



Breed True

Eclipse Hearts

Gem Sivad

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Blurb

Half-Kiowa rancher Grady Hawks owns 9,000 acres of water-enriched Texas grassland. But when the Eastern Land Company moves to steal Hawks Nest Ranch, claiming Grady is too Indian to rightfully control it, Grady decides to apply what he's learned in mixing different strains of cattle.

He needs to find a red-haired wife and breed back to the fair skin and Scottish

features of his father. With a *white* child and wife, he plans to appease his neighbors and outmaneuver the greedy Eastern consortium of businessmen who are trying to steal Texas land.

But when Grady marries auburn-haired widow, Julie Fulton Rossiter, breeding cattle is the last thing on his mind. Julie doesn't *want* a husband, but with an accusation of murder threatening her, Grady Hawks' offer of marriage is something Julie *needs*. When unexpected passion burns hot between them, *want* and *need* take on a whole new meaning.

Prologue

Eclipse, Texas Social, 1878

The sound of a slap disturbed the music for a moment, and everyone who heard paused in their gossiping long enough to look for the source of something new to talk about.

"Here now," Sheriff Bailey halfheartedly called from across the room, then turned away, content in his effort to intervene.

Julie Fulton Rossiter stood holding her cheek, red from Frank's slap and bruised from his fist earlier.

She shouldn't have followed him, but he'd taken the last of her money. She'd started hoarding her funds a month into her marriage when she'd finally realized that it was the proceeds from the sale of her grandmother's farm that her husband was gambling away every night.

Frank Rossiter had told her when they left Tazewell County, Virginia that it would be their grubstake to tide them over until he found work. He hadn't told her that his idea of work was sitting in a poker game until he ran out of money.

"Can I help you?" It was one of the society women from Eclipse. Julie wanted to crawl in a hole and hide. Frank's abuse was regular, but it had never before been made public. He'd now committed the ultimate humiliation.

"No one can help me," she answered flatly, looking around for Frank or someone who could tell her where he'd gone.

"Then you'll have to help yourself." The woman stepped closer and laid her hand on Julie's arm. "My name is Lucy McKenna Quince. If you need help in the future, send word or come to the Double-Q Ranch."

Julie remained silent, but nodded her thanks at the woman. What was there to say?

As she moved away, she heard Lucy Quince ask her companion, "Who are those people?" Julie winced at his answer.

"Worthless trash, a local gambler and his wife who he promotes," the rancher answered, decisive in his opinion. "Grady Hawks took the no-good bum outside. But Hawks isn't much better than a savage himself."

The fight was over by the time she'd pushed her way through the exit filled with Eclipse citizens wagering on the outcome.

Worthless trash, a local gambler and his wife who he promotes ... Julie hid her shame as she edged past the loitering men, ignoring the too-familiar pinches and rubs that she received on her journey to where her husband lay on the ground.

Evidently his fists didn't work as well on a man as on a woman. Frank was in the dirt—stunned, blood spurting from his nose. His assailant stood before her, dusting himself off and straightening his clothes. He smiled at her.

"Are you all right?" Grady Hawks asked, studying her carefully, as though looking for damage. It gave her time to look at him too. He was polite and solemn and actually seemed concerned about her. Good quality denims, callused hands but clean nails, lithe strength ... Frank was outclassed from the get-go.

"Whatever you thought you were doing in there, it wasn't necessary," she told him flatly. The smile left his face. "When someone beats on Frank, then Frank beats on me. You didn't do anything but delay the message."

She covered her cheek with her hand, and then dropped it, straightening her shoulders proudly as she looked first at his attacker, and then at her husband.

On his rump in the dirt, holding a bloody handkerchief, Frank had the nerve to swear at her. "Goddammit, see what you've caused. Get me back to the hotel."

Julie looked away from Frank, silently comparing his pale, dissipated features to the bronzed picture of health before her.

"Watch your back," she warned Hawks grudgingly. She didn't want anyone killed, although seeing her abuser sprawled in the dirt gave her a minute of satisfaction.

"Quit looking at my wife, you dirty Indian," Frank snarled viciously. He seemed determined to provoke another attack, and she wondered at his foolishness. Then she saw his hands tighten around the derringer and deliberately bent over him, blocking his shot.

"Get out of my way," he swore at her again, but she knocked it loose and palmed the handgun, ignoring the list of punishments she'd suffer soon, as she pulled him up and helped him toward the rickety wagon she'd arrived in.

Had she been willing to air her business to all and sundry, Julie could have explained how she'd followed Frank to the town dance, planning to catch him at the social and shame him into returning her money.

Foolish me, I thought the presence of civilized people would help me. The only civilized help she'd encountered had been the Quince woman and then Grady Hawks, the supposed savage.

She'd sat in the hotel room alone and worked herself into a grand passion. The marriage was a fiasco, testimony to her stupidity that she had once believed the handsome gambler when he claimed to adore her.

Disgusted at her stupidity, she'd stripped off the cheap satin gown she'd donned to please him and dressed in her worn cotton, remnants of days on the farm, determined to get her money and go home.

He adored something, but it wasn't me. It had been a shock to admit that she'd been duped. The man, whom she'd thought she'd ensnared with her beauty, had used her vanity to get possession of all she owned.

Earlier, when he'd slammed out of the seedy room he rented by the day, he'd admitted, "God, you were easy. A love-starved innocent with the title to a farm."

It wasn't the picture of sophistication that she liked to imagine when she thought of herself. He reduced her then to what she was—a scared, eighteen-year-old girl who had run away with a scoundrel.

The past weeks had brought Frank's weaknesses to her attention. But he'd still petted her and pretended that she mattered, so she'd ignored warning signs of a deeper ruthless character. Tonight she had finally admitted that he didn't care about anyone but himself.

The additional hurt of knowing he'd married her for the title to sixty acres of played-out bottom land had made her realize how far she had fallen when she'd run off with Frank Rossiter. *Then you'll have to help yourself*, the words of the Quince woman came back to her.

Chapter One

October, 1882

Jewel Rossiter leaned over Frank, careful not to touch the knife lodged in his chest. "Where are they?" Her whisper was accompanied by a rough nudge. "Tell me where you left them."

He labored to speak, grabbed her by the neck of her dress and pulled her closer. "I hid them from you, Jewel. I took your precious gems," he sneered, showing his need to dominate her even as the knife cut away his life.

The dying man wheezed, his death rattle filling the air. "Oh, shit..." He gasped for breath and finally noticed the blood pumping from his chest. He tried to raise his hand to catch it, but his arm didn't work.

"Julie," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it. Find a bolt hole and hide. He's looking for you. I tried..." There was no longer a girl named Julie Fulton. Jewel Rossiter stared down at her partner and focused on persuasion, but prepared to deliver pain if needed. He would tell her what she wanted to know before he died.

Without a doubt she knew what Frank had tried—blackmail—and his victim had turned the tables and murdered him instead. "He knows, Julie. I'm sorry, baby..." Frank's pulse fluttered and his breath labored loud in the night, exhausted by his effort to hold on. The tenderness in his voice, and his use of her real name, was testimony to his awareness of approaching death. She hadn't heard that tone in four years.

Her husband was bleeding to death on the ground, and no matter who killed him, she needed information before he died. She leaned closer and promised, "You're going to be just fine. Hold on, I'll get the doctor."

Jewel Rossiter ran all the way down the board planks that lined one side of the only street in Eclipse. Out of breath and panic stricken, she stopped off at Sheriff Potter's office where Doc Lawrence usually played checkers till the drunk and disorderly gave it up and went to bed.

"Doctor Lawrence, I need you to come." She was panting for breath once she was in the office. "Someone stabbed Frank. He needs a doctor."

Hiram Potter took in the blood covering her dress and the red staining her hands, and picked up his hat and Winchester, following along behind the doc.

"You don't mind if I come along, now, do you?" Jewel ignored the question because it wasn't a real question. She took the doctor's arm urging him to a faster pace.

Frank Rossiter was still alive when they got to the end of the street, but an ever-widening pool of blood, black in the limited light of the street lantern, shed doubt on how much longer he'd endure. She pushed the doctor toward her husband.

"Fix him," she muttered. "I need him to stay alive at least five more minutes." *If it's not the proclamation of a grieving wife—too bad.* Jewel ignored the sheriff's scandalized look. Then he must have noticed that her cheeks didn't match, one being bruised darker than the other.

"You all right, Miz Rossiter?" Jewel ignored his concern, belated as it was.

She knelt beside the doctor, dust and blood mixing on her skirt. "Frank, the doctor's

here. I brought him to tend you. You're going to be fine."

She filled her voice with false reassurances, but when the doctor frowned and shook his head, she gave up gentle and added roughly, "Tell me where they are." She was persistent, so much so that the man opened his eyes and grimaced at her.

One last battle of wills passed between them, and then she said, "Please." She hid her frustration behind an insincere smile and gave him the answer he had always craved. If it was one thing Frank Rossiter loved, it was to see her beg.

"Please tell me where you hid"—to the growing audience, her voice seemed to break before she finished—"my gems."

He coughed up more blood and laughed wryly. "Never show all of your cards, right, honey?"

"Only when it's the end of the game," she answered harshly, afraid he'd die before he could finish his last game of torture. "Tell me."

Before the gathering crowd of men could hoist the gambler onto a slab of wood and haul him to the doc's office, he had the last word. "They're with family, of course." And then, he died.

Jewel let her keening wail rip through the air, even though those in the crowd who knew her would doubt its sincerity. *I might as well put on a show while I figure how to get out of this mess.*

She covered her face with her hands and then realized that she'd smeared Frank's blood on her cheek. Her gasped, "Oh God," was sincere. Her stomach heaved as she considered how to free herself from the sheriff.

"I think you need to come to my office with me, Miz Rossiter." Sheriff Potter's words were spoken kindly, but it wasn't a request, as he already had hold of her arm, leading her in that direction.

"Say, Sheriff," one of the men loitering in the half-dark called. "The gambler owed me money. If he had treasure stashed away, I'm putting in my claim right now."

Another unidentified voice suggested, "Ah, hell, Wiley, you'd be better off taking it out in trade. Teddy James will take over putting Jewel out, the same as Rossiter did. Ain't that right, Jewel?"

She ignored the hecklers and allowed the sheriff to guide her away from the body of the late, unlamented Frank Rossiter.

Once in the sheriff's office, she gladly accepted a tin cup of strong black coffee and was surprised when her teeth clattered loudly against the rim. The sheriff wasn't delicate in his questioning.

"You kill your husband, Jewel?" She let his use of her professional name stand. As soon as she retrieved her babies from wherever Frank had stashed them, she intended to leave this awful place and start over.

She'd soon be Julie Fulton Ross, a respectable widowed mother of twin daughters, instead of Jewel Rossiter, shill and gambler's partner.

She looked at Sheriff Potter's face and realized he actually expected her to tell him the truth. *Did you kill your husband?*

She answered him fiercely, "No," and tried to hide the real truth from him. *Someone beat me to it.* It was a fact. She would have killed Frank had she found him first.

This morning, after five months of freedom, Jewel had opened the door, and he'd stood there before her, looking rough and seedy, something Frank avoided at all times. It

was obvious he was in a bind, or she would never have seen him again.

He'd been polite, humble. First he'd tried charming persuasion. *"I was worried about you, Jewel—and the children, of course. I've been in Albuquerque in the territory. I figured you'd be over your snit by now, and we'd get this marriage back on track."*

Snit? It had been pointless for her to argue. She just wanted him gone. *"Go away and leave us alone."* She'd started backing into the room at that point, anticipating his next move. That he had tracked her to the makeshift shanty where she'd moved with her babies was evidence of his desperation.

"Baby, come back to me. I miss you. It's been hell trying to make it alone."

She hadn't doubted that at all, since Frank's card playing success was in direct proportion to her ability to distract the mark, and Jewel's full breasts, tiny waist, delicate features, and lustrous auburn hair had proven to be a siren call to most men.

"I've got an angle on something right now. Well, I'm just telling you that I—no—we—will be rolling in money soon. I'll move you and the girls into a nice house, and we'll be a family."

Julie swallowed nausea remembering the fierce hatred she'd felt when she screamed at him this morning. *"The prospect of living with you and being a family is a joke. I'd sooner cut your throat than let you near the twins."*

He'd pushed her shoulder, peering inside to make sure she had no defender present. *"Figured you'd have a man taking care of you."*

Then, he, who had never held either child, sneered at the rough home she'd given the girls. *"This is no way for my daughters to live."* And then ludicrously, he'd added, almost anxious, *"They are female children, right?"*

When he'd decided the way was clear, he'd moved to shove her inside. She'd used the shank of wood she kept by the door for protection, and hit him in the head, giving her time to slam and bar the door.

"Damn it, Jewel, I need your help." Of course he did. Frank always found ways to use her.

First he'd stood outside and yelled and hammered on the flimsy barrier. Then, when her neighbors ignored her trouble, since it was a common happening where they lived, he'd gotten bolder.

"I'll kick the whole Goddamned shack down around your ears, Jewel." And he'd started to do just that, lashing out with his boots and screaming threats until he'd kicked a foot through the thin slats that formed the side of the shack.

"Unbar the fucking door, or when I get in, I'll kick your ass so hard it'll make your nose bleed." Frank's masterful act as a gentleman was reserved for citizens to be conned. She'd moved out of that category four years before.

Broke, with no poker stake, he'd demanded that she take up where they'd left off before the girls were born, as shill in his confidence game. *"I've got a high roller in my sights, and he's going to pay big."*

Afraid he'd bring her home down around them, she'd let him in, prepared to fight him if he tried to beat her as usual. But she'd never had a chance. He'd punched her jaw, and knocked her to the ground, using a pair of Old Man Tate's dirty long Johns to tie her to the bed. Then he'd snatched up her babies, Emerald and Amethyst.

"You won't see these two precious gems again. I've got a buyer who wants them bad. Now get your ass back to work, Jewel. I'm not playing." By the time she'd struggled out

of the ties, he was gone.

* * * *

"You don't seem inclined to play the grieving widow, do you, ma'am?" Sheriff Potter's remark pulled her back to the present, and she assessed him. *Wonder if I told him about the four years of hell I just survived, if he would believe or care.*

Was he friend or foe? She already knew that, being male, he more than likely fit the latter category. She edged toward the door and murmured softly in the voice she'd learned to use when dealing with men.

"Sheriff Potter, Frank Rossiter was dying when I found him, but I admit, had he not been, I might have been tempted to shoot him." Her words were bitter until she again pictured the blood bubbling around the blade of the murder weapon. That had her swallowing a surge of bile.

Sheriff Potter stood there with his mouth open, trying to decide how to take a woman's indifference to her husband's death. The fact was—she didn't want to talk about her life with Frank Rossiter. She couldn't gauge Potter's intelligence, so she chose her words carefully.

"Frank Rossiter was much stronger than I am, and he was stabbed in the chest. I might have been able to sneak up on him when he was drunk and knife him in the back, because he certainly gave me many opportunities to do so."

There had been several times when Jewel had actually stood over the drunk and disgusting gambler, contemplating just that.

"Or, I could have cut his throat when he was asleep at night. But Mr. Rossiter and I separated our living arrangements months ago, and I have not had reason or opportunity to catch him sleeping since."

And that was, thank the Lord, the truth. She'd left Frank's *protection* when she'd fled the hotel in Wichita Falls in the middle of the night, babies in her arms. Frank had fallen asleep drunk one too many times, and she'd taken the roll of cash he called his grubstake, counting it as money he owed her.

"What time is it?" She interrupted her explanation to quiz the sheriff impatiently.

"Ma'am," Potter took out his pocket watch and studied it. "It's not quite ten o'clock in the evening."

She hurried her defense. "A killing blow to Frank's chest, made with a long-bladed knife, would be much too difficult for a woman my size."

"Yes, ma'am," the sheriff agreed. "I already figured that."

She hid her face so that he wouldn't be able to see her relief. Nobody cared that Frank Rossiter was dead. She was his wife, and she didn't care—no—that wasn't true. *I do care—I'm glad.*

Evidently, Hiram Potter was old-fashioned in his outlook, thinking a wife was supposed to cry when her husband was murdered. She touched the bruise on her left cheek and cast a defiant glare at the lawman.

"My association with Frank Rossiter ended some time ago, Sheriff Potter. I received a note from him this afternoon, demanding that I meet him in the alley by the saloon this evening."

She reached in her pocket and pulled out the note, scrawled in Frank's elegant penmanship. It had been delivered by the old woman who lived in the shack next to hers.

Frank had been sure she'd follow him and in the note told her where to go.

Jewel, if you want the return of your valuables, meet me at dusk behind the saloon in Eclipse. Do not defy me in this or your treasure is gone.

An ugly brown stain of dried blood spread across the bottom edge of the paper. Hiram Potter's frown changed.

"I understand that you and your husband were parted, but you'll need to tell me what you know about his killing anyway. Did he have anything else to say before I arrived?"

Sheriff Potter's question presumed that she would tell him Frank's whispered last words. She attributed that to her explanation and his memories of the gambler's unsavory stay in Eclipse.

Back alleys and shady companions had been Frank Rossiter's natural habitat. He spied on people, found their secrets, and then persuaded them to pay him to keep his mouth shut about them.

Jewel was not surprised that an unknown killer had finally ended her partner and husband's scheming and cheating. But murder was a hanging offense, so she shifted her gaze to the floor.

"Sheriff Potter," she continued quietly. "Anyone could have stabbed Frank Rossiter. He was a card cheat and a drunk. He didn't scruple who he bilked, and if he couldn't steal a man's money in a poker game, he'd hide in the shadows and rob him of it afterward."

When she glanced up to see how her words had been received, the sheriff gave her a funny look, so she added, "I left him because of his criminal activities."

That is certainly true. His criminal ways got him killed, and I saw it coming. Frank was a greedy fool and tried to squeeze the wrong mark.

Jewel tried to school her face to grief since the sheriff thought she should be grieving over the gambler's death, but presenting a picture of sorrow for the sheriff's benefit wasn't possible.

I owe someone a debt of gratitude, but right now I need to be on my way. The sheriff can't be allowed to take up too much time. Frank said the girls are with family. Family means Ma Siler at the edge of town.

Jewel's panic threatened the harsh veneer of calm she maintained.

Once that horrible old witch hears that Frank is dead, she'll not keep the girls long. Oh, God, she'll slip them laudanum if they cry.

Three and a half years of beatings and rough treatment had shown Frank's true character. When she'd realized she was pregnant, Jewel had been afraid to tell him, though it had been his drunken assault that had caused it.

He hadn't even looked up from shaving, scraping the razor over his jaw, but he'd still scented her fear like a fox after a rabbit. *"Get rid of it."*

He'd grabbed a towel and wiped the residue of shaving cream from his face and calmly buttoned on his shirt.

"I mean it, Jewel. There's no place in our lives for a squalling brat. Get rid of it. Ma Siler, at the edge of town, will take care of it. Go see her."

And then he'd gone to play poker and left the details of clean-up for her. So she'd lied and told him it was done, lacing her corsets tighter until she was well into her sixth month. It wasn't a condition hard to hide from Frank. He saw what he wanted to see—the mark. It was her job to distract and make vulnerable the prey.

He'd been so mad when he'd figured it out. But even the beating he'd administered

hadn't shaken them loose. Her babies had survived. Now they were with the very woman who would have ended their lives.

Panic constricted her lungs as she considered asking the sheriff to get her twins from the hag. But before she could, he asked about Frank's business ventures.

"Uh, rumor has it, Miz Rossiter, that you and your husband have had some shady dealings here in Eclipse. Would you be able to list the folks who might have a grudge against him?"

So, my dealings were shady too. The irony of that almost brought a sharp correction. It definitely confirmed her decision to keep quiet about the twins. Besides, there was no telling what Ma Siler would do to them if the sheriff rode up to her door.

"What do you want me to say, Sheriff Potter? I've already explained. My husband and I were apart. He took"—she paused and licked her lips, anxiety marring the calm demeanor she strove to present—"he took certain of my most valuable possessions in an attempt to force me to his will."

That was not a lie, but even so, she looked at her hands, avoiding the gaze of the lawman. For the first time, she noticed Frank's blood staining them. Bile rose from her empty stomach, and she covered her mouth with an almost clean spot on her sleeve, trying to stave off the ripples of nausea that threatened.

"Here now," the sheriff said sharply. "Maybe you should fix yourself up before we talk anymore."

Jewel sucked in a gulp of air trying to quell her roiling stomach and agreed eagerly. "Please, yes. I need to get out of these bloody clothes."

She thrust her wrist at him where a patch of red was turning rusty on her sleeve. The bosom of her only dress clung to her, wet with blood and other matter.

Sheriff Potter stood up quickly and said, "I'll walk you to your room to get your things."

She didn't want him hanging around. Jewel looked at him, grimly measuring his dedication to job and town.

If servicing the sheriff would get her free, she'd pull up her skirts. Four years of hard living and taught her to use any weapon available.

She studied the sheriff. But she'd assessed the character of men frequently enough to know it was an offer better not made. *I need to get on my way.*

Besides, she wasn't staying at the hotel. She'd had no money for a room when she arrived in Eclipse and had stashed her canvas bag holding her few possessions in the alley where Frank had been killed.

"That's all right, Sheriff Potter. I can find my way back to the hotel."

"No, ma'am," was his quick reply. "There seems to be a number of folks who think your husband owed them money. One way and another, it wouldn't be safe for you to stay at the hotel alone."

He took her arm and started off toward the flophouse up the street that doubled as a hotel until she admitted, "I don't have a room there."

Her words seemed to make up his mind about something, and he tightened his grip on her arm, and set a brisk pace walking in the same direction. "Where are we going?" She panted her question as his long strides half-dragged her down the boarded walk.

"I'm taking you to Comfort's Boarding House. It's at the end of the street. You probably saw it on your way into town. There are women there." He paused and for the

first time seemed awkwardly unsure. "You probably need to have the company of females around you at a time like this."

Jewel was surprised. She hadn't figured Sheriff Potter for a sensitive man.

"I doubt if the ladies of Eclipse will appreciate you bringing them a woman of questionable virtue any time, but especially after they most certainly have gone to bed," she warned him dryly.

But, it didn't matter. The boarding house was closer to the stable. She'd tied her borrowed horse to the hitching rack behind the building, and as soon as the sheriff left, so would she.

Chapter Two

Her plan changed as soon as the sheriff pounded on the front door of Comfort's Boarding House. The owner, Comfort Quince, answered, and late as it was, the woman was dressed and alert. "Hamilton here, Comfort?"

She nodded at the lawman's question and ushered them inside, speaking to Jewel. "You look like you've had a spell of trouble. Come on to the wash room. I've always got water heating. You can bathe and put on something more fit."

Jewel wondered at that. The woman acted like strays off the street commonly knocked on her front door. A man stepped into the hall and inspected Jewel with his stare. She edged from his sight, standing between Mrs. Quince and Hiram Potter.

Her stomach tightened convulsively as her hostess led her down the hall, approaching the man who still silently watched. At the last moment, before Mrs. Quince brushed past, he stepped back into the room he had been occupying, closing that door with a click.

Jewel volunteered nothing, following her hostess to the bathing room. What would she say? *Excuse my mess. I have my husband's blood all over me.*

She felt guilty taking the time to wash, but the bath water was hot, and there were assorted soaps and scented oils on a chair beside it. *Frank's dead.* She'd have liked to savor the truth of her freedom, but hurried instead, pushing away memory of blood and last words.

Jewel concentrated on scrubbing her skin till it was pink, carefully soaping tender flesh, before rinsing and rising from the still-warm water to dress.

She used the towel her hostess had left, binding it tightly around her breasts that were already leaking milk, desperately in need of release. Then, since her dress was ruined, and her canvas bag of possessions still remained hidden in the alley, she dressed in the garments Comfort Quince had left for her.

The underclothes were finer than any Jewel had owned for a long time, but she pulled on the stockings and chemise reluctantly, not wanting to take what she couldn't return.

The soft cloth caressed her clean skin, reminding her that exquisite luxury could be had for a price. But it was a price she'd been unwilling to pay, and Frank's pursuit of such had gotten him killed.

When she stepped into the gray dress that buttoned up the front, it fit surprisingly well, other than the tight pressure across her swollen breasts and the three inches of extra cloth that dragged the ground. Her hostess was a taller woman than Jewel's five and a half feet.

She tried not to see the mottled bruise on her cheek. Now that she'd washed away the powder she'd slapped on before coming to Eclipse, the marks of Frank's fist were obvious.

She eased out of the wash-up room and headed for the back door, but she was met there by the sheriff, who seemed to be expecting her. He took her arm and escorted her back up the hallway where the rumble of male voices interrupted the night's quiet.

"Thank you, ma'am," Jewel said to Comfort Quince, who stood by the entrance,

listening to the conversation in the room. "I appreciate the use of your bathing facility."

Then in an unusual burst of candor she added, "Recent events have interfered with my travel. I will be gone as quickly as possible. Please forgive my late-night intrusion." The elegant woman nodded at her as though she did understand.

Inside the parlor, Jewel discovered that Hiram Potter and two other men were waiting for her to return from her bath. Sheriff Potter pointed at the broad-shouldered rancher, seated on the couch. "Hamilton Quince, ma'am."

Jewel murmured a halfhearted greeting and turned, following the sheriff as he continued making introductions as though conducting a bizarre social hour. Inevitably they reached the stranger who had stood in the hallway inspecting her earlier.

"Miz Rossiter, this man is Grady Hawks. Mr. Hawks owns Hawks Nest Ranch, a piece of land that stretches over a sizeable piece of ground and reaches high into the mountains." Sheriff Potter seemed to ramble without a point.

What possible difference does it matter to me if Grady Hawks owns half of Texas? Jewel tried to school her derisive thoughts when the man who was being introduced stepped forward.

Even though she was surrounded by the safety of civilization, she recognized brutal power and edged away. He spoke to her, and his voice compelled her to look directly at him, proving that she was right.

His personal tone surprised her as much as his apparent interest in her well-being. The stranger ignored the others in the room and held her gaze, looking her over as though for damage. "Are you hurt?"

She had a moment of déjà vu, remembering a stranger asking the same question years before, only that time, Frank had been alive and bleeding in the dirt. "Do I know you?"

"We met at the Eclipse Fall Social awhile back. Remember?"

She caught her breath, and looked at him closer. *Of course.* Her cheek ached just thinking about the public slap that Frank Rossiter had delivered when she'd tracked him down and found him at the dance.

She hadn't really known her husband then, although they'd been married long enough that ignorance had been a personal choice. He'd stolen the last of her money—money she'd brought with her when they'd married three months before—and money she'd planned to use to return, contrite and humbled, to her mother and stepfather.

The innocent girl who had been Julie Fulton had fumbled the bottom from her music box—the hiding place for the money she'd set aside from her inheritance as soon as she realized that Frank was determined to gamble it all away. When she'd discovered the money gone, she'd been furious and determined to get it back even if she had to embarrass him in public.

She should have known better—Frank had already proven himself beyond shame many times. He'd punched her in the face in front of a crowd of people. No one had protested or come to her aid until this man had grabbed Frank and shoved him out the door, with an excited crowd of half-drunk men following.

Jewel assessed the man who had played the gallant that day, the way she would have had he stood on her shanty stoop to hire her laundry service today. His clothes were well made, his hat was a Stetson, and his gun belt wrapped around his waist anchored his gun in place, ready to draw if needed.

It was obvious he was a man who could pay to have his clothes washed, ironed, and delivered. But, then, Frank had looked like that too. If Grady Hawks had knocked on her door seeking her laundry services, she wouldn't have answered.

He frightened her. Frank had worn his public veneer of civilization like a well-fitted coat, hiding his violence for private, unwitnessed moments. This man didn't bother to hide his savage nature; his gaze tracked her like a predator stalking prey.

There was more afoot than a gambler's debt settled. The last evening she'd spent in Frank's company, he'd put together a private game of poker in their suite so she could make sure his *luck* continued. Indian land ownership had been the topic of discussion, and Frank had listened avidly.

The consensus had been that the local families of mixed blood, who still controlled large sections of Texas grassland, would lose them. So, Jewel suspected that Grady Hawks, an Indian who owned a sizeable ranch, was one of the men being talked about.

Not until his slate gray eyes met her own green ones in a stare-down, did she realize that he was part white.

Sheriff Potter cleared his throat uncomfortably and said to the room at large. "It appears someone would like to plant the idea in everyone's head that Mr. Hawks killed your husband. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Miz Rossiter?"

I've got to get out of here and to the twins. Ma Siler might ... Jewel forced down panic. She couldn't let her mind dwell on that, or she'd start screaming.

Ma Siler wouldn't scruple at disposing of them when they became an inconvenience, and the swell of undelivered milk in Jewel's breasts reminded her that the babies were already hungry.

Jewel wanted to snap at the sheriff, but she put on her befuddled expression instead. Most men seemed inclined to believe all women stupid, and as a defense, pretending to not comprehend worked more often than not.

"I don't believe I understand your question, Sheriff Potter." And for once, that was the truth. *I don't know Grady Hawks from a hill of beans, but if he killed Frank, I hope he gets away with it.* "Why would you think Mr. Hawks implicated in the murder of my husband? There are at least a hundred men who have been cheated, extorted, or beaten in a back alley by Frank Rossiter and his cronies. Was Mr. Hawks one of them?"

The sheriff motioned toward the elegant cherry table that decorated the room. A knife with a long blade and a fancy, wrapped handle lay there. She stepped closer, to peer more intently at it.

"That's the knife that Frank was wearing." Jewel paused and then looked away, catching Comfort Quince's sympathetic gaze. "In his chest," she added for explanation. The blade was still bloodstained.

"That knife belongs to Hawks." The sheriff nodded at the dark-skinned man who stared at her from slate gray eyes.

"Well, arrest him if he stabbed Frank. But I'm not a witness. I didn't see who used the knife." For a minute the picture of Frank's chest rising and falling and the blade's handle sticking out with blood bubbling fresh from the wound, resurfaced in her mind.

She stared hard at Grady Hawks. "Did you kill my husband?"

She was prepared to thank him, if that proved to be so. She knew that he was interested in her; hard gray eyes followed her movements, assessing her.

He also tracked the position of every man in the room. His impassive stare neither

denied nor took credit for Frank's death.

"Trouble is, ma'am..." Hiram Potter's tone was deferential. It had been a while since Jewel had been treated with respect, and his tone caused her to look suspiciously at the sheriff. "Grady was here at Comfort's Boarding House all evening talking business with Hamilton Quince. There's a whole house full of people who saw him."

"Well, then, someone else used his knife to kill Frank." She felt as though she was talking to the weak-minded. *What do they want? Does the sheriff think I stabbed Frank?* Impatience replaced politeness as the clock on the wall indicated her need to hurry.

Jewel let her eyes flicker to the stranger since he seemed to be the reason she was being detained. Blue-black hair cut short, dark brows that framed light gray eyes—eyes that were piercing, cold, and direct.

His skin wasn't really brown; it was more bronze, or copper. When their glances crossed, rather than meet his gaze, she looked down, trying for submissive.

Jewel had learned that by not making eye contact with men, a woman could sometimes avoid unpleasantness. But not this time—he stalked toward her, and she felt the chill of dread.

He was dressed like every other man in the room, in ranch denim and work boots.

Grady Hawks had added a heavy duster, lined with what looked like wool. She envied him the coat and shivered, aware suddenly that her hands were ice cold.

She tried to control her spontaneous retreat, but couldn't as she nervously edged farther away from him, letting her gaze slide to the other people in the room.

But they watched him too, and it was obvious that help was not on the way. She realized then that as usual she was on her own. And for some reason, everyone was herding her toward the rancher.

The two white men and the woman named Comfort moved to one side, leaving Grady Hawks with her on the other. It gave them an air of intimacy, as though Jewel and the Indian rancher were somehow aligned.

She couldn't tell what was about to happen, but her practical side knew to get close to a door in case there was a fight. She looked around and inched a little nearer to the room's only exit, other than the big picture window that fronted the street. He shifted, but didn't bother to intercept her. He didn't have to; she was boxed in.

Instead, he picked the knife off the table and pulled out a handkerchief to methodically wipe the blade clean of Frank's blood.

She expected Sheriff Potter to keep the knife since it had been used for murder, but the lawman seemed indifferent when Grady Hawks reclaimed it.

"Thanks," he said. "Glad to get this back." He left his post at the door and walked away down the hall, carrying the weapon with him. Everyone in the room seemed to breathe easier.

They were silently listening for him to leave. Instead, they heard Comfort's back door open, followed by words spoken in a language foreign to her, and then the sound of the door as it closed, before he returned to the boarding-house sitting room.

"How is it your knife came to be in the hands of Frank's murderer?" It was a bold question, but there was a sheriff in the room, and if he wouldn't ask, Jewel would.

