

Wilderness Bound

Book 3 of the Wilderness Time Travel Series

Wilderness Bound
Pamela Ackerson

Chapter One

TWO boys played in the woods behind their home. The playful scurrying of squirrels and chirping of birds filled the air in the tranquil woods as the young boy waited for his twin brother to find him. Jeremy Little Red Hawk's right foot was falling asleep and he desperately wanted to move it so it would stop tingling. Leaning against the tree, he adjusted his weight to his left side. He wiggled his toes and flinched at the dull pain. This wouldn't do at all. Aghast at the humiliation, a brave warrior's foot didn't fall asleep while he waited silently for the enemy.

He was fortunate today. The wind was silent, allowing him to hear any unnatural sounds in the woods surrounding him. There were no rustling leaves or falling branches to mask footsteps. Jeremy listened intently, the way his father had taught him, and became one with the forest. He waited diligently for the sound of crushed leaves, for the telltale footstep, or the snap of a twig underfoot. The rules were strict. He had to keep his position unless he heard his brother's approach, and then he'd search for another hiding spot.

To be a Lakota brave, one must be able to creep up without a sound and touch one's enemy on the shoulder. Thus, his brother Emanuel could proudly declare that in the year 1890, upon his 7th winter count, he had become a true Lakota brave.

Emanuel was improving immensely. Jeremy hadn't heard the stealth approach of his brother's vulpine steps. The sudden deafening betrayal of silence in the forest alerted him to the persistent vigilance of the enemy. The creatures in the area were holding their breaths in anticipation, alerting him with their finely

honed senses. He could hear his father's wise words whispering in the silence. *Become a part of Mother Earth. Become one with nature and you'll become a true and proud warrior.*

Jeremy slowly moved his head left and then right. Which way should he go? Which way was his brother? The trail was ten feet behind him. He would go there and then retrace his steps to this same spot. Wiggling his toes, he bit his lip against the pain as his foot throbbed back to life.

Crouching, he silently inched his way to the trail and the open copse. The snap of a branch rang loud in his ears as his brother emerged from the shadows of the trees. Jeremy ran onto the trail, his new moccasins dulling his sounds of retreat. He circled to an open area of the woods where he found himself staring at a saddled thoroughbred beside a man sitting against a tree. The man appeared to be asleep; his head leaned back, mouth open and eyes closed.

The young boy rounded silently and walked into his brother Emanuel.

"Ha!"

"Not fair!" Jeremy pointed to the sleeping man. "Look."

"Isn't that Mr. Burke?"

"Looks like him. Why's he sleeping in the woods?"

Mr. Burke's hat was sitting askew, shading his eyes, a bottle of whiskey clenched tightly in his right hand. His clothing was crisp and starched, pristine as always. Nothing appeared unusual except, of course, a man of Mr. Burke's status wouldn't be sleeping in the woods. His well-trained horse stood gallantly by his side.

Jeremy frowned as Emanuel soundlessly walked over to the man and shook him gently. "Mr. Burke...Mr. Burke? Are you well?"

The man slumped backward, dried blood crusted under his nose, his limbs rigid. Thickened blood trickled from his mouth as the body tilted to the ground. The boys jumped and screamed in terror, running blindly home.

Attaining their dream of a warrior's first coup was far from their minds.

The boys' father, Andrew Little Red Hawk, and Karen Black Elk were sitting quietly in the morning room, drinking excessively sweetened coffee and enjoying freshly made pastries. "It's been a while since your last visit."

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Karen Anderson Black Elk, known to the Lakota as Spirit of the Mountain, didn't travel the long road to his world as much as she used to. Her second husband, John Black Elk, never traveled to the home and lands she'd once shared with her first husband, Standing Deer.

"It has been a long time. I'm sorry." Tapping his hand, "I do miss my friends and this town. I should come to this peaceful corner of South Dakota more often."

"If not for you... you encouraged us to build the town." Smiling at his good friend, "It's a menagerie of the world, a rainbow of cultures."

When he'd first encountered Karen, he'd instantly understood why the Lakotas had named her Spirit of the Mountain. Green eyes imitated the grass and leaves of the trees. Her hair radiated the colors of autumn, streaking rays of sun-kissed yellow and gold. Even now with age painting its colors in her hair, the silver strands glittered in the sun's rays, brightening the aura that surrounded her.

After the Battle of the Little Big Horn and Standing Deer's death, her family had stopped returning to the Dakota Territory. Only on a few occasions had Karen come to their home or gone to visit Sitting Bull and her Lakota friends at the Standing Rock Reservation. She was one of the strongest-willed women who'd ever crossed his path. Their mutual respect and deep friendship would last until the end of their days.

Andrew smiled. "When's Matthew..." He was startled at the sound of the rear door slamming against the wall, followed by the distinct sound of glass breaking as a vase was knocked to the floor.

The boys charged through the house. The shrill screams of terror interrupted them. Karen and Andrew ran from the room and found the boys running down the hallway toward the morning room, revulsion etching their angelic faces.

"What is it?"

"What has happened?"

Jeremy's eyes were full of fear, tears streaming down his dirty face. Emanuel bounced, stuttering in a high-pitched squeal. "The... woods. Mr.... Burke... dead... blood... horse..."

Jeremy gripped Karen's skirt as she bent down to hold him. Andrew calmed Emanuel with soothing words.

Pamela Ackerson

“Now Son, tell me slowly. Take a deep breath. Try to stay calm and tell me from the beginning...”

Thank you for taking the time to read the excerpt from Wilderness Bound.



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Chapter Two

LYDIA Wetmore Williams, otherwise known as The Widow, sat in the coach for a lengthy minute after it had stopped rocking. She gradually pulled herself out of the cushioned seat she'd been resigned to for the last four hours. The trip across country from her uncle's estate, Chateau-Sur-Mer, in Newport, Rhode Island, had been an arduous one. For the second year in a row, she'd taken her holiday in the spring instead of the usual autumn excursion.

With a deep sigh, she glanced to the right. In an unhurried manner, she straightened the tousled skirt of her dark green traveling dress and disembarked from the coach, smiling. It felt good to be home.

Many looked upon the town as a sleepy quaint place to stay. She knew wasn't the paradise hidden among this mountainous country that everyone believed it to be, not anymore. In the last year, Lydia sensed that their little paradise had grown its own entity, an evil serpent lurking somewhere, until its need to strike arose again.

Approaching the luggage area, she navigated amongst the clusters of people. A tall man wearing the uniform of a Regulator was talking to a simply dressed woman whose face showed resignation to the man's unhappy news. A younger boy of ten or twelve, tears stinging his eyes, held the woman's hand.

Hearing her name, Lydia turned and smiled at Juan de Rivera, who had waited patiently for the coach to arrive. The warm afternoon sun beat on the two friends as he grabbed her hurriedly packed carpetbags. She watched, in amazement, as he placed the heavy cedar trunk into the carriage. He stood eye to eye with her, yet she couldn't move the trunk, let alone pick it up with the ease he had...putting it into the carriage as if it were light as a hat box.

Juan assisted The Widow as she struggled to step into the carriage. "Almost home, Lydia, just a few more minutes."

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A high feminine, cultured voice greeted her. Catherine Miller, Juan's eldest daughter, sat smiling as she leaned over to hug Lydia. The Widow adjusted herself, glancing from Catherine to Juan, watching as the footman slowly shut the door and Juan tapped on the roof with his umbrella.

Though Catherine was a year older than Lydia, she'd always seemed to be younger; or rather, The Widow felt ten years older. Because of that difference, she'd become friends with Juan and his wife, Domina, during the Indian Wars, when life had become complicated and survival was the only reality.

Meeting at a very young age, the two girls had attended finishing school together. Lydia had returned to New York for a holiday before she traveled to the Chateau-Sur-Mer in Newport. Catherine had been visiting friends and had received a much-prized invitation to the exclusive, most sought-after costume ball of the season.

Mrs. Alva Vanderbilt had thrown one of the most lavish and expensive costume balls in her newly built home on Fifth Avenue. A rumor elaborated Alva's extravagance of spending over \$75,000 for the masquerade. It was a flagrant and extraordinary amount of money; Lydia wondered at the time if it'd cause a competition of who could throw the most lavish and expensive parties.

Most of the thousand guests wore costumes for the occasion. Lydia had shocked Society by donning American Indian regalia. A few guests, like the former president, Ulysses Grant, attended but had stayed with their usual conservative nature, wearing formal attire. Alva surpassed all imagination by outshining everyone with an elaborate costume she titled *The Power of Electricity*. Her husband, William, had dressed as the Duc de Guise, reigning supreme for the evening.

Carrie Astor, Catherine, and several young ladies had performed a waltz. The women had adorned their heads with shimmering stars and pronounced themselves the *Star Quadrille*.

All who attended reminisced for years about the event.

Catherine had been the wind, impossible to hold. She was the sort of girl who either forgot her dance program or danced with any boy who pleased her. She'd collected suitors as trophies. That had been seven years ago. Her marriage hadn't settled the butterfly in her spirit.

Not well-liked, many felt she was far too egotistical and heedless of other people's feelings. At times, this was an accurate call. Unless

Catherine liked you, you were insignificant. However, if you were in her heart, you had it all. Though the woman never did anything vindictive and would never intentionally hurt anyone, she craved attention... a lot of attention.

A lock of Catherine's dark chocolate hair strategically wrestled itself out from underneath her sunbonnet. Everything she did was intentional, all the way down to the hair out of place, the rip in her blouse, or the smudged dirt on her nose, depending on whom she might be attempting to entice at the time. The bright cotton dress and matching parasol, along with her perfect beauty, made her stand out. Alas, Catherine would look exquisite in a gunnysack.

Juan appeared exhausted. In the three months Lydia was away from home, three people had died and the good doctor, Glenn Carson, was suffering from kidney failure.

"How's the doctor?" Lydia inquired softly.

"My apologies for cutting your holiday short. I'm at a loss. I was hoping you'd arrive without delay to persuade Glenn not to do anything rash." Juan leaned forward and nodded. "Indeed Lydia, I was hoping that you'd be able to persuade him to keep fighting this, not to give up hope."

"What do you mean by rash, Papa?" Catherine asked, clearly puzzled by his concern.

"You'll see soon enough," Juan de Rivera opened both his gloved hands."

"Be so kind as to inform *me*, then." Lydia regretted her coarse and angry voice, always striving to keep her persona buoyant and congenial.

Holding her breath, she watched as Juan struggled, delaying the news that he had no wish to tell. His hard Spanish features contorted with reluctance, his mouth opened and closed, no words coming forth. The noises of the world outside magnified the silence within the carriage. She could hear the metal-rimmed wheels of a milk cart treading along the rock-strewn road, scraping her nerves. She let out the breath, her lungs bursting. She felt submerged under water, straining to break the surface.

"Glenn refuses to listen to anything I propose, making it quite difficult for his housekeeper to tend him. It's been difficult, to say the least." Juan took another long silent break.

"I haven't had any trouble," Catherine said indignantly.

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Juan and Lydia laughed as he patted his daughter's hand. "That's because you could cajole a dead man to drink."

Catherine's eyes twinkled, she probably could.

"One thing, Lydia, I must tell you. He's fading fast, much faster than any of us could've imagined. I pray it won't pose too much of a burden on you."

Of course, Lydia would care for him without any qualms or misgivings. The news of his illness wasn't a surprise, she'd been aware of the doctor's health problems before she'd left for her holiday. The quickness of the disease shook her clear to her core. Lydia remained frozen in time for half a minute or more, vaguely aware of passing the homes of friends and neighbors. She stared at Juan, uncertain what to say, too anguished to express her emotions.

"What will we do without him?"

Lydia wondered if she'd become too comfortable. Had she been walking around with blinders, too relaxed in her everyday life? Indian Wars had brought them together. When you had to trust your back and your life to someone, they became a part of you.

She couldn't recall a time when Juan and Glenn hadn't been in her life in some way. Glenn had convinced her to move here after the death of her husband. She had no regrets. Lydia's family name kept her in Society, but Society was not where her heart thrived. Glenn had described it as a sleepy little town that wrapped you in a nice soft blanket.

The aura of paradise hung lightly over the peaceful town. Whenever tragedy struck, the townspeople would ease the burdens of their neighbors and work together to help. Celebrations gathered everyone to unite in happiness and good cheer.

The financially comfortable were far from pretentious, never flaunting their money. Tokata's elders expected them to keep the town prosperous and the younger residents didn't disappoint them. The town's atmosphere whispered prosperity, but if a family floundered, the town assembled as one.

However, like any large family there were disagreements, too. There were neighbors with eccentric quirks that irritated others, and secrets were whispered, never spoken aloud.

Tokata was a small bustling town shaped like a beaming star. The main road circled a luscious green park at its center, where benches sat, placed among the gardens and pathways to allow

residents to converse. The residents kept the park pristine for the town picnics where they organized games for the children to play among themselves.

Like Chinese fireworks, the roads fingered out to their own individual section. One road led to the White River and the thriving wharfs, where pleasure boats leisurely floated about. The shipping commerce sailed to the Missouri River. Another road led to the shimmering hot springs off the Cheyenne River and the lake where, during the warm days of summer, the townspeople would swim and the children would play.

The people of the town preferred to keep things simple. Rapid City Road led to Rapid City and the main train station. Lake Drive wound out to the lake, and Mission Road ran to the Old Mission that years before had also been used as a mill. Some old-timers still called it Mill Road.

If Catherine hadn't breathed a sigh of relief, Lydia wouldn't have noticed that the carriage had reached her house. She leaned forward in her seat, clasping Catherine's soft hands, watching her somber eyes as they radiated confusion. Although Lydia's friend had become selfish due to personal needs, she was a very loving woman who didn't understand the tragedies that life served.

Lydia walked toward the double-sized front doors and white-trimmed windows that shouted a happy welcome. The butler, awaiting her arrival, opened the doors. She entered the foyer, relieved that she was home. Juan followed, carrying one of her carpetbags as the footman brought in the trunk. Among the mild commotion, the housekeeper snapped quick orders to the house servants, sending them scurrying in several directions.

With a quick kiss on the hand, Juan bid her good day. "I promise to return to help get the house ready for the doctor."

Chapter Three

ANYONE and everyone who entered Lydia Wetmore Williams' home always felt like they were family. There was a room for everyone: a gentleman's library, a lady's sitting room, a quilting room, a small ballroom, and a smoking room. She even had a small medical office in the back for people who came to her for healing with herbs.

Lydia's sanctuary, however, was the gardens and backyard, artfully designed as a small park. The boathouse next to the half-acre pond was a miniature replica of the main house. She had all varieties of animals and every one of them believed you were there specifically to pet or feed them. Unless you had food, most of the geese and ducks frolicked around the large circular pond and were quite content to mind their own business. It was a blissful, heavenly sanctuary – except for Sir Elmer, as the neighbors and friends had dubbed him.

Sir Elmer... the most complimentary word one could use for Elmer was persnickety. There were a few handful of people blessed with his acceptance that he wouldn't chase or treat to an invidious greeting. He believed he was human with the misfortune of having feathers, acting like a grumpy old man with the regrettable ability to fly. He absolutely adored Lydia and followed her around the house and grounds like a love-struck puppy.

Sir Elmer had made multiple attempts to live in the house. Since he was human, where else should he lay his head? Finally, Glenn had made the suggestion to give Elmer his own private quarters in the back of the house. They arranged it so the door leading into the house locked when necessary, and the exit leading to the backyard remained ajar in the summer months.

This had pacified Elmer's persistence until the snows arrived. He had squawked and complained until a bed with warm blankets became a permanent addition to his room. It had made life more

comfortable for those who were... Sir Elmer. The world revolved around him, and as soon as everyone accepted that, life would be much easier for him. As far as he was concerned, everyone *must* conform to the proper pecking order. He, of course, was at the top.

With the unexpected return of his most beloved Lydia, Elmer was exasperated. Too many raucous and uninvited people were coming in the house. It was utterly audacious! They were distracting Lydia, taking her away from him, moving packages around, and just causing utter chaos. Now that she was home, Elmer expected her exclusive attention. How was Lydia supposed to give him her undivided attention with all these transients and troublemakers coming in and out of *his* house?

The neighbors down the street heard him squawking his obnoxious objections for hours.

His Lydia... gone for months. It had been utterly dreadful. Did the house have to be in such an uproar? He placed his wing dramatically on his forehead. All these people were giving him an abominable headache. Sir Elmer wished these inconvenient distracters would leave and attend to their own homes where they belonged.

Grumbling and stomping to the bedroom where most of the commotion seemed to originate, Elmer squeezed through the housekeeper's legs and clomped his feet as he made his way to the corner. Hopping atop the table, Sir Elmer perched as if he were on a throne. He eyed the inconvenient and unwelcome intruder lying in the bed. Once he recognized the doctor, the goose accepted his presence with a regal nod and sat down.

The town's only doctor lay sick, dying from kidney failure. Lydia took a cool cloth and lightly brushed his fevered forehead. Neither his modern medicine nor her herbal concoctions would save him now. He smiled in gratitude and winked when he heard the distant knock at the bedroom door.

Juan de Rivera was Glenn's good friend and confidant. They'd come to this little town together after the Indian Wars and both had thrived. There was only one secret between them. Today, he would ask. Today was the day the box would open. He knew that soon that he would be in a coma and nothing would bring him back.

The Widow poured another cup of tea and held it out to Juan as he entered the bedroom. Elmer jumped up from his corner, alert as a seasoned soldier, ready to attack, and defend the doctor and his

mistress. Recognition penetrated his guard; he squawked a petulant greeting before he sat back down. Stretching his neck and rotating his shoulder, he relaxed into the soft cushions.

With a quick peck on Lydia's cheek, Juan took the cup and sat next to his old friend. He looked around the frilly, feminine room. It had a comforting and welcome atmosphere. Foregoing and ignoring the whispers of impropriety, she'd opened her heart and home to a friend in need. It was warming to the soul to know, though one may have many acquaintances, there were a blessed few who had friends as special as these two.

The doctor pointed to Juan, his Scottish brogue trembling in his weakened state, making it difficult to understand him. "You will tell me. You cannot let me leave this life without telling me the truth. The Widow over there is as stubborn as you are and refuses to answer my questions; claims she has no idea what I'm talking about."

Juan sighed. "Your brother-in-law arrived safely and is at this very moment unpacking his bags. How was Lydia to know when we never told her we sent for him?"

"What are you two up to now?" She asked.

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. You're trying to distract me."

"I would do no such thing," Juan replied indignantly.

"You would too. Don't you be giving me any hogwash. I'll come back and haunt you for the rest of your days if you don't answer my question."

Lydia insisted again. "What are you talking about?"

"My brother-in-law. We called him in to find out who's killing off all the club members. There have been too many unexplained deaths in the last year. Someone's eliminating the members of the Gentlemen's Club, one at a time." Glenn struggled to continue. "Now, granted, they deserved to be knocked off, but that's not for us to decide. That's what the good Lord is for." Glenn knew Juan was circumventing the actual question.

"Why your brother-in-law?"

"He's a Pinkerton man, or I should say, was a Pinkerton man. One of the best, of course, but he retired a few months back and has been traveling and sowing his wild oats, so to speak." Glenn had the grace to blush as he cleared his throat.

"Isn't that what the sheriff's for?" Lydia wiped Glenn's face with a cool cloth.

Juan intoned with a chuckle. "Sowing his wild oats?"

Lydia bit her lip to cover the smile.

"You're very conveniently changing the subject again, old man."

Glenn pointed a shaky finger. Juan gave an elegant shrug, unwilling to deny the accusation.

"The sheriff may have twisted a blind eye to the club members, but he wouldn't tolerate murder; never did. Unfortunately, if he doesn't die before me, I'll be surprised. He suspects one of the members." Glenn winced in pain, "Maybe he was a little too close to discovering who it was, and that's why they've gone after him, why we decided to send for my brother-in-law."

"I think someone's poisoning them." Juan scratched his forehead.

The Widow snorted. "Maybe it's all that opium they've been doing." She paused and pursed her lips. "The sheriff's dying? I was under the impression that it was just a minor cold."

"I thought so, too."

"That's why I sent his wife the cold remedy." Glenn cringed in pain. "But he's going just like the others; sick on and off for the past three months. I'm not sure how the murderer will do it. You mark my words; it's to be a stroke, heart attack, or the lungs. The killer knows what he's doing."

Juan raised an eyebrow, "He's getting overconfident, too, killing Burke right out in the open like that for those children to find him. Sly fellow that he is, I wonder how many people he killed before we realized they were murdered."

"The sheriff will be dead in less than a week." Glenn closed his eyes, mulling over a mental list of who had access to his office files. "It's almost like the murderer has my medical records and knows where their weaknesses are."

"You need to get some rest. Drink some more of your tea," Lydia quietly encouraged.

"No, I will not. You put laudanum in there to make me sleep. I want answers... thought I'd forget, did you?" Glenn yawned and glared at her.

Lydia glared back. "I didn't put laudanum in your tea."

"Then you put some of your tricky witch herbs in there. I practically heard you cackling while you were brewing it." Glenn rubbed his hands together and started cackling in a high-pitched

voice. "Don't argue with me, you will not win. I want answers and end this attempt to change the subject."

"I don't cackle." Lydia raised her chin and sniffed.

The doctor laughed. "It's good to know I can still ruffle your feathers."

Sir Elmer raised his head and lifted one eyebrow, apparently offended by the choice of wording. He cocked his head toward the doctor and tapped his foot with impatience, expecting an apology.

Glenn stared at the goose and piped, "I'm waiting and not very patiently, mind you."

Juan and Lydia both sighed. Lydia shrugged and nodded her head.

"As you wish, my friend. Make your queries."

"I've waited five years for the answers to these questions." The doctor stared them down in his familiar way. "It was the two of you who saved my life, wasn't it? You were part of the snipers. Who knocked me out? Which one of you took the bullet for me? Whose safe house was I in when I was recovering from pneumonia? Why did you keep me blindfolded when I was one of you?"

"It was my home. We had to keep you safely tucked away," Juan said quietly.

Lydia tilted her head, "I was the driver."

"Lydia's husband, Tall Oak, took the bullet. We had to get the Indians to the cabin." Juan looked down at his hands. "It was our fault you got pneumonia. We're the ones who left you in the storm."

"Tall Oak? I thought he was already in Montana. I thought he died there from a battle wound." Glenn was silent for a few minutes and drifted into a restless half-sleep, leaving the other two lost in their memories.

It'd been a dangerous moment in their lives. Recalling their involvement and clandestine actions in the Indian Wars, risks had been taken and lives lost from both sides. The snipers were handpicked, an elite group known for their deadly accuracy. They had joined a cause they believed was true and moral.

The gentlemen knew Lydia felt exposed. She repressed the loss of her husband as it threatened to bubble to the surface. The winds of memories flushed emotions they believed were peacefully at rest.

"Why the blindfold?" Glenn asked, making both Juan and Lydia jump in surprise.

"Come now, you would've wanted to join us," Juan intoned.

Glenn rubbed his throbbing head, trying to alleviate the pain. "Of course, I would've wanted to join you. We worked together. Why would you even consider me a threat?"

"We didn't consider you a threat."

Lydia added, "We were protecting you."

"I didn't need protection. Tall Oak was supposed to be in Montana. What happened?"

"Lydia's husband was *Metis*. He could walk the woods unseen. He traveled and hid in the forest like the shadows. The story of him fighting in Canada and taking the Indians and Metis to Montana is true, but that day he was with us. We had to use that knowledge to keep suspicion away from us. We had to keep you out of it. You were the sawbones."

"I was already in it," The doctor proclaimed. "The day you asked me to meet you at the Canadian border put me in the middle of your battles. Once you had me taking care of the wounded, you involved me and I accepted it without question."

"That's true," Lydia answered. "We were taking a chance involving you. We hadn't finished getting the rebels across the border yet. Fighting Canadian forces and hiding the rebels was our main priority."

"Glenn," Juan interjected, "Tall Oak died a warrior's death. He was proud to fight and die for freedom. He believed his lifeblood would give a better life to the children of this country." Lydia's husband had fought with the famous buffalo hunter Gabriel Dumont. Fighting in western Canada, Tall Oak, also known as Tyler Williams, along with a group of Indians and the Saskatchewan Metis, fought several skirmishes with the Canadian forces.

When their headquarters had been captured, the defeated group of approximately three hundred rebels traveled to Montana to take refuge among the other Indian tribes. Juan, Lydia, and a small group of sympathizers assisted with their escape, aiding in the transfer of the rebels to safe houses until they'd reached their destination.

"So you weren't part of the snipers?" the doctor raised his brow in disbelief.

