

A Christmas Holiday

By

Laurel Joseph

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Chapter One

“Have I told you how beautiful you look today, Mrs. Sawyer?” Seth whispered close to her ear as he held her close, not giving one damn what anyone else standing in front of the stage depot thought of his actions. He knew that most of the men were jealous of his good fortune in having such a pretty woman for his wife. What Seth didn’t know was that the women were jealous of Laney for the very same reason; several hearts were broken when Seth Sawyer chose Laney Coddington for his own sweet wife.

“Yes, Mr. Sawyer, you have mentioned that a time or two, but I never tire of your compliments,” Laney said with a smile. She felt pretty today, wearing the brand new blue cloak and the matching bonnet, which Seth bought for her while on a cattle buying trip; the fabric was heavy and warm against the chill of December. Seth never tired of seeing Laney in blue, and she never tired of dressing for him. The last year had been perfect, and the party Granddad threw for their first wedding anniversary just before Thanksgiving was truly a celebration. Laney had whispered her special news into Seth’s ear while they were dancing, and he’d whooped like a Comanche, and then announced to the entire room that he was going to be a father! “I’m going to need lots of compliments when I start getting fat,” she said with a bit of a pout.

“Laney, love, I will spank you if you start with that nonsense again,” Seth said firmly, his dark eyes serious. “You won’t be fat; you’ll be sheltering our baby. There is a difference, Red, and I will find you beautiful.”

“Only you would spank a woman for worrying over her appearance.”

“Red, what you are really worried about is that I might turn to another woman when you are big with our child,” Seth stated matter-of-factly. “I give you my word that will never happen. You are my love; you are my life; you are my wife. There is no other woman for me.”

Laney reached up to caress his cheek with her hand and looked him in the eyes. “I believe you, darling. Thank you for saying the words I needed to hear. I love you, and you are my life, my husband,” she repeated his words, meaning them every bit as much as he meant them when he said them to her. They were both careful to keep their conversation private, knowing full well that each and every word would be repeated all over town if they didn’t.

“I would like a promise from you, Laney,” Seth said so quietly she could barely hear him. “I want you to promise me you will tell me if you need help with the house. I can afford to hire a woman to come in and cook and clean.” Harvey’s housekeeper decided to quit in order to travel to California with her daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren, and Laney took over the house, insisting she didn’t need hired help. “I don’t want you overdoing,” he insisted.

"I promise to tell you if it gets to be too much," Laney quickly agreed, anxious to please Seth.

"Thank you, Red." Seth was grateful to have the matter settled and he brushed her lips with his and heard a couple of children giggle. He turned to look at them, and then grinned. "You just wait until you grow up and meet the right lady, boys. You'll be doing some kissing, too!"

"Never!" The oldest one shook his head vehemently, and the younger copied his brother.

"It's good to see you so much in love, Seth," Donna Goodman, the boys' mother, said with a friendly smile. "Laney has brought a lot of joy to this town."

"What a nice thing to say, Donna!" Laney flushed with pleasure.

"It's true. Why, you even have Gertrude Oaks' support, and that is a major feat!" Donna said in a loud whisper. She did not wish to be overheard talking about the Mayor's wife.

"I think it is Granddad who has Mrs. Oaks' ear," Laney acknowledged, and then politely changed the subject. "Are you waiting for someone, Donna?"

"My sister and her son are coming to spend the holidays with us," Donna smiled happily. "I haven't seen Deborah since last Christmas and I am excited to catch up on all the family news. She lives close to all of our cousins, while Bill and I moved here. Are you expecting someone, Laney, or are you and Seth traveling?" she asked.

"We are waiting for a friend of mine," Laney replied noncommittally, making every effort to keep her face schooled in a polite mask. Anne Lambert was not really a friend, but the letter she sent begged Laney for a place to hide. Laney knew the woman had to be truly desperate if she stooped to asking *her* for help of any kind, especially with Christmas so close. Anne Lambert was a gossip of the worst sort, and she'd delighted in tormenting Laney at every conceivable opportunity, even to the point of embellishing tales and carrying them to Laney's prim and proper Mother. Her thoughts were interrupted by the stage pulling into town.

The driver brought the horses to a stop in front of the stage depot, and then jumped down to put a set of steps in front of the door.

"Deborah!" Donna called out excitedly when her sister was the first to step off the coach. Laney smiled at the two sisters as they embraced, and she had to giggle when the cousins greeted each other and started making plans for all the mischief they could get into over the coming weeks, and sharing their hopes for St. Nicholas' arrival.

Two men were next to disembark, and finally, Laney spotted Anne. The redhead nervously looked over the people waiting before her dark eyes settled on Laney. She

smiled, although the smile didn't meet her eyes. "Laney, thank you so much for allowing me to come. I wasn't sure you would... In your place, I wouldn't have been so gracious," she admitted.

"You said you are in trouble, Anne...?" Laney asked quietly.

"Yes, I am in danger," she admitted. "I don't know what I would have done if you'd refused to take me in."

"You'll be safe with us, Miss Lambert," Seth said quietly.

"Oh my goodness! Where are my manners...? Seth, this is Miss Anne Lambert. Anne, this is my husband, Seth Sawyer."

"Thank you for allowing me to come, Mr. Sawyer," Anne said with a smile. Seth was tall, rugged looking, and very handsome. He was the kind of man she longed for. "You are fortunate, Laney."

"I am the one who is fortunate," Seth said gallantly, putting his arm around his wife's slender shoulders. Laney was honest with him about her feelings for Anne Lambert, and Seth was determined that the other woman was going to treat his wife with respect while she was here... or else. "We should be heading for the ranch. The weather is colder than normal, and I want to get you ladies home before dark. Do you have a heavier cloak with you, Miss Lambert? That one won't be warm enough once we leave the protection of town."

"I have a heavier one in my bag, Mr. Sawyer. Remember, it is much colder in Boston than it is here."

"I'll load your things in the wagon," he replied, and moved to do just that, leaving them standing there.

"Anne, you said you were in danger; what kind of danger?" Laney was direct and to the point, looking the other woman in the eye. Anne was only a couple of inches taller than Laney, but her hair was the same shade of vibrant red. Her eyes were a dark brown in contrast to Laney's green eyes.

"You know that I lost Mama in a terrible accident last March; the problem is my stepfather. He wants to marry me off to settle some gambling debts. The bastard has gone through every penny my Papa made and left to Mama and me! Now he thinks to sell me to the highest bidder."

"He can't do that!" Laney exclaimed. "It's illegal to sell another human being. That is what the War was all about!"

“Mr. Grundy doesn’t care about the law. I overheard him discussing the matter with one of his gambling buddies. He talked about me like I was a brood mare!” Anne’s dark eyes filled with tears and her cheeks were red with humiliation. “I confronted him after the horrible man left, and Mr. Grundy beat me severely enough I had to take to my bed. He said I would do as I was told or else he would sell me to a brothel.” She whispered the last few words as if she couldn’t bear to say them out loud.

“Oh, Anne! Did you go to the law?” Laney asked, distressed for the other female.

“I couldn’t. Mr. Grundy forbade me to leave the house, and when I did have to go somewhere, he had me followed. He hired a maid for me, and her whole purpose was to tattle to him about anything and everything I did and said to anyone. I tried once to defy him, and he broke my finger. It still hurts,” she admitted, holding her gloved hand. “I decided it was best to pretend to be afraid of him, and too cowered to argue so that he would relax his guard. Claire and Constance helped me escape and gave me money for my tickets and traveling expenses. I am sure that the holidays will provide him with plenty of excuses for my absence, but he will continue to search for me.”

“This is a long distance from Boston, Anne. He won’t find you here.”

“You have never met Mr. Grundy; he won’t give up until he finds me.”

“We won’t let him near you, Anne,” Laney promised. Seth pulled the wagon close and Laney gave the other woman a hug of reassurance. “You’ll be safe at the Circle C!” Seth helped the women climb up on the seat, and then he rounded the wagon, took his own seat, and then slapped the reins lightly on the horses’ rumps to get them moving. Seth could see that both women were upset, and once he was out of town he pulled the team to a stop and turned to face them.

“Okay, what gives?” he asked sternly, looking at his little wife. If Anne had already hurt her feelings, he was going to take her in hand here and now.

“It’s not what you think, Seth!” Laney’s quick temper fired immediately. “I’m just damn good and mad. Poor Anne is in the middle of a bad situation, and I feel like going to Boston and shooting her stepfather!”

Seth smiled at his feisty wife. “Is that all?”

“No, I think I might ask Scott to go with me!” she added, her green eyes snapping with temper.

“That bad, huh?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Seth, we have to protect Anne if Mr. Grundy comes here.”

“We will,” he answered with confidence.

Anne looked at them and confessed, “He is truly evil, and now I fear he had something to do with Mama’s death. He won’t hesitate to hurt anyone who thwarts him. I shouldn’t have brought my troubles here, but you are so far away from Boston, and Laney, you aren’t afraid of anyone! You have always been so brave and so confident and so sure of yourself!”

“She’s a real terror, alright,” Seth said with a teasing grin for his feisty little wife. “Anne, you can relax and breathe now. We won’t let anyone take you away from here against your will.”

“Thank you! Thank you both.” She promptly covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. To her surprise, Laney put an arm around her and told her to simply cry it out and let go of the fear. Seth gave her a clean handkerchief, and his soft voice kept reassuring her that she was safe. Anne finally was able to compose herself. “Laney, I am truly sorry for all the rotten things I said and did, and if I could take it back, I would. My only excuse is that I was so jealous of you!”

“We were children then. It’s over and done,” Laney generously offered forgiveness and Seth smiled proudly, giving her a little nudge and mouthing the words ‘I love you’. She smiled in return and rested her head on his shoulder for a few seconds.

White Eagle felt alone although he was surrounded by The People. He’d given Willow in marriage to the man she preferred and the smile on her face and in her eyes in the days following told him of her happiness. While he was very happy for his little sister, and felt Straight Arrow would make her a good husband, White Eagle also felt lonely. The woman he planned to wed suddenly decided in favor of his enemy, Red Buffalo, and White Eagle was sure Little Bird’s father accepted Red Buffalo’s gifts because Little Bird grew tired of waiting for him to offer for her. White Eagle felt she was too immature to make a good wife, but now that was Red Buffalo’s problem. No other woman caught his eye, even though many of the maidens tried to capture his attention. He found the young women lacking in spirit even though many of them were pretty enough. It was close to the White Man’s Christmas and White Eagle decided it was time to go and visit his brother once again, and see if his heart would reach out to him as it did the last time he went to the Circle C Ranch. He was shocked to realize that he felt at home on the old man’s ranch; no longer a rebellious young man, he was able to remember the good times he’d had there. The old man welcomed him and there was no anger in his heart. It was also good to see his brother happy. Seth’s wife was a spirited redhead and provided entertainment that he found amusing. Laney kept the old man jumping, too, and White Eagle would pay gold to watch that. His mind made up to go for a visit, he packed enough supplies for a couple of days on the trail, and said goodbye to his sister.

