



*Her Savage
 Lover*

Brenda Williamson
Aspen Mountain Press

Her Savage Lover
by Brenda Williamson

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Chapter One

Eden never thought the day would come that she'd return home. Many times, she wanted to, but an abusive father and a broken heart gave her a huge reason to stay away.

Studying her old house, she tried to remember something good. Anything at all that made her happy about her childhood. She found nothing. Even the best memories had turned into the worst.

"Mother, there's an Indian riding this way." Eden's son Charlie pointed toward the west.

Turning into the gusts of wind, she looked out across the prairie. Dust stung her eyes, blinding her from seeing what Charlie did.

The cloudy afternoon, the distant rumble of a storm, and the glare from the setting sun on the horizon, made it hard to focus as well. She lifted her hand to shield her eyes and stared at the fast approaching, shadowy lone rider.

"Do you think he's dangerous?" Charlie asked.

Eden didn't answer—she couldn't speak. A long suppressed emotion rose from her heart choking her voice. Shivering, she hugged her body to stop the tremors from the trepidation of what would happen to them.

"Is he going to scalp us?" Charlie moved closer, his hand seeking hers.

Putting her arm around his small shoulders, she mustered up courage she didn't feel. "No, dear." She tried to keep her

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voice steady and reassuring. Luckily, Charlie's mesmerized fixation on the Indian prevented him from noticing.

"What do you think he wants?" Charlie whispered.

What wouldn't she do to have a crystal ball to know that answer? Since stepping off the train in Sweet Grove, Texas, she feared only one Indian—Brant Sullette. The Cherokee half-breed threatened her sanity more than her safety. He was the one person she longed to see, and at the same time dreaded to face.

Brant reined in his horse and a billow of dry dust swirled around him. Wide-shouldered with sun-baked skin, there was no man on Earth that portrayed masculinity the way he did. The impressive silhouette of him made her heart stall. His body rippled with muscle and his facial features were carved like stone. It appeared there was nothing soft about him, not even his heart.

"He doesn't look very happy." Charlie remarked.

Eden struggled to breathe. Words wouldn't come and her thoughts rolled like tumbleweeds in her head. The time away from Sweet Grove had solved only some of her problems, not the one giving her an imposing glare.

Brant's stillness told her something was more wrong than her return. She didn't dare think of why his hard look blended anger and contempt into a neat package.

"Mother, shouldn't we say something to him? Indians like it when white people give them stuff."

She swallowed and cleared the dryness from her throat. They couldn't stand there forever eyeing each other like enemies.

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"He's not wearing any war paint." Charlie sighed with more than a small hint of disappointment.

As much as Eden tried to teach her son what Indians were like, books ruled his mind. Very few accounts about the west were as accurate as they could have been, and Charlie liked the raw edge of the storytellers' accounts.

"Good afternoon, Brant." She gave him a polite nod.

Her immediate misgivings waned as his gaze traveled the length of her. Taking in her attire, or maybe recalling her lack of it, his slow inspection made her insides quake. Her heart thumped harder with the thought that he had come because he knew she'd be there. How many times had she wished and dreamed about him wanting her?

"You know him?" Charlie loosened his hold.

She tried to answer, except the whimper rising from the excitement in her soul threatened to embarrass her.

Possessing a powerful agility, Brant's fluid dismount put him on the ground in one swift motion. The adorable boy she had fallen in love with had matured into a handsome man. The love she'd kept locked away, fought to pour out. All she needed was one sign of welcome. A smile, a kind hello, anything at all and she'd spill her heart out of all her close guarded feelings.

"Hello, Sir." Charlie stepped forward, displaying his trusting nature.

Eden tried to move. Brant's spellbinding stare kept her feet fastened to the ground next to her father's grave. He dropped the reins of his horse and his solemn gaze lowered to Charlie.

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"Aren't you going to say anything?" She wiped the back of her hand across her cheek, pushing the tears aside.

His gaze lingered on Charlie. Not saying anything rattled her last nerve.

"Brant?"

The muscle in his jaw clenched and his gaze lifted to her. Forced to make the first move, she managed to budge a few inches toward him, watching for the slightest indication he was happy to see her. One sweet word of encouragement and she'd rush to claim his embrace.

"I've come for the boy."

The hard truth knocked her back a step. They weren't words she'd expected to hear, not exactly. She wanted him to say he had come for her. On the train, she went over what he'd say and how she'd fling herself into his waiting arms. His cold tone dashed away the hopes she had. What she'd clung to over the years became a childish dream.

"My father told you?" She didn't think her father would ever mention her pregnancy to anyone since he sent her away as if she'd committed the worst sin in the world.

It actually came as a relief to have Brant know. She had always wanted to tell him he had a son, and yet, she also hated him for breaking her heart enough that she thought she'd never divulge that treasured fact.

"You've had him for nine years." Brant reached out and grabbed Charlie's arm. "Now he goes with me."

Eden lifted her skirt and hurried forward. "You can't take my son." She positioned herself between Charlie and Brant.

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"You have no say in this." His arm remained stretched passed her, keeping hold of Charlie.

"He doesn't know you," she cried.

"And whose fault is that?" The muscle in his jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed on her.

"Brant, please. You can't just take him from me. He's never known about you." Desperation got the better of her to say anything to stop him. "There are laws. The sheriff will—"

"The law doesn't care about a half-breed."

Eden never thought of her son as a half-breed. Brant was right. The law wouldn't do anything to help her. She never believed for a minute the town would think of Brant any other way than a savage. It didn't matter that he attended school. They considered him ignorant because of what he was, not who.

Upon her insistence, he had accompanied her to church, yet the townsfolk still didn't believe it could help a heathen. All of them had the same narrow-minded opinions about Indians as her father did.

"Brant, please be reasonable."

"Like you were by keeping him from me?" He pushed her away and dragged Charlie to his horse.

"Mother?" Charlie's frightened voice compelled her to advance and grasp Brant's forearm.

"I was hardly more than a child." Everything she had dreamed crashed into the reality before her. Brant was not the same person she'd given her heart to as a girl.

His thick and solid arm prevented her from hanging onto him. He hoisted Charlie onto the saddled horse he'd brought.

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"Mother?" Charlie's eyes watered and Eden knew how he hated to cry. A prideful trait she suspected he inherited from Brant.

"He won't hurt you, dear." She hurried to reassure him, putting her hand on his leg. "He's your father and he'd never do anything to harm you."

Eden pressed her fingers to her lips to quell their violent tremble. Brant had hardened into a man she didn't understand.

"This isn't right," she pleaded. "You were never one to be cruel. He doesn't deserve to be punished for my mistake."

Brant's hand covered hers. She assumed to stop her from jerking Charlie off the horse. It became obvious his intentions were not as she first believed.

He stood close. The scent of him surrounded her. His breath passed along her cheek, heating her skin. He rubbed her knuckles, and for a moment, he seemed lost in thought. His other hand skimmed upward, over her hip to her side. The steady glide stopped against the underside of her breast. Her clothing did nothing to hinder the brief, but scorching caress of his fingers.

She slid a foot back, drawn to him, desiring his attention.

"You're really my father?" Charlie asked, breaking the spellbinding moment that captured Eden's thoughts.

"Yes." Brant answered, letting go of her waist.

He maintained contact by putting his hands on her shoulders with the kind of weight she imagined him using to lay claim to her. There was something in his touch that made her pulse race and her breath come short. Nevertheless, she

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had to negotiate some sort of deal, and therefore, resumed her plea with a compromise. She'd not physically play tug-o-war with her child. There had to be some way to reason with the man.

"He's only nine. Can't you let him stay here on the ranch with me? You can come visit, get to know him and then maybe—"

A loud drum of thunder interrupted her. She never liked storms. Her mother died in one when lightning struck a tree she took shelter under. Brant knew the story, he knew her fear, and to have him offer a sympathetic squeeze to her arms displayed a thread of his gentleness. She accepted the sign as the goodness in him she recalled years ago.

