," she murmured. "When I saw you, sitting on your horse by the stream, you looked so wild and free. I wanted to be yours from the very first moment I saw you."

He positioned her arms above her head, basking in her adoration like a turtle in the sun. "Were you not afraid?"

"Terrified." She watched him bend her legs and spread them apart. "That you wouldn't touch me."

He picked up one of the long weed stalks, looked at her and smiled. "You had nothing to fear. Even if a troop of Horse Soldiers had guarded you, I would have found a way to steal you away." She was his. He just had to figure out how to keep her without starting a war.

Running the feathery weed over her knee, he considered where he should begin his sensual assault on her body. Her doe eyes focused on the spiky weed tuft. A look of

comprehension dawned in them as she followed the upward movement of the stalk. He tickled the inside of her thigh before sweeping it up over her belly and breasts, and grunted in satisfaction when a shudder racked her body. Yes, a little erotic torture would go a long way to distracting him from his own test of will.

"What are you doing now?" Sally peered at Standing Bear, breathless with frustration. Her body thrummed with sexual need and the man was stringing berries like it was Christmas Eve.

"You must learn to have patience," he answered with a devilish grin, and poked holes through three nickel-sized green berries with a bone needle from his medicine pouch. "Don't move."

He hadn't let her so much as stir while he'd played over her body with his delicate instrument of torment. Every inch of her skin was aroused from the tickling he'd given her with the soft tip of the grass stalk. He hadn't missed a single spot on her whole body. Some places, like her nipples, he'd circled again and again until every pore was a bundle of sizzling want, screaming for the more substantial touch of his hands and mouth.

She would never look at weeds again in quite the same light.

"Do I get to tickle you, too?"

He looked up and scowled fiercely. "No."

"Here," he said, and popped a few leaves of spearmint into her mouth. "Suck on these."

He placed a sprig into his own mouth and slowly chewed it as he strung the berries onto one end of the thin, smooth vine and tied them in place about an inch apart. The other end of the vine he trimmed to within a foot of the first berry.

Setting it aside, he spit out his mint leaves and pulled hers from between her lips. Then he lowered himself down on top of her.

Unable to resist, she wound her arms around his neck. "Forget your vision, Standing Bear," she murmured. "I want you."

"Taste me," he urged, and his mouth came down on hers. A shock of icy coolness surprised her when their tongues clashed. She shivered, delighted with the sharp, chilly taste of mint as his mouth devoured hers.

His lips moved down her throat toward her breasts. "Mmm. That feels incredible."

Each time he licked and nipped at her skin, its already sensitive surface jumped like a thousand tiny snowballs were rubbing over it.

"Oh!" His mouth captured her nipple and her breath hitched at the cold, wet jolt of sensation. *Lord have mercy!* He tongued her breasts until she was quivering all over. Her womb wept for him. She ground her thighs against his iron-hard rod, yearning for relief.

"Come inside me," she coaxed.

But he refused to bend to her wishes. Instead, he moved further down, licking her belly, her hips, her thighs. When he reached her mound, he paused to chew another sprig of mint, and spread her legs wide apart.

"Please, Standing Bear. Please!" she begged, craving his skillful tongue on the pearl of her throbbing need. Craving his thick, hard length plunging into her.

He looked at her from his place between her legs, his eyes black and swirling with dark, feral desire. He removed the mint from his mouth.

And picked up the string of berries.

CHAPTER SIX

Sally couldn't imagine what Standing Bear had in mind for those berries, but he didn't give her a chance to ponder it. His mouth surrounded her aching flesh and all thought ceased. The ice from his tongue was like a bolt of lightening between her legs. Need shot from her center in streaks of hot-cold sensation.

She cried out his name.

"How does this feel?"

She moaned. "I— I can't—"

"Good." He licked all around, up and down, drenching her in a trail of molten ice.

