

Cerridwen Press



Single *Heart*
Single Love
PATT MIHAILOFF

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Single Heart, Single Love

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SINGLE HEART, SINGLE LOVE

Patt Mihailoff

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother Leona P. Dewberry who loves any kind of shoot-em-up.

Thanks to Kathryn Quick and Judy Sherwin whose friendship keeps me grounded and filled with joy.

To Jacqueline Hawley and the rest of my RWA/NYC family for always rooting for me every step of the way.

For my husband George, my family and friends who always tell me how proud they are of me.

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And last but not least, Darlene James who has always loved this book, and believes in saving a horse and riding a cowboy.

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Prologue

Alamosa Colorado 1850

It had been his third visit to Chillington, a small mining town on the other side of the Missouri River. He'd never liked the place much, but during one of his stock buying trips, something had caught his eye. Cole watched the girl as she performed her tavern duties, deftly avoiding the reaching hands of less sober vermin who desired to possess her. And what man wouldn't want such a body? Full in the places it needed to be, hips rolling seductively without her wanting them to. Neither the crowd of people, the smoky haze, nor the ill-fitting frock could hide her sensuous form. But those were the things he didn't need or want to think about. His choice had been made from the first day he saw her. She was the one.

Chapter One

Jade carried the heavy tray of empty ale tankards to the bar. It was one of numerous trips she'd made, cautiously passing tables where several gruff looking men in various stages of inebriation waved empty tankards and made lewd gestures at her. Thankfully, the one who'd been grabbing at her all evening was snoring loudly, face down in a pool of spilled wine.

Miles Craven, the tavern keeper, was filling tankards with watered-down ale, aligning them one after the other on the long hard length of planking that served as a bar.

"Get some life in ya girl, you're costin' me money."

Jade looked at him and picked up one of the pewter containers and glanced over to the dimly lit corner where the dark stranger sat. She'd noticed him, that first night when some patrons moved their seats when he'd sat down, while others departed altogether.

Usually, Martine or Cora fought over which one of them would be the one to serve him, this night they were busy pretending to fend off the advances of several army officers at the far end of the tavern.

After placing the watery brew in front of a patron, she braced herself for possibly more degrading offences to her person as she approached the brooding stranger to take his order.

His head was down, so she waited. She almost gasped as his head rose slowly and she was faced with hard, cold, eyes illuminating a fearful yellow from the flickering wall candles that danced in them.

"Food and ale!" his voice was low and a bit raspy.

The warmth of the hot crowded tavern was nothing compared to the heat she felt creep up her face as his eyes roved over her, resting momentarily on her full round breasts. Jade turned away quickly. *Just like all the rest*, she thought with contempt and went to fetch his food.

The kitchen was hot and abuzz with the hum of flies as they lit lazily on the tops of uncovered wheels of cheese and loaves of crusty bread. Jade hurriedly placed the food on a platter and carried it back inside. She'd become quite adept at avoiding the groping and grasping hands of men who wanted little more than to cause her pain, fill her belly and leave her. Aye! She'd have none of that.

"Come here girl and let ole Molvane show you what you need to know about life." An ancient, nearly toothless sailor tried to grab at her skirt but she managed to skitter away just in the nick of time. The others burst into hearty drunken laughter.

"It'll take more than the white-haired likes of you to show her what's what Molvane," one of the others roared, making a lewd gesture with his hand.

Each night it was the same thing. How long would she be able to avoid the gantlet of groping hands and rude remarks?

Placing the tray down in front of the brooding man, she began to set the food out in before he stranger. She waited. Miles demanded that payment be made when the order was put down but this one said nothing and made no move.

"That will be a dollar sir."

He plunked down a ten-dollar gold piece, then leaned over his plate and began eating.

Jade snatched the coin and curtsied slightly. "I'll bring your change directly." With the tray under her arm, she hurried over to Miles for change.

"Where'd ye come by this, girl?" he asked inspecting, then biting the coin to test its solidity. She pointed to the corner.

Miles' mouth turned into an ugly grimace.

"Quick, girl! What'd he have?"

"A tankard, mutton, bread and a small wheel of cheese," she answered with bewilderment as she had never known him to be so uneasy with the presence of the stranger but inwardly she was pleased at his discomfort.

Digging into his waist-pouch to make change, Miles forced it into her hand and pushed her back toward the table. "Take it to him. The sooner that damned mountain trash is away, the better."

Jade could readily understand Miles' agitation. She could hardly stop her legs from shaking as she went back to the stranger. She placed the change on the table and turned to leave. His deep voice stopped her. "Sit, woman."

Jade's hands gripped the sides of her dress. She looked around nervously. The other tavern women enjoyed the fondling of the drunken men, although they pretended not to. But she would never allow them to take such liberties with her.

"You misunderstand, sir. I am indentured and not like the others," she glared at the tavern wenches with their bared shoulders and vixen's eyes.

"Sit down!" the edge in his voice was hard and icy. "I want conversation, nothing more." His eyes slanted over at the laughing trollops.

Jade sat on the hard wooden bench opposite him, looking him right in the eye, trying to show no fear.

He smirked inwardly at her bravado, then resumed eating, but not before he noticed the trembling of her hands just as she folded them on the table in front of her.

"What's your name?" he asked her quietly, his eyes roving lazily from her face to her throat and beyond.

The heat of his gaze, unnerved her, making her self-conscious of the cover-apron she wore which did little to hide the fact that her dress was too tight. The tavern was hot and the cover-apron was torture but necessary because her clinging bodice accentuated her proud breasts and revealed the outline of her taut young nipples offering a false invitation to unwanted advances.

"I am called Jade,"

Of course, he thought, with eyes that color what else could she be called? "How long have you been in this," she saw his mouth turn down as he looked around the tavern with scorn, "domestic arrangement?"

She showed no surprise at his knowledge of her indentureship, it was a common enough practice and she could tell that he knew it was something that she had not chosen. "A year and a fortnight," she answered sadly.

"And before that?"

"I lived at the mission," she whispered, dropping her head.

"Look at me." In spite of everything he'd vowed to himself concerning women, he rather enjoyed seeing her eyes.

She raised her head slowly.

His eyes bored into hers, then moved down her face, inch by inch.

His gaze rested momentarily on the stained bodice of her apron then dragged back up to her eyes. "Are you clean?"

Jade's mouth opened with indignation. Rising quickly, she was about to walk away from this insufferable creature but was stopped by a viselike grip on her wrist. "Are you?" he asked again, glaring up at her.

"Cleaner than you I suspect," she said wrinkling her nose as though to make the point and wrenching her arm away.

Miles heard the angry calls of patrons for service. *Where was that lazy girl?* His eyes roamed the room. When he saw she was still with the mountain man, he drew the tankards of ale and began to wait on the grumbling, complaining group himself.

Miles' irritated glare didn't escape Jade, as he walked by her with the ale tankards *There'll be hell to pay,* she thought to herself as she watched him filling the tavern orders. He was an evil, hard man and many a time she'd been on the verbal end of his bad temper. He hadn't yet whipped her and she surmised it was because of something more sinister and degrading he had in mind for her.

"I'll be about my chores if there's nothing else," she said to the stranger, rubbing her wrist slowly where he'd grabbed her. When he hadn't bothered to answer, she took his silence as permission to leave.

* * * * *

The crowd had thinned considerably, even the dark brooding stranger had made his exit without her seeing him leave.

Jade hurried to clear and wipe down the tables vacated by long gone patrons. Hoping to ease the hostile feelings Miles would no doubt be harboring, she worked extra hard on the scrubbing and setting things to right. Carrying a heavily laden tray into the kitchen, she saw Cooky lifting a weighty sack of flour.

"Ye be quick washing the dishes girl, I'll be needin' your help preparing the morrow's fare."

Jade had never known exactly what Cooky's real name was. It was the only thing the old English woman had ever been called, but she liked her and for the most part they got along quite well, as long as she did as she was told.

"I'll knead the bread. Ye can pluck yon chickens." The woman pointed to the large capons on the table near the huge hearth. "Afterwards, ye can finish scrubbing the pots and kettles and don't forget to sweep up, I'll see to the ale barrels in the morning."

Jade sighed. She was also expected to gather the food scraps and make sure the slop tins were set outside the door to be fed to the hogs in the morning.

Cooky finished kneading the bread and formed it into large round and oblong loaves, then covered them with a damp cloth for further rising.

"Don't forget the floors mind ye," the woman told Jade again, then yawned and shuffled toward her sleeping area just off the kitchen.

Jade finished the arduous task of plucking the chickens, then commenced gathering up the wispy feathers. No matter how she tried, she never quite got them all into the empty sugar sack to keep until it was full so that she could make a feather pillow for Cooky for Christmas.

Dirty kettles and cooking pots were in a heap on the table. She scraped and scoured until the pots were clean, then hung each one on its proper hook where Cooky could easily get at them. The old chef was a stickler for such kitchen details—a lesson Jade had learned early on. Pushing tendrils of escaping hair off her face and with an exhausted yawn she surveyed the room. She'd managed to clear away the mess of bones, scraps and spilled liquids and finally everything was in its rightful place.

She rubbed her chapped hands against her apron and sighed heavily with the knowledge that in a few short hours it would once again be a bedlam of activity and a mess and her mundane ordeal would be the same as it was every day since she had arrived.

Jade went back into the now thankfully empty tavern. The dim candles cast an eerie pall and the deep shadows in the corners made her wary what menace might be lurking there.

She hurried to the door to be sure it was secured and then over to check the shuttered windows. Surveying the room hastily, she was satisfied that all was well and

ready for the next morning. She started back toward the kitchen when she heard a slight scraping sound. She stopped dead still. She knew who it was.

Biting her lip, she glanced at the door to the kitchen, trying to gauge the distance. It had never before seemed so far away. Slowly, she walked toward it, daring not to look to the left or right. She was mere inches from the door when suddenly she was grabbed from behind. One arm was about her waist, while the other large calloused one began stroking her neck, then roved roughly down over her breasts. A scream found its way to her throat but just as quickly, that same dirty hand slammed over her mouth cutting off any sound. A man's head pressed close to hers. She could smell the familiar, fetid breath that could only be that of Miles Craven.

"Come on now, girl! This'll only take a minute, I won't hurt ye." His craggy voice was just above a whisper in her ear. He began pulling at the straps of the cover apron, then yanked it down. She struggled against him as his hands began to fumble with the buttons at the front of her dress. Maneuvering her mouth, she felt his flesh between her teeth and bit hard. Miles shrieked and let her go but quickly grabbed her again and slapped her hard across the face knocking her to the floor.

"I'll teach ye to bite!" he spat. He began undoing the worn leather strap that held up his stained breeches. Jade stared up at him in panicked horror as he pulled his flaccid member out and pointed at her face.

"I'll be feedin' this to ya in any hole I can, girl. Now come here."

She struggled to get up but he pushed her backward, fumbling with her skirts.

She kicked him, connecting with the side of his arm.

He began rubbing himself vigorously and began moving toward her face.

"You'll get used to the taste soon enough, then we'll have some real fun, you and me."

He was at her neck.

"No!" she screeched pushing at him.

"Open ye mouth you little slut, open or I'll force it through."

"Miles!" It was Mollie Craven, his wife—three hundred pounds of flesh and the true owner of the Sleeping Dog tavern.

"Leave off her! I'm warnin' ye for the last time!" she said menacingly.

Jade got up from the floor quickly, rubbing her stinging face and glaring at Miles with the hate of a thousand enemies.

"Get on with ye, girl," Mollie said gruffly, never taking her ferret-like eyes off her scowling husband.

Jade ran into the kitchen, through the small outer room and up the ladder to the loft where she slept. Meager as it was, it was a welcome sight and her only sanctuary.

Not bothering to undress, she stepped out of her too-large, cracked leather shoes and fell across her wooden cot with its mattress of corn husks and straw. The same

unsettling questions plagued her night after night and each and every day spinning around and around in her head.

How many times must I endure this torture? How long will I be able to fend off Miles' sordid attentions?

She heard the angry muffled tones as Mollie berated her errant husband and covered her ears, praying for sleep and maybe even death and never to awaken to the nightmare that was her life. Sobbing uncontrollably into her straw-filled pillow, with tears of lonely frustration still wet upon her cheeks, she finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

Downstairs, Mollie Craven was still belittling her husband.

"I won't have it ya hear me? I will have none of your by-blow brats running around. Leave off the girl or so help me I'll geld ya and that's before I send her packin'. See how you like it when you have to do her work and yours as well," the portly woman said.

"Aw go on with ya squawking woman. The girl came at me," Miles lied. He eyed his wife warily because he knew she meant what she said about putting the girl out and him having to do her work. The shearing of his private parts was something he didn't want to think about. "Mollie, ole girl, you know you're the only apple of me eye. That skinny little chit can't hold a candle to ye." He winked at his wife, trying to ooze his way back into her good graces. "You go on and splash some sweet water on yourself and I'll be waitin' for you in our bed where I'll prove that you're the only one ole Miles needs." He grinned lasciviously and disappeared through the kitchen door.

Mollie spat out a brown wad of tobacco almost missing the spittoon near the edge of the bar. She wasn't fooled. She was well aware that the only reason Miles had married her was because she had enough gold to buy their establishment and because her head for business far exceeded his. He was a cheat and a liar but he was hers and even though it wasn't often, he did on occasion, show her affection in the privacy of the little shack they shared behind the tavern. She allowed her eyes to look upward. She knew it was just a matter of time before Miles took out his reckless lusts on Jade. She didn't relish the extra work it would cause but sooner or later the girl would have to go.

She took a last look around and was about to follow her husband's exit when she heard a single loud knock at the door.

"What now?" she groaned. It was late and she longed to be abed. Grabbing a rough-hewn club from behind the bar ledge, she waddled to the door. Opening it a mere crack, she found herself staring into the ebony eyes of the dark, sullen stranger.

* * * * *

Jade dreamed that someone was shaking her. "Oh please, it can't be morning already. It feels as though I've just lain down," she said groggily and pushed the annoying hands away.

"Wake ye I have to. Ye must come down. And be quick." Cooky's, unmistakable cockney accent brought Jade fully awake.

"What's wrong?"

"Just hurry," the woman said and hurried down the creaky ladder as fast as her girth would allow.

Jade arose, affixed her bodice and began braiding her long hair, which had escaped her kerchief and come undone during her — unbeknown to her — fitful sleep. She heard a clump and she turned to find Miles was standing before her.

"Did you not hear, girl? Hurry." He grabbed her roughly by her arm and pulled her toward the ladder. Her hair forgotten, it tumbled in heavy black waves past her waist.

"Wait...my shoes."

Ignoring her, he prodded her downward.

Fighting to keep her balance on the unstable rungs, she wondered what she could have done now to make him so angry.

Finally at the bottom, Miles pulled her along through the kitchen into the tavern, then swung her around and pushed her forward where she stumbled, and after regaining her balance, found herself mere inches from the tall, brooding stranger.

Jade moved her eyes slowly up and down his body. He was taller than any man she had ever seen and the leather duster he wore seemed a yard wide and stopped mere inches from the floor. She glowered at him, then looked at Miles with puzzlement, then at Mollie Craven who sat at a nearby table counting gleaming gold coins.

"Here! Take her and be gone with ye." Miles said and shoved Jade roughly into the stranger.

Astonished, Jade pulled back from the man's rock-hard chest and faced Miles. "Mr. Craven you can't mean... You know I am not like the others."

"Aye! It be why he's awantin' ye."

"I can't go with him, I won't," she said with a defiance she didn't feel.

"You'll go, girl. Mr. McCayne here has bought out your term — in gold."

Jade's knees buckled but thankfully held as she stared at the man for whom she'd worked for the past year. A man she detested but at least a man she knew.

"Mr. Craven, please, add another seven years to my term, I'll work all my life for you but do not send me away with him," she pointed to the man standing lazily before her with an unreadable expression under his dark hat.

Miles glanced over to where his wife sat fingering the coins. She returned his look coldly.

“’Tis done girl! Now go get your things,” he said gruffly and pushed her back in the direction of the kitchen.

Her mind was racing with a million thoughts crowded together at once. Suddenly the answer to this predicament came to her and she spoke up in desperation.

“Does he know why I am indentured? Or why I was left at the mission?” she asked looking right into the proprietor’s grimy, deeply lined face.

Miles snarled and took a step toward her. “You’ll just shut your mouth about that, girl.” He pointed menacingly at her.

She turned and faced the stranger. “I am the product of an octoroon servant,” she hesitated a moment to allow the statement to sink in, “and a white, what you might call, fancy man, a riverboat gambler.”

The stranger offered no reaction to her statement.

“I was taken away from my mother and sold to a plantation owner. They sent her to a workhouse but she escaped and found me. She brought me to the mission sisters here, just outside town. I lived there until Mr. Craven bought me as a bondservant.” She finished, her eyes staring boldly into his, daring him to still want her now that she revealed her heritage.

He didn’t speak. He just looked deeply into her incredible eyes of the most unusual green. “What happened to your folks?” he asked in a low, deep voice.

Jade waited a full half minute before answering. “I heard he’d been killed because he was thought to have cheated at cards. But I suspect it was because he had consorted with a slave. I don’t know what happened to my mother. She’s probably dead too or she would have come back for me. I know she would have.”

“Then you don’t have anyone. Get your things.” His voice was unemotional and controlled.

Jade’s heart began to hammer in her chest. “I don’t know who you are, or where you came from but I’ll not be going anywhere with you!” she said with a mixture of anger, indignation and just a hint of dread.

“He’s Cole McCayne, from up the White River way, that’s all you need to know, girl,” Miles rasped.

Jade remembered hearing tales of the mountain men of the Salida Mountains. She’d heard they were a wild boorish bunch who trapped animals for fur pelts, mined for gold and captured and tortured women. She looked up at him again. Although she was unable to see his face clearly in the dim light, she didn’t think he appeared as ominous as the stories had depicted, but he was still of the mountains and she knew beyond a doubt that she didn’t want to go with him.

With an exasperated sigh, Cole moved past her and went into the kitchen and to the ladder, taking the rungs two at a time. Jade’s eyes darted to the ceiling as she heard muffled sounds of movement coming from above.

Mollie pouched the gold and was carrying it to her safe place, stopping momentarily in front of Jade. "Believe it or not, this is for your own good," she said, eyeing her husband with contempt.

Suddenly, a tightly wound bundle was thrown at her feet. Cole, with a look of complete annoyance on his smoldering, unsmiling face, nodded to it.

Jade looked around her, there was no solace or protection. There was no one to give her a kind word or stand up for her. Biting her lip to halt the tears that threatened to fall, she knew there was only one recourse. Without further thought or hesitation, she inched her way to the door, snatched it open and ran into the street.

Cole took a deep, wearied breath and ambled to the door. He turned his gaze to Miles, the question unasked.

"She'll not git far, she's barefoot. Besides," Miles said with a shrug, "there's no place for her to go except the saloon or maybe the church at the edge of town." He pointed to it.

Cole retrieved Jade's meager sack of belongings and without further discussion, left the Sleeping Dog tavern. He tied the drab bundle around the pommel of his saddle and stared in the direction the proprietor had indicated. Slowly, he began to walk toward the little church.

Chapter Two

Jade's breath rasped in her throat and her bare feet were smarting from the pebbles that littered the dusty road. Finally, she reached the church doors. She yanked on the heavy pull-rope and heard the dull tinkle of a bell from somewhere inside. After what seemed an eternity, the door swung open and a short, obese padre stood gaping at the frightened, shivering girl before him.

"Sanctuary, Father!"

He looked down at her wringing hands, bare feet, then at her tearful eyes so hopelessly afraid. He ushered her gently inside and slammed the door.

The church was cool and peaceful as she walked slowly to the altar. The Madonna looked down at her sadly. Jade knelt before the beautiful solemn statue and folded her hands, her lips moving in a silent prayer for protection. Crossing herself she arose and looked at the stern-faced padre.

"Now, tell me my child, what is it that you have done?"

"Nothing, Father, I swear. There is a man after me."

"For what purpose?" he asked suspiciously.

"I don't know really. He wants to take me away with him and I do not want to go."

She jumped suddenly as the little copper bell over the door shook and jangled, filling the church with its tinkling sound once more.

The priest turned to answer it but Jade tugged at his sleeve. "Please, Father, don't open it."

He hesitated, seeing true fear in her eyes, and innocence. His face softened.

"Come with me." He led her to a small room behind the simple altar, shut her inside, then went to answer the door.

The padre peered through a small crack of the opening and saw a brooding face and a mouth set hard with annoyance.

"I've come for the woman." He said it as a statement.

"What woman is this you seek my son?" the priest said, looking at him with false puzzlement.

Tired and impatient, Cole tried to push through the door but was surprised by the strength of the little priest barring his way.

"This is a house of God, a sanctuary. Nothing can be removed by force."

Cole eyed him blankly, his lip curling into a sneering half-grin. "Then I guess we'll just have to talk, padre."

The priest hesitated, then stepped aside and widened the door to permit the man to enter. The ominous figure towered over him and the darkness of his clothes and attitude made him a little uneasy. The priest walked ahead for a bit then crossed himself before turning to face the man whose commanding presence could not be ignored.

"Now then, my son," the priest said, folding his hands neatly within the confines of his simple brown cassock, "you say, you are looking for a woman?"

"I am. And I know she's here."

"What is it you want of this woman?"

"She belongs to me."

"Ahh! Then she is your wife. Why did you not say so?" the priest smiled with cynicism.

"No, but she is mine just the same."

"Señor! Are you telling me that she is your servant?" he said, hesitating briefly, "or something else perhaps?" The priest rocked back and forth on his sandaled feet waiting for an answer.

"She was indentured at the Sleeping Dog Tavern. I bought out her term," he replied easily.

"Bah!" the priest spat. "Indenture! Slavery is what it is. For what purpose have you done this?"

"The reasons are my own," Cole shifted his stance. "Where is she?"

"Surely you understand that even if the woman were here, I could not allow you to take her against her will."

"And you must understand I know she is and she can't stay here forever."

The priest merely shrugged. "In that case, I have time my son and so does she."

"I paid a fair amount of gold and I want her so that I can be on my way. Now, will you get her, or shall I tear your little church apart to find her?"

The priest showed little fear but he had no doubt the man could easily carry out his threat and this was already such a poor parish. "One moment, señor."

The priest disappeared into the little room where Jade stood wringing her hands. "He said that he bought out your term of servitude, my child. Perhaps your duration of slavery is over."

"How can I know, Father? I may be going from one form of bondage to another, or even worse?" She turned away, hoping he wouldn't notice the scarlet hue creeping up her cheeks.

"I am sorry, my child. He knows you are here and is determined that you go with him."

Jade sank to her knees before the priest. "Please, Father! I do not know this man. I will do anything but don't send me away with him," she cried into the hem of his robe.

He pondered for a minute. Suddenly, his face brightened.

"There is only one way I know of for sure that he will not dishonor you. Knowing what I know about these types of men, I am positive that he will leave when I even propose it. Come, child." He pulled her to her feet and led her out into the cool, quiet church.

Jade held her gasp in check when she saw McCayne staring at her. He was like an apparition in the dim light and his face was a mask of granite, except for a barely noticeable twitch in his jaw.

"This young woman tells me your story is true but she still does not wish to accompany you."

"She'll come!" McCayne reached out to grab her but the priest knocked his hand aside.

"If you want her señor," there was a heavy pause in the air, "then you will have to marry her."

The stout little priest waited for a reaction.

Jade looked at the priest in astonishment. "Father!"

"Even the church will not come between man and wife," he finished with a self-assured smile.

The priest quieted her, smiling sardonically at the man. "Well, señor? It is the only way I will allow you to take her."

The priest was confident the dark stranger wouldn't consider matrimony when he noticed his hesitation.

Cole's face darkened with a quiet rage. His black eyes glistened as he lowered them slowly to look upon her. The heavy silence was deafening.

"All right, padre, have it your way but make it quick," he said with steely control.

Both Jade and the priest stared at him, astounded. She backed away, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Well!" Cole scoffed. "Isn't this what you wanted? Then let's get on with it, I've a long way to go and she's already cost me more than she's worth."

The priest went to Jade, his eyes sad. "He cannot dishonor you if he is your husband. He will have to be responsible for you."

"You know very little of men and women, Father and I don't know *him* at all," she said, folding her ice-cold hands tightly together.

"I did not think he would do it. I thought he would leave in disgust at the very mention of marriage. I am very sorry, my child," he whispered looking over at Cole who was glaring at the two of them with impatience.

"He means to take you with him. I am positive that he will not leave without you and you cannot go back to the tavern."

The padre knew almost nothing could break a bargain once it had been sealed with gold and he was sure the tavern keepers would never take her back knowing they would have to return the money. "It may be for the best, my child."

Jade looked at Cole who stared at her with a growing impatience.

The priest went to the little drawer near the altar and removed his vestment sash and worn, leather bound prayer book. He opened it and stood in front of them.

"Take her hand, my son."

Cole grabbed Jade's icy, quivering hand in his huge rough one as the priest began the marriage ritual in a droning monotone voice. "Do you take this woman to be your wife..."

Cole looked down at Jade, who in turn looked at the floor.

"Yes." It was a terse, emotionless statement.

Jade couldn't believe this was happening and hadn't even heard the question when it was put to her until she felt the slight pressure of her hand being squeezed.

The sound moved in her throat but could not get past her lips.

"Answer!" Cole's deep, irritated voice brought her to attention. She looked up at him and his dark threatening gaze forced the words from her lips.

"Yes," she answered in a soft, whispery voice.

The priest droned on but she didn't hear him. She mentally begged him not to say, "*You may kiss your bride.*" He must have heard her, for when he was finished, he shut his prayer book with an angry, pronounced thump and ushered them quickly to the door, his sad eyes unable to look at Jade.

Cole stopped at the wooden box tacked to the wall and dropped several gold coins into the slot. The priest sheepishly lowered his head with thankful embarrassment.

Outside, Jade followed the man who was now her husband and walked back to where his horse was tethered.

He undid her small bundle from the pommel of the saddle and threw it to the ground. As she bent to retrieve it, he grabbed a handful of her hair and bent her head back to face him.

"You're bound to me now, Jade. Never run from me. I don't want to have to warn you again do you understand?" He tugged her hair tighter.

"Yes!" she hissed back. "I understand."

"I'm going to see about a horse for you. I don't want to have to chase you down again." He let go of her and walked away.

Cole strode toward the livery. Hell! he muttered to himself, this wasn't going to be as easy as he'd first thought. When he'd first seen Jade at the tavern, he'd chosen her because she looked more docile than the others. He liked the way she went about her work and never spoke to any of the men who constantly hounded her. His rationale

was that he was doing her a favor by taking her out of there and putting her to good use. He was glad she hadn't started using any eye-fluttering wiles to get him to release her. Whatever she was willing to offer as woman, he wanted no part of.

Jade watched as he strode toward the livery where the only light was from a lamp that burned just outside. She waited in the dark, chilly night air, barefoot and afraid. Opening her sack, she fished out her shoes and slipped her aching feet into them.

The thought came to mind to run but she knew he would have no trouble finding her. Besides, where could she go? She had no family, no friends and no money. The only place that would be glad to see her was the Wild Buck Saloon at the opposite end of the town. It had been opened by a shady woman of ill repute not long after she'd entered servitude at the Sleeping Dog. Jade remembered how, on several occasions, she'd been approached to work as a dance hall girl at the saloon but had adamantly refused. She recalled their laughter and how they'd said sooner or later she'd be there.

A quarter of an hour later her new husband returned pulling a dark, snorting horse behind him. Without a word to her, he led it and his own stallion to the two-story hotel in the center of the sleepy little town.

With her bundle in her hand, she followed him into the dimly lit establishment. Having never been in a hotel, she was awed by the space and faded, threadbare carpet that maintained only a hint of its former rich red color. She stared at the worn velvet settee with its sagging middle and smoke burns, then up to the dusty chandelier that had seen better days.

An overweight Mexican sat at the desk, snoring. Cole pounded the desk loudly in front of him. The man awoke with a grumpy start, his jowls huffing and puffing like a blacksmith's bellows.

"Ahh! Señor Cole," the man became alert and nervously animated, "a room for you and eh...the lady?" He licked his lips as his eyes roamed lasciviously over Jade, thinking what a lucky man McCayne was.

Cole signed the register, took the key that had been offered, and urged Jade up the stairs to the assigned room.

Inside, he lit a small lantern. The room was clean but dusty from the sporadic winds that blew down into the town from the mountains.

The first thing Jade noticed was the bed with its lumpy mattress and faded coverlet. It quite literally dominated the small room. She looked around wondering where she would sleep. Then remembered with trepidation that she was married now and of course it was expected that she sleep with her new husband.

"You might as well make yourself comfortable, we're gonna be here for the night." He had removed his coat and threw it on the chair.

Jade could hear him moving but she didn't dare look his way. She heard the trickle of water as he poured some into the washbowl. Only when she heard him splashing did she dare to steal a look at him. He was naked to the waist. His broad back bunched and relaxed with his movements as he splashed water over the back of his neck. Looking covertly at his reflection in the mirror, she could see his chest was smooth except for the line of dark straight hair that wended downward to points beyond her view. His sun-bronzed arms rippled with sinewy muscle, which she attributed to heavy work, but she could also see that his form was part of who he was. His dark-chestnut colored hair was thick and rested in uneven waves almost to his shoulders. Her gaze followed his heavily muscle-rippled back, down to his narrow waist and back up again. She knew little of men but she could see quite clearly that he was a breathtaking specimen. Jade raised her head and caught his reflection in the mirror as he dried his hands. He was staring directly back at her in the glass. Her face aflame she turned quickly away, mortified that she'd been caught examining him.

"We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow. I suggest you get some sleep." He lay down on the bed and turned his back to the wall. Within minutes he was snoring lightly.

Sighing with relief, Jade lowered the scone candle then went to the only chair in the room, a worn tufted seat that would serve as her bed, and curled up. Covering herself with his heavy duster that he'd thrown there, she watched him as his upper body rose and fell with his even breathing until her eyelids grew heavy and she fell into a nightmarish sleep, dreaming of where her life was taking her.

Chapter Three

The sun was warm against her face as Jade slowly opened her eyes and stretched. Groaning, she rubbed her aching neck. Languishing a moment longer she basked in the sun's brilliant rays. Her eyes adjusted to the room and she suddenly remembered where she was. Turning quickly she looked at the bed. It was empty. She heard movement and turned to find her new husband leaning against the window jamb looking down into the street.

The acrid smell of the cheroot he was smoking assaulted her nostrils, sending a wave of nausea through her.

"We'll have breakfast at the cantina, then we'll be leaving. There's water in the tub for a bath if you want," he gestured toward the battered copper vessel.

When had that arrived? she wondered. *He must have had it brought up while I slept.* Rising stiffly from the chair, she walked to it and looked at the tepid water with yearning, then up at him. "Are you going to watch me as I bathe?"

His half-smile was lazy, then turned into a smirk. "Not today."

He strode from the window to the door. "I'll be back in a little while. Don't make me wait." His eyes roved over her quickly then he disappeared into the hall.

Jade went to the door and cracked it open to make sure he was gone then padded back to the tub and began to remove her soiled garments. She moaned aloud as she lowered her stiff, aching body into the tepid water. There was a small bar of lye soap and a washing cloth. She began to rub it, making a foamy froth and washed herself vigorously. Sighing with pleasure, she immersed herself into the water to rinse off the soap. It felt so good and she completely forgot the fact that it would take an eternity to dry her abundance of long, thick, wavy tresses. The pleasant feel of the water and the warmth of the streaming rays of sun that poured through the window relaxed her and soon she drifted off into a peaceful nap.

How long she dozed she didn't know when suddenly the feeling of being watched caused her to awaken with a start. She gasped to find her new husband was standing over her, his face an expressionless mask but she noticed his eyes were not missing an inch of her wet, exposed breasts. She crossed her arms over them quickly.

"I-I...must have fallen asleep, I'm sorry," she stammered.

"Get dressed!"

She started to rise but remembered her nakedness and slid deeper into the tub.

Smirking, he went to the window, perching his leg on the sill and gave her his back.

Jade exited the tub, quickly dried herself and dressed. She hated putting the soiled dress back on her now clean, refreshed body but she didn't have anything else. Stuffing

her feet into the battered shoes, she then began to wring out her hopelessly wet hair as best she could until finally and all she could do was pull it over one shoulder and begin braiding it. She was still trying to do so as they left the room and she hurried behind him down the stairs.

The small town, which only hours before had been almost as quiet as a tomb, was now bustling with activity. Wagons rolled through the dusty streets. Women walked back and forth carrying out their daily duties and children chased after squawking chickens that pecked at the ground for seed and scraps of food.

Jade hurried along, trying to keep up with the long strides of her husband. They walked into the cantina, passing by a young man who strummed a low, lilting melody on a battered guitar.

Cole chose the table farthest from the door and sat with his back boldly to it, gesturing for Jade to sit opposite him.

A man with a stained apron and an impossibly huge mustache rushed over and feverishly began to clear the table of clutter from the previous occupant.

"Señor Cole, eet has been a long time," the man said with a heavy accent as he brushed crumbs onto the floor.

"Bring a platter of eggs, tortillas, steak and coffee," Cole said ignoring his comment.

"Right away, right away." The man sped off, screeching orders in Spanish.

Less than five minutes later, a voluptuous young woman with a wild mane of earth-brown bouncing curls, carrying a tray filled with his steaming food approached the table. Her fiery, slightly slanted eyes overflowed with scorn as she glanced scathingly at Jade, then smiled seductively at Cole.

"*Buenos dias*, Cole. Such a long time you do not come to El Gato Negro." Her accent was thick and enticing.

Cole looked at her, the beginnings of a smile playing on his lips but never quite making it. "Carlita," he said leaning back in his chair and allowing his eyes to take in her full luscious form.

The sultry vixen placed the tray down and began to carefully arrange the food in front of him, making sure he didn't miss her ample bosom, which threatened to spill from her low-cut dress. Completely ignoring Jade, the temptress pulled up a chair and with flirtatious, sensuous movements, began to spoon the food onto his plate.

"I should be very angry with you Cole, you have not been as regular with your visits as you used to be."

"I've been busy."

"With exceptional beautiful business I see," she said with smiling contempt as her eyes once again raked over Jade. "But I forgive you." Her voice was again a seductive caress that offered more than was actually said.

He pushed the tray with the remaining food toward Jade before forking a large piece of steak into his mouth, then gave his complete attention to Carlita.

The woman spoke to him rapidly in a mixture of English and Spanish and every so often, a smile broke out on his face as she told him about the goings-on in town over the past few months.

"One night the Archer boy—you remember him don't you? Well he challenged a cowboy to a shooting match and when the man refused, the boy went outside and started firing his gun to prove his marksmanship. He shot out two windows and the wing off of a chicken," the Spanish beauty said and laughed loudly.

"Johnny Archer never could shoot worth a penny," he said with a chuckle.

Jade tried to ignore the woman's laughter as well as her hand which the wanton had rested lightly on Cole's thigh and was now rubbing it suggestively. Thoroughly incensed by the Carlita's behavior, Jade pushed her chair back and got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" Cole's tone was edged with annoyance, unlike the friendly one he had with Carlita.

"I'm not hungry!" she lied.

"Sit down and eat, there won't be much on the road."

"I can wait. Besides, I'm sure it would be much better if you were alone with your...friend," Jade's voice held an acrimonious sneer.

His dark eyes grazed up at her and she read the impatient anger there.

"Well I think it would be better if you sat down. Of course if you need help with that I could sit you down!"

For a moment she thought to turn her back and leave. But she knew he would stop her and whatever he did to her would cause her embarrassment she didn't relish, especially since Carlita seemed to be enjoying her discomfort so much.

She sat slowly, her face heating as anger mixed with humiliation crept up her neck.

Cole raked some food from his plate onto her battered tin one. "Now eat! We have a long way to go and I can't have you faintin' from hunger on me."

Jade picked up the fork and clutched it tightly to keep her hand from shaking with rage as she heard Carlita giggle at her mortification while brazenly running her slim fingers up Cole's biceps, her eyes offering him unspoken favors.

Jade wanted to cry with angry frustration. She wanted to cry about her entire life and where it was taking her. But she wouldn't, especially in front of this Carlita woman. She placed a forkful of rapidly cooling eggs into her mouth, barely able to swallow over the lump in her throat.

His hunger sated, Cole leaned back in his chair and finished the last of his bitter coffee. When he was done he threw a few coins on the table and rose to leave. Carlita stood up with him, her body leaning into his, her ruby red lips puckered into a haughty pout. "Have you no gift of departure for Carlita?" she said petulantly, waiting for a kiss.

He grinned and tweaked her nose playfully. "I'll see you when I see you, Carlita darlin'," then walked toward the swinging cantina doors.

Carlita tossed her abundance of lovely hair around and glowered triumphantly at Jade.

"You coming?" The question was directed at Jade.

She didn't exactly understand why but she knew she wouldn't be able to stand the girl's triumphant gaze for another second without wanting to scratch out her eyes. With as much resolve as she could muster, she got up, straightened her back and followed her husband.

"Leesen Señor Cole," Carlita's sugary voice drifted loudly after them, "I would be happy to take that little baggage from you eef you do not want her. I could use another hand to slop the pigs," she pointed to the remnants of the meal on the table.

He stopped, looked back and touched his hand to his hat. "Thanks, Carlita. I'll keep that in mind and if my wife gives me any more trouble, she's yours."

The tray she was holding crashed to the floor as Carlita stared after him, "Your wife!" she said astonished, then began sputtering curses in rapid-fire Spanish. But Cole and Jade had already disappeared through the door.

* * * * *

"Go on up and get your things. I'll settle the bill and we can be on our way," he said to Jade in front of the hotel.

She made her way back to the room and prepared her meager belongings for the unknown journey. A quarter of an hour later they left the dusty establishment and he led her to the horses. Hers was a magnificent mustang, with a silky brown coat and a slim white stripe on its forehead.

"He's beautiful. Is he tame?" she asked.

"It's a she and she'll let you ride her," he retorted tightening the saddle cinch.

Jade climbed up onto the horse that snorted and wiggled its haunches nervously. Jade patted the beast and spoke gently to it until it settled down and whinnied softly.

It didn't escape Cole's notice how easily the mare accepted Jade's touch and soft voice.

They left the dusty little town with its cloying odors of spicy food, tequila and sweat. Music from the cantina had livened up the dead air but faded as they moved further away from town.

They rode for a whole day and Jade was almost as tired as if she had worked in the tavern. When they reached another small town later that evening, Cole, noticing how weary she was, decided to stay at the only hotel. This time the sleeping arrangements were different as there was no chair for Jade to sleep in. For a long time she stood in the middle of the room unsure of what to do.

"You'd better lie down and get some sleep," he said as he stretched out on the bed, then turned his face to the wall.

Jade slipped out of her shoes and lay next to him, careful not to touch him in any way. Unaware of just how tired she was, she was asleep in moments and never felt her body roll closer to his during the night.

Cole awoke at dawn to find his hand entangled in black curling hair and her face pressed close against his arm. He shifted trying gently to disengage himself, awakening her. Jade moaned lightly and stretched then noticed the steely muscle against her skin. She moved away quickly.

"I'm sorry...I..." Her already dusky skin tone deepened.

"No need to be. Whatever you're thinkin' never crossed my mind," he said getting up and walking to the washbasin where he splashed icy water on his face.

They were on the road again just after first light and as the hours melded together Jade lost all track of time. They rode until the foliage became denser and the trees were so heavy and thick that it blocked a good portion of the sunlight.

It was almost dusk of the third or fourth day, she didn't know which, when they stopped in a wooded glen. She was tired, irritable and dirty. Cole gathered wood while she looked on sulking. He threw pieces of bark and twigs at her feet. The gesture was clear. She began to make a fire, as he unsaddled the horses.

"I'm going to water the horses," he said leading them away.

She was hungry and her stomach growled embarrassingly.

"Try to have some food ready when I get back."

After he'd returned and they'd eaten a meal of jerky, flat bread and bitter coffee, he unrolled his blanket, lay down and pulled his hat over his face.

The sun was setting and the little she could see of the sky was breathtakingly beautiful with striped patterns of red and yellow with traces of orange and blue against the hills and mountains. Sure that he was sleeping soundly and she herself was unable to rest, Jade got up and walked in the direction he'd taken the horses earlier. Finally hearing, then following, the sound of running water, she found to her delight a glade that had a narrow waterfall coursing over jagged rocks into a large pool. It then flowed out into a long streambed, which is where she surmised he'd watered the horses. Kicking off her shoes, she crept forward and tested the water. It was cool but refreshing. Undressing down to her chemise, she waded out toward the falls. The water was colder and a little rougher and she struggled to maintain her balance. When her body had grown used to the temperature, she began splashing around and dunking her body up to neck level.

She waded over until she was under the falls and allowed the water to rush over her, washing the road grime from her tired aching body.

She lowered herself and swam out into the middle of the pool. The fading rays of the sun hit the water giving them the look of shimmering, almost transparent, golden stripes.

She had no idea how long she relaxed in the water but suddenly, there he was on the bank. He didn't utter a word, just picked up her dress and held it out, his cold stare commanding her to return to the shore.

Wading back, she was instantly aware that the wet chemise did little to hide her body from him. Quickly she crossed her arms over her chest in an effort to hide the dark nipples that peeked through the clinging cloth.

"I think it might be a good idea if you got some sleep now," he muttered.

She snatched the dress and pulled it over her shivering body and walked angrily past him back to the campfire. Why was he always so surly and angry? she wondered, Why was the brief recognition he offered so adversarial?

Back at the campsite, Cole lay down again and turned his back to her. This time, sleep didn't come so easily. His mind was filled with the captivating vision of her as she left the water.

The way the waning sun's rays surrounded her made her seem like a shimmering goddess. But he didn't want to think about that. He'd take his pleasure as he always had, ever since... His mind shut down then. There was no reason to call up the past, even if it was with him each and every day.

It was difficult for Jade to fall asleep as well. A thousand thoughts invaded her mind. Was this to be her life? To spend the rest of it with a man who hardly said more than a few words to her? How would she endure life in a harsh land with man who was inflexible and unyielding?

She was awakened some hours later by the sounds of movement. Cole was hunkered down dousing the dying embers of the campfire. The horses were already saddled and ready. Jade sighed and got up from the hard ground and stretched. She smoothed her dress and noticed her shoes lying nearby. She remembered that she'd left them by the stream. He must have brought them back sometime while she slept. She pulled them on, rolled up the blanket she'd slept on and stowed it at the back of her saddle. Climbing up on her horse she made ready to begin their trek once again.

