



THE TOUCH  
OF  
LOVE

ROSANNE BITTNER

# THE TOUCH OF LOVE

By  
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# Chapter 1



*Central Tennessee...September, 1863....*

"Don't let him cut on me! He's a damned Indian!"

Private Willy Truman squirmed under the pressure of four men who held his arms and legs.

"He's a fine doctor, Willy," Corporal Chadwick told the seventeen-year-old Confederate soldier.

"Thank you, Corporal," Robert told the officer.

"He ain't even in the army!" Willy protested. "What does he care if I lose my arm? He can whack it off and then just leave me to die!"

"I care because *I am* a doctor," Robert told him, washing the boy's upper arm with whiskey. "Do you really think I would volunteer my services in this damned war if I didn't care?"

"Ain't no Indian knows doctorin'!"

Robert just shook his head as he picked up a hatchet. For a moment the Indian in him did not mind what he was about to do. He was damned proud of his Lakota blood, and sick of the remarks he put up with daily from whites who were convinced that being Indian meant he could not possibly be smart enough to be a physician.

"Tie the arm off good just under the shoulder," he told Private John Mendelson, who had volunteered to assist him. As Mendelson obeyed, Robert kept hold of the hatchet, thinking how he'd seen his adoptive Indian father, Rising Eagle, wield a tomahawk against an enemy. Still, he'd never been warlike himself. Something deep inside had always prompted him instead to be a healer. When he was growing up among the Lakota he studied under old Moon Painter, the Oglala medicine man. He wondered if Moon Painter still lived, thinking about the hundreds of wrinkles in the old man's face.

"Give him more painkiller," he told Mendelson, once the man finished applying the tourniquet. Mendelson proceeded to pour a mixture of laudanum and whiskey down Willy's throat until the young man finally relaxed more. Then Mendelson blindfolded Willy as the boy wept pitifully.

"Push up the skin on the upper arm so there will be some left over to tie under the stump," Robert ordered. His softer side took over. He hated this. In the six months he'd been helping doctor Confederate soldiers this was his third amputation of an arm. It seemed like such a waste of healthy young men.

He sighed deeply and the others closed their eyes and looked away as he raised the hatchet. "This is the cleanest, quickest way," he told them. "Hang on tight." With that, he grasped Willy's black, infected lower arm and brought down the hatchet in one swift motion, striking the upper arm between the elbow and the shoulder. Willy screamed, then began sobbing. One of the men poured even more whiskey into him while Mendelson, tears in his eyes, hung on to the leftover skin. Robert tied off the main arteries, then poured more whiskey over the open wound and proceeded to stitch the skin over the end of the stump. He bandaged the stump tightly, then tied it down to Willy's side. Willy had passed out, a blessing for him.

"Take him to the hospital tent," Robert told the others. Suddenly he felt very tired. The men hauled poor Willy out of the operating tent and Mendelson; his lips curled in disgust, carried

out the severed arm to throw it on a pile of other severed limbs and old, bloodied bandages that would be burned.

Robert picked up a bucket of water and splashed it over the crude, wooden operating table to rinse off the blood, then walked over to a chair to sit down, not even bothering to wash his hands yet. He stared at the blood on them. This was one of those moments when he wondered if he'd chosen the right profession, let alone volunteering to help in this war. He was not exactly a supporter of the South, but then having grown up among the Lakota, he also was not a great fan of the United States, considering the problems the whites, who kept pushing American settlement westward, were giving the Lakota.

What a world he lived in, he thought, torn between the white man's life and the Indian's, finding it difficult to know where his loyalties lay when it came to who was right. After all, it was whites, the people of his stepfather's church, who'd donated money so he could go to a medical university in Michigan. It was that same white stepfather who had schooled him after he found his real Lakota mother and chose to live with her in the white man's world. His mother, once called Fall Leaf Woman, had married Robert Kingsley, a Methodist minister. Kingsley had introduced him to the wonderful world of reading and writing and arithmetic; and everyone, even the educators at the University of Michigan, were astounded at what a fast learner he was. Some called him a prodigy. He wasn't sure if that was true, or if they were surprised that a half breed Indian could learn anything at all.

He would never know his real father, a trapper who had badly abused his mother. That didn't really matter, he supposed. Early in his life Fall Leaf Woman had given him away to protect him from that man who'd abused him. He was raised by a great Lakota leader, Rising Eagle, and his wife, Buffalo Woman, until at eighteen he found Fall Leaf Woman, who then called herself Florence. He decided to stay with his real mother, and now, here he was, a full-fledged doctor.

God knew he couldn't get much better training than following an army unit as they trudged through the Tennessee mountains fighting a war without even being sure what they were fighting for. The only thing most of these men knew was that the North had insulted the South, and insults were something southerners did not take lightly; nor did they care to be told what they could and could not do. And so they fought, sacrificing some of their best young men in grisly battles that left them with horrible wounds, too many dying from simple infections, even more from dysentery and diseases not even related to war injuries.

He leaned his chair back against a post and closed his eyes, actually dozing off for a while until he was awakened by a gruff voice.

"Hey, you! Indian!"

Robert jumped awake to see a tall, burly, bearded man standing at the entrance to the operating tent, holding up a lantern to see him better. Robert scowled at the rude salutation as he rose. "Yes, sir?"

"This outfit got a doctor?"

Robert turned away and walked to a basin to wash his hands by the light of a lantern someone had already lit inside the tent. He figured it was probably Mendelson, a very nice young man and one of the few who respected him in spite of the fact that he was Indian.

"You're looking at him," he told the intruder. "How can I help you?"

The man frowned. "You're a damn Indian," he sneered. "Ain't no Indian can be a *real* doctor."

Robert poured water into the basin and picked up a bar of lye soap. "*This* one is," he answered, scrubbing his hands and arms angrily.

"Humph!" The man stepped a little closer as Robert rinsed his hands and grabbed a towel. "I reckon' you like takin' a knife to folks, considerin' how a knife is an Indian's favorite weapon. Now, where's the *real* doctor?"

Robert shook his head as he dried his hands and turned to face the man. "I told you. I am the doctor." From the nearby hospital tent he could hear groaning and weeping, a pitiful sound heard too often in this hideous, unnecessary war. He knew the patient crying was most likely Private Truman, who by now was recovering from his drunken stupor and was beginning to feel the pain of his amputation. "Now, what can I do for you?" he asked the stranger, his anger deliberately obvious in his attitude.

"*Nothin'*, I reckon." The man turned, then stopped in his tracks at the sound of a woman's voice that came from outside the tent.

"John Brady! Becky needs help! If he's a doctor, who cares if he's Indian or white!" The woman stepped past the man and into the lantern light, marching closer to Robert. "Are you *really* a doctor?" she asked. "Schooled and all?"

"I am a graduate student of the University of Michigan. And to clarify something you might be wondering, I am neither a Union nor a Confederate. I volunteered to doctor these southern soldiers because I need the experience and there are not enough doctors to go around. Now, will someone explain what it is you want?"

The woman, though small and thin, looked strong and determined. Her face was wrinkled, prematurely, Robert guessed. She glanced back at her husband, then faced Robert again. "I'm Augusta Brady. That's my husband, John. We live not too far from here. Our daughter, Rebecca, she's sick - snake bit. My ma is with her right now. Can you do anything for her?"

Robert breathed deeply. "I can try, if you don't mind my using special herbs. I do use regular medicines and practices, but for something like a snakebite, I often use the medicines of the Lakota."

She looked him over, folding her arms in front of her. "Lakota? What's that?"

"You would call them Sioux."

"What's a Sioux doing all the way here and mixed up in the war?"

"It's a long story, and your daughter needs help as quick as I can give it to her. Do you want me to come, or not?"

The woman closely scrutinized him. "Well, I expect you people maybe *do* know how to treat a snakebite. I mean, I guess you would *have* to know them things."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What's your name?"

"Robert Kingsley."

"That ain't no Indian name."

"My Indian name is Spirit Walker."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty, but what difference does that make? Do you want me to help, or not?"

She brushed a piece of graying hair away from her forehead. "I reckon' we ain't got no choice. Grab your bag and follow me."

"Augusta, he's a damned Indian!" her husband objected.

"He's a *doctor*. Let him be, John. Our daughter's life is what's important. With three sons out there fightin' somewhere, Becky could end up bein' all we have left. And this man might

even have doctored one of our sons, for all we know. We should be grateful to him. Go on back and sit with ma and Becky. I'll wait and show the doctor here the way to the cabin."

Grudgingly, the man turned away, shaking his head. Robert smiled inwardly at the sight of the slender woman berating and ordering around her husband, who had to weigh at least two hundred and fifty pounds. It reminded him of Buffalo Dreamer and the way she had of often swaying the decisions of her strong, honored warrior husband, Rising Eagle.

"I have to report to the Captain of this outfit and let him know what I'm doing," Robert told Augusta. He untied his bloody apron and hung it aside, then packed his black leather bag with medicines and equipment. He hurried to report to his captain, then went to his own tent to grab a parfleche that held various herbs and sweetgrass.

Buffalo Dreamer had decorated the parfleche beautifully with dyed quills, and although it was several years old now he still treasured it. He pulled on a black wool frock coat, as the early September evening had grown damp and chilly. Nearly every morning fog hung heavy in the Tennessee mountains, gathering overnight in a chill that went to the bone, even though the temperature didn't really drop much. He set a black felt, Quaker style hat on his head, which reminded him he needed another haircut. It wasn't easy getting any kind of style out of his straight, black hair, and he was considering letting it grow long again, no matter what white men thought of it. It just didn't seem natural to cut off his hair. Long hair was a sign of strength and wisdom.

As he exited his tent he could hear a boom in the distance... more cannon fire. Who the heck were shooting at each other at night? There was no way of telling, Confederate or Union, or even where it was. The fighting could be several miles away.

Sound traveled in strange ways in the mountains.

## Chapter 2



Robert hurried back to where Mrs. Brady waited. "How old is your daughter?" he asked as he followed her into the woods. She carried a lantern to see her way.

"Eighteen," she answered. "She's a good girl. She don't deserve to die so young."

"No, Ma'am." Robert made his way over pinecones and sticks, breathing harder as their route took them up a steep incline. "What kind of snake bit her?"

"Don't know. She come stumblin' to the house and passed out. We found the fang marks on her wrist, and now her arm's all swollen up and she's lookin' bad. It'll be a miracle if you can save her."

"I will do my best, Ma'am. I've seen miracles of healing among the Lakota. I do believe in such things."

"Well, that's good to hear."

