



Wolf's Tender

Bounty Hunters

Gem Sivad

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Blurb

Rough and tough bounty hunter Charlie Wolf McCallister knows he needs to get laid when even a skinny, old-maid teacher with a sharp tongue starts looking good to him. But, cad that he is, he operates on the philosophy that a bird in hand is better than no bird at all. And so he offers to trade service for—servicing.

When Naomi Parker's students are snatched from their school by marauding

Comancheros, she can't believe that she hid like a coward and let it happen. The only way to ease her conscience, and get the girls home safely, is to hire the half-Kiowa bounty hunter. Charlie Wolf's price seems a bit steep to prim and proper Naomi, who must choose between her virtue and her students' lives.

When one almost dried-up spinster tenders her body to one cynical sometimes-savage, the unexpected bounty is love.

Prologue: The Bounty Hunters

The three riders were halflings, too young in years to be men, but too weathered by hard times to be boys. The dark one, dressed like a Kiowa warrior, led the other two as they belly-crawled to the edge of the rise and peered down at the Apache camp below.

Lozen, Victorio's sister—the Apache woman warrior who was said to be a witch, a healer, and spiritual guide for her people—was in the center of the encampment, surrounded by the men of three Indian nations. Chief Nana leaned close to hear her words, and the McCallisters teetered precariously above, listening too.

They didn't hear the Arapaho braves who stole up from behind and took them prisoner, shoving them back to the camp where the Apache priestess waited.

The fire was just a fire, but later, all three agreed that her image had been unclear, sometimes almost transparent. She'd stared at them silently, studying them in a moment of utter stillness as the night and sounds receded and left only them, the fire, and the Indian woman—*reading their souls*.

"Why do you come here?" Her question was directed at Charlie Wolf, as it should be. He'd come and his cousins had followed.

"I've come to barter for a woman." It wasn't a lie. At seventeen, Charlie Wolf McCallister did want a woman. And that was more explainable than the need to see Lozen, the woman of magic, who had sensed their presence when the Apache sentries had not.

She laughed at Charlie Wolf's answer. It was a rich, husky sound that floated through the night, inviting the men of three tribes to laugh too.

She pointed at Robert, the tall, red-haired McCallister, already bigger than most men, white or Indian. "And you, do you seek an Apache woman too?"

Robert had been sparking Annie Ross, and his honesty wouldn't stand for a lie. "No, ma'am. Reckon I just followed Charlie Wolf to make sure he'd keep his hair while he was bartering for a bride."

Lozen held his gaze, studying his face a long time.

Then her smile widened as her eyes met those of the third youth. "And you? Did you come for a woman, or do you protect your friend too?"

Younger than the other two, the third McCallister flashed an easy grin that suggested great mischief lurking behind the handsome face. But his light gray eyes were the silver of a moonlit lake, no smile reflected in their depth.

"Heard you were magic," he answered her laconically. "Thought you might be able to make me smart as the wolf—" He motioned his head toward Charlie. "—or pure of spirit." His nod indicated his brother Robert.

Black Hawk, the Arapaho young blood who'd followed the seer's orders to capture them, claimed the honor of killing them. Chief Nana stayed his hand, looking at Lozen for direction. The three McCallisters watched her too.

She rose from her place by the fire and filled three bowls, carrying one to each McCallister in turn. When they all stood holding the noxious smelling liquid, she spoke. "Drink and know your dreams."

Charlie studied her, Robert hesitated, sniffing the contents suspiciously, but Samuel

downed his in one gulp, laughing. "Come on, boys, the party's just begun."

As Charlie and Robert drank theirs, Samuel's legs buckled and he went to his knees. He was barely out and lying flat on the ground before Charlie's will was robbed from him, and he collapsed too.

Robert, being the biggest, resisted the brew the longest. "So you've killed us?" he had time to ask the Apache priestess before he succumbed. Her words echoed in his mind as he went down.

"I've given you your futures. What you make of them is yet to be seen."

When the three woke the next day, the campfire was dead, the ground was cold, and there was no sign that over a hundred Indians from three different nations had been there the night before.

Charlie told the two white boys later, "Lozen took us spirit-walking in the otherworld to find the threads of who we will be."

No one volunteered to share his vision. It was an incident buried, but not forgotten as the three McCallister men grew to manhood.

Chapter One

Charlie Wolf McCallister was the best tracker in the territory, bar none, which was why he and his cousins were crouched in the sand and dust looking down at the Indian encampment. Rumors abounded about a meeting of Arapaho, Kiowa, and Apache tribes, but the location of the powwow had been elusive.

The half Kiowa McCallister cousin knew where to look. Unlike the white army scouts who tried to find Indians in their hiding places, Charlie, who had traveled with the Kiowa on and off during his first seventeen years, knew the locations of both their winter camps and summer hideaways tucked among the myriad canyons and caves in West Texas.

"Looks like they're primed and ready for trouble." A hard elbow to the ribs and a warning glance from his brother had Samuel McCallister clamping his mouth shut. A whisper of noise not in accord with nature and the Indians below would be all over them. Charlie Wolf might survive, but from the looks of the war preparations going on, Deacon and Samuel McCallister wouldn't.

All three men were on their bellies, part of the landscape. Charlie Wolf nodded toward the camp as he eased himself backward an inch at a time, moving away from the overlook.

Deacon and Sam followed until they reached their mounts. Like his namesake, the gray wolf, Charlie was already gone. Not a drift of dust stirred to indicate that he had ridden away moments before.

"Jeezus," Sam swore quietly. "Hope this works or our horses are faster than their Indian ponies. They say Mangas Colorado is set to go to war. I hope to hell Charlie doesn't lose his hair while he's down there."

His words sounded hesitant, but his body vibrated with excitement. White teeth flashed in another grin. "Hell, Deak, you always said God takes care of poor dumb creatures. Watch and see, Charlie'll ride out without a scratch on him, even if this is a rabbit idea."

"Charlie will deal with the devil himself to get a chance at catchin' Jericho." Deacon scratched his rough, red beard, thinking aloud, "...Won't mind cashing that tender in. There's a bounty of \$10,000 on the renegade, dead or alive."

It was an unheard of reward, put up by The Texas Cattlemen's Association, an assortment of New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas ranchers, and banks from all three areas. They'd banded together, publishing the reward in state and territory newspapers guaranteeing the bounty. Then they'd posted the Wanted signs in all the local, county, state, and territory law offices.

"For that kind of money, one of the coyotes he rides with might plug him before we get the chance." Sam's eyes were cold when he muttered, "Hell, that's what I'd do."

Deacon shrugged and answered his brother grimly. "Then we follow the smell of a rotten corpse and take the body in for the reward. If there's a price on the other guy's head, all the better; we'll cash him in too."

The three McCallister bounty hunters were not the only men chasing Jericho Jones and his band of Comancheros. If the rumors were true, there already numbered a couple

of good men who had found the outlaw but hadn't survived the experience.

"Damn, you know it's not the money he's after. Reckon he wants to kill Jericho more than he wants anything else in life." All the McCallisters knew the story that Sam referred to.

Jericho had been instrumental in the massacre of Kiowa women and children at a place named Sand Creek, in Colorado Territory.

Charlie had ridden with his Kiowa father and Chief Black Kettle that day, invited to a peace powwow with the army's representative. Instead, Jericho had led the army to the camp at the river where, unprotected, the women and children waited. It was a slaughter.

"If it's not about the money, then, when we help Charlie catch the bastard, he can have the pleasure of the kill, and we'll cash in the tender," Deak offered dryly.

Sam flashed his brother a grin. "Well, yea, maybe it's about the money too. He's got it in his head to buy some land. I told him Aunt Rachel's share of the MC3 Ranch was his, but he said—" Sam paused and added, "Well, hell, you know what he said."

Charlie Wolf had returned his mother to her white family, as his father had instructed upon his death. Rachel had been warmly welcomed. Charlie had not.

Charles McCallister, Rachel's brother, had two sons, already proclaimed hellions. Robert and Samuel had claimed Charlie, and during the short time he'd lived on the McCallister Ranch, the three boys ran together like a pack of wolves. Over the years, Charlie relied on his cousins for word of his mother's well-being.

The McCallister boys grew up and embraced respectability until Robert McCallister's wife was murdered in the young preacher's home. The minister set his Bible aside that day, and went hunting for the killers. Sam joined him. Charlie was already on the trail.

After they'd executed the men, the three drifted on together, picking up handbills and catching outlaws for pay. Robert McCallister became The Deacon, one of the most feared gun-fighters in the territory.

Sam was better known as Snake McCallister. He did his best work silently, usually before his prey even knew he was present. The knife was his weapon of choice, but he was as proficient with a gun.

The two white men were dangerous predators, only a piece of paper away from being like the men they hunted. Their half-breed cousin, Charlie McCallister, was a dark menace riding at their side. Outlaws trembled when they learned that the Wolf was on their trail.

"Word is, Jericho's got a cozy spot across the river and is making one last sweep to feather his Mexican nest."

"I know Charlie wants him dead before he can get to the other side of the border. Since Jericho and his raiders cut a swath through Colorado and New Mexico territories, they've gone to ground, and no one's saying where they're hid."

Rumors of nighthawks running cattle under cover of darkness had recently reached Charlie. He was sure it was Jericho, headed through Texas, on his way back to Mexico.

"Last time Charlie went after the son of a bitch, he damn near bought the farm." Sam shifted the tobacco in his cheek and spat experimentally at a cactus. "Bet I can hit it in one shot," he invited his brother to compete, while contemplating the time his cousin had been left for dead.

"Highest spot wins," Deacon answered, accepting the challenge. "Figure Charlie

owes Jericho a pain or two before we put him out of his misery.”

“If the Chief hadn’t dodged an inch, he’d ’a’ been food for the turkey-buzzards.” Sam blasted a stream of tobacco at the cactus, marking his spot. “Hope he doesn’t get his hair parted while he’s down there.”

“Shit, Sam, worry about your own. I’m sure partial to keeping mine.” Deacon McCallister scratched his red beard meditatively and complained softly again.

“I can smell myself. I wouldn’t want an Indian to get downwind of me. I need a bath. I hope to hell Charlie gets back here soon.”

“Ah, Deak, if the Comancheros are driving a herd of rustled cattle, Charlie figures they plan to sell or trade them to Mangas Colorado’s band before they cross the border. He’s not going to let up on this till we trap Jericho, one place or another. Better get used to your stink, ’cause you’re going to be wearin’ it for a while.”

“Yea, I’ve got that.” Deacon closed his eyes against the sun, so still one could have mistaken him for asleep.

He muttered aloud, “But I’ve got a couple of questions, like what do the Indians have to trade for the rustled cattle, and more important, how in *hell* does Charlie plan to take down Jericho while we’re surrounded by half the Apache nation?”

* * * *

“Hostages,” Charlie Wolf answered Deacon’s first question with disgust. “White women—all but one are trussed up in a tent. One of them refused Okiah, the medicine man, so he gave her to the tribes. They’ve got her tied outside like a dog, handy for any buck passing to climb on.”

“Damn shame; we probably ought to put her out of her misery.” Samuel frowned at the image. He’d seen enough hostage survivors to know that this one wouldn’t want to live.

“Not a decision for you to make,” Deacon warned him; his former calling sometimes influenced the few convictions he still held. “Just make sure the medicine man gets in the way of a bullet when we go in. I’d hate for her abuse to go unavenged.”

“We’re not going in,” Charlie corrected them. “*I’m* going in tonight, alone. Be ready with those horses, Sam. Deacon, cover me from above. I’ll be bringing the women out the back way.”

“What back way? There is no back way; that’s why the Indians put their camp here.”

Charlie nodded at the cliff they’d peered over earlier in the day. “I’ll be going in the back way.”

There was no argument to be made. Charlie Wolf did things his way. If they objected, he still did things his way.

* * * *

Charlie cut through the back of the tent wall and freed the four white women inside, shoving them out the back slit that he’d made. He hesitated. He’d planned on leaving the one at the tent’s side. She was the only one who would be missed before morning. But he’d expected to find an Indian guard who would need to be silenced inside.

Hell, the sentry’s outside with number five. Change of plans. The guard would wake the camp when he came back inside and saw the captives gone.

Charlie recognized the Arapaho who was announcing his pleasure loudly enough to wake the sleepers surrounding the tent. Charlie wanted to cut his throat for that reason alone.

The woman was silently enduring the assault when Charlie ducked out of the tent; she barely looked up.

“Come back later,” her Indian abuser grunted in Arapaho at Charlie, seeing just one more Kiowa roaming the camp, waiting his turn on the woman.

The guard was on his knees, mounting her like a dog, he had the hem of her skirt pushed around her shoulders and her rump exposed. The woman looked with dull eyes at Charlie, expecting, he supposed, that he would climb on next.

“Long time no see, Descartes,” Charlie greeted the sentry in Kiowa, and then added in perfect English. “You always were a pig.”

Descartes opened his mouth to yell a warning, but the woman reared up, her dress billowing over his head, blinding him for the moment. Charlie had the brave on the ground and his throat cut before he could make a sound.

He sliced through her bonds and motioned her to the back of the tent, dragging the Indian’s body into the spot she’d occupied. Unless another brave got randy before the night ended, it would appear that the woman was sleeping and they’d have a good head start.

Charlie had to fight off the frantic women, repeating in English twice, “I’m here to get you out.”

“I can’t climb,” one woman advised him.

“All right,” Charlie agreed and set the others on the trail, carefully showing the next in line the handholds after starting each up the cliff. When the fourth woman started the climb, Charlie swung in behind her, ignoring the woman on the ground. She frantically climbed behind him.

They crawled up the cliff front, following the night trail he’d left. He let the fifth woman pass him and erased evidence of their presence. Deacon joined them halfway, helping the silent women as they clambered over the ledge and onto a plateau of scrub pine.

The first woman across the ledge helped Deacon with the rest. When Charlie came over the lip and stood before them, she spoke to both men.

“I’m not going back.” The voice of the fifth woman was surprisingly strong—firm and determined for one who had survived such an ordeal.

Neither Deacon nor Charlie answered her, but the red-haired bounty hunter turned and reached as though to stop her from leaving. She spoke again and his hand dropped to his side.

“My family thinks I’m dead. It’s best that way. Tell them Elizabeth Grace Souter is dead. Tell my family that I died in an Apache Indian encampment in 1881.”

When they reached the top, where Samuel waited with the remuda of horses, Elizabeth Souter was gone. Deacon greeted her absence with foul words that were ignored by the other two bounty hunters.

The rescued women looked at the cursing giant, afraid that they had exchanged captivity with savages for maniacs who now held them captive.

It was out of their way, but the bounty hunters took two days from their hunt to accompany the women to safety.

* * * *

Buffalo Creek was closer to where they'd stashed their prisoners, so they took the women to the small Texas village rather than the county seat, Flat Rock.

Hiram Potter was the local peace officer and could be counted on to see that they got the attentions of a doctor before they were taken home.

While they were there, the sheriff sent a rider to Eclipse to wire the relatives.

"You say that there was a fifth woman who made it out with you?" Potter asked.

"She said to tell her kin she was dead. I expect she is by now." Sam McCallister looked uncomfortable at what he knew about her circumstances.

Sheriff Potter's eyebrows rose sharply, and he nodded in understanding. "Just as well she didn't come back," was all he said. Then he turned his gaze to Charlie Wolf.

"How is it you came across the Indian camp? The entire U.S. cavalry under that fellow Buell has been quartering this area of Texas looking for the Apache and renegade Comanche tribes."

Charlie Wolf stood at the window, staring at the passing women on the street ... white women who were afraid of him. He had fucking on his mind and hadn't thought of much else for days. He sighed and turned back into the room. He really didn't want to talk to the sheriff.

Deacon answered, "When we picked up the wanted posters in Abilene, there was a story making the rounds that Jericho is in this area, moving toward Mexico. The bankers and cattlemen have finally slapped a decent reward on his head, and it looks like he's hightailing it to south of the border.

"Charlie Wolf is the best tracker in the territory. While we were running down some of the trash we carried handbills on, we crossed fresh pony tracks."

Charlie turned back to stare outside. He watched two women who had stopped to gossip across the street. One was short and plump, the other tall and angular. Both caused an ache in his groin, reminding him that his cock needed the attentions of a whore. Grimly, he turned back into the room, focusing on the conversation in the sheriff's office, instead of the women.

"We threw the assholes in a cave and blocked the opening so we could follow the tracks. It wasn't Jericho, but I guess these ladies will benefit from our mistake," Sam McCallister assured the sheriff.

"Their families will be grateful to you boys—probably some money in it, if you've a mind to put in for it." Hiram Potter looked curiously at the half-Kiowa McCallister cousin.

Charlie bore the scrutiny with stoic disregard. He knew what the lawman saw. He was as tall as his cousins. But his skin was the color of teak, blue-black hair fell down his back, and his high, slanting cheekbones proclaimed him Indian.

His nose, once a straight blade, had been broken too many times and was now a misshapen lump on his face. Stitch marks bisected his right eyebrow, made a trail down his right cheek, and crossed his chin. The scar was a light color against the dark bronze of his face.

He did nothing to deny his Indian blood or reassure those he did business with, dressing to please his Kiowa side. He wore soft deerskin pants and shirt, lacing his high leather moccasins from the top of his feet up to his knees.

A colorful breechcloth hung from his hips, covering his deerskin pants at the groin

area. He wore a black wide-brimmed hat that shaded his face, concealing any expression that might be surprised from him.

On the rare occasion when he took off the hat, only his light gray eyes indicated his mixed blood.

Charlie Wolf fingered the vicious scratch marks that covered his cheek. “Yea, they were real happy to see me.”

Not one to mince words, Sheriff Potter responded, “Well, damn, McCallister, you dress like an Indian, and you wear your hair like an Indian. Hell, you even walk like an Indian. What did you think the women were going to do?”

* * * *

Once the Buffalo Creek business was complete, the three bounty hunters retraced their trail to where they’d stashed six bodies and two live prisoners.

The bank robbers they’d left handcuffed to each other and barricaded in a flat cave, were down to a few swallows of water and glad to see the McCallisters return.

“Never thought I’d be glad to see you bastards.” The man who had shot his friend in the back over a beer stank of human waste and sweat. “You are not the law. You can’t arrest us.”

Charlie made him jog beside the horses as they carried their cargo to Flat Rock. “Not fit to mount a horse of mine.” The other man, the more dangerous of the two, ran beside him, shackled to him with chains.

“Shut the fuck up, Dawson. If I didn’t have to drag your sorry ass all the way to Flat Rock, I’d kill you myself just to get some quiet.” The buckskin that this man had been riding followed in the remuda of horses the bounty hunters led.

The bodies of the dead had not fared so well and had ripened under the unrelenting Texas sun.

Loaded down with rotting corpses and towing two prisoners, the three bounty hunters headed for Flat Rock.

“Explain to me how getting the white women loose helps us catch Jericho.” Sam was the youngest of the trio. His tone was belligerent, knowing that he hadn’t figured something obvious.

Deacon answered, “Jericho’s beef won’t be going to the Indians. We only left the Apaches a few horses to trade for close to two hundred head of cattle.”

“This renegade, Mangas Colorado—is he a relative?” Sam was only half teasing. Charlie frequently visited the remnants of Gray Wolf’s Kiowa band in hostile Indian camps. He remained friends with those he’d ridden with for three years following his father’s death.

Charlie growled, “Mangas Colorado is a *Mimbreno* Apache. Not as fierce as the Kiowa.”

“So does that make the two of you friends, or relatives? You’ve been talking about getting an Indian squaw. I don’t think you’re going to be too popular with your in-laws the next time you have a reunion.”

Charlie had been negotiating for a wife with one of the Kiowa riding with Mangas Colorado.

“Mangas is no fool. He knows I won’t point any army scouts his way. As far as Jericho, he’ll use that coyote as long as he can. If he were not desperate, the

Comancheros would already be dead.”

Charlie regretted alienating the Kiowa tribesman before he could take possession of his squaw. Woman finding was an arduous task. He motioned at the fifteen Indian ponies that were in their caravan.

“Looks like the cavalry have been running them into the ground.” Instead of the sturdy, well-tended stock he expected to steal from the Apache chief to trade back for a woman, these animals were the best of a worn and old lot. Sam had hazed the rest, chasing them until they ran off.

It didn’t matter now, because by taking the white hostages, he’d be *persona non grata* with the Indians for a while. Charlie sighed, only half listening to his cousin.

He’d thought about taking the fifth hostage as his woman. *Hell, I’d have been doing her a favor.* The sight of Descartes mounting her had stayed in his head, stirring needs he usually had under control.

Deacon changed the subject, drawing him back from the dark memory. “How come three different tribes are holed up together in that canyon? Something big looks to be brewing.”

“...Army troops are arriving to force the Apaches onto the reservation at San Carlos. Figure Mangas Colorado is waiting for Victorio to arrive before they join publicly to disagree with the government’s plan.”

He stroked the scar on his cheek as he contemplated the continued struggle for dominance between the two halves of his blood.

To Sam’s question he answered absently, “Jericho’s going to have to push those cows all the way to Mexico. It’ll be a lot easier to follow his trail from the Indian camp and pick off the nighthawks herding stolen cattle than if his band is riding fast, carrying human hostages on a remuda of fresh horses.”

Sam frowned and asked, “We going to tell the army where Mangas Colorado is hiding?”

Charlie’s flat gray eyes held his when he asked, “Think you can find this spot again?”

“Hell, no.” Sam relaxed and nodded.

“Then I guess you don’t have anything to tell.”

Deacon McCallister shoved his hat back and said impatiently, “Let’s collect the bounty on these hombres, dead and soon-to-be-dead, clean up, find a willing woman or two, rest up, and then follow Jericho and his herd of cattle south.”

He smelled his armpit. “I’m telling you, we’re as ripe as those bodies we’re hauling. I’ve got to have a bath.”

Chapter Two

Naomi Parker stood in the alley between the sheriff's office and the town's only saloon. Neither building offered shade, so the sun, directly overhead, speared her with its heat.

Inside her muslin gown, perspiration gathered at the top of her shoulder, then slid down her back, pooling at her narrow waist. She wore a sturdy corset between camisole and dress, compressing her flesh an inch smaller, as *Godey's Lady's Book* dictated.

A white fichu at her neck had looked crisp and cool when she'd dressed the morning before. At that time, she'd been preparing for her duties as a teacher at the Sparrow Creek Ladies' Seminary. In spite of the day's heat, she shivered, remembering.

The seminary's boarders were all at the meager breakfast Naomi had prepared. The cook and kitchen supplies would arrive when the rest of the girls got there.

The morning was already warm. Someone had opened the window hoping for a breeze, and there were already insects buzzing in the room. She sat with her students, eating cold porridge when the first shots sounded.

The girls bounded out of their seats—thankful for any distraction.

"Ladies, calm down. Mr. Wilson has probably encountered that skunk he's been fussing about." Patrick Wilson had been waiting when she'd arrived in Texas at the Flat Rock stage depot, two weeks before. He'd told her all about the skunk in the henhouse on their ride back to the school.

She'd been prepared to meet a Board Member, or at least the Headmistress. But Patrick Wilson had been assigned the task of transporting her, and later her students, as they arrived to attend the Academy.

By the first nightfall, four of the daughters of Texas had been delivered to the building and left in Naomi's care. Justine Garner, Mary-Beth Calloway, Marta Mullins, and Ambrosia Quince had stumbled up the steps of the dormitory, worn out from travel, but filled with twelve-year-old curiosity.

It was Naomi's least favorite age for teaching students. Twelve-year-old girls were betwixt and between ... neither children nor young women. Sometimes, they were unspeakably cruel. She'd heard her share of giggled name-calling: "Old stick, skinny old maid, dried up prune," behind her back, but not beyond her hearing.

The first week, Mary Calloway and Brody Quince had become fast friends and followers of whatever mischief Justine Garner and Marta Mullins invented. Chickens were tormented, bedding short-sheeted (even Naomi was not exempt), clothing hidden; Justine's specialty was fainting.

The tiny girl, much smaller than her twelve-year-old friends, ruled them with strong will and silly antics. Whenever she couldn't get her way, she would swoon, or at least that's what she called it. Naomi called it falling down to get attention.

By the following week when four older girls arrived—Rebecca Johnson, Emily Erdman, Daisy Meadow, and Millicent Cotter—the first four girls had been there long enough to feel that they owned the school.

The fourteen year olds disagreed. Discord, teasing, and finally mischievous damage ensued. Naomi, quickly losing control of her charges, was forced to render discipline.

It seemed a thing that had taken place a hundred years before. “Hold out your hands.” She’d made her voice severe, disapproving. “Justine, Mary, Marta, Brody...” Naomi flinched, remembering the slap of the ruler against the twelve-year-old palms.

After meting out punishment, she’d walked to the well for a bucket of water to hide her distress. The four twelve-year-olds had stood staring after her, rebellious and defiant.

“Mean, ugly old maid,” one of them had hissed at her back as she retreated, more the punished than the punisher. She had felt so sorry for herself, standing by the well, tears barely held in check.

Naomi’s thoughts jerked back to the attack yesterday. She’d been studying the streaks of black ink that still stained Missy Cotter’s blonde hair, even after a week’s worth of washings, when shots fired down by the barn got everyone’s attention.

“Gently, girls,” she’d admonished them. But benches had gone flying as the students hurried to the front windows.

Naomi had continued calmly repeating her instructions, even though no one listened. “Remember, a lady always maintains poise and calm, even in dire circumstance. Nor does one show extreme curiosity, as it is an emotion of the lower classes.”

The young women of the Sparrow Creek Ladies’ Academy ignored her, pushing and shoving to be the first at the windows. Even watching the hired man shoot a polecat beat the bland morning meal and the boring day that was sure to follow.

Naomi walked slowly to illustrate gracious dignity. Even though she was secretly as interested in the outdoor disruption as her students, she was careful to model restraint as she passed the far window that overlooked the meadow below. She always looked at the meadow; it was the one spot of green in an otherwise monochromatic world of brown dirt, red dust, and gray sky.

That’s when the day had changed. She’d thought it was an Indian attack.

Marta had told the girls about tribes of wild savages that roamed across Texas, stealing cattle and killing white people when they found them. Now, men fitting Marta’s descriptions and like nothing Naomi had ever seen, swooped down on the school in the early morning.

“Indians ... Hide!” she screamed the warning, but it was too late. The men were already at the school, riding their horses up on the porch.

A day later, in the bright sun of the alley, Naomi pressed her hand against her mouth, holding back shuddering sobs at the memory. *I’m a coward. I abandoned my charges. Had I been alert, on watch ... I should have done something!*

She’d stood frozen by the window until the first man burst through the doorway, setting the girls screaming. Then, instincts honed from her childhood, took over and Naomi jumped out and didn’t stop when she landed, until she’d rolled under the school, hiding in the crawlspace.

She knew from the rough sounds, thumps, and screaming that terrible things were happening above, and someone had been badly hurt. She’d pressed her mouth shut, holding her hand over it tightly to silence her need to join in the screams. Instead, gagging on her own fear, she’d remained hidden.

