Sweet Liberty

E. J. Anderson
SWEET LIBERTY

By

E. J. ANDERSON
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Chapter 1

Coming downstairs, Libby Woods stopped short. Those two gunshots had come from the kitchen—where her father and stepmother were eating! Panic ripped through her. She fled toward the front door. Another shot rang out. Almost simultaneously, it felt as though someone had thrust a fist into her lower back with as much force as he could muster. She took another step then collapsed. Searing pain burned through her body. Knowing that her life was at stake, she struggled to remain conscious while feigning otherwise.

“Fergit ‘er,” a man said. “Let’s git the strong box open.”

“But I don’t think I killed her,” another man replied. “You said no witnesses.”

“She didn’t see us, so it don’t matter if she lives. She ain’t even conscious. Let’s git busy and git the hell outta here before she comes to.”

Libby longed to scream for the men to leave the money, but they would undoubtedly kill her if they knew she was conscious. Somehow she had to save herself.

Dear Lord, help me! The pain was excruciating, so it was easy to remain motionless. She didn’t want to move.

Then she heard the men reload their pistols in another room. A shot exploded, but to Libby, it seemed like it happened in the distance.

Metal hit metal. They’d broken open the lock on the strong box, but she hadn’t recoiled at the sound of the blast. Obviously, her condition was so serious that it prohibited any reaction. While she lay immobile, struggling to remain conscious, concentrating on every sound in case she needed to remember them, the men opened and emptied the box. If only she had the strength to stop them. But even if she did, she wouldn’t do anything. The money didn’t matter. She had to stay alive in case her father and Maria were dead.

Terror flooded through her when she heard the men stop beside her. She wanted to scream, to run away, but she could do nothing—not even open her eyes. Was it because of her fear or her injury? Or was her instinct to stay alive prohibiting it?

“You wanna leave ‘er like this?” one man asked.

“We sure as hell ain’t takin’ ‘er with us,” the other answered. “She’s mighty pretty, but she’d slow us down. Let’s get outta here bafer she comes ‘round.”

The men raced out of the house, slamming the door behind them. Still, Libby couldn’t move. Her mind wanted to identify the pair, but her agonized body refused to cooperate until she heard them ride away on their horses. This was her last chance. If she didn’t move now, she would never know what they looked like.

She had to get to the parlor window for a glimpse of the thieves. Crawling on her knees,
Libby held one hand on her stomach in a desperate attempt to restrict the flow of blood where the bullet had exited her body. Her long skirt and petticoats impeded her already laborious movement. No longer able to endure the pain, she gave herself over to the blackness.

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Flossie Woods raced ahead of her half-brother, William, but she stopped short at the open front door. A moment later, her scream pierced the air. “Willie!”

Without hesitation, Willie Nichols sprinted across the yard. He came to an abrupt halt just behind Flossie and grasped her shoulders as he peered over his younger sister’s head. His eyes widened in disbelief. Libby lay facedown in a pool of her own drying blood. He stared at her in disbelief. Libby wasn’t his blood sister—not even half, like Flossie—but he loved her like she was. And he knew that she felt the same way about him. How could anybody have hurt somebody as sweet as Libby? She was so tiny, so delicate, so beautiful that he simply couldn’t imagine anybody wanting to do anything but protect her.

Gently steering Flossie into the house, he made his way to Libby’s side and dropped to his knees beside her. He pushed her soft, auburn hair from her face and pressed three fingers against her neck. With a heavy sigh, he said, “Thank God. She’s still alive.”

“Who did this, Willie?” Flossie asked frantically. “And why?”

“I dunno, but I’m gonna find out. You stay with Libby. I’ll git some water. Maybe we cin wake her up.”

Will stopped short. What he saw in the kitchen made him feel a little seven-year-old, not the seventeen, six-foot-four young man he was. Leon and Maria Woods lay on the floor. Both had been shot in the head; dried blood and brains had matted their hair. Stepping back, Will choked back the urge to vomit—for his sister’s sake.

“You stay outta the kitchen, Flossie,” Will warned. “Leon and Ma are dead, and it ain’t a pretty sight. I’m gonna go hitch up the team so we cin take Libby to the doc in Charleston. We’ll send the sheriff out here when we see if Libby’ll be all right. I mean it now. Don’t you dare step one foot in that kitchen. Unnerstand?”

With tears streaking her cheeks, she nodded. Will left her with Libby and waited until he reached the barn to empty his stomach. No need to clean it up right away. Libby needed a doctor, and it was up to him to get her to one quickly. Now that Leon was gone, it was his responsibility to protect his sisters.

Working rapidly, he hitched a horse to the wagon and drove it to the front of the house. Then he carried Libby to it while Flossie tagged along in a daze.

His life had changed forever, he realized as he climbed into but buckboard seat. The moment he saw Leon and Maria’s bodies, he had become a man.

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That evening, Libby awoke in strange surroundings. She had barely opened her eyes and wondered where she was, when a male voice attracted her attention.

Turning her head, she saw a man with bright red hair sitting on a chair beside the bed in which she lay.

“I see you decided to wake up,” he said with a smile.

This man had nearly colorless gray eyes which showed almost no emotion, even though he smiled, revealing slightly yellowed, crooked teeth. Who was this man? Instead of asking, though, she asked, “Where am I?”

“I’m Dr. Hiram Ross, Miss Woods,” he replied as he approached her bed, “and your siblings brought you here to my office.”

“Why?”

“You were shot, Miss Woods,” he explained, “and your parents were murdered.”

The memory of two shots echoed through her mind. A male voice telling somebody that he didn’t need to kill her followed the shots. She didn’t know why those men had spared her when they’d already murdered two other people, but she was glad they had.

Panic swept through her. Had those men hurt Flossie and Willie, too?

“Where are my brother and sister?” she asked in concern.

The doctor moved to sit on the edge of the bed. “They’re eating at the sheriff’s house.”

Libby sighed and grimaced at the pain such a simple act caused. Then she said, “I’m glad. They need their nourishment.”

“They’ll be back for a few minutes before they go to bed. The sheriff’s wife insisted that they stay there until I release you.”

While they chatted, Libby discovered that the young doctor was a charming, intelligent man with a bedside manner that far exceeded the other town doctor’s. He was small, too, about eight inches shorter than Will, with a scholarly expression on his narrow face. And he had the brightest red hair she’d ever seen. But her mild attraction to him soon waned. He spoke little about anything other than himself and medicine.

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For two weeks, Libby stayed in the doctor’s office. Despite her feeling much better, Ross refused to let her leave, claiming that she could still get an infection. Libby, though, believed it was more because he wanted to be with her.

Other than at night or when he had to go on an emergency call, he rarely left Libby’s side, making her feel very uncomfortable. A good bedside manner was one thing; constantly being with a patient and chatting about little things, was something entirely different.
One day, he told her that they would be married.

"Married?" Libby exclaimed with a laugh. "Why do you think that? We hardly know each other."

“I know you well enough to know that you’re exactly the type of woman I want for a wife. Why do you think I’ve been spending so much time with you? I’ve gotten everything I wanted—good grades in school, medical school, a thriving practice by the time I was thirty. The only way to approach a marriage is with as much rationale as I solve any other problem I have in my life.”

“There’s only one problem with your theory. You can’t control me, and I have no intention of marrying you.”

“You will,” he said with finality as he left the room. “You won’t risk losing everything, because you need to take care of Will and Flossie.”

Libby hated his words. Not only would she stop him from marrying her, she would stop his overt ogling of her little sister. The man actually acted like he owned her, and she responded in kind. If she accomplished anything, she would get Ross away from Flossie forever.

That night when Flossie and Will arrived to visit, Ross was out of the office. As soon as Libby saw them, she spoke with more enthusiasm than she’d ever felt before. If she could get her siblings to agree with her, she could get out of town without Ross even knowing that’s what she was planning.

“Hello, you two,” she said cheerfully. “I have an idea. Let’s sell the farm to the bank and move.”

Stunned, Will stared at her blankly then asked, “Move to where?”

“I don’t know yet,” Libby said. “I thought we could decide together. We could start by getting a map. I thought maybe we could go up the river—maybe to Charlotte, North Carolina.”

Flossie pouted, her voice carrying a tone of true distress. “Do we have to, Libby?”

The excitement coursing through her diminished somewhat when she heard Flossie’s distressed question. She’d been so sure that both her bother and sister would agree that she hadn’t considered what she would say if either of them objected. “Of course, we don’t have to, but think of the adventure—traveling, a new city. It would be a fresh start.”

“I like the idea!” Will agreed. “Let’s do it, Libby. We cin go tamorra if we wanna.”

Libby smiled at him. “Not so fast, Willie. First, we have to see if Mr. Hooper at the bank will buy the farm so we have money for the trip. And we have to sell most of the furniture. But you do like the idea, don’t you?”

“I sure do! I always hated farmin’. That’s why I didn’t argue about goin’ to school longer than most boys my age.”

Turning her gaze to her sister, Libby asked, “What are your objections, Flossie?”
Flossie hesitated, as though she wanted to say something but was reluctant to do so. Finally, she admitted, “I guess I don’t have any, except Papa wanted us to go to school until the teacher said he couldn’t teach us anything new.”

“You two are the oldest ones there,” Libby countered. “And it’s not because you’re stupid. It’s because our father was so determined that we get a good education. It was hard enough for me to go to school when I was your age, but at least I didn’t stand out like a stalk of corn in a cotton field, like you two do. Besides, this will be an education of a different type. I’m sure we’ll learn all kinds of things on the trail.”

“I like the idea, Libby,” Will said. “Honest. I think we should do it.” He turned to face Flossie. “Let’s do it, Floss. It’ll be fun.”

“It will be a lot of work, Willie,” Libby warned.

“I don’t mind.

“I guess I don’t, either,” Flossie said flatly.

“Are you sure, Flossie? I want this to be a unanimous decision, but I don’t want you to feel forced.”

“I don’t.”

“Terrific,” Libby said. “As soon as you get a map, Willie, chart a route. We’ll leave as soon as I settle everything concerning the farm.”

“All right, Lib. This is excitin’!”

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Deep in thought, Libby sat on the bed with her knees drawn up under the covers so her feet were on the mattress. While she clutched her legs with her right arm, she rested her left elbow on her left knee and held back her hair. Despite her effort, an auburn lock fell in to her eyes. She pushed it back as a man spoke her name from across the room.

Looking up, she saw Thomas Morgan, a widower of a little over a year, in the doorway. For as long as Libby could remember, his plantation had bordered on the Woods farm. Since he’d married for the first time at forty-three, he had two small children still too young for school.

“Good afternoon, Libby,” Thomas said. “How are you feeling?”

“Too well to be here, thank you,” she replied. “I’m surprised to see you.”

“I know this is a bad time, Libby,” he explained as he strode to the foot of her bed, “but I have a proposition for you. First, I’d like to offer my condolences.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t think I ever told you how much I appreciated all the help you gave me when Hazel died. Now I want to show you. I want to help you do something with your farm. I said I
have a proposition, but it's actually two. The first one is this: Theresa and Tommy need a mother. Since you need someone to work the farm, I thought we would join forces. We can get married, Libby. Then you'd have someone to work the farm, Willie and Flossie would have a father, and my children would have a mother.”

Although her mind raced with thoughts, Libby said nothing. What an unexpected turn of events. His suggestion hadn’t even entered her thoughts in passing, and she couldn’t force a response to such a ludicrous notion. She could never marry a man she didn’t love and who didn’t love her. She could never be in a marriage which was based on her taking care of a man’s children.

After a brief pause, Thomas continued. “Many marriages take place strictly for convenience, Libby. And that’s exactly what ours would be. If you want, we could even have separate bedrooms.” Still she remained silent, her expression unchanging. “What are you thinking?”

“You said this was your first proposition,” she replied. “Before I answer, I’d like to know your second.”

“That’s fair, and very wise. I’ve been trying to buy your father’s land since before your mother died, but he always had a reason not to sell. Either he enjoyed farming or he wanted his children to grow up there. I hate to be like this, Libby, but he’s not here to work the land now. You, Willie and Flossie are all grown—or nearly grown. If you won’t agree to my first suggestion, maybe you will my second.”

“I see. Which would you prefer?”

“Naturally, I’d prefer the first. I’d like to marry you. I love my children, but I’m old enough to be their grandfather. I can’t manage two children who aren’t even in school yet. I need a wife to do that. Oh, they have Millicent, but she’s just a slave. She can’t raise them properly. I’m too busy running the plantation. But if you won’t accept my proposal, I hope you’ll sell. I can give you everything, Libby—a big house, slaves, fancy clothes, big parties. Everything.”

“I’m sure you could,” she replied, “but that isn’t enough for me.”

“You’re talking about love. I married for love the first time, and it turned into a nightmare. Maybe people shouldn’t marry for love; maybe convenience is a much more suitable reason.”

“I’m sorry, Thomas, but I can’t marry you. I think your second suggestion will be the perfect solution.”

“The perfect solution?” he repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“Flossie, Willie, and I are moving north—if we can sell the farm for a fair price. We’ve only made plans as far as Charlotte, North Carolina, but we’re hoping to go farther. We don’t know where we’ll settle yet.”

“You’re leaving?” he asked in astonishment. “How can you even consider such a thing when the sheriff hasn’t found your parents’ murderers? What if he recovers your money?”

Libby shook her head. “He told me that’s not likely. I never saw the men, and Sheriff Cramer can’t find people no one can identify. He’ll probably never find our money, Thomas. Willie, Flossie, and I have to accept that. Going north will be a new start for us.”
“Are you positive that’s what you want?”

“Yes. I’ll be happy to sell you the land, but marriage is out of the question.”

“If that’s honestly what you want, I’ll give you a good price for the land. We’ve been neighbors for a long time—friends, as well. Since your financial situation is so bad now, I’ll pay you as much as I can for the land.”

“You’re very generous, Thomas, but we both know that isn’t good business. For us to take more than the land is worth would be the same as accepting charity. I’ll take no more than the value of the land as it stands now. Willie’s been taking care of it since Papa’s death, and he says the crops are doing fine. So are the cattle and milk cows. Have your lawyer draw up some papers for the sale, and I’ll agree to whatever is a fair price.”

“All right, Libby,” Thomas reluctantly agreed, “if you’re positive this is what you want.”

Libby straightened her shoulders in a show of pride. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life. I can’t explain why, but I truly believe that my entire future will change for the better if I leave Charleston.”

“Then I’ll come back with the papers of sale and the money as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate your gesture of generosity, and I’m sorry I couldn’t be your children’s mother. But if I ever marry, which is highly unlikely, it won’t be for convenience.”

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Two days later Ross announced that he’d been summoned by a local farmer to tend his wife during her difficult labor. While he was gone, Thomas Morgan visited Libby and paid for the farm, most of the livestock, most of the tools, all of the furniture, and whatever food they decided to leave. The only items the siblings kept were linens, kitchen supplies, nonperishable food, two horses, a saddle and bridle, a large wagon, and the harness to hitch a horse to it.

With Will and Flossie waiting outside to leave, Libby wrote a hasty note to Ross. After placing it and some money on the bed, she dressed and joined her siblings to begin their journey.

Three days into the trip, the siblings found a suitable campsite then left to do their respective chores. Libby went off to fetch water while Will hunted for food. Flossie could prepare the fire while she herself found larger branches to use for overnight heat.

Good, Libby thought. Willie found some food. Casually making her way through the bushes at the edge of the river, she stopped short. A man leaning over Flossie reached for a knife in his belt. Flossie’s skirt was above her knees.

Dropping her wooden buckets, Libby screamed to divert his attention. She raced the fifty yards to the clearing, calling for him to stop.
The buckskin-clad stranger bent over Flossie with a knife in his hand.

Libby couldn’t believe this was happening. He was cutting Flossie—with a knife bigger than she’d ever seen outside of a kitchen. How could she stop him from inflicting more wounds when she was so small? Determination like she’d never known engulfed her. She grabbed his shirt, pulling on it with all her strength.

But the man was much larger and stronger. She couldn’t pull him away from her sister. Where was Will when she needed him? This man was killing Flossie, and there was nothing she could do to stop him.
Chapter 2

Frustrated, she pounded on the man’s back. Still, he bent over Flossie, put his mouth to her leg then took it away, spitting out blood.

Despite her frenzied attempts to stop him, he repeated the process several times. Taking a quick break, he pointed to the left and explained simply, “Snake.”

Libby stared at the rattler in horror. Her fingers slowly tightened on the material of his shirt. A poisonous snake had bitten Flossie. When she was a child, she herself had been bitten—by a coral snake. Now even the sight of a dead snake terrified her. The vivid memory of the colorful reptile dangling from her arm came back in an instant. Her flesh had been in its deadly, gripping mouth until her father had torn the snake, as well as some skin, from her arm.

As she stared at the rattlesnake, it moved. Renewed terror seared her body, and she screamed. She gripped the man’s shirt even tighter.

“Look at the size of this whopper, Libby!” Will exclaimed as he lifted the serpent until its tail touched the ground. “It hasta be as long as Flossie is tall.”

Glancing up from his work, the man spat out more blood while he glared at Will. Before returning to his task, he ordered, “Drop that thing.”

“Why?” Will protested. “It’s dead. It ain’t gonna hurt me now.”

He spat out more blood. “Because you’re scaring the hell out of this girl.”

“She ain’t no girl. She’s my sister. ‘N’ I only wanted to show her what a monster this crit- ter is.”

Sitting back on his knees, he spat more blood from his mouth, then reached behind him and patted Libby’s hip with a gentle, reassuring caress. But when he spoke to Will, he used a paternal tone. “Look, boy, I don’t give a damned if she’s your sister or a complete stranger. Drop that thing, or I’ll tan your ass something fierce. And I don’t care if you are bigger than I am.”

“Don’t call me boy!” Will complained as he dropped the snake. “I’m seventeen now, and I’m the man in this family.”

“Then act like one. Can you shoot?”

“Tolerable good.”

“Tolerably well,” the man corrected. “Do you think you could shoot a rattler if you saw one?”

“Dunno. I aim for bigger things.”
“Now’s not the time to find out. You take over here. I want to get some water.”

“Why cain’t Libby? She ain’t doin’ nothin’.”

“I don’t want her wandering around by the river,” he explained while Will knelt beside him. “There might be more rattlers around here.”

Libby was starting to relax enough to release her grip when he mentioned the possibility of more rattlesnakes. They were out there, lurking about, ready to attack her if she moved even an inch. Her heart pounded within her chest; her breathing became so labored that her lungs ached. She was going to die! A snake was going to bite her, and she was going to die. No, it couldn’t happen—not yet. She had to get Flossie and Will to civilization first.

Her panic increased. She felt as though she would faint any minute. But she couldn’t do that, either. She had to help this man save Flossie.

But even though she told herself that she had to be strong, her hands tightened their hold on the buckskin shirt the stranger wore.

“What if I swallow blood accidental-like?” Will asked.

“It won’t hurt you, but try to avoid it. Do this a couple times so I can see if you’ve got it right.”

For several minutes, Nate Payne instructed the young man on what to do. The entire time he soothingly caressed Libby’s hip. While he watched the teen, he tried to envision what this girl looked like. She was obviously short, unlike her brother. But she probably had his dark hair and eyes, as well as his olive complexion. He was a handsome young man, and she was probably a pretty girl.

Satisfied that the lad was doing his job properly, Nate started to rise but squatted when Libby didn’t let go. To break her hold, he jerked from her secure clutch and spun toward her. He stared down at her silently. His mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened in amazement. The lad was right; this was no girl. She was one of the most beautiful young women he’d ever seen! And she looked nothing like her brother. What shocked him most, though, was the terror in her eyes.

Then he noticed that her eyes weren’t on him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the object of her attention and sidestepped once to block her view.

When Libby started to scream, Nate grabbed her shoulders gently, which cut off her squeal. Then her gaze followed his fringed sleeve to shoulder then his mouth. Suddenly, he regretted not having shaved for several weeks. This young woman probably wanted nothing to do with a trapper who sported a beard and mustache.

But he couldn’t think about that now. He needed to calm her down before he could go off and slay the poisonous dragons for her.

Keeping his deep voice soft so he didn’t upset her further, he spoke as calmly as he could. “It’s all right now, miss.”

He hadn’t set eyes on a woman in months, and simply touching this one aroused him so
much that he wondered if he could bear the ache in his loins. But he had to—for the sake of these travelers. Clearing the unexpected lump in his throat, he said, “I’m going to get some water to clean her wound. I’ll be right back.”

Determined to help, he strode over to the snake, picked it up, and dropped it behind a tree. Then he went to his horse.

Libby watched curiously as he got a canteen then sprinted toward the river. Who was that scroungy-looking man? And what did he want from them? On second thought, she knew exactly what he wanted—their money.

Her gaze went back to his horse. There was a pack mule loaded with furs beside it. Maybe the man didn’t want their money after all. Maybe he only wanted to help them.

A shot rang out, and she jerked her head to look toward the river. Had the stranger killed another rattlesnake or something else? Oh, how she hoped it was a snake! About a minute later there was another shot, then several more spaced at irregular intervals.

When he returned about twenty minutes later, he carried the pails Libby had dropped. Water slopped over the sides as he hurried to Flossie’s side. Kneeling beside Will, he said, “All right, boy. I’ll look at her injury now.” While Will moved out of the way, he turned his attention to Flossie, who was finally conscious. “You’re going to be fine, miss.”

“I feel sick,” Flossie said weakly. “And my leg hurts.”

“I know, but you won’t die. The young man and I got most of the venom from your system. Your job is to lie still and relax. I don’t want you moving any more than necessary.” Glancing over his shoulder, he spoke to the Libby in the same tone. “Do you have a couple of towels and something to bandage the wounds?”

For the first time since she saw the rattlesnake, Libby forced herself to move. She hurried to the wagon and pulled out two towels plus some bandages that her father had insisted be kept on hand at the farm. Returning to the stranger, Libby knelt beside him and silently handed him a towel.

What would they have done if he hadn’t appeared? she wondered as she watched him clean Flossie’s wound. She wouldn’t have known how to treat a snakebite, and Will obviously wouldn’t have, either. If this man hadn’t come to Flossie’s rescue, she would probably be dead by now—or not far from it. Libby was very grateful to him, but …

Instinct told her that he was only there to help them, that he wanted nothing in return. But logic insisted that something more was involved. No man was so giving without wanting something in return. She’d learned that from experience.

Beside her, the man tied off the bandage then handed her what he hadn’t used. Without a word, she rose and put the clean bandages away. When she turned from the wagon, he was standing behind her.

Libby studied him silently. She’d never seen such an attractive man. His features were flawless. His deeply bronzed skin and wavy, sun-streaked sandy blond hair heightened his
outdoor appearance. The bright blue eyes set beneath his long, shaggy locks sparkled conspicuously against the tanned face left exposed by his beard.

When she could finally force herself to speak, her words burst forth in a flurry. "Thank you for saving our sister’s life, sir. I wish there were some way we could repay you, but we can’t spare any money."

“I don’t want payment, miss. I’m just glad I could help.” With a pleasant smile, he paused. She was awfully pretty, and her voice was as soft as velvet. But there was something about it that left him wanting more. Maybe the complete lack of emotion in it. Whatever it was, he wanted to hear it again, and the only way to do that was to keep her talking. “By the way, it’s not wise to mention the amount of money you have to a stranger. Some folks would kill you for even a few cents.”

Libby blushed and bowed her head. “Normally, I wouldn’t have, but I wanted you to know that we can’t afford your services. The best we can do is offer you some of our dinner.”

“Oh, Libby,” Will interrupted, ‘we can’t do that, neither. We ain’t got nothin’ to eat. I didn’t have time to shoot nothin’.”

The man bit the inside of his lower lip. He detested improper English and often corrected people’s grammatical errors. This time, though, he felt it best to hold his tongue.

“Nothing?” Libby asked as she turned her gaze to her brother. “You’d better get back out there and find something, Willie. The least we can do is feed this gentleman.”

“There’s no need for that, Willie,” Nate insisted before Will could protest. “The rattler’s more than big enough to feed all of us.”

Libby snapped her head back to the man and stared up at him in astonishment, her mouth gaping. “You want me to cook it? But we’ll all be poisoned.”

He frowned. Her expression was animated, but her voice still bore no emotion. For some reason, that concerned him. To take his mind off it, he smiled again and said, “In the first place, there’s no danger of being poisoned. And in the second place, I’ll do the cooking.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not, Libby?” Will asked.

“Because …”

“Because,” the man interrupted with a playful grin directed at the woman before him, “we haven’t been properly introduced. My name is Nathaniel Payne, but most folks call me Nate.”

“How do you do, Mr. Payne,” Libby said.

“Like I said, miss, most folks call me Nate. And I’m certainly not Mr. Payne to anybody. So either you call me Nate, or you call me Payne—because I don’t answer to mister.”

“I’m Will Nichols,” he said enthusiastically, “and these are my sisters, Liberty and Flossie Woods. But don’t call me Willie like they do. They still think I’m a little boy, but I ain’t. I’m a
man now, and I aim to be treated like one. So you call me Will or else.”

Liberty, Nate thought. What an unusual name. He liked it—a lot. Of course, as pretty as she was, he would like her name even if it was Fred. To still his thoughts, he directed his next question to Will. “Or else what?”

“Or else I’ll whup ya,” Will declared. “I’m considerable bigger than you are, and I could do it.”

“Willie,” Libby said with only a mild hint of warning in her soft voice.

“It’s all right, Miss Liberty,” Nate said, grinning down at her unalteringly. She had the most beautiful green eyes he’d ever seen. But he had to keep his mind on their conversation and stop dreaming of what it might be like to sweep her into his arms and ...

With a sharp shake of his head, Nate banished the thought from his head then explained, “If Willie wants to fight me, I have no objections. He should be forewarned, though, that bigger is not necessarily stronger.”

Shrugging out of his buckskin shirt, Nate tossed it aside. Libby’s eyes widened again, and she gasped softly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her studying his body. He was a very strong man, and she obviously appreciated his physique. He tensed for battle, forcing the muscles in his arms, chest, and back protruded even more. Only a smattering of hair on his chest obstructed her view.

Proud of the effect his body had on this demure young woman, he tossed his head to clear hair from his eyes, then he directed his gaze to her brother. “Are you ready, Willie?”

Will’s eyes widened in amazement, and he backed up two steps. “You really aim to fight me?”

Standing erect, Nate unclenched his fists and let his arms drop to his sides. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I don’t wanna fight. I just don’t wancha callin’ me Willie. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry. I misunderstood. I’ll make a deal with you. If you at least try to use good grammar in my presence, I’ll try to remember to call you Will. I know from your sister’s speech that you have an education, and it doesn’t make you any less of a man to use it. Do we have a deal?”

Will nodded. “Sure. As long as I don’t hafta—have to fight with you.”

“That’s better. Let’s get dinner started. We’ll make it so your sisters won’t even know what they’re eating.”

Libby agreed with a silent nod. Her reaction to seeing Nate’s half-naked body surprised her, and she was afraid that talking might show him her interest. For the first time in her life, the sight of a bare-chested man commanded her undivided attention, and she was bewitched by his powerful masculinity.

As he slipped his shirt back over his head, disappointment flooded through her. Forcing her mind back to the present, she spoke in a calm, casual voice. She could only hope that it
hid her internal stirrings from her siblings—and especially from Nate. "I'm sorry that we don't have some decent food for you."

"That's all right," Nate said cheerfully. "I'm used to eating whatever I can catch. This isn't my first snake dinner, and it probably won't be my last. The first time it's kind of hard to swallow because you know what it is, but if you're hungry enough, you'll try anything. It tastes a lot like chicken, so if you close your eyes while you're eating it, you should do fine."

Libby grimaced at the thought. "If you don't mind, I feel a little sick to my stomach. I think I'll lie down in the wagon for a while."

"Good idea. I'll tell you when it's time to eat."

After Nate cooked the reptile over the fire Will built, Will called for Libby to join them. Unable to bear the thought of consuming a snake, she claimed that she had no appetite and politely refused. As she watched from the wagon, she wondered how the other three could possibly eat it.

With Nate offering to stay until morning to see that Flossie was all right, all four settled down for the night. When he thought everyone was asleep, he checked on her again. She was a bit more feverish than earlier, so he covered her with his spare blanket. Still unable to sleep, he checked the three horses and his pack mule to reassure himself that they were secured well enough to nearby trees. Then he glanced at the wagon in which Libby lay.

Ever since he'd first felt her hands on his shirt, he'd felt drawn to her. He'd wanted to hold her and comfort her and make all of her fears go away. But she was so aloof that he didn't know how to approach her. Instead, he'd watched her stubbornly sit in the wagon and longed to sit with her. He'd opted for a few fleeting glances in her direction. Now, as he gazed longingly down at her, he noticed she wasn't fully covered against the chilly night air. He pulled the blanket to her neck.

"Willie?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"No, Miss Liberty. It's Nate."

While Nate crossed his arms and rested them on the side of the wagon, Libby sat up. "Is Flossie all right?"

"She's running a fever," he replied with a smile, "but I think she'll be fine if you stay here for a couple of days."

"What if there are more rattlesnakes? I think I'd go insane if someone got bitten again. I'm terrified of them."

"I noticed, but I doubt anybody else will be bitten."

"How can you be so sure?" She examined him silently for a moment then said, "I thank the Lord that you happened by to save her."

Nate grimaced. There was no doubt in his mind. Now was time to admit the truth. "Actually, I didn't merely happen by. I spotted your trail yesterday and decided to say hello. It's been a long time since I've had any human company."
“What do you do that keeps you away from people?”

“I hunt and trap along the rivers in North and South Carolina. Unfortunately, trapping hasn’t been very good this year.”

“Then you travel all the time?”

“Most of the time, anyway.” When her stomach growled, he grinned. “Sounds like somebody’s hungry now.”

Libby grimaced. “I don’t suppose you have any dinner left.”

Nate’s grin widened, and he offered her a conspiratorial wink. “As a matter of fact, I do, but I have a better idea. I’ll be right back.”

While Libby watched curiously, Nate wandered to his saddlebags and dug into one of them. Pulling something out, he returned to the wagon and hoisted himself up to sit on the end.

“Come sit here, Miss Liberty,” he said. “You’ll enjoy this a lot more than what the rest of us ate tonight.”

Reluctant to be so close to him, Libby remained where she was. She liked this man too much, and she was afraid that he might touch her if she got too close to him. In an attempt to disguise her discomfort, she said, “I wish you would call me Libby. I prefer it.”

“I like Liberty, because it’s so unusual,” he returned. “How did you come by it?”

“I was born on July sixth,” she explained, “and my father was a true Patriot.”

“Obviously.” Grinning widely, he patted the end of the wagon. “Now come over here and get the tasty morsels I have for you.”

Although hesitant, Libby maneuvered around the family belongings and joined him. Dangling her feet off the end, she accepted the two pieces of meat he held out toward her. “What is this?”

“Jerked venison. I always keep some on hand in case I can’t bag any game.”

“Nathaniel Payne, you’re my hero.”

Nate stared at her as she bit down on the meat and worked a hard piece off of the strip. She chewed earnestly while he studied her. It made her a bit nervous, but she thought it was probably inadvisable to say anything. To avoid his steady gaze, she looked into the nearby fire, ate the jerky in her mouth, then bit off another piece with less difficulty.

Libby took another small bite and returned her gaze to Nate, asking, “Would you really have fought my brother earlier?”

Nate shrugged his broad shoulders. “He didn’t give me much choice. If he’d insisted, yes, I would have fought him.”

“But why when he’s so much bigger than you?”

“To teach him a lesson. He may be bigger, but he lacks my power and experience. He’s an awfully scrawny lad even if he is a good three inches taller than I am. I’ve also been around
about twenty years longer than he, and I’ve been lugging around heavy traps and carcasses for quite a few years. Naturally, I’ve become a good deal stronger than I was when I was his age.”

“Isn’t it a bit arrogant of you to think you could have beaten him? After all, you have no idea how strong he is.”

“Strength isn’t everything, Miss Libby. There’s also endurance, agility, and experience. Besides, I don’t consider it arrogance—confidence, maybe, but not arrogance.”

“I may not agree with your tactics, but I have to admit that you controlled Willie beautifully.”

“The lad’s right about one thing. You should call him Will. He’s no longer a little boy; he’s a man now. Granted, he’s a little rough, but he’s still a man. He’ll smooth out along the way.”

Libby examined Nate in concern. Now that there was no father in Will’s life, how could he possibly smooth out? She didn’t have the expertise it took to raise a teenage male to adulthood. A teenage girl was a different matter, because it hadn’t been that long ago that she herself had been that age.

After a moment’s pause, she asked, “Do you honestly think so, Nate? I worry that I won’t be able to direct his approaching maturity. It’s difficult to suddenly become a mother and father to a teenage boy. I’m not nearly as worried about raising Flossie as I am Willie. At least, I understand her feelings and problems. How can I possibly guide Will as a father would when I don’t understand men myself?”

“You can’t.”

“But I have to. There’s no one else. Our parents were killed recently.”

Nate shook his head. “I’m sorry, Miss Libby, but you can’t guide him. You’re little more than a child yourself. Besides, women don’t understand men any better than men understand women.”

Pulling her legs up beside her and straightening her skirt and petticoats around them, Libby turned to face him. “I’m far from my childhood. My stepmother told me that I should have married years ago, but Papa always told me to wait until I’m convinced that I’ve found the right man. It made sense, so I stayed an old maid.”

“You’re hardly an old maid. You can’t be more than seventeen or eighteen. Maybe nineteen, but no more than that.”

“You’re very kind, but I turned twenty-three this year.”

He studied her features in the flickering firelight. Her green eyes sparkled; her small nose was set over a pair of pouty lips. Her figure was so delicate in all areas that she reminded him of his mother’s favorite china figurine. He knew from the moment he was first able to study her features that he was attracted to her. Oh, how he wished he could embrace her and devour those full lips with a kiss that would melt her into a more intimate embrace. Obviously, he’d been away from civilization far too long if all he could think of was bedding the first pretty lady he saw.
He'd also seen her overt admiration of his body in her beautiful green eyes when he'd slid back into his shirt after his near-fight with Will. That meant she might be receptive to a little kiss. Her not being married at twenty-three didn't mean that something was wrong with her. In fact, given her appearance and demeanor, everything was right!

“You're the most attractive old maid I've ever laid eyes on. I'm not exactly young, either—thirty-two.”

Her soft, patient voice filled the air and made him long to hold her tightly. But her words came far from indicating that she was interested in intimacy. “If you travel all the time, where do you call home?”

“In the winter I stay at my cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In the spring, summer and fall, I work—trapping for furs mostly, but I do some hunting, too. I do my trapping from my cabin in the winter.”

“Were you born in the cabin?”

Nate chuckled. “My home is no more than a two-room log cabin that I built myself. I certainly wasn't born there.”

“I didn't think so. You're too well educated. What made you decide to trap for your vocation? It must be a world apart from wherever you were born.”

“My father owns a business in Philadelphia, and he had his own plans for my life. But I love being outside. I plan to settle down on a farm—when it's time to settle down, that is.”

“I imagine your father was very angry about that.”

“You have no idea how furious he was—still is, as far as I know. I write Mother regularly so she knows I'm fine, but Father has no interest in my life now. Mother's a very understanding woman. I'm sure she's still pleading for him to understand why I had to leave.”

“Don't you ever go back to see them?”

“I can't!” His vehement exclamation obviously stunned her, because she stared at him in astonishment. As soon as he saw her startled expression, he calmed. “Father and I had an argument before I left. He told me never to show my face in Philadelphia until I decided that he was right. Since I have no intention of agreeing, I'm forced to stay away. I haven't seen or heard from my parents since I was twenty.”

“You sound almost indifferent. Don't you miss them?”

“I did in the beginning, but twelve years is a long time. No, I don't miss them anymore.”

In the dim firelight, Libby gazed at him unflinchingly. Judging from her sympathetic expression, she could tell that, although he spoke the words, he didn't feel them.

She reached over and laid her hand gently on his as she said, “I'm sorry I brought up unhappy memories, Nate. I hadn't intended to.”

Smiling, he laid his free hand over hers. Her mere touch made him recall the long months away from civilization and the arms of a woman. The women he bedded were all prostitutes, because he refused to sleep with young women of breeding. They were to be respected. But prostitutes were different. That's what they did for a living.
Now this young woman reminded him what it was like to have the companionship of a refined lady. To his amazement, the physical excitement was overshadowed by a strong emotional fulfillment. Oh, how he wanted to hold Libby in his arms! And he knew just how to do it. “You’re cold.”

“A little,” she admitted softly.

“I’ll keep you warm.” Glancing around, Nate saw a large trunk about three feet behind him. He scooted back until he could lean against it then bent his left leg in front of him to prevent too intimate of contact. With his right foot firmly planted on the wagon floor, he leaned forward and tenderly grasped her wrist. “Come here.”

Libby studied him with wariness in her eyes. In her normal quiet tone, she said, “I believe a blanket would be much more appropriate.”

Nate flashed her a wide grin as he tugged gently on her arm. “A blanket wouldn’t be nearly as much fun—for either of us.” When she silently resisted, his frown returned. Somehow he had to convince her that he would never treat her with anything but respect. But how, when he himself wasn’t sure he could live by his self-imposed rule?
Chapter 3

After drawing in a deep, shaky breath, he said, “It’s all right, Miss Libby. I promise not to hurt you.”

“But it isn’t proper,” she protested softly as he steadily pulled on her arm. “Willie and Flossie might see.”

Turning her slightly by her shoulders, he leaned her back against him and wrapped his arms around her. This felt so good, so right, that he wondered if he would be able to let her go when he had to. “Are you telling me that Will and Flossie have never seen their sister in a man’s arms.”

“Never.”

To his amazement, she snuggled against him. This felt even better than he’d expected, almost like this was the way it should be between them. But Nate sensed that Libby wouldn’t let feelings cloud her judgment. Unable to resist, he let his long fingers encircled her wrists as he crossed their arms over her stomach. To his surprise, she released a contented sigh.

He smiled at her reaction and stifled the urge to kiss the soft tresses against his face. He’d had a feeling this moment would happen, which was the precise reason he’d shaved while dinner cooked. He wanted to feel as much of her as he could when he finally got the opportunity. “Comfortable?”

“M-m, h-mm,” she moaned.

“Good. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to discuss your reaction to that rattler. Were you bitten by one once?”

“I was bitten,” she explained, “but not by a rattlesnake. When I was four, I tried to make a pet out of a coral snake. I’m grateful Papa was there to help me, just as I’m grateful that you were there to help Flossie. I only wish I could suitably demonstrate my gratitude.”

“You could tell me about yourself,” Nate suggested.

“There’s not much to tell. I was raised on a farm outside Charleston, South Carolina, and I went to school in town. This is the first time I’ve ever left the city. But you must have led an interesting life.”

That statement was obviously all Nate needed to relate stories about his childhood in Philadelphia. For a long time, Libby simply listened, only occasionally asking a question, which spurred him into another story. She was comfortable with Nate, even though she’d only known him a few hours. He was so charming, so undemanding. His voice was deep and inviting as he spoke quietly into her ear. And she enjoyed the seductive tone so much that it
seemed like only minutes when he unexpectedly released her and hopped down from the wagon.

Leaning against the side, he rested his hands on her shoulders and gently massaged them. “I’m sorry, Miss Libby. As you can tell, I haven’t seen another human for a long time.” Nate paused. Then his lips brushed against hers. “You were very kind to listen to me, but I’ll let you sleep now. Good night.”

In that brief, tentative kiss, Libby felt a momentary skip of her heartbeat. Never before had a man caused such a reaction in her; never before had a man made her want more intimate contact. Apparently, Nate sparked something so deep inside her that she hadn’t even known it was there.

Although she wished she could return his good night, she couldn’t force the words from her mouth. Instead, she watched silently as Nate returned to his bedroll and lay down. Then she made herself as comfortable as possible in a corner of the wagon and tried to go to sleep.

Nate woke abruptly and stared at the dark sky. What had disturbed his sleep? Flossie moaned nearby. Rushing to her, he knelt beside her as he laid his hand on her forehead. Almost simultaneously, she opened her eyes.

“It’s all right, Flossie,” he said soothingly as he pulled the blanket to her shoulders. “It’s me. How do you feel?”

“Awful,” she replied. “Nate? Am I going to die?”

He smiled brightly to reassure her. “Not enough venom got into your system for that.”

“But a rattlesnake bit me. Papa told me to always be careful around snakes because Libby almost died from a snakebite. And I don’t feel good at all.”

“She told me about that, and it isn’t the same situation. She was bitten by a coral snake, which is much more dangerous than a rattler, and nobody helped her as quickly as I did you. Maybe your father didn’t know exactly what to do. I don’t know. She was also just a small child. But most of the poison is out of your system now, so you won’t die—not from this snake bite, anyway.”

“Then you saved my life.”

His face unexpectedly burned with embarrassment. “I suppose I did.”

Flinging her arms around him, she thanked him with a kiss. So he wasn’t thrown off balance, he embraced her in return. He was acutely aware of the well-endowed teenager and felt the stir of desire in his loins. The longing, he realized, was actually directed toward another woman—not the girl in his arms. Instantly, his thoughts returned to earlier that night when he’d held and kissed Libby.

_Ah, Liberty!_ he thought excitedly. _The lovely, enticing, unapproachable Liberty!_ He could still taste her lips under his and wanted more. Without thinking, he slipped the tip of his tongue between his lips until it met hers. The other lips separated slightly, enough for him to slide his tongue into her mouth. But when his tongue collided with hers, reality returned with a jolt. It wasn’t Libby in his arms; it was Flossie.
So as not to upset the youngster, he gently pushed her away. Gazing at her in distress, he rubbed his temples with his index fingers and exhaled through his mouth in a long, ragged breath. He tried to apologize but stumbled over the words.

“I ... I’m sorry, Flossie. I couldn’t ... and don’t expect you to understand what happened ... because you’re too young to know what I was feeling. It’s been an incredibly long time since I’ve been with a woman. And when you’re a man my age, sometimes the need for a woman becomes overwhelming. You’re still a child, Flossie, an adolescent. I can’t expect you to understand. All I can say is that I’m sorry, and I promise it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t care if it happens again,” she said. “I like the way you kiss.”

“Oh, God!” he moaned. “What have I done? If I caught a man my age kissing Becky like that, I’d beat the hell out of him. I’m more than twice your age, Flossie. I’m much too old for you.”

“Who’s Becky?”

“My youngest sister. She’s sixteen, and Will tells me that you’re fifteen. If I won’t let a man treat my sister that way, I’ve no business treating someone younger than she in that manner. You won’t have to worry that I’ll do it again, either, Flossie. I promise.”

“Why not? Don’t you like me?”

“Of course, I do. But I was too tempted to bed you, and you’re much too young for that.”

“I am?” she asked in amazement. “But I’ve already been with boys. And I love you, so why not?”

Nate stared at her. This conversation couldn’t be taking place. He had to be dreaming. “You love me? Hell! Now what am I going to do? No, you only think you love me.”

“You saved my life, and I want us to be together like that.”

“No, Flossie. You’re just a child.”

“I’m more of a woman than Willie is a man.”

“That’s enough of such talk,” he declared paternally. “Lie down and get some sleep. There’s still some poison in your system, so you need a lot of rest the next couple of days.”

“Are you leaving in the morning?”

Nate shook his head. “I don’t know yet. You three could use my help, but my staying will depend on Miss Libby. And I intend to discuss it with her first thing in the morning. Now lie down and go back to sleep.”

“Would you sit with me for a while?” she asked as she lay back down.

He smiled and covered her up again. “Of course.”

“If you leave, I’m coming with.”

Already deep in thought about another woman, Nate only distantly heard her words and replied “Whatever you say, Flossie. Good night.”
At daybreak, Nate still contemplated the advisability of remaining with the siblings. As badly as he wanted to stay near Libby, he wondered how he could if Flossie continued her advances. During his life, he’d been attracted to so many women that he’d lost track. But for some reason, he felt a different kind of attraction to Libby. Was it because he’d been away from women for so long? Or was there another reason? To answer his questions, he needed to associate with her. But he was afraid that, if he found he couldn’t stay because of Flossie, he wouldn’t be able to bear the separation from Libby.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he stalked to Will’s bedroll. To wake the young man, Nate shook his shoulder and whispered his name until he finally responded.

“Go ‘way,” Will muttered as he glanced around then rolled over. “The sun ain’t even up full yet.”

“Get up, Will,” Nate insisted in a quiet tone. “This is important. I want you to come with me.”

“What’s so danged important that I hafta git up before the sun?”

“Just get up. I’ll tell you when we’re away from your sisters.” Nate grabbed Will’s upper arm and dragged him to his knees. “Let’s go.”

“I’m comin’,” Will grumbled. “I’m comin’.”

Near the river, Nate stood stiffly erect with his chin thrust forward. Gazing unfalteringly into Will’s eyes, he commanded, “Hit me.”

Will dark eyes widened in shock. “What?”

“I said hit me. As hard as you can.”

“But I don’t want to, Nate,” Will protested. “I like you.”

“I deserve it. Now hit me. Don’t hold back.”

Will shook his head. “I can’t. You could have fought me yesterday, but you made me change my mind. And you treat me like a man. I admire you. How can you expect me to hit you?”

“Because if I ever hear of you doing what I did last night, I’ll hunt you down and do the same to you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain later.” Tapping his chin with his index finger, Nate prompted, “Right here. And make it worth your while. Show me how much of a man you are.”

Even though he made a fist and pulled it back, Will halted. “Before I do this, I want you to know that I don’t feel right about it.”

“You will when I explain.”

Nate continued his direct gaze until Will’s fist connected with his chin. The force was so powerful that it sent him reeling backward. Stunned, he struggled to regain his balance but failed. A sharp pain shot through his head. Then came blackness.
Will gazed down at the motionless man for several seconds. This hadn’t happened. It couldn’t have. It had to be a dream, a nightmare. Stunned, he dropped to his knees beside Nate. Reality returned in an instant. To Will’s horror, blood rapidly spread out on the ground under Nate’s head. Scrambling to his feet, he raced back to Libby.

“Libby!” he shouted as he sprinted back to camp. “Libby, come quick! I hit him, and I think he’s dead.”

Libby bolted upright in the wagon. “Hit whom? What are you talking about?”

“Nate. He wanted me to hit him, so I did. I didn’t want to, but he talked me into it. He just stood there and waited for it to come. He said to hit him hard, so I did. I thought he’d duck, but he didn’t. He hit his head on a rock, Lib. I think he’s dead.”

“Help me down, and we’ll go check him.”