The woman seemed to be hardly out of breath, and Robert thought how she must be used to these hills. She'd probably lived in these mountains all her life, considering how she could find her way at night like this. By the time they reached the top of the hill, his outer coat felt too warm.

"It ain't much farther," Augusta told him. "My husband was huntin' earlier today and seen your camp, and when my Becky kept getting' worse I told him as how we should go down there and see if there was a doctor that could help."

Robert followed her along a flatter pathway then, and he could see lights from cabin windows several yards ahead. Within another few minutes they reached the place, and even in the darkness of night he could tell it was hardly more than a shack. Wood was piled high on the sagging front porch and various trash littered the lawn, if it could be called that. It was mostly dirt and leaves. The smell of animal manure, as well as the unique and repelling smell of chickens, made him wince, even though he was accustomed to the smell of horses. He guessed there were pigs somewhere near, but it was too dark to see any livestock.

As they walked inside more smells met his nostrils, kerosene, pipe smoke, old grease and, he did not doubt, unwashed bodies. One thing he'd never quite gotten used to in the white man's world was how so many of them seldom washed.

The main room of the cabin consisted of a crude wooden table and hand-made chairs, a stone fireplace at one end of the room, a log bed at the other end. John Brady sat there glowering at Robert. Robert glanced up to see a loft above, then nodded to Brady and followed Augusta across the plank floor and over an old braided rug, forcing himself not to curl his nose from the rich odors.

Augusta led him into a small room at the back of the main room. "This is ma's room, but we put Becky here 'cause she was too sick to take up to the loft."

Already Robert could hear a young woman groaning. He leaned over the narrow log bed where she lay.

"He's Indian!" came the cracked voice of an old woman. It was only then that Robert noticed the girl's grandmother sitting on a chair in the corner next to homemade shelves that held stacked clothing. She was so tiny and wrinkled that she looked as though she would blow away in the wind.

"Yes, Ma'am," he answered her remark, "but I *am* a doctor: I can minister to your granddaughter just as well as any white doctor." He was well aware of the prejudice and distrust among these mountain people. They didn't take well to *any* outsiders, let alone an Indian.

"You'd best not let her die, else I'll shoot you!" the old woman warned.

"Don't mind Ma," Augusta told him, going over to pat the old woman's shoulder. "She talks like that all the time. You just do your best."

Robert could only hope Augusta was right, and for a moment he struggled against an urge to leave; but when he looked back down at the young woman suffering from snakebite, he changed his mind. Not only did he feel sorry for her pain and agony but even in her present condition, her dark hair plastered to her head with sweat, he could not help noticing how pretty and innocent looking she was.

"Rebecca?" he asked, leaning closer. She tried to open her eyes but couldn't quite do it. "I'm a doctor. I'll try to make you feel better."

"So...hot...hurts," she mumbled.

"I know." He studied the fang marks. "Looks like a rattler," he told the old woman. "And she's burning up." He pulled back the covers.

"Let her sweat it out," the girl's grandmother told him.

"No. Keep her cool or she could end up with brain damage. Help me take off her nightgown and have someone bring me some cool water."

"Ain't no Indian man gonna see my granddaughter nekked," the woman commanded, her voice so cracked Robert wondered if she might be a good hundred years old. Scowling, he stood up straight and looked down at the frail old woman, aware that now Becky's mother and father stood in the doorway.

"Look, for the last time, I am a doctor. I have seen naked bodies all the way from children and boys to beautiful women and grown men and even old ladies like yourself." He turned to Augusta. "You brought me here to help your daughter. Are you going to trust me to do that, or not? If you are, then you have to do what I ask or I am leaving. You decide."

The woman folded her arms, sighing as she glanced at her daughter. She moved her gaze then to her mother. "Do what he says, Ma. I'll get a bucket of cold water." She turned and left, and Becky's father glared at Robert for a moment. "I'll be keepin' an eye on you," he warned.

"You do that," Robert answered, fighting a strong desire to land his fist into the man. He wasn't as burly, but he was just as tall and he knew a few Indian tricks that would surprise John Brady. He turned back to Becky to see that her grandmother was already briskly hiking up the girl's nightgown. She moved to the head of the cot and pulled the gown over Becky's head and off her arms. That was when Robert noticed bruises on Becky's ribs. "What happened here?" he asked, touching her ribs to feel for anything broken.

"Ain't none of your business," John answered. "Just take care of the snakebite."

Robert decided not to press the issue at the moment, but it was obvious this lovely young woman had been abused. He pulled the covers up to her armpits, leaving her arms outside the blankets. "I need hot water," he told the girl's grandmother. "And a small bowl."

The woman left, clumping across the wooden floor. Robert glanced at her to see she wore a pair of men's shoes. He picked up the chair she'd been using and carried it beside the bed. He sat down and rummaged through his parfleche, digging out a pouch full of the roots of Black Cohosh, what the Lakota called Snakeroot.

Becky's grandmother returned with a wooden bowl and a kettle of hot water. "We keep water heated over the fire all the time," she told Robert, who noticed Becky's father was doing nothing to help. It looked like the old woman could barely hang on to the heavy kettle.

"You can set the kettle on the floor," Robert told her. "And please get me acup. I'll use this Snakeroot for a poultice and to make tea."

Still scowling, the woman left again, but her daughter came in then with a bucket of water. "Here's the cold water you wanted, straight from the nearby creek."

"Thank you. Get a rag or towel or something," Robert told her. "Wet it and apply it to



Becky's forehead." He opened his black leather bag of doctor's tools as Augusta left, and he removed a small knife, using it to shave off some pieces of the Snakeroot into the bowl. Then he poured a small amount of the hot water into the bowl, using his knife to keep poking at the root and stirring the mixture as the root softened and began to thicken the liquid.

Augusta returned, wetting a rag in the bucket of cool water and wringing it out, then laying it over Becky's forehead. Robert felt her watching quietly as he continued stirring the concoction that would be applied to the fang marks on Becky's upper wrist. This was the kind of thing that sometimes got him into trouble at school, but he'd proven to the scholars there that sometimes things like this worked just as well as fancy medicines, sometimes better. He worked the root until it was thoroughly softened, then took some of it out of the bowl and applied it to the snakebite.

Becky's grandmother returned with the tin cup. "Hold her arm for me while I wrap gauze around the wound," he told the old woman. "That will hold the Snakeroot in place."

She obeyed, and Robert took bandages from his doctor's bag and wrapped the wound, securing the Snakeroot. "This will draw quite a bit of the venom. Eventhough a good deal of it is probably already in her system, it will still help." He tied off the gauze, then used his knife to scrape up more of the softened roots, which he then dropped into the tin cup. He poured hot water into it and stirred it with the knife. "Let's see if we can get her to drink some of this," he told Augusta.

The grandmother stepped back, and Augusta helped lift Becky slightly. Robert put the cup to her lips, unable to help noticing how full and pretty her mouth was. He reminded himself he shouldn't notice but there was something about this girl that struck something in him, mainly because of her bruised ribs. He couldn't help thinking the reason she winced with pain when they lifted her was more from her ribs than the snakebite. And she seemed too clean and pretty to belong to this family.

"Becky? Try to drink some of this," he told her. "It will help."

The girl managed to open her mouth, and he was glad she was at least coherent, though obviously not fully conscious. She sipped some of the tea, then made a face.

"It's okay, Becky. I know it doesn't taste great, but you will feel better. Try to drink a little more."

She sipped down another swallow of the hot liquid, and Robert and Augusta lowered her back down. "Get another pillow," Robert ordered. "We should keep her head elevated."

"All right." Augusta left and Becky's grandmother went to stand in the corner and watch.

Robert heard John Brady finally leave the doorway and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Augusta came back with a rather soiled pillow and Robert helped her shove it under Rebecca's pillow. The girl moaned slightly. When Augusta bent over to fluff the pillows Robert leaned close. "Why are your daughter's ribs bruised?" he asked.

Immediately the woman glanced at the doorway. "Ain't none of your business."

"I am a doctor. It *is* my business."

She flashed him a warning look. "I brung you here to take care of her snakebite. Nothin' else." She started to straighten, but Robert grasped her arm.

"Do you love your daughter?"

"*Course* I love her," she answered with a deep scowl.

"Then why do you let her father beather?"

She jerked her arm away. "Nobody said he does."

"I'm not stupid, Mrs. Brady."

To his surprise, the woman's eyes suddenly teared up. "Leave it be," she said. "There's just times a man has to whup his child."

She's eighteen years old," Robert answered in a growled whisper.

"Don't never mind. It ain't somethin' I can fix." The woman straightened and marched away.

Robert turned to study Becky again, who seemed to be resting a little more peacefully. What a pretty young lady she was. Something in him ached over the sorry life she led here.

He took a rag from her forehead and wet it again, wiping it over her arms and shoulders to cool her, then around her neck, finally wetting it yet again and laying it over her forehead. The thought of a big man like John Brady beating her burned in his guts like hot coals.



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locations is entirely coincidental.

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## Chapter 3



"Becky?"

Rebecca opened her eyes, studying the dark, very handsome man who sat beside her bed, leaning close to her. "Who...are you?"

"My name is Robert Kingsley, and I am a doctor. I've been here all last night and all this morning. I have to get back to the army camp nearby and tend to affairs there, but I didn't want to leave until I knew you would be all right. How do you feel?"

Rebecca could hardly believe what she saw. "You're...an *Indian!*" She read the obvious irritation in his dark eyes.

"I am Lakota, what you people call Sioux."

She frowned, feeling as though she was floating in some unreal world. "Sioux? They're...way out west! How did you get...all the way here...to Tennessee?"

"That isn't important. I just want to know how you feel."

She put her right hand to her forehead, aware of how terrible she must look, and wondering why she cared. "I...don't know...dizzy...but nothing hurts." She started to sit up, then winced. "Except my left arm." She started to complain about her ribs, but in spite of her confused state she thought to keep that pain to herself. She wasn't supposed to tell.

"I put a special herb on the snakebite," Robert explained. "It's an old Indian remedy, but it works pretty well. Your arm is wrapped in gauze, but I can tell the swelling has gone down. You had a pretty rough night, but your fever has broken. I bathed you with cool rags all night to keep your fever down."

Rebecca shifted slightly, realizing only then that she was stark naked under the covers. She also realized those covers came up under her arms and her bare shoulders were showing. Quickly she moved her right arm under the covers and pulled them up to her neck. "You bathed me?"

He smiled and she could not help noticing his even, white teeth. He was not just handsome. He was beautiful. "I'm a doctor," he reiterated. "It's all right."

What was it about him that made her feel as though she'd always known him?

There was a certain gentleness that emanated from his eyes, his smile, his touch, when he lifted her left hand to take another look at her arm.