Then, it had gotten quieter, and she’d watched when the savages had pushed and dragged the girls outside, loading them onto the extra horses the bandits led. She had been unable to think of any way to save her students.

And she’d heard the men laughing. She stuffed her fist in her mouth to stop the rising

bile. "Collins didn't lie. White chickies like these'll bring us plenty across the river if he doesn't come up with his part of the trade."

Her fault, all her fault ... she'd known that she was to blame as she hunched under the school hiding from the disaster she'd wrought.

A fortnight before, her heart had almost stopped when Harvey Collins had driven his wagon full of trinkets and worthless gewgaws into the schoolyard.

Harley Collins was an unpleasant memory from her childhood in Alabama, and she'd not seen him in years. But, even as she'd chased him away with threats of the sheriff, he'd leered at the young girls hanging off the porch watching.

"Think you're all high and mighty now, don't you? I remember you. You're Nomi Parker. Turned into a dried-up old maid, didn't you? How's that sister of yours? Knew her pretty well, myself, but then again, so did half the men in the county." He'd smacked his lips and cackled his question loud enough for listeners if they wanted to hear.

Even when Harvey had had all of his teeth, he'd been too lazy to say her name right. But, he knew that she came from a played-out dab of dirt, sharecropped by her father and brother until they'd both been killed in the war.

After that, Naomi's older sister, Comfort, had put food on the table however she could. But when an offer of marriage had been made, she'd grabbed it, leaving Naomi alone with a brush, a comb, a *Godey's Lady's Book*, and orders to leave the ramshackle cabin falling down around her, and go live with the neighbors. Stubbornly, Naomi had remained alone in her shack.

That's when Harvey had decided he needed a girl to look after him.

She remembered well the night he'd broken into her place and tried to jump her, when she'd broken a pitcher across his head and run all the way to the Lancaster Farm. So, when Harvey pulled up in front of the school in what he called his Travelling Wagon of Interesting Items, she'd yelled at him and refused to let him show his wares to her students.

"Get out of here you wicked old man. I'll send Patrick after the sheriff if you don't go now." Then she'd ducked her head, embarrassed that she'd let her temper slip. Ladies were always in control of their emotions.

She'd been glad to see the hired man limping toward her, "Everything all right over here, Miss Naomi?"

"I've explained that we have no use for his potions or fribbles. He's leaving now." Naomi had felt so safe with Patrick Wilson there to protect her. But both Becky Johnson and Missy Cotter had defied her instruction to stay on the porch, and swooped down on the wagon.

"I have money to buy what I want, Miss Parker." Missy Cotter was the product of intense spoiling and never missed an opportunity to brag about the money she came from.

"Go back to the dormitory porch, ladies. The peddler has nothing you would want." She'd been firm, and Becky Johnson's snobbery had helped.

"Really, Missy, would you want anything that dirty old man is selling?" The silly child had raised her voice, intentionally insulting the merchant to impress Naomi with her superior social status.

Harvey Collins had shrugged and driven on down the road, leaving a final warning, "Your day's coming, Miz Parker." He sneered the formal address. "You and all your prissy females will get your comeuppance."

She should have realized it had been too easy getting rid of him. She should have told someone about Harvey Collins.

Her stomach churned with guilt. My fault—Patrick dead and the others stolen; it's my entire fault.

After the outlaws had ridden away, carrying her students with them, Naomi had huddled in the crawlspace for a long time, afraid to move. Shame filled her at the memory.

Had she grown a backbone sooner, Patrick might have lived. She found him dying by the barn when she'd finally shimmied out from under the house, no worse off than a few bruises she'd suffered in her plummet from the window.

"Miss Naomi," he wheezed her name, barely able to speak. "Tell sheriff—Comancheros." She'd lifted him, trying to stop the wound with the fabric from her dress, but nothing slowed the blood as it leaked into the dust around them.

"Take the mule and go, Miss Naomi." Before he died, even Patrick's last words were respectful. She might have sat longer in the wake of death, but he'd given her a direction to follow.

So, she'd ridden Patrick's mule to the town of Flat Rock, the nearest place that had a sheriff. The town she'd arrived in two weeks before.

She'd alternately cried, mumbled aloud, and slumped lifeless on the mule until she reached help. She'd been ready to hand the nightmare over to someone else. But, that didn't happen.

"No, ma'am. That's a sorry thing that happened. But if the Comancheros are stealing women from roundabouts and took them girls, we can't be leaving our own women folk unprotected. I'll wire the Eclipse Marshal, but I won't be asking the Flat Rock citizens to chase down and fight those devils."

It would take days for the territory law to put together trackers and a posse of men, weeks before there was any hope of catching the outlaws. It was only then that she had realized the girls' rescue was in her hands.

* * * *

Three men rode down the main street of Flat Rock, surveying their surroundings for danger. They were bounty hunters who led the evidence of their success behind them—two live prisoners cuffed, gagged, and mounted on horses, followed by the smell of death emanating from the cargo of wrapped bundles that poisoned the air of Flat Rock.

Judging the three riders by the dirt, dust, and sweat they wore, it would have been easy to mistake the men for saddle bums. But the well-groomed and sleekly muscled horses they rode, as well as the remuda of mounts they towed behind them, told a different story.

Naomi had stationed herself at the edge of the alley and watched the trio ride down the dirt path that passed for civilization in the county seat. The heat, flies, and filth that surrounded her in the narrow passage were temporarily forgotten as she watched the fierce men send most of Flat Rock's citizens scurrying to get inside.

The bounty hunters, cloaked in arrogance and savagery, were evidently avoided by the honest and respectable as well as the thieves and murderers in Texas.

By the time the three riders reached the sheriff's office, word had already filtered inside and a deputy stood waiting to unload the neatly wrapped bundles of tarp stacked

on the back of the pack animals.

Naomi knew that what the hunters brought was this land's version of rough justice, but it made her stomach clench, remembering Patrick in death. The strangers seemed more like the Comanchero killers who had attacked the school than like honorable citizens doing a needed task.

As she listened and watched, a deputy unloaded the horses, his complaints filling the otherwise quiet street. He wore his bandanna wrapped around his face to block the odor.

"Jesus Christ, sheriff said to just bring in their gear next time. This pile of stink is smellin' up the whole town."

"Tried that," one of the bounty hunters nodded at the deputy grimly and chided him. "Sheriff didn't want to pay out on our word last time, remember?" Even through the dust of the trail, the man's shoulder-length hair gleamed golden under the noontime sun.

"Well, Sam, he sure as hell ain't the one out here dealin' with rotten corpses. Maybe you could take 'em on over to the undertakers," the deputy bleated hopefully.

Unpleasant as it might be, it was the deputy's task to give each body a quick onceover and confirm its identity. But wrapped as each bundle was, he had to wrestle the dead to the ground in order to peek at each face.

A second of the riders settled wearily in his saddle, and after listening to the grumbling deputy, spoke. "The poster says, 'Wanted Dead or Alive.' They're dead ... job's done." His voice indicated impatience that threatened to change to anger, and the deputy cast a hasty glance his way.

"I'm hurrying as fast as this shit allows, Deacon." But the deputy quickened his pace, comparing the stack of wanted flyers with the corpses he'd unloaded, ticking them off one by one.

"Crawford Bank Robbery: \$1,250 for the capture of the thieves and \$1,250 for the recovery of the gold coin." The deputy read slowly from the wanted poster. Then he looked up at the gagged and bound prisoners. "You got both of the bastards. I don't suppose they told you where they stashed the money?"

As Naomi watched, the Indian drew a heavy pouch from his saddlebags and tossed it at the feet of the deputy, who muttered, "Charlie Wolf," acknowledging the receipt, without meeting the gaze of the third bounty hunter.

The deputy didn't offer insult by inspecting the content. Instead he kicked it over to the office door and moved on to the dead. There were six decaying murderers inside the heavy canvas wrappings. The deputy cursed, gagged, and whined, while the bounty hunters waited.

The horses twitched and stomped at the flies that were drawn by the smell of rotting flesh. Naomi peered at the crudely displayed bodies that had once been men.

"Henry Loco Miller, Thomas Wright, Juarez Sutter—payout for these is one thousand dollars each, wanted for murder." When the deputy uncovered the next body, he cursed and kicked the carcass.

"Damn sonovabitch, I hope this one suffered before he died. Fifteen hundred dollars for murder, fraud, and theft, put up by the Texas Bank Association. He shot and killed the Austin Bank President's wife during the holdup."

The last two bodies, in the final stages of decomposition, were given a cursory glance before the deputy replaced the tarp. "Alsgood boys, five hundred each. They weren't worth much alive and didn't fetch much dead."

The third bounty hunter remained a silent, dark outline against the sun. Naomi looked speculatively at him as he sat facing the far end of the street, ignoring the caterwauling of the deputy. The blond-haired hunter mirrored his position, angling his mount to check for danger from the other direction.

When the count was finished, the deputy pushed the still gagged and cuffed prisoners through the sheriff's door, and two of the bounty hunters followed to collect their reward money. Naomi stared intently at the man called Charlie Wolf. He sat relaxed in his saddle, carelessly resting.

She knew better. He was a predator scanning the area for danger. Every other living creature within sight knew it too. The normal afternoon rowdy bluster that marked the streets in Flat Rock had quieted.

His animal snorted in the dust and scraped its hoof impatiently. Muscles rippled beneath the dark bay coat as the horse made its own protest at the stench permeating the air.

He patted the animal's neck and said something in a guttural language Naomi didn't know, "*Eyaia oyamossa*," and the horse quieted. She tucked herself deeper into the shadows as he glanced toward the alley where she stood studying him.

When the door to the sheriff's office banged open and the other two men emerged, business complete, the sound jarred her into awareness.

Without a backward look, the men headed across the street, leading the string of horses, now empty of their ghoulish burden. They left behind the dead bodies wrapped in tarp, flies buzzing loudly in the heat.

"Sheriff said he didn't have that much cash on hand," The blond man spoke loud enough for Naomi to hear. She suspected he spoke for listeners like herself, who spied from corners and alleys. "Deacon tells him, 'We'll take this voucher to the bank to get the rest tendered.'"

As Naomi watched, they crossed the street to the building there. The sign out front read: **B and B~The Biggest Bank in the Territory**. It had a false front glorifying a tin-roofed building smaller than the town's only saloon. Again, the third bounty hunter waited with the horses, while the other two took their voucher inside.

In a short time, they returned and stood there on the sidewalk, dividing their blood money up, offering bait to the wicked and stupid. Each man received a stack of bills.

"Give you any trouble?" The third man spoke to the other two when they emerged, but his eyes remained trained on the banker who had followed them to the sidewalk. Whatever the paunch-bellied businessman had been going to say, he rethought it and retreated hastily.

"Figured on making us cool our heels until the territory Marshal wired in his approval. We discussed the situation and the banker changed his mind."

Deacon McCallister spoke mildly as he settled into his saddle. All three turned their horses toward Wallace's stock barn, and their conversation floated to her as they led the string of horses to the stable.

"I think we'll get a pretty penny for that roan and the buckskin, maybe a couple more," the golden-haired hunter predicted. Naomi could see that he referred to the few horses in the string that weren't old, sway-backed, or lame. They led them down a street that had become eerily quiet, as though the entire town strained to hear the bounty hunters' plans.

“You’d think outlaws would be smart enough to get themselves good getaway mounts.” Sam’s comments were made to the other white man.

“Reckon smarts and outlaws don’t fit together naturally,” was Deacon’s answer.

Charlie Wolf checked the street, store-tops, and shadowed recesses for danger, ignoring the talk between his companions. Naomi studied the third man because the other two deferred to him and put their security in his hands. He was named well—Wolf—feral like a wild beast in human clothes.

From beneath the broad-brimmed hat, black hair fell below his shoulders. Strong legs hugging the sides of his mount were encased in deerskin leggings. His body swayed as though part of the horse, one animal flowing into another. When they reached the stable, he dismounted, removing his hat to beat the dust from his pants, before he settled it back in place. He turned and looked back down the street, his gaze stopping at the narrow passage where she stood in the shadows. Naomi knew he couldn’t see her, but she stepped back anyway, feeling vulnerable.

* * * *

Someone was watching them. Charlie felt the eyes of a stalker following their movements. *Interesting...* He checked behind them, bringing up the rear when he entered the stable.

“Gonna ride a whore all night long,” Sam called out what was on all their minds. Charlie thought about the trade that he’d almost had worked out, for a Kiowa female to use when he needed a woman. Sam’s words brought his cock to life, want stirring in his loins.

“Ain’t no use in the Indian going over to Jake’s Saloon; he don’t serve ’em,” Wallace imparted his knowledge to the white McCallister cousins as though Charlie Wolf was deaf and invisible. “Redskins, I mean. Jake lost a brother and sister to the ’72 Comanche raids. He holds on to his hate tight.”

“I’ll expect that trough over there half-filled with hot water when I get back.” Charlie deliberately stood in front of the old man and forced him to meet his gaze. Old eyes blinked rapidly, and then he nodded.

“You’re a half-breed—can tell from your light eyes. I ’spect I can wait on the American part of you. But it’ll cost ya. That trough holds a lot of water.” Wallace grabbed a bucket and headed toward the pump.

Chapter Three

Naomi found a shaded spot beside the livery stable and spent her afternoon watching for the men to emerge. When they finally did, she marked their direction and waited until they entered the town saloon. She followed, sneaking through the backdoor to crouch in a hidey-hole under the stairway. From there she observed the three bounty hunters belly up to the bar.

Piss and vinegar flowed in their veins and there wasn't a doubt in her mind a fight was in the offing as the town's regular drunks reluctantly made way for strangers. The newcomers looked to be the type to oblige if they were invited to a brawl.

Jake, the bartender, seemed determined to test her theory when he said, "We don't serve redskins here."

His words had chairs scooting away from the bar as those in the room, fell quiet, listening.

The uncomfortable silence was broken when the Indian named Charlie Wolf, peeled some bills from the wad of cash he carried, grabbed the bottle off the bar, and threw the money at Jake. "Now you do," was all he said, as he and his two companions went over to a table.

The way the sheriff, deputy, and banker had eased around them, as well as the way the town's citizens had scattered earlier, Naomi wondered just how dangerous the men were. She settled down in her crawlspace, watching the byplay closely.

No one wanted to rile the three anymore than Jake already had.

"Get your ass moving, Molly. I don't pay you to sit around," Jake snarled at the saloon girl who had eased onto one of the high bar stools. Everyone knew that he was venting his anger on her for lack of courage in bracing the newcomers, but that didn't help her.

"Molly, come over here," the Indian ordered, deliberately ignoring the bartender. The English words spoken in a Texas accent seemed strange coming from his lips.

The saloon's fancy woman answered the call reluctantly, slowing her pace as though waiting for someone like Jake to intercede. No one did, and when her mincing steps brought her to the table, the Indian pulled her onto his lap, fondling her breast as he fumbled one hand under her skirt.

"Hey, who said you got first dibs?" the blond-haired member of the trio protested.

"Why don't we flip for it?" The third man tossed a coin as the Indian sucked the whore's nipple, cloth and all, into his mouth.

Mouth full of cloth and breast, the Charlie Wolf mumbled, "You'll give us a good ride, won't ya, sweetheart?"

Naomi's heart raced, and she stiffened in shock watching the dark head press against Molly's fullness. She knew she should look away from the indecent display of crude roughness, but couldn't. Instead, her breath felt constricted, and her body pulsed the same way it once had when she'd come upon a stallion covering a mare.

That day, she had stood frozen, mouth agape, breath a harsh pant, as she'd watched the magnificent animal service the female. She'd known that this was the coupling that she'd heard whispered about in furtive discussions. Her body had reacted scandalously,

fevered loins aching for something yet unknown.

Watching the Indian suckle the woman through her dress, Naomi unconsciously pressed her palm against her tightly constrained bosom, mesmerized by the scene before her. The finely chiseled lips moved against the softly swelling mounds, and then his teeth flashed, scraping the fabric and pulling taut the nipple, so that everyone in the room could see the whore's arousal. He laughed and released his hold on her.

The fancy woman tumbled to the floor from her captor's lap and then scrambled to her feet, backing away. Her loud denial belying her flushed cheeks and pointed breasts could be heard all over the bar, as the other saloon girl bobbed her head in agreement.

"Sorry, mister, I have to make a living. If it got out I let an Indian have a poke, I'd have to lower my price." Her hasty look at the saloon owner said she'd have to endure more than a drop in wages if she went up the stairs with the dark bounty hunter.

Behind the counter, Jake pulled out a shotgun and aimed it in the general direction of the Indian. "My whores don't fuck redskins. I'm telling you to leave."

"To hell with it." In one fluid motion, the Indian grabbed the bottle from the table, knocking his chair over as he stood, and threw it straight and sure into the side of Jake's head. The glass hit its target with a loud *thunk*, and then broke, showering Jake with alcohol as the shotgun fell from the bartender's hands and he dropped like a stone.

"Don't threaten me, Jake, or you'll end up dead," the Indian grunted to no one, since he'd knocked out his target.

"One of these days, Charlie, you're going to get your ass blown off doing something like that," the blond stranger said.

"Hell, Sam," the one they called Deacon, growled. "One of these days he's going to get *our* asses shot off doing something like that."

Naomi organized her information. *The Indian is named Charlie; his companions—who had drawn their guns and stood eyeing the customers in the bar—are Deacon and Sam.* No one seemed inclined to challenge the trio.

The one named Sam walked behind the bar, nudging the body of the bartender aside and reached underneath the counter. "Good stuff under here," he grinned bringing two bottles up with him.

"I'm done here," the man who had just knocked out the bartender stood with gun in hand. When no one challenged him he started backing toward the saloon exit, all the while pointing his gun steadily at the bar's occupants.

"Hell, take this to keep you company," Deacon passed one of the bottles to the retreating man.

The three spoke playfully as though it was all a game, but Naomi noticed none of them holstered their weapons until the swinging doors closed behind the Indian. Just as quick as that, the two remaining turned back to the whore, Molly, who, free from the watchful eye of Jake, seated herself gratefully at their table.

Naomi decided this might be her best opportunity. She didn't ask herself why her thoughts were centered on the man leaving, instead of the two remaining bounty hunters.

She backed out of her hiding spot, brushed the cobwebs from her dress, and hurried out the alley door. The third bounty hunter was just easing across the street, walking toward the livery stable when she reached his side.

"Excuse me." He walked in front of her, not acknowledging her call to him. Naomi knew that he heard. They were the only two people on the street. She clenched her teeth

and hurried forward, placing a detaining hand upon his arm.

As soon as she touched him, she knew it was a mistake. Muscles rippled beneath her fingers. The arm itself felt as hard as an oak tree limb.

Nervously she looked up at him. "Excuse me, sir, I'd like to speak with you if you have the time this evening." Naomi was tall for a woman and was accustomed to standing shoulder to shoulder, and sometimes above, most men. Charlie Wolf was half a head taller than she and twice as wide.

As she looked him over, she was uncomfortably aware that he did the same, appraising her body in an intimate fashion. She flushed, remembering his mouth on the other woman's bosom. "If you have the time," she repeated in a whisper, confused under his stare and no longer sure what she was speaking about.

His fierce eyes stared down at her. "I don't."

Caught in his gaze, Naomi couldn't remember the question. "Don't what?" she stuttered.

He stopped walking and carefully appraised the figure she presented. She forced herself to remain calm beneath his inspection. Her dress was stained with Patrick's blood, and her dress was torn in several places. She couldn't remember how that had happened.

When I rolled under the porch, I felt the material give. The thought made her nauseous and jolted her from her malaise. She needed to obtain this man's help.

Evidently the two words he'd spoken to her ended the conversation in his mind, because he shrugged her hand off and walked away.

She had been staring speechlessly at the fresh scratches on his face. He frightened her. *Maybe I should let the territory law enforcement rescue the girls.* Then she remembered the Flat Rock sheriff's refusal to help and straightened her spine and hurried after him, once again touching his arm.

The man grabbed her arm before she could escape, striding purposefully toward the barn entrance.

Dragging her behind him, he stopped for a minute, took a pull from the bottle, and then handed it to her. When she said, "I have need of your services," he snorted and said, "Yeah, likewise."

Naomi declined the bottle with a shake of her head, handing it back to him as she focused on her goal, "I need to hire you."

His main concern seemed to be in feeding her the spirits in the bottle. "You mind drinking after a half-breed?"

"I need to hire you," she repeated doggedly, and shook the arm to get his attention, but the rock hard muscle was unmoving beneath her grip.

"I don't need the work right now." He said it flatly, brooking no argument. But he stopped and waited as though curious.

Deadly stillness hovered around them, and Naomi shifted under his gaze. She felt like she was auditioning for a part. He studied her as she hurried to tell him the story. "A band of Comancheros attacked the school where I am a teacher. They killed the handyman and carried away my students."

"How many?" His indifferent attitude had changed. "How many riders were there?"

"I think there were at least twenty. I saw them coming toward the school, but I didn't realize..." Her words faltered as she was once again there. She shuddered and hugged her arms around her body, suddenly cold.

“Take a drink, you’ll feel better.” He didn’t wait for her to agree but handed her the bottle and asked, “How come they didn’t kill or steal you?”

Automatically, Naomi said “No, thank you,” and handed the bottle back.

He tipped his head back, drinking deeply as he continued to look her over. She ignored the too familiar glance, her gaze locked on the muscles in his throat that moved as he swallowed.

She didn’t want to answer his question. It was the one she dreaded. The one the sheriff hadn’t asked. “I hid,” her confession was barely a whisper. “I hid while the students who are my responsibility were carried away.”

He resumed his progress to the barn and covered her hand on his arm with a callused palm, squeezing it tightly. She had to hurry beside him, replacing her usual mincing steps with a sensible stride that matched his. It was that or be dragged.

Without turning loose his grip or speaking to her, they entered the barn already filled with the shadows of evening. He yelled out to the stable hand, “Get your ass out here, Wallace.”

When the old man shuffled into the open, carrying a pitchfork for defense, the gunman asked, “You heat that water for me?”

Both men ignored Naomi as though she was invisible, but Charlie Wolf didn’t release her so she couldn’t disappear. She drew herself upright and waited while he gave the old man orders. She had no intention of leaving until the bounty hunter agreed to mount a rescue.

“Did just what you said, Charlie Wolf,” the old man’s head bobbed ingratiatingly. “Filled the trough half full of hot water and set the buckets of cold beside.”

Instead of the thank you that Naomi thought such a task should receive, the bounty hunter ordered him, “Get lost for the rest of the night.”

The old man’s unintelligible mutterings accompanied a speculative look at Naomi. She returned his questioning stare with her own bland gaze. Charlie Wolf threw the stable bum some money, and the old man’s frown changed to a grin. He left smiling and pocketing bills, unconcerned with what happened in his barn the rest of the night.

Charlie Wolf McCallister was the most dangerous man Naomi had ever met. The half-breed seemed savagely capable of anything and bound by no rules other than his own. He dressed in soft buckskins instead of white men’s clothes. His hair hung long, held by a headband covered by the black hat until he took it off.

As soon as Wallace disappeared through the door, Charlie Wolf released her hand and walked away without word or glance. He stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the floor of the barn.

Automatically, testimony to her years of picking up after others, she stooped and retrieved it. The handkerchief around his neck, dropped next, and as she bent to pick it up, she saw that he had stopped by the horse trough at the end of the aisle.

“Like I said outside,” she paused and watched as he unfastened his gun belt and laid it on the bale of straw. Then he untied the leather thong that held his knife to his thigh and laid it next to his gun. Scratching his bare chest, he turned his gaze toward her as if he just remembered she was there.

“I need to hire you.” She focused on the hand moving up and down his bronze skin. She had felt his strength only minutes before, and her arm tingled where he had gripped.

Muscles in his chest rippled under his nipple as his hand paused, rubbing a spot

there. Naomi swallowed against the odd feeling in her throat that tightened, making it difficult to speak.

She couldn't help herself. Her eyes were drawn to the colorful loincloth that covered his groin. She licked her lips, but her tongue was dry because all of the spit in her mouth had disappeared. Her breath wheezed out of constricted lungs.

As she began her appeal, she tried, as her sister, Comfort, had always advised, to assume a position of success—in this case, focus on making the man hire his services to her.

“Naomi, most people don't want to think about what to do. Tell them. Give them directions and take charge of the situation.” Comfort always had an angle and usually was right. She'd wrinkled her nose at eleven-year-old Naomi that day and sighed. *“If you don't take charge, someone else will, and then you'll have to live by their rules.”*

Naomi looked at the male standing before her. He was a law unto himself. It was impossible to picture the man doing *anything* that she asked of him—ever. Confirming her assessment, he stood before her and pointed at the tub as though it held some significance she should be aware of.

*

“You've been following me all over town.” The woman didn't even deny it, leaning toward him instead, patiently waiting as he took her measure—thin face with brown hair skinned into a tight knot, straight teeth, and nose spattered with freckles across burned skin. Deep, exotic cornflower-blue eyes met his.

Charlie's gaze came back to the eyes for a second look.

“My name is Naomi Parker.” If it weren't for the unusual shade of her eyes, Miss Naomi Parker would be written off as old-maid material. She was a tall, skinny female with prim and proper written all over her, past the first flush of maidenhood.

Being neither a prize himself, nor considered civilized, he rarely came in contact with females of social standing, but he recognized one now. He intended to run this one off as quick as possible and get on with his bath. Knowing what he did of her kind, he didn't think it would take much.

She held out her hand and for a moment he wasn't sure what she wanted. Then he realized she intended it as a greeting. He grabbed the extended limb and pulled hard, rolling her down his arm, and into his embrace before she realized she'd been captured.

He pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her like bands of steel, pulling her so close her chin brushed his bare chest. The contact sent a frisson of heat coursing through him, which made no sense since her body was encased in iron, or at least something that felt like it.

“What the hell kind of contraption do you have on, Miss Parker?” His hands automatically fell to her hips, holding her against the swell of his erection, stealing a moment's pleasure.

Except for the slight mound of her breasts, she had the body of a fifteen-year-old boy—thin for his age—but a tall stripling. He noted all of this unconsciously, surprised that his cock had roused with fierce interest. *Jesus, I need a woman.*

His shirt and handkerchief were smashed between them. She tilted her head to glare at him as she struggled against his hold. Her hips moved in his hands, and in her struggle, she accidentally rubbed against his arousal. She froze.

“Stupid to offer your hand to someone you don't know,” he admonished her, even as

he blatantly rubbed his swollen flesh against her hip.

Her breasts, about the size of robin's eggs, were nevertheless heaving, and she was pissed, not scared, as he stared into eyes that had darkened. He wondered what color they would be when she came, and then flinched at the thought.

Jesus, all pussy's the same in the dark. What the hell difference if she's a dried-up old prune? His cock demanded, *Fuck her.*

Old maid material or not, his cock was erect and urging him to make friends.

"You're lucky you survived the raid. Think about that, instead of wallowing in guilt, and let the law take care of your friends."

He had a cigar and the rest of a bottle of good whiskey waiting for him, and minutes before he'd thought that was enough.

