

Upon entering the barn, Del's eyes immediately sought out Crow Eagle, but his place on the bed of hay was vacant. A movement from one of the stalls captured her attention. The sun slanted through the loft window, flooding the barn and catching his face in angled light. A tight trembling took hold of her as the memory of those features came back. The high cheekbones, the full, finely shaped lips, the dark eyes beneath black lashes, all were as familiar as though she had gazed upon them only yesterday. But this was no rebellious fifteen year old boy standing there. Her gaze lingered on his face and traveled down the long line of his body. No indeed. This was a man, full-grown and dangerous.

Clearing her throat, she took a step forward and said, "You should not be up."

He looked up and saw her. "I am well enough," he said as he stroked the neck of his Indian pony.

"I brought you something." She held a cup out to him. "It's only water," she said when he eyed it with suspicion. "No medicine."

He gave her a sideways look, his gaze raking fluidly over her.

His strong brown fingers touched hers as he took the cup from her hand. The brief brush of flesh against flesh sent an unexpected tremor coursing down her spine. She stepped back and watched him drink in long, measured swallows, unable to will her gaze away from the column of his throat and the smooth skin of his chest. To hide her nervousness, she reached for the pitchfork and began filling the hay racks in the horses' stalls, all the while feeling the weight of his eyes upon her. "I'll take a look at that wound now to see if it's healing properly."

As she followed him back to his resting place, her gaze traveled quickly but thoroughly over him, noticing that he moved with the grace and stealth of a panther, how the muscles in his broad back flexed with strength, and the way his long, black hair fell like heavy silken ribbons against the brown flesh of his shoulders.

He dropped to a cross-legged position in the hay. Kneeling behind him, Del's fingers tangled in the thick locks as she brushed his hair aside. She removed the previous day's dressing and examined the wound, concluding, "It is coming along nicely."

His skin jumped at her touch as she applied a cooling salve over the wound. Even if he were without sight and unable to hear, he would have known her anywhere just from the scent of her. It was the same clean, sweet smell he remembered from a long time ago, here now filling his senses with memory and longing. "How did you learn to heal wounds?"

"A Lakota boy told me which plants to use."

"The Lakota boy, did he teach you anything else?"

"He taught me to look eastward when I want to think of him."

His breath stilled as he shifted position and turned toward her. Looking into her blue eyes was like wading into a stream of cool, clear water, deceptively calm until it drew him in deeper and deeper and swallowed him up. "And do you?" he dared to ask.

Reluctant to admit how often she had thought of him over the years, she cast about for an appropriate answer and said evasively, "What were you doing out there watching the farm?"

He masked his disappointment. "Is it against the white man's law to watch a woman feeding chickens?"

"You were watching me?"

"I did not know it was you."

"And when I found you by the creek," she said, "I did not know it was you."

"Maybe Iktomi is playing tricks on us. Did your Lakota boy tell you about Iktomi, the trickster?"

"He was never *my* Lakota boy," Del replied. "He always belonged to himself. That is why he got into so much trouble at Carlisle."

"Do not speak of that place to me," Crow Eagle said, his voice tightening with bitterness. "All the memories it holds are bad. Except for one," he added, his tone softening, "I have a memory of a white girl who defied her father to be my friend."

Just as she was defying the law now by harboring him, Del thought miserably. "You learned to write when you were at...that place. When you went away, I thought you might have written to let me know you were well."

"That is the white man's way," he said. "I do not need to write words to remember a friend."

Yes, *we were friends once*, she thought. *Are we still?* "When you are well enough to leave here, will you go to the reservation?" Del asked.

A shadow passed across his handsome face. "Never."

"Where will you go?"

"*Maco sika*. The place you call the badlands. Some of my people are camped there."

It suddenly dawned on her that he was among the Sioux hiding out in the badlands and raiding throughout the Black Hills, throwing terror into the hearts of the white settlers and raising the ire of the army. She placed a hand on his arm. "Crow Eagle, you must be careful." Her fingers tightened for emphasis. "There are men who will kill you if they catch you raiding."

He looked down at her small white fingers encircling his forearm, and then up into troubled blue eyes. "I am not afraid to die in defense of my people. When I returned to my people from that place that caused me so much misery, I did not know what path *Wakan Tanka* had set before me. I listened to the words and feelings of the old men as they sat before the evening fires, and as the seasons passed, the path became clearer. It is not my place to stay at the edge of the fight. My place is to be at its center. In the days of my grandfather, men of strong action were given the bighorn shirts to wear. They were to set an example for the others. The Shirt Wearers are no more. Now we wear shirts of painted muslin."

"The Ghost Dance is even more reason for you to be careful," Del said on a desperate note. "The Indian agent at Pine Ridge is calling for the army to intervene. A religious movement cannot hold off his anger when it is backed up by white bullets."

She felt his skin quiver when she placed her hands on his shoulders and turned him back around. "I've brought you something to eat," she said as she covered the wound with a fresh bandage.

"Not that food the other woman brought," he said.

"The corn soup? You didn't like it?"

He turned his head toward her and made a face.

She reached into her pocket and drew out a little bundle which she unwrapped to reveal some biscuits left over from breakfast. "I can get you coffee. As I recall, you do like coffee."

There were so many other things about him that she recalled, but this was not the time for reminiscing, not with Nate on the way.

No sooner did the thought of Nate enter her mind than they both heard the sound of wagon wheels approaching on the dry, dusty road.

Crow Eagle froze with a biscuit half-way to his mouth. "Someone comes."

"It's just a friend. We're going for a ride. I'll be back before the sun is down. Will you still be here?" *Please don't go*, she breathed to herself. She held her breath for his reply.

"I will stay."

Her features relaxed in a secret smile. Suppressing the urge to touch him again and bury her face in his long, dark hair, she rose and left.

When she was gone, Crow Eagle went to the big barn door she closed behind her and peered through a crack in the weathered timber. A white man was waiting for her beside a buggy. The wind blew open his coat to reveal a pair of holstered six-shooters.

He did not like the familiarity of the white man's hands around Del's waist as he lifted her into the buggy. With a surge of resentment he turned away. Dark thoughts attacked him. Would she give herself to that white man? Would she open her arms to him willingly? Would she joyfully spread her legs and wrap them around him? Had she already done so? Why should he care who she gave herself to? She was not his woman, no matter how many times over the years he had thought about her and wished it.

Her woman's scent was gone now, leaving only the smell of horse dung and sour milk, and the blue eyes in which he'd felt himself drowning were shining on another man's face. He felt his temper rise. He was sorry now that he said he would stay. He should get on his pony and leave this place and never come back. Looking down at the half-eaten biscuit still in his hand, he flung it across the barn.