***

Libby and Will got to the riverbank at the same moment Nate began to regain consciousness. As his hand moved slowly toward his chin, relief flooded through Libby. She glanced up to Will and whispered, “He’s alive.”

Then, lifting her skirts out of her way, she hurried to Nate’s side. Will lengthened his stride to keep up with her. Before Nate could touch his face, she dropped to her knees and grasped his hand tenderly.

Nate opened his eyes for a moment then squeezed them shut. In a soft, comforting voice, she said, “It’s all right, Nate.”

She used a tender, caressing touch to stroke the hair from his forehead. The memory of his holding her last night floated across her mind as a moan escaped from deep in his chest.

Opening his eyes again, he stared up at her. His confusion showed vividly in his expression. Then he spoke in a weak voice. “Miss Liberty? Will?”

She felt like she should smile to reassure him, but her lips refused to follow her mind’s direction. Instead, she tightened her hold on his hand and replied, “That’s right, Nate. How do you feel?”

“I have a hell of a headache, and my jaw hurts. Everything’s blurry, and I’m seeing two of you.” He paused and offered her a brief smile. “Which is good because now I get to see two angels instead of only one.”

But Libby was in no mood for his flirting. She was much too concerned about his injury. “I understand that you deserve it.”

“Then Flossie told you. I’m glad.”

“Flossie?” she repeated. “I don’t understand. Will told me what happened.”
Turning his gaze to Will, Nate gazed up at him, his face distorted with concern. "Would you check on Flossie for me? Miss Libby and I will be along shortly. I want to talk to her alone."

"But you said you'd explain," Will complained.

"I will, but first, I want to explain privately to Miss Libby."

"Oh, all right," Will agreed.

While Will stalked away, Nate struggled to a sitting position. Libby tried to keep him down, but he was too strong for her to hold back. Gazing at her sorrowfully, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen. Honest. I tried to stop her—but not until it was too late."

"You're not making any sense, Nate. Maybe you should rest instead of talk."

"I have to tell you—privately. You need to understand before I tell Will. I promised him I would, so I have to. A man always keeps his promises, and he'll learn that through my example."

"But you're rambling. Surely, what you want to say can wait until you're more coherent."

"It must be said now. I can't go back to camp without you knowing. You have to tell me what to do. I want to stay with you—to help. You need me because Will doesn't know what the hell he's doing. He'll learn, but it will take someone to teach him how to do it right. I don't know if I should stay or not."

"If you're looking to me for permission, Nate, I'd be grateful for your help. But the decision to stay or leave has to be yours."

"You don't know everything. It's Flossie. She thinks she's in love with me. I can't encourage her, and I don't know how to discourage her. You have to tell me what to do, Miss Libby. I don't know how to handle adolescent love."

Libby's chest unexpectedly ached. What was wrong? Why did it hurt to know that Flossie loved Nate? Surely, Nate couldn't be attracted to someone as young as Flossie. Or could he? Despite her distress, she responded in an easy tone. "Don't encourage her, and you won't need to discourage her. Flossie's had a number of boys attracted to her in the past couple years. She was quite early in developing."

"She sure felt like a woman when she was kissing me last night." Libby gasped in horror, but Nate continued as though he didn't notice. "I damned near forgot that she's a child. But I didn't forget. I remembered because you're a woman, and she doesn't feel anything like you. She's round and has curves everywhere they should be. You're delicate. It's not that you don't have curves, too, but it's different. Do you understand what I mean?"

How could she possibly explain that she didn't understand? He was a man. How could he think about a young girl like that? It was sinful, and he should know it. But she couldn't tell him, either. Even if she knew how, she couldn't say anything right now, not with all his incoherent rambling. He probably wouldn't understand, anyway, given his delirious state. Rather than try, she decided to humor him for now; later she could explain—when he could understand.

He apologized several times for letting Flossie kiss him then pleaded for Libby to let him
stay. The night before he’d been so sensitive. Now he continually stabbed her in the heart with his constant talk of the event.

Still, Libby reassured him that he didn’t have to leave, until he at least recovered from his concussion. At the same time, she coaxed him to stand. Draping his arm around her shoulders, she wrapped both of her arms tightly around his waist. Although he insisted that he could walk alone, he leaned heavily on her as they laboriously made their way back to camp.

When they were close enough, Libby called to Will. Together they got Nate back to his bedroll. Will helped Nate lie down, then Libby sent him to fetch water and find something for breakfast. While he was gone, she tended to Flossie and Nate, who continued to chatter incoherently about the physical differences between the sisters. Shortly before Flossie woke, Nate finally fell asleep.

Throughout the morning and part of the afternoon, Libby tended to her two injured patients. Much of her time, she sat beside the attractive man. His scruffy appearance, made more prominent by the untanned part of his face that had once been covered by his beard, attracted her to him even more.

After the bleeding from his head wound stopped, she covered the injury and bound it in place with a bandage wrapped around his head. As he slept, Libby smiled softly. He looked like an overgrown boy who’d been playing war and was too tired to continue.

For several hours, Libby divided her attention between Flossie and Nate. When her sister fell asleep again, Libby sat down beside Nate to wipe his perspiring brow with a damp cloth. He was obviously too warm lying directly in the sun, but she couldn’t move him. Will had gone off to hunt for their dinner, so she had to wait for Nate to awaken before she could help him into the shade. Shifting to a more comfortable position, she drew her legs up beside her.

As she wiped his face, she found it virtually impossible to keep her eyes from wandering to the sweat-drenched buckskin shirt clinging to his body. In her mind, she could vividly see his bare torso when he’d prepared to do combat with Will. She’d never known anybody as muscular as Nate. His physique attracted her—but it also frightened her more than a little. Will was a lot bigger than she, but Nate seemed even bigger despite his shorter stature. He could probably do whatever he wanted to any of them.

Nate’s eyes fluttered open as she swabbed his forehead. When he gazed up at her blankly, she smiled and asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I have a horrendous headache,” he replied. “And I’m hot.”

“Would you like me to help you out of the sun?”

“First, I want to take off my shirt.”

As he pushed himself up, Libby grabbed his upper arm near his shoulder to help him. It was so hard that she had to force the memory of him holding her last night from her mind. He’d been hurt, and she had to take care of him—just like he had taken care of Flossie. She owed him at least that much, and she couldn’t concentrate on it if her mind kept wandering to last night.
When he was seated, she reluctantly released him. She watched in silent admiration while he pulled his buckskin shirt over his head. If only he could have borne the heat and kept it on! Then these wild images of his embracing her, of his kissing her, wouldn’t torment her like they did.

Tossing his shirt aside, Nate tried to stand. But as he rose, he began to sway. Libby scrambled to her feet and wrapped her arms around his narrow waist to steady him. When his arm slid around her shoulders, she gazed up at him.

Despite his mild protest, he let her take him to the shady side of the wagon. With Libby’s assistance, he lay down. Finally, he smiled up at her as she knelt at his side. “Thank you, Miss Libby, but you needn’t fuss over me. I can take care of myself.”

Libby returned his smile. “Any man addled enough to insist that someone bigger than he hit him is obviously incapable of taking care of himself.”

“I suppose I deserved that remark,” Nate replied cheerfully. “Did Will tell you what happened?”

“Yes. He didn’t want to hit you, Nate. He feels terrible, because you hit your head on that rock.”

“So that’s what happened. The lad’s more powerful than I expected. I thought I could take it, but I was wrong. Will doesn’t blame himself, does he?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Where is he? I promised I’d explain after he hit me. By the way, how did I get back here? Never mind. That was a stupid question. Will brought me back, of course. I’m not thinking very clearly yet.”

“As a matter of fact, Will didn’t bring you back—at least, not most of the way. I did.”

His eyes widened, and his mouth gaped in astonishment. “You? How could you? You’re just a little bit of a thing. I don’t think you could drag me.”

“You were conscious for a while,” she explained, “although you were delirious. It took some doing, but I got you back here with your help.”

“You said I was delirious. Did I say anything I shouldn’t have?”

“Not that I’m aware of. You kept apologizing for letting my sister kiss you, and you kept begging me to let you stay. Then you insisted on enumerating all the differences between Flossie and myself. All in all, you didn’t make much sense. I let you ramble on because there was probably no stopping you even if I’d tried.”

“Damn it!” Grimacing, he laid his hand on his head with a groan. “I’m going to have to apologize again. I imagine everything I said was true, Miss Libby, but I wanted to explain calmly. I hope I didn’t give you the wrong idea.”

“It was true?” she asked, stunned.

“Probably. I don’t remember what I said, but if you’ll give me the opportunity, I’d like to explain rationally.”
Unable to speak, Libby nodded and listened, stone-faced so as not to reveal her thoughts. She was afraid that he would misinterpret her distress, and she hated the feeling in her chest when he told her about the intimacy of the kiss. Why wouldn't he stop explaining? Why wouldn’t he treat her like he had Flossie?
Chapter 4

Libby stifled a gasp. Where had that thought come from? More importantly, why had she even had it? She didn’t want men to treat her that way. She wanted to be treated with respect, like her father had always told her she should. Now this virtual stranger was making her feel like she’d been missing something all her life.

Suddenly, Nate stopped talking. The tension she already felt increased in an instant. There was a reason he quit, and she sensed his hesitation pertained to something serious. Even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear what was on his mind, Libby prompted him on. “There’s more, isn’t there. I can tell by the look on your face.”

“Yes, but I’m reluctant to tell you. She might have been fabricating a tale to get me to do what she wanted, and I certainly have no means of validating that it was the truth—short of one way that I refuse to use.”

Libby was quickly losing patience with Nate’s rambling. If he didn’t stop, she might even get angry, and she didn’t want to do that. Forcing herself to speak in her normal volume, she replied, “Tell me what she said.”

“All right, but keep in mind that it may not be true. Flossie told me that she’d ... she’d bed ...” Thoughtfully covering his mouth with two fingers, he muttered, “How the hell can I word this delicately?”

“Why don’t you say that she’s been intimate with several boys?”

“You knew?”

“I suspected it,” Libby admitted. “She gets that kind of behavior from her mother.”

“Her mother was wanton?” Nate asked curiously as he sat up to lean against the wagon wheel.

“I don’t know that I would use the term wanton, but she didn’t hide what she and my father did in the bedroom. I knew what was happening when I was that age, and from the way Flossie acts around boys, I’m relatively certain that she knew, too.”

“You don’t sound as though you cared much for your stepmother.”

“I didn’t.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re so worried about how your brother and sister are going to turn out.”

Deep in thought, Libby leaned back against the wagon wheel. As she did, Nate slipped his arm around her. She lurched forward and glared at him. But when she spoke, her voice
carried no indication of her anger. “Must you do that, Mr. Payne?”

Nate shrugged. “I’m only trying to make you more comfortable. These spokes can be very unpleasant to sit against. It’s all right, Miss Libby. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She stared at him, trying to decide if his motives were innocent, then slowly leaned back beside him. He smiled sheepishly. Gently grasping her elbow opposite him, he asked, “Why don’t you tell me why you blame your step-mother for Flossie’s immorality?”

“She could always talk my father into going to the bedroom—any time of the day or night. And she always insisted that the door be left open so she could hear the children. I saw Papa and Maria in the cornfield and hayloft several times. I even found them in the chicken coop when I was Will’s age. When I asked Papa why they were intimate so often, he told me everything he could. So I understand your need to be with Flossie, Nate. I’ve always been outspoken with relatives, and I told Papa that what he and Maria did was very embarrassing. I begged him to protect Will and Flossie from what I went through. He tried—he told me so several times—but he couldn’t resist Maria’s advances. I talked with him, but Flossie was different. I always felt that she thought she was supposed to be intimate with her male friends. Now, somehow, I have to convince her that it isn’t necessary.”

“I see,” he said noncommittally. “There’s something I need to know, Miss Libby. I honestly believe that you three need my help—at least, for a while. I’d like to travel with you so I can give Will lessons concerning living in the wilderness. Considering the circumstances of last night, though, I’ll understand if you don’t want me to, but I need to know what you think.”

“I’d be very grateful if you’d stay, Nate,” she admitted, “but the decision is yours.”

“What about Flossie?”

“I don’t think you’ll be intimate with her if that’s what you mean. As long as you don’t encourage her, I don’t see why you can’t stay.”

“You don’t have any idea how glad I am that you said that. You can trust me, Miss Libby. I promise.”

When she turned her head to face him, she eyes gazed directly up into his brilliant blue eyes. The intensity of his look caught her off guard, and she forgot what she was planning to say.

Then he spoke again, quietly this time, his tone lower than usual and quite caressing. “It isn’t Flossie you have to worry about, Miss Libby. She’s perfectly safe with me.”

As he spoke, his hand moved slowly up her arm to her shoulder, her neck, then her hair. Libby inhaled at the exciting new sensations his caress sent through her, but she said nothing. His fingers sought out the combs that held her long locks in a neat bun on the back of her head. First one comb, then the second, freed her hair. It tumbled luxuriously past her shoulders to midway down her back. He ran his fingers through it, slowly, deliciously combing it out. Had he somehow bewitched her? she wondered absently. Probably, because it was the only explanation for her inability to either protest or avert her eyes from his.

Nate glanced over his shoulder, so Libby let her gaze follow. Flossie’s skirted legs lay still on the ground, but the wagon hid her torso and head from his view. That meant she couldn’t
see them, either. When she returned her gaze to his face a moment later, she saw that he was looking at her unfalteringly again.

“"My tastes run to women not young girls," he announced in a near-whisper. “Whether or not Flossie has been with other boys or men isn’t my concern. I don’t give a damn. But I do care about you. I want you to tell me that you haven’t. Hearing that would make me happier than anything else, although I’m not sure why.”

Her lips parted slightly but no words came out. To moisten them, she leisurely ran the tip of her tongue around them. As she did, the look in his blue eyes changed. She let her gaze skip to his lips. He had the most seductive smile that she’d ever seen. Within her, the sensations she’d never before experienced intensified. Again she traced her lips with her tongue. It was an instinctive motion, one she’d never before used.

He drew in a deep breath then exhaled slowly and audibly. After licking his own lips hungrily, like a starving dog seeing meat just out of his reach, he whispered. “Damn it, Liberty. Don’t do that. You have no idea how it’s making me react.”

Still not speaking, Libby bit her bottom lip then her upper gently. Again she ran her tongue around her lips again, letting her slightly open mouth beckon to him silently. In the back of her mind, she knew her actions were brazen. No true lady would use them in the presence of a man—especially one who’d been away from women as long as Nathaniel Payne. But she vividly remembered his kiss and desperately longed for another. She didn’t even care about propriety anymore. In truth, she didn’t even know if she was doing the right thing to attract him!

His head moved slowly toward hers. Their lips met tenderly. Then he embraced her almost cautiously, like he didn’t want to break her. He gently laid her on the ground and covered her chest with his. His hands slid caressingly down her arms to her narrow waist.

She was doing the right thing! And the feelings within her became more intense with his embrace, with his tender movements. While he gently caressed her waist and hips, she abandoned her reserve.

Using Maria’s example to guide her, Libby slid her hands up Nate’s muscular arms. His hardness felt wonderful under her tentative touch! Her hands reached his shoulders and slipped slowly across them to his neck. Hopefully, he would understand that she was demonstrating her acceptance. No man had ever made her feel as though she wanted more than a little kiss. No man had ever made her long for more than he was offering. No man, that was, until Nathaniel Payne. Whatever the emotion was that he created in her, she liked it! And she never wanted ...

“"Libby!” Will called from nearby. “Uh-oh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Libby’s propriety returned in an instant. Pushing Nate’s head away, she slapped him hard across the cheek. Almost instantly, he shouted at her angrily. “What the hell did you do that for?”

Despite her irritation, Libby answered without raising her voice. “"You’re an aggressive, arrogant man who needed to be reminded that I’m a lady. You didn’t ask my permission either last night or now. Apparently, you’ve been away from civilization so long that you’ve
forgotten your manners.”

“You didn’t give a damn about stopping me until Will found us.” He sat up as she scrambled to her feet and straightened her skirts, brushing off the dirt on the back. “Besides, I went slowly enough for you to say no.”

“Are you denying that you were aggressive?”

“No, but I am denying that I’m arrogant. You wanted me to kiss you as much as I wanted to do it. I know you did, too, because I saw it in your eyes.”

“That’s exactly what I mean by your arrogance. You assume too much, Mr. Payne. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d better see what Will wants.”

To hide her embarrassment, she scurried around the wagon. How could she ever explain why she’d acted so irresponsibly when she didn’t understand herself?

Grabbing Will’s arm, she pulled him along until they were far enough away from Nate that he couldn’t hear them. This wouldn’t be easy, but somehow she had to find the words to tell Will why she’d acted so irrationally.

With a grin, Will glanced at the wagon over his shoulder then returned his gaze to his sister, observing, “You like him a lot, doncha, Libby.”

“Like who?” she asked innocently.

“Nate, of course.” When Libby peered up at him, pride shone in his nearly black eyes. “He’s a real man, and someday I’m gonna be just like him. He ain’t afraid to fight, and he smokes a pipe and swears, and he can shoot anythin’. And best of all, he cin have any woman he sets his mind on—even you. And you ain’t easy to have from what I seen.”

“Willie Nichols,” she scolded softly, “that was a terrible thing to say. You apologize this instant.”

“I’m sorry, Libby. I didn’t mean to insult you. It was s’posed to be a compliment. He’s a real man, though. You gotta admit that much. And I’m gonna be jest like him with I git older.”

“The only part of his personality that I want you to emulate is his speech. Otherwise, he’s been on his own far too long. He’s become aggressive and arrogant. Besides, his being an extremely handsome man doesn’t mean that all women find him attractive.”

“Maybe not, but you do,” Will interpreted.

Knowing that she couldn’t hide the truth, she admitted, “Physically, yes. But there’s more to a man that his physical appearance. His personality and attitude make up a good amount of him. I’d say about ninety percent. The ugliest man on earth can be as attractive to a woman as the most handsome man if he has a good personality. Two of any man’s worst qualities are aggressiveness and arrogance. Don’t you ever obtain those qualities, either, or I’ll personally take you over my knee. I don’t care if you are more than a foot taller than I. I won’t tolerate it. Do you understand?”

“Sure, Lib, I understand. But …” He stopped speaking and gaze down at her, his anxiety vivid in his expression.

“But what?” she prompted.
“Oh, what the hell. You’re mad at me anyway. You ain’t foolin’ me, Liberty Woods. You ain’t foolin’ nobody but yerse’f. I don’t know much ‘bout women, so if I cin see it, Nate cin, too. You like him a lot. I know you do.”

“That’s nonsense. What you see as liking him is nothing more than gratitude for his saving Flossie’s life. Speaking of which, I’d better go check her. She’s been asleep for quite a while now. You start skinning those rabbits you’re holding so I can cook them.”

After dinner, Nate took Will to the river to explain that morning’s events.

“Are we going to have a man-to-man talk?” Will asked excitedly.

Nate studied him and shook his head. This young man had a lot to learn that a good father would have told him years ago. Apparently, he had to teach Will more than he’d originally expected. “Not the kind of man-to-man talk that you want—not now, anyway. I brought you here to explain why I acted like I did this morning.”

“That’s right!” Will exclaimed. “I forgot you were going to. Libby told me not to say anything about it, so I didn’t.”

“Why would she tell you that?”

“I dunno. Why did you want me to hit you?”

“It was because of Flossie. I kissed her in a far from brotherly manner. I was much more... intense than I had intended to be, and I let myself go beyond something... innocent.”

“You mean you was kissing her like you did Libby this afternoon?”

Nate’s face heated in embarrassment. “That’s you were. And no. It was even more intense than that. I hadn’t planned to get so amorous, of course; and as soon as I realized what I was doing, I stopped.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with what you did. Flossie’s a pretty girl.”

“That’s exactly what’s wrong,” Nate insisted. “Flossie’s a girl—not a woman. I should never have kissed her that way. I’m more than twice her age, Will. What I did was wrong. I want you to remember that you should never, ever treat a young girl like I treated Flossie.”

“I still don’t see what’s wrong. Boys always kiss Flossie that way. She likes it.”

“I don’t care if she likes it or not. I don’t even care if other boys have done it. I expect you to treat a girl right—with respect. A lady, too. Do you promise to remember what I said?”

“As long as I don’t have to promise to understand.”

While Will and Nate were away, Libby approached Flossie and sank onto the ground beside her. “We need to talk about your behavior with Nate last night, Flossie. It was brazen and un-ladylike. He’s going to be traveling with us for a while, and I want you to behave properly.”

“He told you what happened?” she asked in shock.
“He most certainly did. He wanted to be honest with me before he asked if he could guide us. You made him feel very guilty, Flossie. I want you to apologize to him as soon as he and Willie get back to camp.”

“I won’t!” Flossie declared. “I didn’t do anything Mama wouldn’t have done.”

“It was different with Papa and Maria,” Libby explained patiently. “They were married, so what they did was all right. Unmarried women don’t do what you did. They have names for girls and women like you, and not one of them is nice. You have to stop being so … friendly with men. It isn’t normal behavior.”

“But Mama always told me a man and a woman being together—having sex—is normal.”

“If they’re married, but it’s not outside of marriage. I intend to watch you very closely to see that you don’t approach Nate like that again. If I see you trying to be alone with him, there will be serious consequences. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Flossie said dejectedly.

Nate waited until he was reasonably sure that the others were asleep before he got up. Passing the campfire, he went to the wagon where Libby was sleeping with her head by the open end. For several minutes he watched as her breasts rose and fell evenly. Unable to resist touching her, he ran his fingertips across her forearm and hand. They lingered on her fingers for several seconds before he removed them. Pulling the blanket from her waist to her neck, he tenderly lifted some hair off her face. With her left profile exposed, he studied her carefully.

He whispered her name near her ear, but she so soundly sleeping she didn’t move. Somewhat disappointed, he kissed her hair. Still, she didn’t stir. With a heavy sigh, he smoothed back her soft locks to kiss her lightly beside her lips. Then he turned around to go back to his bedroll. To Nate’s horror, Will stood on the opposite side of the campfire.

“She ain’t gonna wake up, Nate,” Will said. “She’s been frettin’ over you and Flossie all day. She’s awful tired.”

Nate joined Will beside the fire and sat down. The last thing he wanted to do now was disturb Libby, because he didn’t want her to hear his conversation with Will. “Have a seat, lad. I think we should have a serious discussion.”

Will’s face became animated as he sank down beside Nate. “You gonna tell me ‘bout men and women together? What it’s like?”

“God, I’m glad I’m not your age anymore. No, lad, we’re not going to discuss men and women. We’re going to discuss men and ladies.”

“But that’s the same thing.”

“Hardly. A man can hold and kiss a woman differently than he can a lady. A lady he should treat with respect. And a true gentleman will absolutely never take advantage of a lady—like I did with Miss Libby.”

“Do you mean that you kissing Libby was wrong?” Will asked incredulously. “Earlier you
told me kissing Flossie was wrong, and now you say that kissing Libby was wrong. I don’t understand. Didn’t they like it?"

Nate looked up at the sky and muttered, “Dear God, how did I get to be a substitute father to this lad?”

“What did you say?”

“Never mind,” Nate replied, returning his gaze to Will. “I told you this afternoon. Flossie’s still a child—at least, as far as her emotions are concerned. She needs to grow up some more to really know what love is. Libby’s a lady, and I treated her like a common strumpet.”

“You did? I always thought they liked to be pushed around.”

“Good Lord, you have a lot to learn! Didn’t your father teach you anything? Even harlots like to think you respect them, even if they know you don’t. A lady like Miss Libby deserves respect. And believe it or not, I do respect her. I just picked a damned lousy way to show it. And the way I talked to her was outrageous. Don’t you ever treat a lady like I treated your sister.”

“It didn’t look to me like she minded you kissing her. She didn’t even try to fight you.”

Deep in thought, Nate paused to watch the flames of the fire die. Will was right. Libby hadn’t done anything to fight against him—until … Nate combed his fingers through his hair from his forehead to the crown. “That doesn’t mean a damned thing. All she had to do was slap me the way she did.”

“I think she likes you,” Will declared. “She even told me that you’re extremely handsome. She never said anything like that about other men. I’ve been trying to think of a way to fix it so she’ll like you even more.”

Shaking his head, Nate sighed. “Don’t bother. Matchmaking seldom works. It’s best to let nature run its course. Besides, it’s very likely that I’m only interested in Libby because she’s the first female I’ve been near in a long time. A man starts missing female companionship after a while.”

“I don’t understand. If Libby didn’t try to stop you, she must have liked you kissing her. What harm did you do?”

“Let me word it this way. If you ever treat a lady like I treated Miss Libby, I’ll beat your bare ass raw. And I don’t care if you’re bigger than I am.”

“How come everybody older than me keeps threatening to tan my hide?” Will grumbled. “I ain’t even done nothin’.”

“The proper phrase is I haven’t done anything. And who else threatened you?”

“Libby, of course.”

“Libby!” he exclaimed in surprise. “That little bit of a thing couldn’t whip you if she tried.”

Will grinned. “Don’t be so sure. She may be small, but she can be real tough when she wants to be. You should see her when she’s riled.”

“I was beginning to wonder if she ever got mad,” Nate admitted dreamily. “Twice I saw
an angry look in her eyes, but she didn’t sound angry. I’m glad to know that she yells on occasion.”

“She doesn’t yell, but she can make you feel awful guilty.”

“She doesn’t yell?”

“Nope. But that doesn’t stop her from telling people exactly what she thinks.”

“I noticed.” Nate tossed a small log on the fire to rebuild it. “She told me exactly what she thought of me after you caught me kissing her.”

“I heard, and that was mild compared to the kind of lectures she gives me. Hell, I ain’t even sure she meant what she said to you.”

“I’m not,” Nate corrected. “Why do you say that?”

“She didn’t lecture you long enough. She would have gone on for a half an hour if she’d meant it.”

Nate rubbed his chin. “I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Never mind. You’d better get some sleep. I have some thinking to do.”

While Will returned to his bedroll, Nate stared into the fire. Could Will have been right about Libby? Was it possible that she actually liked him more than she was letting on? The thought intrigued him. But if he wanted to spend as much time with her as he could and learn more about her, he needed to proceed very carefully to find out if Will was right.
Chapter 5

While the four ate dinner two nights later, a strange noise startled them. Whispering, Nate directed Libby, Flossie, and Will under the wagon where Will could protect them. Satisfied they were as safe as possible, he stalked off in the direction of the noise. Libby's whispered plea for him to be careful echoed in his mind. It felt good to have her show concern for him.

Before he left the clearing a red-haired stranger entered and Libby exclaimed, "Dr. Ross!"

Glancing around, Nate noticed that she crawled out from hiding and hurried to help her. As he lifted her to her feet by grasping her waist, he asked, "Do you know this man?"

"He was my doctor in Charleston." Dusting herself off, she turned to face Ross. "What are you doing here, Dr. Ross?"

"I came to get you. May we talk?" Ross asked as he approached her.

"Over dinner."

"No, Libby. I need to talk with you alone."

"Then whatever it is will have to wait until we've eaten. Maybe you aren't, but the rest of us are hungry."

Nate stared at her, certain that he'd detected a slight note of irritation in her voice. Could it be that she was as upset by the sudden intrusion of the redhead as he was? The immediate dislike he experienced toward the doctor was strong, and he battled the almost overwhelming desire to hit Ross. The doctor's very presence reminded him that Libby had had a life before they'd met, and that life could easily contain a special male friend. Judging from Libby's attitude, though, that man wasn't Ross. Still, Nate had a distinct feeling that Ross's arrival would threaten his own relationship with Libby. To avoid showing his distress, he ate in silence while everyone else chatted amiably.

While the others cleaned up after the meal, Ross and Libby strolled a short distance away. Since Libby was the best cook, Nate had suggested that, while on their travels, she cook while he, Will, and Flossie collected firewood and water, and cleaned up after meals. Libby didn't care for those jobs, anyway, and had eagerly agreed. Now she regretted it, because she didn't have an excuse not to be alone with Ross.

"It appears that you have a life of leisure on the trail, Libby," Ross observed.

"It's no life of leisure, Dr. Ross," she said. "We all have chores to do. Not only do I wash bedding and clothes, I cook, mend, and drive the wagon for half a day. I also help anybody else who needs it and tend to anybody who's hurt or sick. I'd hardly call that a life of leisure."
“Then you work far too hard. You’re a lady and shouldn’t do demeaning chores.”

“On the trail, Dr. Ross, nobody has privileges.”

“Would you stop calling me that? My name is Hiram, and I’d like for you to use it. Aren’t you even curious as to why I followed you?”

“A little I suppose,” she admitted.

“I wanted to be with you. When I was caring for you, I decided that I want you for my wife. So I followed you with every intention of convincing you to marry me.”

Startled by his frankness, Libby hesitated a few moments. This couldn’t be happening. Many men had wanted to court her, but no one except Thomas Morgan had ever suggested marriage. Now the first man who did was one she didn’t like very much. What was she supposed to do? How should she respond?

Choosing her words carefully, she said, “I assume that’s your way of offering a proposal. If it is, you should have stayed in Charleston because I’m not interested.”

“It’s because of Payne, isn’t it? He’s stolen your heart already.”

Libby shook her head, unable to believe they were having this conversation. She wanted to go back to camp and spend some more time talking to Nate before she went to bed. Instead, she said, “Nate has nothing to do with this. I’m not interested in marriage—with anybody. All I’m interested in right now is getting safely to Charlotte.”

“Then how do you explain Payne?” Ross demanded.

“I don’t have to explain him, nor do I have to explain you to Nate.”

“I’m going with you, Libby. And I’ll convince you to marry me.”

“As long as you’re already with us,” she said, “there isn’t much I can do to force you away. You’re a nice enough man, and I don’t mind if you travel with us. The more people there are, the less work there is for each of us to do. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to go back to camp.”

Wandering back toward camp, Libby tried to ignore the man behind her. Apparently, she wouldn’t get to talk with Nate again that night; but at least, she didn’t have to spend the evening alone with Hiram. If nothing else, Nate would probably be as entertaining as he always was in the evening. At least, she hoped he was because she didn’t think she could pretend interest in anything Hiram would say.

From his bedroll, Nate heard Flossie moving in the night. Turning his head, he watched in astonishment as she went to the doctor’s bedroll. After shaking him gently, she whispered something into his ear. She kissed his cheek before they disappeared behind the nearby bushes.

Before long Nate heard rustling and groaning. He didn’t need to get up and check to know what was happening. But he would wait a few minutes to give Ross time to dissuade Flossie. If Ross didn’t succeed, he would intervene.
When the pair returned only minutes later, Nate stared at them in horror. Ross was buttoning his trousers. Now he didn’t know what to do. If he said something, he might cause trouble for the long journey ahead. If he didn’t, Ross might take advantage of Flossie again. Maybe he should wait and see what happened next. For all he knew, this was a one-time liaison that Ross hadn’t been able to resist. Besides, knowing that Ross and Flossie had been intimate would upset Libby, and he wanted to protect her from the truth—even if it meant that she sent him away if she ever discovered that he knew what had happened and didn’t tell her.

Rolling over, he tried to block the incident from his mind and go back to sleep. But instead, he lay awake for a long time, trying to decide if he should say something to Libby or not.

After one day on the trail, Nate was ready to send Ross back to Charleston. Ross refused to do his share of heavy labor, and he paid constant attention to Libby—too much attention to suit Nate. But Ross devoting so much time in small-talk with Libby didn’t bother him nearly as much as the extra effort Ross put forth to be charming.

Nate had known many men like Ross, and that doctor was trying to convince Libby to marry him. She appeared to pay little attention to him, but that in itself gave Nate only a bit of consolation. Still, he was fairly sure that she was smart enough not to believe Ross’s attention was anything other than for his own purposes. At least, he hoped she was.

That night when they made camp, Nate insisted that Will stay with his sisters while he and Ross hunted for dinner. Ross wasted two shots on deer that were out of rifle range, scaring away smaller game and making Nate’s task more difficult. When Nate finally shot enough for dinner, they returned to the campsite.

After eating, Nate went about his chore of feeding and securing the horses for the night. While Flossie washed the dishes, Ross escorted Libby away from camp so he could get some privacy with her. Will followed the pair at a safe distance.

“There’s something I want to discuss with you, Libby,” Ross announced irritably. “Payne isn’t a good influence on your brother. I want you to send him away.”

“I can’t,” she replied. “He’s done nothing to harm us, and he’s been very helpful. I doubt we would have made it so far without him.”

“He swears like the uncouth trapper that he is. Willie is even beginning to swear.”

“I’ve noticed,” she replied. “But he doesn’t do it often, and he has never taken the Lord’s name in vain—at least not that I’ve heard. So he hasn’t broken a commandment yet. If he does, I’ll talk to him. It’s my decision if I should discipline him about it, Hiram, not yours. I’ll speak to him if and when the time is right.”

“Payne thinks he’s in charge of this trip.”

“He is. He’s the only one who knows what he’s doing. He’s also teaching Will how to take care of various things that need to be done on the trail. That way Will can manage when Nate
has to leave us.”

“He has you under his spell, Libby,” Ross said spitefully. “You’re blind to what he’s doing.”

Upon hearing those words, Will rushed back to camp and called to Nate breathlessly. “Nate! I hafta talk to you. It’s important.”

Glancing at him over a horse, Nate continued brushing the mount as he questioned Will. “What is it, lad?”

“It’s Dr. Ross. He’s mean-mouthing you to Libby. He said you’re a bad influence on me. He told her to send you away. She won’t do it, though. She don’t … I mean, she doesn’t like people telling her what to do. When I left, she was tellin’ him about you teachin’ me what to do on the trail. But if he says the right things, she might change her mind. Libby’ll do that sometimes—change her mind, I mean. She might already be startin’ to agree with him, too—’cause of me startin’ to swear. What’re we gonna do?”

Nate seethed with anger. He hated Ross already and knew that he was intelligent enough to convince Libby to change her mind about marrying him. But he had no idea what to say or do to stop it. As angry as he was, though, he crossed his arms on the horse’s back and replied casually. “To begin with, Will, you’re going to slow down and remember your grammar. Then you’re going to forget that you heard their conversation.”

“Aren’t you going to do something?” Will asked, aghast.

“There’s nothing I can do. Libby will do what she thinks is right no matter what I say. You know that as well as I.”

“But even I know we can’t take care of ourselves like you can.”

“Relax, Will. I don’t trust Ross. Hell, I’d rather put my trust in a mountain lion. At least, with a lion, you know to expect the unexpected. Ross is a sneaky, little bastard. I can’t tell what the hell he’s up to. And I’m not leaving unless Liberty asks me to.”

“He’s up to no good if you ask me,” Will mumbled. He paused a moment then questioned Nate anxiously. “What will we do if Libby asks you to go?”

Nate considered the prospect. What would they do? What the hell would he do? In the past few days, he’d become very attached to Libby. Granting her desire should she ask him to leave would be damned near impossible, but of course, he would do it. Then again, he could leave without actually leaving them. That way he could still keep an eye on Ross, not to mention the siblings.

Drawing in a deep breath, Nate exhaled slowly before explaining, “I’m not about to leave you people unprotected. Even that blundering idiot needs my protection—probably more than the rest of you.”

“I don’t think so, Nate,” Will said, shaking his head. “He’s awfully smart.”

“I’ll tell you a little secret, Will. Sometimes the smartest people don’t have a lick of common sense. I think I’ll take a walk and concentrate on what I’ll do if she does ask me to go. You stay with Flossie.”
Even though Nate intentionally left camp in the opposite direction from Ross and Libby, he soon heard their voices. Making his way closer, he stopped out of sight as soon as he could see them in the dimming light of dusk. For several minutes, they discussed inconsequential items. Then Ross abruptly changed the subject.

“I want you to send Payne on his way, Libby,” he said. “Now that I’m here to protect you, having him around isn’t necessary. I even proved that I’m capable of providing enough food for everyone.”

Libby stifled her anger again. If Ross thought he could tell her what to do, he needed to reconsider the notion, because nobody would ever run her life but her. Her father had taught her that lesson very well three years ago when he’d tried to convince her to marry somebody he thought was appropriate.

“That may be true,” she replied after a brief pause, “but Nate knows the area very well. He knows what lies ahead. And he’s extremely good at killing enough game for everybody to eat. If nothing else, Nate can keep us from starving on the trail.”

“There’s an easy way to solve the problems of the unknown and potential lack of food. We’ll turn around and go back to Charleston. I’m sure I’ll have no trouble re-establishing my practice.”

Her eyes widened in stunned disbelief. How could he possibly think that she wanted to go back when she’d gone to such lengths to leave Charleston? “I have absolutely no intention of turning back, Hiram. I don’t know why you don’t like Nate, because he’s been nothing but polite to you. Why can’t you at least try to get along with him?”

“He flaunts his knowledge of the wilderness. He doesn’t seem to think that I know anything on the subject, and he’s wrong. I can do as well as he can. The least you could do is give me a chance to prove it, but you won’t. You won’t even consider it. Payne’s the cause of it, too. You’re smitten. I could tell that the minute I walked into your camp last night. Have you two been doing things a decent man and woman shouldn’t?”

Turning away, Libby plucked a leaf from a small maple tree to toy with it. “That isn’t a very polite insinuation, but it doesn’t bother me because what you’re thinking is nonsense. The only feelings I have toward Nate are of gratitude. He saved Flossie’s life like you saved mine, and I have no intention of sending him away. Nor do I have any intention of sending you away.”

Ross spun her to face him by grabbing her arm roughly. “Who’s been trying to talk you into that?”

Staring up at him, Libby fought the fear rising within her. If she’d known he was this type of man, she never would have agreed to him joining them. Now he was there, and she didn’t know what to do. But she did know that she wanted him to release her. She pulled back her arm, but Ross held it tightly.

Not wanting to antagonize him and risk making him angrier, she spoke calmly. “Please, Hiram. Let go. You’re hurting me.”
“Answer my question first!” he ordered.

Stunned by his temper, she found herself unable to respond. She wanted to, but she was afraid that he would hurt her worse if she said the wrong thing. A sharp pain shot through her forearm as he unexpectedly twisted it. Unable to restrain herself, she squealed in pain.

“Was it Payne?” he demanded. “Is he trying to convince you to send me away?”

A moment later, Nate bolted through the trees to the left of them. Libby stared at him in shock. As glad as she was that he was there, she was a bit irritated that he had followed them.

“Let the lady go, Ross!” Nate said in a warning tone.

Instantly, Ross released Libby and spun to face Nate. “Payne! How long have you been following us?”

“As tempted as I was,” Nate declared, “I didn’t follow you. I left camp in the opposite direction. You’re so damned stupid, you circled around.”

“You’re a liar!”

“The hell I am!”

“Listen to him, Libby,” Ross said bitterly. “He’s been away from civilization so long that he can’t stop swearing. Do you honestly want Willie exposed to that? He’s only a boy.”

“Hiram, please,” Libby replied, shaking her head. She had enough to deal with; she didn’t need two men arguing like a couple of adolescents. The only way to show her displeasure was to put a stop to it right away. “It isn’t polite to talk that way.”

“It’s all right, Miss Libby,” Nate said. “Let him speak his mind. I don’t care.”

To Libby’s amazement, Nate’s gaze went to her hand as she rubbed her forearm gently. Then he stepped up beside her and caressed the back of her neck tenderly, asking, “How’s your arm, ma’am?”

But his touch was different than it had been. Tonight it carried a tense quality rather than its normally casual feel. She offered him a quick smile. “Sore, but it should be fine in a few minutes. Thank you for asking.”

“Payne is trying to make me look bad, Libby,” Ross insisted. “He’s lying about not following us so you’ll think I can’t lead you safely. Surely, you can see that he’s trying to discredit me.”

Studying each man in turn, she released a heavy sigh. This was the most ludicrous conversation she’d ever been involved in. Two grown men should know better than to argue about such an inconsequential matter. All she wanted to do was get away from them. But how could she without being rude? Unable to think of anything else, she said, “I think I should go back to camp.”

“Would you like me to go with you, Miss Libby?” Nate asked politely. “I know the way.”

“I’m perfectly capable of escorting Libby, Payne,” Ross insisted. His nearly colorless eyes glared at Nate. “She left with me, and I’ll take her back.”

Although irritated by Ross’s behavior, Libby spoke calmly to disguise it. “Thank you both.
But if you’ll point me in the right direction, Nate, I can make it on my own.”

“I have no doubt that you can, Miss Libby,” he replied with a reassuring smile, “but I must insist that you be accompanied. We’re only a couple days from a Cheyenne village, and it isn’t safe for you to be wandering around alone.”

“Two days away! Libby, can’t you see that he’s trying to coerce you into going with him? Undoubtedly, he wants to seduce you.”

“Hiram, please,” Libby replied. “Stop acting like a child. Even Will knows that two days isn’t far for Indians. It’s even a shorter distance when you consider how much progress we make in a day with a wagon. Is that right, Nate?”

Nate slid his hand from her neck down her back to just above her waist and nodded silently. Beside him, Libby suggested that they all return to camp, using Nate’s directions.
Chapter 6

A man’s soft, ragged breathing drifted to her ears, and Libby smiled in the dark. For the past few nights, she’d heard Nate snoring softly like that, and it gave her a sense of peace knowing that he was there. Now that Ross was with them, she appreciated Nate’s presence even more. She needed to tell him that, too.

Dropping down from the wagon, she made her way quietly to Nate’s side so she didn’t awaken the others. She stood over him for several minutes, trying to gather the courage to wake him. After all, he worked hard to take care of them. He needed as much sleep as he could get. But she desperately needed to talk to him, and she couldn’t do it with Ross awake. Drawing in a deep breath for courage, Libby sank to her knees.

She gently shook his shoulder, and Nate rolled onto his side with a groan. She shook him again, a little harder. Opening his eyes, he rolled to his back again, whispering angrily, “Leave me the hell alo…” He stared up at her in shock. “Miss Liberty?”

Cocking her finger in a silent gesture that he join her, she rose and watched while he followed suit. Wordlessly taking his hand, she led him away from the others.

When they were far enough away from camp for assured privacy, she stopped and turned to gaze up at him. “I wanted to thank you for intervening when Hiram and I were alone this evening. I would have told you sooner, but I didn’t want him to know that I was alone with you. I think he’s jealous of you, although I told him there’s nothing between us.”

“You’re entirely welcome, Miss Libby. I’m glad I was able to help. There’s no doubt that he’s jealous. He’s made it perfectly clear to me in ways he probably doesn’t even realize. If there’s ever anything else I can to do keep him away from you, just holler.”

As he examined her in the light of the moon, an expression Libby had never seen before came to his blue eyes. For some reason, it made her feel warm inside, but she wasn’t about to admit it—especially to him, because he would only say something arrogant again, and she had other things she wanted to discuss.

To rid herself of her thoughts, she smiled up at him. His responded with a smile so wide that Libby wondered if he would burst with excitement. But all she’d done was smile at him—just like she’d done many times before. Why did he have such a different expression? More importantly, why did it make her feel so powerful over him?
Forcing such thoughts from her mind, she said, “I also want to thank you for not hitting him. I could tell that you wanted to.”

Nate’s grin turned playful. “I’m not sure I can say you’re welcome to that. I wanted to give him one solid blow to the mouth, and I can’t promise I won’t eventually. He strikes me as an obnoxious little bas—runt. I’d love nothing more than to teach him a lesson. It took all the willpower I had not to strike him with a blow that would knock him to the ground.”

“I know. I could feel your tension when you touched me. That’s why I woke you. I want you to know that I’m grateful for your restraint.”

“That’s why you woke me in the middle of the night?” he asked, his voice filled with irritation. “To tell me that you’re grateful?”

Suddenly, Libby regretted her decision. Why had she thought that Nate would appreciate knowing how she felt? Embarrassed by her behavior, she turned her back on him and spoke softly. “Now I’ve made you angry. I couldn’t sleep because I wanted to tell you, but I can’t seem to do anything without Hiram being there. It’s embarrassing that he won’t let me out of his sight, and the only way I could think of to talk to you privately was to wake you up. I’m sorry.”

Chuckling, Nate stepped around her. With two fingers under her chin, he lifted her head until she looked up at him.

“I’m not angry, Miss Libby,” he said. “I’m surprised. Normally, you would never even consider waking me up. I was pleased, but still surprised. I thought of waking you, too, but decided against it. I didn’t want to be accused of being arrogant again. Fortunately, this time you came to me, so you can’t accuse me. Besides, I’m not arrogant because I think you’re a very lovely lady. I also think you’re also a very lonely lady, and I want to keep you company. You can’t fault me for that, can you?”

Her face heated. Hopefully, it was dark enough where they were so he couldn’t see her blush. She didn’t want him to know that his words had affected her. She was lonely, although she hadn’t realized it until she met Nate. He had brought something forth inside her that she didn’t know existed. Now she wanted to explore those feelings, but she didn’t want him to realize that she would miss him when he left them.

Struggling to keep her voice from cracking, she said, “Please, Nate. I woke you for a serious talk, and you’re teasing me.”

“To the contrary, Miss Libby. I’m very serious.” Reaching out, he tenderly grasped her upper arms and rubbed them. “I’m glad you woke me. I wanted to be alone with you more than anything else. Will told me some things tonight while you were walking with Ross, and I wanted you to confirm them.”

His hands on her arms sparked her imagination, calling forth the recollection of his
kisses. Not only had she enjoyed his caresses, she’d enjoyed the taste and smell of his pipe tobacco, even though she’d originally believed both would be unpleasant. But she’d discouraged him then and must continue to do so as long as they were traveling together.

Much to her confusion, however, she couldn’t force herself to dissuade him from this small, intimate caress. Instead, she longed for him to hold her close, kiss her softly, or even passionately. Yes, that was it. She wanted—no needed—him to kiss her.

Staring up at him, she opened her mouth slightly. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t tell him her thoughts and desires. She wanted to speak, but nothing came out. He had bewitched her again! No, that wasn’t it. She couldn’t speak because she was terrified that she would show him her feelings.

“Will told me that Ross said your life had never been in danger,” Nate continued, intruding into her thoughts, “but tonight you compared his saving your life and my saving Flossie’s. If what Ross told Will is true—and I suspect it isn’t—there is no comparison. And if what Ross told Will isn’t true, what is? I don’t trust him, Miss Libby. I don’t trust him at all.”

His words bought her back to more mundane thoughts, and her words finally made their way from her vocal cords. “Maybe he told Will that to spare Will’s feelings.” She hadn’t thought of that before, and now that she had, she wondered if it was true. “Or possibly so he wouldn’t worry.”

“I doubt it. Will described your wound and told me that you were feeling fine within a week. That doesn’t sound to me like you were on the brink of death.”

