



Brought Down

Vonna Harper



www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

Running had always quieted Sabin. He loved feeling his lungs expand and contract and the fine, familiar burning in his legs.

It would be like that today. It would be good.

Even as he studied the ground to ensure his feet wouldn't land on anything sharp, he scanned the endless high desert for signs of life in the shadows and depressions. He also searched for a sense of peace.

It was summer, with its hot days and cool nights. The constant wind pushed against his nearly naked body, as if insisting he didn't belong here. He hoped the wind was wrong. As a member of the Hunter People, he went wherever his chief ordered and obeyed his command. He always had. Always would, even though today's task left him feeling less of a man.

Armed with a spear, knife, and blowgun with its paralyzing dart strapped to his loincloth's waist, he told himself he feared nothing. Wanted nothing, except this existence.

Then why did he wish he were elsewhere?

Sabin frowned and looked skyward, unsettled by his latest thought. Buzzards circled high above the sagebrush to his right, reminding him that life couldn't be taken for granted. He gazed into the distance. Today his destination was the basalt rimrock. Once he'd climbed the steep cliff and reached the nearly flat top, he'd study his surroundings for the human prey that had brought him here.

Human. A female.

Innocent and unsuspecting.

The wind and occasional birdcall was all that stood between him and silence, a silence that suddenly unsettled him. A Hunter scout, he was accustomed to traveling ahead of his clan, but no matter how often he came to a new area, his senses needed time to adjust. He was accustomed to owls that lived in trees, not ones that burrowed into the ground. The falcons were smaller here, their cries higher and sharper. Instead of the small, light brown deer that made the forest their homes, those that lived in the high desert were nearly twice as large, and the bucks' racks were so wide, he couldn't reach across them.

His knowledge of the fleet tan and white antelope that thrived here was minimal. Hopefully that would change when he slipped close to whatever watering hole he found.

Thirst? What did that matter?

Only his goal, his task, his reluctant promise to his clan did. He tried to swallow past his parched throat. But he, the man, would need to find water soon.

Just in time, he spotted a dark gray and yellow snake and jumped over it. As he did, the snake lifted its upper body, its fangs fortunately striking air instead of his feet. Its rattles made a dry clack. The thought of a writhing, lonely death chilled him, but not as much as the fear that had consumed him the spring morning he'd believed he would die.

Slowing, he ran his hand over his left shoulder. Fortune smiled upon him that the still-healing scar there only occasionally ached and that his muscles had returned to full strength. If only he could end the memory of an enemy knife tearing at him, stabbing deep, taking his life's blood.

Determined not to let the nightmare overwhelm him, Sabin willed his heart to return to a steady beat. Nevertheless he remained aware that he'd come to a land where he wasn't wanted and would be seen as the enemy. As he picked up the pace, blood rolled into his cock, causing it to come to life. Shifting his spear to his left hand, he reached under his loincloth so he could cradle and support his erection. What was it about tension that spoke to him like this?

Not just tension, he amended. His *victim* had more to do with his mood than he wanted to admit.

Sweat ran down the small of his back and coated his upper lip. The sun would soon be overhead. He could either continue at full speed to the rimrock rising above the desert floor or better pace himself. Awash in thought and emotion, he slowed.

He, a valuable and dependable Hunter, had been sent to this harsh land for one thing. To capture a female member of the Antelope People. Once the swift, wild creature was under his control and command, he'd begin to break her down by pushing her beyond her limits. He knew how to do that. He'd learned well. He wouldn't fail or concern himself with what being his captive would do to her.

Couldn't.

Because he didn't dare remain here any longer than necessary, he'd take her back to his people. By then, if the spirits were willing, she'd have turned her body over to him. But even if she continued to fight, he'd do what he must.

He had no choice. His clan's survival might depend on her speed and the speed of the children she'd bear.

Whether she understood meant nothing. She was a means to an end, barely human, as his clan had always been led to believe. Just enough like him, maybe, to satisfy his cock's needs.

* * *

Kahsha of the Antelope People planned her daily water-gathering trips to the canyon stream for afternoon, well ahead of nightfall, when animals, predators included, gravitated to it. Even with the need for caution, crouching at the edge of the stream with countless hoof and paw prints carved into the dirt reinforced her belief that she was one with all animals and not just antelope.

Predators? What had made her think of them today and react by shivering and looking quickly around?

Summer was in its brief glory in the land of her birth. She should be enjoying every minute. But as she loped along with the empty water bladders over her neck, bouncing against her breasts, she acknowledged that the days felt as if they were closing in on her. Surely that was why she wished she was somewhere else, maybe someone other than who she was.

She should be looking forward to marrying Rafi, not dreading what the spirits willed. She shivered again. Not only had she known him all her life and admired his skill in fashioning black rock into arrowheads, his family had already given her snow geese feathers and dried yellow paintbrush flowers as welcoming gifts. She'd woven the feathers and flowers into her braid and worn them during the recent full moon celebration. After the drumming, dancing, and eating, she and Rafi had come together on the deer hide he'd brought with him, careful to pull apart in time so that his seed spilled onto the hide instead of in her.

Come next spring, she'd move into his cave house and hand her body to him. If Wind Spirit so willed it, her body would swell and she'd become a mother. A mother!

And spend the rest of her life spreading her legs for a man who reached release scant seconds after becoming erect.

No! Kahsha gave her head a shake. She didn't want that. She also didn't know what else there was to want. Her life with Rafi had already been foretold. She couldn't go against what the spirits said.

An ache in her heart caught hold of her and sent fresh strength to her legs. Lifting her head, she remembered to give thanks to Wind, giver of speed. Tonight she'd dutifully burn some of the rare white lupin and stand in its holy smoke while praying to Wind and, she hoped, in the act, find a measure of peace and acceptance. Today, however, she'd embrace Wind's gift and run like the clan's namesake.

Flee, however briefly, from her future.

Running with an antelope's speed sent hot wind into the hair she'd rebraided this morning. The short, sleeveless deer hide dress flattened against her. Heat worked its way between her legs and touched her sex. Sensitive flesh responded.

She'd experienced the overwhelming thrill that came from touching her woman's parts and knew how to make it happen.

If only Rafi did.

Maybe she could teach him. Although her future husband's body had yet to increase her pulse, that might change once he understood what she craved.

She wrinkled her brow. Why didn't he know? Didn't he care about her needs?

If only today with its tension, fear, and dread were behind her!

She neared the canyon with the life-giving stream at its bottom. As soon as she scrambled down and opened the water bladders in preparation for filling them, she'd have enough to do that she'd no longer think about anything else. She'd live in the moment and be the content Antelope woman her people believed and expected her to be.

Suddenly alarm snaked down her spine. Kahsha slowed and then stopped, stood on her toes, and turned in a slow, seeking circle. Living as one with the antelope meant having more than the gift of speed. She'd also been blessed with the creature's superior sight, hearing, and sense of smell.

Something was different here today, something out of place, an unwelcome presence. Her first thought was that a cougar was stalking her. But there was abundant prey; Antelope People had little to fear from predators. The same held true for the seldom seen wolves, and despite the grizzlies' fearsome appearance, she could easily outrun the massive creatures.

Afternoon was a time of long, dark shadows, which meant she had difficulty making out the details of what or who might be in them.

The empty bladders weighed her down, but although she was tempted to drop them and run, large water containers were hard to come by. Besides, she was wrong. She took another long look around. Nothing was watching her, stalking her, wanting her.

Absently stroking a bladder, she turned her head, hoping the breeze would carry telling sounds her way. She'd seen strangers as they passed through Antelope People land. Some came to trade, others to steal. None stayed long.

Nothing. No matter how alert she remained, she didn't hear, see, or smell anything she couldn't identify. Perhaps her dread of her future was responsible for her unease. Maybe it was as simple as wishing she could tell Rafi she didn't want to marry him. But then she'd also have to tell her parents and Spiritkeeper Wilu, whose study of the stars had told him that she and Rafi belonged together.

Her hand went to her throat. She stroked it, trying to take comfort from the light touch. She *had* to accept. There was no other—

For a heartbeat, she believed the wind had caused the sagebrush to move. Then a man stepped out from behind it. A stranger carrying weapons and wearing nothing but a loincloth.

"Go!" she commanded in the trade language spoken by all clans. "You have no right to this water."

He glanced down and then back up at her. "I'm...ah...lost."

I don't believe you. "What are you doing here?"

Once more he didn't meet her gaze. "Looking for—I hurt my foot." After a moment, he took a few stumbling steps, using his spear as a cane. "I couldn't keep up. They left me behind, said I could, ah, catch up when the cut healed."

He was no longer trying to close the distance between them. If he had been, she would have fled. Studying how much of his weight he placed on his left leg was easier than trying to make sense of what little he'd told her and trying to follow his hesitant speech. Where Antelope men were lean-limbed like their namesakes, the stranger's muscles made her think of a cougar. He was all strength, hard and determined. Dangerous.

No, she amended, not dangerous. He could barely walk, let alone run. Even if he could, she'd easily leave this man with his dark flesh, wide, strong shoulders, and legs built for battle behind.

“Who are the others?” she asked.

“The Mountain People. I’m one of them.” When she gave him a puzzled look, he continued. “We’ve been going from clan to clan showing everyone our many bear pelts, which are perfect for blankets and winter coverings.”

Mountain People were indeed traders, but she hadn’t seen any on Antelope land for at least three summers. Besides, he didn’t look like any Mountain man she’d ever seen. Instead of their light brown hair and strange pale blue eyes, his hair looked like midnight, and his eyes made her think of a cave. Perhaps he’d been adopted into the Mountain clan. She’d know whether she should believe him once she’d seen his injury. If there was one.

First, though, she’d have to get closer to him. Feel his body’s heat.

“You look afraid,” he said.

“Not afraid,” she shot back. “Cautious. Can you blame me?”

“No, I guess not.” He shook his head. “Look, I’d been hoping to get down to the stream. I thought, well, I thought if I could cool the fever in my foot, that would help it, but the path’s so steep.”

No, it wasn’t. The trail, cut into the ground by generations of hoof and claw animals, was a gentle slope. Wondering what it would be like not to be able to rely on her body, she studied the stranger’s weapons. Although it was somewhat longer and thicker than the ones her people used, there was nothing remarkable about his spear. Because his knife was in a sheath, she couldn’t tell anything about it. However, the short, round piece of wood she saw puzzled her the most. It reminded her of something she’d seen someone blow on.

A long red scar ran from his left shoulder nearly to his elbow.

“You don’t trust me, do you?”

“No.”

"I can't blame you." He rubbed his forehead with his free hand. "Maybe," he said after a brief silence, "if I threw you my water pouch, you'd fill it for me? I'm thirsty."

He didn't look parched to her, no dry and cracked lips, no lifeless skin. Quite the opposite. She'd never seen a man more prepared for a life of hunting and fighting. Even with the healing scar, he was formidable. If he were an animal, he'd be a cougar or wolf.

And she was an antelope.

Prey pitted against predator.

Woman against man.

That alarm streaked down her back again, telling her to be cautious. "Throw it to me." She indicated the deer hide pouch at his waist. She didn't want to stay, didn't want to be alone with him, but she'd been raised to see all life as sacred. She noted that the weight of his knife dragged the waistband of his loincloth low on his hip, exposing some of his belly and the curling black hairs that hinted at what was barely covered. At least he didn't have an erection. If he were lying about being injured, wouldn't his body have responded to the sight of a young woman?

But she knew nothing about him. Maybe a woman didn't excite him.

"Thank you. I appreciate it." His tone dropped to a whisper, the sound like the wind caressing rock.

About to tell him that was the least she could do, she settled for a nod. His gaze had her off balance in a way that reminded her of pounding drumbeats. He was sunlight on a winter morning, a moment of cool air in the depths of summer... She shook her head. What was she doing, standing here, finding favor in a strange man's body, a man who hadn't given her any reason he could be believed or trusted?

Watching her, the stranger moved his free hand to his water pouch. He tried to untie it, but the knot refused to give way. She imagined walking up to him and taking over the chore. Her fingers would slide over his flesh and absorb his warmth,

press past flesh to muscle and learn not just how strong he was, but what it took to bring his cock to life.

There. She had done it again. Thinking about this stranger in ways she never had about Rafi.

Unexpected movement jerked her out of the dangerous place her mind had slipped. He'd released the spear in preparation for using both hands to untie his water pouch. However, as the pouch fell to the ground, she noted that his weight was now distributed equally on both legs.

"You lie!"

Whirling away from the enemy, she sent energy to her legs. At the same time, she pulled the water bladders off her neck and threw them aside. One stride, two. She was nearly up to antelope speed, escaping him, soon to be—

Something sharp struck her left shoulder blade. An insect? It remained lodged in her skin. It didn't hurt as much now. Her skin there started to feel hot; then the heat spread out to claim her spine and arms. Most alarming, her legs had caught fire. Fear choked her. She tried to pull out whatever had struck her, only to discover she could no longer lift her arms. Instead of planting one sure foot after another on the ground, she started to stumble.

Help me! Someone help me!

Whether she'd deliberately slowed so she could better control her movements or speed had been stolen from her, she couldn't tell. Her head became impossibly heavy, and she couldn't feel her feet. Could barely think.

The flat ground became a mountain, impossibly steep. She trudged, leaning forward like an old woman who'd forgotten how her knees worked. No longer able to send a message to her hips, she stopped and looked around in confusion.

Then she fell like a just-killed bird.

Chapter Two

I'm sorry. If there was any other way—

The Antelope woman had landed on her side with her back to him, allowing Sabin to see the poison dart in her dark skin without having to look at her face. Given how fast she'd been running, he thanked the spirits for guiding the dart. He also silently asked for the Antelope woman's forgiveness. He blinked. Wanting her forgiveness surprised him. He'd only briefly allowed himself to consider what losing her freedom would feel like for his *prey*. Now with her helpless on the ground, reality rocked him.

She couldn't move a muscle. Every bit of strength left in her would be centered, as he knew, on making sure she breathed. Was she afraid or beyond thought?