Suddenly, she felt something hard and round slide down her crease, then press into her back entry and slip inside. Surprised, she jumped. But then his minty tongue was on her again, swirling frosty circles around her taut bud so she nearly swooned. She'd never felt anything so amazing in her life. She arched into him, seeking the turbulent relief quickly closing in on her.

Once again, something smooth and round breached her from behind. "Oh! Standing Bear, what—" Suddenly, she realized...

"Do you like it?"

The string of berries, part inside, part out, felt wickedly arousing — completely different from his probing finger of the other night, but equally, sinfully, erotic. The tickle of the vine as he played it over her derriere made her wiggle in delight.

"Yes," she whispered.

"You are a very naughty girl," he told her, and grinned.

She thought about what her sister and friends on the wagon train would think of her if they knew what this wild renegade was doing to her right now. And how much she liked it. And she realized she could never, ever, go back to the strict, confining life she'd led with those kind, but narrow-minded, people.

"You make me want to be naughty," she confessed in tones of heated passion. "But only with you."

"How naughty do you want to be?" he quietly asked, nipping at her with his teeth.

Before she could answer, he blew a stream of chilly air straight into her and she convulsed into a blazing inferno of snowflakes and hot lava. His fingers and tongue spread and slicked over her, arousing her to a fever pitch. For the third time, she experienced the sharp sting of round, forbidden penetration.

Standing Bear's minty lips and tongue sucked and swirled. His fingers coaxed.

The lascivious stimulation of the berries made her heat with scandalous excitement.

And drove her over the edge. A fierce orgasm tore through her, racking her with savage pleasure. She reached the peak, grabbed for his head, raked her fingers through his hair. She felt a tug on her bottom, and suddenly the berries popped out in three quick snaps.

She gasped in mute shock.

And came all over again.

Standing Bear wouldn't stop licking her until she gave him two more shuddering climaxes. When he finally crawled up and hugged her to his chest, she was replete and totally exhausted.

His huge erection pressed into her thigh.

"Oh, you must be miserable!" she said and drew back to look into his eyes. In them she saw frustration, but also a gleam of male satisfaction.

"I will have a powerful vision," he said wryly, and put his lips to her forehead.

"I'll make up for this tomorrow," she promised, but instead of getting a smile, she felt him sigh. "What is it, Standing Bear?"

He stroked her hair. "The Trading Day with the wagons is in three suns. I must help my uncle prepare the tribe to bring their goods to the meeting place."

Alarmed, she sat up. "Where will I be? Surely I can help you?"

"I will take you back to the wagons now."

"But—" She shook her head. "No! I can't go back. I won't!"

"You must." He scrubbed his face with his hands. "If I take you with me, the Horse Soldiers will come to our village. People will die. You were right. Black Crow was right. I was foolish to ever think I could have you."

"What are you saying?" She grasped his arms, aghast at what she was hearing. "Don't you want me?"

He pulled her down again and laid her hand over his powerful arousal. "Feel how much I want you. How much I will always want my Pale As Moonlight. Without you by my side I am half a man." He closed his eyes, his face etched in agony. "But I cannot put my people in danger."

Oh, holy mother of God. He was going to leave her. After everything she'd given him, everything he had taught her, he would let her go.

"No," she sobbed, tears seeping over her lashes. "I don't want your people to suffer, but I can't give you up. Standing Bear, please—"

His arms came around her, soothing her despair. "My vision will tell us what to do. I will find a way for us to be together."

"Promise?"

His eyes spoke the sincerity of his words. "I promise."

His vision was a nightmare of blood and death.

Mute and invisible, he was forced to endure wave upon wave of faceless Horse

Soldiers riding through his village slaughtering his family and friends, over and over again. Before his horrified eyes, he relived his mother's rape, his father's screams as the bayonets found his soft belly. His uncle shot down protecting his baby niece, and Whistling Hills' head bashed with the butt of a cavalry rifle. The terrified cries of his people, the taste of blood and gunpowder on his tongue, it all sickened him. He wanted to die.