But Grady Hawks answered readily enough. "Last time I saw it, it was sticking out of a man's shoulder as he rode away."

Sheriff Potter interrupted. "Grady Hawks came into my office last October and

reported that he'd been shot at outside of town. He told me then that he'd wounded the shooter when he threw that very knife and stuck the fellow."

The sheriff was no help at all in pursuing the questioning that Jewel felt should be directed at Grady Hawks.

"Did Frank owe you money?" Jewel hadn't been close enough to hear the conversation that night four years before, but if the Indian claimed Frank had cheated at cards or stolen a valuable, it wouldn't surprise her.

She'd not even thought to ask Frank that night. There hadn't been much talk on the way back to the hotel room, besides Frank's promises of abuse that he later delivered.

She had avoided Grady Hawks then, embarrassed by the entire incident. Now she locked gazes with him and quickly wished that she hadn't.

His black eyebrows were thick, and when he lifted one, he looked even more arrogant than she'd first thought. *Indian or not, this coyote thinks he's somebody.*

She'd been wrong about his eyes; they weren't exactly slate, but an odd light grayish/blue made more startling by the way they pinned her with their intensity.

When Grady Hawks ignored her question, she told the sheriff, without dropping her eyes from the staring match they were in, "I didn't stab Frank or see who killed him, but I'm not sorry to be free of him."

For some reason, Rancher Hawks wanted to play stare-me-down. She dropped her eyes, although his familiar appraisal of her raised her hackles and brought on defiance. She clenched her hands, willing her anger deep. *Playing meek will get me free sooner.*

When the sheriff didn't comment on her words, it irritated her. It was as though the entire room waited breathlessly for something. She had a schedule to keep and no time for foolishness. Clearing her throat, she spoke to Grady Hawks.

"Please excuse my poor manners. I'm sorry I didn't say *thank you* the night of the social." In spite of her efforts, she couldn't keep the dry sarcasm from her voice, "My husband needed my attention after your conversation with him."

Frank had beaten her afterward until she'd forgotten about escape and prayed for survival. Appeasement, while she learned defense against his brutality, became a way of life.

She was jerked from her reverie when the Indian rancher stepped closer. Before she knew his intent, Grady Hawks cupped her face, holding her chin in strong fingers.

"Mister Hawks, I don't care who you are, or who you think you are. You'd better get your hands off of me." Jewel tried to jerk her head free, but his hand tightened while he explored her once-again bruised cheek, turning her face into the light to study her profile. Then he grunted and stepped back, releasing his grip.

"Will she do?" The question came from Hamilton Quince, who was also standing now.

Chapter Three

The woman named Comfort watched silently; a frown of disapproval marred her beautiful features. "Mrs. Rossiter, perhaps I could get you something to eat. Or, if not, at least a cup of coffee."

Jewel's stomach rumbled. She hadn't eaten since the evening before. But, it was more important to be on her way. She took her cue and answered socially, as though they were enjoying an evening of pleasant discourse.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Quince. I will return your clothing as soon as I am able, but I need to be on my way. Now."

She'd had a familiar feeling, of disaster about to happen, hearing the exchange between Grady Hawks and Hamilton Quince. The sound of voices cut through the air, and Jewel eased over to the window as Comfort Quince moved toward her front entrance that faced the only street in Eclipse.

Sheriff Potter was outside. Jewel hadn't seen him leave, but now, on his return, he was followed by a mob. They crowded across the walk and would have shoved through the door, but Comfort blocked the way until the sheriff stepped inside, towing Judge Conklin behind him.

She could tell from the tension in the room that trouble was expected. Escape through the front was now impossible, since the porch was surrounded and overflowing with angry people. *It will have to be the back door, and soon.* Jewel readied herself to make a run for it.

"I didn't kill Frank Rossiter, Sheriff Potter. Am I under arrest?" At the negative shake of his head, she asked aggressively, "Can I go now?"

She tried to hide the tinge of fear in her voice, forcing her tone to sound reasonable. "I'll go out the back way and slip out of town." But she could see from the grave expressions on the other inhabitants of the room that those weren't the plans in play.

Will she do? What now? All she needed was for the respectable citizens of Eclipse to decide they could use her somehow. She'd already met most of the unsavory sort, and these people didn't impress her as being much better.

Grady Hawks hadn't spoken again, leaving Jewel wondering about his presence. She had a feeling that he was more of a threat to her than the lawman or the judge. She could still feel the place on her jaw that his callused fingers had gripped.

From across the room where Hamilton Quince stood next to his wife, her hostess asked anxiously, "What about the children? Where are your little girls?"

Jewel whirled and strode toward the other female in the room, wanting to accept this woman as an ally—to trust her—but unwilling to believe in the goodness of anyone now present. The Indian reached for her, and she brushed his hand aside.

"What do you know about my children?" She'd wanted to appear polite, civilized, but instead her voice came out a harsh demand.

Hamilton Quince unwound his length from his chair and stood, stepping between Jewel and his wife.

"It's all right, Ham, let me talk to her." Comfort Quince maneuvered around her husband and reached a hand out to Jewel.

"I know that you have two baby girls. You've named them Amethyst and Emerald." The woman was eager, and her face flushed as she spoke. Jewel stepped back. She was suddenly sure no help would come from Comfort Quince. This woman had her own agenda.

"I know that you have struggled to care for them, and they were the reason you and your husband parted."

Jewel stared at her astonished. *Since when is my business of interest to the Queen of Eclipse society?*

Jewel had lived in the town and around it long enough to know that Comfort Bailey had married her way up, from crooked sheriff, Owen Bailey—now deceased—to rich rancher, Hamilton Quince. It was also reported that there was nothing Hamilton wouldn't do for his wife, including kill her first husband.

Along the way, Comfort had accumulated the Boarding House they were occupying, and the Mercantile, where Jewel couldn't afford to shop. It was obvious the woman was no fool.

Add to that the lustrous dark hair, elegant height, porcelain skin, and full ruby lips, and it wasn't surprising that she was the arbiter of Eclipse male society. But what was unexpected was that she also ruled the female population and guided them with a firm hand.

But Jewel was sure the Comfort Quinces of the world understood nothing of the underclass—the gamblers, drunks, and whores that made up the town the Rossiters had visited.

Awful fear swept over her, and she clenched her hands to keep them from shaking, palsied like an old woman. She thought she might suffocate on her own panicked awareness of danger. Inside and out, there was no ally to be had.

So close, so close ... just let me survive these next moments to get out of here. Please...

Her entreaty was a nameless mantra to herself. She'd given up praying to God when he stopped listening. Jewel gathered her wits and hid her terror.

"Why do you know about my children?" She phrased her question carefully to maximize her request for information and minimize the time it would take to get it.

It was a conversation between women. The men in the room were excluded, and none attempted to interrupt the tableau. "I ... have been concerned about their well-being. I know that a woman like you..."

Comfort paused, her cheeks flushing a darker shade of rose, as she continued, "Forgive me. I know that your life has been difficult. What I meant to say is simply, I, that is, my husband and I, would like to adopt your daughters."

Once the words were out of the woman's mouth, Jewel felt almost relief. She'd expected some nameless horror.

"Of course you can't adopt my daughters." She relaxed and made to step back, but the other woman claimed her arm and stopped her.

"Listen to me." Even as Comfort took her arm, Jewel shook it off and stepped back. "Listen to me, Jewel Rossiter. You cannot give those precious children a good home. If you love them, you'll see that they would be much better with my husband and me. We can give them everything..."

"No." Jewel turned toward the hall door and started walking, all the time clenching

her teeth to keep the bile of ugliness that festered in her belly from rising to choke her. "I'm leaving now."

I've got a buyer lined up for the twins, Jewel, Frank had taunted her just that morning. She'd thought it an empty threat to frighten her into returning to him. *They are female children, aren't they?*

Now the Quince woman stood there talking about taking her children, and Jewel recognized Frank's signature all over the deal. *He had it all set up to sell Emma and Amy, whether I came back to work for him or not.*

"If you paid Frank Rossiter money to buy my children, you made a fool's deal. My children are not for sale." Jewel couldn't keep the contempt from her voice.

"As a matter of fact," Hamilton Quince spoke finally. "I did pay the gambler money. But he assured me that you would gladly give them up. That you were not interested in motherhood."

Jewel could hear the rising voices of the crowd outside, and that, combined with what seemed the collective will of the room for her to hand over her family, released words ill-considered but true.

"Frank Rossiter had no right to take money from you, even if it's legal to buy and sell children, which I doubt that it is."

When Hamilton Quince would have interrupted, she added, "Frank Rossiter did not provide for his children and lost any right to them long before they were born."

The people in the world to which Frank had descended were animals not to be trusted. That Jewel had found out firsthand. Evidently Eclipse society folks were of the same ilk.

"All the more reason for you to let us have them," Hamilton Quince spoke sternly, showing Jewel why he had a reputation for ruthlessness. He stepped in her path, blocking the door.

"It's not like you're a respectable widow with the means to support two children. Everyone in this room knows how you've made a living, Jewel."

Do they now, I wonder? She hoped nobody knew that Julie Fulton had fallen so far she'd had to take in laundry to support herself and the twins.

"I don't care what you think. Unless you're going to arrange for my death too, get out of my way, because I'm leaving."

Her implied accusation went unanswered, but the Quince couple retreated, no longer sure of their ability to control the gambler's widow.

If Frank had spoken true, and Ma Siler had the twins, every minute Jewel was detained her daughters were in danger.

She searched the faces of her captors. *Always read your subject, Jewel. They'll telegraph their next move before they make it.*

She'd become a moderately decent poker player following Frank's teachings. Now she tried to find a weakness in the wall of humans keeping her.

I can do this, Jewel assured herself. *I delivered my babies alone, on a filthy mattress, in a paper shack, kept them safe for five months, and I will get them back.* Frank had been disgusted when she'd turned up pregnant. She'd been frightened and resentful. She'd been too scared to use Ma Siler. She was ashamed when she remembered how she'd considered it. It had been a horrible nine months.

She'd hidden the sickness easily because the throwing-up time had mostly been in

the morning, and Frank had always been passed out or still gone. After he knew, his abuse had gotten considerably worse. It had curbed her ability to play cards in the last three months, although he'd tried lacing her stays even tighter to conceal her girth.

Her absence from his card games had taken their toll. He'd lost, and lost again—blaming her each time he came back empty-handed. He'd called her a fat cow, a leech, and an idiot.

She'd made him promise to get a doctor when her time came. The afternoon she'd gone into labor, Frank had said he'd go for help. Instead, he'd left Jewel writhing in pain in the only hovel they could afford after his losses at the table. But he'd found a seat in an all-night poker game and left her on her own.

But his leaving had been all she'd needed to conquer her initial fear. Her body had set its own rhythm, and she'd ridden the pains to glory. When she'd thought everything was over, she'd tried to clean herself, only to have her body give her a second gift.

* * * *

Jewel hugged her arms defensively across her chest and stared defiantly at Hamilton Quince. She'd moved her twin daughters to Flat Rock, a town on the other side of the county and made plans to get away from Texas and move to a better place.

Although she initially had been humiliated by the work of a laundress, success had changed her mind after she'd taken care of herself and the twins for five months. *I'll hold my nose and wash Old Man Tate's socks with a smile if I can just get back to my work.*

The dark outside told her more than the clock on the wall chiming eleven. *I need to get to Ma's place.* She assessed the distance to the door, ready to dart there the moment a path opened. She trembled from both anticipation and cold.

Suddenly, Grady Hawks dealt himself into the game. He picked up his coat, and before she could protest or step away, put it around her shoulders. She jerked, as his hand possessively smoothed it over her back.

She couldn't tell whether he was emphasizing ownership of it or interest in her, but her head went up, and she readied for a fight. Cold or not, she didn't want anything to do with these people. For a moment her eyes locked with his in combat. *Leave me alone*, she screamed at him silently.

She was surrounded by people ready to tear her life apart. She knew what the Quinces had in mind, but she still didn't know what the Indian wanted. She was pretty sure, though, that Frank's death had little or nothing to do with this gathering.

"Ma'am." She reacted to the low timbre of his voice, shivering as much from the tone as from the cold in the room. When she stepped from under his hand, and as politely as possible under the circumstances, gave the duster back, he said, "I've sent three trusted friends to fetch your daughters. You can rest easy."

Panic and hope blossomed. If the girls were away from Ma Siler, that was a good thing. "How do you know where Emma and Amy are if you didn't have anything to do with Frank's killing?"

He stared at her hard from those granite gray eyes and ignored her words. She clenched her hands, digging her nails into her flesh instead of his, to remind herself that this man hadn't shown any of his cards yet.

These people would do what they wanted with her, she already understood that they intended for her to have no rights inside this room but for the ones they granted to her.

But this stranger offered to get her children away from Ma Siler, and that moved him from enemy to neutral. She met his stare and muttered fiercely, "What is it you want, Mr. Hawks? Nothing comes free."

Jewel let her gaze slide across the room, assessing the members of the group for weakness or hesitation that she could use to her advantage. The others were grim-faced, showing no give.

Hamilton Quince answered her. "Mrs. Rossiter. Let me explain. Mr. Hawks finds himself at the mercy of Texas expansion. Since his father, Henry Hawks, is gone, there are those who seek to separate his heir, and others who have Indian blood, from land that they rightfully own."

She shivered and folded her arms. Word of Henry Hawks' robbery and murder had reached all the way to the territory when it had happened. *So this is his son.*

Jewel kept her back to the opening, ready to leave the moment an opportunity presented itself. But, meanwhile the cold that seeped under the front door found its way into the drawing room, and the draft intensified her chill. When she spoke, her voice was sharp with impatience and the need to quit the Indian's presence.

"Yes, well, I live in a one-room shack that I don't own, and if I don't pay the price for it, someone will throw me out. I don't have it in me to feel your concern."

She ignored Grady Hawks when he moved behind her. It was more important at the moment to keep Comfort and Hamilton Quince in her sights. "You and your brother own enough land to keep both of you busy, and Mr. Hawks' business doesn't concern me."

Hamilton explained, "Hawks Nest Ranch has something more valuable than grazing area. The largest spring-fed lake in these parts lies beyond Double-Q borders and is on Grady's land." He paused before adding, "My brother and I have an abiding interest in keeping the water open to all of the ranchers around. In this case, that means supporting Grady Hawks' claim. Call it stability, if you want."

So they're not bosom buddies. Just a case of you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. Jewel was aware of the tension in the Indian, almost a force that touched her.

Judge Conklin rejoined the conversation. "The Double-Q and Hawks Nest are the two biggest spreads in this part of Texas and control open range and watering rights for half the smaller ranchers in the area. As things stand, that's good for everyone." His voice took on the sharpness of outrage. "Couple years back, there was a concerted effort to tag one of the Quince brothers and steal the Double-Q. Hamilton and his brother Ambrose held firm and beat the bastards back."

He paused here, looking askance at his own words, "Pardon my language, ma'am," he nodded at Comfort and then, hesitantly, at Jewel. "This year there's a Business Consortium headed by a banker named Alan Michaels." Whatever else the judge was saying was lost to Jewel in a surge of panic.

The name Alan Michaels, itself, made her dizzy and sick. If these people were in a war with Michaels, they needed more than her help.

Finally, understanding clicked into place. *Dear God in heaven, tell me Frank didn't try to blackmail Alan Michaels.* Jewel remembered his whispered apology, *He knows ... sorry.*

What does he know, Frank, what does he know? Did you try to blackmail him? Alan Michaels shot a man in cold blood. Surely you weren't stupid enough to deal with the devil?

If Alan Michaels was in the area, she needed to leave with her daughters and get as far away as possible. Fear sharpened her voice. "Make whatever point you're skirting around, Judge Conklin. It's been a long day, and I have travelling to do tonight."

Jewel didn't bother to be polite to the long-winded jurist. Her voice was a whip of command. He responded with a look of new deference.

"Hawks is a breed"—he nodded apologetically at Grady and continued—"You know, part Indian. Something like a quarter or such, right, Grady?"

"It was only last year or so that the Comancheros burned out Buffalo Creek and the renegade Apache, Mangas Colorado, attacked Eclipse. Everything was fine as long as Henry was alive. But..."

He cleared his voice twice, looking away from Grady Hawks uncomfortably. "Grady needs to marry white, so he can prove himself loyal to the ranch community hereabouts."

She looked closer at Grady Hawks. Except for the blue-gray eyes, he looked pure Indian to her, but one drop or full-blooded, it made no difference to her. There were more savages in the west than the Indians.

"I don't see how any of this concerns me, or the death of my husband."

She called them back to the reason they'd hauled her in here and addressed the man who now seemed the center of everyone's focus. "I need to be on my way. Mr. Hawks, I can't feel sorry for your troubles. As you've heard, I have my own. I see no way we can be of service to each other."

It was her guess that until recently, the judge wouldn't have wasted the spit in his mouth to douse a fire on Hawks or her. But at her words, he set forward on the edge of his chair.

"Awful strange, you being pulled back to Eclipse, on the same day your husband Frank is found knifed in an alley using a blade belonging to Grady Hawks. On the surface, it seems like one or the other of you must have had something to do with it."

Jewel tensed. An accusation of murder sounded like it would be the next sentence from the Judge's mouth. "Arrest me for the murder of my husband, or shut up about it."

Now that she knew the children were safe and on their way, she was emboldened. She didn't consider why the knowledge of Grady Hawks at her back made her fearless. She listened to the conversation, biding her time till Emma and Amy arrived.

Chapter Four

Hamilton Quince accepted a cup of coffee from his wife with an absent, "Thank you, darlin'," before he spoke to the gambler's woman. Comfort Quince did not look defeated, merely resting for the next battle.

Grady maintained his stance behind the Rossiter woman, blocking her from leaving, although he had no intentions of tackling her if she fled.

"Mrs. Rossiter," Quince began. "The U.S. government and a number of Texas expansionists are engaged in passing new legislation that would open Indian lands for white settlement. The land that Hawks Nest is built on contains two 4,500-acre parcels, given to Henry and Gregory Hawks in 1836..."

Jewel Rossiter swayed on her feet, obviously exhausted from the day's events. She didn't protest or notice when his coat found its way around her shoulders again.

"...The brothers built a cabin on the land, and immediately negotiated with the neighboring Kiowa chief for Indian wives." Hamilton Quince, once again the picture of a dilettante, paused to sip his coffee, nodding at the spot where Grady stood, before he continued.

Grady half wished the gambler's woman would speak up and tell Quince to shut up too. He was as tired of the story as she appeared to be disinterested.

"Grady's mother disappeared not long after his birth. His father, Henry Hawks, never married again and had no more children. Grady's uncle, Gregory Hawks, and his Kiowa wife perished crossing the Brazos River during a cattle drive. Their son, Grady's cousin, Dan Two-Horse, lives most of the time with his mother's people and spends little time in the ranch house that his parents once occupied."

"I don't need to know Mr. Hawks' business, because it has nothing to do with mine." Her flat words to Hamilton Quince pleased Grady. The woman had fire in her belly.

Hamilton Quince's eyes were cold when he paused in his telling and took a sip of coffee, speaking directly to Grady Hawks. "There's not much about his circumstances that hasn't been discussed recently, since it affects all of us in Eclipse. Grady's dad was shot down on his way home from Eclipse, eighteen months ago, upsetting the balance of power in the valley."

Then Quince turned back to Jewel and continued his explanation as though she'd not spoken at all.

"Although Hawks Nest has been in the Hawks family for almost fifty years, the representative of the Eastern Land Developers Consortium, Alan Michaels, suggests that Hawks Nest is not a ranch."

His face took on a reflective quality as though he'd considered the merits of the proposal but found it did not benefit the Quince brothers.

"He wants the land to be considered tribal property that, under this pending legislation, would give each cousin a 160-acre allotment and open the rest up for whites."

Judge Conklin broke in excitedly. "Ambrose and Hamilton Quince have blocked that scheme so far, and with their continued support and the backing of the local ranchers, we're attempting to head off a range war that could end up with a lot of people hurt and no one but an Eastern Consortium of businessmen winning."

Comfort Quince spoke in a soothing voice as she carried a silver coffee server around to refill the cups of the men. "Ambrose Quince and his wife, Lucy, are at the state capital, and have been since the end of fall branding. Ambrose will do his own share of arm-bending while he is there."

"The state has too many residents who carry varying amounts of Indian blood to push this through," Hamilton assured the gambler's widow, who had begun to wilt under the assault of three voices. "But there are Eastern businessmen spreading lies and promising eastern settlers that land in Texas will soon be opening."

"Any resident with a drop of Indian blood is threatened by the Allotment Proposal. Right, Judge?" Grady Hawks finally spoke, turning the conversation from *her* to *him*.

He had been watching the performers in the room—as a dispassionate audience. As such, he had to admire the grit the woman exhibited. She was dead on her feet, pale, drawn, and worried, but she wasn't about to let anyone present catch her unawares.

Thank God, the woman wasn't stupid. She listened intently to the explanation, although impatient for the white men to reach its conclusion. Since she'd received his assurance that the children were being retrieved for her, she'd calmed considerably.

He wanted the whites to get out. He had negotiating to do. This woman was no tame horse to be herded and corralled. She was as skittish and distrustful as a mustang.

Grady Hawks looked Indian, employed Indian ranch hands, and kept separate from Texas society. His very presence made white citizens uncomfortable. He knew that if it wasn't for the water supply that he controlled, the ranchers would have looked the other way when Michaels' Eastern Consortium pushed to remove him from his land.

It all came back to the water. Who better to control it, Grady Hawks and Dan Two-Horse, Kiowa, half-breeds, but sons of local ranchers, or Alan Michaels, a banker from back East? It was testimony to the common distrust of bankers and eastern lawyers that the cousins had won that contest.

The Rossiter woman found a chair and seated herself across from the window. His coat still wrapped her shoulders, and it satisfied him for the moment, but he wasn't sure that she didn't intend to jump through the opening and tensed to stop her if the need presented.

Grady could tell she attended the goings-on outside as much as in the room, as did he. Torches flickered in a night that should have been dark, which was a sure indication that there was trouble afoot.

"Again, gentlemen"—she nodded at the room at large—"I fail to see how this affects me or the death of my husband."

He studied her in the soft lamplight of the sitting room. Her hair was swept off her face and pinned loosely in a knot at the back of her head. She was exquisite—lush body and beautiful face with creamy skin and green eyes that were almost the color of emeralds.

I wonder how a colt from her would look. Like his Scottish da, she had a few sprinklings of freckles splashed in gold across the bridge of her delicate nose.

She's thinner, older ... harder than I remember. He hadn't consciously kept track of her after learning she was married to the gambler, but he knew every change that the four years of rough living had brought.

The frightened girl was gone. He faced a feral wildcat of a woman who could be any age between twenty and thirty.

Abruptly, Grady's attention was drawn back to Judge Conklin, who was ham-handedly trying to approach his proposition.

"Now as to that, we think you've been drawn into this to hang Grady for your husband's murder, at the same time rid you of Frank Rossiter's *protection*." The judge had the decency to stumble over the last word.

"Not, mind you, that you killed your husband, but that it has been made to look like you might have."

To her credit, she sat, hands clasped before her, giving the judge her full attention, though he couldn't seem to make his point.

Impatient with the judge's vague mumblings and explanations, Jewel Rossiter finally interrupted. "Judge Conklin, is there an ending to this discussion?"

Hamilton Quince summed up the bad news succinctly. "Whoever used Hawks' knife to kill the gambler knew both of you would be in town today. Think about it. One or the other of you is meant to be found guilty."

If those in the room were expecting missish protests or dramatic hysteria from the woman, she offered none. She might have stabbed her husband, and if so, Grady didn't care. She didn't mince words.

"Mr. Quince, if I have been following this conversation correctly, you were involved in bringing both Grady Hawks and me to town." She swung her gaze to Hiram Potter and continued, "I'd say this man could be named a likely suspect."

Then tiredly she stood and shrugged his coat off, ready to leave. "When will my children arrive?" she asked him, dismissing the rest of the people as unimportant.

Grady upped his opinion of her intelligence. *Frank Rossiter earned his death and she isn't wasting time pretending false concern.*

He could almost see her brain working as she processed the information, including the rising sound of a mob outside the house. Someone had been busy getting the rowdies stirred into frenzy.

"They will arrive soon. While we wait, I have a proposition for you." She straightened to face him, tiredness wiped away, as the fighter returned to face this new threat.

"I need a white wife; you have the bloodlines of the Scots. It's in your features, your hair, and the color of your skin." He almost smiled at the faint surprise on her face. It wasn't what she'd been expecting.

"Irish," she corrected him. "My dad called our people ridgerunners, redheaded Irish."

One woman against—he counted heads, three men and a woman who wanted her children. He admired her control. If it was him, he might have had to kill someone.

And then she spoke directly to all of them, moving toward him and the door he now blocked.

"Let me get this straight." She swept the room with a quick look of disgust. "Mr. Hawks, you want to parade me around the territory as your white wife, to prove how civilized you are. And Mr. Quince, you want me to give my children to your wife, a move that would also eliminate any inconvenience that might disrupt the show Mr. Hawks plans to put on."

Then she looked at Hiram Potter, who was clearly uncomfortable with the way the evening had gone. But she spoke to both him and Judge Conklin, "And you two, they brought in to make everything legal and tight."

After all the bullshit that had been spattered around in the talking, she'd filtered out what affected her. He gave her the courtesy of a tight smile. She considered him for a minute while the rest of the room studied her. She appeared calmer than she had been all night ... and resolved.

"No one gets my daughters, understand that. My children stay with me." Then she focused on him, and he was reminded that she wasn't a tame dog to be frightened into submission.

"Are you talking a real wife?" At his raised brow of incredulity that she might consider otherwise, she paused a moment and then amended her question. "Where would this magnificent coupling take place?"

He almost laughed out loud at her assessment but did her the courtesy of a straight answer. "Hawks Nest Ranch abuts the Double-Q ranch east of town. It stretches above the foothills behind Eclipse."

"Is it isolated? Can people come and go?" Evidently, the gambler's woman needed a place to lay low with her daughters for awhile. He declined to mention the duration of her visit.

It seemed to him that the location of the land might be the only temptation to her agreeing. She needed a haven. Maybe Hawks Nest would be that place.

Her knuckles showed white as she backed against a heavy piece of furniture and clutched the edge of the desk. *So, she's not as tough as she wants us to believe.* As Grady watched, her translucent skin blanched even whiter, displaying clearly the degree of her exhaustion, as her knees began to buckle.

He was on her in a second, his arm sweeping familiarly around her shoulders for support. "Only folks coming onto my land are those I allow entrance."

"I've had a husband, and I don't want another," she told him desperately, but already her gaze assessed him.

She was interrupted by Hamilton Quince, who edged close enough to follow the conversation. "Want plays a poor second to need, and right now, Mrs. Rossiter, it would appear that you need the protection of a man."

Grady remained expressionless and silent, letting Quince make his case. But the gambler's woman didn't spare a glance for Hamilton, intent on answers to her questions.

She skimmed the room with a suspicious gaze at the same time she spoke softly to him, pitching her voice so that even Quince couldn't hear.

"Pretty convenient me just being made a widow." Her tone was intimate, and although quiet, spoke volumes about her willingness to forget the matter if he did admit killing Frank Rossiter. But he had strong doubt that she'd agree to marry her husband's murderer.

"Did you, or your hireling, kill Frank Rossiter?" She locked eyes with Grady Hawks as though she could read his soul. She was a slender woman who reached his shoulder. She was bruised from another man's fists, but she questioned him with authority, asserting her right to know.

"No," he told her. "I can't claim that pleasure." From the sound of the mob, someone had been busy spreading the rumor that one or the other of them had killed Frank Rossiter.

"As you have heard, I have twin baby girls." Her bravado wavered at the sound of the mob's approach, and she waited tensely for his response.

"My wife will be protected, as will her family, because they will belong to me." *No sense in lying to her. She's as safe as she wants to be. I sure as hell don't plan to hurt her or a couple of kids.*

He shrugged and waited, admiring the way she hid her thoughts from those in the room.

"All right," she agreed, accepting his proposal. It was no decision at all when faced with the sound of her other choices coming up the street.

As they turned expectantly toward the judge, she asked. "How long will we need to playact?"

The others in the room strained to hear the negotiations quietly taking place, but her words were too softly spoken. He liked her voice and that she appeared to own some sense and had no need to rely on the others in the room to make her decisions.

"This is no playact. I intend a legal wedding witnessed by the leaders of Eclipse society. We will remain married, and you will give me a son." Grady felt her flinch and shudder.

She stepped back and away, shaking her head. "Don't be foolish. Playacting at being your wife is one thing," she told him. "But I won't give you a child like I'm promising you the first pup from the litter. I'll not leave a baby—boy *or* girl child—to be raised by you."

She was fierce with that disclaimer. He didn't factor in her experience with Frank Rossiter before his own temper flared. "You have a problem with my Indian blood?" Anger simmered as he prepared to say to hell with the whole proposition and take his chances with the crowd gathering outside.

But he explained himself, for her ears only. "I need to deed my spread to a son. My bloodlines range a little too close to my Kiowa mother for present ease."

Her expression was unreadable, but her hands still clutched the edge of the table. She asked, "Why would that fix anything?"

"We'll breed back to the red hair and white skin of my father. If I'm fortunate, my son will inherit those features." He frowned, irritated to admit his plan to deliberately dilute his Indian blood.

His voice dropped into a threatening growl. "After you give me a son, pale-skin or Kiowa, do what you will, but the boy remains with me." The crowd outside was louder, and Grady Hawks thought it was time for plain speaking.

"Ma'am, you need a husband, and I need a wife. What say you?"

The heavy tread of footsteps and flickering light of a torch had more of her attention than he did. She walked to the window and peered outside, ignoring the room's occupants. Grady had time to admire the proud line of her back and shoulders as she telegraphed her right to be left alone.

He mentally shrugged and admitted defeat. The gambler's widow had made her decision. He pulled on the brim of his hat and nodded at the others.

And then, because in a curious way he still needed to close out his memory of her at the Eclipse social, he joined her at the window, shielding her from the room's view.

She didn't flinch or respond, but their gaze crossed in the window's reflection. A shout outside and a lifted torch showed the crowd. But her gaze was tilted upward, fixed on a second-story window in the Golden Eagle Saloon. A man outlined there stood smoking a cigar and watching the mob. Her gaze refocused on Grady, and green fire met

cold slate.

"All right." She nodded her acceptance, surprising him.

It was a good enough answer for him. Negotiations were over, and he'd courted and claimed himself a bride. She turned to him, almost in his arms and lowered her voice, shielding the rest of the discussion from the other listeners in the room.

"Why is it, Mr. Hawks, that our paths seem to keep crisscrossing?"

He drew deep of her scent, the smell of Comfort Quince's soap and bottled pretties drifting up as he leaned closer to hear her husky voice. Her own rich musk wafted sweetly and tickled his senses, unexpectedly stirring an arousal. He was the first to step away, but he had the last word. "I think you know." His eyelids drifted to half slits, and a growl of hunger clawed at his throat. *Siren, they call her. Jesus.*

*

Jewel felt a minor triumph when her would-be groom stepped back. Although it shouldn't have been so, he took up more space than the others in the room combined. She assessed the half-breed rancher. *I think you know.* His muttered words erased any sense that she'd brought these troubles on him. Grady Hawks was just another man who wanted to use her.

He wasn't the biggest man in the room—that would be Hiram Potter. Grady Hawks was neither tall nor broad, standing no more than a head above her five and a half feet.

But his compact build exuded power that dominated everyone else—except her. The woman who was once Julie Fulton stared at him and resisted.

Jewel let her eyes play mockingly across his face as his eyes undressed her. "My husband just perished at the hand of a murderer, Mr. Hawks. Surely you would allow a widow a discreet mourning period."

Her words were now pitched to carry to the other room occupants. It was a call for agreement, protection, support. None was forthcoming.

She tried to look past his thin lips, blade-like nose, and copper skin to see the man beneath. But he remained expressionless except for the pale eyes that returned her intent stare. For a moment she was dizzy; a combination of little food, fear, and the trauma of finding Frank, threatened her with weakness.

Grady Hawks saw the moment her strength abandoned her, and he took her into his arms, preventing her slide to the floor. She looked up at the man balancing her weight, as he demonstrated his claim on her to the room members. For a moment, she wanted to close her eyes, let go, and let him take control.

"Get this woman something to eat," he commanded. It was that order that brought her back to attention. His nose intruded into her space, and she commented waspishly, "I'm fine. I want nothing from these people. Let me up."

Chapter Five

She pushed ineffectually at the forged steel of his shoulder as he remained close, his breath mixing intimately with hers.

"You're very strong," she told him. But instead of the compliment or flirt it might have sounded, it was a recognition of the damage such strength could deliver. Jewel shuddered involuntarily.