Confused by what he was saying and what she knew to be true, Libby jerked away from him. Tears came to her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. Ross had told her the same thing he’d told Will. Why? Because he’d wanted her to feel so grateful that she would agree to marry him? It was likely after what he’d said earlier. Now she was so confused she didn’t know what to do.

A moment after she pulled away from him, Nate swept her into his arms. Libby almost panicked. She couldn’t let this happen, because she knew where it would lead. As much as she wanted a kiss, she also feared her reaction to one. She might lose her last semblance of control if she didn’t get him to release her. But when she tried to push away, she found that his tender hold was too secure to break. Then his deep, soothing voice drifted to her ears.

“I’m sorry, Miss Liberty. I should have thought before I spoke of death. You must miss your parents terribly.”

Her heart constricted, increasing her tears. Nate had misunderstood! But despite the ache in her chest, she felt a sense of happiness. For the first time in her life, she felt truly content. For several moments, she merely listened to the beat of his heart as her ear pressed against his hard chest. Then, from somewhere deep within her, a breeze lapped at the smoldering spark within her, enlarging the area already consumed.
Despite all of Nate’s arrogance, despite all of his aggressiveness, he cared about others. Maybe he wasn’t as bad as she’d originally thought. Maybe she didn’t have to contain whatever she was feeling.

“It’s all right, Nate,” she said quietly. “Honest. I’m not upset by what you said. I’m tired and confused.”

“What are you confused about? Maybe I can explain. I’d like to help if I can. In fact, very little would make me happier than helping you.”

“If you don’t mind, it’s something I want to find an answer on my own.”

“Are you sure you aren’t grieving? I don’t want you to think you have to hide it from me. There’s honestly nothing I’d like better than to help you with your problems, Miss Libby, to soothe your heart. It’s not just something I’m saying to reinforce my gallantry in your eyes. I sincerely mean it.”

“You’re very kind to offer, but that won’t be necessary.”

He paused for several seconds then questioned her hesitantly. “Don’t you ever get angry, Miss Libby? Will told me that you never shout, but I find that hard to believe of anyone—even you.”

Delighting in the comfort of his embrace, she snuggled against him to put her head in a more comfortable position and slide her arms around him in return. Being in his arms felt so good, so she easily remained calm when she talked to him.

“It’s true in my case, Nate. After my mother died—I was only four at the time, but I remember it very clearly—I decided that I would never raise my voice in anger. She and Papa had had an argument about my snakebite shortly before she fell down a flight of stairs. She was due to have a baby in a matter of weeks and lost it after the fall. Mama died two weeks later, and she blamed my brother’s death on Papa until the end. Right then I pledged that I would never argue with anyone like that. Now it’s become a part of me.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Papa loved Mama desperately. So did I. At my young age, I vowed never to love anybody else that much again, never to love anybody as much as Papa loved Mama. I thought that, if I didn’t love, I could never be hurt. Maybe that’s why I never married.”

“I suppose that’s possible.”

Without warning, he tightened his hold on her and moved so fast that she couldn’t react. His lips bore down on hers demandingly. Her mind told her to resist, but her body melted against his. She came even closer against him as she relaxed in his arms. Oh, how she enjoyed the exciting new sensations that exploded within her whenever his mouth captured hers. But
she was afraid of them, too. No other man had ever made her feel like this, and she didn't know what it meant. Right now, she didn't even care. Nate was kissing her again, and that was all that mattered.

Instinctively, she slid her hands up his back to his shoulder blades. Then his kiss changed. It became tender now that she had responded. Still, she did nothing more than return his embrace. She had so little experience in this aspect of the male-female friendship that she didn't know what to do. She only knew that she enjoyed what he was doing to her, and she wanted him to enjoy how she reacted to him.

Her feet left the ground as he lifted her. He sank to his knees and laid her gently on the ground without breaking the kiss. He came down beside her as his hand roamed to her waist, down her left thigh, then up to her covered breast. There it lingered momentarily, taunting the nipple through the fabric of her shirt and camisole.

The sensations were almost unbearable, but she didn't want them to end, either. They were the most incredible feelings she'd ever had, and in that moment, she realized that she would never tire of them. A moan of pleasure escaped from a place so deep within her that she was surprised it existed. Then, to her dismay, he broke the kiss.

She stared up at him nervously, unsure what she'd done to make him stop. Whatever it was, though, she needed to discover it so she didn't repeat it. As badly as she wanted him to continue, she couldn't tell him. But what they were doing simply wasn't ...

He kissed the tip of her nose, and she sighed. No! she told herself. Don't do that or he won't stop. But her eyelids slid shut. His soft lips caressed first one then the other while his thumb toyed with her hardened nipple. Next he kissed each cheekbone then her chin. Finally, he nuzzled her neck just below her ear. To her surprise, a violent shudder raced through her as a tingling sensation shot from her ear to her elbow. Instinctively, she shrugged her shoulder.

Chuckling, he rose to his elbow and propped his head up on his fist. His free hand slid across her chest and tenderly massaged her other breast. A moment later, he slipped it up to her bare neck.

Libby protested in a whisper. “Nate, please. This isn’t right. What if Willie or Flossie see us? We shouldn’t do this. I’m not that kind of a woman.”

“We’re not doing anything to be ashamed of,” he replied in a like tone as he stroked her cheekbone with his thumb. “And I can tell that you’re enjoying yourself as much as I am.”

“That doesn’t mean what we’re doing is right. It isn’t. It’s sinful.”

“We haven’t done anything sinful. We haven’t even broken a commandment. And I haven’t taken you against your will, which I would never do. I know when I’m with a lady, and I know when I’m with a whore. I could never forget that you’re a lady, either, so you have
nothing to worry about. But I still want to hold you; I still want to kiss you.”

“Maybe you should find a city or town that has a bordello where you can pay to hold and kiss a woman,” she suggested, despite the tightness in her chest that the mere thought created. “You can also pay to be intimate with her. Maybe then you’ll be satisfied.”

“That’s not what would satisfy me. What satisfies me is exactly what we were doing. Don’t you understand?” he asked. “I don’t want a whore I can bed. I want a lady I can have a meaningful friendship with, and I don’t want just any lady. I want the one in my arms.”

Despite her desire that he kiss her again, Libby avoided his lips as they approached hers. “No, Nate. You’ve been alone a long time. It isn’t me you want. It’s female companionship. Any woman would do.”

Caressing her face, he shook his head. “If that were true, I wouldn’t have turned Flossie down the other night. No, my sweet Liberty, I’ve done it, and now you need to face the facts. You’re the lady I want to hold, and you’re the one I want to kiss. That’s the only satisfaction I need right now.”

Sliding away from him, she scrambled to her feet. She had to stop this before things turned into something even more intimate. Straightening her clothes nervously, she watched him rise. “You said it yourself, Nate. You said it’s the only satisfaction you need right now. I won’t let this happen again, because maybe next time you’ll want more satisfaction, and I won’t allow more.”

Afraid that he would try to dissuade her, she spun from him and hurried away. If she didn’t get back to camp, he would probably convince her that what they’d done was all right, and she couldn’t let him do that.

He called her name, but she didn’t stop. Instead, she increased her speed. Behind her, she could hear his hasty footfalls as he followed her back.

As soon as she returned, she lay down in her bedroll and, despite her belief that the incident would keep her awake, promptly fell asleep.

Nate wandered into camp a few moments later. While he watched Libby get comfortable, he sank down beside the fire. With a tired sigh, he stared at the flames.

What had he done? Completely alienated Libby, that’s what! And why? Because he turned into a lecher every time he was alone with her. He became a man obsessed with tasting her mouth, feeling her small, supple body against his. And he couldn’t seem to restrain his desires no matter how hard he tried.

Maybe Libby was right. Maybe he should find a woman to satisfy his masculine needs.
That would be a hell of a lot better than having Libby angry with him all the time because he was incapable of restraint. But he didn’t want another woman. He only wanted to be near Libby.

“Where did you and Libby go, Nate?”

Nate started and gazed up at Will as the young man sat down beside him. Knowing that Will would never settle for a quick response, Nate sighed heavily. “For a walk. Miss Libby wanted to thank me for intervening with Ross earlier—and for not hitting him.”

“Did she let you kiss her again?” Will asked.

“It isn’t polite to ask a question like that, Will. I’d suggest that you not do it again, or you might find yourself in a fight.”

“Why? What did I say wrong this time? You already know that I saw you kiss her before. Why is it so bad for me to ask if you did it again?”

“A gentleman doesn’t ask for that information, and a gentleman certainly doesn’t divulge if even if another man asks. When a gentleman kisses a lady, he keeps his mouth shut about it. It isn’t something to talk about. Do you understand?”

Will grinned at Nate from across the campfire. “Sure. You kissed her.”

“You, William Nichols, are incorrigible. Let’s change the subject.”

“Why? I like to talk about you and Libby. She likes you a lot, too. I can tell. She won’t admit it, of course, but she does. And that lousy doctor? He isn’t good for her. She needs a man like you.”

“I’ve got to admit,” Nate said bitterly, “that that damned bastard is nothing but a blundering idiot. But his manners are normally refined and impeccable. He’s probably perfect for her. I wish I didn’t believe that, because I could throw him a hell of a lot farther than I trust him. But Liberty is a lady, and ladies need men who are refined.” Nate paused to sigh. “That could have been me at one time, but since I left home, I’ve lost that quality. I’ve spent too much time alone, too much time away from civilization.”

“That doesn’t matter so much does it, Nate? Can’t a man still be good for a lady even if he’s been alone for a long time?”

“I suppose, but Liberty is different.” Nate sighed again, hating the things he was saying but saying them anyway in the hope he could believe them if he did. “She needs a man who can give her all of the good things in life. She deserves fine clothes, a fine house, servants. Your sister is well-bred, Will. Take it from a man who’s seen all kinds of women—from fancy ladies to whores. She needs a man who can give her those things. And, as much as I hate to admit it, that blundering idiot of a doctor can do just that. He’s the man who’s good for your
sister—not me. I’m nothing but a straggly trapper who’s been away from civilization far too long."

“I think he’s bad for her,” Will declared. “And I’m going to do everything I can to keep them apart.”

“Don’t you want to see her happy?”

“Sure, but you’re the man who can make her happy—not Ross.”

“More than anything, I wish that were true, but it’s not. Let her be, Will. Then things will turn out for her the way they should.” Rising, Nate wandered to his bedroll. “I need some sleep. Let’s go back to bed. We’ll talk again some other time.”
Ross being so persistent about making her his wife was one thing, but he had no right to kiss her without warning her. Even Nate gave her a hint of what was in his mind by the expression in his sparkling blue eyes. And the kiss Ross was forcing upon her at that moment was nothing like Nate’s, even last night when it had been dark and she hadn’t expected it. Ross’s caress was rough and distasteful. There was no scent of the tobacco which Libby had come to like, no taste of the lingering smoke from Nate’s pipe. Separating her thoughts and feelings was easy because she detested the lips grinding against hers.

Determined to make him stop, she began to struggle, but he crushed her so tightly against him she couldn’t escape. She wanted to scream, but his lips covered hers cruelly. When she opened her mouth to bite him, he slipped his tongue into it.

Instantly, the idea drained from her mind. His open lips covered hers as his tongue probed her mouth, occasionally making contact with hers. Each time it did, she pulled her tongue back. Oh, how she hated this wet, unwanted kiss. She had to break it. Forcing her arms between them, she tried desperately to push him away.

Suddenly, Ross kicked her leg out from under her, and she tumbled to the ground with Ross beneath her. He held her head so the kiss wouldn’t be disrupted. On the ground, Ross flipped her onto her back and covered her with his body. He worked his arms under her, keeping her head pinned to the ground by the force of his kiss.

She wanted to get away, but she was so completely pinned she could see no exit. Where was Nate when she needed him? Why hadn’t he followed them that night?

_Dear Lord, she silently prayed, please send him to help me._

“Nate!” Will shouted as he raced into camp. “Come quick!”

Nate spun to face Will as he dried a dish Flossie had handed to him. “What is it, lad?”

“Ross is kissing Libby. You have to stop him.”
Smiling fondly at Will, Nate replied, “If I do that, she might never forgive me.”

“You don’t understand. He didn’t let her know what he was going to do first like you do. He just grabbed her and started kissing her. And I don’t think she wants him to.” Will grabbed the towel and dish from Nate. “Don’t let him hurt her.”

Without further protest, Nate bolted out of camp in the direction Will had come. How dare Ross force his attentions on Libby, especially after what had happened last night. That doctor was pushing him to the limit of his patience. Hopefully, Will had misinterpreted what he’d seen. If he hadn’t, Nate wasn’t sure ...

At that moment, he arrived at the clearing. Before him Libby was desperately trying to free herself, despite the fact that Ross had her wrists pinned to the ground beside her head. Nate stopped a moment and stared at the scene. Then, before he realized it was happening, his wrath erupted in a violent burst. Grabbing Ross by the back of the shirt, he tossed the smaller man away from Libby as though he were a lightweight sack of potatoes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard her scream of shock and fright. Still, he focused all of his energy on rescuing her. He attacked the smaller man with such vehemence that Ross could respond only defensively.

Within minutes, while Libby watched in stunned disbelief, Nate had beaten Ross into unconsciousness. To her horror, Nate continued his assault, despite the doctor’s inability to protect himself.

Forcing herself into action, Libby scrambled to Ross’s defense. She frantically grabbed Nate’s arm, but he shook her off like an annoying puppy. He hit Ross in the face again before she could stop him. When she grabbed his arm a second time, he pushed her away so hard that she fell. Scrambling back to him, she put her arms around him and locked her fingers together at his chest. Finally, she made a last, desperate attempt to pull him off his victim.

Panting from exertion, Nate sat back and drew up his knees. Folding his arms across them, he lay his head on his arms. Libby collapsed behind him, exhausted after her short but physically powerful exercise. After several minutes’ rest, Nate examined Ross then turned his attention to Libby.

Fear flooded through her. She didn’t think Nate would ever harm her, but she hadn’t thought he would hurt Ross, either. He’d already proven her wrong, and she didn’t want to know if he would prove her wrong a second time.

Nate reached out toward her face, and Libby cowered from his touch. He’d lost control of his actions, and she was terrified that he would lose his temper again. As she stared at him nervously, an expression of sorrow dimmed the brightness in his eyes.

“Oh, God,” he sighed. “What have I done?”
“You hurt Hiram,” she replied.

“I examined him, Miss Liberty. I’m sure he’ll be fine in a few days. What’s more important is that I hurt my friendship with you. I did the worst thing I could ever imagine. I made you fear me. You probably won’t believe anything I say now, but I could never hurt you. Not ever.”

“You’re absolutely right. I could never believe that now.”

“Would it help if I say I’m sorry?” he asked hesitantly. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I was trying to protect you. And I’m sorrier than you’ll ever know that I overreacted. I only did it because I didn’t want Ross to hurt you. Honest.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have.”

“Not physically maybe, but emotionally. Ross wants to force more than a kiss on you.”

“I know. He wants to marry me.”

Nate stared at her in disbelief. “Are you going to agree?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

Although her voice was soft, she glared at him. Nate swallowed hard, causing his Adam’s apple to become more prominent, then continued with a different line of conversation. “I should get back to camp and see that Will and Flossie have finished cleaning up. I’ll carry Ross back.”

“Don’t touch him,” Libby ordered softly. “Send Will to get him. And I think it’s time for you to move on. I want you gone by the time we get back to camp.”

Nate stared at her as she rose. Without averting his sorrowful gaze, he also rose. Then, as he gazed down at her unalteringly, he spoke in a voice filled with restrained emotion. “I suppose this moment was inevitable, and I can’t say that I didn’t expect it. I honestly tried to get along with that blundering idiot, Miss Libby. For your sake, I tried.”

“Not very hard,” she returned. “You constantly call him a blundering idiot, and I once overheard you using a much stronger name in a conversation with Will.”

“You don’t strike me as the type to eavesdrop,” he said without thinking of the outcome.

“I’m not. Voices travel well in the still night, especially angry voices. Which reminds me, you have no right telling Will what kind of man is good for me, nor does Will have a right to say who is bad for me. Both of those decisions are mine and mine alone.”

Nate grimaced. “You obviously heard a lot of our conversation last night, but neither of us was presuming to make a judgment for you. We were simply stating our opinions. And
that, my sweet, is our right since neither of us has inflicted an unwanted opinion on you. And while we were traveling today, I lectured Will on what I’d do if he tried to.”

“Do you expect my undying gratitude?”

Two long strides put him directly before her, then he grasped her upper arms firmly yet gently.

Unexpected fear coursing through her. An audible gasp escaped from her. There was a gleam in his eyes that she’d never seen before, and she wanted to get away from him. But he might hurt her if she tried. In an attempt to hide her discomfort, she averted her gaze to a tree behind him. Then his deep, emotion-filled voice drifted to her ears.

“You realize, my sweet, that I’d hoped we could become good friends at the very least. You’re a beautiful lady. Beneath that cool exterior is a fiery woman waiting for the right man to unleash the tempest you’ve kept hidden all these years. But only a man for whom you have deep feelings will release that flame of anger burning in your heart. I once thought, my sweet Liberty, that I could do it. Now I know I was wrong.”

“If you could,” she announced, returning her gaze to meet his, “that emotion would be hate.”

“Ah, my sweet, sweet Liberty, if you only knew. But you have asked that I leave, so I shall. I think I knew all along this moment would come. I’ve been so busy being the rebellious son that I’ve completely forgotten how to be a civilized man. Maybe you were right when you suggested that I find a whore to bed. Perhaps I’ll do just that. Perhaps a whore is the only type of woman I can relate to now. I’m no longer cultured enough to court a lady, nor can I expect to suitably change my ways for such a pursuit.”

As hard as Libby tried to hide it, Nate’s words touched her heart. Several tears slid down her cheeks before he tenderly kissed them away.

“Don’t cry, my sweet,” he said. “Your darling blundering idiot will be fine. I didn’t do that much damage. Apparently, he couldn’t bear whatever pain I inflicted. In the meantime, he awaits your attention. I’ll send Will to carry him back to camp. By the time you get there, I’ll be gone. Take care of yourself, my sweet. Maybe we’ll meet again one day, and I’ll no longer be conceited and arrogant in your eyes. Maybe I’ll be the kind of man who attracts your friendship instead of your hate.”

Turning her back so he wouldn’t see that her tears intensified with his words, Libby listened while he stalked away. He hadn’t even left the clearing yet, and she already missed him. What had he done to her that caused her to feel this way? What had he done to make her feel? She’d never been a person who dwelled on emotions. She hadn’t even cried over her parents’ deaths. And she’d certainly never been one who let a man’s sweet words touch her soul. Whatever he’d done—be it bewitchment or something else—she didn’t like the feelings within her. In fact, she hated the intense ache in her chest.
Libby sank onto a nearby log. Why did she suddenly feel like something was missing, like her arm or leg had been cut off and tossed away? Her heart was heavy, and she felt hungry despite having eaten a large dinner only minutes ago. No, hungry wasn’t the word. She felt empty, but she had no desire for food to fill the void in her. Oh, how she hated this feeling!

***

Back at camp, Nate immediately began packing his mule to leave.

“What happened, Nate?” Will asked, his voice filled with excited anticipation. “Did you stop him from bothering Libby? Did she thank you in that special way a woman thanks a man?”

“I stopped him all right, but I didn’t get any thanks for it. I’d even go so far as to say that she was damned furious with me. I beat the hell out of that little bastard. Liberty probably wouldn’t be so mad right now if I’d at least given him a chance to defend himself. He’s back there unconscious—with your sister tending to him. I would have brought him back to camp myself, but Liberty wouldn’t let me. She wants you to do it and me to be gone by the time she gets here.”

Will watched mutely while Nate saddled his horse until the man finally mounted the gelding. “But what will we do without you? We can’t fend for ourselves the way you can, and you know it.”

“I won’t be far off, in case you need me,” Nate assured him. “Like I told you before, I’ll see to it that you’re protected. There are still Indians in the area, and I’m not going to leave you to fend for yourselves.”

“Can I come talk later tonight?”

“The question is may you, and the answer is that I don’t think Liberty will let you.”

“After she’s asleep, may I?”

Nate shrugged. “Why the hell not? She’s already furious with me, so it won’t get any worse. I’ll make camp about two miles back the way we came.”

***
When Will arrived at the fight scene, he found Ross still unconscious and Libby sitting with her back to him about five feet away. As he sat beside her on the log, he saw the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, Libby?” he asked in concern.

“Nothing,” she replied. “Would you take Hiram back to camp? I’ll be along shortly.”

“I’m not gonna let you stay here alone. Nate’d whup me good if he ever found out I done that. Yer comin’ back with me if I hafta carry you first, then come back here and git the doc. That’s what Nate’d do, and that’s what I’ll do if you make me.”

“Oh, all right,” she agreed, “as long as you never mention that man’s name in my presence again. But you tend to Hiram. I don’t want to be around anybody.”

***

Will arrived at Nate’s camp well after midnight. Nate was waiting up for him, staring into the fire in the hope of finding solace. But there was no solace for him that night—only a terrible emptiness that even his bottle of rye couldn’t relieve.

“I’m sorry I’m so late,” Will said as he sat on the opposite side of the campfire. “I thought Libby’d never go to sleep.”

“That’s all right.” Nate took a long drink of rye directly from the bottle. “I knew you were coming, so I waited up for you.” He held the bottle out toward Will. “Do you want to try some of my liquor?”

“Sure!” Will agreed. “But don’t you think Libby will mind?”

Nate chuckled and tossed the bottle to Will. “Your sister would be madder than hell if she found out, so don’t say anything. She’s already furious with me. If she knew I gave you rye, she’d never speak to me again.” Taking a swallow of the liquor, Will grimaced. Nate laughed. “What’s the matter, lad?”

“It burns. How can you drink it?”

“It’s an acquired taste. Pass it back. I intent to get roaring drunk tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because of the damned fool thing I did. I’d still be in camp with you and the others if I
hated beat the hell out of that damned bastard. How is he, anyway?"

“Pretty bruised up and sore. But as soon as he found out he couldn’t get any sympathy from Libby, he decided he’d be all right by morning.”

Nate shot his startled gaze to Will. “Why doesn’t she give him sympathy? I thought she’d be by his side every second after what I did.”

“She won’t go anywhere near him,” Will explained, shaking his head. “Hell, she hasn’t even said one word since I made her come back to camp with me.”

“What do you mean you made her?”

“Just that. She wanted to stay by herself. I’m not sure, but I suppose it was because she wanted to cry for a while. I don’t know what she’s so upset about. All I can figure is that it has something to do with you.” When Nate’s eyes widened even more in surprise, the teen grinned. “She won’t have anything to do with the rest of us, that’s for sure.”

“Didn’t she tell you anything?”

“Nope. And I had to threaten to carry her back to camp before she’d come willingly. Then she only agreed if I promised not to mention your name around her again.”

“That makes sense. She was awfully angry when I left her.” Holding the bottle up to the firelight, Nate studied it for several seconds before taking another drink. “So your sister is upset about something. Hell, that could be anything from a broken fingernail to the deaths of your parents.”

“You don’t believe that, do you, Nate?” Will asked.

“I sure as hell do. In time, you’ll learn that a lot of women are like that at certain times of each month. Some women will cry about absolutely nothing. That’s the only thing I don’t miss about women when I’m alone. I don’t even mind them being finicky.”

“But Libby was never one to cry. She’s always been what Leon called stoic. I know, because one time I asked him how she never got angry or sad like other girls.”

“I know why she never gets angry,” Nate admitted, “and I suppose it makes some sense to her. But maybe she shed all her tears in private before. She sure as hell can’t do that now, you know.”

Suddenly, Will changed the subject. “Come back, Nate. Libby would be a hell of a lot easier to get along with if you were there. It ain’t ... it isn’t that damned bastard of a doctor she’s crying over. It’s you. I know it is.”
“That’s nonsense. She’s so angry with me that she’d sooner see me back in Philadelphia—where I’m not wanted. She must be getting to her time, so she’s in need of a good cry.”

“She certainly is getting it. I’m not sure, but I think she cried herself to sleep. I wanted to do something to help her, but I didn’t know what it would be. Tell me what I should do if she’s still like this tomorrow.”

“Don’t do anything. She’ll be fine in a few days.”

“Are you sure?” Will asked skeptically.

“Positive.”

“You sure do know a lot about women, Nate. I’m glad I’ve got you to teach me.”

“I’m glad to help.”

“Would you tell me more about the kind of things you do with a whore? Since I’m the man of the family, I figure I should know these things.”

“All right. I suppose you’re old enough now. But wait a while before you put what you learn into practice. And whatever you do, don’t tell your sister what we’ve been discussing. If there’s even the slightest hope of her ever forgiving me, I don’t want to spoil it.”
Chapter 8

Following the Conagree River, the travelers planned to cross it near the junction of the Catawba River. From there they would take a northward journey on the eastern bank of the Catawba until they reached Charlotte, North Carolina.

Following Nate’s instructions from the night before, Will determined the safest point to ford the river. After hastily making a raft, they transported the wagon to the opposite bank without mishap. Across the river, Will abandoned the raft as Nate had told him to. Now it would be easy for Nate to find their trail.

***

Long after Will returned from his nightly excursion, Flossie lured Ross into the woods away from camp. While Will and Libby slept, Flossie seductively disrobed for Ross. Then, as always, he quickly satisfied himself. Instead of returning to camp immediately like they always had before, Flossie insisted on talking for a while.

“We’ve been together a lot lately, Hiram,” Flossie said, not at all confident in her words. “Like this, I mean. I want you to know that the only reason I keep coming with you is because I love you.”

“You don’t love me. You just love the sex I give you.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve been with men a lot better at that than you are. I love you, and I want to marry you.”

“I don’t love you,” he said, “and I certainly don’t want to marry you. I followed your sister so I could convince her to marry me.”

“But you keep coming to me. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“It means sex with you is good. It means that Libby would never let me bed her. It doesn’t
mean that I love you. Now that I know that you think you love me, I won't be coming to you anymore. You're nothing but a child tramp, and I have no intention of marrying either a child or a tramp. Get dressed. I'm taking you back to camp."

Immediately, Flossie started dressing. “You should have stayed in Charleston, Hiram, because my sister will never marry you.”

“Of course, she will,” he insisted. “I've always gotten what I want—like my medical schooling and my practice. There's no reason I won’t get what I want now.”

“Medical schooling and a practice don’t have minds of their own,” she warned. “Liberty Woods does, and she always lives up to her name.”

***

While traveling the next day, Flossie drove the wagon while Libby sat beside her. Speaking tentatively, she asked, “Libby? What’s love?”

Abandoning her mending of Will’s shirt, Libby shot her startled gaze to her sister’s face. She hesitated to answer, though. What did she know of love? Nothing! But when she noticed the sincerity etched in Flossie’s expression, and Libby knew she had to reply—somehow. “I honestly don’t know, Flossie. I haven't found love myself yet, so I can’t very well answer your question.”

“Then what do you think it is?”

“I imagine it’s a number of things combined.” Libby paused a moment to collect her thoughts. She hadn't expected this question and needed a few seconds to think of a plausible explanation. But she could think of nothing. If only, she'd had some experience so she could explain the emotion.

To her amazement, words came out that Libby hadn’t even known were in her mind. “Two people should be friends to begin with—probably best friends. They should be able to tell each other everything. And they should enjoy being together. I imagine they should also have several things in common—like background and religious beliefs. No, Flossie. I don't see how any one thing could possibly constitute love.”

“You mean it isn't sex like it was with Mama and Papa?” Flossie asked.

“I think their love for each other came long before sex, Flossie. Sex is only a small part of love. At least, that’s my opinion. As you know, it’s possible to have sex with every man on earth, but it isn’t possible to love all of them. Do understand what I’m trying to say?”
"I think so."

"I hope so," Libby mumbled as she returned her full attention to her needlework.

***

After dinner Will approached Libby while she washed the dishes. "What do you think of Dr. Ross, Libby?"

"He's a very helpful man—when he wants to be," she replied, handing him a towel. "Here. You dry tonight. Flossie isn't feeling well, so I told her to lie down. And before you ask, she didn't want Hiram to check her. She said it's only an upset stomach."

"Do you like Dr. Ross?" he prompted, accepting the towel then picking up a cup to dry.

"He's nice enough, I suppose." She paused to study him a moment then asked, "Why do I have a feeling that you don't think I should?"

"Because I don't. And I can't understand why you like him after what he did to you the night you sent …"

Libby interrupted and returned to her chore. "I told you not to mention his name, and I meant it. As for what Hiram did, he simply got carried away. It happens to the best of men on occasion."

"I don't understand you, Libby. Can't you see what kind of man Dr. Ross is? Can't you see that he isn't what he wants you to think he is? I don't trust him, and I don't think you should, either. And I don't care what you say about using his name; I'm going to do it. Nate agrees with me."

"That man isn't with us now, Will," she worded, hiding her true feelings. If Will realized how deeply she missed Nate, he would pester her about going back to find him. And she was afraid that she would eventually lose her resolve and relent to his request. "He injured Hiram in a fit of rage. I no longer care what he believes, because he's a man who can't contain his violence."

"But you used to care," Will insisted, "when he was with us. I know you did. And I know something else, too. You like Nate more than any other man you've ever met. I could tell by the way you acted while he was here, and I can tell by the way you act now. You hardly talk, and you hardly eat. You still like him, Libby, and I think you even miss him."

"Nonsense. How could you possibly think that I miss such an arrogant, aggressive, hot-
tempered, violent, opinionated man? I can’t believe that you would even entertain such a thought.”

“I think he misses you, too,” Will continued as though she hadn’t spoken. “I know he likes you a lot, or he never would have kissed you.”

Toying with the water, Libby responded absently. “Do you honestly believe that?”

“I sure do,” Will declared.

But when he tried to continue the conversation, she refused. She didn’t want to listen to anything more about what a young man with no experience thought about Nate’s interest in her.

Once Libby and Will finished the dishes, Ross drew her aside and spent a long time enumerating his reasons for them to marry. When he finally proposed, she turned him down and left, in no mood to go through that conversation, either.

***

A few nights later Will and Nate sat together, each smoking a pipe and sharing from a bottle of rye.

“You haven’t said anything to your sister about our little meetings, have you?” Nate asked after a long silence that he was reluctant to break.

“Hell no! She’d be furious if I did that.”

“Have you been using proper grammar like I told you to? You seem to be remembering quite well now.”

“Libby even commented on how well I’ve been doing the last couple of days.”

Nate’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of her name. If he didn’t want Will to know how much he missed her, he had to respond casually. “Oh? What did she say?”

“She told me that our having met you did have some good behind it.” He paused a moment then added, “I think she misses you, Nate. She isn’t the person she was before you came into her life.”

“Did she tell you that?”
“Why would you ask a stupid question like that?” Will asked in astonishment. “Libby would never admit to being attracted to a man. How can you think she’d admit that she actually missed one?”

“I don’t know her very well.”

“You’re not the same, either,” Will observed. “You’ve changed a lot since you left us.”

Even though he didn’t care what Will thought of any perceived changes in him, Nate shrugged and said, “I didn’t realize that. What makes you think so?”

“You don’t talk nearly as much as you used to. You used to go on and on, but now it’s hard to get you to say much at all—except ask questions about Libby. And you haven’t even said her name since you left. Do you know what I think? I think you miss her as much as she misses you. Hell, you can’t even make yourself say her name. Why don’t you come back to camp with me tonight so you two can patch things up?”

Nate studied the glowing tobacco in his pipe. Will’s suggestion was tempting. During his solitary travel, he often berated himself for not going to a city and finding release in the arms of a prostitute. Thinking of Libby every second was wearing on his nerves, and he spent many hours trying to rid himself of those thoughts.

But every time he considered paying for relief, he couldn’t. His need to hold a woman wasn’t the same as it had been. Before when he thought or dreamed of intimacy, the woman was always without facial features. Now all the women in his dreams had Libby’s face. The hair color could be blonde, brunette, bright red, black, brown, or Libby’s auburn. But the face was always the same—the one he could clearly see in the embers of his pipe at that very moment.

So he continued to follow the travelers, continued to kill their food, continued to be near in case of trouble, in case Libby wanted him to come back.

“There are times,” Nate said, “that I can be a damned fool.”

“Why do you say that?” Will asked.

“Because I stay with you and your companions when all I succeed in doing is torturing myself.” Nate paused then gazed over at Will as he changed the subject. “Is that bastard still bedding Flossie?”

“Not that I know of, but I don’t think either one of them would admit it if he is.”

“I hope not. He hasn’t bothered your other sister, has he? Because, if he has …” Nate fell silent for a few moments, unsure he should make his admission. After taking another sip of his rye, he sighed. “Let’s just say I’ll wait until he’s away from her, hunt him down, and finish the job I started the other night.”
Will studied him. “I doubt he’s bothered her, because Libby doesn’t pay much attention to him. But then again, she doesn’t pay much attention to any of us anymore. She mostly stays by herself.”

Nate sighed again. He would like to think that was a good sign, that she missed him and wanted him to return; but his heart would break if he allowed himself those thoughts and they didn’t come to fruition. He’d left without complaint because he’d wanted to make Libby happy, to give her the one thing that only he could—his absence when she needed it. But from the things Will said, he had failed. The irony tore his heart. He wanted her to be happy by doing everything she wanted, but she was apparently miserable.

To take his mind off his distressing thoughts, he said, “You’ve been doing pretty well at poker these past few nights. I think it’s high time for you to learn how to lose money like a man now that you can play cards like one. Go get the deck out of my saddlebags, and we’ll play for small stakes tonight.”

***

Still upset over Ross’s rejection, Flossie asked to take a walk after they made camp instead of helping with the chores. To her surprise, Libby gave Flossie the time alone and collected firewood for her sister.

Wandering aimlessly, Flossie broke a tree branch or otherwise marked her trail each time she made a turn. She was already a good distance from camp when she heard a snarling sound from a rocky ledge nearby. Glancing up, she saw a large mountain lion crouching for its deadly leap onto her. She opened her mouth to scream in terror as the cat slumped to the ground with an arrow piercing its throat.

Pivoting quickly, she noticed a man a little shorter than Nate but equally muscular standing behind her with a bow in his hand. He was about Will’s age and wore buckskin leggings with no shirt. His long, black hair was loose, and he had a beaded headband around his forehead. Her mind spun. What would this Indian do to her? Would he carry her away as his captive? Would he abuse her? Worse yet, would this brawny Indian take her captive so she never saw her family again?

That was her last thought before blackness overcame her.

When she woke, he knelt beside her. She started to scoot away, but he stopped her by gently grasping her upper arm and spoke with a thick English accent. “It’s all right, miss. I won’t hurt you.”

Startled by his vocabulary and accent, she exclaimed, “You speak English!”
“Yes. My father was a British officer, and I was educated in England. Are you all right?”

“I think so. You saved my life.”

“Possibly.” He examined her, obviously pleased by her appearance. “My name is Wild Bear—the son of a Cherokee woman and a British officer. Who are you?”

“Flossie Wood.”

“You’re very dark—skin, hair, eyes. But you don’t look Indian. Is one or both of your parents of Spanish descent?”

“Mama was.”

“Was? Did she die?”

“Mama and Papa were both murdered,” she explained, studying him with interest. “Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Very.”

“Then may I kiss you?” she asked. “To thank you for saving my life?”

When he bent over her, his mouth captured hers in a kiss filled with desire. His hands roamed over her body slowly, lingering at her breasts. She’d been with many men, but none had ever made her feel like this—not even Ross. To show her acceptance, she slid her fingertips up his arms and across his broad shoulders to his smooth, bare chest. His muscles rippled under her light, taunting fingernails as she drew them down his hard stomach to the waistband of his buckskin leggings.

“Goodness, Flossie,” he whispered hotly as he gazed down at her. “You may be young, but you certainly know how to make a man happy. There’s nothing I’d like more than to show you how much I want you.”

“Then show me,” she returned, “because I didn’t learn how to make a man happy without practice. I can make you even happier, too. If you want me that much, it’s all right.”

“No, Flossie,” he said, “we aren’t married. What we can do, though, is sit and talk for a while.”

Intrigued by this young man who showed so much restraint, she rose then sat down on a nearby log and watched as he sat down beside her.

“Men don’t usually want to talk to me,” she said. “They’d rather do other things.”

“I’m not like most men.”
A long time passed before Flossie announced that she should return to camp before someone came looking for her. Escorting her most of the way back, he kissed her passionately once more before they parted.

***

The following evening, Flossie again requested some solitude. This time Libby made her wait until after dinner and dishes, and she insisted upon joining Flossie for a while. Libby wanted to ask Flossie about her strange behavior that afternoon, and it seemed like the most appropriate time and place for her to do so. Unfortunately, Flossie refused to discuss what was bothering her, so Libby returned to camp alone.

When Flossie hadn’t returned by nightfall, Libby was frantic. Ross was of little help. He constantly told her to relax, that Flossie would be back any minute. Will also did little to relieve her anxiety. Although he seemed as worried as she, he continually spoke of what Nate would do if he were there. Not wanting him to disappear as well, Libby refused to let him leave camp when he asked to. Finally, Will took her aside to talk with her.

“You’ve got to let me go, Libby,” he pleaded. “I can get Nate and bring him back within an hour. I know exactly where he is. Let me go get him. He’ll know what to do.”

“You know where he is?” she asked, unable to believe his words. “How?”

“He never really left us, Lib. I’ve been visiting with him every night after everybody’s asleep. When I’m out hunting for food, he’s there, too. In fact, he’s killed most of the food we’ve eaten since you sent him away. What do you say, Libby? Will you let me go get him?”

Libby paused. It would be nice to have Nate back, but she doubted the advisability of it. She was almost terrified that he would try to kiss her again, because she didn’t think she could resist him any better now than she could several days ago. She didn’t feel she could trust herself with him.

But Will was right. If anybody could find Flossie, it was Nathaniel Payne, Jr. After a heavy sigh, she said, “All right. He does know the country better than we do, and he certainly knows a lot about tracking.”

“Thanks, Libby,” Will said as he grabbed up his saddle and started toward his horse. “You won’t be sorry. I promise.”

Following him at a trot to keep up, Libby waited until he was cinching the saddle before she spoke. Her normally soft voice was so filled with distress that he halted abruptly to stare at her. “And, Will? Please tell him that I’m sorry.”
“I will, sis.” Will smiled reassuringly and patted her shoulder, “but you should probably tell him yourself when he gets here. I’ll be back as soon as I can. And don’t worry. I know exactly where to find him. I won’t get lost like Flossie did.”

Hoof beats in the distance attracted Libby’s attention. They were coming quickly, and she prayed it was Nate and Will. Scrambling from her seat beside the fire, she watched the trees in the direction of the sound anxiously.

“Dear God, please, let it be Nate,” she prayed under her breath. He would know how to find Flossie. His violence against Ross made no difference now. Nate could beat him to death, and it wouldn’t bother her. All she cared about was getting her sister back safely, and Nate could do exactly that.

When she saw the men, tears sprang to her eyes. Despite what she’d said to him, despite the horrible way she’d treated him, Nate had come back. Now she knew that he didn’t hold a grudge. He hadn’t even dismounted yet, but she could already feel his strong, muscular arms around her as he comforted her and promised that everything would be all right.

The thought brought a sudden realization to her. All this time she’d hidden the depth of emotion that she felt for him not only from the others but herself, as well. How foolish she’d been to send Nate away! She’d missed him more than even she had imagined possible. And the closer he got, the heavier her heart became, the more ravaged her uncontrollable sobs of relief and expectation.
Chapter 9

Even from a distance, Nate could tell that Libby was crying hysterically. But where was Ross and why wasn’t he comforting her? Quickly dismounting, Nate handed his reins to Will with instructions to walk the horses for a while before rubbing them down.

Racing to Libby’s side, he embraced her. Her arms slid around his back to return his hold. Being able to comfort her like this, having her accept his comfort, was the most satisfying moment of his life, and it gave him hope that she would someday forgive him for having lost his temper the other night.

“It’s all right now, Miss Liberty,” he said. “You’re not alone anymore. Where’s that no-good, blundering idiot, anyway?”

“Gone,” she said, sobbing against his chest. “I told him that ... Will went for you. He said that ... we didn’t need you ... to find Flossie. He said he could. Then he left.”

“That damned bas...” he growled. “What the hell’s wrong with him? He can’t find her in the dark. We have to wait until morning. So, what does he do? He leaves you alone. If there are Indians around here, you could have been killed—or, worse yet, kidnapped. I’ll never forgive him for leaving you here alone. Never!”

In his embrace, her sobs began to subside. “What about Flossie, Nate? Hiram had to go find her.”

“He can’t track her at night, Miss Libby. He’d never find a trail. The best thing to do is stay put and pray she can find her way back.”

“You can look for her at night, can’t you?” she asked hopefully. “You know how to do things like that. You know how to do everything.”

“Not everything, I’m afraid,” he replied. “Honest, Miss Libby. Nobody can track at night without a torch or lantern, and that draws attention to yourself. Even Indians don’t attempt it without a full moon. And with an overcast night like tonight, we wouldn’t have a chance of finding her. It’s best that we stay here and wait. But first thing in the morning, I’ll try to find her for you—if she doesn’t wander into camp during the night, that is.”
“What if Hiram doesn’t come back?”

“Damn! For such a little runt, he can sure cause a hell of a lot of trouble. If he doesn’t come back, I’ll find him, too. I’d rather not because he was so damned stupid to leave in the first place, but I’ll do it because it will make you happy. I’ve told you all along that he’s a blundering idiot, and this proves it.”

“Just because he doesn’t know much about traveling doesn’t mean he’s an idiot,” Libby said in the doctor’s defense. “He knows medicine, or he wouldn’t be a doctor.”

“If he knows so damned much about medicine,” Nate shot irritably, “why the hell didn’t that fool know that you have to boil water and strain it before you drink it if it smells the least bit odd?”

“That’s something you would only learn on the trail,” she said in Hiram’s defense.

“Is it? Do you know where I learned it, Miss Libby? I learned it at the University of Pennsylvania—when I was taking courses to be a doctor.”

Libby stared up at him in disbelief. But before she could say anything, he smiled down at her. He ran his finger along her jaw, around her chin, and up to her ear on the opposite side. She shivered under his light touch.

“That’s right, Miss Libby,” he said in a deep, husky voice filled with desire. “I was planning to be a doctor. My father thought that I, as the eldest son, should make an example of myself. I was supposed to be a doctor and my two younger brothers were to be a lawyer and a banker. He had everything planned—even the type of men my sisters should marry.”

“Then you know something about medicine.”

“I also know about law and financing. When I realized that I didn’t want to be a doctor, I studied each to see if I might be more interested in either of them. Obviously, I wasn’t. I’m much more suited to some type of outdoor work. That’s one reason I took up trapping. I enjoyed that for quite a while and did quite well with it. I have enough money in the bank so I can start farming tomorrow if I want to. I already have the land, too. But before I could start working it, I wanted enough money available to support myself in case of bad weather. I’ve done well enough trapping that I can take a loss for about three years straight before I have to worry about how I’ll live. That kind of bad luck is unlikely, so I think I’m ready to start a new career.”

Before Libby could respond, Ross returned. Infuriated by what he saw, he demanded, “What are you doing here, Payne? And why are you holding Libby like that? Let go of her, and get out of here. You aren’t needed or wanted.”

Not wanting to upset Libby further by encouraging an argument, Nate released her. She turned so her back was to him. Then, to his amazement, she grabbed his wrists and crossed
his arms around her ribs. His first instinct was to kiss her hair, but he stifled it. His second instinct was to tighten the embrace a little—to let her know that he supported her. Again he held himself back. This was Libby’s argument, and she was obviously determined to fight it herself. Even the soft tone of her voice relayed that as she spoke to Ross.

“Nate came back as soon as he heard that Flossie’s missing. He’s going to find her for me. That’s why I say that he’s welcome to stay with us. Now I expect you to apologize, Hiram. You reacted like a spoiled child when you saw him.”

“Apologize?” Ross repeated in a rage. “I’ll do no such thing! He only came back because he wants you in his bedroll. Why else do you think he won’t let you go?”

“Because I’m holding him,” Libby declared. “Now apologize.”

Ross’s eyes narrowed in anger then spoke grudgingly. “I’m sorry.”

Libby turned in Nate’s arms and rose on her toes to kiss his cheek lightly. “Thank you for coming to our rescue again, Nate. I appreciate it.”

“As always, Miss Libby, you’re welcome.” Oh, how he wished he could show her exactly how much he’d missed her. But he couldn’t—not with Ross watching him. Maybe he could have a few more private moments with Libby after the doctor went to sleep. Then he could tell her, and possibly demonstrate how he felt. No, that would only prove to Libby that Ross was right.

To avoid his thoughts, he said, “I like helping you and your relatives.”

She smiled up at him softly. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go to bed now. With you here, I know everything will be all right. Good night, everyone.”

As the men echoed her words, Libby wearily strolled to her bedroll.

A few minutes later, Ross began a verbal confrontation. Nate glanced over at Libby, who didn’t even stir.

“Answer me!” Ross demanded. “What makes you think that you can wander back in here and take control of Libby?”

Nate drew back his fist but thought better of hitting the smaller man. If he started another fight, Libby wouldn’t even consider forgiving him. His hand dropped back to his side as he replied, equally angry. “I didn’t wander back. Libby invited me through Will—and you know it. She told me that you left when she mentioned that she’d sent Will to get me.”

“That child has been trying to keep Libby and me apart since I first met him.”
“I ain’t no child!” Will protested vehemently. “I’m a man, ’n’ I aim to prove it!”

As Will passed him to attack Ross, Nate grabbed him around the chest to restrain him. “Don’t bother, Will. It’s not worth a fight.”

“But that bastard called me a child.”

“I realize that. But you know how Liberty feels about fighting. Of course, you’re insulted. I don’t blame you. He insulted me, too. But I didn’t hit him—despite how badly I wanted to. Come on now. Relax.”

When Nate felt Will relax in his arms, he released him. Immediately, Will propelled himself through the air, knocking Ross to the ground and hitting him twice in the face. Nate pulled him off and slapped him with a backhand across the side of the head. Will sprawled to the ground on his back, then Nate quickly straddled him. Will stared up in at Nate astonishment.

“What’d you do that for?” Will asked, rubbing the side of his head.

“I told you no fighting, and I meant exactly that. Learning to restrain yourself when you’re insulted is part of becoming a man.”

“Look who’s talking,” Ross exclaimed. Pausing he spat blood into his hand along with part of a tooth. “You broke my tooth. I’ll see you pay for that.”

