

A Thanksgiving Holiday

By Laurel Joseph

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Chapter One

Laney knew better than cry. If she did, it would only draw unwelcome attention, and that was the last thing she needed. But, she was in terrible pain, and she was heartsick over the events of the morning. One minute she was in a stagecoach, thrilled to be on her way to spend Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the coming celebration of the year of 1871 with her Grandfather, and anxious to reach his ranch. In the next minute, the stagecoach was racing ahead at full speed, with screaming Comanche trying to overtake them. Their yipping was frightening, but even worse was seeing the arrow fly in the window and land in her one and only fellow passenger, a man who told her he was married and had three children under the age of five. Laney couldn't help but grieve for the man and worry for the woman who was left with two sons and a daughter to raise on her own.

The man riding shotgun was the next to fall victim to a flying bullet, and he let out a scream and fell past the window of the coach. Laney heard the driver yelling and cursing at the horses to run faster, and whipping them with the leather reins to urge them onward. She felt an Indian jump on the back of the stagecoach, and several more raced past to jump on the backs of the horses pulling the coach. It did not take long for the Comanche to kill the driver and bring the horses and coach to a stop.

Laney was terrified. She had heard stories of the Comanche and knew that they admired bravery more than anything else. When one of the braves opened the door of the coach and reached for her, she punched him in the nose! He let out a surprised howl of pain, and she heard the others laugh and jeer at him. Another man tried to get inside, and she managed to kick him, sending him flying out the door and to the ground. Again there was laughter. In the next attempt one man distracted her while another opened the door on the other side of the stage, grabbing her from behind. Laney kicked and fought for all she was worth, and to her absolute shame, the brave holding her laughed and flipped her through the air. When she landed, she was face down over his bent knee and his hand landed on her upturned backside with a painful whap!

Laney lost her temper, all thoughts of fear erased from her mind, as she struggled to free herself from the hold he had on her. The Comanche braves were laughing and shouting out encouragements as the brave continued to spank her! She cursed him, smacked him wherever she could reach until he took both her hands in his large fist and held them pinned to the small of her back. He continued to spank her hard while she continued to call him names and try to throw herself off his knee.

"As long as you struggle, this spanking will continue, little girl," the Indian spoke in perfect English, shocking Laney. "Be still, or I will take a stick to you."

Laney forced herself to stop struggling. The spanking continued for another ten to twelve hard spans. She tried to bite her tongue to keep from crying out, but by the end, she couldn't control her reaction. The Comanche braves murmured in satisfaction. She was

finally set on her feet and the Indian jerked her around to face him. “Be silent, little girl.” He took out a piece of rawhide and bound her hands behind her, then looped another length through her bindings and tied it to his wrist. Laney could not move without his knowledge and the satisfied look in his dark eyes told her he was aware of that.

The others went through the stagecoach, and climbed on top and opened all the traveling cases and helped themselves to anything of value. It made Laney furious to see her new dresses thrown to the ground and trampled upon as the Indians expressed disapproval at their findings.

Once they were satisfied that they missed nothing of value to them the braves mounted. Laney hoped they would leave her behind, but she knew they would not. The Comanche who dared to spank her like a wayward child agilely mounted his stallion and then reached for her. To her utter dismay, he tossed her face down across the blanket in front of him. Laney lost her temper and tried to throw herself off the animal, kicking the stallion in the process. The horse reared, catching the Comanche by surprise. He swore, but swiftly brought the animal under control, and in the next second he brought a short whip down on her throbbing bottom. There were three strips of leather attached to a handle, and each of the strips left a welt on her delicate skin, even through the layers of clothing covering her. Laney cried out in pain, and tried to reach back, but her hands were secured to each other, and there was nothing she could do. Her helplessness was brought home again and then again as the man gave her another hard lick.

“Owww! You bastard! I’m going to kill you the first chance I get! You evil, corrupt, son of a bitch!” she cursed him fluently using words that would make her Boston bred mother faint with shame.

“You are testing my patience, little girl. Your talk is brave for one so small,” he scoffed as he gave her yet another stinging taste of his whip on the back of her thighs. “Be silent now, or I will stop this horse and teach you the meaning of obedience.”

Laney wisely shut her mouth. She did not want to provoke the man’s anger any more than she already had. But, now, she was feeling ill from lying on her stomach over the stallion’s back for so long. Her stomach hurt, as did her backside, and she had no clue when and if they were going to stop for the night. She needed respite from the awful position she was in, but she dreaded facing the night and what she was sure would happen when they did stop. Tears filled her green eyes and fell silently to the ground. She was supposed to be with her Grandfather now, getting ready to celebrate Thanksgiving. As it was, she had nothing at all to be thankful for!

Harvey Coddington looked at the dead man with growing fear in the pit of his stomach. When the stage was more than an hour late, the Sheriff decided to ride out to investigate. Harvey Coddington insisted on riding with him, and no one dared to tell the imposing man ‘no’. They first found the body of Tanner Johnson, who was riding shotgun. They

rode on, and found the driver dead, too. When the stagecoach was found a short distance away, the body of the male passenger was found, an arrow protruding from his chest. There were other arrows sticking in the coach, and Harvey knew they were Comanche arrows.

There was no sign of his little Laney; it meant that she was still alive, and it also meant the Comanche held her captive. He had argued for months with his dead son's wife, Phyllis, to convince her to permit his one and only grandchild to come for a lengthy visit over the holidays, all to no avail. Then, a couple of weeks ago Laney wrote to him and announced she was coming to spend Thanksgiving, and staying through the New Year! She also admitted that her Mama was not pleased by her decision, but since she was legally an adult she could do as she pleased... provided he would pay for her ticket since her Mama controlled her trust fund until she was married and Phyllis absolutely refused to give her daughter one cent to go and visit her former father-in-law's ranch in Texas. Harvey knew that Phyllis considered him a barbarian, but since he considered her a hoot-snoot he figured their dislike of each other was mutual. He arranged for Laney's ticket, and had his housekeeper prepare a room for his granddaughter, thankful that he had something special to be thankful for this year besides the things he was thankful for each and every day. Harvey Coddington was a wealthy man in terms of land, cattle, horses, and in business. He had more money in his pocket at any given time than most men earned in a lifetime. It would all go to his one and only granddaughter... and to his young foreman. It was this same man he turned to now. "I need your help, Seth," he said quietly. "You're the best man to go after Laney and bring her home."

Seth looked at the man who took him in ten years ago at the age of sixteen and gave him a home and knew he couldn't refuse to do as Harvey asked. "I will find her." Without a bit of hesitation he headed in the same direction the Comanche rode with their captive.

The Sheriff looked at Harvey and exclaimed, "You're sending that man by himself to go after your girl, Mr. Coddington? He'll get himself scalped!"

"You're fairly new here, Bill. Seth was on a wagon train that was attacked by the Comanche when he was little. He was raised by them until he was sixteen years old and decided he wanted to see what it was like to live as a white man. When I found him, he was cutting up one of my prime steers in order to have something to eat. I gave him a job so he could pay me for the price of the steer, and I took him into my house and finished raising him. I love that boy, Bill. I wouldn't send him back to the Comanche for anyone else but my granddaughter. I pray he gets to her before she is harmed." He bowed his head for a moment and then pulled himself together. "Let's get these bodies back to town, Bill."

"Will you behave if I sit you in front of me, little girl?" the Indian asked of Laney, startling her. He had not said one word since he scolded her and lashed her.

“Yes,” she reluctantly promised. Her stomach muscles ached to the point that she feared she would vomit if she did not get some relief.

Without another word, he put his hands around her waist and lifted her to sit astride the horse in front of him. The relief she felt was immediate. “Thank you,” she whispered in acknowledgment. “Would you untie me, too...? Please...?” she added after a pause.

“You will not try to run?” he asked.

“I won’t run,” she said.

“Do you lie?” His voice was filled with humor.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I do not wish to be held captive. I want to visit my Grandfather for the holidays.” She felt her temper starting to assert herself. “He will come after me, you know. He is a very brave man and he has the resources to track me down.”

“He is in the Army?”

“No! He is a rancher; Harvey Coddington! Most people in this part of Texas know of him. He owns the Circle C Ranch!” She felt the man stiffen behind her, and then he sharply ordered her to be silent. “I am only trying to warn you that taking me is not a smart thing to do!”