"Your hand is almost back to normal," he told her, "and a pretty hand it is." Pretty? Should she be offended that an Indian told her such a thing? This one was so different. Apparently he was actually college educated, and so well spoken. A Sioux man, all the way from out west! How strange...and interesting. He looked around the room then, as though making sure no one was there. She noticed her grandmother had left. They were alone. He turned back to her, true concern in his eyes.

"I have to ask you something, Becky," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"I saw bruises on your ribs and I can see a faint one on your right cheek. Looks to me like they are from someone hitting you. Where did you get them?"

She was surprised that he cared. After all, he was only here to take care of her snakebite. She felt a stinging embarrassment at realizing he'd seen her naked, but fear overwhelmed the embarrassment. "I...can't say."

"Did your father put them there?"

In her present state she felt weak and defenseless. And she could not resist the sincerity

in his eyes. He actually cared! "Where's my Pa?"

"He's outside. They all are. You can talk to me, Becky."

She blinked back tears. "Don't tell him I told," she whispered. Robert frowned. "Why on earth would your father hit you?"

"If don't do my chores fast enough. And...I like to be clean. He says..." She hesitated. This man was very clean and neat. Maybe he would understand. "He says I wash too often...and that I shouldn't always be...fixing my hair and all. He says it's a sin...and he made me quit going to school." Why did she feel it was important that he know she'd at least had *some* schooling? The way he talked, so nice, and being a doctor and all. "I can read and write some...and I don't say ain't and things like that. Pa says I'm just uppety...says I'm bad for pampering myself, and for trying to learn things. He says it's not a woman's place."

Robert sighed and rubbed his eyes. "He's wrong." He met her gaze again.

"Among the Sioux, no man or woman strikes a child...ever. That is one thing that has truly shocked me among the whites...beating children. And you're eighteen-years-old, Becky. There is no reason on God's earth for your father to hit you, especially for just wanting to learn and wanting to be clean." He leaned back in his chair. "I have got to get back, but I hate to leave you here."

"It's okay. I'm used to it. Pa will marry me off soon anyway."

"Marry you off? Are you engaged?"

"No, sir. There's a friend of Pa's lives over the next hill. He hunts for a living. He's been waiting for me to be of age. Pa's gonna let him marry me soon."

"Do you *want* to marry this man?"

Why couldn't she stop these tears? "No...but Pa expects me to. I have to do what he says."

He leaned closer, scowling. "No, you don't."

"But I *do!*"

He stood up and walked into the main room to look around, then returned, sitting down and leaning close again. "They are all still outside. Listen to me, Becky. My real mother is Sioux, but she's married to a white man, a preacher named Abel Kingsley. I can leave my service here any time I want. My mother and Reverend Kingsley are wonderful people who would gladly take you in. They live in Springfield, Illinois. I can take you there. They would give you a good home and you could continue with your schooling. You just seem too pretty and too sweet and too smart to just leave you here with an abusive father who intends to hand you off to some older man who will probably also abuse you, let alone the fact that you don't even love him. I realize you don't even know me, Becky, but I can't help making the offer."

Rebecca was astounded at his words. Why would he do such a thing for her?

Maybe he just wanted to carry her away like some white captive and do bad things to her himself. But that look in his eyes, so concerned, so caring...and his touch, so gentle. No man who spoke and dressed like this one would be mean. He'd just saved her life. He'd sat there all night and all morning with her.

"My Pa would follow. He'd kill you."

He shook his head. "I'm half Sioux, remember? I know how to hide a trail. All you have to do is pick a day when they would expect you to be gone for a while. By the time they realize you aren't coming back it will be too late to find you. I could take you to a riverboat on the Cumberland into Kentucky, then make our way over to the Ohio River into Indiana and on over to Illinois."

"But I...I couldn't pack or I'd draw attention...."

"You don't need to pack. I have enough money that I could buy you some things. And you'd love my folks. They are very kind people. They and the people of my father's church would gladly help you out."

It hurt to think of leaving her mother and her grandmother, but never had either of them stepped in when her father beat her. They had taught her that beatings were something a woman just had to put up with. She'd never met a man who'd said such things were wrong...or who'd offered to take her to a better life someplace else.

A riverboat! She'd always dreamed of riding on one. And he was talking of places she'd never even heard of. ..places in that world outside of these mountains she'd always wondered about. "I don't. ..understand," she said softly. "Why would you do that for me?"

He sighed, resting his elbows on his knees and putting his head in his hands. "I don't know myself. I just...I get these feelings, visions maybe. I guess it's the Indian in me. I just feel like God had a reason for leading me here." He met her gaze again. "I just feel like it's the right thing to do, Becky. If I leave you here and go on to other places never to see you again, the vision of you lying here with bruises, knowing you'll be beaten again, knowing you'll be married off to some old man who will abuse you... it would haunt me forever. I had to at least make the offer." He gently took hold of her hand again. "I promise you, I am not dangerous. I don't have ulterior motives, Becky. You can trust me. And how can going off with me be any worse than marrying a man you don't love and being stuck in these mountains the rest of your life, with no more schooling, no medical care, risking your life having babies with no help? I'm just asking you to think about it. The camp I'm with won't be nearby much longer. We'll move on farther east and north. If you decide to take me up on my offer in the next few days, just come to the camp and we'll leave together right away." ·

She studied his gaze intently, trying to argue she'd be crazy to trust him; yet knowing he was right. Going off with this handsome, gentle man couldn't be any worse than marrying Jack Clement, who was old enough to be her father and who always smelled bad. From as far back as she could remember she had dreamed of leaving this place and seeing the outside world, and many times she'd walked to the river and dreamed of being on one of those steamboats, dressed like a fine lady, traveling on the deck only the wealthier used.

"Just promise me you will at least think about it," Robert told her. "I'll come back in a day or two and see how you're doing. Maybe one more visit will help you decide."

She thought several long seconds. "Yes, sir. That would be best."

He smiled again, a smile that melted her. "Good." He squeezed her hand lightly. Then, to her surprise, he leaned closer and kissed her forehead. "You're a very pretty, and I can tell, a very sweet young lady, Rebecca. And you've been abused. I have always had a soft spot for things abused and hurt. As I was growing up among the Sioux I was always helping wounded animals. I studied with a Sioux medicine man to be a healer, and then I got the chance to learn the white man's way and become a doctor. It's a long story." He straightened. "If you come away with me, I'll have the chance to explain all of it to you. This was meant to be, Becky. I know it in my heart."

He picked up his doctor bag and another bag that was made of deerskin and decorated in a starburst design. It was obviously made by Indians. He took a black coat and hat from where they hung on the wall, draping the coat over his arm but putting on the hat. He turned then to meet her gaze once more. "Give it some thought, Becky."

"I will, Dr. Kingsley."

"Call me Robert."

"Yes, sir."

He gave her a smile and a wink. "I'll be back."

"Thank you."

Their gazes lingered until he finally turned and left. She heard the door open and close and her heart rushed with a feeling she'd never experienced before. The sweet moment was spoiled when the door opened a few minutes later and she heard the heavy footsteps of her father. He

came to the door to her small room, scowling.

"How long you gonna lay there pretendin' to still be sick? "

"I *am* still sick, Pa."

"That doctor says you're better. I'll give you till later this afternoon. Then I want you out of that bed and tendin' to your chores. There's a lot of potatoes to be dug."

"Yes, sir."

"And Jack has been askin' about you again. You got one more week to befixin' yourself a dress to wear over there as his bride, maybe not even that long. We've put it off long enough."

Her stomach suddenly churned with revulsion when she compared Jack Clement to the man who had just left. "Yes, sir," she answered. She swallowed back a lump in her throat. Dr. Robert Kingsley's offer was sounding more and more tempting, but the thought of running off into an unfamiliar new world with a complete stranger was indeed intimidating.



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locations is entirely coincidental.

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## Chapter 4



Robert couldn't help being upset with his feelings as he again made his way toward Becky's cabin. Two full days had passed since he doctored her and he could not get her off his mind. Part of him warned he should not go back, that he didn't dare let on that she had struck a chord in his heart. He had to seem as though his only care was her health. This was a doctor's visit and that was all.

But there *was* more to it. For one thing, he couldn't bear the thought of Becky being abused. To him such treatment was hideous and unforgivable. It brought forth strong feelings of protectiveness, and somewhere deep inside it stirred old feelings of hatred for the white man. In general, he accepted them and their ways, and he'd become good friends with many; but those who lived and behaved like John Brady he still found repulsive. No Lakota man beat his children or even his wives.

The thought helped his mood, because it brought a quiet chuckle as he made the steep climb toward the cabin. He could just imagine a Lakota man taking a hand to his wife or wives. They would turn on him with a vengeance and he cringed at the thought of what Lakota women could do to a straying or abusive husband, let alone what they did to enemy captives.

He'd decided he had to take his chances with his feelings. If fate had led him to Rebecca Brady, then he had to allow fate to take its full course. He'd promised Rebecca he would help her if she wanted it, but she'd still been pretty sick. He had to know how she felt once she was better. The poor girl could be anxiously waiting for him to show up again. Regardless of other feelings he was having for her, he had to see if he could help her in any way.

A squirrel rustled across his pathway and scampered up a tree, and birds sang throughout the woods, refreshing sounds after hearing mostly cannon, gunfire and screams of pain. It was only a matter of two or three days before his hospitalcamp would move on. If he was going to help Rebecca it had to be soon.

He reached the top of the hill and stopped to breathe deeply. Damned if his panting wasn't more from excitement at seeing Becky again than from climbing the hill. He leaned against a tree and removed his hat, shaking out his hair. Was there such a thing as love at first sight? It was probably the Indian in him that spoke to him in whispers, telling him he'd been led to that cabin to help Becky for more reasons than snakebite. He could not quit thinking about her beautiful face, those big dark eyes, her vulnerable state. How in God's name was he supposed to leave and let some man she didn't even love take her for a wife?

He'd heard love could happen both ways. Some learned to love each other over time, like his adoptive Lakota parents who were brought together because of a vision Rising Eagle had experienced. He'd been a complete stranger to Buffalo Dreamer when he first declared she must be his wife. Still, Rising Eagle was a gentle and honorable man when it came to women. The one named Jack couldn't possibly be that kind of man.

The other kind of love, love at first sight, was also always a possibility. He had never given it much thought, but he'd read about it in poetry. Was that what was happening to him? He'd been too busy these past years getting his education to think much about women; and although he could tell some of the white women he'd met were interested, he'd never allowed himself to return a look or an invitation. He knew damn well what most whites thought of such a thing, and besides, no woman thus far had really attracted him in return.

