

Katie awoke to a crackling fire.

Overhead, a ceiling of rock stared down at her. Dark, sinister walls loomed into the blackness farther than she could see. Eerie shadows danced over them whenever an imperceptible breeze set the yellow flames in motion. There was a dull ache at her temples. Her muscles torn, her flesh bruised, she was too tired to feel fear, too wrapped up in remembering to care about where she was.

With a shudder she recalled the tense and worried look on her father's face the night before the attack. It had made him look far older than his fifty years. For the first time she'd gotten a glimpse into his mortality, and it had frightened her. She tried to make sense out of what had happened but scarcely knew where to begin. It all seemed like a bad dream from which she was only just now awakening. But if it had been only a dream, how could she explain this pounding in her head and the ache in every bone? Most of all, how could she account for the burning hole deep down inside of her?

As her gaze moved cautiously about the cave, it came to rest upon a figure seated across the flames.

There was nothing friendly about him. He sat without moving, deceptively relaxed in a cross-legged position, puffing silently on a long-stemmed pipe. The fire sent shadows flickering across his face and bare chest and cast him in an ominous light. There was a menace about him, an undisguised hostility and a proud arrogance. The colors and design of the beaded bag that hung from his rawhide belt confirmed that he was Lakota.

Her voice sounded small and childlike when it slipped into the space between them. "How long was I sleeping?"

If he was surprised that she spoke his language, he gave no indication of it. Tossing a stick on the fire, he said stoically, "The sun has risen and fallen once."

A day. She had slept an entire day. It seemed incredible until she recalled just how much there was to forget. She began to tremble, and into the darkness she raged at the utter senselessness of it all. "Why did they have to die like that?"

A muscle twitched in his high-boned cheek. His voice came low and reeking of bitterness from across the flames. "Word of this killing will spread like wildfire and many others will be asking that question."

Remembering what her father always told her about the Indian way, Katie swallowed down the lump in her throat and said in a voice that quavered, "My father will have many fine gifts for you for helping me to escape."

"Your father is dead."

She did not hear him. "He will be very grateful to you."

He repeated, "Your father is dead."

This time she could not block it out. His cold, flat words were the awful confirmation of what she had already sensed in the depths of her being. They had a final, absolute ring to them.

"Richard." She uttered the name as part statement, part question, aimed at no one in particular.

He tapped the spent ashes out of the pipe bowl, saying as he did, "The one with hair the color of the red dog is dead."

It wasn't that he referred to Richard as a fox that caused her to flinch, but the casual way in which he said it. Tears began to form, hot, stinging tears of disbelief, outrage and sorrow. Her shoulders started to shake as great sobs seized her. Like water from a broken beaver dam the tears rushed from her eyes and she wept into her hands. First, her mother was taken from her, leaving a

void that would never be filled. Now, her father and brother, and with them, dreams of Ireland and a life that was never to be fulfilled. The world was suddenly a dark and lonely place, with death and destruction as the only rewards for living.

Black Moon watched her from across the embers. "Death is a part of the circle of life," he said. "Man moves in a sun-wise direction. He comes from the south, the source of all life, and moves toward the west, the setting sun of his life. As he grows older, he approaches the cold north where the white hairs wait. If he lives long enough, he comes to the source of light and understanding that is the east. From there he returns to the place where his life began, to his mother, the Earth. We all return to the place of our beginning. Only the weak ones cry." There was no pity in his voice, no compassion, only a hint of mocking.

Katie lifted her chin and glared back at him. With tear-stained cheeks and eyes wild and bright, she declared with a sudden burst of pride, "I am not weak. I am strong."

His face remained implacable. He gave an indolent shrug, and said, "Is that why you shake like a frightened long-ears? Tell me, little red-haired long-ears just how strong you are."

"I am no rabbit," she said. "Do not call me that."

His jaw tightened at her insolence. "I will call you whatever I please."

"I have a name. It is Katie."

"Names can be changed. A boy is known by his cradle name until he earns a new one."

"But I am a woman, and even among the Lakota a woman does not change the name she receives at birth. My name is Katie and I will answer to no other."

From the storm clouds she saw gathering in his smoky eyes she expected him to draw his knife from its hide sheath and silence her with it for speaking so boldly. But he made no move toward his weapon.