They rode side by side for almost an hour with nothing but the sound of the surefooted horse's hooves and the chirping of birds.

"Back at the tavern you said something about your folks. Tell me a little about yourself."

His voice startled her coming out of thin air like that but the question itself puzzled her more.

"Are you really interested?"

"I asked didn't I?"

Jade's mind retreated to the past. She didn't really want to remember those days.

"There's not that much to tell. The sisters at the mission were kind and they wanted me to stay but I knew there had to be a life beyond those stone walls and I longed to be able to make my own way."

"That's not easy for a woman alone," he said matter-of-factly.

"I was hoping to find a situation. Perhaps become a maid in an established and respected household."

"That usually happens with references and it appears you were sorely lacking in that area."

"I never even got the chance," she said quietly.

"What happened then?"

The memory of that day would forever be in her mind. She had been in the garden weeding along with several other girls and boys—orphans like herself—when one of the lay sisters approached and gestured for her to follow. Wiping her hands on her apron, she fell into step beside the young nun, asking questions to which no answer was given.

When she stepped into the sparse room that the mother superior used for private prayer, she saw a tall thin, straggly man standing nearby. The sister explained to her that in order that the mission be able to continue its good works, it was funded not only by family contributions such as those her mother had provided, but also by private donations. Particularly by innkeepers who needed help in their establishments. While they normally frowned on having anything to do with such places, it was tolerated under the guise of honest-work-for-hire. The mother superior explained further that since Jade was getting on in age and had shown no interest in becoming a novice into the holy order, then servitude was her best recourse. Her only recourse actually. She went on to explain that there had been whisperings of how other girls who left the mission without the benefit of honest work were forced into a life of prostitution or ended up in the workhouse, which amounted to just about the same thing.

Seven years! The mother superior had said. Seven years of being owned by someone solely for the purpose of slavery hidden under the semblance of services for hire.

"Miles Craven," Cole interjected with a kind of hostility.

"Yes. He looked at me with the eyes of an evil man with sordid appetites that had little to do with me serving in his tavern." She shivered slightly as she remembered the sight of his teeth stained dark from tobacco, his thin, matted hair and his stubby, gnarled dirty fingers. "And now," she went on bitterly, "here I am once again. Property, chattel, an unwilling participant in a man's game of ownership."

Cole shifted in his saddle. "You need not worry about me, I'm nothing like him."

But she was worried. She had no life of her own and as his wife, he was free to do anything he wished to her.

* * * * *

They stopped one last time in the afternoon to rest the horses and fill the canteens. Jade sank heavily onto a fallen tree. She was tired and hungry. The grit on her body made her itch and her heart was as heavy as an anvil. She watched as he tied the filled canteens to his pommel and made ready to resume their ride.

She looked up at him with frustrated tear-filled eyes, her lips trembling. "No more!"

He whirled around and looked at her with puzzlement.

"I won't go another step with you!" She stood up and stomped her foot. "You have no right to do this. I don't know anything about you. Not where you came from or where we're going. And I'm so tired." She was shaking with hysteria.

Cole knew there would be an unwanted, messy scene if he didn't stop her impending hysterics. He went to her and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Stop it!"

She shook him off and glared. "Don't tell me to stop. How can you do this?"

"Calm down, Jade. It's not that much further and..."

"I won't go with you, not now, not ever," she cut him off, then broke free and turned into a run down the sloping trail.

Jade ran, tears blurring her vision until she ran headlong into dense brush but she didn't care, she just kept moving.

She was sure he would come after her but she pushed aside the tangled vines and branches and pushed ahead as best she could.

Cole's patience such as it was, ended as he watched her, then started down after her, his long strides following her trail easily. He caught up to her seconds later and found her struggling to untangle her mass of dark hair, which had become caught in the dense bramble bushes.

"Hold still before you tear your hair from your silly little head," he said and worked to unravel the mess. "Someday this hair is going to get you into a heap of trouble," he muttered.

He freed her and swung her around to face him. "Why are you always running away from me? Don't you know there's no place you can go?"

Her eyes blazed back at him. "You think because you bought me that I will obey you? That I will go with you into these godforsaken hills? Well I won't! I won't, you hear me?" she screamed at him.

His tone dropped and he grabbed her alluringly beautiful face and forced her to look up at him. "You'll go because you have no choice."

She stopped struggling as the truth of the statement hit her. It was either him, or back to Miles Craven and the tavern. If she went back she knew she would never be able to escape the clutches of the slovenly innkeeper's decadent appetites. Perhaps it

would be best to just bide her time and wait for her chance to flee from her new owner. Her breathing slowed as she looked up at him with trembling lips.

Cole let her go. "For what it's worth, I didn't have any intention of getting a she-cat like you for a wife but I got you. You belong to me now and I may be able to do little about it but *you*," he pointed at her, "at the moment can do absolutely nothing." He grabbed her hand and pulled her back up the trail to the horses, then lifted her easily and flung her roughly up across hers.

"I'll go but I don't have to like it," she said yanking the reins from him.

Cole got onto his black steed and together they cantered slowly down the rocky path.

He was silent, focusing on the road ahead and Jade furtively stole glances at him from time to time. His profile was angular with a dark shadowy beard covering his jaw, which worked incessantly as though he was grinding his teeth in controlled anger. His tight grip on his reins told her she would much rather have them there than around her neck.

They'd been riding for three-quarters of an hour and Jade decided that it was time *she* had some answers.

"What do you want with me? Why did you buy out my term?"

"I need you," he said in a clipped tone.

"Why?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"I'd like to know now if you don't mind." She hated the cat and mouse game.

"Well then if you must know right now, it's to care for my son," he snapped.

This was not the answer she'd expected at all. "Your son?" she breathed the words out softly.

"Yes, my son."

"How old is he?" she ventured on.

"Ten."

"What's his name?"

He shifted uneasily. "Ramon, but he answers to Ramy."

"Where's his mother?" She half expected him to tell her that she'd left him, not that she would blame her. She wasn't surprised when he hadn't responded to her about his son's mother. Maybe she had found someone and run off. Who would want to live with a hard case like him anyway?

Maybe some things had changed in his life, but a lot more had changed in hers. This is who she was now. Jade McCayne. She worked the name over and over in her mind. She was a wife and soon a caregiver to a ten-year-old boy. Somehow she knew everything would be different for her from now on.

* * * * *

Higher and higher toward Salida they rode as the uneven ground grew hard and rocky. Eagles soared overhead searching for snow rabbits or carrion, while the distant hoot of an unseen owl was the only other sound. Jade was in awe of the snow on the mountains, with clouds that coiled around the tips that seemed to loom closer the higher they rode. The air had grown thinner and chillier than it had been at the lower elevations and Jade found that it took a little more effort to take a breath.

It was dark and Jade leaned precariously over her saddle, her eyes struggling to stay open. She was jolted slightly as the horse's gait stopped and the mare snorted and stomped at the dusty ground.

Sitting upright, she noticed that Cole had taken hold of her reins. She hadn't even remembered dropping them. They were on a hillock and he was in front of her looking down onto a large cabin with gray swirling smoke coming from the chimney. There was a barn, a corral and two other buildings in close proximity of one another.

"Home," he announced softly.

Jade's blurry vision adjusted to the darkness. Cole led her horse down the slope across a grassy knoll and then a running small brook, then through a small forest of trees and bushes heavily laden with berries. A few minutes later Cole pulled the horses to a halt near the front of the cabin. Jade started when suddenly the door of the house flew open and a young boy ran out in his nightshirt and barefoot.

"Pa!" the boy yelled excitedly but stopped short when he saw Cole glaring down at him.

"It's late. Why aren't you asleep?" he asked coldly.

"The boy wanted to wait up for you, Cole."

Following the sound of the new voice, Jade saw a tall, handsome, wiry, thin man had come out of the house behind the lad.

"Howdy Kyle. When did you get back?"

"Bout a week ago, picked up your little scamp from the Serranos on the way in." He tousled the boy's dark hair.

Kyle's gaze wandered over to the occupant of other horse and with raised eyebrows he rubbed his hand over his chin quizzically.

"You get the Arabian?" Cole asked, dismounting his horse.

"Cost five thousand, just like you said it would."

"It'll be worth it," he said.

Jade's head was swimming from exhaustion. Unable to stop herself, she began to slide slowly off the saddle in a faint.

In less than two strides Kyle was there and caught her. Her long thick braid hit against his leg with a dull thump.

"What's this?" Kyle asked.

"That," Cole said sullenly, "is my wife!" He hitched the reins to the rail, then walked on into the cabin.

Kyle and Ramy looked at each other dumfounded and mouthed the word *wife* before following him inside.

"I didn't know you went after a wife," Cole said.

"I didn't. I sort of..." Cole blew out a long breath. "Acquired her on the way."

"Carlita is going to be furious," Kyle said trying hard to not to laugh out loud.

"She *is* furious."

"You mean she knows? I'd give my eye teeth to have seen the look on her face." This time he did laugh and seemed to forget he was holding Jade.

"You gonna stand there holding her all night?" Cole nodded at the woman in his friend's arms.

"Oh, sorry." Kyle moved toward Cole's bedroom.

"Whoa there cowboy, she's not that kind of wife," Cole said stopping him in his tracks. "She'll sleep in your room for now. You can bunk in the tack-house."

Bewildered, Kyle took Jade into the room that was usually his when he stayed and laid her gently on the bed.

"As near as I can recollect, there's only been one kind of wife," he mumbled softly, peering down into her lovely, tawny face.

Ramy stood in the kitchen and looked at his father nervously. "Pa, Blackie had her colt yesterday, she's all legs and chestnut colored with a white peak, wanna see her?"

"Tomorrow. You get to bed, you'll have a lot to do in the morning," he said without looking at the boy.

Ramy lowered his eyes and shuffled to his room, uttering a low, dismal, "Goodnight."

Kyle, came out of the bedroom and went to the cupboard. Grabbing a bottle and two cups he set them on the table.

"Looks like congratulations are in order."

"Just pour and remind me to tell you about it someday," Cole said with a grunt.

Chapter Four

The next morning Jade awoke to the smell of frying bacon and the strong odor of burning coffee. The low growl in her stomach instantly reminded her that she hadn't had much to eat during their long ride. She got up and stretched her aching bones and backside. She had never in her life ridden a horse for as long as she had with him and her body was complaining about the effort.

The last thing she remembered was almost falling from the horse and being caught by strong arms. Finding herself in this masculine room, she assumed it had been her husband who had brought her here. She was relieved to see that her soiled dress was intact but her hair had come undone and was in wild, wavy disarray. Smoothing her dress as best she could and re-braiding her hair as quickly as she could, she walked out of the room toward the voices coming from what she hoped was the kitchen.

Kyle leapt to his feet the moment she entered. "Mornin', ma'am." She turned to face him.

"Kyle Stoner, ma'am, didn't have much chance for introductions last night," he said extending his hand

"Good morning. I'm Jade Carson..." She stopped. This was no longer her last name, she thought looking over at Cole. "I'm Jade."

He was almost completely engulfed by the beautiful green eyes that smiled back at him as she extended her hand. He shook it but she withdrew it quickly, not so much because of what she thought of his reluctance to let it go but because of her rough calluses.

"I'm afraid I overslept."

Cole sat with his back to her and didn't acknowledge her and continued to eat.

"That bacon smells awful good," she said looking over at the stove where a pan lay with grease drippings.

"There's slab of meat under that cloth over there. Tomorrow you'll at least get up with the rest of us. We'll expect to have breakfast before we set out," Cole said icily after swallowing a mouthful of food.

"Yes, of course." Her tone was tight and checked, just like his.

She looked at the empty seat next to Kyle and he caught her gaze.

"The boy is out gettin' milk from ole Bess. He don't eat much but he sure loves that milk."

"Is there a place where I can wash?" she asked.

"There's a water closet outside, just through there." He pointed to a recessed door.

"I'll only be a minute or two," she said, knowing in her heart that Cole didn't care.

She walked to the door and then under a covered walkway until she came to the outbuilding. Adjacent to it, separated by a large screen was a large cast-iron clawfoot tub. How in the world had they gotten that there? Had he brought it for Ramy's mother? she wondered.

She pumped water into a bucket and noticed there was another pail heating over a grilled brazier in a corner. To her further delight there was a small bar of brown soap and several long but dingy drying cloths.

There was no lock on the door, so she tore a piece of her well worn chemise to secure the two wood pieces together to assure her privacy. Pouring the heated water in first, she then added the cold from the pail and then undressed. Stepping into the tub she sank down and luxuriated for a quarter of an hour before she began to scrub the grime from her body and hair.

Somehow she knew that Cole wouldn't be pleased if she took a long time in the tub and with a sigh got up from the tepid water and began drying herself. She turned her nose up at the thought of putting on the soiled dress but wondered how she would get past the men eating in the kitchen. Wrapping one of the long drying cloths around her, she took up her dress and went back the way she'd come. With her ear pressed against the door, she waited, trying to hear voices but she didn't hear anyone. Opening the door a crack she peered inside.

Jade's eyes scanned the room. It was empty. Hurrying through the door, she breathed a sigh of relief when she heard movement outside and she headed to the room where she'd slept. She found her bundle of belongings and undid the knot and donned her patched but relatively clean Sunday dress. Pulling her hair up and fastening it into a tight chignon at the base of her neck, she went back out into the kitchen.

With her hands on her hips she surveyed the room. Finally her eyes came to rest on the stack of dirty dishes. It looked as though they hadn't been washed in days. She knew it was her place to wash them and tidy up the remaining clutter but the pangs of hunger in her belly took precedence over cleaning. She found and sliced some bread and smeared it with butter and honey, then poured some coffee from the large pot that sat over the warm hearth. Sitting at the table, she grimaced as she tasted the harsh brew that was so bitter it brought tears to her eyes. She spat the remainder back into the cup, reminding herself never again to allow any of them to make coffee.

Afterwards, she found a piece of scrap cloth to use as an apron and began to sweep and scrub. It was obvious that the place hadn't had a good cleaning for some time. She was on a mission as she removed the dishes from the cabinet and re-washed them all. She coughed and sputtered as she eliminated the layers of dust on the shelves and floor, then emptied the scrap bucket. The cast-iron wood-burning stove was a chore that took the longest. It seemed that there was at least a year's worth of grease and grime in and around it, with enough ash in the grate to cover the floor. It amused her to think of the many nights she and Cooky had spent cleaning the stove at the tavern and how she never would have been allowed nearly this much grime on it.

She noticed that some pains had been taken to make the house habitable and cheery but there had never really been a woman's touch here, Jade thought sadly. She wiped the grime from the windows and took down the frayed dingy curtains. She swept the floor and then on her hands and knees, scrubbed it clean. While it was drying, she went back to the room she'd occupied to make up the bed but found that the covers could use a good airing. Carrying the heavy blankets and handmade quilt outside, she found the fore-yard deserted. She went around to the back of the house where a line had been strung and she folded the bed covers over it. She found a large stick and began to beat the dust from them, amazed at how much of it there was. After she'd done the best she could, she left and she went back inside to gather the rest of the covers. She stopped short in front of a closed door and opened it to look inside. It was obviously Cole's bedroom from the now familiar duster that lay haphazardly over a chair. The bed had been made but not neatly but somehow she felt it was telling her to keep out. She closed the door and moved on to Ramy's room. There was no doubt that it was a little boy's room, with Native American spear heads tossed about and several crudely carved toy soldiers standing at military attention on the floor.

The bed was unmade and a little nightshirt lay casually across it. Jade smiled and took up the nightshirt, then closed the door to hang it on the nail on the back of it. She started to pull the blankets from the bed and began to straighten up when suddenly, the door smashed open against the wall. Ramy stood in the doorway, staring at her, his eyes wide and anxious.

"I was gonna clean it, honest but I had my chores and..."

He was excited and out of breath, as he started gathering up the spear heads.

"I'm happy to meet you Ramy," she said softly.

He went to her and looked up into her kind, smiling eyes.

"Hi."

"Are you hungry?" she asked not knowing what else to say to him.

"Sure, breakfast was hours ago."

"Hours!" Her hand covered her mouth. "What time is it?"

"Well, it's near bout noon. Kyle and Pa will be coming in soon for midday victuals, well maybe Kyle anyway. Sometimes Pa doesn't come in at all."

Perhaps if I prepare a hearty lunch for them all it will be a way to make up for sleeping so late. Or any other transgression she'd unknowingly perpetrated.

"Look Ramy, perhaps we can help each other. You come on out to the kitchen and show me where everything is and I'll start lunch. After we have it going, I'll help you with your room."

"Sure, come on," he said eagerly.

He showed her where the flour bin was and the cabinets that held the meat and then the root cellar where the onions and other vegetables were stored. Before long, she had a platter of sliced beef ready for the stove and drop-biscuits were already browning

in the newly cleaned oven. Ramy scraped the potatoes while she sliced and browned them with wild green onions. When everything was simmering nicely, they returned to Ramy's room and in a flash had set it to rights.

Jade took his scatter rug out in the yard where she and Ramy laughingly beat as much dust out of it as best they could.

Lastly she swept the room out with a straw and hay broom and when she finished they both looked around quite pleased with their accomplishment. "Well I think we done ourselves proud," Ramy said rocking back and forth on his heels.

"We sure did, now run and wash your hands and get some of that dust off your face and I'll set the table."

* * * * *

Kyle climbed down from his horse and shook as much of the trail dust from his clothes as he could. He loosened the strings on his leather chaps, removed them, and draped them over the hitch rail.

Cole was already heading to the water trough to wash away the gritty dirt from his hands and face. "We'll probably have to make do with some of that left-over cold beef, I'm not real sure about this wench's talent at a stove," Cole said as he dried his face.

As they approached the house, the mouthwatering odors struck them. Both men looked at each other, then at the front door.

"For a wench with no talent for cooking, I'd say she caught on right fast," Kyle said, laughing at the astounded, then annoyed expression on his friend's face.

With his jaw set hard and his thumbs hooked into his belt Cole strolled into the house. The first thing he noticed was how orderly everything was. It was a welcome change from the disarray that usually greeted them each day, even though he had tried in vain to set and keep things right.

Kyle whistled appreciatively as he surveyed the eating room.

"Well I'll be roped and tied. I plumb forget there was a window over that there water pump."

Cole gave him a tight-lipped glare but he too couldn't help but notice how changed the room looked.

Jade stood at the stove turning the slabs of beef simmering in its own savory gravy. The biscuits were piping hot on the table as well as the potatoes and onions heaped high on a platter.

Cole sat down gruffly, unwilling to admit that he almost salivated from the delicious odors. He took a couple of biscuits and buttered them.

The silence was deafening as Kyle took his seat. "Spiffed the place up real nice. Sorry it was such mess but you know how it is when you got three cowpokes living together."

"There's lots more to be done but I'll get around to everything in time," she said softly, casting her eyes over to where Cole sat chewing slowly.

Ramy took his seat and began to pile his plate with food.

"Finished the fence, Pa, and the barn is almost clean and my room too." He winked at Jade secretively.

Cole merely grunted and continued eating.

Content that all was well, Jade went to the hearth and began scraping the cast-iron fry pan. She wasn't hungry but she decided she would have a little something after they had finished. Then she would tour the rest of the house to see what else needed to be done.

"Well, ma'am, I have to say you certainly know how to please a man's stomach." Kyle said patting his belly.

"Yeah it was real good," Ramy said draining his cup of milk.

"What say, boy, you and me go on out and walk the new Arabian," Kyle said as he ruffled Ramy's hair.

The boy's face lit up like a bonfire, then settled back into its paleness as he looked at his father. "Is it all right, Pa?" he asked softly.

Cole nodded and the boy jumped up and ran to the door as Kyle scraped back his chair and followed.

Cole sat mopping his plate with the last of the biscuits. He cut his eyes over to her, scowling slightly at her dress.

"Tomorrow we'll go into town and get you some decent clothes."

"I had hoped I'd never have to go back there," she said just above a whisper.

"We're not. Chillington isn't the only town and besides, I prefer this side of the big river," he said referring to the majestic Missouri, then scraped his chair back, got up and left.

She cleared the table, washed the dishes and set to making the dough for bread. Afterwards she examined the rest of the house right down to the root cellar pleased to find some canned and jar goods, as well as a few apples and some spotty peaches.

It was dusk when the men returned home and dinner was just as solemn as lunch.

Chapter Five

The next morning Jade was up at dawn. When the others awoke less than an hour later, she already had their breakfast of eggs, slab bacon, toasted bread, coffee and milk for Ramy.

"We're going into town after breakfast," Cole announced. "Kyle, you bring the wagon around. Ramy, put on a clean shirt, I don't want you looking like a ragamuffin." His eyes glanced over at Jade. She couldn't help but think the last remark was for her.

The boy ran to his room to get his shirt. Moments later he was back buttoning it.

Jade hurried and finished washing the dishes, letting them dry on the sideboard, then went to freshen up as much as she could. She was plaiting her hair and tied the end of it with a piece of a torn rag when she heard Ramy call out.

"Come on, will ya, Jade!"

She hurried outside as an excited Ramy chattering like a magpie climbed up in back of the wagon. Jade was ready to sit next to Ramy, when Kyle intercepted and handed her up to sit beside Cole, who kept his eyes trained straight ahead and the reins held tight.

It was a hot, clear day and the heat of the sun made its presence known as soon they had left the cool protection of the copse of trees where the cabin lay in seclusion and serenity.

Ramy was busy questioning Kyle about a million mundane things that could only be of interest to a child. Patiently, Kyle answered him, spinning one tall tale after the other to keep the lad entertained.

A short time later the wagon was on a well traveled road, an indication that they were within a mile or so of town.

Cole took the opportunity to question her. More so to try to ignore the way the softness of her hips hit his as they bumped along the road. "Can you sew?"

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"And knit?"

"Yes of course." She remembered how the nuns insisted that all the young women learn to make lace, crochet, knit and sew.

A grunt was his only response.

A little more than an hour later, they entered the town of Colby and pulled up in front of the General Mercantile. Kyle helped her down when he saw that Cole had no intention of doing so. Cole pressed some money into her hand.

"Buy the things you'll need for the kitchen."

She was puzzled, as she thought the larder was quite full.

"Winter's coming. We don't get to town often and the pass will be completely closed when the big snow comes. Now's the time to stock up," he said when he saw the look on her face.

Jade nodded and walked into the store reluctantly, Ramy trotted in ahead of her. She had never been shopping before—there was never a need during her term at the tavern. Whatever Miles didn't barter in, Cooky got at the market. Her eyes bulged at the many items that cluttered the store. Pretty things, bright things caught her eye. She was awed by and touched items that she didn't have a clue as to what they were.

Ramy had disappeared behind a row of goods that held rifles and guns, then on to the handmade toy trains, carriages and wagons.

A few women in the store eyed Jade curiously at first, then with obvious distaste when they noticed her shabby clothes.

The proprietor, a portly man with deep yellow stains underneath the arms of what was once a white shirt, walked stiffly toward her.

"Can I help you?" His tone was surly and sprayed when he talked.

"I would like to make some purchases."

"Do you have any money?" he said looking her up and down with obvious disapproval.

"Why of course, sir." She was quite surprised at his manner, for she had done nothing to encourage such disdain.

"Don't take that tone with me, girl. I don't usually do business with the likes of you during regular business hours," he said loudly enough so that he could be heard by the other women.

"And what likes is that?"

She was relieved to hear Kyle's voice then turn to see him leaning nonchalantly against the door jamb, his eyes hard but with an amused grin across his lips.

"Now Stoner, I don't want no trouble in here." The proprietor began to sweat profusely. "It's just that this little baggage says she had some money and wants to make some purchases." He laughed nervously.

"You know Pete," Kyle sauntered and fingered the edge of some leather goods. "I've never known you to turn down money before, no matter whose it was."

Pete shifted uneasily and scratched his head. "Well that may be true under normal circumstances Kyle but it's just that when one of Soolie's girls comes in here all high and mighty... Well it just ain't right that's all," he said looking at the other, more respectable female patrons in the store. The women shook their heads with approval and satisfaction.

"Soolie's girl? Pete, I think I'd better introduce you and these," he made a grand pseudo sweeping gesture with his hat, "lovely ladies to Mrs. McCayne."

The gasps were audible and the women began to buzz among themselves.

"Miz McCayne?" Pete's face paled.

"That's right! *Mrs. Cole McCayne*," Kyle emphasized the title loud enough for anyone else who might be in the store to hear.

"Why *Mrs. McCayne*, I am pleased to beg your pardon." Pete began furiously mopping his sweaty brow with a soiled handkerchief from his pocket. "How could I have made such a mistake?"

The women fell over themselves as they bustled out the door two at a time, eager to tell the entire town that Cole McCayne had remarried.

Pete jumped to life as he ushered her over to the notions counter.

"Well now Miz McCayne, you just take your time looking around. If there's anything you need that you don't see, well we'll just see if we can get it for you."

Jade was amused at the turn of events as she began rattling off some of the items she needed. Then took her time looking the dog-eared catalog at the far end of the counter.

Pete hustled as fast as his bulk could carry him as he grabbed sacks of flour, sugar and molasses, chattering nervously about other goods he had for sale.

Pete finally had her parcels together. She had kept a close eye on the tally, as she had a fine head for figures and knew that she had been charged exactly the right amount for all the items.

They were about ready to leave when she noticed Ramy eyeing a jar of peppermint sticks with yearning.

"Would you like a sweet, Ramy?" Jade asked.

"Oh I couldn't. Pa don't hold with coddlin' or sweet eatin'," he said as he grabbed a few sacks of their purchased goods and with a long last look at the jar shuffled out of the store.

She emerged from the store a few minutes later just as Kyle was loading the last of her purchases onto the back of the wagon, behind a good many larger bundles that Cole had already placed there.

On the way home, it was now Kyle who had the reins and Cole sat in silence next to him. Jade had climbed up in the back next to Ramy.

After they had been riding for about twenty minutes, Jade reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out two long peppermint sticks and handed one to Ramy. His eyes grew wide, as he turned to look at his father's back, then at Jade who had stuck the sweet confection into her mouth and gave him a conspiratorial wink.

It was almost dark when they reached the cabin and the denseness of the trees gave it even more of an illusion of night. Kyle unhitched the horses and was leading them to the barn, leaving Cole and Ramy to unload the wagon.

"We'll unload, Jade. I got you a few things—nothing fancy, just some things you're gonna need. I'll have Ramy put them in your room."

She looked up at him with surprise. He had asked about knitting and sewing but couldn't imagine what else he might have purchased for her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"I guess we might as well have something light for supper. You and Ramy shouldn't be too hungry after eating peppermint sweets all the way home."

A blush of sheepish embarrassment crept up her cheeks as she carried some of the food parcels he handed her into the house.

After a light repast, Jade cleared away the dishes, then urged Ramy to wash up for bed.

Cole and Kyle were in the parlor smoking and speaking quietly as she lowered the kitchen lantern and went into her bedroom.

She was shocked at the number of parcels that lay on the narrow bed. She sat amid the brown paper-wrapped packages and stared at them with awe. In all her life she had never had anything that had belonged to her. Even this room, in its masculine sparseness was like a room in the finest hotel to her. Now here were all these things. Could they truly all be for her?

She picked up a flat package and opened it, then another and still another. First there were linen goods for shirts, sheets and pillow jackets. There were woolens for warm winter skirts, materials for curtains and needles and threads.

There were two dresses of serviceable material, a black day skirt, a gray tweed suit and another lovely dress of blue with pink rosebuds. How could he know about such things? she wondered.

There was a pair of woolen hip-stockings and two petticoats, one lacy and frivolous, which warmed her face with embarrassment to know that Cole had chosen it.

Another bundle held knitting needles and several skeins of thick serviceable yarn in dark colors. There was also a pair of heavy winter boots and a pair of shoes—both a little too big but they would do. The last package contained two sleeping shifts. White, high-necked with long sleeves and far too big.

By the time she finished inspecting everything and putting them away it was close to midnight. Loosening her hair and removing her clothes, she put on one of the sleeping gowns.

Intending to check on Ramy before she went to bed, she crept out of her room. She was sure that both Cole and Kyle had gone to bed since they were usually up before dawn and didn't worry about running into either of them.

All was quiet as she made her way to Ramy's room when suddenly she was startled by a movement coming from the parlor. Peeking in, she saw that it was her husband sitting alone, dark and brooding staring into the waning embers in the hearth.

She stared at his back for a moment, wondering if she should take the moment to thank him for everything he'd purchased for her. But the solitude of the room and the stiffness of his posture locked the words in her throat.

She continued on to Ramy's room. He was fast asleep, a toy soldier in one hand and the coverlets half hanging off the bed onto the floor. She picked them up and recovered the boy snugly, smiling at the innocence of his sleeping face, then left quietly and hurried back to her own room.

Cole had heard her but didn't dare turn around to look. He'd had enough of her this morning when her body was so close to his, arousing his masculine discomfort as they drove to town. He'd made sure it wouldn't happen on the return trip by offering Kyle the reins. He thrust the stirring thoughts from his mind. She was here for one purpose and one only. He didn't want to feel deep love for a woman, not ever again.

* * * * *

As dawn crept slowly up and over the mountains, Jade arose and quietly made her way to the water closet then came back and donned her new dress, which was almost a perfect fit. She smoothed a measure of coarse linen and used a thin leather strap she'd found hanging on the door knob, to form a cover apron.

She was putting the final pins to her hair when she heard movement and knew that Cole and Ramy had arisen.

When she entered the kitchen a few minutes later she saw that the milk bucket was missing and knew Ramy was most likely out milking Bessie and checking the chicken coops.

By the time she had bacon and eggs searing in the skillet and the table set, all three of them were already seated.

"It sure is a pleasure to come in and find a hot meal waiting for you," Kyle said as he reached for a thick cut of bread.

She looked at them all and her face darkened.

"And it would be a pleasure for me if you all would scrape your boots before coming into my kitchen," she said grabbing the hay broom.

Even she couldn't believe she'd mouthed the words as they all stopped chewing and looked at her.

"Yes, ma'am," Ramy said breaking the shocked tension. Kyle nodded sheepishly but Cole said nothing and resumed eating.

Ramy was gulping his food down hastily until Jade admonished him to slow down.

"He's a little excited because he's hoping to see his pa here take on one of our livelier horses," Kyle said with a chuckle.

"Horses are like some people, they just need a little patience is all," Jade said.

"Not this one," Ramy said through a mouthful of food. "He's meaner than a stuck bull."

"You're both just achin' to see me fall on my butt on ole Diamond Head."

"I just might get a kick out of seeing that myself, Cole," Kyle said sopping his biscuit.

"Yeah well it seems to me ole Diamond has thrown you more than once," Cole said.

"Yep, that's why I leave that sort of thing to you."

It was joking without laughter on Cole's side. Jade noticed that right away.

"Well come on, boy, let's see what kind of mood that horse is in today," Kyle said rising from the table. "Maybe we can mellow him a little before your pa comes out."

Kyle winked at the boy and hurried him to the door as they saw Cole glare at them.

After they left, Jade began to clear the table.

"I, er, got this for you," Cole said.

She looked at his hand and saw a thin gold band between his thumb and forefinger. She wiped her hands on her apron and took a step toward him.

"It's lovely."

"I got it when we went to town. Besides, I can't have strangers thinking you're a kept woman. You don't have to wear it if it doesn't suit you." He laid it on the table.

"Will you put it on for me?" she asked shyly holding out her hand to him.

Cole stared down at the ring for a long moment, then picked it up clumsily and slipped it on her finger.

She was about to thank him but he had gotten up and had headed out the door. She looked at the ring. It was the only thing of any value limited or otherwise that she had ever owned.

As she swept the porch, churned the cream into butter, then did the day's washing, she couldn't help being happy that he was thoughtful enough to buy her a wedding band, whatever the reason.

Afterwards, she found she had a good part of the day left with which to start her sewing. She'd lain awake the previous evening planning out the patterns in her head. She knew exactly what she wanted to do and how she would go about it.

Before Ramy and Kyle came in for the midday meal, she heard the sound of water splashing outside and the scraping of boots against the steps before they came stomping into the room.

She smiled when she saw their faces and hands were relatively free of dirt and their boots cleared of a good part of the usual caked-on mud and dirt.

"Your father isn't coming in?" she asked Ramy as she placed the biscuits and cured ham slices in front of him.

"He's out on the ridge," the boy said after taking a large gulp of milk.

"Well I'll pack something and you can take it to him."

The look between Ramy and Kyle didn't escape her.

"Is everything all right?"

"Ma'am," Kyle began, "Cole keeps dried beef in his pack, he'll be all right."

She knew that it meant he didn't want company – of any kind not even if it was his own son bringing him lunch.

Somehow she had hoped that they would be closer. But it seemed that it was Ramy making all the effort, while Cole did his level best to offer as little conversation, unless it was an order, as possible. Affection was absent altogether and she found that profoundly sad.

When they'd gone back to work, Jade used the kitchen table to set about cutting out the woolens for shirts and linens for night shirts. Then she cut out the heavier broadcloth for pants and a jacket for Ramy. She had just enough material left over for curtains and a tablecloth and from the scraps she thought she would make a fine braided hearth rug for the parlor fireplace. The knitting she could do at night. For this she was thankful, for while the nights since her arrival had been limited to early retiring, she often found that she was unable to fall asleep, especially knowing that Cole was just outside her room.

So went her days and nights—cooking, cleaning, mending and washing their clothes.

Churning the cream into butter was the chore Jade minded the most. It was time-consuming and boring. It did, however, give her a lot of time to think. So many things had run through her mind lately, including getting away. But each day when she saw the innocent face of the little boy she was growing more and more fond of, that idea quickly evaporated.

One afternoon when Cole had come home to get more wire from the barn, Jade sat on the porch pushing the plunger up and down through the hole in the lid of the churn watching him.

A thought had been in her mind all day and she decided she would approach him. Pushing the crock in the shade of the porch, she got up, wiped her hands on her apron and headed to the barn. She reached it just as he was coming out.

"I was wondering if I could speak to you for a minute."

"A minute is about all I have and you too if you don't want your butter to settle." He nodded over to the porch.

So he had been aware of her, she thought.

"It's about Ramy."

"What about him?" he asked, slinging the bale of wire over his shoulder and taking it to the buckboard.

"I was wondering about his schooling."

Cole looked up at her, his dark eyes pinned on hers for a moment.

"There's a schoolhouse in town but it's too far for him to go alone and we can't take him everyday. I've been teachin' him when I have time," he said.

She'd seen no evidence of that, which would make her proposal all the better.

"I noticed the small library of books in the parlor. I thought perhaps I might teach him."

"Suit yourself," he said climbing up onto the wagon and releasing the brake. "As long as he does his chores, taking a little time for book learnin' won't hurt." He didn't wait for a response but climbed up onto the wagon and snapped the reins then turned and left.

"Well thank you very much," she muttered under her breath.

Perhaps this life wouldn't be so bad after all. She was doing the same type of work that she was accustomed to doing and, with the exception of Cole, everyone was nice to her. But she couldn't help wondering how long it would take before Cole claimed her. Claimed what he thought was his.

Chapter Six

One evening a month later, Ramy was so animated with excitement, he could hardly eat his supper. "Guess what, Jade?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full Ramy, it's not polite," she chastised softly.

The boy chewed rapidly, swallowing a lump of food before attempting to speak again.

"Do you know what this Friday is?"

"I don't rightly think I do, Ramy."

"It's Fiesta, right, Pa?" He looked earnestly at his father.

Cole ignored him.

"You'll love it, Jade, there's food and dancin' and ropin'. There's even a bullfight...well not really, they don't hurt 'em or nuthin'."

"It sounds like a very special occasion." She smiled.

"'Bout the biggest in these here parts," Kyle interjected. "Darn thing lasts straight through Sunday night. Folks'll be comin' for miles around."

"It sounds lovely. We will be allowed to go?" Her question was directed at Cole.

There was a long answer with everyone staring at him with anticipation.

"You all can go if you want. I have things to do," he said gruffly.

"Pa don't hold much with parties and dancin'," Ramy said sadly.

"It'll be a right good time, Cole, you know the Serranos give the best gol-dern..." Kyle said trying to ease the obvious tension.

"I said you all can go. I just won't be there!" Cole interjected a little too harshly, then got up and left table abruptly.

The rest of the week seemed to fly by. Cole made it a point to stay out on the range more, and often left before they got up for breakfast, not returning until they were all in bed. On the midmorning of the Fiesta, Jade packed a bundle of food and took it to him. She had hoped to find him in a decent mood and have one last chance to change his mind about going with them.

As she rode up to the north range she heard the dull thud of metal hitting wood.

Even from this distance she could see he was shirtless as he wielded the long-handled sledgehammer over his head and struck the hard wooden post, driving it into the ground with each blow.

As she neared him, she couldn't help but notice the magnificence of his physique. His muscles rippled and bunched with each movement and the bright sun made his

already bronzed skin look as though he was made of pure gold. His dark hair was damp and clung fast to the nape of his neck, curling slightly at the edges. He was a handsome man and it made her uneasy that she thought of him that way on far too many occasions.

He was thoroughly engrossed in his work and jumped when she cleared her throat to gain his attention.

"I thought you might like to have something to eat since you didn't have breakfast with us this morning," she said trying to tear her gaze away from the pearly beads of sweat that glistened on his chest

"Some of us got work to do."

Jade's first inclination was to tell him that she hoped he wasn't insinuating that the rest of them didn't work, because if there was one thing she was sure of, it was that everyone at this ranch pulled their own weight. But she hadn't come for a confrontation. She was hoping to change his mind and hopefully convince him to accompany them to the Fiesta. She knew they could all use a diversion, he most of all.

It was a hot sticky day, the sun blazed mercilessly down on her causing crooked lines of sweat to slide down her neck and bodice.

"Just put it down there," he said gruffly, nodding to the place where his shirt hung on the fence line.

Cole couldn't allow his eyes to linger on her. He didn't want to follow the graceful curve of her neck, then down to her soft-looking round breasts. The way the sunlight danced on the escaping tendrils of her hair and her heart-shaped face pulled him in a direction he didn't want to go and it made him uncomfortable and surly.

She set the basket and beverage tin down as instructed then turned to leave, knowing her audience with him was over. She was halfway to the wagon when she turned and went back to him. Touching him lightly on the shoulder, she was surprised at the way he jerked away from her, almost as though she had burned him.

"Won't you reconsider and come with us, Cole? Even you could use a break," she said choosing to ignore the affront her touch had caused.

"These posts won't fix themselves," he said with a mighty heave of the sledgehammer.

The finality in his voice told her that there would be no further discussion and she got up into the dray and headed home.

* * * * *

He hadn't come home at noontime, and Jade lingered as long as she could, hoping he would have a last-minute change of heart. There was still no sign of him, even when she, Ramy and Kyle were dressed and ready to go to the Fiesta.

"My, my! Don't you look handsome all dressed up, Ramy," she said smoothing down an unruly lock of his hair, enjoying the profuse blush of his cheeks at the compliment.

"Well, ma'am, if I may say so, you look exceptionally lovely yourself," Kyle said as he helped up to her seat in front of the wagon.

She wore a white high-necked, form fitting blouse she'd made to go along with the dark skirt that had been purchased by Cole the day they had gone into town. She had twisted, then wound her long hair into a tight knot at the back of her head and pinned in tiny pink and white prairie roses.

"You look mighty fine yourself, Mr. Stoner. I'll bet anything you'll have all the young ladies falling all over themselves just to have a dance with you," she joked back at him.

"Well, ma'am, it ain't no secret that I can cut quite a jig when I put my mind to it and I'm hoping maybe between the three of us we can show 'em how it's done, eh boy?" He reached back and ruffled Ramy's slicked back hair.

All three were laughing heartily as Kyle shook the reins and headed out toward the glen. None of them saw Cole watching them from a hillock in the distance.

It was almost six miles to El Rancho De Serrano. Ramy sat in the back of the wagon, singing a child's song while Jade sat next to Kyle, who was indeed quite handsome in his high shiny boots and open-neck Spanish-style shirt.

"How did you and Cole become friends, Kyle?" Jade asked over the sound of the turning wheels.

"Bar fight."

Jade swung her head around in surprise. While she surmised that her husband could certainly hold his own, she somehow felt that he went out of his way to avoid trouble.

"I'd just gotten in from a three-month long cattle drive and I went into El Gato Negro for a little tequila." He didn't add what other social diversions he'd intended.

Jade wrinkled her nose at the memory of the place where she and Cole had their first meal together as man and wife, as well as her first taste of attitude from Carlita. Jade wondered if in fact the fiery vixen had been the reason for the fight but decided to let him continue.

"Four or five sheep ranchers were hell-bent on starting trouble with me because I herded cattle. Cole was at the far end of the bar talking to—" He halted as he caught himself before he said Carlita's name. "He was busy, at the end of the bar. I didn't start the trouble but I was sure willing to finish it. So after a few choice words that I can't repeat in polite company, they jumped me. I was holding my own for a pretty good while too. But when two others jumped in with knives, Cole decided he didn't like the odds and joined in."

"That must have been some fight."

"Sure was and I can tell you they got in some pretty good licks. But between us, we managed to send every last high-hittin' one of 'em to the doctor's office and two of 'em just might want to think about adoptin' a family, if you know what I mean." He laughed out loud at the memory. "Yep, there's nothing like a good ole bar fight to bring people together."

"He must have liked your style," Jade said.

"Must have. He asked me if I was lookin' for work and after we discussed some terms, he hired me right on the spot."

Ramy had come up and stuck his head between them. "I was little then, right, Kyle?"

"Right you are." He smiled back at the boy. "Of course I didn't figure on signing on as a part-time baby-sitter when I took the ranch hand job Cole offered me but you were the fattest, cutest little pup I ever did see and I guess I just took to you right off."

Jade beamed as she imagined Ramy as a baby.

* * * * *

Strains of music filled the air as they neared the ranch and the mixture of delicious odors of spicy food wafted in and teased their nostrils. Kyle stopped the wagon by the overly large stable where other conveyances and horses were lined up. Ramy had scooted off the wagon almost as soon as it stopped, ignoring the admonishment to be careful from Jade as Kyle helped her down.

They were walking slowly toward the music just as a tall aristocratic silver-haired man came up to them with open arms.

"Kyle Stoner, you old prairie snake, it has been a long time," he laughed, embracing the cowboy in a back-slapping bear hug.