“Little girl, you will be silent if you value your life.” He tugged on the rawhide strip, pulling her arms up until they hurt. “Do not speak again!” His voice was so harsh she was frightened. Laney wisely stopped talking. He soon let her arms rest once again, but he did not untie her. She could feel the anger radiating from his body, and wished she had not mentioned her Grandfather’s name. Whether he was afraid of her Grandfather or simply hated him for some reason she was not aware of, Laney had no idea.

It was close to sunrise when they finally stopped for more than just a couple of minutes to rest their horses. Laney was exhausted, thirsty, and hungry. She had not been offered anything at all to ease her thirst, and she knew the Comanche brave had to hear her stomach growling with hunger. Her tongue felt swollen and her mouth and lips were so dry. Her arms and hands were numb from being tied so long. She knew for a fact that she would not be able to defend herself if she needed to protect herself from dishonor. Tears formed in her eyes and she reminded herself that she would do what she had to do when the time came. She could still kick and bite, and she would!

The Indian rode close to one of the teepee’s, dismounted, and then jerked on the length of rawhide, pulling her off the horse. Laney landed hard on her sore butt. “You son of a bitch!” she cursed him, jumping to her feet and kicking at him. “You did that on purpose!”

“Be silent or I will silence you!” His hand moved to the knife on his belt and she looked at him in horror. Some of the anger left his face then, and he grabbed her arm and led her inside the teepee. There was a young Indian woman standing there and she looked at Laney and then at the man. Once he tied the end of the rawhide to the pole in the middle of the teepee, he said something to the woman in the language of their people, and then and turned and left the teepee.

The woman picked up a large sharp knife and came toward her. “Do not be afraid. I was told to feed you and you cannot eat with your hands bound.” She cut the rawhide strip from the pole, and then she cut the strips from Laney’s wrists. “You sleep while I cook.” She indicated that Laney should lie down, but Laney was too nervous to do so.

“I need water,” she managed to whisper and was shocked when she was immediately handed a small gourd that had been hollowed out to form a drinking vessel. The Indian woman had filled it from a larger container. “Thank you,” she said after she drank her fill.

“You stay here and sleep.”

“Could I help you in some way?” Laney offered. If she got outside she might be able to find a way to escape.

The woman vigorously shook her head ‘no’. “White Eagle would be angry. You sleep; I soon return with food.” She started to leave and turned to face her. “Do not run away. It would be very bad for you. And White Eagle would punish me, too.”

“He is your husband?” Laney asked.

The woman giggled and shook her head ‘no’. “White Eagle is my brother.” With those words she slipped from the teepee leaving Laney alone. Laney got to her feet and wondered if she should try to make her escape. Slowly, she decided against it. She would be carefully watched, and this could be a test of some sort. Laney did not forget that the Indian woman said White Eagle would punish her. She decided to get some sleep. Her body was tired, and once she slept and ate something, she would find a way to escape.

Laney had no idea how long she slept, whether it was five minutes or five hours, but she heard a loud commotion and it wasn’t long at all before White Eagle came into the teepee dragging his sister behind him. He was carrying a stick, and he threw the young woman facedown over a pile of hides that were often used to sit upon. He raised the stick and brought it down on her backside. The female did not utter a sound, but White Eagle was making plenty of noise. “I did not tell you to untie her,” he said, speaking English.

“She cannot eat while tied, and she was thirsty!”

He gave her another hard whack with the stick.

“Stop!” Laney cried out, jumping to her feet and grabbing his arm before he could strike the woman a third time. “Is beating women all you know how to do?” she angrily demanded. “How dare you punish your sister for being kind to me?” Laney tried to wrest the stick from his hand, which was a mistake. The target for his anger abruptly changed. “Don’t you dare do what you are thinking! I am already so sore I am miserable, and I swear I’m going to get even with you for spanking me like a naughty child.”

“You are lucky I do not kill you and send your body to your grandfather.”

“White Eagle! That is a terrible thing to say!” His sister jumped to her feet and faced him, anger in her dark eyes. “You are being cruel, which is unlike you.”

“It is not a woman’s place to scold a man,” White Eagle stated.

“Someone must scold you!”

“Silence. You will do as you are told, Willow, or I will beat you again,” he raged at his sister. “You, woman,” he snarled as he turned and pointed at Laney, “will sit and not move. If you leave this teepee I will kill you. This is my word.”

He stomped out of the teepee and Willow looked at Laney and to her surprise, giggled. “I knew White Eagle would be angry when I cut his bindings. You were so brave to stop him; not many would dare. He is a great warrior.”

“I wasn’t about to let him punish you because you were kind to me!” Laney said with spirit.

“Thank you,” Willow said, smiling. She then added, “I will bring food soon; you try to sleep. It would not be wise to test White Eagle now.”

Laney nodded and then lie down once again; it was more comfortable than sitting!

Chapter Two

True to her word, Willow soon brought Laney some kind of stew. There were no eating utensils so she carefully used her fingers to hungrily eat all of what was given to her. She didn't dare ask Willow what the stew was made of; if she knew she might not be able to swallow what was in the bowl, and she desperately needed to eat to keep up her strength. When she made her escape she would have to run for hours, and do what was unexpected if she hoped to evade capture. Laney had no doubt in her mind that Willow was correct when she said that White Eagle would be furious with her if he had to come after her, and she was positive he would do just that. Still, she was not the type of person to wait for rescue. She would take the first chance she got to escape, and hopefully that was before the man forced himself on her.

Once she was done eating, she thanked Willow for the food and told her it was very good. Willow smiled and suggested she sleep. Laney was too tired to argue. She again slept, feeling quite safe for the moment. She did not expect trouble from White Eagle until the sun went down once again, and somehow she would need to find a way to run away before then.

Laney awoke when her hair was grabbed and nearly yanked from her scalp! An Indian woman was leaning over her, a wild look in her eyes, and a knife raised in the air, ready to plunge into her body! Laney grabbed the other woman's arm, and the fight was on. Willow heard the commotion and came running, and she called out, asking someone to get her brother. Laney didn't understand one word that was being said, but she did know that Willow was trying to help. Unfortunately, the irate Indian woman kicked Willow in the stomach, and she fell to the ground, trying to breathe. "You bitch!" Laney felt her temper soar. She managed to take the knife from the other woman and held it threateningly. It was at this moment White Eagle came into the teepee. His dark eyes took in the scene at once.

"Put down the knife, granddaughter of my enemy!" he ordered sharply.

"Hell no!" Laney answered bravely. "Not while she is trying to kill me!" Laney kept her eyes on the other woman. "Willow, are you all right?" she asked in concern.

"Yes!" Willow managed to answer.

Others were making their way inside, one of them an older man. He looked at the defiant expression on the Indian girl's face and said something that Laney did not understand. The girl answered, her hate-filled eyes letting Laney know that she wished her dead for some reason. White Eagle said something to her and she bowed her head in shame. She walked from the teepee, pushing others aside so she could leave. White Eagle spoke to the others, his voice full of authority. The older man spoke, too, his voice quiet and calm,

and White Eagle merely nodded. Once they all filed out of the teepee, he looked at Laney, and his expression was one of exasperation.

“You are nothing but trouble.”

“Then release me and let me go!” she said.

“No. He will have to pay much to see you returned, and he will see you returned in pieces if he does not cooperate.”

“Why do you hate my grandfather so much?” she asked, stunned by his words.

“He stole from me.” He stepped toward her. “Hand me the knife, woman, or I will take it. If I have to take it, I will punish you.”

Willow regained her voice. “Do as White Eagle asks, my sister. Little Bird will not attack you again now that she has been publicly shamed.” The look she gave her brother spoke volumes.

“I think I will keep the knife. You will keep your distance if you know I have it,” Laney bravely decided, facing the big man.

White Eagle shook his head in disbelief. He looked at her and said, “I am tempted to make you a gift to my enemy. Dealing with you should drive him to an early grave,” he said with an evil smile.

While Laney was trying to think of something clever to say to his remark, he moved so quickly she did not have a prayer of defending herself. One moment the knife was in her hand, and in the next it was in his hand. “You will pay for your defiance,” he said, grabbing her and dragging her outside. When Willow tried to remonstrate with him, he spoke sharply in their native tongue. She immediately fell silent.

Laney had no idea what the Indian intended to do to her, but she quickly found out.