They lapsed into silence. Katie had no idea how long she sat there with her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms hugging them tight. During the indeterminate hours that passed in which neither of them spoke, she scrutinized him from across the flickering flames.

His hair, unbound and hanging long and straight over his shoulders, was blacker than the recesses of the cave. The fire illuminated a face that bore the stamp of power and sheer force of will. With its high cheekbones, straight nose and well defined mouth, its handsomeness was compelling. It drew her toward it, much like the glazed windows of her father's cabin on the Laramie had often drawn magpies that flew against them with a thud and an explosion of feathers.

She could not help but notice that his legs were slim and hard, made for wrapping around a horse's bare back. A lean, tough belly showed not a hint of extra flesh. His bare narrow shoulders seemed perfectly made for slipping easily through thick groves and brush. His arms were well-muscled from a lifetime of drawing taut bowstrings. A band of red-dyed porcupine quills spanned one forearm. The hands that held the pipe, with their long, tapered fingers, were almost too beautiful to belong to a man.

Yet despite the physical appeal of him that she found so compelling, there was a hardness about him, of angular features and taut muscles and the suggestion of an inflexible spirit. But it was his eyes, in which the flames of the fire shone so brightly, that burned with such undisguised hatred it sent chills through her and forced her to turn her face away.

The silence stretched on and on.

After a while Black Moon drew from his rawhide bag a few hump ribs that had been flavored with melted back fat and tossed them into the fire. The fat sputtered and smoked and sent

a savory aroma into the air. He speared one of the ribs with the tip of his knife and held it out to her, drawing her attention with a low grunt.

She made no move to take it.

With a shrug of indifference, he bit into the meat. When he had eaten his fill, he picked up his long-stemmed pipe and placed into the red stone bowl a pinch of fragrant willow bark and a little leafy tobacco.

"I have not thanked you for saving my life," Katie said grudgingly.

"I need no thanks from you," he replied as he coaxed spirals of smoke into the overhead darkness.

"Still, you did save my life. I suppose that makes us friends."

"I am no friend of the whites!"

The abruptness of his reply startled her. She responded with a flash of anger. "You speak as though all whites are as bad as the ones who killed those people on Blue Water Creek. That is as foolish as saying that all Lakota are as bad as the ones who killed the soldiers over the Mormon's cow."

"Whose voice first sounded in this land?" he exclaimed. "The voice of the Indian who had only bows and arrows. What has been done to our country we did not ask for and we do not want. When the white man comes into our country, he leaves a trail of blood and death behind him. Blue Water is proof of that."

Katie pushed the sleeve of her deerskin dress up past the elbow and thrust out her arm. "Look! Do you see the color of this skin? It is white. If you hate all whites so much, why did you save this one?"

He looked at her for several long, tense moments before answering. "Perhaps it was for the pleasure it gave me to kill those bluecoats."

An unearthly silence pervaded the cave after that.

Gradually, Katie's anger abated and the cold sting of despair set in. A chill sent her body into shivers despite the warmth generated by the fire. From across the fluttering flames she watched with cautious eyes as his gaze wandered about the cave, climbing high upon the walls into the darkness and wandering all about the ground as if he were alone and idling the time away. Several times she caught his eyes stray to her, and then look away in haste.

After a while he rose from his spot and went to the place where his blanket of blue trade cloth was spread over the ground. Dropping to his knees upon it, he removed a buckskin bag from his belt. The bag was beaded front and back in a colorful geometric pattern on a white background, with quilled drops ending in tin cones and tufts of dyed horse hair.

The tenderness with which he handled the bag ran contrary to the overall fierceness of his demeanor. She could only guess at what the bag contained. The talon of an eagle perhaps, or a stone from the base of grizzly butte. Things of importance only to him. As he knelt there running his fingers over the powerful medicine, she knew he would rather die than reveal it to her.

But that was all right. She had no interest in him or the contents of his bag.

Her teeth were chattering with cold and her eyelids drooped with exhaustion. The next thing Katie knew, a hand was at her shoulder shaking her awake. He stood over her, wearing only a breechcloth, the fire flickering across his long, lean legs and near nakedness, the blanket of blue trade cloth dangling from his hand.