Nate stepped over Will to glare at Ross. “If I were you, I’d shut up, Ross. Next time I might not see fit to stop him. In fact, if it weren’t for Miss Libby’s loathing of violence, I wouldn’t have stopped him this time.”

“I’m surprised you did—considering you didn’t even give me a chance to fight back the other night.”

“That was different. You were acting like the bastard you are, and I was protecting Miss Libby’s honor. If you hadn’t assaulted her, I wouldn’t have attacked you.”

“So that’s what they call blind jealousy now—protecting a woman’s honor.”

“I wasn’t jealous!” Nate denied. “Liberty is a lady and deserves to be treated like one. No man can come to her one night and kiss her like you did the next without me taking matters into my own hands. I won’t have you—or anybody else for that matter—taking advantage of Liberty or her hospitality. Do you understand?”

Ross glared up at him. “Oh, I understand, all right. You plan to beat any man who even looks at her with a little interest.”
“That’s not true. Miss Libby is perfectly free to be with any man she pleases. It’s only those she doesn’t want to be with that I intend to protect her from. And that, doctor, includes you.”

“Are you insinuating that she doesn’t want to be with me?”

“I’m not insinuating anything, you damned idiot! I’m telling you! Keep your bloody hands off Liberty as long as I’m traveling in this party. She’s a lady. If I have to fight you to the death to defend her honor, I’ll damned well do it. And another thing, you little bastard, don’t you ever try to tell me that I’m jealous again, because I’ll beat you to within an inch of your life if you do.”

Holding his handkerchief to his mouth, Ross got to his feet and glared at Nate. “Don’t threaten me, Payne. It could be your undoing. Libby sees you as an aggressive, arrogant boor, and it wouldn’t take much effort to assure that she hates you forever.”

With those words, Ross stalked away from them, leaving Nate and Will alone. Sighing, Nate dropped to his knees and sat down cross-legged on the ground. As Nate doodled in the dirt with his finger, Will joined him, waiting several seconds before he spoke.

“Why did you lie to him, Nate?” Will asked.

“What do you mean?” Nate replied, his agonized tone again betraying his calm exterior.

“You are jealous of Ross. If I can see how you feel about Libby, he sure as hell can. Why did you tell him that you aren’t?”

“Because I’m not,” Nate insisted. “I’ve never been jealous of another man over a woman, and I’m definitely not jealous of that little bastard. I don’t even believe Miss Libby sees anything worthwhile in him.”

Will shook his head. “You don’t know my sister, Nate. She can find something worthwhile in everybody. She looks for it until she does. In fact, she’s probably already spotted something in him.”

“You can’t be serious. She’s too intelligent to be fooled by that obnoxious bastard. She’s already proven that I don’t fool her, so she could never fall prey to Ross’s feeble attempts to sway her. Don’t forget, she already thinks I’m arrogant, conceited, and quick-tempered—not to mention aggressive.”

“But you’re also gentle, understanding, and the most attractive man she’s ever met.”

“You’ll get in trouble if she hears you putting words in her mouth like that.”

Will grinned sheepishly. “It’s a good thing those exact words came out of her mouth.”
Unable to believe they were having this conversation, Nate shook his head. “I know you’re trying to play matchmaker with Liberty and me, Will, but it won’t work. And it’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do. I had a lot of time to think after Miss Libby sent me away, and I’ve come to a very serious decision. We aren’t meant to be together. We have totally different personalities and ideals. I’ve accepted that. Now you need to, too.”

“Did you know,” Will asked with a hint of laughter in his voice, “that my sister talks in her sleep?”

Nate was so taken aback by Will’s abrupt change in conversation that he stared at the young man in astonishment. “What? Why you mentioned something like that?”

“Because of something she said when I came back to camp the night before last.”

“Just tell me what the hell she said, Will,” Nate said impatiently.

“I checked on her before I went to sleep like I always do. This time she must have been dreaming about you, because she said your name. I decided to see if she’d say anything else. And she did!”

Again Will paused, forcing Nate to prompt him on. “What was it?”

“She said something about how you probably already knew it because you were so conceited, but that she missed your kisses.”

“She said that? Even in her sleep?”

“Does that sound like something I’d make up? Of course, she said it. Do you still think you two aren’t suited for each other?”

Shrugging to hide his conflicting emotions, Nate explained, “It’s hard to say. She was asleep when she said it. Some people say that dreams reveal one’s innermost feelings, but I don’t know. This sounds like something I should give some thought. I think I’ll go to sleep now. Good night, Will.”

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Will slept lightly that night and got up the following morning when he heard Libby moving about. Trailing her to the river as she began her day, he stood by silently while she filled the bucket. When she turned around and saw him, she started at his unexpected presence.

“Morning, Libby,” he said with a grin. “May I carry the bucket for you?”
“Thank you,” she agreed, surrendering the heavy pail. “I didn’t expect you to be up so early.”

“I didn’t sleep very well last night. Did you?”

“I slept like a rock. What kept you awake?”

“I don’t know. Nate, I suppose.”

“He can snore quite loudly at times, can’t he,” she agreed with a knowing smile.

“It wasn’t his snoring, Libby. He talks as much in his sleep as he does when he’s awake.”

Libby stared up at him in surprise. “He does? I’ve never heard him.”

“I never heard him before, either, but he did a lot last night. He must have had the same dream over and over, too, because he kept saying that he missed your kisses. I got tired of hearing about it.” Although Libby avoided his scrutiny by gazing at the ground, Will could tell that she was pleased. “Why does he do things like that, Lib? All he seems to think about is you, and I know you’re his favorite thing to talk about. And after last night, I think you’re his favorite thing to dream about, too. Why does he act so stupid like that?”

“I don’t know, Will. That’s something you’ll have to ask him.” They strolled silently for several steps before she asked, “Did Nate honestly say that he missed my kisses?”

“Does that sound like something I’d make up?” he asked. “Of course, he said it—at least three times.”

“Hmm,” she said thoughtfully, like Nate would have done under similar circumstances.

Will gazed down at his sister with a smile. Now that both of them had nibbled at his hook, maybe they’d take it upon themselves to decide they like the bait and swallow it. His plan had worked well on Nate. Will was positive of that. But Libby’s reaction was a little harder to comprehend. He thought that the couple would seek one another out by bedtime and have a long, private talk, but he wasn’t positive. All he had to do now was keep Ross and Flossie from interfering. As concerned as he was about his missing little sister, he was glad she’d disappeared so he could reunite Libby and Nate.

During breakfast the four discussed the incidents leading up to Flossie’s disappearance. Libby, Will, and Ross all agreed that Flossie had seemed nervous the day before. She’d often glanced around expectantly. When Nate questioned them on which direction she left camp, Libby gave him a starting point, explaining that she and Flossie had taken a short walk the previous night. Since Flossie had been so nervous, Libby had eventually let her have the privacy she wanted. Libby explained how, when Flossie hadn’t returned by dark, she’d gone to
where they’d parted. By then Flossie had already disappeared. The longer she’d been miss-
ing, the more anxious the rest had become. Finally, Will had convinced Libby to ask Nate for help in finding her.

“At least, I have a place to begin,” Nate said when everybody had finished explaining what they knew. “Miss Libby, I’d like for you to take me to where you last saw Flossie. Would you like to chaperon us so you can assure yourself that I don’t accost the lady, Ross? Or will it be all right if Will goes with?”

“I don’t want to go, Nate,” Will said. “I wanted to do some target practice—since we’re stopped here for the day, anyway.”

“Go ahead. It certainly won’t hurt your marksmanship—only improve it,” he added with a wink. “What about you, Ross? Are you going to come with to see that I don’t molest Miss Libby?”

“Don’t I have any say in the matter?” Libby asked with only a slight note of indignation in her voice. “After all, I’m the one who’s going with you. Maybe I should be the one to decide if I need a chaperon.”

Nate stared down at her, stunned. It was the first time she’d ever spoken in anything other than a calm tone. As he’d suspected all along, he would be the one to bring out the fire within her. And he knew in his heart that this was only the beginning. Smiling inwardly, he reminded her, “The last time we were alone together you said that you were afraid of me. I don’t want you to be alone with me if you don’t feel you can trust me.”

“I was upset the last time. I realized later that I never believed you would hurt me. I want to show you that I trust you implicitly by going with you alone.”

Rising, Nate extended his hand toward her and continued in a voice filled with tender-
ness. “Shall we leave now, Miss Libby?”

Laying her hand in his, she let him gently pull her from the log on which she sat. As they left camp, Nate announced that he would bring her back before he followed Flossie’s trail. They strolled away with his left hand casually lying on her left shoulder, while Ross ordered Will to collect more firewood.

“Get it yourself,” Will said defiantly. “I don’t take orders from you anymore. Now that Nate’s back, I do what he says.”

“You’ll do exactly as I say, or you’ll find yourself in serious trouble with Libby. Now get that firewood.”

“I’d sooner take my chances with my sister.”
Chapter 10

As they walked to the location about a quarter of a mile from camp, Libby contemplated what he’d said about her wanting a chaperon. He must still believe that she was afraid of him, or he would never have made such a suggestion. She considered explaining her regret at having sent him away and the pride that kept her from changing her mind, but she couldn’t. She didn’t know how to put her feelings into words. In all her twenty-two years, she’d never had to explain anything to the men with whom she’d had more than a surface friendship. Then again, she’d never been as close to a man as she was to Nate.

While Nate searched the area for Flossie, Libby searched her mind for the most accurate words to express her regret at having made a mistake. In fact, she was very grateful to him for interfering, and she should somehow find the courage to tell him.

“I found her trail, Miss Libby,” Nate said, interrupting her thoughts in a matter-of-fact tone. “If I haven’t found Flossie by sunset tonight, I’ll come back tomorrow to tell you. Then I’ll go back out until I do find her.”

“Do you think you can find her that soon?” she asked.

Nate shrugged. “It’s possible if she didn’t travel all night, but I can’t promise you results.”

“How far can you go in one day?”

“A lot farther than you can with your wagon. I can get at least as far as where you were camped the night before last and still make it back today. Try not to worry, Miss Libby. I doubt she’s gone far. From the sense of direction she displayed when I was traveling with you, she’s probably lost and scared. I should have her back by noon today.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m afraid something awful happened to her. All sorts of terrible things keep running through my mind.”

She stared up at him with so much concern and sorrow that she hoped Nate couldn’t resist embracing her to stave away her fears. And a moment later, he did. As he held her, he ran his hand tenderly over her hair. Even his voice sounded caressing as he tried to soothe her.
“Please don’t do this to yourself, my sweet. It doesn’t help to worry about the unknown. It only intensifies the fears. Trust that I’ll bring Flossie back. And if I haven’t returned by noon, don’t worry even more. It only means she’s farther away than I expected. Remember my words, Miss Libby. Things won’t seem as bad if you do. Will you do that for me? Will you remember my words?”

She nodded her head against his chest but didn’t speak. The sensations coursing through her refused to let her. Even if they hadn’t, a lump in her throat blocked her from expressing any of her thoughts. Everything she’d said before he left was nothing more than a bad memory that she longed to correct almost as desperately as she longed for his kiss.

Then his soothing voice drifted through her thoughts, bringing her attention back to his words.

“I’ll be back no later than sunset tomorrow. And remember that even if I’m late, it’s most likely because I mistimed myself. Under no circumstances are you to fret about my delayed return. Do you understand?”

Once more she could merely nod. Had Nate read her mind? It seemed possible since he knew she would do exactly that if he didn’t appear in camp by sunset. Or did something in the way she clung to him, unable to loosen her hold, tell him what she was feeling?

“That’s my lady.” Releasing her, he held her at arms’ length to gaze down at her. “Now there’s one more thing I need to know before I leave. Do you or do you not trust me to travel alone with Flossie? I want you to be honest with me, too, because if you don’t trust me, I’ll take Will with me. Hell, I’ll even take that blundering idiot Ross if you’d rather. But I won’t go alone if you don’t trust me with Flossie.”

Moving away from him one step, she gazed into his blue eyes unfalteringly. “If I don’t trust you to be alone with her, would you take me along as the chaperon?”

“Absolutely not! Not without your brother and Ross there, anyway. Traveling with you in their company keeps me virtuous. Alone with you for more than a few minutes might turn me into a man that I don’t want to be—at least, not around you. And I refuse to jeopardize losing your faith in me because I couldn’t control myself.”

“Then I see no reason for you not to be a suitable escort for Flossie.”

Nate stared down at her in shock. “You don’t? Even after I admitted that I don’t trust myself to be alone with you? I don’t understand. That should have been the very reason you wouldn’t let me.”

“You told me the truth, Nate, and not all men would be that honest in those circumstances. I know I can trust you with Flossie, because I know how hard it is for you to be alone with me. You’ve been away from women for a long time and need physical release. But be-
cause you were honest enough to admit that you might have a problem alone with me, I believe Flossie is safe with you. Besides, you were terribly upset by her trying to seduce you the first night you were with us. I can’t imagine you taking advantage of a situation like that if it happened again.”

“There’s more to that physical release you referred to than you know, Miss Liberty,” Nate admitted with a frown. “And as long as we’re being honest, I think I should tell you about it. We’re being drawn together whether you admit it or not.”

Libby interrupted him, unable to stop the heat rising in her face. “I admit that we’re drawn together because of a need. You need to be around people, and we need you to guide us. I see nothing more.”

“It’s still there. You may be blind to your attraction to me, my sweet, but I’m not. The only difference is that I have the courage to admit when I’m attracted to someone. You’re a very beautiful lady,” Nate said as he tenderly toyed with her hair. “It’s no wonder Ross is so interested in making you his wife. But his motives and mine are completely different.”

“How? You’re both interested for purely physical reasons. Although Hiram’s physical reasons are professional while yours are personal, it makes no difference. You both want me for the sake of appearance.”

“You’re wrong, my sweet.” Caressing her face between his hands, he gently massaged her smooth cheekbones with his thumbs. She struggled to remain calm, despite the intense desire that he kiss her which swept through her. “Very, very wrong. If I merely wanted to relieve my masculine needs, I could have taken you the very first time I had the chance. Or I would have accepted Flossie’s offer. I won’t force my desires on you, though, Miss Liberty, because you’re a true lady. You deserve the finer things in life—things which I’m no longer capable of giving a lady. You see, my sweet, I know my limits, and I know myself.”

“But you don’t know me,” she said, gazing up at him. “I’m afraid that I’m not an easy individual for anybody to know.”

“I know what’s important—that somewhere beneath that cool, unruffled exterior lies a steaming volcano waiting for the right conditions to set the lava flowing. Just once I’d like to see you explode and release that heat.”

“If you don’t get on Flossie’s trail soon,” she warned with a playful smile, “that may happen right here.”

As he stared down into her eyes, he bent slowly. The passion was in his kiss from the moment his lips met hers. For the first time, he slipped his tongue into her mouth. This was much more than she’d ever imagined, so much more that she wanted to remember this kiss forever.
Oh, the feelings he sent raging through her! The heat of his kiss was incredible. Sliding her arms around him in acceptance, she reveled in the sensations. If he’d kissed her like this before, she might not have slapped him like she had.

What was she thinking! He was filling her with desire she shouldn’t have in a man’s arms—unless he was her husband. And Nate was definitely not that. She could never wed a man like him. There would be too much tension in a marriage to Nate. She would never be able to release the anger she felt whenever he was conceited or overbearing or childishly foolhardy. No, she could never spend a lifetime with Nate or anybody like him. So why was she letting him kiss her like this? She needed to stop it; she needed to tell ...

Suddenly, he released her mouth and stood erect to gaze down at her. Fury swept through her almost as strong as the sensations his kiss had created in her. How dare he break the kiss! Without thinking, she pushed away and drew back her arm to slap him.

Acting quickly, Nate grabbed her wrist and grinned down at her with a glint of mischievousness in his gray eyes. “That, my sweet, was for your dreams—mine, too. Now we’d better get back to camp. I need my horse if I’m going to track down Flossie.”

“You’re a vile man, Nathaniel Payne,” she proclaimed softly. “A vile, uncouth man who doesn’t care how his actions affect another person.”

“And you’re a beautiful woman who’s beginning to learn what it’s like to release a little of your anger.” Still holding her wrist, he led her back toward camp. “Come along now. I need to get on the trail if I’m going to have Flossie back soon.”

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Will grinned when Nate joined him by the river, then asked, “How did it go?”

“All right, I suppose. I found out which way Flossie went.”

“I’m not talking about Flossie; I’m talking about Libby.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Nate replied. Only minutes ago, he’d been holding Libby and kissing her more passionately than any woman he’d ever kissed before. Now he was ashamed of himself. It was no wonder she thought he was arrogant. The manner in which he’d spoken to her, the things he’d said, added up to one thing—arrogance. Was what he classified as confidence and insight the same as what the civilized world thought of as arrogance and conceit? Maybe Libby was right; maybe he was arrogant.

“Are you all right?” Will asked, startling Nate from his thoughts.
“Fine,” Nate said absently. “I’m going to confide in you about Flossie, Will. I found her tracks, but I didn’t tell Libby that other tracks are there, too. I want you to keep this between you and me, but I’m almost positive that Flossie ran away with an Indian. From the way you say she was acting yesterday, kind of nervous, they probably planned it in advance.”

“Flossie and an Indian? I don’t think that’s possible, Nate. She couldn’t even talk to an Indian to make plans like that. If you found signs of an Indian, she didn’t go willingly.”

“There was no sign of a struggle. I’m going to follow those tracks, and I’m warning you right now that they’ll probably lead straight back to the area you camped the night before last.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you.”

“You’re damned right I am,” Nate said firmly, so there would be no doubt in Will’s mind. “Don’t mention a word of this to Liberty, either. Don’t even say anything to Ross. That bastard would tell her the truth, and I don’t want her unnecessarily upset. Let me find Flossie first and try to convince her to come back. If I can’t, I’ll explain everything to Liberty myself when I get back tomorrow night.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to get back by then?”

“I already promised her I’d be back tomorrow night whether I find Flossie or not. That way I could keep her from becoming upset—at least, until then. She already knows not to worry if I’m late, but I don’t intend to be.”

“Do you think you can get her to come back?”

“I’m going to give it a hell of a try. I’m counting on you to take care of Liberty while I’m gone. Don’t let Ross bother her.”

“Don’t worry, Nate,” Will said with a wide grin. “I’ll keep her safe for you.”

“Not for me, Will,” Nate said as he shook his head downheartedly. “Keep her safe for herself. I’ve never trusted that damned bastard, and I certainly don’t trust him now.”

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As Nate suspected, the tracks led near where Libby and the others had camped two nights earlier. The trail ended at a small log cabin in the woods about three miles from where the siblings had camped. After shouting and knocking without a reply, he opened the door. In the middle of the small building, Flossie stood with a rifle trained on him.
“Put that thing down,” Nate ordered gently. “You know I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Maybe not,” she granted, “but you want to take me back. I don’t want to go. I want to stay here with Jeremiah.”

“Liberty is worried sick about you, Flossie. The least you could have done was tell her you were leaving. You should have seen how hysterical she was when I got back to camp.”

“I don’t believe you,” Flossie said angrily. “She hasn’t cared about anybody but Willie since she first met you. And it’s all your fault.”

“Nonsense. How can it be my fault—assuming that what you’re claiming is true. That’s not saying that I believe you, either, because I don’t. You didn’t see how she reacted to your disappearance. And you seem to forget all the times she answered your questions the best she could. Then there was last night when she took a walk with you—just so the two of you could be alone. All she wanted to do was try to help you solve your problem. Don’t those things prove how much she cares about you? Don’t they show you how much she loves you?”

“All she ever worries about is Willie and how he’s going to turn out.”

Nate offered her a reassuring smile in the hope of calming her. “That’s all, huh? Then explain what caused her concern about you when I told her that you offered yourself to me the first night we met. Why was she so concerned when I told her that I let you kiss me?”

“You told her all that?” Flossie asked in surprise. “I thought she’d seen it.”

“I had to be honest with her before I traveled with you and the others,” Nate explained. “I have a conscience, Flossie. I needed to tell Liberty everything so she could decide if I was welcome to join your family. And I can assure you that she was definitely concerned.”

“I thought she was upset because I did something she wanted to do. I thought she was jealous.”

Unable to stifle it, Nate chuckled. “Believe me, Flossie, Liberty could never be jealous because of me. You know how she feels about me. She hasn’t exactly made any effort to conceal it.”

“My sister was jealous,” she declared. “You just don’t understand her. Besides, if she’s so concerned, why didn’t she tell me what I should do with men when we had our talk?”

“I can’t answer that for sure, but I suspect it’s because she didn’t know what to say. Remember, she knows very little about men. She can’t very well counsel you when she doesn’t know much herself.”

“Maybe not, but you do. You tell Willie everything, and you don’t tell me one word.”
“Will asked me. I had no idea that you were interested. If you come back with me, I’ll be happy to explain to you. Of course, we’ll have to get Liberty’s permission first. She should be the one to explain, but I think she’ll agree under the circumstances.”

“I won’t go back, Nate,” Flossie proclaimed as she lowered her weapon to point it at the floor. “I’m going to marry Jeremiah.”

Nate stepped into the cabin. He’d been standing in the doorway since he’d opened the door, and he was tired of the defensive stance she’d taken. Now that she’d relaxed a little, he felt he could be more daring.

“That isn’t a wise idea, Flossie,” he advised. “You’re still very young. I don’t want to see you do something now that you may regret in a couple of years. And I think I can safely say that Liberty doesn’t, either.”

“I won’t be sorry. Besides, Jeremiah told me that girls my age get married all the time in his tribe.”

“His tribe?” Nate repeated. “How the hell did an Indian get a name like Jeremiah?”

“That, sir, is none of your affair,” a man with a heavy British accent said from behind him. “And kindly cease swearing in Flossie’s presence.”

Turning quickly, Nate saw the Indian, a Cherokee with an eagle feather in his scalplock. In his right hand, he carried a tomahawk, which he was obviously prepared to use if necessary. He wore a quiver of arrows on his back, and his bow was propped against the doorpost.

“I think,” Wild Bear continued, “you should leave now.”

“Not until Flossie agrees to go with me,” Nate insisted. “Her family wants her back, and I intend to honor their wishes.”

“She’s staying with me.”

“Look, Jeremiah, …”

“Wild Bear. I only gave Flossie permission to use my English name.”

“All right. Wild Bear. You’re obviously an educated man, so be reasonable. Let Flossie come back to her family with me. You know as well as I that she’s not used to this life. She won’t be happy in the Cherokee lifestyle. It’s too harsh for her.”

“She’ll not live as a Cherokee. I’m not allowed in the village very often, and then only to trade. Flossie and I will make our home right here after we’re married. You may tell her sister and brother that she is safe and happy, but you will leave alone.”
“Then put my mind at ease before I do. Explain how you came to be educated and why you’re no longer accepted in the village. And since you’re no longer wanted, how do you plan to marry Flossie?”

“My father was a British officer; my mother, the daughter of the high chief. I was sent to my grandparents’ home in England for my education and returned two years ago. By then my father was dead, and my mother had returned to her people. I was furious when I found my wife with another man, and I killed them both. When I didn’t express sorrow, Grandfather banned me from the village. That was a compensation for having been raised in England. Any other man would have been killed. Mother convinced Grandfather to let me return occasionally to visit with her and to trade. I also trade with white men, so Flossie will be well cared for.”

“Then how can I expect you to take care of Flossie? How can you possibly expect me to trust you after you admitted to having murdered two people?”

“I could have lied to you about why I live alone, but I didn’t. Not before or since have I taken another human’s life. I’ve learned my lesson. Being ostracized is not a suitable way of life.”

“Yet you want to inflict it on Flossie. And what about your promise to marry her?”

“I have Grandfather’s permission to marry in a tribal ceremony,” Wild Bear explained, ignoring Nate’s first question. “Mother arranged it for me long ago. Flossie and I will leave tomorrow to go to the village. We’ll be married by the time a week has passed.”

“Flossie?” Nate asked without taking his eyes from Wild Bear. “Are you positive this is what you want?”

“Yes,” she answered, assurance evident in her voice. “I love Jeremiah.”

“I’m sure you have no idea what love is, Flossie, but all right. I won’t try to force you to leave. I’ll tell Liberty. If you ever change your mind, I’ll see that she takes you back. Best wishes, Wild Bear. And I wish you good luck, Flossie, because you’re certainly going to need it. I suppose there’s nothing left to say except good-bye.”

Wild Bear moved from the doorway when Nate approached. Before passing him, Nate stopped and faced the half-breed, saying, “There’s one more thing I want from you, Wild Bear. I want your promise that, if Flossie changes her mind about this arrangement, whether it’s tomorrow or a few years from now, you won’t force her to stay with you. If she changes her mind, you take her to my father’s house in Philadelphia. He’ll know where to contact me, then I’ll contact Flossie’s family. Do you promise?”

“That’s a reasonable request, and I’ll honor it. What’s your father’s name?”
“Nathaniel Payne, Sr. He won’t be hard to find. He’s known all over town. Don’t disappoint me, Wild Bear. I’m only letting her stay because you seem like a decent sort. I trap in this territory regularly, and I have every intention of returning to can check on Flossie. Treat her like a lady, or I’ll track you down and rectify the matter with my own hands.”

Without waiting for Wild Bear to reply, Nate left. Instead of camping that night, he continued so he could get back to Libby with the news as soon as possible. At daybreak, he arrived from the direction of the river. To his pleasure, Libby was alone on the bank, drawing water for the day. With a smile of satisfaction, Nate dismounted and strode up behind her.
Chapter 11

After filling both wooden pails, Libby stood and picked up first one then the other.

“Let me take those,” Nate said from behind her.

Startled, she dropped the buckets, spilling their contents onto the dry ground. She wanted to turn around and look at him, but she was afraid to. If he was alone, she didn’t want to know. But Flossie could be with him, too. In that case, she wanted to know.

“I realize it hasn’t rained for a long time, Miss Libby,” he said with a playful grin. “But you don’t need to water the ground. By the look of the sky, it should start to rain sometime today.”

As Nate picked up the buckets, she spun to face him. Tearing the pails from his hands, she threw them aside. He stared at her mutely, obviously stunned beyond words by her first true show of a temper. Then a slow grin came to his lips. Libby knew exactly what he was thinking, too: He hadn’t gotten her to shout at him, but he had gotten her to express her feelings. Undoubtedly, that made him very proud.

“Don’t smile at me, Nathaniel Payne,” she said softly, without even a hint of irritation in her voice. “You found Flossie, didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t bring her back with you.”

“No. She . . .”

“. . . didn’t want to come back,” Libby interrupted. “She left willingly and intends to stay away.”

“How did you know?” he asked in amazement.

“I saw the tracks, Nate. Even I knew there had been no trouble, but it was easier to think there had been. I didn’t want to admit that I’d done such a poor job of raising her since her parents died that she ran away.”

Nate’s expression changed. He didn’t look like he pitied her, nor did he appear to be sympathetic. Despite the sorrowful expression on his lips, his blue eyes carried a look of determination. In a way, it almost appeared that he wanted to protect her. But protect her from what?

“That’s not why she left, Miss Libby,” he said. “She left because she fell in love.”

Libby studied him suspiciously. His expression didn’t change this time. Instead, he stared down at her as though forcing himself not to react. Something was wrong here, and she was pretty sure she knew what it was: Nate was lying to her.

Hoping to conceal her insight, she asked, “How could Flossie fall in love? She’s not even
sixteen years old. She isn’t old enough to know what love is.”

“Age has nothing to do with love,” he replied. “I knew people who fell in love when they were younger than Flossi and married when they were old enough. My parents did, and they have a very happy marriage. Then I know somebody thirty-two years old who still isn’t sure what love is.”

“Meaning you?” Libby asked, meeting his gaze.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But I think I’m beginning to understand it.”

Libby turned her back on him and mumbled, “I don’t think I ever will.” Pausing a moment, she faced him again. “Is she happy?”

“She seems to be.”

“That’s what matters then. Is she living with an Indian?”

“A half-breed. His father was a British officer. If it’s any consolation, he was educated in England.”

“But he lives as an Indian.”

“Yes,” Nate admitted with an undertone of anger, “but he promised to treat her like a lady. I believe he was sincere, Miss Libby. I’ve always considered myself a reasonable judge of character, and I think Flossie will be happy with the young man.”

Libby stared up at him. “Are you positive?”

“As positive as anybody can be when foreseeing the future.”

“Is there any chance of her changing her mind?”

“There’s always a chance, but as a gambling man, I wouldn’t make any bets on it. If you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t seem very upset.”

“I’m certainly not happy that my baby sister is living in sin, but I can’t change it, either. I did a lot of thinking while you were gone, and I’m resigned to the fact that she doesn’t want to stay with me. I don’t like it, but what can I do? If I try to force her to come back, she’ll probably run away again.”

“I’m glad you’re being realistic about this. If it’s any consolation, they won’t be living in sin. His grandfather is the high chief and has agreed to let them marry as Cherokee.”

“It’s only a slight consolation, Nate. Papa always dreamed of all three of us having big, beautiful weddings, but now my baby sister will never have one. No, Nate, I don’t particularly like her running away with a Cherokee, but at least, they’ll be married.”

Nate gazed down at her with a grin and took her hands in his. “Did you miss me while I was gone, Miss Libby?”

Embarrassment swept through her, and she averted her eyes. “You were gone less than a day. Certainly, you don’t expect me to miss you in such a short time.”

“I missed you, too.” With his fingertips under her chin, he gently lifted her head until her
eyes once again met his unfalteringly. “I came right back, my sweet. I didn’t even camp anywhere last night. One reason was to relieve your mind as soon as possible, but mainly I wanted to hurry so I could be with you.”

She started to turn her head, but he stopped her by caressing her face with both hands and adding, “I want to be with you during your time of distress, Miss Libby. I want to be your comfort, your support.”

Libby sighed. The sensations flooding through her were incredible, but she couldn’t let Nate do this to her. She couldn’t let him sweet-talk her into forgiving him for not bringing Flossie back. But he was so considerate, so understanding, so genuinely concerned about her reaction. How could she not forgive him?

Without trying to break free of his embrace, she said, “Please, Nate, you’re making things very difficult for me. One minute your attitude makes me so angry that I could almost scream; then the next, you say such kind things. You make me almost believe that you care about others. I don’t know how to react to you.”

“Try reacting like the woman that you are.” He slid his hands from her face down her neck to her shoulders, and she shuddered under his tender caress. “Don’t be afraid, my sweet.”

As he tenderly stroked her throat with his thumbs, she stared up at him. There was a look in his eyes that she’d never seen before. It was almost as though he was holding himself at bay because of her naiveté. But was that truly how he felt—or was it just the overactive imagination of how happy she could be if she would simply kiss her again.

“Ah, sweet Liberty,” he said in a near-whisper, “how I wish …”

“I see you came back early,” Ross said from behind them. “I suppose this means that you lost Flossie’s trail.”

With a grimace, Nate reluctantly released Libby then offered her an apologetic smile before he turned to face Ross. “I found Flossie, all right, but she didn’t want to come back. She left willingly. She’s content and safe, so I decided to let her stay. It was best for her that way. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get my horse and rub him down. After that, I plan to get some sleep. I’m exhausted. Tomorrow’s soon enough to travel again.”

Libby watched as Nate left. Will strode up beside her, saying, “You like him a lot, don’t you, Libby.”

She said nothing for several seconds as she stared after Nate. Would he have kissed her again if Ross hadn’t appeared? Probably, which made Ross’s presence a stroke of luck for her, because she would undoubtedly have let him. But was it good luck? Or bad? She adored Nate’s kisses and desperately longed for more of the intimate caresses they’d shared in other private moments.

“Libby?” Will prompted. She turned her gaze to his face. “You like him a lot, don’t you.”

Shaking her head slowly, she stifled the urge to cry out the truth. But right now she wasn’t sure what the truth was. One minute she could have honestly said that she liked him;
but in the next minute, she could have said that she loathed him and have been equally honest.

To conceal her indecision, she declared, “He’s the most arrogant, most insulting man I’ve ever met, and I would have told him exactly that had Hiram not joined us. That man had the audacity to insinuate that I don’t act like a woman. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. Would you please refill the buckets and bring them back to camp for me?”

Not waiting for a reply, Libby left Will and Ross alone.

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For several days the company traveled toward Charlotte, but not once during that time did Libby speak to Nate. This caused him a great deal of embarrassment and even more distress. The night before they planned to arrive in Charlotte, Will called Nate aside to talk.

“What the hell’s wrong with Libby lately, Nate?” Will asked when they were alone. “She’s acting awfully strange. She’s not a real talkative person to begin with, but she’s really quiet now. I’m worried that something’s wrong with her.”

Nate nodded in agreement. “I noticed, and I must admit that I’m more than a little concerned myself. All I can think of is that she’s upset or angry about something. Women react like that sometimes. God knows I’ve tried to talk with her, but she won’t let me anywhere near. She’s driving me damned insane, too. That makes me suspect that she’s angry with me for not bringing Flossie back.”

“I don’t think so,” Will said, shaking his head. “She didn’t seem upset when she told me Flossie was marrying a half-breed. She said, as long as, there was a ceremony—even if it was an Indian one—she wouldn’t try to stop the marriage. I think it’s something you said to her when you came back.”

“Something I said?” What could he possibly have said to deserve her aloofness? All he’d done was tell her the truth, even if he’d started off by lying about being in love. No, he hadn’t said anything that could explain her behavior. “For the life of me, I can’t think of anything I said that I shouldn’t have. I only told her that I hurried back to let her know the status with Flossie.” Nate paused then added, “Now that we’re talking about it, I do recall that she said some rather strange things to me. When I asked her if she missed me, she said something about not knowing how to react to me.”

“Did you tell her how?” Will asked excitedly.

“Of course. I told her that she should try reacting like a woman.”

The smile on Will’s lips disappeared, and he gasped in shock. “Oh, oh. I think that’s what did it. She told me that you were arrogant and insulting, and that you said she didn’t act like a woman.”
“What?” Nate asked, shocked by the discovery. “I didn’t want to insult her, but that’s exactly how it sounds now that you’ve said it to me. All I wanted to do was try to instill some confidence in her. I wanted her to make her feel better about her femininity. Damn! What the hell have I done?”

“You made her awfully angry with you. Now what are you going to do?”

“Hell, I don’t know,” he admitted in self-disgust. “I’m taking a walk. Maybe I’ll get an idea of how to say I’m sorry. The more I’m with Liberty, the more attracted I am to her—and the more convinced I am that she’s the woman for me. I’ll walk, and I’ll think, and I’ll find something I can do to change her opinion of me.”

Deep in thought, Nate wandered out of camp. He needed to be alone again. He needed to think of a way to assure Libby’s forgiveness, because he didn’t think he could ever forgive himself if she didn’t.

For nearly an hour, Nate disappeared. Despite her dislike of Ross, she wanted to talk to somebody that night, so she agreed to sit with him for a while. Then Nate came into the clearing and approached her as she and Ross sat at the fireside. She watched Nate, who had one arm behind his back, curiously while Ross chatted, registering only in the back of her mind, because since her thoughts focused on what Nate might be planning. Speaking politely, Nate interrupted Ross.

“Excuse me please, Hiram. I’d like to speak with Miss Libby for a few minutes. I’ll return her to you when I’m through. Would you kindly join me for a moment, Miss Libby?” he asked as he held his left hand out toward her.

Too stunned to deny him, she placed her hand in his and rose. Her gaze didn’t leave his face as he led her into a nearby grove of trees. Still, he kept his right hand behind his back. What had come over him? she wondered. He was acting like the perfect gentleman, charming and, except for his still-scruffy appearance, very debonair. At the same time, however, he was being extremely mysterious.

Then his right arm moved, and he extended a small bouquet of white asters toward her. Before she could question him, he explained his actions. “I have come to offer the flowers of truce, sweet Liberty. Instead of a white flag, I am waving white asters. I beg you to accept them. I beg forgiveness for any offense I may have unintentionally created in your mind or your heart.”

Still too amazed to say anything, Libby accepted the bouquet in silence. How many more times would Nate do this to her? How many more times could she cope with his mood changes? Then again, if she hadn’t been in the midst of a mood herself, he probably wouldn’t be offering her these flowers of truce.

What a wonderful way of wording it! The flowers of truce—_showing_ that he wanted to atone for any indiscretion he’d made instead of simply _voicing_ his apology. Not only was the wording he used wonderful, the gesture was quite romantic. Romantic! She’d never given thought to the word—or the concept—before. Nor had she considered that a man could have romance in his nature. Yet Nate’s voice was as tender and romantic as his flowers of truce.
“I’m led to believe,” he said, dragging her from her fantasy, “that I offended you the other day. I understand that I gave you the wrong impression with a remark I made. You have my deepest apologies and my quest for forgiveness. I in no way meant to insinuate that you don’t act like a woman. I simply meant that your reactions are those of a refined lady. In my rough manner, I was paying you a compliment. Please say you’ll forgive me for my unfortunate choice of words.”

Libby stared up at him in amazement and replied in a small voice. “You’re doing it to me again.”

“Insulting you?” he asked. “I assure you that isn’t my intention.”

With a heavy sigh, she shook her head. She didn’t want to make this admission, but she could see no way of avoiding it. “Not insulting me, Nate—confusing me. I don’t know whether to hate you or ... or like you. One minute you make me furious; the next, you make me feel so much like a lady.”

“It’s my personal opinion, Miss Libby,” he replied with a seductive smile, “that you like me. I may not always be able to find white asters to wave in surrender for another mistake in my choice of words or some unintentional indiscretion that meets with your disapproval. Now if you will please answer my two questions, I’ll return you to the doctor. Do you accept my sincerest apology? And do you forgive me?”

Libby smiled up at him. How could she possibly deny him after such an endearing speech? “The answer to both is yes.”

“Thank you, Miss Libby. May I quickly kiss your cheek to say good night?”

“No.” Filled with romance, she closed the gap between them. Still clutching the flowers in one hand, she slid her arms around his neck. She didn’t want a quick kiss on the cheek; she wanted a kiss on the lips that was filled with the passion he always exhibited. “I wasn’t very polite to you the past few days, so I apologize as well and ask your forgiveness.”

“I, too, agree to both,” he replied, his arms encircling her in a return embrace.

Bending over her upturned face, he approached her until his lips were only inches from hers. Just as he was about to fulfill her fantasy, she heard a noise nearby. Nate apparently heard, too, because he stopped his descent and turned his head, his cheek less than an inch from her mouth.

“How touching,” Ross said bitterly.

Startled, she pushed away. It wasn’t Will like she’d expected. She couldn’t believe that she and Nate been caught in such a compromising position by the one man she never wanted to see such a thing!

Her chest felt heavy because she and Nate couldn’t finish their kiss, but she knew their embrace had been destroyed for the night. She gazed up at Nate sadly, then she whispered, “I’m sorry, Nate. I wish it could have been, but it can’t now. I have to go.”

“I’m sorry, too, my sweet,” he returned in a like tone. “But not only do I understand, I agree.”
The pain in Nate’s heart was reflected in his eyes as he gazed down at her for a few moments. Then, without another word, he stalked off into the woods. Her vision clouded with unexpected tears as she watched him leave. Why had she let Ross come between them again? Why did she always back away from Nate just when she was beginning to open her soul to him?

Only one thing was clear in her mind. No matter what happened, she would never send Nate away again. She would always accept him for the man he was—despite all his faults.

No longer able to see Nate, Libby glanced up at Ross as he stared down at her lustfully. She didn’t like that look in his eyes, and she dreaded the very thought of being alone with him. But the only way to avoid that was to leave, so she quickly turned away and fled back to camp.
Chapter 12

They arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina, at nearly two the following afternoon. Nate insisted on making reservations at the nicer of the two hotels in town, but it only had one single room and one double available. After renting Libby the single room for three nights, he rented the double for Will and Ross.

At the same time, he paid the clerk an extra three dollars to have a hot bath set up in Libby’s room as soon as possible. Then he requested a piece of paper, pen, and ink to write a note for the man to leave in Libby’s room. Accepting the note, he assured Nate that Libby would have a hot bath waiting for her in about twenty minutes. Thanking the man, Nate left.

Outside, he noticed Libby browsing in the window of a nearby dress and millinery’s shop. He wandered up to Will, who stood outside the hotel waiting for him. “I rented two rooms, lad—one for Liberty, and one for you and Ross.”

“All right, me and Ross!” Will exclaimed. “You don’t expect me to sleep in the same room as him, do you?”

“I do, and I expect you to be civil.”

“I’d sooner sleep with a rattler,” Will mumbled, “and take my chances on being bit.”

Nate chuckled. He felt the same way, but he couldn’t encourage Will to act like that. To hide his feelings, he continued as though Will hadn’t complained. “I’m going to rent a room at the other hotel. I want you to see that Liberty’s satisfied with hers, then you can come to my room. I have a few things I want to discuss with you. But before you do that, I need you to stall Liberty for a while.”

“Why?” Will asked curiously.

“Her room’s not quite ready. Why don’t you take her into that mercantile store and let her browse. The clerk said it would be about twenty minutes.”

“All right. And then I can come to your room?”

“Absolutely,” Nate said as he started toward the other hotel. “We have to make some plans.”

After making his own reservations at the other hotel, Nate took the wagon and the few belongings on it to the livery stable. There he also asked where he could sell his few furs.

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When Ross went inside the hotel, he noticed a bathtub being carried upstairs. Announcing himself to the desk clerk, he added, “I want that tub taken to my room.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the clerk replied politely, “but the baths for your use are on this level. That bath is for a very special guest.”

“Would that guest be royalty?” Ross asked. “Or possibly a member of the presidential family?”

“Neither, sir.”

“Then I demand equal treatment. I want a tub sent to my room. I do not bathe publicly.”

“I would suggest, sir, that you either find a hotel that will cater to your whims—something we don’t have in Charlotte—or you can go dirty. Or you can go to the public baths and bathe there. Those are your choices, sir.”

“Let me talk to the owner of his establishment.”

“You are, sir. Do you have a complaint about the service?”

“I have a complaint about your attitude. I am a doctor, and I deserve your respect.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Ross, but I give my respect to people who are polite. I give it to men like the one who rented the rooms for you and your companions, then thanked me after paying the bill in advance. If you offered me fifty dollars to have a bath set up for you, I’d go without the money.”

“So that’s it. You want a bribe. Is that how the person that tub is for got his privileges?”

“As a matter of fact, that individual did give me extra money,” the owner admitted with a bright smile. “But I’m doing it because he was a kind, respectful man—not because of the money. Now if you’ll excuse me, you have your room key, and I have work to do.”

Abruptly ending their discussion, the owner of the hotel turned his back on Ross.

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Libby blushed when the owner passed her the key to her room and told her to have a pleasant evening. Something in his eyes gave her the impression that he knew a secret about her. But she could think of no possible reason, until she opened the door of her room and caught the light scent of lilac. Nate had conspired with the owner to give her a surprise! But when she glanced around the room, she saw no flowers.

Across the room, a maid smiled and announced that she was there to help her undress for her bath. Although thrilled that Nate would go to such lengths to please her, Libby didn’t like people seeing her undress.

“Thank you for offering,” Libby said with a smile, “but I’d rather do it in private.”

“If that’s what you want, miss,” the maid replied. “Do you want me to help you get
dressed later?"

“That won’t be necessary,” Libby replied. “I’m going to bed when I’m done. But thank you, anyway.”

“Mr. Gray—that’s my boss—told me I’m to see that you’re comfortable. You sure you won’t want me?”

“Right now I can’t think of a thing more comfortable than a hot bath and a soft bed. Mr. Gray is certainly interested in making his guests happy. I didn’t know hotels gave such excellent personal service.”

“Mr. Gray don’t usually, either. The man who rented this room gave him an extra three dollars just for the hot bath. Mr. Gray told me he thinks the man’s sweet on you. He decided to give you extra treatment to help him out.”

“How kind of them both.”

“Tell you what. I’ll come back in about an hour and a half to see if maybe you changed your mind.”

“That would be fine. Thank you.”

The maid thrust her hands into the pockets of her apron. “Oops. I almost forgot. I was supposed to give you this note.”

“Is it from the owner?” Libby asked, accepting the paper the maid extended toward her.

“I didn’t read it, but I don’t think so. I think it’s from the man in trapper clothes who checked you in. I saw him writin’ somethin’, anyway. He’s a handsome gent, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Libby blushed. “He is, isn’t he. Unfortunately, he’s become very arrogant because of it.”

“All I know is that he acted like a gen’leman when I seen him at the desk. And Mr. Gray never gives such good service to anybody he don’t think is a gen’leman. I’ll be leavin’ for now. Have a nice bath.”

“Thank you,” Libby said as she watched the maid leave. Alone, she opened the folded paper to read the note:

My sweet Libby,

Have a pleasant, relaxing bath. You deserve it. When you’re done, put on your prettiest dress. Tonight, we’re going courting.

Admiringly,

Nate

Anger sparked within her. Again, he demonstrated arrogance by assuming that she would let him court her. Then the anger subsided as the aroma of lilac-scented bath broke
through to her consciousness. Again, he confused her by showing kindness and understanding.

As she stepped into the warm water, she wondered if her conception of arrogance was what Nate considered confidence. He certainly was right about her accepting his invitation. And the hot bath put her in the mood for an evening with an attractive man.

Smiling, she settled down into the water.

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When Will joined Nate, he continued complaining about the room arrangements. “I don’t want to sleep with Ross, Nate. Why can’t I stay here with you?”

“Because I have plans for the evening. Besides, I’m used to being alone. I prefer it that way.”

“You gonna ... Are you going to see a whore tonight?” Will asked conspiratorially. “Is that why you aren’t staying at the same hotel? You don’t want Libby to know, right? That’s probably a good idea. She wouldn’t like it.”

Nate chuckled. He’d completely forgotten that seventeen-year-old boys had minds that dwelt on one topic. “Actually, I’m courting a lady tonight. That’s why I want you to room with Ross. I want you to keep him from roaming around Charlotte.”

“You’re going to court Libby?” Will asked hopefully.

“If she agrees.”

Will reached into his pocket and pulled out some neatly wound-up white ribbon. Holding it out to Nate, he said, “Libby asked me to get this for her. She wasn’t going to buy it, but she changed her mind. I’d wait to take it to her, though. She’s probably taking a bath right now. At least, that’s what she planned.”

Nate grinned. “That’s probably exactly what she’s doing. I had a hot bath set up in her room, which was why I had you stall her. What I have trouble understanding is what was so hard to decide about buying that little bit of ribbon. It couldn’t have cost that much. It’s nothing more than plain white, satin ribbon. Why should she have trouble deciding whether to buy a yard or two?”