"I know you can hear me," he said as he knelt beside her. She was smaller than she'd appeared, standing apart from him. "And if I turn you toward me, you'll be able to see me. You can also feel."

Unsure how long the paralyzing drug's effects would last, he needed to tie and gag her. However, duty would have to wait. He held his breath as he pulled out the dart. It left behind a small hole that oozed a little blood. When he touched his forefinger to her precious lifeblood, his reaction surprised him. She was little more than an animal, all instinct and little intellect. That was what his clan preached.

Or was she? Sabin shifted, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable.

Not only had she been able to carry on a conversation with him, she'd seen through his reluctant but necessary lie.

Pushing the doubts aside, he licked his finger. Her taste filled his mouth and slid down his throat. Wanting more, he leaned over her and, taking in her desert-scented body, touched the injury he was responsible for. Suddenly he felt more alive than he had in a long time. Since he'd last fucked.

Pressing his lips to her shoulder, he sucked, secure that the poison was deep in her system. A sound like a newborn fox kit trailed out with her exhaled breath. Curious about what other sounds she was capable of, he lightly closed his teeth over the back of her neck.

The fox kit he'd likened her to was no longer a newborn. Now the sound spoke of anger and fear.

Fear he understood, but anger? Shouldn't she be so terrified that the ability to think had deserted her?

Confused, he straightened and studied the bit of saliva and the faint indentations where his teeth had been. To his surprise, he longed to brush both away. At the same time, he ached to roll her onto her back, push up her dress, and bury himself in the soft, secret place between her legs. Remind himself of her value to his clan.

Maybe he'd take her from behind, so he wouldn't have to see her expression. Once her arms and legs were capable of supporting her weight, he'd command her to spread her legs. If she refused, he'd force her ass cheeks apart.

No! He couldn't, wouldn't!

What was he thinking?

Somehow, someday, he'd turn her into his *willing* breeder. Silence the thoughts that shamed him. Silence the thought that she was more human than animal.

The arm laying over her hip twitched. Taking her hand, he squeezed it, felt the fine bones within. She moaned, and her fingers curled a little. Either he hadn't put enough *thelm* juice on the tip of the dart, or her system was already starting to recover.

Once he tamed her, he'd watch her run with the wind. But until he could trust she wouldn't try to escape, he had to keep her immobilized. He pulled several lengths of leather out of his pouch, shook them apart, and wrapped one around her right ankle several times, careful not to cut off blood. He noted that, like his, the bottom of her foot was calloused. In contrast, the flesh over her calf was duck-down soft, with only a hint of hair. So unlike his own tough skin with coarse hairs.

Fighting the urge to explore more, he grabbed her other leg and drew it close to the first. Leaving a space equal to the width of two hands between her ankles, he finished. Both slender ankles were now partly hidden beneath dark deer hide strips. Her breath remained labored, and she seemed to be testing the strength of what now confined her.

One more thing to do and then he'd look into the eyes of fear and feel the power he'd been preparing himself for since his grieving father's emotional plea: To put his people's future first.

Rolling her onto her stomach with her head to the side, he drew her arms behind her. He'd begun to cross one wrist over the other when she jerked the right one free.

"Not possible," he muttered and claimed it again. Her moans lacked meaning, but that would soon change. He started to cross her wrists again, only to change his mind so that he wouldn't strain her shoulders. Seconds later, her wrists were restrained much as her ankles, with less than a hand's width between them.

Pulling his gaze from her helpless body, he chose the thickest strip and used it to gag her. Silencing her was vital, since he intended to remain on Antelope land at least until tomorrow. He had no doubt that her clanspeople would come looking for her.

His tasks complete, he dragged her over to a boulder and positioned her so the rock supported her back. Her useless legs stretched out in front of her, and her head lolled to one side. Her eyes opened and closed repeatedly. No expression touched her features, and he surmised she didn't yet understand the totality of her situation.

Was she capable of grasping her future? If so, she'd want him dead.

Stop! Her thoughts mean nothing.

Finding a woman with water containers had been another gift from the spirits, because if he was going to live up to his promise to his clan—to his father—he needed to make sure both he and his captive had adequate water. Climbing down the canyon to the stream would take a while, and she might fully recover while he was gone.

Fortunately, she'd still be here when he returned.

Walking over to the bladders, he picked them up, but instead of heading for the canyon, he returned to her and lifted her chin. Again he was struck by her skin's softness and the strong bone structure beneath.

"I'll return." He spoke slowly and clearly. "I won't leave you to die."

At first she gave no indication she'd heard. Then the mist lifted from her obsidian eyes. Fear was still there, but also loathing.

In her hatred, he found the answers he'd been seeking. Yes, she was capable of emotion.

It didn't matter that she hated him, he told himself as he stood and turned away. His task was to teach her, break through her defenses, tap in to her sexuality, and use her primitive needs to re-form her.

Man-need wouldn't weaken him. Neither would her pleading gaze touch him. He'd remain who he was, a warrior and hunter. Maybe his people's only hope.

* * *

Two winters ago, Kahsha had been struck by a high fever soon after her people shared food and heat with a small group of travelers. Her body had ached so much, she begged her mother not to touch her. She'd spent most of her time sleeping and was never sure whether she was dreaming or hearing actual conversations. Her family asked questions, but she'd been unable to concentrate enough to answer. She'd just wanted to be left alone, and if she died, so be it.

Today was different. Disbelief ran through her, and yet she felt equally disconnected from her body. The enemy with his scar and intense gaze had bound her arms and legs and forced rawhide between her teeth. Those things mattered, and yet they didn't. Soon, her mind would clear, and she'd concentrate on what had happened and what she must do to get free. For the present, however, she was grateful for the support for her back and wished her head wasn't so heavy.

Wished her captor wouldn't return.

Was dead.

The wind danced over her face, throat, and legs. Every time a gust struck, she became more aware of the comforting sensation. Bit by bit the heavy fog was lifting, and the sagebrush and rock-strewn land became more distinct. Vowing to remain calm, she struggled to separate her legs. When that failed, she did the same with her arms. Then she tried to scream.

Hot panic sped through her. Fighting it took all her strength, and by the time she'd climbed on top of it, the last of the fog in her mind was gone.

She'd been captured by a powerful stranger from a clan she had no doubt thrived on such things. His spear and other weapons were part of him and as nerve-wrenching as his uncaring eyes and rope skill. At least he'd once been wounded. Otherwise she might believe he was invincible.

Even this time of year, most Antelope men wore shoulder capes decorated with symbols proclaiming their clan status. In contrast, the man who'd lied to her and then stolen her strength wore only what was necessary to cover his groin.

She had no doubt that before long, he'd remove his loincloth and take her.

Fear won this time, forcing her to clamp her shaky legs together. She'd fight him with all her strength, and should she get free, she'd pray to the spirits for the speed to escape. And if her strength wasn't equal to his, and he kept her tied—

Realizing she'd allowed her body to fold in on itself, Kahsha moved closer to the boulder and straightened. He'd gone after water. Did that mean he had at least a little compassion for her? Maybe he'd keep all of it for himself.

Where would he take her? He couldn't keep her out here, where other Antelope People would eventually come across them. She wondered if he was a Hunter, a clan that never stayed in one place for long and sometimes went to war with other clans, such as the murderous Wolverines. She didn't know where the Hunters were camped now, maybe a mountain away.

Would he force her to go there with him?

The rest of her life spent as his captive?

Stopping the fresh wave of fear before it could overwhelm her took all her strength. Even as she shook, she tried to quiet her mind by focusing on a speckled horned lizard slowly crawling through a jumble of rocks.

She was still watching the lizard when *he* returned. In contrast to her struggles to carry two full bladders, he seemed oblivious to their weight. Her first impression of him had been fleeting. Now, although she didn't want to, she took her measure of every inch of him. He was one of the tallest men she'd ever seen, but his height made less impact than the hard chest and powerful shoulder muscles. Yes, he carried himself with confidence, but self-assurance seemed such a part of him that she wondered if it went deeper than what his body was capable of. How had he felt when the knife responsible for his scar tore into him? Maybe he'd shrugged it off.

Speed defined her. Strength defined him.

Was it possible they had something in common?

Upset at letting the thought in, she clenched her teeth around the hated gag and fought the impulse to draw her legs against her in a futile attempt to keep as much distance as possible between them.

Because she was looking up at him, if he came much closer, she'd see beneath his loincloth. Maybe he'd make the seeing easy by pulling the deer hide aside.

And then what?

He carefully laid the water on the ground and then held up the flutelike weapon she'd noticed earlier.

"When I blow into one end," he told her, "the dart in it shoots out. That's what I struck you with. The tip carries a numbing poison. I've never seen its effects wear off as soon as it did with you. Fortunately for what I must do, it lasted long enough for me to tie you."

Must, not want?

A prickling sensation clawed at her. Determined not to let him know, she swallowed her emotion and returned his steady gaze. His rich brown eyes challenged her to look beneath the surface. Would he have told her what he just had if his only intention had been to take and then kill her?

"I know what you're thinking." Squatting beside her, he closed a rough hand over her shin. "But you're wrong. Why should I force from you what, eventually, you'll freely give me?"

"Never," she tried to say. Concerned he couldn't understand, she shook her head.

His expression still grim, he nodded. "Many years ago, Hunter People looked at wolves, not as the enemy but possible companions, protection, and fellow hunters. Instead of killing them, my grandfather and his companions followed wolves to their dens and took the cubs they found. They fed the cubs human mothers' milk, slept with them, taught them that food and warmth comes from human hands. Now when we hunt, our wolves accompany us. Whatever we want of them, they obey. It will be like that for you."

No, she tried to scream.

"Yes, my captive, yes. Right now, you don't believe me. I don't blame you." His expression sobered. "You believe the only way I can get you to cooperate is by force, but force breaks the spirit."

The whole time he'd been talking, his rough fingers had tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed, sending strange sensations throughout her lower leg. There

was nothing forceful in what he was doing, and his grip was far from painful. To her shock, she regretted it when he stopped.

“A woman’s body is quick to heat,” he went on. Releasing her shin, he pressed the heel of his hand against the side of her calf. “Just as a wolf answers to his belly’s needs, a woman heeds her sex.”

What had he said? If not for those words, surely her attention wouldn’t have turned to what lay hidden between her legs. No longer just pressing on her calf, his hand now moved back and forth. Even more disconcerting, he’d started lightly raking his nails over her knee. The touch put her in mind of a bird’s wing.

No, not a bird’s wing.

She couldn’t get away. Struggling would serve no purpose. As he continued his unexpectedly gentle exploration, she relaxed a little. She should fear this man with the thick, rich black hair that brushed the tops of his shoulders and bushy eyebrows. Unlike some men who wore beards, he’d taken a knife to his cheeks and chin, but not for the past few days. The shading added to his wild appearance.

“I didn’t think your flesh would be this soft,” he muttered. “It should be rough from the wind.”

His uncertain tone pulled her back from her study of his appearance. For the first time, she noted curiosity in his eyes and wondered if today was as much a journey for him as for her. Yet the differences were telling. He was in control of his journey, while she had no say. He’d captured her simply because he could.

Sighing, he changed from a crouch to kneeling. Once settled, he ran his hand along her thigh. Both dreading and anticipating what was going to happen, Kahsha breathed through every inch of the journey. He could be cruel yet wasn’t. Could draw blood but hadn’t. Instead he studied her while slowly, so slowly, guiding his hand to the inside of her thigh. Her dress barely covered her crotch, yet he didn’t take advantage.

“You can’t want this,” he muttered. Leaning forward, he exhaled his warm breath on her leg. “You hate everything I’m doing.” He sighed. “At the same time,

you want to know what's going to happen. That will make you tremble, and in the trembling, you'll give up pieces of yourself. Hand your body over to me."

He was right about the shivering. To her disbelief, insisting she wanted nothing to do with what he was doing would be a lie. Surely it would be different once she fully recovered from whatever he'd injected her with.

Ah, that was it; there was still poison in her system. Nothing to do with wondering what his fingers on her core would feel like.

Maybe he'd tapped into her thoughts, because after patting her knee, he slid his hand between her legs. *It's going to happen*, his deep eyes said.

"Time," he muttered, "to begin."

Barely believing what was happening, she stared at his forearm and what she now could see of his wrist. The upward march fascinated her so that she couldn't concentrate on remaining erect. His rough skin burned hers. She tried squeezing her thighs together, only to sob and let go when her muscles threatened to cramp.

He was saying something in a language she'd heard a few times but understood nothing of. Only the tone, soft and low, mattered. Perhaps what he was saying had nothing to do with her, but maybe he was detailing everything he had planned for her.

Didn't matter. Only her captor's hand did.

"What is it like to be an Antelope?" The hand between her legs stopped moving, and the other splayed over her right thigh. "Do you take great speed for granted? You shouldn't, you know. It's such a rare skill."

Skill? How little he knew.

"But not as precious as this."

The side of his thumb touched her sex place. Pressure grew, forcing the loose and sensitive flesh there against her body. Alarmed, she threw back her head, only to wince when it bumped the boulder.

"No escape. Your body under my control. Taking what I must."

Must?

Either he was no longer pressing with as much force, or she was getting used to the sensation. Filling her lungs briefly gave her something to do. Then he rubbed his thumb against her sex, and something sparked to life in her.

“A taste. Giving you an idea of what’s to come.”

Her head still throbbed from hitting the rock. Now both of his hands were between her legs, one forcing space between her knees and spreading them outward while the other—by the spirits—the one against her sex continued its invasion!

The stranger had found her woman’s opening and was working his thumb into her, making her sob and shake. Rafi had briefly explored her there. Although she’d encouraged him, she hadn’t felt anything beyond vague discomfort and the sense that it should be better.

Rafi’s thumb wasn’t this broad or work toughened. He’d never taken her slow, never gave any sign he expected her to feel more than disappointment. In contrast, her captor’s knowledge of her sex place emptied her mind.

“Just a taste, little Antelope,” he muttered, his breath on her forehead and sliding into her hair. “Take this as an example of what’s ahead.”