Seth rode into the Comanche encampment, unsure of the reception he would receive. Nothing on his face reflected his doubt, however. The People stared at him and the silence grew as he rode his mount through the village to find the teepee of his brother. The visits between the two of them had been very few in the last five years, and only by accident when one of them happened to cross the other’s path. The peace between them was fragile at best. Seth chose the white man’s world; Scott chose to live as a Comanche.

Seth heard the commotion before he saw what was happening. White Eagle, as Scott preferred to be called, was dragging a white woman from his teepee and tying her to a stake in the ground. The stake was in the full sun, and clearly, White Eagle intended for

the fair skinned female to sit there while her skin slowly burned. This was further evidenced when he cut the dress and petticoats she was wearing from her body, leaving her arms, neck, and shoulders completely bare in the sun's relentless glare. He also removed her shoes and stockings, while the girl kicked at him and tried to plant her heel between his legs. White Eagle cursed fluently in Comanche, raised one knee so that his foot was flat on the ground, and then he flipped the redhead over and brought his hand down on her rounded bottom. With only her drawers to protect her backside, the girl was soon hollering her head off. White Eagle smiled, sat her on the ground with a painful thump, and then tightened the rawhide around her throat and hands so that she was forced to sit without moving. Her tear stained face did not cause him any remorse.

"I can see you still have a way with the ladies, Scott," Seth called to him, aware that White Eagle was oblivious to his arrival even though the rest of the village was not.

"The old man wasted no time in sending you," White Eagle stated, recovering quickly.

"I suppose that is Laney...?" Seth calmly nodded in her direction. He knew his brother well. He was not a cruel man, especially to women. He had no doubt in his mind that Laney Coddington did something to earn a punishment.

"She is a hellion," White Eagle switched to the Comanche tongue.

"I am not surprised," Seth answered in kind. "I have come to take her home. What will it cost me to relieve you of her presence?"

"You have not been here long enough to discuss that. Come inside and greet our sister."

Seth knew better than press his brother. White Eagle was stubborn. Besides, it had been five years since he last saw Willow. He followed White Eagle inside, and to his surprise, Willow was crying. When she saw him, however, she squealed in delight and ran to him, jumping into his arms for a big hug, just like she did when she was a child.

"You are a beautiful young woman, Willow!" he exclaimed. "Why is it you still live in our brother's teepee instead of your husband's?" he asked.

"I have found no one who matches my brothers in strength and bravery," she answered with a smile. "I will get you some food," she offered.

"Thank you, little sister," Seth said politely. He was hungry since he hadn't stopped to eat anything since they discovered the coach.

"I want fifty horses for the girl," White Eagle said, knowing the number was outrageous and that Harvey Coddington would never agree to the demand.

"I would love a gift like that, too," Seth said with a grin. "You know the boss won't pay that much."

“He will if I start cutting off her fingers and sending them to him one by one.” White Eagle was angry and it showed.

“Do you hate him so much you would hurt a little girl who had nothing to do with our living with him?”

“He tried to destroy me. I am Comanche and he tried to make me white, as he did you!”

“You are white, Scott,” Seth reminded him. “We were taken captive by the Comanche when they killed our folks. Gray Cloud raised us as his own. The Boss tried to give us back what was taken from us.”

“I did not want to conform to his rules.”

“And you left. He did not try to stop you the last time you ran away. He said that if you still thought like a Comanche after five years then you needed to go back to them and be happy. It broke his heart, Scott. He was proud of you.”

“This is why he beat me?” White Eagle angrily demanded.

“You didn’t give him much choice when you tried to scalp Petey, and you burned the Wilson’s barn while you stole their horses.” Seth looked at him. “He kept Petey from pressing charges and he built the Wilson’s a new barn and paid off the mortgage on their place so they wouldn’t have you arrested. A tanned hide was a small price to pay to keep from serving time behind bars. You would have died in prison and he knew it.”

Willow entered the teepee carrying two bowls of the stew. She handed Seth’s to him, but she flung the bowl and its contents at White Eagle and then started yelling at him, and swinging his own whip at him, catching him wherever she could as he tried to get the burning stew off his body. Seth wanted to laugh at the shocked look on Scott’s face, but knew that Willow would be the one to pay for his laughter. He heard her telling Scott that unless he released Laney immediately she would go to Red Buffalo’s tent and beg him to marry her that very night! Red Buffalo and White Eagle had hated each other since they were small boys. As a threat, it was a good one.

White Eagle grabbed his whip from Willow and stomped outside without a word. He did not stop to release Laney, but went on to the water where he could bathe and soothe the stinging burns on his chest and face. Willow took a knife, and within seconds she brought Laney inside the tent. Her pale skin was already red from the sun, even though she’d only been outside a few minutes.

“White Eagle has ruined your clothing,” Willow grumbled angrily, as she watched Laney grab a blanket and wrap it around herself in embarrassment as she looked at the man sitting across the teepee from her. “This is my brother, White Horse.”

“Are you alright, Miss Coddington?” Seth asked quietly. “Other than the fact my brother has spanked you and staked you out in the sun?” He grinned wickedly, and then teased, “He has a problem with redheads; he thinks they have too much temper.”

“This situation is not funny, Mr. High Horse!” Laney retorted. “I want to get the hell out of here and to my grandfather’s ranch. I am sure he will pay you well if you help me.”

“If you go using that kind of language in front of the Boss, he will tan your hide himself, and probably use the same belt he used on Scott and me when we messed up.”

“What? Who is Scott? Are you talking about my Grandfather? Do you work for him?” Laney demanded.

“Scott is White Eagle’s real name. We were taken by the Comanche when we were kids. They raised us. I wanted to live in the white man’s world, and left. Scott came after me, and your Granddad insisted he give the white world a try. Scott was miserable, and returned to the Comanche. He hates your Granddad for trying to make him fit into that world, and sees you as his opportunity to even the score. Now, suppose you do yourself a huge favor and try to control your temper until I can get you out of here. Scott is a decent man, and he will let you go eventually.”

“I want to be with my Grandfather for Thanksgiving!” Laney insisted, pulling the blanket closer when it slipped off of her shoulder.

“Let’s try this again, Miss Coddington. Shut up. No more cussing. No more verbal battles with Scott. Behave yourself. Defy me and you’ll soon find out that I am the mean brother. That little spanking Scott gave you will feel like love pats compared to the one I’ll dish out on your bare butt.”

Laney was stunned. This was the man her Grandfather sent to rescue her from the Comanche? He was shirtless and had his long hair tied back with a bandana. He looked every bit as wild as did White Eagle. “You don’t scare me, Mister. I’m not used to being bossed around and I damn well won’t let you tell me what to do. If you work for Granddad, then you’d best shape up or I swear I will get you tossed off his ranch the second I get there!”

Seth felt his temper flare but before he could say anything, Willow asked him a question, pointedly trying to distract him. He did not wish to distress his little sister. He answered in Comanche, completely ignoring the feisty redhead who needed taming in the worst way.

Little Bird saw White Eagle heading for the stream and she silently followed him. She was ashamed of her behavior, and her own father would not speak to her. The public rebuke that White Eagle delivered made her fear that he would not offer her marriage,

and her heart would be broken. There was no other man who made her heart soar with pride as did White Eagle's. She must go to him and she must be humble and beg forgiveness in the only way she knew. By the time she heard him splashing in the water, she hoped that no other men would come this way to disturb their privacy. She waited for what seemed like an eternity, but was only a few short minutes. White Eagle climbed from the water, the drops of moisture glistening on his beautiful skin. Only his manly parts were white. The rest of him was a golden bronze from the sun. His dark hair and eyes made him look Comanche. Once he pulled on his leggings and breechclout she stepped out to confront him.

"You have been spying on me again, Little Bird...? Have you no maidenly modesty?" he chided her.

"I knew I must speak to you and make amends for my shameful behavior, White Eagle. I have come to ask for punishment." She held out a bundle of switches that she'd cut herself, peeled the bark from, and then tied into a bundle with a strip of rawhide. "It is my wish that you punish me so that I will again be pleasing to you."

White Eagle was positive that this is when he was supposed to take the bundle and throw it onto the ground and then take her in his arms and declare his love for her. He smiled instead and held out his hand and accepted the bundle of switches and said, "You may show your sincerity by bending over and placing your hand on that rock, and pulling up your dress, Little Bird." The look in her eyes was meek, but to his genuine surprise, she did exactly what she was told. The sight of her bare skin was exciting to him, but he was man enough to know when a lesson was warranted. He drew back the switches and gave her a hard stroke across her rounded cheeks.