“It wasn’t the ribbon,” Will explained, his surprise evident in his voice. “It was the brooch.”

Confused, Nate stared at Will. “What brooch?”

“The one she fell in love with, of course.”

“You aren’t making any sense, Will,” Nate complained, shaking his head. “You went back to get the ribbon Libby wasn’t sure she wanted to buy. How, all of a sudden, does a brooch fit into the story? You’d better start from the beginning—and tell me everything.”
“I thought you knew everything about women,” Will said with a grin, “but you sure don’t understand Libby. I took her into the mercantile store like you told me to. That’s where she saw the pin. She got all excited about it, too. She kept saying how beautiful it was. Damned if I understand why, though. It wasn’t even fancy like my ma’s were. It was just a green oval stone on a gold oval background. I admit it was pretty, but it sure wasn’t beautiful. Anyway, Libby knew she couldn’t buy that brooch, so she thought about buying the ribbon instead. But she decided she didn’t need it. By the time we got back to her hotel room, she’d changed her mind and sent me back for it.”

“So she fell in love with the brooch,” Nate translated as he nodded, “but knew she couldn’t afford it. She only bought the ribbon because she needed to buy something.”

“Why the hell would she need to buy something?” Will asked in astonishment.

“Because she’s a lady.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Leon always told me not to buy anything unless it was absolutely necessary. Why would he tell Libby it’s all right to do it?”

“He may not have,” Nate explained. “Sometimes ladies buy things to make themselves feel better. That’s probably exactly what Liberty did. She’s been pretty upset since Flossie left …”

“She was upset long before that, Nate. She’s been upset since you left.”

“All the more reason to buy herself a present.” Nate grinned again. “And it’s all the more reason for me to buy her a present. I got a very good price from my furs a while ago, so I can afford that brooch.” Grabbing Will’s arm, Nate said, “Let’s go buy a beautiful lady a beautiful present.”

Frowning, Will warned, “I doubt Libby’ll take it if she knows it’s from you.”

“I’ll mount that obstacle when I come to it.”

After purchasing the emerald and gold brooch, Nate asked the female clerk if he could leave it there until later. He wanted to bathe, get a haircut, and change clothes before he delivered the ribbon and pin; and he certainly didn’t want to leave it in his room unattended.

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A soft knock on the door startled Libby from her nap. That had to be the maid returning, so she shouted, “Come in!” instead of asking who it was.

The door creaked as it opened. Behind the screen in the corner, Libby splashed as she clamored out of the tub while saying merrily, “I’m glad you came back. I fell asleep and lost track of the time. Would you please hand me the blue dressing gown on top of my valise? I forgot it.”

Although she heard movement, she didn’t hear the telltale rustling of the maid’s skirts. That was odd. Earlier the woman’s clothes had made quite a bit of noise. Surely, they still
would. And the woman had been talkative earlier, whereas now she said nothing. Then, to her horror, a buckskin-fringed sleeve appeared beside her. The hand at the end held her robe.

Libby gasped. “Nate!”

“That’s right, Miss Libby,” he replied. “Would you rather I wait outside until you’re dressed? I don’t mind, and it would seem less brazen of you to greet me fully clothed instead of wearing only your gown. So, which will it be? Shall I leave until you’re dressed or talk to you as you are?”

“You don’t need to leave, Nate—not after all the traveling we’ve done together. I’ll be out in a second.” As she slid into the robe, she noticed a glint on it. Quickly tying the sash, she stepped from behind the partition. In the sun-lit brightness of the room, she examined the pin with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Do you know how this got on my gown?”

“It was there when I got here. I assumed it was always there. I must admit, though, I thought it rather strange that you would wear such a lovely piece of jewelry on a dressing gown.” He paused then added, “Perhaps you have a secret admirer.”

Libby laughed. “A secret admirer? That’s nonsense. I’m much too old for such childishness.”

“Now that’s nonsense. No woman is ever too old for a secret admirer, especially a woman as attractive as you.”

“How flattering you are this afternoon. Could there be a reason for it? And could there be a reason that you’re even here?”

“There’s a very good reason that I’m here—two of them, in fact. Number one is that I brought you the ribbon Will picked up for you. The second reason is to see if you got my note. Did you?”

“I did, and I was very angry that you assumed I would agree to court you simply because you dictated it.”

When Libby paused, Nate coaxed her to finish. “But you intend to agree, don’t you. I can tell by the look in your eyes. You think you can hide behind the cool façade of yours—and you probably can in most circumstances. Or should I say with most men? But you can’t with me. I can see right through that stone wall.”

“Oh, you can? All right,” she challenged, “tell me exactly what you see.”

“I see a woman who’s beginning to let her emotions show. Maybe not to the point of not holding them back at all, but to the point that it’s noticeable. You’re angry as hell right now. You’re thinking that I’m a conceited, arrogant son of a bitch because I have the audacity to claim that I understand your thoughts and how they work.”

As he spoke, disbelief seeped into her, and she could feel her expression change. Now Nate would be able to see how she was reacting inside, but she was powerless to conceal her emotions. How could he possibly know so much about her?

“What you said about being angry with me because of my assumption was true,” he granted. “You were angry—until you sank into the nice, private, hot bath I had set up here. At that moment, of course, you could hardly turn down the invitation of the man who did
such a wonderful thing for you. Naturally, I planned it that way. Don’t get angry again, either. I only wanted to assure one evening in your company, not as traveling companions but as a gentleman courting a lady. I’ll be leaving for the mountains the day after tomorrow. Since we’ll be parting company, I wanted this one night to remember you by. I wanted something more than what we had on the trail.”

“Why are you going to the mountains when winter is so close?” Libby asked, struggling to keep the disappointment from her voice. “You’ll get stranded up there.”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do, Miss Libby. Hopefully, I’ll come to my senses and realize that leaving you is the best thing I’ll ever do in my life. As of now, I’m having a hard time convincing myself of it. I suppose courting you this one time is the worst thing I can do, but it’s important to me. Please tell me that I was right, that you’ll accept my arrogant-sounding invitation to dinner and a moonlit stroll outside of town.”

“I don’t know, Nate.”

“I wish, sweet Liberty, that I could say I bought you that brooch to sway your decision, but I’m afraid I can’t. I wish I could tell you that I bought it because I thought you deserved something as lovely as you, but I can’t do that, either. All I can do is ask you to accompany me for the evening. Will you, my sweet?”

“Why do you always confuse me, Nate?” she asked. “You were right about the bath making me agree. But you’re so sure of yourself—and of me—that it’s frightening.”

Nate stepped close to her and gently caressed her shoulders. When he rubbed his thumbs up and down her neck, a chill raced down her spine and made her shiver involuntarily under his touch. He moved closer still.

“You haven’t answered yet, my sweet.”

“I’m afraid to,” she admitted in a near-whisper. “I’m too confused. One second you infuriate me with your manners; and the next, I’m bewitched by your power of persuasion. I honestly don’t know how to react to you. Why do you cause such confusion in me, Nate? Hiram certainly doesn’t.”

“That’s because Ross is a damned idiot, and you know it.”

“But he has a respected profession. I have yet to hear of a respected trapper.”

“Let’s not talk about Ross, my sweet. I’m here to convince you to be my companion tonight.”

“I want to, Nate,” she admitted, “but I’m afraid to agree. I’m afraid to let you see any reaction in me. Can’t you understand that?”

“I understand completely, my sweet.” He lowered his head toward hers as he spoke. “You’re afraid to show your feelings. That’s all right, too, because I know you like me almost as much as I like you. What’s wrong with one night together? We could make a beautiful memory to hold in our hearts for the rest of our lives.”

Libby was about to speak again when Nate’s lips met hers. His arms slid around her to hug her to him. Still moving slowly, Nate backed up. Suddenly, he stopped and, with a swift movement, swept the valise to the floor. Then, almost simultaneously, he lifted Libby and
laid her on the bed. As he kissed her, she felt the weight of his body move the mattress and heard the wood slats groan as he lay down beside her. Not once did he break his strong, almost demanding kiss.

Afraid of the feelings of desire swelling within her, Libby struggled in his embrace. Her robe fell open, exposing one moderately-sized, perfectly-formed breast. Oh, no! Now he would see her partially naked.

But the notion was fleeting. Crushed to him, she experienced a sensation so completely new that she sighed contentedly. Unable to resist, she returned his embrace.

The moment she relaxed, Nate’s hand slid up her side and sought out her breast. He drew in a deep breath when his large hand came to rest on her nakedness. His hand squeezed her breast tenderly.

Even greater pleasure burst forth in Libby. Something happened inside her that made her want more. Something changed in her body that made her want him to lie atop her, to cover her body with his. She moaned softly behind his lips a moment before his tongue passed into her mouth.

An unexpected knock at the door shocked Nate back to reality. Releasing Libby, he scrambled from the bed and stared down at her nudity. He reached out for her slowly. To his surprise she didn’t recoil from his approaching hands, so he pulled her robe together. Offering his hand to help her up, he grasped her wrist and pulled her to a sitting position.

The person rapped again, and Libby shouted, “One moment please!” Then she turned to Nate and gazed up at him sadly. Her face was hot with a mixture of desire and embarrassment. “You must think me very brazen, Nate.”

“To the contrary,” he replied. “I’m ashamed of myself for forcing my attentions on you. As a lady, you deserve better treatment than that. I sincerely apologize. I only wish there were some way I could make it up to you—some way I could show my regrets in a constructive manner.”

“Maybe there is.”

“Tell me what it is, Miss Liberty. I want to make amends.”

“The person knocking is probably a maid the hotel owner told to help me dress for courting this evening, but I don’t know how long I have to get ready. When will you call for me?”

Nate couldn’t restrain his astonished excitement. “You mean you’ll still go with me after what I did?”

“I will. But you might want to pay for a woman who can satisfy your desires first. I mistakenly encouraged you, but it won’t happen again.”

“You can be equally sure that tonight I’ll remember I’m with a lady, not a whore. You can also be certain that I won’t be seeking satisfaction from any woman—a prostitute or not. That would be very ungentlemanly of me. I’ll call for you at seven, my sweet.” Taking her hand in his, he kissed the back of it softly. “Until then, remember our parting moments, not the heated moments of a few minutes ago.”
Turning on his heel, Nate hurried to the door and opened it. To his surprise, Ross stood in the hallway. Nate stared at his rival in shock, not knowing how to explain his presence in Libby’s room—or even if he should.

While Nate blocked Ross’s entrance, the shorter man stared at Libby for several seconds. Then, returning his gaze to Nate, Ross glared at him a moment before hitting him squarely and soundly on the jaw, exclaiming, “You, hypocritical bastard!”

Stunned by the unprovoked attack, Nate reeled across the room. He smashed into the dressing screen and tried to regain his balance by twisting to grab hold of it. As the partition toppled, so did Nate. The screen fell against the tub of water and crashed into pieces, but did little to cushion Nate’s descent. He hit his forehead at eyebrow level on the edge of the tub. It tipped over and spilled onto the floor. Not fully aware of his actions, Nate instinctively picked himself up, clutching his hands into fists.
Chapter 13

Libby stared at Nate in shock. Blood streamed from a long cut, spreading from halfway into one of his eyebrows to about a third of the way into the other. Instantly, she sprang into action and interrupted Nate’s approach toward Ross by stepping between the men. The doctor entered the room and closed the door behind him. Libby forced herself to remain calm despite her panic.

With her hands against his broad chest, she gazed up at Nate. “Stop, Nate. Don’t make matters worse.”

He stared down at her blankly then blinked several times. Obviously, he was too incoherent to argue with her because, without a word, he nodded once and loosened his fists. Relieved, she grasped his wrist and led him to her bed.

“You've been hurt, Nate,” she said soothingly as she pushed him down by his shoulders. “Lie down, and I’ll nurse your wound.”

“What are you doing, Libby?” Ross asked. “He deserved that for being alone with you—especially when you’re dressed as you are. Now you want to help him. Have you no morals?”

“I obviously have more than you.” She dabbed Nate’s head with the towel she’d used to dry herself. “You can make amends by going downstairs and paying for the damage you caused. Then you can have someone come clean up this mess.” When Ross didn’t move, Libby looked over at him and added maternally, “Go on now. Do as you’re told.”

“Don’t you ever talk to me like that!” he raged, grabbing her arm tightly. “And I refuse to leave this room as long as Payne is here alone with you.”

Despite her squeal of surprise, Libby maintained her calm. “I invited him in, Hiram, which is more than I can say for you. Now get out of here, and get some help for Nate. This cut is bad. I think it needs a doctor to sew it closed.”

“Let me see that wound.”

“Get away from him. You’ve already done enough damage. I won’t let you hurt him more. If you won’t get a doctor, I’ll send Will when he gets here.”

Ross jerked Libby away from Nate. Pain shot through her shoulder, and she cried out. Instantly, Nate was on his feet to protect her.

“Leave her alone, you bastard!” Nate demanded.

“Get out of this room!” Ross retaliated. “I’m not going to hurt Libby. That’s a lot more than I can say for a man who comes into her room when she’s alone and undressed.”

“I invited him in, Hiram,” Libby said in a hushed tone. “Now you two be quiet. I don’t
want you attracting attention to this room.”

“Don’t you ever tell me what to do, either,” Ross said.

Still holding Libby securely by the arm, he slapped her hard across the face with the back of his free hand. Her head snapped back, and she again cried out in pain. If he hadn’t had such a tight hold on her, she would have fallen from the force of the blow.

“That does it!” Nate shouted. “How dare you treat her that way. If you don’t get out of this room right now, I’ll forget that Libby doesn’t like violence and beat the hell out of you.”

“I’m going,” Ross agreed angrily, “but Libby’s coming with me. I won’t leave her alone with you.”

Ross forced Libby to the door as she struggled against him. Nate jumped into action. Grabbing Libby’s other arm gently but securely, he hit Ross in the back, just below his ribcage. With an agonized yell, Ross released her. Immediately, she felt herself spin into Nate’s protective embrace. Despite his pale, disoriented expression, he stood stolidly with one arm around her and the other pointing accusingly at Ross.

“If I hear so much as a rumor that you’ve hit Miss Libby again,” Nate warned, “I’ll find you—no matter where you are. And I’ll make damned sure that you never hurt her again. Now get the hell out of my sight and do what Miss Libby said. Go down to the owner and offer to pay for all the damages you caused. Then you can come back and apologize to Miss Libby for hitting her. I’ll be waiting right here with her, too. If you don’t apologize, I’ll find you and force you to. Go on, you bastard. Get the hell out of my sight before I lose my temper completely.”

Angrily slamming the door behind him, Ross left the room. A small crowd had gathered in the hall, but he ignored it. The owner met Ross as he hurried down the stairs.

“What’s happening up there?” the owner asked.

“The lady in 212 had an argument with her gentleman caller. From the looks of things, he assaulted her. She’s only wearing a dressing gown and has a small cut on her cheek. But she apparently did well enough in fighting him off to injure him, as well. He fell against the tub you sent up to her and cut his head.”

“I find that hard to believe. I heard two men’s voices as I came upstairs. I didn’t hear the young lady’s, nor did I hear her scream.”

“She didn’t scream. I arrived in time to thwart that trapper’s attack.”

Studying him suspiciously, Mr. Gray blocked Ross’s descent. “I don’t believe that, either. That trapper is a true gentleman. He would never hurt the woman he loves.”

“Loves! That man loves no one but himself. If you don’t believe me, go ask her what happened. You’ll see for yourself that I’m telling the truth. The evidence is all there.” Ross pushed his way past the owner to race downstairs and out of the building.

Once the owner dispersed the crowd, he knocked on the door to Libby’s room and waited for admittance. When he saw Nate lying on the bed with a towel on his head, Mr. Gray
asked, “What happened in here?”

“Hiram hit Nate—without provocation,” Libby explained. “Nate fell against the tub and hurt himself. I think a doctor should see him, but I don’t want Hiram. I want the town doctor. Do you think he would come?”

“I’ll go get him myself. On my way out, I’ll send someone to clean your room.”

When the doctor arrived, he gave Nate a mild sedative would sleep while the doctor stitch the wound.

After tending to the small cut under Libby’s left ey, he told her that Nate would wake up soon. Then he left with instructions for Nate to rest a few hours to assure that he didn’t suffer any worse damage than a cut.

By the time Nate awoke a short time later, Libby was dressed and sitting in a chair she’d set beside the bed.

Before he could speak, Libby said, “The doctor said for you to stay in bed for a few hours. How do you feel?”

“Fine—under the circumstances. Did Ross pay the damages yet? Did he come back to apologize?”

“As far as I know, he’s done neither. But Will was here for a few minutes. He came in just after the owner left to get the doctor. He heard the noise all the way upstairs on the fourth floor, so he came down to see what all the commotion was. That’s when he realized that it was my room. I was surprised at how upset he was. I didn’t know he could be so caring.”

“That’s because you never give him the chance to show it. He’s becoming a man now, Miss Libby. It’s time that you realize that.”

“I do now,” she replied. “But he’s been my little brother for a long time, Nate. It isn’t easy to let him grow up.”

“He’s getting to be as much of a man as he looks.”

Libby nodded. “I know. He’s been tall for so long that I always thought of him as a big child. Now he’s starting to look different. I didn’t notice it until today, but he needs a shave. Would you be willing to teach him the proper way so he won’t cut himself much?”

“Gladly, but it’s more than a shave he needs. He could use some new clothes, too. He’s beginning to fill out all that lankiness of his. Maybe all the work he’s had to do on the trail had something to do with that. Does this mean you’re going to give him a chance to become the man he can?”

“Of course.” Libby paused, uncertain she should tell him what was on her mind. But deep in her heart, she knew she must, despite the embarrassment it could cause her. “I honestly don’t feel that Hiram’s the proper influence on Will. As much as I hate to admit it, I’m afraid of Hiram now. I’d like to send him away, but I’m afraid he would ignore me—or hit me again.”

“That’s quite understandable considering what happened a while ago.” Reaching up, Nate laid his hand on her cheek. Earlier he’d noticed a light bruise and small cut, and now he
tenderly touched them with his thumb. Smiling, he rubbed her cheekbone. “I wish I could stay with you to protect you from him.”

Her heart almost broke at the thought, and she fought to control her voice. She couldn’t understand why he insisted on leaving them. “Why do you have to go to the mountains, Nate?”

“I already told you. I always spend the winter at my cabin there. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful as to wake up one morning and see everything blanketed in snow—until you came along, I should say.” Winking at her, he smiled. “You have no idea how much I’ve longed to have someone there to share the beauty with me.”

“You love the mountain in winter, don’t you.”

“Very much. The only thing I’ve ever found missing is the companionship of a lady.”

“I see.”

Suddenly, Nate was nervous. He’d never even considered this before, so he’d never rehearsed the words. Now he found it difficult to express himself. But he had to force the words out, or he would never know the answer. Moving his hand to take hers, he asked, “Miss Liberty, could I persuade you to go to Nashville instead of going north? I have some land outside of town that I plan to start farming this spring. We could still see each other, be near each other, if you’d move to Nashville. That way we could still travel together. I could protect you from Ross, and so I could teach Will to be the right kind of man.”

“I don’t know Nate,” she replied with a blush. “Does Hiram have to go along?”

Nate squeezed her hand tenderly. She must have been waiting all this time for him to invite her to change her plans and follow him. “I don’t see how you’re going to avoid it, Miss Libby.”

“Couldn’t we leave without telling him?” she asked.

“We could, but we both know he’d follow us. After all, he followed you from Charleston when you left without telling him. And he’s said several times that he wants to marry you. As I see it, that’s the best offer you’ve had so far.”

“But he hit me, Nate,” she protested softly. “How can I possibly marry a man who would hit me?”

“He probably lost his temper in a fit of jealousy. He’d just found us together in your room while you were wearing only your dressing gown. For all he knew, we’d been in bed together—intimately, I mean. Or even more intimately than we were.”

Libby blushed. “Do you think I should give him a chance to prove it would never happen again?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say, but I can’t explain why I feel this way. Deep in my heart I want him out of your life, but in my mind, I know he can give you everything you deserve—unlike me. I suppose that’s why I’m pleading his case to you.”

“Could we make it to Nashville before the first big snowfall?”
“Probably not, but we could make it to my cabin. We could all stay there until spring. It’s not a big place, but it does have a separate bedroom. You could sleep there—if you decide that you want to go. The rest of us can sleep on the floor in the main room.”

“Do you honestly want so much company? You’re used to being alone up there.”

“Didn’t I just tell you that I’ve always wanted someone to share it with?”

“You said you wanted a lady to share it with,” she reminded him. “You’d be getting more than a lady, you’d be getting two men, too.”

Nate smiled. She was beginning to relent, and he could hardly wait until she finally agreed. “I won’t mind—as long as you’re the lady. What do you say? Will you go?”

“I don’t know, Nate. This is so sudden. I should talk to Will about it. I’ll give you an answer after I do.”

“I can tell you right now that he’ll agree. He’s been very obvious about having to go north when I’m going to the mountains; he doesn’t like the idea at all. He has some sort of belief that I’m a real man and wants to stay with me.”

“What’s Nashville like?”

“It’s nice. It could also use a young doctor. The one they have is getting pretty old to be practicing medicine. I know, because I needed his services when I was there buying my land last year. I can tell you right now that Ross would make a good living in Nashville—good enough to put you two into the upper class.”

“You act like I’m going to agree to his proposal before we get there. Do you honestly think I’m so interested in marriage that I’d say yes to just anybody?”

“Isn’t that how all women feel?”

Libby shook her head. “I can’t answer for other women, but I don’t feel that way. I told you before that I never intend to love anyone to that extent. I won’t risk losing someone I love like my father did. If I don’t fall in love, I won’t lose anyone.”

“You can lose love without being married, my sweet,” he said. “After all, marriage isn’t the only way to express that kind of commitment. One can also fall in love without having the slightest idea that it’s happening in the first place. That’s something I know from experience. And I also know from experience that one can lose a loved one without being married. Remember, I lost my mother, even if she didn’t die like yours did. And I love my mother deeply. Anyway, that’s all beside the point. You’re going to Nashville with me, right?”

“Nate, …”

Interrupting her, he grasped her other hand, as well. “I’ve listened very carefully to everything you’ve said, Miss Libby. You said that I act like you’re going to agree to marry Ross before we get to Nashville.” He emphasized the last words to remind her. “That sounds to me like you’ve already made up your mind. Now all I have to do is get you to admit it. All I need to do is get you to agree to come with me to my cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Say that you’ll be the only lady to share the snow with me there.”

“First promise me that you won’t kiss me like you did earlier while we’re at the cabin—
if I decide to go. It wouldn’t be a good idea given the conditions under which we would be living.”

“If you’ll go, I’ll promise you the world and stick to my promise like molasses.”

She giggled at his lighthearted tone. “All right. Will and I will go, but I still don’t particularly want Hiram to go with us. I trust you not to hurt me—or do anything else that I don’t want you to. But I don’t think I can ever trust Hiram again.”

“That’s understandable. And I promise that, if he does come along, I’ll do everything in my power to see that he doesn’t bother you. It’s not that I want him there, mind you; it’s that I believe he’s bound to show up eventually, anyway.”

“Then I suppose we should make plans to leave the day after tomorrow. We can do that tonight—while we’re eating dinner right here. Mr. Gray—the owner of the hotel?—offered to bring us some because of the trouble you were put through in his establishment.” With a mischievous smile, she added, “I think you’ve made a conquest, Nathaniel Payne. The owner obviously likes you.”

After kissing her fingers, Nate reached up to caress the back of her head with one hand. Staring unfalteringly into her eyes, he emitted words he was uncertain she wanted to hear. “There’s a much more important conquest I’d rather make, my sweet, one that could lead to a deeper friendship than already exists.”

Although she pushed her head against his hand to slow his movement of drawing her downward, she couldn’t stop him. He was determined to have this one night, despite her reluctance.

“Nate, please,” she said. “You promised not to do this.”

“No, I didn’t—not here, anyway. I promised I wouldn’t kiss you like that at the cabin, and I intend to keep that vow. But as for here, sweet Liberty, I made no promises.” His lips met hers in a soft kiss that lasted only a moment. “This won’t work with you sitting in that chair. Come sit on the bed with me.”
Chapter 14

Gazing at him longingly, Libby fought the desires surging through her body. Even though she didn’t want to, she had to deny him. From somewhere deep within her, she had to summon the courage to tell him that she would never lie in a bed with him again. But could she do that when he was so kind to her? Knowing she must, whether she liked the idea or not, she removed his hand from her head.

“No, Nate,” she said softly. “I can’t let this go as far as it did earlier. It’s immoral, irresponsible, and simply not right.”

“Don’t be afraid of your feelings, my sweet,” he pleaded. “I can see in your beautiful green eyes that you want me to kiss you—and not a mere peck. You want a passionate kiss like we engaged in earlier. For God’s sake, Miss Liberty, why do you want to deny yourself a simple pleasure?”

“I told you that my eyes don’t speak; my mouth does. And my mouth says no. Besides, even if it is to you, such a pleasure isn’t simple to me.”

“But your heart says yes. It’s obvious by the way you respond to me.” Gently pulling her so she was forced to move from the chair to the bed, he embraced her waist. “Don’t deny your heart, Miss Liberty. Enjoy our attraction to each other as much as I do.”

She released a moan of pleasure when he slid his hands up her sides and around to her back. Why did her body always respond, even when she tried to will it not to? “It isn’t the same for me as it is for you, Nate. I’m a lady. I’m not supposed to do this until I fall in love. I’m not supposed to have physical attractions.”

He smiled at her, his eyes glowing with adoration. “At least, you’ve admitted that you have a physical attraction. I suppose that means I’m making some progress.”

His hands continued massaging her back. They moved closer to her neck and head until he found the combs in her hair. Removing them, he tossed them aside. They clattered onto the wood floor as his fingers combed through her hair in a languid motion. His actions made her long for more intimate caresses—caresses she had to deny both of them if they were going to continue traveling together.

“All right. I admit that I’m physically attracted to you. But I can’t give you what you want, Nate. I was raised to be a lady, and even you know ladies don’t do that kind of thing.”

“Don’t they? The first woman I bedded was a woman of breeding, a woman who was from one of the most prestigious families in Philadelphia. She was a woman many years older
than I, a woman who loved showing young men the facts of life as they pertain to the upper echelon of society. Granted, I felt no love for her and, quite frankly, no attraction. Then her husband went out of town on business, and she needed a strapping young man of eighteen to help her move some heavy furniture. But it turned out that the only furniture she wanted moved was her bed—and then only the mattress. It’s difficult for a young man that age to turn down the advances of a woman, and it was even more difficult when I discovered that she wore nothing but the sheet under which she lay. So your claim that ladies don’t bed a man without the benefit of marriage has fallen on deaf ears. I know better.”

Nate’s description of his seduction brought vivid images to Libby’s mind, and she began to respond to his caresses. But if she continued, she would find it difficult to turn him away at the cabin. Besides, with her brother and the doctor present, they would need to hide their attraction. Taking advantage of this privacy now might make that deception impossible.

“What will happen at the cabin, Nate?” she asked nervously. “What if we go farther now? How will be contain our desires there?”

“My God!” he breathed heatedly. “Now you’re admitting that you have desires. Don’t torment me like this any longer, Miss Liberty. Let me kiss you. Let me hold you. Let me show you how attracted to you I am before the long, cold winter of hiding our feelings.”

“Nate, please understand ...”

“To hell with pleading!” he exclaimed, crushing her against him. “Now that I know you want the same thing I do, I’m going to take it. And I’m going to give it to you in such a way that you’ll never question my feelings for you again.”

With his hands holding her head, his fingers entwined in her hair, he brought her lips against his in a passionate kiss. Before she could stop it, a heated moan ripped from deep in her chest. Oh, how she loved it when he kissed her like this! Then his hands began to explore her clothed body.

The heat his caresses summoned forth was like nothing she’d ever experienced, not even in Nate’s arms. Her body refused to listen to her mind and moved against him of its own accord. Then again, she had only thoughts of pleasure in her mind, anyway. Her thoughts of propriety were no longer present. Giving in to her instincts, Libby grasped his shoulders tenderly while he skillfully maneuvered them on the bed. When she finally lay beneath him, he flung one leg over one of hers and pressed against her covered womanhood.

Sensations so intense that she couldn’t classify them swept over her. They centered between her legs and spread directly to her chest, constricting her heart and lungs until she could scarcely breathe. His tongue entered her mouth as she moved against him. Even through all the layers of their clothing, she felt his hardened manhood. Not only was he leading her to a union that she’d long been avoiding, he was leading her to one of which she’s been dreaming!

What he gave her was much more than physical fulfillment. She’d never felt so satisfied in the realization that a man wanted her. And she never wanted the moment to end.

This throbbing excitement when he quickly released all the buttons separating him from
her naked breasts was too wonderful to lose. And when he repositioned himself to trail feathery kisses from her mouth to her breasts, her excitement grew even greater. He suckled gently on one while toying with the other with his free hand.

Not once did he relieve the pressure of his leg between hers. The desire kept growing until she came to a panting physical explosion that she never even considered possible. And she certainly never thought she could show a man how much she enjoyed him—not even Nathaniel Payne.

Kissing his way back to her mouth, he massaged her taut breasts for several minutes. Finally, he released her lips and stared down at her with a look in his bright blue eyes that she'd never seen before.

“Oh, God, Miss Liberty,” he whispered. “I would give the world to show you my feelings properly.”

“I don't understand,” she replied, still slightly short of breath.

“I want you so much—much more than I'll allow myself the pleasure of taking. I'll have to be content knowing that you were satisfied.”

“What?”

“Because I could never do that to a lady.”

“But you said ...”

“I know what I said, but it was a lie designed to seduce you into letting me do exactly what I did. I wasn't seduced by a much older socialite when I was eighteen—not that there aren't socialites who would do exactly what I recounted. The truth is that I lost my virginity to a poor girl from the wrong part of Philadelphia—when I was sixteen. And the idea was all mine even if she did agree. I took advantage of her, my sweet, just like I did you.”

“I don't feel like you took advantage of me,” she admitted as unexpected shyness overwhelmed. “For the first time in my life, I feel like a man honestly found me attractive enough to give me something special. And I feel like you still respect me now that it's all over. Papa always told me that men who seduce a woman without the benefit of marriage don’t respect the woman afterwards.”

“For one thing, Miss Liberty, you’re father wasn’t right about everything he told you. For another, what we did wasn’t what he was talking about. And finally, I'll always respect you. I'll never do anything to you that could even make you think that I don’t. But what we did a few moments ago won’t happen again for a very long time. I made a vow that I doubt I’ll have trouble keeping while we’re at the cabin with Will—and probably Ross, too.”

While Nate tied her camisole and buttoned her blouse, Libby delighted in the feel of his fingers against her skin. When he finished, he lay back beside her. Snuggling against him, she laid her head in the junction of his shoulder and chest. Almost instantly he began to run his fingers through her hair.

“You showed me something about myself today, Nate,” she admitted, “something I never knew I had. I didn’t know that I was capable of responding to a man like I did you, and I’m surprised that it was you who showed me that I was. After all the trouble we’ve had getting
along, it didn’t seem likely to me.”

“We didn’t get along because we were trying too hard to hide our attraction to each other—at least, you were. You didn’t even want to let yourself see it. Now that you’ve admitted you’re attracted to me, though, things should be a lot easier for us.”

“Should they, Nate?” she asked skeptically. “Or is that wishful thinking on your part? Or maybe it’s something you’re saying to make your distress easier to bear. It won’t be easy for me, Nate, so I know it will be even harder for you. You understand your feelings much better than I understand mine.”

“No, my sweet, I don’t understand my feelings, no matter how it seems to you.” Kissing her hair softly, he wrapped his arms around her. “All of those other things are probably part of it, but I honestly believe we’ll have less trouble now that we know how we feel about each other.”

“We still have to hide it from Will and Hiram, Nate. Neither one of them can ever know what happened this afternoon—or tonight. Especially Will. I couldn’t bear it if he thought badly of me.”

“I agree, and neither will learn it from me. Now enough about this. It’s part of our memories, and we should keep it there for the time being. We need to begin making plans for the trip to the cabin.” He kissed her hair softly. “I should leave now.”

“Leave?” she asked, struggling to keep the disappointment from her voice.

“You don’t want Will or Ross to find me here in the morning, do you?”

“No, but I’m not ready for you to leave yet, either. Can’t you stay a little while longer?”

With a smile, he hugged her. “A little while. But when you finally fall asleep, I’ll go to my own room in the other hotel.”

“Thank you,” she replied, sliding her hand across his muscular chest and delighting in the feel of it.

The next morning a knock on the door startled Libby awake. Realizing that she was alone in the bed, she smiled as she rose. Nate was a true gentleman. He’d granted her request that he stay, yet he’d kept his vow to leave so Will wouldn’t find him there. Her heart swelled with joy to know that she could trust him to keep his word—no matter what it was.

After breakfast, Libby and Nate traded her wagon, along with many of the supplies, for a smaller, more lightweight carriage and another pack mule for their journey into the Blue Ridge Mountains. The day after that, they packed their belongings and began their trip.

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As soon as they arrived at the cabin, everyone prepared for when the snow finally came.
Will cut cords of wood, and Libby smoked as much meat as possible in the small smokehouse a few yards behind the cabin. This was a task she willingly took on, according to Nate’s instructions, because the men were gone nearly all the time looking for enough food to hold them through the sparse winter months.

Snow began falling in small flakes that third morning, growing as the day progressed. Shortly before noon, the men returned because the snow was rapidly getting deeper. The flakes became larger as they mounted on the ground, blanketing everything with a cottony appearance. After eating, Nate tenderly grasped Libby’s hand and led her to the door. While he embraced her from behind to keep off the cold, they watched the gentle but persistent snowfall.

“What do you think, Miss Liberty?” Nate asked in a whisper. “Is it as beautiful as I predicted?”

“Oh, yes,” she sighed.

“Wait until the clouds clear. Then it will be even more beautiful—with blue sky, white ground, and evergreens weighed down with snow, the green scarcely visible.”

“It sounds lovely.”

Libby was so comfortable in Nate’s arms that she hardly noticed the biting winter air. This was why Nate had invited her to the cabin, and she wasn’t a bit sorry that she’d come. The scene before her was as beautiful as he had described, and she could hardly wait to see the new vision he’d created in her mind.

The boughs of trees already buckled under the weight of the snow. The green of the pines and firs was scarcely noticeable through the white. Libby had seen snow before, but only for a short time and nothing compared to what lay before her that day.

When Ross complained of the cold several minutes later, Nate whispered into her hair. “Ross is right this time. It’s getting too cold to stand here. You could get sick if we don’t close the door, and I can’t let that happen to the best cook in the house. Why don’t we move to the window?”

Absently agreeing, Libby kept her gaze unalteringly on the winter scene until the dark, wooden door blocked it.

With Christmas upon them, snow covered the ground constantly. Not only did Nate need to hunt and trap daily, he needed the help of Will and Ross. For some reason, game was exceptionally scarce that year. Not only they, but carnivorous animals were on the verge of starvation.

To ease their minds, Nate vowed that they were in no immediate danger. With rationing, they could come through the winter with the little food Libby had smoked, as well as what the men could find on occasion.

Hearing Nate’s decision to ration, Libby gave all of her food possible to Will. His trousers became too short for his legs, and the crotch tightened as he began another growing spurt.
He needed the extra food now more than she did. Had it not been for that tightness, she reasoned, she could add material from her dresses to the length. And she did, although it did nothing to correct the other problem.

She also noticed that his shirts were becoming too snug across the shoulders. He was filling out and broadening as he labored until his muscles bulged. Since she’d stopped growing years before, Will needed the nourishment of her food much more than she did. So she pretended not to be hungry whenever Nate wasn’t around to know what she was doing.

But the food wasn’t the only place Libby scrimped. Although Nate had told her to let him know when the firewood was in danger of running out, she refused. He didn’t need the added burden of finding wood when he had to worry about putting food on the table.

To conserve wood, she used it only to cook and when the men were there. Otherwise, she put out the fire and bundled up in a coat. Then she worked vigorously inside the cabin, cleaning everything over and over to keep warm.

The afternoon of Christmas Eve, Libby realized that she needed to go out into the snowstorm. If they were to have the big Christmas dinner she’d promised Nate, they needed a lot more firewood.

She felt terrible, like she would vomit or faint at any moment. And she couldn’t seem to stop coughing lately. Today, though, her cold seemed worse. Her chest felt tight, and it was almost impossible to breathe.

But what could she do? If they were to make it through winter alive, they all had to make sacrifices and do their fair share of work.

Already bundled in her heaviest coat, Libby set out to find a small, dead tree. She trudged through the deep snow with great difficulty. As much as she hated to do it, she released the cough she’d been stifling. It hurt all the way down to her chest. She coughed again—a loud, hacking sound that racked her entire body with pain that radiated from her chest.

She forced herself onward. She had to find wood so she could cook Nate the dinner he so desperately wanted. After all he’d done for her, all he’d shown her, he deserved at least that much.

***

Coming home early to warn Libby that they’d killed a large white-tailed deer stag, Will raced into the cabin.

“Libby!” he shouted, slamming the door behind him. When she didn’t reply, he strode to the bedroom door and rapped on it lightly. “You in there, Libby?”

Again he received no reply. Slowly opening the door, he peeked in to see if she was napping. To his amazement, she wasn’t there.

“Where the hell did ...” Will gasped in horror. “Oh, my God! Indians!”
Racing out of the cabin, Will jumped on his horse and urged it as fast as it could go in the rapidly deepening snow. When he returned to where Nate and Ross were skinning and butchering the deer, he called out frantically. “Nate! Come quick!”

Glancing up from his work, Nate rose as hurried to Will. “What is it, lad?”

“Libby’s gone,” Will announced as he dismounted.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Nate asked frantically. “She has to be there somewhere. Did you look in the bedroom?”

“No, of course, I did,” Will said irritably. “I’m not stupid. She’s not there. I think Indians took her.”

Nate’s heart skipped a beat. He would never forgive himself if that were true. But before he could berate himself for convincing her to join him, he needed to verify Will’s suspicions. “Did you see their tracks?”

“I didn’t exactly look,” Will admitted, “but where else could she be?”

“I don’t know,” Nate said, taking Will’s reins and swinging into the saddle, “but I’m sure as hell going to find out. You help Ross get that carcass back. I’m going to find Libby.”

Nate raced the horse all the way back to the cabin. Even as he dismounted, he saw her tracks, too faint for the less experienced Will to notice. After about fifteen minutes of following her trail on foot, he found her lying unconscious in the snow, with several pieces of firewood scattered around and under her.

“Oh, God, no!” he exclaimed as he raced to her side. “For God’s sake, Liberty. Why didn’t you tell me we needed wood?”

Dropping to his knees, he gently rolled her onto her back then removed his glove. Despite the fact that she’d been lying on her side in the snow, her cheeks and forehead were warm when he felt them. Nate could only imagine how high her fever was.

Without hesitation, he gathered her into his arms and rushed back to the cabin. There was no fire in either fireplace! He needed to warm up the cabin. But first he had to get Libby out of her cold, wet clothes. Laying her on the bed, he quickly stripped her then covered her with all the blankets and coats available. Now to start a fire in the bedroom fireplace.
Chapter 15

Going to the woodbin, he removed the last four small logs and took them into the bedroom. After starting the fire, he returned to the bed. His heart broke as he gazed down at her. She looked so pale. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? Had he been so busy trying to feed her that he’d ignored her illness? Or had he simply not wanted to see it? Whichever it was, he needed to warm her up.

He changed into dry clothes then got into bed with her. The best thing to do was rub her extremities briskly. Even though areas of her body showed early signs of frostbite, she was still running a high fever. And now he could tell that she’d lost a lot of weight during their two and a half months in the cabin. Her weight loss was greater than it should have been under the circumstances, too.

Before that moment, he’d been unaware that she had a cold, and her difficulty in breathing now concerned him. She didn’t have a simple cold; she had pneumonia.

Nate was furious with himself. All this time he’d been oblivious to her suffering. Apparently, all of them had. Now she could die. And why? Because he’d been so desperate to have her share the mountain winter with him that he hadn’t had the fortitude to send her somewhere safe.

Until that moment, he’d never considered himself a selfish man. But with Libby so sick, so frail, he thought of himself as nothing else. If he hadn’t been selfish, she would have been out of the mountains and in the warmer climate of North Carolina, probably safely in a big city where she could be comfortable and well. And he had nobody to blame for her illness but himself.

By the time Will and Ross returned, Nate sat beside Libby on the edge of the bed. He fought back tears of concern as he held her hand, desperately willing his health to heal her.

The outside door opened, and Nate shot his startled gaze to the bedroom door. “Is that you, Will?”

“Yeah!” he replied, stomping his feet to knock off the snow on his boots. “Did you find
“Is Ross with you?” he asked frantically.

“Of course, I am,” Ross returned, “so you’d better not be doing anything to Libby.”

“Just get the hell in here, Ross,” Nate ordered. “Now! Libby’s sick.”

Ross and Will rushed to the bed. While the doctor examined Libby, Nate paced the room. What had he done by bringing her to the mountains? He should have known that she was too delicate to withstand the harsh winter.

Before him, Ross rose and glared at him.

“Well, Ross?” Nate asked nervously. “What is it?”

“You know what it is,” Ross declared. “She has a severe case of pneumonia, probably due to insufficient nourishment and too much work in this cold weather. She’s not suited to this kind of labor. You never should have brought her here, Payne. She could die because of you.”

Nate sank onto the edge of the bed and took Libby’s hand in both of his. Gazing at her in sorrow, he choked out words that nearly caught in his throat. “Nobody knows that better than I. You two go change out of your wet clothes. I’ll sit with Liberty first.”

Taking turns watching her, the men ate, did chores, hunted, and cared for Libby in shifts. But it was Nate, consumed by guilt, who took full responsibility for her condition. He’d brought her to his cabin then spent most of the time away from her.

For several days Libby slipped in and out of consciousness. When she was awake, either she was too weak to speak or incoherent if she tried.

Libby woke slowly. There was a heaviness in her chest that wouldn’t go away, but she didn’t hurt like she did before. With a moan, she rolled her head to the side. A moment later, a large hand came down heavily on hers.

Her eyes fluttered open. Directly before her Nate lay sleeping on the floor in a corner of the room. She spoke his name.

“No, Lib,” Will replied. “It’s me.”

She turned her gaze on her brother, who shouted to Nate as he moved from his post at her bedside. Nate scrambled to his feet and hurried to sit on the edge of the bed while Libby repeated his name.
“Yes, Miss Libby,” he replied, tenderly grasping her hand.

Her chest ached, and the mere act of saying his name was an effort. She gasped for breath in an attempt to get more air, but it didn't work. “It's so hard to breathe.”

He smiled reassuringly. “I know, my sweet. You're a very sick lady.”

“And my chest hurts.”

“You have pneumonia, sweetheart, so you shouldn't talk as much as you are.”

“Did Willie tell you?” she asked weakly.

“Tell me what?”

“About the food.”

Nate shot his startled gaze over his shoulder to Will. “What food?” When Will shrugged his broad shoulders, Nate returned his gaze to Libby. Stroking her warm cheek, he said, “Don't worry, my sweet. I'll talk to him about it later.”

“He's growing again.” She took a deep, agonized breath. “I had to lengthen his breeches.”

The smile on his lips faltered, but Nate continued his gentle caress. “I know. I'm already getting ready to make him a pair of buckskins like mine. That will give him something more comfortable to wear. So don't you fret about it. Concentrate on getting well.”

“He needs more food than you said he could have. That’s why.”

“Please don’t talk,” Nate pleaded in concern. “You're making it harder on yourself.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be, Miss Liberty. I’m not going to let anything happen to you if I can help it. I promise.”

“I need to get firewood. You're too busy.”

“Don't worry. I had Will do it. Ross and I thought we should be here in case you needed us.”

Libby gazed up at him. “Ross?”

“Yes. You remember him. He’s the one who came to the cabin with us—the doctor?”

“Dr. Ross?”
“That’s all right. You don’t need to remember right now, Miss Liberty. You will eventually.”

“Tomorrow is Christmas. I have to get up. I promised to fix you a big dinner. I have to start tonight.”

“You stay right where you are,” he insisted sternly yet quietly. “Christmas is already passed, so you don’t have to cook anything.”

“Passed?”

“You’ve been unconscious most of the time for quite a while. This is January first.”

“The new year? What year? I can’t remember.” Panic flooded through her, and she squeezed Nate’s hand weakly. “Why can’t I remember anything?”

“You can’t remember because you’re still very sick. Just don’t worry. I’ll explain anything you want me to. All you have to do is ask.”

“I did.”

“Now I’m confused. I’ve been so concerned about you that I’m having trouble concentrating on our conversation. I’m just glad that we can even have this talk. As far as I’m concerned, nothing else matters right now.”

“What year is it?”

“It’s the turn of the century, my sweet. It’s 1800.”

“I’m afraid. Am I going to die?”

“Not if I can help it, you’re not,” Nate answered. “I won’t let you. I didn’t bring you all the way to my mountain cabin to let you die. I brought you so you could share the winter scenes with me. If you’re going to do that, I have to keep you alive, don’t I?”

“Do you promise?”

“Tell you what, Miss Libby,” he said with a cracking voice. “If you promise to fight for life, I’ll promise not to let you die. Is it a deal?”

She nodded her head and offered him a weak smile. “Yes. I trust you, Nate. If you say you won’t let me die, I believe you. But I’m tired. May I go back to sleep?”

“The more sleep you get, the better your chances of a complete recovery. You can sleep all you want to, my sweet. Just close your beautiful eyes.” With his free hand, he shut her eyelids then smoothed her hair back from her face. “I’ll stay right here with you to make sure
you’re all right.”

Her eyes drifted open to gaze up at him. “Would you, Nate? You won’t leave me for more than a couple of minutes?”

“I haven’t since I brought you back from your wood-collecting excursion,” he assured her, “and I have no intention of starting now. Relax now. And don’t worry about anything. I’ll do all the worrying for you. You concentrate on getting well.”

“All right. Thank you, Nate.”

Within seconds, Libby returned to sleep. Nate, still holding her hand, waited until he was sure she wouldn’t hear their conversation before he faced Will.

“All right, lad,” Nate said. “Exactly what was Liberty talking about when she asked if you said anything to me about food?”

“I don’t know, Nate. All I can think of is that she gives me the food she doesn’t want to eat. But she only did it when you were gone and she wasn’t hungry. Otherwise, she always ate everything she was rationed.”