Grady Hawks set her on her feet but didn't remove the hand that telegraphed ownership from her back.

The judge licked his lips and looked alternately at the rancher and then at her. Jewel could see that the man of mixed blood made most of the people in the room uneasy.

When Judge Conklin moved toward her, Hawks shifted, subtly warning the other man away. And yet, he was careful to keep his gaze from touching any but her, ignoring the others in the room as though the two of them were alone. She was irritated at his possessive stance.

"Well, then, Judge. Mrs. Rossiter has agreed. Let's get on with it." The voice of Hamilton Quince interrupted the silent tableaux, urging haste.

"Wait," Jewel hesitated. Again, remnants of her former self clamored in her head. She turned to the man she had just agreed to marry. "I can't do this."

But, on the porch, someone yelled, "Come on outside, Jewel. Glad you're back in town. You can stay at my place for awhile."

"Better take her weapons away from her before you tuck her into bed, Jud." Julie recognized the voice of Ansell Harper, one of Frank's card buddies.

"Better yet, how 'bout we both tuck her in. I figure Jewel can handle us both," and then, as though he knew she was listening, he yelled, "Right, Jewel? You'll fuck more than one of Frank's friends at a time, won't ya?"

Her face burned in humiliation as the room's occupants listened. She stepped toward the door, ready to leave. "I'm going out the back way."

"I'll see to the care of your daughters and give each one a section of land when she marries."

Jewel stopped in her tracks. She had nothing to return to but a thin-walled paper shack that now had holes kicked in the side.

Her glance played over Comfort Quince, who sat tensely on the arm of her husband's chair, as he rested his hand on her hip. It was such an intimate gesture Jewel looked away. The Quinces hadn't given up.

If she stayed where they could watch her, she could lose her children anyway. The judge seemed ready to toady up to whoever wielded the most power and influence.

Grady Hawks was a rich rancher who could protect her and her children. "Access to water," she asked him, adding silently, *to be able to give my girls a dowry, a grubstake to protect them when they're grown.*

She didn't know much about Texas land, but she'd heard the word *water* repeatedly since this conversation had begun. So she put that in too and studied his face, looking for assurances. His eyes were cold and hard, but he nodded.

"One year. If there is no child in one year, the girls get their land or the price of it,

and I get enough money to set us up in a decent home when we leave."

He stared at her sudden, aggressive demand and then nodded.

"I want it in writing." She swung around to the judge, who laughed nervously, glancing at Grady Hawks and then back at Jewel.

"Might be best to put the conditions in writing," he advised.

Grady Hawks pulled on the coat that she'd abandoned, turned, and walked toward the door, saying nothing to the people in the room. The occupants didn't realize at first that he was leaving.

Jewel froze. She'd pushed too hard. Grimly, she stepped to his side and laid her hand on his arm, turning to face the others. "I beg your pardon. I'm accustomed to dealing with men who don't keep their word."

It was all she said, but she felt the stiffness of affront drain from his muscles as he turned her back into the room.

Once begun, the particulars didn't take long. "Your full name—we need to make sure this is right and tight." It was Hamilton who pushed the business forward.

When she hesitated, he assured her, "It goes no further than this room, but the documents need to be witnessed and legal. We need your given name."

"Julia Fulton Rossiter." She hadn't been that girl for four years, and it felt as though she called out another's name when the Judge made fast work of the ceremony. The vows consisted mostly of *Will you?* and *Do you?*, wrapped up in male ownership papers. As soon as the last promise was made, she asked, "My girls?"

Before anyone could answer, the front door banged open and rowdy drunkards filled Comfort's Boardinghouse. It quickly became the scene of a milling crowd determined to add to the developing story about the death of the gambler.

Several of the men at the front of the mob had other concerns. Teddy James had been her dead husband's drinking-and-carousing buddy, not to mention his partner in mutual scamming and thieving projects.

"Jewel, you need to come back to the Golden Eagle tonight. Frank had obligations we need to discuss." He leered at her familiarly, as if the last time she'd been near him, she hadn't slapped his face.

At least his girth blocked those who pushed from behind. "Hurry on over here, Jewel. I can't hold this mob back for much longer. The Kiowa half-breed knifed Frank, and the people of the town are fixing to get justice for your man."

If the mob hadn't been a real threat, it would have been funny. When Teddy said *your man*, Jewel wanted to ask, *Which one?* Instead, she looked toward Grady Hawks.

But it was Hamilton Quince who answered. "Don't know of any Indian hanging around town, do you, Judge?"

The question was caught and answered by Conklin as though rehearsed. "I came over for dinner with you and your lovely wife, and stayed for a meeting with those now present. I've not seen any strangers in town."

The judge avoided lying adroitly, and Jewel shifted her attention back to Teddy James fast enough to see his frown.

"Judge, we know for a fact that Sheriff Potter pulled that fancy knife that belongs to Hawks out of Frank's chest."

Hiram Potter spoke up. "How do you know that, Teddy? I didn't see you or any of your cronies around when Mrs. Rossiter and I found her husband. Maybe you need to

come on over to my office if you've got information."

In a seemingly friendly bear hug, Sheriff Potter turned the saloon owner and half pulled him from the door and to the outside, where Jewel could hear him calming down the mob.

"There are no murderers at Comfort's place, gentlemen. I brought the widow here to clean up and catch her breath before she has to face tomorrow." Several of the men called out offers to put her up, but Sheriff Potter shushed them and added, "Teddy, here, was making some dangerous and mistaken allegations, weren't you, Teddy?"

Potter continued as if the man had agreed. "First off, there aren't any Indians hanging around the town tonight. I'd know. Secondly, you fellas are causing a mite of disturbance here at Comfort's house." His observation was amiable as he pulled the saloon owner in his wake.

"Comfort was entertaining Hamilton Quince and Grady Hawks, as well as Judge Conklin and Mrs. Rossiter when this all happened." Jewel was pretty sure that the chokehold the sheriff had on Teddy James was enough to silence his dissent.

Hiram Potter's voice boomed as he directed the crowd. "I'd take it kindly if you'd all go home now. If you've got information, like Teddy does, come on over to the jail, and I'll take your statements."

Jewel watched the crowd disperse at Sheriff Potter's blanket invitation to visit the jail. As one danger receded, a second, much more threatening, reminded her that she had a new husband.

"Julie Hawks." His voice was a whisper of sound in the room, but it raised the gooseflesh on her arms and the fear in her heart.

She shouldn't have agreed to the scheme, but her best option at the moment seemed limited to a man she didn't know. "My name is Jewel. I don't go by the other."

But she spoke to his back, and he paid her no attention as he headed toward the door, clearly intending for her to follow.

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Grady didn't trust the woman the distance it took to get from one side of the room to the other, but that didn't seem to matter to his cock. He'd had to turn away from her to hide the swollen log in his pants.

He could feel the gaze of his new bride on his back, and his shoulder blades itched as he imagined her getting ready to stab husband number two. *Jesus, what did I just do?*

But he didn't have to look behind him to know why he'd jumped at the chance to maneuver the widow into marriage. When he'd seen Jewel Rossiter in town for the first time, four years before, he'd been stunned by her looks.

Like his father, her hair was the color of good whiskey. Her skin was pale and fine, with cheeks that were blushed with a peach color. He'd wanted to know her that day and had set out to make it happen.

Even then he hadn't liked her name. *Jewel*. It had seemed to him something a loose woman would call herself. He was glad to know her given name was Julia, even though his new wife had removed all doubt that she was for sale.

And not a two-penny whore, either. She just sold me a year or so of fucking rights, plus a baby, in exchange for good range land with water access.

Grady Hawks scowled at the thought of diluting his Kiowa blood with the mercenary white woman; at the same time his dick, now hard for her, didn't give a rat's ass what her

motives were.

On first glimpse of her, four years before, she'd seemed lost, scared, and adrift. He'd lingered in town after his father had driven the wagon home, stalking her.

Even after she'd checked into the seedy hotel at the end of town, he'd still waited around, hoping to get another glimpse of the exotically beautiful girl.

She'd been sweetly innocent then. He'd still been spying that evening when she'd braced Frank Rossiter, and he'd witnessed the blow she'd taken when the gambler used his fist on her.

Grady had reacted by instinct, yanking the jackass outside with the intention of beating him to death. It wasn't till the girl he'd followed all day had intervened, half carrying the worthless gambler to the wagon she had waiting, that he realized she was a married woman. And on top of that, she was married to the bastard who had punched her.

It should have been a bucket of cold water dampening his interest, but he'd still listened when gossip about her came round. She'd disappeared from Eclipse after that night.

But around the time Grady's father had been killed, the saloonkeeper, Teddy James, mentioned the gambler was back in town. The saloon owner had claimed that for a price, the gambler would share her.

Red hair or not, Da would have had a fit over this match.

It didn't matter. Grady thought about her pragmatically. She would do for his purpose. He needed to get a son upon a white woman.

He'd already figured that by marrying an Eclipse ranch daughter, he'd temporarily secure his stance in the county—but he didn't trust any of the locals enough to give a white woman's relatives a strong claim on Hawks Nest. That would just invite a bullet in the back, leaving a new-made widow ready to take over.

This woman had no relatives to protect her or steal from him. She would do. He'd have to watch and make sure no other males covered her until after she caught. Then—his face was grimmer than usual—then she could be on her way.

The hard years had taken their toll on her beautiful features. Lines marred her forehead and pinched a groove on either side of her nose, giving her an almost feral look. *A wolverine.* Grady saw her as the fierce animal, avoided by prey and predator alike.

Today he'd come to meet with Hamilton Quince. The territory was overrun with crooked land agents stealing Texas out from under white and Indian alike. When he'd received a message from Quince, calling for him to ride into Eclipse for a cattleman's meeting in town, he'd almost smiled.

He'd been here longer than most and sure as hell qualified as a cattleman, owning the second largest spread in the territory as well as the water rights needed by all. But since his father's passing, there had been few invitations to the Eclipse Cattlemen's meeting.

He'd arrived at Comfort Quince's Boarding House in late afternoon, tying up discreetly in the back. Other ranchers drifted in and out, giving him a stiff nod before they spoke to Quince.

According to Hamilton, the land grabbers were after the water rights that made the two ranchers allies. If today's meeting was intended to give him a heads-up, it had turned into more than that.

During the afternoon, he'd known that he'd left himself too vulnerable, with so many white men giving him questioning looks, like he wasn't one of them. For most of them,

the suspicious glances weren't a real threat, and Grady knew it.

But when the sheriff brought Jewel Rossiter and Grady's stolen knife to the boarding house, it was obvious he'd been set up. The woman was so recently widowed that she had her husband's blood on her hands, and it was the same blood coating the blade of the murder weapon. When it was apparent that one or the other of them was intended to be found guilty, he'd seen a solution to two problems.

He needed a white wife, and she needed someone to keep her out of jail or worse—Teddy James' brothel. He'd watched Comfort Quince escort the woman to the bathing room, and he'd stepped into the alley and signaled for his friends who'd ridden to town with him.

He'd asked Dan, Rowdy, and Navajo to find out what had transpired. When Dan had knocked on the back door of the boarding house and told him about the babies the gambler had left at Ma Siler's place, he'd been sickened. To have even a brief association with a woman who would abandon her children to the care of the slattern was unpalatable.

But he'd sent the men riding to retrieve the children to get them away from the old harridan more than for Jewel Rossiter's sake. His cousin, Dan, brought a canvas sack of clothes found in the alley near where the gambler had been struck down and figured that they belonged to the gambler's wife.

Grady subdued his distaste, reminding himself that the fact of her children proved Jewel Rossiter was fertile. It should be enough for him. He didn't expect to see the pedigree of the mustangs he caught and bred, he just used them to strengthen his thoroughbred stock. It would be the same with the gambler's woman.

Whatever mischief had been planned for the two of them would be set back by their alliance. That irony didn't escape Grady as he heard her footsteps, hurrying to keep up with him.

When he stepped outside into the alley, she was one step behind. "My children," she managed to say to his back, before he raised the lantern in his hand, and she saw Rowdy with his arms full of sleeping babies.

"You got them back for me." Grady was jealous of the smile she sent Rowdy. It was the first of its kind he'd ever seen on her face. She would have pushed Grady out of her way had he not stepped aside.

But it pleased him to see her reach for the babies, settling each close in her arms. So Frank Rossiter had lied. This woman was a true mother. That was suddenly more important to him than it should have been.

He looked with interest as she settled the two bundles closer, oblivious and indifferent to the men who watched as she clucked and crooned and checked the babies, who both continued to sleep.

Half a minute later, he scooted her toward the mounts. Navajo Leonard and Dan Two-Horse waited silently, appreciating her beauty until Grady glared at them. Even thin as a rail, bruised from hard blows, and wearing torn, bloody clothes, the woman was a fragile picture of female perfection. It didn't surprise him that his friends admired her looks. It did surprise him that he cared.

Her canvas bag they'd found stashed in the alley lay across the withers of the horse Dan rode. She headed for that mount, but Grady stopped her and turned her to the gentle mare Dan led. "My satchel." She nodded at the tattered bag expectantly, and waited until

he moved it to her mount.

When Grady lifted her to the saddle, he expected to have to fight her for one of the bundles, but she settled into the saddle, handing one of the babies to him while she arranged her blanket in a crisscross loop held tight by her belt.

Then, she snuggled the baby on her arm into the first pouch she'd created and reached to him for the other. He watched her arrange the second child in her improvised carrier, then take up her reins and nod.

She seemed oblivious to the men, and she hunched, crooning, over the babies as he led her mount into the plateaus that climbed toward Hawks Nest Ranch.

Chapter Six

Comfort Quince turned to her husband as the door closed behind the last of their visitors. Grady Hawks and his new wife had started the exodus home. Nothing in her graceful posture indicated anything but relief that they were alone. Comfort had spent a lifetime learning to mask her emotions—until she'd met Hamilton Quince and finally found a man she could love. He knew how much she wanted a baby and that she was devastated by this setback. She'd already assembled a layette of clothing and decorated one of the upstairs bedrooms. Her husband knew that her calm acceptance of the night's loss was a sham. "That's it, then." She sighed tiredly.

"Not necessarily, sweetheart," Hamilton assured her. "Married doesn't make the gambler's widow a good mother. Jewel Rossiter may say she wants those children now, but how long will that last when she's trapped up on that Godforsaken place alone with half the Apache nation?"

"She loves them, Hamilton." Comfort was no fool. She wanted those baby girls like she hadn't wanted anything else for a long time. Hamilton knew that, and he would act accordingly unless she stopped future actions right now. "I know what it is like to be desperate and alone. I don't think she's what you implied."

She scolded her husband's insult to Jewel Rossiter. "Her hands are not the hands of a prostitute. She's been doing hard work. Her hands showed it." Her own soft hands clenched as she added, "I want you to promise me you won't bother that woman again. It was not meant to be, and I won't steal a good mother's children to fill a void in my life."

Hamilton Quince wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his embrace. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

Comfort's pensive gaze lifted to meet his. "Many times, but I never tire of hearing it anyway. I adore you." She smoothed the material of his shirt as she repeated softly, "Promise me."

Hamilton's answer wasn't the pledge she'd requested. "Nobody knows if she *is* a good woman, darlin'. Common gossip says that Jewel Rossiter is a rough woman who joined her husband in his illegal dealings. If the day comes when I see that those babies need to be moved, I'll not hesitate. And it will be for them as much as for us."

"Hamilton, I could see her love for them. She was fairly eaten up with worry, and all you men just made it worse."

Hamilton answered her fiercely. "I paid that sonovabitch she was married to a thousand dollars apiece for the twins. I'd like to know what happened to the money. I don't think your *put-upon* woman is as innocent as she would have us believe. I'm not finished with Jewel Rossiter Hawks. Before it's all over, it won't surprise me at all if Hiram Potter discovers that she killed the gambler."

"Her face still bore the marks of his abuse," Comfort said with disgust. "If she killed him, let it be. She did the town a service. As for the money, this was my scheme. Take it out of the Mercantile profits at the end of the month. I want this over with."

She wasn't sure, though, that her husband would follow her wishes this time. Hamilton wanted her childless despair at an end.

"I'll get us a daughter, Comfort. I want this as much as you do." She was certain that

he already had feelers out looking for other potentially unwanted baby girls. When they'd discussed adopting, he'd grimly refused to consider a boy. It only served to deepen her sorrow knowing that she could never give Hamilton a son.

* * * *

Stoically, Jewel rode the animal, focused on one thing at a time. Emma and Amy were safe. The way they slept worried her. She was sure Ma Siler had given them something to keep them quiet. The wind whistled around her thinly clad shoulders, and she held the twins closer, sharing as much of her heat with the girls as she could.

She ignored Grady Hawks who kept his horse between her and the other men, making it clear she belonged to him. They all rode together, but he was in charge. *It's only a year. A person can do anything for a year.* Her thoughts chased themselves like a squirrel caught in a cage.

They eased out of town under cover of darkness and rode through the cold night. When her hands were too chilled to hold the reins, the man who now owned her reached over and took them from her stiff fingers, leading her mount. She pulled the girls closer and huddled her body around them but shivered at her feeble attempt to find heat where there was none. Jewel was afraid that she'd never be warm again.

When they were away from town and the immediate danger left behind, Jewel had time to assess the ramifications of her hasty decision. It had been Alan Michaels watching the mob descend on Comfort's Boarding House. At that moment, the rancher's offer had seemed the only option.

Now Jewel looked at Grady Hawks, who in making her his wife offered safety but also new peril. Had she been alone, she might have cried aloud, *Dear God will this ever end?* Instead, she pulled the blanket tight against the wind and held on.

Her life had toughened her, but still her thighs ached where they grasped the saddle. Her body rocked with the horse's movement, each step lolling her closer to exhausted sleep.

They left the main trail shortly out of Eclipse and cut across rough country that rose and gradually turned into hills dotted with scrub pines.

As night turned into dawn, Jewel had a glimpse of the ranch long before they arrived. The trail that wound through the trees descended toward the house giving her both a front and back view where the fall foliage thinned in places. It appeared to be a meager dwelling built of mud, logs, and fieldstone and sat on a bare piece of ground, standing unadorned and ugly.

As if sensing her mother's disquiet, Emma finally woke up, nuzzling against Jewel's bosom, searching for her next meal. Her fussing roused Amy and both babies loudly announced their hunger. The sounds of the lusty cries in the early morning brought sudden relief, and Jewel sagged in the saddle as tears of relief streamed down her face. She'd been so afraid...

None of the males keeping her company reacted to the squalls emitting from her makeshift carrier. The nappies wrapping the girls had passed from damp into sodden. "My babies need changing."

They stopped immediately, and Grady Hawks stood close, holding one daughter, while she fumbled dry, swaddling clothes out of her satchel, for the other. The wind whipped the cloth loose, and it would have flown from her hand if Grady Hawks hadn't

caught it. He moved closer, protecting her as she crouched low to complete her task.

When she stood, they exchanged babies, repeating the process. The thin covering she'd wrapped them in was damp, and without her asking, he slid his coat around her shoulders and then wrapped the girls in his own blanket, blocking the high wind that blew chill across them.

"Loosen your dress and feed them." Her new husband's orders were terse and stern. When she looked over his shoulder at the other men, he stepped closer, blocking their view as she unbuttoned her bodice with shaking fingers.

She was accustomed to handling the unwanted attentions of men. But it shamed her to have her daughters be part of the tableau.

The binding towel was wet and sticky with milk that had leaked from her engorged breasts. A hot blush of embarrassment swept her as she struggled with the tight cloth. When his knife parted the material, she flinched back, causing her milk to shoot from her teats, dampening the front of his vest.

"Stop looking at me." Jewel fumbled to close her dress and waited tensely for the slap and ribald remark.

"Babies need to be fed. Too cold out here to stand around." He brushed aside her efforts to conceal her white flesh, and watched, fascinated, as her daughter's pink lips settled around her mother's turgid nipple.

Jewel's throat closed on a sob, but she stifled that show of weakness. Her other daughter's anxious demands filled the air, until Grady Hawks spread her dress wider and set the second baby to feed.

She stood, awkwardly balancing the girls, until Hawks circled her waist, growling, "Hang on to them." Then he stepped into his stirrup, lifting the three with ease. He seated Jewel across his thighs, and she settled the babies, who quickly rooted like little pigs at breasts that had inexplicably stopped giving milk.

His arms hugged her close as he reached around, guiding the horse that they all now rode. The blanket cocooned her next to his warmth, and her neck ached with the effort to keep her cheek from resting against him.

She shuddered, remembering that she was riding on the lap of her new husband, whose knife had killed her former husband. Finally, he solved her struggle to remain upright by roughly pushing her head against his chest. With no way to protest, gradually her body swayed, following the movement of the horse, and as she relaxed, she felt her milk come down, flowing from her into the hungry mouths of the babies.

The other men who had fallen in behind them, offered no talk, as they picked their way through branches and brush, following a trail marked only for their eyes. When they emerged from the woods hours later, they were in the clearing that Julie had seen from above.

Ugly or not, it was a relief when they arrived at the house. It had taken half the night and almost a full day to arrive. From the back of the clearing, Jewel could see that her first impression had been incorrect. It was not a small building, but a long, low structure that had been built to blend with the landscape.

Holding both her and the girls, Grady Hawks slid off of his horse, carrying them all to the ground before she realized his intentions. Her legs were stiff from cold, and she staggered, finding her balance on land.

He took each baby into his arms and headed for the house, leaving Jewel fumbling

with the buttons on her dress which flapped open. Shivering from the wind, she hurried into the lodge behind him.

"Snow tonight," he told the other men who remained mounted, ready to ride on.

"Post the sentries and keep good watch. We might have been followed."

Jewel mulled that over silently. Evidently the path they'd ridden was not the usual course to the ranch.

"Are you expecting trouble?" For a moment she thought that he wouldn't answer her. He waited until her canvas bag was inside, and the other men had departed.

"I don't hunt trouble, but when it's on the way, I don't hide."

It was such a male response, if he hadn't been so intimidating standing before her, she might have laughed out loud. As it was, Jewel let her gaze play over the interior of the house instead of the man.

A stone fireplace comprised the entire end wall of the room she stood in. Jewel looked longingly at the empty grate, no longer able to hide the shivers she'd been trying to disguise. She had never felt so vulnerable.

Her fingers were stiff with cold, and the clean dress Comfort Quince had given her now clung wetly to her front, smelling of milk, urine, and baby spit-up. It seemed a likely deterrent to advances, albeit an uncomfortable one. She wasn't sure what the next move would be or whether it was hers or her new husband's.

Without her asking, he moved to the stacked wood and quickly got a fire burning. She carried Emerald and Amethyst closer, laying them on his heavy blanket to protect their soft bodies from the hard wood of the bench. Then she peeled off the underclothes that were wet again and washed each baby with the rag he provided.

"...Babies done feeding?" It was an honest question that nevertheless brought a flush to her cheeks. *This man has looked at my flesh already.* Dislike coiled low in her belly, angry that he'd spied on her in an intimate moment meant only for her family. She bent to pick up one daughter, avoiding his gaze, concealing her own.

"No," she admitted. The girls were still hungry. *Feeding them is more important than covering what he's already seen.* She planned to feed Amy and soothe her to sleep and then tend Emma. But when Jewel placed Amy at her breast, Emma emitted a distressed baby sob, unhappy to be alone, and lay waving her feet in the air, whimpering.

"How old are they?" When she would have set down Amy to take up Emma, Grady lifted the fussing baby to his shoulder and rubbed her back until a contented hum emerged.

Jewel looked at him sharply. Not many men held a baby so comfortably. Emma settled down, satisfied to be held and cuddled. Grady Hawks stared at the baby's hair, fingering a curl meditatively.

The golden strand he rubbed between two fingers showed its reddish cast in the firelight. "You'll breed true," he grunted in satisfaction.

Jewel turned her back on him and fed Amy, stroking her soft hair as comfort for both of them. She anxiously listened as Grady Hawks tended her other daughter. When Jewel's nipple slipped from between Amy's lips and the baby fell asleep, the tiny mouth continued to open and close, dreaming of her time at the breast.

Jewel's breath hitched on a sob as she stared at the innocence of the child entrusted to her keeping. Under the man's attention, Emerald had stopped fussing and waited for her meal patiently as Grady Hawks cuddled her in his arms and stroked her curls. Jewel

noticed how gently he held the baby and the way his swarthy skin contrasted with Emma's.

He met her eyes and asked again. "You never said their age."

"They're five months old," she told him softly, pride swelling inside at how perfect they were. The girls were plump and healthy.

"Feeding one calf takes a lot out of a cow—two'll pull her down if she doesn't eat enough."

Jewel didn't know how to respond. The man talked about her as if he'd just acquired a new cow in the herd. She decided any answer would be insulting or antagonistic, and she was already sore from Frank's fists. She remained silent and fed Emma as he watched with eyes that never wavered.

Emma drank from her mother's breast, burped, and quietly went to sleep. Jewel laid her on the blanket-covered bench beside her sister and faced the stranger she'd married. "I'll need a place for the twins to sleep." She frowned at him, edging closer to her daughters.

"I'll fix up a makeshift cradle for tonight. We'll improve on it tomorrow," he told her.

Silently, she nodded her head in agreement but stayed next to the bench and steeled herself to show no fear. When he pulled on his heavy coat and left the cabin, she sank onto the end of the bench, relieved of the need to pretend indifference to his presence.

She was so tired that she was ready to curl up on the floor. Instead, she gathered the babies to her, sagging under the double weight.

"As fast as you're growing, daughters, I'll soon not be able to hold you both at the same time." She crooned to them softly, carrying them with her as she explored their new home.

It wasn't the humble dwelling it appeared to be from the outside. The front room they'd entered was heated by two stoves and a rock-faced fireplace, and Grady Hawks had started a fire in each before he left. The room glowed in the soft firelight. For a moment, she stilled, turning around to take in the beauty of the simple structure. Wind rattled the windows reminding her that she had more work before she could rest. The babies needed a secure bed for the night.

Jewel walked from one end of the building to the other. Frank had drilled his axiom into her head—*learn where all the exits and entrances are before you get comfortable*. It was a rule that had served them well.

There were no partitions in the long rectangular space, but she could see that it was used for both eating and living. The kitchen was at the opposite end from the fireplace. It had its own water pump and sink, a luxury Jewel hadn't had in almost five years.

A door opened from the kitchen into a hall and doors that opened into bedrooms. Regardless of Grady Hawks' promise of a *makeshift* cradle, she chose the smallest room that held a bed wide enough for her and the twins. Then she laid her daughters down, tucking a brightly colored blanket from the foot of the bed, around them.

Jewel rolled another blanket so that it would act as a bolster to keep the babies from falling off, and shoved the bed against the wall. After securing their safety, she continued to explore. There was another door at the end of the hall, and she hurried through it.

Jewel had never seen anything quite like it. There was a pit with rocks in the middle, and stacks of wood along the side. The room was cold, and she shivered, wondering what they roasted there. The wooden floor in the cabin left off in this room. Huge flagstones,

like those used in the mammoth fireplace, were fitted together in a mosaic pattern, giving this room an exotic look. Except for an outer door, there were no openings or windows, but Jewel marked that exit and turned to leave.

The outside door opened, and she looked up, startled when Grady Hawks stood in the doorway. Big flakes of snow floated to the ground behind him, covering the ground rapidly.

"What are you doing in here?" He scowled at her and searched the corners of the room as though looking for others. "Where are the babies?"

"Asleep." The word was barely a whisper. His frown changed to a speculative look she had seen on too many male faces.

A light shone behind him in the building that Jewel assumed was the barn. She took her time answering, aware that his interest was more than concern for her daughters. His eyes appraised her openly, measuring the woman he'd bound to him.

"What is this room?" Jewel tried to distract his attention from her. She was swaying on her feet, ready to fall down, covered in the scent of breast milk, and he still looked at her with lust. It was hard to hide her disgust, and he must have gotten her silent message.

"Sweat lodge," he growled, but then he surprised her when he turned to leave, grunting, "You look like you're done in. Better clean up and get to bed before you fall down."

As a welcome to her new home, it wasn't much, but it was the best offer Jewel had heard in a long time.

He left the room through the same door, and she gritted her teeth as she hurried to the kitchen, swallowing the thick knot of resentment that constricted her throat. *This arrangement with Grady Hawks is one I agreed to.* What was it Hamilton Quince had said? *Want takes a poor second to need.*

If Alan Michaels was hunting her, it was for one reason only. *I know he murdered a man in cold blood.* Jewel shuddered at the thought.

She surely *needed* a place to hide until she could leave the area. But looking around at her temporary home, she realized that Grady Hawks hadn't exaggerated. Hawks Nest really was a fortress, just as he had said.

In the kitchen, she pumped water into the sink and used a wet cloth to clean herself, getting out of her smelly dress and into her ragged nightgown, the only change of clothing she owned. Before she quit, she washed out the borrowed dress and soft chemise belonging to Comfort Quince and laid them out to dry in the big room before the fire.

As she changed, she was calmed by the knowledge that the ranch was isolated. Right now, her clothing, or lack thereof, seemed of little consequence. *Alan Michaels can't follow me here.*

Jewel went into the bedroom where the twins slept and curled around them, sharing her heat under the covers. She fell asleep immediately. The tumult of the day, the death of one husband, and his immediate replacement with another, was too bizarre for her to analyze.

Julie Fulton Rossiter Hawks gave herself up to oblivion and hoped that the next day would prove it all a bad dream. No one bothered her or her daughters, and she slept soundly, waking the next morning when Emerald flipped over on her belly and began to fuss.

Chapter Seven

Jewel fed and changed the girls, who promptly went back to sleep. She put the bolster up to keep them from falling and crept silently to the outer room, hurrying to the fire to grab her still-damp clothes.

The first thing she saw, bathed in golden light, was the double-sized cradle sitting in front of the fireplace. The fire crackled invitingly, and she felt the heat on her body through the thin folds of her night clothes. She knelt next to the baby bed and explored the craftsmanship, afraid to believe in good deeds.

It was made to hold both daughters. Gratefully, she went back to the cold bedroom, gathered up the sleeping babies, and returned them to the big room where she could hear them when they woke.

Then she shimmied into the dry chemise and damp dress and dared to hope for a day of rest that would give her time to gather her senses.

When Amethyst snuggled beneath the blanket and sighed contentedly, Jewel patted her cheek and then brushed a kiss against Emerald's forehead. "Your first bed, sweeties." She smiled down at them.

She and the girls seemed to be the only ones in the house, which suited her. She snooped, looking for food first, and after she found the lard, potatoes, and smoked ham on the sideboard as though waiting for her use, she fixed herself a meal.

She ate and relaxed for the first time in months. The girls were safe in a new cradle. Surely a man who provided such a nice piece of furniture for a stranger's babies meant them no harm. Then her mind skittered away from him.

He was a puzzle. In her world, people fell into two categories, those who hurt her—and those who didn't. So far he hadn't done the first, and the cradle seemed reason enough for gratitude if not trust.

Her exploration of his home the night before had revealed a well-built structure. It was chinked tight so the wind and cold from outside stayed outside. The floor, wood planking planed and smoothed until it was a rich golden hue, fit snugly together, and although cold under her bare feet, it was lovely.

She wandered the perimeter, inspecting the sturdy furniture and thick walls. When she arrived at the big fireplace, she ran her hand across its dusty surface. *Grady Hawks needs a good housekeeper.* An intricately carved wooden box sat halfway across the heavy slab of oak. She pulled the top off, and looked at the contents. Inside, a thin turquoise ring rested on a piece of soft deerskin. Jewel could tell the ring had some special significance. Hastily she replaced the lid, unwilling to be caught snooping.

She moved to look out of one of the two windows on either side of the door. Two more windows were on the back wall, overlooking the ridge that they had ridden down the day before. Jewel recognized the expense of the glass that let her see every angle of the ranch.

She wanted to curl up like a cat on the window sill and lie in the morning sun, absorbing the heat of the day. But curiosity drove her into exploring further. The most exciting discovery was the pantry. It was well-stocked, and she found loaves of bread stacked there next to a bin of potatoes.

The sound of horses outside alerted her to his arrival home. A quick glance out of the front window confirmed that he was not alone. He was accompanied again by the men from the night before.

Jewel figured that at some point at least one hungry man would come through the door. From the look of the long table that took up most of the space in the main room, more than Grady Hawks ate here. She briefly wondered who had done the cooking before.

Thanking the days when she'd helped her mother feed field hands on the farm, she ruthlessly sliced two loaves of bread, setting them on the table as she found a skillet and stirred together chunks of the smoked ham and diced chunks of potatoes, browning them together.

Whether the men smelled the food or her timing was better than it had been for awhile, as soon as the hash was finished the door opened, and the men from the night before filed in.