"Please." She tried not to sound like a whimpering child or a sniveling woman. Charlie watched her and she needed to remain calm and clear thinking for him.

"And then, when I'm not looking, you'll get on a train and disappear again?" Brant accused, withdrawing from her.

She spun around, facing him. From his quick, sharp tone, it became apparent his hurt ran deep. She sympathized for that kind of pain, and touched his arm, stroking the short fibers of black hair with a soothing glide of her hand. How often had Charlie required her to comfort him when troubled? Father and son were much more alike than she ever dreamed.

"I didn't disappear." Looking back at Charlie, she was glad to see the horse had more of her son's interest than her predicament.

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Slipping her fingers over the warmth of Brant's forearm, putting her other against the center of his chest, she pushed him back from Charlie's hearing range. "Don't do this to me—to him." She bowed her head. "I'm begging you not to take the only thing I have left in my life." She kept her gaze down, afraid if she looked into Brant's eyes, she'd lose the fight to keep her deepest feelings for him hidden.

His silence kept her talking, explaining.

"You stopped coming to visit me, Brant. For days on end, I sat waiting in the apple grove and you never showed up. I thought you must have already known I was carrying your child and you hated me. Feeling abandoned, I was frightened and I had to tell someone. My condition left me little choice, and against my better judgment, I told my father."

Eden paused and took a slow deep breath to keep from crying. Brant's desertion had crushed her spirit. The baby coming was her salvation from falling into the permanent depression she had suffered.

"You have to know how hard that was for me, knowing how my father felt about you. I was just eighteen, unmarried and terrified what people would say. After he beat me within an inch of my life, he sent me back east, to Boston. I was actually relieved because it meant I would be safe and so would our child."

She glanced at Charlie, hoping her whispered tones kept him from hearing the heart-wrenching story she'd never told anyone.

Brant's silence rattled her and she continued blurting out facts to make him understand.

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"I trusted you to be there for me and you weren't. I went away to have a baby, Brant. I stayed away so my father couldn't abuse him for being the bastard son of a half-breed Indian."

Brant lifted a hand, touching her side and she pushed away from him. The feelings she had buried long ago, rose with a resentment she hadn't wanted to face.

"I had to do what was best for me and Charlie, and you have no right to treat me as if you were wronged."

"He's mine and I want him." Brant declared as if she hadn't spilled her soul to him.

"Then take me, too." She lifted her face and looked straight at him, seizing the chance to have him in her life. "I'll do anything you ask."

A glimmer, a tiny trace of a flicker in Brant's velvet brown eyes gave her hope. Maybe she'd been wrong to think he didn't care for her. She brought up the list of reasons why he stopped seeing her. After her initial fear she had done something to upset him, she had fantasized a slew of more plausible reasons.

His father wouldn't want him with a white girl.

His mother worried he'd be hurt, or God forbid, killed by white men not understanding their relationship.

He got sick—terribly ill that it prevented him from visiting her.

The list went on and on with every passing month until Charlie's birth and then the illogical explanations for his disappearance took over again.

"You would live in my village with me?" His tone softened.

"Yes." Her mind soared with the prospect of what he suggested.

"I'll be in charge of his teachings from now on." He made his intentions clear.

Eden nodded quickly. Agreeing to be with him under any terms filled some of her needs. For Charlie, she'd save her arguments for battles she could win.

Brant stared at her as if he reconsidered the hasty arrangement. Did he fear she'd be trouble? His expression gave away nothing about his thoughts. However, his desires were clear, and real. If Charlie were not there, she imagined him scooping her up in the cradle of his powerful arms, carrying her to the place of her son's creation.

Reliving the memory, she closed her eyes for one second. Brant's touch startled her from the reverie of how his body once enveloped her in the warmth of his adoration.

He led her to his horse.

"Can we get our things from the house?" She glanced in that direction.

"I'll provide for you." Heat radiated from his palm against her back.

While she'd miss some items from her luggage, she trusted Brant to provide all she'd really need.

"Can I ride with Charlie, then?" She watched her son petting the horse he sat on.

"The boy rides alone." Brant's large hands gripped her waist.

For one long minute, they stood as they had many times before. His gaze traveling to her face, the expression

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suggesting he also recalled the past. How many times had he set her on his horse? His gentle manners always impressed her.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she readied for him to lift her to sit sideways on the saddle. "His name is Charlie," she reminded as he made picking her up seem easy. "I don't see why I can't ride with him. You and I both know you could catch us if I tried to escape."

"The boy doesn't need his mother holding him." He swung up behind her.

"Fine, but could you please not scare him anymore?"

Brant gave her a grunt as an answer. His rigid body pressed against her back. One arm circled her waist, the other hung midair where he held the reins. When his long fingers tensed, she wondered if holding her wasn't his real reason for not letting her ride with Charlie.

"Charlie hasn't ridden a horse very much. In the city, we rode in carriages." She peered around his arm to check on Charlie again. Brant glanced back as well and Eden noted the hint of worry in his eyes. She rubbed his arm in understanding. "You'll teach him."

A magic spell couldn't have captured her any better than the movement of Brant's fingers digging into her side, latching on as if she'd get away.

"He will learn everything there is to know about a horse," he whispered hoarsely over her head. "He'll learn to be a brave warrior like his people."

"His people are mostly white. The only Indian blood in him is the half from your father," she reminded him. "He's been raised white and you can't take that from him."

"The boy will learn to be Indian."

"I see your stubbornness hasn't changed." She turned her head and stared at the strong line to his jaw, the determined set to his mouth. "You can't undo his life up until now."

Brant's gaze drifted to her eyes and then to her mouth. He swept loose wisps of her hair back from her face. "I do what I want," he answered.

If that included kissing her, she was prepared. She had longed for the day Brant's passion spilled over her again. Leaning on his rock solid chest, she waited for him to bow his head and catch her lips with his. She tipped her head back, ready to find out if her memory was different than reality.

"You'll have no say over what I do with him," he added.

Anger swept away the idyllic opportunity of her boldly making the first move in kissing him.

"I'll agree to let you teach him things I never could. But know this Brant Sulette, he's a child raised on my love alone. If you ever do anything to hurt me I'll make him hate you." She didn't know why she chose then to challenge his authority, especially when he could dump her on the ground and ride off with Charlie. But years on her own had toughened her against domineering men.

"You rely on the fact he would know of such matters between us." Brant retaliated. "Remember you are only coming with us because I allow it."

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Chapter Two

Brant thought taking his son away from Eden would be a fitting punishment for her leaving him. The distress in her beautiful face hurt worse than if an arrow struck him in the heart. His lungs tightened, limiting his breathing.

He had lived a lonely ten years not wanting anyone other than her. The women he bedded since had been indiscriminate choices in a whorehouse in town. He had no wife and no children. He'd grown bitter on regrets. When her father told him he had a son, he waited patiently to seek revenge. The idea he first had to make Eden suffer vanished the moment he saw her.

Brant rode into the small Cherokee village with a measure of pride. Everyone knew about his son. His mother gave no consideration to keeping it private. A grandmother's delight was hard to suppress when she wanted her friends to know.

His ego swelled as he showed his people that he reclaimed what was rightfully his. While the boy gave him a chance to salvage what was left of his spirit, his broken heart looked for ways to forgive Eden and regain everything he had with her.

"Nothing has changed," she commented.

"As it should be." He stopped his horse and that of the one tethered to his with Charlie.

"Life *does* go on," she added.

"Does it?" Questions filled Brant's head. What had Eden done over the years? Had she found someone to make her happy? Did she plan to go back east? Could he let her? By

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Indian tradition, she and the child were his. He aimed to keep them.

Motioning for his young half-brother to come and fetch his horse, Brant helped Eden down. She slid into his arms and he paused with the memory of the many times he had caught her. The scent of her heightened his desire and the softness of her body almost begged him to hug her.