"No. Well, yes, we were. The snipers watched our backs until we were safely away from the Canadians. Lydia's husband was the one who hit you from behind, hiding your body under the table. He'd been alerted that the Canadians were going to rush the campsite."

“He knew he’d be able to fight them, whereas I was unarmed.” Glenn stared out the window. “He gave his life for me.”

“Tall Oak gave his life for freedom,” Lydia declared.

“Thank you. It was always a part of my life that had too many unanswered questions.” The doctor sighed in relief. It’d been troubling, not knowing what had happened. He understood their actions, had compassion for the extreme measures they’d taken to protect him. He’d never have voluntarily left the injured rebels.

“You’re welcome,” Juan and Lydia answered.

“It’s about blessed time you two fessed up. When’s that no good brother-in-law of mine going to show his shining face?”

Juan laughed. “Well, it shouldn’t take Domina much more than a few days to fatten him up. I’m sure Lane will be over as soon as he’s able.”

“Don’t know what’s causing his delay.” Glenn grumbled, “It’s not like my house has been empty for more than a day.”

“He has his work cut out for him. He’ll want to ask questions of a lot of people.”

“Starting with the sheriff, I imagine,” Lydia piped in.

“So now we seek a murderer amongst us.”

“Well, at the rate the killer is going, he’ll be getting rid of all the members,” the doctor snapped back.

“They’re ruining our town. Do we really want the killer caught then?” Juan inflicted.

“Juan!” Lydia looked at him in shock.

Juan didn’t look remorseful. “South Dakota’s plate’s full since it became a state last year. We’re dealing with the Indian Ghost Dance. Add the drought and the depressed financial economy to all of that... how much more can we tolerate?”

The doctor leaned forward. “The government pushed the majority of Sioux Indians onto the reservations and destroyed their lifestyles.”

A faint frown marred Lydia’s forehead. “It’s upsetting when they make decisions that affect us when they’re thousands of miles away. Though it hasn’t touched our hometown in the same way it has the rest of the Midwest, the corruption is unacceptable.”

“Now, we have a murderer seeping his poison into our town.” Juan grimaced.

Lydia helped Glenn lay back; his eyelids drooped. He declared with a yawn, mumbling before he fell asleep, “Like I have a say in

what happens in the world around us. Besides, Lane will be here soon to speak with me. He'll be investigating the murders with the persistence of a hungry wolf and will have the murderer behind bars in no time."

Chapter Four

THE raised embroidered linen shades welcomed the morning breeze into the room, eerily billowing the net, and Spanish lace curtains. Elegant fabrics of muted blue and peaches masterfully painted a picture of elegance. It was a room for a princess.

Oblivious to her outward beauty, the young girl tapped her fingers on the rosewood vanity and sat transfixed, staring at the reflection in the mirror. Regal and earthy, she was a contradiction of sexuality and innocence that intrigued all. Inheriting her mother's Polynesian beauty and elegance, dark penetrating eyes radiated an inner beauty and wisdom beyond her years. Her voice had a smooth musical lilt with a mild caress of a mixed accent, creating a kaleidoscope of child-like illusion and exotic unassuming nature.

From the onset of early childhood, she carried a reserved countenance for one so young. Her hair, never cut except to keep the length uniform, sparkled in the sunlight like the brilliant luster of polished hematite. Wrinkling her nose, Devry Little Red Hawk pulled the front of the dress higher to cover more of her all-too-soon generously proportioned breasts.

"Quit fiddling, Devry. I'll never get your hair finished before your dance instructor arrives."

Frowning at her maid in quiet frustration, she sighed heavily. "Why have I started my dance lessons so soon?"

"It's what your father wishes, Devry."

"I don't care for it."

Aghast, Anna's jaw dropped. "You don't like to dance? For the four months you've been taking lessons, you haven't uttered one word of dissatisfaction." Anna squinted her eyes, straining to see into Devry's mind.

Devry looked toward the door to make certain no one was about. "He's old." Whispering, "That man has clammy hands and mean eyes."

Anna laughed. "Why do you always refer to him as 'that man'? He has a name, Devry. He is certainly not old. He's only twenty-five. That man, as you call him, is also doing your father a great service by teaching you to dance. Mr. Taylor wasn't available." She sighed when she saw the pout on the girl's face.

"He's a friend of your father's and can teach you well. Come along. I'm sure he's arrived." Anna sighed again. "And stop wrinkling your nose, you're going to put wrinkles on your pretty face. It's going to stay that way if you keep doing that."

How could she explain to Anna how much she detested the dance instructor? She wrinkled her nose again. He was too everything: too smooth, too smart, and too cunning. It was easier not to call him by name. He wasn't quite as real that way.

Devry smiled and changed the subject as they alighted the stairway. "Can you give me a hint of my birthday present?"

Anna grinned. "No, Devry. But, I will tell you that you'll be informed of the surprise after your lesson."

The two quietly entered the gilded ballroom. Inviting the cool breeze, the opened French doors overlooked the formal gardens. The sun created a sparkling effect on the mirrored walls. Devry's father, Andrew, and the dance instructor stood near the fireplace beside the Victorian rugs and black walnut furniture. To the side, a shadow darkened the carved arched alcove where the band played when they entertained. Strategic placement of the tables and chairs allowed the center of the ballroom to accommodate approximately twenty-five couples.

Anna nodded to Devry and eased herself into the feather-filled cushion seat by the window. Devry smiled at her father and cautiously acknowledged the dance instructor.

"Sir, I hope you have not had an extensive wait."

"Ah, Devry, I would wait as long as it'd take to see your beautiful face." He took her hand and kissed it. Hidden from Andrew's sight, he blatantly stared at her breasts.

Devry smiled and wondered if her smile was as fake as his appeared to be. She was cautious and alert. His smile didn't reach his eyes. The eyes, her mama had said, were the portals of truth.

After her father left, Devry pleadingly looked toward Anna. Hopefully, she wouldn't fall asleep again and Devry wouldn't have to endure the man's odious pawing.

"We shall practice your turns today, Devry... *Bonita*."

Devry averted her eyes downward as she hooked the train onto her middle finger. His instruction was exceptional. She gave him credit for his tolerance and endurance of stepping on his feet, missing the rhythms, and floundering like a fish. Her awkward steps didn't bother him, his patience remarkable.

Although she'd told Anna otherwise, dancing *was* a pure pleasure, until she had to endure his supposed accidental touches of her breasts and backside with each turn. He'd mumble his apologies but the sincerity wasn't there, the accidents happening too frequently. She might be naïve in the ways of coupling, but she knew the look of desire.

The man was an accomplished dancer. He could make the worst dancer in the ballroom appear as one of the best. Devry had to give him some credit for his expertise. His steps, seductive, and polished, flowed with graceful rhythm, making her feel like they were dancing on a cloud.

He wasn't an offensive-looking gentleman, for someone that old. Groomed to perfection, his pearl-blond hair always impeccable, he appeared the ever-efficient and meticulous gentleman. His voice was soothing to the ears and his laugh, if she had to be honest with herself, was contagious. The man was what The Widow described as smooth and charming.

Then, she heard Anna's little snore. The pleasure of the dance disappeared. Right on cue, she felt his hand on her backside as he turned her in a swirl of petticoats and silk. She stiffened, forced to cling tighter, lest she find herself in an undignified position on the floor. He praised her stance. Devry wanted to gag in his face.

Unfortunately, she giggled at the undignified image and he, the beast, took it as encouragement. Blushing, she focused her eyes across his right shoulder, unsuccessfully ignoring his endearments.

"I'll wait patiently for your father to allow you to come out, Devry. You will be mine and I'll show you another dance, one you'll find much more pleasurable." He licked his lips and smiled, caressing her breast with his left thumb. "I'll make you dance and sing with pleasure."

Devry lost count of the waltz and tripped. He slowed his pace and eased into a basic step so she could gather her wits before gliding across the floor. "I see I make you nervous with anticipation. That's good. I'm looking forward to us together as well."

"Time's up. Are you staying for tea?" Anna stood and stretched, ignoring Devry's heated glare.

"That will be my greatest delight," nodding his consent to Anna.

The Morning Room was directly across from the music room and foyer, which opened onto the ballroom. The French doors were open, allowing a spectacular view of their rose garden. Sky-blue walls and carved moldings created a fresh atmosphere in the day and an intimate setting in the evenings.

They entered just as a knock sounded at the front door and the hall clock started to chime.

"Well, I see my timing is excellent." Andrew Little Red Hawk spoke in his usual cheerful voice as he entered the room. "Janice will be in with tea and cakes shortly. I believe the caller knocking is most likely our good friend arriving, late as usual. Eduard will bring her to us shortly. How did the lesson go?"

"Very well, Andrew. She's a natural."

There was such a vast difference between the two men. Her dance instructor was sophisticated, a tall and muscular man with pearl hair and blue eyes. With the dark coloring of his Sioux ancestry and a quiet dignity, her father was short, and slightly overweight. Her instructor was reserved and stoic, her father congenial and good-natured. That man acted the gentleman but only when eyes were upon him. Her father was always a gentleman.

Lydia Wetmore Williams entered the room with the wisp of fresh air that always seemed to follow wherever she went. Though it'd been five years since her husband had died in battle, the townspeople still referred to her as The Widow. She'd yet to remarry and became an enigma among their elite society. Lydia had left the high society of which she was born and, as far as 'the 400' were concerned (Mrs. Astor et al), The Widow lived with savages in the 'Wild West.'

Her eccentricities caused a much bigger stir, however, for she tended the poor with expert apothecary skills, knowledge she'd learned from her late husband. Now that the doctor lay bedridden, with his help, she'd acquired his medical practice, at least to those willing to accept administrations by a woman.

There was also the gossip and stories of why she'd left St. Augustine two years earlier and moved to South Dakota. However, truth be told, she arrived in town like a swift, refreshing breeze. Juan and Domina sent several missives, trying to convince her to come for months, but it wasn't until Domina de Rivera Aquinaldo had written, pleading to The Widow to help their family. She'd responded in the only manner she knew. As a true friend, she came when needed.

Once people met her, they dismissed the rumors of scandal and considered them quite outrageous. How could someone so serene, face accusations of such atrocities? Despite the unofficial title, she rarely wore black and a day didn't pass without a smile brightening her face. If someone needed help, she was there.

Devry watched as the petite woman greeted her father and instructor, apologizing to him for her tardiness. Devry noticed that The Widow barely acknowledged the dance instructor. *Interesting... Mrs. Williams does not care for that man, either.* She greeted him with just enough of an acknowledgement to be polite. *What could that man have possibly done to offend her?* Devry had never seen The Widow be anything but pleasant and generous.

Her dress was bright and cheery. The Widow was the epitome of etiquette, except for the lack of a hat. She had her golden-brown hair wrapped and uncovered like the Seminole Indian women, which of course, always caused a stir among the elders. Devry sometimes wondered if The Widow did it intentionally, just to irritate the old biddies. Her retort to them... She had a hat on; it was just made of her hair.

Devry smiled. *Mrs. Williams is definitely a feisty lady.*

"Devry, are you listening?"

Stunned out of her contemplation, she blinked. "I'm sorry, Father. What were you saying?"

"I was saying that your birthday is next week. It's also opening night of the season." Andrew Little Red Hawk looked at his daughter and smiled. "I'm having a ball gown commissioned for your birthday. It'll be whatever you choose." Andrew kissed his daughter on the cheek.

Looking at her dance instructor, Andrew added "Although my lovely wife, Christine, is in Washington, D.C. involved in the suffrage movement with Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony, we've decided to allow her to come out and attend the dance."

The maid placed the tea and cakes next to Devry and quickly departed the room. Devry's hands shook as she absorbed what her father had just announced. Anna stood in the back of the room, watching the young girl's reaction.

Grabbing the opportunity to calm herself, Devry served the tea and cakes to her father and their guests. She inhaled a slow, deep breath. With a serenity that belayed her distress, she responded to the announcement. "Am I ready? Aren't I too young? I'll only be fifteen next week. I'm not supposed to come out until my sixteenth birthday."

"That's true, my pet. However, we decided at the town meeting a while back. With all that's happening, there aren't enough young ladies at the usual age for a true season. There are only four, you must understand, who are at the proper age for coming out, so the parents have decided that it's necessary to push the required age back."

Devry nodded in consent. Her heart thundered in her chest, she bit back the overwhelming panic threatening within. How could she tell her father she didn't want to come out yet? It would hurt him. He looked so excited.

She should be happy. This was her preparation for womanhood and marriage. However, Devry was terrified. The season... embraced by the elite and used to find the perfect spouse. *What if some ugly old man asks for my hand in marriage and I have to marry him?* She spied the look of fascination on the dance instructor's face, shivering in revulsion. *No, please, not him!*

"You will have the most beautiful gown. Your appointment's in an hour." Andrew's grin widened. "Choose whatever fabric and style you wish, my pet. Mrs. Anderson's prepared to have it ready for you by Friday. Mrs. Williams will escort us. You need not be so worried and distressed."

Devry walked over to her father and gave him a hug and kiss. "Thank you. I'll make you proud of me."

Andrew whispered, "My pet, you already make me proud." Pointing to the door, "Now, go upstairs and Anna will help you get ready to leave. Don't take too long. We don't want to keep Mrs. Anderson waiting."

The Widow turned from looking out the window and watched the two gentlemen. What she saw sitting before her was a vulture

and a deer. He might be a deer but sometimes she forgot how deadly Andrew Little Red Hawk could be. The white man's world was where he lived but his heart remained Sioux. She wondered if, or possibly when, Andrew would send Devry to Sitting Bull for the ceremony of womanhood.

Lydia eyed the vulture. The Widow didn't trust him. She'd wait and watch before telling Andrew how she felt about this man. *Time*. She just needed a little bit more time, to find solid undeniable proof before she broke her silence and made any pronouncements.

"Gentlemen, I'll go upstairs and assist Devry if neither one of you object?"

"If that pleases you." Andrew waved to a servant to escort The Widow.

Andrew looked at Devry's dance instructor. "I don't know if this is wise. She's still so young."

"Andrew, she'll be ready. She is beautiful and will be the princess who rules the soiree. I'll ensure no one harms her, protected like she was the finest jewel that she is. I'm sure you'll be attending some of the dances. Besides," sweeping an open hand toward the door where Lydia had departed, "Do you really believe The Widow and the other old hags would allow anyone to compromise Devry?"

Pointing at the younger man, Andrew laughed. "Some of those old hags are younger than me. Seriously, you know whom she must avoid. The club members must not have my daughters. We've been lucky with Devry's cousin Catherine. Though Richard's a member of the club, it appears she's escaped the repercussions of being married to one of them.

"Attending one of their business meetings was enough for me. I still have the scars because I left early. I'll kill the man who considers using either one of my daughters in their macabre and dishonorable activities."

His guest swallowed hard at the threat.

Andrew shook his head in disgust. "Did they really believe I would denounce their behavior publicly when the new sheriff was part of their corrupt clan? Look where the sheriff is now, fighting for his life."

"Andrew, I know you're unsure of your decision," his friend encouraged, "but you must trust me. None of those men will have her."

Chapter Five

THE flames in the fireplace danced and popped a merry song as they slowly eased the chill from the Morning Room. The young ladies were silent while Janice placed the tea and finger sandwiches on the sideboard. Their sewing meeting had launched into a discussion of the Woman's Suffrage movement. Though none had actually ever done any sewing during the meetings, the politics they discussed had always refreshed and invigorated them.

Devry insisted that Janice could be trusted. Unlike Devry, the other ladies hadn't been encouraged to be independent. Not one of them was willing to take the chance of enduring their father's or husband's wrath for discussing a subject they'd obviously never be able to comprehend. Women weren't supposed to discuss anything but the weather and fashion.

Each waited for the click of the door to signal their freedom to speak. Excitement coursed through the room. They'd been discussing Devry's mother, Christine, who had joined Elizabeth Cady Stanton's and Susan B. Anthony's outspoken struggle of national suffrage. Christine was an enigma among the elders. Still, they cheered her efforts.

A few weeks after Stanton and Anthony had announced they would unite, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Christine traveled to the state capital after Mrs. Stanton's election as president of the Association, to help with the fight to gain a woman's right to vote.

"We should've had the right to vote when the constitution was written. There was absolutely no reason why women were excluded," Catherine insisted.

"Were women allowed to be landowners then?" Elizabeth asked.

"I believe everything became the husband's property," Devry answered.

"Well, anyway, even if that's true, when they wrote the 15th Amendment, women should've been given the right to vote. I can't believe they allowed uneducated black slaves to make such crucial decisions with our country," Elizabeth scolded in her southern drawl.

"Ex-slaves," The Widow corrected.

"They were still uneducated."

"I won't deny that, dear. Whose fault is that? If it hadn't been illegal to educate them, or the fact that they were bound to be servile to start with, we wouldn't have been in the situation."

"If the North had minded their own business..."

Elizabeth intoned acerbically, leaving the statement unfinished.

"I don't understand why you're so bitter about it," Arabella remarked. "You weren't even alive during the War Between the States. America's shame is what I call it. How could they have fought against each other, brother against brother, father against son?"

"No one from the South voted for Lincoln."

Devry didn't like the direction the conversation was going. "That's true, however, no one from the South voted for Lincoln because he wasn't *on* the ballot. The southern states refused to put him on it." Putting her hand up, "The war ended 25 years ago. Maybe we should discuss another subject. One not so heated?"

"An excellent suggestion!" Elizabeth commented. "Catherine, I'm sure your husband feels quite relieved that the officer who was about to arrest him believed his story." Elizabeth relished any form of gossip.

"Yes, Richard claims he was walking down the street minding his own affairs when the men surrounded him, forcing him to follow in the shuffle. I'd say it put a bit of fear in him."

"What was he doing in Deadwood?" The Widow's eyebrows rose.

"It was business for his father. I just cannot picture him involved with people like that. Richard's so reserved and quiet."

"It amazes me that so many of them were arrested," Arabella chimed.

Catherine covered her mouth, a devilish gleam in her eyes. "Well, I'll tell you what good it did do. He was so riled that he

performed quite well, and in the afternoon, too. It was scandalous and exciting.”

The room filled with girlish giggles. “That was a first for us.” Raising her hand to her forehead, Catherine pretended she was fainting. Leaning over she whispered to The Widow. “Which reminds me, I’m almost out of my special herbs. I’ll stop by later this evening, if it’s convenient for you, Mrs. Williams?”

“Of course, dear.”

Jumping up, Catherine announced, “Well, I’m off for now. I promised to go down to the Quarters and give Memaw some old dresses of mine. I’ll be back in a few.”

Catherine blew kisses to the ladies, rolling her eyes at the last question she heard Elizabeth pose as she shut the door.

“So, how is a woman supposed to feel about her duties to her husband? Are we really supposed to enjoy it like Catherine says? I mean, is it normal to *like* it?” Elizabeth looked directly to Mrs. Williams while she nervously fiddled with her sampler.

“When we were discussing my possible upcoming betrothal, my mother informed me that it was something one must get accustomed to,” Arabella nodded.

“I believe there must be a mutual desire for it to be enjoyable.” Lydia smiled and winked at the girls. “It makes living with him that much more pleasant if you enjoy all the aspects of marriage.”

“I’m not marrying unless I’m in love. No arranged marriage for me. Papa and Mama promised.” Arabella replied.

“I’m sure Papa will arrange my marriage to the perfect man for me, too.” Devry added. “It’d be grand to be in love. Just like you, Mrs. Williams.”

“My father didn’t choose my husband. He didn’t speak to me for almost a year because I ran off a week before my wedding. I certainly wasn’t supposed to fall in love with the neighbor’s half-breed son. But, that’s a different story. I know your fathers well. You’ll have some say about who you marry. And love can grow over the years.”

“Well, how will we know true love?” A worried frown creased Elizabeth’s forehead. “We’re all coming out this year. How will we know we’re choosing the right man?”

“Yes, how will we know?”

The Widow's eyes twinkled above a coy smile, "Now, what makes you think I can tell you what love is when poets have tried for centuries?"

Lydia looked at the three young ladies leaning toward her in anticipation. Elizabeth fought to tame tight blonde curls every day without success. Her blue eyes seemed to penetrate to a person's soul. An excellent catch, she was already in demand among the men.

At sixteen, Arabella, with her auburn hair and mint-green eyes, would need a strong and independent man to handle her fiery personality. She would need a loving husband who wouldn't feel threatened by her inner strength.

Then, there was Devry. Lydia feared for this child. Not that Andrew would do her wrong; however, Devry was much too compliant, never wanting to make ripples with anything or anyone. She'd need someone who didn't take advantage of that.

"You ladies want to know about love?"

The three nodded their heads enthusiastically.

"For me, it was a gradual thing. I met my husband after my betrothal to Robert, a gentleman my parents had chosen as a suitable husband. However, I felt a pull toward Tyler, Tall Oak. He was intriguing. I'd be busy with the accounting records and his face would come to mind. I started hearing his laugh and seeing his smile. When he came to deliver correspondence between our families, my heart would pound the whole time he was there.

We'd laugh and talk for hours. I'm sure his parents wondered what kept him. After a while, Tall Oak was all I could think about. Feeling guilty for desiring a man that wasn't my betrothed, I became sullen and cranky. I thought that I was just infatuated with him and it would pass. I was wrong."

"What happened?" they asked in unison.

"After months of platonic friendship, he'd suggested we meet near the Old Stone Mill. That's where Tall Oak confessed his love to me."

"Oh! How exciting!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she flipped her fan open.

"And romantic," Arabella sighed.

Devry gasped, "What did you do?" She stared at The Widow, seeing her for the first time.

"Well," The Widow laughed. "I met him at the Old Stone Mill. We talked for over an hour. I sensed that he'd never kiss me. He was

the type of man who needed a boost, just a smidgeon of encouragement. Always the gentleman, he'd never have tried to kiss me. I had to take matters into my own hands. So, I kissed him. That's when I knew he was the one I would marry."

"Because of a kiss?" Arabella asked. "How?"

"It stayed with me even after we stopped kissing. I could feel the tingle on my lips, the heat from the gentle touch made me desire more. At the time I didn't understand what more I yearned for." Lydia laughed at the pleasant memory. "What more there could be? I wanted him to keep kissing me until I couldn't stand it anymore."

"It's the kiss that lets you know?"

Lydia laughed. "The kiss is extremely important, but you have to understand there's a whole big picture to deal with."

The Widow sighed as she returned to memories that seemed a lifetime ago. "It's watching the door when you're at a dance and not realizing that you're looking for him until he arrives. It's the pounding of your heart in anticipation of him coming over to greet you. It's the desire of wanting him to be the only one you dance with; the thrill and complete awareness that you belong in his arms. And most unusual of all, it's being in a room full of people and he's the only one you're aware of."

All three girls sighed in unison.

"It's the way your heart flutters when he's near. The way it pounds in your chest when he touches you. It's all of that in one big package. It's knowing that no matter what, he'll always be at your side because that's where he belongs."

The girls flushed, romance illuminating their eyes, as they watched The Widow intently. Lydia cleared her throat and smoothed her dress. She shouldn't be encouraging so much romanticism.

"Well, we should all be so lucky to get the perfect man. Sometimes I get carried away." Lydia took a deep breath and pushed aside an imaginary piece of hair.

There was a knock on the door and the butler entered. "Miss Elizabeth, your carriage is here."

"Thank you, Eduard." Arabella and Elizabeth gathered their samples and sewing baskets. The Widow excused herself and went to find Andrew, leaving Devry alone to absorb everything she'd said.

Catherine licked her lips and wondered how she could still be thirsty. It was uncharacteristically warm for this time of year but if

she drank any more water or tea, she'd float away. Maybe she should consult The Widow about it. While she was at it, she would mention how she was always so tired.

Saying her goodbyes to Memaw, she left the cabins, heading southwest on her horse. Taking her time, she anticipated the extensive visit to the Quarters. The ladies' meeting wouldn't be over for at least another hour. Lunch hour would be starting soon for the first group.

Catherine was lonely, a woman with needs. Her husband had rarely come to her bed in the two years they'd been married. The first time was her wedding night, consummating the marriage. Until the last few months, excluding his unusual behavior at the meetings, the second was just recently, when that fiasco in Deadwood had excited him. Odd that fear would increase his desire in such a way.

On her wedding night, she'd been prepared to show her virgin's blood by using blood from a chicken. Nevertheless, luck was a friend that day. She'd had the beginnings of her monthly, enough to give the appearance that he had taken her virginity. Richard hadn't known the difference. She should've realized something was wrong with the man. He never tried to kiss her while they were courting.

When they first married, she came to believe he didn't care for her dark Spanish looks. Then she began to wonder if Richard didn't desire women at all. Nevertheless, as their marriage continued, she noticed how he seemed to find light-skinned women attractive.