No one spoke or looked at her, so after setting platters of hash and gravy next to the sliced bread and honey already on the table, she crossed the room and bent to pick up the babies.

She paused long enough to tell them, "I want to thank the one of you who made this fine cradle for Emma and Amy, my twin daughters. It's their first bed."

The men ate as though she hadn't spoken. Her face flushed red at the insult. *So I'm to be a servant to his needs but not a person in the home.*

She stored that thought away for later and finished her speech.

"Anyway," she told them softly, "thank you." Before she could retreat, *he* spoke.

"Stay." Grady Hawks' one word was a command.

She froze. Shame flooded her. She'd responded like his pet dog.

Slowly she straightened and turned, tensed for the next show of his authority over her. Her eyes flickered toward the door, back to the babies, and then to him.

"Leave the babies and come here." She did not want to go one step nearer to Grady Hawks. Whatever tentative thoughts she'd had about trusting him fled her mind.

Men in general were dangerous, but she'd found that men in groups were more deadly than a pack of wolves. Whatever her husband had planned for her, there was no help to be found among the men at the table.

Her stomach lurched, and the food she'd enjoyed earlier threatened to return. She met his gaze and clenched her jaw as she walked toward him, obeying.

Jewel watched him evaluate her physical conformation as though she was an animal he checked for flaws.

When she stood beside his place at the end of the table, he turned on his seat and pulled her to stand between his thighs. *Here it comes.* She'd expected him to handle her in front of the men, if not worse. But that didn't make accepting his touch easy. She stood tensed, waiting.

"This is Julie Fulton Hawks. She'll give me the son that we need to secure our claim to Hawks Nest. Give her the respect due my woman."

Give her the respect due my woman? She stared at the wall, refusing to react as his hands fumbled at her hair. One by one, he pulled the pins from the bright auburn mass, and they all watched as it tumbled in shining waves to her hips. Jewel shifted her stance between his thighs, preparing to pick up her pins and leave. Instead, she froze as she

inadvertently brushed against the bulge that swelled along his leg.

But he ignored the contact and said prosaically, "If you keep serving up the bread that way, we'll run out before the next trip to town."

Startled, she looked at the remaining crumbs on the plate. It hadn't occurred to her that he bought the loaves, but of course, there was no one here to bake.

He called her thoughts back to him, when he tugged on her hair.

"Leave it down from now on." He'd wound his hand through its length and showed it to the other men. "Red," he growled. "She'll breed true."

Of all the arrogant ... She couldn't disguise her anger and forgot her fear.

He dropped the length of hair and turned away, dismissing her with a shrug. As Jewel began to gather her pins, he covered her hand and murmured without looking at her, "Leave them."

She hesitated. They were plain wooden hairpins, but they were all that she owned. She couldn't decide whether the battle was worth the effort. Without them, her possessions could be counted on less than ten fingers.

"I don't have a proper comb," she murmured, eyes downcast, testing to see if there would be punishment for backtalk. She was tense, ready to spring away if need be.

But he said nothing, nor indicated that he'd even heard. His hand lay still, covering hers, until she withdrew her fingers—empty. She fiercely resented his victory as she moved to carry the cradle from the room.

Silently, he crossed the floor and stood beside her before she could leave. She hunched defensively, preparing for the slap that didn't happen. Instead, he took the cradle and set the babies back by the fire, saying, "Too cold back there."

Jewel stood nonplussed as he returned to resume his meal. It was too much. She looked wildly at the table of men, desperately trying to keep from screaming at him. *What do you expect me to do? Stand here and wait for your commands?*

No further orders were issued, though, leaving her to make the next move. She cast a scathing look toward the men in the room and pulled the heavy bench so that she faced the fire. Then she sat with her back to them with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders as she lifted each twin for her morning meal.

As always, feeding them soothed her anxieties. She focused on the tiny hands that clutched her breast as first Emma fed, and then Amy. *This is what I was made for—this is my purpose.* She ignored the rancher who owned her for a year and already tried to dominate her.

Humming softly as they fed, she rocked her body until the twins blinked into sleep. When she laid each into the new bed and tucked the rough blanket around them, she became aware again of the men behind her, evidently listening to her because they weren't speaking to each other.

A year ... I can do anything for a year. Jewel squared her shoulders and went out the cabin door, leaving the babies for his tending. It didn't occur to her until later that she already trusted Grady Hawks to protect her children. Once outside, the brisk fresh air worked wonders on her spirit. She trudged around the house to the back, inspecting the building that would be home to her and the twins for a small time.

Logs already chopped gave her a purpose. She stacked a bundle in her arms, remembering occasions on the farm when she'd done likewise. The skirt of her borrowed dress was too long and caused her to stumble every third step, so she gathered it high and

used it to carry the wood inside.

When she fumbled the door open and carried the logs to pile them next to the fireplace, her long hair swung over her shoulder and tendrils caught on the rough wood.

She didn't even hear his approach before he reached across her shoulder, untangled the snarl, and pulled all her hair back, tying it at the nape of her neck with a leather strip.

"Can I borrow your knife a minute?" she asked him. He frowned at her, but unsheathed the weapon that had killed Frank and handed it over.

In one quick motion she flipped the long tail of hair over her shoulder and hacked it off.

"Here." She handed him the knife and the hank of hair. "You like it so much. You take care of it."

His eyes darkened and became slits of anger, but without a word, he stuffed the hair into his pocket and turned away. The other men were leaving, and he shrugged into his coat, silently following.

* * * *

"Well, howdy-do, good-day-to-you, and say what..." she murmured into the emptiness left by their parting. Ruefully she brushed the ragged ends of her hair that now touched her shoulders instead of hanging down her back.

"I don't believe he's much of a conversationalist, girls." Jewel was pleased with herself for winning that hand. She turned her attentions back to the babies who were awake and cooing from their cradle.

"Pretty fancy bed you've got there, ladies," she rattled on, covering one topic after another, using her daughters for both company and an audience as she worked in the main room of his house. It was clean, a little dusty, but not the clutter and filth that she and Frank had once shared.

Jewel shuddered, shying away from thoughts of before. She'd learned a long time ago that she couldn't change the past and made it a point to forget most of it. Until she'd given birth to the twins, she'd not seen a future for herself, either.

She looked at them tenderly. She'd been so scared, the whole time she was carrying. Jewel was glad her fear hadn't marked them somehow. Instead, every time she looked at Emma and Amy, she was surprised anew. "You are the best thing that ever happened in my life," she assured them as she peeled potatoes for a stew.

Remembering his caution about serving too much bread, she took the ground cornmeal she found, made sure it was clear of weevils and made a batch of johnnycake.

Once the mix of meat and cut-up turnips and potatoes was set to simmer on the cookstove, she put another pan of water on to heat and dragged the tub she'd located out next to the fire.

When she had the water ready, she bathed first one twin, then the other, laying them out on the spread blanket so they could kick and fuss in the warm air while she washed the nightgown of each.

"I think we need clothes, ladies. What do you think, Emerald?" Jewel liked to pretend that the girls understood her and frequently answered for them.

"You say I need a dress too? Well, that's not likely in the near future, little girl. But, I do have a suggestion about what you and Amethyst can wear while your nightgowns are drying."

Before she could change her mind, Jewel went to the first bedroom off the hallway where she'd seen a stack of clothes earlier. Glad that she'd gone snooping, she borrowed two of the three shirts she found.

The girls were five months old and growing. They were both scooting and moving on their bellies whenever Jewel let them try. The shack they'd lived in after she'd fled Frank had been infested with vermin, and she'd spent the nights sleeping with the babies next to her and carrying them around with her during the day, so they'd not been free to practice.

Jewel had guarded the babies from the minute they were born. She'd refused to return to the saloon and gambling tables, and as soon as she got the chance after leaving the birthing bed, she'd taken Frank's stash of poker money and run.

She'd been right to be afraid. Jewel shivered remembering the past violence of more than one man.

"Let's not think about that, Emerald." She squinted her eyes at the baby and buttoned her into one of Grady Hawks' shirts. "Mister *High-and-Mighty* is rich. He's got enough shirts to share with us for a minute or two."

She carried the clothed babies back to the kitchen and stripped off her clothes, hurrying through her own bath, all the while straining to hear the sound of approaching horses as she lathered and rinsed, washed her ragged hair, and every now and again, playfully sprinkled water on the girls who giggled and watched from their new bed. "You look fine, like young society ladies," she assured them as they watched her from the cradle, propped there like two dolls at different ends.

It was her intention to have the shirts clean and back in the bedroom stack by the time Hawks returned. But, she couldn't resist the lure of his bounty. After her bath, she carried the girls to his room and laid them side-by-side on the bed while she sorted through his clothes, enjoying the soft feel of cotton shirts.

Jewel held a pair of Grady Hawks' long johns up, and on impulse, dropped the blanket she'd covered herself in and pulled on a pair of his underwear, shifting the waist to above her breasts. Then she buttoned his last shirt over the ankle-length pants that outlined her shapely calves. The shirt hung below her knees. It was the color of red dust, and she stroked its softness wishing she had a dress that color. A turquoise-studded belt she found in her snooping, looped around her waist, completed the colorful outfit. Since her boots were wet and muddy from her morning trek through the snow, she left them off.

Her hair curled as it dried, bouncing on her shoulders instead of pulling on her head with its long weight. It was surprisingly comfortable, and she grinned, looking in the mirror on the wall like an idiot, remembering the astonished look on his face when she'd handed him the clump of hair. *Maybe he'll think twice before he orders me to do the next thing.*

She didn't hear the outside door open while she stood playing dress-up games like a child. The sound of Grady Hawks' voice was the first indication that someone else was in the cabin with her.

"Julie?"

She froze and looked for someplace to hide, and then stood transfixed, afraid to answer or move.

"Julie Hawks?" This time she could hear the sound of more than one man's voice, and she listened, trying to gauge his mood.

"Looks like your bride flew the coop, Grady."

They shifted language then, and she heard different voices, including her husband's, but she couldn't distinguish what they said.

On his third call, "Jewel," said in a stern voice that demanded answer, she gathered the girls in her arms and carried them into the main room.

One look at her and they all stopped talking. Then the one called Dan Two-Horse slapped Grady Hawks on the back and said something in the language she didn't know, making them all laugh.

"I didn't hear you come in." She stumbled over the words, aware that she'd been caught pilfering his possessions.

"Next time I leave, put the bar across the door." He didn't say anything beyond the warning meant to protect her and the girls when he couldn't. But his gray eyes raked her body possessively, as though by covering herself in his shirt, she'd become even more his. Her nipples tented the material, and she was embarrassed at how it suddenly seemed to cling to her breasts.

Grady Hawks reminded her of a big cougar studying its prey, readying to pounce. At the same time, she was uncomfortably aware that she was the prey.

Chapter Eight

Grady didn't know what she was expecting, but it sure wasn't a caution about barring the door. The way the woman flinched and froze when he was around told its own story of her recent abuse.

The bruise on her jaw, now an ugly mustard yellow, was testimony that Frank Rossiter had died too easily. Grady would like to have staked him out and slowly flayed him alive.

Julie carried one child on each hip when she hesitantly answered his third call. He'd been going to chastise her for not answering him twice; first when he called her given name and then again when he'd joined it to his. But when he saw what she wore, the words dried on his tongue.

The woman stood before him in leggings and long-tailed shirt that was the color of the desert morning. He frowned at her bare toes and grumbled, "Put something on your feet."

Jesus ... His cock was hard in two seconds just looking at her. Her nipples pointed through the material, emphasizing the rounded breasts beneath. Her face was flushed and innocent of the powdered artifice from the day before. In her flustered stance, he could see the young girl who had faced him outside the Eclipse Social years before.

He wanted to shove Dan and the others out the door, put the babies in the cradle he'd spent most of the night making, and explore his wife's body on the blanket in front of the fire. *Naked on the blanket in front of the fire*, he amended his thought.

Instead, he stomped his feet, loosening the snow collected there, and asked, "Food?" "Oh." She looked relieved.

Guess she could see from my face what I really wanted. He frowned as she hurried to leave the room. "Next time I call, answer." The tight swelling at his groin made his voice harsher than he intended.

"My name is Jewel," she muttered.

"Not anymore," he answered swiftly. "You are Julie Hawks, my wife, now."

For a year, he could almost hear her silent rejoinder. *For a year, and then we'll be free.* But she answered brusquely, "Sit down at the table. There's a pot of stew made, and johnnycake to go with it. My dress should be dry by now. I'll change. You can serve your own meal." Carrying the shirt-clad babies, one on each hip, she grabbed her clothing from beside the fire and hurried from the room. A scrap of white fluttered to the floor beside the door, and she left it behind, unnoticed in her hasty retreat.

Grady walked to the door and retrieved the material which proved to be linen pantalettes. He smiled, felt a tightening in his groin, and tucked the clothing into his pocket.

The men had waited for Julie to leave before speaking. Grady approved that. *On this ranch, there are too many secrets tucked away from the outside world to trust a woman who is probably temporary.* But he fingered the scrap of cloth she'd dropped and thought of the hidden pale skin that had blushed rosy pink as he'd watched her feed her young.

"Your woman has crawled under your blanket." Dan Two-Horse nudged him and laughed.

"I don't think she'd agree," Grady frowned at his cousin. They always ate meals in this room and discussed the work for the day, either before it happened or at night, to report back on how much got done.

All of the men in the room were part of Hawks Nest. They studied him openly to judge if he'd lost his mind. He'd gone into Eclipse to attend a cattlemen's meeting and ridden home with a ready-made family.

Aware of the new presence in the cabin, the men ate fast and talked at the same time. But intentional or not, Julie's cooking offered them solace with the uncommon smell and taste of a hot meal that had been waiting at the end of a hard day's work.

They all understood that it was better to get their talking done while the woman stranger was out of the room. But they scraped the last drop of stew from their plates and enjoyed the cornbread she'd baked to feed them. Trusted or not, the woman had already brought welcome change to his home.

Without the ranch fortress, most of the people on Hawks Nest land had no place to go, no home. Over the years, the elder Hawks brothers had built the ranch with the help of their Kiowa in-laws. They'd made it known that any man, red or white, who earned his keep with work would be welcomed on the spread.

When the Apaches were herded to San Carlos, many escaped and found their way to Hawks Nest, becoming part of the crew that worked the high country, drifting undetected among the cows and drovers.

As soon as the door closed, Rowdy spoke around the stew in his mouth. "Got the new drovers rounding up strays in the high country. Told 'em to hold the cattle in that box canyon and use what they needed."

"There are women and children with some of 'em, Grady. I don't know how that's gonna play out."

Grady's cousin, Dan Two-Horse, stared at the table grimly and repeated his position in an ongoing disagreement. "A man has the right to have his family with him."

The goal to separate the Indians from their lands had gained momentum and was largely aided and sanctioned by the government.

In late summer, the Apaches who had refused to be imprisoned on reservations had begun to drift in, finding sanctuary and jobs on Hawks Nest land before moving on. In turn, they protected the borders fiercely, all the while remaining invisible to the neighboring white ranchers.

Now Alan Michaels and his band of land-grabbing agents had focused on owning the property that offered life to hundreds of refugees. There was more scrutiny of the property than Grady was easy with. At first, he'd had been firm. *No women or children.* The Indian *men* could hide in open sight, mixed in with the Hawks Nest crew. The women were not so easy to conceal.

"It was a practical rule," Grady began stating his position again, but Dan broke in and finished for him.

"...To a solitary man who has no woman to miss, maybe. Now that you have a woman of your own, you'll understand the way it is." It was commonly held that Grady Hawks was as hard as stone. Since his father had been killed, Grady remained aloof from the others on the ranch.

But Dan Two-Horse had argued from the beginning that the Indians riding for the Hawks Nest brand earned the same rights as white cowpunchers. Those men had cabins

built for their families when needed. It was a moot point, since white drovers were rarely hired to work on Hawks Nest land. Dan argued that the common benefits offered to whites should be provided for the Indian drovers who came to the ranch and herded cattle.

But now, sanctioned or not, the Indian women were coming, driven from their homes by white men's expansion. Children were inevitable.

Christ, it's a mess churning into worse. Grady didn't have to look across the room to know that his own woman had reentered. The men had stopped talking.

The twins she carried, one on each hip, were evidence of her fertility. He'd never enjoyed the game of poker when he and his dad had played, but this was one gamble he was betting would pay off. His cock swelled, assuring him that it would be a willing participant.

He let himself follow the gaze of his men. She looked younger with no paint on her skin. The red hair that was left from her morning tantrum curled softly around her face and fell to her shoulders.

Her boots steamed by the fire, still soaked from the morning's trek through the snow, and he fingered the pantalettes that should have protected her legs from the cold. He frowned. She'd changed back into the dress Hamilton Quince's wife had given her. It was too long and dragged the floor, catching on things. After he'd watched her stumble over it twice, he rose, unsheathed his knife, and crossed the room.

"Stand still," he ordered her. He crouched at her feet and cut the bottom four inches of material from the gown. Her feet were still bare. "Pick your foot up." He wrapped the first foot in the extra length, tying it off above her calf. She stood still, teetering, trying to not touch him.

Deliberately he ran his hand up the inside of her bare leg. A flush stained her cheeks pink, and since he knew it wasn't passion, he figured it for anger and was careful with the knife she'd already wielded once this day. Nevertheless, he explored the smooth flesh that pebbled under his touch, her heat scorching his fingers that itched to climb higher.

"You realize you just destroyed this dress, so I will not be able to return it." Her anxious words warned him that this was serious. "I don't want to owe the Quinces anything. Now I do."

He ignored her distress and set her first foot in place to lift the other. When he finished, she had makeshift socks protecting her feet from the cold floor.

He stood, slid his knife home and looked across at the babies. They waved at him, almost making him smile. "You cook and clean." His voice thickened, as had his cock, while he'd knelt on the floor touching what he wouldn't let himself have yet. He turned away, controlling his lust and told her gruffly, "I'll worry about the Quince woman's dress."

She answered sharply for his ears only. "Cooking and cleaning are extra duty. You brought me here to be a broodmare. That's what you'll get. Anything else will cost you."

He turned back and gripped her chin, forcing her head up so he could stare into her eyes. "Breed true, then," as though by his ordering it, her womb would assemble a baby with the features needed to please the white Texas citizenry.

"Sometimes I wonder how it is that men, being as stupid as they are, have come to be in charge."

The woman had to have the last word, but she didn't shift away from him, and he

claimed that as victory. Whether she knew it or not, she hadn't feared sassing him.

His grip changed to a caress, and he stroked her jaw. "We're bigger than you, Julie. That's why a beautiful woman has to find a man to take care of her. Otherwise the wolves will take her down."

"Who protects her from her protector?" she asked bitterly.

He dropped his hand and stepped back. "Maybe you'll decide that you can trust him," he murmured the words low enough to keep them private between them.

He had no idea what he was talking about. The words were not the rehearsed thoughts he'd mulled on while he was away from her. Being near her had a way of knocking sense from his head.

With no explanation, awkwardly he pulled out the comb he'd carved from wood that morning. When he handed it to her, she hesitated before she accepted the gift and tucked it into her pocket on her retreat to the cold bedroom she'd staked out for herself and the babies.

Grady watched her leave the room and wondered how long he'd be able to restrain himself from claiming her. He wanted to bury his face in the soft waves that now touched her shoulders. He lay awake that night, imagining the silken strands brushing across his body and used his hand to get release.

At breakfast the next morning, he caught the other men staring at the rich auburn locks and jealously wished he'd never told her to leave it down. He didn't want to share that part of her beauty with anyone.

* * * *

It was late autumn. The snow that had fallen the night of her arrival marked the beginning of the new season. Grady rode out every day and let Julie have the ranch house to herself. Julie served breakfast for the men and then retreated to the other side of the room where she fed the twins as she hummed softly to them. Even the clink of cutlery against plates stopped as they listened to the woman's voice.

After his cousin, Dan Two-Horse, had given him direction, Grady followed a morning ritual with her.

Grady and Dan had been standing in the barn, ready to ride to the high country and bring in late calves when Dan had told him to go back inside and say good morning. "Your wife is like a thoroughbred that's been abused. Use her carefully, cousin. Woo her. Let her know that you're her friend, her protector."

At first Grady had bristled at the advice. But Dan had continued anyway. "She's your wife. Make her want to be your woman. She's a good mother. Start with that and let her know she can trust you."

Grady and Dan-Two Horse were more like brothers than cousins. They knew each other better than most siblings. Grady had followed his father's white path, although the white world held him at arm's length.

Henry Hawks, Grady's father, had married an Indian woman to gain the land and had used Indian ranch hands to hold it. While he was alive, the other ranchers looked to him to keep the Apaches happy. But his death left this part of Texas in an upheaval, coming at the same time as migrating tribes of Indians crossed the mountains fleeing the U.S. cavalry. The ranchers around Eclipse looked with suspicion on Grady with his mixed blood.

Dan, on the other hand, moved in and out of both worlds, mingling with the people of every race as easily as he whispered their horses.

"I see the way you look at her. That's good. She needs to know that you desire her."

Grady interrupted Dan sharply. "If you know so much about women, why don't you get your own?"

"I have a woman. She just doesn't know yet that she belongs to me." With no more explanation than that, Dan mounted and followed the other riders toward the foothills.

Grady had stood alone in the barn puzzling over his cousin's words. And then he'd gone back to the house.

"Thought I told you to bar the door." It wasn't much of a *good morning*, and she'd stepped back as though expecting violence.

"Come here." He could see that his gruff words frightened her, but he couldn't unsay them or change the tone he'd used, so he waited.

Her steps were reluctant as she approached. When Julie stood before him he studied her. The bruise was a fading mark on her otherwise creamy skin.

Grady cupped her face in his hands, holding her still when she tried to jerk away. "Easy," he murmured. "Be easy, I'll not hurt you." And then he'd brushed his lips across hers and departed, leaving her stunned and silent.

"Don't forget to bar the door," he reminded her as he left. He'd tasted her lips and wanted more. After that, every morning before he left for the day's work, he called her to him for a kiss. After the first week, she even wrinkled her nose at him when he told her to bar the door.

He took that as progress, since she smiled at him during the process.

*

They fell into a routine that gave Julie's fears time to settle. Temporary sanctuary or not, Grady Hawks made her feel that she had a home and a reason for being. The big, silent rancher didn't hide his desire for her, but he didn't bother her at night or try to get personal except for the kiss he insisted on from her every morning. So, she cooked and cleaned the cabin instead of worrying about what she couldn't control. *I'll not be beholden to him for any reason when we go.*

The oak planks she walked on grabbed her attention first. The beautiful wood was streaked with mud, and on hands and knees she scrubbed the area, knowing that her daughters would soon learn to navigate in safety there. The best she'd been able to provide before was a dirt-packed floor that was never clean no matter how hard she'd tried to maintain it.

She worked all day, pouring her tension and anxieties into the strength of her labors. When she heard horses enter the ranch yard, she cast a quick look out the big window to see her husband and the other ranch hands disappearing into the barn.

In a short time, the men filed into the room, following Grady Hawks to the table where their supper waited.

"Cold out," her husband grunted as he stomped his feet free of snow, leaving a muddy puddle where she'd just cleaned. The other men silently followed Grady's lead as they collectively headed for the food. Julie was aware of a few uneasy glances cast her way, as she mopped the floor free of the mess they'd tracked in. She didn't bother to hide her anger at the extra work they made for her.

While they ate the supper she had waiting, she left the twins in their cradle by the big

fire and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. Taking up the carrier she'd found by the fireplace, Julie escaped to the outdoors.

The snow in the ranch side yard was trampled and dirty, but the area in back where the woodpile sat was unblemished.

The air was crisp and invigorating as she stood in the pristine world and breathed deeply. It was the first time since the twins had been born Julie had ever felt completely free of fear. Her mission to fetch wood was forgotten as she stood in the middle of the clearing, gazing at the forest they'd ridden through to reach Hawks Nest.

She heard the snow crunch behind her but didn't turn to greet his approach. Instead, she pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, a shield from him as much as the cold.

"Thinking of walking out of here with a baby on each hip?" He stood behind her shoulder, not touching but so close that she felt his heat.

"No," she answered him honestly. "I was wondering what keeps your enemies from sneaking through the woods and catching you sleeping."

He relaxed into an easier stance as he laid big hands on her shoulders, pulling her back against his chest. "I do."

"One man can't guard a border this long." Alan Michaels was on her mind. She needed to know that Grady Hawks truly did have a fortress.

"Listen." He made an eerie call that floated through the air toward the woods. In a moment, she heard a wolf's cry. The sound echoed up and down the perimeter of the trees, as the sentinels reported to each other and Grady.

"You're safe with me, Julie Hawks." Both his warm breath that brushed across her ear and his murmured words caused a jolt of heat inside of her. She was suddenly too aware of the man whose arms were now holding her close.

"Come back inside. It's too cold out here for that light blanket. You need a coat."

* * * *

Good food, quiet rest, and a sense of safety made Jewel easier in her mind than she had been since she'd married Frank Rossiter and begun her turbulent life in the West. The ranch pleased her, calling up memories of her early years on a farm.

Just as she'd explored every crack and crevice of Grady Hawks' house, so she looked around outside too. She bided her time to conduct her barn and outbuilding visit until the first clear morning after her arrival at Hawks Nest. When the men rode away from the ranch house, she bundled the twins into layers of Grady's clothing and carried them with her to snoop.

Like the house, the barn was solidly constructed, but it was built into the side of a hill so that there were two floors. Below, where the stalls were located, a wide door opened into a paddock for horses and a pen for livestock. A ladder on the side of the barn led through a cut hole in the floor to the upstairs. She held the babies close and walked around to the front and through that door.

There she found a tack room and the main area that was stacked full of hay, straw, and feedbags. A wagon sat in the middle of the wooden floor, ready with harness nearby, for trips to town.

On the way back to the house from her investigations, she stopped in the middle of the ranch yard and let her gaze sweep the woods at the edge of the back clearing. There

were guards there. She knew it, could feel the power of the fortress surrounding her. For the moment it was a haven, not a prison. But Jewel wondered how far she would get if she hitched up the horse and wagon she'd found inside the barn and headed toward Eclipse.

Chapter Nine

"You looking for anything special in the barn today?" His question at supper was mild, but let her know that she'd been watched during her journey that morning.

She set the meal on the table before she answered, thinking of something to say besides the truth. *I've been marking future escape routes.*

"Chickens," she told him. Hands paused in forking over the venison steaks from the platter, and she had the attention of the four men at the table.

She had no idea where that had come from, but since they were all listening, she embellished her story. "I had a flock of chickens on my mother's farm. I hated them then, but I can see now how handy it would be to have a good flock of layers here. Cooking for all of you, I've almost gone through the crate of eggs you had in the pantry. You'll have to double your usual order once I start baking bread."

The promise of future baked goods ended the ranch hands' curiosity about her barn exploration, but Grady's gaze was still speculative.

When he questioned her no more, she left the babies in their cradle and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders to go outside.

Talk started around the table as soon as she shut the front door, and she remained alone in the night as the men inside wrestled with whatever ranch problem had called a grim look to each face.

Jewel waited outside until she heard the men leave the cabin before she returned to the warmth inside. Holding a giggling twin under each arm, Grady Hawks greeted her at the door. "You finished taking your nightly constitutional?"

He stood aside as she entered but didn't relinquish the girls when she reached for them. He nodded toward the cleared table where steam drifted from two cups of coffee, and a filled plate sat waiting for her. He'd done her work for her while she'd been out dreaming under the stars. She flushed, expecting a rebuke. Instead he said, "You need to eat."

It was plain to see that he meant now. He carried the girls with him and sat down expectantly, waiting until she picked up her fork to eat before he sipped the hot drink.

"Where is it you're from? You don't speak like Texas women." His casual question didn't fool her. Jewel's survival instincts slammed into place. Where she came from might be where she returned after a year. Grady Hawks didn't need to know anything more about her than what he'd already learned.

"East of here," she answered vaguely, and he nodded as if she'd told him more.

She moved the food around on her plate, anxious to end the time alone and escape into the little bedroom with the girls. He held them on his lap in the crook of his arm where one girl leaned sleepily against the other and dozed.

"It's time to put them to bed," she said almost desperately. His eyes watched every one of her moves as though deciding his next.

"You finish the food on that plate while I see to it." He outmaneuvered her, leaving her alone at the table while he carried the now-sleeping twins to their cradle before the fire.

Abruptly she pushed the plate aside and stood. "I can't eat any more."

He met her as she crossed the room toward the fireplace and stopped her with a hand laid on each shoulder.

The kiss this time was different from the morning brush of lips. His mouth descended on hers before she could turn her head and rebuff him. Even early in Frank's courtship she'd been repulsed by the act of kissing. Frank's mouth had been wet, reminding her of a sloppy dog, and his breath had smelled of alcohol.

Grady Hawks' lips covered hers as he pulled her body closer. She shuddered and closed her eyes, avoiding the sight of the man who held her. *I need to do this*. She tried to school herself into submission, but the meal she'd just eaten churned in her stomach, making her nauseous.

"Open your eyes," he ordered her. When she blinked up into the dark face that hovered above hers, he explained softly, "I want you to know who's kissing you." This time when his mouth descended, the rough, dry caress was accompanied by the tip of his tongue lightly tracing the seam she held tightly closed.

When her lips remained shut, he shifted his hand to her chin, and she felt the brush of his rough thumb before he used it to tug on her lower lip. She clenched her teeth, but he caressed the soft inner lining of her mouth before his head blotted out the light, and his tongue touched where his thumb had been.

Jewel gasped and tried to back away, only to find that his other hand held the back of her head as he gained entrance. He tasted her, and by necessity, she him. Grady Hawks tasted like coffee.

He discovered her mouth, leisurely exploring her teeth, rubbing her tongue with his, and invading her in a way that brought alarm. He caught her bottom lip between his and sucked on it before he lifted his head and stared down at her.

He was a handsome man, with wide, powerful shoulders muscled from years of hard ranch work. Jewel knew she was no match for his strength and shivered at the threat he presented. Grady studied her face out of those gray eyes that didn't match his bronze skin and high cheekbones. "One more," he muttered and took her mouth again.

This time, she let him enter without resisting. The hand on her neck slid lower, pressing her back and forcing her breasts tightly against his chest. His scent—sage, coffee, and some indefinable spicy smell that was just him—filled her lungs before he released her and stepped back.

"I'll carry the babies to the bedroom for you." She recognized his aroused state and cringed at what would happen next. But once in the room she'd chosen for them, he tucked the girls into the narrow bed and left, saying, "Good night," as he closed the door.

*

It seemed to Grady later that he hadn't been in the presence of Julie more than a minute till he'd stopped thinking about breeding a child for Hawks Nest and become intent only on making love to his wife.

He knew he followed her with his eyes wherever she took up residence in the room. He couldn't help himself; her exotic beauty wove a spell over him at the same time he admired the calm way she handled her bargain.

Every morning he kissed her and then spent all day thinking about the next stage of his courtship. Grady had started a slow seduction, begun with his first exploratory brush of lips across hers.

She didn't deny or accept his advances, but gradually, when she trembled in his arms,

he didn't think it was from fear. Her mind resisted him, but her body responded to his touch—need answering need.

Each night, after Dan, Rowdy, and Navajo Leonard left following the evening meal, Grady tended the babies and sat at the table and watched Julie toy with the food on her plate to delay his determined courtship. He pushed her to eat a little more each time, and enjoyed the sight of pink lips closing over the fork and the way her throat worked when she swallowed.

The truth was he'd walked around with a perpetual hard-on since the day they'd been married. He wanted to ease her into the physical part of their bonding, but he could barely keep from taking her, resistant or not, when he touched her.

The memory of the taste of her made his voice gravelly with need for her again. "Come over here."

This night the twins had already been sleeping by the time he'd finished his meal. He'd interrupted her plans to flee with them into the cold bedroom by playing on her need to keep them safe. *She's a good mother.*

The babies were healthy and happy, testimony to the sacrifices she'd made to keep them that way. Her lack of any meat on her bones was also. "Eat," he told her.

When she'd eaten more than she wanted, stalling as long as she could, he shoved his chair back from the table and held out his hand. She hesitated before she stood and walked to where he sat and waited for her.

She was trembling when he pulled her onto his lap. He couldn't wait another moment, and claimed her mouth, devouring her with his need.

His hand found its way under her skirt, and she jerked in alarm as it traveled up to her knee and then higher.

"Don't," she pulled her mouth from his and whispered a plea to delay him. But it was too late. His fingers were through the slit in her pantalettes and had already begun to stroke the silken hair on her mound.

She pressed her legs closed, trying to prevent his invasion, but he wouldn't let her deny him. He lifted his head from the kiss and nipped her ear. "Open your legs for me," he growled roughly.