“She was giving you her food?” he asked in surprise. “No wonder she lost more weight than the rest of us. I noticed that her clothes didn’t fit as well, but I attributed it to all of us having to cut back on eating. Why do you think she did a stupid thing like that? Didn’t she know she would get sick if she didn’t eat right?”

“She was trying to see that I got enough, I suppose.”

A tear slid down Will’s cheek. He brushed it away and straightened his shoulders as though he wanted to hide his distress. Nate smiled knowingly. “It’s okay to be upset, Will. I’ve shed my fair share of tears over this, too.”

“It’s different for you. You love her.”

“Love’s a strong word, lad. Besides, you love her if anybody does. She’s your sister.”

“I do love her, Nate,” Will said as another tear dribbled down his cheek. “That’s why I’m so upset. It’s my fault she’s so sick. If I weren’t growing again, she would have eaten everything. She was going to give her life for me, and there’s nothing I can do to help her in return.”

“I imagine she feels very protective of you. She’s a woman and can’t help but have that damned maternal instinct. But don’t blame yourself. It isn’t your fault that you’re growing again. That’s life. As big as you are, I sure as hell didn’t expect it. Miss Libby probably didn’t, either.”
Will paused, watching as Nate held Libby’s hand while she slept. “You don’t admit it, but you’re in love with Libby.”

“You don’t understand, Will,” Nate replied, gazing at the young woman in his bed. “I can’t be in love with her. That would presume that Liberty returns my love, which she doesn’t. She told me more than once that she can’t love any man.”

“It was you she called for when she woke up,” Will said. “She didn’t want me, and she doesn’t even remember Ross. How can you say that she doesn’t love you?”

“Because she’s made it very clear that she intends to never fall in love. She remembers all too vividly the pain her father suffered when her mother died. And once she told me that the only way to avoid experiencing similar pain is to refuse to fall in love. So you see, Liberty does not now nor will she ever love me. Simply the thought of feelings that deep frightens her. I can’t say that I blame her, either.”

Nate paused to sigh. “But I adore Liberty, Will. I love her with all my heart, so much so that I understand exactly how she feels. The mere possibility of Liberty dying hurts like hell. I’ve been in love before but never like this. In fact, I never believed it was possible to feel so strongly about a woman.”

“You wait, Nate. You’ll see that I’m right. She loves you, or she never would have agreed to come to the cabin with you.”

“If you say so,” Nate replied.

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Three nights later, after everyone was asleep, Libby woke with a start. What was that noise? She rolled over on the bed, and her arm knocked against an immovable object. Opening her eyes, she saw the darkened form of Nate lying on the bed beside her.

Smiling, she drew her arm from under the covers and let her fingers trail through the hair covering his chest as she lay her arm across it. Nate moaned then continued his quiet snoring. Libby snuggled closer. Even though she was cool lying under the covers, he lay atop them, his torso warm and inviting.

She planted a tender kiss on his shoulder, and he rolled toward her, flinging his arm over her body. His face lay so close to hers that she could feel his breath on her cheek. Unable to resist, she kissed his nose.

“Oh, God, Liberty,” he whispered heatedly. “I need you so much.”
His mouth covered hers as he pushed her onto her back. Libby sighed and parted her lips slightly in the hope that he would gift her with a passionate kiss like the one they’d shared in the hotel room. And it worked! His tongue dove into her mouth, clashing with hers as he worked the covers to her waist.

His hand sought out her nightgown-clad breast. He moaned in disappointment. He released her and quickly freed the buttons on her gown then slid his hand inside. The warmth of his large hand on her cool mound increased her excitement so much that she dared her first intense response by tentatively pushing his tongue from her mouth with hers.

She dipped her tongue into his mouth, working it around when he groaned and began to massage her breast. Oh, how she loved what he did to her! How he made her feel so much like a woman. And suddenly, without question or hesitation, she wanted to give him everything she had.

Tenderly grasping his head in her hands, she pushed it away and whispered. “Please, Nate. I want to give everything to you—right now.”

His eyes popped open in stunned disbelief, and he whispered, “My God, it’s not a dream.”

“No, Nate. It’s real.”

“Are you sure, Liberty?”

“I’ve never been more positive of anything in my life. I want to give you what I’ve never given another man.”

“Oh, God,” he sighed.

Without arguing, he stripped off his breeches and climbed under the covers with her. His mouth captured hers, and he began working the nightgown up her body. When he got it to her breasts, he repositioned himself, kissing his way down her throat while he pushed the gown above her breasts.

His lips caught her nipple. This was the first such contact Libby had ever had. The sensation drew a startled gasp from her. But when he began to suckle gently, her body reacted with an instinct that she didn’t know existed. She’d seen her father do this to Maria, but she never dreamed ...

The thought disappeared as deeper, newer sensations engulfed her. Frantic, she grabbed the hem of her nightgown and struggled to get it over her head. In the back of her mind, she heard a small tearing sound but ignored it to toss her gown heedlessly on the floor.

Nate kissed her other nipple then began a trek of feathery kisses down her body that she thought would make her fly over the bed. His tongue dipped into her navel, circled it, then moved lower—to her hip, her thigh, the place where she felt alive for the first time in her life.
He kissed her, then moved upward, the weight of his body spreading her legs as his slippery tongue left its trail of hot embers over her stomach and ribs.

He kissed each nipple again then lay completely atop her. “I’ll do this quickly, my sweet, so you can spend the rest of the time enjoying yourself.”

Positioning himself at her entrance, he captured her lips in a grinding kiss that she found rather brutal. Then, just as she was beginning to think her lips would never be the same, there was an excruciating pain between her legs. Nate’s lips stifled her scream of agony.

Then his kiss changed. He merely lay atop her, not moving except to massage her breast or caress her thigh. His lips moved against hers gently now. He didn’t need to take her mind away from another part of her body. And, under his gentle caresses and tender kiss, she felt her muscles relax. At last, she was ready for the joy of passion.

He moved within her slowly, making her wonder if the new sensations she’d had with Nate before had been worth the experience. These even newer sensations made the others seem drab, almost unappealing, as if they hadn’t been so exciting after all.

She moaned heatedly into his mouth and let instinct control her body. Beneath him, she moved her hips, sliding them back and forth across the bed as far as he would allow her. He began to move faster in her, to send the flames she’d never felt before even higher—so high that she wondered if …

Nate burrowed into her with a lusty growl into her mouth. He lay atop her for several seconds, panting heavily, before he rolled onto his side, separating them.

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her hair gently then whispered, “Thank you, sweet Liberty. I’m sorry it had to be so rough on you. But the next time you give yourself to a man, at least you’ll be able to enjoy yourself. I wanted you to tonight, but I’m afraid I couldn’t wait any longer. Do you forgive me?”

“Yes.” She hadn’t enjoyed herself? She’d thought that she’d enjoyed herself tremendously, but Nate seemed to think that there was more to what they’d done. Was it possible that there were more feelings locked inside her that still hadn’t been set free?

But she was too afraid of the notion to question him. Instead, she fell back to sleep, completely exhausted and content in Nate’s embrace.
The winter wore on, and the leaves budded on the trees as spring showed it's freshness. After finishing her work early one day, Libby dragged a chair onto the porch to enjoy the weather. Sitting in the warm sun, she delighted in the sound of birds chirping and squirrels chattering. In the distance, a rabbit scampered from one bush to another with her young chasing her.

Oh, to have the freedom to race across the meadow! But Nate had warned her that she should stay within sight of the cabin. There was always that ever-present danger of an Indian attack. Of course, the meadow was still in sight of the cabin if she could see the rabbits. So why should she sit on the porch when she, too, could enjoy the spring more completely?

Returning from a hunting trip, Nate spotted her wandering through the green grass and wild daffodils. He stopped just outside the clearing where he could watch her without being noticed. Libby was so pretty! And her dark red hair appeared even more fiery in the sunlight. She'd regained all of the weight she'd lost during her illness, too, even though he and Will had practically had to force-feed her at times.

Nate chuckled at the memory. Thanks to his brief time in medical school, he knew that Ross being on Libby’s side was nothing more than an act. No matter what she wanted, Ross supported her—even to the point that it could endanger her life. If she didn't want to eat, Ross told her that she didn’t have to. But he knew what was best for her, and he always insisted that she eat everything he put on her plate. Many times she protested, but she always complied—almost as soon as Ross told her that she didn’t have to do anything Nate said.

With an idea, Nate stalked up to the porch and laid his catch near the door. Hurrying to her side, he said, “You look like you’re ready for a good, old-fashioned stroll through the woods, Miss Liberty.”

Libby turned and smiled up at him. “I never thought I’d be so desperate to do something so simple. I must admit, I love spring more this year than I usually do.”

“That’s because there’s not much difference between winter and spring in Charleston. There’s a big difference here. Would you like me to escort you on your walk so you can go
farther?"

Her smile brightened. "I’d like that a lot more than you’ll ever know."

For quite a while they strolled silently, sharing the loveliness of the mountains. Libby was content to be alone with Nate. While they walked, she let her mind wander to the first major snowfall they’d shared and fondly reminisced about standing in the doorway with him as the falling snow blanketed the earth.

The feelings she had now, wandering through the woods with Nate, were as satisfying as those she’d experienced during the winter. They were probably even stronger, since he’d shown her so much concern and devotion during her recovery from pneumonia.

He’d been very understanding. He’d even doted on her as though he’d wanted to make amends for having put her through such an ordeal. She wasn’t positive, but she suspected it was because he’d suggested that she join him in the mountains. Granted, he’d never admitted it and she would never ask, but she sensed his attendance went much deeper than just a friendship. And that night when everybody else had been asleep had been a marvelous experience—probably the most marvelous of her life.

She’d always been afraid to get that close to a man. The mere thought of lying with a man like that had terrified her. But Nate had made her first time something beautiful that she would remember for the rest of her life—even after Nate left her in Nashville.

And he would do exactly that. She could tell by the way he acted around her, by the way he made arrangements so he would never be alone in her company. That was why she constantly reminded herself that she could have misunderstood his actions. What she viewed as devotion could have been nothing more than guilt.

“You’re awfully deep in thought, Miss Liberty,” he said, bringing her out of her daydreams. Stopping, he leaned against a large oak tree and smiled down at her. “Would you mind sharing them with me?”

“I was just remembering the reason I came,” she replied as she stopped and gazed up at him. “I was remembering the first snowfall and how it was as beautiful as you’d promised it would be.” She paused, hesitant to admit the truth. But the words came out despite her reluctance. “I was also thinking about the last time we were alone together. It’s something that I’ll remember fondly.”

“Is that why you came to the mountains with me? Because of the mental picture I painted of the snow?”

“Partially. It was a very intriguing thought to see what winter in the mountains was like. And partially I came because you said you wanted to share it with me.”
He stared down at her in amazement. "You did? I didn’t think that could have been the reason you agreed. I mean the part about my wanting to share it with you. I thought you came because you wanted to go to Nashville."

"Going to Nashville had absolutely nothing to do with my decision. The thought of someone wanting to share something with me was so pleasant that I wanted to experience it. As much as I hate to admit this, it was very nice standing in your arms and watching the snow fall. I didn’t even feel the cold of the open doorway because I felt so warm inside."

"I know what you mean. I felt the same way. But now we’re sharing the newness of spring. To me, that’s equally special."

"It is, isn’t it," she said. "It’s not quite the same but it is as special."

"To you, too, my sweet?"

"Absolutely. And I was thinking about something else, as well. I was thinking about how wonderful you were to me while I was recovering. You showed me more devotion, more patience, than any man I’ve ever known—including my father."

"There’s more to that devotion than …"

Nate moved slightly. An arrow whistled between them and landed with a thud on the tree only a fraction of an inch from his neck. He grabbed Libby’s wrist and began to run. She stumbled along behind him as he attempted to escape the attack.

What was happening? she wondered frantically. Were they going to be killed? Would Nate lose that beautiful head of hair that she so dearly loved running her fingers through?

Two strong hands wrapped around Libby’s upper arm. Terror flooded through her, and she frantically tried to grab Nate’s wrist. The men ripped her from his grasp. This couldn’t be happening! She'd only now found happiness, and it was being viciously taken from her. She had to do something to stop this nightmare.

Her scream of his name virtually drowned out his desperate denial that rang so distantly in her mind.

"No!" he cried out as he turned to help her.

One of the other three warriors blocked his view. A moment later a knife lodged in his arm. Determined to save the woman he loved, he yanked out the weapon. Dodging one Indian, Nate rammed headlong into another. With a quick jab, he drove the knife into his opponent’s stomach and bore downward, declaring, "Damn you to hell for this!"
The Indian screamed as the long blade tore open his abdomen, then dropped to the ground, already dead.

From behind him, Nate heard the third Cherokee start in his direction. Nate drew his gun from his pants and fired it. The other man crumpled to the ground with a death groan caused by a single bullet that ripped through his brain. Filled with hate, Nate spun to face the surviving Cherokee. The warrior stopped short when he saw the weapon trained on him. Then he turned and fled.

Racing after him, Nate prayed that he could catch up with Libby's abductors. How could he have let this happen? He should have known better than to take her for a walk in the forest when he knew they could be attacked. How often had he warned, not only Libby but Will and Ross, that they should never leave the area unless it was absolutely necessary? How many times had he told them that even then they must be extra careful? Now he was the one who'd caused Libby's kidnapping, just as he'd caused her illness. If only he'd listened to his own advice!

Determined to find her, Nate followed the tracks. If those Cherokee had only wanted to kill Libby, they would have done it right then and there. They wouldn't have dragged her away. No, they wanted a hell of a lot more from her than she would ever willingly give them.

He had to get her back—before they could assault her in a more intimate way. He had to get her back if he ever wanted a chance to convince her to love him so he could make her his wife.

In desperation, he shouted for her, even though he knew the Indians would never let her respond.

“Liberty!” she heard Nate call in the distance. “Liberty!”

She desperately wanted to respond, but one Indian brave had a hand clamped over her mouth. He had her torso in a secure hold. Another Cherokee held her legs as they raced away. Struggling to free herself, Libby let her mind center on Nate, their time together and their future—if there was one.

Throughout everything, Nate had been patient and loyal. Not once had he turned his back on her, despite her reluctance to trust him. He would come to her aid again. The desolate tone of his voice, even father away than it once had been, certainly indicated that he would.

The only thing keeping her from panicking was that she could hear Nate. That meant he was still alive. And given his past treatment, he would use every resource at his disposal to find her.

All she had to do was stay alive long enough for him to succeed.
By sunset, Nate sank onto a fallen tree and rubbed his aching wound. The handkerchief he’d tied around it was still sticky, indicating that the bleeding hadn’t stopped completely yet.

He had to think of a way to rescue Libby before she was killed, and that wouldn’t be easy. If the Cherokee had taken her in the first place, they weren’t members of one of the friendly tribes of the nation.

Poor Libby. Stranded in an unfriendly Indian village with little hope of escaping on her own. They would probably turn her into a slave, or worse still, one might force her to become his wife.

Dear God, he couldn’t let that happen. He had to find her and rescue her before some damned brave forced her to carry his child.

With renewed determination, Nate started back to his cabin. Before he could get Libby, he needed to take care of his wound so it didn’t get infected and render a rescue impossible.

“Where’s Libby, you miserable trapper?” Ross demanded as Nate wandered wearily into the cabin. “What have you done to her this time?”

Exhausted and furious with himself, Nate shot back at Ross. “You’re a damned bastard, Ross! I have enough problems without your bitching. The Cherokee have her, and I have to get her back before they kill her—or worse. I’m going to pack some food and go find her. Ross, you get me every piece of jewelry Liberty owns. I’ll need it to trade for her.”

“Can I come with you, Nate?” Will asked in concern.

Nate shot his gaze to Will. “No, I don’t want help. I have to do this alone. They took her from me, and I’ll get her back. You go saddle my horse and get two more ready to take with. I’ll need them for trading, too.”

Will nodded in understanding. “All right, Nate. But what happened to your arm?”

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Will nodded in understanding. “All right, Nate. But what happened to your arm?”
Glancing down at the handkerchief, Nate grimaced. He’d been so concerned about Libby that he’d mostly ignored the pain in his upper left arm. Now that Will mentioned the wound, he was aware of the throbbing again. Examining his torn and bloody buckskin shirt sleeve, he touched the injury gently then untied the bandanna to see how bad it was.

“One of those damned Cherokee got me with his knife. You’d better sew it up, Ross. It’s pretty deep and should be cleaned well before I go get Libby. I don’t want it infected on such a serious mission.”

While Will dished up some stew and Ross got his medical supplies, Nate dropped onto a chair at the kitchen table.

“I don’t want food, Will,” Nate said. “I couldn’t eat, anyway. Go get everything I need so I can leave as soon as Ross finishes with me.”

“You sure?” Will asked as he set the bowl on the table. “You always tell Libby and me that we need to eat to keep up our strength.”

“I’m so sick to my stomach over what’s happened that I’d probably just throw it up, anyway. Now go.”

Will stalked out of the house as Ross returned from the bedroom with his medical bag and set it on the table. Despite Ross’s rough treatment of his injury, Nate didn’t make a noise. Instead he gritted his teeth so tightly that his jaws ached.

After Ross cleaned and stitched the wound, Nate relaxed his jaw and worked it around for a few seconds. It cracked several times before the pressure diminished. Then, as he rose, Will’s concerned voice stopped him. “How are you going to track Libby now, Nate? You told us when Flossie ran off that you couldn’t do it at night.”

“I’m going back to where I ended my search,” Nate explained. “I want to be that much closer to my goal by morning. I refuse to waste any time getting her back.”

“Do you want me to give you some laudanum for the pain?” Ross asked.

“Absolutely not,” he replied. “It would dull more than the pain. It would dull my senses, too, and I need to be alert to track those savages.”

With a final farewell, Nate mounted his horse and began his long journey. He had to find Libby. She’d captured his heart without him even realizing that she’d had a hold on him. No wonder he’d fallen in love with her. She hadn’t done anything to try to keep him tied down. She’d only been there when he’d needed a friend and had asked for nothing in return, except that he find her sister.

She’d also accepted him as the man he was—even if she didn’t like him much that way. Well, he would show her. He would be the kind of man she could like without reservation.
And he’d be that kind of man before he joined her in the Cherokee village—wherever that was.
Chapter 17

Long after Libby had abandoned her useless battle, the men carried her over rocky and dirt ground. After crossing two streams, they came to a small waterfall. Finally, they released her to cook the rabbits a third man, who had joined them earlier, had killed.

Aware that she was in grave danger, Libby was too frightened to attempt an escape. She wasn’t even sure she could survive it if she did. If she was patient and didn’t cause trouble, Nate would arrive. He would save her from these savages, like he had saved Flossie from the rattlesnake. And he would probably do it by the time the Indians finished eating.

Believing that Nate would save her soon, Libby silently refused the cooked rabbit one Cherokee held out toward her. Instead, she opted to study them while they ate and chatted in their native tongue. All three were bald except for the scalp lock at the back of their heads. One’s was adorned with decorative bears; the other two sported feathers in their scalps. Each of them wore deerskin breechcloths, which covered only enough of their loins to conceal their manhood and buttocks, and a pair of deerskin boots that came to their knees. She noticed all three were tattooed and well-proportioned. But she was so embarrassed by their dress that she avoided glancing in their direction after her initial scrutiny.

Scanning the surrounding area, Libby searched for Nate. Was he hiding somewhere in the trees waiting for the most appropriate moment for his rescue? If so, she couldn’t understand why he didn’t attack. No time would be better than while the braves were eating.

A rattling sound caught her attention, and she stared in terror at the poised diamondback about three feet from her. She froze instinctively as a piercing scream escaped from her. An object whizzed past her to send the snake flying through the air for several feet. It landed in a bloody heap surrounding the tomahawk with a leather thong attached to the handle.

Her gaze remained fixed on the dead reptile until she saw one man bend over to retrieve the weapon. Her eyes wander up the body of the dark-skinned man approaching her, but her gaze stopped at the black eyes. He stared down at her with the most lustful expression she’d ever seen—even more lustful than Nate’s gazes.

He stopped before her and spoke in Cherokee. Thankfully, he made no move to touch her as he tucked the tomahawk thong into the waistband of his loincloth. Then he returned to his meal as though nothing had happened.
Where was Nate? she wondered as she scanned the area. Surely, her scream had alerted him to danger, but he’d remained hidden. Why wouldn’t he rescue her? Surely, he knew that she’d never been so frightened in her life. Had he suddenly changed his mind about her? Then another question savagely struck her mind. What if he’d been killed?

As she was being carried off, she’d seen Nate battling three Indians, but only one had returned. She’d heard a gunshot early into her abduction. At least, one Cherokee must have died, because Nate seldom missed his target. Since Indians didn’t use pistols, any other killings had been made in silence. And Nate could easily have been a casualty.

On second thought, his survival was very possible. Even though his voice had been far away and fading, his cries for her had been strong and healthy, not the weak calls of a dying man. He had to be out there somewhere, patiently awaiting the most opportune moment to rescue her. And when he did, she would …

A hand clamped tightly around her upper arm, and Libby stared up at the warrior in fear. Without a word, he dragged her to her feet, pointing in the direction he wanted her to move. Now that the men had eaten, they seemed anxious to resume their journey. To keep from angering them, she walked willingly.

During the night-long trek, she often reminded herself that Nate could never rescue her if she died. At times, it was the only thing that kept her going. Although exhausted nearly beyond her limit, she continued as long as the men did. She stopped to rest just once the entire time and then only because the Indians rested, as well.

At last, the eastern sky cast dull shadows upon a small Cherokee village in a valley. With the possibility of sleep in sight, Libby increased her speed. If she needed to help Nate when he came for her, she needed as much rest as possible.

As they entered the camp, other Indians prepared for the day ahead. Women cooked on open fires outside the rectangular houses. Two of the men left them to greet women who appeared to be their wives. All of the women were dressed in buckskin shirts with deerskin skirts to their knees and knee-high moccasins similar to those of the men.

Pulling Libby along behind him, the Cherokee entered a simple building similar to a house and greeted an older man. They conversed for several minutes before he led her to another room.

She was amazed that the buildings in the village were so modern, not wigwams as she’d long believed. These homes had gabled ceilings, clay and grass-coated walls, and even rooms. This one contained a raised bed made of poles with wooden cross pieces. Covering that was a crude mattress of mats and several skin blankets, one of which appeared to have come from a bear.

The man’s deep voice from beside her drew her attention to him, and she glanced up to see him pointing at her while he spoke. Moving his arm, he pointed to the bed. Libby started
gratefully toward it, glad for the opportunity to sleep. But he grabbed her arm again to stop her. When she gazed up at him in surprise, he spoke again, this time tugging gently at her blouse before pointing at the bed.

Oh, no! He hadn’t meant that she was supposed to sleep. He wanted her! Panic raced through her. If she tried to run away, he would probably kill her. But if she agreed, he would take something that she only wanted to give to Nate. What should she do? Either way, she could only lose. But which was worse? But there was only one choice. She had to do whatever the Indian wanted. It was the only way to stay alive. And it was the only way she still had a chance to be with Nate.

Her fingers shook in a mixture of fright and nervousness as she slowly undressed. The Cherokee brave watched unfalteringly. His breechcloth bounced lewdly as his excitement for her grew.

He feathered her lips with tender, light kisses and spoke hotly as he caressed her soft hair. “Oh, my sweet Liberty, you’re so beautiful. You’re more than everything I’ve always wanted in a woman, and I love you deeply.”

“I love you, too, Nate,” she replied. “You make me very happy, and there’s nothing I’d like more than to make you very happy, too.”

“Are you saying what I think you are?” he asked.

“Only if you think I’m saying that I want to give myself to you.”

“My God, it’s a dream come true. I’ll be gentle, my sweet. And if you’re frightened or change your mind, all you have to do is tell me. I’ll stop right away.”

“I won’t be frightened, Nate,” she assured him. “And I certainly won’t change my mind, because I want you as much as you want me.”

His lips met hers softly at first, but her frantic caresses made his kiss grow hungry. It demanded that she respond without reservation as he disrobed her. Despite her amazement that her clothes seemed to melt away, he continued to kiss her until she lay naked beneath him. Now all that remained was for him to remove his own clothes, which he did without breaking the kiss.

When he lay atop her, his nude body against hers, his desire grew even larger. But he avoided their imminent union. He memorized the feel of her naked figure from her knees to the top of her head. First, he paused at her breasts to massage them, then her stomach, hips, thighs, and womanhood, always caressing, constantly touching, never once ceasing his seductive movements until she jerked her mouth from his.
“Love me, Nate,” she begged in a heated whisper. “Show me what true love feels like. Please, don’t wait any longer. I can’t bear the unfulfilled excitement another second.”

Nate positioned himself between her spread legs and slowly drove into her body. He united with her in an all-consuming love so strong that neither he nor Libby could contain their excitement. Only minutes after their joining, they exploded in a mind-boggling satisfaction of passion beyond control.

“Oh, thank you, Nate,” she panted as he rolled off her, “for showing me the difference between sex and love. You proved to me that the Cheyenne brave could never have made me feel so good, even if we’d spent months or years together in his bed.”

Nate bolted to a sitting position on the ground. Desire still pounded in his loins. “God, no! Don’t let him take Liberty. Oh, God, please, please don’t let him have his way with her.”

Studying his surroundings, he saw that morning had arrived. After rubbing his tired eyes, he grabbed his cup from beside his bedroll and wandered to the nearby stream for a drink. As he dipped his head into the cool water to clear his mind of the bittersweet dream, his desire waned.

He had no real reason to believe the Cherokee would take Libby simply because he’d kidnapped her. Maybe he wanted a woman with red hair to work in his fields, or maybe he only wanted to show her off. What a ridiculous idea! Of course, the brave wanted Libby in his bed. There was no other reason for the abduction. Well, the brave wouldn’t have her—not if Nate could stop it.

With renewed determination, Nate saddled his horse, and after taking some jerky from his saddlebag, resumed his search.

***

Libby sat naked in the middle of the bed and hugged her knees. Rocking back and forth, she stared at the door in a daze. She’d never had such a horrifying experience. She’d kept telling herself that calm was her only hope of survival, but she’d given over to the panic.

Despite her deep desire not to antagonize him, she’d fought against the brave. But at least, he hadn’t done anything to hurt her. Actually, he’d been rather gentle under the circumstances. And he’d stopped when he’d seen her tears. Still, she hadn’t wanted to be with him. She hadn’t wanted it that afternoon or evening, either, and each time she’d shown her distress by battling against him until her tears returned and he stopped.
“Dear Lord,” she sobbed aloud, “why won’t You let Nate rescue me? Why must I endure this endless torture of spirit and mind? What possible reason could You have for putting me through such a horrendous experience? Oh, God, where is Nate? In my heart, I know he’s alive, but I don’t know why he hasn’t come for me. Please, God. Please help me through this terror until he can free me.”

The blanket covering the door suddenly opened, and the brave entered, letting it close behind him. When he noticed her tears in the dim moonlight, he lay down on the bed and pulled her down against him. He spoke softly while he trailed his hands over her hair in the same comforting gesture that Nate had used when she’d been so upset about Flossie’s disappearance.

It was incredible! The man was a savage who had kidnapped her, but he still showed compassion. How could this be? She’d always thought Indian braves controlled their concern for others. But the one who’d taken her for his woman was very caring, very open in his concern, and apparently very much infatuated with her. After having been in his arms for many minutes, he showed her no signs of wanting her again, even though they were both naked.

Before Libby realized what was happening, her tears stopped and she drifted into relaxing dreams of Nate.

***

As he sat by his campfire, Nate sorted through Libby’s jewelry chest. She owned nothing of great value to a white man, but the Cherokee had grown fond of trinkets like Libby’s. The jewelry would give him bargaining power when the time came to buy her freedom. All of a sudden, he caught sight of the green oval brooch he’d given her. Cradling it in the palm of his hand, he spoke to it as though it were Libby herself.

“Oh, my sweet Liberty, where are you? I miss you desperately. If only those damned Cherokee had left an easier trail to follow. I’m making progress, though, my sweet. I pray it won’t be long before we’re reunited.

“My love for you is strong, Liberty. And you might never know how much I hate myself for never having told you. Don’t try anything that might get you killed, and I’ll tell you every chance I get once I find you and buy your freedom. Do whatever those braves want, my sweet. Please don’t anger them.”

Rising, he wandered to the stream by which he camped that night and sat down again. How could he have been so selfish to not verbally express his love? She could die never knowing how he felt, never knowing if a man had truly loved her with all of himself.
The internal pain was almost more than Nate could bear. He’d always admitted it to a woman if he loved her, but he hadn’t told Libby, because he’d truly believed that she would leave him. She didn’t want the kind of total love and loyalty he wanted to give her.

“Never again, my sweet,” he vowed to the pin. “I’ll never deny myself the pleasure of telling you that I love you again. Just hold on to life, and I’ll be with you as soon as I can. I’m coming, Liberty. I’m coming to free you.”

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Nate’s lips captured hers in a heated kiss that she couldn’t deny as his hands sought out her breasts. What a wonderful way to wake up! But when his lips kissed her nipple and she moved her hands to entangle her fingers in his hair, she came to a terrifying realization. The man had no hair, so it had to be the brave! She fought against him as she had each other time. Instead of stopping, however, he took her gently despite her tears and verbal protests.

Would this nightmare never end? Would Nate never rescue her? If she had enough courage, she would escape. But she lacked the necessary valor to risk her life. She was too afraid that she would never see Will again, that she would never lie in Nate’s arms again. Being with the brave was a terrible trauma, but being with Nate was a joyous experience, because he loved her. She could tell by the way he treated her.

Wait! He loved her. It was the first time she’d admitted it, but she knew it was true. Maybe Nate had never said the words, but he’d certainly demonstrated his love more than once, especially when she was recovering from pneumonia. No, especially when he’d taken her virginity. Although, if she wanted to be honest with herself, she’d given it to him.

What had they discussed just before she was kidnapped? Something concerning her recovery, but what? Searching her memory for the exactly words, Libby ignored what the brave was doing to concentrate on Nathaniel Payne. Ah, that was it!

“Yes. And I was thinking about something else, as well. I was thinking about how wonderful you were to me while I was recovering. You showed me more devotion, more understanding, than any man I’ve ever known—including my father.”

“There’s more to that devotion than ...”

The brave rolled off her and pulled her against him.

Libby tried to analyze what Nate had started to tell her. From the tone of his voice and the expression in his eyes, he’d been ready to proclaim his love for her. Maybe now, while she was a captive, would be the perfect time to analyze her feelings toward Nate.
But she soon learned that she would have no time or energy for analysis. The next morning the brave brought her deerskin clothes like the other women's and took her to the field. There she worked until noon when she was brought back to village to eat. In the afternoon, she went back to the field. Too exhausted for any exertion, she fell asleep before the Indian could join her.

When she awoke, she discovered it was already dark outside, and there was a bowl of food beside her on the bed. Eating ravenously, she finished then lay back down and returned to a dreamless sleep.

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“Thank You, God!” Nate exclaimed. “You led me to a place where I know my love has been. Her tracks are all over the area around the falls. How could I ever have doubted that You would lead me to her? And the tracks leading away from here are good. It'll be easy to find her now.”

After eating, Nate withdrew the oval brooch from Libby's jewelry chest and spoke to her through it. “I've found your trail, my sweet. It won't be long now before we're back together. God, I pray you're alive, because I need you.

“What had I done before you entered my life, Liberty? What had I accomplished? As far as I'm concerned, I accomplished nothing. At least, that's what everything else amounted to before I started my quest to buy your freedom. I'll do it, too. I swear to God I will. Then I'll take you away and tell you exactly how much I love you.”

Nate rubbed the green stone with his thumb. “If I want to be completely honest, though, I can't tell you exactly how much I love you. There aren't the appropriate words in anybody's vocabulary. No one word I can think of could even come close to the depth of emotion that's been churning in my heart since I met you.

“That's how long it's been, too—since the evening I met you. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that my attraction, in fact, was deeper than what it was with all the other women I've ever known. That was something I didn’t learn until you almost died.”

The thought made Nate stop speaking for a few seconds as he gazed up at the star-filled sky. “Dear God, I know all I've done in the last couple of days is talk to myself and You. I also know that I don't deserve to ask You for as many favors as I have been the last couple days. But it's important that I find Liberty, and I know I can't do it without Your help. I'm going to beg You again to keep her alive. Please don't let her die before I can tell her that I love her. Please! You've got to keep her safe and help me find her.”
The hard labor she was forced to endure the following morning was more than Libby could bear. When the brave took her into his home before the noon meal, she fell into a deep sleep. Upon waking, she realized that she had slept through the afternoon. Deciding to take all the rest she could, she stayed in the bed and waited for him to return. This time he gave her the plate of food and left.

Curious, Libby watched his departing figure. Now that she was relatively rested and alone, she wondered if it would be possible to get free. Apparently, Nate had either not survived the attack or he hadn’t been able to find her. If either were the case, she had to depend upon her own common sense to get away from the Cherokee.

An overwhelming desire flooded through Libby. She needed to get out of the house, but she had to be very careful. She would never know Nate’s fate if she got killed. Carefully opening the cloth door to the bedroom, she peeked out into the next room. Thank goodness, it was empty. And judging from all the noise outside, people wouldn’t be paying attention to what she was doing.

As she stole to the outside door, she remained alert to anything out of the ordinary. When she reached the portal, she sighed with relief. She hadn’t been detected yet! After pausing to steel herself, she raced into the open.

Nate arrived outside the tribal village long before dark. After making camp a reasonable distance away, he returned to hide in the surrounding area and observe the Cherokee. The women were bustling around in preparation for the meals, which they cooked on open fires now that the weather had warmed. The men engaged in a variety of activities.

A group of braves near the edge of the village chipped out the charred side of a twenty-foot long, burned-out log to make a dugout canoe. Another group had gathered around a central fire to smoke their pipes and chat. Still more assembled to watch a man tattoo a warrior with a needle and blue coloring. Nearby, children played games while older boys practiced their skills with bows and arrows, spears, and blowguns.

Suddenly, a flash of red in the setting sun caught his attention. Libby! Praying that she could make her escape, he watched in desolation as a brave captured her and carried her
back into his house while she screamed for him to stop, to let her go home.

All right, he reasoned as he made his way back to camp, at the moment she was still alive. That much he knew for certain. But how much longer would that last? And would she make another attempt to leave if that brave didn’t kill her? Hopefully not. To go into camp and bargain for her now would be risky, and he didn’t dare force a rescue since she’d tried to free herself. The brave would either watch her like a hawk or would have someone else do it. If he tried anything, he would risk both their lives.

Back at camp, Nate stared into the campfire. If he’d told her before how much he loved her, she would have something to live for. That way, she would have died knowing that she was loved.

Nate tried to sleep but, knowing that Cherokee captives of war were tortured and killed slowly, found it difficult. Granted, she hadn’t been taken in war, but she had tried to escape. That was probably equally bad. Libby could have died in torment—or could be dying at that very moment—and he sat helplessly in the wilderness surrounding the village. The notion was as torturous.

“No!” he said firmly to the night. “I won’t even consider her being dead. She has to be alive because I’ve called on You so many times lately, God. I’m trusting You to keep her alive. Please, don’t let them kill her.”

As hard as he tried to force the idea from his mind, he couldn’t think of anything else. If she was already gone, he would probably suffer the same demise, as well as lose the jewelry and horses he’d brought to trade.

But if he couldn’t have Libby and love her as he should have all along, what difference did it make if he was dead? If Libby had died, he would have nothing to live for, anyway, because sometime during their short acquaintance, she had become his life.
Chapter 18

The Indians stared at Nate with curiosity and anger. One little boy grinned when he passed, so Nate asked him directions to the chief’s house. Despite the overwhelming feeling of awkwardness, he followed the child. A second boy ran ahead to warn the chief that Nate was coming.

When the chief met him outside the house, Nate spoke to him in Cherokee. This was the same building into which Libby had been carried, and he had to hide his shock.

“I have come in peace,” Nate announced without dismounting. “I wish to trade jewels and horses for my woman.”

The chief studied Nate. During the silence, Nate took the opportunity to examine the chief. He had a tattoo of a deer stag on his bare chest, and he was bald except for a scalplock adorned with feathers at the back of his head. His ears were cut on the outer border, stretched, and arced with wire which was wound around the piece of ear.

Finally, the chief spoke. “Your woman?”

“I know she is here, chief. I saw her last night. I want her back.”

“She belongs to my son now.”

“The hell she does!” Nate declared in English. Then he returned to the chief’s native tongue and a calmer tone. “She was stolen from me. I want her back.”

“Come into my house. My son is there.”

“Where is my woman?” Nate asked as he dismounted. “There will be no jewels, no horses until I know she is alive.”

“She is alive.”

Knowing the chief wouldn’t lie to him, Nate followed him into the house where his son waited. Although the son had an identical tattoo on his chest, he had no ear decorations. Instead, he bore tattoos of a bear and a mountain lion on each thigh and geometric tattoos on
his upper arms. Before resuming the conversation, the chief lit a pipe, the bowl of which was a bear sculpted from stone, then turned to his son.

“He wants his woman,” the chief announced. “He brings jewels and horses.”

“No!” the younger Indian replied. “The woman with red hair is mine. I will not let her go.”

“I have come many miles,” Nate explained, struggling to contain his temper, “to trade, not to steal. You stole my woman, but I will buy her back.”

“I want the woman with red hair. You cannot trade. You must pay the jewels and horses to fight for her.”

Nate furrowed his forehead in concern. This wasn’t something he’d considered, and he was astonished that this young Cherokee was so insistent. It was normally the Cherokee nature to avoid a fight.

Despite his reluctance, Nate considered the brave’s words. He had nothing to lose but his life. And if there was even a slight chance that he could gain Libby’s freedom, he had to take it. If that meant fighting the warrior, so be it. Life without her wasn’t worth living, anyway.

“Yes,” Nate finally agreed. “I will pay for the honor of fighting for my woman.”

“To the death,” the young warrior insisted.

Nate nodded his head once. “To the death.”

Libby’s heart beat faster. That was Nate, but he spoke to the Indians in their language rather than English—except when he swore that one time. Then again, the Cherokee didn’t know English, so Nate had probably learned their native tongue.

Oh, Nate, she thought, where have you been for so long? Why didn’t you come for me before I was forced to spend the night with that vile man?

When the brave entered the bedroom several minutes later, she backed away from him. Apparently, nothing had been solved between him and Nate.

“Please, not again,” she pleaded in English as the young warrior approached her. “I’d rather die than have you lay another finger on me.”

He spoke in Cherokee as he grabbed her upper arm and dragged her, struggling against him, from the house. He bound her wrists behind her with her arms around a small tree. Then Libby caught a movement from near the house. There was Nate. He hadn’t abandoned
In preparation for the fight, Nate took off his shirt. As he did, he scanned the area in a frantic search for Libby. When he saw her tied to a nearby tree, apparently so everyone could watch the competitors without worrying that she would escape, he examined her. She appeared tired and dazed, but she showed no injuries. Thank God, the brave hadn’t seen fit to harm her—at least, that Nate could tell.

The sad expression on her face, however, caused him deep concern. He’d never seen her so desolate! Even from this distance, she appeared to have given up all hope.

After about fifteen minutes of grappling with neither man gaining a distinct advantage, Nate grabbed his opponent’s arm and flipped him through the air. The brave’s head cracked against a tree limb on the way down. He landed, unconscious, with a sickening thud on the ground.

Standing over the Indian, Nate stared down at him. Now the Cherokee expected him to kill the warrior, but he couldn’t. He’d never killed a man before, and he had no intention of starting now. But he had to think of a suitable alternative—fast—before the brave regained consciousness.

One of the other braves handed Nate the axe he’d had on his horse. Accepting the tool, he continued to stare at the unmoving Indian. A strong compulsion swept through him—to take the brave’s most valued extremity so he could never bed a woman again. It was hard to resist the temptation.

Steeling himself, Nate drew the axe over his head. With one swift, powerful movement, he brought it down, nearly severing the Indian’s leg halfway between the knee and the groin. Other Indians swarmed to attend to the wounded man, doing everything possible to stop the serious bleeding. Only then did Nate turn to the chief, who was gazing at his son in disbelief.

“He can live,” Nate said, “if the bleeding stops.”

“But he will not be a warrior. He is disgraced.”

“He is alive. I won. I want my woman.”

The chief studied Nate then examined Libby. Nate glanced at her, as well. Apparently, she didn’t look excited enough that her man had won, because the chief returned his gaze to Nate and said, “I do not think she is your woman.”

Nate gasped at the chief’s honesty. “She is. I have won the fight, and you must give her back or break your promise.”
“You must prove that she is your woman.”

“How _can_ I? She cannot speak Cherokee, and you cannot speak English. You could not understand if she told you the truth.”

“You must be a husband with her in my house. I will watch.”

“Never!” Nate exclaimed, aghast.

“I cannot believe if you do not.”

Stifling his rage, Nate explained, “Cherokee men do not bed a woman when others are there, and white men do not. It is not your way, and it is not our way. She would not like it. No, chief, I will not bed my woman while you watch.”

What were they discussing? Libby wondered as she watched them. Why was she still being held captive when Nate had won the fight? Maybe she wasn’t the reason for the battle as she’d thought. Maybe Nate hadn’t come to rescue her. Maybe he had other reasons for coming to the village.

At last, the chief nodded his head once. Another brave stepped forward and untied Libby from the tree. Afraid of what might happen if she moved, she stood immobile against the birch. Thankfully, Nate seemed to sense her fear and took one tentative step toward her with outstretched arms. In an instant, she ran to him.

His strong arms encircled her in a comforting embrace. She was so relieved to see him that her heart swelled with happiness. Her throat constricted. She clung to him mutely, grateful to be alive and even more grateful that _he_ had won the contest.

“Come, my sweet,” he whispered as he led her away with one arm still around her. “We have to leave before the whole damned village decides I’ve overstepped my bounds.”

Still in a daze, she let him direct her toward his horse and lift her onto it. With the reins in his left hand, he swung up to sit behind the saddle. Finally, he urged his mount into a walk and calmly left the village. As soon as they were out of sight, he slid into the saddle, gently pushing her forward with his body.

Libby stiffened in his arms. She could feel him against her, and to her horror, she hated it. She wanted to tell him that, but her voice wouldn’t work. Who was she fooling? It wasn’t only her voice that wouldn’t work. Her brain wouldn’t, either. She was too terrified to do anything but tremble uncontrollably.

“It’s all right now, Miss Liberty. We’ll ride for a while, then we’ll stop and eat. You can get some good rest at the same time.” He chuckled briefly. “Not to mention, I can get some good
rest. I need it after that fight. I can't tell you the number of times I thought it was the end of me. But it wasn't! I beat that bas... that brave in a fair fight.”

Still, Libby didn't say anything. After the many times he'd been able to comfort her, she'd thought that he could this time, too. But she was wrong! He couldn't calm her with his strong, tender embrace, and he couldn't calm her with his soothing words.

“I'm glad you're away from them,” he continued. “I got to you as soon as I could.”

Again, she couldn't respond. More than anything she wished her voice would work when she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. How would she ever tell him how grateful she was that he'd endangered his life to save her? She probably couldn't, though, because there were no words that would express her gratitude.

“This is probably going to be one of the longest days we'll ever spend together,” he said. “It's a long trip back to the cabin, but we'll try to make it as quickly as possible. Will and Ross are as worried about you as I was. No, let me rephrase that. They're as worried about you as I am. You're awfully quite, Miss Liberty—even for you. Won't you please say something?”

Libby gazed at him. Oh, how she wanted to reply! But something was caught in her chest now. Something was holding all words and feelings inside her, and she doubted that she would ever be able to release them.

To her relief, he smiled warmly, as though he understood what she was feeling. “It's all right, Miss Liberty. You don't have to talk now if you don't want to. I won't talk, either. I'll let you get accustomed to being free again. When we stop to eat, we'll try a conversation again.”

For hours, neither said a word. Nate occasionally hummed a tune, which helped to relieve a bit of her anxiety, but he didn't speak. Libby laid her head against his shoulder and listened. She knew he was trying to make her feel better, but she doubted anything he could do would help—not humming and not talking.

And no matter how hard she tried to stifle it, she still shook with fear. She wasn't even able to shed tears to release the inner turmoil, let alone talk. Nate was right. The best thing to do was give herself time. But how much time would she need? The way she felt right now, it could be years.

When they stopped for the night, Libby finally spoke. “Can't we go straight home, Nate?”

“It's been a long day, Miss Libby,” he replied as he took the rabbit he'd cooked off the makeshift spit. “We both need to rest.”

“Won't they come after us?”
“The chief set you free,” he explained. “No man in the tribe—short of his son—would come after us. As you know, his son isn’t able to travel right now.”

“Why did you do that, Nate?” she asked. “Why did you try to cut off his leg? How could you do that to another human being?”

“I was expected to kill him,” he said, handing her a piece of rabbit. The chief’s son took you as his woman, so I have an idea of what you went through over the past three days. But I still couldn’t kill another human—even after he treated you so abominably. Instead, I took his leg. I doubt he’ll ever be able to ride again, because my axe was imbedded in his femur. The chief was grateful that I spared his life, though. That’s why he let you go so easily.”

“Then why did you two sound like you were arguing before I was untied?”

“It had nothing to do with you being released.” Nate took a bite of his rabbit.

Knowing that he was avoiding her question, Libby continued, determined to get an answer. “If it didn’t have anything to do with my release, why were you arguing?”

“Miss Libby, …”

“And for heaven’s sake, quit calling me that. I thought you would stop after that night in the hotel. Now that you’ve saved my life, just call me Libby. After what happened with that awful Indian, I’m not the lady you always said I was.”

He grinned at her. “I thought you’d never ask me to stop using miss.”

“Now, I expect an answer. After all, it’s my life we’re discussing.”

“Oh, all right,” Nate agreed, “but it wasn’t a pretty conversation. He wanted me to prove to him that you’re my wife. He wanted me to bed you—in his presence. I came within seconds of castrating his son for what he did to you. That damned brave is mighty lucky that I didn’t. You have no idea how close I came to cutting off his … his, uh. Should I say manhood?”

Libby gasped and stared at him open-mouthed. The gesture was so uncharacteristic of her that Nate laughed heartily. When an angry glare replaced her surprise, he apologized. Then Libby asked, “Would you honestly have done that to him?”

“Yes, I would have,” Nate insisted. “At least, I would have if I’d had any courage.”

“Courage?” she repeated as she shot him a startled gaze. “After what you did to save my life?”