"Would you help Charlie get down?"

He reluctantly let her go.

"Sully, this is my son Charlie," Brant said proudly. "Take and introduce him to your mother."

"How many wives do you have?" Eden asked.

He hadn't considered she might think he had embraced all Indian customs, including taking more than one wife. He tried to find a trace of jealousy in her expression.

"One." His mind dragged him back to the night he and Eden made lifelong vows. They had lain together, professing their love beneath the heavens. For an Indian, it need be nothing more than saying she was his wife. He thought she knew that.

"Is that a white man's law you follow, because your mother is white, or is it you've not found another woman that would accept you?" Her words had a ring of bitterness.

"My preference has never altered." He took her arm. "Come, my mother will wish to see you. She has often mentioned how much she has missed you, so don't say anything to upset her."

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"Like what, that she has a son that has developed the manners of a badger? What will she say when she learns you would steal my son from me?"

The flap opened of a teepee lodge and his mother emerged. Tears streamed down her face. She'd loved Eden ever since the first time he brought her to the village.

"My daughter has come home, at last," she cried, and rushed to hug Eden.

Sully and Charlie followed her out of the lodge.

"Brant, can I show Charlie the canoe we made?" his brother asked.

"Yes."

"Brant," Eden stepped back out of his mother's hug and grabbed his arm. "Charlie can't swim."

"Then he will learn quickly if he falls in the water." He waved the boys to go.

"Please, he's all I have." Her other hand touched his chest. The heat of her palm sunk deep, through his deer hide shirt and into his skin. Her fear leached into him and he decided to work on the side of caution. He didn't want to cause Eden distress. He already hated he had tried to upset her by stealing her son.

"Sully, don't go out in the canoe just take him to see it, Brant called. "It will rain soon."

"Thank you." Eden patted his arm.

Brant watched the two boys run off toward the river. Sully wouldn't have taken the canoe out regardless. He wasn't allowed to go alone. The autumn rains made the river dangerous with the rapids crashing into rocks. The boys didn't

have the strength to handle the boat should they venture too far.

Eden's touch slipped from him as his mother led her away.

"Boston," his mother sighed. "Such a large and busy city, I understand."

"It's different from anything around here, Lucy. There are many buildings and a whole lot more people than one could ever imagine being in a single place."

"Was your life good there? You had friends?"

"Yes."

"Did you have sausages and ice cream and chocolate?"

"Not all at one time." Eden's laugh blended with his mother's and made a cheerful sound.

Brant's insides clenched deep in the pit of his stomach. The odd sensation made him feel sick with longing for the simple joy of hearing Eden happy.

"I miss chocolate." His mother's words disturbed him.

"Brant can't get you any from town?" Eden's gaze met his.

"He doesn't go to town."

His mother never expressed any regrets of leaving her white life behind. She always seemed happy. He had known her love of chocolate. The twinge of guilt for not providing that small treat for her, made him sad. He had to wonder if Eden would have regrets for staying with him. Would there be things she missed? She used to tell him she'd be happy to live anywhere with him. Had ten years changed her to the point there was no going back.

"Charlie is a good son?" His mother held Eden's hand.

"He's a very good son." Eden smiled.

"Then he is like his father." His mother glanced his way.

Eden's gaze lifted as well. "Lucy, my son is every bit like the man that fathered him. He's polite, considerate of others, and loving."

Brant stared into Eden's blue eyes trying to remember not to trust anything she said. She didn't intend to come back to him. Given the chance, he had to assume she'd run from the life he wanted with her and his son.

"Come, let us have something to eat before the rain," Lucy worked at getting a bowl of stew from the pot hanging over the fire.

"Mother," Charlie yelled, returning to them.

Brant watched with an ache in his heart. He saw himself in the boy with the display of youthful vibrancy, the sheen of black hair and the adoration for Eden. The boy loved his mother. A pang of jealousy hit Brant for the way Eden had deprived him of experiencing the same affection from his son.

"You should see the canoe and the river," Charlie exclaimed.

"I've seen it before." Eden gave him a bowl. "Now, sit and eat while you tell me what you found so magnificent about it."

"It goes fast and the fish jump into the air in front of you."

"Hmmm, yes, I do remember that. One day, maybe you could try catching one with your bare hands."

Brant grunted. He had tried to impress Eden by catching a fish and fell face first into the water. He didn't think it was possible to be more humiliated by his clumsiness than that day.

His mother laughed because she knew the story. Her gaze shifted to him, and then back to Eden's giggles. It irritated him to have his mother enjoy a joke at his expense.

"It's not very funny," he muttered.

"What isn't funny?" Charlie asked. "Catching a fish?"

"No, falling in the cold water while trying." He rose to his feet to go.

Eden's chin tipped up. Her eyes glistened as if she were truly happy. When her delicious mouth moved, he almost didn't hear the words that came out.

"Someone will appreciate his efforts," she said, softly.

He always wanted to forget the foolish moments of his youth, but Eden suddenly made him want to recall each one involving her. There were many from his attempts to impress her. He tried too hard to make her love him. After all they had shared, her move to Boston showed him he failed miserably.

Brant let the matter drop. On outward appearances, anyone would think he had the upper hand with Eden. He'd brought her home to his village on his own terms. She had to do as he said or suffer consequences. However, while he always wanted to possess her like a prize, the best he ever managed was to let her have command of him. Adoring her with his heart and soul, he used to give in to her every whim. Unable to hurt her by taking away her son proved she was still in charge of his actions.

Once Sully joined them, Eden stayed quiet. The boys talked endlessly with a thousand questions about the differences in their backgrounds. Sully especially wanted to

know about the white man's world making Brant feel guilty for not educating his brother in regards to anything beyond their village.

Unable to sit, he paced anxiously waiting to take Eden to his lodge. Catching her eye, hoping she'd understand his needs, didn't work. She remained content listening to the boys and answering his mother's questions about the city.

Marching around the fire, Brant stopped next to his mother. "Charlie will stay with you tonight."

"That will be good." She patted his arm. "The boys need much more time than there is in a day to know each other, and I don't think they're ready to end their talk just yet."

"Come." Brant motioned for Eden to follow him.

"Where?" She got to her feet on her own when he should have helped her up.

He didn't answer and prodded her along.

In the firelight, he had studied her features and tried to recall the texture of her skin. Long ago, he'd held her close enough to know the softness of her legs and the smoothness of her breasts. He loved everything about her touch, even the feel of her fingers folded with his.

"Our lodge." He lifted the canvas flap so she could enter.

Eden ducked beneath and entered. "Where's your wife?" She turned and faced him.

He put a hand up to the side of her face. Sliding his thumb over her cheek, he brushed her lips.

"If you've sent her away just to accommodate me, I won't have it. Shouldn't Sully have come here to sleep?"

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"He sleeps where my son sleeps." He slid his hand behind her head and pulled her to him. "You will sleep where my wife should."

"And you?" her voice squeaked. "Where will you be?"

"With my wife."

Lowering his head, he captured her mouth, taking what he wanted before she could deny him. Plying her moist lips with a hunger he had never been able to satisfy, he crushed Eden's slender frame to him as she squirmed in resistance.

"Brant, stop." She wrenched her head to the side. "I won't share your bed. I can't do that with another woman's husband."

Digging his fingers into her pinned up hair he grasped her head. "Don't you understand? I've said vows to only one woman in all my life."

He watched her eyes widen as she absorbed the information.

"But Sully, his mother ... He's your son, is he not?"

"He's my brother. My mother had him several months after you were gone."

"You've never taken an Indian wife?" Her voice made it sound unbelievable.

"You are my woman." He pressed his mouth to hers again.

She tasted sweet, honeyed by what she spread on a piece of bread at her meal. He scooped her up without breaking his kiss, savoring the flavor of her tongue as he pressed his between her parted lips.

Her fingernails dug into his hair and scratched at the back of his head. She kissed him with all the passion he recalled as

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if it were yesterday. Wracked with emotional sounds, she clung to him, showing him there was something salvageable in their relationship.