"It's good to see you too, Miguel. May I present Mrs. Jade McCayne."

"Welcome, señora! Welcome to our rancho. I am Don Miguel Jose Serrano."

"It's a pleasure sir," she said with a shy smile.

"The pleasure is mine señora," he said taking her hand and kissing it gallantly, then glanced over her shoulder. "Cole is not with you?"

"Pa said he had too much work," Ramy's little voice said.

"And who is this young caballero?" Don Miguel lowered his gaze with feigned surprise. "Could this be little Ramon? The last time I saw you, I could fit you inside my saddlebag but look at you now, you are a man."

"Aw, Don Miguel," the blushing boy said as he kicked at the dirt.

"Come my friends," Don Miguel said as he gently took hold of Jade's arm, "I will take the señora to my wife and both of you know where to go. Please enjoy! Enjoy!" he said merrily as he led Jade toward a gaily decorated area where a half dozen women sat

and engaged in animated conversation. A handsome woman with honey-colored skin and a warm smile rose and came to greet them.

"My dear," said Don Miguel to the woman, "I have the pleasure of introducing Señora McCayne. This is my wife, Maria," he said with adoring eyes.

"A pleasure Dona Maria and you must call me Jade," she said with warmth.

The older woman took hold of both her hands and smiled sweetly. "Welcome to our home, Jade. We heard that Cole had remarried. He did not come with you I see."

"No, I'm sorry," she said biting her lower lip with embarrassment.

"There is no need for apologies my dear. It has been some time since he has come to one of our fiestas." There was a sad look in her eyes when she said it. "But you shall have a wonderful time, I insist upon it. Now come, let me introduce you to some of the others and then we shall have some food. I hope you are hungry." The woman's laughter tinkled as she led Jade to the other women.

After the introductions, they went to the food area. Never had Jade seen so much food or food displayed so beautifully. There were several whole sides of beef roasting slowly over spits and whole pigs roasting on others. Tables were laden with tortillas, rice, beans, salads of every kind, pork and beef dishes, rabbit and venison. There were different types of wine, champagne, a fruity sangria and other assorted liquors and spirits. The dessert table was laden with cakes, cookies, puddings and other confections that any French pastry chef would envy. Jade sampled and enjoyed some of the best food she had ever tasted, some familiar fare, others not but all delicious.

There were so many people. Jade hardly thought there could be so many in this area. No one had visited the ranch except for a couple of young friends of Ramy's and to her knowledge Cole hadn't made any such social calls either.

She watched the children as they ran about chasing chickens and piglets, while older couples stole away under the grape arbors for a moment of tender kisses. How she envied them their freedom.

The ladies were all very kind to her, the conversation polite and engaging. Every so often their husbands and beaux returned for a light kiss or bit of relaxation beside their loved ones. Don Miguel stood near his wife his hand lovingly on her shoulder, smiling down at her from time to time. What she wouldn't give to have a man look at her the way he looked at his wife.

A fleeting thought of Kyle's whereabouts crossed her mind but she remembered the ladies talking about the men going off and succeeding in drinking their fair share of liquor and then most likely being coerced into many of the events that had been arranged for their entertainment including cards, dominoes and horse-shoe tossing.

Jade excused herself and decided walk about the area. Drawn to the sound of the music, she found herself standing outside a large square of wood planks that had been laid down, where people were dancing around gaily. Suddenly, she found herself snatched up and whirled across the floor in a wild prance. Looking up at her partner she saw that it was Kyle, laughing and practically lifting her from her feet as he spun

her around. Her carefully bound hair came undone and flew about her wildly. The other men whooped, yelled and clapped. She too began laughing, her head already spinning from the one glass of champagne she'd enjoyed. The laughter felt good, she was having a grand time but she was out of breath long before the dance ended and begged Kyle to rest.

"My goodness! That was something," she said trying to catch her breath and mopping her face with a small square handkerchief she'd made.

"You're right spry on your feet but I agree, it sure does take a lot outta ya. I'll get us something cool to drink, stay right here."

The music slowed to a beautiful bolero. The combination of several types of guitars gave the melody a haunting, hypnotic effect. Jade closed her eyes and swayed gently to the music.

"Where ees your husband, señora?"

Her eyes popped open. It was a voice that she could never forget. She turned and faced the wantonly beautiful Carlita. Her first inclination was to lie but she figured that the woman already knew that Cole wasn't present.

"He isn't here," Jade said returning her attention to the dancers once again.

"I thought not," the fiery beauty said with a smirk and sauntered away, her hips swaying provocatively, her laughter fading as she went.

When she heard the woman's footsteps grow fainter, she stole a glance in the direction of her departure. She wondered how many people knew of their relationship—if in fact there had been a real relationship, and to what degree it had gone before she came along. She felt that as long as Cole wasn't around, there was no way either of them could put her in an embarrassing situation.

Jade decided to forget the sultry temptress and enjoy the festivities. And that she did, everything from the horse races, the mock bullfight, to the clowns and magicians for the children. There was even pie eating and apple bobbing contests to which one lucky winner was awarded a pinto pony.

Ramy had found his friends and was running a sack race with her and Kyle cheering him on. The laughter of the children made her forget all her problems and warmed Jade's heart.

Lanterns had been strung and were lit as soon as the sun settled behind the massive mountains. The music was now soft, lilting, complementing the soft breeze of the evening.

"Jade, come let me show you our home." It was Dona Maria.

She showed Jade her exquisite, yet comfortable home, with its rich furnishings and fine Old World architecture and history. Jade was awed by the pride that Dona Maria took with the care of it and the obvious love she had for her husband and family whenever she spoke of them.

They walked into the fragrant gardens that must have taken years to perfect with the glorious colorful flowers and local shrubbery. They stopped by a small fenced-in cemetery.

"Much of our family is buried here. My mother and father, aunts, uncles and our son Luis," she said sadly. "He was only three when he died, a fever. Never have I felt so helpless." The woman crossed herself quickly.

Jade took her hand. "I'm so sorry, Dona Maria. It must be awful to lose a child."

"It was a terrible winter. Little Luis caught a flux and everything we tried failed. This can be a harsh land, Jade. It can beat even the strongest of men."

Not Cole, Jade thought. It appeared to her that he was determined to cut his way through this land even if it meant killing him and everyone else in the process.

"Dona Maria, if I may ask. Did you know my husband's first wife—Ramy's mother?"

The women pulled her lacy black fringed shawl closer around her as though an icy chill had passed over her.

"No my dear. I have only heard the stories. I do not know much but..." They started back toward the party. "It was a very bad time for him and I do not know all of it. I just know that something has encased his heart in ice and he lived the life of a tortured soul for a very long time. There is a place within in him that he will let no one enter," she said.

Jade knew full well that Cole was a hard, cold man. He certainly hadn't shown his own son much kindness, let alone her. She sighed morosely.

Dona Maria looked at Jade and saw the sadness in her eyes. "When we heard of you, I hoped that you would be able to ease some of the pain inside him. But I see in your eyes that it has not been easy for you."

"He hasn't shared anything of his life with me. I was brought there to care for Ramy."

"Endure, my child. Be strong and endure, things are not always as bad as they seem," Maria said patting her hand lightly.

If you only knew, Jade thought.

Dona Maria put her arm around Jade's shoulders and smiled. "I insist there be no sad thoughts this evening. Come, let us return and enjoy the fiesta."

There were more activities and of course more food and drink and in spite of her thoughts about her husband, Jade managed to have a good time. She wandered from site to site, stopping now and again to admire some fancy lariat spinning or other contest.

Suddenly, there was the loud strum of several guitars. After a series of impressive rapid chords they receded down to a low, smooth lilting tone. As though summoned by the music, everyone, especially men, hurried toward the dance area. The beat went from fast, then to an earthy, deeply seductive timbre. Curious, Jade followed behind the

crowd. Finding a space between two men whose eyes were riveted on the sight before them, Jade saw Carlita. The woman's shoulders were bared and her blouse was pulled down precariously close to her round, taut nipples. Part of the hem of her skirt had been raised and was tucked into its waistband. Her small, bare feet, with her brightly painted toenails were pointed delicately as she whirled about in time with the music in a seductive folk dance. Her hair was flying, whipping around her head like a wind-tossed storm cloud.

The dance was obviously a well-known favorite, for the men whistled, yelled and clapped their hands. Jade noticed the lascivious ogles on the faces of some of the more inebriated men, as they followed the girl's every enthralling move.

Carlita was spinning and pulling her dress higher and higher above her tawny thighs. The higher she raised it, the more the men bellowed, urging her on.

Just how far is this going to go? Jade wondered and was glad that the evening was too dark for anyone to notice the heated blush creeping up her cheeks.

Carlita teased her audience with innuendo. Her movements did more than promise, they called out to the men, making them forget everything except this wild gypsy with her flashing eyes and lying lips. At the moment of truth, when the men were sure they would be privileged with a view of the dancer's more hidden charms, the music ended abruptly and the girl sank to the floor in a flourishing finale.

The applause was thunderous as she arose, bowed and then made her way through the adoring crowd. She made a point to pass by Jade, her jutting breasts heaving with exertion and her eyes filled with conceit and scorn.

It was getting late and Jade went to find Ramy. He was sitting on a pile of hay with two or three other boys, the remains of a half eaten slice of cake in his hand as he fought to keep his eyes open. She was about to shake him awake, when Kyle took her arm and led her once more to the dancing area. The slow sensual music charged the air with romance. Kyle, slightly bleary-eyed, dared to hold her a bit too close and the feeling unnerved her.

Kyle closed his eyes and breathed in the woman scent of her. Tendrils of hair tickled over his hand that held her back as he moved her around the dance floor.

Was it the hypnotic chord of the guitars? The air? Or the spicy sangria that made her lean into him? Her body relaxed as he held her just a bit closer, his warm hand traveling up her spine. Everything grew hazy as the moon covered them with its eerie silvery light. She raised her head and looked at Kyle but she didn't see him because the wavering image of Cole's face loomed there. Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to kiss her husband and closed her eyes willing his face closer to hers.

"I think it's time to go." The spell broken, they both turned to face a cold, steely-eyed Cole.

She pulled away from Kyle too abruptly, trying to read the expression on her husband's face. They all moved together. Cole stopped and looked at Kyle.

"Stay and enjoy yourself, Kyle. I'll take them back. I brought your horse, it's in the corral," Cole said.

Kyle nodded and said goodnight to Jade and stared at them as they walked away with Cole a stubbornly respectable distance from his wife.

Damned fool, he thought then turned abruptly and walked back to the gala. He saw Carlita talking with a young woman, who didn't have a chance at marriage unless it was arranged for her, given her girth and less than attractive face. Kyle edged between them and introduced himself to the blushing young woman.

"I don't think I've made your acquaintance little lady," he said with tight politeness, taking her hand and kissing it.

The girl giggled lightly.

Kyle leaned over and whispered into the young woman's ear and her eyes grew large as buttons.

"Oh señor I cannot," she said. But her eyes told him she would.

The girl turned to Carlita. "I think I heard my madre calling, Carlita, you will excuse me?"

The girl hurried off to the direction of the secluded gardens. The very place her mother would never be.

Carlita grinned at him crookedly. "Why take a girl when you can have a woman?"

"Because I need comfort, not trouble," he said and sauntered in the same direction the girl had gone.

Ramy was fast asleep in back of the wagon where Cole had lain him. Jade hoisted herself up beside him and cradled his head in her lap. Climbing up into the driver's seat, Cole clicked his tongue and the horse began to slowly pull the wagon on its way into the darkness and toward home.

They rode in silence until she broke it. "We were only dancing," she said to his back. *Why was she explaining anything to him?* She hadn't done anything wrong. But his arrogant silence made her think she had.

Chapter Seven

The next two weeks Cole worked both Kyle and Ramy extra hard, almost as though to punish them for having had a good time at the fiesta. There were evenings Ramy came in so tired that he went straight to his room. After calling him several times for supper, Jade went in and saw him fully clothed, lying across bed and dead asleep. The poor child was totally exhausted and all Jade could do was pull off his boots and cover him gently.

Finally after the third such evening her anger had risen to fever pitch. She stormed into the kitchen and proceeded to dish out the stew that had been simmering on the stove. Kyle sat at the table desperately trying to keep awake but started as she plopped the bowls of food angrily in front of them. She was so angry she found it hard to breathe.

"How can you do this?" she yelled at Cole.

"What are you squawking about, woman?"

"Are you trying to kill him?" she pointed to the sleeping boy's room.

"Hard work never killed anybody." He took a spoonful of the delectable stew. *Lord, the woman sure could cook*, he thought, trying to dismiss her tirade.

"You simply can't go on driving him like this day after day."

He ignored her tantrum and chewed slowly, then dragged his eyes up and half glared at her. "Things have to get done around here. Who's going to do them? You?" His tone was even but there was an undeniable edge to it.

Kyle snapped alert and was trying hard not to intervene.

Jade stood before Cole her hands waving in front of his face.

"I can't believe you can work that boy so hard. He couldn't even eat his supper tonight and his little hands are so chafed..."

"Enough!" he shouted above her voice, then got up so fast his chair toppled over and crashed to the floor. He stared down into her angry, yet rebellious face. His angry gaze said all there was to say.

With trembling lips, Jade dared to stare him straight in the eye willing her gaze not to waver.

Cole was privately impressed but openly annoyed that she would dare challenge him with such irresistible defiance.

The air hung thick with tension.

Kyle cleared his throat loudly, dissolving the curtain of opposition. Cole looked over to where his friend sat, then stalked from the room slamming the door behind him.

Kyle went to her. "You all right?"

She could only shake her head in a frustrated tearful reply.

Cole stalked to the barn and began pitching hay. He was moving so fast his actions were almost a blur. He wanted to drive the pitchfork through his own foot, anything to rid himself of the images of her that kept playing around in his mind. That night at the fiesta when he'd gone to get her, he stood for many moments in the shadows watching her. Her long hair was full of finger-deep waves and when the gentle breeze blew it across her face and she removed it, he swore he could see the beautiful green of her eyes.

He remembered clenching his fists when he saw Kyle put his hand around her slender waist and whisk her out onto the dance floor. He could feel his nails digging in to his palms, during the bolero when he saw his wife in the arms of his best friend. While he knew there was no way his friend would ever betray his trust, it angered him when he saw her laugh up into Kyle's face and he hated the way those luscious breasts were pressed against him. He had long ago thought those strong feelings of emotion inside him were dead. His dalliances with Carlita had been wild, fun and sex-filled. But now, as much as he'd fought the urge, he longed for the softness of the innocence that was right here in his own house.

He threw the pitchfork to the ground and went and saddled his horse. A good hard ride was just the thing he needed to cool the heat that was beginning to take hold of him.

* * * * *

In the weeks that followed, Cole hardly said a word to her that wasn't absolutely necessary and he continued to work them all hard, as though he wanted to spite her.

One chilly afternoon as Jade was tending the ground in the small garden she'd made at the side of the house, she heard an excited young voice and ventured around to see who it was.

"Come on Ramy, you gotta go! There must be at least two or three hunnert horses. White ones and chestnut bays and the black. I saw the black leading 'em. Aw, come on Ramy it's only on the north ridge, they'll be movin' soon."

It was little Manuel Vega, one of the boys she had seen at the Fiesta.

"Can't! Gotta finish cleaning the barn 'fore my pa gets back," he said miserably.

Jade wiped her hands on her apron, as she approached them. Manuel snatched his hat from his head quickly.

"Afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon, Manuel."

"I was just asking Ramy if he wanted to see the wild horses, they'll be moving on soon and they won't be back until next year sometime. People come from all over to see

them and even try to round some of them up. Especially the black, he's special. No one's ever been able to get him. I was hoping Ramy could go see 'em with me." The boy's sable-dark eyes were as large as army coat buttons as he spoke with excitement.

She glanced over at Ramy, who in turn looked down, jabbing the pitchfork into the ground sullenly.

"It must be quite a sight to see?"

"Yes, ma'am, you oughta see 'em, must be hunnerts and hunnerts."

His excitement was so intense she had to smile. Jade could almost feel Ramy's disappointment. The boy had so little in his life that made him happy. All the small things she did for him, like baking cookies, listening to him, or just reading to him, made him smile and it always warmed her heart.

"Wait here a moment both of you." She went into the house and returned a moment later with two wrapped parcels and handed each boy one.

They looked at her quizzically.

"Well you can't watch a horse roundup on empty stomachs. It's a piece of mulberry pie for each of you."

"But my chores," Ramy said.

"You go on. I'll finish up the barn."

Ramy's face broke into a wide grin just before he and Manuel raced away. Ramy stopped and returned to where she was standing and wrapped both arms around her waist.

"Thanks, Jade, you're the best."

The feeling of the little boy's arms around her filled her with such joy she thought she would cry. "Mind you be home by suppertime," she chastised as he let her go and ran off.

When they'd gone, she pulled the hem of her skirt up into her waistband and began the dirty job of cleaning the remaining barn stalls. It was grueling work but as long as she knew Ramy was having a good time, it was worth it.

She had finished the stalls and was spreading hay around up in the loft when she heard the sound of horses' hooves. Her hands flew to her mouth. She knew it had to be Cole and Kyle. *The time! Where had all the time gone?* She rushed from the barn and almost right into the largest, blackest Appaloosa steed she'd ever seen. The horse bucked and reared as Cole fought to control him from his own horse.

"Whoa boy! Whoa!" he said, patting the side of his head and stroking his mane. The horse calmed a little but still snorted indignantly.

"What tha..." He got off his horse and looked into her dirt-streaked face.

She smoothed down her skirt and wiped her face only managing to smudge it even worse.

"Where's the boy?" he asked.

"I-I..." He always made her nervous and she knew he knew it. She stood up straighter and cleared her throat. "Manuel Vega came by and he and Ramy went to the horse roundup at the north ridge. I told him it was all right. He'll be home soon. It's...it's almost suppertime." She was speaking too rapidly and it denoted unintended guilt.

Kyle glanced at her with a there's-gonna-be-hell-to-pay expression, as he unsaddled his horse.

Cole's face was blank but she knew he was harboring a bucket-sized amount of annoyance bordering on just a whip snap from rage.

She hurried to the water pump and washed as much of the dirt from her face, arms and hands as she could. Her eyes anxiously darted around hoping that Ramy would make an appearance. Her hopes were dashed, when once again she looked at her husband's fuming face as he ambled alongside her and began to wash his hands.

Kyle had taken the horses to the corral and was coming back, his hat pushed back on his head.

"I'm mighty hungry Jade. I'm looking forward to some of your hot biscuits."

"I'm sorry Kyle, there'll just be spoon bread tonight."

She hated that she hadn't kept up with the time. They had so little to look forward to and the least she could do was have a proper dinner ready.

She had no alternative but to go inside and hurry and get the batter going and as for the rest of the meal, they would just have to make do with leftover beef stew. Thank goodness she had made the pie earlier in the day. Perhaps it would take some of the fire out of Cole's foul mood.

As she raced around the kitchen, she could hear the angry snorts and whinny of the stallion as well as the muffled tone of comforting words from Cole.

By the time they came inside, she had already served the food and was setting it on the table. Every so often she peered out of the small kitchen window searching frantically for any sign of Ramy.

No one spoke and the air was brittle with tension.

Darkness fell like a cloak in the valley and already it was too dark see outside. Fingers of apprehension gripped Jade's heart. *What if he was hurt? Oh God!* Her face lost its color as every imaginable horror invaded her mind about Ramy's possible demise. Wringing her hands, she glanced over at her husband's broad back. How would she ever forgive herself if anything happened to his son?

Kyle looked up at her with reassurance that everything would be all right.

The two men were almost finished eating when Ramy burst into the room. Jade closed her eyes and let out a long sigh of relief.

He stopped abruptly and looked at his father but walked over to her. "I'm sorry Jade, honest," he said softly, "but you should've seen 'em." He began speaking excitedly, explaining about the beauty of the wild beasts.

Jade shushed him and nodded toward his father.

Ramy moved slowly to him. "I-I'm sorry, Pa, I didn't mean to stay out so late."

Then his voice became animated once again. "But it sure was a sight. And, Pa, the black wasn't there. Someone said they saw him run over to the creek to the south and then near the crag. They said he was running so fast you could hardly see him. They said they think he went up into the high plains and he won't come down until way next season. You think so, Pa?"

Suddenly Cole stood up raised his hand and was about to bring it down across the boy's face, when Jade moved between them.

"Don't you dare!" Her eyes glared at him with poisonous venom.

Kyle too scraped his chair back and stood up, his face embroiled with anger. "Damn it, Cole!"

"This ain't none of your concern, Kyle." Cole challenged his look and the other man reluctantly backed off.

Cole focused his attention back on Ramy. "You think you got servants around here? You didn't finish your chores, you let Jade do them."

"I offered to do them!" she shouted at him.

He ignored her.

"You go to your room. There'll be no supper for you tonight! And while you're in there you think twice about leaving this ranch again."

Ramy threw this father a mean, hurt look, then ran to his room and slammed the door.

For a few minutes there was total silence in the room. Cole sat down and spooned the last of his pie into his mouth.

Jade unclenched her tight fists and began to clear the table but then slammed the dishes back down. "How can you treat him like that?" She glared angrily at him.

"Not that again!" he said.

"Yes again! What are you trying to do? Make him into a hard, bitter man like you?" she shouted, then regained some of her composure and spoke a little softer. "He's a boy Cole and he needs the company of other boys. He needs to run and play in the sunshine. Not just work all day and into the evening. He'll be a man for a long time, let him enjoy these years. And it wouldn't kill you to show him a little love either!" she finished.

Kyle's head snapped up and looked at her. He knew she was on dangerous ground when Cole hadn't responded.

Jade resumed clearing the dishes and threw them into the washing basin and began pumping water angrily.

The weighty silence was interrupted by the scraping of the chair and Cole's heavy footsteps as he walked to her.

Swearing to herself that she would show no fear, she turned to face him, looking up defiantly. Only the rapid beating of her heart contradicted her bravado. He stood so close she could see the flecks of lights dancing in his eyes and the angry twitch of his jaw.

"He's my son and he'll do what I tell him."

"I know that but you'll never hit him while there's a breath left inside me."

"I think it would be best if you had just let this be, woman." His tone was low and threatening.

They stared at each other for eternal moments. The rage that overtook her was like one possessed.

"Or what? You going to try to hit me too?"

He'd never struck a woman in his life and he wasn't going to start now but as he looked into her eyes, he saw the daring challenge.

She grabbed a cup from the cupboard and poured milk into it. She plopped some of the stew onto a plate, along with two circles of spoon bread smeared with butter and honey and all the time each never took their eyes off the other.

Finally, she placed a wedge of pie on the tray and stepping deftly around her angry husband, carried it into Ramy's room.

He was sitting on his bed morosely, inspecting an arrowhead. When he saw her he lowered his head in shame.

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Jade, honest."

"Hush now, I know you didn't."

She put the tray on his lap and watched his face brighten.

"Pa's gonna be awful mad," he said stuffing his mouth with the honeyed bread.

"You just let me worry about your pa. Now, tell me about those horses again."

He excitedly began his tale and talked until he became weary. She stayed with him until he fell asleep, pushing the dark, straight hair away from his forehead and covering him quietly.

Reluctantly, she went back into the kitchen. She'd hoped that Cole had retired to the parlor or gone for a ride, anything so that she wouldn't have to face him. But there he was, standing in the middle of the room eyeing her every move. To get to the dish basin she had to pass him quite close and he gave her no quarter. Swallowing hard, she lifted her head high and moved on. She was scraping the remains of food from the dishes when she felt him move up behind her. She wouldn't let him get to her, not this time.

"I make the rules here, Jade," he breathed his hot breath onto her neck. "I won't have you, or anyone, undermining my authority with own son, do you understand?"

She said nothing but she gripped the bowl she had in her hand, so that he wouldn't see her shaky hands.

He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around to face him. "I said do you understand?"

"Perfectly!" she whispered with trembling yet defiant lips.

He released her and she fell back against the sink, the bowl slipped from her hands and crashed to the floor. Then as casually as if he were on a Sunday stroll, he went to the stove and lit his cheroot, then sauntered to the parlor where he joined Kyle for a smoke.

The tears that had been threatening finally slid silently down her cheeks. How had this happened? What was she doing here? Endure, that's what Dona Maria had said but how could she? He had shown her nothing but contempt and discontent from the moment they'd met.

* * * * *

After Kyle had retired to the tack-house, Cole sat in the parlor. Curls of smoke from his cheroot danced in front of him then disappeared into the air. His brow knitted in thought, the smile that wasn't a smile crossed his lips, slowly his head worked up and down in agreement with himself. *She was a spirited little filly.*

The next morning when Ramy left the house to do his chores, he saw his father leading the bucking black stallion out of the barn. Ramy dropped the egg basket and ran over to him, forgetting his anger from the evening before.

"Pa! It was you? You got the black." His eyes were wide with fascination.

Kyle exited the tack-house, his eyes moving from Cole to Ramy.

Without a word, Cole pulled the stallion to the gate. Opening it, he pulled the slip knot on the rope that was around the horse's neck and waved his arms. "Yah! Go on. Yah!" he yelled.

The horse snorted, reared up onto his hind legs once, then took off like the wind.

"Oh, Pa, why'd you let him go? Why?"

Cole wrapped the length of rope into a circle and walked back into the barn.

"Why did he let him go, Kyle?" Ramy asked running over to the ranch hand.

He pushed his hat back on his forehead and adjusted his weight on one leg. "He got him for you. He thought you were old enough. We were going to start training him today."

Ramy stared at his father's retreating back, then at dust trail the stallion had made as he ran off into the wilderness. Ramy wished his father had hit him the night before. It wouldn't have hurt nearly as much as losing the best horse in the land.

Chapter Eight

Winter crept up on them silently. The summer leaves that had turned as if by magic from green to gold were gone altogether. The day air was chilly and the nights had grown bitter with winds that promised to deliver even colder weather.

They made one more trip to town and her reception this time was a lot different and even though the town ladies nodded politely, they still acted as though they really didn't approve of her.

"What's wrong with them?" she ventured to ask Kyle on the drive home.

"Don't mind those chicken-necked old biddies, they've never approved of any of Cole's choices concerning women."

She couldn't help but wonder if he'd meant Carlita or herself. It couldn't have anything to do with his first wife. Or could it?

* * * * *

One evening after Ramy was long abed, Kyle and Cole sat before the fire lost in pensive thought over a chessboard. Jade sat in a chair behind them, her knitting needles clicking against each other as she put the final stitches on a pair of socks she had been making for Ramy. She had already finished two pairs each for Kyle and Cole, along with warm mittens and mufflers. She was proud of her handiwork and wondered if other women sat by their fires sewing and mending for their men. What had made her think that? Neither of these were her men. She was brought here as a servant and as she looked around at the dancing shadows, she knew it was better than living in the loft over the tavern. Her musings were interrupted by a loud noisy stretch from Kyle.

"Well, I guess I'd better get my things and get going."

Jade stopped her knitting. "Are you leaving, Kyle?"

"Kyle rarely stays on in winter," Cole said nonchalantly, his eyes still glued to the chessman.

"But you will be back won't you?" she asked the cowpoke anxiously.

The concern in her voice annoyed Cole but he said nothing.

"Like Cole said, I rarely stay on in winter but don't worry, I always come back too," Kyle said with a lopsided grin.

"Oh dear, I suppose I'd better give you your Christmas present now then," Jade said quietly.

"Ma'am?" Kyle's expression was full of puzzlement.

She reached into her sewing basket and held out the socks, mittens and the long muffler she'd made for him.

He got up and walked to her, a warm flush covering his face as he accepted the gifts she offered. He shifted from foot to foot as he handled the items reverently.

"Well now these are right nice. Thank you, Jade," he said sheepishly. "These will come in real handy where I'm going."

"I'll fix some food for you to take on your way." She got up and headed for the kitchen.

"And a maybe a jar of them fine peach preserves of yours if you don't mind," he yelled after her.

Cole had stretched out his long legs and shifted his gaze to the crackling flames in the hearth.

"Y'all gonna be all right here, Cole?" Kyle asked his sullen friend.

"I expect we will," he answered without looking up.

"Cole, before I go I want to ask you, why don't you treat Jade more kindly?"

Cole's eyes raised, steeled then looked his best friend in the face. "Something wrong with the way I been treating her?"

"I'm just saying that she's a good woman and she adores Ramy. I think things could be better between you if you just gave it a chance."

Cole shifted in irritation. He didn't want to talk about Jade, not with him, not with anybody. "I brought her here to look after Ramy and to cook and clean for you and me. That's all I want from her and in return she gets a safe place to live and me to look after her." His voice was raised and edgy.

Kyle knew that further conversation was both futile and dangerous as he eyed Jade returning from the kitchen. "Well then, I guess I'll be seeing you all in the spring. Tell your whippersnapper I'll bring him something special."

Cole stood up and held out his hand, an apology of sorts played on his lips and showed in his eyes. There was no need to speak it.

Kyle knew Cole was a hard-nosed, stubborn son of a bitch but he was fair boss and a good friend. He shook his hand heartily.

"In the spring then," Cole said as he watched his friend walk outside and Jade following behind.

Kyle tied the bundle she'd given him onto his saddle pommel. He turned to her and stared down into her deep green eyes, his gaze lingering for an immeasurable moment. "You'll take care of 'em won't you, Jade? They're all the family I've got."

"I'll take care of them," she answered softly. "You just take of you."

He fumbled with the reins, looking sheepish.

"Ya know, Cole ain't a bad sort. It's just that..."

She cut him off. "It's all right. I heard what he said. He brought me here to care for Ramy and this house and that's what I intend to do."

He felt sorry for her just then. Had things been different perhaps even he... *No!* He erased the thought from his mind. "Well goodbye until spring thaw."

"Be careful Kyle." She reached up and pecked him on his rough cheek.

He felt the heat of an embarrassing flush creep up his neck, so he hurried astride his horse before it was too obvious, smiled once again and rode off into the cold night.

The brisk air closed in and sent a chill all through her. Shivering, she pulled the shawl more snugly around her shoulders and headed back to the porch. She looked up and saw Cole at the window staring expressionlessly at her. She wondered how long she would be able to endure her husband's indifferent attitude.

* * * * *

A week had gone by and already it was lonely without Kyle with his prattling tall tales to entertain their otherwise boring evenings. Now each night was the same for her. She would help Ramy with his book learning, then send him off to bed. She'd then sit quietly by the crackling fire sewing, while Cole smoked or stared hard into it, saying nothing. She often wondered where his thoughts were and why he found it so hard to engage her in any meaningful conversation.

The clock chimed and she put her sewing away.

"I'm going to bed Cole, is there anything I can get for you?"

Cole didn't answer her, nor did he bother to look her way. She was especially lovely in the firelight and the last thing he wanted was to find himself wrapped in a situation he didn't want or need to be in. It was hard enough knowing that she was in the room next to his and that alone had caused him many a sleepless night.

Jade knew that his silence was just the beginning of a long hard winter and went to her room which was chilly and growing colder. She undressed quickly and pulled on a cotton nightdress, shifting from foot to foot trying to keep her feet from getting too cold.

She turned the lantern down low, then decided to go to the kitchen for some heated flat stones. Perhaps she could make a last-ditch effort to make amends for goodness-knew-what by putting a stone or two in Cole's bed to ward off the chill when he got in it

She went to the kitchen hearth where the fire was low but very warm. Carefully, she lifted a large stone with a coal shovel and wrapped it in layers of clean rags, then carried it to his room. She placed the stone at the foot of the bed under the blanket and was backing out of the room when she ran right into him.

She turned quickly. "I... I..." she faltered as his eyes roved lazily over her.

Cole's lips clenched. The dimness in the room combined with the light from the lantern allowed him to see the exquisite silhouette of her shape through her nightdress. The outline of her perfect breasts and vague contour of her nipples teased him as his

eyes moved from head to toe, halting at the place where her titillating tuft of hair loomed dark and inviting against the whiteness of her nightdress, almost made his head spin.

"I was putting a stone in your bed. It gets so cold at night and when you first get in it's..." She was rambling and she knew it. She noticed his eyes move from her face and wander down her muslin clad body once again. She might as well have been completely naked for the way he was looking at her. Jade wanted to cover herself with her hands and run but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Goodnight!" she said with barely disguised annoyance.

* * * * *

The first snow started mid-November. The white flurries covered the ground with an ever so slight dusting at first, giving the land an appearance of a glistening fairyland. The winds started out as a gusty breeze but soon howled like banshees, bringing with it a deep bone-chilling cold.

The heavy snows started the first week of January and it was the coldest Jade had ever been in her life. It had become quite a chore just to get to and from the barn in order to milk the cows and gather eggs from the hen house, which was now her job since Ramy had to help his father now that Kyle was gone. He and Cole took care of the field herd of cattle, rounded up strays and of course there were the constant fence repairs.

It was a difficult time for her but Jade adjusted. She barely had time to remember that she'd had a birthday. It was 1851 and she was twenty-two years old and no one knew or cared.

* * * * *

One cold blustery morning as she prepared the tins of hot soup, warm buttered bread and steaming strong coffee, she noticed that Cole dressed warmer than usual and was loading his big rifle.

"We're going to try to round up some more strays. There's a bad storm heading this way and I noticed some cougar tracks up around the north ridge."

Jade remembered Kyle's tales of mountain lions and bears but now it seemed more like a reality when she saw Cole looking so serious and loading his buffalo gun.

Ramy exited his room dressed in the warm winter woolens she had made for him, complete with the long muffler trailing behind him.

"Come here little man and let me fix that for you. I can't let you go out with this dragging the ground. It might get caught on a bush and pull you clean off your horse," she teased.

"Aw, Jade, I'm a good rider. I been riding since I was four," he said, but secretly enjoyed her mothering and allowed her to wrap the muffler securely around his neck.

Afterwards, she handed him his tins and checked him over once again. Cole had already taken his and was waiting outside.

She could barely see them through the heavy snowflakes as they rode slowly away and it troubled her that Ramy was out in such weather, much less on a cougar hunt. She silently prayed that they would both be all right and return home safely. She watched them until they became specks in the distance, then disappeared over the ridge.

There really wasn't much to do now but try to keep busy and wait. Cole had seen to it that there was an abundance of wood and chips for burning in the stove and fireplace. Of course, there was a good store of food and water was plentiful as long as she was able to get to the stream and if not, there was the snow.

She made the beds and did the daily cleaning. Afterwards, she went to the root cellar for some apples to make a pie. It would be a welcome surprise for them when they came home. After she pared and cored the apples and put the remains in a pot to boil down for jelly, she rolled out the dough, filled it and set it to baking.

It was noon when she finished straining the jelly remains through a cloth and into a jar to be stored away for a later time. By then, the kitchen was permeated with the delicious odor of cinnamon, nutmeg and apples.

After eating a light lunch of cold ham and cornbread, she sat down in the parlor and began her knitting.

In the late afternoon, Jade fought her way to the barn to make sure that the animals had enough water and fodder and that the door was secure in case that shifty cougar found its way down to the low country and inside the barn.

The brutal wind had turned the snowflakes to ice that stung her face mercilessly as she traveled just the short distance from the house to the barn and back.

Night comes early in winter and soon it was pitch black outside. The howling winds sang over the top of the house, gusting and waning, then gusting again, battering at the front door like an angry ghostly visitor. It did little good to peer out of the window, for all she could see was the swirling snow, which was getting deeper and higher with drifts that reached the middle part of the back windows.

The musical sound of the mantle clock joined the tempest raging outside in a weird symphony, causing her to grow anxious at the waning of the hours. *They should be coming in anytime now.* But her heart wasn't convinced.

She prepared dinner and kept it warm over a low fire, then set the table and listened as the clock—her only companion—chimed away another hour.

In the parlor, she threw some more wood on the fire and sat down in Cole's large chair. It felt good, big and hard, like him. It made her feel close to him. The warm fire caressed her face taking away the chill that had gripped her earlier when she'd ventured outdoors. With a quilt across her legs, the howling wind and the crackling fire, she was soon lulled into fitful sleep.

Chapter Nine

What was that? Jade awoke with a start. She didn't know how long she'd slept or exactly what it was that had awakened her. She shook her head to clear it and knew instantly that it was very late and that she was still alone. The fire had receded to just a few glowing embers and the room had grown cool. Rising quickly she added more wood and stoked it back to a full blaze, then hurried over to the window. The storm had grown worse and the winds were raging.

She went to the front window. Wiping away the vaporous frost, she squinted but was unable to see anything except dancing tree limb shadows and whirling snow-devils.

She glanced back at the clock. It was well after midnight. *They should have been back hours ago. Where could they be?* She wrung her hands fitfully. *What if something has happened to them?* She began to pace the floor and briefly entertained the thought of going to look for them. *But where?* She had little knowledge of the land and in this storm she could easily be lost herself.

She went to the kitchen and removed the stew pot from the warm brazier. It had all but cooked down to a pasty mush. Her eyes kept returning to the clock. Each ticking moment was like an eternity. Twice, she donned her cloak and ventured out onto the porch but it took only a moment before the fierce winds drove her back inside.

It was impossible to sleep now and all she could think of was them, outside in the cold, maybe frozen to death. The inconceivable thought made her bite back her tears. She had to remain calm.

She paced back and forth and paid frequent visits to the window. *How could they survive out there? How will I survive without them?* Her husband and his son could be lost outside and she was powerless to do anything to help them. She covered her face with her hands and cried softly. She put more wood on the fire, making sure that it was kept high and hoped that the smoke could be seen if they looked hard enough. She settled back into the chair, gripping the arm rests until her knuckles ached. She stared at the hypnotizing flames, her mind playing over a hundred different things she planned to do for them if they returned. She cried, she hummed and she prayed.

* * * * *

There was a sound outside and at first she wasn't sure she'd heard it. But then there it was again, something different from the sound of the raging storm. It's them! she thought and jumped up and ran to the window, glancing at the clock as she went. It was after two in the morning and the storm showed no signs of letting up. Wiping

away the vapor that her warm breath had made on the pane, she tried to focus her vision. She saw shadows of movement. *No! It was only the dancing snow playing tricks again.* Squinting, she tried to focus her vision on the swirling snow. Finally, she saw a small figure with a larger one behind making their way precariously into the front yard and she knew for sure it was them. Throwing on her woolen shawl, she opened the door and went out into the raging din.

"Ramy! Cole!" she called, but the wind caught her voice and carried it off into the night.

Jade struggled to get to them. She heard Cole yelling, "Go back!" But by then, she had grabbed hold of Ramy who seemed to be wavering on his feet and pulled him onto the porch. She looked back to see her husband struggling to get the skittish horses into the barn.

Fighting against the howling winds, she was finally able to wrench Ramy into the house. His face and head were wrapped burnoose style and she could feel his little body shivering beneath his coat.

"Oh my dear little boy, look at you," she said as she began to unwrap the muffler then stifled a muffled gasp when she saw his chapped, red face. His cold shaking hands were still curled around invisible reins and his blistered bleeding lips were moving wordlessly over his chattering teeth.

Maneuvering him into his room she began to remove his clothes quickly. He nodded in and out of sleep but became fully awake again when she had gotten down to his underthings.

"Aw, come on Jade, you ain't supposed to be seeing a man in his drawers," he said groggily.

"Never you mind..." she said, covering him with extra blankets. "You aren't a man yet. Now rest. I'll bring some warm stones for your feet and something to heat your insides too." She said as she tucked him into bed tightly.

He was too tired to argue with her and settled down under the covers, as he muttered incoherently and fought to stay awake.

She ran to the kitchen and began to pull stones from the hearth. After wrapping them, she hurried back to his room and distributed them around his feet and legs.

A few minutes later, she brought him a bowl of stew, only to find him fast asleep. She adjusted the covers more securely and left quietly.

The kitchen door flew open and Cole struggled to close it as the ferocious wind outside battled against him. Ice was hanging from his hat and muffler as he staggered to and dropped into the nearest kitchen chair. Jade quickly poured steaming hot coffee into a cup and pried his shivering hands open to receive it.

"Of all the crazy things! How could you keep him out in this cold?" she fussed. "What kind of man are you?"

"Not now, Jade... So tired," he said, then his head fell heavily against his hands on the table.

Still muttering she went to his room and grabbed two large blankets and threw them over his already sleeping form, then massaged his arms to get his circulation running more quickly. Darn fool! Traipsing around in this storm! she thought to herself.

She knew there was no way she could get him to his room and to bed so she took the cup from his warming hands, then went and stoked the fire, adding more wood in the stove. Only when she saw the ice crystals begin to disappear from his coat and heard his light snoring was she satisfied that he was all right. Lowering the lantern, she finally went to her room and although still angry and exhausted, she was grateful that they were both safe.

Jade lay awake in her bed a long time. Her mind was tired from the torture of waiting for them to return and she was bone tired as if she had worked in the fields all day after they had returned. Finally sleep began to claim her and her lids lowered until she was fast asleep.

* * * * *

There was a moan. No! A tortured cry. At first she thought she was dreaming. Then she heard it again.

Ramy! Jade leapt from her warm bed and hurried through the tepid kitchen and into the boy's room. There he was, all the covers had been thrown to the floor as he tossed in a sweat drenched bed. She felt his forehead. He was burning up.

Cole was beside her in an instant.

"What is it?"

"Fever!" she said him and left to go to the stove to heat some water and more stones.

Jade brought a basin of water and noticed that Cole had pulled the discarded blankets up over the distressed boy and stood over him, his brow furrowed with anxiety.

She began to bathe Ramy's sweat-drenched face and neck. The boy went from high-fever to ice-cold, then back again within moments. Jade had seen it before and she knew there was a good chance the outcome might not be favorable. She knew these first hours would be critical.

She had to force broth and water into his mouth but the ill lad was unable to keep it down. The boy's face went from scarlet with fits of coughing to deathly pale in between.

She stayed with him throughout the night, leaving only when he had brief moments of quiet rest. Exhausted but unable to stop her vigil, Cole urged her to get some rest.

"Go on, Jade, I'll stay with him a while."

She was reluctant to leave, holding onto the boy's slack hand tightly.

"Look! I can't have both of you getting sick, now go on and get some sleep, Jade." He said it a little too harshly, then softer, "It'll be all right, I won't leave him."

Jade reluctantly plodded back to her room and fell into her bed where sleep claimed her in moments.

Cole held his son wrapped in blankets, rubbing the child's head and wiping him down continually but the insistent fever raged on for three days.