The whole time Standing Bear was powerless to do anything. The people did not hear his warning yells, his club sailed right through the soldiers' bodies like they were ghosts, and he couldn't find his Winchester. He ran to the Council Fire and pounded his club into the ground there, tethering himself by his Badger Man sash. But no one would fight him. No one could see him.

No one except the Leader of the Wagons, who pointed his white, bony finger at Standing Bear and screamed, "You can't have her! You can't have her!"

Suddenly, he found himself at the mouth of a deep, protected valley, high up on the big mountain. He carried a tiny blue-eyed babe, and led a small band of battered survivors into the sheltered valley. His heart leapt when he saw Pale As Moonlight walking among them. They had not taken her from him! He called her name, ran to her, but when she turned, he was looking into the face of his uncle's captive wife, White Lily.

Whistling Hills found him at dawn, curled into a ball, shivering on the ridge above where he and Pale As Moonlight had made love the day before.

He couldn't meet the eyes of his friend for shame and sadness. How could he have ever thought to risk the lives of his people like that? He knew his vision was all too realistic. He himself had lived through just such an attack, and they were becoming more and more frequent, with less and less provocation. Those who fought the white man died.

He gathered his heavy spirit and his pony, and silently followed Whistling Hills back to the village. It was a warrior's duty to tell everyone of his vision as soon as he'd had it, but Standing Bear could not bring himself to do so. Not until late that night when his uncle and the other elders were gathered around the Council Fire and summoned him to them.

"Tell us what you have seen, son of my sister, so we can hold council. Your vision clouds your eyes and heart. Together, we will decide what must be done."

By the time of the big trading day with the Indians, Sally didn't know which emotion was strongest within her, desperation that she would never see Standing Bear again, or fear that, if she did, she'd haul off and throttle him because she was so angry.

She hadn't heard hide nor hair from the man since they'd parted three days ago.

How dare he leave her like this? The least any gentleman could do after ravishing an innocent woman and introducing her to all manner of heinously improper acts of physical lust was to say thank-you before riding off on his painted pony.

Of course, Standing Bear was no gentleman.

Still, it cut to the quick that he had given his word, and then broken it without so much as a good-bye.

"Come on, Sally." Her sister Alyssa pulled at her arm, snapping her out of her stormy thoughts. "It's time for supper and I promised Mrs. Tompkins that we'd help at the serving table."

She'd managed to avoid the trading grounds all morning, under the guise of baking pies. But it seemed her time had run out.

"You've been moping around long enough. Stars above, I don't know what's gotten into you for the past few days, but it's going to end right now."

"The pies are still too hot to carry," she protested unenthusiastically. She knew Standing Bear would be there, and she didn't know if she could get that close to him without doing something they'd both regret. Like murder the obstinate man in front of everyone. Or throw herself at his feet and beg.

It was mid-afternoon, and the wagon train had taken a rare day of rest in the wide river valley where they were trading with the Arapaho and Cheyenne. The Indians had camped on the other side of the river the night before, and this afternoon they would share a feed, to celebrate a successful day of peaceful trading.

"Don't be ridiculous. We can carry the pies with a towel or something. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were afraid of those savages. Now, let's go."

"They're not savages," she countered automatically. *At least most of them weren't.*

"Well, then."

Sally reluctantly allowed herself to be dragged up the long line of wagons to the huge meadow where the trading had begun early that morning. The clearing was a riot of rippling colors, sounds and smells, dotted with scores of blankets on the ground where both Indians and wagoneers had plied their goods. By now, most of the exchanges had taken place, and everyone was happily looking over their new treasures. The wagoneers had acquired baskets of dried fruit, jerky, furs, and the finest cured hides she'd ever seen. The Indians had gotten flour and sugar, dried beans and an assortment of tools, furniture, clothing and personal items, which had proved impractical for the travelers to carry any further west. If Sally weren't so nervous, she would have found the whole thing fascinating. As it was, she had eyes for only one piece of work.