Anne woke to sunlight pouring through the window in her room and she was shocked to realize that the fear she'd lived with for the last few months was gone. She'd only been at the Circle C for a week, but during that time she'd learned enough about Harvey Coddington and Seth Sawyer to know that Mr. Grundy wouldn't stand a prayer of taking her away from the ranch. Laney's Grandfather was incensed to learn how Grundy treated her and promised to take a whip to him if he showed his face on Coddington land. Anne felt safe, and happy, for the first time since her Mama died. She recalled her promise to go riding with Laney and jumped out of bed to get dressed. Anne had been certain that Laney would treat her poorly, but instead, she'd gone out of her way to make Anne feel welcome, and Anne was shocked to realize that she truly enjoyed spending time with Laney. They talked as if they'd been best friends for years.

Anne was also surprised to see how different Laney's marriage was from her friends' marriages in Boston. She and Seth kissed often, held hands, and they fussed lovingly. The first time Anne accidentally witnessed the two of them disagreeing to the point their tempers were involved, she was afraid for Laney... especially when Laney took the wooden spoon she was using and smacked Seth with it! Anne was positive she would need to defend the other redhead, but instead of raising his fist to Laney, Seth calmly took the wooden spoon from her hand and bent her over the kitchen table and gave her bottom three smacks before handing the spoon back and telling his wife to behave herself. Laney apologized for striking him, and Seth bent down to kiss her. Laney was completely over her temper by the time Seth left the kitchen to go outside, their disagreement settled with love. Her friends in Boston barely spoke to each other; they certainly didn't hold hands and kiss. Laney had the kind of marriage that Anne always believed she wanted. She wanted to love and be loved in return. She didn't want to be married to a man who would raise his fists to her, but she didn't want to be married to a man who had no backbone, either. Most of all, she wanted to choose for herself, and she would not marry a man just because he could line Mr. Grundy's pockets with money for gambling.

Once Anne was dressed to go riding, she went downstairs, wondering if Laney would be down yet. She found her in the kitchen, along with her Granddad and Seth. Seth was frowning and shaking his head 'no'. "I said 'no', Mrs. Sawyer," Seth growled.

"You are being overprotective, Seth! I'm not ill; I'm pregnant! I can go riding if I want to!" Laney argued heatedly.

"No you can't. Something could spook your mount. You could get thrown. It's just not safe."

"I am good on horseback!" she pointed out.

"Girl, you might sit your saddle better than most, but you're carrying my great-grandbaby inside you now, and I agree with your husband. You are not going to be riding, even if I have to give orders to the men to come and fetch me each time you think to do as you are told not to do!"

“Laney is going to obey me, sir,” Seth stated firmly, his look telling.

“I’m going to go riding!” Laney stubbornly insisted. “I promised to show Anne the ranch.”

“I’ll take the girl riding myself,” Harvey insisted. “You’re staying right here.”

“Granddad, I’m all grown up, and if I want to take Anne riding and show her this ranch, then I am, by damn, going to do so!” Laney said angrily, stomping her foot.

“Oh, please...! No arguing. Laney, we can stay right here. I don’t have to be entertained,” Anne said, coming into the kitchen to voice her opinion. “Your Granddad and Seth are right, Laney; you shouldn’t be riding right now! If I’d known you were expecting, I wouldn’t have agreed in the first place! Why, if something happened to you or your baby I would never forgive myself!”

“Now see what you’ve done?” Laney scolded her grandfather and husband.

Chapter Two

“Sit down and have some breakfast, Anne,” Harvey bossed. “I would be right pleased to show you around the Circle C.”

“Granddad!” Laney raised her voice.

“Laney Sawyer, we are going to have a serious talk after breakfast. If I were you, I’d sit there and eat quietly.”

“Son, you just better remember this little gal is with child,” Harvey warned.

“I’m just going to remind her of that fact, sir,” Seth replied, giving the older man a warning look to butt out.

Laney got to her feet, picked up her husband’s half full plate, and dumped the contents on his lap before stomping from the room.

Harvey chuckled and when Seth glared at him, he laughed that much harder. “She’s full of it, ain’t she, boy?” he asked.

“She is a brat, sir,” Seth replied, getting to his feet to go after his feisty wife. Once he left the room, Harvey chuckled again and then said, “Eat up, Annie. We’ll go for a ride and let those two butt heads all they want to.”

“Aren’t you worried that Seth will harm Laney?” Anne asked with a worried look in her dark eyes.

“That boy wouldn’t hurt a hair on my granddaughter’s head. He might put a few handprints on her butt, but Laney needs settling down now and then. That girl has my temper,” he admitted with a proud wink.

Anne managed to eat some bread and butter and she sipped her tea, but when she sensed Harvey was finished, she jumped up and said, “I’d better clean up in here before we ride out.”

“No. The girl made the mess and we ain’t going to clean it up. Besides, she’ll want something to do to keep from sittin’ down for a while,” Harvey predicted. He grabbed her hand as they walked down to the barn. “I’m awful glad you come out here, Annie. It’s been good for my girl to have someone her age here that she could talk about Boston with. I know she loves it here, but she misses her life there sometimes, too. Her Ma won’t come out here to visit, and even though the boy has offered to take her to Boston for a visit, Laney won’t go.”

"I don't understand why Phyllis hates this country so much," Anne said. "I think it is beautiful here."

"So did my son. But, he loved Phyllis more, so he took her and Laney back to Boston to live. I've visited them a couple of times in Boston, and if Laney didn't have so much spunk I never would have seen her again unless I made the trip East, and when you get to my age, traveling that far ain't fun."

"I have King saddled for you, Boss," one of the hands stepped forward to tell Harvey.

"Do you have one ready for Miss Anne?" Harvey asked.

"Yes, sir. Miss Laney asked me to do that first thing this morning," he replied.

"Well, you might want to unsaddle my granddaughter's mare. Seth put his foot down about her riding for the foreseeable future." He lowered his voice and whispered, "I'm gonna be a great-granddad. I'd appreciate it if you don't let Laney go sneaking off when our backs is turned."

"I'll make sure of it, Boss," the other man promised with a grin. "Now that is sure good news."

"I'm sure as shootin' pleased," Harvey commented. "Thank you kindly," he told the man as he brought out a gentle horse for Anne. Harvey helped her mount, and then got into his own saddle with practiced ease. "We're going to the North Range, Davis, if I'm needed for anything urgent."

"Got it, Boss."

"No one is trying to tell you that you aren't an excellent rider, Laney."

"Then why did you and Granddad embarrass me like that?" the redhead snapped.

"Because we love you, and we love that precious life you are carrying," Seth said calmly. His wife was quick to take offense. "And, since you are already mad at us this is a good time to tell you that your Granddad is planning to hire a woman to come and cook and clean."

"The hell you say!" She stomped her foot again. "No he is not!" she raged. "You two are not going to make my life miserable, do you hear me? I am not helpless. I am pregnant, and women have been having babies since the beginning of time. I am no better than any other woman who doesn't have all of Granddad's money, and I damn well won't be pampered. I'll go crazy with nothing to do! Now, either you call him off, Seth Sawyer, or I swear I'm going to go down to the corral and start breaking horses!"

“Laney, dear, you try that and I’ll paddle your sweet rear in front of anyone on this ranch who cares to watch!”

“I’ll take Granddad’s whip to you if you dare try that!” she threatened.

“You need a good spanking, little girl,” Seth told her, his dark eyes flashing.

“You’d better not spank me; you’ll hurt the baby!” she taunted him and then realized that she’d crossed that invisible line that she couldn’t seem to see before she crossed it!

“I don’t think the baby will feel a thing, little girl. We are not going to go through several months of temper tantrums and it is time you learn that right now.” He reached for Laney and easily drew her down over his left thigh and the bed. Without ado, he flipped up her skirts and then tugged her drawers down to reveal her shapely bottom.

“Don’t you dare spank me, Seth Sawyer! I’ll get even if you do!” she warned.

“Owww!” she hollered as the palm of his hand cracked on her left cheek. “That *HURT!*”

“Good!” Seth continued to hold her down and spank her, listening to Laney alternately threaten him and tell him how much he was hurting her.

“Seth, stop! I won’t be able to sit and Anne will know you spanked me, and she’ll go back to Boston and tell my Mother, and then she will descend on us, and you don’t want that!”

“I would love to meet your mother,” he said calmly.

“Owww! No, you would not! She would make your life hell!” Laney insisted.

“Owww! Damn it!”

“Stop swearing. Our child’s first words will be swear words and I will blister your butt if that happens!”

“You’d better stop spanking me or I will take my baby and go back to Boston to... OWWW!” The spanking suddenly turned very painful, and Laney struggled to get free. “Owww! I’m sorry! Stop, please! You are really hurting me, Seth! Please stop! I’m sorry!”

“Never threaten me with that, young lady. I won’t have it. I would come after you and spank you every inch of the way back here; do you hear me?” He punctuated his words with harder spans on her sit spots, making sure the mild lesson turned into one she was going to feel for a day or two each time she tried to sit down.

"I hear you! I won't do that, I promise! I was just mad! I didn't mean it, Seth! I promise! Please, please stop! I'm so sorry!"

"Are you going to settle down, Laney Sawyer? No riding while you are pregnant...?"

"Okay, but I think you and Granddad are being silly!"

"Maybe so, but I would rather be cautious than lose you or our child. I love you." The words didn't sound a bit loving, even to his own ears and he wasn't surprised when he heard her muffled giggle. "I do love you," he said quietly.

"I love you, too," Laney answered.

"Will you behave now?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Seth," she agreed. He helped her up and sat her on his lap, and held her close. After a while she spoke, "I don't know why I get so mean, darling."

"You don't like to be told what to do."

"Mother was forever trying to make me conform; I just couldn't. In my heart I know that you aren't trying to make me conform so you aren't embarrassed, but a part of me is so used to fighting with her that I act terrible with you... and with Granddad, when all you both want is to keep me safe because you love me." She paused and started crying. "What kind of mother am I going to be." She turned tear-filled green eyes up to him.