Part of her took his words as a warning, but that faded under sensation. Her heels dug into the ground, and the bonds chafed her ankle bones. Her head sagged forward as what little strength she had slipped away. A man’s thumb was inside her, forcing her to accept it, lightly gliding over willing flesh. His damp breath kept washing her; the hand not at her core seemed to be everywhere, nails scratching her thigh and palm firm against muscle.

His thumb advanced and then retreated, only to reach so far inside her it filled her. Her place inside was becoming wet, loose, and helpless, wanting.

“No more.” His voice sounded tight, as if forming words took effort. “Not now.”

She was still trying to make sense of his words when, with a gracefulness that reminded her of a hawk taking flight, he slipped out of her and stood up. Her legs remained splayed, and the moisture he'd teased to life slid out of her.

"Look," he commanded. When she did, she saw that he was holding his hand up to the sunlight. His thumb was covered with her unwilling offering.

"Lesson number one. The next will come once we're in my cave."

Chapter Three

Sabin chided himself for not having thought out how he'd get his captive to the cave he'd selected yesterday. Accustomed to rich soil, he didn't understand the appeal of what had been created in the aftermath of an ancient battle between underground spirits. He'd grown up listening to old men's stories of the furious battle that caused molten rock to explode from an opening deep in the earth and coat the land, but this was the first time he'd been to the harsh place.

He couldn't get back to his people soon enough.

Casting aside the question of when that would be, he pulled the woman to her feet. She swayed, compelling him to wrap his arms around her until she could stand on her own. The whole time he held her, his heart raced.

Stepping away, he studied her. Her dress again covered much of her thighs, but that did little to ease his memory. He'd caught only a glimpse of her sex before his hand covered it, yet his cock had come to life. His erection continued to press against his loincloth, and she was staring at it. Seeing his vulnerability.

Grabbing her chin, he forced her head up. "You are my responsibility and the promise I made to my people, nothing else." *Maybe*.

She couldn't speak, of course, but he suspected she didn't believe him. The tightness in his groin continued to make its presence known, forcing him to admit his words had been as much for himself as her.

Letting go of her chin, he retrieved the water bladders and placed them over the back of his neck. "You will walk," he informed her. "If you refuse, I'll drag you."

Although anger flashed in her eyes and her nostrils flared, he preferred that to defeat. Turning her into what he needed her to become might not be as easy as he'd initially told himself it would be.

But maybe it would, he amended, recalling the moisture she'd left on his thumb. From what he knew of the Antelope People, marriages were arranged by the clan's leaders. If a man became wealthy enough, he could take a second wife or even a third, so there'd be enough hands to care for his property. Physical compatibility among couples was considered unimportant. Possibly his captive—who he had no doubt had been promised to a man, as she was of marrying age—had so little expectation of sex that she'd had no idea she'd respond to being handled.

Taking hold of her elbow, he aimed her toward the ash bed and hill beyond. Eyes wide, she shook her head. When he tugged, she drew back.

"You can't refuse to walk. You can't!"

His command earned him a tilt of her head and a look that left no doubt she loathed him. Despite his threat to drag her, he couldn't do so while carrying the water. Obviously, she knew that.

Nodding, he drew his bone knife from his sheath and held it up. Now caution warred with her loathing. "I can kill you. Don't forget that." Stepping behind her, he touched the point to the small of her back. "Now, walk."

From where he stood, he couldn't see her expression, but he didn't need to because, shivering a little, she took a shuffling step. He kept the knife in place until she found a pace that allowed her to walk without much risk of falling. She didn't look back at him. Studying her helpless hands and the smooth movement of her ass and thighs took him from responsibility, desert heat, and the weight around his neck.

She belonged to him. The reality of what he'd accomplished tightened his throat. He'd captured her and, short of taking her, could do whatever he wanted. Eventually he'd let her know about the limits, but for now, he needed her to think about his power and domination.

See him as her captor and not just a man.

Her form was like moving water, like grass waving under the wind. She wore her hair in a long, thick braid that moved in time with her steps. Although her hips weren't as wide as Hunter women's, her long-limbed legs and muscles looked fit. Of course they were. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to run with her namesake's speed.

Fixing his attention on her bonds should have reminded him of his task. Instead he found himself longing to watch her race at full speed. Granted, he wouldn't have been able to capture her, but for those precious moments, her grace and power would become his. He'd feel her joy, his confidence in something other than weapons.

Spotting the cave entrance, Kahsha tried to swallow. When her captor pushed on the top of her head, she had no choice but to duck and enter. Some daylight had made its way into the cool space, and once her eyes adjusted, she took note of a ceiling tall enough for him to stand upright. This cave wasn't as large as the one she lived in with her family and was empty except for several piles of his belongings. She'd come across this one several seasons ago, when restlessness had sent her out into the desert, but had dismissed it as just another unoccupied cave. She no longer could.

Putting off the moment of facing the man who'd done this thing to her, she tried to work moisture into her mouth. The leather strips around her ankles had chafed them, and her shoulders ached from the unnatural position. She hadn't been tied that long, but she already sensed a change in herself. Whoever this man was, he'd taken pieces of her soul.

"Look at me," he said.

Wishing she could bury his knife in his throat, she managed an awkward turn. He'd set down the water bladders and spear and was removing the weapons around his waist.

"I want you to see this." Walking over to one of his piles, he dropped his knife and the thing he'd numbed her with near a bear pelt. That done, he held his arms out from his sides. "It's you and me now. Only us."

Except he was larger and stronger, and she couldn't run.

Lowering his arms, he returned to her. Like her, he smelled of sage and sweat, which had to be the only things they had in common.

"If you scream," he said after a long silence, "I'll gag you again. I don't want to, because I want to hear you, but neither am I willing to risk my life."

He reached behind her and started doing something at the back of her head. In a moment, the pressure against her cheeks let up. She had to spit several times before she could dislodge the soaked strip from her mouth. Past caring what he thought, she licked her dry lips.

"Thirsty?"

She started to nod, then stopped and swallowed. "Yes."

"So am I."

Leaving her again, he strode over to his second pile and retrieved a hollowed-out gourd, which he filled with some of the water he'd been carrying. He drank it all, his head back and throat working. Then he refilled the container and again drank. The third time, he brought the gourd to her and placed it against her lips. She was too thirsty to do anything except accept his gift, but she wasn't so focused on swallowing that she missed his message. For as long as he wanted, she was totally dependent on him.

After offering her a second drink, which she took, he stood before her on widespread legs with his arms folded across his too-strong chest. She didn't want to think about his strength, which was much greater than Antelope men. Wanted hate, instead, to run uncomplicated through her. But it wasn't that easy, because studying him stirred the place he'd laid claim to earlier.

"What's your name?" he asked.

I won't tell you. You have no right asking. But if she refused, maybe he'd never see her for the Antelope woman she was. "Kahsha."

"Are you married, Kahsha?"

"No."

"But spoken for, right?"

The questions were getting too personal, digging into her and leaving nothing. "You don't need to know that."

"But I already do, Kahsha." Placing his hand under her chin, he turned her head to one side and then the other. "My clan has long traded with yours. We know Antelope men want wives who are swift and skilled in cooking, food gathering, and other things necessary for survival and success."

"What do you want?"

He released her chin. "Your speed."

Why? She wanted to demand, but just then, he placed his hands on the outsides of her thighs, and her thoughts splintered. He pressed.

"Don't." Her voice was too high. "Don't."

"Ah, but I can. And I will. Until you beg me for this."

He'd already warned her of his intentions; regardless of the need to concentrate on standing, she shouldn't have forgotten that.

The cool cave air felt good against her sun-heated flesh, but as he stopped pressing and started sliding his hands up and down her thighs, her throat and between her breasts caught fire. Already he'd demonstrated that his hands could be both gentle and harsh, gift and punishment. At the moment everything about those hands was good, not soothing but exciting. The flesh under his palms and fingers became even more sensitive, yet much as she needed him to continue, the danger was too great.

"You're no wolf cub in need of a firm master," he told her. "But like the predator, you will learn to accept your new place in life. You won't understand the

reason behind everything I do, but that's how it needs to be. What neither of us has any control over."

Holding on to her hips for support, he knelt. His hand moved slowly upward, one whisper at a time, causing her sex place to twitch and her belly to clench. Breathing became easier when she lifted her head, but there still wasn't enough air in her lungs. Her sex clenched and released, clenched and released. Sweat coated her temples and pooled at the small of her back. No one had ever touched her like this. She hadn't known her body was capable of such—such what?

"Hungry?" he asked.

Food was unimportant. Neither could she focus on her aching shoulders. If he kept on stroking her legs, she'd collapse. She had to think of something else, take her mind back to her people.

Yes, her people. When she didn't return home, they'd look for her, and as expert trackers, they'd eventually find her footsteps—hers and the man now taking hold of her dress hem and lifting it.

"No!" She tried to kick him, only to start falling backward.

"Careful." Planting a hand on her ass, he steadied her. "I don't want you hurting yourself."

"You don't care about me! If you did, you wouldn't have—"

"That's where you're wrong, Kahsha. You're vital to my clan's survival."

"No. How can you say that?"

Looking weary, he shook his head. "You don't understand. Yet."

Shocked, she barely noticed that he was again lifting her dress, his movements slow. And relentless. Much as she needed to cling to sanity, all she could do was wait. Anticipate. Experience.

"Getting there," he informed her when the hem reached her hips. "I didn't realize your legs would be this slender. All that speed wrapped in a woman's slight form."

“You have no right! My clan will never again trade with yours.”

“Maybe not, but what the Hunters need is more vital than trade goods.”

Much as she wanted to demand an explanation, she couldn’t form any words. He’d just worked his hand between her legs, high so that it rested against her sex.

He’d done this before, and in the doing, she’d nearly lost herself.

“Tell me what you’re feeling.” He sounded slightly out of breath. “And don’t lie, because I’ll know the truth.”

She nearly cursed him, only to remain silent as he one-handedly knotted her dress around her waist so that her belly was exposed. Even more unnerving, he could now see the hair nested over her woman’s place—or he could if his hand wasn’t in the way.

“Why?” She’d intended the word to come out as a demand, but it sounded sharp and filled with fear. “Just take me. Get it over with.”

Maybe he grunted, maybe he cursed. Maybe it was a sigh. Whichever it was didn’t matter as he got to his feet and looked down at her with his hands once more folded over the most powerful chest she’d ever seen. Even when he grabbed her arms and pulled her toward him, her dress remained tangled around her waist.

“Is that what you fear, that I’ll take you?”

Ignore the danger in his eyes. Fight his aura of strength. “What other reason is there for this?”

“I told you. My people need Antelope speed.”

How did they expect to make that happen, by forcing her and other Antelopes to do their running for them? It made no sense.

“You don’t understand, do you?”

“How can I? Our speed is a spirit blessing. Only Antelope People can—”

“What if a child you carry is half Hunter?”

His words struck her with a storm’s force, and not caring what he might do, she struggled to free herself. For a moment, she thought he was going to release

her. Then his fingers tightened, and he dragged her over to a stone wall. When he positioned her so that the backs of her shoulders rested against the wall, she realized he wanted her off balance.

The now hated dress still clung to her waist.

When he stepped back, she twisted from side to side, attempting to dislodge whatever knot he'd put in her garment.

"Give it up," he said without emotion. "I know what I'm doing."

Yes, he did. His rawhide around her wrists and ankles served as a harsh reminder. "Do it. Take me! That's the only way you'll ever place Hunter seed in me."

Her words and the accompanying images exhausted her. Fighting weakness, Kahsha pointedly looked down at herself and shrugged to let him know she hadn't surrendered.

"You heard me! Get the taking over with. Then leave. Your bastard will suckle at my breasts, because I could never destroy any child, but he will grow up unloved, an outcast. Is that what you want?"

Seeing his mouth contort, she realized she'd hurt this man who looked capable of standing before Nature's greatest storms.

"It won't be like that," he said, long after she'd given up getting a response from him. "I would never abandon a child who carries my blood."

A sick possibility struck her. "You would take it from me? Kill me."

Looking shocked, he shook his head. "No. Never. If you believe nothing else, believe that. You will come with me and live among the Hunter People."

"What? No!"

"Willingly."

She struggled to stay upright. "Never!"

"You're wrong." Something about his tone made her wonder if he wished he didn't have to say what he had. "By the time I'm finished with you, you'll want to live with me. You'll beg to be allowed to spend your life in my bed."

The man knew nothing about what it was to be an Antelope, especially a woman. "I'm not a wolf cub."

By way of answer, if that's what he intended, he ran his knuckles down her belly, making her shiver. "Listen to what I have to say, because I won't say it again. I have been well prepared for my task by Hunter elders, both men and women. Grandmothers gave up their bodies' secrets. They taught me how to touch them so their sex juices flow and madness strikes. Even the oldest women crave a man's hands on them. Gentle hands. Sometimes hard."

Unable to escape his words, she fell into them, and her sex place responded. It didn't matter why Hunter grandmothers would show a young man where they wanted to be touched. He'd learned from them.

And now he'd captured her.

Chapter Four

Seeing Kahsha's eyes widen, Sabin wondered if he'd made a mistake by telling her as much as he had, but maybe it didn't matter, because soon only what he did to her would.

If he reached her the way he'd told her he could.

The way his people needed.

"Your hands have been behind you long enough. However, I'm not foolish enough to allow you to use them. If you try anything while I'm making the change, I'll stop you."

Instead of looking defeated, she glared. "Of course you will. Strength is your greatest weapon."

Confused, he left her long enough to retrieve yet another rawhide strip. Placing it around her waist, he tied it in front, leaving the end to dangle between her legs. He debated repositioning her so that he could more easily reach her wrists, but if he did, she might fight him.

Do it. Fight, so I'll have reason to flatten you under me. To feel your heart beat next to mine.

The knots had tightened during the walk here, but it didn't take him long to free her hands and bring them in front. He'd left one wrist tied and when she tried to pull free, he simply waited her out.

"Are you done?" He asked when she stopped pulling.

"Never."

Don't say that.

Confusion again rising in him, Sabin grasped the back of her neck and pulled her away from the wall. Then he forced her to lean far forward. Holding tight to the wrist rope, he stepped to her side and took hold of her dress in back.