Grady ignored her soft protest as she relaxed her stiff thighs. He thumbed the moisture that seeped from the seam of her cleft and then opened her folds to touch her inner flesh. Her cunnie wept for him, giving the lie to her indifference.

At the same time he took her mouth again, he slid one finger into her channel. When her muscles clenched around it, his cock throbbed with the need to be inside of her. "Put your arms around my neck," he ordered her.

He heard himself groan as he stroked his finger in and out of her tight, wet channel. Her breath came in harsh gasps, as she struggled to fight her body's response to him, but when he brushed his thumb across her swollen clit, her hips thrust up to meet the stroke, and she shattered, her internal muscles gripping his finger and pulsing in release.

He could have taken her as she lay limp, recovering in his arms. Instead, he carried her into the bedroom where he stripped her of her dress and laid her in the bed. Then he left the room, returning with the cradle. She held her arms up, and he handed her first one baby and the other, and before she could turn away, he bent and took her mouth one more time.

"Good night." He managed to leave the room without pouncing on her in the bed, his

cock so hard between his legs that walking was painful.

"Good night." Her soft answer following him to the door made his restraint almost bearable.

He told himself that he had the right to take what he'd paid land and water to get. But he waited anyway. He didn't want to put a baby in her belly until he knew that she'd stay with him and raise his son.

* * * *

Every day Jewel tried to build back her wall of resistance, and every night Grady Hawks proved her defenses against him weak. Her body turned to him, craving the feel of his touch as much as he seemed to need to explore her with his hands.

Why he remained alone in his bed without fully consummating the marriage was a mystery to her, but each evening he increased their intimacy and her protests helplessly fell before his will.

When he bent to brush his lips against hers each morning, she was swept by the heat that he'd kindled the night before. Every day she spent scrubbing the cabin and working fiercely to deny the feelings he aroused before he left.

The men who accompanied him into the cabin each night for supper received the brunt of her pent-up emotions. They didn't disrespect her, they ignored her. In itself, that was not a bad thing. But it piqued her sense of pride that the men ate the food she knew was well prepared without so much as a *Thank you*, or *That was good*.

She focused on righting that wrong, since she had no control over the man who challenged her determination to remain aloof.

Grady had carried a bushel of fall apples into the house the night before. Jewel spent all day peeling fruit for dessert that when baked, filled the cabin with the aroma of apples, cinnamon, and sugar.

As usual, the men filed in, following Grady to the table where the meal waited for them. All the men, including her husband, sniffed the air, looking for the source of the delicious scent. When nothing was apparent, they sat down and quickly made their way through the potatoes, carrots, and beef roast she'd prepared. They remained silent, waiting for her to leave. When she didn't, the men remained mute, even after they'd emptied all the dishes and platters and consumed the last of her homemade bread.

Jewel had strategized her protest and instead of leaving as usual so that the men could speak openly, she asked, "Do you men like apple cobbler?" She set the hot apple confection on the table as she asked. As usual, her words were ignored as if she had not spoken. Grady Hawks watched her with interest this time, just as he had at every meal she battled wills with them.

"Guess you fellows don't like apple cobbler." She whisked it off the table after her initial question remained unanswered. Rowdy, knife in hand, was in the process of reaching for the dessert and howled. "Hell, yes, I like apple cobbler. I like apple pie too. Ain't much made with apples I don't like."

She cut a big slice of the hot cobbler and put it steaming on his plate. Then she carried the rest to the sideboard and set it down, standing guard over it so that it wasn't disturbed.

Grady Hawks rose from his chair and walked to where she stood barring the way to her cobbler as she dared the men to trespass and risk injury.

"I like apple cobbler too, Julie. Would you cut a piece for me?" Suddenly in front of the ranch hands who watched silently, now more interested in their exchange than in dessert, she blushed.

It was incomprehensible how the gravelly pitched question could bring a flood of color to her face, but nevertheless, it happened. Heat scorched through her body, leaving her vulnerable and breathless with the memory of his touch the night before.

His eyes became half-slits, heavy with desire, as his gaze boldly caressed her, promising more intimate explorations after the men left them alone.

She'd gotten what she wanted—their attention. But the trembling anticipation that filled her as a result wasn't the victory she'd planned.

"Here," she picked up the hot plate without a potholder and thrust it toward him, burning her hand in the process. "You serve dessert. I've got better things to do."

Before she could back away and hurry to her outdoor sanctuary, Grady caught her hand and raised it to his lips. He stepped closer, hiding his act from the other men as he opened his mouth and sucked on her burned fingers.

Red streaked across his high cheekbones, announcing his arousal as loudly as if he'd shouted it. Her breasts ached as her nipples distended and brushed the rough fabric of her dress.

She could feel his tongue, a velvet caress against the burned fingers inside the hot cavern of his mouth.

"Thank you, Julie." His voice was unsteady when he finally let her go. She hurried outside, breathlessly fleeing her tormentor.

Chapter Ten

Aggravating as the man was, Julie reminded herself that the cabin was a safe haven for her girls. The winter outside was cold, and when she remembered the paper-thin shack where she'd been living, she'd tried to find ways to make herself both useful and invisible.

Sometimes, when her work for the day was complete, she'd draw a deck of cards from her pocket and play a hand of solitaire. It relaxed her to stack the four suits in order, arranging them thoughtfully as she contemplated the next move in her life.

East or west, Virginia or California—she'd lay the cards out in a line of twelve, and turn each face card over to represent the months still to be endured until she could leave with the girls.

She needed the cards now to point her direction. *East or west, Virginia or...* She groaned aloud. Instead of California, a picture of Grady Hawks' flushed cheekbones inserted itself into her thoughts. He was a devil trying to steal her life, and she didn't know how to stop him.

As she paced along the edge of the clearing, trying to gain back her composure, why she had chosen to confront the men and bring even more attention to herself was a mystery. Grady Hawks was intent on bending her to his will. She knew that, even as she recognized his weapon as seduction. Reluctantly, driven by cold and the need to tend her daughters, she returned to the cabin when the rest of the men left.

Grady Hawks sat in his chair, cleaning the knife that had killed Frank and cut her hair. When she closed the door, he laid the sharp blade on the table, beside his rifle and side arms, and said, "Come here. I've been waiting for you."

Need coiled hotly in her belly. Grady Hawks called forth wildness in her that had been repressed a long time. She was very afraid that he knew his effect on her and would use it ruthlessly.

"No, I have dishes to do." He'd stacked the dirty dishes in the washtub and pumped water in to cover them. She tried to remain indifferent to him as he watched her roll up her sleeves and prepare to do the night's cleanup.

Grady Hawks interrupted her retreat with a request. "Fetch me that oil from the counter, Julie." His voice was stern, demanding obedience.

Irritated with herself and the flash of heat that seared her skin, she slapped the dishrag against the counter and grabbed the can of oil, carrying it to him defiantly.

When she handed it over, his hand closed around her wrist, causing her to jerk and step back as old reflexes sprang to life. Jewel clenched her other hand into a fist, preparing to fight or run. "My name is Jewel," she told him flatly.

"I wish Frank Rossiter was alive," he answered mildly, still holding her prisoner as he slowly examined her burned fingers. Then he opened his callused palm and allowed her arm to slide free.

"Why?" she asked. "If that's true, Grady Hawks, that makes you the only person alive who misses the gambler."

She retreated from him, but he stood and followed her. His answer, although softly spoken, was fierce. "So I could kill the sonovabitch with my bare hands."

The social flirtations and calculated conversation that she had learned to engage in as the gambler's wife, words that had kept men at bay at the same time she'd helped part them from their money, didn't work on Grady Hawks. When he looked at her, he stripped away the veneer of toughness she'd donned to survive.

She stared out the window, deliberately avoiding his gaze as she plunged her hands in the soapy water to do supper wash-up. He joined her, standing so close his shoulder brushed hers as he looked outside too.

"Make yourself useful," she ordered him, slapping a drying cloth in his hand. He accepted her order and remained beside her, his shoulder bumping against her arm, as he dried the plates. She fought the wild longing that his heat and male scent called from her.

She lingered over the dirty dishes as long as she could, but when the last fork was clean and there were no more plates giving her an excuse to keep her hands hidden in lukewarm water, he handed her the drying towel.

"The twins..." she said desperately.

"...Are asleep," he finished her excuse and took the cloth from her tense hands and picked her up, setting her on the counter beside the clean crockery.

"I will have another taste of you before you run and hide." He flipped her skirts high on her thighs. She was momentarily ashamed at the display of her worn pantalettes but forgot that embarrassment as he lifted her and tugged them from her body.

Grady boldly ran his hands up her legs, parting them as he looked at her woman's secrets. "I don't want this," she told him.

He parted the lips of her sex and thumbed the moisture that already gathered there. "I think you do," he answered.

Before she could protest or argue, he lowered his head and set his mouth where his thumb had been.

Shock replaced resistance as he hooked her legs over his shoulders and tasted the tender flesh that readied itself for him. His tongue traced a path tasting the slippery evidence of her desire. He licked her from her channel to the nub of nerves at her apex. When he reached her swollen clit, he set his teeth around it, nipping it gently.

A moan of need escaped her as her hips jerked in helpless response, and he pulled her higher, cradling her rump in his hands to bury his face in her heat and feast.

Two fingers breached her channel, plunging in and out of her as he sucked and laved first her velvet folds and then the magic button that made her want to scream out her need. When her body could take no more, she convulsed in an orgasm that swept over her, and her soft screams of pleasure echoed in the cabin.

Again he carried her sated body to the bed she shared at night with the twins, and although he made no move to gain his own release, he stared at her with lust-filled eyes. Before he left her to a restless night, he claimed her mouth, and she tasted herself on the tongue that he slid through her lips.

"You taste like honey," he whispered and left her alone with her babies.

In spite of Grady Hawks' determined seduction, she relaxed and began to enjoy her respite from the hardscrabble existence of before. By the second week, she answered automatically to Julie when he called; by the third, he'd trained her body to coil with need at his touch and her years as Jewel Rossiter began to recede.

Then on the eve of the babies' six-month birthday, things changed again.

* * * *

Grady was in the high pasture running down loose strays, trying to save their mangy hides from freezing or starving, when Navajo Leonard appeared on the ridge above him, waving his hat.

"We've got company," were the first words out of the Indian's mouth when Grady rode up to meet him.

"The Double-Q outfit's heading toward your lodge with Hamilton Quince's woman driving a buckboard piled high with our monthly order."

Grady didn't waste time asking how Leonard knew that. If he'd wanted to, the wily warrior could have slipped into the wagon and stolen half the merchandise while the Quince outriders remained oblivious.

They made fast time, gathering more crew members as they rode to the ranch house. The buckboard entered the ranch yard at the same time Grady rode in the other side. For a tense moment, both outfits faced off.

Then Hamilton swung down and crossed the clearing to where Grady sat his horse. "Had news I thought you should hear. Comfort decided to bring your supplies up to you and save you a trip to town."

"The Mercantile delivering now?" Grady asked ironically. But he dismounted to shake the hand Hamilton offered. Tensions abated and the riders of both outfits relaxed in their saddles.

"Comfort decided to visit with your wife while we transact our business." Quince nodded at his own wife, who in spite of their rough travel still looked beautiful and composed.

Had the Eclipse rancher been alone, Grady would have let him stand in the cold while they talked. But outmaneuvered by the pair, he crossed to the buckboard where Comfort Quince waited patiently.

"I expect Julie's got the coffee on by now. Better step down and come in. She'll be interested in hearing what you have to say, I'm sure."

If it wasn't a welcome, it was still an invitation. Hamilton Quince lifted his wife from the wagon bench and accompanied her into the cabin.

Grady had a moment of unease as he remembered the fine upholstered furnishings in Comfort's parlor. For the first time he wondered if Julie found his home wanting.

Julie kept him between her and both the Quinces, testifying silently that she wanted no part of whatever conversation Comfort intended.

Hamilton interrupted the tableau, though, with his next words. "Teddy James is putting it around that Mrs. Rossiter," he paused and awkwardly changed that to, "your wife, colluded with you in Frank Rossiter's murder. He's stirring up trouble as fast as he can. No doubt that Alan Michaels is behind it, but whatever the reason, the upshot of it is they're urging Hiram Potter to arrest you."

Grady flashed a cold smile with his question. "Who thinks he can ride on Hawks Nest land and do that?"

"Nobody. We all know you've got the place barricaded. I didn't see our escorts, but I know our progress was tracked the whole way to the ranch yard. It made my ranch hands a mite jumpy coming up the trail."

"I didn't kill Frank Rossiter, and I didn't even know Grady Hawks until the day you witnessed our marriage." Julie's words were a fierce denial, but her hands trembled as she poured coffee for their unexpected guests.

"Did you take the two thousand dollars from his pocket when you found him dying?" Hamilton Quince took the coffee she offered and asked his own hard question. His voice was steely, and for once, he ignored his wife's efforts to hush him.

"Would I be here if I had two thousand dollars to set my children up in their own home?" Grady felt the slap of her rejection as her bitter answer rang true.

"I guess she answered that question for you, Quince." Grady pulled his hat on and headed for the door. "The wagon needs to be unloaded. I'll be in the barn."

Hamilton followed him, leaving the two women to face each other alone.

*

Julie set two cups of coffee on the table and invited Comfort Quince to join her there. She silently faced the woman who had tried to buy her children.

"We brought Grady a two-month supply of everything. That way, he won't have to make any trips into town until Hiram gets this cleared up."

Julie didn't know Hiram Potter, but Comfort Quince seemed to think the sheriff was capable of unsnarling the mess and solving the mystery of Frank Rossiter's murder.

While she listened, the Quince woman said the words that had brought her into the cold in an open wagon. "I came to apologize to you. What Hamilton and I tried to do was unconscionable. Forgive us, please."

When Julie remained quiet, not responding with social niceties that smoothed over the wrong, Comfort continued, "My former husband was quite brutal, and the final beating he delivered left me unable to have children."

For the first time, Julie felt her heart soften toward the woman. But she refused to allow any future attempts to steal the twins. "There are a lot of babies who need a good home. Mine have one."

Comfort looked over the sparse furnishings dotting the floor before she spied the wooden cradle where the babies slept.

Without permission, she rose and crossed to them, kneeling beside the baby bed to stare at the rosy-cheeked girls sleeping there.

"They are so beautiful." She smiled as Emma pursed her rosebud mouth and sighed softly, dreaming baby dreams.

Then, in spite of the tears that had marked tracks down her cheeks, Comfort Quince stood, once again the elegant lady in control, and said briskly. "I owe you. If you ever want to leave Grady Hawks, or Texas for that matter, get word to me and I'll help."

Then she turned around and laughed, spilling the rich husky sound throughout the room. "And if you decide to stay, tell your husband I sell furniture at the Mercantile."

* * * *

The Double-Q riders escorted the empty wagon back through Hawks Nest land, leaving discord behind them. Grady couldn't forget Julie's public rejection, and Julie couldn't forget Comfort's offer to help her leave.

Two nights later, after a day and a half of silence between them, Julie was roused from sleep by a mouth pulling on her breast. One of the babies had found her in the night. She struggled to open her eyes when teeth nibbled her nipple, and then firm lips settled around her teat and suckled so strongly she felt the pull all the way to her womb.

"What..." she gasped, and then she realized the head that nursed at her breast wore thick hair ... *Grady Hawks*.

He switched his attentions to her other teat, kissing the heated flesh that demanded his concentration now that he had relieved the pressure from the first.

Even as she lay appalled under his assault—*no, not assault; I agreed to this*—Julie gritted her teeth to keep from protesting. At the same time she clamped her hands on the sheet to keep from pulling him closer.

When he opened her cleft with searching fingers, she tried to remain still while he explored her intimately, arousing the passion he knew she hoarded like a rich man's silver.

She stifled a gasp, as he riffled fingers through her feminine curls, teased her flesh knowingly, stroked her folds that were suddenly wet—and finally invaded her with two fingers, all the while he suckled at her breast.

Julie tried to remain still and quiet, conscious of the two babies who slept in the bed beside them. But her wayward body arched under the knowing touches that made her belly coil with need. Her hips rose to meet his plunging fingers, and pleasure coursed through her body, making her cunnie clench as if begging him for more.

At last she gave up the struggle to remain aloof. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on tight as he swept her control aside and claimed her cries with his mouth. Her climax rolled over her in wave after wave of wicked pleasure.

He didn't wait for her to recover, but instead guided her hand to his engorged flesh, wrapping his palm around hers, as he fitted himself to her opening. His cock nudged inside the channel that still clenched with aftershocks from her release.

He radiated heat, power, and control. It would be easy to relax and let his seduction give her pleasure. She squashed that thought when he pulled the old, tattered, nightgown she had worn under her first husband's attentions over her head. She chanted silently, *I will not catch, I will not catch, I will not catch*, willing her body to obey.

He spread her thighs wider and entered her while she clutched his shoulders against the burn of his invasion. Even softened from her recent climax, her tunnel hugged his thick length and made this first possession slow as he tested the limits of what she could handle.

He rocked his groin against her mound and finished the burning slide of man into woman with a quick thrust that seated his cockhead against her womb. Bracing his weight on his arms, he stared down at where they were joined. She froze, determined to show him neither passion nor pleasure.

When he lowered his head to kiss her, she buried her face in his shoulder, determined to keep what control she could. "Get it over with," she muttered.

She forced her body to relax and pressed her pelvis upward. He slid into her even more deeply, with a grunt of disgust at her words. He abandoned her pleasure for his own then.

Julie clenched her jaw and gripped his naked shoulders, receiving his thrusts but making sure that it remained a passionless union. When she swiveled her hips, clenching her inner muscles, sweat dropped from his face onto her shoulder, as he increased his rhythm working above her.

In an effort to finish him, she wrapped her legs around his waist and took the last of his cock deep. It was enough.

His release swept over him and pulsed into her. He lifted her buttocks, tilting her to give him even deeper access until she felt him spill his seed in the secret recesses of her womb. Then he groaned, slumping over her for a moment, before he rolled away and left

the bed.

Alone again, she stared into the darkness, stifled by the pressure of fear. Now that he was gone, her breath rasped out in panicked bursts. *Please don't let a child take root inside of me.*

She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, to plead with fate. If she willed it hard enough, surely her body would obey. Hastily she rose, cleaned herself and used the chamber pot, as she tried to expel his seed.

She paced the room and worried. Long after their silent coupling, she remained awake. Finally, aware of the long day in front of her, she lay back down and fell asleep counting the items in the room.

Dresser, washbowl, hook, bed ... Emerald's cry of hunger brought her awake at dawn. Had it not have been for the ache in her thighs, she would have thought the midnight coupling a dream.

Chapter Eleven

But it wasn't a dream, and she was more aware of that, when after the breakfast meal, instead of leaving with the other men, Grady Hawks remained behind.

Julie cleared the table, avoiding his glance, although he sat staring at her. Abruptly he stood and walked to the fire where Emerald and Amethyst were propped, one at one end of the cradle and one at the other. He picked up both, and they gurgled happily, arms and legs kicking and flying, delighted to be cuddled.

Julie watched the man who had all rights over her for a year. He returned to his chair with her twin daughters. Grady Hawks made it clear he had something to say. She cleared the table around him, fiercely ready for him to be gone.

When Emerald began to fuss, ready for her own food, Amethyst did likewise. Julie had fed them in front of him dozens of times in the last month.

In fact, she had become so comfortable in his presence that she had often forgotten that he was in the room with her when she tended them. But his visit the night before, his lips surrounding her teat, his mouth suckling against her flesh, were still fresh in her mind.

Reluctantly, she sat on a chair at the table and unbuttoned her gown. When she lifted Amy and put her to feed, he scooted closer with Emma and watched. Then, eyes still on the baby tugging hungrily, he told her, "I always wondered what it tasted like."

Heat scorched through her in a flood of embarrassment that spread from belly to scalp. He cupped her second breast and lifted it, careful not to jostle the baby feeding on the right. A drop of milk pearled on the tip of the teat.

His own cheeks were flushed as he lifted Emma and placed her to feed. Julie cradled both babies as they rooted happily, enjoying their meal.

He walked across the room and shrugged into his coat before he told her what he'd stayed behind to say. "I've found a wet nurse. You won't be feeding the babies from now on."

Had he struck her a blow, she couldn't have been more stunned—or angry. But, she'd learned over the years of dealing with men to keep her mouth shut and assess the situation before she revealed her thoughts. She repressed all the rage inside and asked, "Why?"

"You haven't bled yet," he told her. At first she didn't know what he meant. Then she flushed at the intimate statement.

She didn't know what to say. Her menses hadn't resumed, and she'd been glad to be rid of the monthly ordeal. She hadn't had a doctor to consult, but since she wasn't pregnant or sick she hadn't been concerned.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Julie tried to remain calm and not scream at him. Feeding the babies was the best part of every day.

"You won't come fresh and catch, as long as they're at the teat. Make up your mind whether they go on cow's milk or you want a wet nurse to feed them. Let me know tonight. This is the last day they nurse from you."

"I hate you," she gasped before she could stop the words. It was good that he wore his knife sheathed at his thigh and hadn't left it on the table near to her hand. She would

have killed him right then if she'd had the weapon close.

*

Grady wished he could forget the look of horror and betrayal that Julie had shown him before she grabbed her emotions and hid them away. He swallowed the shame that threatened to make him recant his decision.

Damn it, I brought the woman here for one reason. I can't be waiting any longer. I bought a year of service. I've already wasted a month.

At first, he'd told himself, he wanted to take no chances that she already carried another man's seed. He watched her closely at first, expecting her to flirt and carry on with the ranch hands who came to meals.

After her skirmishes to get a *thank you* for her cooking, she'd ignored them right back, convincing him that she had no interest in any of them at the table—including him.

On the morning of her second day there, she'd stepped up to him toe to toe and announced, "You get me these ingredients, and you won't need to buy poorly made bread that is stale by the time you eat it." She'd thrust the list at him, and he'd been so surprised, he'd not even read it before he passed it to Rowdy.

"Ride into town and bring this stuff back." Rowdy had been scheduled to ride the fences, but no one questioned the change in plan.

Once the ranch hand was ready to leave, Grady added, "Pick out some cloth."

Rowdy looked uneasily around. "What kind of cloth?"

Grady stood pondering, then pulled a wad of cash from his pocket and handed it to Rowdy. "Give that to Comfort Quince and tell her my women need clothes. She'll know what's best."

When Rowdy had returned, he brought a stack of baby nightgowns, picked out by Comfort Quince for the girls, and two dresses, a blue and a pink, for Julie. She'd taken them without a word and retreated into the cold bedroom. Later, cooking for dinner, she'd been wearing the blue dress that fit well enough.

"Thank you for the dresses and the baby things," she'd told him politely when she set supper on the table. That was the end of their discussion about clothes. But he'd seen her fingering the material and had watched her smile at her reflection in the glass of the windowpane.

Cooking seemed to make her happy, so he made sure there were plenty of *ingredients* on hand for her to play with while he and the others were at work. As soon as she received the makings, the cabin was changed, having absorbed the aroma of baked bread and the other enticing scents that mingled with the smell of hot rolls.

He'd made a lot of progress in getting her to trust him. When she forgot that he shared her space, she'd sing to the babies, and most of the time, when she was setting the bread to rise before going to bed, or when she was fiddling with the knotted rug she'd begun, she hummed. But watching her with her babies gradually erased his fear that he'd tied himself to a round-heeled woman who'd mistreated her young.

She'd filled the empty silence of his home, with the sounds of contentment and harmony. His increased intimacies had found a passionate woman who tried to hide from his determined seduction. He'd thought he'd begun to make headway there too.

He admitted to himself that he'd hoped to win her trust so that she'd stay with him to raise their son when the time came. Her words to Hamilton Quince had killed that notion.

He hadn't lied when he told Julie that he'd found a wet nurse. The Apache woman,

Dawn, had lost her own baby on the trek from New Mexico territory with her man. She was at the camp in the hills, and he intended to bring her to the ranch today.

He was in the saddle and heading for the high-range box canyon where trouble waited, before he allowed himself to think about the night before. And then, he wished it an indulgence he'd forgone. His cock swelled and ached mightily, squeezed between his groin and saddle leather.

He'd looked in on her every night as she lay with the twin girls and slept peacefully. The tense look that had made her features appear hard had all but disappeared in the month since she'd arrived.

But as he'd stood over the bed and listened to all three females breathing softly the night before, she'd turned, as though sensing his presence. The blanket had fallen back, exposing a naked breast, teat filled and leaking milk.

He hadn't even questioned his motives or want. He'd dropped his clothes on the cold floor and climbed in too.

His mouth watered, remembering the taste of her. *One taste, that's all*, he'd told himself. But it hadn't been enough. She'd come awake and blinked up at him, surprised, but not fighting or reluctant.

Grady shook off the mesmerizing memory and nudged his horse into a lope that sent snow flying and fast diminished the distance between him and trouble.

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. As he rode, the rhythm of the horse's gait matched the cadence of the words in his head.

Did it matter? Granted, he didn't want to wrestle the woman to the bed every night and have his way with her. That thought brought the memory of her heat as it had surrounded him. His cock swelled bigger and harder, and he couldn't shake the need to be in her again.

She hadn't fought. Hell, she'd even wrapped her legs around him and took him deep. He pulled his hat low and tucked in his chin, to ward off the chill wind, but he wasn't cold. An involuntary groan escaped his lips, the sound mingling with the creak of leather and pounding hoofbeats.

Tonight—he'd have her again tonight. That settled in his mind, he turned to thoughts of the Apache camp he approached.

He was harboring renegade Indian warriors who were being sought by the U.S. government. Meanwhile, he had women and children in the camp, not fighters, but refugees of war.

Come spring, they had to be gone, before the town of Eclipse and the surrounding ranchers found out, or regardless of shared fear of Alan Michaels, the white citizens would turn on him faster than two heartbeats. It was only the distaste for the Eastern businessman that kept the lynch mob from screaming for his neck right now.

Some of the old men who waited in the box canyon camp had once raided and killed settlers in this area. Grady would feel bad about that if he didn't know that at the time, the Indians had been protecting *their* space, the same land the ranchers now called home. The tribal use of broad tracts rather than fenced allotments had been an easy way for settlers to maintain that the land was unclaimed and open to settlement.

And somehow in this whole tangled mess, Hawks Nest Ranch had become a conduit for one of the sub-tribes of the Apache nation—the Kiowa considered this a place of safe passage as they fled federal reservations and headed for Mexico.

At first, it had been braves, remnants of decimated tribes. Some had stayed, like Navajo Leonard. Others rested and drifted on, searching for lands to call home.

Recent appointments of government Indian agents had disrupted the treaties and set even more Indians off their lands. Now, Rowdy reported that there were women and children holed up in Aerie Canyon. Winter was here, evidenced by the snow shifting under his horse's hooves.

How to deal with the hungry bellies to be filled...

He let his thoughts spiral back to the woman who'd lain under him last night and accepted his attentions. He'd held back coming, savoring the intense pleasure, but when his release was finally on him, he'd collapsed on top of her, oblivious for moments. Hell, she might be carrying already as fertile as she appeared to be—two babies at once. Every time he looked at the little girls, he was amazed.

The night before, after his release, he'd slumped on her and come back to himself, with her stroking her hand up and down his back. She hadn't complained of his weight, although he had to be at least twice her size. He'd have liked to stay the night, but the bed was small and already crowded with the three of them.

He'd move them into the bigger bedroom with him, he decided. She'd sleep with him every night. *That way, I can access her and plant my seed regularly until she takes.*

That settled his thoughts, and he turned back to the trail, climbing through scrub pine as he slowed his mount to a careful walk along the slippery path that was quickly filling with snow.

The cave was deep and hidden in the shadows and crevices of the sheer cliff face. There was nothing in the canyon to give away the truth. He urged his horse up the shale path, icy now but still navigable. Before he reached the top, a shadow loomed before him, and the Apache husband of Dawn materialized.

"We are ready." That was all the man said, but he left no room for dissent. If the woman was going to the ranch, so was her man. It would do no good to argue, so without stopping, Grady turned around, and joined by the two others, retraced his journey.

It occurred to him later that the Indian hadn't wanted him to enter the cave. Maybe that was good. He didn't want to count heads. The ones he already knew about had him worrying night and day.

By the time he got back, the storm that had been threatening had set in for a hard blow. Snow whipped around the three riders and collected until the horses had to wade through four-foot drifts the last stretch to the ranch.

Grady slid off his mount, his legs so cold that his feet felt like they might splinter when he hit the ground. Bent almost double against the press of the wind, he stomped down the snow in front of the barn door and pulled on it till it opened. The Indian woman and her man rode through, leaving him to pull the door closed.

It was black as pitch inside when he led his horse through the doors, but he could hear the man murmuring words of assurance to his woman. Grady felt like an eavesdropper and fumbled to find a lantern to light. "*Light of Morning*," the Chiricahua man spoke her name as it was in the Apache language. "You will come back to me now."

Light flickered into life, and the man stood holding the woman in his arms. Grady didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"Gotta get these horses put up, then we'll go inside," he said gruffly.

Stepping from the man's arms, the woman turned to tend her mount. Her face was

devoid of emotion as she stripped the blanket and followed him to the rope cross-tie, strung across the barn.

The Indian followed her with his eyes, and Grady had no trouble reading his face. It was a picture of worry. He led his horse to tie up beside hers.

Grady told them both, "Come on into the house with me. You can meet"—he hesitated for a moment and then finished—"my woman and my babies."

The words resounded in his head after he spoke—*my woman, my babies*. And then swiftly the truth echoed in his head. *Claim one, claim them all*.

The air was thick with tension, and Grady looked to the couple. She remained still and the Chiricahua male silent, but Grady had no doubt that a war of words was going on.

Any peace that had reigned in the barn, as a haven after the storm, was ended. Grady headed out the door, carrying the lantern. "Follow me, and keep close," he ordered.

The woman put her hand on his back and the her husband put his hand on hers, forming a chain as they forged toward the cabin through snowdrifts that now came up to Grady's knees in the open spaces.

When the small woman stumbled, floundering in thigh-deep muck, the Chiricahua warrior swept her into his arms and grunted in clear English. "Go, I have her."

The door swept open before they reached the ranch house, and Julie stood, lantern in hand, lighting the way inside. Whatever her feelings were about the wet nurse, she seemed glad that he'd made it back. It gave him an unexpectedly warm feeling to have her standing there waiting for him.

He stepped aside and let the other man, who was carrying his wife, through the door first. The cabin smelled like stew, and Grady looked around hopefully.

"Let's get you out of these wet clothes," Julie handed the woman a towel and a blanket and ignored both of the men, so Grady knew she wasn't talking to him. He was just glad she hadn't found a weapon to use on him while he was gone.

Instead, she treated the woman civilly and bustled around the cabin like she had fine guests calling. The twins woke up and began to fuss, and Grady suddenly had four females to deal with, and the thought left him wondering uncomfortably if he'd bitten off more than he could chew. Girls and women had been no part of his life, and suddenly they outnumbered him in his home.

But then he remembered the night before and decided he could learn a woman's ways, at least, Julie's ways.

Chapter Twelve

Julie was sick at heart. She'd spent the first hours after Grady Hawks left pacing the length of the cabin. At one point, she had even resolved to gather up the twins and walk off of Hawks Nest land. Listening to the wind whistle around the corner of the house, she was glad that she hadn't been so foolish.

At suppertime, she set the kettle of stew on the table and cut the loaves of bread that still steamed from the oven. The men filed in and sat at the table, but her husband was not with them.

As usual, they ate silently and ignored her. "Where is Mr. Hawks?" She directed her question to Rowdy, because he was a white man and seemed more approachable. It was the man called Dan Two-Horse who answered.

"He rode out this morning." She knew that. She'd seen Grady Hawks swing into the saddle and ride from the ranch yard.

"Where did he ride?" Her tenacity surprised her. "That's a blizzard out there. Is he out in this?"

Upset as she was with him, she still felt like these men should be hunting Grady, not filling their stomachs with her stew.

Rowdy mopped his plate with the slab of fresh bread, stuffed it in his mouth, and spoke around it. "Figure he'll be in soon. I'll head out and look for him if he's not back by the end of supper."

That was what she'd been hoping for. She had rehearsed her speech to Grady Hawks all day. Now she had no one to deliver her words to, not to mention that he was out in a bad storm, and instead of retaining her anger, she'd begun to worry about him.

The three men at supper, Navajo, Dan, and Rowdy, saddled up and rode into the blizzard when Grady wasn't back. The girls had fussed all day, she didn't know why, and between the storm, their on-and-off-again crying, and Grady's continued absence, her nerves were on edge.

When three riders came back into the stable yard, they were too far away for her to discern who they were. Because there were three, she assumed it was the Hawks Nest riders and not her husband. When the figures started for the house, she was ready at the door, waiting to throw it open and light the way.