She'd caught him several times lusting over their neighbor, Amanda Burke. He had attempted to hide his swollen discomfort when she came visiting. It was obvious to both women that Richard was having trouble controlling his desire. Catherine would flush with anger, and Amanda would flush with embarrassment. She recalled one time that Richard's member had become so hard watching Amanda that he left the room.

His blatant desires changed dramatically when Amanda had become fat with child and her husband sent her to her sister's home to have the baby.

Catherine's forehead had scrunched in frustration.

It wasn't until the last few months that he'd started showing his desire for her. She could see his member pulse, tightening his trousers, but Richard would just turn and leave the room. She'd be reading or sewing in the salon and he'd join her for tea and swell while he spoke about the most menial things. Catherine would watch

his eyes glaze with desire, but then Richard would leave. She would sit there wondering why he never made an attempt to bed her.

She rolled her eyes, like he actually mounted her when he had desires to fulfill. She shook her head in disgust. When had Richard ever gone foraging through *her* petticoats?

Then things drastically changed, although, not enough activity for her considering it was only a couple times a month.

This change in behavior started about the time Amanda had left town. She recalled the very day Richard had come into the library and proceeded to inform her that his men's club voted and they were now hosting the meetings.

Richard requested that she divest herself of all the petticoats she usually wore while she was a hostess for the club members. He claimed it was distracting. Of all the strange requests Catherine had ever heard from men, that one puzzled her the most. What did being a hostess for the club members have to do with how many petticoats she wore?

His odd behavior puzzled her, suggesting multiple partners, and being so solicitous and passionate in front of the club members... his sharing. She closed her eyes remembering a few of those encounters, her body thrummed remembering the hands, the hot mouths suckling her. Her honey spot was ready to be enjoyed, satisfied.

Thank precious life for the men willing to serve her where her husband lacked, and for the herbs that prevented pregnancy. She couldn't possibly imagine herself tethered to one man for the rest of her life. Perhaps Richard should've waited a few years and married Devry. They could've deferred each other to boredom.

Catherine watched a group of Andrew's employees filing out of the Lunch House, the sunlight gleaming on their glistening, hardened, and muscular bodies. She guided her horse into the pied shadows, waiting for the men to walk by while her body shuddered with anticipation. By the time Anthony reached her side, her eyes were glazed with desire. Her nipples peaked as she hungrily stared at the bare chests.

Anthony stopped and looked toward the shadows. "Well, Miss Catherine, come to visit for a while?"

Catherine laughed as Anthony reached up, putting his hands on her waist as he helped her dismount. Her body tingled in anticipation

Wilderness Bound

from his touch. She loved being with Anthony. He was rough, hard, and dominant. She liked it rough.

“Why, thank you, Anthony. I have come to visit.”

A few men watched, grinning as Anthony guided Catherine to the hidden clearing.

Chapter Six

DEVRY stood and admired the transformation from the child, who just earlier that morning was digging with her hands in the garden, to the exquisite lady before her in the looking glass. It'd taken a considerable amount of persistence to get the dirt from under her fingernails. Anna clucked her tongue the whole time, reprimanding her for the unladylike behavior. It was half-hearted, since Anna had been working in the garden beside her.

"You look beautiful, Devry."

"I wish Mama was here to see it." Devry sighed.

"She is, Devry. She's watching and with you always for she left her heart here. Don't forget, there's also the photograph taken yesterday. She'll be able to see how elegant and beautiful you look."

The gown, sophisticated and romantic, caressed her body. It flowed from her waist to the floor, creating a feminine and dreamy allure. The deep curved neckline, decorated with a floral overlay of Celtic gold and silver embroidered appliqués, covered the fitted bodice in the front and back. Pearls accented the embroidered appliqués, adding extra shimmer.

About the waist, the gathered skirt and train was a light blue satin lining, layered with a full gathered crinoline skirt of sparkling lavender. A third layer of the skirt carried a ruffle, encircling the hemline with several bands of ruffles lifted in the back, creating a mountainous peak that increased the bustle.

Devry lifted the train and circled as she watched the fabric glitter in the lamplight, sparkling like distant stars.

"It's breathtaking. Mama would love this gown."

"Here Devry, put your gloves on. Everyone's downstairs in the foyer, waiting for you. You must make a spectacular entrance." Lifting her chin, Anna kissed her cheek. "Are you ready? Remember,

don't dance more than twice with any man. Do you have your dance card? Where's your fan?"

Devry hugged Anna and laughed. "I believe you're more nervous than I am."

As they approached the staircase, Anna replied. "Yes, I certainly am. Do you remember the rules of the fan, Devry? We don't want you giving the wrong impression to anyone." Cupping Devry's chin, "Make sure you keep the fan up and to the side. Don't fan yourself slowly in front of your chest. You'll be inviting the man for favors. And, please, don't forget to look straight at your host and hostess when announced. We must show them the respect of being chosen as hosts for the First Ball of the Season."

Anna inhaled slowly. "Oh, my baby, my Devry." Anna's eyes filled with unshed tears.

"Please don't cry, Anna."

"But you've grown so fast. You've become a lady right before my very eyes. It's all too soon."

Anna hugged her and watched as she made her entrance into the foyer. Devry descended the stairs into the open arms of her family. Catherine, Richard, Domina, and Juan stood waiting next to her father and The Widow.

Devry watched her cousin. Catherine's agitated antics and pale face caused her great concern. She was dressed in a simple ivory and peach satin gown, hemmed with deep coral rosettes. Normally, the ivory color would have accented her Spanish beauty, but lately Catherine appeared sallow. The dress drew attention to her lack of health.

Standing next to Catherine was her husband Richard, dressed impeccably as always in formal wear tailor-made to match his skin color and hair. The silk attire caressed his tall lean frame, accenting the gleam from his golden-brown cropped hair and deep brown eyes.

The Widow was wearing a bright yellow silk gown and train, her hair swept up in a cascade of curls. Her attention was on Catherine. Devry knew that Lydia was concerned with her cousin's health and behavior. Turning toward the stairs, she smiled as Devry descended.

Nervous and excited, Devry entered the ballroom on her father's arm. Chinese lanterns encircling the dance floor created a mysterious, mystical atmosphere, a fairy tale of glittering prisms. Shadows danced on the wall while the lanterns swayed in the breeze,

sprinkling light onto the ceiling mural; angels and cherubs appeared to fly down to greet the guests. The dance card, shaped like butterflies, had Chinese lanterns drawn next to each dance, completing the theme.

Arabella and Devry relaxed in the cool evening breeze as they waited on the veranda. They hoped their dance cards were bursting with names as the band started tuning their instruments, preparing to strike the first waltz.

Catherine approached them in a huff. Stomping her feet as she strode toward the two young ladies, she crossed her arms, her voice as steely as her gaze. "Do you know what The Widow just told me?" Not waiting for an answer, "To be careful with the laudanum I've been taking. When I told her that I wasn't taking laudanum, she told me to leave the morphine alone!"

The two girls stood dumbfounded as Catherine raged.

"The audacity of that woman. That witch has to be involved in everyone's life. If my life gets any more calm and serene, I'll be dead! Of all the stupid tonics out there, I wouldn't take morphine. Gracious!"

"She's worried about you." Arabella said. "Maybe you should go see a doctor,"

Catherine stomped her foot and shrieked, "I'm not going all the way to Rapid City just to see a doctor to allay her delusional fears. What would make her think I'm using calming tonics? Say something, Devry! Don't just stand there and stare at me!"

"Well," Devry stammered, "maybe you..."

"Ah, there you are, Catherine." Richard approached with two glasses. "I've been looking for you. Here, I've brought you some punch. I just had a word with The Widow. It appears she's concerned with your health. She said you look a bit tired."

The two ladies warily watched Catherine as she spun on her heel to look at her husband. They could see that she'd nearly released her fury on him, but had stopped herself from causing a scene.

Richard was always so calm, serene, and complacent. His charm and attentiveness was what had attracted Catherine when he was courting her. He was generous and nurturing. When they were betrothed, Catherine had told Devry that he was what she wanted and needed.

For a brief moment, Devry saw resentment clouding Catherine's eyes. Catherine sighed and took the cup of punch. "Thank you, Richard. Hopefully, it will get rid of my headache."

"Drink it up, love. It'll help you relax. There now, that's good. You must be thirsty." Richard smiled, handing her the other glass when she emptied the one he gave her. "Take mine, then I'll get us more."

Catherine drank the punch thirstily, finishing the second glass in record time. She placed it on a tray near the door as Richard approached with another. They quickly realized they were gifted a reprieve and left the couple while Catherine was distracted.

While Richard cooed and encouraged Catherine to drink more punch, Devry and Arabella gradually made their way to their table and joined The Widow and Arabella's mother. Handing them their dance cards, The Widow watched as Catherine and Richard glided onto the dance floor in anticipation of the first dance.

Catherine appeared to be quite relaxed and composed. The Widow squinted her eyes in anger, drumming her lips with her index finger. What had Richard given the woman to calm her so quickly? He wouldn't put laudanum in her drink without telling her, would he?

Maybe Catherine wasn't aware she'd been taking laudanum and morphine.

A solid, muscular wall dressed in formal attire strategically blocked The Widow's field of vision. Her eyes slowly and methodically scanned upward, noting the hard, muscular thighs as she gradually made her way to his face.

The snug fit of his trousers accentuated the muscular legs, the generous bulge in his manly region. Lydia blinked as she noted the small waist and wide shoulders of the fortress before her. The dress coat hid most of his build, the arms of the jacket strained against his bulk. He was toned and hard. The man's hair was a swath of mahogany, his eyes cerulean. His rugged cheekbones made his straight Roman nose less prominent. The man had a boyish glint, yet carried the steel of inner strength.

The scent of sandalwood tickled her senses, invoking sensuous desires. His lips were kissable and inviting. Caressing his body slowly with her eyes, she found herself aching to touch him. Her heart pounded, Lydia's mouth went dry, and she licked her lips. She looked into his eyes and caught the twinkle of humor.

He slowly raised his eyebrow, a crooked grin mocking her, “Are you pleased with what you see?”

Aghast at her uncharacteristic thoughts, Lydia immediately felt the heat flushing a scarlet crimson from her neck to her face. *My goodness, how rude for him to point out... of all the blatant, ungentlemanly, and arrogant... Oh, but his voice was sensual and mellifluous.*

Juan stood next to the formidable icon that was blocking the view of the dance floor. As he introduced The Widow to Lane Parker, former Pinkerton man, she tried in vain to recover her dignity.

Lane Parker thoroughly enjoyed The Widow’s discomfort. He’d already filled his eyes with this intriguing lady from across the dance floor.

His investigations had prepared him for a widow, except for one major problem. Lane had mentally developed a picture of a plain-looking, elderly lady in her sixties, willing to mother every human being and animal in the town. Whoever had called this woman plain needed to visit the doctor and be fit for spectacles. He had pictured a gray-haired, overweight, tottering grandmother. She couldn’t be past the age of twenty-five.

The townspeople he had spoken to had placed her on a pedestal that practically made her a saint. When Juan had expressed his desire to introduce him to The Widow, Lane believed it’d be to the older woman sitting beside Lydia. He had no desire to have a Grandma fluttering around distracting him while he scrutinized the murders. Resigning himself to the inevitable, Lane had been calculating how he would finagle his way into an introduction to the young lady, hoping she was unattached.

Her golden-brown hair, placed in ringlets atop her head, sparkled in the lamplight. Deep brown eyes seared through him, firing his blood. The iridescent yellow gown accented her coloring, making the lady appear sun-kissed. The conservative gown was just low enough to hint at the creamy, generous glory of her breasts.

Taking The Widow’s hand, Lane kissed her fingers as he gently stroked the inside of her palm. Lane had to consciously restrain himself from licking his lips like a hungry wolf. Nevertheless, a wolf he was, desiring to corner her, preparing to pounce on the unsuspecting innocent.

Intriguing and beautiful, the striking, celestial Venus before him was The Widow. He prayed that she was unaware of the impact she was having on him.

She was an enigma. What person with any claim to normalcy would have a goose as a pet? Not only that, but also create a personal bedroom for the grumpy old codger! Eccentric, that was what it was, completely and utterly eccentric.

Lydia closed her eyes, opening them slowly. The moment became surreal. Everything and everyone appeared to be shadowy glimpses in a dream, as she saw and felt only him. Her initial reaction was to stand up and fall into his arms, which, of course, wouldn't do at all!

Common sense told Lydia to bolt. She needed to run from Lane Parker as fast as her feet could carry her. Mr. Parker was a Pinkerton man, an ex-Pinkerton man. He was dangerous.

She could feel her whole being shake. The earth underneath her feet seemed to rumble with forewarning. She was no longer safe in her secure world if this man was in it. Things were going to change, drastically. He would be her undoing.

The strings of the orchestra chimed and filtered lazily through her thoughts. Lydia felt herself helplessly pulled from the chair. She'd never be able to fight this magnetic force.

The evening passed in pure illusory splendor as they danced all night, causing the whole town to flush and sputter.

"Look at The Widow," Richard whispered into Catherine's ear. "She never dances with potential suitors."

Catherine swept her drug-hazed eyes toward the center of the ballroom where The Widow and a gentleman danced, oblivious to those around them.

"Who's that man?" Catherine slurred and stumbled as she turned to watch the couple.

Lydia Williams had inadvertently created a whirlwind of intrigue and mystery. Those who hadn't already met the Pinkerton man whispered, "Who is that man? Why has The Widow accepted him so quickly?"

Answers flowed through the room, creating more questions. Would he be able to identify the murderer? Where did he come from? Who invited him here? Why has he attached himself so quickly to The Widow?

Devry sat next to Domina and watched as Catherine and Richard left the dance. She'd noticed that her cousin appeared a bit unsteady on her feet. Domina handed her the dance card and Devry cringed. "That man" was next. She bit her lower lip, wondering if she could invent an excuse to sit out the last dance.

"What's wrong with Catherine?" Devry asked as she nervously darted her eyes among the crowd searching for her dance instructor. She spotted him standing in the corner speaking quietly with her father. His pearl-blond hair shimmered in the rainbows of light cast from the Chinese lanterns.

"She was feeling under the weather. Richard's taking her home. He said the night was exhausting her," Domina explained.

"Many of the older men are leaving early."

"Yes, I noticed. They're mostly club members. Men you shouldn't be interested in, Devry."

Mrs. Sally Barnes piped, "No lady is safe around the club members. I wish the sheriff would stop their behavior." Hands clasped tightly together, Mrs. Barnes leaned over and whispered to Domina. "The Widow better watch out. That Pinkerton man won't care she's a woman when he finds out she's the one murdering the club members."

Domina closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, seething. "The Widow heals people with her herbs. She's a healer, not a murderer."

"Well, that's not what they say in St. Augustine," Mrs. Barnes quipped.

"And how would you know?" Domina growled, "You've never been there."

"They say she was punishing men who were abusing their wives, killing them with her herbs, giving them the death sentence. The self-righteous woman felt she was avenging those who were wronged. She was escorted out of St. Augustine without even a 'by your leave' and told never to return. I heard she was nicknamed the Black Widow because unexplained deaths have followed wherever she has lived."

"They? Who are *they*?" Domina retorted indignantly. "Those are groundless, offensive, and very damaging rumors."

Mrs. Barnes stood in a huff. "Well, Domina, watch your back. Upset the Black Widow and you may be next."

Wilderness Bound

“Ah, I see Mrs. Barnes is in a Sir Elmer mood.” Devry’s dance instructor approached as he watched the woman make a well-designed exit.

“I do believe she was acting the goose, Sir,” Domina smiled as she watched Mrs. Barnes approach another table.

“Come, Devry, I believe we’re to end the dance together.”

His smile was cunning and self-assured, the way a hungry mountain lion eyes its feast after the kill. Devry was wary of his self-satisfied grin as he took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

Chapter Seven

QUESTIONING the townspeople had become difficult and extremely exasperating. Their replies appeared rehearsed. He was asking either the wrong questions or the wrong people. He'd get to the bottom of these murders. Surrendering and declaring defeat was not an option for Lane Parker.

The list of club members lay in his pocket awaiting his chance to review their actions and possibly be on guard for the next victim. The sheriff had taken the time to scrutinize the list of suspects and answer Lane's questions. He'd scribbled notes next to their names, as well as reviewing their particular quirks.

Lane sat across from Mr. Davis. He must have finally started asking the correct questions. Mr. and Mrs. Davis seemed more than willing to provide information about everyone in Tokata that they had met, could meet, and would meet in the near future.

When Mrs. Davis left to retrieve some cold drinks, Mr. Davis quietly told Lane he had information that he wouldn't discuss with Mrs. Davis in the room. Lane turned on the neighborly charm, leaving the air of an ex-Pinkerton man buried. Lane quickly ensnared Mr. Davis' confidence, and in return received the man's opinions willingly.

"It's horrendous what they do to their wives. The club members choose a host for the meetings," Mr. Davis watched the doorway, listening for his wife's footsteps. "The wife entertains..." Hearing Mrs. Davis' approach, he quietly whispered, "We must discuss this later, around four, at the tavern down the street? I can give you more details about the club members and their indiscretions."

Lane nodded as Mrs. Davis handed him a glass of iced lemon water.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Parker. Now, let's get to the point of this visit, shall we?" She sat next to her husband. "What can we do for you?"

"As you know, I'm here in Tokata to investigate the murders. It's frustrating." Lane dramatically sighed, taking advantage of his boyish features, playing on Mrs. Davis' sympathy.

She leaned forward and patted his hand. "Don't fret, Mr. Parker. We may not know who the villain is, but we can send you in the right direction."

"You're both so very considerate." Lane gave her a winsome smile. "I have many unanswered questions. I feel like some of the townspeople have misled me."

Mr. Davis nodded, "I'm sure some of them have. Club members, I expect."

"That's where you need to look, Mr. Parker." She paused, refilling his glass. "The murderer is targeting the club members. Perhaps it's a disgruntled husband or wife. There are some, shall we say, questionable and offensive activities among the members."

Mr. Davis winced. "This is not an acceptable subject to be discussed among the gentle-born."

Lane nodded, agreeing with Mr. Davis. "Let me ask, if you please, do you believe Mrs. Williams is involved?"

Mrs. Davis' mouth formed an O, as she fluttered her hands. "Oh! My gracious, no! The Widow's a generous and kind soul. She would never, never consider intentionally harming anyone."

"She's an asset to our town," Mr. Davis added.

Lane rubbed his jaw. "What about," pausing for emphasis, "the scandal in St. Augustine?"

Annoyance flashed in her eyes. "Unfounded and utterly ridiculous, we've benefited from Mrs. Williams' generosity and kindness."

"Your opinion of Mrs. Williams is commendable." Lane knew he had to change the subject. "It seems to be the overall consensus." He was losing their confidence. He should've waited. "Could you direct me to someone acquainted with Mr. Burke?"

"Mr. Brandt is, was his closest friend," Mr. Davis grabbed a cookie. "He may be able to help you."

Mrs. Davis blushed, "Mr. Burke also visited Mrs. Enlow on several occasions."

"Mrs. Enlow?"

“Yes,” Mr. Davis cleared his throat. “She has a boarding house on the south end of town.”

Lane looked over at the clock. “If you would excuse me, I have another appointment. Would you mind if I came back at another time?”

“Of course, Mr. Parker.” Escorted him to the door, Mr. Davis stood behind his wife, raising his eyebrows. Lane nodded, verifying their appointment at the tavern.

* * *

It'd been a month since the ball. Lane Parker hadn't made the slightest dent in finding the murderer. He'd yet to receive a telegram from his acquaintance in St. Augustine, and there were now more unanswered questions than when he'd started. To make matters worse, the desirous and illusive Mrs. Lydia Williams was avoiding him.

Activity in the township on the brisk morning had reached its peak before the luncheon hour. Lane had just left the sheriff's home for the fourth time in as many days. A handful of residents had possible motives, many involved with the murdered men. Richard Miller, was one. According to the sheriff, he had only been involved with the members for just over two years, about the time he had become betrothed to Catherine. Miller made frequent visits to the apothecary.

The sheriff was acquainted with almost everyone in the club. He foraged deep into their lives and couldn't find one member who didn't have a legitimate alibi. They had meetings once a week but were sociable with each other daily. If someone from the club were the murderer, someone would've known and, most likely, would've told him immediately.

The Widow had visited the sheriff the day before yesterday and his health was improving. She appeared to have a vast knowledge of medicine, considering she was a gentle-bred woman. She knew almost as much about medicine as the doctor. He, too, insisted that Mrs. Williams was a healer, not a murderer, and trusted her with his life. Was that not obvious? If the sheriff felt she was the murderer, he'd never have allowed her to administer medication to him. The whole town trusted the woman. Mrs. Williams helped when people were ill or in unfortunate situations, cooking, cleaning, or watching

and caring for the children. She prepared meals or had them delivered if she was too busy to bring them herself. She even helped pay some of their debts.

The sheriff had believed that the victims were poisoned. After Lane's persistent questioning, he finally admitted that he had, in the beginning, suspected The Widow and had investigated her personal apothecary. He had searched the supply room, made a list, and had all the herbs identified. The room was organized and all of the medications labeled. The sheriff hadn't discovered any herbs or medicine that could possibly be mistaken as poison or used as poison.

As Lane approached the front entrance of Mrs. Williams' home, a horse and buggy carrying Catherine Miller raced away, her face mottled, tears streaking down her cheek. The stoic butler stood with the door open and waited.

Lane entered and greeted The Widow, who was putting on her gloves to leave. His heart pounded, struggling with his desire to hold her the way he had at the dance. Disappointment creased his face when Lane realized he wouldn't be spending precious time with her. Common sense battled with his heart; she too was a suspect. Lusting after her, falling in love with her, wouldn't be wise.

"I'm sorry to do this, Mr. Parker. I know you wanted to speak to me, but Catherine's husband is very sick. Glenn's waiting for you." The carriage arrived as she spoke. The Widow tipped her head, grabbed the medicine bag, and whisked out the door, leaving the scent of lavender in her wake.

The butler stood waiting to escort him to his brother-in-law's room. As he walked toward the bedroom, Lane wondered if he'd be able to find the supply room where The Widow kept her herbs. He'd like to investigate it himself, before she had the chance to hide anything.

Lydia was rapidly spitting orders to the housekeeper as she adjusted Richard's pillows. He opened his fever-laden eyes, pleading for relief from the pain.

"How long has he been like this?"

"I don't know," Catherine whined. "When he didn't come down to breakfast, I sent the maid upstairs. He was fine at the meeting last night."

"Meeting?"

“We hosted the club members’ meeting last night.”

Lydia fumed, restraining her acerbic remarks. “What happened at the meeting last night?”

“They discussed setting up another fund, this one for Amanda Burke. For some reason they felt obligated to support her. They talked about the town, the Pinkerton man, and the sheriff. They were heatedly discussing the murders and what they would do about it. I don’t remember who it was, but they had suggested ending the Gentlemen’s Club.”

“What did they say to that suggestion?”

“Oh, it didn’t go over well at all. Something about Mrs. Enlow not taking proper care of their needs, that for a madam, she was chaste about performing particular sexual acts... not knowing how to give real enjoyment to men. Mr. Taylor mentioned having the meetings at his house for a while and then coming back to ours. Almost everyone was against that suggestion,” Catherine laughed.

“They said the entertainment at our house was the best they’d ever had. I love it. Richard is so attentive.” Clearing her throat, “Anyway, I placed the last of the refreshments on the table, and Mr. Brandt offered me a glass of sherry. I had two glasses and we all ate from the buffet I had set out.” Catherine shrugged. “I wasn’t in the room for too long after that. I was tiring and one of the gentlemen had spilled his drink on my bodice. The last thing I remember was him handing me a handkerchief to wipe it off. Nothing that would cause concern.”

“What do you mean by the last thing you remember?” The Widow asked.

“It’s odd. For some reason, whenever I hostess a meeting I get so tired. Sometimes, I don’t even remember going to bed or even walking up the stairs. I just wake up the next morning with a dry mouth and incredibly thirsty. It can’t be the sherry; I never drink more than two glasses.”

“Sometimes you don’t remember? Catherine, who prepared the refreshments and who gives you the sherry?”

“Most of the time I’m the one who prepares the buffet.”

“And the sherry?”

“Richard or one of the club members gives me my glass of sherry.”

The Widow sighed. “Richard,” biting her lip in concentration. Caressing Richard’s hair, “wake up.”

Wincing, he opened his eyes.

"Where do you hurt?"

"Everywhere," he croaked.

"Open your mouth, Richard, let me have a look."

Like an errant child, Richard clamped his teeth together and refused to budge, his agitation apparent as he clenched the blankets under his chin.