He'd meant to scare her away so he could climb into that tub of hot water while it still had some steam coming from it. Instead he had a woman wrapped in his arms, and his body seemed determined to keep her. His cock said this woman could service him just fine—and she could do it now.

It was pleasing the way she fitted up against him, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. His first assessment that she was skinny gave way to new knowledge. She was a slender armful, her softness hidden under the iron casing she'd wrapped around her flesh. The thought of her long white legs sliding around his hips while he sank into her filled his mind.

He let his thoughts play over the impossible possibilities for a second before he let her go, allowing inches between them and dropping his hand that had been stroking her back.

"I'm planning on being in that tub of water in two minutes, naked as the day I was born, whether you get out of here or not."

He released her abruptly, expecting her to hurry from the barn. Instead, she continued the connection between them, pressing her body against his, her unwavering blue eyes staring up at him. Her lips trembled for a moment, and then she repeated her request.

"I need your help."

Chapter Four

He stepped back and released his loincloth, then unlaced his pants. She turned away to set his clothes on the straw. Her face was beet red, but she wasn't caterwauling about his embrace or his current actions. When she turned back to him, her voice was steady and her face only slightly pink. "Do you have soap and linens for your bath?"

"In here," he dropped the saddlebags next to her, watching to make sure she didn't steal anything. Besides spare buckskins and a pair of long johns, he carried a wad of money and his extra Colt six-shooter.

He didn't like the sound of her Comanchero story. Her students must have suffered the repercussions from his scheme to strip Mangas Colorado's band of a bartering tool.

He figured he at least owed her a listen-to. But he had a hard time concentrating on her words because he'd been on the trail of murderers and thieves for six weeks and hadn't been in a town for longer than that. He needed a woman and, old-maid schoolteacher or not, she looked better to him every minute she stood there.

He watched her fumble through the contents of the pouch before withdrawing the soap and drying cloth that she then laid next to the tub.

He ordered her, "Naomi Parker, grab my boot and pull." He said her name deliberately, trying it on. He liked the way his mouth moved over and around it, almost like making a kiss.

He could remove his own boots; he'd spent a life time taking care of himself. But she jumped to do his bidding, worrying her full bottom lip with her teeth, as she avoided his gaze, concentrating instead on his foot. He deliberately clenched his toes inside the leather moccasins to keep the boot from coming off.

"You'll have to turn around and stand astride my leg."

She looked askance at him, and then a blush stole up from beneath her prim collar. Embarrassed or not, she climbed over his extended leg and tugged his boot off. When he stretched out the other foot, she straddled that leg, expecting to do the same, but he pulled her down so that her female parts rubbed against the soft suede of his deer skin pants.

She squeaked in surprised shock, but her voice was back under control when she looked over her shoulder and repeated yet again, "I need to hire your help in rescuing my students."

Her thighs reluctantly caressed him through his pants, and he felt the heat of her woman's place against his leg. He had to give credit where it was due; she was tenacious.

"What part did you plan to play in this rescue?" He wasn't really listening to her answer, mesmerized instead by the feel of pussy. From this angle, the old-maid teacher was looking pretty good.

The rump that pressed into him was rounded; he'd already re-estimated the size of her breasts, raising the expectation from robin eggs to apples. They, of course, were bound as tightly as the rest of her body. She sat, ass cheeks splayed over his leg, heated center brushing his thigh while she looked over her shoulder at him, pink lips shaping her answer. Sensory overload distracted him for a moment.

"I intend to ride with you." That got his attention. *I intend to ride you.* His cock jumped inside his pants. But she looked at him so trustingly he parsed her words again

and figured out what he'd missed ... *ride with you, my ass*. He started shaking his head, doubly pissed at his mishearing and his heated response.

She persisted, ignoring his loud, "No." Charlie needed to run her off fast or dried-up spinster or not, the teacher was going to be fucked.

"Some of the girls will need me." Her grim tone made it clear that she understood what was happening, probably even at the moment, to the kidnapped students.

"I don't work for free, teacher. How do you plan to pay me?" He raised his leg and flexed his muscles brushing hotly against her through the material that separated his flesh from her core. Given the state of his arousal, it was a dangerous move.

"I get paid once a month at the school." She looked worried. "I'm not sure now who will tender my pay. It's not clear to me what's going to happen." She continued to stare over her shoulder, her female parts riding his thigh, his cock stretched and elongated against his leg.

Well, it's clear to me what's going to happen here in about two minutes if you don't get the hell out of this barn. But Charlie didn't say it aloud. Instead he looked at her face, scrunched in worry, her teeth nibbling her bottom lip, and had the almost uncontrollable urge to lift her up and bury his face between her breasts. They were looking more like melons to him now.

All sense had left his mind. He was concentrated on one thing ... pussy and how to get into it.

First, I need to get her out of that god-awful wire contraption she's wearin' ... His cock was full and demanding release, and so it was with real reluctance that he offered her one last chance to get out.

"How you get paid is none of my concern. I don't take I.O.U.'s, in poker or for chasing danger, so if you don't have something to offer me in payment, you best be leaving, and you best do it now."

Her chin tilted up and she repeated, "I need to hire you," and then she turned back to her task and slid down his outstretched leg, and he knew that she was aware of her affect on him. She grasped his boot and tugged. *Well, maybe we can work a deal.*

A grin softened the stern lines of his face as he looked at her backside. From his view, he could see the slightest rounding of hips that tapered to a narrow waist. His cock drooled in need, creating a wet spot on his pants pulled taut across his shaft.

She shivered and he asked her, "Scared or cold?"

"I lived through a Comanchero raid because I hid," she answered. "You are not frightening. The only thing that scares me is the thought that I won't be able to help my students escape those men—so I guess, I'm cold."

"Not for long, teacher," he growled, his inner beast excited and stretching to get out.

As if reminded by her own words of the haste needed, she continued softly, "We should proceed with your bath, sir, before your water cools." It was the barest murmured suggestion, but his erection throbbed painfully at her sweet drawl.

Sweet drawl—*her* husky tones were definitely not Texas.

He couldn't resist. He reached for her and brought her up into his lap, nestling her against his cock.

"Wolf—my name is Charlie Wolf," he murmured into the shell of her ear as he nibbled there and then sucked on her earlobe. It would be the right thing to do, telling her the truth. *Come morning, me and my cousins will be on the trail of Jericho Jones, and*

your students will be returned to you in due time.

Charlie cast that thought aside. Instead, his hand fumbled at the buttons on the back of her dress, determined on a different course. "A man has needs a woman like you could take care of." She drew in a harsh breath, stifling a sob. *Tough shit, I told her to stay out.*

But then she straightened under his hands and suggested. "Why don't I bathe you while we talk." Charlie paused at that, his hands stilled on her buttons. He had never been bathed by a woman. He'd heard of it, sometimes dreamed about it, but in thirty-two years of living, it had never happened.

The combination of the bartender's antics and the rejection of the saloon whore had launched an evening Charlie intended to spend in a drunken stupor, smoking a cigar, in a tub of hot water. An hour before that had sounded like a good time to him. Now he had a woman offering to bathe him so he would listen to her story of woe.

Giving her one last chance to leave was the hardest thing he'd ever done. "Don't want to talk. Don't have a thing to say." If she didn't get her hot pussy off his lap and hike on out of here, he was going to jump her bones and get himself hung.

She continued to squirm, pressing her rump into his cock as she struggled to turn and look at him. "I am sure that my monthly stipend will be forwarded here. I contacted the school officers for assistance today."

She's really not as skinny as I thought. He drew in her scent, rolling it over his senses. Beneath the road dust and everyday sweat, she smelled sweetly like a woman. He ran his thumb down her smooth cheek. *I'll be damned; she's not as old as I first thought, either.*

He felt oddly aggrieved like she'd been laid out as bait, and he'd taken it without looking close enough.

"I will do whatever it takes to hire you. Mr. Wolf." Her hands were clasped in front of her now, as she endeavored to appear calm. Squirmed around the way she was, it felt natural the way her breasts brushed against his chest. The woman was asking for it and didn't even know it.

But then he glanced at her hands. Her white knuckles belied her pose. So Miz Parker wasn't as composed as she would have him believe. Deliberately he lifted and rolled his hips under her.

"Anything?" He shifted and murmured his words against her neck.

"So these girls at the fancy school," he paused in his nuzzling of her neck to ask, "They're friends?"

"They are children who were my responsibility. I saw the riders coming across the field and didn't call out in time. When they arrived, I hid, saving myself instead of protecting my charges."

Charlie could see she was eaten up with guilt. *Good, I can use that.*

She spoke calmly but firmly. "It's my responsibility now to rescue them. The sheriff here refuses to get a posse together, and by the time the U.S. Marshal finds a tracker and deputizes men..." Her voice piddled off and she shook her head, denying that inevitability. "So yes, I'll do anything."

She straightened on his lap, her back pressed to his chest, buttocks against his engorged shaft. He leaned forward and resumed his attentions to her ear, licking down the crease between flesh and lobe. He wasn't playing with her anymore.

He murmured his last warning, "If you do that, Naomi, you'll be the lowest of the

low—a white woman who fucks redskins. Because, make no mistake, if you stay, I’m going to be inside of you.”

He nuzzled the delicate earlobe until she shivered and moaned, then tasted the flesh with tongue and lips before biting just a little bit harder than a lover should on the soft flesh between his teeth. “Best get out of here or you’ll meet the same fate as your students.”

He stood, his swollen cock marked by a wet spot and outlined inside the now taut pants. He dumped her from his lap, rejecting temptation. But, instead of leaving, she replied, “Not at all. They have no choice. *I* do.”

The woman didn’t know when to quit. He turned to look at her then. “So you’ll trade your life for theirs?” He watched shock blanch the last of her color, before she answered quietly, “Yes.”

Later, Charlie always remembered that as a frozen moment. Her word *yes* hung in the air between them, meaning so much more than that one sound. He broke the spell when he grunted his assent. “So be it.”

Reaching behind her, he drew his knife from the straw and ordered, “Hold out your hand.”

She closed her eyes and held up both palms extended toward him. Using his knife, he cut a thin line on his palm that instantly seeped blood. Then, his sharp blade tasted Naomi’s flesh. Her eyes popped open and she looked at him, puzzled. “What?”

He pressed the cuts on both hands together. He said the necessary words in Kiowa, and fumbled a strip of cloth, binding their hands together.

“Now we talk.” She wiggled her fingers nervously in his palm, but he held her hand pressed against his until he was sure that their blood had mingled.

“Surely scaring me to death with a knife wasn’t necessary,” her voice was close to a scold. “I thought you were going to kill me.” Her nipples tented the front of the ugly dress, and he couldn’t look away.

He unwrapped their hands, releasing her to step back while he dropped his buckskins without further warning. “Have to do,” he muttered to himself.

“What are you mumbling about?” She didn’t try to disguise the irritation in her voice. It piddled into quiet when she realized he was naked. When he reached out to pull her close, deliberately pushing his cock between her thighs, she seemed to forget her question altogether. Her mouth opened and closed like a guppy, and he smiled inside.

Holding her gaze, first he ground his groin against her mound, and then, lifting her slightly, he pushed his hard length against her dress material until it rode up into the vee between her legs. He held her still with one hand on her hip, while he languorously rubbed his naked cock against her nether lips.

He didn’t dare linger there, or he would spill his seed without ever filling her glory hole. He wanted to pull up the skirt and take her. Instead, he watched her skin grow pale and her chest rise and fall rapidly in distress. Even so, she stared back at him steadily.

“Still sure you won’t mind layin’ under a dirty Injun?” he queried, mimicking the saloon owner’s words and tone.

“If you will use the water Mr. Wallace provided for your bath, you won’t be dirty.” Her tart answer studiously ignored his body moving against hers. But the cloth that rode between them was damp, and her flesh, felt through the thick fabric of her dress, was heated. He quit trying to scare her, his anger easing under her calm practicality.

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed and started to turn away. And then his original desire to test her limits revived, and he turned back. “Touch me,” he ordered.

“Whhhhat?” He could have lit a cigar from the blaze in her cheeks. He took her hand and put it on his engorged flesh.

“I mean—touch me, like this.” He clasped her slender hand around him, even though her long tapered fingers didn’t meet.

She looked down in astonishment and he knew that she’d never seen a man’s naked dick before, then she jerked her gaze away from his flesh. But she couldn’t remove her fingers because he wrapped his big paw around them, stroking her hand up and down his shaft.

She was trembling so much he was afraid she might fall down, but she didn’t cavil or whine. When her odd-colored eyes blinked back tears, he hardened his voice, gruffly asking, “Think you can take a big man like me?”

She didn’t answer his question, eyes staring at his chest, as though she’d never seen one of those before either.

“You need to bathe now,” she repeated her earlier suggestion and pretended that her hand wasn’t pleasuring him below.

“Tub’s plenty big enough for a little bit more. Take your clothes off and get in with me.” This time he *had* shocked her beyond docile cooperation.

Her face primmed up and she dropped his cock, stepping back as she said, “I will not.”

He’d been waiting for her first challenge, and it pleased him to cut away the iron trappings that compressed her flesh as he would cut away the false trappings of her society. He drew his blade and once again pulled her to him.

“What are you going to do, cut my hand again to punish me?” Her words were derisive, not the respectful tone of a squaw. It occurred to Charlie right then that Miss Naomi Parker wasn’t exhibiting the usual white woman’s fear of him.

In one motion, he cut through the fabric of her clothes—the dress, the chemise underneath, and the lacings of the corset that constricted her flesh. He stroked his finger down the pinch mark that marred her flesh, pleased to see pink flesh and rounded breasts spring free. “Don’t wear one of those damned things again.”

Apparently struck dumb, she said nothing when he shoved the cut material wide, pushing it off her shoulders, to the floor, where the corset landed with a loud *thunk*. She stood before him in nothing but cotton drawers.

“That was my only dress.” All the spunk seemed to drain out of her, leaving her looking tired and vulnerable.

“It had blood all over it.” But he would have cut it off of her had it been clean. The dress was a mockery of her surprising delicacy. Done talking, he took hold of her drawers and pulled them down.

The bleached cotton skimmed right off narrow hips but caught for a moment on a surprisingly rounded bottom. He followed the cotton, bending to unlace the half-boots she wore. “Step out of your shoes,” he ordered. On his way down, when his head was even with her feminine curls, he noticed their light color and nuzzled her there for encouragement.

“Stop it. I’m not ready for this,” she gasped, regaining some of her spirit. He grabbed one shoe and started work on the second. She clutched a wad of his hair and pulled.

“Quit that,” he smacked her bottom, feeling the silken skin under the rough calluses on his palm. When she twisted to kick him, he caught her foot, pulled off the second shoe, and then her bloomers.

“You surely do have long legs.” He stared at the alabaster flesh stretching from her toes to where her legs split into a delicious vee at the apex of her thighs.

Bent over like a man shoeing a horse, he began working his way back up her leg, nuzzling her dimpled knee, kissing the inside of her thigh, brushing his lips across her lower curls, inhaling her scent. All the time, his movements were accompanied by her squeaks of shocked distress.

He didn’t have it in him to be mad about the hair pulling when he stood upright. She looked like a wild woman, ready to go toe-to-toe, bare-knuckle brawling with him.

“I am not ready for you to begin,” her face was flushed and her hair had fallen loose from the sedate bun she had worn earlier. What had once appeared brown in color when skinned back the way it had been was now revealed to be strands covered with a dark oily mixture that didn’t match her lower curls at all.

“Too late, we already started,” he growled wondering why he’d thought her plain. Her delicate skin had a rosy hue, and her breasts were plump fruit ready to be enjoyed. Each nipple was surrounded by a brown aureole from which the nub thrust jauntily at him in response to his touch. His mouth watered as he looked at them.

“Get in the tub,” he told her gruffly.

“You cannot tell me what to do.” And then ludicrously, she crossed her arms and stared defiantly up at him, challenging his right to order her into the tub.

“I can and I just did. You told me you’d do anything to get your friends back. Well, this is what it’s costing you.”

It was his turn to cross his arms and stare at her. He looked at the creamy white flesh, and the softness of a woman’s body. His cock bobbed, pointing at her strongly. *I want that, I want that, I want that ...* His voice was a guttural growl when he answered.

“You’ve taken up my time and already owe me. You can either take a bath with me or bend over the nearest bale of straw right now while I settle our account.”

She glared, but he ignored her hostility, focusing instead on the flush that warmed her skin. “Until I say otherwise, you’ll follow my directions. Now get in the tub.”

He concluded that he might have to wrestle her into the water and stepped closer, dropping his hand to her nipple, thumbing it to attention. He palmed the plump melon and squeezed, “Looks to me like you’re ready for me, Naomi.”

“What are you doing?” she gasped, displaying real horror as her nipples reached for him. For a minute he thought she might run bare naked from the barn, screaming like a banshee.

He timed the moment her glance dropped lower and she remembered that her full glory was exposed to him. “Ohhh...” she moaned and covered the pale silken curls with one hand, wrapping her other arm across her breasts as she backed away from him.

“Better be care—” his warning was too late. He caught a glimpse of creamy pink flesh between splayed thighs as she lost her balance and fell backwards into the half-filled horse trough. Not one to miss an opportunity, he climbed in behind her and pulled her, sputtering, to the surface.

“Like I said, the tub’s plenty big enough for both of us. Now settle back down and enjoy yourself. I’m sure going to.” He surrounded her slim hips with his thighs and

rubbed his cock against her back while cupping her breasts in his hands.

She was breathing in small pants, her ribs moving against the edge of his palm. He pulled her head back and fit it against his chest.

Chapter Five

It wasn't the way Naomi had thought it would happen. She had already been with this man through the dusk into darkness. It was time they needed for traveling.

But the bounty hunter seemed intent on coupling with her before they set out on the trail of the Comancheros. There was no getting his attention. He was like Pa Lancaster's terrier after a rat—only this time she was the rat, and it appeared he might be going to devour her. She tried to reason with him.

"Mr. Wolf, we need to get on the trail of the men who kidnapped my students. Surely we could conduct this part of our transaction after we have completed the rescue."

It was a difficult proposition to sell since as she spoke, he ignored her suggestions, exploring the valleys and hills of her body. His fingers ran willy-nilly up her ribs, seeming to count them, possibly to make certain she was real.

For a man who had *needs*, he was certainly taking his time. And now she was held captive between his thighs, and unless she turned around and risked bumping that waving protrusion of his, she couldn't see his eyes.

She needed to be able to read his eyes; the rest of him was just a blank slate, but she knew his thoughts when she looked into his eyes.

But it wasn't to be. He held her, her back to his chest, and controlled her body in spite of her will to resist.

Her clearly developed plans were delivered as moaned suggestions suborned to his will. While she marshaled her arguments, he explored her body, top to bottom.

When he slid his hands between her thighs, she stiffened her legs and made her back rigid. Still, he gave her a reprieve from his lower exploration to press his thumbs against her nipples. She expelled her breath in a loud, thankful breath, only to gasp in shock. Not finished with her nipples, he rotated them, before pinching each nub between finger and thumb.

She had never felt anything like that in her life. Even in moments of her own self-explorations her breasts had remained—well—breasts. They had become something else entirely, cradled in his hands. They ached, itched, tingled—they seemed to have a life of their own, demanding that she turn and rub them against his skin.

Unable to stop, she arched her back, shoving her flesh against his roughly callused palms. "Ahhh," the groan of pleasure escaped her lips before she could suppress it.

Heat flared in her belly. He cupped her flesh in his large hands and whispered in her ear, "Pretty." He lifted each one and squeezed the plump mounds intimately. "I want to taste these."

Taste—God yes, I want him to taste them. Struggling to control her responses didn't help, because he was everywhere. She backed away from the merciless hands cupping her breasts, but her thighs and rump bumped and ground against his male length. The tactile assault confused her.

He nibbled and bit at her ear, her neck, her shoulder, under her jaw. All the time he murmured, sometimes in words she understood, sometimes in a language foreign to her. She had no time to protest or refuse, swept along on the tide of his passion.

And the feelings that he stirred in her had never been roused before. She didn't know

the correct behavior. Her woman's book of etiquette and decorous behavior had never discussed *this*. Cooking plentiful meals, sewing ruffled curtains, pouring afternoon tea ... but not the feel of a man's hands on breasts, as his mouth sucked hard on the crease between neck and shoulder.

She was certain that no mention had ever been made of the frustrated feelings, almost anger, that swamped her and made her fierce. She wrenched free and turned violently on his lap, "You will listen to me now," she exhorted him fiercely, straddling him, her knees bent on either side of his narrow hips, her breasts heaving her protests and outrage. But words would not come.

"Thank you," he closed his lips around the pointing nub of her nipple, milking it erotically, teeth scoring the swollen button before sucking it into his mouth, cheeks concave from the pull.

"Oh, my God, now what are you doing to me?" Her words spilled out as a moan instead of a protest. He didn't stop what he was doing, and instead, put his hand back on her other breast, teasing that nipple in time to the pull of his lips. Naomi clutched his shoulders, holding onto him, back arched into the pleasure he gave.

The solid erection she'd touched before was stiffly reaching for her and determinedly nudging against her cleft. He dropped his hand to her hip, and she knew it hadn't been accidental.

Charlie Wolf held her, but this time his shaft prodded her until her nether lips parted and he rubbed against her tender folds. Startled out of her sexual haze, she froze.

"Let's see what happens when we do this," he murmured. Her eyes followed the trail of his hand as he slid it down her ribs until it rested on her stomach.

With his other hand, he rubbed his shaft against the slick flesh inside her folds, sliding it against the sensitive nub at her apex. She jerked, feeling as though a flash of fire had jolted through her. He seemed pleased at her uncontrolled response and grinned, "Like that, do you?"

She was fascinated by the smile on his face. He looked nothing like the stern bounty hunter who had ridden into town leading a string of dead men. He continued brushing back and forth across the spot that tingled, until she pushed back, needing more.

"That's it," he directed her. "Give yourself to me. Let me in."

Let him in? This is going to be a "he's too big, won't fit, this is going to be a disaster" in. Naomi stared into his eyes. Deliberately, holding her gaze, he pressed his hand on her stomach, moving the other to her hip.

"Nowww," he growled at her, pressing downward at the same time he thrust his hips upward. She felt the tip of his engorged flesh breach the opening to her body and *in* took on a whole new meaning.

He used his chin to scrape aside the wet hair from her shoulder. She was embarrassed at the way its pomade-covered-length lay in limp clumps. He didn't seem to notice, nibbling on the bend in her neck. She was wrong; he did notice. "What the hell do you have on your hair?"

His tone was insulting, and even in this moment, poised above his shaft, ready to change her destiny, Naomi had to have the last word. "Does it really matter right now?" He snorted, derisively, she felt, and her already sunburned cheeks burned hotter. She crouched helplessly, aware of his flesh intimately touching hers, her body's heated response telegraphing her desire.

She shivered when whiskers along his jaw brushed the tender flesh on her neck. She was focusing on that when he moved the hand on her stomach lower, petting her nether curls before sliding his fingers between her legs, brushing that bit of flesh that was so sensitive.

They needed to talk; she had his attention, now she needed to remember what they were talking about. *Oh, yes, her hair.*

“My hair is curly, wild, unless I pomade it.” He looked up from the nipple he was biting and frowned at her.

“No more,” he grunted and then went back to scraping his teeth across the end so erotically that she melted and squirmed on the flesh invading her core. She panted, clinging to his shoulders, trying to gather her thoughts at the same time she stopped her descent onto his shaft. Instinctively, she tried to close her legs against him.

“No, ma’am,” he said sternly, lips and teeth removed from her breast, where he had been giving her so much to think about. “You’ll not keep me out of this sweet honey. This belongs to me tonight. Open for me, Naomi.”

She obeyed, closing her eyes as she let her legs fall apart, stiffly enduring as his fingers touched and pressed intimately, learning the shape and size of her parts. His manroot throbbed against her flesh, and she wondered how she would ever be able to take it inside of her when just the tip burned and stretched her opening.

He probed gently, pressing her downward so that his shaft pushed inside of her entrance. He was breathing heavily and rasped into her ear, “Shoot, teacher, you’re not even broken to ride.”

She struggled to reply, “I would prefer not being compared to a horse, *if* you don’t mind.” But the words that she’d meant to be caustic came out as a weak whimper.

She felt his chest vibrate against her and knew without looking that she’d made him laugh. He kept his hand pressed against her belly, holding her still when he pushed his finger harder against the nubbin he stroked. Her almost relaxed muscles clenched around his flesh as he inched deeper inside of her.

Trying to expel the foreign intruder, her body strained away from his touch. “You’re too big,” she protested. But it didn’t matter; he was inside of her, and she still straddled his thighs, his rigid pole connecting the two bodies.

Abruptly he reached for the soap. His voice was harsh when he handed her the bar. “My back needs to be scrubbed. Reach across my shoulders and get at it.”

His rough order offended her, and she meant to use that as an excuse to climb out. Instead, he drew her toward him until his turgid member slid higher inside of her. “Stop that,” she ordered him and twisted, trying to disconnect their bodies and scramble out of the tub of water.

Gravity and the slippery trough conspired to aid him in breaching her flesh. She slipped and fell down on his shaft, impaling herself fully. His groan of pleasure accompanied her shocked gasp.

She cried out and clutched his shoulders, leaning against his strength for solace from the pain he’d given her. Her face pressed against his chest, hiding from his gaze.

He rubbed the white suds across her shoulders and down her back, easing her closer, fitting himself deeper.

“Why is this purported to be such a grand thing?” she asked petulantly before she could stifle her words. She’d made him laugh again, and his chest moved under her

cheek. He kept stroking her back, patting her like she was a child. Well, she wasn't a child any longer.

That last thread of innocence that had tied her to her childhood had just been severed—in a tub of water with a savage. She drew in a deep breath and pushed upward, levering away, she felt the scrape of his flesh internally as she began to withdraw.

“Whoa, there, teacher.” He grabbed for her hips, his soapy hands sliding on her wet skin before he brought her back down, filling her with his cock again. “We're not done yet.”

*

Jesusmaryandjoseph. Charlie groaned as her gyrations sent her plunging back down on his ecstatic cock. One more up and down and it would be all over for him. He held her in place until she stopped trying to climb out to get away from him.

His release was so close, he had to clench every muscle in his body fighting it off—not now—not yet ... breathe in ... breathe out. She settled, taking him deeper, all the time staring at him with her mesmerizing blue eyes. He forgot about her burned cheeks, lumpy hair, and skinny hips and knew only that she watched his face and made a place for him inside of her body.

Groin to mound, joined as they were, her sweet breath feathered across his chin, and he watched her bite her bottom lip. He wiggled, settling her tighter against his groin, reaching like a spoiled child for a spot deeper inside. Tentatively flexing her inner muscles around his cock, she squeezed.

Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead, and moisture flooded her eyes. He leaned forward and kissed the end of a lash, capturing a tear with his tongue. Their heavy breathing joined into one melodic score.

He brushed his lips down her cheek and across her mouth, tasting her lightly with his tongue. He jerked in surprise when she reciprocated, but when her tongue brushed across his bottom lip, he opened, drawing her tongue into his mouth and then followed her retreat, back to the warm cavern of her mouth.