“They wouldn’t have killed you, Libby. The chief’s son had other things in mind for you. Now, though, he has a long recuperation ahead of him, and he’ll probably never be able to ride a horse again. And by the time he can track us on foot, we’ll be gone. That is if he can
walk without a limp.”

Libby shook her head. “I don’t understand, Nate. The only horse I saw in the village the entire time I was held captive was yours. Why are you worried about him being able to ride?”

Neither spoke again for several seconds before Nate explained “I had to bargain for the fight, Libby. I had to trade for it. I brought things to trade with the Indians—for you. But it didn’t work out quite the way I expected. The chief’s son was determined to keep you. He refused to trade for you. All he traded for was the fight. If I’d lost, I would have lost more than my life. I would have lost you and all of your jewelry, as well.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “You gave them all my jewelry? Without my consent?”

“Will insisted on keeping your mother’s wedding ring, but I brought everything else—and two of your horses. I didn’t have anything they would have wanted.”

“But my jewelry! Every last piece! How could you?” she asked accusingly. “How could you give them everything? You didn’t even save the most important item. Do you hate me that much?”

When she rose indignantly, Nate scrambled to his feet. As he replied, he pulled her to him in a secure but gentle embrace. “I had to, Libby. And I don’t hate you. To the contrary, I love you—more than I thought possible. I didn’t think you would mind as long as I freed you.”

“Love me? How the hell can you claim to love me when you gave away my most cherished possession? I hate you!” she shouted as she pounded her fists against his chest. “I hate you; I hate you; I hate you.”

Nate smiled. It had finally happened. He’d been the man to release the storm in Libby, just as he’d told her he would. Even though she continued her tirade, he knew she didn’t hate him as much as she claimed. Granted, she was hitting him fiercely, but she wasn’t trying to break free. In fact, she could easily have escaped if she’d wanted. Smoothing her hair, he listened distantly to her angry words.

“Damn you, Nathaniel Payne! Damn you for giving away that pin I got in Charlotte! I cherished that brooch, and you gave it away like it was nothing! I hate you for doing that. I hate you for being such a damned fool to think that it meant nothing to me.”

The smile on his face disappeared. He couldn’t have heard her right. Holding her at arms’ length, he studied her expression. “I had no idea the pin meant so much to you, Libby. I thought you considered it nothing more than another bauble.”

She brushed away the tears. “You’re a damned fool. Will thought you knew so much about women, but you know nothing.”
Spinning from his embrace, Libby raced away from him.

It took several seconds for Nate to collect himself. He’d been so shocked by what she’d said that he hadn’t realized she was running toward the deep forest. He sprinted after her, and in only a short time, caught up with her, knocking her to the ground and straddling her so she wouldn’t run off again.

“I love you, Liberty,” he vowed. “I told you that I could release the storm in you, and I did. I can’t say that I like the cause of the storm, but I did set it free.”

“But you gave him my pin. You gave him something that meant everything to me. I hate you for that. And don’t you ever profess your love for me again. I don’t want to hear it. I can’t believe that you love me when you gave away your pin.”

“My pin?” Nate asked, gazing down at her in disbelief. “Why do you say my pin?”

“You gave it to me, didn’t you? Will was the only one who knew that I thought about buying it for myself. He told you about that; I know he did. So you bought it, and you put it on my robe. I knew from the second you denied giving it to me that you did. I also knew that there was some reason you didn’t want to admit it, so I didn’t make you. Now you’ve given it away like a piece of candy—just like you’d give a piece of candy to a child as a reward for good behavior. But his behavior wasn’t good. He raped me! Do you hear? He raped me. And he would still be doing it if you hadn’t come along and given him my pin.”

Silently picking her up, he flung her over his shoulder. She kicked and beat on his back, screaming her protests. When they returned to the fire, he set her down. She scrambled to her feet and dashed away. This time when he caught her, he carried her under his arm. Striding to his horse, he reached into his saddlebag.

Finally, he pulled out a piece of dried meat and carried both the meat and Libby back to the fire. This time when she tried to run away when he put her down, he grabbed her around the waist before she could take two steps. Sighing, he forced her to lie on the ground and kneel over her while he worked with the meat in his hand. Then he held the pin toward her. Libby stared at it in disbelief.

“Do you still hate me?” Nate asked with a playful grin. “As you can see, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t give away the pin I’d given you. What you went through here—showing your anger—was a waste of time. Answer me, my sweet. Do you still hate me?”

“Yes!” she shouted. “Because you deceived me into reacting. You deceived me into getting angry. You said that you’d be the one to do it, and you did. You must be very proud of yourself. But you’ll never again see me as angry as I am right now.”

Nate stared at the pin in his hand then at Libby. “Fine. I guess I was a little premature in
showing you that I still had it. Maybe I should go back to the village and tell the chief that I deliberately withheld this little trinket."

"No!" Libby protested when Nate started toward his horse. "No, that's mine!"

Running after him, she threw herself against him and knocked him to the ground. While she straddled him as he had her only seconds earlier, she struggled to get the brooch. But he held it under his back where she couldn't reach it.

As she battled for possession, she found herself becoming physically excited. And she'd been certain that she would never again respond to a man like she had to Nate that night in his cabin! That was precisely what she was doing, though.

"Give it to me!" she ordered. "Give me my pin! You can't have it!"

Beneath her, she felt his body responded to the intimate contact. Then again, she was sitting on him in the most strategic spot possible, moving frantically in her desperate attempt to retrieve her brooch. What else did she think would happen?

"I saved it for you, Libby," he said. "Don't you think I deserve a reward? If it weren't for my sense of romance, it would be in the hands of that Indian right this second."

Furious with his antics and words, she bent over to give him a quick kiss. Nate's arms wrapped around her. His fingers slid into her hair to hold her head securely. Then his tongue touched her lips, and she parted them to admit this wanted intruder.

His lips ground against hers, demanding yet gentle, and she reacted to his heated kiss. This is what she'd dreamed of all those times that the brave had taken her. It had given her not only a release from reality, but also hope that a future with Nate's existed.

Oh, no! Now she was responding to his embrace as one of his hands fondled her covered breast. His other hand massaged her back in a languorous circular motion. Oh, how she longed for him to show her that she was still desirable after what the chief's son had done!

Still, she was unable to restrain herself and pushed herself up to stare down at him. Her breath burst forth in short, heated pants of desire, and she whispered as if they were in a crowd of people. "Nate, show me that you love me. Prove that what that Indian did to me would never happen in a loving liaison."

Laying the brooch in her palm and curling her fingers around it, he said, "No, my sweet. I won't do that to you. I don't want to jeopardize any future I might have with you, and I'm terrified that I'll lose you again by making the wrong choices. The chief's son may have had his way with you, but you're still a lady in my eyes. You can't possibly be ready for intimacy like that yet. Another time, my sweet, but not now."
“You can’t do it, can you,” she accused. “Because of what he did to me, I’m no longer a woman that men want to be with. I thought you were different, but I was wrong. Because of that Indian, I’m not a woman your mother and father would want you to marry.”

“That’s not it at all, Liberty. I always have and always will see you as a lady. You had no control over what happened in the village. You’re still a lady, my sweet. I want you to forget everything that happened while we were apart.”

“I can’t forget it—not ever. You don’t know what it was like to wonder if he would come to me again. You don’t know what it was like to live in constant fear.”

She considered mentioning how she’d thought of him almost constantly, but she decided against it. She didn’t want him to think that there was more in her heart than gratitude that he’d come for her.

“Maybe you can’t forget,” he granted, “but you can remember that I love you. And because I almost lost you a second time, I’m never going to stop myself from saying it again. I always did before, because I knew that you would never love me. I can accept that, but it doesn’t stop me from loving you. That’s something you’ll have to get used to, because it won’t change. I’ll wait for you forever if I have to, but I won’t be intimate with you again until you’re my wife.”

“Until?” she asked in amazement. “What if I never agree to marry you?”

“I’ll have to live on hope and continue loving you. But don’t worry about my being too aggressive or arrogant or conceited. Now I’ll be patient and humble. Maybe after a while you’ll learn to love me as much as I love you, and maybe you’ll forget about the pain your father experienced long enough to break down your defenses and marry me.”

“I can’t say that will ever happen, Nate,” she warned. “I don’t know if I can ever love a man—not even one as loyal as you.”

“Unfortunately, I’m finding that unrequited love can mellow a man.” He grinned again to lighten the mood. “And believe me, I never thought I would mellow. Thank God, you came along to prove me wrong.”
Chapter 19

The trip that Nate had made in three days when he tracked Libby took only half the time going back. When the couple walked into the cabin, Will and Ross were discussing Nate and Libby’s plight. Glad to see her, they rushed at her.

She cowered beside Nate, filled with fright, clinging to him as he comforted her with one arm around her shoulders. Knowing that Will was her brother didn’t relieve any of her terror. He was so much bigger than she remembered! And Ross had hurt her in Charlotte, had forced his attentions on her during the trip there. Now she had to encounter him again, even live with him again.

Would she ever be able to get over what that monstrous brave had done to her?

Beside her, Nate’s soothing voice drifted to her ears. She gazed up at him. For the time being, he was the only man she trusted.

“It’s all right, Libby,” Nate assured her, his brow furrowed in concern. “They won’t hurt you. They’re just happy to have you back. Come with me, my sweet. I’ll put you to bed so you can rest. I want you to get as much sleep as possible in the next few days. We’re leaving this hellhole as soon as Will and I can shoot enough meat to dry and jerk before we go. Come now, my sweet. Let’s go into your room.”

While Nate spoke, he slowly steered her to the bedroom door and closed it behind them. Once they were alone, he helped her out of her clothes, dirty and wet from the trip in the rain that morning.

Libby knew she shouldn’t allow him to disrobe her, but she had no energy to stop him. She knew she should be embarrassed that he saw her nude, but she wasn’t. Apparently, he didn’t even pay attention to her state of undress. When he passed her a nightgown, she slid into it. As she got the covers, Nate built a blaze in the fireplace. Then he returned to the living quarters.

Noticing Will’s concerned expression, Nate asked Ross to examine Libby while he talked to her brother. The moment Ross entered the bedroom, however, Libby screamed for Nate.
Racing to her side, he drew her into his arms. Again, she clung to him in fear.

“It’s all right, Liberty,” he said as he stroked her hair. “He’s only examine you. Right, Ross?” The doctor nodded. “There, you see, my sweet? I’ll be right outside with Will. I want to explain your reaction to him. If you feel too uncomfortable with Ross, call for me. I’ll come right away.”

Libby nodded against his chest then pushed away from him, saying, “Go talk to Will. I’ll be fine now.”

Nate studied her skeptically. “Are you sure?”

Glancing at Ross, she returned her gaze to Nate. “No, but I know you’ll be close if I need you.”

“I’ll be in the next room,” he assured her with a smile. Rising, he started toward the door, but he stopped in front of Ross and whispered, “You’d better not do more than examine her, Ross. Or you’ll have to contend with me. I almost killed a man the other day, and I doubt it would be hard to kill you.”

Stalking out of the room, Nate slammed the door behind him. Will stopped pacing and spun to face him. “What’d that bastard do to my sister, Nate?”

“Nothing,” Nate replied, sinking down on a chair at the table. “Is there any coffee?”

“I’ll get it.” Will poured Nate a mug of coffee, then sat down with him and pushed it across the table. “Why was Libby so scared of me?”

“I think the way you rushed at her did it. That’s how the Indians came at us the day she was abducted. She went through hell in the village, Will. You’ll need to be careful around her for the next few days. Don’t make any sudden moves in her direction. Things like that will frighten her for a while.”

“But I’m her little brother. She shouldn’t be afraid of me.”

“I imagine she realizes that, lad. But she sees you as a threat—probably because you’re so damned big. In fact, I would gamble that she doesn’t see you as her little brother anymore. Right now, she sees you as a very big man. It’s her viewpoint that’s changed, Will, not her love for you. If you go slow and give her time, she’ll eventually remember that you never did and never will hurt her.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, but you have to remember that she’s changed because of her experience. You need to remember that she no longer feels like a lady. And you must treat her more like a lady than you ever did. You need to treat her like a piece of fine china—at least, for a while, until she’s
able to regain some of her confidence.”

“It must have been awful for her,” Will observed. “What happened to change her so much?”

Nate tried to smile in reassurance, but his lips seemed to have a mind of their own. Instead, his frown deepened as he explained, “The capture was enough to make her fearful of men, but the brave who took her went further than that. He assaulted her—the way only a man can assault a woman. Do you understand?” Will nodded as Nate added, “She’s come to believe that she’s not a lady anymore. We need to do everything we can to prove her wrong. We have to convince her that she’s still a lady.”

Will hesitated then said, “I won’t do anything to scare her. I promise.”

Nate nodded his approval. “Good. Now, we won’t be here much in the next few days. You and I are going to be busy trying to find enough meat that we can dry and jerk for our trip to Nashville. In the time that we are here, though, I don’t want you to mention her captivity to her. I don’t want you to ask any questions or to somehow bring that memory to her mind. Promise that you’ll act like you used to toward her—and maybe be a little more respectful of her privacy.”

“All right,” Will agreed. “I won’t do anything to upset her if I can help it.”

“I didn’t think you would. Let’s get a few things together and get started hunting. I saw a little game on the way back, so we’ll head in that direction first. As soon as I tell Ross and Libby that we’re leaving, we’ll go.”

“You know, Nate? I’ll bet Libby’s name means more to her now than it ever did.”

“What do you mean?” Nate asked curiously.

“Liberty. She lost it for a while. Now it must have a different meaning to her.”

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While Will and Nate were out hunting one afternoon, Ross sat idly watching Libby clean house. She could feel him studying her with interest, but she chose to ignore him. If she did that, maybe he would find something to do and leave her alone.

As she dusted the fireplace mantle, he embraced her from behind. She grew rigid with fear. Her breathing stopped when he ran his hands around her waist then higher to cup her clothed breasts. If Nate were nearby, she could shout for him. But he’d told her both he and
Will would be quite a distance from the cabin most of the day.

“Relax, Libby,” Ross said. “I’m only going to give you the same thing that Indian did.”

“I don’t want it,” she replied. “All I want is for you to leave me alone.”

“That won’t happen, my dear. You’re going to give me exactly what you gave him. A woman who had it before always wants it again.”

“How can you say such a thing?” She struggled to break away from him, but his fingers dug into her soft mounds. She grabbed his wrists and tried to free herself, but he tightened his hold. Pain shot through her breasts, and she ceased her struggle, demanding, “Let go of me.”

“Not until you give me what I want,” Ross declared. “You’re nothing more than a common slut now. Besides, if I were Payne, you wouldn’t spurn my advances. You would give him anything he asked for—and more. And that’s exactly what you’re going to give me.”

“No, I’m not, Hiram Ross!” she shrieked. “Nate respects me. He wouldn’t have even thought the things that you said to me. You’re rude, and you’re obnoxious. And I’ll never do anything you want me to.”

“You’re no more than a whore. You gave yourself to that Indian. I know you did.”

“No lady likes to be treated like this!” Finally breaking free of his painful grip, Libby spun to glare at him. “If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll find one of Nate’s guns and shoot you myself.”

Ross laughed menacingly as he approached her with slow, deliberate movements. “You’re going to be mine in only a few minutes.”

“No!” she screamed, racing around the table.

But Libby was unable to escape the determined man as he headed toward her the other way. He caught her around the waist with one arm, then he scooped her off the floor. To protect herself, she grabbed his hair and snapped his head back viciously. Some of his red locks came out in her hand, and he dropped her instantly. Scrambling to her feet, she started toward the door. He grabbed her again, this time pinning her arms to her sides.

In the distance, Will heard Libby’s angry voice. By the time he got to the window, Ross was forcing Libby to the bedroom. Already angered by Ross’s words, Will lost all control. The doctor picked up Libby and carried the screaming woman to the bedroom.

Will burst inside and ran to the door of the bedroom. To his horror, Ross had already slid the lock bolt into place. What Nate had installed for her protection now served as a weapon
against her. But Will was determined to rescue his sister. He shook the door violently, and Libby screamed for Nate as material tore.

Since the door opened toward him, hurling himself against it would be useless. Will left the cabin and raced around to the bedroom window. The slats were open, but the shutters themselves were closed.

Ross tried to kiss Libby as she lay pinned under him. She fought to get away while he ripped away her clothes.

Her scream of protest came from deep within her. If ever she needed help, she needed it now, because Ross wasn’t being gentle at all—not like Nate or the Indian. Ross was waging a brutal, vicious attack on her. She called desperately for Nate to help.

How could this be happening to her again? Why wasn’t Nate there for her again? Why was she so vulnerable? Was it because she was so small, or was it something else?

Breaking of wood drew Libby’s attention to the windows, and there stood Will, his expression of fury evident. With a surge of energy, he ripped the shattered shutters from the hinges and tossed them aside. A moment later, Will scrambled through the window.

Grabbing Ross by the shirt, Will threw him off the bed, tossed the blanket around Libby, and raged, “Get out of the way, Lib.”

But Libby couldn’t respond. She was too shocked by Will’s behavior. As he overpowered the smaller man, she shrieked Will’s name. Then, as though the word had forced her into action, she unbolted the door and raced into the living room. A second later Ross flew through the open bedroom door and landed at her feet. She stared down at him. He was bloody from the blows administered by Will and obviously stunned.

Irately flinging furniture around the room, Will hurled everything he could pick up at the doctor. Ross spent his energy dodging the articles and none on retaliation. As Will picked up the dining table and lifted it over his head to throw it, Libby stepped between him and Ross.

“Get out of the way, Libby,” Will ordered. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Will, don’t!” she shouted in panic. “You’re destroying Nate’s home. Please stop. Please.”

He stared at her blankly for a few moments, then set the table down and dusted it off with his hands. “I’m sorry, Libby, but I was so angry.”

“I understand,” she said, “but that’s no reason to tear apart Nate’s home. You need to learn to control your anger.”
“But that bastard attacked you. He was going to do things to you that no gentleman would do. I couldn’t let him get away with it.”

“And I appreciate your help more than I can say. But you should have stopped before you came to the point of destroying another man’s property.”

“I’ll apologize to Nate.”

“You also need to clean up this mess. You, too, Hiram, because you alone caused Will’s rage. Then I want you both to forget that this ever happened.”

“But Nate would want to know,” Will argued. “Somebody has to tell him.”

“No, Will,” she said. “Don’t tell about this to him. Tell him that you lost your temper with Hiram because he insulted me, but don’t you dare tell him the truth. He’d never let Hiram travel to Nashville with us if he knew. Hiram doesn’t know enough about this country to make it safely back to civilization alone. Without Nate, he could starve to death.”

“If Nate finds out that he’s been deceived, he’ll be madder than hell.”

“I’ll see that Nate doesn’t blame you. But, Hiram, if you step one inch near me like that again, I’ll personally tell him and let you rot in the mountains. I don’t care how much help you need getting back to a city. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” he replied grudgingly.

“Good, because I won’t hesitate for one second to do it.” With those words, Libby went into the bedroom to redress, locking the door behind her.

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When Will apologized to Nate privately that night, Nate lectured him about controlling his temper, ending, “You have to learn to control that temper of yours, lad.”


“The circumstances were different. I was protecting Libby’s virtue. He was doing something to her that she didn’t want. You, on the other hand, were protecting her honor. That’s admirable, but hardly something to get violent about.”

Will almost blurted out the details of what had happened. Libby didn’t want him to say anything, though, and he’d promised he wouldn’t. “Ross wouldn’t have listened to me, and
you know it."

“Maybe not,” Nate agreed, “but insulting words are no cause for fighting. Now, do as I say and never start a fight over words again. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Will said as Nate wandered toward the smokehouse. Turning, Will went into the cabin and dropped onto the rocking chair.

“Did you apologize?” Libby asked as she dried the last dish from dinner.

“Yeah, and he lectured me about fighting when all Ross did was insult you.” Will watched as Libby sat down on the wooden sofa Nate had built. “I came real close to telling him the truth, Libby. He should know what happened.”

“I don’t want him to yet,” she insisted. “Do you know where he is?”

“He went to the smokehouse.”

“I think I’ll go see him.”

The moment she opened the smokehouse door, smoke poured out. She covered her mouth and nose with her hand and peered inside, asking, “Are you in here, Nate?”

“That I am,” he replied, stepping over the threshold and out of the smoke. Taking her hand from her mouth, Libby smiled as he closed the door behind him. “I’m busy. What do you want?”

“I thought we could talk,” she replied.

“I’m too busy trying to get you to a city. Now go back to the house and leave me alone.”

In an instant, her cheerfulness disappeared. “Since when, may I ask, have you become my mother, my father, and my guardian all in one person?”

“Since I rescued you,” he declared.

Turning from him, she stopped a few of steps away to pluck a new leaf from a small oak tree.

“Why is it,” she asked as she toyed with the leaf, “that we’re constantly bickering? Why can’t we be friends instead of enemies?”

“Because you have a difficult time listening to reason—as difficult a time as I have controlling myself around you. If I don’t get you to civilization soon, I’m afraid I’ll forget that you’re a lady. I don’t want that to happen, Libby.”
“Then we do have a friendship? Even though we’re always arguing?”

Laying his hand on her lower back, he directed her a short way into the woods behind the smokehouse.

“Of course, we do,” he said. “In fact, e’ve progressed from a friendship to a having a connection much deeper and more interesting than you’re willing to admit. I love you more than life itself, or I never would have taken such drastic revenge on that brave. I never would have wanted to kill him without outright killing him. To me and the chief’s son, I did worse than kill him. I disabled him. If only I’d been able to take his most prized extremity! That’s more important to a man than his leg. And I think you know what I mean.”

Blushing at the thought, Libby nodded twice and mumbled, “I know.”

“We haven’t talked about this since we’ve been back, my sweet. Now, I think it’s time to explain exactly why I did what I did.”

“You did that on the way home, Nate,” she said, hoping to avoid further discussion.

“But there’s more. And it should be said before we get to Nashville.”

“Please, Nate. Not now.”

“It must be now. We’ll be leaving in the morning. I suppose Will has already started packing some things to take, too. I was gathering the smoked meat and fish. When we get back to the cabin, I’ll prepare what horses we have left and the mules, and start packing them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that we’re leaving tomorrow? I have some things I need to do before we go.”

“That’s exactly what Will should be doing right now. I told him to get Ross to help. I want you to rest. This trip won’t be easy. It’s very mountainous west of here, and we’re short on horses now. I want you healthy for the long journey ahead of us.”

“’I’m perfectly capable of preparing for the trip, Nate.”

“I’m in charge of here, my sweet. And I say that you rest. After our little talk—which you can no longer stall, by the way—I’m taking you back to the cabin and seeing that you go straight to bed.”

“We don’t need to talk,” she insisted.

“Maybe you don’t, but I do. Now shut that lovely mouth of yours before I forget myself and kiss you to silence you.”

“Talking isn’t necessary, Nate. Surely, you said all that needed saying on the trail the very
first night of my freedom. Freedom,” she repeated dreamily. “I never realized the meaning of the word until I was held captive. When I was a child, I always wondered what was so important about freedom—when the country was new and there was so much war. Now I know. I’ll never take freedom for granted again. My name means something entirely different now, too. I don’t think I’ll ever be embarrassed by it again. Instead, I’ll cherish it and teach my children that there’s nothing more important than having your liberty.”

“You’re stalling again, my sweet,” he said as he gently grasped her shoulders.

Lowering his head, he kissed her, consuming her with an explosive desire. After what she’d endured in the village, she should be afraid of moments like this. But she enjoyed Nate’s kiss, delighted in his gently massaging hands on her shoulders. For the first time, she responded without reservation and found herself returning his kiss with equal enthusiasm. Clinging to him, she slid her arms around his waist. Only seconds later, Nate pulled back his head mere inches to gaze down at her.

“I still intend to talk to you.”

“Nate, please”

He gazed into her eyes unfalteringly. “I need to tell what happened to me. When they took you, I was frantic. I wanted to rescue you immediately, but I couldn’t catch up with you. I went back to the cabin at nightfall to think of a plan to get you back. I couldn’t bear to have lost you so foolishly. I prayed—like I haven’t prayed since I was a child—that you would be alive when I finally tracked you down. Thank God, you were.”

“I was never in danger of losing my life, Nate. In that respect, I was safe.”

“But you were in danger of losing your sanity. I’ve seen what can happen to a white woman who’s made a slave of the Indians. You’re so fragile that I couldn’t bear to think of you being treated that way. I don’t know. Maybe your fragility didn’t have a damned thing to do with it. Maybe I was jealous of the chief’s son. I had a feeling as to why he wanted you, and I wished it had been me—under different circumstances, of course.

“Anyway, on the trail to the village, I realized that I was a driven man. I didn’t want to rescue you because I’d been the one to put your life in jeopardy. I wanted to rescue you because I love you so deeply. I only realized how deeply then. That realization changed me. I vowed that you would never again think of me as conceited or arrogant. I vowed to change so you would be able to return my love without hesitation.”

“You have changed, too, Nate,” she interrupted. “I noticed it almost immediately. But there’s a problem.”

“What problem?” he asked. “I’ve done everything I can to make up to you for what happened. I don’t know what else I can do to make you love me the way I love you.”
“There’s nothing you can do, Nate,” she replied. “Love isn’t something you can force from another person. Love just happens. Of all people, you should understand that. It’s unfortunate, but occasionally one loves another without the other being able to return that love.”

“Are you saying that you can’t return my love?” he asked hesitantly.

Libby sighed. “I suppose I am. You already know that I refuse to love someone. The trouble is that I’ve changed, too. Right now, I’m confused. I don’t want to think about love, Nate. This isn’t the time. Too much bad has happened recently.”

“Will there ever be a right time?” he asked, his voice filled with sorrow.

“I don’t know.”

“You say you’ve changed, too. How?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I’m not sure I like the change in you. You’re not the Nate I used to know, the one I came to like despite your arrogance and conceit.”

Nate frowned. “I’m sorry, Libby, but I doubt that I can change back. On the trail, I realized that I didn’t like the way I acted any more than you did. But I do like the way I am now.”

“Then maybe we weren’t meant to be anything more than friends.”

“Don’t say that!” he shouted. “I love you, and I refuse to listen to that kind of talk. Some- day you’ll see that you love me, as well. I know you do, Liberty. I could tell by the way you responded to my kiss a few minutes ago. I’ll kiss you again to prove it, too.”

“You don’t need to prove anything to me.”

The mischievous grin that appeared on Nate’s lips convinced Libby that he would do as he said. Although she wanted nothing more than his embrace, she didn’t want him to know how right he was. Maybe someday she could learn to love him. What she felt a few minutes earlier in his arms would indicate it. And maybe if she told him, he wouldn’t want to continue the conversation.

“Nate, you spark something in me that’s new and exciting,” she said after a brief hesita- tion, “but I don’t know what it is. I need more time, Nate. That’s all I’m asking.

“I can still kiss you, can’t I?”

“No, because your kisses confuse me even more than I already am. I’ll come to you when I’m ready for your kisses again. I promise”

“As long as I know there’s hope, my sweet,” he said as he drew her against him, “I can wait forever. But before that, I want one more kiss to remember—one more kiss to liven up
my already vivid dreams.”

Before she could protest, Nate’s lips met hers in a tender kiss, which grew more heated within seconds. Although she sensed he longed for more intimate contact, she knew he would never go further than she wanted him to. And maybe, she thought, that was why she liked being in his arms.

Libby ignored the rustling she heard nearby as Nate lay her on the ground. He caressed her breast gently, squeezing it in a rhythmic motion that heightened her arousal. His hand went to the collar of her dress. He released the top button then slowly unbuttoned the remainder until only her camisole obstructed his intimate touch. Pulling the end of the first tiny bow, he moved his kiss to her chin.

His lips caressed her throat. His lips followed the path of her the material on her body that spread so slowly as he untied her camisole. His hot kisses left a fiery trail down her chest and through her cleavage to her stomach and navel. He circled it several times with his tongue then slipped his tongue back up her abdomen as his hands caressed her bare ribcage, spreading the cotton material even wider.

The cool air hardened her nipples on contact. His warm lips embraced one in a hungry kiss. The flames of desire shot higher within her, and she inhaled sharply at the caress. He suckled gently as she slid her fingers into his thick hair with a heated moan.

His tongue slithered its way across her breast, into the valley between the pair then up the other mound. When it reached her hardened bud, it circled the tip languorously. The feeling was incredible! She moaned again, unable to bear the delectable excitement coursing through her body, directly to her loins.

As much as he desired her, he pulled back, his head directly above hers, and gazed down into her eyes. Then he saw the truth. The love shining from her green orbs was unmistakable, and he wanted to shout with joy. But he couldn’t. He had to move very slowly and prove that his love would still be waiting when she was ready to admit hers.
Chapter 20

As Nate had predicted, the journey was treacherous. One night, after a particularly grueling day, he sank down near the fire and took out a tablet, paper, pen and ink. When he heard Libby’s footfalls behind him, he hid the paper then rolled his shoulders forward. He desperately needed to relieve some of the stiffness.

Suddenly, her small hands rubbed his neck, back and shoulders. He moaned as her fingers worked their magic on him.

“M-m,” he praised, “does that ever feel good. You can do that forever.”

“I hope it helps,” she replied. “You had a bad day today, didn’t you?”

“Very bad.”

“Who were you writing to?” she asked.

“My mother. I’ve wanted to tell her about you for a long time, so I decided I’d start my letter tonight so I can mail it in Nashville. Do you mind? I want her to know what I’ve found with you—even if there’s only a slight chance of you returning my love.”

“I don’t mind.”

Nate laid his hands on hers while she massaged his shoulders. “I wish you could meet her, Libby. It would really make her happy. She was always worried about the women I kept company with, but she would love you as much as I do. I don’t have a doubt in my mind.”

“And your father?”

“I told you that he gave up on me a long time ago. He wants nothing to do with me or my companions.”

“It’s been an awfully long time, Nate,” she said, releasing her hold on his shoulders and kneeling before him. “Maybe he would want to see you again. Maybe that would make him happier—bring him more pleasure—than you could imagine.”
Nate shook his head. “You don’t know my father, Libby. He would go to any lengths to avoid me. He proved it too many times when I was living in his house.”

“In his house?” she repeated.

“That’s what he called it the last time we spoke. I can remember his exact words. He said, ‘As long as you live in my house, you’ll do things my way. Otherwise, you can find someplace else to live.’ I left that night without another word to him. I haven’t said or written anything to him in the past twelve years.”

“Don’t you miss him?” she asked.

With a sad smile, he took her hands in his and ran his thumbs over the backs. “How can I miss a man who would send his own flesh and blood out into the world without so much as an ‘I’m sorry, son’? He didn’t even care that I left.”

“You don’t know that, Nate. And from the way you tell the story, you didn’t give him the opportunity to say he was sorry—if that’s really what you wanted.” When she met with silence, she asked, “What caused your argument with him, Nate?”

“He told me that I had to be a doctor because that was his plan for my life. We had a good number of arguments about it, too. He said he wanted me to have the best and that being a doctor was the only way to achieve it. What he didn’t realize was that my becoming a doctor would have been the worst thing for me. I would have hated myself, as well as him, for the rest of my life if I’d followed his dictates. I did try to appease him, though, which is why I studied law and finance, too.”

“But you’re doing what makes you happy now, and you still hate him.”

“I don’t hate him, Libby. Oh, I’ll admit that I dislike him, but I don’t think I hate him. If he came to me and said, ‘Son, you’re welcome back at home any time you’re ready to come,’ I’d be there as soon as possible. Besides, at least, I don’t hate myself this way. I don’t have to live with Dad, but I do have to live with me. To dislike him is a lot easier to hate myself.”

Libby stared up at him for several seconds before she spoke again. “Go back to Philadelphia, Nate. Go make amends with your father. Twelve years is a very long time, but a lifetime is forever. Don’t let your father die without at least trying to set things right with him. To know that you tried would probably make him very happy—you, too, for that matter.”

Shaking his head, he smiled down at her. “Actually, my sweet, I think that knowledge would make you happier than either one of us.”

“Maybe, but surely, it can’t hurt to at least try. If you think it will help, maybe you could consider the outcome a different way. What if I gave you ten dollars and told you to go gamble it in the nearest poker game? What if I told you that you could keep everything you won but you didn’t owe me anything if you lost? What would you lose?”
“Nothing, of course, because it wouldn’t have been my money. But, Liberty, ...”

“It’s the same with your father. You’re gambling the ten-dollar chance to reunite with him. If you win, you have your father back. If you don’t win, ...”

“If I lose, I haven’t lost my father, because I don’t have him now. That’s true, except taking the chance means exposing my soul. I don’t know if I want to do that.”

“If you don’t try, Nate, you might never have the opportunity again.”

“I don’t know, Libby,” he said. “I’ll think about it. Mostly, I don’t know if I want to leave you alone in Nashville while I trot off to Philadelphia. You could be married to Ross by the time I get back, and I would have no say in the matter.”

“Your father could be dying, and you would have no chance to get back on good terms with him. Worrying about Hiram and me getting married is nothing more than an excuse.”

“I suppose you’re right. But I’ll only promise to think about it.”

“That’s better than nothing. Maybe you should get some sleep now. We have another long day ahead of us tomorrow. Your letter will still be there to finish tomorrow night.”

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They arrived in Nashville on Will’s eighteenth birthday, and Nate agreed to take him to a brothel—as long as Libby didn’t hear of their outing. Will was thrilled at the prospect and spent much time in a tub of hot water that afternoon. Nate left him there and went to buy some supplies they would need for the remainder of their trip.

Later Nate went into a gunsmith’s shop, where he argued with the proprietor over the high cost of a musket.

That night Nate took Libby and Will to eat then said good night to Libby at her hotel room door. Even though he wanted to spend a leisurely evening talking with her, he explained, he had previous plans. Libby appeared mildly disappointed but said that she understood. After wishing him a pleasant evening, she disappeared into her room. Confused by her stony attitude, Nate turned toward Will with a shrug. Then they left the hotel for the brothel outside town.

“Will this really be as easy as you say, Nate?” Will asked nervously as they waited in the parlor.
“Absolutely,” Nate replied. “These women know what they’re doing. In fact, some of them have probably done this many times.”

Inwardly, he shuddered at the sight of the establishment. Red, pink, and white carnations covered the wallpaper, and the bright red of the curtains at the windows didn’t match. Having seen the interiors of many bordellos, Nate knew that this one was of a lower grade, and he desperately hoped that Will would come out of this experience with his health in tact. But it was too late to leave now.

The madam with the dyed, bright red hair approached the men as they sat on the red couch of still a different shade. Suddenly, Nate realized that he never wanted to see another shade of red as long as he lived—except for Libby’s auburn hair. The nauseating overuse of red in this establishment had changed his opinion of the color.

“Can I help you?” the madam asked.

“That’s may I help you,” Nate responded. “And the answer is yes. My name is Nate Payne, and my friend Will here needs a woman for his first time. I want you to give him one of your more understanding girls. It’s my birthday present to him. Oh, yes. She has to be clean, too—no diseases. Who do you have that might do him right?”

“His first time, you say?” Her expression as she examined Will showed that she was concentrating on the problem at hand. “Let’s see. I think Ginger would do nicely. She’s about the same age—twenty years old. She’s very experienced, though, and is quite good at putting a customer at ease.”

“Fine. As long as she’s clean.”

“She is.”

“All right then. Go on, Will. She’ll see that you’re taken care of.”

Silently obeying, Will followed the madam. Nate poured himself a drink of the rye that he found on a table covered with a red and white checked tablecloth. Splashing some of the liquor into a small glass sitting beside the bottle, Nate started in surprise. The madam’s voice came from directly behind him.

“By the way, my name’s Tess,” she said. “Now that your friend’s taken care of, how about if I find you someone to take care of your needs?”

Nate took a long swallow of rye as he turned to face her. “Thanks, but I’m not interested. I have my own red-headed beauty waiting for me at the hotel.”

“There aren’t any private working girls in this city.”

“She’s no working girl, of that I can assure you. She’s a lady. And her hair is red by nature,
“If she’s a lady, then you probably won’t get from her everything you can get from me or one of my girls.”

“And I don’t want anything like that from her until we’re married. In fact, I don’t want anything like that from any woman until I marry my lady. Now if you’ll let me enjoy my drink, I’ll sit here quietly and wait for my friend to finish his initiation into sex.”

Without another word, Tess stalked from the room.

Nate was already on his third rye when he heard a man at the door ask the madam if Nathaniel Payne was there. Nate approached the door to introduce himself, but he halted and stared in astonishment when he saw the badge on the vest of the middle-aged man.

Why would the sheriff be looking for him? Had something happened to Libby? He sensed trouble, but he had no idea what the problem could be. He hadn’t done anything illegal, so Libby could be the only reason for the sheriff wanting to see him. Wait a minute! How could the sheriff know he was there when only he and Will knew about their outing? Inhaling deeply to gather his courage, Nate said, “I’m Nathaniel Payne, sir. What can I do for you?”

“I’m Sheriff Jefferson, Payne, and you’re under arrest.”

“Under arrest?” Nate repeated, unable to conceal his surprise as Jefferson confined Nate’s wrists in handcuffs. “But why? What have I done? Nothing. No, I haven’t done anything illegal. Why would you want to arrest me?”

“You can’t hide from the truth here, Payne. You murdered a man, and you’re under arrest. Come along peacefully, or I’ll have to use force.”

Astounded, Nate followed the sheriff as they walked toward town at a speedy clip. When he finally recovered some rationality, Nate questioned the sheriff. “Look, Sheriff Jefferson, I don’t know what all of this is about. Who am I supposed to have killed?”

“There’s no supposed to about it, Payne,” Jefferson said. “I have a report from an eyewitness, so you won’t be able to talk me into releasing you.”

“I’m not trying to, because I know you won’t hang an innocent man—which is what I am. I only want to know who your witness claims I killed. When I was at the university, I studied law for a while, and I know that I have a right to know at least that much.”

“His name is Robert Royer, and he’s the town gunsmith.”

Nate gasped. Someone must have heard him arguing with the gunsmith, and now the
person was using that disagreement to hide his own crime.

Since Nate knew no one in Nashville, he could only surmise that whoever had accused him had some sort of vendetta against Royer, and the person had found the perfect suspect in him—a stranger who’d had an argument with the victim that very day.

“I don’t suppose,” Nate said, “that you’d be willing to tell me who this eyewitness is.”

“Don’t know,” Jefferson admitted. “Somebody doing his civic duty slipped an anonymous note under my door about an hour ago.”

“How did you find me?”

“The note mentioned a stranger in town—a trapper. You stand out this time of year, mister. Several people saw you heading toward Tess’s cathouse.”

“That doesn’t explain how you knew my name. I’ve never lived in the area, so nobody here has any idea of who I am.”

“The note named you. Did you introduce yourself to the gunsmith?”

Nate gasped. He had introduced himself, as was his normal practice upon meeting new people. In fact, he’d introduced himself to several people that day—not just the gunsmith. Any number of people could have taken the opportunity to settle a grudge and name him as the suspect.

Deciding to resign himself to his immediate destiny, Nate sighed. “I won’t cause any trouble, sheriff, so would you go back Tess’s and get William Nichols to come to the jail? His sister and I are very close, and I’d like her to hear what happened from him instead of you.”

“I’ll think on it. Right now, why don’t you stop the chitchat, because I’m not interested.”

When Will came downstairs to meet his friend, he didn’t see Nate anywhere, so he questioned the madam. “Do you know where my friend Nate went?”

“That damned trapper’s been arrested for murder,” she said. “And to think he was arrested in my establishment. The nerve of him to think that he could hide out here. And as far as I can see, you’re as bad as he is. Don’t either one of you come back here and expect to be serviced by any of my girls. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Will said. “And I promise that neither of us will ever come back. This place is nothing but a pigsty. My ma’d have a heart attack knowing I was here if she wasn’t already dead. Did Nate go with the sheriff?”
“Yes. Now you get the hell out of here.”

Will ran all the way to the sheriff’s office to get information. He raced into the building, speaking frantically. “Constable! I’m William Nichols. Nathaniel Payne is my friend. Why did you arrest him?”

Jefferson scowled. “I’m a sheriff, not a constable. And your friend has been arrested for murdering Robert Royer. They had an argument over the price of a musket this afternoon. Now the musket in question is missing and I believe he used it to kill Royer.”

“Why do you think Nate did it?”

“An anonymous note was slipped under my door, and it told me what the witness saw. That led to Payne’s arrest.”

“But when did this happen? Nate’s been with me almost every minute since we got to town.”

“Sometime during those minutes he wasn’t with you he found the time to commit murder.”

“Can I talk to him?”

Jefferson shook his head. “I’m afraid not, son. Maybe later, but not right now.”

“What about my sister? Would you let her talk to him?”

“All right,” Jefferson agreed. “Bring her over, and she can have a few minutes with him.”

“Thanks, sir,” Will said as he hurried out the door. “I’ll be right back.”

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Startled from her dreams, she called out that he wait a minute. She slipped lipping into her robe as she hurried to answer the knock. Will’s concerned expression told her something was wrong. Pulling him into her room, she struggled to maintain her composure.

“What happened, Will? Is Nate all right? Are you all right?”

“Nate’s been arrested, Libby. We hafta help him. The sheriff said he killed somebody, but I know he didn’t ‘cuz he was with me at the whorehouse tonight. You need to get dressed and go talk to him. We have to help him.”
“Slow down, Will. You’re talking in circles. What’s this about a bordello?”

“Nate took me there for my first time with a woman. He was s’pose-ta wait downstairs ‘til I was done, then we were goin’ to go to the saloon and celebrate. But when I came back to the parlor, he was gone. The woman who runs the place said he was arrested. Libby, the sheriff said he murdered somebody. But we know Nate would never kill anybody.”

“He does have a violent temper, Will,” she reminded him. But in her heart, she knew Will was right. Nate had the best chance he would ever get in the Cherokee village, but he still couldn’t kill the warrior. Instead of reassuring Will, though, she said, “He could have killed a man quite without even trying. He almost killed Hiram.”

“But he didn’t kill that Robert man. I know he didn’t. You hafta talk to him, Libby. The sheriff said that if I brought you, you could. Please, Lib? I’m sure he can explain everything, and maybe you two can figger out why this happened. Now hurry up and git dressed.”

“I don’t know if I want to help him. Maybe he deserves to spend some time in jail. After all, he took you to a bordello tonight. And he was even considering taking you to a saloon.”

“Libby!” Will exclaimed in shock. “You can’t believe that Nate would murder anybody! You’ve gotta help him after all that’s happened between you two.”

Libby bowed her head in shame. How could she have been so concerned and angry that Nate had taken Will to a brothel? He could be in graver danger of losing his life than she had been when he rescued her. Will was right! She had to do help Nate just as he had helped her.

***

Nate sat on the cot in his cell with his head in his hands, looking like a small child who’d been done a great injustice. Libby’s heart went out to him. Somehow, she would free him—as he had freed her.

“Nate?” she said, almost afraid to speak.

He looked up as she stood outside his cell, holding onto the bars to steady herself. Rising, he approached her while she kept her unfaltering gaze on his face.

“What happened, Nate?” she asked.

“I’ll be damned if I know. For the life of me, I can’t think of anything I’ve done or said to make somebody hate me enough to accuse me of murder. I can’t believe this is happening. And I sure as hell can’t think of a way out of here short of the gallows. For the first time in
my life, I don’t know what to do.”

“How do they know it was you?”

“An eyewitness who heard me tell the gunsmith my name.”

“I’ll do my best to help you.” After pausing a moment, she added, “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell me why you took Will to that sinful place tonight. You knew how I feel about that.”

“He’s old enough to learn a little more than I have the power to teach him. You have to let the lad grow up, Libby, and now’s as good a time as any. How did you hear of our visit?”

“Will was awfully upset when he told me about your arrest. He’s never been very good at keeping secrets—especially when he feels like he’s nervous. Will’s always told me everything, even what my father was giving me as a birthday present.”

“I was afraid of that. Oh, well. What’s done is done.” Laying his hands over hers, he studied her, his eyes filled with deep concern. “Are you very angry?”

Libby smiled up at him. “I was at first, but not now. I have more important things on my mind than being angry at you. Did the sheriff tell you what you’re charged with and why?”

“He said something about me murdering the gunsmith I argued with this afternoon. I was supposed to have shot him with the musket I thought cost too much money. That’s what’s so asinine about all of this. He tried to cheat me by raising the price, but when he realized that I know about muskets and the prices of them, he came down to something I was willing to pay. Why would I want to shoot a man that I’d made a good bargain with?”

“I don’t know, Nate.” Gazing up at him, she continued in hesitant words. “I don’t want to sound like I don’t trust you, but I feel like I have to ask—because you didn’t offer the answer. Whatever you say, I promise I’ll believe, because I trust you.”

A reassuring smile came to Nate’s lips, and he squeezed her hands affectionately. “You don’t even have to ask, my sweet. I did not murder the gunsmith. You have my word on that.”

“Thank you, Nate. When did the murder happen? Maybe Will or I were with you at ...”

“You weren’t,” he interrupted. “Royer was killed about a half an hour after I bought the musket. I put it with my belongings then went off alone to decide if I should tell you what I’d planned for Will. And as far as I know, nobody saw me.”

“That sounds hopeless.”
“I know. Maybe there’s somebody out there who could corroborate my story about the purchase or saw me leave town, but I can’t think of anybody.”

“Try not to worry, Nate. Will and I will do our best to get you out of here. I don’t want to see you spend any more time in prison than is necessary.”

“I’ll worry, all right. I’ll worry that that bastard of a doctor will try to steal you while I’m in prison. I’ll worry that you’ll marry him without my having a fighting chance to convince you to love me.”

“You needn’t worry about that, darling.” Libby smiled reassuringly and laid her right hand on his clean-shaven cheek. “I could never spend one day married to him. Now I need to go see what I can do about freeing you from this place.”

Although Nate heard her call him darling, he decided against mentioning it. He preferred to keep the special memory private, a glimmer of hope for a future with her. Libby’s endearment would, whether it was intentional or not, would keep him sane during his imprisonment. Tenderly grasping her wrist, he kissed the palm of her hand then said, “Good night, my sweet. I’ll dream of you tonight.”

“And I of you,” she replied. “Good night.”

Nate watched Libby leave. He’d won Libby—even if she hadn’t admitted it. She was determined to help him and equally determined not to marry Ross. He may not have won her love yet, but he had won her trust. With that victory, he at least had a chance to win her completely, especially since she’d let the word darling slip into her conversation.

“What are we going to do, Will?” Libby asked as they strolled back to the hotel. “Nate can’t prove that he was in the mountains at the time the gunsmith was murdered.”