"I cannot help you if you don't let me." The Widow coaxed him as she would a child, "Now come, let me see."

His throat wasn't red or swollen. The offensive stench of ammonia perforated the air. Lydia bit her lip. Carefully she pressed on the lower part of his swollen abdomen, working her way toward the heart. He flinched when she pressed on his liver.

She placed a cool cloth on his head and a damp towel across the torso.

Lydia sat down on the chair next to the vast bed. He appeared lethargic, agitated, and confused. Richard's normally pale skin was a golden brown, warning her of jaundice and possible liver failure. Her fingertips felt like they were floating on water as she examined him. Either fluid was building up or there was internal bleeding.

She didn't think it was internal bleeding, though, not with that coloring. Reaching into her medicine bag, she pulled out several herbs and combined them on the table, giving the mixture to the housekeeper for a medicinal tonic.

Juan, Andrew, and Devry entered as she was explaining the preparations and portions to Catherine's housekeeper. Richard's reaction was startling. He became restless and fearful. When Devry walked toward the bed to help calm him, his agitation increased. He clutched the sheets to cover his face, croaking grunts of deep-seated apprehension.

Devry sprinted from the room in tears.

"Calm down." Mrs. Williams caressed his cheek. "She's gone."

"What is it, Richard? What could Devry have done to upset you?" Catherine pressed in confusion.

The housekeeper began to leave the room as the maid carried in cooler, damp towels, curiosity slowing their steps.

"She's trying to kill me. She's the one who's poisoning everyone." Richard croaked his fears. "She's the one who helped you yesterday. I ate the pastries she brought. Now, I'm sick."

Devry? The group stood with mouths agape, staring at Richard. The housekeeper and maid scurried from the room. They knew the accusations would spread, the gossip mill would be in an uproar.

“But Richard, everyone ate some of the pastries. No one else is sick!” Catherine protested.

Andrew paled at the accusation about his daughter. He realized he would have to send Devry away to protect her from the unwarranted accusations. His decision to send her to Standing Rock with Karen Black Elk would stay firm. Patting the telegram from his wife Christine, he felt reassured of his decisions. He’d inform Devry before the dance tonight.

Chapter Eight

MATTHEW groaned. An unfamiliar jingle of harnesses echoed in his dream. Always slow to awaken, his eyes barely registered the furnishings that surrounded him. Rolling onto his back, he expected to see the fan on the ceiling. A minute ticked by as he realized the fan wasn't there and the furnishings didn't look like antiques. They were freshly polished and new. He had arrived.

His mother's personal touch was evident as he sat up on the bed. The armoire doors were open, showing the clothing she'd purchased for him. Two pairs of shoes lay on the floor in front of it. Saline solution for his contact lenses sat on the bureau next to his favorite cologne. The absence of a clock in the room left him wondering the time. Dressing, he approached the window and found the sun high in the sky.

In childish excitement, Matthew raced down the stairs, creating the sound of a thousand buffalo, alerting the household of his arrival. Entering the dining area, three expectant faces greeted him, each with their own unique reactions.

Karen jumped up and ran to him, encircling his broad shoulders. When she finally let go, relief was etched on her face and she clapped her hands silently.

Andrew Little Red Hawk reached over and shook his hand. The boy he remembered well had grown into an impressive young man, a man so very much the image of his father. If the eyes hadn't been green, he would've mistaken him for his father's ghost.

Andrew hugged him. "It's good to see you again, Gentle Raccoon, or do you prefer Matthew?"

"When I'm not on the reservation, call me Matthew."

"Agreed, Matthew it is. How's your firefighting? Your mother had mentioned some rough wildfires when you had just started the job."

"I love being a firefighter. It's going great, thank you." Matthew nodded. "The wildfires were rough. It was an excruciating way of initiating my first days in the field. So much land was destroyed."

Andrew stepped back, hand open, and pointed to the dining table. "I would like you to meet my daughter, Devry."

Devry sucked in a quick breath when her father moved over. Standing in the dining room was the most gorgeous, handsome man she'd ever had the pleasure of resting her eyes upon. Tall and broad-shouldered, his eyes shined emerald green, feathered with long eyelashes that would make any woman jealous. His long black hair waved down to the center of his back. Large, hard muscles bulged as he patted his mother on the back.

Matthew turned to Devry, who was still sitting stiffly at the table. His mother had told him she was an exquisite, exotic beauty, the mirror image of her mother Christine. Her hematite-colored hair was pinned elaborately in a large knot at the back of her head, a small section cascading in curls down to below her waist.

Bending to kiss her hand, he looked into her eyes and knew she was an innocent. The timber of Matthew Standing Deer's voice resonated warmth. His lips were beckoning to her. "It's very nice to meet you."

A blaze of desire scintillated and surged through his blood. It grasped his heart and nested its embers deep within. She would be his and absolutely nothing would stop him.

"Yes," Devry's heart quickened, her body warming with unfamiliar sexual desire. She decided, without any doubts, that Matthew would be her husband. "It's very nice to meet you. Will you be attending the dance this evening?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

Enjoying the cool evening air, Arabella, Elizabeth, and Devry stood huddled together drinking punch on the patio, relaxing as they waited for the last set of dances. The dance was festive and the grist of gossip passed among the ladies and men circling the room with each new topic.

"Oh my stars! You have to see him," Devry exclaimed excitedly. "Matthew's so perfect. He's the one I'm going to marry."

"You've kissed him already?"

Devry's eyes grew wide and laughed. "No. I haven't. Mark my words, I will. Nevertheless, The Widow was correct about needing

hot coals to stoke the fire. All of those boys I tested with kisses, didn't bring the sparks she said it would. I know they aren't for me."

"You may not have liked the way Taylor kissed, but I do." Arabella giggled, no longer upset because Devry had kissed him first.

"Oh!" Devry shivered in dramatic exaggeration. "At least I got away from 'that man' when he tried to kiss me."

"That man." Arabella smiled. "It's so funny when you call him that. Or, when you blink at him like a dumb bunny. You're so mean sometimes."

"Well, I don't need to kiss him to know *he* isn't the one for me." Devry wrinkled her nose.

"I don't believe Mrs. Williams meant for you to kiss every boy you dance with or has tried to court you." Elizabeth lips twitched with a dimpled grin.

"Most likely not," mischief sparkled in Devry's eyes. "It was interesting, though, the different ways each one kissed. Some of them had wet kisses. I just wanted to wipe my mouth and" she made a gagging noise, "some had real soft lips. Some of them were so rough my lips bruised. I do know that I don't like kissing men with whiskers or a mustache." The three laughed together.

"Indeed, that's reassuring for those of us who don't have hair on our faces." A deep voice resonated from behind the girls.

Devry, Elizabeth, and Arabella whirled around in unison, like a choreographer had instructed them in a theatrical play. Each stood, stunned, as they stared at the young man before them.

Her face beat red, Devry wondered how much he'd heard. "Oh! Matthew. We didn't know you were there. These are my friends, Arabella Peck and Elizabeth Parson."

Matthew gallantly took Arabella's hand and kissed it gently. "I'm enchanted to meet you," repeating the performance with Elizabeth, murmuring the same words.

"I've been looking for you, Devry. I believe I have the next dance." Matthew escorted her to the dance floor. Devry cast a joyful glance at her friends. Elizabeth smiled and winked back, knowing the mischievous grin would promise an interesting end to the dance. Arabella giggled behind her fan, making muffled kissing noises only Elizabeth could hear.

Matthew knew the strict rules of society and had absolutely no intention of following them. He retrieved her dance card and placed it in his jacket pocket. The first rule he intended to break was to keep

her in his arms dancing for the rest of the night. His not-so-subtle announcement would deter anyone from trying to court her.

After the third set, Matthew took Devry for an evening stroll, satisfied in the unintentional disclosure that she preferred men without whiskers or facial hair. A kiss would seal the evening. He'd have to restrain his desire for more than just a trifle kiss. Unlike the modern world, he understood that in the late 1800s a woman of twenty was an innocent. Having her run from him in terror wouldn't suit his plans.

She was discussing suitable, lady-like, approved topics while Matthew listened with one ear, his eyes intent on finding the opportunity for concealment from prying eyes. His heart pounded in nervous anticipation. Her scent, her being, enveloped him in a cocoon of warmth.

Low on the horizon, the moon smiled at them, and the stars winked, conspiring with him. The songs of the night skillfully played their enchanting tunes. A slight breeze caressed a stray hair near her forehead, placing it strategically in front of her eye. He repressed his desire to move it, afraid to break the spell.

Matthew grabbed his moment. With a surprised squeak from Devry, he pulled her behind a bush.

"Devry," he whispered. One hand gently grazed her chin as he lifted her face toward his lips. He looked into her eyes, feeling lucky and blessed that he had this woman to cherish.

She opened her mouth, puzzled at his sudden movement. For a fleeting moment, surprise flashed in her eyes until she understood his intent and accepted his unspoken invitation with unabashed desire. She licked her lips in anticipation.

As faint as rustling leaves, he caressed her lips. His manhood jolted in response. Matthew pulled Devry closer, melting his body with hers as they merged and became one heart and soul. A roar pounded in the distance. The Earth slammed to a halt. His body ached to be deep inside her, enclosed in her heat. In response, his lips took control and filled her. His senses reeled with emotions from unfamiliar territory.

The wind whispered quietly, *you can never go back*, as he plummeted into a chasm engulfed by something he did not fear. He reluctantly released her lips. The withdrawal made him feel like he'd vaulted into the freezing cold waters of the Arctic. His lips screamed in protest. He was drowning and she was his lifeline. Holding and

hugging her body to his, Matthew kissed Devry again, sealing a vow he didn't know he was making.

The band strings sang, beginning the last dance of the evening, as the two rushed toward the dance floor. With Devry in his arms, he swept her into a waltz. A contented smile etched pleasantly on his face, knowing he had more than surpassed the accepted amount of dances for an un-betrothed innocent. They both saw the tall, blond, and very red-faced gentleman approaching the couple as they made a turn in the waltz.

Matthew raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Sorry, sir, but the lady's dancing with me."

Gracefully maneuvering Devry in a swirl of glittering silk, Matthew chuckled, watching the man's face mottled with rage. The private ballroom dance lessons his mother had insisted on were giving him the expertise to skillfully keep them out of the enraged man's reach.

They were lost in their own private moment while the room buzzed; many had seen the evasive maneuvers. The elders gossiped, recounting the previous dance and The Widow's uncharacteristic behavior.

Matthew's mother, Karen, heard the clucking and ripples of whispers, "wild and uncontrollable... undisciplined... we understand The Widow's faux pas... obvious what is happening ... what a scandal."

She silently watched her son, wondering what he could possibly be thinking to create such a social uproar. How was she going to explain his outrageous behavior to Christine and Andrew? Thank heavens he wasn't traveling with them to the reservation. The scandal would be ten times worse.

She scanned the room, seeking Andrew and his pending reaction to her son's odd behavior. She watched Mr. Brandt skirt the perimeter of the dance floor, following her son and Devry like a wolf circling his prey. His body reeked anger, his eyes declared murder.

Karen jerked her ankle at an angle, tilting it back and forth. Grimacing, she watched Brandt trip, stumbling as he tried to follow the couple around the room. She was being petty, and knew it, using her gift like that. But, it was worth it to see the look of embarrassment on Brandt's face.

Chapter Nine

LANE Parker shook his head in sincere surprise. He should attend Sunday church services more often. It was the last place he'd expected to find clues to the murders. Everyone was bustling with news of last night's scandalous dance. The enraged and apparent murderous wrath of Mr. Brandt fueled the gossip, loosening their tongues, opening torrents of information.

Of course, he'd missed the dance. He'd had no desire to waste his precious time when he knew The Widow was helping Catherine attend Richard Miller. Now he was kicking himself for not attending the soiree. Lane clenched his jaw in frustration, another murder was inevitable. The question was when, and how soon?

Mrs. Barnes snagged him as he was leaving the church, insisting that he come to her home. She sat across from him, stiff and regal, like a queen blessing her minions with an audience.

"Mr. Parker, I have no hesitations." Shrugging, "Many don't care for my lack of diplomacy and honestly, I don't care. If you don't want to hear my opinion..."

"Please, continue."

"Well then, I shall," she sniffed. "Mr. Burke has been, excuse me, had been a club member from the moment he realized that women could satisfy his base needs. He specifically chose Amanda for a wife because of her wanton desires. She was a hot-blooded pretty girl until the tonic and pregnancy started taking its toll."

"Tonic?"

"Yes. Don't interrupt me, young man." She pursed her lips. "The club members vote on a host. The wife entertains the men, in any fashion they choose. When the hostess becomes pregnant, they move on to another. I've tried to warn the women of the town, but they refuse to believe me!"

"How did you get this information?"

She glared at him for interrupting. "My son was a member. Mr. Brandt brought him home one evening, intoxicated to the hilt. My son tends to babble when he's been drinking."

"What about...?"

"Talking to the sheriff? No!" Mrs. Barnes chuckled. "He's a member. However, while the sheriff may have abnormal desires, he wouldn't abide murder."

When she was quiet for a few moments, Lane demanded. "Tell me about Mr. Brandt."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Brandt likes it all. He has to feel in control. Mrs. Enlow and her boarders take care of some of his needs. Mr. Brandt enjoys the feeling of superiority, dominance."

Lane stared at the elderly woman before him. "Is he a member?"

"I'm unsure. Mrs. Enlow's dealings with the club members and her preferences don't quite harmonize with Mr. Brandt's and the rest of the club members. They still visit her boarding house, even if her girls won't do what some of the members want."

In my opinion, she has made the unfortunate mistake of falling in love with one of them. He spurned her love and many of the club members started ridiculing her. Mrs. Enlow was quite loud in her protests, announcing to anyone who would listen that she would make them pay."

"You believe she's the murderer?"

Mrs. Barnes knew she had his ear. "She's in cohorts with The Widow. If, Mr. Parker, you were sincere in your desire to unearth the murderer, you'd take yourself to the Black Widow's doorstep. She's created an illusion to fool the whole community." Refilling his cup, she nodded. "Ask why she'd left St. Augustine. If she's honest, Mr. Parker, she'll tell you that her voluntary departure from St. Augustine was on the heels of another murder investigation."

Lane interrupted. "What about Mr. Brandt's business?"

"Ah yes, Mr. Brandt's illicit business dealings." She took a sip of tea. "Mr. Brandt had become obsessed with obtaining riches. During the Indian wars, he manufactured munitions and sold them for exorbitant prices. As he became more affluent from the sales, other businessmen approached him and borrowed money to expand their businesses, or keep them productive while the low economy depleted their incomes."

"Mr. Brandt considered the use of his money a personal loan?"

“Yes, he would create a contract to protect both parties with the clause defining a purchase option, upon default of repayment. Since he rarely loaned money to someone who didn’t have a bank loan on the property, he’d often give them the option to purchase back their property, at the market price.”

“Mr. Brandt manipulated the situation?”

“Quite well, too. The borrower, unable to maintain payment for both loans, would find themselves in arrears and feel relieved that Brandt was willing to help them. Many of those who have died in the last year owed Brandt money. Their deaths increased his wealth and position immensely.” She sighed heavily. “I don’t believe Mr. Brandt’s the one you need to pursue. Now, someone else you may want to speak with is Mr. Miller, considering... his present situation. He’s made frequent visits to the apothecary.”

A knock on Mrs. Barnes back door interrupted them. “If you would excuse me, I have business that needs my attention.” She stood and swept her open palm toward the front door, dismissing him. “Thank you for coming to visit.”

Heading toward The Widow’s home, Lane puzzled through the conundrum. Brandt’s business dealings weren’t illegal, just unethical. Mrs. Barnes suspected that Mr. Brandt was a member of the gentleman’s club, but no one, except the members themselves, knew. He wasn’t on the list the sheriff had given Lane.

How many names were missing?

The suspect list was growing daily. Since Mr. Brandt had reason to have many enemies, now Lane had too many suspects. Some borrowers hadn’t quite understood the financier’s unethical behavior, most didn’t consider him an enemy but a friend. The remainder made up a separate handful of possible suspects.

Mrs. Enlow had declared her revenge in front of the town. Lane shook his head. She didn’t have the ability, nor did she have the education to know which medications would cause death. If she were to consider murder, it’d most likely be something less complicated. Besides, her alibis were concrete and unwavering.

His information from the sheriff in St. Augustine indicated that Lydia Williams, accused of killing sixteen men by poisoning them, escaped a conviction for murder by the skin of her teeth. His investigations had been thorough, including having the autopsies done on the victims. Upon her arrest, they had confiscated her complete supply of medicines.

The sheriff had questioned every pharmacist and apothecary within a fifty-mile radius. No evidence showed that she'd purchased or possessed any of the medicinal drugs found in those sixteen victims. Without proof of the poisons, the sheriff was forced to release her. It'd been a major scandal, separating the town into those defending Lydia's innocence with full-force passion, and those demanding her incarceration and death.

Lane had spoken to the local apothecary several times, answering multiple questions without hesitation. Richard Miller had purchased an abundance of dangerous drugs and medicines from the apothecary in the past year. Besides purchasing cocaine, morphine, and laudanum, Miller had been procuring an anesthetic called flunitrazepam.

When he further questioned the apothecary, Lane learned that this anesthetic caused adverse effects if used improperly. It could decrease blood pressure, impair the memory, and cause drowsiness, dizziness, and confusion. The pharmacist claimed that it could also impair vision and cause intestinal disturbances and urinary retention. Lane's internal beacon flared brightly.

Could that be the drug Richard used on Catherine? As a depressant, the anesthetic could cause excitability or aggressive behavior. It was also addictive. They would need to wean Catherine from the drug to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

He mentally listed the symptoms as he watched a crowd of people entering The Widow's back gate... headache, muscle pain, anxiety, tension, restlessness, confusion, and irritability. There could also be numbness, hallucinations, delirium, convulsions, shock, and heart failure.

Richard had accused Devry of trying to poison him. Could she have found it in the house and used this anesthetic on Richard? Dismissing accusations like that would be neglectful on his part, even though she was still a child. She'd also been the only suspect who'd never set foot in the apothecary's drug store. In addition, acute kidney or liver failure wasn't on the list of side effects.

Lane stood at the entranceway to Lydia Williams' backyard. This was obviously something else he should've done sooner. Before his eyes, bubbled a kaleidoscope of people and animals. Laughter and squeals of happy children filled the air. Above the ruckus, a very

distinctive and loud goose bellowed, quite agitated at someone or something.

He had never set eyes on a more eccentric or elaborate piece of property. The people he had spoken to had nonchalantly referred to it as her backyard, but what Lane saw before him was an elaborate park. Making his way toward the covered patio, he skirted some children squealing in delight.

The goose continued to resoundingly honk his objections.

It was an uncharacteristically hot day and half the town was there. Matthew and Devry sat on the covered porch, dining and obviously enjoying each other's company. Mr. Brandt stood leaning against a tree with his arms crossed, glaring at the young couple. Feral anger radiated from his eyes.

Animated in cheerful conversation, the elders of the community enjoyed the cool shade of the massive oak trees, observing the festive lawn party with practiced ease, delighting in the enjoyment of the children's play.

None of the other suspects appeared to be present. He had a feeling they would arrive soon.

In the distance, he saw a boathouse near the water. People were swimming and splashing about. Several boats drifted beyond the reach of the swimmers, the passengers relaxed, enjoying the warm sun. Swans, ducks, and geese meandered, oblivious to the human infiltration of their habitat.

A few young boys fished from the shore and boat decks with their canes. Against the fence, toddlers petted the lambs, feeding them scraps while their mothers watched with prudent eyes. The sound of a violin tweaked his ears and he turned to see a group of men under a large gazebo.

Next to the gazebo, a maze of flowers flourished, with benches strategically placed for the enjoyment of those who wished to rest. A young couple with a child sat on a blanket next to the garden. The mother reading a book to her child made animated faces and movements, acting out the story. The child laughed and bounced in delight.

He heard voices filtering through the kitchen window, some of the town's women chattering and giggling among themselves. Through the whole gathering and above the din of laughter, the irritated goose wouldn't stop wailing.

Lane's eyes rounded when he saw three very large tables full of every mouthwatering dish imaginable. He was surprised that the laden tables had not collapsed from the weight.

Uncomfortable in such a large crowd, he scanned the area for a familiar face. One of the ladies greeted him and handed him an ice-cold glass of fresh lemonade, indicating pleasantly where he could refill his glass. He stood silently watching a group of young teens gathering to play a competition unfamiliar to him.

Two teams of young teenage boys stood in a line of battle, their anticipation vibrating through the enthusiastic crowd. Tension increased as all silently waited for the signal to start.

The whistle blew, and Lane watched intrigued as the boys attacked each other, trying to wrestle their opponent to the ground. Cheers and shouts of encouragement and instruction came from the spectators.

The goose honked louder.

"It's called *Che-hoo-hoo*," the doctor, sitting comfortably in a wheelchair, explained as Karen pushed him past Lane.

She wheeled him to the plank brunch table, walked over to the food, and started filling three plates. Lane pulled out a chair for Karen before sitting next to his brother-in-law.

"Who-who-what?" Lane laughed.

Glenn smiled and thanked Karen as she placed the plates in front of them. "*Che-hoo-hoo* is a northwestern Indian wrestling game. Little Red Hawk taught it to the youngsters. You see, he wanted them find something to keep their minds occupied and out of trouble. The wrestling match can have as many wrestlers as they want, as long as both sides have an equal amount. Every time they play, they choose a different leader to call sides and then set themselves up in the line of battle. They cannot attack their opponent until the signal to attack is given, or they're disqualified."

Lane nodded. He was going to strangle that blasted goose if it didn't cease making so much noise. "Any rules, or is it a go-for-the-throat competition?"

"Rules are quite strict. If someone doesn't keep good form and follow the rules, he's ridiculed and shamed into embarrassment." Glenn chuckled. "Not too many teenage boys are going to allow themselves to be subjected to that type of ridicule, so they all play fair. It's against the rules to strike with their hands. Nor can they take

their opponent by the neck. Of course, no cat fighting and they're not allowed to kick or pull hair."

The group watching the wrestling match swelled as the competition continued.

"This is intense! Look at those two boys. No quarter given there," Lane exclaimed.

He watched as two teenagers wrestled with great intensity. The shorter one broke free and ran a few yards away. At first, Lane thought he would give up and run away, possibly to another wrestler, but the boy spiraled suddenly and pushed himself into his opponent. The tactic didn't work. His opponent pinned him to the ground. One of the men officiating declared him down and counted out.

Cheers of approval roared through the crowd. The blasted goose honked louder. The boy's opponent helped him up and they shook hands. Applause from the group of onlookers ensured the boys that they had had a good match. Arm in arm, the two slowly strolled over to a group of girls who were watching the encounter.

"A lot of people here," Lane commented. Cooked goose for dinner tomorrow sounded very enticing.

"Yeeeeup, not unusual for Lydia. It started a few months after she came to live here. People seem drawn to her. It's always been that way. Every Sunday, unless she's visiting family out of town, the people of the town come and have a nice friendly gathering. Everyone brings food and drinks." The doctor pointed to the table overflowing with food and the overflowing plates in front of them. "If they don't have food or drinks to bring, no one worries about it."

"You'd think, with all that caterwauling, he would've lost his voice by now."

Glenn blinked at Lane, baffled. "Who?"

"The goose." Lane pointed to the locked door.

"Sir Elmer? Fat chance." The doctor laughed. "He'll calm down when Lydia feeds him. She'll be back soon."

"No, you misunderstand me, I mean the goose. Who's Sir Elmer?"

"The goose," replied Karen between bites of potato salad.

Lane stared at Glenn and Karen with a vague look of confusion. "She named the goose Sir Elmer?"

"No," they both answered.

Lane closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "What's the goose's name?"

"Sir Elmer." Glenn looked at him strangely, "Get on the same page, boy."

Karen covered her mouth, stifling the urge to burst out laughing.

"But, you just said..."

"We said *Lydia* didn't name him Sir Elmer. She named him Elmer. The neighbors added the Sir because of his being a royal pain in the..."

"The goose that's making all that blasted noise is named Sir Elmer? Wait, did you say The Widow's not even here?" Surprise and disappointment colored Lane's face.

"Yes, the goose is Sir Elmer. Lydia went over to the Miller's to check on Richard."

"I didn't see her at church. Was she there all morning?" Lane started rubbing his temples. He'd cook Sir Elmer, the goose, if he didn't stop harping so loudly.

"Only time you'll see Lydia at church is for a funeral or a wedding," the doctor dryly professed. "She'll be here soon, so you can wipe that disappointment off your face."

"I'm not disappointed."

Karen laughed at the obvious denial.