“No!” She stumbled, and he took advantage of her attempt to keep her feet under her to drag the garment over her head. Guessing what he had in mind, she tried to ram her arms down by her sides. For a moment they stood like animals prepared to go to battle, but the strength she hated and he owed his life to won over, and he easily stripped her naked.

Maybe being naked took the fight out of her, because she offered no resistance as he crossed her wrists over each other and bound them together. That done, he fastened her hands to the waist rope.

Her eyes were like knives on him. An apology pressed against his teeth, forcing him to clench them until the impulse passed. The Hunter spirits had given their approval for what he was about to do. For now, nothing else mattered.

Her nostrils remained flared as she turned her attention to what he'd done. “Why?” she whispered.

Hunter People believed young men needed the wisdom of older women before they were ready to breed with women of childbearing years. As a consequence, he'd spent the last year sharing a bed with Danyel, who'd seen fifty winters. Danyel's heavy breasts nearly reached her waist. Although she'd instructed him how to suck on them, they'd remained loose and soft. The first time he'd placed his mouth on the breasts of a woman his own age, he'd been shocked and then delighted when her nipples hardened. Only fear of how much a pregnancy would displease their families had kept them from completing the sex act.

Kahsha's breasts were nearly as large as Danyel's but high and erect, with dark nipples. Although her nipples looked swollen, he knew enough not to tell himself he was responsible. Cold could do that, and maybe fear.

“Step back,” he commanded. “Don't stop until you're again against the wall.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I’ll make you.”

Her helpless fury no longer surprised him. When she’d finally complied, she looked down at her breasts. “You have no right to these.”

“Don’t I?”

“What you have is force and might, which is different from right. I want you to know how much I hate you for this.”

Hunter wise men hadn’t told him that this would happen. Everyone had been convinced that whatever Antelope woman he captured would be like a wounded prey animal, helpless and silent.

Kahsha might be helpless, but she was far from silent. His hand started to burn, compelling him to turn his thoughts to what he’d be asking of it—and the rest of his body. Extending his hand toward her, he fought to regulate his breathing. Nearly at his goal, he hesitated.

His clan’s future might depend on his success. Shrugging off the insane thought that he’d be changed after today, he pressed his hand against her breast. Her nipple pushed at his palm while the breast itself flattened a little. Needing more, he cupped his fingers around the mound and began a gentle circular motion.

“Don’t, don’t.”

As her words circled around him, his view of her became less distinct and his awareness of his surroundings slipped away. This female body belonged to him.

What was it the old women had cautioned him about? Oh yes, a warning to keep a woman emotionally and physically off balance by constantly varying the experience. He could do that, couldn’t he, make his hand gentle and strong by turn; touch her deep, followed by the lightest brush of a nail.

And staying on top of his own body’s hunger.

Kahsha had stopped trying to focus. As a consequence, she was caught off guard when her captor slid his hand under the breast he'd been massaging and lifted it. "Heavy," he muttered. "A woman's breast."

Did he expect her to respond? No matter; she wouldn't.

She should have attacked him when he freed her hands from behind her. She would have if not for the blood suddenly racing through her and numbing her arms. No wonder he'd easily yanked off her dress. To her disbelief, she'd stood there like some dumb animal and allowed him to again restrain her.

Opportunity lost.

Body under his command.

"Do you have a name?" she demanded when helplessness threatened to swamp her.

Instead of responding, he stared down at her. Had she angered him? Did it matter?

"Please give me that one thing."

His mouth twitched, and he briefly closed his eyes. "Sabin."

Sabin still held her breast and was once more studying what he'd claimed. What she'd surrendered to him.

"The old women say their breasts speak to their sex." He released her mound only to close his thumb and forefinger around her nipple and draw it toward him. Moaning, she arched her back. "That there's something, a lifeline maybe, connecting them. Is that true? When I roll your nipple like this, does it make your channel weep?"

She hadn't been thinking about her sex. How could she, when so much focus went to what he was doing to her breasts? But now that he'd drawn her attention to that other place, she couldn't hold back the whine escaping her throat.

"You call that an answer?"

When he released her nipple, a second whine followed the first. That couldn't be! Surely she didn't want him claiming her there? He lifted his cupped hand so that it hovered over her other breast.

"Watch," he commanded. "Watch and learn."

Just like that, he slapped her, a sharp, stinging blow that made her mound shake. Shocked, she tried to twist away. Grabbing her tethered hands, he yanked her back in place.

"Again. And again."

The second slap was more like a tap, but the next stung. While waiting for the next blow, she acknowledged that he hadn't hurt her. Instead, the throbbing echoed everywhere, touched her core.

"You said you hate my strength." He brought his face so close to hers that his breath dampened her lashes. "But you'll soon learn what that strength is capable of. Pay attention now; these are lessons you *must* understand."

Although she vowed not to back down when he captured both nipples and pulled her away from the wall, she hunched her shoulders and tried to fold in on herself. The pulling sensation in her chest grew. He drew both breasts outward, and she stared at what he was doing while twisting one way and then the other. He gave no indication he intended to release her, yet she continued her helpless battle. Heat and a feeling like butterflies in her belly mesmerized her. Yet another desperate sound pressed against her lips.

Then he was gone, leaving her breasts hot and sensitive and her belly grinding.

He returned with the bear pelt she'd noticed earlier and dropped it to the cave floor in front of her.

"Kneel."

She wouldn't! He couldn't make her.

Why then was she bending her knees and not protesting when he held on to her to keep her from losing her balance?

What was she doing here, she silently demanded, only to find the answer when he knelt opposite her, so close their knees brushed.

"Think about your hands," he said. "You want to use them. You hate how helpless they are. At the same time, your helplessness excites you."

How little Sabin knew of her!

"Touch me."

His belly was inches from her fingers, with his loincloth too close. "No."

"Because you hate the command, or because you lack the courage?"

"Don't say that!" She wasn't sure how long she could keep her fingers clenched.

"You don't want to hear the truth?"

Although he was goading her, she couldn't believe he really wanted her fingers on him. Holding her breath, she extended her fingers, leaning toward him as she did. The instant her nails touched his taut flesh, he straightened.

Encouraged by his less than steady breathing, she raked his belly.

"Damnation!" He jerked her hands down and away.

"What is it, Sabin? I did what you wanted."

"And now you'll pay for it."

Waiting to see what he'd do next seemed to take forever. Finally he released her hands and leaned back. The increased distance between them allowed her to see the bulge beneath his loincloth. She debated saying something but didn't.

"What does it feel like to run the way you do?" he asked unexpectedly. "When the wind pushes against you, do you become free and wild?"

Confused by the sudden shift, she rested her ass on her heels. He was right about how incredible the wind over her racing body felt. Although speed had been part of her since shortly after she'd learned to walk, she'd never forgotten that it was a gift. Of course he envied her; all other clans did.

"I don't understand why your people live in caves." Placing his hands on his thighs, he indicated their surroundings. "Hunter People live in tents. Even when men go off to hunt, we take sleeping tents with us. Our way is much better. We aren't tied to one place like you are."

The last thing she wanted to do was explain that living where caves were plentiful meant having many hiding places.

"Don't you ever want to live somewhere else?" he asked. "Where it rains and winter's wind and snow doesn't freeze everything?"

She'd tried to imagine what being surrounded by lush vegetation and mild winters would be like, but Antelope People belonged on Antelope Land. The gods and spirits had so decreed.

"Enough."

She was still trying to make sense of why he'd said what he had when he planted his hand over her breast and pushed. He didn't let up until her back was on the bearskin with her legs twisted under her.

"No!" Alarm at having her head and shoulders low and her sex even more exposed had her struggling to straighten her legs. To her surprise, he didn't try to stop her, only studied her efforts. Finally she lay trying to cover her belly with her hands and her legs stretched out so that her feet touched his thigh.

One moment she loathed her captor, the next he spoke to her body in a way she'd never experienced or expected. Waiting for him, she wasn't sure which it was right now. Did she want his attentions, or did she loathe them?

"Why do you wear your hair so long? Hunter women keep theirs short, so it doesn't get in the way."

"I do," she ground out. "Isn't that enough?"

Head cocked to the side, he held up his hand so she could see it before brushing a strand away from her temple. "At least you braid it so you can run

without it blowing over your eyes. You'd hate being blind, wouldn't you? Unable to so much as guess what I'm going to do to you."

"You wouldn't," she barely got out.

"I haven't decided. Maybe if I don't want to see how much you hate me, or because I want you only thinking about me."

His last words had been delivered in a singsong tone that took her back to falling asleep in her grandfather's arms. Why should she think that when Sabin was nothing like the gentle and loving man who'd taught her that all living things deserved respect?

"Enough talking," he muttered. "Time for you to come over to me."

Once more he reminded her of a predator as he positioned himself at her side. A masculine hand pressed on her rib cage under her breasts. His other trailed over her throat, causing her to swallow reflexively.

"I'm not going to hurt you. If nothing else, I promise you that."

He leaned closer, folded himself over her. Her nerves screaming, she watched as he opened his mouth. Unlike Rafi's discolored front teeth, Sabin's were snow-white. The tongue that had lapped up the blood on her shoulder caused by his dart came into view, and she knew what he was going to do.

Because his hand was on her throat, she didn't dare turn toward him. She could only wait, anticipate. He leaned even closer; his features went out of focus. Then it happened—his tongue licked the breast closest to him.

Swallowing a scream, she forced herself not to move. Her nostrils flared. Her heels dug into the thick fur.

Blowing out his breath, he lifted his head a little. "You taste like the desert."

Leave me! Save me!

This time instead of a simple touch, he ran his damp, warm tongue around her nipple. It tightened, hardened. He kept at it, the tip of his tongue now pressing, now circling, now closing his lips around her breast as if he meant to suckle. She tried to

thrash about, but the hands over her throat and pressing on her rib cage held her in place.

“Mine,” he muttered around what filled his mouth.

By slow degrees, the mouth pressure increased. His lips clamped on to her, sucking more and then even more of her breast into his mouth.

Her body became rigid, and she couldn’t stop trying to tug her hands free. She repeatedly bent her knees, only to forget what she was doing until at length her legs lay useless on the pelt.

The insane thought that he intended to swallow her mound gripped her. Seconds later, he spat her out and blew on her breast until the moisture chilled. When he touched his teeth to her hard nub, she arched her back. He increased his hold.

“Please, please no.”

“Silence!”

Although his command was garbled, she had no doubt what he’d said. Even with the pressure steady and bordering on pain, she understood he wanted her quiet, limp, and, if not willing, pliable.

Fighting the instinct for self-preservation, she relaxed. After several tense seconds, his hold on her nipple relaxed, and as the almost pain receded, she remembered his promise not to hurt her.

She was safe—if she could believe him.

A sucking sensation yanked her attention back to her breast, and she shut her eyes as he filled his mouth again. He started stroking her throat. His fingers trailed over the lifeblood line there, teasing and gentle, yet serving notice of what they were capable of.

Rough fingers lightly brushed her. Her breast lay covered in his saliva, and his heat reached her lungs.

She opened her eyes, saw nothing, closed them again. Sabin surrounded her. Owned her. Knew her.

A tingling on her belly drew her attention there. His hand was no longer over her rib cage, no longer kept her in place. Instead he'd begun a slow journey to her sex.

Don't speak. Don't beg. Give him nothing. Somehow.

Sparks warred with the blackness behind her closed lids. Fascinated, she pondered whether snow could ever look like that. Hot snow maybe, melting the landscape and quieting a storm's wind.

Quieting her body.

No, not that, because she'd started shivering again, and dug at the waist rope. Sabin's fingers slid into her pubic hair, his nails gliding over her flesh. Her thighs heated, yet she kept contracting and relaxing the muscles there.

Wait. Anticipate. Be ready somehow. But for what?

Yes, that's what she could do. Instead of letting her thoughts fix on feathered strokes against her throat and his mouth around her breast, somehow she'd protect her core. He might invade her there again; she couldn't stop him. But this time, her sex wouldn't weep, it wouldn't!

Heat attacked her breast. Alarmed, she lifted her head, opened her eyes, and stared at herself. That's when she realized he was again blowing on her wet mound and no longer had hold of her throat.

Only one thing remained as it had been a moment ago—the hand sliding between her legs.

"Don't think," he muttered. "Just feel."

Yes.

Despite his gentle words, his jaw was clenched and his eyes smoldered. She stared at his loincloth.

"What about you?" she managed. "What do you feel?"

Chapter Five

He should have blindfolded her. If he had, she wouldn't know about the erection aching between his legs, but he couldn't bring himself to stop what he was doing long enough to rob her of that sense. Besides, she might panic, and he didn't want that.

Today was for her.

Giving himself a mental shake, Sabin tried to concentrate on his task. Instead he wound up wondering how he could have agreed to this without realizing that bringing a woman to the brink of sanity might do the same to him. Giving his father his word still meant everything, but he was more than just a son and Hunter warrior. He was also a man.

One with a naked woman laid out in front of him.

"You like my tongue," he said. Instead of giving in to the need to touch her sex, he flicked her nipple. "You love what it does to you."

"How little you know."

Careful not to get too close to her teeth, he clamped his hand lightly over her mouth. He tightened his hold on her mons. "I told you not to lie."

"All right! All right," she muttered.

Tonight, somehow, he'd sleep with her tethered to him. Somehow he'd wrench his mind from her lean, strong body so his own could rest.

Taking time he might need more than she did, he lifted his hand from her mouth. The one cupping her mons remained in place. "Has a man ever drunk from your sex?"

Her eyes widening, she shook her head.

“Why not?”

“By the spirits, Antelope People don’t—”

“Don’t they?”

She seemed to be considering his question. “What about Hunters?”

“Think on this, Kahsha. Everything I have and will do to you comes from what I learned from long-experienced Hunter women.”

He thought she might say something. Instead she stared at a spot beyond his right shoulder. For a moment he believed her people had followed them, but that danger wouldn’t come until later.

Besides, he had more to fear from the Wolverine clan than the Antelope.