"You are going to be the kind of mother that your mother wasn't and isn't. You are going to be loving with our child, and you'll encourage him or her to be himself or herself. Our baby will be lucky to have you for a mother." He leaned down and kissed her reassuringly. "Will you please stop worrying, little mama? We will learn to be good parents together. We will love our child, as well as any other babies who come along to us. We won't be like your mother."

"You promise to stop me if you see me constantly criticizing?" she asked.

"I promise."

"I already love this baby so much, Seth."

"So do I," he agreed.

"How's your sit upon holding up, Annie?" Harvey asked, looking at the pretty redhead. "I wasn't figuring on riding so far north, but I'm proud of this ranch. I built it up from

nothing and made me a damn good living from the land. Seth and Laney will inherit this place when I go to meet my Maker.”

“And that won’t be for a very long time, Mr. Coddington,” Anne said with a smile. “You have a great-grandchild on the way!” She shook her head and then said, “It’s so hard to imagine the Laney I knew in Boston as a mama! But this Laney, she is so happy, and so much in love with Seth... She will be a great mama! I’m a little bit jealous, to be honest.”

“Jealous? Why, honey, you don’t need to be jealous. You’re going to meet some man, fall head over heels in love, and then you’ll get married and be a mama, too.”

“Men don’t seem to like me, Mr. Coddington. I’m not pretty like Laney; I say the wrong things. I’m not witty or smart.”

“Whoever put that nonsense in your head, girl?” Harvey demanded, his eyes reflecting his disapproval. “Why, you need a damn good spanking!” he stated. “You’re pretty, and you’re smart as can be! You just haven’t met a real man yet,” he said, shaking his head. “Those guys back east have their own set of stupid rules that don’t hold water out here. The women are all like my daughter-in-law and act like wearing the newest dress and the latest style hat are all important. The mama’s all try to find husbands for their daughters with trickery, hoping to marry into more money. The men want a wife who looks good on their arm and will bear them an heir. None of them know what marriage is really about, the love of a man and a woman. No, Annie, you want to find a man who loves you for who you are. You want a man you can love in spite of his faults. A man who will support you, care about you, who will do his best to keep you safe, and who will treasure you and defend you with his very life. A man you can’t wait to see come through the door at the end of the day. You’re pretty enough, honey. A girl like you would be wasted on a man who cared more for his money and his standing in society more than he cared for you. Are you listening to me, Annie?”

“Yes, Mr. Coddington,” Anne replied. “How can you know all of that?” she asked.

“I got eyes in my head, and I’ve lived a heap longer than you have,” he replied with a smile.

Anne was quiet as she rode beside the older man. Finally she said, “Thank you for thinking I’m pretty. No one has ever told me that before.”

“You need to start thinking it for yourself, Annie.”

She started to ask him what he meant by that comment when they were suddenly surrounded by three men.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Harvey demanded. “You’re on the Circle C Ranch.”

“We came for the girl,” one of the men spoke up. “Seems she ran away from her loving Daddy and he wants her to come home.”

“No!” Anne cried out.

“You got no say in the matter, girl,” the man said with an evil grin. “We’ve been hired to make sure you get home, and we’ve been instructed to punish you every step of the way so you won’t make a mistake like this again.” He laughed when Anne’s dark eyes grew wide with horror.

“You son of a bitch!” Harvey growled, and went for his gun. There were three shots and Harvey Coddington fell from his horse and to the hard ground, bleeding.

“Mr. Coddington!” Anne screamed, and tried to get down from her horse, but one of the men grabbed her and shoved her back on the saddle.

“Stay put, girl, or we’ll take you right here and now!”

“He’s hurt!” Anne cried out, slapping at the man’s hands.

“He’s dead, and that’s what he gets for bringing you here,” the first man said derisively. “Take her reins and let’s get the hell out of here. There’ll be plenty of time tonight to start training her. Girl, your Daddy is really pissed at you. He said to tell you that you brung this on yourself. He wants you broke in real good before he sells you to a whore house. You’re gonna learn how to do all sorts of tricks, and by Christmas, you’ll be ready to give yourself as a present to any man who asks.”

“Never!” Anne glared at him. She remembered the gun tucked in her pocket, and she would damn well use it, starting with that bastard.

“That sassy mouth of yours is goin’ to earn you a good whippin’ with my belt,” the man declared. “Let’s go. Keep your mouth shut, girl, or I’ll shut it for you.”

Anne watched for any sign of life in the old man lying on the ground so still, but Harvey didn’t move and she feared he was truly dead... and it was all her fault for coming here in the first place. Anne badly wanted to cry but she wasn’t about to give the men that satisfaction. She only had two bullets in her gun, but she vowed she was going to use those bullets, and then she would fight like hell to protect herself from the third man.

“I wonder why Granddad and Anne haven’t returned from their ride?” Laney mused as she dished up vegetable soup for her husband’s lunch.

“Knowing the old man, he is probably showing Anne every inch of the ranch, and talking her ear off,” Seth said with a grin.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, Seth, but I can’t help but worry. If Granddad took ill or something, Anne would never be able to find her way back here to get help... and Comanche were spotted an hour north of the ranch a couple weeks ago...”

“It was a hunting party,” Seth said quietly, his mind immediately going to his brother. Scott preferred living with the Comanche rather than coming back here to live as a white man. He missed his brother, and hoped he would come for Christmas. Laney invited him, and Scott did enjoy watching Laney give him a rough time. “There haven’t been any raids since we were married,” he stated factually.

“I know that, but Granddad doesn’t miss too many meals,” she fretted.

“If they aren’t back in another hour or so I’ll go and try and find them,” Seth promised, more to ease her mind than because he was worried, but the hour passed, and then another, and Seth had to admit that he was starting to get concerned. Of course, he knew that the old man was capable. One of the horses probably came up lame and they were on foot. Harvey still knew how to build a fire and shoot a rabbit, so they wouldn’t starve, he reassured himself.

“I want to go, too,” Laney said, pouting.

“You need to stay here, honey, just in case they come back and something is wrong.” Laney knew something was wrong, so she stayed. But, after two hours, Seth was back, asking if they’d returned. He organized all of the hands and they went to search the north range, inch by inch. They finally found Harvey Coddington, barely clinging to his life. Seth sent one of the men to town to get the doctor while he carefully built a travois and brought him home. The makeshift bandages Seth put over the wounds were soaked through, and Harvey was still unconscious. After the first moment of shock, Laney pulled herself together and told Seth what to do to help her. She knew she had to stop the bleeding, and she did everything she could think of to do, including praying.

“What about Anne?” Laney finally remembered to ask about her friend.

“Three men took her, Laney. They weren’t bothering to hide their tracks. I’m going to go after her... if you are sure you can handle this on your own...? I don’t want to leave you, but you know those men will hurt Anne if I don’t rescue her.”

“Go and find her, darling. I will take care of Granddad.”

Seth nodded, tears in his eyes. “I should have known they would come and do something to keep him and Anne safe!”

Chapter Three

“You don’t know that this has anything to do with Anne’s stepfather, darling. It could be that they came across some drifters... or rustlers. Take some of the men with you,” she bossed.

“I can move faster and quieter without help, Laney.” He kissed her, hard. “You keep a gun close... just in case. If that bastard Grundy is behind this, he might try to get even with you for helping Anne. I want your promise that you will be extra careful.”

“I will be careful, Seth,” Laney promised. After he left, she got her gun and put it in the pocket of her dress. Seth taught her to shoot after they were married, and she knew how to hit what she aimed at. She sat there with her Granddad, talked to him, and willed him to regain consciousness. It seemed like forever before the doctor arrived, but he actually made good time. He shook his head, but quickly went to work, sewing the wounds shut, and digging the bullet out of one. Surprisingly, he said it was the head wound that kept Harvey unconscious. The loss of blood wasn’t good, either, and the doctor looked at Laney sadly and told her that it would be a miracle if Harvey survived until morning.

Laney promptly told her Granddad that he was not only going to live until morning, he was going to make a full recovery and be there when his first great-grandchild was born! “I promise you, Granddad, I will be so angry if you die that I will do something truly horrible! You must get well! I couldn’t bear to lose you!” She rested her head on his chest and cried.

It was easy to find their trail and it didn’t take long for Seth to realize they were traveling hard and fast. It was obvious they didn’t expect to be followed, and it was equally obvious they didn’t care if they killed their horses by pushing so hard and fast. The only good thing about that was that they hadn’t stopped to abuse Anne. He was determined to stop them from doing that, if it was at all humanly possible.

Anne hurt. Her butt was sore from the saddle, and she was exhausted from riding all day without a break. The men were grumbling; two of them wanted to stop hours ago, but the man making all the decisions kept driving them, insisting they wouldn’t get paid if they didn’t make good on their escape.

“Okay, Sims. This is far enough. I’m going to get me some of that girl right now and then sleep for eight hours straight.”

“We’ll get a fire started first, and have us some supper. She doesn’t get fed, hear me? He wants her hungry and eager to do what she’s told for a bite of bread.”

“I don’t give a damn about any of that. You promised me money and all the woman I wanted. I want woman and I want it now.”

“Why should you go first, Cully?”

“Why should either of you go first?” Sims asked, his voice full of deadly intent. The other two men seemed to realize that they were in danger, and Anne hoped they shot each other. It would be easier for her to save herself from what they planned to do to her if they turned on each other.

Cully suddenly went for his gun and Sims drew and fired before Cully cleared his holster. Cully grabbed his chest and then fell to the ground, dead.

“What about you, Tomas?” Sims demanded, still holding his gun.

“I wasn’t the one putting up the fuss,” the man insisted.

“Just don’t be starting. The longer we ride, the less of a fight she’ll put up. She can barely sit her saddle now. What about it, girl? You ready to stop for some fun?” he asked, giving her an evil laugh.

“Go to hell,” Anne told him, refusing to cower before him.

Sims laughed and said, “We keep riding until it’s too dark to see.”

White Eagle heard the shot and decided to investigate. He didn’t want trouble finding him in the dark; it would be better to sneak up on it instead. The warrior easily found what he was looking for; three whites, two male, one female. The female interested him because of her hair. In the moonlight he could tell she was a redhead, like his sister-in-law, but neither of the two men was his brother. White Eagle found this strange and wondered how the two managed to take the feisty Laney captive. He followed quietly, waiting to see what they would do next. After another hour the man in lead called them to a halt.

“Now we’ll see what you got under them clothes, girl,” he said and White Eagle had no trouble understanding the evil laugh. The girl would suffer.

Anne kicked at Sims when he reached up to pull her from the saddle. “Do not touch me,” she warned.

“I’m going to touch you all over,” Sims told her. “Tomas, get a fire going, and some coffee and beans on. You can have her after she’s broke in.”