Glenn snorted. "Sure, Lane, whatever you say. Any luck on the investigation?"

"Better today than yesterday. I have five suspects. Guess the scandal last night started wagging tongues. I was surrounded by gossip after the service ended."

"What scandal?" The doctor brightened with enthusiasm.

Lane laughed at the spark of interest for some juicy gossip. It was about time the doctor had a good day. It was hard watching him deteriorate day after day. He was such an adventurous and energetic person.

"My son, I assume?" Karen asked, taking another bite of her chicken.

Lane nodded and grimaced. "Well, it seems Matthew Black Elk breached an unforgivable etiquette rule by dancing with Devry for more than two dances in a row. He's made a powerful enemy."

"Standing Deer." Glenn corrected.

"What?" The doctor never failed to confuse Lane. "Standing Deer?"

“Matthew Standing Deer. Karen’s second husband, John Black Elk, is his stepfather. Matthew’s father was killed at the Little Big Horn massacre.”

“When was that battle? I don’t recall hearing about it.”

“Custer’s Last Stand,” Glenn rephrased.

“On that note,” Karen put her half-eaten plate of food down. “If you gentlemen will excuse me?”

Lane nodded. Everyone knew about Custer. He stood silently, remembering the tales about the infamous soldier, as he watched Karen descend the stairs.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or am I going to have to use my own imagination?” The doctor growled at Lane.

Lane’s mind quickly returned to the present conundrum. “I didn’t mean to upset her.”

The doctor shook his head. “You didn’t. She was there, fought for her life, and like any other battle memory she prefers to keep it safely tucked away.” Watching Lane stare at the people around them, “Lane, you going to stand there staring at the crowd or are you going to tell me?”

“Yes, sorry. Last night seemed to have caused a cauldron of speculation. I don’t think there was one person that attended the dance last night who didn’t tell me that Brandt was furious. Actually, their words were more specific, along the lines of his wanting to murder Matthew.”

Glenn grunted. Lane knew information was coming. His brother-in-law wasn’t much for words but when he spoke, Lane had learned to listen. Obviously, the doctor was figuring out how to word it, or what to say. Patience hadn’t been one of Lane’s virtues. It was a hard lesson, one he learned well as a Pinkerton man.

“Put the cards on the table for me.” Glenn glanced toward the pond. “Tell me what you’ve been dealt.”

Lane sighed, “There’s only one person who’s made comments about a scandal in St. Augustine.”

“You’ve been talking with the town gossip. Good place to start but Lydia’s innocent.”

“Your opinion’s in accordance with the rest of Tokata. She was the only person to have something negative to say about Mrs. Williams.” Lane cleared his throat. “I was left with the impression that The Widow may have a personal vendetta against men.”

Sir Elmer was getting louder right along with the pounding pain that had gradually infiltrated his head. Maybe he would stuff it and mount the thing, too, forever to live in silence. Lane smiled to himself, picturing the goose stuffed, and getting dusty in his attic.

"Mrs. Barnes fuels gossip. She's a bitter woman and envious of Lydia." Glenn took a bite of chicken, forcing Lane to wait even longer for answers. "However, out of all the information she gave you, there's something there, some clue that could put you on the right path."

"She had her own personal list of suspects." Lane grimaced. "Her son's a member."

"Was a member, he moved to California." He shook his head, "Appears the list is growing."

"Which list are you referring to?"

Glenn grunted, "The club members, which in turn increases the list of suspects and increases the list of potential victims."

"Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Enlow appeared to be on the top, along with Mr. Brandt." Lane pushed his empty plate to the side. "Mr. Brandt and Mrs. Enlow visited the homes of the murdered on several occasions before their deaths. She told me to watch Richard Miller, too."

"Miller, Brandt, and Mrs. Enlow? Hmm."

"Mrs. Barnes elaborated the sordid details of many of the club members' desires, starting with Mr. Burke. When I questioned her about Mrs. Enlow's alleged involvement with Brandt, she proceeded to inform me," Lane blushed, "of his unique and unusual sexual desires."

The doctor nodded, picked up another piece of fried chicken, and pointed it at Lane. "Yes, he does have unusual needs. However, Brandt's not a murderer. He'd pay someone to do it."

Just as Lane was going to pummel Glenn with questions, the goose stopped screaming and Andrew approached with greetings. He had escorted Lydia to the Miller's, and then, they'd made a quick stop to check on the sheriff. Andrew explained that Richard was now comatose and probably only had a few days before he would pass to the next world. He was happy to announce, after giving the bad news first, that the sheriff was recuperating very quickly with the medications and herbs that Lydia had given him.

Lane kept silent during the exchange, absorbing as much information as his aching head would allow. Andrew had

commented that he should get Lydia to give him a tonic for his headache. It took a considerable amount of tongue-biting to avoid making a flippant remark. A woman doctoring him? God help him. With the doctor sitting there as well, he most likely would've gotten an earful.

He was attracted to The Widow. She made him tongue-tied like a greenhorn getting his first woman. His palms began to sweat whenever someone mentioned her name. The thought of her kicked his heart (and other various unmentionable parts of his body) into blood-rushing desire. Knowing she was a few feet away had his heart thundering so loud he wouldn't have been surprised if Andrew and Glenn could hear it.

Lane wanted to take her to his bed and never let her leave the room. He would like to change the reference of her being a widow to being Lane Parker's wife. Lane was stunned. Where did that come from? A wife, Lane Parker's wife; *Mrs. Lydia Parker* had a nice sound to it.

His gut instinct told him he should arrest her and then find proof, which of course, he couldn't do. South Dakota was a state now, protected by laws, even suspected murderers had rights. Unfortunately, regardless of what direction his queries took him, they always came back to The Widow.

The problem, he had completely searched her storage closet of herbs. Taking a pinch from each jar, he'd meticulously marked them and sent them to one of his old Pinkerton friends to have the herbs verified.

His instincts told him The Widow was guilty. His heart denied the accusations. Circumstantial evidence didn't convict a criminal. Lane had to find undeniable proof. Otherwise, he'd never be able to honestly love her without seeds of doubt getting in the way.

Chapter Ten

A small group of friends sipping iced lemonade sat under the breezy shade of the majestic oak trees at The Widow's home. Catherine sat stiff and immobile. A thankful numbness from the tragedy of the past week carried her through the hot afternoon. Oblivious to the conversations cantering about, she stared at the swans swimming and frolicking on the shore, amusing herself in her own private bubble.

Richard's funeral and the speed of his illness had left the town dazed. They'd watched the ex-Pinkerton man investigate and question half the residents, frantically searching for leads. During the funeral services, Lane Parker had kept looking at Catherine, guilt radiating from his handsome features. They knew he was searching relentlessly for the identity of the murderer, understanding the frustration engraved in his expression and stance. The only times they'd seen him relax were at the dance with The Widow and at her home a few days before.

Their thoughts brought them to the chimerical memories of that Sunday afternoon. The cat and mouse game between The Widow and Parker had kept them entertained. Most Sunday afternoons, The Widow would join the elders under the tree and leave only to bring food to the women who had trouble walking.

Last Sunday afternoon was quite different. She hadn't stayed in one place for very long. The elders noticed how her eyes had followed Mr. Parker when she thought no one was looking. The Pinkerton man was more aggressive in the chase. They had watched him repeatedly approach her. The Widow would skitter away from his advances.

Today, with talk of murder, her eyes had kept darting toward the entranceway and the rear doorway, anticipating Lane's arrival. A few innocent queries had Lydia blushing and changing the subject.

Secretly the small group of friends had started placing bets on how long it'd take the tall handsome man to win her heart.

Love seemed to be the focus, as life must continue, even on such a mournful day. Devry and Matthew were the newest and most refreshing aspect of the marriage season. In the town's eyes, Mr. Brandt was an unlikely candidate for marriage to young Devry. Most had expected Mr. Brandt to continue his bachelorhood. He hadn't revealed any desire to join the marriage mart until this year.

They started discussing Brant's reaction to Karen Black Elk's son. Matthew's increased interest in Devry created concern among the elders. Not that Matthew was unworthy, but rather, their concern was about his impending encounter with the contentious Brandt.

An eruption between the two men was imminent. Devry, as the young so often were, was oblivious to the burning hatred developing between the two adversaries.

Lydia excused herself and walked by a group of men sitting near the porch. She could hear their whispers of frustration, and sense their feelings of incompetence. They seemed like lost fledglings searching for home. They heard rumors that the club members had called an emergency meeting after Richard's funeral. What would the club members do? Who would be next? Would the Pinkerton man find the killer before another murder took place?

As he walked through The Widow's house, Lane noticed that the residence, which usually glittered with effervescence, now breathed a quiet sadness. The poignant melody of a flute floated through the open window.

He casually leaned against the doorframe of the doctor's room as he watched The Widow bending over Glenn, helping him drink one of her decoctions. Her body blocked his view of the doctor, but he was more than willing to watch Lydia's gentle movements, unabashed and uninterrupted. Lane clenched his fist, trying to curb his desire to caress her backside.

Clearing his throat loudly, he entered the room. Glenn and The Widow turned slowly to greet him. Discreetly, the doctor closed a book that was open on his lap. From behind the door a loud, vitriolic screech caught him by surprise. The cantankerous goose gouged Lane, backing him against the closet doors. The invidious little savage was going after his manhood!

“Sir Elmer!” Lydia shouted and clapped her hands together. “Sit down.”

With a hauteur known only to royalty, the goose sat immediately, in regal posture, and proceeded to yell at Lane. Glenn chuckled as Lane stood motionless, staring warily at the beast. He watched wide-eyed as she picked up the goose and placed him in a padded basket on the table behind the door. His hands remained cupped, protecting his private parts, when she grabbed his wrists to inspect them.

“You’re bleeding,” Lydia stated without compunction and pulled him toward the door. “Come into the kitchen. I’ll bandage them for you.”

Dazed, Lane glared at Glenn, who was trying to restrain his laughter, and then at the back of his hands, as he watched blood trickle from his wounds. *Holy Jesus! The blasted thing went after my manhood. I’m going to neuter the beast! How does one go about neutering a goose?* Addressing the different ways he was going to break Sir Elmer’s neck interrupted his thoughts, bringing visions of a stuffed and mouthwatering roasted goose.

Clenching his jaw, Lane watched her grab a jar and bandages from the cupboard. Gently, she cleaned his wounds, her languorous movements inflaming his desires. Her breast came within inches of his hands as she bent to retrieve more water, and his manhood twitched. He moaned, fearing Lydia would see what she was doing to him.

Thinking that she’d hurt him, Lydia apologized. Lane shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Looking around at the various pots and pans wasn’t helping. He could smell the sweet lavender scent she used. It was alluring, intriguing, and invigorating.

She explained how Sir Elmer’s possessive behavior had started from the moment he’d been able to walk. She’d found the egg, still warm, but somehow moved from the nest. Nurturing the egg until the bird had hatched, she’d fed him as she would a baby.

She placed a salve on Lane’s wounds and bandaged his hand. He winced expecting it to hurt. Surprised, he looked in her eyes and she smiled.

“I don’t use iodine or alcohol.”

Her gentle smile mesmerized him. She didn’t pull away as he placed his bandaged hand on her head. Slow and sweet, like warm golden honey, he leaned toward her lips, waiting for her to reject his

advance. Lane had seen the desire in her eyes but until now, she'd been skittish and evasive whenever he had approached.

When she didn't pull away, he leaned closer, within a breath's touch. She closed her eyes and leaned toward him. He could feel the heat between them, but at that moment the door swung open and they both sprang back.

Andrew saw what he was interrupting and immediately apologized. Explaining that he was there to visit Glenn, he quickly left the red-faced and embarrassed couple. Without another word, Lydia finished bandaging his other hand.

As they entered the bedroom, Glenn and Andrew smiled at them. Glenn had a satisfied smirk painted on his face with a twinkle in his eyes that spoke loudly of their whispered conversation. Andrew concentrated on the books on the shelf as if the answers to the world's questions were there on the book covers.

An uncomfortable silence ensued until the goose hailed his presence to all in the room. Sir Elmer had had enough of the childish behavior and proceeded to tell the group his objections. He glared at Lane, loudly informing the group of his personal discomfort.

Glenn chuckled. "It appears Sir Elmer's jealous of our Pinkerton man."

Andrew smiled. "I wonder how one competes against a goose for a lady's attention."

"Perhaps the competition for her hand will entertain us on those rainy days?"

"Can the aspiring candidate succeed against one whose position has never wavered?"

"Ah, but you missed the most precious attack," Glenn laughed. "I've never seen Lane move so fast before. It seems Sir Elmer knew where his weakness was and went for it."

"Really? Tell me about it, my friend." Andrew smiled and leaned back in his chair.

Lane glared at the two men. Had it been anyone else they were discussing, he most likely would have joined in the battle of wits. Unfortunately, he was competing against a goose for the lovely widow's attention... a goose whose feathers would be a welcome addition to his pillow.

Lane smiled as he scrutinized the goose, picturing it stuffed and dressed. His mouth dropped open. Did it just humph and stick his nose up at him?

Wilderness Bound

“Enough. The two of you could try a saint. Let’s discuss something a little more harmonious, shall we?” Lydia suggested. “Were Karen and Devry on time for the coach this afternoon?”

“Yes, they’re on the way. Devry’s quite excited. I’ll be leaving tomorrow morning after I send a telegram to Christine. She won’t arrive there in time for the ceremony but will be meeting me at Sitting Bull’s camp. We’ll be gone for a few weeks and return home together. Matthew will be taking over the ranch while I’m gone.”

Lydia tilted her head, listening, and frowned. “Did you hear someone yelling?”

All three of the men shook their heads.

“I could swear I heard someone call for help.”

Eduard Colon rushed through the house searching for Andrew and Lydia. Andrew jumped up and rushed toward the butler. Lane and Lydia followed his retreat.

“What is it? What has happened?”

“It’s Master Standing Deer.” Eduard paused, breathless. “They found him in the path leading to the Lunch House on the ranch. He’s been shot. They’re bringing him here now.”

“Shot? Where? How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. Anthony found him. Some of the men are bringing him on a makeshift travois. They should be here soon.”

They escorted Eduard to the kitchen to let him rest and have a refreshing cup of hot tea. Lydia scrambled into the back room used specifically for patients. Andrew put a pot of water on the fire while she prepared the room for Matthew. She set out various scalpels and medical tools, bandages and medicine on a tray. The housekeeper brought towels into the room as Lydia tugged back the bed cover and sheet.

Chapter Eleven

THE noise and chaos in the yard alerted the group that the men had arrived with Matthew. One of the men grabbed a horse from Lydia's stables and rode off to alert the sheriff. Fear raged through the group of people who had heard about the shooting.

What was happening to their peaceful town?

When Lydia had seen all the blood on him, she grabbed more towels. The men laid Matthew down and solemnly left the room. Andrew and Lane cut the bloody clothes off the young man while her housekeeper carried in a pot of steaming water.

"I'll need more washcloths," Lydia ordered and the housekeeper scurried away. "Someone needs to sit with Glenn, please!" She called out to whomever was within hearing range.

The three continued to clean the blood and locate the wounds. It was amazing—all that blood and no puncture wound. Lydia used a cold compress on the swelling lump on the back of his head, a lump he most likely received when he fell.

She proceeded to clean the gash caused by the bullet. Not a deep cut, the wound began on his hand, and then slashed a long puckered trail up his arm to his shoulder. It was bleeding profusely. Biting her lip, she wrapped some gauze around Matthew's arm and proceeded to make a fresh poultice.

Andrew and Lane changed the bandages on his head as she unwrapped his arm. Carefully, she applied the poultice and then rebound Matthew's arm.

All three sighed in relief.

"I hope he doesn't stay out for too long. That could be his biggest problem," Lydia added. "Head wounds are so touchy."

Lane scowled. "I'll be back. I'm going to ask those men who found him some questions."

Wilderness Bound

About fifty feet from the Lunch House, a group of men surrounded the sheriff. Lane tied his horse and the group separated. Standing back, he listened as the sheriff rapidly fired questions.

No one had seen anything.

When they heard the reports from the gunshots, they'd immediately hit the floor for cover. After a few minutes of silence, the men gradually opened the door and scanned the area to see if it was safe to leave the premises. That was when they spotted Matthew lying face down on the path.

The sheriff had one of the men lay down in the same position, on the same spot. As the man stood up, he thanked everyone and sent the men on their way. Lane turned to look where the shots could've come from when the sheriff walked in the opposite direction. The sheriff tapped Lane on the shoulder.

"A .22"

Lane nodded his head. "How many people you know own a .22 rifle?"

"Off the top of my head? Three. The Widow, her groundskeeper uses it for hunting, Mr. Barnes, and Curry up at the old mission."

Lane blew air through his teeth and the sheriff shook his head. "Lydia was with me. Mr. Barnes was in the backyard the whole time. He was sitting out on the back porch."

"Where was the groundskeeper?"

Lane sighed and kicked some dirt. "Don't know." Irritated, he snapped at the sheriff. "She doesn't have a motive."

"Don't go getting all upset with me. I don't think she's guilty either, but it doesn't look so good. You ask your lady friend some questions and I'll check with Curry. If you go up there, he'll probably shoot you, not knowing who you are. He's real quick with his trigger finger and mighty itchy to stay alone on his hill."

"He won't shoot you?"

"Nah, I go up there every once in a while and threaten to destroy his still. He can tell it's me just by the sound of my horse. I visit for want of some of his whiskey. Good stuff, best I've ever had." The sheriff grinned, shook Lane's hand, and walked toward his horse.

Before the sheriff rode away, he turned to Lane and waved. "I'll meet you at The Widow's."

On the ride back to Lydia's, Lane tried to reword every question in his mind to avoid sounding like he was interrogating her.

Nevertheless, no matter how many times he changed the wording, he was still questioning her on another murder case.

He shook his head, disgusted, and discouraged with himself. He was in love with a possible murderer. She had her hands dirty with everything. St. Augustine, the suspicious poisoning of the club members, and now Matthew possibly shot with one of her rifles. It didn't make sense. At least the murders in St. Augustine and the murders here paralleled. Matthew's situation didn't quite fit with the killer's pattern.

They had to be dealing with two separate cases.

Lydia entered the parlor and saw, immediately, the seriousness of the situation. Lane looked angry, upset, and troubled. Walking over to the cabinet, she poured them both a glass of bourbon. She carefully placed the bottle on the coffee table. Handing the glass to him, she delicately touched his face.

"Matthew woke up for a few moments but fell back to sleep."

"I want to question him."

"Not yet, Mr. Parker. Give him time to rest and recuperate."

"Lane. My name is Lane. My father is Mr. Parker."

"As you wish, Lane. What have you found?"

Taking her hands with both of his, he clenched his jaw. "Sit down, Lydia. I have to ask you some questions."

Sitting on the chair across from The Widow, Lane looked to the fireplace, searching for answers in the mortar and bricks.

"I don't want you to feel like I'm accusing you of any kind of culpability. There are so many unanswered questions involving your past and, as it stands, the present."

Lydia nodded. She'd sidestepped this confrontation as long as possible, but had known it'd come down to this. He was astute and thorough. It was one of his several attributes she found attractive. Sadly, none of her answers would declare her innocence. "Why am I being questioned for the attempt on Matthew's life?"

"How many firearms do you own?"

"Firearms?"

"Yes, firearms. As in shotguns, rifles, and hand guns?"

"I have several." She added with an ostentatious sniff, "We do have to eat."

"How many do you have, Lydia?"

"I just told you, several," she snapped.

Wilderness Bound

Lane took a deep breath. This was not going well. "What brand are they?"

"Well, let's see. I have three Remington rifles, a split breech carbine, a rolling block, and a cavalry carbine. I have several revolvers, a Colt Walker, pocket revolver, and three Remington Peacemakers."

It was amazing. She was answering his questions, but not giving complete responses. She was good. He wished he had seen her work her magic in the courtroom in St. Augustine.

"Which one is the .22?"

Lydia blinked wondering where his questions were leading. "The Remington rolling block rifle."

"Does anyone have access to your guns?"

"Yes."

The goose was honking and Lane's tone was harsh. "Are you intentionally being obtuse? I'll get the answers one question at a time, if that's what you want. You're not in a courtroom where every word will be scrutinized."

Lydia raised her eyebrows. "The only difference is there's no jury, but it appears to me that there is a judge."

Lane sighed. "Who has access to your guns?"

"James."

"Your groundskeeper?"

"Yes."

"Did he have access to your rifle today?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

Lydia squinted her eyes at his patronizing attitude. "I have a key."

Pulling out the key ring, she jingled it in his face. "I keep all firearms locked in the closet."

"Are you sure he didn't have access to the rifle today?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Lydia growled her response through clenched teeth.

Lane was quiet for a moment, staring at the ceiling. He appeared calm and unaffected. Lydia wanted to hit him with the bourbon bottle.

"Can I see it?"

"Of course." Lydia left the room with an irritated swish of her skirt.

Quickly returning, she handed him the rifle. He dismantled it, finding no evidence of recent use. The rifle was clean.

"Do you know anyone else who owns a .22 rifle?" Lane asked as he handed her the rifle and watched her place it on the table near the door.

"Yes." She countered curtly as she seated herself across from him, tapping her foot in irritation.

"Who?"

"It's a common rifle. Most likely, half the people in town own one."

"Who?"

"Was Matthew shot with a .22?"

"I wouldn't be asking these questions if I thought he was shot with anything else."

"Where?"

"Close to the Lunch House."

Lydia bit her lip. "There are only a few places near there where someone could fire. It would have to be someone who was very accurate."

"That's true. The person would have to be a sharpshooter. Lydia... who?"

"I don't want to accuse anyone. I know what it's like to be accused of a crime when you're innocent."

Silence permeated the room. Lane would've sat there glaring at her all day if she didn't speak up. He was like a wolf stalking its prey, waiting patiently for its victim to make that one spurious move.

Lane shrugged, "I'll wait all day for an answer... who?"

"I don't know anyone who'd be that accurate. Except..." Lydia took a deep breath, "except Curry. Rumor has it that he was a sniper in the war. But, it doesn't really make sense."

"What doesn't?"

"That Curry would miss." Lydia tilted her head toward Lane. "If Curry shot at Matthew, he'd be dead. Curry wouldn't have missed."

"There were two shots according to the men at the Lunch House. He's that accurate?"

"Yes, he's that accurate." Lydia couldn't fathom Curry missing. "Two shots? Curry wouldn't need two shots."

When they had shooting competitions, no one wanted to compete against him. Had someone paid him to scare Matthew? Curry could've intentionally grazed him with the bullet, as a warning.

What was the first shot for? How in blazes did he cut a line right up Matthew's arm?

"The sheriff has gone up there to talk to him."

"If anyone can get answers from Curry, it'll be the sheriff." Lydia started to rise from her seat. "Well, that's settled. I have to check on my patients, if you'll excuse me."

Lane grabbed her arm. "I'm not done."

Lydia gritted her teeth unsuccessfully pulling her arm from his grip. When he let go, she sat next to Lane, emitting a deep sigh. She'd worked very hard to forget the past and continue as a respectable citizen after the raking she'd received in St. Augustine. She'd become a paragon of virtue and still the past came back to haunt her.

She was attracted to this man sitting next to her, didn't want to be virtuous or chaste. This was the first man who had ignited her womanly desires. Lydia wanted to wallow in his seduction. She craved carnal sexuality—every blissful, sinful manner in which she could have him.

Yet, circumstances had caused a rift where none should've been. Lydia didn't have a choice. The nightmare of her past would follow regardless of her innocence. And, regardless of how she answered his questions, a seed of doubt remained. Could they overcome this hurdle? If she'd been accused of anything else, Lane most likely would've been able to live with it. Suspected murder, though, was a seed no normal self-preserving adult would ignore.

"I'll be direct, Lydia, and make this easy on the both of us. I already have all the information available to me from the sheriff and an acquaintance of mine from St. Augustine. I'm not going to waste your time or mine on questions that I feel have already been answered."

Lydia nodded. Holding the glass, she prayed that her hands would stop shaking.

"Do you have access to anesthetics other than the apothecary?"

She glanced away from him, unable to bear the hostile accusation in his eyes. "Yes."

Lane was dumbfounded. He expected Lydia to deny it. He'd searched her personal medical supply area thoroughly, going through the pantry where she prepared and stored the medicinal herbs.

"How? Where do you get them?"

"From the doctor. His medicine cabinet's in the closet in his bedroom. Glenn gives me the key whenever he wants me to get anything out of it."

"His bedroom at his house where I'm staying?"

"No, here at this house."

"You have access to anesthetics at this house?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded rough as she breathed quickly, pleading with him to understand.

"Oh Lydia, my love. This doesn't look good at all."