It hurt much more than she expected it would, but Little Bird forced herself to stay in place. She had to prove to White Eagle she was worthy of his love. Another blow landed right below the first and she whimpered in pain. A third time White Eagle struck her, and it was the backs of her thighs that felt as though a million bees were stinging her. "I am sorry, White Eagle!" she cried out, dancing in place as the pain grew worse and worse with each passing second.

"I think a few more should teach you some restraint, Little Bird," White Eagle said without one bit of sympathy for the young woman. Her bottom was laced with little welts that he knew were stinging unbearably, but as a man, it was his duty to teach the woman he intended to make his bride that there were limits to his patience. Little Bird would speak to him before doing such a rash thing the next time she was tempted. He made the fourth blow even harder and the woman cried out, unable to prevent herself from doing so. He gave her one more, positive she would not sit for a few days without feeling this lesson. "Have you been adequately punished, Little Bird?" he asked.

"Yes, White Eagle," she turned to face him, her eyes cast downward in the custom of their people. "Am I now forgiven?" she wanted to know.

He put his arms around her and pulled her to him, and turned up her pretty face so that he could look into her tear-filled eyes. "You are forgiven, little one. There is one custom of the white man's that I enjoy," he whispered, and then his lips found hers and he kissed her sweetly.

Chapter Three

“We will have a feast tonight to celebrate our brother’s return,” White Eagle announced.

“There is no need for a feast, Scott. Just let me take the girl and go before the Boss loses patience and comes charging up here ready for battle.”

“He will die if he tries that,” White Eagle promised. “We will have a feast in your honor, and then I will tell you what I wish from you in return for his granddaughter.”

Seth knew better than to protest again. White Eagle was up to something, he just didn’t know what. He also did not realize how deep his hatred ran for Harvey Coddington until Willow told him. It made him wonder if they knew the same man. One thing was clear, one misstep could easily mean Laney’s life. White Eagle was powerful among the Comanche and Seth knew that whatever his brother decided to do with the pretty captive would be alright with the others of the tribe.

Laney waited until they were once again alone. “Well? What are your plans for getting me out of here?” she asked.

“Waiting and hoping we can do it without bringing the entire Comanche nation down on our backs.”

“Are you always so incompetent?”

“Girl, you are going to get the flat of my hand across your behind if you don’t stop baiting me.”

“As if you would dare!” Laney scoffed. “I want to leave now,” she stated, rising to her feet.

“We wouldn’t make it ten feet before we were discovered. You are just going to have to be patient and let me reason with Scott.”

“There is nothing reasonable about the man,” Laney stated, clearly frustrated that the man sent by her grandfather was doing absolutely nothing to rescue her.

“You don’t know him at all, little girl, so keep your opinion to yourself.”

“You’re just the hired help; don’t tell me what to do!” Laney picked up the first thing she could get her hands on and threw it at him.

Seth ducked and then jumped to his feet and ran to grab the item she intended to throw next. It was a ceremonial pipe that belonged to their father... and he knew that White Eagle treasured it. “If you’d broken this, my brother would have let you die slowly and

painfully.” He reached for her, deciding she needed a good lesson. Instead, he learned that Laney was a wildcat, just as his brother claimed she was. She started fighting with everything she had. Seth was aware that they had company, but he didn’t dare turn his head to see who entered. He was too busy trying to subdue Laney Coddington.

Laney sunk her teeth into his hand when he grabbed her, and that was just the final insult as far as Seth was concerned. He managed to haul her over his lap and then he grabbed the waistband of her drawers and jerked them down to her knees, baring her for the spanking she damn well had coming to her.

“No!” she cried out, horrified. Her protest fell on deaf ears. Seth’s hand landed on her bare cheek with a loud crack and she instantly realized that getting spanked without the padding of her clothing hurt much more than she thought possible. “Stop!” she begged.

“After you bit me? No damn way, girl. You’re going to get a lesson to remember for the rest of your life.” Seth was just aggravated enough to do as he said. He started giving Laney a reason to regret biting him, and his brother’s evil laughter broke through the red haze that was his temper and Seth realized that the girl was sobbing. Her skin was a deep dark red, and the lesson was more than learned. He jerked up her drawers and then sat her down on her aching bottom. “Do not move, little brat, or I promise I will use something harder than my hand next time!”

Laney was in pain; physical and emotional. How could her Granddad’s employee dare to use her so cruelly? He’d bared her! He had actually dared to lower her drawers and spank her! It was beyond bearing and she hated the man!

“I asked if you heard me, Laney?” Seth grabbed her arm and gave her a shake. If he was shocked by the look of absolute loathing she dealt him he didn’t let on. He met her glare with one of his own and waited for her to answer.

“I heard you, you evil son of a bitch!”

“I don’t remember much of my mother, but she wasn’t a bitch; she was a lady,” Seth said so coldly that Laney couldn’t help but shiver. “I suggest you shut up before I decide to put a bar of soap in your mouth.”

Once again White Eagle laughed and Seth looked at him in disgust before speaking in the language of The People. “She is not the angel the old man is expecting.”

“No, she is not. She is a hellion and will need to be punished every day.”

“She does not deserve to be punished because you are angry with him,” Seth pointed out.

“She will be wed to a Comanche brave before she returns to her Grandfather,” White Eagle said calmly.

“What?” Seth was shocked and didn’t bother to hide it. “You would give this girl to a man against her will?”

“Yes, and if she wishes to escape death, she will cooperate fully. It is the only way she will leave this village.”

“You can’t be serious, Scott!” Seth tried to reason with his brother. “You know she will put up a fight. It will be the same as giving some man permission to rape her; the old man will come after you with a horsewhip!”

“She needs a husband to tame her.”

“Is that what this is all about? You intend to wed her and have her and then return her to her Grandfather?” Seth wanted to kick his brother’s butt!

“I would not marry her; I will wed Little Bird,” White Eagle said with certainty.

“Scott, I won’t allow you to do this,” Seth warned.

White Eagle was through talking. He got to his feet and said, “I will go now and see how preparations for the feast are coming along.” He raised the flap on the teepee and then turned back, “Do not get any ideas about leaving, brother. You and our angry redhead will be my guests this night.”

Seth cursed under his breath. Scott was smart enough to place guards on the teepee and another with the horses. There was nothing he could do at this point except try to talk some sense into the feisty Laney and hope she would listen to reason and calm down and control her temper. He would continue to try and talk Scott out of this foolishness, and if that failed, he would then attempt to rescue her before she was raped... “Girl, stop crying. You aren’t hurt.”

“That is easy for you to say,” Laney sniffled. “Between you and your brother I have been beaten four times in less than twenty-four hours! I am so sore I can’t bear to sit here like this!”

“Then kneel,” he said impatiently, “but stop that sniveling so I can talk to you.”

“Are you going to get me out of here?” she asked hopefully, quickly moving from the sitting position she was in to one of more comfort, resting her weight on her knees.

“You are going to have to do as I say if you want to leave this camp in one piece. Scott is full of anger toward your Granddad, and he knows the one sure way to get to him is through you. He plans to marry you to a Comanche brave.”

“I won’t agree to that!” Laney declared angrily.

“You will agree or he will hurt you until you do agree,” Seth bluntly informed her. “I need you in one piece to get you out of here. I expect you to keep your mouth shut and just go through with it.”

“You cannot seriously expect me to consider such a thing!” She was well and truly shocked. “No, Seth! I won’t; I can’t!”

“Laney, the wedding won’t be real in the white man’s world.”

“And I am to permit some strange man to take liberties with me just to satisfy your brother’s need for revenge? It would be rape, and I will never willingly allow that to happen!” Laney wanted to throw up at the very thought.

“I won’t let that happen. I’ll break away from the feast and get you out of here before the groom is brought to you.”

“Won’t White Eagle have you watched?” she asked.

“Not if he thinks I am drunk and passed out.” He heard a noise and quickly put his hand up to halt any further conversation just as Willow entered. She pointedly ignored Seth and motioned for Laney to come with her. “Go!” he told the redhead when it was obvious that she would object. “You will not be harmed; the women will bathe you and prepare you for your wedding.”