She spotted Standing Bear immediately, sitting astride his horse at the edge of the clearing, in the middle of a rank of a dozen mounted braves, all wearing sweetgrass ropes coiled over their chests. Badger Men. Lookouts, no doubt. Keeping watch over the proceedings to make sure everything remained peaceful. On the opposite side of the meadow stood a matching group of men from the wagon train, unmounted, but no less

vigilant for that. Everyone was armed to the teeth.

Shaking off a tingling of foreboding, she followed Alyssa to the long, rough plank table the men had put together for the pot luck. After depositing her pies, she joined Mrs. Tompkins and picked up a ladle to help serve the line of hungry traders that had already formed.

She could feel Standing Bear's eyes on her unrelentingly, but she refused to meet his gaze. He could sit there and stew until doomsday as far as she was concerned. A woman had her pride.

She made a point of smiling and chatting merrily with everyone who came through the line, but inside she was dying. She couldn't help but steal short glances at the man she'd had the supreme misfortune to fall in love with.

He looked magnificent. Broad-shouldered and straight of bearing, he personified rugged masculinity. Her heart simply melted at the sight of him. The ends of his long, raven hair fluttered in the breeze along with the feathers that adorned it and the ceremonial club he held in one hand. Bright sunshine gleamed off the trimmings of his pipe-bead vest and the fringes of his leggings, the butter-colored buckskin contrasting handsomely with the deep copper of his skin. The ruthlessly male angles of his face looked sharp enough to cut herself on.

It was a total package that never failed to reduce her limbs to the consistency of the mashed potatoes Mrs. Tompkins was heaping onto tin plates.

"Oh, what lovely pies," said a voice, interrupting Sally's reverie. She looked up, surprised to see a beautiful older white woman, dressed as an Arapaho. Her honey-blond hair hung in a thick braid down her back, and she wore an ankle-length, fringed dress made from soft, supple deerskin. The woman smiled, indicating the pies. "One of the few things I've missed. May I?"

"Of course," Sally said, snapping herself out of her shock. "Which would you like? Apple or cherry?"

"Oh!" The woman's warm brown eyes lighted on the pies in reverence. "Apple and cherry?"

Sally chuckled and cut two generous pieces, one of each flavor. "I insist that you sample both."

"You are too kind," the woman said, her smile broadening. "And what a happy coincidence. My nephew was just asking yesterday what pie tasted like." She gestured toward the line of mounted warriors and tipped her head at Sally. "I can't imagine where he heard about pies. He was also talking about some mysterious potion he'd heard of, made from arsenic beans. What a strange idea!"

Sally blanched. *Arsenic beans? Her nephew?* Involuntarily, her eyes darted to Standing Bear.

"Um, I sure he must have meant coffee beans."

"Coffee! Why, of course, that's what he must have been talking about."

"There's some brewing just over there you might try."

"I think I will." The woman paused. "I wonder if I could ask a favor? Can you take my nephew a slice of pie? He refuses to leave his post to eat, and I do worry so about him." She gave Sally a much-too-knowing look. "He hasn't been himself for the past couple of days."

"I, um..." She wanted to refuse. Needed to refuse. There was no way she could do this. But the appeal in his aunt's concerned gaze was impossible to disappoint.

"He's that one, there, with the red striped war paint on his cheeks and the black spotted pony."

Like she didn't know exactly which warrior the woman meant. "I—" She sighed, knowing she couldn't say no. "All right, I guess I can do that."

"Thank you, my daughter. Sometimes men are too stubborn for their own good."

With that, the woman slipped out of line and walked over to join the circle of elders who, together with the leaders of the wagon train, were seated at the center of the goings-on.

"She must be a captive," Alyssa said in hushed tones of pity. "Poor thing."