Brant lowered her into the nest of furs and blankets making up his bed on the ground. He used to lay awake for hours thinking about her being there with him, cradling her in his arms, sucking at her lips and quenching his long denied thirst for her. The one woman he wanted to possess owned his soul. The fire in her eyes, the puffs of her breath on his face, everything about her beckoned his Indian blood to take her without hesitation. His white blood summoned the courage to let her know his feelings while making tender love to her.

Endearments, confessions and declarations of love formed in his head. "Eden..."

"Brant, please." Her words stopped his sentiments from flowing before he lay his heart open to her.

He paused from his attack on her beautiful mouth and waited for her to speak. Her gaze lowered and lifted to meet his.

"I don't know you anymore. I can't pretend everything is the same between us." She smoothed a hand over his chest.

The unsure tone in her voice wasn't enough of a denial against him kissing her. Taking her mouth again, he tasted the salt of her tears and felt the quaver of her responsive lips. All he had ever dreamed of having was in his arms. He recalled every nuance of their lovemaking and the vibrant way she seduced him with her emotions. He had to make

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everything the way it used to be for them or he'd die of a broken heart.

Like a boy, overeager and impatient, he tugged at her blouse. Fingering the buttons, not having any luck undoing them, he gave up. Eden's quiet repose stopped him completely. Lifting his head, he examined her tear-stained cheeks. In all his imaginings, he believed she'd still want him. He didn't have enough restraint to accept she'd be unwilling to ease his suffering.

She tried to get up, out from under him. He pushed her back to the mound of furs and he captured her wrists, locking them in one hand to pin her down.

"Brant, please don't."

Ignoring her plea, he kissed her harder. Dragging his lips across her cheek, he aimed for the pulse in her neck. Raising her skirt, he shoved his hand between her silky thighs and massaged her warm flesh.

Out of control with lust, it took him a long while to notice she didn't fight his advance nor did she encourage it.

"Don't make me afraid of you," she whimpered.

Brant froze, sickened by his actions. "Damn." He lifted his hand from under her clothing.

In reaction to his swift retreat from touching her, Eden quickly twisted her head to the side as if he'd strike her. No amount of frustration would make him ever physically harm a woman.

He slipped his hand beneath her head and brought her to a sitting position. Holding her face, he stared into her tear-filled eyes.

"I'd never hit you, Eden. No one will ever hit you again, I promise. If they did, I'd kill them."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and he wanted to cry for all the pain she suffered at the hands of her father.

"I promise." He brushed his finger over her damp cheek.

A sob sputtered from her and he moved to get up.

"I'm sorry that I thought you would." She held his wrist, keeping his palm against her face.

His chaotic emotions made him a weak man. Eden had all the power, frustrating him. He stood up to distance himself from the cause of all his angst.

"I truly am sorry," she said again. "It was an instinctive reaction."

"Stay in this lodge if you know what's good for you." He went to the exit.

"Where are you going?"

He flung the flap of the lodge door out of the way and stepped outside.

"Brant?"

Slapping the weathered hide back in place, he cut Eden off from him.

"You didn't go on the hunt these last few days." His father appeared out of the shadows, surprising Brant.

"I had something to do." He rubbed the new stubble on his face.

"Getting your woman?"

"And my son."

"Why is it you brought them here?"

"They belong to me."

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"Is that the only reason? You had a wolf pup once, and when he began to wander off to be with his own kind, you didn't make him stay."

"This is different." Brant kicked the toe of his moccasin in the dirt and confessed. "I've always needed Eden. These years without her have been the most miserable ones I could have ever lived."

"Have you told her that's why she's here?"

"It's of no importance to her. She left me once. I'll not allow her to do so again. It may be too late to have her affection, but I can have my son's. She'll stay because of him."

"This could cause trouble if word were to get to town that you hold a white woman and her son captive."

"He's my son, a half-breed, no one cares. Besides, I'll not let him go. If you want, I'll leave with them."

"I would not take you away from your mother, anymore than you could take your son from his. A woman only lives for her children. Remember that Brant. We have the business of providing for their everyday needs, but a woman only lives to provide emotionally for her children."

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Chapter Three

Eden woke from a frightful nightmare she couldn't remember. The rain beat against the buffalo hides stretched over poles to make up Brant's lodge. She wiped the tears from her face and sat up in the darkness. A remnant sob hiccupped out and she brushed away more tears.

Brant wouldn't do anything to her just for checking on Charlie, she decided and crawled to the flap. She glanced out and while the rain made her hesitate, the thunder pushed her back inside. Dry and warm, and safe with his grandmother, Charlie would be all right.

"It's tough to form a plan of escape in a storm, isn't it?" Brant startled her from his place on the opposite side of the lodge.

"I wanted ... I needed ... I wasn't thinking about leaving," she stumbled over the right thing to say. "I didn't get a chance to tell Charlie goodnight."

"You've coddled him enough." Brant struck a match and lit a lantern. "I'll not have a son raised as weak as a woman with her emotions."

"Emotions don't make a person weak, the lack of them does. My father was a cold, harsh man and I've worked hard to make sure Charlie is kind and thoughtful. If I had better sense, I would have stayed in Boston with him."

"You were happy there?"

The question surprised her. Brant hadn't expressed much curiosity in how she felt about anything since he came to

claim his son. In the shadows of the dim light, she couldn't see his face to tell if he was really interested. She would have liked to say, *no, how could I be happy so far from the only person I've ever loved?*

"Charlie did well in school. We both had friends. I worked at the museum one day a week and the library for five. We did all right."

"The boy is intelligent?" He leaned forward slightly and the glow from the lantern lit his eyes.

"Yes." She drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs. "Yet, with all he knows of the city, his love is with cowboys and Indians."

"Things he's learned from you?"

"From books. I rarely told him about my past."

Brant stiffened and she was sorry she hurt him by making him think she never told Charlie about him.

Eden crawled to the flap and looked outside to see the rain had let up. "I can't sleep. I'm going for a walk."

Brant followed her out. "I'll go with you." He held her elbow as she got to her feet.

"I want to go by myself."

His grip tightened.

"You've no reason to fear I'll escape—not as long as you keep my son captive."

"He's not a prisoner."

"He's not allowed to leave."

Brant let her go and she walked toward the river. In the wet grass, she sat, not caring that it soaked her clothing. She pondered her future in comparison to a past that haunted

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her. Aching inside, she hugged her body and thought of the one occasion she and Brant made love.

I'll always take care of you, his words whispered in her head. *You mean everything to me, Eden.*

Every minute with him was meaningful. His care with her feelings had touched her in ways she'd not known before or since.

Tell me if I'm hurting you in any way. I want to know.

She couldn't begin to count the number of times he asked if she was all right.

Never hold back your feelings, my sweet Eden.

Overly considerate, he exasperated her with his tenderness. Squeezing her eyes shut as tight as possible, she brought back the images.

"You're so pretty." His wide smile displayed his excitement. However, his hands were the eager extensions of his happiness that she felt gliding over her body, removing her clothes. Calloused fingers rubbed sensitive areas—ticklish spots that made her laugh.

"You talk too much." She twirled her fingers in his long hair. "Show me how you feel."

She squirmed against the length of him as he shifted to remove more of her clothing. The contours of his lean frame mated to the softness of hers. His warm lips pressed kisses to her cheeks and nose before they met with her expelling breath. Kissing her as he had a million times, the nakedness of their bodies became the catalyst to something much deeper.

"Remember, I want you to tell me..."

"Shush, now." She rubbed his wet mouth. "Love me, Brant, and you'll know how very much I want this between us. Let my responses be your guide."