Once Laney was gone, Seth decided he would get some sleep. He would need his strength later if he was to protect Laney from what Scott’s devious mind had planned for revenge, a revenge that was foolhardy at best.

Laney wanted to scream! She was not used to having anyone bathe her or dress her or do her hair! She had no maid, and had never wanted one, even though her mother seemed to thrive on that sort of pampering. It was all the lovely redhead could do to keep from slapping at the hands of the women who were helping Willow prepare her for a wedding that was not going to happen! Laney knew she could never agree to a marriage she had no intention of honoring. She would not give White Eagle the satisfaction of using her as revenge against her Granddad. She was going to hold her head high and tell him ‘no’ in very plain words and then, if he chose to kill her, it would be on his conscience, not hers. She only hoped that Seth would somehow manage to talk his brother into releasing her so she could get to the ranch before Thanksgiving.

Once the women deemed her pretty enough they took her to another teepee, and after much giggling, they left her there to wait and worry.

Willow gently woke Seth. "Our brother has asked that you join us, White Horse."

Seth tried to shake off the cobwebs as he stepped outside the teepee and realized it was already dark. He'd slept for several hours and now he was starving. A feast would be welcome now. Seth talked to Willow as they walked through the teepees. Several of The People called out greetings to him, and it wasn't until he spotted his brother sitting outside a teepee at the edge of the encampment that he realized he'd been tricked. The teepee was newly constructed but the paintings on the outside unmistakably proclaimed it his. It was then he noticed the two young braves following behind him and leading ponies, and two others bore other 'gifts'; gifts that Seth was damn sure and certain were provided by Scott. He realized too late that the small procession was the equivalent to a marriage ceremony to the Comanche! His brother gave him the same wicked grin as before and the laughter and delight in his dark eyes expressed his satisfaction he accepted the generous 'gifts' for the hand of his captive. White Eagle walked inside the teepee and pulled a struggling Laney outside and put her hand in Seth's. "I wish you the joy of your bride, brother," he said in Comanche, and just like that Seth found himself married in the eyes of the Comanche. "Welcome to your new home. Your wife will be happy to serve you, I am sure."

"This is not funny, Scott!"

"Make her your wife, brother, and you both may leave in the morning after I see proof that she is no longer a maiden. Refuse and I will see her die... slowly, and you will watch so that you may tell the old man of her suffering." With those words White Eagle left his brother alone with his new bride... who still had no clue she was married to Seth.

"Damn him!" Seth swore violently. "Damn him to hell!" When he attempted to go after Scott, three braves stepped in front of him. There was nothing to do but take Laney inside and explain the facts of life to her.

Laney had no clue why Seth was suddenly so angry, but his touch was not gentle as he marched her inside the teepee. It was then that he looked at her and saw how beautiful she looked in the white doeskin dress that was artfully decorated with elaborate beading. Her red hair was parted down the middle and then braided; the headband and the moccasins she wore matched the dress. Willow and the other women made Laney beautiful in the eyes of The People. Seth found that he was very attracted to her, but how in hell could he force himself upon her... even if it meant saving her life. He had seen women after they were violated and some never recovered. *Damn Scott and his temper!* The emotions on Seth's face frightened Laney. "What is going on?" she asked in trepidation, knowing full well she was not going to like the answer.

"Laney, please sit down. We need to talk, seriously, and without anger or emotion."

"Sitting pains me as well you know, Seth!" she scolded.

“The hides covering the ground are soft, woman. Sit.” Under different circumstances he would have found it amusing that she sank to her knees and supported her weight on her heels to keep from sitting directly on her backside. Instead, he barely noticed as he sat beside her.

“They have sent you to tell me who I am supposed to marry...? I will not do it, Seth. Your brother asks too much of me, and I won’t do his bidding. I would rather die than speak vows I have no intention of honoring. I refuse to lie before God.”

Before he could reply, there was a call from outside the teepee and he responded. Willow entered, carrying a large tray bearing all sorts of food that she’d taken nearly all afternoon to prepare. She smiled shyly, but the fire reflected her happiness. “I welcome you as my sister,” she told Laney, and then sat down the heavily laden tray and scurried from the teepee leaving Seth and Laney alone once more.

The smell of the food made Seth’s stomach growl in hunger. “Let’s eat something, Laney. We will need the nourishment for the trip home.” There were no utensils, but the redhead did not seem to mind using her fingers to eat. Obviously she was hungry, too.

In truth, Laney had had very little to eat in the last few days of travel. At one point she had to make a choice between missing her connection or eating a meal; she chose to skip the meal. And the last relay station they stopped at for fresh horses was filthy. Laney wasn’t about to eat the food the slovenly man prepared. What Willow gave her to eat that morning was good, and she was not afraid to eat her cooking; besides, she was hungry and Seth made good sense when he said they needed nourishment to travel, especially if he had to put his plan to take her away under the guise of night came to pass. They would have nothing but what they wore, and Laney couldn’t help but wonder what her Granddad would think if he saw her in this dress! Her mother would hopefully never learn of this experience.

Seth did not try to speak while they were eating their fill. He was pleased to see that Laney’s appetite was healthy; she was not jittery and afraid, and for that he was thankful. Now if he could just control her temper when he told her the truth of the matter, they might make it out of the camp alive. His only alternative to save her life would be to challenge his own brother, and Seth knew it would ultimately be the death of them both. He would never be able to live with the shame... IF he were by some miracle survive the deadly battle. Scott was a skilled warrior, and used to fighting in the Comanche way. Seth was used to guns now, and while he could hold his own in a knife fight with anyone else, he wasn’t sure he could bring himself to kill his own brother. He had to make Laney see reason and get her out of this camp. “Are you finished eating?” he asked politely.

“Yes, I am.”

“I will sit the tray outside,” he said, getting to his feet and carrying the tray over to the flap that served as a door. He called out, and was answered immediately. He shook his

head and growled a few more words. There was male laughter, but the flap opened and two hands reached inside to take the tray.

Seth returned to his seat beside the redhead and said quietly, “Laney, I am asking you, begging you, and ordering you not to say anything right now until you have heard me out. Is this understood? Will you be able to control yourself or do I need to gag you?”

Chapter Four

“If you dare to try and gag me I will bite you!” Laney promised, her temper flaring in spite of his warning to remain quiet. She did, however, keep her voice down, but her green eyes flashed fire at him.

“Little girl, I need a promise. The promise of a Coddington,” he tacked on.

“Very well,” Laney agreed, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. “I won’t marry a Comanche brave!” she warned.

“You already have,” Seth told her.

“But, I did not stand up with anyone and agree to anything!” She was truly puzzled and Seth realized he needed to explain in detail.

“Laney, the ways of The People are much different than the ways of the whites. It is the way of the Comanche that a woman has no say in who she will marry. Oh, a daughter may show a preference for a man, but if someone else offers more in the way of wealth to the father, he will accept the gifts and the woman is married, just like that. A father who dearly loves his daughter might choose less wealth to see his daughter happy. If the father is dead, then the oldest brother chooses for his sister, or an uncle will step in.”

“Okay, but what has this to do with me? My father died years ago; I have no brothers, and no uncles. My grandfathers are the closest thing I have to a male figure in my life. And neither of them would agree to this.”

“I’m sure your Granddad wouldn’t,” Seth agreed, feeling even guiltier for what he was going to tell Laney. “White Eagle assumed this role since he claimed you as his captive. That is why he ordered this teepee built, and why he had Willow wake me and bring me here. He had me followed by younger braves leading horses and bearing gifts, which he himself provided. He then accepted those gifts and placed your hand in mine. In plain words, Laney, you are my wife in the eyes of the Comanche.”

“Really?” She smiled happily. “Now that is very smart. We can leave in the morning for Granddad’s ranch, and White Eagle will think he’s pulled off something smart... This is so much better than I hoped. Now you won’t have to risk your life in any way fighting to protect me...” She broke off, the serious look on his face telling her that she was missing something important. “What haven’t you told me, Seth?”

“White Eagle wants proof that you were bedded, Laney,” he bluntly stated.

“What?” she asked in a strangled voice. “You cannot be serious?”

“I am very serious.”

“Well, that is out of the question.” Her eyes went to his belt. “You have your knife. Just cut me and I will use that blood to convince him that you forced yourself on me.” It was the perfect plan, or so she thought, but Seth was shaking his head ‘no’. “Why not?” she asked.