Sally turned to stare at her sister. "She seemed happy enough to me. Didn't look the least bit like she wanted to escape."

"I've heard some white women choose to stay with the heathens," Mrs. Tompkins confided in a whisper. "They say Indian men know things..." She glanced at Sally and Alyssa's astonished faces and cleared her throat. "Well, never you mind."

The rattled woman sliced off a piece of pie and handed the plate to Sally. "You be careful, hear? Isn't that the very devil who followed you the other day?"

"I don't remember," Sally stated flatly, then sucked in a fortifying breath and marched across the meadow to the cadre of warriors.

"Your aunt wanted you to have this." She thrust the pie toward Standing Bear and turned smartly, ready to flee.

"What is it, Pale As Moonlight?" he asked, boring holes in her neck with angry eyes.

Deliberately misinterpreting his question, she answered, "Pie," and started walking away.

"Wait."

At his sharp command, the other braves turned to stare. She recognized two of the men as his companions from that first day. Their eyes assessed her somberly.

"Did you make this pie for me?" he quietly asked.

Her heart trembled, wanting to cry out, *Yes. I made it for the man I love.* Instead, she said primly, "You flatter yourself, sir," and bolted back to the table.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a haze. Soon it was time to squeeze a blanket in amongst the others surrounding the central bonfire and watch the impromptu speeches and dancing which had been suggested by both sides of the happily stuffed gathering.

The mood was festive, with laughter and much improvised sign language

between new friends. The wagonmaster, Mr. Dexter, and the Arapaho chief gave long-winded orations on the benefits of a peaceful co-existence of their peoples, and a group of beautiful young girls did a haunting circle dance around the fire, accompanied by thundering drums and high-pitched singing.

Sally noticed Standing Bear's aunt sitting behind the Indian chief, and wondered if he was her husband. She got her answer when, after the dance, the chief got up and addressed Mr. Dexter. It took him a while to get around to the point, but by the time he did, the large crowd was breathless with curiosity and anticipation of what he would say next.

"In the old days, it was the custom for Indian warriors to take enemy women captive." He looked around, and, next to her, Alyssa and Mrs. Tompkins shrank back nervously.

He went on. "It was in this way I met my wife, White Lily." He turned and smiled at her. His wife's returning smile left no doubt that the two were deeply in love. "In all ways, we are united. Our four children are the joy of our lives." He paused again, looking affectionately at a group of youngsters who were off to one side on a blanket eating sweets that had been distributed earlier.

"But there is one thing that troubles the heart of my White Lily. We were never married by one of your Christian preachersmen." His gaze swept the gathering. "Is there such a man here among you who would do this for us now?"

The crowd erupted in surprised speculation, until Dan Monroe, a Baptist minister en route to the gold fields of Alaska rose from a blanket and stepped forward. "I will do it, gladly."

A hush descended on the onlookers as the unusual couple took each other's hands and recited their nuptial vows in front of the preacher and the odd assembly.

Sally's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, this is so romantic!" Even Alyssa agreed, wiping moisture from her lashes.

Sally stole a glance at Standing Bear, who still stood his lookout post. He was watching his aunt and uncle, a tender expression on his face. He caught her staring, and she nearly missed what happened next.

Standing in front of the gathering, White Lily was saying, "Some of you might think it strange that I would give up my 'civilized' life to stay with my Arapaho captor. To marry him, and bear his children. But I love my husband, and he loves me. I have been treated well and am accepted among his people as an equal. These are a good, honest people whose only wish is to live and hunt in peace. I have a good life, and I don't regret a minute of it."

Her eyes wandered over the crowded blankets and stalled for a moment on Sally. "But I'll admit, sometimes I long for the sound of my own language." She laughed softly, then became serious. "We live in troubled times, with misunderstanding and hostility so common between Indians and whites. Both sides wish to end the bloodshed, but to do that, all of us need to educate ourselves, learn about the ways of

the other."