One night, when it was particularly bad, Cole watched helplessly, his face etched with fear as Jade climbed into bed with the fever-wrenched boy. She held his struggling body close, sharing her own warmth with him as she whispered soothing words to calm him and all the time her teary, accusing eyes were on Cole.

Her angry glance didn't go unnoticed. He knew she blamed him and there was nothing could he say.

The boy remained incoherent and fitful. Twice they thought he was lost but each time Jade continued to work on him, hold him, bathing him in pine tar oil, pouring water or clear soup down his throat and speaking to him in soft soothing tones.

On the fourth day during one his more restful periods, as she and Cole sat at the kitchen table, unable to eat the breakfast she'd prepared, she heard Ramy call to her.

"Oh God!" her hand flew to her mouth as she raced to his room and found him struggling to sit up.

"I'm starved! Can't a man get anything to eat around here?" he asked weakly.

He was pale and his eyes had dark hollow circles under them but he was alive.

Jade couldn't help herself as she sat on the bed and hugged him close.

"Gosh, Jade, you're gonna just smother me to death."

She planted kisses all over his face and forehead. "I'll bring you some broth."

He reached up and traced the path of tears down her face. "I was sick something awful wasn't I, Jade."

"Yes, little one, you were very ill but you're all right now."

Cole hadn't moved. He was still seated at the table, his face ashen, waiting to hear words that he dreaded. His eyes went to hers as she entered the kitchen, searching her face questioningly.

"He's awake and he's hungry," she half laughed through her tears as she went to the stove to ladle up the broth.

A heavy relieved sigh escaped his lips as he lowered his head in silent thanks.

It was another week before Ramy was allowed out of bed, while he improved day by day and insisted that be allowed to help out.

"It's too cold and the range is no place for a grown stubborn man like your father, let alone a little boy like you."

"Aw Jade, I'm tired of just layin' here." But he secretly loved all the attention she gave him.

* * * * *

Colorado is a hard, strange land. After long months of bitter cold and snow, Jade was greeted one morning by the telltale dripping of water as the snow began melting. It was already close to May and living in the higher elevations slowed the normal weather changes but the worst was over and spring was on the way.

Cole was finishing up his breakfast and Ramy had already gone outside to the corral.

"He's still so pale," Cole muttered, a hint of worry crossed his face as he looked in the direction of the door.

"It will take time for him to recover fully but with fresh air and sunshine, he'll be right as rain."

"We have two mares about to foal, I can really use him."

Jade stopped wiping her hands and looked at him.

"I'll help with it. Ramy has to regain his strength." Her voice held finality to it. A tone that said she was not going to allow him to work the boy to death and he would have to wait until he was fully recovered to *her* liking.

Cole looked at her but didn't say another word about it. He sat for moment nursing the last dregs of coffee in his cup.

"Look, I never thanked you for what you did for Ramy while he was sick. I don't know if he would have made it with just me."

She had finished clearing the table and was washing the dishes. She didn't turn to face him. "It's all part of my job."

She never thought of Ramy as part of any job but she had remembered Cole's hurtful words to Kyle the night the cowboy left. She was there to be a caregiver and that was all.

Cole moved his chair back and left the table. His jaw was set hard as he strode from the kitchen. It was just like a woman not to let a man forget something he'd said that he shouldn't have.

* * * * *

Two days later she was out back airing the winter blankets, keeping an ever watchful eye on Ramy, as he replaced worn leather straps on the hitch post when suddenly she heard his excited voice.

"Kyle's back!" he yelled and ran to the cowboy.

Kyle had returned. He was dusty, a little thinner and a full beard covered his handsome, usually smooth face.

"Hey there partner. Ole man winter didn't get his icy fingers on ya, did he."

Just then Jade ran out to greet him.

"Kyle!" she shouted gleefully. "It's so good to see you."

"Howdy, Jade. Looks like you all made it through our mean winter just fine."

"It was touch-and-go for a minute or two but we're all here," she said, ruffling Ramy's hair.

Cole walked out of the barn, pulling off his leather work gloves.

"Well I see you made it back, smelling worse than a hibernatin' bear and looking 'bout as bad," Cole said with a mock grimace.

"Well you ain't smellin' much better, seein' as how you're cleanin' out a winter barn," Kyle said laughing and shaking his friend's hand.

"Did ya stay with the injuns, Kyle?" Ramy jumped around them excitedly. "Did ya see Nakoa?"

The smile left Kyle's face. "No! I didn't stay with the Native Americans this time Ramy." But the look he gave Cole contradicted his statement.

"Ramy, go fetch some water and start a hot bath for Kyle, he's needing it real bad." Cole scrunched his nose up tightly.

"Okay, Pa. But then I want to tell him all about how we almost got lost in the snow and how I got sick and how Jade took care of me." The boy was half running backward and talking at the same time.

Kyle's face flashed concern. "He looks thin."

"Like he said, he was sick," Cole said followed by an awkward silence.

"But he's all right now," Jade chimed in. "I'll go in and fix you something to eat. You're looking a little thin yourself."

"Don't mind that one bit, Jade. I sure did miss your good home cookin' that's for sure."

"It'll only take a few minutes. By the time you're done with your bath, it'll be ready for you," she said hurrying to the porch and into the house.

It didn't escape Cole that Jade was much more animated when Kyle was around. She had never shown *him* that kind of enthusiasm but then he'd never given her reason to. Confusion was battling inside him and it made him irritable and tense.

As the two men walked to the house, Cole's face was set as hard as granite. "Well, did you see him?"

"Yeah, I saw him."

* * * * *

Ramy was pouring water into the large copper tub when Jade entered with an arm full of drying cloths.

"Ramy, who is Nakoa?" she asked.

"Why he's the gol-dernest, meanest injun there ever was," he laughed and poured water into the tub.

"Ramy!" she poked him good-naturedly. But there was something about the edgy way the two men acted that alerted her to the fact that there was more here than they were saying.

"Have you ever seen him? This Nakoa, I mean."

"No but Kyle has and Pa too. 'Course they don't like to talk about it in front of me much." He swirled the water around with his hand, then ran to the door to yell for Kyle.

"Bath's ready, Kyle, and I put some extra lye soap in too." The boy pinched his nostrils together as Kyle walked by him.

"Very funny." He ruffled Ramy's head before entering the small room.

"You just hand me those dirty things, I'll have them washed and ready in no time," Jade said holding out her hand.

"I had clean ones out of the tack room. I'll be okay for a few days, if that husband of yours don't work me to death."

"Too late. There's two mares about to foal, he'll need your help."

"Be right out!" he said with a cheerful smile.

After they'd left, Kyle undressed and sank into the steamy water. How in the world can a woman be so damned beautiful all the time? he wondered.

That evening after a special supper, Kyle brought in his saddlebags, which held presents for each of them. For Jade, he brought a lovely white handmade lace shawl, a new rifle for Cole and for Ramy, a special handmade fishing lure. "Guaranteed to catch every fish in the river," he laughed.

* * * * *

Spring was disappearing rapidly and the promise of a hot summer was upon them. No more evening fires were needed and hot stews were replaced with other, lighter savory dishes.

One day, they brought home bushels of apples and peaches, and jars for making preserves to store for future winter months and to give as gifts. The job took an entire week and even Kyle sat and helped pare and core apples, dazzling her with never-ending stories of his winter adventures. Jade guessed that they were mostly tall tales meant to excite and amaze an impressionable young boy but she enjoyed them too.

She looked forward to the evenings after a hard day's toil when Kyle spun his inflated tales, as Ramy listened with his mouth and eyes wide open, interrupting periodically with a barrage of questions.

Cole never said much, he just sat in his chair staring out the window, listening and smoking.

It was one of these slow, easy evenings that Jade dared to ask Kyle a question that had been on her mind almost since that night at the fiesta.

"How is it you've never married, Kyle?" It was really a lead-in to what she really wanted to know.

For a moment there was an unbalanced silence.

"Don't rightly know," he said with a knitted brow. "Guess the right filly hasn't found and reined me in yet."

"Maybe it's because you have too many fillies," Cole chimed in.

"That's not likely and besides," he grinned back, "when would I have the time with the way you work me?"

"You find time for what you need and I don't think you have much trouble in that area," Cole grinned.

Jade cleared her throat loudly, indicating to them that there was a youngster in the room.

"Speaking of time, you should get to bed, Ramy," Cole said to the boy.

"Aw, Pa..." the boy pouted.

Cole scowled at the lad briefly. "We all have lots to do tomorrow and Kyle'll be right here in the morning, lying through his teeth about his adventures." There was a semblance of a grin on his face.

The boy got up from the floor where he had been sitting and listening to the stories. "G'nite everybody," he said with a little pout.

"I might as well go too," Jade said huffily, throwing her sewing into the basket at her feet. "I'm sure there's a lot for me to do tomorrow as well!"

* * * * *

Jade was still more than a little miffed the next morning. *Work and more work, that's all he ever thinks about.* She needed another pail from the barn for the extra peels and core scraps so that they could be dried and mixed with the animal feed for the winter.

Cole was brushing down a beautiful full-grown mustang mare. The horse stood calmly, its haunches flinching slightly each time the hand-brush coursed over her. Cole glanced up at her as she entered, stopping a moment to notice the rise of her unbuttoned bodice, before resuming his work. The pail was on a hook higher than she could reach. *I'll be hanged if I'll ask him!* she thought petulantly.

Perching precariously on a stall railing, she balanced herself carefully and reached up. She wiggled her fingers, it was mere inches away but still out of her grasp. Suddenly she saw his large hand slowly reach up and unhook the pail, his body so close to her she could see the beads of sweat on his brow.

"Next time just ask."

"I didn't want to disturb your work time. I know how important it is to you," she eyed him challengingly.

His eyes left hers and traced the neat lines of her cheeks down, over her throat and down to her breasts.

She rolled her bottom lip inward nervously.

"What's wrong, Jade?" His voice was low and raspy.

Suddenly the stifling hot air in the barn was more pronounced.

"Nothing. What makes you think anything's wrong?"

His face leaned a little closer to hers.

"Well it just seems that you seem a little unsettled. Are you unsettled, Jade?" He reached up and touched a wayward tendril of her hair letting it wind around his finger.

"It's a warm day. The heat gets to me a little that's all."

"Is that all that's getting to you?"

She snatched the pail from him.

"I assure you, that's it," she said huffily and stormed out of the barn.

Chapter Ten

It was a bright Sunday afternoon. Their chores finished, Jade and Ramy went down to the river for a picnic. She thought about asking Kyle but he was busy in the corral, his full concentration on gently breaking in a temperamental spotted appaloosa. It was pointless to ask Cole to come along, for she knew that he would decline, that is *if* he bothered to answer her at all.

Ramy brought his hide kick ball that Kyle—always Kyle—had made for him.

After they'd eaten her delicious prepared lunch, Jade leapt to her feet, grabbed the ball and began running with it. Ramy was instantly up and after her laughing as she ducked and dodged away from him.

They were having a grand time passing the ball back and forth and trying to keep control of it. Of course whenever she won Ramy told her that it was, "On account of you being a girl and all."

They laughed, got dirty and were loving it. Jade's hair had come loose as always but she knew if she stopped to fix it she would lose control of the game for sure.

They playfully fought for the ball, Ramy grabbed her around the waist and even with her hair flying and blinding them both, she managed to get away with it tucked neatly in her hands. Laughing, she was running and looking back at Ramy who had an odd expression on his face. Suddenly, she was stopped by a force so powerful she was knocked to the ground. The smile left her face as she found herself looking directly up into the hard, cold eyes of a thin, wiry Native American brave. His painted face was expressionless as he stared down at her. His dark hair hung straight and long to his shoulders with a sleek downward slanted eagle's feather woven around a single side-braid.

For a moment she was unable to move, then gathering her wits she managed to scramble away from him and get to her feet, shielding Ramy behind her.

The brave moved toward them as she backed herself and Ramy away slowly.

"The boy!" He pointed at Ramy. "Your son?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation, surprised that he spoke English.

He moved like a panther and when he was directly in front of her, he reached around her and grabbed for Ramy. "He will make a fine brave."

She slapped his hand away and screamed, "No! Run Ramy, run!" then threw herself at the brave, entangling them both within her flailing arms and flying hair.

Ramy stood as though hypnotized.

"Go!" she yelled again.

This time Ramy didn't wait but turned and sped off, leaving a high trail of dust in his wake.

The brave shoved her hard to the ground and started after the boy. She scrambled along the ground and grabbed his leg but he kicked her harshly away.

Ramy glanced back and saw them long enough to see that she'd tried to stop the brave giving him a chance to escape. He knew this part of the land well, it had been his home all his life, and was soon gone.

The brave stalked back to Jade who was trying to get to her feet. He yanked her the rest of the way up by her hair.

"You shall take the boy's place and you will wish that it had been him that I had taken," he hissed at her.

He pulled her with him to where his horse was tethered. Snatching a leather thong that hung near his rifle, he bound her wrists. The bonds were so tight that little beads of blood immediately began to trickle through the pores of her skin. Picking her up roughly, he straddled her across the horse and with one swift movement was up behind her and off he galloped into the dense forest, then out onto the wide plain and toward the Platte.

Jade bit her lip to keep from crying out. She was so frightened that she thought she was going to faint. With the slight wind against them and the speed with which they were traveling, her hair was constantly whipping around in his face. After several moments, she heard him grunt, then stop so suddenly that she could feel him bump into her. He slid off the horse, dragging her with him. She lost her balance and fell to the ground. With lightning speed, he unsheathed his hunting knife and knelt over her.

Jade shut her eyes tightly. She tried to summon up the images of Cole and Ramy. If this was to be her last moment then she wanted to die thinking of them. The brave turned her roughly over onto her stomach and straddled her.

"No!" she screamed sure that he was going to rape her. She struggled fiercely to get up but he only laughed and slammed her facedown once more.

She felt him grab a handful of her hair and wind it around his hand then begin hacking at it, pulling at her scalp until she screamed in pain. It seemed like forever before he stopped the sawing motions of the knife. When he was through, her hair was in uneven lengths just below her shoulders.

Snatching her up once again by the leather strap he sat her back astride his horse. He kicked at the horse's haunches and the beast took off like the wind while tears of fright flowed down Jade's dirt-streaked face.

* * * * *

Ramy was out of breath as he ran into the yard.

"Pa! Pa!"

Kyle leaped from the horse he had finally managed to bring to a canter and ran toward the hysterical boy. Cole ran out of the barn just as Kyle caught the boy as he fell into an exhausted heap, his face streaked with tears and dirt.

"He's...he's got Jade."

"Who?" Cole asked with his face hardening.

"An injun, Pa, he was at the river and he... He just took her."

Kyle had run to the well and returned with a ladle of cool water, forcing it to the boy's trembling lips.

"He was gonna take me but she wouldn't let him, Pa, she told me to run," he said after taking a huge gulp.

Cole's face turned as dark as a storm cloud as he strode into the house and returned moments later, strapping on his six-gun and carrying his loaded Winchester under one arm.

Kyle had already saddled the horses and was leading them to him. "I'm going with you."

"You stay with Ramy. I'll get her back."

A retort died on Kyle's lips. Whatever secrets in the inner reaches of his heart and mind that he harbored for her, died as he watched Cole gallop rapidly away.

"Come on little guy, let's get you cleaned up."

* * * * *

Cole was a man of the mountains like his father before him, and tracking was effortless for him. He followed the trail easily, almost too easily, as though the brave *wanted* to be followed.

It wasn't until Cole came upon the discarded hair that he became concerned. He followed the trail for a mile or so more through the forest, then came upon them at the southern ridge near the mountain pass at a narrow stream bed.

Jade was sitting on the ground near the edge, her dress wet and torn. The brave was kneeling a few feet away drinking water next to his sweat-lathered horse.

Jade looked up and saw her husband but didn't utter a word as Cole dismounted.

The brave didn't stop drinking.

"You have taken my woman. I want her back."

The brave stood up and sneered at him. "You will fight for her?" It was a confident question.

Cole looked at Jade as she sat on the ground her chest heaving with exhaustion.

"I will fight."

"If you win, she is yours. If I win I will have her—and your scalp," the brave said with cool arrogance.

Cole loosed his gun belt and removed his shirt. His bronze muscles rippled and bunched in the waning sun.

Jade had seen Cole like this on other occasions but his size and musculature was no less amazing each and every time. The brave was no slouch. He was a little shorter and thinner perhaps but appeared equally as strong.

The two men prowled around each other like stalking elks, their eyes locked in a strategic mental battle. Then suddenly they were at each other, punching and kicking. Blood spilled from the brave's lip as Cole's fist connected with it. Angered by the sight of his own blood, the brave flew at Cole and tried to punch him and missed. Seeing that this enemy was a lot more formidable than he'd first anticipated, the Native American drew his knife and crouched into a wide-legged stance with a sinister grin on his face.

He lunged at Cole who faked to the left and then to the right, as the brave struck out with lightning quick movements. He lunged again, this time slicing Cole's arm. Blood spurted out and Jade leaped up and started toward him.

"Stay there!" her husband yelled without looking at her.

In a surprise turn of events, Cole knocked the knife from the brave's fist, all of them watching as it slid a few feet away.

The two men both ran to recover it but Cole was quicker.

Grabbing the knife, he kicked the brave's legs out from under him in one motion and sent him sprawling on his back. In a quick, agile move Cole was astride him, the deadly blade locked at his throat, pushing it until the pressure caused a small indent.

Jade ran forward and laid her hand gently on his strong arm.

"No, Cole! Please don't kill him. Don't kill on account of me."

Cole moved the knife closer to the man's throat. A pinprick of blood appeared as he pressed it harder.

"Please don't do this," she whispered. Her hand was cool on his hot, sweating flesh.

He turned his gaze slowly, up into her tired, smudged, tear-stained face. After a long tense moment he tossed the knife into the streambed and moved off the brave.

"I won't kill you."

"I would have killed you!" the Native American spat in disgust.

Rising, Cole helped Jade to her feet and guided her to his horse. Scooping her up, he settled her sidesaddle, then climbed deftly up behind her. Cole clicked at the horse and turned him toward home. He heard the brave call out to him.

"McCayne!"

Cole stopped and turned the horse, not surprised that the brave knew him by name.

"Nakoa will know of this."

With his arms tightly around her, Cole took the reins and jerked the horse back around and started for home.

"You should have let me kill him," he said to the back of her neck.

When they reached home, she slid from the horse as Ramy ran to her, hugging her tightly around her waist, his face filled with relief and joy.

"Jade! Jade! You're all right."

She looked over at Kyle who moved his hat back on his head and wiped his brow and nodded. He too was glad she was unharmed.

She kissed the top of the boy's head, as he looked up at her. "Aw Jade, your hair. He cut your hair."

She felt back to where it used to reach and found a few long isolated strands. "It will grow again, Ramy."

"And look at your wrists," the boy said taking them in his hands. "If only you had let me stay, I wouldn't have let him hurt ya Jade, honest."

She hugged him again tightly. "I'm all right little darling."

Cole dismounted and was handing the reins to Kyle. Jade saw him wince and clutch his bleeding arm.

"Ramy get me some water and find some bandages. Come inside, Cole, and I'll fix that arm," she said.

"Kyle can do it, you best see to yourself." He nodded at her torn bodice.

She followed his eyes, which were trained on her nearly exposed breast, where her dress had been torn during her scuffle with the brave. Kyle turned quickly away to save her from further embarrassment. Covering herself with both arms, her cheeks burning, she turned and hurried into the house.

After unsaddling the horse and letting him loose in the large corral, Kyle sat opposite Cole in the kitchen tending his wound.

"Sioux?" Kyle asked as he wrapped the clean bandage around his friend's arm.

"From Nakoa's own band, I'm sure of it."

"He was probably a scout sent to spy on you."

"I think you're probably right."

"He means to kill you."

"He's had his chance at any time."

"The time wasn't right. You know how Nakoa's mind works, after all he's..." He stopped short just as Jade walked into the room, cutting off his unfinished statement

She took the cloth off her still damp head and looked at them.

"I'm afraid one of you will have to trim my hair so that at least it's even." She held out pair of shears.

Cole looked at Kyle, who gestured to him.

"Whoa! Not me partner. I'm no good at cutting hair," Kyle said getting up, pushing both hands up and in front of her to ward off the shears that were being offered.

Jade handed them to Cole, then sat down in Kyle's vacated seat.

With a furrowed brow he stood behind her and smoothed the ragged, shorn locks with his hand and began to trim them.

"I always said this hair would get you into trouble," he muttered as he snipped the uneven strands.

When he finished and handed her the shears, her hair was just below her shoulders.

Quite becoming he thought. He allowed his fingers to touch her wavy tresses lightly.

She felt his lingering fingers and got up quickly.

Perhaps it was the way he spoke that made her turn and look back at him. His eyes seemed a little brighter and his face just a little more relaxed.

"I think I'd better get supper started," she said trying to ward off the peculiar feeling in her belly.

Cole knew her capture had been a harrowing experience and wanted to tell her that maybe she should get some rest, that they could see to their own supper but he somehow couldn't offer the comfort he knew she needed. He just let her go.

* * * * *

The fire in the lodge burned low and cast dancing shadows on the tanned, hide walls. The summer months didn't warrant a large fire but one was always needed in order to counsel with the spirits.

"Are you sure it was he?" a deep voice asked from the shadows.

"I am sure, Nakoa, there was no mistake."

"And the woman?"

"She risked her life to protect the boy."

"This woman, what was she like?"

"A dark vision and full of spirit. A witch with devil eyes and hair so long that it had to be cut," the brave said with apprehension.

"Her hair?"

"It hindered our flight, so I cut it."

Nakoa's lips tightened with annoyance but he said nothing.

"Was there nothing more?"

"I believe her to be...like you. Two different spirits living in one skin," the brave continued cautiously.

The statement was ignored. A moment later a smile crept up the corners of Nakoa's mouth.

"My revenge!" he said as he stared into the fire, "I have finally found it."

"Then we will raid and burn his house?" the brave asked with exuberance.

“We will raid. We will leave his house – and the boy – but I will take his woman.”

The other brave shrugged, thinking that the boy would be the better prize.

“My taking her will force him to come to me to get her back.”

“Shall this be the final confrontation?” the brave asked.

“Final!” Nakoa spat.

Chapter Eleven

Something seemed different about her husband. Jade caught him staring at her strangely and every so often she noticed he found reasons to touch her lightly at her waist, or her hair.

Although she was unnerved by the way he was always suddenly behind or beside her, or with his arm touching hers, it was hard to hide the pleasure she felt.

A week later, she and Kyle sat in the parlor enjoying what was left of the warm summer evening. Ramy had already been long gone to bed and Cole had gone out to check on one of the young ponies that had gone lame.

Kyle stared into the fire much like Cole did each night, whistling one of the tunes she recognized from the fiesta. With only the ticking of the clock interrupting the silence, Jade wondered what each of them could be thinking when they stared into the dancing flames.

She pulled the needle through the pillowcase she was embroidering for Maria, Don Miguel's wife, as a holiday gift.

"Who is Nakoa?" she asked not looking up from her work.

Surprised, Kyle looked over at her. After a moment's hesitation he spoke. "Why he's the gol-dernest meanest..."

She cut off his intended humorous dismissal of her question.

"I know what an awestruck boy would say, I'm asking *you* who he is and what has he to do with Cole?"

"What's what got to do with me?" Cole asked entering the room.

"I-I was just asking about Nakoa," she stammered knowing it was best to tell the truth since she was positive he'd heard the question anyway.

Cole threw Kyle a hard look, then dragged his eyes back to his wife. "Haven't you had enough of Native Americans, Jade?"

"I was only asking..."

"Well don't ask! Why don't you just go to bed now."

Angrily, she stuffed her needlework into the cloth bag at her feet. "Well whoever he is, he's not the only gol-dernest meanest..." She couldn't finish but looked at Kyle apologetically then stomped from the room.

"What the hell was that all about?" Cole asked.

"Like she said, she was asking about Nakoa," Kyle answered smoothly.

"And what did you tell her?"

"Nuthin'. I figured it was your place and you'd tell her when you were ready."

"There's nothing to tell," Cole said irritably.

* * * * *

Jade was unsure of how, or when it had started but she noticed that Cole hardly took his eyes from her now. He watched her when she fixed meals and when she worked in the small garden along the side of the house. In the evenings he contemplated her more and the fire less than he'd done in the past. When she dared to look back at him, his gaze was almost shameful and it embarrassed her.

Kyle too, sensed the changes and found reasons to be away from the ranch as much as possible – away from the two of them.

One evening in the parlor after Kyle had gone out for a night on the town, Jade sat sewing and was having a difficult time concentrating on the stitches because she could feel her husband's brooding eyes on her.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" she hissed at him, pricking her finger with the needle in her anger.

She watched as he dragged his eyes lazily from her and refocused his attention straight ahead.

It came screaming into her brain in a moment. *He wants me. He wants me as a man wants a woman.* She could see the set of his jaw and that damned twitch that gave away the mental intent he was trying to conceal without success.

The air that was far too charged with unspoken emotion and his confounded silence was too much for her. She couldn't sit there a minute longer. "I'm going to bed."

After she'd left he chewed on the stem of wild wheat reed. *Exactly where you should be, only in mine,* he thought as a familiar heat raced through him.

Jade lay in her bed, waiting, shivering. Every sound she heard, she thought was him making his way to her. But he didn't come to her that night nor the next. In her heart she knew it was only a matter of time, she could feel it.

* * * * *

Several weeks later, when the sky held the promise of a late summer shower, Jade couldn't get the feeling of trepidation out of her system.

The brooding thoughts however disappeared as an animated Ramy came bursting into the kitchen, fishing pole in hand. She gazed at him fondly. To think, this small boy was the only thing in her life that could bring such joy to her heart and keep a warm smile on her face. She wished she could find out what the barrier was that stood between him and his father and wondered what could have happened to prevent Cole from showing his love for his son the way he should. It had something to do with Nakoa of that she was sure.

The boy looked at her sheepishly. "I'm going to have to take some of those honey cookies, Jade. I might get mighty hungry down by the stream ya know."

She rocked back and forth on her heels. "Oh? And a sandwich won't do?"

"Well yeah, but cookies are easier to carry," he said stuffing one in his mouth and wrapping several others in a red gingham cloth. "You just wait and see, I'm gonna catch the biggest, best fish in the whole river," he said backing away toward the door. He was almost through it when he backed right into his father.

Ramy looked up at him trying to discern his mood.

Cole stared down at the boy with mock sternness, then his face broke into a lopsided grin, something Ramy only vaguely remembered him ever doing.

"Looks like you're heading for the river son."

Son! Had he actually called him son?

"I uh... I thought I'd catch our supper for tonight Pa, Jade must get awful tired of cooking beef and chicken all the time," he said glancing over at her.

They walked outside together. Jade following behind and stopping on the porch to retrieve the basket of wildflowers she'd picked earlier.

"I suppose we all get a little tired of it. And maybe you'd better catch some extra, especially with the way you and Kyle eat."

Cole was speaking to Ramy but his eyes were fixed on Jade's hips as he watched her walk back inside.

"I will, Pa," Ramy said happily.

"You go on now," he said, ruffling his son's hair absentmindedly as he moved purposefully toward the door.

Cole stood in the doorway of the kitchen and watched her arranging the flowers in a vase. The tingling sensation that crept up his spine unnerved him, and the sight of her brought on an emotional hunger so strong, it was all he could do just stand there.

Without turning, Jade felt the heat of his eyes and her hands became clammy and the room was suddenly overwhelmingly stifling. She summoned the courage to look at him. She watched as his eyes traveled over the length of her, leisurely halting in intimate places that made her feel as though she were standing before him naked.

"I-I picked these for the table. The flowers are so beautiful this time of year aren't they?" She tried to control the quivering in her voice.

* * * * *

Ramy whistled as he skipped passed the corral where Kyle was working with a tethered stallion.

"Whoa there partner! Looks like you're aiming to do some right serious fishin'."

"Sure am. Gonna catch our dinner for tonight."

"It's a good day for it. I bet those ole fish'll be jumpin' right out of the river and laying on the ground waiting for you to just scoop 'em up."

"Come on Kyle you know they ain't doing that," the boy laughed.

"Well in that case I hope you got that special lure I brought you, cause like I said, it's guaranteed to catch all the fish we can eat."

"The lure! I knew I forgot something," Ramy said with sparkling eyes.

"Ya know what? I just might join ya. Fishin' sounds like a pretty good idea."

"I already got some of Jade's cookies, they're her best."

He put his arm around the boy's shoulders as they turned and walked back to the house.

"If it's the ones with the honey in 'em, I agree they're mighty tasty."

"You like Jade don'tcha Kyle?"

The man dropped his hand from the boy's shoulder and stuffed them in his pockets.

"Your pa's wife is a mighty fine woman. Now let's go find that lure."

* * * * *

Cole was still watching her as she poured the coffee he'd asked for. Her hand was shaking so hard he was afraid she was going to spill the hot liquid.

Setting the kettle back on the stove, she went to the sink and began to wash the vegetables that she had intended to stew for the evening supper—just in case there were no fish.

The scraping sound of his chair made her heart race but she willed herself to remain calm as she continued her chore. She sensed, rather than saw him as he moved up behind her. The tiny hairs at the back of her neck rose up one by one and a chilly tingle raced along both her arms. She closed her eyes for a moment, bracing herself and summoning courage, then turned to face him.

He was close. So close in fact, that had she taken a deeper breath, her breasts would have touched his broad chest.

His appraising eyes roved over her as though laying claim to what his lips couldn't say.

"No," was all she could manage to whisper.

"You're my wife. It's my right." He touched a wayward strand of her hair.

"Your right?" she said moving away from him. "You wanted me here to take care of Ramy and I've done that. There was to be nothing more, you said."

"That was true once." *God! she was so beautiful with her deep green flashing eyes and full sensuous lips. Didn't she realize that they were just begging to be kissed?*

"You've never treated me like a wife. I've done everything you asked. I've kept your house and taken care of Ramy. Why should I give in to your base needs when you yourself said there was nothing you needed from me?"

He shoved his large thick hands into his front pockets. "There comes a time when a man needs the warmth and comfort of his woman."

"Oh really? I didn't think you needed anything except work. That seems to be all you ever want to do. It's all you want *any* of us to do," she said.

"Well now I want more."

"And what about what I want? I've never known a man in this way. How am supposed to feel if all it does is satisfy your immediate manly stress? You can relieve that with Carlita," she spat out the tavern girl's name.

Cole's brow knitted. "Look, Jade, I know this won't be easy for you but it's just how things are."

She looked at him sadly and reached around and untied her cover apron. "Very well, then I am at your service," she said and started toward the door to his bedroom.

He reached out and pulled her to him, crushing his lips to hers. Just as he knew they'd be, they were soft and luscious.

"No, Jade, I don't want you to come to me like a lamb to slaughter. There's something more inside me—I just can't..."

She turned her face up to his, searching for one small indication that his feelings for her were more than just this moment of need. She could see he was fighting against something but what? The closeness of his body had set her on fire. She could feel the rock hardness of him against her thigh and it brought forth a warmth of her own. She wanted him, she'd always wanted him, but unlike him, she was too shy and reserved to give him the least inkling. But now things were different. She was afraid, yes. She wished things could change between them in a way that she could make him see that they could have a good life together but if this is was the way it was to be, then she would live with it.

"Cole."

She spoke his name like a breathy caress and he couldn't hold still a second longer.

When his tongue pressed against her lips, opening them slightly, he delighted in the sweetness of her warm mouth. It exhilarated him to find that she was responding to him as he felt her hands as they moved up his back.

Suddenly she pressed her mouth harder against his, reaching up to run her small fingers through his hair. Almost losing their balance, he brushed against the table causing the vase of carefully picked flowers to crash to the floor. Breathlessly she pulled her mouth away from his and looked down at water soaking into the wood planks.

"Maybe I'd better..."

"Leave it," he said cutting her off then picked her up in his arms and carried her to his room.

Pent-up desires flooded through him. A heat unlike anything he'd felt in a long time threatened to consume him to his soul. Visions of another face, another time assailed him but he shook it off, chasing it back to the far recesses of his mind.

He set her down gently, standing tall and ominous between her and the door.

"I need you to get undressed."

Her eyes dropped to the floor but she didn't move.

His mouth ached to kiss her again but he wanted her naked when he did it. He wanted to feel the silky warmth of her body underneath him. He needed it.

He reached out and began to undo the buttons on her dress.

"I know you aren't used to me like this, Jade. But I'll go easy." He wasn't sure if he could. She was driving him crazy just looking at her.

Slowly, Cole undid the waist sash and pushed the dress off her shoulders and it slid easily down her curvaceous frame. The rise of her breasts nearly took his breath away and made him ache with desire all over. Even in the dimness of the room he could see how the tawny color of her skin showed through the white almost translucent, muslin chemise. Her skin was dark and smoky, giving indisputable credence to a heritage that made her hated among the people who thought themselves better than she.

He heard her rapid breathing and a small snuffle he began to undress keeping his eyes riveted to her face, lest he become excited beyond control if he gazed at her body.

Jade kept her gaze trained on his strong, hairy legs. Slowly, her eyes moved upward and stared at his manhood in perfect ready poise.

Gently, he placed his hand under her chin and turned her face up to look in his eyes. "This doesn't have to be bad, Jade."

He removed her chemise, letting it drop to her feet beside the discarded dress. She stood before him, dark, beautiful and still trying to hide behind stubborn resentment.

He kissed her gently, pressing his body closer to hers, moving her back, then laid her on the bed.

Her eyes were glistening with the awe of what was about to happen. "I want this, Cole, but not with secrets between us," she said pleadingly.

But he didn't want to think about that, or anything except kissing her, hoping he could make her forget everything except this moment. His lips wandered over her body as he moved her hands high above her head. His mouth found her breast and captured the soft, dark nipple. His tongue worked it into a hard nub that made her shiver, but not with cold.

She gasped as she felt the urgency of his lust as it pressed against her, hard, long and seeking.

Shutting her eyes she whispered softly, "Don't hurt me."

He kissed her damp closed lids. "Never again after this, I promise," he said gently, thinking of her virginal state.

Ramy and Kyle entered the house together laughing. The smile slid from their faces as soon as they saw the disheveled condition of the kitchen. A muffled agonized moan emanated from behind the closed door of Cole's room, then a brief anguished wail and Cole's barely audible voice trying to calm his wife's soft sobs.

Ramy started toward his father's closed bedroom door but Kyle grabbed him and pulled him roughly back outside, urging the boy away from the house.

Ramy stared up at him questioningly. "But he was hurting her, you heard. Why didn't you do something?" Ramy yelled up at him, trying to match the man's long, angry strides.

"There's nuthin' I *can* do." His jaw was hard set and his eyes had lost their usual merry twinkle.

"But why?" Ramy pressed on.

"Because! She's *his* wife, not mine!" Kyle shouted angrily and stalked away, his long legs leaving Ramy to lag behind.

Jade lay stiffly under the man who was her husband. A man who for a whole year had made no attempt at consummating their marriage, a man who seemed to show nothing but indifference to everything any of them tried to do for him. Yet he was a man she feared she was beginning to love even if she didn't fully understand why.

Her mind went back to the day of her abduction and how he had held her with his arms resting under her breasts, strong and protective. She should have known then that he wanted her, for surely long before that her feelings for him had begun to burn within her. But they had all but died when she heard him tell Kyle that the only reason she was there was to take care of his son.

Cole was struggling not to satiate his lust as he stared down at the woman under him. The sight of her beautiful body, with its soft curves was almost too much for any man to bear, let alone one who'd hadn't tasted real love in years.

Cole kissed the hollow of her neck gently. His hands still held her now clenched fists above her head as his lips again made their way down to tease her breasts. Everything inside him urged him to move on, to take her quickly but the tawny proud nipples beckoned him for still more kisses, forcing his ardor to recede so as to enjoy the pleasure. Her body was rigid but even in its stiffness she was beautiful, almost wanton with her hair spread out around her head, her chest rising and falling and her flat belly invitingly smooth.

"It'll be all right, Jade, don't fight this, don't resist me."

With every kiss his body pressed harder onto her. She could feel the rigidity of his male length and his strong hard legs rubbing against hers. He began to urge them apart with his knee. Every place he touched her felt like a searing hot poker. She was

engulfed in a blazing hot fire and she wanted to offer herself to him but everything was all mixed up with the way he'd been ignoring her and his hateful words.

"Please Cole I..." she breathed up at him. But her protestations sounded unconvincing even to her. Of course she wanted him. Her heart had been trying to tell her all along. Now she needed to tell him.

"I'm your wife Cole and I'm new at this but I want you. I want you so much." She reached up and touched his face gently.

Her green eyes were glistening, the deep gold specks in them sparkled like wet gems and he almost stopped. When he'd started this, he had wanted to do it quickly. He wanted to satisfy a craving for her that had been building in him for months. He'd been trying to fight it but she was his wife and making love went along with marriage. It would have been so much better if she had been more agreeable but he knew that she had little or no experience in such matters and while it made the present situation uncomfortable, there was no way he could stop himself.

"It will be all right. I swear," he said taking hold of her hips he positioned himself between her legs.

Instantly her hands flew to his chest, then to his biceps, holding on tightly, accepting this new and passionate embrace. She nodded once, hoping that he understood that she was ready for his love.

He wanted her so badly. The urgent maleness of him urged him to push himself inside her, hurriedly, to shove through her innocent essence but was halted momentarily by the anguished fright in her eyes. Then the time had come and he could hold no longer.

Easing into her he halted a moment to allow her body to adjust to the width of him. She whimpered pitifully and he captured her mouth at the same moment, quelling her moan of pain, moving deeper until he settled into the depths of her soft core.

It was all he could do to remain gentle. The beauty of her face accompanied with the utterly soft, alluring feel of her body and the heady sound of her whimpers made him want to draw back and plunge into her, to make her feel everything he knew she needed to feel. Everything he wanted so desperately to feel again.

As he stroked inside her warmth, past visions of her assailed him. The first time he saw her at the inn. Then again when she emerged from the water like a seductive nymph and that last time when he had to fight to get her back, the images melded together to form this one lovely woman.

He was not unaware of her discomfort but he was unable to loose himself from the bonds of his passion. Bonds that so readily consumed him that it confused the reasoning of his desire for this dark beauty.

Cole's actions increased, he knew he was close to releasing. His body rose to its final crescendo and the flow of his long held desires poured forth, hot and thick.

He knew she couldn't help but feel the creamy splash of his life force.

At that very moment a name escaped his lips but it was not her name. He saw her lips tremble as she glared up at him.

"Jade, my name is Jade," she said through clenched teeth.

With blood lust pounding in his ears, her voice seemed muffled to him as he held her tightly then let go the last of his seed, a piteous groan escaping his lips almost as though it was she who was hurting him.

Spent and with his heart beating rapidly, he collapsed atop her trying to recapture the strength her tantalizing body had stolen from him.

Slowly, he raised his head to look at her only to find her face turned away from him, her lips trembling. She looked so small and vulnerable. He wanted to say something to comfort her but found it difficult to formulate the words. He slid away from her but still encased her small waist within his arm as the specter of sleep that comes of satisfaction began to claim him. He felt her body trembling and knew she was crying.

"It won't be like this again. Next time it will be better, I promise," he mumbled, then nuzzled into the thickness of her hair and neck and slipped into sleep.

Jade lay next to him, the heat of his body searing her own aching one. *There will never be a next time. I'll just go back to being the workhorse you bought!*

Sleep wouldn't come to her, so she stayed quietly until she heard him breathing evenly in a deep satisfied sleep. Still skin to skin with him, her mind went back to moments before when the pain she felt began to leave her and was replaced with something else—something new and not entirely unpleasant. The memory of his hot breath against her neck as he circled inside her brought on another flash of pleasure in her groin. *What's happening to me?*

She was his wife and he had claimed the right to make her a woman and now lover. The memory of him inside her was satisfying, right up until he had said a name close to her ear. *Enez.*

Jade eased herself from under his heavy arm and slipped away, hurrying to the water closet where she held a cloth to her mouth to stifle her cries of embarrassment and confusion.

The sun was low in the sky and she had returned to her room, dressed, brushed her hair and twisted it into a tight chignon at the back of her neck, then donned her cover apron and went to the kitchen. It was more than a quarter of an hour later before she heard Cole moving around in his room.

Chapter Twelve

It was almost dusk when Kyle and Ramy returned.

Of course the fish bucket was empty. Neither had felt like fishing after the unfortunate discovery earlier.

Dinner was a light repast, tense and quiet with only the sound of utensils hitting the plates as they consumed the meager meal. Cole cleared his throat, breaking the deafening silence.

"It's time you had your old room back Kyle," Cole said.

The ranch hand picked at the food on his plate. "I think I'll just stay on in the tack-house, if it's all the same to you," he said tersely.

"Where's Jade gonna sleep?" Ramy asked with a hateful glance at his father.

There was a long pause. "She'll be sleeping my room from now on, son."

"I'll bet it wasn't none of her idea," Ramy said glowering at his father.

"That's enough, you be still now, boy," Cole scolded.

"I won't be still, I won't! I heard you this afternoon and Kyle heard too. You...you were hurting her, she was crying, we heard it didn't we, Kyle?" He looked at their family friend for support but the tight-lipped man could only look away.

Tears lay at the rims of the boy's eyes, his lips trembling with confused frustration.

Jade lowered her face, embarrassed that the little boy had to hear what went on that afternoon.

Ramy reached over and touched her hand. "Are you hurt bad, Jade?" he asked innocently.

Words eluded her. She didn't know how to explain this thing to him. All she could do was offer a weak smile and shake her head.

"It's all right, Ramy," she reassured him and threw Cole a brave look. The last thing she wanted to do was alienate the two of them further.

"This has nothing to do with you, Ramy," Cole's voice was low and controlled but with an irritated edge.

"Nuthin' ever has anything to do with me. You're all the time treating me like I don't exist. It wasn't until *she* came that you treated me any kind of way at all." The boy stood up and was crying openly now. "You think I don't know nuthin' but I know a lot. I know about you and my mother. I know about Nakoa too and I know you hurt Jade this afternoon and I hate you! I hate you!" he shouted.

Cole slammed his hand on the table and stood up angrily. Kyle leapt to his feet and placed himself between Cole and Ramy.

The boy wiped away his tears, then turned and ran outside, the words, *I hate you* echoing behind him.

"Dammit! Stay out of this, Kyle." Cole said, his body set for a fight.