They groaned in unison. His hand came up, cupping the back of her head, steadying their kiss. It was a first for him too—part of him held onto her as if she was a sacred moment—he was almost scared to proceed. He'd never bedded a virgin.

Part of him wanted to fuck her so hard she'd never forget him; he wanted to be more than her first. He hadn't even pulled from her body and already he wanted to be the only man who ever gave her this pleasure.

She pulled away from the kiss, lifting up again. “Huh-uh.” His hips followed her rise.

“You said you wanted your back scrubbed.” She had the wash cloth and soap in her hand and seemed determined to do his bidding.

Naomi's breasts were presented to his lips as an offering when she reached over his shoulder to scrub his back. He didn't know if it was accidental or intended but didn't wait to figure it out.

He sucked on her teat like a starving baby and then like a man long denied. At the same time, he held her hips in place and nudged higher inside of her. She pressed harder on his back, kneading the muscles there like bread dough, even as her sheath tightened around him, responding to the slow draw of his mouth on breast.

He licked her nipple, scraped it with his teeth, and then suckled it strongly, feeling

her internal muscles flexing in time to his pulling lips. And then her release was on her and her hips jerked, reaching for more.

Her internal muscles clamped down on his rod, spasming in a long, drawn-out orgasm that pulled and milked him, demanding that he shoot straight into her womb. It was the most erotic moment Charlie Wolf had ever experienced.

Somehow he staggered to his feet without slipping out of her. Probably because he was so hard and she was so tight that they were stuck together like two dogs going at it.

Dripping water left a trail as he held her rump and she wrapped her legs around his hips for purchase. Her fingernails scored marks in his shoulder as her hips continued to jerk against his groin, his cock pressing deliciously against some pleasure point inside of her.

He needed to ram, to pound, he needed ... He watched her blue eyes darken into midnight skies and held her as her body fought to claim another release that would spread pleasure through both of them.

"Hold on." He backed her against the wall of a stall and draped her legs over his arms. Virgin tenderness was forgotten as he slammed his cock deep and hard, riding through one orgasm and into another.

He pressed his thumb on her clit, rotating, squeezing, and teasing the sensitive nub of flesh at the same time he pumped into her hot wetness. At some point, he grabbed her head and pulled her mouth under his, claiming that part of her too.

He breathed for her, held her like a sacrifice before his need, and rutted on her until they both collapsed from exhaustion in the straw beneath his feet.

Charlie poured his seed into the woman, his hips still moving after the last drop had been jetted into a womb that clenched in aftershocks, muscles tightening and then relaxing as her peak slowly abated.

She was completely vulnerable to him in that moment. He curled protectively, aware of her every snuffle, sob, and sigh as he surrounded her slender length without crushing her.

When she shivered, he reached up to drag a horse blanket across them, trapping his heat for her. He knew when she was awake—she held herself stiffly and her breathing was controlled and shallow. He knew when she fell asleep, because her body relaxed, letting her natural contours fill the planes and angles of his form.

He looked wryly at the palm of his hand marked by his cut. Her palm wore the same mark. *What the hell was I thinking?*

He'd been like a bull on her the moment he'd gotten her into the building. And then to claim her in such a savage manner—but he wasn't sorry as he held her in his arms and breathed her scent into his lungs.

He'd always planned on having a woman some day. Thinking about the night, his teeth flashed in a wolf's grin. She'd never had a chance. If she'd tried to leave any of the six times he'd offered her reprieve, he knew he'd have blocked the door.

But, she hadn't tried to leave. She'd stood up to him and made a bargain to save her charges. Charlie closed his eyes and fell asleep, brushing his hand across her hair. Satisfied with the night's events, he relaxed. He'd found his mate.

Chapter Six

Naomi took a moment to explore the cut on her right palm. She'd been prodded out of contented sleep by a loose straw poking her hip. She'd discovered that she was naked, stiff, and sore, curled under a blanket smelling of horse, in a stall of the stable, but thankfully, alone. She wanted to believe that she'd had a bizarre dream, but her itching palm proved that her memory was sound.

She sat up and looked down at her nakedness, as though she'd never really seen her body before. Red marks covered her breasts. His whiskers had scraped, his teeth had nipped, and his lips had sucked. She flushed, remembering.

She clambered out of the stall, hastily looking for the remnants of her clothing. Parts of them were in the stable owner's scrap heap. Thinking she'd tie it on somehow, she searched through the rags for her dress, but it was missing altogether.

Her eyes drifted to Charlie Wolf's change of clothes, drying on the bale of straw. He'd be wearing the spare clothes she'd seen in the saddlebag when she'd pulled out the bathing supplies.

"You owe me, Mr. Charlie Wolf McCallister." She pulled the nearly dry set of buckskins from the straw and shimmied into them. She stretched, appreciating the rich leather against her skin. She hadn't felt so free since Ma Lancaster discovered her bosom coming in. Naomi had been taped, tucked, and tortured by corsets ever since.

His clothes were too big around and too long. She hitched up the pants, tying a corset string around her middle to keep them in place. Then she covered that with the deerskin tunic and belted it all with a leather strap she found hanging on Wallace's wall. The extra length of the pants wrinkled around the ankle of her boot, as she stomped her feet into them, but she stood, pleased with her own ingenuity.

"*Godey's Lady's Book* says a lady must deal with challenge in a calm and creative manner." She smoothed her hands over her hair, realizing that unredeemable disaster had struck. Her once slicked down and tamed mane of hair was free, billowing out around her in a halo of dandelion snarls.

She lifted a strand and looked at it. "What the hell's on your hair?" he'd growled, even as he'd buried his face against her neck and pushed it to the side. She blushed standing there in the morning light, struck dumb remembering.

Well, there's nothing on it now, Mr. C.W. McCallister, and just look at this mess. She couldn't cry over her hair when there were so many more important reasons to have hysterics, but she wanted to.

Remembering his touch left her feeling disconnected from her body. As if something had happened to her that separated who she had been from whom she was today.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the old man who owned the barn banging around the trough where she and Charlie Wolf had bathed. She slid back further in the stall, hiding until she heard him grumble his way out the door, easing it closed behind him. It jarred her from her dithering. She grabbed a bunch of hair and tied it back with a broken corset string.

If he saw me sleeping in Charlie Wolf's embrace, my reputation is gone. Apparently so was Charlie Wolf. Not knowing what else to do, Naomi saddled the buckskin mare

and rode into the early morning toward the Sparrow Creek Academy for Young Women.

Her thoughts about the bounty hunter were grim. He might not come after *her*, but she was betting that he wouldn't let anyone steal from him, and she'd taken his horse.

In spite of the ache between her legs, she was physically none the worse for her experience. Her mind flitted swiftly past her reputation. She knew from the smirk on the stable owner's face the night before, he wouldn't remain silent.

She clasped the sides of her mount and remembered the feel of Charlie Wolf inside of her. Her cheeks flushed and she squirmed in the saddle, internal muscles clenching a reminder of the pleasures of being filled.

It was unseemly to think about physical gratification when her students' lives were at risk, so she reminded herself that Charlie Wolf had taken advantage of her dire circumstance to seduce her. He was a libertine and an undesirable person.

Even so, she was quite relieved when, at midmorning, Charlie Wolf caught up with her, riding up on her right side.

"You need a hat. Your face is burned red by the sun." She knew that, and he didn't need to point out to his cousins how bizarre she must look. Tendrils of curling fluff escaped the corset string thong holding the mass.

The two bounty hunters who hunted with him moved in on her left. They all rode silently through the gates of the school property. She dismounted, staring at the rocks and rough ground instead of toward the body of Patrick Wilson.

"I need to give this man a burial." The horror of the earlier event seeped through her bones, leaving Naomi shuddering under a wave of panic—she couldn't look at a dead Patrick.

Charlie Wolf put his hands on her shoulders, scrutinizing her, taking in his drooping buckskin pants and the tunic that covered her to her knees.

"Go back to the horses and get your clothes out of my saddlebag." He turned her around, pointing her away from Patrick's violent death. "I'll take care of that." She was both relieved and aggravated.

She was glad to let Charlie Wolf take over the burial task because being back at the school left her too anxious about her students to be of any help. Patrick's body was a gruesome reminder that the girls had been captives of the Comanchero for over a day.

Every other consideration was outweighed by the need to hurry after them. Galling though it was, she couldn't rescue her students without Charlie Wolf and his bounty hunter friends.

"I bought you a dress," he said gruffly. Confused, she stared at him and then down at his buckskins that she wore.

"I like what I have on better. It's easier to get around." She ignored his proffered offer of clothes and went into the empty school dormitory, where green-eyed flies crawled insolently over the day-old porridge on the long breakfast table.

By this time, someone would have notified the school trustees that the school had been attacked. The headmistress, Eleanor Beecham, who would have arrived in a fortnight with the remainder of the girls, wouldn't come. Naomi didn't know what would happen next.

She pushed the porridge bowls aside and laid her head on folded arms, overcome by her own feeble attempts to help the girls.

If these men found her students and freed them, then her sacrifice had been

worthwhile. The three men were dubious heroes at best. It was telling that Charlie Wolf was the most civilized-looking of the three. Her eyes slid over him rapidly and on to his cousin.

Deacon McCallister's hair poked from under his hat, ragged as though roughly sawed off. The whiskers on his face curled in a scraggly beard hiding most of his features. Only his bitter blue eyes and low-slung gun distinguished him from the usual cattle bums who drifted from town to town.

Samuel McCallister was almost pretty in his handsomeness, with yellow hair that curled around his shoulders, a lithe build, and well-chiseled features that flashed a frequent grin. But his eyes remained cold when he smiled and left Naomi wondering if his grin was even a reflection of humor. His gaze chilled her, *especially* when he smiled.

Naomi didn't trust the bounty hunters, but she didn't doubt their ability to deliver the service her body had paid for. They would find the Comancheros and defeat them in battle, saving the young ladies of Sparrow Creek Academy. What would happen after that, Naomi couldn't guess.

She was startled from her reverie when a body blocked the light streaming through the open door. She turned her head on her arms and then sat upright, waiting. With the three men digging, it hadn't taken long to bury Patrick.

He threw her his saddlebag. "Better get dressed." He stood watching, and she was too weary to argue that the buckskin worked better where they were going. His next words surprised her.

"Put the long johns on under the pants. It'll take up some of the slack and give you some extra padding between your rump and the saddle. You'll thank me tonight."

They didn't have time to waste on her missishness, so she removed the pants, and he left her dressing, returning to his cousins. She followed his progress as she hopped on one leg and then the other, pulling the leggings up and then the deerskin pants back over those.

After her first moments of consternation, she pulled on her boots and tentatively moved toward the door. Her trunk was upstairs in the dormitory with the students' belongings. She hesitated and then ran across the floor and up the steps. The outlaws had been up here. The bedding was scattered, as were her clothes and personal items.

"You can't take much with you. We're riding light and fast if you want to catch up to your friends." She flushed at his admonishment. Again, he'd crept up on her without her hearing a thing.

Swiftly she grabbed a carpetbag and stuffed underclothing and blouses lightweight enough to cram into the bag. One brush and comb, soap.

She carried it back where he stood watching. He shook his head. When she walked down the steps, she had the brush, comb, soap, two drying cloths, and a blanket. She'd tucked her *Godey's Lady's Book* in the waist of her pants.

She knew he was right, but it did not make her like him the better for it. But, he would save the girls because of their bargain. For that she would listen to his advice. She followed him to the horses, appreciating the freedom of movement that skirts didn't allow.

As she reached for her horse's leathers, *his* hand closed over hers, and she was uncomfortably aware of his larger size pressing her against the animal. She tilted her head to look up, and he set a hat on her head. She recognized it as the handyman's wide-

brimmed straw.

"I can't take Patrick's hat."

"Don't figure he'll be needing it, and the sun'll burn you to a crisp without it." He ran his thumb across her already chapped and reddened cheek. "Wear it." He turned away after setting it on her head. Then, as if he had an afterthought, he turned back.

"We'll be stopping in Buffalo Creek and leaving you there," Charlie said mildly. Sam McCallister stood avidly listening, tying on the shovel that they'd used to bury Patrick.

"I told you I am going along," she responded in a tone as mild as his. But she had to clench her jaw to keep from reminding him that she'd paid for the right to go along.

"Introduce us to your woman, cousin. It appears she has a mind of her own." The big red-haired bounty hunter had come up behind Naomi unheard. She flinched, uneasy around these McCallisters who moved so stealthily. He spoke across her shoulder to Charlie Wolf. Then he shifted something inside his mouth and carefully spit, landing the brown stain on a tuft of parched grass.

Naomi stared at him, horrified. Pa Lancaster had dribbled tobacco on his chin now and again. Naomi looked for signs of the same from this crude man. "I am not Mr. Wolf's woman."

"Deacon and Sam McCallister," Charlie nodded from them to her. Then he boosted her into the saddle, adjusting her stirrups when she was seated. She took that opportunity to lean toward him and whisper, "Please tell me you do not engage in that filthy habit." He turned sharply in time to see Sam hit the same spot Deacon had stained a minute before.

Gathering his reins, he eschewed the use of stirrups, swinging lithely onto his mount, "No, ma'am," and Naomi thought his eyes were dancing with suppressed mirth. "But I have other proclivities."

Then he squeezed his thighs and his horse, incongruously named Old Mossy, broke into a dancing side-step, arching his neck and snorting in response to his rider. Her first impression remained—Charlie Wolf McCallister was a beast riding a beast.

He nudged her mare into motion, coming in beside her on the right. As they started down the trail, his cousins brought up the left, and he finished the introduction, speaking across her.

"Cousins, this is Naomi Parker." He nudged his horse a little closer to where she rode his buckskin mare. "Former teacher at the Sparrow Creek Academy for Young Ladies, and..." he finished the introductions, "...my woman."

Sam and Deacon pulled their hats at her, having no comment other than a nodded, "Ma'am."

*

It was late afternoon going onto evening when they reached Buffalo Creek. They rode into the town livery and dismounted. Sam and Deacon went on to the sheriff's office to check on the women already rescued. Any rewards that might be forthcoming, the McCallisters aimed to collect.

Charlie figured it was time to speak to the teacher about what had transpired between them.

He intended to drop her off in Buffalo Creek and pick her up on the way back. He'd leave her enough money to make do on until he returned. Then—when he got that far in

his thoughts—he stalled. He suspected that if he left her with much money, she'd be long gone before he hauled Jericho to justice.

She studiously avoided his face, slid sideways whenever he got too close, and didn't have anything to say to him. When Miss Parker had nothing to say, he already knew it meant trouble. She clenched her jaw, holding back argument.

He sighed and pulled her up against his length, wishing they had the time for another joining. She stood stiffly in the circle of his arms, staring at his shirt. "We made a bargain. You were going to help me rescue my students." Her voice was stubborn and her arms rigid barriers between them.

"Woman," he scolded her sternly. "You can hardly stand up. I can tell by the way you're walkin' that your rump hurts." His hand patted her there familiarly. "And, from the sounds your belly's makin', you're more than a little hungry. Besides, you'll be in the way." He was happy to end that conversation. "When did you eat last?"

His body relaxed against hers as though it had found home. He groaned and pressed her against the swell in his pants. Her face flushed, showing a reluctant reaction, but her body remained stiff and unresponsive.

Her effect on his body fascinated him. He'd heard of men being pussy-whipped and had always disregarded such talk. Now he knew better. He wanted nothing more than to follow her around all day on the off chance he might get a chance to slip it to her again.

He swatted her butt, laughed, and stepped back, "Be glad you get to stay behind. You've got the services of three bounty hunters who will rescue your students. You're staying here."

"I'll get you a room and some supper." Charlie Wolf ignored her silent fury and turned toward the barn door. "Hiram Potter is a good man, at least as much as any lawman can be. You'll be fine until we get back." He moved toward the open barn doors and then paused, looking at her.

"Put your new dress on. You can't go into the hotel wearing my buckskins." He pulled his hat low on his forehead, eyes on the dirt street, while he walked toward the hotel situated next to the sheriff's office. No sense in advertising his movements this evening.

For once she'd kept her thoughts to herself. Usually, her tart arguments had to be dealt with before she'd budge. Maybe she was in shock. He didn't think many people had ever managed to make Naomi Parker mind.

Aside from the fact that she was a liability, she moved like a woman pure worn out. Mad at him or not, she needed a hot soak and a good dinner followed by sleep in a soft bed. Much as he'd like to climb in behind her, he'd be sleeping in the saddle or on the hard ground, as usual.

He opened up the place, banging on the counter until the clerk came out frowning, wiping his mouth on a napkin. "I need a room."

His money was still nestled in the saddlebag flung over his shoulder, but she'd taken his Colt 45. He should have seen that coming.

"Never mind." He turned away and headed back to Naomi on a run. By the time he got to the barn, she was gone. He saddled Old Mossy and headed into the dusk, following her trail through the quickly fading light.

He hadn't ridden far when Deacon swung in on his left and Sam took the right.

"Following the schoolmarm, cousin?" The younger man grinned knowingly.

Deak, the older McCallister brother said, "You two set the town of Flat Rock on its ear. You fixin' to do the same with Buffalo Creek?" Deacon McCallister didn't have much to say on most occasions. When he spoke, people tended to listen.

"I doubt that there was a soul this morning who didn't know you'd spent the night with the Sparrow Creek schoolteacher."

Deak eyed him expectantly and when no explanation was forthcoming, added, "Wallace was in the bar with a fist of money, claiming you'd paid him to get lost after dragging the schoolteacher inside. Said he snuck back and she was struggling to get away from you and you had your knife out."

"Funny," Charlie mused and then kicked his horse into a faster gait. "I didn't see anyone comin' to her rescue."

"Well, they might've, but with Deak watchin' the front of the bar and me eyein' the backdoor, no one troubled you." Sam savored the memory of danger like it was a tasty dish. Then he remarked in a more serious tone than his usual, "There's gonna be hell to pay over this one, Charlie."

But he followed the warning with a grin saying, "Not to mention I didn't get my monthly fuck, and even the sway of Old Mossy's rump is lookin' good to me."

Charlie pulled his hat lower. "Naomi Parker's under my protection. That's all any bastard needs to know." It was the only thing Charlie had to say on that subject and glowered at Sam, who would laugh skidding into the flames of hell.

Now it was doubly important he catch up to Naomi. She had no business riding out alone, unprotected. The town might have turned a blind eye on an Indian bedding a whore, but a schoolteacher from the territory was another matter.

As soon as word circulated, there would be those who wanted to lynch him for soiling one of their own; at the same time, Naomi would become fair game for any man's attentions. Her teaching days were over, whether she realized it or not. "You will do right by that woman?" Deacon rumbled in the voice Sam called his *Wrath of God* imitation.

Wolf's stoic regard was answer enough, and Deacon switched topics, satisfied.

Sam said, "U.S. Marshal wired a request that we track down a bunch of Comancheros who've kidnapped Important Daughters of Texas Citizens." His drawled words were underscored by Deacon's addition of, "as opposed to unimportant citizens."

When his wife had been murdered in their Abilene home, Robert McCallister had been an unimportant citizen. His eyes were shards of blue ice remembering. "I take it Naomi Parker was the Sparrow Creek teacher. It's handy that chasing after your woman is going to get Jericho for us too."

Sam grunted, "Looks like your plan fell apart. Mangas Colorado's Apaches must have taken the cattle, payment or not."

"Yes," Charlie agreed. "And, one way or another, Jericho kidnapped the Sparrow Creek girls to replace the ones we rescued. The Comancheros will be travelling fast, heading due south toward Mexico. We need to keep the gang too busy riding to stop and abuse 'em."

"Well, nevertheless, cousin—" Deacon fingered his beard and spit. "—your woman is running loose, interfering with our hunt."

Sam nodded. "I'm going on to Eclipse and have the sheriff there contact the families, and then I'll circle back and join you on the trail. By the time the families get word, maybe we'll have the ladies safely home."

“Deacon, you ride up the trail.” When his cousin frowned Charlie assured him, “Hell, they left tracks a mile wide; you don’t have to be a tracker to follow that. It’s like they didn’t care who knew where they were going. Stay alert because that’s *not* a good sign.”

Deacon frowned and Charlie added, “It appears I’ve got some work to do corralling Naomi Parker and seeing to it that she gets to Buffalo Creek in one piece.

“I’ll catch up to you later.”

Chapter Seven

Naomi had time to wonder, more than once, why folks always thought they knew best for her. Her sister had started the trend, sending Naomi to the neighbors to stay when an offer of marriage had taken Comfort Parker to Texas.

Naomi reacted now the same way she had then. That day, she'd climbed under the porch and refused to say good-bye. Then, for a full week after Comfort had gone, Naomi had fished all day and stayed alone in the one-room shack, telling herself she didn't need anyone.

In the end, she'd been happy to be taken in by the Lancaster family when she'd fled her shack in the middle of the night, running from a monster named Harvey Collins.

Now she was going out on her own looking for the same monster, because in her heart, she knew that when she found the girls, he would be there too.

She would either have the help of the bounty hunter, Charlie Wolf, or she wouldn't. But, she'd hired him to help her, not tell her what to do. And fulfilling her duty to her students was what she had to do.

She uneasily remembered his question, "You'll trade your life for theirs?" when she'd bartered for his help. Of course he hadn't actually meant her life—as in the rest of it—had he? Just thinking about that possibility made the cut on the palm of her hand itch.

When the starless sky turned dark, closing down around her like a blanket thrown over her head, she forgot about any misunderstanding that might exist between her and the bounty hunter and hoped that Charlie Wolf would catch up to her soon.

The buckskin mare put one foot in front of another as though she had a destination in mind, so Naomi left the reins slack and gave her the lead. The animal traveled swiftly as Naomi alternately slumped in the saddle or tensely strained to see through the blanketing darkness.

Charlie Wolf's dark stallion edged beside her when shades of purple began to lighten the sky. Her legs were trembling with fatigue, and she wasn't sure she would be able to stand if she slid from the buckskin, but he pulled her mount to a stop, dismounted, and caught her as she toppled over.

"I told you to stay put in Buffalo Creek." The whole time he was scolding her, he led her away from the open flat land and toward a shaded gulley.

"Best stop for a time. The animals need rest, and so do I." He loosened the girth on the buckskin mare, slid the bit from her mouth, and hobbled her, all while Naomi stood, weaving on her feet, watching from exhausted eyes.

When both animals were cared for, he strode to a spot under a tree, brushed away the dead limbs and debris, and unfurled his ground cloth. Then he laid his blanket on top of that.

"Rest here, before you fall down," and she did, too tired to even ask where he would be.

When she woke, she was alone. She was reassured by the sound of the horses. She listened, eyes closed, sorting through her most recent memories. Charlie Wolf had put her to bed.

He was near; his horse, Old Mossy, stood next to the buckskin mare and ate leaves

from the tree Naomi rested under. She sat, wincing at the ache in her body, stiff from both the hard ground and all the unusual activities that she had recently engaged in.

In the time it took for her to rise from the blanket and look around the camp he'd made, he was beside her.

He handed her linen and a bar of soap. "There's a river down below. Bathe." Grateful for the chance to soak, she left comment about his uncouth behavior for another time and turned to hurry to the water. "Watch out for snakes," he advised.

The snakes would have to watch out for her. She intended to get clean. She wallowed in the semi-warm water that moved lazily past. Her hair hung in rough strands that would become snarled balls when dry. She worked ineffectually at one tangle.

She felt his eyes watching her. "I wish my hair was straight like yours." He held out his hand indicating it was time for her to quit the river. "Just look somewhere besides at me," she told him, exasperated at his bold stare.

When she emerged from the water, he wrapped the blanket around her, and rubbed the linen across her hair. Then he handed her a tin, and said, "Rub that into your hair, then rinse it out."

She smelled it. It smelled like him, or at least the spicy wood scent she associated with him. "What's in it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Bear grease." He grunted impatiently. "Now rub it on your hair."

It was odd how right away her hair felt different. It hung in soft wet strands that felt like silk when she rinsed his concoction from her head. "It feels like when I was a child and rinsed my hair in rain water." She let her hands play down the silken length and looked at him doubtfully. "Bear grease?"

He snorted. "No. My mother makes it for me to use on my hair." She had noticed how shiny his hair was.

"It's indecent for a man to have hair that hangs down his back and is prettier than a woman's." The tart words escaped her before she could stop them. Then she fastened on the important part of his sentence, excusing her own rude comment.

"You have a mother?" She was surprised. He didn't look like a man with a mother, let alone one who made him beauty products for his hair.

He capped the tin and stuck it in his pocket. "Did you think I was born in a cave with wolves?"

She ignored his sarcasm, because frankly, she *could* picture him in a cave with wolves, and asked politely, "Does your mother live with the Kiowa tribe?"

"My mother is Rachel McCallister of the MC3 Ranch. She's a white woman, like you."

While she was digesting that information, he did one of his silent maneuvers, moving much closer, leaving Naomi very conscious of his nearness. He stepped even closer; she could feel the heat from his body, as he rubbed a different salve on her cheeks. "Sun ointment—should make it quit burning."

His nearness and gentle application of the medicine flustered her. No one had taken care of her since—well—ever. She'd grown up taking care of others. Now this man leaned over her and squinted as he dabbed another kind of cream on her cheeks. "It does soothe the burn." She couldn't resist and touched his hand that so gently applied the balm making her feel better.

"You're seducing me, aren't you?" She suspected that Charlie Wolf never made a

move that didn't benefit him, but at this moment she didn't care.

"Yes," he responded. "Your skin is too chapped. I want it soft under my lips when I taste you."

Naomi blinked at him, confused. "It's daylight. We need to travel now that I've rested."

"Its daylight, and we won't be traveling until dusk. Stars will be out tonight, and it will be clear enough to move." He turned her toward the camp and her bed under the tree. "Meanwhile, you can tender the next installment of your payment to me."

"What?" her voice sharpened, disappointment a twist of pain. The man didn't need to remind her that she'd traded him liberties for his care. The hair and face creams seemed less special, and her momentary pleasure at being tended stopped.

"How many such installments will it take to close this account?" she snapped.

He leaned into her and murmured, before he claimed her mouth, "Depends on the amount of danger I incur in the course of the rescue." And then his shoulders blotted out the sun, and he laid her to the ground, coming down on top of her on the blanket.

He supported his weight, blanketing her with his body. A few pulls and he removed his shirt, and then his pants, baring his flesh to press against her skin beneath his. His eyes darkened as he languidly fitted his knee between her thighs and pressed her open.

She closed her eyes, refusing to watch the pleasure he took in debauching her. But she could feel. Oh my, she could feel. The silk of his hair trailed across her breasts following his lips in a carnal path across her flesh.

When his tongue touched her navel, and then licked inside, her eyes popped open. He rimmed the sensitive area and sipped and kissed around her belly. When that same tongue traced a lazy path of licks and nips down to the soft curls that covered her core, she clapped her eyes shut again. He wouldn't—he couldn't—he did.