“How much is that bastard paying you to do this?” Anne bitterly demanded. “He won’t pay you, you know. He’s already spent every cent my father earned in his lifetime, and he has gambling debts he can’t pay.”

“He’ll pay me or I’ll keep you,” Sims promised. “Now, get down or I’ll knock you off that horse with the back of my hand. Your Daddy don’t care how many bruises you get, girl.”

“I’m not making it easy for you,” Anne told him, her hand in her skirt pocket and wrapped around the butt of the derringer. She waited until he reached for her again, and then fired.

Sims fell to the ground, clutching his stomach, shock in his eyes. “Get her, Tomas!” he pleaded, but the other man didn’t come to do his bidding, even though Anne searched the darkness for him. She was so busy searching for Tomas that she didn’t notice Sims reach for his weapon. It was Sims’ dying scream that finally caught her attention.

Anne fired her gun a second time, but the Comanche brave seemed to be expecting her to do just that. When she missed, Anne did the only thing that any self-respecting lady from Boston would do... She promptly fainted.

White Eagle caught the woman in his strong arms and gently laid her on the ground. Now that he was closer, he realized that this pretty redhead was not Laney Coddington Sawyer. She was, however, riding one of the old man’s horses. His questions would have to wait until she awoke, and in the meantime, he made camp for them. He took the dead bodies a good distance from the camp, buried them in rocks and stones to keep the coyotes away. He started a fire because the air was turning quite chilly, and he took care of the horses. Once those things were done, White Eagle set about making coffee and heating the beans he found. He would rather have the rabbit he’d killed earlier, but this would do. The woman would need food inside her belly to stay warm through the night. He looked at her again and wondered who she was. She did not look familiar, but he imagined Laney had lots of friends from the East that he’d never met. He still couldn’t believe she’d had the nerve to shoot at him when he was only trying to protect her from the two men, but then, he had his face painted for battle and it probably frightened her, as it did most whites. He grinned. Unless she apologized he would turn her pale bottom up for a good spanking. It was one white man’s custom that he thought most women could benefit from occasionally.

The coffee was finally done and the beans were hot. White Eagle helped himself while careful to keep an eye on the woman.

Anne slowly came awake and her memory came rushing back! Comanche! She’d been taken by Indians! She’d gone from terrible trouble into an even worse situation... and

she didn't know what to do. She listened intently, but the only one she could hear was herself. Surely the Indian didn't simply go away and leave her here alone? She held her breath for what seemed like forever, trying to work up enough nerve to open her eyes.

"How much longer are you going to play possum?" an amused voice asked in the silence.

Anne's dark eyes flew open. She was lying on a blanket close to the fire, and she was surprised to realize she had another blanket covering her. The Indian was still there, but he was sitting on the other side of the fire, calmly drinking from a cup. He'd put on a shirt and washed his face, and didn't look as scary as he did before. "Who are you?" she asked.

"White Eagle of The People," he said with pride. "Who are you?"

"I'm Anne Lambert. What are you going to do with me?" she demanded, doing her best to hide her fear.

"How did you come to be with those two men?" White Eagle asked curiously and was dismayed when she promptly burst into tears. He got to his feet and silently walked around the fire to sit beside her. "Do not cry now. They cannot harm you."

Anne jumped when his voice came from right beside her. "Don't you touch me!" she warned, trying to scramble away from him.

White Eagle reached for her, his intention to calm her, but Anne decided to fight. She struck him as hard as she could, and his good intentions were gone just like that. He grabbed her arm and in the next instant she was lying face-down over his lap and his hand smacked loudly against her bottom.

"What are you doing?" she screeched loudly as his hand spanked her again.

"Something that you asked for by striking me for no good reason," was his answer as he continued to apply his hand to her rounded bottom in hard, stinging spans.

"Ouch! No!" Anne kicked her legs and tried to push herself off of his lap, but White Eagle easily held her and gave her a spanking that at first enraged her. She cursed him, using language she didn't learn from her Mama.

"You need a lesson with a bar of soap in your mouth," White Eagle told her, his voice full of disapproval.

"You just try it and I'll bite off your fingers!" Anne angrily promised. "I'm going to cut out your heart for mistreating me like this!" she threatened.

“You are welcome to try it if you wish to eat standing up for the rest of your life!” White Eagle was good at making threats, too. He increased the strength behind the spans and Anne’s threats turned to cries of pain.

“Owww! Stop! Damn you, I said, *STOP!*” When that got her nowhere, Anne realized a different tactic was in order. “Please, you are hurting me! Please, stop! Please?” Finally, when the pain in her backside was growing unbearable, she burst into tears. “I’m sorry I struck you. Please stop now. I’m sorry!”

White Eagle stopped, but it wasn’t because the redhead asked him to. It was because of the gun at his back.

“Let her go now.”

The voice was low, but White Eagle recognized it immediately. “Do you not have enough trouble with your own redhead, brother? Must you protect this one as well?”

“Scott?” Seth demanded, immediately holstering his gun. “What the hell?”

“Seth! Oh God, Seth!” Anne scrambled to her feet and threw herself into his arms, sobbing. “They killed Mr. Coddington! I must take you to him!”

“What does she mean, Seth?” White Eagle asked, his dark eyes blazing.

“The old man took Anne for a ride this morning. When they didn’t come back, we went looking and found him with three bullet holes in him. He wasn’t dead when I left to trail the ones who took Anne. I was afraid I wouldn’t get to her in time to protect her, and when I heard her screams, I thought...”

“She has not been harmed, brother,” White Eagle announced. “She is as feisty and stubborn as your woman. She concealed a gun and defended herself when the mean one meant to take her. I killed one of them, and finished what she started when he tried to shoot her before he died. The third man was shot by the mean one. That is how I found them and trailed them when I saw her hair in the moonlight. I thought it was Laney at first.”

“Thank you, Scott. Anne is Laney’s friend from Boston. Her step-father is behind this,” Seth explained. “The old man and I didn’t think he’d find her so soon. We were wrong and now the old man might pay for that mistake with his life.”

“He is strong,” Scott answered. “I have coffee and beans. I will heat more. We will fill our stomachs, sleep, and then ride at first light.”

Anne pouted. She received no sympathy whatsoever from Seth over the fact that his brother spanked her! In fact, he acted as though she deserved the child’s punishment. She wanted to refuse to eat, but immediately knew that she would be the only one to

suffer from that. "I suppose you spanked poor Laney?" she angrily accused as she finished eating, her dark eyes snapping at Seth.

"That is none of your business, young lady," he promptly answered.

"The two of you seem to think that spanking grown women is acceptable!"

"It provided a certain amount of satisfaction," Scott spoke up, a grin on his face.

"Besides, there isn't a redhead alive who couldn't use a good spanking on a daily basis."

"How dare you?" she sputtered.

"I'm stating pure fact." Scott looked at her, and then said, "You need to wrap up in your blankets and get some sleep, Annie. We'll ride hard and fast tomorrow."

"I don't have to go to bed if I don't want to!" she declared.

"No, you can act like a stubborn child and find yourself over my knee again," he replied, and his manner told her he wouldn't mind at all.

"You are impossible!" she said, throwing up her hands.

"Go to sleep unless you want a sore butt to sit your saddle with in the morning," Seth added his two cents worth. "Scott will tan you again for sure if you continue to act like a bratty child... and I won't stop him a second time," he warned.

The two men waited to grin at each other until she gave them her back, doing her very best to insult both of them as she did as she was told.

Anne was beyond angry. Men were not to be trusted, not a one of them! First of all, her Papa died, leaving her at the mercy of a step-father who only married her Mama to get his hands on their money. Her step-father cruelly abused her and hired other men to do the same; she rescued herself, only to find herself at the mercy of Seth's Comanche brother, Scott Sawyer! And, with her luck, she was going to have Harvey Coddington's death on her conscience, too! Life was so unfair and cruel to women!" She started crying, and even though she tried to muffle the sound, she was unsuccessful.

Seth was sound asleep, but Scott heard her tears and felt drawn to comfort Anne. He got up and knelt down beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She immediately opened her eyes and he held out his arms, offering her comfort and safety.

Anne didn't know what she was thinking, but she found herself in Scott's arms, hugging him as if her life depended upon it. He carefully picked her up and carried her away from the camp so they wouldn't wake Seth. He sat down on a large rock and held her on his lap, rocking her back and forth, and singing to her in words she did not understand.

The little redhead's body was shaking from all she'd been through that day and Scott felt like kicking himself for not being more patient and understanding with her. He sang a song the women used to soothe their young and it seemed to soothe Anne, too. When she finally slept, he simply sat there and held her for a long time before taking her back to her blankets and tucking her in. He leaned down in the moonlight and gently kissed her cheek before seeking his own bed and sleep.

Laney didn't leave her Granddad's side all night. She talked to him, told him she loved him, and begged him to fight to live. She promised him her child would be a grandson, and knew she spoke the truth. She also told him how much she was looking forward to Christmas, and told him she'd been working on a gift for him for several weeks now, and she simply couldn't wait to see him wear it. She sang to Harvey, read to him, but she constantly let him know she loved him and that he couldn't die without making things completely right with Scott.

When the Doctor arrived early the next morning, he shook his head in amazement. "Harvey is a tough old cuss. I didn't give him much of a chance yesterday, but his heart is stronger today, Miss Laney. He needs good, rich broth to build up his strength again, if you can get him to wake up and take some."

"I'll get him to wake up," Laney promised with confidence.

"Any word yet about Miss Lambert?" the doctor asked kindly.

Chapter Four

Anne was embarrassed when she was awakened by Scott. His eyes gave her no clue as to what he was thinking, but he probably thought her very foolish and silly for crying like a babe last night. “Drink this,” he said quietly, handing her a cup of hot coffee. “It will help ward off the chill.” As usual, he was not wearing a jacket of any sort... just a vest over his bare skin. Her dark eyes were drawn to his chest. He was even more handsome in the pale light of morning, and it was easy to see the two men were brothers.

“What can I do to help?” she offered as the men moved around, packing up their camp.

“You can drink your coffee and eat some of those beans while they’re hot, Anne,” Seth told her with a smile. “I’m proud of you for keeping your head yesterday and not doing anything foolish to get yourself hurt or killed before help could reach you. And, do I have my little wife to thank for arming you with that derringer and teaching you to shoot it?” he asked, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

“You won’t scold Laney, will you?” she asked in consternation, biting her lower lip.