"He's just a boy, Cole! He doesn't understand about you and..." he faltered, "about this afternoon. Go after him. He's old enough to know how things are now," Kyle said gritting his teeth to control his own anger.

Cole looked at Jade who stared at him with a mixture of sadness, embarrassment and anger.

"I'll go," she said getting up from the table.

Some of the puff left his chest. Cole knew his friend was right. Things had been different since she'd come to live with them. Today had only complicated an already tense situation between him and his son. Kyle was right. Ramy didn't understand what had happened earlier. His treatment of the boy's confusion was inexcusable. If he couldn't be the right kind of father, then it was time for him to at least try to be one.

Cole looked from one to the other. There was nothing he could say to them so he went to go find his son.

Outside, he took a deep breath and glanced back at the house. *Damn! I sure managed to really mess things up this time.*

He knew where his son had gone. It was where he always went when he was upset.

The atmosphere remained stiff in the kitchen where only Kyle and Jade remained. Her nerves on edge, and with trembling hands she gathered the plates and cups and was suddenly overwhelmed with sobs. She slammed them all back down on the table, gripping the sides of the wood until her knuckles were white.

Kyle went to her. "It's going to be all right. He'll explain things to Ramy in a way he can understand."

"What about me? Will he explain it to me in a way I can understand? Will he tell me why he had to let things happen this way?"

Kyle rubbed his chin with the back of his hand.

"I can't say, Jade." He couldn't stand the pain in her eyes and looked away.

"I wish he never brought me here," she said bitterly.

"Don't say that. I know things might be hard for you but your being here changed things."

"What, Kyle? What did it change? He now has another person working for him only this one provides more gratifying duties now as well." Her face was hot with embarrassed distress.

"It may not seem clear to you right now, Jade, but I can tell you this was a cold, hard and almost dead place until you came along. *He* was dead inside until you came."

Her eyes flashed up at him and she sneered through her tears.

"I didn't just *come* along Kyle. He brought me here, or should I say *bought* me, because that's exactly what he did. He paid for me, like a cow or one of his prize stallions." Kyle saw her eyes glinting with green and gold fire and her mouth was too harsh a line for her small face. He didn't know what to say to her and she didn't give him that chance.

"Well if that's what he wants, then he will have to pay. He will have to pay every time he treats me that way. He'll have to pay me like one of Soolie's girls." She spat out the words, remembering the tavern wenches that the shop owner had spoken of during her first trip into town.

Kyle took her by the shoulder and led her to a chair and sat her down, then pulled one up and sat opposite her.

"Now you listen to me." His voice had taken on the same tone that Cole's did when he meant business. She raised her head and glared at him.

"I'm sorry if things weren't exactly right for you today. I'm more sorry that Ramy and me walked in at the wrong time. But you can't talk that way. I know you've been through a lot and it hasn't exactly been a picnic for you. But they need you. They need you more than even they know and even if it looks like Cole can't see it, I see it. I know him. He's difficult and unyielding but he needs you more than money, the horses or this ranch."

"Cole doesn't need anybody," she said bitterly.

"Most of us men are stubborn and hardheaded. Sometimes it takes something or someone to come into our lives to make us understand and accept things." His voice became softer. "I've seen a change in him, one I thought I'd never see again and it's because of you, Jade."

She looked into his eyes and saw a resolute sadness there. Like something he was losing or had already lost.

"Tell me what happened, Kyle? What turned him to such bitterness?"

Kyle dropped his head. There was no way he could tell her about Cole, it wasn't his place.

"It's not something we talk about, Jade. But I know someday he'll tell you. Someday, you'll have to know everything."

She knew she wouldn't be able to get any more out of him and her shoulders drooped dejectedly.

"I guess I'd better get things cleaned up here," she said looking at the mess of dishes.

Satisfied that he'd at least brought some semblance of calm to the situation, Kyle stood up and walked to the door. "Tell Cole I'll be ready at first light to go out on the north ridge."

"Why don't you tell him? I'm sure he'll be in any minute."

"Because tonight," Kyle said with a hard set to his jaw, "I'm going to town and I'm gettin' drunk." He grabbed his hat from the hook by the door and left abruptly.

* * * * *

As he knew he would, Cole found Ramy in the barn up in the loft crying softly in the newly pitched hay. He climbed up and stood over the distraught boy, unsure of what his next move should be because it had been so long since he had shown tenderness. Lowering himself, he picked up the boy and cradled him close. Ramy punched weakly at him. "Leave me alone, I hate you."

"Hush boy. Hush now!" he soothed him, squeezing him until the little boy was spent and finally allowed his small arms to encircle his father's neck.

"Ramy...son, I want to explain about Jade and me this afternoon."

"No! Don't!" he cried.

"Listen to me son." This wasn't going to be easy.

Ramy didn't want to hear and in reality he didn't want to talk about it. *Ever!*

"What happened this afternoon, well...it was bound to happen. Jade is my wife and it's my right as her husband to..." He hesitated, trying to find the right words. "To be with her the way man is with a woman."

"She was crying, we heard," Ramy said with an anguished sob.

"I know, son. It should have gone better for her and I explained everything as best I could to her. I'm hoping she understands, the way you will when you're older."

The boy's sobbing was beginning to quiet.

"It'll never be like that again Ramy. Not ever I promise."

Still not wanting to hear, Ramy buried his head deeper into his father's hard chest.

"I like her, Pa. I really like her."

"I know you do, son. I know."

Cole held him and rocked him a long time until the boy fell into a fitful sleep. Not since Ramy was an infant had he done this and when he brushed away a lock of the boy's dark, hair he felt a tug in his heart that reminded him of how it was when he'd first witnessed his son's birth.

Placing a kiss on the boy's forehead, he gently lifted and carried him down the ladder and into the house.

Jade sat at the table waiting, coming to her feet when he entered carrying Ramy.

"Is he all right?" her voice was filled with concern.

"He's asleep," he said then carried the boy into his room.

* * * * *

Jade waited in the parlor staring dully at the dying embers as their smoldering edges cast an eerie glow around the room.

It was time to know the truth. She needed answers and now that he had fully claimed her, it was her right to know about his past.

Cole entered the room and sat heavily, running his hands through his hair off his forehead.

Jade glanced over at him. If she was ever going to know about him, then now was the time to ask.

"What did Ramy mean when he said he knew all about you and his mother and Nakoa, what does *he* have to do with you?"

Inside, Cole was weary to the bone. It was the last thing he had expected her to ask and the very last thing in the world he wanted to talk about. His hands gripped the arms of the chair. "He didn't mean anything."

"I think that after today there should be no other barriers between us. I have a right to know."

"What happened today has nothing to do with what's gone on in the past. So just let it be, Jade."

She stared at him resolutely. *What could he do to her that he hadn't already done?*

"How did Ramy's mother die?" she persisted.

His head shot around, his eyes boring into her.

"Who told you that?"

She stared straight back at him but said nothing.

"Kyle!" he spat. "Why the hell didn't he tell you all of it then?" He returned his hard gaze back to the waning fire.

"No! Not Kyle. He's the best friend you ever had if you'd only open your eyes for a minute to see it. He would never betray you. It was Dona Maria—she told me some of it, the rest I'm still trying to piece together."

"She had no right to tell you anything." His brow knitted and his voice grew sullen.

"I wanted to know. I think I deserve to know."

She saw the cloud cross his face and knew she was running the risk of his unbridled anger.

"If and when I decide I want to tell you, I will. Until then I don't want to hear you speak of it—ever. I mean it, Jade."

Her mouth twisted into a sardonic half-grin as she shook her head.

"You're as stubborn as any one of your unbroken horses. You won't let people care about you. That way you don't have to care about anyone."

"Are you deliberately trying to provoke me?" His eyes glinted like black diamonds against the dying fire.

"I'm trying to get you to tell me the truth. The real truth."

"Why? What will knowing do for you, Jade?" His voice was louder and she was afraid he would wake Ramy.

"It just might make me understand why you won't let anyone love you. Not Ramy and not...me."

He was not prepared for that statement. He didn't want her love. He wanted her body and her passion, that was all!

"Don't love me, Jade. If that's what's in your mind get rid of it."

Her expression was sad. Yes that's all she was, a housekeeper and guardian for his son. Someone he could use whenever the urges of his passion took hold of him. What was the use?

"Cole..." she said looking at her hands, "I think I'd much rather sleep in my own room."

"And I want you with me," he said through clenched teeth.

Even if he didn't touch her, he knew that he no longer wanted to sleep without the softness of her body next to him, even if his stubborn heart fought the idea every step of the way.

"It's just too crowded for me, Cole."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"When you were..." she said, biting her lip to try to keep her control, "at the end, you called her."

He looked at her stupidly. "Called who?"

"Enez," she whispered, then turned and walked out of the room.

Cole blew out a long breath. It came back to him now. While he was making love to Jade he had called out the name of his dead wife.

* * * * *

Cole was surly and snappish after that day and Kyle and Ramy were unnaturally quiet. The laughter was gone.

Although the ranch was down in a hidden valley and received a decent breeze in the evenings, the last of the summer days were unbearably hot and made everyone uncomfortable and irritable.

"I'm going into town. We need anything?" Kyle announced one afternoon as slapped the corral dust from his pants.

"She might," Cole said, gesturing to where Jade was sweeping off the porch as he pulled a stallion into the corral, "take her with you."

Kyle took Ramy and Jade to town on two more occasions after that and whenever he did, tongues wagged as to why the hired help was always with the *Missus*.

* * * * *

One searing afternoon after the bread wouldn't rise and the milk had soured, Jade wanted to be out of the stifling cabin.

Leaving the unleavened dough on the table and the milk on the drain she left and began to walk. Deep in thought and not paying any particular attention to where she was going, she went in the opposite direction of the river of her prior abduction.

Soon she found herself in the middle of almost waist-high chaparral and a little further on noticed a copse of trees. She went to the edge of it and found that it was cooler since the denseness of it shielded the harsh rays of the sun.

The tension in her neck began to ease the moment she laid down in the grass, her eyes squinting upward at the high white clouds that seemed pasted against the azure sky. With the scents of nature all around her and the sound of chirping birds and cicadas, she began to relax. After the oppressive morning heat, the coolness and the scent of wildflowers was more soothing than any medicine. Breaking off a thin piece of reedy grass she stripped it and stuck it in her mouth, swiveling it from side to side as she lay back onto her elbow. The ache in her head all but receded and she couldn't help but smile as she watched a purple and black butterfly flit from one wildflower to another.

She turned over and scanned the high dense grass and she saw him. It was Cole striding toward her. The tight line of his lips told her that she was in for trouble.

"I thought I told you never to go off by yourself," Cole said angrily when he approached her.

"I just needed to be alone for awhile."

"Just needed to be alone," he repeated. "What if that brave returned? What if Nakoa himself came along?"

"Look Cole, I'm sorry, I didn't do this to upset you."

"Don't you think I have enough on my hands with the ranch and Ramy without having to run after you every minute?" he said ignoring her apology. He had no idea why he was so angry. It wasn't as though she had gone far. He'd watched her leave and when he saw her go toward the high grass he'd followed. He'd looked at her for some time, trying not to notice how beautiful she was in the sunlight.

She looked up at him, her own eyes glittering with deep green and gold flecks of rising anger. "I said I was sorry."

Cole stared down at her. She was never more beautiful, never more enticing than she was right then, with bits of grass in her hair, her breasts straining against her bodice as she tried to maintain her defiance.

"Being sorry wouldn't have helped you." His eyes roved over her curvaceous form. "Have you any idea what they'd do if they found you here?" His voice had grown husky. "The very least would be to kill you but before that there would be other things and they wouldn't waste time with preliminaries."

He lowered himself down to her and took her by the shoulders.

"All right! I get your point," she said, trying shake free of him.

His snorted a hollow laugh. "You think fighting would help you? They'd be holding you down while the others..." He didn't even want to think about that as he looked at her full lips, or her emblazoned eyes as she glared at him. Everything in his body was fighting to resist the call of his inner passion, which beckoned to him like a seductive siren. *Damn! This woman had no idea the effect she had on him.*

The fierceness left Jade's eyes. It wasn't the blaze of the sun that heated her now. She felt that peculiar fluttering in her stomach and knew it was because his body was so close to hers.

"Cole..." Her voice was a whisper.

His name on her lips was like a signal. The way her mouth curved when she spoke it aroused him to a fever pitch. He pushed forward, pressing his lips hard against hers, quieting the moan that was trying to escape. He felt her hands on his bulging biceps and knew that while she wasn't giving in to him, she wasn't exactly resisting either.

He moved his hand under her skirts, he felt her tense.

"Cole, don't. Not here," she said looking around and trying to dislodge his roving hand. But she could see he didn't hear, or didn't *want* to hear.

Surrounded by nothing but nature, the beauty of her form, was more than he could stand. Fumbling with her skirts, then his own clothes, he moved her legs apart and guided himself into her.

"Oh Cole," she breathed against his neck.

Instantly, the warmth of her enveloped him, sheathing him in a cocoon of sweetness that was enough to make him reach his crest right then and there. He ceased moving within her, giving himself a moment to allow his ardor to fall back.

His heavy body on hers aroused her and she desperately wanted to hold him there but too much had happened, too many harsh words had been spoken and she bit back the passion she was beginning to feel.

Holding her tightly hoping that he was not hurting her this time, he moved heavily inside her. How truly wonderful she felt with the downy softness of her skin against his. She smelled of the high grass they lay in and everything around him was every bit as wonderful as she was. Her soft moan was not from pain but of something warm and wanting. He looked down at her and saw her face thinly sheened with perspiration, her eyes bright, her mouth parted. She was accepting him, she was accepting this. It was what he wanted but a memory crashed through his brain. A face that seem to be fading tearfully away. Incensed at himself for allowing the memory he'd cherished for so long to be tarnished, he forgot his gentleness and allowed lust to dictate his ardor.

He finished quickly then tried to mask his desire for her with recriminations. "And that my girl isn't the half of what they would have done to you, only they would have been less gentle," he said, rising and adjusting his clothes.

She couldn't look at him. She was angry and sad at the same time. Angry with herself for doing the very thing that she knew would send him into a rage and sad because she knew that he felt the only way he could have her was take her and pretend it meant nothing.

Jade got up from the ground and smoothed her dress.

"I never thought it would be like this. I thought..." she faltered momentarily. "I thought things would be different. I thought if I could just show you how good I was with Ramy, how good I could be to you, that it might make a difference. All I've ever been was someone else's *thing*. Taken away from my mother, an orphan at the mission, then indentured to Miles Craven and now you. Only now I'm not just your housekeeper, I'm a receptacle for your passion."

"No! Jade It's not..." He reached for her clumsily trying to find words of explanation.

But she evaded his touch and smiled at him sadly. "You've made it perfectly clear what I am to you – what my position is here, so I guess I'll just have to live with it."

As though the day was sad for her, a cloud rolled lazily from behind the mountains and obscured the sun from her view.

"At least this time, you called out the right name." And she walked slowly back to the cabin, tears glistening on her cheeks. The ache inside her was thick and heavy as the realization that had been in her head and heart for weeks burst forth like flower opening in the sunshine. Somewhere in the middle of everything that had happened, she had fallen in love with her husband. She loved him even though he couldn't or wouldn't love her back.

Cole watched her go, then scrubbed his hand over his face. It was hell fighting these new demons inside him. He wasn't a gentle man, he knew that but something about her was easing the tension and hardness within him and he didn't know how to handle it.

His stubbornness did not allow him to make love to her every night but it drove him nearly to madness to be abed with her in the deep of night when she made soft sleepy sounds and unintentionally curled up against him. He wanted to do nothing else but hold and protect her. But inside, he was ashamed of his needs. He was ashamed because he was allowing this little snip of a girl with her green eyes and thick, dark hair to batter at and tear away the memorial shrine he had built in his heart. Even while he'd thought he never want to be close to another woman, ever again.

Chapter Thirteen

Someone threw a stone at the dog that had been barking relentlessly. Nakoa stood at the river watching the dark water as it rippled and eddied. By any standard, he was an impressive specimen. Gray-eyed, tall and well built, with wide muscular shoulders and narrow hips. Unlike the rest of the tribe, his hair was the color of dark tea and hung straight – with just a hint of a wave – beyond his shoulders.

He peered into the slow moving water wondering what, if anything, the river spirit would reveal to him.

Olathe, willowy and beautiful, hidden by one of the giant trees that lined the edge of the forest not far from the water, stared at Nakoa's broad back.

"What is it, my sister?" Two-Crows stole up beside her and whispered.

"I do not know. For many days Nakoa has had dark thoughts. A blood fever rages in him."

"And *you* cannot quell it?" the brave mused.

She could sense her brother's smile in the darkness.

"It is not one of the flesh. I can do nothing," she sighed softly.

"He lived in the white world a long time and learned many of their ways, perhaps he misses it."

"White world! Bah!" Olathe spat. "What could he have learned from them? All that he is comes from our people – and that which is strong within himself. He is here with us, where he belongs."

"Perhaps. But it must be difficult trying to keep the two spirits struggling inside his skin separate."

"Nakoa will be a great chief. Something so small cannot keep him from doing what is best for us."

"My sister, when Nakoa looks at his reflection as he does now and sees his strange eyes the color of melted silver, I believe the white ghost demon in his blood torments him with harsh memories and during this time he is lost to us all."

"He wants nothing of their world. He has forgotten that life," she hissed quietly. "He will return to me when the time of his inner struggle has passed," Olathe said.

He is a great warrior and someday he will make a fine chief and I shall be his wife, she thought and smiled with self-assurance. "I will leave you to your vigil sister and it is my hope that what you say is true."

Before Two-Crows moved on, he looked at Nakoa once again, silent and unmoving. He knew that the time to strike was near if the conflict was ever to be finished.

* * * * *

Weeks later, things were almost back to where they once were at the McCayne ranch, with quiet meals and hard-working days. Ramy was growing and filling out nicely. The sickness that had ravaged him during the winter was a distant memory and he was a whole other person than he had been when Jade had first arrived. Things had changed a little between him and his father but she knew that any more would take a lot more time. *If only I could find out what he refuses to discuss. If I could only find out more about Ramy's mother and about Nakoa.*

But life is full of surprises and Cole was a prime example of it. They'd all finished eating and Ramy was helping Jade clear the table.

"Mighty fine meal as always," Kyle said and leaned back in his chair after dinner. "Yep mighty fine."

Jade smiled. She liked it when they enjoyed her food and even though he never said it she knew her husband liked just as much.

"Well I guess I'll be turning in. See you all in the morning." Kyle said, rising from the table.

"There's a picnic..." a low voice said.

Everyone stopped moving. Ramy turned with his mouth open and stared at his father.

"On Sunday down near the South Fork River. I thought maybe we'd all go. "

They all stared at him now with looks of total incredulity.

Cole cleared his throat before going on. "I thought it might be nice for us to get away from chores and have a little fun." He tapped on the gingham table cloth nervously. Clearly, he was uncomfortable with this. "Everybody's going to be there. The Serranos and your pal Manuel," he looked over at his son.

The silence was deafening, as he fiddled with his cutlery.

"Well don't all speak at once, do you want to go or not?" he asked sharply.

"We'd love to go Cole. I'll pack a nice picnic basket," Jade said quickly, before he changed his mind.

"Good! It's settled then." He got up and walked to the door, then turned before going through it. "I hear tell there's a baking contest. You should enter your apple bread, I know no one can beat it," he said sheepishly and left.

"Well I be a..." Kyle whistled, staring at the door.

Even Ramy was stunned into silence to have heard a compliment—of sorts—come out of his father's mouth.

Jade was excited and could hardly get through the rest of week just waiting for the weekend.

She got up early on the day of the picnic and prepared the finest apple bread ever, then fried the crispiest chicken, flat batter cakes and stirred up a batch of currant juice. She was proud of her accomplishments and set everything aside then made a light breakfast.

Ramy had been almost too excited to sleep the night before and had to be roused in order to do his morning chores of feeding the livestock, spreading the hay beds and straightening his room.

A little after midmorning, the men had bathed down by the creek bed so that she could use the facilities and were dressed and waiting outside the house swatting away flies and an occasional bee by one o'clock.

Jade was inside patting at escaped strands of hair, which she'd brushed to a high sheen and tied back with several brightly colored pieces of woven cloth, allowing the dark curls to fall gently against her shoulders.

"Jade! Ain't you ready yet? Everything's loaded on the buckboard," Ramy's impatient voice sounded from outside.

"I'll be right out," she called back.

The boy shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the dirt with irritation. "She said she's comin' but she's been saying it for darn near fifteen whole minutes," the boy lamented.

Cole leaned against the wagon waiting patiently and Kyle sat astride his horse leaning on the pommel of his saddle. "There's a few things you're gonna have to learn about women, lad, and one of them is you can never rush 'em when they're prettying up for a shindig," Kyle said with a grin.

Just then Jade came out and shut the door behind her.

Cole straightened and looked at his wife and whistled softly. "Another thing about a woman, son," he said half under his breath, "when they finally *are* ready, it's well worth the wait." He couldn't take his eyes off her. The flattering blue flowered dress fit her snugly, accentuating her slender waist before flaring out into a graceful expanse ending just below her ankles. The white lace collar she'd made was a lovely accent and complemented her beautiful dark hair.

Cole had to fight his inner emotion from becoming apparent to everyone when she smiled shyly at them.

"Well? Do I look all right?"

"Wow! You look beautiful," Ramy said as he walked toward her. "Doesn't she, Pa?"

Cole held out his hand, then let it slide down her tiny waist before allowing the other to encircle it and help her up onto the seat. "She certainly does, son. She certainly does."

A warm blush crept up her face. It was the first personal compliment he'd ever given her.

It was almost an hour's ride to the picnic grounds and Ramy could hardly contain himself. Music from guitars, banjos and mouth harps could be heard as soon as they entered the meadow.

Cole pulled in alongside a line of wagons, buckboards and drays tethered on the outskirts of the gala.

The moment the wagon stopped, Ramy *would* have been off and running to where the children were laughing, running and playing, if Cole hadn't stopped him. "Whoa there, son. How about you help Kyle unpack the wagon, while we go over and enter Jade's apple bread in the contest."

The boy was so excited it was all he could do to contain eagerness. "Sure, Pa." And hurriedly began to unload the wagon.

After he'd helped Jade down and retrieved the covered dish, Cole took her gently by the elbow and led her to the judging tent.

"Look at all this," Cole said eyeing the jams, jellies, cakes and pies. "You should have entered some of your preserves, you'd win for sure," he leaned down and whispered to her.

Jade couldn't believe this was her husband speaking to her about her cooking talent with such admiration.

A rotund pleasant faced woman ambled over to them. "Good afternoon and welcome, I'm Patience Norlin, the new reverend's wife."

Cole nodded politely. "I'm Cole McCayne and we have an entry."

The woman looked from one to the other then glanced down at Jade's hand and when she saw the thin gold band, she smiled and took her by the arm. "Why of course. Come with me my dear and write your name and what you brought on a piece of paper and just tuck it under your entry and set right it down. My, my, it sure is browned pretty."

As they left to go back to the picnic ground, Cole whispered down to Jade once again. "Did you see the size of her? Let's hope she leaves something for the judging." He laughed.

Jade stifled a giggle as she looked up at him.

* * * * *

Kyle and Ramy found a nice spot under a shade tree a few feet from a small gurgling brook. They'd spread out the blanket and set the large heavy basket down and both waved to Cole and Jade when they saw them coming their way.

"This is a lovely spot," Jade said looking out over the river bed.

"Yes, quite lovely," Cole murmured as he looked at her with the sun surrounding her like a golden halo.

Kyle coughed. "Well, Ramy old man, what do you say you and me find us a little game of horseshoes. You know we can beat anyone out here."

"Sure thing, Kyle." The boy was itching to be on his way.

"Hey! What about something to eat first? I prepared all this food," Jade said pointing to the large picnic basket filled with their favorite dishes.

"Aw Jade, we're gonna miss all the fun. We'll be back later." Ramy half pouted.

She searched Kyle's face for support but he only smiled and shrugged noncommittally.

"Well all right but I want you both back here in an hour."

She watched as Cole reached into his pocket and drew out a coin.

"Here's some spending money son, have a good time."

The lad turned the coin over in his hand. "Gee thanks, Pa! See ya later, Jade," he said pulling Kyle by the hand and the cowboy tipped his hat respectfully before allowing himself to be led away.

Jade shifted from foot to foot nervously. Now that they were alone she was at a loss for words.

"Well, *I'm* certainly ready to enjoy something to eat. Seeing as how you went to all this trouble," he said breaking the awkward silence.

He started to sit, then stopped and waited until she folded her skirts under herself and sat daintily.

The muted sound of spirited music was playing somewhere off in the distance and she cocked her head slightly trying to catch the tune. A merchant came by selling apple cider from a keg he carried on his back. Cole held out two tin cups he took from the basket, allowing the thick, cinnamon scented liquid to flow into them.

"That'll be ten cents."

Cole paid him and handed Jade one of the cups. She was about to have a taste when Cole touched his cup to hers. "Here's to you."

"Here's to all of us," she said taking a sip.

There was a long silence and Jade fidgeted with her dress, wondering who would be first to break the stillness.

"Do you remember that day you told me all you've ever been to anyone was a thing?" Cole said finally.

Jade was surprised at his question but her expression remained unchanged as the words she'd spoken rushed back to her. It wasn't something she'd wanted to remember.

"Of course I do."

"Well it's not true. You've come to mean a lot to Ramy and Kyle too."

She turned and looked at him. "And you, Cole, what about you?"

His dark eyes bored into hers. "It's not easy for a man like me to say the words you want to hear."

"Why are you so afraid to let your feelings show, Cole?"

"Everything just gets mixed up sometimes," he said looking down into his cup.

"Do you even know what you feel?" She knew the question came out a little harshly but at that moment she didn't care.

"Sometimes I'm not sure." He looked at her through dark irises. "I do know the minute I saw you at the tavern and knew your plight, there was no way I could leave you there."

She looked away from him, toward the horizon.

"I know things have been rough for you, Jade. I know I've been coarse. I guess I just don't know any other way to be."

There was another long silence before she spoke.

"There were times I wondered if you even wanted me to stay," she said with a short laugh. "Especially with things between us being so difficult and secretive."

"I know everything isn't as clear as it should be. But I can say this now, the very thought of losing you is more than I want to think about. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I care about you, Jade."

Jade saw his brow furrow as though it hurt just saying the words. She snorted out a small breath. *He cared! How nice!* She got up abruptly and leaned against the tree, her lips pursed and her eyes misting with unshed tears.

Puzzled, Cole moved his hat back and scratched his head, then jumped up and went to her. "What's wrong? What'd I say?"

She looked at him with a half-smile. "You really don't know do you?"

Just then Kyle came sauntering back, smacking the dust off his pants with his hat and was about to plop down on the blanket when he noticed strained the expression on both their faces.

"That whelp of yours has more spunk and energy than whole herd of wild ponies," he said looking from one to the other trying break the tension. When neither of them responded he started to get up. "Maybe I better go find that whippersnapper before he gets into trouble."

"No, you stay I'll find Ramy. It's time he had something to eat anyway," Jade said before stalking off in the direction of the lively strains of music.

Cole let go of a deep breath and sighed. "Women!"

"What happened?" Kyle asked hunting around in the picnic basket. Finally locating a crispy chicken leg, he took a large bite.

"What happened? I'll tell you what happened, I did like you said. *I treated her more kindly,*" he mimicked the words his friend had uttered before he left just before winter. "I told her...well you know, I told her..."

"Told her what?" Kyle asked through a mouthful of chicken.

"I told her I cared for her."

Kyle stopped mid chew and stared at him. "You told her you cared for her?" His brows raised to an almost impossible angle.

"Yeah, that's what I said, what's wrong with that?"

"Cole, you *care* for your ranch or your horse. Women like things a little more dressed up. You should have said something with a little more pluck to it."

"I don't know if I can say things like that to her."

"You can if you feel it." He hesitated a moment before continuing, "You have to let that other thing go, Cole."

"What if she doesn't feel the same? Things between us haven't been exactly ideal," he said ignoring the latter part of his friend's statement.

"If you really want to know how she feels, ask her. Then tell her how you feel—how you really feel."

Cole knew Kyle was right. Every bone in his body ached for her all the time now. But it had been so long since he'd shown any real affection and he knew he was lousy at it.

"She's a good woman Cole. She's easy to care for and easier to love if you give yourself half a chance." Kyle looked down for a moment. "I don't know a man alive who'd let her get away from him if he had her."

"Maybe she doesn't want me," Cole said sourly.

"Your head is as hard a hickory stump. I've seen her come more than halfway you mule-headed fool. I don't think it's too much for you to go the rest of the distance."

Cole stared at his friend. Jade had tried her best to understand him and like everything else in his life he had closed her off. If he was ever to set things right in his life he had to take a stand. He had to put old regrets and feelings aside. It was time to let the pain be healed.

"I'll be right back." He started toward the direction Jade had gone. "And try not to eat all the food while I'm gone will ya?" he smirked back at Kyle.

* * * * *

He came upon his wife was standing with a crowd of people watching a lariat-spinning contest. He went up to her and spun her around to face him.

Stunned, her mouth dropped open in surprise as she saw him remove his hat.

"I love you, Mrs. McCayne." Encircling her in his arms, he kissed her tenderly.

The kiss took her breath away and she could hear the adoring sighs of approval from the people watching them.

When he broke their kiss she stared into his eyes trying to see beyond them, trying to see any untruth or misgiving, but found none. She blushed, unsure of what to do with such a moment.

"Cole, I..."

"If you love me with all your earthly heart, you have to tell me, right here and right now."

She hesitated only for a moment. "I do, Cole. I love you."

He kissed her again and everyone began clapping and cheering.

Blushing clear down to her toes, she took her husband's arm and walked back to their picnic area.

Kyle was lying back with his hat covering his face. He removed it long enough to look at the two of them.

"Well it's about damned time!" he said covering up again.

It was dark when they left the picnic area. Kyle squeezed up onto the buckboard seat pushing Jade even closer to Cole. When he saw him slip her arm under his, he knew they deserved some long-awaited time alone. He clicked at the horse then glanced back at Ramy. "What say you and me rough it under the stars tonight up on the crag?"

"You mean it, Kyle?" the boy asked excitedly.

"I sure do. Looks like there's gonna be a handsome moon and I'll bet you two bits I can count more stars than you in fifteen minutes."

"You're on. It's all right ain't it, Pa?" he asked his father.

"Yes, son. That would be just fine." Cole looked down at Jade with nose flaring passion.

* * * * *

That night Jade waited breathlessly for Cole in their bedroom. With only a light coverlet over her nakedness and her hair cascading around her shoulders she stared at the door.

When he entered the room she didn't shiver or look away. For the first time she felt warm, safe and comfortable. She watched him as he undressed hastily and stood in the shadow of the dim candlelight.

"Does it still frighten you to look at me, Jade?"

"No," she whispered and pulled the cover back.

They made love gently, softly and for a long time. Her body was receptive to him now and opened to accommodate his powerful thrusts. She opened her legs wider and let him take her as deeply as he wanted. Stilling the moans that threatened to escape she buried her face in his steely shoulder, which only invited him to pump harder and faster, then slow to an agonizing, teasingly tender pace.

This time, she needed no prompting from him as she wrapped her legs about him.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Always?" she asked.

"Always, and nothing will change it."

Her heart leapt free and she felt the race of her passion flow through her body as he stiffened against her. She knew he was straining not to cry out his emotions so she took his mouth to hers and swallowed the moan of his fervor.

By the time the rooster crowed, she was answering his urgent call for desire with some of her own, which had been silently inside her since their first union.

Finally sated, he moved off her. Trying to recapture his breath he pulled her close to him, feeling her body mold to his as though it had always belonged there. Then, for the first time in many years, he slept peacefully. There was no haunted past, no ghosts, no Nakoa. With his wife tucked securely against him, he slept without dreaming.

Chapter Fourteen

It was late August, hot and sticky. The trees were still and there had been no breeze for weeks. The air was dusty and nothing seemed to go right. Two of the milk cows got loose and it had taken a good part of the morning for Ramy and Kyle to round them up.

For the first time since she had come to live with them, she raised her voice at Ramy for letting the chickens walk through her small flower garden. She was immediately sorry and made it up to him by later baking his favorite cookies.

Finally, two nights later, a wind came out of the east. Tempers cooled and there was laughter in the house once more.

Cole and Kyle were mulling over a lengthy game of chess and Ramy was on the floor playing with a set of soldiers that Kyle had painstakingly carved for him when he was just an infant. More than once she'd caught Cole looking at her and she blushed as she read the hidden meaning in his eyes.

Something was wrong! The hairs at the back of Kyle's neck stood up. It all seemed to happen in a moment as he leapt out of his seat, chessmen flying from the board, scattering all over the floor. He reached for the rifle from over the mantle but it was too late. They burst into the room like a cannonball. There were four of them, fierce and with black war paint crossing their hard faces.

Jade screamed once, then ran and stood in front of Ramy, determined to protect him with her life.

Cole too had risen swiftly and was moving toward Jade and Ramy when the tall Sioux sauntered into the room.

Jade instantly knew who it was, for no other could have commanded such attention.

Cole's eyes locked on his while the heavily painted braves kept their guns trained on the rest of them. The two men eyed each other with such hate that it permeated the room.

"What do you want, Nakoa?" Cole asked, his eyes dark and angry.

The man said nothing but allowed his gaze to move lazily over to Jade, who with Ramy behind her, was backing away from his menacing glare.

Kyle held the dangling rifle in his hand, then in a flash he brought it up to take aim but a brave anticipating his movement threw a spear at his chest, dropping him instantly.

The surprise on his face would be forever fixed in Jade's memory as a thick, uneven circle of blood began spreading out on the shirt she'd made for him and in an instant she knew he was dead.

Pandemonium broke loose as Ramy pulled away from her and ran to Kyle's fallen body, Jade right behind him.

Like an angry cougar, Cole was at Nakoa's throat as they began to fight. Nakoa was as big and as strong as Cole and neither could best the other. Finally, one of the braves hit Cole over the head with the butt end of his rifle. Jade screamed as she watched her husband sink to the floor fighting to stay conscious.

Ramy flew at Nakoa and began kicking and punching at him.

Nakoa picked him up as though he weighed no more than a handful of honeysuckle petals and threw him to the floor next to his father. "Be still, mosquito!"

The voice was deep and resonant. His cold gaze roved over Jade as she ran to Cole and Ramy, shielding them with her own body.

"You have grown soft, Cole McCayne. You cannot defend your family and you hide like a whipped dog behind the skirts of a woman."

Cole tried to rise but Jade pushed him back.

"There's food, blankets and cattle. Take them but leave us in peace," she said with chin-trembling bravery.

"Your woman has spirit. She bargains quite well for your life my brother. But she is unwise to think that we cannot take what we want, if we want it." Nakoa's eyes were amused even though his mouth was a hard, tight line.

"You touch them and I'll hunt you down like the dog you are and cut your heart out," Cole spat.

The room filled with a raucous sarcastic laugh. "And what if I kill you? Here and now! Then who will hunt me? The mosquito?" He pointed to Ramy.

Cole had finally risen unsteadily to his feet. He looked at Nakoa for a single moment, then spat full in his face.

Jade gasped, thinking that surely Nakoa would kill him where he stood so angry were his eyes. But the moment passed as he wiped away the spittle, his eyes never leaving Cole's.

"Hold the boy," he said to one of his warriors.

The brave went over and grabbed Ramy, who started a furious struggle. Nakoa strode to Jade and looked down into her small, glowering face. He touched her neck with his long slender fingers. Then down they went, over her throat and chest until finally he reached her breast and cupped it harshly.

Cole sprang forward but the brave who held Ramy drew a knife and held it to the boy's throat.

"No! Please don't move or he'll hurt him," Jade screamed at him.

Powerless, Cole stood his ground, helpless anger almost blinding him.

Nakoa wrapped his arm around Jade's waist and pulled her to the door. He spoke to the brave who stood closest to him. "Don't kill him but I do not wish that he follow for many moons. Spare the boy."

The brave threw his spear. It found its mark through Cole's shoulder. He spun around and staggered to the fireplace holding it for support but failing. Ramy screamed out to his father as Jade struggled against her captor screaming out her husband's name.

Nakoa covered her mouth as he again nodded to the brave who then threw his stone knife and caught Cole in the leg. The punctured tendon spouted blood at once, darkening the color of his pants to crimson. He sank to the floor. His eyes glazed and were rapidly clouding over. He reached out shakily. "Jade..." he rasped painfully.

She strained against the strong hands that held her trying to reach him, tears flooding her eyes.

Nakoa signaled to the brave who was holding Ramy to let him go. He ran to his father, tears streaming down his frightened, angry face.

"Tell my brother, when he is able to understand, that I will be waiting for him when he comes for his woman." Nakoa said to a glowering Ramy, then backed out of the door, pulling Jade along with him.

Outside, Jade fought against him in the darkness but it was useless. He yanked her along until he reached his horse, which was as black as the night itself. Only its impatient snorting and stomping on the hard ground gave indication of its presence.

"Do I have to tie you?" Nakoa asked sternly.

"No." Her voice was a defiant whisper.

He threw his leg over the beast straddling it easily, then reached down and pulled her up in front of him. She heard the sound of the other braves mounting their horses, filling the air with screeches and war cries before riding off into the night.

Tears streamed down her face as they raced away from the ranch. Her tears were for poor dead Kyle and for the boy she had come to love as her own son. And what of her husband? Would Ramy get help in time?

* * * * *

They had ridden for what seemed like an hour or more before they reached a wide bend of the river, far from the only place she had ever thought of as home. Jade was breathing rapidly not knowing if it was because she was tired or just frightened half to death. Nakoa, unaffected by the mad ride, dismounted and drank heartily. It was dark but she could see the silhouettes of the other braves as they watered their horses and drank.

Jade bit her lip, not wanting to believe her own good fortune. *No one's watching.* Slowly, she reached for the reins. As quietly as she could she, wound them around her hands then jerked the horse's head and kicked his flanks hard. "Git!" she hissed. The

horse took off like the wind through the dense forest. Her face was whipped mercilessly by low hanging branches and twigs but she spurred on.

Not more than a minute later she heard the shrill report of a sharp whistle tear through the air. The beast stopped dead in its tracks, hurling her over its head and onto the hard ground.

Nakoa was upon her in an instant, glaring down at her, his silver eyes shining like that of a cat in the dark. "Shadow Wind has been part of me since I was a young brave. You should not have tried to run," he said evenly but his voice was tinged with annoyance. He reached down and pulled her roughly to her feet. "As with most women, you cannot be trusted." He snatched a thin leather cord from his long side plait.

"No, please don't tie me. I won't try to run away again I promise."

"Must I tie your mouth also?" he hissed.

She snapped her lips together tightly as he commenced coiling the leather strap around her wrists, then yanked her back to the horse. Shoving her up and onto it, he remounted behind her and once again rode off.

Sometime later, they reached a place against a mountain buttress, which Nakoa examined carefully then thought sufficiently safe to rest and where he could easily detect any riders below. Grunting orders to the others he dismounted and pulled Jade down and glared at her as he gave a low whistle to the horse and it clopped away with reins dragging to the thick clumps of brush a few feet away.

Pulling at the pouch at his waist he shoved his hand inside and withdrew it and put the contents into Jade's still fastened hands.

It was some awful smelling hard tack and a few kernels of dried corn. It was terrible but it helped to halt the nervous grumbling in her stomach.

"I will keep first watch," he announced.

The other braves grunted, removed the blankets from their ponies and arranged them in a semi-circle and slept.

Nakoa tied her to a sapling and went to the small hillock and sat.

Several hours later, a brave took his place. All the while, Jade had been working the leather thong against the rough edges of the tree. When he approached her and saw the frayed edges, he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet.

"I will not permit this!" he hissed. "Do not try it again." He pushed her to the pony blanket, then lay down beside her.

"I will not tie you to me but if I feel you move one inch..." He didn't finish the sentence but she knew what he meant by the way he touched the knife at his waist. It was all the explanation she needed.

The next morning they rode again. Every time she closed her eyes, the image of her husband lying on the floor of the cabin bleeding tormented her. She saw Ramy's

frightened, tear-stained face as he leaned over his father and cradled his head. Please let them be all right. Please, she prayed.

Her tears and anxiety hadn't escaped her abductor. Hearing her crying and feeling her tenseness, made him grunt with satisfaction.

Through all her fear and pain, two words wouldn't leave her mind. Nakoa had called him, *my brother*. Could this be the dark secret that haunted Cole?

Further and further they rode into the mountains, twice she almost fell from the horse and had to clutch Nakoa's strong arms to keep her balance.

Finally, they reached the Sioux settlement. It wasn't at all what she had expected. She was surprised to find it orderly and serene, with many hide tents, lodges and corral poles. A few people, mostly women, milled around but she was too tired to really focus on much else.

Children ran to meet them as they rode in, laughing and speaking in a tongue she didn't understand. The villagers ran forward and thronged around Nakoa's horse, looking up at her with adoration and puzzlement.

He dismounted, as Jade slumped forward over the horse's long neck. She was tired and thirsty.

Through weary eyes, Jade noticed the people speaking and touching the statuesque warrior, clearly happy that he had returned unharmed. The throng of people quieted and parted as a regal figure in a magnificent eagle feather headdress and red and black woven blanket approached.

"You have returned. My heart is filled with happiness," he said in a low raspy tone.

Nakoa greeted him and took hold of the shoulders of the man with reverence.

The old man touched his hand to his heart then turned and walked forward, focusing his aged eyes on Jade. "This is the woman of Cole McCayne?"

"It is," Nakoa spat.

"Are you sure you wish to do this, my son?"

"I am sure, Grandfather," he said with a sneer.

"When you have tended to Shadow Wind, come and we will speak of it."

Nakoa pulled Jade from the horse, barely giving her a glance, as he led his horse away.

The old chief shouted something Jade didn't understand and an old crone hobbled forward and pulled Jade by the leather cord. As they passed, the women and children taunted and laughed at her, pulling at her skirts and hair.

Olathe, who had been standing in the midst of the other women, looked from the retreating back of the girl to that of Nakoa's, her eyes narrowing as an angry chill clutched her heart.

Chapter Fifteen

Jade's eyes slowly became accustomed to the dimness of the lodge that she'd been thrust into. It was fairly roomy and smelled of animal skins but there was no fire in the hole in the center of the dug-out ground. Fur pelts lay strewn about the dirt floor and a large war-shield with intricately worked beading was propped up against the far wall.