"I know how bad it looks. I'm innocent. You have to believe me." Her eyes welled with unshed tears. "Please, believe me. I'm a healer. I don't hurt people."

He could see the bridling fear. Leaning over, Lane held her close. He wanted to believe her. He could feel Lydia trembling underneath his arms as he cradled her and kissed her forehead.

"Hush now, listen to me. Have you used any of the anesthetics?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I don't know how to use modern medicine. Anytime I went into Glenn's medicine cabinet, he would just tell me what to bring to him. He prepared everything. I just delivered his preparations."

Lane kissed the tears on her flushed cheeks. "It's all right. If what you say is true, the doctor can vouch for you."

Lydia sniffed. "See? Even you said, 'If what you say is true.' You must believe me!"

He held her tight, feeling her body relaxing a moment at a time. Caressing her arm with one hand, he raised Lydia's face to his. As he leaned in to kiss her complacent and willing lips, a knock sounded at the door. They both looked at the ceiling and groaned, interrupted again.

"Enter," Lydia called to the unknown intruder.

The sheriff entered and Lydia handed him a drink. Not one to waste time, he immediately went into the reason for his arrival.

"Well, I spoke to Curry. He was up at his still just like I thought he would be. He said if he had wanted the boy dead, we'd be burying him in the next few days."

"Did he admit to shooting him?" Both Lane and Lydia asked simultaneously.

"Nope, said he was up at his new still since early morning."

"New still?" Lydia pointed out. "Where would Curry get the money to build a new still?"

“Good question.” The sheriff lifted his glass in salute. “Same question I asked him. He said he did a friend a favor. The friend paid him by buying him parts to make a new still.”

“Like shooting Matthew?”

The sheriff chuckled at Lane’s sarcastic remark. “Told him Matthew had his signature, straight up his leg.”

“But it wasn’t his leg, it was his arm.” Lydia was confused.

“That’s where I got him. Curry said the boy was hit in the arm and then drew a line right where the bullet grazed him.

That’s when I arrested him. He’s at the jail as we speak.”

“How did you know? That’s exactly where Matthew was hit.”

“I didn’t.” The sheriff glimpsed out the window as his face blushed a bright crimson. “Shucks, Mrs. Williams, I called a bluff.”

“Who hired him?” Lane asked.

“Can’t get it out of him. Even when I told him he’d rot in jail for attempted murder. He just threw his hat on the cot and said I knew da... excuse me, Mrs. Williams. Curry said I knew that if he wanted the boy dead, he would’ve done it. The boy’s alive cuz that’s how it was supposed to be. Just a scare.”

“Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’m going to check on the boy who has had *just a scare*.”

Chapter Twelve

TWO weeks had crawled by as Matthew recuperated from his injury. His arm was healing fast. The salve The Widow had applied smelled similar to what Sitting Bull had used when he was a child years ago. It might not leave a mark, which, if it did (picturing the ladies fluttering around him in awe), he realized it'd be difficult to explain once he returned home.

Mrs. Williams had been overbearing and overprotective, not allowing him to exert himself or leave the grounds. When he had mentioned her overly zealous patronage, her reply... accept it. She wasn't about to let anything happen to him while he was under her care.

Whispers had managed to come to him in the past week carrying suspicions of who had paid Curry to shoot him. Matthew was counting his blessings. He was told by more than one person that if Curry had wanted him dead, he wouldn't be complaining about Mrs. Williams' obsessive nurturing.

No one had bothered to ask him whom he had suspected. If they had, he wouldn't have told them anyway. But he'd take care of the situation himself. Murder was not on his mind. Matthew laughed as he opened the door to The Widow's porch. He might be wearing white man's clothing, but he was still a Sioux warrior. He'd take care of it the Lakota way.

He was looking down at Sir Elmer piously honking at him as the goose ran under his legs and out the door. A swoosh of skirts alerted him that he had interrupted Lane and The Widow for the second time this week. Sir Elmer's raucous screech was piercing and Matthew closed his eyes in pain. The back of his head throbbed as he opened them and watched the intrepid lawman scoot backwards, away from the attacking goose.

Caustic anger radiated from the helpless man's eyes. Matthew knew the only reason why the goose was still on this Earth was because the man was in love with The Widow.

Sir Elmer's fealty was noble, but Matthew wasn't sure he could tolerate the attacks the way Lane had. In just the last two weeks, the goose had managed to break skin on Lane's nose, knee, both hands, and now his elbow.

The Widow picked up the ranting, jealous goose and purred sweetly in his ear as he continued to berate Lane while she returned Sir Elmer to his room. Matthew promptly apologized as Lane grabbed a handkerchief to place on his elbow.

Lane shrugged and sighed. "One of these days I'll be able to taste her lips."

"You mean you haven't kissed Lydia, yet?"

"No. Every time we get this close," holding up two fingers, "someone or that soon-to-be-roasted goose comes in. Do you have any idea how frustrating that is?"

"Why don't you take her out alone on a picnic or something?"

"I've tried. She's afraid to leave Glenn."

"When Mom gets back maybe she can watch Glenn while you two spend some time together."

"I've thought about asking her."

"That makes two of us, but I don't think I'm being patient about the wait."

Lane raised his eyebrow and laughed. "I don't think it's your mother you're waiting so impatiently for."

Matthew had the grace to blush. "They'll be here soon."

* * *

The carriage ride had been long, arduous, and unusually void of conversation. The wind whistled violently, warning of an impending storm. *Ominous*, Karen kept thinking. It unsettled her when she had those feelings. She looked up into the dark, foreboding sky and prayed the rain wouldn't begin until they'd made it safely home.

Karen had been able to visit with Sitting Bull and her Lakota friends. She knew in her heart she was a strong person with the utmost faith in herself and humanity, but wished she possessed Sitting Bull's unwavering spirit. The strength in his soul created a celestial aura. His heart was immortal. With everything the Lakota

had lived through, despite all the disasters and tragedies, he still reached for the heavens with an intensity no one could diminish.

Sitting Bull led the ceremony with exceptional refinement and skill. Devry's induction into womanhood was magnificent, as the Lakota cherished the spiritual and sacred ceremony. Glancing at her young companion, Karen noticed an astounding transformation.

"My warrior awaits me," Devry professed after the lengthy silence. "I've been searching for him ever since I realized that someday I wanted to marry. As we travel across the plains, I know he stands proud waiting to make me his wife. He's my light and my soul. I can feel him and see him, sense his power calling me, waiting for my return."

The intensity of Devry's words didn't surprise Karen. It startled her that she'd found someone she desired so soon. She wondered which warrior would be her life-mate and when she had fallen in love. She didn't recall a moment when the young woman had been out of her, Christine's, or Sunshine in the Morning's.

Karen's heart palpitated. Was that the ominous disaster she'd felt in the air? Could the warrior Devry fell in love with want her to live at the reservation, or would he come to live in the white man's world? Would he turn away from Devry when she refused to live on a reservation?

Would he be one of the survivors?

She inhaled a deep breath. "Who has stolen your heart, Devry?"

Devry face was enfolded in smiles, her sweet soul reflecting in her eyes. "Matthew."

Karen gazed out the window, her face paled, her stomach roiling, her heart twisted in fear, anger, disgust, and sadness. She was appalled, terrified, that Devry had declared her love for her son. She was only fifteen years old. It'd be different if she was eighteen. But right now, Matthew's much too old for Devry. He'll be declared a pedophile in our world. He'd never be able to return home.

"No," Karen growled, wondering how she missed the warning signs, kicking herself for not talking to him immediately about his actions at the dance. She shook her head, disappointed in his selfish schemes. He wasn't the kind of person to play games with people's feelings. The more she contemplated his churlish behavior, his inconsideration for someone else's feelings, the more outraged she became. She tapped her fingers on her leg in irritation. She was going

to give Matthew a piece of her mind, encourage a young, impressionable girl like that.

Devry's eyes widened, hurt at the response from a woman she highly respected. Her heart sank as tears trickled from the corner of her eyes, a lump strangled the breath in her throat. She couldn't understand Karen's horrified reaction.

Karen regained her composure, "Devry, it's not you. You're a wonderful, enchanting woman. If you were older, wiser, a little more experienced with life, you'd understand my objections. If he falls in love with you, his life, everything that Matthew has worked so hard for will be taken from him. In our world, he'd be condemned. Misery and ridicule would follow him everywhere."

"I don't believe you. Just because you don't live here in South Dakota doesn't make your world any different from mine."

"There's too much you don't understand. You're not at an age to marry in our society's eyes."

"How can you say that? You just witnessed my ceremony. Women marry at my age all the time. I started my season. My father is considering who would be a good match for me." Devry cried. "I know he'd approve of Matthew."

"That's not the problem. Of course, your father would approve of Matthew, just as I would if you were older. I wouldn't..." She exhaled loudly, "I wouldn't object if you were at least eighteen. Even then, that's too young."

Devry whimpered. "I thought you liked me," Tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. "What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, honey, nothing is wrong with you." Karen hugged the heartbroken girl. "I'm so very sorry. If you're seeking my approval, I cannot give it. You'll find your place on the unwinding path and you'll find the right man to be your husband. You'll have your rainbows and make a wonderful wife."

"I have found him."

"Matthew's not that man. I'm sorry."

Devry pulled away, livid and inconsolable. The rest of the ride home would be miserable. She'd painted a picture of them discussing the wedding plans. She'd dreamed of having Matthew's children, sharing more love than one could imagine. Instead, her hopes and dreams were shattered by Karen's disapproval.

He *was* the man of her dreams. Stolen kisses and stolen moments when they'd found themselves unescorted left her in a haze of desire.

When their bodies had touched, when their lips joined, she felt liberated. She ached for his touch, craving the pulse of energy as she melted against him. Matthew was in her thoughts, always there, drifting with her through the day, infiltrating her dreams at night.

He was the one who should be her life-mate. She'd seen it and felt it at the ceremony. The winds had whispered their consent, tendered the path she was to follow. Her vow was steadfast.

Chapter Thirteen

HIS mother and Devry arrived home that afternoon. Matthew had missed them by minutes. After he'd received the note that they'd arrived safe, he'd tried to get home at a reasonable hour, but ended up working at the ranch late into the night. One disaster after another seemed to consume his day. He wondered how Andrew managed to gain any free time.

Walking into the sitting room exhausted, He poured a drink, and sat down next to the fireplace. His mother had already been asleep for hours. Matthew rubbed his aching neck and shoulders. The way he was hurting no one would believe he'd worked a hard day in his life. The guys at the fire station would be laughing at every groan.

He was startled as gentle hands pushed his away and began massaging the area.

"I do this for my father when he's had a long day," Devry whispered sensually in his ear.

She pushed and kneaded his aching muscles, relaxing his entire body. He was melting under her touch, yawning from exhaustion and wistfully wondering if he could perform as tired as he was. Her fingers sent shivers of longing pulsing through his blood, and his member throbbed with each stroke.

She didn't end the onslaught until his upper body thrummed, a total contrast to the rigidity in his aroused lower region.

Devry walked around the couch and sat next to him, an evening robe covering her nightgown. He could see the frilled lace peeking out of the collar. His heart pounded with the thought of what waited for him underneath the flimsy fabric.

Matthew read the carnal desire in her eyes, the innocent need for his lips on hers. He watched, as a feather of red blushed her features when she became aware of the bulge in his pants. Radiating

virginal innocence, she had an intriguing magnetism, inflaming his senses in torment.

However, he wasn't a virgin and enjoyed exploring willing flesh over the years.

"I missed you," Matthew whispered as he caressed her eager lips.

He brushed her lips with his tongue, fondling and caressing them until she opened her mouth. She tasted as sweet as the darkest honey. He kissed her eyes, neck, and chin, willing her to surrender.

Devry pulled on his shirt, opening the buttons as quickly as she could. Her lips kissing everything within reach, her fingers danced across his tight chest.

His lips tingled in anticipation as he fell into the chasm of her love. He became aware of every movement, every touch, caressing and kissing his neck and chest. Flames of passion marked his heart.

His body sizzled with need. Matthew wanted to throw her on her back and satiate their burning desires. He must keep control.

Matthew had to keep reminding himself that she was a virgin, to take this slowly. He kept forcing his mind to stop before it was too late. If he didn't keep his desires under control, he would dishonor himself, his family, and friends. Languorously, he made love to her lips. Intensifying each caress, he greedily devoured the alms she gave him.

Lost... he was lost in desire, fulfillment, and the satisfaction of completion. He opened the evening robe and pulled her nightgown down.

His lips burned as he kissed her neck, easing his way to her luscious peaks. He suckled them until they were red and hard. Looking into her eyes, seeing the burning plea of possession, Matthew reached for the nightdress and pulled it up, exposing her legs. He may not be able to penetrate her, but he could have just a taste, a sweet taste of everything she was willing to offer lay within his reach.

His hands gently tickled her soft thighs as he traced his way to her hidden desire. She grabbed his neck, her nails scratching him as she uncontrollably bucked with every finger-stroke. Matthew groaned in engorged pain as his member throbbed, begging for release.

Devry's body jumped like flames seeking oxygen. She jerked with each graze of his tongue, her chest heaving with excitement. She whimpered as the throbbing pressure grew, curling her heart

around his essence. Her body screamed as she restrained a cry of release, fighting the unknown.

“Don’t fight it, my love,” he whispered, coaxing to allow her frenzied release. “Let it go.” His body shook as she stiffened, holding her breath, as fire peppered her from the inside. Tears filled his eyes and somewhere deep inside Matthew grabbed the strength to withhold his intense desire to penetrate Devry and fill her with his seed.

Her breaths came quickly as he felt her body melt against his. Matthew leaned his head against her shoulder, wincing as his own release spilled onto his leg. Their hearts raced, pounding in rhythm. He was still in painful need to enter her but kept his promise to himself, unsure of how that made him feel. He’d always made a point to please the women he was with, made sure they’d received their pleasure before he sought his own release. This was a different experience, a completely selfless act of compassion.

As he released their entwined bodies, he wondered when they ended up on the floor. Devry’s hands were shaking as she sat up and clumsily attempted to cover herself. Matthew assisted her, and when they looked in each other’s eyes, they both started laughing.

The day after Devry and Karen had arrived home, Lane had taken Karen aside and asked for her help playing matchmaker with Lydia. Her reaction had been caution, but once she understood his plans, she’d readily agreed to sit with Glenn. Lane and Lydia were together now, alone on a picnic somewhere in the hills. She hoped The Widow would lay down her guard.

Glenn was comatose. There was nothing Karen could do except keep him comfortable. His skin had the golden-tan pallor of the sickly. She would randomly hold his hand and talk to him, unsure of how far into the coma he had slipped. She bathed him, brushed his curly red hair, trimmed his nails, and gave him a good close shave. His fingers had trembled while she was shaving him, and she could almost hear his Scottish accent warning her to be careful.

She sat across from Sir Elmer, who was being unusually quiet. She attempted to focus and read the same page repeatedly, until she finally yielded to her wandering thoughts.

Juan had come to visit earlier, asking if she or Lydia would visit Catherine. He was understandably worried about her health and behavior. Lydia had prodded Richard mercilessly, until he finally

caved, and gave her the name of the drugs he'd given Catherine. Karen was shocked when The Widow told her that he had been giving Catherine morphine, laudanum, and flunitrazepam.

Flunitrazepam was an anesthetic. In modern times, it was known as *roofies*, the date-rape drug. It was a dangerous addictive medication. They'd have to preen her off the addiction gradually. With the combination of the drugs Richard gave Catherine, Karen was surprised that the woman was still alive.

The withdrawal was not going easily. She complained of headaches and muscle pain, her behavior swinging between extreme anxiety, restlessness, and confusion. Juan understood her depression and irritability, and helpless loss. She was too young to be a widow, with no children of her own. He didn't want to believe Richard would do such a thing to his daughter.

Andrew and Christine would be arriving soon. They should be able to help Devry understand why Matthew couldn't marry her. A sensitive and delicate situation, there would be no pleasure in discouraging the union. Karen hadn't spoken to Matthew about it yet. She didn't know where he stood.

Instinct told her it was unwise to forbid them from seeing each other. If Matthew was interested in Devry, he'd perceive it as a control issue. Would he overlook the fact that she was only fifteen? Karen shook her head. Matthew had common sense.

Devry, however, looked at it as a complete rejection. That was not what Karen had wanted the young woman to feel. Unfortunately, that was how it sounded to a young and impressionable heart. Perhaps she should've kept her opinion to herself and approached Matthew, warning him of Devry's plans to marry him.

She and Devry had been back for over a week. Although they stayed in the same house, neither had spoken to the other. Devry avoided breakfast until Karen left to help Lydia. Matthew was busy running the ranch for Andrew, leaving the house before dawn and not returning until late at night.

"Good afternoon. How is he doing?" Lydia inquired.

Karen jumped at the sound of Lydia's voice. "What are you doing here?"

Lydia laughed. "You mean besides the fact that I live here?"

Karen smiled until she saw Lane. He didn't look happy. As a matter of fact, he looked furious.

Sir Elmer jumped down off his bed and started yapping a greeting to his beloved Lydia. When he realized that Lane was in the room, he turned to honk at him and attempted to nip his leg, fluttering his wings violently, and darting his beak with fierce bellicosity.

Karen covered her mouth to hide her laughter when Lane growled at Sir Elmer, "Don't even think about it."

Wide-eyed, the goose cautiously and wisely walked backwards a few steps, frowned, and sat down, pouting. With a loud honk toward Lane, Sir Elmer stuck his nose in the air and proceeded to ignore the man.

Karen made a poor attempt to hide the amusement in her eyes. "So, what happened?"

She watched Lydia lift the cloth napkin off the basket and hand some chicken to Lane.

"Mrs. Hayes had her baby. Her son flagged us down as we were leaving town. It appears she..." Lydia turned to look at Lane and blushed.

"I think I'll go check on, um, the horses."

Lydia smiled as Lane rushed out of the room, hitting his knee on the doorframe in the rush. They could hear the uneven click of his boots on the wood floor and his unmistakable cursing throughout the house. Sir Elmer bounded onto his bed, laughing.

If a goose could smirk...

"Her water broke. She wasn't due for another two months. The baby came fast. When I walked in the bedroom, one foot was already waving at me."

"Oh!" Karen shivered and winced. "That hurts just thinking about it. Are they doing okay?"

"Yes, both mother and son are doing excellent." Lydia started laughing, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "Oh... oh! You should've seen Lane's face when he saw that foot! Neither one of us was expecting the labor to be so advanced. I've never seen a man's face turn red that fast."

"You'd think that as many times men have seen animals deliver, it wouldn't faze them to watch a human be born. But instead they get all gushy."

"It was priceless." Lydia smiled. "He was staying outside and kept sending her son in to see if I needed anything."

“Poor Lane. I guess he never thought he would be in these situations when he decided to stay with Glenn. So much for some time alone. Did he ask for a raincheck?”

“Pardon? A what?”

“Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and...” Karen bounced, grinning, “Sorry, my humor,” clearing her throat, “it’s a voucher used for spectators when a baseball game has been rained out. Did Lane ask to see you again?”

“No.” She shook her head sadly. “I would imagine he’s very frustrated at this point. Too many obstacles seem to get in our way. It’s not wise for me to become involved with anyone anyway, especially a former Pinkerton man.”

“Goodness! Why? You’re still young. You have your whole life ahead of you. What difference does it make what his last occupation was? It’s not because of your family, is it?”

“My family would love him. I have never really been very conventional and they accept that. They would welcome him.”

“This isn’t characteristic of me to pry. Forgive me for being so forward, or tell me it’s none of my business, but what’s stopping you?”

Lydia bit her lip. “I’m afraid. No, afraid is too simple a word. I’m terrified. There’s so much of me that I’ve kept locked away. I’m not sure if I’m able to take the chance to allow someone that close to me again. We all have skeletons. I know that. Mine are just more severe than most.”

Karen took her hand. “Lydia, please consider opening yourself to another relationship. Whether it’s Lane or someone else, don’t let the chance for happiness pass you by because of fear.”

“I just have so many doubts.” She clasped her hands together and sighed as she sat next to Karen.

“Doubts about Lane?”

“Yes,” Lydia laughed nervously. “No. He’s an ex Pinkerton man. Being accused of murder in the past, and now there are murders here in Tokata.” She shook her head. “Who wouldn’t wonder about my innocence? You can’t honestly tell me he doesn’t suspect me.”

“That is a real concern. Serial murderers are very smart, and they do tend to move around to evade being caught,” Karen explained solemnly. “Also, it seems that it would be someone close, that a person would never suspect.”

Wilderness Bound

“Serial murderers, is that what they’re called?”

“Yes, when you have murders by the same person over a period of time.” Karen grimaced. “However, it’s unusual to have a female serial killer. They’re usually men.”

“Mostly men?” Lydia pursed her lips. “Odd. Still, the seed of doubt would be worse for him. How could Lane commit himself to me if he had the slightest suspicion that I’d be what you call a serial murderer?”

“Until he uncovers the murderer, there will be doubt.”

Chapter Fourteen

PREPARING to leave to visit Andrew and Christine, Juan and Catherine led their horses from the stable. Catching movement out of the corner of their eyes, they stopped abruptly. Mr. Brandt was sneaking out Catherine's back door! They stood hidden in the shadows, suspicious of his intentions. She'd refused to open the door to the man along with other members of the club.

It had been weeks, and Catherine was still weaning herself from the drugs that Richard had given her.

"Be careful," she whispered as Juan approached the skulking Mr. Brandt.

Catherine watched her father approach the man. The agitated and animated movements of his hands didn't lessen her apprehension. Often she'd teased him that he wouldn't be able to speak if someone tied his hands, but the quick motions alerted her to a problem.

Warily, she watched Brandt hurry away. She rode toward Juan, leading his horse. "What did he say?"

"He claims he was trying to assure himself that you were well."

"Through my back door?"

"That's what I asked. He said he'd knocked on the front door and when he didn't receive a response, went around to the back to see if you were outside."

"And, Mr. Brandt let himself in my house because?"

"He claims he heard something and went in to investigate. When he didn't see anyone in the house, he left through the same door he entered. It sounds innocent enough."

She snorted. "He lies. There was no one in my house."

"Catherine, we cannot assume the worst. Mr. Brandt has attempted to visit you and see to your welfare."

"Father, you're too trusting."

“And you, daughter, are too cynical.”

Juan and Catherine entered the living room amid cheerful laughter. Greetings and kisses, in addition to sincere condolences, greeted the new arrivals. Juan had brought his wife Domina over earlier and then left to escort Catherine.

Their arrival had interrupted a controversial discussion on women’s suffrage. Christine was passionate in her beliefs. No one in the room would disagree with her. Christine had the gumption to travel to Washington and fight for those rights and everyone in the room respected her for it. The men wanting to protect their women from the heartless political system, were wise enough to keep their mouths closed and their humble opinions to themselves.

“It’s not just women’s rights that are involved here,” Christine added passionately. “Indian rights are being fought for also. There are also some heated debates in D.C. right now about Mississippi.”

“What’s going on in Mississippi?” Matthew took the bait, smiling.

Curious eyes turned to Christine. “They’re trying to add a clause to their state constitution withholding votes from those who don’t comprehend the U.S. Constitution.”

“Isn’t that taking a step backwards?” Karen asked.

Domina piped. “Sounds like it to me. Why would they want to do that?”

“I honestly believe, if I may give my one-sided opinion, it’s to prohibit the illiterate Negroes from voting.”

“Don’t leave many people voting, does it?” Matthew quipped.

“Well, obviously, they don’t want to have a true democracy. They’ll have a handful of white, educated voters running a predominately black state.”

“It’s just the beginning,” Andrew joined in the debate. “The southern states are searching for ways to get around the 14th Amendment.”

“The only way it’s going to change is with a woman’s vote and that won’t happen. Men don’t want to relinquish control.” Christine’s vehemence startled the group.

Andrew shot back. “That’s unfair,”

“You, of all people, should understand.”

“You’re not the only one fighting oppression.” Christine blinked, stunned that she was yelling at Andrew. “I’m sorry, Honey.

I guess I've gotten used to exerting my opinion so fervently just to be heard."

Changing the subject, Catherine asked. "How was the visit with Sitting Bull?"

"It was wonderful!" Christine exclaimed.

"Yes, it was good to see our old friends. We also learned the truth behind the Ghost Dance." All eyes turned to Andrew.

"Sitting Bull is much more colorful with his words. However, I shall attempt to describe the Ghost Dance for you.