All around, people nodded. "But how?" one of the wagoneers called out from the crowd. "So few of them can read or write, or even speak English. How are we supposed to teach them if we can't even talk to them?"

Typical, thought Sally. Surely they had at least as much to learn from the Indians as the other way around.

"There is much we can all do to help." White Lily continued. "But you are right. First, we must learn to communicate with each other. I do what I can to teach them English, but it's a big job. I could use some help."

White Lily hesitated and took a deep breath, giving Sally a quick glance. "I wonder if perhaps there is some young woman among you who might like to come with me, back to our village, to help teach them?" White Lily looked around, again pausing at Sally.

Why did she keep — Sally froze. Oh, Lord! This was the way!

Before she'd even made a conscious decision, she jumped to her feet and called, "I will!"

Alyssa and Mrs. Tompkins cried out in horrified unison. "Sally, you can't mean it!"

She ignored the outburst and repeated, "I'll go with you, White Lily," and threaded her way between the blankets to receive a hug from the petite woman.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the crowd. An indignant matriarch, Mrs. Smythe, rose up and declared, "This will never do! We cannot allow a young, unmarried girl to go unchaperoned to live with these heathens. Why, who knows what ungodly things she will be subjected to!" There was a murmur of assent among the wagoneers.

Sally knew precisely what ungodly things she would be subjected to, and that was exactly why she wanted to go.

But before she could open her mouth to argue, White Lily took her hand and announced to the crowd, "All right. Then she must marry first, mustn't she?"

That seemed to satisfy Mrs. Smythe, and people around the meadow declared that marrying would be just the thing. A scattering of amused male voices called out their willingness to do their duty.

Sally's jaw dropped. "But..."

"Which of you men will come forward to marry this delightful young woman and spend your life in our village, helping us teach English to the Arapaho?" White Lily's questioning gaze swept the crowd. Those men who had spoken out so quickly now slunk back on their blankets. "Is there no one?"

Apparently the thought of marrying her lost its appeal when faced with a lifetime living among the Indians.

Thank God. Sally let out the breath she'd been holding and dared a glance at Standing Bear. He sat his horse stiff as a pine, watching her with an indecipherable

expression on his face.

White Lily tugged on her hand and smiled sublimely. "Well, then, in the spirit of the occasion, perhaps you would care to choose one of our fine young braves as your husband? We have many handsome warriors, and you would do them a great honor."

The crowd let out a collective scandalized gasp at the very idea of her marrying an Indian man. Then someone laughed, and the mood lightened. A saucy girl's voice advised her to choose the cute one with the long staff, which produced a bevy of guffaws and other suggestions. Obviously no one believed she'd actually go through with it.

She moistened her lips. Hell, *she* didn't know if she'd actually go through with it.

Standing Bear had deserted her days ago, and, today, had done nothing but scowl. Did he really want to be tied to her for life? Was this his idea, or would he run for cover if she chose him? Did she even want to choose him, furious as she was over his thoughtless abandonment?

Sally stood frozen in a muddle of indecision. Serene, White Lily pulled her over to the line of mounted warriors and indicated she should choose. *Okay, this is it.* She straightened her spine and tried not to look too terrified.

On wobbly legs, she strolled slowly along the horses' noses, pretending to carefully consider each man. The warriors grinned and preened. The crowd got into the game and called out advice, registering their approval or lack thereof of each brave with hoots and applause. She figured, if she chickened out, at least everyone would have had a good time, and no one would suspect she'd been serious.

When she got to Standing Bear, she willed herself to be calm and looked up. Unlike the other men, he sat solemnly atop his horse, silently staring down at her with eyes blazing.

Oh, God. He was angry. He wants nothing to do with me.

Hurt sang through her body like a bittersweet lullaby. The hopes that she'd harbored crashed down around her.

She squared her jaw. He would not see her cry. She'd go on as if this man and his quiet condemnation meant nothing to her.