She sank onto the pile of furs, grateful for their softness. Her whole body ached and she felt bruised. With no idea what was to become of her, she fell into a deep exhausted sleep.

She slept through the night and a good part of the morning and when she groggily tried to rise, her limbs were sore and stiff. During the night, someone had cut the cords from her wrists, yet the thin crimson line around them attested that this had not been a nightmare. It was all too real.

The flap of the lodge moved aside and the old woman from the day before stooped in the archway. She gestured that Jade should follow her, all the time shrieking in an angry tone. Reluctantly, Jade arose and followed her outside.

The sun was hot, bright and hurt her eyes. She shielded them as she tried to keep up with the woman, stumbling along the ground as children and women taunted her once more. She followed until finally they were at the edge of a large running stream, which emptied into a dark pool of eddying water. The old woman pointed to the water where women had stopped frolicking and Jade assumed she wanted her to bathe.

She walked toward the water but the old woman pulled her back and began to rip her dress from her. Jade beat at her hands and backed away from her to water's edge.

Glaring at the woman, Jade removed her dress and waded into the water wearing only her chemise.

The women, who only moments before had been splashing and laughing happily, stopped and looked at her curiously. Olathe, who was on the far side of the pool also looked but hers was a look of intense hatred.

Jade waded further out into the water.

Olathe dived in, stroking through the water deftly before coming up easily in front of her. Jade couldn't help noticing how exquisitely beautiful the girl was. Dark and sultry with her long dark brown hair that easily reached her waist but now cascaded around her in the water in a swirl. Her eyes were deep chestnut and laced with cold anger.

Olathe sniffed at the air around her, as though she smelled something unpleasant and dived once again. She began to swim in circles around Jade, then disappeared

underwater. Suddenly, Jade found herself being dragged down. She fell backward and the water claimed her while her legs waved in the air.

As she sputtered her way up, she heard the hysterical laughter of the other woman.

Without thinking, Jade grabbed Olathe by the hair and pulled her face forward into the water. The girl kicked but Jade held her under until she felt the girl stop her wildness and grab onto her hands for support. Pulling her up Jade glared at her. Neither said anything as Olathe sputtered and spat out water.

The two women eyed one another. Jade never wavered under the other woman's intense gaze of pure hatred but when she determined that the savage beauty was not going to continue her confrontation, Jade turned and waded to the bank where the old woman stood scowling.

Olathe watched her, an odious sneer etched across her mouth. She saw that Jade was beautiful, with her full breasts, much fuller than her own, and her legs, though not long and lithe as hers, were nevertheless strong and well formed. She also noticed with delight that her hips were small and narrow, no good for bearing children, she thought triumphantly. She smiled with arrogance, thinking of her own hips, which were wide, strong and perfect for that for which she felt she was destined, to be the mother of future chiefs—a young leader who she wanted to be sired by the great Nakoa.

The old woman handed Jade a rawhide dress. It was old and worn but relatively clean. At least she would be saved the embarrassment of walking through the entire village half naked.

Muttering in the tongue of her people, the old woman prodded Jade forward to where several women were seated in a semi-circle, grinding dried corn kernels between two flat stones. The woman pushed Jade to her knees and screeched at her. The others laughed when Jade stumbled forward. The woman gestured for her to start working and she assumed she wanted her to grind the hard kernels, so she picked up a flat stone and began. The others didn't speak to her and during the long afternoon, she often looked up to find them pointing at her, making faces and laughing.

The brutal sun beat down on her but the other women seemed not to notice. But as the shining orb raced across the sky she continued to work and soon grew thirsty and hungry. There was a tanned leather pouch hanging from a pole nearby with little droplets of liquid dripping into a crudely hewn squash gourd.

Jade's throat ached with dryness and she got up and went to the gourd. A woman leaned over and slapped her hand as she hissed and taunted her, gesturing for her to back away. The gourd flew from her fingers and she watched miserably as the parched earth soaked up the precious liquid.

Jade sat down again and continued her work, willing herself not to cough to try to ease the dryness in her throat.

Not long after, the women began to pour the finely ground powder into sacks, then gathered them up and started to walk away. Not knowing what else to do, Jade followed them.

By the time she reached the inner village, the odors from the cooking fires assailed her nostrils and she thought she would faint from hunger. Perhaps she should pray for death and save them the trouble of killing her if that's what they intended to do.

Waving sun-leathered, reed thin arms that belied her girth, the old woman once again came toward her jabbering and gesticulating wildly, pushing Jade toward a huge wickiup set apart from the others.

She was urged roughly through the open flap. After her eyes had adjusted to the dimness, she looked and saw a curl of smoke rise from the center fire pit and wend its way to the top of the lodge where a hole had been made for it to escape.

The odor of something recently cooked had Jade wavering on her feet as she was reminded once again of her hunger. She squinted at several figures seated around the center fire pit and tried to focus on the dark silhouettes of others sitting stoically behind them. Tricks! My eyes are playing tricks on me, she thought as a new wave of dizziness gripped her.

"Sit!" It was Nakoa's stentorian voice.

She obeyed his request and noticed that Olathe sat a few feet directly behind him, a triumphant look on her face.

Jade's vision was blurring and she had to bite her lip to keep from fainting. Some of the men looked at her with disinterest while others didn't bother to look at her at all.

The acrid smoke in the lodge assaulted her parched throat to the burning point. "May I have some water?" Her voice was an almost incoherent rasp.

Nakoa looked at her curiously. "Have you not eaten?"

"No. Nor have I been allowed to have any water but I hardly expect you to care." Her throat was hurting it was so dry.

His dark eyes were angry as he shouted an order in his native tongue to Olathe, who leapt to her feet with indignation and sharp words passed between them. Finally, Olathe turned around and walked to the far end of the tent. The next thing Jade knew, a water gourd was being shoved at her, most of it spilling into her lap. A small bowl half filled with a kind of stew was pressed into her chest.

Embarrassed by her hunger she began to eat greedily with her fingers.

"How did you come to be with Cole McCayne?" Nakoa asked without looking at her.

"He bought me," she said softly.

"Are you bound to him by marriage?"

"I am," she said proudly as she looked at the scornful expression on his face.

"Are you with child now?"

Her face burned with embarrassment but her voice was filled with anger at such personal inquiry.

"That is none of your business."

Nakoa threw her a mean look of warning, then his lip curled in to a sneering smile. "No matter, I will know in time."

She had no intention of staying long enough for him to find out anything about her but she thought it best not to stress that point. She did however think she was entitled to some answers, "Why have I been brought here?"

"So that your husband will come for you," he said casually.

"There is no doubt that he will." Her smile was small but confident.

"Not for many moons," Nakoa said with complete self-assurance.

"Why is it so important for him to come here?"

There was a long pause and only the crackling fire invaded the silence.

"So that I can kill him."

Her head snapped up at the way the words fell from his mouth with such hatred.

"But why? What has he done to you?"

"His father killed my mother and he is responsible for the death of she who was to be my wife."

"No! That cannot be true, I don't believe you."

"Then believe this," he hissed and turned his head to face her. "Long ago, Aaron McCayne, Cole's father came to trade with our people. He took a Sioux maiden unto him and I am the result of that barbaric union," he spat.

"So that's it. You and Cole are brothers." Things were beginning to fall into place.

"My half brother and my enemy," he spat.

"And your mother? What happened to her?" Jade asked, wanting to know the entire story.

"When I was the same age the mosquito is now, Aaron McCayne came and took me from my mother—from our village and my people. He took me to the mountains where he lived with his white wife and son—Cole. My name was changed to Alexander McCayne. They cut my hair and I was forced to wear the white man's clothes and learn his ways. But inside—here," he said pounding on his massive chest. "In here I was always Sioux. Nothing they could do would ever change that."

The puzzle was finally coming together as she listened intently.

"I learned their ways and skills but only those things that might benefit my clan. Then I ran away and returned to our people and continued to learn *their* ways, keeping them high in my heart. But no matter how many times I ran away Aaron McCayne always came back for me," he spat, staring once again at the blazing fire.

Jade could only see his profile when he spoke at length like this and couldn't help but notice the angry set of his jaw indeed resembled that of her husband.

"Cole was a little more than a year older than I and we hated each other from the beginning and it only grew worse as we grew. There was always something to make it

worse. I was a better hunter, better tracker and as a fighter, I bested him too. But he was stubborn and never gave in."

Jade thought she detected a fleeting tone of admiration just then.

"I was fourteen summers, nearing the time of my totem, when my mother," he looked reverently to the old chief, "and her father, came to the mountain house searching for me. They demanded that I be allowed to return to our people. But Aaron McCayne was arrogant and selfish. He refused and sent them away. That night, she again came for me—alone. I am told that McCayne must have mistaken her for an intruder or wild animal and he shot and killed her. It made my hate for him even stronger."

Jade glanced briefly at Olathe who looked back at her smugly, as Nakoa continued his story.

"When I was seventeen, we were sent to the Long Valley Colorado School. I was truly in the white man's world and Cole had the upper hand. He was acknowledged, I was not. There was no pretense about my presence being unacceptable at social gatherings and in the homes of the school's most prestigious gentry."

Jade was well aware of class and ethnic separation. Her own mother had experienced it and her as well.

"I had to find my own entertainment at cantinas and places where the people were not unlike myself."

Was it her imagination or had his voice grown softer?

"It was at one of the fiestas that I met Enez. She was the daughter of a Mexican woman and a full-blood Cheyenne chieftain and I knew from the moment I saw her, that she was to be my wife. She was beautiful and her heart was rich with kindness."

Olathe fidgeted angrily as he spoke the name of the woman he once loved.

"Cole had his world and I had found mine. But the white eyes find other cultures amusing and needed a constant source of diversion to exercise their idle over-indulged lifestyles. They often came to the fiestas to fuel their mirth and create trouble. We of course, were under strict martial law and could do little to protect ourselves."

"I can't believe my husband would be part of such rabble."

Nakoa turned his head slowly and looked at her.

"He was a part of it! He was always there with his highbrow, troublemaking friends," his voice boomed.

Jade jumped at the sound but was determined to hear all there was to hear.

"On the evening I was to ask Enez to be my wife, Cole and his friends came. It didn't matter that he'd brought the daughter of the most prominent man in town, the second he saw Enez, there was lust in his eyes. He wanted her and I hated the way his eyes devoured her."

What Nakoa hadn't told her—what he couldn't admit, even to himself—was that when he looked at Enez, he saw that she too had lost her heart to Cole. In the single moment that it had taken them to see one another, they had fallen in love.

"I had planned to bring Enez to my people and had gone ahead to prepare the way. But when I returned less than a month later, I found that Cole had come like a thief in the night and had stolen her away."

Jade could almost feel his misery, even though he had tried to hide it.

"I tracked them. It took more than a year but I found them. When I did, Enez was laboring to bring forth his child. Another beast like me, not white, not Native American. The mosquito, the boy you call Ramy, was born. But Enez died."

His voice drifted off as he remembered that fateful day.

He had burst in on them and found Enez clinging to Cole and her newborn infant, her face sweaty and pale. She begged Nakoa not to kill her love or her baby, that if he ever cared for her he would not harm them. Then with her last breath she expressed her love for Cole, and that he must live to raise their child.

Nakoa looked down into the face of the dying woman he loved, the look in her eyes telling him that there was only one man in her heart. Cole McCayne.

As they both watched her die and Nakoa nodded in agreement to her request, he swore silently to himself then and there that he would someday kill his half brother.

"So you see, I have many reasons to hate the McCaynes." He turned to face her, noticing how the flames from the fire danced in her eyes.

"Their blood runs through your veins. You are a McCayne," she rebuked him.

He glared at her with hard steely gray eyes. "I am Nakoa of the Sioux nation. The blood of many chiefs fills me and the man responsible for the deaths of my loved one will die."

"I am sorry about your mother. Her death was an unfortunate accident," Jade said her heart softening a little. "But this will solve nothing."

"He took my woman," he spat.

"And you've taken me to get even?"

"To kill him...but not until he sees you great with *my* child."

Olathe leapt to her feet. "Your child! She cannot bear sons for you. It is I who shall be the mother of future chiefs."

Black Shield glared at the maiden angrily. "Silence woman! This is not your concern." The chief's voice, although gravelly with age, was harsh and authoritative.

Olathe sat down slowly eyeing Jade with the hatred of a thousand evils.

Jade was speechless and her head was beginning to ache.

There was a long silence and she knew there was to be no more conversation when Nakoa said something to the old woman who then pulled Jade to her feet and ushered her from the lodge and back to his tent.

Once inside, Jade dropped to the furs, tears of frustration coursing down her cheeks. His child! His intent was clear and she knew that she had to get away from him.

Some time later Nakoa entered. She inched from him to the furthest corner of the tent.

"Do not worry wife of my enemy, I am tired. I will not take you this night." He sneered amusedly at her before lying down on his sleeping furs.

Nor any night, she thought to herself. She allowed her hand to move protectively over her belly. The thing he wanted to do to her was already done. She was carrying her husband's baby.

Chapter Sixteen

She went to the grinding stones each morning and the women all looked at each other and began to laugh secretively, making obscene gestures at her. She knew what they were thinking. Because she slept in the tent of Nakoa, she was sure they thought he was having his way with her.

A few minutes later she saw Olathe stroll toward the stream. She waited and then made a gesture that she needed to attend to her personal needs. When they waved her off, she made for the stream. She found Olathe staring out over the water. Jade cautiously approached the beautiful Sioux girl.

"You love him don't you," Jade said to her back.

"We do not have that word here but my heart is full for him if that is what you mean," she said not looking at the hated woman.

"It is your wish to marry him." Jade said.

"I would become one with him in any way so that I may bear his sons."

"Then help me," Jade pleaded.

Olathe turned to face her.

"If you help me leave then he cannot carry out this madness—he will take you as his wife."

"You do not know him."

"If I can get out of here I can return to my husband. I'll convince him to go away to where Nakoa will never find us."

Olathe pondered this, knowing in her heart it was a foolish idea. "You have no idea of what you ask."

But Jade could see that her mind was working as the idea became more appealing. "I know it is a terrible risk but what does it gain you if I am kept here?" Jade continued pleading.

"If Nakoa knows of this he is within his right to kill me."

"Just leave me a horse somewhere. I will take it and go."

"When?" Olathe asked.

"Anytime you say. Tonight! I'll leave tonight."

"And you will not return? Even with your husband?"

"Never! We will go far away." Jade was exuberant at the thought of escape.

Olathe walked away from Jade, then said over her shoulder, "It cannot be tonight. Tomorrow Nakoa and the others will be on a hunt, they may not return until dusk. I will have a horse waiting for you there," she pointed down the stream bed.

"Thank you," Jade whispered with relief, truly meaning it.

"Do not thank me. Just do not return." Olathe shook off her gratitude and revulsion once more destroyed the beauty of her face.

* * * * *

Nakoa and a small band of braves left at dawn. By midafternoon Jade was on her way through the dense forest.

After she had gone to the stream to wash and endured Olathe and the others laughing and poking fun at her, Olathe suddenly shouted something to them and pointed into the water. The other women leapt out of the water and ran to shore screeching in horror. As she hurried passed Jade, she whispered to her.

"I told them that your presence fouled the water with snakes." She pointed to the curling water as a cottonmouth water moccasin slid toward the center of the stream. She then gestured downstream.

Jade pretended to follow them as they hurried back to the village. When they were far ahead of her, she doubled back and hurried downstream where a bare-backed pony was tied to a tree just inside some dense brush.

At first, Jade rode at breakneck speed not caring that the low branches and shrubbery tore at her arms and legs. Holding desperately onto the horse's knotted mane she pressed on with no idea which direction she should take. *Sooner or later I should happen upon someone who could help me find my way home.*

When she thought she was a comfortable enough distance away and confident that she wasn't being followed, she slowed the pony to a trot but keeping up a steady pace.

Nakoa returned and found that Jade had disappeared. He questioned the old woman who denied any knowledge of her whereabouts. They all stood around him and Black Shield as they demanded knowledge of the woman's escape.

His eyes scanned the villagers one by one, then stopped at Olathe. Her face was a mask but her lips were trembling. He went to her and saw that her bold shining eyes revealed the truth.

"Why?" was all he asked.

"She wanted to go back to her husband." Her voice betrayed her defiant gaze.

Nakoa stalked angrily to his horse and with one leap was astride him. He threw Olathe a murderous glance and rode off into the waning sunlight.

"She does not want you Nakoa, she wants her husband let her go," she shouted after him.

Nakoa tried not to hear the shouts of the Sioux maiden as he spurred Shadow Wind into action.

Jade had dismounted to rest, her legs ached and her throat was dry. Exhausted from her earlier mad ride, she lay down on the velvety green grass and in moments fell into a deep sleep, never even hearing the lightly tethered horse break loose and trot away.

She didn't know how long she slept but the sun was low in the sky when she awoke and alarm gripped her when she saw the horse was gone. *I'll just have to go on foot.*

The thorny bushes caught and tore at her skin and hair as she made her way toward the sunset. Twice she saw snakes, which almost paralyzed her with fear and caused her to slow her pace as she stepped cautiously through the leaves and forest debris.

She had just reached a clearing when she heard him break through the dense brush behind her. Nakoa was like a giant devil riding toward her. She began to run, tripping and falling, her breath burning in her throat. She ran until she was exhausted and then she just stopped. Looking back, she saw that he had reined his horse into a shallow gallop. He had been toying with her, she knew that now. He could have caught her at any time. Falling to her knees, her chest heaving with exhaustion, she looked up at him, tears of frustration creasing down her dirty face.

"Please, just let me go home," was all she could manage to gasp.

He said nothing, just reached down and yanked her up by her arms and pulled her up behind him onto his snorting impatient stallion.

She cried out with rage and hopelessness but clung to his slender waist for support as he sped back home.

When they reached the village, he threw her to the ground savagely, dismounted and yanked her up by her hair, pulling her to where a crowd had gathered. Olathe had been tied between two upright wooden stakes, her back was bare and angry red welts had risen on her tawny skin.

Jade's hand flew to her mouth to keep from screaming at the horrific sight. Several feet away, a long branding iron glowed in a fire pit. Nakoa stalked over and retrieved it, the flat of it glowing white hot.

Olathe's eyes widened in horror, her trembling body glistened with sweat. Nakoa moved closer to her. Slowly he raised the scorching iron toward her face. The woman cringed.

Jade moved swiftly and caught his arm. "Stop! Please don't do this."

His muscle rippled under her touch. "She betrayed me!" he shouted at her, his eyes cold and steely hard.

"She didn't! I did. I begged for her help. I told her that it would please your gods and help her to be one with you if I were gone from here," Some of it was an out and out lie but Jade had to try anything.

"She knows the penalty for betrayal, now all will know – forever." He shook her off and moved once again to the girl's face.

Jade moved so that she was between Olathe and him.

"Then punish me. It was my fault, not hers."

Nakoa shoved her aside and continued to move closer as the trembling girl struggled to move her face away from the heat of the iron.

Suddenly, Jade grabbed the knife that hung at his waist and held it to her own heart. "If you do this, I will kill myself. Then what? Cole will come for a dead woman and your revenge won't be as sweet. Let her go." She moved the knife closer.

Nakoa examined her closely, he saw the determination in her ravishingly beautiful eyes, then slowly let the iron drop to the ground.

"Olathe will be taken to the Apache village and left there," he said aloud.

Olathe screamed out in fear and struggled against her bonds. "Kill me! I would rather die."

Nakoa's hard eyes bored into the lovely ones that he had often thought he would look into forever had he taken her to be his wife. Eyes that betrayed him, Enez's eyes. "You will be taken to Changi. He hates all Sioux, even those as beautiful as you. He will not be kind." He glanced over at Jade. "You have sealed her fate, one worse than death."

Two braves untied the girl from the post and dragged her to the waiting ponies for transportation to the enemy camp. Her screams resounded in Jade's ears and she saw Nakoa tense and knew that he'd heard her too.

"She will never give you her heart Nakoa! Like the other one she will give her love to your enemy – your brother. Do you hear me? She will never love you!" Olathe screamed as the braves pulled her to their horses.

* * * * *

Nakoa pulled Jade along with him to the stream. "You are filthy, wash the dirt from your body." He loosed his rawhide breech cloth and short tunic, letting them fall to the ground. Naked, bronze and resplendent, he waded into the water.

Jade reluctantly removed the hide dress, hoping that the deepening dusk and her torn chemise shielded her from his view and stepped into the water. Nakoa swam to her and she lowered her body into cold water. She swam away from him but his mighty, long strokes caught up to her easily. He snatched her into his arms and turned her to face him. Sputtering and swallowing water, she glared at him. He smoothed the long black hair away from her face.

"I can see why my brother has chosen you."

"She's right you know. My heart and love belong to Cole."

His eyes roved over her as far as he could see. "I never said I wanted your love." He fingered a lock of her hair.

"Don't touch me again." She pushed him away and swam for the shore. Donning her dress quickly, she hurried back to the tent. She was well aware that he was very angry with her and was well within his rights, such as they were, to punish her as he done with Olathe. She lay on the hides in her corner keeping her eyes trained on the flap, waiting for such a moment. Finally she slept fitfully and awoke later in the night to find Nakoa's bare, strong back to her. She inched away, quietly as not to awaken him. By morning he was gone.

The old woman came to fetch her and through signs and misunderstood words, she explained that she was to keep Nakoa's fire and while most of the time he took his meals in the council tent, she was always to have it ready just in case.

She was taught to tie long willow reeds together to form a crude broom to sweep with. Her other duties consisted of gathering wood, berry picking, grinding and stretching hides over long poles to dry in the scorching sun. She also worked in the smoke lodge where meat was dried for travel when the weather turned cooler and finally to winter.

Not one day passed that she didn't think of Ramy and of her husband. *Had he survived? Would he come?*

Chapter Seventeen

Black Shield sat in meditation outside his tent. The woman who tended him had gone off on an errand. Jade had watched his routine for days, contemplating if it was wise to go over and speak with him. Today was finally that day.

After she had completed her chores, she took time and baked some flat cakes, which were little more than the corn flour she pounded each day, water and honey from a hive she had found to sweeten it. She looked around and saw that everyone was busy. They were positive that she would not run again and she would not, lest others pay a terrible penalty for her deed.

After the cakes had cooled, she wrapped them in oak leaves and walked over to Black Shield. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be asleep.

Jade bit her lip pensively. Perhaps now wasn't the best time to speak with him. Quietly she leaned down and placed the small parcel near him.

"Join me."

His voice startled her. His eyes opened and were looking right at her.

"I did not mean to disturb you. I thought you might like some honey cakes."

He nodded for her to take the place to his left.

Folding her legs crosswise she sat a few inches from him.

For long moments he didn't speak. "You have caused a great stir of emotions within my grandson."

"I just want to go home," she said plainly.

"Still, it was unwise of you to test his patience or try to leave here."

"I don't regret what I did, only that..." She hesitated a moment.

He knew what she was about to say. "Olathe chose to walk a dangerous path when she betrayed the confidence of Nakoa."

"He was cruel and inhuman," she sneered.

"Someday, he will be a great chief and sometimes it is necessary to show strength of character, even when it is unpleasant."

"Still, what he did to that girl was insufferable."

The old chief gazed at the blue sky, his eyes finally coming to rest on the horizon of the distant mountains.

"It is not for you to know the ways of his mind."

For several moments neither of them spoke. Then Jade broke the silence.

"It was your daughter that Aaron McCayne killed wasn't it?"

The old chief nodded.

"All my sons died at birth. Little Elk was my only woman-child, she was dear to me."

"I am sorry for your loss and I can understand your anger."

He turned his old watery eyes to her. "You have not seen anger within me. I released the demons that now torment my grandson long ago."

"I cannot see what benefit he gains by killing his brother. He will still be half white and then there is the constant reminder of Ramy," she said.

"There is a terrible battle waging inside my grandson. He must find his own solutions."

She looked at him for long moments before speaking.

"Somehow, I sense that none of this sits well with you. Can't you make him see reason?"

"I was but a youth myself when it was foretold that the whites would come and destroy our way of life. The great bison, once numbered in the tens of thousands, with hoof beats that could be heard miles away, are now scattered and decreased to sorrowful numbers. Our hunting grounds grow more and more sparse as the settlers come ever toward us. I fear that someday, our people will be no more. That too, is part of what he fights for."

In spite of herself, Jade liked Black Shield. His fighting days were over and while he had endured much tragedy, there was an inner peace within him. He was not an unkind man but she surmised that in his day, he had been an impressive as well as a feared leader.

She watched as he reached down slowly and picked up the parcel she had laid near him. With gnarled fingers he opened it and broke off a piece of the treat. He chewed slowly, deliberately.

"It was kind of you to bring the cakes but I know you did not do this without wanting something in return."

She was ashamed that he could see through her attempt at bribery.

"A little information perhaps."

He grunted as though he already knew what she would ask. "I know little about his relationship with the one called Enez. There is much inside him that he does not share about his time in the white world. In my heart I believe that the woman he looked at, did not look at him the same way," Black Shield said as he swallowed the bit of honey cake.

Jade was puzzled. "Looked at?"

"When we desire a woman to become one with us, we walk around her and look at her many times. If she looks back, then we know that we can start the proceedings for acquiring her from her parents. It involves much gift giving and a great deal of

waiting.” He smiled as though remembering a time long ago when he was a young suitor.

“What if she does not look?” Jade asked with interest.

“If a woman does not want a brave, then she turns away from him and never again looks his way until he or she has chosen another.”

“But Enez must have...looked at Nakoa.”

“Sometimes, one can be blinded by one’s own feelings and refuse to see what is before him. I believe the girl was kind in her heart but held no love for my grandson.”

“She loved Cole,” Jade whispered.

“When such a thing happens, a man’s reason can become clouded and he believes only what he wants to believe.”

Jade shook her head. *All this and the woman never even loved him?* “Black Shield, I have *looked* at my husband and while it has not always been so, we now share a bond.”

“I am not sure what my grandson intends to do about you. He confers daily with the spirits in the council tent. The path he must travel will soon be revealed to him.”

“What if the path is not a true one?” she asked earnestly.

“I can tell you this, his heart is genuine and someday he will come to see things in a different light. Now, I am tired of this talk.” He closed his eyes and she knew that he would speak with her no more.

* * * * *

Jade had been with them for two months and it was now what was called Indian summer. A time when the leaves on trees turn various shades of yellow and gold. There was a great change in the village as they were preparing to move into the mountains for winter.

One evening as Jade sat by the quiet stream lulled by the gentle motion, the hairs on the back of her neck rose when she heard footsteps.

“I am not unaware that your thoughts are in the mountain home of my brother.”

She didn’t dare mention that her thoughts were also of the safety of her unborn child. She had no idea how it would affect his all-consuming burning anger. “He will come for me you know.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“He will fight you.” She glared into his sparkling steely gaze.

“And I will kill him.” His words were matter-of-fact with a trace of venom.

It frightened her to see the ferocious iciness of his eyes when he spoke of killing Cole. She knew that he had one mindset and it was obvious that it had been eating at him for a long time.

"Once I asked him not to kill for me. This time I will not be able to stop him." She remembered the day she begged her husband not to kill the brave who had tried to abduct her.

"Do not even try, for our paths are set."

Night noises permeated the air and the only other sound was of a distant baying of wolves and of her heartbeat which she was sure he could hear.

"Is this really over Enez, or because you are half white and wish to destroy that link that is part of you?" she dared ask him.

He didn't answer but glared at her.

She smiled slightly as she saw Cole's own angry eyes, the way they were before they had loved, staring back at her.

"You are very much like him, much more than you know," she continued.

Nakoa's mouth contorted into a snarl as he grabbed her shoulders.

"I am nothing like him!" He released her with a slight push. "But you are correct about one thing. With his death, I will be rid of that part connects us and torments my soul."

"What of Ramy? His son and Enez's—your own nephew."

Nakoa's face twisted into a mixture of hatred and hurt at the mention of the woman he had loved.

"The boy is still young. There is still time to teach him how to be a fine Sioux warrior."

She smirked with a slight laugh. "Cole will never allow you take his son and he will never let you keep me," she said bitterly, rising and stalking away.

Nakoa stood, looking after her, his face dark and brooding. He leaned over and looked into the water. The eddying waves distorted it but it was true, an uncanny caricature of Cole's face reflected back at him. He spat at the hated image then marched back to his tent.

Jade saw the flap being ripped aside then the hunched form of Nakoa as he entered. He stood in the dim light of the fire eyeing her, his gray eyes shining brilliantly in the firelight.

She looked up at him and saw the same look in his eyes that was in his brother's the day he had claimed her. She sat up with bold defiance.

"He *will* come to take me back."

He snarled and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back so that she strained to look up at him. The rawhide dress tautly revealed the swell of her ample breasts. Nakoa laughed. It was a hard almost insane sound. He rubbed his huge splayed hand over her still firm stomach.

"You think he will want you when he sees your belly filled with my son?"

She tried to pull away, glad that he was too angry to detect the fact that she was already pregnant.

"He is my husband and he will come and take me home, no matter what you do to me."

"I think not. My brother is a hypocrite. I just may let him live long enough to see my son born, then I will cut out his heart and feed it to my dogs."

His hand slackened and she pulled away eyeing the lodge flap to the outside. Anticipating her, he moved slowly and stood in front of it.

"His father took my mother, he took Enez, so now I shall have you."

Grabbing her struggling body, he molded his almost naked one to hers tightly, lowering his head inch by inch.

"There *is* one good thing I learned from the white-eyes—the kiss." He covered her mouth with his.

She pulled her face away as he stared down at her, a smug grin across his supple, full lips.

"Perhaps by the time McCayne finds you, you may not *want* to be taken away." He laughed and stopped her protest with his lips once more.

Nakoa lowered her to the furs and lying atop her, he opened her legs slowly. "I will dishonor you, the way he did Enez."

"He didn't dishonor her. They were in love and that is what you hate. She loved him. She never loved you."

"It's a lie!" His voice rose in anger but unsteadily.

"No! It's the truth! She loved him and you couldn't stand that. She went to Cole of her own free will. You're not fighting them, you're fighting your own disbelief that she chose him over you."

His hands were gripping her shoulders painfully. She tried to wrench away but he held her fast.

Her eyes blazed as she goaded him, hoping that he would leave in disgust. "She never loved you, she loved him and only him, didn't she?" she yelled at him.

"Yes!" he hissed and pushed her dress above her thighs and fumbled with his own clothing.

"Please don't do this—you can't." Her hands beat at him savagely.

Warding off her fighting hands, he tried to wrest her legs apart.

"I'm going to have a baby," she shouted.

The very air seemed to stand still as he glared down at her. The rage that filled his eyes hung heavy between them. "You lie!" he snarled.

"I swear it."

With a growl that was as feral as a wild animal he slammed his coiled fist down hard into the furs inches from her head. "I would have my life inside you, yet again my brother reaches into my soul and stabs at it, one teasing jab at a time."

"Just let me go, Nakoa. End this."

"You will stay but you are correct, this will all end." He pulled himself reluctantly away from her, arose and readjusted his clothes. "Let your man come! I want him to come. I *will* kill him and if you try to stop me, I will kill you." He stalked angrily from the tent.

Jade buried her face in the furs and sobbed.

Nakoa leaped on his stallion and raced away from the village. His legs gripped the steed's strong flanks and they became as one and then became part of the night. Branches tore at his skin but still he rode, trying to rid himself of the image of her when she spoke. She had humiliated him with the truth. A truth he dared not face for so many years. It was a disgrace unto himself that he couldn't live with and because she had brought it all back, she would have to pay.

* * * * *

In the days that followed Nakoa taunted her with threats to take her to his tent and complete what he'd started. On several occasions he actually ordered her to leave her toils and come with him to his tent and when she refused to be a spectacle with an exhibition of pressure tactics he pulled her to her feet and amidst the titters and lewd gestures of the braves and women alike he yanked her away.

Sometimes he would take her to the woods and sometimes to his lodge but each time he would just sit opposite her staring. Then after some time passed he would leave.

"Why are you keeping up this pretense?" she asked him.

He didn't bother to answer her, he owed her nothing but even he was irritated by this sorry show to prove his manhood.

One evening as she sat by the stream, he came to her. The routine now imprinted firmly in her brain, she sat firmly where she was, ready for the usual confrontation.

He gestured for her relax. "Tonight I have come to enjoy the evening with you."

So he thinks my spirit is sufficiently broken, she smirked to herself.

She turned her attention back to the serene waters.

"In less than two moons we will be moving to the mountain camps. The old one will instruct you in what needs to be done to prepare."

She threw him a cold look.

"Your anger amuses me." He snickered out loud.

"And my shame it seems." She turned to look at him. "The others also seem to find your playacting entertaining."

"Our women consider it an honor if their man comes for them. It means that his need for her is great."

"You," she seethed at him, "are not *my* man. Your brother is."

An angry twitch played across his jaw, his eyes reduced to slits, as though he was trying to decide if she was worth his irritation. He shrugged nonchalantly.

"Then I will shame you no longer. There may come a day when you will come to me."

"Then be assured, that will *never* happen," she said confidently.

"Never is a very long time and if your husband does not manage to find you it can be an eternity for you." He got up and stalked away, leaving the air charged and disturbed.

Jade pounded at the hard packed earth. She would never go to him, never! *Cole has to come, he has to.* Suddenly she stopped in mid-thought. What if he couldn't come for her? What if he was... She shook her head to rid it of the thought. The very possibility of her husband's death crushed her and her sobs filled the air.

Chapter Eighteen

Ramy rushed into the room with a load of wood. "Pa, can I go see the roundup today?"

"Sure, son, go ahead but mind your chores," Cole said as he cleaned his rifle. His arm was still a little stiff and while his leg was mostly healed, he would forever have to slightly favor it, a permanent reminder from his brother.

It had been months since that fateful night and the last thing he remembered was seeing Ramy run out of the house, before a cold blackness took him.

He awoke days later to find Miguel by his bedside reading.

"Ahh, my friend, you have finally returned to us," he said removing his spectacles.

Cole struggled to speak but his throat felt as though it had been filled with rancid hay.

"I-I have to find Jade," he rasped, struggling to sit up.

Miguel pushed him gently back.

"You have been very ill Cole and you lost a lot of blood. It will be many days before you are even able to sit out in the sunshine let alone astride a horse."

"He took her! He has my wife," he tried to scream it but his voice was only a rasping whisper.

"I know my friend. Ramon told us everything. I sent trackers after them. But there had been a hard rain during their search and the trail was lost."

Dona Maria came in with a bowl of broth and coaxed him into swallowing a few drops. Together they told him how Ramy had taken the fastest stallion they owned and had ridden to their hacienda until the horse nearly collapsed and he himself was in a state of exhausted shock when he arrived. All they were able to get out of the boy was that his father had been hurt and Kyle was dead.

Accompanied with a few rancheros, Miguel Surrano and his wife returned with Ramy to Cole's place. Dona Maria stopped the bleeding as best she could but a fever took him and raged for days. In his delirium, he called out Jade's name over and over and tried to get out of bed. It took three strong men to hold him down until the doctor they'd sent for was able to administer a sleeping elixir to calm him down.

The Serranos stayed with him until he was able to get up and care for himself and his son and he would be forever grateful for their care and concern.

Since that fateful night when Nakoa had stormed into the house, killed his best friend and stolen his wife, Cole's thoughts had been preoccupied with nothing else but

killing his younger half brother. It would be the final battle. One of them must die if the other was to live in peace.

* * * * *

Another month passed and all Jade could think about was that in a few days they would be moving to the mountains--a slow perilous trek but one that had been made for generations. How would Cole ever find her? She felt so alone.

Earlier that day, she had watched the other women as they packed smoked meat and gathered wood and if nothing more than to keep busy, began to do the same. The entire village was alive with motion and even the children had chores that encompassed readying the village for the move to higher ground.

It was dusk and Jade had finished binding the pelts and was bringing them to the storage lodge when two or three women passed her, two of which broke into gales of laughter. One maiden hushed them and walked over to Jade who eyed her suspiciously. She smiled sweetly and gave a gesture of friendship. The woman reached into a small pouch that hung from her intricately beaded belt and extracted small pieces of dark chunks that reminded Jade of tree bark. The girl took a piece and put it in her mouth and then presented some to Jade. She shook her head refusing the offering. The girl took another small piece and again made an offer, smiling sweetly. This time, Jade took a small piece and put it slowly into her mouth. It had the taste of sweetened walnuts but with an underlying tinge of bitterness. The girl smiled and appeared to chew happily. The other girls came over and took some and waited while the first girl poured the remaining sweets into Jade's open palm and gestured for her to eat. Jade emptied the remainder of the pellets into her mouth, chewed and then swallowed. The girls began to chat among themselves then turned and walked away. Jade didn't see that the one who had eaten a piece had spat it out. Nor did she see that the others threw theirs to the ground and begin to giggle uncontrollably.

Angered by their abrupt and rude departure, she threw the furs to the ground and stalked away. She hadn't gone five feet before a wave of dizziness struck her. Steadying herself, she shook her head to clear it. When her vision cleared, she felt lighter and everything was suddenly acute and sharp. There was a slight buzzing in her ears but it too soon subsided.

She walked toward the dense woods. Never before had she noticed how the colors of the fall foliage blended so beautifully against the sky. The harsh call of the crow seemed to speak to her and she looked up and saw the black, beady-eyed bird, perched on a tree limb staring back down at her. The evening was very cool and while she remembered that harsh winter when they'd almost lost Ramy and although she was shaking, it was her inner mind that barely felt the crisp air as it blew around her. She walked up the stream bed, the sound of it gurgling over the rocks sounding loud and fresh in her ears. Then she saw him. He was wrapped in a great black bear hide that covered him from shoulders to foot. It was funny, she had never seen Cole wear that

before. But Cole wasn't here – was he? She shook her head trying to remove the slight buzz and lightheadedness.

He turned and for the first time since she had known him, his eyes did not show hate or disdain. The slate gray orbs were soft and the usually troubled muscle in his jaw was relaxed.

She shook her head again to rid it of confusion of the double faces she was seeing.

"It is growing colder," she uttered looking directly into his eyes.

Endless moments sped by, as she saw the blur of his motion. Slowly, he opened the buffalo robe and waited, his eyes boring into hers. Everything was hazy and specters of her imagination danced around her. Dizzying images unfocused in her field of vision almost made her ill. With lids as weighty as iron bars, she saw the face of her beloved Cole and as though hypnotized, she walked slowly into his open arms.

Nakoa enclosed the robe around her, warming them both. The cool contact of her body to his warm one replaced the tepidness with a different kind of heat. It was the heat of something more reckless. He felt it creep up his body like a slithering snake as she nestled herself against him, trying to get even closer. Remembering his own words. He let the robe fall from her and tried to step away. But she clung to him and buried her face against his hard smooth chest.

"No, hold me," she whispered, her head swimming.

But he disengaged himself from her, taking still another step back.

"Do you wish it?" he asked.

She knew he was staring at her, even though she could no longer see his eyes.

"Why are you asking me that?"

"I must know that it is what you want."

"Yes!" she said.

He walked toward her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded her head.

"And you will not fight me?"

"No," she whispered.

He let the robe fall to the ground and gently pulled her to him. His lips kissed her neck, her throat and her teary closed lids but before he pressed his lips against hers, he whispered once again, "By your will?"

"Yes," she said up into a face that was undoubtedly that of Cole.

He lowered her to the robe. The chilly air was ignored as he held her with an almost ethereal sweetness. He whispered her name as his mouth claimed her lips, which had taunted him from the moment he'd abducted her. He kissed her, opening her mouth and easing his tongue inside. Suddenly he stopped and stared down at her and saw the faraway glaze in her eyes. He licked his own lips and tasted the fading bitterness of

peyote. He looked at her as she ran her tongue over her dry lips, wetting them almost as an invitation.

His stone hard body was still pressed against her, molding her under him. It was her flesh he wanted to touch. He wanted to feel the essence of her softness against him. She began to move against him and her thrashing caused her rawhide dress to lift and the heat of her legs burned him like fire. Her arms found their way into his long, thick hair and it nearly drove him to the brink of hellish desire.

Holding on the very edge of control Nakoa was still as she positioned herself to accept him. All he had to do was take her, he knew she would be ready but he didn't move.

"Cole..." she breathed up at him.

Now he knew without a doubt she was not here with him. She was with her husband.

He concentrated, driving his passion backward.

She clutched at him. "Cole! Cole, my love!"

It enraged him to hear his brother's name on the lips of this woman during this, most precious of all moments and he wanted desperately to erase the memory of his hated brother. But he remembered what she'd told him, she was carrying Cole's child – *just like the other*. His brother had managed once again to thwart him. Nakoa fell away from her, his breathing labored from the ordeal of trying not to take her in spite of everything.

"Why, Cole? Why won't you love me?" she said in a drug-induced haze.

"Hush now." And Nakoa wrapped her in his arms as he stared with hatred into the dimness.

He held her until she fell asleep, then lifting her, carried her to his lodge and lay her gently down. He knew she thought she had been in the embrace of her husband and wondered where she had gotten the potent mind herb.

The next morning Jade awoke, stiff and hungry and her head ached. There was no sign of Nakoa but as the blur began to clear she began to remember and knew the previous night had been no dream.

Oh God, what have I done?

The women had been up since dawn to first tend the curing tents, then the sleeping hides which were shaken, bundled and tied, then the extra ponies were gathered and fed. Each woman saw to it that the water skins were filled for her own shelter as well as three extra for the council lodge. Even though there were many watering places on the way, this was a custom that never wavered.

Jade went to fill her skins at the stream. Nakoa was sharpening his war lance. He didn't bother to look at her but she saw the set of his jaw and knew that anger still claimed his heart.

She leaned down and filled the skins, a wave of dizziness hit her and she didn't know if it was an expectant woman's morning complaint or because she was nauseated by what had happened the night before. "It was you last night," she said angrily. "I'm not sure how it happened. I was... I didn't feel like myself. It was a mistake that will never again be repeated."

"That is what you said before, yet you came to me. I asked you if it was of your own free will. I asked this twice." His face was as hard as a stone, his eyes shiny.

He didn't tell her about the drug he had tasted in her mouth when he'd kissed her, nor did he tell her that he had not taken her, only held her while she slept. He refused to allow himself to believe that yet another woman preferred his brother to him.

"You called for him."

"I said his name because I thought you were my husband."