Julie was relieved to see Grady Hawks alive, although he looked frozen to the core. He stood dripping by the front door, seeming stunned by her rapid assumption of authority.

Julie brushed by the other man and led the unresisting woman to the fire to sit on a chair she'd moved there. The Indian woman's husband quickly knelt before her and unlaced the knee-high soft leather boots.

Julie warmed a blanket on both sides, handed it to the woman's husband, and then warmed another which she carried to Grady Hawks and wrapped around his shoulders after he shrugged out of his coat. He shivered, and she returned to the stove where stew simmered.

She'd put on a fresh pot of coffee as soon as she'd seen the three horses, and so she poured three cups—two for the couple in front of the fire and one for her husband.

After he'd left in the morning and she'd slammed all the pans in the kitchen at least twice, she'd sat holding the babies, crying. When they began to howl with her, she calmed and quieted.

It was a hard truth to face, but she was where she had bargained to be. Grady Hawks wanted a son. He needed to deed his land to his child. As plain as the house was, she understood his need to save it and the land of his father, to pass on to an heir. *Am I any better? I made this deal to get something worth having for my girls.*

This was a home that provided safety and comfort for Emma and Amy. On her own, she had been unable to afford either for her daughters. Once that truth was accepted, her needs, wants, and desires meant nothing.

All day she'd paced and worried and planned. She couldn't leave, and in all honesty, she didn't want to. After four years of terrible conditions, frightening situations, and criminal companions, Hawks Nest was an answer to prayers unsent.

That Grady Hawks intended to assert his rights and use her body from now on seemed of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. If she stayed for a year, baby or not, her daughters would own valuable land. When she weighed that against the offer of escape that Comfort Quince tendered, she resolved to make the best of this situation. The Quince woman would still be in Eclipse at the end of the year, and if Julie needed to accept the offer, it would still be there too.

Of course, a pesky thought found its way through all of the others. As the wife of a rancher, Julie already had more status than a gambler's wife or a single woman with children. It mattered not at all to her that her husband was part Indian. Kiowa, half-breed, or white—having any property-owning man to protect her and her girls was an unexpected opportunity.

She knew what awaited her once she left the haven of this ranch if she didn't fulfill her contract—no money, no home for the girls, and no decent life to offer them. Besides, from the story that the Quince rancher had carried to them, Alan Michaels still lingered in Eclipse.

So, she forced her anger aside and tried objectively to grasp control of her situation. Grady Hawks wanted a child. *Naturally a boy will be expected.*

What-if she could be a real wife and let the girls grow up here in safety. She'd paced, sometimes carrying one daughter, sometimes another. She walked and hummed and soothed, made stew because it was easy, tended the fussy babies, and tried to feed them when they cried.

While she played the *what-if* game, her body prepared for what she knew she must do. Very little milk came down, and when the twins remained hungry, she resorted to honey water.

Emma had latched onto Julie's finger and gnawed on it when she smeared the honey along the baby's gum. She'd felt a bump on the bottom that she had never noticed before. Emerald sniffled and seemed generally unhappy. Amy was usually quieter, but today she had been almost listless, and Julie feared she'd caught a cold. She drooled and cried most of the time.

Julie spread a blanket in the kitchen and surrounded them with rolled-up blankets. The twins fussed and played and chattered and slept while she baked bread and biscuits.

She didn't explore the impulse to add cookies to the evening meal, but while the oven was hot for baking, she hunted up ingredients for her mama's drop recipe and mixed up a

double batch.

She'd gone at top speed all day, trying to get back the time she'd spent having a tantrum. By the time supper came and the men ate, she'd made up her mind. She'd assume her position as Mrs. Grady Hawks, mother of two children and ranch wife. Julie decided that she would do whatever it took to keep her place on Hawks Nest Ranch.

When her husband stood dripping and cold by the door, she shoved a cup of hot coffee in his hands, took up another towel to blot up some of the water soaking his clothes and dripping on the floor, and wrapped a warmed blanket around his shoulders.

"Stew's ready. Your clothes are laid out on the bed. I'll have the food on by the time you change."

She gave him an order, but it was sensible and well planned, and left no reason to ignore her directions. He looked surprised before he crossed to the hall and disappeared inside the bedroom.

Julie spooned food into two bowls, cut off two hunks of warm bread, spreading butter over each, and carried the simple meal to the man and woman by the fire. The coffee cups were empty, so she hurried back to the stove and wrapped her makeshift apron around the handle and returned to the man, who held the cup up for a refill.

Grady Hawks came out in time to hear her say, "I don't have night clothes to offer your wife, but I have a dress she can change into."

The smaller woman trembled, teeth chattering, even as she tried to stem the shivers. Just then, the babies woke and began to fuss. Julie turned away abruptly and hurried to the twins' cradle.

"Shhhhh, my lovelies," she murmured, indifferent to the other three adults in the room. She lifted Emma, who was whimpering as she had all day, settled her on her hip, and reached for Amy, but Grady was there before her, lifting her second daughter from the cradle.

He held her up, inspecting the baby, and when he saw the red rash on her chin, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Julie admitted. "They've both been cranky all day long."

"Are they hungry?" he asked hesitantly. He set his earlier stern animus aside as he inspected the babies for sickness.

There were a million unpleasant answers she could have given him. It seemed like all of them flitted through her mind. But bound by her earlier decision, Julie shook her head and told him the truth. "Neither girl ate much today. I think they've caught colds."

She touched Amy's cheek, worried that it was flushed a rosier hue than earlier. "I think she has a fever." The baby looked up at both of them as they peered into her face. She yawned, and when she did, Julie was reminded of the bump on her gum.

"She has a bump in her mouth." Without words, he transferred the twin into her arms, went to the sink, and washed his hands thoroughly, returning to inspect Amy's mouth. She fussed and gnawed at his finger, and his frown turned to a smile.

"Is Emma fussing the same way?" He nodded at the baby in her arms and then inspected her mouth too.

"Teething," he announced. "Babies' gums are sore. Good time to wean them." His remark was so self-satisfied she couldn't control her sharp answer.

"How do you know such things, a man alone with neither chick nor child?"

He rubbed his jaw tiredly, and Julie was sorry she'd challenged him. But he answered

her anyway.

"Babies of one kind or another all get milk teeth. Some just get them earlier than others. When it happens, they get cranky and started chewing on everything in reach."

He carried Amy to the table with him, and she followed and set the loaf of bread on the table after filling a bowl with stew. She juggled Emma on her hip as she worked. Silence was easier than trying to have a conversation with this man.

When he finished the stew, she sat the crock of cookies on the table and filled his cup of coffee. After she watched him eat half a dozen of the confections and figured she'd sweetened his disposition as much as she could, she told him her decision.

She spoke quietly, but intended the woman and man by the fire to hear also. "You'll have to get a cow. I will feed my own children one way or another." She leaned over him and lifted Amy from his arms.

"Until then, I'll feed them as I have before." She'd almost made it to the hall doorway when he spoke.

"The cow will be brought tomorrow."

She nodded at the couple by the fire. "You folks can have the bedroom back here that my girls have been sleeping in. We'll be across the hall tonight."

She'd already moved her nightgown into the bigger room. The cradle sat next to the bed in reach of her hand should they waken in the night. She intended that there would be no more coupling with Grady Hawks while her children lay asleep in the same bed with them.

But then the Indian man unrolled a bedroll and made a place in front of the fire for him and his wife, and Julie felt silly for her offer. She retreated to the bedroom, and clutched a blanket around her as she hurried to get ready for bed.

She knew he liked her hair, so she took special care with the heavy waves, using the wooden comb he'd made her. Then she put a bolster between the cold wall and the cradle where the babies slept, crawled into her own cocoon of blankets, and fell asleep listening to the men's murmured voices speaking a language she didn't understand.

His cold nose, pressed against the crease between her shoulder and neck, woke her. He had shifted her into his arms and curled around her back, nuzzling her almost absently. In spite of her intentions to service him, before she rolled over to comply, he sighed and pulled her closer, then went to sleep.

When Julie was certain it was not feigned and his exhaustion had made him oblivious to what she did, she reached into the cradle lifting the babies to her, opened her nightgown, and fed both daughters. Then she tucked them back into their cradle where they resumed sleep in their comfortable, warm nest.

She woke later, her nightgown around her waist and her bare bottom pressed against his engorged flesh. His hand splayed across her belly, holding her in place while he eased his length into her sheath. When he was seated deep inside of her, he pressed his hand against her mound, forcing the last inch of his cock inside.

"Oh, God." She tried to stifle her moan, but it escaped her in a breathless gasp. He was much bigger than her unprepared flesh was ready to receive.

"You can take me." His entry pulled and burned as he took possession of her and made her flesh his own. He dropped his hand lower and stroked her intimately, rubbing a callused thumb across her clit.

The rough caress made her internal muscles clench, and he in turn sank even deeper

as her body heated and prepared for him.

He anchored himself, hand on her now-slippery folds, fingers playing with her sensitive flesh, while his own turgid member pumped slowly in and out, stretching her around his thick cock. He cupped her breasts, thrusting even deeper, so she spread her legs for him, letting him take his pleasure as he wanted.

When his breath began to rasp in his chest, she squeezed her internal muscles, and it was enough. He pulled her hips high and thrust deep, spilling his seed in a mighty flow that flooded her and trickled down her thigh.

Satisfied that she'd done her duty, she was surprised when he left the warm cocoon of the bed and padded across to the pitcher and bowl on the side table. When he returned, he used the wet cloth he'd fetched to clean away the residue of their coupling.

Then, with no words spoken between them, he climbed back into bed, tucked his half aroused member against her rump, and promptly fell back to sleep. Julie lay in the bed awake, the heat from Grady's body and the weight of his arm slung over her uncomfortable and strange.

She couldn't remember being tended as a baby. Other than that long ago possibility, she had never in her life had anyone wash her for any reason. She had even cleaned herself after the birth of the girls.

Julie had expected to satisfy Grady Hawks' sexual needs, but had been unprepared for his thoughtful attentions after. She wanted to scoot as far away from him in the bed as possible. His sexual intimacies were opposed to everything she understood. Coupling was supposed to be about a man climbing on, satisfying himself, and climbing off. It didn't include personal familiarity or the passion he tried to call from her each time.

She gritted her teeth as his breath whistled annoyingly in her ear, and his body, wrapped as it was around hers possessively, blanketed her with too much heat. She could see out the window that the winter storm still raged, and as her eyes drifted shut, she smiled. There would be no cow in the barn tomorrow.

When his long arm reached beyond the edge of the mattress and rested on the cradle, seeming a silent promise of safety and care, Julie opened her eyes again and stilled the impulse to shrug out of his embrace. Her sleep, when it finally came, was tangled in confusion.

Chapter Thirteen

Grady woke early, feeling rested in spite of the grueling journey he'd made the day before. In the dim light streaming through the window, he could see that the snow had settled into a fine blow.

His woman lay with her back to him, curled protectively toward their two daughters. In the Indian way, he had claimed the twins as his children, making it so. He enjoyed looking at all three females sleeping soundly.

All three were pink and white confections, exotic in a land where white skin and red hair were rare. His hand rested on Julie's hip, and his bronze color contrasted starkly with her alabaster skin. He nodded. One thing in his plan was apparently going right.

He'd been surprised when the angry woman of the morning had changed into an accommodating wife, greeting him with warm clothes and hot food.

His body already accepted hers as its nesting place, and his cock reached out longingly, hoping for another taste before his day began.

But it was the middle of a snow storm, early winter, and he had to find a cow that had dropped a late calf. Not an easy project, but one promised.

He swung his feet to the cold floor and tucked the blankets back around the sleepers, warding his family from the cold.

The murmur of voices greeted him as he walked down the hall to the big room. The Chiricahua Apache, Dakota, stood by the fireplace when Grady entered the room, and his wife, Dawn, moved quietly, folding the bedroll they'd slept on.

Grady spoke in Kiowa and explained that Julie wanted a cow, rather than a wet nurse. The woman looked relieved, the man concerned.

Grady sat on a chair in the kitchen, lacing up his knee-high boots. Then he stood, shrugging into his coat. "Gotta find a milk cow in this mess," he explained as he headed for the door.

He was surprisingly light-hearted as he began his quest. Dakota followed him, telling Dawn he'd be back soon.

"My woman," Dakota began, as they slid toward the barn, but whatever he intended to say, was lost in the storm. Grady yelled his own explanation.

"Julie won't let another woman feed the babies. Sorry to have brought you here." Grady could feel the blood in his veins turning sluggish as the cold of the morning attacked him.

"Dawn must help your woman with the babies." Dakota's voice was a fierce demand.

Grady shrugged sympathetically, but headed for his horse to get riding anyway. "The babies will get fed the way their mother says. She says we need a cow. I'm going to go find a cow."

He threw his saddle on and mounted. Dakota slid onto his Indian pony and rode beside Grady into the cold half-light of morning.

They tracked the herd to a windbreak where the animals stood in a circle, heads down, bunched together sharing body heat. It was hell, trying to find a cow with calf still suckling, and it took the better part of the morning for the two men to cut the mama from the herd, rope her, and haul her to the ranch.

Once there, they made a makeshift stall to hold her, put the calf in with her, and hurried to the cabin. Grady was limping where he'd gotten head-butted, and Dakota needed to clean up and change, because he'd slid in cow manure, falling hard in the green muck.

Neither man wanted to admit his anxiety to the other. They had left the two women, strangers to each other, alone all morning without a way for them to communicate. Dawn spoke no English and Julie no Kiowa.

"My woman still grieves for our son. Her empty arms need to be filled so that she can end her tears." It was a stiff plea for help. "If she gives suck to your babies she will grow strong before she gets with child again."

Grady frowned at the man. "Don't climb on your woman if you don't want to plant your seed."

"You can stay off of yours?" The Chiricahua's startled question brought a flush to Grady's jaw, remembering how he'd wanted seconds the night before, as soon as he'd finished firsts.

He didn't answer, but as he headed for the house he was uneasy at the question. Having the woman sleeping next to him in bed was a pleasure he'd never before experienced.

When Grady was sixteen, Henry Hawks had bought him a night with a whore to learn about women. His teacher had been inexhaustible, and by the time she deemed his training complete, he had been used thoroughly.

During his sexual initiation he'd been like an animal unleashed. The woman had laughed with delight and taken him every way a woman can take a man.

Afterward, he'd been disgusted by his loss of control and the wantonness of the woman's behavior. Since that time, when the need came on him, he mostly limited sex to infrequent and quick couplings with whores, and more often, his hand.

Having his own woman in his bed, available for him when he wanted, opened up a sensual side of him repressed for half of his life. He'd used his training well, bringing cries of passion from his woman with tongue and lips. Now he longed to feel her pulse around the length of him when he filled her with his seed. The feel of gliding into her wet heat was already imprinted on his brain.

It surprised him that he'd slept so easily with her in his bed. She'd smelled fresh and clean, like the soap she'd made with more of the ingredients she'd ordered him to buy; he'd reveled in the feel of silken hair brushing across his skin.

She'd left it unbound, and when he'd crawled in behind her, he'd breathed in the smell of lavender as he'd spooned, enclosing her in his arms. There had been a feeling of rightness, of coming home, he'd not ever felt before.

He'd fallen asleep inhaling the flower smell of her hair, mixed with warm yeasty milk and her unique female scent that aroused him just thinking about it.

And *Jesus*, when he'd come awake, his cock had been swollen bigger than he could ever remember. She was asleep, so he'd tried to ease into her, amazed that she was there, and he could.

He'd been careful, entering her slowly, holding himself in check when he wanted to plunge into the velvet heat. She'd taken all of him after a little help, and he'd gotten relief. It had been good. But she'd restrained herself and not given him the pleasure of her own release. He wanted that too. He clenched his jaw belligerently. He would have *all* of her.

The walls of his life had expanded to encompass the woman and her daughters. Somehow they had already become part of him.

He frowned. Could he stay off of her? His immediate response was—*Why the hell should I? She's mine.*

*

When she woke and found herself and the girls cuddled together minus Grady Hawks, she realized he must have put them in the bed with her while she slept. She was tempted to go back to burrow under the covers and hide all day. She remembered that there were strangers in the cabin with her, and she didn't want to face the changes they brought with them.

Breakfast for the ranch hands was part of the duties she'd assumed, so she rolled out of bed trying to keep from waking the babies. But Emma's eyes popped open, followed by her mouth. She was loud, demanding, and determined to wake her sister.

Julie changed them, tickled and laughed as they tried to crawl off the bed, and then returned beneath the covers to let Emma and Amy feed.

"I love you so much. I love you so much." She blew a raspberry on each belly and giggled when they did. And then it hit her. "Oh God." She buried her face in a pillow to stop the loud sob that escaped. Her girls would not see her sniveling over a deal gone wrong.

"Mr. Hawks has the right to ask this of me, babies. Grady is a good man, just stubborn about what he intends to have. I made a commitment I have to keep." She tippy-toed her fingers up Emma's arm, across her shoulders to Amy and down the other girl's arm.

"He even smells good." She thought about her words and realized that they were true. It was one of the first things she'd noticed about the man. Even in the turbulent moments at Comfort Quince's Boarding House, she'd liked the way he smelled.

"We'll have to get you two into a bigger bed. You're getting too frisky for that little bitty cradle he made for you." Behind her words bravely spoken to her daughters, a foreign thought from her life as Jewel Rossiter scrolled through her mind.

This is a poker game. He's betting he can put a baby in my belly, and I'm counting on that not being so. As long as I remember that, we'll be okay. I will not let myself get with child.

She lingered in the bedroom with the girls as long as it was possible. But the morning meal was still to be cooked, and men would still stomp mud and snow in to be mopped. She didn't even consider abandoning the chores she'd taken on. She enjoyed the work.

Her hand automatically dropped to her belly where he had planted his seed. He had been so careful, trying to sneak that big shaft of his in like she wouldn't notice; she'd almost giggled and turned over to take him in hand.

He'd groaned his pleasure as he stretched her sheath and slowly seated himself. It was a sound he'd tried to suppress, and it pleased her that he couldn't.

And then he'd reached around and touched her intimately, and her body had softened around him, accepting his flesh in a way she hadn't expected. She'd refused to let him draw her release from her, but she'd been left frustrated and tense when he finished alone.

* * * *

Fed, dry, and warm, the twins fell back to sleep, and Julie edged out of the room, leaving the door open so she would hear them when they woke.

Today, she was a hostess entertaining a guest, never mind that it was a stranger who spoke another language and dressed exotically. Julie was eager to make the Indian woman comfortable and visit with her.

Her man and Grady Hawks were both gone, and the woman stood in front of the window staring at the snow when Julie entered the room. "Good morning."

Crossing to the banked embers in the stove, she got the fire going, pumped some water into the kettle, and put on a pot of coffee. The woman remained aloof and silent, and Julie understood that kind of reserve since she exercised it herself.

She had food ready by the time Navajo Leonard, Dan Two-Horse, and Rowdy poked their heads in to check on it. Since she'd been cooking, there had been no compliments, nor *thank yous*, but she'd noticed a softening in their attitudes toward her. After the first week, they had even spoken when she was in the room.

They always spoke Indian, so it made no difference, but even that had been withheld at first.

When the three came in and sat down to the meal, they looked at Dawn curiously and then ignored her too. That confirmed what Julie had suspected—the men were not accustomed to being around females and treated them all like strange creatures they'd just discovered.

She set a plate of flapjacks on the table and targeted Rowdy with her question. She'd already discovered that he was the weak link. He liked to talk. "Where is Mr. Hawks?"

Rowdy had a pancake speared and answered automatically. "Dunno. He and Dakota were up and gone before first light."

The other two men offered no information, but Dan Two-Horse spoke softly to the woman by the window, and she answered in the same language.

He relayed the information, looking directly at Julie for the first time since she'd been on Hawks Nest Land. "She says he went looking for a cow—for the babies."

"Oh." There was a storm; she hadn't thought that he would be that determined, or that foolish. Her stomach knotted painfully at the evidence of his obsessive focus.

Her face heated. She was embarrassed that they all knew why a cow was being procured.

"Might be awhile till he gets back," Navajo Leonard looked at Dan Two-Horse, but his words were for her ears. "Take some doing to find a cow with calf this time of year."

"Yep," Rowdy snorted. "We might not see him again till spring thaw." And Julie realized that they were, in some strange male way, teasing her.

Hesitantly, she spoke to them. "Would you ask her what her name is and tell her my name is Julie Fulton"—she hesitated—"Julie Fulton Hawks, and I would be pleased if she would join me for the morning meal." It didn't occur to her until much later that she'd taken her old name back. Sometime in the month that she'd lived with Grady Hawks, he'd erased Jewel Rossiter from the fabric of her being.

But the men remained silent as though considering her request, and Julie was afraid she'd pushed too hard again. They finished their food, pulled on coats and hats, and headed for the door. As they left, Dan Two-Horse spoke to the woman in a rapid burst of sound Julie longed to be able to understand.

The woman turned from the window and answered him, looking all the time at Julie.

"Says her name is Dawn, and she will eat with you." Dan Two-Horse was out the door leaving her *thank you* said to his backside.

Julie had a name to work with—that would do. "Dawn, won't you break your fast with me?"

The women ate side by side, cleared the table silently, and then as one moved to clean the floor of the muddy tracks left by the ranch hands.

Julie felt at ease bringing the girls to the big room, now that it was clear that Grady Hawks was fetching a milk cow. Her aversion to having her children drink from another woman's breast made no sense, but it was strong.

Apparently, Dawn had the same aversion to feeding a baby not her own. In agreement on the milk cow, that barrier was removed, and the women relaxed in each other's company, each standing in front of the window, with a twin on her hip, watching for the men to come home.

Each girl took right off to having a woman all to herself. Julie was, at first, jealous that Emma didn't reach for her when Dawn held her. But the novelty of having another woman to hand a baby to overrode her fears and anxiety, and she hummed to herself, soothed by Dawn's calm presence.

When the babies began to fuss and announce their hunger, Julie sat on the bench in front of the fire and unbuttoned her dress. Dawn held Amy and sat on the bench next to Julie and Emma. As Julie put the baby to her breast to feed, Dawn sighed sadly and pulled up her loose top.

As Julie looked on with horror, Amy latched on to Dawn's teat and suckled, happy with her meal. The tears of sorrow that rolled down the Indian woman's face prevented the harsh words that Julie would have shouted.

And then she realized that she was crying also. She sat beside Dawn, feeding one twin, while the fragile Indian woman fed the other.

They rocked the babies to a shared melodious tune that had no words, no ending, and no beginning, and wept their unhappiness together. They were still there when the cabin door slammed open, and Grady Hawks and Dakota returned.

"We put the cow in the barn." Those were the first words from Grady Hawks' mouth. When he realized what he was seeing, his voice trickled to a stop in mid-sentence. Dakota stumbled against him, pushing him into the room.

Julie looked at him sadly. The past month had quickly filled each day with things that needed done, and Grady Hawks had accepted her services, first with grudging approval and later with respect. He was a hard man, strange in ways she didn't understand, but his determination to get her with child superseded everything else.

Julie's *what-ifs* game seemed foolish now. *What-if* it could be a real marriage, one that brought a child when the time was right, not from a forced breeding program? *What-if* Emma and Amy could grow up the respected daughters of a Texas rancher?

Her feelings, emotions she'd kept repressed to survive, had ruled her. His intimacies had kept her in a confused state. When he was alone with her, he changed from the grim rancher to a man of passion. She'd told herself that she hated his touch but couldn't deny that her body relished it.

And then there was the truth that Grady Hawks made her feel safe for the first time in years. He'd protected her the night of Frank's death, and he'd taken her daughters into his home without question.

She'd felt him stealing her resistance, but had been unable to stop his siege. That he had finally completed their coupling should not have surprised her. It was why she'd been hired.

She'd been silly, playing a child's game of wishful thinking. But when he'd been so intent on his goal he'd suffered a storm to get a cow to bring her fertility back, it was a splash of cold reality.

He had made it difficult to remember that her role in his household was temporary, but she wouldn't forget again. As she ended one phase of her motherhood, she turned her thoughts from *what-ifs* and accepted what was. *I have eleven more months to endure.*

Chapter Fourteen

Winter settled in with an icy blast that kept Grady out of the cabin and digging out steers. The snow continued for days, leaving the ground frozen and leftover fall grasses buried. Hawks Nest riders spent from dawn to dusk herding the animals into protected areas for shelter from the storm, where hay could be hauled to them.

Grady had more than one occasion to be thankful for the extra shadow-hands that rode his land. Without them, he stood to lose half of his herd.

It was the special cattle that he had tucked away in a holding pen that he worried about the most. Henry Hawks had imported the red Hereford bull from New England and paid a fortune for him. But, he'd survived last year's mild winter and proven his potency when the longhorn cows had dropped their mixed breed calves in the spring.

Grady watched to see if they would survive Texas.

"Henry would be proud." Dan Two-Horse gazed down at the number of red cattle milling around the hay that had been scattered for their feed. The Herefords were stocky, and therefore beefier than the rangy longhorns. They had more meat on them and were less trouble, forgoing the wild behavior of their long-horned cousins.

"The real question," Grady's face was grim, "is will they be able to live on their own without this pampering."

Most of the longhorns were scattered over the open range, and in spite of their attempts to get hay and feed to them, the storm had limited Grady's access.

"You worry too much about what you can't control. Enjoy the sight of your father's dream come true. It'll be spring soon, and this bunch will make a good start for herd building."

Grady knew his cousin spoke true. It was foolish to worry about what he couldn't control.

"And your other breeding program—how goes it, Grady?" Dan Two-Horse was an enigma. Some called him a magician—others a *whisperer*.

Whatever he was called, the truth was Dan had a way with animals, especially horses, like nothing Grady had ever seen. No matter how crazed or devil-filled, Dan could gentle the animal, leaving the owner with a dependable mount.

Grady had taken his marital advice and coaxed his distrustful wife into passion. That thought brought a frown of regret to his face. He'd let Hamilton Quince's visit rile him. He shouldn't have forced Julie to wean the twins. Nothing had been the same since. But the thought of her leaving the ranch—leaving him—had clouded his judgment.

He knew she'd never leave a baby behind, so he'd been in a rush to put one inside of her. Unfortunately, his hindsight was perfect, and he knew he'd handled things wrong, but he had no way to rectify the error.

Grady studied Dan hopefully. He'd be damned if he would admit to his cousin that he'd messed things up with his wife, but if the man wanted to share some more of his horse sense, Grady was willing to listen.

Dan was in demand and was gone most of the time, three seasons of the year. It was only in the winter months that he and his cousin saw each other. Usually, Dan bunked down in the cabin with Grady. This year, the cabin was full of females.

"Women are not like men." It was the only thing he could think to say in answer to Dan's question.

Dan clapped him on the back and laughed aloud. "At last you noticed."

"I noticed," he muttered. Julie and Dawn had changed the cabin. He couldn't even count the ways. It had started with the rugs.

"I took those cloth rags from the barn," she'd told him after dinner one night. He didn't know what she was talking about, but it was so rare that she struck up a conversation he'd given it his full attention.

"I washed them, and Dawn and I are braiding them into floor rugs." He'd mumbled some stupid answer that must have been an okay, because she'd nodded and gone back to her bread making.

And then, the feed-sack material he'd stacked to sell back to the Mercantile in Eclipse, had disappeared. He told Dan Two-Horse, "She put curtains at the windows."

He asked his cousin. "Why cut a hole in the wall to look out, and then cover it with feed sacks?"

Dan said, "Women are a mystery, cousin, but you're lucky to have found such a fine woman. Your children will be blessed if they have her beauty and not your ugly face."

"It's been almost two months." His frown spoke volumes. It had taken less time than he'd thought for her milk to disappear. He was impatient for her to get with child. He needed a son, but he needed her more. In his mind, one got him the other. He was just confused about which came first.

She'd cried at night when she thought him asleep, but she'd never turned away from him or refused his touch. And he'd touched a lot—after the first night, he'd become insatiable. He shifted uneasily in his saddle, his groin area suddenly tight with the memory of her heat the night before.

"*Cetan Nagin*," Dan scolded him using his Apache name—*Shadow Hawk*. "Do you think to breed this woman as if she is one of your cows?"

"Same principle," he grunted.

"Maybe you don't know what you're doing, *Cetan*." Dan laughed at him.

Grady pulled his mount around and navigated the slippery slope down to the boxed corral that contained a hundred and fifty head of bawling mix-breed cattle and the prize bull his father had imported. "Breed true for me," his murmured request was as much for his wife as it was for his bull.

If that was incongruous, so be it. He fixed on his original purpose for this whole charade because he didn't understand how to keep the treasure he'd unexpectedly claimed and having a white son from her fixed both things. He couldn't lose sight of the fact that the legislature in Austin was back in session and debating the Indian Allotment and Relocation Act.

Ambrose Quince was there, representing ranchers from this side of the state. Grady trusted the Quince brothers more than most men outside his ranch and friends. But in his mind, it was better to remove any future doubt about who owned the land. When his son was born, he would deed his share of Hawks Nest to him.

Dan brought his horse alongside Grady, not finished with his advice. "You need to learn your woman. Do you talk to her? Do you give her presents?"

"She doesn't want to talk." And then he added, "There's no time alone to have conversation."

It was an irritant of small matter, but the crowding of the cabin bothered him. Dakota did not leave his woman when he wasn't working. Dawn didn't leave the babies, so Dawn and Dakota occupied the big room all evening. The two of them sat close, communicating without words.

Sometimes, Grady sat alone, watching them, and felt like an outsider in his own home. After Julie put the girls into the crib he'd made for them, she worked in the kitchen and ignored everyone. Even if she allowed it, there was no place to take her for those moments of intimacy he'd enjoyed in the first month. He almost groaned aloud, remembering the taste of her.

Dan tapped his head and spoke to him in Kiowa. "You sleep in the same bed. Talk to her there."

Grady resented his cousin's words; at the same time, he mulled them over on the way home.

When he walked through the cabin, two hours later, after he'd bedded down the horses for the night and fed the rest of the livestock, he stood amazed anew at the cabin's transformation.

Curtains, rugs, children—the twins were toddling and were everywhere they shouldn't be. Dawn had produced a *Gunpiitudai*, and Julie had hung the Kiowa protector talisman over the hallway door.

And when he let his gaze rest on Julie, he pondered her change as well. Her hair had grown and now hung midway down her back. She wore it pulled back in the leather thong he'd tied it in the first day. It shone with health, and he knew she brushed it with vigor at night because when he came to bed, sometimes it seemed to crackle with life.

But she doesn't. The thought soured in his mind. His wife would have hung from the rafters and serviced him if he'd asked. She was ever accommodating, never complaining.

But not with a sigh or a moan did she respond to him, either. She lay under him receiving his seed, and when he finished, she always rolled away and tended herself.

After the first night, she'd made it clear that his attentions after their coupling were both unnecessary and unwanted. He hadn't argued; maybe he should have.

"I'll not have more of your familiarity with my person, either. Babies aren't made that way, and that's what our deal is about." Her face was set in anger, and her words hard. "You want a son. If that happens, so be it. But, the other"—her skin had turned rosy with embarrassment as they both remembered his mouth on her womanhood—"no more of the other."

He'd had more fun with his hand, he frequently admitted to himself. And the hell of it was—even though he knew that she was going to lie there like a washboard and be just as lively—he still wanted her every night, sometimes more than once. It disgusted him knowing that the situation was of his making, but he wasn't smart enough to see his way out of the mess.

So he mulled over the horse whisperer's words. *Talk to her. Give her presents.*

* * * *

It took some doing and a trip to the Double-Q, where his sanity was questioned by the Quinces, but two nights later, he followed Dan's advice again.

"Come with me to the barn," he told Julie after the supper dishes were finished, the babies asleep, and Dakota and Dawn were cuddled in front of the fire. It remained a

source of irritation that they'd taken up residence where Grady wanted to be with his own woman in his arms.

So his voice was gruff when he ordered Julie to get her coat on for a trip into the dark, cold night. He walked beside her and held the lantern above her right shoulder as an excuse to have his arm wrapped around her. Her feet squelched wetly in the snow, and she protested weakly, "Surely whatever this is could wait till morning."

"No, it can't." He couldn't waste another minute of his year with her in silent combat. He couldn't explain his sudden overwhelming need to win her approval—maybe it was because spring was around the corner—maybe it was because every day she built the wall between them higher. He'd decided the wall was coming down.

They reached the barn and he tugged it open, shepherding her through the door he then closed and secured. Her eyebrows went up on the bar he set in place, locking out the world and them in.

But, he bided his time. First the present—then...

*

"Chickens?" Julie couldn't believe what she saw before her—three hens sharing nine baby chicks among them, to be exact.

Even as she asked, she crouched down beside the wire enclosure he had penned them in. Grady knelt beside her, opened the cage for a minute, and scooped up one of the yellow balls of fluff to hand to her.