“No, I’ll give her a hug and a kiss,” he replied. “The old man and I didn’t think to do that, and I’m proud of Laney for thinking of it; your actions gave Scott the distraction he needed, and I think it would have bought me the time I needed to find you before they harmed you. I am sorry I underestimated Grundy. It won’t happen again.”

“I will promise that, also,” Scott shocked his brother by stating firmly. “I will protect what is mine.”

“Yours?” Seth’s eyebrow shot up again.

“Mine. Annie might not know this yet, but she is mine. I knew this last night when I held her. She is the beautiful woman of my dreams.”

Anne’s mouth fell open in shocked surprise, and Seth looked at her in stunned amazement. Scott put his finger under Anne’s chin and gently closed her mouth. “You will know this in your heart soon enough, but for now, I will keep you safe. That is my promise.”

Seth couldn’t wait to get home and tell Laney about this. He was also worried about the man he loved as a father. “Let’s get going,” he urged the other two to hurry.

“You are so good at stringing popcorn for the Christmas Tree, Granddad! You have patience and your strands were a lot longer than the ones Seth made last year,” Laney spoke gently, hoping and praying for a response.

“I have been trying to think of good names for a boy child, Granddad. What do you think of Louis Harvey Coddington?” she asked.

“Hate that Louis name,” Harvey managed to whisper. “Not manly enough for my boy.”

“You can pick his name if you get well and promise me you’ll be here when he is born, Granddad,” she tearfully answered, reaching for his hand and holding it tight.

“I promise, honey,” Harvey said, and then he slept.

Laney woke him a bit later and spooned some of the beef broth she’d made into him, along with some water. She felt as though she could see a change in his color after just a few spoonfuls of the broth.

The doctor came by again around noon, and smiled when Harvey opened his eyes. “Do you know who I am, Harvey?” he asked.

“What the hell kind of question is that, Doc? I’ve knowed you ever since you came out here twenty or so years ago!”

“You’ll do just fine, Harvey!” The good doctor actually laughed. “You have a great nurse, and I think we are witnessing a Christmas miracle a couple of weeks early. You had me scared, old friend.” Doc listened to Harvey’s heart and smiled. “You stay in bed and rest, drink that broth Miss Laney made for you, and you’ll be up and around by Christmas, Harvey.”

“I got to get up and go find Annie. Those bastards took her,” Harvey said angrily, determined he was going to do for them.

“Granddad, Seth is tracking them, and I sent the men after him, to help. Seth will get her back; he found me, remember?” she asked, reminding him of the time she was taken captive by the Comanche. Seth risked his life for hers, even to the point of putting her and his love for Harvey over his love and loyalty to his brother, Scott... Scott was determined to hate the white man and live as a Comanche brave, even though he was white himself. Scott married her to his brother under Comanche law, positive he would be punishing Harvey, and Seth, too. His plan backfired; Laney and Seth fell in love, almost at first sight. Once Scott got past his anger, he accepted Laney as his sister, and even came to the ranch a couple of times to visit. Laney invited him to come and have Christmas with them, and she knew that both Seth and Harvey were hoping he would come. “Please rest now, Granddad. You are too weak to be of help to Seth, and would only hold him back.”

“Damn it, girl! You’re right, but I don’t like it one bit!” he growled. “Give me more of that broth. I ain’t gonna stay in this bed more than today.”

Doc smiled. “You just do what you’re doing, Miss Laney. Send for me if he starts running a fever. I’ll come by again tomorrow to see how Harvey is doing.”

“There is food in the kitchen, Doc. Would you like for me to fix you a plate?” she offered, grateful to the man for his attention and care for her Granddad.

“Thank you. I’d be right pleased for a meal, Miss Laney. I haven’t had anything since yesterday. Been real busy,” he rubbed his face with his hand, his eyes telling her he was exhausted as well as hungry.

“After you eat you’re more than welcome to sleep in the guest room if you have nowhere to rush off to. You need to take care of yourself, too,” she added in a scolding tone.

“I’m not as young as I used to be,” he conceded. “I thank you, Miss Laney. You are a kind woman.” He sat at the kitchen table and cleaned his plate in record time; she refilled it, and he ate a bit slower the second time. She then served him a generous slice of chocolate cake, and he enjoyed each bite. “This was real good, Miss Laney. Thank you kindly. I’ll take you up on that bed now, and that way I’ll be up to dealing with whatever else comes my way today.”

She showed him to a room, and promised she would see to his horse and buggy. One of the hands immediately came when she called out and said he would be glad to care for Doc’s weary animal. Once that was taken care of, Laney took her grandfather more broth and fed him. He thanked her and then said, “Girl, you’re tired. Lie down here with me and rest. I can’t do anything for Annie, but I will take care of you. You got to sleep now. Come on, there’s plenty of room, and if I need you, I’ll wake you up.” Laney was too tired to argue. She lie down beside her Granddad and was asleep within seconds, a prayer for Seth’s and Anne’s safety still on her lips.

Harvey promised himself he would rest until Laney woke, and then he was getting up. By his reckoning, Seth should be back by now, unless something went wrong. So help him, he was going after those three, and there was no where they could hide he wouldn’t find them, and if they hurt Annie or Seth, they would die slow.

Anne kept stealing looks at Scott when she thought he wouldn’t see her. She couldn’t believe he fancied himself in love with her! Why, it was ridiculous, wasn’t it? She’d tried to shoot him; did hit him as hard as she could; received a sound spanking from him; been held tenderly and comforted when she truly needed another human being’s touch. How could he know she was the one he wanted? *And to call her beautiful?* The man had to be touched in the head to say such things.

“We need to stop and rest the horses a bit,” Seth said as they came across a stream.

“I don’t remember this place from yesterday,” Anne said. “Are you sure we are heading in the right direction?”

Scott found her question funny and laughed as he reached up to lift her from her saddle and carefully put her on the ground.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny,” she said, stomping her foot... right on the toe of his moccasin.

Scott’s laughter immediately died. He gave her a rough shake and asked, “Do you wish another spanking so soon, woman?”

“No!” She tried to back away, but his hold on her upper arms was too tight. Even if she wanted to get away from him, she couldn’t. He was very strong, even though his grip on her was not painful. She suddenly was ashamed of hurting him. “I’m sorry I stomped on your toes. I don’t normally behave like such a shrew.”

“You are a woman with hair of fire... It is to be expected of you,” Scott said matter-of-factly. “Once that passion is put to another use, you won’t stomp on my foot unless you are in need of a spanking.”

Anne blushed as she realized the meaning behind his words and she couldn’t look him in the eye. He gave her another shake, gentle this time. “Collect some wood for a fire. I will find us a rabbit or two before Seth catches his fish.” He leaned down and put his cheek next her hers and held her like that for a few moments. “We will learn each other’s ways soon, little one. And, just so you know, both Seth and I know this country well. We are not lost. The ones who took you were traveling in circles most of the time, trying to keep from being followed.” He tipped her chin up so she was forced to look at him. “Will you collect firewood and start a fire now?” he asked.

“Yes, Scott,” she answered. She was hungry, and they had to be hungry, too. Neither of them would be here but for her, and the least she could do was to start a fire. She got busy, and had a fire going soon. She put on some coffee, but the supplies they’d taken from the dead kidnappers were gone. If Scott and Seth weren’t lucky with their hunting and fishing, they would go hungry. Her stomach growled at that thought.

As it turned out, both Seth and Scott were successful, and they had a feast. The fish was done first, and tasted simply wonderful. The rabbits were worth waiting for, and to be honest, Anne’s backside was grateful for the long rest. She was tender from sitting the saddle before Scott spanked her, and that painful spanking only made matters worse. She longed for a pillow to put on her saddle, but could only imagine the hoots of laughter she would get if she tried to put a pillow under her bottom!

“Why are your eyes full of temper, little Annie?” Scott asked with an amused smile. “Did we not provide a good meal?”

“Yes, the food was wonderful, and I thank you both,” she said with a sincerity that couldn’t be faked. “I am thankful you both came to my rescue,” she added. “I’ve done nothing to deserve such consideration.”

“You are a guest in my home, and you are my wife’s friend,” Seth told her and shrugged. “Of course I would help you, Anne.”

“I would not allow those men to rape you, Annie,” Scott added. “I might be Comanche, but I am also a man with principles.” He reached out and took her hand in his. “Now tell me what you were thinking that had you so angry...?”

“I was wishing for a soft pillow for my saddle,” she admitted, her cheeks turning a bright red. “My bottom hurts something awful. And, even if I did have a pillow, the two of you would laugh at me if I were to try to ride with it on my saddle...” They were grinning now, like two peas in a pod. “See, you are smiling at the thought!”

“I am smiling because you think I would permit you a pillow after you were soundly spanked. Sitting on a sore backside is part of the punishment,” Scott told her, his voice and expression making it sound as though she should have already known that.

“I think you gave your lady her very first spanking, brother. She was frightened when I had to give Laney a few swats.”

“A man spansks a woman he cares about,” Scott told her. “My brother cares only to keep his woman safe and to keep peace in their home. He does not bully her or take out his temper on her. That is not how a real man behaves. A real man spansks with the intention of correcting a behavior or to insure obedience. It is a firm expression of love.”

“You should discuss this with Laney. Ask her how she feels before and after a punishment,” Seth suggested. “She feels safe and cherished.”

“Mr. Grundy beat me with his walking cane; I felt betrayed and hurt and terrified he would do it again. He also broke my finger as a punishment for speaking to someone and asking for help.”

Scott muttered something in Comanche and got to his feet, his hand on the hilt of his knife. “Where is this man who would abuse you so? I will make him regret being born!”

“He’s the one who hired these men to kidnap Anne, Scott. He married her mother, and just a few months later, she had an accident and died. Anne thinks now that he is responsible for her death. I know for a fact he is not going to get another chance at Anne.” Seth was furious with himself for assuming Grundy would not be able to find

Anne so quickly. The old man might pay for his mistake, and Seth would have to live with that knowledge for the rest of his life!

“He will die by my hand,” Scott said quietly, and the words were all the more terrifying for his lack of emotion. Seth knew his brother was deadly serious, and he understood the feeling well. He felt the same way. Grundy needed to be dealt with so he couldn’t harm Anne.

Anne’s dark eyes were full of fear; not for Mr. Grundy, but for Scott. She would not have him harmed because of her! “Please do not go near him, Scott. He is evil, and I would not have you become involved. He would think nothing of murdering you. He shot Mr. Coddington without a qualm, and wouldn’t even let me get down from my horse to check on him!”

“Do you fear that I am a weak man?” Scott was clearly offended. “I am a great warrior.”

