

ONE
Indian Territory 1879

Namid lay perfectly still beneath the lifeless body of her mother and concentrated on regulating her breathing so that it would be shallow and cause as little movement as possible.

She had heard the approach of one of the killers by the sound of his boots on the hard ground. Now he stood very close and although she kept her eyes tightly closed, she sensed he was studying her face and deciding if she was still alive. He moved again and she recognized that he had squatted down beside her because his heavy breathing was near enough to her face that she felt the heat and the smell of his foul breath. He spoke softly, something imperceptible before she sensed him move again and the head of her mother was lifted from where it rested against the top of her own head.

‘Well lookee here,’ he muttered. ‘Looks like we got us a white woman.’

He replaced the woman’s head and Namid felt it rest once more against her own. Suddenly the man yelled something and she was almost startled into jumping and giving herself away.

‘Mister Hanlon!’

After a moment, somebody answered from what seemed a few yards away.

‘Yes Joe, what is it?’

‘This one’s a white woman sir.’

There came a moment’s silence before Hanlon responded.

‘Is she dead?’

‘Yes sir, but there’s a young girl here who’s still alive.’

Another short silence.

‘Is she white as well?’

‘She’s dressed like an Indian, but she’s a white kid alright.’

‘Kill her Joe; as far as I’m concerned, she’s Indian by association.’

‘Shouldn’t we take her back to let her be with civilised folks?’

‘What good would that do? She’s obviously been raised by Indians, therefore, decent folks will see her as a heathen and shun her. No, she will be better off dead same as the woman.’

‘Well if you’re sure Sir.’

‘Just do it damn it and don’t question my judgement.’

‘Yes sir.’

Namid’s heart felt as though it would beat itself out of her chest as she sensed the man move before she felt his hand wiping something wet and

sticky all over her face. Then he appeared to shift and she felt something hard press against her temple.

‘Sorry kid,’ he muttered.

Her eyes shot open and she looked up into the grizzled face of the man who held a gun to her head. She was lying half on her side and partly on her stomach with her face sideways on. He looked into her frightened, blue eyes and smiled sadly before putting pressure on the trigger. The girl closed her eyes tightly and waited for the gunshot that would spell the end of her short life.

The man called Joe, fired the gun then quickly turned and strode back to join the rest of the men who were now mounted and waiting for him.

‘You sure she’s dead Joe?’

The man who spoke was John Hanlon, the leader of the thirty or so, gunmen who had wiped out nearly two dozen women and children camped on the banks of Goose Creek in Indian Territory. Those poor defenceless Cheyenne people put up no resistance as they were systematically, cut down by gunfire and given no mercy or any chance to escape. They had been stragglers and infirm people who were following the main party of Cheyenne as they innocently, made their way back to the reservation they had originally absconded from. Joe mounted his horse before turning his eyes to regard Hanlon.

‘I could hardly miss at that range Mister Hanlon.’

Hanlon studied the man’s face for a few moments then turned his eyes to the girl noting the thick blood that matted her head and face a few yards away, before responding.

‘Ok, let’s get the hell out of here.’

He turned his horse, and followed by his gang of killers, rode away leaving in their wake the harrowing scene of carnage, devastation and death.

TWO

Kansas 13 years earlier

Rose’s Story

Rose had ventured farther away from the wagons than she realised. But at that particular time, she desperately needed to be alone and find a place where she could luxuriate in her solitude. Therefore instead of washing at the point of the creek close to where the wagons were, she ventured along the water’s edge to seek out an appropriate spot that would suit her needs. Eventually, she found the ideal place, but the distance she had walked placed

her barely within hailing distance of the wagons and the rest of the settlers including her husband Jeff.

She chose, what she considered to be a very pretty spot when she finally halted her progress and looked around. What she saw was a grassy area with wild flowers and shrubs. Butterflies, bees and other insects flitted around and the sweet sound of birdsong brought a pleasurable sound to her ears. There were cottonwoods and hawthorn as well as a couple of willow trees close to the water with their waterside branches overhanging the shallow creek.

She settled down in the shade of the slender branches of one of the willows and curled her legs beneath her. Then plucked a flower from a Black eyed Susan plant and touched it to her chin before dreamily gazing down at the pretty yellow flower in her hand.

It felt good to be alone in the solitude of this peaceful place and away from the other women of the wagon train. She had noticed how the hostility that had been targeted at her had been building, some of it quite open and she accepted that her past had caught up in the form of one of the women who had recognized her from her saloon days in Abilene.

When she and Jeff had first joined the wagon train they had been warmly received and welcomed into the fold. But it didn't take long for the gossip to start amongst the predominantly religious people that made up the bulk of the travellers. This did not particularly bother Rose, her past had made her tough and she had become insulated and insensitive to the stares and mutterings of the good women of Abilene as well as the ones travelling with the wagon train. But she did fear for Jeff's discomfort and even more, for his daughter, Star's distress. However, her concerns were unfounded because neither Jeff nor Star noticed, or if they had, were completely unconcerned.