But Becky...damned if she didn't get to him. He always thought he would one day go back west and help doctor the Lakota; then marry a Lakota woman. This feeling for Becky had thrown

him into real confusion. Again he was tempted to just turn around and go back, but now he could see the cabin in the distance. He heard someone chopping wood.

Straightening his shoulders, he put his hat back on and walked toward the cabin. The day was too warm for his topcoat. He wore only black pants and a white shirt, an eagle bone whistle Rising Eagle had made for him around his neck. The whistle was really for blowing on to help pain during the Sun Dance ritual, which Rising Eagle had suffered more than once, as had Rising Eagle's son, Brave Horse. Robert had never stopped missing his adoptive brother, and not a day went by that he didn't worry about both of them and the rest of the family. There had been a good deal of trouble with the Sioux out west and things were bound to only get worse. One thing he would definitely do was return to the Black Hills and try to find Rising Eagle and his family again... Maybe he would be taking Becky with him.

He reached the cabin to see Becky working in an open plot of land, digging. When he came closer he realized she was using a potato fork. Her back was to him as he dug, and she didn't even realize he was there.

He watched her a moment, thinking it was too soon for her to be working so hard. Her thick hair was drawn up and tied at the top of her head and even from behind her shape was pretty, her waist slender, her back straight. Although it was against his ethics, he could not help remembering her full breasts. He'd seen them only for a moment, but the sight of them stuck in his mind. He found he couldn't bear the thought of some ungrateful, abusive older man groping at those breasts with no respect for her body. "Damn!" he swore under his breath. He looked around, noticing it was Augusta who was chopping wood, not John. The old grandmother sat in a rocker on the porch and Robert nodded to her. She nodded back.

Robert decided he'd better go talk to Augusta first and make sure she understood he was here on a professional basis. He walked in her direction, noticing two plow horses tethered nearby. A cow grazed near the creek, and again he smelled pigs and chickens. It was not until he reached Augusta and the wood pile that he could see a chicken coop and a pig pen behind the house.

"Hello, Mrs. Brady," he called as he came closer. "I just came to see how your daughter is doing."

The woman straightened and wiped at sweat on her face. "Doin' just fine. You're welcome to go and talk to her."

He nodded. "Thank you." What was that in the woman's eyes? Almost a pleading look.

He turned and headed for the potato garden, noticing Rebecca was watching him now. She wore a plain calico dress that looked a little big on her, but she certainly filled out the bodice. As he came closer he saw her hands were dirty from digging potatoes. Sweat had left streaks in her dirty face, but by God she still looked pretty. Strands of her thick, dark hair tumbled about her face and it was easy to envision her with her hair done up fancy and wearing a beautiful dress that fit her right, just a little color on her cheeks and lips. He removed his hat.

"Hello, Becky. How are you feeling?"

She pulled one strand of hair behind her ear. "Pretty well, but I wish I'd known you were coming, Dr. Kingsley."

"Robert, remember?"

She nodded, looking down at herself. "I look terrible! I haven't had a chance to wash up or brush my hair."

"Don't worry about it. Let me have a look at your arm."

She looked around before dropping the potato fork and walking closer. She held out her left arm. Robert noticed there was still a little swelling and the area around the bite was blue.

"This must still hurt."



"Yes, sir, but I can still dig potatoes."

Robert sighed against his anger. "You should still be resting. Do you have a headache?"

"Well, actually, I do."

"Of course you do. You should be lying still." He glanced at the potato field, noticing several gunny sacks already filled. "This is ridiculous. Where is your father?"

"Out hunting, sir...I mean, Robert."

"While all the women do his work."

She shrugged. "We have to eat things besides potatoes."

He squeezed her hand lightly before letting go of her. "Among the Lakota, it's somewhat the same. The women work and the men hunt. But if a Lakota woman is sick, the man does not expect her to do too much. Other women help. I understand that here there is only you and your mother, but you've dug plenty of potatoes and the rest will keep just fine in the ground."

She folded her hands together nervously, looking down as she spoke. "Pa said I had to dig all six rows so we can store them in the dugout under the cabin."

"And what happens if you don't dig all of them today?"

She met his gaze. "I know what you're saying, Robert, but I can't go against his wishes."

"Yes, you can. Have you thought about my offer?"

She glanced over at her grandmother before replying. "Yes." She looked back at Robert. "I'll have to think about it some more."

"I don't have a lot of time, Becky. And I just. . . ." He looked away. "I can't bring myself to leave here without you. Fact is...I have these...feelings for you. I don't mean to scare you, and I don't want you to worry about it. I mean, if you let me help you, you don't have to feel obligated or anything like that."

He met her gaze again. What was that he saw there? Mutual feelings? "I would never take advantage of you. I just want to get you away from here. You would love it in Springfield. I see so much...so much beauty in your face, and intelligence in your eyes. I know this all sounds crazy, but..."

"I want to go," she said quietly before he finished. "I dearly want to go. I'm just afraid."

Robert took another look around before he continued the conversation, making sure her grandmother and her mother were still where he'd left them and could not hear. He turned back to Becky. "You don't have to be afraid if I'm with you. Believe me, Becky, I can handle things."

"My Pa would come after us."

"I told you that you don't have to worry about that. Will he go hunting again tomorrow?" Was that love he saw in her eyes?

"No. But he'll go again the day after."

"Fine. You could come to me then. We'd be long gone before he would come after us, and he'll expect us to move on with the army unit. That's the most likely direction he'd go in first. We'll be heading in the other direction and be on a riverboat before he could catch us. My unit will most likely leave out tomorrow. He'll think I've gone with them. What about your mother?"

Her eyes teared more. "My Ma is a good woman, but when she tries to stop the beatings she gets hit, too. She accepts it, but I've never felt it was right. I asked her once what she'd do if I ran away. She said she wouldn't stop me. I'd hate leaving her but my brothers, they'll be home after the war. I hope. They'll take care of her."

"Maybe running off with an Indian would be a different matter for her."

Becky shook her head. "I don't think so. She likes you. She kind of told me so. I think...she knows."

"Knows what? That you want me to take you away?" She studied his eyes intently. "More than that."

He thought a moment, then realized what she meant when she suddenly blushed.

"You said you had...feelings." She dropped her gaze." I do too. I mean, I don't care that you're part Indian. You're a good man, an educated man, and you care about people. I hope I'm not...speaking out of place."

Robert felt a wave of relief. Was this really happening? Had he lost his mind? "Not at all." He reached out to grasp her hand again. "Not at all."

She met his gaze again, and he could swear that if he tried to kiss her, she would let him. "Day after tomorrow. I'll meet you at the bottom of the hill," he told her. "I have two horses we can ride." He squeezed her hand. "We'll be okay, Becky. I promise"

She nodded, smiling bashfully. "I believe you."

"Just act natural tomorrow. You don't want your father to suspect."

"Okay."

He let go of her hand, hating to leave her, yet knowing he had no choice for the moment. "This is all pretty crazy, I know, but the spirit within me tells me this is right."

She quickly wiped at a tear that slipped down her cheek. "You'd best go now," she said softly. "Pa will come home early this evening, so if I went with you now, there wouldn't be time. I'll come down the hill day after tomorrow, early morning."

Robert nodded, wanting to let his gaze linger. Instead, he forced himself to turn away. He walked over to her mother, thinking he should say something, yet not sure it was wise. When he came closer, Augusta landed her axe into a log and faced him, surprising him when she spoke.

"Take good care of her. She deserves better than this. I want her to have the things I used to dream about."

Robert stood there dumbfounded. *I'll be damned.* "I'll see that she gets them," he answered. "You're a good and wise woman, Augusta Brady."

She shrugged and turned back to pick up her axe. "I'm a mother. Go on now." She began chopping away again, and Robert turned away, astounded at her words. Augusta Brady had just given him permission to run off with her daughter!



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## Chapter 5



Rebecca literally struggled to hide her excitement once her father came home from hunting, afraid he would wonder why she was so happy. He ordered her to stop digging potatoes and help him skin two rabbits, then proceeded to break out a jug of whiskey while she did all the work. Still, she didn't even mind this time, since everything she did helped make the time pass more quickly. She cut up the rabbit and took it inside for her mother to boil with potatoes, then picked up a bar of lye soap and a towel. She ran off to the nearby creek to scrub her hands and arms, then wash her face.

She always washed this way, out of sight of her father. Watching her reflection, she wondered if Robert knew about fancy creams and such, things that would make her skin softer, perfumes that made a woman smell nice. She stood up and stretched out her arms, whirling around, wondering if Robert knew how to dance.

What a long wait it would be between now and the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, she didn't want to make her father angry, especially when he was drinking. She hurried back to the house to help finish supper and to knead bread dough that would rise overnight. Again she tried not to look too happy as she helped serve supper. To her relief her father soon fell into heavy snoring on the bed in the main room. That snoring had too many times been a welcome sound. It meant he would sleep hard for several hours.

Rebecca helped her mother clean up while her grandmother went off to lie down in her small back room. Becky started toward the ladder when her mother caught her arm and motioned for her to walk outside with her.

Becky followed Augusta through the door and into the dark night. The ringing sound of thousands of crickets met her ears and she slapped at a mosquito. She followed her mother to the end of the porch, careful not to trip on the warped boards. "What is it, Mother?"

Augusta kept hold of her hand, leaning close so she could talk softly. "I just want to tell you, Becky...I won't be hurt when you go. I'll understand." Rebecca blinked in surprise. "You *know*?"

Augusta squeezed her hand. "I'm your Ma. Mothers know things like that. Before Robert left earlier today, I told him to take good care of you."

Rebecca stepped back slightly, letting go of Augusta's hand. "I wasn't sure how to tell you, Ma, or if I should tell you. I kind of thought you knew, but still..."

"It's all right, Becky. You go. It's too late for me, daughter, but not for you. I always knew you was special, made for better things than this. I want my girl to be happy."

Rebecca felt a lump in her throat. "You won't tell?"

Augusta shook her head. "I hope you get away and have a good life. I seen somethin' in that doctor's eyes when he first looked at you...and I seen it again when he came to visit you earlier today. He's a good and gentle man. Ain't no way Jack Clement would treat you that way. I don't want to see you go down the same path I took."

Rebecca shook her head. "I never knew you felt like this, Ma."

"You'll understand once you have a daughter of your own. Just promise me not to look back...or ever come back." Augusta reached into her apron pocket and pulled something out, taking hold of Rebecca's hand and placing it into her palm. "This here is a real pretty barrette my own Pa gave me when I married John. It ain't nothin' real expensive, but it's real pretty, silver, with different colored stones in it. It's the prettiest thing I've ever owned, and I saved it all these years. John wasn't always mean, at least not early on. But he wouldn't let me wear the barrette after we married, said as how it would make me look pretty to other men and he didn't like that. So I just put it away, 'cause I was afraid he would break it and throw it into the creek. You take it and keep it for me. Wear it for the

doctor once you get all cleaned up and into a pretty dress. Think of me every time you wear it. I used to be pretty as you."