And she let him, like a wanton, she raised her heated flesh, reveling in the pleasure of his mouth and tongue on her silken folds. He arranged her body to his liking, cupping her rump in his hands so that he could lift her into his searching lips.

He nipped the sensitive nub at her apex and then sucked on it, pushing two fingers inside of her as she rose against his mouth seeking pleasure. Naomi moaned at the exquisite sensation.

He lifted his head, and his teeth flashed wickedly in a satisfied smile. His fingers continued pumping in and out of her, following the sway of her body as it clenched around them, sucking them back when he pulled them almost free.

She was gloriously, wantonly, free, she wanted what he had given her before. Her flesh softened around him and her body wept tears of desire that he bent and lapped up leisurely. "Please," she whimpered.

"Please what?" he teased, rubbing his face against her belly, licking her navel, swooping lower to suck on her clit. And all the while his fingers thrust rhythmically in and out until her hips caught the movement, and she thrust upward each time he tried to withdraw.

"Want something else?" His voice was husky, no longer teasing but aroused, gruff. She opened her eyes in time to see his cock splay open her nether lips and replace his fingers that had been not quite enough.

He filled her. She pushed up with her hips, taking him as quickly as her body would allow, groaning at the incredible slide of pleasure that burned a path to her core. *This part*

of him she liked. This part of his company she would miss. She gave herself up to passion and met each thrust with one of her own, each demand from her lover, with a request of her own.

At dusk, they were mounted and on their way. Neither spoke of the powerful coupling that had lasted all afternoon. If they were battling silently, than Naomi felt that she had won this round. He intended to return her to Buffalo Creek. She refused to go.

"I'll follow you as soon as you leave town," she promised. He'd been angry, their afternoon interlude of mutual satisfaction erased, but she rode beside him when they traveled toward the mountains and away from Buffalo Creek.

The next day, he found a similar spot; this time they lay together, his arms curling protectively around her until she fell asleep. He nudged her awake, hours later.

"It's time we see what you can do to protect yourself," he explained as he ushered her to a clearing he'd already prepared.

The instruction in self-defense was really an excuse to interrogate her, Naomi decided as she lay on the ground where she'd collapsed.

"What happened to your family?"

"War." Naomi declared the word flatly, not sure if she spoke of what had been, or the strenuous exercise that Charlie forced on her now. The men in her family had marched off to defend the South's honor and left daughters and sisters to defend their own.

"Your daddy keep slaves?" A tide of suppressed anger escaped.

Her hands clenched, and her breath came in gasps around her words, so enraged that her usual reticence in things personal was forgotten and grievances against the males in the world spilled forth.

"Of course not," she snapped. "My father was a sharecropper who could barely scrape together the rent for the land he went broke on. He and my brother both joined the Confederate army the day we heard the South had seceded from the Union. Daddy and Beau didn't care about holding slaves or letting them go. They just didn't want to stay at home on a played out farm another moment."

"So you're not a rich girl?" He said *rich girl* as though an insult. But if he had to ask, it was a compliment of the highest order he'd never understand unless he saw the shack she'd come from.

"If you think that, then my sister, Comfort—wherever she is—is vindicated. When she left to get married, she gave me her copy of *Godey's Lady's Book* and told me to memorize it. I did."

"How old were you then?"

"Eleven when I went to live with the Lancaster family next door. That lasted two years, till they both died, six months apart."

She stood, hands balled into fists, waiting for him to come at her from the left. He feinted right and swooped in on her, taking her by surprise and tossing her to the ground once again; this time, he followed, coming down on top of her.

"Then what?" He was so close his breath ruffled her eyebrow.

"Then," she said tartly, squirming under the very personal way he pressed his length against her, "I went to work taking care of myself, as I have done ever since."

"Don't think much of men, do you, Miss Parker?"

"Never if I don't have to..." a statement that of course wasn't true. Recently, she

couldn't seem to think of anything other than men, specifically the man sprawled on top of her.

"Is that why you picked a school for females?" He held her face between his hands and stared down into her eyes as if he could see truth there.

Naomi stared right back, ignoring the way he pressed his hips against hers. She had worked her way up from a one-room schoolhouse teaching twelve ruffians, to a position of importance teaching deportment to young ladies. Of course, she had chosen to work with only girls. She prided herself on being able to choose; most women couldn't.

"I took a job that would get me to Texas. I'm here to find my sister. That's all."

If her tones were more strident than they should be, she forgave herself. Her many purposes for being in Texas didn't include the man pinning her beneath him, but he filled her senses, stealing her will.

"I have not seen my sister since she left seventeen years ago. I plan to return to Alabama once I've assured myself that she has a good home."

"Why would you want to find someone who went off and left you?" He kept her from getting away and easily deflected her attempts to punch him when he stood and pulled her to her feet also.

"You are a weak, silly woman. You can't even defend yourself." He whirled her around, forcefully demonstrating that she was at his mercy.

"Leave me alone." She didn't like to think about the day that Comfort had left, or the years in between, when few letters had changed to no letters. "I don't have to answer your questions." Her tone was harsh, brooking no dispute. It was the one that she used with students who didn't respond to soft persuasion.

"I say you do. What's got your back up—questions about your sister?" Charlie Wolf prodded her secret fears from her.

"The man she left town with was a bad man if I ever saw one." Naomi admitted this to Charlie, wishing she was wrong, but knowing she wasn't. "Comfort married him because he was the only one who ever asked."

There had been plenty who took without asking, though. Naomi held that back, not wanting to reveal the sisters' shared shame. When Comfort had brought home her first meal paid for with her body—she'd prostituted herself for a chicken and two ears of corn—the girls had cried together.

The memory gave her resolve.

"And you, Naomi ... how come you're still unwed?"

She blinked at him, trying to discern his reason for asking. Then she told him the truth. "I guess I was just fortunate. No one ever wanted me."

She didn't know what she'd done to anger him, but his lovemaking that afternoon was rough, forceful, and prolonged, and she was sore by the time he was satisfied and rolled off.

She was angry with him but didn't know why. "Are you going to give me more self-defense lessons?"

She didn't know why she'd ever thought his face unreadable. She didn't need to hear the disdain that dripped from his voice. She could see it in the jut of his chin and arrogant tilt of his head. "You will have to use your brain to get out of trouble, I can't teach you violence unless I can figure how to harness your tongue."

That night, before they started riding again, Deacon McCallister rode into their

camp. Not more than two hours later, Sam McCallister joined them.

No one commented on her presence, and the men spoke as if she was not there.

“Jericho and his wild bunch are camped in that box canyon ahead. I couldn’t get close enough to hear the gist of the argument, but he and the old man driving the kidnap wagon have been going at it since I been here the last day. Jericho sent half his men out scouring the countryside, but I have no idea for what.”

Sam McCallister had the most interesting news. “I wired the families, notifying them of their daughters’ abductions and then lit out before I had to deal with a bunch of bawling mothers.” And then, as an afterthought, “The U.S. Marshal telegraphed his approval for payment. The reward money is waiting in Eclipse. All we have to do is bring in Jericho, just like we planned.”

Naomi played that over in her mind once and then again. “When did you start chasing Jericho,” she asked Sam, keeping her voice light as though making light conversation.

“We’ve been dogging his heels all summer,” Sam admitted. “And I’ll be for damn sure glad when he’s dead and we can quit.”

“He has a large reward?”

“The biggest ever,” Sam stopped, aware of the silence behind him. “What?” He turned, asking the question of Charlie, who glared in his direction.

“You talk too much.”

“What is the plan?” she asked the brothers, since she knew that she would get no answer from Charlie Wolf.

“The plan is for you to wait here, while we go in, rescue your students and bring them back to you, and we take the bad men to jail.” Charlie explained her role as *just-stay-put*.

The men left and she waited. It occurred to her that they might get killed. She was afraid that she was too far away from the outlaws’ camp to know if something went wrong. She did wait ... for a while. And then she climbed on the already saddled buckskin mare and rode toward the Comanchero camp.

The mare’s head came up and she broke into a trot, alerting Naomi that they were near. Had night sounds not carried so clearly, she might have blundered into the camp and become a captive too.

A horse ahead of them nickered a greeting. She pulled up fast, and slid to the ground, covering the buckskin’s nostrils. Now what? Charlie was going to be really angry with her. That was the one sure thing she knew.

Other than that, she was somewhere unknown with a gun she didn’t know how to use. Pa Lancaster had spent plenty of time teaching her how to snare, clean, and cook a rabbit, but shooting hadn’t been among her lessons.

Looming to the right of where she stood were shadowed boulders that had tumbled down from the cliffs above. Naomi led the mare to the first dark area. The boulder was tall and bigger across than her one-room shack in Alabama.

In the sheltered niche, there was just room for the horse to turn around. It was almost a perfect hiding place; but she hesitated, holding the reins and looking at the big slab of granite, until the buckskin fidgeted, reminding her to move. She didn’t know what else to do with the horse.

If she turned it loose, it would go straight into the camp. She looked around for

something to fasten the reins to, but couldn't see a thing. Finally, she just let the reins trail on the ground, hoping the animal had been taught to ground-tie. She thought about riding back the direction from which she'd come, but the laws of probability told her that all of her night blundering on horseback would get her in trouble.

Now that she had caught up to the outlaws, Naomi admitted that she didn't know how to rescue her students. She had hoped that Charlie Wolf would tell her his plan, but wasn't surprised when he didn't.

It appeared the payment of her body she had tendered in advance for Charlie Wolf's bounty hunter expertise was a sham, giving him reason to seduce her. He'd been going to capture Jericho anyway.

She wasn't sure how that knowledge affected her. She felt like a fool and admitted that her self esteem that had blossomed under Charlie Wolf's attention now wilted under the knowledge that he'd falsely let her hire him, tendering her body as payment.

She shrugged off the loss, at least temporarily, and assembled the little she knew. Multiple outlaws were camped not too far inside the canyon, and Harvey Collins was with them—she could hear his agitated tones sporadically, even though she couldn't understand individual words.

A deeper voiced male was yelling, and it sounded like it was aimed at Harvey. Good, the miscreants are arguing among themselves. *I need to get inside that camp while they are looking at each other.*

The time of day was on her side. It was half dawn, and mist drifted in undefined swirls, appearing in random spots over the dew-covered ground. A slight breeze carried camp sounds and smells toward her.

She needed to know how many men were inside, where the girls were located, what armaments were on display, and how to sneak the girls past the Comancheros without being seen. Naomi crept around the boulder and dropped to the ground.

She was reminded of early morning trips through the woods with Pa Lancaster. He'd fixed her up in baggy trousers, pretending, she'd thought then, that she was a son. He'd taught her to walk lightly, crawl carefully, and slither smoothly. She could almost hear his voice as she obeyed old teachings.

Crawling on her knees, Naomi was thankful for Mr. Wolf's deerskin pants. As she approached the clearing, where ground cover became sparser, she carefully lowered herself flat to the ground. It wasn't that easy, moving only inches in as many minutes, but the buckskins that she wore blended with the underbrush, allowing her to creep closer and closer to the camp.

She was unfamiliar with the Texas night life, but in Alabama, the snakes would have been a threat. Hoping her path was free of creatures, she belly-crawled toward the sound of the argument, until she lay behind a scrub bush not ten feet from the two men arguing.

Around them, Naomi counted six men—three squatted by the fire, a fourth stretched flat, leaning his head on his saddle, while two still remained asleep, although Naomi had no idea how that could be with all the shouting going on.

"Old man, I brought these girls to you for a price. Deliver or get out. I can find a different use for the women."

Harvey talked fast. "I figured you'd not have need of an old man once you got your shipment. I stashed the guns close to where I picked up the girls."

The man named Jericho slapped Harvey across the face and made as though to cut

him with his knife. “The baby chicks will remain ours, right, Comancheros?” The three squatting at the fire looked with interest at the wagon, and Naomi knew that was where she’d find her students.

“Not so young as all that, boss, couple of those girls look ripe for the pickin’ to me.” It was the man lying on his saddle, hands behind his head, who spoke. He grinned suggestively at the wagon.

Naomi could see that Harvey Collins had gotten himself in a predicament, and now he wasn’t sure *he’d* make it out with skin intact. She listened to the leader harangue Harvey in a mix of languages, shifting angry words back and forth from English to utterances Naomi didn’t recognize. Harvey Collins seemed desperate to soothe the Comancheros but determined to keep the girls for his own scheme.

“Don’t be foolish, Jericho.” Harvey was adamantly protecting the kidnapped students. “I can’t ransom those girls back to their families if you’ve ruined them. Hell, there’s thousands of dollars riding in that wagon. We made a deal. You get me the girls, I bring you a shipment.”

The Comanchero leader lowered the knife and put it back in its sheath. “Until I receive payment, the girls belong to me. If that’s later than sooner—” He shrugged and nodded toward the other men. “—then the girls’ futures may be different than you planned.”

She held her breath and tried to think clearly. Harvey’s Wagon of Interesting Items was pulled up next to the only scrub pine in the small clearing, but she couldn’t catch sight of any of the girls. She inched sideways, flat against the ground, watching, gaze steadily scanning the terrain, but not touching those she surveyed.

Suddenly, the smell of coffee hit her, and her stomach growled loudly. Had the volume of the argument not increased, they might have heard it.

“I’m telling you boys, use that one you’ve ruined already, but leave the rest of the healthy ones alone. I can’t get nothin’ out of ’em if you’ve poked em to death first.”

“Sheeet,” he drew the expletive out incongruously. Naomi froze as he spat in her direction. “You boys have any idea how much these females are worth? I’ve got the children of the territory’s wealthiest in that wagon. The mighty will pay through the nose to get their flesh and blood back. I’ll be rich as a king.” He smacked his lips over broken teeth and cackled at the thought.

Use the one you’ve ruined already. Dear God, what had they done? Naomi slithered on her belly, crawling toward the wagon, desperate to reach the girls before the outlaw camp came fully awake. A mounded bundle by the side of the back cart wheel was enough to send her in that direction.

It was Justine. Naomi shinnied under the wagon and slipped as close to the injured child as she could, scrunching into the shadows to study the girl. Justine breathed shallowly, dried blood streaked through her hair and across her face.

“Justine,” Naomi whispered the name with little hope of a response, so she was shocked when the eye nearest her popped open, and then closed in a distinct wink. *Well, that surely makes a difference.* Suddenly, Naomi didn’t feel so hopeless.

Then Justine’s finger twitched the slightest bit and seemed to be pointing above Naomi. *Save your strength*, Naomi wanted to warn her. *I know the girls are in the wagon.* She nodded reassuringly and began her retreat, planning to crawl around to the unguarded side, climb inside the wagon, and free the other students.

She heard nothing, but as she eased backward through the wet morning dew, a hand came over her mouth.

At the same time a hard body sprawled on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Naomi bucked upward trying to free herself. "Naomi."

It was a feather-like stroke of air that settled her fight, before he took his hand away. As soon as he freed her, she rolled over and stared into the face of Charlie Wolf. He crawled backward beside her, shinnying quicker than she could keep up. When they were on the outside of the camp, he pulled her to her feet and motioned her to follow him.

They remained silent, until reaching two horses, his and the one Naomi had ridden in on. His stallion's reins trailed the ground; the mare's leathers were looped over his pommel. When she would have spoken, he shook his head and handed her the reins, boosting her into her saddle.

She followed where he led, wondering if she would have to return his gun before she had her show-down with Harvey Collins, because sin or not, she intended to kill the old man.

As soon as they were far enough from the camp to talk, he slid down from his horse, and lifted her down, without waiting for her to use the stirrups. "Teacher, did I not tell you to stay put?"

Shocking both of them, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged.

"Mr. Wolf, I am so glad you're here. Justine is playing hurt, and the other girls are tied up in the wagon. I so hoped you would come." Her words tumbled out as he held her, squeezing her to him until she thought her ribs might crack.

She didn't care. He could hug her as tightly to him as he wanted. She squeezed him right back, liking the feel of his power in her arms.

The girls were alive, Justine wasn't as badly hurt as Naomi had feared, and Charlie Wolf had arrived in time to help her with the rescue. She leaned her head against his chest for just a moment, drawing upon his strength, and then she stepped away, dropping her arms. "I have a plan," she said briskly.

His eyebrows beetled into a frown, and impulsively she touched his arm again. "I came to help. The girl who's on the ground beside the wagon is playing possum. She's not nearly as hurt as they think." She drew a deep breath and then whispered softly.

"I heard the Comanchero leader arguing with Harvey Collins. For once in his no-good life, Harvey Collins did something right, even if for the wrong reasons. At least till now he's kept the other girls unharmed."

"How do you know this man, Harvey Collins?" Charlie's feral gaze looked more wolf than man as he listened.

Her fingers clenched around the reins. "Years ago, he was run out of my home county in Alabama for misdeeds—he says he's a peddler of small household necessities, but it's more commonly thought that he's a merchant of sin and evil. Young girls had a way of turning up missing when Harvey was in the area."

Charlie didn't exact details, just nodded at her assessment as if he understood. There were flesh-peddlers who roamed the territory, run out of most decent places, but always ready to do business with the outcasts from society, who always found them.

"Now that you're here, it will be easier. I'm going back into that camp and crawl up on the wagon seat and drive the wagon out. They've left the mule hitched up, and they won't be expecting trouble. You can climb onto that shelf above the canyon and use your

rifle.” She paused for breath and then asked, “You can shoot, can’t you?”

Charlie Wolf stood listening to her with arms folded across his chest and no expression on his face.

Chapter Eight

There were six outlaws representing varying degrees of evil in the camp. Seven, if he counted Harvey Collins. After listening to the fat windbag, Charlie had no trouble adding him to the potential body count at the end of the forthcoming shoot-out.

Deacon had circled around to the other side of the ravine, so he had a clear shot from above, into the clearing. Sam was busy cutting loose the remuda of horses the gang used for travel.

Waiting for the call of a mourning dove, Sam's signal, Charlie gave Naomi her directions. He wanted nothing more than to turn her over his knee and wale the daylights out of her.

She'd belly-crawled like an Indian right up to the camp. Part of him swelled with pride—he'd chosen well—another part of him long dormant trembled from aftershocks at seeing her so close to death. For thirty-two years he'd waited for a woman to claim his interest. Miss Naomi Parker had his full attention, and he didn't plan on losing her to her own stupidity.

"Stay here." When she started to shake her head, he asked, "You still have my .45?" When she fumbled it out of her pocket, he frowned. It had a hair-trigger and it was loaded. "You know how to use this?" Without waiting for a reply, he took it out of her hand, checked to make sure that the cylinder was fully loaded, including the chamber that was usually kept empty for the hammer to rest on, and handed it back.

"Anyone besides Sam, Deak, or me comes running this way, pull the hammer until it cocks, and shoot 'em." Then he left her standing behind a boulder, holding the reins of the horses in one hand and his Colt .45 in the other.

Timing was important. Charlie acknowledged the weakness of his plan to himself as he walked into the boxed canyon. If the girls were unable to help themselves, it would be hard getting them out alive. But if they died in the shootout, it was better than leaving them in the hands of the Comancheros.

While Naomi was crawling around risking her life, he'd had time to watch the six gang members. Jericho wouldn't be able to hold them back much longer. If the old man didn't deliver what cargo he'd promised, the girls would be forfeit.

* * * *

"*Hola!*" Charlie called as he walked into the camp, his six-shooter drawn and ready. It was enough to stop the tirade being delivered upon Harvey Collins.

"Jericho, your guard's asleep at his post. A child could steal your remuda and gut you at the same time." In fact, the guard, a Mescalero killer with a hefty bounty on his head, wouldn't be waking up—ever.

Jericho whirled, going for his gun as he turned to face the voice he knew well. As soon as he saw the aim of Charlie's gun, he stopped in mid-draw and finished his turn, a smile on his face.

"My old friend, Charlie Wolf! What brings you to my camp this morning?" The hand that had been resting on his holster carefully lowered to his thigh and remained still. The

smile on the Comanchero's face broadened as he took in Charlie's horseless state.

"Dropping in for coffee?"

"You have something that belongs to me." Charlie nodded at the wagon as he spoke.

The outlaw leader turned on Harvey Collins. "What is this? You sold the merchandise more than once?"

"No," Charlie answered for the old man. "He was stupid enough to steal from me. I came to get my own back." No one in the clearing doubted that he spoke of more than the contents of the wagon. The scar on Charlie's back demanded retribution.

He nodded toward the wagon and continued, "The flesh-peddler's cart and what it carries is mine."

A hiss of anger was the only warning. Jericho palmed his knife and in one fluid motion, poised to throw it at Charlie. When Harvey Collins gurgled in fear, the outlaw swore. "Old man, I will kill your useless hide right now."

Charlie shot the knife from Jericho's hand before he could release it. "Another move and you die."

The outlaw turned slowly and looked at him in amazement. "You can't walk into my camp and kill me."

"I'm not planning on killing you." The barrel of the gun was now trained on Jericho's crotch. "I'll just leave you with something to remember me by." The two men stared at each other, hatred so deep it was a tangible force between them.

Jericho froze, not even turning his head. He gritted through clenched teeth, as much to his outlaw friends as to Charlie, "Don't shoot." He glared at the bounty hunter. "What do you want?"

"The wagon and its contents belong to me," Charlie repeated.

Harvey Collins chose that moment to join the discussion. "That's my wagon, and it sure as hell don't carry nothin' that belongs to you."

Charlie ignored him and spoke again to Jericho. "Have one of your men put that bundle laying over there into the wagon with the rest of what you stole." The gun never wavered from its aim.

The Comanchero leader yelled, "Pete, do it!" and one of the remaining five gang members bent to lift the girl from the ground. Charlie held his breath, hoping. The blanket remained limp as the man settled it inside the wagon and out of sight.

"We're going to walk over there now, and we're going to drive the wagon out of this camp, and if you're fortunate, I might let you live."

Charlie lifted his gun so that it was again aimed at Jericho's heart and then stepped close, whirling him around and jamming the gun against the outlaw's back as he pushed him.

"Move it," he ordered.

The Comanchero leader smirked. "You're surrounded. How do you think you're going to get me into that wagon and out of this camp while my friends are here to stop you? You are a dead man."

"Not today, I'm not," Charlie disagreed. "But keep running your mouth, and you won't be so lucky."

Charlie had reason to appreciate Naomi's earlier visit, although it stuck in his craw to admit it. "Justine," he called out.

A young girl, blood matting the side of her face, poked her head through the canvas

opening. "Untie the ropes on the other girls, and one of you get up top and drive this rig."

The daughters of Texas didn't falter or faint, as Justine, the little girl who'd played possum for three days, came alive to free her classmates, one by one.

Charlie kept the gun buried in Jericho's ribs, waiting. Quickly another girl crawled to the wagon seat and picked up the reins.

"I'm Ambrosia Quince." She introduced herself as if they were at afternoon tea. And then she added, "And I'm very glad to meet you."

Charlie eased the gun out of Jericho's holster and handed it to the driver. Then he called back to the other girl, "Justine, you got a length of that rope they used on your friends?"

The little girl waved a loop at him. "Drop that right here..." He shoved Jericho forward, forcing his head into the noose until it circled his arms.

Two loops and the outlaw couldn't move. "Now give me another one, Justine." Again the head popped out. This time she dropped the rope around Jericho's neck. "We're gonna walk out of here, Miss Quince." Charlie nodded reassuringly at the driver who held the reins with confidence. "Your teacher hired me to get you to safety. Let's get started. If things go bad, run this old mule and don't stop till you get to Flat Rock."

Naomi's girls were better than he'd hoped for. One of them slid a noose around Jericho's neck from the back and tightened it, while another wrapped another length of rope around the outlaw until he was trussed up and unable to move anything but his legs.

As Ambrosia Quince slapped the leathers against the old mule, the wagon rolled out of the camp. Jericho stumbled along beside it, his choice to keep up or be dragged behind and choke to death.

Charlie kept his back to the wagon and shifted his gun, training it on the remaining outlaws. On schedule, Sam hazed the remuda of horses into frenzy, chasing them from the box canyon where they'd been corralled. They stampeded through the camp.

The old mule broke into a run to get out of their way. Charlie used the chaos for cover and leapt on a passing bay, leaving the other seven outlaws behind for his cousins to deal with.

He grabbed Jericho, who was running beside the Wagon of Interesting Items, trying to keep from being strangled. Charlie hauled him up, slinging him face-down across the back of a passing animal. Jericho agilely rolled until he straddled the mount, wrapping his legs around the horse's sides. He was smiling until Justine tugged on the noose around his neck.

"Keep moving," Charlie called to the young girl driving, but it was unnecessary. She was running that old mule hell-bent for leather and would have trampled the outlaw who jumped in front of them, had he not jumped to safety.

Behind them, shots sounded, and she urged the mule faster on the trail. The wagon bounced over hardscrabble rock and dirt, and Charlie feared it might shake itself apart at the pace she'd set.

But it hung together, and when she reached the boulder where he'd left Naomi standing, Charlie didn't stop, but shouted at Naomi, "Bring the horses and get a move on."

She was already mounted and leading Old Mossy at a run as she urged her horse close to the wagon, craning her neck to see inside and count her students. "We're all here," the girl driving the rig assured her.

On seeing the cart loaded with his hostages, Jericho laughed, "Keep them rounded up for me in that wagon. I'll have them back in my hands by the end of the day."

Charlie brought the gun up and slammed it against the man's head, shutting him up effectively. Then he pulled the mule to a halt and slid from the saddle.

"We need to go to Buffalo Creek," Naomi told him. He ignored her, talking to the girls in the wagon instead.

"Mr. Wolf. I can get help for the girls in Buffalo Creek."

Finally, he looked at her and said, "That's the wrong direction." He turned back to the Quince girl driving and instructed her.

"Keep driving the wagon toward the sun." He tied the limp body of the Comanchero leader across the horse he was mounted on, while Naomi nudged her horse into a lope, following close to the wagon's rear axle.

"Is everyone back there?" she called anxiously.

One by one, as Charlie watched, three girls poked their heads out of the flap covering that closed off the back of the wagon from view. "We knew you'd save us, Miss Parker," a young girl piped, looking out the opening at Naomi. "Justine was playing possum, but she *is* really hurt."

Before Naomi could jerk the reins and pull the mare to a stop, Charlie slapped her horse's hind quarters and shouted, "Keep moving, don't stop for anything."

Then he dropped behind them and rode next to Jericho who, tied head down and ass up in the air, was conscious and cursing. The thunder of hooves followed behind, and Charlie hoped it was Sam and Deak.

"Head to Flat Rock—toward the sun," he directed the females again. "Keep that gun handy," he ordered Naomi. "If the prisoner wakes up and gives you any trouble, shoot him." Then, as an afterthought he added, "Don't kill the horse."

He spurred back toward the gunfire, aware that he'd left his cousins outnumbered three to one. He needn't have worried. Deacon was strapping bodies across one of the gang's mounts. Four from the camp were wounded, three were dead, including the Mescalero guard, and neither Sam nor his brother had caught lead.

"Where's that fat windbag that set up the kidnapping?" Harvey Collins was nowhere to be seen.