“You are nothing like Mr. Grundy. You are a good man; he is evil. You would fight fair; he would stab you in the back. Please tell me you will stay with me,” she begged. “I could not bear to lose you now that I’ve found you.” *Was she really saying those words out loud and to him? They were true, but she was used to guarding her feelings. Men didn’t like her! They didn’t like her because she asked questions and demanded answers. And, here she was telling a man she’d just met that she couldn’t live without him!* “You must think me foolish and presumptuous,” she tearfully proclaimed. “I have no right to speak to you as if I own you, or you owe me any explanations. I’m sorry!” She was so embarrassed she didn’t know what to do with herself.

Chapter Five

Seth watched in no little amusement as Scott swallowed his temper and outrage and took Anne in his arms to reassure her. "I feel as you do. This is not something I have experienced before; it is what my brother felt when I married him to his wife. They loved each other strongly, without knowing where this love came from. It is how we feel for each other. I will guard you with my life, Annie. I will keep you safe from all harm. This is meant to be."

"I think you are so handsome, Scott. I am truly lucky. You are my Christmas present from God. I think Mama is watching and asked God to bless me with you."

Seth couldn't help laughing at his brother's expression. "I've waited for this moment, brother, and I am happy to be here to witness that certain look on your face. I'm going to fetch the preacher as soon as we get home and put you two out of your misery. It's only fair, you know," he told Scott with a brotherly smile that was half teasing and half serious.

"In my heart Annie is already my wife, but I will offer her respect until we speak the white man's words in front of God and witnesses," Scott said with dignity.

"I hope you don't want a fancy wedding, Anne?" Seth teased. "My brother is not a patient man. In the Comanche way, you have both declared your desire for each other in front of me, and you are wed." He loved watching her eyes widen in surprise, but to his amazement, the surprise was replaced with joy.

"I am now Anne Sawyer. I like that," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears, happy tears, as she looked up at the man who won her heart so easily. "My friends in Boston will not believe my good fortune. I am married for love, not money or position, but for love."

"Let's get you two home, and hope the old man will be able to see you married. He would approve," Seth said with quiet certainty.

Scott lifted Anne and gently sat her on her saddle. "If I had a pillow I would permit you to use it," Scott looked up at her and whispered so his brother couldn't hear. "It would be my gift to you this day." His words earned him a beautiful smile, and they were soon on their way.

Seth's mind was on his wife, and he hoped Laney remained at home and did not follow him like he feared she would. He did not wish to punish her again, especially now that she was with child, but if she followed after him, he would set her cute butt on fire. If she lost her Granddad, however, she was going to want the men who caused his death. He couldn't blame her for that... He prayed.

Scott wanted the chance to talk to the old man and tell him he was sorry. He'd been a miserable man the last year, missing his brother and missing the old man, too. His heart was no longer Comanche. He'd taken a white woman for his wife, and his path was now clear. He would now live in the white world as did his family. Now that Willow was safely married to a good man, there was no reason to remain with The People.

Laney woke with a start and looked around, trying to decide what woke her. Granddad was sleeping, and she felt his forehead, making sure there was no sign of a fever. She heard footsteps in the hallway outside the door, and they were not Seth's or Anne's. Laney put her hands on her gun and waited to see who came through the door, fully prepared to shoot if necessary.

"How is Harvey doing?" Doc asked in a hushed tone.

"I've just checked his forehead and he feels cool to me. I've been sound asleep!" she sheepishly admitted.

"Good," Doc said with a smile. "You needed to sleep. He checked the bandages on Harvey, and Harvey woke while he was doing it.

"Doc, what are you doing here again?" he demanded.

"Miss Laney fed me and offered me a bed to take a nap. I took her up on it. I'm not as young as I used to be and my body reminds me of that when I go too long without sleep."

"I'm okay and don't need fussing over," Harvey insisted. "I made Laney lie down here and rest. With the baby, she needs extra rest," he argued.

"It was a good idea, Harvey. She slept until I woke her up coming to check on you once more before I leave. You're doing much better. You just keep your stubborn hide in this bed. Miss Laney, walk me out, please. I want to give you some instructions on how to tend the wounds." Once they were out of hearing, Doc opened his black bag and gave her a small bottle. "One or two drops of this in some coffee will keep Harvey in bed and resting, Miss Laney. I'm not fool enough to think he'll listen to either of us, but it is important Harvey gets plenty of rest right now. We're lucky there is no sign of infection, but keep checking him for fever. Send for me if you need me. I want to keep that old man in this world if I can," he added emotionally. "I owe him my life," he simply stated, and then took his leave.

Laney took the small bottle to the kitchen, made coffee for both of them and added the drops to her granddad's cup. She carried the tray upstairs and he was cursing and staring out the window.

“They should have been back by now, Laney.”

“You have to trust in Seth, Granddad. You know he will find them.” She put the tray on the table and said, “I brought us some coffee, Granddad. Doc said it was alright for you to have some. How much sugar would you like?” she asked.

Harvey growled an answer, letting her know how grumpy he was, but he took the cup, sipped the hot brew, and then nodded. “This is good, honey. Thank you.”

Laney talked of other things and sipped her coffee and watched as her Granddad grew sleepy. When he was almost asleep, she took the empty cup from his hand and then made sure he was properly covered before turning down the lamp and leaving the room. She left the door open in case he woke and needed her. Laney went down to the kitchen and put on food for supper. She was sure that Seth would be home soon, and she prayed that he would bring Anne back... unharmed. She trusted Seth, and knew he would do everything in his power to make sure Anne was safe. Laney made several trips upstairs to check on her Granddad, pleased that he was resting.

After her tenth trip in the last few hours, Laney came down the back stairway into the kitchen and found a man standing there. She immediately knew who he was and felt her temper flare immediately. “Who do you think you are, coming into my home without an invitation?” she demanded, her voice intentionally sharp.

“You aided my daughter in running away from home, Miss Coddington. I am here to warn you that any further meddling on your part will have drastic consequences.”

“First of all, you are not Anne’s father. Secondly, she is of age to do as she pleases. I am married and my name is Mrs. Seth Sawyer. Your men shot and seriously wounded my Granddad. I will see you rot in prison for that.”

“Someone needs to thrash you severely.” He raised his walking cane in a threatening manner.

“Someone needs to take a whip to you,” Laney returned. “Or better yet, shoot you dead... Or turn you over to the Comanche.”

“How dare you speak to your better in such a flippant matter? You always were the subject of gossip, whore that you are.” He once again raised his cane and Laney pulled out her gun.

“You have three seconds to head for the door and get out of here or I am going to blow you to hell.”

He took an enraged step toward her and when Laney pulled the trigger, the gun jammed and wouldn’t fire at all! She tried again, but the gun was not working. She quickly moved out of reach when Grundy took a swing at her with his cane. He kept coming at

her, and Laney couldn't get past him to run to her Granddad's study to get another gun. The knives were on the other side of the kitchen, and she couldn't get to them, either. Grundy was like a man possessed. He kept swinging that cane, and she suspected he was enjoying her attempts to evade him, and the fear he was responsible for. Laney's thoughts were for her baby, and protecting him from the madman who wanted to beat her!

"I am going to teach you a lesson, whore. You'll never interfere in my business again!" He raised the cane high and Laney knew there was nowhere she could go to escape him. She covered her baby with her arms and curled into a ball. Laney expected to feel the blow any second, but before the cane landed, there was a gunshot! Grundy cried out in pain and grabbed his stomach.

"Move away from that child before I shoot again," Harvey's voice was strong and if Laney didn't know better, she would swear he was just fine.

"I need help!" Grundy cried out, falling to the floor. "Oh God, it hurts!"

"You're dying, you son of a bitch. Your men made a big mistake; they didn't make sure I was dead before they rode off with Annie. My boy went after her and he tracks like a Comanche. Annie will be well rid of you." Harvey Coddington kept his gun steady as he made his way down the stairs. "Are you all right, honey? Did this son of a bitch hurt you?"

"I'm fine, Granddad, thanks to you. My gun jammed," she explained. Some instinct told her not to run to his side and support him. He was a proud man and he'd saved her life, and probably her child's life. She would show him respect.

"Please, get me a doctor. I'll pay you anything you ask! I hurt so much." Grundy was bawling.

"You're gut shot; ain't nothing Doc can do but watch you die. You got maybe another fifteen minutes, so you'd best make your peace with God, if you believe in Him!"

"Just shoot me and end it!" Grundy begged, sobbing.

"You caused little Annie a lot of pain; you're getting a small dose of it back." Harvey Coddington could be a hard man and he felt no sympathy at all for the wounded man. He spared a glance for Laney and she met his gaze with understanding. "You ain't an animal to be put down."

"I don't want to die! I'm going to be rich; you don't understand! I had it all planned. Oh, why did that bitch have to spoil everything?" he ranted. He finally gave one final gasp of pain and it was over.

“I need to sit down, Laney. Pull a chair over here, honey,” Harvey bossed and smiled when she hurried to obey him. “Thought the hands would come running by now.”

“I sent them out to follow after Seth,” she admitted.

“*ALL* of them, girl?” Harvey asked, his tone incredulous. “Seth is going to paddle your fanny for that.” He chuckled as he shook his head. “Lucky for us I woke up when I heard a strange voice down here.”

They heard the front door open, and voices in the large entryway. Seth hurried into the kitchen, his dark eyes searching for Laney. She ran to him and threw herself into his arms, crying.

“She’s alright, boy, just emotional.”

“You don’t look dead to me, old man,” Scott said as he followed Annie into the kitchen.

“I ain’t that easy to kill, son,”

The days passed quickly, and Laney was determined to make Christmas special for their family. It was hard to tell who was most surprised when Anne told them that she and Scott were married, but she definitely recovered first. After all, Seth had the same affect on her senses that Scott did on Anne’s.

Harvey refused to go back to his bed to rest until Laney promised to have Seth and Scott carry a table in his room so they could all eat supper in his room and share their stories. Anne told all of them she was grateful for their love and gave each of them a hug. The older man was happy and proud that he’d saved Laney, and glad that neither of his boys were at the ranch when it happened. The Sheriff held an inquest in the bedroom the next day, and based on all the information gathered, he pronounced all the deaths self-defense. He told Anne that he was proud of her for showing so much courage and getting away from Grundy, and then he congratulated Anne and Scott on their marriage.

Harvey was proud and happy to have his boys home again. He and Scott sat down across the table from each other and hashed out their differences. Harvey was shocked to learn how things appeared to Scott as a young boy, and Scott finally understood Harvey’s reasoning for why he handled situations as he did. Scott had to admit that he’d been wrong and had been responsible for most of the fixes he got into. He was able to see that Harvey truly did care for both him and Seth. The anger from his youth was set aside and peace reined in the Coddington home.