The far off sound of a wolf's howl broke in on Eden's memory. She glanced at the once dark sky, brightening as the dense clouds drifted apart leaving wispy strands over the full moon. She sat for a long time letting the sound of moving water carry away her troubles. Lying back on the cold, damp ground, she searched the heavens for salvation. When greeted with a splash of shimmering stars peeking between the clouds, her whole body calmed and the peaceful night led her back to the moments in her past she held dear. She drifted off to sleep, remembering Brant's promise—*I'll always take care of you.*

When Eden opened her eyes again, she sat up, disorientated and panicked.

"You're safe." A hand clamped over her arm and she glanced at Brant sitting next to her.

What felt like a natural impulse to throw herself into his arms, vanished when his expression remained stern. She stared across the river at the magnificent sunrise on the horizon. She loved it when she used to spend the morning with him. It made her day at home better, if only in her mind. No matter how many times her father beat her for sneaking off to see who he called *'that heathen savage'*, she felt at peace with her decision.

She adjusted the deer hide shirt Brant had laid over her by throwing it around her shoulders. He'd not accept it back if she offered and she was chilly. "I've missed the way the sky

can appear so big. In the city, buildings block a clear view until I walk to the harbor."

"The harbor?"

"It's where ships sail in from other parts of the world. You must remember from school." She shivered as her body responded to the cool morning.

"I know what ships are."

"The harbor is what they call the area where the ships anchor or dock. You'd find it fascinating, I'm sure."

Brant sat with his legs crossed and his hands resting on them. His bronze skin glistened in the morning light. His muscles rolled beneath the taut flesh whenever he made the slightest movement. She studied the contours of his upper body, noting the addition of scars.

"You slept well out here?" he asked, taking her mind away from questioning him about the marks.

"Yes."

"It was not too cold for you?" He continued staring straight ahead. "If I'd known that you would stay all night I would have brought a blanket."

"I wasn't cold." She pulled his shirt from where she draped it on her shoulders and held it out to him. "My dress is made of wool and quite warm."

He grunted as a form of answering her and took the shirt. "To sleep in the open too soundly, invites animals to attack." He sat the shirt on the ground and picked a blade of grass to put in his mouth.

"Then that would have been my misfortune. You didn't need to guard me." She regretted the words immediately.

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She didn't know the first thing about seducing a man. He had surprised and frightened her with his aggressive lust in the tent. She wanted to give into him, but she needed him in a gentler way.

Leaning forward, she made the first attempt at recapturing his love. "I'm sorry. Thank you for watching out for me." She kissed the corner of his mouth. "Don't be angry with me."

He didn't react.

"I'll try not to worry you again." Sweeping her lips to his cheek, she nuzzled her nose alongside his.

"I wasn't worried."

She placed her hands on his legs for support and elevated high enough to kiss his brow, thankful he hadn't pushed her away. "You wouldn't have said anything about the wild animals if you weren't concerned."

Lowering to sit on her heels, she rubbed her palms back and forth over the taut leather of his leggings. He grasped her hands and pulled them away.

"I didn't want to explain to my son how stupid his mother was."

Eden's eyes widened. She didn't understand his indifference to her. The drastic change in his mood from one moment to the next confused her.

"I have things to take care of." He rose from his cross-legged position.

"And I've traveled many days on a train," she said, thinking maybe it was the reason for his rejection. "I'd like a bath."

"Come with me." He bent over and grabbed his shirt in one hand.

She took his other hand without thought and let him pull her up from the ground. They walked, and the natural way he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, stopped her from moving.

"What's wrong?" He glanced back without releasing her.

"Nothing." She kept her smile inward.

"Do you remember the basin where we used to go swimming?"

"It's unlikely I'd forget where I met you." She thought of that first kiss between them at the swimming hole. He had held her face between his fingers and asked if he could. She debated refusing. Only she was so in love with him, she gave her permission eagerly.

"I've gotten you and Charlie some clothes. We'll go get them and then I'll take you to the basin."

"Can I go alone?"

"No." He jerked her toward him. "I'll never give you an opportunity to run away with my son."

She cringed at his angry tone and he immediately rubbed her arm as a form of apology. Brant towered over her. His hard torso pressed against hers and woke the yearning she had to hold him.

Give him sympathy and comfort. If their roles were reversed and she'd been robbed of knowing her child, she'd be just as insane from grief.

"I didn't mean with Charlie. I meant by myself. I told you I won't leave, Brant."

He looked away as if the decision to trust her was a hard choice.

Eden opened his hand and rubbed her finger over the spot he cut for her. She held her palm up, kissed the place she once had a cut, and pressed her hand in his. They had made many promises and pledges sealed by their blood. She hoped he'd understand the symbolism now.

"I'll take Charlie out in canoe." He twisted his hand and folded his fingers between hers without commenting on the silent oath she made. "Charlie seemed excited about learning how to paddle the boat."

"I worry about him falling in the water." She placed a hand on his arm. "Please watch him carefully."

"He'll be fine. We'll come to the basin in two hours." His eyes danced with a delight that she felt down to her toes.

They walked back to the camp in silence. No longer holding hands, but no longer using words to keep their emotions charged either. Brant was never a quiet man with his feelings and she understood how she had exacerbated his fear of sharing them with her. Every time his gaze turned her way, he caused her insides to wrench from shame.

"He doesn't appear to have problems fitting in," she commented, seeing Charlie and Sully wrestling and laughing.

"Charlie," Brant called him over while pulling his shirt over his head. "You and I are going to the river while your mother bathes in a nearby pond."

"Aren't you going to be cold, Mother? You said it was too cold when I asked about going swimming in the creek back home."

"That was Boston, Charlie. The weather is different here. Though, I'm sure my memory is a bit hazy as to the water temperature."

"Come." Brant gave a jerk of his head indicating Charlie should follow.

"Can Sully go too?" Charlie asked.

"He has chores."

Charlie accepted the denial and the two walked off.

The smile dropped from Eden's mouth. Brant's manners were not as smooth or refined as they once were and it made her nervous. As he walked away, she watched him. No man captivated her the way he did, yet his reserved attitude worried her. There seemed to be a lot of distance to cover if they were to put the past behind them.

In the lodge, Eden checked the garments Brant selected. A doeskin dress and a pair of moccasins awaited her. She'd always wanted Indian clothing, but with a father that hated Indians, she didn't dare bring anything home when Brant said he'd get her whatever she wanted.

The white and turquoise beaded detail around the neck was beautiful and her favorite colors. She fingered them and a silly thought came to her that Brant remembered she favored those colors.

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Chapter Four

Brant jumped in the canoe as he pushed it off from the muddy shore.

"It's too bad Sully had chores to do." Charlie looked over his shoulder at him. "Will you make me do chores too?"

"I'll ask that you do your share." Brant felt awkward with the boy. It was why he decided he and Charlie should spend time together without Sully.

"Mother always made me do chores at home. She doesn't ask, she insists. She's kind of strict. Sometimes I don't think she likes me to have fun." He dipped his hand in the water and splashed it away.

"Maybe she's forgotten what it was like to be young and enjoy life."

"I think she's too sad to think about fun stuff."

"Why would she be sad? Did someone do something to her?" Brant hated that he was never able to stop Eden's father from hurting her. Whenever she had a bruise or a cut, she always had a ready story explaining it as clumsiness. When she confessed her father hit her, he swore he'd kill the man. She convinced him it would be wrong and that she didn't want her father dead.

"I asked her once," Charlie stated. "She said it was because she missed someone very much."

"Her father?" Brant didn't want to believe it was possible.

"She said her father wasn't the kind of person anybody missed. I don't know what she meant but I don't think she

liked him." Charlie jumped up and pointed to shore. "Look, is that a bear?"

"Sit down!" Brant yelled.

Startled, Charlie toppled over the side of the canoe into the river. Brant tried to reach for him, but the tide moved swift and erratic. Charlie sank and bobbed to the surface.

"Don't fight the water Charlie, dig deep just as if you were a dog." He paddled harder until he had the boat alongside the boy. Snatching him up by the collar of his shirt, he dragged Charlie out of the river.