“Nate doesn’t lie, Libby, and he could never kill anybody. We can make up a story and tell the sheriff that we were with him.”

“William Nichols!” she admonished. “I’m ashamed of you for even considering that. And Nate would be, too. Lying is no way to get him out of prison. We need proof. Maybe somebody saw him and didn’t realize it, or maybe somebody heard something.” Libby sighed, knowing she was reaching for stars she could never catch. “Maybe somebody other than the person who witnessed the murder wrote the note. Maybe he’s too afraid of the killer to come forth.”

“I’m surprised to see you two without Payne,” Ross said from behind them. “Where is your trapper friend, anyway?”
“Hello, Hiram,” Libby greeted. “Nate was arrested tonight, and we’re trying to think of a way to help him.”

Ross laughed sarcastically. “Probably for brawling in a saloon.”

Libby glared at him. “This is serious, Hiram. Nate was charged with murder.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Ross declared. “He nearly murdered me last year. It sounds like this is the perfect time to leave. Payne finally got himself into serious trouble, and now you can see he doesn’t deserve your friendship.”

“He didn’t desert me when I was taken captive, and I won’t desert him now. If you won’t help us prove him innocent, we’ll do it ourselves. Come along, Will.”

With those words, Libby hurried down the street with Will at her side.
Chapter 22

One week passed when Ross appeared at her hotel room door. With Will trying to find
the alleged witness to the murder, she gladly let Ross into her room.

“Thank you for coming by, Hiram,” she said. “I’ve been lonely lately.”

“I imagine you have,” he replied, his tone filled with sarcasm. “It’s probably because your
lover is in jail.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” she scolded. “And it’s not true. Nate is a good friend, and
you should consider him your friend, too. He’s been very patient with you on the trip.”

“Let’s not quarrel, Libby. I came here for a reason, not an argument. I want you to marry
me right now. You’re going to be my wife, and you can’t visit that criminal again.”

“You’re wrong, Hiram. I won’t marry you.”

“Yes, you will. That trapper is no good for you now that he’s proven himself a murderer,
and I forbid you to marry him.”

Libby bristled at the paternal tone in his voice. “Number one, Hiram, I don’t believe that
Nate murdered anyone. Number two, you have no voice in whom I choose for a husband—if
I decide to marry. And number three, I’ll be the one to decide what is and is not good for me.”

“Just because was our guide, doesn’t mean you owe him anything. If you think about it,
hes owes you—for nearly killing you twice.”

“What happened was beyond his control,” she snapped. “He did everything he could to
rescue me from what he says would have been a fate worse than death. It would have been
hell.”

“Libby!” he exclaimed. “That trapper has had a terrible influence on both you and Will.”

Libby shook her head. “You’re just jealous because you think he’s the reason I won’t
marry you.”
“But you will marry me, Libby,” Ross declared. “You’ll marry me because Payne will be hanging from the end of a rope in a few days.”

“Do you think marriage means so much to me that I’ll marry anyone who happens to offer himself as my husband?” she asked incredulously. “If so, you’ve made a huge mistake. I’ll be perfectly content living either alone or with Will.”

“I heard Payne tell you that he loves you. I also saw the way you and he kissed. You should be ashamed of the way you behaved. You wouldn’t let me touch you like that when I wanted to show my love for you, yet you let him.”

“There’s a big difference between the way you treat me and the way Nate treats me. You treat me like I’m an object that you want to possess. Nate treats me like a lady, and I like that. You would do well to take some lessons from him. I’d much sooner build a life with a man like him than one like you—if I had any desire to spend my life with a man.”

“You awfully adamant about not marrying. I think you’re trying to convince me that you don’t have an interest in Payne.”

“That’s ludicrous,” Libby declared, wondering if that was truly the case.

“Is it? Or do you think he can give you better sex than I can? If so, you’re wrong.”

Ross approached her slowly, his eyes filled with malice. Fear raged through her. Backing away from him, she glanced around an escape, but she saw none. Her calves bumped against the bed, and she fell onto it. She raised her knee as Ross dropped upon her, but he avoided it and straddled her hips. His lips bore down on hers in a brutal kiss.

Libby panicked and went limp. Oh, no! Not again!

A hand squeezed her breast roughly, and in that instant, fight exploded in her. She grabbed his wrist and, with a strength she hadn’t realized she possessed, she tore his hand from her body. Encouraged by her newfound power, she caressed his face then bent her fingers and ripped her nails down his cheeks.

Ross howled with a mixture of pain and rage. As Libby screamed for help, he slapped her across the head. Furious, she balled her hand into a fist and hit him squarely in the nose with such force that she heard crunching cartilage. Blood splattered onto her.

Across the room, the door flew open, and Will barged in with an angry roar. This time Ross ran out before Will could attack. Will started after the doctor, but Libby stopped him by grabbing his arm.

“Let him go, Will.”

“But …”
“Let him go. I told Hiram that I would tell Nate myself if he attacked me again, and I will.”

“There’s something I need to know first. Seeing Ross here made me think of it. Were you with Ross the night Nate was arrested?”

“No. Until today, I haven’t seen Hiram since we got to town.”

“That’s what I thought. He wasn’t with us, either. He never liked Nate, you know. Do you think that Ross could have left that note for Jefferson?”

“I suppose.” Libby paused for several moments before continuing. “In fact, it’s very likely. Nate couldn’t remember even one instance where he introduced himself as Nathaniel Payne. He could only remember telling people his name is Nate Payne. That could be a nickname for either Nathaniel or Nathan. Only you, I, and Hiram know his Christian name. It could also explain some of the things Hiram said to me. I need you to do something for me.”

Libby explained her plan, then she went to Jefferson’s office while Will went to the livery stable. Nate had stored the items he always kept with his horse there, and her idea hinged on that.

Excited about her plan, Libby explained it to Nate. “I have Will doing a chore for me right now that might get you out of here tonight. But first, I have to tell you something. I probably should have said something in the mountains, but you have such a temper, I was afraid of your reaction. I thought I’d see if it happened again before I mentioned it.”

“Something happened at the cabin?” he interrupted suspiciously. “What?”

“Do you remember when Will wrecked your furniture while we were getting ready to leave?” When Nate nodded, she said, “It wasn’t because Hiram had insulted me. It was because Hiram had tried to rape me.”

“What?” Nate demanded. “No wonder Will couldn’t understand my lecture about learning to control his temper. How could you have hidden something so important from me?”

“Hiram needed help getting back to civilization. If I’d told you, you never would have agreed to take him with us. You might even have done him serious harm. So, I insisted that neither Will nor Hiram say anything except that Hiram had insulted me.”

“And it happened again?”

“He tried again tonight. You would have been proud of me. I fought back. I scratched his face and bloodied his nose—actually, I think I broke it—before Will broke into the room. Hiram left, and I had to stop Will from following. I cleaned up and changed my clothes, and Will went to carry out my plan, then I came straight here to tell you what Hiram did, just as I’d told him I would.” She paused a moment then added, “Don’t be angry with me because I didn’t say anything the first time, Nate. I only wanted to see that Hiram made it safely to a
city. Now, I don’t care what happens to him.”

“If I weren’t here in jail, my sweet, I’d give him exactly what he deserves.” Then Nate’s expression changed from anger to delight. “Libby! Do you see what happened? That bastard did this to me. He slipped that note under Jefferson’s door. That’s how Jefferson knew my given name. How could I have been so stupid? Have Will look in Ross’s room and see if he can find my musket, Libby. Jefferson didn’t find it in mine, so it must be in his.”

“If Hiram did what you suspect, Nate,” she said, “he wouldn’t have been stupid enough to hide the weapon in his own room. He would have hidden it somewhere in your possessions. Will went to see if he can find it in your belongings at the livery.”

Taking her hands in his, he changed the subject. “Liberty, do you remember what you told me about freedom and how you never understood what all the fuss was about? I feel the same way. I’ll never take freedom for granted again. And like you, even your name holds new meaning to me.”

“Hopefully, it won’t be long before you’re free again. Will and I are doing everything we can to insure that.”

While Libby visited with Nate, Will explained his and Libby’s suspicions to Sheriff Jefferson. Will explained everything, starting with when Ross was Libby’s doctor in Charleston. After that, he answered all of Jefferson’s questions.

“Then this Ross has had hard feelings about Payne for a long time?” Sheriff Jefferson asked as Libby joined the two men in the office.

“That’s right, sir,” Will replied. “A very long time.”

Constable Jefferson took a moment to examine Nate’s new weapon and the items that belonged with it. He glanced at Libby then turned his concerned gaze to Will. “This weapon has never been used.”

As Libby sat down on a chair before the desk, Will laid his hands on her shoulders, saying, “I know, sir. And that’s the one Nate bought from the gunsmith the other day. I know because I’ve used all of his weapons, but I’ve never even seen this one before. If you ask Nate, he’ll probably tell you the same thing.”

“And this Ross? Does he own a weapon?”

“Yes, sir. A musket kind of like this one. In fact, I could swear that’s why Nate bought it. He always admired the doc’s.”

“Why don’t you take me to this doctor?” Sheriff Jefferson suggested. “I’ll see if I can tell if
his rifle’s been used recently.”

When Ross opened his hotel door to see Will standing there, he slammed it shut, shouting, “Go away, boy!”

“IT’s Sheriff Jefferson, Dr. Ross,” the lawman said. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

Opening the door, Ross watched as first Will then the sheriff entered his room and shut the door behind them. “Nobody invited you in, boy. Get out.”

“He’s with me,” Jefferson said. “Now do you or do you not own a musket?”

“Of course, I do.”

“I’d like to see it—and all the accessories.”

Ross got everything and laid it on the bed. Then he turned to Jefferson and asked, “Why do you need to see this stuff?”

Without answering, Jefferson examined Ross’s belongings. Will watched over his shoulder. Although it wasn’t a new weapon, it didn’t seem to have been used very often. Despite an apparently recent cleaning, the job had been done so poorly that gunpowder residue remained in the stock.

“When did you last use this gun?” Jefferson asked.

“Not since we arrived in town.”

“When did you clean it?”

“A couple of days ago, I imagine. I didn’t have anything else to do.”

“How many times have you cleaned it between its last use and a couple of days ago?”

“I’m not sure. At least one other time because I always clean it right after I use it.”

“You didn’t do a very thorough job either time,” Jefferson observed. “Where were you the night the gunsmith was murdered?”

“I was trying to convince my lady friend to marry me.”

“You damned liar!” Will interrupted. “You weren’t with Libby. She told me so.”

“That’s right,” Ross returned with a note of irritation. “I wasn’t with your sister. I was
with a different lady friend.”

“And whom might that have been, doctor?” Jefferson asked suspiciously.

“Clara Sullivan.”

“You were trying to convince Clara to marry you?”

“That’s right, Jefferson. And she accepted my proposal without hesitation.”

“How amazing! I wonder if she’s told her husband and two children of her plans.”

Ross’s mouth dropped open, and he stared at the lawman in surprise. “She didn’t tell me. I had no idea.”

“She wears her wedding ring all the time. This town isn’t that large, Dr. Ross,” Jefferson said irritably. “I know every woman in it, and there is no Clara Sullivan. Now tell me the truth. What were you doing and where were you one week ago tonight?”

“I was asking my lady friend to marry me.”

Jefferson snapped questions at him. “When did you last fire this weapon?”

“A long time ago—long before I got to town.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. Three or four days.”

“And you cleaned it twice after that?”

“That’s right,” Ross replied, wringing his hands.

Will smiled at Ross’s anxiety but said nothing as Sheriff Jefferson asked, “How long ago did you arrive in town?”

“A week ago, I think. Yes, a week. It was the same day Payne murdered the gunsmith.”

“In the morning or afternoon? Or was it the evening?”

“The evening—shortly after we had dinner on the trail.”

“He did it!” Will exclaimed. “We got here late that afternoon. We only ate a little snack on the trail, ‘cuz Nate wanted to treat Libby to a meal at the hotel.”

“That’s right,” Ross agreed. “I almost forgot about that. It was afternoon. Immediately
after we ate, and just before we all took baths.”

“Immediately after we got here,” Will informed the sheriff, “we got rooms. Then Libby and I went to take baths while Nate went to the gunsmith. Ross said he wanted his hair cut, but he said later that he couldn’t get it done. I remember ‘cuz I asked him why his hair was still long. He said he didn’t feel like waiting his turn. So, I asked where I could get mine cut. I didn’t think of it last week, because it didn’t seem important. But your barber said he hadn’t had any business all day. He couldn’t understand why Ross hadn’t come into his shop.”

“I think you’d better come with me, doctor,” Jefferson said, grabbing Ross’s arm near the shoulder.

“Go with you? What is this?”

“Since I haven’t been able to disprove anything Payne told me, I’ll have to release him. On the other hand, you gave me several reasons to question you further at my office.”

“In other words, you need someone else to blame. That won’t be me, though, because I won’t confess to anything. And there’s no possibility of you proving anything because …”

“Because what?” Jefferson asked when Ross stopped in midsentence. “Because you know for a fact that there were no witnesses?”

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At the jail, Jefferson put Ross in a cell adjacent to Nate’s as Ross glared at the trapper and declared, “You told the sheriff that I murdered the gunsmith.”

“Nope.” Nate loved the sight of Ross’s two black eyes and warped nose as well as the scratches on his face. “But if I’d thought of it, you can be damned sure I would have.”

“You haven’t won Libby yet,” Ross proclaimed.

Nate shook his head, unable to believe that they were having this conversation. “She won’t have you, Ross. She already told me so. And she told me that you assaulted her tonight.”

Jefferson closed and locked the door of Ross’s cell, then turned and unlocked Nate's door. On his way past, Nate grabbed the iron bars of Ross’s cell and glared at him.

“I want to make something clear, Ross,” Nate declared. “I’m taking Liberty away from this God-forsaken town. You’d better not follow us, either. She wants nothing to do with you, and I’m going to make damned sure you never bother her again.”
Then he turned and stalked into the office. Libby raced up to him, embracing him. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and kissed her passionately to make up for all the time that they had been separated by the cell’s bars. He didn’t want to release her, and he didn’t care who saw his desire for her. He needed to revel in holding her again.

When he finally released her many seconds later, he slid his arm around her shoulders then extended his right hand toward the constable. As the two men shook hands, Nate said, “Thank you for believing my friends, Sheriff Jefferson. Do you think you’ll need us for the trial?”

“Not unless you want to press charges for what he did to you.”

“I’d rather meet the devil face to face than even see that so-called doctor again. He’s caused enough trouble for me and my loved ones.” Gazing down at Libby with a smile, he hugged her. “What do you think, my sweet? Should we leave town as soon as possible?”

“Oh, yes!” Libby agreed. “As soon as we can.”

Constable Jefferson grinned at the couple. “You’re free to leave whenever you want. I have a feeling I should wish the two of you well, too. And, Payne? You’d better take good care of your lady-friend. She’s a very special woman to stand behind you like she did.”

“I know,” Nate replied, staring down at her lovingly. “She’s very special, indeed.”

***

While Will returned to the hotel, Nate and Libby walked out of town to stroll in the surrounding wilderness. After many minutes of silence, Nate finally spoke.

“Libby?” he asked, unable to stop the nervous cracking of his voice. “Now that you know I’m not a murderer, would you consider marrying me? I know you love me. There’s not a doubt in my mind.” He paused a moment then added, “It’s what I see in your gorgeous green eyes every time we’re alone together. You keep saying that you refuse to love anyone, so you can’t see it the same way I do. You’re too determined not to become involved to the point where you might feel the pain of a loss. But I can’t—no, I won’t accept that anymore. You love me, and you know as well as I do that we belong together.”

Libby smiled up at him. “You’re beginning to sound conceited and arrogant again. I thought you said you didn’t like yourself that way anymore.”

“I don’t.”
“Then let me tell you something. I like you much better the way you were when we met. You give me a sense of security, a sense of power, that I never got from other men. That might even be what attracted me to you in the first place. If you regain the conceit and arrogance that I came to adore, I might consider answering yes if you ask me to marry you again.”

Nate grinned boyishly. “In that case, my sweet, I’ll be as arrogant and conceited as you want. Does that mean that you’ll marry me?”

“Oh, hell,” he said, “you win. I’ll go back and make amends with my father. At least, I’ll try. Now will you please say yes when I ask you to marry me?”

“Yes.”

Stopping instantly, he stared down at her, his heart filled with wonder and love. “You will? Honest? I’m not dreaming again, am I? This is truly happening? You’re finally agreeing to be my wife?”

“Are you finally asking me again?”

“Am I ever!” Taking her into his arms, he held her lightly and gazed down at her. “Liberty Woods, will you be my wife?”

“Yes, but I need to prove something to myself before we’re married.”

“What’s that?”

“I need proof—not for you but for myself—that I can make you happy like a wife should. I want you to be intimate with me—right here and right now.”

“Here and now?” he asked, stunned by her request. “But, Liberty, we’re in public.”

“We’re in the woods where no one will see us—unless Will followed us again. But I doubt it, because he knows how much I want to be alone with you.”

“As much as I’d like to honor your request, my sweet,” he explained, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about my intentions. I’m not marrying you for sex, Libby. I’m marrying you because I love you.”
“Good, because that’s exactly why I agreed to marry you. I love you, too, but I’m afraid that I might not be able to fulfill your, um … needs. Like I said, I need to do this for myself—not for you. Will you show me that I can satisfy you?”

His kiss was all the answer she needed. The love and passion it contained erupted in her veins. She fought to restrain her desire, but she couldn’t. She was too overwhelmed by his passion.

When he unbuttoned her blouse, she sighed heatedly into his mouth. His tongue connected with hers; his lips ground against hers with a hunger that she absently wondered if he knew was present. With her blouse and petticoats open, he slid his hand inside to caress her bare breast. She unexpectedly shuddered at the touch. His physical warmth radiated even stronger heat throughout her body.

As his hands tugged at her skirt, much stronger, much more intense sensations raged through her. All thought drained from her mind, except the hot desire centered between her legs. Finally, Nate cleared his path to her womanhood, pulling up both her skirt and her petticoats.

While she watched, entranced by the masculinity of his body, he unfastened his trousers. Until then, she hadn’t considered that the mere sight of a man’s body would ever make her want him. But viewing Nate’s did! Would he never consummate their love?

Then he lowered his head to suckle on the tip for a few minutes. Intense flames of passion sprang to life. She tried to stop her hips from moving but couldn’t. She was Nate’s captive—and she loved it.

Suddenly, he began a downward trek of feathery kisses. Libby protested with a groan and grasped his head. Her excitement was so intense that she found it impossible to contain. Drawing his head to hers, she captured his lips with hers and lifted her hips to meet him. With a heated sigh of joy, she accepted him into her body.

The sensations he created increased her. Nate brought feelings much deeper than physical excitement to her. He made her want to give him everything she had—and more! Even though she’d said the words earlier, she’d been far from convinced that she meant them. Now she knew she did. She loved Nathaniel Payne.

Then new sensations overwhelmed her, all centered between her legs. No longer able to bear the exciting torment, she tore her mouth from his to release an unabashed cry of release as her body was consumed with tremors of fulfillment. Moments later, Nate stiffened and groaned into her ear.

Almost immediately, he rolled off her. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she began to cry. Taking her into his arms, he comforted her in a voice thick with concern.
“I’m sorry, my sweet Liberty. Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to upset you.

“I’m not upset, Nate,” she assured him. “In fact, I’ve never been so happy. You helped me realize something very important. Before they were mere words, but now they have meaning. I love you, Nathaniel Payne, with all my heart.”

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The following morning, they were married in the town church. Stopping at the sheriff’s office one last time to thank him, they announced their good news. To their surprise, they learned that Ross had confessed everything under Jefferson’s persistent questioning.

Filled with a mixture of contentment, relief, and fulfilled love, they began their journey to Philadelphia with Will.
Chapter 23

Nathaniel Payne, Sr., stared at the Indian standing on his Philadelphia mansion doorstep. The redhaired infant the Indian held looked about five months old. But when the Indian spoke, Payne's astonishment increased. This Indian spoke with a heavy British accent.

“I can see you’re Nathaniel Payne, Sr.,” the Indian said. “You look much like your son. I've come in the hope of contacting him.”

“My son?” Payne repeated in amazement. “Which one of my sons would know a savage?”

“I'm only half Cherokee. I was educated in England, where my father was born. Your son—Nate I believe he prefers to be called—told me to come here if I ever wanted to contact him. He said that you would know where I could find him.”

“Nate!” Payne spat out his son’s name. “I should have known. What do you want with him? Does he have something to do with that child you’re carrying.”

“In a manner of speaking. I want my son to be raised in the white man’s world.”

Payne stared at Wild Bear in disbelief. “Nate? Raise a child? This must be a practical joke, because that boy never grew up himself. He couldn’t raise a child.”

“I've met your son, Mr. Payne, and I assure you that he would do a fine job.”

“You said you were educated in England. Why don’t you send your son over there?”

“I haven’t the money.” The Cherokee peered over Payne’s shoulder then returned his gaze to Payne. “It’s rather inconvenient for me to stand in the doorway to discuss this. Would you let me in?”

Stepping back, Payne let the Indian pass then closed the door. “Come into my study, and explain how you knew where to find me and why you came to my house.”

In the study, the Indian introduced himself as Jeremiah Caldwell, also known as Wild Bear, and his son as Nathaniel Jeremiah Caldwell. He explained that the baby was named after Nate at the request of his late wife, who died shortly after the birth. Since he preferred
that his son be reared as a white man, he came to Payne to contact Nate, as Nate had requested. In turn, Nate had promised to locate the child’s aunt, Libby Woods, and take little Nathaniel for her to raise.

“Then you aren’t interested in my son raising him,” Payne said when Wild Bear finished his story. “You want your sister-in-law to do it.”

“Exactly,” Wild Bear admitted bouncing the crying baby on his lap. “I’m afraid I don’t make a very good mother. I plan to take a Cherokee wife someday, but I don’t want my son raised that way. I want him to have the same advantages I had. I want him to make his own choice of lifestyle when he’s an adult. I will teach him the Cherokee way when he’s old enough to understand the differences between the white man’s world and the Cherokee world.”

“Excuse me a moment.” Going to the door, Payne called to a woman named Esther. In seconds, the rotund black woman appeared and he said, “Take this child to the nursery, Esther. He may need to be fed or have his diaper changed. Either way he needs attention. His name is Nathaniel, and he’ll be staying with us for a while. You and Miss Rebecca should be able to care for him sufficiently until my son comes to get him.”

“Yas-sah,” Esther replied, taking the baby from Wild Bear.

Studying Payne, Wild Bear rose. “Do you plan to keep him here until Nate comes?”

“You shouldn’t be traveling all over the countryside with a child that age. He’s much too young. Do you have any objections?”

“No, sir, but I didn’t expect it. I thought I would have to take Nathaniel to him. He’s my son, and I’m responsible for him.”

“My daughter and servant can take care of him until I can summon my son to get him. Is that sufficient?”

“Yes. Fine. I should go now.”

Payne glared at Wild Bear. “Of course. You don’t want the baby, so you leave as soon as you can. That’s not at all uncommon in men who don’t want responsibility, and I imagine it makes sense that you break the ties quickly.”

“I wish I could assume the responsibility, Mr. Payne, but I want better for my son than I can give him. Nathaniel is my son in name only. Another man bedded Flossie before I married her, and I knew it before I married her. Fortunately, I came to love her. That’s why I want what’s best for the boy. My hope is that Libby will raise him as the nephew that he is, not as her son. I want him to know that his mother was a wonderful woman. I’d also like to be known as his father, but I can’t care for him. Someday I’ll return to claim him as my son—when he’s old enough to need the kind of love I’m capable of offering him.”
Payne nodded. “I’ll contact my son and tell him your preferences when he arrives.”

“Thank you, sir.” Reaching into the waistband of his buckskin breeches, he pulled out a wax-sealed envelope and handed it to Payne. “This is a letter to Libby, telling her everything she should know about my son—his birthday, what he likes to eat, how his mother died, and things of that nature. I must go now. I don’t like what I’m doing, but I know that it’s right. It’s best that I leave without saying good-bye. I don’t think I could bear that. Thank you again, sir. I trust your daughter to take good care of Nathaniel until Nate arrives. Good-bye.”

Payne watched silently as Wild Bear strode away. When the Indian was gone, he returned to his study and wrote a letter to Nate, addressing it to the last address his wife had—the post office in Nashville, Tennessee.

In the parlor, he leaned against the fireplace mantle and stared at the portrait of his wife above it. “Ah, Nancy. What would you think of our son if you knew about this? You always told me that he was a good man, but I never took the time to believe you. I do now, though. I’ll get him home, and then I’ll explain things like you always wanted me to. If only you could be here to see that moment.”

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Anxiety stronger than he’d ever known swept through Nate as he lifted Libby from the carriage. They were at his childhood home, and he would soon face the man who had sent him away. But he would also reunite with his mother, and he could hardly wait. In silence, he escorted Libby to the door while Will followed a step behind. A moment before he knocked on the door, however, it opened.

“Mistah Nate!” Esther exclaimed happily. “Yer home!”

“Only for a day or so,” Nate replied with a smile. “It’s good to see you again, Esther.”

“Thank you, sir. Come in.”

Nate gently pushed Libby into the foyer while Will followed behind. “I came to introduce someone to my parents. Is Mother home?”

Esther’s face dropped as she stared at Nate. He knew that something was wrong, but he refused to let Libby see his distress.

“Come to the parlor, Mistah Nate,” Esther said, leading them toward the room. “I have a s’prise fer you.”
“First take Miss Liberty's coat, please,” Nate requested as he helped her out of it. “She won't need it in such a warm room.”


“I wrote Mother about her several months ago. Where is Mother?” Nate prompted after Esther took Libby’s coat. “I thought she would be here. I wrote a letter, but I didn’t know if it would get here in time, so it seems not, since our being here is a surprise.”

“Things change, Mistah Nate,” Esther replied. “I sent Phoebe for yer papa. He should be here soon.”

“My father?” Nate repeated, suddenly overwhelmed by his nervousness.

“You already sent for him? Without my permission? Why would you do such a thing?”

Esther's dark face took on a stricken expression. “Mistah Payne would wanna to know.” Sorry if I made you mad, Mistah Nate.”

“Nate, please,” Libby interrupted as she laid her hand gently on his forearm. “Remember why we came in the first place. Don’t act like this. It isn’t polite, and it doesn’t become you.”

“I can’t help it, Libby. I don’t know how else to react.”

Patting Nate’s arm reassuringly, Libby turned her gaze to Esther. “I’m sorry for his reaction, Esther. He’s a little nervous. He didn’t mean to snap at you like that.”

“Yas-um. I’m goin’ back to my chores. You wait. It’s good yer back, Mistah Nate.” With those words Esther left the trio alone.

For several minutes Nate paced the room. Libby and Will both tried to convince him that he was doing the right thing when he suddenly bolted from the house.

Libby and Will chased after him, but she stopped in the doorway while Will continued his pursuit. When they were out of sight, she turned around and saw Esther standing behind her with a young Caucasian girl at her side.

“Miz Becky,” Esther said before leaving again, “this is Miz Liberty.”

“Where’s Nate?” Becky asked.

Libby grimaced. “I’m afraid he left.” Then she let a bright smile come to her lips. “You must be his youngest sister. Rebecca, right?”
“Yes, ma’am. But everybody except Nate calls me Becky,” she said, extending her right hand toward Libby. “Esther said your name is Miss Liberty?”

“I prefer Libby.”

Becky’s eyes brightened. “Is that by any chance Libby Woods?”

“That was my maiden name.”

“Good. Come on into the parlor, and we can talk. There’s something you need to know.” In the parlor, they sat down on the settee before Becky spoke again. “In a way, I’m glad Nate left for a while. I think what I’m going to tell you should be said in private. But I do wish your husband were here to share this with you.”

“I don’t think you understand, Becky,” Libby said soberly. “Nate is my husband.”

“Nate got married?” she asked in shock. “Everybody in the family told me he swore he’d never, ever do that, so I assumed that the tall man I saw leave here was your husband.” She glanced at the door as though she was more than making conversation. “Who is he?”

“My brother,” Libby explained. “Could you get back to what you wanted to tell me?”

But Becky shook her head. “Not now. I didn’t realize Nate was your husband. If I said this without him being here, he’d be furious with me. Even I know that, and I was still little when he left. I’ll wait until he gets home.”

At that moment, the front door flew open, and a man rushed into the house calling Nate’s name. Becky hurried to the parlor door and invited her father to join them.

“I’m sorry, miss,” Payne said as he stared at Libby in amazement. “I didn’t realize that Nate brought friends. I’m Nate’s father, Nathaniel Payne, Sr.”

“How do you do, sir,” she responded, rising from her seat to face Payne as they shook hands. “I’m Libby Payne, Nate’s wife.”

His mouth dropped open, and he stared at her in disbelief for several silent moments.

“Nate’s wife?” he replied. “I … I don’t know what to say.”

Libby smiled, but she sensed something was wrong. “Neither do I. Nate was supposed to be here to introduce us, but I’m afraid he left when he heard that you’d been summoned.” His shocked expression gave Libby pause. Did she dare tell him? Yes, he had a right to know. “Nate was afraid to come home. He has been for years. That’s one reason he stayed away for so long. If your wife had been at home when he arrived, I think it would have been easier for him. He was looking forward to having her here when the two of you were reunited.”
“My wife?”

Libby studied him for a few moments. From the tone of his voice, he hadn’t expected her to make such an announcement. Taking a deep breath to still her unexpected anxiety, she said, “Of course. I was under the impression that he and his mother were very close.”

“They were,” Payne admitted, “but my wife’s been deceased for a little over a year now. Didn’t he get my letter telling him that?”

“Oh, no.” Sinking into the soft cushions of the sofa, she slid her fingers into her thick hair. “Now what should I do? I’d convinced him that she would be here to help him.”

“Where did he go, Libby?” he asked in concern. “I’ll see if I can find him.”

“He didn’t say where he was going. He just ran out of the house like he had to get away. My brother went after him. He’ll be back, Mr. Payne. He promised that we’d never spend a night apart.” Libby’s heart ached. He looked so disappointed that she wished she could tell him that she was, but she didn’t want to lie. Granted, she thought he would return, but she wasn’t positive. To keep her words honest, she said, “At least, I’m as sure as I can be that he will return.”

“All right. I’ll wait with you.” Turning his attention to his daughter, he asked, “Did you tell her yet, Becky?”

“Not yet, Daddy. I didn’t think I should since Nate’s her husband.”

“Good. We’ll wait until he comes back. If I remember my son for anything, it’s how protective he can be of his loved ones, especially the women in his life. He wouldn’t like it if we took care of this matter without his being present.”

Libby glanced from father to daughter then back. Something more than Nate’s mother being deceased was wrong in this household, something more than Nate’s unexpected return. But she had no inkling as to what it could be.

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For hours, Will wandered the streets in search of his brother-in-law. Since he’d lost sight of Will within three blocks, he went from one tavern to the next. Finally, he spotted the trapper with a half-empty bottle of rye sitting on the table before him. Will decided to determine Nate’s condition before taking him home to Libby.

“Can I join you, Nate?” Will asked from behind Nate.
“It’s may, Will,” Nate corrected as he stared at the bottle. “And sure. Why the hell not?”

Pulling out a chair at the table, Will dropped down on it. “I’ve been looking for you an awfully long time.” Will took out the pocket watch that had been Leon’s and glanced at the time. “Over three hours.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“What’s the matter with you? Why’d you run away from Libby like that?”

Nate shook his head. “You don’t understand. I didn’t run away from Liberty. I ran away from my father. I couldn’t face him. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to face him. There’s too much bad blood between us, and I’m terrified of seeing him again.” Nate’s voice took on a dreamy tone. “When I first met Liberty, I was terrified of my feelings for her.”

“That was different. You’d never been in love like that before.”

“Liberty said that Mother would be there to make the meeting easier for me, but she was wrong. My mother wasn’t anywhere around.” Ignoring the shot glass before him, Nate paused to drink straight from the bottle. “Do you know where she is, Will? She’s in the family plot at the church. She died over a year ago. She died, and my father didn’t even have the decency to send me a letter and tell me.”

“How did you know she died?” Will asked.

“I could tell something was wrong by the way Esther acted. I decided the first place I should look was in the cemetery and, sure enough, there she was.” Nate slammed his fist on the table, nearly knocking over the bottle. “Damn that man! Damn him for not telling me.”

“Maybe he did.”

“I never got a letter.”

“Sometimes letters get lost.”

Lifting the bottle, Nate studied the liquid in it intently. The lad had a good point. One of his mother’s letters had taken over two years to make it to Nashville. But was that any excuse? No, his mother was much too important to him for his father not to have written more than one letter, in case one had gotten lost.

Nate took a long swallow directly from the bottle then sighed. “I suppose that’s possible, Will, but he should have mailed more than one to be sure I got the message.”

“You left Libby back at the house, Nate. She’s probably still waiting for you.”
Why had Will reminded him of that? He felt guilty enough without an eighteen-year-old insinuating that he was being foolish and selfish. No, Will hadn’t insinuated it. He probably perceived it that way because he felt so guilty about leaving Libby amid strangers.

Nate took another swig of liquor. “I suppose.”

“Don’t you think it was inconsiderate of you?”

Inconsiderate? Yes, it probably was. But he hadn’t been able to help it. He couldn’t have stayed in the house when he knew his father was coming to see him and his mother wasn’t there. Besides, nobody the house would hurt Libby. They would all be courteous to her.

“Everybody will see that she’s comfortable,” Nate said as he looked up into Will’s eyes. “Will? Do you think something’s wrong? Liberty and I desperately want a baby, and so far, nothing’s happened. We’ve been married for three months now, and she’s still not pregnant.”

“You’re asking me about something like that?” Will asked incredulously. “I sure as hell can’t advise you. I know less than you do.”

“How can I face her now, Will? I can’t go back there after I left her stranded.”

“I’m sure she understands why you did it.”

“But I’m drunk as hell,” Nate said. “I was so upset about Mother that I completely forgot that I promised Liberty I would never drink this much again.”

“She’ll understand.”

“Do you think so? She doesn’t like it when somebody breaks a promise to her.”

“She’ll understand,” Will repeated before adding, “Come on. Let’s go back to the house.”

But the moment Nate stood up, he nearly fell over. Grabbing Nate’s arm to support him, Will said, “Good God, Nate, you are drunk. We can’t let Libby see you like this, or she’ll be furious. And now she doesn’t just lecture—she yells. We have to sober you up before you can go home.”

“That’s not home, Will,” Nate insisted as he dropped back onto his chair. “Liberty and I don’t have a home yet. But we will—as soon as I can build her a beautiful house on my land in Tennessee.”
Epilogue

Another few hours passed while Will, forcing Nate to drink one cup of coffee after another, sat in a restaurant with him. When Nate complained of a nasty headache, Will suggested it was time to return to the Payne house. Together Nate and Will mounted the steps to the front door.

But Nate wasn’t quite sober enough to react calmly when his father answered their knock instead of Esther. Unresolved fury burst forth, overpowering his fear. He didn’t want to speak to his father now. He wanted to be with his wife, to apologize for leaving her alone, to beg her forgiveness for getting drunk.

Nate pushed past his father without a word and started searching the house, beginning with parlor. Will started after Nate, but Payne stopped him.

“Let him go, young man,” Payne advised as Nate peered into his father’s office.

“But he ignored you,” Will replied.

“It’s all right. If I’m not mistaken, he has more pressing matters on his mind. Excuse me a minute, please.”

Not finding Libby in the office, Nate turned to leave. He stopped for only a second when he saw his father. This time when Nate passed him, Payne said, “She’s asleep in your old bedroom, son.”

Again, Nate stopped abruptly, stunned that his father had called him son. The word sparked unexpected ache in Nate’s chest. He fought it off. He couldn’t let his father see the agony the word sent to his heart. Muttering a short thank you, Nate raced up the stairs to his bedroom.

Entering quietly, he sat down on the edge of the bed then bent over to tenderly kiss his wife’s forehead. Libby woke instantly and threw herself into his arms to hug him.

“Where have you been, Nate?” she asked in concern. “Never mind. I can smell. You reek like you’ve been in a tavern. I thought you might have gone to one and gotten drunk.”
Nate grimaced. He should have known he couldn’t fool her. He’d hoped he could, but now that he was sober, he could see how ridiculous the notion had been.

“You were right, my sweet,” he finally admitted. “Thank God, Will found me and made me sober up before I came back. I’m sorry I left you here alone.”

“It’s all right, darling,” she replied. “I explained to your father.”

“I’d hoped you would. I learned something while I was gone, too, Liberty. I learned that my mother is dead.”

Libby sighed. “I thought that might have happened. Your father and I were very worried because you hadn’t received his letter telling you about her death.”

“He wrote me?” Nate asked, his chest emptying of emotion—or did it fill with an emotion he couldn’t explain.

“Of course, he did. Surely, you didn’t think that he would have neglected to let you know what happened.”

“I’m ashamed to say that I did. What happened, Libby? How did she die?”

“She contracted influenza.”

“I should have gone to medical school. Maybe I could have saved her.”

“Don’t you dare start that, Nate,” Libby scolded. “I won’t have you blaming yourself for something over which you had no control. It’s in the past now, Nate. You keep it there—where it belongs.”

“But it’s the present for me.”

“I realize that.” Libby shook her head when a baby began to cry. “There goes that poor child again. Becky has spent more time nursing it than she has with anybody else today. I’m so sick of hearing those screams that I could scream myself.”

“Is it Rebecca’s baby?” he asked in amazement.

“Your father says it’s not, but they won’t tell me whose baby it is, either. They won’t even let me try to help them with it. I’ve been so tempted to find it and take over that it’s all I can do to restrain myself.”

“You want a baby badly, don’t you, my sweet. So badly that you would take over the care of another woman’s child so you can be a mother.”

Libby giggled. “I’m not quite that desperate yet, but I do want your baby. We probably
haven’t had enough time to make one. I feel sorry for the baby in this house. I want to cuddle it and sing to it and see if there’s something I can do to make it feel better. I offered, but your father said that I’m company, that I’m not here to take care of a child.”

Hugging her, Nate kissed her hair. “Then I’ll take you to the nursery myself so you can take over its care right this second. I’ve always been the rebel of the family, Liberty, so they’ll expect it of me. Get into your robe and meet me in the nursery. It’s at the very end of the hall.”

Nate left Libby and went to the nursery, arriving only seconds before she did. When he saw the redheaded infant in the cradle, he stared at it in disbelief until he heard Libby’s footsteps behind him.

“Get away from here, Libby!” he ordered. “Don’t come near this baby.”

Tears flooded her eyes. “What’s wrong with it? Is it deformed? Tell me, Nate. Is that why no one would let me help with it?”

He smiled reassuringly. “No, my sweet, as far as I can tell, it’s a perfect baby.”

“Then why don’t you want me to see it?”

At that moment, Payne, Will and Becky entered the room.

“I refuse to let you have anything to do with this child,” Nate insisted. “I won’t be responsible for it, and I won’t let you be responsible for it. I want to know exactly how it got here before I’ll even let you look at it.”

“I’ll look if I want to, Nathaniel Payne,” she declared. “I’ll hold it if I want to. I’ll even be responsible for it if I want to. You cannot tell me what to do because I won’t allow it.”

This couldn’t be happening, Nate told himself. He’d seen the baby, and he knew exactly what it was doing there. Wild Bear had brought it, but it certainly wasn’t the Indian’s child. The worst part was that the baby was probably there because Wild Bear wanted Libby to raise it.

Finally finding his voice, he shouted his response. “No! I refuse to allow you near this child, Liberty Payne!”

Payne motioned for Will and Becky to leave them alone and spoke quietly. “You’re frightening the baby even more, son. Lower your voice.”

Nate watched his father stride to the infant, pick it up and cuddle it to him. While Nate stared at him in amazement, he stroked the child’s stomach caressingly to soothe it. Almost immediately the baby’s cries subsided. With his bottom lip trembling, Nate finally spoke to his father.
“Why didn’t you ever treat me like that?”

“You never let me when you were little,” Payne explained. “When you got older, I didn’t think you would let me, because you always thought yourself so much of a man. In short, I didn’t know you wanted it.”

“May I hold the baby, Mr. Payne?” Libby asked softly.

“No!” Nate denied, quickly stepping between them. “Don’t you dare give her that baby, Dad. I don’t know how the hell it got here, but I won’t have my wife anywhere near it.”

“She has a right, son. It’s her nephew.”

Libby stared at him in shock, but it was Libby who repeated, “My nephew?”

“Yes. Your sister was his mother.”

“Was?” she repeated. “She’s dead now?”

But Libby didn’t hear Payne express his sympathies as she crumpled to the floor. When she regained consciousness moments later, Nate knelt beside her holding her hand. Her eyes filled with tears, and she repeated her request to see the baby. Again, Nate refused.

“Nate, please,” she said. “I have to know how much he looks like Flossie. I know that’s why you won’t let me see him.”

“Oh, my sweet, if that were the reason, I’d let you see him and hold him and love him—even be responsible for him. But that isn’t the case. He doesn’t look anything like Flossie. Hell, he doesn’t even look like her husband. I saw her husband, remember? So I know. You must believe me. That isn’t his child.”

“You’re right, son,” Payne inserted. “It wasn’t the baby’s real father who brought him here. It was your sister’s husband, Libby, but he told me the child isn’t his. Nathaniel’s father was another man.”

Nate shot his surprised stared to his father as he and Libby asked, “His name is Nathaniel?”

“Yes. Nathaniel Jeremiah Caldwell. Libby’s sister wanted to name him after you, Nate. The Indian who brought him here explained that much to me. He also left a letter for you, Libby, explaining everything he thought you should know.”

“If he doesn’t look like Flossie and he doesn’t look like the Indian, …” Libby stopped short and gasped in horror. “Oh, Nate, don’t tell me. He looks like Hiram Ross, doesn’t he?”

“That’s right, my sweet.”
“All right,” she said with finality. “Now that I know, let me hold him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Nate helped Libby to sit in the rocking chair before Payne handed her the baby. She held Nathaniel close, stroked his fine red hair, and rocked while Nate spoke with his father.

“I realized after you left home that I did you a great injustice, son,” Payne admitted. “I was very sorry, but I didn’t know how to approach you in a letter. All I know is that I love you, and I wish we could get back the twelve years we’ve lost.”

“That’s not possible,” Nate replied. “What’s past is past, and nothing can change that. Libby told me that only a little while ago.”

“Yes, I know. But this is your home, son. It always was, and it always will be, for as long as you want it to be. After you left, I changed my will. I left the house and all the furnishings to you.”

“A lot of good that would have done me when I didn’t even get your letter telling me Mother died,” Nate snapped. The silent look Libby shot him reminded him that he should show his father more respect, and Nate bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Dad. It wasn’t your fault that the letter was lost. I don’t want things to be bad between us anymore. I want us to at least part on good terms.”

“Part?”

“Yes. Liberty and I have a farm in Tennessee, and we’re going back to as soon as we spend a few days with you. I’d like for you to will the house to one of the other children. I can’t accept it, because Liberty and I already have plans for our life together.”

“You didn’t even tell me that you were going to get married.”

“We didn’t know ourselves until the last minute.”

“Son,” Payne said, “let’s go downstairs and discuss this. We’ll talk like we never had a chance to before.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. We can talk, but never the way we would have when I was growing up. I have a wife now, and I want her included in our discussions. I want her to know everything about my past and her possible future with an old rogue like me. I want her to hear first-hand what we say. Do you mind?”

“If I can talk to you again, son, that’s all that matters. Come along, Libby, we’ll all go downstairs—father, son, wife and nephew.”
“He’ll be raised as our son since we have none of our own,” Nate insisted firmly.

“That’s out of the question, Nate,” Payne said as Libby rose from the chair to join them. “It was the Indian’s wish that Nathaniel be raised as Libby’s nephew. He wants Nathaniel to be told all about his mother, and he wants to come for the baby when the time is right. Remember, he’s only your responsibility because the Indian deemed it best for him. He isn’t your child.”

“But we have none of our own and none expected. We could adopt him, and he would be ours.”

“Your father’s right, Nate,” Libby said. “I’ll care of Nathaniel until Wild Bear returns for him. But I could never accept him as my own child—not after what his natural father did to me and what he tried to do to you. He will be in our house because of Flossie, and I will love him as I would love any other nephew or niece. But I could never love him as my own son. He’s an innocent child, but I honestly don’t think I can ever forget—or forgive—what his father did. And his red hair will remind me of Hiram every day. Our time will come, Nate. One day we’ll have a son or daughter of our own.”

“Now that that’s settled,” Payne said, “let’s go downstairs and get acquainted again. Then I’ll be the happiest man on earth. I’ve come to miss my son very much. Now it’s time for me to come to know him as a person rather than as a man that I’m trying to force into something he doesn’t want. I’m proud to say that I have a namesake who’s a farmer—not a doctor.”

Payne took Nathaniel and carried him down the steps. In the hall, Nate stopped Libby and swept her into his arms.

“Thank you, my sweet,” he said after kissing her soundly. “You’ve made me one of the happiest men alive by being my wife and insisting that I do this. The next to the happiest man is my father, even though I never believed he would be. Thank you for making me come home. Knowing that we’re father and son again means everything to me.”

“Couldn’t we stay in Philadelphia, Nate?” she asked hesitantly. “Now that you’ve admitted that this is home to you, I don’t want to travel so far with a baby. Couldn’t we please sell the land in Tennessee? We could try to buy a farm near here. You’re on good terms with your father again, darling. Let’s not separate the two of you. I just know that things would be pleasant for you here.”

“That would make you happier than anything else, wouldn’t it, my sweet? For us to stay near Philadelphia, I mean.”

“Except for bearing your child. And I think it would make you happy, too.”

Nate chuckled. “You know me a little too well, Mrs. Payne, so well that it scares me sometimes. I’ll tell you what. We’ll talk to Father and see what happens. If things go well, which is what I expect, we’ll work something out so we can stay if that’s what you want.”
“It is, Nate. I don’t want you to spend any more time away from your father and family. He’s a good man, Nate. In fact, he’s a lot like you, which could be why you have such a hard time getting along. Now let’s not keep your father waiting.”

“Just a couple more minutes, my sweet. I’m sure he won’t mind. First, I want to say this again. I love you desperately. As soon as we’re done talking to Father, I’m taking you to bed and trying to prove exactly how much by making a baby of our own.”

Smiling up at him, Libby blushed. But she accepted his kiss, knowing that a total reunion of father and son would take place very soon. And once she explained to Nate that the real reason she’d fainted was because she was already pregnant, their happiness would be complete.