“When you were prepared for your wedding night, were you examined by an old squaw?” he asked, and watched as her eyes filled with embarrassment and shame. “She is known as Medicine Woman, and she was testing your innocence. Scott wouldn’t waste his time if you were not a maiden. He would have come up with another plan even more sadistic.” He looked at her and said, “Medicine Woman will examine you again in the morning to see if your membrane is broken.”

“We could ask her to lie... Surely she wouldn’t want...” He was already shaking his head ‘no’.

“The People do not lie.”

“The answer is no, Seth. I won’t do it.”

“Honey, you have no choice in the matter,” he said firmly. “My brother is determined to see your Granddad suffer, and he knows the best way to hurt him is through you. You will either give yourself to me, or he will see you tortured to death so that I will have to go back and tell the old man what happened to you at the hands of White Eagle.”

“It sounds as though he is punishing you, too,” Laney said, tears filling her eyes.

“He is. He knows that your Grandfather will either kill me outright or have me whipped raw and cast out to die if I touch you. If I go back and tell him I watched you tortured to death, he will also kill me. Scott has never forgiven me for choosing the way of the whites over the Comanche.”

“He is being ridiculous and he will regret his actions.”

“Right now he is stubborn and too full of pride to listen to reason, Laney. The only prayer I have right now to save you is to make you my wife by Comanche law. I wish there was another way, but there isn’t. I don’t want to hurt you; I don’t want to cause you pain, but the pain of making love the first time is much less than anything my brother would do to you in his misguided anger.”

Laney could not believe this was happening to her. In her wildest dreams she never imagined being taken by Indians to be used in an act of revenge against the Grandfather she had seen only a few times in the last fifteen years. And, she never imagined her wedding dress would be made of doeskin, even though she found it beautiful. The choice was to either permit a man she barely knew to claim her body, or suffer being tortured to death. She’d already experienced a small bit of White Eagle’s cruelty; he’d beaten her

with his riding whip, and he'd tied rawhide around her neck and ripped off most of her clothing before staking her out in the hot sun so that her pale skin would burn. Willow managed to rescue her before much damage was done, but Laney had no doubt he would have left her there for hours if not for his sister.

"I've seen women tortured, Laney. It is not pretty. The very thing you are trying to avoid, losing your innocence, will happen over and over again, until there is very little left of you, and then they'll use fire to burn you with hot knife blades. It will take a very long time to die."

"Are you trying to frighten me?" she asked, her voice breaking on a sob.

"Yes, I am. It is the ugly truth, however, and I don't want you to suffer like that, Laney." He was telling her the truth. "Scott is wrong, and if he has a problem with your Granddad, he should take it up with him... not you." He shook his head, and then spoke softly, "I will be gentle with you, honey. That is all I can promise."

Laney closed her eyes. Her decision was simple because there really was no choice. It wasn't as though she was engaged to be married to another man. She'd never found a man that she thought would make a good husband; most men were too soft and with her temper she would crush whatever manhood they had. It was one reason she was anxious to come and visit her Granddad. She wanted to find a husband, and she was sure she could find a man out here that wasn't afraid of her temper and her tendency to boss people around. Who knows, under different circumstances, Seth just might be the perfect man for her. Her snooty mother would have a fit if she was to marry someone like Seth, but Laney figured that was a good thing. If things went as she hoped they would, Laney had no intention of returning to her mother's home in the east. But, she was drawn to the present, in order to find that right man she had to survive her present circumstances. The least painful way of doing that was to close her eyes and pretend she was truly married to Seth. At least her curiosity about the act would be satisfied.

Seth could see that the little redhead was thinking over her options, and unless he was mistaken, he knew the exact moment she made her decision. She opened her eyes and looked at him. He prayed she would be reasonable and he wouldn't have to resort to force in order to save her life. "Well, Laney?" he asked quietly.

"There is only one option that is worth consideration, Seth. I hope you will keep your promise to be gentle with me...?" Her voice sounded like she was pleading with him, and she hated sounding so afraid, even though she was. Her married friends had told her tales of the marriage bed, and she had no idea if Seth would cause her much pain or treat her kindly. He'd already given her a spanking that hurt like the very devil!

"First of all, we have all night, honey. I'm not going to throw you down and jump on top of you. I'm going to make sure you enjoy this as much as possible," he told her, his voice warm and silky. "Do you have any questions about making love? Your mother isn't here to give you reassurance, but I'll do my best to fill in for her," he offered.

“Mother would tell me to close my eyes and pray until it was over,” Laney said with a giggle. She heard him chuckle and that bit of laughter warmed her as nothing else could have right then. It made the stern man more human. “Do you have a betrothed? Or a girl you’ve been courting?” she asked.

“No. I’ve never met a woman who was sassy enough to put up with me when I get ornery,” Seth admitted. “I have a temper, and I don’t need some shrinking violet that is going to cry every time I raise my voice.”

“Good. You won’t be cheating on anyone else, and neither will I,” she added. “I wouldn’t want to be guilty of that.” Somehow they were now lying down on the soft bedding, facing each other, and Laney felt relaxed and safe for the first time since being taken captive. “I’ve heard that it hurts a lot the first time…?”

“I’ve never lain with a virgin before, Laney, so I can’t tell you how much it hurts. I can promise you that I won’t rush you, and I’ll make sure your body is prepared before I enter you. I promise I won’t take pleasure in causing you pain.”

“I find that hard to believe!” she responded with spirit. “That spanking you gave me hurt a lot and you enjoyed every smack you gave me!” she accused.

“You were having a tantrum and then you bit me. You earned that spanking, but it was a punishment, and given to your hind quarters. It wasn’t a sexual matter at all. I would never use sex as a punishment,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Laney believed him. “I’m sorry I bit you, but White Eagle already punished me and I was sore and wanted to protect myself.”

“Understandable, but I won’t allow you to get away with behaving like that. I believe in spanking. It works, and you haven’t tried to bite me again, now have you?” he teased her.

“I really don’t go around biting people, Seth! My manners are better than you’ve seen here.” She didn’t know why it was so important that he not think badly of her, but it was.

“I’m sure you have plenty of spirit, Laney,” he stated. “Enough to warrant a damn good spanking every so often.”

“Oh, that is just barbaric!” she declared.

“And necessary with a feisty woman,” he stated. “Now don’t go getting angry with me. I wouldn’t want to have to put my hand to your sore bottom again tonight, especially when we are going to have a long day in the saddle tomorrow.”

“Do you believe White Eagle will permit us to leave as long as we consummate this marriage?” she asked, her doubt reflected in her pretty green eyes.

“Scott is a man of his word. He will release us as long as you give up your innocence.”

“Then let’s just get it over with, Seth. I’m a bundle of nerves.”

Seth didn’t argue with her. Ever since she agreed to the act, his jeans were bulging and he was ready for release. It had been a long time since he was with a woman. The Widow Thompson was his mistress for over a year, but she moved away several months ago, and Seth made it a point not to sleep with the women who worked in the saloons in town. He didn’t think less of them, but he didn’t like sharing with every other cowboy in the area. He was more than ready to make the pretty redhead his. He leaned over and his kiss was very gentle and persuasive. He knew he didn’t dare frighten her with the intensity of his passion. He was going to take it slow and easy, even if it killed him... and it just might, he realized as his throbbing manhood grew even harder.

The kiss was perfect, Laney realized, and she was shocked to discover that her body was already tingling. She was enjoying the soft persuasiveness of his warm lips on hers. She kisses him back, and Seth’s response was to deepen the kiss and claim her lips with passion. Laney had been kissed before, but never like this. It was obvious that the man knew what he was doing. She relaxed and simply allowed herself to enjoy the experience.

Seth couldn’t believe that Laney was responding like a much more experienced woman. He had to keep reminding himself not to rush her, but it did not take long for him to divest both of them of their clothing. Their nude bodies touched and Laney took as much pleasure in roaming her hands over his body as he did from touching her. She was moaning and begging for him to touch her even more intimately before he dared touch her between her legs. He found that she was soaking wet, and he stroked her tiny button until she was writhing before he knelt between her legs and positioned himself to take her.