As if feeding off his thought, his scar started to ache. He rubbed it, only to stop when she turned her attention to what he was doing. No way would he let her glimpse his vulnerability.

He could spend what remained of the afternoon teaching her breasts to worship him, but her sex was more responsive. It understood pleasure and frustration.

Frustration. Agony of the spirit.

Leaving her mons, he bent her knees so he could reach her ankles. He untied one but left the rawhide trailing from the other. Planning his next move took thought and yet didn’t fully distract him from his cock. Given how deep the ache was, it wouldn’t take much for it to give up its seed.

What if he spilled himself on her breasts?

His heart pounding, he clenched his fists. As exciting as the image was, he wouldn’t lose control.

Still holding on to the ankle rope, he rolled her onto her side. Hissing, she struggled to roll back.

“No!” he commanded. Yanking on the rope, he forced her to bend her knee. That done, he straddled the leg still on the ground and sat on it to anchor her. Despite her struggles, he easily slipped the rope end under her waist rope in back and tugged. When her heel touched her ass, he let up a little before tying the rope in place.

Breathing heavily, he lifted himself off her.

“Test this,” he commanded. “Understand what I’ve done.”

At first she didn’t move, and because she was facing away from him, he could only study her body language while trying to guess her thoughts.

He hoped she didn’t have more fear again.

Or more hatred.

She bent her free leg and rocked back, so she was looking up at him. The strain in the thigh of her tethered leg said she was trying to free herself.

“Easy.” Although he hadn’t intended to, he stroked her taut muscle. “Soon you’ll stop thinking about that.”

“Son of a buzzard! I wish you dead.”

“Maybe now, but not in a little while.”

After another jerk that caused the waist rope to briefly dig into her belly, she sighed and glared at him.

He slipped his fingers between hers and was pleased when she squeezed, proof that her circulation hadn’t been compromised.

Resting his hand on her flank, he scooted closer. When he lowered his head toward her crotch, she struggled to put distance between them, prompting him to increase his hold on her flank. “This is why we only captured newborn wolves. The older ones fought too much.”

“I wish they’d torn you apart.”

“You say that now, but soon you won’t.”

For as long as his attention remained on her, the battle with the Wolverines that had nearly killed him couldn't intrude. Neither could the other thing that had happened that day. A few moments of stroking her ass and thigh quieted her, but he wasn't fool enough to believe she'd given up. It didn't matter. He'd take whatever seconds she gave him. Make the most of them.

"You want to know why I unshackled you. Don't worry. It won't take long for you to understand."

His promise hanging, he rolled her onto her back, forcing her onto her bent leg with her ass off the bearskin. She started to protest, then gasped when he placed her free leg on his shoulder. He couldn't keep her like this for long, but hopefully long enough to teach her something she'd never forget.

Trusting her not to do anything that might hurt her, he positioned himself between her legs, slid his hands under her ass, and lifted. The leg on his shoulder pressed down.

"Don't move," he warned. "Don't try to kick—"

"Stop it! I don't want—"

"You will."

Her sex was so close; he could smell her woman scent. Although that part of her was blurred, he made out the soft, dark flesh. He even glimpsed the opening his cock ached to fill.

Fighting a powerful need to turn their bodies into one, he planted his head in the sweet space. Instead of clamping her thighs against his ears as he thought she might, she went limp. Her legs splayed outward as if in invitation.

Dizzy, he extended his tongue. Felt her sex lips. Tasted. Lost his mind.

"By the spirits," she whimpered. If he could speak, he'd say the same. He'd done it! Reached her core. Yet despite the sense of accomplishment and relief, he needed a moment to work up the courage to touch her opening and even longer to

lick at the magical place. His fingers hadn't told him enough, hadn't whispered the truth about how soft and hot she was there. How sweet she smelled.

Dizzy, he ran his tongue over the puffy flesh. His head roared; he went blind.

As her own head pounded, Kahsha gave up trying to keep her moan to herself. When he'd first lifted her, she'd been aware of her body's weight on her shoulders and too much blood rushing to her temple. She'd thought she'd prepared herself for what he was going to do; hadn't he warned her?

But he hadn't told her it would feel like this, that her sex would scream and melt. If he lost his grip, she'd fall and perhaps injure her trapped leg in the process, but it didn't matter. She couldn't quiet the shivers rolling through her like a hot, stormy wind. She bit her tongue when she tried to clamp her chattering teeth. Tears distracted her from the relentless attack on her sex. Then the sting receded, leaving behind only pleasure. Frightening pleasure.

"Don't," she managed. "I can't—can't..."

Can't what, she wondered, only to shrug off the unimportant question. Sabin seemed to be everywhere, twice her size and in her head somehow. Mostly taking ownership of her sex.

Ah yes, his tongue stroking her hungry flesh. Eventually he'd invade her, but only this moment mattered, his tongue slipping into a place no man had ever reached. She screamed.

He licked, lapped, bathed.

"By the spirits!"

Instead of more of what she desperately needed, he drew back.

"What?" she gasped, staring at his mouth with her juices on its corners. "By the spirits, you can't—"

"Yes, I can."

He was right, damn him. Hadn't he just demonstrated his cruel ability to leave her unsatisfied? As she waited to see what he'd do next, reality chilled her overheated nerves. He intended to repeatedly bring her to the brink, only to stop before release enveloped her.

Ask him why? Demand an explanation. But hadn't he already done so when he'd explained that his intention was to break her down?

No, not just that. Something else. Something beyond her comprehension.

Ducking under her lifted legs, he lowered them to the ground. Despite her vulnerability, she couldn't think to close the space between them so she could hide her sex from him.

When she felt strong enough, she studied his expression. She'd seen sexually aroused men, of course, so she understood the look in his eyes. Sweat had gathered on his upper lip, and his clenched hands were back on his thighs.

She didn't want him to touch her again.

At the same time, she wasn't sure she'd ever needed anything more.

"I don't believe you want to fight me," he said after a long silence. "You see me as something less than human. You'd celebrate if your men killed me." He touched his scar. "But that isn't going to happen today. Today is for you and me."

She started to tell him how much she hated hearing him say those things when a cramp gripped her tethered thigh. Groaning, she struggled to bring her leg to her belly so she could massage it. Whatever it took, she wouldn't ask for help.

Without warning, he spun her around so that her back was to him. Sure hands tugged at her waist, and in a moment, her leg was free. He began massaging the knot.

Holding her breath against the pain, she concentrated on her heartbeats. Under his firm touch, the burning muscle relaxed.

Thank you, she came close to saying. Instead she worked herself into a sitting position and glared at him. Undoubtedly her look would have more of an impact if her body wasn't exposed. Even worse, her nipples hardened under his gaze.

"My clansmen will kill you."

"Not if they can't find us." He spread his hand over the thigh he'd been massaging. "I know Antelope People ways. They won't leave the land of their birth."

And he'd be taking her far from it. "An Antelope woman has never been stolen," she pointed out. "That will change things for them." *Maybe*.

"I don't think so. Are you thirsty?"

Now that he'd mentioned it, yes, her throat was dry. Eventually she'd have to urinate, undoubtedly while he watched.

Although she didn't answer his question, he got up and refilled his gourd. This time, he held it to her lips before drinking himself. Her stomach rumbled, not that she could handle the idea of eating.

"Later." He patted her belly. "Now is for more of us."

* * *

Sabin had freed her hands from her waist but had left the rawhide around her bound wrists. As he led her outside, she took what comfort she could from her renewed ability to freely walk again. If she could run, she'd be gone before he could think to give chase.

Holding the lead rope with one hand, he drew his loincloth aside and sent a stream toward a jumble of lava. So that was what his cock looked like, larger than she'd expected. Dark lifeblood lines contrasted with the rest of it. He'd pulled back his meaty part to urinate, which made it possible for her to study even more of him. Maybe she was mistaken, but his cockhead appeared thicker than Rafi's, and where her intended's shaft bent to the left, Sabin's was straight.

Too soon he covered himself.

"Do it." He pointed at the ground.

Determined not to acknowledge him, she stared at the horizon as she widened her stance and crouched. Old women needed to use their hands to keep from losing their balance, but her made-for-speed muscles easily balanced her. Done, she considered how best to stand. That's when she noticed he wasn't looking at her. Was he being considerate of her desire for modesty? No matter. This might be her only chance.

A grunt propelling her, she straightened, jerking her arms away at the same time. The rope slid out of his hand.

"Wolverine dung!" she screamed and dug her toes into the ground. She'd taken her first step when her arms were yanked to the side and back. Desperate to keep from falling, she fought to break free. When he jerked again, her right leg collapsed, sending her to the ground. She landed on her side with lava digging into her hip and her arms stretched toward him as if begging forgiveness.

Hurrying over to her, he held the rope high. She managed to roll onto her back but couldn't get off the ground.

"Don't ever try that again!"

"I wish you dead." She glared at his scar.

He rubbed the pale, raised flesh. "Sometimes I wish I were."

If she hadn't been concentrating on him, the wind would have stolen his quiet words. Even with him keeping her on the ground, her thoughts turned from her captivity to him. For the first time since he'd invaded her space, her curiosity overpowered distrust. Looking into his eyes told her he wasn't about to explain why he'd said what he had.

There was more to him than a strong, masculine body and knowing hands. As for what that was—"Everyone must face things they don't want to," she said. Maybe all she could do was hand him words and hope that at least some would break through his barriers. "Life isn't kind or easy."

“Do Antelope People live in fear of attack? No, because only they have wanted this land. Unless you’ve come face-to-face with an enemy knife, you can’t understand.”

Although she hoped he’d say more, she knew he wouldn’t when she saw his tightly clamped lips. He relaxed his hold on the rope enough for her to push off the ground. Debris clung to her so she brushed herself off as best she could. That done, she waited.

“Back into the cave.”

Leading the way, she did as he’d commanded. Shouldn’t she feel defeated? Maybe she did a little, but the cave also promised more of his lightning and thunder touches. As the cool and shadowy interior once again surrounded her, she wondered why she hadn’t screamed. Was it possible she didn’t yet want to be rescued?

Chapter Six

He'd said too much. Vowing not to let it happen again, Sabin tied her hands behind her, careful not to cut off her lifeblood. Although he remained alert to any sign that she might try to escape, her lack of resistance let him relax a little. She had a scrape on her hip, which he ran water over. Their brief struggle had shaken some hair from her braid, and a long strand had settled over her right breast, covering her nipple. He brushed the hair aside, taking care to stroke her as he did so.

"Listen to me," he began, using a tone dredged up from the warrior deep inside. "If I need to, I'll tie your legs again."

"Do what you will."

His half-formed plan could fail. In fact, he risked having her make another break for freedom, which was why he'd left rope hanging behind her. Despite that, he knew what needed to be done.

What he wanted to do.

Leading her over to the bear pelt, he stepped back and glowered down at her. Moments passed. She leaned away, straightened, lowered her head, and then lifted it.

"What?" she finally asked.

Did that mean she was ready to obey? Only in his dreams—except lately, his dreams had become nightmares.

"Your legs are too close together."

The way her eyes lowered told him she was determined not to reveal what she was thinking, but soon, hopefully, every emotion she possessed would flow out of her.

“Separate them.”

Earlier she’d begged for mercy. By her blank stare and the rigid set to her shoulders, he knew that time had passed.

“More,” he commanded when she’d doubled the normal space between her feet.

She obeyed, barely. “I’ll lose my balance.”

“No you won’t.” Not giving her time to argue, he slapped the insides of both thighs. Her breath hissed as she complied. When she winced from the strain, he again stepped away.

There, her sex lay exposed, secret flesh no longer hidden by modesty and woman hairs. Studying that part of her and her young woman’s breasts left him with no control over his cock.

If only she wanted him.

Using her hips for support, he knelt before her. Being this close to her sex sent more blood to his cock. His vision dimmed. The land beyond the cave was harsh and unfamiliar and might kill him. But in here, for a little while, it was just him and the Antelope woman called Kahsha.

He began with a touch, the lightest brush of his forefinger along her slit. Her breath sobbing, she rocked back a little, only to straighten. She wasn’t wet there. Yet. If he entered her now, he’d cause her discomfort, which, thanks to the old women, he knew to avoid at all cost.

Another stroke followed by a third had her standing on her toes. Her breath was ragged, but whether from worry or anticipation, he didn’t know. Reaching far between her legs, he touched her rear opening. In the middle of an exhaled breath, she sucked it back in.

Fighting the ache between his legs, he lightly raked the inside of her right thigh, then did the same to the other.

“By the spirits!”

He waited until she was no longer on her toes before cupping his hand around her sex and applying just enough pressure to force her upward again. Her calf muscles trembled.

“Come down. Let *it* happen.”

Sighing, she did as he’d commanded. Her warm, soft sex against his palm was a gift, albeit one given reluctantly. Was that moisture?

“Tell me what you’re feeling. Hold nothing back.”

“You,” she whispered.

“What else?”

When she didn’t reply, he drew her toward him. Yes, woman’s juices started to coat his palm. Testing his ability to function.

“What were you going to do once you returned with the water?” he asked. “Maybe you planned to use some to start a soup. Is cooking your responsibility? Maybe you have sisters to help.”

Sabin had laid claim to her sex. His hand pressed against it, covered it, owned it. Heat flowed from him to her, and she thought she felt his pulse.

Her legs ached, muscle strain competing with the inner tingling for her attention. The world she’d known all her life no longer existed, yet she didn’t want it back. Right or wrong, safe or dangerous, these moments were all she knew.

Sabin. His breath on her. His hand proclaiming ownership.

And her craving that.

“It’s good that you’re strong,” he said, “because Hunter People are always on the move. You’ll be expected to carry my belongings and walk from dawn until night.”

His words had little meaning; she didn't care about tomorrow. Only the pulsing deep inside mattered. Then her calves' burning had her settling onto the balls of her feet. Once again, his knowing hand took over her world.

Impossible! She couldn't be standing in a small cave with her hands behind her and giving her captor access to her body, and yet she was. She was naked with a scrape on her hip and the water he'd given her in her belly. Her sex welcoming his touch.

"A woman's body cries when she's happy. Have you ever wondered why that is?"