Rebecca fingered the barrette, running a thumb over the small stones. "I...never knew you had this side to you, Ma...wanting pretty things and all."

"Every woman has that side to her. It's just that a lot of men destroy that part of her. Your doctor won't do that. He'll bring out all that's beautiful in you. I just hope you get away."

Rebecca reached out and embraced her. "Thank you, Ma. I'll miss you so, and grandma, too."

"I know. And you don't know how bad you will be missed. But I'll be happier knowin' you're well took care of. By and by your brothers will be back and I'll be plenty busy. They'll be marryin' and givin' me grandkids. You just be sure to write me after a year or two and tell me about your new life." The woman sniffed and pulled away. "Get on to bed now 'fore your Pa wakes up and finds us talkin' in whispers out here."

Wanting to go cry even harder, Rebecca stifled her sobs, hugging her mother once more before going inside and climbing to the loft. She lay down, her head swimming with visions of Robert Kingsley and being the wife of a doctor in some pretty little town away from here. She didn't want to leave her mother, but as long as the woman approved, it would help the leaving.

Was Robert right about some things being meant to be? How strange that a snakebite could lead to something like this. Was she just dreaming to think that Robert Kingsley might be in love with her? He hadn't actually spoken the words.

One more day. One more long day.



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## Chapter 6



This was the kind of day Rebecca dreaded. Her father had announced he was staying home all day, tired from hunting the day before. He would be sure to have plenty of chores lined up for her. If not for the thought of leaving tomorrow, she would find those chores drudgery. Today, she would simply get through them without complaint so that she would not be the brunt of her father's cursing, or worse.

She again kneaded the bread dough and put it into the bread pans. As soon as the dough rose to the proper height she would put the pans into the oven at the side of the fireplace. In the meantime there were eggs to gather, a cow to milk, breakfast to be made, and corn to pick.

She picked up the egg basket and walked outside to the sagging chicken coop, long accustomed to the smell inside. She shooed away several hens and gathered their eggs, squinting at the feathers that flew as the birds squawked their protest.

"One more day," she reminded herself as she left the coop. She hurried back to the house with the eggs so her mother could start breakfast, then picked up a bucket and walked out to where the family milk cow was penned, her belly sagging with a new calf soon to be born. Her father had bred the cow with a bull Jack Clement owned.

Jack. She shuddered at the thought of how close she'd come to being handed over to the man for a mate, to be bred with little more feeling or respect than breeding this poor milk cow. "Hello, Tildy," she said, patting the cow's neck. She had never deliberately named the animal, but Tildy just always seemed to come to her lips when addressing her. She took a wooden stool from beside the fence and sat down, setting the bucket under Tildy's udder, thinking how sweet the animal was to always stand so still and let her squeeze her milk into the bucket.

She began pumping the teats, thinking what a pretty morning it was. It wasn't even foggy and cool like mountain mornings normally were. Birds sang, and the sun shone. It was as though Nature understood her happiness and was joining in the celebration, everything a sign that she was doing the right thing.

The bucket was nearly half full by the time she finished. She patted Tildy's neck again and set the stool aside, then carried the bucket to the house where her father already sat at the table wearing a pair of soiled pants and suspenders over the tophalf of his long johns. His beard and hair were unkempt, and as always, Rebecca wished he would wash and maybe even shave before coming to the table.

She imagined how Dr. Robert Kingsley probably came to the table mornings, bathing and shaving first, wearing a clean shirt and pants. She would gladly do his laundry for him, mend his clothes, press them. It would be a pleasure.

"I want you to finish all your chores by two o'clock today," her father told her then, as she set a plate of eggs and fried pork in front of him. "Make sure the pigs out back get fed and the corn gets picked. Then clean yourself up a little."

Rebecca frowned, her heart pounding a little faster. John Brady always grumbled about her bathing too often. Now he was telling her to clean up. "Why?" she asked.

"Just do it."

She glanced at her mother who told her with her eyes to do as the man asked and not to make trouble.

"Yes, sir," she said, feeling suddenly sick to her stomach. "We having company or something?"

John scowled at her. "If I wanted you to know I'd have said so. Just do what I ask. Now, sit down and eat some breakfast. You have a lot to do. You know how it is with your brothers gone."

Rebecca sat down, swallowing back an urge to scream a demand that he tell her why she should "clean up." Did it have something to do with Jack Clement? Should she run away to the army camp if she could find the chance? No, she mustn't. Her father would follow and might beat or kill Robert. In these parts, no one would think much of a local killing an Indian man who was fixing to run off with his daughter.

She told herself to stay calm. This might be nothing. If it involved Jack Clement, maybe he was just coming for a visit, to have another look at his "bride." Trouble was, she would never be a true bride. She would just go to live with him, and that would be that.

*Never!* she thought. She managed to choke down a few bites of eggs and a hunk of bread. "I'm not very hungry," she said then. "I'll go ahead and slop the pigs." She rose and left, needing to get out of the cabin so she could think more clearly. It was not going to be easy to act normal all day, especially if Jack Clement came around. But for Robert's sake, she had to do her best. The last thing she wanted was to place him in danger. Once her father left tomorrow to hunt again, she would be free to go through with their plan.

She took several deep breaths, then walked around behind the cabin and picked up two buckets of garbage, mostly potato peelings and corn cobs. She carried them several yards behind the cabin to a pen that held six good sized pigs and several piglets. One sow lay on her side under a crudely built shelter, six or eight piglets squirming and fighting each other to get to her nipples and feed. Watching them helped her forget her worries for a brief moment. She loved piglets. She loved any baby animals and it made her think how she would love to give Robert Kingsley a little baby of their own.

That meant doing something she'd always dreaded even thinking about with Jack Clement but something that suddenly seemed could be beautiful and exciting with Robert Kingsley. Pleasing him that way...the thought sent a rush of desire through her blood that she had never before experienced.

Spirit Walker. His Sioux name was Spirit Walker. What a nice name. It inspired thoughts of gentleness.

She dumped the buckets into troughs, then headed back to 'the house to exchange the buckets for a stack of baskets, hauling those past the potato garden to several rows of feed com that needed picking. She caught the smell of fresh bread baking, one of the few pleasurable smells around the house. Apparently her mother had put the bread in the oven.

This was actually quite a pleasant day, peaceful so far. If only she could ignore the odd dread she felt at wondering why her father wanted her to finish her chores by early afternoon. She began snapping off the cobs that appeared to be developed enough to be ripe, noticing some of them had worms. The cow and pigs and horses wouldn't really mind. She filled several baskets, leaving each full one sitting in its row. She would lug them to the shanty where her father kept animal feed once she was done picking.

The day grew hotter as she picked, and various bugs tormented her. By the time she finished and hauled the baskets of corn to the shed, her father was yelling at her from where he sat on the front porch, telling her to hurry up so she could wash and put on a better dress.

Since when did he care? That's what worried her. She finished with the corn and walked around and up the creaking porch steps, refusing to look at her father as she went inside. She climbed the ladder to the loft and retrieved clean drawers and knee high stockings, as well as the best dress she owned, her best just because it was the only one with no stains. She grabbed a ragged towel and a bar of soap she kept hidden for her own personal use, then picked up her

brush and the fancy barrette Augusta had given her. After rolling the loose items into the dress she descended the ladder and walked back out, still ignoring her father.

She decided that no matter what his reasons, she would at least be clean and bathed for tomorrow. In the morning she would simply dress and leave, taking only her brush and a homemade woolen cape. She hurried off to the creek, going to the special place where she always went to bathe. It was surrounded by thick bushes.

She undressed and scrubbed herself, again feeling a wave of excitement at the thought of someone like Robert seeing her naked...touching her. Actually, he had already seen her naked. The thought gave her a pleasant chill. What did he think of her? Had he been with other women? Surely he had.

She scrubbed harder. Why was she thinking about such things? She finished washing, dried herself and slipped on the clean drawers and socks, then pulled the clean dress over her head, wishing she had an undergarment of some sort. Her mother had a couple of corsets, but she seldom wore them. It was too hot. Augusta had told her once that some women wore fancy, lacy things under their dresses. Was Robert used to things like that? There sure wasn't anything fancy about her, but she could learn how to dress and behave.

She bent her head over and brushed her hair vigorously, then flung her hair back and pulled back the sides to meet in the middle behind her head, pinning them there with the barrette. She finished buttoning up the front of her dress, wishing it fit better through the bust, but it was slightly large. She stepped into her only pair of shoes, black, flat heeled boots that had been worn so much she knew she would soon have holes in the soles and would have to find a new pair, if and when her father would allow her to spend the money when they took the wagon into the closest town. Still, if she left tomorrow, there would be no more trips to town. Maybe Robert would buy her new shoes.

She straightened and took a deep breath, picking up her things then and rolling them into the soiled dress. Tomorrow was wash day. At least her father did not complain about scrubbing clothes once in a while, although he seldom changed his own, except on wash day. This time it wouldn't matter. She would not be there. Sometimes a neighbor lady from farther up the mountain, Luella Sands, brought a wagon down with her own wash and the women all washed clothes together. She hoped Luella would come tomorrow to help her mother.

Another pang of guilt rushed through her at the thought of leaving Augusta, but she had her mother's blessing. Besides that, she absolutely could not bear the thought of Robert leaving without her. She already knew she could never forget him for the rest of her life; nor could she be happy now without him.

She walked back to the cabin and started to carry her things inside when someone rode up to the cabin on a big gray gelding. Rebecca recognized the horse, and she quelled instant panic. Jack Clement was here! She turned and headed inside.

"Drop them things inside and stay out here," her father ordered.

"I don't like Jack, Pa. I shouldn't have to stay out here while he's here."

"You're gonna be his woman. I promised him that after his wife died. You was only fifteen then. I figured that was old enough but your Ma made me wait till you was eighteen. Poor Jack's been waitin' long enough."

She set her things inside the door, then faced her father, putting her hands on her hips. "Well, he can wait *longer*. I am not going with him anyplace and you should have told me what this was all about."

Her determination waned when her father stood up, towering over her. "You sassin' me, girl?"



She breathed deeply. "I am telling you I have a right to marry who I want." Her courage came only from the thought of being with Robert.