He tossed the blanket to the ground beside her. "Even a white woman must have warmth."

Katie snatched the blanket and hurled it at him. "If you can stand the cold, so can I."

With a shrug, he returned to his spot across the fire, laid down and pulled the blanket up over him.

Some time later, when the fire had burned down to a few smoldering embers, he came to her again, trailing the blanket behind him. Without a word, he dropped to the ground beside her and drew the blanket up over them both, using the heat of his lean, muscular body to chase the chill from hers. This time she made no protest. The raw masculine scent of him, mingled with the smell of sweet grass that emanated from his hair, filled her senses. Drawing in a deep sigh, she snuggled against him, closed her eyes and sank into a dark dream.

Two days later they rode into the Oglala village on the Running Water. Black Moon halted his pony before an unadorned lodge. Sliding off its rump, he walked to its side, placed his hands about Katie's waist and pulled her to the ground. He left her standing there while he disappeared inside.

From all around dark, curious, distrustful eyes peered at her. She'd never been afraid of the Sioux before. Her father had traded with them without any trouble, and her brother had married into Bone Bracelet's clan. Her visits to the Brulé village had always been happy, joyous times. But now, she felt suddenly like an intruder among hostile people who understood her even less than she understood them. Despite her circumstance, she straightened her back and stood as tall as she could, making eye contact with no one, feeling isolated and alone, so unbearably alone.

After what felt like an eternity Black Moon emerged from the lodge. "Some argue to send you back to the whites," he told her. "But Turning Hawk says your place is here." He shrugged, as if it made no difference to him. "The choice is yours."

Katie cast a wary glance around at the scores of eyes upon her. Unconsciously, she inched closer to him, feeling somehow safer in his shadow. He made no move to step away.

"What will become of me if I stay here?" she asked.

He looked down into those eyes that were the color of a new leaf, and said, "Turning Hawk has offered to take you into his lodge as his daughter. His woman is old. She has three sons but no daughters to help scrape the hides. He knows of the one you called father and says he was a good man." His expression darkened, telling her he was not convinced that any white man could be considered a good man. "Do you have a white family you can go to?"

Katie shook her head. "There is no one."

"You could go to the soldier town. Perhaps there someone would help you."

She had accompanied her father many times to Fort Laramie, but the thought of what the soldiers had done to Long Spear's village filled her with revulsion. No, there was no place for her at Laramie.

Privately, Katie assessed her options. McCabe was dead. Richard was dead. Bone Bracelet, Long Spear, and all the others she had known and loved were dead. For a reason that was unknown to her Providence had spared her life.

The question now was to which world did she belong, the white world to which she owed her heritage, or the Indian world to which she owed her life?

She looked up into his dark, intense eyes, and said, "I do not know your name."

He answered grudgingly, "My name is Black Moon."

"Is this your village?"

"My mother's lodge is at the end of the circle."

Despite what she sensed from his tone was his eagerness to be rid of her, the look in his eyes softened a little bit and seemed to beckon her to stay. He was fierce and imposing and made

no secret of his hatred of the whites, and yet she felt no fear of him. He had saved her life when he could have let the soldiers have their way and then dispose of her. Was it really for the pleasure it had given him to kill them? Yes, she suspected it was. But there was more to it than that, and she need only to look past the savagery in his ebony eyes to the passionate man beneath to know that they shared a common bond, a wild, tempestuous nature and a love for this untamed land.

Where else could she gallop her pony across the plains and thrill to the feel of the wild wind blowing through her hair? Where but here would she ever find a welcome such as she knew these people would extend to her?

“Treat ‘em fair and they’ll do like to ye”, her father used to say. They were, after all, just people, no better, no worse than anyone else.

And then there was Black Moon, whose handsomeness stole her breath away. Black Moon, her savior, fierce, violent, yet who she sensed was fair and just in his beliefs.

Black Moon, whose dusky eyes were searching hers for an answer.

For one incomprehensible moment Katie stood straddling both worlds, belonging to neither and feeling adrift with no one to guide her. For many long, silent minutes she grappled with doubt. Then, drawing in a deep, uncertain breath, and deriving strength from the Oglala warrior standing beside her, Katie made her choice.