"I am Nakoa, future chief of the Sioux nation and just so that you understand, it was your husband's name that renewed my vigor to kill him." He left her by the stream, more confused and afraid for Cole than ever.

When Jade returned to the tent, she found that heavier clothes had been left for her. Deer skin boots and a longer, thicker hide dress. The village was almost deserted now, most of the tribe had begun their journey as soon as they were ready. All that remained were long lodge-poles and pits, where only yesterday fires had roared.

Donning the warm clothes, she picked up her bundle and shifted it more comfortably on her back before following slowly behind the others. She could see Nakoa, Black Shield and the elders riding ahead as befitting their position.

Chapter Nineteen

The Search

Ramy sat on the sofa next to Dona Maria, staring at the two men talking a few feet away. Don Miguel looked at the tall mountain man sternly.

"At least take some of my *compañeros* with you. Better yet," the Spanish gentleman said, his hand pounding his chest, "I will go with you."

"No, Miguel, I have to do this alone. I couldn't stand another death on my conscience," Cole said gratefully.

He looked down at his hands. "Look, I know I've been a hard, stubborn man. I'd be dead now if Ramy hadn't ridden like the wind to get you to come out to the ranch. I can't thank you enough."

"You would have done as much for anyone. Besides, we have always thought of you and Ramy as part of our family," Dona Maria said softly.

"Your heart carries a heavy burden *mi amigo*. You should not have had to carry it all by yourself."

"It's been mine for a long time. I guess I just had to work it through." Cole glanced over at his son, who looked back him with wide confused eyes.

Cole then looked down at his hands. "I'd be beholden to you both if you'd look after my boy. I don't know how long it's going to take tracking them but if I haven't returned by this time next year, all I own is his."

"Cole..." Miguel began but Cole threw up a hand stopping him so that he could finish.

"I need you to look after it all until he's of age. I've drawn up papers and left them with the circuit court in town. But it's you I'm trusting his life with."

"I will care for him as if he were my own son, you know that. But to make this journey alone to find your wife is certain death." Don Miguel's voice was filled with emotion.

"I have to go after her."

The regal gentleman sighed. "It will be as you wish." The Spaniard's voice dropped with remorse. "Cole, if you find her, she may not be the same woman you knew."

Cole closed his eyes remembering Jade's face.

"She will be the same to me." But the words belied what was really in his mind.

"And you still intend to kill Nakoa?"

"Yes."

"And this hatred will be finished." It was a statement with a hint of a question.

Cole got up and went over to his son. He saw with pride that there was a wisdom to his face, his son was beginning show a hard determination but he still had little boy eyes that were wide and held a hint of foreboding as they stared back at him. He knelt in front of him.

"Son, I'm going now. You stay here and mind your ways with the señor and Dona Maria."

"But I want to go with you, Pa," Ramy pleaded.

"Now Ramy we've been all through this. You can't go. You're not old enough. I can't risk losing you too."

The boy threw his arms around his father's neck. He had wanted to be brave but it was impossible.

"Please, Pa, let me go with you."

"That's enough, Ramy! Now please, do as I say, son." He untangled himself and stood up, glancing at him once more. He turned to leave quickly not wanting Ramy to see how much he hated to leave him. It was quite conceivable that his son was all he had left. He halted and looked back at the distraught boy. "I know I haven't shown it much but I have always loved you. I just didn't know how to say or show it."

Ramy ran to his father and hugged him one last time. "Bring her home, Pa."

"I will, son, I will." He took a long look at the handsome little face and then at Dona Maria. The woman glided to them and gently pried the distraught boy from his father and held him close to her breast, her eyes bidding Cole to go.

* * * * *

Jade's back ached, it seemed the bundle she carried grew heavier with each step. She'd always thought of herself as strong but as she watched these women endure under the most grievous conditions, she was amazed at their strength and tenacity of will.

It had begun to rain. At first a slow drizzly miserable mist, then a torrential downpour and did so for two days.

They slept in the woods in makeshift lean-tos. They ate food that was tasteless and the tiring days seemed endless.

Her thoughts often drifted toward escape, back to civilization but with the threat of harsh weather coming, she knew it was impossible.

It grew much colder as they went upward and Jade thought she would surely freeze to death before they reached their destination. The snows had started, just a few wet flakes at first but they soon became a steady white blur. Even so, they marched ever upward. The roads, such as they were, would soon be impassable. Jade knew that if Cole was still alive, it would be impossible for him to find her during the winter months.

Day in and day out they marched, for more than a week. She was unable to complain and as she watched the other women, she refused to be less than they because of her weaknesses.

Unable to keep food down, she grew weaker and fell behind a number of times but caught up by sheer strength of her will. There came a day when she was just too tired and began to lag far behind. The old one dressed in a heavy fur cloak came to her and began to pull her along none too gently.

"No stop for you, girl. Must walk. No stop for you," the old woman said in broken English, much to Jade's surprise, for it was the first time she had ever dared utter a word in an intelligible language.

"Leave me alone, just leave me here," she said, snatching her arm away from her.

"No! You walk now." She pulled Jade with her heavy bundle along the path beaten into the snow by the others who had gone ahead.

After she had fallen back a number of times, the old woman tied a leather strap to Jade's waist and pulled her along like a burro. The others laughed but she was beyond caring, her mind fuddled with hunger and fatigue.

* * * * *

Cole sat by the fire wrapped in his blanket. Snow had begun to fall lightly, the crisp, cold air chilling him to the bone. *I'll never find her in this.* His eyes wandered up to the where the mountains loomed like dark specters. *She could be anywhere.*

He thought he heard a sound but chalked it up to the trees rustling through the dead branches. *No! There it was again.* Cole crouched and drew his gun.

"Come on out, I know where you are and I'll blow a hole right through ya."

The chestnut colored horse came into view.

"Ramy?" Cole's shocked expression, expanded to a thin line of relief.

"I gotta go with you, Pa, I just gotta go," Ramy said as he got down from the horse.

"You young fool! I could have shot you."

"I don't care what you say, or what you do to me. I ain't going back," Ramy shouted.

Cole saw the determined look on his son's face and pulled him close in an embrace and then to the fire.

"How'd you find me?" he said looking up at the falling snow.

"It was easy. I'm the son of the gol-dernest, best trackin' mountain man there ever was," the lad said stretching his hands out to the fire.

"Guess I can thank Kyle for teaching you language like that." They both grew quiet at the mention of their deceased friend.

"Go on, unsaddle your horse, I'll get you something to eat."

"And coffee too?" Ramy asked wondering if he was pushing it.

"Yes son and coffee too." His son was becoming a man.

* * * * *

The snow was falling rapidly now and Jade pulled the buffalo robe closer around her face. She could feel her body inside it, she had grown thinner in spite of her pregnancy and her face was pale, making her eyes seem larger, their color even more exaggerated.

Finally, they reached their mountain destination. It was more like a dell with a range of high peaks all around. There were several small caves and the thick timber formed a large thick copse keeping the snow from falling too quickly to the ground.

The braves cut and distributed lodge-poles, erecting a village within the circlet where before there had been nothing except a dusting of cold white powder. Like a well organized ant colony, the new community began to take shape.

By the end of the day, with the smoke coming from the tops of the teepees it looked as though they had always been there.

The chief and his family had a choice of the large caves and the others were distributed by lottery. Nakoa had chosen a smaller but comfortable one and bade the old woman instruct Jade as to what needed to be done to make it habitable.

First, she dug a small hole for the fire, then arranged the furs to form a bed for Nakoa. Her own, she placed a few feet farther away. It made a fine shelter and after the fire was lit it was quite warm and dry.

A nearby stream provided cold water and some fish but it was beginning to freeze and ice was forming on the banks. It was imperative that the women and children to catch as many as possible for smoking and curing, for they knew the winter would be long and relentless.

After the long tiring journey, they all longed for sleep and soon everyone had disappeared into their prepared shelters.

Jade had taken some dried meat and greens from the communal pouch and had hot food ready for Nakoa when he came in.

He pulled the heavy cloak from his shoulders and to Jade's surprise he wore very little underneath. After watching him for some moments he went to her furs and was about to lie down.

"Why are your sleeping furs there?"

She didn't answer but continued to recline. He grabbed her and the furs and threw them atop his own. He pushed her down and then lay beside her.

"Sleep now."

She was too tired and weak to argue and lay down next to him, looking at his broad back. He had fallen asleep instantly.

* * * * *

Deer and other wild game were scarce and while they were in no immediate danger of starving, there was little fresh meat. Once Nakoa left the camp and didn't return for three days. When he did, he had a large elk across his horse and that evening the village feasted.

Jade was still sick in the mornings and found it embarrassingly difficult to keep her food down. She wouldn't be able to keep her condition from them much longer. The hide dress was already becoming too tight across her breasts and her abdomen was thickening.

One day the old woman came to her.

"I know what you not tell."

Jade ignored her and continued rolling out the flat cakes.

The woman grabbed her and pulled her out of the cave.

"What are you doing?" Jade said snatching away from her.

"You come, you see." The woman hauled her toward a large tent at the back of the camp and pushed her through the flap hole. It was some moments before she was able to see anything.

Finally after her eyes adjusted she saw a young girl no more than sixteen sitting up against a large rock with two women holding her legs. Her face was contorted with pain but with the exception of an occasional heavy intake of breath and an occasional groan, she made no sound. The girl was in labor and her distended belly rose and fell with each push.

As she labored, she clutched at wooden stakes that had been driven into the ground by her sides.

Jade looked at the faces of the other women who gave no words of soothing or encouragement.

"Do something! Help her!" Jade cried unable to contain her concern.

"Do nothing, baby come." It was the old one.

Jade found a rag and knelt down and wiped the girl's sweating brow. The girl grabbed Jade's hand as another contraction ripped through her.

It was two hours before she was delivered of the child. It was only then that the other women came to life. They immediately took the baby and began to work on the exhausted girl.

Is this what it's like? Would that be me in a few months, with nothing but dirt under my body and two sticks to aid me? she wondered.

Jade could take no more. She ran from the lodge out into the cold, blindly toward the stream. Her hot tears instantly turning cold as the wind whipped across her face. *What if that girl had died? These people are heartless.* She knew she couldn't stay here another minute.

The old one caught up to her. "I know what you not tell."

She placed her gnarled hand across Jade's belly. Jade shoved it away and ran to the bank of the stream, which was now ice. Further out there was the freezing water and she moved ahead wading into the icy current. She didn't care if she reached the other side or not, she didn't care if she died.

The old woman saw her walking into the stream and ran to get Nakoa.

Like the wind he was after her. He reached her pulled her back to shore and whirled her around and shook her hard.

"Let me go, just let me die," she screamed at him.

He half dragged her back to the cave, picking up a long thin tree branch along the way.

Seeing this, the old woman ran to catch up. Nakoa pushed Jade inside the cave and she fell to her knees breathing heavily.

"You will not defy me by trying to escape. You will stay."

He was about to bring the tree limb down across her back when the old woman stepped between them, her hand raised stopping the falling blow.

"Would you beat the child she carries from her body?"

Nakoa lowered his arm slowly, his eyes never leaving Jade's quivering back.

The old woman, seeing that he would not carry out his threat left the cave quietly.

Jade knelt there sobbing. He pulled her to her feet and really looked at her for the first time in weeks. He saw the unmistakably larger swell of her breasts and the ever-so-slight rise of her belly. He placed his hand across the expanse of it, his gleaming eyes boring into hers.

"All will confirm this child to be mine. He will not want you now," he said with devilish delight. "Do not try to leave again Jade, This is your last warning." The threat in his voice was unmistakable.

* * * * *

The snow and sleet encumbered Cole and Ramy as they climbed higher into the mountains. It was a grueling trek, with one snow and ice storm after the other.

They came upon a few lost cattle and sheep frozen to death and Cole knew he had to get his son to safety. Although Ramy put up a good strong front, he was still just a boy.

"We have to go back, son," he yelled above the howling wind.

He looked at Ramy, who was bundled from head to toe with his horse blanket wrapped around him. He looked warm enough but he remembered a little more than a year before when they had almost lost him to the fever. He wasn't about to risk it again.

Turning around, they headed back down the mountain pass.

Home was much further away than he'd expected and Cole knew the weather wasn't about to hold.

It was nightfall when they entered the closest settlement looking for a place to stay. The common hall was full and it was only through the kindness of the restaurant proprietor and his wife that they were offered a room in their home a few yards from the establishment.

Cole prayed that the storm would pass over but it had other ideas and twenty-four hours later, the settlement was nearly buried under eight feet of snow.

Frustration ate at him as he and Ramy waited. It didn't begin to melt until late April which meant the ground would still be a soggy mess. He surmised they wouldn't be able to start out again until mid-May at best.

Chapter Twenty

It was time to move and the whole process began again as Nakoa's camp prepared to return to the low country. More than eight months along Jade was unable to proceed as fast as the rest and thankfully Nakoa allowed her to ride a great deal of the time. No one acknowledged her but because it was known that she carried his child, she did gain a modicum of respect from the elders. By late May they were settled once again. There was food aplenty and the village flourished once more.

One day as she sat among the women at the grinding stone, the girl who had labored and given birth to the child in the mountains, came and sat down next to Jade. Without looking up Jade struggled to get up and move away. The others had always made it plain that she was an outsider and wouldn't sit close to her and still made unkind remarks and gestures to her.

The girl stopped her and patted the place beside her, inviting Jade to sit. She sat back down glancing at the sleeping baby strapped to her back. The girl smiled, reached over and took Jade's hand and held it to her face.

"Seester," she said in broken English. Jade nodded curiously. Then the girl took her hand and held it to her heart. "Seester," she said once again.

Suddenly Jade understood, the girl meant *sister*. Tears welled in her eyes as she held the girl's hand to her own chest.

"Sister," she said. The others looked at them and mumbled among themselves then went on with their work.

Jade had never had a close friend and this, her first, was a young Sioux maiden. One small act of kindness of just wiping her brow and holding her hand, had made them, in a way, kindred.

After that day, Jade found pleasure in teaching her new friend, whose name was Little Deer, English and she in turn taught her corresponding words in Sioux. They were always together and didn't care that some of the others still shunned her but others grudgingly on occasion came forward and joined them.

Little Deer showed Jade many things to help ease the burden of day-to-day hardships. She showed her which herbs were good for cooking and which ones were just right for healing.

The young girl was playful and enjoyed learning the things that Jade could teach her. She especially enjoyed untangling Jade's wayward curls which had grown again and now hung nearly to her waist, and plaiting them into two long braids.

Jade loved her rambunctious little boy Ahote, which she later learned meant *restless one*.

She suffered sleepless nights and found herself wandering around the camp, for which Nakoa, remembering his own mother's demise, reprimanded her severely.

"If you wish to walk about, tell me and I will go with you."

"It's not your company I want," she shot back.

"What do you want then?"

"My freedom!"

* * * * *

It was a warm on a late June morning and she was coming back from filling water skins. Jade walked slowly, stopping now and again to ease the chronic cramping in the small of her back.

She heard the sound of a horse's hooves and got out of the way just as a brave suddenly rode by her at breakneck speed whooping what she thought was a war cry.

Nakoa exited his tent and waited. The brave had been gone a week and had only now returned with the news that he'd long awaited. Cole McCayne was coming.

Mid-July was when Jade calculated the baby should be born but along with her low belly aches and the fact that the baby almost never stopped moving now, she also had a sense that either her timing was off or the child was coming early.

* * * * *

Cole and Ramy came upon Nakoa two mornings later as he and some braves were spearing fish at the river. The other braves stiffened as he approached. Nakoa however, didn't even bother to look up but spoke in a deep guttural voice.

"So! You have come and you have brought the mosquito."

Ramy shifted in his saddle at the barb.

"Where is she?" Cole asked trying to control his rage.

"She is among us." He jabbed his spear into the water nonchalantly.

"I want to see her."

"In time."

Cole noticed the others closing in around them.

Nakoa spoke to them in his native tongue as he waded out of the water and onto the bank. Then, he threw his brother a scathing look and walked away.

The braves hovered behind Cole and Ramy, urging them forward.

At the camp, they were ushered into the council lodge where Black Shield, sat before a blazing fire.

He saw Cole and his weak watery eyes filled with conflicting emotion, for this was the son of the man who had killed his daughter.

He glanced at the boy, who was not unlike Nakoa at that age and that was good. *There was still time to save him.* But judging by the look on Nakoa's face, Cole McCayne had come to the end of his life's road.

"I want to see Jade now," Cole said with loathing.

Nakoa looked at him, a glint of unbecoming humor in his eyes.

"Patience my brother."

The air was filled with tension as they sat eyeing each other across the smoky fire.

"I have waited long for this day, McCayne. I am going to kill you but you already know that."

"Or I you," Cole answered back smoothly.

"When I take your life, I will do it slowly. I want to watch you die in agony and I want you to see me watching it. Then, I will keep your woman and the mosquito." He pointed to a frightened but brave-fronted Ramy, who immediately leapt to his feet.

"No! You won't keep us. We're gonna find Jade and take her home, ain't we, Pa?" His little voice expressing a statement that even he wasn't sure was possible.

"You have spirit. That is good. You will make a brave warrior," Nakoa said, his eyes held a vicious glint as he looked down at the little boy.

"Never! I'm staying with my pa and with Jade."

"You cannot be sure that your father still wants her. Much has changed."

Cole bristled, the muscle in his jaw working up and down rapidly. "Where is she?" he said through gritting teeth.

"Your woman has a strong spirit. I must tell you she tried to return to you many times. Her efforts as you will soon see, were futile."

It was all Cole could do to hold his temper in check. The cool smug attitude his brother displayed angered him beyond reason, even though he realized he was deliberately being provoked.

"I think she would still try to come to you...if she could," Nakoa laughed.

The game had gone on long enough. Cole's wrath, no longer checked, shouted out in anger. "Where is my wife, Nakoa?"

The tall Sioux rose and shouted, equally as angry, "Come! Both of you. I will take you to her."

He walked them to his lodge and bade them wait as he marched inside. He pulled a half dozing Jade up.

"What's wrong?" she said struggling to maintain her balance. He pulled her through the opening and swung her around to face her husband.

"Take her! *If* you still want her," he shouted, his eyes blazing with triumph.

Jade's eyes widened in disbelief. She couldn't believe that they were actually there.

"Cole? Ramy?" she whispered, still not trusting that they truly stood before her.

Ramy ran into her arms. Ignoring her girth he hugged her, crying her name over and over. Jade kissed the top of his head, marveling at how much he had grown.

Through her tears she looked at her husband, only to find his shocked eyes glued to her distended belly. She let go of Ramy and walked toward him. As she did, he took a single step back from her.

Jade's face instantly registered hurt and he was immediately sorry. But the harm had been done. He swung around to Nakoa, his eyes blazing with fury and his stance ready to fight.

"You filthy animal! You pig!" Cole said with his teeth bared and fists clenched.

Nakoa looked at him with arrogance mixed with glee. He knew that his brother thought the child was his and he would let this fire to burn a little while longer.

"She missed you so she came to me and of her own free will," Nakoa said with a tight amused grin.

"You're a liar. She would never..."

"Ask her, brother. Ask if she did not come to me." He conveniently left out that nothing had happened, then looked at Jade, a sneer crossing his face, daring her to deny it, even though it wasn't what she knew her husband was thinking.

Cole whirled around to Jade, his eyes accusing and questioning.

She wanted to tell him, to explain but things about that night was still unclear to her but the sire of her child was not.

"Cole, I have to tell you —"

But he held up a hand to stop her. "You went to him on your own, Jade?" His voice was filled with pained incredulity.

Jade couldn't stand his painfully accusatory tone. "It wasn't... You have to let me explain..."

His dark eyes were steeled points boring right through her.

Intoxicated with satisfaction Nakoa scoffed at them.

"You two should talk. I will take the mosquito." He tried to move him but Ramy jerked away.

Cole stared at Jade but spoke to his son. "Go with him, Ramy. I need to speak to Jade alone. He won't hurt you," he said, throwing Nakoa a murderous look.

After they'd gone, Cole turned on his heels and walked angrily away. Jade held her protruding belly and was hard pressed to try to catch up to him. With her breath coming in gasps, she saw him leaning against a tree.

"Why?" he shouted with a voice filled with hurt and anger at the same time.

"Why what, Cole? I've never had a choice in any of this, not with you and not with him," she shouted back.

"What he said, is it true?"

She looked away in shame.

He closed his eyes, he knew the answer. "You did go to him didn't you?" His voice had an odious finality to it.

"No! Just..." she said with confused anguish.

"Just the night this child was conceived." He finished for her pointing at her swollen belly.

"NO! I was already pregnant when he took me away."

Cole's eyes softened momentarily. "What?"

"I wasn't really sure or I would have told you."

"And knowing you were carrying my child you went to him anyway? You disgust me."

Jade was crying hysterically. "No...I didn't. One moment we were talking. It was like I was talking to you. I couldn't see clearly."

"But you were with him, you gave yourself to him," he yelled.

"I don't know," she screamed back.

"You don't know?" He wanted to laugh.

Jade wanted to explain further but the fury in his eyes told her that anything she said was beyond his comprehension.

"He knew I was pregnant, I told him the first time he tried to..." She didn't finish.

"He used you to get to me, you must have known that?"

"And what would you have me do? I tried to leave but he brought me back."

He turned and slammed his fist into the tree. "And to think I held back, when all the time..."

Jade's face grew dark with fury. "When all the time what? You think me a common whore now? You took me, Cole. You took me when I was innocent of the ways of men."

"You are my wife not his."

"Have you no mercy for what I've had to endure? I was there when your heart was hurting and when you were fighting to keep a memory alive. But I fell in love with you anyway, and if that wasn't bad enough your brother tried to take me out of revenge and hatred for you and now you can look at me with disgust?" Her shoulders slumped. Suddenly she was tired, very tired. "You should be ashamed. Both of you! I'm the one who has been a pawn in this hateful game. You have no idea what I've been through and you don't even care."

He went to her. Removing his hat he ran his hand through his dark hair, his face etched with a confusion of emotion. Searching her face, he found it filled with pain and anger. She was right. He did love her and he needed her.

"Come home with me and Ramy."

Surprised, she looked at him and then took his large cold hand.

"Oh, Cole, do you mean it?" She hugged him as much as her girth would allow but he didn't caress her back. "Yes, Cole, take me home, I want to go home."

The words sounded so good on her tongue. It was her home, the place where she could finally show him the love they were meant to share.

"The child of course will have to remain here. I just can't be sure, Jade," he said quietly.

She pulled away from him as though burned, searching his face for a trace of humor, he was serious.

"Nakoa was right, you are a hypocrite! Did you leave Ramy with his mother's people when he was born?"

"Ramy is *my* son," he shouted.

"And so is this child. Yours and mine," she shouted back.

"He acts as though it's his!" he hissed at her.

"He never said that."

"He said that you came to him that you offered yourself to him."

"I did no such thing. I told you, I wasn't myself. I'm not sure what happened."

"But something might have." He knew his tone was still accusing.

But she couldn't lie to him. "I woke up and I was alone, that's all I remember. Cole the one thing I do know is that this," she held onto her belly, "is your child."

Cole looked at her wanting with all his heart to believe her. But he knew his brother, he knew the hatred he carried for him and he knew he was not above doing just this sort of evil thing. But to get her to lie about it was unconscionable even for him, unless she truly had wiped it all from her mind. He had heard how white captives when freed came back to their homes and had completely erased the entire episode of their capture out of their minds. Choosing to act as though they never experienced any of it. Others, he knew, went mad and either killed themselves or had to be institutionalized.

"Tell me, Cole," Jade said when she saw him pondering. "Why do you really want me to come back? Ramy is getting to be a young man now and can take care of himself, he doesn't need me. If what you're thinking is true and you're always going to think it then why?"

"Because I need you," he said quietly into the evening air.

"But not our child."

"Try to understand, Jade. I hate him," he said looking in the direction of the camp.

"Nakoa is your brother."

"Half brother!"

"What's the difference? You share the same blood."

"I am going to kill him."

"And what if he kills you? What do think will happen to Ramy and me?"

He whirled to face her once again.

"Maybe you'd like that wouldn't you? You'd like to be one big happy family," he said sarcastically.

"Why can't you make up your mind, Cole? Your ego is jumping around like a gelded bull trying to find a place that suits you." She looked at him with pity.

"Don't look at me like that, Jade."

"I know why he despises you, but why do you hate him?"

Cole could only stare at her silently. "I didn't, not until he came and took you away."

"I feel sorry for both of you. Yes! I know all about your father, Enez and Ramy. You never shared those things with me. You kept it bottled up inside you, wallowing in a barrel of self-pity, letting your hate twist you into a hateful, cold man with no heart. You allowed it to rob you of the most important years with Ramy, years that can never be regained. Well go on with your hate then, both of you. I don't need either of you. I will be out of your life and Nako's as soon as I am able. I only wish that Ramy didn't have to stay with you. He's had it hard enough being part Native American like his uncle and not having the love of his father. Well my child will have love. I will protect this child with my life. Do you understand that, you miserable coward?" She was crying now.

Suddenly, a cramp doubled her over. She looked up at him amazed at the realization that her unborn child was beginning to summon its birth. She winced when another dizzying pain struck her again.

Cole tried to help her but she staved off his assistance with a sharp raise of her hand.

"Don't you touch me!" she said, then stumbled back to the encampment.

Chapter Twenty-One

Nakoa had been watching them from a distance. From what he could see, he knew that his brother had not disappointed him.

He saw Jade double over and stumble away from her husband. He came to attention when she tried to move past him. He too held out his hand to aid her.

"You too! Leave me alone, I wish I never had to look at either of you again. Go on kill yourselves. We're all better off without your hatred." She shoved the lodge flap aside and crawled inside.

Cole had caught up and was standing before Nakoa.

"I think it's the child." His eyes stared at the lodge anxiously.

Nakoa moved to go inside the tent but Cole caught his arm. "I'm not leaving here without her."

"You surprise me, brother. You still want her? Even under these unchangeable circumstances?"

"She's my wife."

"Not for long."

"She'll never stay with you Nakoa, if that's what you're thinking."

Nakoa bristled. Cole went on, sensing his brother's growing irritation. "She won't stay once that child comes. She'll leave the first chance she gets."

"She will stay. I know you, brother. You are not sure about things and your pride would never let you accept her after what you think has happened," Nakoa said angrily but he looked longingly at the tent.

Cole looked at him and suddenly it was clear to him. Cole couldn't deny the unmistakable truth he was witnessing.

"You want her don't you? It's not about what's been between us all these years. You love her."

Nakoa's fist opened and closed. He wanted to strike at this hated face before him. A face that he had seen every day for most of his life. One that had haunted his dreams. A face that had attached itself to his soul for an eternity and had kept the burning hate alive within him.

When he spoke his voice was low and controlled.

"Tonight I will sit in the fire lodge and speak with the war gods so that they can council me on the best ways to make you suffer. The mosquito will stay in the lodge of my grandfather. I know you will not sneak off without him. Tomorrow, I will kill you."

Cole was equally angry, his eyes piercing with hatred.

"Until tomorrow then."

As he turned to leave, Nakoa called out to him.

"Brother! After I have counseled with the sprits, I will lay next to your wife," he goaded.

Cole whirled to face his brother, his entire being contorted into a ball of rage.

Nakoa seeing that he'd finally gotten the response he wanted, walked off to the council lodge.

Cole could hardly walk to the river, a blinding heartache overtook him and he rubbed his brow wearily. The fight left him. He sat on the bank and stared at the ebbing waters. What was wrong with him? Had he confused desire with love? Of course he wanted her, she had wended her way into his heart even before he knew it was happening. Jade had always shown promise and spirit. And he knew that if he had just given her the chance, she would have loved him without reservation, as he had done with Enez. Cole knew it was time to put Enez's memory to rest. He had to let go if he was ever to have a life with the only woman he had loved since the death of his wife.

But now with the past mixing with the present, brought it all back to Cole, and he struggled with the agonizing and unacceptable knowledge that his brother was in love with his new wife. But Jade was his and he wanted nothing more, than to take her and Ramy home to his valley.

Killing Nakoa was inevitable. For he was sure now, that his half brother would never let her go.

* * * * *

True to his word, later that night, Nakoa came in and lay beside Jade.

Pains that had been haunting her earlier were a mere shadow of what they had been but the child had moved lower into the birth canal and she could feel the pressure building in her back.

Since Cole had made it perfectly clear that he wanted little to do with her if she kept the baby, she would not go to him but she knew that Ramy needed his father. She had to try to save him.

"Please do not kill my husband," she said softly in the dimly lit tent.

"When I kill him, I will be your husband."

The realization of his statement didn't shock her. She'd felt the difference in him for some months now. He had become softer and more gentle.

"Let him go, Nakoa." Her voice was a whisper. "Let him live and I will stay with you. Please." She was grasping at any straw she could.

"Aside from his hypocrisy, my brother is selfish and full of pompous pride. He will not leave you behind."

"I'm sure I can make him see reason."

"You love him so much that you would sacrifice yourself to me save him?" he spat bitterly.

"I'm tired, Nakoa, don't ask me to be clear about things where you are involved. But yes, I do love him that much."

Nakoa rose on one elbow and looked down into her face that was bathed in a thin sheen of perspiration. Her voice was tinged with pain.

"I told Cole I wanted nothing to do with either of you. I am not going to let my child be consumed by this insane hatred," she said through the dull ache in her belly and back.

"He wants you still."

"He refuses our child."

"It takes a man with great strength of will to accept seed that is not his own."

"Could you?" she asked.

He arose on one elbow and turned to look at her. His heart ached as he refrained from pushing a damp curl from her forehead.

"If my brother sees the light, we shall never know the answer to that."

"You know the truth, Nakoa. Tell him, he will believe you."

"Even if his beliefs warrant that the child remains, you could never leave it. Even now the connection of motherhood binds you and will never allow you to be separated."

He lay down again.

Jade looked over at the stony-faced man lying beside her.

"Was there never a moment when you didn't hate each other?"

"There was one such a time, when we were boys but it passed quickly."

"Tell me." She moved her bulk sideways to look at him, hoping the conversation would ease the pains that were beginning to creep back into her spine.

"He was fourteen and we had gone into the high country to hunt. The chaparral there is very thick and it covered the ground like a dull yellow blanket. We were in the high grass looking for small animals, rabbits and such. I was going to prove to him once and for all that I was the better hunter. He was lagging behind me, when suddenly I found myself in a deep hole. The more I tried to get out, the more I began to sink. It was quicksand. I knew I was going to die. I looked up and saw him staring down at me with jubilation in his eyes. He smiled a little. I knew he wanted me to beg for his help. But I wouldn't. I stared him straight in the eye and began my death chant."

Jade couldn't help but be intrigued by his story as he continued.

"I had sunk to my shoulders and I knew I was facing death. Then suddenly, he yanked off his belt and threw it to me, then took hold of a nearby bramble bush for leverage. At first, I didn't take the belt and he snarled at me to do it. He screamed at me

to take it, yelled and finally pleaded. I told him that I would soon be dead and he wouldn't have the shame of a red-skinned brother to embarrass him.

"He started calling me every vile name he could think of. Half-breed, red-man born of a dog and worse. Still, I wouldn't take hold of the safety he offered. It wasn't until he called my mother a Native American whore, that I grabbed hold of the belt. I could think of nothing else but getting out of that quicksand pit and splitting his head wide open. I hung on and he pulled. Only when I was out did he let go of the bush. His hand was torn and bleeding with many barbed thorns stuck in his palm. I was exhausted and out of breath but I told him that he had better take back what he'd said about my mother or I'd kill him. He said it was the only way he could get me to take hold of the belt. After all he said, I was the '*stubbornest injun there ever was*'."

Jade thought she saw a shadow of a smile cross his face.

"I looked at his bleeding hand. With my knife I began to take the thorns out one by one. There were sixty-eight of them and he never made a sound as I worked on him. I knew the pain was unbearable. If you've ever seen a bramble bush you'd know what I mean. I tore my shirt and wrapped his hand and told him we'd better get home before it started to swell and it surely would. As we walked home I wanted to thank him for my life but somehow the words wouldn't come. We were within sight of the cabin and I stopped him. I told him that I owed him my life and until I could repay the debt, I would be his slave. He told me I was a stupid injun and couldn't be his slave 'cause I was his brother. It was the closest we ever came to being friends. It was like that for most of that summer, both us living on the fringes of friendship. But then my mother was killed by Aaron McCayne and the true hate started once more."

Jade became excited by a new thought. "Then this is your chance Nakoa, to repay him with a life. You said it yourself. Let us go and the debt will be finished."

Nakoa said nothing. He did owe Cole his life.

"I will spare the life of the boy, that will be payment enough."

She sat up and glared at him angrily. "Both of you are so stubborn. This hate is eating you both alive and destroying everything you touch."

Suddenly, a pain struck her so hard, she leaned backward onto the pelts. Nakoa reached over to touch her but she slapped his hand away. Her grimacing face was a mask of agony as sweat broke out on her brow and upper lip. Nakoa knew that there was nothing he could do to help her. He wanted to hold her, to tell her that everything would be all right. He tried once again to touch her but her angry glare stopped him as her breath came in gasps.

He left the lodge to find the old woman to tell that Jade's time was near. Instantly she leaped into action and summoned several midwives to accompany her.

He waited until he saw them hurry to his lodge and then emerge again, taking Jade's pain-racked form to the birthing lodge. Only then did he go the council lodge once again and begin to mediate and prepare for the ordeal of the next day.

Earlier, a ditch had been dug and a fire built. It was then covered with alternating layers of stone and wet leaves which emitted great white vapors of hissing steam. He stripped down to bare skin. From a large clay bowl he dipped in his fingers and extracted some oil and began to smooth it all over his body. From another bowl he took red paint made from clay and covered his hands and his feet. A pipe lay nearby. He raised it to his lips and lit it, inhaling deeply. The air became acrid with the pungent smell of peyote, the hallucinogen that had brought Jade to him, and other strong, mountain herbs. Laying the pipe aside, he sat cross-legged in front of the huge blaze. He took hold of the six large eagle feathers that had been placed by the fire and placed three in each hand.

He thought he heard the soft beat of drums, as his mind entered the magical place of his ancestors. Slowly, his mind left him as he traveled high above the mountains like an eagle searching for prey. Nothing existed for him except the blue sky and the hard rock of the rolling hills. He never heard the elder come in and pour more water into the ditch over the hot stones and leaves. The lodge became a steam bath and sweat poured from every pore of his body. He didn't move, his eyes staring hard and almost unblinking into the flames.

All that night Nakoa struggled with the forces of the sprits while Jade struggled with her own agony.

Cole, not far away, was deep in thought when he heard the groans of his wife. *His wife*, bearing what he thought to be the child of his enemy and the devils of his conscience rode him ruthlessly. He wanted to go to her, to tell her that he loved her but his stubborn mind wouldn't allow his legs to obey. He hunkered down and picked up a stone and threw it haphazardly. Suddenly the air seemed dry and quiet and a dizziness overtook him. He sat back and held his head in his hands.

You no longer have reason to live between your world and my ghost land my beloved.

His head shot up and he looked around frantically. It was impossible. "Enez?" he said aloud.

A soft caressing breeze brushed against his cheek.

A new life comes. Not to replace me but to bring you joy and happiness if you let it.

"Where are you?" He was standing now, looking around crazily.

In the deepest places of your memory where I belong. She is in your heart now. She has always been true to you. Think back to the time you loved with her and you will know that there has been no betrayal. Unbind me from your heart so that my spirit will be free.

It was true. He had been holding on to a memory for so long, he didn't know how to live without it, but now he knew had to, once and for all.

Rest now Enez, and be happy in paradise.

Once again normal noises filled the air. A barking dog, a squawking bird, and in that moment Cole knew that whatever had just happened was gone now and gone forever.

At dawn, Nakoa went to the birthing lodge where he found Jade still in labor and weakened to the point of exhaustion. Tendrils of her hair plastered themselves to her pale, wan face.

Unable to stay away, Cole entered the lodge only to be halted from moving closer by two resolute maidens.

"Let him enter!" Nakoa's voice filled the air.

He moved forward and looked down at her. Memories of Enez giving birth to Ramy caused his head to produce a thick dull ache.

"Look at her!" Nakoa hissed angrily. "Watch in hopelessness and helplessness. Feel the pain, resentment and vulnerability I felt when I watched Enez bring forth *your* son."

Cole could only clench his fists tightly.

Jade opened her eyes slowly and looked at both of them with pity. "Not yours Nakoa," she rasped. "I hope I die and this child with me." She lapsed into another spasm of agonizing pain.

Suddenly Cole didn't care whose child it was. He didn't want her to die. "Live, Jade! Live and come home with us." Cole said the words, as he remembered all the years of barely accepting his own son. A lifetime of loneliness perpetrated by a surly, inattentive father, heaped on one defenseless little boy.

If Jade lived he would spend the rest of his life making it up to both of them. He would take them all away, from this place but he also knew that he would have to kill Nakoa in order to do it.

Jade again became animated as the pains overtook her. The baby was coming.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The two men stepped outside the lodge. They walked together a few feet.

"What if she dies?" Cole asked him as he remembered Enez.

"She will not die," Nakoa said willing it in his heart.

"She's having a bad time."

"Her will is strong, she will live."

"And the child? What if it dies?"

Nakoa turned savagely to face his brother.

"You're hoping for that, aren't you? You want that so you can try to take her away but not her child. Do not worry my brother, they will live and after I kill you I," he pounded his chest, "will have them both."

"Not while I have breath in my body!" Cole hissed back.

Less than an hour later they heard the high-pitched, indignant wail of a newborn baby. Nakoa stalked toward the lodge, Cole at his heels just as the old woman emerged holding the naked baby, the severed, knotted umbilical cord still dangling.

She handed the child to Nakoa. He took it and examined it swiftly, then showed it to Cole.

"A boy! As I knew it would be," he laughed aloud which sent the infant into a renewed fit of crying.

"How is she?" Cole spoke slowly and pointed to the lodge trying to make the woman understand. Ignoring him the old woman said something to Nakoa in their own tongue.

Disregarding them both, Cole ran into the lodge and knelt beside her and took her clammy hand in his. "Jade! I was a fool! A stupid crazy fool. I love you. Open your eyes and see that I love you. Don't leave me." Tears were in his eyes as he looked at her pale face.

"End your hatred. Spare your brother," she uttered weakly.

"I cannot promise that. He means to kill me."

"Forget this hatred and mean it. He will not fight you I promise."

"You cannot promise that my love."

"Send him to me."

By then the old woman had given Jade back her baby. Though weak and with her head swimming, she marveled at the beauty and perfection of him. His soft skin, his dark eyes and perfectly shaped mouth.

Nakoa entered a moment later and stood over them.

"Let them go. Ramy and Cole, just let them go."

Nakoa's face was expressionless.

"If I let him live he will come for you again and again."

"So it's about me now. When are you two going to make up your minds? Go ahead and destroy yourselves but I will not let my son be a part of this hatred."

In a flash, she covered the baby's face, pinching his nostrils with her hand. Instantly, Nakoa crouched and snatched it away. The baby wailed at the offensive treatment he was receiving.

"I will not allow you to harm my husband," she rasped.

"But I hate him with all my heart," Nakoa said with confused indignation.

"Part of you cares about him too." She watched him turn away as if to hide the truth she always knew. "If you agree to let him live, I will leave this child with you and your people because it seems I cannot convince him that he is ours. I will go with Cole. We will not return...ever."

"You would leave your own child?" he asked incredulously.

"I am not sure he will ever believe the truth. Yes, I am willing to make that sacrifice. What are you willing to do?"

He stood up, it was all too much. He wanted to live but he wanted Jade too. The moment he saw her, he'd wanted her and not just because she had belonged to his brother.

He was perplexed. What was to be done? There was a matter of his honor. All these years he had pondered over ways of killing the man he thought to be his worst enemy. Now this woman who had just borne a child in the middle of it came between all that.

"I will speak to him," Nakoa said, then went out to where Cole was pacing.

"She is willing to go with you and leave the baby here with me."

"It's not only about us Nakoa, there was my friend Kyle. You had him killed. You have more than just this to answer for. Besides, you'll come after her if I know you. There will be no rest until one of us is dead."

"She threatened to end her son's life if one of us raises a hand against the other. I could not be a leader to my people if I had a ghost child following my every step."

Cole sighed heavily and shook his head. "I couldn't live with it either."

"It is just like you brother, to get a head strong obstinate woman for a wife," Nakoa scoffed at Cole. "So I tell you this. She has told you the truth. That is your son who lies at her breast. It is true that she came to me but only because she had been somehow tricked into taking peyote. She had no knowledge of her actions."

Cole looked at him. "I've been a fool. She tried to tell me again and again, and in my heart I know the truth. I also know that your desire for her is strong. It must have been hard for you not take her."

"How could I when your name was constantly on her lips? How could I when she tried to run to you every chance she got until I threatened her?"

Cole breathed with relief and sorrow. "I said some awful things to her. She wanted to die. I have to find a way to make it up to her."

"Living was always the better choice. There are already too many dead honorable heroes, to what end would two more make?"

It was true and they both knew it.

* * * * *

Jade remained weak and took no nourishment. The old woman forced a thin gruel down her throat, only to have it spewed back at her.

"You no eat, child no eat. He not live," she said in broken English.

She knew the woman was right. The child was fitful because her milk was shallow and slow. It was another two days before she was able to nurse her son and even then he wiggled fitfully against her breast suckling as best he could.

Both Nakoa and Cole were ordered by Black Shield not to see her but to wait until she was stronger, then together they might all come to a suitable conclusion to their difficulties.

Much to Cole's confused irritation, Ramy had managed to become friends with several young Native American boys. They were so much alike and had found common ground. Ramy especially liked Tall Bear, a youth a little more than a year older than Ramy who showed him how to fish like a brave and even showed him what he believed would be his totem path.

* * * * *

After much thought and wrestling with his demons, Cole had made his decision. He only hoped it was the right one.

He went to the council tent. Black Shield, Nakoa and all the elders sat silently in a circle as he spoke to them.

"There has been too much bloodshed and too much hate. The woman called Jade is my wife and it is my wish that I be allowed to take her and our son home," he addressed them as a group but his words were exclusively for Nakoa.

There was a low rumble of protest from some of the elders.

"Allow me to finish!" Cole went and sat cross-legged opposite Black Shield. The old man's weak watery eyes rolled up to look at the man who was the son of his enemy.