From the first time they corresponded, she had been open with Jeff about her past and he had accepted it. Their marriage was one of convenience and though they were very fond of each other, they both recognized the need they shared rather than love.

Jeff's First wife had died two years previously leaving him to take care of their two year old daughter and the small farm they had occupied in Iowa. At that time, Rose was living in Chicago having given up her life as a saloon girl and returned to her birth place around three years previously. She had saved enough money over a period of time, to make the journey, but because she was a good looking girl and the most popular waitress around at that time, her boss was reluctant to let her go. However, he recognized that she had made up her mind that she was going to change her ways and hopefully find a man who would love and take care of her. So he gave her his blessing and a hundred dollars cash to help her on her journey.

Her life in Chicago did not go as planned and she soon found herself short of money and facing eviction from the room she rented in a large tenement building. She had no relatives in Chicago that she knew of. Her mother had left her on the steps of an orphanage when she was a baby and that was the only home she had known. Then when she turned seventeen she headed west with a gambler who had besotted her with his good looks and charm. He had left her in Abilene penniless and alone when he left in a hurry after being caught cheating at poker. However, by then, she had already seen through his shallowness and selfish greed, so in one way, it was a relief to be rid of him. But the downside was, she was broke and had no way of getting back to Chicago. The only assets she possessed were her good looks and curves. The attractive young woman had already noticed the admiring looks she received from many men and so decided to put her attraction to good use and earn enough money to get back home. It wasn't long before she was working as a saloon girl and receiving the attentions of rich cattle buyers, ranchers and bankers as well as cowboys and gamblers. Rose became so popular, she could afford to be choosy and in most cases chose generous men who had plenty of money. So, after a little more than two years, she had saved enough to pay her way back to Chicago and have some left over to live on for a while.

Back in Chicago, meaningful work was hard to come by for she had no skills and she flatly refused to go back to her old ways and use her incredible assets to earn money. There had been men of course, quite a few of them had come calling because of her good looks and statuesque bearing. But none had lived up to her expectations. Some had been abusive, both mentally and physically and others had either, been married, or were simply too ridiculous to even contemplate having a relationship with. Even the jobs she had found in order to compliment her dwindling pot of cash, had been disastrous. The latest was as a nanny and housekeeper looking after two small children. A job she had liked so much she thought that she had at last, found her calling and she was happy. That happiness was short lived when the gentleman of the house tried to force himself upon her, but Rose had a violent temper and was no stranger to far more abusive and violent men than he was. Therefore, during the ensuing struggle, he fell and banged his head against a table causing a deep gash and knocking himself out in the process. His wife chose to believe his version of events, in that, it had been Rose who came on to him and it had been he who had tried to resist her advances. Rose was aware that his wife did not believe him, yet she still chose to take her husband's side over hers. However, because she secretly, believed Rose's version of events, she dismissed the hapless girl rather than call the police and Rose was once more out of work and practically penniless. She knew that sooner or later, she would

have to go back to pleasuring men for money for in her present financial state, she saw little alternative. There were certainly, no shortage of establishments that would take her on, especially as with her good looks, she would be very popular and would be in great demand. But she intended to hang on until sheer desperation drove her to once more, take up that type of work. However, before that day came, her life took an entirely different course to anything she would ever have envisaged.

She figured what she had left of her nest-egg would keep her for another month. She would hopefully, supplement that with the small amount of cash she was able to earn doing menial cleaning jobs in stores and offices which might give her an extra couple of weeks, maybe longer if she ate just one meal a day. So it was, that one day whilst sitting in a café taking her time over a cup of coffee before venturing out into the rainy, cold street, her fortunes changed. She sat poring over a newspaper somebody had left behind and whilst looking through the ads hoping to find work, she happened on an ad for mail order brides. It was an agency, run from an office just around the corner from where she sat. She figured there would be no harm in enquiring and there was just a chance it could be a way out for her.

Things moved very quickly after that. She found the small office and before she had a chance to grasp what she was getting herself into, had exchanged letters with a potential suitor and was soon on her way by train and stagecoach to meet Jeff Deeping her future husband, at his small farm in Iowa. Although it wasn't love at first sight, there was an immediate affinity and they were extremely comfortable in each other's company.

They married soon after meeting and Rose took over the task of raising his daughter Star and doing the chores, leaving Jeff free to run the farm. Soon after they wed, he told her of his plan to head for Texas and realize his dream of setting up a ranch and raising cattle. Having promised to stand by him no matter what, she complied with his plans and less than two years after meeting him, he had sold the farm and bought a Conestoga wagon and six mules. Soon after that, they joined a wagon train in Des Moines which was heading for California. They would stay with it as far as Kansas, then leave and head south for Texas.