He leaned closer, and she could smell the whiskey on his breath. He'd been drinking all morning. "Jack is brewin' me twenty jugs of his best white lightnin' for you, plus givin' me that prize bull of his. He's also bringin' me his first two good deer kills this season. I done made a promise to him and I aim to *keep* it." He straightened. "Besides, Jack has a nicer cabin than this one. You'd have curtains and all. And his wife was about the same size as you. She had a couple of fancy dresses. You can have them. Hell, that's not such a bad life, is it?"

"It is if you don't love the man you're with. You can't make me, Pa!"

He grasped her arm, squeezing tightly enough that it made her wince. "I can make you do anything I want. Don't you shame me in front of Jack, girl!"

"What's going on, John?" Augusta came to the doorway, opening the screen door. She noticed Jack Clement dismounting then. Rebecca glared at the tall, gangly man who always wore overalls. Jack was wiry but strong. He'd actually beat her father once in arm wrestling. The man also had a mean streak. She'd seen him kick dogs.

Today Jack had actually cleaned up, at least as much as men like him called clean. His pants were soiled only slightly and he wore a clean blue shirt. His face was clean shaven, a rarity, but he sported several razor cuts. His unwashed hair was slicked back with some kind of grease, and he held a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand.

"Afternoon, John. I figured I would bring over the bull tomorrow. I can load my wagon with the jugs of whiskey and tie the bull to the back of it. I just thought that today I'd get here quicker this way."

"No problem, Jack." John let go of Rebecca's arm to walk out and greet his friend with a handshake. Rebecca glanced at her mother, thinking how she'd somehow thought this day would never really come. Now here it was, just one day before she was to run off with Dr. Robert Kingsley. What was she to do!

"She ain't ready today," Augusta spoke up for her. "It ain't fair to spring this on her like this, Jack Clement. She's got to have time to talk to her Ma and be really ready."

"Becomin' a woman is a natural thing," Jack answered with a wide grin. He came up to Rebecca and handed out the flowers. "Here's some nice flowers for you, sweetheart. Come get on my horse, darlin'."

"I'm not going!" Rebecca answered, stepping back.

"Give her a little more time, John," Augusta told her husband pleadingly, moving an arm around Rebecca.

"Don't be tellin' me what to do," John replied. "You want a whippin', woman?"

"I want you to think about the fact that our sons ain't home yet. I need Becky here to help me with chores."

John scowled. "She can come back. Jack won't mind bringin' her here every couple of days to help out."

"Heck, no. I don't mind."

"I do!" Rebecca spoke up. Before she realized he'd even moved, she felt her father backhand her across the right side of her face. She fell against her mother, dizzy.

The sudden jolt made her mother stumble backward and land into the screen door. Already stretched, the screening tore away from the frame when Augusta hit it. Rebecca clung to the woman, helping keep her from falling all the way through it. "You okay, Ma?" she asked.

Augusta gained her balance. "I'm fine." She glared at Jack. "Let her be for a little longer."

Rebecca knew the woman was trying to stall for time. After tomorrow she would be gone.

"I've waited long enough." Jack threw the flowers aside, coming closer and grasping Rebecca's arm. He jerked her away from her mother. "This ain't no way for a blushin' bride to be behavin'. Let's go, honey."

Still reeling from her father's blow, Rebecca tried to pull away. "I'm not going!" Should she say something about Robert?

"Lordy, girl, I ain't gonna kill ya' or nothin'," Jack told her. "Once you're my wife, you'll grow to like it, 'specially when you get with child."

"Not with you, I won't!" Rebecca spit at him. In the back of her mind she thought how just two days ago she would have accepted the fact that she had to leave with this man. But meeting Robert had given her new courage and new determination.

"Well, you're gonna make this a real challenge ain't you?" Jack said, grinning.

"Let me talk to her a minute," Augusta interceded. She looked at John. "Please. She'll be okay once I talk to her."

John looked at his friend. "Let her Ma talk to her. You and I will have us some of that good whiskey you make, Jack."

Jack glanced at Rebecca a moment, then let go of her.

Rebecca hated the look of eager hunger in his eyes, the same way he looked at her every time he'd visited the last three years. It seemed a miracle that her mother had convinced her father to wait this long.

"Okay, I'll share a jug with you," he told John. He walked over to another chair on the porch.

Augusta pulled Rebecca inside, taking her over to the fireplace. "Go with him," she told Rebecca.

"What!" Rebecca fought tears. "Ma, I can't! What about Robert?"

"Make somethin' up for tonight. Tell him it's your time of the month. That should keep him off of you. Meantime, I'll go down and tell Robert what has happened, after your Pa falls asleep tonight. Robert will come for you. I know he'll do it."

"But I don't trust Jack! He'll try to kill Robert."

"Robert is the sort who can take care of himself, I'd bet on it," her mother told her. "Go with Jack now, and do whatever you have to do to keep the man at bay until Robert comes for you. This way nobody will know the difference until it's too late. If Jack and your Pa drink for a while it won't take long for Jack to fall asleep tonight. Once he does, he won't know what happened when he wakes up. He'll figure you ran back here and he'll take his time comin' back for you on account of he won't be feelin' so good in the mornin'."

Rebecca wiped at her tears. "And neither one of them will suspect you had anything to do with this. They'll think I ran off on my own." She hugged her mother. "Thanks, Ma."

The woman embraced her daughter, a rare gesture for the tough, proud Augusta Brady. "Go and tell your grandma that you're goin' with Jack now. She don't know about the rest, and she don't need to know," she told Rebecca quietly. "And pack yourself a couple of things so's you'll have them when Robert comes."

"Yes, ma'am." Rebecca kissed her mother's wrinkled cheek, then hurried over to where her grandmother sat smoking a pipe in the back bedroom. "I'm leaving, grams," she told the woman, coming over to bend down and kiss the frail old woman's brow. "I'm going with Jack."

The woman nodded with a frown. "That's how it is. You're a woman now."

"Yes." Rebecca realized that life had been even harder for her grandmother than for her mother. Things got a little better with each generation. Her own life would be wonderful...as long as Robert came for her.

Her grandmother just sat staring and smoking, and Rebecca knew she was again lost in her own little dream world, something that often happened with her. She left the woman and climbed into the loft, throwing clean underwear, three clean dresses that were in better shape than the

others, a Bible, soap, and her cape onto the quilt on her bed, then pulled up the four comers of the quilt and tied them together.

Outside she heard her father and Jack talking and laughing, apparently having no understanding of what this event was like for a girl her age. She sat down on her bed to wait a while, wanting Jack to drink as much as possible before they left so he would fall asleep quicker when they reached his cabin.



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locations is entirely coincidental.

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## Chapter 7



Robert lay inside his tent, eyes wide open. How could he sleep, knowing that tomorrow Rebecca would come to him? He'd already told Corporal Chadwick that he would be unable to go on from here. He'd simply told him he was heading home. To his relief, scouts had come to the camp earlier today to inform them they were to join a larger command roughly five miles east of them. That unit had a doctor. Now Robert would not have to feel guilty over leaving these men. Those in the hospital tent would be able to go on, carried on stretchers until they reached the bigger command where they would get more help. They would leave at dawn.

He realized it was time to leave his service here, even if he had not met Rebecca. God only knew how or when this war would end. He'd seen enough of the stubbornness of these southern boys to know they would not go down easily, but the superior weapons, as well as the practically endless manufacturing capabilities of the North, were sure to defeat the Confederates in the end. In the meantime, he'd seen all he cared to see of war wounds. He preferred to use his knowledge to heal those sick with diseases, those who might have tumors that need surgery, and operations that could correct deformities...like the deformity he'd had as a baby.

He wished now that he had not been so tiny that he could not possibly remember that night on Medicine Mountain when Rising Eagle took him there as a baby and prayed over him. The man's powers of prayer and spirituality had resulted in the healing of Robert's own deformed fingers. Although some would never believe it, Robert had no doubt it was true. Too many had testified to the fact, including his own real mother. The story of his healing had left its mark on his heart. He, too, wanted to heal, and the world of medicine, both Lakota and the white man's, held a deep fascination for him.

"Hold it there, ma'am!" he heard someone shout from outside. "State your business."

"I come to see the doctor, Robert Kingsley," came the sound of an older woman's voice. It sounded like Augusta! Quickly, Robert sat up and pulled on his boots. He'd slept in his pants tonight, rather than just his long johns. He'd wanted to be ready, however early he had to rise to greet Rebecca. But what was Augusta doing here? He heard the private outside asking the same thing.

"I...it's my daughter again. She got sicker again from her snakebite."

Robert frowned. Why would that be? He pulled on a shirt, leaving it outside of his suspenders and letting it hang. He then strapped on a holster he always wore under his topcoat and shoved a small pistol into it. He pulled on his topcoat and grabbed his hat. His horses were tied to the tether rope outside, already packed and saddled. He'd wanted to be prepared to leave promptly as soon as Rebecca came down the hill to meet him in the morning. His heart raced with dread at what could have gone wrong.

"There's a woman here to see you, Doc," he heard from outside his tent. "Mother of that gal you went to doctor a couple of days ago."

"I heard." Robert grabbed his doctor's bag in one hand, a rifle in the other. In this part of the country, with Union soldiers apt to pop up anywhere, men always kept their firearms at hand, even doctors. He exited the tent to see Augusta waiting there, although he couldn't see her well until she raised her lantern to see him better in return. That was when he noticed the terribly worried look on her face. "What's happened?" he asked.

She glanced at the private who stood listening curiously. Robert cast him a scowl. "She's found me, so you can go on about your duties," he told the young man as he led Augusta away from camp. "What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Jack Clement come for Becky," she answered.

Robert felt as though someone had gripped his heart and was squeezing it. "My God! You let her go to him?"

"Didn't have a whole lot of choice, if you know what I mean. But I told Becky to make up some excuse as to why she couldn't share his bed tonight. And he's likely to fall asleep early because he drank a lot of moonshine before he left with her. I told her to make out like she was willin' to go so's not to stir up too much curiosity with her Pa. I said I'd come get you soon as my husband fell asleep. He's sleepin' now. We have to hurry. I don't want him to wake up and notice I'm gone."

"I'll get my horses!" Robert hurried to where the animals were tied, quickly loosening their bridles and leading them back to where Augusta waited. "Private James," he called softly. The young man hurried up to where Robert stood. "I have an emergency. I may not be back, as I intended to head home tomorrow anyway."

"Yes, sir, Doc. We'll miss you."

"Thanks." Robert hurried away with Augusta who held her lamp to lead the way. He'd said his goodbyes to Private Mendelson earlier in the day, urging him to consider going to school to study to be a doctor. The young man seemed to have a lot of potential.