She forced herself to walk on to the next warrior, one of Standing Bear's companions. She smiled up at him and winked.

Suddenly, Standing Bear gave a sharp command and his horse leapt out of formation, cutting her off from the others.

"Enough!" he shouted, raising his club over his head. "I claim this woman. She will be mine!"

The meadow rang with shocked silence beneath the echo of his outrageous declaration. Then, suddenly, Ernie Tompkins' voice hissed over the people.

"She will not! This has gone far enough. Sally Hewitt ain't gonna marry no dirty heathen, and I'll kill any one of 'em who lays his filthy hands on her!"

Lightening swift, Standing Bear reached down and swung Pale As Moonlight up

behind him on his pony. Gratified, he felt her throw her arms around his waist and cling to him. Relief swept through his heart. *She still wanted him.* She was just angry because he hadn't come to her. At the first opportunity, he would explain about the Council Fire and she'd understand.

"She chooses me," he yelled, so all could hear over the clamor and chaos that had erupted.

"She didn't chose nobody," the white troublemaker bellowed, drawing his six-shooter. "Let her go, redskin!"

Standing Bear whipped his Winchester from its sheath and took aim. Suddenly, leather sang and metal clicked and a hundred guns, lances and arrows were pointing at each other. Two Otters let out a war yell and stabbed his lance into the ground.

Behind him, Pale As Moonlight let out a terrified gasp.

He saw the ashen faces of White Lily and his uncle, standing horrified next to the Leader of the Wagons, who looked equally stunned. Women cowered, children cried, and all around him light men and dark glared at each other, crackling with distrust, weapons drawn, ready to fight.

It was Standing Bear's worst nightmare, about to erupt in the living flesh, and he was paralyzed with shock at how quickly it had all happened.

"I do."

Like a songbird, the shaky, but determined voice of Pale As Moonlight soared above the tension-filled air with its sweetness.

"I do choose him," she repeated more strongly, shifting behind him so she could be seen by all. "This is the man I will marry."

He felt her hand light softly on his shoulder and he thought his heart would burst with pride. What had he done to deserve this brave, splendid woman?

"But you cain't!" His adversary's face dissolved with the pique of a roused porcupine. "You cain't want to be a renegade's woman!"

"I can and I will," she said, sliding off his pony. "Don't you see how important this is? By becoming a teacher, I can make a difference in our world. How better to start the healing than two people joining freely in Holy Matrimony? Mrs. Smythe is right, I can't go to them single and unchaperoned. This is the only way."

"But it ain't right. It ain't Christian!" the white man exploded.

"Yes, it is. Or will be, just as soon as Mr. Monroe performs the ceremony."

The preacher hurried through the crowd to their side. "Yes, of course. Of course I will."

"Now, put down your weapons, all of you. I won't have guns drawn at my wedding." Pale As Moonlight looked up at Standing Bear pleadingly, a mixture of love and fear shining in her eyes.

There was nothing he could do but obey. They might shoot him down like a dog, but it didn't matter. He would gladly die to make the fear in her eyes go away. He lowered his Winchester and slid it home in its leather sheath.

First one gun hammer was released, then a rifle uncocked, then a chant of weapons being neutralized sang through the meadow.

From a nearby blanket came a choked sob. Pale As Moonlight's sister stumbled toward her and fell into her arms. "Oh, Sally, are you sure? Are you very sure you want to do this?"

"More than anything."

Her sister searched her face. Standing Bear saw exactly when she began to understand. Her eyes widened and her lips parted. "The guard... You've been meeting all along!" She barely whispered, so only the three of them could hear. "You're in *love* with him!"

"Yes, I love him," Pale As Moonlight whispered back, hugging her sister fiercely.

Her gaze found his, weaving a powerful spell of love and promise all around him. She smiled and, right then, he knew he would always be her captive, heart and soul, for all eternity.