As for Laney and Anne, they were pleased to be sisters-in-law, and they were amazed at how quickly they fell for the Sawyer brothers. Anne quickly realized that her husband truly believed in spanking, and he wasn’t big on warnings or second chances. One

morning when she and Laney were disagreeing about something, Scott and Seth entered the kitchen, and before they could tell them that the argument was just silly and not serious, they were both upended, getting spanked for upsetting the harmony and peace within the home. Finally, Seth paused long enough to ask what they were fighting about, and Laney tearfully explained they were just debating which of them had the best pie crust recipe. The men were slightly ashamed, but promptly decided the best way to decide was for them each to bake a pie for supper that night. Scott gave Annie's rear a soothing rub before he released her, and he and Seth made a point of bringing home a Christmas tree for the parlor. They also dried the dishes at lunch and supper, after telling both women that their pie crusts both tasted wonderful. Harvey sat back and watched with a wide grin on his face. He had a secret of his own he was planning for Christmas, and he hoped it didn't backfire on him.

"Sir, I'll do your shopping for you...?" Seth offered, trying to keep the man from taking the buggy into town by himself.

"Or I will drive you," Scott offered. He did not miss the grimaces of pain Harvey did his best to hide from all of them.

"I'm going by myself," he said firmly. "Now, you boys keep those little gals happy today, and don't let Laney work too hard. They've been baking up a storm and planning a feast for supper tonight and another one for tomorrow. I don't want them too tired to go to Midnight Services at Church," he said in his usual bossy style. "And, Scott, it would please Annie if you'd go to church with us tonight. She needs you with her through this Christmas since she is missing her Mama so much."

"You're right, sir," Scott answered. "I'd planned to go for her sake."

"You're a good husband, son. You both are, and I'm proud of that. I wasn't as smart as you two and wasted too much time on wounded pride. Now kiss those gals and see if they'll let you help out some way. I'll be home in time for supper," he added as he climbed on the buggy seat and picked up the reins. "I intend to have lunch in town." He hadn't ridden a horse yet, and to be honest, he wasn't sure he could handle driving, but he didn't want to take one of the boys along. He had to see his lawyer, and then meet the stage. He stopped when he was out of sight of the house and waited for a couple of minutes until one of his men noticed him. "Grady, I'm not as up to driving as I thought I was. Care to drive me into town and back?"

"Sure will, Boss," the man promptly answered, and climbed from his mount onto the buggy. "You take Joe back and put him in the barn, Corey," he said. "I got me a date in town!" He set his hat on his head, nodded, and then grinned at Harvey. "Thanks for asking me, Boss. I'm a better driver than Corey," he claimed, and kept his boss entertained for the long ride.

“What are you two doing?” Seth asked as he and Scott went to the kitchen per the old man’s orders. “Do you need any help?”

“Don’t ask that question unless you are prepared to be put to work,” Anne playfully shook a wooden spoon at her brother-in-law.

“I don’t know much about cooking or baking, but I can wash dishes,” Scott said with quiet dignity, knowing he would be the laughingstock of The People if the other braves saw him doing women’s work.

“I think that is the sweetest thing you could offer to do, Scott! Only a man who has nothing to prove would offer to do dishes. I love you so much,” she declared and then put her arms around him and kissed him passionately.

Scott decided he would help with dishes more often if it made Annie kiss like that!

“I love you too, my darling,” Laney whispered to Scott. “I would love your help,” she told him.

By the time the baking was done and the dining room table set with fancy dishes for Christmas Eve, the kitchen was sparkling clean and the house looked festive. They all changed into Sunday clothes and were relaxing in front of the fire in the parlor. The last minute details for their evening meal would wait until Harvey was home. Scott heard the buggy first, and they all got up to go and see if the old man needed help.

“Thank you for driving us today, Grady,” they heard him say to one of the hands.

Seth was suddenly aware that his wife was too quiet and her eyes were fixed on the woman in the buggy. “What’s the matter, honey?” he asked of Laney.

“What is she doing here?” Laney whispered, obviously angry and distressed.

“Phyllis!” Anne said. “What a surprise! Right, Laney?” she turned to the other redhead to ask.

“Oh, this is a surprise, alright. Mother, I can’t believe you are here.”

“It’s Christmas, Laney. You’ve been married for over a year now, and I have yet to meet your husband. Harvey wrote to me and invited me to come, and I was pleased to accept. I’ve missed you,” she said quietly.

Chapter Six

Laney gave her Granddad a sour look. He responded with a wink and asked, "Is supper ready? I'm a starving man. I nooned at Crispin's and that woman don't know how to make anything right. I'm fortunate that Laney and Annie feed me well," Harvey said, and once they were inside he sniffed and said, "It smells good in here. Just like Christmas."

Once they were all seated, Harvey offered grace, reminding all that Christmas was a time of miracles and changes of heart. Laney knew he was speaking for her benefit and she felt angry. She didn't want her Mother here. All she would do is complain and ruin the holiday for everyone.

"Harvey has told me that you took over the cooking and cleaning when his housekeeper quit, Laney. I did not know you could cook, but this is simply delicious," Phyllis commented, obviously impressed.

"Matilda taught me," Laney said quietly. "You ate my cooking when I was home; you just didn't realize it at the time."

"Why did you keep it such a secret?" Phyllis asked, hurt.

"Because I didn't want you to tell me that cooking was beneath me," Laney replied, her voice testy. "You constantly found fault with anything I did. So, I kept things private if they mattered to me so you couldn't take them away."

"I only wanted your happiness, Laney."

"No, you wanted to be happy, Mother. You wanted me to live up to your expectations and marry someone you handpicked."

"I certainly didn't expect you to come out here and marry the first man who looked at you!" Phyllis answered sharply.

"I didn't. I married his brother instead. Anne married the first man who looked at me. Granddad, I don't know what you hoped to accomplish, but this is not going to work. Excuse me; I suddenly feel like throwing up!"

"That is so crude, Laney!" Phyllis couldn't seem to keep from criticizing her daughter.

"I'd better go and check on Laney," Anne murmured, jumping to her feet.

"No, I will go," Seth answered and Scott correctly interpreted his look. Little Laney was due a spanking for showing such poor manners.

To Seth's surprise, Laney was actually ill. He went into the bath with her and held her hair out of the way while she emptied her stomach. He handed her a glass of water to rinse her mouth. "Better now?" he asked.

"Yes. Why in hell did Granddad bring her here?" she fumed.

"Why are you being so rude?" Seth demanded, putting his hands on his hips. "I felt like turning you over my knee right there in front of everyone."

"Me? What about her?"

"I heard her compliment you, and you weren't polite enough to say 'thank you'."

"I am not going to sit there while she rips me apart. And, damn it, I love you! How dare she accuse me of marrying the first man I met! I wouldn't do that; I didn't intend to get married at all... ever! Not unless I was desperately in love and wanted to bear the man's children... Like I do with you, darling." Her green eyes filled with angry tears. "How dare she make fun of us like that?"

"Laney, you were acting like an immature brat, and your behavior did not inspire confidence in our marriage. You turned into a rebellious teenager the moment you set eyes on Phyllis. What is she to think? She doesn't see a mature woman who is in love with her husband; she saw a child who married a man to keep from coming home."

"I am not going to kiss her butt!"

"I am going to kiss your butt with my hand," Seth said sternly.

"No! I don't want a spanking! I didn't do anything wrong!" she squealed as Seth took her into their bedroom and led her over to their bed.

"Pull up your skirts and bend over the bed," he ordered. "By the time this spanking is over, you will know that I expect my wife to behave when we entertain guests in this house."

"She is not my guest! She is a pain in my neck, and always has been!"

"Now she will be a pain for your backside. Do what I said, Laney, or my belt will come off and I'll spank you for defiance when I am done spanking you for acting like a snotty brat."

Laney stomped her foot in frustration, but she pulled up her skirts and lay over the bed, turning up her bottom for a spanking. To her, this was the embarrassing part of a

spanking. She hated submitting to her husband in this manner, but she'd learned early in the marriage that defiance earned another punishment with his belt, and on top of the spanking she'd already had, it was nearly unbearable. Laney did not want a strapping, so she submitted and did her best to accept a spanking when he decided it was warranted. "It is Christmas Eve, Seth! I do not want a spanking for Christmas! We have to go and sit on those hard pews in Church tonight!" she reminded him.

"It is too bad that you did not think of that earlier, Mrs. Sawyer. Now you will have a sore bottom to ride on the buggy there and back, and in Church you will sit still and there will be no squirming to draw attention to the fact you were spanked like a naughty child." He chose the words deliberately, letting her know he was displeased with her behavior. Seth reached under her and untied the blue ribbon holding up her pretty drawers. In another moment they were down around her knees, baring her backside for his hand.

"Please, Seth! You don't know her like I do!" Laney tried to make him understand, but her words fell on deaf ears. He started spanking her immediately and she quickly realized that he was not messing around. He meant for this spanking to sting and chastise. He spanked hard and deliberate, aiming for one cheek and then the other. It did not take long for both sides of her bottom to turn a dark shade of red. Laney was already crying and asking him to stop, but after a year of warming her bottom when necessary, he could tell she was far from being sorry for her behavior.

Laney was sure she wouldn't feel like sitting by the time Seth stopped spanking her. His hand moved lower and his new target was her sensitive thighs. Laney loved it when he stroked her thighs when they made love. Her legs were more sensitive than her breasts! And, she felt that was the reason that spanking her thighs was extremely painful. This time was no exception. She was begging and pleading with him to stop from the first spank. "I'm sorry, Seth! I was rude, and I'll behave now! Please, please don't spank me there!"

Seth felt he was finally reaching his wife. "Are you truly sorry or just saying the words?" he asked, spanking her again.

Laney yelped and said, "I'm sorry."

"Good. I'll give you a few more and I want you to think about how you are going to apologize and how you will behave when we go back downstairs."

"I don't want to go back downstairs! I won't be able to sit, and everyone will know you spanked me! That is just too embarrassing, Seth! Please don't make me do that."

"You will change your mind," he calmly stated, and this time he targeted her sit spots.

Laney cried out and tried to get up when he spanked her between her bottom and her thighs. That area bruised easily, and unfortunately, Seth always ended a spanking by spanking her there. He was being very firm this time and it hurt too much for her to lie

still and accept it. His left hand moved to the small of her back and held her down while his right hand gave her sit spots a thorough spanking.

Laney told him she was sorry and begged him to stop. She promised she would obey him and go down to dinner. She finally stopped struggling and lie perfectly still, surrendering to the punishment.