"...Took off running when he saw us come into camp. I let him go. Figured if the snakes don't get him, the sun will." Deak was right, and Charlie had more pressing worries than a crooked old man.

"By my count, we've got another five or six thousand to divide up, not to mention the price on Jericho's head. Sure was fine of your schoolmarm to lead us to these outlaws." Sam offered a sly grin and emphasized *your schoolmarm*, claiming Naomi for Charlie.

Charlie didn't deny the claim. Instead he advised his cousins, "Better move fast and get this bunch back to Flat Rock. There were only seven wanteds and an old man in camp with Jericho. Half the men who ride with him were gone."

Sam and Deak mounted and strung the lead line behind them. Then they spurred their animals to a gallop, accompanied by the sound of Jericho's men groaning and protesting at the pace being set and the thud of hard leather against their wounds.

They soon caught up with Naomi, who instead of following directions, was heading away from the sun toward Buffalo Creek.

She was pushing that old mule to go as fast as he would oblige. Three of the girls clung to the bench as it rocked and swayed across the range, and five more were inside the wagon.

When Charlie rode up next to her buckskin, he expected her to pull up. Instead she dug in her heels and tried to get more speed out of the mare without leaving the raggedy merchant cart and her students behind. A stunned Charlie stopped in the middle of the trail staring.

“That wagon is too rickety to take the speed she’s travelling,” he muttered out loud as Deacon came up on his left. His cousin snorted. “Seems like she’s in a hurry to see the last of us.”

Sam offered, “Maybe I should ride along home with her. It won’t do for her to go back alone. That flesh peddler Collins is still loose.” He laughed as Charlie slanted a warning in his direction.

“Get your own woman, McCallister runt.”

Jericho took that moment to groan and demand loudly, “Let me sit up. You’re killin’ me slung over like this.”

Charlie didn’t wait for particulars but turned toward the departing clutch of females. “She’ll come to Flat Rock with us and her brood. After that, we’ll figure something.” Charlie handed the lead line hauling Jericho to Sam and kneed his mount into a lope.

Sam grinned as Charlie raced toward the retreating wagon. “Reckon Charlie can make her mind?”

Deacon snorted. “Doesn’t look too promising.” The two of them turned the opposite direction escorting the prisoners to jail.

Chapter Nine

Naomi rode up close and slapped the mule's rump, urging it to a faster pace than was smart in the hot weather. She hoped to be halfway to Buffalo Creek with the girls before the three bounty hunters and the band of Comancheros stopped fighting and missed the hostages.

"Tell me how badly Justine is hurt," she called to the girls in the wagon bed, afraid to hear but concerned that she might need immediate attention.

She was shocked to hear Justine herself answer. "I'm all right. I got knocked in the head when they first came through the door. Then, I got hit again when I told that old man I wasn't going anywhere with him." Justine was wound up and needed to tell her story. "I was out for awhile, but mostly, I've been playing possum ever since. I thought maybe they'd leave me behind if I didn't wake up."

Justine hung from the side of the wagon, making Naomi shudder with horror. "Justine, you could fall, sit back. Girls, make her be still, she has a head injury."

That reminded Justine that she was an invalid, and she withdrew back inside the wagon.

Mary gripped the bench and called, "She'll live."

Brody handed Marta the reins and said, "Drive." She climbed into the back and changed places with Rebecca. "I'll look at the cut, Miss Parker. Buffalo Creek is this side of my home, but it's in the right direction."

"I'm going to help all of you get home, girls," Naomi assured them. She didn't know enough about Texas to decide which was closer, Flat Rock or Buffalo Creek, but the girls had trusted her judgment when she'd turned toward Buffalo Creek.

Naomi was worried about Justine, in spite of her reassurances, because there had seemed a lot of blood, some fresh, on the girl's face. "Brody, how bad is Justine's injury?"

She was so focused on that and travelling that she didn't see Charlie Wolf until he rode alongside the mule and reached down, grabbing harness to haul them to a stop. "Whoa up there."

Naomi wasn't sure whether he spoke to her or the mule. The mule, feeling abused, was more than ready to follow orders. Naomi helplessly watched him stop in his tracks.

"We are on our way back to Buffalo Creek. We can manage there until the Board of Trustees makes a decision about procedure. Since Sam has already notified the girls' parents, they will be on their way to take them home. I'll need to be with my students while they wait."

Naomi knew she was babbling, but she couldn't stop the nervous flow of words anymore than she could look at him.

"We thank you for your help. I believe the charge for your services should be covered by the bounty you'll collect on the outlaws." She couldn't keep the sour note of displeasure from her voice; his duplicity still pained her, even though she wasn't sure in what way he had broken her trust.

She hid behind the word *we*—treating the episode in the stable, and the days together on the trail as though they had never happened. On that thought, she risked a quick glance

at his face and saw an implacable, surly scowl.

"You are coming back to Flat Rock with me." Naomi paused in her comments. It was the first time in her life anyone had ever come after her. The fact that it was a bounty hunter who probably saw a way to collect money on the girls tempered her appreciation.

"No, we are not," she replied, treating it as though it was a ridiculous suggestion and a matter of her choice. She took up her reins to proceed, explaining to him in polite terms the end of their relationship.

"You have caught the outlaws and rescued my students. Our transaction is complete. I can arrange for the girls to return to their homes from Buffalo Creek. I should have gone there to begin with. The sheriff in Flat Rock is an idiot."

She tightened her knees and lifted the reins, prepared to move on, having said what needed to be said.

"You're wearing my clothes." He stated the obvious. That was not the response Naomi had expected. Her usual calm control was once again breached by the Indian.

His flat stare raked her form. She glared back at him and edged her horse farther from the wagon as if to prevent her students from hearing.

"I'll return them when I can."

Before she could get the mare going, Charlie Wolf reached down, scooped her off of the buckskin and transferred her to his lap, where he held her in front of him on his saddle.

"Miss Parker," Rebecca called to her teacher for assurance. Fear filled her voice. They had just escaped one band of savages.

Charlie rode closer, holding tight to Naomi. "Name's Charlie Wolf McCallister," he nodded at the frightened girl. "I need you to turn this rig around and go back to Flat Rock. It's closer than Buffalo Creek."

Rebecca's fearful expression changed to surprise when he nodded at her. "Keep driving the wagon, you're doing a mighty fine job."

Naomi was surprised that the girls lost their fear of Charlie Wolf so quickly. They were looking him over with great interest. "Harvey Collins got away."

He held her in his arms, his horse prancing under them, while he explained his reason to her students.

He ignored Naomi even as his arms that seemed like bands of steel refused to turn her loose. He gave the girls their orders, and they accepted, nodding agreement, glad to have him in charge.

Rebecca picked up the reins, clucking to the mule as she turned him into the sun.

Naomi could see their relief, sensed that their terror was soothed by the fierce bounty hunter's presence. Hers wasn't, although from the safety of his arms, she realized that, once again, she had almost put her students in jeopardy. *Harvey Collins got away.*

"Follow me to Flat Rock," Charlie Wolf told Rebecca. The wagon bounced and the mule kicked at the traces in protest, but Charlie leaned down and slapped his rump and the animal settled down and went to work, obeying authority.

He said nothing to her. He didn't even look at her. Instead, Charlie turned his horse and started in toward town, never doubting that the wagon of girls would follow. Naomi sat, back ramrod straight, until he roughly pulled her against his chest. He was angry. Waves of suppressed violence radiated from him, and her instincts warned her to remove herself from his arms.

"I would like you to put me back on my horse."

"You don't own a horse," he growled. "As far as I can see, you own one book, a comb and a hair brush."

"Oh." She'd forgotten that, and realized how foolish she must seem to him. An old-maid schoolteacher—she shouldn't be aware of his thighs that he'd draped her over—but she was. Every time the horse took a step, her rump moved against Charlie's groin.

She was besieged by impure thoughts and flashes of memory. Her cheeks flushed red—red enough that Marta called out a warning, "You've got too much sun, Miss Parker. You're face is going to hurt soon."

It hurt already. It burned, but not from sun. The heat of his body had ignited a wicked desire that was totally inappropriate. Her students were next to them in a wagon, the evil man who had perpetrated the kidnapping was still loose, and the man sitting behind her was a savage.

Nevertheless, with every shift of her body, she rubbed against his manhood, at first resentful, and then resigned, and finally aroused. He dropped his hand to her middle and murmured in her ear, "You ever have an ass-beatin'?"

Naomi was pulled from her fog of self-induced desire by his question. Composing herself, she asked hesitantly—*Thank God, he hadn't recognized her behavior*—"I beg your pardon?" *Did he just ask me if I had ever had...?* "What?"

She jerked around and stared into his eyes, scandalized. His hand pressed harder against her midriff. "You heard me. And you'll feel my hand on your backside, soon as we get to town and some privacy."

He seemed to feel better for saying his words. He relaxed and pulled her tighter against him.

"The girls are looking at you, Mr. Wolf. You are holding me in an indecent fashion. I would like to borrow your spare mount until we get to Flat Rock."

"Can you behave?" he asked, waiting for her answer as if she were a child.

When she nodded, he dropped behind the wagon where he'd had the buckskin tied and set her in the saddle once again. Without another word to her, he rode back to the front of the wagon, expecting to be followed.

By the time Naomi reached Flat Rock, the shock of their captivity and rescue had worn off, and the girls were clamoring to tell her the details of their kidnapping. Harvey Collins had waited in the meadow below the school and loaded the captives in his wagon when the Comancheros had carried them there.

When Justine, recovering from her first knock in the head, protested, refusing to get in the wagon with Harvey, she'd been struck down, and this time, rendered unconscious. There was a wicked cut on her forehead that would probably scar, still seeping blood.

Naomi was all too aware of her impoverished state. She had no money to stay in a hotel with her students, her dress had been cut to pieces by the heathen bounty hunter she'd had inappropriate relations with, and she had no means of paying a doctor for looking after Justine's injury.

In Buffalo Creek she could have promised payment against her teacher's allotment. Traveling to Flat Rock was plainly a stupid idea on which Charlie Wolf would not budge.

The emotions churning inside of her were relief, anger, and fear. She knew that the Sparrow Creek Ladies were safe with the bounty hunter, just as she knew that she wasn't. *You ever have an ass-beatin'?* She could number her grievances against him and had

mentally done so all the way back to Flat Rock.

The cause of his anger he summed up in one sentence, “I told you to stay put in Buffalo Creek.”

Naomi shrugged away his right to tell her what to do. But when her horse had brushed close to his on the ride in, she’d braved a quick look in his direction. His stern gaze promised a reckoning at journey’s end.

He made her feel breathless, half the time with irritation at his arrogant assumption of authority, but half the time it was a breathless yearning for him, what they had done together, for the feel of his body on hers again.

So much had happened since that that night, and she had remained focused on rescuing the girls. But now she had no distractions and memories flooded her mind. She was torn between embarrassment, disbelief at what she had done, and revisited desire coursing through her veins when she thought of his hands on her body.

She scolded herself. *I am a spinster of advanced years—twenty-eight and not one offer of marriage—an old maid. He was drinking spirits and probably inebriated or else it would never have happened. It is best to pretend that it didn’t.*

She was not sad that she’d had the experience nor fraught with self loathing. In fact, the incident had satisfied a long-held curiosity about the coupling that happened between men and women. She was still an unmarried spinster, but now she had a memory to cherish as she faded into middle age.

Naomi rode close to the wagon, hovering over her students like a mother hen over her chicks. She had done it; she had rescued them, and other than a severe fright and Justine’s bump on the head, they were unscathed.

Naomi could forgive Charlie Wolf his arrogant command tactics because he’d helped her. She couldn’t have done it alone. She looked at the set of his fine shoulders and sighed.

Now that the girls were saved, she preferred not seeing him again, as being around him was proving most awkward. *He seems to have expectations that I will follow where he leads.* Naomi snorted softly at the thought but waited breathlessly for his next order.

Chapter Ten

It went to hell quickly when the three bounty hunters rode into town escorting Naomi and her wagon of students. She had on her snooty-I-don't-know-you act as though she wanted nothing to do with Charlie, but he claimed the space next to her and had stayed close by as she inspected each young girl for injuries, after she'd cleaned the wound on Justine Garner's head.

"I'll get a doc for her if you think it's needed," he'd offered. She'd agreed without looking up from the next girl in line.

"Tell the doctor I think Justine's cut needs stitches," she'd advised him, and he'd left to find the town sawbones. By the time he'd returned, he had to clear a path to the wagon and its cargo.

A crowd of the locals, including Jake, the saloon owner, who sported a white bandage tied around his head and carried a rope, were ready to mete out their brand of social justice. As soon as they caught sight of Charlie, they grabbed hold of his arms, dragging him to stand in front of the Sparrow Creek girls.

"Just tell us that the Indian took advantage of you. Dirty redskin will pay for messing with a white woman."

Naomi stood in the wagon looking down at Jake and said clearly, "Don't be stupid, of course Mr. Wolf did not assault me."

"Hey, she called you stupid, Jake." It was a voice from the back, far enough to poke the beehive with a stick without getting stung.

Jake swelled up and looked even uglier than he already was. "Why you Indian-loving slut, that makes you a whore, because you were seen fucking Charlie Wolf."

If the doc hadn't been with Charlie, they would have dragged him off to the closest tree. As it was, two of the bar crowd held him, then twisted his arms behind his back.

Naomi remained unruffled by the taunts and catcalls, and treated the saloon owner as if he was a misbehaving student. For the moment, she had him under control. Charlie shifted his attention to the men twisting his arms behind his back.

"Best think about what you're gonna do when you have to turn loose." Charlie smiled at them both. It was not what he said but the soft way he said it. Both men looked sick as they realized they held a wolf down and might soon be subject to tooth and claw.

"Give me that saddlebag," Jake reached for the leather pouch slung over Charlie's shoulder. Before the bartender could claim it, Naomi leaned down and plucked it from his grasp. "You are a bully, sir. That we know. Do not add thievery to your sins."

Charlie wanted to tell her to shut up, but she was on a roll. "I will guard this until you have sorted out your disagreement with Mr. Wolf. If it concerns the incident in your bar when he hit you with a bottle of your spirits, it doesn't appear to have done permanent damage." She paused and then added, "I'm sure Mr. Wolf will be happy to pay for the whiskey."

The teacher refused to entertain the first sentence concerning her night in the barn with Charlie Wolf. Instead, she stood upright and scolded the crowd of half-drunk men until the better part of them retreated, like schoolboys caught in a prank.

Jake's plan to rouse the town citizens into a tar and feathering was momentarily

derailed. Naomi turned her look upon the two holding him, and even before the doctor pushed toward the wagon, most of the ruckus had stopped, and they'd loosened their hold.

"Here now, I've got a sick young'n to look after. Clear the path to this wagon right now." The doctor, held up by the tussle over Charlie's belongings, now used his hard-sided bag to push and jab his way through the diminishing crowd.

The McCallister cousins, escorting a reluctant sheriff, joined them, stopping the worst of the physical abuse on Charlie, but the verbal assault on Naomi intensified.

"How was she, injun? Did you ride her all night?" They pretended to ask him but directed the questions at her. "Kinda long in the tooth, ain't she, half-breed?" Deacon McCallister shot his gun into the air, bringing order to the last of the chaos.

"Better bring the young ladies and follow me, Miz Parker." The sheriff, unable to avoid his duty, sneered at her and motioned one of Jake's men to lift her down.

Charlie nodded passively as he stood in the grip of his handlers. Deacon stepped to the wagon and gently lifted Naomi out. "Your woman is in my care, cousin." Then he turned, tucking her into safety under his arm.

"If you've got anything else to say about this young woman, you'll say it to me, now that we are relatives." Even the sheriff looked at the rough bounty hunter in surprise. His speech was that of an educated man, and he spoke with the quiet authority of the powerful.

"What the hell? The teacher ain't no McCallister. She fucked the Indian, and she's a whore." Jake wasn't turning loose his favorite theme.

"You're speaking of my cousin, Charles Wolf McCallister, the man who took Naomi Parker to *wife* three days ago and rescued eight daughters of Texas. So, yes, Naomi Parker Wolf McCallister *is* kin."

*

Naomi listened to the wild accusations and lurid descriptions Wallace, the stable owner, reported. He had remained silent through the verbal attack from Jake, but when it looked as though she'd quelled that bully, Wallace decided to stir things up again.

"Defiled her, that's what he did. Took his knife and cut her clothes off till she was buck naked." He held up Naomi's dress and shook it at the crowd. It had clearly been sliced from top to bottom.

The crowd of mostly men looked at Naomi speculatively. She stared back, wearing the expression she used on recalcitrant students. She was startled when Charlie's cousin took charge of the situation.

"Give me your hand." Deacon McCallister grabbed her right hand and jerked it above her head, showing the crowd the cut mark on her palm. His voice dropped to a lower octave, and he intoned as if giving a benediction.

"This man and this woman exchanged blood. Such an oath is common practice among citizens who wish to make a vowed pledge until the preacher can arrive. I say this woman is my cousin's wife. Any carnal knowledge that they shared was of the spirit as husband and wife as well as of the flesh."

Pressed as she was into the side of her newly claimed relative, she couldn't help but understand the danger. Nevertheless, Naomi corrected him, "I do appreciate your assistance, Mr. McCallister but I believe I have this situation under control and telling that story isn't necessary."

Cold blue eyes met hers briefly as he murmured for her ears alone, "Then, madam, you are a fool and the magnitude of your stupidity intensifies. Cease."

Deacon McCallister swept Naomi along behind Charlie, guarding his back as he was dragged toward the sheriff's office. Sam brought up the rear, carrying Justine, while the doctor urged the rest of the girls along between them.

They ended up in the sheriff's office arguing about the merits of matrimony, until finally Charlie said flatly, "Get the preacher."

"That won't be necessary." Deacon nodded at his cousin. "I would be proud to perform the ceremony."

*

"I'm not doing it." The teacher glared at Deacon's suggestion and refused to allow Charlie to make her an honest woman. "I am not interested." Her flat refusal left no room for persuasion or negotiation.

"You don't have a choice," Sam explained slowly as though talking to a not-too-bright child.

"Of course, I have a choice," Naomi Parker snapped back tartly. "And I choose to teach school and remain unmarried."

"That won't be going back to Sparrow Creek or any other school in the territory," Deacon broke the bad news. "You signed a contract with a morals clause. Something they all have in them." Charlie watched her process his statement and don a look of stunned outrage.

"I don't have a school to go back to?" The outrage turned to panic. "But I have to go back. That's where I live."

"No, ma'am, not anymore. The Sparrow Creek School Board that you wired? The day before last, they sent word that you don't need to come back." The sheriff looked pleased when he handed her the wire. Charlie wanted to tear him apart.

Miss Parker. Stop. Two weeks' salary tendered. Stop. No longer need your services. Stop.

Charlie didn't enjoy watching bad news delivered, but it was better for Naomi to learn her circumstances now than have some old biddy in town gleefully impart the gossip, or the town drunk pull her into an alley and have his way without reprisal. Charlie's blood boiled thinking about that possibility.

The sheriff added, "Message included a trunk of personal items, mostly just books. Reckon you won't need them from now on."

Naomi bit her full bottom lip that was trembling and whispered in distress, "My books."

"Satchel filled with 'em." Charlie broke his silence, irritated that her nibbling teeth had distracted him.

Her head came up on that and she nodded stiffly. "Thank you for your helpfulness. I will not take more of your time." She headed for the door but was stopped by the sheriff's next words.

"Best not go out that way. Safer if you take the back door." Charlie watched the lawman look at her speculatively, measuring the worth against the trouble.

"What the sheriff means is—if we don't come out of this room hitched, I'll be hanging from the nearest tree this afternoon, and you'll be entertainment for Jake's regulars. If you're lucky, they'll put you on a horse and run you out of town tomorrow,

after they finish taken turns on you tonight.”

When she remained silent, lips pressed tightly together, stubbornly avoiding his gaze, he grabbed her chin. “Look at me.” He forced her to meet the demand in his eyes. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

*

Deacon McCallister spoke to her in that rich, resonating voice that was meant to reassure and persuade. “Miss Parker, everything Charlie says is true. And it will happen just like he says. Now Charlie’s my cousin and I can’t let the fate of hanging befall him.” He let the words hover in the air, making it clear whom he protected.

“You, being a white woman and choosy, if Charlie doesn’t suit, then my brother Sam McCallister will stand up with you, or I will. But you are not leaving this room until you are a married woman. What happens then is up to you. But a McCallister will make you an honest woman today. And then we all will leave together.”

Deacon McCallister spoke in crisp tones that brooked no room for defiance or dissent. Naomi’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

The eight students who had been rescued draped themselves wherever seating could be had. Five sat on the side bench, two on one chair, and Justine, her head neatly bandaged by the doctor, sat behind the sheriff’s desk.

The room was crowded, and every one waited for the wedding to proceed, interested who the bride would choose as her groom. Naomi looked at the floor. “Mr. Wolf, then—it will have to be Mr. Wolf.”

Naomi remembered it later as being a five-minute wedding consisting of, “Do you, will you, and I do.” She didn’t feel married and relied upon Deacon McCallister’s words, “After the wedding, what you do is up to you.”

If the sheriff’s attitude was any indication, Flat Rock would not be a good place for her to stay, even if she had funds to do so now that her two-week stipend had arrived. But before she could make further plans for her own future departure, the sheriff ignored her and spoke to the McCallister brothers.

“Best get all this trash out of my town. You didn’t get all the Comancheros, and my jail ain’t strong enough to hold the ones you’ve got. You’ll have to take them in to the Territory Marshal.” Then he smirked, like he knew more than he was saying.

“Figure if you carry ’em over to Eclipse, you can wire the law and collect your blood money there.” The sheriff shifted uncomfortably under the three bounty hunters’ stares. “Go on, then. I mean what I say.”

He nodded at the eight students. “Girls can stay here until their folks fetch ’em. They’ll be safe enough without the taint of her around.”

He’d been waiting to slap an insult on Naomi and delivered it with relish.

Justine Garner sat holding her bandaged head and glared at the sheriff, “I’m not staying here with you. I’m going with Miss Parker.”

“It’s Mrs. Wolf now, Justine. Miss Parker just married Charles Wolf McCallister.” Marta corrected her but then agreed. “I’m going where our teacher goes.”

One by one the girls stood and began moving toward the door. Naomi followed. They would send a rider ahead to Eclipse and have the sheriff there notify the parents that the girls could be picked up in Buffalo Creek.

“We were on our way there. You should have let me continue.” She wanted to pull her words back as soon as they were spoken.

Charlie Wolf grunted his answer, “So I could rescue you and the girls all over again?”

Or I would still be an unmarried woman. His glance pulled her eyes and he tilted his head as if knowing what she thought.

Charlie Wolf didn’t give Naomi time to argue before he nodded at Marta, who had appointed herself spokesperson for the Sparrow Creek young ladies. “Get yourselves ready to travel. If you need anything to make life easier for the next spell, we’ll buy it at the town store.”

The sheriff cleared his voice as if preparing to protest when Deacon stepped closer. “About those prisoners, sheriff, haul ’em out front. I want cuffs on them and you out of the way.”

The rough-spoken bounty hunter was back, the powerful and educated minister hidden once again. Naomi watched dispassionately as the three bounty hunters coordinated their plan and herded everyone in the direction they wanted.

Sam had melted from the room at the final “I do.” Naomi could see out the dirty window that the remuda of horses was lined up and ready for cargo. The wagon, now hitched to a workhorse, stood waiting.

Evidently, it had never been in doubt that she would become a bride. She looked at her husband for the first time since the girls’ rescue—and remembered his question on the trail coming back, “*Ever had an ass-beatin’?*” Her sex clenched nervously as she met his gaze.

Chapter Eleven

The three bounty hunters left the town together, accompanying the daughters of Texas who were on their way to Buffalo Creek.

Outside of town, when the trail split, Deacon and Sam McCallister took their loaded caravan of strapped-down bodies, turning toward Abilene and the territory law there.

The prisoners were handcuffed and tied across their saddles, riding face down. One man vomited before they ever set out, others groaned, one cursed steadily. The bounty hunters ignored the noise and proceeded toward the territory law at a steady trot.

Charlie Wolf rode his horse in the opposite direction, ram-rodding the journey to Buffalo Creek where the families of the eight girls would meet them. The wagon was driven by Rebecca Johnson part of the time, and Brody Quince, the rest.

He exercised control and didn't bawl out Naomi for the ten different things he had to yell about. Instead, he put her up on the buckskin mare without comment. At least that was so until she reined her horse toward the other side of the wagon.

Charlie's fuse had already been lit when she'd run off from Flat Rock. It had sparked back into life when she took out after the Comancheros by herself. His hand had itched to tan her behind when she'd crawled into the outlaw camp, and the distance between the end of the fuse and Charlie's control shortened considerably now.

Each time he thought he had a handle on who she was and what she would do next, she proved him wrong. When offered the choice of marrying either one of the McCallister men, she'd stared at the floor and called his name instead, then she'd turned around outside and tried to weasel out of it.

Oh, she'd been discreet, checking for curious listeners before she mentioned Deacon's promise. "Mr. McCallister said once I married, my future was my own choice."

Charlie admired the way she folded her arms across his buckskins, pulling them taut. He'd wanted to taste her again.

"...Should've married Deacon, then." He'd folded his arms and matched her stare. He wanted to ask her about that, why she hadn't chosen a white man. He'd laid the bad news on her, expecting denial and hysterics. "He's ordained."

She looked confused until he added, "A minister, ordained. His words are legal—binding."

"So you really are my husband? I'm a married woman?" When he nodded silently, she dropped her arms and stepped toward the door. "All right."

All right? What the hell does that mean? Not for the first time in his life he was thrown off stride by a woman's words, which was why, except for bedding one now and again when he got the chance, he'd just watched. There was something about the teacher, though, that made him want to learn her ways.

His horse, Old Mossy, had ideas about the buckskin mare as well. He sidled close and nipped the horse's withers, right above where Naomi's knee rested.

The mare flicked her ears flirtatiously and resisted when the teacher tried to steer her away from the big stallion.

"Figure she'll throw a nice colt early summer next." Charlie leaned close to Naomi and straightened the reins in her suddenly slack fingers.

As he watched her face suffuse with color, bright enough red to scorch his fingers, his cock stirred. What was it about this woman that had him lusting after her like a randy bull? As he watched, her mouth trembled and her teeth again caught that plump bottom lip. He reached across to touch her cheek, feeling her heat travel straight to his groin.

Jesus. He kicked Old Mossy into a trot and moved to the front of their caravan, the motion of the horse giving him the painful pleasure of the slap of the saddle against his rigid prick. But aside from the log riding in his pants, he was settled and comfortable. He had his own woman.

He was feeling so smugly pleased with himself, he almost missed the tracks—unshod horses mixed with the smaller prints of Indian ponies.

They'd known that Jericho's numbers were low. Charlie was betting the lives of Sparrow Creek Academy's young ladies that they'd just crossed tracks with the rest of the gang.

*

If what he claimed, was true—Deacon McCallister being an ordained minister—then she was a married woman. Naomi thought about that as she rode and a secret smile curled inside of her belly. So much had happened to her in three days, and the most exciting was the way Charlie Wolf had claimed her.