Julie cupped the precious bit of life in her hands and tried to keep the moisture in her eyes from spilling over. "Why would you do such a thing?" The words trembled on her lips, but he shushed her question by covering her mouth with his.

"I want you, Julie. Want me too." He murmured the words against her lips, fumbling to get the chick back in its pen with one hand as he drew her into his arms with the other.

"It's too cold out here," she protested.

"I'll keep you warm."

She wasn't cold. He held her to him, lips hungrily tasting her, and she opened to him, relishing the feel of his tongue touching her own. Never lifting his head, he pulled her coat from her and shrugged out of his own, piling them behind them in the straw he'd already prepared.

When he cupped her breasts and kneaded them through the rough material of her dress, her moan of need broke free and loosed the hard control she'd maintained over the past two months.

He didn't ask permission but swept her under him, lifting her skirts as he tumbled her onto the bed of coats and straw. But, he didn't come into her as she expected. Instead, after he'd pushed her underclothes to her knees, then to the top of her boots, he parted her thighs and set his mouth on her.

"Grady, no." But even as she protested, her hips rose to meet the exquisite invasion.

"Yes," he mumbled against her folds, causing a tickling sensation that made her shiver. "Yes, yes, yes," he muttered the words from hole to clit and lifted her higher as his tongue, teeth, and lips set her aflame.

Julie's nipples were hard pebbles swollen with need. He aroused such want she pressed her hands against his head demanding more.

When his tongue entered her, she pushed against it. "More," she whispered. But he withdrew, causing a sob of distress, until he pushed two fingers into her, giving her what

she begged for.

His drank the honey that flowed from her core, licked the soft inner flesh of her cleft, and sucked on the nub of nerves that seemed to swell and demand his attention. Her climax flowed over her in a stream of heat and bursting stars. She knew she shouted out, but had no recall of her own words later.

When she came back to herself, he was cradling her head on his shoulder. Her skirts were back in place, and he seemed content. When he nuzzled her neck, she could smell her scent on him, and it made her feel wicked at the same time arousal stirred again in her belly.

He hadn't come. She didn't have to slide her hand down his front and cup his jeans to know that. The length of his manhood was outlined as the denim stretched to contain it.

There are ways to pleasure a man without getting with child. Before she could lose her nerve or question her sanity, Julie tugged open his pants. When she touched his swollen member, his breath hissed out, arousing her even more. She parted the flaps of his jeans and brought the full length of him into the open.

"Julie, no." His protest mimicked her own so closely, her first taste of him was wrapped in laughter.

"Yes," she fluttered the words around the head of his cock, tasting his pre-cum with the tip of her tongue.

"Yes, yes, yes," she murmured against the velvet hardness of his length, swirling her tongue against his thickness, sucking him with her mouth.

"Julie." It was a desperate groan she ignored. "Sweetheart, you've got me so hot, I can't hold back. You have to stop now." The jerky confession came from a man who controlled every facet of his life. Instead of allowing Grady reprieve, Julie opened her jaw wider and angled her throat to take him even deeper.

He clutched her hair and held her to him as his seed shot from him in an explosive gush that filled her throat and then her mouth as his manhood softened. When the last drop was spent, Julie rubbed her tongue along his cock, savoring the taste of him before she sat up and tucked him back inside his pants.

He stared up at her from his collapsed position on the coats, and she spoke her thoughts aloud. "You make me lose control. I make you lose control. Reckon that makes us even, Grady Hawks."

Chapter Fifteen

Julie prided herself on how well she had adjusted to this new life. After their foray in the barn, tension between them lessened considerably. *When the need for passion is on him, Grady Hawks always finds a place to ease it.*

Her thoughts were wry, because she knew that her need for that passion was as great as his. Their secret trysts were always the same, his lips on her, her mouth taking him. Only then did she let loose her control and give him the release he wanted from her.

In the bed at night, when he penetrated her and left his seed next to her womb, she refused to give into passion. Ridiculous or not, she felt that her body would refuse his seed as long as she remained unresponsive.

The cabin was considerably more comfortable than when she'd been brought here four months before, and she was proud of the improvements to the men's lives she'd made. The food was cooked on time and served hot, she washed the denims for all of them, and she and Dawn had made the barren cabin into a home.

For three months of Julie's stay, the Indian girl had been with her, both as a helpmate and a friend. They worked beside each other, communicating when they needed, but mostly they used sign and not words. It was already early February, and the winter so far had been fierce, but it would soon end. She dreaded that as much as she welcomed it.

Dawn and her husband would be gone, and Julie would be alone with Grady Hawks and the girls. She hated the thought of the lonely days after the other woman left. She also feared the growing affection her daughters had for Grady. Already, they climbed on him in the evening, demanding his attention.

"Ate," Emma would coo, wobbling in front of him. Amy's babble was still just that, but Emma's Kiowa "*father*" was very clear when he pretended to ignore her. Dawn was busy teaching them the Indian word that had an English meaning Julie refused.

"You have a good man." It was something that Dawn told her often, as though she wanted Julie to understand.

Julie always nodded agreement and let it go. She did not consider Grady Hawks her man. *We made a bargain. I am doing my best to fulfill it. Come November next, we'll be gone.* If she told herself that enough, she thought she could prepare herself for the departure.

"I don't want the girls to get too attached to him," she tried to explain hesitantly. "He's not their father, you know."

Dawn had shaken her head in denial, repeating, "*Cetan Ate*," and then stubbornly, in English, "Father Hawk."

It rattled her. She didn't tell Dawn that she planned to leave, but the other woman knew anyway.

One day they stood watching as Dakota and Julie's husband rode into the ranch yard. There were icicles hanging from the horses' manes, and the men's breaths pumped out white in the air.

Grady Hawks looked as cold and proud as the mountainous landscape that surrounded him. Dawn nudged her and then picked up a length of Julie's hair.

"Your man is warmed by your fire." She tugged on the end of the red strand as

though scolding Julie for ignoring something she should understand.

He'd been so sure he'd get her with child immediately they hadn't discussed the possibility that she could be carrying but undelivered at year's end. She had already been here four months, and in spite of his nightly attentions, and her former fertility, her womb was empty.

In eight months' time, Julie intended to be gone. The first month here, she could feel this place weaving bands around her heart. She'd worked hard to make herself useful. At first she'd been silly, falling back into her *what-ifs*.

What-ifs had stopped shortly after Grady Hawks made it clear she was here for one reason—to present him with a child as soon as possible.

The day she handed the twins over to Dawn to nurse, she vowed she'd get her little family away from Grady Hawks and the Hawks Nest Ranch and never look back. Julie could tell that the longer she stayed, the harder it would be on her daughters. She refused to think of the passion that he unleashed in her. She preferred to think of it as gratitude that her daughters would have a grubstake in life.

The cow had wintered in comfort, giving her milk to her calf, while Dawn had assumed the role of wet nurse. When her resolve to remain aloof weakened, Julie reminded herself of the painful swelling of her breasts when he'd forced her to wean the girls.

This is a business deal to him. Presents are just his way to make the medicine go down smoother. So when Grady Hawks came to her each night to plant his seed, she lay still and passive, and willed her body to remain barren.

* * * *

March came and went, the winter turned into early spring, and Dawn weaned the twins, preparing to leave with Dakota. As soon as the mountain passes thawed enough for traveling, the two were headed to Mexico.

Grady watched enviously as the once-solemn Indian girl flirted with her husband. It was spring and the two were in love. Sometimes he caught Julie discreetly peeking at them, a puzzled look on her face. *Did she expect that from him? Did she want that?*

He thought about asking her to stay beyond the year if she remained without child, wondering what he could offer beyond the girls' land deal. But remembering how Julie had wanted a written contract, he kept silent, figuring she'd see it as his intention to weasel out of their original agreement.

Every morning, he and the rest of the hands were out at first light, rounding up the cattle that had survived a hard winter. It kept Grady busy and his mind off what he couldn't change. The first break in the weather, he'd ridden to the high country and visited Hawk Canyon. The cave was swept clean, the fires cold.

When the Indians had gone, he didn't know. Dakota was unsurprised, and Grady felt the old resentment—he would always be part of two worlds, accepted in neither. On the way back to the cabin, Grady spied an elk and brought it down with a rifle shot.

"Be good to have fresh meat," he said to the Indian as they dressed out the carcass. Dakota rolled the skin out to dry in the sun, and motioned at it. "For your woman—give—maybe she stay in your lodge."

He was the second man urging Grady to give Julie a gift. It embarrassed him that the other men could see the weakness of his marriage.

* * * *

Spring sunshine melted the snow in the high elevations, and by April, Julie's friend prepared to leave. Grady loaded a pack horse with provisions for Dakota and Dawn as the two women said their *good-byes*. With silent tears wetting her cheeks, Julie watched until the two figures on horseback disappeared into the mountains.

The cabin seemed empty with Dawn no longer there. Julie dreaded the lonely days, and looked for excuses to wrap the girls in warm clothes, exploring outside the cabin. But this morning she could hear rain hitting the roof, playing a dreary tune.

Grady had risen early to join the hands who were already working the foothills in the spring roundup. He'd leaned over the bed, tucking blankets around her as he always did, and then dressed. Before he'd left, he said, "Don't worry about meals this week; we'll be camping in the hills, branding calves as they come in."

That had brought her awake immediately. "You won't be here tonight?" She tried to be casual.

"I can ride back in, if being alone here bothers you." He waited for her answer.

"No, don't worry, we'll be fine." But she was already tense at the notion of being isolated in the cabin. It was foolish, but she had become accustomed to all of the layers of protection that Grady Hawks provided—especially his own presence.

Confined to the cabin by the weather, she worked, keeping the oven going all day to produce baked goods since there was no one to eat a meal. She hulled the last of the fall pecans and made pies.

At the end of the day she was exhausted, the cabin smelled like a bakery and was filled with treats for the ranch hands with no way to deliver them.

She faced the night with trepidation. Bold claims made to Sheriff Potter notwithstanding, she did not know how to shoot a gun, handle a knife as a weapon, or fight like a man.

As soon as she tamped down the fire in the oven, the chill of the wet spring evening seeped through the cabin walls. Shivering, she dragged out the big baby crib that Grady had built for the twins and stationed it in front of the fireplace in the main room.

After she made a pot of coffee and watched the twins toddle and play until they were weaving with tiredness, she bathed them in the tub of water she'd heated, and put them to bed. She would have relished their company but both were fast asleep, leaving her in the eerie quiet of the cabin as rain pelted against the roof.

Julie rocked in the big chair that had materialized shortly after she'd arrived. She was snuggled in a blanket, staring mesmerized at the flames when she was jerked from half-sleep by pounding on the cabin door.

"Who is it?" She wasn't going to lift the plank, unbarring the door, without knowing who stood outside.

"Let me in, Julie." She was enormously relieved to hear Grady's gruff voice. When she swung open the door, he took in her nightgown, the crib in front of the fire, the rocking chair pulled up close, and he smiled.

It was such an unusual expression on his face Julie smiled back. He sniffed the air, "Sure smells good in here."

Before she could hurry to get supper for him, or pour him a cup of coffee, he pulled her into his arms.

"Hmmm," he murmured into her hair. "You smell good enough to eat." Moisture

from his shirt and pants seeped into her nightgown as she stood in the circle of his arms. When she shivered, he pulled the blanket tighter around her and stepped back, releasing her. "Sorry. Forgot I was all wet."

Unexpected feelings of tenderness welled up in her throat. Julie took the blanket from her shoulders and wrapped it around his. "I don't want you getting sick. You work too hard and don't take care of yourself."

When she would have stepped away again, he pulled her close inside the cocoon of the blanket. "You should get out of those wet clothes," she whispered, trembling, but not from cold.

"I think you need to get out of that damp nightgown too," he murmured, walking toward the fire without releasing her. He stopped by the crib where Amy snored softly at one end and Emma smiled in her dreams at the other.

She grasped the hem of his shirt and pulled it up and over his head. He untied the ribbon on her nightgown and pushed it off her shoulders to fall at their feet. And then he kissed her.

His lips settled gently over hers, asking without words. She opened for him, and his tongue explored her mouth. A moan escaped her throat as she felt the brush of his hot skin against her breasts.

She liked the feel of his callused hands, thumbs circling her nipples erotically as he continued to plunder her mouth.

"I want you, Julie—want me too." He used the words that always inflamed her.

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Grady lowered Julie to the blanket, covering her with his body. Both of them fumbled at his waistband, freeing him quickly from his pants. His cock was hard and ached to sink into her sheath, but tonight, he wanted more, he wanted her to need him as much as he hungered for her.

He buried his face in the crease between her neck and shoulder, breathing the scent of skin perfumed with the aroma of cookies, as he nuzzled his way to her ear, murmuring his pleasure. He pulled loose the leather thong that bound her hair, and then, conscious of the hard floor under her, he rolled on his back, pulling her on top of him.

The silken strands of red fire caressed his chest as she sat up. "Ride me," he ordered. Before she could think, or lose the passion he'd unexpectedly ignited, his lips closed over her nipple, making her arch into his suckling attentions.

He held her, one hand on her hip, urging her forward, the other pulling and tweaking her other nipple. She clasped his head and stroked his hair as he pleased her with his mouth.

His cock stood tall, a pillar of iron ready to melt in her internal heat, and when she centered herself and slid down, taking him into her body, they both sighed thankfully.

"Yes." Her eyes were closed; her hair curtained them as she rode his thrusts and tilted her pelvis to take him deeper than he'd ever been.

She was wet and ready for him. His cock ground against her mound as her internal muscles gripped him, demanding more. Her knees straddled his body, as she swiveled her hips and thrust back. "Please," a whispered plea escaped her lips, asking him for relief.

He slid his hand between them and stroked her pearl. Lightning forked through her body, her muscles spasmed, squeezing his shaft as her climax caught him and carried him along too. In a straining mass of tangled limbs, they soared together and collapsed as one.

Grady petted her back, smoothing his hand up and down as aftershocks pulsed through both of them. He didn't want to move—ever.

Her head rested against his shoulder; his cock, unwilling to stop the delight even now, twitched inside of her, reveling in the slide of soft heat that enveloped him.

When she lifted her head, her expression was grim. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Why? Why withhold pleasure from coupling when we have it so many other ways?" Her truculent expression accompanied the shake of her head.

"It's best not to have feelings for you." Her lips were firmed in an almost frown, and her eyes were brimming with tears ready to overflow.

Grady didn't let the moment pass. *Talk to your woman.* The words of Dan Two-Horse resonated in his mind. "I already have feelings for you. I hoped you would grow to have them for me."

She peered down at him and then touched his chin, lifting it so she could study his expression. "You do?" Grady held still while she explored his face with the tip of her finger, as though reading his soul. "Does that mean you want me for more than a year?"

"Forever." He held her gaze and waited.

She didn't give him back words, but settled him deeper inside of her, bending to claim his lips. When she ended the kiss, she smiled. "Maybe we could do that again." His cock surged to full strength inside of her. He never had enough of her, and tonight she matched his need with equal fire, her sheath burning his cock as she held him inside with want, not duty.

He turned so that she lay under him. "Again?" he asked.

Her shy nod and flushed cheeks were all the encouragement he needed. Hours later, passion sated at last, they lay quietly before the burning embers in the fireplace. He cushioned her body with his, turning so that he held her in his arms, her head resting against his shoulder.

There was so much he wanted to say to her, but in the afterglow of their first true lovemaking, he hid behind whispered words in the language of his mother—words that Julie didn't know.

You are my woman. I will walk beside you all of our lives. Let me be your man. Let me be your life.

While she slept easy, spooned against his side, relaxed in his keeping, he thought about her. He realized he no longer cared what she'd been or done before she married him.

He smiled and nuzzled her hair, inhaling his scent mixed with hers. It had taken him less than an hour to maneuver her into being his wife, but almost six months to claim her as his woman.

His thoughts were confirmed when she opened her eyes, looked into his, and blushed. *This beautiful woman is mine.* Fascinated he watched the pink flush wash over her, staining her body and face with a bright rose color.

She reached for her nightgown, straining away from his embrace to grab it. It was the same tattered gown she'd worn since the first night, and it suddenly offended him greatly. Before she could rescue it, he threw it on the fire, where it disappeared in a burst of flame.

"Put my shirt on. I like the way you look wearing my clothes." He put his red shirt,

which he knew she was partial to, over her shoulders and watched as she pulled her hair free of the collar and then buttoned it closed.

Reluctantly, he stood and pulled on his pants. She busied herself tidying the blankets and checking the twins, although they still slept and gave her no one to hide behind.

When she started to withdraw into herself, Grady knew he had to forge a connection stronger than the passion they'd just shared. He looked out the window marshaling his thoughts.

"Tell me," he invited. "Tell me how Julie Fulton, from a small farm back East, ended up married to a no-good crook like Frank Rossiter."

He thought that was a safe way to start a conversation since there was no disputing that her deceased husband had been among the lower forms of life.

Julie sighed. "When I was just eighteen," she began her story, "and full of myself..." she flashed Grady a smile so filled with mischief that he could see the girl chasing womanhood.

"...I met Frank Rossiter at an ice cream social. I ignored my mother's warning and latched on to the best-dressed man there when he asked me to dance."

Grady wondered why he'd ever thought her features hard and then realized how much she had changed since she'd come to Hawks Nest.

"My mother was recently remarried. Her new husband had a way of looking at me that made me uncomfortable. Without being vain—I know men stare—and being young and foolish, I enjoyed it then."

She said the last regretfully and then explained. "When it was my stepfather ogling it wasn't fun anymore. Mama wanted me out. She told me to choose a man and get my own home."

She was so pretty it didn't surprise Grady that men had been lined up, looking, although he felt possessive stirrings when he thought about it.

"There were plenty of farmers I could have married," Julie admitted. "But I didn't want a man who smelled of pig manure or hayfields. I didn't know the sweet-smelling stranger who came courting was a gambler. And my mother didn't approve of him, but wanted me out of the house worse, so I ran off with him."

Grady listened to the familiar story of a con artist fleecing a mark—and no doubt Rossiter had seen the young Julie as easy pickings. She'd owned a little land inherited from her grandmother. "Sixty acres," Julie admitted. "A farmhouse and outbuildings that needed work. I thought I was too good for that." Her laugh was filled with self scorn.

"I thought I was being smart to insist on marriage. I didn't realize..."

That pretty much described the whole affair. Frank Rossiter had married her before one of the locals could intervene, whisked her away from everyone who could have helped, and sold the farm quickly after.

"He told me that I looked like a rube, and I embarrassed him. So one of the first things he bought with my money was a new wardrobe for me." He reached over to stroke her hair, tousled from their lovemaking.

"That was some wardrobe. I went from cotton pantalettes and prim shirtwaists to cheap silks and satins. Even I knew that wasn't how decent women dressed. But Frank had a purpose in his choices."

He wished he hadn't asked. She stood up wearing his shirt and nothing else, and frowned down at him

"I was not a whore. You understand that, don't you?" She stated it unequivocally. "Frank had intentions from the first. But when I could have gotten away and gone home, my damned pride kept me there. And at first, stupid kid that I was, I liked the fancy dresses cut too low. By the time I realized what Frank had in mind, I'd lost control of the money and everything else."

Grady had no doubt of that. Rossiter had been an expert.

She shivered, hugging his shirt tighter around her as bad memories disturbed the aftermath of their lovemaking. "Come over here," Grady told her.

Julie hesitated and then stepped into his arms. He picked her up, wrapping the discarded blanket around her, as he settled them into the rocking chair.

The rest of the story unfolded, sordid and sad. Rossiter had turned her into a partner in con games. He'd said she needed a new name—Jewel. He'd told her it would be like her stage name.

Julie rubbed her cheek against his chest, seeking warmth and reassurance. "By that time," she confessed, "I was more than happy to call myself something different. I didn't want anyone to ever know that Julie Fulton had been brought so low."

The rest of the story was a tale of Frank's violent rages and the fists he'd applied liberally.

"By the second week, I was ready to leave him. I didn't love Frank Rossiter when I married him. I didn't even know him. But I thought love would grow. I thought he did me a favor by getting me away from the small-minded community I despised. I thought if I did what he asked and tried to please him in every way, things would settle down between us."

Grady could barely hear her final whisper. "I was wrong."

Chapter Sixteen

If it was one thing Julie didn't want to talk about, it was her life with Frank Rossiter or what she had done while married to him. But she had been a coward to keep her silence this long.

"Frank was invited to a party." She knew her body had tensed, remembering, but she needed to tell Grady before she lost her nerve.

"We'd been invited to what was supposed to be a friendly poker game held in Teddy James' rooms above the Golden Eagle Saloon. He said Alan Michaels was entertaining bankers from Philadelphia, and it would be easy money for Frank to pick up."

It had been friendly all right. She shuddered. "I was supposed to be the entertainment."

Grady looked blank, and then his face darkened before cold settled across his features. She looked away, but continued.

When Frank escorted her through the door, Alan Michaels had greeted them, slapping Frank on the back before he reached for Julie and grabbed her breasts, squeezing them until it hurt.

"*Look what I have for you fellows.*" He'd spun her into the room and made no pretense that she was anything other than part of the night's fun.

She'd tried to leave right then, but Frank blocked that move, although he was already upset at Michaels.

"It would have been worse," she continued telling her gritty story. "But for once in his life, Frank protected me. I *had* to sit in on the poker game. It was my job to distract the other players, while Frank fleeced them."

It had been Frank's determination to get her at the table, and next to a mark, that had saved her from Michaels' attentions.

"I picked the only man at the table dressed like a rancher and not in a three-piece suit. The Eastern bankers were already half drunk, and they were more interested in the fancy women in one of the back bedrooms than in playing cards."

"The rancher," Julie paused and then went on, "was a gentleman in control of his faculties. He had a cup of coffee in front of him, and it was obvious he was the only man at the table Frank would have to beat."

She'd sat next to him, prepared to flirt and practice her wiles. Instead, he'd looked at her sympathetically and given her advice.

"*You don't belong with this crew, lass. Best get shut of that fool you're traveling with, because he'll take you down.*"

She'd not acknowledged his warning even though it was true. But she'd felt better with him at the table. Alan Michaels had stood smoking a cigar and watching her when she'd resisted another banker's attempts to pull her out of her chair and into the bedroom.

Julie's thoughts returned to the present when Grady questioned her sharply.

"And did you distract them?" Grady's spoke with disgust and anger, but Julie continued, determined to finally tell him about that night.

"I don't know what would have happened if interest had not been turned in another direction." Julie's voice was grim; the moments of Grady's tender lovemaking sustained

her need to trust him.

She had presented a distraction at the table, but not the kind Frank needed.

"So, Rossiter," Michaels stood behind her chair and deliberately looked at her breasts that were on display in the gown cut lower than a whore's. "You don't care if I fuck your wife, do you?"

She acknowledged her part in the deadly confrontation that had ensued. When the eastern banker had grabbed her by her hair, intent on forcing her from her chair, she'd picked up the only thing she could use for a weapon, pitching the rancher's cup of hot coffee over her shoulder into her attacker's face.

She didn't want to revisit the moment Frank had grabbed her arm, twisting it behind her back while he propelled her into a second bedroom not yet being used by the businessmen.

"Rossiter," Michaels had called after him, mopping his face and laughing. "Don't ruin her mouth. I have plans for it."

The rancher, who had been kind to her, had protested, and she'd heard a scuffle when he tried to follow.

"Frank disagreed with my refusal and pulled me into another room to discipline me. That's when Alan Michaels killed a man. When Frank heard the gun fired in the other room, he was more interested in that than in me. I took that opportunity to leave."

She'd had her leg over the sill and ready to climb out and down, when Frank abruptly quit watching the bankers, locked the bedroom door, and followed her out the window.

"Jesus, Julie. That maniac Michaels just shot the old man." When Frank called her real name, she knew he was just as scared as she was.

They'd sneaked out of town under cover of night, not bothering to report what they'd witnessed to the sheriff of Eclipse.

"We left while they were disposing of the body, which I think, is the only reason I'm still alive."

She stared at her clenched hands, unable to look at Grady again. "Alan Michaels is not the kind of man you blackmail. I assume that Frank didn't understand that, and that's why he's dead."

Grady's question was tense, letting her know that he already suspected the answer. "Who was it, Julie? Who did Alan Michaels murder that night?"

Julie closed her eyes so that she would not have to look at him when he repudiated her.

"Your father," she whispered. "I didn't know at first. No one introduced him, and it all happened so fast, he never introduced himself. But"—she stopped, opened her eyes, and met his gaze—"later, when word of Henry Hawks' shooting reached us in Albuquerque, Frank said that was the man Alan Michaels had murdered."

"I'm so sorry." Julie's stomach knotted in fear at the rage on Grady's face. "He was defending me. I caused it to happen. If I'd just played along and not made a fuss, your father would still be alive."

Her words hung between them before he seemed to grasp their import. Then he shook his head. "No, sweetheart, my dad would be proud to die for that cause, but Alan Michaels used the poker game as bait."

With his words, Grady removed the burden of guilt that she had carried over his

father's murder.

"Everyone in Texas knew my dad liked a good game of cards. He got that invitation from Michaels a week after the business consortium hit town."

Looking at it from that perspective, it did seem to Julie as though Michaels had concocted a bold plan to eliminate Henry Hawks as a means of grabbing Hawks Nest land.

"My father's horse came in without him, and when we backtracked, we found his body on the trail home. Afterward, the sheriff and I talked to Michaels about the poker game. He said that my father had been the night's big winner and celebrated in the Golden Eagle before leaving."

Grady's eyes burned with promise. "Teddy James swore he talked to my father in the saloon before Da left."

"Teddy James was at the poker game," Julie told him. She was shivering—chilled by her memories and the grim look on Grady's face.

But when Grady hugged her close in his arms, saying, "None of it was your fault, sweetheart," the last remnants of her resistance to him ended.

*

Grady watched the play of emotions cross Julie's face. She was softer, warmer, and less frightened than he'd ever seen her. At the same time he was filled with grief and anger for his father's murder, peace was given to him in the form of this woman.

The fire burned low as she drowsed against him, absently running her fingers up and down his arm. "What is this," she touched the braid that circled his wrist.

His hunger for her and the wonder of this moment, wouldn't permit him to let her fall asleep.

"I have this"—he lifted a tendril of red hair and pulled it gently, showing her what he meant—"with me at all times. Your fire warms me."

She blinked, her half-closed eyes holding an expression of puzzlement.

"I have the hair that you gave me at our wedding breakfast." He was smug, satisfied at her look of outrage. He'd taken her defiance and made it tribute.

He felt his lips quirk up in an unfamiliar smile that turned into a grin when she sat up on his lap. "My hair ... you kept that hank of hair?"

"*Your man is warmed by your fire.*" Dawn said those words to me. I didn't understand then what she meant." Julie inspected the braided bracelet he wore.

Grady explained. "We didn't get the chance to exchange rings. You probably would have thrown it at me, even if I'd had one along." He paused as both of them remembered the bizarre wedding.

"There was no time that day. I apologize now. But," he became serious, "my pledge to you was made with the hair you sacrificed. I am your man."

An unfamiliar reckless belligerence filled Grady. He needed her loyalty. He needed to know she was his. He stood, setting her carefully in the rocker, while he went to the box that rested on the mantle above the stone fireplace. He retrieved the turquoise stone ring that rested inside.

"This is the ring my father gave my mother. Will you wear it as a sign that you are my woman?" He asked her that, because she was already his unhappy wife. He'd not told her the truth when he'd said he wanted her to want him. *I want her to love me.*

She unclasped the hands that were laced tightly together and slowly extended her left

to him. "I will," Julie told him. She held his gaze as he slid the ring over her knuckle and seated it on her fourth finger.

"My mother wore this ring until she returned to her father's people. The day she left, she put it in that box on the mantle."

He wanted to let her know that he would not force her to stay. But he wanted her to know too, that she was in his heart.

"I hope that you will always remain with me, but if you choose to go, put the ring back in its box, and I'll understand."

She pulled her hand back as though he had slapped her and asked hesitantly, "When did your mother leave?"

"Two days after I was born," he answered, masking his shame beneath pride.

At her gasp, he explained stiffly, "My mother, like you, was only a pawn in the lives of men. My father wanted Kiowa land—this place he named Hawks Nest.

"My Indian grandfather was a shaman. He knew the days ahead would be troubled. He made a bargain with my father so that I would be born; he believed that someday I would bring the land back to the Kiowa."

"And your mother?" Julie stood from the chair and took his arm, moving him so that he sat.

"There, that's much better." She eased into his lap and leaned back against his chest, pulling his arms around her.

Then she laid her head against him and told him, "It's not polite to give your woman a ring and then ask for it back. Because of the circumstances, I'll let it slide this time."

And then playfully she poked him in the chest. "Don't do it again."

He felt an easing inside of him—as though a spring that had been coiled tightly all the days of his life suddenly loosened and relaxed.

"You wouldn't go off and leave your baby, would you?" He knew the answer already and didn't need her confirmation. But he asked anyway.

She pulled his head down and nipped his jaw. "No, I would not. Did your mother ever come back?"

"My father went after her the first dozen times. Then, he let her go. He could have remarried. No one would have faulted him for taking a white wife once the settlers brought some here to choose from."

"He made a bargain with your grandfather and got you. It was enough for him." Her husky voice said the words his father had spoken many times, and he knew they were true.

They sat, learning each other in their mutual silence. Outside, the wind picked up, drying out the land that had been bogged down in rains. When daylight shone through the windows, the sun had already cut a path through the clouds and pointed the way to a clear, warm day.

He dressed and readied to go back to the work site, and she looked at the baked goods she'd made the day before. "I guess I went stall-crazy cooped up in this cabin in the rain."

"Can you put that stuff into a basket, or a couple of baskets?" It was a question asked as he went through the door, anxious to get a head start on the day as usual.

She was wearing her pink Mercantile dress when he came back inside. It should have clashed with her hair, but instead, she was beautiful.

"Get the girls dressed in something warm. We'll take these supplies up to camp and you can see my Herefords."

And he realized that he really wanted her to see the young bull his dad had imported. Henry had been sure that this new breed would change the way of cattle ranching on Hawks Nest.

Chapter Seventeen

Emma and Amy were ecstatic to be outside. Grady drove, with his horse tied on behind. "Now pay attention," he warned her. "You might have to drive up to the line shack for me someday. Learn the way."

Julie took comfort in his words instead of being offended. She and the girls had a home here. They were safe. In her heart she'd accepted him. He called the passion from her, cherished her daughters, and asked only one thing in return—a son. Why her stomach clenched in protest made no sense.

But it happened anyway, and she couldn't get past it. *He says he cares for me. I have feelings for him too. That should be enough for a good marriage.* The real question remained unanswered. Would he still care for her if she gave him no son? Unbidden the memory of Comfort Quince's barren state came to mind.

I can give Grady a son. She admitted the truth to herself. She didn't *want* to have another child. The memory of her first time was too fresh in her mind. After months of fear, pain, and finally abandonment, she'd survived. She knew in her heart that Grady Hawks would take care of her, but her head didn't trust what her heart told her.

"You're not paying attention." He was back to being his autocratic self, so she wrinkled her nose at him, and he responded by pulling her closer under the arm he had slung around her shoulders. The girls sat on a thick blanket in the back of the wagon, tied in place so they couldn't crawl out.

They were as excited about the trip as she was. It took a good while to get to the camp. Once there, Rowdy was first at the wagon, followed by Dan, and then Navajo.

"Took you long enough," Rowdy complained. "Something wrong down at the cabin?"

But then he seemed to notice the arm still slung around Julie's shoulders, and he swallowed whatever he'd planned to say next.

Dan had already untied the girls, who had climbed happily into his arms to be carried.

"I baked some apple cobbler and pecan pies yesterday. Grady thought I might like to bring them and see where he works."

But her words were spoken to their backs, as Navajo grabbed one box of food and Rowdy grabbed the basket.

Grady jumped down and lifted her to the ground. "Some things don't ever change," she grumbled, but her complaint was delivered with a smile.

He untied his horse from behind the wagon, mounted, and then leaned down and scooped her up in front of him.

"What are you doing," she gasped, but he just pulled her tighter in his arms and trotted up to where Dan held the girls.

"I'm taking Julie to meet Pretty Boy. You'll be all right with the girls for a while, right?"

The horse whisperer grinned and hefted each girl higher in his arms while they giggled. "Glad to see you two came to terms. We'll be fine—for awhile," and he winked at her.

Grady didn't wait, but set his horse into a lope, making Julie throw her arms around his waist and bury her face in his chest.

"I like the way that feels, sweetheart." His laugh rumbled under her cheek. She could feel his heart beating a solid thump against her ear.

It occurred to her that she had heard him laugh more in the last twenty-four hours than in the entire rest of the six months that she'd lived with him. He pulled up abruptly, throwing her even closer to his body.