At that point, he knew she'd had enough. He gave her ten more hard spanks, and then rubbed her back while she cried. He told her he loved her and told her that she was too beautiful to revert to the way she was behaving earlier. When she quieted, he pulled up her drawers and then helped her to her feet. He tied the ribbon on the garment, and then smoothed her skirts, making sure she looked beautiful. Then he pulled her down on his lap to sit while he comforted her.

Laney knew she was forgiven, and after she washed her face, she placed her hand in Seth's and they returned to the dining room.

"Do you feel better, Laney?" Anne asked, her dark eyes full of concern.

"Yes, I do. I apologize to all of you for behaving like a bratty child. Mother, I am sorry I was so rude. It is Christmas Eve, and not a time for rehashing the past. I know you will come to love Seth while you are here, and you will understand why I chose him. I am very fortunate to have such a loving husband. He cares about me, and he loves me, flaws and all."

"Just as you love me." Seth looked into her eyes, and then gave her a kiss before he pulled out her chair and seated her. If she was in pain, she kept it well hidden.

Anne brought them fresh plates and took the others away and urged them to eat food that was hot. Everything tasted great, and once the meal was over, they cleared the table. Everyone, with the exception of Harvey, helped to carry everything to the kitchen. There was very little food left over, and it was mostly a matter of washing dishes. Anne preferred to wash and since Laney was very particular about putting things where they belonged, she dried. They urged everyone to leave them, but Seth picked up a dish towel, and Scott carried dishes to Anne for washing.

"I feel as though I should do something, but what?" Phyllis asked in confusion.

"Mother, you are a guest. You should go into the parlor and keep Granddad company."

"Oh, he would prefer I stay out here. The man barely tolerates me," she admitted. "I wasn't suited to life out here, and he blames me for taking your Dad back to Boston. I frankly am amazed you love it here, but I can see you do."

"Yes, I love it here. I love the air, the trees, the cattle grazing. I love riding for miles and not seeing another human being. I hated Boston, Mother. I don't like city life. I never

fit in, and was the source of gossip because I was constantly doing things there that no one bats an eye over out here. I can wear pants when I go riding, and it is considered practical on the range. When I go into town, I wear a skirt. I respect the customs, but there isn't much here I don't like. And, I missed Granddad," she added.

"I should have permitted you to come for visits, but I was afraid you wouldn't return, and that is exactly what has happened," she said, her voice filled with sadness. "You married and your life is now here instead of in Boston. But, I still want to be part of your life, Laney. You and Father are all I have left."

Laney swallowed the bitter comment she wanted to make and instead, she said, "I think we are all done with this. Let's go and sit in front of the tree, and I'll play some Christmas music," she offered, far too brightly. She simply couldn't handle any more of her mother right now, and her poor bottom was entirely too sore to endure another spanking. *Why did she have to come here and ruin Christmas?*

Before long, Laney was playing music, and Anne was singing. Granddad joined in boisterously when he could remember the words, but both Seth and Scott remained silent, and so did the brooding Phyllis. Harvey read the Nativity story from the Bible, and then he announced it was time to head for church.

"Granddad, I think you and I should stay home. You've had enough excitement for one day, and I am tired, too. We can play cards, or I'll read to you," Laney offered. She simply couldn't face sitting on the bumpy seat of the buggy and then on the wooden pew. Her behind was truly miserable, and so was her heart. She needed some time to breathe... away from her Mother.

"Nonsense," Harvey said. "This is Christmas; we are *all* going to church together and that is final. I told you not to overdo today, child," he softly reminded her.

"Are you ill, honey?" Seth asked, his concern evident in his eyes.

"No," she said, sighing.

"I will stay here with you, Laney, if you simply wish to rest," Phyllis offered.

"No! We'll go to Church. I am simply concerned for Grandfather, but since he is determined to go to Church, we will all go." She hurried to don her new blue cloak and matching bonnet. Much to her chagrin, Seth followed. He closed the door to their room behind him, and then turned her around to face him. Laney looked up at him and tears filled her eyes. "Don't you dare start scolding me! I am miserable."

"Enough of this, Laney. You are treating your Mother as if she has a disease you don't want to catch."

"I don't want her here. How could Granddad do this to me?" she wailed.

“He is trying to help you make peace with your Mother, probably because you are going to be a mother. I’ve already spanked you once tonight for acting like a child; do I need to give you another?” he demanded, and she knew he was perfectly serious.

“If you do, then I definitely will not go to Church,” she threatened. “I am already so sore I don’t know how I am going to get through the next couple of hours!”

“By behaving,” he said firmly. “Just one more act of rudeness tonight is going to earn you a trip over my knee and a long session with the back of your hairbrush when we get home.”

Laney was furious with her husband, and with her grandfather, but she did her best not to let it show as she prepared to go to Church. She was helped into the large buggy and gingerly took her seat, completely unaware that she was being watched. It wasn’t long before they were underway, with Seth driving the team of horses.

The service was beautiful, and it did lift Laney’s spirits, although she was positive that nothing was going to help her poor bottom. She was truly miserable from sitting on the hard pew, and the idea of riding home in the buggy, did nothing to improve her mood. To make matters worse, her Granddad decided he was going to sit in front with Seth to help him see on the way home. That left her sitting with her mother in the back seat.

“He beat you, didn’t he?” Phyllis whispered. “Darling, I will help you escape if he is hurting you! You don’t have to put up with that!”

“Seth didn’t beat me, Mother,” Laney told her, making sure her voice didn’t carry.

“You can barely sit down!” Phyllis was in tears as she put her arm around Laney and pulled her close. “I won’t permit him to hurt you!”

“He spanked me, Mother. That’s all. With his hand... It wasn’t a beating.” Laney was embarrassed.

“Why would he do that?” Phyllis demanded.

“Because of the way I treated you at supper tonight. I was rude and acting like a bratty child.”

“But, I don’t want him to interfere like that. We are the ones who need to talk. I have much to apologize for, Laney. I did so many things wrong... I can see that now, but at the time I thought I was doing what was right. When I lost your father, I was terrified at the thought of raising you all alone, but the thought of marrying someone else was, and still is, repulsive. I loved him so much, Laney. The only way I could get through each day was because I had you to take care of. You remind me of your Dad. He loved it out here, but moved East because I could not adjust to the open land. I should have tried

harder and felt guilty because I didn't. So, I tried my best to make you like me. You never liked Boston, even as a child," Phyllis said with a smile. "When I heard you married so quickly after arriving, I was afraid you did it to spite me. I wrote to Harvey and begged him to send you home. I would pay for a divorce, and do whatever it took to make you happy. He told me to butt out, that you were happy. You didn't write, and I was lonely. I found your journals, Laney. I read every last unhappy word, and I saw myself through your eyes. I am so sorry I didn't listen when you tried to tell me how you felt. I was trying to be like my Mother, and raise you to be happy, but... I didn't take into account the things that made me happy weren't making you happy. Laney, I can't undo years of me, but I can offer to start over and be a Mother to an adult daughter, and I can promise to accept you for who you are. You don't have to please me, or hide things from me any longer. I love you, Laney. I'm asking you to let the past go and build a new mother/daughter relationship. Can you forgive me?"

Laney was opening crying by the time Phyllis stopped talking, and she squeezed her hand and nodded, too emotional to speak. Phyllis kissed her cheek, and simply hugged her all the way home, whispering things that Laney never knew. "Your father believed in spanking, too," she confessed. "I know that Harvey wouldn't believe this, but your Daddy really did make the decision to move East. I was so afraid he would be miserable, and refused to move... until he spanked the daylights out of me and said, 'Now will you start packing, Phyl?' Of course, I did. He would have taken a leather strap to me if I argued at that point!" She looked at Laney and said, "Tell me about Seth... How you met; how you knew he was the man you wanted to share your life with." Laney talked then, and had the first of many adult conversations with her Mother.

Christmas Day was festive, with lots of gift giving, but most of all, the gift of peace in the house made for a wonderful day. They had one visitor, who apologized for disturbing them on Christmas. The man's name was Phineas Burgess, and he was the attorney for Anne's father's estate and her mother's estate. He asked to speak with Anne privately, and she shook her head 'no' and said he could speak in front of her husband and family. The man nodded in understanding, thankful he wouldn't need to leave the warmth of the fireplace in the parlor for some other cold room. He did not bother reading the documents in legal form, but launched into a simple summation of the terms. In short, Anne was a very wealthy woman. Her father left her nearly all of his estate, leaving her Mother a generous amount and the right to live in her home for as long as she desired, but the house, and all that was in it, was legally Anne's upon her twenty-first birthday. The rest of the estate, the money and other holdings, was to be signed over when she was married or twenty-five years of age, whichever came first. Anne thanked the man for the news and said she already had everything she needed right beside her. Scott's dark eyes shone with pride.

Harvey asked Phineas to stay and share Christmas with them, and the lawyer gratefully accepted the sincere invitation, his eyes on the pretty blonde who kept staring at him. Phineas wanted an opportunity to speak to her, and he arranged that fairly quickly, although, if you asked Harvey, he would say the two of them were like magnets pulling on each other. Phineas stayed an extra day, just to be with Phyllis, and Laney found it

amazing to see her Mother actually flirting with a man! When Phineas tore himself away from the Circle C, and Phyllis, she remained for another week, spending as much time as possible with her daughter, and getting to know Seth better. Laney hugged her tightly when she put her on the stage, and told her she was welcome to come when the baby was born. Phyllis promised she would be there to help, and she was.

Baby Michael Harvey Sawyer was born in May, and was seven months old for his first Christmas. His cousin, Julia Ann Sawyer, was only two months old, but both babies had all the attention and love they could hope for. The fact that their parents were madly in love and not afraid to show it pleased their Great-Grandpa Harvey as he spoiled them outrageously with gifts they would have to grow into as well as a couple of baby toys he'd taken the time and effort to make himself. Phyllis, and her new husband, Phineas, proudly claimed both babies as their Grandchildren, telling Anne and Scott that Julia needed Grandparents to love her, too.

When Seth and Laney managed to find some time alone in the hectic household, he took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. "Merry Christmas, Laney-love."

"It is a wonderful Christmas, isn't it, darling?" Laney returned his kisses with love and passion and then said, "I have another present for you, Daddy." She took his hand and placed it over the slight swelling of her body. Seth looked at her, joy filling his eyes, and his whoop was heard throughout the large house.

When the others in the parlor jumped and looked around for danger, Harvey just laughed and told them, "I wondered when Laney was going to tell Seth about the new baby!"

Merry Christmas!