She was so absorbed she didn't notice at first that they had left the trail. What they had been following had been rutted and rough, but at least it was a path. Charlie Wolf led the wagon full of young women across the open range until they hit desert land.

She rode to his side and asked, "I thought we were going to Buffalo Creek?"

"Change of plans," he answered and then turned away and rode to Rebecca who was driving the wagon. "We need to move fast before we lose our daylight."

Rebecca obeyed without question, slapping the horse into action. The old wagon rattled and shook, but held together as they bounced across the rough ground.

Naomi knew something was wrong by the set of Charlie's shoulders. Strange how he was so newly acquainted, and yet she recognized his moods as plainly as if he'd shouted them. She frowned, nudging her mare into a faster trot until she rode beside him.

"What is it?" she asked as soon as she came abreast of the other rider.

"Comancheros," he answered grimly. "We need to get this wagon out of sight. I'm going to drop back, try to throw them off our trail."

He turned and rode toward the remuda of horses that followed behind the wagon on a lead line. Unhooking the rope, he tied the line to the saddle pommel and told her, "Get the wagon to those rocks ahead and into cover so that it can't be seen."

He started to turn away and then looked back at her. He handed her his saddlebag. "Money inside is yours now. Use it to get yourself home."

She clutched the leather pouch, unable to say anything, not even *good-bye*. She felt aching fear as she watched him spur his mount into a lope across the trail they'd just made, then turn and ride west, the line of horses stretching out behind, stirring up dust as they ran hard where his big stallion led.

She turned back to the wagon. "Hurry. Mr. Wolf thinks trouble's on its way. We need to get to those rocks ahead and hide the wagon."

None of the girls questioned the plan. All held on as Rebecca slapped the horse into a faster pace, bouncing them across the rough ground. The rocks seemed near, but they travelled in that direction until the sun had shifted westward in the sky before they began

to draw closer.

Naomi worried about the man who had ridden away, using himself as a decoy. The saddlebags she'd slung across the mare's withers and his last words indicated that he didn't expect to return to her.

Her throat ached, holding back terror, tears—and more emotions she couldn't name. She only knew she didn't want anything to happen to Charlie Wolf.

Daylight was fading into darkness quickly when the ground underneath became rockier and the sheer face of the rock formation loomed in front of them.

Rebecca drove the wagon straight toward the incline and slapped the reins across the draft horse's back to force it up until the ground leveled out into a stony plateau.

As soon as the wagon stopped, the girls were out, unhooking the traces and shoving the cart deeper into the shadows.

Naomi, thinking of her childhood when she and Pa Lancaster had erected a screen of camouflage when hunting deer, said, "Sage brush. Push the wagon back against the rock wall and cover it with sage brush."

"With all due respect, teacher—" It was Emily Erdman who wore glasses and now pushed them higher on her nose. Naomi wondered how she had managed to preserve their safety during the harrowing abduction. "—We might need the wagon for shelter, Miss Parker."

"Of course, forgive my foolishness." Naomi was flustered and ill-prepared to establish a camp with the girls. She wasn't sure what to do first. As she stood trying to decide, her students took charge.

They chattered about the getaway, the ugly outlaws, a torn dress, and Justine's head wound, but no one spoke of Charlie Wolf.

Justine crawled out of the wagon carrying tins of peaches and canned beans. Brody had a knife she produced, pulling it from her boot. She grinned at the astonished looks of her classmates.

"Pa gave it to me and said to keep it close 'cause I might find myself in a tight spot some day and need it."

"Bet your Mama was scandalized at that." Emily snickered. "My mama says a lady doesn't carry such things."

Brody used a rock to drive the knife through the top of the tin of peaches, cutting it open with relish. "My mother taught me to shoot. My Pa insisted I be able to handle a knife." Her words were sincere and no one doubted her ability as she handled her knife with dexterity.

"I'll have to figure another carry-all spot. Had I been able to get it out of my boot earlier, we could have rescued ourselves."

Naomi didn't know what to say. None of her deportment lessons applied in this situation. She tried to help set up the camp, but the Texas born and raised ranch daughters knew more than she did about surviving in the desert. Worry for Charlie Wolf dominated her thoughts.

Most of the wares that Harvey Collins carried in his Wagon of Interesting Items were useless trinkets and beads. But the girls wrapped themselves up in the thick wool blankets they found, passing them around until they all had one. Before lying down, Brody Quince took a length of rope from the side of the wagon and laid it in a circle.

"Snakes," she explained, "won't crawl over a rope, so we should be all right except

maybe for scorpions.” Brody had an inexhaustible interest in bugs, reptiles, and animals, and was a fountain of knowledge, sharing with anyone who would listen.

The girls accepted her wisdom and rolled into their blankets inside of the rope as if it could ward off all danger. Soon the sound of sleep-breathing drifted to where Naomi kept watch. The girls depended on her to protect them. She swallowed back tears, feeling the inadequacy of her abilities.

Even wrapped in a thick blanket, Naomi shivered in the cool night air, and pulled it tighter around her shoulders. She would wait for Charlie Wolf to arrive. She leaned against the rock wall, situated so that she could see anyone coming up the incline that led to the plateau.

Naomi had time to puzzle over the appearance of Harvey Collins so far from Alabama and home. What was that old man doing, trafficking in blankets and beads with the Comancheros?

Then she remembered the shipment the men had spoken of and how determined the outlaw had been to get it—*guns*—he’d said once during the argument. Of course, understanding settled around Naomi. Harvey had moved into another area of commerce and was now a gunrunner as well as a kidnapper, extortionist, and flesh-peddler.

She pulled the scratchy wool material closer and sighed at the hard dirt and rough stone beneath her rump. This country was stark and bare compared to the lush green of her native state.

That thought reminded her of Charlie Wolf’s parting words. He’d said to take the money and go home. Did he mean for her to go back to Alabama? She was tempted to dig in his leather pouch and pull out the wad of money he’d had in the bar, and then again in the barn.

She wanted to count it, hold it for just a time. She had never seen so much money in one place as when he’d thrown bills at the stable owner. And in his saddlebag, there was a wad of so much more. It occurred to her that if her marriage to him was real, her husband was a man of some material worth.

She kept herself awake thinking of sassy remarks she could say to him. She already knew how to ruffle his calm and get a response. She relived the first night, moved on to the school when he buried Patrick, analyzed his rescue of the girls, and came to the end with him riding off to act as a decoy.

Confidence that he would return was slowly replaced by pervasive unease, until finally, when the first light of dawn brightened the sky, she heard the clip of shod hooves against the stone path, she couldn’t wait, but hurried down the trail to meet him. Relief was replaced with dismay. Charlie’s horse was riderless. Old Mossy trotted in, reins tied up to make sure they were clear of dragging.

The sound of the incoming horse woke Marta. Naomi was already scrambling to ready herself and talked as she prepared to leave. They all knew that Charlie Wolf would be on Old Mossy’s back if he’d been able. The other seven girls ringed her and Charlie’s horse.

“I’ve got to go look for Mr. Wolf. He’s obviously been injured somehow and sent his horse to find us.”

If Old Mossy hadn’t been looking so expectant, nudging her with his head as though impatient for them to leave, it would have been a ludicrous statement. Instead the girls nodded agreement.

Marta frowned thoughtfully. "He wiped our trail, how will you find him out there?"

"I don't know, but I have to try." The uneasiness of the night had now given way to panic.

"He'll be mad. He said for us to stay put." Marta teetered on her boot heels, thinking, and then added, "But I think you should go anyway. Keep the mountain straight behind you and watch the ground. If you come across any unshod pony tracks—" She paused and looked at Naomi considering her. "—ride like hell in the opposite direction."

They filled two canteens from the barrel of water strapped to the side of Harvey's wagon. Naomi had intended to ride the buckskin mare, but since Old Mossy stood saddled and ready, she mounted him instead.

Justine spoke up before she rode down the rough incline and onto the desert floor. "Maybe you should take the mare with you. You might need it to bring back Charlie Wolf's body."

The rest of the girls glared at her, but Naomi nodded and put the mare on a lead line, as she had seen Charlie do with the remuda of horses.

She did as Marta directed and rode straight, keeping the mountain at her back as her guide. It was midmorning when, despairing that she was riding too far away from the girls, she decided to turn back. That's when Charlie's horse picked up his pace, trotting toward a spot in the distance.

Then the big stallion broke into a lope as they neared a body up ahead. Naomi tensed at the sight of buzzards circling in the sky, dreading what she would find when she arrived.

*

Charlie lay in the limited shade of a cactus. He could feel the bones in his leg scrape against each other when he moved, and he knew that it was a bad break. The last time he'd tried to mount, he'd fallen and twisted it even worse.

He'd managed to grab the rifle out of its scabbard as he fell, but the pain had taken him under for a spell. He'd lain all afternoon, sipped the canteen dry, and shivered through the night. Earlier, when the coyotes had started closing in, he'd sent Old Mossy running, shooing him away rather than have the animal die in the desert with him.

He'd made it through the night. There were coyotes out there, but still intimidated by the man smell. That wouldn't last much longer. He dripped sweat from both pain and the scorching hot sun above.

His thoughts drifted to the day he'd followed his father into the Battle of Sand Creek. He'd been fourteen, watching Gray Wolf's back as he rode to rescue Rachel McCallister, scooping her from sure death, before racing from the massacre.

When Jericho circled behind the fleeing man and woman, Charlie hadn't realized the half-breed was fighting on the side of the whites until Jericho had thrown a saber, stabbing Gray Wolf. Charlie relived that time and the time after when he'd taken his mother back to the McCallister ranch.

Almost lazily, he fingered the scar that marked his cheek and just missed his eye.

"Nits make lice, boy. You're the son of a murdering savage. I'll beat the devil out of you every day you're here, but you'll always be a no-good savage." The sound of the whip his grandfather always carried had lingered in the room while Charlie faced the hate-filled man. He'd wanted to kill the McCallister tyrant. Instead, he'd taken the whip from the old man, unwilling to kill his mother's father.

His white cousins, Sam and Robert McCallister, subject themselves to the old man's violent temper, had hidden him and then brought his mother.

She'd found him trying to tend his laid-open face. She'd stitched the wound and put a poultice on it. "Charlie, he'll kill you if you stay here. Go back to your father's people. Ride with them until I send for you."

Charlie closed his eyes and let himself dream again. Dust whirls kicked up in the dry wind, creating the red haze in Lozen's prophesy.

In his drugged state years before, his vision had shown his mother saving his father instead of the other way around. Now the image of his mother segued into a tall, sharp-spoken schoolteacher, and Charlie drifted through the escalating heat and pain, a sad smile on his face.

* * * *

It was near noon when Charlie squinted at the sun overhead, watching the buzzards lazily catch the wind, gliding and circling and waiting for him to be dead enough to suit them. His water was gone, and already his tongue felt swollen behind lips that were dry and cracked.

It had been a stupid mistake. He'd been thinking about the woman he'd caught for himself, paying no attention to the world around him, more importantly the ground under him.

He'd dismounted, dropping his reins to follow the tracks on foot, checking on the unshod hoof prints he'd crossed. He'd stepped into a gopher hole, falling hard, feeling the bone in his leg snap as he twisted.

He couldn't leave the remuda of horses standing in the heat, ready to draw the first riders who happened by, knowing that it would either be the other part of Jericho's gang or one of the Apache tribes meeting with Mangas Colorado.

He'd untied the lead line, hopping along on one foot and dragging his broken leg, intending to mount up and get back to the wagon. But hazing them in the opposite direction from the mountain where he'd told Naomi to take the girls, he'd fallen again. He knew it was bad when he'd called Old Mossy to him, tried to pull himself up and into the saddle, but he couldn't make his body obey.

It wasn't the ending he'd expected, but he settled into meet his fate like a warrior. He pulled his knife out. He'd save bullets until the end.

* * * *

When Charlie saw the horses coming toward him, he thought he was hallucinating. The closer they got, the surer he was that he was seeing a mirage until Old Mossy trotted to the cactus and butted him with his head, announcing his return.

Naomi was out of the saddle, holding a canteen of water to his lips before he could blink. "I knew something was wrong when you didn't come back."

"Help me up into the saddle," he ordered her gruffly. She shouldered his weight, and he was glad again that he'd picked a tall, strong woman for his mate. Between the two of them they got him hoisted into his saddle. "Tie me on," he told her. He wasn't steady enough to make the ride without falling.

Instead of following his order, she climbed up behind him and wrapped her arms

around his body, holding onto him tightly. “No time for that,” she said, “We need to get back to the girls.”

Charlie didn’t remember much of the ride back to the mountains. Had she not held onto him, he’d have fallen and died in the desert. Naomi clung to him for hours as Old Mossy carried them to the foothills, and then up the incline to where the girls were hidden.

He was delirious with pain when the girls eased him from Old Mossy’s back, but not too far gone to reprimand his wayward wife. His last words to Naomi as she started working on his leg were, “What part of *stay put* don’t you understand?”

He would have preferred to slide into the oblivion of unconsciousness when she aligned the broken parts of bone and splinted his leg. Brody Quince stood next to her and helped set the break, while the other girls held Charlie down so that he couldn’t thrash around and fight them.

“*Told* my dad that Sparrow Creek Academy was a waste of money, but he’s determined to see me be a lady.”

Brody snorted at the idea, as she squinted down at Charlie’s leg, assessing the damage. Charlie played possum, Justine-style, and hid a smile as he listened to the derision in the girl’s voice. Being a lady didn’t seem to be high on her value list.

The young girl squared her shoulders and stated flatly, “I’m going to be a doctor. Mama said she’d send me back East to medical school if Sparrow Creek didn’t suit me.”

Charlie opened his eyes and looked at the girl more closely, taking in the strange aquamarine eyes, steady hands, and determined jaw. “You’re already a lady. Someday, I have no doubt, you’ll be a doctor too.”

From Brody’s surprised, “*Really?*” Charlie figured that her Papa didn’t agree with that plan.

Brody Quince searched his face to see if he was sincere. Charlie met her gaze steadily, “Really.”

He didn’t imagine the lips that brushed his ear when Naomi bent over him the next minute. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Chapter Twelve

The first thing Charlie was aware of when he woke was the giggle of a young girl. It was an unfamiliar sound. He lay with eyes closed, analyzing what he heard—female whispers, the rustle of clothes, and the sound of a horse lipping the meager strands of grass nearby.

He reached out with all senses, straining to gather information. Something was wrong, something had awakened him.

His eyes jerked open, and he sat up so quickly he banged his head on the rock shelf Naomi had tucked him under.

“Put that goddamned fire out,” he ordered softly, struggling to get up and do it himself.

For once Naomi didn’t question him. She kicked dirt on the small blaze of wood, smothering it quickly before hurrying to his side. “You need to lie back down and keep that leg still.”

Charlie’s head hurt like a sonovabitch, he had to make water, and he had nine females peering at him like they’d never seen a man before. “I need to take a piss—now,” he growled.

His crude words primmed her mouth, but she only nodded assent and bent as though to help him stand. He pushed up against the rock, waving her off. “I can take care of this.”

Damned if she didn’t cross her arms and watch as he struggled to stand. When he was halfway inched up the rock and getting ready to straighten, she swooped down on him and tucked herself under his arm. “Lean on me. I don’t want you twisting the bones in your leg.”

She had him on the move toward the makeshift privy they’d devised before he could tender a response. She was so damn smug, he couldn’t help rattling her a little. He had his hand braced on her arm. Deliberately, he brushed the side of her breast with his knuckles.

Her breasts pebbled. He could see her pointed nipples even through the thickness of his buckskins. He rubbed harder, bending over her to murmur for her ears only, “*Two* ass-beatin’s. Told you to stay put, didn’t I? You don’t mind, woman.” He rumbled his threat in her ear, smelled her hair, and breathed the scent of his woman. She’d come for him, just like his father had rescued his mother.

She turned her head and deliberately let her lips brush against him. “Behave,” she breathed into the soft kiss she landed on his shoulder.

She left him to his own devices, handing him a stick he hadn’t noticed before. She’d fixed him a makeshift crutch. Charlie’s headache was forgotten. He contemplated his good fortune as he emptied his bladder. A strong woman, courageous, a little too independent, but he would manage that out of her, and young enough to have children.

Another giggle floated to him—a *son*—he amended his thoughts. She was young enough to birth him a son. All the females swarming around the clearing made him uneasy.

There were Comancheros scouring the country side looking for them, if he’d read the tracks right. And instead of cowering quietly until they were rescued, the girls appeared

to be enjoying themselves.

He limped on his crutch back to where Naomi was waiting. "Those girls need to quiet down." Even as he spoke another soft laugh drifted on the wind.

Naomi's smile instantly changed to concern. "Can you manage?" she asked, not waiting to see before she hurried back to shush her young ladies. Watching the sway of her hips inside his pants that she wore, Charlie's cock tented his own buckskins. *Jesus, what the hell is the matter with me?*

He followed her across the stony landscape, intending to take charge of the females from the Sparrow Creek Young Ladies' Academy.

"There's a band of riders looking for sign out there," he motioned toward the arid desert below. "Sign of you." He listed his orders.

"No fires, no talk." Even Charlie recognized the impossibility of that, so amended his order to, "Whisper."

Naomi frowned and murmured doubtfully, "We can't hide up here forever."

Charlie answered gruffly, "We've got three horses, two guns, and a couple of knives," he nodded with approval at Brody. "What would be your plan, teacher?"

"Well, there's no reason to be sarcastic, Mr. Wolf," she reproved him sharply.

* * * *

Charlie lay beside the wagon two nights later. Naomi had gone to their make-shift privy, leaving the girls to continue a discussion they'd been waiting to have. He'd kept his breathing even and his body relaxed as though in sleep, when the one they called Missy tiptoed over and looked down at him.

He listened to the girls whispering in the dark. He'd refused their pleas for a fire and gruffly ordered them to bed. The girls' gratitude for being rescued was quickly giving way to resentment. They planned a mutiny. "It's his fault we're stuck here. If we'd gone straight to Buffalo Creek, we'd be home by now." There was more than a hint of tears in her voice.

"We should leave without him. We can all go, ride double, maybe three up on the draft horse." Rebecca's plan was simple. Take the horses and leave with whoever wanted to go. He grinned to himself wondering how Old Mossy would take to Rebecca's plan.

"Charlie Wolf's stallion isn't going to carry anyone but maybe Miss Parker, and she's not going anywhere without Charlie Wolf."

It was Brody Quince speaking. He felt a tinge of disappointment at her disaffection until she added, "And I'm not going anywhere without her. So, we might as well resign ourselves to being here a spell longer, because Charlie Wolf can't travel yet." She spoke as a doctor, setting conditions for his recovery.

The grumbling that followed dispelled the immediate need to guard the animals. Naomi came straight over to where he lay by the wagon when she walked into the camp. The girls were in a tight circle, again inside Brody's makeshift snake protection.

When Naomi leaned over him and placed the back of her hand against his head, he caught it and pulled her down.

She didn't even struggle. She came into his arms like she'd been waiting for him to gather her close. He liked that. With eight sets of ears listening, there wasn't much canoodling to be done, but Charlie turned so that he lay on his good leg, and brought her back against his chest and her rump against his groin.

They lay like that, spooning into each other's body, one muscle at a time relaxing until there was nothing between them but clothing. His cock was rigid, her rump moved restlessly. Her breath hitched and held when he slid his hands under the hem of his buckskin shirt and took ownership of her breasts.

It wasn't his imagination when her hips pressed back and her ass rubbed his ever-growing erection. He pinched her nipples and felt her jerk and then thrust her flesh into his hands.

He buried his face in her hair to keep from groaning aloud. She pressed backward, deliberately grinding against his need. His hand snaked under the waist band of the pants she wore and cupped her mound.

She didn't try to keep him from touching her. Her body remembered last time and her legs parted, letting his fingers relearn the soft petals of her womanhood. He kept one hand on her breast, continuing to knead that luscious mound, tweaking the nipple, pulling and rotating until he could feel her shudders.

But she remained totally silent—unwilling to give voice to her passion lest she wake her students and it end. Charlie played in the slippery evidence of her desire, nuzzling her ear and encouraging her wanton responses.

When he slid a finger inside of her, her body clenched around it and her hips asked for more. He kept her on the edge, teasing her body into frantic need, and then soothing her into patient waiting.

His cock was so hard he could have pounded nails with it, her pussy so wet, his hand was slippery with her fluids and he hadn't yet let her come. Even as he seduced her passion from her, he listened to the night sounds, the sleeping girls, the moment for privacy.

When it came, he shoved her pants down around her knees, opened the slit in his own and entered her slippery folds from behind. He was too aroused himself for delicacy. All he could remember was the need for quiet.

He drew the blanket over and around, pressed her stomach so that he could angle his cock inside of her sheath, and proceeded to thrust so deep his short curls brushed the splayed cheeks of her ass.

On his second thrust, Naomi started her climax. Charlie felt her internal muscles grab hold of his dick and start sucking. It was the damndest thing he'd ever felt. She sucked him off with her pussy, and his dick sank into her, giving her everything he had.

Not a sound escaped either of them. Their flesh slid softly, the blanket hid the slap of skin against skin. Charlie felt his own climax begin in his toes and roll upward, growing until, not able to get deep enough, he rolled her under him. Holding nothing back, each of his thrusts delivered a river of cum, filling every part of her with the essence of Charlie Wolf McCallister.

He left his cock inside of her and rolled them back so that once again he lay on his good leg. Naomi's chest heaved and he smiled, recognizing the feel of her spent passion. He dropped a kiss on the place where neck and shoulder joined and felt her shiver and her sheath tense.

His cock hardened and he dropped his hand to the petals of her womanhood that were splayed open wantonly, pulled taut around his fat cock. He bit her earlobe and breathed his demand. "Come for me again."

He pinched her clit and flexed his hips, sliding, fucking, nibbling, filling her, until

once again her climax unfurled and her pussy milked his shaft. He nipped her when she slipped into exhausted sleep and roughly pinched her nipples, demanding her attention, orchestrating her release yet again. While the dark night gave them a private room and the young girls slept, Naomi and Charlie Wolf had their honeymoon.

During the night, somehow, Naomi managed to change places with Charlie. Not a surprise, since she sprawled across his chest exhausted after her last release. He pulled his buckskins back up over her rump and tidied her shirt, before rolling out of their cocoon to do sentry duty.

He left her sleeping, a satisfied smile on her face. He used the crutch she'd made him to do a three-legged dance to the edge of the granite shelf that hid them from below. He sat there watching the sun come up, waiting for the morning female flutters to begin.

It was a totally unexpected, excited cry from Naomi that brought him hopping across loose slate and shale. She was on her hands and knees, tugging at something under the wagon. Charlie just had time to admire her rump when she sat back on her haunches and pointed at the box she'd found.

He hobbled to her side and looked down—rifles.

Eight girls ringed him, all looking down at the hidden cache of guns. There were three more boxes, each packed with twenty-five Winchester Model 1873 rifles. One hundred Winchester carbines would feather Jericho's nest in Mexico very nicely. Or in the hands of Mangas Colorado, a lot more blood would spill—on both sides.

"They're not going to quit looking for us are they?" It was Missy Cotter showing more intelligence than usual. "I thought they'd get tired of looking for us and go catch some other girls."

It was a pretty cold wish, but everyone understood her desperation.

"Well," Brody Quince offered her opinion. "I guess we'll have to shoot them if they find us, any ammunition in those boxes?"

Charlie amended his earlier wish for a son. He'd take a daughter like the Quince girl, as many times as Naomi gave him one.

"It's been four days since my cousins left for Eclipse. They were stopping in Buffalo Creek to leave word that you were on your way. I expect some of your families will be wondering where we are."

Marta nodded her head, Rebecca Johnson looked relieved, and Brody Quince expectant. Naomi held up the shells that were packed in the bottom of each crate, under the rifles.

Charlie looked at Naomi and wondered if she intended to fight the Comancheros with an army of twelve-year-olds. For an intelligent woman, he'd noticed that his schoolmarm didn't have a lick of common sense.

They couldn't practice shooting. The sound would bring every rider combing the desert looking for them, right to their hideaway. Instead, Charlie had them load and unload, hoping if the time ever came to defend themselves the girls would be able to shoot.

Naomi fumbled nervously whenever she handled a rifle. Brody Quince could probably shoot the eye out of a hawk in flight, Emily Erdman's eyesight, even with her glasses, was so poor Charlie just hoped she could aim in the right direction if it was ever needed.

Marta, Mary, and Rebecca proved to be as expert as Brody, Daisy willing but

unskilled, and Missy, a complete lack of willingness to learn. “I can’t do that. It’s too heavy...” or “My daddy tried to teach me once, but the noise is too loud...” The silly lisp that she affected became more intense, and she puckered into tears. Charlie avoided her.

The guns were bad news, not good like Missy had said. Neither Mangas Colorado nor the Comancheros would give up this prize. The water barrel was less than half full, even though they’d been rationing since the first day. The beans and peaches would last another two days, maybe three if they all sucked in their guts and ate less than the half-rations they had already practiced.

He looked at the girls from the Sparrow Creek Academy with new eyes. For all their giggles and petty rebellions, he’d been with grown men who didn’t act as well. He wanted to save them. Hell, he wanted to save himself. But most of all, he wanted to save Naomi Parker Wolf McCallister. He wanted to save his woman.

After their silent passion, it wasn’t possible for him to keep his hands off of Naomi when close, so by tacit agreement, they stayed clear of each other. It was different now. He felt her eyes on him when he hobbled around the camp, and there was never a moment he didn’t know her exact spot.

Chapter Thirteen

Charlie was worried. Ever since they'd discovered the cache of guns, he'd been ... stoic. After Naomi had seen him measure the water the first day, she'd been checking too. She could see that it was too low to linger here much longer.

It was no surprise when he grasped her elbow and limped beside her to the overlook that was big enough for only two and afforded them a small amount of privacy.

As soon as they were seated, she turned to him, a hundred ideas churning, most of them impractical and born of desperation. She was surprised, though, when he already had plans made.

"It's time to get your students home. We're going to move them tonight, navigate by the stars. You're going to have to move fast, away from here, traveling toward Buffalo Creek as fast as the horses can go."

"Okay." Naomi was ready to do something. The waiting was against them now that they knew the Comancheros were looking for guns. Maybe the Apaches were out there too, maybe they had moved on, but there was no maybe about leaving this hideaway.

"If luck is with you, you'll run into a posse of citizens coming for those girls and..."

Naomi put her hand across his mouth. "Stop." She stroked her thumb across his lower lip, as he was wont to do to hers.

"We are not going anywhere without you. Do not suggest other than that."

Patiently, he explained his plan. He would stay behind, set fire to the guns when he figured they'd traveled far enough to be in the clear. He would deliberately draw the Comancheros to him, holding them off with the rifles while the girls rode through the night to safety.

"No."

"Naomi Parker Wolf McCallister," he sternly pronounced her name. "Did you not hire me to save your students?"

"No ... yes." She stopped and then added, "But not by killing yourself. There has to be another way. No," she said tartly, "we'll find another way."