"From this day on, my life belongs to Standing Bear," she said for all to hear. "And I will always be his woman."

EPILOGUE

Pale As Moonlight leaned her chin on her fist, which in turn rested on the smooth expanse of Standing Bear's naked chest. She shot him a roguish grin, savoring the sweet taste of victory.

"You will be punished for this," he calmly informed her with a tug on his bonds. Her grin widened. She was counting on it.

But not before she inflicted a little punishment of her own, first.

"Let me loose now, and I'll go easy on you," he continued, again pulling on the ropes that held him spread-eagled in a soft nest of feathers and fragrant pine needles. She had been gathering feathers for a month — long ones, fluffy ones, decorative and plain — and pine needles all morning. Just the greenest, most tender shoots, stripped of the hard bits, and slightly crushed to emit a cloud of tangy perfume.

"Not a chance," she answered. Two years it had taken her — the whole time since Standing Bear had led the village up into the high mountains — to acquire the tracking and trapping skills needed to bring the man down to this delightful position, and she planned on taking merciless advantage of the occasion.

She probably wouldn't get a second chance.

"You will be very, very sorry."

"I doubt it," she murmured, and trailed a finger lightly down the middle of his abdomen until it was stopped by a solid, fleshy barrier. "Ah, what's this?"

"The instrument of your reckoning."

She glanced up. Oh, dear. He'd been reading her Shakespeare volume again. She *was* in trouble. A little shiver of anticipation slid down her spine.

"I believe you've got that backwards, my love." She rose up on her knees, untied her wide, beaded belt, and pulled her chamois dress over her head so she was completely nude.

His gaze raked her hungrily. He reached for her but the sweetgrass ropes prevented his hands from moving more than a couple of inches. He jerked at them in frustration. She gave him a coy smile and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

She'd tied his bonds well, so she figured she had about half an hour before he wriggled loose. Maybe less — if she got him really excited. The thought had its appeal.

Going down on hands and knees, she climbed over him and positioned her body above his. Tantalizingly close, but just out of reach. She let her long, silky hair fall forward, dragging the ends across his chest. A long shudder racked him at the fairy

contact, and she bit back the urge to cover him with kisses. Time enough for that after they'd both been thoroughly, exquisitely punished.

"Please," he said in a gruff voice, with just enough genuine pleading in his tone that it got her attention. "Please, don't tickle me."

She tipped her head. Oh, ho, what was this? How had it happened that for two years she'd missed this little nugget of personal information? Possibly because every time she'd tried it before, she'd always landed on her back within two seconds, all thoughts of tickling knocked completely from her mind.

"Now, would I do something naughty like that?" she innocently said. "Especially when you ask so prettily?"

"Yes."

She gifted him with an evil grin. How well he knew her.

He squirmed, giving the ropes around his wrists a substantial yank. There was just a glimmer of panic in his eyes.

Lord, life was sweet.

She ran her hands up and down the muscular geography of his torso and arms. He really was incredible. Magnificently masculine. Tall, lean, and breathtakingly, achingly male.

And every single delectable inch of him belonged to her, to do with as she pleased.

"I love you," she whispered, and lowered her lips to his. His hot, velvety mouth welcomed her with eager devotion.

"I love you, too," he answered in a voice gritty with desire. "Untie me and let me show you just how much I love you."

Reaching for her belt, she kissed his nose. "No."

He let out a miserable groan, then tensed as she placed the wide strip of soft leather over his eyes and tied it in place. "What are you doing?" His voice actually cracked.

She chuckled. "Relax. I promise this won't hurt. Much."

"Woman, I'm warning you—" Under her, his body bucked.

Oh, yes. This was going to be an experience to savor.

Almost as much as she was going to savor telling him the good news afterwards. About his baby. Their baby.

"Now, where exactly was it you didn't want me to tickle you?" she whispered in his ear.

And reached for a long, satiny feather.

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