Now that was the least of his concerns. The thought of Becky at the mercy of Jack Clement made him feel ill. He could only pray he would get to her in time. "Is there any kind of shortcut?" he asked Augusta.

"Not a true shortcut," she answered, "but I can take you farther over Jack's way before we start the climb. That way we won't go past me and John's cabin first. And the climb ain't as steep but you'll have to leave the horses tied at this end. The way is thick with brush and tree limbs. If we ride, the horses or one of us could get hurt. We'll have to walk it. It's close to three miles; about an hour and a half."

It dawned on Robert then that he'd never even met Jack Clement, but this whole situation only told him the man had no real feelings for Becky. She was a mate, someone to cook and clean and do chores for him..and share his bed. Nothing more. He would make sure she didn't do *any* of those things for the man, especially not share his bed.

He tied the horses as Augusta ordered and headed out on foot. Was he crazy, following this woman he'd known for only four days into the deep woods and into a possible fight with a mountain man he'd never even met, all for a girl he hardly knew yet, but wanted to marry? This would be humorous if not so serious. He wished he could talk to his mother and the reverend about this. Under normal circumstances he would have time to at least write them; but this predicament left no time for any such thing. Becky was in trouble!

\* \* \* \* \*

Contrary to what Rebecca and her mother thought would happen, Jack Clement did not fall asleep. His body full of liquor, he'd become more amorous than Rebecca even thought was possible for the man. He'd ridden with his arms around her to his cabin, a good forty minutes' riding distance from her father's cabin. Sickened by his whiskey breath, she'd fought his attempts to grasp her breasts, finally wiggling free of him and jumping down from his horse, insisting she would continue on foot. Jack begged and pleaded with her to get back on the horse and when she refused and started walking ahead of him, she was startled and instantly terrified by a kick in the back that sent her sprawling onto her face. Jack had laughed...he'd *laughed!*

Hell was the only way to describe the rest of the evening. It was dark by the time they arrived at Jack's cabin and her father had been right that the place was much nicer inside than their own, although it definitely needed a woman's cleaning.

That was the least of her worries. Jack insisted on a good meal, saying he wanted to check out her cooking. She had gladly obliged, thinking he might fall asleep if his stomach was full. He'd shown her where everything was, looking her over hungrily with every move she made. She felt naked under his stare. She took her time, wanting to stretch the hours and give Robert time to get here.

Would he really come? It just seemed too good to be true that the handsome doctor would really save her from this fate. Just four days ago she'd been resigned to this. Robert Kingsley had completely changed her outlook on life, her willingness to simply accept what her father told her must be. If Robert failed her now, she was sure her heart would break into a million pieces. She would never be the same and she would rather die than spend the rest of her life with Jack Clement.

To her consternation and despair, Jack did not fall asleep after eating. In fact, he was very much awake, most likely from the prospect of getting her into his bed tonight. She'd lied and told him it was her "time of the month" and that she could not share his amorous advances. To her dismay, he'd said he didn't care. He'd waited too long for this.

Becky began to panic. Jack came up to her while she stood washing dishes in a large pan. He moved his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck from behind. Becky shuddered with fear and revulsion at his advances. His breath reeked of whiskey, a smell she had never liked. He wore an odd, musky scent, which was neither repelling or alluring. She knew he'd used something to make himself smell better without a full bath, but it would not help.

*Robert, where are you?* she thought. How soon had her mother been able to go and find him? What if his unit had already left and he'd had no choice but to go with it? No. Surely he wouldn't do that. "Please stop," she told Jack.

He just laughed, moving his hands to her breasts. She took a fork from the dishpan and jabbed it into his hand, causing him to cry out pitifully and jump back. "You bitch!" he growled, grasping the wounded hand with his other hand.

Rebecca headed for the door but he grabbed her by the hair, yanking her back.

"You ain't goin' noplace," he told her.

*Robert!* she screamed silently.

"Let's get this over with, girly," Jack told her. "You'll learn to like it. I've been a long time without a woman, and I paid your Pa good for you." He jerked her backward, hanging on to her hair so tightly that she screamed with pain. His strong hand came around her throat then, cutting off her air just enough that she could not fight him and breath at the same time. "Just remember," he told her, shoving her onto his bed, "You ain't got your Ma here to run to and you're plenty old enough. We can do this the easy way, you bein' a mature woman, or you can behave like a scared kid and make it rough for yourself. Makes no difference to me." He let go of her throat, straddling her as he yanked open his shirt and pulled it off.



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## Chapter 8



In spite of her dazed condition, Rebecca knew she had no alternative but to fight the drunken Jack Clement. No man but Robert Kingsley was going to touch her! She took advantage of the fact that he'd carelessly let go of her and she reared up, banging her head hard into his chest and digging her nails into his cheeks at the same time. She raked her fingers down his cheeks and he let out a scream. He grabbed her wrists, and Rebecca slammed her head into him again, this time against his mouth. He jumped off of her yelling a stream of profanities as he walked bent over, holding his hands over his mouth.

Rebecca scrambled off the bed and headed for the door, feeling Jack right behind her. She flung open the door, surprised when it came open too easily. In that instant she realized someone outside had shoved it open just as she reached it.

"Robert!" she gasped. He'd come!

Jack grabbed her from behind, but in an instant Robert was holding a pistol to Jack's forehead, just above her own head. Jack froze. Rebecca was astonished at how quickly Robert had leveled the gun. She wasn't sure if he'd already had it in his hand or pulled it from inside his coat.

"Let go of her," Robert said coldly, a look in his eyes that astonished Rebecca. Until now she'd seen only gentleness in those eyes, but there was no sign of that now. For that one quick moment she saw in him a wild Indian, capable of landing a hatchet into a man's skull.

"Who the hell are you?" Jack said, still gripping Rebecca tightly.

Robert cocked the pistol. "I am a man who will kill you in ten seconds if you don't let go of Rebecca Brady." He started counting. "One- two- three- four-"

Jack let go of her and backed up. Robert stayed right with him as Rebecca ducked out from between the two men.

"Find something to tie him with," Robert ordered Rebecca.

She began looking around as Robert kept the pistol cocked.

"You're a goddamn Indian," Jack said. "An Indian in white man's clothes! You figure on capturin' my woman?"

"She's not your woman. She's *mine*."

Rebecca stood still for a moment. The way he'd said that... "she's mine." It made her heart beat faster. She loved the sound of the words. She wanted nothing more than to belong to Robert Kingsley.

"What do you mean - yours?"

"Exactly what I said. Now, sit down."

Jack hesitated, then suddenly lunged, ducking his head and slamming into Robert's middle. The pistol went off and Rebecca screamed as both men went to the floor. Jack slammed a fist into Robert's face, but Robert reared up one knee and literally flung Jack over his head. The man landed on his back, and Rebecca picked up a black iron fry pan, ready to clobber Jack with it if she got the chance. But before Jack could get to his knees, Robert had an arm around his neck from behind and bent Jack's left arm up behind the man's back with such force that Jack screamed with pain.

"I am a doctor," Robert told him gruffly. "My job is to relieve pain, but I damn well know how to *inflict* pain if it's necessary." He pulled a screaming Jack over to a wooden chair, moving around behind it and shoving Jack into it. Jack bent over groaning and Robert hurriedly picked up his pistol, glancing at Rebecca. "You all right?" he asked, panting.



"Yes, sir!" She saw the relief on his face.

"When you screamed I was afraid the damn bullet hit you." Blood streamed from where Jack had split the skin on Robert's left cheek. He certainly did look the warrior at the moment. He turned to Jack again. "Find some rope, Rebecca."

She noticed a long piece of light rope looped around a peg on the wall by the door. She hurriedly retrieved it and brought it over to Robert. "You're hurt!"

"I'm all right." He handed over the pistol. "I'll trade you the gun for the rope. Aim this pistol straight at him. If he makes one wrong move, shoot him."

"Shoot him?"

"You heard me."

Rebecca swallowed nervously, aiming the hand gun right at Jack's middle while Robert began tying the man to the chair. He wrapped the rope around Jack several times, so tightly that Rebecca could see how terribly uncomfortable it must be.

"I should *kill* you for attacking Rebecca," Robert growled. "But the doctor in me won't let me, unless you try it again. But you won't get the chance, Jack Clement."

By the time you figure out how to get loose of these ropes, Rebecca and I will be long gone. She is going to be my wife, the *legal* way, and no one is going to interfere."

He continued speaking angrily as he yanked on the ropes and tied them into tight knots. Jack grunted and winced. Finally, Robert turned his gaze to Rebecca again. "Get your things."

"Yes, sir. ..Robert." She carefully handed over the pistol, noticing then that the anger and vengeance in Robert's handsome dark eyes began to soften to a look that sent a wave of desire through her that made her blush.

"I hope I didn't frighten you," he told her.

"No, sir."

Suddenly he grinned. "When are you going to remember to always call me Robert?"

She smiled in return. "I'll try." It was just beginning to sink in that this was real. Robert had come for her. He'd even fought for her! He'd threatened Jack's very life if he hurt her. Not only was he educated and successful, he was also protective and brave. What was there to fear from such a man? And what was there not to love about him?

Quickly she gathered her quilt full of belongings, and Robert grabbed the shirt Jack had thrown to the floor. He shoved the pistol into a holster under his coat, then stuffed a good deal of the shirt into Jack's mouth. Jack let out several muffled screams and curses as Robert took the sleeves of the shirt and tied them tightly behind Jack's neck so that what was in his mouth was secured. He walked toward Rebecca then, who waited wide-eyed at the door.

"Sound can travel a long way in these mountains," he told her as they headed out. "He'll be all right. I'm sure your father will be by later tomorrow to see how his daughter is doing, only she won't be here."

*She won't be here!* Rebecca couldn't remember ever being so happy. She was leaving Jack Clement, leaving these mountains, leaving her old life behind. "Is my Ma okay?" she asked.

Robert led her along a pathway that tonight was well lit by a bright moon. "She's fine. She said to tell you she loves you and that you shouldn't feel badly about this. This is what she wants for you."

"I know. I'll miss her so."

"We might be able to come back someday. You can certainly write her once we're away from here and married. I know how you must feel about leaving her. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be. I'm just happy to be with you."

Robert held her arm as they headed down the steep path to a flatter pathway that took them on the long walk back to where Robert had left his horses.

"It's a good two or three miles to the horses," he told her. "I think we can see good enough to make it. I would have been here sooner if it weren't so far. I didn't want to bring the horses because the pathway here is hardly big enough for a man, let alone a horse. Your mother or I could have been smacked in the head with a branch if we rode. Then I never would have reached you."

Rebecca hurried behind him, familiar with these backwoods hills. "I understand," she assured him. "You don't have to explain."