"What? No."

"You should."

Not giving her time to respond, he ran his knuckles over her thigh. "Describe what I'm doing. Tell me everything, leave out nothing."

Hearing the wind running over endless dry grass was music to her soul, and to her disbelief, Sabin's voice was having the same impact. Staring at nothing, she followed his fingers as they slid through her woman hairs and from there to her belly. Her hip bones.

"Light. Not painful," she managed. "Like bird wings tickling."

He blew his hot breath over her sex. "Only tickling?"

"No. No." Closing her eyes took her deeper into herself, where insanity waited. But staring at the top of his head with its thick, dark hair wasn't any better.

"Then what?"

Driven by the masculine fingers separating her sex lips, jumbled thoughts and impressions swept through her.

"I'm afraid." After trying to lick the sweat off her top lip, she continued. "And yet not."

"Because you trust me?"

That would never be! Couldn't.

“You can’t answer that? Maybe this is easier.” Closing a thumb and forefinger around one sex lip, he gently drew it downward. “What do you feel now?”

Terrified. Excited. “I don’t know.”

“It can’t be that complicated.”

Maybe not, but she’d never stood where she now did. A man she needed to hate but didn’t had taken over.

The fingers holding her sex lip started to slip. “You’re weeping, captive. Your body’s making a lie of your protests.”

“Only because...”

“Forget what you were saying? That’s all right. I’m going to do something different, something that brings us even closer.”

A single finger slipped into her opening. From what she could tell, he’d buried it as far as his fingernail. Now he rested there, and if she put her mind and body to it, she could free herself—if she wanted to.

She didn’t.

“You’d give anything to have something in your sex, wouldn’t you?”

“N-o.”

Grabbing the inside of a thigh with his free hand, he shook it. “No lying.” He shook it again.

“I’m sorry!”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

His silence seemed to go on forever. Then: “Tell me what your body wants from me.”

She couldn’t do that! If she started, she might not be able to hold anything back. But maybe their time together wouldn’t end until she’d laid herself before him.

“Your finger—the one in me...”

“What about it?”

Eyes squeezed shut, she surrendered. “It isn’t enough.”

He released her thigh. “What would make it so?”

“You.” The admission nearly made her gag, and yet she’d gone too far for anything except the truth. “Filling me.”

“No. You don’t really want that. You need release, and because you’ve lost ownership of your body, you believe release will only come from my hands and cock, but if there was any way out of what’s happening right now—if you could kill me—”

“Do you blame me?”

“Maybe not.”

In the silence that followed, she brought her legs slightly closer together. Grateful for the lessened strain, she tried to recall his last words but lost them as he worked his finger farther into her. Up to his knuckle maybe, his finger not broad enough to fill her.

“More,” she whimpered. “Please.”

“Like this?”

All the way in, with his other fingers pressing against her. Nothing except him.

“Yes!” Shocked by her outburst, she fought herself. Lost. “It isn’t enough. I need—please.”

The pressure against her sex walls increased. Distracted by the sparks behind her closed eyes, she belatedly comprehended that another finger was joining the one already inside her. His nails might be ragged. She should demand he return her body to her.

Instead, as a feeling like hot rushing water overtook her, she clamped her inner muscles around him.

“This is enough?” he asked.

“Yes.” Sweat ran between her breasts. “No.”

“What do you need from a man, Kahsha? If you could make me do anything you wanted, what would it be?”

Too close to the cliff for anything but the truth, she begged him to work his fingers as if they were a cock. “Don’t pull out. Stay with me until—until I fall apart.”

Something damp ran over the joining between leg and body, making her cry out. Almost as soon as fear gripped her, it fell away. What she’d felt was Sabin’s tongue, a wet and teasing touch that curled her fingers.

“Is that how you find pleasure, with your man’s cock inside you?”

“You have no right asking.”

“It’s a question, not a demand. I’d like to know.”

“No. That has never happened.”

Her confession hung between them. Desperate to bury it, she opened her eyes and looked around for something to distract him. Before she could, however, he pulled out of her.

“No,” she whimpered. *Please.*

Despite her pulsing head, she knew he was sticking his fingers in his mouth. Her empty sex ached. She should be used to the lonely pain, but Rafi had never taken her this far.

“The old Hunter women aren’t of a single mind,” Sabin told her. “Some say they find great pleasure only when a cock’s in them, while others speak of another place. One not all men know of.”

“Or care about.”

“Is that what it’s like for you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She might have said more if not for his hands on her hips. By turn, he pulled her toward him and then away, followed by twisting her one way

or the other. She didn't know how long she'd been standing like this, not that it mattered. As long as he did these things to her, she'd hand her body to him.

"Your promised doesn't care about your pleasure?"

The gently spoken question opened something inside, and she made no attempt to stop her tears. "Rafi knows very little about me. His release is everything. It comes so fast—unlike you."

"Unlike me what?"

Accustomed to Rafi's pride, she caught the same coming from Sabin. "I don't know what sex is like for you. Rafi would have finished by now. He wouldn't try to hold back."

"Maybe his way is easier."

"For him."

"But not for you."

"No."

"Hmm. The other place the old women told me about, how sensitive is yours?"

She had no intention of telling him, yet when he leaned into her and ran his tongue over her sex hairs, she arched toward him.

"You find no satisfaction in Rafi's cock. What about after he has let go? Does it become your turn? The two of you work together?"

"I don't want to talk about him."

Thank the spirits, Sabin didn't throw her words at her. Instead he wiped his damp fingers on her belly, took hold of her woman's spot, and shook it. Stopped. Shook again. Sensation slammed into her. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

"Help me, Kahsha. Guide my fingers to that hungry place."

"Near my sex." Her voice rasped. "Just before it. A small, hard knot."

When he reached between her legs, she wondered if they'd gone beyond captive and captor. In this hidden place, as strangers they would unite and her pleasure would echo off the stone walls.

Beyond wanting anything except for that to happen, she opened her stance. Her breasts got in the way of seeing what he was doing, but it didn't matter because feeling was enough. Eyes closed, she experienced.

A silent Sabin bathed his fingers in her juices. He then lightly dragged his nails here and there on her sex lips, not quitting even when her nerves screamed, causing her to bleat like a newborn fawn. Close. So close. But not *there*.

"Please," she begged when it seemed as if he might tease her forever. "Where I'm hard, please."

His fingers danced, tiptoed, brushed, and retreated. More times than she could count, he touched everything except her hard nubbin. It didn't matter which way she turned or how desperate her plea, he avoided that one place. Finally, half-crazy, she understood.

"This is on purpose! Why?"

The hands that had freely roamed over her outer sex withdrew. Even in her pain, she heard his rough breathing.

"Why?" she repeated as her juices ran down the insides of both thighs and her taut nipples throbbed.

"So you'll understand what it means to belong to me."

Chapter Seven

Kahsha lay beside a softly snoring Sabin. Nightfall had come while her captor's hands were on her. It seemed as if he'd been laying claim to her body for days—not that she could concentrate on time when every nerve in her was in agony. Long, long ago she'd thought that having Rafi finish before she was aroused was among the worst things she'd ever endured.

But that was nothing compared to sex heat that grew and faded only to grow again. An unextinguished flame was agony that pushed over into hatred.

She'd barely noticed when Sabin had rebound her arms in front and had paid little attention to the dried meat he'd given her to eat. Maybe he was waiting for her to thank him. If so, he'd have to wait the rest of his life.

Whoever had lain open his arm had been cruel. When she'd first seen the scar, she'd come close to expressing sympathy, but that was before he'd demonstrated his own brand of cruelty.

After they'd eaten, he'd ordered her to lie on her stomach on the bear pelt. Then he'd joined her, commanding her not to look in his direction as he touched her, but she had. She only hoped he hadn't known as his fingers trailed over her shoulders, back, ass, the backs of her legs, even her feet, that his doing those things had nearly killed her.

There hadn't been a moment of pain, nothing but pleasure. And frustration that went on and on, until she'd clenched her jaw to keep from crying out. She was still fighting the impulse when he had abruptly turned from her.

"No," she'd moaned. "No, please."

"Quiet! I'm done with you."

Somehow she had to find a way to empty her mind and body. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to sleep, and tomorrow, exhausted, she'd again beg for the release he'd denied her.

Only no matter what she said or did, he wouldn't grant her satisfaction until nothing remained of the Antelope woman she'd always been.

In preparation for night, he'd tied her hands to his wrist with a little slack in the connecting rope. As long as he remained on his back, she was relatively comfortable, but he might know if she tried to reach for her woman's spot.

It would take so little to push her into a sensation like being struck by lightning. That done, she'd be able to sleep, and renewed, she'd be able to remain alert for a chance to escape.

The thought of the wind on her straining body as she ran had her pressing her legs together. Unfortunately no matter how much she squeezed, frustration continued to hum.

She should jump to her feet. Even with the hated rawhide preventing her from standing upright, she'd kick his cock with all her strength. Yes, she'd render him helpless! Make him scream and clutch his throbbing organ. No matter what he did to her once he recovered, it would be worth it.

She sighed. No, it wouldn't.

Turning from her side to her back, she stared up at the cave roof she couldn't see. She'd been naked for so long she'd all but stopped thinking about it. Her family would be horrified by what had happened to her, but they'd understand and forgive. Rafi, however, was another matter.

Did Sabin know Rafi would refuse to marry her? Even if she managed to return to her people without Sabin's cock having been in her, Rafi would consider her damaged. Unworthy. Worthless.

A tear trickled down the corner of her eye, but she sternly reminded herself that crying wouldn't change reality. Antelope People were proud of their race's

purity. Antelope men and women might change sex partners, but they never went outside of the clan. As far as she knew, there'd never been an impure child.

Contemplating her future distracted her from her too sensitive sex. She could continue to live with her parents, but her presence would diminish their status, and her younger sisters' choice of marriage partners would lessen. Suddenly furious, she fumed. It was her captor's fault! He'd done this to her! If Antelope warriors found them, she'd command them to kill him.

Yet thoughts of Sabin's blood staining the ground made her shudder. Just because she didn't want him in her life didn't mean he deserved to die. If he'd just walk away, she'd return to her people and she'd never speak of what had happened here.

Sabin's breathing quickened, drawing her attention to him. The moon's light barely reached where they were, but she'd memorized his features. His breaths soon lengthened yet seemed shallower than before. Just as she told herself she didn't need to be concerned with what might be happening to him, he gasped.

She started to scoot away, only to stop because she didn't want to risk drawing his attention to her. Whatever was going on, he had to deal with it by himself.

He half sat up. "No. By the spirits, no!"

"No, what?" she blurted. He'd fallen back down but was flailing so that her arms were being jerked about.

"No! Please, it cannot be!"

Her grandfather had said much the same thing the morning he'd awoken to find his wife dead beside him. Because she'd become shockingly thin, the family had known her mother's mother was very sick, but her life partner had been unprepared for her death. Had Sabin experienced the same with someone he loved?

"Breathe. Wouter, please don't—By the spirits!"

Thinking to pull him out of his nightmare, Kahsha sat up and placed her hands on his chest, only to find it drenched in sweat.

“Wake up.” She shook him. “Sabin, it’s a dream. Only a dream.”

“Wouter, no! By the spirits, I’ll kill them for—”

“Sabin! Wake up.”

Whether it was her voice or because she’d resorted to scratching his chest that finally registered, didn’t matter. He stopped crying out.

“That’s right.” She spoke without planning her words. “Nothing has happened. You had a nightmare.”

Grabbing her wrists, he jerked her down on top of him. Her breasts flattened against his sweaty chest, with her useless arms off to the side. As she prayed he hadn’t mistaken her for the enemy, he muttered something she didn’t understand.

“Sabin, it’s me, Kahsha.” *Your captive*. “You need to wake up.”

He grunted repeatedly, reminding her of how her parents sounded when they were waking up. He opened his eyes. “Kahsha?”

“Yes. Let me up.”

He did, but instead of uncomplicated relief, she missed hearing his heartbeat and feeling his lungs rise and fall.

“What happened?” he asked as he sat up.

“I think you had a nightmare.” She nearly let it go at that, but then rethought. This might be her one opportunity to glimpse beneath his surface. “Who is Wouter?”

“I spoke his name?”

Sabin was more presence than form, an essence sitting across from her. From what little she could see thanks to the moon, she thought his loincloth was askew and he had an erection. “Yes. Did something happen to him?”

As the moments stretched out, she reconciled herself to getting nothing from him. The rawhide linking them together might have been their only connection. Then he took a ragged breath.

“Wouter was my eldest brother.”

“Was?”

“Yes.” His head dropped. “I grew up knowing he’d become our war leader. Even as a boy, he spent most of his time with the other warriors. They taught him fighting skills.”

“You loved him.”

“I worshipped him. Whenever he came home, he showed me what he’d learned. As soon as I was strong enough to use a bow and arrow, he started bringing me along on hunting trips. Eventually I became taller than him, but I never stopped being in awe of his courage.” Sabin paused. “His fearlessness.”

The telling was tearing Sabin to pieces, but if she let him stop now, the moment would be lost. “How did he die?”

“Murdered.”

No! “Were you there?”

“Yes.”

Not long ago, she’d believed she hated this man. Now she wasn’t sure what she felt, so why had she placed her hand on his knee? “Is that how you were wounded?”

“This doesn’t concern you.”

“Yes, it does!” Fighting emotion took a moment. “You’ve changed my life in every way possible. I deserve to know a little about you. The important things.”

To her shock, he gently laid his hand over hers. Then he began, speaking softly. She was grateful for the near silence surrounding them, because otherwise she might have missed the emotion behind the simple words.

“Last spring, the Hunters had been staying near a mountain river so they could take advantage of the fishing. One day while scouting farther up on the mountain, I came across some twenty Wolverine warriors who’d ventured into the area. The Wolverine People have been enemies of the Hunter People since the beginning of time. I quickly hurried back to camp to warn everyone. After a lengthy discussion, the warriors decided to confront the Wolverines and insist they leave. Surely, we thought, a large group of Hunters would intimidate the Wolverines. At

least forty warriors made the journey. Wouter led the way because he'd recently become war leader.