"Naomi, see those stars?" He ignored her words and pointed at the sky so brightly lit it was a thousand lanterns showing the way. "I'm going to show you how to use them as your guide." He motioned at the sky, and explained how to navigate through the night using the pattern there to steer a course.

"You're going ahead with the wagon and the girls. I'm staying here with Old Mossy and put on a show. Those cartridges hold a lot of gunpowder, and I've got good use for it."

"We'll saddle up the buckskin and harness the draft animal, let either the Quince or Johnson girl drive. They're both steady. You keep going, no matter what you hear behind you. Like I said, I'm going to set a fire or two and make some noise. I want you and the girls in the wagon, traveling like the devil is on your heels."

"Follow the bear..." He showed her the constellation, murmuring the directions in her ear as he drew her close in his arms. "Come morning, drive with the sun at your back until you hit the trail to Buffalo Creek. Then kick the horses into a run. You're not safe until you hit town."

When he was done, she turned and looked him in the eyes. “If you think you can get out of this marriage by getting yourself killed, think again. I expect you to catch up with us after you set your fires. If you don’t, I’m not promising that I won’t come back for you. I never thought to have a husband, but now that I’ve been exposed to the institution of marriage, I find that I am quite partial to the idea.”

Then she kissed him full on the lips, the chin, the cheek, and back on the lips, awkwardly placing each intimacy. When he drew her closer and laughed, scraping his rough beard against her jaw, she said again, “I mean it, Charlie Wolf McCallister.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered gruffly. “Now let’s get you loaded and on your way.”

She called the girls together and told them the plan. Charlie threw a box of cartridges to three of the girls, Becky Johnson, Brody Quince, and Daisy Meadows. “Open those up, ladies. I need a supply of gunpowder.”

When she filled a canteen for him and fussed at the blanket covering his horse, she looked up and asked, “Why do you call a beautiful horse like Old Mossy?”

He stopped tearing apart the rifle boxes and grinned. It was the first fully developed smile he’d given her. “Oyamossa,” he said slowly, and for the first time she heard. “Oh, he has an Indian name.” She paused and then corrected herself, “A Kiowa name. What does it mean?”

“Fearless warrior—or close—the Indian language doesn’t exactly match the English in descriptions. Sam made the word into ‘old mossy’ so that he could remember how to say it. That stuck.”

He spilled the rifles onto the ground and stacked them, with the boxes broken up for kindling.

“You’re going to destroy the rifles?” He was methodically slamming the stock against the ground, breaking each rifle before he threw it on the growing pile.

He looked at her bleakly and asked, “Army, Indian, Comanchero?” Naomi could see the worlds he straddled. She picked up a gun and banged it on the rock, splintering the wooden stock.

“Can’t let these fall into the hands of either Mangas Colorado or the Comancheros, and they’re closer than the army right now.” She banged a second gun against the boulder and felt the crack of wood under her hand. “I think you’ve made me stronger.” Her grin turned into a tender expression as she looked up at him.

“Please don’t get yourself killed.”

“I’ll use them to get a little noise and light showing, priming them with gunpowder. Then I’ll lay a trail that leads up to it. I’m not lighting it till you’ve had plenty of time to get off the mountain and out of sight. Then I’ll light the charge and ride like hell to join you.”

“You can’t ride. Your leg is broken.” It seemed like a poor time to remind him of that, but Charlie just shook his head.

“I can ride. Don’t worry. Climb on board, girls. The wagon should travel fast, there’s no cargo weighing it down now. I left a box of rifles on board. Use them if you have to.” The eight students from Sparrow Creek Ladies’ Academy looked solemnly at Charlie Wolf and then took up their positions in the wagon.

Indifferent to the girls waiting to get started, he drew her into his arms and hugged her. “Tonight, Naomi ... the stars will guide you tonight.”

* * * *

Becky Johnson drove the wagon down the side of the mountain. Every creak and groan of the old cart seemed magnified in the night. From the back of the buckskin, Naomi sighted a course and led the girls across the desert and away from the plateau that had concealed them for three days.

No one spoke as the mountain receded into the distance. Hours passed and the shadowed rocks and cliffs no longer loomed behind them, when the first fire flared high.

"Charlie set the rifles ablaze," Daisy's voice carried to Naomi.

"Quiet, ladies, or else Mr. Wolf's risk was for naught." She knew her voice was sharp, but fear rode with her. Silence once again prevailed as they bumped across the rugged terrain.

When the first light of day began, Naomi altered their course accordingly, and they headed for Buffalo Creek.

It was midmorning by the time they hit the trail that led into Buffalo Creek. They began smelling smoke even before the residue of ash and fire drifted toward them. By the time they arrived at the small village, they knew it was not a haven for them.

Buffalo Creek was no more. It had never been large, not more than a restaurant, sheriff, doctor, and small general store. The buildings were gone, burned to the ground.

"Don't stop or slow down, Brody. We're going to Eclipse." Charlie had anticipated trouble. He'd said, "If you can't get to Buffalo Creek, bypass the town and head straight to Eclipse. It's big enough. You ought to be safe there."

"Load your rifles and get ready, girls. Brody, no matter what happens, keep the wagon moving."

And then she heard the thunder of hoofs behind them and Charlie Wolf was there, yelling instructions as he herded them toward the town. Old Mossy stretched out under him, Charlie rode the animal gripping with his thighs, the splint on his broken leg gone. Charlie had bound his leg to the stirrup.

"Comancheros have Eclipse under siege. Follow me." The draft horse was covered in sweat, heaving in exhaustion. They'd driven him at a hard run to Buffalo Creek and then past that horror. Now, they pushed him harder, skirting the town, to cut through the desert and come in on the other side.

Naomi clung to her mount and kept up, riding close to the wagon. Charlie rode on her outside, shielding her as they galloped toward Eclipse.

The sounds of battle carried through the desert air. Naomi looked across at Charlie. His hat was gone, and he crouched low on his horse's neck, his hair streaming back and mixing with the midnight coat of Old Mossy. *He looks like an Indian.*

For the first time since their meeting, she saw him as a savage, a wild, untamed creature to be feared. Suddenly the landscape changed as Apache warriors rose from the hidden trenches they'd burrowed and came after the wagon.

Naomi counted five running on the ground and one warrior riding a piebald stallion, closing fast. Charlie turned to block the horse and rider. The last Naomi saw, the two riders came together, fighting hand-to-hand, Charlie with knife against spear.

Shots fired from the wagon drove the running Apaches back, and the wagon raced toward white riders who were coming to meet them.

When Charlie circled Old Mossy and came up by her side, the rifles sounded, mistaking him for the attacking Indians.

Naomi swerved her horse closer, throwing her arms around Charlie. Their mounts

sped along stride for stride until bronze arms of steel lifted her from her horse and sat her in front of him. All guns were trained on them when they pulled up at the edge of Eclipse. Riders surrounded them as they rode beside the wagon into town.

“What in the name of hell did you think you were doing?”

Naomi buried her face in his chest, wrapped her arms around his waist, and muttered, “Saving you.”

“That’s *three* ass-beatin’s you’ve got coming,” he whispered into her ear.

“Better quit canoodling and get inside the town, Chief, although you might not be any safer here than wherever you’ve been.”

It was Sam coming up on Old Mossy’s left side. Deacon came up on his right. Naomi looked at the cold-eyed gunslinger and said, “I’m very glad to see you too, cousin.” The McCallisters edged out the other riders, protecting as well as escorting Charlie and Naomi down the main street of Eclipse. “Wouldn’t want anyone to think you’re part of Mangas Colorado’s band, Chief.” Sam handed over his Stetson, and Charlie pulled it on, tucking his hair underneath.

They ended up in front of the county jail, Sheriff Wood out front to greet them. Hiram Potter, Buffalo Creek’s sheriff, stood beside him.

“Ma’am.” Hiram Potter tipped his hat in Naomi’s direction and reached a hand behind her to grab Brody Quince, drawing her out to stand in front of him.

“I know your folks will be glad to see you. Hamilton rode out to the ranch when the bastards...” He blushed and said gruffly, “Excuse me, ladies. When the Comancheros burned us out of Buffalo Creek, there wasn’t but a few folks in town, and we got out ahead of them. If they hadn’t been so bent on destroying everything there, they’d have caught us. Guess they thought Jericho was locked up in my jail.”

“We got here just in time to warn Eclipse citizens that the outlaws were coming. Hamilton rode hell-bent for leather to the Double Q and then the Comancheros hit, pinned us down, and we hoped you’d stay put wherever you were.”

Hiram Potter was a friend of the family, but knew his place professionally. He stepped back and mumbled to the Eclipse sheriff, “Begging your pardon. Just needed to welcome Lucy’s girl home.”

Naomi wanted attention to turn to Charlie Wolf. She stood before the townspeople of Eclipse, and for the first time since her adventure began, was acutely aware of Charlie’s buckskins that drooped and sagged on her form.

Sheriff Wood asked, “Would this be the wagon Jericho Jones is having a conniption fit over?” One by one, the girls handed over their rifles and displayed the sixteen that were still boxed. No one mentioned the other three cases that Charlie had destroyed.

The men were immediately deep in conversation and the girls and their ordeal an unimportant event because they’d survived.

As soon as the wagon was unloaded, the girls and Naomi were hustled into the biggest building in Eclipse, the CQ Mercantile. For just a moment, she’d felt the pull of Charlie’s glance and when she’d looked up, he’d held the saddlebag ready to throw. “Use what you need, teacher.”

She caught the toss, warmed by his need to care for her and his desire to protect her from the disapproval of the town. “Thank you, husband,” she said firmly, loud enough for those in the room to hear the claim.

Samuel McCallister laughed at them. “It looks like she’s not letting you weasel out

of the contract, Chief.”

Naomi frowned at that. Did Charlie want out of the contract? Maybe he didn’t want to acknowledge her as his wife. Marta said an Indian squaw walked behind her husband. She didn’t see herself doing that, but maybe they could negotiate.

Before she could spiral into complete doubt, Charlie Wolf called loudly across the room. “Use what you need, *mi corazón*.”

* * * *

“You go ahead and pick out whatever you need, ladies. Mr. Quince will approve your purchases.” It was the sheriff, Hank Woods. “There are rooms ready for you and a bath and such down at the end of the street at the CQ Boarding House.”

“Whoever this CQ is,” Daisy Meadows quipped, “looks like he owns half the town.”

“Just about,” Brody Quince answered. “That would be my Aunt Comfort Quince you’re speaking of, my Uncle Hamilton’s wife.”

Chapter Fourteen

The CQ Boarding House proved to be a respectable rooming house—for women only. The girls shared bedrooms, giving Naomi her own. The room was so elegant that she hesitated to sit on the side of the bed, lest she mar the flounced and ruffled cover.

She paced, reluctant to undress, as if taking off Charlie's buckskins would in some intangible way break the connection between them. After all of the students had used the facility, bathing, primping, and trying on their new clothes from the Mercantile, and Charlie had not yet sent for her or come to her room, Naomi waited no longer to bathe.

She peeled off the buckskins next to the tub. Then, for the first time in ... she had to pause and think about it, it had been a fortnight since she'd been Naomi Parker, spinster schoolteacher at Sparrow Creek Ladies' Academy. For the first time in two weeks, she relaxed in a real tub of water, sighing with pleasure to be clean and safe.

She pulled on the soft chemise she'd bought at the Mercantile, using some of the cash from Charlie's saddlebag. The dress he'd bought for her in Flat Rock was a wrinkled mess that she ironed into smooth folds before donning it.

She ran her hands over the blue-flowered muslin, smoothing the flounced ruffles on each hip. It was pretty. *Cornflowers—after the first night together, Charlie bought me a dress dotted with cornflowers.* It wasn't the kind of dress she usually wore ... she stretched her neck to see her behind in the mirror that topped the vanity, liking the way the dress made her rump look ... she grinned. Charlie's influence was everywhere.

Her hair, free of the pomade she usually used to tame it, was a much lighter brown, almost blonde. Charlie liked to play with it, after they coupled. Naomi shivered, wishing he would come and get her. She hadn't had much luck with people coming back for her, and every minute she was separated from Charlie Wolf, she got more doubtful and afraid he would be like the others.

Before she'd left the sheriff's office, she'd hugged the thrown leather pouch and asked Charlie suspiciously, ignoring the others in the room, "Mi corazón. Is that your pet name for me, like Old Mossy is for your horse? What does it mean?"

"Sharp-tongued woman." His answer had been irritated, calling forth snickers from the avidly listening men. She'd exited hastily, following the sheriff of Eclipse.

"Mi corazón," she murmured half aloud. "It doesn't *sound* like sharp-tongued woman." She frowned, wondering what Charlie had really called her, determined that she'd find out as soon as she found him.

She finished bundling her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck, tendrils flying around her face softening the severe style and decided to find Charlie herself. She bent toward the mirror, brushing at the stray locks, wishing that she had just a little pomade, when the picture behind her changed. The man crawling through her window, gun drawn, was ready to shoot—her.

At the same time, the front door slamming below signaled that people had begun to arrive. She smoothed her palms on the dress and repeated silently, *a lady is always in control.*

The sound of pounding feet on the stairs was accompanied by two voices united in one purpose. "Brody—Ambrosia Quince, come out here."

Naomi hoped that someone in the room below would remember her. It hadn't taken the Quinces long to come round up their chick. That must mean the fighting was over and they thought all outlaws dead, run out of town, or in jail.

She looked at the one exception—a dirty old man who hunched over his gun, ready to use it. She didn't want to die. "Told you you'd not seen the last of me," Harvey Collins hissed his venomous hatred at her.

*

It was the damndest thing. He'd been thinking about his woman again; his mind was on getting her alone and in a real bed, when the natural order of things in the sheriff's office changed.

He had to tell the two sheriffs, Potter and the Eclipse man, who didn't impress Charlie with his brain, about hiding the girls, and then finding the guns. They all looked at the stack of twenty-five remaining rifles.

"Good thing the rest didn't fall into the hands of the Comancheros." Hiram Potter decided to look for the positive.

"How do we know they didn't?" Hank Wood continued to look at Charlie as though he were the enemy.

"...Because I broke the stocks on them and set fire to the lot." In point of fact, he'd tried to blow them to pieces, using the gunpowder he'd salvaged.

Noticing the avaricious gleam in Sheriff Wood's eyes, Charlie knew he'd made the right decision. He was exchanging glares with the Eclipse law when the sheriff's door banged open and Harvey Collins strode through, gun drawn and aimed at Naomi's head.

"Turn loose those men you've got locked up back there." The old man gestured at the back of the jail.

"All of them?" Hiram Potter drawled his question in an unruffled manner, distracting the outlaw.

Charlie stood slowly, careful to appear in control instead of the raging animal that wanted to tear a new asshole for Harvey Collins.

Before Charlie could pounce, Harvey's gaze dropped to the box of rifles behind Sheriff Wood's desk. "I knew you'd find them." He shook Naomi by the wad of her hair he held. "Snoopy, dried-up old prune. You just couldn't keep your nose out of my business."

Collins dragged her across the floor, gun jammed to her head until they were behind the sheriff's desk, standing over the rifles. Though Naomi said nothing, Charlie likened the tight lips and heated look in her eyes to that of a trapped catamount. Their eyes locked.

"Give me the keys to the cell doors or I blow Naomi Parker's head off. I already want to do that, so it wouldn't be smart to give me additional incentive."

"I'm not turning those bastards loose." Not for the first time, Charlie wondered about Hank Wood's lack of a brain. He showed it again, answering the already crazed Collins defiantly, "I don't care if you shoot everyone in this room."

"Fine, we'll start with you," the outlaw said and shot Hank Wood in the head.

Blood and brain matter splattered back on them, more so than Harvey had apparently expected or planned for.

"Shit," he lifted the gun for a minute to wipe goo from his brow.

Naomi saw the opportunity and made her move—in the wrong direction, as usual.

Instead of dropping to the floor and rolling, as he'd taught her, or gouging out Harvey Collins's eyes, as he'd instructed. Naomi screamed pure fury and knocked the gun right out of his hand, "Look what you did to my dress," she screeched.

Unarmed, Collins proved an unworthy opponent. Naomi straddled his arms, pinning them to his sides so that he could not muster any defense. Although he approved that move, Charlie was surprised she'd remembered that one—she used her advantage to bang the outlaw's head against the floor, bent on ending his life, not escaping with her own.

Hiram Potter took the decision from her hands, rescuing Harvey and throwing him in jail with the rest of the prisoners.

Now that he wasn't needed, Hamilton Quince charged into the sheriff's office and stopped in mid-sentence. "Naomi Parker is miss—"

"Naomi Wolf McCallister," Charlie corrected him, holding the woman in question closer in his arms while she clung to him and fussed at the same time. "And she's right here." *Muttering in my ear and ready for the hardest ass whipping yet.*

"If I can't leave you in a woman's boarding house and know you're safe, where will I keep you?" He was doing his share of mumbling too. She ignored his whispers, burying her face in his neck, all the while complaining.

"My dress is ruined. Turn me loose. If I get it off and soaking, I might be able to save it." But her arms were wrapped around his waist, and he crushed her to his chest, neither one of them breaking the hold on the other to worry about a little blood and brain matter caught between them.

Across the room, Hamilton Quince squatted next to what was left of Sheriff Wood. "Damn, Hiram, you'll have to take over here. We can't seem to keep a sheriff alive in Eclipse."

Hiram Potter sorted through handbills without looking up, but answered, "Not much of a recommendation. First Owen Bailey, now Hank Wood. A man would have to be a fool to take the Eclipse Sheriff's job."

He paused in his search, triumphantly pulling out a tattered handbill. "Looks like you've got a new bounty hunter in the family. Harvey Collins has a price on his head too." Hiram waved the wanted poster at them, pleased to give the odd couple a wedding present.

"What did you say?" Naomi loosened her grip on Charlie's waist, turning to hear Hiram Potter better.

Hamilton Quince explained. "The last sheriff of Eclipse turned to graft and corruption, and it got him killed. Hank Wood was hired to take his place. Looks like a different side of corruption got him."

"No, before that—what did you say before that part, Sheriff Potter?"

Hiram beamed and presented her with the handbill. "Harvey Collins is a dead-or-alive outlaw. You hit pay dirt."

Naomi looked pleased, accepting the wanted poster as the gift it was intended as, she murmured, "Now, how do I redeem this?" but then remembered her real question.

"Who was the last sheriff? What was the name you called?" Naomi's voice trembled, and Charlie knew this was something important.

Hamilton Quince had been following the threads of the conversation as if it was a game of jump in when you can. He seized the moment.

"Owen Bailey, my wife's deceased husband, was the former sheriff of Eclipse."

Hamilton lost his polite smile when he mentioned the man. “Why?”

Charlie felt her straighten her stance and felt a surge of protective ownership when she stepped toward Hamilton Quince.

“I knew he was no good when I was eleven.” Naomi held her hand out to him and when he grasped it, looking puzzled, she added, “I guess that makes you my brother-in-law. I’m Naomi Parker, Comfort Parker Bailey’s sister. I told her when she decided to marry Owen Bailey that he was an undesirable. But she didn’t listen to me.”

Charlie watched the importance of Quince’s words get past her need to congratulate herself on being right. Surprise was replaced by hope as she whispered, “Could you take me to her? Can I see Comfort, please?”

Then, the shock of too much excitement, tragedy, and worry must have weighed upon her, because, Naomi, his warrior woman, began to cry.

Chapter Fifteen

Charlie witnessed the reuniting of sisters and then ran. Naomi thought about his desertion grimly. "I'll be back. Visit with your sister now that you've found each other. Relax, spend some of this money."

He'd stuffed a few greenbacks in his shirt pocket and thrust the rest at her. "Here, use what you need." He'd been happy to leave with his cousins. She could tell; she could see it in his eyes.

For the first time in her life she had money to spend and a store where to spend it, her sister's CQ Mercantile being a pleasure to visit.

But how could Naomi appreciate the blessings that were surrounding her—the ladies of the academy were all safe and on their way home, no one had been killed besides Hank Wood in the Comanchero attack, and her sister Comfort was returned into her life—when she spent every minute of the day waiting.

She should be ecstatic. Instead she went to sleep at night worrying. Her answers were composed, her questions interested when at last Comfort Parker Bailey Quince was reunited with her. But each day she spent alone in Eclipse, a kernel of hope that had sprouted in her soul withered a little more.

The first afternoon after Charlie's defection, the two women so long separated had sat together in the sun room. It was awkward, now that they were alone. Comfort, being more of a social creature than Naomi, seemed impelled to open the conversation.

"My circumstances with Owen Bailey didn't allow for my sending for you." So many times, Naomi had had this conversation pretending both sides, that the real seemed pointless.

"It doesn't matter. We are here now." It was true. Charlie Wolf wasn't here now, that was what made her feel soulful and lonely.

"I memorized *Godey's Lady's Book* and advertised myself as a teacher of deportment. I fared well and saw a piece of the world. It was an adventure."

Her sister, Comfort, seemed nonplussed by the answer, evidently expecting recriminations rather than acceptance. With that moment out of the way, Comfort was more natural asking questions about Charlie Wolf and her future plans.

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know."

"Does he own property?"

"We didn't speak of it."

"Who are his people? I mean besides those strange cousins of his. Truly, Naomi, I know that *Godey's Lady's Book* cautioned about speaking ill of anyone—" She paused as Naomi chanted aloud, "...a young lady should be very guarded indeed about speaking evil of anyone, and equally so of how she repeats the disparaging remarks of another."

They both giggled over the words that in light of both their life adventures seemed a rather odd stricture to be concerned with.

Comfort settled the matter, continuing with her opinion of the McCallister cousins. "Well, I don't care what *Godey's* has to say. Those two are odd. It is a terrible truth that a woman may have to work hard to win her husband, but she gets the crazy relatives for

free.”

It wasn't hard for the sisters to resume a friendship that had been interrupted seventeen years before. Naomi smiled a lot, supported Comfort's business venture by spending Charlie's money, and felt hope die within ... *he wasn't coming back.*

“What is wrong with you?” Comfort had pounced on her listless behavior immediately and she'd confessed her doubts.

“Of course, he's coming back. You've got his saddlebags. Men don't leave their personal items with someone they're not planning to see again. Besides that, you have his money.” Then, remembering the last shopping excursion she'd used to cheer Naomi, she amended, “Well, you have some of his money.”

Naomi knew these things in her head, but her heart waited for his return, silently more frightened each day of his absence.

Comfort insisted that they visit the Double Q ranch, and since it was a way to get her mind off of missing Charlie, although she did miss him there as well, she spent two nights visiting with Brody Quince and meeting Brody's mother, Lucy Quince.

Brody had already demonstrated many times over her storytelling ability, but repeated the events of the Sparrow Creek Ladies' rescue for anyone who would listen. Naomi was always part of the audience, since seeing the event through another's eyes that were just as admiring of Charlie as her own helped keep his memory alive.

She already mourned him as a lost lover.

Which was why, when they arrived back in Eclipse, trotting toward the CQ Boarding House, and Old Mossy stood tied in front, Naomi's head went up, her spine straightened, and her nostrils flared, preparing for the moment when she would tear a strip of hide off of Charlie Wolf McCallister for leaving her alone so long.

*

Charlie traveled to Abilene, accompanying Hiram Potter, the McCallister cousins, and the U.S. Army as they herded the Comancheros to justice. It had been decided that Jericho would remain under federal custody and all interested parties would travel with the prisoner to settle up claims.

He hated leaving Naomi. She'd folded her hands in that old-maid-pious manner of hers when he'd said he was traveling to Abilene, but she had remained uncomplaining although he could see the words fighting to bust loose from her tight lips.

She'd been thumbing through her instruction manual on wifely duties, and it had advised her that wives should be silent and respectful.

It was a shame he had to leave town and miss that five-minute episode in her life. After finishing their business in Abilene, he and his cousins swung over to the MC3.

That was why his mother accompanied him back to Eclipse and waited in the parlor of Comfort Quince's Boarding House while he paced the front porch, irritated that Naomi wasn't where he'd left her.

When Comfort and Naomi came trotting up the street in that fancy rig belonging to Hamilton Quince, Charlie felt the palm of his hand begin to itch.

Before the horse was tied off or the ladies ready to step down, he stood waiting for his wife.

“What is it about ‘stay put’ that you don't understand?” He set Comfort Quince on the ground and reached for Naomi. She stared at him and then launched herself out of the seat and straight into his arms.

“What took you so long?” was her first question, followed by seventeen more before she slowed down to notice him.

They stood beside the buckboard. The rest of Eclipse had disappeared some time before, at least as far as they were concerned.

“You cut your hair.” He’d sat on a stool in his mother’s kitchen and let her cut it. He touched his neck self-consciously, feeling bare.

“What kind of man has prettier hair than his woman?” he repeated her question to him from sometime before.

When he’d been crouched Indian-style riding into Eclipse, and she’d swerved to protect him from guns held in the hands of white men, he’d made some hard decisions. He now also wore white men’s denims, boots, and Sam had bought him a fancy Stetson with some of their Jericho bounty.

But none of that mattered at this minute. There would be time for *telling* later. Right now, he needed a room and two or three hours of uninterrupted *showing* of how much he’d missed her.

He kissed her, savoring the feel of her mouth beneath his. “Mi corazón,” Charlie murmured into her ear holding her closer than decency allowed. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Naomi hugged him. And then in honeyed tones unlike her usual self asked, “Mi corazón ... What did you say that meant?” She said it casually, as though it was unimportant. He knew from her change in manner that she hoped to trap him into divulging a secret.

“Chattering badger,” Charlie grinned down at her, ready for the next skirmish. Her face primmed up and she glared at him.

“The last time, you lied and said it meant ‘sharp-tongued woman.’ You can’t keep your stories straight, Mr. Wolf. I will expect better of you in the future.”

Whatever else she might have said was silenced by his kiss.

Two women stood watching from the porch of the CQ Boarding House. Comfort Quince turned to Rachel Wolf McCallister and asked, “What does he keep calling her?”

Rachel smiled a memory of joy. “When his father spoke it to me, ‘mi corazón’ meant ‘my heart.’”

Historical Notes

Although the characters in Charlie Wolf McCallister's family are fictitious, history records that Black Kettle, the Cheyenne Chief mentioned in *Wolf's Tender*, was present at Sand Creek, the site of a massacre that took place on November 29, 1864. While Chief Black Kettle sought peace with the U.S. government at nearby Fort Lyons, his village along the Sand Creek in Colorado Territory became the focus of an unprovoked attack in which 150 Cheyenne and Arapaho women and children were slaughtered.

The life of mystic, healer, and woman warrior, Lozen, is well-documented. It is written that as the sister of Apache chief, Victorio, she used her supernatural powers to heal wounds, communicate with animals, and detect the proximity of the enemy.

Naomi's choice of reading material, *Godey's Lady's Book*, published from 1830 to 1898 in Philadelphia, was the defining voice of civilization for the early American woman. The most popular magazine of its day, it included recipes, sewing patterns, advice concerning social congress with men, and rules for women of all ages on proper conduct and deportment.

The End

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