"You can look up now." He nuzzled her collar away from her neck, and then nipped the bared flesh there.

She sat up straight, her rump cushioned by his thighs and the swell of his arousal. Julie tried not to smile.

"Meet Pretty Boy," Grady growled.

Julie looked down at the red-colored animals browsing in the feedlot below. Grady put his two fingers to his mouth and emitted an earsplitting whistle.

One red head came up, as a fierce-looking bull trotted to the edge of the corral and stood, nostrils distended scenting the air. Then he pawed the dirt, lifted his head, and blew through his nostrils, as he issued his challenge.

"That's Pretty Boy, brought all the way from New Hampshire by my father. I'm carrying on his breeding plans. There's a fellow in Kansas who's been developing a strain of polled Herefords..."

As Julie listened Grady waxed enthusiastically about the merits of the red-coated beasts below. "It'll change ranching for sure. But, I think my father was right. We had a tough winter this year, but these guys just *tailed the wind*."

At her questioning look, he explained, "They get in a huddle and protect each other. Long horns don't do that. Even if they didn't lock horns, they're too contrary. Dad saw this breed when he was a boy in the old country. He said they were hardy stock, and he was right."

"The Old Country?" It was odd hearing a man who looked so much a part of this land, speak of a faraway place as if he knew it.

"Scotland," and then he grinned. "I'm Scots-Kiowa, a mix of the two mightiest warrior peoples God put on earth." It was a glimpse of him she'd not seen before. Pride in both of his heritages shown from him. His features mimicked those of the woman who had abandoned him, but his father's blood filled his veins.

"You miss your father a lot, don't you?" Julie leaned into his arms and watched his eyes crinkle as his smile turned to her.

"He was a tough hombre, there's no denying that, but he wasn't any harder on others than he was on himself." He sighed and hugged her. "Hell, yeah, I miss him. And now that I know who the sonovabitch was who killed him, I aim to make Dad rest a little easier from wherever he's watching."

"What will you do?" The spring wind shifted and swirled around them, and despite the arms that held her close, Julie shivered.

*

What will you do? Grady wanted to ride into Eclipse and kill the bastard. His rage grew hotter as he mulled over his next move.

Cutting Michaels down on the town's main street would convince the townspeople that Grady was a savage. Ironically, with Michaels' death, it would give the Eastern

Consortium ammunition in their land-takeover scheme.

But he didn't like the idea of Julie bearing witness against the murderer, either. First of all, she hadn't seen the shot fired. She had Frank's eyewitness account, but the gambler was dead.

Second, she had been the partner of a con man who had included her in acts during their marriage that didn't bear scrutiny. By the time Teddy James finished blackening her character, the town would be ready to lynch Julie and give Alan Michaels the reward for capturing Henry Hawks' murderer.

"I don't know yet what's to be done," Grady told her. "But I know I'd like to find a place to make love to you again."

He meant it. The bite of anger fueled unreasonable lust on his part, and he wanted to be inside of her, to feel her heat.

The horse fidgeted under them, sidestepping as Grady's emotions fueled the animal's nervous dance. "Will you lift your skirts for me, if I find us a place to be private for a minute?"

He was already scanning the terrain for a trysting place and nudged his horse into a lope before she could reply.

When he pulled up short, in a copse of cottonwood trees, she looked at him wryly, "I take it you didn't really want an answer."

He slid down and lifted her after him, leaning into her and pressing her against the animal's withers.

The kiss stopped her protests and turned molten. He fumbled with the buttons down the back of her dress. "I need this off," he growled, "I need to feel your skin on mine."

Their coupling was not the tender joining of the night before. "I need you now." He shoved her dress roughly to the ground and lifted her to wrap her long limbs around his waist.

"Hold on." He balanced her against a cottonwood, pulling his shirt over his head to make a cushion between her and the rough bark.

"Now," he groaned as he seated himself deep inside of her and felt her internal muscles clench and squeeze his cock.

Her nails scored his back as he called fire from her, swallowing her passionate cries as she grew more aroused and demanding.

After her first shuddering climax, he set her on the ground, her legs so weak she could barely stand.

Turning her around, he pressed her hands to the tree for balance and tilted her hips, taking her from behind.

"Don't let loose of the tree," he ordered her as he cupped her breasts and pleased them even as he stroked his shaft in and out of her clenching sheath.

Her panted, "Yes, yes, yes," was all the encouragement he needed. He dropped one hand to touch the nub at her apex and felt a second orgasm wash over her.

Grady savored the feel of her as he thrust deeper, his cock massaged by her rippling internal grip. He groaned at the pleasure, holding back his release to prolong the glorious agony and ecstasy.

He lowered her to the ground, his shirt again used to cushion her back, as he settled between her thighs, lifting her into his powerful lunges. "Come for me again. Give it to me," he demanded and felt the surge of her climax so strong this time that it forced his

own.

He held her in his arms while they both gasped for breath and tried to regain sanity that had flown away in the face of their passion. Finally, she moved restlessly in his embrace.

"I think," Julie said dryly, "that Dan might want loose from the twins by now."

Grady rubbed his face in her hair that was now a tangled mess around her shoulders and grinned.

"Yes, *Mama*," he agreed, boldly calling her what the twins had been trying to say for days.

He let the syllables of that name roll off his tongue, tasting the word he'd had no reason to call in his own life.

He stood, adjusting the pants that he'd never lost in their encounter. "Guess I got carried away, huh?"

He tried to make light of his loss of control, but the marks of his passion were on her neck and breasts, as she fumbled into her clothes.

He studied her for signs of rebuff, but she wound her hair back into a sedate knot and turned for him to button her dress.

"I think we both got carried away." She spoke softly, her blush evident as he closed the pink dress and buttoned it over her flushed skin.

*

Julie didn't want to think about their joining under the cottonwood trees, but her thoughts lingered there anyway. It had been startling, overwhelming, exhilarating...

She looked at the man who had been her husband for six months—but all was different, now. Julie was uneasily aware of her complete vulnerability to him.

When he'd been deep inside of her, she hadn't repelled him with her thoughts. She hadn't willed her body to remain barren. She was torn in two directions. Everything in her screamed, *No!*

Grady Hawks still wanted a white child. He still lay with her to produce an acceptable offspring that would secure his hold on this land.

And yet, the encounter under the cottonwood trees had been different. For her, it had been earth-shattering in the power that she had ceded to Grady Hawks. She knew that legally he was her husband, and by man's law, that made him her master.

But until their violent coupling, he hadn't touched her spirit. Now, she felt undone—as though she had revealed her most private secret to a stranger.

* * * *

She and the girls stayed with the crew all day. By afternoon, Emma and Amy were thoroughly spoiled, grimy, and ready for their bed at home.

"I'll ride back with you," Grady decided, swinging the girls high in the air, one at a time, as they giggled and grabbed at his hat. To their delight, he settled them into the back of the wagon, and climbed in beside them. "You drive, *Mama*. I want to make sure you know the way home."

Julie looked at him, astonished. He leaned his back against the bench of the wagon and turned his attentions to the girls, ignoring her consternation.

"But, I..." It seemed that he meant it. The horse looked around at her as if to say, *Let's go*, so she took up the reins and flicked them, slapping the animal on the rump,

accompanied by a *giddy-up* she'd learned as a girl on the farm.

The horse cooperated, eager to be back in the stall with a scoop of oats and a flake of hay.

Gradually, the silence from behind her and the swaying motion of the wagon settled her anxieties.

It wasn't much of a challenge finding the ranch buildings because the horse knew the way. But she diligently marked her passage, trying to see landmarks that she might need another day.

She was of two minds as she dug herself even deeper into this life that made her tremble with doubt.

I hate choices, she told herself. *I don't want to make any decision that I might regret later. My whole life has been about disappointment and stupidity.*

She fingered the ring she'd taken. At the moment of its giving, nothing could have prevented her from reaching out to him. His loneliness had called to her in a way that his lust hadn't.

He'd made her forget her plan to start over. He made her want things she didn't understand or trust. *He calls me Mama*. That, and his powerful lovemaking under the cottonwood trees, frightened her. *He wraps himself around me in layers of need.*

Chapter Eighteen

The weather held, warming the land and painting the barren landscape of winter with the flowers of spring. Grady made love to her every night, but the passion that they'd shared by the cottonwoods wasn't repeated.

If he was disappointed, he didn't show it. The girls shared a giant baby bed that Grady had made for them. She teased him that it looked more like a pen for his livestock. But once she lined it with a thin mattress, it worked fine.

The girls were almost a year old and were adventurous and daring in their explorations. At least when they were in the baby bed, they were confined, and she knew they were safe.

She tried not to think about the time she had been married before, or the life that she had lived then, but it wasn't to be so.

There was much talk at night at the table about the growing Indian rebellions farther west. The army had spent all summer rounding up the Apache tribes to quarter them at San Carlos on a reservation that was too small for their numbers and with too little food to sustain that many.

Renegades escaped and were joined by those who had eluded original capture. Stories of Indian raids became common, although Julie suspected that the accounts were being exaggerated in Eclipse to make a case for the men who wanted to steal Hawks Nest.

"Alan Michaels is behind this. He and that damned consortium of eastern investors he likes to talk about."

It was Rowdy, offering his opinion at the table that brought Grady's disclosure. Julie hadn't realized he'd not told the others.

"He killed my father." The words hung there in the air, all sound, including the snick of the cutlery against the plates, suddenly quieted.

"You know this to be a fact?" It was Navajo Leonard who asked, but they waited for his nod.

"Yes," he said flatly, but offered no explanation and none was required.

"When do we kill him?"

Julie had never heard Navajo Leonard speak more than three or four words during her tenure in the cabin.

"Can't kill the bastard now, it would just give the land grabbers an excuse to move on us."

Anger and loathing filled Grady's voice, at the same time he declared Michaels off limits to the crew—for the moment anyway.

* * * *

They were in bed that night when Grady sat up, grabbed his gun, and rolled to his feet.

"What is it?" She'd been dozing after their lovemaking, but not really asleep.

"Someone's outside." He pulled on his clothes as he spoke.

"Better get dressed," he told her, but she was already following his actions as she pulled her blue dress over her head.

She didn't bother with shoes as she hurried to the crib to stand guard next to the babies.

"Bar the door behind me." He had his rifle in hand and his gun belt on as he headed toward the outside door.

Before he left, he veered to the mantle, over which hung a Winchester carbine.

"This is lever action, sweetheart, so you don't have to do anything but point and shoot." He pulled the lever back and down and handed it to her. "Stay away from the windows. It might be a good idea to bring the girls in here with you till I get back from looking around."

She barred the door behind him, carried the sleeping children into the main room of the ranch house, and made a bed for them in front of the fire.

They continued to sleep, unaware of Julie's fear. It seemed to her that Grady was gone only a short time before he rapped on the door, calling, "Let me in now, Julie."

When she opened for him, he stood surrounded by Indian braves. He stepped through the door, and they followed, filling the room with their presence.

"Julie, do you have food you can get together quick?" Grady's expression was grim but not afraid when he took the carbine from her hands and motioned her toward the kitchen.

He spoke in their language, and the Indians followed him down the hall and away from her. One stayed behind, sentry at the window as she fired up the stove and fried venison steaks in the skillet.

Grady came back alone and spoke to the lone Indian, who disappeared down the hallway too.

"What?" She had lost her fear and was now consumed by curiosity.

"Sweat lodge," Grady explained. "The Indians need a place to powwow."

Since it required no opinion or comment, she offered none. "They're on their way to Mexico. Little Eagle knew my father, knows me. He said they needed a safe place to talk, so he brought them here."

"Why would he do that?" Julie whispered.

"Little Eagle is my uncle—my mother's brother. It's not something I can say *no* to."

"Can you stack that food on a tray and bring it back to the sweat lodge when it's done?"

At her nod, he hugged her and whispered, "Don't worry; they're not here to hurt us." And then he disappeared down the hall too.

She carried the twins back to their crib, unwilling to leave them sleeping untended by the fire. Then she stacked the food as he'd asked her to and carried the tray, heavy with meat and bread, down the hall to the mysterious room she had explored the first day.

Grady had since explained that Indians used such places for body purification, and Henry Hawks had taken to the idea like a true Apache. He'd built his own and attached it to his cabin for convenience.

She didn't know what to expect, but when she nudged the door open with her shoulder, she saw six Indians and Grady sitting on the floor around the small fire they'd built.

Grady stood and took the platter of food from her so that she could retreat, but one of

the braves followed him and stopped her.

He lifted a strand of her hair that hung long down her back and gaped at her. "*Wiwasteka*," he grunted in amazement.

The Indian led her back to the fire pit, gesturing excitedly to the one who sat separate from the others.

At first, Julie thought it was another brave, but then the figure spoke. "*Cetan Nagin* has found his mate."

The voice was eerie in the half-dark room, beautiful and mesmerizing and all the more astonishing because it came from a woman. She was burly, almost manlike in her appearance, her long black hair worn like the braves in the room.

She motioned Julie to her side, and reluctantly, Julie approached. "You think I might hurt you? Kill you?" The voice had become mocking and harsh. The woman grabbed Julie's chin, fingers digging into the flesh painfully.

"My husband says you are his people. So I guess that makes you my folks too. No, I'm not afraid you will hurt us." And Julie spoke true. The woman's eyes were fierce, measuring her worth, judging her soul as though searching for assurances that weren't there. "You will be Apache for us."

She pulled a short, skinning knife from her belt and motioned Grady to her side. "*Cetan Nagin* has his *Mahala Nizhoni*." With those words she lifted his hand and sliced a deep gash in his palm. Then she picked up Julie's hand and did the same.

Blood mingled with blood as the Apache priestess pressed their flesh together. She chanted in a language Julie didn't understand while the fire blazed high in the middle of the room as if in response to her words. The moment ended when the Indian woman stepped back, releasing them from her spell. She loosened the strap around her neck, freed the bundle that she carried on her back, unrolled her blanket, and uncovered a pair of knee-high moccasins.

"For you," the woman said and handed the split-leather deerskin boots to her.

Then she motioned to the others and said, "Bring the food. We are done," and they exited as quietly as they had come, through the backdoor in the sweat lodge.

Julie watched them steal away, one by one like shadows in the night, until all evidence of their presence was erased.

"I don't understand," she told Grady.

He laughed harshly, "Don't have any answers either. Little Eagle said they were on their way, passing through the mountains and not even near, when Lozen called a halt and said they had to bring those boots to you."

"Lozen...? But how did she know me?" If it had not been for the leather moccasins she still held, Julie would have thought it all a dream.

"Victorio's sister. Since the army killed him, the Apaches follow her. She's a mystic, shaman, and warrior. When Lozen says *stop*, the others stop."

"What were the words she said over us?" It had sounded more like a wedding ceremony than the one she'd had in Eclipse, but Julie thought it would be nice if she at least knew the words.

Grady hugged her to him and repeated the Indian woman's words first in Kiowa, then in English. "As one, you will be."

She touched his chin and then slid her arms around his neck, questioning him still as she pulled his mouth down to hers.

"What does it mean, *Mahala Nizhoni*, the name she called me?"

"Lozen gave you your Indian name."

"Well," Julie nudged him in the chest. "What is it?"

Grady's smile was content. "Beautiful Woman," he murmured in her ear.

Julie set down on the edge of the bed and pulled on the boots that Lozen had traveled fifty miles out of her way to bring the unknown wife of *Cetan Nagin*. They were high-topped moccasins that wrapped her lower legs in soft warmth.

She held up her feet to show Grady. "Strange wedding gift," he growled. "Take off the rest of your clothes and let me see what they look like, then."

He flashed a wicked grin at her and instead of the shy embarrassment his suggestion once would have caused, Julie pulled her dress over her head and stood naked before him but for the leather moccasins. Her red hair cascaded down her back and over her shoulders, touching the tips of her breasts.

"*Mahala Nizhoni*," he groaned as he lifted her in his arms. "My beautiful woman," he claimed her as the weight of his body carried her to the mattress and they became one.

* * * *

Two weeks later, Grady left at dawn, and the day settled in to be long and boring. Julie was in back of the cabin gathering wood with the girls who wore the leather moccasins she'd made for them. She had taken over Grady's red shirt, and wore it today along with a pair of his long johns. She'd turned his long undershirts upside down, and improvised leggings for the girls too.

She watched for snakes and followed them closely as they staggered around the clearing picking up twigs. Spring filled her with a zest for life ... *No*, she admitted ... *Grady Hawks fills me with a need to live forever like this*. "Come on, girls," she called. "Bring your wood and follow Mama." That called up the chant Julie had become accustomed to.

"Mama, *Ate*, Mama, *Ate*." Julie grimaced. The girls were learning words and practiced the sounds endlessly, chattering back and forth.

She felt the vibrations under foot of many horses and dropped the wood, gathering the girls to hurry toward the cabin.

She didn't make it to the back door leading to the sweat lodge, before the Hawks Nest riders entered the ranch yard from one side; at the same time, horsemen coming from the other direction arrived.

Hidden by the corner of the cabin, she shushed the twins, who mimicked her stillness.

Grady had eight men with him; the other group was fifty strong and all carrying weapons drawn and ready.

Julie stayed back but could hear the words exchanged. "You got a problem, Hiram?"

Grady's drawled question brought a smile to the sheriff's face. "I hope not, son. But you can see I have some uneasy people riding with me, so I'd keep my guns holstered if I was you."

Teddy James interrupted the friendly, but tense exchange, yelling, "You've been harboring Indians on this land. It's a fact, and your neighbors aren't going to stand for it any longer. We're here to see to that."

Before the fat saloonkeeper could say more, Sheriff Potter interrupted him. "You're

here, but if you want to stay, you'll keep your mouth shut while I ask some questions. I told you that before you mounted up to ride along."

The two groups of men faced each other across the clearing, as Grady reached for his hat. Half the guns already drawn marked him as a target. But he ignored them and took his hat off, wiping sweat from his brow.

It was an uncommon gesture for him, and Julie tensed, afraid it was prelude to a gun battle, but he set it back on his head and said prosaically, "That what you come all this way to ask?"

He flashed a cold smile at Teddy James, and Julie saw the fat man flinch. "Everyone knows I have some drovers working for the Hawks Nest brand, who may have a drop of Indian blood. Hell, I have a drop or two. So, yea, there's some Indians livin' here. We own the place."

His tone had remained affable the entire time he spoke, but his eyes glittered, giving the lie to the smile that repeatedly flashed white. "And now explain to me why you're trespassing."

His smile had disappeared, and in spite of the lopsided numbers, members of the sheriff's posse looked nervous.

Determined to stir up trouble and feeling comfortable with fifty men at his back, again, Teddy James spoke up. "They've been seen. We've had people watching your place, you think we don't know you have Indians coming and going all times of the day and night."

"And these Indians that people have seen, did they stop by to visit? Maybe have supper with me and my wife?"

Since that's what they *had* almost done, Julie thought it brazen of Grady to mock them with it. The horses moved restlessly as taunts flew back and forth.

"These men have been deputized by the federal marshal in Abilene to pursue and capture, if possible, the remnants of Victorio's band. They were sighted southwest of here, traveling fast—a pack of warriors heading toward the border."

Sheriff Potter maintained the voice of calm reason and added, "Thought I'd deputize myself into this hunt when Teddy decided he'd start here."

Julie could see the changing expressions on the individual faces. Some clearly thought Teddy James was on a wild-geese chase that had taken them in the wrong direction. Hiram Potter was encouraging that opinion and was making some headway.

Before she could change her mind, she settled the babies tighter in her arms and walked around the corner of the sweat lodge.

Grady's red shirt hung below her knees, the top of the leggings covered by the hem.

"Sheriff Potter," she called to the one man in the posse who had always been fair to her. "What brings you and these fine men to our ranch this morning?" Julie hugged the girls close and smiled at the riders.

"Jesus, would you look at that. There's your Apache warriors, Teddy." The man guffawed loudly, and the few who hadn't seen the Indian woman come around the corner all looked now—except her red hair gleamed in shiny waves that fell halfway down her back, as her English words of cordiality reached their ears. The silent Indian babies had golden curls, and the three females were the prettiest picture many of the men had ever seen.

"Morning, Mrs. Hawks. I've been meaning to come out this way and check on you. I

can see that you and the mister have been busy."

The sheriff nodded meaningfully at the babies in her arms who remained still, as though they understood the danger. But then Emma spotted Grady on his horse across the yard.

"Ate," she called and held out her arms to him, squirming to get free from Julie.

"Ate." Amy took up the cry as they both wrestled to get loose.

"Looks like you've got an armful there, missus. Seems like they saw someone they want real bad."

Grady started his horse across the clearing, leaving the other Hawks Nest riders where they waited.

When he reached her, he dismounted and took Emma from Julie's arms, blowing on the neck of the little girl as she giggled and threw her arms around him.

"You've got a real nice family there, Grady. I'm glad to see it all worked out for you."

And just like that, the situation was over. "Teddy, the posse will be riding after the real Indians now. You might want to consider the distance from here to Mexico and change into some better suited clothes. I'll be heading back to Eclipse, myself."

Hiram Potter nudged the riders on their way and herded Teddy James back down the trail. When the saloon owner was beyond hearing distance, the sheriff paused and tipped his hat at Julie.

"Good day to you, ma'am. Sorry if we disturbed you." And then as if an afterthought, he quirked a brow at Grady and added, "I thought you might be interested to know, the front man for the Eastern Consortium had an accident. Damned if we didn't find him on the same trail where you found your pa, Grady."

Julie knew her mouth had dropped open, but Grady looked unsurprised. "Well, what killed him?" she asked, since the sheriff didn't volunteer the information.

He shook his head in disgust. "Tenderfoot. You can't tell 'em anything. Guess he rode out alone, fell off his horse, and was dragged a while before the animal shook him loose. Damned mess is what he was. Almost looked like he'd been flayed, but I figure that was just the rock and cactus ripping at him while he was dragged."

"Am I still suspected of murdering Frank Rossiter?" The name echoed from a time before and felt so long ago, it was if Grady asked about a stranger.

"Nah, I never put any truck in that, son. Hell, I was with you at Comfort's place. As I pointed out to Hamilton Quince, Teddy seems to have come into some money. He just bought that run-down barbershop next door and says he's puttin' a stage in his saloon. I asked the carpenter working over there how much he figured Teddy would have to spend. Seems like two thousand dollars would catch it just about right."

"You going to arrest him?" Grady seemed more interested than angry.

"Well, as to that," Hiram punctuated his words with a smile. "Comfort Quince made the most sense, since it was her money that started that ruckus. *'Let him have it as payment for a deed well done. Teddy did the town a service if he killed Frank Rossiter.'*"

"Hamilton quieted down, but I'm expecting Teddy and the Quince brothers will have an accounting soon. He's about worn out his welcome in Eclipse."

Hiram Potter's audience listened open-mouthed to the events that had taken place over the winter. "Things change, son. Your dad was a fine man. I knew him well." He left off his words, then said as an afterthought, "You'll do."

The sheriff turned for home still talking. "Your shadow riders paced us the whole way up the trail." He removed his hat and mimicked Grady's gesture from earlier. Then he grinned. "I was a mite relieved when you gave your men that signal to stand down."

Julie frowned. She had seen only eight men from the Hawks Nest crew.

Hiram Potter's voice was cheerful as he took up reins to travel. "The damned fools in that makeshift posse didn't even know we had an escort. I feel sorry for 'em if they catch up with that band of Apaches. They say the Indians have got a seer who rides with them and tells them when to strike and when to lay low. But they don't need a witch to hear those fools coming."

He tipped his hat and said, "I'd better catch up with my own fool before Teddy gets his neck slit. Glad to see you two made it. I figure things'll be better now, Grady." He nudged his horse and said, "Myself—I'm done fighting Indians."

And then he was gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Grady had been up every morning at dawn and home every night after dark. But he'd not left her alone in the cabin at night, realizing her fear. She told herself she was glad to see him leave every morning, but she missed him as soon as he was gone.

"Babies are getting all grown up." The night before, he'd lounged against the sink, wiping dishes while she did the supper wash-up. Emma and Amy were under the table, playing peek-a-boo.

"You think you might be carrying yet?" he asked casually, but there was nothing casual in his glance.

"No." She'd been sharp in her answer. So sharp that he'd turned her to him and studied her face.

Neither had said anything, but when they'd gone to bed, he'd rolled away from her for the first time, and she'd lain awake staring at the ceiling until the light through the window had signaled dawn.

He'd dressed silently and hugged the girls good-bye. But he hadn't given her his usual kiss, and she wanted to cry as she stood in the door and watched him ride away. She knew he was mad by the set of his shoulders, and all the anxiety and confusion that had beset her for days welled up into sobs of sorrow.

She was sitting at the table, head buried in her arms, crying, when the door banged open. "Thought I told you to bar this when I'm not..."

Scared, she lifted her head, vindicated. He'd come back to settle things. He was angry, so she edged away from him as he strode across the room.

"Tell me what's wrong, sweetheart. I couldn't ride away without knowing." Instead of the harsh words she anticipated, he lifted her from the chair and sat back on it, with her in his lap.

Emma and Amy crawled out from under the table where they'd peered at her during her bawling spell.

Grady picked up Emma and put her on Julie's lap. Then he grabbed Amy and settled her on the pile too. "Hope this chair holds," he joked.

He looked at the twins and asked, "Why's Mama crying, girls?"

She struggled to free herself from the pile of bodies, wiggling out of his grasp.

"I don't want a baby." She rushed to tell him before she could stop herself. "Not now, I'm not ready. I know I said I would. I know you need a son. But I just can't." And she started to cry again.

"I don't know why." She sobbed, turning to lean against the sink and away from him.

She heard him move quietly behind her, and then he was back. "Penned the kids in for a minute while we talk, okay?"

Julie had the urge to hit him for being nice. Why wasn't he yelling at her? She had no frame of reference for his behavior.

"You want to leave me?" He stood beside her and looked out the window while she struggled to compose herself.

"No." Her answer was quick and sure, and some of his stiffness disappeared.

"I don't understand, then. That's what men and women do. They get married and

make babies."

"I know. I know that's why you married me, and that's what you expect. I know I owe you a baby—but..." Her voice trailed off, desperately trying to put into words her need for more time.

"That's not why I married you. That's the excuse I gave myself, in order to have what I'd been wanting since I saw you at the Eclipse Social the first time almost five years ago."

As she pondered his words, he turned to pull her close. "So, it's not me you don't want. It's just not time yet for us to have another young'n?"

She nodded, and he said, "Well, I reckon we can find ways to hold off on that."

"But you need a son, I promised..." Anxiety filled her voice again.

"Come here," he urged her. "I didn't get my morning kiss."

But she turned away and walked to the mantle and took the box from where it always rested.

"All right," he said, stoic—resigned.

But instead of taking off the ring, she threw the box in the fire that burned on the grate.

It lay there for a minute, a cruel reminder of another woman's betrayal. But then flames consumed the ancient wood, turning it to ash.

"Now," she said defiantly. "You can quit looking at it and wondering when I'm going to put this ring back in it. The answer is never."

He crossed the distance between them and stood watching the ashes disintegrate and turn to nothing.

"Did our bargain not say you would give me a child before the end of the year, Julie?" His voice was stern, implacable, and she felt her stomach twist in disappointment.

His voice cut through her distress as he continued. "I think the neighbors got a look at my family and saw that we already made a good start with two."

At her indrawn breath of surprise, he scolded her.

"Who is the father of your babies, Julie Hawks?" he demanded in his warrior voice. But she smiled, understanding at last.

"You are, *Cetan Ate*," Julie whispered, turning into his embrace. "You are Father Hawk." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "You are my love," she murmured as she drew his lips to hers.

Epilogue

Eighteen months later

Grady leaned next to Dan on the fence, watching the twins cast the chicken feed out to the greedy hens. He kept one eye on them and another on the cabin where Julie was being examined by a doctor.

"She seems all right," he muttered. He didn't like the idea of anything being wrong with his family, and Julie was the heart of his home.

"You worry too much, *Cetan Nagin*," Dan chided him easily. "All your impatience to have a son has brought you a family to be proud of. Your woman is fine."

"You sure this doctor knows what she's doing?" Amy took that moment to drop her bucket and chase after a biddy hen, trying to catch it by its tail feathers.

"I don't know how I'm going to keep the wolves at bay once those two grow to womanhood. I'll be damned if they don't look just like their mama."

He opened the chicken fence and rescued the red laying hen from his daughter.

He was about to scold her when the door to the cabin opened, and Dr. Grace Souter emerged.

His cousin's gaze rested on the doctor too, but his possessive stare said more than he revealed in words.

"So does she know she belongs to you, yet?" Grady asked him casually.

Dan's pensive look told the tale. "She will," he assured Grady. "Soon."

Grady forgot about his cousin's woman troubles when Julie joined the doctor on the porch.

"Watch the girls," he ordered Dan, already striding toward the two women.

"Everything all right?" He tried to remain casual but failed to fool even himself.

Julie laughed at him. Stood right there in the open of the porch and made fun of his worry. "I'm fine, Little Henry is fine, but it looks to me like the girls are getting the best of Dan."

Grady didn't give a shit about Dan and the chickens. He stepped onto the porch and closed the space between them. "What did you need to see the doctor about, then?"

His voice was truculent. She'd been evasive when she'd asked him to send Dan to fetch Grace Souter to their home.

"I'll tell you later," she shushed him with a smile.

"You'll tell me now, damn it. If there's something wrong, you don't need to keep me in the dark. I want to know now."

The woman doctor had apparently heard enough. "Six-week check-up, Mr. Hawks. Your wife and son are in perfect health. Julie just wanted to make sure..."

He felt the tension ease from his shoulders and had just begun to relax when the lady doctor completed her sentence. "Sure that she could resume her marital duties."

"What marital duties? Julie doesn't need to think about doing anything until I say she can."

Even the doctor smiled at that remark. "Somehow I don't think you'll find this task too arduous for your wife."

She turned to Julie and said, "Henry is gaining weight just fine. He was a little early." She cast Grady another look. "Impatience seems to run in the family. But he's a healthy boy, and I don't expect to see him again before the fall.

Julie had slipped away and returned now holding Grady's son in her arms. Not being able to decide which one he wanted to hold, Grady slung his arm around Julie's shoulders and held them both.

He inspected his son smugly. Gray eyes set in tan skin stared into his own. Young Henry's thatch of black hair mimicked his father's, his gray eyes were the same as his grandfather's, but bronze skin had been replaced with a golden tone closer to his mother's. Faint signs of freckles splattered across the nose that already shaped itself like his Kiowa ancestors.

"We did good, didn't we, Julie?" Grady meant it. His son was a fine cross between two unlikely parents. The next generation of Hawks would be a whole new breed, adding strong bloodlines to the state of Texas.

Grace Souter frowned as Dan untied her horse from the hitching rail, lifted the twins into the saddle, and walked horse and riders to the porch. When he presented the giggling girls to Grady and silently waited for the doctor to mount, she gave an exasperated sigh.

"You don't have to wait on me."

"But I will." Dan's growled response made it clear that he spoke of more than a trip to town.

Grady held the squirming twins in his arms and shook his head as he watched Dan and his lady doctor ride toward Eclipse. "Reckon Dan has found something he can't *whisper* and make tame."

"Time will tell." Julie kissed Grady's jaw and then moved to return to the cabin.

"Wait just a damned minute." He stopped her. "What the hell are marital duties?"

Julie laughed softly and hugged the baby close in her arms. "Ask me after the kids are in bed tonight, *Cetan Nagin*, and I'll show you."

Historical Notes

Apache is a combination of two words, from the Yuma dialect meaning "fighting-men" and from the Zuni language meaning "enemy." It is a collective term referring to several culturally related groups of Native Americans who inhabited the Southwest. The Apache tribe consisted of six sub-tribes—the Western Apache, Mescalero, Jicarilla, Chiricahua, Lipan, and Kiowa. The Kiowa roamed over the southern plains of Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas, but by 1868, like most of the Apache tribes, they had been driven from their homes and relocated on reservations.

Victorio, a Chiricahua Apache, and his followers escaped the San Carlos Reservation in 1877 and made war on the white settlers who had taken the Apache homeland. At this time, many Apache renegades from all six sub-tribes banded together to fight.

Victorio and his followers were accompanied by his sister, Lozen. According to reports from that time, she could ride, shoot, and plot battle strategy as well as her brother. When Victorio was ambushed and killed in 1880, Lozen joined the 74-year-old Chief Nana, who led the remnants of multiple Apache tribes in a bloody campaign of vengeance across southwestern New Mexico.

The Texas Indian Relocation Act mirrored the U.S. government strategy used to gain control of land that was still occupied by the Apache tribes. It was an attempt to remove the few remaining Native Americans from the little land they still controlled.

The End

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