Charlie flopped over on Brant's lap, choking. Steering the boat to the bank, Brant carried him to dry ground.

"That's it boy, cough it up." He held him over his forearm and rubbed his back. "Enough?"

Charlie nodded and Brant lifted him.

"I'm sorry, sir. I forgot—" he coughed. "I forgot you told me not to stand up in the boat."

Brant pulled him forward and hugged him tight. "It's all right. You'll learn."

"Please don't tell mother, sir, or she'll never let me go in the canoe again."

Brant held Charlie at arm's length. His first impulse was to tell his son his mother didn't make the rules.

"We'll not be able to keep this from her, but I'll take all the blame."

"You don't have to, sir. It was my fault. I don't want you to get in trouble because I never do anything right."

"Just being here is right, Charlie." He hugged him again. "Just being my son makes everything you do perfectly fine."

"Sir?"

"You don't have to call me sir all the time either. My name is Brant."

The village wasn't far and they talked as they walked.

"I know. We're named the same ... well almost."

"I thought your mother said your name was Caruthers."

"That's my short name. When she gets angry, she uses the whole thing. Charles Brant Sullette Caruthers. When she calls me that, I know I'm in big trouble."

Brant put an arm around Charlie's shoulders. "I know what you mean. Your mother and I knew each other a long time ago and I got my fair share of her temper too."

"That means she likes you."

"How's that?"

"She says it's not worth the energy to yell at someone of no consequence."

Brant rubbed the boy's wet hair. "I reckon you'll be the one to get yelled at, then. You're very important to her."

"Hey, you said you'd take the blame."

Brant laughed and felt a quick and irreversible bonding with his son.

"Won't you feel funny if I don't call you father or something? I heard a kid on the train call his father Pa. I liked that and ... Well if you want..." His voice trailed off and he went silent. "Never mind, I'll just call you Brant."

"I'd like it very much if you called me what you'd like." He squeezed Charlie's shoulders. "Now I promised your mother I'd bring you to the basin. I think earlier than she expected would be best."

"Do I have to?" he kicked his foot in the sand. "Scully wanted to show me his knife collection."

"You like knives?"

"I don't know, but it sounds neat. He said you got him all kinds and sizes."

"A good knife is an invaluable tool to an Indian. We hunt with them. Defend ourselves with them and—" Brant stopped before saying kill with them. He had a strong urge to shield Charlie from anything harsh about the world. He'd been wrong to give Eden the impression he didn't think she raised Charlie right.

"Shave," Charlie added. "Scully says I should watch you shave with yours."

Brant rubbed his jaw. He had shaved the day before in preparation of meeting Eden—another one of his attempts to impress her.

"Maybe tomorrow." He put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Soon you'll be a man needing to shave and I shall teach you."

"Neat."

"All right then, you need to change into dry clothes. There are some in the lodge for you and then you can go see my brother's knives. Be careful, they're not toys."

"I promise. I'll just look at them."

Brant nodded and waved him to go. He watched Charlie run through the camp and dodge around everything in his way.

Putting a hand to the back of his head, Brant rubbed the tension knotted by the scare he had of Charlie nearly

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drowning. Nothing ever rattled him the way Charlie had when he fell in the river.

Walking to the basin, the sight of Eden beautifully naked in the water stopped him just shy of making his presence known. The lovely shape of her had always captivated him. He remembered her giggles and her tears when he clumsily made love to her. He never told her it was his first time. When he worried he had hurt her, she explained the crying was an expression of excessive happiness.

Brant clenched his hands in anger. Eden made him love her with his very soul. The emotions he thought she destroyed, resurfaced and he feared she'd hurt him again.

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Chapter Five

Eden lifted her head when she heard the crunch of gravel.

"Brant Sulette!" She squatted in the water. "How dare you stand there watching me without ... without ... What are you doing?" She put a hand over her face and covered her eyes. Brant shucking off his clothes, shocked her. She had shared love, intimacy and her body with him when he was a boy. As a man, almost a stranger to her, she couldn't look. However, curiosity got the better of her and she parted her fingers to peek between them.

The sight of him brought back a flood of good memories. Beauty had a form and it walked toward her. The sight of Brant's lean, hard body stirred desire deeper into the pit of her belly. He waded into the water and stopped within inches of her. The surface of the pond stopped at waist level on him and for a second her gaze dropped lower between her fingers. She stared at his abdomen grooved with muscle.

"I want you, Eden." His touch glided along her shoulder.

She shook her head.

He didn't accept her answer and as his palm eased beneath her elbow, she let him guide her to stand. Rising from the concealment of water, she exposed herself to his gaze. Yet, from what she saw while coming up from the water, she felt it best not to remain face to waist either.

"Look at me." He pulled her hand from her eyes.

"You're embarrassing me, Brant."

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His face neared and his lips swept across hers. "You're more beautiful, than I remember." He kissed her cheek, her temple, and her forehead.

His seduction was better than hers.

"I've missed you," he whispered in her ear so low, she almost didn't hear him.

His large frame seemed to envelope her as he pulled her to him. She shivered from both the cold of the water and the intimacy of a man's body next to hers. When his mouth pressed against hers, she parted her lips and allowed his tongue to enter. She always said he had Indian magic on his side.

Brant's embrace mated her thighs to his. Her belly, her breasts and her arms all connected to him. She whimpered at the touches he placed on her back and over her bottom. The work-roughened palms stimulated her flesh with the kind of heat she craved.

"I want you," he said it again as if she'd forget his statement.

Eden hung onto him, giving her silent approval.

His kisses became more passionate and their bodies fit together tighter, seeking intimacy. He slid his hands over her shoulders, down her back and cupped her bottom, squeezing and massaging her right into the hardness nudging her belly. With a firm grip on her thighs, he hoisted her up to his waist and she locked her legs around him. She shivered as his erection wedged against the entrance of her heated center.

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"Charlie told me you said you were sad because you missed someone very much," he spoke close to her ear. "Who was it?"

"Oh Brant, do you really need to ask?"

"My Eden," he murmured.

She cried and hugged him, afraid in the next moment she'd wake from the perfect dream. Brant always called her his Eden because he said there was no better place he'd rather be than in her arms.

His kisses dried her tears and the enchantment washed away years of loneliness. He carried her to a patch of grass and eased her to the ground. The angry man that had wanted to take her son away, transformed into the caring one that always treated her with tenderness and love.

For a time, they remained quiet, kissing and caressing. She moved her head, twisting to give him the access of her neck. His soft lips sucked and kissed against her pulse. He nibbled on her earlobe, and without missing an inch of skin, he kissed his way to the other side of her neck.

His kisses ventured to her breasts. There he swirled his tongue around her hard peaked nipples. Each time she moaned, he clenched his teeth gently on the tip and tugged. Moving lower, his long black hair tickled her belly. A laugh erupted and for the first time, he looked at her with a genuine smile.

"You'll be gentle, like the first time?" She really didn't need reassurance.

"I'll never hurt you." He nuzzled his face to her belly. "I'm sorry I frightened you at the ranch. I was angry with you."

"I know and you had every right to be." She stroked a hand over the back of his head.

"If you had come back after Charlie was born, I wouldn't have let you stay with your father." He pressed kisses lower, making her squirm anxiously.

"I didn't know that. I believed you didn't want me anymore."

He lifted his head and stared at her. The conversation ended and she lost sight of his face when he lowered. She didn't say anything about the odd sensations he created kissing her intimate region. Years of inexperience didn't make her stupidly think Brant would have gone the same length of time without touching a woman. He was a man—a virile, passionate man with needs and she appreciated his acquired skills.

His tongue darted between her nether lips and hit a sensitive spot that made her wiggle involuntarily. Pressing his hands on the inside of her thighs, he offered the restraint she needed. The quick jabs of his tongue, the suckling, and his hum, echoing deep into her body, continued to agitate her in a good way.

"Brant," she cried, "Brant don't ... Please, don't stop."