It's said that Wovoka, a Paiute from Nevada, recovered from scarlet fever right after a total eclipse of the sun. He'd seen a vision, a prophecy, that if the Indian believed in the faith of his heart, sang ceremonial songs, and danced, his deceased relatives would return. The Buffalo would return and the *wasicu* would be destroyed. If we respect and abide by the prophecy, Mother Earth will be reborn with the coming of the green grass, in the spring of 1891. A fresh layer of fertile soil shall be set upon the Earth. Sweet grass will cover the land, clear, fresh running water will flow from the rivers and trees, and plants will thrive and grow tall to feed and house the creatures of the land. The Buffalo will thrive and the wild horses shall return."

Andrew cleared his throat. "When Kicking Bear and Short Bull returned from Nevada, they taught the Ghost Dance to the Sioux. They described how Wovoka had flown over them on horseback teaching them Ghost Dance songs. All Indians who join in the Ghost Dance, no matter what tribe, will rise into the heavens while the soil and land replenishes itself. They will then return with their ancestors and live upon the revived Earth. The *wasicu* will not walk upon the land."

Andrew scanned the room. "They call Wovoka, Christ," he added carefully.

A hiss of repressed anger blazed through the room. Excluding Andrew, all listening to the story of the Ghost Dance were Christians. He understood their reaction and had compassion for their shock. Waiting a few moments for the impact to settle in their minds, Andrew watched as a kaleidoscope of emotions danced across his friends' faces.

"Because of the unacceptable circumstances on the Dakota reservations, the Lakota have embraced the passionate aspirations of the Ghost Dance. It's spreading to all the Sioux reservations. They

gather at the Strong Hold on the northern part of the Pine Ridge reservation where they hold the Ghost Dance ceremony.

"Black Elk has designed the Ghost Shirt. Kicking Bear has convinced the Sioux that if the dancers wear their Ghost Dance shirts, decorated with the magic symbols given to them by Wovoka, the soldiers' bullets will not harm them."

Silence permeated the air.

"Have you joined in the Ghost Dance?" Domina asked, breaking the silence.

Andrew shook his head in denial. "I cannot. In my heart, I believe it's wrong. My wife, my soul mate, doesn't have Indian blood. The belief is that all non-Indians, all *wasicu*, will be destroyed. The Ghost Dance doesn't single out non-Indians who will die and others who will endure. I have many friends who would die for me that aren't Lakota. I'll not turn my back on them."

"Will it cause an Indian uprising?" Catherine bit her lip.

"I honestly don't know. I didn't see any dissension. There are rumors of a letter written to the Secretary of the Interior giving information and warnings of Lakota plans of resistance."

Juan frowned at the lack of reassurance. "What does Sitting Bull have to say about all of this?"

Andrew looked over to Karen. Slowly she glanced around the room, understanding the concern of the people around her. No one wanted the Indians destroyed or hurt. Everyone present had attempted to improve the life of the reservation Indians. Each, in their own way, had fought for the Lakota, for their freedom, and for the rights they deserved as American citizens.

"Sitting Bull has his doubts," Karen explained. "He doesn't believe the dead will return. If allowing the Ghost Dance on his reservation encourages the hope of the Lakota, then he won't stop them. He's aware that the white people living around the reservations and the Indian agents are getting nervous about the Ghost Dance. He's worried that they're transporting soldiers to some of the reservations. He fears that the soldiers' return will mean the death of more of his people."

"If he's so afraid that it'll hurt his people, why is he allowing it?"

"The people need their hope," Karen explained. "Sitting Bull doesn't want to destroy any chances of his people keeping their faith. Why squash their optimism for a better life? Kicking Bull requested

permission from Sitting Bull to teach the Ghost Dance at Standing Rock. He granted that request.”

“Good for him,” Christine interjected. “The Indians have every right to perform any sacred religious ceremony they choose. Our constitution protects that right. Pick any other religious sect encouraging prayers and ceremonies for a day of ascension, and the government wouldn’t hinder them.”

“It’s disheartening that they have to perform their religious ceremonies in secret. When will people learn not to persecute others for their religious beliefs?” Domina turned to Devry. “Was your ceremony hidden also?”

Devry radiated with pleasure. “Yes, it was. It didn’t stop it from being the most beautiful ceremony I could ever have imagined. I... the man I want to marry was included in my prayer songs.”

Andrew and Christine looked at each other, puzzled. It was the first they had heard of their daughter’s intentions. Karen turned bright red with repressed anger as her heart thundered, waiting for the announcement.

“Well Devry, please don’t leave us in suspense,” Domina encouraged.

Devry beamed at Matthew and he smiled in return. Both were recalling the last few evenings they’d shared together.

Andrew and Christine’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Seeing Matthew’s response, Karen turned a deeper crimson. Juan, Domina, and Catherine were the only ones in the room who didn’t see a problem.

Biting her lip, Devry blushed happily, “Matthew.”

“Matthew,” Andrew said quietly, tilting his head toward Karen. “Are you sure?”

Andrew and Christine had mixed feelings. They both felt honored. The friendship they shared with Karen lay forever in their hearts. They were happy that Devry would choose such a worthy man. Nevertheless, would Matthew want to take their daughter back to his strange magical world? How often would they see their precious daughter if he did?

“Yes Papa, I’m sure.”

“Matthew, how do you feel about this?”

“I’m honored. At a more opportune time, I believe we should discuss our future nuptials and decide on how you’d like to proceed.

I was planning on the Lakota way in making my proposal. I'll do it any way you choose to fulfill my obligations."

Karen sat forward, determined. "No." A whiplash of fury descended upon the room. "I'll not allow it."

The room exploded. Matthew was stunned.

"What?"

"Why not?"

"What's wrong?"

"You insult us!" Christine cried as tears filled her eyes. "I thought we were friends."

"I hate you," Devry yelled.

"Stop! I'm sure she has a good reason for objecting." Andrew spoke over the clamoring voices, his face pale. "Why Karen? What is it?"

Karen looked at her good friend and then to her son's furious face. "It isn't Devry. She's a wonderful, beautiful, young woman."

Matthew clenched his jaw, repressing the urge to yell at his mother.

"Your marriage won't be accepted in our world without problems. Matthew, what are you thinking? Do you want to bring the whole family to our world so they can sign the papers consenting the marriage? How can you want to marry someone so young? Gees Matthew, use your brain and not your..."

"I am using my brain!" he interrupted. "She's not that young."

"Not that young?" His mother snorted. "Oh! What do you mean not that young? Just the thought nauseates me. What are you thinking?"

"Oh! I hate you!" Devry screamed at Karen and stomped out of the room.

Matthew stood, watching Devry run through the door. "I can't believe you! How can you be so insulting to your closest friends? I've never seen you act this way toward anyone." Matthew waved his hand, "Yes, she's young and inexperienced, but come on, Mom, so am I. It's not like I'm announcing that I'm gay or marrying a twelve-year-old."

"Close enough!" She yelled sarcastically at him.

"She's twenty!"

"Twenty?" Throwing both hands in the air, "Twenty! Is that what she told you? She's fifteen, Matthew!"

Matthew sat down, stunned. His heart knotted, his stomach churning. Everything, all his dreams had just collapsed around him.

His voice croaked as he looked around the room. “Fif... Fifteen?”

Andrew and Christine nodded their heads.

Matthew paled. Swallowing the panic, he covered his face with his hands. “Oh my God, I think I’m going to be sick.”

Chapter Fifteen

LYDIA paused, gathering her thoughts in front of the crowded congregation. People crammed themselves into every available space, the doors of the church open for those who stood outside. She looked at the open casket and prayed she'd get through this without breaking down.

Taking a small knife out of her reticule, Lydia reached up and cut a piece of hair from the nape of her neck. Her lips moved in prayer as she leaned over the casket and ceremoniously placed it in Glenn's hand. Returning to the pulpit, she scanned the townspeople before her.

"Doctor Glenn Carson was my friend, my mentor, and the brother of my heart. His spirit blessed and touched us, branded with the goodness of his character. I believe, to the utter reaches of my soul, that he's in a better place. He's with his beautiful daughter and wife.

"He had an abundance of love for everyone. He taught me that life wasn't cold, that I could do anything as long as I had faith. That's how Glenn lived his life. Through all the tragedies we've all experienced, his faith was there to help carry us through the hard times.

"He taught me there were few things in life we could actually control. We have the gift of choice. It was up to me to choose the path of my life. He taught me that life was a kaleidoscope of changes. It was my decision as to how I wanted mine painted.

"Many years ago, when my heart was at its weakest, he explained to me that everything comes, everything passes, and everything is replaced. A change is in the wind now, and we cannot hold him back. Our memories we will cherish.

"I'll miss his smile, the burr of his Scottish accent, and his sense of humor. Most of all, I'll miss his uncensored love."

Lydia's voice broke as unbidden tears streamed down her face. Juan stood and approached the podium, putting his arm around Lydia for comfort and encouragement. He reached over and handed her a handkerchief. Taking a few deep breaths, she continued.

"Glenn will always be with us, in our hearts, and in our memories. Our time with those we love is never long enough, but we have them with us in our hearts. He'll be there, always strong, smiling, and encouraging. I shall look to the stars and see His spirit watching over us, knowing that Glenn's in His loving care."

Silence permeated the town, a mournful essence veiled the skies. Not a soul walked the streets. Dark ominous clouds blanketed the funeral procession as they walked sullenly toward the burial grounds. The Earth wept with the people. Across the river, the cemetery waited patiently for its newest tenant. It was a secluded place, where one was laid to rest among trees and flowering gardens.

The doctor was well known, highly respected, and cherished among the townspeople. He'd always been an honest and generous man, a dedicated and meticulous doctor, never deceiving anyone and never expecting more than one could give. His death was a great loss to the community and many felt cheated by his passing.

They watched the undertaker's carriage struggle along the narrow road. Many of the townspeople were gathering memories, wanting to remember the good doctor's face, his dimpled smile, and his merry eyes, always gleaming with a happiness that reached out to his friends and patients.

They pictured him with the gold chain and watch hanging from his pocket, the one his wife had given him as a wedding gift. Many could hear his voice, a resonant sound that brought cheer to those around him, even in times of despair. They had looked to him for comfort, for his positive outlook, and his effervescent desire for life.

He was now with his daughter and wife in the next life. His watch rested on the mantle next to his picture, in the home that now belonged to his brother-in-law.

All those who loved and respected him surrounded the grave of Doctor Glenn Carson. His closest friends, after moments of silence, honored his memory by recalling the drinks of cheer, the smell of his cigars, his precious art, the battles, and his complete passion for life.

All took the drizzling rain as tears from heaven. The brown earth sagged in sadness under their feet, shovels of dirt struck against the

wood of the casket. The congregation stood in paralyzed unity while the minister mumbled a few more words in Latin, then closed his Bible with a resounding thump.

Lane Parker stood in the corner of Glenn's office watching the whole town walk in and out of the house. The women scuttled about, covering the formal dining room table, the counter tops in the kitchen, and every other available space with food.

He'd never seen so much food in his life. He wanted to mourn alone, not have people surrounding him, cooing words of wisdom and condolences.

Glenn's will and testament sat on the desk unopened. Juan had brought it to him hours ago, telling him not to allow anyone to rush him into any decisions. Mr. Brandt had already approached him with an extremely generous offer to buy the house. Lane hadn't considered selling the house, but the generous offer played chimerically in his thoughts.

He warily eyed Brandt, sitting across the room. The man didn't look well. A sheen of moisture dotted his pale face. He appeared about ready to fall off the chair. Lydia was handing him a plate of food, encouraging the man to eat.

Mrs. Barnes was sitting next to Catherine, insidiously babbling about The Widow. Lane overheard her cutting words of warning.

"Watch The Widow, Catherine." She tapped the young woman's arm to get her attention. "Mr. Brandt will be dead next. You wait and see. The Widow is single-handedly murdering all the club members, just like she did in St. Augustine."

"Are you saying that Lydia killed my husband, Mrs. Barnes?" Catherine replied caustically. "She tried to save him."

"Oh, you poor child. She's good at hiding the evil within her. Of course, she made it look like she was trying to save him. She does claim to be a healer." She pursed her lips, "With the good doctor gone, who will control her now?"

Catherine stared blankly at the older woman.

"Why is that young man shunning Devry? Every time she goes near him, he walks away."

She turned to see Matthew shaking his head at Devry. Her heart went out to her cousin. Everyone close to Andrew and Christine knew that their friend Karen and her son came from a different type of society. Once Karen explained her objections, it was

understandable given the problems it would cause. She recalled Matthew's destitution as he sat on the couch that fateful day, humbled, and broken.

"Maybe they had a bit of a spat. You know how young people can be."

Lydia approached Lane with a plate of food. He quickly escorted her onto the veranda, away from the insipid woman.

Lydia protested, "You must eat."

"I will, if you promise to stay here with me for a while."

"Are you trying to protect me from Mrs. Barnes' vicious tongue?"

"You know?"

"Of course I know." Lydia laughed. "She's never been anything but honest in her dislike of me. Mrs. Barnes truly believes what she says. I respect her honesty, though not quite as tactful as she should be. Her lies, well, what can I say?"

"She has a point about Brandt. He doesn't look well at all."

"True, but I don't think he's eaten all day. He gets that way when he doesn't eat."

Lane nodded his head. "With him being one of my suspects, it'll definitely put a twist on the investigation."

"Brandt's one of your suspects? I was under the impression that you were watching him because of Matthew."

Lane wanted to kick himself for letting that bit of information slip. He needed to be more cautious around The Widow until this murder case was over. He couldn't take it back, so he might as well watch her reaction.

"Yes, I didn't really see him as a solid suspect until Catherine told me they saw him sneaking out of her house."

"Catherine told me about that, too. It really upset her." Lydia looked through the doors at Mr. Brandt. "Do you want some lemonade with your meal? I'm going to get a glass for myself."

She accepted his suspicion without a blink of her eye, as if they were discussing the weather. Lane watched as The Widow walked away. Her mourning dress billowed around her ankles, her hips swayed gracefully. The dress went up to her neck, sequestering generous breasts.

Breasts his fingers ached to caress.

Lane groaned. He hadn't even kissed her yet.

Wilderness Bound

When he saw Lydia standing at the podium during the service, she seemed so vulnerable and forlorn. He'd wanted to kiss her tears away. He had felt the pain of her loss when she'd spoken at the funeral. Such radiating love couldn't hide a murderer. The aberrant behavior would've shown its ugly head by now.

He watched her enter the office with a servant carrying trays of lemonade. Juan and Andrew approached him and quietly told him it was time.

Lane entered the room solemnly. Slowly, methodically, he opened the envelope and leaned against the desk.

"I, Doctor Glenn Carson, being of sound mind and body... bequeath to the following:

Lydia Wetmore Williams – all of my medical supplies, including medicines and tools for her future use.

Juan and Domina Rivera – the collection of handguns, and my grandmother's china closet and the china collection.

Andrew and Christine Little Red Hawk – the collection of bows and arrows along with the new Winchester carbine rifle, and my wife's emerald necklace and matching ring.

To my brother-in-law, Lane Parker – all of my worldly possessions, not mentioned herewith, with one stipulation; that he not sell the house. He may dispose of any other personal property as he sees fit.

Night had fallen quickly and the sound of crickets filled the air. The house was quiet as Lydia cleaned in the kitchen. Lane sat next to the fireplace, staring at the will in disbelief. Glenn had told him that he was inheriting the house, but not everything else. Ironical how an offer was made to buy the house and Glenn's will stipulated that he keep it. How had Glenn known? He never did finish the conversation they had started a few Sundays back. What was Glenn going to tell him?

Glenn would never have willed his medicines and supplies to Lydia if he had any suspicion that she would use them to hurt people. It had to have been his way of declaring the woman's innocence.

He offered to retrieve the gifts from Glenn, all said to wait. There was plenty of time. It was pointless for him to worry about those things now. He had an estate to care for and needed time to mourn.

Glenn had been very comfortable financially. It was overwhelming to learn that he had that kind of money within his reach now. Lane had always lived frugally, his lifestyle as a Pinkerton man didn't offer him many options for luxuries.

Lydia entered the room and offered to pour him a glass of bourbon. She handed him his glass and sat daintily next to him.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. He was sick for a while. I appreciate you taking care of him the way you have."

"I would've done anything for him."

"Can I ask you a question?" He gently stroked her hand as he spoke, sending chills of pleasure up her arm.

"A lawman question or a Lane question?"

He laughed. "You're a cautious one, aren't you? I didn't know there was a difference."

"A huge difference. When you wear the lawman face, you're serious and unbending. I prefer the Lane face. Go ahead, ask."

"It was something you did during the service. I'm curious. Why did you cut a piece of your hair and give it to Glenn?"

Lydia smiled. "It's a custom from my first husband's tribe. It's a gift from me to carry with him to the afterlife, a part of my spirit, as a symbol of my love for him."

"Why have you never remarried?"

Surprised by the quick change in subject, she fluttered breathlessly. Blushing, she became ensnared in the rhythmic caress of his hand. "I've been to dinner and dances with gentlemen a few times. There's never been anyone who appealed to my interest more than a simple need for companionship."

Lane was caressing her arm. Lydia could feel the heat from his gentle fingers through the lace of her dress. She yearned for his lips on hers, wanted to taste him. It'd been so very long since she'd desired a man.

"No one?"

Silently, she shook her head and returned his heated gaze.

Lydia was startled when Lane stood up, slicing the poignant moment as he crossed to the door and locked it.

He shrugged. "Just in case someone decides to interrupt us. It seems to be a habit of the folks in this town."

With an impish smile, Lydia lifted her glass in salutation. A burble of jittery excitement raced through her veins. "What do you have in mind that you need to have the door locked?"

Sitting down, Lane took her face in his hands and kissed her, tasted her, seduced away the resistance she might have given him.

Lydia's scent of sweet lavender enveloped him. He met no resistance as he greedily kissed her lips. They were hot, soft, and pliant. Her unfettered response consumed him in heated flames. He indulged his desires as his hand strayed to her neck, feeling her pulse quicken as he deepened the kiss. His member strained, objecting to its confined quarters, pleading release.

Standing on unsteady feet, she took his hand and guided him to the door. Lane puckered his brow as he watched her twist the key, unlocking the door to their precious privacy. She smiled, leading him toward the back of the house. When they reached the top of the stairs she hesitated, unsure of which direction to pursue.

Leading her to the room, he was amazed at the boldness of her gesture, thrilled that he had found someone to love so thoroughly. Locking the door behind them, he heard Lydia's giggle as she sat on the bed, unbuttoning her dress with shaking hands.

Shrugging, Lane turned from the door, walking toward her with determination beaming from his eyes. "Just in case."

Chapter Sixteen

ANOTHER dreary day. The rain danced on the windows and lightning flared as the thunder rolled over the land. Lane leaned against the doorframe of the doctor's medical supply room, watching Lydia pack boxes, one for the apothecary and the other for medicines and tools she wanted for herself.

She was such an extraordinary woman. Their lovemaking had shown him a passion he'd never expected. His fantasies and dreams hadn't come close to the intensity they'd shared.

Lane recalled the night before with vivid clarity. His fingers and hands tingled at the memory of caressing her smooth silky skin, of how Lydia's bold responses encouraged the rhythm of their lovemaking, her whispered sighs of passion. His body reacted to the memory and he surreptitiously adjusted himself.

"What are we going to do with two houses?" he asked while she placed medical books on a chair.

"Two houses?"

Seeing her puzzled expression, he glided over, kissing her on the forehead. "I don't want you to leave. Will you be my life-mate? My wife, my love, the mother of my children?"

Lydia blushed. "You don't have to marry me..." Stunned, "I... it's not like you seduced me and stole my virtue. I was... oh!"

She turned quickly, embarrassed, and started putting more jars in the box, her movements jerky and animated.

Lane laughed as he turned Lydia slowly toward him. "Do you love me?"

Nodding her head, "Yes, I do."

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Tears filled her eyes. "What about the murders? I know you've suspected me."

"Just minor doubts, but the doctor put them to rest."

"What could Glenn have possibly said that was different from anyone else you've asked about me?"

Smiling, he caressed her face. "It wasn't only what he said. It was what the doctor did."

Lydia stared at him, puzzled. He could see her mind working.

"If he had any seed of doubt about you, any unspoken suspicion, Glenn would never have given you his medical supplies in his will."

Hugging him, she mumbled, "That's true."

"Will you marry me, Lydia?"

"Yes, I will. I love you."

Hugging him, she smiled and felt a piece of her heart grow.

He played with a lock of hair that had fallen out of her bun. "How about this Sunday? I don't want to wait any longer than I have to. Is there anyone I need to speak with, for permission?"

"This Sunday! Oh my, but there are so many preparations!"

"You want a big wedding?"

"No. I would prefer the time to have a dress made and to discuss what our future plans are." She kissed his nose.

"As you wish. We'll marry on the following Sunday."

"You are exasperating!" Pushing on his shoulder "How about a few months from now? October?" Offering him a shy smile.

"But that's too far away. I don't think I can wait that long."

Arching her eyebrow, "Wait that long for what?"

"Is there someone I need to speak with?"

"No. I'll send an announcement to my uncle and brother."

Lane blinked. "I didn't realize you had a brother."

She looked at him, surprised. "I talk about him all the time. Charles works with shipping and the railroad. He and his wife live in Newport near my uncle's home."

"Of course," Lane chuckled. "I didn't realize he was your brother. I thought he was another cousin."

"If you think I have extravagant picnics, wait until you experience one of George's at the Chateau-Sur-Mer. Oh, you'll love it there! It's such a beautiful place. Each year I visit my relatives in Newport. Normally, I take my holiday near the end of summer, but the last two years I've taken it at the beginning of the year. Last year, I went for my cousin, Edith's, debutante ball."

"Your uncle's a senator for Rhode Island, correct?"

"No. He was governor of Rhode Island and ran for the Senate last year but was unsuccessful. I'm sure he'll try again."

"Won't he object to you marrying a commoner?"

Lydia smiled. "You're far from being a commoner. There will be no objections. George isn't pretentious in any way. He'll accept you for who you are." She paused, tapping her finger on her lip, animated in deep contemplation. "There is one minor detail you'll have a problem with though."

"Oh?" Lane frowned as he closed the box she'd filled with medicine and carried it to the door.

"Sir Elmer." Lydia laughed. "He hasn't taken a liking to you at all," she drawled, batting her eyes like the most innocent southern belle.

"I gathered as much, by the slow torture he has inflicted upon me. Do you really want to wait until October?"

"Autumn's my favorite time of year." Seeing the look of discouragement and the uncharacteristic pout on his lips, she winked. "Oh, you poor dear. How about the end of August?"

Lane brightened. "That's my girl. August it is."

A quiet knock sounded behind the couple. "What's in August?" Devry asked, as she and her father entered the room.

One week before the wedding, Mr. Brandt, frustrated with his failure to lure the elusive Devry into his arms, walked into Mrs. Enlow's sitting room. He needed a woman and he was tired of abstinence, tired of trying to win over someone who just wasn't responsive. How could a woman, so stunning, have absolutely no innate desire for passion?

"Here, let me take your coat."

He turned and handed her his evening jacket. She was wearing his favorite gown, one he had commissioned especially for her. His heart pounded with desire as he licked his lips. She wore nothing underneath the lace bodice, her voluptuous breasts straining and yearning for his touch. He could always depend on her to satisfy his needs.

"You're angry." Brandt stroked her ear.

"You haven't come to visit for a while."

He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't exactly leave here on a good note."

"No one cares for rejection, my dear."

“I apologize for hurting you. You surprised me. I hadn’t expected your declaration of love. After you vented your anger in front of the whole town, I didn’t think you wanted to have anything to do with me.”

“A most unfortunate temper tantrum, I apologize. You’re here now, that’s all that matters.” Mrs. Enlow pointed to the table. “Make yourself a drink. I’ll return shortly,” she cooed.

Excusing herself, she rushed to the rear entrance of the house. Scribbling a note, she handed it to one of the boys to deliver. The young man ran as quickly as he could, the promise of a coin fueling his effort. He delivered the note, waited, and then ran away, another unexpected coin clasped in his hand as he tightly grasped the bag he was to give to Mrs. Enlow.

Sir Elmer sat on Lydia’s bed watching Catherine and Devry buzzing around his mistress. It was another day with people that he had to deal with. What were these women doing today? He looked around the room, smelling the change in the air.

Something was happening and no one had informed him about what it was. This was not picnic day, the usual day for everyone to infringe on his privacy and his home. This was garden day and they hadn’t gone outside yet. Yesterday was laundry day and they worked in the garden. He was not happy. This week was all in a shambles.

People weren’t supposed to be here today. This was their exclusive day together. Saturday was *his* day, not for the rest of these interfering humans. These people think they can just do whatever they want. He fervently wished they would leave.

Sir Elmer mumbled petulantly as he watched the women help The Widow with a gown.