Laney felt stretched wide as Seth gently entered her. She knew she wanted and needed this intimacy, but when it started to hurt, she felt herself stiffen. Seth stopped and gave her time to relax to his touch, and when she was once again moaning in pleasure, he swiftly broke through her hymen and lodged himself deep within her willing body. Laney cried out at the sudden tearing inside her, but Seth remained still for quite a while, murmuring words of endearment as he softly kissed her and stroked her, bringing back the fires of passion from earlier. When he felt her move on him, he smiled. The little redhead was a passionate woman and she wanted to experience the pleasure he was offering. Seth didn’t disappoint her, and once he felt her spasms of release and heard her cries of ecstasy, he found his own release deep within her.

Laney felt content once Seth untangled himself from her and then lie on his side and pulled her close to lie against his body. They both slept deeply, happy and content, and

when they woke during the night it seemed natural to make love a second time. Laney was a bit sore and felt some discomfort, but it was quickly forgotten when she discovered that it was indeed better without the pain of the first time involved.

“You are beautiful, Laney,” she heard Seth say. “Don’t you worry about anything; I will do the right thing as soon as we get back to the ranch.”

“What do you mean, Seth?” she asked, half asleep again.

“I’ll marry you for real,” he said, and was left wondering if she heard him when her soft even breathing told him she was already sound asleep. Seth didn’t worry about it. He slept too, and didn’t wake again until Medicine Woman entered the teepee.

Laney wasn’t happy when the woman touched her, and she tried to kick her away. Seth had to hold her for the brief examination, and the elderly Indian left the teepee without a word. “How could you allow her to do that to me, Seth?” Laney demanded, her feelings hurt.

“Would you rather Scott did it?” he asked quietly, and saw her face blanch at the very idea. “I’m sorry if she was rough with you,” he added, and then pulled her to him and kissed her tears of shame away. “Let’s get dressed and leave. No one will stop us now, Laney, and I don’t want to stay here one second longer than necessary. I don’t trust my temper.”

“I understand,” Laney whispered, pulling herself together. She reached out to touch his cheek. “Thank you, Seth. You are a man of your word, and I thank you for making sure I did not suffer.”

“You gave me a precious gift, Laney. I will treasure this memory always,” he replied. She smiled at him, and he should have realized she was planning something outrageous, but in truth, he expected her to silently follow him out of the camp. Not so. As soon as she was dressed, she stepped outside the teepee before Seth had his shirt buttoned and his boots pulled on his feet. It did not take her long to reach the teepee of White Eagle.

Chapter Five

Seth ran after her and followed her inside and was just in time to see her take a dipper of water from the large container and throw it on his sleeping brother. White Eagle immediately jumped to his feet to glare at her. "What do you do here, woman?" he demanded.

"I simply came to thank you for choosing such a wonderful husband for me, my brother. Seth and I are very happy, and I am sure Granddad will be pleased. You are welcome to join us for Thanksgiving dinner if you wish. I am sure that my husband would be honored to welcome his brother to our home." She turned to Seth and took his hand in hers. "Let us go now, my husband. Granddad has worried about me long enough and I wish to tell him our wonderful news." She pulled Seth outside and then listened in satisfaction at the curses coming from inside White Eagles' teepee.

"We need to ride now, little girl, and pray that he doesn't follow!" Seth was going to set her backside on fire for this stunt, just as soon as he was sure White Eagle wasn't following.

"He gave his word," she said with smug confidence.

"He is also mad as hell," Seth stated, giving her butt a hard spank before he picked her up and put her on his stallion's back. Laney cried out in pain a second time when he dropped her hard on the saddle. "That is just a small sample of the spanking you just earned, Mrs. Sawyer," he stated firmly.

Laney kicked her foot back and her heel landed firmly on his shin. "Don't you dare threaten me, Mister!"

"It's not a threat; it is a promise." Seth urged his horse to a fast gallop, wanting to put as much distance between them and Scott as possible. He was thankful his guns had been returned, not that he was sure he could shoot his own brother. He prayed that Laney was right and Scott would honor his word.

Laney tried once or twice to talk to Seth, but each time he hushed her, stating he needed to listen for trouble. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he reined in and said, "We'll give Mac a rest now. If you need to pee, take care of it now," he crudely advised. "Just don't go far."

Laney wasn't stupid. She knew there were other Indians out here, and she might not be lucky enough to be rescued a second time. She relieved her bladder, and was thankful for the water that Seth provided. "How much farther is it?" she asked. Her poor butt was so sore she didn't know how much longer she could tolerate riding.

“We won’t be at the ranch until late tonight. I know you’re hungry, but I don’t want to draw attention to the fact we’re here, so no hunting and no fire. We’ll eat tonight. Let’s go now.”

Laney was dismayed at the thought of riding that much longer, but she knew it wouldn’t do any good to argue with Seth. He couldn’t change anything. Seth kept up a steady pace, and he stopped again to let the horse drink and rest. Laney took advantage of the time to relieve her bladder once more and to have another cool drink of water. She was unprepared when Seth took her arm and pulled her over to a rock jutting from the ground. He took a seat and then pulled her face-down over his lap, and then he pulled up her dress to bare her backside. “No!” she hollered. “Please don’t, Seth!” she begged. “I’m really sore!”

“You purposely baited White Eagle, Laney Coddington Sawyer,” he answered, giving her a firm spank on her tender bottom.

“He deserved it!” she cried out, and earned herself a second hard swat. “Owww!”

“And you deserve this.” Seth gave her a dozen more hard spanks and was surprised when Laney burst into tears. “You do not bait a man when you are in such a dangerous situation, little girl. What if he’d decided to go ahead and torture you to death?” He gave her another dozen hard spanks.

Laney was in pain. “Please stop! I am sorry I upset you, Seth, but you will see that it will work out! White Eagle will come for Thanksgiving, and the two of you will reconcile and perhaps he will forgive Granddad!” Laney heard his grunt of disbelief.

“You do not know my brother.”

“Please stop spanking me, Seth. I am very sore,” she pleaded with him.

“I will stop this time because we have to ride another three hours and I do not want any whining and complaining from you.” He picked her up and carried her to Mac, but he was gentle as he put her down on the saddle. He mounted and put his arms around her to hold her close. “You are one sassy lady, do you know that, Red?” he asked, his voice a mere whisper.

“I’ve heard from my mother that I am impossible,” she confessed. She was in pain and was trying to think of something else.

“You aren’t impossible,” he said. “You are just a wild lady in need of a firm man.”

“Are you a firm man, Seth?” she asked.

“When I need to be,” he responded.

“What if I tell you that I do not like being spanked?” she demanded, suddenly feeling very brave.

“Then I would tell you to behave and you won’t earn a spanking.” His lips twitched when he heard her sound of exasperation. Being married to such a feisty, passionate woman would be a challenge; provided Harvey Coddington actually agreed to the marriage. The old man was just as liable to shoot him dead when he heard that he’d bedded Laney.

Laney did her best to keep Seth talking as they traveled the rest of the way to the ranch. Once they reached the ranch, it was another two hours before they actually reached the ranch house, and sitting grew increasingly uncomfortable. She did not understand why she wasn’t angry with Seth for spanking her, but she wasn’t. He was the type of man she’d always needed. One who wasn’t afraid of her temper and one who would stand up to her, and yet treat her with tenderness and respect. Finally, they saw lights and Seth pointed out the ranch. No one was moving about, and Seth rode right up to the front porch of the big house.

Harvey Coddington was out the door and met them in the yard, holding out his hands to lift his granddaughter from Seth’s arms. “Laney, honey, you’re safe now. Granddad won’t let anything like this happen ever again.”

“I’m fine, Granddad,” Laney reassured him. “Seth and I are starving so I hope you have some food on the stove... or something I can fix really fast...?”

“There is food, honey,” he said with enthusiasm. He then turned to Seth. “Son, are you alright? You weren’t hurt?” Harvey demanded.

“Sir, I am fine, just hungry enough to eat a bear!” Seth dreaded the conversation he needed to have with the man he respected.

“Let’s go inside,” Harvey said. He saw movement down by the bunkhouse and called out, “Billy, come and get Seth’s horse and give him a good rub down and a good feeding. He’s been rode hard.”

He followed them inside and realized that Seth was holding Laney’s hand as he led her toward the kitchen. “Do you want to eat before you get a bath and change into something?” he heard Seth ask considerately.

“Food first,” she answered, and then shocked him by adding, “I love this dress. I know that Willow made it, and I hope she has something just as pretty for her own wedding.”

“Wedding?” Harvey repeated, clearly shocked. “You say that is a wedding dress?” he demanded.