The aggressive moves of his mouth drove her mind further from thoughts of him and to the ardent pleasure. Clenching on the thrusts of his tongue, she rode the wave of exhilaration. However, before the climax, he rose over her, halting the fiery stimulation. Repositioning between her legs, he eased down and nudged her dampened opening with his cock.

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He breathed heavier as he watched her.

"Brant?" She clutched his sides and stared into his love-filled eyes.

He didn't speak. His arousal poked and pushed into the tight entrance. Not swift, but in short strokes, he penetrated. It hurt differently than the first time. The tolerable discomfort of him stretching her inside, eased over the time he gave to each thrust. He held still and let her grow accustomed to his invasion.

Eden waited for him to move. Her chest heaved and Brant's gaze remained locked to hers. She pulled her bottom lip inward, worried the whimpering sounds she couldn't control, would make him stop. She didn't notice when he did. The shift of his body, the retreat of his cock gliding away, made her concentrate on clenching her insides to prevent him from leaving. However, he continued in a motion that drew his hips back. Shoving them forward, he moved in and out with a rhythm she learned to follow.

Brant's whispers were sounds of affection, not words, and it didn't matter how he expressed his adoration as long as she felt it.

She relaxed under him, reacquainting herself with the emotions she held in check. Crying out his name as one orgasm after another brought her the ecstasy of love; she clung to his powerful shoulders.

In a lull, she raked her nails over the hard cheeks of his ass. "You're more beautiful than I remember, too." She pulled at him.

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His thrusts gained speed and she bucked with the eager thrill of finally feeling like a woman again—like his woman.

Eden moaned as the sensations he created, spiraled through her. His whispers turned to grunts and hers into pleas.

"Don't let me go, Brant. Don't ever let me go."

"Never."

Her body climaxed and peaked when he jolted against her. Liquid warmth filled her as he jerked hard and deep, penetrating her womb. Together they cried and clung to the moment.

"Will you take me as your husband?" His question surprised her.

Choked by overwhelming emotions, she strained to make the words come out. "Yes, I'll have you as my husband," she answered, renewing her vows.

"I want more children."

With the excitable anticipation of having another child by him, she hugged him. "I want that too."

Brant kept his head down on her shoulder. "Eden, I...." His body shook and he made a strange, strangled sound.

"Shhh...." she hummed, understanding the intense feeling of completeness.

When he lifted his head, she caught just a glimpse of the tears floating in his brown eyes. His love was as real as hers. His mouth sought hers and in the fervor, he expressed to her a fierce possessiveness she embraced with her heart.

"Ma?" Charlie's voice broke the spell.

Eden pushed Brant to get up and when he did, she scooted out from under him and hurried into the pond. Shivering until it felt as if her skin would fall off she stared at Brant watching her.

"Put your pants on," she demanded.

"Ma," Charlie shouted again.

"Over here." She would have liked it better if she had her clothes on, but as long as Brant wasn't standing there naked, Charlie wouldn't be too shocked.

"Ma, we saw a bear," Charlie rushed into the clearing.

"That's nice, dear. Now would you both turn around so I can get out?" She focused on Brant and the way he wiped a hand over his eyes.

She offered him a smile, and he smiled back before he and Charlie gave her a moment of privacy.

"Ma, did you hear me? I saw a bear and it was bigger than Pa. Then I fell out of the canoe and...."

"You fell into the river." Eden hurried to get into the soft leather dress.

"Yeah, but I'm all right."

"Are you sure?" She rushed to squat down in front of him as she held the ties of the doeskin.

"Sure, Ma."

Brant took over fastening the dress while she ran a hand over Charlie's forehead and pushed his hair back, searching for bruises.

"What's this calling me Ma? Oh, never mind." She rose and pulled Charlie away from Brant. "He fell in the river. I knew

something like that might happen. You were supposed to keep him safe. How could you not tell me, Brant Sullette?"

She didn't understand Charlie's snicker or the smile he shared with Brant.

"He's fine, Eden."

"There's nothing funny about this. He could have drowned. I don't want you to take him in that canoe again." She pulled Charlie snug to her side. "You've no right endangering my baby."

"Ma, I'm not a baby anymore," Charlie whined.

"You want we should turn him into a squaw?" Brant charged, folding his arms.

Eden swung her hand to slap Brant for suggesting any woman was inferior to a man. In his quickness, he caught her wrist.

"Ma," Charlie exclaimed in shock.

Eden had never struck anyone, and to even want to was upsetting.

"Be quiet and stay out of this Charlie." She pursed her lips for a second. "Brant knows how to swim, and if he didn't then he could drown for all I care. You on the other hand, mean everything to me. Now go wait over there while I finish this conversation with Brant. Just go over there by the rocks please, Charlie."

"It was my fault he fell in the river. He was never in any danger of drowning, Eden. I was to him in seconds."

"He knows nothing of the west or the wilderness of the prairie, Brant." She tried to ignore the way his gaze drifted over her.

"He'll learn." He glanced at her bare feet.

"Would you stop gawking like you want to devour me!"

"But I do." He pressed a kiss to the center of her palm.

A shiver of excitement took away her anger and she watched him lick her skin, tickling her repeatedly with his persistence.

"Brant, I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I've never hit anyone." The resemblance to her father's actions scared her.

"And you still haven't." He kissed her knuckles.

"I didn't mean what I said about you drowning in the river, either."

"I know."

"About Charlie." She needed to explain, make things clear, have him understand Charlie had been the only person to keep her from despair. He was the part of Brant she had clung to and cherished. "He doesn't know what dangers there are with animals, cliffs or people. You have to watch him every minute of every day."

"I'll keep one eye on him and the other on you." He grinned.

She'd forgotten about the dimples in his cheeks when he was happy. He cupped her face and she nuzzled her cheek to his palm.

"Do you like the dress?" He fingered the edge along her collarbone.

"I love it."

"I kept it all these years, hoping you'd come back to me."

"Brant, don't make me cry." She moved in closer to him.

His fingers slid over the pattern of beads that trailed between her breasts. "This symbol is of our marriage. I had planned to give you a proper Indian wedding in the autumn. I don't know how many times I sat at night holding this dress, wishing I had given it too you sooner."

"This autumn we can do everything right. All our dreams and fantasies will come true." She tipped her head back as Brant's mouth descended toward her.

Her mind snapped away along with her head from the tender moment when Charlie's heart-stopping scream surrounded them.

She turned, but Brant was quicker to react. He was already running. The rattlesnake that struck Charlie's leg was dead the second Brant severed its head with his knife. Eden rushed to them and stared in disbelief as Brant tore Charlie's pant leg open, cut into the flesh and sucked at the wound. He spit and blood spattered the dirt.

"We have to get him back to the village." Brant rose and shook her. "Do you hear me Eden?"

She nodded and watched him pick up her son. Charlie dangled like a limp rag in Brant's arms. He appeared small and frail.

"He's going to die," the words tumbled from her.

Brant's hurried and determined strides were longer than hers. She felt numb and slow. She almost lost sight of him until he stopped, slung Charlie over his shoulder and came back to take her arm and drag her along to the camp.

"Sully, get our mother. Charlie's been bit by a rattlesnake." He let go of Eden's arm and ducked inside his lodge.

Eden felt shut out, alone and terrified. Brant emerged, snatched her wrist and pulled her into the dimly lit area. She didn't want to watch her son die and began crying, looking at him as if he were already gone.

Lucy entered a moment later and went to work on Charlie. Eden didn't pay attention to what was done. She reached her hand out and drew it back, too afraid to find out the truth. Charlie was the most precious thing in her life and if he died, she knew she'd surely want to die too.

"Eden." Brant picked up her hand and laid it on Charlie's arm. "Be strong for him."

She tried to wipe the tears blurring her vision. It seemed useless as they continued a steady flow.

"There's nothing else to do, but wait." Lucy patted her shoulder and left.