Lydia admired herself in the mirror as Catherine’s experienced hands clasped the small pearl buttons. The wedding gown was ivory silk and satin with elegantly embroidered gold and lavender lace. Pearls and embroidered silk sparkled beneath the translucent layer of ethereal chiffon that flowed over the gown, creating an angelic appearance. The detachable, twelve-foot train was finished with the same intricate lace trimmings and silk chiffon.

Her golden-brown hair, decorated intricately with ringlets, entwined through the tiara. The gold and lavender embroidered chiffon headpiece cascaded down the center of her back.

It was Saturday, September 6, in the year of our Lord, 1890, and her life would change for better or worse in less than twenty minutes. They delayed the original wedding day to allow her uncle, cousins, and brother to attend. Lane had waited graciously and patiently for this day to arrive.

Sitting in the closed carriage in front of the church, her Uncle George patted her hand, reassuring her thrumming nerves.

Her stomach rumbled its objections.

“Ready, my sweet?”

She nodded and smiled. “I’m so pleased you’re here.”

“We wouldn’t have missed this for the world, my dear.”

As he disembarked from the carriage, someone shut the doors of the church and waited for Lydia to arrive at the steps. Taking a deep breath, she nodded to her Uncle George, and he asked the deacon to open the doors.

Sir Elmer was incensed. He had watched the group enter the carriages and ride away. As he stood at the front doors waiting expectantly for an explanation, his Lydia hadn’t said one word to him, just kissed him on the nose and left. Something important was happening today and he was going to discover what it was.

Sizzling in vexation with each step, he stomped toward the end of the road, watching the final carriage meander out of sight. Oh bother, he was going to have to fly. Spreading his wings with awkward, wobbling movements he managed to take flight, keeping the group within easy reach.

Landing behind Lydia’s carriage, Sir Elmer skulked near the rear wheel to watch Lydia and her Uncle George enter the church. Hopping up the stairs, he stood at the entranceway and watched warily.

Frowning, he heard the preacher.

“We are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony...”

Matrimony? *Matrimony*? They were getting married? With silent and vitriolic steps, he marched down the aisle. There was no way he’d allow this farce to continue. He wouldn’t allow this arrogant buffoon to marry his Lydia. How dare this man think he could just strut in and take over, take his woman away from him? Who did he think he was?

Sir Elmer was a man of purpose. His goal: to stop this wedding.

The congregation watched, mouths open in astonishment, as Sir Elmer bit Lydia Wetmore Williams' future husband on the backside. Lane howled in excruciating pain as he swatted the feisty, invidious goose, tears pooling in his eyes.

Tears of laughter filled the church.

The preacher made a feckless attempt to calm Lane and the rest of the congregation. Chaos and unfettered laughter filled the church. Throwing his hands in the air, the preacher sat down and joined the congregation, watching the chimerical show before him.

Lydia mumbled apologies as she scooped the goose into her arms. After calming the bird, she handed him to Juan. Sir Elmer squawked his disapproval, his voice echoing off the church walls. Lydia turned a disgruntled eye toward the goose and he sat back.

Deep anguish filled his eyes as he pouted, crushed that she'd choose someone else to love. He stared at Lydia, beseeching her to still love him. Lane stood gawking, open-mouthed at the destitute reaction of the beast. Lydia lifted her hands, pleading to him to wait just one more moment.

Walking over to Sir Elmer, she held him close, hugging him, reassuring him that she still loved him. Carrying him back to the altar, she placed him between Lane and herself. Sir Elmer looked at Lane, tilted his head, and smirked. Wide-eyed, Lane watched the goose snub him, turn his face toward the minister, and wait for the man to proceed with the ceremony.

The congregation finally settled down, a few snickers tickling the air. Lane nodded to continue and Lydia looked to the heavens for comfort. Standing proudly, the audacious Sir Elmer listened intently to the minister.

"May he speak now or forever hold his peace." The preacher paused and scanned the members of the church.

Waiting for the question, Sir Elmer sprang forward, wings outstretched, and stood in front of the congregation bellowing his protests. A few giggles circulated through the church. Some of the guests held their Bibles in front of their faces in an attempt to shield their laughter. Lane turned a deep shade of purple, repressing the urge to sacrifice the goose on the sacred altar. Lydia hid her face in the bouquet but couldn't hide her giggles.

Looking at the goose, the preacher solemnly nodded, acknowledging Sir Elmer's ranting objections. "Is there anyone *else* who would like to express their objections?"

The ceremony continued without another eruption or mishap from the angry goose. He stood between the couple as if he too were joining them in holy matrimony.

Grumbling, the goose kicked Lane, his piercing eyes riveting resentment at his nemesis. The preacher patiently waited for Lane's response. Beaming at the goose with a self-satisfied grin of triumph, he answered, "I do."

As they faced the congregation for the first time as man and wife (and goose), Lane glanced at Sir Elmer. The goose stuck his tongue out at him.

Chapter Seventeen

KAREN tapped her foot as the band played a lively waltz. Bright sunshine blazed its happiness upon the guests as they danced and mingled, enjoying the festive atmosphere and delicious buffet. The reception held at Andrew and Christine's home was simple with a twist of elegance. It was a celebration and gift to their friends to share the happiness of Lane and Lydia's union.

"This is a wedding reception, Matthew. We're supposed to be celebrating," Karen pleaded with her son. "Do you think you could possibly find a generous smile in that frown for one day?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm frustrated."

"Besides the fact you can't marry Devry, what's bothering you?"

"How could you tell?"

Karen laughed. "I'm your mother."

Matthew sighed. "I still want to discuss Devry with you. However, you're right. That's not what's on my mind at the moment."

"What's bothering you, Son?"

"The murderer's after Brandt. I'm pissed. I wanted to deal with him myself."

His mother's eyes widened. "You want to kill Brandt? Have you lost your mind?"

"No. I don't want to kill him, just muck around with him a little. He's not dead yet. I might still be able to inflict some pain."

"Whoever it is knows exactly what they're doing. It's wrong, Matthew. No one has the right to judge anyone. There's a self-righteous, pompous man out there playing God. It isn't our place to create our personal Judgment Day. I expected better from you."

Karen watched Matthew bite the inside of his cheek, a habit he had when deep in thought. His eyes scanned the dance floor, until

he found Devry dancing with her father. Confusion strummed his features.

Saddened by the loss her son felt, she wished she could mend his heart. Karen knew she had to allow her children to fly with their own wings, fledglings soaring to their own beginnings. Unfortunately, this time she didn't have a choice.

"If Devry was willing to wait until she was older, would you accept the marriage?" Matthew asked quietly.

Biting her lip, "That depends. How much older?"

Hope flared in his eyes. "Eighteen?"

"Would she be willing to wait that long?"

Matthew smiled, showering her with hugs. "I know she will."

"You still can't..."

"I know." With a quick kiss on his mother's cheek, he departed and tapped Andrew on the shoulder. Andrew turned and waited for Karen's consent before he relinquished his daughter to Matthew. Joining Karen, the two friends watched as the young couple glided on the dance floor.

"So much for interfering," Karen said, as she tasted her wine.

"We did raise them to be independent. What did you tell him?"

"They have to wait until she's eighteen."

Andrew laughed. "Do you think they'll listen?"

"Yes, and no. Her age is a hurdle for him as well."

"Oh, there's no doubt there. His face went whiter than yours." Grinning, "Didn't think that was possible."

"Brat."

"They do look like they're in love. They shine when they're together."

Karen sighed. "Yes, they do."

"You look beautiful," Matthew grinned.

"I missed you. Why did you stop seeing me?"

"I apologize, Devry. I'd never intentionally hurt you. You have to understand that my mother's right. She was protecting me. Taking you as my wife at your age would make me an outcast in my world."

"Why?"

"It's the way it is. The thought of you being so young leaves me cold. I have so many mixed feelings right now. I look at you and know you're my love and then..." Matthew inhaled a deep breath, "then I see you as the child you are and it makes me nauseous."

"I make you nauseous?" Her voice croaked.

"No! Yes!" Closing his eyes, he took a second to think about how he was going to word things. "If we're meant to be, it'll happen. When you're older and closer to adulthood and we still feel this love for each other, we can become man and wife."

"I'm not a child," Devry whispered.

"You just turned fifteen a few months ago." Matthew shivered, aghast at the reality of her age, at what he had done. Thank God, he'd restrained himself. He groaned as the memories haunted him. They'd done everything else a couple could possibly do.

Matthew squeezed his eyes shut, inwardly cursing the memories. "You haven't even finished school yet. I graduated from college. I have a career as a firefighter. I cannot lose that. It's a part of who I am."

"Why are you stopping?"

"The music stopped."

"So, we'll dance the next set."

"No, we've already danced two dances. I'm not going there again. Not now, anyway."

"Fine. Then we'll sit and finish this conversation."

"There isn't anything else to say." Matthew remained standing, shuffling his feet uncomfortably while she sat down at an open table.

"I'm not finished," Devry protested.

"You're not going to change my mind. No matter what you say. You're still fifteen. It won't work."

"Fine." With a swoosh of her skirt, Devry stomped away.

"Well, that didn't go over too well," Matthew spoke to the deserted space where she'd stood.

Domina asked as she approached. "What didn't turn out well?"

Matthew shook his head and sighed.

"She'll yield, Matthew. Give it time for the winds of change to administer their own plans. Come, let's have a dance and you can tell me of your plans to visit Sitting Bull."

Devry joined Catherine and Lydia's brother.

After a few moments of strained silence, Devry looked at the two of them. "Did I interrupt something? I can leave and join Juan at his table."

Charles Wetmore responded quickly. "No. We were discussing the rumors that were circulating the room about one of the residents here."

Devry lifted her eyebrow in question.

"Mrs. Enlow was brought in for questioning," Catherine whispered as she looked around the room.

"For what?"

"For the attempted murder of Mr. Brandt and the murder of the club members. I was just telling Charles, I mean Mr. Wetmore, about the club members." Catherine blushed prettily from the slip.

Ignoring her cousin's usual calculated antics when it came to men, Devry scanned the room searching for the sheriff. "Mrs. Enlow? That doesn't make sense."

"The sheriff overheard Mrs. Davis talking to someone about Mr. Brandt being at Mrs. Enlow's home a few days ago. He rushed over to Lane and they whispered something, and then the sheriff left."

"Lane left?" Devry was stunned. "His own reception?"

"I was sitting next to Lydia when Lane told her of the sheriff's sudden departure," Charles added.

"No." Devry shook her head in denial. "Mrs. Enlow doesn't have the intelligence to continuously hide something like this."

"Maybe she's being framed, making it look like she's guilty?" Catherine whispered.

Charles speculated. "There's a possibility she expected people to underestimate her."

"They're wrong," Devry stated with purpose. "They need to find someone who has a medical background, someone with knowledge of drugs."

"Well, Devry, that points to yourself, me, the doctor who is no longer with us, and Mrs. Williams." Catherine laughed. "I mean the newlywed Mrs. Parker."

"Don't forget Mrs. Black Elk," Charles added.

"Karen Black Elk?" Devry was stunned. "No, oh my stars, no. For one thing, she's rarely in town, and she doesn't practice doctoring here." She scrunched her forehead. "Something about not being allowed to practice medicine here, and not interfering with the doctor's patients."

"Besides, the last time she came for an extended visit was two years ago. Except for a few short visits here and there, she hasn't been in Tokata," Catherine added.

Charles was puzzled. It was obvious that Devry and Catherine weren't capable of being conniving and dangerous. He knew his

sister wasn't guilty. She wasn't capable of pre-meditated murder. It had to be Mrs. Enlow or Mrs. Black Elk.

The sheriff was on his way to The Widow's estate. He thoroughly questioned Mrs. Enlow and her servants. They searched her home for any possible evidence. He was discouraged until his deputy told him one of the boys had delivered a note to Lydia Williams on the same evening Brandt visited Mrs. Enlow.

The Widow and Mrs. Enlow, conspiring with each other? Now *that* would be an interesting trial – if he found evidence. However, it just didn't taste right. There was something in the back of his head, something he couldn't quite grasp, that told him he was following the wrong leads.

While he waited for the apothecary to arrive with the deputy, he entered her medical supply room. The sheriff was amazed at the organization. Everything in the room, every bottle, jar, bag, and box was clearly marked and dated. Some of the jars recorded usage of the herb and warnings to not mix them with certain medicines.

"She's more organized than I am," the apothecary exclaimed as he entered. "Those decoctions cannot be opened." Pointing to a group of bottles, he lifted one and looked at the date. "It'll ruin the medicinal properties."

Smelling the bottles, he identified them and gently put them back to their designated spots. He walked over to the shelves, opening jars and meticulously inhaling and evaluating the scent of each one. An hour later, he was finished.

"Nothing, sheriff. Everything here is marked as it should be." He stood silently waiting for a reply while the sheriff looked about the room. "If that's all, I'd like to return to my business."

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

The sheriff watched the apothecary leave. Chewing his unlit cigar, he quietly shut the medical supply room and followed his deputy outside. Nothing, they had found nothing.

There was no denying his relief. It wasn't illegal for a neighbor to send a note to another neighbor. Blushing prettily, Mrs. Enlow said she'd requested some herbs, female herbs.

He was at a loss.

Chapter Eighteen

DEVRY, Catherine, and Lydia were clearing out the kitchen cabinets, making room for Lane's contributions to the household. The utility room and pantry had already been prepared for the influx of crates and assorted boxes.

"What do you want me to do with these herbs?" Catherine held a jar up and pointed to the cabinet with medical supplies. "They're out of date."

"Just empty them into the grass bin outside the door and I'll mix it with the garden mulch."

"What about the salves?"

"Put them aside and I'll put them in the medical pantry later."

Catherine went outside and dumped the herbs in the bin. Grabbing the trowel, she mixed the grass and herbs, sprinkling them with water from the canister.

"I turned the mulch for you, one less thing for you to do. While I was outside I think I heard a carriage coming up the drive."

Devry raced to the window, hoping to get a glimpse of Matthew. He was helping Lane pack his boxes and move his belongings to Lydia's. For the last three weeks she kicked and chastised herself for acting the petulant child, the child Matthew accused her of being. She'd been unreasonable and selfish, his point proven by her childish antics and behavior. An apology was forthcoming and she would humbly give it to him.

She didn't want him to leave for the reservation thinking that she wasn't willing to wait. Matthew had to know that he was the morning sun, the evening moon, and the stars in her dreams. She'd rather live in his world than without his love in hers. He would take her love with him, and she'd stand tall and wait for her warrior.

The men entered through the rear door, arms full of boxes and crates overflowing with kitchen supplies. Lane kissed Lydia on the

forehead as Catherine and Devry directed where to place the crates. He waited patiently as Catherine moved an assortment of empty herb containers from the counter.

"You can't be throwing herbs away to make room for my things," Lane protested.

"No dear, they were past their dates and needed to be disposed."

Lane frowned. As meticulous as his wife was about her herbal medications, he found it difficult to believe she'd have so many that had expired. Smiling, he realized that circumstances, with other pressing matters, had kept her occupied in the last few months. Some things may have been neglected.

Catherine nudged Devry when she noticed Lane and Matthew's flushed faces. Pouring two glasses of iced, lemon water, she handed one to Lane and the other to Matthew.

"Juan and Domina are coming with the cart. Where do you want to put the furniture?"

"Andrew, Karen, and Christine have cleared out the front sitting room."

Matthew laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Picturing my mother moving furniture in a gown."

Karen walked through the doors, Andrew and Christine behind her. "Well, I don't think it's so funny. I like my pants, much more comfortable than wearing long dresses."

"She did mumble once about 'stupid dresses' getting in the way. You have to admit men do have it a bit easier when it comes to clothing," Christine chuckled. "Someday, I'm going to try men's pants. That'll get the elders clucking."

"We should all do it on the same day!" Catherine suggested.

"That'll give them something else to talk about besides..." Devry stopped mid-sentence and blushed, "I'm sorry, Lydia. I didn't mean to bring it up."

"Don't worry about it," Lydia comforted her. "The sheriff didn't find any evidence, and I gave him a sample of the herbs I had sent to Mrs. Enlow. He had confiscated the herbs she possessed and they compared the two packages. The apothecary verified what they were used for."

"I just wish they'd catch the murderer," Catherine said.

"I don't plan to give up my search. The killer will make a mistake and I'll be there to catch it," Lane declared.

“We wouldn’t expect anything less,” Lydia commented. “Besides, until the culprit is found I’ll never be completely clear. Will I?”

“I know I’m missing a major clue. I just cannot seem to point my finger in the right quarter. I have an odd feeling that someone knows something and refuses to come forward.”

“Who would feel they needed to protect a murderer?” Devry asked.

“I don’t know. However, I do know I’m not letting go.”

Lane patted Matthew on the shoulder and they headed out of the room. Andrew and Devry remained in the kitchen while the rest went to the front to greet the new arrivals coming up the drive.

“They’ll never find her,” Andrew said under his breath.

Devry whipped her head around, astonished at the whispered words. Did she hear him right? Did he say ‘her’? She stared at her father, shocked, as she watched him leave the room.

It was a long and challenging day. Evening stars twinkled through the open windows. The cool breeze caressed the weary friends who had gathered to share a table at dinner.

Devry was listening to the men discuss Matthew’s impending trip to the reservation. She couldn’t believe he was leaving and traveling in the winter months. Didn’t he realize the dangers of traveling through the hills in the winter? It was dangerous. He was leaving in the morning, and they hadn’t had any time alone.

He spoke, with animated excitement, about seeing Sitting Bull, Gall, and Black Elk. His plans were to arrive at Standing Rock and then proceed to Pine Ridge to visit with Black Elk. The flames in the fireplace flickered light on his features, creating a halo around his black hair as he spoke wistfully of the Lakota.

When she looked at him, she saw her dreams of tomorrow. Some things she’d never understand, but she knew her heart was wherever he was. Hope filled her because she knew one day they’d be one. She would be in his heart again. When Matthew returned from the reservation, she’d be there waiting, with unconditional, unwavering love. Together, they’d share the happiness and the sorrow.

Later that evening, Devry was in her room preparing for bed. Her nightdress and robe lay on the bed, ready for her to don after her bath. She’d tried unsuccessfully to get Matthew’s attention

earlier. He had dodged her quite easily. Her decision was final, tonight she'd give herself to him, place the gift of her heart and soul into his hands. She'd let him fill her with his seed and they would share a brief joy and laughter until they were together again. She would give him her unselfish love.

Matthew stared out the window, frustrated with Devry's attempt for his attention. He had to give her credit for her persistence. It wasn't easy avoiding her. At least he knew she wasn't ready to give up on their love. He'd think of her, feel himself harden, and then he would remember her age. Her age was an excellent deterrent, Matthew was flaccid the second it came to mind.

He loved her but, wouldn't allow what she was planning. Bad form, that's what it was. The timing to fall in love with someone so young was cruel. Nevertheless, time was what he had to face. At least four long, drawn-out years during which she would be tempting him, enticing him with her seductive eyes, her perky, begging-to-be-caressed breasts, and the swing of her hips.

He went to the bedroom door, locked it, and crawled onto the bed, groaning. *Fifteen, fifteen, fifteen!* Devry had the voluptuous body of a grown woman and the mind of a child. Beautiful hair that he'd love to spread on a bed of flowers while he took her, possessed her, and made her his love for eternity.

Matthew pounded his pillow, venting his frustration. *She's only fifteen... fifteen... fifteen!* Flopping onto his back, he stared at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the night. He cocked his ear, unsure if he had heard the whisper of feet in the hallway. He sucked in his breath, his heart pounded, and he closed his eyes hoping it was only someone passing by his room.

Devry scratched at the door and attempted to turn the knob. Matthew put the pillow over his ears as he rolled over groaning.

Damn! His eyes were leaking.

Chapter Nineteen

EVERYTHING was packed and Matthew was ready to travel to the reservation. He and his mother had discussed everything under the sun: his trip, the Special Police, the precarious situations at the reservations, the Ghost Dance, and his situation with Devry. Now, he had to take a deep breath and tell her what they had decided.

"I will wait for you." Devry looked into Matthew's eyes, holding his hand.

"You have to make me a promise."

"Anything, my love."

"You need to keep going to balls and socials and enjoy your life." He cringed, his heart clenching. "If you want to go to dinner or an event with a young man, go. Please. You need to have fun."

"But, I don't want to."

"I know. But, I promised my mother that I wouldn't put my life on hold for four years, nor allow you to either."

Her eyes filled with tears, knowing that he would be seeing other women.

"We'll still be seeing each other. When I come back from the reservation, you'll be coming to my world. You'll be able to visit, spend time with us, with me."

She gave him a sad smile.

"Don't be sad. We'll see each other again," Matthew whispered as he held her close.

"I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too."

He kissed her on the forehead. Devry closed her eyes and wished he'd kiss her lips, just once more.

Matthew saw the need and desire and succumbed to impulse. Slowly, he touched and tasted her sweet lips.

His mother cleared her throat.

Wilderness Bound

He approached the small group who had stood back giving them a bit of privacy.

Hugs, kisses, and gentle reminders to take care came from his friends.

He looked once more to the woman of his dreams. Leaning his head against the saddle, Matthew shut his eyes tightly and whispered. "I love you."

Sneak Peek

Warriors of the Wilderness Book 4 in the Wilderness Series

IT had felt like a lifetime, but Matthew recalled the day his mother, Karen Standing Deer, had asked if he was ready to time travel, to find his destiny.

He had waited a long time, prepared himself for this moment, this moment where he could live his dreams.

Found in an estate sale, his mother had purchased the elaborately carved four-poster bed. It had changed her life forever. It sat in the spare bedroom, the door locked waiting for him to be ready, waited patiently to give them the mystical gift of time. A precious blessing, sacred in its use, would honor them with its celestial gifts.

He was ready.

He was prepared. For years, he worked toward time traveling; toward this moment. He knew there were rules he had to follow. Strict rules he must live.

His mother and stepfather, John, decided to wait until after Matthew finished college before allowing him to seek the gift of the mystical bed. Matthew had postponed the journey another two years to work as a firefighter.

Jennifer, his sister, would travel soon.

Growing up, he and his sister had listened, enthralled by some of the stories about their mother's travels. In the beginning, she'd been scared, finding herself in a whirlwind of events beyond her control. Their mother was a surgeon, admitting she was a cautious person, living life where it led and always playing it safe.

Her life had drastically changed the day she gone to an estate sale and purchased the antique four-poster bed from an elderly woman named Bea.

Lying down for a nap, she'd awoken in the past. Unsuitable for survival in a wilderness where only the strongest survive, she'd been given precious, paranormal gifts. She'd surrendered to the inevitable, to her destiny, and allowed herself to be spirited away in the arms of Matthew and Jen's father, Standing Deer.

Landing in Tokata, Matthew had fallen in love with Devry... the timing couldn't have been worse.

He had stood, dumbfounded, shocked, and furious when his mother had blatantly refused to allow him to pursue Devry.

He'd watched, heavy-hearted as Devry ran through the door in tears.

His mother would never have been so insulting, so obstinate. Matthew had never seen his mother be so cruel. He should've known better.

Matthew had waved her concerns, commenting that twenty was young, but not *that* young.

Her voice, raised and angry still rang in his head. "Twenty? Twenty! Is that what she told you? She's fifteen, Matthew!"

Fifteen? Everything, all his dreams had just collapsed around him.

Always careful, he'd made sure that the women he'd asked out were legal. Some of those young girls could be tricky, lying about their age, and wearing make-up to make themselves look older.

But, Devry didn't wear make-up. She didn't dress herself up to look older. She did look older. She acted older, had a mature way of talking, looking at things. She even carried herself like an adult, not like a fifteen year old trying to pretend she was older.

He'd been nauseous for days, thanking his good sense of honor that he didn't put themselves in a position of embarrassment.

Devry had been tenacious. Not quite understanding, she wasn't going to give up. He loved her, loved her stubbornness, loved her way of looking at the world, but he wouldn't allow what she was planning.

He had to stay away from her for a while.

Bad form, that's what it was. The timing to fall in love with someone so young was cruel.

Nevertheless, time was what he had to face. It would be at least four long, drawn-out years during which she would be tempting him, enticing him with her seductive eyes, her perky, begging-to be-caressed breasts, and the swing of her hips. Devry had the voluptuous body of a grown woman. Beautiful hair that he'd love to spread on a bed of flowers while he took her, possessed her, and made her his love for eternity.

She had tried to seduce him. Matthew had had the foresight to make sure the bedroom door was locked before he crawled onto the bed.

He'd heard her scratch at the door, attempting to turn the knob.

He'd stared at the ceiling, chanting only *fifteen, fifteen, fifteen!*

It's a good thing Matthew was going to the reservation