"I can't change what has been done to you. I can't bring your daughter back. I wronged your grandson by pursuing the woman he wanted. But I must tell you that she loved me and I loved her. When she died, something in me was dead as well. It wasn't until I took this new woman as my wife that my life began to change. My selfish pride prevented me from being the husband she needed and deserved but I love her. Perhaps I waited too long to tell her and that will forever be my regret, but the decision about what happens to her should be her own. If she desires to stay, I will take Ramy and we will leave and never return." Even as he said the words his hope was that if she loved him the way he loved her, she would go with them.

The old man was quiet for a long time. Cole was not sure if he'd even understood what he was saying. The air was thick with a quiet tension. Finally Black Shield spoke.

"My grandson has shared with me how your new wife came to be with you. If that is true, then she has suffered through much with men controlling her life. I agree, let the decision be hers." He turned to face Nakoa who sat stiff-lipped and silent. "You must again endure the taste of this bitter medicine grandson but as with all great chiefs, sacrifices must be made."

"Then so be it," Nakoa said in a low voice.

"My grandson no longer wishes to have a woman who does not care for him, one who belongs to his brother. Put this hatred aside Cole McCayne, take your woman and your family and leave us as soon as she is able to travel."

* * * * *

That same night, as everyone slept, the Apache nation struck. Jade lay with her son at her breast and thought the wild cries outside were part of the singing. Then suddenly, the flap of the lodge was torn aside and Nakoa entered. His naked chest was glistening with beads of sweat mixed with blood from several shallow wounds.

"Hurry! I will take you to safety."

"What is it?" she said dislodging the baby from her breast and trying to rise.

"Apaches! Black Shield is dead," he said with sorrow and went to retrieve his rifle.

"Where are we going?"

"To where you will be safe," he said, handing her a fox pelt for the baby.

"What about Ramy and Cole?"

"I will find them but first you must come." He hurriedly pulled her from the tent.

Outside was an inferno of blazing tents, mutilated bodies and screaming people as they fought or tried to find safety from the slaughter. Keeping to the shadows, they slunk away. Twice they were attacked but Nakoa's bravery and fighting prowess saved them. He was making their way into the dense foliage of the forest, and surreptitiously traveled along the river's edge. Jade hugged her precious newborn son close then tugged at the sleeve of Nakoa's rawhide shirt.

"Where are they?" she whispered fearing that he might be trying to spirit her away.

The grunting sounds of a skirmish brought them both to attention. Looking through a copse of trees Nakoa and Jade saw Cole trying to fend off three Apache braves. Ramy was lying in the dirt bleeding from a small arm wound. Jade gasped and started to rush toward him but Nakoa held her back and went to join the fight.

The three braves were no match for this overwhelming twosome and soon the marauders lay dead in the dirt. Just as suddenly, they whirled and faced each other, the hatred they each carried so long once again prevalent. Each poised in a fighting stance but unsure as what they intended to do.

Jade ran to them.

"There is no time! We will all die if we stay here. Cole! Nakoa!" she yelled trying to get through the cloud of heated confusion.

"If things were as they once were we would continue this another time brother, but I think it's important to get your family out of danger," Nakoa said.

Cole nodded in agreement then went and scooped Ramy up and stood him on his feet.

"There are horses this way. Hurry," Nakoa whispered to them.

"Can you ride son?" Cole asked.

"I-I think so, Pa," the boy said with wide, frightened eyes.

Just as they all turned to run in the direction Nakoa had indicated, they were faced with Changi, chief and most hated of all Apaches.

He was fierce looking, with long straggly hair and war paint smeared in angry slashes across his scarred face. His mouth was an angry slash that reeked of cruelty. It was said that he had killed two of his wives for not presenting him with sons and had even slaughtered an innocent child for not keeping up during the winter trek. His brutality was legendary. It was no wonder Olathe had been so afraid of being sent to him.

Changi's ferret-like eyes roamed over Cole with hate. With a wild war cry, he took aim and threw his heavy war lance aimed straight at Cole's heart.

"No!" Nakoa shouted and leaped into the path of the flying spear. It caught him full in the chest. So powerful was the thrust that it knocked him backward and to the ground.

Cole flew at Changi and took him down, they struggled for only a moment before Cole pulled the knife from the brave's own hand and thrust it into his throat, forever stilling the cry that would have brought his braves running.

Cole raced to his brother's side and knelt. His breathing was labored and blood was running from his mouth as he struggled to speak.

"She is a true one, your wife. She never gave up hope that you would find her. That night she came to me was because she was confused with the drug. She slept and I held her for a time, that is all. She loves only you."

"Nakoa," Cole began but the brave struggled to hold up a hand.

"I return a life. Take them. Raise both your sons so that they will not know the hatred we did. Make them understand all the things we could not."

Jade was standing over them holding her whimpering baby, tears welling in her eyes. Nakoa reached weakly up to her. She knelt with the child and Nakoa laboriously pushed the fox pelt away from his little face.

"In my spirit world your name shall be called Hawke. This, I decree at the hour of my death. I will watch over you from the city of the spirits of fire and water as if you were my own son." He winced heavily with pain and looked again at Jade. "I curse myself to wander until the dusk of your life, then I will come for you." And with a sharp, gurgling intake of breath, he slumped to the ground. Nakoa, future chief of the Sioux nation was dead.

"Jade!" It was Cole. "We have to leave. Now."

She rose and whirled to face him. "He gave his life for you, now what will you give him?"

"There's no time," he said looking around them.

"Make your promise before his dead body."

He looked at her obviously frightened but determined face. He knew that she would not be moved unless he made a pact of peace and forgiveness at that very moment. He knelt down and with his knife and made a small cut in his index finger, then laid it across the bloody chest of his Sioux brother.

"I swear by this blood that mixes with my own, that I will honor your life. I will teach my sons the ways of my people and allow them to know the ways of your people. I will turn them against hate, and as you walk in the halls of your spirit clan, you will know that my son will bear the name given him by his uncle, a great and proud Sioux warrior. I swear this by the blood of two nations."

He rose, then went and picked up a now semi-conscious Ramy, as Jade looked at Cole with concern.

"It's not serious but he's just exhausted. He fought like one of them."

They heard a wild war cry and saw a new band of warriors coming out of the forest to aid the ravaged Sioux. With one last look at the death-stilled face that was even now becoming part of the night, Cole took her by the arm and led her through the trees into the dark denseness of the forest, as the battle raged on.

Chapter Twenty-Three

There had been a land boom in the last year and the once sparsely settled valley was dotted with wispy smoke from new cabins and ranches that had been built. Still, they trekked for two days before they found a farmhouse where they rested and borrowed horses. Within the week, they had made it to Cole's ranch in the Salida Mountains.

Don Miguel had sent his most trusted caballeros to take care of Cole's horses, and two servants to keep his house while he was away. And when they arrived, it was flourishing with new foals and cattle and the garden was brilliant with bursts of colorful blooms and leaves. Ramy who had mended nicely, could hardly be contained as he ran to the corral to watch the cowboys riding and breaking the wild stallions.

Over the next weeks, they slowly returned to a normal routine. Cole took over the care of his ranch but agreed to keep on several of the hired hands who had been helping out in his absence.

Ramy brought milk in from the cows several times a day because since that horrible night of the raid, Jade had trouble lactating.

Hawke was good baby, with large black eyes, a mop of spiky hair and a strong, healthy grip. Ramy enjoyed helping out with the little one and had set aside most of his toys for when the child was older.

"He's still kinda squishy-lookin' ain't he, Jade?" he said peering down at the gurgling baby.

"So were you when you were his age I'll bet," she laughed.

Several times since their return, Jade watched from a distance as Cole stared down at Hawke lying in his cradle. At first she couldn't discern his expression and her heart began to beat rapidly. She wondered if he still had reservations about the baby. Was he still remembering how things were? Would he break his promise to the spirit of Nakoa?

Then one day, she watched from the doorway as he reached down and took the child in his arms. He held him up as though weighing him, then cradled him in the crook of his arm. He went to his chair and sat, holding the child close.

"Looks like the milk is agreeing with you son. You don't seem any worse for the wear after all you've been through."

The baby made a gurgling sound. Cole reached down and allowed the baby to take hold of his long, thick index finger.

"Pretty soon you'll be running and jumping around like a wild colt. You'll be needing a pony of your own. I'm going to let Ramy pick it out for you. I think he'd like

that." He then cradled his son against his shoulder, taking in the clean baby smell of him.

From her covert place, Jade bit back tears of joy and smiled. It was all going to be all right.

* * * * *

Don Miguel and his wife paid them a visit a few months after their return and brought news and presents for everyone.

"I can tell you my friend. I was frantic when I found that Ramy had run off. I knew he had gone to find you. I had my best caballeros out looking for him but that little rascal covered his tracks better than a seasoned bank robber," Don Miguel said.

"He found me all right." Cole laughed proudly.

"Tracking is in his blood. It comes from his mother and from you."

Don Miguel looked at Cole closely. "Is it over? Are you free of the binds that have tortured you?" The man's heavily accented voice was low.

"It's been a very difficult time for all of us. Nakoa is dead, he gave his life to save ours. We've learned some pretty valuable lessons. Me especially."

"Perhaps it is all for the best. Nothing happens that is not designed to happen."

"He died leaving nothing behind to even say he was here."

"You are here," the Don said solemnly. "You will speak for him."

Cole gazed toward the kitchen where Maria Serrano was holding Hawke and making cooing noises to him.

"You have always had a good heart, it's just that it was crowded with pain and left no room for anything else."

"I have my wife back and we're a family, that's the most important thing to me now."

"My heart is happy for you Cole and someday," Miguel poured another healthy portion of the hearty Spanish wine he'd brought, "you will be a very rich man. Your stallions are the best in the land. You now have some of the best breeders and horse-breakers in the country. I know of a buyer who would pay top dollar for some of your stallions."

Cole smiled at him. "That's what I was intending to do, breed them and sell them."

"I will get word to him. He will be pleasantly surprised when he sees your stock and more than willing to pay the outrageous price you will ask." Miguel winked and slapped him on the back and laughed heartily.

* * * * *

Maria sat on the settee bouncing the baby gently. "Your son is very fine, Jade. He reminds me of our own little Luis before he died," Maria said a little sadly.

"He's a very good baby actually and most of the time when his belly is full, he sleeps quite well."

Jade had never been happier. Her figure had returned, a little plumper perhaps and she hoped still desirable. Her hair, now with proper nourishment and plenty of sunshine was as shiny as the mane of a newly brushed colt. The only thing lacking was the unfulfilled marital attentions of her husband.

Maria Serrano had always been helpful and kind, so Jade felt no embarrassment in speaking with her about it. She sat pensively, biting her bottom lip.

"Is there something wrong my dear?" Maria asked with concern.

Jade hesitated and blushed profusely. She let her voice drop to just above a whisper.

"Well Cole and I... Well we... I mean since our return we haven't..." Now that she had started she didn't know how to go.

Maria patted her hand delicately. "You both have been through a terrible ordeal. It takes time my dear but do not let it take too much time. In fact, I think Miguel and I shall take Ramon to our hacienda tonight. My nephews are visiting from Spain and would enjoy the company of someone their own age."

Jade smiled sheepishly.

"And judging from how he is awake now, this little one should sleep right through the night." She winked at Jade.

Ramy was more than eager to go with the Serranos. "Is it okay, Pa?" he asked Cole when Maria had spoken of the proposed visit.

"Why don't you ask your mother." His eyes slid over to Jade and twinkled.

Ramy smiled at them.

"Can I go, Ma?" There was not even the least hesitation in bestowing the title upon her.

Jade could hardly hold back her tears of joy. "Of course you can go."

He ran to her and hugged her tightly. "I love you," he said against her chest.

"Never more than I will love you, my son." She thought her heart would burst with pride.

* * * * *

Later that night after Hawke was safely asleep in his cradle in Ramy's room, Jade sat on the bed brushing her hair the obligatory one hundred strokes.

"Mind if I do that?"

She jumped at his voice, then smiled.

"Not at all." She held out the wooden brush to him.

He sauntered over to her and took it, allowing his fingers to caress her hand gently. Jade turned her back to him and he began to brush her hair with long slow strokes. She closed her eyes. Her heart rate elevated ever so slightly when she felt his hand smooth her thick dark hair.

The room was dim, with nothing but the low flickering lantern casting dancing shadows against the wall. He stopped brushing and she turned to stare up at him, her eyes wide and brilliant in the lantern light. He gripped the brush handle when he saw her mouth part then she slowly rolled her tongue over her bottom lip.

"I always told you this hair would get you in trouble." His voice was low and sensual.

"It's been through a lot but I can't see what trouble it could possibly get me into now," she whispered up at him.

She saw his chest rise and fall just a little faster as she spoke. There was an intense, cavernous silence, each wanting to speak but each careful not to say the wrong thing. Her eyes glittered in the lamplight as her next words floated up to him.

"If you have a problem making love to me Cole, now is the time to say it. Right now, before the desire I am feeling for you threatens to consume me and there will be nothing to quell it."

It was all he needed to hear. He pulled her up from the chair and crushed her lips to his. His hands lost themselves in her hair as he plunged his tongue into her mouth, tasting the sweetness there. She leaned against him, feeling his hard thighs against her legs. She didn't pull away when she felt his erection grow and strain against his clothes and against her. He rained kisses down her neck and over her chest.

"You're so beautiful Jade McCayne and I've been a damned selfish fool."

"I love you Cole, you know I do."

"And I love you and I'm going to keep on loving you. I can't make up for what's done but I can make sure you go the rest of your life knowing no one on this earth will ever love you the way I do, the way I will." He plastered his mouth against hers once again.

Jade accepted his kiss for a moment then drew away from him. With her eyes glued to his, she untied the ribbon that held her sleeping chemise together and pulled it over her head. Her tawny body glistened with the perspiration of desire. She reached up and began to unbutton his shirt. The emotion that permeated the two of them was too much and he grabbed her hands and kissed them.

"Do you want my love, Jade?"

"Yes. I want you to love me the way you need to, the way I've always wanted you to."

Cole tore at his clothes and in moments he was as naked as she. His lips crushed at hers as he backed her to the bed and lay her down upon it.

"Feel me husband, lest you have any doubts that I desire you."

He reached down and touched her. She was hot, moist and ready and this time, more than willing.

He wanted to make love to her slowly, to watch her passion build against him. Even though his heart, mind and libido were racing, he wanted to make sure that she would enjoy the deep, [deliberate undulating moves deep inside her.

His hands roved over her breasts, heavy from childbearing but milkless. He teased one, then the other with his tongue. Jade moaned aloud. His teasing rapid, featherlike strokes increased with pressure as he explored the expanse of her belly and beyond. Without thought of embarrassment, she arched to meet his mouth as he delved within the musky deepness of her womanhood. Shoving her fist in her mouth to keep from voicing the agonizing pleasure, she writhed under his tongue.

When she could hold back no longer, the crescendo of her essence raced through her and poured from her in thick musky waves.

He slithered back up her body and took her mouth in his. Of their own accord, her legs opened wide to accept him.

Holding her close, positioning himself, he moved until he was at her opening. Slowly he slid inside her. It made him smile when she let out a slow, purring moan and pulled him deeper inside her. He drew back, then in again. Jade moved up to meet him but he teased her with slow, halting movements.

She began begging him, wanting him to love her hard, the way she knew he wanted to. He spoke to her softly, asking her what she wanted.

"Tell me love," he whispered. He made small circles inside her.

"Cole, please." Her voice was almost tearful.

"Shall I go deeper?" He pushed inside her more.

"Yes!" she breathed against him.

"Maybe I should wait." He stopped moving.

"No!" she cried out. "Don't stop, please."

She opened her eyes and the green of them shocked him into action.

"Then accept my love, for now and for always." He raised her legs and parted them, widening her even more. He wanted her so much he could hardly bear it but he wanted to bring her to the pleasure he knew she was meant for.

He rode her body wildly and she answered back with a fury all her own. She was screaming aloud long before he reached his apex, having done so herself three or four times.

By the time he released a heavy gush of his life inside her, she screamed his name so loudly, she awoke Hawke who had until then slept peacefully in his crib across the room.

Cole collapsed on top of her, breathing as though he'd just rounded up a whole herd of stallions. "See what you've done wench, you've awakened our son," he teased breathlessly.

"It's your fault you brute, you've withheld this pleasure from me far too long," she said not wanting to break the moment.

He moved off her and leaned on one elbow and gazed down at her, toying with a long damp strand of her hair.

"As soon as I catch my breath, I'll go and rock him back to sleep. While I am gone, prepare yourself because I don't intend to let you get one wink of sleep this night, wife. But you're gonna have to rein in those banshee screeches."

With that he threw both legs over the side of the bed, smiled at her once again and went to soothe the crying baby.

They made love with wild abandon and many times. Thankfully, after a morning feeding Hawke slept for hours giving them time to languish after yet another bout of lovemaking.

"Cole."

"Hmmm," he answered as he rubbed his bare leg up her soft one.

"Do you think you're comfortable enough with me now to tell me about Enez?" She expected to feel his body stiffen into rigidity but surprisingly, he kissed her gently.

"I believe I am. I think it was hard for me because I knew Alexander — Nakoa really loved her."

"What really happened?"

Cole shifted so that his arm was under her head and he pulled her close.

"It was a fiesta, where the Mexicans and Native Americans from nearby reservations gathered for a monthly shindig. I suppose it was the least the town could do, they didn't afford them many other comforts and freedoms."

"Is that where you met her?"

"She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen."

"But she was with Nakoa," Jade said.

"I didn't know that until later but by then it didn't matter, not for her or for me."

The long repressed memory came rushing back at him as he remembered those days. He had escorted Lucy Saunders, the richest and most respected young woman in town to the Governor's ball. Afterward his friends told him they were going over to the fiesta for some real fun. Lucy had no problem with it and agreed to go along. Her haughty manner and exquisite beauty had men staring open-mouthed the moment she stepped into the dancing area. Cole was used to her admirers and appreciated the fact that he was the one she had chosen to be with. But suddenly there was no comparison

to the innocent beauty he found himself staring at. He noticed that his brother was heavily engaged in conversation with the beauty and held onto her arm possessively.

All that evening Cole stole glances at her and each time, her own lovely dark eyes clandestinely found his from over her lace fan.

Days later he saw her at the marketplace where she was accompanied by her *dueña*, a stout eagle-eyed woman who watched everyone around them closely. He went over and introduced himself to the chaperone who wasn't the least bit interested in who he was.

After much cajoling and with the promise to be a gentleman, he was allowed to walk with them.

The nearness of her nearly drove him mad but the ever-watchful eye of her *dueña*, prohibited anything more than brief, polite conversation.

Then one day she came without her chaperone. His heart nearly leaped from his chest. She bought flowers and pretended not to notice him. Following a well-worn path toward the lake, she went there and waited. He was there in a moment, bowing politely to her, his heart nearly burst with affection.

"Your brother Alexander has looked at me," she'd said softly and tearfully.

"He can never look at you the way I do, the way I want to for the rest of my life," Cole said.

"He has spoken to my parents. He will bring gifts when he asks for my hand."

"Do you love me?" Cole asked her.

She answered by melting into his embrace. One kiss and they were lost in the spell of a love so deep that neither cared if it burned them alive.

They met secretly, wherever they could after that first day and Cole soon knew that he would never be happy unless she was his wife.

Her parents grew suspicious when she spent so much time at church and were aghast to see the love in her eyes one Sunday when their eyes had followed hers to where Cole was standing, looking back at her with the same emotion.

They chastised her severely for her folly, telling her that it was impossible to marry one brother and love the other.

"Their situation is too mixed up as it is. If you try to see him, I will lock you in your room," her father had shouted in a rage.

It was weeks before Cole saw her again and he was crazy with worry and love. He couldn't bear to see her tears when they'd finally been able to meet briefly.

"Everything is going to be all right, I promise Enez."

"You do not understand," she said in between tears, "Alexander is now Nakoa of the Sioux Nation and he has gone to his people to announce our betrothal."

Cole held her, swearing to her that they would be together.

He spirited her away a mere fortnight before Alexander was due to return.

They were married and for months they lived a simple, happy life. Later word had been sent to him that his parents had been killed in avalanche that winter and that he should return and claim his birthright.

Never had his life been so complete as when Enez told him that they were going to have a child.

"I want our child to be born in the house my father built, on McCayne land. We're going home."

"And that's where Nakoa found you," Jade said.

"Yes. I was frantic because Enez was having a terrible time with the birth and I didn't know what to do. The baby finally came but I couldn't stop the bleeding. Enez was slipping away from me. I expected Nakoa to kill us all but at that moment I didn't care. I didn't want to live if she didn't."

"But you had to, because of your son—Ramy."

"He was so small and helpless and only because she begged him did Nakoa leave us alive. Then she just slipped away."

"I'm so sorry, Cole."

"So am I. I did a despicable thing in taking her away from him."

"She didn't love him. She never would have been happy."

"It was no excuse. I should have tried to talk to him."

"You know your brother. He never would have listened."

He turned to her. "I love you, Jade, I am not making a comparison between you and Enez but you wanted to know how it was."

"I just wanted there to be no secrets between us. I wanted you to tell me so that you could be free."

"As long as you're with me, nothing can change me back to who I was." He kissed her deeply, holding her tightly in his embrace.

Their new life had truly begun.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cole expanded the ranch and named it The Double H. The cattle brand was two slanted letter Hs with an arrow going through the middle of them and was known far and wide. It became one of the best and largest horse breeding ranches in the territory. The Double H stallions were known all across the country, not only for their beauty but for their racing prowess as well.

The arrangement he'd made with the friend of Miguel Serrano led to more lucrative deals and soon he was richer than he'd ever thought he could be.

He built a mansion for Jade and the boys but left the ranch the way it was. Many times he would find Jade there, for it was where she felt most comfortable. It was her home.

The one thing Cole balked at was the selling of any of his land. Many people came and offered him exorbitant fees for parcels of his mountain range but he flatly refused all offers.

"This land belongs to the McCaynes and will always be in our family," he said to one pompous millionaire who desired some of his best property.

Cole became even wealthier with the help of a visiting Northerner who invested his money in a railroad project as well as a commodity called stocks, making them rich beyond his wildest dreams.

In the years that followed, Jade presented her husband with a third son whom they named Shannon and a daughter they called Serenity.

* * * * *

The land was changing. More settlers poured in. People from foreign lands looking for freedom and stability, bringing different cultures, plants and traditions began to populate low and high regions of the Colorado mountains as well as Wyoming, Nebraska and Kansas.

Cole often saw Jade looking off into the mountains and he wondered where her mind was. The memories that haunted them secretly and individually wouldn't leave and Cole felt he had no alternative but to move his family to a new city, San Francisco.

It was a bustling town, with its busy seaport harboring its fair share of pickpockets, scavengers and cutthroats due to the gold rush.

Cole took a stand right away and joined the small but elite local law enforcement group to try to restore some semblance of order to the town. A few years later, he was elected sheriff and soon after, sat on the mayor's council where he predicted that San

Francisco would someday be a one of the greatest and most flourishing ports in the country.

Jade, subdued and private, became a great lady of fashion and vision. Her charitable nature was known throughout the land and her contributions to the Indian Affairs Bureau, Orphans of California and The Women's League for Equality were legendary.

She declined residence on the fashionable Nob Hill section, so Cole had a large airy two-story house built for her on the bay in Sausalito.

Ramy and Hawke had grown into fine, devilishly handsome young men and became successful attorneys. Serenity, the apple of her father's eye, was an irrepressible, headstrong impish beauty and the toast of polite society.

Shannon their youngest son, on the other hand, was a bit of a disappointment. He was a dandy and seemed to always be in trouble.

Almost from the time he was born, he required more and took more than his due. Thanks mostly to the station of his parents and siblings, his indiscretions were usually overlooked if not covered up altogether.

One morning as Jade and Cole sat at the table having breakfast, they heard a commotion in the front hall.

Cole now in his mid sixties and Jade, a most beautiful and youthful looking fifty, looked at each other wondering what the matter could be. They rose and went into the parlor. There stood a weaving unshaven Clete Hargon, a decent, hardworking man usually, whom they had never known to show any display of public misconduct as he was doing now. But here he was, unkempt and bleary eyed.

"What can I do for you Clete?" Cole asked.

"What can you do for me? You can't do nuthin' for me. Your no-good uppity son has compromised my daughter, slandered her good name all over town. Saying she seduced him and threw herself at him." His arms were waving about wildly. "My Arletta would never do anything like that. She's shy like her mama was. Why there's talk in town about how all his cronies had at her. It ain't true I tell ya! It ain't true!" Tears welled in his rheumy eyes as he sat down holding his aching head in his hands.

Jade felt sorry for the man and went and laid her hand on his shoulder gently.

"Clete, I'm so sorry..."

"She's with child, Miz McCayne. She tried to hang herself. She's so filled with shame. If I hadn't gone in at just that moment she'd be..." He couldn't go on.

Jade clutched at her own throat as looked down at the sobbing man. She knew what he said was true. Shannon did nothing but cause them pain and heartache from the time he was small. She could never fathom exactly what was wrong for such a small boy to have so much anger inside. But she knew it started soon after she sent him to the

brand new school in Hammonton, a school they had helped fund and build in Colorado.

Cole sighed heavily. The pain on the man's face was heartbreaking. "I knew nothing of this, Clete. I know you'll understand when I tell you that as a father, I'll have to have some proof."

Even though Cole knew his youngest son was often in one minor scrape after another, he loved his children and had a tendency to look the other way, especially where Shannon was concerned. What problems he didn't see, were always cleared up, made right.

Serenity stood at the top of the winding staircase, dark and beautiful like her mother.

"Oh, Daddy, open your eyes. I can be your proof. Shan chased Arletta 'til he wore her down. She wanted nothing to do with him, given his reputation. Of all people you should know how charming Shan can be." The young girl seemed to float down the staircase as she continued.

"Arletta caught his eye last spring at the governor's ball and it was because she rebuffed him that he pursued her. But our Shan knows how to get what he wants. He wooed her with lies and unfortunately for her, she fell in love with him."

"Dammit!" Cole banged on the hallway table. "Am I the only one who doesn't know what's going on right in my own family?" Cole yelled.

"Daddy, your manager, Nick Bishop is an expert at making sure these little trivial problems are kept from you. Just call him in here and ask him." She crossed her arms daintily across her chest.

Just then, Clete rose from the chair as if he had a hundred pound weight on his shoulders. "It don't matter now. We can't live with this shame. We'll sell the store and move on."

Cole put his arm around the despondent man. "No, Clete. You'll do no such thing. This time Shannon is going to stand up and take responsibility for what he's done. Come on into my study. I think we have a lot to discuss." He turned to his daughter who was looking at him in surprise. "Serenity, have Julie bring hot coffee and some breakfast too. Looks like Clete could use it."

Clete looked at him with suspicious wonder. He had heard many things about this family, good and bad but he always tried to let the actions of people speak for themselves. They seemed to be honest folk in spite of their acquired position, all except for that Shannon. He stopped in front of Jade.

"Your husband is a good and fair man, Mrs. McCayne."

Jade gave him a weak smile, then looked down at her hands. So many things had been done to cover up Shannon's dirty doings but she knew now that Cole would make him own up to this, his last foul deed.

Serenity went over to her mother, her dimples deep but her brow acutely furrowed with worry. "Was I wrong to speak up like that, Mother? Was I out of turn? I just couldn't let this happen to Arletta. Why, she's the sweetest kindest thing in the world and she wouldn't hurt a fly. I had to make Father see that."

Her face transformed into the cutest scowl as she spoke. "Ever since he hired that Nick Bishop, things are just not the same around here." The girl pouted prettily and played with one of her long honey colored curls.

Jade looked at her daughter with knowing amusement.

"Of course he thinks I'm just a silly little girl and he ignores me but I look and I listen and I see things."

Jade hugged her daughter and smiled gently.

All her children were young adults now and she wondered where all the time had gone. It seemed like yesterday that she was forever cleaning mud stains, or wiping a runny nose and tears from their faces. She adored all her children but it was her daughter who gave her the most pleasure.

"My sweet Serenity, you were always old beyond your years and you are my treasure. You never put anything before what you feel is right. I am so proud of you for speaking up for Arletta." They hugged each other fondly. "However my girl, it seems that Nick Bishop's name is on your lips quite a bit lately."

"Mother! How can you say that? I would rather own up to loving a rattlesnake." Serenity gasped with mock indignation.

"I said nothing about love, dear," Jade teased sweetly.

Trapped, Serenity could only blush as Jade laughed.

"Now then, why don't we get dressed and go over and see Arletta. It might be that we have wedding to plan. We could get Mr. Harvey to cater the whole thing."

Together they walked upstairs, Serenity leaning, whispering close to her mother. "Mother is it true what they say about Mr. Harvey?"

"Now! Now! We aren't going to start carrying tales like that in this house—true or not," she giggled as they continued upstairs arm in arm.

* * * * *

Late that night after most of the household was asleep, Shannon came home in his usual state of light inebriation. Cole heard him walking toward the stairs and called out to him.

"Father? What are you still doing up at this ungodly hour?"

"I'm glad to see that you indeed notice that the hour is ungodly and I might ask you where you've been."

"I'm a grown man, Father and I don't see why I should have to answer for my whereabouts," he said churlishly and headed toward the carafe of expensive brandy on the sideboard.

"No, I suppose not. But there is something you do have to account for and that's Arletta Hargon," Cole said and watched as Shannon's color faded a little but recovered nicely.

"Ahh! Yes, sweet Arletta. Never such a nubile, willing wench has there ever been. Who would have thought such a shy little bird could be filled with such passion."

Cole had risen from his chair and went to his son and slapped him hard across one cheek and then the other.

"Mind your mouth lad. You shouldn't be talking that way about your future bride."

"My bride? What the hell are you talking about?"

This time Cole knocked him to the floor. "If there is to be any swearing in this house, I'll be the one doing it. Now get up, Shannon."

The young man got up, rubbing his jaw slowly, his face filled with controlled rage as he glared at his father.

"I don't have to do anything I don't want and I don't want to marry Arletta Hargon," Shannon said wiping the blood from his nose.

"You will do it! And you'll do it the first of the month, if she'll have you. And her *legitimate* child will be heir to any fortune I choose to leave you!" Cole shouted.

"But Father..." Shannon continued to rub his rapidly swelling jaw.

"Enough! Arrangements will be made and I'm warning you Shannon Douglas McCayne, you'll not shame your mother anymore."

The lad straightened to his full height which was almost as tall as his father, his face dark and quivering with anger.

"Shame her! What about my shame? Everybody knows the story of how she carried on with you and your savage half brother and how people still whisper about who Hawke's true father is. So don't you go telling me about shame. I know all about it. You never had to live with the taunts, the accusations or the ridicule. It's no wonder I am the way I am. You've no idea about the never-ending battle of my own I'm fighting, Father."

"What the hell are you talking about? You've had the best of everything from the moment you were born."

Shannon scoffed as he extracted a handkerchief from his lapel pocket and dabbed at the corner of his mouth where a line of blood trickled.

"You think I don't know how the old money in this town snickers behind our backs? You think I don't know what she is, what I am—what we all are? Have you forgotten all those times I came home bloodied from the many fights I had trying to defend a common..."

Cole started toward his youngest son once again, his fists raised, his face a mask of black rage.

Shannon paled and backed away. He had never seen his father so angry.

Cole's voice was controlled but tinged with a tone of wrath that made Shannon literally shake where he stood. "Your mother is the bravest, kindest, gentlest, most wonderful person I have ever known. Things weren't always easy for her, not even with me in the beginning. But from the moment you were born she has given you nothing but love and devotion. More than any of the others, perhaps because she knew you needed it. And you thank her by listening to sordid stories that people make up in their dirty little minds when they know nothing of the truth?"

"Why would they lie, Father? Why?"

"Since you're so grown up, are you man enough to know the truth? The real truth?"

Shannon looked at his father unsure of what to say.

"Some of it I even hate to speak of because you'll know things about me that I never wanted you or Serenity to know. So you sit yourself right down and I'll tell you the story the way it really was."

"Father, I..."

"I said sit down!" Cole's voice bellowed throughout the room.

Shannon sat in the French provincial arm chair to the right of his father's large leather seat.

Cole poured two glasses of whiskey and handed one to his son. "Not that you haven't had enough but you might need this before I'm done." Then he sat before the fire with its dancing flames, taking him back. All the way back to another time.

The words came slowly at first and then escalated into a torrent as the tale unfolded. At some points, tears formed in Cole's eyes as he remembered and continued telling the story he had hoped never to tell anyone again.

Dawn was creeping over the horizon and the fire had faded to glowing embers as the two men sat facing each other. Shannon looked at his father with new and respectful understanding.

"And now Clete Hargon tells me his only child tried to hang herself because of the shame you caused her."

"I'm so sorry, Father I didn't know," was all the lad could manage as he looked down at his slack hands, embarrassed.

"Then you know why it's important for you to do what's right son," Cole said, wincing as he shifted into a more comfortable position in his chair.

"I do Father, and I will, I promise."

"Good, now stoke that fire a bit, I feel cold."

Shannon went to the large stone fireplace and added another log. It really wasn't that cold, but he surmised that when one gets on in age they have more of a need to feel

the warmth of a good fire. When he next looked back his father had fallen asleep. He went over and pulled the handmade coverlet over his father's legs.

He started to go to the sideboard and pour himself a drink, but thought better of it and went to the settee near his father and sat heavily. He looked at the grandfather clock in the corner. It was almost three a.m. He loosened his cravat and laid his head back. In moments he too was asleep.

Slowly the house was awakening and the servants had begun their daily duties.

Jade entered the study, surprised to see the two men there. "My goodness, have you two been up all night?" she said as she went to pull back the drawn curtains.

Shannon roused himself and hurried to her and buried his face in her neck. "Mother, I've been such a fool, a damn fool."

She hugged her son tightly then looked over at her husband, perplexed.

Cole had not moved. There were unshed tears in his eyes but they were eyes that no longer saw.

Slowly, Jade disengaged herself from Shannon and went to him. His once brilliant dark eyes were flat and dead. She laid a hand on his massive chest. There was no hint of a heartbeat. She felt his face and already it was cooling and his skin felt different.

As the realization hit her, Jade could do little more than cradle his head and moan, a low pitiful woeful sound.

Shannon looked at her bewildered, then shock sank in as he yelled out, "Father?"

At the sound of his loud voice, Serenity and the servants came rushing in.

"It's Father, oh my god he's..." Shannon couldn't finish, his face ashen with shock. Serenity ran to her mother who was still rocking back and forth.

The scream that came from her jolted Jade back to reality. She laid her husband's head gently back against the chair and closed his dark eyes. She stood upright and went over and grabbed her daughter's shoulders and shook her soundly. "He's gone, Serenity. Now stop this! Stop it, do you hear?"

Serenity dropped to her knees and glared up at her younger brother. "You did this! You killed Father and I'll hate you to my dying day."

Jade grabbed her and stood her up. "Now you listen to me young lady, your father fought hard and long against things in his own heart to prevent hate from being a part of his life ever again, especially between siblings. You will not tarnish his memory by encouraging one ounce of it, do you hear me? Both of you. I won't have it." She eyed her two children severely, trying to keep her own grief in check. Her voice was near hysteria and the siblings finally shook their heads in unison.

Nick Bishop hurried into the room and surveyed the situation. He went over and felt Cole's neck. Sadly he retrieved the coverlet from the leather sofa and covered him. He then softly gave orders to the servants who scurried away tearfully.

"I'm awful sorry, Mrs. McCayne. Your husband was a good man," Nick said in a low sincere tone.

"Thank you, Nick. He thought the world of you too. I'll be depending on you a lot in coming months."

"You know I'll be here, ready, willing and able to do whatever needs to be done."

She smiled wanly at him. "Now then," Jade said as she smoothed her immaculate day dress and patted her already perfectly coifed hair, "there are things to be done. We have to send for Ramy and Hawke in New York and Colorado. Then of course after all this there's the wedding to plan." She threw Shannon a threatening gaze and Serenity started crying again.

Jade pushed her sobbing daughter into Nick Bishop's arms.

"Nick, please handle this, she's upset."

He was stunned, his mouth opened to protest, just as the beautiful young girl collapsed against him.

* * * * *

Cole McCayne was buried in Colorado on a hill that overlooked their beloved valley, the place to where he had first brought Jade and loved her.

The wedding took place as planned. Arletta was beautiful and Jade knew that she would be a good, strong-willed wife. The very kind Shannon would need. They were all surprised at how he seemed to grow up in a matter of days. He stopped drinking and took a responsible position in the family business affairs. Although Jade kept a sharp eye on him, soon she was satisfied that he could be trusted to be the kind of husband he should be. Serenity however was not quite convinced that a leopard could change its spots and was wary of him.

Two years later, all that was set aside as at the age of twenty-one, Serenity married Nick Bishop. Ramy, who had a successful law practice in New York, was married and had three rambunctious children. Hawke took a wife late in life, a lovely Native American girl, but had no children, which was just as well for they loved each other almost to the exclusion of all else. He was deeply involved with the Indian Affairs Bureau and was a scholar and brilliant lawyer.

With her children well educated and safely married, Jade retired into seclusion to the valley where she could be close to her husband and an unknown force that that willed her there.

Epilogue

It was the summer of 1899, almost the dawn of a new century and Jade McCayne was two months past her seventieth birthday. Never one to stand on ceremony, it was her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren who decided that their schedules permitted them to come to the valley ranch and where they were planning an elaborate belated birthday party combination family reunion for her.

She knew that she would never attend. There was a feeling that she'd had for days now. He was coming come for her just like he said he would.

Just the other day as she laid fresh flowers on the grave of her husband, she saw him. It was Nakoa, a shadowy, wavering image sitting majestically astride a snow white stallion on hillock a few yards away and it wasn't the first time in the past few months that she'd thought she'd seen him. He never motioned to her but only watched her as she sat by the grave. Somewhere deep in her mind an echo was coming forth. It was his words from all those years ago, "In the dusk of your life I will come for you."

Jade knew that the time was at hand.

The morning of her birthday, Jade got up and went to her closet. Sleep had eluded her most of the night but she didn't feel tired. She took out a box hidden deep in the back. In it was a beautiful soft white rawhide dress, magnificently beaded in the pattern of the Sioux nation. She donned it and then pulled on soft white boots, intricately woven in the same pattern.

Slowly, she undid her hair which was now as white as snow and fell to her waist, like in the old days. She tied a colorful beaded headband with a single dangling eagle's feather around her forehead. She removed the large diamond ring from her finger and set it on the bureau. She lovingly caressed the plain gold band Cole had given her so many years before.

The house was quiet as she padded slowly down the stairs, through the living room to the kitchen and out the back door.

The predawn air was chilly as she left the room and stepped outside, taking one last look at the house where she had spent so many years. The tall scrub grass waved slowly in the morning air and the vibrant scent of honeysuckle and bluebells shrouded her. She stopped and gathered bunches of the magnificent flowers then continued down the path that led up to the glade where a tall oak stood enclosed by a black wrought iron fence.

Three headstones, a few feet apart seemed to grow larger as she approached. Walking proudly she stopped at the first stone. It was Kyle's grave, sweet wonderful

Kyle who had selflessly given his life for his friends. The second was a memorial really and read, Nakoa, Pride of the Sioux nation and Brother. The third and largest of the graves was her husband's.

Jade knelt at the head of the grave and laid the flowers gently upon it. Memories flooded back to her as closed her eyes and allowed the images to come as they may.

She gasped slightly. Had she heard the sound? It was her name but it seemed to have been blown to her across an unearthly wind. There it was again.

Then she saw him, a few feet away, astride the great white stallion that was stamping the ground impatiently like a silent thunder.

"Jade!" It was a whispered caress. She went to him and extended her withered arm up and as he reached down and touched her fingers, it was no longer leathered and old but young and soft. Her hair was again dark and rich.

"Come."

"I cannot, Nakoa. The love I bear in my heart has always been for my husband. I came dressed like this to show you respect, how I would have looked if the stars had shone on us and I came to you as a loving bride. Find peace and mourn not for what could never have been."

Nakoa looked down at her with his silver gray eyes, sad but understanding, and then placed his open palm gently across his chest.

She knew it meant that she would live in his heart forever.

The horse snorted and stamped the ground once more and was off.

* * * * *

Serenity thought she had heard her mother moving about and got up. Her tired body was achy and complaining but she was careful not to disturb Nick as she dressed. She watched her mother leave the house as she had on so many of these mornings since they'd arrived. She knew that she was going to her father's grave and she usually watched from the back window, sipping a cup of hot tea until she saw her mother return safely. But today was unusual, something tugged at her and she felt a need to follow her.

Pulling her shawl close around her, she went out the back door and started down the path at a quiet and respectable distance. She noticed there was something different about the way her mother was dressed this time and her hair, which was usually in a simple loose bun and side curls, hung loose.

She was about to call out when something else caught her eye. A mist, an almost imperceptible disturbance in the atmosphere. She watched as her mother stretched her hand up into the shimmering air.

A gust of wind blew dust up into Serenity's face and she shielded her eyes for a moment. When she was again able to see, she thought she saw a Native American brave

astride a white horse. The maiden looking up at him had dark lovely hair that hung to her waist in a long silky veil.

The woman was so familiar, why she looked like her moth... *No! This was all impossible*, she *was* getting old. Serenity, shook her head and blinked. When she looked again, the horse and rider were gone.

Serenity walked slowly over to her father's grave where she found the body of her mother lying across it. Her lifeless face was filled with radiance.

Serenity knew it was impossible but was beginning to understand. She looked down and saw the fading tracks in the dirt. They were the hoof marks of a huge horse and she followed them for a short distance. She stopped and looked up and saw a shooting star that left a twinkling trail miles long.

The dawn wind came down from the mountains and Serenity shivered, but not from the chill. When she looked down at the ground again, she found that the tracks had faded away completely, as though they were never there or as if plucked by some unseen hand away into the morning sky. The ground was once again smooth and undisturbed. But she knew and she smiled.

"Be at peace, Nakoa," she whispered tearfully into the brightening sky. "For she is forever in the loving arms of my father, your brother."

About the Author

Relocated from New York City in the early 90s, Patt has always had a love for writing ever since her third grade teacher told her to assert inner passions by putting them on paper “backwards/sdrawkcab” and in script.

She has enjoyed success as a multi-published short story author and articles and currently resides with her husband, the hero of her heart, in Hillsborough New Jersey.

Patt welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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