Brant tried to hold Eden and she pushed his hands away. "This is your fault."

"Eden."

"No, get away from us." She lay down next to Charlie and hugged his lifeless body hoping her prayers would be answered.

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Chapter Six

Brant watched for two days as Charlie shook with a fever, his body fighting the venom poisoning him. Eden barely ate what was brought to her and had finally passed out from exhaustion. She hadn't spoken and refused to look at him the whole time. Just as it appeared that he and Eden might resume their relationship, this setback appeared irreversible. Closing his eyes, he prayed. If Charlie died, he wouldn't need Eden's hate to destroy him.

When Charlie cried in his sleep, Brant lifted him up and held him tight. He buried his face against the boy's neck and prayed harder to every God and spirit that ever existed.

Crying soundlessly in his heart, he didn't think he'd survive losing his son and the woman that gave his life meaning.

"Mother," Charlie mumbled. "Mother, make him stop."

"Get away from him." Eden crawled over and put her hands out for Charlie.

Brant loosened his grip, realizing how tightly he had hugged the boy.

"Get out and leave me alone with my son. If he dies, it'll be your fault and no one will ever hate you the way I will."

"Eden." He released Charlie to her. "Eden I—"

Brant left the lodge. He paced the perimeter, vigilant with his thoughts on Charlie recovering. Eden's screams dragged him back inside.

Charlie lay in her arms, convulsing. His body stiffened and jerked. Brant drew his knife sheath from his legging and

forced it between Charlie's teeth to prevent him from biting his tongue or choking. Pressing a hand on his chest and one on his forehead, he held Charlie down until the seizure passed.

"It's over." Brant took the leather from Charlie's mouth and picked him up.

"Let me have him." Eden's extended arms shook.

"I'll hold him in case it happens again. Come sit next to me to be close to him."

He got no argument. Eden scooted around the pallet and pressed herself into the niche he offered. She put a hand on Charlie's chest and laid her head on Brant's shoulder.

"He'll get well. He's made it this long." He squeezed her tighter and pressed a kiss along her hairline. "Tell me what he's like. What he does when he's not in school, or what he excels in when he is."

At first, he didn't think she'd talk to him. Her silence worried him.

"He's like you were as a boy." A note of happiness rang in her words.

"You gave him my name." His heart beat harder with such pride in that fact.

"And my father's. You may think it strange since you know how my father mistreated me, but I was a child having a child. I needed something familiar."

"Does he like anything special, something I could do with him?"

"He likes to read."

"Well that's nothing he got from me." Brant laughed. "I hardly did well in school."

"You did well when you put your mind to it." Her respect restored hope in him for salvaging their relationship.

"What does he like to read about?"

"He's read everything he could about the west and about Indians so he'd know what you were like and where I was from."

"You said he didn't know about me."

"I would have said anything to stop you from taking him from me."

"Then you should have said he wasn't mine."

"But he is and I wanted you know that." She turned her face against his chest and cried. "I always wanted you to know him. Ever since he was born, I told him every story there was that was fit to tell about you. I intended on bringing him here to meet you. I just didn't know how you'd feel about having a son when you didn't want me."

It was his turn to go silent as he contemplated just how much of the past he wanted to rehash.

"Your father ordered me to stay away and I didn't want to do anything that would make things difficult for you. When I got the courage to try, you were gone. He told me then that he sent you away to have my child."

"I'm sorry, Brant. I didn't know."

"It no longer matters." He kissed her again.

"Ma?" Charlie groaned.

"Yes, honey, I'm here." She put her hand to his forehead.

Brant put his hand there at the same time and she weaved her fingers with his.

"I'm thirsty," Charlie said.

Eden moved out of Brant's circling arm. He felt a breeze drift over his skin and a coolness touch his heart with self-sacrifice. He couldn't keep her if she didn't want to stay. She had a safe life where she'd been in the east and that's what he wanted for both of them.

Eden poured water into a small wood bowl and held it to Charlie's lips. Brant held him up while she fed the liquid into his mouth.

"Pa, am I going to die?"

"Not today. It's not a good day."

He looked up at Eden. Her wet face had less worry. The lines in her skin, softened. Her lips moved a silent *'thank you'* and he imaged them saying, *'I love you'*.

Brant eased Charlie down on the bedding of furs. His mother entered and he motioned to her to tend Charlie as he stood.

He pulled Eden up. "When he's well, I want you to take him back east—where he belongs."

"I can't do that." She twisted from him and went outside and he followed.

"Why not?"

"First, because of the very reason you want to send him away. You care about him and I'll not deprive Charlie or myself of whatever affection we can get from you!" Her voice rose with each word.

Her Savage Lover
by Brenda Williamson

Brant looked around at the sudden silence from everyone within hearing distance of them.

"Fine, you won't leave," he agreed.

"Damn your pride, Brant Sullette! I love you with all my heart and we've been apart too many years for you not to have anything else to say to me." Her trembling lips sputtered with a sob.

He'd seen more than he had ever wanted to remember of her tears. Wiping them from her cheeks, he bowed his head.

"I've always loved you. He tugged her into his embrace and gave her his heartfelt pledge. "You're my, Eden, forever."

The End

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Her Savage Lover
by Brenda Williamson

We hope you enjoyed this western romance by Brenda Williamson. If so, you may also enjoy our western selections by Alex de Kok including *Mail Order Bride* and *A Promise Kept*.

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Excerpt from *Mail Order Bride*

"Please, no!" A whisper. It was the frightened girl, her face white. She glanced sideways at the man beside her, then at me, her brown eyes wide, dark against the pallor of her face. "Not for me."

"I fear 'tis too late, Miss." I smiled again. The man lurched to his feet and loomed over me, and I flinched, almost gagging from the reek of his breath, as he pushed his face close, the greasy brim of his hat almost touching my face.

"Far too late," he said. He leered at me. "Do you know who I am?"

"No sir, nor do I care. You have offended the lady and must make amends." I nodded to him. "So who are you, sir?"

"Jed Calloway," he said. "I'll be waiting for you on the platform."

There had been a collective gasp from the nearest of my fellow passengers on hearing the ruffian's name and as he made his way to the end of the car there was a buzz of conversation and the imparting of dire warnings to me, the gist of which was that Calloway was a known killer, with variously twelve, fifteen and nineteen victims, 'not counting redskins' as one of my advisers said.

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"I merely intend to advise him of the error of his ways," I said. "There will be no bloodshed."

"That won't stop him," said one young man, bright blue eyes almost lost in the sun-squint lines on his tanned face. "Are you carryin'?"

"Carrying?" I repeated. "Carrying what?"

"A gun; a pistol."

"I have one in my knapsack," I responded, "I won't need it."

The man snorted. "He'll kill you, sure as eggs."

"We'll see," I said. I glanced from the window. Softer country now, for we were well past the mountains, and the plains were days behind us. Rolling hills, trees everywhere, plenty of water, beautiful. The train had been slowing as we talked and now it came to a standstill. To take on water, I guessed, as we'd made several such stops.

"Please excuse me, I'll just go and see Mr. Calloway," I said to the old lady next to me. She gave me a hard look but said nothing, and I thought I saw a touch of pity in her eyes, fearing I might be going to my death.

I walked toward the end of the car, following Calloway. Every eye was upon me, some frightened, some bemused, all avid. I smiled at one or two, especially the ladies, and made my way to the door. The sun was almost at right-angles to the train, which was Calloway's misfortune, because the shadow of his waiting figure, arm raised to club me with his pistol was clear to me as I glanced through the last side window.

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I opened the door at the end of the car and took a long, fast step forward. It was that which took Calloway by surprise, for the blow aimed at my head, clearly intended to stun or even maim me, missed, and Calloway lost his balance. I hit him. I felt no compunction, for he had obviously intended to hurt me, in hitting him as hard as I possibly could. I hit him in the belly. I had been working as a blacksmith; I was young; I was strong; I knew I could hit hard.

I did.

~*~*~

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