Now as she sat beneath the branches of the willow tree listening to the babble of the fast flowing creek, she contemplated whether or not to tell Jeff that she may be with child. He desperately wanted a son to carry on the Deeping name. A boy who would grow tall and strong like his father and help run the Ranch they planned to build in Texas.

She felt certain there was a baby growing inside her because she hadn't bled for over six weeks and until recently, that particular monthly curse always

came round as regularly as the rising of the sun. But what if she was uncharacteristically, late on this occasion? She knew if she raised his hopes, then dashed them, he would be broken hearted about it. Better then, to wait and be sure before breaking the news.

She clambered to her feet and stretched her tall, lithe body.

‘Better get back to the wagon,’ she murmured. ‘Jeff will begin to wonder where I am.’

She stooped and made her way out from beneath the shade of the low branches. Then straightened up and began to stroll back the way she had come. Suddenly, she stopped and yelped loudly, shocked and frightened when she saw an Indian warrior sitting his horse a few yards ahead of her. His black hair was parted into two braids with eagle feathers hanging from them. His brown face had streaks of white and red paint daubed in various places which to her mind, made him look terribly fierce. He was naked from the waist up and wore a breech cloth that left his muscular thighs exposed and his dress was complimented by a pair of knee high deerskin moccasins. He gazed impassively at her from his paint horse, which was also adorned with feathers and streaked with coloured paint.

She was suddenly, paralysed with fear and trepidation. She had seen Indians before of course, usually old men, or women and children begging for money and food. But she had never been this close to a wild Indian warrior and her terror was felt in her trembling hands and legs as he continued to hold his silent gaze upon her.

She tried to compose herself and give the impression that she was unmoved by his presence. So, moving her eyes away from him, she took a few unsteady steps in his direction before making her way falteringly around his horse. He moved the horse into her path blocking her way. She turned and tried to move around him again, but once more he blocked her way. She looked up into his dispassionate face with scared, imploring eyes, but he simply returned her stare and waited for her next move. He was barring her way back to Jeff and the others and she was sure he knew what he was doing. She thought about screaming, but the weapons he possessed, a tomahawk, a huge knife and a lance, made her fear for her life. She was sure that if she screamed for help, he would harm her and there may even be more Indians around which would put the people of the wagon train in grave danger, for apart from Jeff who had fought in the Civil War and Clee Davies, the wagon master, she doubted that many others were fighting men.

‘What do you want?’ she asked hoarsely, for her mouth and throat had dried considerably.

He did not answer and simply sat astride his horse regarding her silently. She decided he probably didn't understand her anyway and frustration was beginning to take over from her fear.

She stood still and looked around for a way of escape uncertain what to do or what he expected her to do as he sat his horse and silently watched her. She tried once more to pass his horse, but once again, he barred her way. Finally, she tried a different tack and turned around before setting off in the opposite direction to see if he would halt her progress again. But he allowed her to go and she felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe if she could get far enough away from him, she may be able to circle round and head back to the wagon train.

After around a hundred yards, her curiosity got the better of her and she turned her head to see where he was and what he was doing. He had not moved from the spot where she had left him, so she began to move away from the creek with the intention of circling and giving the Indian a wide birth. She turned to look at him and her hopes rose further when she saw he still remained sitting his horse in the same place.

'Maybe he was just teasing me,' she murmured as she upped her pace and began the wide arc that would put her on a course for the wagons. 'I guess he meant me no harm after all.'

Her optimism was short lived however, because when she once more, glanced back, he was trotting his horse toward her and she could only surmise he planned to head her off. Unfortunately, she was proved right when he began to herd her with gentle nudges from the horse's shoulder or flank until she was heading back in an easterly direction and going the opposite way to where the wagons were. She felt like a stray calf as he walked his horse behind her and occasionally steered her in the right direction whenever she veered off track. It was very unnerving because he never made a sound and his face was completely expressionless, although, one time when she looked up and studied his countenance, she saw amusement in his eyes and she began to realize he was playing a game. However, that thought did not particularly fill her with confidence. After all, cats play with mice, but they still kill them once boredom sets in. She began to wonder what else he had in store, before he finally tired and killed her. Well while she still breathed, there was hope. Jeff would be searching for her by now and he would know she had gone to the creek to be alone, she had done it before and although the Indian brave had kept her walking on a set course, she doubted she had travelled so far that her husband would be unable to catch up. Her confidence would have been dashed along with any hopes she harboured of ever seeing Jeff again, had she known that at that very moment, the travellers with the wagon train were having problems of their own and were also in serious danger.