"No, I *don't* think you understand."

"What do you mean?"

Robert stopped, turning to face her. In the moonlight that filtered through the trees, with a cut on his cheek that spoke of his love for her, Rebecca thought him more handsome than ever.

"I mean I was just about crazy with worry over you," he explained, "wondering what would happen to you before I could get here. You'd already been with Jack for a while by the time your mother was able to come for me, let alone the time it took to get here."

She smiled. "Heck, I can take care of myself. I'm pretty tough."

He touched her hair. "That's obvious by the scrap you were putting up when I got there, and that's part of what I love about you." He drew her close, and she rested her head against his chest. "Tell me he didn't touch you," he whispered.

She was glad for the darkness, for his remark made her blush, knowing what he really meant. "He didn't get the chance. He made me cook for him and thought of ways to put him off. I was hoping he'd fall asleep from whiskey and food, but he didn't."

"I noticed a bruise on your right cheek. Did Jack do that to you?"

She shivered at the thrill of being pressed close to him. "No. My Pa did it when I argued about going with Jack. Then Ma said I should go so's not to get you involved right then. She promised she'd go get you and the thought of you coming, that made me braver." She moved her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. "I knew you'd come, Robert."

He fully embraced her in return, and never had she felt so safe and loved. "I'd die for you. Don't ask me why, since I still hardly know you...but I think I'm in love with you, Rebecca Brady."

Rebecca felt on fire at his closeness. "I love you, too, Robert," she whispered. She turned her face up and their lips met in a hungry kiss. She thought how easy it would be to let him make a woman of her right then and there, and the heat in his gentle kiss told her he'd like to do just that; but he moved his mouth to her neck.

"I'd love to lay you down right here, Becky," he told her, "if you wanted me to." "I do," she groaned.

"We can't. Not here. We have to get as far from here as we can tonight."

She knew he was right, but it wasn't easy to let go. He kissed her once more and she returned the kiss eagerly, but then he turned away.

"Damn," he swore quietly. "Let's get out of here." He took off at a rapid walk, holding her hand.



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## Chapter 9



"It must be one or two A.M." Robert was relieved to find the horses still tied and untouched where he'd left them. "Can you keep going? We've been walking for almost two hours, and after taking a blow from your father and then your struggle with Clement..."

"I'm fine," Rebecca interrupted. "I just want to get as far away from here as we possibly can." Robert sighed, unsure if they should continue. "You're riding on my horse in front of me," he advised. "That way I can hang on to you and you can relax a little. This has been a traumatic day for you. It's bound to have its effects." He tied her quilt full of personal items to his roan gelding, which he would use as a spare horse. Then he lifted Rebecca onto his Appaloosa mare. Mounting up behind her, he picked up the reins to the gelding and headed out along the clearer pathway that led past and behind the army camp.

How strange, he thought, that only five days ago he was cutting off a young private's arm and figuring to go on with his unit into more battles. Now here he was running off with a young woman he hardly knew and yet loved enough to want to marry.

Rebecca leaned against him as he headed down the road that would lead to the river...and eventually, home. "I hope you know that staying with me could mean going west," he told Rebecca. "Before I can settle for good I need to find my adoptive Indian family and make sure they are all right."

"I'll go anywhere with you, Robert." He heard the weariness in her voice.

"Life could be hard out there," Robert told her.

"I've already lived a hard life."

He kissed her hair. "That you have, my lady."

She tipped her head back, trying to look up at him. "Do you really consider me a lady?"

He kept her pressed close, his arm around her middle. He liked the feel of her slender waist. "Of course you're a lady."

"I'm not a very fancy one."

"I don't *need* a fancy lady. But I do know that with the right clothes, your hair all up in curls, your skin soft from creams and smelling good from perfumes, you will be beautiful. You already are the prettiest young woman I've ever come across." He could feel her smiling.

"Even in college?" she asked.

"Even in college."

"And back in Springfield?"

"And back in Springfield."

"What about among the Lakota women? Maybe when you get back out west you will be attracted to a young Indian woman. You haven't been around your people for a long time. Maybe you've forgotten how pretty their young women are. I've never seen a real Indian woman."

He sighed in thought. "Well," he answered, "young Lakota women are *very* beautiful and chaste. But I've lived in this world too long not to be attracted to women of both races. And my loving you has nothing to do with you being white. If you want to know the truth, I never even thought about marrying a white woman. I have never forgotten how pretty Lakota women are, including my own mother, in spite of her age now. It's obvious she was once very beautiful, but beauty isn't what really counts, Becky. I see in you a woman who will be a devoted wife and mother, a woman eager to learn new things, a woman with a great deal of spirit and bravery. And you don't look at me with any doubt in your eyes because I'm an Indian. It doesn't matter to you, just as it doesn't matter to me that you're white. We are just a man and a woman who know this is right. Our spirits are one."

"I like to think about it that way. That's a beautiful thought." She yawned. "I am so tired, Robert."

"I'm pretty tired myself. It's been a long and trying day for both of us, but worse for you."

"For me it started out with feeding the pigs, gathering the eggs, helping with breakfast and picking eighteen baskets full of feed corn before my father ordered me to clean up for a visitor." She grasped the

arm he had around her waist. "Then Jack came for me."

He halted the horse. "My God, Becky, you did all those chores before Jack came?"

"I'm used to it."

"This is enough." He dismounted.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going to sleep for a while. It won't take more than three hours in the morning to reach the river."

"Are you sure?"

"Believe me, Jack Clement isn't going anywhere tonight. It will be at least mid-day tomorrow before anyone knows what happened. Your mother will make sure of that. By then we will be well up-river. Even if someone did come, they wouldn't get past me. You, my lady, are going to get some rest before we go any farther."

"We're sleeping on the open ground?"

"That all right with you?"

"Oh, sure. I've slept that way before. I like to lie and watch the stars."

"We can't light a lantern, we don't want to attract attention just yet." He led the horses off the pathway to what he could see was a grassy area amid some pine trees. "I'll just spread out a couple of bed rolls."

Rebecca dismounted. "Can I help?"

"No. Just stay put until I'm done. I know where everything is packed. I can find it in the dark." Robert fought some of the thoughts he was having as he untied blankets and spread them on the ground. Then he tied the horses to a couple of nearby trees. "The horses will be fine still loaded," he said. "They aren't carrying that much gear and they haven't had to do much all day but graze and then stand waiting for me." He walked back to see Rebecca already lying on the ground.

"It feels so good to lie down," she told him. "Come and lie beside me, Robert. I could never be afraid with you beside me."

Reluctantly, because he didn't trust his own desires, Robert removed his hat and stretched out beside her, lying on his back and watching the stars.

"You're worried about me, but what about you?" Rebecca asked. "You walked all the way to Jack's *and* back, and you had that fight with him. It must be sore where he hit you."

"I've been clobbered before. Some men just naturally think an Indian needs hitting."

"That's terrible!" She turned on her side to face him. "Did you ever fight as an Indian against whites?"

"No, but my adoptive father did. I've seen Indians in battle plenty of times and I guarantee the US Army has their work cut out for them if things get worse and an all-out war erupts with the Sioux."

"Do you think that will happen?"

"I *know* it will happen." Robert closed his eyes against the pain of wanting her when she moved closer, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Then let's not talk about it right now. I just want to lie here next to you like this. I was so happy when you came for me, Robert." She kissed his cheek.

He pulled a blanket over both of them. "We're supposed to be getting some sleep."

"I don't want to sleep – yet."

"You need your rest. Tomorrow will be another day."

"From now on all my tomorrows are going to be wonderful, no matter how hard they are, and no matter where you take me."

He could not resist facing her and pulling her close. "Do you know how hard you are making this for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean."

She laughed lightly. "Would you lose your respect for me if I told you I want you to make a woman of me, right here and now?"

She spoke the words in a near whisper, and Robert ached with the want of her.

"That isn't exactly a question you should ask a man. He'll always tell you he'll respect you no matter what."

"But *would* you – for real?" She touched his hair. "I'm serious, Robert. I want you to always think of me as a lady."

He had no resistance left. She was here and she wanted him ...and he loved her.

"We'll have the captain of the riverboat marry us tomorrow," he answered, moving on top of her. "So I guess there is nothing wrong with marrying our bodies...tonight."

"How can it be wrong when we love each other so much?" She smiled. "Make love to me, Robert. I want to know what it's like. And I want it to be you, just in case something does go wrong." She met his mouth in youthful eagerness.

How was he supposed to say no to her? He wanted her just as much as she wanted him, and by tomorrow night she would be his wife. Once she added this fuel to the fire that raged deep in his loins there was no turning back. He returned her kiss hungrily, reaching down to move her dress to her waist. She groaned his name when he raised to his knees to pull off her drawers. He unbuttoned his pants to release the ache pressing inside, and in the next moment he slid into her heated nest, knowing he must be hurting her, but the first time should be quick so he could end her pain and teach her the pleasures of union. He smothered her with kisses to still her cries of pain. She arched against him in sweet abandon.

God, how he loved her! And he realized that in spite of how tired they both were, they just might not get much sleep tonight after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebecca stood at the railing on the deck of the Lilly Belle, a riverboat carrying Confederate supplies north to Kentucky. It mattered little to her where the boat would take her and Robert. All that mattered was that they were together. In a few weeks they would be in Illinois. Then they would head west into an exciting new world and a new life together.

Robert stood behind her, his arms around her, and she watched the Tennessee hills as the boat paddled its way north, the rhythmic swish of the water a comforting sound.

She would miss her mother and grandmother always. But knowing this was what Augusta wanted for her helped the pain of the separation. Robert had promised that someday she would see them again and she believed that promise. Last night had been beautiful. How she loved him! Both were weary and spent, but their night of lovemaking was worth it.

Robert leaned down and kissed her cheek. "How does it feel to be Mrs. Robert Kingsley?" he asked. She smiled, her tearing from a mixture of emotions. "It feels wonderful," she answered. "I never knew life could be like this."

Robert pressed a strong hand against her belly. "I've spent my whole life not quite sure where I belonged," he told her. "Now I know. I belong with you, wherever we go."

"What's it like out west, Robert?"

"It's the prettiest country you'll ever see, especially the Black Hills."

"It's your true home in your heart, isn't it?"

He sighed deeply. "It is. The Lakota call it *Paha-Sapa*. There, the land is the people, and the people are the land. Nothing will ever separate the Lakota from the Black Hills."

Rebecca tried to envision what it was like there. One day she would see it all for herself. If they ended up living there, that was fine with her, as long as she was with Doctor Robert Kingsley, her lover, her husband, her spirit, her soul.



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