"When the outnumbered Wolverines indicated they wanted to talk, the just retired war leader, Wouter, two senior warriors, and myself sat down with the Wolverines while the rest of the Hunters waited a short distance away."

He stopped a moment. Kahsha didn't press, realizing he had deep heartache to work through.

"The Wolverines said their people had gone through all their dried and smoked fish. Otherwise they wouldn't have come near us," Sabin explained. "Because we knew better than to believe them, we demanded to see their fish. They had a decent supply. To our surprise, they invited us to join them at a peace fire, saying that generations of killing on both sides should end. My brother said he wanted to lead our people in a new direction; I agreed with him."

"A peace fire is never lit if lies are going to be spoken." She might not know everything that involved warriors, but she did know that.

Sabin didn't immediately respond. While waiting for him to gather himself, she realized she no longer felt like a captive. Her awareness of his male body had also increased.

"They served us smoked meat from a bull elk's hindquarter, which is only done among people who trust each other.

"However, like the peace fire, we quickly came to find out that the food—its significance—had been a lie. The meat had just finished being passed around when their war chief jumped to his feet and threw a pot of boiling water on Wouter." Sabin shook his head. "That must have been the signal for attack, because the assembled Wolverines pulled knives from under their capes and began slashing at the handful of Hunters who sat around the fire.

"Before the rest of our men could reach us, the attack was over." Sabin hung his head. "We'd made the mistake of putting down our weapons."

Because your brother told you to?

His words terse and low, Sabin went on. "Three Wolverines surrounded Wouter and repeatedly stabbed him. The Wolverines concentrated their attack on the Hunter leader. I got to my feet and grabbed my spear, hoping to buy time for the other Hunter warriors to reach us. I stood over Wouter's body, fending off the enemy. Then I stabbed a Wolverine. I was pulling my spear out of the man's body when someone sliced my arm from shoulder to elbow.

"He would have killed me," Sabin said with finality, "if he'd had time. Our warriors saved my life."

"The Hunters killed the Wolverines?"

"Three died, but the rest fled into the forest. They'd accomplished what they'd wanted to. My brother died in my arms. But not before I'd vowed to avenge his death."

Of course he had. A warrior as strong as Sabin would have. It was his duty.

"It was my responsibility to carry his body home to our parents, but I didn't have the strength."

She knew the ways of warriors, knew some of the customs, knew that not being able to carry his brother's body would have greatly wounded him. Sabin might have nearly bled to death, but that didn't mean he had not felt unmanned by not being able to honor his brother's spirit, his memory. If he'd died, she would never have met him. They wouldn't be sitting like this in the dark, with emotion a living force. She'd slid her hand out from under his while he was talking because she hadn't wanted to distract him from his story, but now she ran her fingers over his calf.

"I hurt for your parents."

"Wouter was their heart, their greatest pride."

Had Sabin resented knowing he wasn't first in his parents' hearts? Maybe one day, he'd tell her. *One day?*

"He was also our clan's future."

“What happened afterward?” Why hadn’t she cared more about the decisions warriors had to make before this? Even though Antelope men chose flight over battle, she should have concerned herself with learning more about the aggressive clans.

“The clan voted as one to have me replace my older brother.”

Kahsha heard the surprise in Sabin’s voice but kept quiet. Of course they’d voted to have him replace his brother. Did he not know how very brave he’d been?

“I thought to tell them that I wasn’t ready to take command, but couldn’t. Because I was too weak to help dig my brother’s grave”—he swallowed hard—“I had to watch my elderly father work. Halfway through his task, my father knelt beside me and begged me to bring peace to Wouter’s soul. That would happen only if Wolverine blood equal to what Wouter had lost was shed. The deed needed to be done by a relative.” Sabin looked up.

“I agreed. What else could I do? My father had lost his father to the Wolverines. The same happened to my mother’s grandfather, and his father before that. I have no doubt that relatives of the Wolverine I killed want my blood shed.”

When he’d started telling her about the conflict, although she had felt his pain, she also felt removed from the animosity that existed between the two clans. She hurt for Sabin and his parents, but she couldn’t share their pain. Their loss, Sabin’s promise, and the danger he was in had nothing to do with her. Or did it?

“Will it ever end?” she asked.

Instead of responding, he stood and tugged on their tether, indicating he wanted her to do the same. He led her over to the cave entrance, where the moon’s light touched them. In daylight he might appear as an ordinary man. Now, however, he seemed magnificent and intimidating. And human.

“The Hunters are a strong clan.” He ran his hand roughly over the side of her neck. “Our warriors are among the finest fighters.”

“But?” she asked when she wished she could have remained silent.

"But some of our best fighters through the years have lost their lives to the Wolverines."

"Just as Wolverines have lost their finest?"

"Yes. While I was healing and mourning my brother, I kept thinking that hatred between the two clans will never end unless something changes."

"What changes?" she asked, although she was beginning to understand.

"That's the question I took to our spiritkeeper. I asked him to pray to the spirits. To tell them that enough blood has been shed.

"Although no Hunter leader had ever asked that of a spiritkeeper, the spiritkeeper fasted so that his mind and body would be clear when he prayed to the spirits. He'd been praying all day and most of the night when the image of an antelope came to him. When he begged the spirits to tell him the antelope's meaning, the animal had turned into a human."

Sabin's hand moved from her neck to her throat, then slid toward her breasts. "The dream woman ran as fast as any antelope. Then she stopped and stood before our spiritkeeper. She told him the Hunters must breed with Antelope women if they want to fully embrace the future. She said speed will become our greatest weapon."

"Are you sure?" she managed, although she knew better than to question a spiritkeeper's visions. "He was exhausted. Maybe it was simply a meaningless dream."

"No."

"You have no doubt?"

When Sabin didn't respond, she started to repeat herself, only to stop as he cradled a breast.

"A warrior doesn't cry," he said. "Yet I wept when my brother died. Maybe my body's weakness was responsible for those tears, but I'm not ashamed to tell you. I'm saying this because I want you to know I don't lie."

"I didn't say you did."

“Neither does our spiritkeeper.”

“I wish ours did.”

“Why would you say that?” He sounded shocked.

“Because he insists the spirits say I must marry Rafi. My belief is he’s convinced our families will be made stronger from the union, not because of spirit messages. Maybe...” Exhausted from what she’d just said, Kahsha placed her hands on Sabin’s chest. If only she had his strength. “Is it possible your spiritkeeper said what he did because he knows your people must have hope?”

When his hand tightened around her breast, she wondered if he was going to punish her. It didn’t matter. She had to tell him what she was thinking.

“Our future depending on a spiritkeeper’s random dream?” he muttered. “I don’t want to think that.”

“Of course you don’t. When you captured me, I told myself it wasn’t happening, but it was.”

Releasing her breast, he drew her hands off his chest and touched his mouth to her palms. “I had no choice.”

Just as she couldn’t escape her marriage to Rafi—at least she hadn’t been able to before Sabin turned everything around.

“Nothing has changed, has it,” she said when she would have given anything to kiss him. To hold on to him as his equal. “No matter what happens between us, your duty remains the same.”

“Yes.” With that, he pushed her away from him and untied the rawhide around his wrist.

“What is this?” she asked.

“I can’t allow my duty to come between you and your life.”

Free. “What changed your mind?”

He pressed his hand to her temple. “Learning you’re more than a simple animal.”

Much as she needed to examine what had just happened, she had to say what was on her mind. "Sabin, even if an Antelope were to mate with a Hunter, I don't believe that child would be blessed with speed."

"Why not?"

"Because our gift comes from blood purity and prayer."

"Are you sure? Maybe that's what your spiritkeeper says so he'll remain powerful."

"I don't know," she admitted. "I never thought—Why must everything be so hard to understand?"

Sighing, he pressed his fingers to his temples. "Are you going to leave?"

He was giving her back her freedom if she wanted it. But not only wasn't she ready to walk into the bleak tomorrow ahead of her, she wasn't ready for their time together to end. "Take it off." She held up her bound hands.

His fingers brushed her wrists as he did what she'd asked him to. When he was done, she rubbed at the faint lines that were all that remained of her captivity.

That, and her nakedness.

"Earlier, you built a fire in me," she admitted. "The coals still burn."

Lifting his head from what she'd assumed was his study of the rawhide on the ground, he held out both hands. Heart beating as if it were about to burst, she took a deep breath and placed hers in his.

"You want to stay?" he asked, his fingers easy around hers.

"For now." It was the best she could give him.

Chapter Eight

Even with the large opening, there wasn't enough air in the cave, making Sabin wish he'd carried the bear pelt outside, yet it was better here where moonlight couldn't reach and his emotions remained safe from her.

Maybe.

Hunter men were raised to respect women's equality when it came to sex, but he was still working on letting go of the belief that Antelope women were little more than animals and seeing one as an equal. As a result, he didn't wait to see if she wanted to remove his loincloth but threw it aside himself. Now he felt vulnerable—not as helpless as when he'd been wounded, but far from a war chief.

He'd told her about crying after his brother's death, something not even his parents knew.

"I'm shaking," Kahsha said. As if to reinforce her words, she placed less than steady hands on his chest. "Always before..."

Putting off the moment of touching her, he let his arms hang at his sides. His fingers were clenched, and the erection he'd recently exposed grew. "What about before?"

Her fingers were like a summer breeze awakening him instead of lulling him to sleep. "I've only had sex with one man, the one I was going to marry. Other women told me I'd love his cock in me, but I didn't."

"Why not?" Given how responsive she'd been, he found that hard to believe.

"Rafi can't hold back. The moment he becomes aroused, he's ready for release. He pulls out of me so soon after entering that I feel almost nothing."

“He withdraws so his seed won’t come to life in you?”

“Yes, but other unmarried women—they say there’s time for pleasure before the dangerous moment.”

If Rafi were here, he’d be tempted to beat him, because this woman whose skin danced when he touched her deserved better. “Maybe I’m no different.”

“No. I don’t believe that. All the time you were doing—you know, you remained in control.”

“It wasn’t easy,” he told her when maybe he should have explained that Hunter men’s training included lessons in holding back.

“Yet you did.”

Something she’d said a short while ago stopped him from responding. She’d referred to Rafi as the man she’d been going to marry. Had something changed that?

Before he could ask, she lowered herself to her knees on the bear pelt, balancing herself by sliding her fingers over his legs. Her arms now around his thighs, she rested the side of her head against his cock.

“Earlier I just wanted to sleep,” she whispered. “But every time I started to, I thought about this.” Turning her head, she nuzzled him. “I didn’t understand how you could dismiss me.”

Only because he hadn’t. He would have explained if not for her hands now stroking his ass. For a heartbeat, he fought the impulse to force her off him, but it wasn’t her he was fighting, it was himself. He’d come to Antelope Land believing he’d do everything he could to protect his clan’s future. That no longer mattered.

Her breathing ragged, she cupped his cock. “I’m afraid.”

“Of me?” Keeping his voice calm took all his strength.

“I don’t know.” Fingers like warm water glided over his length and nearly brought him to his toes. “Maybe of myself.”

How could that be, he wondered, but like other things, an answer would have to wait. This woman he hadn't known existed a few days ago had laid claim to what more than anything else made him a man. Accustomed as he was to his clan's senior women and Danyel demonstrating what his cock was capable of, he should be able to stay on top of his nerves.

He couldn't.

"Earlier you tortured me," she said. "You refused to give me what I needed. Maybe it's my turn to do the same to you."

The thought of her taking control of his body made him break out in a sweat. Then she lifted his cock and ran her wet tongue over his tip, and he stopped thinking.

"I've never done this," she whispered. "Barely allowed myself to even think about it." Her so-soft lips caressed him. "I don't know if I can—if you want..."

He'd forgotten how to breathe, wasn't sure he could keep his legs under him. As her lips closed over him, he planted his hands on her head. Doing so anchored him, but now he had to deal with her heat against his fingers.

Careful. He needed to warn her but couldn't make himself admit how close he was to losing control. Somehow he wouldn't disappoint her as Rafi had. Rafi, who he wanted dead.

Kahsha's mouth was magic, gentle and hesitant, sweet, wet, and warm. Taking him places he'd never been. Her breathing became ragged, yet when she pulled back and his cock slid out, he tried to push her forward again.

Shaking, she welcomed him in again, a little, a promise, a touch. He couldn't think how to make his muscles work. When he started to sway, he tightened his hold on her hair. If he was hurting her, she gave no indication. In his mind's eye, he saw her mouth open even wider and glimpsed the teeth barely brushing his length.

She was going to take him deep, maybe let his head press against the back of her throat. Any second now, she'd make a gagging sound, perhaps drool.

Didn't matter. Now became all about him, blood pressing against the lifeblood roping his cock and lightning touching everywhere.

Too late. Restraint gone! His cum—

He was standing on the ledge between self-control and animal instinct when she all but spit him out. She scrambled to her feet before he comprehended what had happened.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I thought I could, but I can't. I'm scared."

Given what he'd put her through, why had taking him into her mouth frightened her? Determined to find his way back to the man he'd been a short while ago, he ran a hand over the side of her face.

"You're afraid of me?" Could she guess how much he hated having to ask?

"No. You—you've been with many women, knowledgeable women, while I..."

"Not so many." If he kept talking, maybe his cock would stop throbbing so. "And those times were lessons, not..." What was happening between them? Was there even a word for it?

"Show me what you learned, please."

Moments after making her plea, Kahsha lay on her back with her knees bent and legs wide. Sabin knelt in the space she'd created for him but hadn't yet touched her. Even with darkness isolating her, her electrified nerves said he was staring at her. Rain seldom came to the land of her birth, but she'd experienced what her people said were the spirits fighting among themselves. When that happened, lightning lit up the world and thunder rolled and rumbled. It was like that now, here, with Sabin. The air seemed to come to life, the temperatures increasing, even if only for her, and an inner energy inside her made her wonder if everything might catch fire.

Right now, that energy coursed through her.

Beyond caring what she was revealing, she massaged her breast. Her other hand lightly stroked the heart and soul of her woman's core. Delicious pressure built.

"Let me," Sabin muttered.