“Oh, Granddad, there is much to share with you, but will you please let us eat first. It’s been over twenty-four hours since we’ve eaten, and we are beyond hungry. Let me reassure you that I am fine, other than my backside, and I would appreciate it very much if you would find me a pillow to sit on while we eat.”

“No,” Seth said firmly.

“Seth, please. I’ve had to sit a saddle all day; that should be enough punishment for one day. I need a bit of pampering now,” she said, pleading with him.

Seth felt himself weaken. “This one time, Red. Don’t expect me to permit this another time.”

“Another time...? What the hell is going on?” Harvey demanded.

“Sir, Scott is the one who took Laney captive. He intended to ransom her until he learned she is your granddaughter.”

“Did he harm you, Laney?” Harvey asked, fear in his dark eyes.

“No, not really,” she said, stirring the stew she was heating on the stove. “He was angry when he learned who I was, and my temper did not help matters,” she said with complete honesty. “He spanked me,” she confessed.

“I’ll have him horsewhipped!” Harvey shouted angrily.

“No you won’t, Granddad!” she argued. “He ended up doing Seth and me a favor. Congratulate us, we are married,” she said with a grin for the irate man.

Seth felt like shaking her. The news would better have been delivered in small doses.

“Married?” Harvey repeated, sinking onto a chair. Of all the scenarios he imagined, this one never entered his mind.

“It was a Comanche wedding, so I imagine we’ll need to have a quiet ceremony with a minister or a Justice of the Peace,” Laney mused as she dished up the hot stew and then carried the plates to the table. “Sit down and eat, Seth. Granddad, are you hungry?” she asked politely.

“Why the hell did you two get married without asking me first?” Harvey was pissed off.

“Because White Eagle was being a pain and he insisted we marry,” Laney replied.

“Woman, would you let me explain all of this to your Granddad?” Seth ordered.

“No. You’ll just make it out to be something deadly serious, and I don’t want Granddad angry with Scott when he comes for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“He has a right to be angry with Scott.”

“Why? Scott did us a favor, didn’t he?” she asked, her eyes full of hurt.

“Yes, he did, but that doesn’t mean he was right to force us to marry each other the way he did. Now, sit down and eat and please allow me to speak to your Granddad.” He raised one eyebrow when she started to protest, but just that quickly she caught herself and decided to be prudent. “Thank you, honey,” he acknowledged her acquiescence.

Laney listened as Seth spoke to her Granddad with respect as he told exactly what happened, even to the point of admitting that the only way he could be assured of a chance to save Laney’s life was by taking her by force if necessary. Harvey’s face was pale by the time Seth finished speaking, but he bravely continued, “Sir, I would like the honor of your granddaughter’s hand in marriage. I give you my solemn word that I will never mistreat her and I will provide for her to the best of my ability.”

“Laney, do you want Seth for your husband?” Harvey asked emotionally.

“Yes, Granddad. I know that we haven’t known each other very long, but we’ve been through a lot together. He doesn’t mind my temper and I don’t scare him. I guess this is as good a time as ever to tell you that I came here with every intention of staying. I am not going back east. I’m sick of Mother’s attempts to choose a husband for me. White Eagle chose well, and I am pleased.” She looked at him and then asked, “Are you happy for us?”

“I hoped you two would hit it off,” Harvey admitted with a deep sigh. “Not in this dramatic way, but I hoped. We’ll send for the preacher tomorrow and get you two wed legal.”

“Just in time for Thanksgiving,” Laney said with a happy smile.

The legal wedding took place the next afternoon, and Laney was just as beautiful for this wedding as for the first. Seth wore a suit and a tie, and his bride returned his kiss with excitement and passion. Once the wedding was over, she threw herself into preparations for the holiday, happy and content to be home. If she was disappointed to learn that Seth’s ‘home’ was in her grandfather’s house, she certainly didn’t say it out loud. In fact, Laney seemed to be happy as could be. She dealt with all the nosy visitors who came to express their concern and worry over her kidnapping, and told them that White Eagle recognized her as Harvey’s granddaughter and protected her until Seth came to bring her home. Her laughter and sparkling demeanor gave one and all to know that she had not suffered at the hands of the Comanche.

It was nearly time to sit down at the table for their Thanksgiving Dinner when Seth came into the kitchen in time to hear her swear as she burned her fingers on a hot pot. “Watch

your language, young lady,” he scolded as he gave her bottom a swat. “I won’t have my wife swearing.”

“I was so sure your brother would come,” she tearfully proclaimed.

“Scott wants nothing to do with this world,” Seth said, holding her close. “Now, don’t worry your pretty head about him, honey. You are what I am thankful for this year.”

“I am thankful for you, too, Seth,” she admitted, standing on tiptoe to kiss him.

“Don’t you two get to smooching so much you burn the turkey!” Harvey declared as he entered the kitchen and caught them kissing.

“The turkey is fine, Granddad. Are you hungry?” she asked with a happy smile. This was her best Thanksgiving ever!

“Very hungry,” he replied with a huge grin. “Is there anything I can do to help you?” he offered. His housekeeper was spending the day in town with her daughter’s family, and Harvey was surprised that his little granddaughter knew how to cook. She wasn’t a child any longer and it was difficult for him to absorb that fact.

“Yes, you and Seth can go into the dining room and have a seat. I’m going to start taking up.” The turkey came out of the oven and she purposely let it sit so the juices remained inside before cutting it to serve. She took up the other dishes, and was ready to start carrying them into the other room when the door opened behind her. A strong arm was wrapped around her, lifting her off her feet. Laney jabbed her elbow into the man’s ribs and said, “Put me down, White Eagle!” To her surprise, she was dropped to her feet and released. She whirled around and was shocked to see White Eagle standing there, but he looked as if he belonged. He was dressed much the same as Seth.

“Am I still welcome?” he asked, uncertainty in his dark eyes.

“Of course you are,” she replied. “I set a place for you at the table,” Laney told him. He grabbed her left hand and saw the wedding band on her ring finger.

“You and Seth are truly married?” he stated.

“Yes. I was not lying when I thanked you for choosing him for me.”

“You made me very angry.”

She giggled, “Yes, I know. Seth spanked me for baiting you,” she dared to admit, even though it was embarrassing, and even though she knew he would laugh that evil laugh of his.

“Good. He needs a wife with spirit. May I carry the turkey into the dining room?” he offered. “Perhaps if I am carrying the bird the old man will not beat me until after we eat.”

“Granddad will be happy to see you, Scott,” Laney said factually. “Of course he will bluster a bit, mostly for show. But, he does care about you.” She picked up a couple of bowls and led the way into the dining room.

Harvey Coddington jumped to his feet when he spotted Scott, as did Seth. Scott put the turkey in front of Harvey’s place so that he could carve the bird and then met his gaze bravely. “I will leave if you do not wish to welcome me to your table.”

“You are welcome to eat with us, Scott, but if you ever lay a hand on Laney in anger again, I will cut it off.” The threat was no less threatening because it was said quietly. “If you have an issue with me, then you bring it to me, man to man. Is that understood?”

“It is.” Scott then turned to face his brother. “I take it you are pleased with your wife since you put a white man’s ring on her finger...?”

“I am very pleased with my wife.”

“Then perhaps you will forgive me for choosing a wife for you?” he asked with a wicked grin. “I did not know I had the skill of a matchmaker.”

“You have the skill of an idiot who is lucky I decided not to pound some sense into you,” Seth replied darkly.

“Would you accept my apology?” White Eagle asked with dignity. “I let old anger consume me and I have spent much time regretting the way I behaved toward my brother.

“I forgive you because you gave me the very best reason to be thankful this year,” Seth said as he looked at his beautiful bride.

“I am thankful to have you for my husband, Seth,” Laney replied. “And, Granddad, I am happy to finally have a chance to be with you, too. I’ve missed you so much.”

“I am thankful for your safe return, Laney. I am happy that you and Seth are married, and I hope to live until next year this time and have a great-grandchild to be happy over. I am also very happy to have both of my boys under my roof for this Thanksgiving dinner. You have been separated much too long. Maybe the circumstances that brought you two together once again weren’t the best, but that is in the past now. We are a family.”

White Eagle actually smiled and said, “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Look for *A Christmas Holiday* featuring Laney and Seth, and of course, White Eagle coming in December.

Wishing you and yours a very Happy Thanksgiving as we all count our many blessings.