Crawling closer, he braced his arms over her thighs. *He's going to enter me. Just like that. No waiting.*

Of course he was. Her channel was wet and ready; why wouldn't he want to crawl into her? Maybe, just maybe, she tried to reassure herself, she could pleasure herself enough before he—

"Move your hand," he commanded. "Right now, that belongs to me."

Reluctantly lifting her finger off her woman's spot, she splayed her hand over her belly. Muscles singing, she lifted her ass off the bear pelt. His cock slipped along her slit, stealing her breath and sending anticipation through her. Instead of pushing into her opening, however, his cock glided up and over it.

Touched her hard nubbin.

Moaning, she gripped his upper arms. Stared at nothing. Panted.

His cock repeatedly caressed that most sensitive of places, his touches strong and gentle by turn. Red flashes filled her vision. She felt as if she were swimming, floating effortlessly in rare and precious water that bathed every inch of her in sensation. Control weakened, but she didn't care.

"By the spirits!" she sobbed.

"You want this?"

His voice drifted over her, the unimportant words breaking apart. Not long ago, she'd taken his cock into her mouth, only to lose courage. Now there wasn't anything she wouldn't do, a single experience she wouldn't embrace.

"Answer me," he muttered, his body straining over hers. "Do you want me in or against you?"

"Both. By the spirits, both."

“How?”

“Please, just do it.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he said as his cock again slid over her clit. Retreated. His warmth and strength surrounded her. He entered her, accepted her gift to him. Too soon, he pulled out. Before she could beg him not to, his cock kissed her hard nubbin. She spun in dizzying circles, whirling faster and faster, even as she clung to him. In her mind’s eye, a canyon dropped away.

“I can’t—can’t help—” Higher yet, even faster, Sabin’s knowing cock pushing, pushing against the heart of her pleasure. His breath raged over her.

“Now!” he exclaimed. “Hold nothing back.”

He again plundered her, burying himself deep only to withdraw and coat that most sensitive place with her juices.

Waves hit, drenching her in sweat. She arched her back. “Yes! Oh, hah, yes!”

Her throat burned, yet she couldn’t stop screaming. A deeper voice shared the air with hers.

Heat raged through her. Her heart slammed against her chest. Flying and falling. Body shaking.

The harsh waves washing over her began to lose strength. Even as she acknowledged that her body had nothing left to give, she prayed for more. Longer. Deeper.

“Cry for me, captive! Call out my name.”

“Sabin!”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

The waves continued to caress her, kept her adrift in a new and exciting place. She’d remain here forever, mindless and content.

“My turn.”

Sabin entered her before she could make sense of what he'd said. At first, her channel was so sensitive, she shivered. Then her tissues stretched, accommodated his male bulk, and she silently thanked him. How well he understood her.

She didn't know why she was crying, didn't want to examine the tears. Opening her mind and body to his powerful thrusts was enough. Everything. Determined to become part of his strength, she clung to him. Stroking the hard, smooth, long scar there, she wondered if he was aware of what she was doing. Going by his quick, harsh grunts, probably not.

This was for him. She'd had her turn, her wonderful inner storm. Her body was content, still humming a little but certainly—no, not just humming.

Sabin's cock pummeled her, his bulk insisting. Dominating.

Yes! Under him. Helpless to stop him. Not wanting to. Riding his desperate strength.

In contrast to the first, this ride to the finish was a long, easy slide. Maybe she could have stopped, stepped aside, and experienced as he exploded.

She didn't.

Her body jolted, starting slow but quickly building. Taking her higher. Laying her open. Gripping her so tightly she barely noticed when he released in her.

Only later did she wonder if he'd planted his seed in her.

Chapter Nine

Morning cool was starting to give way to heat by the time they stepped out of the cave. She'd dozed after they'd had sex only to wake a short while later. Judging by Sabin's restlessness, she wasn't the only one who couldn't silence her thoughts, although maybe his nightmare was returning. Much as she wished she was capable of putting that time behind him, she knew better. After all, the most exciting woman explosions of her life hadn't brought her peace.

"I want to see you run," he said as they watched the rising sun. Except for asking how much smoked meat she wanted him to pull off for her for their morning break, this was the first time he'd spoken.

Absently stroking the dress she'd put back on, she willed herself to keep her distance. "You saw—"

"Only a few steps. Then I stopped you."

Yesterday seemed so long ago. Even more disconcerting, she couldn't remember many details of her life before that. One thing she couldn't shake off—Rafi's and her family's reactions.

"I shouldn't have said that," he muttered, "because if you start running, you won't come back."

Feeling his stare, she reluctantly faced him. His whiskers gave him a somewhat sinister appearance. His loincloth was back in place, as were the weapons around his waist. She took comfort in her lack of bonds and mourned the end to what they'd represented.

"What will happen if you return to your people without me?" she asked. "Will you become an outcast?" *Like me.*

“No. Did you think I would?”

“I, ah, shouldn’t pretend I know what it’s like to be a Hunter.”

“Maybe if you understood what our lives are like—”

“And you understood the Antelope People.”

They stared at each other, their eyes mere slits against the sun. “Do you think that’s possible?” he asked. “Your people believe they must remain pure or the spirits will take away the gift of speed. What if that isn’t true?”

Shock ran through her. She’d only vaguely thought the same thing yesterday. “I don’t know.”

“What if an Antelope carried Hunter blood? Would that person, that child, be less or more?”

“I don’t know.”

His attention slid to her belly. “Maybe we will.”

“That’s what you want!” Surprised by her sudden anger, she clamped her hand over her mouth.

“I once did. No longer.”

She removed her hand. “Why not?”

“Because of what you said.” He sighed. “Maybe our spiritkeeper didn’t receive a spirit message after all. He prayed for a way to end threats from the Wolverines, but maybe nothing came to him. Knowing his place within the clan was at stake, he said what he did.” Sabin pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “The burden became mine.”

Hearing Sabin question his spiritkeeper saddened her even more than doubting the Antelope spiritkeeper did. How much simpler life had been back when she hadn’t cared what happened to the Hunters. Studying Sabin’s scar, a frightening thought struck her. If the large and warlike Wolverines didn’t hesitate to attack Hunters, would anything stop them from coming after her people?

“What is it?” Sabin asked as he touched her arm, worry in his voice.

“Where are the Wolverines?” Just saying their name chilled her.

Although he didn’t immediately answer, she saw comprehension in his clenched jaw. “I don’t know.”

“But they could come this way.”

“It’s possible. Conquest feeds them.”

Wondering what, if anything, she’d say when she turned her back on him, she took in her world. Distant movement caught her attention.

“I see it,” Sabin said.

When his shoulder brushed hers, she had no doubt he’d tapped into her sudden tension. They might be looking at antelope or deer or humans.

“Your people—” she started.

“It isn’t them. They’d come only if I failed to return.”

“Wolverines?”

“I pray not.”

She could outrun the Wolverines. She’d race to her people and warn them in time; most of them would flee. However, those who couldn’t run would be in danger.

As Sabin had been and might be again.

It made little sense for Wolverine warriors to come to the desert to track down one man, even one who’d killed a valued member of their clan, but if they were determined to overwhelm the Antelope People—

“They’re moving too fast,” Sabin said. “Coming from the canyon where you and I met.”

With a start, she realized he was right. If she hadn’t been so afraid of the Wolverines, she would have already come to that conclusion.

“My people,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

He sounded not frightened but resigned. "You didn't expect them to look for me so soon?"

"I knew it was a possibility."

Turning toward him, she frowned. "Then why are we still here?"

"Because everything changed between us."

Much as she wanted to touch him, she only nodded. "Leave. I won't let them come after you."

"It's too late for that."

"No! Sabin, your safety—"

"That's not what I'm talking about."

* * *

Her parents, Rafi, and the others now staring at Sabin shifted their weight, reminding Kahsha of nervous animals. She didn't blame them. After all, it was the Antelope way to flee danger instead of facing it like Hunters such as Sabin did. Her people had no way of knowing other Hunters weren't hiding in the cave. Instead of telling them they could relax, she stood between her clan members and Sabin. She didn't have to look at him to pick up on his tension.

No, she amended, not tense so much as ready for battle. If only the Antelope People were like that. Maybe Antelopes needed courage even more than Hunters did speed.

"You're all right?" her father asked in the Antelope language. "He didn't harm you?"

"No, he didn't."

"The spirits bless us," her mother said, sounding near tears. "All night, I prayed for your safety." Dragging her attention off Kahsha, she stared at Sabin. Her unspoken question hung between them, and until it had been answered, mother and daughter wouldn't embrace.

"What are you doing with him?" Rafi demanded.

“Learning that Hunter and Antelope hearts beat the same,” she said, switching to trade language so Sabin would understand.

“You had sex with him?”

“Don’t answer,” Sabin warned. “Let me.”

“No.” She glanced back at him. “It doesn’t matter what either of us say. Rafi will believe one thing. Go on.” She glared at the man she’d been fated to marry. The man who hadn’t understood her sexual needs. “Say what everyone is waiting to hear.”

Rafi had armed himself with a meat-cutting knife that was shorter and thinner than Sabin’s. Looking both confused and angry, he pointed it at Sabin. “You defiled her. Made her unclean, unworthy.”

“We had sex.”

Thinking he might lie to protect her reputation, Sabin’s admission surprised her. Then she remembered what he’d said about his belief in the truth. Armed with yet more proof of what it meant to be a Hunter, she walked over to her parents and placed a hand on their shoulders. Tears filmed her mother’s eyes while a look of love and resignation touched her father.

“I’m still your daughter. That will never change. But I’m not the same woman I was yesterday. I couldn’t run as is the Antelope way. As a result, I looked into a Hunter heart.”

“Couldn’t run?” her father said. “He captured you?”

The prickling down her spine told her Sabin had come closer. Just the same, she kept her attention on her parents. “Yes, but that changed.”

“You willingly spread your legs for him,” Rafi spluttered. “You should have refused—”

“If I had, he and I would have remained strangers. Enemies.”

“Don’t tell me this! I reject you, Kahsha! You will never be allowed in my bed.”

Even as several Antelope gasped, relief filled her. She might not know what tomorrow would be like, but at least she was free.

Or was she?

“Mother, Father, I’ll come home later. Whatever you think of what has happened, never doubt that I’m safe.” She turned toward Sabin. “With him.”

* * *

“I’m sorry,” Sabin muttered. “If I’d known your intended would refuse you, that you’d become an outcast—”

“I’m not.”

“But everything has changed for you.”

Although her people were out of sight, leaving her and Sabin alone, she remembered their reactions.

“It’ll be the same for you, won’t it?” she asked. She wrapped her arms around his waist. “When you go home, you won’t be dragging your captive breeder with you. They’ll believe you failed.”

Hugging her back, he pulled her toward his swollen cock. “They won’t if you’re with me.”

Unnerved, she rested her head on his chest.

“What?” he asked.

“Will I be safe?”

“You protected me today. I’ll do the same.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle. “Antelope People are prey, not predators. Rafi’s knife was nothing next to your weapons.”

“I wanted to slit his throat.”

“What if I begged you not to?”

He relaxed his hold on her ass cheeks, allowing her to look up into his eyes, where she found acknowledgment of the differences between them. Fortunately last night had shown her the similarities.

"If you had," he said, "I would have listened."

She'd never had such an intense conversation, yet the words weren't enough to pull her away from his body's impact on hers. Of course she'd accompany him home and tell the Hunters what, beyond speed, it meant to be an Antelope. Then with her by his side, he'd do the same with her people. Afterward, she prayed, Hunters and Antelope would have a greater understanding of each other.

More important, a connection would have begun. The two clans would be stronger together than separate.

As for children born of the union—"Maybe the spirits brought us together," she said. "They want our clans to stop being strangers."

"We aren't, Kahsha."

"No, we aren't."

"Show me."

Shifting her hold from his waist to his neck, she hoisted herself onto him and wrapped her legs around his hips, his loincloth and her dress in the way.

"The cave?" she suggested.

"I want sunlight."

Not telling her what he had in mind, he carried her over to a boulder. Making sure her dress was between her and the rock, he settled her onto it. Smiling, he pulled his loincloth aside and rubbed his cock against what he could reach of her sex. In seconds, her juices leaked from her channel, prompting her to anchor her legs to his hips, tilting her pelvis toward him as she did.

"I don't want to pull out," he said.

"I don't want you to."

Sobering, he planted steadying hands on her back and guided his cock into her. She didn't dare move about. She clung to his neck which left the other free to finger that most sensitive place.

Everything had changed. Her world was new and uncharted.

As was his.

"Do it," he encouraged. "Pleasure yourself."

She did, her touches easy. In contrast, he held nothing back. Anchored by him, filled by him, she stared at an aching clean sky. Her body left the boulder he'd placed her on, left him even. As he pummeled her and his grunts filled the air, she half believed she was flying.

There, lifting off, she saw a hawk rise and drift overhead and wondered what that felt like.

Then Sabin slammed into her, and she joined her man.

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Vonna Harper

Brought Down
Fantasy's Fear
Galen's Pet
Midnight Soldier

The HOWL Series

Devil Man
Storm Howl
Wind Howl

Vonna Harper

I was born and raised in the boondocks of the boondocks. TV? What was that? It wasn't unusual for the small mountain logging town to be snowbound in winter but I didn't care. As long as my sister and I could get outside we were happy. And if we couldn't, we read. Our mother and grandmother, who helped raise us, were both teachers so the reading bug hit early. Only with me it soon morphed into a driving need to create something from the adventures I was having in my mind. I started by giving The Lone Ranger's horse Silver fab adventures but eventually I educated myself about the publishing world and have been chasing that brass ring ever since. Under my 'real' name, I penned who knows how many romances and Native American historicals. For the last four or so years Vonna Harper has taken over my creativity and I'm having a ball writing erotica.

My poor characters, I can't do light. Each of them is burdened with emotional baggage because that's what makes them interesting to me. Yes, they love or are fascinated by sex, but they also have past issues that need resolving. Hopefully I do get to the resolution part.

Find out more about me by visiting <http://www.vonnaharper.com/>.